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# Liliana Cavani's *La pelle*: Debunking the Fake Promises of Postmodern Sexual Emancipation and the Silencing Effect of Cultural Oblivion

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When Malaparte's *La pelle* (The Skin) came out in 1949 it caused an immediate scandal, quickly becoming the target of severe political attacks. In the novel, Malaparte gives a rather innovative account of the American liberation of Italy during World War II by unveiling the American exploitation of the defeated peninsula. More precisely, the novel illustrates the moral condescension of Americans and the harrowing self-humiliation of Italians. Thirty years later, Liliana Cavani adapted Malaparte's book into a film, and despite the differences in time and medium, the political reaction was equally dismissive.<sup>1</sup> If Malaparte's historical account had been obliterated through political action, cultural marginalization, and systematic censorship, Cavani's film would meet with a similar fate.<sup>2</sup> The Italian and international political situations in the 1980s would contribute to this dictated oblivion.

This essay will trace the connections between the zeitgeist of the early 1980s and Cavani's poetics with a particular emphasis on the issue of gender and sexuality in Italy. Through a consideration of Cavani's previous production, it will be argued that the structures of power reflected in *La pelle* present a new and more radical twist on the politics of aesthetics, gender, and sexuality at this specific time and place. In fact, not only does Cavani put forth Malaparte's thesis, showing the dark side of the liberation, but she also illuminates the path that goes from economic changes to cultural subjugation, delving into its racial and gender-related implications. Moreover, Cavani illustrates how the postmodern, or late capitalism set in motion by the Allies, gives way to a variety of fetishistic desires, interracial erotic tensions and several variants in the master/slave scheme.<sup>3</sup> By recounting the history of the book and its cinematic

adaptation, I will illustrate how Cavani shifts master/slave relationships of hierarchical societies into the sexual sphere. In particular, it will be posited that the internationalization of the Italian economy and the implementation of the Marshall Plan meant, for Italy, a relocation of control over national politics and its redefinition in terms of moral obligations and psychological submission to the United States.<sup>4</sup> By translating these new modalities of dependency into the erotic sphere, Cavani shows that their intersections must take into account pre-existing behavioral and sexual patterns, both within the United States and Italy.

In this essay, I address Cavani's construction of three separate storylines for three different women; this literary mechanism is noteworthy because it represents the most significant difference between the cinematic adaptation and the book. In the representation of these three women, I suggest that Cavani challenges the representation of women as emancipated sexual agents by shedding light on the difficult nature of their opportunities as experienced in a phallogocentric society. Particularly, by pointing out these three women's inability to escape master/slave dynamics through gender's performances, the director questions the political effectiveness of such an approach to postwar Italy.

Secondly, I focus on three specific scenes that help to trace the evolution of the concept of fetishism from its classical definition to its contemporary significance. By illustrating the connection of fetishism to master/slave dynamics similar to the ones illustrated in the first section, I will elaborate on the relation between new forms of erotic and racial objectification and the economic changes generated by the WWII clash of cultures.

Finally, the analysis will address the issues put forth in the essay and it will further extend them by taking into consideration the vantage point of the director and her position as a female artist both in Italian cinema and in the society of the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the cultural silencing of Cavani's voice is the result not only of her distance from Italian moral standards, but also of her isolation within the increasingly sexist environment of Italian film production and distribution.

#### HISTORY OF THE NOVEL *LA PELLE* AND ITS FILM ADAPTATION

Malaparte's book *La pelle*, first published in Paris in 1949, was not released in Italy until 1950, due to Malaparte's enduring resistance to any form of censorship.<sup>5</sup> In his work, Malaparte gives an account of

Italy's liberation after WWII and of his participation as a general in the Allied Army's Italian contingent. By that time, Malaparte was already a renowned intellectual and writer. Furthermore, having been on the frontline of Italy's political and cultural life for decades, he had experienced the discrimination cast upon all those writers and artists who had ties to Fascism before the war. Notably, Malaparte was accused of political opportunism as his former friendship with Mussolini conflicted with his postwar commitment to the struggle against Fascism. Malaparte was a fervent supporter of Fascism during the period in which Fascism was still a socialist and revolutionary movement; however, he became critical of Mussolini's regime when the fascist movement grew into a dictatorial and conservative party.<sup>6</sup> Once Fascism consolidated its power, Malaparte was sent to jail and later confined to the island of Lipari. When reintegrated into society, he persisted in opposing the regime as a war-envoy. It is therefore the constancy of his beliefs that persuaded Malaparte to join the Army of the Allies when the Americans landed in Italy. For the same reason, Malaparte never lost his intellectual honesty and, despite his desire to see the defeat of Fascism, soon came to the conclusion that the American Liberation represented the imposition of a new political and economic regime.<sup>7</sup> For the writer, if Fascism had imposed its rule through the coercive use of power, then the United States was employing an economic advantage to create the conditions for a psychological and material dependence. The same title *La pelle* (The Skin) and the book's many examples of the body's commercialization and exchange puts emphasis on a condition of economic subjugation so pervasive as to affect the physical *personas* of the allegedly liberated population. At a time when Italy's primary goal was, however, entry into a commercial partnership with the United States, Malaparte's account could not be endorsed by the Italian authorities. What is more, Malaparte's depiction of Naples as a *locus* beyond civilization and moral integrity resulted in his religious excommunication and his banishment from the capital of the South.

