

New Existentialism: The Literary *inetto* as a Reemerging Prototype in Twenty-First Century Cinema

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The new prototype of the *inetto*, a helpless and impassive character, makes his first appearance near the end of the nineteenth century in Italian literature, continues to gain strength and status throughout the twentieth-century artistic climate (through the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Camus) and reemerges in contemporary cinema. The present study examines whether there is a gradual exacerbation or overcoming of this psychological disorder across the centuries in the novels and films investigated. Specifically, I offer a comparative analysis of Svevo's character Emilio Brentani in *Senilità* (1898) and Giuseppe Piccioni's Guido in *Giulia non esce la sera* (*Giulia Does Not Date at Night*) (2009). This study will also draw unusual parallels between Schopenhauer, Svevo's existentialist philosophy and contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *inetto*, malaise, impotence, existentialism, philosophy, (anti)hero

Introduction

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century literary characters in many Italian novels offered a significant break from their self-assertive and positivist literary predecessors. Their personalities weakened exponentially and their certainties progressively crumbled under the social and historical epochal events, especially the WWI and the communist and fascist revolutions. This same prototype of character reemerged in several twentieth century French existentialists' works and it made a final appearance in twentieth first century Italian cinema, which generated more than a century-long *trait d'union* between genres and disciplines.

The Trajectory of the Existentialist *inetto*: The Anti-hero

Many late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian novels welcome the appearance of a fairly new stereotype in the array of literary characters. This new prototype reveals two very distinctive features: a deep and dramatic ineptitude and *malaise*. Notables among the many literary examples include Alfonso Nitti in Svevo's *Una Vita* (1892), Mattia Pascal in Pirandello's *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (1904), Emilio Brentani in Svevo's *Senilità* (1898), and Zeno Cosini in Svevo's *La Coscienza di Zeno* (1923).¹ Most of these characters are unable to deal with distressful and traumatic events since they are tormented by a psychological condition of anguish and helplessness. When a traumatic event occurs, the characters normally have two methods for coping with tragedy. In one approach, they fall into neurosis and psychological distress causing their own collapse. In the

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¹ Many other twentieth century Italian novels present characters affected by the same disease of ineptitude such as in Antonio Borgese's *Rubé*, Federico Tozzi's *Con gli occhi chiusi*, Alberto Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*, just to mention a few.

second, they adopt an attitude of complete estrangement and indifference towards reality, incarnating the prototype of *inetto*.² Curiously and anachronistically, the second approach will be theorized a few years later by the novels of two existentialists: Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942).

Through a postmodern and philosophical lens, enlightened by the writings of Schopenhauer, Leake and Docherty, this essay traces how the existential literary milieu (1) spread at the beginning of the twentieth century; (2) was theorized by Sartre and Camus in the middle of the century; and (3) resurfaced a century later in Italian contemporary cinema. Several contemporary movie directors, such as Francesca Comencini, Emanuele Crialese, Daniele Lucchetti, Nanni Moretti, Paolo Muccino, Ferzan Ozpetek, Paolo Sorrentino, and Paolo Virzì, portray characters that share the same psychological disorder as their literary ancestors. Some of their common traits include nausea, triggered by exclusion from society and life in general; inclination to "pensiero debole" (weak thought), which causes the weakening of the self, theory elaborated by Vattimo.³ They also include nihilism, annihilation of the emotions, feelings of worthlessness, and powerlessness with thoughts of suicide. The aim of this discussion is to establish whether there is an exacerbation or an overcoming of this psychological disorder across the centuries in the literary novels and films investigated. Specifically, it will focus on a comparative analysis of Svevo's Emilio Brentani and Giuseppe Piccioni's Guido to show whether and to what extent there is an overcoming of the literary psychological *malaise* or a regression towards a more tormented individual. It will also dwell on how the themes of Italo Svevo's novels anticipated early twentieth-century French existentialism and resurfaced in twenty-first century Italian film, creating a long *trait d'union* between different artistic media and a new revamped model of existentialist *inetto*: the (anti)hero.

