ON THE SERIOUSNESS OF THINGS: PIRANDELLO'S *MA NON È UNA COSA SERIA* FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

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Abstract. A study of Mario Camerini's *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It's Nothing Serious* [1936]), a film based on Luigi Pirandello's eponymous 1918 play and typical of the 1930s Italian romantic comedy genre, elucidates the transformations that a literary conception undergoes when adapted for the screen, especially as those reflect the historical context of the film's making. The challenge for the filmmaker when working on a literary adaptation for popular consumption is to identify the cinematic strategies most suitable to render a psychologically and philosophically nuanced discourse, such as Pirandello's, appealing to a mass audience in search of diversion. Camerini's film also exemplifies that unique moment in Italian culture when the Fascist government took decisive measures to strengthen the film industry, promoting the expansion of popular genres in the style of classical Hollywood cinema. Camerini, therefore, works on three fronts: to convey literariness, to apply a sophisticated system of popular filmic representation, and to sustain, if subtly, some Fascist cultural ideals. A reading of the 1918 play with respect to Pirandello's theory of *umorismo* questions the seriousness of the legal status of marriage, which in Pirandellian terms we may describe as an ideal construct or "fiction." While this notion informs also the film's fundamental thematic layer, Camerini modifies parts of the plot and deftly applies the techniques of classical cinema to convey Pirandellian humour specifically through cinematic means, placing emphasis on the identity of the male protagonist, which here takes the form of a visually vibrant array of diverse identity constructs. At the same time, through a graceful coordination of camera work and mise-en-scène, Camerini communicates the Fascist ideal of Italy as a modern and affluent nation but also one that preserves its traditional values.

In spite of its seeming narrative and stylistic simplicity, fairly typical of romantic comedies, Mario Camerini's *Ma non è una cosa seria* (*But It's Nothing Serious* [1936]) represents an intersection of factors that sheds light on some of the concerns of Italian film production in the 1930s. An adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's eponymous 1918 play, the film constitutes a negotiation between at least three ambitions: high literariness; the engagement of a mass audience through a popular form of entertainment; and, to a lesser degree, or less overtly, the dissemination of some leading ideals of Fascist culture. The aspiration to literariness through adaptation had been crucial for cinema since the early years of the medium's appropriation for public entertainment.¹ In literature, cinema found ample narrative material but also a foil against which to develop its own voice as a new and unique form of representation. Basing many of its plots on stories written by esteemed authors, the film industry sought to establish its own cultural legitimacy, promoting its products as a means not only to diversion but also to intellectual and moral edification. At the same time, the medium displayed its ability to translate words into astonishing images and sounds, exhibiting its revolutionary technical apparatus. Along with other prominent Italian authors, such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Giovanni Verga, Pirandello was a vibrant figure for cinema. He published some of the time's most acclaimed novels, numerous novellas, and influential theoretical pieces. He was known mainly as a playwright and was recognized for his innovative dramatic techniques, which led to his being awarded the 1934 Nobel Prize in literature. Both in Italy and elsewhere, at least eight films were based on his works in the silent era alone, and at least seven in the 1930s.²

This study is concerned not only with what cinema finds in literature but mainly with how it adapts literary material to its own set of technical, economic, and social imperatives. I will examine the ways in which Camerini's film transforms the original work with respect to two lines of inquiry. Firstly, like many works by Pirandello, the 1918 play raises existential questions about the negotiation between social norms and the elusive human psyche, a negotiation that, here, is centred on the institution of marriage and the issues of gender and class that it entails. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the narrative and stylistic strategies

¹ In Italian cinema, *L'Inferno* (1911), from Dante's *Divina Commedia*, is noteworthy, produced by Milano Films and directed by Francesco Bertolini and Adolfo Padovan. Welle notes that *L'Inferno* paved the way to the feature-length narrative both in Italy and abroad (22).

² For more on films based on Pirandello's work, see Genovese and Gesù.

through which popular cinema wishes to render Pirandello's complex psycho-philosophical discourse palatable to a mass audience in search of diversion. Secondly, Camerini's film exemplifies the revival of the Italian film industry in the 1930s, largely a result of the State's intervention in mass culture. Following the Italian cinema's first golden age in the 1910s—thanks to its slapstick shorts, historical epics, upper-class melodramas, mesmerizing divas, and lively strongmen, to name some of its strengths—filmmaking in Italy entered a phase of low productivity that lasted throughout the 1920s.³ In the 1930s, however, along with the transition to sound, and in the context of the State's mission of expanding large industry as a whole, measures were taken in favour of the cinema, leading to a noticeable increase in the number of films produced in Italy.⁴ Although Mussolini's State—as compared to other totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany—exercised a lesser degree of control over film content, works that portrayed Italy as a modern nation while also exalting Italian traditions were promoted.⁵ Therefore, despite the lack of direct political references in *Ma non è una cosa seria*, one may consider which aspects of this comedy, if any, reflect the values of Fascist culture.

Regarding the basic storyline, Camerini's film is largely faithful to the original. In the play, Memmo Speranza is an affluent and charming young man with a history of multiple love affairs. A sense of obligation and pressure to conform to societal expectations compel him to promise marriage to each of his lovers. However, unwilling to commit, he breaks the engagement each time. In his most recent case, he is left wounded after having to fight his fiancée's brother in a duel. Though well aware of himself as not the marrying kind, he cannot resist the charming women who surround him and falls in love easily. After the latest debacle, however, he devises a plan to resolve his dilemma once and for all: he marries Gasparina Torretta, owner of the Pensione Torretta boarding house. Gasparina is a plain, benevolent, and humble woman whose main ambition is to run the *pensione* to her lodgers' contentment. Memmo marries her not for love but for the ability to enjoy his extramarital affairs without having to commit, as his mistresses will know that he is already married. He does not live with Gasparina but provides for her and keeps a country villa where she can retire to lead a leisurely life. Hence,

³ See, among others, Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*.

⁴ See, among others, Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*; Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano di regime*.

