

Fellini's Art of Affirmation:  
*The Nights of Cabiria, City of Women,*  
and Some Aesthetic Implications

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Frederico Fellini has, over the past thirty years, established himself as one of the most important directors in the brief history of cinema. More than that, his work has earned him comparison with Shakespeare, Dante, Blake, Joyce—and other great visionaries in the Western literary tradition. Yet, in spite of his enormous reputation, his work has incited a good deal of hostility. Certain intellectuals distrust him because they can't take ready abstractions to or from his films. Others abhor him because he fails to provide political dogma and programmes of reform. He's accused of being self-indulgent and irrational by the former, of being an irresponsible bourgeois romantic by the latter. For those interested in a political reduction of the cultural imagination, anything that resists reduction—like Fellini's non-prescriptive vision—will be denounced. On the other hand, any intellectual with an adventuring mind may, conceivably, be persuaded. There *is* a method to Fellini's imagination. There is, in fact, a rigorous consistency to his films. The "chaos" that many claim to find in his work is really complexity—and the richness and density that complexity demands. This essay will attempt to examine certain processes in his work to demonstrate that his vision is anything but self-indulgent, that he has something profound to say about what it means to be human, that he is—in short—worthy of his reputation.

Fellini's work seems initially to divide into two categories: films of failed potential, films of realized potential. In the first group, characters never get beyond a very limited capacity to grow or create. They end up as either comic failures (*Variety Lights, The White Sheik, "The Matrimonial Agency,"<sup>1</sup> The Orchestra Rehearsal*) or tragic failures (*I Vitelloni, La Strada, Il Bidone, Amarcord,<sup>1</sup> Fellini's Casanova*). In the second, characters develop the capacity for wholeness, heightened awareness, self-transformation (*The Nights of Cabiria, 8½, Juliet of the Spirits, Fellini: A Director's Notebook, Fellini-Satyricon, The Clowns, Fellini's Roma, City of Women*). There is also, however, a third category: films of "annulment-and-redemption," in which characters who are unable to relate, virtually self-destruct—cancelling out their own flawed ways and everything that gets in the way of wholeness. Their self-destruction reinstates the possibility of growth, enlightenment, and so on. *La Dolce Vita* is truly apocalyptic in this respect, witnessing the moral collapse of an entire society (the main character toasts "the annulment of everything" near the film's end), then concluding with the extremely positive, restorative, image of a young angelic girl smiling at the camera eye and at us. "The Temptations of Dr. Antonio" and "Toby Dammit" do away with single characters rather than entire cultures, but the effect is the same: everything negative is negated, opening the

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way for something more positive.

Though some of Fellini's non-redemptive films (*La Strada* and *Amarcord*, for example) have been highly and justifiably acclaimed, his imagination is most unique and explosive in the movies of affirmation. Works such as *8½*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, *Satyricon*, and *City of Women* set him apart most clearly from other directors. These movies are also, I believe, where his greatest significance as an artist lies. He has, with greater persistence than any of his contemporaries, used the art of film to explore and advance the frontiers of spiritual possibility. He hasn't done so in any orthodox way: he's hardly advocating Catholicism or Christian doctrine. Rather he's used film in the same way Blake used poetry to forge a unique religious vision of experience. For this reason, I've chosen to focus on the two movies which "bookend" Fellini's affirmative view. \* *The Nights of Cabiria*, made in 1956, was the first film in which a Fellini character was able to transcend failure. (*Cabiria* was preceded by *Variety Lights*, *The White Sheik*, *I Vitelloni*, "Matrimonial Agency," *La Strada*, and *Il Bidone*.) It ushered in a sixteen-year span—through *Fellini's Roma* (1972)—during which all Fellini's films focussed on redemptive possibility. *City of Women*, his most recent work (1981), marks a return to affirmation after *Amarcord* (1974), *Casanova* (1977), and *Orchestra Rehearsal* (1979). *Cabiria* introduces a number of fundamental processes that recur in all Fellini's positive movies. Moreover, it reveals the profundity and discipline of Fellini's imagination as he fashions his tales of individuation. Finally, it provides an excellent context in which to approach *City of Women*. The two films, in turn, lay the groundwork for some brief concluding remarks about the relationship of Fellini's "art of affirmation" to spiritual development.

### I

#### *The Nights of Cabiria*

A brief plot summary might be useful for those who have not seen the film—or have not seen it recently.

*Cabiria, a thirtyish prostitute, is out for a walk with her presumed lover, Giorgio. He pushes her into the Tiber, steals her purse, and runs off. Cabiria is rescued and revived, and returns home. At night, after burning Giorgio's belongings, she joins Wanda and her other prostitute friends at their workplace: the*

\**The Nights of Cabiria* is not available in 16mm in Canada; *City of Women* is available from Criterion Films, Toronto.

