JOMEC Journal
Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies
Published by Cardiff University Press

The Great Beauty: Italy's inertia and neo-baroque aestheticism

Enrica Picarelli

External Post-Doctoral Associate,
Center for Comparative Studies
University of Lisbon
Email: enricapicarelli@gmail.com

Keywords
Neo-baroque cinema
Paolo Sorrentino
Cultural memory
Berlusconismo

JOMEC Journal
Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Abstract

In an article published in the *New York Times* in the months preceding the U.S. premiere of Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty*, Rachel Donadio looks at the movie as a commentary on the impasse that seems to paralyze Italy. Through this viewfinder, the journalist writes, Sorrentino sets the stage to have his say on 'a culture that is blocked, resigned, embalmed in elegant decline', where 'inertia overwhelms all forward momentum'. As with other movies produced in the last two decades, most notably Nanni Moretti's *Il Caimano, The Great Beauty* is part lament, part critique of all that is wrong with a country that the fiction identifies with its political leadership. Italian directors criticize the country's pervasive atmosphere of inertia and decadence. Sorrentino has often remarked that although his films are not political per se, their representation is a critique of Italy's current state of affairs. Contemporary history, that is, lies at the core of his artistic engagement. Yet, the baroque aestheticism of *The Great Beauty* reworks current tensions in an ambiguous fashion. This chapter employs journalistic sources and textual analysis of the film to inquire into what kind of cultural memory of contemporary Italy emerges from the scene. It uses Sorrentino's neo-baroque aesthetic register and filmic philosophy of civic engagement as frameworks to explore history in the making. To this end, the essay refers to Patricia Pisters' recent work in *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (2012).

Contributor Note

Enrica Picarelli is a visual and media studies scholar, a freelance translator, and digital ethnographer at a fintech company in Cambridge. She has taken part in a number of policy-impacting projects, including as 'Michael Ballhaus Fellow' at the Center for Digital Cultures of Luephana University from 2011 to 2013. At present, Picarelli is External Postdoctoral Associate at the Centre for Comparative Studies (CEC) at Lisbon University where her research focuses on African and Afro-diasporic sartorial subcultures on participatory media. Her publications have appeared in *Clothing Cultures*, *Transformations*, *Altre Modernità*, as well as chapters in several British and American anthologies.

Citation

Picarelli, Enrica (2015), '*The Great Beauty*: Italy's inertia and neo-baroque aestheticism', *JOMEC Journal* 8, 'Italian Cultural Studies', ed. Floriana Bernardi. http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2015.10032

JOMEC Journal
Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Capturing the audience: *The Great Beauty* on television

In March 2014 Italy's second largest public broadcaster, Mediaset, aired Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013), provoking a media sensation in the country. Fresh from winning an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and other accolades, the broadcast drew an audience of nine million – an impressive achievement for Mediaset. Over the following weeks, collective discussion focused on whether the film carried a political message.

The debate even involved members of the Congress and other public figures. Notoriously, conservative Senator Maurizio Gasparri seized the opportunity to vent about Italy's stagnating politics, inciting an indignant and, at times, hilarious call-and-response from other users. In a tweet addressed to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, for example, Gasparri noted sarcastically that if Renzi 'had become Prime Minister, then Sorrentino could certainly win an Oscar' (Paudice 2014). In another, he applauded the film's 'anti-communism' and deprecation of leftist intellectualism (Paudice 2014). For his part, Renzi commended Italian excellence, as yet another artist brought home the coveted statuette, the last one having been Roberto Benigni for *Life is Beautiful* in 1998. Social media users, instead, remarked upon Gasparri's ignorance and small-mindedness, his shady connections with Silvio Berlusconi, even his poor looks. Other opinions, conflating political criticism, gossip, and aesthetic judgment, appeared also on the major national newspapers and art magazines.[1]

For example, on his blog, Paolo Liguori observed that *The Great Beauty* had prompted an unexpected 'cinephiliac' revival (2014). The comment sounded a caustic note on the state of the Italian culture industry, where the audience happily submits to a 'comforting and liberating emptiness' filled with 'light comedies' and reality shows. Liguori noted that the millions of viewers that tuned in for the film 'would have normally watched it only by force of law' (2014, my translation).

So, how are we to explain the 36,11% share, and what are we to make of the film's 'long tail' on social media? According to Cristina Piccino (2014), *The Great Beauty* was marketed as a media event that would initiate a public conversation involving the audience well beyond the broadcasting moment: Sorrentino's films 'are perfect machines that wheedle the social desire of participation, their popular appeal is to be taken at face value since literally everybody wants to have a say, just like at the end of a big football match' (Piccino 2014, my translation).

The status of *The Great Beauty* as a cult film in the very year of its breakthrough confirms the success of this strategy. However, by likening the film to a sport event Liguori and Piccino imply that it attracted viewers solely for its sensationalism, inciting bland 'vapid' reactions (Liguori 2014). Yet, another part of the press canonizes Sorrentino's cinematography as a work of art, contending that it, instead, invites an

[1] To get an updated map of user participation in the discussion on *The Great Beauty* I used social analytics, freely accessible site www.topsy.com

informed and educated kind of participation even from unlikely viewers. In particular, reviewers and audiences have been drawn by the director's ability to reinvent the stylistic and thematic conventions of post-war cinema, citing Fellini and Antonioni as the inspiration behind its sumptuous style and desolate representation of bourgeois life (Finos 2014, Raimo 2015).

