

# Fellini's Rome and the Practice of Everyday Life

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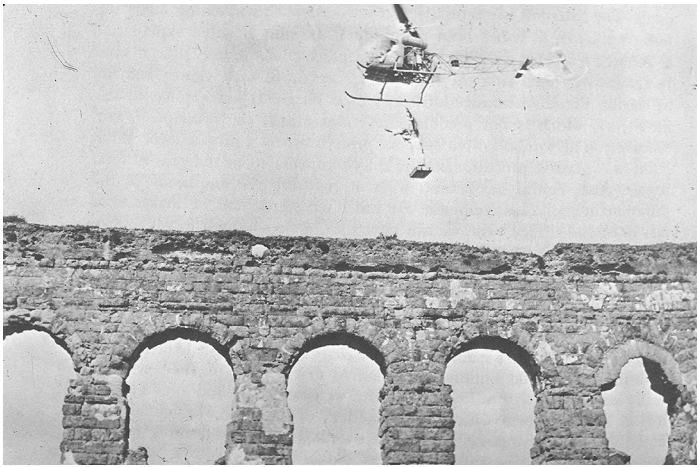


Fig. 1. *San Felice Aqueduct, (La Dolce Vita).*

In 1960, Federico Fellini featured the San Felice aqueduct in the opening frames of *La Dolce Vita*.<sup>1</sup> Its raw masonry arcades evoke powerful associations with ancient traditions, but very different symbols of time, place and humanity disrupt the halcyon scene. Two helicopters hover above the aqueduct, one carrying a statue of Christ, the other ferrying a reporter and photographer who record the spectacle. The aqueduct marks the beginning of the statue's journey to the Vatican. Fleeting it sweeps over the city, passing anonymous new buildings, nearby construction sites, and upscale apartment terraces. No signifiers of the historic city appear until the dome of St. Peter's basilica comes into view. For an instant the sacrosanct figure, its arms spread in a gesture of blessing, dangles over Bernini's Piazza S. Pietro (1656-67). Fellini's chaotic urban panorama chastened by the serene symbol of the church pits the time-tried values of Christianity against the sterility of the postwar city, a place resistant to traditional morality and religious dogma. Through contrasting images of the beauty of ancient ruins and the cacophony of an ever-modernizing urban land-

scape, Fellini confronts architectural symbols fraught with meaning in a city that self-consciously engages all of its past in the invention of its present. This paper considers how Fellini's representation of the iconic and the everyday in Rome articulates profound intersections between ordinary spatial practices and spectacular structures of power.

Enduring myths had lured generations of foreign artists to Rome's ancient enclaves. Like them, Fellini, born in Rimini in 1920, was an outsider. To his eyes, Rome was a creation of the modern world, a symbol of decadence and vitality that was absent in the provinces.<sup>2</sup> Through the representation of ordinary scenes of life invaded by extravagant or inappropriate elements, Fellini captured his understanding of Rome in "some of the most powerful images in the history of art."<sup>3</sup> In so doing, he created a visual culture so distinct that his name has become a generic term, "Felliniesque." Architectural imagery figures significantly in this remarkable aesthetic.

Fellini came to Rome in the spring of 1939 seeking work as a journalist. Through the war years he pursued opportunities in screenwriting,<sup>4</sup> but Fellini's involvement with the cinema—and with the critical, yet scenographic, representation of the city—began in earnest when in 1945 he collaborated with Roberto Rossellini on Rome, *Open City*. The film, a documentary about the Italian resistance, became a hallmark of Italian neo-realism, a genre distinguished by its use of actual locations to represent real social and economic conditions.<sup>5</sup> Nearly as soon as Fellini began to produce films independently, he drew reproach from Marxist critics who judged his reliance on symbols and emphasis on human feelings inconsistent with the neo-realist perspective.<sup>6</sup> For Fellini, however, neo-realism was a matter of "looking at reality with an honest eye."<sup>7</sup> So doing engaged memory and psychic realities that could be magnified by the careful pictorial design of a scene.

