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Pirandello’s Influence on Nino Manfredi’s Film Nudo di donna (Portrait of a Woman, Nude)

Film is the language of images, and images do not speak.
(Luigi Pirandello)

In 1977, in his opening key-note address of an International Film Convention dedicated to Pirandello, the noted film critic Giovanni Grazzini stated that many directors including Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini echo themes reminiscent of Pirandello (28).¹

When asked about his views on the future of cinema Luigi Pirandello answered: “without limitations!” (Nulf 47). Still, Pirandello had strong reservations about the success of talking movies, as he wrote in 1929 in the article entitled “Whether the Talking Film Will Abolish the Theater.” In defense of the supremacy of the theater (“un’espressione naturale della vita”), Pirandello contends that it will never die because of the fact that “non è lui, il teatro, che vuole diventare cinematografia, ma è lei, la cinematografia, che vuol diventare teatro.” But there is no doubt that he was so fascinated with the new medium that he adopted film strategies in his own works.² Some of these are incorporated in the plays for which Pirandello is famous. Yet, he was not wholeheartedly interested in translating his stage work for the camera; rather, he employed cinematic techniques in his fiction and remained open to the implications of the newer medium. In this paper I will write about the influence of Pirandellian theories on a popular Italian film, Nino Manfredi’s Nudo di Donna (Portrait of a Woman, Nude, 1982). As early as 1915 in Si gira! (Shoot!), later entitled Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore, Pirandello used cinema as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of technology which reduce individuals to the state of things like “the hand that turns the projector’s reel.”³ In Novelle per un anno’s “Il viaggio” the magical city of Venice became the symbolic setting for a story about the illusory escape from existential despair. Plays such as Six Characters in Search of an Author artfully blur the boundaries between fiction and reality as the viewers become active participants in the staged performance. Through the technique of the play-within-the-play, the stage becomes a mirror reflecting the spectator’s fragmented vision of self. Thus the dramatis personae dramatize Pirandello’s axiom of “vedersi vivere”, of seeing oneself alive as a puppet in the hands of overwhelming forces.

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Pirandello’s art bears resemblance to Platonic dialectics of truth and appearance. This can be seen in the theatrical invention of a fictional character who becomes real and free from the constraints of the fictive text, novel, play, or film. Being is equivalent to seeming; only the illusion is real.

Did Pirandello have a theory of cinema? Despite his apprehension, even hostility toward the ever-increasing popularity of cinema, Pirandello understood the importance of the “seventh art” (see Nulf). Pirandello’s greater appreciation for cinema was most likely enhanced by his friendship with Eisenstein. They met in 1929 in Berlin where the Soviet director first discussed with him his theories (Grazzini 27-28). Eisenstein’s theories seem to coincide with Pirandello’s own use of movement and sound to captivate the attention of the spectators. Words, Eisenstein claimed, should not interfere with the language of images. This belief was also shared by Pirandello who was fascinated by photography and understood well the narrative function of sound and visual effects. For both, sound and image should have different meanings. This idea seems to apply also to the film that we are going to analyze. In this erotic comic mystery, the protagonists seek their physical and mental entrapment in the convoluted world of Venice during the Carnival festivities. Their literal and metaphorical navigations into the beautiful waters of Venice and the unconscious is musically associated with strident jazz motifs. Like Eisenstein, Pirandello believed that music was to serve as an aural counterpoint to the images. In the 1928 Statement on the Sound of Film, Eisenstein makes the sound-montage aesthetic explicit:

every adhesion of sound to a visual montage piece increases its inertia as a montage piece, and increases the independence of its meaning — and this will undoubtedly be to the detriment of montage, operating in the first place not on the montage pieces, but on their juxtaposition.

Only a contrapuntal use of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection.

The first experimental work with sound must be directed along the line of its distinct non-synchronization with the visual images. And only such an attack will give the necessary palpability of visual and aural images. (257-59)

Pirandello must have been impressed by Eisenstein’s idea of montage, namely that the combination of two different images created “an explosion” or third image in the mind of the spectator, much like Japanese haiku (Horton 98; Moses 55). His notion of humor is similar to Eisenstein’s theories in as much as it relies on the awareness of opposite images which gives way to metaphorical significance. In his essay On Humor (1908), a summa of his aesthetics, Pirandello explains a similar notion: images, instead of being linked through similarity or juxtaposition, are presented in conflict:

each image, each group of images evokes and attracts contrary ones, and these naturally divide the spirit which, in its restlessness, is obstinately determined to
find or establish the most astonishing relationships between these images. (119)

