

# Introduction

## Political Fellini?



This book sets out a “political” reading of Fellini and discusses the relationship between his films and Italian ideology.

In the popular mind, Fellini is synonymous with dream, creative freedom, visual inventiveness, poetry. The notion of a political Fellini might therefore seem rather odd.

And yet, at the filmmaker’s funeral, Ettore Scola said that, in his opinion, Fellini “contrary to all appearance” had been “the most political Italian film director.” Scola did not seem to mean that Fellini’s films espouse a political thesis or enshrine specific political ideas. What he appears to have been suggesting is that Fellini’s imaginative “elsewhere,” beyond any sort of political grouping or affiliation, shows a deeper and better understanding of the essence of the Italian identity than other filmmakers had been capable of demonstrating.

Fellini is part of a long line of intellectuals and artists, from Leopardi to Pasolini, who investigated the relationship between the Italian identity and modernity in its many social, cultural, and political manifestations.

Fellini’s lack of interest in politics is well known and is an essential part of his myth. In the history of Italian cinema, Fellini was the least “engaged” director. In some ways, the insistence of critics and of Fellini himself on this aspect of his work served to justify the anomaly of his films within the rather regimented context of postwar Italian cinema.

Camouflaged behind the myth of the artist outside history, Fellini was the great exception in Italian culture. When in *Amarcord* he told the story of Italian fascism as no political film had ever managed to do, or in the allegory of *Prova d’orchestra* he portrayed the profound crisis of Italian democracy, he demonstrated what he had always been: an auteur whose

imagination fed off the conflicting trajectories of Italian modernity, a kind of seismograph, able to pick up even the faintest tremors in customs and the political and cultural life of the country.

Seen in a political light, the motifs of his work, the nostalgia for childhood, the phantoms of femininity, the invention of memory, the dreamwork—dwelled on at length by the critics—take on a pathological connotation, i.e., they become the allegory of a nation unable to leave its adolescence behind it, trapped by its own history in an immaturity that is uniquely Italian.

The apparent repression of the “political” in his work has an emblematic significance:

I realize that mine may be a neurotic attitude, a refusal to grow up, determined perhaps in part by growing up under fascism and hence uneducated, disinclined to take part in any form of politics that was not demonstrative, people parading in the streets; while feeling throughout that *politics is for grown-ups* .... The whole Anglo-Saxon mythology of *democracy*, this lesson of civilization and political awareness, has perhaps passed us by, has not been an integral part of our culture, and in some way has left us with the conviction that politics is always something done by someone else, people who know how.<sup>1</sup>

While Italian comedy investigated these motifs above all sociologically, Fellini turned them into powerful visions. The symbolic forms, such as the figure of Christ lifted by helicopter and the monstrous fish in *La dolce vita*, the transatlantic liner *Rex* in *Amarcord*, the obscure wrecking ball in *Prova d'orchestra*, the rhinoceros in *E la nave va*, and similar examples, are—among other things—a commentary on the traumatic dimension of Italian modernity.

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At the end of the sixties, the theoretical journal of the Soviet Communist Party, *Kommunist*, attacked the prevailing criticism of Fellini's films, affirming that the subjective deformation of the world by no means concealed “the acute representation of the agony of capitalist civilization.” The journal took issue with Fellini himself and the way he talked about his films. “There is an objective sense to his films,” the house organ of the PCUS went on, “which opens up far vaster horizons than those the director himself wishes to deal with, even at the expense of—and contradicting—his own artistic conceptions.”<sup>2</sup>

These horizons, I think, have not been investigated systematically by criticism.

In a book by Peter Bondanella, one of the leading experts in the field of Fellini literature, there is a chapter on *Amarcord* and *Prova d'orchestra* entitled *Fellini and Politics*; there are some hints of politics in Tullio Kezich's biography of Fellini; look hard and something comes to light from the essays and almost endless amount of material dedicated to individual films and aspects of his cinema. Interesting is a piece by Pietro Angelini, published in 1974, with the significant title *Controfellini* (Counter-Fellini) which, in line with the cultural Marxism of the time, analyzes the ideological ambiguities of Fellini's cinema. Of a more documentary nature is Angelo Olivieri's booklet on Fellini's work as a political cartoonist from 1938 to 1947 for some satirical and humorous newspapers of the period, notably *420*, *Marc'Aurelio*, and *Il Travaso delle idee*. It shows how in the postwar period Fellini managed to work both as a neorealist screenwriter and as an anti-Communist satirist for *Il Travaso*.

This book does not attempt to interpret the whole of Fellini's work. What I seek to do principally is to outline an area of investigation that has been largely neglected and that I hope may stimulate further research into Fellini and the cultural history of Italian cinema.

Some films, such as *I clowns* and *Toby Dammit* (an episode in *Tre passi nel delirio*) are barely mentioned. Others, for reasons of space, are discussed only briefly. I do not deal with the films chronologically. I have decided to focus on just a few topics. For example, *La dolce vita* crops up repeatedly and many different aspects of the film are analyzed in chapters 1 and 4, as well as in the chapter dedicated to it.

I have looked at contemporary sources, the newspapers and journals of the day—not only specialist publications—and I have attempted to reconstruct some of the important debates that accompanied the films. They include the discussion of *La strada* in the mid fifties and the raging polemics that were prompted by *Prova d'orchestra*, *La città delle donne*, and *Ginger e Fred*. Today, these indicate how paradoxical and emblematic the artistic trajectory of Fellini was, from fascism to the symbolic end of the First Republic. Where *La strada* indicated the political point of no return for neorealism and for the engagement of Communist intellectuals, *Ginger e Fred* can be considered the first anti-Berlusconi parody, ten years before Berlusconi entered the political arena.

Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are more theoretical. From a number of different points of view, the introductory first and second chapter set out the essential thesis of the book, i.e., the political dimension of the perpetual childhood represented in Fellini's films. If Fellini is now a major figure in the anthropological history of the country, and emblem of what is quintessentially "Italian"—alongside Dante and, say, Ferrari sports cars—the ways,

reasons, and mechanisms involved in this process of symbolic acquisition are far from simple and should not be taken for granted, particularly in view of the fact that Italian culture has always been so closely related to politics.

Chapter 4 focuses on the “elective affinities” between Fellini and Rome, and revisits them in the light of the visual culture of fascism and the mirroring effects of the relations between Fellini’s imagination and the pursuit of the myth of Rome harbored by Mussolini.

Three chapters constitute a reading of Italian modernity, partly stimulated by, and borrowing from, Giulio Bollati, Silvana Patriarca, and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg in relation to the construction of national character and identity, as well as the important studies of fascism by Emilio Gentile.

The Appendix at the end of the book includes intriguing materials and documents from the Andreotti archives, including the correspondence between Fellini and the many-times prime minister of Italy.

## Notes

1. F. Fellini, *Intervista sul cinema* (Interview on the Cinema), ed. Giovanni Grazzini, (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 2004 [1983]), 15–16.

2. The opportunity arose from the publication of a book edited by Georgi Bogemski, *Federico Fellini: Stat’i: Interov’ju: Recenzii: Vospominanija* (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1968). Also see C. Fracassi, “Così vedono Fellini in URSS. Un realista suo malgrado” [How They See Fellini in the USSR: A Realist Despite Himself], *Paese Sera*, 22 September 1969.