

# Introspective Conflict in the Middle of a Moveable Feast

## The Tragedy of Ageing Masculinity in Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013)

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**Abstract:** *After being recognised as one of the most interesting filmmaker of post-millennial Italy in contemporary film studies, Paolo Sorrentino seems to lead the new Italian cinema as a proper auteur following the tradition of such important figures as Fellini, Rossellini, De Sica, Antonioni and Bertolucci. The Great Beauty, released in 2013, was his major hit and raised his career to an unthinkable level of fame and recognition in the international milieu. In his film, Sorrentino pays homage to Fellini's universe with some intertextual allusions to La dolce vita (1960), 8  $\frac{1}{2}$  (1963), and Roma (1972). However, this homage is not exempt from an ironic gaze about the excessive and grotesque landscape inherent to the eternal city; moreover, the old age of Rome explicitly displayed in interrupted shots of the ruins of the Roman Empire is symbolically related to the protagonist's awareness of his ageing. That the film's narrative starts with the celebration of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday is nothing less than a meaningful hint, since it symbolically marks the age of retirement, physiological changes, and the starting point for the last phase in any man's life. It is the intention of this chapter to analyse the issue of ageing masculinity embodied in the male protagonist and expanded to the presentation of the decadent city of Rome as a technique for producing a film narrative consisting of two separate sets of sequences working together and constructing a short-circuit for the logics of the plot. Firstly, the protagonist's monologues are expressions about an introspective conflict, which defines male old age as a stage*

*of contemplation, reveries, and nostalgia for the loss of youth, and, secondly, the insistent exhibition of social strident partying introduces a sense of psychological noise that conveys a sort of consolatory device, which unsuccessfully enough hides the reality of his self.*

**Keywords:** *Aging Masculinities; Paolo Sorrentino; The Great Beauty; Rome; Italian cinema; film narrative; cinematographic point of view; psychological process*

## Introduction

The inclusion of Paolo Sorrentino in the Hall of Fame of Italian filmmakers is a phenomenon that possibly started some years ago, before the release of his greatly recognised movie *The Great Beauty* (2013), which won the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film a year after. In 2014, he had attained the categorisation of an acclaimed figure within the realm of Italian culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the publication of three novels and the production of six movies including the one that is the object of analysis here. It is not difficult to understand that many film critics were aware of his increasing relevance in the international milieu, which provoked a rising interest in studying his career as the most significant author in Italian cinema since the golden age of Neorealism and Post-Neorealism. The highly stylised aesthetics of Sorrentino's films and his ironic comment developed along the lines of his scripts were the most interesting aspects for an increasing number of scholars, who started paying attention to this filmmaker as the proper emblem of an artist. It was in 2019 when this focalisation on Sorrentino's oeuvre reached the status of academic value, with the publication of a collection of articles entirely devoted to this director in the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*. In the editorial, Annachiara Mariani elevated him to the consideration of a "transcultural and postnational" auteur and set the most highlighted components of his films in terms of formal, metaphysical and poetic grandeur:

Sorrentino's global breadth, his unique visionary style and distinctive aesthetics, his outspoken hubris and weighty poetics, his metaphysical lyricism and stunning compositions (with Luca Bigazzi behind the lens) tout court make him a contemporary director worthy of scrutiny. (Mariani 2019, 332)

Only two years after, two books on Sorrentino's career with the titles of *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino. Commitment to Style* (Killbourn 2020) and *Paolo Sorrentino's Cinema and Television* (Mariani 2021) consolidated the Neapolitan filmmaker and extended the diversification of research around his film narratives. In fact, some pieces of contemporary criticism stress the connection between Sorrentino's baroque style with inherent political statements, as Vito Zaggario (2016, 127) highlights in his chapter "The 'Great Beauty', or 'Form Is Politics'", where he states the intimate connection established between the complex visual style of Sorrentino's films and his engaged representation of Berlusconi's decadent Italy. That is also the thesis of Claudio Bisoni's chapter "Paolo Sorrentino: Between Engagement and *savoir faire*" (2016, 259), which comes to the conclusion that it is a common mistake to confuse his protagonists' perspective with that of the director's:

Sorrentino's cinema is rather read above all as a discussion that applies irony and contingency in turn to the world that it depicts on the screen. If this is the case, it is difficult to read any complicity between Sorrentino and the worlds of his characters. Instead he emerges, even before *Il divo*, as a director who creates pop icons that reflect [the collective Italian psyche. Italy as a space of solitude].