In Pirandello’s definition, laughter is the “perception of the opposite” and does not entail deeper feelings, whereas humor makes us see behind the comic surface of things. It unveils the more meaningful side of reality. In his famous example, a deeper and more meaningful perception of reality rises from the awareness of a more painful reality hidden beneath. This is made possible by the “special activity of reflection” which is brought about the “association through contraries.” Thus incongruity between these opposing images is essential, “like a violin and a double bass at the same time.” By fusing the antinomies of life, humor contributes to give meaning and coherence to one’s life and the world. Thus Pirandello learned from Eisenstein that in cinematography visual and sound imagery supersede words, or dialogue, in describing the protagonists’ fragmented personalities. Pirandello’s dream was to contribute to a new art form, which he called cinemalografia; as the word suggests, cinemalography, unlike its counterpart, was not writing in light, but writing in music. Pirandello knew well that, in the power of sound and images, “il linguaggio visibile della musica” [the visible language of music], lay cinema’s key to success (Angelini 96).

The film, set in Venice amid the mardi gras festivities, illustrates many Pirandellian dialectics. It is structured around such motifs as the double, the mirror, the mask, and all their visual ramifications. The popular Italian actor Nino Manfredi is, in typical Pirandellian fashion, author, director and protagonist of this movie that — though not critically acclaimed — achieved international success.

The film begins with an image of Venice emerging from the lagoon in the pallor of dawn. We see a gondola at medium range, silently gliding into the night. Pirandello exploits a similar view of the city of Venice to represent the inner turmoil of the protagonist, Adriana Braggi, in “Il viaggio”:

L’ultimo giorno a Milano, poco prima di partire per Venezia, si vide allo specchio, disfatta. E quando, dopo il viaggio notturno, si aprì nel silenzio dell’alba la visione di sogno, superba e malinconica, della città emergente dalle acque, comprese che era giunta al suo destino; che lì il suo viaggio doveva aver fine” (Novelle 2.453).

[The last day in Milano, just before leaving for Venice, she saw herself in the mirror, worn-out. And when, after travelling by night, she caught in the stillness of dawn the vision of that dreamlike, superb yet, sad view of the city emerging from the water, she understood that she had reached her final destination; that her life journey would end there.]

Thus the opening shot of the film quickly introduces the Pirandellian idea of Venice as the city where the boundary between illusion and reality is blurred. From the onset Pirandello appears inextricably linked to the narrative strategies of the film. Next, we follow a gondola at medium range, at the front of which a tall white clothed figure is standing. This shot will set up the network of Carnival-related images which come full circle at the end of the movie. Manfredi’s
film subsumes contemporary concerns, exploiting the bizarre costumes and setting of Venice at Carnival time to explore universal antinomies. We recall that also in "Il viaggio" the images of Venice and of the gondola were symbolic of love and death. The gondola’s color, black, and its serpent-like shape evoke a sense of the dread which pervades Pirandello’s description of Venice, eerily shrouded by night:


[She wanted to have her day in Venice. Until evening and into the night, riding a gondola in the stillness of the canals. She lay awake all night long, under the spell of that day: a day of velvet. The velvet of a gondola? The velvet of the canals’ shadows? Who knows? The velvet of a coffin!]

In Pirandello, death and insanity seem to be the only alternatives to metaphysical despair. Pirandello finds a meaning to life by vying with the forces of chaos and destiny. Feeling oppressed by unpredictable chaotic universe, man can only act like Camus’ Sysiphus who, even if vanquished, is defiant and happy. By not acquiescing to his torments, he is free, and to a certain degree, he can control chaos through the power of humor. At the end of Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Sysiphus is alone in his struggle and yet he is capable of laughing at death and at the gods who oppress him ("Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" [168]). Pirandello also recognized that humor frees man from the bonds of an adverse fortune by exposing the perverse mechanism of his existential predicament.

