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## Irony, Sexism and Magic in Paolo Sorrentino's Films

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 (Sorrentino, 2015).

### Introduction

Scathing humour is at the centre of Paolo Sorrentino's oeuvre. His films poke fun at political leaders (*Il Divo*, 2008), mock burnt out celebrities (*This Must Be the Place*, 2011), satirize the Roman elite (*The Great Beauty*, 2013) and parody the way men look at women (*Youth*, 2015). However, humour in Sorrentino films is always ambiguous. As a director, he often makes it impossible for the viewer to decide what is meant to be funny and what is meant to be serious. Simon Critchley describes this type of humour as the mirthless laugh, "the laugh laughing at the laugh." When the laughter sticks in our throats, we realise that the object of the laughter is actually the subject, who is laughing: we are laughing at ourselves (Critchley 2002, 49). The ingenuity of this humour is that first it makes us laugh and then it makes us question whether we were supposed to laugh at all. In humour, this reflected understanding allows irony to happen by presupposing a critical position and creating a space of ambiguity.

Irony generally signifies the opposite of the literal meaning for humorous effect, thus it is a form of expression with ambiguity at its heart. According to my first argument in this paper, irony is a key ingredient in *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) and humour's ambiguous nature in these films can be grasped through narration. Borrowing David Bordwell's concept of film style, I argue that these two films are expressions of irony by presenting style as pure narration. Narration can be interpreted as a disparity of knowledge

possessed by the characters inside the story and the viewer outside the fictional world. It develops as knowledge is unevenly distributed among the characters and the viewer (if the viewer and all the characters were all-knowing, narration would be unnecessary). It is partially defined by technical criteria (like camera positions and editing) and how these techniques construct the viewer's perception in order to transfer knowledge (Branigan 1992, 66). The viewer experiences ambiguity through accentuated film style displaying film specific technical solutions, like camera movement, editing and acting.

*The Great Beauty* won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2014, while *Youth* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures in 2016 and thus they can be regarded as mature works where the director has found his trademark form of expression. I selected the director's last two films, because both films are critically acclaimed works. While humour is a crucial element in every Sorrentino film, these two works not only present unproblematic examples of humour (verbal jokes in the dialogue that are clearly included with a humorous intention), but they also feature an excessive style that creates room for ambiguity and thus makes an ironic interpretation possible.

Before analysing irony as style in greater detail, I am going to introduce Geoff King's argument about the comic mode (King 2002, 2). This idea is particularly useful, since I examine the way the two films use irony as a form of expression. Using Edward Branigan's definition of narration and narrative comprehension as disparities of knowledge (Branigan 1992, 65-72) I define the accentuated style used by Sorrentino as pure narration.

Numerous books written about the topic of humour and film start by stating that humour is a very popular subject despite its indefinable nature (King 2002; Critchley 2002; Zupančič 2008; Harrod 2015). Everybody knows what she or he finds funny, however, it seems to be an extremely challenging task to define what humour means and theoreticians struggle to come

up with an overarching definition. For instance, Henderson (1978) and Palmer (1994) note that comic genres are generally considered light-hearted and therefore humorous works of art are usually considered secondary or lower status compared to more serious, higher forms of art like tragedy (similarly to Kerr 1980; Palmer 1987; Neale and Krutnik 1990; King 2002; Harrod 2015). In his book on film comedy, Geoff King writes that “comedy is often taken to be the epitome of light relief or ‘just entertainment’ on film... Comedy, by definition, is not actually taken entirely seriously” (King 2002, 2). To be clearly defined as comedy a film should be dominated to a substantial extent by a comic dimension.

Various works contemplate comedy as a genre, but to sidestep this problem of definitions, I took comedy to be a mode of presentation. Instead of defining film comedy as a genre, King introduces comedy as a mode, a manner of representation:

Comedy in film, generally, is probably best understood as a mode, rather than as a genre, if these various different degrees of comedy are to be taken into account. Comedy is a mode – a manner of representation – in which a variety of different materials can be approached, rather than any relatively more fixed or localised quantity. Any genre might be treated as a subject for comedy. (King 2002, 2)

To explain the comic mode, King refers to Rick Altman, who differentiates between “genre” used as an adjective or as a noun (Altman 1999, 51). The adjective form refers to the mode the main genre is presented in, whereas the noun form refers to the major genre qualifications. Comedy is a mode that can be applied to any genre. In Sorrentino’s films its adjectival qualification manifests as an expression of irony. I explain this ironic expression by defining it as accentuated film style (borrowing David Bordwell’s concept): through its technical solutions (including camera movement, editing and acting) it becomes a form of pure narration.

