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Between Purity, Sexual Corruption and Maternity

—Sexual and Ethnic Ambiguities in *Love with the Proper Stranger* (1963)

Love with the Proper Stranger is a film made in 1963 by Robert Mulligan. It tells the story of an Italian-American young woman Angie, who finds herself pregnant after having a romantic encounter with an Italian-American musician Rocky, and she asks him to find a doctor for her. In their thwarted attempt to abort the child, the two of them begin to develop some affections, and after some twists and turns, the story ends with Rocky's proposal to Angie. While Mulligan lightly summarized it as a story of "falling in love in reverse," and the screenwriter Arnold Schulman also joked it as "A funny thing happened on the way to the abortionist . . ." (Bowman 231), the film was actually quite bold in the time of its release, and shed light upon larger themes including ethnicity and gender.

Although it ends with a potential marriage, the story is based on a premarital sex that results in pregnancy, and despite the strained effort to reframe the "one night stand" in a marriage, the film makes breakthroughs in terms of its shaping of its female protagonist, embodying up-to-date ideas about gender and sex while providing us with a somehow fresh view of third-generation Italian-American families. This paper will argue that by depicting Angie, a third-generation Italian American woman's story, this film expresses some of America's cultural anxieties in a period of transitions of 1960s. The Italian ethnicity of the main characters helps the film to construct the conflicts between family and individual, between the good old values and the new liberalist beliefs. Meanwhile, the film leaves much ambiguous space in terms of Angie's Italianness and sexuality. By rendering her Italian ethnic marks almost invisible, as well as hiding her romantic sexual encounter behind her pure image, the film represents a time of rapid changes, where ideological and moral problems are left unresolved.

Angie's character is easily differentiated from earlier representations of Italian-American women in that she enjoys more agency or subjectivity in the story, more significance in the narrative, and more points of view which could illicit more identification. As Golden has beautifully put: "The pattern of portrayal of Italian women suggests that they rise to significance

only when the film itself is not overtly exploitative, when the aim is exploration of important issues and ideas that reach beneath surface renderings of ethnic stereotype. Only then can these women, even if they are still trapped in the kitchen, become more than *mamma mia*” (Golden 354). In contrast, Angie is the protagonist of the film, the central figure who strings together the storylines of she and Rocky, her family, and the Columbo family. She can push forward and lead the narrative, for example, in the conflicts with her family where she decides to leave, but she also has the ability to freeze the narrative, when we see her crying behind the curtain, having us immerse in her moment of grief and helplessness. Angie also has a personality which is strong and determined, especially near the beginning. In the first scene where she pages Rocky, she is the one who initiates and commands, while Rocky can only accept and cooperate. She looks determined and strong: “You don’t know who I am, do you?” putting him in an embarrassing situation, where he looks for words and stutters.

Angie’s conflicts with her family also proves her rebelliousness and sets her apart from other members of the family. Her brother Dominick’s insistence on picking her up by truck and questioning everything about her life has aroused her anger. The family’s collusion of having her meet Mr. Columbo and her feeling of lacking privacy at home finally makes her mad, and she for once wants to leave the family. This being said, there are limitations to her agency within the family, and sometimes her ways of rebellion are less explicit. For example, when she gets back home from work, she should help do the chores while the boys do not. As Casillo suggest, “a double sexual standard is also suggested in Angie’s passing comment that her brother Giulio ‘goes out with all kinds’” (Casillo 582). But in the scene in which Angie is doing the dishes, her brothers are sitting at the table and their mother is serving the brothers, Angie and her mother take up the farthest spot in the two ends of the image, and their spaces almost never overlap. And When her mother boasts about the good old days when “You did what you had to do, and if you don’t like it you liked it anyway” and is about to start preaching how she meet her husband and get married soon, Angie quickly interrupts. In various ways, Angie tries to assert her difference from her family, especially her mother.

Perhaps what is most rebellious about Angie, however, is the way she and Rocky deals with the premarital pregnancy. As several biographers and scholars points out, “‘Morality’ never intrudes on a scene that becomes a turning point in their relationship and that, when the movie opened, would provoke several American reviewers to take the moral high ground” (Lambert 193);

“The attractive pair thus begins their friends-or-lovers tango, matter-of-factly, without frenzy, without panic. That ‘panic’ is just what some sputtering reviewers/moralists thought was missing: a sense of the biblical consequences of pre-marital sex and abortion” (Bowman 232); “Yet the unwed mother could also be rewarded with the love of a good man and welcomed back into legitimate domesticity. Such films provide important clues about society’s shifting attitudes on sexuality and notions of male prowess” (May 2). Indeed, the film provides little, if any, outsider’s look to establish the moral stance. Within the Italian-American community and families, words such as “abortion” “premarital pregnancy” are unspoken, but Rocky and Angie are never faced with direct charges of immorality.

