

Fabrizio Borin

FEDERICO FELLINI



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A Sentimental Journey
into the Illusion and
Reality of a Genius

One of the lost true poets of this century, Federico Fellini, author and director of masterpieces such as *La Dolce Vita*, *Eight and a Half* and *Amorcord*, recreates the atmosphere of an alternately middle-class, Fascist, working-class, aristocratic, baroque, cinematographic and contemporary Italy, and of Rome itself, in an extraordinary way. An entire universe is reflected in the eyes and faces of a whole range of true-life characters and personalities, with so many nationalities represented that it could almost form an international heritage of the human species.

From Gelsomino's expressive face to the grotesque clowns found in both the circus and real life, from the alter ego of Marcello Mastroianni to the tumultuous farrago of both noble and despicable extras, from (post)-neorealism to the psychoanalytical reinvention of cinematographic speech in the Sixties and Seventies, right up until the melancholy, prophetic Eighties, no-one else has ever achieved the same level of imaginative creativity. Fellini knew how to magically portray the contradictions within an individual, such as gentle reserve, overpowering humility, or just ordinary restraint: body and soul exposed right down to unexpected depths, in deference to a genuine, penetrating, 'political' or intellectual curiosity.

Prince of clowns, Fellini has led different generations of viewers by the hand through an ironic, sentimental journey, amongst half-remembered day-dream figures, sublime forgeries or dream-like realities, simultaneously creating evocative images that only a magician wielding a movie camera, a liberated vagabond of invention, in short, a bold dreamer of life such as he could unfold. And he did it by means of the disarming power of film, which continues to shine out from his unforgettable masterpieces.

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Federico Fellini with Roberto Benigni on the set of
The Voice of the Moon.

Fabrizio Borin

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Introduction

*“Does the shadow die?” This is the splendidly rhetorical question that Federico Fellini poses in order to underscore the immanent character of the clown in contemporary shows. It is a superfluous question, on a par with the one asked by his last clown, Ivo-Benigni in *The Voice of the Moon*, about the destiny of sparks and of music when it ceases to play. And it is precisely this poetry of the useless exalting the apparently unessential that suffuses Fellini’s great art: a fantastic universe that absorbs and reinterprets reality, an invented dream world that is mirrored in life, the image of the probable and the fictitious on film.*

In short, the presence of an absolutely resolute persona, irreplaceable, incomparable in the artistic and cultural panorama of this century, aiming to prevent our society from losing its way. A presence that goes beyond the limits of mere cinema, which has given us heart, soul and unforgettable images. A role and significance so wide and limitless as to make one think of Fellini as an alien author, a “magician of light” who has been touched by the same fate as his characters, whether they be clowns or alter egos. The more one tries to define, decipher, classify and file them away, the more they take fright, flee, reinvent, disappear, and return to the unknowable sphere of the music of sparks.

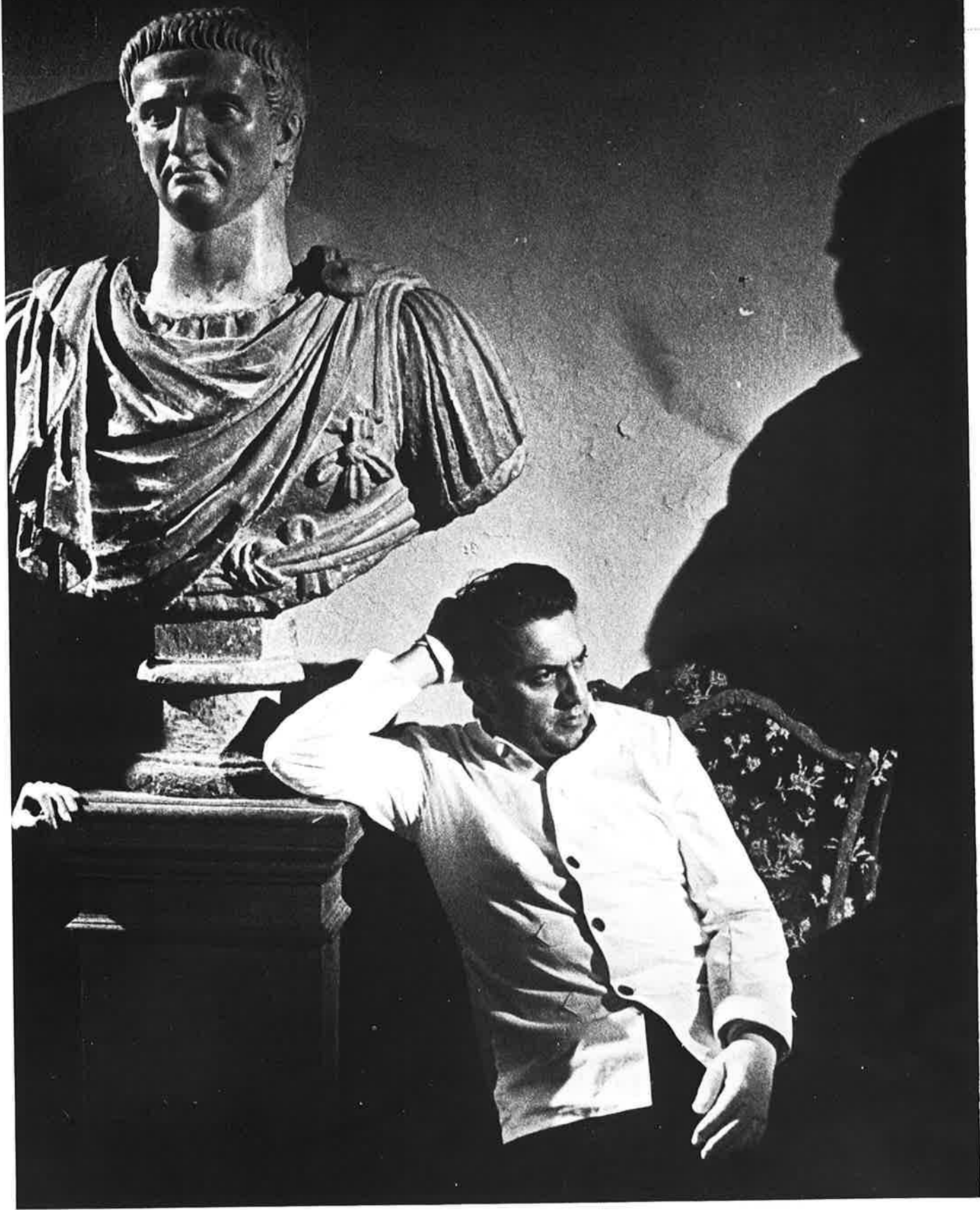
Much has been said about Fellini, often of a contradictory nature. Each of his movies (and the context within which they were produced) has left discordant critical traces, has moved people, divided and enthused generations of viewers, has provoked negative reactions and won prestigious international awards, has marked an epoch of Italian cinema and, like few others, has influenced its language at root level, freeing its oneiric imagination, its memory, its fantasizing about reality.

*Much has been said about Fellini, but still not everything. And not only because of what has not been published or the interpretations that will continue to bud like the flowers of a kaleidoscopic rainbow, but because, together with *Fellini the Director* (the artist of Italian genius) and *Fellini the Personality* (exported and known throughout the world), there is still digging to be done into *Fellini the Man*, *Fellini the Classic*, *Fellini the Shadow*.*

*Fellini the Man is certainly still continually brought to the fore, from movie reruns – truly liberating psychoanalytical sessions – as well as statements and interviews from more than forty years in the business; but there are still rich, unexplored reserves to be tapped (his dreams and writings for the screen, his private life and his designs, his story-telling and the unforeseeable qualities of a visual and evocative creativity worthy of a raconteur of the printed page). *Fellini the Classic* ...*

And if, by chance, somebody’s brow should suddenly furrow in perplexity or somebody else’s nose should wrinkle, let them not fear: for the moment, there is no danger. Those like Federico Fellini who give voice to the imagination and to memory, to both pretence and reality, open up new perspectives with every fresh viewing of their work, and make minds turn somersaults and tingle with merriment and sincere emotion. They do not disturb orthodox beliefs, they are bashful and deceitful to the insensitive, fascinating and shameless to those who completely accept them. Like clowns and their melancholy human shadows, they make one laugh and cry because they are clowns and shadows, as evanescent and dense as air, cinematic phantoms and solid forms. But do shadows die?

f. b.



Fellini dressed as a waiter on the set of the high society party in La Dolce Vita

Life is a Dream

Federico Fellini was born in Rimini on the stormy night of January 20, 1920. His father, Urbano, a salesman nicknamed 'the prince of merchants', came from Gambettola, an inland market town. His mother Ida came from an established Roman family on her mother's side. He inherited a number of characteristics from each of them which would have more than a little influence on his artistic future. As he grew up, he developed a unique sensitivity that was to make him stand out from other artists of the twentieth century.

Fellini, who was a solitary child and adolescent, has this to say about his own character: "Deep down within, some people cry, whilst others laugh. I was always inclined to keep my feelings private. I was happy to share joys and laughter with others, but I did not want them to know of my sadness and fears." These simple words clarify the direction his movies would take when combined with the memories, the brilliant imagination and the mixture of true and completely fictional events they contain.

Many of these memories live on as images within his movies, whereas there are other scenarios for which Fellini cannot account, uncertain as he is whether they are memories of his own life or have been "borrowed from someone else, as is the case with many things we remember. All I know is that these memories belong to me and will exist as mine for as long as I live."

This declaration ought to clear up, once and for all, the doubts regarding the biographical truth of the things Fellini recounted during his life. In other words, in this book we shall not be looking for deeply hidden motivations, nor hazard theories or far-fetched interpretations – something that the director always abhorred even while being amused by what others dug out of his movies concerning his life.

It will be enough if one is content to enjoy the feelings which Fellini succeeds in arousing within us, those same things which allow each of his admirers, as Bernardino Zapponi says, to find affinities for himself, be it in an image or a flash, a word, a laugh; and this not for a lack of philological scruple, but rather so as not to diminish Fellini's

imaginative and visionary power, his universality, his simple and, at the same time, complex way of communicating with everyone, even in his less successful works. In short, that magic which only the great can handle when, with their mysterious alchemy, they illustrate life, real or dreamed, or, more precisely, really dreamed.



Aged six, with his brother Riccardo

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on", writes Shakespeare in Act IV of *The Tempest*. And no definition appears more appropriate than this when speaking of Fellini who, as has been said, one can easily imagine still intent on dreaming his veracious visions, his primary reality, perhaps his only reality, seeing with what rigor and insistence he has recalled those dreams ever since childhood, relived them with open eyes and presented them to us.

But Fellini the child is not only this. If his love of solitude makes him dream with eyes closed, half closed, or open, it also allows him to develop other attitudes, preferences, sudden loves, unequivocal premonitions.



With Riccardino in 1933, dressed in avant-garde costume



Photograph of Rome with dedication, 1940: "To dear mum, Federico"

One example is the memory of running away with the circus, which paves the way for the future themes of travel and the love of that world which he immediately feels to be his own. It is an episode to which, in the course of time, the director adds new and sometimes incredible details, perhaps because it is a presage in which he wanted to believe and use to shape his sensibility.

On his first visit to the circus he was upset by the clowns – "I did not know if they were animals or ghosts" – but he had the distinct premonition that this was the world awaiting him. "At the time I did not know that my future was going to be in the circus... the cinema circus", but he dreamt of it by day and by night, convinced that he had discovered his rightful place. His encounter with Pierino, his first clown, is revealing: "I realized that he and I were one being. I sensed my immediate affinity with his lack of respectability. It had something to do with his carefully planned self-neglect, something that was both amusing and tragic."

And so, fascinated by that world, he 'ran away' for an entire afternoon and bound himself forever to these people by helping out with washing a depressed zebra, a feeling that he would never forget. The adventure – described for many years in a wealth of detail as a

genuine flight of varying duration – had in fact been an episode lasting just a few hours and interrupted by a family friend who brought him back home – a detail that is scarcely mentioned in the enlargement made of the story by the adult Fellini's fable-producing memory. "I recounted the story of my desires rather than my actual experience. After many years spent retelling an ever more embellished version of the same story, this appeared to me more real than reality. Exaggeration had become so familiar to me that, by then, it had become part of my memories." The memories of an honest liar, the justification of his inventions in which we have no reason not to believe.

It is a bit harder to believe in his assertion of having been a very bad student. For a quiet kid – on the surface anyway, because it is clear just how tumultuous his inner life was – to advertise himself in adulthood as having been a good-for-nothing in a world as creative, chaotic and rather extroverted as the Italian cinema, can be considered a unique thing: the innocent lie that masks banal normalcy. But, reading between the lines, one gets the true picture: surely Federico was an intelligent but rather bored student who, not finding valid motivation in a Fascist school,

managed to just get by all right so as not to make his mother unhappy.

Conversations with Charlotte Chandler reveal a high school student who spent many hours doodling in class while pretending to take notes – another opportunity to live in his highly personal fantasy world which, having found expression in drawings ever since elementary school, opened up the world of comics to him and, above all, the adventures of Windsor McCay's 'Little Nemo', who was "someone like me who did fantastic things, a stimulus for my imagination", a twin brother



A classic Venetian setting in Piazza San Marco in September 1937
(from the left: Fellini, the father, and Riccardo)

who, at the end of every adventure, realized he had been dreaming.

Federico spent many happy hours drawing, encouraged by his mother who taught him the basics in spite of opposition from the very energetic Urbano. He used his imagination a great deal in his little theater, constructing marionettes like Bergman – "one of my most tenacious memories." Thus he sharpened his dramatic sensibility by writing the scripts and acting out all the parts himself, a technique which he did not abandon when, as a director, he needed to show an actor his way of seeing the character.

What else is there to add to so 'complete' a biography, even if it is based on a flood of memories rather than on the punctilious checking of dates and events? Having fled, by way of the imagination, from one's family and a repressive/regressive Catholic and Fascist education, he now needs a pretext for attempting a real flight without disappointing anyone, without causing suffering, as was his disposition. Indelible formative years that will lead him to say: "I spent my life trying to recover from my upbringing".

How to uneducate himself, to liberate himself from such limitations when the imagination no longer suffices? Only one thing remains: to leave Rimini as soon as possible, to get away from an unhappy and oppressive maternal figure, an inward-looking provincial town, a religion that operates solely on the sense of guilt, an unstimulating school, an absentee father. To find an excuse, some pretext to flee like his father – the father who remains a stranger to him "until after his death", when Federico will finally get to know him properly.

To find a motive for leaving Rimini, just like Moraldo in *I Vitelloni*. When only just twelve, Federico starts sending drawings, stories and illustrated anecdotes to several Roman and Florentine comic magazines. He uses various pseudonyms all beginning with 'F', such as Fellas, but is not taken seriously until one day he manages to place his first cartoon, and many others then follow on. The pay is laughable, but the pride in seeing himself published is boundless. By now, he is seventeen, and he finally finds a reason for leaving: he will go to Florence to work at '420', a satirical review for which he had worked as a freelancer. "I stayed there for about four months. Rome is where I really wanted to go"; and, having finished high school, the dream is about to come true.

