

## ***La Grande Bellezza* and the Aesthetics of the Absurd Intertextuality, Identity and Space**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although the film *La Grande Bellezza* was released in 2013 and therefore does not belong to the modernist or existentialist era, it contains many elements that are characteristic of these 'isms' and their common denominator, the absurd. The protagonist, Jep Gambardella, has led a hedonistic life in the higher circles of Rome, but no longer seems to be able to identify with it. After the death of his first love, Elisa De Santis, a change takes place within him. In the film, numerous references are made to modernist works of art, including books and modernist concepts, but also to films with existentialist themes that highlight Jep's lack of connection with his surroundings and his search for identity. This article links Jep and *La Grande Bellezza* to the style and themes of the absurd, modernism and existentialism, paying special attention to the way space is represented in the film.

### **Keywords**

*La Grande Bellezza*, The Absurd, Modernism, Existentialism, Space

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## Introduction

The film *La Grande Bellezza* (2013), directed by Paolo Sorrentino, revolves around Jep Gambardella and his decadent way of life in the higher social circles of Rome. Jep writes and publishes a bestseller, *L'apparato umano*, in his twenties, and after its subsequent success he moves to Rome, where he is caught up in an extravagant but hollow lifestyle. Soon after his sixty-fifth birthday party, after coming home from a one-night stand, he finds a man, Alfredo Marti, outside his front door. He tells him that Jep's first love, Elisa De Santis, has passed away. Alfredo (her widower) and Jep reminisce about her, and Alfredo tells Jep that he read Elisa's diary in which she wrote that the only person she ever really loved was Jep. Jep had written his bestseller about his love for her. The loss and sadness he feels following her passing make him realise the existential emptiness he had been feeling all this time, causing a gradual change within him.

This article intends to extend the critical conversation on Sorrentino's masterpiece by focusing on its dialogue with modernism, existentialism and a characteristic they share, namely the absurd. As discussed by Mimmo Cangiano in his article 'Against Postmodernism: Paolo Sorrentino and the Search for Authenticity', *La Grande Bellezza* has often been associated with postmodernism. In postmodernism, it is often argued that there is typically skepticism towards the idea of originality and the idea that art can reveal a deeper truth about reality. In addition, according to postmodernism, everything in art has been done before, hence why elements such as pastiche can be found in postmodern film, literature and other art forms. Cangiano states that 'undoubtedly, the phenomenic world in which his characters [Sorrentino's] act is dominated by a postmodernist way of thinking and living, by transient sensations, desires and stimuli'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the film actually seems closer to modernism instead, for both thematic and stylistic reasons, as the characters in Sorrentino's films 'search for an identity (a classical modernist topos)<sup>2</sup> and have 'a desire for a strong point of reference' and 'the aspiration to define herself/himself',<sup>3</sup> which reveals 'Sorrentino's cinema as exemplary modernist art'.<sup>4</sup> Cangiano claims that Sorrentino uses 'postmodernist tools to criticize postmodernist ideology'.<sup>5</sup> A good example of this is when he writes that

the protagonist takes many wrong turns while searching for his identity, exemplified by his attempt to gain a new identity (one meant to distance him from old age, and therefore death itself) through Botox. The studio of Alfio Bracco (Massimo Popolizio) is actually the physical setting for a collective postmodernist ritual to defend the continuation of *Frivolit t*. In this nihilist temple nostalgia, or memory, itself is degraded [...] to a commodified element: 'Want to go back 30 years, to when it rained at the end of August? Done. That's 700 euros'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, here Cangiano describes a scene which he argues contains postmodernist elements, but we also see Jep's search for an identity and the superficiality of the event, which is more related to modernism, as Cangiano also states.

The influence of modernism on *La Grande Bellezza* has not been analysed extensively so far, with the exception of Cangiano's article, and, for example, Russell Kilbourn's *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style*. In it, he writes about the topic of memory and the different ways in which it is represented in *La*

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<sup>1</sup> M. Cangiano, 'Against Postmodernism: Paolo Sorrentino and the Search for Authenticity', in: A. Mariani (ed.), *Paolo Sorrentino's Cinema and Television*, Chicago, Intellect, 2021, pp. 24-36: pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, pp. 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 32.