In particular, this collective Italian psyche was created by the Italian golden age of Neorealism and Post-Neorealism with the highly praised contributions of auteurs such as Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni, who represented the profound decline of the bourgeoisie as metonymic of the nihilism invading the post-war era in Italy. The intertextual relations observed in Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* and Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) have been a matter of concern for many scholars (Carmelitano 2013; Lemus Polanía 2017; Durán Manso

2018; Mariani 2019; Mendieta Rodríguez 2019; Killbourn 2021), who determine the continuity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century film and the fictionalisation of Rome as the scenario of social and moral decline displayed by Fellini. Yet, the 2013 movie cannot be interpreted simply as a modern version of *La dolce vita*, mainly because it is not so easy to erase the fifty-three years that separate the two.

Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones (2007) define the 1960s as the moment in which Italian cinema took advantage of the total decay of Hollywood dominion caused by the disappearance of the studio system which controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of movies for forty years. The period saw the increasing presence of Italian films in theatres, and, with it, the empowerment of Italian directors who were paving the way of differentiating their narratives from those of commercially driven American cinema. Besides, Italy became a perfect location to reactivate the taste for adventure films which was the origin of the “peplum” (movies about the ancient history of Rome), which led to the arriving of hundreds of cinema people at Rome. This influx of activity known as “Hollywood on the Tiber” offered many Italian technicians an opportunity to gain the experience and expertise essential to the boom in Italian film production in the 1960s (Celli and Cottino-Jones 2007, 86).

When Federico Fellini released *La dolce vita* in 1960, Italian cinema was ready to adopt the idea of artistic and experimental cinema in line with other national cinemas in Europe. By benefiting from the experience of Neorealist movies and their critical perspective about post-war Italy, the decade inaugurated a new form of seeing art cinema as a space for interrogating the economic boom of the period and its immoral consequences. The city of Rome embodied the perfect setting for the multiple sides of Italian society to be displayed throughout the psychological journey of the protagonist Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni), a journalist looking for stories to tell and a well-known inhabitant of the Roman nightlife. The narrative follows Marcello for one week through his psychological journey in his confrontation with his inner conflicts masked by the noisy party life of the city towards final self-assertion of not being able to gain any deep understanding of his superficial and empty self.

One year before, Michelangelo Antonioni had inaugurated his alienation trilogy with the release of *L'avventura* (1959), followed by *La notte* (1961) and *Leclisse* (1962), three films that abandoned Rome for Milan in the second film in order to revise the most modern city of Italy as the place for moral unease and the breakdown of characters lost in a dense and out-of-focus society, hopeless in its own moral void. Antonioni's landscape transforms the city into a myriad of barren streets where the high buildings and the geometrical shots of blocks and small terraces reinforce the idea of claustrophobia. The characters present their unease by constantly moving from place to place, wandering without any possible end.

