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RUSSELL KILBOURN
Wilfrid Laurier University

The 'primal scene': Memory, redemption and 'woman' in the films of Paolo Sorrentino

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of gender and the marginalization of the female subject in the films of Paolo Sorrentino – especially La grande bellezza *(*The Great Beauty*) (2013) and* Youth *(2015) – and the TV series* The Young Pope *(2016), to better understand the significance of 'woman' for the cinematic and mnemic constitution of the Sorrentinian subject. I situate Sorrentino's work in the context of the post-war Italian, European and now transnational art cinemas, and the new era of prestige television. Finally, in a shift from the desiring and objectifying intra-diegetic gaze to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in the context of disability studies calls 'the stare', I briefly analyse Sorrentino's fascination with non-normative identities whose on-screen function as locus of a radical alterity serves in the end to throw an even sharper, more ironic light upon the masculine subject at the centre of each story. From film to film to TV series the treatment of gender grows increasingly complex, particularly with respect to the nexus of memory and whatever secular or post-secular redemption awaits the protagonist.*

KEYWORDS

Paolo Sorrentino
the cinematic representation of women
memory in film
masculinity
melodrama
redemption
'the stare'
subjectivity

> '[W]e fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live' – Audre Lorde
>
> (quoted in Garland-Thomson 2009: 59)

INTRODUCTION

As 'the Dude' (Jeff Bridges) says of notorious *L.A.* pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) in the Coen Brothers' 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*, 'he treats objects like women'. Taking the joke at face value, to treat an object as a woman is typically treated in our society is to treat it as if it were an *image*. This article examines the representation of gender, beginning from the marginalization and sexualization of the female subject in the films of Paolo Sorrentino – including *Le conseguenze dell'amore* (*The Consequences of Love*) (2004) and *L'amico di famiglia* (*The Family Friend*) (2006), but focusing especially on *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) (2013) and *Youth* (2015), and the television series *The Young Pope* (2016) – to better understand the significance of 'woman' for the cinematic and mnemic constitution of what I call the Sorrentinian subject. In the process I situate Sorrentino's work in the context of the contemporary transnational art cinema tradition, with a nod to the current rise of prestige television programming. And, in a shift from the desiring and objectifying intra-diegetic gaze to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in the context of disability studies calls 'the stare', in the final 'coda' I briefly analyse Sorrentino's fascination with non-normative identities whose on-screen function as locus of a radical alterity serves in the end to throw an even sharper, more ironic light upon the masculine subject at the centre of each story. From film to film to TV series the treatment of gender grows increasingly complex, particularly with respect to the nexus of memory and whatever secular or post-secular redemption awaits the protagonist.

The sexual and gender politics of Sorrentino's films have been an issue for critics and scholars since the director first came to prominence in Italy, before breaking out internationally with *The Consequences of Love*.[1] My argument begins beyond Milicent Marcus's reading of Sorrentino's 'postmodern *impegno*', in which 'the contemporary vogue for stylistic virtuosity – including the use of pastiche, abundant citation, semiotic playfulness, imagistic saturation, decorative exuberance – can co-exist with an ethics of political engagement in the arts' (2010: 246).[2] This is necessary to appreciate an ongoing sense of political engagement in contemporary Italian film and TV work that is not beholden to a tradition of cinematic realism. I therefore broach a more general appraisal of Sorrentino's ironically dialectical approach, which frequently seems to produce a contradiction between film form and diegetic content. This allows for a reconciliation of the films' typically self-reflexive style with the ethical commitment of a social and political critique conveyed via a spectacular image.[3] A film such as *The Great Beauty* especially harkens back to the 'beautiful *image*' of 1980s European and Hollywood cinema, exemplified by the *cinema du look* in France (Bordwell and Thompson 2009: 582–84), by films as diverse as *Diva* (Beineix, 1981) and *Wings of Desire* (Wenders, 1987). As will be seen below, in the transition from his feature films to the long form TV series, Sorrentino's treatment of gender acquires a politically progressive appearance, in which the sheer beauty of the image is tempered or even overpowered by its affective impact within the montage. The thematic shift is occasioned by a modal shift from a transnational art film style towards a hybrid species of postsecular male melodrama.

Sorrentino's ironically dialectical approach becomes most contentious in the representation of gender, especially images of women. (To this extent, I am partaking of what feminist film theory knows as 'images of women' criticism in the most literal sense, but without the attendant assumption of a direct relation between such images and real-world women to which this approach

1. *The Consequences of Love* was the highest grossing Italian film to date. *Il divo* shared the Jury Prize at Cannes and also secured wide international distribution and coverage in the international press. *The Great Beauty* can be seen as Sorrentino's consecration by the Academy. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *JICMS* for this clarification (see also Hipkins 2008, 2013; Mariani 2017; Simor and Sorfa 2017).

2. Marcus invokes the historically important notion of *impegno* in a contemporary context as indicative of not a single, overarching ideological agenda but of a 'diversification' of a generally leftist critical perspective (Antonello and Mussgnug 2009: 3).

3. I owe this reading of Sorrentino's filmic image as 'spectacular' to an anonymous reviewer at Columbia University's Wallflower Press.

was prone [Hipkins 2008: 214].[4] It goes without saying that such images do not bring the actual experience of real women to the screen in any unmediated sense.[5]) This is not merely another instance of a male Italian director indulging in the medium's potential for the exploitation of women's bodies, however.[6] Sorrentino exploits all the resources of narrative cinema to engage critically and self-reflexively with questions of identity, power and representation in a contemporary transnational and – in *The Young Pope* – postsecular context.

