

## Daide Finco

*A Fascinating, Elusive, Frustrating Otherness. Sweden in Italian Films of the Early 1960s*

### Abstract

*In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Italy was experiencing its post-war transformation from a largely agrarian, relatively poor nation into one of the most economically and socially advanced countries of the world, whose role in the international scenario grew in importance, especially in the founding of the future European Union. In a rapidly changing society – even as regarded social customs – there increased the curiosity about the way other people and countries approached modernity. Sweden (often standing for the whole Scandinavia) was still an ‘exotic’ area for Italian public, included most intellectuals. My contribution focuses on three movies of the early 1960s (*Le svedesi*; *Il diavolo*; *Nude, calde e pure*), with further hints at the ‘Swedish’ element in other films of the 1960s and 1970s, in order to highlight and discuss how the image of Sweden is stereotyped (as well as problematized) in these relevant Italian works.*

### Résumé

À la fin des années 1950 et au début des années 1960, l'Italie vit sa transformation d'après-guerre : d'une nation largement agricole et relativement pauvre elle devient l'un des pays les plus avancés économiquement et socialement du monde, dont le rôle dans le scénario international est de plus en plus crucial, notamment dans la fondation de la future Union européenne. Dans une société en mutation rapide – même en ce qui concerne les coutumes sociales – la curiosité pour la façon dont les autres peuples et pays abordent la modernité augmente. La Suède (représentant souvent toute la Scandinavie) était encore une région « exotique » pour le public italien, y compris pour la plupart des intellectuels. Ma contribution porte sur trois films du début des années 1960 (*Le svedesi* ; *Il diavolo* ; *Nude, calde e pure*), avec d'autres références à l'élément « suédois » dans d'autres films des années 1960 et 1970, afin de mettre en évidence et d'examiner la façon dont l'image de la Suède est stéréotypée (ainsi que problématisée) dans ces œuvres italiennes significatives.

### Keywords

*Image of the North – Italian cinema – stereotypes – Swedish otherness – Italy and Scandinavia*

### Mots-Clés

Image du Nord – cinéma italien – stéréotypes – altérité suédoise – Italie et Scandinavie

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## A Fascinating, Elusive, Frustrating Otherness. Sweden in Italian Films of the Early 1960s

Daide Finco  
Università degli Studi di Genova

The Italian image of Northern Europe has long been marked by a degree of exoticism that could even be traced back to the influential illustrations contained in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555) by Olaus Magnus and to his *Carta marina* (1539), where frightening sea monsters emerge from the Northern Seas. The classical and medieval myth of *Ultima Thule* placed legendary islands or lands at the Northern boundaries of the known world (or hinting at still unknown places). This image has persisted in modernity, mainly as a literary concept, but nonetheless with a metaphorical significance, namely the perception of an essential otherness which Southern people tried to confront, at least in their imagination. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Scandinavian countries (and frequently Sweden as a metonymy for them all) were observed – sometimes suspiciously – in the context of the newly born Nordic welfare state, which clearly started to develop between the 1920s and the 1930s and began to receive attention internationally in the 1950s, often becoming the subject of journalistic and academic investigation.

This view of both politically and economically more advanced countries, which had experienced a long period of peace (nearly 150 years at that time, i.e. since the end of the Napoleonic wars){{1}}, was often connected with the idea of a society where people were emancipated, women had the same rights and freedom as men (universal suffrage was introduced in the Nordic countries about thirty years earlier than in Italy) and all social relations had essentially been redefined in comparison with what was usual in Southern Europe{{2}}. Women's demands and gains were even thought to threaten men's control in a strictly patriarchal society such as 1950s Italy. Additionally, Nordic people were said to enjoy a privileged experience of nature, something that deeply marked their lifestyle and their inborn sense of freedom and lack of moral scruples, at least if compared to the general hypocrisies and the explicit or implicit social prescriptions to which Italians felt they were subject. This apparently anthropological background turned out to be fruitful in Italian cinema, which was experiencing a rapid change from Neorealism to Italian-style comedy; in this context, some films displayed the most common stereotypes, pursuing dramatic (mainly comical) outcomes, but even occasionally questioning prejudices. Despite these elements, Italy's relationship with Sweden – now nurtured by the presence of Northern tourists – was essentially based on a lack of knowledge, and filmmakers often tried, or pretended, to help spectators learn more.