However, if morality has little presence, shame could be another factor. As Casillo reminds us, “the southern Italy from which most Italian Americans derive exemplifies a shame rather than guilt culture in which violators of social norms risk ridicule and ostracism” (Casillo 583). Angie, Rocky, their families and even the abortionists clearly evades words such as “pregnancy,” “baby” or “abortion,” for it is unspeakable in a shame culture. When they have the first conversation in the hall, Rocky carefully avoids any sexual implications when Angie asks him whether he remembers her, and answers merely “Yeah, it was in a dance in Brooklyn this summer.” Later when Rocky comes to talk to Angie at Macy’s, when he has to mean the baby, he refers to it as “the thing.” Also, were it not for shame, Dominick wouldn’t feel enraged to know that Angie refuses to marry Rocky when Rocky is willing to, and mother wouldn’t be ill in bed. Angie’s subjectivity is limited in the culture of shame, just as her rebellion is curbed at home.

If the fact that Angie sets up her mind to find a doctor is a proof of her agency, then her failure to take the abortion announces that she only has partial control over her own body. Moreover, I would argue that the sequence happening at the abortionist’s serves as a watershed which marks Rocky and Angie’s shifting roles in their relationship. Entering through the door, they slowly walk through a long slim hall, then go up the spiral runs of stairs, the entire process resembling the path to the womb. Or Boswell contends, “abortions in movies were illegal and easier to stage, as in . . . *Love with the Proper Stranger* (1963), where Angie (Natalie Wood) climbs the narrow stairs of a tenement to meet the abortion provider . . .” (Boswell 175-176). After the man opens the room door only slightly, the camera shoots Angie’s face from inside the house, and through the slight gap between the door and the wall we see the panicking face of Angie, visually

caught between the man's back and his stout silhouette. After Angie enters the room inside, while she is still hesitating, Rocky feels how she feels and takes her place do the decision.

After the incident at the abortionist's, Rocky begins to take more initiative, while Angie seems to lose much of her autonomy and determination which she once had before. It is as if the moment Rocky kicks open the door greatly restores his masculinity, so that later he could "be like a man" and tell Dominick that he wants to marry Angie, and could start to take the initiative to invite Angie out for dinner, etc. When Angie leans on his shoulder while sitting in the cab after they leave the abortionist's, their image are superimposed with the background of New York's night view. The beauty of this scene almost lets the audience forget that the problem for Angie has not been solved.

Why does the change of Rocky to a be more proper, more responsible, more "man's man" bring the change of subjectivity to both characters? According to a scholar, by the late fifties there was a shift in relevant films which "lessened emphasis on the virtue of the mother and the transformation of her careless lover into a caring father-to-be" (May 2). As audience had "a greater interest in women's relaxed sexual ethics, and a new identification with a male character's ability to navigate the perilous waters of sexuality and domesticity," the filmmakers presume that the viewer's identification would shift "from a female to male bias," so "they come to articulate the male concern, 'How will he reconcile sex and paternity?'" That reconciliation depends increasingly on the male protagonist's ability to see the heroine as an object of desire rather than a helpmeet and mother" (May 2). In this film, we can say that before Rocky decides to accept the child, the child is a source of agency for the mother, Angie, as Boswell argues: "A woman on screen . . . has a power, hidden from the camera, that she—and we—already assume. What is the hidden power? Pregnancy, of course" (Boswell 168). When Rocky thinks of marrying Angie, he claims the baby and takes away a part of the power that Angie originally has alone.

In concise, Angie oscillates in the vast uncertain area between asserting full agency and having little control over her body. A similar contradiction is reflected through the romantic sexual encounter, which motivates the whole story, and her pure image, refraining from any overt display of sexuality. In conjunction, Rocky and Angie are also subject to an apparent lack of ethnic marks, or as Casillo phrases it, the "lack of *italianità*," amounts to a social comment, witting or unwitting, by the filmmakers" (Casillo 583), which form a stark contrast with their families and other members of the Italian-American family. What is unique about the film, I would argue, is how the

invisibility of sexuality and Italian ethnicity intertwine, and how the tensions between visibility and invisibility, desire and repression, are at play in cultural anxieties.

