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Marvelous Rome: Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* and the Rhetoric of Ovid and Vasari on Art, Spectacle, and the Sublime

Loren Eadie

This paper examines Paolo Sorrentino's 2013 film *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) and its visual discourse on the gaze, spectacle, and transformation, by putting it in dialogue with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Vasari's *Lives*. Rome as portrayed in the film appears as two cities. The first is the modern capital city of Italy inhabited by Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo), the film's protagonist, and his cohort of rich, elite friends, as well as the artists that he profiles for his work. This first Rome has undergone the many changes of time, showing traces of different customs, cultures, styles, rulers, and political regimes. The second Rome is less seen, but Jep and the viewer often enter into it by means of the gaze. This second Rome, which *La grande bellezza* locates in and around the city's historical monuments, is both a liminal and markedly theatrical space in which looking can bring about physical transformations, including death.

Indeed, the emblematic monuments in and associated with Rome—the aqueducts, the Colosseum, the Trevi Fountain, Vatican City—all underscore both Rome's longevity as well as its ability to subvert linear time by conveying a multiplicity of meanings and eras (pagan, Classical, Christian, Renaissance, functional, decorative, political entity, and spiritual epicenter, among many others). Filmmakers who capture Rome in its modern or even contemporary iterations cannot help but reveal these older connotations. Consider, for instance, the famous sequence of Sylvia's visit to Rome in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960). As portrayed by Anita Ekberg, Sylvia, an American actress, is the ultimate symbol of crass consumerism and the very opposite of what Western society had come to define as the Roman mythos.[1] As Peter Bondanella and others have noted, in placing Sylvia at St. Peter's and the Trevi Fountain, Fellini associates her visually with two of Rome's main spiritual guises during her visit—Christian priest and pagan mother-goddess. By the time the jaded protagonist Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) finds her wading through the Trevi Fountain, she has been transformed into an untouchable virgin goddess whose sensual corporality is nevertheless rendered innocent by the surroundings.[2]

When Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* arrived in cinemas fifty years later, in many respects it presented itself as a successor to or continuation of the themes and imagery presented in *La Dolce Vita*: art, beauty, the gaze, and death. Sorrentino's film often leans into the connection to its Fellinian precursor.[3] Jep Gambardella is a journalist in the throes of an existential crisis precipitated by his sixty-fifth birthday and by the unexpected death of his first love, Elisa. Throughout the film, he attends a series of elite Roman parties and events, mingling with the

[1] For an in-depth treatment on the myth of Rome and its various permutations, see Peter Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Bondanella considers the heart of the myth of Rome to be the tension between its longevity and its continual change: "in every modern expression of the myth of Rome from Petrarch to Fellini, Rome endures as the symbol and victim of inevitable change rather than the chief earthly expression of stasis and unity" (Bondanella, *The Eternal City,* 5).

[2] Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 234.

[3] This essay is indebted to Russell Kilbourn's recent book on Sorrentino and its chapter on *La grande bellezza* ("The Great Beauty [*La grande bellezza*]: Reflective Nostalgia and the Ironic Elegiac"). See Russell Kilbourn, *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style* (New York: Wallflower, 2020), 91.

powerful and provocative. At one point, Jep announces to his stripper-girlfriend, Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli), that he will take her to see "un mostro marino" (a sea monster), alluding to the monstrous fish with which Fellini ended *La dolce vita*.[4] In general, the film's commentary on the state of Italy at a turning point in its development (the aftermath of twenty years of Berlusconi and a reckoning with where Italy now stands, culturally and politically) makes *La grande bellezza* the heir apparent to Fellini's evaluation of Italy in 1960.[5]

Notwithstanding these similarities, Jep's story has different concerns. Russell Kilbourn declares the central theme to be one of nostalgia, and other critics examine the film's implicit and explicit discourses on post-Berlusconian Italian culture.[6] The emphasis on nostalgia is borne out not only by Jep's personal journey towards rediscovering the source of his "great beauty" and literary inspiration, but also by the many pronouncements and actions of characters throughout the film that emphasize this melancholy look backwards.[7] Related to both nostalgia and looking, however, is the trait that Jep uses to define himself at the start of the film: "sensibilità" (sensitivity, perception). Jep spends the film looking at art, gazing at beautiful objects and bodies, and, through the act of seeing, experiences moments of grace. Jep's gaze, coupled with the editing of sequences and framing of scenes that make the audience complicit in that gaze, render the viewers cognizant of their own acts of looking, perceiving, and meditating on the interrelated visual discourses on the gaze, spectacle, and transformation. In so doing, *La grande bellezza* taps into the great tradition of Rome's constant search for beauty and artistic creation that go beyond human abilities, a quest that found expression in both ancient poets and Renaissance authors, specifically Ovid and Giorgio Vasari.

As a critic tasked with writing about art and performance, serving equally as a tastemaker in Rome, Jep finds a clear parallel with Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth-century painter and author whose *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti* (1568, *Lives of the Artists*) taught his readers how to look at, understand, and appreciate the visual arts.[8] With rare exceptions, *La grande bellezza* almost exclusively presents Jep's point of view. The audience sees through his perspective and is meant to gaze in wonder or recoil in distaste at the performances along with him.[9] Drawing a correlation between Jep and Ovid may require more imagination, given that the former was a

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[4] *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*), directed by Paolo Sorrentino (Italy and France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013).

[5] Cinematographer Luca Bigazzi (quoted in Kilbourn, 93), reads the film's title ironically, emphasizing all the misery that dwells in the Italian populace after twenty years of Berlusconian politics.

[6] Kilbourn, 86–87. See also Claudio Bisoni, "Paolo Sorrentino: Between Engagement and *Savoir Faire*," in *Italian Political Cinema: Public Life, Imaginary, and Identity in Contemporary Italian Film*, ed. Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 251–64.

[7] Jep's editor, Dadina, at one point, in referring to rice, declares that "il vecchio è meglio del nuovo" (old is better than new); later, la Santa remarks that she only eats roots because "le radici sono importanti" (roots are important).

[8] Vasari's *Vite* was first published in 1550, referred to as the Torrentino edition. The definitive Giuntina edition was published in 1568.

[9] The one clear divergence between Jep's perspective and that of the viewer comes at the end of the little girl's artistic performance. Forced to paint to satisfy the financial, and possibly social, needs of her parents, the little girl paints while throwing a temper tantrum. Jep watches unmoved as the girl throws paint at a giant canvas.. Ramona, Jep's girlfriend and date to the event, by contrast, is moved by the spectacle, noting that the girl is crying. Jep responds callously, "ma che piangeva? Che stai dicendo? Quella ragazza guadagna milioni!" (What do you mean 'crying?' What are you saying? That girl earns millions!). Jep and Ramona then leave the show before seeing the final product; the viewer, however, does see the completed painting which, based on Sorrentino's framing as the camera cuts from a medium close up to the girl covered in paint, taking deep breaths, to a crane shot that reveals the completed painting. This reveal coupled with the diegetic sounds of crickets and non-diegetic music leads the viewer to appreciate what Jep could or would not witness.