These two directors propelled Italian cinema to the level of the New Wave in France, the Free Cinema in Great Britain, and the New Cinema in Germany, to counterpart the Hollywood film industry and its dominion. They transformed the direct political criticism of Neorealism into a subtle denunciation of Italian social texture in times of economic boom and the consecration of neoliberal bourgeois life (Marrone 2016, 19). Moreover, what this group of films has in common is the tendency of representing social unease in the figure of a masculine type, that of the loser, producing representations of men who have lost their inspiration, the majority related to the realm of art: writers that have to succumb to the materialistic realm of gossip journalism leaving aside their transcendental desire of being literary masters, whose identity has lost the brilliance of the visionary and has reached a moment of delusion and despair. This existentialist nihilism entails an ageing process that is divorced from the effervescent youth and seems statically located in middle age as a new category of being, not just related to a proper evolution of life, but rather as a point in which they feel the weight of ageing and the abyss of not knowing how to go on. Antonioni's trilogy presents an enthralling excursion across a sentimental and social failure of bourgeois marriage as an imposition, an itinerary through the desert of love that the characters (male and female) see as an unbearable load. In this sense, there is no redemption, no solution for this state of mind, and their wanderings symbolise life, while the claustrophobic settings embody the hostility of a social order that abandons them to annihilation.

In general terms, the masculinity that all these protagonists perform is one with no safe sense of belonging in a world lacking opportunities, a social scenario obscured by their sterility (as non-fathers and as hopeless professionals), and their infructuous search for a stable self-identity. Along with the narratives, these male characters are bored with the women they have at their side, with their frivolous friends, and with a social texture they abhor. According to Sergio Rigoletto, the art cinema of post-Neorealist auteurs was proclaiming contemporary interrogations of manhood by showing male disempowerment and vulnerability. It meant the representation of the crisis of masculinity that in the next decade was going to concentrate on some of the most radical fictionalisations on sexual and social boundaries and their construction of acceptable and marginal male identities (Rigoletto 2014).

This is the connection between what Paolo Sorrentino offers with his acclaimed film *The Great Beauty* and the art cinema to which he wants to pay homage. Yet, the nation that was depicted in the 1960s is completely different from 21<sup>st</sup> century Italy, the political turmoil left by Silvio Berlusconi (Durán Manso 2018, 555; Picarelli 2015, 6) and the beginning of a period conditioned by the post-truth age, where the traditional borders between honesty and lying become completely blurred. Taking into account the very syntax of the film, the shot edition, the constant interconnection of images, and the surrealist collage of different camera angles and focuses, it is possible to understand how the film constructs a logical framework of action and themes concentrated on the omnipresent figure of Jep Gambardella, the main protagonist, and the need to read him in a problematic relation to Fellini's and Antonioni's dramatic universe.

Nonetheless, the development of this thematic interconnection conveys a contemporary reflection on the category of masculine identity and ageing, which is absent from the post-Neorealist filmmakers' interests. This aligns the film with prominent contributions in Masculinity Studies when this discipline turned to the issue of aging as part of its intersectional approach (Armengol 2018; Bartholomeaus and Tarrant 2016; Blundo and Estés 2005; Calasanti 2005; Calasanti and King 2005; Fennell and Davidson 2003; Hearn and Pringle 2006; Jackson 2016; Thompson 2018; Wangler 2013). Paolo Sorrentino's awareness of his protagonist's

personal understanding of old age creates an important gap regarding the representation of masculinities in previous decades of Italian cinema, a strategy that allows him to interact with the principal achievements of Masculinity Studies mentioned above, evidently absent in his ancestors' films.

### **Rome as a Moveable Feast: Masculine Social Masks which Maintain the Dream of Youth**

Acting, like setting, constitutes a fundamental component of *mise-en-scène* and, also like setting, is shaped by other filmic elements such as camera angle and movement, lighting and editing. Rome's neighbourhoods, monuments and landmarks are narrative spaces that have loaned themselves to myriad interpretations: historical, ideological, psychological and symbolic. (Cooper 2017, 263)

Taking as a metaphor the title of Ernest Hemingway's memoirs (*A Moveable Feast*, published posthumously in 1964), and concentrating on the idea of an eternal city, Paris, as the scenario of the writer's diverse experiences in a foreign and revolutionary country devoted to the arts as the political engine of the times in the decades of his coming of adulthood, it is possible to make a connection between this symbolic city and the Rome fictionalised in *The Great Beauty* by Sorrentino. If Paris was the capital of the avant-garde, of the attack against classicism and the bourgeois manners, and of the liberation of the senses for the sake of innovation and rupture, the Rome represented in Sorrentino's film embodies the failure of this infinite hope that Paris represented one century ago.