Rome, especially Rome as Fellini first encountered it commands his cinematic vernacular. It was then, according to the director:

...a tiny casbah of furnished rooms around the main station with...frightened immigrants, prostitutes...and Chinamen selling ties...sleazy pizza-bars and neon restaurants...it wasn't even Rome...it was some fairy-tale vision.<sup>8</sup>

At once an astonished voyeur and a knowing guide, Fellini represents Rome as an aggregate of discourses, *mises en scenes*, and sites of visual culture that he has described from three different viewpoints: a realm of "fossilized ruins" — the ancient city; a sprawling "city of desolation" — the modern city; and the "psychic city" — an inescapable atmosphere that offers comfort, but, nevertheless, inhibits the growth and development of the "willful children" that are its citizens.<sup>9</sup> On film, each face of Rome is fragmentary, defined by spatial practices and revealed through accumulated pasts.

#### A REALM OF FOSSILIZED RUINS

Fellini examines Rome's mythic and modern epochs through absolute juxtaposition of the past and the present. The pre-modern city is set apart in Rome's historical collective, but it is also vulnerable to the indifferent, oftentimes disquieting, practices of contemporary urban life. Fellini relies on rich and accessible architectural and urban fabric to demonstrate how a great city can be shaken suddenly by contemporary forces that defy all calculation.<sup>10</sup> For example, the dome of St. Peter's basilica, introduced in the opening sequence of *La Dolce Vita*, reappears to mock the tourist gaze in a scene that introduces Sylvia, an American film star lost in a carefully contrived tour of the city.<sup>11</sup> The camera captures her treacherous climb to the top of the dome. In lieu of its familiar classical profile, the narrow steps and constricted space between its walls set the scene. While Sylvia dashes up the steps, oblivious to the irony of a sex symbol so defiantly conquering Christianity's most sacred site, an entourage of paparazzi and reporters lag behind. Only Sylvia and Marcello, a character based in part upon the director's formative experiences as a reporter, ascend to the top. After they descend, the seductive pair grace the balcony; simultaneously, the arms of Bernini's colonnade and the vista of the Via delle Conciliazione appear below them. As the fashionable couple and the divine landscape meld, Fellini reveals Rome to be a city of doubles where the sacred and the profane coexist in delicate balance.



Fig. 2. Overlooking Piazza S. Pietro, (*La Dolce Vita*).

The serenity of the ancient city and its vulnerability to modern corruption also permeates *La Dolce Vita*'s Trevi Fountain scene. Following an evening of debauchery in a night club set in the Baths of Caracalla, Sylvia and Marcello drive into the night, finally arriving at an aged, yet unidentifiable place in the old city. A silent journey through narrow streets and arcaded passages steeped in the mystique of antiquity brings Sylvia to the landmark fountain. Enraptured by its visual power, awash with a shocking white light against the dark city sky, Sylvia wades in and performs as if the fountain were a wet Baroque stage. Marcello joins her. But as he attempts to consummate their dip in the fountain with a kiss, the water suddenly shuts off, and dawn returns the city to modern exigencies. Again, the disjuncture of the old city and the spatial practices of its modern inhabitants are underscored by Fellini's framing of the scene. Shooting at an oblique angle, the director obliterates potent memories of picture-postcard images of Neptune and the tritons, focusing instead on the rough marble ledge from which they rise.

In *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini's character formations, which are essential to this story line, evolve synchronously with the spaces of the city. In contrast, the city and its history are the stories in his *Roma* (1972).<sup>12</sup> Rome is not merely a locale or background; it is the film's protagonist whose character is exposed through the director's unique impressions of the city: as a school boy during the Fascist regime; as a provincial arriving in the city at the outbreak of World War II; and as an increasingly jaded critic observing Rome's postwar mores. By collaging scenes set in three ages of the city—the Age of Latin Letters, the late Renaissance, and the Atomic Age, linear progress of time and history is shattered.<sup>13</sup> In baroque juxtapositions of antiquity, the recent past and the present, shepherds drive sheep through a contem-