When Cavani decided to adapt the book into a film, a new storm of criticism fell upon her.<sup>8</sup> It was suggested that Cavani departed from the erotic dynamics of her previous movies only to turn to a fictitious and unreliable historical documentary. The reality was that a subterranean, yet strong continuity existed between Cavani's previous productions and *La pelle*. In *Il portiere di notte* (The Night Porter) and *Al di là del bene e del male* (Beyond Good and Evil), Cavani demonstrated that the private

could be political, both in terms of ideas and performativity.<sup>9</sup> In *La pelle* she showed the lack of distinction between the public and the private and their ultimate *reductio ad unum*. More precisely, by extending master/slave dynamics from the private to the public sphere, Cavani was again emphasizing the relationship between the two domains, while asserting the radical difference of scale and proportion in the postwar context.<sup>10</sup> Also, the same master/slave dialectic that was previously applied to a singular and paradigmatic case was now applied to the whole gamut of social relationships, so that race, nationality, and gender began to regularly play a pivotal role in assigning to each individual a specific spatial and moral position. Nonetheless, the most striking difference between the book and its cinematic adaptation is reflected in the development of the female characters. From the protagonists to Malaparte's unnamed prostitutes, every woman seems to find in Cavani's film an unprecedented narrative space. By downsizing the otherwise overshadowing presence of Malaparte in the novel, Cavani highlights the limits of these women's agency, thus implying the persistence of sexism, racism, and class-consciousness in capitalist society. Moreover, Cavani will not only oppose the possibility to counteract a master/slave dynamic based on sexist principles through performative actions, but she will also delve into the fetishistic instantiations of master-slave dynamics within a late-capitalist, or post-modern society.

#### THE WOMEN OF *LA PELLE*, OR WHEN DOLLS BREAK

In *La pelle*, Liliانا Cavani creates three storylines for three individual women who are only briefly developed in the novel. In doing so, she stimulates a reflection on women that goes beyond Malaparte's work and links the problem of gender to the writer's anti-capitalist thesis. Cavani redefines these three women not only on the basis of their sexuality, but through their intersection of class, race, and nationality, therefore illustrating how all those elements shape their relationships to the male characters. In particular, while *La pelle*'s women seek to pursue identity and social affirmation through their active quest for independence, Cavani shows that their attempts are regularly censored, thus questioning the notion of female gender performativity and the concrete possibilities for women as participants in society. To demonstrate such a point, I will look at Cavani's *La pelle* through the lens of Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti's antagonist views. Hence, I will read the film against the background of the Italian feminist discourse. Eventually, I will argue that

Cavani's *La pelle* shows the limits of gender binary's obliteration, thus advocating for women's conquest of a language of their own.

When Judith Butler tackles the notion of the normative and its role in the determination of genders, she claims that, "gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized."<sup>11</sup> Butler also suggests that such a naturalization is operated in a socio-symbolic manner and that normativity can never be extricated from its activations, so that differently from other disciplinary narratives, exclusively subsists in and through its instantiations. Therefore, if one followed Butler's theory, *La pelle*'s female protagonists would be transforming the idea of gender by simply behaving outside the normative.

In contrast from Butler, Rosi Braidotti sees the neutralization of gender and sexual difference as an endangering depletion of women's political subjectivity and agency. Braidotti believes in the necessity of sexual politics and positioning. As a consequence, she maintains that "the positioning that comes from our embodied and historically located subjectivity also determines the sort of political maps and conceptual diagrams we are likely to draw," provided that any attempt to neutralize gender which fails to acknowledge sexuality ends up conflating the neutral with the masculine.<sup>12</sup>

In the film *La pelle*, the three female protagonists enact the struggle between an emancipatory tension to overcome gender prescriptions through performance and the constant reminder of their position in societal networks of power, thus raising questions on the concrete possibilities of political affirmation through performativity.<sup>13</sup> The first of these women, in order of appearance, is Princess Consuelo. As if generated from the center of the earth, the princess is a Dionysian creature *par excellence*.<sup>14</sup> In the film, she actively seeks sexual encounters, and although aristocratic, often shows sympathy for the Neapolitan people, thus suggesting that her libidinal nature is able to move beyond class and gender hierarchies. For instance, in the last scene, by indentifying with the exploding volcano, she is seen striding along the deserted alleys of the city until she finds a young man and gives herself to him, their sexual embrace signaling her last appearance in the film. By concluding her *diegesis* with this erotic scene and by surviving the war, the Americans and the natural disaster, Princess Consuelo appears to be *La pelle*'s only winning female character. In reality, Princess Consuelo's emancipation

is problematic as it appears to take place outside civilization and never leads to a real integration into society.

