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The White Lotus – Season 2. Directed by Mike White. Screenplay by Mike White. United States. HBO Entertainment, Pallogram, The District, Rip Cord Productions. Seven episodes, 2022.

The first episode opens on a Sicilian beach in Taormina with a loaded interaction between Daphne, whose holiday is coming to an end, bragging about her experience to the newly arrived guests at the exclusive White Lotus resort: “The food is amazing. And the wine. I mean... Italy’s just so romantic. You’re gonna die. They’re gonna have to drag you outta here.” Daphne’s parallelisms between the clichés of the Italian *dolce vita* and death in the following scene foreshadow the overarching theme of the entire season: As she takes one last swim, her screams at the sight of floating human remains break horrifying news among the Lotus managers: “One of the guests drowned [...] and they found also other corpses... other guests have been killed”. Thus the flash-forward ends taking the audience back to the beginning of the vacation where the lyrics of the song *A far l’amore comincia tu* (You Start Making Love) by Raffaella Carrà sets the mood for the arrival of the rich American tourists to the resort. And so, with this familiar formula Mike White begins his second season production of *The White Lotus*. Aired for the first time on HBO in 2021, this Emmy Award-winning tv series was initially conceived as a limited miniseries, but its success renewed a second installment transforming it into a seven-episode anthological series.

While the first season, set in Hawaii, “explored privilege and imperialism against the backdrop of a luxury Maui resort”¹, season two’s storyline is propelled by fragile masculinity², male competition, female coping mechanisms against patriarchy, and sex work politics, which turns the stereotypical romanticized touristy Sicilian setting into grotesquery³ as the character’s fragilities and paranoid seep into each progressing episode.

The unsettling atmosphere surrounding the characters’ unbridled passions becomes manifest through the looming presence of the Testa di Moro, decorated vessels shaped like human heads tied to local folktale: “When Sicily was occupied a young Moorish man seduced a Sicilian girl, but after she learned that he had a family back home, she beheaded him and used his skull as a vase”⁴ or as Daphne puts it “It’s a warning to husbands, babe. Screw around and you’ll end up buried in the garden.” (S02E01) The Testa di Moro becomes a strategic narrative device that appears as a foreboding element that ties together Sicilian tradition and the fates of the characters creating the cohesion that was lacking in season one. Art is everywhere in the second season and, from the opening credits to the wall hangings, all making clandestine allusions to the destiny of the characters.

Right from the opening title scene the allusion to the Italian operatic (and melodramatic) motif of the season are clear. The XVI Century Italian frescos, modified by the production, are symbolic of the characters behaviors and fate⁵. The image of a renaissance man courting a woman while the wife is watching, another prostrated at the feet of a woman that is throwing a necklace in the river, and the last one showing a man serenading a woman are used to represent respectively the three generations of Di Grasso men visiting Sicily to find their ancestral home. These characters represent “three varying

¹ David Mack, “The Men – And Butts – of *The White Lotus*,” *Buzzfeed News*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/white-lotus-butts-season-2?bfsource=relatedmanual>

² Lauren J. Joseph, and Pamela Black, “Who’s the Man? Fragile Masculinities, Consumer Masculinities, and the Profiles of Sex Work Clients,” *Men and Masculinities* 15, no.5 (2012): pp. 486-506.

³ Marta Boni “Kidding: Everyday Life, Disrupted” *Mise au point. Cahiers de l’association française des enseignants et chercheurs en cinéma et audiovisuel* 14 (2021).

⁴ Shirley Li, “The Sex Lives of the One Percent,” *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/10/white-lotus-season-2-review/671938/>

⁵ Brain Pilot, “The White Lotus Season 2: Opening Title Sequence Breakdown & Explained,” YouTube, December 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBh4miYBE8Y>

archetypes of misogyny.”⁶ Grandpa Bert haplessly epitomizes an outdated form of patriarchy: he is constantly hitting on younger women, ignoring their discomfort and irritation. Dad, Dominic pretends to be enlightened, but he is incapable of overcoming his sex addiction to win back the wife he had betrayed endless times. cheated on. And the son, Albie, sees himself as a sensitive, pro-feminist, Gen Z, college graduate, who refuses “to have a bad relationship with women.”⁷ Although he constantly chastises his father and grandfather for their old-fashioned points of view, he will come to question and recent his “nice guy” persona as his peer-tourist Portia and local sex worker Lucia take advantage of him. Ultimately, “all three seem like photocopies of the same type of man, each one slightly more faded than the last but with the writing just as legible.”⁸ The DeGrasso men’s perverse attitudes aren’t biologically inherited, but rather passed down from generation to generation normalizing their misogynistic behavior. They represent the trope of a fragile masculinity, which is epitomized during their multi-generational debate about *The Godfather*⁹ when Albie tells Grandpa Bert: “Men love *The Godfather* because they feel emasculated by modern society”.

