

The Films of Federico Fellini

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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 *8½* 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 Barbiani (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:

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

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

notebooks, always remained wedded to the early comic-strip style, not the Disney variety.

In 1937, Fellini published his first drawings in a magazine issued by the Opera Balilla, the Fascist youth organization. These were caricatures of his friends from a camping trip from the summer of 1936. During the 1937 vacation season, Fellini joined forces with a friend named Demos Bonini to set up a sketch and caricature shop called FEBO that sold such humorous sketches to summer tourists, and during the same year, Fellini drew caricatures of famous European or American actors to be displayed by the owner of Rimini's movie theater, the Fulgor (another mythical site immortalized by *Amarcord*). Some of these sketches are still extant and may be examined in the catalog of the first retrospective on Fellini held in Rome in 1995, soon after his death.⁷ Fellini would soon send his drawings, accompanied by one-liners, to the *Domenica del corriere*, where a number of them were published between 1938 and 1939, when he left Rimini for Rome. Before leaving Rimini, Fellini also encountered the caricaturist Giuseppe Zanini, internationally famous as Nino Za, who had made a fortune publishing humorous sketches of the world's great actors and actresses in Germany. Za's artistic style, like that of the early American comics, would become another formative influence upon Fellini's drawings.⁸ Before moving to the capital, during a six-month period between 1937 and 1938, Fellini went to Florence and presented himself at the editorial office of the weekly humor magazine *420*, then managed by Mario Nerbini. There, if we may believe one of Fellini's possibly apocryphal accounts,⁹ Fellini and another sketch artist named Giove Toppi created a substitute for the popular cartoon strip *Flash Gordon* by Alexander Raymond (1909–56), which the Fascist government found insufficiently Italian. Whether or not this story is a true one, years later, in shooting *Satyricon*, Fellini noted that he attempted in the film to re-create some of the particular colors typical of the comic strips of the time, including those by Raymond.¹⁰

The Move to Rome and Fellini's Precinematic Career as a Writer

In 1939, the young Fellini moved to Rome with his mother and sister. In Rome, he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the university but never

completed a degree. Soon, the friends Fellini met would play a determinative role in the choice of his eventual career as cartoonist, journalist, gagman, and scriptwriter. Fellini began to work on *Marc'Aurelio*, a widely distributed and highly influential biweekly humor magazine filled with gags, cartoons, and brief comic sketches. Between 1939 and the end of November 1942 (the date of Fellini's last contribution to the magazine), Fellini's work included more than two thousand pages of text – cartoons, gags, comic columns.¹¹ The *Marc'Aurelio* experience also inspired Fellini's first book, a small pamphlet probably published in 1942 (there is no publication date on the title page) under the title *Il mio amico Pasqualino* [My Friend Pasqualino]. It contains numerous drawings that attest to the influence of the comic-strip style of *Op-per*: Pasqualino bears a clear physical resemblance to Happy Hooligan. Perhaps even more intriguing is the possibility that the content of this book may well reflect Fellini's early reading of Franz Kafka, a writer practically unknown in Italy at the time.¹²

The staff of *Marc'Aurelio* was filled with writers whose contribution to the Italian cinema would soon become legendary. They would eventually include Cesare Zavattini (the scriptwriter for Vittorio De Sica's neorealist classics); Ruggero Maccari (who would introduce Fellini to key figures in the cinema, such as the actor Aldo Fabrizi); Ettore Scola (the future director); and Bernardino Zapponi (who would eventually become one of Fellini's major scriptwriters in the 1960s and 1970s). Some of Fellini's friends in Rome did not have a connection to *Marc'Aurelio*, such as the painter Rinaldo Geleng (who became his lifelong friend and who would assist him as set decorator in a number of his films) or Nino Za, who was working in the capital at the time and who did a caricature of a young and very impoverished Fellini that the director kept on his office desk until his death.¹³ Still, the brief period of work at *Marc'Aurelio* would be the determining moment in Fellini's life, for the writers, gagmen, and scriptwriters whom he met on the editorial board, who were almost all simultaneously writing for the cinema in some capacity, provided the same kind of entry into the world of show business that a young student today might well find in a film school in Los Angeles or New York.