*Grande Bellezza*, especially through flashbacks to Jep's experiences, and nostalgia 'particularly in the mise-en-scène, the dialogue, and the soundtrack'.<sup>7</sup> There are, for example, references made to older Italian films that are connected to 'Jep's personal trajectory'.<sup>8</sup> Kilbourn writes that

Kovács's identification of the post-war modernist art cinema as a typically hybrid genre is based in the presence in such films of what he calls forms, but which in this contemporary transnational context I would call tropes, motifs, or thematic tendencies, two of which are combined together in the production of meaning in *The Great Beauty*: the first is nothingness [...] the other wandering.<sup>9</sup>

In his article, he links these two concepts to the modernist trope of the *flâneur*,<sup>10</sup> as well as writers and book titles of the modernist period, such as Flaubert and Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928). According to Kilbourn, modernist art is used in *La Grande Bellezza* to convey the topic of memory, which he discusses in his book. Moreover, Lydia Tuan writes that the search for identity - a modernist and existentialist theme - permeates Sorrentino's work and that 'his films approach their conclusion when the protagonists uncover a revelation about themselves or reveal a secret from the past'.<sup>11</sup>

This article discusses some under-researched aspects of Sorrentino's dialogue with modernism in *La Grande Bellezza*, as well its relationship with a philosophical current that is closely connected to the modernist era - namely existentialism.<sup>12</sup> It will touch upon other 'isms' connected to modernism, including Dadaism and Nihilism as well. The article will further address these movements and this philosophical current below, but an important characteristic they share is the absurd. The absurd is also an important theme in *La Grande Bellezza*, present throughout the film through its references to works of art and its use of space. The absurd could be defined, according to Camus' philosophy, as the conflict between man's search for significance and purpose in life and the universe's lack of it.<sup>13</sup> The 'remaining silent' of the universe,<sup>14</sup> which ultimately renders existence meaningless, creates a sense of anguish but also freedom. If existence itself is absurd, then Nothingness lies at its very core.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on the absurd in works of art serves as a reflection of the developments that took place in society at the time:

While faith in progress and the idea of individual success flourished, anxiety or, existentially considered, tragedy accompanied them. Its outgrowth was solitude. It is this solitude that

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kilbourn, *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style*, New York Chichester, Columbia University Press, 2020, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> This concept was introduced by Baudelaire (a Symbolist), but later used by a number of Modernists and is, for this reason, also associated with Modernism.

<sup>11</sup> L. Tuan, 'Paolo Sorrentino's Cinematic Excess', in: Mariani (ed.), *Paolo Sorrentino's Cinema and Television*, cit., pp. 57-78: p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> There is a body of scholarship that discussed existentialism in contemporary cinema. See, for instance, J.-P. Boulé & E. McCaffrey (eds.), *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*, Oxford/New York, Berghahn Books, 2011. The book analyses existentialist elements in films, such as *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Lost in Translation* (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Camus, who is considered an absurdist, refused to call himself a philosopher or an existentialist, even though his ideas had similarities with existentialism.

<sup>14</sup> R. Aronson, 'Albert Camus', in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/#ParCamAbs>> (15 September 2025)

<sup>15</sup> 'The dissolution of the rationalistically conceived vision of the universe was transcended by the instinctive spirit of man, evident in painting from Klee to Picasso, Matisse to Mondrian, Cubism to Futurism, and Surrealism to Abstractionism, but also in music, literature and theatre' (A.H. Wegener, 'The Absurd in Modern Literature', in: *Books Abroad*, 41, 2 (1967), pp. 150-156: pp. 150-151).

characterizes the fundamental condition of man. The turning towards *Innerlichkeit*, or more precisely, toward the creative sources of life in the depths of man's experience, occurred throughout Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, modernism (which in its broader sense also includes avant-garde movements such as Dada, Cubism or Futurism), started at the end of the nineteenth century, during a time in which the world was rapidly changing. Due to the consequent societal change, people experienced feelings of isolation and alienation, amongst other things. It was 'a break with the past and the concurrent search for new forms of expression'.<sup>17</sup> Features of the absurd in modernist art and literature are, for example, the 'theatre-in-the-round', *chiaroscuro*, no clear references to space and time, short plots or theatrical situations that seem not related to each other, actions that lack an explanation, the theme of death, inappropriate situations, persiflage and fantasy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, existentialist ideas,<sup>19</sup> like the absurd and modernism, were a reaction to the changing society at the time, which was exacerbated by the atrocities of the war. Views that can be ascribed to existentialism, and that resonate with the concept of the absurd, include the idea that it was believed that there is no higher power, such as a God, and man himself is responsible for creating his purpose in life. Sartre, who was instrumental in developing existentialism,<sup>20</sup> describes it as:

If God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man [...]. What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in choosing exactly who one wants to be and finding meaning in life, man himself plays a central role and this is a development that only stops when man dies. H.W. Clark writes that

it is through suffering that one comes to an understanding of the inner self; a person cannot approach seeing himself as he really is [...] without suffering. And suffering can be almost unbearable when one confronts the existentialist dilemma, the absurdity of life. Being trapped in existence, seeing oneself as one indeed is, but finding no purpose of one's being - herein lies the anguish of the Existentialist man.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> K. Kuiper, 'Modernism', *Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/art/Modernism-art>> (11 January 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Wegener, 'The Absurd in Modern Literature', cit., p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> Existentialism started to gain popularity in the nineteenth century, but became more common around 1930.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre calls the existentialism he is concerned with 'Atheistic Existentialism' (J.P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Paris, Yale University Press, 2007, p. 20).

