

Silvio Soldini's *Giorni e nuvole* and Paolo Sorrentino's *Il divo*: The Differing Styles and Chief Directions of the New Italian Cinema?

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This article is meant as a comparative study of two remarkable yet very different films, *Giorni e nuvole* (2007) and *Il divo* (2008), in the belief that they may serve as an exemplary case study for two chief directions of Italian cinema in the twenty-first century. The choice of directors and films is dictated by the established career paths of Silvio Soldini and Paolo Sorrentino and by the critical and popular success worldwide of the two selected films. The principle argument is that the features of each work speak of one and the other directors' concerns and thrusts and that these ultimately stand in opposition of each other. The two films are examined consecutively within the broader context of Italian national cinema and in relation to pertinent literature and criticism. The analysis is conducted by putting to the test the relationship between the purported import of and the formal strategies adopted by each film in delivering their points.

When we look back at the first decade of the twenty-first century we are faced with a resurgence of internationally successful Italian films. In the past century Italian directors have been notoriously concerned with the concretely real stories affecting Italy and Italian life. During the 1940s films such as Rossellini's *Paisà* and De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*¹ tackled important themes inspired by the social and political condition of the country at the time: post-war trauma, adjustment and rebuilding, poverty, employment and family. During the tense and violent 1970s Petri's films, beginning with *Indagine di un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*, and Rosi's work, the masterpiece *Cadaveri eccellenti*² among others, dealt with the political crises, the corruption, and fears of those years. In the 1990s director Gianni Amelio with his look at both the past and the present made historically-conscious and sobering films, starting with the pivotal film *Il ladro di bambini*, while Bernardo Bertolucci explored the crisis of identity via his idiosyncratic penchant for sensuality, as in his 1996 *Io ballo da sola*.³ In very different ways, Amelio and Bertolucci offered a useful portrait of the individual and national dilemmas of the end of century: the tussle between excitement and bewilderment at future prospects, the reckoning with one's past, and the widening of the social crisis. In terms of functional strategies, that is, the formal choices that distinguish a director's style, individual viewers may conclude that one director's vision may have succeeded over another given the popular and critical success of their work over a considerable period of time.

There is no doubt that the Italian cinematic tradition is renowned for its socially engaged directors. But what makes the new Italian output of the 2000s appealing and why, and how should we understand innovation within such a cinematic tradition? *Giorni e nuvole* (2007) by Silvio Soldini and *Il divo* (2008) by Paolo Sorrentino are two internationally successful films which came out one year apart, and which may stand for two very different styles and leading directions in Italian contemporary cinema. It is worthy of note that Soldini and Sorrentino are two among the few contemporary directors whose works are successful overseas. In keeping with the Italian cinematic tradition, both directors appear to have a keen interest in portraying Italy's contemporary socio-political milieu, but in significantly different ways. They are engaged in conveying a picture of Italy's societal and national dilemmas, but their visions are a set of techniques apart. How are we to understand the significance of this

differing approach? How can we compare two contemporary directors whose concerns are both quite traditional, but whose styles appear antithetical? What leading directions of Italian cinema in the new millennium is such a chief opposition pointing to, if any? A comparative study of *Giorni e nuvole* and *Il divo* may offer revealing answers to these queries. This study is conducted by analysing and comparing a few instances of formal strategies adopted by each director, that is, the technical features of each film within the broader tradition of Italian cinema. This article argues that the features which differentiate one film's style from the other, Soldini's and Sorrentino's directorial choices, not only stand for what makes two contemporary Italian cinematic aesthetics successful with different viewers, but also for the distinctive strains that put their visions one in opposition of the other: a vision charged with responsibility versus an exuberant *divertissement* attitude.

*Giorni e nuvole*⁴ may not have had as much festival exposure as *Nuovomondo*⁵ had — given the different production dynamics and ventures — but its impact, most especially on cinephiles and film scholars is assured by the attention the director has secured in academic circles.⁶ Silvio Soldini's work is based on an original story conceived and written in collaboration with screenwriters Doriana Leoneff and Francesco Piccolo — who have been collaborating with several directors on a number of recent Italian film scripts. Though not anywhere to the extent of other notable Italian international co-production, *Giorni e nuvole* is also a co-production effort. It is a topical film, realized at the heel of the 2005 economic global crisis, and about a middle-class well-off Northern Italian couple — played convincingly by Antonio Albanese and Margherita Buy. The couple finds itself plunged in an unexpected economic and spiritual crisis as they enter their middle age: a relentless journey downward — suggestive of a Dantean crisis — through an emotional spiral of uncertainty, self-doubt, and moral squalor.