While Sorrentino's films are sometimes accused of being crassly sexist, I want to argue in this paper that his use of comic irony undermines the apparent sexism of his films. Academic literature does offer a feminist critique of these films (Hipkins 2013; Badt 2006) and film reviews often point out the humorous tone of Sorrentino's work (Mayersberg, 2012; Romney, 2007 and 2015; Weissberg, 2008 and 2015; Crowdus, 2014; Abrams 2013; Bradshaw 2013 and 2016; Calhoun 2013; Atkinson, 2013), but my purpose is to highlight the ambiguous nature of humour in these films and shift the attention from (the exploitation of) women to (the weakness of) men. The depiction of women as objects of male desire to the point of absurdity undermines sexist representation and works instead as a humorous subversion. *The Great Beauty* and *Youth* parody a certain kind of objectification and desire and I argue that the object of Sorrentino's criticism is the "male sex deficit" (Hakim 2011, 178). In her controversial book, *Honey Money*, Catherine Hakim merges neoliberalism with sexuality by advocating complete freedom around the exchange of goods, including one's own body. By male sex deficit she means substantial differences regarding sexual desire and behaviour that persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century among men and women, namely that men's sexual desire for women always exceeds women's desire. However, neoliberal feminist scholars like Catherine Rottenberg pointed out the problematic nature of such an easily calculable exchange. Following this criticism, I argue that through ironic presentation Sorrentino parodies this simplistic view of an unbalanced relationship between men and women. As the examples in my following analysis will show, these two films create room for an ironic interpretation through their excessive stylistic solutions and offer a parody of men's stereotypical obsession with women.

### **Irony**

To read Sorrentino's films ironically, I rely on the concept of cinematic excess. Kristin Thompson argues that when analysing a film, we should look beyond its narrative. Often there

is a conflict between the materiality of the film and its unifying structures and by concentrating on the elements of excess we could offer an alternative interpretation (Thompson 1977, 63). Her approach could enable us to concentrate on what effect narration – and not just the narrative – has on the viewer's understanding.

Edward Branigan defines narration as a perceptual activity, concerning “*how* an event is presented... rather than what is presented” (Branigan 1992, 65). He underscores the distinction between narration and narrative with the difference between the “how?” and “what?” questions. Film specific technical solutions have the potential “to make something tangible” (Carroll 2008, 41) and filmmakers use the divergence between the “filmic mediation” of their subject and its normal perception to highlight the expressiveness of their viewpoints. Consequently, Sorrentino's style highlights a contrast between content and representation.

*The Great Beauty* opens with Jep Gambardella's (Toni Servillo) 65th birthday party. We first encounter Jep in a circle of women; he is kissing and flirting with them with a weird smirk on his face. Suddenly the image turns upside down and this striking visual element is a clue for the viewer. The film offers structures of information, one on the level of the narrative, while the other one is a stylistic system (Bordwell 1987, 30). A narrative film creates cues and patterns for the viewer to put together a coherent story, with this introduction however the emphasis falls on how the story is presented. The viewer brings expectations and hypotheses born from everyday experience and the artwork sets triggers and constraints to test and retest these hypotheses (Bordwell 1987, 32). Turning the image upside down is such a surprising visual clue that it calls the viewer's attention to the importance of narration over narrative. It tests the viewer's expectations by creating space for ambiguity and therefore it becomes an expression of the ironic comic mode. This striking visual element emphasizes how Sorrentino's excessive use of film style techniques creates irony.

The eccentric camera movement emphasizes the mode of representation; it is not the story, but the way the story is told that is important. The meaning of the upside-down image is uncertain. It may invoke ideas around Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque where the usual social rules and restrictions are temporarily suspended (Bakhtin 1984, 200-201), or it could simply point to Jep's drunken state. The viewer cannot easily interpret this image, because it is not part of the standard continuity of film grammar. Therefore, the most important aspect of the image is that it calls the viewer's attention to how the story is told; the object of the viewer's attention is the representation itself. This is an example of what Bordwell calls "style": pure narration without narrative (Bordwell 1985, 49-50). It demonstrates how it is possible for a film director to create meaning through style; *how* he or she chooses to present the subject matter can generate different levels of meaning.

It is not only the camera movement that is extravagant; but other elements of film style are also accentuated. In addition, the films' episodic structure draws attention to the narration, since instead of coherent storytelling the films are built up of only loosely connected long sequences that highlight the cinematic nature of the image. The stylistic elements do not only emphasize the narration but are often crucial to the understanding of the joke. Much of the humour builds on contrast and culminates in visual punchlines.

*Youth* meticulously builds up a visual joke about Paul Dano's character, Jimmy. An actor by profession, he makes various references to a historic role he rehearses and will later shoot in Germany. It is only revealed later in the film that he plays Hitler. This episode has no particular relevance to the film's story as a whole, it is only included for its comic and visual potential. The director keeps the character's identity secret for a long time and Jimmy's earlier references to his future role work as jokes in retrospect after his persona is revealed. First the viewer sees Jimmy getting ready for playing the role; he receives a complete makeover with a haircut, makeup and costumes. However, when he is transformed, the images only reveal his back and

the viewer is still uncertain about the character's identity. He encounters a little girl on his way, but he still faces away from the camera. The viewer sees the girl's surprised reaction first before the character is finally revealed in a reverse shot.