Besides, the city shown in *La dolce vita* situates Rome in the late 1950s, when it was a famous tourist destination and the European capital of Hollywood crews: a cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and frivolous city invaded by rich foreigners for the true Italian citizens to take economic advantage of. This is why Fellini selects the settings with the objective of being recognised by all spectators: the dome of St. Peter's Basilica, Bernini's Columns, Trevi Fountain, and Via Veneto, compounding an

image of grandeur and monumental splendour. However, Sorrentino's depiction of Rome takes a significant turn, and apart from the Coliseum (which stands for the B-side of Gambardella's terrace), the buildings chosen to establish the connection with the past transform previous grandeur into a cynical perspective, by which the touristic postcard turns into intricate associations with the characters' inner desolation, usually taking the interior of phantasmagorical palaces under candle-light and plunged into silence. As Luigi Carmelitano (2014, 157) asserts, Roma in *The Great Beauty* is the metaphor of paralysis, an immovable city that is incapable of coping with the present, passively witnessing its decadence while being consoled with the remembrance of its imperial past.

The opening scene reveals Sorrentino's perspective regarding this idea: Rome's splendour has some effect only in admiring tourists that can even collapse as victims of a sublime experience, as it happens with the Japanese man sighting the city from the Janiculum, the eighth hill of the capital. This overture introduces a list of film techniques that are going to set the baroque composition, the complexity of symbols, and the intertextual games all along with the narrative. In the published script of the film, the scene is described with incredible minute detail: the image of a cannon starts a quick syntax of travelling shots depicting the Janiculum as a place of mixing categories: the spectators of the cannon firing, the Japanese tourists, the workers, the aristocratic woman smoking, the choir singing David Lang's "I Lie" (a song released in 2013 but still keeping the tone of antique sacred music) inside the monumental building, while the camera shows the Garibaldi statue and fixes its attention on the words 'Roma or death' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013).<sup>1</sup> The transcendental effect on the spectator is counteracted by the tourist's fainting and the tourist female guide's lack of empathy ('Oh, my Asian man has died', Sorrentino and Contarello 2013), and the script finishes this scene with the words: 'And the last shot is for Rome, mon-

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian script (Sorrentino & Contarello 2013) are mine.

umental and most beautiful. And heartless' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013).

The lack of emotion invades the rest of the Roman scenarios from this beginning to the end of the movie, and it is what joins the category of 'city as background' to that of 'city as a character', taking the thesis at the core of Carla Molinari's contribution, "The Urban Dimension as Film Character: Rome in *The Great Beauty*" (2021). The link between the two categories is clearly the protagonist, Jep Gambardella, who permeates the plot with his cynical perspective, and who sets the structure of the thematic lines connected with all Roman scenarios.

The Roman settings introduced in the film produce a thematic structure which divide the plot into several sections regarding the different meanings of the social gatherings represented: the birthday party, Jep Gambardella's terrace in front of the Coliseum, monuments as the containers of postmodern art, streets and places as frames of the protagonist's wanderings. All of them function as metaphor of the old age of the eternal city in intimate connection with the ageing Gambardella, who constantly tries to retain the spirit of youth symbolised by his brilliant, colourful suits, and his intense countenance. The social success of the protagonist is concerned with the arresting power of surfaces, just like Rome, whose beauty wastes away before the eye. (Picarelli 2015, 8)

It is not by accident that the second scene of the film takes his bizarre, noisy, and appealing 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party to a hotel terrace, where his ageing male friends perform their lost adolescence in a quite ridiculous manner in the middle of the turmoil of young, sexy bodies. It is full of significance that Sorrentino's selection of film techniques produces a collage of different shots to stop in a moment and divorce Gambardella from the rest, the former looking directly at the camera and saying that he loves the smell of the old people's houses. With this intrusion of the protagonist's interior monologue, Sorrentino offers clues to understanding the doubling of his character: on the one hand, the successful still-appealing man of the world, the one invited to all parties in Rome, the outside performance of the once-famous writer, and, on the other, the inner side of old age, the recognition of his life

coming to a phase of decline, in sum, the protagonist of Fellini's film waving goodbye to middle-age (Lemus Polanía 2017, 29).

