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## La Grande Bellezza: Adventures in transindividuality

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In Paolo Sorrentino's HBO series *The Young Pope*, Pope Pius XIII (Jude Law) declares his aversion to the presence of tourists in Rome on the grounds that 'they are just passing through'. By contrast, Sorrentino's *La Grande Bellezza* (The Great Beauty, 2013) makes the tourist's experience of 'passing through' the very condition for the production of moments of transformational beauty that alone have the power to save us from floundering in despair. Through the figure of Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo), less a classical protagonist and more of an aesthetic catalyst, the film tells us that 'the best people in Rome are the tourists'. Taken in the context of the formidable aesthetic monument that is this film, the celebration of tourism is not confined to its literal meaning or devalued as outright commodification. Rather, this celebration expands to account for 'the indissoluble bond between aesthetics and tourism'. [1] Gambardella himself, a citizen of Rome for the past 40 years, has not yet become immune to the city's extraordinary images and sounds, and instead embodies the attitude of the tourist in his avid quest for aesthetic 'attractors'. [2] As we pass through Rome via Gambardella's body and senses, we are not given stable or defined objects, but events of life in a state of fragile and changing equilibrium. Indeed, this ephemeral passing through events, where shock and contrast give rise to moments of heightened perception and affection, is at the core of both Gambardella's experience of Rome and the viewer's experience of the film.

This reading of *La Grande Bellezza* will situate the film's ontology of passing through in a philosophical tradition that considers being as the constant becoming of a process of individuation. In particular, I will draw on Gilbert Simondon's conceptual apparatus of individuation-as-process as a means to overturn substantialist views of the individual, self, or subject. In Sorrentino's film, I will argue, the aesthetic experience proceeds along a similar processual path, one where each successive individuation results from a reservoir of pre-individual being that exceeds the individual. Given the well-documented relations between Deleuze and Simondon, it may be germane at this point to address the import of these relations and to consider what exactly Simondon's conceptual apparatus adds to Deleuze's notion of becoming. While Deleuze's philosophy, and in particular his work on cinema, have by now been considerably integrated into film and media scholarship, film scholars have not yet engaged with Simondon's philosophy of individuation to a comparable degree.[3] Yet, as Anne Sauvagnargues has observed, Deleuze was significantly inspired by Simondon, from whom he borrowed the concepts of disparation, modulation, and crystallisation,[4] all of which became decisive in Deleuze's analysis of art. The two philosophers shared a strong opposition to substantialist approaches, hence their firm understanding of being as becoming. The uniqueness of Simondon's perspective, in my view, lies in the way he looks to the scientific field to fashion concepts that can operate transversally across different existential territories and can offer rather concrete models for understanding the operations that take place in any process of individuation, be it human or non-human, individual or collective. Simondon offers invaluable specificity when elucidating the primacy of relation over the terms that enter into such a relation. The primacy of relation, we shall see, is also crucial to understanding the links between the individual and the collective in Sorrentino's film.

On the assumption, therefore, that Simondon's thought may be relatively unfamiliar to film and media scholars, I would like to start by offering a summation of some of his key concepts relevant to this discussion. First, the concept of metastability is central to individuation as perpetual ontogenetic process. As Sauvagnargues explains, metastability addresses 'a type of equilibrium no longer situated at the level of stability, but implying the transformations operating in a system which has not exhausted its potential difference'.[5] It is this quality of disequilibrium and transitoriness that is powerfully suggested and unconditionally celebrated in *La Grande Bellezza* as the foundational engine of being. The unstructured potential in being pushes it

in all of its forms – whether pertaining to matter, life, or social/cultural formations – to reach successive phases of individuation. As Brian Massumi puts it, '[t]he living being is an individuation that has no choice but to *continue* its invention, or face dissolution.'[6] (original emphasis)

Second, as defined by Simondon, the individual is the 'reality of a meta-stable relation'.[7] This relation actually conjoins two relations, one interior to the individual (the psyche, or relation of the individual to the self) and one exterior to the individual (the collective, or relation of the individual to the world and to others). From this double relationality it follows that 'the individual is incompatible with itself', as it is 'always more-than-individual'.[8] Simondon conceives this 'more-than-individual' as an 'excess of preindividual being' in the individual subject.[9] The preindividual belongs to the collective and constitutes the latent presence of the collective within the individual. It is this impersonal, yet intimate, dimension of the collective that is addressed in Simondon's notion of the transindividual. The transindividual thus expresses a form of individuation neither synonymous with isolation, nor with sociability/socialisation; rather, it involves an experience of solitude that is simultaneously a 'milieu densely populated with relations'.[10] The transindividual surpasses social functions (it is not an expression of social taste or opinion) as well as outright individual isolation. Indiscernible qua individual, the transindividual shares an impersonal affective life with others in its milieu.

