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At Sixes and Sevens: *Six Characters (Still) in Search of an Author*

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Abstract

The article reads through Pirandello's most famous metatheatrical work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and compares it to *Magnificent Presence* (2013) by an Italian Turkish director Ferzan Özpetek. It's a ghost centered dramedy with Pietro Pontechiello, a gay man who rents a large house in the historic center of Rome which is infested with strange and mysterious presences: the ghosts of members of a theater company dating back to the times of fascism who do not know that are dead. The ghosts believe, in a very Pirandellian way, they are on leave to participate in a new show, and Pietro does not know how to drive the intruders from the building.

Keywords: Luigi Pirandello, Ferzan Özpetek, LGBTQ+, film analysis, Italian Modernism.

Magnificent Presence,⁸ a 2012 movie directed by Ferzan Özpetek, pays tribute to one of the most famous and studied works by Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* from 1921 (a part of the theater in theater trilogy, together with *Each in His Own Way* and *Tonight We Improvise*), as claimed by the very director in an interview:

MP è anche un film pirandelliano. In cui la realtà appare finzione, mentre la finzione diventa realtà ... gli attori ... vivono mentre recitano, mentre gli altri recitano nella vita ... finzione e realtà si mischiano e si confondono ... E così il teatro in cui abbiamo girato parti del film è il Valle, lo stesso teatro dove ci fu il debutto dei *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* di Pirandello, (Özpetek)

or, likewise, in another interview given together with the screenwriter:

Özpetek: Il riferimento a Pirandello e *Sei personaggi* è molto presente, anche l'idea del tram mi è venuta un sabato sera come Piero Tosi che

8 Throughout the paper the abbreviation *MP* will be used instead.

diceva che Pirandello avrebbe preso i fantasmi e portati a teatro.

Pontremoli: Per scegliere lo spettacolo da far fare alla compagnia ... nel film non è specificato di che spettacolo si tratti ma il film è intriso di Pirandello e i *Sei personaggi*, con gioco di specchi tra presente e passato che arriva alla realtà e non si distingue più chi è vero e chi finto ... (Özpetek and Pontremoli)

Despite the inevitable differences, Pirandello's work is quoted directly in the movie (the line "Finzione, finzione," repeated several times throughout the movie, is taken from Pirandello's play); moreover, both works share key concepts developed by the Sicilian author, such as *metatheater*, the conflict between reality and fiction, as well as the fundamental dualism of Life (*vita*) and Form (*forma*), Mask (*maschera*) and Face (*volto*). In this mixed atmosphere, at first sight muddled and chaotic, comedy, tragedy, imagination and paradox become interwoven into indefinable nuances, succumbing to fictional kaleidoscopes (di Giorgi 3); however, the movie has its own internal logic, stemming from the Pirandellian philosophy, described as "... tumultuosa e non procede mai ordinata: non c'è sviluppo logico ... concatenazione negli avvenimenti ..." (15) by the very author in his *Preface to Six Characters*. However,

... rappresentare un caos non significa affatto rappresentare caoticamente ... che la mia rappresentazione sia tutt'altro che confusa, ma anzi assai chiara, semplice e ordinata, lo dimostra l'evidenza con cui, agli occhi di tutti i pubblici del mondo, risultano l'intreccio, i caratteri, i piani fantastici e realistici, drammatici e comici del lavoro, e come, per chi ha occhi più penetranti, vengono fuori i valori insoliti in esso racchiusi, (16)

the values that have, throughout decades, been inspiring more and more authors to do remakes of his works or pay tribute to the author with their works inspired by his thought. Pirandello's genius, greatness and importance in modern literature, indisputable as they are, have been recognized nationally, internationally and transmedially. That being said, different analogies can be made between Pirandello's play and Özpetek's movie, falling within what Brunetta defines as "l'onda lunga di Pirandello sul cinema modern" (23). Pirandello's characters, as well as Özpetek's actors, can be seen as representative of Life, authentic urges in all their genuineness, while Pirandello's actors and Özpetek's Pietro represent Form, self-deceptions and social obligations. In both cases Life, eventually, conquers Form, while the only way out of the

tension are either suicide or insanity.

The technique of metadrama or metatheater is crucial for understanding Pirandello, in whose work Özpetek finds inspiration for his movie, in which the concept of metatheater becomes the phenomenon of cinema in cinema (di Giorgi 2) or even theater in cinema. While in *Six Characters* the characters ask an acting company to bring their personal drama to life, in *MP* an acting company implores an aspiring actor to solve the mystery of their inexplicable disappearance during World War II. One of the key principles of the concept is the alteration of real and imaginary: one play contains another, reality and fiction become intertwined, almost impossible to tell apart. This literary strategy is typical of Pirandello's works, in which the audience, as well as the actors, remain unsure which events are real and which not, like the death of the Son. In *MP*, the entire storyline revolves around the acting company, of whose existence no one is certain- whether they are real or simply the protagonist's fruit of imagination. Both in Pirandello's play and in Özpetek's movie, real actors, the acting company together with Pietro, become the audience: the roles become reversed as fictional characters take their place. The staging extends to the auditorium, leaving the characters perform their play.