From March 1939, Federico Fellini is officially registered as a resident of Rome, on the pretext of reading law. With him are his little sister and his mother, who has re-established the relations with her family interrupted after her marriage.

His experience of the city is wonderfully familiar. "No sooner had I arrived than I felt at home. This is the secret of



*Stylish Federico
with his friends in
Rimini in 1937*

Rome's seductiveness. It is not like being in a city, but rather like being in one's own apartment. I was very pale and romantic-looking. My shirt was always dirty, my hair long." Confident that his mother will be appeased because he had promised to enroll at the university (but not to attend classes), he busies himself with earning money in the city which "totally exceeded anything my imagination could produce, a reality that far outran any fantasy", even if he discovers for the first time what it means to go hungry.

Not knowing many people, he approaches the editors of humorous magazines, offering them stories, cartoons and vignettes, the only things in which he has considerable experience. He dreams of working for the legendary 'Marc'Aurelio', but must achieve this by working first of all for 'Il Piccolo' and 'Il Popolo di Roma', more in the role of a secretary than that of a journalist. He has a romantic concept of the latter, based on his adolescent infatuation with the tilt of Fred McMurray's hat and – a detail not to be underestimated – the fact that American newspapermen all have cars and glamorous girlfriends. "I had had no experience of the life of an Italian journalist. When I realized my dream and got a job on a daily paper, nothing was the way I had imagined it. It took quite a while before I could afford a trench coat."

Meanwhile, he is becoming more and more settled in the

capital. "Rome became my home at first sight. That was the moment of my birth. It is my real birthday. If I could remember the date, I would celebrate it." A friendly, magical city, where he begins to make his first acquaintances – with the painter Rinaldo Geleng for example, a friend from the very beginning and collaborator in many movies to come. Together they scrape a living doing portraits in restaurants and decorating shops, a job which is unsuitable for Federico, as he does not know how to use oil paints (and will never learn to).

Having got a feel for the place and experienced Roman life with other insignificant, temporary jobs, Federico finally gets the chance to work for 'Marc'Aurelio', a biweekly comic paper with a large circulation. He shows up with a portfolio of vignettes, as Stefano Vanzina, secretary of the editorial department at that time and later film director going by the pseudonym Steno, recalls. "As soon as he spread them out on my table, I realized that they were an omen – they looked like drawings by Grosz. So I had him wait for the managing editor. At that time, Fellini was the figure he later portrayed in *Fellini's Roma* – tall, lean from hunger, with a wide-brimmed hat on his head and a white scarf. On a human level, I immediately recognized him as one of ours. And he stayed with us, starting to work for the publication straight away, because the managing editor, Vito De Bellis, who has always been a great talent scout, had no hesitation in employing him."

His circle of new acquaintances widens through working at 'Marc'Aurelio', a real storehouse of humorous minds, who were already partly working in theater and, later on, were loaned to the movie industry. Fellini draws numerous vignettes and writes about seven hundred articles, from his debut column *Raccontino Pubblicitario* to *Ma tu mi stai a sentire?*, a series of political attacks that will win him the hearts of the young readers. In these first attempts, he borrows the somewhat surrealistic style of Cesare Zavattini, although he will soon abandon this for a more personal one based on autobiographical experiences.

Towards the end of 1939, and for the whole of the following year, he dedicates himself to the theater with a series of humorous sketches about vaudeville, depicting each of its components, from the comedians to the ventriloquists, dancers and magicians – all characters that he will transform into movie images in *Variety Lights* and later in the long episode dedicated to the Barafonda theater in *Fellini's Roma*.

Autobiography and self-irony make up the quintessential nature of his columns and, in essence, the secret of their success. *Seconda Liceo*, the very popular *Primo Amore* and *Oggi Sposi* introduce the figures of Cico and Bianchina – clearly they are Federico and Bianca Soriano of the

unhappy Rimini affair which was cut short by the oppressive interference of his mother. When this column is adapted for radio, Bianchina will take on the name Pallina and the voice of Giulietta Masina, an excellent setting for the first encounter between the future film director and the young actress. During this time, *Il Mio Amico Pasqualino*, published as part of the 'Umoristi Moderni' series, also appears, while another album from 1945 is entitled *La Bomba Atomica*. His last article for 'Marc'Aurelio' appears in November 1942. By now, having permanently settled in Rome, Fellini is a regular contributor to radio broadcasts; and, having had considerable success as scriptwriter of Mario Bonnard's *Avanti c'è posto* with Aldo Fabrizi, he increasingly looks for more lucrative work within the movie industry.

Fabrizi and the best known variety actors drew more than a little from 'Marc'Aurelio' for their quips. Fellini begins to frequent this circle, first of all in the company of colleagues, and later on his own when writing for the weeklies 'Cineillustrato', 'Cinemagazzino' and 'Il Travaso'. For 'Cinemagazzino', he is editor of "Che cos'è l'avanspettacolo?" ("What is vaudeville?"), a series of interviews with the leading stars of the moment: Anna Magnani, Totò, the De Rege, Nino Taranto and many others, including Fabrizi, later to become his friend.

Many comedians ask for jokes, songs and character sketches (to be paid for, of course). Among these are famous and well loved figures such as Nuto Navarrini and Macario, whom Federico goes to see in their dressing rooms because "the dressing rooms, corridors and wings have always fascinated me", certainly more than the theater as seen from the auditorium. This is an attitude that he will maintain throughout his life.

At this time, light theater was divided into two main types: the luxurious reviews of Macario, Dapporto, Wanda Osiris and the Za-Bum Company; then there is variety or vaudeville with Fanfulla, the Maggio family and Fabrizi, who appears as a special guest star in the finales of other people's reviews. This latter genre, experimental and inventive, is aimed at an informal, working class public who would not accept the repetitious formulas of reviews which were the delight of the upper and lower middle classes attracted by the glittering sets. However, it is vaudeville ...

Fellini first meets Fabrizi at the Cinema Corso, where he goes to hand in his new quips. He does not normally go into the auditorium, but one of the few occasions on which he decides to see the show is when the Roman comedian is appearing. The rapport between Fellini and Fabrizi is instant. Together with Ruggero Maccari, Fellini often goes to meet Fabrizi at the end of the show, and accompanies him home, walking through Rome in the hours when one feels "truly Roman". During these encounters, Fabrizi recounts stories on which Fellini will draw to create characters and situations in his work as scriptwriter, gag writer, and later film director.

Over time, numerous differences of opinion will divide the friends, but Fellini always pays tribute to the influence of "the fabulous companion of my early days in Rome. A kind of Daddy Bear, a good-natured Demon Caron, a most valuable guide. It was through him that I began to truly get to know the Roman character, the lives of the people living on the outskirts of the city."

The world of vaudeville furthermore leads him to write two reviews with his friend Maccari: *Divagando* and *Hai visto com'è?*, the rights to which he will cede to the lead



1939: a last photo before leaving his home town



Being a director means noticing even the smallest detail. Fellini arranges Melina Amour's costume (his wife, Giulietta Masina) in Variety Lights, together with Aldo Buzzi the costume designer

comedian, as was customary at that time. Meanwhile, he continues his radio work and pursues his relationship with Giulietta Masina which, after the usual tactic of an invitation to lunch, continues to develop, and ends in marriage after less than a year. Things are going better for him now. He is paid well for his contributions and a new, more lucrative kind of work is waiting for him: scriptwriting.

Fellini creates the comic tram conductor character for Aldo Fabrizi and puts him into the movie *Avanti c'è posto*. The actor is well-suited to the popular humor of this unlucky, comical figure who goes from one misadventure to another with the easygoing jocularly of the fat man from Rome.

This is the first script on which he works together with Piero Tellini, marking the beginning of a successful collaboration which will continue for at least ten projects.

It is not always easy to trace Fellini during these years: the scriptwriters work as a team, and their names do not always appear in the credits. On other occasions, they get credit for extremely limited contributions. Fellini's presence in Turin as part of Nicola Manzari's team for *Quarta Pagina* is highly controversial, as is the African adventure for *Gli Ultimi Tuareg* (or *I Predoni del Deserto* or *I Cavalieri del Deserto*)

where, according to him, he risks his life aboard a German plane which comes under American fire.

Apart from his marriage to Giulietta, 1943 is not an easy year for people in show business. Although Rome is occupied by the Germans, there is plenty of desire for escapism, however, and the fatalistic, courageous Romans go to the theater in the afternoons. A little clandestine filming is carried out and the Basilica of St. Paul is the location for the shooting of *La Porta del Cielo*, a movie which lasts as long as the German occupation. Another interesting fact about this "ghost movie" (because it was never publicly released) is that an incredible three thousand people worked on it, many of whom escape the transfer of Cinecittà from Rome to Venice.

With the arrival of the allies, actors and technicians alike come out of hiding, including Fellini who, having made use of a mix-up about his place of residence in order to evade the draft, had concealed himself in Giulietta's aunt's house. On one of his rare sorties from the house, he is caught by the Germans and loaded onto a truck in Piazza di Spagna, destined God knows where. But he saves himself with an imaginative ruse that is worthy of a storyteller.

After nine months of occupation – "which made one feel



Liliana (Carla Del Poggio) owes her outstanding début to her scantily dressed appearance and final walkdown in the dazzling Variety Lights



Four of the company stars stand between two smiling young ballerinas: top comedian Dante Maggio, aspiring soubrette Carla Del Poggio, would-be international variety artiste Peppino De Filippo, and Giulietta Masina.

Peppino suffers many misfortunes, and he is even forced to offer Lilita an expensive meal



constant terror every hour of every day, even if one were to stay in bed with closed eyes and ears stuffed with cotton" – he begins writing once more for Fabrizi, creating the movies *Campo de' Fiori* and *L'Ultima Carrozzella*, which are considered to be minor works even though they are not lacking a certain primitive and ingenuous kind of neo-realism which, according to Fellini, is nothing more than a way of looking around at things without prejudice.

And he is an excellent observer, motivated by great curiosity about the world as well as the fascination of group writing and in the human fauna that populates the movies (extras, groupies, the art of making ends meet as practiced by so many poor wretches hoping for a part). At Alleanza Cinematografica Italiana, in the offices of Vittorio Mussolini, director of the 'Cinema' magazine, Fellini meets Roberto Rossellini, who he will meet again in 1944.

Rome is invaded by American soldiers and Fellini, together with his friends from 'Marc'Aurelio', runs the profitable Funny Face Shop, where they draw caricatures of customers in ancient Roman costumes – an enormous success based on a brainstorm idea which he had already tried out on tourists in Rimini and in the caricatures of famous actors commissioned by the owner of the Fulgor Movie Theater.

In what he remembers as a kind of Wild West, made up of fights and idiotic behavior among drunken soldiers, Rossellini approaches him and asks him if he will act as a go-between with Fabrizi – easygoing as an actor, but stubborn and touchy in person – whom he wants for a short on the life of Don Morosini. The subject, written by Alberto Consiglio, is incomplete, but the participation of Sergio Amidei and of Fellini himself, whose job is to concentrate exclusively on Fabrizi's character, will make *Rome, Open City* an unequivocal masterpiece.

The relationship between the two of them continues in the co-scripting of *Paisà*, where Fellini also works as assistant director. "It was a very important experience for me. Rossellini created movies shot outdoors among people under the most unpredictable conditions. It was in accompanying him on the shooting of *Paisà* that I discovered Italy. It was from him that I got the idea of a movie as a journey, an adventure, an odyssey. For me, he was an incomparable teacher and friend. He was inimitable."

The movie turned out to be a revelation for him because it makes him realize that "film making was perhaps the most congenial form of expression for me, the most suitable one considering my laziness, my ignorance, my curiosity about life, my desire to poke my nose everywhere, to be independent, free from rules and regulations, and my incapacity for making any real sacrifices. This is the most

important lesson I learned from Roberto – this humility in front of the camera and, in a certain sense, this extraordinary faith in things photographed, in the people, the faces. Up until then, I remember, when I entered a set, when I worked as a scriptwriter, I had no idea of what was going on. It seemed to me that I was wasting my time. Essentially, I was writing literature of a kind rather low in tone. There was always something ascetic about it: just me, alone with pen and paper. The thing that most struck me, and which finally made me understand, looking at things with this love, my very own profession, my trade, is this communion that you create from time to time between yourself and a face, between yourself and an object. I realized that making a movie could really fill your life; I might not have to look for anything else; it could be something so rich, so exciting, so emotional as to justify you and help you find some meaning.”

With Rossellini ill, the young assistant tries his hand at directing the demijohn scene in the Florence episode, but this is purely by chance. In 1946, he meets Tullio Pinelli, with whom he writes, among other things, *Il Delitto di Giovanni Episcopo*, directed by Alberto Lattuada, with Aldo Fabrizi, now well known following his appearance in Rossellini’s masterpiece. Next comes *Il miracolo*, a brief episode which, together with Jean Cocteau’s *La Voce Umana*, adapted for Anna Magnani, Rossellini’s companion at the time, makes up *L’Amore*. For this subject, Fellini delves into his childhood memories and comes up with the story of a pig castrator who passed through Gambettola, where it was said that he caused a woman to give birth to the devil. In this work, where Rossellini pays homage to Magnani, Fellini makes his acting debut as a St. Joseph with peroxide blond hair.

Once again with the Raman director, he collaborates in *Francesco giullare di Dio*, then writes other successful scripts like *Senza Pietà* and *Il Mulino del Po* for Lattuada, and *Il Cammino della Speranza*, *Il Brigante di Tacca del Lupo* and *La Città si Difende* for Pietro Germi. He also plays a part in writing *Persiane Chiuse*, which is supposed to mark the directing debut of Gianni Puccini. But Puccini has a breakdown and renounces the job. The producer, Rovere, suggests that Fellini direct the movie. Fellini, in turn, suggests Luigi Comencini. However, in order to keep the shooting on schedule, he directs a scene – the police finding the body in the river Po – which so favorably impresses the producer that he entrusts *The White Sheik* to Fellini’s direction some years later.


By now aware that directing may be his true vocation, Fellini gives it a go with *Variety Lights* (1950), co-directing with the more experienced Alberto Lattuada. In truth, although he puts his name to the movie, he is essentially



Middle-aged Checco Balmonte (Peppino De Filippo) goes along with the whims of his “discovery”, believing he is winning her favor

involved with the script (aided by Ennio Flaiano), while also undergoing a short, intense apprenticeship in the rudiments of the technical side of film making.

Variety Lights closes the chapter on his friend-father relationship with Fabrizi, who accuses him of having drawn too heavily on his (Fabrizi's) tales of vaudeville. Fellini always denied the charge, saying that he drew upon "memories from a tour I made around Italy with a stage review". It is probable that the subject had been written at an earlier date with and for Fabrizi who, out of spite, decides to make a 'counter movie', *Vita da Cani*, which the producers Ponti and De Laurentiis immediately shoot. The situation is more or less analogous to the one that will lead to the painful break in the long-standing friendship with Ennio Flaiano many years later.

