

Introduction

The Films of Federico Fellini provides an introductory overview of the Italian director's life and work, with particular focus upon five important films: *La strada*, *La dolce vita*, *8½*, *Amarcord*, and *Intervista*. The first four works were incredibly successful, both critically and commercially, winning numerous awards and establishing Fellini's international reputation as Italy's most important film director. The last work, Fellini's penultimate film, provides a summary of Fellini's cinematic universe and analyzes the nature of cinema itself.

The series in which this book appears – Cambridge Film Classics, under the general editorship of Ray Carney – aims at providing “a forum for revisionist studies of the classic works of the cinematic canon from the perspective of the ‘new auteurism,’ which recognizes that films emerge from a complex interaction” of various forces and are not only the result of a director's genius. I accept and even embrace the correctives supplied to auteur criticism, which underline the importance of economic, political, cultural, bureaucratic, and technical factors in addition to the influence of the creative director. However, in the case of Federico Fellini, we have the archetypal case of the “art film” director. Indeed, the very name Fellini has come to stand for the art film itself and for the kind of creative genius that produced this phenomenon, so crucial a part of the film culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Inevitably, the critical pendulum would swing in the opposite direction, since au-

Cambridge University Press
0521573254 - The Films of Federico Fellini
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teur critics celebrated the director as superstar, concentrating upon such figures as Antonioni, Bergman, Buñuel, Fellini, Hitchcock, and Welles.

Much contemporary film criticism emphasizes a sociological or psychological explanation of cinema and is suspicious of any statements about “original genius.” Many who write on the cinema ignore its aesthetic qualities and even refuse to describe or evaluate a work as a “masterpiece.” I do not share these prejudices. Moreover, I believe that film historians and critics have an obligation not only to understand the development of this uniquely modern art form but also to assist in the formulation of better taste among filmgoers. Notions of gender, race, class, and culture (understood as a superstructure reflection of class or power relationships, one of the few Marxist ideas that still retains great credibility among academic film critics) have often replaced aesthetic criteria in the literature. Almost no respectable film critic is willing to discuss the emotional appeal of a film because a Brechtian aesthetics – so popular among the followers of Godard and company, or their acolytes in the academy practicing cultural studies – holds incorrectly that when a film appeals to the emotions, it must, of necessity, employ emotional appeal as an ideological sham. In fact, few critics or historians remain concerned with appreciating a film as either a cleverly told story or a beautifully crafted series of visual images. Gender, race, class, and the other sociological flavors of the moment are seen as the dominant critical categories of value, with much else of interest either ignored or ridiculed.

So what is the scholar to do with the cinema of Federico Fellini? His films represent a series of complex chapters in the creation of a unique, private, and personal world of poetic, lyrical, visual images. Fellini stands in complete contrast to the prevailing conventional wisdom of the academy, for if his cinema represents any ideological stand, it is a courageous defense of the imagination as a valid category of knowing and understanding and a rejection of “group thought,” political correctness, or sociological explanations of art in favor of the individual imagination and the personal creative act. It is, of course, a truism that film is a collaborative business; but there are collaborations of entirely different kinds. Nothing could be further from Hollywood industrial practice than the manner in which Fellini continued to work throughout his career. His cinema might better be compared to the art produced in the workshop of a Renaissance painter, such as Titian or Mi-

chelangelo, than to an industrial product. Every one of Fellini's films was scripted personally by the director, assisted by a very small group of his trusted collaborators whose sensibilities were similar or complementary to Fellini's. These included Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, Brunello Rondi, Tonino Guerra, Bernardino Zapponi, and Gianfranco Angelucci. Virtually every detail – costumes, makeup, lighting, sets – of every film was minutely sketched out by Fellini with his famous felt-tip-marker drawings that were then given to each of his collaborators to underline exactly how the Maestro wished a detail to be constructed visually. Nino Rota contributed the sound tracks for his works from his first film through 1979; after his death, Rota was replaced by Luis Bacalov, Gianfranco Plenizio, and Nicola Piovani. Fellini worked with a small group of great cameramen: Otello Martelli, Gianni di Venanzo, Giuseppe Rotunno, Pasquale De Santis, Dario Di Palma, and Tonino Delli Colli. The list could be continued for each category of Fellini's productions: editing (Leo Catozzo, Ruggero Mastroianni, Nino Baragli) and set design (Piero Gherardi, Donato Donati, Dante Ferretti). More than just professional colleagues, Fellini's collaborators were friends of long standing as well as consummate professionals, but the atmosphere on a Fellini set (as chronicled in a large number of publications devoted to Fellini's actual work practices) was always one of adventure, discovery, innovation, and creative improvisation.

