Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale, Volume XII, Numbers 1-2 (1988).

DECONSTRUCTING FELLINI

Frank Burke

Fellini's work tends to be identified with the European art film movement of the late 50s and early 60s (*La Strada*, *La Dolce Vita*) then with the emancipatory romanticism of the mid and late 60s (*8 1/2*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, *Fellini Satyricon*). His films of the 70s and 80s have not received the attention enjoyed by his earlier films. As a result, he is viewed principally as a high modernist and, especially, as the kind of romantic/individualist artist prized by high modernism.[1] Concomitantly, his films tend to be seen as romantically affirmative, closed works whose closure is consistent with both bourgeois art and the privileged, separate nature of art in high modernism.[2]

Ironically, Fellini's films, even from the sixties, serve to undermine both romantic individualism and Fellini's own persona as romantic artist. At the same time, his films either dissolve or attack both closure and the separation of art from life. In *8 1/2* (1963), Guido (a Fellini surrogate), never completes his film (a strange hybrid of self-centered autobiography and escapist science fiction). Moreover, after his individuality and egoistic separateness are dissolved, and he merges with all the human images from his past, Guido himself disappears. The film ends without Guido or even his symbolic reincarnation as the boy in white, with only a dark circus arena, an unsettling site of both presence and absence, out of which something new may or may not be born. Gone are both the single, heroic identity and the sense of affirmative closure upon which bourgeois romanticism depends.

What happens to Guido in *8 1/2* happens to Fellini himself as main character in *The Clowns* (1970) and *Fellini's Roma* (1972). By the end of

the former, Fellini as director is replaced by an old clown who tells a story which, in taking on a life of its own, narrates *The Clowns* to its conclusion. The story is about the inseparability of death and life, absence and presence, as it confirms both the demise and the resurrectibility of the art of the clown. It too ends in the domain of openness, its concluding circus arena — like that of *8 1/2* — a space of indeterminate futures, cleared of limiting specificity.

At the end of *Roma*, Fellini has again disappeared as narrator/director. Present only as camera eye, he becomes absorbed in the balletic dance of motorcyclists who weave their away among the monuments of Rome (the past) and out onto the Via Cristoforo Colombo. The motorcyclists, though communal and synchronized, are also depersonalized by their gear; the roar of their engines is threatening as well as energizing; their encircling "occupation" of Rome suggests the destructiveness of the Visigoths and Vandals as well as the positive potential of contemporary life-on-the-move. (Moreover, the Via Cristoforo Columbo not only implies discovery of a new world, it leads to the E.U.R. district of Rome, product and symbol of Italy's repressive past under Fascism.)[3]

In short, Fellini's identity becomes absorbed in a act or process of "futuring" which involves decentering (leaving the filmic and historic centre of Rome), dehumanizaton, the death of identity, and a hurtling-forth amidst images that offer no romantic assurances or conclusions whatsoever.[4]

In all three films, Fellinian process is much like Derridean difference or differentiation, constantly effacing presences, encountering traces rather than origins, affirming the activity of life rather than its meanings or moments of closure.

These films, from Fellini's middle period,[5] tend to originate in a context of romantic individualism which includes a modernist predisposition toward the completed, whole artwork (Guido and Fellini himself seeking to make movies). Then they proceed to deconstruct romanticism and modernism, working through to a postmodernist situation and sensibility.

One film from his later period, *City of Women* (1980), does the same. Here, we have a dream-memory which functions as the film within the film (the closed artwork), with Snaporaz as dreamer-director as well as romantic lead. The dreamwork gradually pushes Snaporaz beyond his totalizing fantasies of women (eliminating also his romantic alter ego, Cazzone) and breaks its own boundaries as dream, leaving Snaporaz in an awakened state, on the move, in a train surrounded by actual women rather than mere symbols of his own wish-fulfillment. Again, the culminating condition is one of open-endedness. The women are "real" yet they originated in his dream — as did the train journey and — his now broken glasses. We don't have reality versus dream, conscious vs. unconscious, we have both. Moreover, the movie concludes with an ending *and* a beginning. The train enters a tunnel, the screen goes dark, and the credits roll by, signifying that the movie is over. Yet after the credits a small light appears