 *Variety Lights* tells the story of Checco Dalmonte and the actors of the rag-tag 'Star Dust' theater troupe, the Neapolitan singer, the fakir Edison Will and his duck, the aging soubrette Valeria Del Sole, and the younger Melina Amour, Checco's fiancée and daughter of sor Achille, the administrator.

In a small, anonymous town, the troupe's box office takings are confiscated, and they decide to sneak out of town. While at the station, they are approached by Liliانا Antonelli, a lovely young country girl and an avid reader of romantic pulp fiction, who has decided to become an actress.

The first one she approaches is Checco who, misunderstanding, courts her crudely and is rejected. When they reach their destination, Liliانا gets her own back, as she is the only one who has money for a carriage. With calculated courtesy, she invites the others to share it, thus making the troupe accept her despite themselves.

Her new number in the review entitled 'Everyone to Bikini' is enjoying great success with the naïve public, who only want to see a bit of leg. The lawyer, La Rosa, has set his sights on the new girl, and invites the troupe to his large house on the outskirts of town, where they are at last able to eat their fill. During the night, Checco discovers the lawyer in Liliانا's bedroom and, after a violent fight, their host

throws the miserable players out of his house, and they start walking to the station as the sunrise dawns.

In Rome, the lead comedian introduces his new discovery at the Galleria Colonna, a meeting point for artists in search of employment. Counting on her beauty, he wants to stage a new show. He plans an evening at a nightclub in order to meet with the impresario Palmisano. Liliانا orders lobster and champagne, creating havoc with Checco's finances, and then disappears with the impresario, leaving Checco to foot the bill. Offended, he waits for Liliانا outside the house, intending to seduce her, but she outwits him.

Intoxicated with this new infatuation, Checco ignores all advice and gets Melina to lend him the money for the new show: 'Lightening Bolts and Sparks', a piece involving a black trumpet player, an American gunman and a South American guitarist who all accidentally meet, as well as a so-called Hungarian choreographer, arrogant and completely inept. But Liliانا has other plans. She moves into a hotel and hangs around with Adelmo, who gets Palmisano to take her on as a soubrette in a sumptuous review.

One day, at Rome's Termini station, two trains are standing on either side of a single platform. Checco sees Liliانا in a couchette on a train bound for Milan. The encounter is brief, just long enough for the merest greeting between one who is heading for success, and the other who must accept the truth. The latter returns to Melina in their third class compartment and, while he is thinking of his missed opportunity, another girl tries to attract his attention. A new fantasy begins for Checco.

Up to now, following his brief adolescent attempts at one thing and another, Fellini's early career has demonstrated a passion for design, for concise comic writing, for the humorous annotation of scripts – all of them indispensable premises for the complex creative activity of directing. An essential apprenticeship for the one who is born Fellini, but who must become a director. A collection of premonitory signs which must inevitably lead into the spectacular and artificial world of the cinema from whose grip Fellini will never be able to free himself.

Fellini Sponge

The White Sheik • I Vitelloni • Marriage Agency • La Strada • Il Bidone

“I make movies because I do not know how to do anything else, and it seems to me that events came together in a quite spontaneous and natural way in order to bring this about [...] I would never have expected to become a director, but from the very first time I shouted ‘Camera! Action! Stop!’, it felt like I had always been doing it, and that this was me and my life. Besides, by making movies, I am merely following my natural inclination, which is to tell stories by way of movies, stories that are congenial to me and that I enjoy telling in an inextricable tangle of truth and invention; the desire to astonish, to confess, to be absolved, the shameless desire to please, to

interest, to be a moralist, a prophet, a witness, a clown... to make people laugh and to move them”.

It is clearly not possible to summarize the entire life of a man with one detail; and yet, when presented with such an important detail that is somehow absolute, one can almost succeed in doing so. The movies learned this lesson once and for all from Orson Welles, and the sled called ‘Rosebud’ in *Citizen Kane* (1941), a crucial detail to know and hold on to, even if it does not reveal the soul of the tycoon Charles Foster Kane. The words of Federico Fellini – the grotesque Kane of the Italian cinema – will be our “guiding sled”, the chosen method of travelling the entire journey we could call



The military fanfare has just completely overwhelmed Ivan Cavalli (Leopoldo Trieste), the abandoned husband in The White Sheik



The Journey of F. Fellini – paraphrasing the legendary, never undertaken *Journey of G. Mastorna* – around and within his unique world of fantasy. In an arbitrary manner, to be sure. In an incomplete way, certainly. In a way which will lead one to venture onto terrain that has been little explored, ignored up to now, such as the subject of his fictional personal history, the sense of his 'Roman horror', his memory, his phantasmagoric psychoanalysis and whatever else may present itself for examination in a spectacular, ordinary, gross, sublime, pathetic, decrepit or non-intellectual way.

All this while being fully aware that the contradictions and images which are shown by the distorted mirror of his cinema are the basic ingredients of a personal and artistic life, without which the architecture of the Fellini galaxy would be deprived of all function and meaning. And so, if the complete picture should, in the end, slip through one's fingers, be impossible to grasp because it is deliberately hidden in a game of hide and seek between truth and fiction, one might just as well follow the false leads, the disconnected fragments, the traps and the smoke signals. And, as there are already innumerable fascinating biographical-critical incursions, one might as well let oneself be drawn into the magical realm where that creative



Above: The romantic fantasy of the photo story is more important than her honeymoon, and Wanda (Brunella Bovo), the "passionate doll", stares in adoration at her beloved White Sheik (Alberto Sordi)

Left: A framed snapshot of the magazine stars on the exotic seaside set



The clumsy pass made by the White Sheik / Fernando Rivoli, former butcher's boy, succeeds because of his character's surprising fascination

The "lovers' lies", and Wanda's naïvety, provoke a violent outburst from Fernando's wife (Brunella Bovo, Alberto Sordi and Gina Mascetti)



presence resides, peer between the lines in order to gather the traces of an incomparable wealth of most fragile and cunning humanity.

On the other hand, how can one be suspicious of someone who declares that it is his destiny to make movies because he does not know how to do anything else; and that, prior to those preliminary efforts to create caricatures, invent short stories, gags, themes and scripts, his whirlwind, childish imagination shot movies in his mind after naming the four corners of his bed after the Rimini movie theaters? And even if it were not true, as many of his declarations are not, how would this change the imaginative content of his movie sequences, or the audience's legacy? Not in the least. Most definitely not in the least. On the contrary, to know that Fellini is one who 'tells stories' with moving pictures increases the inventive quality of the oneiric-poetic language, along with the felicitous ambiguity of his inspiration, which gives rise to the deliberate portrayal of that which is not true and the mechanisms which support it.

This inherent trait – the inclination towards 'fictional cinema' – comes to light on the very first day of shooting the first movie: "The first day of work on *The White Sheik* went badly, really badly. We were supposed to shoot outdoors. I left Rome at dawn and, as I said goodbye to Giulietta, I felt as if I were on my way to sit an examination. I had a Cinquecento, and I parked in front of a church, where I actually went in to pray. I thought I glimpsed a catafalque in the shadows, and I succumbed to the superstitious belief that this was a bad omen. But there was no catafalque, and there wasn't anybody, living or dead, in the church. There was only me, and I couldn't remember even a single prayer. I made a few vague promises of repentance and then left, feeling more than a little uneasy". In the *Intervista sul cinema*, we find an exaggerated version of events as follows: "That morning (my first morning as a director), I said goodbye to Giulietta, and left the house at dawn. I was rather agitated, and the housekeeper stood at the door and skeptically wished me luck, commenting that: 'You are going to die of heat dressed like that'. Because, in spite of the fact that it was already summer, I had dressed up like a director in a sweater, boots, leggings, tinted glasses around my neck and a whistle like a soccer referee's. Rome was deserted. I scrutinized the streets, the houses, the trees, looking for a propitious sign, a favorable omen. And, just then, a sacristan opens a church door as if he were doing it just for me. I give in to an ancient impulse, get out of the car and enter. I wanted to summon up a prayer, try an invocation, make myself worthy of help – you never know. Strangely, given the early hour, the church was all lit up and, in the center, a catafalque with

hundreds of candles, their flames standing straight and motionless. A bald man was kneeling in front of a casket, crying into a handkerchief. I ran back to the car, making a circle of good luck signs around myself from my feet to well above my head."

Verification that this scene did in fact take place, that events really did unfold as he relates, and that there actually was a catafalque, would be pointless and, above all, uncharacteristic. The existence of a Cinquecento in 1952 is clearly complete fabrication (perhaps in order to explain his tardiness because of a flat tire). From his earliest days, Fellini demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for description, accompanied by a haughty disregard for the boring, constrictive space-time realities which would leave any real flights of fancy dead in the water. For Fellini, past and present are interchangeable whilst navigating through the higher spheres of cinematic fantasy, and it is difficult, not to say futile and meaningless, to make the distinction between reality and imagination, between memory and its arbitrary reconstruction.

We will have to get used to his approximations of events which, he says, are always true when he himself relates them, confirming the liar's paradox: because he is a known liar, no-one ever believes him; and we never know if he is actually telling the truth, even if he solemnly swears that he is telling nothing but the truth. This is what we will discover in his movies, and is identical to what one finds with Orson Welles, another genius of the programmatic lie who is much closer to our subject than the much proclaimed affinity with Ingmar Bergman's world.

The similarities between these two superb charlatans of the screen in their mastery of cinematic forgery are almost touching in their disarming, perceptive candor. The natural habitat of the Italian is the circus and the set, while the American feels at home somewhere between the stage and the histrionic sense of tragedy which he reinvents with the camera. If Fellini moves nonchalantly through the melancholy distortion of a reality which has been restructured within the world of dreams, Orson Welles, some ten or fifteen years earlier, lays the foundations of contemporary cinema, which Fellini will also indirectly pay tribute to. Both have an intuitive gift for spectacular narrative, the ability to recount movies through film. Both make their debuts by creating a dilemma within language: Welles by means of radio, and Fellini by making use of the photo-story. These will become exemplary because, after *Citizen Kane* and *Eight and a Half*, their imitators will be countless. The cinema within the cinema and all its variations – the movie within the cinema, the cinema within the movie, movie stories within movies, the lives and dilemmas of actors, of cinéastes, producers, using a variety

of contexts and metaphors of sight, vision, reflection, etc., in all their infinite, obsessive forms – all this will become the fabric of stories, and stories in themselves. But what counts most is the predisposition to lying which neither of them (in the company of many others within the movies) intends to abandon, as it is an integral part of their artistic nature.

Welles could not have escaped it even had he wanted to, because the duplicity of the mask, of the theater actor's fantasy and the magical power of the director, will mark him for the rest of his life. One need only think of the lies of the labyrinthine Kane, of the revealing title *It's All True* (1942), of the Nazi-transformist Franz Kindler in *The Stranger* (1946), of the traps and deceptions in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), of the specular Shakespearean confrontations of *Macbeth* (1948) and *Othello* (1952), of the lucid madness of *Don Quixote* (1972), of Gregory Arkadin's murky, evasive past in *Mr. Arkadin* (1955) and Hank Quinlan's diabolical one in *Touch of Evil* [1958], of the tangled web of Kafka's *The Trial* (1962), of the excessive posturing in *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), of the unreal obsession of *The Immortal History* (1968) – a legend brought to life, but never realistic. And to complete the circle, *F for Fake* (1975) suffices or, to return to the beginning, the radio program *The War of the Worlds* (1938).

It was precisely during this great Martian landing in the States that an alien from Rimini landed in Rome. In this symbolic city of cinema mythology and the phantasmal immortality of the Church, he soon became known for famous caricatures – that is, distorted images – early presage of the animated caricatures in *The White Sheik*, a movie about the false illusions created by the brittle lies of the world of photo-story magazines.

Fellini's forgery (as earlier with Welles) is new and completely valid, given the absence of an original within the invention of the motion picture. Lacking that genetic humus, that aura of a non-technically reproduced work of art, the motion picture does not actually feel this absence as something which diminishes. In effect, it is not a loss, but has instead the same structure as an identical copy. So then, if the motion picture is born and reproduced as a tracing, a duplicate, a replica/imitation of itself, it will not be able to exhibit the fascinating call of the 'here and now', nor for that matter the impossible nostalgia for the 'one and only'. Instead, it will exhibit with reckless urgency the irresistible attraction for the plural, only acknowledging the transparencies of the camera and technical replicability as its 'parent'.

However – and it is here that the names Welles and Fellini become most synonymous – cinematic reality is based on methods of manipulating and falsifying its unstable foundations even while trying to convince us that it is



The shrewd editor of the photo story (Fanny Marchiò) mistakes the shy, romantic newly-wed

reproducing and portraying reality, that it is able to restore real portions of space/time.

When the falsehoods of the Dream Machine were hidden behind stories, this created what may be called a corrupt deception, where it became completely impossible to suggest taking the machine apart in order to see what was inside. As soon as the cinema starts telling lies, it is trying to fool itself (and others) into thinking that it is portraying the truth. So then, in learning from our two directors, it portrays the makeup and deceits as if they were the real origins of innovation. It is just as well, then, to open the mystery box, and to disclose the soul of the toy in order to see (as a director) and show (the spectator) what it contains. It will surely not lose any of its fascination but, on the contrary, will perpetuate the infantile magic behind the tricks of its creation. And so it will be able to portray what the technique of corrupt deception had so carefully hidden from tenacious adherence to the remains of idealism. The latter gained satisfaction from the hidden contrivances of its priest-directors, actors, producers and workers, while the spectator, an economically important player, was kept out

of the ritual, collaborating only in the role of an essential outsider.

Ever since the tricks of the cinema have been revealed, 'commendable deceit' has been in evidence, systematically creating falsity while openly declaring it at the same time, disclosing the narrative representation of that falsity. This is the true significance of Welles and of Fellini, our native deceiver, within the panorama of contemporary cinema: that of making a significant contribution to the expansion of linguistic potential and, at the same time, creating a mosaic in which the pieces are the many directors who, following the Forties and Fifties, have found an appropriate place within it, not forgetting the principal intelligence of our two 'masters of ceremony'. In their hands, falsity assumes a truly unprecedented dignity of meta-cinematographic affirmation and fascinating display. Particularly in the case of Federico Fellini, the story-telling and mendacious art of the film illusionist is summarized in the catafalque incident described above, the prologue to a long voyage he is about to undertake. The following statement,



*Wanda's private dreams
and her husbands' public
prejudices have just collided with reality*

quoted by his biographer – Tullio Kezich – provides proof of this:

“My movies are complete inventions from the first to the last scene: they are not related to the truth. The Rimini I loved, as I have repeated ad nauseam, is the one I have reconstructed in the studio, the only true one. As for the rest, if you want to tell the truth, the word “I” is already a misguided point of view. To reveal the truth, one would have to get rid of ‘I’; instead, one cannot do without it. Not even to say ‘I was not there.’”