The following analysis of *La Grande Bellezza* will consider the relation between the city of Rome and its human inhabitants as a vivid instantiation of a creative process of mutual modulation. The latter part of the essay will join Simondon's concept of crystallisation and Deleuze's cinematic concept of the crystal image as a way to understand the city-human relation as a reciprocal, layered modulation of form and matter, space and time.

## **A tourist at home: An ontology of passing through**

In *La Grande Bellezza* the city of Rome is not there to advance a project of aesthetic classicism. What contributes decisively to the film's energising, expressionistic modulation of Rome is the discordant presence of its 21<sup>st</sup>-century people, who find themselves at once totally at home and totally alienated from the grandiose aesthetics of their surroundings. Despite the film's implicit celebration of tourism, with the exception of the opening scene, these

places are shown devoid of actual tourists. It is as if these awesome sites had been reserved for our own private tour, with Gambardella as our insider guide. In this tour, we are given a sense of the reciprocal animation and transformation that occur between bodies and their milieus, and the expansive potential and creative difference that emerges out of their relation.

As noted by Carlotta Fonzi Kliemann, the film opens in the Janiculum, a terraced-square overlooking the city.[11] Seemingly dealing with literal tourism, this opening scene immediately abandons this notion, as it presents us with an actual tourist who suddenly dies while enjoying a sightseeing tour. The man's death is absolutely anonymous and devoid of drama, and takes only a few seconds of screen time. Subsequently, at the nearby Fountain of Acqua Paola, a likewise anonymous female choir sings a poignant song as if in elegiac response to his death. Yet, in tune with the camera's insistence on the enduring magnificence of the setting, the song also registers the milieu's indifference to the man's individual passing. Set against the backdrop of Rome, this everyman's death signifies the contrast between the passing of the individual and the endurance of the milieu as inscription of the collective. While Rome is a place rife with material signs of the passage of time, it also embodies the endurance of something that surpasses the death of the individual. Through its sensual, spectacular journey, *La Grande Bellezza* aims at lending material form to this invisible depository of preindividual, collective endurance always available for future transformation. From the start, the film conceives the milieu not so much as a specific location, but rather as a temporal register of collective affects. As we see later in the film, if the experience of death is tolerable only when one considers it in the context of collective individuation, so too is the experience of life. As Gambardella tells Andrea (Luca Marinelli), his friend Viola's (Pamela Villoresi) emotionally tormented son, '[t]hings are too complicated to be understood by one individual.'

*La Grande Bellezza* defines tourism primarily as a perceptual attitude and an affective response to one's milieu, rather than an exceptional state requiring one's physical relocation. In this regard, the film features two individuals who experience tourism while in their own city: Gambardella himself and Elisabetta Colonna di Reggio (Sonia Gessner). Gambardella can embody the tourist's perceptual and affective dispositions not only because he always was, as he puts it, 'destined for sensibility', but because at his age, loss and nostalgia lend intensity to everything he perceives. Like all of the other human figures

we encounter in the film, Elisabetta is not really a character in a classical narrative sense, but her brief passage through it is interesting enough in the context of tourism to warrant a few remarks. Elisabetta and her husband are old, impoverished Roman aristocrats who offer themselves for hire to raise the cache of private parties. On their return home, on the night when they attend Gambardella's dinner party in honor of Sister Maria (Giusi Merli), Elisabetta decides not to go straight home to the basement she occupies with her husband. Instead, she visits the opulent upper floor that used to be her childhood home, now turned into a tourist attraction. Passing through exquisitely decorated salons, she walks decisively into the exhibit room at the far end and grabs one of the earphones meant for tourists to listen to her own story. The shot is visually overtaken by a brightly lit baby cradle, supposedly her own, while a female voice narrates her birth, the death of her mother on the same day, and the financial hardship that forced the father to sell the property.