This combination of 'auteristic' presumptions and mass appeal helps to frame the cultural impact of *The Great Beauty* as a work that reaches out to different viewers in different ways, yet making a certain articulated critique of the establishment – usually the domain of critics and a restricted elite of intellectual/viewers – palatable and, indeed, expected of *all* viewers. The film's unflattering depiction of the Roman high life poses uncomfortable questions about the state of the country that echo seething social tensions. To expose the end of Italy's golden age, Sorrentino accumulates visual citations on the history of the city as a mecca of world cinema and *bon viveur*. The debate grows out of these meta-textual and self-referential suggestions, functioning as a sort of collective psychotherapy. Andrea Minuz contends that beauty, and the search thereof, are a 'national obsession that inflames the soul', thus intimately affecting the audience (2015: 217, my translation). The hypocrisy and self-regard professed by the characters as they tirelessly stage a grotesque caricature of *la dolce vita* expose the decline of this last of Italian collective values. Playing upon the audience's 'inherent sense of aesthetic superiority' and propensity to 'self-denigration' (Muniz 2015: 217, 220), the film is a swan song about the main symbol of grandeur and the lifestyle that it spawned that has a deep impact on the collective self-apprehension, particularly as it plays on Italy's deeply ingrained nationalism. This affective address translates into the nostalgia and cultural revisionism that frame a good part of the reception of the film.

Cinephilia in the age of the *cinepanettone*

> *Italy's bad spell (well, at least that particular spell) is nearly over. Berlusconism is nearly over. Italy will still suck, but it will suck a little less. At least I hope so. It is indisputably better to be knee-deep in shit, than to be eye-deep in shit.*

The social resonance of *The Great Beauty* reveals that a part of the audience values it for its socio-cultural critique. The film persuades because it draws a realistic picture of the state of the country, populating it with archetypes of the 'culture of nothing' that has thriven in the past two decades (Rohter 2013). A consequence of the politicization of the film is that many hail Sorrentino as a representative of the Italian *indignados* – that part of the country that accuses populist political-entertainers like Berlusconi of having anaesthetized the populace with entertainment and diversions for self-serving reasons (Tricomi 2013). Yet Sorrentino insists that the film is a meditation on 'modernity' (Salovaara 2014) or, more specifically, on the 'neurotic component' of modern life (Lawson 2013) and that political commentary is incidental to the narrative.

The contribution of an informed audience to the success of the film is an important analytic element that upends the notion of Italian cinemagoers as

averse to civic cinema. As I am about to discuss, this belief is ingrained in the logic of the Italian entertainment industry. To grasp the impact of *The Great Beauty* on the self-apprehension of the nation, it is thus useful to devote part of the analysis to understanding what informs Italian cinema-going practices in the present. While some critics celebrate the efforts of 'an articulated civil society' to fight a shallow 'cultural hegemony' (Wu Ming 1 2006), the past three decades have witnessed significant changes in the way the former understands the role of Italian cinema *vis-à-vis* the evolution of society. From the late 1940s to the 1970s, cinema was expected to provide ethical and intellectual growth to a country that was profoundly polarized. To this end, the industry operated as a sort of connective tissue, promoting a cultural revolution across regional identities and divergent views of the world (Restivo 2002). Describing Italian cinema as a 'public diary' written by 'a collective I' (2009: 127), Gian Piero Brunetta notes that the vernacular and larger-than-life tales taking place on the big screen incited a feeling of collective belonging and identification with the disembodied ideal of nation. The 'ethic of seeing' (Brunetta 2009: 127) of genres like Neorealismo in the 1950s and civic cinema in the 1960s and 1970s cemented a collective sense of Italian identity, defining citizenship as a civic and intellectual endeavour.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, this role has been progressively marginalized in favour of fast and easy monetization. While the place of cinema in the collective consciousness has not disappeared, the commercial success of a certain type of conscious cinematography is limited and so is its ability to affect the collective consciousness. The works of Marco Bellocchio, Gianni Amelio, Cristina Comencini address a contained demographic of often politically-active individuals. While niche reception is primarily a marketing and production choice, it reflects a cultural transformation, or 'anthropological change' to borrow Pier Paolo Pasolini's phrase, linked to what many perceive as an overall disillusionment with culture's organic function as a vehicle of progressive thinking. Reception of the works by Gabriele Salvatores and Matteo Garrone reaches a larger audience, with Salvatores being an established presence of the international film circuit. Roberto Benigni and Giuseppe Tornatore are, obviously, very successful artists, but I would argue that numbers are only part of the equation. Almost none of the films by these directors, with the exception of Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, has invited extended participation or solicited the affective identification of a collective narration. Cinema is now generally expected to provide instant diversion, with venues opting for big, often foreign distributions, in efforts to monetize as much as possible.

For the past twenty years the highest grossing productions in Italy have almost always been satirical comedies. A representative example is *Sole a Catinelle* (*The Sun is Shining Cats and Dogs*, 2013), a comedy on Italian 'misfortunes' that pulled in an exceptional 35 millions of euros at the box office in 2013 (Pollina and Pe 2013). To explain this unprecedented success, the main actor stressed in two separate interviews that the audience loved the film because it made them 'laugh' (Pollina and Pe 2013) and 'is not a sociological analysis' (Ugolini 2013). This statement is representative of the cultural politics of the Italian film industry at present. Like other

contemporary productions, *Sole a Catinelle* advertises laughing as preferable to the intellectual activity invited by 'sociological' cinema. Laughing at the misadventures of ordinary men and women incites an immediate and spontaneous reaction in the audience that does not demand any ethical engagement on its part, since it does not question the status quo. It is a diversion that provides pure self-satisfactory release. In different ways, this escapist element of the farcical feature has always been a staple of the national film industry, met with polarized reactions by critics and a part of the public. In his comprehensive review of Italian national cinema, Pierre Sorlin dates its origins to the years of the economic boom, when a 'new pattern of comedy' – the so-called *Comedy Italian style* – emerged, that blurred class distinctions without threatening the status quo (1996: 121). With time, this trend pursued a 'witty style more adapted to sarcasm and skepticism than moralism' (1996:122) that often depicted bribery and corruption with cynicism but not criticism.[2] Whatever misfortune and bewilderment the protagonist may encounter in these features it is never used to question society's rules; the comic effect is caused by the apparently unexplained course of events and by the lengths the protagonists go to restore their lives.