The film’s early scenes humorously illustrate the story’s principal thematic concerns. A bird’s-eye shot pans through an elegant Venetian chandelier to a wedding reception. A priest is lecturing on the importance of spirituality over sexuality in marriage. The camera pans, following the sound of snoring to its cause. Sandro is asleep in a chair. The scene ends with the wedding cake being cut between the statues of the bride and groom. The opening has brought us into the middle of the action. Nudo di donna’s visual imagery not only provides a background to Sandro’s actions, but it also relates important thematic information. Patterns of visual images and sound repeatedly remind us of Pirandellian strategies aimed at reproducing the mental phantasmagoria of the protagonists. The various narrative elements introduce the principal themes at the film’s onset. Venice is in the midst of festivities, and we will later understand the implications of its celebrations for the wedding and carnival. Carnival is highly suggestive of the pleasures of love and marriage; implicitly, it suggests fantasy and reality; ideologically, Sandro’s pedestrian behavior alludes to the clash between the rich industrial North and the mainly rural poorer South. The characterization deliberately supports the dialectic interplay of various levels: Sandro is a Southern working-class man who is frustrated with his life; Sandro’s wife, Laura is bour-
geoise, Northern and refined, the owner of an antique bookstore.

Like most Pirandellian plays, the film is, at the level of the narration, ambiguous. There seems to be no plot and the characterization is, to say the least, tenuous. Sandro relies on pantomime, confessions, gags, and the full range of "commedia all'italiana" repertoire to communicate to the spectator his inner quest. Sandro, the fictional persona, is cognizant of his ephemeral nature, as illusionary as the fictional text which tells his story. As in Pirandello, Sandro's search for the identity of the woman constitutes the plot itself: a philosophical question: "who is Riri?" But the larger question is, who is Sandro? He who is trying so hard to discover her identity appears to be a very confused man himself. The entire movie sees Manfredi endlessly pursuing his wife's double through the tortuous mazes of Venice, the city of water. Water reflects and distorts; thus the setting of Venice, city of dreams and illusion, provides a Pirandellian mirror which obviates catching any glimpse of one's true self.

Manfredi's film emphasizes many elements that characterize Pirandello's plays. The most evident is the manipulation of space and time to destroy the linearity of the narrative flow and to reinforce the theme of the illusory essence of reality. It is precisely through incongruity that Pirandello moves the spectator to laughter which quickly turns to sadness when a more serious and painful truth is discovered. The dialectical tension that pervades the film is at the essence of Pirandello's antithetical definition of humor. As Pirandello explains in his essay *On Humor*, his definition derives from the ancient notion of the four humors, blood, bile, phlegm and melancholy, which could determine a man's personality as well as his health. Pirandello borrows from Thomas Carlyle his definition of humanity: "L'uomo è un animale vestito" ["Man is an animal in clothes" (158)]. That is why we laugh at the lady who is ostentatiously dressed, and ridiculous in her attempt to disguise herself as a younger woman, unable to hide her wrinkles and gray hair. The true humorist is he who can move us from laughter, the realm of the "perception of the contradiction," and appeal to our "sense" ("sentimento") of intelligence and compassion. The old woman deserves our respect because she is acting out of love; she is intimately humiliated by her attempt to appear desirable to the eyes of her younger husband. In Pirandello, humor is never thought of as something funny or entertaining; on the contrary, it is stylistically a liberating, innovative force which has the power of bringing about epiphanic revelations of life's deeper truth. More importantly, it produces a nobler sentiment which fosters a deeper understanding of human suffering.

Venice's entanglement of canals and bridges is an appropriate metaphor for the characters' quest for identity, lost in the labyrinth of their subjective world. It is a most entertaining allegory about the deceptions of role playing. As the film reveals, the water, the glass, and mirrors of Venice reverberate the many images of the protagonists' selves during mardi gras. The Carnival revellers who crowd the *calli* of Venice personify Sandro's deceptions as he strives for stability, certainty and meaning. Having said this, Pirandello's *Henry IV* comes to mind. It is
precisely during a re-enactment of a medieval mardi gras that Henry falls from his horse losing his memory, his sanity, and his identity. The similarity is reinforced also by the last scene of the movie showing Sandro wearing the costume of a first world war soldier, his head wrapped in blood stained bandages. He seems completely lost within himself and within his world. Venice with its architecture, piazzas, and canals thus provides an ideal mise-en-scene for Manfredi’s Pirandellian quest, a splendid paradigm of a world in which appearance creates reality.

After the wedding cake is cut the groom statue symbolically falls, leaving a standing bride, thus anticipating the woman’s predicament as in the conjugal crisis that is to follow. Graphically, this image visually reinforces that of the tall white clothed figure standing on the gondola seen at the outset. Through repetition this image acquires significance. Stylistically, the gondola’s white figure re-appears as the statue standing on the wedding cake thus establishing a visual connecting element which contributes to the overall visual unity of the film. As mentioned, the image is also charged with thematic resonance since not only is it associated with Sandro’s spiritual journey (the gondola), but also with his marriage (the wedding cake). Finally, it also underscores Pirandello’s clothing metaphor of humor, we are what we appear to be, in other words, the reality of oneself is as fragile as his appearance.

