

A Hundred Years of Fellini

Feeding hungrily on the fruits of memory, the director summoned worlds to comply with his imaginings.

By Anthony Lane

A hundred years ago, on January 20, 1920, Federico Fellini was born in the Italian town of Rimini, on the Adriatic coast. The time and the place matter more than anything else, as we approach him now and try to make sense of the movies he bequeathed—crown jewels such as “La Dolce Vita” (1960) and “8 1/2” (1963), Oscar winners such as “La Strada” (1954), “Nights of Cabiria” (1957), and “Amarcord” (1973), and a cluster of other works. Many of them are warmed by the music of Nino Rota. Some glitter too fiercely for comfort.

Rimini has two faces. One face looks out to sea, and any Fellini fan will recall the beach scenes that litter his films. (The bullying hero of “La Strada,” a circus strongman, winds up collapsing in tears on the sand. Exhausted orgiasts, in “La Dolce Vita,” drift through pines and emerge onto a barren strand, where a monster of the deep, with viscid and accusing eyes, has been dragged ashore in a net.) Rimini’s other face is turned inland, toward the Eternal—and maternal—City, which beckons Fellini’s characters and gathers them to its bosom. The first word that we hear in “The White Sheik” (1952), his first film as a solo director, is “Roma.” It is uttered by a man at a train window, nearing his destination. As Fellini explained to Lillian Ross, in 1965, in this magazine:

My mother was a Roman. As soon as I came to Rome, I had the feeling that I was home. Now I consider Rome my private apartment. That is the seduction secret of Rome. It is not like being in a city, it is like being in an apartment. The streets are like corridors. Rome is still the mother.

We should also remember the notorious March on Rome, in 1922, two years after Fellini's birth. Fascists strode en masse toward the capital, and, shortly afterward, Mussolini came to power. So it was that Fellini grew up in the embrace of Fascist rule. "Amarcord," his most autobiographical film (which is saying something, for no director has fed more hungrily on the fruits of memory), is set in a heightened version of Rimini, staffed with figures in black uniforms. Fellini wastes no opportunity to find them absurd. As a Fascist commander, pool cue in hand, prepares to play a shot in the local bar, one of his minions tiptoes around the room, so as not to disturb the maestro at work. Suddenly, the lights go off. We could be in a theatre, watching a dark farce.

Foes of Fellini will point to a sequence like this and ask, Where are the victims? Do the sufferings of the time count for nothing, under his anesthetizing gaze? To be sure, the vision of Fascism that arises from "Amarcord" has none of the sinuous and oppressive mood that sheathes, say, Bertolucci's "The Conformist" (1970), and Fellini may be the least politically engaged of major filmmakers. He would shrug, I suspect, and say, "That's how it was"—like it or not, that's how the events of the period lodged in the soul of a boy. But "Amarcord" also discovers something adolescent in Fascism itself, with its taste for proud poses and its laughably doomed attempt to manhandle the vast profusion of experience into line with a single point of view. If Fellini's camera finds it hard to sit still, that is less a stylistic tic and more a principled refusal to get stuck.

No surprise, perhaps, that he began as a cartoonist, and continued to scribble sketches throughout his career. Whenever a soirée, in his movies, swells into a gallery of grotesques, you detect his primary insistence—shared with his friend Ingmar Bergman—on cinema as a record of the human visage. When Fellini went to Rome, in 1939, his mother wanted him to study law, but he never did. Instead he drew, and wrote garrulous humor pieces for newspapers. He had a regular column, "Will You Listen to What I Have to Say?" After the Allies liberated the city, he opened a store called the Funny Face Shop, where caricatures

could be produced in ten minutes. Among the customers were American soldiers, who needed something to send home.

One day, in 1944, the movie director Roberto Rossellini came to the Funny Face. Having heard about Fellini, he invited him to participate in a new project. The result was that Fellini received writing credits on Rossellini's "Rome, Open City" (1945) and "Paisan" (1946), which happen to be two of the most wrenching testaments to the effects of war. (So much for his being numb to pain.) For each movie, Fellini—who had no college degree, and never went to film school—was nominated for an Academy Award. He started directing in the early nineteen-fifties, and didn't stop until "The Voice of the Moon" (1990), three years before his death. And *that* show you get to be a great filmmaker. Simple, really.

