The Eternal Cinematic City. Fellini, Sorrentino, Rome (Part 2)

Alessandro Pugliese (January 30, 2015)

Examining the influence of Fellini on Sorrentino's film "La Grande Bellezza"

In 1972 Fellini released his homage to the eternal city, Roma. Here, the many layers of time, history and memory are evoked explicitly in stunning images. In one famous scene, Fellini depicts the excavation of the new subway line in Rome. At one point, the workers dig through a wall and discover themselves in an underground chamber with ancient Roman frescoes. The frescoes are still vivid and colorful after 2,000 years. But as soon as the polluted air of contemporary Rome filters into the chamber, the frescoes literally dissolve and disappear before the astonished eyes of the workers. For both Fellini and Paolo Sorrentino, beauty—both ancient and modern—is threatened by the crassness and crudeness of contemporary society.

In one scene of Sorentino’s La Grande Bellezza, Jep walks out on his terrace to find the saintly and ancient Sister Maria accompanied by a huge flock of flamingos. The image calls to mind the peacock in Fellini’s film Amarcord . In both scenes, the birds appear as a form of magical realism. The flamingos are migrating through Rome and the peacock has just escaped from the local baron’s

estate and landed in the snowy town square of Rimini. But the juxtaposition of the gloriously colored birds in the austere landscape hint at a fertility and creativity just below the decadent surface of things. Sister Maria asks Jep: “Why did you never write another book?” and his response is: “I was looking for the great beauty but I didn’t find it.” The irony may be that the great beauty is right there in front of us but we are incapable of seeing it.

In another echo of Fellini, Jep resembles the filmmaker Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) in Fellini’s autobiographical 8½. Just as Jep cannot find the artistic inspiration to write another book, Guido is blocked in making his next film.

A key in La Grande Bellezza is a scene Sorrentino curiously deleted from the final cut of the film. Jep interviews a famous aging director who recalls how, as a child in Milan, his first enchantment was his father holding him up above a huge crowd, which had gathered to observe the city’s first traffic light. The director recalls how it was possible then to see a traffic light and be filled with infinite curiosity about the world: “Che bellezza. Che grande bellezza,” he sighs. It was, the old director confesses, “my first enchantment” and what led him to be a film director. The “great beauty” here is the beauty of being exposed to something never before seen, and the hope that lives in reliving that moment again throughout one’s life.

The two films have very different endings. Fellini’s La Dolce Vita ends in complete dissolution. Marcello has been catapulted into a moral abyss. He has thrown his lot in with a decadent group of “friends.” At dawn, Marcello and the others are drawn to cries coming from fishermen hauling in their nets. A monstrous fish with unblinking eyes confronts them on the beach. Marcello hears someone calling to him from across a small stream that empties into the sea. It is the young girl who had waited on his table at the local seaside restaurant in an earlier scene. Marcello promised to teach her how to type. Now, recognizing him, the young girl calls to him over the sound of the crashing waves and roaring wind, with futile gestures. Marcello, hung over, disillusioned, and having lost any moral sense, either refuses or fails to recognize her. With a shrug, he turns his back on her—perhaps his only and last chance at redemption—and rejoins his decadent friends. Fellini leaves us with an empty feeling, a missed opportunity, and a failure to see the possibility of redemption.

Sorrentino’s La Grande Bellezza, instead, concludes in a more ambiguous way, Jep claiming “È solo un trucco.” In both La Dolce Vita and La Grande Bellezza the final shot is a close up of a young woman, looking out into the distance, which then fades out. In La Grande Bellezza, the final credits roll as the camera floats down the Tiber River at sunset. Beautiful music is accompanied by the sound of native birds. The viewer might conclude that in the midst of such decadence and contemporary alienation, there is still great beauty in Rome and in Italy.

Fellini’s film was a moral, political and religious indictment of the Italy of the “economic boom” of the post-war era when the country was transformed from a rural, agricultural country into an urban, sophisticated society. Sorrentino’s film mirrors Fellini’s in that it is a moral, political and religious indictment of a conformist and consumerist Italy that has lost its way.

But Sorrentino’s conclusion contains a measure of melancholy hope lacking in Fellini’s

masterpiece. The Tiber River is contemplative, teeming with life and accompanied by the singing of birds, almost as a Buddhist meditation far from the forced gaiety of Jep’s parties. While both films critique a particular historical and cultural moment in Italian society, they differ in their style, protagonists and conclusions.

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