⁵ See, among others, Ben-Ghiat; Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*; Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy*.

though they are legally married, the marriage is “nothing serious.” Paradoxically, a marriage commitment is Memmo’s way of evading that very commitment. In the end, however, a deeper connection develops between the two protagonists and their union becomes “a serious thing.”⁶

The “paradox” begs that we read Memmo’s plan in the context of Pirandello’s worldview, which the author elaborates in the essay *L’umorismo* (*On Humor*), first written in 1908.⁷ Clearly, we are facing two notions of marriage. On the one hand, we are dealing with a legal process, the state of being married officially, “on paper.” Despite the different ways in which titles may be used or interpreted, the legal status trumpets a conclusive and unequivocal state of affairs; it stands for stability and entails a specific code of conduct. The play claims, however, that marriage as a legal status is “nothing serious.” This is not only because of the illegitimate uses to which it lends itself, as in the case of Memmo, but also because it is the textual token of a fiction, of a social norm to which humans are expected to conform—one of the illusory fixities in which humans arrest life in order to comprehend it: “La vita è un flusso continuo che noi cerchiamo d’arrestare, di fissare in forme stabili e determinate” (Pirandello, *Saggi* 151).⁸ On the other hand, we are dealing with the soul in its supreme restlessness, as it is engaged in a quest for authenticity. It sneers at marriage as a legal process, where it sees a mere construct, one of the fictions that we craft to guard ourselves against the chaotic flux. The soul longs instead for the thing itself, that is, for a union based on sincere love and solid commitment, a contract that evolves naturally and stands on its own without legalities. This is marriage as “a serious thing.” Yet, in seeking authenticity, the soul plunges into chaos:

In certi momenti di silenzio interiore, in cui l’anima nostra si spoglia di tutte le finzioni abituali, e gli occhi nostri diventano più acuti e più penetranti, noi vediamo noi stessi nella vita, e in se stessa la vita, quasi in una nudità arida, inquietante; ci sentiamo assaltare da una strana

⁶ Like other Pirandello plays, this one is based on some of Pirandello’s previously published novellas: “La signora Speranza” (1903) and “Non è una cosa seria” (1910); see Bernardi 168.

⁷ From the vast scholarship on Pirandello’s humour, I am especially indebted to Casella, *L’umorismo di Pirandello*; Harrison, *Essayism*; Leone de Castris, *Storia di Pirandello*; Tilgher, *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo*. See also Syrimis, *The Great Black Spider*. The essay is quoted from Pirandello, *Saggi*.

⁸ “Life is a continual flux which we try to stop, to fix in stable and determined forms” (*On Humor* 137).

impressione, come se, in un baleno, ci si chiarisse una realtà diversa da quella che normalmente percepiamo, una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione. (*Saggi* 152)⁹

The soul sees that any reality beyond one that is crafted by human reason is inaccessible. Notions such as “sincere love” and “solid commitment” are also crafted. Thus, the soul flips back to fiction as it shudders at the thought of its own extinction. It seeks relief in fictional ideas because they are graspable and manageable. Despite their deceitfulness, “sappiamo ormai che sono un nostro inganno per vivere e che sotto c'è qualcos'altro, a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi, se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire” (*Saggi* 153).¹⁰ Hence the “non-serious” asserts its seriousness. To be exact, the “serious” and “non-serious” engage each other in a play of union and division, to the point that they become indistinguishable. In its deft elusiveness, the soul stays, at the same time, locked within the fiction and outside it, as far away from fiction as possible.

One may wonder how *humour* relates to this condition, a dialectical process in which fixity and fluidity engage one another in a constant negotiation, each side being continually negated and reformed. Let me clarify that *umorismo* does not refer to a specific literary movement; it represents, rather, at least two things: first, a disposition specific to the “humorist” writer but also to the reader who is in tune with such a writer; second, the aesthetic concretization of such a disposition, which may inform works from any literary movement. How might one define this disposition? Surely the term “humour” evokes situations that involve laughter. Yet Pirandello is not interested only in things that amuse. The humorist is one who experiences two or more, simultaneous yet diverse, and even conflicting, responses to a single phenomenon. One such response is often laughter, accompanied nonetheless by a response that complicates or contradicts it, such as melancholy or compassion. Such is the case of the elderly “dolled-up” lady,

⁹ “In certain moments of inner silence, in which our soul strips itself of all its habitual fictions and our eyes become sharper and more piercing, we see ourselves in life, and life in itself, as if in a barren and disquieting nakedness; we are seized by a strange impression, as if, in a flash, we could clearly perceive a reality different from the one that we normally perceive, a reality living beyond the reach of human vision, outside the forms of human reason” (*On Humor* 138).

¹⁰ “[W]e now know that they are deceptions which we use in order to survive and that underneath them there is something else which man can face only at the cost of either death or insanity” (*On Humor* 138).

whose gaudy appearance provokes both laughter and compassion, as described by Pirandello in a passage that he added in 1920 upon revising his seminal essay.¹¹ Humour may even be entirely free of the comic, as in Giuseppe Giusti's 1846 poem "Sant'Ambrogio," whose narrator feels at once hatred and sympathy for his foreign adversaries.¹² Humour is not by definition linked with laughter, hatred, sympathy, melancholy, regret, and so on; rather, it may comprise several such reactions concurrently. Their coexistence defines the humorist's disposition. "Umore" in Italian means "mood" or "state of mind." The same is true of the English "humour," in addition to its common usage that refers to laughter. Thus, "umorismo," which generally corresponds to "humour" as laughter, may also be rendered in English as the "philosophy of moods."

Nevertheless, "umorismo" does not cease to also evoke "humour" as laughter, which informs the term's more common usage in both languages. Pirandello formulates a theory that teases us, at once evoking and negating the comic. His theory calls not for conclusive answers but for new horizons of reflection. Even if a situation is clearly comical, an inner voice compels the humorist to search for contrasting aspects in it. Conversely, we know that a situation is sad, even tragic, yet we suspect that the turmoil has something to do with the failure to uphold some socially constructed ideal, one that upon further scrutiny may seem unworthy of such serious consideration. The title of the play, *Ma non è una cosa seria*, whose story concludes with Memmo's keen affirmation, after he has fallen for Gasparina, that "è, è, è una cosa seria!" (*Maschere nude* 119),¹³ captures the author's concept of humour as a whole. Like Memmo's marriage, all things are both non-serious and serious. While the soul, like a funambulist, strives for equilibrium on the fine line between fiction and non-fiction, we learn that society's illusory constructs are at once laughable and crucial. As Adriano Tilgher suggests in his influential study of Pirandello, fictions may be illusory, but they are also the only truths that we may grasp and rely upon: "Godere della Vita nella sua nudità e libertà infinita, al di fuori di tutte le forme e costruzioni in cui la società, la storia e gli eventi di ciascuna particolare esistenza ne hanno incanalato il corso, non si può" (192).¹⁴

¹¹ Pirandello, *Saggi* 127; *On Humor* 113. See Casella on the essay's revisions.

¹² Pirandello, *Saggi* 128–129; *On Humor* 114–115.