Knowing then, that Fellini’s ‘I’, as well as being the distorted mirror of a macroscopic ‘Self’, transferred to the celluloid figures of others, is also the vehicle for his art of escapism (is not the ‘I’ perhaps someone else?); and realizing that, for Fellini the producer, the visionary is the only true realist, one can confidently raise the curtain on his inner screen, once more rejoining the plot of his initiation into directing.


Amorosa Menzogna represents Fellini’s professional baptism, an authentic premonition, because it is, on the one hand, the title of Michelangelo Antonioni’s study of the world of photo-story magazines but, on the other, it reveals the themes and characters of *The White Sheik* and all other future obsessions.

Credit must go to Luigi Rovere for his fortuitous decision

to take a chance on a completely inexperienced director when Antonioni abandoned the project. Rovere was the last in a long line of producers who had turned him down because they were not convinced about the success of the project, refusing to give the leading role to Alberto Sordi, as they believed the public disliked him, and that he was therefore a guaranteed box office failure.

In *The White Sheik* (1952), the set plays an important role right from the first scene. The narrative setting, fundamental to Fellini’s art of story-telling, had been traditionally omitted. Here it has been deliberately used as an ideal way to destroy the conventional relationship between truth and fiction, between the narrating machine and the story, by immediately putting on screen that which by definition should be behind camera. Chronologically, it is true that this was not a complete innovation, but Fellini uses it in a new way, in an anti-symbolic, meta-narrative format. Fellini works in his own down-to-earth manner: he places the set and its very human inhabitants in front of the line of demarcation ideally represented by the camera. Then, he intentionally mixes and confuses various roles, plots, settings and rhythms, giving them a very free, bi-frontal ‘sponge’ effect.

The liberating alienation of the ‘sponge shot’ will be developed to extremes during the two golden decades of Fellini’s production, the Sixties and Seventies, and will be the reason for his style standing out from all the rest and becoming one of the principal phenomena of this century’s art.

 Wanda and Ivan Cavalli are an unsophisticated couple spending their honeymoon in Rome during the Holy Year. The petit bourgeois husband, methodical and tenaciously organized, has already planned out every step of the short trip: the hotel, meeting up with his uncles, dinner with his De Pisis cousins, a visit to the Vatican and a papal audience, the archeological itinerary and even the times for relaxing.

At the hotel, Wanda, having made the excuse of going to take a bath, goes out to the editorial offices of her favorite photo-story magazine so that she can deliver a drawing in person to her dream hero, the White Sheik. Her encounter with this fascinating world sends her into such a whirl that she actually forgets all her obligations, and accompanies them down to the beach where they are shooting the new episode.

Meanwhile, her husband, awakened by the overflowing bath tub, discovers her disappearance. In the confusion, he puts a letter in his pocket and, having questioned the bell boy, rushes over to the editorial office just as their trucks are setting off in the opposite direction. The letter, addressed to ‘Passionate Doll’, and signed ‘Your White Sheik’, is evidence of a possible betrayal. Ivan is overwhelmed by the events around him, including a platoon of soldiers on the run and the hammering perseverance of his uncles from whom he tries to hide his wife’s absence.

When they arrive at the beach, Wanda, realizing that she has gone off for too long, is trying to get back to Rome when she suddenly catches sight of her majestic White Sheik on a high swing. The two introduce themselves, and Rivoli (the actor who plays the part of the White Sheik), using her fascination with his character to his advantage, begins to court her in a way which is as clumsy as it is effective.

Amidst joking, problems, rowdiness, and sudden interruptions, they prepare the set, which is disrupted by a strong wind. After a few hitches, they start shooting an action-packed sequence of love and death. Wanda, her head in a spin, is made up for the part of Fatma, the sheik's faithful slave.

Meanwhile, in Rome, the farce of Ivan's restaurant meal with his uncles continues, while his wife, during lunch-break on the beach, goes off in a boat with Rivoli, who is determined to bring his conquest to fruition. They return to shore only after a small mishap, amidst the shouts of the furious director and the anger of the wife of this coarse seducer, who is really only an unemployed butcher.

Ivan becomes more and more distressed. He goes to see Don Giovanni with his uncles and, swayed by the opera's theme, decides to go to the police. His erratic and somewhat bizarre behavior cause the police not to take him seriously and Ivan, afraid that he has landed himself in trouble, runs out of the police station and wanders around the city.

Giulietta Masina playing the role of Cabiria, an unlikely prostitute, a character first introduced by Fellini in The White Sheik



Rivoli's wife makes a huge scene, and Wanda goes off into the pine woods, and manages to get a lift back to town. Once she gets to the hotel, however, she is afraid to go in. Meanwhile, Ivan meets two prostitutes, Silvana and Cabiria, in whom he confides his woe. He decides to spend the night with Silvana. In the meantime, Wanda, in order to make amends for her dishonorable actions, decides to drown herself in the river, but is prevented from doing so because it is too shallow!

The next morning, returning to the hotel, Ivan learns that his wife is in hospital. Determinedly ignoring his uncles, he rushes away to fetch her, as they have a rendezvous arranged with Ivan's relatives in St. Peter's Square. Having finally regained their roles of respectability, the couple hurry off for the papal audience.

This bridge between the imaginary and the real is the movie's opening motif. That childhood fantasizing is the point of suspension between real life and the future of the adult couple. The honeymoon in Rome is the ritual pretext for the start of the whole story in which the two, for different reasons, are caught up in events bigger than themselves, in the face of which Ivan's middle class mind means nothing, incapable as it is of comprehending the imaginative desires of the woman he thinks is his fragile and submissive little wife, an unremarkable woman and provincial dreamer, but who is determined to betray her husband/father for an apparently ingenuous motive which is, in reality, more subtle: to lose herself fabulously in the arms of an exotic 'lover'.

The main collaborators, Fellini, Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano, along with Bernardino Zapponi and Tonino Guerra, emphasize the contradiction between appearance and real existence by placing the protagonists in a kind of hyper-realistic limbo between duty and desire, between real things and people, and those taking a different path from normal, everyday lives. This will make their existence (in the movie) very hard for both. Ivan has to defend his honor as a Southern male, and particularly his future 'career' as a civil servant, if his uncle's connections at the Vatican work. At the same time, he must preserve the social image of his wife who, by running off, has disrupted his carefully made plans and created turmoil with regard to the extremely punctual relatives, in particular the famous De Pisis cousins. To miss their dinner party could be interpreted not only as a failure of his organizational abilities, but also as an affront almost worse than missing the papal audience. Their sharp-sounding name magnifies the importance of a family most definitely of long-standing in the town, and thus made legendary by their status, which is reflected in that long 'De Pisis'.

Ivan's experiences with social commitments, his unfortunate visit to the police station, the gloomy performance of Don Giovanni, and his rendezvous with Silvana (Cabiria's friend – a prelude to the heroine

portrayed in *The Nights of Cabiria*, played by Giulietta Masina) are contrasted with the misadventures of the 'Passionate Doll', allowing the director to smirk affectionately, and increasing the genuine anguish of the characters.

This realism will have a particular impetus in *I Vitelloni* and *La Strada*, and will cause inevitable comparisons with neo-realism, the great post-war theme for which Italian movies are reknowned, esteemed and imitated throughout the world. And when one speaks of neo-realism with regard to Fellini, it is preferable, rather than mentioning De Sica, Zavattini or Visconti, to consider the way he wrote for the screen, and his relationship with Roberto Rossellini, of whom he is an admirer for three distinct reasons: for being his friend, for working with him as scriptwriter and actor, and for giving Fellini a passion for cinema – and particularly for cinema reality, entirely autonomous, 'humanistic', non-ideological and apolitical.

"It seems to me that I learned from Rossellini [...] the possibility of keeping my balance in the most adverse conditions of conflict and, at the same time, the natural ability to turn these adversities and conflicts to my favor, transform them into feelings, into emotional values, into a point of view. This is what Rossellini did: he lived the life of a movie, as a marvelous adventure to be experienced and simultaneously recounted. His self-abandonment to reality, always attentive, lucid, earnest; the way he automatically placed himself in an impalpable and unmistakable position between the indifference of detachment and the clumsiness of union allowed him to capture and fix reality in all its dimensions, to look at things from the outside and the inside at the same time, to photograph the air surrounding things, to reveal what life contains that surpasses understanding, that is arcane, magical. Is all of this not neo-realism?"

The magic of life attracts the young Fellini, together with everything that moves comically on the seaside set. What else is it that fascinates the fragile Wanda when she comes into contact with the stuff that her dreams are made of, if not an enchantment masquerading as a photo-story? She experiences it with the same unawareness as Ivan listening to Mozart's Don Giovanni. And while Wanda "would like to, but would not like to" accept the advances of her awkward seducer, she falls into a magical atmosphere when confronted with a very real world, of which she had only previously dreamed – an incongruous combination, which the director reveals as affectionate images of people in costume, speaking Roman dialect, who shout, wholeheartedly laugh, engage in repartee, eat. In short, they live and work as on any other crummy set.

With one difference: in *The White Sheik* Fellini instinctively

A series of glances, a spiked drink and dancing at the idiosk in the pine wood bewitches the young admirer, who finally realizes her dream (Alberto Sordi and Brunella Bovo)



distances himself from extra-Rossellini neo-realism, because “the neo-realist never laughs” – and serious analysis would stifle his movie – whereas he is not yet ready for the cinema-set of *Eight and a Half*. In order to create his esthetic of crisis, he will first have to experiment with the destruction / recreation of the narrative, alternating the separate stories of the couple, often for analogy and sometimes for contrast. Furthermore, he adds to the atmosphere an element that will be frequently present from now on in his director’s bag of tricks, an element ostensibly removed from the visual options that movies impose: the wind.

To ride with the wind from one event to another allows one to carry the echo of the dream when it touches reality. The background to the opening titles, the deserted beach at sunset, shows the tent blown about by the wind in the foreground and, below, a kind of turret with the camera mounted on a tripod, while in the distance there is the White Sheik on a horse to complete the picture, and the wind that whistles as we hear the theme tune by Nino Rota – musical scores that form a single entity with Fellini’s images. And the wind, this element that one cannot see and cannot photograph (but which can contribute to the creation of the story by disarticulating it), ensures that Rossellini’s wager is achieved because, in the words of the St.

John’s Gospel, and as will be remembered at Fellini’s funeral: “the wind blows wherever it pleases; we hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from nor where it is going”. The director instinctively understands the cinematic quality of the wind, at one and the same time a threshold leading to a fantastic universe and an invisible special effect, the harbinger of the irrational and the unknowable, of a world of surprises, of subconscious invention and the undeniable texture of dreams. Fellini learns to film the wind in order to make something impalpable visible and, by showing the invisible – that is, what for him is not yet visible and may, in fact, never entirely become so – he will create his movies in a pure state, in his mind, using the imagination.

For the little provincial lady, the mischievous wind that reveals her sheik on a swing may be sufficient. An irksome wind disrupts the ‘posing’ on the beach, or another sudden gust thwarts Fernando Rivoli’s conquest. The wind, once again, leaves the mind in a whirl, but creates a strong impression of action by the simplest of production techniques, an impression of movement, when one captures a snapshot of a false action only just hinted at by the actors’ caricatured posture.

With a motley crew of workers, extras, curiosity seekers,

animals, odalisques and characters such as Felga and Oscar, the cruel Bedouin, the atmosphere surrounding the set seems to move as lightly as a camera: how can one fail to remember Rossellini and his ability to "photograph the air surrounding things"? The overpowering wind of adventure and Wanda's unconscious desire to actually participate in the events she so avidly reads about alone in her little room – while she is made up as Fatma, we enjoy imagining Ivan intently sniffing around the drawers of their dining room – bring about a 'blessed forgetfulness' that causes her to utter the excusing phrase "Oh, I am not in the least calm" with regard to an unstable situation about which Wanda ought to feel very agitated. But Fellini's wind, which will later set in motion the ghosts of memory and the dreams of time-paled phantoms, prevent the bayadère, for the moment, from continuing to live irrationally. She will return to her senses outside the hotel.

Humanized grotesqueness reaches its peak in her attempts to drown herself in a shallow stretch of water, whilst Ivan is spending the night with a prostitute. At the apex of their crises, the spouses each feel 'guilt' which, for Wanda, is a dreamy but stupidly honest folly (she reveals

the nonsense about a magic filter to Rivoli's wife, and this will steer the story towards its conclusion), while, for Ivan, who always has the initiative, it represents self-absolution for his 'little adventure', his farewell to celibacy.

In the end, it is a grotesque of physical features bathed in dazzling light, of close-ups of extras resembling ink stains, the faces of waiters, doormen, workers and all the other species of humanity which populate Fellini's movies, faces on which one can perceive the special attention he gives them, his sharp sense of the photogenic, his extraordinary ability to hit on the stories behind these faces and make them emerge, to transform them into phrases, anecdotes, stories.

It is a grotesque which is dissolved by the couple's hurried confession under the sanctification of St. Peter's cupola, and during the race to the papal audience: "Ivan, I didn't do anything bad, you know. Really, it was doomed. I am pure and innocent." "So am I, you know". Not, however, before Wanda has told her husband, who is emotional and willing to be understanding, that public proprieties and private tears are under control: "Ivan, you are my White Sheik". With which one realizes that, from the first night of their



Fellini, along with Leopoldo Trieste who is wearing a chinese mask, gives out the instructions for one of the Carnival scenes in Vitelloni



The young people's boredom as they loaf about, set against the background of a winter sea: an expressive summary of the author's complex microcosm

marriage, and for the rest of their lives, no doubt slightly gray, she will continue to think of her cardboard sheik because, when dreams are realized, they lose their fascinating mystery.

Variety Lights, with its shabby theatrical company, and *The White Sheik*, with its ramshackle photo-story set, as well as being part of the minor show business world, both exhibit in reverse the attitudes and vices of a vast provincial Italy, where the city artistes go off to the country, and the country couple come to the capital. A round trip that allows Fellini to good-humoredly mock that world not far removed from his own origins.

I Vitelloni (1953), on the other hand, takes the provinces by the scruff of the neck and, for the first time, creates something clearly autobiographical from it, and thus clearly exposed to falsification because it is absorbed by the sponge of artistic invention and distortion.

As has been mentioned, the personal, private aspects of the director, the element that reflects on his past, is to be understood as self-reference, when put into cinematic form, only with great caution, especially as critical analysis has shed light upon what could be called, without any irony at all, 'participatory detachment', the languid disenchantment

of time revisited. One could easily fall into the trap of attributing direct autobiographical and chronological intentions to Fellini, or feelings and fears of long ago, but traceable in episodes deliberately dispersed, confused and falsified, the fruit of the development of the imagination and observation of reality.