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> H.W. Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', in: *Italica*, 43, 3 (1966), p. 281.

Because there is no God or focal point to build one's life around,<sup>22</sup> man tries to find it himself, but this is a complex search.<sup>23</sup> Clark's description of the 'absurdity of life' can be linked to modernist's sense of alienation and meaninglessness and Camus' views about human's search for meaning in a meaningless universe: in other words, the absurd, as described by Camus, is a feature existentialism and modernism have in common. The absurd is a prominent theme in early twentieth-century literature, philosophy and visual culture. As such, it also plays a key role in Sorrentino's dialogue with the age of modernism and existentialism. Moreover, these 'isms' can be linked to the way space is depicted in *La Grande Bellezza*, as exemplified by the figure of the *flâneur* as a modernist trope.

In short, Sorrentino's dialogue with modernism and existentialism - and more specifically the absurd - in *La Grande Bellezza* is still largely unexplored. This paper explores this dialogue by discussing a series of previously undetected intertextual similarities. The first section will delve deeper into the absurd as a thematic *fil rouge* underlying Sorrentino's references to modernism and existentialism, while the second part will discuss the way space is represented in the film.

### References to Modernist Works of Art and Their Absurd Nature

*La Grande Bellezza* contains many references to modernist works of art that contain absurdist characteristics. As early as the opening scene clear links are made with the short Dadaist film *Entr'acte* (1924) by René Clair. Sorrentino may have been interested in using this film, not only because the Dada movement came into existence during the period of modernism, but also because these elements from *Entr'acte* might have the same effect on the spectator watching *La Grande Bellezza* as it had on the spectator watching the short film: creating disorientation by showing confusing and absurd elements. For instance, in both films the spectator looks down the barrel of a canon which is subsequently fired in one of the first scenes. Another reference in *La Grande Bellezza* that links the film to *Entr'acte* is when Jep meets Arturo, an old friend and magician practising a trick to make a giraffe disappear, whom Jep asks to make him disappear too, reflecting his sense of feeling trapped in his role and the life he leads.<sup>25</sup> In one of the last scenes of *Entr'acte*, we also find a magician who makes people disappear, for no particular reason, using a magic trick, creating a disorienting effect on the viewer and mirroring Jep's existential confusion. With these connections made by the creator of *La Grande Bellezza*, it suggests he wants to associate Dada with *La Grande Bellezza*, in which some characteristics of Dada, such as the irrational and chaos, can be found.

Another absurdist reference at the beginning of the film is a quote from Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, presented in the film as *Viaggio al termine della notte* (1932):

Viaggiare è proprio utile, fa lavorare l'immaginazione. Tutto il resto è delusione e fatica.  
Il viaggio che ci è dato è interamente immaginario. Ecco la sua forza.  
Va dalla vita alla morte. Uomini, bestie, città e cose, è tutto inventato. È un romanzo, nient'altro che una storia fittizia. Lo dice Littrè, lui non si sbaglia mai.  
E poi in ogni caso tutti possono fare altrettanto. Basta chiudere gli occhi.  
È dall'altra parte della vita.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, cit., p. 37).

<sup>23</sup> Even though modernism and existentialism are different movements with distinct characteristics, they coexisted for a period and share a common reaction to the changing world of their time.

<sup>25</sup> P. Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, Medusa film, 2013, 01:31:30-01:32:43.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, 0:01:25.

Showing this quote at the beginning of the film, implying that everything around us is not real and has no purpose, immediately gives the viewer an absurdist and existential perspective on the film and determines their experience, and also how they perceive Jep. In addition, this mind-travel seems to function as a form of escapism and links to Clark's existentialist ideas about being trapped in existence and the struggle to find purpose in life: it could function as a way out in order to escape this feeling. Céline was a conflicted (and notoriously controversial) author himself. According to Henri Godard, the author's biographer and critic, Céline, amongst others, is one of what he calls 'the novelists of the existential', which refers to 'a collective literary reaction to a specific historical crisis,' namely the First World War.<sup>27</sup>