¹³ "[I]t is, it is, it is a serious thing!" Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

¹⁴ "One may not enjoy Life in its infinite nudity and freedom, outside all the forms and constructions in which society, history, and the events of every particular existence have

It is not by chance that the play closes with the lines, “Aspetta... aspetta...”¹⁵ (*Maschere nude* 121). The finale brings together Memmo, Gasparina, and Signor Barranco at the country villa where Gasparina resides. Barranco is an elderly bachelor; he is traditional, quick-tempered, and stuttering and had previously been a lodger at Pensione Torretta. He displays sincere interest in Gasparina's well-being and vehement disapproval of Memmo's marriage fiasco. He hopes to convince Memmo to annul the marriage so that he himself may marry Gasparina. However, the “serious thing” between Memmo and Gasparina manifests itself in his presence, giving him little choice but to surrender as gracefully as possible:

GASPARINA (*esitante, quasi dolente, pietosa e pur felice; con gli occhi bassi*). Eh... poiché ora, signor Barranco, ha sentito! dice che diventa una cosa seria...

BARRANCO (*dopo un lungo silenzio, funebre*). Sta-sta bene... È giovane anche lei.

Pausa.

Basta. Le-le auguro che-che non abbia a pentirsene. E-e la saluto.

Si avvia grave, fosco, profondamente commosso.

GASPARINA (*a Memmo, che vuol subito abbracciarla alle spalle del vecchio, piano, ridente, vergognosa, più col gesto delle mani che con la voce, alludendo al vecchio che se ne va*). Aspetta... aspetta...

(*Maschere nude* 120–121)¹⁶

With her demeanour and closing lines, Gasparina expresses hesitation, lack of readiness to openly celebrate her new partnership. Given Barranco's loyalty and her previous agreement with him to consent to the annulment of the marriage, she feels uneasy and prefers to delay the fanfare until Barranco is gone. There is

channelled its course.”

¹⁵ “Wait... wait...”

¹⁶ “GASPARINA (*hesitant, almost apologetic, sympathetic and yet happy; with her eyes lowered*). Eh... because now, Mr. Barranco, you heard! He says that it is becoming a serious thing... / BARRANCO (*after a long silence, mournful*). You-you are fine... You are young too. / *Pause* / That's enough. I-I wish that-that you don't have to regret it. And-and I bid you farewell. / *He proceeds, serious, sombre, deeply moved.* / GASPARINA (*to Memmo, who immediately wants to embrace her behind the old man's back, quiet, laughing, bashful, more with the gesture of her hands than with her voice, alluding to the old man who is leaving*). Wait... wait...”

nothing odd about her reaction—that is, in diegetic terms, there is nothing odd. Structurally, however, the story is left suspended, closing with an allusion to the author’s concept of humour. Besides awkwardness, Gasparina’s lines suggest some doubt regarding the stability, the “seriousness” of the new partnership, which is not surprising given Memmo’s past. I am not painting Gasparina as a humorist, that is, one whose vocation is to ponder the seriousness and non-seriousness of all things, a role for which Pirandello’s text hardly provides evidence. As far as the diegesis is concerned, it suffices to say that her hesitation to embrace Memmo suggests not only awkwardness but also apprehension, given Memmo’s atypical eagerness to commit. On the extra-diegetic level, however, by depriving his narrative of formal closure, Pirandello the humorist conveys to his theatregoers that the new state of affairs may not lead to eternal merriment—that is to say, the newfound “serious thing,” the true bond, as it were (which, indicatively, Memmo endorses enthusiastically once he learns from Barranco that Gasparina, despite her age and life challenges, has remained a virgin), is itself rooted in the prerequisites of a social norm, a fiction that is neither more nor less “serious” than its textual token.

Parts of the play other than the finale also encourage a humoristic reading. As occurs at times in the author’s fictional works, the characters engage in discussions that make explicit references to the essay on humour, to such issues as the validity of social norms or the conflict between feeling and reason. Such is the nature of a debate that unfolds at the *pensione* about the education of young women, inspired by the presence of Professor Virgadamo, who teaches pedagogy at an all-female school (Act 1, Scene 7). Memmo criticizes the ways in which female pupils are instructed to think about their future, as they learn to overvalue marriage and life-long commitment:

MEMMO. Ma perché, domando io, ciò che capiscono così bene tutti quanti gli animali — anche gli uccellini, santo Dio, con quelle loro testoline! — non dev’essere capito soltanto dall’uomo? — *Per sempre!* O *per sempre* o niente! Ti circondano, ti avviluppano, t’ubriacano, ti fanno perdere la testa...

S’interrompe per contraffare la voce di una ragazza innamorata.

“No! prima giuramelo: per sempre!” Ti obbligano a giurarlo anche davanti a papà... Un pover’uomo, signori miei, che s’è ubriacato,

che ha perduto la testa, che volete che faccia? Giura, impegna la sua fede...

(*Maschere nude* 34)¹⁷

According to Memmo, instead of promoting social norms, professors should present a more philosophical view of life, inspiring young women to think about those rare instances in which consciousness is shaken up and a mysterious inner truth is momentarily revealed:

MEMMO. [...] Scusate: non abbiamo forse sentito tutti, in certi momenti, aprirsi, accendersi dentro di noi come una luce d'altri cieli, che ci permette di vedere nelle più misteriose profondità dell'animo, e che ci dà la gioja infinita di sentirci in un attimo... in quell'attimo — eterni — e che s'è vissuto — e che può bastare? — Ecco, questo, professore! Insegnare alle ragazze il concetto di quest'eternità... (*Maschere nude* 35)¹⁸

His lines clearly paraphrase the well-known passage from *L'umorismo* (quoted above) on "certi momenti di silenzio interiore" when the soul sheds its fictions and sees, in a flash, life in its disturbing nakedness. In fact, Memmo strikes us as a character conceived to display a humorist's disposition, not only because his philosophistic assertions direct us to Pirandello's essay, but mainly because of his profound ambivalence vis-à-vis the social presuppositions of romance, which he fails to reconcile with his otherwise-sincere feelings for his lovers. It is this ambivalence, verified time and again, that sheds doubt on the sustainability of

¹⁷ "MEMMO. But why, I ask, should something that all animals understand so well—even little birds, dear God, with those little heads of theirs!—not be understood only by man?—*Forever!* Either *forever* or nothing! They surround you, they engulf you, they get you drunk, they make you lose your mind... / *He stops to imitate the voice of a girl in love.* / 'No! First swear to it: forever!' They force you to swear to it even before their father... A poor man, gentlemen, who got drunk, who lost his mind, what do you want him to do? He swears, commits his faith..."

