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Narrating the 'Eternal City' in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *La Grande Bellezza* (2013)

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Abstract
Early city films undermined the association of the city with social and technological progress by showing what Siegfried Kracauer termed 'a hidden modernity' – a spatial mapping of social/ideological structures and values that provided a critique of modernity precisely though focusing on its 'surface' aspects. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's notion of 'pedestrian speech acts' this essay explores the ways in which Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and Sorrentino's homage *La Grande Bellezza* (2013) – both of which paint a picture of a decadent society, the consumer society emerging in Italy during the postwar economic boom, and a morally decadent neoliberal Italy – 'narrate' the Eternal City through their flâneur protagonists, in order to illuminate the two filmmakers' different critical engagement with history and with Rome's 'decadence'.emporary interdisciplinary methodologies in the humanities, from.

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Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of the city and the moving image to the modern urban imaginary: one need only recall Anne Friedberg's illuminating account, in *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (1994), of the ways in which 19th century visual experiences like photography, urban strolling, panoramas, and dioramas anticipated cinema, video, shopping malls, and VR technologies; or Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2002), which explores the connections between early cinema and travel culture, linking the anatomy of move-

ment engendered by early cinema to flânerie and modern bodily architectures. Early city films encouraged the association of the city with 'crime, anonymity, a loosening of morality, unemployment and class struggle on the one hand, and with movement, speed, entertainment and liberated erotics on the other hand'.[1] Even as they 'fetishized the surface aspects of modernity',[2] many of these films undermined the association of the city with social and technological progress by exposing the hidden face of progress, what Kracauer would call 'a hidden modernity' – a spatial mapping of social/ideological structures and values that provided a critique of modernity precisely though focusing on its 'surface' aspects. What makes this mapping of social/ideological structures possible in the first place is the fact that, as Michel de Certeau has argued, urban landscapes, architectural spaces, and films all have narrative qualities: 'the walk is to the city what the speech act is to language or to an utterance'.[3] Inasmuch as the city dweller's enunciative function is realised in their choice from a city's many spatial possibilities, the cinematic city is bound to 'narrate' in particular ways and produce particular ways of seeing. This essay explores the ways in which *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *La Grande Bellezza* (2013) – both of which paint a picture of a decadent society, the consumer society emerging in Italy during the postwar economic boom, and a morally and politically decadent neoliberal Italy – 'narrate' the Eternal City through their flâneur protagonists, in order to illuminate Fellini's and Sorrentino's different critical engagement with history and with Rome's 'decadence'.

Fellini's and Sorrentino's representation of Rome's decadence, at two very different historical moments, has played a major role in the films' mixed critical reception. While some reviewers have argued that Fellini's seductive depiction of 'la dolce vita' threatens to conceal the film's satirical edge, others believe that over-emphasising the satirical tone prevents one from appreciating Fellini's humanism. The image *La Dolce Vita* painted of contemporary Italian society as one made up of 'public relation stunts, meaningless intellectual debates, empty religious rites, and sterile love affairs'[4] caused a scandal. The film was criticised for its 'interclass mixture of aristocracy, the world of entertainment, the bourgeoisie, and sub-proletariat, all [of which] appeared together, with no distinction, in a cynical and amoral circus'.[5] Many of the criticisms directed at Fellini's 'nauseating image of rotting suburbs and vice-ridden districts'[6] are reminiscent of the critical response to film noir, a genre similarly condemned for viciously skewering the American dream and exposing its ugly underbelly. That Fellini was no longer concerned with

the literal city-in-ruins left after the war but with 'the spiritual ruins left behind by the Italian economic boom'[7] does not, however, make *La Dolce Vita* apolitical. Andrea Minuz has dedicated an entire book, *Political Fellini: Journey to the End of Italy* (2015), to challenging the myth of Fellini as a disengaged filmmaker, arguing that his films are best seen as an expression of the nation's 'mythical biography' and 'traumatic modernity.' For Minuz, the film's political significance lies in its emphasis on the continuity rather than discontinuity between the ancient and the modern, the sacred and the profane. The difficulties that have plagued the critical evaluation of the politics of *La Grande Bellezza* have been compounded further by the challenge of identifying the dominant affective stance of remakes in general – is Sorrentino's acknowledged remake of Fellini melancholic, nostalgic, cynical, ironic, or all of the above? Like Minuz, Giuseppina Mecchia has sought to redeem Sorrentino from his (mostly) Italian critics by proposing the concept of the sublime as way to theorise the film's subtle politics.[8]

Walter Benjamin's, Siegfried Kracauer's, and André Bazin's divergent accounts of Rome as a city overburdened by its own history and incapable of giving birth to the flâneur, but rather to its vulgar version, the tourist (Benjamin), as inherently more cinematic than other European cities, affording filmmakers endless natural possibilities to 'stage a scene' (Bazin),[9] or as particularly adept at capturing 'the flow of life' with its fleeting impressions and unexpected encounters, especially in neorealist films (Kracauer),[10] are symptomatic of the contradictory roles Rome has played throughout its cinematic history, 'lending its venerable ancient settings'[11] and associated cultural prestige to films of the silent era; providing an archeological and archetypal foundation on which the Fascist narratives of *romanita* were played out; serving as a gritty, fragmented urban stage for neorealism;[12] being subjected to Pasolini's polemical repudiation of the historic centre; or being reduced to the cursory metonymic packaging of cinema cartolina.'[13]

