

## Federico Fellini

Federico Fellini's films retained many of the same elements and themes throughout his career. His films are so distinctive that "Fellini-esque" has become a word used to describe a style of film making. Fellini's films often include an air of pageantry. The symbolism of a circus is a theme that enters into many of his films. He also often concerns himself with the emptiness he perceived in life. Fellini's characters are generally internally conflicted and disturbed. Although they have these common elements, Fellini's films clearly change over the course of his career. His earlier films, like *La Strada*, have linear plots in the neorealist style of the time. In his later films, Fellini abandoned simple plot lines for the grand symbolism of films like *La Dolce Vita* and *8 1/2*. Despite this shift over his career, Fellini's films never departed from their common fascination with the bizarre in human personality and the world.

As one of his earlier creations, *La Strada* is much more realistic than the films Fellini would make later in his career. The film is a simple tale of Zampano, a traveling performer, and Gelsomina, the young woman who assists his act. Zampano and Gelsomina travel the countryside together. Zampano is a brutish, animalistic man who cares for nothing beyond his basic needs. He relentlessly abuses the innocent and childlike Gelsomina. Gelsomina initially tries to flee from her captor but she eventually realizes that he loves her and she chooses to stay with him. Eventually Zampano crushes Gelsomina's spirit and she loses her mind. By the time Zampano realizes what he has done, it is too late and Gelsomina is dead.

Despite being poorly treated throughout the film, Gelsomina is so trusting and full of wonder that she tolerates the rough Zampano and manages to find beauty wherever they are along la strada. Zampano forces

Gelsomina to learn to play the trumpet and drums for his stage act and he beats her when she initially struggles. Even though her introduction to playing is unpleasant, Gelsomina loves the sound of her music and takes great pleasure in her accomplishments. Again and again, Gelsomina shows that she is the sweet and pure opposite of the bestial Zampano. While Zampano is waking from a night-long drunk in the light of the morning, Gelsomina is planting tomato plants by the side of the road. She is so taken with the world that, it initially seems, not even Zampano can crush her.

Though Gelsomina finds it difficult to flee Zampano's abuse she does try to run away on several occasions. One of her attempts to get away from Zampano leads her to a nearby town where she witnesses the performance of a high wire artist called The Fool. The differences between Zampano and The Fool are obvious from the very beginning. While Zampano looks the part of a dimwitted brute, The Fool appears much more whimsical. Zampano wears traveling clothes for his act. In contrast, The Fool has his own wardrobe for his acrobatic high wire show. When Gelsomina first witnesses The Fool on his tightrope, he is wearing a bumblebee costume. The two say little to each other when they meet after The Fool's act but the expressions on Gelsomina's round face tell the audience that here are two much more kindred spirits than the pairing of Gelsomina and Zampano.

Gelsomina's encounter with The Fool sets up the meeting of Zampano and the circus that The Fool performs in. The pair of Zampano and Gelsomina join the circus and begin to tour with them. However Zampano is unwilling to share his assistant and gets jealous and angry when Gelsomina spends time with The Fool. The Fool and Zampano are enemies from the start. The Fool teases the dim Zampano and the strongman replies the only way he knows, with physical force. Gelsomina is only an

excuse for the conflict between the pair. The true root of their mutual animosity is their opposite dispositions. The two characters, Zampano the brute and the free spirited Fool are opposite symbols that, as Fellini shows, can only be resolved when one triumphs over the other.

In *La Strada*, this resolution comes when Zampano meets The Fool on the road and kills him in front of Gelsomina. This one violent act finally crushes Gelsomina's innocence. After years of abuse she finally cracks, pushed over the edge by the horror of the murder. Tragically, it is just now that Zampano realizes that he loves her. Zampano is forced to leave Gelsomina, now terrified of the sight of him, by the side of the road. The movie ends when, some time later, Zampano finds out that Gelsomina has died. In a very typical Fellini image, the strongman flees to the beach, trying to find redemption. The sand and water give him no answers, the ugliness of Zampano has destroyed the beauty of Gelsomina.