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"Passeggiata Archeologica." She gets in a fight with a huge whore, Matilde, then demands that some friends drive her to the Via Veneto—where she looks hopelessly out of place among the high-priced hookers. As she loiters in the street, Alberto Lazzari, a famous movie actor, bursts out of a nightclub, embroiled in an argument with his mistress, Jesse. Jesse storms off, and Lazzari invites Cabiria to keep him company. They visit a nightclub then go to Lazzari's villa. When Jesse shows up, Cabiria is forced to spend the night sleeping in the bathroom. At dawn she awakens and leaves.

Cabiria and friends attend the "Divine Love" pilgrimage, where Cabiria passionately asks the Madonna to help her change her life. Following the services, Cabiria agonizes over the fact that she and her friends haven't been changed. She vows to sell everything and go away.

At the Lux theatre, Cabiria submits to hypnosis and to an imagined courtship with a rich young man, Oscar. After the performance, she's approached by a man who claims his name is Oscar and who insinuates himself into her company. In succeeding scenes, he appears to be generous and understanding, and Cabiria is satisfied to accept unquestioningly his gifts and companionship.

Out for a walk near her home, Cabiria meets Brother Giovanni, who offers her spiritual counsel and incentive. She decides to give up both prostitution and her undemanding, basically selfish relationship with Oscar. When she tells Oscar she can't see him any more, he offers marriage and she accepts—viewing it, as Brother Giovanni would, in spiritual terms. She sells her home and most of her belongings, and after a tearful farewell to Wanda, boards a bus to join Oscar.

As she and Oscar dine, then walk through the woods, he appears increasingly sinister. At the edge of a cliff Cabiria realizes he intends to kill her and steal her money. She responds with a fury and terror that neutralize Oscar. When she drops her purse at his feet, he grabs it and runs off, leaving her to sob herself to exhaustion and sleep.

A short time later Cabiria awakens, retrieves a "bridal bouquet" she had gathered earlier, arises, and walks back through the woods. When she reaches the road, she is surrounded by numerous boys and girls playing musical instruments, riding motorcycles, or walking arm in arm. Devastated by her cliffside experience, she seems initially untouched by their joy. But as they continue to weave and play around her, she gradually softens and responds. A young dark-haired girl bids her "Buona sera," and her face becomes luminous with renewed

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*life. She nods her acceptance—not only of the girl's benediction but of all she has undergone. She begins to glance all about her with the pleasure of total engagement. For a brief moment, she glances at the camera eye and us, and her sense of wholeness magically becomes ours.*

Cabiria's story is a struggle for enlightenment and self-transformation. Through her numerous adventures and dark nights of the soul she develops powers of consciousness which enable her to enjoy full spiritual harmony.

At the outset, Cabiria is little more than a body: imaged in long shot, capable only of physical activity. (Her job as prostitute suggests this, though it also establishes her as a giver and a lover.) Her initial "death and rebirth" marks the beginning of individuality and intelligence. When she comes to, her face is revealed clearly for the first time, a passerby identifies her as "Cabiria," and she begins to question the motives and whereabouts of Giorgio. This leads shortly to the crucial question: "What if I'd died?"—which signals the birth of self-consciousness.

Cabiria's self-consciousness is initially mere body-awareness: sensitivity to herself as a distinct, mortal piece of matter seemingly separate from everything else. (Perspective or "point of view" is the perceptual equivalent.) In the scene immediately following her birth of awareness, the opening words—"Notice the difference between me and all of you"—capture precisely Cabiria's sense of separation. Her accompanying defensiveness and alienation manifest themselves when she immediately gets in a fight with Matilde.

The symptoms of emerging self-consciousness are not all negative. Cabiria's developing intelligence, in responding to her alienation, creates a sense of something missing—and the need for change. This leads not only to the temporary abandonment of the *Passaggiata*, but to the awakening of idealization, wonder, and rudimentary love through Cabiria's encounter with the romantic movie star, Alberto Lazzari.

Lazzari, whose name suggests a profound form of transcendence—death and rebirth—introduces Cabiria to four modes of getting beyond herself: role-playing, projection, vision, and make-believe. Each of these is, obviously, associated with Lazzari's profession in movies.

*Role-playing.* Not only is Lazzari himself a player of roles (always undergoing change), but he casts Cabiria in a role: "understudy" to his temporarily estranged girl friend, Jesse. Cabiria adapts quickly and admirably, becoming a suitable and refreshing companion for Lazzari.

*Projection.* When Cabiria is transported by Lazzari's appearance, it's clear she's projecting onto him her dreams of romantic fulfillment—then worshipping him as the illusory object of her dreams. Narcissistic as this may be, it still marks the beginning of Cabiria's capacity for something other than mere physical love or prostitution.

*Vision.* It's Lazzari's image that astounds Cabiria, and her eyes that reflect her

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wonder. Moreover, consistent with his work in movies, Lazzari lives in a highly visual world. Within this context, Cabiria learns to relate to the given—and particularly Lazzari—as image rather than matter. She settles for his photograph instead of his body when Jesse reappears, and she ends her evening watching their reconciliation through the bathroom keyhole. In fact, she turns the Jesse-Lazzari relation into a film, as is made clear through an iris shot of the lovers as the scene concludes.