That the acting company is merely the fruit of imagination of Pietro, the protagonist, the inability of all the other characters to see them bears witness to the fact. Maria, the doctor and the transvestite encountered in front of his house never manage to see them; rather, they have concerns about his mental health. In fact, the transvestite tells him: "Tu sei un po' distratto. Ognuno combatte la solitudine come può" (*MP* 42:33-44:28), calling his strange behaviour "a game," a direct reference to the play *The Rules of the Game* (*Il giuoco delle parti*), mentioned in *Six Characters*, for which the acting company is doing a rehearsal. Pietro feels "one" and "real" only after accepting the multiplicity of the characters as his own, as one personality composed of various fragments, analogous to the Pirandellian philosophy and his concept of shattering of the self. As a homosexual, Pietro incarnates the duplicity of Hermes, believed the archetype of the unconscious by Jung, in that way representing the connection between male and female, reality and fiction, dream and imagination (di Giorgi 1). The figure of Hermes, deity that represents the dark side, the hidden corner of the human psyche, could be seen as an analogy to the Pirandellian idea of duplicity, as well as his dualism of Life and Form.

Özpetek's cinema has broken boundaries in its depiction of the theme of "otherness" in contemporary Italy, through the questions related to the LGBTQ+ community (Bauman 389). In that way, the fascination

with the idea of duplicity of the human psyche, as well as with the masculine body, become of central importance in his other cinematographic works, such as *Il bagno turco - Hamam* (1997) in which the protagonist discovers his repressed homosexuality during his trip to Turkey, while his wife, after his death, becomes attracted to his lover. Similarly, in *Fate ignoranti* (2001) the protagonist, after her husband's death discovers her late husband's homosexuality, becoming a part of his *queer* family, as well as having feelings for his lover. In these movies, the death of an individual enables the diegesis of the "other," as well as their transformation (Bauman 394-398), analogous to Pietro who, metaphorically, "kills" the predominantly heterosexual social expectations, the Form, accepting Life, indulging in his urges, hidden and forbidden, as hinted by the title of the script he reads, *Forbidden dream (Sogno proibito)*. According to Judith Roof, the homosexual culture came as a response to the Enlightenment ideology focused on one ordered, carefully arranged and controlled reasoning, in that way representing a significant deviance as regards the binary tradition, from singular to plural, from unity to multiplicity (Rigoletto 207-208). Consequently, the deviance from the traditional *modus cogitandi* and the insistence on the non-fixity of ambivalent identities lead to the emergence of a new system characterized by the multiplicity of the self and the truths (Rigoletto 212), analogous to the *modus operandi* of Pirandellian works.

Moreover, the central procedure in Özpetek's films is the fusion of the Turkish, Oriental culture with Italian, Occidental, thence enabling once more the duality of the self and of belonging, through protagonists that belong to the dualizing spectrum of existence, identified in the theory of Edward Said, according to whom Western nations have a mental construction of the East as "other" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 165). By freeing the characters from restrictions of one singular and dogmatic truth, Özpetek, like Pirandello, prefers ambiguity as a narrative trope that enables to put different, self-complementary realities into perspective (Rigoletto 214), through the idea of duality that stems from the Oriental beliefs in reincarnation and metempsychosis (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 167).

Game, one of the key motives of *Six Characters*, becomes an indispensable element of Özpetek's work; ludic systems lie at the heart of his movies, where the characters undergo a transformation by rediscovering a hidden side of their personality or get to know themselves through socio-erotic interactions where each participant gets ahold of something other's (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 168). During his character arc over the course of the story, Pietro retrieves the repressed parts of his personality, becoming "something more." Similarly, an analogy can be

made to the game theory of the mathematician John Nash, according to whom strategic collaborative alliances in the social dimension generate “win-win” situations, mutual benefits (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 165), like Özpetek’s protagonists who fully develop their potential through homosexual and bisexual strategies. Likewise, Johan Huizinga, Dutch historian and sociologist, in his work *Homo ludens* claims how the civilization expresses itself through game, its essence (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 167-168).

Özpetek’s interest for the masculine body derives from the Neoclassical ideal which celebrates male beauty, while his creations dealing with nuances of identity cause the ambiguity of his “divi” who unite ideals of male virility and sensuality as a part of Italian national identity (Bauman 401). This dualism in male representation, according to Landy, can be seen in the literary figure of the 20th century “ineto,” marked by passivity, sensitivity and refinement (Bauman 392), but even earlier, in the antique theatrical representations and *commedia dell’arte* which have given birth to tropes used to describe the ideal of Italian masculinity, traditionally related to the inclination towards the theatrical genre and the *melodramma* which represent a victory over repression, interested in transparency and truth hidden to the outside viewer, an allegory that stand for “something else” (Champagne 2-22). By confronting distinctive features of the *melodramma* with the relationship between the Pirandellian Life and Form, it can be said that Life, represented by Pirandello’s six characters, together with Özpetek’s eight characters, is not completely transparent to the external audience, but instead remains a secret concealed even to the protagonist who has yet to accept that personal trait, undergoing a real transformation, re-emerging in front of the society which is searching for ways to suppress any sign of diversity and authenticity. In such a manner, the way of breaking the chains that society places on individuals for the Son and the Little Girl represent suicide, while Özpetek’s Pietro accepts the stigma of mental instability as an involuntary side effect necessary for the reward of freedom. Pietro therefore becomes that unifying *magnificent presence*, unifying masculinity and femininity, conscious and unconscious, reality and fiction, but also life and death, serving as a mediator between the world of the living and the dead of which he feels no fear but, on the contrary, makes their presence his own, simultaneously being the *magnificent presence* which unites the movie and Pirandello’s play, in the *Preface* suitably defined magnificent (“magnifica”) (2). In this way, death is very close to Pietro; he feels it deep down in his soul. Similar encounters similar, death encounters death (di Giorgi 1), and what else is the Form that society is trying to