In order to focus on Italian cinematographic representations of Sweden, two things must firstly be taken into account: the peculiar social context of the 1950s-1960s and the development of the genres present in Italian cinema. Not only was Italian social, political, economic and material life under (re)construction after the catastrophic effects of the Second World War, but the country became a Republic for the first time in its brief history as a united nation. The country had positioned itself in the Western, i.e. American-influenced, bloc during the Cold War, although it had the largest Communist party in the West. The new Constitution that was in place since 1948 granted unprecedented rights, but they were only fully established after lively political battles and public demonstrations lasting until the 1970s. However, rapid changes were about to take place, mainly due to the international context and the development of the media (Italian public television started its programmes in 1954). The greatest innovations in Italian society were probably the emergence of a consumerist lifestyle and the birth of a new social category, “young people” who were more frequently consulted and sought as a commercial target, mainly for music and fashion. Young people proved to be more aware of their own opportunities in life and could enjoy dedicated media programmes and places of entertainment. In addition, younger generations started to reflect on the contradictions and deficiencies in the unchanged, authoritarian educational system, something which would lead to the protests and demands for reform of the late 1960s. Faced with such a dynamic context where women, above all, were making (or preparing to make) great steps forward in terms of emancipation, the media still often conveyed traditional images of the family and social roles.

As a reaction to the fascist regime (1922-1943), which was mainly focused on political propaganda and comforting portraits of the country emphasising success{{3}}, Italian cinema developed (early, during the War) a realistic and at times documentary language (though it was not

without pathos), which was labelled Neorealism. The purpose of Neorealism was to finally show real life without any hypocrisy, therefore dealing with such subjects as the spread of poverty, tough working conditions and violence, but also hope of redemption. This overarching common approach to representation was spontaneous, involving directors who would become famous and internationally known, and often relying on shoestring budgets and non-professional actors, due to the post-war emergency situation and general shortages. The phenomenon can be considered a pioneering rebirth of the national cinema, which had a brief, though seminal, history. However, Italians soon expressed their desire to enjoy funnier accounts and plots, being prepared to face concrete problems as long as they could laugh about them. These premises led to the *Commedia all'italiana* (Italian-style comedy), which began to appear in the late 1940s, but reached its most successful period of development throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and most of the 1970s. In particular, the Italian-style comedy managed to point out the first signs and the consequences of the economic boom (1958-1963){4}.

As well as films representing Italian society in a large variety of situations and nuances, in the 1960s, some directors and screenwriters began to explore Italians abroad, taking the chance to observe and play with the characteristics of foreign countries. In this context, I have selected three examples where the alterity of Swedish society is relevantly thematized and which are, to my knowledge, the three main contributions from this perspective in the early 1960s: *Le svedesi* (1960), *Il diavolo* (1963) and *Nude, calde e pure* (1964). The third film does not actually deal with Italian characters abroad, but the Italian viewpoint is represented by the narrating voice. However, the significance of all three films lies in their position as first reflections on the Swedes, depicted with a set of stereotypes about them, but also on Italian society, in a period when both countries, though starting from different premises, were experiencing a fast and decisive process of modernization.

The otherness of Sweden from an Italian standpoint was portrayed not only in the films, but also in their screenwriters' or directors' reports on the making of them. This was certainly the case of the first film I would like to focus on, probably the first ever Italian film on Sweden, at least in the comedy genre: *Le svedesi* ("Swedish Girls", 1960) by Gian Luigi Polidoro. As a testimony to the pioneering nature of this production, its scriptwriter Rodolfo Sonogo once declared:

I had never seen Sweden and I didn't know anything about it. Antonioni had told me that Polidoro [the director] wanted to make a little film in Sweden, a kind of first, not expensive film. Therefore, he invited him to visit Sweden with me for a couple of weeks [...] *Sweden was so far away that, after all, it could even not exist at all.* It is hard to imagine now what the world was like then, but someone could really come and tell us that a nation called Sweden had never existed, that it was just a literary fiction, a funny trick of the mind. I had never met anyone who had been to Sweden {5}.

Though the background was at first bewildering, it triggered Sonogo's ambition to explore that world, to the extent that it would come to fruition three years later in *Il diavolo*, the second movie on which I will focus. The main feature of *Le svedesi* is, doubtlessly, the desire to play with the naïve expectations of young male Italians who have the opportunity to stay in Sweden, in the presence of the much talked about (and even more dreamt about) Nordic women. The plot is straightforward: fascinated by the beauty and the shameless behaviour of some girls on a bus from Stockholm, three Italians leave for the Swedish capital with the purpose of conquering women and selling the shirts they smuggle onto the ship. After the first sequence when they are faced with Swedish customs and have to come to terms with their estrangement due to their poor English (and non-existent Swedish), the three meet Alberto, a Roman who has converted to the Nordic lifestyle and offers to put them up. After an evening at a club where women invite men to dance (much to their surprise), and the first contact between them occurs, the Italians seem to find the female company they were hoping for: Fabrizio falls madly in love with an austere policewoman who speaks a little Italian, Peppino accompanies home a beautiful girl with whom he struggles terribly to communicate, while Alessio decides to pay a prostitute just to have sex (but he is a victim of a terrible misunderstanding). One of the peculiar characters happens to be the young men's (older) friend, who has already settled down in Sweden, and proudly declares: "I have adapted to this social model and would not go back. Just think, I have applied to become a Swede." This statement should, however, be placed in the overall humorous atmosphere affecting the film (after having highlighted the Swedes' love of nature and animals, for instance, the same character approaches a duck in a pond to wring its neck and put it in his bag). The director Gian Luigi Polidoro considered this film a neorealist movie, in spite of its clearly humorous features. As a matter of fact, the making of the film