The film begins with a thesis defense, a research authored by Elsa, the female character, on the attribution of a work of art — which includes a fresco painting which by the end of the film will be attributed to Boniforte da Barga. From the opening scene onward it becomes very clear how Soldini opts for both a realistic and introspective mode, one mirroring the outer complicacies of a society in crisis through the inner turmoil of the characters. His style succeeds in conveying a feeling of authenticity, poignancy, and self-reflection. This is achieved through an improvisational approach, and the unglamorous composition and *mise-en-scene*, in line with Italian cinema's traditional concern for realism — a 'national brand' according to some ongoing studies.⁷ Soldini looks at the contemporary and recurring economic crisis through the unfolding story of a family awaked by it, and he does so with the discernment and that committed impulse that animates the enduring tradition of Italian cinema. His camerawork explores the characters' praxis rather than dictating it. In his case the innovation is found in an advanced filming procedure, in techniques such as the steadycam, and not in a newer form of pastiche or by foregrounding the cinematography at the expense of the subject matter. The result is a fresh look at the real and now, unembellished and 'unpasteurized.' Rather than being indoctrinated into such a tradition Soldini appears to adhere to it from within, bound to a concrete cinematic vision opposed to a flamboyantly fashionable one. In the panorama of Italian cinema the masters of this tradition are disowned, appropriated, and banked on repeatedly. We are periodically — and painfully — reminded of its underlying principles or philosophy, as in the words of Mario Brenta at the «Un certo Olmi» conference:

Pensavo che il cinema, oltre che finzione dovesse essere inganno. E questo senza rendermene effettivamente conto, come per una tacita scontata adesione ad un patto di omertà mafiosa. Ecco allora il mio provincialismo venire fuori in tutta la sua meschina evidenza grazie a un signore che veniva un po' malignamente etichettato come un provinciale, perché isolato, fuori da ogni giro, da ogni clan, ma soprattutto da ogni convenzione. Trovavo finalmente (e questo è davvero sorprendente!), nel cinema di Ermanno, quel cinema che io, inconsapevolmente e inconfessabilmente, covavo dentro di me. Quel cinema che guarda alla vita come essa è realmente e non a come essa deve apparire secondo i canoni istituzionalizzati (da chi poi?) di una cosiddetta visione cinematografica.⁸

In his concretely bred vision and rather plain style Soldini stands quite apart from newer trends, especially from Sorrentino's deflected image-making approach and trendy style. The immediacy and impact of the film's narrative strategies are assured by a robust story and script, and by the director's ponderous but solid vision and direction. A Milan based Italian director whose personal story and training paths may have aided his determination to seek original and independent approaches to the art of film,⁹ Soldini offers a documentary-like portraiture of a middle-class Italian couple through a difficult period of the early 2000s, and he does so with an unadulterated eye to the cultural traits and idiosyncrasies of a typical bourgeois Northern Italian family.

The new millennium has ushered Italy only into an illusionary and short-lived sense of prosperity. The country is beset by high unemployment rates, precarious social conditions for the vast majority — among other historical anomalies of the Peninsula — and an unsettling uncertainty about the future. Within the first fifteen minutes into the film the initial festive cheer and mood surrounding Elsa, who's just been awarded a university degree — as an adult student — is 'knocked out' by a devastating revelation made by her husband Michele: «È da due mesi che non lavoro [...] Volevo aspettare che ti laureassi [...] Si sono dimessi, poi hanno eletto loro stessi e mi hanno fatto fuori [...] Dobbiamo venderla [la casa], ricordi che l'avevamo data in garanzia per l'aumento di capitale?» An un-comfortably 'true picture' of the country and one of its raw stories begins to unravel. The camera appears to be synchronized with the characters' every move, even subtle quiver, in silent cheer and in raucous commotion. There is no excess of artifice or hyperboles neither in the script nor in its execution, except a patterned and rather balanced use of jump-cuts, speed, and audio mix, which come to strengthen the points made.

The form, that is, the technical strategies, the 'how' of the film, is not obtrusive to nor is it domineering over the story, and not because of conformity to the continuity-style, or the adoption of old conventions — such as invisible-editing typical of Hollywood classic and standard cinematic practice — but rather because the story is explored in an almost Zavattinian sense. What Soldini appears to have adopted from the peculiarly Italian realist tradition and school-of-thought on the forms and function of the cinema is that the style of the cinema can express the reality (and thus find the 'truth') of the surrounding world first by accepting that reality is rich in its matter-of-fact incidence and meaning and second by letting it prevail over the means adopted to express it. One just needs to learn how to look at it, and use a discretionary amount of, or, as Zavattini suggested, 'a bit of imagination on the condition that it exercise itself within reality' and not vice-versa.¹⁰ *Giorni e nuvole* amounts to a display of faith in this truth, an awareness that the willingness to explore and understand the unfolding events

may lead to an unsettling denouement, to unveiling a parade of unpleasant and embarrassing facts, in stark colours. This appears to be the necessary path to a 'symbolic collective awakening,' to a cinema of individual and national identity and purpose — as was the case with neorealist films.¹¹ Elsa is utterly shocked but unable or unwilling to take in the full impact of the news she just received, as if she still needs time to put together the meaning of last night's events — a most recent piece of the bigger and disconcerting puzzle she awakens to. They will no longer be able to take a trip in Cambodia, have a house maid, and own a boat, cars, several cellular phones, and other luxury items. Their life-style will have to change, she must find a job, a 'real-job' (one that pays), and they will have to rent an apartment in a less attractive quarter of the city, as they will no longer be in a condition to own a house.