Sartre's *Nausea*: The Nothingness of Existence

At the core of existentialist theory lies Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" (2007, p. 19), which means that a personality is not built over a previously designed model predetermined by nature (as ancient metaphysics maintained) or a precise purpose laid down by religious tradition.⁴ As Sartre puts it in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards" (2007, p. 30). The idea that "existence precedes essence" is that, for human beings, there is no predefined pattern that they must fit into. Each life defines what individuals truly are, not any idealized set of characteristics.

Sartre's *Nausea* theorizes this new existentialist approach through the main character, Antoine Roquentin. Antoine suffers from a very ingrained psychological *malaise*, ineptitude, and powerlessness that will later infect Camus' characters as well. The novel claims to be a collection of sparse notes written in the form of a diary by Roquentin, and put together by an editor who found them. Roquentin feels that something has changed in the

² This article uses the Italian word "inetto" as a noun representing ineptness, lack of will, and powerlessness.

³ Vattimo's philosophy of "weak thought" involves a withdrawal from metaphysics by asserting hermeneutical nihilism. This requires that the foundational certainties of modernity with its emphasis on objective truth founded in a rational unitary subject be relinquished for a more multifaceted conception closer to that of the arts. The philosopher from Turin is convinced that the contemporaneous philosophy, following Nietzsche and nihilism, presents itself as thought without foundations, as reflection that is not anchored anymore on the solid bases of metaphysics and on the Cartesian certainty. The period of the systems and of the strong ideologies has set this as the epoch of weak structures. Reason is not central anymore; it is as if it had lost its power, entering into a dark zone and taking on the form of a nebulous silhouette, just as if it had eclipsed. The pilaster of "pensiero debole" (weak thought) is built on the idea that man interprets the world within linguistics horizons, not fixed but historical. "Pensiero debole" (weak thought), in a few words, means that the foundational concept of philosophy has consumed itself, the ultimate foundations, the incontrovertible principles, the clear and distinct ideas, the absolute values, the primary evidence, and the ineluctable laws of history have dissolved.

⁴ The maxim "existence precedes essence" coined by Sartre subsequently became the axiom for the existentialist movement.

way he sees objects, but he cannot clearly understand his malady. He hopes that a diary will help him better process his thoughts specifically in an effort to see, classify, and determine the extent and nature of the change. However, this writing exercise does not help him work through his anxiety, and he only realizes an increasing feeling of disgust of the outside world because ultimately it cannot be known or understood. In writing the diary, he begins to address the major themes of existentialism: anxiety, suffering, fear of freedom, and self-deception. As he observes the world and realizes that there is no real essence or meaning to the objects, he concludes that everything disgusts him, which increases his sense of nausea towards everything and everyone. He progressively proves to himself that life is senselessness and begins to realize the nothingness of existence. It is important to remember that Sartre's "nothingness" can also be considered a form of existence; therefore, the paradox represents another reason for Roquentin's nausea. Nevertheless, Sartre believed that awareness of the "nothingness" behind existence inevitably leads individuals to exploit their freedom. As a matter of fact, rather than suffer indefinitely, Roquentin uses his recognition of the absurdity of existence to reestablish his identity: "the *I* surges into the consciousness, it is *I*, Antoine Roquentin" (Sartre & Alexander, 1964, p. 85). Roquentin decides to write a novel and, though he doesn't think it will make him unaware of his own existence, he hopes that writing it will help him make sense of who he *was*. Eventually, he feels confident that he can survive his nausea by ignoring anxiety, living a life of action, and embracing responsibility. As Sartre wrote, "Life begins on the other side of despair" (Sartre & Alexander, 1964, p. 133), which means that in order to start a true life, it is necessary to overcome the anguish of existence.