Latin poet active in Rome during the reign of the emperor Augustus. His *Metamorphoses*, which narrates the "perpetuum…carmen" (unbroken song) of human existence through the examination of bodies transformed ("mutatas…formas"), concerns itself more with representing the known myths of interactions between gods and men rather than recount one man's life story.[10]

Nevertheless, a closer inspection of the two texts reveals many commonalities between Ovid's epic poem and *La grande bellezza*, particularly the shared emphases on artistic creation, the perils of looking, and an overall fixation with death. The death which preoccupies Jep, that of Elisa, is one of many on- and off-screen deaths that form part of the film's narrative.[11] Like Ovid's text, which similarly depicts a series of striking images of transformations and artistic creations in an atemporal but often highly recognizable world (it concludes in Augustan Rome), *La grande bellezza* presents the viewer with many oneiric digressions full of sumptuous visuals that show the protagonist and the figures that populate Rome grappling with aspects of their own existence when confronted with Rome's visual arts, spectacles, and beauty.[12] Moreover, these scenes are framed in such a way as to draw attention to the concept of the marvelous, whether it be an artistic illusion or true flash of ineffable grace. In this regard, the influence of Vasari comes to the fore, specifically the ekphrastic language in the *Vite* that describes those moments in which the creations of his illustrious *artefici* reach the sublime. Of the countless authors who have treated this subject during Rome's (and Italy's) long history, Ovid and Vasari put the same emphasis on artists or creators as heroes, underscoring humanity's ability to surpass nature and rival the divine in the creative process. Both authors, however, offer different perspectives on art and the gaze that are later echoed in *La grande bellezza*. The connection between physical dangers and the act of looking stems from Ovid, while the attention to artists' abilities to both trick the eye and rival God in their creations are evocative of Vasari's rhetoric in his *Vite*. Ultimately, the discussion of *La grande bellezza* in the context of the *Metamorphoses* and the *Vite* enriches the visual text, elevating the story of one man's late-life creative rebirth to a rumination on the second Rome in which amidst all the signs of death and decay can be found true marvels and the sublime.

The merging of Jep and Rome is made explicit from the character's introduction in the film. Though from Naples, the second scene of *La grande bellezza* links Jep and Rome through the celebration of his birthday. Almost ten minutes elapse before we finally meet Jep. His introduction is announced by the arrival of an elaborate cake in the shape of the Colosseum out of which jumps an ex-showgirl exclaiming, "Auguri, Jep! Auguri, Roma!" (Happy birthday, Jep! Happy birthday, Rome!). The association between Jep, Rome, and the Colosseum is, at this point, the only information we have on the character who will momentarily be revealed as the film's protagonist. In fact, *La grande bellezza*, up to this moment, has only established the prominence and history of Rome as the film's focal point. *La grande bellezza* begins in the barrel of a cannon, specifically the Cannone del Mezzogiorno, whose midday explosion results in brief applause from spectators and then the ringing of bells. The bells continue as the camera cuts from the crane shot of the appreciative crowd to moving tracking shots of various angles of the monument to the statue of

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[10] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Hugo Magnus (Gotha: Friedr. Andr. Perthes, 1892), book I.1-4, http://perseus.tufts.edu.

[11] *La grande bellezza* opens with the on-screen death of a tourist visiting Rome. Other deaths that take place off-screen but are referred to are the suicide of Viola's son, whose funeral Jep attends with Ramona, and then that of Ramona herself.

[12] In discussing the interconnected concepts of bodies, transformations, and creative potential, Segal states that the "pervading trope of the *Metamorphoses* rests on the premise that its world of myth and art can convert into physical form some underlying quality of mind, character, or emotion, whether these are a lasting feature of personality or a transient mood or emotion" (12). See Charles Segal, "Ovid's Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the 'Metamorphoses,'" *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 5, no. 3 (Winter 1998): 9–41.

Giuseppe Garibaldi, where a man observes the general's famous declaration, "Roma o morte!" (Rome or death!), cast in bronze.[13] This again serves as a nod to Rome's mythos and preeminence within the film, as well as to two of the major themes of *La grande bellezza*: Rome *and* death.

Striking in this initial sequence are all the abrupt cuts between tracking shots: from a medium shot of the man regarding the words of Garibaldi, the frame cuts to another vantage point in the same piazza, showing the same image (the man and the monument) but from a different perspective, in a wide shot that foregrounds the bust of another patriot. This sequence of edits repeats with each subsequent image: a mobile tracking shot that captures an element of the Parco del Gianicolo—a bust of a famous patriot, a woman smoking while reading the paper, a man sleeping on a bench—and then an abrupt cut to a similar yet different vantage point, before tilting upwards towards the trees. As the bells fade and the song of a female chorus begins, the constant, disorienting movement ultimately stops at the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, also known as the Fontanone. The frequent and unexpected cuts from one perspective to the next, as well as the many mobile tracking shots that pull the viewer into a location and then hurriedly push them away from it, almost recall the flight pattern of a bird, swooping around the park, briefly alighting on one spot before then taking wing to find another. In fact, in addition to the bells, the only other diegetic sound that can be heard at first is birdsong.[14]

The scene shifts to the Fontanone, while David Lang's Yiddish aria "I lie" plays in the background. This non-diegetic music is revealed to be part of the action of the film, as a choral group sings within the archways of the fountain. Following the explosion from the cannon, the Rome that has appeared in *La grande bellezza* up to this point is that second Rome: an ethereal, even pastoral space overwhelmed by female voices joined in harmonious song. The tranquility of this version of Rome is so complete, that the discordant sounds and images of modernity, such as the tour guide's spoken Japanese or the coach driver's angry phone call, appear inappropriate rather than the norm. Meanwhile, a single tourist wanders off to photograph the beauty that surrounds him before taking a breath, wiping the sweat off his brow, and collapsing dead. While parallels can be made with Sylvia's bath in the Trevi Fountain in *La dolce vita*—namely the framing of the fountain as a liminal, mystical, and transformative space—this sequence in *La grande bellezza* culminating in the tourist's death is more evocative of the *Metamorphoses*, specifically the story of Diana and Actaeon (Book III).[15]

In the Ovidian tale, Actaeon, a mortal hunter, observes Diana bathing. Actaeon's surprise at witnessing the sacred rituals of the virgin goddess is quickly transformed by Ovid into a voyeuristic gazing upon her nude body. The hunter is rendered mute by the spectacle: first figuratively by the shock of seeing the goddess and then literally after she flings water at him as a curse, transforming him into the stag that will promptly be torn apart by his own hunting dogs. Though no naked

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[13] Kilbourn, 91. Kilbourn maintains that, in focusing on the monument, "death is literally inscribed as a theme from the film's opening." Indeed, the opening sequence, he argues, underscores the history or life-cycle of modern Italy, presenting "what could be called the primal scene of the birth of the modern Italian nation."

[14] On this opening sequence, the use of sound, and the filming of the "sublime" in general within Sorrentino's film, see Giuseppina Mecchia, "Birds in the Roman Sky: Shooting for the Sublime in *La grande bellezza,*" *Forum Italicum* 50, no. 1 (2016): 183–93.

