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REVIEW ARTICLE

L'Italia di Fellini. Immagini, paesaggi, forme di vita

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With a Hat and a Red Scarf: the Construction of Federico Fellini's Public Image

edited by Clizia Centorrino, Marco Dalla Gassa, Andrea Minuz, Special issue, *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 9 (1), Bristol, Intellect, 2021, 170 pp., £17.00 (paperback), ISSN 2047-7368

Fellini, Roma

by Andrea Minuz, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino Editore, 2020, 178 pp., €12.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-8849860894

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In 1993, a few months before his death, the veteran film director Federico Fellini was invited to the University of Bologna to receive an honorary doctorate. Bologna, the oldest modern university in the world, wished to bestow on Fellini its institutional recognition of his half a century in the Italian film industry. Not unflattered, Fellini declined, and wrote to the rector of the university that he felt 'like Pinocchio being decorated by the headmaster and *carabinieri* for cavorting in Pleasure Island'.

The episode is recounted by the editors in their introduction to *With a Hat and a Red Scarf*, a special edition of the *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* on the centenary of Fellini's birth in 1920. It also expresses a more general awkwardness in the relationship between Fellini and academia. Almost from the start of his career, Fellini had been claimed by the Italian intelligentsia as one of their own; a claim the director always resisted, yet could never really deny. One could find much material if one were to write an essay on anti-intellectualism in the work of Fellini, and it would surely have at its centre the moment when the director-protagonist of *8½* (1963) shoots a relentlessly voluble critic dead. In this episode, Fellini embodies the difficult relationship between intellectuals and culture in mid-twentieth century Italy. Commentators in the cultural

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journals habitually chided popular culture for not living up to their ideals, but this was because they granted it a genuine public importance.

Fellini landed in the midst of this conflict soon after his arrival to Rome in 1939 from the provincial seaside town of Rimini. He had come to study law, but reportedly never attended a class, and got a job instead as a caricaturist on the satirical magazine *Marc'Aurelio*. Here he met a circle of people who would soon revolutionise postwar culture with their commitment to popular social change. The most tangible result of this commitment was neorealism, in which Federico Fellini played an important role as a scriptwriter. But as a director Fellini rejected neorealism's earnest concern with social reality, turning it inside out with fantastical and spectacular visions of personal subjectivity, focusing on the role of the media in eliciting desire and the potential of cinema for self-reflexivity.

Fellini was no unrecognised genius, but rather inhabited the role of film director as public celebrity. He was the arthouse filmmaker who also received 16 Academy Award nominations. Images from *La dolce vita* (1960) continue to adorn Italian restaurants the world over. Fellini helped cultivate an image of himself as an icon – perhaps *the* icon – of 1960s European art cinema. But one would be hard-pressed to imagine one of his contemporaries, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, shooting a pair of oversize breasts as they nearly suffocate an adolescent boy, or Andrei Tarkovsky deploying fart jokes. This unique position between popular culture and the intelligentsia has inspired one of the greatest bodies of academic literature devoted to any single director. In fact there is so much writing about Fellini that there is even a book about books about Fellini, *TuttoFellini*, published in 2019 and so before the centenary of his birth in 1920 added a whole new round of publications to consider. To take just a partial selection, the reviews section of *With a Hat and a Red Scarf* includes the encyclopaedic *A Companion to Federico Fellini*; an updated study of his entire filmography with new sections on his commercials; a semiological study of his work; an account of paganism and Christianity in his films; and Fellini as seen by one of his friends (pp. 149–166). These publications take their place alongside the three publications under review here. All of which means that any new entrant to Fellini Studies now has to ask: what else is there left to say?

Author Marco Bertozzi answers this question in *L'Italia di Fellini* with no less a claim than that Fellini reimagined, and thereby recreated, Italy itself. Fellini's caricaturist's eye captured the quirks of provincial life, from the overgrown layabouts of his first big success, *I vitelloni* (1953), to mature, nostalgic reflections like *Amarcord* (1973). Yet Fellini was also the cosmopolitan visionary of a spectacular Rome, the Eternal City that attracted glamorous arrivals from a new affluent world. Rather than take his place among its jetsetting celebrities, Fellini seems however to prefer the sardonic perspective of Rome's local inhabitants, whose unpretentious tastes Fellini associates with an age-old pedigree of popular habits. In Bertozzi's account, this perspective is as anthropological as it is comedic, with Fellini as much a contributor to the development of modernity as a custodian of a sometimes ancient heritage. Fellini is helped in this in no small part by the partnerships Bertozzi recounts with creative collaborators and friends that included composer Nino Rota, novelist Dino Buzzati, screenwriter Bernardino Zapponi, filmmaker Vittorio De Seta, down to his Jungian psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard and of course the omnipresent Pier Paolo Pasolini. One wonders what Bertozzi might have had to say about Fellini's relationships with the women in his life, not least Giulietta Masina, who as his most frequent star and also his wife could reasonably have expected a little more space.