To better understand Princess Consuelo's diegetic function and problematic critical nature, one must read her character in the context of Italian feminism from the 1970s to the present. The Italian feminist discourse starting in the 1970s with Carla Lonzi endorsed an idea of femininity which,<sup>15</sup> by opposing patriarchal and sexist criteria, has found its main object in the reinvention of women's sexuality as its main object, thus leaving women such as Princess Consuelo in a controversial position.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, the Princess seems to embody a sexual nature uninhibited by procreative obligations, on the other she can hardly be identified as Lonzi's "donna clitoridea," due to her submission to men's objectifying desire. Such ambivalence is not atypical in Cavani's production or in the films of other female directors. In "Women's Cinema: A Look at Female Identity,"<sup>17</sup> Paola Melchiori argues that the tendency of women directors to depict exotic yet subdued female characters depends on the "woman's attachment to the world and to the images and relations that have condemned her historically and existentially."<sup>18</sup> Princess Consuelo would therefore fall into the category of, "The Androgyne, the Amazons, the mother goddesses of ancient times ... all figures that embody and signify omnipotence as opposed to power."<sup>19</sup>

Antithetical to Consuelo, is Officer Deborah Wyatt, the wife of an American senator and high-ranking member of the American air force. In the film, a series of semiotic elements opposes Officer Wyatt to Princess Consuelo. For instance, while the princess embodies Mediterranean beauty and carnality, Deborah Wyatt appears to be the distant and androgynous woman, and yet, in spite of this aesthetic opposition, the two women will prove to be subjected to the same system of values. If Princess Consuelo seems to be beyond socialized cultures, Officer Wyatt is the spokesman (or spokeswoman) of American civilization. Emblematic of marital loyalty and love for the United States, she is both a wife and a general, and as such she summons up the image of the Fascist woman.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Officer Wyatt is not only divided between her sex and her nation, but she also serves as a deictic icon of militarism and androgyny within Italian past and future visual imagery. In particular, if in the 1920s women embraced militarism in the context of Fascist armed actions with nationalistic intents, in the late 1970s and in the 1980s terrorism led to the association of androgyny and militarism with an anti-social, anti-national, and anti-institutional behavioral code.

The figure of Officer Wyatt conflates these two historical periods and through clothing choices, she signals her adherence to the Fascist revivals of fashion and cinema.<sup>21</sup> It is for the same reasons, I believe, that Cavani chooses to have Officer Wyatt raped by a group of soldiers, inflicting upon her the *diegetic* punishment that in Fascist movies would be commonly perpetrated upon prostitutes, sexualized women, or girls living in “sin” outside the bonds of marriage.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as if to render the final tragedy more poignant, Cavani redirects the viewer by building a storyline, in which the woman systematically rejects sexual opportunities with the intention of setting herself up as a model of virtue.

If it is controversial to interpret the rape of a woman as a feminist act on the part of Cavani, it is possible to read her choice as a means of showing the real condition of women in a patriarchal society. Significantly, the rape scene is made possible because Officer Wyatt climbs onto the military truck without publicly displaying any sign of either her military or political status. As such, she is immediately deprived of the respect previously ascribed to her as a representative of male authority. Once she loses her status, Officer Wyatt becomes a mere sexual object and consequently an intermediary of homoerotic projections.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it must be noted that Deborah Wyatt does not even attempt to make known her military or familial position. While Cavani does not tell us if Wyatt is finally refusing the respect owed to her by her uniform and her husband’s name, or if she is unleashing her libidinal nature and ultimately surrendering to her inconsistency, the filmmaker does suggest that female virtue and moral integrity are never innate or inherent qualities, but are instead always granted by a group of men who can remove it at a moment’s notice. In addition to this, it is not clear if her punishment comes as a consequence of her gender, or rather of her sexuality. On the one hand, it seems that Officer Wyatt’s sexuality is not put into question even when she wears her military outfit. On the other, it could be argued that she becomes the victim of a collective rape when the overlapping between her gender and her sexuality becomes more easily recognizable. Finally, Officer Wyatt demonstrates that sexual harassment can become, as Butler would say, the “instrument by which gender is reproduced,” as well as she represents the proof that neither gender’s performance nor exterior transformation can erode a sexist society’s *a priori* belief in the inextricable tie between gender and sexuality.<sup>24</sup>

The last female character is the virgin of Naples. In the book, Malaparte devotes a whole chapter to this character. Yet, due to her



metonymic and exemplary role, he never gives her a name and does not develop the character any further. The virgin of Naples is a girl who has been able to keep her virginity intact in a city where every woman seems to have turned to prostitution. Yet, in the abased city of Naples, even virginity becomes a perverted object of commodification. In fact, not only does the virgin's father monetize the evidence of her virginity, but he also attracts flocks of soldiers who appear to be more enticed by the scopical pleasure of an untouched hymen than by the famished prostitutes lingering in the streets of Naples. In the film, Cavani names the virgin and rewrites her into a storyline and a larger narrative space. Moreover, she creates a love story between Concetta, the virgin, and Jimmy, Malaparte's friend and co-protagonist, also fabricating a new and tragic ending to Concetta's story. While in the book her virginity remains 'intact,' in the film Concetta is deflowered by Jimmy, who takes away her virginity, once he discovers the role that she plays within her father's trade. In doing so, Jimmy asserts at once his refusal of her 'public' virginity and the United States' supremacist role in economic exchanges, thus appearing as just another man whose reasoning aligns with sexist principles.<sup>25</sup>

Through the characters of Princess Consuelo, Officer Wyatt and Concetta, Cavani shows the impossibility for women to operate outside social prescriptions. While Deborah Wyatt and Princess Consuelo's characters illustrate that a woman's role in the 1980s was no longer synthesized into the opposition between the mother and the prostitute, the film also opposes androgyny with a socially praised form of promiscuous behavior, the case of Concetta warning the viewer that any attempt on the part of women to move beyond patriarchal rules would miserably end in failure.