Albert Camus' *The Stranger*: The Philosophy of the Absurd

Just a few years later, Albert Camus published *The Stranger*. In this novel, the Algerian writer posits his philosophy of the absurd and humanity's futile attempt to find rational order where none exists. The main character Meursault believes that the world is purposeless and feels no grief for life's tragic events, a sentiment that is epitomized by the lack of emotion he expresses at his mother's death. While he is completely unmoved by the emotional, social, and interpersonal content of situations, he is far from indifferent when it comes to the realm of the physical and practical, as in Roquentin. Camus' philosophy of the absurd characterizes the world and human existence as having no rational purpose or meaning. According to his philosophy, the universe is indifferent to human struggles, and Meursault's apathetic personality embodies this philosophy emphasizing the futility of man's inevitable attempts to find order and meaning in life. The "absurd" refers to the feeling man experiences when he tries to find or fabricate order in an irrational universe. During the story Meursault kills a man, yet there is no logical reason for his action. He does not try to justify his act because he comes to the conclusion that there is no way out of prison and there is no way out of life that inevitably and purposelessly ends in death. Meursault's lack of concern about his death sentence implies that his trial and conviction were pointless exercises. In his heightened state of consciousness prior to his execution, he says that he has come to recognize the "gentle indifference of the world" (Camus & Ward, 1989, p. 122). Meursault decides that, like him, the world does not pass judgment, nor does it rationally order or control the events of human existence.

Camus' novel proves that the condition of total estrangement and schism between action and immobility becomes the mental disorder affecting (post) modernity, whereby the individual moves with no direction after having satisfied his primary needs and becomes disinterested in finding reasons to feel alive. The modern individual, according to existentialist philosophy, does not know how to deal with freedom and gets

overwhelmed by all the possibilities and choices life offers.⁵ Thus, the individual decides to give up freedom and chooses to face a life of ineptitude. Very soon, s/he realizes that s/he is trapped in this existential desperate dimension, which spirals him/her down to a dark and depressive place or even to suicide.⁶

However, preceding Sartre and Camus' twentieth-century existentialist claims, Italo Svevo and Alberto Moravia in Italy wrote various *ante litteram* existential novels, in which their main characters greatly recall the dysfunctions and absurdity of those of Sartre and Camus. The connection between Sartre/Camus and Svevo/Moravia is clear: ineptitude is perceived as a direct result of an existential *malaise* that assails the characters and seems to be too strenuous to overcome. It is important to emphasize that for some of the aforementioned writers, the indifference is not a stoic form of wisdom towards life,⁷ but a form of self-degradation affecting individuals who, resigned and defeated, renounce fighting for their lives. The new concept of indifference entails moral inertia⁸, existential passivity, alienation, and superficiality that the bourgeois society uses as a shield to cope with existential questions and urges.

Italo Svevo's *Senilità*: A Lacanian Split Subject

In Svevo's 1898 *Senilità*, the main character Emilio Brentani is a subject split between the longing for love and pleasure and the regret for not having enjoyed them. He is a Lacanian subject in that his self is divided between his conscious part (the ego, the awareness of unhappiness) and his unconscious (his inner and unspoken pleasure-seeking id).⁹ In his *The Lacanian Subject* (1995), Fink explains that "the subject is split in between the conscious and the unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language (the signifying chain) in the unconscious" (1995, p. 45). According to Fink's interpretation of Lacan, "the being's two parts share no common ground: they are radically separated (the ego or false being requiring a refusal of unconscious thoughts, unconscious thoughts having no concern whatsoever for the ego's fine opinion of itself)" (1995, p. 45). Emilio incarnates the alienated Lacanian subject, in continuous confrontation with the Other's desire. As Fink insists:

If alienation consists in the subject's causation by the Other's desire which preceded his or her birth, by some desire not of the subject's own making, separation consists in the attempt by the alienated subject to come to grips with that Other's desire as it manifests itself in the subject's world. (1995, p. 50)

Emilio views separation from the Other (his lover Angiolina, her sister Amalia, his friend Balli) as the only possible way to accept and come to terms with his alienated self. However, he will never get out of his psychological *impasse* and he will end up desperate and alone. He is not capable of handling his inner struggle and his romantic life; his indecision and moral inertia lead him to close himself off in his memories, in a state of spiritual senility (as the title of the novel evokes). In other words, Svevo's senility foreshadows the distressed

⁵ In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre claims: "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning" (Sartre & Kulka, 2007, p. 24).