Since the 1950s, Comedy Italian style has spawned several subgenres, culminating in the *cinepanettoni*, or 'Christmas films'. The *cinepanettone* (meaning 'film-Christmas-cake') is the most representative example of such genre productions and also the one yielding the highest revenues. The first of these comedies appeared in the 1980s, released by Filmauro distribution company, making its real breakthrough on the market in the following decade. Their success is due to the ritualism associated with attendance, when millions of families head en mass to the theatre to enjoy it, often on Christmas night. Despised and derided by critics but loved by an audience of millions, quickly *cinepanettone* 'has become a byword for low quality and a metonym for the degradation of Italian film culture' (O'Leary 2011: 431).[3] In his study of the subject, Alan O'Leary observes that the pejorative use of the term implicates the films as 'a matter of mere consumption, a kind of cultural over-indulgence when the spectator is already full, akin to the slice of *panettone* ingested after a substantial Christmas meal' (O'Leary 2011: 432). *Cinepanettoni* include ensemble pieces that rely on a stock of comical characters, focusing on male homosociality in the context of generational adventures, historical travesties, and travelogues, where gross, commonplace jokes, and nakedness abound. With its occasional satire of corruption and celebration of sensorial pleasure, the *cinepanettone* makes light-heartedness and civic disengagement its banners. Over the years, the films have been met with strong criticism and disregard, particularly in light of their cultural and artistic vacuity, a disregard that extends to their public, whom

[2] Sorlin's examples of Comedy Italian style include *The Widower* (1959) and *A Hard Life* (1961) by Dino Risi.

[3] O'Leary correctly underlines that *cinepanettoni* also suffer from the traditional suspicion of mass culture nurtured by the culturally authoritative circles in Italy. 'Italian cinema studies remains wedded to the notion of a "national" cinema, where the "national" is conceived of as a kind of diplomatic project to be presented abroad, and genre and popular filmmaking (and film-going) is still seen as inauthentic and pernicious' (O'Leary 2011: 431).

commentators and members of the entertainment establishment regard as, indeed, ignorant or poorly educated. O'Leary reports the opinions of screenwriter Fausto Brizzi that the audience of his films is a very 'provincial' one and of producer Luigi De Laurentis, who famously stated: '80% of the country is simple, it needs a very easy language' (O'Leary 2012: 141). Finally, yet another author of *cinepanettoni*, Marco Martani is reported saying: 'if you make a Christmas film for people who go to the cinema once a year, it is not that you are dealing with cinephiles' (O'Leary 2012: 141).

Among the reasons of despise are the grotesque and hedonistic attitudes of the characters, which the audience often cheers to. Critics ascribe this favourable reception of the films to the positive representations that the media have offered of Silvio Berlusconi's commendable lifestyle, whose own vicissitudes call to mind aspects of the films. Notoriously, Berlusconi's media empire is built on a televisual monopoly (among other things). The fraudulent launch of its three network television channels in the 1980s coincided with the explosion of what has been called a 'pornocratic rule' of communication (Celluloid Liberation Front 2012) which, in place of education, informed debate, and critical thought (the pedagogical tenants of the national network, RAI, in the post-war decades), offers variety, gossip, and various forms of light entertainment that invariably foreground charismatic male figures while belittling and overexposing, the (scantly-dressed) female body. For thirty years, this philosophy has secured viewership and bred a form of political consent supportive of populism, prompting many to lament that *berlusconismo* is, indeed, a form of cultural colonization where, as the quote at the beginning of this section states, Italians are 'eye-deep' in trouble.

Many intellectuals register with dismay that an escapist attitude is, by now, a dominant feature of Italian cultural policies, with the entertainment industry promoting works marketed to an audience that is viewed as ignorant and simple-minded. Director Nanni Moretti decries that 'there are good movies made in Italy, but it's the artistic climate and the industry that isn't full of energy and doesn't support this creation of cinema' (Bell 2012). Like Moretti, Sorrentino has voiced his distaste for the negative effects on Italian film culture of the collusion of cheap entertainment and populism. When asked whether *The Great Beauty* is a portrayal of *berlusconismo*, he stated: 'Berlusconi made a great contribution to this culture of nothing. He's an example of this attitude. There are all sorts of reports of Berlusconi being expected in Parliament to discuss important matters, and he kept everyone waiting because he was busy doing frivolous things. So Berlusconi has contributed greatly to this culture of distraction from important issues. He has promoted a culture of escapism' (Rohter 2013, my translation into English). Apparently, then, Sorrentino's film on the 'malaise' that affects the country was, indeed, inspired by historical contingencies (Sorrentino quoted by Fonzi Kliemann 2014). His approach is to incorporate a reflection on nostalgia and memory, investigating how we make the passing of time meaningful to us.

To intellectual lethargy, *The Great Beauty* opposes a dense cinematography rich both in visual references to the national and international film culture, and in a creative redefinition of the filmic language itself in neo-baroque terms.

These expedients do not exhaust themselves in creating a pleasing and/or challenging aesthetic spectacle. They create a form of interpellation that involves the viewer's senses in investigating cinema's role as a cultural and historical archive. In this sense, we can return to Muniz's observations on beauty as a connective national tissue to better understand Sorrentino's collective appeal.

On the surface: neo-baroque aesthetics

The Great Beauty appeared in the context of a general disillusionment with the Italian entertainment culture and film industry, in particular. Sorrentino takes issue with this pessimism, imbuing his latest work with meta-textual reflections on the cultural inertia of *berlusconismo*. In an interview with *The New York Times* he declares: 'there's a kind of lassitude that found its symbolic culmination in dancing, in conga lines, in trying to seduce the beautiful woman of the moment or the beautiful man of the moment […] [a]nd so I tried to turn that into a film – that everything had become a bit of a salon' (Donadio 2013). The chaotic promiscuity evoked by the reference to Berlusconi's wild parties informs the aesthetics of *The Great Beauty* that develops by way of accumulation, often reaching sensorial and sensual overload to narrate the inner life of a disillusioned sixty-five-year-old writer, whose daily adventures among the Roman elite (of which he is a part) unveil a hedonistic world of incessant partying and incessant, but aimless, soul-searching. The opening sequence is significant in this respect and although the film is filled with many such dense moments, its first ten minutes are emblematic of Sorrentino's visual register and thematic preoccupations. Accordingly, the following sections provide an analysis of the opening moments, showing how they encapsulate Sorrentino's effort to produce a visual commentary on Italian history in the making.