An exterior night shot of Venice follows. Walking home Sandro encounters Zanetto, a homosexual friend who is in the company of two transvestites dressed for Carnival. Zanetto’s bi-sexuality reinforces the dialectics of being, as when he reveals to Sandro: “I didn’t marry, because I didn’t know whether to be the bride or the groom.” The men walk through a dark tunnel. The image evokes once again the initial scene; Sandro is like the standing figure on the gondola navigating the perilous waters of the unconscious. The encounter with Zanetto introduces Sandro’s soon-to-emerge sexual problems. As a rat darts in front of them, Zanetto exclaims: “Ghosts are worse than rats in Venice.” As his reference to the supernatural suggests, Venice is a place of illusions. Sandro does not know Venice’s streets, and Zanetto leads him to the lagoon where he gives him as a gift “Dawn over Venice, East meets West.” Zanetto, who seems at home in Venice, whose intricate whole parallels Sandro’s existential maze, clearly alludes to the duality of reality and illusion when he underscores Venice as the synthesis of antinomies: the Orient, the real of magic, and the western world, reality. Once again the film poses familiar Pirandellian polarities.

Sandro, the protagonist-narrator, bored and middle-aged, detests Venice. In seven months he has not made love once with Laura, his blond, delicate, and intelligent wife of sixteen years. Usually sleep prevails over his sexual attempts. Sandro, a “Southerner from Rome,” loves cars, which explains why he hates a city of water. Laura has inherited an antiquarian bookstore which she manages with the help of Giovanni, who adores her as much as he loathes Sandro. In Giovanni’s opinion, Sandro is a total disgrace to the South. Suddenly, Laura be-
comes fascinated by erotic art which seems to fulfill her frustrated sexual desires. Sandro is alarmed by Laura’s interest, especially after perusing some of Laura’s favorite books: a lavishly illustrated edition of Juvenal’s erotic tales about the Emperor Claudius and his secretly whoring wife, Messalina. A cut to an angel and a devil on a boat, immediately juxtaposed by a cut to Laura, visually raises the possibility of her duplicity. She defends erotic art as “intellectual, the highest form of sexual desire.” His virility threatened, Sandro announces that he will leave her in search of his own “kamasutra.” According to Pirandello, to be truly a realist meant going beyond reality into the realm of the imaginary; ambiguity becomes in Pirandello a mode to express the real. Thus the film’s pursuits of erotic art bring us back to Pirandello’s notion of art as a mirror to the ephemeral nature of perceived reality.

Laura’s identification with the fictional reality of Messalina is reminiscent of a Pirandellian mise-en-abyme, the play-within-the-play. The characters become aware of the futility of their existence because they are cognizant of the fact that their identity is confined to the story’s spatial and temporal limits. This concept of the fictional persona who becomes a reader of herself is suggested by Laura’s reflection of herself in an erotic book. Again this ties the film to Pirandello’s self-referential preoccupations evident in Il fu Mattia Pascal and other writings. Indeed, the notion of the reality and autonomy of the fictional character is perhaps one of Pirandello most influential contributions to contemporary art. In On Humor, Pirandello wrote that, when a poet genuinely succeeds in giving life to one of his characters, this character lives independently of its author. We can imagine it then in other situations so much alive and unique that later it may become what is called a “type,” something that “was not a part of the author’s intention at the moment of creation” (86).

Pirandello uses Cervantes, whom he considers the greatest humorist of all times, to illustrate his ideas. He imagines an aging Cervantes who, in the solitary confinement of a prison cell, painfully reflects on his existential misfortunes. It is out of the contemplation of his troubled self that Don Quixote is born. He, as Cervantes’ alter ego, will outlive his creator and become immortal. That death remains pending and is even unimportant, since he is a fiction, “un uomo di carta,” a man made of paper, art, an illusion. As in Don Quixote’s case, the security of a new role and a new name are revealed as an ephemeral solution to existential misery. Pirandello astutely observed that the dynamism of self originates from the fact that life is in a continual flux and it resists being cast into fixed forms. In order to avoid stagnation, individuals must constantly evolve and take on new identities. But if it is true that art escapes death through form, it is also true that the character confronts his own death as his existence is limited to the text which contains it. According to Pirandello’s atheistic views, life is as illusory as art, since, in the absence of God, it mirrors the void of a transcendental reality. Only our will to oppose the stifling forces of life gives to our existence its ultimate meaning. Thus, for Pirandello, humor describes our sense of a compassion-
ate detachment from negative perceptions of self and of others. The tedium vitae which transpires even from his most humorous tales can be traced to the writer’s personal encounter with madness. Three women who loved Pirandello were mentally sick: his younger sister Annetta, his first fiancée and cousin, Rosalina Pirandello, and most importantly, Maria Antonia Portulano — Antonietta — his wife, a severe schizophrenic.