By developing the story of these three women and by expanding their narrative function, Cavani seems to align her work with a specific trend within Italian feminism. In fact, differently from queer and gender studies in North America, the vast majority of contemporary Italian feminists has looked less at the post-structuralist lesson of Foucault and Derrida and more to the tradition stemming from Luce Irigaray. For feminists such as Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro, for instance, there is no freedom in the use of one's own gender without the previous acquisition of a difference in language and thought.<sup>26</sup> In other words, for many Italian feminists, Butler's aspiration for the "framework for sexual difference [to] move beyond binarity into multiplicity"<sup>27</sup> remains

utopian when attached to exterior permutations and metamorphoses and becomes imaginable only through a radical rethinking of the structures of thought, politics, and language in Western society.

Reading *La pelle*'s female characters through the lens of feminist theories helps to see the clashing between women's aspirations and their contingent reality in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While Princess Consuelo, Officer Wyatt and Concetta are desperately trying to counter their prescribed roles, their attempts are regularly censored and their narrative *personas* put back into frame. Eventually, the inability of these three women to escape dependence and subordination unveils the ineffectiveness of their "performances" within the sexually binary Italian context, and the specificities of their respective survival strategies appears irrelevant due to their absolute lack of political agency.

#### FETISHISM OF THE 'SKIN'

The notion of fetishism has a hybrid identity today, mainly due to its particular history. Though Charles de Brosses introduced the term in Europe as a synonym for "primitive" idolatry, fetishism would soon be appropriated both by Marxism and psychoanalysis.<sup>28</sup> Nowadays, however, fetishism has partly lost these historical meanings, and it is not rare to see it applied to a variety of scopical and erotic fixations. By examining its activation in *La pelle*, this analysis demonstrates that even in its contemporary meaning, fetishism not only maintains clear "psycho-economic" roots, but also reactivates in different forms the master/slave dynamic previously examined.<sup>29</sup> In *La pelle* it is possible to see fetishism as this historical trajectory hinging upon economic changes.

The film is set in Naples and takes place in 1943, at which time definitions of gender fell into the mediterranean sexist and homoerotic pattern. In the city, however, the strong opposition between sexual roles did not entail a straightforward rejection of homosexuality. Rather, by defining the homosexual as "femminiello," the Neapolitans expressed a binary conception of sexuality, thus endorsing the classic psychoanalytical definitions. Exemplary of the latter is Freud's theory of fetishism as a phenomenon originating from the early childhood sight of female genitalia and the consequent fear of castration. According to Freud, some people become homosexual as a consequence of this impression while others fend it off by creating a fetish, and the vast majority overcomes it.<sup>30</sup> While a thorough investigation of the relationship between homosexuality and fetishism in Freud should take into account his ongoing

elaboration of these terms, it is arguable that Freud's theory has its foundations in the chauvinist, heteronormative, and patriarchal society of his own times, while expressing a deeply normative and binary model of sexual development and identification.

In one of the most suggestive scenes of *La pelle*, the protagonist Mastroianni/Malaparte is invited to a party for men only. Far up the mountain, "La figliata" (the offspring), a traditional ceremony among Neapolitan homosexuals, is being celebrated. On this occasion "femminielli" coming from all parts of town gather to witness the miraculous event of a male's childbearing. Finally cries of exhaustion and awe signal that the child has come into the world. While the viewer tries to understand what is actually going on, a wooden sculpture begins to circulate within the scene. In reality, the child is the phallic reproduction of a male infant with disproportionate sexual endowments, hence available to fetishistic adoration. As the product of a society that defines gender in binary terms, 'La figliata' is therefore the paradigmatic activation of Freudian theory. Indeed, by identifying themselves as women and by performing post-castration roles, these men have to systematically displace their castration anxiety upon a substitute that reproduces and somehow restores the virtual loss of their penis.<sup>31</sup> And yet, what Freud's definition does not sufficiently address and what a more accurate analysis could instead demonstrate is how fetishisms, even in their classic psychoanalytical form, is strongly tied to political and economic movements.

In "The Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism," Robert A. Nye stresses the link between classic psychoanalytical definitions of fetishism and economic stagnation.<sup>32</sup> Nye argues that fetishism found its best incarnation in nineteenth-century France, due to political deterioration and a sense of powerlessness in the face of Germany's increasing political strength. Such an observation brings Nye to conclude that stagnation often triggers a vicious cycle of decreasing birthrate and discursive magnification of deviant sexual practices, among which he includes fetishisms. In other words, while rejecting the logic of causality between discourse and material culture, the scholar emphasizes the impact of economics on sexual attitudes.

Following in Nye's footsteps, I argue that the discursive shift from fetishism as a phenomenon of sexual or economic magnification/deviation towards fetishism as commodification is intrinsically tied to the logic of late capitalism. What is more, I believe that, while the novel *La pelle* pinpoints this cultural change by representing the *continuum* existing

between body fetishism and commodity fetishism, in her film Cavani characterizes commodified-body fetishism as an *a posteriori* reflection on the sexual and racial implications of such a dynamic. In the film, for instance, the episode of 'the figliata' symbolizes the fetishistic drift of a sexually binary and historically subjugated population, whereas the arrival of the Allies splits the old master/slave dynamic into a variety of possibilities. Although the new invaders supposedly come to liberate the country, this is a kind of freedom that has to pass not only through the homogenization of culture and the economic system, but it must also gain entry into a network where Italy occupies a peripheral role.