Yet Rome, a city steeped in history, is also a modern city, with much of its built-up area 'the result of disordered growth since Italian unification and more particularly since 1945'.[14] Neorealist films, in which 'the boundary between the city and the country seems fluid and the city's accumulated layers of ancient, medieval and Renaissance history remind us of the past rather than thrust us into the future',[15] are a testament to Italy's delayed modernisation and to Rome's ambivalent status as both modern and pre-modern. Art historian Richard Wrigley attributes Rome's 'delayed modernity' to the synthesis of Art and Nature, city and country, peculiar to Rome.[16] Unlike other

paradigmatic cities of modernity (Berlin and Paris), where the economic expansion and development at the end of the 19th century led to rapid urbanisation, Rome fell behind during the Industrial Revolution, partly as a result of Italy's late unification. The processes of modernisation that created the conditions for the emergence of the Parisian flâneur at the turn of the 19th century were thus not set into motion in Italy until after the Second World War, specifically during Italy's 'economic miracle' (1958-1963), a decadent period of unprecedented material prosperity, increasing secularisation, and the disintegration of traditional social structures.[17]

The city has always been particularly important to cultural manifestations of decadence. The notion of 'decadence' understood as a 'complex response to the dual industrial and political revolutions that produced the urban, bourgeois values of liberal society',[18] has gone through an important semantic shift, usually traced back to Theophile Gautier's analysis of Baudelaire's style as an example of the generative, progressive potential of the idea of decline. Unlike the quintessential dandy, who withdraws from modern life and retreats into a private, artificial world of fantasy, Gautier argued, Baudelaire tried to find a passage between the romantic and modern sensibility, which accounts for the numerous dualities that characterise his lyric poetry.[19] Like Baudelaire's poems, Fellini's films reflected his own ambivalent attitude toward the dramatic social changes taking place in Italy in the 1950s, giving rise to the now familiar 'Felliniesque' dualities and strange pairings, dualities that, as we shall see, are resolved in Sorrentino's remake: the beautiful and the revolting, the moral depravity and vulgarity of an emerging consumer society along with a decadent fascination with 'the society of the spectacle', the critique of the spectacularisation of religious ritual and the inauthenticity of social personas paired with a love for illusion and deception, a yearning for authenticity and innocence coupled with a fascination with studio reconstructions.

In an often-quoted passage Benjamin wonders why the flâneur appeared in Paris rather than in Rome:

> The flâneur is the creation of Paris. The wonder is that it was not Rome. But perhaps in Rome even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well paved. And isn't the city too full of temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines to be able to enter undivided into the dreams of the passer-by, along with every stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway? The great reminiscences, the historical frissons – these are all so much junk to the flâneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist.[20]

Benjamin's verdict notwithstanding, Rome – an unmappable city without structure, where the distinctions between center and periphery, old and new, authenticity and reproduction, have disappeared – has also served as a metaphor for the indestructibility of mental life, most famously in Freud's account of the city-as-palimpsest in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)[21]. The city-as-palimpsest is precisely one that enters 'undivided into the dreams of the passer-by'; it's not surprising, then, that both the journalist-turned-gossip columnist Marcello and the aging writer-turned-journalist Jep have been discussed as modern-day flâneurs.[22] Comparing Fellini's construction of Rome as an accumulation of fragments and historical moments to Freud's city-as-palimpsest, Minuz describes Fellini's Rome as 'a 'polyphonic, fragmentary palimpsest continuously being written over'[23] while Joanna Paul applauds Fellini's 'conscious rejection of the impulse towards historical authenticity that superficially dictates many modern reconstructions of the ancient past'.[24] *La Dolce Vita* marked Fellini's transition from location shooting to studio shooting[25] and experimenting with 'creative geography.' It is precisely the superimposition of both psychic and historical layers, which transforms Rome into what Pierre Nora calls 'lieu de mémoire,' that Fellini finds fascinating:[26]

> I thought of Rome as Imperial, Fascist, Papal. But when I got there in 1938 on a steam train, I realized that none of it was true. The fact was that Rome was an African city. It had a Middle Eastern climate, sprawling, slovenly, hot, thousands of kids playing in the streets, people with eyes averted, black, their voices hoarse, speaking dialect.[27]

Fellini's Rome constitutes his critical response to the fascist celebration of Rome's imperial glory – which he counters by emphasising the city's chaos and decadence – even while remaining structurally similar to Mussolini's falsification of Rome inasmuch as both Mussolini and Fellini view Rome as 'a symbolic space over which to exercise absolute control, to project and sculpt one's ego permanently'.[28]