Before I dive into more analyses, it will do benefit to show that *Love with the Proper Stranger* is a film where the influence of main actors and actresses can and should be taken personally, and that chances are that they can carry their old personal marks to this new work. First, the contributions of the director Mulligan and the producer Alan Pakula is hardly separable. As Mulligan claims strongly, “There is no question Alan made a significant contribution on every film we made—and in every conceivable way. Alan had a direct hand in—or influenced—aesthetic choices and decisions throughout all our films. –Robert Mulligan, 2002” (Brown 57), and as the biographer Brown comments, “It is virtually impossible to isolate Pakula’s specific contributions to the films he made with Mulligan” (58). Then when asked about the approach of working with actors, Pakula answers that he works in a very private way, being “more a conspirator than a director” (Pakula 42). He takes producing a film as a collaborative process and would allow for much room for spontaneous creations (Pakula 43-44). Before the shooting, Natalie had deep conversation with Pakula: “[Natalie] talked about her own experience, and her progress in figuring out who she really was, what she really wanted out of life, with an almost sexual excitement. She also told me about her family situation, her fear of dark water . . .” (Lambert 194). Natalie also had similar reflections: ““Many of the scenes in *Stranger* were improvised,” Natalie revealed, ‘in the abortion sequence, all the script said was to get hysterical, and Steve and I worked the scene out by ourselves’” (Bowman 232). Based on these, it would be useful to consider the mutual influence of Natalie Wood, the former roles she played, and the character of Angie in *Love with the Proper Stranger*.

Continuing her acting career in Hollywood as a child star-turned-adult actress, Natalie Wood’s maturation was clearly marked on screen. Her performance life started as early as nine years old, in 1947 when she became an established star in *Miracle on 34th Street (1947)*, and “for the next few years it seemed that Natalie played everyone’s daughter in a series of ‘family’ films” (Tibbetts 130). In her early adolescence “she appeared in television roles, more often in pigtails and frilly dresses than in costumes appropriate to her age” (Lucia 223). In her middle teens, she acted in *Rebel Without a Cause (1955)*, in which “Her childlike sweetness, still intact, was infused with the restlessness that was characteristic of the youth of the 1950s” (Tibbetts 130). In her twenties, she played more restless and rebellious roles, reflecting “a relaxing movie censorship

code, youth gangs and juvenile delinquency, the Cold War during the Eisenhower administration, and even the emergence of rock and roll” (Tibbetts 131).

Noteworthy, even when she had played more rebellious roles, her images of her younger times were never away from her. For example, Lucia finds that an article “implies that she is a ‘safe’ rebel, politically non-activist, sexually inactive, and as a result, clearly non-threatening” even if “drawing from her ‘rebel’ image in the film” (Lucia 224). Audience also sought for familiar and continual aspects of her image: “Upon Natalie Wood’s emergence into adult stardom, her image required careful construction for audiences invested in her childhood innocence who thus imagined her to embody the ideal “devoted sweetheart. At the same time, it was necessary to acknowledge her sexualized womanhood, even if in muted terms, and sometimes with the aid of costuming that supplied curvaceous enhancements” (Lucia 224). It is imaginable that while Wood was balancing her sexualized characters with the impressions of her childhood innocence, audience were also, consciously or unconsciously, bringing preconceived ideas of her when watching her new works.

Lucia succinctly concludes “Natalie Wood as experienced innocent” (Lucia 226). Applying Lucia’s view on *Love with the Proper Stranger*, we can see how the potential moral criticisms by the critics towards the character of Angie might be toned down by the personal charismas of Natalie Wood. The previous works and the public image of Natalie Wood bleed into Angie, endowing her with an essential core of purity, despite the erotic implications of the story, just as Wood’s lingering childhood innocence does to her later image as a mature woman. If there is one characteristic of Wood’s acting that enhances this effect, I would characterize it as the concealment of her body and the use of her eyes. The first two scenes of the film (in the musical hall and in Barbie’s home) set Angie up as a working-class woman whose body language is to wrap herself tight in the coat, as opposed to the stripper Barbie, whose debut is preceded by the debut of her bare legs. From how Rocky throws his coat over the life-sized cupboard of the sexy woman, we get a sense of the film’s preference of concealed beauty to the ostentatious one.