was preceded by two different surveys, the second of which led to the production of two short preparatory films. The first contribution, which was made by Sergio Perucchi, dealt with the weather, sunsets, landscapes, light and darkness. In 1963, Perucchi would publish a book on the family in Scandinavian countries. The second film was split into two parts, both directed by Polidoro, one about young Swedish people, their lives in the open air, motorcycle rides, liberal education, and organized social lives; the other one about Italians who had moved to Sweden and their jobs, such as selling balloons, plaster statues, ceramic items and so on.

The theme of Sweden and Swedish women had broken through into Italian life in 1960, thanks to the worldwide success of *La dolce vita* by Federico Fellini, in which the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg sensually displayed all her Junoesque beauty. This film does not present her as a Swedish character; however, she was very present in the Italian imagery of Northern beauty. In 1962, her imposing figure would inspire a surreal episode in Fellini's *Boccaccio '70*, where her huge image on a poster to promote drinking milk comes to life and stalks, in her charming and childish way, a conformist and bigoted bourgeois.

*Le svedesi* is a lively picture of different Italian and Swedish people, whose existences intertwine with occasionally funny results. This story might be seen as a kind of cinematographic sequel to Silvano Ambrogi's 1959 short debut novel of the same title. Yet, in Ambrogi's work, the much-expected Swedish female tourists never appear. On the contrary there is frequent talk of them, and they are eagerly awaited by the protagonists in the countryside and seaside resorts of Tuscany, in a vivid, melancholic portrayal of 1950s Italy.

The collaboration between Polidoro and Sonego and their experience of Sweden would lead, a few years later, to *Il diavolo*, a much more unusual film which testifies to different ambitions to exploit Swedish women's otherness from an Italian perspective, be it in a trivial and entertaining or a refined and problematic manner. Alberto Sordi, playing the protagonist Amedeo Ferretti, reported a conversation with the producer Dino De Laurentiis about the subject: he wanted to act as a married Italian businessman travelling to Sweden, where he was sure he would easily have several passionate love affairs with emancipated Nordic women. Yet, according to Sordi's suggested plot, Ferretti would actually fail on each occasion, his behaviour would generate, on the contrary, numerous comical and pathetic situations, and, eventually, he would return to Italy without any conquests<sup>{6}</sup>. One might notice how this essential plot already hints at the (unpleasant and frustrating) encounter with an allegedly more emancipated society, where lack of moral scruples and feelings of shame was supposed to be the rule. In addition, the Italian public was already used to considering Sordi's characters as lively, provocative (and rarely edifying) examples of the average contemporary Italian<sup>{7}</sup>.

Sonego's project layout was clearer and more ambitious. Deeply struck by the Swedish silences he had experienced during the making of *Le svedesi*, he started to imagine a kind of travel diary, with no plot, but with the strong feeling that he would make something interesting out of it:

It looked like a very dangerous, crazy project [...]. I would leave for Sweden again as a Northern Italian young man who had attended film societies, who had seen German films and Dreyer's films, who admired Bergman's professionalism and elegance, and who, in spite of everything, had remained deeply Catholic in a now agnostic country. Sweden fascinated me because of the tangible presence of a future all of us, sooner or later, would be bound to experience. Not the fear of atomic wars, which was so common in those years, but a destiny of solitude and independence for men, for women, for couples. A kind of feeling that actually I had not perceived while working on *Le svedesi*, but that I knew I undoubtedly would find in winter, with snow and darkness at three o'clock in the afternoon. A journey through a secular country that was forty years in advance if compared to the rest of the world, to America and Russia, which were both puritan, and to Italy, which was half-bigoted and half-heathen. *I wanted to make a film on the future of the soul*. I was not interested in what would happen to the characters; I planned, for the first time, to make use of long mute scenes<sup>{8}</sup>.

Here, significant polarities are suggested: Mediterranean light vs Northern darkness; Southern social life vs Northern solitude (the price of independence?); Italian conformism (with Sonego assessing the hypocrisy of agnosticism in Catholic disguise) vs Swedish courage and freedom; Italians' outdated attachment to traditions vs Swedish experience of an unavoidable destiny. Yet, paradoxically, the "future of the [human] soul" can only be described through an unusual silence, maybe too great an alterity for an awkward, average Italian man to cope with. Sonego talked about the making of this film

as something unique, as the lack of a proper script led all the actors to immerse themselves in Swedish society in search of inspiration. Consequently, several scenes are a slightly modified version of real experiences, in a naturalness which places the film between fiction and docu-film, even acting as an original counterpart to some influential, but likely more stereotyped docu-films on Sweden made in the same decade, like *Nude, calde e pure*, which will be examined later, and *Svezia. Inferno e Paradiso* (“Sweden: Heaven and Hell”, 1968) by Luigi Scattini.