Given Rome's oneiric and palimpsestic nature, in which 'life and death coexist to the point of becoming nondifferentiated',[29] it is important to decouple Fellini's 'sense of place' from physical or geographical place. That Fellini's studio sets are based more on the filmmaker's 'memories of old Italian films than [on] the monuments of the classical city'[30] does not detract from the sense of place created by his film, first because placing is inevitable inasmuch as places always 'stand in for more abstract and wide-ranging social processes' (e.g., crucial historical events like Italy's late unification, Fascism,

'the economic miracle') and, second, because 'any engagement with place is necessarily limited and capricious in terms of what it can capture about a place'.[31] Tellingly, John Agnew's analysis of Fellini's 'sense of place' underscores Fellini's love for urban open spaces and beaches, 'places without clear identities but open to sudden visual surprises and emotional responses that unsettle any easy definition of their meanings',[32] as well as his fascination with the EUR district because of its provisional nature 'rather like a film set, but also dream-inducing'.[33] Indeed, Fellini himself attributed his fascination for Rome's perennial state of decay to its potential to be transformed into a stage:[34]

> I look with affection upon this panorama of wreckage, of ruins and catastrophes. The torn-up roads, scaffolded monuments, archeological ruins and cosmopolitan crowds give it the air of a theater, a set, a half-dismantled stage.

Fellini's Rome has also been discussed as an instance of the classical ruin's immortality. The classical ruin itself has been read in two mutually exclusive ways, in terms of its *excessive presence* – e.g., in critiques of the fascist mythology of Rome that view the ruin as a symbol of Rome's imperial power and legacy – and in terms of *the absence or decay* it signifies, e.g., in the Romantics' obsession with ruins.[35] Similarly, the 'city-as-palimpsest' has been seen as a positive testament to the indestructibility of the past and collective memory and, *at the same time*, as exemplary of a postmodernist approach to history that flattens time and reduces the city to a series of disparate fragments. Fellini's Rome is, thus, *at one and the same time*, a 'lieu de mémoire' *and* the epitome of the postmodern city (the city as construct).[36] Such divergent readings of Fellini's Rome are indicative of one of the biggest challenges postwar Italian cinema faced, namely the 'ideological antagonism', stemming from the years of fascism, which pitted on one hand 'a nostalgic attitude for a mythologized, distant past', typified in an idealised if outdated pastoralism, and on the other, 'a longing for a brilliant future (modernization, an unknown interclass harmony and material well-being, or new cities and leisure activities) that appears on the horizon but is still largely unrealized'.[37] In the years of Italy's postwar reconstruction, which saw the vast migration of people from 'the rural countryside towards the city, from inland areas towards coastal settlements, and from the south to the north',[38] this ideological antagonism informed all town planning debates, especially those concerning the historical centre in relation to the city's periphery, as Italy tried to rebuild its cities damaged during the war.[39]

Critics who argue that *La Dolce Vita* depicts Rome's periphery – the 'disabitato' – as 'a grim and foreboding, nearly ahistorical place, testimony to the results of heedless… [postwar expansion] of residential development into the surrounding rural periphery',[40] point to the film's opening sequence as an illustration of the loss of continuity, both temporal and spatial, between the past and the present. Alessia Ricciardi suggests that Fellini's entire film alternates between two different styles, 'that of a benign, dream-like ancienneté associated with the pleasure principle and that of a grim, functionalist modernity associated with the reality principle'.[41] I would argue, however, that the opening sequence, as well as the rest of the film, challenges the 'ideological antagonism' by demythologising the Roman past and emphasising its continuity, rather than discontinuity, with the present. The sequence shows a helicopter transporting the statue of Christ over the ruins of the Acqua Claudia, on the periphery of Rome, in the middle of which a soccer field is clearly visible. The soccer field, the helicopter, and the Roman ruins are part of the same establishing shot, the superimposition of different historical layers undermining the difference between them: the soccer field appears as 'old' as the ruins are 'contemporary'. The camera moves from the ancient ruins to the nearby 'housing projects built to replace the shantytowns that had sprung up after the war when immigrants, mostly from Central Italy and the South, had flocked to Rome'.[42] These working-class modernist apartment buildings are 'only partly finished yet they are already worn down by use, and are thus differentiated from the adjacent area, which is an active building site – the fascist complex of EUR'.[43] Although the new buildings look unquestionably modern compared to the Roman ruins, they also resemble them both in their uniformity and incompleteness.[44]

In Fellini's sprawling city-as-palimpsest the past and the present co-exist without opposing or supplanting each other (think of Adriano Celentano singing 'Ready Teddy' in the Caracalla Baths sequence), engaged in constant dialogue. This dialogue, however, is absent from Sorrentino's film, in which any historical reality – whether the 1960s and 1970s, the remnants of the imperial history of Rome, or Jep's youth – is immediately tinged with melancholy, nostalgia, or sublimity. In Giuseppina Mecchia's reading of the film Jep, 'the ultimate flâneur', mediates between the film's two aesthetic modes, the grotesque and the sublime, with the sublime functioning mostly 'as an interruption of the grotesque and the comical'. Perhaps it is in the relationship between these two aesthetic modes that we can locate one major difference between Fellini's and Sorrentino's films. If the sublime in Sorrentino's film functions as an interruption of the grotesque, the 'essential experience

of *La Dolce Vita* is expressed not in the simple juxtaposition of decadence and the numinous but in the surprising realization of what they hold in common'.[45] This sense of the co-existence of the decadent and the numinous is absent from Sorrentino's film, in which every scene, every interaction is either vulgar/grotesque (the party sequences) or holds the promise for transcendence (the Saint's taming of the storks), but never both at the same time.