[15] The entire Trevi Fountain sequence frames this tourist hub in Rome as otherworldly. The center of town is completely deserted, save for the immaculate white kitten that Sylvia finds and carries around on her head. Furthermore, as Marcello watches Sylvia bathe, his monologue suggests an understanding of his errors and willingness to change: "Ma sì, ha ragione lei. Sto sbagliando tutto. Stiamo sbagliando tutto!" (But of course, she's right. I'm getting everything wrong. We are all getting everything wrong!). *La dolce* vita, directed by Federico Fellini (1960; United States: Astor Pictures Corporation), my translation.

goddesses or hunting dogs appear in *La grande bellezza*, the Fontanone sequence presents a similar warning against transgressing into unspoiled, feminine spaces. Though the film locates the sacred space of transformation at a site of papal power (the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola, as indicated by its inscription, was commissioned by and created to celebrate Pope Paul V), it nevertheless bears striking similarities to the grove of Diana in *Metamorphoses* III.154-163[16]:

> There was a valley there, all dark and shaded
> With pine and cypress, sacred to Diana,
> Gargaphie, its name was, and it held
> Deep in its inner shade a secret grotto
> Made by no art, unless you think of Nature
> As being an artist. Out of rock and tufa
> She had formed an archway, where the shining water
> Made slender watery sound, and soon subsided
> Into a pool, and grassy banks around it.[17]

In this opening sequence of *La grande bellezza*, we enter that second Rome. In place of the ever-present hustle and bustle of people moving through the city center—the din of traffic, the constant hum of bodies in motion—the opening of *La grande bellezza* foregrounds the greenery, the expectant quiet, and the birdsong of the Parco del Gianicolo, creating a version of Gargaphie within the heart of the city. The Fontana dell'Acqua Paola thus appears as the baroque equivalent of Diana's secret grotto, hence the framing of the fountain in a way that continually draws the viewer's attention to the prominent archways out of which the water gently flows (fig.1).

Fig. 1. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013

Moreover, the fountain is dominated by women, specifically women who, like Diana, draw attention to themselves, whether wanted or not. Though far less sexual than Ovid's provocative description of Diana's retinue of nymphs bathing the goddess, the choral group nevertheless command the viewer's attention. The singers stand at the balcony in the central arch, their dark clothing distinguishing them from the white marble of the fountain, as their voices emanate from

[16] Peter Aicher, "Terminal Display Fountains ("Mostre") and the Aqueducts of Ancient Rome," *Phoenix* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 339–52. Both the Fontana dell'Acqua Paola and the Trevi Fountain are terminal display fountains serving similar purposes (334).
[17] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 61–62.

the structure. Added to their singing is the female tour guide, who shouts in Japanese above the song. Due to placement and bearing, the women in this scene, like Diana, stand above the rest, "taller by head and shoulders."[18] Continuing the parallel, the people in this scene who clearly violate what the film establishes as a female space are the men: there is the local washing his face with the fountain water, the tour group's driver angrily swearing in which he emphasizes the male member ("m'hai veramente rotto il cazzo, eh!"), and finally the male tourist who deviates from the group.[19]

Indeed, much as in the story of Actaeon, this opening sequence in *La grande bellezza* emphasizes the correlation between stepping away from safety and the inevitability of death. Just as Ovid's unlucky hunter wandered into the grove with uncertain steps ("per nemus ignotum non certis passibus errans"), so too does the Japanese tourist meander away from his group. The look the tour guide gives him is one of both annoyance and admonishment. It appears almost to follow Ovid's "stage directions" in his description of the myth, exhorting his reader to look towards offstage to the arriving Actaeon: "ecce nepos Cadmi" (Look! the grandson of Cadmus).[20] The editing of the subsequent frames strengthens the causality between the male tourist's transgression and some form of female vengeance. The camera cuts between the tourist as he wanders away to the all-woman choir singing, focusing on the leader of the group, who is captured in close-ups from various vantage points, much like the busts in the Parco del Gianicolo. As the camera moves with the tourist away from the fountain, the choral group can still be seen within the frame, their song following him to the balcony of the piazza.

It is not just the movement away from the group that marks the tourist for death, but rather the act that precipitates it: gazing through his camera and taking pictures. He is essentially trying to record and preserve the beauty that surrounds him, the modern-day equivalent of Diana's taunt to Actaeon as she cursed him: "Tell people you have seen me, / Diana, naked! Tell them if you can!"[21] Another connection between this scene and the conclusion of Actaeon's story appears in the tourist's wiping of sweat from his forehead, that is, the same place where the vengeful water hits Actaeon (thereby beginning his transformation into the stag). After the tourist's wordless death, the female presence becomes again overwhelming in this scene. The camera lingers on the tourist's body as the guide tries to rouse him before cutting back to more tracking shots of the chorus singing in the Fontanone. The final image of the chorus singing further emphasizes the fountain as a feminine space like Diana's grotto: a mobile crane shot captures the chorus in a semicircle before the main arch. The camera then passes over the chorus, following the water as it flows into the fountain and then framing the tour group gathered around the dead tourist in an extreme wide shot that includes a panorama of Rome.

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[18] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 62.

[19] Andrew Feldherr concurs that Actaeon's wandering into the grove is not so much an intrusion as a violation of a sacred space, stating that he is "not only an inadvertent Peeping Tom, but a prodigious hunter whose depredations are initially described as having polluted the idyllic landscape where his tale takes place" (29). See Andrew Feldherr, "Metamorphosis and Sacrifice in Ovid's Theban Narrative," *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 38 (1997): 25–55.

[20] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, III.174-175. On the inherent theatricality of the Actaeon narrative and Ovid's reliance on a Roman audience of spectators, see Feldherr. On the relationship between setting, transformation, and "narratological expectation" see Stephen Hinds,"Landscape with Figures: Aesthetics of Place in the *Metamorphoses* and its Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 122–149, 132. The translation is my own.

[21] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 62

This is then followed by a woman's scream that bridges this scene and the next. The scream is not related to the opening sequence, but it, like the singing, suggests the screams of the nymphs as they tried to cover the goddess from the gaze of the mortal man. The result of the Fontanone scene and the story of Actaeon from Ovid's poem is to make the viewer—be it the public watching on the screen or envisioning the action in their mind's eye—complicit in the transgressive act that just took place. In both cases, the audience becomes a witness to the interconnected acts of taking pleasure in looking at beauty and being punished for that very form of voyeurism.[22] As with most of the film and Jep's story in particular, the opening sequence is a seemingly small moment that Sorrentino reframes in *La grande bellezza* as a spectacle.[23]

While the Japanese tourist's death is literal, an existential death precipitates Actaeon's physical demise in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Actaeon is first transformed into a stag. As such, he is unable to identify himself with words to his dogs and even to recognize himself when confronted by his reflection. Ovid underscores the psychological devastation that accompanies this moment in the epic: "and finally he sees, reflected, / His features in a quiet pool. 'Alas!' / He tries to say, but has no words. He groans, / The only speech he has, and the tears run down / Cheeks that are not his own."[24] This death of the self or the inability to self-identify occurs to Jep in another short, outwardly inconsequential scene in *La grande bellezza* at a location not far from the Parco del Gianicolo.