impose to him but the death of self? For this reason, Pietro welcomes the actors with open arms, this Life that “... vuole a ogni costo trovare il modo d’essere rappresentata ...” (6), escaping the death represented by the Form. By contrast, the Son and the Little Girl from *Six Characters* choose suicide as a way of escaping death, represented by their lives in the form of actors. Given their falsity and artificiality, their attempts to represent the six characters remain futile; in fact, they seem so grotesque and ridiculous to provoke laughter from the Father and the Step-Daughter. In the end, the Father states: “Io ammiro, signore, ammiro i suoi attori ... Ma, certamente... ecco, non sono noi...” (66).

The acting company in the movie uses the word “fiction” (“finzione”) as a secret password, alluding to their imaginary existence. Even Pietro in one moment concludes: “Di notte mi vengono delle idee, di mattina sono sempre una delusion” (MP 39:29-39:35), while the name of the play the actors are rehearsing for is entitled *Forbidden Dream* (*Sogno proibito*). Also, one member of the acting company at one point exclaims: “Macché finzione, realtà!” (MP 47:01-47:03), the same words pronounced by the Father from *Six Characters*, “Ma che finzione! Realtà, realtà signori! Realtà!” (86). For Pietro, the actors are not a fruit of his imagination, but real people with real-life characteristics, personalities, hopes and dreams; for Pietro, they are so real that he is unable to distinguish them from other, “real” people he encounters in everyday life. Likewise, The Manager in *Six Characters* at one point exclaims: “Ma che verità ... Qua siamo a teatro! La verità, fino a un certo punto!” (67). Pirandello, the very author, in the *Preface* to the *Six Characters* introduces the concept of “Fantasy” (“Fantasia”), one of the synonyms of the word “fiction”, written with a capital F, attributing it characteristics of a real person: “Un po’ dispettosa e beffarda, se ha il gusto di vestir di nero ... spesso alla bizzarra ... Si ficca una mano in tasca; ne cava un berretto a sonagli; se lo caccia in capo, rosso come una cresta, e scappa via” (2). For Pirandello, like for Pietro, Fantasy is something alive, with its own will and, consequently, real. It is precisely Pirandello’s Fantasy that decides “... di condurmi in casa tutta una famiglia, non saprei dire dove né come ripescata” (2), similarly to Pietro’s Fantasy that, literally, brings an entire acting company to his home, while some of its members are even related. Also, Pietro’s house is not by case represented very similarly to the fictional house of Leone Gala, one of the protagonists of the fictional comedy *The Rules of the Game* for which the actors in *Six Characters* are doing rehearsals: “... una strana sala da pranzo e da studio ... Tavola apparecchiata e scrivania con libri e carte. Scaffali di libri e vetrine con ricche suppellettili da tavola. Uscio in fondo per cui si va nella camera da letto ... Uscio laterale a sinistra per cui si va nella cucina” (22). Leone Gala in one of the scenes is to be

represented “... con berretto da cuoco e grembiule ... intento a sbattere con un mestolino di legno un uovo in una ciotola” (23), similarly to Pietro, pastrymaker by profession, in his workplace. Leone Gala, like Pietro is, in fact, a classical Pirandellian character, “... pensatore, filosofo ... tuffato nella buona cucina, al punto che ne ha fatto una ragione di vita ... nell'esempio dell'uovo egli formula il concetto della vita e del cristallizzarsi delle norme ... l'interno dell'uovo è il contenuto, la vita ... e il guscio, è il concetto astratto delle cose, la loro forma esteriore che viene gettata via” (di Iorio 184-185). Just like the acting company that appears to Pietro, even Pirandello's characters, “... or l'uno or l'altro, ma anche spesso l'uno sopraffacendo l'altro, prendevano a narrarmi i loro tristi casi, a gridarmi ciascuno le proprie ragioni, ad avventarmi in faccia le loro scomposte passioni ...” (3). Furthermore, Pirandello retells how “... senza sapere d'averli punto cercati [the characters], mi trovai davanti, vivi da poterli toccare, vivi da poterne udire perfino il respiro ...” (3); in the same way, the actors suddenly appear in front of Pietro, at first glance without any warning or logic.

However, according to Pirandello, “... non si dà vita invano a un personaggio” (4), an internal reason must be the cause of their apparition. These would be the subconscious reasons, manifesting themselves and taking their form in the actors, each of them representing one personal trait of their creator, from sensibility, anxiety, gluttony, self-reliance, to introversion. Likewise, the Father from *Six Characters* concludes: “Ciascuno di noi- veda- si crede 'uno' ma non è vero; è 'tanti' signore, 'tanti', secondo tutte le possibilità d'essere che sono in noi ...” (43). For this reason, the spirits seem so real to Pietro, given that they are an inextricable part of his Fantasy. The doctor who examines him comes to a similar conclusion: “Lei come era da bambino? Era cicciottello?” (MP 01:10:11-01:10:16), to make him understand how little Ivan is the projection of himself. The use of Dutch angle throughout the scene additionally emphasizes Pietro's disorientation, as well as the use of shallow focus, creating a blurred background throughout the scene in the hospital, as well as the scene of his fainting in the streetcar. Furthermore, the interplay between shallow and deep focus is particularly interesting when it comes to Ivan's character; he is always portrayed in deep focus, with great clarity, in this way indicating his realistic nature. In fact, deep or sharp focus, characterized by large depth of field and small aperture, is primarily used to portray realism and verisimilitude, whereas soft focus, characterized by shallow depth of field and large aperture, smooths out the identifying details and distances the image (Monaco 198). This exchange between the two types of focuses can be best seen in the scene in which Pietro notices Ivan outside of the café

