

Whose Family Values? The Cinema of Ferzan Ozpetek

By George de Stefano



Italo-Turkish film director Ferzan Ozpetek

As the so-called culture wars of the past several decades have demonstrated, “the family” is an ideological construct – and political weapon – as much as it is a social arrangement. American conservatives oppose public policies that would actually

strengthen families stressed by economic woes, but they constantly extol “family values” and condemn those – gays and lesbians and feminists – whom they view as “anti-family.”

In Italy, the Vatican and its allies follow a similar script, insisting that the State uphold – and enforce -- conservative Catholic values about family and sexuality. Vatican officials from the pope on down denounce all attempts to grant legal recognition to same-sex couples as an attack on the sacrosanct family, and opportunistic politicians of both the political right and center-left act as the Vatican’s echo chamber. Even the head of state engages in gay-bashing rhetoric; witness Silvio Berlusconi’s comment that it’s better to be a virile heterosexual him than a *frocio* – a faggot. As the philosopher and journalist Paolo Flores d’Arcais recently wrote, “When the insults come from the apex of executive power, they become more than a threat: some will interpret them as giving the go-ahead for violence. It is not fortuitous that attacks on homosexuals have increased sharply in recent years.”

In such a regressive climate as now exists in Italy, cultural interventions that challenge conservative and Catholic ideology, as well as common, everyday prejudice, are not only welcome but necessary. Ferzan Ozpetek, the gay, Turkish-born director who calls himself “Italian by adoption,” has offered such a challenge with his most recent film, *Mine vaganti* (Loose Cannons). But the film, released in Italy in 2010, also confronts the belief, once foundational to both feminism and gay liberation, that the family is by nature oppressive, a sort of domestic dictatorship.

In “This Be the Verse,” the British poet Philip Larkin famously wrote, “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.” *Mine vaganti*, while acknowledging that families indeed can do damage, asserts that for gay children, familial bonds need not be oppressive, and can even be sustaining. Or at any rate, that the ties of blood and love are too tenacious to be easily severed.

Mine vaganti centers on the bourgeois Cantone family, owners of a *pastificio* (pasta factory) in the southern Italian city of Lecce. The youngest son, Tommaso returns to Lecce from Rome, where he has been attending university. He confesses to his older brother Antonio that he has been studying literature in order to become a writer, rather than economics, as his family believed. He also tells Antonio that he is gay, and that he intends to disclose his sexuality to the rest of the family. Tommaso expects -- no, he is certain -- that detonating this particular bomb will so outrage his conservative father Vincenzo that Vincenzo will stop trying to groom him to take over the management of the *pastificio*, enabling Tommaso to return to Rome, his literary pursuits, and his partner Marco.

But that evening, at dinner, Antonio trumps Tommaso by announcing to *la famiglia* – the domineering father and imperious mother, the sister and her husband, the eccentric aunt and the wise nonna, and Tommaso -- that *he* is gay, and that his lover was one of the employees of the Cantone *pastificio*. “I’m sick of hiding,” he declares. At first everyone assumes Antonio is joking. The dinner conversation, after all, began with Vincenzo telling a homophobic joke involving a gay police officer and an automobile stick shift. When it becomes evident that Antonio is in earnest, Vincenzo reacts with

wounded fury. “Why are you doing this to me?” he shouts. He disowns Antonio, expelling him from the home and the family business, before collapsing from a heart attack.

Tommaso is as stunned by Antonio’s revelation as the others. And when Vincenzo recovers, Tommaso finds that not only has he been thwarted from making his own disclosure, but that his father intends him to assume Antonio’s roles and responsibilities. “You must stay here,” Vincenzo tells his younger son. “Your home is here.” Besides being forced into the unwanted responsibility of managing the pastificio, he has to deal with the fallout from Antonio’s unexpected disclosure, including the gossip of neighbors and townsfolk, and confront his parents’ prejudices. And then several of his gay friends arrive from Rome, complicating matters further.

Ozpetek’s recent films – *Cuore Sacro* (2005), *Saturno Contro* (2007) and *Un giorno perfetto* (2008) -- have been somber, even melodramatic. But *Mine vaganti* is in the tradition of *commedia all’italiana*, a genre whose best films seamlessly blended comedy and incisive social commentary. During the genre’s heyday, from the late 1950s to 1970s, film makers such as Mario Monicelli, Pietro Germi, Luigi Comencini, and Dino Risi held up a mirror to Italian customs and mores, exposing societal hypocrisy and satirizing Italy’s ruling elites and institutions. But Ozpetek’s film, with its frank sexuality, flamboyant characters, outrageous plot twists and bittersweet but ultimately optimistic outlook, also recalls the work of another European auteur: Spain’s Pedro Almodòvar.