At most, *I Vitelloni* is the beginning of a therapeutic directing process which will lead to many voluntary insights into his memory, genuine Proustian incursions among the lightening flashes of adolescence – *Amarcord*, the pre-finale of *City of Women*, some moments in *Eight and a Half* – but only after the mediation of Cinecittà, and the contemplation of artistic and private maturity with the phenomenon that was *La Dolce Vita*, the 'gospel' *Eight and a Half*, the melancholy *The Clowns* and, last but not least, *Fellini's Roma*, the most successful of the frescos of that generation. It is almost as if the direction in which his inspiration progresses were inversely proportional to the passing of time. In terms of Fellini, the 'first' comes after the movies interpreted by his alter ego. Marcello Rubini's agitation and dissatisfaction (*La Dolce Vita*), and the fires burning within film director Guido Anselmi (*Eight and a Half*) come forth only after the door of the imagination is actualized once again – could Fellini really deny that there



Top: One of the many of Fellini's portrayals of the Variety Show, affectionately ironic as always. In the foreground, Franca Gandolfi, Maja Nipora and top comedian Achille Mojeroni

Above: Family arguments for two of the vitelloni: from the left, Sandra (Eleonora Ruffo), Fausto (Franco Fabrizi), Moraldo (Franco Interlenghi), - Paola Borboni and Enrico Viarisio (parents of Moraldo and Sandra)

are no traces of himself in Wanda, the photo-story addict – and thus after the memories of the places and people of his sleepy Rimini years in *I Vitelloni*.

To get to Rome, he must leave Rimini. To descend the dream slide that is *City of Women*, he must first clamber up the steps of his obsessive origins, and pace the length and breadth of the premises of his movie world, from *La Strada* to *Satyricon*, from *Il Bidone* to *Orchestra Rehearsal*, from *The Nights of Cabiria* to *Intervista* to *The Voice of the Moon*. In saying that in order to arrive, one must depart; to slide down, one must first have climbed up, is not just to make witty remarks like the impish 'Snaporaz' (the nickname exchanged by Fellini and Mastroianni, and also a character in *City of Women*). Instead, it brings less obvious evidence into focus, the preliminary movements of an impending journey, prior to the official arrival in Rome.

Thus, before arriving, or, having arrived fourteen years earlier, Fellini now decides to tell how and why he left Rimini, to recount what happened beforehand through the portrayal of the false life of the 'vitelloni' (shirkers) of his home town. "I was never a 'vitellone', and I didn't even know that the ones I saw were shirkers. I regarded them with admiration: one because he was skillful with a billiard cue, another because he wore beautiful scarves, and yet another because women liked him. But the whole time I lived in Rimini, I never mixed with them. They would not even have deigned to greet me, they wouldn't."

The benefit of the doubt that we grant the magnificent liar cannot prevent us from pausing a moment to consider that 'they wouldn't' as if, after such a long time, he could still maintain his interest in lives so different from his, and the almost jealous pain of an ironic and affectionate eye cast over people who had already become personages.

'Vitelloni' are louts who, for as long as they can get away with it, avoid any sort of commitment to work or relationships; non-enrolled students who hang around the coffee bar or roam around in groups without being completely ostracized from society like Pasolini's *Ragazzi di Vita* or Lina Wertmüller's *I Basilischi*. The 'vitelloni' are the archetype national average, boys who will move to the city when they grow up, fill government offices and the streets of the Italian comedy, carrying with them all the stereotype qualities of their origins.

The nickname 'vitelloni', together with all the other pet names, diminutives and augmentatives that Fellini affectionately invents throughout his life, are analogical, tell their own stories and are symptomatic examples of his contradictions, ranging from the serious to the grotesque, exaggeration and subtle understatement. In short, they range from the quest for poetry to the fear of all-too-human perceptions, from conspiratorial affection to little artistic


*Alberto (Sordi), drunk
and depressed at the
party, portrays the
classic icon of a
stupefying provincial
tragicomedy*



lessons, polite but scathing. Just consider 'Marcellino' ('little Marcello' Mastroianni) and 'Anitona' ('big Anita' Ekberg) – all the '...inos' and '...onas' added to the names of his troupe, and an incredible number of other inventions, until we get to the world famous 'Papparazzo'. It is a language entirely of his own, invented in order to ensure an exclusive complicity, but also a very precise distinction between the roles played out in his movies and his real life, which should never be forgotten: mix them together, perhaps, but always with great clarity.

The 'vitelloni' are part of the Italy of the Fifties and, just like those in *Amarcord*, are sons of his land, Romagna: "A mixture of marine adventure and Catholic church. A land with this misty, towering mountain of San Marino. A strange, arrogant and blasphemous psychology where superstition mixes with a challenging attitude toward God. Humorless, and hence defenseless people, but with a sense of mockery and a taste for swaggering. One man says: I can eat eight meters of sausage, three chickens and a candle. A candle as well. Circus stuff. Then he does it. Immediately afterwards, they take him away on a motorcycle. He has gone puce, and the whites of his eyes are showing. And everyone has a good laugh over this atrocious event, death from gluttony [...] And yet, there are also infinitely sweet

rhythms in this land, that come perhaps from the sea." A native and symbolic sea, very little loved, hostile in certain aspects, on which Fellini works progressive transformations to the point of denying it as a natural liquid element, and falsifying and circumscribing it so as to control it and thus be able to relate it.

 Rimini 1953. A society evening on the terrace of the Kursaal for the 'Miss Mermaid' beauty competition is ruined by a sudden rainstorm, and the discovery that the winner, Sandra, is pregnant. The culprit is Fausto, the head and spiritual leader of a group of friends, among whom are the Roman Alberto, the intellectual Leopoldo, the young Moraldo and the robust Riccardino. Called to account, Fausto tries to flee, and only reluctantly allows himself to be persuaded to start a family by marrying Sandra and going to live with his in-laws after a honeymoon in Rome.

The friends continue to spend their evenings in the coffee bar playing billiards, joking around and recounting their unattainable dreams as they roam the deserted streets before going back to their homes. Alberto lives with his anxious mother who waits up for him every night, and his sister Olga, the family breadwinner. Riccardino lives with his parents and checks every evening how much weight he has gained, while Leopoldo, having eaten the dinner his aunts have prepared for him, spends the night writing his new play and courting the maid from the house across the way. Only Moraldo does not return



Sandra and Fausto's conciliatory celebrations. From the left in the photograph, Riccardino Fellini, Franco Interlenghi, Eleonora Ruffo, Leopoldo Trieste, Franco Fabrizi, Borboni and Viarisio, and Jean Brochard (Fausto's father)

*The disturbing newcomer (Arlette
Souvage), heartbreaker of the movies,
is unable to attract Fausto any more, as
he is worried about what has happened
to Sandra and little Moraldino*



home, but always hangs around the train station. A dreamer by nature, he listens to the train whistles, looks at the stars, and follows his thoughts. Perhaps he would like to leave, but he contents himself with making friends with Guido, a juvenile railway worker.

Life continues in its lazy way when, one Sunday, as the group goes to look at the winter sea, Alberto discovers that his sister is still in a relationship with a married man.

Fausto and Sandrina, who have returned from their honeymoon with all the latest gossip from Rome, begin a turbulent married life. Fausto is now working as a clerk in the respectable haberdashery owned by Michele and his wife, Giulia. Obstinate pigheaded about assuming responsibility, bored with his job and family life, he ends up picking up a woman he does not know and leaving his wife in the movie theater.

Carnival time comes along with its jovial annual fancy dress party. Moraldo accompanies Alberto home at dawn, drunk and dressed up like a woman, just in time to run into Olga, who has decided to elope with her lover.

During the festivities, Fausto makes a pass at his boss's wife, and begins to flirt with her outrageously the following day, thus getting himself fired. He decides to wreak revenge and, pretending that he is just the victim of a tyrannical boss, he gets Moraldo to help him steal a carved wooden angel which he says is just about worth part of what he is owed as severance pay. The two of them, together with the idiot Giudizio, try in vain to sell it to various religious institutions and get caught. Sandra is frantic because of her husband's infidelity, but allows herself to be reconciled once more, because their child, Moraldino, has just been born.

The evenings become more balmy, Moraldo continues to meet the

little railway worker, and spends an evening with his friends at the theater, where Leopoldo is going to meet the great actor, Sergio Natali, who has been reading his last play.

After the show, the 'vitelloni' are enjoying themselves in a restaurant with the dancers, while the intellectual reads his play to Natali who, just to make him stop, and possibly with other, more ambiguous motives, invites him out to the dark, wind-swept beach. Fausto is unfaithful to his wife once again with the soubrette. This time, however, Sandra is not inclined to forgive him, and she runs away to her father-in-law's house. He is a simple working man and a widower, who lives alone with his little daughter in a dignified manner.

Desperate, Fausto and his friends look for her everywhere. On returning to town in the car, they encounter some road repairers, whom Alberto offends and taunts, making the others laugh. Suddenly, the car runs out of gas and stops, and the road workers come after them, determined to wreak revenge. Fausto finally finds Sandra at his father's house, where he is given a sound lesson with blows from his father's belt.

The next day, at dawn, Moraldo gets on a train without telling anyone, possibly without even having an exact destination in mind. Little Guido sees him and, after a brief goodbye, he walks off, balancing himself along the railway track.

In this movie, too, the wind has a fundamental, evocative role. Gusts of wind accompany the changes of scene, and bring with them the spirit of unseen places beyond the horizon; sudden breezes emphasize the lazy awareness that those regions of infancy are not going to be abandoned,



As he is waiting to leave, abandoning his friends to their vain existence, Moraldo makes the acquaintance of a small railway boy, who is mature for his age (Franco Interlenghi and Guido Martufi)

and caress the ears of the characters, making them dream of, and awaken to, unforeseen events. From the very start, the ordinary pleasures of the party are interrupted by a summer storm brought on by a change of weather that, just in a few shots, sets the action, and Fausto's anxiety, into motion. Like the circus director he always dreamed of being, Fellini precipitates a static action, augments the rhythm of the characters' movements, alternates up and back in the shots, in the music, in the commotion of the gestures, the dialog, and the acceleration of the editing. It is a way of conveying confusion and uncertainty, creating passages and impressions of interlinking fade-outs, which are often present within his vision of the real and the cinematic imaginary. These circus sequences, reproducing the spectacular dilation of the simultaneous presence of two apparently opposing contexts, aim to dislocate and surprise. In the realism of the opening shots of *I Vitelloni*, one already recognizes, for example, the finale of *The Nights of Cabiria*, the aristocrats' party in *La Dolce Vita*, and the memorable line dance at the end of *Eight and a Half*.

Equally involved is the famous shot of the friends standing before a winter sea agitated by a cold breeze, lazily hinting at the suggestion of the summer months lurking beyond the horizon, which will change the face of that

sleepy Rimini. Riccardino keeps his hand on his hat, Leopoldo's bohemian scarf blows in the wind, and the motionless profiles, stark against the gray of the lowering sky and the sucking sound of the surf, just barely work as a counterpoint to Riccardino's typical 'vitellone' comment: "If someone came along and offered you 10,000 lire, would you go in for a dip? I would!" Meanwhile, they continue walking along apathetically until Alberto's chance meeting with his sister.

Once again, the metaphysical wind blows change into the carnival sequences, along with the music, costumes, and the characters, all captured in moments of ephemeral gaiety, which will soon leave a bitter taste in the mouth of those who do not know how to restrict the amount of enjoyment – such as Fausto who, dazzled by Giulia's unusual vivaciousness, deludes himself into thinking that he can exploit the spirit of misbehavior of Mardi Gras in order to make a new conquest, without understanding that, on Ash Wednesday, there is to be no more joking around in the devout haberdashery.

And, in fact, Giulia's husband, Michele, does not joke around. Before firing Fausto, he gives him a lesson about contented conjugal love that Fausto will hardly be able to share with Sandra, considering the squalls of betrayal he

slyly commits (one example will suffice: the case of the unknown woman in the movie theater, an episode connected to the emotional wind of Sandra's fear as she waits for her husband out in the cold until the end of the movie).

Masks and disguises, as in *The White Sheik*, anticipate a change of direction in behavior: Leopoldo courts the maid, but goes off with another girl; Fausto is ashamed of his wife because she eats a sandwich; Alberto, drunk as a lord, in fancy dress, carrying an enormous papier-mâché head, is caused to reflect on his life by the repulsive greeting of the carnival puppets, and also the lack of a woman. Compelled by Moraldo and the morning air, he goes to the real women in his life. The exhortation of the impenitent bachelor – “we must get married” – is obliterated by the storm that is about to break over his head when Olga goes off with her lover. The drunkenness and the careless gaiety of the festivities give way to inherent melancholy and the first ever verbal acceptance of responsibility when he tearfully tells his mother: “I’ll stay with you, I won’t go away. But you’ll see that she’ll come back. And if she doesn’t, better still! What does she think? For the lousy pittance she provided us... let her go, let her go away! I’ll find a job... I’ll find...” And the mother, with hope even in her pain: “Really Alberto? Have you found something?” He: “No...!” And so, the dramatic, bitterly ironic lines are



The vitelloni search in vain for Sandrina in an expensive car, but they have no petrol



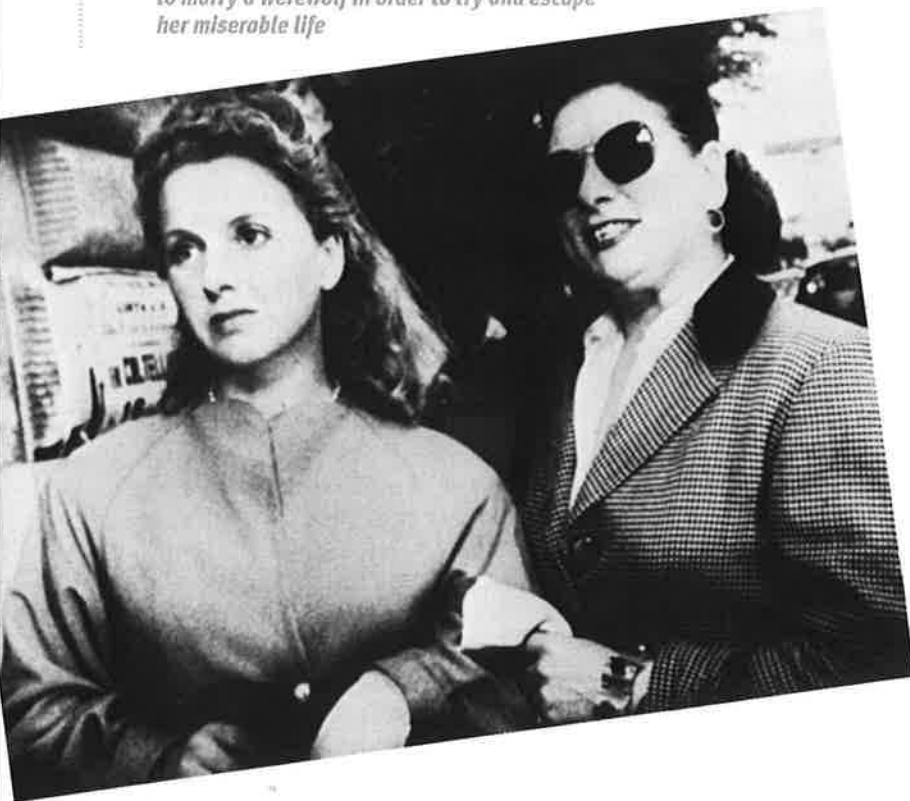
In order to take revenge for his dismissal, Fausto gets Moraldo and idiotic Giudizio (Silvio Bagolini) involved in the pointless theft of the angel statue

resolved in just a few words, almost an anticipation of the mockery against the 'Workers!'.