Fellini immediately fell in with a crowd of actors and vaudeville players. As has always been the case in the cinema, connections and



Nino Za's sketch of Fellini (1942), a drawing that remained on Fellini's desk until his death. [Photo: Federico Fellini]

being at the right place at the right time (in addition to talent) make a difference. Maccari introduced Fellini to Aldo Fabrizi, the actor soon to become world famous as the partisan priest in Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Open City*, 1945). Fabrizi would eventually present Fellini to Rossellini. Between the end of Fellini's collaboration on *Marc'Aurelio* and his collaboration with Rossellini as the scriptwriter on *Roma, città aperta*, which launched his international fame with his first nomination for an Oscar in the category of scriptwriting, Fellini had to survive the war and the occupation. Some accounts of Fellini's first activity behind a camera date it from 1943, when he was dispatched to Tripoli to work on a film directed by Gino Talamo entitled *Gli ultimi Tuareg* [The Last Tuaregs]. The on-location shooting was cut short by the Allied invasion of North Africa, and just before Tripoli fell to the Allied troops, Fellini managed to obtain a seat on one of the last German transport planes leaving the area.¹⁴ Returning, he worked on a number of scripts for minor films. In 1943, he married Giulietta Masina, a theatrical actress employed by the EIAR (Ente Italiano Audizioni Radiofoniche, the state-owned radio service). After the liberation of Rome on 4 June 1944, Fellini maintained his family by drawing portraits and caricature sketches for Allied soldiers at The Funny Face Shop, a store he opened on the Via Nazionale.

There is no doubt that Fellini's film career was launched in style with the international success of Rossellini's melodramatic account of war-torn Rome. Fellini was responsible for much of the success of the film, being principally concerned with creating the character of the partisan priest, played by his friend Fabrizi. Since *Roma, città aperta* not only launched the international film careers of Roberto Rossellini and Federico Fellini but also announced to the world the birth of what film historians and critics would label Italian *neorealism*, much of Fellini's early career would involve a slow but persistent evolution toward an entirely different kind of cinema than that embodied in either *Roma, città aperta* or *Paisà*. Italian neorealism may be briefly (but superficially) defined as a film style favoring documentary effects, real locations (as opposed to the so-called artificiality of studios), natural lighting, nonprofessional actors, and a progressive (if not leftist) political stance treating contemporary social problems (unemployment, the war, the partisan struggle, old age, strikes, the working class, etc.).¹⁵ When Fellini's film career began almost immediately to diverge from this kind



On location during the shooting of the monastery sequence of *Paisà*: Roberto Rossellini, a young monk, and an even younger Federico Fellini. [Photo: Federico Fellini]

of cinema, he would soon find himself the target of relentless negative criticism from the Left.

Between 1945 and the shooting of his first feature film, *Luci del varietà* (*Variety Lights*, 1950), Fellini contributed an extraordinary amount of work as scriptwriter to the Italian cinema. Besides the scriptwriting for Rossellini's second postwar work, *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946), Fellini made substantial contributions to Rossellini's *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle*, 1948), in which Fellini appeared himself for the first time as an actor, playing the mysterious vagabond. The film's controversial treatment of the nature of sainthood was scripted by Fellini primarily as a vehicle for Anna Magnani, then Rossellini's mistress. It offended some conservative Catholics in America and was censored. The distributor

ultimately took the case as far as the U.S. Supreme Court, where it would serve as the occasion for the ground-breaking decision delivered on 26 May 1952 in *Burstyn v. Wilson*, which ruled that film was not merely a business but was also a means of expression protected by the First Amendment, reversing a 1915 decision to the contrary. Furthermore, because the state was not charged with protecting specific religions from criticism, the court ruled that sacrilege could not be an excuse for artistic censorship.¹⁶ Thus, Fellini's script and his acting performance had a direct impact upon the making of constitutional law in the United States.