Actually, as Molinari demonstrates, in Sorrentino's film "Rome is not really explored as a whole city" (2021, 129), but as compendium of individual sites forming a collage of experiences associated with Jep Gambardella's social position in the bourgeois, decadent community he belongs to. Among these, there is special insight in the meetings with friends at his terrace, a repeated setting that punctuates the narrative with the constant take of the Coliseum as a bored witness of these conversations dipped in alcohol and exhausted by rivalry, greed, and envy. The protagonist's narrative voice is used to deepen each secondary character's psychological profile, normally expressed by means of confrontations around the political situation of Rome, the anti-essentialism of culture, and the criticism of the Church. Politics, culture, and Catholicism are the objects of satirical comments juxtaposed by some scenes exploring the superficiality of all. To convey this idea, there are spectacular moments in which Gambardella, playing the role of the interviewer of important characters, assists to art forms, such as the one represented in the Antique Roman Aqueduct with a female artist totally naked and with her pubic hair dyed in red with the communist flag drawn on her pubis. Her only line states 'I do not love you at all' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013), while she precipitates against the aqueduct stones and faints with blood emanating from her head. In a sense, this is the state of affairs with culture and art in Sorrentino's film: the relativism of postmodern art at the service of politics without any effect on the spectator, but with the enthralling presence of Imperial Rome as the stage.

Within these meetings, there is one that seems to establish a strong line of thought in *The Great Beauty* with respect to the Catholic Church and Rome as the site of the Pope, something that again connects with Fellini's oeuvre. The series of scenes associated with this issue comes in the last part of the film and has to do with the arrival of Sister Maria the Saint, a sardonic recreation of Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who is visiting Rome as part of a religious tour accompanied by a manager. Jep Gambardella is asked to interview her but she rejects, accepting in the course

of events to share dinner at the journalist's home. This female character, as old as the city, grotesque in her physical weakness, toothless and completely wrinkled, with feet that cannot touch the ground when sitting on any chair, provokes a short-circuited situation when having dinner with Gambardella's friends. Poverty and silence do not form part of their character, and the Saint imposes a psychologically tense atmosphere on them. She is part of another world, an alien in the palace inhabited by the journalist, yet she does not seem to be aware of the shock she produces in the group when her manager pronounces her age: 104 years old, or when he says what she eats everyday: 40 grams of roots. When the group dissolves in the middle of the night, Sister Maria has disappeared and Gambardella finds her sleeping on his study's floor, in a manner that provides a link with the protagonist's assimilation to ageing. In this line of interpretation, Gambardella is again young regarding the emaciated woman who can live of nothing, and the Saint is transformed within the plot into a sort of oracle (imaginary or real, it does not matter) for the 65-year-old man. This is why the most intense and brief dialogue takes place at dawn when the protagonist wakes up and goes to the habitually crowded terrace, to meet the woman surrounded by hundreds of flamingos that seem to have some sort of communication with the Saint. Astonished by the image, Gambardella keeps silent while Sister Maria asks him why he did not write a second book, to which he answers: 'I searched for the great beauty but I did not find it' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013). And finally, in one of the scenes that construct the emotional ending of the film, the old woman says: 'Do you know why I eat only roots? [...] Because roots are the most important' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013).