Perhaps only an artist of Ferzan Ozpetek’s social position could have made *Mine Vaganti*: as an immigrant who has lived in Italy for more than three decades, he has an

outsider's perspective but is sufficiently "inside" Italian society and culture to comprehend and critique it. It is remarkable that he is the only director currently working in Italy who consistently portrays gay characters and their lives realistically, and with insight and compassion. In Italian cinema, gay men and lesbians largely have been rendered invisible, and, when they do appear, they often are reduced to comic stereotypes. Even worse, homosexuality has been deployed as a metaphor for Fascist and/or bourgeois corruption, a tradition exemplified by the evil Nazi queers in Rossellini's *Open City* and the eponymous protagonist of Bertolucci's *The Conformist*. Some Italian filmmakers have offered more nuanced and insightful treatments. But even in such films as Ettore Scola's *A Special Day* and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*, same-sex desire is either theoretical (in the former, the persecuted gay protagonist played by Marcello Mastroianni makes love to a woman, the unhappy housewife played by Sophia Loren) or symbolic (Aschenbach's unconsummated lust for Tadzio is a metaphor for a doomed pursuit of youth and beauty). The cinema of Ferzan Ozpetek represents a decisive break with this tradition of retrograde representation.

Born in Istanbul in 1959, Ozpetek moved to Rome in 1976 to study cinema at La Sapienza University of Rome. After working as an assistant director to such filmmakers as Massimo Troisi, Maurizio Ponzi, Ricky Tognazzi, and Sergio Citti, in 1997 he directed his first feature, *Il Bagno Turco (Hamam)*. [photo] The film, which was shown at the Cannes Film festival, was an international success. In *Il Bagno Turco*, and in two of his subsequent films -- *Le Fate ignoranti* (released abroad as *His Secret Life*), and *La Finestra di fronte* (Facing Windows) -- sexual minority individuals are estranged from their

families of origin and marginalized by societal bigotry. In *Le Fate ignoranti*, from 2001, his best-known and most successful film, a group of gay men and Turkish refugees living in an apartment building in Rome form an alternative family. They share communal meals, socialize, and otherwise offer each other the solidarity and emotional support denied them by their families and communities of origin. But as Ozpetek said in a 2010 interview, "After my father's death, I started to look at relations between parents and children in a new light." The theme of father-son relations clearly has considerable personal import for Ozpetek: the director dedicated *Mine vaganti* to his late father. In his latest film, the gay sons don't sever their family ties; the battles for understanding and acceptance instead are waged on the domestic territory.

Mine vaganti is a film, not a sociological tract, and an engaging, funny, and moving one at that. But the narrative and thematic elements in the script by Ozpetek and Ivan Cotroneo reflect an acute understanding of the social status of sexual minority persons in contemporary Italy, and of cultural beliefs and attitudes towards homosexuality. In Italy, denial, more than criminalization, has traditionally characterized law and public policy. The first penal code of the Italian Republic, for example, did not criminalize homosexuality unless it caused a so-called public scandal, a stance shared by the Catholic Church, which regarded "sodomy" as an unmentionable sin. Italy is the land of "don't ask/don't tell," where a kind of repressive tolerance prevails -- as long as one's sexuality remains closeted, and out of the public eye. This stance has generally prevailed in Italy, but with some exceptions, such as during the Fascist era, when male homosexuals were arrested and imprisoned, and increasingly during the Berlusconi era,

when violent anti-gay rhetoric by public figures and actual violence by non-state actors have become more common.

From the 1970s on, however, Italian gay men and women increasingly have established a public presence. Activists have built a political movement and national organizations, such as Arcigay and Arcilesbica. The most dramatic instance in recent Italian history of gay political mobilization, and of homosexuality becoming a subject of public discourse, was World Pride Rome, a week-long series of social, cultural, and political initiatives held in 2000 that culminated in a mass march through the capital. World Pride's success – it drew hundreds of thousands to Rome, including many heterosexual supporters of gay rights – occurred in spite of the concerted opposition of conservative politicians, some of the center-left, and the Vatican.

In the upper middle class and conservative social milieu depicted by Ozpetek in *Mine vaganti*, homosexuality is a matter unfit for public discourse. Vincenzo Cantone observes that it was much better in the old days, when “they” kept to themselves and didn't declare their presence publicly. But he also believes, contradictorily, that gay people *should* be visible, so that they can be identified, and presumably set apart from the normal majority. And for him, the visible marker of homosexuality is gender nonconformity. An unbearable cognitive dissonance arises when he is confronted by the fact that a conventionally masculine, non-effeminate man like his son Antonio is homosexual. “Normally you can spot them,” he laments.