Fellini's scripts for several films by Rossellini, often starring Ingrid Bergman, were expressions of the same kind of Christian humanism that infuriated leftist critics in Fellini's own early works. In addition to *Il miracolo*, Fellini made important contributions to Rossellini's *FrancoESCO*, *giullare di dio* (*The Flowers of Saint Francis*, 1950), as well as uncredited work for his *Europa '51* (aka *The Greatest Love*, 1952). Fellini's scripts for pictures produced by the Lux Film company were equally significant in the immediate postwar period. They include *Il delitto di Giovanni Episcopo* (*Flesh Will Surrender*, 1947), *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity*, 1948), and *Il mulino del Po* (*The Mill on the Po*, 1949) for Alberto Lattuada; *Il passatore* (*A Bullet for Stefano*, 1947) for Duilio Coletti; *In nome della legge* (*In the Name of the Law*, 1949), *Il cammino della speranza* (*The Path of Hope*, 1950), and *La città si difende* (*Four Ways Out*, 1951) for Pietro Germi; and *Persiane chiuse* (*Behind Closed Shutters*, 1951) for Luigi Comencini. Although Fellini's own career as a director would rely primarily upon his own personal vision of the world, in the studio films his work touched upon traditional American genres (the gangster film, the film noir, the western). So much work on so many important films would represent the bulk of a career for a lesser talent than Fellini; but for the precocious young man fresh from the provinces and eager to make his mark in the world, these major credits represented only the penultimate step toward direction. It is also important to underline the fact that Lux Film was responsible for some of the very best neorealist films produced in the postwar period – not only the key works by Germi and Lattuada above but also such seminal titles as *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1948) by Giuseppe De Santis and *Senso* (*Wanton Countessa*, 1954) by Luchino Visconti.

Since one of the most frequent critiques of Fellini's early cinema was

that it represented a betrayal of neorealism, it is important to note that Fellini's experiences as a scriptwriter exposed him to two entirely different kinds of director. On the one hand, Roberto Rossellini's practice was as far removed from the industrial system of Hollywood filmmaking as could be imagined. Rossellini's scripts were written and rewritten at the local trattoria shortly before shooting began, there was a constant lack of funding, and work generally moved from one day to the next without any master plan such as was normally required of a capitalist studio intent upon maximizing its profit and minimizing its risks. The precarious nature of such an operation directed by the flamboyant personality of Rossellini was precisely what Fellini loved about working with him. Indeed, even though Fellini would become the most exacting of taskmasters on his own sets at Cinecittà and rarely use authentic locations in his mature work – preferring precisely the so-called artificiality of the studio because it was completely under his artistic control – he would also attempt to re-create the chaotic mood typical of Rossellini's sets during his own shooting in order to be open to intuitive inventions and serendipitous surprises.

On the other hand, it is too often forgotten that Fellini also apprenticed with Lux, a traditional commercial studio company similar in operation and outlook to Hollywood studios, where he became the trusted collaborator of a number of professional directors whose artistic products emerged from exactly the same kind of production company as its Hollywood counterparts. In fact, Fellini remembers that Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis, then young producers working for Lux (and, later, coproducers for *La strada*), even attempted to mimic the style of Hollywood moguls, displaying three or four telephones on their desks, puffing huge cigars, and propping their feet up on their desks – in perfect imitation of the images of Hollywood producers they had seen on the silver screen.¹⁷

Thus, when Fellini began his career in the cinema as a director, he had undergone a unique experience: Not only had he entered the active life of scriptwriting through the school of a completely nontraditional director, Rossellini, who enjoyed breaking all of the conventions or rules of the trade; but he was, simultaneously, employed by a production company that was arguably the most advanced expression of industrial capitalism in the Italian movie industry. Both of these lessons would serve Fellini well in the future.