¹⁸ "MEMMO. [...] Excuse me: haven't we all perhaps felt it, in certain moments, open up, light up inside us like a light from other heavens, that allows us to look into the most mysterious depths of the soul, and that gives us the infinite joy of feeling in an instant... in that instant—eternal—and that we've lived—and that it's enough?—Here it is, Professor! To teach the girls the concept of this eternity..."

his devotion to Gasparina in the play's finale, thus leading to the unconventional, unsettled closing.¹⁹

The question of narrative closure is essential in considering the types of transformation that Pirandello's story needed to undergo in its migration to the screen. Camerini's adaptation, differently from its literary source, is quite compliant with the conventional happy ending of the romantic-comedy film genre. Not only has Gasparina's line, "Aspetta... aspetta...!", been removed, but the new bond between the two protagonists is established several minutes before closing, with a fiery kiss that Memmo (Vittorio De Sica) suddenly steals from Gasparina²⁰ (Elisa Cegani). A few seconds later, the housekeeper announces the arrival of Barranco (Ugo Ceseri). The seriousness of the affair is then made clear and a disheartened Barranco gives his "blessing" to Memmo: "Almeno... non la tratti come le altre."²¹ He makes a total exit from the villa, letting the two lovers freely embrace and display their new union. A dolly-shot brings them from a medium-shot to a close-up, highlighting the cinema's typical narrative resolution in terms of the formation of a heterosexual couple, whose eternal happiness in this case is reaffirmed by a fade-out, accompanied by the increasing volume of Gian Luca Tocchi's idyllic extra-diegetic tune.²² This compliance is part of a whole range of aesthetic and ideological factors that inform the Italian film industry's adoption of the classical Hollywood style on the one hand, and the need to disseminate commendable Italian subjects on the other. To be sure, the industry's wish to attain an optimal fusion between the two sets of values reflects the goals of the State's intervention in mass culture in the 1930s.

Benito Mussolini's famous dictum, "il cinema è l'arma più forte,"²³ evidently drew on the medium's potential to disseminate ideology on a large scale. In the 1920s, the Fascists founded the Istituto LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa [The Educational Film Union]), the acronym translating as "light," thus alluding to film technology, but also enlightenment, truth, and so on. The Institute produced numerous newsreels and documentaries celebrating the new

¹⁹ For a similar case of intertextuality in the play, see *Maschere nude* 53 and *Saggi* 154 (*On Humor* 139).

²⁰ The heroine is named Gasparina in the play and Gasperina in the film.

²¹ "At least... don't treat her like the others."

²² My reading of the film is based on the 2003 DVD from RHV (Ripley's Home Video).

²³ "Cinema is the strongest weapon."

Italy being formed under Mussolini's regime. However, it was not until the 1930s that the State took decisive measures for the rejuvenation of narrative film production. The main aims were to encourage the public to seek enjoyment in domestic films rather than American or other foreign imports; to make Italian cinema internationally competitive again; and to promote values and role models suitable to what constituted a desirable Italian identity at that juncture. Italian cinema needed not simply to compete with its American counterpart; to compete successfully, it needed to adopt a similar aesthetic program. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat explains,

national film aesthetics and policies were formulated with international considerations in mind; namely, the need to respond to a Hollywood studio system that produced consistently polished and engaging films. [...] [The] audience appeal and technical sophistication [of American films] led even militant fascist filmmakers, along with their Nazi neighbors, to emulate and adapt their conventions, story lines, and star culture. (73)

Among the core institutions founded by the Fascists for the promotion of film production were the Direzione Generale di Cinematografia in 1934, run by the politician Luigi Freddi, whose "two-month fact-finding mission to Hollywood in 1932 had made him an admirer of the American studio system" (89); the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935, Rome's government-controlled film school, which, despite its mission to create pure Italian cinema, "fulfilled Freddi's wishes for a school that would produce commercially viable films on the American model" (91); and, of course, Rome's Cinecittà studios in 1937.

The adherence of Camerini's film to the classical cinema paradigm, standardized in Hollywood by the 1930s, is observed in the film's audio-visual techniques and mode of narration, among other factors. Like other Italian romantic comedies of the time, as well as other Italian genres popular in the 1930s, such as the historical film and melodrama, *Ma non è una cosa seria* exemplifies classical compositional unity. A variety of technical factors adopted here by Camerini work together to achieve compositional unity, including narrative causality, coherence of time and space, synchronized sound, formal symmetry, motivation, self-effacing technique, and narrative closure.²⁴ Certainly, Pirandello's complex view of human

²⁴ See the formal analysis of Hollywood cinema by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. See also Zaggarro who, describing the then-upcoming Cinecittà

experience lends itself more to an elliptical and fragmentary type of discourse, marked by rupture, contradiction, and disbelief, and less to a narrative mode based on unity, harmony, closure, and so on. The challenge for the filmmaker is to identify strategies for achieving an ideal compromise, where the density of the original is preserved enough to ensure the film industry's cultural legitimacy, but not to the extent that the gratification of the mass audience is put in jeopardy. The critic, of course, wishes to elucidate those strategies and assess the compromise.

Critics of the time spoke favourably of the film, noting its wit, naturalness, camera deftness, lightness, calculated craft, and more. They praised its faithfulness to the play with respect to the main storyline and messages. According to Filippo Sacchi, writing for *Il Corriere della Sera*, “Chi vorrà provare che si può trasporre un’opera di alto valore letterario sullo schermo senza tradirla troverà in *Ma non è una cosa seria* un esempio” (qtd. in Genovese and Gesù 73).²⁵ In spite of the changes that the original needed to sustain for the film’s marketability, critics seemed to agree that the adaptation was praiseworthy. Writing for the popular magazine *Cinema illustrazione*, Enrico Roma affirms, “L’originale e succosa commedia di Pirandello ha fornito al Camerini una materia di prim’ordine; ma egli ha saputo impadronirsene, piegarla alle necessità dello schermo, sfrondarla d’ogni elemento superfluo ai suoi fini, senz’aggiungervi nulla che la nobiltà dell’opera non consentisse” (qtd. in Genovese and Gesù 73).²⁶ According to *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the film even freed the original story from the physical limitations of the stage:

Camerini ha saputo dare alla commedia un più ampio respiro, ampliando la visione di particolari a cui il palcoscenico imponeva una fugace sintesi, imprimendo, così, al lavoro il dinamismo e il necessario

as a “parodia della macchina mitopoetica americana” (“parody of the American mythopoetic machinery”), draws a list of sociocultural parallels between 1930s Italian comedy and the American screwball comedy in particular (75–89, esp. 77–78).

²⁵ Originally printed in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 12 Apr. 1936; “Whoever will want to prove that one may transpose a work of high literary value to the screen without betraying it will find in *Ma non è una cosa seria* an example.”