*Make-believe.* Like the movies he stars in, Lazzari traffics not just in images but in fantasy. Though he's surrounded by visual objects, he's also ruled by things unseen, whose presence is wholly mental. He refers to people absent (his maid) or who no longer exist (Beethoven), and his entire evening with Cabiria is predicated on the fact that Jesse is *not* there. Cabiria responds to his influence by concerning herself with things absent. She gravitates, in short, closer to the realm of the non-existent and the merely possible.

This becomes quite clear the following morning. Not only does she leave behind Lazzari's photo when she leaves the villa, but when she awakens in his bathroom, she gazes out the window and off into the distance—not back into the bedroom. For the first time, she looks beyond rather than at her world, reflecting a longing to penetrate the realm of the invisible.

Appropriately, the next phase of Cabiria's experience is religious. She and her friends take part in a pilgrimage which is given almost entirely to transcending the physical, given, world. Above all else, the pilgrimage is a "head trip." Words (incantations, prayers, hymns) become the dominant form of experience, continuing Cabiria's progress beyond the visible. The images that do appear tend to be evocative or mandalic rather than representative: mere outlines or hollow symmetrical forms which one looks through, as well as at. When they are representative, they refer to spiritual rather than physical reality (e.g., a picture of Madonna and Child to which Cabiria prays).

Within this environment, Cabiria becomes truly cerebral for the first time. When her companions return to self-indulgence (eating, drinking, etc.), she turns her back on them, states "I'm thinking," and contemplates the seeming failure of the pilgrimage to bring about transformation. More important, though it won't become clear until the following sequence, Cabiria acquires the most crucial of intellectual tools: symbolism. One of the principal incantatory phases at the shrine is "Viva Maria"—a phrase that is also electrified and elevated as a dominant visual sign. Under hypnosis at the Lux theatre, Cabiria will take the name "Maria" as a way of articulating her quest for renewal, innocence, purity—those values symbolized by the Virgin which Cabiria is struggling to identify with (or re-identify with) in her journey beyond prostitution.

At the Lux (whose name equates it with enlightenment), Cabiria goes all the way into her head and away from the world. Under hypnosis she closes her eyes and uses her imagination to create an ideal of self-transformation and love that she will ultimately realize. She enters wholeheartedly into the romantic tale of "Maria" and "Oscar" introduced by the conjuror—quickly adopting the role of Maria, inventing dialogue, and becoming the co-creator of the fiction. The

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conjurer describes what's going on as "auto-suggestion" (i.e., "self-suggestion"), and the phrase is even more accurate than he intends. In becoming Maria, Cabiria "suggests" an ideal self: one who passionately pursues love as the all-consuming goal of life. Love here is not merely projection as it was with Lazzari. Having assimilated the notion of spiritual transcendence on display at the pilgrimage, Cabiria develops a sense of "divine love" that is both personal and transpersonal: the union of a loving self with a loving other.

Cabiria's development through the Lux sequence, though extraordinary, is incomplete. She has withdrawn from reality into fantasy. Since she tends to deal with notions of love and transcendence only within her mind, they remain self-centered. She has created a *symbol* of otherness, but she hasn't really assimilated the symbol into experience. The appearance of a "real" Oscar gives her the opportunity to apply her newfound capacity for symbolization and spiritualization to her day-to-day world.

Oscar initiates another major process of mental development. He introduces himself as a "*ragioniere*" (an "accountant" or, in terms of its root meaning, a "man of reason"), and through the early part of their relationship he teaches Cabiria how to "account for" experience with rational explanations. In short, he shows her how to relate to the outside world consciously, actively. Initially, he tends to be her surrogate intelligence, but she quickly makes his powers of reason her own.

As Cabiria becomes more attentive and analytical, she also begins to invest Oscar with tremendous significance. She begins to see him as the necessary agent of her transformation. At first she does so in largely physical terms—seeing him as a means of escaping the *Passaggiata*. But this alters drastically in the most contemplative scene of the film (and one which parallels the pilgrimage sequence): her encounter with Brother Giovanni. He's virtually born out of Cabiria's thoughts as she walks, lost in meditation, near her home. A voice of revelation from the realm of the spirit, he tells Cabiria she must be in the grace of God to be happy and that she should be married because "matrimony is a holy thing." From here on, Cabiria views Oscar in terms of "holiness," "grace," and salvation—and she views her relation to him in terms of profound spiritual union. No longer merely a person, he becomes a symbol—the real becomes imbued with religious value.

Most important, she now sees transformation completely in terms of movement-beyond-self. She prepares to abandon the known and familiar—renouncing prostitution, selling her house, and leaving behind her maternal friend Wanda. True, she appears to be doing this all for Oscar, but—as becomes clear by the end—he's not an embodiment of the familiar. He's the absolute "other," the denial of all Cabiria is and has been.