Even more disturbing to Vincenzo is the prospect of Antonio's sexuality becoming common knowledge in Lecce. Once he has sufficiently recovered from his

coronary to show himself in public, he makes a brave effort to maintain his *bella figura*. But keeping up appearances is difficult, since he is certain that everyone in town knows what he regards as his family's shameful secret. In one scene, set in an open-air café, he hears the laughter of other patrons and assumes it is all directed at him. "They all know," he exclaims. "I can't go out anymore! I will never get used to it!" One of *Mine vaganti's* ironies is that Vincenzo, the macho, traditionalist patriarch, is the biggest drama queen in the film.

Ozpetek's film considers the issues of coming out and whether to establish emotional and/or physical distance from the family in a specifically Italian context. Italian society is characterized by strong intergenerational ties and by an intensity of exchange along generational lines. The labor market and the housing market are organized on the basis of assumptions about family solidarity and intergenerational dependence. Social policies often are based on the assumption that the individual's welfare can rely upon solidarity within the extended family. One manifestation of this pattern is the "lunga famiglia," literally, long family, where young adults in their twenties, and even thirties, continue to reside with their families.

Given this construction of the family in Italy, the "exit option" can be difficult for Italian gays and lesbians. But social science research conducted in Italy during the past two decades indicates that Italian homosexuals, and especially young gay men, do tend to leave home earlier than heterosexuals of the same age group.

Like Tommaso in *Mine vaganti*, they often move from provincial towns to cities like Rome or Milan or Turin, where they can live more openly and with greater

autonomy, and also find community. In a 2003 survey conducted in Turin of gay males and lesbians who had moved to that city, 35% of the gay men declared that they had relocated specifically to be able to live openly and freely. This pattern of migration is familiar to the characters in Ozpetek's film; so much so that they are surprised to learn that gay people live among them because they had assumed that the big city is the natural habitat of homosexuals.

As I have observed, the focus of *Mine vaganti* is entirely on families, or rather, a particular, wealthy southern Italian family and its social milieu. The larger world of politics doesn't intrude. A viewer, and particularly one unfamiliar with contemporary Italian politics, might conclude that Italy's gay movement had made no inroads in Puglia and that gay issues were absent from public discourse in the region. But the president of Puglia is the openly gay, former Communist Nicola "Nichi" Vendola, twice elected to his office by voters in a supposedly conservative and traditionalist region. Vendola also is one of Italy's most prominent politicians, as well as a figure whom many believe could unite Italy's fractious Left. Moreover, Lecce is not some unsophisticated backwater but a small city with a university, vibrant nightlife (due mainly to the large numbers of students), a rich culture (it is located on the Salento peninsula, heartland of the pizzica revival), and significant tourist attractions. Ozpetek's depiction of Lecce at times recapitulates the stereotype of southern Italian society as frozen in time and impervious to change.

The one reference in the film to the larger political environment comes when Tommaso's partner Marco remarks that "it is no longer 2000." Marco is alluding to the

World Pride events of that year, and the widespread hope among Italian homosexuals and their allies that World Pride's success would advance gay issues, particularly the legal status of same-sex couples. Instead, successive center-left and center-right administrations have blocked all attempts to enact national gay rights legislation. Although opinion polls consistently demonstrate majority public support for gay rights, including legal recognition of same-sex relationships, too many Italian politicians cater to the Vatican's integralist agenda and to conservative Catholic voters.

The meaning of Marco's comment, then, is that Italy actually has regressed since 2000. Ozpetek's *Le Fate ignoranti*, made that year, ends with a scene of the characters preparing banners and posters to bring to the World Pride march; images from the actual event appear during the film's closing credits. A decade later *Mine vaganti* is informed by the waning of the optimism generated by World Pride and the stalled political agenda.

But *Mine vaganti* indeed is "political" because it challenges the social construction of homosexuality as alien to the family. Ozpetek focuses on the family because that institution is central to generating and maintaining cultural values regarding gender and sexuality that can become writ large in the worlds of politics and public policy. The film further asserts that families should not demand self-denial from their gay children as the price of their remaining within the family orbit. Parents like Vincenzo Cantone must not see their sons or daughters simply as extensions of themselves but as autonomous individuals. And children should not sacrifice their autonomy or aspirations to preserve a spurious family peace. As Antonio's and

Tommaso's grandmother admonishes, "If one always does what others want, then it's not worth living."

Before her death, the grandmother urges Tommaso, the aspiring novelist, to write the story of her family and its history on the land of Salento. At her funeral, Antonio returns to help carry her coffin. Vincenzo clearly is discomfited but he does not object to the presence of the son he had banished. The funeral then turns into a celebration, and we see the story of the Cantone clan as Tommaso "writes" it: a vision of social integration, of harmony among the generations, genders, and sexualities. Men and women dance together, men with men, women with women, the straight and the gay, the old and the young. Tommaso's – and Ozpetek's – utopian vision is far from being realized in today's Italy, and certainly not only in that land. But it nonetheless is, to quote an English playwright who sometimes wrote about Italian family conflicts, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