²⁶ Originally printed in *Cinema illustrazione* 11.20 (13 May 1936); “Pirandello’s original and rich comedy provided Camerini with first-rate material; but he managed to master it, bend it to the needs of the screen, prune it of every element that was superfluous to its objectives, without adding anything that the work’s nobility did not permit.”

taglio scenico, che un film esige, senza alterare lo spirito e l'ossatura della trama pirandelliana. (qtd. in Genovese and Gesù 76)²⁷

In a somewhat modest self-commentary, Camerini admits that he did not truly convey Pirandello's spirit, though he addresses some redeeming features at least in character construction:

Se non sono riuscito a rendere del tutto la concitazione dialettica dello scrittore siciliano, son riuscito, spero, a caratterizzare sufficientemente i personaggi principali: Memmo Speranza, la Gasperina e Barranco. Gl'incontri fra questi tre tipi e le reciproche reazioni sono i pezzi più perdonabili del film. (qtd. in Genovese and Gesù 71)²⁸

One thing that he regrets is the historical period in which the film was set. He would have liked to set it in the late 1910s, when the play was written. That was also a time, he explains, when breaking an engagement was more scandalous than in the 1930s. Yet he complied with the studio's preference for a contemporary, 1930s setting. Augusto Camerini, Mario's brother and also a filmmaker, who had made his own film adaptation of this play in 1921, agreed with Mario: "Quando io lo girai, Memmo vestiva alla moda di allora né poteva essere altrimenti, dato che il film era quasi coetaneo della commedia. [...] Se quell'ambientazione e quei mobili e gli abiti [...] risultassero più adatti allo spirito del lavoro e dei personaggi, allora vorrebbe dire che il film non avrebbe perso a essere trasportato una ventina di anni addietro."²⁹ While the brothers hoped to preserve the play's

²⁷ Originally printed in *Il popolo d'Italia*, 12 Apr. 1936; "Camerini managed to give the comedy a more expansive breath, expanding the vision of details to which the stage imposed a fleeting synthesis, thus imprinting on the work the dynamism and necessary scenic cut that a film requires, without altering the spirit and framework of the Pirandellian plot."

²⁸ "If I could not fully convey the Sicilian writer's dialectical excitement, I managed, I hope, to sufficiently portray the main characters: Memmo Speranza, Gasperina, and Barranco. The encounters between these three types and their reciprocal reactions are the film's most forgivable parts." All facts and quotations of Mario Camerini and Augusto Camerini (Mario's brother) presented in this paragraph are drawn from the article "Due fratelli e un film: 1921–1936," appearing in *Cinema illustrazione*, 11.9 (26 Feb. 1936). An excerpt from the article including Mario Camerini's commentary alone is reprinted in Genovese and Gesù 71–72.

²⁹ "When I filmed it, Memmo dressed according to the fashion of the time, and it could not be otherwise, since the film was almost the same age as the play. [...] If that setting and furniture

historical context, we learn from Mario that Pirandello, who was present at the set, supported the 1930s option. To be sure, despite the brothers' preference for the original setting, the author's selection of the 1930s was the more Pirandellian gesture. Augusto and Mario betray a fondness, if not nostalgia, for older styles. For Augusto, if it were seen again "today" (15 years later), his film would be a "costume drama" (*film in costume*). He closes his remarks with a reference to Romano Calò, the actor who played Memmo Speranza in 1921. He seems to refer to a film still of Calò that accompanies Augusto's own commentary in *Cinema illustrazione*: "Del resto, guardate qui a sinistra, dietro la colonna, Calò: è un poema!"³⁰ Mario also expresses his fascination for older styles and rituals, perhaps for nostalgic reasons but also for comic effect:

Memmo Speranza io lo vedevo come un gagà dell'epoca, col colletto alto, con le uose, i calzoni stretti, la giacca abbottonatissima, a quattro bottoni. Quando egli si rifugia nella pensione della Gasperina, dopo la scandalosa rottura di fidanzamento, io immaginavo con diletto la sua toletta serale, prima di coricarsi. Immaginavo i piegabaffi e la scena violenta tra il fratello della ragazza ripudiata e lui, Memmo, coinvolto in una spiegazione così drammatica con il piegabaffi affondato sulla bocca. Non si può credere quanto dispiacere mi abbia fatto il dover rinunciare a quel piegabaffi. Ma Pirandello è stato di altro parere.³¹

Pirandello was not in search of nostalgia or comedy for its own sake, nor did he associate the paradoxes of the soul with a specific historical moment any more or less than with any other—which perhaps is, in contrast, what Augusto implies when he considers whether "quei mobili e gli abiti [...] risultassero più adatti allo

and the clothes [...] were more suited to the spirit of the work and the characters, then it would mean that the film would not have lost anything by being transported about 20 years back."

³⁰ "After all, take a look here on the left, behind the column, Calò: he's a poem!"

³¹ "I saw Memmo Speranza as a dandy of the time, with a high collar, with his gaiters, tight trousers, a fully buttoned jacket, with four buttons. When he takes refuge in Gasperina's boarding house, after the scandalous breaking of the engagement, I imagined with delight his evening toilette, before he went to bed. I imagined the moustache snood and the violent scene between the brother of the rejected girl and Memmo, the latter involved in such a dramatic explanation with the snood sunken on his mouth. You cannot believe how sorry I was for having to give up that snood. But Pirandello had another opinion."

spirito del lavoro.” The earlier ambiance, with its gaiters and quirky moustaches, may have suited the story’s dynamism, but Pirandello’s standpoint, I think, was that humour represented a human experience that transcended historical boundaries.

The extent to which the film conveys Pirandello’s humour is debatable. Inevitably, while keeping the play’s basic storyline, Camerini made substantial changes to the original, doing justice to the medium specificity of his own work and suiting the romantic-comedy genre. He did so not only with film techniques but also with creative plot devices that spoke to Mario Soldati and Ercole Patti’s talent as screenwriters. For instance, whereas the play’s first act is set at the *Pensione Torretta*, the film opens at Memmo’s apartment when he is preparing to leave for the residence of the Rossi Bellinis, the wealthy family of his latest fiancée, Elsa (Elsa De Giorgi), to attend a reception held in honour of the engagement. Thus, whereas the play narrates Memmo’s breaking of the engagement and ensuing duel with the brother in third-person conversations at the *pensione*, Camerini lets the pandemonium unfold on screen, thus profiting from the event’s cinematographic potential. When Memmo’s extreme tardiness causes confusion at the Rossi Bellinis’, where the sophisticated guests are anxious to meet the groom, Elsa and her brother Giulio (Albino Principe) telephone Memmo and urge him to appear. After a moment of self-reflection, however, Memmo breaks the engagement. He fears Giulio’s vengeful reaction, so he hides at Gasperina’s *pensione*, where his closest friend, Vico Lamanna (Umberto Melnati), is lodged. When Giulio finds him, the confrontation and Memmo’s resulting injury take place in the *pensione*, thus leading plausibly to Memmo’s recovery under Gasperina’s care. This plot addition, drawing a contrast between Gasperina’s maternal style and the worldly women who crowd Memmo’s hospital room—along with some close-ups and point-of-view shots suggesting a potential intimacy between the two protagonists—sows the romance that will flourish in the film’s finale. It thus presents a case of narrative causality tied up with romance, which is a convention in classical cinema. The play, on the other hand, leaves the motive for Memmo’s choice of Gasperina as his bride somewhat open, suggesting that it is none other than her plainness that determines this choice, evidently because her plainness is also what reassures Memmo that he will not fall in love with her, thus setting him free to seek casual affairs with other women.