⁶ Ultimately, Meursault's fate is a self-induced suicide since he favors the death sentence on him.

⁷ For Epicurus, the most pleasant life is one where we abstain from unnecessary desires and achieve an inner tranquility or freedom from all worry (*ataraxia*) by being content with simple things, and by choosing the pleasure of philosophical conversation with friends. The stoics claimed that *ataraxia* is a virtue with which philosophers manage to control irrational passions and impulses. In Roman times, Seneca claims that *ataraxia* coincides with the concept of *aplomb* (from the Latin *Tranquillitate*), and it is the only attitude that helps individuals to attain happiness.

⁸ Carolina Sartorio explains in her essay published in 2008 that moral inertia is "moral pressure to fail to intervene in certain circumstances" (2008, p. 117).

⁹ On this topic, see Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. New York: Norton, 1977, p. 288.

condition affecting Sartre and Camus' existential characters.

Svevo's other characters are associated by the same sense of helplessness, worthlessness, and powerlessness.¹⁰ A force coming from within themselves overpowers Svevo's inept characters: they are not necessarily crushed by external events, but by an internal disease that spreads within their souls and slowly consumes them. They are impaired by an intrinsic inability to function properly, and they are unable to turn their will and desires into actions. Therefore, they feel excluded from the fight for existence, and prefer the position of contemplators to fighters. They willingly accept the existential condition of ineptitude since they decide not to defend their beliefs and to renounce living. In an attempt to explain the possibility of accepting such a complex psychological stance, it is imperative to recall Schopenhauer's philosophical apparatus that undoubtedly influenced Svevo's *Weltanschauung*.

Arthur Schopenhauer's *noluntas* and Svevo

In *The World as Will and Representation* (1844), Schopenhauer states the supremacy of will ("desire", "striving", "wanting", "effort", and "urging") as the nexus of life and all being. His philosophy holds that all nature, including man, is the expression of an insatiable *will to life* (1958, v. 2, p. 269). It is through will that mankind finds all of their suffering, as the desire for more is what causes this misery. Thus, the awareness of will can have tragic outcomes since human nature has limitless unsatisfied wants and unattainable goals. The only way to avoid suffering is the renunciation of desire and the practice of *noluntas or the negation of will* (1958, v. 2, p. 369). Those who successfully manage to negate this urge are able to eradicate the eternal and unsuccessful quest for truth, happiness, love, and beauty that undeniably would lead them to dissatisfaction, failure, and further suffering (1958, v. 1, p. 193). Aesthetic pleasure results from being a spectator of the "world as representation" (mental image or idea) without any experience of "the world as will" (need, craving, urge) (1958, v. 1, p. 4).

It is likely that Schopenhauer's argument likely influenced Svevo's idea of the *inetto*, a character who decides to give up his will and his actions in order to enact his detachment from reality, protecting him/herself from the pain of living with awareness. However, the schopenhaurian *noluntas* cannot include every aspect of one's life, but it can only be applied to shun oneself from corrupting pleasures. According to Svevo, the individual should avoid giving in to negative vital instincts because they lead to fixed and conventional living schemas and eventually to death, anticipating Camus' Meursault.

Emilio Brentani incarnates Schopenhauer's theory of negation of will since he decides to give up his love for Angiolina (the only source of his happiness) when he realizes that he would have to fight for her love in order to have her. He does not care and does not have enough moral strength to assert his will; therefore, he decides to forsake his romance and continues on with his miserable life. However, Emilio's decision ultimately challenges and invalidates the German philosopher's claim of salvation through renunciation since Emilio finds more pain and suffering in his decision to deny his will. Emilio is a man torn between his longing for love and his ineptitude, and he is incapable of enjoying either.

Following the same path as his predecessor Alfonso Nitti in *Una vita*,¹¹ Emilio personifies the prototype

¹⁰ Alfonso Nitti in Svevo's first novel *Una Vita* feels inadequate and incapable of living with other people. His sense of helplessness culminates in the final suicide. Zeno Cosini in Svevo's last novel *Zeno's Conscience* is a man without qualities and fails to be able to assert his life and take important decisions.

