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Le notti di Cabiria (*Nights of Cabiria*)— Cabiria in the Classroom: Teaching Fellini in the Twenty-first Century

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When one of my students asked, about a five years ago, "Who is Fellini?" I was taken aback, having assumed that anyone interested in taking a course on Italian film would know at least that singularly iconic name. I had noticed earlier that students were experiencing greater difficulty engaging with Fellini's work than had been the case in the past. Though endowed with remarkable audiovisual literacy—honed by their habitual engagement with new media—they often seemed impatient with the spectacle-driven films of the director's maturity and were generally unwilling to meet their interpretive demands. Searching for an earlier film that might offer readier access to the director's distinctive style and vision, I settled on *Le notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria* 1956). As this has become the Fellini film I most often include in my Italian cinema courses, I am prompted to reflect on the specific revelations it has provided in the classroom setting.

Fellini's second film to win an Academy Award, *Le notti di Cabiria* has been continuously accessible in subtitled versions to English-speaking audiences, first on celluloid, then on VHS or DVD and, more recently, via streaming. It has, to some degree, been overshadowed, however, by *La strada* (1954), which won Fellini's first Oscar, and to which it bears some resemblance due to the riveting performance of Giulietta Masina in both films. Although I also considered *La strada* for my course, *Le notti di Cabiria* seemed to make more sense pedagogically as a compelling standpoint from which to discuss the transition from neorealism to the Italian art film of the 1960s.

An introduction to neorealism is still the cornerstone of my course on Italian cinema, despite the recent critical debate about the validity of this once widely accepted category.[1]

A discussion of cinematic realism—as understood by the neorealist filmmakers themselves and by critics such as André Bazin who canonized their work—provides the pedagogical bridge linking Italian cinema of the 1940s to Fellini's films of the mid- and late-1950s. In addition to illuminating the historical transition from realist representation to the beginnings of auteur cinema, *Le notti di Cabiria* proves to be an excellent starting point from which to explore what John C. Stubbs (1993, 49) calls "the Fellini manner."

For Stubbs, the two basic elements that characterize Fellini's oeuvre are "the open form of narrative revelation" and "the visual style of excess" (49–50). Although this characterization may seem reductive, it offers a useful introduction to the director's creative process. Whereas "visual excess" is the element that most consistently disturbs students in later Fellini films, they often find the "open form" of his narrative process in the films of the 1950s equally disconcerting. Therefore, when I teach *Le notti di Cabiria,* I first address students' discomfort with the film's lack of conventional plot and with what they describe as its "confusing ending." Accustomed to the predictable arc of the Hollywood narrative, they are initially drawn to Cabiria as a struggling streetwalker perpetually yearning for happiness and duly anticipate that, by the film's end, she will

have either fulfilled her heart's desire or faced definitive defeat. Their earlier exposure to two or three neorealist films scarcely serves to mitigate their struggle with the indeterminacy of Fellini's conclusion. Reluctant to read the heartbroken Cabiria's tearful smile in the film's final moments as an indication of psychospiritual transformation or redemption—an interpretation suggested by several scholars[2]—they tend at first to focus on a single, more mundane narrative issue: Has Cabiria given up prostitution, or will she return to it?[3]

Following a careful review of the film's narrative structure, I have been able to encourage a shift in perspective among even the most skeptical students. First, I show that even if *Le notti di Cabiria* appears to lack a conventional plot, it does, in fact, have a carefully organized structure, composed of a handful of discrete but loosely interrelated episodes, all of which underscore Cabiria's thwarted quest for a happier life. An examination of the opening episode, in which a presumed lover steals Cabiria's purse and pushes her into the Tiber, uncovers the narrative pattern that governs virtually all subsequent ones as the protagonist moves from hope or joy to a state of disappointment. The first episode also reveals the themes of betrayed love, robbery, and murderous intent that will reemerge in the film's concluding minutes in a sequence that—unlike its earlier counterpart—culminates in renewed hope rather than rage or disappointment.

Set against the backdrop of apartment buildings that recall the new but ill-equipped housing estate in the opening scenes of *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and then cutting to Cabiria's arrival at her house, a small concrete structure in a cluster of similarly modest dwellings that anticipate the shanty towns in Pasolini's films of the 1960s, the film's initial episode conjures up a distinctive social world and unique perspective on Rome's urban landscape (Figure 43.1). This perspective is not infused with the same order of realism as that embraced by the neorealists, but it is nonetheless rich in social, political, and anthropological insight. Angelo Restivo (2002, 37) has argued that neorealist filmmaking in its early stages possessed a "vital historical imperative—the imperative to discover 'Italy,' to construct new maps that had been negated by the homogenizing thrust of fascist ideology." The process of remapping was also important for Fellini. Restivo makes the claim that "Rome [...] is ultimately the vital subject of most of Fellini's work from the late 1950s on," and points to *La dolce vita* (1960) as the first of the director's films to offer a "cognitive map of the city" (37). I find, however, that *Le notti di Cabiria* provides an equally compelling "map" of the Italian capital, poised on the threshold of the Economic Miracle and so-called boom years, but revealing dramatic contrasts of wealth and poverty.