By showing the interactions between the soldiers of the Allies and the local people, *La pelle* demonstrates how the reconfiguration of the master/slave dynamic functions according to the principle of concession rather than imposition, generating changes in the respective relational modes. On the one hand, the locals go beyond obedience and offer themselves to the Allies. On the other, the diversified group of people composing the Army of the Allies relates to the local population according to erotic modalities hinging upon their respective racial identities, ethnic backgrounds, and fetishistic desires. Two main episodes poignantly illustrate the dependency of racial fetishism on the new capitalistic order. In the first of these two episodes, Malaparte/Mastroianni is strolling around the streets of Naples with his very naive American friend Jimmy, when he decides to show him a scam invented to please Neapolitan prostitutes' more generous clientele: the black soldiers. Taking Jimmy to a rundown artisan shop, Malaparte instructs him on the fetishistic attraction of black soldiers to blond pubic hair, and then reveals that the shop's main business is the construction of an underwear strap used to fake a 'blond cunt' and arouse the 'negroes.' In the second scene of the film, Malaparte accompanies Officer Wyatt into the labyrinth of the city, typically acting in an unperturbed and disenchanting manner, and yet a new scene of abjection and degradation is offered to the eye of the spectator. Diligently lined up by their mothers, adolescent children prostitute themselves to the Moroccan contingent of the Allies, thus merging stereotypes on race and homosexuality.

When tackling the issue of homosexual racial fetishism in his 1986 essay "Reading Racial Fetishism," Kobena Mercer stated that the "frisson of (homo) sexual sameness transfers erotic investment in the fantasy of mastery from gender to racial difference."<sup>33</sup> Three years later, however, he had to go back to his previous writings and admit that things were

more complicated. Mercer was reintegrating the dimension of desire; notably, he was reconsidering the viewer's desire for the subject/object of spectacle without convincingly explaining how the introduction of desire would have freed the fetishized subject/object from a position of subjugation. As a matter of fact, what a work such as *La pelle* offers and what Mercer does not address, is the oscillating relationship of desire to economic positions. Both the black soldier's desire for blond pubic hair and the Moroccan's desire for adolescent flesh appear to be determined by political and economic subservient positions within socio-cultural systems that reject them and within which they yearn to assimilate. The war represents for them an opportunity for unprecedented power and emancipation, and it is at this moment of delusional freedom that their fetishism surfaces. For the black soldier it is the desire for the wife of his master, her blond pubic hair, or, more generally, for any white woman. For the Moroccan or North African it is the desire to possess the goods and the flesh belonging to their former colonizers.<sup>34</sup> In other words, what Liliana Cavani is representing is a world in which flesh and its color, as well as national minorities, are commodified and circulated.<sup>35</sup> While partly reinforcing the racist stereotype of colonized people's rape fantasies and attitudes towards the colonizers, Cavani inscribes this desire in an economic setting where the activation of these fantasies is made possible only by significant changes in socio-economic status. It is indeed in the cooperative and yet hierarchical economic system determined by the Allies that the fetishism in relation to a commodified body takes place. Indeed, while the use-value of the body is assigned by a capitalist economic system in which both master and slave culture participate, the different degrees of distance from its attainment determine its greater or smaller magnification, and thus its fetishistic value.<sup>36</sup>

In her other films, *Il portiere di notte* and *Al di là del bene e del male*, Liliana Cavani represented desire and the master/slave dialectic at its dramatic peak. In *La pelle* she shows the dialectic in its moment of synthesis. If Malaparte puts an emphasis on the degenerative character of such a moment by illustrating the persistent social inequality and its corporeal manifestations, Cavani emphasizes the intersection between the class struggle and its sexual and racial correlatives, thus deflating the conflict by spreading it onto a larger and much more layered surface. In this respect, the difference in public reception in 1981 certainly played to the director's advantage; indeed, this difference, far from being marginal,

forces us to look at her work not only as a proof of psycho-Marxism but also as a product of the Italian zeitgeist of the 1980s.

### THE END OF AN ERA

Italian Cinema of the 1970's was characterized not only by the disappearance of alternative film spaces, but also by Italian film producers' preference for commercial cinema. By this time, RAI, the Italian state's television company and main broadcast service, had fostered a commitment to *auteur* cinema, soon becoming its only space for survival. Unfortunately, during the same years, the Italian television and cinema systems were taking a dramatic step towards an administrative oligopoly due to changes occasioned by a 1976 ruling which authorized the creation of private televised broadcasting. In fact, of the varied conglomerates that benefited from the ruling, few had been able to gather the necessary advertising revenues to sustain production costs and investments. As a result, between 1983 and 1985, Rusconi, Mondadori, and Rizzoli all collapsed, and Silvio Berlusconi bought out their channels and created his empire.<sup>37</sup>

During the 1970s, Italian women, faced with their substantial exclusion from both Cinema and TV, set up independent co-operatives with the objective of infiltrating the media, and in 1977, they also launched *Si dice donna*, the first feminist oriented program in Italian television. However, in 1981 the program was cancelled, and programs criticizing the condition of women began being prohibited on the grounds of never clarified political reasons.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the increase in film production costs and the dramatic collapse of ticket revenues between 1975 and 1990 created exorbitant financial losses that were, for the most part, absorbed by TV distribution companies, resulting in a substantial expansion of Berlusconi's integrated TV and cinema system. Silvio Berlusconi could now set new trends for Italian television, and he opted for a successful industry based on a mix of entertainment and soft pornography.

