

A life in DREAMS AND CELLULOID

The strange art of Federico Fellini

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For years, the strange images of the films of Federico Fellini have captured the imagination of cinemagoers the world over. Even to this day newcomers to film studies are invariably drawn by their dreamlike quality. For more than half a century his cinema has perplexed us, amused us and startled us into contemplation. Let us stroll then, for a while, in Fellini's universe. Let us discover more about the man who became an adjective.

'Although my father wanted me to become an engineer, and my mother a bishop, I am quite content to have succeeded in becoming an adjective' Federico Fellini

Federico Fellini was born in the Adriatic Coastal town of Rimini, Italy, on the 20th of January 1920. His father Urbano Fellini was a travelling salesman and spent little time at home with the young Federico and his mother, Ida. The young boy showed an early interest in sketching and was devoted to many of the cartoon strips and photo-strip comic books of the time. Fellini, who admits to being a liar, and an embellisher of the truth, especially regarding his childhood, ('I am a liar, but an honest one') recalls that he once ran off to join the circus but was returned to his family after the better half of a week.

'Fellini was less concerned with telling the truth about his own life, than with painting his history in rich colours and exaggerated excess...

'...I see no dividing line between imagination and reality' Federico Fellini

At the time of Fellini's adolescence, Italy was in the grips of Fascism. While the city populations carried the yoke of its oppression, smaller villages like Rimini were less aware of the true impact of Fascism, and gladly celebrated their leader and his ideals.

Meanwhile Fellini received a strict Catholic education at various Jesuit boarding schools.



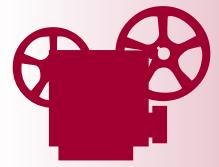
A lover of the circus world and all it entailed, Fellini cracks the whip as the ringmaster during the filming of *8½*

Insets from top: Fellini's first job was as a cartoonist and he never stopped drawing. Here he designs the costumes and makeup for *The Clowns*

Fellini often played musical instruments on set, whether it be a xylophone, a trombone or as seen here, a trumpet

The sets for his films were mostly huge requiring him to constantly use a megaphone

Fellini in pensive mood on the set of *Casanova* which was a financial failure but an artistic masterpiece



Fellini often recalled some unpleasant experiences at the hands of the clergy who ran these schools. They were often fierce, and the young boy sometimes found their rituals frightening. Yet, a childhood crush on a nun indirectly led Federico to want to join the priesthood. Luckily for us, his resolve was not very strong!

In the light of these preceding events in Fellini's formative years, we are able to identify the three themes that would later manifest themselves in his cinema, namely: a Fascist environment and people; Catholicism; and, a passion for the circus and its people. Though disparate themes, they are the quintessence of Fellini's art. He relentlessly mocked the Fascists, and likewise the Church, and often had a strong, absurd, circus-like backdrop to do this in.

Indeed, under Fascism, Church and State were united, making it even easier for the future director to deride these institutions.

Fellini was less concerned with telling the truth about his own life, than with painting his history in rich colours and exaggerated excess... The images in his films, autobiographical, or not, are rich, vibrant, often absurd, but always fascinating. Moreover, it made for far more interesting cinema than the truth. Yet, no matter how much we know (or do not know) of the childhood, or life of Federico Fellini, nothing could ever tell us more about the man than his art.

In films such as 1974's **Amarcord** (I remember) and 1987's **Intervista** (Interview), the audience gets a glimpse into the childhood and late adulthood respectively of Federico Fellini. At times, Fellini claimed these to be accurate reflections of his life, and at other times, he dismissed them as fantasy. Here begins the enigma. Fellini once said, '...I see no dividing line between imagination and reality.' These and other films prove his point repeatedly.

