

Hitchcock/Sorrentino

Comparing The Lady Vanishes not all that favorably to La grande bellezza

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January 2014

One Friday evening I saw Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* ("The Great Beauty"), commonly listed as one of the best films of 2013. At home the next evening my son and I watched Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, a long-time favorite. It remained as deliciously entertaining as ever, but, when juxtaposed with *La grande bellezza*, the Hitchcock movie seemed second-rate, unambitious, a very clever combination of clichés. (As *The Lady Vanishes* dates back to 1938, it would take some work to determine which of Hitchcock's characters or scenes were making use of existing clichés, and in which cases Hitchcock and other filmmakers and writers, by subsequently re-using the characters and scenes of this movie and similar movies, turned them into clichés. Cf. a comment of Hitchcock's: "Self-plagiarism is style.")

Given how influential Hitchcock's films have been on the last several generations of American and French filmmakers (and perhaps on Italians as well), it has seemed that comparisons of the two films could speak both to what an "ambitious" movie might involve and also to what we have come to expect and resist when we go to the movies. My goal here is not to come to grand conclusions on my own, but rather to open a door on a process of reflection. I am sure that another person could explain how and why Hitchcock's is the greater, even perhaps more ambitious, of the two films, and I would be interested to read that explanation. But first the following, preliminary observations:

(1) In considering together *The Lady Vanishes* and *La grande bellezza* I have thought of those street vendors who, for children, inflate balloons and twist them into animal shapes. So Hitchcock, his actors and cinematographer inflated and twisted into adorable shapes existing or prospective clichés: European mountain scenery, train travel, English cricket fans, the spineless cheating husband, evil doctor, spoiled rich American girl, and so forth. Similarly *Bellezza* may be said to both re-inflate and twist clichés developed by Fellini and others, and to propose some of its own. There is the Via Veneto, the dwarf editor, the 700-euro-a-shot Botox guru, the cardinal more interested in recipes than salvation, the middle-aged stripper working to pay her medical bills, . . . Seen on a screen in New York City, the movie's charming protagonist Jep Gambardella—impeccably dressed, warm, hopeless, disdainful and delighted—seems a true original and to embody a seductive, perhaps even an ideal way of living for those who happen to have more than enough money. My understanding is, however, that Italian viewers, and those closer to Italy than me, recognize Jep as an embodiment of “la bella figura”—the peculiarly Italian mix of fashion, decorum, loyalty, culture and reserve. And, given the success of *Bellezza*, it may now be difficult for Sorrentino and the actor Toni Servillo to *not* further reproduce Jep or Jep-like characters. Think of Fellini's Marcello Mastroianni, and of Jack Nicholson, Katherine Hepburn, . . .

(2) Like big-budget movies, so detective novels, fantasy fiction and other literary genres also offer the pleasure of lovable or detestable characters who reappear in book after book. In more “serious” (and more comic) literature—e.g. Dickens, Henry James, Balzac, Saul Bellow, Amy Tan—there are types of people, scenes, ways of talking that repeat, and a reader may, say, pick up a James novel in order to bathe in the familiarity and recall or re-experience pleasures previously enjoyed. But the predictability of such texts, as of such movies, is also a drawback. At an extreme it may reduce the pleasures of the experience to those of repetition and of an assurance of fixity—e.g. in a rapidly changing world. (I have written about commercial aspects of this phenomenon in “[A Fresh Look at the Movies](#).”)

(3) It is interesting that we think of Hitchcock as a master of suspense, and that we often indeed feel tense watching his movies. Although my son, unlike his father, has long been a devoted movie watcher, the first time I put on *The Lady Vanishes* there came a point when he found the tension—the possibility of insanity, of believing you had seen someone

who never existed?—unbearable, and it was years before I could get him to try the movie again. Yet, are there any truly open questions in Hitchcock’s movies? In *The Lady* do we really think the frumpy governess-spy, Miss Froy, is going to end up dead? Do we think that Michael Redgrave and Margaret Lockwood are not going to end up falling in love, or at least kissing in the movie’s final scene? Afterwards does one find oneself reflecting on the fine lines between doubt and belief or sanity and madness? (No.)

This observation comes to me by comparing *The Lady* with *Bellezza*, which is quite ambivalent and may leave a viewer feeling the unanswerability of one of life’s (and philosophy’s) most fundamental questions: How to live? I have heard that some people feel Sorrentino’s film is not good (not worth watching) because nothing happens. This is nice in view of Jep’s interest in trying, after Flaubert (and *Seinfeld*?) to write a novel about nothing. But it also seems an odd comment given what a large and lush movie *Bellezza* is. Can nothing be happening in a movie in which a giraffe disappears in the Terme di Caracalla (third century Roman baths), and a performance artist first presents her communist-red-painted vulva and then runs full speed into a concrete wall? Can nothing be happening in a movie that includes the death of both the protagonist’s first love and of the woman (the stripper) who Jep, at 65, is just beginning to love? In light of such a profusion of events, the way I understand the “nothing happens” criticism of *Bellezza* is that it has to do with the fact that—whereas Hitchcock’s heroine (Lockwood) throws over her fiancé (the man she “should” marry) for Michael Redgrave, the man who excites her—Jep makes no changes. In the United States, when confronted with problems, we don’t just talk about making changes, for God’s sake we do something!