*Il diavolo* is entirely set abroad: it starts with the protagonist leaving on a train from Italy to go to Sweden and ends with him on the return train, alone. In spite of two international awards (a Golden Bear for the film and a Golden Globe for the main actor), this movie is nowadays very little known in Italy, certainly overlooked in favour of many other films by Sordi before and after. The film is evidently structured as a thesis which is proved to be false (hence the protagonist’s different impressions at the beginning and at the end). Amedeo Ferretti is a leather and fur trader making his first trip abroad and his first long journey without his wife. The day before, she accidentally glanced at his travel guide, finding the following presentation of Swedish women:

Girls will not ask you who you are, how old you are, if you have wife or children. They will not ask you silly questions. One of them will take you by the hand, will take you into her room, will light two small candles, will stare at you in silence; and, in that deep and mysterious glance, you will understand that you have never before been a happy man{{9}}.

This is the thesis which typifies Ferretti from the beginning: he will constantly pursue his goal with this mantra in mind. Nonetheless, his curiosity about Swedish society will cause him to try to acquire better knowledge of it whenever possible. This apodictic and, in a contemporary view, astonishing description of Swedish women – invented by Sonego as a suitable formulation of an urban legend – provides two further noteworthy elements. First, women will be Ferretti’s way in to Swedish culture and mystery: while male figures explain the main features of the Swedish worldview in a rational way (and this happens in three longer conversations){{10}}, women offer him a deep, emotional experience of it, until this has unpleasant and partly frightening consequences. Second, all mystery – and, at the beginning, all signs of hope for Ferretti – is found in the gazes of women, which the protagonist eagerly explores and enjoys with all the pleasure of a foreigner who does not speak Swedish, just a bit of English and French. Ferretti clearly embodies a traditional *male gaze*, which objectifies women both in a voyeuristic and in a fetishistic way{{11}} (for instance, in his fascination for women’s boots), yet whose inclination is constantly scorned by the outcomes of his encounters and rendez-vous. He never shows acceptance or understanding (apart from at the very end) for the unexpected context he discovers in Sweden. On the other hand, women are not proud promoters of their own viewpoint, rather they express their own lifestyle naturally, while Ferretti intrudes into their lives.

The peculiarity and probably the limits of this film both lie in the co-existence of two very different, partly antithetical needs: that of exploring Sweden without prejudices (while questioning or, at least, provocatively staging the major stereotypes) and that of developing a typical Italian comedy, whose protagonist has to show off all his impertinence and shamelessness in order to defend his alleged status as a Latin lover, a feature that is a source of fun in many scenes and rather useless in such a different environment. These contradictory premises influenced the outcome: some critics referred to an Alberto Sordi not at his best, claiming that all his efforts were somehow frustrated and, in the clash with a foreign reality, his character was often unsuitable. The representation of Sweden, on the other hand, triggered criticism from both conservative and liberal standpoints, which labelled that society as either immoral or insufficiently progressive{{12}}. On the whole, there emerges a (deliberate) failure of the brilliant Italian comedy, where everything in the setting and the environment had been planned to make Ferretti clumsy, without eventually leading the spectators to fully side with the Swedes, with a general atmosphere of suspension.

The destination of Ferretti’s trip is Stockholm, but his journey is interrupted by a terrible toothache, forcing him to stop in a little town at night and to walk in the snow in search of help. This is another expedient to increase his awkwardness, as he wraps his winter scarf around his face so that he looks like an old woman. The first person who can give him indications speaks only Swedish, but understands he needs a dentist and leads him to the community preacher, who is also a dentist. The scene is a funny interlude, yet the main thing to consider is their conversation after the dentist has seen him:

In our country there is a great wellbeing, which has been achieved through, so to speak, a rosy and discreet socialism; but recently, new generations have more or less lost their faith and ... churches are completely deserted. It's heaven, yet one where God is by now unknown." [Ferretti replies]: "A country without God ... But, tell me, father, is it true that even women here have left the Church?" / "Yes, exactly like men." / "Therefore they must have lost that sense of shame and guilt which has always been women's greatest scruple, above all in love affairs..."

Here the main theme of religion, which will be taken up again later (and which is recurrent in Italian films about Sweden at that time), is introduced. Ferretti's stance is particularly interesting: he is seen to attach great importance to God, faith, and the Church, but at the same time he is attracted by Swedish emancipation, and his question about women's freedom has comical or trivial connotations after the deep reflection on spiritual things. Conversations like this highlight Italian social hypocrisy, as Ferretti happened to reveal he regretted not yet having been unfaithful to his wife.