In **Amarcord**, the director paints a peculiar, yet sweetly nostalgic picture of his formative years. Images of the giant cruise liner Rex, symbol of Fascist glory, slowly passing the fog-drenched coast. An adolescent sexual encounter in a seedy cinema. The beguiling village beauty, and the pathetic village idiot. Fact or fiction, the film is a fascinating glimpse into the life of one of cinema's great auteurs. Although **Amarcord**, nor any of his other films, can reliably be viewed as autobiographical, it is the way in which Fellini



*Fellini embraces his wife Giulietta Masina after filming a scene with her in the movie **The Nights of Cabiria** (1957)*



*The film **Variety lights** (1950) started Fellini's career as a director with the assistance of Milanese director Alberto Lattuada. It was an exuberant and farcical comedy about the world of show business*



*Fellini's **The White Sheik** (1952), although not a huge success initially, is today considered a classic Italian comedy with the charm that was characteristic of his early films*

'remembers' and tells his stories that remains greatly significant.

Fellini dropped out of university where he was (under duress from his father) studying law. He found employment working as a receptionist, and submitted stories and cartoons to one of Italy's leading satirical magazines. He regularly contributed to, and collaborated on motion picture screenplays. In the years before his directorial debut, in 1950, he had contributed to well over a dozen screenplays.

Along with some friends, he opened a small store in the latter years of World War II, drawing caricatures of American soldiers for them to send home to their families.

In addition, he wrote plays for the radio, and it is in this environment that he met his future wife, Giulietta Masina. Masina was a radio actress, and four months after Fellini wrote a radio play especially for her, they were married. Their union, despite bouts of infidelity on his part, would last for the rest of their lives.

By the end of the war, Fellini's career was about to take a giant leap forward when he met a young director by the name of Roberto Rossellini.

Rossellini is considered by many to be the founding father of Italian Neo-realist cinema. His films would cast non-actors, and be

filmed on low budgets, with as little artifice as possible. Classics of this genre include the well-loved De Sica film **The bicycle thief** (1947), and Rossellini's own **Rome, open city** and **Paisan** (1945 and 1946 respectively). It is with these last two works that Rossellini first worked with Fellini. Fellini collaborated with Rossellini on the screenplay for both films, and was Rossellini's assistant director on **Paisan**.

Next Fellini wrote the story, the screenplay, assisted Rossellini as director, and even acted in the 1948 film, **The miracle**. It was clear that Fellini had caught the movie-making/directing bug.

Finally in 1950, Fellini made his directorial debut with **Variety lights** which he co-directed with Alberto Lattuada. The film deals with a travelling vaudeville group and their adventures in the Italian countryside. Giulietta Masina was cast as a member of the troupe, and would later become a regular actress in her husband's films.

With Fellini's past experience as a cartoonist and his love of photoplay magazines,



his next project suited him particularly well.

The White Sheik (his solo-directorial debut) concerns a newly-married couple on their way to receive a blessing from the Pope. The bride, long obsessed by the hero of a photoplay magazine, called **The White Sheik**, runs off to find adventure with her idol, but finds that these often have feet of clay. She learns the painful lesson that there is indeed a difference between reality and fiction. It is an unusual comic farce, with Fellini bringing in his blend of religion and circus extravagance to the mix.

His following efforts met with escalating success, and the future master was well on his way to conquering the Italian film market. However, it was a story about a feeble-minded girl, sold by her mother to a brutish showman that brought Fellini to the attention of the world market. **La Strada** (The road) released in 1954 won that year's Best Foreign Film Oscar, and made a star of Fellini's wife, Giulietta Masina. American audiences were so taken by her pantomime that they hailed her as the female Chaplin. Indeed Masina gives a truly remarkable performance as Gelsomina, whose naïve love and admiration for the strongman, Zampano (played by Anthony Quinn), bring about her own demise. Her performance is filled with such pathos that the character remains with one year after seeing the film.

Il Bidone (The swindle), and **The nights of Cabiria** brought further acclaim for the director in 1955 and 1957, but with his next effort, Fellini would put his permanent stamp on Italian and world cinema.