As Cabiria moves beyond self-centeredness, she is not merely surrendering to what's outside and sacrificing her identity. She's *becoming* what's beyond her, through her capacity for imaginative identification. This is reflected in one of her final conversations with Oscar when she tells him that he and she have become "*uguali*"—a word that means not just equal but identical, the same.

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In directing her energies outward, Cabiria becomes increasingly effective. She even begins to make Oscar respond to her initiative rather than vice versa. (She's the one who forces the marriage proposal.) She also makes more and more significant decisions on her own. In fact, Oscar is absent from five out of six consecutive scenes when Cabiria takes the necessary actions for changing her life. By this point she has assimilated everything he has to offer and she's reached the verge of self-transcendence. She's ready to jettison Oscar and to die and be reborn as a new kind of individual in a new spiritual climate.

This occurs in an unearthly landscape at the edge of a cliff, far above the water. Oscar reveals his true intent, and Cabiria is overwhelmed with disillusionment and moved to utter self-denial: "Kill me, throw me in. I don't want to live." This desire for death is Cabiria's renunciation of all she has been to this point. It's a willingness to encounter the complete unknown and, as such, it's the "death" that precedes enlightenment.

Cabiria, of course, does not die a physical death. She's saved from this by her own, fully developed, power of personality. Even in her extreme vulnerability she remains a dominant force—and her violent grief momentarily redeems Oscar. Not only can't he bring himself to kill her, he's turned from murderer into savior as he pulls Cabiria away from the brink and says "Can't you see, I don't want to hurt you." Furthermore, he doesn't actually rob her. He only takes the money she drops at his feet as an offering—money which is no longer of value to her.

Oscar's cynicism is so thoroughly destroyed that, in the end, he just negates himself. He escapes pathetically into the woods in tacit acknowledgement that he has no place in her world. Moreover, at the moment he "self-destructs," he can only do good: his final acts—taking the money and himself out of Cabiria's life—are prerequisites to her full enlightenment.

Though she's not killed by Oscar, Cabiria does undergo a kind of death once he's gone. She gradually lapses into unconsciousness and regresses to a point prior to birth. As she does, her sobs become those of a little girl, her final cry that of a baby. Then she lies dormant, "dead"—about to be reborn to a moral environment so highly evolved that Oscar and all he embodies are no longer possible.

When she comes to, picks up the bouquet she had earlier gathered with Oscar, and moves back through the woods, she has become a bride of life. Married to no one in particular, she is married to the world at large. Her act of self-affirmation, her willingness to keep on keeping on, generates the youngsters whose music and dance celebrate their life and hers. Though their appearance is miraculous, it's not arbitrary. They are her own transcendent powers released into the world, her "othered" self made manifest. They are her own capacity for resurrection and renewal acting upon her in a spiritual domain where all separation between self and world has vanished.

Union is not restricted to Cabiria and her adolescent companions. Just before the film ends, her gaze focusses briefly but firmly on the camera eye. As it does, she miraculously penetrates the eyes and souls of the viewers. At that moment,

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the conventional relation between spectator and film is destroyed. Fellini and his camera eye—instead of being merely the media through which we see the film—become the media through which his film sees us. More than that, as the seer—seen relation becomes reciprocal and unitive, mediation is dissolved.

In piercing the veil of invisibility, *Cabiria* does not end up in the realm of illusion as she did at the Lux. She connects with powers (camera eye and us) that are indeed present though not seen by her. This becomes the final and fullest expression of her capacity to live in a universe of spirit—a universe defined by the paradoxical present-ness of absence, which can only be experienced through the genius of seeing what is there yet invisible.

## II

### *City of Women*

Despite the fact that *Nights of Cabiria* and *City of Women* are roughly twenty-five years apart—and the latter reflects Fellini's tremendous imaginative development in the interim—virtually all the major processes of *Cabiria* recur in *City of Women*: the growth from physical experience to spiritual vision; the movement from a real or given world to one of pure imagination—then to a new kind of reality filled with the freedom of imaginative possibility; the increasing willingness on the part of the main character to explore the unknown, the "not-I," in search of transformation; the use of the opposite sex as a symbolic embodiment of the unknown—hence as the principal agent of transformation; the quest for a unity beyond not only biological dualism but beyond the psycho-sexual dualism that emerges when sexuality evolves into a symbolic means of addressing experience.

Several of these processes are established in embryonic form in the very opening moments. When Snaporaz first appears, he's an unconscious body, mechanically bounced around by the movement of the train. He then acquires a face and identity, as he appears reflected in the glasses of the "Signora" sitting across from him. Next he opens his eyes, and his awakening is imaged as the ascent of vision from the Signor's boots up to her face. Awakening is quickly followed by the birth of attention and interest, as he dons his glasses—instruments of scrutiny and visual analysis. This in turn is followed by passion as his hand and the Signora's touch on a wine bottle that's about to topple onto the floor. Finally, when the Signora gets up and leaves, a sense of purpose and rudimentary abstraction is awakened. Snaporaz arises and pursues a figure who, no longer present, has become an ideal—a goal in his mind which he's seeking to fulfill.