Religion turns out to be a sort of obsession for Ferretti, who refers to this subject even during his rendezvous with women – his potential love affairs – as if, basically, he feels a sense of guilt for what he is going to do or, from another perspective, as if he means to save the godless young Swedish women he is flirting with. This is especially the case of his meeting with a very young woman (she says she is 16, while he is around forty) he picks up in a night-club. Once in his hotel room with her, he experiences an upsetting of the foreseen roles, as the girl does not seem to be charmed by him, while she is deeply interested in his experience during the war, which Ferretti mentions, after seeing a scar on his chest. She says she has never met someone who fought in a war and shows real pity and empathy when he tells her about how he murdered a Greek soldier.

More decisive is Ferretti's encounter with a married woman at the Nobel ceremony, where she notices he is bored and uneasy, and, afterwards, she takes some time to talk to him. Ferretti emphasizes his loneliness in the capital, and she notes down his address and phone number, later inviting him to her house outside the city. Once there, he takes her by the arm and they kiss each other: he is sure he will have a real love affair this time, but she leads him to the party they are having upstairs. Ferretti's alienation reaches its climax, when he has the chance to meet the woman's husband, who has nothing against all the signs of affection the two keep exchanging. Ferretti learns from the woman that her husband knows perfectly well that she is faithful to him in every circumstance apart from one, and replies: "But this is the most important to me" / "You [Italians] give too much importance to these things." Ferretti then presses her to his body, and she reacts: "Do not hug me so tight" / "Ah, so he is jealous." / "No, he isn't. He is an adorable, clever man, above every kind of selfishness. We are linked by feelings you maybe can't understand ...". And the husband himself, in the last conversation about Sweden, will confirm this situation, once again explaining their freedom and their openness to every joy of life through their lack of religious constraints.

The development of the film offers a gradual change from the elaborate and artificial side of Swedish society (such as intellectual conversations, the Nobel ceremony, and business talks) to more primitive activities, like the closeness of the naked bodies in the sauna, which eventually run out – still naked – through the wood in a burst of happiness, and the final car race on an icy lake. This is by far the most dramatic scene, where Ferretti is picked up by an unknown woman, who only speaks Swedish and has fun frightening him with her reckless driving, but whose long silences he seems to understand for the first time, until the risk of sinking due to the breaking ice makes him want to travel back home.

The last scene reminds one of the first, with Ferretti lying in bed and smoking while looking at the landscape outside the train. His face is reflected in the train window, but, while his interior voice is giving the last monologue, the faces of all the women he has encountered during his stay in Sweden appear alternately. "I liked the noise of the train taking me back to my old town, to my office, to my friends, to my wife ... If you look at them, they will smile at you, if you take them by the hand, they will follow you; if you love them, they will be grateful. But they will never be yours, because they are souls, and you are the devil."

This last, decisive remark explains the film's title, while leading to the greatest paradox: Ferretti, who more than once wanted to represent religious morality faced with the inexplicable and alarming freedom or even lack of virtue so widespread among Swedish women, seems to have encountered a superior world, with which he cannot fully come into contact, and before which he embodies a perverse temptation{{13}}. Figured (by him) as potential and willing objects of his proud and self-confident machismo, the women he meets have a surprisingly different way of expressing their emancipation, something the protagonist is not yet ready to accept, so that his return home acquires the features of a

liberation, after Swedish women's consistent, complex and balanced conduct has overwhelmed his stereotyped behaviour and his hypocrisy.

At this stage, we can point out a set of *concept mythemes* <sup>{14}</sup> in the Italian imagery about Sweden (or the North in general): sexual emancipation, freedom of thought, lack of moral scruples, growing atheism or agnosticism, advanced modernity, solitude, a peculiar relationship with nature (and with their own body as part of it), long and dark winter days. Yet, if in *Le svedesi*, these features are mainly used to trigger dramatic and comical effects, in *Il diavolo*, on the contrary, they gradually but relentlessly affirm the distance between Swedish and Italian culture, eventually shaping Sweden as an enigma which is hard to handle and requires a deep change in one's own mindset.

Most of the above-mentioned issues – this time in an implicit comparison with the Italian worldview – are addressed in a peculiar docu-film, a joint Italian and French production of 1964, released in 1965: *Nude, calde e pure* (Naked, hot and pure [the Italian title makes it explicit that it deals with women]), which is actually not an example of Italian-style comedy. Despite its ambiguous title, this production claims to investigate and find connections between two very different societies – Polynesia and Sweden. The former is considered as a primitive world that is experiencing the appearance of modernity, while enhancing the view of Sweden as a very advanced society that is rediscovering some primitive approaches to the world. The latter aspect is worth investigating as a completion of my brief and synchronic survey.