When a joke is followed by a pause of hesitation, it becomes ambiguous. In one of the most absurd scenes of *The Great Beauty*, we see a parody of a contemporary art performance. Jep is sitting in the audience in the grass at the foot of a Roman viaduct and looking at a naked woman on stage. Suddenly she runs towards the viaduct, gaining enough momentum to bump her head into the stone wall with enormous power. The stunt has the audience hold its breath in shock as people are wondering if her bleeding head is part of the performance or if she is seriously injured. She dizzily stumbles back in front of the small crowd and cites a few lines. After a short pause, a shy clapping breaks the silence and this presentation creates space for hesitation. The director parodies the non-sensical nature of contemporary art performances by using this stereotype and making fun of it at the same time. This ironically expressed ambiguity is the main characteristic of the films' humour.

Sorrentino's work is often dismissed as banal or described as overtly beautiful (Romney, 2015; Clarke, 2013). Even positive reviews emphasise the films' "exuberant visuals" (Clarke, 2013). Jonathan Romney writes that "there are two main accusations that often get leveled at Sorrentino – one, that he too often indulges banality, the other that he doesn't know when to stop. In *Youth*, he's guilty of both sins" (Romney, 2015). Similarly, Dave Calhoun notes that "in his stories, the far-too-beautiful rub up against the overly grotesque" (Calhoun, 2013). As opposed to these criticisms, I argue that narration in these films is always excessive and Sorrentino's aesthetically pleasing images are an expression of irony. With their "exuberant" and "far-too-beautiful" images, *The Great Beauty* and *Youth* emphasise narration. The narration is never a transparent window into the narrative as it is always inflected by Sorrentino's ironic style.



*The Great Beauty* and *Youth* place narration over narrative by highlighting the main actors' performances, thus Sorrentino's accentuated style also includes acting. *Youth* is a Sorrentino version of Steve Seidman's "comedian comedy", where the comic performance is at the centre and the protagonist adopts a performance strategy that derives from his or her simultaneous status as a character within the narrative and as an extradiegetic persona" (Seidman as quoted by Trahair 2007, 4) outside the narrative and thus defying conventions of classical Hollywood realism. The comic actor is a performer first and a character in the film only second. His or her performance is so arresting that it does not always fit into the film's diegetic world and therefore the performance dominates the narrative.

Sorrentino's *Youth* is a contemporary version of this comedian comedy, since its episodic structure is constructed as a series of jokes and the narrative is dominated by the comic performances of its two aging male protagonists (Michael Caine and Harvey Keitel). The scenes themselves (including dialogue and visual puns) have the structure of jokes, they are building up towards a punchline delivered at the end of each sequence. From a purely narrative point of view, certain scenes in *Youth* are excessive and do not contribute to a coherent story, instead they draw attention to the film's narration and accentuate acting for humorous effect. To examine humour's ambiguous nature in Sorrentino's films, I use Simon Critchley's description of the absurd body.

### **Being and Having a Body**

Critchley explains how human beings experience an existentialist gap between being and having a body. Absurd humour highlights a "lack of fit" between our human desire for rationality and the world's irrationality (Wartenberg 2008, 114-115). Being and having a body emphasizes the absurd existential experience through closeness and distance, simultaneous identification with and alienation from our "corporeal housing" (Critchley 2002, 60). This

dichotomy described by Critchley appears on multiple levels of representation in the films as the director contrasts the old with the young, the experience of being and having and irony and nostalgia.

The absurd existential experience is highlighted in *Youth* through focusing on the experiences of its physically declining protagonists. The film's title is an ironic wink; the two elderly men spend their time in a Swiss spa resort where they undergo various reinvigorating treatments in order to feel young again. Comic dialogue describing bodily processes dominate; Fred Ballinger, a retired composer (Michael Caine) and Mick Boyle, an outmoded director (Harvey Keitel) constantly reflect on the experience of growing old. The characters distance themselves from their bodies and reflect on them critically with humour. While they share memories of their youth, they are painfully aware of their aging bodies.

Critchley argues that absurd humour requires a sense of detachment, and he explains this from a bodily perspective: "everything becomes laughably absurd when I begin to detach myself from my body, when I imagine myself, my ego, my soul in distinction from its corporeal housing" (Critchley 2002, 60). We think of ourselves as thinking and feeling human beings, but at the same time, we are also defined by our physicality, which can be comically absurd when we look at it from a critical distance. This means that there is gap between the physical and the metaphysical; for example, when we experience illness, or pain, we try to distance ourselves from our bodies. Critchley claims that humour takes place in this gap between being and having a body.