The events described above include details that seem to question social conventions. Therefore, one may feel inclined to examine them with respect to humour, or at least in terms of Camerini’s attempt to wed Pirandello with popular

entertainment. In Pirandello, the characters of Memmo's last fiancée and her brother do not appear on stage; their names are never mentioned and they are described as "la signorina" (the young lady) and "il fratello" (the brother). We know little about them other than the duel and the *signorina's* resulting departure from home, and we learn little of their socio-economic status. In the film, meanwhile, both characters enjoy a substantial amount of screen time. Their high socio-economic status is announced by the refined *mise-en-scène* that informs their lifestyle in the opening sequence. The film's farcical portrayal of some rituals and codes of conduct that distinguish this class, alongside the central problem of the institution of marriage, may be examined in relation to the overarching discourse on the dubiousness of social norms, or what Pirandello calls fictions or illusory fixities. When the guests become impatient with Memmo's tardiness, Elsa's mother (Maria Arcione), hoping to alleviate the guests' boredom, asks one of the female guests to sing. At the same time, Giulio decides to hunt down Memmo because, as he proclaims repeatedly with frantic and frail pomposity, he needs to defend the honour of the Rossi Bellinis, who simply cannot accept such a scandal. His mission is intercut with the soprano now inundating the Rossi Bellini parlour with an aria whose penetrating trills cause much annoyance to the otherwise cultivated guests. When Giulio invades the bedroom at the *pensione* where Memmo feigns illness, he threatens Memmo with a revolver that he finds by chance and again evokes the honour of the Rossi Bellini family. However, his masculine pride as the guardian of family honour quickly fades: he begins to tremble and shoots Memmo seemingly by accident. He then hides behind a curtain. To be sure, if the *mise-en-scène* at opening boasts the stability of this class and of the codes and rituals that define it, song and word—the aria and the evocations of family honour—complement each other in their self-conscious efforts to reaffirm such stability, thus setting up a process that instead exposes class fragility.

Insofar as these details expose a social ideal that fails, they may constitute instances of irony, satire, or comedy, but not Pirandellian humour. They may evoke humour, but they fall short of it. For Pirandello, the humorist's response consists of two layers: the *avvertimento del contrario* and the *sentimento del contrario* ("perception of the opposite" and "feeling of the opposite").³² The former refers to one's mere perception of an abnormality. To use his classic example, if an elderly lady dresses in a conspicuously youthful fashion, one perceives a conflict between dress and age—to be exact, between the dress she is wearing and the type of dress that

³² See *Saggi* 127; *On Humor* 113.

the social norm dictates as suitable to her age. A likely reaction on the observer's part is mere laughter. This is so if the observer is not a humorist. The humorist, however, also experiences a *feeling* of opposition, that is, the conflict between his/her own diverse responses, throwing him/her into an unsettling state. The humorist may think that the lady looks funny, but as a humorist, he/she cannot help but ponder the possible hidden motives that make her defy the norm, motives possibly related to a painful life experience. Thus, along with feeling amused, the humorist feels sympathy or affection.

Pirandello does, indeed, explain why humour is distinct from satire, irony, and comedy. These three practices stop at the *perception* of the opposite, whereas the *feeling* of the opposite, which they lack, is the fundamental and foremost defining condition of humour:

E quest'appunto distingue nettamente l'umorista dal comico, dall'ironico, dal satirico. Non nasce in questi altri il sentimento del contrario; se nascesse, sarebbe reso amaro, cioè non più comico, il riso provocato nel primo dall'avvertimento di una qualsiasi anormalità; la contraddizione che nel secondo è soltanto verbale, tra quel che si dice e quel che si vuole sia inteso, diventerebbe effettiva, sostanziale, e dunque non più ironica; e cesserebbe lo sdegno o, comunque, l'avversione della realtà che è ragione d'ogni satira. (*Saggi* 145–146)³³

A careful viewing of the film reveals that no aspect of the plot details discussed above incites any response other than laughter linked to irony or satire. The stunts of the soprano and the honourable son begin and end with the *avvertimento del contrario*.

An aspect of the film that seems to operate more in line with humour is the construction of the protagonist, which evokes Pirandello's notion of identity as a mask. The film alludes to this notion from the start. In the opening shot, when

³³ "This is precisely what distinguishes the humorist sharply from the comic writer, the ironist, and the satirist. The feeling of the opposite does not arise in any of the latter; if it did, the laughter provoked in the comic writer by the perception of any abnormality would turn bitter and therefore would no longer be comical; the contradiction which in irony is only verbal, between what the writer says and what he wants understood, would become real and substantial, and therefore would no longer be ironic; and the scorn, or at least the aversion, for reality, which is the reason of any satire, would cease to exist" (*On Humor* 131).

Memmo is preparing to attend the reception at Elsa's home, his head is hidden under a white shirt that he is trying to pull down in vain as it is buttoned at the collar. He resembles a person dressed as a ghost. His mistress, Loletta Festa (Assia Noris), sobbing childishly because she is losing him, unbuttons the collar and reveals his face for the first time. This "unmasking" is crucial for the story and relates to Vittorio De Sica's star-image and Camerini's choice of him for the role. De Sica began his career as an actor long before he directed his own films and became a master of Italian neorealism next to Roberto Rossellini and Luchino Visconti. Thanks to his acting talent and "handsome appearance, debonair manner, and winning smile," he was very popular in the 1930s, establishing a reputation as a matinee idol in both theatre and film (Cardullo 11). By 1936, Camerini had made two comedies with De Sica in the leading role, *Gli uomini che mascalzoni...* (*What Scoundrels Men Are...* [1932]) and *Darò un milione* (*I'll Give a Million* [1935]), the first of which cemented the actor's status as a "recognizable screen idol and a media personality" (Cardullo 12). More collaborative works between the two men followed *Ma non è una cosa seria*, including *Il Signor Max* (*Mr. Max* [1937]) and *I grandi magazzini* (*Department Store* [1939]).