The film develops the idea that socially and technologically advanced societies, like Sweden which represents a Western avant-garde, are rejecting modern behaviours and conventions and recovering some older ones, especially in terms of approaches to the body and freedom of relationships. Thus, this contribution implicitly suggests that very modern people have time, freedom and cultural means to set social constraints aside and move towards a true wellbeing, which is, however, not unproblematic itself. The narrative structure is built up to suggest a comparison, with ten sections of different lengths alternating Tahitian and Swedish customs, focusing on the female condition, in a parade of beautiful Eastern and Western women who, occasionally, are even interviewed. Yet, it is the narrating voice that presents, comments and, above all, draws conclusions to provide coherent explanations and reinforce exoticism through ironical or provocative remarks. Polynesian and Swedish social occasions are constantly set in parallel with a frequent charming alternation of tropical summers and Scandinavian winters, where – due to a sort of unavoidable evolution – “naked humans dress up [in Polynesia], dressed humans take their clothes off [in Sweden]”.

With the background of a winter landscape, Sweden is introduced as the place “where the best steel is produced, and human life is ruled according to the most systematic and frightening rationality [...] a country that has eradicated diseases due to misery, yet, it does not know how to cure the ones caused by wealth” <sup>{15}</sup>. Even here, emancipated women provide access to Swedish culture, thus their initiative, in love affairs as well as in everyday life and life at work, is highlighted, something that evidently strikes (and pleases) the awkward male Italians who have gone to Sweden in search of beautiful blond prey: the hunting metaphor occurs, and it is remarkable that, in the penultimate scene on Sweden, when women are shown riding horses in the snow, it is observed that “[this is] a risky and violent sport, a collective burst of energy. With such an impetus, in ancient centuries, women entered as protagonists into Swedish history”. Emancipation is therefore explained as the legacy of an anthropological otherness, something that bursts out of a remote past to affect the present.

Despite the unusual condition of female Swedes, which could be disturbing for some Italians in the 1960s, it is added that Southern people are welcome, as racism is considered monstrous, while Italians, French people and Africans are asked to be sociable and cheerful, with the promising chance of reawakening Swedish women's maternal instincts. Nonetheless, any contact between Italians and Swedes is presented as leading to reciprocal misunderstanding: “So South and North can meet in a pathetic effort of comprehension through the natural ways of youth and sex [...] Italians [are] drunk with the Southern myth of the Northern woman, an unattainable goddess. They act like bosses.” <sup>{16}</sup>

Pleasant love experiences are actually possible, and more than once depicted as a kind of fairy tale; however, this never reduces the extent of Swedish otherness, which in the last scenes is further investigated, with the eye and sometimes the language of an entomologist. Dance scenes are thus followed by gymnastic performances, whose benefits were discovered, it is said, by a Swede, and which allow “any part of the female body, none excluded, to be awoken, set in motion, polished, boosted towards its natural development.” Apart from its fundamental contribution to physical beauty, the

practice of gymnastics is seen as a wonderful chance to experience “the sense of harmony in social life, the habit of playing one’s own part together with others [...]. There is no place for untidiness up here.” This remark, expressed like many others in an enthusiastic tone, in fact ends up in an ambiguous consideration of the advantages of a well-organized society, where individuality is always forced to fit collective needs.

In Sweden, it is later explained, people live in safety and peace thanks to the government’s caution and good sense, and the future is taken for granted. Nevertheless, a malicious enemy lies in wait: “Swedes miss nothing. And this is maybe the reason why the most dangerous storms in Swedish souls happen about nothing, not something existing, rather something non-existing. That indescribable condition called boredom.” Tedium is overcome by car races on ice (here the final event seen in *Il diavolo* is shown as an expression of vitality rather than a source of puzzling feelings). After routine days spent in their offices or factories, young Swedish people are shown to gather like “polar animals” to spend time together and look for physical contact in a world where a high respect for others’ space and privacy usually rules. They even organize fake fights, or they pretend to be drunk at parties, where they organize games of strip poker.

The most relevant aspect in this context is young people’s attitude, which more than once is said to imitate American film characters, so as even in the North a process of cultural unification, linked to consumerism, is evidently taking place. The anxious search for company, according to this analysis, is a temporary escape from the solitude that affects everyone, but perhaps also a revolutionary attack on society, or more precisely on “boredom, respectability, reserve: the three daily virtues that control the mechanisms of their society.” As human beings, they need violent outbursts, which, however, remain just a funny game for them, unlike what happens in many other parts of the world.

The film even provides interviews with Swedish people, where we find women who resemble those met by Ferretti, who claim that Italians only think about sex<sup>{17}</sup> and a woman’s availability, while in Sweden women already have leading positions in factories or firms. The interviewer asks further questions about the family, parents and religion, discovering, however, a more varied world than he had expected. The survey on the Swedish (female) soul is further complicated by an inborn sense of nature and silence, that in the film leads a girl to take care of a squirrel in a park while faintly uttering some lyrical verses: “the young woman you met yesterday in a club – and music, dance, company were never unbridled enough for her – now would hate your voice. [...] You will never know the deepest secret of nature’s melancholy, because you do not love the snow as she does, and you are not able to talk to the wind.” A similar scene had taken place in *Il diavolo*, where Ferretti chats up a woman who is taking care of a bird and is clearly rejected by her. No narrating voice is provided on that occasion, just the protagonist’s disappointment and puzzlement.