In perpetual exile from her own childhood home and her past, Elisabetta experiences an affectively-loaded form of tourism. The merely cognitive level of information designed for the tourist is here brought to a new dimension of information as catalyst of creative disparity and novelty. If the tourist feels the distance between herself and an array of unfamiliar sights and sounds, Elisabetta feels her family home as both painfully intimate and distant. Above all, her tourist-like activities, no less than Gambardella's, remind us that perception is not aimed at grasping something that pre-exists the individual, but rather an operation that resolves the conflict between the living being and its milieu. As we perceive, we do not merelyprehend a ready-made form, but we 'invent a form' that will help us resolve a problematic tension with our milieu by modifying both our structure and that of the object perceived.[12] From this perspective, the film as a whole is an exercise in perceptual invention aimed at resolving a temporal and affective conflict between the becoming of Rome-as-milieu and the becoming of its people.

## **The collective within the subject**

The quiet reverence of the film's opening soon transitions to a rooftop party combining the frenzy of rapturous sensuality with middle-aged enjoyment on the fast lane to desperation. In this and other party scenes in the film, the human body is decidedly less human and more fauna, the atmosphere as a whole reminiscent of wildlife in a zoo. But, far from conveying judgment or

discrimination, the film's focus on the grotesque human search for pleasure and attempt to shun mortality is humorous, inclusive, and compassionate. As I will argue in a later part of this discussion dealing with aesthetics, the film's ability to play out, while affirming, the quality of disparation – the heterogeneity of sacred and profane, solemn and vulgar, old and new – is the prime mover in its core aesthetic project. The film's bringing together of asymmetrical fields that resonate in disparation is highly evocative of Giorgio Agamben's defense of profanation – the act of deactivating the transcendence of the sacred by neglecting the enforced separation between sacred and profane, and by returning the objects, spaces, and rites of the sacred to common use.[13]

Amidst a colorful variety of bodies, the opening scene introduces us to Gambardella, who on his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party straddles nonsensical enjoyment and somber reflection. On one hand, the scene as a whole, with its 'deafening' 'pulsating techno music' (disjointedly juxtaposed with Mexican music and Mariachis cutting through the dancers), its overcrowded space and frivolous tone, can be seen as the 'cruel opposite'[14] of the opening moments. On the other hand, towards the end, the scene folds back on itself as if sinking into a virtual hole that connects it right back with the film's elegiac beginning. From the background to the foreground of the shot, the dancing bodies are organised in two rows facing each other, women on one side and men on the other. Towards the back, Gambardella steps out of the men's row and stands isolated in the middle. He lights a cigarette and looks at the camera. As he does so, the image dramatically slows down, while the sound of the music fades into the background. The camera tracks forward until he is framed in a medium close up. His facial expression is somberly appropriate to the words we hear in voice-over: "To this question, as kids, my friends always gave the same answer: "pussy." While I always responded: "the smell of old people's houses." The question was: "What do you like most in life?"

This moment is important not only because it unexpectedly injects sensibility into vulgarity, but also because it singles out an individual as the central force of the party, while placing him in solitary distinction from the rest of the people. Gambardella's double status as a catalyst of both social effervescence and profound solitude is established from the film's beginning. In his capacity as a master of social relations and protocols, Gambardella is bogged down in the blah, blah, blah of sociability and human commerce, what Simondon calls 'interindividual relations'. This aspect of social exchange is in fact the very opposite of what Simondon refers to as collective

individuation and the discovery of transindividuality attending it. Yet, at the same time, by singling out Gambardella from the outset, the film makes him the central engine of a process of individuation aimed at expressing the pre-individual share of potential at the heart of the collective.

In a way, this oscillation between interindividual relations and transindividual potential precipitates Gambardella's crisis, a crisis that is resolved in his final decision to take up writing again. From the beginning, as seen in the first party scene discussed, the film positions Gambardella as if transindividuality were immanent to his individuality – as if he were inherently suited to channeling impersonal, collective affects. 'I was destined for sensibility,' he says in his voice-over monologue at the party, 'I was destined to become a writer.' Yet, Gambardella only becomes a writer by re-becoming one – that is, by accomplishing a new individuation that passes through the collective. This psycho-collective individuation, although being there as immanent ground from the outset, requires a 'creative effectuation' on the part of the subject 'which is never achieved before being pursued, each time the object of a recommencement'.<sup>[15]</sup> From this perspective, *La Grande Bellezza* shows the process Gambardella passes through on his way to becoming 'more-than-individual', becoming, in short, a transindividual collective.