Snaporaz is hardly a figure of moral discrimination at this point. He's pathetic

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in his predatory male obsessiveness. Yet the emergence of identity, the awakening and focussing of consciousness, and the development of a sense of quest beyond the physically immediate all hint at a talent for spiritualization that will bring about much more authentic forms of growth as his story progresses.

In terms of the film-as-a-whole, we begin in the realm of the physical: Snaporaz's attraction to the Signora is entirely sexual. He chases her into the bathroom (the sanctuary of the body), gropes her, enjoys a (rather imperiously administered) french kiss, and makes a ludicrous attempt at intercourse. However, sexuality evolves to the level of ideology as soon as the Signora leads the unsuspecting Snaporaz to a feminist convention. Here sexuality defines itself in terms of role, identity, and ideology, rather than biological urge. "Fellatio" and "penetration" become symbols of "phallic narcissism" and "sociological oppression" in the intellectual jargon of the conventioners. "Castration" and "masturbation" become ideological slogans of feminine self-determination, marriage becomes a political statement rather than a biologically-determined institution. (Enderbreit Small accumulates six husbands as "an example of feminism within the family circle.") Most important, biological and physical necessity are utterly denied as women claim "menopause doesn't exist, it's only an alibi for Male Society," "teaching [children is] more rewarding than having them," "I've no fear of aging or dying," and "all women are beautiful, they are only twenty years old." The culmination of this is the outright rejection of the male—an act which, for the feminists, symbolizes total liberation from the sexual process and its patriarchal consequences.

Confronted with sex as an ideological and intellectual reality, Snaporaz is forced to abandon his physical ambitions. By the end of the convention sequence he's actually blind to the sexual attributes of women. Momentarily saved by a beautiful young woman (Donatella), he pays no attention to her amply displayed cleavage. Moreover, as soon as he leaves the convention, he encounters sexual obsession as negative and threatening. An ursine creature, who offers him a ride on her motorcycle, attacks him in a greenhouse—much as he attacked the Signora in the toilet—and he discovers that turnabout is not much fun.

Although Fellini's feminists deny the biological, they don't really transcend it. By defining themselves solely in terms of sexual identity, they remain unwitting victims of their physical inheritance. Once we enter the environs of Dr. Zubercock, sex evolves from an idea tied to physical necessity to an ideal verging on pure imagination.

Unlike the feminists portrayed in the film Zubercock is not an analyst of the given, he's a maker. He's created his own environment (the women rely on a hotel), he's invented gadgets in honor of women, and he ends up being a major force in Snaporaz's transformation. For Zubercock, sex is always a matter of fantasy, divorced from reality. He can't relate to women, only to "monuments"—whether they be the statue of "Mama," the romantic poetry of D'Annunzio, or the celebration of his "10,000th conquest." He never makes love to his fiancée, and, in fact, he ends his visible career in the film renouncing "real" women once and for all. A creature devoted to imaginative wish-fulfillment, he allows

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Snaporaz the space to begin seeing women not as real figures to be seduced but as means for achieving wholeness—i.e., "marriage" in the fullest sense. Not that Zubercock is, in the long run, an admirable figure. As his name suggests, he's absurd—merely an advanced manifestation of the kind of self-centeredness Snaporaz embodied at the film's beginning. For this reason he must be counterbalanced by the appearance of Elena—Snaporaz's wife—who demands that Snaporaz be accountable in terms of his relations to women. More than that, Zubercock must ultimately be eliminated so that Snaporaz can achieve a vision of women that is far more mature than anything Zubercock has to offer.

Accordingly, the "retirement" of Zubercock signals a movement beyond romantic idealization (which still has its ties to biological dualism) toward a kind of symbolization which is mythic or archetypal in its comprehensiveness. "The Feminine" replaces individual women and even the ideal of women—and comes to encompass all that's unknown—both outside and within. It becomes the source of mystery, awe, and fear—the "non-I" or non-ego with which Snaporaz (like Cabiria before him) must make contact in order to be transformed.

At this point, sexuality and real women disappear—a turning point marked when Elena, after an operatic attempt to arouse Snaporaz, falls asleep. She too "retires" as it were, freeing Snaporaz to enter the uterine chute of his imagination, where he re-encounters all the female images that have combined to create a mythic composite of the unknown deep within him. Though some may have been real women in his past, these figures are memories and symbols in the present. Moreover, they become increasingly de-humanized, non-realistic, as they move Snaporaz's mind further and further beyond the familiar. From the warm, tactile Rosina who hugs Snaporaz as a child, we move to the two uniformed motorcycle daredevils, then to the distant and mechanical lady in blue at the beach. Then Snaporaz recalls his childhood cinema heroines. These women are projected rather than physically present—hence completely inaccessible—but for this reason they are all the more susceptible to being fetishized and invested with enormous mythic significance. Accordingly, the cinema heroines become even less familiarly feminine than the preceding women—even more alien and bizarre—concluding with a masculine, static, Mae-West type figure.

