

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.



The setting is the seaside town of Rimini, the birthplace of Fellini, and the source of so many experiences which were to colour this and other films (like *Amarcord*, made exactly 20 years later). The simple plot follows the adventures of five youths who refuse to grow up and accept responsibility. Only one of them, Moraldo (Fellini's alter ego), comes to understand that life in the small town and the way they live it, is ultimately an empty existence. He is able to pack up and go, leaving his friends behind to continue with their meaningless games that give them a momentary release and security, but ultimately turns them into puppets to forces beyond their control.

In the long dream of image and spectacle that was Federico Fellini's career, *I Vitelloni* occupies a focal point. Filmed in 1953, between the brilliant but somewhat superficial *The White Sheik* (1952) and his first fully characteristic work, *La Strada* (1954), *I Vitelloni* marks a big step forward in Fellini's ability to get deep into his characters' psychology; it points ahead both to the bitter social satire of *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and to the great canvases of nostalgia and the artist's nature, *8 1/2* (1963), *Amarcord*—and the neglected late masterpiece *Intervista* (1987).

In terms of technique, *I Vitelloni* may be the least "Fellinesque" of the director's major films. It makes far less use of the odd foreshortenings, the unexpected close-ups, the expert manipulation of relations between foreground and background that formed so much of Fellini's expressive vocabulary, and there are fewer of the gargoyles and dreamlike surreal characters that populate his most recognizable work. In places the camera

work is uncharacteristically static, as in the early scenes in which Fausto prepares to leave his father's house after learning that Sandra is pregnant.

Yet despite its relatively conventional technique, *I Vitelloni* takes the first definitive plunge into many of Fellini's dominant thematic and imagistic preoccupations: arrested development in men, marriage and infidelity, the life of provincial towns versus the city, the melancholy and mystery of deserted night-time streets, the seashore, the movies themselves. Many of these themes and major images can be found in somewhat germinal form in *The White Sheik*, and even to some degree in *Variety Lights*. But in *I Vitelloni* they move from being accessories to the action to being the heart of the matter.

I Vitelloni hangs us on the horns of an insoluble dilemma that lives at the center of Fellini's work. That dilemma takes subtly shifting forms but ultimately seems to stem from the tension between childhood's sense of wonder and possibility, with its undertow of infantile dependency and decay if the individual can't grow up, and, on the other hand, the practical and realistic understanding of life's responsibilities and costs, which carries its own undertow of possible stultification, cynicism and corruption. This tension finds its most pointed expression in the repeated images, throughout Fellini's films, of the exploitation of the mysterious, beautiful or sacred by those whose ego or lust for power has blinded them to what is most precious. *I Vitelloni* brings this imagery into the centre of the picture for the first time.



The vitelloni (the word means “large young calves”) are a sort of provincial Rat Pack, living off mothers and sisters and fathers, dressing beautifully, chasing women and idling their time away in a small seaside town modeled apparently on Fellini's home town of Rimini. Alberto Sordi and Leopoldo Trieste, both of whom played major roles in *The White Sheik*, are outstanding here; likewise Franco Fabrizi, who as Fausto bears an eerie resemblance to the young Elvis Presley. Franco Interlenghi plays Moraldo, the thoughtful one and the only one who seriously questions the life they lead. Riccardo Fellini, the director's brother, is somewhat less defined as a character—Zeppo among the Marx Brothers.

Against their narcissism and lassitude is posed the solidity and maturity of the town's older men, who have assumed the standard responsibilities of middle-class family life. But admirable as they may be, these solid citizens—unimaginative, satisfied with their lot, stuck in the same places—are hardly made to seem a stimulating alternative, and at the end Moraldo leaves the town's tape loop of foreclosed possibilities for another arena of possibility in the city.

In *8 1/2*, Fellini's alter ego, the director Guido, also caught between childhood and maturity, obsessively unfaithful to his wife, and unable to endow his film-in-progress with an explainable theme or a plot with a definable shape, finally creates the great circus mandala in which everyone and everything has a place—an echo of the procession at the end of *Nights of Cabiria*—representing acceptance and inclusion, a transcendence

of the polarities of existence.