As this summary suggests, the book comes across primarily as a celebration of Fellini's work. Its laudatory purpose is perhaps understandable given that Bertozzi is part of the team behind the new Museo Internazionale Federico Fellini in Rimini. Fellini appears throughout its pages as *il genio* and *il maestro*, and a photo adorns its cover of the director smiling on the set of *8½* – Fellini's film where a film director is himself the protagonist – his face turned towards a sunny sky, hands aloft as if conducting an orchestra.

Bertozzi's book is thus ideal for any reader seeking intellectual ballast for their passion for Fellini's films. However, its celebratory tone occasionally comes at the expense of a more critical account. Bertozzi lightly chastises Fellini for the 'politically incorrect' labels he gave the bundles of photos of extras for *Roma*, which include 'queers and transvestites … street whores … monsters, dwarfs and clowns' (p. 49).[1] But he also reassures the reader that Fellini's cinema has nothing to do with any of the Catholic bigotry, cultural backwardness or widespread conservatism that can be found in Italy (p. 131), citing approvingly the fact that 'his films always include a gay, a gypsy, a foreigner, a prostitute' (p. 109).[2] He even manages to mount a political defence of *Città delle donne* (1980), Fellini's late-middle-age attempt at a commentary on feminism. Yet his appreciation would surely lose little by acknowledging that the caricaturist's eye might also be the eye of a man immersed in the prejudices, and the anxieties, of his day. Both Sergio Rigoletto and Shelleen Greene have previously shown that an awareness of the shortcomings of Fellini's sexual politics or racial imaginary need not deny his imaginative abilities. Rather, it might help the reader appreciate that even the imagination has a context (after all, Fellini's films often poignantly expose the everyday determinants on the imaginations of many of his protagonists).

The level of praise produces a tension in Bertozzi's central thesis, over whether Fellini was the artist of his place and time or rather someone who soared above it. Bertozzi explains how:

> Like Dante, it is only by abandoning the horizons of the visible world and entering the world of invisible perceptions that Fellini makes his date with true freedom, the freedom of desire and expression. In that 'inferno' of failed protection, fragility and tenderness, but also of complexity and understanding, his cinema no longer pertains to conventions of storytelling, to genre or to respect for dramatic necessity, but to a zone of magical indeterminacy which can reactivate a way of feeling that is steeped in acceptance and fatality (p. 76).[3]

But in this case what bonds then remain that tie Fellini to Italy? Admittedly this is a difficult question, especially given Fellini's evasiveness in making conclusive statements and his preference instead for the compelling but elusive power of cinematic spectacle. We might start however by lingering among the very historically-grounded contradictions Bertozzi feels that Fellini transcends – between disenchantment and belief, modernity and nostalgia, intellectualism and entertainment, the individuality of the *auteur* and the generality of his context.

Indeed we might also counterpose Fellini's carefully constructed position as an outsider looking in on events to his actual status as an artist and bourgeois white man, the universality of whose subjectivity it never apparently occurred to Fellini to question. That it took a conscious, collective endeavour to create Fellini – not only his body of work, but the image of their creator – is the topic of *With a Hat and a Red Scarf: the Construction of Federico Fellini's Public Image*. Taking a lead from the Fellini scholar Frank Burke, the editors Clizia Centorrino, Marco Dalla Gassa and Andrea Minuz establish their intention to look critically at the 'universality' of Fellini, by 'address[ing] the director's social value and public image' – or what they also call, with scare quotes in the original, the Fellini 'brand' (pp. 4–5).

Eight separate articles by different contributors offer interpretations of the diverse elements that together constitute what is called 'Fellinian'. Some of these are novel readings of themes already common in Fellini scholarship, with Bertozzi contributing a chapter on Fellini's relationship to his hometown Rimini, Joanna Staśkiewicz his interest in clowns and the burlesque, and Ivan Pintor Iranzo the circulation of ancient imagery, both in his own films and in various comics that include the Fellini figure. Stephan Ahrens considers how Fellini and his wife and collaborator Giulietta Masina were used to sell Italian cinema in West Germany, while Valerio Coladonato discusses the role of the Cannes Film Festival in promoting Italian *auteur* cinema in general and Fellini's work in particular, some of which was co-produced between Italy and France. Especially illuminating is Damiano Garofalo and Angela Mancinelli's study of Fellini and television, which lays out the historic competition between the two media. This has further implications for Fellini's exuberant style, which seems definitive of the 'cinematic', and appears in this context as an increasingly elegiac aesthetic developed in differentiation to a despised, and ultimately more successful, rival medium.