¹¹ Alfonso Nitti is the protagonist of Svevo's first novel, *Una Vita*, published in 1892.

of the *inetto*, as he is incapable of living life to its fullest because he is trapped in his dreams and illusions, in a perpetual and unaware self-deceit. They are both vanquished by an unwelcoming reality. But, whereas Alfonso commits suicide, putting an end to his sense of uselessness and unsuitableness, Emilio shows even more ineptitude by his incapability of carrying out this ultimate gesture of (lack of) will. Conversely, his sister Amalia shares a similar fate with Alfonso because she decides to end her life by injecting ether after realizing that she cannot cope with the anguish caused by the loss of the man she loves.

Svevo himself explained Emilio's senility in his 1927 preface to the novel. Just like Sartre's nausea, senility is a mental condition that triggers the protagonists' ineptitude and impairs them from engaging with life and reality. It also leads them to be absorbed even more with their inner being. This obsessive insistence with self-analysis reflects the form and syntax of the novel. In effect, Svevo structures his narrative following the meandering of Emilio's conscience and psychology by freely recounting his feelings and opinions, similar to Joyce's stream-of-consciousness style. The space-time continuum of the novel is not crucial; rather, the internal motives and the reactions to the events become the pivotal feature of this (post) modern novel.¹² Due to his obsession with self-analysis, Emilio loses everything and everyone in his life. His lover, Angiolina, leaves him after she grows tired of his jealous attacks. His sister, Amalia, commits suicide when she cannot cope with a romantic setback with Stefano Balli, and she simultaneously feels abandoned by her brother Emilio, who seems to be paying more attention to his tumultuous love affair than to her. At the end of the novel, Emilio is left alone, desperate and hopeless, sadly trapped in his state of senility and ineptitude.

The conclusion of Svevo's novel confutes Schopenhauer's assertion that negation of will generates a positive resolution to overcome the senselessness of existence. After he feels he is getting too attached to Angiolina, Emilio tries to leave her in an attempt to suppress his will. He also indirectly neglects his sister Amalia (suppressing his affection to her) when he falls in love with Angiolina because he realizes that his attachment to his sister was getting too morbid and incestuous. However, the several attempts to negate his will fail and his life ends up being more miserable and intolerable than at the beginning of the novel. Emilio's turbulent experience demonstrates that Schopenhauer's theory is rather utopic and unrealizable. It is impossible to convince oneself to negate will and live happily ever after according to Emilio/Svevo. Everyone confronts struggle, and in the face of it one cannot simply take sides; rather, as Lacan's split subject shows, one must cope with both will and apathy. Thus, Emilio's fate foresees Sartre and Camus' philosophical characters Roquentin and Meursault since they are all bonded by the same nihilistic view of life and existence manifested through abhorrence, disgust, and resignation.

Giuseppe Piccioni's *Giulia non esce la sera*: Postmodern Pessimism

This harsh and sudden awareness of a utopic happiness and inner helplessness finds its way in many cinematic characters throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Italian cinema. These include roles such as Guido in Fellini's *8 ½* (1963), Giuliana in Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), Michele Apicella in many of Moretti's films, Titta Di Girolamo in Sorrentino's *The Consequences of Love* (2004), and Jep Gambardella in Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013).¹³ Similar psychological existential nuances are also found in Guido

¹² *Senilità* paves the way to the new narratology in *Zeno's Conscience* where the narrator and the main character coincides, giving the readers the internal and not objective point of view. The plot of the novel does not follow a traditional chronological order but a psychological sequence of facts ordered by the conscience and memory of the main character.

¹³ This list of *inetti* does not include characters in the Neorealist films, whose desperation was triggered by external devastation at the aftermath of the Second World War.

Montani, the main character of Giuseppe Piccioni's *Giulia non esce la sera*.