Fig. 3. Trevi Fountain, (*La Dolce Vita*).

porary neighborhood piazza; prostitutes imperiously survey the city from ancient ruins, wartime variety acts perform in a seedy cabaret, and chic tourists flock to Trastevere. So too, faceless crowds of hippies in the Piazza d'Espagna and traffic jams around the Colosseum transform the accessible signifiers of the past into equally accessible witnesses to the postwar transformation of cities from seats of glory to sites of chaos. Here, both the ravages of modernity's technologies and the prurient interests of its café society profane the everlasting myths of the ancient city.

By the time *Roma* was filmed, Fellini was known for producing cinematic spectacles.<sup>14</sup> With sensational, if apocalyptic, views of deteriorating temples framed by fireworks, the Colosseum emblazoned with flashing lights, and a Campagna ravaged by shattered classical columns, the spectator is likely to wonder if Rome has been driven to despair. A watershed sequence in *Roma* crosses the tragic line between the death and possible rebirth of Roman culture, respectively the victim and beneficiary of modern technology. Fellini's film crew, a recurrent presence in the picture, descends beneath Rome to record the excavation of a subway tunnel. As an engineer dispassionately lectures the crew on the complexity of the excavation, the party moves deeper into the archaeologically rich strata under the city. At a spot "beneath the Appia Antica," an ill-considered blast through a hollow spot in the terrain unearths an ancient house sealed beneath the city. Brick walls, classical sculpture, mosaic floors, and wall paintings evoke the villas of Pompeii and Herculaneum, but the rendering of the fresco figures is strikingly modern, their gazes sharp, engaging directly with the audience in a manner inconsistent with ancient exemplars. Their

gazes are portentous, for as soon as fresh air touches the frescoes, their colors fade and the house crumbles. The depths of this unforeseeable basement of Rome are womb-like, but rather than celebrate her ancient maternal authority, Fellini divulges her culpability for the decadence of the ancients and the perversions of the moderns alike.

### A SPRAWLING CITY OF DESOLATION

Fellini's visual style was meant to fracture the conventional boundaries of cinematic space, for the modernist rigor of the neo-realists could not accommodate the range of experience his films encompassed. Historic Rome, the city's architecturally rich haven, is a bounded city, compressed by walls and ring roads, but its palpable reality extends beyond these artificial boundaries. Only by representing her periphery as well as her center could Fellini cinemagraphically build the horizontal city wide enough in space and time to incorporate evolution, desolation and fantasy. The edges of Rome do not share the extraordinary architecture and visionary planning of its center. Their expedient buildings and chaotic design, however, are no less authentic.<sup>15</sup>

In Fellini's early films, the outskirts of Rome provide impoverished settings that underscore the social isolation of ordinary people. *La Strada* (1954), which heralded Fellini's break with the neo-realists, is the story of two gypsies, Zampano, a circus strongman and Gelsomina, his innocent companion. Their lifestyle is defined by the destitute small towns and roadsides they inhabit; only when they join the Giraffa Circus do they call upon Rome, where makeshift tents and sawdust floors of the circus represent an institutional structure foreign to the itinerant couple. Performing on a site "somewhere near St. Paul's," they dwell in a forbidding edge of the city that Fellini has called "the gipsie's Rome."<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in *Nights of Cabiria*, released in 1957, few recognizable landmarks identify the city.<sup>17</sup> *Cabiria* opens with a broad view of the dreary fields on the outskirts of Rome. Here, off the Ostia Road, Cabiria, a guileless prostitute, lives in a small cinderblock house. Set behind gasoline tanks and a jungle gym made of pipes, the architectural situation hardly evokes the mystique of either ancient Rome or its modern inheritance. Ordinarily, Cabiria joins other lower-class prostitutes who ply their trade on the Passeggiata Archeologica, in the shadow of the city's walls just south of the Baths of Caracalla. The whores promenade on park-like grounds, the relics of seventeenth-century villas. But it is the Aurelian walls, rugged and much rebuilt, and the

semblance of the Porta San Sebastiano that clearly delineate the lines between inclusion in and exclusion from proper Roman society. The recurrent use of the location, always at night, often in the rain, underscores that the separation of the city's extremities from its center is not merely geographical, it is also social and spiritual.