Swedish melancholy becomes the protagonist in the last section, when it is said that the Swedish light eyes (of a woman, unsurprisingly) have a more and more anguished longing for the sun. At the end of this journey the narrating voice concludes that in Sweden, many signs hint at a future that will be for everyone a world of glass, steel, crystal, “a difficult and sometimes incomprehensible moral experience [...] where, however, many ancient truths about humankind reappear.” Sweden finally plays the role of a privileged point of view from which to consider human history and destiny, in a broader perspective, which Italy – still in a quick rush to become modernized after the destruction of the war and the privations and hardship due to the previous regime – cannot, yet offer. These remarks may be reminiscent of Sonogo’s project for *Il diavolo*, with a common feeling that perfectly represents the least trivial Italian stereotype with regards to Sweden.

## Conclusions

Italian interest in Sweden in the 1960s (and 1970s) was triggered both by the exoticism of a fairly small country whose society suggested a new, controversial and revolutionary lifestyle, and by a set of urban legends about Swedish women’s emancipation, while films and an increasing number of Northern tourists allowed their beauty to be assessed. Italy was experiencing significant economic growth at that time, which laid the foundations for a proper boom and for several social reforms to modernize the country. Italians were eager to travel abroad in search of new job opportunities and love affairs, and the newly born Italian-style comedy, which grew out of Neorealism, soon took the opportunity to exploit this new context. The general lack of knowledge about the North led to both cultivate and exploit commonplaces and to try to understand something more: these two main intentions intertwine in an interesting and, occasionally, fruitful way to convey a charming observation of the North.



Italian comedies in the early 1960s make fun of young Italians' expectations and their awkwardness, while, in an unsurprisingly patriarchal (and heterosexual, if not macho) perspective, Swedish women assume, often unwillingly, the task of representing Swedish otherness, in a general instance of essentialization of a whole culture that marks this exploration. If female emancipation and self-confidence are at the core of these encounters, it must be observed that this situation is nuanced and made problematic, not only by the assessment of a more complex (and frustrating) attitude by Swedish women, but also by the acknowledgement of Swedish solitude, unease and conformism as the counterpart of their efficient and protective society, even though this aspect seems to be in turn stereotyped.

The most relevant features in these surveys (which are as entertaining as they are didactic) are probably, from an Italian viewpoint, the more developed Swedish sense of nature and physical wellness, which in itself proves to be a way out of modern society's artificiality, and, above all, the presage that Sweden was just experiencing in advance what Italy would see and possibly practise in the future. From this perspective, Sweden plays the role of both a model and a daring exception in the Western world: if we take, for instance, the example of the United States, which acted as a clear political and economic guide, we must observe that this country (as the screenwriter Sonogo had remarked) was a religious country with strong Christian morality where the freedom of women was (and partly is) still debated. On the other hand, Sweden itself proudly affirmed its pursuing of a social and political (even to some extents economic) alternative to the leading doctrines in the world of the Cold War. These circumstances made Sweden, even if this may not always be explicitly stated in the considered movies, a sort of laboratory to become aware of what we might gain but even lose with progress, which in the 1950s and 1960s was particularly rapid and determined, in the South as well in the North.

[[1]]The long period of peace and political neutrality (questioned only in very recent times) is actually only a feature of Sweden in the Scandinavian context; yet, as said above, it was Sweden that mostly represented the whole of the North in Italian public debate and imagery, probably due to its position as the biggest and most populated country, but likely even to the image its establishment purposefully developed and conveyed abroad. It can be amusing to notice that contributions about Sweden happened to be accompanied by illustrations or videos of other Scandinavian countries. [[1]]

[[2]]This overall perception was partly based on real phenomena. For deeper reflections on these topics, see Marzio Barbagli, *Provando e riprovando. Matrimonio e divorzio in Italia e negli altri paesi occidentali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1990; Louis Roussel, « La famille en Europe occidentale: divergences et convergences », *Population*, 1, 1992, p.133-152; Carmen Belloni, « Madri e padri: due tempi, due organizzazioni », *Inchiesta*, 111, 1996, p. 35-43. [[2]]

[[3]]“In the cinema of the fascist era, tragedy and comedy, on the whole, meet on the neutral field of sentimentalism.” Masolino D'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana. Il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 2008, p. 34. All translations from Italian are my own. [[3]]

[[4]]For further remarks on the essential features of Italian-style comedy, see Masolino D'Amico, *ibid*, p. 31-32 and p. 57, and the entry “Commedia all'italiana” in the Enciclopedia Treccani (see bibliography). Here we might underline that, born as a lighter version of Neorealism, this kind of approach allowed serious and problematic topics (with real taboos) to be dealt with, avoiding – at least partly – censorship. [[4]]

[[5]]Tatti Sanguineti, *Il cervello di Alberto Sordi. Rodolfo Sonogo e il suo cinema*, Milano, Adelphi, 2015, p. 202 (my emphasis). [[5]]