We not only laugh with our bodies, but often also about the fact that we have a body. As Critchley explains, the close description of bodily affairs can arouse sensual disgust through a play of distance and proximity. That is an excessively detailed description of the sensuous can highlight all the imperfections of the flesh and thus can emphasize the *having* aspect of the

body. In scatological humour, we laugh at the fact that we have a body. When we focus on the materiality of the body, it becomes laughable, because its sheer materiality is so in contrast with our thinking and feeling self. Here what makes us laugh is the return of the most physical facts of our bodies into the spiritual seclusion of the soul and mind. In this case the *being* returns to *having* a body (Critchley 2002, 44-47). In *Youth*, Mick and Fred constantly reflect on the experience between being a body and having a body. They poke fun at what it feels like to be betrayed by their bodies, for example not being able to urinate is a re-occurring joke. “Did you take a piss today?” asks Fred. “Twice” answers Mick. He then continues: “Four drops. You?” “Same. More or less.” answers Fred. “More? Or less?” asks Mick again with raised eyebrows. “Less.” confesses Fred. As they are getting old, they experience a distance from their own bodies through their failing health. They maintain a critical attitude toward their sheer physicality and thus they emphasize the distance between being and having a body through humour.

Humour highlights the gap between being and having a body by provoking laughter when the physical returns to the metaphysical. This gap however is not a real distinction, but an expression of irony. Both relations, being and having, happen simultaneously, even though they are contradictory. *Youth* showcases a physical comedy performance by the “South-American” (Roly Serrano), whose character embodies this dichotomy. He is old and young at the same time, because he is both enormous but at the same time physically dexterous. His comic representation highlights the gap between being and having a body and the simultaneous but contradictory evocation of irony and nostalgia. Since his character is a caricature of the retired Argentine professional football player, Diego Maradona, his physical traits are exaggerated to make him look ridiculous. Through his contradictory physical characteristics, he embodies Critchley’s distinction of being and having a body.

Sorrentino's great predecessor, Fellini was famously fascinated by the circus milieu and its characters frequently figured in his films (Fellini 1996, 115). In 1970 Fellini directed a documentary (infused with fictional elements) about the now dead performance art. *Clowns* strikes a tragic tone. Fellini interviews white clowns and Augustes, who were acclaimed artists during the golden age of the circus, but now are bitter old men with a nostalgic attachment to the past. Sorrentino repeatedly references Fellini films in his own work and Maradona's clown figure is similar to those of Fellini's (clowns famously featured in the director's films from *Variety Lights* (1951) to *8½* (1963), but perhaps most famously in Giulietta Masina's performance as the sad-eyed but lively Gelsomina in *La Strada* (1954)): they are grotesquely funny and tragically moving. In his physicality, the "South-American" is old and obese, can hardly walk and needs to be helped by his wife, who often pulls an oxygen tank after him. However, he is still a skilled sportsman, therefore he also embodies his younger self through his skill. He breathes heavily and he struggles to do sport, but he kicks the tennis ball high in the air over and over again. He does not kick the ball with ease, but he does not let it drop and there is still grace in his movements. He embodies the physical and the metaphysical simultaneously.

He is awkwardly comical through his exaggerated and contradictory physical traits, which make him an easy target for ridicule, however, he is also ambiguous, since he has a visible disconnection with his body through his skilfulness. Just like Fellini's clowns, his effort is an act of nostalgia, a desperate attempt to relive the past.

The being and having a body distinction is also apparent in how the films depict men's relationship with women. I argue that Sorrentino's criticism is a simplistic view about men's obsession with women and that he parodies a certain type of objectification and desire. In her controversial book, *Honey Money*, Catherine Hakim coined the term "male sex deficit" (Hakim 2011, 178), arguing that male sexual desire always exceeds women's. This oversimplified and

easily calculable exchange however is problematic and through its stereotypical nature it serves the jokes of Sorrentino's parody.

Parody is an important comedy tool used by Sorrentino in these films and I understand this type of comedy as a form of ironic ambiguity. As Geoff King argues, parody requires engagement on two levels: on the level of the parody and its object. This duality must be recognised by the viewer to work as a parody. Parodies mock their targets, but while doing so, they also pay tribute to their originals (King, p 112.) In order for parody to work, the reader/viewer must be familiar with the original, because it presupposes previous knowledge and interaction from the viewer.