Another interesting example is that Angie wears a white hood over her head on the day they go to the abortionist’s. In a similar way, the hood covers a part of her body (her hair) and magnifies her eyes, especially considering the preference for close-ups when it comes to the dialogues between Angie and Rocky. As Lucia reminds us, the hood may also evoke reminiscence from Wood’s earlier films and achieve further effects: “Wearing a white headscarf on this day of

the scheduled abortion, Angie exudes an innocence, insight, and vulnerability that gather reflexive resonance for careful viewers familiar with Wood's earlier performance in *Splendor in the Grass*" (Lucia 230). The impressively sincere and pure way Wood lift her eyes and look at the other person involved also makes the audience hard not to empathize with her. "Fascination with her beautiful face and deep brown eyes dominated fanzine and popular press accounts of Natalie Wood" (220), and "In reviewing *Proper Stranger*, Stanley Kauffmann tellingly mentions, first, Wood's 'beautiful dark eyes,' before acknowledging her "gift for comedy" (Lucia 234). In these ways, while the narrative creates for Angie a sexually liberated event, the acting and persona of Wood add a layer of purity, thus rendering Angie in an intriguing middle ground, which miraculously shows that such two characteristics are not incompatible.

In parallel, Natalie Wood (and even McQueen) are considered to lack Italianness. "Though charming, *Love with the Proper Stranger* suffers from the leading actors' lack of *italianità*, whose absence amounts to a social comment, witting or unwitting, by the filmmakers. As Casella remarks of Hollywood films, Italian American characters who escape the ethnic enclave are those who, without observable marks of ethnicity, can most easily assimilate" (Casillo 583-584). Not only the way they look, but the places they work, or the people they meet daily except from their families, lack an ethnic marker. Moreover, the director shot the film in such a way that it had more European texture instead of having more Italian-American concerns. The first image of the film—the advertising board—sets up New York as the background of the story; the repeated location—the Macy's—is a place where consumerism overshadows all ethnic differences. Lucia and Bowman also points out that the film uses hand-held camera and black-and-white cinematography to establish the films' realistic aesthetic, and to bring an European tone and texture (Lucia 227; Bowma 231; Lambert 193). Lambert also points out that "there was also a distinctly 'un-American' element in the screenplay by his client Arnold Schulman that Abe Lastfogel sent Natalie" (Lambert 193). Not only do those who lack observable marks of ethnicity can better assimilate, but the white American audience can better and easier be identified with them.

However, Angie and Rocky's lack of Italianness is contrasted with the abundance of ethnical markers of their family and the community. Many of the characters except the main ones continue to embody stereotypes of Italian-American in obvious ways. For example, Angie's mother is fiery, outspoken, moody, but also uncomplainingly takes the traditional domestic role of taking care of the children, which accords with the "paradoxical public image of the Southern

Italian woman when he notes ‘the fiery, sensuous, outspoken, willful ‘Sophia Loren’ image (indeed, the actress is a native of Naples) and the jolly, all-loving, naïve, rotund *mamma mia* image’” (Golden 350) Angie’s brothers are also fiery and emotional, and they become overly protective in believing in the doctrines of masculine prowess. Rocky’s family has a different outlook, but the film shows that the community grows up is a traditional, densely populated Italian-American community, which is sharply demarcated from the society outside. When Rocky shows Angie to the community where he soon finds his parents, the area they enter has wire meshes as clear boundaries, separating itself from the roads and bridges. People within the community seem to live in a small acquaintance society. Rocky meets a lot of acquaintances in a few minutes, including, for example, the man who grows up and goes to the same school with Rocky. It shows that integration is only a partial story; Italian-Americans are still relatively clustered in their own communities and have close relationships with each other more than “strangers” outside. In fact, the word “strangers” cover the range of anyone beyond one’s own family, as indicated in Dominick’s words when Angie attempts to move out: “If that’s what you want to make you happy! By yourself with strangers! Go!”

Interestingly, the families of Angie and Rocky are not the same. When Rocky meets his mother and says, “How’re you doing, sexy?” and Mother replies: “I’ll give you sexy! What’s the matter? Postcard once in a year? Can’t you say Hello? Hm? Give me a kiss,” Angie is shocked by the way they get along. Rocky lives alone and rarely contact his parents, but between him and his parents there is an intimacy which she never feels. When Rocky shows Angie his photos with his family when he was young, Angie comments that “it seems very funny putting you together with a family somehow,” wondering about “the way they love you.” But Rocky assures her that it’s because “they haven’t seen me for a long time. Let me hang around here for a couple of months, I’ll melt right into the wallpaper just like everybody else.” For seconds they silently look at each other, and Angie realizes that in fact they essentially grow up similar families, even though he is a boy and she is a girl.