In a dream-like transition from one of Jep's memories of meeting his first love Elisa off the Amalfi Coast as a youth, the camera quickly cuts from a medium close-up on the young Elisa's face, to a medium close-up on a different woman's face. This unknown woman enters the scene to ask if her interlocutor has seen her (equally unknown) daughter. The viewer has only just identified Elisa through the context clues provided earlier in the film, thus making the appearance of this second woman and her query even more confusing. The woman's unexpected arrival is heightened by the way in which she comes into frame directly in front of Bramante's Tempietto, occupying almost the entire screen. This choice of location doubly plays into some of the themes that the film develops: absence, death, and the power of the gaze. Commissioned by Spanish royalty at the start of the sixteenth century to accompany their renovations of the church of San Pietro in Montorio, Bramante's construction has no obvious purpose other than an aesthetic one. As Earl Rosenthal argues in his study of the Tempietto, which is within a stone's throw of the Fontanone, this structure serves as a memorial to Saint Peter (whose very presence in Rome has long been contested) and, as such, "it is more than likely that Bramante associated this form with funerary and memorial functions."[25] That Bramante also designed the Tempietto to dazzle the eye is clear from his original

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[22] Zahra Newby emphasizes the ambiguity of the role of the viewer in these violent spectacles, in that they were both "voyeur and potential victim" (351). Newby also notes that the taste for such bloody theatrics found in the staging of the myths within Ovid's text and the myths themselves was an integral part of the larger Roman culture. See Zahra Newby, "The Aesthetics of Violence: Myth and Danger in Roman Domestic Landscapes," *Classical Antiquity* 31, no. 2 (October 2012): 349–89.

[23] Paolo Sorrentino, "In Search of 'The Great Beauty': An Interview with Paolo Sorrentino," interview by Gary Crowdus, *Cinéaste* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 8–13. Sorrentino, in discussing the opening sequences of his films, *La grande bellezza* included, declares that he wants the spectator to "be hooked right away. I want for him or her to know that if they came to see my film, what they will get is a *spectacle*" (12).

[24] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 63.

[25] See Earl Rosenthal, "The Antecedents of Bramante's Tempietto," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 23, no. 2 (May 1964): 55–74. Rosenthal disagrees with previous descriptions of the Tempietto as a tabernacle or reliquary, as no other tabernacle among the antecedents uses elements of design created by Bramante, and the structure does not house any relics of St. Peter or other figures (68). Many thanks to the editors of this volume for their comments regarding the Tempietto and the absent presence of Peter. Though Peter as the first pope and head of the nascent

designs as well as the completed structure. The designs, as explicated by Rosenthal, relied on a "circular ambulatory of the courtyard" so that a person entering this space "would have looked to the compact, cylindrical mass of the Tempietto as a stable and serene center into which all these centripetal forces came to rest…he would have experienced what may be called 'intensified perspective.'"[26] While Bramante was unable to realize these designs fully, the completed Tempietto as it stands today nevertheless relies on tricks of perspective to make the structure seem larger than it actually is within the confines of the circular courtyard. Rosenthal contends that the only antecedent for such a structure is not a building designed for devotion, but for theatrics: the Teatro Marittimo in Hadrian's Villa.[27]

La grande bellezza plays with both these design elements of the Tempietto in the scene with the missing girl. When the woman enters the frame in a close-up, the camera flattens any sense of distance between her and the Tempietto in the background, essentially erasing the carefully wrought perspective for which the structure is known. Moreover, the camera assumes Jep's point of view—an association between protagonist and audience that heretofore has not occurred in the film (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013

Much like the story of Actaeon and many of the other myths of transformation that fill Ovid's epic, this episode in *La grande bellezza* is once again predicated on the gaze. The unnamed woman asks Jep, "Ha visto mia figlia?" (Have you seen my daughter?).[28] Jep's voice emanates from behind the camera, still suggesting the fusion between character and viewer. He sounds lost and confused, which only adds to the audience's sense of disorientation. The woman then moves out frame calling for her daughter as the camera moves forward on a dolly tracking shot into the Tempietto, presumably mirroring Jep's movement forward. As the camera continues moving towards the structure, Jep enters the Tempietto from the left without any cut to the tracking shot that had led

Church is intrinsically linked with Rome and believed to have been crucified there during the reign of Nero, there remains controversy surrounding this tradition due to the dearth of clear evidence. See D. W. O'Connor, *Peter in Rome: the Literary, Liturgical, and Archeological Evidence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

[26] Ibid., 69–70.

[27] Ibid., 70–71.

[28] All translations of the film's dialogue are my own.

us into Bramante's memorial.[29] The result is a jarring and unexpected separation between the viewer and the protagonist.

The viewer's sense of disorientation or loss of identity anticipates the experience that Jep undergoes moments later as he encounters the disembodied voice of the missing child (Francesca) from beneath the cella of the Tempietto. While the mother continues to circle around the Tempietto, Jep enters the monument, looking around. It remains unclear why he is there and what has precipitated this entire encounter. Adding to the confusion, he hears a voice coming from beneath him, immediately interrogating him on who he is:

Francesca: Chi sei tu?	(Who are you?)
Jep: Chi sono? Io sono –	(Who am I? I'm–)
Francesca: No, tu non sei nessuno.	(No, you are no one)
Jep: Nessuno? Ma io…	(No one? But I …)

Kilbourn reads this exchange as the one point in the film in which a character reveals the truth about Jep to himself, that he has become no one. This, however, is not a negation of self, but rather a form of "epistemological blindness…this is Jep's dawning awareness of his own lack of self-knowledge."[30] In this regard, Jep's transformation carries with it the same tension that Leonard Barkan identifies in the myth of Actaeon, namely the tension between presupposed identity and actual form.[31] Actaeon, when faced with the truth of his new form as a stag, can still express his sense of loss in the very human act of crying, though he no longer has the power of speech. Jep, too, is at a loss for words when confronted by Francesca's statement that he is no one. Jep is taken aback, repeats her word ("nessuno"), and then fails to declare any aspect of his own identity, something of which he was fully capable when first introduced: "Ero destinato a diventare uno scrittore. Ero destinato a diventare Jep Gambardella" (I was destined to become a writer. I was destined to become Jep Gambardella).[32]

The players involved in this episode, however, invoke another Ovidian reference point: the story of Ceres and Proserpina. Certain particulars of this scene recall the myth as recounted by Minerva in book V of the *Metamorphoses*. Beyond the obvious parallel of the mother searching for her lost daughter, there is the discovery that the daughter, Francesca, is in the space below the main cella of the Tempietto, not unlike Proserpina's removal to the world below. Central to Ovid's account of this myth is the involvement of witnesses whose impactful testimony shapes the story. First there is the nymph Arethusa who tells Ceres of seeing Proserpina in the Underworld, again stressing what she saw and the act of looking: "visa tua est oculis illic Proserpina nostris" (I saw / Proserpina, with these very eyes I saw her).[33] Proserpina herself has a moment of vengeance