It is hard to imagine today why **La dolce vita** (The sweet life) caused such a stir back in 1960. The images are sometimes surreal, and the characters are often immoral or hedonistic at least, but the offence is less evident. Yet, the Vatican banned the film! Audiences shouted insults at the screen. Fellini was accused of being a Bolshevik and was spat upon. The media, the priests, public forums, and even parliament denounced the film, often causing riots in the streets outside the theatres. The Vatican called it 'disgusting', 'obscene', 'indecent' and 'sacrilegious', even suggesting that the film should be re-titled **The disgusting life**.

What caused such a passionate outcry from the Italians? One needs to bear in mind that nearly fifty years have passed since its debut, and in those fifty years, morals, ethics and other social standards have changed drastically. Issues



La Strada (1954)

Top: This film portrays a brutish strongman who enjoys flaunting his power and his main victim (above) the impish gentle clown



of adultery (unpunished), public scandal, free love, and such were hardly standard fare for a country just barely free from war and Fascism. For many the film seemed to glorify the hedonistic and amoral life of the set of the bohemian area known as the Via Veneto. People felt it was an affront to their newly-gained freedom, and the progress the country was making, by painting such a sordid picture of life in Rome.

Fellini strongly contested that it had not been his intention to exalt the **Sweet life**, in fact he meant the title to be more ironic. He once said that the name '...came to have a meaning exactly the opposite of what I had intended...I wanted (it) to signify not "easy life" but "the sweetness of life"'

The film deals with a journalist (Marcello Mastroianni) covering events in the Via Veneto. It is a world of nightclubs, jaded celebrities, visiting royalty, debauched parties and scandals. Along with his photographer, Paparazzo, they both observe and partake. Marcello continues an extra-marital affair; cavorts with Anita Ekberg in the Trevi fountain, and has a threesome with a bored socialite and a prostitute, while his long-suffering wife continues her decline into mental instability. This is interspersed with religious imagery. A giant statue of the Christ is airlifted over Rome by helicopter. And two young children fake a vision of the Virgin.

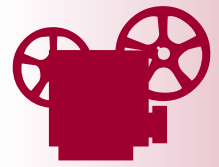
La dolce vita earned Fellini a nomination for the Best Director Oscar, and for Best Screenplay. The film was also nominated for Best Art Direction, and Piero Gherardi won an Oscar for Costume Design. (Incidentally, **La dolce vita** is the film from which the word 'Paparazzi' originates named for the tabloid photographer character of Paparazzo.)

While the heat of **The sweet life** subdued, so Fellini's creative spirit had seemed, to himself, to fade. Uncertain of what his next project should be, he became depressed.

La dolce vita (1960)

Above: Filming the most famous scene of the film at the Trevi Fountain

Left: Fellini in his trademark hat and scarf observes Anita Ekberg playing with a kitten



Fellini had thus far directed six full-length features, and co-directed three more. When he added these up, counting the co-directed projects as halves, he concluded that he had made seven and a half features.

His next feature then, would be number eight and a half. The film, he decided would be about a screenwriter/director, with writer's block. In **8½** (1963) Fellini thus explores his own dynamic as a writer/director, and the creative processes that he goes through to produce films. Once again Marcello Mastroianni was hired to play Fellini's alter ego (this time called Guido).

8½ is an important film in the Fellini oeuvre, in that it represents the first time that the director gave free reign to his imagination. Thus, allowing himself to come up with the truly bizarre dream imagery that would henceforth become his trademark.

The 'Harem' dream sequence is particularly effective, with Guido surrounded by adoring females of every shape and size. Their only desire is to please him. They cook, clean, wash and make love to him on demand. There is no jealousy among them, and they all live as a happy 'family'. But, even in dreams, things can go wrong, and a minor event causes the dream to become a nightmare. The black and white images are truly overwhelming. The choreography is subtly seducing, and the faces of the women are truly mesmerising.