Early in the film, Gambardella begins to shed the façade of sociality that stands in the way of a real collective. His tendency to set aside the network of structured identities and functions is most notably exercised in his relations with women. At his age, he's no longer compelled to believe in romantic myth or to pretend enthusiasm for an easy sexual encounter. Feeling a lack of inspiration towards casual sex, for example, he flees the room of a self-obsessed and needy woman. Instead, Gambardella begins to enjoy the non-sexual friendship of Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli), a terminally ill, emotionally complex woman, who works as a stripper in her father's nightclub, yet zealously guards her body against male intrusion in private. Ramona and Gambardella share an affective intimacy that skips the gestures and rituals of conventional heterosexual relations. On the morning after a night together, Gambardella says, 'It was nice not making love', to which Ramona replies, 'It was nice loving each other'. In stark contrast with the individualised, narcissistic context of a romantic affair, their relationship expresses the intimacy of a collectivity beyond themselves. Thus, when they exchange stories about their first experiences with love, they partake of a pre-individual share on the



basis of which they can become intimate rather than relying on cultural assumptions about what constitutes ‘normal’ sexual relations between men and women.

Andrea’s funeral provides the film with a chance to stage the difference and the tension between interindividual relations and the excess of preindividual being that can be expressed by the transindividual. Gambardella’s initial attitude towards the funeral is that of a connoisseur of social etiquette. At the store where he takes Ramona to buy a dress suited to the occasion, he describes a funeral as a highly organised social event where the act of mourning consists of carefully choreographed performative effects (‘at a funeral you are appearing on a stage ... in this way everyone will see you ... the chosen place needs to be isolated, but clearly visible to the public ... a performance is good when it is devoid of any superfluity’). Once we move to the actual funeral, Gambardella sticks to his own prescribed rituals, down to the comforting words he whispers in Viola’s ear. But a few moments later the scripted tone is visibly derailed. The derailment off superfluous sociability is triggered by the event’s own unpredictable affective potential – a series of unforeseen elements added to the mix (i.e. the piercing choir music, Gambardella’s unexpected isolation in the central aisle, the men gazing at each other through long moments of silent indecision before hoisting up the coffin). Exceeding social functions, these elements constitute the ‘more-than’ charge in the event. This excess of potential catches Gambardella off guard and opens onto a collective affectivity that does not withstand rules. As he carries the coffin with three other men, he breaks down in a display of uncontrollable weeping that is no longer just for show.

In Simondon, the collective designates the structuration of emotion across many subjects. As Combes notes, ‘intimacy arises less from a private sphere than from an impersonal affective life ... held immediately in common’[16] with others. The party sequences in *La Grande Bellezza* offer eloquent instances of such collective intimacy. In the first party scene mentioned earlier, some shots privilege a kind of communal, organised dancing where the subjects are fully responsive to each other’s gestures and moves, while other shots linger on isolated bodies entranced in affects that reverberate across many bodies. This latter form of dance foregrounds the importance of a non-cognitive schema, a ‘social energetics’ whereby individuals imitate flows of belief and desire that traverse the collective.[17] And yet, as we also saw in the funeral scene, affective collectivity surpasses the distinction between conscious versus unconsciously performed gestures, socially

organised versus unruly or chaotic events, instead pointing to a 'human energetics' that is at work at all times.