Soldini relies on a *bona fide*, genuinely real, performance given by Buy and Albanese, as he follows them from left to right and from low angle to a high angle with his fluid camera. What appeals in Soldini's style in this case is his observational-like mode of filming his characters in action, and this is antithetical to the sped-up and slow-motion mode and frequent cuts techniques which are typical in Sorrentino's film. In two end-sequences, the one where Michele on a moped working as a delivering-boy is spotted by his appalled daughter Alice sitting in a car next to him at a red street-light, and the one where Michele fumbles to attach a wallpaper to the wall of a neighbor's house — a job he has little to no skills for — Soldini's technique and intended import are a perfect match. The point is well-delivered and powerfully riveting: the character is unable to carry on, his morale plummets. A straightforward storyboard and the minimal editing of sound levels and straight cuts — which are then followed by a slightly sped-up picture and a few jump-cuts in the second case — are the minor creative use (and not overuse) of technical devices that secure compelling results. At the red street-light moment the camera follows Albanese and Rohrwacher's (playing daughter Alice) performances, with very minimal editing, and at one point it makes a one-hundred-and-eighty degrees turn, as if aligning the viewer to the full cycle of emotions and quandary the main protagonist finds himself trapped into, unable to proceed for a moment when the light turns green. As for the wall paper scene the use of two medium angle shots, one sideways and the other from behind the character, along with a slight emphatic increase of the character's heavy breathing, succeed in conveying a sense of increasing panic as he detaches and re-attached the same wallpaper several times around the edge of a pillar, unsure of how it is done. Soldini's jump-cuts are never unwarranted, and they are not an embellishing strategy. They play a functional role rather, that of morally charging and emphasizing the protagonists' collapse into spiritual sterility. A deeply affecting moral conundrum, in which the protagonists must realize that a one-hundred-and-eighty degrees turn, is needed in order to prevent a total failure.

The novelty in Soldini's style is to be found in his attempt to update the solid direction of Italian cinematic tradition at a time when *imitatio* is replacing *mimesis* and a flashy style the focus on the subject matter. Soldini's moves are brave, even unforgiving, when depicting foibles and fears in the characters. The explorative approach, as in his documentaries, is aimed at exposing the «uncomfortable aspects of our contemporary society in ways that are often disquieting but always revelatory.»¹² His style is characterized by a feeling for forms of honest and truthful execution, the 'truth' or simplicity of means at his disposal to bring out the dishonest traits of the characters, along with their sense of despair and shame. Michele and Elsa are shamed on the streets, before their friends, in presence of strangers, in the presence of their

daughter, Alice, and with each other. Elsa initially tells her husband that he shouldn't accept a job unsuited to his social rank, and later she tells a friend with whom she meets up as she exits the call-center, where she now works: «Non ti ho detto niente perché mi vergognavo, Nadia [...]»

There is no hesitation, in line with the bravest of Italian cinematic tradition, to display the ugliest traits, the petty-mindedness of the protagonists; an unabashed but redemptive admission of Italy and Italians failures, the ostentatious and ludicrous display of wealth and appearances. If there is an image of the nation worth considering this is an unknown one, the one to learn from. And in this pursuit his camera renews, in a present-day mode, a thrust similar to that found in De Sica's pursuit in *Ladri di biciclette* rather than Rossellini's shot composition and effect montage found in *Paisà*.¹³ His philosophy brings him to see meaning in apparently banal events, where other directors may shy away from. The depiction of what may initially appear a banal event, however, turns into a major metaphor. The crushing of plastic bottles becomes the scene *par excellence* of how the economic turnaround is putting the nature, and strength, of the couple's relationship to the test, and a convincing illustration of the futile existence they have sunk to. The camera moves and pans about the couple, once again left and right, up and down: Michele stooped to the floor crushing bottles and Elsa walking up and down, from the main-room to other rooms and back. Soon they get into a major fight:

Elsa, uneasy about the affair she just had with her boss, enters the apartment, greets him and asks: Che cos'è?

Michele: Schiaccia le bottiglie.

She walks back and forth, then comes back to him: M'a che cosa serve?

Michele, as he keeps crushing: Risparmi spazio.

Elsa: Ma non sei andato al colloquio questa mattina?

Michele: No.

Elsa: Hai intenzione di continuare per molto?

[...]

Elsa: Michele, così non va bene, eh! [...] Sono fuori tutto il giorno, torna a casa che sono stanca morta...

[...]

Michele, who has now stopped from crushing plastic bottles: Perché certo, sei tu che lavori... tu che mantieni la famiglia... Adesso sei tuuuu!

Elsa: Non ti frega niente di niente... Questa casa fa schifo! Non fai più neanche il minimo sforzo... Non fai più neanche il colloquio adesso!

Michele: Potrò almeno decidere io se vale o no vale la pena di andare a un colloquio?

Elsa: Tu sei soltanto buono a stare su questo cazzo di divano a dormire!