Moreover, the opening sequence is equally memorable. Guido floats through the roof of his car, stuck in a jam-packed garage, and soars high above the ocean and pristine beaches, until he realises he is connected to a rope. The rope, he notices, is being held down on the ground by his alter ego, calling him to come down, as he tugs hard on the rope. Guido falls fast, and just before he lands, a priest, making the sign of the cross, pronounces, 'definitely down!'

Here the circus also makes its first major appearance in a Fellini film. At the end of the film, Mastroianni, dressed as a ringmaster, armed with a whip, marches all the people in his life, and his dream life, round and round the ring. The circus music (by Fellini favourite Nino Rota) gets faster and faster and the sequence becomes quite dizzying.

Such images are hard to forget, and have influenced many directors, when they construct their dream sequences, or surreal films. Those films that critics would today refer to as 'Felliniesque'.



*The opening traffic jam scene in the film **8½** (1963) is a dream which takes place in Guido's mind and suggests that he wants to escape his responsibilities*



***Fellini satyricon** (1969) is a film filled with strange and exotic rituals which involve the subconscious mind and contain many exotic sets and costumes allowing Fellini to indulge his artistry*

8½ set the tone for the future work of Fellini, and was universally hailed as a masterpiece. The film is worthy of multiple viewings, as the many layers of the plot unfold differently each time. Fellini won yet another Oscar for Best Foreign Film, and Gherardi for Costume Design.

Juliet of the spirits (1965) starred Fellini's wife, Giulietta Masina. Again, autobiographical details may be spotted in the long-suffering wife who has to bear her husband's many infidelities. The film also deals with another subject of which Fellini was enamoured - spiritualism, magic and the occult.

Fellini did much research into the occult, and had great interest in astrology, palmistry and the like. He associated with many well-known Italian spiritualists, and was often found in their company. This fascination with the occult is clearly present in **Juliet of the spirits**, but also in many other films, especially in the construction of his dream and fantasy sequences.

Fellini satyricon (1969), a very bizarre film, based on some surviving fragments of the work (**Satyricon**) by the ancient Roman, Gaius Petronius (1 AD). The film seems just as fragmented as the text it is based on, with some sub-plots just ending halfway through the telling. Sometimes character relations inexplicably change during the course of a scene, and even the final sentence is left unfinished. Some have called the work self-indulgent, and it is hard to

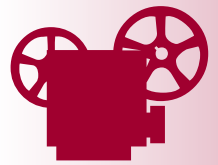
argue with such a statement, however, the film does cast a mesmerising spell over the (receptive) viewer.

Fellini Roma (1972), is again a series of vignettes, some, one assumes, autobiographical, relating to Rome, both ancient and modern. Fellini paints a fascinating picture of the city he loves so much. The film is peppered with the usual bizarre characters, and unusual faces. Someone once said that Fellini casts faces and not actors, and in **Roma** this is especially true. The dream sequences are stunningly mounted in colour, and the fantasy Papal Fashion Parade at the end leaves a particularly indelible impression.

As evidenced by the titles of some of the films mentioned above, Fellini's status (and perhaps ego) had grown tremendously; with his name often preceding the title. Thus, taking Alfred

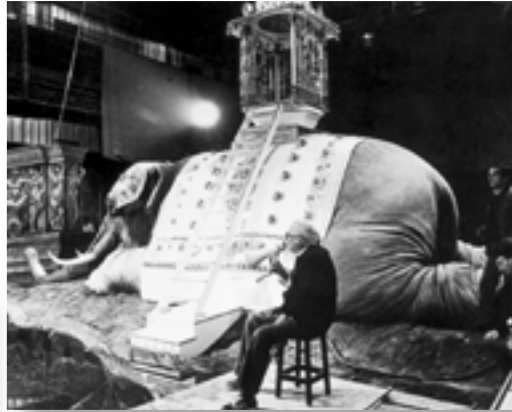
Hitchcock's concept of the name above the title even further by having the name become part of the title.