Gambardella's crisis in the film signaled repeatedly by the question 'Who am I?' voices the crisis of an entire people – a specific social class of economic and intellectual privilege. Well aware of the collective despair that suffuses their lives, at one of the gatherings on his terrace Gambardella challenges Stefania's (Galatea Ranzi) self-righteous claims to political consciousness and dignified achievement. Opposing Stefania's claims to ideological integrity, he defends their discussions of trivial matters as the very sign of authenticity, for their preference for the trivial truthfully reflects the poverty of vitality that affects them: 'We ... know our untruths and for that reason we end up talking about nonsense and trivial matters ... We are all on the brink of despair, all we can do is look at each other in the face, keep each other company, joke a little.' This combination of despair and affection/concern for each other is not an individual affect emerging prior to the relation with the outside, but one Gambardella and his friends, perhaps an entire class, share as the 'intimacy of the common'.<sup>[18]</sup> The importance of affect to the notion of psycho-collective individuation cannot be overstated. As Combes remarks, drawing on Simondon, 'the affective ... is the experience wherein a being will feel that it is not only individual'.<sup>[19]</sup> The film makes a clear distinction between Stefania's politically correct rhetoric and Gambardella's invocation of a collective affectivity that needs to be seized upon with humility and generosity if it ever has a chance to serve as the foundation for a new collective individuation and a new politics. It is precisely this process of coming to terms with the relation between the individual and the preindividual/collective that Gambardella himself undergoes, with the last scenes in the film enacting the crucial turning point in his transformation.

For Simondon, the subject discovers the transindividual only 'at the end of the ordeal ... of isolation'<sup>[20]</sup> it has imposed on itself. As in the example of Nietzsche's Zarathustra and his encounter with the tightrope walker, the solitary trial of transindividuality is initiated by an exceptional event that suspends all interindividual ties.<sup>[21]</sup> In *La Grande Bellezza*, the exceptional event that suspends Gambardella's routine mix of wild partying and dilettantism is his encounter with Sister Maria, a sort of Mother Teresa 104-year old missionary invited to visit the Vatican. With the imposing presence of her frail body, and her unpretentious insight into humans and animals alike, Sister Maria channels pure transindividuality. For the most part, the Sister abstains from participating in the currency of social exchange that is language. 'You

can't talk about poverty', she says to the guests at the dinner party, 'you have to live it'. At the audience she gives to leaders of different religious faiths, the Sister's awareness of each of the faithful approaching and standing before her does not pass through social recognition or religious ritual, but through an intensive affective capture of the other's presence. To borrow Massumi's terms, the relation played out between the Sister and the faithful is not inter-individual/communicational, but transindividual/ontogenetic.[22]

The encounter between Sister Maria and Gambardella is also marked by this kind of affective prehension that an appeal to the likes of Cardinal Belucci (Roberto Herlitzka) could never have enabled. In this regard, Sister Maria is the antithesis of Catholic Church dignitaries who are mercilessly mocked by the film as ineffectual social parasites (a critique Sorrentino deepens and refines in *The Young Pope*). In an earlier scene where Gambardella approaches the Cardinal in search for a breakthrough out of his crisis, the Cardinal's banal social games and lack of interest in his soul-searching questions humorously convey the Church's incapacity to address the transformational potential of individuals. By contrast, Gambardella's encounter with the nun instantiates a 'becoming through which [they both] receive a boost of extra-being from their participation in an event that surpasses them as individuals'.[23] Sister Maria does not stand for arbitrary dogma, but she performs the body's capacity to take itself to the limit of what it can do, her attitude in this sense owing more to Spinoza than to Catholicism. When the Sister takes her body to the limit of its powers (by sleeping on the bare floor or by ascending Saint John's Basilica's 'Scala Sancta' on her hands and knees, almost using her head to prop her body up the steps), she is not proposing that others emulate these actions as part of a moral or religious ascetic program. Instead, her actions serve to compel others into effectuating *their own* potential towards their own new individuations. Thus, her presence functions as a renewal of value, substituting each being's intensity of individuation for the rigidity of communal rules and structures.

The moments shared by Gambardella and Sister Maria on the terrace of his home grow into a breathtakingly beautiful scene. As Gambardella walks onto the terrace at dawn, he is surprised to find Sister Maria surrounded by a flock of storks dispersed over the span of the terrace all the way to the ledge. Gambardella is gently warned by the Sister's assistant not to make noise, as the storks, he says, 'are migrating West, but now ... are resting'. The Sister asks Gambardella why he never wrote another book following *The Human Apparatus*, his early successful novel. As he answers, 'I was looking for the great

beauty, but I didn't find it', we see a single, impossibly thin leg of a stork on the ledge set against the awesome backdrop of the Coliseum. This unlikely juxtaposition of extreme delicacy and strength, of animal nature and human artifact is immediately responsive to Gambardella's search for beauty. By this point, Gambardella's 'passing through' the film has enabled us to experience this beauty many times over, yet, for him to find it, he needs his own relation with the outside. The restful time of the storks on the terrace evokes a similar stage in Gambardella's process of individuation: this is a transitional moment before he, like the Sister in her own way, can channel collective, preindividual potential through his writing.