[29] Kilbourn, 97.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Leonard Barkan, "Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis," *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 317–59. Actaeon's identity is, according to Barkan, multiplied and shattered both first by the vision of Diana, who herself is another hunter with whom he identifies, and then by his transfiguration from hunter into prey (322).
[32] The emphasis here on destiny and the fates determining Jep's course in life to the extent of naming him is also a point in common with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the story of Actaeon—Ovid's narrator recounts the young hunter entering Diana's grove by chance, "as fate seemed bound to have it" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 62).
[33] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, V.505; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 122. Humphries's translation not only repeats the act of seeing on the part of Arethusa, but also makes it active voice. In the Latin, the phrase is passive: "your Proserpina was seen there with our own eyes." The use of *nostris*, however, suggests the same sort of

against the spectator whose act of looking thwarts her from returning to earth and her mother. Ascalaphus was the one witness to Proserpina eating pomegranate seeds, thereby violating the Fates' one rule not to eat any food in the world below. Sight, once again, becomes the transgressive act, for Ascalaphus "vidit…vidit et indicio reditum crudelis ademit" (and no one / Saw this but Ascalaphus…He saw, he tattled, / So she could not return). Ascalaphus's punishment is to become the screech owl. In Ovid's interpretation, this bird is not known for any sound, but rather for "big round eyes…and a dull way of moving, so he barely / Shudders his feathers, sluggish."[34] As such, the transformed Ascalaphus is not dissimilar from Jep after his encounter with Francesca, as he too is struck dumb and rendered slow in his ability to respond to her accusation of being "no one."

More so than transformations, the distinct emphasis on the act of looking and its psychological repercussions is what the various Ovidian tales and the scenes from *La grande bellezza* have in common. Jep's primary concern as a journalist is to write on art, typically performance or installation art. Two such events bookend the film and reflect upon one another, both with either visual or thematic precursors in Ovid. The first is the performance by the artist Talia Concept. This is another episode introduced after a dreamlike sequence during which Jep watches small children running with their nun caretaker in the garden next door. This scene is marked by a sense of innocence conveyed by the smiling children, the nun's white garb, as well as the background music of "My Heart is the Highlands."[35] Much like the memory of Elisa shifting abruptly to the mother at the Tempietto, there is another unexpected transition from this scene to the next, as the camera cuts from the medium close-up on Jep, who has been watching the children from his balcony, to children dressed as angels wrapping a woman's head in white, gauzy fabric. It is initially unclear if this is an extension of the previous scene or something different. The subsequent frame showing the naked woman from behind, revealing an audience, followed by the wide shot of the audience sitting near the aqueducts inform the viewer that this is no longer a private spectacle for Jep but rather a public exhibition that he is attending. Still, some elements of the previous scene's innocent or virginal signifiers carry over: the white fabric, the non-diegetic music, and the angels. As the woman, later identified as the artist Talia Concept, stands to begin her performance, she visually recalls Atalanta, the swift runner who used her speed to avoid being forced into marriage.

Notwithstanding the modern touch of the hammer and sickle shaved into her pubic area, Talia Concept initially appears like a representation of both Ovid's descriptions of the virgin runner as well as Guido Reni's baroque painting of the same subject (fig. 3 and fig. 4). As Venus recounts to her mortal lover Adonis in book X of the *Metamorphoses*, Atalanta's beauty and her naked body as she ran are so powerful as to change Hippomenes from scoffing observer to avid suitor: "ut faciem et posito corpus velamina *vidit*…obstipuit tollensque manus 'ignoscite,' dixit / 'quos modo culpavi. Nondum mihi praemia nota / quae peteretis, errant'" (But when he *saw* her, / Her face, her body naked…he was struck with wonder / Threw up his hands and cried: "I beg your pardon, / Young men, I judged you wrongly; I did not know /The value of the prize!").[36] As in previous erotic descriptions of the female form, Ovid does not limit his narration to only discuss the effect on the internal audience. Rather, he, in the voice of Venus, provides the external audience (the reader) with a sensual depiction of Atalanta's body as she runs, making the reader as much an

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emphasis that Humphries uses with "these very eyes." In either instance, Arethusa's act of looking is instrumental in moving the story forward.

[34] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, V.539-542; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 124.

[35] Kilbourn, 98–99.

[36] Though in this particular portion of the text it is Venus speaking, the entire narrative sequence is actually recounted by Orpheus. Ovid has essentially created a written text that presupposes multiple voices and multiple audiences simultaneously. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, X.578-582 (my emphasis); trans. Humphries, 253.

active appreciator of feminine beauty as Jep, the spectators, and the external public of *La grande bellezza* looking upon Talia Concept's nude form. The description of Atlanta's race in *Metamorphoses* X could equally describe Talia Concept's performance in *La grande bellezza*:

> And running made her lovelier: the breeze
> Bore back the streaming pinions of her sandals,
> The colored ribbons fluttered at her knees,
> And a light flush came over her girlish body
> The way a crimson awning, over marble,
> Tints it in pastel color.[37]

Fig. 3. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013.

Fig. 4. Guido Reni, *Atalanta and Hippomenes*. Oil on canvas, 206 x 279 cm, 1618–19. Madrid: Museo del Prado. ©Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

[37] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 253.

The failure of Talia Concept's performance (and entire persona) for Jep stems from her rejection of any guiding principles for her art. Talia herself declares that she does not read, relying primarily on "vibrazioni, spesso di natura extra-sensoriali" (vibrations, usually of an extra-sensory nature) in her performances—though, when pressed by Jep, she is unable to define these "vibrations." Moreover, the entirety of her show is based on a trick: Talia runs head-first into the wall, seemingly bludgeoning herself. Instead, her head is protected by foam rubber—the "trucco" (trick) as Jep's editor calls it. The stakes of Ovid's story of Atalanta are much higher by contrast: the suitors who lost the race were sent to their deaths. After picking herself up, Talia stumbles back to the starting point and shouts, "Io non vi amo!" (I don't love you!), in contrast to the direct result of the race between Atalanta and Hippomenes, namely mutual love. While the audience is visibly moved by Talia's performance, Jep later dismisses it as "amateur theatrics."

The second art show that Jep witnesses by himself towards the film's conclusion, however, equally rewrites its Ovidian precursor, yet it elicits an emotional response from the typically aloof critic.[38] Again, with little connection to the previous party scene at Jep's terrace that found everyone melancholic and self-destructive, the action cuts to the semi-circular loggia of Villa Giulia in full daylight. Moving towards the structure in a mobile tracking shot, the camera first seems to take on the point of view of Jep as in the Tempietto scene, before revealing the protagonist speaking with the photographer in the foreground. The photographer explains his project to Jep, indicating that it was a job he inherited from his father: "Il vero ideatore era mio padre. Cominciò a fotografarmi dalla nascita tutti i giorni. Una foto ogni giorno. Mai dimenticato, neanche una volta. Da 14 anni in poi, ho proseguito io. Mi sono fotografato tutti i giorni" (The real creator was my father. He started photographing me every day from birth. One photo every day. He never forgot, not even once. From age 14 on, I continued it. I took a picture of myself every day). The story of a son wishing to carry out his father's work, to literally take the reins, appears in the Ovidian tale of Phoebus and Phaethon (Book II). In hopes of proving his parentage, Phaethon asks his father to drive the Sun-god's chariot. Phoebus relents, knowing that his son is not strong enough to manage the horses and will likely fail. Phaethon inevitably loses control of the chariot, accidentally sets the world on fire, and, through the intervention of Jupiter's lightning bolt, falls to the earth, dead.