The existential framework is reflected in Jep's own experience. Whilst drunk at his own party, Jep reveals: 'Sono anni che tutti mi chiedono perché non torno a scrivere un nuovo romanzo. Ma guarda questa gente. Questa fauna. Questa è la mia vita, e non è niente'.<sup>28</sup> This conveys Jep's feeling of emptiness and 'the absurdity of life',<sup>29</sup> as he says that the trains of people at this party 'sono belli, perché non vanno da nessuna parte',<sup>30</sup> which underlines this feeling of 'being trapped in existence' and 'finding no purpose of one's being',<sup>31</sup> because the trains are moving around in circles. Jep goes on to refer to Flaubert and says that Flaubert wanted, but did not manage, to write 'un romanzo sul niente',<sup>32</sup> and wonders if he would be able to do it.<sup>33</sup> Flaubert mentions this wish in a letter (1852) to Louise Collet, his mistress:

what I should like to write is a book about nothing, a book dependent upon nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends upon nothing external for its support: a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be invisible, if such a thing is possible.<sup>34</sup>

In Flaubert's letter, style takes on a more important role than the plot. In this respect, Flaubert anticipates a defining feature of both the absurd in modernist literature and existentialism - namely the loss of interest in the plot as a meaningful, purposeful sequence of events. As stressed by A.R. McKee, 'Flaubert was one of the moving forces in the early stages of modern literature [...] and his work has influenced such literary figures as Émile Zola, Franz Kafka and Jean-Paul Sartre'.<sup>35</sup> The idea of a lack of purpose and the emphasis on Nothingness are also a key tenet of existentialism, as exemplified by Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943). As Kovács puts it:

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<sup>27</sup> D. Catani, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline: Journeys to the Extreme*, London, Reaktion Books, 2021, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 1:39:07-1:39:21.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', cit., p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 1:37:16-1:37:20.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', cit., p. 280.

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that Flaubert wanted to write a book about 'nothing', in which he attempts to see the world through a different reality and perspective, and in which, as he says, style is very important. These aspects could be ascribed to (pre)modernistic characteristics. Whereas Jep wants to write a book about 'the nothing', so with the article 'the' (when he refers to Flaubert, who wanted to write a novel about the nothing [voleva scrivere un romanzo sul niente]), which holds existentialist characteristics, as man tries to find purpose and meaning in a world where there is no higher power and man is alone and the only one who can make something out of his life.

<sup>33</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 1:39:25-1:39:30.

<sup>34</sup> A.C. Danto, 'Philosophy as/and/of Literature', in: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 58, 1 (1984), pp. 5-20: p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> A.R. McKee, 'Flaubert, Gustave (1821-1880)', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, <[www.rem.routledge.com/articles/flaubert-gustave-1821-1880-1](http://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/flaubert-gustave-1821-1880-1)> (DOI: 10.4324/9781135000356-REM88-1) (6 January 2023).

[Sartre] differentiates it to the simple emptiness of nonbeing. His conceptual operation is this: he makes Nothingness the key concept of human relations and of the relationship of man to the world. He interprets Nothingness as a product of human intentions and, at the same time, as the essence of being. Nothingness for Sartre is not another world, nor is it beyond our world. He translates the concept into a series of everyday situations where man is alone, disappointed by his beliefs and expectations, desperately looking for something solid in a situation where his own identity is called into question. Sartre places Nothingness right into the world.<sup>36</sup>

According to Sartre, identity based on matters such as place of birth and education is false; instead, it is a free choice of man what he wants to be and he is able to change these choices at any point. Nothingness has its origin in man and lies in the freedom he has to make his own decisions. In the awareness of this freedom also lies man's anguish, since he is a free man and everything he chooses is coming from him, but he is also alone in doing so. When Jep is observing his partying guests, one can detect disappointment in him when he says that this is his life and it is nothing, while searching for something "solid" in the search for his identity. At one point in the film, Jep walks into a chapel while a mother is searching around in panic for her daughter Francesca. Jep hears the girl through the grating in the ground asking him: 'Chi sei tu?' to which Jep replies: 'Chi sono? Io sono...', but she interrupts him: 'No, tu non sei nessuno'. Jep is surprised and lost for words: 'Nessuno? Ma io...'.<sup>37</sup> This accusation of 'being no one' further connects this concept of Nothingness to the film and ties in with what most existentialists say about authenticity, in which they maintain that it is important to understand that one exists, to become one's own self, and to make something of one's life<sup>38</sup> through the choices one has. This preference for focusing on style rather than plot and the exploration of 'Nothingness' finds a parallel in *La Grande Bellezza*'s depiction of Rome. As Carla Molinari has argued, the city of Rome functions as a character in its own right. To illustrate this, Molinari describes scenes in which Jep simply walks around the city, or in which unknown people go about their usual business, and claims that 'without these episodes, the final tale would be exactly the same. In this sense, these scenes are very unique, as they do not contribute to the development of the plot'.<sup>39</sup>

*La Grande Bellezza* also links Jep in a number of scenes to Pirandellian characters or elements out of Pirandello's stories. Luigi Pirandello is associated with both the absurd and existentialism<sup>40</sup> and, for example, has similar ideas to Sartre when it comes to how man is placed in the world. Robert Dombroski interprets these ideas as follows:

Pirandello asks what has happened to our world. His answer is that the world has become incommensurably small, a top spinning aimlessly in space. Man has been unseated as king and plunged into the mud of existence. His fear of annihilation makes him delirious and his delirium causes him to ascend, with his mind, to every corner of creation; but there he finds no God in waiting, only horrific emptiness. Man is lost in an immense labyrinth, surrounded by the

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<sup>36</sup> A.B. Kovács, 'Sartre, the Philosophy of Nothingness, and the Modern Melodrama', in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64, 1 (2006), pp. 135-145: p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 0:40:15-0:40:31.