Right after the Sister in the same scene expresses the essential importance of roots, she smiles, closes her eyes, and exhales a powerful breath that sends the flock of birds off on their journey West. This moment dispenses with the physical likelihood of such an occurrence, and instead affirms the power of spectacle and aesthetics in general to carry out an expansion and transformation of potential. Following this scene, Gambardella embarks on a yacht and returns to the island where he met Elisa, his first love, as a young man. More affectively consequential than his memory of Elisa, however, is the image of Sister Maria that follows, as she climbs the steps of the Scala Sancta with all the stubborn strength her body can muster. Against this image of sheer will power, Gambardella's voice-over conveys two ideas that in my mind sum up the film's as well as his own discovery of transindividuality: first, the embracing of a collective, preindividual share over the empty prattle of social exchange; and second, the power of aesthetics and the imagination in conferring surplus-value to the passing materiality of life, an idea that is already announced in the Céline quote heading the film. These are Gambardella's final words:

[Before death] there [is] life. Hidden beneath the blah blah blah. It is all settled beneath the chitter chatter and the noise. Silence and sentiment. Emotion and fear. The haggard, inconstant flashes of beauty. And the wretched squalor and miserable humanity. All buried under the cover of the embarrassment of being in the world. Blah blah blah blah. Beyond there is what lies beyond. I don't deal with what lies beyond. Therefore let this novel begin. After all, it's just a trick.

In Nature, the power of something is not readily conveyed by its form or appearance, but it lies at the root. And yet, sometimes, as in the strength displayed by the delicate leg of the stork or by the frail body of an old woman, the power hidden in the root finds its way to the surface. When we humans emulate these potent tricks of Nature, we call it aesthetics.

## Transindividual milieu as crystal image of time

Let us now return to the importance of aesthetics in the film as the means to carve out a space for transindividuality. Whether for the artist or the spectator, the aesthetic event creates an experience of ‘more-than-individual’, transindividual affects, where the specific terms involved do not pre-exist their relation. Thus, in thinking of the transindividual associated milieu in *La Grande Bellezza*, we are not simply dealing with a pre-existing space called Rome serving as a beautiful backdrop to a human story. Rather, we are addressing an energetic-affective field of resonance that is more than just a place or its people. Thus, we prioritise the ecologies formed in their relation, which, as Massumi suggests, have more to do with ‘intensities of time’[24] than they do with a spatially-informed idea of place or identity.

Because of its capacity to set in motion impersonal affects that speak to a non-individuated, unstructured potential, art is uniquely equipped to put us in touch with the ‘intimate dimension of the collective’.[25] The importance of time to the aesthetic expression of transindividuality can be taken up from yet another angle. Art is a capture of forces. Its operation can be understood as a modulation, in the sense of a ‘continuous “assumption of form” between the properties of the material and the concrete action of the form’[26] or mould. In contrast with the hylomorphic opposition between active form and passive matter, Simondon’s concept of modulation entails the mutual and continuously variable determination of form and matter. The action expressed through modulation does not consist of a capture of forces into fixed or static forms. Rather, modulation addresses the modification of forms in a ‘variable, continuous, temporal mould’.[27] The relation between time and matter itself can be considered paradigmatic for the operations of modulation. As time impacts matter, so does matter impact the way we experience time. Time itself is thus the ontogenetic force of creation and differentiation.

Several scenes in *La Grande Bellezza* powerfully show that the aesthetic discovery of transindividuality hinges upon an intense valorisation of time as engine of creation. The photo exhibition provides an interesting example of an active, time-based encounter with the artwork that ‘prolongs the saliences of world and life’.[28] In the grounds outside a beautiful classical building, Gambardella meets an artist whose father began to take daily photos of him since birth, with the artist himself taking over as self-photographer from the age of fourteen onwards. Emulating his usual mobility through the city,