The chapters have a cumulative effect of challenging traditional understandings of the role of the director. The volume acts as a corrective to the use of Fellini as the exemplar of what Film Studies calls *auteurism*; the belief that all good films are the artistic expression of the creative preoccupations of one controlling creative force, the director. The collection thus opts more for a demythologising than an idealising impulse; we might call it a materialist as opposed to a 'great man' theory of film history. Barbara Corsi, Marina Nicoli and Alfonso Venturini recount Fellini's haphazard career as a film producer in their chapter 'Fellini the Founder? The Fellini Brand in Film Production', in what is at times a farcical instance of the contradiction between the *auteur*'s interest in art and the producer's in commerce. The success of *La dolce vita* allowed Fellini to capitalise on his reputation as a 'superstar director' and form Federiz with the Cineriz boss Angelo Rizzoli. The firm folded within a year, after turning down a variety of promising projects including Fellini's friend Pier Paolo Pasolini's first film, *Accattone* (1961). Fellini claims to have been visited in a dream by Anita Ekberg, who urged him to flee the Federiz offices. It seems she did not reappear in time to make him reconsider trying to be a producer again in 1973, with Franco Cristaldi during the shoot of *Amarcord*. The archival material suggests Fellini's involvement was restricted to the prestige of his name, an unfortunate limitation caused by his habit of not turning up to meetings.

The most devastating account comes in 'Federico Fellini and the Debate in Italian Feminist Magazines (1973–80)', by Francesca Cantore and Giulia Muggeo. Their story begins just after the release of *Amarcord*, when Fellini decided to offer his views on feminism in an interview for the magazine *Playboy*. Complaining that feminism 'annoyed' him, he likened its demands to 'the crippled [getting] together to claim that being physically impaired should be the norm' (p. 47). With a career built on objectified images of women, Fellini now had a place as 'Antifeminist of the Month', an accolade granted in the columns of the new feminist periodical *Effe*. But the career-defining moment came in 1980 with *La città delle donne*. This was Fellini's ham-fisted attempt to engage with the concerns of the contemporary women's movement, through the eyes of his late-middle-aged alter-ego Snaporaz, played by actor Marcello Mastroianni reprising his role as the harem-owner from *8½*. Seemingly not anticipating any issues in this set-up, Fellini recruited from the ranks of activist women writers, artists and performers to work as what he called 'consultants'. Enjoying his status as the great director and 'Grand Seducer', Fellini was in his element in the studios of Cinecittà in Rome, where he exercised total control in elaborate shoots that Fellini believed resembled a big party, and that others might more readily recognise as a classic set-up for abuse. The Nemesiache, a group of female artists, withdrew their participation in the film; the writer Adele Cambria contributed to an early version of the script but her work was discarded. She refused a request for a cameo appearance but recognised herself in a mocking caricature as one of the speakers at the feminist conference that the film lampoons. Sonia Schoonejans' production diary, published soon after the film's release, and articles by Adele Cambria contributed to the feminist press's general conclusion that the production did not represent a step forward for women in Italy.

Perhaps it is such instances of criticism – or of being held to account – that explain Fellini's unease about cultural commentary. What they do not negate is the sheer originality revealed by his body of work, and it is this which provides the focus of Andrea Minuz's *Fellini, Roma*. As the author in 2012 of *Fellini politico*, Minuz has already marked himself out as one of the rare people to have found something new to say about the director (he is also a co-editor of *With a Hat and a Red Scarf*). This study provides an analysis of one single film, *Roma* (1972). It is never counted as one of the director's greatest successes, yet Minuz shows it to be a turning point in his career, and his most accomplished vision of one of his central concerns: the city of Rome.

Minuz's study is in two halves (with a very nice selection of illustrations separating the two). The first reconstructs the processes surrounding the film, including protests at its poster image of a three-breasted woman in the pose of a she-wolf and its disastrous, strike-hit and debt-ridden production. Fellini had thought about making such a film ever since *La dolce vita*. He found his opportunity in his partnership with scriptwriter Bernadino Zapponi, and together the pair set about creating a vision of Rome that is both familiar and strange. Fellini claimed inspiration for this from a *mondo* documentary – an exploitation genre popular in the 1960s that showcased the exotic 'savagery' of far-flung lands. In Fellini's words, his task was to film Rome as if 'scrutinised by a foreigner, a city that is extremely close and as distant as another planet' (p. 23).[4] Minuz places this spur to the film's conception within a wider panorama not only of film history, but of changes that include the economic miracle, urban (lack of) planning and social movements in the wake of '68, to add to the historical remnants of war, Fascism, the Vatican, the Baroque and the ancient world that Rome so visibly presents. The film thus emerges as the product of a repository of images and characters from film to literature to art history to popular theatre, songs, variety and iconography, and of the director's own personal encounter with the city.