Over the course of Cabiria's nights and days, she is propelled across a broad swath of municipal territory and is witness to a wide range of socioeconomic circumstances. Some scenes are set in locations linked to the exigencies of her work: the street running just below the Baths of Caracalla where she plies her trade alongside her colleagues (some of whom are obliged by financial necessity to sleep under the arches); the more glamorous environs of the Via Veneto where she briefly tries her luck; the upscale nightclub she visits in the company of film star Alberto Lazzari; and Lazzari's ostentatious villa on the Via Appia Antica where she spends a disappointing night. In the company of her fellow streetwalkers, Cabiria also makes a pilgrimage to the semi-rural Sanctuary of the Madonna of Divine Love to beseech the Virgin Mary to change her life. She later attends a variety show in a modest suburban theater where she is subjected to the spell of an unctuous hypnotist.

In another episode set in the urban periphery, Cabiria discovers underground caves inhabited by the most destitute members of society. The sequence has acquired notoriety and its own name—"The Man with the Sack"—because, while included in the version of *Le notti di Cabiria* that

premiered at Cannes in 1957, it was eliminated from the cut originally distributed worldwide. It was included, however, in *Fellini: A Director's Notebook* (1968) and then reinserted, because of its acknowledged importance, in the restored version of *Le notti di Cabiria* released in 1998.[4] Since the sequence casts light on key elements of the overall narrative and is shorter than other major episodes of *Le notti di Cabiria,* I screen it multiple times in class to facilitate close analysis of its *mise-en-scène*, narrative structure, and affective arc.

Cabiria first meets the titular character, an anonymous citizen who delivers provisions to the homeless, after she realizes that a client has dropped her off in an isolated location without access to any kind of transportation. Pulling up alongside her in his car, the "man with the sack" offers his assistance, but she must first accompany him on his rounds. As they approach one of the caves—which is little more than a hole in the ground—she recognizes one of its inhabitants as an older, once well-to-do streetwalker, now reduced to a state of toothless abjection. Cabiria's surprise at meeting an old friend seems to impede her acknowledgment of the broader implications of the woman's present circumstances. Watching the scene, however, my students immediately realize that the only element that guarantees Cabiria a different kind of future is her ownership of the small concrete dwelling she proudly calls home. The encounter with the aging prostitute thus adds an additional layer of poignancy to the film's final sequence, where Cabiria, now homeless and penniless due to her betrayal by the man she planned to marry, may well be headed in a similar direction even if her tearful smile suggests a shining, redemptive grace.

Significantly, it is in this episode that Cabiria, for the only time in the film, reveals her full name: Maria Ceccarelli. Inspired by the actions of the apparently selfless benefactor, she thus feels free to reveal something about herself. When the man finally drops her off at her tram stop following their visit to the dispossessed, she thanks him joyfully, buoyed by the example of his goodness rather than devastated by the poverty she has witnessed. As some of my more attentive students have noted, the restored episode is particularly striking for the fact that it reverses the affective trajectory of all other episodes in the film, with the exception of the final coda. Cabiria's discovery that individuals such as the "man with the sack" exist in the world she inhabits may thus perhaps be linked to her tentative smile at the film's end.

Bazin (1957/2005) famously characterized *Le notti di Cabiria* as a "voyage to the end of neorealism." Not quite a dead end, it seems, but rather a passage to "the other side" (87). Anticipating that the film would be criticized for falling short of the purported principles of canonical neorealism—as had occurred in the critical response to *La strada*—he seeks to persuade his readers that Fellini's poetic approach, with its use of symbols and simultaneous refusal to psychologize characters, succeeds in shaping reality anew rather than simply recording it (87–92).

Bazin interprets Giulietta Masina's tearful, smiling glance toward the camera in the film's closing shot as an invitation that is "direct enough [...] to remove us quite finally from our role of spectator" (92). At this closing moment, the film seems indeed to blur the line between the performer and her character, meshing the diegetic with the metadiegetic, celluloid image with the world of the spectator. Just as the film viewers are hailed visually as Cabiria's/Giulietta's audience, so too has Cabiria been hailed as the audience of the group of reveling teenagers who surround her within the frame, embracing her company. As Bazin suggests, *Le notti di Cabiria* is crucially about encounters—encounters that tend to "befall" Cabiria rather than to derive from a progression of logical circumstances (84). And in the final moment, the sense of encounter is doubled, exceeding the limits of the film's fictional space. Tom Brown (2002, 81) has aptly described the final shot of *Le notti di Cabiria* as "one of cinema's most famous instances of direct address." But, as Bazin and other

commentators have shown, Cabiria's/Giulietta's look is not fixed. Rather, it moves away and then returns and might seem almost accidentally directed at the audience.

As adept consumers of postmodern audiovisual narratives, my students have little difficulty recognizing the self-reflexive dimension of the film's closing sequence once they have been encouraged to go deeper than its surface narrative elements. Acknowledgment of this self-reflexivity prompts some of the more film-literate among them to identify other self-conscious or citational elements present throughout the film, including Masina's performative references to Chaplin and Keaton. Making sense of Cabiria's/Giulietta's fleeting gaze at the film's end thus becomes pivotal to classroom discussions of the shift from the (neo)realist aesthetics still influencing Italian filmmakers in the 1950s to the strategies of self-reflexivity and intertextuality that characterize much of the *cinema d'autore* of the 1960s. These strategies also crucially foreshadow the elements of irony, pastiche, and bricolage that saturate the audiovisual landscape of the present, in which my students—whether critically or uncritically—are already fully immersed.