Events and people mature in unforeseeable ways, in which solitude plays various roles. Fausto is terrified of it, whereas Moraldo reacts by deciding to leave so that, in solitude, he can find the courage to make the big leap. *Moraldo in Città* (Moraldo in the City) will be the title of this subject, written in 1954 with Flaiano and Pinelli. And, even if it was never shot, it became the indirect inspiration for *La Dolce Vita*. Nocturnal meanderings, in the style of Cesare Pavese, through deserted streets or to the railway station, at a time when everyone else is already back home and there is nothing to do other than the nothing they have already been doing, conclude with the friendly sougning of the little railway worker, who starts his job when Moraldo goes to bed.

The accumulation of memories etched in his mind, and the premonitory whistle of the unseen train impel this hero, in some positive way, to leave his boring adolescence behind. "Where are you going?" the railway kid asks him. "How come? Didn't you like it here?" And Moraldo/Fellini replies: "I don't know. I'm leaving, I don't know. I have to go. I'm going away".

In Marriage Agency, the fourth imaginative episode of Love in the City, a girl replies to a fake advert, and is actually prepared to marry a werewolf in order to try and escape her miserable life



The definitive question about his departure should not be played down, as Fellini himself has always tended to do, nor over-generalized: "I don't seem to have anything to say: I was born in Rimini, I came to Rome, I got married, I got into Cinecittà." Nor should it be mythicized in relation to the countless cinematic 'departures': "Making a movie is like going on a trip, but what interests me about travel is the departure, not the arrival. My dream is to take a trip without knowing where to go, maybe even without arriving anywhere, but it is difficult to convince banks and producers of this idea". The departure, an answer to loneliness and monotony, is the impetus for getting us on the move, setting things in motion, for discovering and recognizing something we have carried inside ourselves for a long time and that, even including the waiting, manages to overcome it.

From one season to the next – as in *Amarcord* – one expects, who knows what, perhaps nothing in particular; one lives, one sees oneself living in an intrepid, but squalid, adventure, in the vindictive theft of a sculpture, in an actor's wind-swept homosexual/theatrical joke, or in the rebellious lesson of Sandra and the working class father. But also in the piercing work of a director countering the risk of making an entirely male friendship too sentimental, as when Alberto, more concerned about eating than about Sandra's disappearance, makes light of it, saying: "Listen, Fausto, Sandra is at home. Sandra is at home, I'll bet you anything she has come back", and Fausto (impatiently), ready to go looking for her on his bicycle, says: "Let me go, come on". Alberto: "Now you are letting yourself get scared. You should have thought of it sooner". And here, as in Olga's departure, comes the strong part. Fausto (pushing Alberto roughly aside and starting to pedal): "Come on, let me go, idiot! Worry about your sister who never came back". A dialog displaying realistic cynicism about existence, which Fellini follows up with the farm woman's invitation to taste a bacon omelet.

"They always talked about going away, but only one of them, one morning, without saying anything to anybody, actually left." And so, for the time being, the parable of the 'vitelloni' comes to an end: the off-screen voice that had marked the narrative sections, functioning as the watershed between representation and reality, is, like the wind, the invisible sixth 'vitellone' – possibly the director himself. It departs with Moraldo, leaving the other four to stay put and to grow old in a deep sleep of expectation and remorse, of time lost and never regained, except as figures in the little world of *Amarcord*.


In the meantime, Fellini's sponge has given back a part of his consuming vital juices, and the director has, in truth, put his film world into motion: fantastic images and

intuitions, prophetic openings based on a minimal and eccentric reality, decisively non-political in the banal, traditional sense. An exercise in 'clairvoyance of the ordinary', the product of an acute eye focused on the present and the future in order to disappoint all those who want, now and forever, a Fellini outside of society and its collective and cultural implications.

Fellini enters into society, in his own way of course, with the *Marriage Agency* episode of the movie *Love in the City* (1953). After *I Vitelloni*, which had won the Leone d'Argento prize at the Venice Film Festival, he is secure in the knowledge that his career, endangered by the failure (from the producers' point of view) of his first two movies, has now been safeguarded.

Cesare Zavattini, the man who discovered the film-inquest and the device of 'spying', asks him to shoot this episode in "the most journalistic way possible", in order to increase the realism of dramatic documentaries that were, in actuality, complete inventions. "Because Zavattini gave me this opportunity, I decided to shoot a short in the most neo-realistic way possible, with a story that could in no way be real, not even 'neo-real'. I asked myself: 'What would James Whale or Tod Browning do if they had to shoot *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* in a neo-realistic style?' And thus *Marriage Agency* was created."

To recount "the incredible in a straightforward way" was also a real and exciting challenge for Tullio Pinelli, and the two authors, probably with a great deal of fun, sat down to write the story of a girl so keen to get married that she even accepts a werewolf.

 A journalist, in order to get a story, goes to a matrimonial agency in the working class district of town and, concealing his true identity, asks the proprietor to find a wife for his friend, who suffers from lycanthropy. The woman, not at all dumfounded by this, suggests Rossana who, in order to escape from a large, poverty-stricken family, accepts: all things considered, a werewolf might give her less trouble than her terrible relatives.

The neo-realistic intentions found at the start of the movie, and entrusted to the popular actor, Antonio Cifariello, soon mutate during this short story, and reveal *Marriage Agency* to be not in the least neo-realistic, but simply a true horror story. Ironically, the critics accepted it as neo-realism – but one does not know to what extent – thus allowing Fellini a perfidious revenge for the misunderstood realism of his previous movies. Apart from the already dated misunderstanding between modern gothic and neo-realism, there remains the fact that even this little *divertissement* contains hints of things that the director will later transfer to the character of Gelsomina. In fact, Rossana



The owner of the Marriage Agency describes the qualities of an ideal candidate to a journalist (Antonio Cifariello)


The reporter and Rossana in conversation in the car: the marriage is not going to happen even if she never finds out that she has been the subject of a journalistic scam



can adapt to anything, even to a werewolf, because she is someone who "gets fond of people". And, with this, the director proves that his sponge has not dried out at all, but is ready to piece together the fragments of another story.

"Why am I shooting this movie, this one rather than another? I don't want to know the reason why. Reasons are obscure, inextricable, confused. The only reason that one can honestly cite is that I have signed a contract to make it, have received an advance, and so, since I don't want to give the money back, I am obliged to make the movie. And I am trying to make it in the way that I believe the movie wants to be made."

The declarations in inverted commas, taken from statements made in *Fare un film*, a true mine of contradictory information, inadvertently provide an essential clue for any study of Fellini's cinema. A lead that is relevant to his destiny because, as Tullio Kezich writes, "*La Strada* is the project in which Federico Fellini's cinematic vocation emerges, his 'kinematische Sendung'"—the visual-poetic predestination that is etched into his very existence.

 Zampanò, a gypsy street entertainer, arrives at Gelsomina's house in order to take her on as his assistant in place of her sister Rosa, who died. Gelsomina is a young girl who lives in poverty with her mother and four younger sisters.

As they travel along in his caravan, Gelsomina watches his strongman act in amazement as he breaks an iron bar in half with his bare chest. Then, under duress, she gradually begins to learn the spiel for his miserable show by heart, and to put up with sleeping in the back of the wagon with this brusque, rude man without making a fuss.

Made up as a clown, funny little Gelsomina begins to practise, playing a drum and reciting farcical, disjointed pieces about sunny squares in isolated villages. She imitates his every little gesture, keen to learn everything. When Zampanò goes off with a prostitute and leaves her all alone after a hearty meal at a *trattoria*, Gelsomina is bitterly disappointed, and sits on the pavement and sadly waits for him all night long. She finally finds him in a drunken sleep on the outskirts of the village. While she patiently waits for him to wake up, she discovers the possibilities within the surrounding terrain, and plants some tomatoes, in an unspoken desire to settle down somewhere.

Her destiny, however, is a vagabond life, wandering the world with an ill-tempered, taciturn master, which leads them into discourse with guests at a rural wedding banquet organized by a fireless widow. While Zampanò goes off with her under the pretext of fetching the clothes belonging to her deceased first husband, the children take Gelsomina to the bedroom of little Osvaldo, who is ill and bedridden, so that she can make him laugh with some funny faces.

An insensitive, habitual creature who lives only for the moment, Zampanò does not understand how the poetic soul of his assistant can be moved to emotion by a short burst of song heard from an open window. Hurt by such an unfeeling response, she decides to leave. She puts on her threadbare cape and canvas shoes, and leaves the stable



Federico Fellini
and Giulietta Masina happily
accept the Oscar award in 1955 for *La Strada*

where they are bedded down to follow the lure of three 'magic pipers' heading for the fair in the next town.

After following the procession, Gelsomina assists il Matto ('the Fool'), a strange tightrope walker who performs forty feet up in the air, with his acrobatic act, in the midst of a large crowd who are all looking up at him. After the entertainment is over, she finds herself alone once again. Zampanò finds her at two o'clock in the morning and, with hefty slaps, takes her back to their caravan.

And so to the Giraffa circus on the outskirts of Rome, where Zampanò can perform his act. Here, Gelsomina sees il Matto once again, playing her favorite tune on his fiddle. The latter, for some unknown reason, pokes fun at Zampanò once he is dressed again, who, completely impervious to jesting and interruptions, chases him among the caravans. But the mischievous acrobat manages to make himself scarce.

The vendetta continues the following day when Zampanò catches him trying out a new act with Gelsomina. Zampanò objects to this, and il Matto throws a bucket of water over his head. The gypsy runs after him with a knife to kill him. Rescued by the police, the acrobat confides in Gelsomina and reveals that he no longer wants to wander around after the circus. He takes her in his van back to the barracks, where Zampanò is released the following morning.

The two of them resume their wandering. They offer a lift to a nun returning to the convent, and are offered a bed for the night. In the middle of the night, the strongman steals some former offerings of gold, after Gelsomina refuses to do so.



Zamparò (Anthony Quinn) has arrived, and innocent little Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina) delightfully learns to play the trumpet

In the morning, the girl cries as she takes leave of the sisters with whom they are staying, but sets off again, believing that there is no one else who could possibly put up with Zampanò, as il Matto so correctly perceived when he confided in her.

An accidental meeting with the acrobat, who had pulled over because of a flat tyre, turns into tragedy as Zampanò lays into him with powerful fists. He punches him in the head and il Matto, after a short fit, dies. As Gelsomina watches on in terrified horror, Zampanò hides the body and tries to make it look like an accident by trashing the acrobat's vehicle.

Nobody witnessed this incident, but Gelsomina, still in shock, feels that she is to blame. During the cold winter months, she becomes delirious, falls ill and seems to lose all reason, not wanting her master to sleep anywhere near her in the wagon. After ten days or so, on one sunny morning, Gelsomina goes out into the snow, apparently better, but still thinking that il Matto is hurt... then she lays down on a blanket and goes to sleep. Zampanò doesn't know what to do for the best. He covers her up and quietly departs, leaving her some money and her beloved trumpet.

Some time passes, at least four or five years. It is summertime, and Zampanò has a new assistant, and is performing in a small circus near the coast. He goes for a short walk before the show and, whilst eating an ice cream, he hears a female voice singing Gelsomina's song. When questioned, the girl confirms that Gelsomina was there: a stranger who played the trumpet, sat out in the sun, and just didn't wake up one morning.

Shaken, Zampanò goes through his act like a zombie. That evening, he gets drunk and is thrown out of the tavern. He goes to the beach, and walks into the sea. He washes his face, goes back to the shoreline and appears to be dazed. He looks up at the sky and, for the first time, he bursts into sobs as he stands there alone.

"At the beginning of *La Strada*, I only had a muddled perception of the movie, a sustained note that filled me with an undefined melancholy, a diffused sense of guilt like a shadow, vague and consuming, made up of memories and portents. This feeling insistently suggested a journey taken by two creatures who are fatally united without knowing why."

The feelings that move Fellini come from the desire of the two characters to establish a relationship where there is real communication, a true problem of modern society. Fellini and Pinelli had already talked about making a movie about ramblers, and Pinelli had begun to write a piece while Fellini was still completing *The White Sheik*. They present it in vain to Luigi Rovere who, too devastated by the previous disaster, passes it from person to person in the so-called "dance of the producers", skeptical about the choice of Masina as the leading role. The piece ends up on the desk of Lorenzo Pegoraro, who provides financial backing only in exchange for more scripts (one of which is *Moraldo in Città*, the other *I Vitelloni*, the only one to be actually filmed).

It is a never-ending story, the first of so many of Fellini's

never-ending stories involving producers, beginning in 1951 and concluding in 1953 (the movie will be released in 1954), because Fellini holds fast to his conviction that this movie has to be made with these particular actors and, more specifically, with that particular beginning and that melancholy ending. Two years go by since its initial conception, a period of maturation that, together with Flaiano's valuable contribution, was of great benefit to the final result. An excellent example of the exhausting refinements and modifications, the passing of the work from person to person that invariably happens with all his projects, and which he seems determined to mention during interviews and statements.

With so exhaustive a background contributing to the project, the incommensurable sum of thoughts and feelings coalesces first into a series of drawings for Gelsomina – his old habit of drawing pictures of the characters before going on to the written text. The synthesizing of the character of Gelsomina is connected to an appreciation of the expressive medium and accuracy of the direction, attained from editing *The White Sheik*. The director probably had to go



Closely watched by the amused villagers, Zampanò performs his strongman act

through that suspended dimension and that same 'metacinematographic' involvement, the intentional fusion of some aspects of reality with 'vulgar' manifestations of the false – in that way so entirely his own, affectionate and relentless, bringing the fabulous component down after having created it so lovingly, giving the impression of 'poetic abdication', which was transferred with the same intensity up to, and beyond, *The Nights of Cabiria*.

Perhaps it is being too rhetorical to recall to mind that Fellini is both the amazed Wanda and the wrathful photo-story director of *The White Sheik*. Now he is preparing to be Gelsomina and Zampanò and also, in his own way, 'il Matto' ('the Fool'). In the final analysis, it would be enough to get up onto the precarious turret mounted on the beach in *The White Sheik* and look down in order to recognize the final shot of *La Strada*, where Zampanò cries for the first time in his life as the camera pulls back. And so Fellini does away with the initial image, and closes the circle by returning to the opening, with Gelsomina among the sand dunes.

Created for Giulietta Masina, Gelsomina is a "creature who lives in a world too hard and brutal for her temperament". An allegory of the victim of violence, she loves and wants to be loved with that unnatural candor that the world reveals to her when causing her to suddenly discover that she, too, is of some use.

"If I don't stay with you, who else is going to?" she repeats, somewhere between comedy and tragedy, adopting the Fool's opinion: "But... if you don't stay with him, who else is going to?" And she says it with conviction to that brutal and distracted great beast of a Zampanò, that creature who, like dogs, "look at us, and it seems they want to speak, but instead they only bark."

