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The Question of Fellini Continued

Mahler is reported to have proclaimed, "A symphony should be like the world — it should contain everything!" and Guido Anselmi, the director in *8½*, echoes him. Fellini, in his recent films, has become a cinematic Mahler. *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*, if they are not exactly like *the* world, attempt to squeeze in all that Fellini can of his own world. Limitingly but not disqualifyingly personal, they manage to draw the most heterogeneous material into a unity, by relating everything to a central psyche, which is more (in *8½*) or less (in *La Dolce Vita*) that of the director. If certain episodes alienate in isolation, because of their vulgarity or exhibitionism, they become subsumed into the total structure when the film is considered as a whole, and their significant relationship to other passages proves them indispensable (like the vulgar, apparently banal marches, etc., that at first sight disfigure, but in fact set off the grandeur of, Mahler's symphonies). Nor is it valid to criticize *8½* for the initial confusingness of its unexplained juxtaposition of dream, memory, fantasy, subjective reality, etc. For one thing, on a second viewing it is perfectly clear at any given moment what level of reality one is on; for another, the whole film explores subjectively the "world" of a man for whom fantasy and reality are hopelessly confused — it is essential that no clear-cut discrimination be made between the levels.

Yet the central weakness of these films *does* lie in the indecisive function of their protagonists — our uncertainty as to the exact nature of their relationship to Fellini himself. In *La Dolce Vita* one was inclined to give Fellini the benefit of the doubt and see the protagonist's shortcomings as viewed and judged more objectively than the film really justified, when looked at with a detachment a Fellini film wisely never encourages. In *8½* one is constantly troubled by doubt as to whether we are meant to find the hero, with the arrested infantilism apparent in his relationships both with wife and mistress, so distasteful. Furthermore, Fellini here trades too much on our awareness of his large measure of self-identification with his hero, whose alleged genius remains for the spectator merely alleged. The film finally suffers in the comparison with Mahler because, for all the dazzling and unflagging invention and virtuosity and (always Fellini's saving grace) the disarming humor, the grandeur of spirit is almost entirely lacking.

The earlier, less ambitious films do not suffer from this vaguely defined personal intrusion of the director; but they are seriously flawed by a self-indulgence that, in *Nights of Cabiria*, coincides with an indulgence of Giulietta Masina.

Robin Wood