Meanwhile I quote from the libretto version of the *Bellezza*’s most impassioned discussion, Jep speaking:

Stefania, madre e donna, hai 53 anni e una vita devastata come tutti noi.
Aniché disprezzarci e farci la morale, dovresti vederci con affetto e tenera solidarietà. Siamo tutti sull’orlo della disperazione e abbiamo un unico rimedio: farci compagnia e prenderci un po’ in giro.

Stefania, you are 53-year old woman and mother whose life, just like all of our lives, has been a train wreck. Instead of despising and preaching to us, you should look on us with affection and show some solidarity. We are all on the brink of despair and have only the solace of one another’s company and of being able to make light of our situation.

(4) I would take this one step further. If people go to the movies for reassurances and to escape from their problems and from the human predicament more generally, then what is most unsettling and wrong with *La grande bellezza* is that we cannot say if Jep's life is a failure or not, nor can we say that Jep does or does not consider his life a failure, nor that he or Sorrentino truly see human lives, or the lives of well-to-do Italians, as a train wreck ("devastate"). What makes Jep extraordinary is hardly that he wrote a promising first novel and then never wrote another, but that—unlike so many of us—he has no false hopes. And thus he has none to offer us viewers.

I read several *New York Times* articles that—to reduce anxiety, do away with uncertainty?—suggested *Bellezza* had a moral ("La Dolce Vita Gone Sour"), that it was making a particular point, e.g. about Italy during the Berlusconi era. Or a German critic proposed that *Bellezza*'s moral is that as you sow, so shall you reap; there are costs and consequences to a dissolute, undisciplined (i.e. Southern European) life. It might be said that *The Lady Vanishes* (and on the eve of the Second World War) was making a rather more positive point about Britishness, or that the film was a celebration of the British people. I.e., while they may be silly, boy are they courageous and resolute in a fight. It might also be classified as a pre-war propaganda film—the Brits allying themselves with the American and determinedly gunning down the evil Eastern Europeans; the weasel of a two-timing British pacifist, waving his white handkerchief, being quickly gunned down.

Meanwhile, *La grande bellezza* engages unabashedly in social criticism and has no pat answers—or simply no answers at all (beyond the pleasures of complex, beautiful, open-ended films). When I wondered if and why I might wish to see the movie a second time, the thought that jumped into my mind was that I would like to see the middle-aged people conga dancing again. I bought the libretto above all to get the Italian for some of Jep's wittiest lines. When one so enjoys the dancing, the repartee and the movie's broad-mindedness, how can one conclude that much of anything has gone wrong in Sorrentino's Italy? Jep smokes a lot—to an American viewer this is very striking. His life is going up in smoke, we—on the other side of the Calvinist divide— might like to say, but in Rome, in Jep's apartment with the view of the Coliseum, can it be said that there is any better way to live?

(5) Both *The Lady Vanishes* and *La grande bellezza* have fun with illusion and thus with how easy it is for the movies to play tricks and to divert us thereby. I have already mentioned *Bellezza's* giraffe; there is also the computer-generated and yet so-present-looking flock of flamingos who appear on Jep's balcony. Hitchcock has his ladies who vanish, reappear and exchange places, and his magician's magic cabinets, and Miss Froy's name written in the dust of the train window and then disappearing after the train goes through a tunnel. Hitchcock quipped that a "good film is when the price of the dinner, the theatre admission and the babysitter were worth it," and I suppose a Hitchcock fan might say that his technique and self-confidence were such that he could leave to such viewers and critics as wished the task of making more of his cinematic tricks, inflated clichés and suspense than was necessary to justify the price of the tickets and babysitter. But Sorrentino goes one very large step further. He calls viewers' attention to the Eternal City's long dependence on glorious illusions and deceptions, from the Roman circuses and the Church's transubstantiation to the present-day cast of post-modern artists, lovers, aristocrats, political leaders, beautiful people. In Jep's interview with the performance artist, Sorrentino probes what—nothing? meaningless vibrations? pitiful humanity?—may be behind our illusion creating. And, then, in the scene of the aged nun climbing the Scala Sancta (Holy Stairs) on her knees, and with her real or made-up toothless mouth, Sorrentino asks, rather more seriously, if there might be some real power in or need for illusions. (Legend has it that in 1511 Martin Luther climbed the Stairs, recited an "Our Father," and then raised himself up from his knees and asked, "Who knows whether it is so?")

(6) Toward the end of *La grande bellezza* the cardinal is describing how to make a splendid dish of bitter radishes with lemon sauce. Jep interrupts and, with a certain aggressivity, says: "You want to know something, cardinal." When I first met you there was something important, a spiritual question I very much wanted to ask to you about. "But then you were distracted."

"You could ask me now," the cardinal says.

"No, I no longer feel that I can."

"Perché?" Why?

“Perché,” Jep says, “sarrebbe molto deludente per me, scoprire che lei no possiede nessuna risposta.” It would be such a disappointment for me to find out that you had no answers.

Hitchcock’s characters do not speak on this level, and if they did, it would be easy enough to figure out whether they were seriously disillusioned or making a joke.

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Credit

The lines quoted above are from the libretto: Umberto Contarello and Paolo Sorrentino, **La grande bellezza** (NarrativaSkira, 2013). The English translations are my own.