It is in this climate that the film *La pelle* was produced. It was only Gaumont, a production house with headquarters based in France, which was willing to sponsor and finance Cavani's adaptation. During the 1980s, Gaumont had started a global expansion, and, under the direction of Daniel Toscan du Plantier, had embraced an ambitious cultural mission, thereby attracting many European directors such as Volker Schlöndorff, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Liliana Cavani.<sup>39</sup> Renzo Rossellini, the son of Roberto, was appointed director of the

Italian branch, and it was under his guidance that *La pelle* was produced. Nonetheless, lacking governmental support in this highly competitive and increasingly monopolistic climate, Gaumont Italia could not survive, and *La pelle*, still property of the French company, disappeared from the circuit and became the archival patrimony of a few libraries and video-stores.

When reviewing *La pelle*, film-critic Gian Luigi Rondi claimed not to see any significant invention in relation to the book, the only exception being that of an American soldier falling in love with a young Neapolitan girl, and an ambitious American female officer somehow obstructing the Allies' operations.<sup>40</sup> For Rondi, the objectification of both the girl and the female officer by the soldiers, who are presented as national heroes, evidently constituted only a minor detail. In opposition to Rondi, Gaetana Marrone, in her article, "Il mito di Babele in *La pelle* di Curzio Malaparte," does largely elaborate on the specificity of the director's cinematic adaptation. Marrone, in fact, declares: "Pur conservando i segni del punto di partenza (l'apologia dei vinti), la regista se ne allontana per riproporre la dinamica di violenza e desiderio come scenario della storia."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Marrone sheds light on the the director's pruning of Malaparte's rethoric narration as much as on the creation, "di una verità tragica, grottescamente realistica in forza dell'esperienza fondamentale che si fa sul corpo, col corpo, come unico strumento di comunicazione."<sup>42</sup> Marrone partly dismisses, however, the gendered nature of this communicating body, failing to call attention to the film's female characters and treating Deborah Wyatt's rape as just one of the many scenes of abjection shown in the film. Furthermore, while Marrone demonstrates how Cavani is uninterested in softening Malaparte's controversy and focuses instead on the babelic and fragmented corporeity of the director's characters, she never really expounds on the fetishistic and racial implications of such a dissembling.

With this analysis, I have striven to bring justice to the diegetic function of Cavani's women as well as to the economic, sexual, and racial connotations of Cavani's imagery. First, by choosing three women, Cavani delineated three possible *lifestyles* that in the 1980s, under emancipatory appearances, subsume new forms of female subordination and control. Secondly, by expanding upon Malaparte's racial fetishism, Cavani manifested her ambivalent relationship with the cultural discourse of her own times. Finally, by sketching an overview of 1980s Italian Cinema and TV and by showing its transformation into an "all men's club," I

tried to show that the oblivion to which Cavani's *La pelle* has been relegated is the result of her antagonist choices. In fact, what appears in the book as a mere scopic and tactile fixation becomes in the film the violent appropriation of a girl's virginity. What in the 1980s was a promise made by a line of clothing to a woman's empowerment and independence, is here debunked by a woman's rape as ultimate proof of the condescending character of that promise. Finally, what in the book was a mere critique to the commodification of the body becomes in Cavani's 1980s film a complex kaleidoscope of fetishistic desires, which displays the persistence of racial and sexual power relations while suggesting their economic perversion and proliferation.

## Notes

1. The film, *The Skin* (*La pelle*) was released in 1981 and featured a cast of international stars. Among the protagonists, the viewer will easily recognize Marcello Mastroianni (Curzio Malaparte), Claudia Cardinale (Princess Consuelo), Burt Lancaster (General Cork), Ken Marshall (Jimmy) and Alexandra King (Officer Deborah Wyatt).

2. Malaparte had countless detractors. The quest for sensationalism emerges as the most common criticism as seen in Luigi Martellini, *Invito alla lettura di Malaparte* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1976). Very similar is the criticism addressed to Cavani in Francesco Buscemi, *Invito al cinema di Liliana Cavani* (Milano: Mursia, 1996).

3. For the use of the term *capitalism*, as for its implications, I refer particularly to the epochal Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

4. For an in-depth analysis of the economic and cultural implications of the Marshall Plans, see Barry Eichengreen, *The European Economy since 1945: Coordinated Capitalism and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945–1951* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1984).

5. For a detailed account on the publication's history of *La pelle*, see "Notizie sui Testi: *La pelle*," in Malaparte, *Opere scelte*, ed. Luigi Martellini (Milano: Mondadori, 1997), 1548–60.

6. See in *ibid.* Also, Giancarlo Vigorelli titles the preface to the book, "Malaparte: Testimonianza e proposta di revisione" (Malaparte: a testimony and proposal of revision), stating the importance of rethinking Malaparte's



relationship with Fascism on the basis of the movement's transformation from an anarchic-syndicalist party to a dictatorial and conservative one.