he is in with his cousin and doctor. Suddenly, little Ivan is the only element that remains in deep focus, while the background, as well as Maria and the doctor, become blurry and gradually fade away. In this way, the director is implying that the only reality and truth for Pietro is the multiplicity of his personality, something the rest of the society simply cannot come to terms with. In another medium wide two-shot scene, Pietro and Ivan can be seen in Pietro's living room, little Ivan standing and Pietro seated down, in this way being of the same size, implying their equal standing, given that Ivan is none other than a nuance of his personality or, better say, of eight different nuances of his personality. Even little Ivan's words pronounced in the scene are of great significance; he wants to know whether Pietro would like to make an exchange of album stickers, implying that Pietro's interiority is splintered into separate personalities. This idea is supported by a particular use of aesthetics in Pietro's house, which is not by coincidence equipped with multiple mirrors and glass doors. For instance, the mirror in Pietro's hallway consists of nine smaller, separate mirrors he is seen cleaning at the beginning of the movie. Yet, one mirror is seen missing, which can be interpreted as eight different nuances of his personality embodied by the eight actors, while he himself is struggling to reconcile them in one and only, *magnificent* personality, missing at the beginning of the movie. The same element of multiple mirrors is present in his glass door which consists of eight separate glasses, at the beginning of the movie shot in shallow focus as to emphasize his inner turmoil, only as the movie progresses to be presented in deep focus, to imply how the protagonist has come to terms with his own complexity. This game of multiple mirrors can be extended to the game of multiple screens which is most prominent during the two job interviews Pietro goes to.

During the first interview Pietro is presented in a medium close up shot, as well as in two additional camera screens; in this way the director creates not only the effect of the so-called cinema in cinema, but also implies how Pietro has not yet come to terms with the complexity of his interiority, unlike during the second interview in which he is again presented in a medium close up shot, but this time accompanied by only one camera screen. For this second interview Pietro receives advice from the eight actors and is, eventually, much more successful- in order to show how different nuances of his personality are, slowly but surely, finding their place and successfully co-existing. It can be said that multiple mirrors, glasses and screens are carrying connotative meaning throughout the film, by becoming powerful indexes which measure a quality not because it is identical to it, but because it has an

inherent relationship to it. Like in a language, a movie's true power lies not in its denotative ability, but in its connotative aspect (Monaco 162-169). A mirror or a screen is not simply a mirror or a screen, a signifier does not equal the signified, it exceeds its denotative, static meaning and, as a connotative index, it becomes something more, something dynamic- a specific metonymy. In *MP*, mirrors, glasses and screens, as connotative indexes, become a metonymy to indicate Pietro's complex, multifaceted personality. A similar technique can, for instance, be seen in Claude Chabrol's *Leda* (1959), in which the protagonist's image in the cracked mirror represents a metonymy of his schizophrenia (Monaco 169). Yet, metonymy can as well be applied to the particular use of the color scheme throughout the movie. The eight actors Pietro encounters are, as already stated, presented in deep focus. However, what also counts is the effective use of color when it comes to their clothes; all the actors are wearing exclusively contrasting, black and white clothes, in order to create a strong contrast between known and unknown, order and chaos, expansion and contraction, light and dark, truth and deception, masculinity and femininity, creating a perfect Pirandellian dualism of Life and Form, Mask and Face, order and chaos, authenticity and artifice.

Like two parts of the ancient yin and yang symbol, which can be seen as an implicit reference on the Oriental culture often present in Özpetek's work, the eight actors teach Pietro how the only way inner harmony can be achieved is through embracing dualities or, better say, multiplicities of the self; and like dots of the opposing colors inside the symbol, the actors show Pietro that there is no absolute, unique and dogmatic truth, but rather a multitude of relative and miscellaneous ones which are in constant movement and fluctuation, just like the Pirandellian notion of Life, a continual, unceasing flux. This use of a metonymic of color is, however, a concept employed in many other movies, from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) in which Giuliana, the protagonist, feels oppressed by the the grays of the urban industrial environment (Monaco 170), or in the entire Pedro Almodóvar's filmography in which red color becomes a distinct trait of his cinema, symbolizing passion or danger. Özpetek's cinema shares many common a trait with the latter; in fact, similarly to the Spanish director, Özpetek's movies as well employ complex narratives, bold patterns and décor, contrasting colors, but also pay extreme attention to detail. Because of that, the filmography of both directors is swarming with carefully selected extreme close ups which focus on specific features, such as the extreme close up of make-up applied on the eyes and lips of actors at the beginning of *MP*, presented in fast motion and, at times,

double exposure, in order to create disorientation and confusion for the spectators at the very beginning of the movie. Almost identical scenes can be noticed in Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*) (1999), probably the director's most metatheatrical work in which, like in *MP*, an incessant Pirandellian interplay between the binary opposition of reality and fiction, Life and Form, authenticity and artifice takes place. The question of identity therefore becomes a shared interest in Pirandello, Almodóvar and Özpetek, and the work of the latter is rich with references to both authors. One of the side characters in *MP*, a transvestite Pietro encounters in front of his house, can, in that light, become a powerful connotative index present in Özpetek, as well as in Almodóvar, and based on the Pirandellian idea of Life and Form, authenticity and artifice. Both in *MP* and *All About My Mother*, the transvestite represents the authenticity of Life and the ability of choice and self-construction, as Agrado from *All About My Mother* puts it during her *impromptu* soliloquy in the theater: "A woman is authentic only in so far as she resembles her dream of herself"¹ (*Todo sobre mi madre* 01:18:42-01:18:47).