In Nudo di donna, there are allusions to madness. When Sandro leaves home it is through Zanetto that he arranges to stay at a run-down baroque palace, the home of a Southern friend, Pireddu, a photographer from Sardinia. What Sandro is about to experience during the night he spends there evokes Il fu Mattia Pascal, when the protagonist, alias Adriano Meis, goes to live in the insane household of the Paleari family. There Adriano comes into contact with the world of the occult and participates in seances. What we see happening in Pireddu’s brings to mind the episodes of the Paleari’s. That night, a violent rain storm rages, water is leaking from the ceiling, there is no electricity, bursts of lightning ominously reveal a desolate interior. It is a fitting commentary on Sandro’s spiritual state. Sandro sees that he is not alone; lovers of every age are sprawled out in the darkness. As he seeks a place for himself, a bolt of lightning illuminates a larger-than-life picture: a woman sleeping facedown naked. The woman resembles Laura in every detail. Self-reflexive motifs are advanced by means of light (erotic blue) and a split screen showing Sandro in a red-lit doorway looking at the nude photo in blue light. Sudden bursts of lightning also create the illusion that the woman is real. As flashes of light distort Sandro’s face and his environment, the film’s spectators are forced to question his mental state.

Lighting and colors, like the setting, thus further elicit a parallel with Pirandello’s strategies requiring multiple deceptions and illusions. Sandro’s bout with the Pireddu’s “insane” world helps bring into focus questions of conformity in marriage, politics, and of art. The film systematically alternates scenes of darkness with scenes of daylight. Sandro’s walking with Zanetto and his fight with Laura take place at night; his search for Riri takes place during daylight. More specifically, the scene in which Sandro discovers the mysterious picture at Pireddu’s house is distinguished from the rest of the film by its soft, blue under-lighting which creates an unreal, dreamlike effect. The camera’s angle changes from an omniscient medium straight angle shot to a medium close-up. A tilt of the camera angle now juxtaposes the spectator’s gaze with that of Sandro, who intently contemplates the woman, nude. With a close-up the camera forces us to join Sandro’s fictional reality. Her face is resting on the pillow half hidden by her arm and her blond hair. She is on her side, her legs slightly crossed. We feel as excited as Sandro as we recognize Laura in that nude. As in Six Characters in Search of an Author, the roles are reversed as the spectator becomes part of the screen performance.

Alarmed by this discovery, Sandro runs back home hoping that finding Laura at home will dispel his fears. The next day he returns to query his friend. The
man is adamant; he will reveal only the name of the model, Riri. Thus Sandro’s pursuit of Riri begins. He searches for her all over Venice following many women who resemble her. Finally, he recognizes her portrait among others displayed by an elderly street artist and queries him about her. Yes, the name is familiar, the man says with a smile, Riri was the libertine darling of the poet Giovanni Pascoli and of Renoir. When Sandro insists that the Riri he is looking for can only be the young woman in the portrait, the artist offers this sibylline reply: “Everyone knows her but no one has seen her.”

When it all seems hopeless, Sandro is sitting in a bar and sees Riri in the reflection of a mirror. She is wearing a wild red wig with gold speckles, hot pink high heels, multi-colored leggings. She appears innocent, partly a clown, partly fairy, but she makes a living as a prostitute. Sandro follows her to her apartment with its colorful butterflies on the pastel painted walls. There are paper birds hanging from the ceiling. It is very small, but sunny. There are no windows; the light comes from a large skylight. Sandro and Riri make love, but she refuses any compensation. They continue to meet daily as Sandro runs back and forth the short distance separating his home from Riri’s place. The rest of the movie deals with Sandro’s attempt at solving the puzzle of Riri’s identity. Is she his wife or a look-alike prostitute? Sandro may fear that his wife is playing a ferocious joke on him; we, the spectators, see the women as the incarnations of his divided self.