7. The banishment from Naples was motivated on the ground of Malaparte's debasing depiction of the city. On several occasions, however, the author claimed that such a representation did not aim at describing the city as barbaric but ascribed responsibility to the presence of the Army of the Allies. Malaparte claims in Edda Ronchi Suckert, *Malaparte* (Città di Castello: Famiglie Suckert Ronchi, 1994) that "Esiste in tutto il mondo un pregiudizio su Napoli originato in gran parte dalla cattiva letteratura, sia antica che recente. Mi basta citare i *Vermi* di Federico Mastriani, *la Malvita* di Cangiano, molte pagine di Matilde Serao, molte pagine di Anatole France e di Panait Istrati, più recentemente alcuni libri inglesi e americani apparsi anche in traduzione italiana, quali *La Galleria*, *Niente spaghetti a colazione*, *Il soldato Angelo*, per non parlare di molti film di Hollywood. Da tutti questi libri risulterebbe che quanto di doloroso è avvenuto a Napoli, come in tutte le altre città di Europa dopo la liberazione, sia in queste ultime una conseguenza della guerra e che a Napoli invece costituisce uno stato di cose permanente, anteriore alla guerra e che non ha niente a che fare con la guerra. Contro questa menzogna ho voluto scrivere un libro che stabilisse in modo preciso le responsabilità degli alleati (alleati ma pur sempre invasori) nella creazione di questo atroce stato di cose assolutamente nuovo per Napoli." (96)

8. Edda Ronchi Suckert did not recognize in the tame Mastroianni her brother's boldness. See Giordano Bruno Guerri, "Quell'addormentato di Mastroianni non assomiglia a mio fratello," in *Domenica del corriere* (13 giugno 1981): 58–65; also, critics commonly reproached Cavani for her recuperation of Malaparte's historicity. See in <<http://www.mymovies.it/recensioni/?id=17928>> (accessed 15 April 2010).

9. *Il portiere di notte* (The Night Porter) released in 1974 and starring Dirk Bogarde, Charlotte Rampling, and Philippe Leroy, tells the story of the erotic relationship between a concentration camp survivor and her jailer. By delving into the sensitive matter of the Holocaust and Nazism's eroticization of power, the movie was often discarded as a mere provocation. *Al di là del bene e del male* (*Beyond good and evil*) was released in 1977, and starred Dominique Sansa, Erland Josephson, and Robert Powell. The film which represents the complex relationship formed in the 1880s between Friedrich Nietzsche, Lou Salome, and Paul Rée, was along with *Il portiere di notte*, Cavani's most successful film. Having, however, represented the connections between institutional power and explicit sadomasochistic practices, both films had to deal with various forms of censorship, and were temporarily put out of distribution.

10. Among the many theorists that have used the master/slave scheme in the interpretation of sexual and gender relationships, Judith Butler is certainly one of the most internationally debated. In the trajectory that goes from her dissertation, *Subjects of Desire* to 2004's *Undoing Gender*, Butler has openly stated her reliance on the Hegelian scheme, at the same time trying to make it more complex and open it to several possibilities. More specifically, in several moments of *Undoing Gender*, Butler has attempted to break the binary or "dyadic" structure of the Hegelian 'master/slave dynamic,' pointing to the many permutations inherent to the scheme. See in Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1987]); and in Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

11. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.

12. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 123.

13. Braidotti's positions are largely elaborated in Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*; and Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2002). I argue that the main difference between the two scholars can be reduced to a question of positioning and emphasis. While Braidotti is aiming at the indefinite expansion of the concept of femininity within a heteronormative society, Butler is reasoning for the extension of a space that is (or wants to be) outside that frame. Though both legitimate, these positions seem to refer to different stories and contexts, and it is for this reason that Braidotti's theorization proves to be more pertinent to our specific study case.

14. Such a connotation is amplified by the choice of Claudia Cardinale for the role of Princess Consuelo. An interesting analysis of the semiotic resonance between Italian movie stars and their roles is in Marcia Landy, *Stardom: Italian Style* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

15. See in Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel, la donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale, e altri scritti* (Milano: Rivolta Femminile, 1974).

16. For an account of Italian feminism I drew particularly on *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice; Equality and Sexual Difference* eds. Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (London: Associated University Presses, 2002).

17. Paola Melchiori, "Women's Cinema: A Look at Female Identity," in *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy* eds. Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti (London: Routledge, 1988), 25–35.

18. *Ibid.*, 27.

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

20. Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 1998) has highlighted the ties between Italian feminism and early Fascism, also stressing how early Fascism endorsed women's militarism and a more open definition of gender. Barbara Spackman in *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1996), and Victoria De Grazia in *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1992), look instead at the development of feminism under the regime, and in particular to the notion of Latin feminism. De Grazia writes, "Latin feminists saw [sexual] difference as meaning complementarity and collaboration between men and women, whereas Fascist men understood it to mean sexual hierarchy and female subordination," seen in *ibid*, 238.

21. According to Beverly Allen, Italian fascist and militarist revivalism was exemplified by Armani's epochal 1975 collection (internationally remembered for its overtly androgynous tone), also becoming a source of international imitations. For Allen, however, Armani had drawn his inspiration from the terrorist tension of those years and it was only partially conditioned by the Hollywood movies of the 1930s. See in Beverly Allen, "The Novel, the Body, and Giorgio Armani: Rethinking National 'Identity' in a Postnational World" in *Feminine Feminists: Cultural Practices in Italy*, ed. Giovanna Micheli Jeffries (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1994), 153–170.