Right: Fellini on the set for the film *Intervista* (1987) which is full of recreations of old memories. It is fitting that he features an elephant

Below: *Casanova* is held aloft as the winner of the lovemaking contest in the film *Fellini Casanova* (1976)



Amarcord (1974), *Fellini Casanova* (1976), *Ginger & Fred* (1986) and his final feature *Intervista* (Interview) in 1987, are all very telling in their depiction of Italian life, history, nostalgia and introspection. And *Intervista* in particular gives the film lover an

opportunity to see Fellini at work, as he really was, or as he really wanted us to see him. The film may be done in a documentary style, but one ignores the director's penchant for lying at one's own peril.

Intervista was also the director's final offering and six years later Federico Fellini died. He was followed less than a year later by his devoted wife, and inspiration for so much of his art.

Federico Fellini gave the world of the visual arts a legacy that has not yet been equalled in terms of originality and vision. The visual feasts that are his films, continue to feed the imagination of film scholars, enthusiasts and those in the profession to this day.

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- Note: *Title not available in Provincial Library Service stock.*

2006

Screenwriter

- 1939 **Lo vedi come sei**
- 1940 **Il pirata sono io**
- 1940 **Imputato alzatevi**
- 1940 **No me lo dire**
- 1941 **Documento Z-3**
- 1941 **Bentornato Signor Gai**
- 1941 **Sette poveri in automobile**
- 1941 **I predoni del Sahara**
- 1942 **Quarta pagina**
- 1942 **Avanti c'è posto**
- 1942 **Campo dei fiori**
- 1942 **L'ultima carrozella**
- 1942 **Chi l'ha visto?**
- 1942 **Apparizione**
- 1942 **Tutta la città canta**
- *1945 **Roma, città aperta** (Rome open city)
- 1946 **Il delitto di Giovanni Episcopo** (The crime of Giovanni Episcopo)
- *1946 **Paisà** (Paisan)
- 1947 **Senza pietà** (Without pity)
- 1948 **Il miracolo** (The miracle)
- 1948 **Il nome della legge** (In the name of the law)

- 1949 **Il mulino del Po** (The mill on the Po)
- 1950 **Francesco, giullare di dio** (Flowers of St. Francis)
- 1951 **Cameriera bella presenza offresi** (Attractive maid available)
- 1951 **La città si difende** (Pasport to hell)
- 1952 **Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo** (The Brigand of Tacca del Lupo)

Director/Screenwriter

- 1950 **Variety lights** (Luci Del Varieta)
- *1952 **The White Sheik** (Lo Sceicco Bianco)
- 1953 **The vitelloni** (I vittelloni)
- 1953 **A matrimonial agency** (Un'agenzia Matrimoniale) Eps. IV of L'amore in città)
- *1954 **La Strada** (The road)
- 1955 **Il Bidone** (The swindle)
- 1957 **The nights of Cabiria** (Le Notti Di Cabiria)
- *1960 **La dolce vita** (The sweet life)

- 1962 **Boccaccio '70** (Segment: The temptation of Doctor Antonio)
- *1963 **8½** (Otto e mezzo)
- 1965 **Juliet of the spirits** (Guilieta Degli Spiriti)
- 1968 **Toby dammit** (Episode III in Tre Passi nel delirio)
- *1968 **Block-Notes Di Un Regista** (A director's notebook)
- 1969 **Fellini Satyricon**
- 1970 **The clowns** (I clowns)
- *1972 **Fellini Roma**
- 1973 **Amarcord** (I remember)
- 1976 **Fellini Casanova** (Il Casanova di Federico Fellini)
- *1979 **Orchestra rehearsal** (Prova D'Orchestra)
- 1980 **City of women** (La città delle donne)
- *1984 **And the ship sails on** (E La nave va)
- *1986 **Ginger and Fred**
- *1987 **Intervista** (interview)

*Note: *Titles available in Provincial Library Service stock.*