Fellini is also the great divider. "La Dolce Vita" was the film most loved by Roger Ebert, for whom it was transformed with every viewing, whereas Pauline Kael likened Fellini's efforts to "poking your head into a sack of fertilizer and then becoming indignant because you're covered with excrement." The director, she said, was "shocked and horrified" by the antics of the idle rich that he surveyed. If so, the shock has not survived; what lingers, after sixty years, is a lazy amusement at mortal foibles, which are scarcely confined to the wealthy. It is the poor who flock to a strip of wasteland where a couple of kids, for a giggle, claim to have beheld the Virgin Mary. Any hint of holiness is wrecked by a rainstorm, and by the glare of the arc lights under which TV cameras hope to catch the miracle, yet Fellini does not rage at our credulity. He smiles.

The Catholic Church, meanwhile, *was* horrified at "La Dolce Vita." How else to respond to a film that begins with a skyborne statue of Jesus being ferried over Rome—a second coming, brought to us by helicopter? (Notice not just the sacred cargo but, beneath it, the half-built apartment blocks: a postwar metropolis, captured in mid-boom.) Then, there's the movie idol (Anita Ekberg), who dresses like a parody of a priest to ascend into the dome of St. Peter's, and famously romps in the Trevi

Fountain. A monument of pagan majesty, in her strapless gown, she is an alabaster bust endowed with the breath of life; more blasphemous still, she drips water onto the head of her devotee, a hangdog reporter named Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni). No infant could be more tenderly baptized.

Mastroianni is one of two performers who lend a nourishing continuity to Fellini's films. The other is Giulietta Masina, to whom Fellini was married for fifty years. Her roles included a trumpet-tooting waif in "La Strada," a prostitute in "Nights of Cabiria," and a housewife visited by fantasies in Fellini's first color feature, "Juliet of the Spirits" (1965). The joke, with Masina, is that she couldn't be further from the voluptuaries who stalk through her husband's tales; with Mastroianni, the joke is that, though forever cast as a seducer, he is visibly hesitant and shy, halfhearted and half-cocked, as if embarrassed by the sway of his own lusts. Never does he appear more naked than when removing his spectacles.

If anything is to mute the centennial celebrations for Fellini, it will be his attitude toward the opposite sex. He was certainly more gynophobe than misogynist, not that so fine a distinction will carry much weight today. Think of Mastroianni, as the film director rendered unable to direct, in "8 1/2," and heckled by a parade of his past loves; or, again, as the limp Lothario in "City of Women" (1980), who strives and fails to make out with a fur-hatted passenger in the toilet of a train. Later, amid a throng of her fellow-feminists, she upbraids him as "this dismal, hollow, worn-out sultan," declaring, "We women are simply an excuse for him to perform, once again, his bestial fables, his circus, his neurotic show."

What's going on here? Is Fellini paying lip service to a new moral dispensation that he doesn't understand, or honestly chiding himself for former sins? Either way, the film is an ugly display, and I prefer the poise of "Fellini's Casanova" (1976), in which the dying hero of the title, played by Donald Sutherland, ends up peering back, with red-

rimmed eyes, at his youthful self, waltzing on a frozen Venetian canal. His partner is not a willing paramour but an animated doll. Her features, though colored like flesh, are as polished as porcelain. History's leading lover is consoled in the arms of a machine.

The true Venice, needless to say, had no part in the scene. By the time of "Casanova," Fellini had more or less forsaken actuality, with its risks and smuts, for the controllable universe of the studio—specifically, for the cavernous soundstages of Cinecittà, in Rome. (It was opened, in 1937, by Mussolini.) There, for "Amarcord," he re-created Rimini, swaths of the original having been flattened by wartime bombs. For "Roma" (1972), he built half a kilometre of highway, four lanes wide, with billboards and rest stops, ignoring or defying the fact that, if he wanted real roads, he had only to step outside. "And the Ship Sails On" (1983) took place on an ocean liner, which never left the safe haven of Cinecittà, and, for "The Voice of the Moon," Fellini said, "I felt it was necessary to build an entire country," complete with "a piazza, a church, a discothèque, a town hall, a shopping mall." He had attained the status of a creator, summoning small worlds to comply with his imaginings. As he once remarked, "God may not play dice, but he enjoys a good round of Trivial Pursuit every now and again."

No wonder these late movies feel so hermetic. We may be charmed and dazzled, but often we can't breathe. That is why, if I had to introduce a novice to Fellini, I'd suggest a big-screen showing of "I Vitelloni" (1953)—an early film, breezy and inconsequential, about a bunch of aimless pals in a Rimini-like town. Somehow, the younger Fellini strikes me as sadder and wiser than the all-powerful magus he would eventually become. (Maybe Ariel knows more than Prospero ever will.) The movie is sparsely plotted and blessed with fresh air; a typical day finds the *vitelloni* down at the misty beach, in coats and scarves, staring out to sea, like castaways hoping for a ship. And the ship, of course, sails on. ♦