Many of his best works took shape in the studios of Cinecittà (especially the famous Teatro 5, the largest studio in Europe). There, Fellini could control everything – light in particular – unlike the less predictable real locations preferred by the neorealists with whom Fellini learned his trade.

Fellini has frequently compared his set to an ocean voyage like that of Columbus toward the New World: The crew constantly attempts to turn back but the director-captain must somehow lead them all to a successful landing. Once again, the model of the Renaissance artists' *bottega* or workshop provides a more suggestive image for the personal creativity associated with Fellini's cinema than the industrialized production methods typical of the contemporary Hollywood studio. We know, for example, that many of Titian's great canvases bear the mark of many shop assistants and apprentices, but the grand overarching design and the most important parts of the canvas were reserved for the master's hand, who was also the workshop manager, and whose genius

guided the others. A Titian painting is no less a Titian because of the contributions of his assistants. In like manner, a Fellini film is as close to being the reflection of a single personality as one can come in the industrial art form that is the cinema. None of Fellini's collaborators has ever claimed that any of his films were not ultimately the reflection of a single artist, Federico Fellini. Their collaboration was almost entirely aimed at helping Fellini arrive at the expression of his own visual fantasies. It would be fair to say that if there is a outer limit to the power of the auteur, Fellini certainly approached it and even stretched it significantly in comparison to other directors of the postwar period.

In spite of the attempts of academic film critics to marginalize his works because of their supposedly deficient levels of politically correct ideas about women or life in general, Fellini continues to enjoy a healthy respect among serious moviegoers as well as those who actually work in the international film industry. Fellini was a consummate showman, not only an artistic genius but also a master magician and even something of a con man. He was a believer in the power of illusion and prestidigitation, an artist who preferred artifice to reality, and a man who believed that dreams were the most honest expression possible for a human being.

In a revealing conversation with the creator of a BBC documentary on his life and work entitled *Real Dreams: Into the Dark with Federico Fellini*, the director recounted how he was often asked by taxi drivers in Rome, with a bit of embarrassment, why he insisted – as they believed – in making films in which “you can't understand anything”: “Ma perché, Signor Fellini, lei fa dei film dove non ci si capisce niente?” (“But, Signor Fellini, why do you make films where nobody understands anything?”) Far from being insulted, Fellini valued such an honest (if naïve) question, since it revealed something of importance about the purpose of his work. Thinking back on the question, he said to the BBC journalist:

It is understandable that when one is so sincere, little is understood. . . . It is a lie that is clear. Everybody understands a lie. But the truth or sincerity pronounced without ideological protections – and therefore other lies – is extremely difficult to grasp. When a man speaks honestly, sincerely about himself, I believe he truly presents himself in his most complex, contradictory, and, therefore, most ambiguous attitude.¹

It would be difficult to find a statement designed to infuriate contemporary film critics more than Fellini's belief that an artist can speak sincerely and directly to a spectator of a film and that the film, considered foremost as a work of art, represents primarily a moment of artistic expression that establishes a mysterious relationship between storyteller (Fellini) and viewer (the public). The visual images narrating the director's story are ultimately derived from the director's dream life. Rather than ideological pronouncements, Fellini's images typically aim at the communication of emotions or sentiments rather than ideological statements. Fellini honestly (some would say, naïvely) believed that one human being can communicate something of significance to another, without ideological interference. Much of contemporary film criticism is premised on the assumption that such a thing is impossible.²

With an artist of Fellini's stature, the moments of intense emotional communication his films inspire in their viewers more than justify their study and continuous rescreening. There are images in a work by Fellini that cannot be reproduced by any other filmmaker and are so clearly a product of a single style and a unique sensibility that they could never be mistaken for the style of any other director. Some of these include Zampanò's single tear on the beach at the conclusion of *La strada* when he realizes that Gelsomina will never return; the magic moment when Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg enter Rome's Trevi Fountain in *La dolce vita*; the mysteriously festive circle of artistic creativity that concludes *8 1/2* after the director Guido Anselmi has concluded his film must end because he has nothing to say; the unforgettable appearance of the patently cardboard ocean liner *Rex* in *Amarcord*; and Casanova's dream of a waltz with a wooden doll (the only woman with whom he has had a successful sexual liaison) upon a frozen Venetian lagoon. The list of such sublime epiphanies in Fellini's cinema could be lengthened, but the point is simple. No other Italian director, and perhaps no other director in the history of the cinema, has relied so much upon his own private resources to communicate with us through what he hopes will be universal images, images that awaken in us something that is, in the Jungian sense, archetypal. Besides being a storyteller, Fellini was essentially a poet. He created his visual images primarily through an examination of his own dream life, and when his personal expression succeeded in tapping into a similar visual experience in his audience, this linkage, this reception of a personal form of poetic communica-

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0521573254 - The Films of Federico Fellini
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tion, created a powerful emotional experience that is often unforgettable.