The Maradona character's wife (Loredana Cannata) is a servant-like figure, she pulls his oxygen tank after him, she massages his tired feet and she helps him to get out of the pool. Her portrayal however has humour in it and through its ambiguity it becomes ironic. She is a parody of a stereotype (a rich man having a wife to take care of his domestic needs) and her character parodies the way men can take ownership of the female body. On the other hand, her representation is also based on a visual joke of contrast, when the "South American" falls ill in the swimming pool the wife has to rescue him. A fragile and thin woman has to pull an enormous body out of the pool. With its emphasis on physical humour this scene is also reminiscent of the slapstick and the film uses this stereotype but at the same time it also makes fun of it.

### ***Sexism***

*The Great Beauty* and *Youth* offer a parody of how men look at women and feminist scholars have reflected on the dynamics of these relations represented in Sorrentino's films. Danielle Hipkins writes that the female in his films is merely a fetish object for the narration of male desire (Hipkins 2008, 213-214). While also numerous critics have pointed to the films' sexism.

“The unreconstructed sexism of Sorrentino’s films can sometimes be, at a stretch, semi-excused by locating it in a certain Italian cinematic tradition of objectifying goddess figures” (Romney, 2015). As a director, he “tells his recurring story of ridiculous men and beautiful women” (Romney, 2007). According to Jonathan Romney, Sorrentino has “a tendency to objectify female beauty [...] there’s also a genuine obsessiveness in his interest in female beauty pushed to idealisation, especially when contrasted with mortal male weakness (Romney, 2007). Such accusations disregard the comic representation in the films’ images. These critics use terms of feminist film theory (such as fetishism and objectification) and it is clear from their examples that sexuality and the dynamics of male-female relationships are central themes in Sorrentino’s films. I argue that the representation of sexuality can be ironic in these films and that it can be linked to the ridiculousness of human nature.

Rosalind Galt’s critiques feminist film theory for rejecting the decorative image as a site of pleasure. According to Galt, the pretty image that belongs to the territory of the feminine, immediately invokes negative connotations and is always regarded as artificial and misleading in film theory. A feminized image is considered incapable of carrying serious meaning. Certain sorts of feminist film theory seem to exclude images that are overly visual or defined as cosmetic (Galt 2011, 13). For Galt however, the pretty is a site of excess, pleasure and masquerade that should be embraced for its potential to express serious meaning. She sees a possibility in the pretty to express the subversive or even the radical, because by emphasizing narration it highlights the potential of the cinematic image (Galt 2011, 250). Following her argument, it is important to underline the ambiguity and the comic potential of such images in an attempt to shift the attention from the exploitation of women to the weakness of men.

The object of Sorrentino’s criticism is the “male sex deficit” (Hakim 2011, 178). Infamous for her controversial ideas, Hakim embraces the belief in an easily calculable and unevenly structured relationship between men and women based on sexual desire. Neoliberal feminist

scholars however pointed out the problematic nature of this in their critique. Catherine Rottenberg's neoliberal feminism is an example of being a body, where women are transforming themselves into human capital (Rottenberg 2017, 331). She argues that neoliberal feminism produces "an individuated feminist subject whose identity is problematic because it is formed by a cost-benefit calculus" (Rottenberg 2017, 331). Highly achieving women are encouraged to become human capital, to self-invest and enhance their market value first and think about bearing children later. Taking her starting point from the neoliberalist idea of human capital, Hakim coined the term "erotic capital" to refer to the "combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills – a combination of physical and social attractiveness" (Hakim 2011, 1). For Hakim, it is perfectly acceptable for women lacking other (intellectual or financial) advantages to exploit their physical and social attractiveness and women should exploit the weakness of men (Hakim 2011, 178). By male sex deficit she means substantial differences regarding sexual desire and behaviour that persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century among men and women, namely that men's sexual desire for women always exceeds supply. Because of its simplistic and stereotypical nature this view offers fertile ground for parody. Sorrentino's films joke about such male weakness described by Hakim through their ironic representation.

In order to understand the female representation in these films as ironic, I use two theories that highlight the artificial nature of femininity. Roland Barthes argues that eroticism is a product of cultural norms with a description of a strip-tease as an un-erotic act, while Joan Riviere points out that a natural femininity does not exist, because womanliness can be worn as a mask.

In Barthes description, the undressing during a strip-tease is non-erotic, the eroticism at the strip-tease is not in nudity. The rituals of the supposedly erotic dance only seem to evoke the idea of sex, but through the artificiality of the décor and the set, they negate the excitement of the original provocation. He writes: the "woman is desexualized at the very moment when she

is stripped naked” (Barthes 1972, 84). Barthes suggests that during the strip-tease the woman becomes an “object in disguise”; the performance’s constructed nature creates a feeling of artificiality as opposed to a natural excitement of getting undressed. Through the strip-tease the woman becomes clothed in her nakedness.