### **Introspective Insights: Gambardella's Revelations About the Ache of Ageing**

Sorrentino's films are character driven: without exception, the protagonist's vision of the world and his impact on or clash with the surrounding human community is central. Every main character is the *divo*, the main attraction of his world. Yet the protagonists are

often relatively detached, if not entirely marginalised, from the communities that revolve around them. (Bisoni 2016, 255)

Extending this idea with the category of masculinity in mind, it is possible to say that Sorrentino's films are driven by different performances of Alpha male protagonists who need to cope with the strict codes of gender as imperative to maintain popular admiration. The focus on characters suffering from masculine defects positions the narrative within a very contemporary issue around the construction of gender. That human beings not only have bodies but that they *are* bodies is a consideration of the social construction of human corporeality and of the cultural regulation imposed on it. The body, from this perspective, must be understood as subject (the physical embodiment of a self, the site of subjectivity, the container of the mind) and object (the most intimate and primal property, the material part that is categorised and conditioned by social and cultural norms). In line with constructivist theories about identity and the relevance of understanding the body as the site of power inscription, Nick Crossley (2006) considers that the perception of this problematic duality transforms embodiment into a reflexive process, which Paolo Sorrentino uses in *The Great Beauty* to explore the protagonist's conflict between "the experience of being and having [a body that was young] and irony and nostalgia [when embodying old age]" (Simor and Sorfa 2017, 6).

In the previous section, I have been arguing that the presence of Rome does not take the function of providing a background setting but rather is used as a psychological space for Gambardella's display of his social mask. In spite of the first impressions, there are many more scenes devoted to investigating what the protagonist's mask hides in his interior, reinforced by the multiple sequences filmed inside houses, palaces, and monuments. Besides, the plot does not follow a simplistic timeline with action at the service of the film syntax; as explained above, the techniques used by Paolo Sorrentino are meant to show different experiences of the leading character not necessarily linked with a linear narration. As Ponce Beniuc (2018, 187) explains, the story becomes a set of disjointed actions where there is no possible differentiation between

the trivial and the relevant, between the subjective and the objective, the imaginary and the real.

What is evident is that the formal elements included in order to reveal Gambardella's thoughts produce a doubling in the film style: the noisy world of the protagonist's social appearances contrasts with the calm dialogues he maintains in the intimacy and the intrusive monologues that he pronounces addressing the spectator while sound, music, and action stop. Regarding these scenes, the most relevant topics explored about Gambardella's inner self consist of two main axes related to ageing: on the one hand, the need to situate sexuality at a different level of experience unconnected with the sense of the present, and, on the other, the imperative of equalling old age with a period of loss, a phase of nostalgia (Killbourn 2020, 86–90) which guides him sometimes to pessimism and nihilistic feelings.

Within these sections, Sorrentino makes room for the characterisation of secondary characters that accompany the protagonist on this journey of the self, with manifest differences between male and female companions. The most highlighted male figure that functions in this manner is Gambardella's close friend Romano, a failed playwright and a failed lover of a young actress that despises him whenever she has the opportunity. In the conversations they maintained at Romano's small department and at Gambardella's luxurious place, the protagonist shows the impossibility of returning to his golden age as a reputed writer while sharing experiences of youth in their natal provinces far away from Rome. In their last meeting, Gambardella has been talking to a magician, Arturo, who is able to make a giraffe disappear, the protagonist then asks 'Can you make me disappear?', and the magician answers 'If I really could make someone disappear, would I still be here, at my age?' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013). After this pessimistic comment, Romano appears and tells his friend that he is going back to his natal town: 'Roma has disappointed me' (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013), and Gambardella looks at him with a mixture of sadness and recognition, as if wanting to be like him, with no social load, free to go and find the roots of his identity. In a sense, to lose his friend in Rome means to lose

any emotional link with his past, and so, to break all options to come back to his youth.