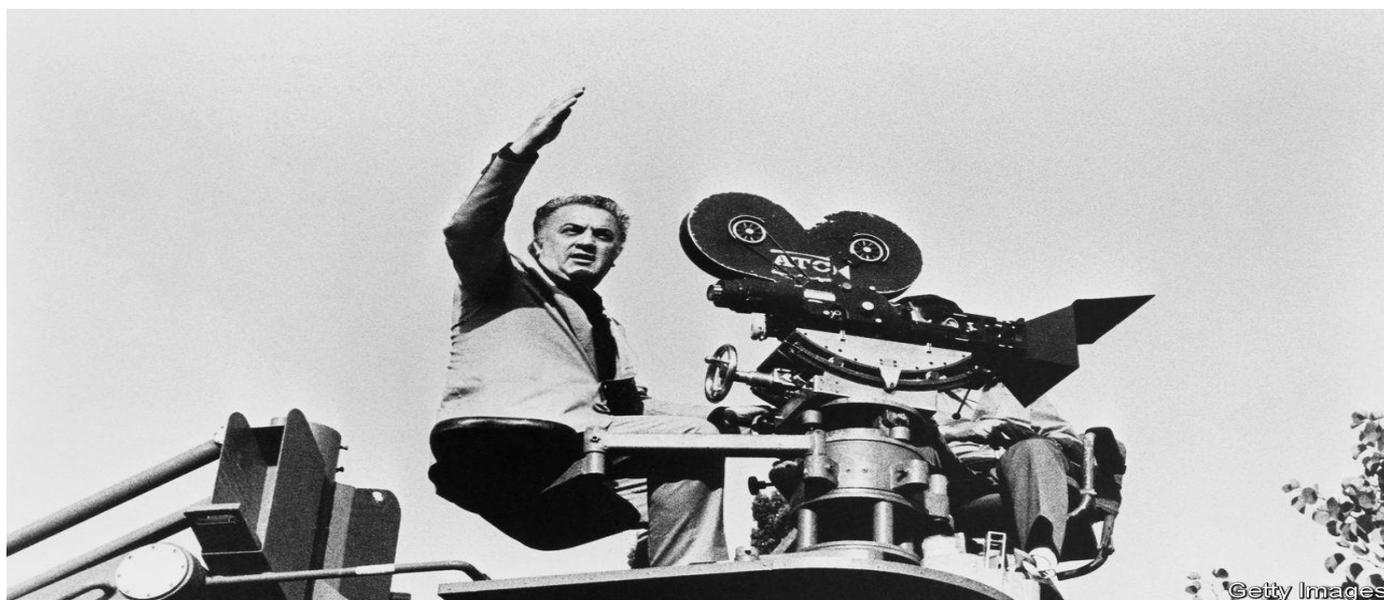
I Vitelloni, filmed nine years earlier, offers no such reliable image of wholeness and acceptance. The closest it comes is the character of the station boy (also named Guido) with whom Moraldo passes time now and again during his nocturnal ramblings, and who watches Moraldo leave town at the end. It is worth remembering that *I Vitelloni* ends not on the image of Moraldo leaving amid the glimpses of the sleeping vitelloni, but on the station boy walking down the tracks, back toward town. Young Guido has a simple relation to his work, and, most importantly, seems to accept life as a gift and a grace. “Are you happy?” Moraldo asks him at one point, and the boy responds, “Why not?” It is a stance that Fellini reserved for some of the characters he plainly loved the most—the Fool in *La Strada*, Cabiria shrugging and smiling into the camera as she joins the procession at the end of *Nights of Cabiria*, Guido summoning everyone into the moving circle at the end of *8 1/2*.

I Vitelloni is full of subtle and beautifully achieved dramatic and comic moments: Alberto standing next to Fausto and blocking Sandra as they pose for the wedding photo; Leopoldo in a narcissistic trance reading his cliché-laden play to the aging actor and lecher Natali as the latter gorges himself and the vitelloni flirt with the female members of the actor’s troupe; the hilarious mixture in the troupe’s performance of sentimentality, military imagery, and vulgar erotic display. Throughout, Nino Rota’s score strikes its own characteristic balance from vulgarity and aching nostalgia; a wonderful segment is the segue between the frenetic carnival celebration in which the band plays a breakneck version of the old pop song “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” (Rota liked this song, and used it again in *La Dolce Vita*) to the scene after the ball, a couple of vitelloni and their partners still dancing amid the tatters of the party to a solitary trumpeter playing the same tune, moving it up in key a half-step each time, until finally the badly soused Alberto shouts at him to stop.

In one of the film’s most important sequences, Fausto convinces Moraldo to help him steal a statue of an angel from his former employer’s shop. They try unsuccessfully to sell it at a convent and at a monastery before entrusting it to the idiot fisherman Giudizio for safekeeping overnight. Giudizio (the name means “judgment”), alone with the statue after toting it around all day, sets it up outside his hovel and regards it in awe, doffing his cap and stroking the statue’s arm and hair. It is a touching and subtle moment, one that finds its echo in most of Fellini’s subsequent films, above all in *La Strada*, which is a sort of extended fugue on the subject.

I Vitelloni is also the first of Fellini’s films to use the open-ended form that would mark his major work from then on. Allergic to endings that sum things up too neatly, or that resolve in a definitive way the tensions set up in the film, Fellini once remarked, “Our duty as storytellers is to bring people to the station. There each person will choose his or her own train... But we must at least take them to the station... to a point of departure.” It is a striking image, one foreign to many popular storytellers: the ending of a story seen not as an arrival, but rather as a prepared departure. *I Vitelloni*, of course, brings us literally to the station at its end, with Moraldo’s departure from his provincial town. But on a deep level the film was Fellini’s point of departure, too—the beginning of his important work as a filmmaker, the place where he got serious. And as he made clear at the end of *Intervista*, the only thing that kept Fellini truly happy was his work; the end of any project was a kind of death, overcome only at the moment at which one was ready to begin again, to try and get it right one more time.

Essay written by Tom Piazza for the BFI Fellini season at the National Film Theatre, London.



Next... Otto e Mezzo -8 ½-

**Wednesday 18 March, Playhouse Cinema, 19:15
(sadly enough not at 8:30).**