The Fool's reasoning strikes home with the little clown lady. Even if he did compare her to an inert pebble, he gave her the courage to defend, in a fit of anger, her role and, above all, her woman's reasons for continuing to love even in the midst of brutishness. "I'm going to burn everything, mattresses, blankets – everything. That will teach you. I never said I didn't want to go with him. He paid 10,000 lire, and I'll knuckle down to work. And he beats me."

Vengeance and rage give rise to feelings: "Is that how to behave? He doesn't use his head (she taps her forehead). I tell him, and what does he care? So what's the use? So, I'm finally going to put poison in his soup. You think I won't? And I'm going to burn everything. If I don't stay with him, who else is going to?"

And the last time this simple truth is spoken, Zampanò "doesn't really understand it, and that frightens him even more. He scrutinizes her silently for an instant, then exclaims aggressively, with genuine, subconscious despair: "But I can't



The crowd enjoy the improvised "comic farce" performed by the clown couple

For the wandering artistes in this Fellini masterpiece, the big top of the Giraffo Circus is not only a magical place, but a focal point for tension and argument. This is revealed by the worried looks of the director (Aldo Silvani, in the centre) and Gelsomina in the background, as Zampanò threatens the Fool (Richard Bosehart)





The title La Strada was not translated, thus retaining its aura of pointless love and desperate hope, portrayed by the expressive intensity of Masina, the "female Chaplin" of Fellini's circus

go on like this! I have to earn a living! You are sick... You are sick here! (and he strikes his forehead furiously). Gelsomina turns to stare at him in silence, strangely; then, slowly, calmly, she starts to arrange her rags as if she intended to lie down and sleep against the wall." We are at the conclusion. The Fool is dead; Gelsomina, even though she is ill, has remained with Zampanò and, in spite of the anguish which has caused her to lose control of herself over a guilt which is not hers, she saves her man's life by making him abandon her in the snow; and the little warmth found between the stones of the wall and the tiny pebbles on the ground, serves as a basis for the end of the movie, before the epilogue: "It feels good in the sun... We need a little wood. The fire is going out..."

The fire, primary element of nature and of a child's amazement, is no longer burning; it is slowly going out before our eyes, just like the life of the heroine, as the small truck rolls away with the motor switched off. Zampanò, the brave Zampanò, is an emotional coward. Only a summer sea breeze will accompany his memories, bringing with it the notes of the clown lady's sad song – notes which will cause his remorseful tears on the beach, in the loneliness of his human condition.



Gelsomina's gypsy training even takes place at the tavern, where she accompanies the "brutish" Zampanò



"La colpa è del bajon", or how to earn a living at a country wedding (Mosina in a bowler hat and Quinn on the drum)

It almost seems to be a paradox, but *La Strada*, which will have more than a little influence on some American 'road movies' (which mark the departure from Hollywood studios), is based not only on the phenomenon of nomadism, but on the visceral element in considering 'off beat' types like Zamapanò, rather than normal people. A double-edged concept/journey already seen in the figure of the railway kid: when Moraldo, leaving for an imaginary future, observes with us what the poet Andrea Zanzotto calls Fellini's continuous creation: "something that is simultaneously magical and commonplace."

The overwhelming effect of the movie lies precisely in the conflicting co-existence it creates between hard reality and ferocious fable, the cruel magic of an existence without ideas (Zampanò) and an artistic idea without real existence (Gelsomina and the Fool). Ever since she left her mother and her numerous siblings, Gelsomina is content to take the place of her sister Rosa and go wandering as she learns her 'art' of singing and dancing. But, unexpectedly, she becomes sad. Zampanò's only solo act is one using his 'pectoral muscles or chest'; while she, seated in the truck, looks on in amazement. It is one of the few times we will see Gelsomina inside the mobile home, and Zampanò will be seen there even less often.

It is a tunnel, an open double window from which one can look out in two different directions. Two privileged observation points which, by connecting the two sides of the truck, allows Gelsomina to comfortably watch the road

behind (the past, the farewell to the family, etc.) and Zampanò who, driving, is obliged to look ahead (but without awareness). This emphasizes the two opposite directions in which the characters can see their world.

The cinema, which is to say the camera, by focusing on the two open ends of the truck, lifts that lurid curtain, reduces the lack of communication and is able to rely on the camera's movements without having to cut very often. An good example would be the first notable narrowing of the field. The gypsy, having eaten the soup "fit for pigs", forces Gelsomina to lie down with him. The two sub-frames reduce the volume of physical space therein practically to zero, and allow the director to show the characters as if, somehow, they were always inside the vehicle, prisoners of that rickety truck, even when they are on the outside.

The difference between the two of them is made clear. Gelsomina has to beat the drum in a certain way, and solemnly announce that "Zampanò is here". But, having decided to have fun whilst she is learning, she makes her boss angry, because he is opposed to the playful side of life, and has the right to impose his will because he bought that damned 'scatter brain'.

Gelsomina, however, just like her creator/husband, is naturally talented, a born artist, and she has fun playing the part of a clown, because the instinct for clowning is within her like song is in a bird. Only for this reason does she fail to obey orders, and Zampanò trains her by cracking the whip. The Fool, for his part, will lose his life for having indulged in the sheer pleasure of seeing Zampanò angry. Incurably inharmonious by nature, Zampanò fears spontaneous harmony, observes how irrational it is and defends himself through brute force, while the two congenial imps are unaware that they have asked the impossible of him. Zampanò's truck is not the circus, but the symbol of a creative block, as Via Veneto will be in *La Dolce Vita*, the spa in *Eight and a Half*, the concert hall in *Orchestra Rehearsal*, the television studio in *Ginger and Fred* and *The Voice of the Moon*...

When Gelsomina discovers the little treasure trove of the charlatan's art, she puts on the derby hat and the makeup, and takes up the trumpet and the drum, which make her euphoric in a way she must hide from her intolerant, gloomy mate. And so the apprentice clown girl learns by imitation, performs according to orders and quickly finds her place in the theater of the road, achieving great personal success among both children and adults, who instinctively love her. And, in the *trattoria*, it is equally marvelous when, following orders "to learn to keep her mouth shut", she opens it with great gravity and amusement, only to stick a toothpick into it in imitation of her barbarous Pygmalion.

During the journey undertaken by 'these two creatures who stay together without knowing why', Gelsomina appears to Fellini "in the guise of a clown, with a massive dark shadow – Zampanò – right alongside her for contrast." She is a character who is modeled, as has been said, on Giulietta Masina, who her husband finds "singularly gifted to express the astonishment, the dismay, the frenetic gaiety and the sudden comical gloom of a clown, [because] the clowning talent of an actor is his most precious gift and the sign of an aristocratic vocation for the theater."

Gelsomina sees what she has left behind her, but she can also see, wide eyed, that which never even crosses Zampanò's mind. And, above all, she thinks. She thinks about the future, of filling the emptiness within a violent man with a horde of feelings she believes she can just glimpse. The source of her optimism lies in the art of masquerade, honest fiction, the opposite of Zampanò's way, which is to act just as he lives, entirely without taking the soul into account. Someone who asks himself no questions, perhaps because he does not think it possible to do so, he lives by his instincts, using what nature has provided him with: healthy lungs, muscles of iron and a voracious physical and sexual appetite.

But on this shared journey among the villages, countryside and valleys of the Apennines, these two lives cannot be joined, and in the pre-finale, the protagonists, each accusing the other of not thinking (the one because she is mentally ill, the other because he is instinctive), both use the same gesture: the gypsy furiously beats his forehead with the impossibility of becoming human as long as there is this 'dog-like' attachment for his clown who, in turn, puts her hand to her forehead and, with all the strength she can muster in light of her physical weakness, expresses her feelings by caressing him in her mind.

As the drama moves towards its conclusion, the switching of strong and weak roles is more evident than at the beginning or middle of the movie. Gelsomina's progressive growth has, as a counterpoint, the primitive mediocrity of Zampanò, satisfied at having taught everything to an assistant "who didn't even know how to open her mouth." Obedient fidelity, the only way of being accepted, comes to the surface the first time she is briefly abandoned, when Zampanò goes off with a redhead. Gelsomina waits on the sidewalk like an abandoned dog, and does not even eat until a woman tells her where the truck and her man have gone. Her apparent dependence masks an act of emancipation, the readiness to wait without being resigned, and to enjoy the little things. Gelsomina plants tomato seeds even if she will never see them grow because the trip will continue into uncharted areas where not even the unfortunate itinerants of *Variety Lights* had ever set foot.



The unfortunate virtuosity of the street entertainer results in the death of the frail fool, and hastens Gelsomina's demise

And this might suffice, if destiny had not set new traps in an attempt to break her fragile equilibrium. One of these is the show put on for a country wedding party. To the tune of *La colpa è del bajon*, the rooms and corridors of a farmhouse open up before us, the places of a childhood memory which has been offered several times before. Rooms, stairs, hiding places inhabited by strange, sequestered, phantasmatic creatures, both the old and the ill, like the little macrocephalous Osvaldo, from whom Gelsomina tries to wrest a smile.

This sequence contains a truly typical element of Fellini's cinema: a suspension of time between the certainty of the narration and the uncertainty of which direction to take, almost a fear of opening the next door. It is a gay and melancholy mood, similar to the carnival festivities in *I Vitelloni*, and the finale of *Amarcord*. A moment that is just barely sketched, but with the same bitter taste of so many collective ritual occasions: fiestas, dinners, processions, pilgrimages, automobile and motorcycle parades, people coming and going in compromising places, when the laden tables are full of leftovers, the light fades, it sometimes rains and the usual latecomer fills the screen. What is it, if not the valuing of something which has been and is about to end? The world gets on track, the sudden agitated pressure of Fellini's action is in the hands of diverse characters who come on and go off camera, to create confusion with the

intention of re-establishing order, and allowing their director time to think.

Within such a context, her first attempt to leave Zampanò takes place – “not because of the work, because I like it, I like being an artiste. It's you I don't like” – either because he does not answer her questions, or because he “goes with women”. The man, with the excuse of fetching some costumes, goes off with the widow. And it is these costumes which mark the beginning of a new phase: when she reappears in a double-breasted jacket, wearing white makeup and the derby hat, Gelsomina once again, conversely, puts on the military cloak of the first encounter. Having returned to the initial stage, she is once again prey to her infantile curiosity and, as in all fairy tales, follows the piper to the town square, where the tight-rope walker is performing. The wind shaking the rope is the same wind, only worse, that surrounds her when Zampanò goes to fetch her after her rebellious gesture. It is her first encounter with the Fool, someone like herself, whom she will find again at the Giraffa Circus camped outside the walls of Rome.

With Fellini, one always goes to Rome; and should one already be there, one stays put. In this story about the great emarginated, one necessarily remains on the outskirts of the city. While the Fool plays Gelsomina's song, the wind, messenger and shaper of events, shakes the tent and creates

sparks between the mocking of the spiteful acrobat and the violent outbursts of his rival.

In the circus ring, there are strong men, animal tamers, trapeze artists, acrobats, tight-rope walkers with wings, clowns, the Fool and Gelsomina – a sharp contrast between two realities that, in *La Strada* show themselves only in a few images. The distinction between the gypsy and the Fool/Gelsomina comes to the fore when, in Zampanò's absence, they rehearse a new comic number. Zampanò opposes it and, not being able to come up with any good reason, capriciously says "because that's how I want it, that's the way I want it." And when his rival reacts yet again by throwing water in his face, he goes after him with a knife. The night he spends in a cell will seal the friendship between the two 'angels of the circus', who sit on the

pebbled beach and discuss, semi-seriously, the universe and Gelsomina's role in life.

The movie takes a dramatic turn with the incident involving the pail of water, an object analogous to the tools used for Gelsomina's first lesson as a clown. Both incidents come about because of the unexpressed jealousy felt by instinctive Zampanò, not so much for the woman – she is no use for taking to bed, she makes no gifts of clothes, she has no *ex votos* to steal – but for himself, his intense ego. Gelsomina is his, and he wants no changes to his one and only, monotonous number; but most of all, he does not want her to work with the Fool, because the Fool mocks him. Being someone like Gelsomina, the Fool does what she does not want and cannot ethically do: he takes revenge. First with the water, and then dying a senseless death that

Two villagers get taken in by the buried treasure scam of the crafty swindlers in Il Bidone. From the left, Richard Basehart (the priest), Franco Fabrizi (the driver) and Braderick Crawford (the Monsignor)



paves the way for Gelsomina's madness and death, a necessary condition for the sense of the ridiculous to be transformed into the liberating tears of the finale.

"If I don't stay with you, who else is going to?" is not a distracted repetition dictated by a liking for one of the loveliest lines in Fellini's poetic output. It is that the movies – sometimes an industrial bull in a china shop – can also move with the lightness of a butterfly in a flowering field, and is full of lines which have become proverbial. The sensational visual emblem of *La Strada* is a high point of the potency of feelings of union between two halves of a world, overturned yet repairable. It is an invitation to look into the other levels of the movie, and what it has inspired in broader, more symbolic and actual terms.

In short, the comic figure, the benefactor of humanity, is presented in the guise of a Fellini clown, one of acting's highest and most difficult expressions that, on the occasion of the Oscar award for *La Strada*, won for Giulietta Masini the accolade of 'female Chaplin', because she is, in Fellini's words: "singularly gifted to express the astonishment, the dismay, the frenetic gaiety and the sudden comical gloom of a clown. That's exactly what Giulietta is – an clown actress, an authentic 'clownesse'. This definition, a magnificent one in my eyes, irritates other actors, who suspect it may diminish them, mar their dignity, indicate something crude. They are mistaken: to my mind, the clowning talent of an actor is his most precious gift and the sign of an aristocratic vocation for the theater." An art which can only express itself in the circus, in street theater at country fairs and fiestas. As he had already done in *The White Sheik*, the director continues his exploration into the noble, plebeian ancestry of the cinema, which he has already discovered – in its spectacular embryonic forms – in his first love, the circus.

Finally, in that 'you', there is hospitality to be found for the alter ego, still a little concealed, a self in development – Zampanò, and also Federico – in whose womb a conflict is established, an insidious fight for identity which can only be opposed by Fellini the artist, the only one adapted to coexist with the many facets of the other Fellini, the one who, three weeks before finishing the movie, will be struck by a sudden depression, a kind of 'psychic Chernobyl'. But that plural 'you' is also that which can accommodate future characters, who only have to emerge one at a time, or else in a closely knit cortège.