If the inspiration for Fellini's film was the world of illustrated magazines and the scandals reported in them, the inspiration for *La Grande Bellezza* can be located in *Cafonal*, Umberto Pizzi's book of photography, in which

> we find today's dolce vita crushed into an absolute present. Everything is transitory and ephemeral, nothing is invariable or aspires in any form to the eternal.[46]

Structured as a series of loosely connected episodes, *La Grande Bellezza* introduces us to Jep on his 65th birthday. We learn that Jep arrived in Rome in the 1970s and, after publishing his first and only novel, *The Human Apparatus*, has given up his literary ambitions and dedicated himself to a life of decadence. Soon after his birthday Jep learns that his first love, Elsa, has died. The rest of the film follows Jep as he wanders through Rome, dines with friends, and meditates on life, death, art, and time in a series of confessional voiceovers. The film opens with an elegant choreography of camera movements that circle around a solitary figure in front of the inscription 'Roma o Morte' on Garibaldi's Monument on Janiculum Hill, a couple of Italians scattered among statues of heroes of the Risorgimento, a man freshening up at the nearby Fountain of Acqua Paola, and a Japanese tourist, who, having walked away from his group to take pictures of the glorious view of Rome in the distance, suddenly collapses, overwhelmed by the city's beauty. All the while, a female choir sings a poignant, elegiac song that – far from being a response to the tourist's unfortunate destiny – seems to embody 'the voice' of the Eternal City, whose myth is evoked through the numerous sculptures, monuments, and ruins scattered around.[47]

Not only does *La Dolce Vita* cover a larger and much more varied physical and social space than Sorrentino's film, which is limited to a number of recurring exterior locations (especially rooftops and terraces) – Fellini's film circulates freely between the historical center and the city's periphery while Sorrentino's stays within the confines of the historical center. If *La Dolce Vita* bursts with street life in all its species diversity, watching *La Grande Bellezza* one is tempted to ask: where are the Romans? Fellini's Rome – a cosmopolitan city[48] populated by Romans, Italians from the provinces, and foreigners – is a veritable tower of Babel: in every scene we hear several overlapping

languages, including standard and vernacular Italian,[49] French, German, American and British English, English spoken by Italians, and Italian spoken by Americans and Brits. In one scene Marcello's father, mildly inebriated, asks his son which part of Rome they are in, to which Marcello answers 'the Italian neighborhood'; later, on the way to a party in Bassano di Sutri, Marcello asks the fashion model Nico – who switches freely between Italian, French, and German – what language she speaks, and she replies 'Eskimo.' If Fellini's Rome is cosmopolitan, Sorrentino's is multicultural yet strangely empty: in one night sequence Jep walks down a deserted Via Veneto, glancing through a window at a sheikh eating pasta (in an empty restaurant) in the silent company of his veiled wife, before passing by a group of Chinese businessmen leaving the restaurant. The sheikh and his wife, the Chinese businessmen, and the other 'foreigners' in the film – Jep's Filipino maid, Elisa's husband's new Polish fiancé Polina, the Polish strippers Ramona mentions – have by now become a regular fixture of Rome, which is why Sorrentino does not draw special attention to them, in contrast to the in-your-face presence of non-Romans in *La Dolce Vita*. And yet, save for a few minor exceptions, the only language we hear in Sorrentino's Rome is Italian (Jep alternates between Italian and his native Neapolitan dialect), spoken by mostly white Italians (except for Jep's Filipino maid). While the moral and spiritual malaise Fellini explores points to a space beyond the concrete geographical boundaries of the city (the rest of Italy, Western Europe, America), the cultural and political decline in Sorrentino's film is very clearly that of the Italian nation at a specific point in its history.

Compare, for instance, the scene in Steiner's apartment, where Marcello and Emma are introduced to an international group of artists and intellectuals,[50] to the one roughly corresponding to it in Sorrentino's film, the scene on Jep's terrace during which he exposes his leftist intellectual friend Stefania's claims to political engagement and female martyrdom as nothing but bad faith. Whereas the conversation in this scene revolves around what Giuseppina Mecchia calls 'the end of the historical time of politics' (the 1960s and 1970s), in Fellini's scene – where the conversation revolves around artistic autonomy, the uncertainty of the future, and modern man's alienation from nature – no specific historical moment in the nation's past is invoked against which to measure or judge the present's moral, intellectual, and political decline. Indeed, Fellini consistently dramatises historical tensions in *spatial* rather than *temporal* terms – e.g., in the juxtaposition between Romans and characters from other parts of Italy (Paola, Marcello's father, the locals in the Madonna sequence, the girl from Fano in the Fregene party sequence),

or between the sterility of Steiner's Roman intellectual circle and the authenticity of nature (in the last sequence the wasted partygoers stumble out of the beach house, wondering out loud 'What's out there?' to which someone replies, 'Ah, nature!').