If Fellini's attempts to delve into the depths of the human imagination may explain his impact upon individual filmgoers, Fellini's obsession with the irrational is also the aspect of his fantasy that frightens most film critics, whose task is normally to explain rather than to argue (as Fellini himself often asserts) that rational explanations are fruitless. It is this dilemma that a Fellini critic must face squarely: how to apply rational and critical discourse to a cinema that fundamentally privileges fantasy, imagination, and the irrational. I trust that the reader will judge my attempt to do so suggestive and even provocative.

I

Federico Fellini

A Life in Cinema

When Federico Fellini died on 31 October 1993, he had reached the pinnacle of international success. In April of that year, the American Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences had honored him with a lifetime achievement, an Honorary Award for his entire career. This was his fifth Oscar, after earlier awards in the category of Best Foreign Film for *La strada* (1954), *Le notti di Cabiria* (*The Nights of Cabiria*, 1957), *8½* (1963), and *Amarcord* (1973), not to mention numerous nominations and awards in the technical categories for a number of films.¹ Similar lifetime-achievement awards had earlier been given to Fellini in 1974 by the Cannes Film Festival, and in 1985 by both the Venice Biennale and the Film Society of Lincoln Center. On Broadway, Fellini films inspired important musicals: The Bob Fosse-directed *Sweet Charity* (1965; film 1969) was based upon *Le notti di Cabiria*, whereas Fosse's *Nine* (1981) and earlier film *All That Jazz* (1979) both owed their origins to Fellini's masterpiece, *8½*. References to Fellini or direct citations of his work are found in a wide variety of films by very different directors: Lina Wertmüller's *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (*Seven Beauties*, 1976), Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980) or *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1988) and *L'uomo delle stelle* (*The Star Maker*, 1996), or Joel Shumacher's *Falling Down* (1993). Television commercials for various products have frequently employed parodies of Fellini's style.

In 1992, a *Sight and Sound* poll asked two groups of individuals for their estimations of which film directors and which films represented the most important creative artists or artistic works during the century-old history of the cinema. The group comprising international film directors or working professionals in the business ranked Fellini first in importance in the history of the cinema, setting him even before Orson Welles by a slim margin of votes.² These directors, including such luminaries as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, also indicated they considered $8\frac{1}{2}$ one of the ten most important films made during the past hundred years.

The blockbuster impact of a single Fellini film in 1959 – *La dolce vita* – gave birth to new expressions or vocabulary. In Europe, the aesthetic impact of *La dolce vita* may be accurately compared to the impact of *Gone with the Wind* or *The Godfather* upon American culture. The title itself became identified abroad with the bittersweet life of high society, while in Italy, *dolce vita* came to mean turtleneck sweater, since this kind of garment was popularized by the film. The name of one of the film’s protagonists (Paparazzo) gave birth to the English word “paparazzi,” which came to mean unscrupulous photographers who snap candid but embarrassing shots of celebrities for the tabloids. Finally, the adjective “Fellinian” became synonymous with any kind of extravagant, fanciful, even baroque image in the cinema and in art in general. More than just a film director, Federico Fellini had become synonymous in the popular imagination in Italy and abroad with the figure of the Promethean creative artist. Like Picasso, Fellini’s role as the embodiment of fantasy and the imagination for a generation of fans and film historians transcended his art: People who had never seen one of his films would nevertheless eventually come to recognize his name all over the world and to identify it with that special talent for creating unforgettable images that is at the heart of filmmaking.