Furthermore, it is not surprising the transvestite in *MP* pronounces exactly the same line as the actress Huma Rojo in *All About My Mother*, taken from Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a pop-culture reference present in both movies: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (165), a final line pronounced by Blanche DuBois to her doctor, which can be seen as indicating her inability to separate the outside reality from her fantasy, finally deciding to break free from the cruelty of the harsh reality in order to cope with the suppressed trauma, choosing her own, personal truth, similarly to Pietro and the transvestite in *MP*, as well as the entire acting company in *All About My Mother*, whose actors' roles and private lives, art and life, become intertwined (such as Manuela's portrayal of a grieving widow for her hospital's sketch that becomes real when she grieves her son's tragic death, or Agrado's soliloquy in the middle of the theater about her real life experiences), only for Life to eventually overpower the Form in the shape of Lola and Rosa's son Esteban. The direct influence of Pirandello, as well as theater in general on both directors is not so much surprising, since both have been directly involved with theater during their lives; while Almodóvar in his youth was a part of an acting company *Los goliardos*, Öztepek was a part of the *Living theater* of Julian Beck, a contemporary, experimental acting company. Similarly to Özpetek, Almodóvar's works have a canny blend of artifice

1 Translation mine; the original reads: "[...] una es más autentica cuando más se parece a lo que ha soñado de si misma"].

and gritty realism, examining the lives of contemporary people trying to free themselves from various prisons through the way of an unconventional *modus vivendi*, formed outside the dictates of the so-called normal society. For that reason, his works seem immersed in a visually hyperbolic universe (Dieckmann 75), which seems simultaneously exaggerated and fascinating, abundant with passionate intensity, striking camerawork, meticulous attention to detail and eye-catching aesthetics, paired with Pirandello's theoretical background interested in the questions of identity and belonging.

Like Pirandello's characters, Pietro's actors are none other than "creature del mio spirito" (4), or "... la molteplice personalità d'ognuno secondo tutte le possibilità d'essere che si trovano in ciascuno di noi ..." (6), given that "... abbiamo tutti dentro un mondo di cose ..." (35). Like in Pirandello's case, what Pietro experiences slowly becomes "... una vera e propria ossessione" (5), and it is hard to tell whether he becomes obsessed with them or possessed by them. According to di Iorio, the protagonist feeling this multiplicity of the self almost possesses magical abilities: "Il doppio contiene in sé una condizione esorcistica e magica di tramandare il mistero della vita, al pari di un medium mostra la presenza di un altro, una figura perturbante ... la capacità di apparire e sparire, l'onnipotenza di moltiplicarsi, conferiscono al doppio le proprietà di una sostanza magica ... in grado di riportare alla memoria i fantasmi come veri ..." (31). That person is then able to create "... a piacere i personaggi, i loro doppi, i loro fantasmi, come tanti corpi estranei che si sovrappongono ad altri personaggi, per essere rappresentati ..." (di Iorio 32), just like the eight actors that suddenly appear in Pietro's home. The actors are none other than what di Iorio calls "...una forma mentalis irreversibile ... ogni fantasma è inseparabile dalla sua ragione. Il concepimento della realtà è dato alle figure allotrie ... forme estranee che rappresentano fantasmi capaci di esprimere tutto il suo disagio interiore" (32). Yet, these apparitions, like those in Pietro's house, can take very different shapes and forms: "Il doppio per essere riconosciuto non deve necessariamente intrattenere con il corpo che lo ospita un legame di somiglianza ... può essere diverso, e può assumere una forma diversa ... il doppio ... come nel caso del mito di Ermafrodito ... invece di separare, unisce due corpi, due entità, in un'unica coscienza ..." (di Iorio 149-153). Even the first time Pietro sees the acting company, he immediately asks them: "Siete attori? Pure io sono attore!" (MP 36:35-36:44). It is of great interest to notice how the first thing he does upon seeing eight intruders in his house is to ask them whether their profession is the same as his, alluding to the fact that he already, even if subconsciously, knows that they are none other than a creation of his mind.

The first to notice it is the manager who remains astonished: “Ma non ci conosci, scusi?” (MP 37:02-37:04); Pietro knows them since they are nuances of his personality, “la molteplice personalità d’ognuno secondo tutte le possibilità d’essere che si trovano in ciascuno di noi; e infine il tragico conflitto immanente tra la vita che di continuo si muove e cambia e la forma che la fissa, immutabile” (6).