What truly links the two texts together are the themes of memorializing mortal life and rendering permanent something that is ephemeral. The father's photography project, like Phoebus-Apollo's helming of the chariot, is a daily endeavor that must never be missed. Similarly, the myth of Phaethon and the photographer's project are concerned with the relationship between fathers and sons. In both the *Metamorphoses* and *La grande bellezza*, the sons seek to emulate their fathers. The main difference between the two texts is the presence or absence of those paternal figures. R.C. Bass reads the story of Phaethon as centered on Phoebus's relationship to his mortal son. There is first the sun-god's desire to reassure Phaethon of his divine paternity by making the unbreakable promise to fulfill any wish. He then spends the bulk of the narrative trying to dissuade Phaethon from going through with what will inevitably be a fool's errand, before the tragedy occurs and Phoebus must mourn his son's untimely death.[39] In *La grande bellezza*, by contrast, only the son's voice and presence are noted. The father's whole photography project is centered on

[38] For a discussion of the inherent misogyny in Jep's reaction to the two artists, Talia Concept and the notably less-interesting male photographer, see Kilbourn, 89.

[39] R. C. Bass, "Some Aspects of the Structure of the Phaethon Episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *The Classical Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1977): 402–8.

capturing images of his child. He, as an artist and a person, has been erased or at least reduced to an idea ("il vero ideatore").

Even the mortal Phaethon cannot be erased by death. Ovid compares the doomed son's fall to a star that "de caelo…sereno…potuit cecidisse videri" (seemed to fall from a clear sky). A shooting star, like the lightning bolt sent by Jupiter that ended Phaethon's mad chariot ride, is the epitome of a transitory event. Yet Ovid contrasts this fleeting moment with the subsequent actions of the Naiads, who bury Phaethon and use that same bolt to carve his permanent epitaph: "HIC SITUS EST PHAETHON, CURRUS AURIGA PATERNI: / QUEM SI NON TENUIT, MAGNIS TAMEN EXCIDIT AUSIS" (Here Phaethon lies, / Who drove his father's chariot: if he did not / Hold it, at least he fell in splendid daring).[40] What matters most in commemorating the son's life is his relationship to Phoebus and the confirmation that he was continuing, albeit poorly, his father's work. The artist in *La grande bellezza*, as he has stated from the start of the scene, engages in the same activity, that is, memorializing his father and commemorating his life's work. The way the artist's project transforms the ephemeral into a more lasting form is twofold. Both he and his father used the medium of photography to capture and make indelible a single moment in time from every day of his life. Moreover, the artist then anthologized these moments by placing them in sequence atop another monument—the loggia of Villa Giulia (fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013

While Kilbourn is correct that Jep is moved by the "exploration of masculine identity on a monumental scale" presented by the photographer's self-portraits, what differentiates this exhibit from other shows within the film is the underlying tone.[41] Talia Concept claims to act based on vibrations; the artist of this scene, conversely, presents a piece with appropriately elegiac tones. In fact, the undercurrent of sadness and nostalgia that permeates this art exhibit is no different from Jep's sense of melancholy throughout the film. Whether reflecting on his love for the recently deceased Elisa, looking forlornly at the children as they play with the nun, or being moved to tears by the death of his friend's son, Jep's entire story is precipitated and marked by death and sorrow. Such, too, is the overarching tone of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[42]

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[40] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, II.327-328; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 38.
[41] Kilbourn, 89.
[42] On the role of melancholy, nostalgia, and elegy in *La grande bellezza*, see Sorrentino's interview with Crowdus as well as Kilbourn.

The use of Villa Giulia is perfectly suited to the story of the passage of time that the artist, Jep, and even *La grande bellezza* wish to tell. John Coolidge's lengthy study of Pope Julius III's sixteenth-century palace, designed (and then redesigned) by Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo, Jacopo Vignola, Bartolomeo Ammannati, and Baldassarre Peruzzi (among others), tells the story of multiple plans being partially brought to fruition, ultimately creating one cohesive structure. The result, declares Coolidge, is that the villa is "an elaborate palimpsest, a series of superimposed projects, each one partially carried out and then in part replaced by later schemes."[43] The photographer has added yet another layer to that palimpsest, bringing the structure into the twenty-first century and also making it part of his own family's history. Moreover, the setting of Villa Giulia further reinforces the link between this installation and the other examples of contemporary art portrayed in the film, particularly that of Talia Concept. Kilbourn argues that, though a series of static images, the artist's presentation of his changing face in a narrative sequence creates the illusion of a spectacle.[44] Using one of the loggie of Villa Giulia, a structure which, according to Coolidge, was designed and built in part by Ammannati with the intention of staging performances, further emphasizes the theatricality of the art.[45] All the spaces examined so far – the Fontanone, the Tempietto, the aqueducts, and the Villa Giulia – are in fact either places where a performance is staged (the singers at the Fontanone, Talia Concept at the aqueducts) or places that were created using theatrical models (such as the Teatro Marittimo in Hadrian's Villa for the Tempietto) or for a theatrical purpose (the Villa Giulia).[46]

When trickery or marvels and their emotional resonance are added to this discussion of looking and spectacle, we move away from Ovid and to a later author influenced by the ancient Roman poet: Giorgio Vasari.[47] Within the monumental *Vite*, Vasari often devotes lengthy descriptions to artistic marvels that delight the eyes. In terms of word choice, Vasari's use of the word *maraviglia* does not often distinguish between an illusory trick and what could be considered the sublime. Marvels are expressions of human *ingegno* that move us closer to the divine.[48] Within

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[43] John Coolidge, "The Villa Giulia: A Study of Central Italian Architecture in the Mid-Sixteenth Century," *The Art Bulletin* 25, no. 3 (Sep. 1943): 177–225. This specific declaration appears on page 179.

[44] Kilbourn, 89.

[45] Though Coolidge confirms that there were no known theatrical performances staged at the Villa Giulia, this does not preclude that staging dramas was not the intention of the structure. When describing his plans for the main court in a letter, the architect Ammannati compares the pathway to a "'*proscenio*…the semicircular of the palace represents the tiers of the seats; while the other section which I am about to describe provides the stage set.'" Coolidge reminds us in his article that the patron who commissioned the Villa Giulia, Pope Julius III, was "an enthusiastic patron of the drama. At the very least Ammannati's letter and Balduino's inscription suggest that the Villa may have been intended for use as a theater." It was owing to Julius III's untimely death prior to the completion of the Villa that it was not able to realize its intended purpose (Coolidge, 215).

[46] For a discussion on the theatrical sources and purpose of Bramante's Tempietto, see Rosenthal, and Mark Wilson Jones, "The Tempietto and the Roots of Coincidence," *Architectural History* 33 (1990): 1–28.