In the film, characters’ hair-dos and attire further underscore the Pirandellian analogy. In the essay On Humor, Pirandello writes that it is the old woman’s red wig that elicits the “feeling of the opposite” [“il sentimento del contrario”]: “vedo una signora, coi capelli ritinti, tutti unti non si sa di quale orribile manteca, e poi tutta goffamente imbellettata e parata di abiti giovanili” [“I see an old lady whose hair is dyed and completely smeared with some kind of horrible ointment; she is all made-up in a clumsy and awkward fashion and is all dolled-up like a young woman”] (Saggi 127). Similarly Riri wears a red wig; when she tantalizingly removes it, uncovering blond hair, she becomes for a moment Laura. The deliberately slow manner in which she takes off her wig is exemplary of Pirandello’s use of transition which moves us from laughter to sadness, as does Sandro’s distress at Riri’s unmasking. Riri dresses in wild pink, Laura prefers demure classic colors and fabrics. Laura’s house is rich and elegant, resplendent in crystal and silver. In Riri’s surreal apartment there is little furniture; the walls are painted in pastel pink and blue hues.

Colors, props, costume, and makeup are equally important in Manfredi’s film as in Pirandello’s aesthetics. In Pirandello, his characters’ psychologies are described according to where they live and how they dress. In On Humor, as stated earlier, he defines man as “un animale vestito” [“an animal in clothes”] and observes that “la società ha per base il vestiario” [“Clothing is at society’s roots”] (Saggi 158). In a wider sense, we can say that Pirandello’s emphasis on the visible underscores what all other great artists know, namely that art derives from the realm of images. His concern for imagery is implicit in his pervasive sym-
bolic use of clothes, as demonstrated by the titles of many works such as "Il bottone della palandrana" ("The coat’s botton"), "La veste lunga" ("The long dress"), and "L’abito nuovo" ("The new suit"). As Pirandello explains in Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore, costume defines his protagonists’ personal and social identity (Canadian 39-51). And lastly Pirandello pointed to the centrality of clothing in his epitaph: "Morto non mi si vesta. Mi si avvolga, nudo, in un lenzuolo" ["Do not clothe me dead, wrap me instead in a sheet, nude"] (Saggi 1249). Pirandello parallels King Lear who finds a therapeutic challenge to chaos, death and conformity in madness and nakedness.

In retrospect, we can understand the episode depicting Sandro as he peruses Juvenal’s Satires. The story tells how, when Claudius slept, his wife would don a cape, the attire of a whore, and thus attired would venture forth to a brothel where she would ply her trade. Having read this, it is no surprise that Sandro follows Laura when he sees her wearing a cape that seems inspired by Messalina herself. Throughout the film costume provides information about the characters and their actions as it does in many of Pirandello’s stories.

As the actions of Riri illustrate, an identity can also be acquired by disguising oneself under a false name; hence, the theme of “chiamarsi,” or “naming oneself,” points to a further connection with Pirandello. In Il fu Mattia Pascal the protagonist is fully aware that his being is determined by his verbal identity, his name: “Una delle poche cose, anzi forse la sola ch’io sapessi di certo era questa: che mi chiamavo Mattia Pascal!” [“One of the few, perhaps the only thing I knew for sure was this: that my name was Mattia Pascal”] (3). Laura’s name evokes that of Petrarch, as Mattia’s name is purposefully reminiscent of the philosopher Pascal. Also, Riri’s identity is tied to the fictional world of art by means of its association with a poet and a painter. As in Pirandello, the names allude to self-reflective discourse about the incapacity of language to circumscribe the real. The film underscores the problematic relationship between the artist and the creation of art. As the creator gives life to new characters they find themselves caught in the dialectical predicament of seeking their own individuality within the boundaries of fixed forms created by the artistic imagination. In Nudo di donna, smoke contributes to the graphic unity of the film by visually connecting scenes in which Sandro, Laura, and Riri are seen smoking a cigarette. In the essay On Humor, chapter 4, “The Essence, Characteristics, and Substance of Humor,” Pirandello explains: “Art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tends to fix life; it fixes it in one moment or in various given moments — the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective. But what about the perpetual mobility of successive perspectives? What about the constant flow in which souls are?” (142). In psychological terms, the two female characters thus embody the dichotomies of Sandro’s selves. Sandro is literally and figuratively caught in the circular flux of these existential poles. As narrative devices, Laura and Riri are symbolic of the polarities of art, the impossibility of the characters who achieve integration within the text. As in Pirandello’s plays, the plot is secondary
to its philosophical content.