Early Days in Rimini and the Romagna

Nothing in Fellini’s early life or background would lead the casual observer to predict the heights to which his fame would reach. His parents, Ida Barbiana (a housewife) and Urbano Fellini (a traveling salesman) were of no great distinction in terms of wealth or birth. Fellini was part of a relatively small family by Italian standards of the period:

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a younger brother Riccardo was born in 1921, followed by his sister Maddalena in 1929. Fellini himself was born on 20 January 1920 in Rimini, a small town on the Adriatic coast of Italy in a location known best as a watering hole for rich foreign tourists who would frequent the Grand Hotel and other beach establishments during the tourist season, then abandon the sleepy city to its provincial rhythms. Like all vacation towns, Rimini enjoyed a lazy, cyclic existence that alternated between frenetic activity during the tourist season and endless boredom afterward. In an essay entitled “Il mio paese,” first published with a beautiful photo album of scenes from his native city and translated into English as “Rimini, My Home Town,” Fellini looked back at his origins and concluded that in his life, Rimini represented not an objective fact but, rather, “a dimension of my memory, and nothing more . . . a dimension of my memory (among other things an invented, adulterated, second-hand sort of memory) on which I have speculated so much that it has produced a kind of embarrassment in me.”³ During the entire course of Fellini’s career, the director’s recollections of his childhood and his adolescence would serve him as an almost inexhaustible source of fertile ideas for his films. The sleepy provincial atmosphere of Rimini was re-created by him for *I vitelloni* (1953) on the opposite side of Italy at Ostia, Rome’s ancient seaport. The dream palace of Rimini’s Grand Hotel that figures prominently in *Amarcord* as the locus of the frustrated sexual desires of the entire male population of Rimini stands as one of the most unforgettable images in all of Fellini’s works. Even the distant destination of the grand metropolis of Rome toward which all Fellini’s anxious provincials are drawn, a theme that figures prominently in so many of his films and particularly in *La dolce vita* or *Roma* (Fellini’s *Roma*, 1972), must always be read against the background of Rimini.⁴

Other provincial influences were also subtly at work during Fellini’s early childhood. Fellini regularly was taken to the tiny town of Gambettola in the inland area of Romagna. There Fellini visited his grandmother, encountered the typical kind of eccentric figures that rural life in Italy has always spawned, including a frightening castrator of pigs, numerous gypsies, witches, and various itinerant workers. The mysterious capacity of many of Fellini’s film characters (in particular, Gelsomina of *La strada*) to enjoy a special relationship with nature surrounding them was directly inspired by Fellini’s childhood visits to

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his grandmother's home. Gambettola seems to have been a breeding ground for characters with diminished mental capacities but with special emotional qualities, and in *La voce della luna* (*The Voice of the Moon*, 1990), Fellini's last film, he creates another Gelsomina-like figure (Ivo) who seems to be a half-wit but who enjoys an emotional depth that normal characters cannot fathom or imitate.⁵ The famous harem sequence of *8½* where a young Guido is bathed in wine vats before being sent to bed is only one of the many scenes from Fellini's cinema that recall his childhood past in Gambettola. However important Rimini, Gambettola, and the Romagna were to Fellini's nostalgic memories of his childhood, there were other more formative cultural influences taking place there that would begin to shape his early career. As a child, the young Federico was well known for his unusual imagination: He was a precocious sketch artist and spent hours playing with a tiny puppet theater. His favorite reading materials were the comic strips that appeared in an extremely popular magazine for children, *Il corriere dei piccoli*, which, as early as 1908 in Italy, reproduced the traditional American cartoons drawn by such early American artists as Frederick Burr Opper (1857–1937), Billy De Beck (1890–1942), Winsor McCay (1869–1934), George McManus (1884–1954), and others. Opper's *Happy Hooligan* (called *Fortunello* in Italy) is the visual forerunner not only of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp but also of Gelsomina in *La strada*, Fellini's most famous creation, as well as Cabiria in *Le notti di Cabiria*. Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, a wonderfully drawn strip about a little boy who goes to bed and experiences fantastic dreams, was certainly a powerful influence upon Fellini, whose visual style in several films (*Satyricon* [*Fellini Satyricon*, 1969] and *I clowns* [*The Clowns*, 1970], in particular) would recall McCay's character Little Nemo. Years later, when Fellini began to analyze his own dreams under the influence of a Jungian psychologist, he would begin a series of drawings in his dream notebooks that utilize the style of the early American comic strip, and he would even dream of himself as a young boy in the same sailor-suit costume worn by Little Nemo in McCay's strip.⁶ Even though the cartoon characters created by Walt Disney (1901–66) in both the comic strips and the films ultimately became far more popular in postwar Italy than were these early artists' characters in the newspapers for children, Fellini's own visual style, particularly in his preparatory drawings or his dream