[47] Vasari's indebtedness to Ovid is evident from the text of *Le Vite* itself, in particular his overt and implicit references to the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion in describing art for the reader. See Paul Barolsky, "As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 451–74. On Vasari's use of elegy and its connections to Ovid, see Anne B. Barriault, "Piero di Cosimo: The Egg-Eating Elegist," in *Reading Vasari*, ed. Anne B. Barriault, Andrew Ladis, Norman E. Land, and Jeryldene M. Wood (Athens, GA: Philip Wilson Publishers/Georgia Museum of Art, 2005), 191–201.

[48] Baroslky gives a simultaneously thorough and succinct primer on the term *maraviglia* in the sixteenth century and in Vasari's works specifically. This term "denotes wonder, astonishment, or surprise, conveying further the sheer delight or pleasure of such wonderment. It refers to religious experiences, as in visions and miracles; it pertains to the wonders of nature; and it characterizes the astonishment arising from the experience of things exotic, of things from faraway places…The marvelous is not less fundamental to aesthetic experience, and works of art were often referred to as *maraviglie*. The language of marvels is extensive and includes the *stupor* one experiences when beholding that

the narrative of the film, the word "trick" or *trucco* undergoes a Vasarian rehabilitation. While *trucco* is still pronounced with the same dismissive air that was used by Jep's editor, Dadina, in the discussion of Talia Concept's performance, this term evolves when applied to a genuine marvel, namely something otherworldly, beautiful, and not easily explained by logic—all elements lacking in Talia Concept's deception. This is, ultimately, the conclusion to which *La grande bellezza* comes in its discourse on the search for beauty: visual tricks are not too dissimilar from those ephemeral moments of beauty that nourish the soul. The movement towards this conclusion begins with Jep's encounter with Arturo, which is then confirmed by his viewing of the photographer's self-portrait exhibit, and finally by the interactions with Suor Maria, la Santa.

Outside a theater, Jep finds himself unexpectedly confronted by a giraffe. By this point Jep (like the viewer) has witnessed so many extraordinary things—Talia Concept, the child-prodigy artist, all the beauties of Rome—that it seems unlikely anything could surprise him, and yet, upon being confronted by the animal, Jep removes and lowers his hat, almost in an act of reverence (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013

The presence of the animal is quickly explained by the arrival of Arturo (Vernon Dobtcheff), the magician, who will include in his performance a "disappearing giraffe" trick:

> Jep: Tu sei capace di far sparire questa giraffa?
> Arturo: Ma certo che faccio scomparire la giraffa.
> Jep: E allora tu fa' sparire eppure a me!
> Arturo: Ma Jep! Secondo te, se io potessi davvero far scomparire qualcuno, io starei ancora qui alla mia età a fare queste baracconate? È solo un trucco!

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which is *strano, straordinario,* or *raro*…More specifically, what is marvelous or extraordinary in a work of art can be the result of astonishing manual skill or virtuosity, just as the marvelous can demonstrate the genius that informs the very conception of the work. Underlying these diverse usages of the word *maraviglia*—that often link artistic, religious and scientific experiences—is the sanction of God, who created the *maraviglie* of nature, who inspired artists, imitating God in the creation of their own marvels" (41–42). See Paul Barolsky, "Cellini, Vasari, and the Marvels of Malady," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 41–45.

> Jep: You're able to make this giraffe disappear?
> Arturo: But of course I can make the giraffe disappear.
> Jep: Then make me disappear too.
> Arturo: C'mon Jep! Do you think that if I could really make someone disappear that I would still be here at my age doing these circus acts? It's just a trick!

Arturo's words are as dismissive of his profession as Jep had previously been of Talia Concept—these are essentially more amateur dramatics. He repeats the line, "è solo un trucco," three times, both as a means of gently letting down Jep and also to indicate that true magic does not exist. Yet for the viewer, and even for Jep in this moment, the sight of an exotic animal and the act of making such an animal disappear are marvels. Arturo's "trucco" is indeed no different than Vasari's description of the sixteenth-century trompe-l'oeil techniques used by Baldassarre Peruzzi in staging Bibbiena's *Calandra* for Pope Leo X. Moreover, Vasari employs the word "maraviglioso" to describe the pleasurable delights that come from witnessing Peruzzi's cleverness at tricking the eye into believing a small space is in fact a large piazza:

> Baldassarre fece al tempo di Leone X due scene che furono maravigliose et apersono la via a coloro che ne hanno poi fatto a' tempi nostri. Né si può immaginare come egli in tanta strettezza di sito accomodasse tante strade, tanti palazzi e tante bizzarrie di tempii, di loggie e d'andare di cornici, così ben fatte che parevano non finte, ma verissime, e la piazza non una cosa dipinta e picciola, ma vera e grandissima.[49]
>
> Baldassarre made two such stage sets, which were marvelous, and opened the way to those who have since made them in our own day. Nor is it possible to imagine how he found room, in a space so limited, for so many streets, so many palaces, and such an extravagant number of temples, loggie, and various kinds of cornices, all so well executed that it seemed they were not counterfeited, but absolutely real, and that the piazza was not a little thing, and merely painted, but real and very large.[50]

The genius of Peruzzi, his ability as an artist and architect, is here being highlighted by Vasari, even though Vasari harbors no illusions that Peruzzi defied optics in creating these settings. The source of the *maraviglia* for Vasari is that Peruzzi defies the imagination ("né si può immaginare") and therein lies the delight. In the context of *La grande bellezza*, what separates the trick of Arturo's disappearing giraffe and the performance of Talia Concept is that in the former case neither Jep nor the viewer are able to imagine how the illusion is realized. The giraffe is simply and surprisingly there (and, presumably, will later disappear).

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[49] See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architetti,* ed. Luciano Bellosi and Aldo Rossi (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 701-702.

[50] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects,* vol. 5, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere (London: McMillan & Co., 1912–1914), 69. This passage is from the 1568 Giuntina edition. See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (Rome: Grandi Tascabili Economici Newton, 1997), 1390–91. It is worth noting that in the 1550 Torrentino edition, Vasari does not use *maraviglioso* to describe Peruzzi's set designs. Instead, he uses the forceful word "ingannare" (to deceive): "che con case parte vere e finte ingannavano gli occhi di tutti, dimostrandosi essere, non una piazza dipinta, ma vera" (that with a mix of real and pretend houses they deceived the eyes of all, making them seem to be, not a painted piazza, but a real one). The translation is my own.

Vasari deploys a variant on the same word, *maraviglioso*, to describe works created by Raphael and Michelangelo that seem imbued with some element of the divine.[51] On Raphael's panel of the Deposition for Atalanta Baglioni, for instance, Vasari declares that the way in which Raphael has captured the witnesses to the dead Christ is done "con una maniera da far comuovere qual è più duro animo a pietà. E di vero chi considera la diligenza, l'amore, l'arte e la grazia di quest'opera, ha gran ragione di maravigliarsi perché ella fa stupire chiunque la mira per l'aria delle figure, per la bellezza de' panni et insomma per una estrema bontà ch'ell'ha in tutte le parti" (in such a manner as to move the hardest heart to pity. And in truth, whoever considers the diligence, love, art, and grace shown by this picture, has great reason to marvel, for it amazes all who behold it, what with the air of the figures, the beauty of the draperies, and, in short, the supreme excellence that it reveals in every part).[52] Vasari's language in this passage suggests both a marvel of artistic creation and the presence of the sublime. The use of the phrase "comuovere a…pietà" should be taken, as argues Paul Barolsky, in the context of religious fervor rather than mere hyperbole.[53] Hence Vasari's dual emphasis on the human talents, that is art and diligence, as well as divine inspiration, namely love and grace ("la diligenza, l'amore, l'arte e la grazia") shown by Raphael in representing Christ. In essence, the marvel of this painting lies in the liminal space between the human and the divine: on the one hand, Raphael's panel astonishes the viewer not only because of its beauty but also thanks to the "estrema bontà," a term often used to describe the benevolence of God, that it displays.