Providing little information on the diegesis, the first minutes of *The Great Beauty* display the flamboyant audio-visuals with which the director paints the picture of a 'lazy' and irresponsible people (Murphy 2014). The first half is set at noon on the Janiculum hill in Rome, among casual visitors and tourists. A steadicam glides across the gardens, capturing in tracking shots their eerie quietness and the unhurried activities of a few individuals – an old woman reading the paper, a man sleeping on a bench, a middle-aged man standing pensively by a statue – resting briefly at the edge of the Giuseppe Garibaldi memorial, catching a fragment of a vulgar phone conversation, finally moving to the pool of water of the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, where a man is washing himself. A female chorus is intoning a piece of sacred music from the balcony overlooking the fountain, adding languor to the scene. Some Japanese tourists, meanwhile, assemble around a tour guide by the monument. The grandeur of the surroundings seems to transfix the tourists and the fastidious falsetto of the guide's voice fades in the background: sight is the predominant sensorial register of this particular filmic fragment. The combined view of the monumental complex standing on one side and of Rome's metropolitan spread extending at the foot of the hill is majestic and the cinematic eye replicates the voyeuristic gaze of the tourist. It glides seamlessly like an eye unaccustomed and enchanted by the

view, moving about with reverence, keeping a distance from the monuments as if to preserve, but also to fully embrace, their immaculate *gravitas*.[4] The absence of the flocks of people that usually crowd this site and the warm light falling on the marble create a picture of august torpor slightly tarnished by a feeling of neglect, or abandonment.

Thus, the lyrical spectacle presents a postcard-like picture of the Eternal City, but the familiar sight has a displacing effect. In the audio commentary of the sequence, Sorrentino states that his goal in filming this scene was to represent the idle lifestyle of the Romans, who live as if they were perpetually 'on holiday' (Murphy 2014). The desolation of the gardens, the absence of janitors, and the self-centredness of the man on the phone that turns its back to the monumental complex while another washes himself indolently in the fountain communicate lassitude and lethargy. As they enter the frame, these elements voice a silent reflection on civic responsibility: who manages the historical heritage? Who takes care of the city? Ahead in *The Great Beauty*, the main character laments the reckless irresponsibility of the local population, declaring that 'the best people in Rome are the tourists'. Their experience of the city is, indeed, full of wonder: under their eyes, beauty takes life once more. In the many scenes shot in the outside, Rome is represented as if it were seen for the first time. The lighting is especially important on these occasions: the caravaggesque density with which it selectively illuminates portions of monuments, façades, hanging pictures, forgotten corners, but also human bodies dressed in sumptuous apparel, or robes, makes their slow revealing part of a game, suggesting that beauty is not a given, but a gift to earn and a goal to strive for. It is a responsibility.

Significantly, the real protagonists of the scene on the Janiculum are the Japanese tourists, whose intense fascination with the surroundings drives the subsequent visual fragment. While taking pictures from the belvedere, one of them dies of a heart attack. The man's body lies lonely on the cobblestones, camera in hand, physically overwhelmed by the spectacle. All the while, the chorus continues to intone the religious aria, underscoring the solemnity of the moment. The event is not represented dramatically or investigated narratively. Rather, the ethereal embrace of diegetic sound and the cinematography of the scene serve to set the contemplative tone that characterizes the film and its investigation of sublime encounters with beauty. A widescreen shot in 35mm from the top of the fountain places the bodies of the tourists that assemble around the dead at the bottom of the frame, while leaving most of the screen space to the majestic view from the belvedere. This cinematographic expedient amplifies the imposing nature of the monumental complex and reduces the characters to distant miniatures, as if to underline that their presence is transitory. Through this schematic opposition between man and art/nature, *The Great Beauty* produces a figural representation of the inconsequentiality of existence in the face of everlasting beauty. More importantly, it takes the filmic point of view away, albeit partially, from human agency, to align it with a disembodied eye that roams about the city propelled by the unbridled curiosity of *flaneurism*.

[4] In the voice-over commentary of this scene, Sorrentino states that the steadicam is the best device to capture 'the softness and the beauty of the city' (Murphy 2014).

On this occasion, as on many others in *The Great Beauty*, Sorrentino's camerawork creates a sequence of vignettes that only sketch the narrative, rather focussing on gaining aesthetic autonomy and the sensual lure of a work of art. The film is, indeed, concerned with the arresting power of surfaces, with the beauty that lasts or wastes away before our eyes. Rome is its object of fascination, both background and subject of this intimate investigation. The film celebrates its magnificence, placing its characters within the walls of opulent palaces like Palazzo Sacchetti, Palazzo Braschi, Palazzo Brancaccio, Villa Medici, having others roam aimlessly through alleys and avenues in an effort to retrace the steps of the more important figures who walked these streets in the past. Gliding on white, wide surfaces, on the fountain's shimmering waters, on the busts of the heroes of the Roman Republic, on the melancholic abandonment of hidden gardens, the discovering eye of these *flâneurs* presents the Italian viewer with mementoes of history (also cinematographic history: at one point the main character runs into Fannie Ardant in a dark alley at night) and with the pressing question of their fate, which becomes symbolic of the nation's. 'The city is one of the most beautiful in the world, built by the Italian people many many years ago. But now the people who are in Italy are not able to replicate that beauty. In a very simple way, the contrast between the beauty of the city and the lack of beauty of the people could be a motive for reflection' (Rohter: 2014). Sorrentino's instrument to expose this loss of beauty, which is a loss of affection and care, is a baroque cinematography of contrasting elements that follow each other in an accumulative aesthetics of dazzling effect.