After having insulted each other, Michele stands up and approaches her threateningly: Sei ridicola Elsa [...] Lo sento il sollievo che provi tutte le mattine quando esci di casa... E io rimango qui a non fare un cazzo, a farmi le seghe come quando avevo quindici anni... ma non penso a te [...]. After shaking her and then pushing her to the floor Michele leaves the apartment. Unbeknown to him, his neighbor will come to his aid when his wife Elsa meets him at the door instead, as the neighbor goes to retrieve his laundry item and speaks of Michele's kindness with her. If, for its ability to function as a recording artifact, we look at film as aiding the documentation of the standards of life relative to a specific period of the history of the nation, and were to

compare the relationship between Michele and Elsa to that of Antonio and Maria in *Ladri di biciclette*, we would readily appreciate how the dynamics and their representation have changed, are revisited, along with the conditions of the country. In Soldini's 2007 portrayal the dire times have antagonized the couple rather than strengthening their resolve to work towards a shared goal. Both films depict a time of despair, bewilderment, and confusion, due to a great extent to the economic conditions, but within the twenty-first-century new globalized greed, in *Giorni e nuvole*'s depiction, the interior turmoil and the sense of desolation appear to have reached an eruption point, as the gender roles are given more narrative space, have evolved and deteriorated. Unlike the family dynamics in De Sica's film, here the domestic and social space become unsafe and threatening, and the characters end up losing control of their lives, due, to a significant extent, to their own choices and doing. It is the story of an increasingly wider new middle class family — where Elsa is able to achieve her dream of earning a university degree, though the prospects to put it to use appear bleak — supposedly at the helm of a certain cross-section of Italian society.

The collision course on which such society is bound is not entirely the result of external forces — which are beyond the individual's control — on the contrary, it is partly a responsibility of the characters whether or not the outcome will turn out to be a positive or negative one, as they must learn to adjust their rapport in relation to each other and within a changing and worsening community dynamic. The film stands as a topical metaphor for the country as a whole: it is a reflection of Italy's contemporary state of affairs, a country in perennial economic and social crises in a likewise fatiguing global economy and community. The crushing of plastic bottles by an unemployed mechanical engineer is not trivial *per sé* if it were not for the fact that it is taken up as an excuse, as a surrogate for real responsibilities. Though Soldini emerged onto the international scene with successful comedic films like *Pane e tulipani* (*Bread and Tulips*, 2000) — which in its farcical tone, however, did not gloss over true stereotypes involving the Southeastern Balkans — here his work shines for its renewed effort to seek once again the suitable formal strategies within the present-day wearied 'school of realism,' the proper mimetic key to depict the uncomfortably true and desperate condition of a good part of the country.¹⁴ As Adriano Piccardi writes:

Soldini, lo sappiamo, è portatore di una ricerca espressiva, narrativa, visuale che non si accontenta mai e non ama fermarsi al già trovato. Rinnovandosi ancora una volta, ha filmato questa storia, così quotidiana a dispetto di un titolo così metafisico, mostrandocela a distanza ravvicinata [...] Soldini cerca comunque la misura della messa in scena capace di dare ordine alla rappresentazione del disordine interiore, dell'affanno, dell'annichilimento. Senza rinunciare alle sue responsabilità. Senza abdicare ad alcuna forma di "immersione nella realtà", che risulterebbe in ogni caso illusoria o, peggio, oggetto di scambio truffaldino.¹⁵

The route to ways of coping with the crisis is found at the end and with it a glimmer of hope. Michele and Elsa re-unite on the floor of an ancient house, they lie there staring at the medieval fresco painting. They are filmed from the perspective of someone watching from above, as if a divine light descends on them from the sky — 'the light of Boniforte,' says the professor's character — that of the fresco painting on the ceiling. Any redemptive power is re-directed and found within, this is also part of their work as a couple and family; and by extension the same re-configuration rests on

the responsibility of the entire community, the country, whose job bears an even greater onus. The focus of the film seems to be that of framing-up and delivering this 'responsibility' point. Soldini's uncompromising approach is directed at drawing the viewer to look deeper, into his characters' souls, at the hard dilemmas they face. This stands in hard contrast to Sorrentino's ludic achievement, where much work is done at the surface level, and which stands out for the heavy make-up of one of Italy's national protagonists and the spoofing of the conundrums his persona entails.

Michele says to her: Pensavo che potesse tornare tutto come prima ma non è così [...] Mi inventerò qualcosa, partirò da zero... ma senza di te no, senza di te non vado da nessuna parte.

Elsa replies: Sei arrivato proprio mentre pensavo che l'unica cosa che volevo è che tu fossi qui. Sei tu vero?

Michele: Sono io, Elsa. Purtroppo son io per davvero.

Elsa reaches for his hand: Anch'io.

The realization that they must come together, find strength in each other, in order to usher their relationship and lives into a new and stronger union is delivered as they stare at the depiction of providence in the fresco painting — surprisingly to a medieval representation of it. Soldini manages to evoke the symbolism underpinning the scene with a bare set up and choice of rather unobtrusive cinematic techniques. The long gone darker age, the so called Middle-Ages, may conceal an ethic and aesthetic concern the principles of which may still hold some precious lessons for one's contemporary society and its ephemeral preoccupations.