Fig. 4. *Passeggiata Archeologica*, (*Nights of Cabiria*).

On the edges of the city, even Rome's upper classes can shed their obligations and abandon the trappings of their positions. In this liminal space, *La Dolce Vita's* Marcello can cross the traditionally hierarchy of social class to court Maddalena, an aristocratic young heiress. Although the pair meets in a fashionable nightclub on the Veneto, they drive frenetically to escape the paparazzi, solicit a prostitute, and drive to her apartment in an outlying district. In the dark of night, sense of place is ambiguous, but at dawn, the sparseness of the apartment building, part of a barren postwar community lined with dirt roads, is revealed. The interior, where a flooded basement hallway creates a moat between apartments and the stairs that lead to them, is no more salutary. If, as Marcello asserts, "Rome...is a dark jungle, and a good place to hide," the edges of the modern metropolis offer a camouflage of poverty and squalor.

#### THE PSYCHIC CITY

Stripped of its historic legacy, Rome is a place where modern architecture is a souvenir of Fascism and contemporary urbanism signifies late-modern tendencies toward conspicuous consumption. Only in this Rome, could the E.U. R. rise and the Via Veneto flourish. At once banal and terrifying, the E. U. R. (Esposizione Universale di Roma, 1938-42) was planned to emulate the authority and grandeur of old Rome, but its



Fig. 5. *Housing Estate*, (*La Dolce Vita*).

disconcerting scale and resistance to habitation defeated the heroic aspirations of its plan. Fellini's representation of the E.U.R. reveals a place where immense buildings and civic spaces render men small and inconsequential. The director featured the E.U.R. in *La Dolce Vita* where the enclave is home to Steiner, one of Rome's intellectual elite. At first, the character appears in the E.U. R.'s neighborhood church, Saints Pietro e Paolo, a stark white marble edifice constructed in 1938. Noteworthy for its severe high modern massing and vast yet void interior, the sterile rationalist church not only counters popular expectations of Roman ecclesiastical architecture, but also provides an incongruent, if foreboding, stage for presenting Steiner, a modern man who reads Sanskrit, listens to Bach, and questions the lure of the Church. Away from the old city, where the ancient and modern blend into a vital historical collective, according to Fellini, "monsters"—be they fascism or the alienation of the human spirit—grow. Thus, it is not surprising that Steiner, described as "a spire of a Gothic cathedral," is the perpetrator of a murder-suicide in his E.U.R. flat.

Fellini's unexpected transformations of canonical places highlight his examination of postwar Rome, but the recurrent representation of the Via Veneto weaves a single continuous thread through his films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. From his first glance at the Veneto, Fellini was in awe of its visual power. Laid out early in the twentieth-century, it rises steeply from the Piazza Barberini to the arches of the Porta Pinciana before opening out onto the greenery of the Borghese gardens. As early as the 1930s, it was known as an aristocratic domain of elegant shops, glamorous cafes and exotic nightclubs. But the Veneto, a refuge for writers and intellectuals as well as a playground for a

new and reckless bourgeoisie, was one of Rome's most aberrant *modern* others.



Fig. 6. Via Veneto (*La Dolce Vita*).