When Snaporaz leaves the cinema behind and moves back to memories of actual women, he takes with him his fetishizing impulses and abandons all realistic sense of the female. Moreover, he associates the final images of the chute sequence with that most comprehensive and frightening of unknowns: death. (He has opened himself out more and more to experiences of departure and death during the Zubercock sequence, and his journey both up the stairs to the bedroom and down into the chute has been established as a "night journey" with profound implications.) First, he recalls the ass of a widow polishing a grave. Then, he recollects a whorehouse, in the midst of war-battered Rome, which is repeatedly rocked by nearby explosions. Here he encounters the "assophile's delight": a robotic prostitute whose most notable attribute is a gigantic rear end. Though the image of her enormous ass is party comic, it's also immensely

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unsettling. The grotesqueness communicates a sense of mystery which is made all the more resonant by the funereal sounds of a tolling bell.

By this point, Snaporaz's perception of the feminine has moved far beyond mere sexual attraction. (The ass, in fact, is "neuter.") He has moved from a physical familiarity which breeds contempt (his assault on the Signora and her "superbuns") to a vision of complete otherness. Associated as it is with death, his image of the prostitute becomes a way of transcending self that will lead to the same kind of resurrection and renewal that Cabiria achieved.

Nevertheless, as its grotesqueness makes clear, Snaporaz's warehouse vision has its limitations. It brings him to a point of absolute separation from the feminine and the mysterious, and it runs him the risk of getting lost in a private, distortive symbolism that would forever destroy his ability to relate to real women. He must find a way to bridge the gap between himself and the Other. He must develop a new kind of familiarity by seeing himself and the feminine as part of a larger, unitive process and, even more important, as part of each other. The only way he can do this is by coming to realize that the feminine is not something ineluctably "out there." It's something which is also latent within him, something he can create as well as encounter. Having spent most of the film relying on bodies, images, and ideals of women derived from outside, he undergoes a crucial change when he's trapped and questioned by a tribunal of women, then offered an opportunity to meet the "Ideal Woman." For one thing, he chooses to meet the mysterious head on, rather than view it from the distance and security of memory as he did with the prostitute. He's willing to journey into a realm of terror and death—knowing that those who have preceded him have been brought back either on a stretcher or not at all. But most important, while he starts out thinking in terms of an existing, objective "Ideal" ("If you existed, would you be my reward or punishment?"), he experiences a sudden flash of insight: "you must be somebody new, born out of me as I was born out of...". Though he doesn't finish the statement, it's obvious that he can now envision the feminine as something to-be-created, as a force born from him in much the same way that he is born of women. (Biological genesis now functions merely as a model for imaginative genesis.) Seeing himself as a potential creator, he can see himself sharing in the feminine power of fecundity. In a crucial sense, he and the feminine have become "*uguali*."

He not only hypothesizes about his power to give birth, he demonstrates it. He closes his eyes and announces that by the time he counts to 7, "She"—the Ideal—will appear. Summoned by his imagination, she does: an enormous ballooned image fashioned in the likeness of the young and beautiful Donatella.

As a representation of Donatella, this version of the feminine is far more accessible, realistic, and appealing than the dehumanized *derriere*. Moreover, it combines darkness and light and—in offering to remove Snaporaz entirely from his immediate surroundings—it combines the known (Donatella) with the unknown (a new world and life). As a result, it embodies totality rather than just alienating otherness. Yet it's still grotesque, it's still a denial of reality, and it's still a symbolic substitute for an open and direct relation to the world and to

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women. It's mechanical, cumbersome, static, and illusionary—as symbols tend to be.

For all these reasons, the ideal must be destroyed. As part of Snaporaz's journey back from the symbolic to the actual, the de-humanized to the human, the real Donatella appears, in the guise of a terrorist. She strips away her own veil of distortion—her terrorist's mask—and, as a radiantly concrete image, shoots down the false dream, Snaporaz and all. As he and the balloon plummet toward earth, the inflated Donatella diminishes to human size and collapses against the netting to which Snaporaz clings. Suddenly, her image is replaced by vivid closeups of four blonde women—"real" people but apparent strangers to Snaporaz. Their startling appearance is associated with his impending death, and in terror he asks of them (and of death): "Who are you?"—a question which remains unanswered. At this moment, Snaporaz has completed his journey back from the grotesquely symbolic to the real. However, he discovers that the real is no longer familiar, comforting. He invests the images of the blonde women with all the mystery of the unknown—which his imagination has learned to envision. The real and the created, the known and the unknown, have also become "uquali."

In the very next shot we see him, awakened in the train compartment, confronted by his wife. All, up till now, has been his dream. He awakens to an experience of wholeness quite similar to Cabiria's in the final scene of her story. Initially put off by his dream and by an imperious Elena, he suddenly discovers that the glasses he broke in his dream are now broken in reality. The world he'd imagined/created begins to infuse the real world to which he's awakened. Even more miraculously, women from his dream—the Signora, Donatella, and one of Donatella's companions—enter the compartment. On the one hand, these females are all alien (they've changed roles from the dream, and all seem strangers to Snaporaz). On the other hand, having originated in his dream, they are, in a crucial sense, born out of him. Much as the youngsters at the end of *Nights of Cabiria* embody her own powers externalized, the three "dream women" in the compartment are Snaporaz's manifest femininity.