at the end of the tunnel, breaking the traditional concluding barrier of the film itself. As at the end of *Roma*, we have perpetual motion. In addition, though the entry into the tunnel (given the thrust of the film and Snaporaz's age) suggests death, the light at the end suggests new life. As at the end of *The Clowns* we are left with both death *and* life — coupled here with both darkness and light — rather than one or the other.

In contrast to *City of Women*, Fellini's other recent films tend to operate principally or solely in a negative mode — focusing on the limitations of closure, hierarchy, romantic individualism, static harmony or unity, without escaping a world caught in those limitations.

Fellini has said of *Amarcord* (1974): "another title I wanted to give it was *Il borgo*, in the sense of a medieval enclosure, a lack of information, a lack of contact with the unheard of, the new . . . ."[6] The small town in *Amarcord* is the most obvious form of closure in the film. However, the narrative mode of memory, suggested by the meaning of the title ("I remember"), is equally important — and one which is never opened out the way it is at the end of *City of Women*. Moreover, the town "narrates" its existence through a series of rituals such as the burning of the witch of winter and the gathering of April 21, whose yearly repetition (like the coming of the puffs of spring) suggests mere cyclicness (identicality, sameness in terms of deconstruction) rather than difference and novelty.[7]

The attempted compensation for entrapment in the film is romantic fantasy, imported from the States via movies and the ocean liner Rex, and most insidiously fulfilled by Mussolini and his myth of Italian superiority. Fascism and America converge in the film's final scene with the marriage of Gradisca to a carabinière, whose marriage moves him only to proclaim *Viva Italia!* and who is described by a wedding guest as Gradisca's Gary Cooper. Of course the joining of the town sex goddess to a petty Mussolini in an institution that is supposed to provide happiness ever after makes the romantic alternative just another closed ending. Unlike *Roma* and *City of Women*, *Amarcord* ends with no sense of forward motion, just the sense of entropic conclusion.

Interestingly, though the film moves to a dead end, Fellini, in talking about his and friends' response to the film, suggests a favorite postmodern strategy, "resistance" or "refusal," as a counterbalance to closure: "psychologically, it would [be] more accurate to speak of a kind of heartrending refusal of something which once belonged to you, of something which made you, of something which you still are. And in this refusal, there is always something sad, tortured, and tortuous. You speak of that infamous school, of that stupid and dull life together, of ridiculous dreams, of the bruises that you have dragged along with you forever, of a complete refusal of that life." Yet for Fellini, the "refusal" proves ultimately to be a failed strategy: ". . . at the same time, you know very well that unfortunately you had no other life, you had only that one."[8] One ultimately collapses into,

becomes identical with, the negative memory of *Amarcord*, rather than maintaining an energizing distance.

Fellini's Casanova (1976) is Fellini's painful disembowelling of Casanova as romantic hero: as writer/creator, as lover, as loved one, and most important, as fatuous persona of all three. Moreover, it is Fellini's unmasking of the dark side of romanticism: fascism. All this is suggested by Fellini's comments on the film: "Casanova for me does not exist . . . . There is nothing in *The History of My Life*, it recalls nothing to you, nothing! . . . He has gone all over the world, and it is as if he never got out of bed . . . . Who knows what Casanova was like? We are evaluating the character of a book . . . a loud, annoying, despicable character . . . a man who possesses the stupidity, the arrogance, and the bumptiousness of the barracks and the church . . . . He is a man who does not even allow you to be ignorant, he superimposes himself on everything . . . . A fascist."[9]

Not just an attack on his main character, *Fellini's Casanova* is a critique of a rigid hierarchical society, characterized in part by the Inquisition, whose suppression turns potential creators into posturers and sycophants, directing most of their attention to impressing authority and the rest to seducing women.