<sup>38</sup> C.B. Guignon, 'Existentialism', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/existentialism/v-1/sections/authenticity-1> (DOI: 10.4324/9780415249126-N020-1) (17 April 2024).

<sup>39</sup> C. Molinari, 'The Urban Dimension as Film Character: Rome in *The Great Beauty*', in: A. Mariani (ed.), *Paolo Sorrentino's Cinema and Television*, cit., pp. 121-136: p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', cit., p. 276; and Wegener 'The Absurd in Modern Literature', cit., p. 151.

impenetrable mystery of life. Like that top spinning aimlessly in the dark, he has no stable position from which he can know and make judgements.<sup>41</sup>

Comparable to Sartre's description, here man is also alone and is looking for a firm base whilst being uncertain about his identity and his relation to the world.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, it is the individual here who plays a central role, rather than a God or a 'Supreme Being'.<sup>43</sup> Like Céline's quote, Pirandello also describes travelling in the mind. For example, in two of the short stories from the publication *Novelle per un anno* that are titled: 'Rimedio: la geografia' (1920) and 'Il treno ha fischiato' (1914), and in the novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (1926), all men have troubled minds or have gone mad in this "labyrinth" of life, as described by Dombroski. Mind-travelling helps them to cope with and escape reality. In the latter novel, for instance, the protagonist starts mind-travelling because he sees the countryside in the green down of his woollen blanket: 'Ah, perdersi là, distendersi e abbandonarsi, così tra l'erba al silenzio dei cieli; empirsi l'anima di tutta quella vana azzurrità, facendovi naufragare ogni pensiero, ogni memoria!'<sup>44</sup> Similarly, as Jep lies on his bed reflecting upon the past, while looking at the ceiling in which he imagines the sea, it is as if he transports himself to another place. This imagination happens on three occasions,<sup>45</sup> in one of which he travels back in memory to the summer he spent with Elisa.

A further link between Jep and Pirandellian characters can be found during the scene in which Jep has put a beauty mask on his face while listening to an audio book of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) by Pirandello.<sup>46</sup> In this book the protagonist assumes another identity to escape his miserable life.<sup>47</sup> A mask can function to conceal somebody's identity or to show a different one. Since Jep is wearing this mask while listening to the story, the film underlines that Jep also pretends to be somebody that he does not want to be, or has assumed an identity of somebody he is not. It suggests that he relates to the protagonist in *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, where unhappiness and existential crises are important themes. This ties in with the character's search for an identity, as discussed by Cangiano, and Jep being conscious of the situation he finds himself in,<sup>48</sup> as if he is conscious of the mask he is wearing. He is part of this hedonistic and nihilistic world, but at the same time he feels like he does not truly fit in when, for example, he says: 'Ero destinato alla sensibilità'.<sup>49</sup> In this particular scene, we see the crowd partying at his sixty-fifth birthday, yet we see Jep separated from the group of dancers, which suggests that the director wanted to make clear that he is different from the rest.

We can also see this logic in other scenes. A first example is the one in which Jep is sitting and drinking with friends on his roof terrace, Jep criticises his friend Stefania for portraying her life, in his eyes, differently than it actually is and tells her how he perceives it. He shares his view of Stefania without the "mask" and seems to be trying

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<sup>41</sup> R. Dombroski, 'Pirandellian Nakedness', in: G. Biasin & M. Gieri (eds.), *Luigi Pirandello: Contemporary Perspectives*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999, pp. 125-138: p. 126.

<sup>42</sup> Clark also connects Pirandello to existentialism when he says, 'the same world of fear, anxiety, and despair [sic] that produced Luigi Pirandello produced the so-called existentialist'. See Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', cit., p. 276.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 281.

<sup>44</sup> L. Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, E-book, Gaeta, Passerino, 2017, p. 492.

<sup>45</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, 00:17:06-00:17:20, 00:38:19-00:39:40, 01:27:10-01:27:43.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, 00:16:28-00:16:35.

<sup>47</sup> When the protagonist moves to Rome with his new identity to start a new life, the door is answered by his landlord, Anselmo Paleari, with his head covered in foam. This could function as a reference to link Jep with his face full of cream to this novel and protagonist as well.