Gambardella's strolling across the thousands of pictures visualising the artist's life is literally in step with the passage of time, and it thus suggests a strong connection between transindividuality and the temporalisation of being. In other words, the 'more-than-individual' in the individual is largely an effect of time's modulation, which prevents being from ever coinciding with a stable and autonomous entity. The photo exhibition elevates the pliability of the face to an ontogenetic dimension that destroys binary distinctions between depth and surface. 'Living tissue produces time.'[29] Indivisible from time, the face here registers the endless processes of individuation the individual passes through. In its provisionality, each photo is simply a 'moment of being'.[30] Like the cinema of the time-image, the photo exhibit is thus a direct rendition of the workings of time – of temporal modulation as the 'operation of the Real'.[31]

It is the logic of modulation working on these images, their 'disparation on a plane of forces',[32] that instills the photos with the mobility characteristic of the cinematic image. In this scene and others that intensely engage with aesthetics as a transindividual field, *La Grande Bellezza* lays out this field as a crystal image in which time produces the ultimate relation of differentiation and creativity. The art party that Ramona and Gambardella attend is particularly interesting for celebrating the relation between contemporary abstract art and classical sculpture and painting as one of creative tension. The scene plays out like a system composed of two contrasting halves: in the first, Gambardella and Ramona attend a party where a young girl paints live on a huge canvas before a crowd of art cognoscenti; in the second half, Gambardella and Ramona leave the party and set off on a nightly excursion into Rome's magnificent palazzos.

The film reveals the act of painting as the process of individuation that leads subject/painter and object/painting to become indiscernible as a single milieu. More interested in playing with other kids than in producing art for the benefit of her parents' egos, the girl is visibly angered. She throws buckets of paint onto the canvas, all the while emitting cries of rage and hurling her entire body upon the surface. As the action continues, the difference between the girl's body, the paint, and the canvas grows more and more imperceptible. The girl is engaged in an affective battle which the act of painting is both intensifying and resolving. At the end of her ordeal, we return to an earlier close-up of her face smeared in paint, followed by a long shot of her body standing on a stool, now calmly putting the final touches on the canvas. In becoming an aesthetic field, the painting has resolved the chaotic forces of

the process without negating them. The girl's becoming-paint is tantamount to the production of a new individuation. What should be stressed here is that no psychic interiority founds this process, but rather a constitutive relation of the self to the outside, which renders both ultimately indivisible. Individuation thus results from an action on the world by the subject and on the subject by the world – an affection that is immediately reciprocal.

In contrast with the affective milieu informing the sequence's first half – the girl's aggressively creative response to her parents' narcissistic imposition – the walk through the classical art works that follows exudes spontaneous wonder and serenity. To fit the change in temporal and aesthetic registers, Ramona wears a long, dark blue cape that covers her glittering party body suit. Carrying a briefcase filled with keys to 'Rome's most beautiful buildings' and holding a chandelier, Stefano (Giorgio Pasotti) leads the way into a tour of corridors lined up with busts, statues, and paintings from the old masters. As in other scenes discussed, the huge contrast between the sacred reverence of this second part and the loud and restless energy of the first part is not the object of a value judgment favoring one over the other. Instead, this noticeable asymmetry (also in keeping with Agamben's idea of profanation mentioned earlier) responds to a basic requirement of aesthetics – the need for disparate forces, which 'cause sensibility and thought to emerge as a resolution of potential or intensive difference'.<sup>[33]</sup> This tendency towards disparation is a constant in *La Grande Bellezza*: two aesthetic orders enter into resonance with each other to 'produce an irreducible singularity',<sup>[34]</sup> a relational third term that creates its own ecology.

This relation between asymmetrical orders can also be felt-thought as a crystal image of time – a cohabitation of disparate aesthetic and temporal registers as formations within a many-layered crystal. In fact, one of the salient features in Sorrentino's handling of the *mise-en-scène* is its creative juxtaposition of spaces, which simultaneously results in what Deleuze would call a crystal image of time. Deleuze borrows the concept of the crystal from Simondon's philosophy, where the physical process of crystallisation serves as a model for the operation of transductive modulation occurring in processes of individuation. To use Sauvagnargues's words,

[t]he crystal provides the simplest image of transduction; beginning with a very small seed, it grows in every direction within its pre-individual milieu, each already formed layer serving as the structuring basis of the next molecular stratum in the process of being constituted through an amplifying reticulation.<sup>[35]</sup>

