

*Please note: The photo-essay simply tells the story of the film in intermediate-level Italian. This is a basic, literal translation to assist Italian learners understand the text. In writing the photo-essay, we aimed for a more fluid Italian and wrote a translation to match it. We hope that this language-learning tool will be engaging and enlightening. It's no substitute for material written at a native-language level that explores the film in depth!*

*The images are an important part of the photo-essay. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog, so that you can see the screenshots that go with the text. These visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the video clips and [links](#) to other references in the blog itself.*

*Thank you, and enjoy!*

## **Il sorpasso**

Regia di Dino Risi (1962)

### **Summary**

Bruno (Vittorio Gassman), carefree and boisterous, meets up with the young student Roberto (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and the two take off on a road trip, in this film full of people, situations and typical elements of the '50s in Italy, those of the economic boom.

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The opening title sequence of *Il sorpasso* sets the mood of the film: jazz music, a sports car – with some damage on the side – a determined driver at the wheel. The car speeds right past a 'do not enter' sign onto a street where all the stores are closed.

It's *Ferragosto*. The driver can't reach a public telephone behind a rolling shutter. He leaves.

The driver pulls over for a drink of water. He notices a man looking at him from a window in a nearby building. He calls up to the guy, but he backs away and disappears from the window.

"Are you hiding?" ("Yes," the window guy might answer, "I'm hiding from life. I'm just an observer of life, here from my window.")

"Everything's closed!" exclaims the driver. He asks the man at the window to make a phone call for him. From the street, he gives the phone number along with a useless strategy to remember the numbers. We see here a man with his own sense of logic.

"Tell Marcella I'm coming and that we'll pick up the others as well!" he yells.

The window man starts to make the phone call, but he needs more information, so he proposes that the driver come up and make his call himself. Actually, at this moment, he is inviting the driver to enter into his life.

The driver skips and sings as he goes to the apartment. When he arrives, he apologizes for the intrusion. That day Rome seems to him “like a graveyard.” That offhand line is a foreshadow.

The two introduce themselves. The driver is named Bruno. The young man is named Roberto and he’s a law student. Bruno makes a little fun of Roberto’s studies, of the fact that he doesn’t smoke, and of his mom, who he has seen in a photograph and who he calls “fat.”

After Bruno makes his call, the two say goodbye, but a moment after Roberto has closed the door, the doorbell rings. It’s Bruno again who invites Roberto out for a drink. The student protests that he should study. In fact, he hasn’t done much that day... “It’s my fault!” the guest insists, and convinces him, explaining that buying him a drink would be a way of making up for the disturbance. A logic all his own.

The two take off for their drink, or whatever it actually is that Bruno has in mind. We see them against the Roman landscape. Bruno, at the wheel, constantly interacts with – and against – the world that surrounds them: he speeds down a one-way street, causing a police officer to come running out and blow his whistle; he yells at a pedestrian who’s walking his dogs.

Meanwhile, we spectators get to enjoy some gorgeous views of Rome filmed by cinematographer Alfio Contini.

At this point, we see the *sorpasso*, with Bruno overtaking various cars and trucks. He speeds wildly, honking his horn, yelling and making obscene gestures. Roberto is terrified.

The film is full of scenes loaded with typical elements of Italian society of the time. In this scene, Bruno approaches a cafe with tables outside, and plows through, terrifying everyone. The scene lasts less than 30 seconds, but the viewer could watch over and over, or re-watch it in slow motion to absorb every detail.

In the next scene, the guys pull over to have lunch in a trattoria. For Director Risi, it’s an opportunity to put different modes of transportation in the shot. There’s a ship, a train, some cars and the motorcycle of the policeman who is going to give a ticket to one of these parked cars. Not the car of our heroes, though, because Bruno has taken the ticket that was already on another car and put it on his own. By the way, in this scene, air transportation is missing, but earlier we saw that too: Bruno was given a traffic ticket after a helicopter saw him commit numerous infractions.

Our heroes are in the trattoria. While Roberto gets a table, Bruno goes to fool around in the kitchen, again interacting with the people and spaces where he doesn’t belong.

Now, the two are being served; Bruno eats with gusto. He has his eye on the waitress; maybe he’ll give her a try later ...

In this scene, we learn that Roberto is secretly in love with his neighbor, Valeria. He even has a photo of her with him. But he barely knows her; they’ve only spoken once, at the university. And the photo is not very clear because Roberto took it secretly at the window. His friend can’t believe it and he advises the student to find a way to meet her again.