The fundamental dualism of Life and Form is underlying Pirandello’s philosophy, concepts elaborated in his essay *On Humor* (1908); Life is defined as an incessant flow in constant transformation, chaotic and irrational, referring to authentic urges and wishes, while Form refers to social obligations, illusions and self-deceptions (Pirandello 168-183). In everyday life, Form is trying to put a constraint on Life and its unstoppable flux, seeking to substitute the authentic with the artificial. The Form corresponds to the concept of the Mask: Forms are imposed Masks. Precisely from this contrast between Life and Form, true human drama emerges. The essence of humans is often hidden underneath socially imposed rules and it is rare for individuals to be able to break free from the Mask which becomes a necessity, a *conditio sine qua non* crucial for being admitted as a member of a society, so cruel a society that it does not permit authentic emotions, while individuals are dehumanized, reduced to a shell of their former selves. In case one tries to break free from the chains society has placed on them, they become condemned and isolated, like Pietro who is believed to be mentally unstable. However, Pietro decides to break free from the artificiality of social constraints, choosing to take the mask off and live his life to the fullest, accepting each and every nuance of his personality, even if sometimes contradictory and undesirable by the rest, letting the eight characters follow him everywhere, rather than in the inner circle of his friends and relatives. Whereas for Pietro the way of breaking free from the Form is insanity, in *Six Characters* the Son that chooses a self-inflicted gun death and the Little Girl that drowns in a fountain make a similar decision, preferring death to the imposed social obligations represented by the artificiality of the actors. As a consequence, both analyzed works have a dual role to play: that of a comedy and that of a tragedy, two faces of the same coin present in any human drama.

Still, Özpetek’s movie, as any other work, either literary or cinematographic, cannot be analyzed from a singular point of view. In fact, MP pays tribute not just to *Six Characters*, but rather a plurality of genres of Pirandello’s works, moving freely from drama to comedy, by way of grotesque. It is a movie that bravely combines various film genres, juxtaposing comedy, tragedy, imagination and reality, where

the mundane and the supernatural are intertwined; a movie done with *Pirandellian* courage, retaining the author's philosophy at its core.

Rather than referring to particular segments of Pirandello's work, Özpetek's movie proposes what can be defined as *Pirandellian modality*, by filtering numerous elements proposed by the author. In fact, the entire movie is based upon the idea of duality, one of the principal themes in Pirandello, present not just in *Six Characters*, but also in his most famous novels *The Late Mattia Pascal* and *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*. Multiple facets of reality can perhaps be best seen in the scene where the protagonist is looking at himself in a double mirror dressing table in which he sees his own reflection, as well as reflections of two actors. In this scene, the actors do Pietro's makeup; in Özpetek's movies, makeup serves a dual purpose, to make fiction real or to make reality fiction (di Giorgi 3). As in the second case, Pietro transforms his exteriority (Form) in his personal reality (Life) which represents fiction for external reality. Still, for Pietro the subjective reality becomes the only true reality, Life in all its forms.

Furthermore, in one metatheatrical scene the actors are reciting the same monologue Pietro will be reciting during his job interview: "La menzogna può essere molto convincente, per fortuna la verità lo è ancora di più" (MP 50:29-50:35). Even the title of the song the acting company is dancing to, "Perfidia," can be considered significant, since synonyms of the word "perfidia" ("perfidy") can be "dishonesty" and "deception" (di Giorgi 3-4), alluding to the artificial nature of the Form, constantly trying to repress real urges of Life. Filippo, the manager, best gives evidence of the fact that the characters are nuances of Pietro's personality: "Lei non ha capito niente. Noi non possiamo uscire da qui" (MP 46:25-46:28). Generally speaking, movie directors create elaborate schemes to correlate the visual images with the film score so that music accompanies the images (Monaco 56). Although sound often tends to be ignored in movie analyses, it often becomes a movie's signature, creating not only a ground base of continuity to support the images (Monaco 213), but it also often carries additional meaning. The soundtrack for the movie was composed by the Neapolitan composer Pasquale Catalano, with whom Özpetek had even previously collaborated; the soundtrack has a distinct Turkish sound, as well as lyrics, in that way becoming a recognizable signature of the Turkish director who, in his work, often fuses Oriental and Occidental culture, in this way indirectly introducing the aspect of duality and multifactorial personality that is directly portrayed by his characters who are often in search of their identity. Other than the soundtrack, it is of great importance to notice the background noise often present in the

movie; these sounds highlight what is happening on screen, especially during the scenes in which the action is only partially visible, such as multiple scenes in which Pietro is lying in his bed, while hearing hushed voices and barely audible footsteps of the actors, as to imply that they are omnipresent presences, nuances of his personality that can never completely vanish. The background noise therefore represents the truth throughout the movie, just like the sound the shells from Livia Morosini's dress make, representing the harsh truth about the actress who betrayed the rest of her acting company by revealing they were spies to the Nazis, which caused their tragic death; it is a fact Pietro soon understands, as well as the audience that is presented the whole incident in a brief flashback on screen, with the sound of the shells from her dress rattling behind the actress, although she is never even fully portrayed on screen. The entire Livia's flashback is triggered by the actual shells Pietro finds in his house, and the sound stretches into the flashback without interruption; in this way, the shells turn into a Proustian element that stimulates a past memory. Finally, asynchronous sounds are also worth mentioning; these sounds are contrapuntal sounds which, according to Karel Reisz, come from outside the frame, from people having a dialogue outside of the scene. These sounds are commentative (Monaco 214), such as in the scene in which Maria and the doctor discuss Pietro's mental state both in the hospital and later in the café. For the vast majority of the time, none of the characters can actually be seen on screen; instead, only their voices can be heard, while the spectators are presented the close up of Pietro and little Ivan. In this case the asynchronous sounds are opposed to the images (Monaco 215), which is, in the first case, highlighted by the use of Dutch angle as to imply that Pietro is confused by their version of "truth," and in the other case, by the use of shallow focus that blurs the background, except for little Ivan that appears in deep focus as the only "real" element present on screen.