*Nights of Cabiria* offers Fellini's earliest exploration of the Via Veneto. Cabiria defiantly walks the high-style street, framed with café tables and neo-classically detailed stone walls. Clad in bobby socks and a scruffy fur jacket, she is demeaned by fashionably dressed streetwalkers and nightclub maître d's alike. Fellini presents episodic glimpses of the street from the pedestrian's eye view and from the vista of the windscreen. The portrait of the Veneto, as a result, is alternatively a microscopic web of sidewalks or a sweeping halo of headlights. By the time Fellini shot *La Dolce Vita*, the Veneto was firmly established as a metaphor for a rapidly modernizing and globalizing Rome that the director described as:

Living in a new jazz age, waiting for a third world war, or for a miracle, or for the Martians. The cinema exploded, the Americans came, café society prospered.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, recording the Rome that inspired the movie proved daunting, and Fellini reconstructed the Via Veneto, with exacting detail and in true scale, at his studios in Cinecittà.<sup>19</sup> Gradually, the replicated street became more "agreeable" for Fellini than the actual street.<sup>20</sup> In Cinecittà, the architectural situations and spatial practices of Rome were entirely Fellini's to construct. Here, he could control Rome with explicit authority by giving the city the capacity to self-reflexively contain representations of itself.<sup>21</sup>

## FELLINI'S ROME

In conclusion, Fellini's Rome is a city that is part real and part of his own invention. A few months before his death in 1994, the director, questioned about his portrayals of the city noted:

"Reality? There are only images of it, after all. Man uses images in order to fix reality in an acceptable shape, to make it less dangerous and more familiar."<sup>22</sup>

Historical fidelity, thus, is not important to Fellini who represents antiquity and the present through fragmentary and episodic images of place. Like nineteenth-century painters who described Rome in frozen moments on canvas, Fellini creates an imaginative historiography of the city, which reflects temporal, local, and popular interests. In addition, he embeds the verisimilarities of ordinary life amidst an urban assemblage of extraordinary places. As Walter Benjamin suggested in the landmark essay, "The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction," cinema is not only discontinuous with tradition, but also potentially hostile to it. The mechanical process of the film's production challenges the aura of the cultural texts it represents.<sup>23</sup> The cinemagraphic representation of Rome, whether through precisely orchestrated location shots or meticulously replicated sets, demands an imaginative shaping of place, not a mechanical replication of it. In this sense, Rome replicated and represented in the cinema, is not merely a site of everyday life; it is an idea, through which the Fellini resurrects a vivid past and, moreover, connects it to present interests.

In the stunning final sequence of *Roma*, a procession of phantoms on motorcycles races through the deserted blocks of a sleeping city. From the anonymity of the autostrada they emerge, zooming past the Castel S'Angelo and crossing the Tiber, seemingly flying through the historic center. Head-spinning glimpses of the Gesu, the Piazza d'España, and the Piazza del Popolo punctuate a whirlwind ride up the Corso Vittorio Emauele and down the Via del Corso. Rumbling cycles violate the Campidoglio, and ultra-violet spotlights blur the silhouettes of the Sons of Zeus on the Quirinale Place. Illuminated with motorcycle lights, Rome looks as if it might burst into flames. With a moment's homage to the Colosseum the spectacles concludes. The bikers retreat.

By representing architectural situations that disclose the ideological interests of both antiquity and its subsequent appropriations, Fellini activates fantasy and transforms the consciousness of his audiences. Thus, on