Outside the trattoria the director treats us to another vibrant scene rich with typical Italian people, things and activities. Men with musical instruments, moms dragging children, a priest who says goodbye to a woman with a kiss, a boy eating an enormous slice of watermelon, two cops escorting a man in handcuffs who proclaims innocence, an upset woman who says that her suitcase was stolen and who pleads for help.

Roberto starts to assist her, but Bruno dissuades him. It would not be much fun for him to spend *Ferragosto* in a police station.

Roberto decides that he doesn't feel comfortable with Bruno and he has already decided to take off. He'll take the bus to visit some relatives that live nearby, but Bruno insists on taking him.

Again, he drives recklessly and arrives at the estate, blowing the horn like a crazy person. Roberto introduces his aunt and uncles and Bruno behaves in a friendly and charming way with them.

The student, on the other hand, is shy with his aunt. He has had a crush on her since he was little. But seeing her now, he is aware of how plain she is. Seeing his aunt as others see her represents a step out of childhood for him. The film starts to take on the tone of a "coming of age" film.

He leaves her to go upstairs where he gazes out the window at the village that reminds him of his visits here years ago. This trip is a revisiting of a childhood place. It will be his last time here.

Roberto returns downstairs and finds that Bruno has charmed the entire family. In fact, Bruno seems more like a member of the family than Roberto.

In this important scene, Roberto leaves his childhood and his innocence behind a little. He has seen his aunt as she really is. He sees his relatives – who used to fawn over him during his childhood – being charmed by the oaf, Bruno. And he sees himself as others must see him, too: a quiet guy, not so much fun.

Bruno bursts into the life of Roberto's aunt; re-awakens youthful excitement in her; then leaves her.

In the next scene, Risi shows us another set packed with real Italians.

The two friends drive by an outdoor country dance. They make good-natured fun of the characters doing the twist: an old man, a girl with glasses, a guy with a funny hat.

A kind of love is growing between Bruno and Roberto, as often happens between buddies in road movies. In fact, here Bruno tells Roberto, "Well done! I like you like that. When you laugh, I like you more. Oh, Robe', don't think about sad things."

They drive onto a street that is completely dark, arriving finally at the house of Bruno's ex-wife. Bruno hasn't seen his wife for years, yet she doesn't seem that struck by seeing him again.

Bruno is astonished when he sees his daughter again. She has changed a lot. She reminds him that 'kids have to grow up.' This seems to be a message from her about him and his immature ways.

That night, Bruno makes a pass at his ex-wife, but is not successful. Rebuffed, he decides to take off, so he pulls Roberto out of bed and takes him to the beach. There, the two consider: what is the best way to live? To look before you leap? Or just to leap? They fall asleep in their beach chairs.

The next morning, Bruno is awakened by children playing around him. He searches for Roberto, who has gone for a walk. Once again, Risi has designed a set rich with people practically posed as in a tableau... or a Norman Rockwell painting (Italian beach version).

Meanwhile, Roberto has gotten daring. He decides to call Valeria, the neighbor he has a crush on. She's not home; he's too shy to leave a message. He tells Bruno. Bruno is happy about it; finally, his friend has decided to leap.' He offers to take him to Viareggio where Valeria is on vacation.

On the way, they talk about what to do next. Roberto says that they shouldn't make plans. They can wait and see. The young Robe' – as Bruno has been calling him throughout the story – is euphoric. He has been completely seduced by Bruno and this way of life without limits. No studies, no responsibilities, always many surprises, living to the fullest. The last two days have been the best of his life. Maybe this *Ferragosto* is the first time he has ever really lived.

While they talk, Bruno goes faster and faster, passing the other cars. Roberto urges him on. They are celebrating the escape, the easy life. This beautiful sports car is like a liberation for Robe'. As Alberto Lattuada did in the *commedia all'italiana* *Mafioso*, Risi gives us a lot of clues, but then waits until the end to show us that this easy life is not really so much fun, after all.

Suddenly, from around the bend, a truck appears in the path of our carefree friends, and bears down on them. Bruno swerves to avoid it and is thrown out of the car. But Roberto is trapped inside as the car tumbles down the rocky cliff.

A policeman asks Bruno if Roberto is a relative. Bruno is forced to admit, "I don't know his last name. I just met him yesterday morning."