In order to better elucidate the psychological contour affecting these cinematic characters, it is necessary to refer to Thomas Docherty's postmodern theory of pessimism elaborated in his *Postmodernist Theory: Lyotard, Baudrillard and Others* (1994). Docherty affirms:

The pessimism of the postmodern lies in the realization that the future will not redeem the present; that the material world may be thoroughly resistant to consciousness and to our determination to master it by signification; that history, in short, does not exist *for* the Subject. (1994, p. 500)

If history does not exist for the subject as a linear entity, and there is no essence in existence, as Sartre maintains, the individual loses all spatial and temporal points of reference. This loss of direction makes it difficult to assert one's will because the individual feels disoriented and does not possess hope for the future. Schopenhauer's negation of will becomes strictly interconnected with pessimism, nihilism, impotence, and the awareness of the impracticality of a personal catharsis and an ultimate final redemption. Characters become aware of the unlikelihood of a final atonement because they have lost the ultimate reference point (the proverbial Lacanian transcendental signifier), opening a massive vortex of existential possibilities, which could drag them to a senseless dimension.

This is the gloomy milieu that surrounds and influences Giuseppe Piccioni's characters in their choices, verbal exchanges, kinetics and nonverbal communication. Pessimism becomes an invisible entity that acts as a centripetal force that paradoxically draws closer and pushes away the characters, impairing their will and rendering them helpless like marionettes in a puppet show.

In Piccioni's film, the viewer witnesses an opposing game of forces, which creates a kaleidoscope effect. The film unravels through the vicissitudes of two lonely characters, Guido and Giulia, who are deprived of any specifically interesting characteristics. Guido is the stereotypical example of an inept writer who does not even recall why and how he started writing. His writings' imaginary characters, who are exactly like him, also condemn him, as they are airy, lofty, harmless and apparently deprived of any history. Giulia is a convict for having killed her lover in cold blood even after having abandoned her family and her small child for him. Over time, with good behavior, the judge grants her daily leave from prison to work as a swimming instructor, where she first meets Guido as her student. Despite their many differences, they share the same outlook on life: they are spectators of their existence. They passively see their existence flow by without getting too involved in it, as if they were swimming beneath the surface of their life using the metaphor of the water omnipresent in this film. The water simultaneously isolates them and protects them from coming into contact with and communicating with the rest of the world. This system of thought combines Schopenhauer's philosophy with Pirandello's ontology.¹⁴ In fact, the characters seem to avoid getting too involved in their existence for fear of being hurt by reality, following the concept of *noluntas*.¹⁵ Therefore, they negate their will and desires while embracing a mediocre existence. They accomplish this detachment from reality, borrowing the Pirandellian concept of

¹⁴ Pirandello's ontology is based on his concept of "absurdism" which is an idea or view of philosophical thought of existentialism, of the contrast of humanity living in a world that is and will always be hostile or uncaring and their efforts to find meaning in the world in a meaningless world. In the absurd world, there is no meaning or absolutes; the only absolute is that there is none. The absence of absolutes seems to remove all reason for living. Absurdism is based upon the nature of the absurd and how one should react to if he or she becomes conscious to it.

¹⁵ This existential approach also recalls the estrangement of Camus's Merceault, who realizes that we all have to die eventually, so it does not matter if one gets killed or dies a natural death. The only reasonable position is the detachment from life's passion.

“vedersi vivere”,¹⁶ a philosophical and existential theory that confines them to be spectators of their existence. Guido’s life is characterized by a series of misjudgments, as his mental inertia and ineptitude prevents him from taking a definite stance on anything. For instance, Guido is not able to leave his wife while he is dating Giulia, he cannot find the strength to move to another house with his family, and he does not manage to continue writing his novel, blaming this arid state on writer’s block. Similarly, Giulia’s will is impaired; even if she would like to talk to her daughter, she represses her desire for fear of being rejected. Instead of talking to her, Giulia spies on her from a distance without daring to meet her face to face. All of the ill-conceived attempts lead to a deep ineptitude and helplessness that will eventually culminate in Giulia’s suicide in her jail cell.