The 'primal scene' in my title alludes to Freud and the Oedipal crisis only to the extent that our subjectivities are shaped by the films we watch, especially by certain specific set pieces, recurring character types, visual clichés or iconic images – the iconography of the cultural politics of gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, age or various other categories of individual or collective identity.[7] There is thus an implicit acknowledgement here that such a primal scene is always already culturally–ideologically constructed, the *locus classicus* in occidental culture being that of Adam and Eve in the Garden in Milton's already thoroughly remediated version of the story. (In *Paradise Lost* [Milton 1993], it should be recalled, the figure of woman is already present in all its contradictions, embodying both damnation and the promise of salvation – for the man. Such occidentalist tropes are thus far older than either Sorrentino or, for that matter, Freud; nor are they limited to the Italian context. They therefore fully justify the feminist critique whose most productive form emerged in 1970s film theory.) In my approach here, I invoke neither a psychoanalytic nor a literary-theological model but a theory of cinema as eidetic memory, for, just as we tend to remember films on the basis of single powerful images and set pieces (see e.g. Scorsese 2017), so do we make reference to cinema when we seek to represent memory to ourselves. I will return below to the significance of memory in Sorrentino's cinema. For the moment, I should add that by 'iconic image', I do *not* mean the Russian Orthodox variety, which represents a wholly *other* aesthetic logic.[8] Nor do I primarily refer to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic usage, where 'iconic' names the mimetic or imitative dimension of the image that, along with the indexical, accounts for its unique relation to the representation of an extra-filmic reality. The contemporary turn away from psychoanalytic models of film analysis has been balanced by a turn back to the cinematic image as visual-mimetic sign, where the relation between signifier and real-world referent (in a pre-digital sense, at least), is not arbitrary and cannot be ignored. It is largely the advent of digital technology that precipitated this return, ironically, as we begin to mourn the loss of an image that represents a reality that we know unconditionally was there before the camera.[9]

Generally speaking, all of the films since *The Consequences of Love* (and including *The Young Pope*) feature individual shots or whole scenes that may or may not further the narrative but whose sheer beauty arrests the eye. (The latter is largely the result of lighting: director of photography Luca Bigazzi favours placing lights within the shot, indistinguishable from real light sources within the scene. This is one reason why all of Sorrentino's films after *One Man Up* [2001] are more visually pleasing than his first feature.) Many of these iconic set pieces feature secondary (or tertiary) female characters in various stages of *déshabillé*. These are what I mean by 'primal scenes': compare for instance the spa bath sequence towards the end of *Youth*, featuring Romanian model-turned-actress Madalina Ghenea, to the scene it transmediates: Anita Ekberg in the Trevi fountain in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960).

4. 'Unfortunately mainstream Italian criticism has only flirted with the basics of this preliminary stage, and certainly never moved towards thinking about 'images for women'. There is in fact an uncomfortable degree of overlap between the most basic 'images of women' criticism and a kind of descriptive criticism that merely celebrates a bevy of female beauties, repeatedly fetishizing female stars without analyzing the complex gendered construction that constitutes a star'. (Hipkins 2008: 215)

5. The spectacular nature of Sorrentino's images reveal a fictional version of what Jill Godmilow calls 'the pornography of the real' in documentary film: 'the objectifying of a graphic image, turning it from a subject into an object, so that the thing or person depicted can be commodified, circulated and consumed without regard to its status as a subject' (quoted Kraemer 2015: 65–66).

6. Danielle Hipkins describes 'the much-lauded recent films of Paolo Sorrentino, in which the female is merely a fetish object for the narration of male desire (*The Consequences of Love*, 2004; *The Family Friend*, 2006)' (2008: 213).

7. My approach begins from a point beyond psychoanalytic theory if only because it is no longer reasonable to read every film made according to a certain set of stylistic parameters as an allegory for the history of the psychoanalytic subject, the Oedipal family romance.

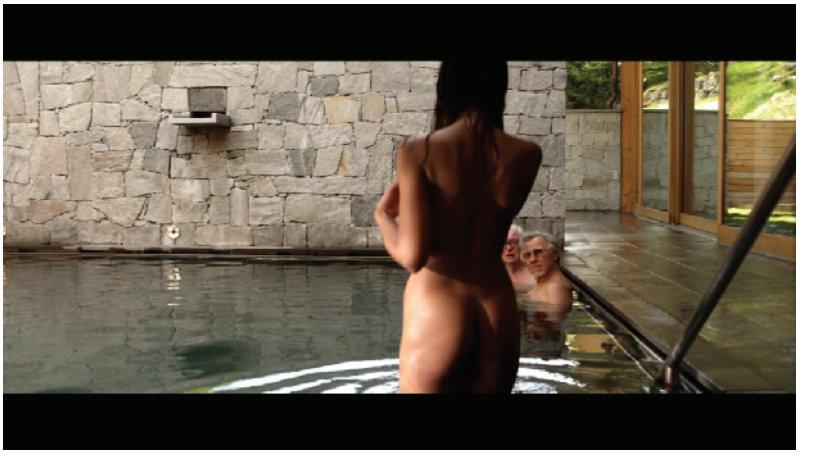

Figure 1: Madalina Ghenea as 'Miss Universe'. Sorrentino (dir.), Youth, *2015.*

Figure 2: Anita Ekberg as 'Sylvia'. Fellini (dir.), La dolce vita, *1960.*

The scene in *Youth* represents a far more egregious instance of objectification than its Fellinian antecedent. It is hard to not see Fellini's influence, however, when Sorrentino includes in a film a sequence involving the objectification of a woman's body. On the other hand, Fellini himself cannot be blamed for inventing but only for perpetuating this convention. Issues of authorial sexism and misogyny aside, the question is: why would a twenty-first-century director like Sorrentino choose to do this? In what ways, if any, do his films succeed in changing the meaning of this kind of generic set piece, inscribing a critique while amplifying the spectacle, the sheer beauty of the image?

8. Although on the level of content – e.g. Madonna and child – this is not irrelevant to my reading of Sorrentino's films.