From Neorealist Scriptwriting to Direction: The Trilogy of Character in *Luci del varietà*, *Lo sceicco bianco*, and *I vitelloni*

While continuing to write scripts for Lux Film, Fellini's debut as a director came about as the result of a collaborative effort with one of Lux's more experienced directors, Alberto Lattuada. The film (starring his own wife, Giulietta Masina, as well as Lattuada's wife, Carla Del Poggio) was entitled *Luci del varietà* (*Variety Lights*, 1950). The film was not a success (ranking sixty-fifth in gross ticket sales in the 1950-1 season) and even failed to garner the usual government subsidy given to works considered of artistic merit; yet its bittersweet depiction of the world of show business and the sometimes tawdry reality behind the illusions on the stage of a traveling vaudeville troupe mark this debut in the cinema as a work with Fellini's personal signature. In fact, a number of the recurrent visual images in Fellini's cinema are exploited in this film: the deserted piazzas at night that Fellini frequently employs to provide an objective correlative for the often superficial illusions of his characters; frenzied nocturnal celebrations followed by the inevitable letdown at dawn; processions of grotesque and unusual characters with amusing physical traits reminiscent of the figures Fellini drew for his cartoons and sketches in *Marc'Aurelio*. Seen in retrospect, *Variety Lights* contains the entire range of the style and thematic concerns of Fellini's early cinema before the watershed appearance of *La dolce vita* in 1959.

This interesting but too infrequently studied film was followed in 1952 by the first film directed solely by Fellini, *Lo sceicco bianco* (*The White Sheik*). Based upon an original idea provided to Fellini's producer, Carlo Ponti, by Michelangelo Antonioni, Fellini collaborated with Tullio Pinelli (1908-) and Ennio Flaiano (1910-72) on the script, beginning a collaboration that would last for many years afterward. Nino Rota, thereafter to be identified almost entirely with Fellini's cinema, also began his lifelong collaboration with Fellini as the creator of a particular brand of music that would become an integral part of the Fellini cinematic experience. *Lo sceicco bianco* represents a hilarious parody of the world of the *fotoromanzo* – the photo-novel or sentimental true-romance-type magazine that sold millions of copies in postwar Italy and boasted such titles as *Grand Hotel* or *Sogno*. Before the advent of mass audiences for television, such pulp magazines filled the



Fellini's directorial debut in *Luci del varietà*: Liliana (Carlo Del Poggio) and Checco (Peppino De Filippo) provide a bittersweet vision of the world of show business. [Photo: The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

same role in popular culture that soap operas fill today. They were produced by employing black-and-white photographs (not colored cartoon drawings), while the dialogue was contained within the traditional comic balloon. In *Lo sceicco bianco*, Fellini not only pokes gentle fun at the kind of unsophisticated people who take such publications seriously, but he also implicitly provides a hilarious parody of the film star Rudolph Valentino (1895–1926), the original Latin lover on the silver screen whose brief but meteoric career included several films in which he played a sheik (*The Sheik*, 1921; *Son of the Sheik*, 1926). Fellini's sheik is a much less imposing figure, a character in a *fotoromanzo* played brilliantly by a young Alberto Sordi. Giulietta Masina plays a cameo role as a prostitute named Cabiria, a figure that Fellini will use as the central character in the later masterpiece entitled *Le notti di Cabiria*, also starring Masina.





Ivan Cavalli (Leopoldo Trieste) is chased by a parade of *bersaglieri* troops in *Lo sceicco bianco*, a financial failure now recognized as a comic masterpiece. [Photo: The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

Fellini's third film, set in a town obviously based upon his hometown of Rimini on the Adriatic coast, managed to rescue his early career from an undeserved obscurity and critical neglect after the negative reception of his first two works (today considered comic gems). Entitled *I vitelloni* (1953), it was awarded a Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival by a jury headed by the future Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale. It also first attracted the attention of critics abroad, especially in France and the United States, whose accolades would eventually prove an effective counterweight to the harsh attacks within Italy, from both the Right and the Left, that Fellini would endure throughout his long career. Like the first two films in what I have elsewhere termed the "trilogy of character,"¹⁸ Fellini's third film concentrates upon the illusory dreams of five young men in the provinces: They are all *vitelloni*, a word Fellini recalls from his regional dialect to mean an immature, lazy young man without any clear notion of direction in his life. The five *vitelloni* each harbor a specific dream – to leave for the capital city, to write a great play, to play the local Don Giovanni, and so forth – and the social masks of each are eventually stripped away to reveal the somewhat hollow, superficial reality of their true personalities. Fellini's particular penchant for the world of show business continues in this film, as the moments of crisis during which the flawed personalities of the *vitelloni* come to the surface have some link to the entertainment world – a beauty contest, a carnival, a movie theater, a variety theater performance. At the close of the film, a single character – Moraldo – abandons the provincial backwater where such superficial illusions have trapped the other protagonists in a lotus-land of tawdry dreams and heads for the capital city of Rome. Many critics, especially those of an autobiographical bent, consider Moraldo Fellini's alter ego and the predecessor of Marcello, the journalist from the provinces who becomes the famous protagonist of *La dolce vita*. Moraldo did become the major figure in a script called *Moraldo in città* (*Moraldo in the City*), which was written in 1954 but never realized as a film, although parts of the script later surfaced in *Le notti di Cabiria* and in *La dolce vita*.¹⁹