<sup>48</sup> Cangiano, 'Against Postmodernism', cit., p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 00:12:07-00:12:10.

to unveil what her life is truly like, while his friends try to stop him.<sup>50</sup> A second example is the scene in which, whilst having dinner with Sister Maria and her entourage, Jep reminds Cardinale Bellucci of his unanswered spiritual questions. When Bellucci suggests asking them right there, Jep does not want to: ‘Sarebbe molto deludente per me scoprire che Lei in realtà non possiede nessuna risposta’.<sup>51</sup> Here Jep (similar to his critique of Stefania) is no longer playing his role, but wants to break through this world in which one is keeping up appearances - he cannot and does not want to keep wearing his mask. Jep’s doubts about Bellucci’s ability to answer his questions correlate with the existentialist idea that the individual, rather than a God, or a representative of God, has a central role in determining his place in the world and the choices he makes. Sartre states that ‘no general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world.’<sup>52</sup> This aligns with the absurdist idea of the absence of a universe as rationalists perceive it. Moreover, like the protagonist in *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, Jep seems to want to disappear (as was also touched upon when discussing the film *Entr’acte*) when Jep asks his magician friend Arturo to make him disappear as well. Thus, the references to modernist works of art and literature and their existentialist and absurdist significance, Flaubert’s letter and Jep’s interactions with characters all contribute to highlighting important themes in *La Grande Bellezza*, such as Jep’s search for his identity and the confusion that comes with it. The references frame the viewer’s experience, because they are so closely linked to existentialism and the absurd. As a result, we connect Jep’s development to these themes.

### Space and its Relationship to the Absurd and Modernism

*La Grande Bellezza* is set in Rome and the city plays an important part in the film. We see many shots of Rome and its highlights through the eyes of Jep when he is walking through the city at night or at dawn, often walking home from a party. Through his reflections and observations while strolling, we see the ‘symbolic organization of space’<sup>53</sup> in which Rome, on the one hand, is the setting for a hedonistic lifestyle, with Jep moving about in the higher circles of Rome, and, on the other, an important place for many religious people in the world.<sup>54</sup> This duality is also visible in Jep and his search for the self. On the one hand, there is the nihilistic world he has lived in for the past forty years, and, on the other, his sensibility and the love he still feels for a woman with whom he was involved for one summer in his teenage years: the Jep with and the Jep without the “mask”.

As discussed in the first section, Jep seems separated from the rest, as shown by his portrayal in some scenes and the way in which his opinions set him apart from the others. Yet, his lone strolls through the city, in which he does not really partake in city life but merely observes it, reinforce this sense of isolation. Jep’s strolling and observing resembles the modernist concept of Charles Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, which is described by Keith Tester as an individual who searches for the self in his modern surroundings.<sup>55</sup> According to him, *flânerie* is ‘the activity of the sovereign spectator

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, 00:44:45-00:50:19.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, 1:56:11-1:56:15.

<sup>52</sup> Sartre, ‘Existentialism is a Humanism’, cit., p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> M. Ryan, ‘Space’, *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, <<http://lhn.sub.uni-hamburg.de/index.php/Space.html>> (3 May 2023).

<sup>54</sup> This is also reflected and emphasised in the soundtrack, which conveys the same contrast. Moreover, another passage from the audio book Jep is listening to that resonates with *La Grande Bellezza*, is when Anselmo Paleari comments on Rome’s transformation from “acquasantiera” to “portacenere”, where Rome as an old city is considered incompatible with the modern and meaningless life we are leading. Here, again, we see the opposites that can be found in Jep and the way Rome is portrayed in the film.

<sup>55</sup> J. Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 40.

going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence, replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life'.<sup>56</sup> When Jep strolls along the river Tiber in the early morning he says 'volevo diventare il re dei mondani. E ci sono riuscito',<sup>57</sup> which corresponds to the sovereign spectator as described by Tester. Tester's description of the *flâneur* also links to Sartre's ideas of Nothingness, as well as his existentialist idea that the human being can choose who he wants to be.

As mentioned before, *La Grande Bellezza* links Piranello's Mattia Pascal to Jep. Jacqueline Reich writes that '[Mattia Pascal] like the *flâneur*, is a witness to, rather than a participant in, modern bourgeois existence, describing himself as an "estranged spectator" lost in the crowd',<sup>58</sup> similar to Jep. This detachment is also reflected in the representations of space in the film: because we accompany Jep on his walks and to the parties he goes to, the spectator sees what Jep experiences and consequently we feel the same alienation. Since he is mainly out at night, we either see the hedonistic nightlife with eccentric people, or a deserted Rome at night or dawn; we hardly get to see Rome's daily life consisting of commuters, tourists, etc. and almost everything we see is interesting and beautiful.