These apparitions confirm the two fundamental discoveries of Snaporaz's dream: the feminine that appears without is also a part of him, and reality viewed in the light of imagination has all the mystery of the unknown.

As the brief sequence progresses, Elena's distance and disdain disappear. She and the Signora share a knowing and complicit smile, forcing Snaporaz, amidst his astonishment, to do the same. Somehow—he knows not why—he and the women are all implicated in the same embracing, beneficent process. More than that, they are magically implicated in each other's very existence. Sexual dualism—whether biological, intellectual, or achetypal—has given way to spiritual androgyny and communion.

At home in his city of women, Snaporaz performs one final act: he chooses to return to his dream. No act of escape, it's a return to the death he was facing as he and his Ideal plummeted earthward. Armed with a faith beyond fantasy, he can face death now—or perhaps dream a new and deathless dream. He can enter the

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dark tunnel and search out the small but insistent light Fellini provides at the end of the tunnel for the final six or seven seconds of the film. He can see the tunnel not as an end but as one more transition in a world that has become infinitely transitive. In a world without ideals, absolutes, "termini," death itself dissolves into the ongoingness of life.

We have followed Fellini's lead in suppressing the fact, until the very end, that most of *City of Women* is Snaporaz's dream. His development prior to awakening is quite coherent without the dream being taken into account. However, viewed in the light of his dream, the film takes on new and much larger significance.

First of all, it means that from the very beginning, even in his pursuit of the Signora, Snaporaz is relating to a world of images (rudimentary spirit) rather than physical presences. His relation to the dream is the same as our relation to the film. Even he is an image or character in his dream, rather than a "real person." He's not "actually" abusing the Signora, he's imagining it—and he's envisioning how absurd and pathetic such behavior really is. There is, in short, a kind of creative distance to all that happens.

As a result, there is an element of accountability built into the nature of his experience. This becomes all the more pronounced once we realize that he, as dreamer, is responsible for all the women who appear. As a character, he may be tempted repeatedly toward wish-fulfillment, but as the imaginative source for his dream, he is continually creating situations in which wish-fulfillment is destroyed. The Signora's initial sexual compliance proves only a ruse in Snaporaz's dream strategy, leading him to the feminist convention where the Signora can denounce him for the fraud that he is. His self-indulgent delight in Zubercock's "greenhouse" of erotic images and sounds is abruptly halted by the appearance of the angry, demanding Elena. His roller-coaster ride through the sexual fantasies of his past gives way to the tribunal, where he is rightly accused of selfishness, confusion, and "maniacal assophilism." The appearance of the ballooned ideal of Donatella is followed swiftly by its destruction at the hands of Donatella-as-terrorist. In the final analysis, we are presented with a figure who dreams a rhythm of wish-fulfillment and rejection that moves him ever deeper into the realm of the feminine while, at the same time, killing off mere adolescent dependence on it. He dreams a process in which the feminine forces demand nothing less than self-transformation. Since his dream is himself projected, the women he envisions are his own powers struggling to make him new and integral.

Another crucial fact of the dream is that it offers a world of extraordinary unity. Inside and outside (Snaporaz-as-character and Snaporaz-as-dreaming-imagination) are not polarized; they are different aspects of the same process. The dream offers Snaporaz and us as a model of life in which everything conspires to the growth of the individual and the individual (albeit unwillingly) creates the very experience he undergoes.

Finally, the dream offers a highly refined model of "feminization." Structu-

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rally, Snaporaz's dreaming imagination serves as the womb in which the character Snaporaz is nourished and developed. As a result, he gives birth to himself when he awakens. He is, from the beginning, both part of the feminine (as a character) and the feminine itself (as "mother" and dreaming imagination). Seen in this way, feminization is completely beyond biological determinism and duality. It's the capacity for spiritual parthenogenesis which each of us—regardless of our inherited sexuality—can attain through imaginative vision.

### III

#### *Fellini's Art of Affirmation*

In telling their tales of individuation, *Nights of Cabiria* and *City of Women* also point to the function and value of the kinds of stories they tell. Artworks of affirmation, they tell us something of the nature of affirmative art—at least of the sort Fellini creates. This is especially true of *City of Women*, since Snaporaz's dream functions precisely as a movie might within his growth toward enlightenment.

One obvious conclusion we can draw from *Nights of Cabiria* and *City of Women* is that Fellini's art is one of spiritual process. His films work out the possibilities for human development in moral and spiritual terms. Because they are processes, they are resistant to generalization, to abstractions imposed from without. The narrative situation is always evolving, values are continuously being generated on the move. As a result, we must address ourselves to how and why things *change* rather than what they "mean" in any static sense. Only by determining the full significance of change will we begin to derive true meaning from the films. (Note how easily the image of the prostitute's ass can be misconstrued—and Fellini and Snaporaz accused of misogyny—if it is not seen as part of a process.)

