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Federico Fellini: Director as Protagonist

Alberto Moravia

Translated from L'ESPRESSO, Rome

Federico Fellini has given his latest film an opus number: 8½. It is his eighth full-length film, but there is some question about the one-half. According to some, it refers to a film he co-directed some years ago with Alberto Lattuada; others think Fellini had his Bocaccio 70 episode in mind. Far from denying that his study of a film director in crisis is autobiographical, Fellini has described 8½ as "something between an unhinged psychoanalytic session and a haphazard examination of conscience in a kind of limbo". Italy's leading film critic and theoretician, Guido Aristarco, writes that "impressionist" Fellini "for the first time aligns himself with a peculiar kind of avant-garde literature, influenced in some respects by Antonioni's later works and even more by Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. . . . His is a hypnotic power. But when he has to probe deeply he rarely succeeds. However fascinating and

however rich in truly artistic passages the film may be, it reveals—if not on first viewing certainly on the second—its lack of genuine subject matter and its shortcomings as an expression of the avant-garde."

Novelist Alberto Moravia, who reviews films for the weekly L'Espresso, sees 8½ as the courageous confession of a man without subject matter.

THE LEITMOTIF of European culture in Stendhal's day was demonic vitality, youthful and fierce. The leitmotif of contemporary culture, however, seems to be neurotic impotence, or the collapse of creative powers due to lack of vitality. Today nearly everyone is afflicted with a shortage of vital energy, but artists—whether by the very nature of their work or because they are more aware, more sensitive—suffer most. Yet, as far as I know, few have had the courage to be honest about this fundamental drama of our age. Hemingway, for example, who had a reputation for virility and creativity, chose suicide rather than admit, to himself or to others, that he was no longer the strong and sanguine man he had been in his youth. Perhaps the only author who had the courage to face reality was Scott Fitzgerald in *The Crackup*. Yet

A scene from 8½



realism is, or should be, stronger than any feeling of impotence. When he has nothing further to say, the realist can always tell us how and why he has nothing further to say.

This is what Federico Fellini has done in his latest film, *8½*. Actually, *8½* has no plot at all. It might be called Fellini's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; like Pirandello's play, it deals with the mysteries of artistic creation. However, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the work of a sophisticated and disciplined writer while *8½* is the revolt of an exuberant temperament against its antithesis. The film has a pitiless sincerity that is sometimes even embarrassing. If nothing else, in tackling the theme of a collapse of vitality, Fellini has provided conclusive evidence of vital energy.

The film may have no plot, but it does have a theme, and this theme is developed on various levels. Guido Anselmi, the famous director, is under contract to make a film, but for the first time his powers of expression fall short of his ambitions. Guido simply isn't up to it. He goes to a spa to take the waters, talks with the actors and the producer, dreams, meditates, racks his brains—but all in vain. Then the idea of suicide passes through his mind. But the realistic solution, to which I have alluded above, comes to his aid *in extremis*; he won't kill himself, he won't give up—he'll make a film about the fact that he can't make it: he'll accept and go forward to meet his destiny.

Fellini's character is an erotomane, a sadist, a masochist, a mythomaniac, a man afraid of life who longs to return to the womb, a clown, a deceiver and a swindler. In some ways he recalls Leopold Bloom, the hero of Joyce's *Ulysses* which Fellini has obviously read with attention. The film is totally introverted, which is to say that it is essentially an interior monologue only rarely interrupted by fragments of reality. Fellini illustrates this modern neurosis with an impressive clinical accuracy that may occasionally be involuntary. Everything is there: the sense of absurdity inspired by an oppressive and incomprehensible reality, the transformation of life into dream and dream into life, the nostalgia for childhood (age of energy and vitality which has the further advantage of protective maternal love), the horror of the sexual relationship that impoverishes and emasculates, creative velleity, disgust at reality, flight from responsibility and, finally, flirtation with suicide. It is important to note that Fellini is not ascribing all this to deep-rooted social causes as he did in *La dolce vita*; *8½* centers on a purely individual psychology—which not infrequently borders on pathology.



Director



"Director"

Given the nature of the film, it is not surprising that Fellini should have frequently deserted realism for surrealism. Actually, the latter is the form of expression that best suits dreams and, up to a certain point, memories. And *8½* is largely made up of dreams and memories. Fellini has a marked ability to assimilate; while watching this film the famous surrealist painters often come to mind, from De Chirico to Dali, from Max Ernst to Delvaux. Echoes of Joyce, specifically of the Circe episode in the Dublin brothel, keep recurring during the long sequence in which the protagonist dreams he possesses a harem. Then there is Pirandello, who emerges in the final section. But Fellini, with his baroque and riotous imagination, succeeds in making all these elements his. They are not derivations, but analogies. Fellini's dreams are always surprising and, in a metaphorical sense, original, but a more delicate and more profound sentiment pervades his recollections. This is why the episode of childhood in the house in the Romagna countryside and the one in which the adolescent meets the woman on the Rimini beach are the best in this film and among the best in all of Fellini. Generally speaking, the first part, which includes a macabre and pitiless satire of the world of the spa, is superior to the second part,

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which occasionally tends to drag and is perhaps too explicit at the end.

8½ is an important film both for Fellini's career and for our cinema. It indicates a crisis and the successful resolution of it, and at the same time it demonstrates Fellini's unique ability to create cinema out of any kind of subject matter and to rise again, like a phoenix, out of his own ashes. Compared with *La dolce vita*, this seems to be a better film, more poetic, more assimilated and more consistent, even though less ambitious and less spectacular. The very characterization of the intellectual, a complete success after the poorly drawn one of *La dolce vita*, is enough to show Fellini's development both as critic and artist.