"The cinema of truth? I am more in favor of the cinema of lies. Lies are always more interesting than the truth. The lie is the heart and soul of a show, and I love a show." A useful remark to use as a Dantesque device to introduce *Il Bidone*, a highly falsified work, inasmuch as it deals with



In the struggle for existence in Italy in the Fifties, two completely opposing characters square up to each other: Iris (Giulietta Masino), Picasso's wife; and cynical, elderly Augusto (Braderick Crawford), not wearing a cassock

trickery and swindle. In fact, to tell of trickery, of falsification, is an upside-down device, an alibi for the desire to intensively practice, not so much the small deceptions of the plot, as the scenic tricks which are perfected in all Fellini's subsequent work. The end of the director's declaration now states: "It is not necessary that the things one shows be authentic. In general, it is better if they are not. What must be authentic are the feelings one has in seeing and giving expression." And what else are his shows,



The gang drink a toast to celebrate the umpteenth successful trick at the expense of the poor locals (Richard Basehart, Frances Babi, Brederek Crawford)

other than the glorification of the Fellini Lie, of which *Il Bidone* (1955) is the dress rehearsal?

Baron Vargas is awaiting the trio of swindlers, Augusto, Picasso and Roberto, in order to give them final instructions with regard to the buried treasure swindle. Disguised as priests, Augusto and Picasso, with Roberto's help, easily manage to cheat two ingenuous peasants who, in exchange for a treasure-trove of rubbish, obtain a wad of banknotes which, according to them, are intended as payment for masses for the dead. Another successful ruse is the false assignment of public housing to the Roman hut dwellers. The three go to the outskirts of the city, where whole families of poor wretches, invalids, and unemployed struggle to pay the 'quota', without once suspecting anything from the nonchalant behavior of the three pretending to be officials from the institution.

The reality of their private lives is altogether a different thing. The angel face, Picasso, is a painter, possibly a forger. In order to keep his wife, Iris, and his daughter, he has given up his art and joined with Augusto, the elder of the three. Roberto, who has the ideal countenance for the role, with a perfect cynical, insensitive scoundrel's face, aims to break into the big time, and is just learning the trade whilst waiting for his big break.

During a New Year's Eve party at Rinaldo's house, a con man who has made it big, Augusto offers his services to the host, but is rudely put down, while Roberto is publicly exposed and humiliated when he tries to steal a gold cigarette case. For his part, Picasso

cannot keep his wife from discovering the source of the dirty money he earns.

After one of numerous trips into the countryside to sell old, reconditioned overcoats, the squalor and distress of that unpredictable life cause a crisis for the painter, who gets drunk and finds the courage to give it all up and return to his painting and tranquil family life. By chance, Augusto meets his daughter, Patrizia, who is living with her mother, from whom he separated in order to be free for his new job. Augusto invites her to spend a whole day with him. During lunch, the girl explains her plans to her father, and he promises her the security money she needs in order to get a job as a cashier, which will in turn allow her to pay for her university studies. Father and daughter go to the movie theater, but a former victim recognizes Augusto, and he is arrested.

When he is released from prison, he learns that Roberto has set himself up well in Milan, and he goes back to work for Vargas in the old buried treasure gambit, at the expense of a peasant with a paralyzed daughter. As usual, Augusto is very credible, perhaps too credible, because the handicapped girl thinks he really is a monsignor, and asks to speak with him. The conversation bothers him, partly because of the girl's ingenuous faith in him, but also because the loot corresponds to the amount of money he has promised to give Patrizia.

After the swindle, when the two fake priests are changing their clothes, Augusto confesses that he has given the money back to the girl because he was touched by her situation. When the rest of the gang do not believe him, he runs away, but the others throw stones at him.

One strikes him and he falls, breaking his back, and his accomplices find the money hidden in his shoe. At daybreak, after a night of agony, Augusto tries in vain to find help, and dies alone just as he has almost reached the roadside.

After *La Strada's* touching journey through the contradictions of the soul, the study of human nature in Fellini's movies is reflected in the story of the *bidonisti* (con men), and the character of Augusto, played by the American actor Broderick Crawford. Whereas Zampanò was the bulky, evil shadow lurking over Gelsomina who, not fearing him as a man, was animated by an innate *pietas*, a new kind of fear manifests itself in *Il Bidone*, which fluctuates between the tender anxieties of Wanda, the immaturity of the *vitellone* Fausto, and the faltering uneasiness of Moraldo as he leaves his provincial Heimat.

Here the fear is always present, tangible – if one gets caught, one ends up in prison – but also metaphysical, associated with the uncertainty of a future based on risk.

The anguish and ambience are underscored by the music of Nino Rota, a composer who established a very special relationship with Fellini. The musical theme of *La Strada*, one of the most memorable motifs, full of "menacing, heart-breaking music", and the other works – perhaps the most famous and catchy being the motifs from *La Dolce Vita*, *Eight and a Half*, *Amarcord*, *Orchestra Rehearsal*, and *Casanova* – have created a completely inseparable intertwining of music and image within the public's imagination.

Successful collaborations between director and composer are not frequent in the history of the movies, either because of a hidden contempt on the composer's part for the movie, or because the medium of film itself inevitably draws

The fake priest begins to feel some remorse when faced with the calm acceptance and realism shown by the young cripple (Sue Ellen Blake)





When indifference is replaced by the loving unselfishness of a father, it is inevitable that Augusto will end up in jail, because a swindler cannot give in to tenderness

attention to the stronger element, the shot and the sequence, adapting the contribution of the music to that of following the narrative. But, in the case of Rota and Fellini, a magical interplay takes place, an enveloping hypnosis which allows the maestro at the piano to extract from the keyboard – on the basis of the director's confused, or vague, or quite precise solicitations – a little motif, possibly only just glimpsed, but immediately accentuated, with no direct connection to the story, the characters, the narrative blocks or even the overall theme. In short, Rota had the miraculous gift of being the reflection, if not the unique image, of that moment, that episode, that character, even

while having no direct cognition (despite the minutely timed notations that exist in his tightly-packed notebooks). The underscored insistence of that intuition, and no other, coincides with the incomprehensible and magnetic attraction of these two 'great distracted ones' of the artistic imagination. The result is an enrichment of Fellini's movies with unforgettable melodies which, in turn, are nourished by the identification/memory which the impact on the eye can impose on the ear, until the 'cinemusical' pendulum moves from mental vision to 'visual listening' in a continuous interchange.

In this regard, Nicola Piovani, who wrote the scores for *Ginger and Fred*, *Intervista* and *The Voice of the Moon*, recalls: "What we might call the poetics of the Memory of the Motif presides over the whole span of the sixteen works of genius that Fellini and Rota produced. A constantly displacing sound montage, music that rarely presents itself with real and true comments, but as echoes of fragments-become-objects, and brought back into an otherwhere that, little by little, is shocking, consuming, pungent, demystifying or mystifying, but always strongly involved in a dialectic with the editing of the images, thanks, of course, to the genius of a musician capable of infusing sublime soul into whatever the current material, the basic clay used may be."

Let Fellini himself describe Nino Rota: "Between the two of us there was immediately a complete, a total understanding beginning with *The White Sheik*, our first movie collaboration. We did not need any breaking in to understand each other. I had decided to become a director and Nino was there as a premise for my continuing to do so. He had a geometric imagination, a celestial musical vision, which made it unnecessary for him to see the film images. When I asked him what motifs he had in mind as musical comments for this or that sequence, I clearly saw that the images did not concern him. His was an inner world to which reality had scarce possibilities of access. He lived music with the liberty and spontaneity of a creature in its natural element. He was a creature with a rare quality, that precious quality which belongs to intuition. This was the gift that kept him so innocent, so light-footed, so happy. But don't misunderstand me. When the occasion presented itself, or even when it did not present itself, he made very acute comments, deep and impressively precise on people and things. Like children, like simple people, like some psychics, like certain innocent and candid people, he suddenly said things of dazzling brilliance."

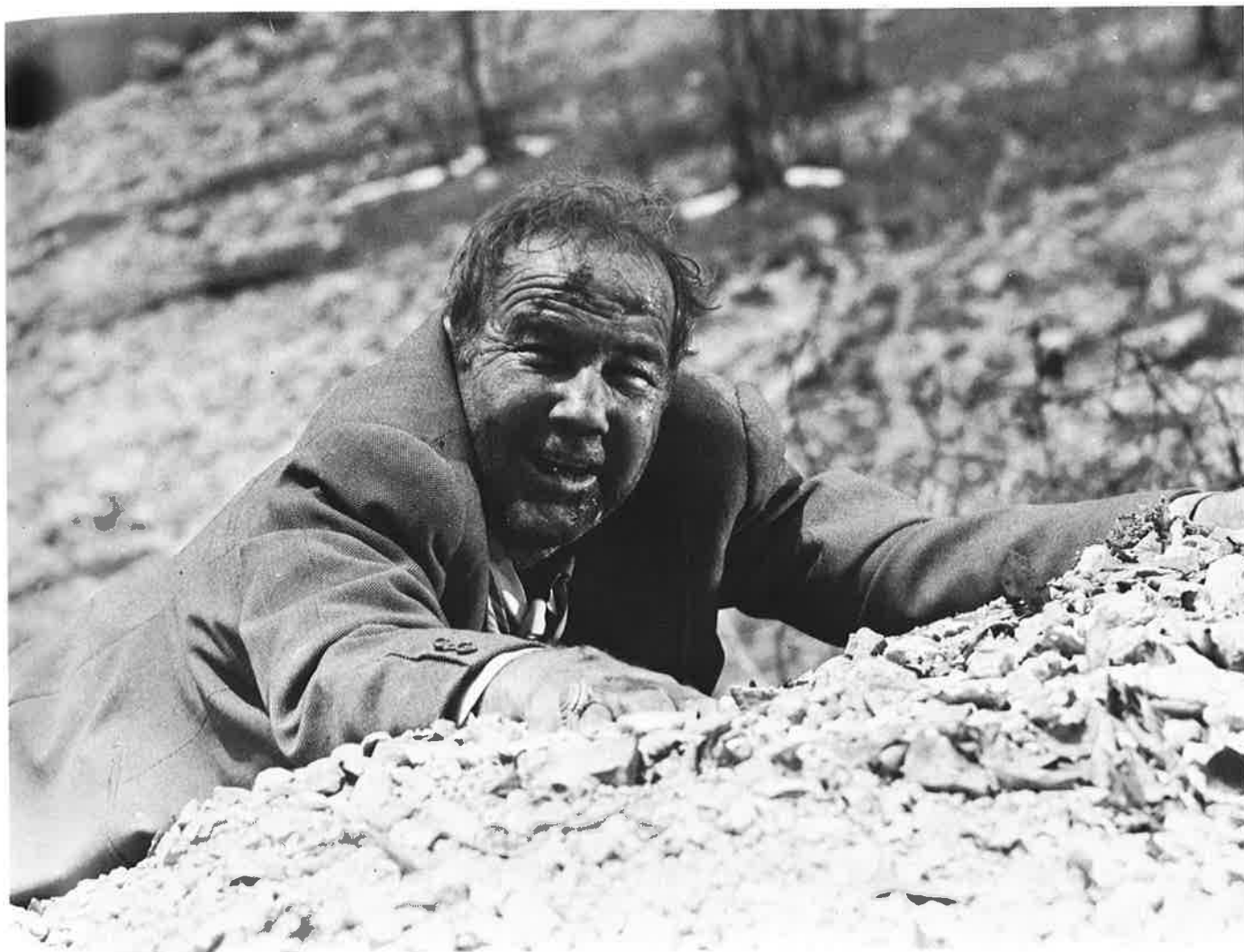
If one should try to understand his working "method" in these musical collaborations, one would be astonished to discover that contrary to what usually happens, Rota composed *on* the scenes already shot. Certainly there were no questions of "priority" inasmuch as Rota neither wanted

to or was supposed to “illustrate” anything, but rather to create a twin musical and harmonic world that was yet different, united but independent, a sound track that was yet a supporting *column* co-original with properly cinematic phrases and narrative phrases. And all this without ever making Fellini realize that he was doing something other than what Fellini had asked for.

Here is how the director explains the procedure which, furthermore, is implicitly indicated by the composer in his notebooks filled with tempos, episodes and visual scansions: “When I am working on my movies I am in the habit of playing certain records as background music. [...] Obviously then, when the shooting is finished I have become fond of that improvised sound track and do not want it changed. Nino immediately agreed with me, saying that the tunes were beautiful (even if they were the most sugary trumpery),

were just the right thing and that he would not have been able to do better. Then, suddenly, the discrete and crafty miracle arrived in two stages. The first stage was that as he said this, he tinkled on the piano. ‘What was that?’ I asked after a few moments. ‘What were you playing?’ ‘Playing when?’ Nino asked with a distracted air. ‘Just now,’ I insisted. ‘while you were talking you were playing something’. ‘Was I?’ Nino replied. ‘I don’t know, I can’t remember.’”

Thus it was only in the second “trance” stage that the genuine and deep invention of the exchange of parallel artistic sensibilities took place, which could only be integrated in the impenetrable, highly personal musical feeling: “I took my place there beside the piano to describe the movie to him, to explain what it was I had tried to suggest with one image or another, one sequence or



Augusto's initial dramatic plan following his final, fated trick at the expense of his colleagues



The tragic destiny of a professional trickster unfolds: having been discovered, Augusto will die alone just moments away from safety

another. But he did not listen, he was distracted even if he nodded or said yes with broad gestures of assent. In reality he was establishing contact with himself, with the musical motifs inside himself. And when he had made contact he did not follow you anymore, did not listen. He put his hands on the keyboard and started off in a kind of trance like a true artist. When he had finished I said: 'That's beautiful!' But he replied: 'I have forgotten it already'. These were disasters which we remedied by the use of tape recorders, but it was necessary to turn them on without his noticing or else the contact with the celestial sphere was broken..."

In his "diary" of *La Dolce Vita*, Rota himself, asked by Tullio Kezich, summarized better than any paraphrase could do the essential aspects of that alchemy between music and image: "We go to the piano and make music, as always. I give him the gist of some theme, serve it up to him if I have something ready. At times we actually compose together. Fellini gives me a hint, not as a musician would, but always with a firm rhythmic idea and maybe with a snatch of melody. In short he suggests a musical expression in an embryonic form. Perhaps this time too, as for *The Nights of Cabiria*, we will look at the moviola and sketch out a musical comment to the silent images, once we have established the 'contacts'. [Fellini] is not a director that the

musician has to worry about. He gives more importance to the music than I would myself. It often happens that he irks the sound technicians by eliminating all the natural sounds, all the realism of the scene that carries a musical comment". And he ends with a compliment to his friend's sensibility who "believes that the cinema has not yet expressed everything it is capable of expressing. He has the true director's sensibility that coordinates all the elements into a whole. He is not a man of letters, but he knows how to make use of a literary expression with the utmost security. He does the same with music. This is a gift that other directors, who may be very fine musical connoisseurs or even good musicians, do not have at all."

Thus with Rota's music Fellini's films become something really special in artistic and evocative memory, doubtless more than either of the two would have been able to do without the other. (Naturally this does not refer to music apart from films). Something light and phantasmagorical while at the same time melancholy, grotesque or even downright gloomy. An ambiguity and a premonitory duplicity that could easily have delighted Luigi Pirandello when at the end of the Twenties he hoped for "cinematography, the pure expression of the two major senses, the eye and the ear, tuned onto the cinematography