9. By the same token, exploitative and objectified images of human bodies in the digital era have only proliferated, in part because they do

By 'subject' or subjectivities here I refer to human types, conventional social roles, performative identity categories and so forth – and only secondarily the subject of Freudian, Lacanian or feminist psychoanalytic theory. Others have analysed *The Great Beauty* from a feminist-psychoanalytic perspective (e.g. Mariani 2017). More broadly, feminist theorists of melodrama in the 1980s and 1990s identified the 'over-valuation of masculinity' as a fundamental problem in North American mainstream culture (Gledhill 1987: 10). My approach here draws equally from this branch of post-structuralist theory and the kind of post-Marxist ideological critique typical of cultural studies. It goes beyond both, however, insofar as the first is too prone to reducing every film narrative to an allegory of the Oedipal family romance, and every female body to a cipher for castration anxiety, and the second tends to overlook film form in favour of story content as the basis of an uncritical view of realism that one continues to encounter in cultural analysis and media studies. In film, after all, any so-called 'unconscious' dimension, like everything else, is right on the surface.[10] Throughout film history, even the most intimate moments of subjective interiority, if they are to be made manifest, end up looking much the same as everything else. I use the term 'subject' therefore in a philosophical or narratological sense, as ground for identity or self, as concatenation of attributes or predicates. But by 'subject' I also mean a visual-optical position in space, a mobile point-of-view upon the objective world, upon others, or the Other. Historically, in the occidental tradition on which my argument is necessarily based, this subject is silently but inescapably gendered masculine.

What I call the Sorrentinian subject is embodied in a series of protagonists, all of whom are white, male, heterosexual, mostly (but not always) European and of a certain age or generation (Jude Law's youthful American Pius XIII is an interesting variation). The complement to this recurring type is the enigmatic figure of 'Woman'[11] – the very 'monolithic and transhistorical entity' identified by Molly Haskell in her canonical 1974 text, *Reverence to Rape*.[12] The fact that his films perpetuate even as they appear to critique specific gender-based, sexist (and, for some, misogynistic) stereotypes of femininity, places Sorrentino into a long line of (male) filmmakers for whom the female body is at best a paradox or contradiction and at worst the ultimate reified object of heterosexual-consumerist desire. Sorrentino is hardly the first Italian director to engage in this kind of self-reflexive critique of the male gaze as it tends to manifest in Italian popular culture (see, e.g., Nichetti 1989), a fact that only foregrounds the difficulty of exploiting such images to critique them without on some level appearing to participate in the perpetuation of a whole range of negative connotations. Ultimately, to invoke in any interpretive act the author's gendered identity, coupled with the intentional fallacy implicit in any auteurial approach, risks opening up a critical minefield unless this is balanced with a consideration of as much as possible of the surrounding context.

On the one hand, then, Sorrentino is an Italian auteur working in a transnational cinematic context using the latest technologies to produce stylistically cutting-edge and formally progressive audio-visual narratives. On the other hand, Sorrentino appears to uphold to a significant degree a retrograde point of view on gender difference and the representation of women. The latter is the inevitable complement to the films' elegiac meditation upon what it means to be a no-longer youthful, late-middle aged or even elderly man in twenty-first-century Europe (*The Young Pope*, again, obviously complicates this reading).

not depend upon an indexical link to the pro-filmic world. In any discussion of such images, however, there is always more at stake when one knows that the actor was really there before the camera, a body subject to the violence of representation.

10. As Susan Sontag observed, in her essay on Bergman's *Persona*: 'it's in the nature of cinema to confer on all events, without indications to the contrary, an equivalent degree of reality: everything shown on the screen is "there", present' (2000: 67).

11. For Mulvey: 'the castrated woman' = 'Woman-as-lack' = 'Woman' (2000: 483).

12. Quoted in Hipkins (2008: 215n4).

SORRENTINO AND 'THE GAZE'

In her classic essay on 'Visual pleasure in narrative cinema', Laura Mulvey argued that:

> [Woman's] visual presence tends to work *against* the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. […] A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space.
>
> (2000: 488)

Rather than re-explore this psychic no-man's-land,[13] and the attendant questions of alleged narrative disruption, however, I want to stay on the surface, on the level of the image as visual signifier. In a subsequent essay, for instance, Mary-Anne Doane does just this:

> The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of *imaging* – framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as […] Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the *surface* of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3-dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control.
>
> (Doane 2000: 497, original emphasis)

Like Mulvey, Doane refers primarily to specific ideological effects of classical Hollywood style; nevertheless, she describes a more or less explicit gendering of the image in its Peircian semiotic dimensions that may be useful in our discussion of Sorrentino. In other words, where 'woman' is aligned with the *surface* of the image in its radical exteriority, the masculine protagonist is associated with the visual and metaphorical *depths* of the image, with the metaphysical depths of memory and with nostalgia as masculine affect.[14] Thus, where woman in this classical view is coterminous with the image itself in its objecthood, the masculine protagonist is the subject of memory, of melancholic or elegiac remembrance (see Mariani 2017: 175),[15] in which the object of nostalgic desire is a woman who as often as not is no longer among the living. This woman, however, despite being dead in the present is very much alive in the protagonist's memory, at least insofar as she represents for him – for his narrative trajectory – the eschatological force of his salvation. She is, in short, his saviour – the feminine embodiment or personification of the salvific force of memory, so to speak. This is the eroto-salvific paradigm so dear to occidental culture; it forms the basis of many famous literary and cinematic narratives, both old and new, from Goethe's *Faust* (1976) and Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* (1982) to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004). In the cinematic expression of this model, the affective and non-rational dimension of nostalgic or elegiac memory is associated with the masculine; this is the aspect of the image where the illusory force of realism is working its magic, occluding the material basis of the image, and thus representation itself. On the other hand, the image *qua* image is aligned with the feminine, the aspect in which the image stops the

