

Paolo Sorrentino's 'Great Beauty' Explores Italy's Decline

By [RACHEL DONADIO](#) SEPT. 8, 2013



The Italian director Paolo Sorrentino. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

ROME — There is a striking scene in [“The Great Beauty,”](#) [Paolo Sorrentino’s](#) luscious new film, in which Jep Gambardella, a perpetually amused, impeccably tailored blocked novelist, looks down on the hulking body of the Costa Concordia cruise ship, which has been lodged off the Tuscan coast since its captain all but sank it there nearly two years ago.

The camera pans slowly along the horizon as Jep, played by [Toni Servillo](#), surveys the ship, a larger-than-life metaphor for a career — and a country — run aground. More than any other film to emerge from Italy in recent years,

“The Great Beauty” (“La Grande Bellezza”) explores one of the most difficult questions in Italy today: What happened here?

How did this country — that has a natural beauty and a culture that are the envy of the world; that produced Federico Fellini and Anna Magnani; that hurtled from poverty to prosperity in a two-decade postwar economic boom; that has been in the avant-garde of art since neorealism, if not Dante — reach the languorous impasse at which it finds itself now? How did it become this strange hothouse where the debate set to begin in Parliament this week revolves around whether applying the rule of law, a conviction against the former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi for tax fraud, puts the country’s stability at risk?

Mr. Sorrentino’s film, which has been described as a Technicolor [“La Dolce Vita”](#) for the Berlusconi era, doesn’t confront the question directly. Instead, it follows Jep on a kaleidoscopic Orphic journey on which his fellow travelers include an aging stripper, a struggling playwright, cash-poor aristocrats, a vacuous cardinal and a would-be saint — set against the photogenic backdrop of Rome.

“The Great Beauty” appeared in Europe this summer and is scheduled for release by Janus Films in New York and Los Angeles in November. It made its debut at Cannes in May and will play at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) this week.

On a warm late August afternoon, Mr. Sorrentino, who at 43 has already become one of Italy’s most important directors, sat in his high-ceiling study in Rome and reflected on what compelled him to make the film. What he wanted to convey, he said, was a general atmosphere.

In Rome today, “since it’s hard to be optimistic, it’s hard to be positive, there’s a kind of lassitude that found its symbolic culmination in dancing, in conga lines, in trying to seduce the beautiful woman of the moment or the beautiful man of the moment,” Mr. Sorrentino said, settling into an armchair

and puffing on a small cigar. “It seemed that this had become the principal occupation of the country.”

The director Paolo Sorrentino narrates the opening sequence of his film.

By Mekado Murphy on November 13, 2013. . [Watch in Times Video »](#)

The Roman rooftop terrace parties in “The Great Beauty” show a culture that is blocked, resigned, embalmed in elegant decline, where some seek religion and others cocaine, and intellectuals talk endlessly about what’s wrong and yet inertia overwhelms all forward momentum.

“Obviously, it’s not only like that,” he continued. “There are lots of people who work and do wonderful and commendable things, but there’s still a sense that the nerve centers of the country had fallen asleep on their couches at home. And so I tried to turn that into a film — that everything had become a bit of a salon.”

“The Great Beauty” is not a political film per se, but while other contemporary Italian directors have looked to the past or produced more prosaic dramas, Mr. Sorrentino is one of the few to engage fully with the culture of excess that has come to characterize the Italy of Mr. Berlusconi, prime minister, most recently, until 2011. (Two notable examples are Nanni Moretti’s 2006 [“Il Caimano,”](#) about a director unable to make a film about an unnamed media mogul, and Matteo Garrone’s 2012 [“Reality,”](#) about obsession with reality TV.) Mr. Sorrentino’s fresh, timely response is rare even beyond Italy, as artists have largely not yet addressed the economic crisis and social shifts that have swept across Europe over the past several years.

The film has been the talk of Rome all summer. Beyond debates about its merits, and its portrayal of the complicity of the left-wing elite in the country’s decline, responses have often reflected Italy’s polarization over Mr. Berlusconi.

Some criticize what they consider the film’s exaggerated sense of decline.

Riffing acerbically on the film's reception, the critic Mariarosa Mancuso wrote in the pro-Berlusconi newspaper *Il Foglio*: "It's a Kierkegaardian film. It's a Célinian film. It's a faithful portrait of the Eternal City. It's a faithful portrait of Italy today." She added: "Federico Fellini in 'La Dolce Vita' leaned on the balustrade to look down. Today, there isn't even a balustrade anymore; it's collapsed, too."

Mr. Sorrentino welcomes the debate. "The film makes you face questions that might be irritating," he said. "There's a tendency among Italians to say: 'We're not part of that,' 'I'm not part of that.' Many people went out of their way to say that they weren't a part of it, and they were the ones who were most a part of it."

Mr. Sorrentino grew up in a middle-class family in Naples. When he was 17, his parents died in an accident, a gas leak. At an early age, he started working with theater actors, including Mr. Servillo, who has become for him what Marcello Mastroianni was for Fellini. Mr. Sorrentino's first feature-length film, "One Man Up" (2001), stars Mr. Servillo as a washed-up Neapolitan lounge singer. In "The Consequences of Love" (2004), Mr. Servillo plays a Mafia bag man living in a Swiss hotel. Sean Penn was on the jury at Cannes in 2008 that lauded Mr. Sorrentino's "Il Divo" and afterward the director cast Mr. Penn in ["This Must Be the Place"](#) (2011) as a heavy-metal singer who tries to avenge his Holocaust-survivor father.



A scene from Paolo Sorrentino's new film, "The Great Beauty." Gianni Fiorito

“The Great Beauty” did not appear at the Venice Film Festival, a telling sign about its declining importance as a place to sell films but also of Mr. Sorrentino’s uneasy relationship with [Italy](#)’s politicized cultural establishment.

In Europe, culture, politics and aesthetics have always been deeply intertwined. It is a theme that Mr. Sorrentino has explored before more directly in “Il Divo,” about the seven-time Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti. It also starred Mr. Servillo and was set in the sepulchral halls of power in Rome, filled with classical busts, where politicians have been wheeling and dealing uninterruptedly for millenniums.

[“Il Divo”](#) won the jury prize at Cannes, a vindication for Mr. Sorrentino and his producers, who had met significant resistance in finding financing for the film in Italy because of its critical take on Mr. Andreotti. (He died in May.)

In Mr. Andreotti's day, ideology dominated the debate. Today, it's style.

"Berlusconi gave a serious contribution to this climate," Mr. Sorrentino said. His conduct, his insistence on "having fun as a categorical imperative, on the ephemeral," left its mark on Italy. "If it's done by someone in a position of great responsibility, it becomes in my view a kind of license for many people."

To the perennial question — How is it possible that Mr. Berlusconi still has a grip on Italy? — Mr. Sorrentino offers an aesthetic answer through his latest movie: *Everyone loves a party*.

Mr. Sorrentino has also been criticized for being too baroque, a claim he refutes. "Considering that cinema is aging, it seems strange to me that it shouldn't ask questions about style," he said, as the evening light poured into his study.

"Films that only have content have already been done," Mr. Sorrentino said. "All disciplines need innovation, and innovation comes more readily through form than through substance."

In the final credits of *"The Great Beauty,"* the camera glides in a boat down the green-brown Tiber. There is no music, only the cawing of birds. Time stops, and everything is beautiful, as only Italy can be.