Svevo’s Amalia and Piccioni’s Giulia both decide to take their own lives after coming into contact with an *inetto* who initially seems to care for them but who ultimately cannot commit to them and abandons them to their ruthless fate. The ineptitude suffered by the male characters is transferred to the women as if it were an infectious disease. The only major difference is that women cannot cope with the castration anxiety fever that assails men; they succumb to it without finding redemption. However, if suicide becomes an extreme gesture of self-assertion and rebellion against an adverse fate, it can further be interpreted as a tool to overcome a paralyzing ineptitude.¹⁷ Their suicides become a symbol of a fearless spirit, which puts an end to their enslavement, reminding us of the suicide of the romantic character Thomas Chatterton, which “became a symbol of a fearless spirit that triumphed over death and was somehow conceived as a victory of the individual against adversity” (Friend, n.d., p. 125).

Elizabeth Leake, in her *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth Century Italy* (2011), examines the suicides of several Italian writers who ended their lives at the beginning of the twentieth century. She pays particular attention to Guido Morselli, Giuseppe Rensi, Cesare Pavese, Gianni Vattimo, Primo Levi. Leake theorizes that these writers’ acts of suicide represent attempts to become the authors of their own death. The suicide is therefore perceived as an extreme gesture that expresses the writers’ wills to control and write the moments of their lives until the last instant: “The authoring of one’s own death,” Leake points out, “will be key to conceptualizing the ways suicide acts as a form of writing and rewriting” (2011, p. 10). However, the author refers to the aforementioned writers’ suicides as a hermeneutic tool to (re)analyze their entire opus. Therefore, the voluntary act of suicide reimagines and redirects the interpretation of their work. The writers reify ultimate control over their lives through suicide, which becomes a calculated and rationalized decision that has effects that are imposed and controlled *post-mortem*. Therefore, their suicide becomes a literary statement: life is their work of art on which they have full control and can be manipulated at their will.

Conversely, Giulia’s suicide is a more desperate and pragmatic gesture that aims to terminate the anguish and suffering of her life. Since it expresses a renouncement of fighting, her suicide can be interpreted as a consequence of her ineptitude, conceived as final capitulation.

The recurring theme of ineptitude in the film does not only impose itself as a philosophical and psychological leitmotif, but it also becomes visibly tangible through the presence of several signifiers: (1) Guido’s nearly empty house, which stands for the emptiness following the departure of his wife and daughter; (2) the recurring scene of the white curtains lifted by the wind, which symbolizes a possible change that never

¹⁶ The concept of “vedersi vivere” can be translated as “watch one’s life from outside”.

¹⁷ This type of suicide recalls the Stoics’ view of it. The Stoics accepted that suicide was permissible for the wise person in circumstances that might prevent them from living a virtuous life. Plutarch held that accepting life under tyranny would have compromised Cato’s self-consistency (*constantia*) as a Stoic and impaired his freedom to make the honorable moral choices. Suicide could be justified if one fell victim to severe pain or disease, but otherwise suicide would usually be seen as a rejection of one’s social duty.

occurs; (3) the several scenes at the swimming pool which denote a search for protection and a regression to the amniotic fluid of the womb. Moreover, the long cinematic scenes at the swimming pool emphasize the paradox of a human activity that leads nowhere, i.e., swimmers going back and forth in an enclosed pool without actually travelling anywhere. The pool further symbolizes the absurdity of their lives where every effort is meaningless and uselessness.

Giuseppe Piccioni and Italo Svevo: The *inetti*'s Meaningless Lives and Impotence

Although Piccioni and Svevo belong to different times and use different artistic means, they offer the same individual prototype of the *inetto*. Their protagonists are disabled by the same psychological *malaise* affecting Sartre and Camus' characters. The *inetti* are not capable of living and acting like the rest of humanity because they are more aware of the meaninglessness of life. Accordingly, they react to their helplessness by finding refuge in the alibi of an alleged intellectual superiority (in an aristocratic isolation) or dreaming of a life filled with glamorous actions and exceptional gestures (as with Guido).