13. Regarding the latter see, e.g.: 'the viewer suspends disbelief in the fictional world of the film, identifies not only with specific characters in the film but more importantly with the film's overall ideology through identification with the film's narrative structure and visual point of view, and puts into play fantasy structures […] that derive from the viewer's unconscious.' (Cartwright and Sturken 2001: 73) In the Italian context this stems from 'the *velina* or television showgirl, who is a standard trope' within the '*cinepanettone*' tradition. As Danielle Hipkins (citing Alan O'Leary) reminds us, 'the *velina*'s function is most often read as debasing to women, as contaminating the genre further through the female actors' origins in the despised medium of television and all its associated particular political problems, and with the women's frequently semi-naked appearance as object of the male gaze. It is worth remembering that for international film audiences, however, this particular vision of women is familiar not so much from Italian television, or the '*cinepanettone*', as from Italy's tradition of art-house cinema, such as the opening scene of *La dolce vita*. Such a use of the female body formed, and continues to form, part of the international appeal of Italian cinema, although the growing visual presence of bikini-clad women on Italian television is almost universally deplored.' (Hipkins 2013: 1–2).

narrative in its tracks, drawing the viewer's attention away from the content and onto the form of the film, laying bare its formal operations, the potential source of spectatorial emancipation (see Brecht [1948] 1977; Rancière 2009). To read the iconic images of women in Sorrentino's films this way, is to resist the more doctrinaire reading traceable to Mulvey, in which the very opposite is seen to occur, the viewer's rational response short-circuited by the overpowering affect of the feminine in close-up. It is out of the tension between these two perspectives that the richly ambiguous but troubling meanings of the films arise.

With notable Italian cinematic intertexts such as Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953), *La dolce vita*, *8½* (1963) and *Roma* (1973), and Antonioni's *La notte* (*The Night*) (1961) and Ettore Scola's *La terrazza* (*The Terrace*) (1980) – *The Great Beauty* positions itself unapologetically in the tradition of filmic explorations of the psycho-emotional life of middle-aged and older heterosexual bourgeois or upper-middle class male intellectuals, epitomized by many of the characters played by Marcello Mastroianni.[16] Protagonist Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo) represents a significant change in the nature of Italian cinematic masculinity, however, in the transition from post-war to post-millennial. The tone here is generally far more elegiac than in the cinema of the post-war period. His 65th birthday and the news of her death inspire in Jep a melancholic return to memories of Elisa (Annaluisa Capasa), his first love, signalled by flashbacks to their time together 40 years before, off the coast of Naples. Elisa never appears as a character except in flashback, her death at the story's outset the event that precipitates Jep's ultimate epiphany. The concluding scene is structured more conventionally than Jep's earlier flashbacks to his time in southern Italy, which generally begin with him dozing on his bed in Rome, gazing up into the ceiling above, which digitally transmogrifies into the upside-down Mediterranean Sea.

In this final flashback, present tense Jep travels by boat to the same coastal area, the act of putting himself into the same place physically and seeing the same lighthouse triggering the shift back into his own past. 'This is how it always ends', Jep intones in voice-over, on the lighthouse stairs, in place of his younger self, aligned by eyeline match with Elisa above him. Intercut with this mental journey is Suor Maria (Giusi Merli), 'la Santa', crawling on her knees up *la Scala Sancta di San Giovanni* in Rome, an ascent with Christ as its goal, underlining the irony of this visual and thematic juxtaposition. In this complex flashback, a consummately cinematic memory, the resurrected youthful Elisa appears on the stairs above, baring her breasts to the suddenly youthful Jep, then turning away. The now once-again 65-year-old Jep stands watching her retreating, Eurydice-like. In voice-over, he says: 'Finisce sempre cosi: colla morte. Prima però, c'è stata la vita. Nascosta sotto il blah blah blah… […] Gli sparuti incostanti sprazzi di bellezza e poi lo squallore disgraziato e l'uomo miserabile. […] Dunque, che questo romanzo abbia inizio'.[17] Jep is an exorbitant updating of the morally undeserving late-middle-aged man redeemed by the woman from his past – the age-old trope of gender-specific eroto-salvific redemption, the eschatological framework ironically deconstructed ('Altrove c'e l'altrove', he remarks. 'Io non mi occupo […]'[18]). The reference to a new novel beginning indicates that Jep's salvation will take the form of his rebirth as a writer, here, in memory's primal scene, and that this new novel will tell the very story we have just witnessed.

The Great Beauty treads a fine line here between an unironic nostalgia and a more critically complex position. Historically, discussions of the intersection

14. For a different reading of the gendering of these diegetic elements in the context of Italian 'heritage cinema' see O'Leary (2016: 67).

15. Mariani quotes an interview with Sorrentino in which he confesses: 'melancholy is a vital key to the leitmotif in the movie' (2017: 181n28).

16. As early as 1960 'Pauline Kael called this film genre the "come-dressed-as-the-sick-soul-of-Europe party"' (Bradshaw 2013: 3). For Peter Bradshaw, *The Great Beauty* looks like a '"come-dressed-as-the-fantastically-vigorous-and-unrepentant-soul-of-rich-Europe" party' (2013: 3). As Roger Clarke puts it, 'this isn't the 1960s bourgeoisie deliquescing into their own emptiness – this is the vaunting pleasure of the modern "one per cent" reveling in unapologetic wealth' (Bradshaw 2013: n.pag.).

17. 'This is how it always ends: in death. But first there was life, hidden beneath the blah blah blah. […] The fleeting and sporadic flashes of beauty amid the wretched squalor and human misery. […] Therefore, let this novel begin.'