an axis between Rimini and the eternal city, Fellini's Rome is space where visual culture is formed, and lived through an historical collective and a popular culture that is rooted and regional, but without precise temporal connotations.<sup>24</sup> It is never fixed, centered, or static. In so doing, his works and the architectural situations that they represent attain a timeless veracity based upon a constellation of images accessible to mass audiences, and Rome attains meaning as part of the culture of everyday life.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *La Dolce Vita*, directed by Federico Fellini; screenplay by Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, Brunello Rondi, from a story by Fellini, Pinelli, and Flaiano; produced by Giuseppe Amato (Riama Film, Rome and Pathé Consortium Cinéma, Paris. Filmed in Rome, The Odiscalchi Palace in Bassano di Sutri (Fregene), and in the studios of Cinecittà from March 16 to August 1959. Released in Italy, 1960; in the United States in 1961.
- <sup>2</sup> For a capsule biography of Fellini see John C. Stubbs, *Federico Fellini, A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1978), 1-16.
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Ledeen, *The American Spectator*, vol. 7 (January 1994): 74.
- <sup>4</sup> Fellini collaborated on *Avvit, c'è posto* (Cone on, there's room), *Campo dei fiori* (Field of Flowers), and *L'ultima carrozella* (The Last Merry-Go-Round) with actor Aldo Fabrizi. He also worked on *Documento 23, Quarta pagina* (The Fourth Page), *Chi l'ha visto?* (Who has seen him?), and *Tutta la città canta* (The Whole City Sings).
- <sup>5</sup> See Frank Burke, "Fellini, Italian Neorealism, and the Contours of Vision," in his *Federico Fellini, Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 1.6.
- <sup>6</sup> See Giuseppe Ferrara, *Il nuovo cinema Italiano* (Florence: Felice Le Monier, 1957), 304-09. 343-45, 385.
- <sup>7</sup> Fellini quoted in Gideon Bachmann, "Federico Fellini: An Interview," in *Film: Book I*, ed. Robert Hughes (New York: Grove Press), 97-105.
- <sup>8</sup> Federico Fellini, "Via Veneto: dolce vita," in his *Fellini on Fellini*, trans. Isabel Quigley (London: Eyre Methuen, Ltd., 1976), 60.
- <sup>9</sup> Federico Fellini, "As Fellini Sees Rome: A City of Desolation, Fossilized Ruins, and Children," *New York Times*, 3 June 1973, section 10, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> For a parallel conceptual framework see Wassily Kandinsky, *Du spirituel dans l'art* (Paris: Denoel, 1969).
- <sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this scene with regard to character formation and motivation, see Stuart Rosenthal, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1976), 137-38.
- <sup>12</sup> *Roma*, directed by Federico Fellini; screenplay by Fellini, Bernardino Zapponi; produced by Turi Vasile, an Italo-French co-production for Ultra Film and Les Productions Artistes Associés; filmed on location in Rome and in the studios of Cinecittà; released in Italy and the United States, 1972.
- <sup>13</sup> See Fellini, quoted in Aldo Tasone, "From Romagna to Rome: The Voyages of a Visionary Chronicler," in Peter Bondanella, ed., *Federico Fellini, Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 269.
- <sup>14</sup> Alberto Moravia, "Un defile col cardinale," *L'Espresso*, 26 March 1972: 23.
- <sup>15</sup> David Bass discusses movies that look at the periphery of Rome in his "Insiders and Outsiders: Latent Urban Thinking in Movies off Modern Rome," p. 84-101 in Francois Penz and Maureen Thomas, eds., *Cinema and Architecture* (London: British Film Institute, 1997). Other critics have noted that the environment of the periphery is wrought with symbolism, see Francesco Bolzoni, *I misteri de Roma di Cesare Zavattini* (Rome: Cappelli, 1963).
- <sup>16</sup> Fellini, "Via Veneto," 69.
- <sup>17</sup> *Nights of Cabiria*, directed by Federico Fellini, screenplay by Fellini, Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli, produced by Dino De Laurentis. Filmed in Rome during the summer and autumn of 1956. Released in Italy and the United States, 1957.
- <sup>18</sup> Fellini, "Via Veneto," 75.
- <sup>19</sup> By the time that Fellini filmed *La Dolce Vita*, Cinecittà had been established as more than a mere studio. Opened in 1937, it was a symbol of Italy's resistance against foreign films. Literally conceived as a city, it housed everything required for making films, incorporating studios with workshops and processing laboratories. See. James Hay, *Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- <sup>20</sup> Fellini, "Via Veneto," 81.
- <sup>21</sup> For a discussion of Fellini's use of Cinecittà, see Bass, "Insiders and Outsiders," 95.
- <sup>22</sup> Federico Fellini quoted in Gideon Bachman, "A Guest in My Own Dreams: An interview with Federico Fellini," *Film Quarterly* vol. 47 (Spring 1994): 88-9.
- <sup>23</sup> In Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 223.
- <sup>24</sup> See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Fellini and Popular Culture," *Sight and Sound* vol. 3 (April 1993): 14; Tassone, "From Romagna to Rome," 299.