Sorrentino's *Il divo: La spettacolare vita di Giulio Andreotti*¹⁶ earned several nominations and awards, among which an American Academy Award nomination for the makeup, and a Cannes Film Festival nomination for the Palme d'Or, and given its subject-matter soon became a popular film. The title — from the Latin *divus*, god or the celestial one — refers to long-time politician Giulio Andreotti, several times Prime Minister of Italy and now lifetime senator, on whose public life it is supposedly based. The film sets out to depict the controversial and ubiquitous political life of this one time powerful Italian politician, and justify the attribution of the Caesarean epithet, 'divine Julius.' *Il divo* is indeed a spectacular film, set to meet-up with its entertainment-and-money-making goals. In a 2006-2008 three-year report ANICA lists *Il divo* among the few Italian films sold in more than ten territories. Its worldwide box-office earnings were over 11 million dollars.¹⁷ Quite deliberately and unlike *Giorni e nuvole* — which is not part of that list — the entire film is executed above-the-line, and successfully so. Sorrentino's style seems inclined to both a caustic and thrilling effect, one of pungency and excitement at the same time. His is a vision in which dominate an ultra-sense of glamour, a polished aesthetics, a sleek and even mendacious use of films' trendy techniques — as long as these help trigger a surge of adrenalin in the viewing public.

The film opens with a zooming shot that gradually reveals the contours of a figure shrouded in total darkness and lit barely on the right side by a desk lamp as he lifts his head to show a face and forehead full of needles, undergoing ago-puncture treatment for migraine. The voice-over is that of Toni Servillo who, under heavy makeup, plays Giulio Andreotti, eerily and with unemotional verve. He tells of the people who offered prognosis of his imminent demise, starting with the medical officer who visited him at the time of his call to military duty, and who died before him instead while he survived;

and then speaks of his real nemesis, a lifelong migraine, which he tried to cure in every conceivable way, in vain. At one point ‘the Optalidon drug seemed to promise well’ and so, he continues: «Ne spedii un flacone anche a un giornalista, meno Pecorelli.»¹⁸ At this point a light switch click is heard and the main light goes off, and, in the dark, he concludes: Anche lui è morto.

The opening titles appear, underscored by a fast-paced song in English, as we are made to re-view a number of important killings, by gunshots, machine guns, poison, and bombs. The music beat slackens as the gunmen approach a journalist inside a car, Carmine Pecorelli — as if mimicking the heart-beat, that of the journalist, which is about to stop. This clichéd technique — particularly popular with the 1990s generation of American filmmakers — is repeated throughout the film in several scenes with equal intensity and mastery. Andreotti’s cabinet ministers and political entourage are presented with sardonic humour via an empathic use of formal techniques and strategies borrowed from other genres, including the renowned Italian spaghetti-western-style of the Corbucci, Leone, and Castellari years. In this particular scene, introduced by the double-entendre ‘brutta corrente’¹⁹ line, the foreboding and heavy soundtrack is topped with a recurring whistle call, typical of a few gunslingers characters in Italian-western films. The tribute to Italy’s glorious 1960s filmmaking is further topped with a gun hand gesture by one of Andreotti’s DC deputies, nicknamed ‘Lo Squalo,’²⁰ filmed with a telephoto lens. The film is comprised of a number of units stitched together by gimmick flairs and video-music-like segments. The latter seem to be meant as a sort of respite interludes within a cacophony of sound effects and a trendy montage style. In *Il divo* the historical perspective and analysis which the topic may have required is often sacrificed on the altar of an enlivening and exhilarating vignettted approach. The use of glossaries and captioned statements attempt to fill the blanks in matter of representation of facts, and data, related to a number of events. These are events which aggrieved the country from the end of the sixties to the beginning of the eighties and then again into the nineties, the chief import of which a general viewer may be unfamiliar with.

At the Toronto International Film Festival North-American premiere of the film, on the evening of September 09 2008, the festival director Piers Handling introduced the film warning viewers that they may be puzzled at first, unable to put together the pieces, and that the success of the film may be due to the very fact that it calls for the viewer to do his own research. Other than a necessary preamble for a festival crowd, this may be otherwise read as a codified response for detecting *lacuna* in the film. The problem that such an introductory premise poses to a scholarly perspective is that the functionality of film form is eschewed at the expense of both media studies and history’s competency. The issues with the film’s execution and style are simultaneously turned into matters of cinematic practice, and matters of exegetic concerns, as if the film were an intro item for a proper historical approach. What is then being overlooked is the very fact that *Il divo* is what Sorrentino has to offer to the viewer, it is his exhilarating depiction, or appropriation, of a socio-political subject, the controversial facts and lifestyle pertaining to the person of Giulio Andreotti, the senator’s political and private life — including any and all preconceptions associated with the same. At the end of the TIFF screening Sorrentino was asked whether or not Andreotti had seen the film and what this one thought of it. Sorrentino replied that the senator did watch the film, and later in an interview commented that he would have preferred that they’d make it after his death — as it is customary with bio-epic films. It was also reported that Andreotti

thought he was not as cynical as the character depicted in the film, and Sorrentino conveyed the idea that what the senator thought was not of big concern to him. What Sorrentino seems concerned with is the gaudy effect via an eccentric use of cinema's peculiar attributes. His socio-political oriented theme progresses in imitation of the ludic proclivity found in directors like Sergio Leone and Elio Petri. Rather than appearing innovative such a strategy points to a continuation in the new century of the *divertissement* attitude of a number of old masters.