The second half of the opening sequence perfectly encapsulates this virtuous and at time vertiginous aesthetic register. A piercing howl bridges the final shot at the Janiculum with the second half of the opening sequence, which takes place at a house gathering. The source of the inarticulate sound is a woman, one of the thousands attending the social event. It is late at night on a home terrace and the guests are partying hard to the sound of electronic music. Roving camerawork, a composition of extremely quick cuts, and a bombastic soundtrack of cheap dance music establish the wild atmosphere of the birthday bash of Jep Gambardella (impersonated by Toni Servillo), a Neapolitan writer revered by Roman literati and politicians. The editing and the elaborate choreography that occupies the actors make it impossible to focus on individual faces. The camera pushes through a mass of limbs that move frenetically, mimicking or pursuing copulation, consuming drugs, resting debauchedly on the floor in the pulsating chiaroscuro of stroboscopic lighting. A burlesque dancer is performing from behind a glass, four mariachi in full gear are doing their number, a former showgirl 'now in full physical and mental decline', as a character observes, jumps out of the birthday cake blabbering about the grandeur of Rome and of the party's host, there is even a midget among the participants to this carnival. All is flesh in its primary meaning of living matter. The rhythmic move of the bodies fuses with the visual editing, creating a spectacle of pure energy. Excess dominates the scene and the overwhelming soundtrack provokes a feeling of sensorial overload that contrasts markedly with the sombre quiet of the previous sequence.

It is also this way of progressing by means of contrasts and dissonances that

prompted some critics to describe *The Great Beauty* as an 'impressionistic' picture (Di Rosso: 2014). Indeed, the film endeavours primarily to produce a fictional tale of the eminently sensorial experiences that fill Italy's 'culture of nothing'. Stylistic preoccupations are at the forefront of Sorrentino's *oeuvre*.

> Considering that cinema is aging, it seems strange to me that it shouldn't ask questions about style […] Films that only have content have already been done. […] All disciplines need innovation, and innovation comes more readily through form than through substance. (Donadio 2013)

The party sequence attests to the formal experimentation of the film and its affinity to innovative 'neo-baroque' cinematography (Ndalianis 2004). Best exemplified by the work of Baz Luhrmann, this aesthetic philosophy is characterized by a visually and sensorially seductive language, theatrical lushness and a spectacular *mise-en-scène*. Its goal is creating an immersive experience of spectacular compositions. Commenting on the use of visual saturation in *The Great Beauty*, Brogi notes its 'anti-romantic and anti-novelistic' function (Brogi 2014). The grotesque, the soundtrack's estranging effect, the 'visionary oneirism' of the film, he writes, 'enhance the narrative potential of the scene, providing no explanation, rather progressing by means of congestion and condensation' (Brogi 2014, my translation into English). Sorrentino comments on this sensorial development of his cinematic work. Contrasting musical sources, in particular, allows the film to accrete affective impact without indulging in novelistic efforts. 'Music is the most immediate tool that one has at their disposal because it doesn't require any cultural knowledge or common ground in order to convey an emotion. So it's a formidable tool to combine and provide a synthesis of the emotions one wants to convey in their movies' (Hutchinson 2013).

In *The Great Beauty* this intensified sensorial apprehension of moving images is also an artistic reflection on the power of the sublime, that ineffable moment where understanding evaporates before pure emotion, provoking a sense of estrangement from the spectacle that forces the viewer to elaborate and ask questions. By means of fluid camerawork, accumulation of characters, and a highly stylized use of diegetic sound and soundtrack, Sorrentino puts a distance between the film and the viewer, who is emphatically drawn to the spectacle, but unable to identify with the characters and their trifling adventures. 'If the viewer's *cognitive alignment* is strongly supported by a visual and audio alignment, the same is not true for *allegiance*: Jep is too world-weary and cynical, a squanderer of his own talent not to divert the spectator's sympathy. This fracture, even more evident in some of the filmmaker's previous movies, produces a destabilizing effect' (Fonzi-Kliemann 2014, my italics). Disengaging cognitive alignment and sympathetic allegiance enhances the affective potential of the cinematic experience, its power, that is, to elicit a reaction that supersedes linguistic expression and meaning-making. The following and final section discusses how this technique of estrangement – or 'defamiliarization' – contributes to create a cultural and historical memory of Italian alienation.

Cultural memory in the making

The delight in spectacle and sensory experiences has not a simple aestheticizing purpose. Its neo-baroque sensibility summons reflective participation. Angela Ndalianis writes: '(Neo-)baroque form relies on the active engagement of audience members, who are invited to participate in a self-reflexive game involving the work's artifice. It is the audience that makes possible an integral feature of the baroque aesthetic: the principle of virtuosity. The delight in exhibitionism revealed in displays of technical and artistic virtuosity reflects a desire of the makers to be recognized for taking an entertainment form to new limits' (Ndalianis 2004: 25). Sorrentino's goal is to reflect on a historical moment, using the affective force of cinema to expose the debasing condition of the nation, at the same time innovating the cinematographic language.

Engendering a collective and diversified affective-aesthetic process, cinema is an archive that operates directly on the formation and preservation of historical and cultural memory, often as it is in the making. In *The Neuro-Image* (2012), Patricia Pisters includes 'films that in one way or another address historical reality' among the 'memory practices' that prevent official narratives and identities to be 'arbitrated through one common version' (Pisters 2012: 222). Adopting Lipovetsky and Serroy's theorization of 'hyperhistoricity' in cinema, Pisters writes that memorial films, 'films that give a past to the present', elaborate a critical view of the cultural processes of remembrance (Pisters 2012: 225).[5]

> [A]lthough the question of the indexical is even more open in fiction films than in, for instance, documentaries, many contemporary films refer more or less directly to historical events – questioning official versions of history or offering powerful and affective insights and perspectives that are important in understanding the complexities of history, memory, and their political implications. (Pisters 2012: 225)

In such instances, the exact references and recordings of documentaristic works (their indexical elements) are superseded by a more generic 'historical thematic' inspired by the need to prevent or attack the presumptions of creating a 'unanimous' record of the present (Pisters 2012: 226). In a word: they operate on a political register, opening up the narrative to different forms of interpretation and engagement.