De Sica's star-image was well suited to the role of the heartbreaker Memmo Speranza not only because of De Sica's youthful charm. The "mask" removal at opening teases the viewer with a promise, an infinite pleasure in recognizing the beloved star. Yet the gesture leaves something to be desired. The face is revealed not in a close-up but in a medium shot in which he and Loletta stare at each other briefly, before Loletta begins sobbing again. Also, this exchange of gazes shows both actors in profile rather than a frontal shot. The camera thus prohibits our boundless delight in an abstracted rendition of the star's full face. Furthermore, any type of firm identity we may be inclined to attach to the familiar face begins to fade. Loletta acts as our surrogate for the gaze. Her sobs at Memmo's unveiling, as if she had been startled, suggest the sight of a man whom she fails to recognize—one now betrothed to another woman—and not simply the man with whom she shared the intimate moments that she mournfully recollects, such as the *zuppa di pesce* they had in San Remo.³⁴ This defamiliarizing of the familiar is crucial to the film's Pirandellian message. It also relates to De Sica's star-image, of which the question of identity was a robust component. In *Gli uomini che mascalzoni...*, which had bolstered his stardom, De Sica plays a chauffeur named Bruno who dates the working-class Mariuccia (Lia Franca) in style, by passing as

³⁴ See Farassino 110.

the owner of his wealthy employer's posh automobile. Alberto Farassino sees an exchange between popular culture and Pirandello even before the adaptation of *Ma non è una cosa seria*:

Non è sorprendente che la questione dell'Identità e della Forma sia così centrale in questi anni Trenta di diffusione-banalizzazione del pirandellismo (ma quanto invece Pirandello non aveva ricavato le sue tematiche favorite proprio dalla tradizione 'bassa' della commedia degli equivoci?), e sarà quindi quasi naturale l'approdo di Camerini e De Sica, nel loro film successivo, a un vero testo pirandelliano, *Ma non è una cosa seria*.³⁵ (110)

Il Signor Max followed with the story of Gianni, a newspaper vendor who squanders the largesse received from a generous friend to pose as a wealthy gentleman and court the high-class socialite Donna Paola (Rubi Dalma).³⁶

It can be said that both Bruno from *Gli uomini che mascalzoni...* and Gianni from *Il Signor Max* wear a "mask" that represents their class aspirations; in each case, we have a poor young man who chooses to impersonate a rich man. A similar kind of "mask" characterizes the soprano and the son of the Bellini family in *Ma non è una cosa seria*; although members of a higher social class, their performances suggest an attempt to reaffirm their social status. While it surely produces comedy, the "mask" observed in these four cases, however, evokes Pirandello only vaguely. As Farassino indicates, it is a "banalizzazione del pirandellismo." The case of Memmo, however, is distinct. Despite diluting its literary source in many ways, the film adopts the Pirandellian mask as a central theme. The notion of identity as mask, which is a part of the theory of humour, does not refer to a binary split between one's social image and the real person underneath. The mask is not even specific to identity; rather, it is another term for the fictions with which humans regulate the flux of life. A fiction is a rational reconstruction of any phenomenon, including another's identity or one's own, be it national, social, professional, or

³⁵ "It is not surprising that the question of Identity and Form is so central in the diffusion-banalization of Pirandellism in the 1930s (but still, to what extent had Pirandello not drawn his favourite themes from the 'low' tradition of the comedy of errors?); and therefore, Camerini and De Sica's achievement, in the next film, of a real Pirandellian text, *Ma non è una cosa seria*, will be almost natural."

³⁶ For insightful commentaries on the films mentioned here, see Landy 85–94.

other. The humorist differs from the non-humorist in that the former struggles among various fictions whereas the latter is pleased with one at a time. The humorist “scompono a una a una quelle costruzioni” (*Saggi* 146); “coglie subito queste varie simulazioni per la lotta della vita; si diverte a smascherarle” (148).³⁷ This unmasking does not expose an absolute truth; beneath the mask, another mask is revealed. Aware of the lack of a core, the humorist enjoyably crafts the coexisting masks. As we learn from Pirandello’s *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (*One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* [1925]), a person wears at least as many identities, or masks, as there are people. Being “no one” is the only firm identity. This “no one” is what Camerini launches at the film’s opening with Memmo’s “ghost,” a face of white cloth. Loletta’s removal of the cloth to unveil Memmo’s face enacts a Pirandellian paradox: if the cloth—its blankness, its infinite receptiveness—represents one’s only firm identity, its removal represents the drawing of masks upon it, as indicated by Loletta’s reaction when she sees a man she knows but also someone new. Yet in labelling the cloth as the “only firm identity,” we are drawing another fiction, which is inevitable as we operate within the limits of reason. We are found in an intellectual loop, the only escape from which is a confrontation with a “realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell’umana ragione [...] a costo di morire o d’impazzire,” as we saw earlier. The prop of the white cloth is, in my opinion, Pirandellian *par excellence*.

Once presented at opening, the mask theme is developed throughout the film, largely thanks to Camerini’s additions to the original plot for the depiction of Elsa. In the play, the women involved with Memmo and shown on stage are Loletta, her friend Fanny Martinez, and Gasparina. In the film, we see numerous women interested in Memmo: Loletta, Elsa, and Gasparina stand out, each representing a distinct socio-economic class. Loletta impersonates a cute and frivolous lower-middle-class stereotype. She usually expects a cash handout from Memmo, who responds positively. Elsa is classy, dignified, and splendidly dressed; her inclusion in the film grants the viewer the voyeuristic pleasure associated with the depiction of an exclusive class, a convention in 1930s comedy. Finally, Gasparina is a modest working-class woman. The nature of this group is crucial for the characterization of Memmo. With Elsa in the list of depicted lovers, we have a tangible array of socially diverse types that captures his love life. Allow me to note

³⁷ “[He] disassembles those constructions one by one” (*On Humor* 132); “[he] readily perceives the various simulations used in the struggle for life; he amuses himself by unmasking them” (134).

that women in this story, both in the play and film, are generally addressed as “*la signorina*,” a term that refers to an unmarried woman, suggesting her virginity. By referring to all women as *signorina*, Camerini highlights a key feature that they share despite their differences: the frequent use of the term across the board represents, it seems, Memmo’s yearning for a firm identity as a bachelor, a *bon viveur*, involved only with *signorine*, hence never married. At the same time, their differences, reflecting different aspects of Memmo’s temperament, embody the contrasting masks that together comprise his fluid identity. With Loletta, we see a caring and honest man, but also detached, seeking casual affairs that bear only minor responsibilities. With Elsa, we see a man who seeks stability associated less with personal intimacy than with a secure role in a given socio-economic milieu. With Gasperina, we see the man who manages, as it were, to overcome his womanizing ways and class aspirations and find true intimacy, a bond that needs no add-ons except sincere love—that is, we see the man who has learned how to value the thing itself.