This detachment of life and Jep being a witness rather than a participant in it, can be illuminated by referencing Michel de Certeau's ideas from the chapter 'Walking in the City':

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. [...] His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. [...] The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below", below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk - an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it.<sup>59</sup>

Hence elevation and distance put one in a position to observe. We can see this at work in *La Grande Bellezza*, when Jep, from his roof top terrace, sees what is happening in the monastery garden down below,<sup>60</sup> and seems to be able to follow the "text" that the "people down below" write - this creates the feeling of distance and alienation, and the sense of being a "voyeur" rather than a participant. This, again, is in line with the concept of the *flâneur*, as although one walks and does not look from an elevated position at the people down below, here one also observes without really partaking. In addition, Tuan writes about the protagonists in Sorrentino's films that

the commonality amongst these protagonists is clear; even though they have professions, they are not working in them - and the peculiarity of this shared isolation from their careers, physical environments and social settings, for example, is interestingly reflected in the films' visual tone, specifically through formal treatments of cinematic time and space that, through frequency, integrate into Sorrentino's unique cinematic grammar.<sup>61</sup>

Tuan states that the film *La Grande Bellezza* contains cinematic excess and, according to her, this style is applied by, for example, slowing down or speeding up time 'to portray his protagonists' thoughts, memories and flashbacks in a way that parallels

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<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, cit., 0:34:00-0:34:05.

<sup>58</sup> Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover*, cit., p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S.F. Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, pp. 92-93.

<sup>60</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, 00:18:13-00:18:48.

<sup>61</sup> Tuan, 'Paolo Sorrentino's Cinematic Excess', cit., pp. 58-59.

their suspended states.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, with regards to space, Sorrentino films in a fragmented fashion, so that the viewer experiences the setting and space in a different way.<sup>63</sup> Thus, according to Tuan, the protagonists' state of mind is connected to and reflected through the manner in which time and space are presented in the film. 'Elimination of time and space',<sup>64</sup> as discussed in the introduction, is also a characteristic of the absurd in art and literature.

Moreover, when it comes to space, *La Grande Bellezza* is often compared to modernist films that deal with similar themes,<sup>65</sup> the most important being Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). The film is set in Rome during the Italian economic boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its protagonist indulges in a hedonistic and excessive jet-set lifestyle, while also showing an interest in art and literature and aspiring to become a writer. Being in this city in these years of great prosperity in Italy, 'the carnivalesque atmosphere [...] proved to be an exhilarating but ultimately an empty and alienating experience',<sup>66</sup> which ties in with the themes of existentialism and existentialist crises that can be seen within the protagonist, Marcello Rubini. Another theme that these films have in common is the central role played by the city of Rome. In *La Dolce Vita* the city symbolises the centre of this prosperity, likewise in *La Grande Bellezza* the metropolitan element of Rome and decadence are also important. In both films, the decadent lifestyle of the protagonists links to emptiness and alienation, and both Marcello and Jep have a different, more reflective side to them in which they are trying to make sense of the world around them.

Kovács writes about the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his ideas on modern cinema<sup>67</sup> and space:

Modern cinema does not represent a physical world but a mental image of the world on the basis of a belief that this is an existing world. [...] Any image of the physical reality necessarily contradicts the mental reality of our times, that is, we cannot believe that things exist as we see them. The specificity of modern cinema takes into consideration this mental reality - not a critique of reality, but a mental correction of the illusion of physical representation.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, what is real and what we think is real, or what we actually see or think that we see, is mixed up here. In this respect, although *La Grande Bellezza* is a recent film, many of its features convey this perspective on space. Sorrentino makes use of famous sights in Rome where one can experience optical illusions. Some examples are Palazzo Spada, La Villa del Priorato di Malta and Via Nicolò Piccolomini. When Lello and his wife drive back from a party at Jep's, they pass Via Nicolò Piccolomini, a street known for an optical illusion, in which Saint Peter's Basilica seems to shrink as one approaches it.<sup>69</sup> Another example of this tension between 'physical reality' and 'the mental reality'

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<sup>62</sup> Ivi, p. 59.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 70.

<sup>64</sup> Wegener, 'The Absurd in Modern Literature', cit., p. 155.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example: A. Ricciardi, 'The Spleen of Rome: Mourning Modernism in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*', *Modernism/Modernity*, 7, 2 (2000), pp. 201-219.

<sup>66</sup> Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>67</sup> Although modern cinema and modernist cinema are not exactly the same, Kovács writes that Deleuze, amongst others, has 'a single and synthetic idea about modern cinema, since he does not distinguish between *modern* and *modernist* cinema' (A.B. Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 44). Moreover, Kovács himself defines modern cinema on the basis of 'three general thematic frameworks [that] recur in modern films', namely: '(1) disconnection of the individual human being from the environment, commonly called alienation; (2) subjective, mythological, and conceptual redefinition of the concept of reality; and (3) disclosure of the idea of nothingness behind the surface of reality' (ivi, p. 203). This is in line with the descriptions of modernism and existentialism in this article and their relation to the themes in *La Grande Bellezza*.