Fellini's films can educate us in the possibilities of imaginative freedom: how unities are forged and how the new comes into being—in the realm of the spirit. Attuning us to the "logic" of creative experience, they can serve, in their highly specific way, as a "science" of creative change.

In terms of its relation to day-to-day life, such art is a symbolic, ideal, construct which acts as a medium or bridge between raw and creative experience. It serves precisely the same function that hypnosis and dream do for Cabiria and Snaporaz. It lifts one out of the realm of necessity, to be educated in imaginative freedom and to carry freedom and initiative back to the world of the necessary. Because it is merely a medium or bridge, the artwork cannot be an end in itself. It must at some point self-destruct. Snaporaz's vision of the balloon is a perfect case in point. For Snaporaz-as-character it's the one symbol he creates for himself in

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the dream. And while it's crucial as the expression of a newfound power of creation—and as a new synthesis of the feminine—it must quickly be shot down so that he can get on with his return to the real.

Given the nature of its conclusion, *City of Women* may initially seem to contradict what's just been said. Snaporaz's return to reality is brief, and he ends the film seemingly back in dream—his world of art. However, I think Fellini's point is that he's not escaping reality. He's entering yet a new dimension in which the dream will be infused by the real. He's entering a phase of heightened, more resonant reality. Fellini himself has said: "This time he will dream because he is deciding to dream. It will be a vigilant dream, full of attention for the profound, a witnessing dream. He goes back consciously into the dream in order to have a more lucid contact with himself. Lucid and fascinated at the same time, passionate and yet with a sense of distance. Intentionally without intention..."<sup>3</sup>

Moving from the more general aspects of Fellini's art to the medium of movies, we can see the "film experience" as offering a unique and vital form of creative life. It engages us in a coming-into-being of which we are part. We dream the film; it's inside as well as without, a marriage of the subjective and objective. Its coherence becomes our own, and our fantasies become projected on and through it. As Fellini sees it, the cinema is to the spectator as woman is to man:

I think the cinema is a woman by virtue of its ritualistic nature. This uterus which is the theatre, the fetal darkness, the apparitions—all create a projected relationship, we project ourselves onto it, we become involved in a series of vicarious transpositions, and we make the screen assume the character of what we expect of it, just as we do with women, upon whom we impose ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Hardly a mere passive enterprise for Fellini, moviegoing is a means by which we co-create life as mythic, awe-inspiring, religious. (As we noted, Snaporaz's greatest leap beyond the merely representational took place through his memories of the cinema.) Movies offer us concrete images—an external world—but they do so in the mode of envisionment. They give us the real under the sign of imagination, mystery, magic. Unlike literature, which can foster escape into words and subjectivity—and a consequent distrust for the world outside—movies encourage reverence for and expanded perception of "thereness." As a result, literature and film create a useful counterpoint in the rhythm of enlightenment. The former takes us on the "trip in," as we deny the given and refine our capacity for invention. The latter takes us on the "trip out," where we re-encounter the given in the guise of the numinous—and as born, in part, out of us.

The ultimate goal of Fellini's art is the same goal sought and achieved by

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Cabiria and Snaporaz: transcendence of gravity, of matter, of all that ties us to the earth and our animal natures. Once asked about his fears, Fellini remarked:

The fear of falling, of growing too heavy. There is a vertical line in spirituality that goes from the beast to the angel, and on which we oscillate. Every day, every minute carries the danger of losing ground, of falling down again toward the beast.<sup>5</sup>

Fellini's art of affirmation is part of his struggle to overcome the dangers of "falling." It's also his way of showing that man can succeed in his journey beyond the beast. It's his attempt to dream himself and us anew, in a shared revolution of sensibility, that can bring us back from art to life, somewhat closer to the angels.

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### Notes

1. The italicized titles refer to feature films, those in quotation marks refer to shorter films included in "film anthologies" with the work of other directors. "The Matrimonial Agency" is part of *Love in the City*. "The Temptations of Dr. Antonio" is part of *Boccaccio '70*, and "Toby Dammit" is part of *Spirits of the Dead*.
  2. *Amarcord* is not as obviously tragic as, say, *La Strada*. It's a much more mellow film with a more pervasive comic spirit. Yet there's a sense of great sadness, emptiness, at the end. With young Titta's mother dead, things have fallen apart. His father has lost all direction. The once-mythic Gradisca (the stimulus to Titta's imagination) has married a Fascist. And Titta is drunk and lost in a world from which all his adolescent supports have suddenly and devastatingly disappeared.
  3. Gideon Bachman, "Federico Fellini: 'The Cinema Seen as a Woman...'", *Film Quarterly*, 34, No. 2 (Winter, 1980-81) p. 5.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
  5. Gilbert Salachas, *Federico Fellini: An Investigation Into His Films and Philosophy*, trans. Rosalie Siegel (New York: Crown Publishers), 1969, p. 114.
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