By contrast, Sorrentino's film is suffused with nostalgia for origins: the Saint tells Jep that she eats only roots because 'roots are important'; Dadina teaches Jep that real friendship means occasionally helping the other feel like a child again; Romano ultimately leaves Rome to return to his hometown, but not before writing a play that seeks to redeem nostalgia as the only thing left to those who have lost faith in the future; Jep's ultimate redemption becomes possible only through a return to the home-bound memory of his first love. This nostalgia for origins sits uncomfortably with Sorrentino's repeated references, in various interviews, to the figure of the flâneur. He wanted, he says, to propose a re-valuation of the semantic potential of the usually maligned figure of the tourist, attributing to it some of the subversive potential formerly associated with the flâneur.[51] But while the figure of the tourist is central to the film's opening sequence, setting up the rest of the film as a reflection on the different gazes directed at the Eternal City – the flâneur's versus the tourist's – and while Jep, himself disillusioned with Rome, declares that 'The best people in Rome are the tourists!', in various interviews Sorrentino seems to make no meaningful distinction between the flâneur and the tourist. When asked why he chose to make a film about Rome, he replies that as someone originally from the provinces, he 'still look[s] at it with the eyes of a lover, a tourist…a Neapolitan in Rome'.[52] When, in the same interview, he is invited to comment on his choice of locations in the film, Sorrentino states that rather than selecting the locations in advance he 'adopted an attitude which was the same as that of the main character when he was wandering around Rome at night, a flâneur attitude, someone who just wanders around the city at leisure [and allows himself] to be seduced by places'. Although in his quest for 'the great beauty' Sorrentino invokes both the flâneur and the tourist, he ultimately insists on the importance of reconnecting to one's roots – Jep's spiritual and creative rebirth becomes possible only through his return to the Mediterranean-set memory of his first love (interestingly, these scenes were shot not in Naples but on an island off the Tuscan coast). In short, the film affirms cultivating the sensibility of a foreigner – a tourist – as a possible cure for the disillusionment with the decadent city. Sorrentino's 'tourist', however, remains a privileged position not available to just anyone: the tourist sensibility is clearly not that of the unfortunate Japanese tourist we see dying in the face of Rome's unbearable beauty (this 'vulgar'

kind of tourism is immediately 'punished' by death). Instead, the kind of tourist sensibility the film recommends is one predicated on the comfortable social status enjoyed by Rome's decadent high life.

Benjamin's flâneur strolls through the city craving the little transitory pleasures of the unexpected, yet he also yearns for that which remains the same, the familiar 'red, tin cigar in front of a thousand tabacs; the zinc counter in the little bar; the concierge's cat'.[53] Sorrentino's camera, too, is constantly searching for intimate images that signify 'Rome': a gorgeous, secluded garden, a beautiful night view of the city in the distance, mysterious palazzi, and deserted squares. Yet these places do not strike us as familiar or intimate; rather, they 'belong' to Jep and his entourage only because they can access them: the beautiful garden at which Jep gazes from his private terrace is accessible only to those who can afford an apartment overlooking the Colosseum; the fairy-tale like night view of the city is accessible only to those escorted there by enigmatic key masters. These private views and exclusive experiences of the Eternal City are precisely that, private and exclusive.

In Sorrentino's film Fellini's penchant for theatricality – his circus parades and processions – is rendered literal in scenes featuring real art performances, which, however, are presented as a travesty of art rather than associated with playfulness and innocence. Significantly, the figure of the paparazzi, central to Fellini's exploration of the emerging celebrity consumer culture, not least because it personified the divide that still existed between subjects/celebrities and the media praying upon them, is entirely absent from Sorrentino's film, in which the media's gaze has become seamlessly integrated into the social fabric of a narcissistic, hedonistic and social media-dependent culture perfectly symbolised by the two female dancers we see in the birthday party sequence kissing themselves and simulating striptease in front of two giant windows, and the partygoers practically throwing themselves at the camera as it weaves in and out of the crowd of mature yet well-preserved bodies gyrating to the hypnotically repetitive music.

If Fellini's exploration of the boundaries between the private and the public (summarised by Paparazzo: 'Everyone has a right to their image') clearly draws the line between the authentic and the fake – the paparazzi do not pretend to be concerned with 'truth' – things are much more complicated in Sorrentino's film since art (as opposed to celebrity culture) is tied up with the notion of 'truth'. Artistic pretensions are mocked throughout the film – a vacuous actress writing a Proustian novel while pondering a filmmaking career; a woman describing her haircut as 'Pirandello-esque'; another one declaring pompously that 'the Ethiopian jazz scene is the only interesting one today' –