The second half of the book takes an in-depth look at the film itself. It is a film with no star, no protagonist, and no clear plot, although Minuz debunks the myth which Fellini liked to propagate that his shoots were sites of freewheeling improvisation without regard to the script. In fact its timeline moves carefully between a reimagined Fascist Rome of his youth and the contemporary crowds of hippies on the Spanish Steps, establishing a contrast between them at the same time as it suggests an unspoken communion.

Unlike the modernity of *La dolce vita*, Minuz describes *Roma* as a return to the archaic. Its varied episodes layer the historical sediments of millennia in a way that mimics the strange temporal shifts that any wander around Rome presents. In one of many memorable sequences, the underground construction of a metro line halts on discovery of an ancient fresco – only for the priceless relics to vanish on exposure, the rapidly fading ancient faces shown in close-up as they stare directly back at the spectator. An equally striking exemplar of Fellini's ability to show, not tell, is the ecclesiastical fashion show. Cardinals, nuns and bishops parade their splendour in what is at once the director's greatest act of iconoclasm, and a sincere appreciation of the Vatican's singular ability for spectacle. The eight-minute tracking shot of a traffic jam on the GRA ring-road, shot entirely in the studios at Cinecittà, the sequences in the Ambra Jovinelli variety theatre, or a festive Trastevere (for centuries the centre of working-class Rome, now a playground for American students), all combine to create a panorama of the city which, in Minuz's words, discovers not so much the quintessence as the impenetrability of Rome.

The response to the film in the press was generally negative, viewing it as egotistical and uncommitted. Yet Minuz argues for the film as an exemplar of Fellini's work, describing how:

> Filtered as always through invention, autobiography, personal fantasy or a fake inquiry, Fellini multiplies the play of identification between his cinema and Rome,

> staging the relationship that Italy and Italians have with the city's imaginary: of Rome as dream, as national neurosis and as collective hallucination (p. 44).[5]

This tension perhaps goes some way then to answering our opening conundrum, of how Fellini's cinema can somehow act as the definitive response to intellectual debates from which, however, it also keeps a distance. His films are deeply concerned with the problems of artistic representation, social change and personal subjectivity, but not because they provide any identifiable answers to them. Rather, they restage them cinematically, demonstrating the possibilities, and limitations, of spectacle, creating through the expressive means available combined states of exhilaration, fantasy, levity and disappointment.

Gore Vidal makes a cameo appearance in *Roma* to tell the spectator that 'This is the city of illusions. It's a city, after all, of the Church, of government, of movies'. We could include Fellini in that list too. His career encapsulates the nature of art itself and cinema's place within it, from his apprenticeship in neorealism to his increasing interest in the media itself, and his embodiment of an *auteurist* concern for self-reflexivity. In this, it is assured that Fellini's cinema will always present the scholar with something more to say; and that it will always eventually elude our attempts to say it.

Notes

1. 'Politicamente scoretti … frocci e travestiti … mignotte del raccordo … mostri, nani e clowns.'
2. 'Nei suoi film c'è sempre un gay, uno zingaro, uno straniero, una puttana.'
3. 'Come per Dante, solo abbandonando gli orizzonti del mondo visibile ed entrando in quello delle percezioni invisibili, Fellini va all'appuntamento con la libertà vera, quella del desiderio e dell'espressione. In quell'"inferno" di mancata protezione, di fragilità e tenerezza, ma anche di complessità e comprensione, il suo cinema non appartiene più al racconto codificato, ai generi, agli impegni drammaturgici da rispettare ma a una zona di magica indeterminazione, capace di riattivare un sentire intriso di accettazione e di fatalità.'
4. 'Scrutata da uno straniero, una città vicinissima e lontana come un altro pianeta.'
5. 'Nascosto come sempre dietro il filtro dell'invenzione, dell'autobiografia, della fantasia privata o della finta inchiesta, Fellini moltiplica il gioco di identificazioni tra il suo cinema e Roma mettendo in scena il rapporto dell'Italia e degli italiani con l'immaginario della città: Roma come sogno, nevrosi nazionale, allucinazione collettiva.'