Among the points in common between the cinematographic and the literary inept characters, one such quality is their inability to approach the women they love. Logically, their internal uselessness makes them incapable of having authentic feelings towards others because of their lack of self-esteem; thus, they continue making mistakes and showing poor judgment when facing romantic issues. For example, Emilio in Svevo's *Senilità* neglects his responsibilities since he convinces himself that he needs to sacrifice other obligations for Angelina's well being. Similarly, Guido in Piccioni's film continues to date Giulia without committing to her, giving her poor advice and eventually and unwillingly causing her to commit suicide. Therefore, their preexisting *malaise* impairs their will and prevents them from acting in a proper and judicious way.

Another common characteristic between Emilio and Giulio is their inability to fight when facing crises, confrontations and crucial circumstances, which serve as a direct repercussion of their disease. In accordance with Pirandello's thinking, Svevo maintains that mental illness affects people with fixed certainties in which they ground their existence and cannot analyze themselves with criticism because they think that life is ruled by unchanging laws.¹⁸ Therefore, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between the two psychological conditions of sanity and disease in a climate of universal *malaise*, imbued with Einstein's theory of relativism which becomes the *humus* and cultural environment of both nineteenth and twenty-first century aesthetics.¹⁹ Consequently, this sense of helplessness viewed as a psychological illness inevitably leads to physical death and suicide, and may be perceived as the ultimate solution to an unsustainable mental oppression and agony. However, the very decision of ending one's life by some of Svevo's and Piccioni's characters once again dismantles Schopenhauer's theory of *noluntas* since according to the German philosopher, the answer to overcome the pain of existence is not found in suicide (which is still an affirmation of the individuals' will) but in the liberation from the *will of living* (*voluntas*). Broadly, in Schopenhauer's view, suicide is the ultimate personal failure when conceived as an extreme refuge and escape from the world (2010, p. 12). It is in this sense that the twentieth-century literary and cinematic successors of the German thinker embody a progressive decline in individual strength and an increase in psychological fragmentation, which will lead to a severe psychological collapse and a crumbling of meaning and certainties.

¹⁸ Pirandello also believed that life is a constant flux, and whoever tries to fix it in a form becomes insane.

¹⁹ Einstein's theory of relativism is transposed in literature with Pirandello's concept of "relativismo gnoseologico", which states that nothing can be fully known since our knowledge is limited by its endless possibilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison between Schopenhauer's philosophy, Svevo's novel and Piccioni's film proves a progressive regression of individual's personal and psychological strengths and sanities. This new prototype of the *inetto* as a helpless and impotent character first makes an appearance at the end of nineteenth-century literature, continues to gain strength and status throughout the twentieth-century artistic milieu (through the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Camus) and reemerges in contemporary cinema. However, while the nineteenth-century literary characters represent an attempt to react to and escape the condition of *malaise* called ineptitude²⁰ (although, for the majority of the time, the attempts result in failure) and are still mindful of Schopenhauer's lesson of *noluntas*, the twenty-first century cinematic descendants remain stuck in mental disorder and adopt drastic measures to cope with this impotence. In fact, Guido in Piccioni's film shows an ontological weakness, which spoils his will of power and traps him in an irreversible mental state of helplessness. Moreover, we can also infer that this twenty-first century character is more dangerous than his forerunners because he infects those around him, and uncontrollably spreads his contagious existential *malaise*. The last scene of the film is emblematic of this theory since it shows Guido and his daughter Costanza standing by themselves at an empty banquet, just after learning that he has lost a prestigious literary prize for his latest book. During the speech of the award-winning writer, Guido and his daughter start selfishly taking food from a buffet table and begin eating right off the serving plates without consideration of the other guests who have not yet retrieved their food. Metaphorically, Guido is contaminating other people and spreading his disease of ineptitude through his surroundings after his final and definitive failure. Thus, Guido's *malaise* is even more acute and severe than that of his predecessors due to the fact that he inherits the weight of the twentieth-century crisis of consciousness and ontological fragmentation, which exacerbates his illness and sends him spiraling down to an irrecoverable capitulation. One wonders what the future of the *inetto* will be both in literature and film.

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²⁰ Among the many examples, we can mention Zeno Cosini in *La Coscienza di Zeno* and Mattia Pascal in *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*.

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