The Great Beauty records an experience of time with neo-baroque aesthetics, providing an affectively-laden interpretive framework of recent Italian history. Its power of attraction lays precisely in its expressive virtuosity. This formalism has not a documentaristic goal. Sorrentino has often remarked that the film is not a literal representation of Italy in 2013, but an investigation of 'the miseries, splendors, joys of a city […] It's about human beings who are put in contrast with the beauty of the city and of the country. It's about the empathy between the viewer and the characters' (Barry 2014). When an interviewer compared the director's critique of *berlusconismo* with the scathing picture emerging from *Videocracy* (2009), Erik Gandini's

[5] Her analysis focuses predominantly on cinema as an archival practice. She writes that 'film not only preserves time (the past), but also preserves an experience of temporality, a "now" that has become "then"' (Pisters 2012: 223).

documentary on the Italian political-entertainment complex and its cult of celebrity, Sorrentino commented: 'That film describes Italy very well in that context. In my case, I didn't want to tell that same exact story. I take what it says for granted. What I set out to do is describe the feelings that are already present and that world is manifested in *The Great Beauty*' (Brooks 2013). The film's neo-baroque sensibility rather remediates the affective atmosphere, the structure of feeling of the nation. Indeed, its aesthetics operates not as an ideological critique of *berlusconismo*, but on the viewer's disposition to feel, particularly his/her inurement and ultimately acceptance of it. 'Sorrentino's idiosyncratic use of character engagement […] constitutes the perfect vehicle for his narrative themes; rather than merely representing alienation, Sorrentino replicates this alienation in the viewer' (Marlowe-Mann quoted by Fonzi-Kliemann 2014). The party scene represents the farce nesting in the palaces of power, a search of beauty that breeds something grotesque and alienating: 'I wanted to emphasize the sense of emptiness to which we are irremediably attracted. Parties are the epitome of this void, they're beautiful but senseless' (quoted by Fonzi Kleimann 2014).

Through a process of defamiliarization, the dance of *mimesis* and *poiesis* of this representation gives birth to cultural memory. Sorrentino puts on stage with intense expressive ability the dramatic insignificance of the life of power, reproducing but at the same time giving new form, to a spectacle that the national audience has become accustomed to. This moment when everything is clear and foreign at the same time, when 'cognitive alliance' does not encourage 'allegiance' is in itself a sublime experience. Working through Jean Epstein's theory of 'photogenie', Paul Coughlin describes defamiliarization as a 're-seeing for the first time' that has an 'epiphanic' power: 'the moment is in excess of all representation, transcending cognitive meaning and functioning as evidence of the unknown, where a "truth" is captured on film' (Coughlin 2000). Sorrentino assigns this power of unveiling to his cinematic portraits. The many close ups of retouched or intoxicated faces in *The Great Beauty* expose nature's doing and undoing of the body, concurring to the creation of a tapestry of 'human frailty' (Salovaara 2014) where appearances are not masks, but canvas that undo the characters' self-possession and sense of subjectivation. The directorial framing of Jep in the film's opening, for example, foregrounds his role of interpellator, rather than observer of life. In the party sequence the camera pans rapidly over hundreds of people before it zooms on Gambardella as he leads a frenzied *colita* dance. Surrounded by adoring guests he is, obviously, the centre of attention. With a cigarette between his teeth, he stands in the middle of the parting crowd, carrying an air of glamorous self-importance. This is where the editing slows down, chaos fading in the background, the camera closing up on Jep who speaks his mind and finally gives a start to the film: 'To this question, as kids, my friends always gave the same answer: 'pussy'. Whereas I answered: "The smell of old people's houses". The question was: "What do you like most, really, in life?" I was destined for sensibility. I was destined to become a writer'.

The scene draws a portrait of the protagonist and summarizes the narrative that is about to unravel. Jep presents himself as witness and

accomplice of the hedonism that informs the Roman celebrity culture and it is fitting that the film presents him at the peak of the carnival, when the extremely beautiful and extremely ugly coalesce and literally switch places in the figures of Latin American dancing. While Jep looks into the camera, suddenly bored, almost disgusted by what goes on around him, the portrait-shot establishes his condition of outsider, whose inclination to place sensibility over pleasure destined him to be an observer of life. His portrait is thus a white canvas, untouched by emotion, waiting to be tinged by colour, or by a beginning. By the end of the film, Jep seems to have finally been shaken alive and is ready to colour his canvas. Unsurprisingly, his epiphany comes as a reflection on beauty, this time, however, on its enlivening power.

> This is how it always ends. With death. But first there was life, hidden beneath the blah, blah, blah... It's all settled beneath the chitter chatter and the noise, silence and sentiment, emotion and fear. The haggard, inconstant flashes of beauty. And then the wretched squalor and miserable humanity. All buried under the cover of the embarrassment of being in the world, blah, blah, blah... Beyond there is what lies beyond. And I don't deal with what lies beyond. Therefore... let this novel begin. After all [...] it's just a trick. Yes, it's just a trick.

The timing of the first portrait-shot of Gambardella, at minute 10 of the film establishes the surface/depth dialectic around which *The Great Beauty* develops. These motifs come together in the dynamics of identification/lack of identification that viewers engage with Jep the character, but also with themselves.