Joan Riviere shows that women who wish to be appreciated as men, can put on “a mask of womanliness” (Riviere 1929, 306). Therefore, she comes to the conclusion, that womanliness in general is an artificial concept and it can be assumed and worn as a mask. She writes:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. (Riviere 1929, 306)

Both Barthes’ and Riviere’s arguments underline the idea of having a body as opposed to being. The artificial nature of femininity again highlights this gap. By putting on a mask of womanliness or performing the (un)erotic act of the strip-tease, women are not their own bodies, but they have those bodies.

Sorrentino’s images are the site of excess and masquerade, highlighting the artificial nature of femininity. His films parody the way men look at women by both using femininity as an artificial concept and by emphasizing the stereotypical nature of men’s obsession with female attractiveness with the help of excessive film style. By drawing the viewer’s attention to narration, the films present a humorous subversion of how men look at women with the help of the shot/reverse shot editing technique and the use of overdetermination.

Emphasized narration in *Youth* offers a humorous subversion of a stereotypical male fantasy about a woman with the help of editing. A veiled Arab woman is a guest at the Swiss spa hotel, where the retired composer protagonist, Fred (Michael Caine) is spending his holiday. When



going up to their rooms one evening, they reach the elevator in the lobby at the same time. Fred being a gentleman, opens the elevator door for her. The woman's face is framed in the elevator's window, like a round painting. Her two-dimensionality is further emphasized in the next, wider shot. In a medium close-up, we see her in her long black cloak standing in front of the patterned wall of the elevator – again just like a framed painting. The framing here emphasizes her two-dimensionality that can be interpreted as a parody of objectification as if she only existed as a painting, a pleasurable sight for men to look at. She is wearing a *battoulah*, a traditional mask worn by Arab women in the states of the Persian Gulf. Fred is looking at her, then he shyly looks away. When he looks at her again, her mask disappeared and the picture reveals the face of a beautiful woman. The reverse shot shows Fred smiling and looking in the woman's direction. This scene reveals a stereotypical male fantasy with the help of emphasized narration; the editing makes it possible for Fred to make the woman's cover disappear (an extensive amount of academic work has been written about veils and eroticism, see for example DelPlato and Codell 2017 or Zahedi 2007). With the help of a film specific technique the woman's mask is removed and her beauty is displayed for the man's enjoyment.

The film provides another good example with one of its pivotal scenes, Miss Universe's naked pool entrance. Miss Universe (Madalina Diana Ghenea) steps naked into a pool, while two old men (Harvey Keitel and Michael Caine) watch her in awe, stunned by her beauty. Here the editing technique creates the viewer's interpretation according to the character's perception. Following the viewer's interpretation process as described by Branigan (Branigan 1992, 76), his or her understanding is created by identifying with the point of view of the men here through the editing. Here the viewer's look is constructed in accordance with the male characters.

In a shot/reverse shot order we first see the men looking, and then the woman's body as the object (what they are looking at). The traditional shot/reverse shot editing calls the viewer to identify with the look as he or she is structured into the film's fictional world. However,

Sorrentino here parodies this particular kind of editing and pokes fun of the way the men (and through them the viewer) looks at the idealized woman. Humour prevents the audience from complete identification and it provides distance for detachment by creating an ironic space with a room for laughter. The film does present an idealized female figure, however through this stylistic technique it also parodies the way men look at women. It creates ambiguity through this humorous subversion. Thus, the feminine figure is not only idealized, but is also part of the joke. The attention is shifted from the objectification of women to the weakness of men.

When Miss Universe approaches the pool, she blinks towards the camera, she is aware of being looked at. As she enters the pool, the viewer sees her naked figure from behind, while the two old men already sitting in the pool also become visible in the background. Then the viewer gets a close-up of the men, stunned by her beauty. “Who is she?” – asks Fred in astonishment. “God” – replies Mick musingly. A short pause is followed, after which Mick explains that the apparition is Miss Universe embodied. Fred protests “but she looks so different.” While we continue to listen to the men’s conversation, we see a close-up of her figure. Her features are glistening in the sunshine. Looking at her, Fred continues to whisper “unrecognizable.” “She’s been transformed...” comments Mick... “from watching all those robot movies.” Mick’s joke refers to an earlier scene where they met Miss Universe. However here the accentuated film style presents her as a figure of extreme beauty instead of a real character and that is why Mick does not recognize her. Miss Universe’s immaculate naked beauty is revealed in the transparent water in a full body frame. Extreme physical attractiveness is presented in a dreamlike set up. The overdetermined style portrays her as the ideal female body. Previously, Fred did not take notice of Miss Universe, but here – through the accentuated film style – she has been transformed. The excessive style of overdetermination creates sensual desire, while at the same time this excessiveness also draws attention to the artificial nature of female beauty and accompanied by the characters’ joke it becomes a humorous subversion.