The simple story line of *La Strada* is one of the last of its kind in Fellini's films. Despite the film's uncomplicated plot, it contains many symbols and elements that would show up repeatedly in Fellini's later, more abstract films. The circus element of the film is one that Fellini would reference even in films with no actual connection to any sort of traveling show. This is because Fellini saw the circus as a metaphor for life. He saw parallels between the wonder and whimsy of a carnival and the endless show of human life.

Another device that Fellini used in *La Strada*, and then used again in later films is the framing of his story with complementary first and last scenes. In the first scene in *La Strada*, Zampano goes to a seaside hovel and buys a girl from her poverty stricken mother. The distraught child, Gelsomina is then led away from her home on the beach. The last scene of the film has Gelsomina's opposite character, Zampano, returning to the

beach. Again the scene is tragic. Zampano is tormented with the knowledge that he is responsible for the death of the one he loved.

*La Dolce Vita* represents the first step Fellini took away from the strict realism of his early films. While *La Dolce Vita* is linear in the sense that it follows one character through a chronologically ordered period, it diverges from traditional storytelling by splitting its plot into vignettes. Each of these segments covers a night and a dawn in the life of a gossip reporter named Marcello. This episodic format is one that Fellini would use again in his films, particularly *Amarcord*.

*La Dolce Vita* chronicles the wealthy and famous who are living "the sweet life" along Rome's Via Veneto. The film's title is ironic because the movie shows "the sweet life" to be hollow and meaningless. Marcello pursues women endlessly without really knowing why. He aimlessly follows celebrities who are themselves wandering aimlessly. Marcello has vague aspirations to be a meaningful writer but he can never stay focused long enough to actually produce anything. The figure that he looks up to is an artist named Steiner whom Marcello thinks is living a life filled with happiness and purpose. He is proved wrong when Steiner kills his two children and himself. *La Dolce Vita* is a film about the emptiness of life. Fellini provides no relief from this theme until the last scene when we finally see something that is real, an ugly sea monster in a net.

The seven episodes contain many Felliniesque motifs. The circus puts in an appearance in the form of a media circus. One of the stories follows Marcello as he goes to report on a supposed holy apparition. The event draws huge crowds of reporters and the faithful. The mass of people gather in a small town and surround a tree where a couple of children say they saw the Virgin Mary. Meanwhile, the media sets up spotlights in a large circle around the proceedings. The crowd quickly turns into a mob as the children claim to see the Virgin everywhere. Chaos begins to over-

whelm the situation as the crowd frantically follows the children. A sudden downpour begins and the lights start to explode while the frenzied crowd shreds the tree in hopes of getting a holy relic as a souvenir. The whole scene has a disturbing carnival atmosphere. The children and the tree are the planned show but the audience is not contented, causing the circus to degenerate into a farcical mess.

The Fellini framing device is prominent again in *La Dolce Vita*. The first scene has Marcello in a convoy of helicopters carrying a statue of Jesus over Rome. The image is both beautiful and empty. The statue appears to be giving a benediction to the city that it hovers over, yet it is just a carved piece of stone. The worldly baseness of the scene is made clear when Marcello's helicopter makes a detour to look at some sunbathing women. Marcello tries to get their phone numbers but they have trouble communicating over the roar of the helicopter.

The final scene of the film takes place on a beach where some fishermen have just caught a large, ugly fish. The reality of the sea monster provides a contrast, both with the empty people that accompany Marcello and with the emptiness of the first scene. Furthermore, the idea of lost communication is repeated. Marcello sees a woman across an inlet, on the other side of the beach. He goes toward her and she tries to say something to him but he can not hear over the sound of the waves. He strains to talk to her but she is just out of hearing range. He is forced to leave her with their communication never completed.

*8 1/2* is Fellini's most fantastical film. Its main plot is constantly interrupted by flights of the character's imaginations. The film tells the story of a fictional director, based on Fellini himself, named Guido Anselmi. Guido has just made a hit movie. Since his great success, everyone wants a piece of him and he is constantly hounded by fans, actors and producers. He tries to escape from the pressure by going to a health spa. He is joined

there by his mistress, and eventually, his wife. In the meantime, he is expected to be working on his next film but he has a block and has no idea what his movie will be. Despite the total lack of a plan for the film, the producers have already spent a fortune on a giant rocket set piece. By the end of the film Guido is so overwhelmed by the demands made on him that he abandons the project totally. Throughout the film, we see Guido's true feelings only when they come out as short film sequences that diverge from the story.