> The story's identity, the 'Je/Jep', revolves around who and what the I happens to associate with or meet. The voiceover with which the protagonist detachedly looks at life [...] does not, technically, capture Jep's interiority. The anxieties, the discomfort, even the insomnia that [...] somehow makes him similar to Sorrentino's many other character: this dark world is pushed out of individual emotionality, it is brought out [...] and it is left to exist without a comment, becoming a dramatic space thanks to the theatrical set design, the lighting, and Servillo's performance, who is the essence of apathy; other times the life of the soul manifests itself through the rêverie in medias res, with no narrative mediation. (Brogi 2014, my translation)

Avoiding to use the trope of the *rêverie*, or that of recreating the contemporary reality in a parallel dimension, as happens, for example in Moretti's *We Have a Pope* (2011), Sorrentino manages to turn the obsession with beauty and youth that has been so glorified in the three decades of *berlusconismo*, into an occasion of collective self-reflection. This displeasing effect has been the cause of vehement criticism by a number of acclaimed journalists, which accuse the director of promoting an empty dandyism, while collecting the accolades reserved for 'real' engaged *auteurs*.

> The baroque movement on the void of our times that Sorrentino practices with emphatic virtuosity is measured on the same void, and on a sort of acknowledgment of being that is registered with no ambiguity

> whatsoever. Fellini, repeatedly invoked as a referent, invented his own Rome and his own 'dolce vita' with imagination before reality. Sorrentino invented nothing: his Jep Gambardella is immersed in the moment that he narrates, on this moment he slides, holds forth, enjoys himself. Even the bitter acknowledgement of the dandyism he flaunts – if there ever is any – is self-congratulatory, just as self-congratulatory is the Roman/Italian catalogue that populates his nights. (Piccino 2014, my translation)

Marked by the Japanese's impaired attempt at capturing the secret of the Eternal City, *The Great Beauty* is a meditation on impermanence in the face of the illusion of eternity pursued by the characters. The film's neo-baroque aestheticism uses the scrutinizing power of the lens to magnify and bring to the fore innumerable traces of decadence and decomposition. *The Great Beauty* attaches an inescapable materiality to decaying beauty. Interestingly, it is precisely the fact that the deterioration of the most distinctive of Italian attributes can be visualized that ensures its afterlife. Muniz describes the corruption of beauty in the film as a 'cultural brand' ready to be packaged and sold to foreign audiences (2015: 218). These viewers may even have the chance to directly experience Jep's peculiar malaise thanks to the film's product placement, which includes beverages like Peroni beer and Disaronno liqueur.

> Reviewing Disaronno's sales charts helps to grasp the incongruous reception of Sorrentino's film in Italy and abroad. In recent years, the liqueur has sold increasingly on the international market […] Italians consider Disaronno a provincial, old-fashioned product, whereas abroad it is perceived as a glamorous liqueur, symbolizing the creativity and taste of Made in Italy. This perception is more or less interchangeable with that of the film. (Muniz 2015: 219, my translation)[6]

Sorrentino returns again and again to the theme of the passing of time, saying that its film employs the 'dichotomy sacred/profane' to reflect on what is expendable, the latter, and what is worth preserving in memory, the former (Riccardi 2013). This discarding of the profane as something ephemeral and the desire to work with memory pervade *The Great Beauty*, informing also the audience's reaction to the film. Welcoming and inviting criticism, Sorrentino has thus brought the issue of cultural memory to the heart of the debate. Leaving open the question of whether *The Great Beauty* will live up to the present hype – whether posterity will preserve the place it claimed for itself in the canon by means of Sorrentino's 'event management', or discard it as a fad of the moment – he has certainly been able to submit to viewers a work that demands self-reflection on themselves as part of a national community that refuses to let go the myth of 'nation'. Given the unprecedented effects elicited by this effort and evident in the collective debate that still goes on about the film, it could ultimately be argued that the lethargic climate that Sorrentino decries is possibly its own myth, to whose debunking the director should perhaps devote his future efforts.

[6] The director explores this theme even more in depth in his latest work featuring Michael Cane and Harvey Keitel, *Youth* (2014).

References

Barry, C. (2014), 'Sorrentino's 'The Great Beauty' divides Italian critics even as it racks up awards abroad', *CTV News*, 28 February,

http://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/sorrentino-s-the-great-beauty-divides-italian-critics-even-as-it-racks-up-awards-abroad-1.1708602 .[Accessed 3 January 2015]

Bell, C. (2012), 'Interview: Nanni Moretti Talks 'We Have A Pope', Berlusconi Film, And Italian Cinema, *Indiewire*, 4 April, http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/interview-nanni-moretti-talks-we-have-a-pope-berlusconi-film-and-italian-cinema-20120404. [Accessed 6 January 2015]

Brogi, D. (2014), 'La memoria e lo sperpero. Su "La grande bellezza" di Paolo Sorrentino', *Le Parole e le Cose*, 3 March, http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=11462#more-11462 . [Accessed 28 November 2014]

Brook, B. (2013), 'Paolo Sorrentino Talks Roman Decadence in "The Great Beauty"', *Film Society Lincoln Center*, 14 November, http://www.filmlinc.com/blog/entry/director-paolo-sorrentino-roman-the-great-beauty-interview. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Brunetta, G.P. (2009), *The History of Italian Cinema: A Guide to Italian Films from its Origins to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Celluloid Liberation Front (2012), 'Citizen B: The Legacy of Silvio Berlusconi's TV Empire', *Indiewire*, 30 October, http://www.indiewire.com/article/television/citizen-b-silvio-berlusconi-future-of-television-italy. [Accessed 28 November 2014]

Coughlin, P. (2000), 'Sublime Moments', *Senses of Cinema*, 11, http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/philosophy-criticism-film/sublime/. [Accessed 6 January 2015]

Di Russo, J. (2014), 'The Great Beauty', *ABC*, 23 January, http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/finalcut/the-great-beauty/5215818. [Accessed 5 January 2015]

Donadio, R. (2013), 'La Dolce Vita Gone Sour (and This Time in Color)', *The New York Times*, 8 September 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/09/movies/paolo-sorrentinos-great-beauty-explores-italys-decline.html?pagewanted=all. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Finos, A. (2014), "Sorrentino e i quattro 'maestri': 'Da Fellini a Maradona, vi spiego perchè'", *La Repubblica*, 7 March, http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2014/03/07/news/paolo_sorrentino_repubblica_oscar-80461615/ [Accessed 14 May 2014]

Fonzi Kliemann, C. (2014), 'Cultural and Political Exhaustion in Paolo Sorrentino's The Great Beauty', *Sense of Cinema*, March, http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/feature-articles/cultural-and-political-exhaustion-in-paolo-sorrentinos-the-great-beauty/. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Hutchinson, S. (2013), 'Sean Interviews The Great Beauty Director Paolo Sorrentino', *Criterion Cast*, 13 November, http://criterioncast.com/interviews/sean-interviews-the-great-beauty-director-paolo-sorrentino/. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Lawson, D. G. (2013), 'Interview: Paolo Sorrentino', *Film Comment*, 4 November.