<sup>68</sup> Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>69</sup> Sorrentino, *La Grande Bellezza*, 00:29:47-00:30:10.

occurs when, at a party, Jep meets Stefano, who holds the keys to the city's most beautiful palaces. They visit Palazzo Spada and La Villa del Priorato di Malta, places known for optical illusions. For example, when one looks through the keyhole of La Villa del Priorato di Malta, Il Buco Della Serratura, with a view of the Saint Peter's Basilica, it seems larger than it actually is.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, in Palazzo Spada, both the gallery to the courtyard and the sculpture seem much longer and bigger than they really are.<sup>71</sup> The scenes shot in these locations take place at night, creating a surreal experience: old princesses playing cards in the dark, hidden within one of these palaces, while countless statues and paintings are only visible by candlelight. These scenes in the dark, like the optical illusions, contribute to the idea that 'we cannot believe that things exist as we see them',<sup>72</sup> thus fitting the characteristics of modernism. In her article on spatial excess, Tuan writes that 'excess is recognized as style when the characters take paths that transform the meanings of the space. The chance to think about spatial excess as part of Sorrentino's style is offered by pedestrians who mobilize access through these once inaccessible spaces'.<sup>73</sup> Tuan also uses the example of these specific spaces to which Jep and Ramona gain access to through Stefano:

While Jep and Ramona walk through this space, the placement of objects in darkness leaves spectators literally and figuratively in the dark and prevents them from mapping a topology of the space, as Sorrentino presents this inaccessible space as negative or 'surplus' space. The fact that we see only portions of the space at night makes us doubt their existence.<sup>74</sup>

The characters move around in space and choose to be in certain locations which reflect their state of being, since the alienating feeling their surroundings evoke is also present within themselves. This feeling of confusion and alienation is also palpable for the viewer, as one is not able to map "a topology of the space" nor tell what one can actually see and what not (which resonates with Céline's quote, mentioned earlier as well). This links to the modernist and existentialist characteristics of isolation, trying to make sense of the world, and understanding one's place in it; in this way space is connected to these themes in the film. Finally, regarding illusion in Luigi Pirandello's work, Clark writes that 'Pirandello is forever concerned with illusion and reality'.<sup>75</sup> The mask Jep wears in the scene whilst listening to the audio book *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, symbolises this 'illusion and reality', as Pascal's true identity is not clear, as well as the fact that he seems dead, but is not. Likewise, here, just as with the description of (optical) illusion in space, illusion is an important aspect in *La Grande Bellezza* as well as in Pirandello's work.

## Conclusion

Elements of modernism, existentialism and their shared emphasis on the absurd are intertwined with *La Grande Bellezza* through references to modernist literature, film and cinema style. The film refers to several modernist artworks and existentialist concepts that connect to key themes such as the futility of existence, the blurring of illusion and reality, the concept of Nothingness and the absurd. Examples include Céline's quote in which he describes the feeling of emptiness and the traveling in the mind in order to escape it, the film *Entr'acte* with comic and absurd elements, and

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<sup>70</sup> Ivi, 00:15:03.

<sup>71</sup> Ivi, 01:18:53.

<sup>72</sup> Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, cit., p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Tuan, 'Paolo Sorrentino's Cinematic Excess', cit., p. 74.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>75</sup> Clark, 'Existentialism and Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi*', cit., p. 279.

Flaubert's letter to his mistress in which he expresses his wish to write a book about 'nothing'. These aspects mostly relate to Jep and reflect his mental state and behaviour, which suggests a particularly close link between the protagonist and the aesthetics of the absurd. As for the element of illusion, this can be connected to the Pirandellian references to, for example, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*, in which the unclarity of Mattia Pascal's identity can also be related to Jep, who is on a quest for his identity, the Self and purpose in life.

However, these modernist and existentialist aspects are conveyed not only through references to literature and film, but also through representations of space and the protagonist's perception of his surroundings. Jep's alienated mental state is reflected in the way space is represented in the scenes. Here we see both the physical as well as the mental distance between him and the people and things around him. Through this, we can recognise the modernist concept of the *flâneur* in Jep, for example when he is strolling through Rome, not really taking part in daily life, but rather observing the people around him. The way that space is depicted in the film also ties in with Kovács' description of space as a 'mental correction of the illusion of physical representation',<sup>76</sup> which can be related to modernism. Here the use of darkness and optical illusions could function as a means to convey this unclarity between what is real and what is not and thus reflect the characters' state of being.

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<sup>76</sup> Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, cit., p. 42.