Eventually, Pietro decides to accept the repressed part of himself, not letting the society suppress it, living freely despite the stigma of mental instability, taking little Ivan by the hand in the middle of the street. In that way, theater expands beyond its initial boundaries, to the streets, in the streetcar and, eventually, in the theater. Although Pietro remains seated in the auditorium to let the characters play their parts, he never remains a passive spectator, unlike the Manager from *Six Characters*; instead, Pietro is an active spectator who revives all the emotions the eight characters feel: happiness, sadness, confusion and anger. Unlike the emotions he had to feign during his job interview, "sorrìda sù, si stupisca, rida, abbia paura, sia triste" (MP

11:55-12:51), analogous to The Manager's instructions to The Son, "... venga, venga un po': mi faccia vedere! Si nasconda un po' qua ..." (79), this time the emotions Pietro feels are real and pure, a product of his own free choice to accept hidden urges of his personality, letting go of the Mask and choosing Life, identifying nuances of his personality in the characters: virility (Fiorello), femininity (Buy), ambiguity (young man), social humility (housemaid), corporality (corpulent man), gluttony (boy), open-mindedness towards the other (Turk); by observing them, Pietro perceives the *collage* of himself and performs an operation of composite synthesis.² This is a quintessentially Almodóvarian moment in which Pietro is presented in a close up shot, seated in the auditorium and watching the actors perform, similarly to Manuela from *All About My Mother* who observes the performance of *The Streetcar Named Desire*. However, Pietro, like Manuela, never remains a passive, static spectator; he feels everything the actors are going through on stage, like his female counterfeit who identifies with the character of Stella. According to Monaco, while a stage actor acts with their voice, a movie actor acts with their face; therefore, the face must be extraordinarily expressive, especially when magnified as much as a thousand times in close ups (48), just like the close-up of Pietro reviving the actors' emotions, which enables the spectators to scrutinize his face for detail and hidden connotations. Since the audience of *MP* does not see the actors performing the play, they can focus on Pietro's reactions, and this privation of action serves as some sort of a pause during which the audience can reflect on the scene, as well as the movie, the message it carries through connotative meanings. In this way the movie becomes what Fellie calls a medium for philosophical and intellectual reflection, while the goal of the director is for the spectators to have a cathartic experience (an emotional reaction is, in fact, the main reason spectators go to the movies), simultaneously as the protagonist, in order to realize that the role of the audience should never remain passive, but that instead an active mode of spectatorship is required (225-229), in a certain aspect similar to the mode of functioning of the Brechtian Epic Theater which, as Bertolt Brecht himself put it, "turns the spectator into an observer, but arouses his capacity for action, forces him to make decisions ... the human being is the object of the inquiry, he is alterable and able to alter ..." (37), emphasizing the audience's reaction and intellectual participation by being critical of issues presented. Monaco similarly claims that a movie director is not interested in scientific, but in psychological reality (85), leaving

2 www.mymovies.it/film/2012/magnificapresenza. Accessed 19 June, 2021.

for the audience to actively search for it in order to decipher it. That is why *Six Characters*, as well as *MP*, breaks beyond the limits of the stage; instead, the theater extends not only to the auditorium, like in *Six Characters*, but to the streets, as in the case of *MP*, becoming visible to the rest of the people, turned into spectators, who have a choice whether to recognize the message or, like Maria and the doctor, simply disregard it. Since they are parts of him, a product of his Fantasy, Pietro's actors, like Pirandello's characters, "nati vivi, volevano vivere" (3), while the most suitable place for their life becomes theater: "... lasciamoli andare dove son soliti d'andare i personaggi drammatici per aver vita: su un palcoscenico. E stiamo a vedere che cosa ne avverrà" (5). And what happens is "... ciò che doveva avvenire: un misto di tragico e di comico, di fantastico e di realistico, in una situazione umoristica affatto nuova e quanto mai complessa ..." (5-6). And the script? "È in noi ..." (29), now taking place in the streets of Rome as well. The theater curtains as a theatrical index completely cease to exist and there are no more physical barriers between the theater and the city, allowing the actors to move around freely. The curtains, simultaneously an element of metonymy and synecdochy, seen either as a detail or as a part of the grand structure the theater is, completely fade away and Pietro, the spectator, becomes a true protagonist of the story of his life. This is perhaps the core message of the movie for its spectators as well, which is, according to Monaco, one of the main functions of a movie- a psychological determinant which is introspective, focusing not only on the connection between the work and the artist, but on the work and the audience, the consumers as well, which should be active participants in the process. This is not so surprising since the profound psychological effect of a work of art has been recognized ever since Aristotle's theory of catharsis, as well as Horace's idea that a work should be both "utile et dulce," useful and enjoyable (32-34). The movie as such, perhaps even more than literature, can significantly reduce the degree of distortion in its representation (Monaco 27). As Monaco has put it, the great thing about literature is that you can imagine it, and the great thing about film is that you cannot. Film does not suggest – it states (158-159). And in the case of *MP*, the statement is clear- an open invitation to intellectual reflection, search for hidden connotations and active spectatorship. This new artistic equation implies that the observer is the equal of the artist and the movie can be seen as "semifinished" material to be used by the observer to complete the artistic process rather than simply consume it; only in this way, participatory artistic democracy can be achieved (Monaco 37). The line directed from one of the actors to Pietro could perhaps as well be

the message directed from the director of the movie to the audience: “Devi alzarti, è tardi” (*MP* 41:55-42:01), a direct invitation not to remain stifled by inertia, but instead to actively search for answers during the film screening.