The formally «new phase» Marcus speaks of in regards to *Il divo* and the *cinema d'impegno*²¹ is incompatible with the *cine-storia* of Italy, as it is with the historiography of world cinema in general. At the level of form — which she argues is the only level where we find enacted the political question at the center of Sorrentino's film — numerous aspects of his aesthetic extravaganza are found in several Italian films of the 1960s and 1970s as mentioned above. We ought to remind ourselves that many so-called 'political films,' as well as the works from other *filoni*, were executed above-the-line — like Sorrentino's — and successfully so in the opinion of many viewers. Whatever the thematic concerns, at a close analysis the supposedly «newness» of form, whether adopted in fiction or documentary film, appears rather old.²² The foregrounding of film techniques, of which a large part of the newer generation of filmmakers is quite fond of, as Sorrentino is in *Il divo*, is no novelty at all but rather as old as the emergence of the cinema.²³ *Il divo*'s style, as in other instances of Sorrentino's filmmaking, stands out for its macabre excess, more typical of the cinematography of horror films. Its indulgence of form: the frequent use of close-up shots, telephoto lens, extremely low angles, symmetrical framing, a fondness for anamorphism, spot and back lighting, along with *lazzo* performances, easily reach the point of intoxicating and confusing the viewer — even though some of the clues may have been recalled later in the film, as in the OP²⁴ cover of Andreotti on Pecorelli's desk. Unlike Silvio Soldini, whose camera is set out to explore the characters' development, Paolo Sorrentino makes his characters the subject of crafty and ostentatious cinematographic interventions. This appears to be a distinctive trait in *Il divo* as well as in other works by him, such as *Le conseguenze dell'amore*.²⁵ If the zany caricatures of Vittorio Sbardella, Cirino Pomicino, Totò Riina, and others, are intended to decry and ridicule the public image and idiosyncratic traits of the real people they are meant to depict, Andreotti's grim caricature appears monolithic and dehumanized.²⁶ It is so to the point of muddling and distorting any certainties on the side of the viewer's own perspective, as do the director's extreme camera angles close to the edges of buildings and furniture, and the bazaar-like use of different music styles, from the 1980s to classic music to digital pulse trends. The risk is that of warping and lessening the form along with its intended meaning, as when an excerpt of the video playing the plea of Rosaria Costa, the wife of agent Vito Schifani — killed with judge Giovanni Falcone and his wife in 1992 — is seen framed in conjunction with other items on a slant angle. Mrs. Costa is heard speaking the following words: «[...] io vi perdono, però vi dovete mettere in ginocchio, se avete il coraggio di cambiare... Ma loro non cambiano, loro non vogliono cambiare,» and is followed by a shot of the Andreotti character and his entourage standing inside a room, their faces turning in the direction of the TV screen. The viewer is momentarily invited to revise his perception and memory of historical events in favour of an entrancing spectacle, and in recompense he is called upon to assess its entertainment value.

The display of *bravura* in matter of scene composition and execution seem to be pointing in the same direction. It appears that the main-protagonist of every scene is the

very flashy style of filmmaking: the subject matter is feed to the art of deception. Any sense of nationhood and identity become unserviceable as they are delivered by an overwhelming number of generic stereotypes and aesthetic clichés. Even if the character of *Il divo* were asked to perform a moment of cinematically-conveyed-remorse for whatever involvement he may have had in the recurring topic of the *stragi*²⁷ which have tainted the image of a nation, there would be no place in Sorrentino's film for it other than via a sarcastic or parodied remittance of the same. The overriding *divertissement* displaces altogether any serious representation of moral responsibility. The commercial success of such films allegedly tailored to the theme of identity — as the 1996 Bertolucci sensation *Stealing Beauty* — may compel the film scholar to come to terms with it, yet the results appear often quite dubious: «His sensuous composition [...] and his sexual frankness deflect attention from narrative progression towards the fluidity of identity (personal, national and sexual) and the role of cinema in creating it.»²⁸ The paraphrase appears to be a tautological exercise and little more. Convolved analyses make it only harder to understand the significance of their excess, and undermine the flawed use of technique. The viewer of these spectacles is 'stitched' to the aesthetic elements of the film with little to no space for his or her own perspective.²⁹ A similar instance, in Sorrentino's film, occurs in the scene referred to as the *monologo* or *giudizio universale*³⁰ by the Andreotti character: a zooming shot of the character, lit with a back light — in this case a top light — which is made considerably stronger than the main light, and speedy cuts from side angles, and from medium-close to close-up shots, while he speaks and confesses to his wife Livia, and to the families of all the victims, his alleged involvement in the 1969-1984 years of *stragismo*.

[...] per rafforzare i partiti di centro, come la DC, l'hanno definito strategia della tensione; sarebbe più corretto dire strategia della sopravvivenza [...] tutti a pensare che la verità sia una cosa giusta, e invece è la fine del mondo, e noi non possiamo consentire la fine del mondo in nome di una cosa giusta! Abbiamo un mandato noi, un mandato divino! Bisogna amare così tanto Dio per capire quanto sia necessario il male per avere il bene! Questo Dio lo sa, e lo so anch'io.