Living in this society, Casanova becomes little more than a pseudointellectual Snaporaz who cannot awaken from his adolescent fantasy of feminine conquest, salvation, and perfection. Accordingly, in contrast to Snaporaz, Casanova ends his film under the influence of the unconscious, recalling a dream he had the night before in which he returned to Venice and, with the blessing of his mother and the Pope, danced one final dance with his mechanical doll partner, Rosalba.

Unlike Guido in *8 1/2* and Fellini in *The Clowns* and *Roma*, Casanova never escapes his identity, his persona, or his own autobiographical fictions.

The Orchestra Rehearsal (1979) is Fellini's most blatant attack on closed art, static harmony, and hierarchy. Its setting is an old oratory, perfect accoustically — hence perfectly sealed off from the outside world. The musicians, under the authority of the conductor, seek some kind of elusive perfection — an ideal held solely in the conductor's mind. The orchestra is hierarchized not only by the conductor, but by union representives, a mafioso "*capo orchestra*," and a kind of natural ranking among the musicians themselves from percussionists (mostly Neopolitans we are told) to violinists (presumably Northern Italians!).

The art process itself is one of repression and projection. The extreme temperamental and biographical differences among the musicians, their radically self-centered obsession with their own instruments, are gradually levelled by conformity. First the majority of the orchestra band together in a rebellion against authority which diminishes rather than affirms self-expression. Then, when the insulated world of the oratory is shattered by a wrecking ball, the rebellion is quickly abandoned. The orchestra restores the conductor to his podium, and devotes itself to the piece of music he

has been seeking to impose on them from early in the movie. All individuality, all difference, has been eliminated. Order becomes complete within the world of the artwork. (Even the seeming threat posed by the wrecking ball seems neutralized by the false harmony of the orchestra.)

Central to this story of imposed and escapist unity is the character of the conductor, a German authoritarian romantic in the tradition of Wagner. He is the artist as dictator, locked into and perpetuating a system of art as power and submission. At the film's end, when the piece is concluded, he cannot abandon his role as conductor. He must criticize and insult, demanding ever more rehearsal. There must be no way out of this endlessly repetitive, hence fully closed, world of art.

And the Ship Sails On (1983) concludes what might be called Fellini's "late trilogy" of dead and deadening art. Here the form of isolate artistry becomes opera rather than autobiography (*Casanova*) or the symphony (*The Orchestra Rehearsal*), and the site becomes an ocean liner rather than Casanova's decadent imagination or an oratory. There are numerous similarities to *The Orchestra Rehearsal*. The ship and the opera troupe are hierarchies much like the symphony. Authority becomes increasingly dominant and finally comes altogether from without. (The Austro-Hungarian battleship combines in effect the roles of wrecking ball and German conductor as exogenous motivating force by the end.) Differences among the opera stars are repressed in favor of false harmonies: first the pilgrimage to scatter Edmea Tetua's ashes near her birthplace (harmony as worship), then the various operatic performances that accompany the attack of the Austro-Hungarian ship and the evacuation of the ocean liner (harmony as elitist art).

Underpinning the movement of the film is, of course, the romantic myth of the great artist (Tetua), as well as the romantic illusions of the various passengers who somehow live through or in lingering competition with her. The implied logic of the film is similar to that of *The Orchestra Rehearsal*: romantic mystification creates a closed inner world of fantasy while the outer world gets increasingly out of hand and exerts increasing authority over the isolate romantic world.

And the Ship Sails On is also a film about film — and about film-as-closure. In the opening sequence, we move from documentary camera work (film as presumed reality) to increasingly sophisticated cinematic techniques (closeups, editing) which reveal film's manipulation, structuring, and "de-realizing" of the found world. Moreover, color is introduced as *realism* (a mere technological, aesthetic achievement), not as heightened or increased *reality*. In fact, the colorization of the images coincides with the movement from documentary to filmed opera or musical comedy — i.e., pure escapist cinema.

