

Sorrentino & “The Haggard, Inconstant Splashes of Beauty”

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Once again, the Italian movie director and screenwriter Paolo Sorrentino, confirms himself as one of the greatest representatives of Italian cinema in the world. His "The Great Beauty" has won the Golden Globe for best foreign film! Our interview

"Travel is very useful and it exercises the imagination. All the rest is disappointment and fatigue. Our own journey is entirely imaginary. That is its strength. It goes from life to death. People, animals, cities, things, all are imagined. It's a novel, simply a fictitious narrative (...)"

Louis Ferdinand Céline, *Journey Through the End of the Night*

Paolo Sorrentino starts his movie with this exact quote. "The Great Beauty" is a story of a journey through Rome, in which the director offers a provocative and realistic portrait of the Italian modern society and its moral degradation. Women "made of botox," frivolous cardinals, politicians, actors, decayed nobles, artists and other presumed intellectuals are the background, amidst which Sorrentino makes us reflect upon the meaning of our existence. An existence that is nothing else than "just a trick" and of which we can only contemplate fragments of beauty.

In the middle of the existential emptiness into which society has fallen, enters Sorrentino's main

character, Jep Gambardella, outstandingly performed by Toni Servillo. Jep is a cynical and ironic journalist who came to Rome when he was 26. There he is swallowed by a life consisting of night parties, drugs, sex and people who waste their lives talking about absolutely nothing. Even though he is aware of this degrading reality, he lapses into the frivolous world. The memories of his first love and a few fortunate encounters are the only things which make him reflect on life's real meaning.

On the occasion of the premiere of the movie in New York, we had the pleasure to meet and chat with the movie director.

“The Great Beauty” starts with a famous phrase from Celine’s novel Journey to the End of Night, where the author makes an almost irreverent critique of society. Similarly, in your movie, we notice a critique of the vacuity of the middle class. Was this book a source of inspiration for you and the script?

The ambitions and the tone of Journey to the End of Night inspired this movie a lot. This book is not only a critique of society but is also the great attempt to get to know men in their shallowness and how within this shallowness we could aim at beauty. The author makes some memorable descriptions of people who are humanly and morally miserable but who are also bearers of beauty.

The movie describes a journey...we couldn't help but notice a resemblance to Dante’s journey. Does your movie aim to be an image of human sin? In your opinion, does “The Great Beauty” depicts this dantesque aspect of the man who during the journey of his life finds himself into the “ dark forest” of sin?

The fictional structure of Dante and Celine are almost the same. It’s all about wandering within the underworld. In short, the Roman worlds described in my film are hells where those who enter lose contact with what matters in our existence. These are contexts so empty that they make you lose contact with the earth and wherein life seems to have no sense.

This movie hints a bit to Fellini. Did you want to pay homage to the great director by putting in scene animals from the circus and by using images of the enchanted city?

The movie presents a few assonances with “La Dolce Vita” in the sense that it shares themes we mentioned previously. Calvino very well describes Fellini’s movies when he says that the film of which we deceive ourselves of being spectators, actually is the story of our lives. This is what is scary in Fellini’s movies, but that at the same time is fascinating. Seeing worlds you think you are distant from, but which in reality are talking about you, are part of you, are your biography. In this sense my film recalls certain themes that were already treated by Fellini, but for the rest there is no connection with Fellini’s movies, which are unique and cannot be imitated and it would be presumptuous and dangerous to try to imitate him.

What is your relationship with Rome and why did you choose the eternal city par excellence to describe a humanity that has nothing eternal but only appears to be?

The dichotomy is not between the eternal city and the people who are not eternal, but between the Italians of the past who, in building the city, were able to produce beauty that cannot be imitated, and the Italians of today who are more asleep and tired causing the stop of the evolution of our country. Within the movie you can see what Rome has been in the past and its citizens today.

How important is the union Servillo-Sorrentino for your success? Can we compare it to the union Mastroianni-Fellini? How does being from the same city influenced your relationship?

It’s very important. Together we executed four films which did very well. We helped each other. I wouldn’t compare it to the union Mastroianni-Fellini. Times have changed, their union was legendary, ours is more simple, made of reciprocal exchanges. Being from Naples makes us recognizable for many things, most of all for the sense of humor, which is something we have in common. A lot of Neapolitan families are the real example of a theatrical representation.



The world described through irony is an essential feature of your film; an irony that hides the social degradation within the political, cultural and also religious worlds, with cardinals of elite and nuns who use botox. Then there are characters, like “La Santa,” who have a deep sense of humanity even though, as Jep says, we are “convicted to sensibility.” Do they represent a call to morality or are they only needed to highlight a morality that doesn’t exist anymore?

There are some charismatic figures that are stronger than the people’s attempt to reduce them to a comical effect. My purpose was to represent “La Santa” as a figure who, even expressing elementary concepts, was able to disarm the protagonist and his friends’ attempt to let it pass as another appearance within the stage that was Rome and its terraces.

In the movie we saw a critique of the society also in terms of a lack of new ideas and of a cultural avant-garde. Also, the protagonist becomes aware of the mediocrity of the environment that surrounds him even though he doesn’t do anything to change his status quo. How can we overturn this cultural and social crisis?

The majority of people are condemned to spend their time talking about worthless things. What is important is what remains imprinted in memory and becomes unforgettable. In my movie everything is about emptiness except the memory of the girl he loved when he was young. Love in its banality has an emotional effect so strong and devastating that it becomes unforgettable.

Watching the movie, what made us think a lot was the absence of words. You put on stage a writer who had success with a novel but who, at the same time, lost his words spending his time to engage in conversations about nothing. However, at the end, he once again finds the power of words, which is, in a sense, his personal “great beauty.” Why this redemption? Do you imply that there is hope for this depressed humanity?

The protagonist stops writing because he hates the world where he lives in. Since he is committed to write only about beauty, he thinks that the world is dumb. But it’s the opposite! It is thanks to that sea of foolishness and frivolousness that he discovers beauty. Since he possesses the wonderful weapon of words, he will order that mess and will write another novel.

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