

Federico Fellini Season

Tuesday 03 March: I Vitelloni

Wednesday 18 March: Otto e Mezzo -8½-

Tuesday 31 March: Giulietta Degli Spiriti
Eden Court, Playhouse Cinema, at 19:15.



8½: A Film with Itself as Its Subject

By Alexander Sesonske (*From the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*)

8½: a bizarre and puzzling title, but one precisely appropriate for this film, which announces in its first frame that modernism has reached the cinema. If the mark of modernism in art is self-reference, *8½* surely goes beyond any predecessor in having itself as its subject. By 1963, Federico Fellini had made, by his count, seven and a half films. Hence *8½* is like an opus number: this is film number eight and a half in the Fellini catalogue. *8½* is a film about making a film, and the film that is being made is *8½*. Notice how everything Guido says about the film he is making turns out to be true of *8½*, even the sailor doing a soft-shoe dance; how all the screen tests are for roles in the film we are seeing; how some camera movements create an ambiguity between Guido, the director in the film, and Fellini, the director of the film, thus taking self-reference one step beyond the work to its maker.

It was perhaps this last level of self-reference that led some critics in the mid-1960s to dismiss *8½* as autobiographical trivia, brilliant on its surface but devoid of significant content—a criticism already made within the film by Daumier, the writer. Its surface flow of images dazzles us with sharp contrasts of black and white, startling eruptions from off-screen, unexpected changes of scene, and a virtuoso display of all the possibilities and effects of camera movement. We find almost a catalogue of humanity in its stream of faces; some of them are momentary visions, while others persist through the film and long after in our memory, such as Saraghina, that lumbering monster transformed into the embodiment of joyous life and movement. But Fellini's brilliance reaches beyond the surface to include an intricate structure of highly original, highly imaginative scenes whose conjunction creates an unprecedented interweaving of memories, fantasies, and dreams with the daily life of his hero and alter ego, Guido Anselmi. This made *8½* the most influential film of the 1960s, liberating filmmakers everywhere from the conventions of time, place, and mode of experience that had prevailed in cinema for decades.

In a film in which almost every scene is memorable, within its own pace and ambience, its characteristic forms of movement and emotional tone, some scenes are extraordinary: a childhood reminiscence of a farmhouse overflowing with warmth, love, and security, and an ascent into an enchanted darkness where the magical words *asa nisi masa* promise wealth and happiness; a boyhood flight from the stifling confines of a Catholic school to the voluptuous marvels of Saraghina's rhumba, with its grotesque aftermath of cruel punishment and guilt; young Guido being told that Saraghina is the devil, though a descent, like Dante, into hell, reveals a cardinal enthroned at the centre of the inferno, solemnly repeating that there is no salvation outside the church; a whirling, riotous harem scene that mocks the absurdities of male fantasy.



Fellini began his career in the motion picture world in 1945, as writer for and assistant to the neorealist director Roberto Rossellini, but by the time he directed his own first film, his vivid imagination had begun to replace reality as the central source of his inspiration. Through the 1950s, he explored the fantasies and illusions that both sustain and destroy us, in films peopled with characters whose lives run outside the normal streams of everyday experience: circus

performers, swindlers, prostitutes. Then *La dolce vita*, a huge, sprawling evisceration of contemporary urban high life, made him an international celebrity and presented him with that most stultifying challenge for an artist: after such a success, what can you do next?



Fellini responded, finally, with *8½*, making the challenge itself his subject and expressing the stultification in Guido's confusion and inability to choose. He used this as an opportunity to probe the mystery of artistic creation and the problems of human relations created by a society whose traditional education portrays women as either sacred or profane, either mother or whore. Serious problems, but his film is comic. Hence none of the questions posed are ever really answered, for, as Guido/Fellini tells us, he has nothing to say. But his complete mastery of film technique and form speaks for him, shaping a purely formal solution for Guido in an imaginary dance of acceptance and communion that leaves us, the spectators, feeling a glow of happy resolution as young Guido, now dressed in white, leads his clown band into the darkness.

One puzzle that remains unresolved for most viewers of *8½* is the meaning of *asa nisi masa*. "Say the magic words, and when the picture moves its eyes, we'll all be rich." The words derive from a children's game, like pig latin, in which one takes a word, doubles each of its vowels, and then puts the letter s between them. So, run backward, the root word is *anima*, the Italian word for soul or spirit. Daumier dismisses all this as another idle childhood memory, devoid of all poetic inspiration. Yet in the film, the utterance of "asa nisi masa" works like magic, releasing the wonderful flow of the joyful life of the farmhouse scene. And the childish promise is hardly idle, for it was when the picture moved its eye—when Fellini found his true *métier* in motion pictures—that we all became enriched.

Next... Giulietta Degli Spiriti

Tuesday 31 March, Playhouse Cinema, 19:15

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