Fellini's first three films treat the daydreams and the illusions of provincial Italians who grow up longing to change their lives by moving to the capital or by becoming a famous personage in show business. Even though such content was hardly what film viewers had come to



In Fellini's first commercial success, *I vitelloni*, a drunken Alberto in drag (Alberto Sordi) dances with a carnival reveler. [Photo: The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

expect from neorealist cinema, which dealt more immediately and more polemically with such pressing social problems as unemployment, the war, the Resistance, and the postwar economic recovery, it was certainly possible at the time Fellini made his debut to include his early cinema within the rubric of neorealism. After all, the view of provincial life and its bittersweet critique as full of comic illusions and failed characters could easily lend itself to a more politicized critique of Italian bourgeois culture by the Left. What such critics failed to comprehend, in their initial attempts to save Fellini from the charge of betraying neorealism's progressive politics, was that even while Fellini poked gentle fun at the characters he created who tried to make their illusions and dreams a reality, he was nevertheless more interested in the subjective side of life and the power of illusion and fantasy than he was in the so-called objective, materialistic, and ideological issues that occupied so many Italian film critics.

International Fame on the Road beyond Neorealism:
La strada, Il bidone, and Le notti di Cabiria

If Fellini's trilogy of character retained a neorealist flavor in what critics today now praise as the accurate and believable (if comic) portrait of the Italian provinces in the 1950s, Fellini's subsequent trilogy of grace or salvation moved immediately beyond the ideological boundaries of neorealist cinema defined as socially relevant cinema and toward a philosophical position of Christian existentialism that exploited traditional iconography or religious concepts (such as that of conversion) to mark out an entirely different kind of cinema.

Immediately after shooting *I vitelloni*, Fellini shot a single brief episode, *Un'agenzia matrimoniale* ([A Matrimonial Agency], 1953), for *Amore in città* (*Love in the City*), a project conceived by Cesare Zavattini, perhaps the most famous of the neorealist scriptwriters, who wanted to create a new style of cinema comparable to the daily newspaper. Zavattini called this kind of cinematic journalism that would focus upon current events *il film inchiesta* – the film inquiry or investigation. He hoped that by using six different directors (Fellini, Antonioni, Latuada, Francesco Maselli, Carlo Lizzani, and Dino Risi), all of whom would employ nonprofessional actors to create something like a news magazine, he could keep Italian cinema on what he considered its proper course toward the simple representation of daily life. Fellini's contribution involved a complete overturn of Zavattini's plan, for he proposed a story about a reporter who goes to a marriage agency, posing as a client, to look for a woman willing to marry a werewolf. Apparently, the naïve Zavattini actually believed Fellini's claim that his film was based on a true story. So much for social realism!

Fellini turned in his next three films toward a sharper break with his neorealist heritage than was first apparent in his earlier films. The most important of this trilogy, *La strada* (1954), Fellini once described as “really the complete catalogue of my entire mythical world.”²⁰ *La strada* is a fable about a circus strongman (Zampanò) who takes on a dim-witted girl (Gelsomina) to assist him in his act.²¹ He accidentally kills a high-wire artist (Il Matto or the Fool) before her eyes, causing Gelsomina to go mad and forcing Zampanò to abandon her after he has realized, only too late, how much she has changed his brutish, animal-like existence through her mysterious presence. Because *La strada* rests

squarely upon a secular form of a major Christian notion – the Catholic belief that a conversion can radically change a person’s life – the unprecedented international success of this work also touched off a very interesting debate between warring critical camps in France and Italy that was to continue (but with a reversal of protagonists and intellectual positions) until the appearance of *La dolce vita*.