In addition, the credits are accompanied by the sound of a projector, emphasizing that the film we are watching is a completed product, quite separate from the world it presumably reveals, mechanically reproduced for a theatre audience. It is not a form of immediate, living access to the

world it represents. By film's end, as all becomes mechanized melodrama and opera, complete with happy ending, the emphasis on disassociated projection is even more pronounced. Moreover, the final image — an iris in to darkness — emphasizes mere laboratory technique, superimposed on the film stock, even further removing the film from the reality it supposedly represents. (The iris in is, of course, a dramatic instance of closure and contrasts directly with the small iris of light that opens out the tunnel at the end of *City of Women.*)

The dissociation between film and reality is accentuated by the role of the journalist who serves often as our major link to the action. It becomes clear early on, as he is banished to a corner of the dining room, that his awareness of what's happening (hence our knowledge derived from him) is partial in the extreme. Paradoxically, though his limits (and even self-doubt) as a journalist pervade the film, he becomes our sole source of information. We are forced to accept only his version of the facts — a version which itself is full of tentative hypotheses rather than persuasive documentation.

Though Fellini's use of an unreliable journalist-narrator is a strategy found in his early work ("The Matrimonial Agency," 1953) it also serves as a link between the late trilogy of "dead art" and Fellini's most recent work, *Ginger and Fred* (1986). Here media replaces art altogether, instead of remaining in its service. Fellini's journalist-narrator becomes the vast consciousness-programming network of television.

In *Ginger and Fred*, television serves as the new fascism for Fellini. Its initial presence seems casual: a placard at the train station, displaying the name of the Christmas special ("*Ed Ecco a Voi*") on which Amelia and Pippo (Ginger and Fred) are to appear. Yet even here, the world of television arrests Amelia's attention and dictates her movement. Soon, actual television transmissions appear and begin to rivet the characters' attention (e.g., the soccer game at the hotel). Amelia herself uses the tv in her room to unwind. Then, she and Pippo are moved inexorably toward the tv station and the show. As this happens, all transmissions begin to come from one station — and consist only of announcements relating to the Christmas spectacular. Even Fellini's camera eye becomes slave to the tv monitor, dutifully revealing guests in the network cafeteria as they are described by the female tv announcer.

Once Amelia and Pippo are inside the studio and past the security checkpoint, their entrapment becomes complete. (Pippo, fearing this, throws a brief revolutionary tantrum before going through security setting off the alarm with his horseshoe.) Amelia and Pippo become Ginger and Fred, they are regimented into the mechanistic schedule of the show, and they become subservient in the presence of the smugly authoritarian network president. Their remaining freedom consists only of a few moments of self-expression and rebellion during a power failure — moments whose authenticity is undercut by the setting: the stage of a tv studio. As soon

as the lights return, Ginger and Fred resume their place within the show's rigid scheme of things.

Because Amelia's and Pippo's relationship is ruled by the pervasive authority of television, their personal identities remain subordinate to their stage identities of Ginger and Fred. They have no opportunity to (re)establish contact or develop a meaningful partnership. Even in the final scene, as they reach a moment of potential honesty and directness at the train station, they are interrupted by autograph seekers who restore them to their roles as Ginger and Fred.

For Fellini, television clearly serves not only as the new fascism, but as the new god and santa claus, dispensing love, spirit, good will, and gifts on Christmas day. It is the latest commodity form in a consumer society (the preponderance of food commercials makes the link between television and consumption quite clear). It derives from the willingness of people to be programmed, and it fuels their desire for passive acceptance of meaning from without.

The nature of television programming provides perhaps the most graphic instance of false harmony in Fellini's later work. It also harkens back to his early work, combining two favorite Fellinian arenas of entertainment: the variety theatre and the circus. Acts follow one another with virtually no connection, no principle of integration. A cow with 18 teats can coexist with a levitating monk and 24 dancing dwarfs. Interspersed are sausage and olive oil commercials. The only thing that holds the show together is the fact that it occupies a continuous time slot.