[[6]]Tullio Kezich and Alessandra Levantesi, *Dino De Laurentiis, la vita e i film*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2001, p. 154. [[6]]

[[7]]Sordi was already a star at that time as, in the 1950s, he had offered interesting contributions to several portraits of the Italian man (with titles such as *The Widower*, *The Bachelor*, *The Seducer*). He also featured among the protagonists of a trilogy by Mario Monicelli on Italian history in the First World War (*La Grande Guerra*, 1959), Second World War (*Tutti a casa*, 1960) and the years leading to the economic boom (*Una vita difficile*, 1961). [[7]]

[[8]]Tatti Sanguineti, *op. cit.*, p. 220-221 (my emphasis). [[8]]

[[9]]Something similar – though less romantic – occurs in *Le svedesi*, where Fabrizio reads from a book, “they are generally tall and beautiful [...] even in the coldest climates they bathe naked in the snow [...] in any hotel you just need to press a button and a maid will promptly come to wash your back”. [[9]]

[[10]]For further details and remarks, see Davide Finco, “In Search of the Swedish Soul among the Stereotypes. The Italian Film *Il diavolo* (1963, *To Bed or Not To Bed*)”, *Scandinavian Exceptionalisms. Culture, Society, Discourse*, eds. Jens Bjerring-Hansen, Torben Jelsbak and Anna Estera Mrozewicz, Berlin, Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt Universität, Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik. Band 29, 2021, p. 483-506. [[10]]

[[11]]See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen*, 16/3, 1975, p. 6-18. [[11]]

[[12]]See Sanguineti, *op.cit.*, p. 224-226 and Finco, *op.cit.*, p. 502-505. [[12]]

[[13]]This element of *pureness* is exploited in a different, somewhat provocative way in “Il cavalluccio svedese” (“The Dalecarlian Horse”), the second episode – by Luigi Magni – of the film *Quelle strane occasioni* (“Those strange chances”, 1976), where the Italian protagonist hosts a Swedish friend’s daughter for the night. He has known her since her childhood, when he spent some months in Sweden. He is alone at home (his wife and daughter are away), when the Swedish girl arrives with her boyfriend, who, however, decides not to stay. She has always been in love with the Italian man (in spite of their very different ages) and, between spontaneity and provocation, she displays all the freedom she is used to in Sweden (like going around naked and sleeping with nothing on). The difference between her approach and the way the man’s daughter lives (though she is about the same age) is remarkable and shown by the daughter’s childlike bedroom. During that night and the following morning, however, the man will acquire a better (though unsettling, and partly comic) knowledge of his own life and family. Eventually, the man wonders if she will tell her Swedish boyfriend about their night of love and she replies: “No, I won’t: he is jealous, he is not pure like we are!”. In spite of the different period (over ten years later than *Il diavolo*), Antonio (played by Nino Manfredi) shows similar confusion and embarrassment to Ferretti, while he similarly pretends to be open-minded, though the situation is evidently the opposite. In the end, *pureness* is in both cases presented as emancipation in human relationships without hypocrisy. [[13]]

[[14]]See Thomas Mohnike, “Narrating the North. Towards a theory of mythemes of social knowledge in cultural circulation”, *Deshima*, 14, 2020, p. 19. [[14]]

[[15]]In this regard, and in the context of the international attention paid to the Swedish case at that time, it is worth mentioning Mario Soldati’s survey *I disperati del benessere. Viaggio in Svezia* (“Desperate out of wellbeing. A journey to Sweden”, 1970), where limits and contradictions of the Swedish society and lifestyle are highlighted, with surprising, occasionally apodictic testimonies by Swedes. [[15]]

[[16]]This comment is placed during dance scenes in a night club, where romantic encounters suddenly turn into violence by Italian males, which is explained as the “survival [in those Italians] of the most barbarian ages in the modern man’s conscience”. The narrating voice, however, imagines that psychiatrists would even study Swedish women, and concludes that a journey to the South could be healthy for them. [[16]]

[[17]]The connection between Northern countries and sex (in a more emancipated context) is suggested several times in Italian films of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with some hints or funny jokes by the Italian characters, or even with the simple use of a few replies in a (pseudo)Northern language. A peculiar example may be the episode “Lavoratore italiano all’estero” (“Italian worker abroad”) in the film *Sessomatto* (“Madsex”, 1973), a lively humorous description of different idiosyncrasies about sex. The protagonist (played by Giancarlo Giannini) is a sperm donor who accomplishes his task (with extraordinary and much-praised outcomes) by having erotic fantasies about the very beautiful nun (played by Laura Antonelli) who has welcomed him. While in the other stories of the film the different characters generally display a variety of Italian regional accents, in this episode – clearly set in Denmark – they all speak an invented language, easily reminiscent of some Germanic one, where occasionally some Swedish, Danish or (mainly) German words can be distinguished. [[17]]