and there is also the scene in which Dadina (and, through her, Sorrentino) questions the belief that only a socially and politically engaged art is worth anything. There are, however, three sequences structured specifically around contemporary art's self-calculated ephemerality: Talia Concept's art performance at the Roman Aqueduct ruins, the action-painting girl at the art collector's party, and a photographer's display of thousands of daily self-portraits on the walls of Villa Giulia. Only the last one of these art performances is 'authentic' inasmuch as it provokes an authentic reaction from Jep, who is brought by tears by the photographs' record of the inevitable passage of time (what Barthes calls the photograph's 'punctum'). Displaying these selfies in Villa Giulia, now housing the Etruscan museum, gets to the core of Sorrentino's film, which locates 'the great beauty' not in Italy's official cultural heritage (i.e., Etruscan frescoes or statues) but in the pathos of time, in what Jep calls 'the haggard, inconstant flashes of beauty': the glimpse of a nun picking oranges in a convent's orchard, of kids playing hide and seek in a beautiful garden, or of a couple's seemingly never-ending kiss. Sorrentino locates the authentic not in a particular art object or art form, but rather in a certain heightened, artistic sensibility that finds beauty in the transient, the ordinary, the familiar, in that which makes one feel at home (like the memory of your first love) or makes one feel like a child again (like being called by the name your parents used to call you as a child).

Most reviews of *La Grande Bellezza* comment on the central role played by the city: one critic writes that the film offers a 'melancholy tour of a city so spectacular and historic that it paralyzes its inhabitants',[*54*] while another argues that 'Rome has rarely looked better, resplendent in baroque tonalities, showing off the city's palaces, aqueducts and fountains'.[*55*] I would argue, however, that 'Rome' here figures not as a real city but rather as a state of mind, the protagonist's mental landscape of ennui, anomie, and decadence. The most obvious aspect of what we understand by 'city' – the street, with its constant flow of life, its promise of anonymous encounters and sudden danger – is absent from *La Grande Bellezza*, as though the death of a single tourist in the opening sequence prefigured the disappearance of all tourists – and locals – from Rome. Sorrentino's Rome is a desolate city that serves either as a stage for art performances or as the permanent décor of Jeb's apartment overlooking the Colosseum, which is treated as a convenient shorthand for the entire city. Equally absent is that other product and symbol of the city, the crowd – the only crowd we see is that of mature yet inexhaustible partygoers.

In the absence of any views from the city's periphery, and of any examples of modern architecture, Rome's historical centre (access to which is so exclusive that it may require special keys – cf. the scene with the key master) is here supposed to 'stand in' for the whole city. Rather than bringing together the past and the present, Sorrentino's elegant cinematography and editing underscore the unbridgeable aesthetic and spiritual gap between them – the match cut between a girl hiding in a transcendently beautiful church and an ordinary egg boiler in Jep's kitchen is emblematic of this. Unlike Fellini's Rome, 'a sort of a moderate, tranquil jungle' through which Marcello wanders freely, interacting with people from all walks of life – actors, aristocrats, prostitutes, pimps, flight attendants, doctors, restaurant owners, gas station attendants, waiters[56] – Sorrentino's Rome is devoid of life: most of his exterior locations – shot exclusively either at dawn or at night, when the city is empty, never in the daytime – are either rooftops or deserted streets and piazzas (Jep and Orietta walking at night through Piazza Navona, Jep walking along the Tiber at dawn, Jep and Ramona walking at night near the Colosseum, etc.) The Romans are nowhere to be seen in Rome, which seems to be populated only by Jep and his entourage, nuns (appearing at regular intervals), and prostitutes. The only city people we see – in the sequence of Jep walking home after his birthday party – are an Asian man walking his dog and a woman arguing loudly in Spanish on the phone.

While numerous scenes in Fellini's film could be discussed in terms of the legacy of *vedutismo* – the art of viewing the city emerging in early modernity and generally considered to be the forerunner of photography and the movie camera – none in *La Grande Bellezza* could. In his studio reconstructions Fellini took pains to create richly-textured scenes from daily life and create the impression of capturing life as it passes by; Sorrentino shoots on location yet evacuates every trace of life, replacing it with extravagant compositions. The operatic, swirling, and gliding camera movements of the opening sequence, which provides us with a rare glimpse of the city as a whole are followed by an extended birthday party sequence, after which we see Jep looking down from his terrace at a secluded garden, where a nun is playing with a few kids. We next see a conceptual art performance at Parco degli Aquedotti Trastevere, from where we are transported directly into Dadina's office, then into Jep's apartment, and finally his terrace. A few flickering lights in the distance and Rome's most iconic symbol, the Colosseum, are the only reminders we are in Rome.

Sorrentino's camera, of which we remain constantly aware, zooms in and out of people and objects in a way reminiscent of camera movements in art

documentaries, in which the camera often zooms in and out of an artwork to reveal some important detail. Even the rare scenes shot at street level – e.g., the scene of Jep returning home in the early morning – never present us with a coherent image of a particular part of the city but only with a series of brief, almost subliminal impressions conveyed, paradoxically, through flamboyant camera movements. Exterior night scenes are always set in deserted streets or piazzas and lit by streetlights, looking like a theatrical stage. When Jep accompanies Orietta to her apartment, the camera follows them through Piazza Navona and into a majestic palazzo, gliding behind them, past old sculptures and paintings, in an uninterrupted movement ending in Orietta's bare apartment, also lit like a stage, as if to suggest that these interior spaces, which are supposed to be inhabited, are also nothing more than décor.