18. 'What lies beyond lies beyond. That is not my concern.'

of film and memory have generally focused on commercial genre films rather than an art cinema tradition (e.g. Erll 2011). Hollywood's conservative nature, for instance, means that it is far more likely than a more 'serious' art cinema to exploit nostalgia unironically. Nostalgia continues to be invoked in popular discourse in a pejorative sense, a reputation that has influenced popular thinking about memory itself. 'Memory is not commonly imagined as a site of possibility for progressive politics', writes Alison Landsberg. 'More often, memory, particularly in the form of *nostalgia*, is condemned for its *solipsistic* nature, for its tendency to draw people into the past instead of the present' (2003: 144). The concluding scene in *The Great Beauty* is saved from falling into cliché,[19] in my view, by the overall structure of the montage: the intercut shots of 'la Santa' crawling penitently up the stairs towards her symbolic and redundant salvation complicate Jep's elegiac flashback, inflecting its meaning in a richly ambiguous direction, a conclusion underscored by Jep's final line in the film: 'É solo un trucco' ('it's just a trick').[20]

In *Youth*, by contrast, the already old men (Michael Caine's Fred Ballinger and Harvey Keitel's Mick Boyle) do not appear to be 'saved' or redeemed by the scopophilic vision of a stark naked 'Miss Universe' in the Swiss hotel spa pool. To Ballinger's question '[w]ho is that'? Boyle responds: 'God' – before correcting himself: 'Miss Universe'. How different is Marcello's response to Sylvia's trespassing in the *La dolce vita* Trevi Fountain scene: 'She's right. I've had it all wrong. We've all had it wrong' – whereupon he joins her, fully clothed, in the fountain.[21] The scene in *Youth* is simultaneously more progressive – the two men, like Miss Universe, are presumably also naked (their elderly bodies hidden underwater) – and more retrograde: their fixed intra-diegetic gaze is both a parody and an egregious example of Mulvey's male gaze. The *mise en scène* perpetuates the problem in terms of Ghenea's hyperbolically voluptuous body, lit and framed as if for a *Sports Illustrated* photo shoot, the two men looking on in the background, impotent subjects to her youthful and sexually potent object.[22] In *La dolce vita*, by contrast, Sylvia beckons to Marcello, displaying an agency ironically denied her twenty-first-century counterpart in *Youth*. Marcello joins Sylvia in the fountain, their almost-embrace in balanced medium two-shot; the woman remains elusive but with a measure of power over the man, ever withholding herself at the last minute, a projection perhaps of Marcello's shaky post-war masculinity. In this regard as well, the viewer who over-identifies with Marcello will be rewarded with the sophisticated frustration of the post-war art film spectator, and spared the phantasmic satisfactions of Mulvey's ideal masculine consumer.

To the foregoing, we can compare the other primal scene of Italian post-war cinema: Pina's death in Rossellini's *Roma, cittá aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) (1946), a graphic match of the frontal view of Michelangelo's *Pietá* (1499). The final shot of Don Pietro holding the dead Pina in his arms says as much about Christian iconography as it does about the representation of women in Neorealist film. This comparison transcends post-war Italian cinema, revealing the generic and tropological underpinnings of the Passion narrative as crucial intertext for so much contemporary cultural production. As Lenny remarks to Cardinal Gutierrez (Javiér Camara), in Episode 1 of *The Young Pope*, as they gaze together upon Michelangelo's statue in St. Peter's Basilica: 'It all comes back to this in the end, doesn't it? To the mother'. At the conclusion of Episode 3, moreover, in a high-angle shot that foreshadows his death in the final episode, Lenny faints into the arms of Esther (Ludivine Sagnier), the Swiss guardsman's wife, positioned from the series' start as 'virgin mother'

19. For a complementary reading of this scene as a 'parody of men's obsession with female beauty' see Simor and Sorfa (2017: 11).

20. See Hipkins' reading of the film, echoing the terms of my argument but with a different valuation: 'Hailed as part of the "re-birth" of Italian cinema, Sorrentino's intense evocation of Fellini's Rome expresses nostalgia for and an attempted re-instantiation of the same gender dynamic. The female character is, once again, made to carry the burden of corporeal ageing, like the (feminized) body of Rome itself, whilst male ageing is a question of redeeming soul and memory, in which the male melodrama of Jep's suffering, as Catherine O'Rawe describes [...] becomes "the gateway to the sublime"' (Hipkins 2013).

21. Fellini famously based this scene on a real incident in which Pierluigi Praturlon, one of the original paparazzi, photographed Ekberg wading in the Trevi fountain (Levy 2016: 281–82).

22. See Simor and Sorfa's reading of this scene's 'excessive style' and parodic 'representation of female beauty' (2017: 11).

Figure 3: Anna Magnani as 'Pina' and Aldo Fabrizi as 'Don Pietro' in Rome, Open City.

Figure 4: Jude Law as 'Lenny Belardo' and Ludivine Sagnier as 'Esther' in Episode 3 of The Young Pope *(2016).*

(and counterpart to Sister Mary [Diane Keaton], for all intents and purposes Lenny's foster mother).

Later, in Episode 8, Lenny's birth mother (Olivia Macklin) is seen in an unattributed hallucinatory vision – and perfect graphic match to the foregoing scene – as virgin mother to the young Dussolier (Jack McQuaid), who, as the adult Cardinal (Scott Shepherd), is murdered in Honduras in Episode 7. In scenes such as these, the TV series complicates and, to a certain extent, transcends the more conventional and troubling representation of women in the

films. That said, there is still a pronounced tendency for carefully composed, well-lit static shots of young attractive women in various stages of undress – especially in the protagonist's fantasies, dreams and flashback sequences.

A relevant guide to this nexus of passion, pathos and gender – particularly with respect to the character of Lenny Belardo, Pope Pius XIII – is Linda Williams 1990s work on the centrality of melodramatic narrative to American popular culture. Among the five characteristics of melodrama, Williams singles out the recurrent type of the 'victim-hero', the 'recognition of *virtue* involving a dialectic of *pathos* and *action*', in which gender identity (in cinematic and televisual narratives, at least) is revealed as constructed in relation to a power dynamic in which anyone, regardless of biological sex, 'becomes' a 'woman' when in the position of victim (2001: 28). This is the moral-affective counterpart to the notion (from 1970s feminist film theory) of the 'female gaze'.[23] According to Williams:

> Recognition of *virtue* orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama's function. […] The suffering body caught up in paroxysms of mental or physical pain can be male or female, but suffering itself is a form of powerlessness that is coded *feminine*. Of course the transmutation of bodily suffering into virtue is a *topos* of western culture that goes back to Christian iconography.
>
> (2001: 29, original emphasis)[24]

The connection with Christian iconography, especially Renaissance paintings of the crucifixion, is crucial: the spectacle of Christ on the cross, the very moment in the Passion narrative of abject suffering and ecstatic transfiguration. This is also the image par excellence that encapsulates the meaning of divine grace as the promise of forgiveness and redemption at the core of Catholicism. In the twenty-first century, however, it is one thing to be a victim and bear the biological body of a man, while it is another thing altogether to be so in the undeniable, because visually displayed, body of a woman. And there is a third category still: the non-normative body of the disabled person.