To represent female beauty ironically, Sorrentino uses overdetermination; the effect is determined by more than one cause, but any of the determining causes would have resulted in the same effect on its own (Jaworski 2011, 240). The director overdetermines the object of desire for parodic purposes: she is not only a beautiful and naked woman, but Miss Universe. The setting is also impeccable, the pool is in the spa of a luxurious Swiss resort in the Alps. The sun is shining and the water is pristine. It is the film's excessive style that creates this effect with its emphasized visuals, choreographed camera movement, structured shot/reverse shot editing and carefully designed mise-en-scène. This excessive style also draws attention to narration and distances the viewer. This distanced critical position allows a reflected understanding and the overdetermined representation of female beauty becomes a parody.

Sorrentino also uses overdetermination for parodic purposes at the end of *The Great Beauty*. When Jep realises that “the great beauty” he was looking for was his love for Elisa (Annaluisa Capasa), he is able to create art again and he starts writing a novel about this revelation. Thanks to the final scene's overtly stylised representation, this revelation also becomes ridiculously absurd.

When Jep remembers Elisa, the viewer sees the memory in a flashback. The importance of this scene was prepared in a previous sequence. Jep had tried to tell Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli) about his first love, but had been so overwhelmed with emotion by remembering it that he was unable to go through with it. Jep says to Ramona: “at the lighthouse at night... she took a step back and said...” Jep says this twice, but cannot finish the sentence. The viewer only sees the beginning of the flashback, but not the end. Now, at the end of the film, the director reveals the full flashback.

Because of its extreme stylistic emphasis, the flashback serves as the film's climax but also as a parody. In the flashback, Jep sees himself as a young man getting close to Elisa for the first

time. In this scene, Elisa seduces Jep (this is the answer to the *what?* question on the level of the narrative), but *how* it is presented is overtly stylized and heavy with symbolism, therefore the narration is again heavily emphasized. In the moonlit summer night, Jep and Elisa are walking towards a lighthouse on the beach. Their faces gleam in the moon's radiance. The moon – a stereotypically obvious symbol of femininity – is the light of revelation for Jep. Everything turned upside down in his life when Elisa showed him her breasts. The feminine symbolism is also accentuated by the sea. Jep sees Elisa as a mother figure, as the ideal woman, the mother of the whole universe. This memory scene reveals that Jep was so overwhelmed with female beauty that the writer inside him died. The ambiguity of this scene again leaves room for hesitation and creates space for an ironic interpretation. The cause of the protagonist's writing block is revealed as being overwhelmed by the physical attractiveness of an idealized woman. It becomes a parody of men's obsession with female beauty.

### **Magic**

There are magical characters in every Sorrentino film. As opposed to ironic characters, they lack ironic distance and they mean everything literally. They take up an absolute non-ironic position. In *Youth*, a rumour circulates among the hotel guests about a monk (Dorji Wangchuk), who is able to levitate. The story about his supernatural abilities is mentioned multiple times in the film. At the beginning, Fred's daughter, Lena (Rachel Weisz) looks outside the balcony of their room and tells her father, "That guy who levitates is out here." Fred answers, "I have been coming here for years; he has never levitated." In a revelatory sequence, we first see a close-up of the monk's head with a gorgeous mountain scenery in the background. The shot is just as mysterious as it is picturesque. The camera floats slowly backwards and the frame slowly reveals his shoulders. Then his back becomes visible too and the viewer can affirm that his body is covered by his long cloak. Next the camera sweeps the entirety of the cloak before it lets us glimpse its edge and the viewer can see that the cloak does not touch the ground. The

monk is indeed levitating. Sorrentino meticulously builds up this joke with an articulated visual punchline. In the most common kind of joke, we laugh because of our disappointed expectation, we expect one thing, but another thing happens. Here, Sorrentino does the opposite: our expectation is not disappointed, but unexpectedly affirmed. The monk really is magical.

Magical characters in the films are often spiritual or religious figures. In both *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, there is a yearning for spirituality. The films' excessive narration opens up the possibility to the viewer for a non-ironic enjoyment with the help of the secondary characters. The monk in *Youth* can actually levitate and Sister Maria (Giusi Merli) in *The Great Beauty* can actually blow the flamingos away. However, non-ironic enjoyment eventually proves to be impossible since the viewer occupies the ironic position of the protagonists. Jep Gambardella and Fred Ballinger look at the world around them with critical distance. The characters who represent the possibility of magic (Sister Maria in *The Great Beauty* or the monk in *Youth*) are beyond the pretensions of the world but this also makes them inaccessible, since it is difficult to identify with them. They represent an idealistic position that clashes with reality.

In *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, secondary characters represent magic, whereas the protagonists (and through them the viewer) occupy an ironic position. However, the director's latest work, *The Young Pope* (2016), complicates this relationship, since it merges the non-ironic outlook of the protagonists with the spiritual attraction of the secondary characters into one persona. The Pope (Jude Law) has ironic distance, but at the same time he is also magical. He is the absurd body, he embodies being and having a materiality simultaneously.