After *La strada* won for Fellini the Silver Lion at Venice in 1954 and his first Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1956 (not to mention dozens of other awards), still continuing his interest in the fundamental psychological changes of conversion that would come about from an act of secular grace in ever more complex individuals, Fellini next shot *Il bidone* (1955), casting Broderick Crawford in the leading role of a con man named Augusto who often poses as a priest. *Il bidone* means “the swindle” in Italian, and Fellini had originally thought of Humphrey Bogart for the leading role, but Crawford was perhaps equally as suitable, since he was associated by audiences all over the world with Hollywood gangster pictures. With *Il bidone*, Fellini took a traditional Hollywood genre and gave it a special Fellinian twist, for the plot of the film represents a variation of the Christian story of the good thief, the character near Christ on the cross, and traces Augusto’s descent into a personal hell through five days of confidence games and a growing sense of remorse.²²

The presentation of *Il bidone* at the 1955 Venice Film Festival was a disaster and would prevent Fellini from presenting one of his films at Venice until the opening of *Satyricon* in 1969. Nevertheless, the subsequent *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957), assisted by another brilliant performance by Giulietta Masina as Cabiria Ceccarelli (awarded Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival for her efforts), enjoyed international acclaim and earned Fellini’s second Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Fellini initially had difficulty obtaining backing for this film, which he had in mind even before *Il bidone*, because he wanted to shoot a picture on prostitution at precisely the moment when the question of legalized prostitution had become a burning social issue in Italy. Ultimately legalized prostitution was banned in 1958 by the Merlin Law, finally closing the state-inspected brothels that had played such a large role in the sexual education of every Italian male of Fellini’s generation. Although Fellini toyed with the idea of a pseudoneorealist study of prostitution in Italian society – interviewing numerous women in “the life” and

even hiring the then little-known Pier Paolo Pasolini to help him with realistic or earthy Roman dialogue that would reflect the milieu in which Cabiria thrives – *Le notti di Cabiria* employs a by-now familiar Fellinesque picaresque plot, ambling around Rome with Cabiria and her friends or acquaintances, to suggest an entirely nonrealistic and essentially illusionistic vision of the world. In fact, the key sequence of the film – a vaudeville act during which Cabiria’s dreams and aspirations are revealed to the audience while the plucky prostitute is in a trance – underlines how completely Fellini’s cinema has focused upon the irrational, subjective states of his characters and how little Cabiria’s socioeconomic status (the focus of any neorealist inquiry into the social aspects of prostitution) matters to the director.

The Mature Auteur: *La dolce vita* and a New Subjective Film Narrative

With the unprecedented international success of *La dolce vita*, Fellini departed in a number of fundamental ways from the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations that had earned him the coveted title of auteur from international critics. Whereas his cinema first emerged in his trilogy of character from a dialectical relationship with neorealist cinema, a style of filmmaking in which Fellini’s career began as a scriptwriter, the evolution of Fellini’s film language in *La dolce vita* and afterward – most particularly in *8½* and *Giulietta degli spiriti* (*Juliet of the Spirits*, 1965) – would move beyond any overriding concern with the representation of social reality and concentrate upon the subjective, often irrational areas of human behavior connected with the psyche or the unconscious. As *La dolce vita* and *8½* are the subjects of separate chapters in this study, it is sufficient here to note that the lush fresco of the titular “sweet life” in the first film, presenting a comic panorama of life defined as image and style, broke all Italian box-office records and most of those in Europe as well, winning a number of international awards, including the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes. *La dolce vita* – especially in conjunction with the subsequent *8½*, a film about a filmmaker’s inability to make his film – resulted in the virtual canonization of Fellini as *the* archetypal genius, the auteur of auteurs, the undisputed king of what is today, in retrospect, referred to as the European “art” film. Finally, and most surprisingly, Fellini found the leftist Italian press