Sandro’s kaleidoscopic vision of Riri and his unrelenting search for truth are reminiscent of Pirandello. According to Pirandello’s pessimistic view, reality is like a fragmented mirror projecting a multiplicity of reflected images. The absurdity of life is that it is not possible to look at the inner self to gain a sense of identity since we are what others perceive us to be. To look at oneself is illusory since we would be catching a mirrored image of ourselves. As Pirandello maintains in his novel *Uno, nessuno, e centomila*, one’s personal identity disintegrates into a myriad of selves: the protagonist is no one and one hundred thousand persons. Alienated from ourselves and from others, these individuals must live pretending to be what others want them to be.

Sandro tries to recover his lost unified self as displaced Southerner and inadequate husband through his pursuit of Riri. At this point he seems more willing to choose Riri, the life of the imagination, over Laura, who represents tradition and conformity. In his quest, he turns to Zanetto for help. The gondolier Charon, as Zanetto calls him, agrees to follow her and takes Sandro through a canal, which, to continue the Dantesque metaphor, we may compare to the river Styx. Like the mythic descent into the Inferno, Sandro’s gondola navigates under archways and tunnels in search of a disreputable woman in an entertaining distortion of Dante’s endeavor. Sandro faces no perils, he lives in a world of illusion. The gondolier’s warning to feign indifference so as not to appear to be spying on the woman is suggestive of Pirandello: “ma fa’ finta, fa’ finta di fare finta,” [“pretend, pretend to pretend”]. Sandro anxiously sits in the gondola, hiding behind a wooden crate. The gondolier delivers him to Riri’s place which happens to be near his wife’s bookstore. And, in fact, Sandro sees Laura there. As his secretive pursuit continues, he follows her through a maze of bridges and alleys with suggestive names such as “Ponte Storto” [“twisted bridge”], only to lose her. At the “Caffè dei Pensieri” [“Café of Thoughts”], Sandro gazes at his smoke-screened reflection and, in an illusion, sees Riri reflected through a mirror through his mirror; in so doing he catches a glimpse of his own gaze, but it is only a fleeting illusion. This evokes Pirandello when he wrote at the conclusion of *Si gira*: “È curioso l’effetto che ci fa la nostra immagine riprodotta fotograficamente, anche in un semplice ritratto . . . . Perché? — Forse — gli risposi — perché ci sentiamo fì fissati in un momento, che già non è più noi” (“Seeing our own image reproduced as a photograph has a strange effect upon us; even in a simple portrait . . . . Why is it? — Perhaps — I replied — because in it we feel fixed in a moment of time; it is no longer us”) (283).

Smoke as a visual metaphor of deceit further reinforces Sandro’s portrayal as a Pirandellian character. His constant lighting up cigarettes is a reminder of his falsehood, of his life as a fraud, of betraying his wife, and of hiding the truth to himself and others. In the film smoke has the function of costume, of a mask, a disguise which protects and hides. Because of its inherent qualities, its gaseous ever-changeable state, smoke adds texture and movement to the stillness of an
image. It also signals the transition into the realm of illusion. Those familiar with Pirandello’s stories recognize that smoke is a leitmotif in the description of the Sicilian landscape. This can be seen in several of his short stories; in *Novelle per un anno*, for example, there is one entitled “The Smoke” (“Il fumo”), where the fumes from sulphur mines pervade the Sicilian landscape (*Novelle* 1.96).

The importance of smoke, in a truly Pirandellian sense, can be fully appreciated when it is examined in conjunction with the film’s music. In one scene, for example, Sandro is smoking in silence. Suddenly, a close-up shot brings to our attention his facial expression of joy and the music reminds us of his excitement as he ran through the *calli* of Venice in search of Riri. The contrast between the high pitched and frantic music and the static image of Sandro in a pensive mood creates a dialectical tension as well as a mysterious effect. This is reminiscent of Pirandello’s notion that in a creative process the images, instead of being linked through similarity or juxtaposition, are presented in conflict (119).

Pirandellian theory, according to which life is a continual flux that resists fixed forms and ideal concepts, also applies to this discussion of the film. As in Pirandello, Sandro’s quest is beyond rational explanation. Against the cavorting backdrop of mardi gras, Sandro, Laura, and Riri are constantly moving and changing, searching to give some permanence to their lives. The film’s kinetic effects thus underscore thematic implications about Sandro’s tenuous sense of self and his mental fragmentation which coincide with a Pirandellian whirlwind of ever-changing identities.