Many of these little interludes incorporate elements of Guido's childhood. One important sequence shows Guido as a child visiting a prostitute named Saraghina in her small hut on the beach. The giant, rough Saraghina dances the rumba for the lusty boys who come to visit. Guido is caught by his priest and told that he is hopeless and that Saraghina is the devil. Another sequence has Guido in a house with all the women from his past. Everyone is getting along and he thinks that he has finally found the perfect place. However, a riot breaks out and, like a lion tamer in the circus, he tries to keep control of his women with a whip. These scenes show us that, in his confusion, Guido is turning to his past for answers but is only finding more questions.

The last scene of *8 1/2* is one of Fellini's typical carnival references. In the scene, Guido is dragged to the podium to speak about his new movie. He imagines himself crawling away under the table and committing suicide. Instead, he stays and announces that he is quitting the movie. The producers are incensed but he ignores them and goes to his wife to apologize. He says that he wants to stay with her and that he can commit to loving her, even at the expense of his career. His wife is sufficiently convinced and tells him that she will give him one more chance. The movie ends as clowns enter, playing circus music and leading all the characters in Guido's life in a giant circular parade around the half built rocket

ship. This scene again reflects Fellini's ideas that life is just one big circus.

In form, *Amarcord* is very similar to the episodes of *La Dolce Vita*. In subject matter it is a film rooted in Fellini's childhood. The town that it takes place in is largely based on Fellini's own hometown of Rimini. Many of the characters in *Amarcord* are based on people from Fellini's childhood. Since the film is so autobiographical, it provides a lot of insight into where Fellini's themes and characters came from.

In *Amarcord* we are shown the origins of the circuses, parades and lusty women that are so common in Fellini's films. The film follows Titta, a boy representing Fellini, as his town carries on its existence in Fascist Italy. We see the festivals, the Fascist parades and the women that clearly influenced Fellini's development and, hence, his films. Several episodes take place along the beach that would later figure so heavily into Fellini's film making.

*Amarcord* is another example of a Fellini film with framing scenes. The very first shot is a view of the white dandelion seeds, floating on the breeze, signaling the start of spring. This is an incredible image that Fellini also used for the last shot of his film. The reuse of the image at the end of the film gives the audience a sense that it is not the end. Instead, the reappearance of the dandelion shows that a new spring is just beginning.

Women figure heavily into all of Fellini's films. Fellini was both obsessed with and terrified of women. From an early age he loved women, but was also scared of them. The female characters in Fellini's films tend to be of two varieties. One is the innocent paragon and the other is the lusty, seductive prostitute. The "good" women are often thin and the "bad" women are usually big and busty. Both characters have their root in Fellini's childhood and, concurrently, in *Amarcord*. Gradisca is a slender

and inaccessible beautician in *Amarcord*. In contrast, the tobacconist is an imposing woman with giant breasts. Titta is both drawn to and terrified of both of these women. He surmounts his fears and attempts to express himself to the women. Gradisca brushes him off, much to his embarrassment. He succeeds in arousing the tobacconist and she exposes her breasts to him and tells him to suck on them. While Titta inexpertly attempts to do so, the objects of his desire ironically begin to smother him. The tobacconist laughs at him and sends him away.

Both the pure and the sinful women typecasts would appear again in Fellini's films. The innocent waif Gelsomina is the most obvious example of the first type. Guido's imagined muse in *8 1/2* is another similar character. The tobacconist type has at least one reincarnation in all of Fellini's films. In *La Strada* Zampano spends a night with a prostitute who resembles the tobacconist. In *La Dolce Vita*, Marcello meets many women who fit the character. Most notable among these is the American sex symbol Sylvia who captivates Marcello and leads him to famously wade in the Trevi fountain. Saraghina of *8 1/2* is yet another version of this same character.

Fellini's films have many elements that are common to all but each movie is unique in many respects. The varied films that Fellini directed are so identifiable as his that Felliniesque is a perfectly clear film definition for anyone who has seen even a few of his creations. His distinctive and innovative film style make Federico Fellini both an auteur and a great artist.