In terms of a re-situation of sexuality, Gambardella's social mask conveys an image of sex appealing in the display of flirting and seducing women as all sequences dealing with partying constantly show. The lack of emotional empathy is inherent to Gambardella's social performance, but it also conditions his hidden self, something that seems to reinforce his sense of solitude and dullness. When facing his life after his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, he is unable to find a true emotional response, since it seems that his social mask has been muting this vital experience when there was no need for it. Yet he starts obliging himself to the construction of several intimate relations to taste life in a different manner. This is the case of Ramona, whom he meets at a striptease club in Via Veneto, being the 40-year-old daughter of one of Gambardella's friends and one of the oldest strippers at the club. Ramona is the protagonist's female alter ego, a woman with no interest in creating a family of her own, but with an ageing body that might ruin her life, not only in terms of her economic maintenance but mainly because her body's erotic exposure is the most important part of herself. In finishing the scene, the protagonist and Ramona are left alone talking about the future, and Gambardella confesses. 'I feel old' and she answers, 'You are not young' with a smile on her face (Sorrentino and Contarello 2013). This brief dialogue introduces an epiphanic moment in Gambardella's inner process of recognition and this is perhaps why he starts a relationship with her that ends apparently with Ramona's death in his bedroom. The scene follows one in which she is assaulted and receives a supposedly fatal blow when they were coming back from an art performance. The camera focuses on the splendid body of the stripper semi-naked on the bed, seemingly sleeping after a convulsive night, he is preparing breakfast and notices that something is wrong with Ramona, then he says 'It has been a good chance not to have sex this night', she smiles; and when breakfast is ready he approaches her touching her weakened body, then shares with her a repeated imaginary scene with her at the moment in which he decides to lay next her in bed: 'Can you see the sea?', 'Where?' she asks, 'In the ceiling', 'I see it, the sea' (Sorrentino

and Contarello 2013). By sharing this emotional moment, the couple seems to be in complete connection, but the film wants to destroy the possibility of rebirth for Gambardella in the instant Ramona is dead.

Another important point in relation to the remembrance of transcendental moments is the introspective take about his first love affair before establishing in Rome with Elisa. As a conventional adolescent experience, love is mixed up with sensuality, symbolised by the presence of the sea at night, and sexual attraction. Elisa is a character depicted only through the protagonist's perspective by means of the nostalgic moments in which he quits his social masks and imagines the sea in his ceiling. The repeated scene is that of an adolescent girl silently conquering the heart and the libido of the protagonist in his youth: the sequence at night near the sea constructs this instant in the loneliness of a natural landscape, letting the spectator know that there was no sexual contact, but an experience of a lost opportunity. In the middle of the plot, a man called Alfredo waits for him at his door to inform him about Elisa's death, the arrogant Gambardella feels the pinch of learning that his idealist love has disappeared, even more upset when Alfredo confesses that Elisa has been loving him for all her life. This apparently introduces an emotional element to save the protagonist from the moral decay he has made of his life, and this idea is reinforced when Sister Maria refers to the importance of roots. Sorrentino makes the spectator think that this is the great beauty Jep Gambardella has been looking for:

When Jep realises that 'the great beauty' he was looking for was his love for Elisa (Annaluisa Capasa), he is able to create art again and he starts writing a novel about this revelation. Thanks to the final scene's overtly stylized representation, this revelation also becomes ridiculously absurd. (Simor and Sorfa 2017, 11)

Jep Gambardella has along with the narrative many ways of recovering this final beauty he is constantly searching for as an existential motif, but he is so conditioned by his bourgeois life in Rome and by the comfortability of wearing the mask of a man of power, that all opportunities are just brief moments of nostalgia that in few seconds are forgotten. There is no love affair, no professional chance, no friendly gesture that

can move the divine Gambardella to abandon his constructed self, since finally, he is what the Roman bourgeoisie has made of him. With nothing to do with beauty, the final sequence serves as the ironic comment on the whole narrative. There is no possibility of grasping the splendour of the past, there is only the need to forget and go to the eternal hypocritical party in the very sense that Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni depicted the problems of masculinity four decades before, only with a postmodern touch. (Mendieta Rodríguez 2019, 336)

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