At the end of the virtuoso performance with crescendo tones, the character slows down to deliver the last sentence «Questo Dio lo sa e lo so anch'io» after which the picture cuts back to a medium-close shot, and the main light is put off, making the character assume a spectral look. The *divus* epithet finds self-fulfillment in the character's own words. After a moment the back light starts fading away and we hear a heavy release of breath with the blacking out of the picture. Rather than a pedantic portrayal of the metaphysics of power — a parade of universal Machiavellian-like principles regulating a community's social and political life — it is the message imbued in the cinematic style that the viewer is drawn to. The 'divine Julius' is lit from above, in a spectral way, but also in a way mocking of any and all saintly notion, awkwardly in reverse for a moment with respect to standard horror characters (which are lit from below). It is the summation of formal choices, a strategically lit virtuoso act, an entertaining and slanted instant of contemporary (consumerism) visual culture, which is being offered to offset any and all metaphysic or socio-political pragmatic fancy the viewer may have held. We are quite removed from the concretely real and humanistic concerns of a Silvio Soldini's style; or with the psychological realism and clarity-of-style lessons from masters like Francesco Rosi.

From a technical perspective we are reminded of the stylish sprees at the end of the sixties beginning of the seventies, with films like *Indagine di un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* the formal extravaganza of which appear to have overburdened any message it may have had.³¹ Years from now, while *Giorni e nuvole* — on par with films like *Ladri di biciclette* and *Ladro di bambini* — may give a glimpse of Italy's social history at the beginning of the new millennium, *Il divo* may appear dated and utterly confusing. It may also compare to the *macchiette*³² delivered by the Bagaglino variety shows (with Oreste Lionello, Lando Buzzanca, and Leo Gullotta, among others) on RaiUno, Italy's national television, during the 1980s — with the necessary reservations demanded by the different nature of the two media of TV and film. The opposing visions offered by Soldini and Sorrentino amount to their auteurist philosophy: their trusts and styles project the chief preoccupations the directors had in making each film. In Sorrentino's case it is the 'good reviews' which may give a hint of the hermeneutical issues the film ought to confront:

[...] The film, which won the Jury Prize at last year's Cannes festival, has an uphill battle in American theatres. Most of its real-life characters are unknown outside Italy, and the complicated, shadowy relationship among politicians, the Mafia and the Vatican are difficult to decipher. But the filmmaking is sensational. From its bizarre opening image of the migraine-prone Mr. Andreotti with acupuncture needles stuck in his head — a picture of prime minister as human porcupine that could be out of a Fellini film — "Il Divo" is a tour de force of indelibly flashy imagery. [...]³³

It is not a matter of 'cosmetics' alone, though heavily so; it is a matter of entertainment, and yet not cynically so as to be confused with the idea of perpetuating 'aesthetic evil' in order to insure good fun — as the Andreotti role supposedly calls for. It amounts to a moment of diffracted perception, of spectacle via the cinematic mode favorable to a more appealing attunement to one's need of historical awareness and memory, and this in itself does not set any new trends. It may be understood as renewing the direction of amusing-oneself-to-death into the twenty-first century. As Piccardi writes: «E per noi non ci sono alternative a quella di perderci volontariamente e con paradossale piacere nella vertigine che ci accoglie. Che in ultima analisi non è quella comunicata dal Divo, ma da *Il Divo*.»³⁴ The film will end with the — still quite unsettling — 1982 New Wave German song *Da Da Da I Don't Love You You Don't Love Me*³⁵ which, among other music, brings up the closing credits.

In conclusion, whatever the two directors may have shared in matter of topical and historical concerns their visions are set apart by their craftsmanship and directorial choices, and appear to stand for the continuation of two main directions within the tradition of Italian cinema. On one hand we have a film the unobtrusive techniques and stark quality of which stand for the traditional attempt to convey an honest and truthful picture of the embarrassing moral, social, and economic conditions the country has sunk into at the beginning of the century, and on the other a film whose clever features and loud buzz purport to convey the enigma surrounding the private and public life of one of Italy's most representative politicians but the results of which appear to definitely sway the outcome to a display of *divertissement*, or, if I may put it in Italian instead: *dove il puro piacere di divertire ha la meglio su tutto il resto*. Considering the struggling state of national cinemas, and transient nature of contemporary visual culture, even if only by

raising the responsibility question discussed here, this article may have delivered a noteworthy point.



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¹ R. Rossellini *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), V. De Sica *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948).

² E. Petri *Indagine di un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* (*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, 1970), F. Rosi *Cadaveri eccellenti* (*Illustrious Corpses*, 1976).

³ G. Amelio *Il ladro di bambini* (*Stolen Children*, 1992), B. Bertolucci *Io ballo da sola* (*Stealing Beauty*, 1996).

⁴ The DVD release is distributed in North-America by Film Movement: <<http://www.filmmovement.com>> a company with good tastes for independent filmmaking.

⁵ (*Golden Doors*, 2006), E. Crialesi.

⁶ Soldini is among the very few 'new' Italian directors whose work has been object of early monographic studies: see B. Luciano's *The Cinema of Silvio Soldini: Dream, Image, Voyage*, 2008; S. Colombo's *Il cinema di Silvio Soldini*, 2002.

⁷ See L. Ruberto and K. M. Wilson, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, 2007, pp. 1-10.