FROM GAZING TO STARING

With *The Young Pope*, Sorrentino shifts from the classic secular salvific model of the woman whose death somehow redeems the undeserving artist figure, to an ironic yet openly religious iconographic model of Christ and Mary alike in their redemptive relation to the protagonist. In a sense, both spiritual and erotic salvation are fused in the figure of Sister Mary (both Keaton and Allison Case as the younger version), who also functions as surrogate mother to Lenny – although he seems to be the only character who does not recognize this. It is important to acknowledge the relative complexity of Sorrentino's invocation of these art historical, Christological and narrative tropes. Equally as troubling, arguably, as the exploitation of women's bodies are the occasional inclusion in the films and the TV series of non-normative identities, bodies and faces – although it is arguable that the entrenched normativity of the male body comes in for mild critique in either the elegiacally ageing (Ballinger and Boyle in *Youth*) or melodramatically pathetic (Geremia in *The Family Friend*) male bodies of the protagonists. Here we see Sorrentino moving beyond his Fellinian fascination with grotesque and/or hyperbolic human bodies to something more serious, less susceptible to ironic interpretation.[25] For reasons of space I will touch on only a few brief examples here.

23. Cf. Mary Anne Doane: 'The cinematic apparatus inherits a theory of the image which is *not* conceived outside of sexual specifications. And historically, there has always been a certain imbrication of the cinematic image and the representation of the woman. […] For the female spectator there is a certain *overpresence* of the image – she *is* the image' (2000: 497–99).

24. Williams amplifies what she calls melodrama's 'sentimental politics', which often entails a climax that offers 'a feeling for, if not the reality of, justice', in which 'the death of a good person offers paroxysms of pathos and recognitions of virtue compensating for individual loss of life'; i.e. 'compensation' as *redemption* through 'self-sacrifice', typically on the part of a woman (2001: 31).

25. Regarding Sorrentino's penchant for the Fellinian grotesque see O'Rawe (2012). See Hipkins 2013 regarding Sorrentino's transition from the on-screen objectification of women to the broader exploitation of non-normative bodies and faces, especially but not exclusively those of women. See especially the aging former '*velina*' in *The Great Beauty*'s opening party scene vs her antecedent in Marcello's 'harem' dream in *8 ½* (Hipkins 2013: 2).

In *Youth*, right after the above-mentioned spa pool scene Boyle learns that Brenda Morel, his long-time lead actress (played by Jane Fonda) has quit his latest and final film. Boyle soon after kills himself out of despair at his failed project, his 'testimony', whereas Ballinger, within the story world, is somehow redeemed, judging by the final scene of his command performance for Queen Elizabeth of his famous, Brittenesque 'Simple Songs'. In the scene immediately before this, Ballinger achieves for himself what appears to be a highly narcissistic form of redemption. Visiting her room in a long-term care facility in Venice for the first time in ten years, he delivers a long monologue ostensibly to his wife, Melanie (Sonia Gessner), who remains silent throughout. The scene is framed so that she is visible in medium shot with her back to the camera as she gazes out the window at Venice. Only at the end of the scene, with Ballinger, after many years of neglect and infidelity, having paid his penance to his wife, do we see the reverse angle of Melanie's grotesque, mask-like visage in medium close-up, staring open-mouthed in a frozen rictus, evidently so ill that it is impossible to know if she heard anything of her husband's confession.

She is not a subject at all but only a face or mask, literally a *persona*, her open mouth a terrible visual mockery of the fact that she was once a gifted soprano for whom Ballinger originally wrote his 'Simple Songs'. What is the larger significance of this penultimate image of his incurably ill wife's mask-like face in Venice? What is the significance of the film's title, 'Youth', with respect to gender difference? To ability? (Her condition is arguably a kind of disability.) To age? The Venetian setting is explained, or rather itself explains in retrospect, an early dream sequence, in which Ballinger, in his conductor's coat and tails, traverses the raised *passerella* down the centre of a beautifully lit, flooded nocturnal Piazza San Marco, encountering the oneiric figure of Miss Universe in full beauty pageant regalia. They pass each other awkwardly on the narrow boardwalk, and, as Miss Universe struts towards the Museo Correr, Ballinger, continuing on towards the Basilica, gradually sinks into the rising *aqua alta*, calling out for his wife: 'Melanie!'.[26] This opening dream scene thus establishes, albeit obliquely, Ballinger's guilt over his wife's condition and his (non-)response to it, while at the same time foreshadowing the film's conclusion, in which he overcomes his psychological impasse and his sense of guilt towards his wife by agreeing to conduct his 'Simple Songs' once more – with a different singer.

On a more ironically metaphorical level, the film's title – *Youth* – foregrounds Sorrentino's abiding concern with a masculinist culture that can never reach adulthood; a generation of perpetually adolescent subjects, kept from ethical and axiological maturity through its ongoing interpellation by advertising, trashy television, crass music videos and, by implication, the Internet, especially social media (in this critique Sorrentino echoes the later Godard[27]). Not incidentally, the latter technologies, such as social media, go unrepresented in this and other projects, Sorrentino's stories focusing instead on characters and situations that seem somewhat out of time, if not downright old-fashioned – or just plain old. (Once again Jude Law's 'young pope' presents a complex variation, being at once prematurely old and perpetually immature.). Generational difference emerges in *Youth* as perhaps the most significant determinant of contemporary identity, in a culture that is also characterized, in Fredric Jameson's perspicacious critique, by a lack of historical consciousness and a consequent over-privileging of the present – a 'presentism' whose *reductio ad absurdum* is a perpetual present moment of

26. In a structurally identical dream scene in *The Young Pope*, Episode 7, Lenny's birth mother, emerging from what appears to be an enormous pile of (dead?) babies, proceeds across the Piazza, where she is joined by Lenny's father. Together they move towards him as he, emerging from the depth of the shot just like Ballinger, proceeds open-armed towards them. The dream ends as the three embrace.