The membrane that separates interiority and exteriority in the crystal is not just topological or spatial, but it is also 'productive of time'. [36] It is this aspect of temporalisation of being that Deleuze seizes on in his notion of the cinematic crystal as a direct time-image. 'What the crystal ... makes visible', he says, 'is the hidden ground of time ... its differentiation into two flows, that of presents which pass and that of pasts which are preserved'. [37]

Key to the conversion of space into time in *La Grande Bellezza* is of course the ever-present signs of the milieu's historic past surrounding every event in the present. This coalescence of past and present allows two temporal and aesthetic orders to enter into a resonant relationship that speaks to the striving for transindividuality mentioned earlier. One such crystallised formation in the film emerges through the proximity between Gambardella's apartment and the Coliseum. Because of this proximity and the striking cinematographic uses made thereof, Gambardella's terrace is at once a site for extreme frivolity and for a radical return to transindividual affectivity – the kind of 'roots', to use the Sister's word, that exceed the confines of a single individual.

Just as the formation of a crystal always keeps the seed at its core, the city of Rome may be seen as a temporal layering of consecutive territories of human activity. In these time-layered territories, some ancient signs stubbornly remain, while others have been obliterated by subsequent formations. Yet, like the seed at the center of the crystal, the city's singularity persists. In this sense, *La Grande Bellezza* is the expression of the mutual, co-constitutive generation of the human and the city in a process of modulation where they both act as form and matter. The film is a testament to the idea that 'art begins with an animal that "constructs a home" ... territorialises ... modulates with the forces of the earth to produce a new and singular expressive space'. [38] In ushering us through the spectacle of Rome, *La Grande Bellezza* gives form to this expressive, transindividual space. Granted, Sorrentino's Rome is not Fellini's. But what Deleuze, largely inspired by Simondon, said about Fellini's cinema echoes throughout the quest for the transindividual in *La Grande Bellezza*:

[t]he only unity of Rome is that of the spectacle which connects all its entrances. The spectacle becomes universal, and keeps on growing ... [a spectacle] where movement, which has become movement of world, makes us pass from one shop-window to another, from one entrance to another ... It is a crystal which is always in the process of formation, expansion, which makes everything it touches crystallize [sic], and to which its seeds give a capacity for infinite growth. It is life as spectacle, and yet in its spontaneity. [39]



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## Notes

[1] Michaud 2013, p. 131.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Among the few available film and media contributions drawing on Simondon's thought to date, the following are worth noting, ranging from sustained analyses of his philosophy to sporadic mentions: Gunning 2014; Hackett 2015; Hansen 2006; Lessard 2010; Machado Oliveira & Rebolledo Palazuelos 2016; Fox 2015.

[4] Sauvagnargues 2016, p. 75.

[5] Sauvagnargues 2013, p. 58.

[6] Massumi 2013, p. 30.

[7] Simondon 1989, pp. 79-80, quoted in Combes 2013, p. 28.

[8] Combes 2013, p. 32.

[9] Ibid., p. 35.

[10] Ibid., p. 37.

[11] Fonzi Kliemann 2014, p. 2.

[12] Combes 2013, p. 27.

[13] Agamben 2007.

[14] Fonzi Kliemann 2014, p. 2.

[15] Krtolica 2013, p. 87.

[16] Combes 2013, p. 51.

[17] Ibid., p. 52.

[18] Ibid., p. 51.

[19] Ibid., p. 31.

[20] Simondon 1989, p. 155, quoted in Combes 2013, p. 35.

[21] Combes 2013, p. 37.

[22] Massumi 2015, pp. 202-203.

- [23] Ibid., p. 202.
- [24] Ibid., p. 123.
- [25] Combes 2013, p. 52.
- [26] Sauvagnargues 2016, p. 70.
- [27] Deleuze 1986, p. 24.
- [28] Michaud 2013, p. 125.
- [29] Sauvagnargues 2013, p. 69.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Deleuze 1989, p. 28.
- [32] Sauvagnargues 2016, p. 73.
- [33] Ibid., p. 65.
- [34] Ibid., p. 72.
- [35] Sauvagnargues 2013, p. 59.
- [36] Ibid., p. 68.
- [37] Deleuze 1989, p. 98.
- [38] Sauvagnargues 2016, pp. 74-75.
- [39] Deleuze 1989, p. 89.