To some degree, does Angie also carry or reproduce some stereotypes of Italian-American woman? The answer should be affirmative. In terms of the actress, although Wood is not Italian-American. “her Russian heritage – would find frequent though less consistent expression in press accounts and indirect expression in several roles that defined her as ethnically or racially ‘other’” (Lucia 424). In terms of Angie in the film, apart from our previous discussion about the in-between

state of her agency, her oscillation between sexual corruption, purity and maternalism also resonates with earlier stereotypes. This complexity is suggested in Golden's analysis of the female gangster type: "The *strega*-like figure Ma Magdalena, the female gangster: "the very paradox of her name suggests the perennial American infatuation with an exotic mixture of maternalism and moral corruption; only an Italian could be both Ma and Magdalena at the same time. In this case corruption is not complicated by female sexuality, but we would do well to remember that our popular culture immortalizes the whore 'with the heart of gold'" (Golden 351). While Angie is caught between these paradoxes, she revises this category by asserting her power over her own body and questioning the moral corruption. Similarly, while the fact that Angie's pregnancy and her initiative in asking Rocky for help has broken the peace of Rocky's life, which evokes the tradition which "casts the Italian woman as Mediterranean voluptuary, a siren-like figure of primal sensualism that distracts and threatens to devour the male protagonist," or the "archetypally Dionysian self-destructive passions that Calvinism ostensibly sought to control and suppress" (Golden 352), the film finally shows the Angie is just a normal human girl, who have an identifiable and respectable character.

These ambiguous middle grounds that Angie takes reflect an era of rapid transitions, an opening up of individual choices, and the corresponding anxieties thereof. The film is also itself a mixture of styles and ideologies. As a biographer of Wood comments, the film starts out as a romantic comedy, but halfway through it comes "the most harrowing episode" of the scene at the abortionist's; however, Rocky later offers to marry Angie, while Angie "spends the rest of the film alternately showing contempt for Rocky and attempting to attract him" (Brown 59). The incoherence of different episodes shows the film's effort to be inclusive of different ideas. Likewise, the comic effects in some plots contrive to balance more blatant and serious social critiques with the palatable style of light comedy. For example, when Angie hides in the bathroom to shy away from the date her family arranges for her, her mother leads Mr. Columbo straight into the bathroom. Angie seems deliberately making a mess, Mr. Columbo appears too clumsy to be hateful, the atmosphere is awkward but also funny. The comic here channels the repressive atmosphere and diverts the audience from it, which undercuts the possibility for more serious reflection of the situation.

The film leaves much ambiguity about whether the Italian-American family paradigm will continue in the future. "The film's title, of course, suggests a confluence of two seemingly

incongruous states—of love, with the emotional intimacy it implies, in the arms of a complete, if “proper” stranger” (Lucia 233), and this incongruity extends to the ending of the film. It suggests a return to the family, but such a reconciliation appears contrived and stretched, thus it would be too simplistic to draw the conclusion that the rebellious sexuality is completely reframed in a marriage. Despite some development of their relationship, it is questionable whether they can work through their problem together; the romantic ending forms a stark contrast with the realistic style of shooting. In the least, the ending remains open for the audience to the degree that it can only go so far as a proposal, not a marriage. In many places in the film, family is depicted as something one will not and should get over with, for example, when Angie goes back soon after she leaves the house in anger, or when Rocky smiles and tells Angie: “That’s what makes it rough. When they love you.” But Angie still eventually moves to her own apartment. By showing the dilemmas that the Italian-American families are facing, the film reflects upon the changing notions of family and sexuality, sometimes infected with the questions of race and ethnicity.

As a maturing female actress whose growing and sexualized body has been recorded since her younger times, and whose Russian stock offers her an ethnical trait which could establish her as the racial other, Natalie Wood’s body offers a site where purity, sexual corruption and maternity coexist and interact. Setting the story in an Italian-American background helps keep the focus on issues of the conflicts between family and individual, between the traditional Catholic doctrines of chaste virtues and the arising mainstream liberalist thoughts about family and gender relationships. The interplays of the visibility and invisibility of Angie’s ethnic traits further blurs the boundary between the Italian-American and other races and ethnicities, while the interplays of purity, sexual corruption and maternity comment on the transitions that the culture is experiencing at the time, while also leaving much space for different moral and ideological interpretations. In this sense, *Love with the Proper Stranger* enables us to see how a personal, romance story evokes cultural anxiety, and how the ethnical, sexualized female body could be used to channel and mediate it.

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