The television show is, of course, a closed form in much the same way as is a memoir, symphony, opera, or projected film. However, in its radically disjunctive embodiment of both fragmentation and closure, it is even more symptomatic of our current world — our quest for order among the ruins — than the art forms of Fellini's preceding movies.

Like Fellini's analysis of the dis-integrating and authoritarian nature of television, his continuing examination of the limits of art, closure, and romantic individualism attest to the relevance of his recent work as both critique and expression of contemporaneity. They indicate that, despite his diminishing visibility on the international film scene, Fellini is working diligently and self-critically on issues of urgency in the realm of cultural articulation.

Department of Film Studies
Queen's University

Notes

1. My sense of how Fellini is currently perceived is derived largely from discussions with other film scholars concerning the neglect of Fellini's work on the part of film theorists and critics. Indicatively, Fellini's name does not appear in the index of *Movies and Methods. Vol. II: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985) — a 743-page compilation of contemporary film theory and analysis.

Attacks on Fellini-as-romantic are typified by Robert Phillip Kolker's remarks in *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983): "Fellini [has] slipped back to a melodramatic mode via expressionism, an autobiographical expressionism in which the structures of memory and fantasy are limned out with history relegated to a backdrop and nostalgia elevated above analysis. He returns to a romanticism that insists that the productions of the artist's life and imagination must be of interest simply because they are the productions of the artist" (p. 87).

2. Modernism's privileging of the autonomy of art is described as follows by Andreas Huyssen: "Contrary to the avantgarde's intention to merge art and life, modernism always remained bound up with the more traditional notion of the autonomous artwork, with the construction of form and meaning . . . and with the specialized status of the aesthetic" (*After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* — Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986 — p. 192). Modernism's tendency to privilege closed form and the finished art object is addressed by Ihab Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 91.

3. E.U.R. was begun as a monument to Fascist architecture and ideology, though it was not completed until long after the second world war.

4. For related and more extensive analyses of *The Clowns*, see A. J. Prats, *The Autonomous Image: Cinematic Narration and Humanism* (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1981), pp. 122-152 and Frank Burke, "The Three-Phase Process and the White Clown-Auguste Relationship in Fellini's *The Clowns*," *1977 Film Studies Annual: Part One: Explorations in National Cinemas* (Pleasantville, New York: Redgrave Publishing, 1977, pp. 124-142. For a related analysis of *Roma*, see Walter C. Foreman, Jr. "Fellini's Cinematic City: *Roma* and Myths of Foundation," *Forum Italicum*, 14, no. 2 (Spring 1980), 78-98. For a discussion of the dissolution of identity or "decharacterization" is other films from Fellini's middle and late periods, see A.J. Prats and John Pieters, "The Narratives of Decharacterization in Fellini's Color Movies," *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 45, no. 2 (May 1980), 31-41.

5. In terms of Fellini's feature films, I consider his early period to embrace *Variety Lights* (1950) through *La Dolce Vita* (1960), his middle period to include *8 1/2* through *Roma*, and his late period to commence with *Amarcord*.

6. "*Amarcord*: The Fascism Within Us: An Interview with Valerio Riva," in Peter Bondanella, ed. *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1978), pp. 24-25. Hereinafter cited as "*Amarcord* in Bondanella."

7. The sense of a dead end is emphasized by Fellini in describing the response of close friends to the film: " . . . what is it that agitates if everything in the film is ridiculous? It is because you sense that it is your Italy, it is you, because you sense that if today you are able to look with an almost impious eye at this thing, at the same time it is your mirror. And then, notwithstanding that, you sense that there is no time left for another kind of life and that this thing from which you wish to detach yourself and which you judge without pity is the only life you have had." *Amarcord* in Bondanella, p. 26.

8. *Amarcord* in Bondanella, p. 25.

9. "*Casanova*: An Interview with Aldo Tassone," in Bondanella, pp. 29-30.