On the one hand, the Pope's occupies an extreme ironic position. He confesses to one of his priests that he does not believe in God. The priest is outraged by the idea of an irreligious leader of the Roman Catholic Church, but he is bound by the secrecy of the confession. When the Pope sees that the priest is overwhelmed by bitter fury, he says: "I was just joking. Wasn't it

obvious?" The priest is relieved, but the viewer has doubts after having witnessed the Pope's arrogant and narcissistic behaviour in the Vatican. We cannot get rid of the feeling that it was not a joke at all. Sorrentino creates a radically ironic space here, a sort of double irony, the irony of irony. This extreme ironic position seems to be in stark contrast with the spiritual yearning of magical characters. However, in Sorrentino's work even ironic characters can yearn for spirituality. The Pope is arrogant and cynical but he is magical, he is able to perform miracles.

The main characteristic of Sorrentino's humour is this yearning irony. He creates a pope who does not believe in God but is capable of performing miracles. His adopted mother, Sister Mary (Diane Keaton) believes that he healed an incurable ill child by prayer. Later in the series the audience can actually witness the pope performing miracles. He is able to tame a wild kangaroo (arriving to the Vatican as a gift from Australia) just by looking at it and releases it as an exotic pet to run freely in the Vatican's gardens. When they stare at each other the viewer has the feeling that the Pope can actually talk the language of animals. He also helps an infertile woman, who is desperate to have a child. After she receives the Pope's blessing, she miraculously becomes pregnant. These miracles are presented as divine interventions; however, Sorrentino's depiction is also extremely ironic. The Pope confesses his shaky belief in God multiple times, but it is never clear to the viewer if he is actually struggling with doubts about his own religiousness or if he is being cynical. His miracles are also ambiguous and leave room for an ironic interpretation. They can be seen as visions or illusions that are wishful projections of the faithful around him, who want to see the Pope as a real saint.

The contradictory but simultaneous experience of being and having is displayed through accentuated style, emphasizing pure narration. In *The Great Beauty*, Jep encounters a magician in the middle of performing a magic trick at the Colosseum, who wants to make a giraffe disappear. He asks him: "Can you make me vanish too?", whereas the magician answers: "It's

just a trick.” The scene stresses the difference between trickery and genuine magic through film style. The viewer actually witnesses the disappearance of the giraffe; however, the real magician is cinema. It is the film itself executing the trick with the help of a cinematic technique. The film closes with Jep’s voice over saying: “Beyond there is what lies beyond. I don’t deal with what lies beyond. Therefore...let this novel begin. After all it’s just a trick. Yes, it’s just a trick.” The film can make the giraffe disappear. The editing performs the magic trick. Cinema is the medium of magic.

### **Conclusion**

Humour is a key element in Sorrentino’s films, however, the nature of this humour is always ambiguous. Using David Bordwell’s concept of film style and Edward Branigan’s narration definition, I argued that *The Great Beauty* (2013) and *Youth* (2015) are expressions of irony. The films’ excessive style emphasizes narration over narrative by highlighting different filmic solutions like acting and editing.

While Sorrentino’s films are sometimes accused of being sexist, I wanted to argue in this paper that his use of comic irony undermines the apparent sexism of his films. The films accentuated style creates room for an ironic interpretation and this permits them to undermine their own representation of sexism, since the distanced critical position allows a reflected understanding. The director overdetermines the object of desire for parodic purposes with the help of excessive film style and thus the “sexist” presentation of female beauty becomes a humorous subversion. This ironically expressed ambiguity is the main characteristic of Sorrentino’s humour.

To examine humour’s ambiguous nature in *The Great Beauty* and *Youth*, I introduced Simon Critchley’s description of the absurd body, explaining how human beings experience an existentialist gap between being and having a body. This dichotomy described by Critchley

appears on multiple levels of representation in the films as the director contrasts the old with the young, the experience of being and having and irony and nostalgia.

Finally, my last argument focused on magic as a contrast to irony. The films' protagonists are defined by an ironic outlook, whereas the secondary characters are magical. As opposed to ironic characters, magic characters lack ironic distance and yearn for spirituality. However, even ironic characters can become magical. The director's latest work, *The Young Pope* (2016), creates a protagonist that merges the ironic and the magical outlook and thus bringing these two seemingly contradictory aspects together, he represents a yearning irony. The Pope embodies the absurd body as described by Critchley; he has ironic distance (having), while at the same time he is also magical by being able to perform miracles (being).

The director's latest work brings together my three points; it merges irony, sexism and magic. *The Young Pope* television series contains all the typical Sorrentino ingredients: excessive visuals, scathing humour and a yearning for spirituality.

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