It is this same liminal space that la Santa, Suor Maria (Giusy Merli), inhabits in *La grande bellezza*. At first glance, this character, with her comically old-age makeup and missing teeth, seems to be another ironic wink at the decay of Rome's eternal institutions in a bankrupt modern society.[54] While she remains silent for most of her visit, she finally speaks during and after the dinner held at Jep's house in her honor. After the guests have left, Jep walks out onto his terrace and is once more confronted and confounded by an unexpected sight: flamingos (fig. 7).

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[51] When describing Michelangelo's works, the term "maraviglia" often only carries divine or sublime connotations, as in the case of Vasari's description of *La Pietà*: "Quivi è dolcissima aria di testa, et una concordanza nelle appiccature e congiunture delle braccia et in quelle del corpo e delle gambe, i polsi e le vene lavorate, che invero si maraviglia lo stupore che mano d'artefice abbia potuto sì divinamente e propriamente fare in pochissimo tempo cosa sì mirabile; che certo è un miracolo che un sasso da principio senza forma nessuna, si sia mai ridotto a quella perfezzione che la natura a fatica suol formar nella carne" (Here is perfect sweetness in the expression of the head, harmony in the joints and attachments of the arms, legs, and trunk, and the pulses and veins so wrought, that in truth Wonder herself must marvel that the hand of a craftsman should ever have been able to execute so divinely and so perfectly, in so short a time, a work so admirable; and it is certainly a miracle that a stone without any shape at the beginning should ever have been reduced to such perfection as Nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh). Vasari here does not limit himself to "maraviglia" to describe Michelangelo's supernatural art, but uses further religious terms such as "divinamente," "mirabile," and "miracolo." See Vasari, *Vite*, 2593; Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects,* vol. 9, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere (London: McMillan & Co., 1912–1914), 231.

[52] Vasari, *Vite*, 1244-1245; Vasari, *Lives*, vol. 4, 216.

[53] Paul Barolsky, "The Ultimate Paradox of Vasari's *Lives*," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 10–11.

[54] The exchange between Jep and Dadina discussing the Santa's arrival certainly primes the audience for this outcome. Not only has Jep just discovered that his upstairs neighbor was one of the most wanted criminals in Italy, but he also expresses multiple times how much he is not cut out for life in Rome anymore. In the following scene featuring her first visit with religious leaders, Suor Maria sits in a large wicker chair, kicking her feet like a child, while members of every religious sect in the country, from nuns to rabbis to Buddhist monks, all in ceremonial garb, gather around her.

Fig. 7. Paolo Sorrentino, *La grande bellezza*. Italy/France: Indigo Film and Medusa Film, 2013

The only explanation provided by la Santa's assistant is that the flamingos are migrating but stopped to rest. Unlike Arturo's giraffe, this is no mere trick but a vision of the ineffable and mysterious "grande bellezza" that brings about transformations. The exotic flock of birds chose to land on Jep's balcony en masse due to the presence of la Santa, as if responding to some divine calling. Adding to the astonishing sight, la Santa herself is suddenly moved to speak, saying first that she knows "i nomi di battesimo di tutti questi uccelli" (the Christian names of all these birds). La Santa's connection to the animals again underscores her beyond-human nature, with allusions to Orpheus, and also to Vasari's biography of Raphael. One of the marvels of Raphael's person, according to Vasari, was that he was "sì piena di gentilezza e sì colma di carità, che egli si vedeva che fino agli animali l'onoravano, non che gli uomini" ("so full of gentleness and so overflowing with loving-kindness, that it was seen that the very animals, not to speak of men, honoured him").[55] The vision has meaning for Jep, too, as he finally finds his voice during this exchange, whereas in previous moments—with the child Francesca at the Tempietto, or standing before the giraffe—he was left without words.

Jep responds honestly to la Santa's question as to why he never wrote another novel, and, by extension, identifies the source of his melancholy: "cercavo la grande bellezza. Non l'ho trovata" (I was searching for great beauty. I didn't find it). Of all the wondrous images and strange encounters that Jep has experienced in this film, this is the first that sees him transformed. Following la Santa's visit, Jep finally leaves Rome, returning to the Amalfi Coast. This sequence of Jep's return, not just to the coast but to his past, is crosscut with la Santa's equally arduous climb up the Scala Sancta across from the church of Saint John Lateran in Rome, thereby conflating Jep's arrival at Amalfi with the nun's arrival at deliverance.[56] Though Jep sees only the ghost or memory of Elisa, *La grande bellezza* frames the conclusion of his story not as death but as a creative rebirth. The rediscovery of those "sparuti incostanti sprazzi di bellezza" (the brief fickle flashes of beauty) hidden under all the "bla bla bla bla bla" of daily chatter and noise, as Jep calls it in a voice over, is the rediscovery of life. New life for Jep means new creative endeavors, as he triumphantly announces, "dunque, che questo romanzo abbia inizio!" (let this novel now begin). This coalescing of creative energies following transformation and death at the conclusion of *La grande bellezza* again recalls the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid, too, concludes his epic with an encomium to his own poetic achievement: "Now I have done my work. It will endure…my name will be remembered /

[55] Vasari, *Vite*, 1287; Vasari, *Lives,* vol. 4, 248-249.
[56] Kilbourn, 103.

Wherever Roman power rules conquered lands, / I shall be read, and through the centuries…I shall be living, always." The final word of the Latin text is "vivam" underscoring that notwithstanding the ephemerality of human life, art makes humans immortal.[57]

La grande bellezza further stresses the connection between human immortality and artistic creation with the line that ends the film. Jep finishes his epiphany, through tears and a smile, repeating Arturo's statement: "è solo un trucco. Sì, è solo un trucco." Much like Jep, this line which for Arturo had been a repudiation of wonders as empty theatrics has been transformed. In Jep's final words, "è solo un trucco" becomes something sublime, a joyous reminder that these flashes of beauty are lifegiving miracles. Jep's story concludes off the Amalfi Coast; *La grande bellezza*, however, transports the viewer back to Rome for the closing credits with the camera appearing to float down the Tiber as it winds through the city. Indeed, these final images deliver on the opening sequence. This is once again Rome's story, which, is mostly the banal, the blah blah blah. The true joy and the true marvels are in those fleeting moments of beauty that belong to the second Rome. Finding them for Jep—and for us—is the trick.

[57] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Humphries, 392; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Magnus, XV.879.