22. See in Marcia Landy, *Fascism in Film, 1931–1943* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 72–117. Landy maintains that the cinematic punishment, while not exclusive to Italian production, was used in fascist cinema with uncommon strength and regularity. Also, specific to the Italian case was, according to Landy, the image of women's social immobility.

23. For the notion of woman as intermediary in homoerotic society I draw on Luce Irigaray, and particularly on the elaboration of the concept in Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

24. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 54. Butler defines sexual harassment (as any other form of socially prescriptive behavior) as the instrument by which gender is reproduced. In so doing, she opposes Catherine MacKinnon's idea that gender itself implies a heterosexual relationship of subordination.

25. A classical frame for the analysis of sexist society is in Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949). Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of virginity is included in her chapter on myths, a key placement. By looking at several primitive groups, de Beauvoir maintains that while in primitive society virginity was considered either a danger or an unappealing attribute, in 'less primitive' societies, it is highly praised for its relation to the concept of property. Judith Okely, in her essay, "Rereading The Second Sex," in

*Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Fallaize (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), stresses that such an idea of virginity, though conceived as universal by Simone de Beauvoir, is tied to a Judaic-Christian frame and is anthropologically unreliable. However, in its simplification, Simone de Beauvoir's description proves to be useful to the understanding of my specific analysis where the issue of 'power' and 'fear' is related to a specific position in society.

26. In particular, while Luisa Muraro insists on the need for a female genealogy both in material and cultural terms, Cavarero engages in the rethinking of the Western metaphysical structure of thought. See in Luisa Muraro, *Diotima: Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milano: La Tartaruga 1987); and Adriana Cavarero, *In spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (London: Associated University Press, 2002). For a more in-depth study of the Diotima group and of the theoretical dissonances between Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero see also in, Lucia Re, "Diotima's Dilemmas: Authorship, Authority, Authoritarianism" in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, 50–74.

27. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 197.

28. William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993), 119–151; 131. Pietz gives an historical account of the term fetishism and its discourse. According to his chronology, immediately after Charles de Brosses's introduction of the term, fetishism was mainly used by historians such as Christoph Meiners and Philippe Christian in reference to the earliest stages of primitive religions.

29. For my definition of psycho-economy, see Robert Miklitsch, *From Hegel to Madonna: Towards a General Economy of "Commodity fetishism"* (Albany, NY: State University of New York University Press, 1998). In the book, Miklitsch speaks of "psycho-marxism" and refers to the influence of general economy on structures of the unconscious. On the other hand, in my use of the term I do not necessarily agree with Miklitsch's distancing from Marxism and with his clear-cut separation between the fetishistic sign-value and use-value of the commodity, as in *ibid.*, 25–28.

30. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI (1927–1931): 147–58.

31. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London: Imago Pub. Co., 1949 [1905]). Freud states, "In all the cases we examined we have established the fact that the future inverts, in the earliest years of their childhood, pass through a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation with a woman ... and after leaving this behind they identify themselves with a woman," in *ibid.*, 23. While it would be reductive to pass this as Freud's final word on

homosexuality, Freud's recurrent identification between sexual roles and genders is maintainable.

32. Robert A. Nye, "The Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 13–30.

33. Kobena Mercer, "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe" in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 307–30; 311.

34. The Moroccan fetishistic desire appears to be paralleled with the sexual myth of Italian youth in and outside Europe. See also in Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Aldrich recounts how Grand Tour diaries spread the legend of Italian youths as extremely handsome and sexually insatiable. Aldrich also describes homosexual travelers' attraction to southern Italy, indicating, among its motives, the psychological *dépaysement* due to the socioeconomic context of disparities of income between visitors and southern natives. It is therefore possible to maintain that the chance to identify with North-European erotic standards played an important role in the amplification of the Moroccan's sexual 'perversion.'

35. Frantz Fanon clearly illustrates exchange/ fetishistic dynamics in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Fanon writes, "from the moment the Negro accepts the separation imposed by the European he has no further respite, and is it not understandable that thenceforward he will try to elevate himself to the white man's level? To elevate himself in the range of colors to which he attributes a kind of hierarchy?" in *ibid.*, 82.

36. In the elaboration of this theory I draw on William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx." While the author makes a first connection between the Marxist notion of fetishism and desire, his conclusions are quite different from mine.

37. For a complete analysis of this period, see Mino Argentieri, *Il cinema italiano dal dopoguerra ad oggi* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1998).

38. For an account of feminist oriented Cinema and TV in Italy, see Annabella Miscuglio, "An Affectionate and Irreverent Account of Eighty Years of Women's Cinema in Italy," in *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy*, eds. Bruno Giuliana and Maria Nadotti (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

39. For further information on Gaumont and its production of *La pelle* see in, <<http://lewesternculturel.blogs.courrierinternational.com/archive/2010/04/21/dvd-la-peau-de-liliana-cavani.html>> (accessed 15 April 2010).

40. G. Luigi Rondi, *Il Tempo* 9 Oct.1981 <<http://www.mymovies.it/recensioni/?id=17928>> (accessed 15 April 2010).

41. Gaetana Marrone, “Il mito di Babele in *La pelle* di Curzio Malaparte: pathos, veggenza, e l’invenzione del racconto cinematografico,” *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 19.2 (2001): 219–32; 221.

42. *Ibid.*, 227.