Liguori, L. (2014), 'La Grande Amarezza: 8 Milioni di (Neo)Cinefili da Oscar', *Movie Player*, 5 March, http://movieplayer.it/articoli/la-grande-amarezza-8-milioni-di-neo-cinefili-da-oscar_12204/. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Muniz, A. (2015), 'La mistica de La Grande Bellezza e il Made in Italy', *Allegoria* 68, 217-220.

Murphy, M. (2013), 'Anatomy of a Scene: "The Great Beauty"', *The New York Times Culture*, 13 November, http://www.nytimes.com/video/movies/100000002550148/anatomy-of-a-scene-the-great-beauty.html. [Accessed 5 January 2015]

Ndalianis, A. (2004), *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press

O'Leary, A. (2011), 'The Phenomenology of the Cinepanettone' *Italian Studies* 66(3), 431-443. http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/007516311X13134938380526

Paudice, C. (2014), 'Maurizio Gasparri stronca La Grande Bellezza su twitter. Ma gli utenti insorgono: "Non capisci i film di Vanzina, figuriamoci', *The Huffington Post*, 5 March, http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2014/03/05/gasparri-grande-bellezza-twitter_n_4904326.html. [Accessed 3 January 2015]

Piccino, C. (2014), 'La trappola vintage de La Grande Bellezza', *Il Manifesto*, 14 January, http://ilmanifesto.it/la-trappola-vintage-della-grande-bellezza/. [Accessed 23 January 2014]

Pister, P. (2012), *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Pollina, E., and Pe, A. (2013), 'Italian movie "Sole a Catinelle" finds humor in economic ills', *The Columbus Dispatch*, 25 December, http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/life_and_entertainment/2013/12/25/italian-movie-finds-humor-in-economic-ills.html. [Accessed 30 December 2014]

Raimo, C. (2015), 'Sorrentino Sorrentineggia', *Minima et Moralia*, 21 May, http://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/sorrentone/, [Accessed 29 June 2015]

Riccardi, K. (2013), 'Sorrentino: "La grande bellezza è non dimenticare". Il cinema e il gioco dell'arte', *La Repubblica*, 5 November, http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/2013/11/04/news/sorrentino_grande-bellezza-lottomatica-70240333/?ref=search. [Accessed 28 November 2014]

Rohter, L. (2014), 'Paolo Sorrentino on 'The Great Beauty' and Italian Alienation', *The New York Times*, 4 December, http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/paolo-sorrentino-on-the-great-beauty-and-italian-alienation/. [Accessed 28 November 2014]

Salovaara, S. (2014), '"The Misery of Some People:" Paolo Sorrentino on The Great Beauty', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 4 February, http://filmmakermagazine.com/84363-paolo-sorrentino-on-the-greaty-beauty/ [Accessed 28 November 2014].

Shoard, C. (2013), 'Paolo Sorrentino on The Great Beauty and why Italy must change or die', *The Guardian*, 19 December, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/19/paolo-sorrentino-great-beauty-italy-change. [Accessed 28 November 2014]

Sorlin, P. (1996), *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996*, London and New York: Routledge

Tricomi, A. (2013), 'Servillo e Sorrentino contro Grillo: "Antidemocratico, dietro di lui c'è il vuoto', *La Repubblica: Napoli*, 8 June, http://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/06/08/news/tonmi_servillo_contro_beppe_grillo_antidemocratico_non_mi_piace-60649735/ [Accessed 15 December 2014]

Ugolini, C. (2013), 'Checco Zalone, un film a catinelle: oltre 1200 copie, mai visto prima', *La Repubblica*, 31 October, http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2013/10/29/news/zalone_dei_record_1200_sale_mai_prima_d_ora-69747505/. [Accessed 30 December 2014]

Wu Ming 1 (2006), 'Bela Lusconi's Dead', *Wu Ming's Official Website*, 5 April, http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/outtakes/burlesquoni.htm. [Accessed 4 January 2015]

Films

Gandini, E. (2009), *Videocracy*

Moretti, N. (2011), *We Have a Pope*

Risi, D. (1959), *The Widower*

Risi, D. (1961), *A Hard Life*

Sorrentino, P. (2013), *The Great Beauty*

Sorrentino, P. (2015), *Youth*

Zalone, C. (2013), *Sole a Catinelle*

cardiffuniversitypress.org

This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal*

JOMEC Journal is an online, open-access and peer reviewed journal dedicated to publishing the highest quality innovative academic work in Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. It is published by Cardiff University Press and run by an editorial collective based in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, committed both to open-access publication and to maintaining the highest standards of rigour and academic integrity. *JOMEC Journal* is peer reviewed with an international, multi-disciplinary Editorial Board and Advisory Panel. It welcomes work that is located in any one of these disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary work that approaches Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies as overlapping and interlocking fields. It is particularly interested in work that addresses the political and ethical dimensions, stakes, problematics and possibilities of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

To submit a paper or to discuss publication, please contact:

Dr Paul Bowman: BowmanP@cf.ac.uk

www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal

Twitter: @JOMECjournal

ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. Based on a work at www.cf.ac.uk/jomecjournal.