27. See e.g. *Éloge de l'amour* (2001).

consumption (Jameson 1999: ix). This attitude emerges in *Youth* in particular as the unspoken nemesis of any serious person, meaning any *man* of a certain age whose ironic self-understanding in the present is ineluctably tied to his memories of the past. This is not because it is good or necessary to remember specific things, but because in *The Great Beauty* and *The Young Pope* especially remembering per se, even bad or traumatic memories, is prerequisite to the maintenance of a subjectivity determined by an elegiac sensibility that knows itself to be out of date and yet derives an ironically nostalgic pleasure from this critical self-understanding.

The potentially patronizing close-up on Melanie Ballinger in *Youth* demands an analytical model other than a gendered theory of looking. In *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson elaborates a theory of 'the stare', otherwise known as the 'Baroque stare' or the 'colonizing gaze', in the context of disability studies. While Garland-Thomson's examples of the stare are primarily sociological, the visual basis of 'the stare' justifies the appropriation of this idea into a film studies context, applying it in aesthetic-ideological rather than sociological terms.[28] Translating Garland-Thomson's 'stare' into the terms of a visual structure in specific films helps to illuminate scenes in which a more ideologically based notion of the gaze fails to lead to deeper understanding.[29] In other words, even when stripped of its original feminist-psychoanalytic connotations and applied more straightforwardly as a critique of the process of objectifying ('reifying') another human being, reducing her/him to an object of erotic desire, the 'stare' by contrast reduces the other person to precisely that: an *other* who is the object of either fascination or disgust, or some intermediate but still powerful affective response. Either way, arguably she or he is reduced to something other than fully 'human' in the process:

> Cultural othering in all its forms – the male gaze being just one instance – depends upon looking as an act of domination. The ethnographic or the colonizing look operates similarly to the gendered look, subordinating its object by enacting a power dynamic. When persons in a position that grants them authority to stare take up that power, staring functions as a form of domination, marking the *staree* as the exotic, outlaw, alien, or other.
>
> (Garland-Thomson 2009: 42)

The stare would seem to be clearly at work in *The Great Beauty*, for instance, in those scenes involving Dadina (Giovanna Vignola), Jep's editor, who is in her own words a 'dwarf' (*una nana*). Dadina is a fully fleshed-out character, however: a successful businesswoman of a certain age with an active sex life (as implied in the dialogue) and a healthy sense of self-irony. In showing Dadina as capable of laughing at herself, Sorrentino appears open-minded while getting away with exploiting the actor's physical appearance for a melancholically humorous effect. This unusual casting choice pays off, as Dadina's scenes with Jep emerge as important because of the light they shed on his character.

An even more glaring example of Sorrentino's exploitation of the stare occurs in The *Young Pope*, Episode 2, when Cardinal Voiello returns to his apartment near the Vatican. Sorrentino structures the scene as one of thwarted voyeurism: the viewer is aligned with Sister Mary as she spies on Voiello at Lenny's behest. The viewer likewise spies on him, perhaps hoping (with Sister

28. I thank my Ph.D. student Grace McCarthy for drawing my attention to Garland-Thomson's work and for first suggesting the stare as a cinematic and not merely a sociological structure.

29. E.g., R. W. Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), whose characteristic set piece is a highly formalized, artificial scene in which one or more characters stare blatantly at another marked as their ethno-cultural or racial other. In Fassbinder's film this strategy adds a clearly Brechtian resonance to the film's meanings.

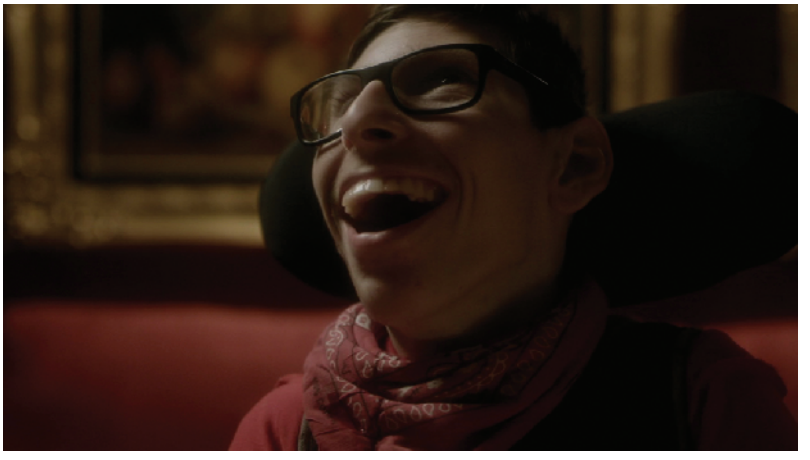

Figure 5: 'Girolamo' (unattributed) in Episode 2 of The Young Pope *(2016).*

Mary) to catch him out in some unpriestly behaviour in the privacy of his home. This is suggested for instance by the fact that, as he carries a box of pastries into the building, he is followed by an attractive young woman in a tight red dress. The framing and *mise en scène* conspire to create this sense, as Mary is able to watch unobserved, *Rear Window*-style, from an adjacent car park, Voiello conveniently visible through the large windows of his lavish apartment. The red dress turns out to be a red herring as from outside we watch Voiello greeting his charge, Girolamo (unnamed in the credits), a young man with a severe physical (and perhaps mental) disability, played by an actor who is clearly authentically disabled.