Another form of toxic male interaction involves Cameron’s friendship with his newly wealthy and former college roommate Ethan. Cameron is associated in the opening titles with a tall, chiseled statue and a dog peeing on its base, reflecting his narcissistic and entitled attitude. This toxic relationship is a “study in masculine competitiveness and validation.”¹⁰ In an awkward conversation, it emerges that Cameron would always sleep with the girls Ethan admitted to liking, in what Ethan describes as a “bad case of mimetic desire, or the idea that he only wants what those with higher status do”¹¹.

At the other end of these toxic heteronormative relationships, we find Cameron and Ethan’s wives. These women resort to various coping mechanisms. They can exploit men for financial and professional gains, like Lucia and Mia, or they can reckon with them, like Daphne, who has decided to fight back with her own extramarital liaisons. Or they can try desperately to win their husband’s affection by proving for all their wants and needs as in the case of Tanya’s loveless marriage to Greg.

Tanya, in the opening title scene, is depicted as a lonely maiden locked in a tower holding the chain to a monkey. This scene appears to symbolize her lonely and suffocating relationship with her husband, Greg, who is represented here by the monkey (an animal that in art symbolizes mischief and trickery). Her needy and insecure personality keeps her from detecting the fact that her closeted husband is contriving to inherit her fortune, condemning her to the faith of Puccini’s tragic heroines.

Tanya’s inability to adapt to her surroundings is comic and tragic at the same time, creating a sense of the pathetic¹² which peaks during her attempt to impersonate Monica Vitti and live out a fantasy day in Italy. The romantic getaway on the Vespa, the sunset aperitivo on the coast, and an expensive pasta dinner in a romantic restaurant are completely stripped of their touristic allure as her clumsy tragicomic behavior creates a grotesque atmosphere. This sense of the grotesque is further accentuated by the clever juxtaposition between the panoramic shots of the idyllic Sicilian landscape and the closeups of Tanya’s ridiculous style and mannerism.

The “Antonioni-esque” male desire that Tanya seeks is directed, however, towards a different woman in the series. The scene in which Harper finds herself at the footsteps of the cathedral of Noto

⁶ Mack, “The Men.”

⁷ Judy Berman, “In *The White Lotus*’s Provocative Second Season. Sicily is for (Rich, Miserable) Lovers,” *Time*, October 24, 2022, <https://time.com/6223583/the-white-lotus-season-2-review/>

⁸ Berman, “In *The White Lotus*’s.”

⁹ Ethan Shanfeld, “*The White Lotus*’ Creator Mike White Breaks Down Homage to Italian Cinema and Why Jennifer Coolidge Had to Come to Italy,” *Variety*, November 13, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/the-white-lotus-episode-3-sex-workers-lavventura-jennifer-coolidge-1235429639/>

¹⁰ Mack, “The Men.”

¹¹ Mack, “The Men.”

¹² Ellen Myles, *Pathetic Literature: An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 2022).

is almost identical, shot by shot, to the iconic take of Monica Vitti in Antonioni's film *L'avventura/The Adventure* (1960). The unnerving male gaze experienced by both women is a fitting reference for episode three, since it discusses the sexual politics and gender power dynamics in the series. The homage to Antonioni's film couldn't be more fitting as in *L'avventura*, all the characters are on the brink of disappearance, drifting in an existential limbo, desperately searching for meaning in life. *L'avventura*, just as much as *The White Lotus*, "suggests that in the absence of traditional moral restraints, an unbridled animal nature seduces sexual love and, more seriously, shipwrecks agape, leaving men beaten and mean, with no satisfaction, feeling mutually exploited and hardened, yet still filled with desperate yearning."¹³ Against this backdrop, Sicily's landscapes in this tv series become unexpectedly unsettling as they act as imagined geographies of the characters' emotions, downfalls, and eventual demise.

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¹³ Gregory Solman, "L'avventura," *Senses of Cinema*, April 2003, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/cteq/1_avventura/