The entire Özpetek’s movie can be summarized with this line from Pirandello’s *Preface* as a fusion of fantastic and realistic, tragic and comic elements that remain fleeting glimpses of a captivating, labyrinthine complex. During the spectacle in the Valley Theater (Teatro Valle), the place of the debut performance of *Six Characters*, unlike during his first job interview, Pietro shows his raw true self, the Life, instead of suppressing and negating himself, like he did during the job interview with exactly the same lines. Likewise, in *Six Characters* the characters represent Life in its dynamics, while the actors represent Form, the artificial life for which they never manage to represent well the characters, since “... quella che per loro [gli attori] è un’illusione da creare, per noi [i personaggi] è invece l’ unica nostra realtà” (73). In order to break free from the Form and its almost grotesque falsity, the Son deliberately chooses suicide as a way out, also letting the Little Girl drown in the fountain: “... sarà anche per causa tua, se quella piccina affoga ...” (82), rather than letting themselves be restrained by the falsity of the Form, the actors that transform the stage in “... un luogo dove si giuoca a far sul serio” (81), in a vain attempt to represent Life that cannot be represented if not in its authenticity and spontaneity.

“Quando si sta chiusi là dentro, la realtà e l’immaginazione si confondono” (*MP* 58:32-58:35); all of Özpetek’s movie can be summed up with this line, a movie in which reality and imagination are juxtaposed with the aid of meta acting scenes which create confusion for the spectators, uncertain whether the eight characters are spirits or something more. An individual can feel truly whole only if they accept that “other,” so many times suppressed for conformity or convenience, letting themselves be defined and irreversibly ossified in the Form, even if that is contradictory with their true nature. When one of the characters wants to know if in 2012 Italians are finally united, Pietro responds: “Liberi liberi... proprio non ce la passiamo benissimo” (*MP* 01:24:23-01:24:27). And when can one really feel free? Only when they set loose from restraint and decide to uncover hidden parts of their personality, their suppressed desires,³ as Pietro does in *MP*, as well as the transvestites who fabricate clothing and wigs for theater and the Son and the Little Girl in *Six Characters* who reject the artificiality of the Form. For Özpetek, life is a great commingling, an inextricable

3 www.informareonline.com/sei-personaggi-in-cerca-d-autore-e-mille-maschere. Accessed 19 Jun. 2021.

osmosis of reality and imagination, Life and Form that each individual is free to choose from (di Giorgi 4-5). For this reason, only when Pietro chooses the eight characters, Life over Form, he manages to complete his sticker album with stickers from the Italian *Risorgimento*, and feel “free” and “whole.” Unlike Pirandello’s play which “... non riesce a rappresentarsi appunto perché manca l’autore che essi cercano; e si rappresenta invece la commedia di questo loro vano tentativo, con tutto quello che essa ha di tragico per il fatto che questi sei personaggi sono stati rifiutati” (8), Özpetek’s movie succeeds in this representation since the actors manage to find their *magnificent* author that accepts them as a part of his life.

It can be said that our whole existence is one big stage in which thoughts, ideas and hidden desires intermingle, and absolute answers do not exist. Yet, on the great stage of our life everyone is, sooner or later, offered a choice: keeping the fiction or pursuing the truth no matter what, even at the expense of our own reputation and life,⁴ something that Pietro, the Son and the Little Girl find courage to do. As concluded by the Father in *Six Characters*, the character created by the author to only be abandoned and negated as a nuance of their personality “... ha ragione di mettersi a fare quel che stiamo facendo noi ... davanti a lui per persuaderlo, per spingerlo, comperandogli ora io, ora lei ...” (76), precisely what the acting company does while appearing in Pietro’s house. According to Pirandello, what life should never become is “... un giuoco di parti assegnate, per cui lei che rappresenta la sua parte è volutamente il fantocchio di se stesso” (23), remaining devoid of distinctive features, eternally ossified in the Form. In the scene where Pietro is looking at his reflection in a double mirror dressing table, he finds courage to make a decision, not wanting “... che si viva davanti a uno specchio ... non contento d’agghiacciarci con l’immagine della nostra stessa espressione, ce la ridà come una smorfia irriconoscibile di noi stessi” (83). Pietro in this very moment decides to live his life the way he finds true, even if that decision will mean he will become stigmatized as a mentally unstable person. It is a decision similar to that of the protagonist of Pirandello’s novella *La mano del malato povero* who, despite the imposed stigma, feels free of any convention and truly alive; his words could easily be pronounced by Pietro as well: “E io passo per pazzo perché voglio vivere là, in quello che per voi è stato un momento, uno sbarbaglio, un fresco breve stupore di sogno vivo, luminoso; là, fuori da ogni traccia solita d’ogni consuetudine, libero di tutte le vecchie apparenze, col respiro sempre nuovo e largo

4 www.mymovies.it/film/2012/magnificapresenza. Accessed 19 Jun. 2021.

tra cose sempre nuove e vive ... sarò pazzo, ma io vivo" (Pirandello 462). Eventually, what matters most is not accepting one common truth, but a personal truth, equally real for its creator, simultaneously precise and imprecise, dogmatic and antidogmatic, absolute and relative.

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