If nothing else Sorrentino's casting choices cannot be accused of 'cripface': Hollywood's tendency to cast non-disabled actors in treatments of mental and physical disability. There is something to be said for casting genuinely differently abled actors in disabled roles – although it is important to avoid the uncritical conflation of the role and the person playing it. Generally speaking, the difference of disability trumps that of either gender or age – until, that is, all three identities are merged in the same character. *The Young Pope*'s counter-tendency is announced in the series' opening dream sequence. At one point Lenny says in voice-over over a close-up of a young worshipper with Down syndrome: 'God does not leave anyone behind'. The fact that this occurs within a dream sequence does not alter the scene's exemplary status as instance of Sorrentino's use of non-normative identities as a spectacular way to underline the series' apparent championing of the meek and powerless, the disenfranchised and disabled, while simultaneously complicating the exploitation of women's bodies and faces – all in the service of adding nuance to our understanding of the principal masculine characters.

CODA: *THE YOUNG POPE* AS 'MIDDLE-BROW MELODRAMA'

In *The Young Pope* series, as in *The Great Beauty,* memory is foregrounded as the primary metaphysical framework, whether in the form of the burden of an individual's past or the pressure of history upon the present. The former – subjective memory tied to individual character – manifests in these later works

in the form of the flashback in which the highly conventional and artificial cinematic rendering of memory has been naturalized. The flashbacks in the TV series are structurally less complex than in *The Great Beauty*, for instance. Undoubtedly, this is in part the result of narrative expediency, but it is worth noting that these scenes culminate in a treatment of memory – in general and specifically in terms of the protagonist – that, if not more sophisticated or complex, appears to me more progressive than the films from the perspective of gender politics.

In one telling example, the conclusion of the penultimate episode of *The Young Pope* represents a thematic and structural inversion of the conclusion of *The Great Beauty*: instead of the dead woman reappearing as her younger self to save the ageing and undeserving protagonist, here the Pope speaks in voice-over the words of his teenage self to his now middle-aged former beloved, the nameless woman who nevertheless receives the revelation of his love as a gift in the present. But this love letter is read over a montage of several other characters from the preceding episodes, each of whom somehow shares in this confession of love.[30] Here the voice-over begins while Esther is in frame, in what appears to be the answering shot to one of Lenny on the beach near her house in Ostia; his eyeline suggests that he is looking at her, whereas by the time she finds his gift (a photo portrait) he is already flying away in the papal helicopter, like the archangel after the annunciation.

It is no coincidence, however, that this voice-over-montage sequence is preceded in the same episode by two deathbed scenes, one within the other. In the first Cardinal Spencer (James Cromwell) succumbs to cancer, ironically, just as his opportunity to assume the papacy is within sight. In the second scene, another flashback, to Lenny's childhood orphanage in upstate New York, the custodian's wife (Ann Carr) lies dying from what appears to be cancer. The two death-bed scenes are ironically juxtaposed as Spencer asks Lenny to confirm the miracle cure he performed on the sick woman decades before, as evidence of his saintly status. Lenny grants Spencer's dying wish, recounting the event and offering him the comfort of knowing that his faith in God has not been in vain.[31] That Lenny does not extend the same favour to his expiring former mentor is an irony muted by the series' wholesale descent (if that's the right word) into a hybrid form of postsecular male melodrama. But this is more a description than a criticism, as the affective intensity of the scene is clearly written into the script, with its highly conventional flashback structure guaranteeing the veracity of the 'miracle' for the viewer as much as the other characters who witness and/or hear of it. Thus, the almost kitschily Christological *mise en scène* – large crucifix and statuette of Mary, anti-naturalist lighting effects, actors staring in wide-eyed wonder – contrasts starkly with the final scene in *The Great Beauty*, analysed above. Again, this scene inverts the one in the film: the man saves the woman who is not dead but dying. Her mask-like visage in this flashback visually echoes Melanie's rigid, open-mouthed expression in the above-mentioned shot in *Youth*. If the youthful Lenny's (Patrick Mitchell) miraculous curing of his friend Billy's mother, his saving her from death, fails to redeem all those other men in Sorrentino's films, this is not just a criticism of Jep or Ballinger as masculine subjects.

By comparison to this scene in *The Young Pope*, there is greater artistic sincerity to the elegiac nostalgia of the final flashback in *The Great Beauty*, just as the lack of closure in the latter and in *Youth* is paradoxically more satisfying than the TV series' melodramatic finale. The resurrected woman's beatific expression invites the viewer to exchange a stare for an awestruck gaze – whether of sentimental wonder or cynical disbelief, as the case may be. Such a female character,

30. In a manner reminiscent of what has become a stock musical sequence in contemporary American 'smart' film and television, in which several disparate characters, separate in space, are united in a montage by a piece of music played over top. The famous montage in P. T. Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), in which all the major characters sing the same song while in separate locations, is the self-reflexive *ne plus ultra* of this technique. Sorrentino's employment of a wide variety of musical styles as a principal source of meaning in his films guarantees the frequency of this technique. Regarding the 'smart' film see Sconce (2002). Thanks to the website 'tunefind', we know that the pop song playing over the final montage is 'Never be like you' by Flume (featuring Kai).

31. Curiously, Spencer's dying words, 'time to die', directly quote replicant Roy Batty's dying words in the original *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982).

however, no matter how marginalized by age, illness or gender, is still recuperable, part of the closed (masculinist) economy of *The Young Pope*'s narrative. She remains in the end a fictional construct, a narrative function. The series' authentically disabled bodies, by contrast, represent identities not susceptible to such melodramatic redemption, the actors' extra-diegetic authenticity translating, paradoxically, into a spectacular image of radical unknowability.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Russell J. A. Kilbourn is associate professor in English and film studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, specializing in film theory, memory studies and adaptation. He is the author of *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (Routledge, 2010), *W.G. Sebald's Postsecular Redemption: Catastrophe with Spectator* (Northwestern University Press, 2018) and co-editor, with Eleanor Ty, of *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013). His forthcoming book is *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino* (Director's Cut series, Wallflower Press and Columbia University Press).

Contact: Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3C5, Canada.
E-mail: rkilbourn@wlu.ca