The last episode of the film describing Count Bardolino’s masquerade party, “the Night of 1945,” further underscores an analogy with Pirandello. Visual effects help reverse the clock back to a frightening war night-time. Here Sandro discovers that his wife is dressed as a Second World War floozie (a Riri look-alike). During a staged air raid, Sandro loses sight of her. An aerial shot shows the crowd in St. Mark’s square at the festivities’ apex. The shot suggests Sandro’s disintegration of self, life as a continuous flux, and the senselessness of his search. Sandro seems lost and unhappy as he pushes himself through the festive crowd. The laughter of the crowd intensifies Sandro’s feelings of isolation, of his spiritual vacuity.

The scene depicting Sandro tiredly crossing St. Mark square in the desolate atmosphere of the morning after pays homage to Federico Fellini’s film *I vitelloni*. Of all the filmmakers, Fellini best translated Pirandello’s theories into images. In the tradition of popular Italian cinema, Fellini, more than Pirandello, has become synonymous with the illusion/reality continuum. Like *I vitelloni*, Sandro imitates Alberto Sordi who oscillates between objective and subjective reality as the empty piazza surrealistically reproduces his feelings of isolation. Street sweepers are at work; the camera focuses on a clown sleeping with legs apart and leaning against a column. Having confronted his existential ghosts, Sandro seems now a wiser man. Fellini, in the sixties and seventies, contributed to consolidating the Pirandellian tradition. In the eighties, *Portrait of a Woman, Nude* indi-
cates, Pirandello’s influence was, and now continues to be, stronger than ever.

In the last episode, Sandro finds a Laura/Riri double who offers him the roasted pumpkin she is eating. This scene repeats the first encounter at which Riri had asked him to stay for lunch. Sandro is confused: “who are you?” he asks. The answer is not forthcoming; however, in the simple gesture of following her as she walks away towards the lights of the city, we the spectators realize that Sandro is as much at home with the dialectics of being as he will ever be. It is left to the audience to put together the bits and pieces and come to a resolution — if there is one. It appears that, philosophically, the quest will continue.

At the end of the movie, the same gondola of the opening shot is heading in the opposite direction; it no longer carries the tall white figure. In the dimming light of sunset, the slender boat passes the familiar Venetian landmarks in reverse order. The gondoliers have removed their costume; they are young women and men in jeans. They are in direct opposition to Sandro who is still wearing a costume now that Carnival is over. His head is bandaged and bloodstained. He reminds us of Pirandello’s Henry IV who lost his sanity after his head was injured during the re-enactment of a medieval mardi gras. Both are equally comfortable in protecting themselves from others, having adopted a new role for themselves. Abandoned and anguished, Sandro, as a battered World War I infantryman is much like Don Quixote, a neurotic hero dear to Pirandello, for he sees the world as a broken mirror casting multiple reflections.

Manfredi’s film is thus anchored in Pirandellian tradition. Obviously, as this reading of Portrait of a Woman, Nude has revealed, Manfredi, unlike Pirandello, does not pose absolute, existential questions. Still, the film is most representative of the social and regional characteristics of many Italian serio-comic films today. More importantly, it is a good example of how Pirandello has become assimilated into the general culture. In her book Franca Angelini acknowledges his presence in Italian cinema by stating with confidence: “Io credo che [Pirandello] avrebbe girato il primo film del neorealismo italiano” [“I believe that he would have directed the first Italian neorealist film”] (97). Indeed, Nudo di donna fully exploits the Pirandellian repertoire to portray the paradoxes of Italian life. What we have is a clue to current trends that place greater emphasis on formal excellence than ideological integrity, and a tribute to a most unreal place, Venice, truly the quintessential Pirandellian city of dreams.

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NOTES

1 For a variety of theoretical perspectives on Italian film and literature including valuable essays by Brunetta and Moses on Pirandello, Bondanella on Fellini, and on Futurism, Neorealism, the Tavianis, Calvino, Moravia, and other topics, see Annali d’Italianistica 6 (1988).

2 All references to Pirandello’s works, cited hereafter by page numbers in the text, are to
Luigi Pirandello, *Maschere nude, Novelle per un anno, Saggi, Poesie, Scritti vari, Tutti i romanzi*. All translations of *L'umorismo* are taken from the English edition *On Humor*. All other translations within the text are mine.

3 For a discussion of this topic, see Moses.

4 For a discussion of the influence of Platonic thought on Pirandello, see Federici.

WORKS CITED


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