I previously mentioned the “thing itself” to describe the utopian state for which the soul vainly searches in its strife against fictions. That such a state is actualized at the film’s closing is to be expected; it constitutes the happy ending that accompanies the classical film’s formal closure. In and of itself, this ending is anything but Pirandellian. Insofar as we deem fictions indispensable to life because ultimate truth is found only “*a costo di morire o d’impazzire*,” we do not speak of *only one* fiction to prevail and eclipse all others (which we seem to have in this film), but of multiple fictions that coexist, constantly reforming and merging with each other in an infinite process whose driving force is a utopia that remains unattainable. Instead, the classical ending’s idealism, its anti-Pirandellism, comes in handy to the cultural aspirations of Fascism, which aims not for an interminable search into the mysteries and ambivalences of experience, but for a solid national identity, defined by lucidity, simplicity, coherence, wholeness, and unshakable conviction.³⁸ Despite the film’s lack of political references, the ideal state of affairs presented at closing is informed by some of the values of Fascist culture, a state of affairs that is indicated, as we shall see, in the productive teamwork between narrative content and audio-visual technique.

³⁸ In spite of Pirandello’s outward support of Fascism, his work on humour runs counter to nationalism, as it questions the solidity of any rational, self-contained discourse. For more on Pirandello’s politics, see Giudice.

Halfway through the film, Memmo is torn between two paths. Once he learns that Elsa had come to see him at the hospital, a fact that his friend Lamanna had concealed, he has second thoughts about the marriage to Gasperina and decides to reclaim Elsa. He meets Elsa at a train station, wishing to join her on her imminent departure. At the same time, he must meet Gasperina and Barranco at the country villa where Barranco will explain how the marriage to Gasperina can be annulled. Elsa prevents Memmo from joining her but is willing to discuss their affair at a later point, given the possible annulment of the marriage to Gasperina. Memmo thus rushes to the countryside by bus, since Lamanna has borrowed his car without advising him. Ironically, upon arriving in the rural town late in the evening, Memmo just misses Barranco, who takes the same bus back to the city, though he plans to return to the villa the next morning. This crafty scenario sets up the film's narrative resolution in two ways: it suggests the dilemma between Elsa and Gasperina as potential spouses; it has Memmo stay overnight at the villa as he misses the last bus to the city. In the villa, Memmo realizes that Gasperina's restful life has unleashed her formerly suppressed refined sensibilities. Seeing that the villa has a piano, he learns that she plays and sings. When Gasperina offers him the master bedroom, where she normally sleeps, explaining that it is more comfortable than the guestroom, we foresee a self-sacrificing spouse. When she removes her personal belongings from the room, we see her elegant, high-heeled, fluffy slippers. And when left alone, Memmo finds a framed photograph of himself that she hid in a drawer, a sign of her secret feelings for him. He then sees a French grammar book, evidence of her thirst for knowledge. This parade of details paints the new Gasperina as an ideal spouse: modest, self-sacrificing, cultured, and just elegant enough to preserve her humility. She is ideal for any modern yet traditional household, surely a Fascist one, with qualities that a woman like Elsa, ostentatious and worldly, might undermine.

The closing of this night sequence sets the tone for the finale, to unfold the next morning and expose another crucial aspect of Gasperina's suitability. Before going to bed, Memmo opens the window and observes the nightly serenity of the lush greenery by the villa. The next shot shows a bright open field with Gasperina in the foreground in a *plan américain*, her back facing the camera, gazing at Memmo who is arriving on a horse. He looks tiny in the far distance while riding through a herd of grazing cows. The folkloristic extra-diegetic tune resounds the crucial role that land and tradition—that which is essentially Italian, as it were—play in the couple's discovery of true love. We have a contrast between epochalist impulse

and bourgeois desire for the *bel mondo* on the one hand, portrayed in the figure of Elsa, and traditional values on the other, for which the simplicity, frankness, and serenity of an idyllic rural life make a powerful metaphor that is mirrored in Gasperina's similar traits.³⁹ Not failing to promote Italy's image as a modern and affluent nation, seen above all in Elsa's world, the film nevertheless favours the ideology of *strapaese*, according to which "only through images informed by ruralist ideals could Italians discover a sense of national political culture" (Hay 133). In this reverie, Memmo's own "modernity" and belonging to a class of socialites are exposed as inauthentic. Memmo and Gasperina walk up a hill towards an old decrepit building reigning at the top, where, Memmo joyfully recounts, he played as a child, adding that he now realizes how "stupid" his adult life has been. The pronounced low-angle shot ascertains the authority of the ruin, whose unyielding permanence will forever determine what is authentic, or "serious," in one's life. The *coup de grâce* to Memmo's dilemma is the twist involving Barranco's explanation of how the marriage may be annulled: as he tells Memmo, "la Signorina Gasperina" can prove that, although married, she has remained "la... *Signorina* Gasperina," namely, a virgin. With this knowledge, Memmo's recovery of authenticity through Gasperina is firmly validated and permanently sealed, leading to the film's closing lines of Memmo's reassurance to her: "È una cosa seria."

The anti-Pirandellian premise of this finale—where all elements, both narrative and stylistic, enrol in a perfectly harmonious union, affirming what is good, genuine, and "serious," and conveying the promise of happiness—is indisputable. The choice to maintain the protagonist's original surname, Speranza, is thus adapted to the non-Pirandellian notion that the hope to find happiness is realized. Yet Memmo's ghostly white cloth, followed by Loletta's perplexing gaze upon unmasking, may haunt some of us throughout. It may not be a coincidence that, just before the affirmation of the "serious thing" at closing, Barranco gives his "blessing" to Memmo by addressing his lacking "seriousness": "Almeno... non la tratti come le altre." Despite Memmo's introspection and candid love confession, the question for some remains: will Gasperina have the same fate as the others? Memmo's well-known history, recalled by Barranco at this crucial moment, reclaims the original Pirandellian meaning of *speranza*: that the hope to attain utopia will remain a forever-lasting hope. To be sure, the model proposed here is readily adaptable to this film, which is based on a Pirandello play. One may be keen to consider, however, the possibility of a subtle Pirandellism in the other

³⁹ See Hay (Chapter 1) on the *bel mondo* and the epochalist impulse in 1930s Italian cinema.

Camerini–De Sica collaborations, or other films of the 1930s, whether or not they are Pirandello adaptations. Art, after all, even an art that is also industry, despite the conventions and regulations to which it must conform—economic, political, or other—bears its name only because its vocation is to call for new horizons of reflection.

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