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Una risata seppellirà Roma: Paolo Sorrentino's Deadpan Pathos

"When I start to write a movie, my first priority is that I want it to be funny ... I want to make people laugh. On my way to doing that, I often wind up creating something that is also sad."^[1]
—Paolo Sorrentino^[2]

As with periods of social, economic, and political unrest that came before, the 2008 global financial crisis prompted comically mediated responses in various cinematic forms. In this paper I pursue a resurgent style of deadpan humor which began to develop in Italian cinema at the height of The Great Recession. More specifically, I turn to filmmaker Paolo Sorrentino whose work, both before and after the 2008 financial crisis, exhibits a distinct style of politically charged dark humor—conveyed predominantly via irony and satire. Consequently, Sorrentino's idiosyncratic, polemical brand of humor, I argue, is most pronounced in the historically situated style of recessionist deadpan humor featured in his Academy Award winning 2014 film *The Great Beauty*.

The Great Beauty, arguably Sorrentino's most well-known film, described by many as a Technicolor *La Dolce Vita* for the Berlusconi era, follows its oft-deadpan protagonist Jep on a kaleidoscopic, yet vacuous, journey through Rome during which we meet the denizens of his social circle, including: an aging stripper, a struggling playwright, cash-poor aristocrats, and a listless cardinal—all of whom symbolically question the complicity of the left-wing elite in economic decline of Rome and Italy at large. Even as early as the opening sequence, the droll energy of a conga line quickly turns doleful and appears more like a surreal funeral procession painted by Francis Bacon.

From the combination of temporal shifts between static tableaux and sonorous camera movement and the juxtaposition of operatic music followed by sobering dialogue, there emerges a decadent aesthetic of deadpan with which Sorrentino challenges the risible and political threshold of his audience. Multifaceted in style and approach, I contend Sorrentino's deadpan aesthetic pushes us to rethink contemporary affective economies and reevaluate structures of feeling: happiness, contentment, and apathy.

Consequently, as I will argue in this paper, Sorrentino's comic sensibility offers meditations on recession era Rome while also revealing Italy's crisis laden history buried deadpan... or alive under a bed of mirthless laughter.

[1] [1] Quoted in Rosen, Judy. "Six Screenwriters Leaving Their Mark on Hollywood." *T Magazine*. Dec. 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/12/02/t-magazine/amy-schumer-aaron-sorkin-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu.html>