⁸ «Un certo Olmi» Atti del convegno (Conference Proceedings) in Mario Brenta «I registi di Olmi» *Ermanno Olmi: L'esperienza di Ipotesi Cinema*, E. Allegretti and G. Giraud (a cura di), 2001, pp. 53-59.

⁹ Soldini quit his studies in political science in Milan to travel to New York, where he took a film course, and is also known for his intense activity as a documentarian.

¹⁰ See C. Zavattini, «A Thesis on Neo-Realism» in D. Overbey (ed.), *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neorealism*, 1978, pp. 67-76. This is far from saying that Soldini has married Zavattini's late credo *tout court*, what is being meant, rather, is that his style finds justification and strength in a consolidated philosophy. The tradition in which Zavattini plays a monumental role, and this one's theoretical legacy with regards to neorealism and reality in the cinema, continue to occupy a major critical position in the direction, development, and 'shape' taken by Italian cinema as well as other national cinemas. Zavattini's ideas appear to be still non-transcendable in their theoretical and philosophical relevance to the cinema, as principled historiographies attest.

¹¹ See D. Spinelli Coleman, *Filming the Nation: Jung, Film, Neo-Realism and Italian National Identity*, 2011, pp. 88-90. Another notable film to be aligned with Soldini's realist direction, and which preceded *Giorni e nuvole*'s release by one year, is K. Rossi Stuart gripping debut film *Anche libero va bene* (2006).

¹² B. Luciano, *The Cinema of Silvio Soldini: Dream, Image, Voyage*, 2008, cit., p. 47.

¹³ See H. Curle and S. Snyder (eds.) *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, 2000, p. 153; P. Brunette, *Rossellini and Cinematic Realism*, «Cinema Journal» 25.1, 34, Fall 1985, pp. 39-41.

¹⁴ In the 1990s Zagarrío includes Soldini among the narrow generation of new *auteurs* taking the place of the old masters. See V. Zagarrío *Cinema italiano anni novanta*, 1998, p. 10.

¹⁵ A. Piccardi, *Piovono pietre su Elsa e Michele: Giorni e nuvole*, «Cineforum» 47.10, 2007, pp. 26-28.

¹⁶ *Il divo: The Spectacular Life of Giulio Andreotti*.

¹⁷ Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico & Istituto Nazionale per Il Commercio Estero. *L'export di cinema Italiano*, Venezia: Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica, (6 settembre) 2010, 9. *Overseas Total Yearly Box Office Results 2008*. Box Office Mojo. March 04, 2009. <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ildivo.htm>> (2012-10-15).

¹⁸ Carmine Pecorelli was an Italian journalist shot dead in Rome in 1979, a year after the kidnapping of Aldo Moro. Giulio Andreotti was cleared of his death by the Supreme Court in 2003.

¹⁹ Literally 'bad current,' as in 'air' and, by extension, 'movement.'

²⁰ Vittorio Sbardella, nickname 'The Shark.'

²¹ M. Marcus, *Il Divo: A discussion*, «The Italianist», 30, 2010, pp. 245-271.

²² According to Marcus Sorrentino must «entrust the signifying task to film's plastic material, to the creative possibilities available to the plastic material of film», directly implicating «the viewer in the interpretative process charged with moral implications» in order to deliver a readable representation of the inscrutable Giulio. *ivi*, pp. 250, 252, 256. Pudovkin's 1920s ideas on plasticity, among others, are catapulted into the discussion as if film lost its 'plastic' condition for a while. Are we to understand her reference to Pudovkin's theories on cinematic techniques as a-historical or as referring to a new sort of ability, plasticity's new ability to implicate the viewer at a higher level? V. Pudovkin, *Film Technique*, I. Montagu (trans.), 1933.

²³ A number of established film techniques were refined with the work of cameramen such as Karl Freund in the 1920s and Gregg Toland in the 1940s.

²⁴ Osservatorio Politico (Political Observer), a press agency and journal founded by Carmine Pecorelli.

²⁵ *The Consequences of Love*, 2004.

²⁶ The historical character is known to often hesitate in his replies and even indulge in smiles.

²⁷ Massacres.

²⁸ M. P. Wood, *Italian Cinema*, 2005, p. 128.

²⁹ It would be likewise misleading to speak of theories of 'identification' and so forth in the twenty-first century panorama of moving-image studies, and in the case of films that are chiefly relying on (classic) patterns of suture.

³⁰ Monologue, Universal Judgment.

³¹ H. Hughes *Cinema Italiano: The Complete Guide from Classic to Cult*, 2011, pp. 202-203.

³² Entertaining caricatures.

³³ S. Holen, *Out of Fellini and Into 'The Godfather,' a Politician's Life*, «The New York Times» (April 23, 2009).

³⁴ «And for us there are no alternatives to that of letting ourselves go, voluntarily, and with paradoxical pleasure in the dizzy spell that welcomes us; one which in final analysis is not exactly the one conveyed by the Divo, but the one conveyed by *Il Divo*.» A. Piccardi *Il divo*, «Cineforum», 50.10 (2010): p. 53.

³⁵ *Da Da Da*, written by Stephan Remmler and Gert Krawinkel, was an international hit of the New German Wave of the 1980s.