Although we notice several recognisable landmarks – piazza Navona, the Janiculum, the Colosseum, the Tiber – most of the action takes place indoors, in palaces, terraces, or rooftops most ordinary Italians (let alone tourists) do not have access to. In fact, most exterior shots serve as mere transition devices between the longer, more elaborate dialogue scenes indoors. Instead of *depicting the city* through exterior shots of different neighborhoods or streets Sorrentino *implies it* through a series of partial shots that never give a proper sense of what part of Rome the action takes place in. The ugly underbelly of modernity imagined by early city films, often literally 'under' the city, has been relocated on the rooftops and terraces of Rome: far from being hidden, like a dark secret, the decadent underbelly of neoliberalism is defined by its aggressive presence, its ostentatiousness. If Jep is a flâneur at all his flânerie takes place down memory lane, not in the streets and alleyways of Rome.

Is Rome, by default, impervious to 'the weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality',[57] to the triumph of 'depthlessness'[58] and 'the waning of affect'[59] that Fredric Jameson identified as constitutive features of postmodernism, the cultural logic of late capitalism? In other words, how do we negotiate Jameson's account of late capitalism with Freud's thought experiment, in which Rome figures as a visual metaphor for the structure of the psyche and the indestructibility of the past? That *La Dolce Vita* remains such a historically rich document of 'the sweet life' of indulgence and prosperity brought about by Italy's post-war economic boom should be attributed, I think, to the film's exploration of the intersection of divergent social and cultural city spaces, to its interclass mixture of aristocracy, the world of entertainment, the bourgeoisie, and sub-proletariat, as well as to Fellini's postmodern iconography.[60] While Fellini's film peers into different strata of Italian society,

without passing judgment or assigning a higher moral ground to the subproletariat (as a neorealist film might have done, for instance), Sorrentino's remains too focused on its aging protagonist's private search for inspiration and meaning.

That Sorrentino is much more interested in distinguishing between those living in bad faith (Stefania, Talia Concept) and those cynical enough to recognise their own lack of justification (Jep) than he is in interclass relations is certainly one reason for his film's lukewarm reception at home. Contrary to many Italian critics who saw the film as pandering to foreign (mostly American) audiences, Giuseppina Mecchia has sought to redeem Sorrentino from critiques of apoliticism and mysticism by positioning his film as 'an *ethical*, not a *political* denunciation of the corruption and vacuity of Italy's cultural elites', and arguing that *La Grande Bellezza* is anchored 'in the aesthetics of the sublime as a profoundly ethical category, based in our emotional and affective response to infinity and loss'.[61] Far from wallowing in gratuitous melancholy, she maintains, Sorrentino points to the necessity for 'a spiritual and political transformation', whose possibility he 'confirms beyond all ironic skepticism' and envisions in terms of the sublime (examples of the sublime include the Saint's taming of the storks and the recurring shots of birds and sky). Challenging traditional notions of the sublime as 'a pessimistic, even reactionary approach to history and politics', Mecchia insists on the political significance of staging the loss of politics: even as *La Grande Bellezza* dramatises 'the loss of another kind of time associated with the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, the historical time of politics', she writes,

> Jep's ironic deconstruction of his friends' recollection of their past political engagement is…represented as an essential prelude to the experience of the sublime. […] We can only stage the loss of politics, and in the immensity of that loss we can at least find an aesthetical release of emotions.

Mecchia's analysis of the sublime is not entirely persuasive, however.[62] In her view, Sorrentino evokes the sublime by summoning overfamiliar images of Rome, which attest to the city's 'peculiar kind of photogeny [as] an essential part of the history of cinema itself'. She adds, however, that as soon as it presents us with 'postcard-like portraits of Rome', Sorrentino's camera 'moves away from them, coming back again and again to the blue expanses of the sky or of the River Tiber and the inhuman sounds of bird callings', images and sounds she reads as constituting a *specifically Roman sublime*, which, paradoxically, is 'irreducible to the city's 'great beauty' or to any historical-political past'. In short, what Mecchia calls the 'Roman sublime' is nothing

other than the pathos of things, or what the Japanese call 'mono no aware'. Mecchia's description of Sorrentino's 'Roman sublime' to which Rome gives birth but with which the city, as a place with a particular historical-political past, has nothing to do, illuminates an important difference between Fellini's and Sorrentino's engagement with history. *La Grande Bellezza* does not presume to chronicle the collective experience of a nation; instead, it visualises the cultural logic of late capitalism through the private existential search of one man. Sorrentino's fascination with the way in which 'la dolce vita' of the late 1950s/early 1960s is 'crushed into an absolute present' finds a perfect manifestation in the way in which in his film a socially, racially, and culturally heterogeneous Italian society is 'crushed' into a homogenous, seemingly 'classless' world. This kind of 'presentism' (the disappearance of historicity)',[63] the inability to situate oneself historically, is perfectly demonstrated by Jep's redemption (via 'a return to origins' or a flight into the past), which the film presents as the only possible way to deal with 'the end of the historical time of politics'. Ultimately, Sorrentino's Rome remains nothing more than the private mise-en-scène of an aging flâneur reminiscing nostalgically about his youth, oblivious to the various processes of neoliberal restructuring the 21st century 'Eternal City' is undergoing.[64]

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Notes

[1] Mennel 2019, p. 23.

[2] Ibid, p. 44.

[3] de Certeau 2002, p. 114.

[4] Bondanella 1992, p. 146.

[5] Minuz 2015, p. 63.

[6] Ibid, p. 82.

[7] Ibid, p. 60.

[8] Mecchia 2016.

[9] Bazin 1967, pp. 28-29.

[10] Kracauer 1960, p. 71-77.

[11] For a survey of the representation of Rome in cinema, see Sbardella 2003. On ancient Rome in Italian and Hollywood cinema, see Wyke 1997.

[12] Shiel 2008, p. 27-42.

[13] Wrigley 2008, p. xi.

[14] Agnew 2020, p. 117.

[15] Ibid, p. 27.

[16] Wrigley 2008, p. xiv.

[17] On the socio-economic and political context of Fellini's film, see Piccinato 2018. On the dark side of Italy's 'economic miracle', see Gundle 2012 and Pinkus 1993.

[18] Desmarais & Weir 2019, p. 7.

[19] On the figure of the flâneur as a mechanism for coping with the aporias of modernity, see Clarke 1997.

[20] Benjamin 1929, p. 263.

[21] Freud 1930, p. 6.

[22] Carrier 2015.

[23] Minuz 2015, p. 79.

[24] Paul 2008, p. 111.

[25] Bondanella 1992, p. 139.

[26] Nora 1989, p. 7.

[27] Fellini qtd in Minuz 2015, p. 86.

[28] Minuz 2015, p. 89.

[29] Szaniawski qtd in Agnew, p. 122.

[30] Theodorakopoulos qtd in Agnew, p. 119.

[31] Agnew, p. 120.

[32] Ibid, p. 124.

[33] Ibid, p. 121.

[34] qtd in Mariani & Barron 2011, p. 315.

[35] Ruins can represent both the presence and absence of the past: the Papacy, the Risorgimento, and the fascists all celebrated ruins as evidence of Rome's imperial legacy reaffirming Italian national identity, whereas the Romantics saw ruins as symbols of decay and mortality.

[36] See Holdaway & Trentin 2013 for an alternative reading of Rome as a key site for the development of postmodern culture.

[37] Bertellini & Giovacchini qtd in Mariani & Barron 2011, p. 310. On peripheries and suburbs in Italian cinema, see Bertellini & Giovacchini 1997.

[38] Piccinato 2018, p. 238.

[39] See Piccinato 2018 for an analysis of the major town planning debates and challenges during the period of post-war reconstruction. The real risk of denaturing historical inheritances came from the pressures exerted by the real estate market.

[40] Mariani & Barron 2011, p. 318.

[41] qtd in Mariani & Barron 2011, p. 319.

[42] Carrera 2019, p. 39.

[43] Pratt & Juan 2014, p. 46.

[44] The overlaying of historical/architectural layers is mirrored by the overlaying of psychic layers dramatising the self as performance: the film is populated with characters either literally performing or 'playing' games.

[45] Nicholls 2020, p. 471.

[46] Minuz 2015, p. 64.

[47] On the different ways in which the stylistic and architectural aspects of the two protagonists' spiritual journeys 'fashion a unique voice for Rome's genius loci', see Gammon 2019.

[48] On the rebirth of post-war Rome as a cosmopolitan city populated by glitterati and expat artists, and an epicenter of film, fashion, and tabloid media, see Levy 2016.

[49] On the use of standard and vernacular Italian in the film, see Carlotta Kliemann, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2014/feature-articles/cultural-and-political-exhaustion-in-paolo-sorrentinos-the-great-beauty/

[50] On the figure of the 'artist traveller' in its historical context, see Nicholls & White 2016.

[51] Following Sorrentino's success at the Oscars, he was awarded honorary citizenship of Rome. The city council has since introduced a series of itineraries for tourists inspired by Jep's wanderings through the city.

[52] https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/02/great-beauty-director-talks-giraffes/358465/

[53] Benjamin 1929, p. 266.

[54] https://film.avclub.com/the-great-beauty-1798178676

[55] https://variety.com/2013/film/global/cannes-film-review-the-great-beauty-1200484710/

[56] On the rarely explored presence of LGBT characters in the film, see https://jclark-media.com/filmreviewladolcevita/

[57] Jameson 1991, p. 6.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., p. 10.

[60] On Fellini's postmodern iconography, see Benincasa 2013.

[61] Mecchia 2016.

[62] Mecchia alternates between defining the 'Roman sublime' in purely temporal terms (the awareness of the inevitable decay of all things) and defining it as a 'coping mechanism' necessitated by the traumatic nature of the sublime, a coping mechanism she analyses in terms of a particular '*cinematic techne* of sublimity' (fixed camera, long tracking shots, extreme close-ups, natural sounds).

[63] See Baumbach & Young & Yue 2016.

[64] On the neoliberal restructuring of Rome, see Gemmiti 2019.