

The Perfect Coquette

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We see her from behind, golden hair falling softly down her back, stumbling past a cobblestone street where we catch a glimpse of the most beautiful fountain. Its stone gods and creatures look as though they have been carved not by humankind, but by the running water itself over thousands and thousands of years. Her black train dragging elegantly behind her, she steps into the cool water, feeling the surface with her fingertips, and then turns back, telling her friend to come in and join her.

Marcello, we see, watches her with a curious gaze. He looks upon her figure—eyes closed and head tilted up towards the heavens, her beautifully curved shape as organic and flowing as the water that surrounds her—and with enlightenment and inspiration filling his eyes, he whispers, “I am coming too.” His look suggests that in this moment, she holds the answer to everything, and he says, “Yes, I guess she is right. I’m making a mistake. We are all making mistakes!” He steps into the water after her. Nose to nose, it looks as though he can barely dare to touch her—*la prima donna della creazione*, the first woman of the first day of creation, as he calls her. And just as he thinks he may have Sylvia, will finally be able to kiss her as he has been trying to all day, the water stops, its final splashes die down, and dawn comes—as it always does to interrupt the most wonderful of dreams. A bicycle delivery boy watches the couple as they wade their way out of the fountain and back to the car, and we can’t help but notice the awkwardness that daylight has exposed in this most enchanting of moments.

Sylvia is the woman at the center of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960). She is the perfect coquette, and as described by Andrew McKenna, “her coquetry . . . is, in a sense, absolute, pure. . . . She doesn’t have to lift a finger, just ignore more people than the classic coquette ever had the chance to” (167). Like every coquette, she promises everything and delivers nothing. The classic scene in the Trevi Fountain will always be remembered fondly by those who have seen the film and has been recreated and reinterpreted in sev-

eral later works. What is often forgotten is how frustratingly disappointing the scene actually is.

But therein lies the magic of *La Dolce Vita*: it is an epic of repeated disappointment that still manages to be enchanting. The story follows gossip journalist Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni), a writer originally from the country, as he searches for meaning and happiness in Rome. Over seven distinct episodes and one long night, we watch Marcello—a man with serious literary aspirations who distantly documents the bacchanalian nightlife—transform into the very subject of his gaze: an empty, uninspired reveler. The movie, like the magnificent Anita Ekberg's character, is the perfect coquette.

Watching *La Dolce Vita* is a lot like flipping through the glossy pages of your grandmother's Summer 1965 edition of *Vogue Italia*. Every image is worthy of its own black-and-white fashion spread: the opening shot of a helicopter carrying a statue of Christ over a group of bikini clad rooftop sunbathers; Anouk Aimée's character Maddalena leaning on the bar with her dark sunglasses, whisky in hand; a group of beautifully gowned, drunken socialites making their morning procession back to the castle. But while the film's impressive style, aesthetic beauty, and clever camera work have always been its undisputed strengths, it has not been universally praised for its meandering, unresolved story.

At the time of its 1960 release, the movie touched upon many of the inconsistencies of Roman life during the post-war economic boom. It was received with religious criticism and critical acclaim, but some critics also seemed frustrated with it. R. M. Franchi and Eric Rhode both expressed a disappointment with characters that seemed to be “callow clichés of the gossip column” and saw the action both as unmotivated and superficial (Rhode 34). They both found it difficult to feel any sincere connection with Marcello. Historically, their reservations make sense. They were writing when Italian neorealism was still in vogue and cinema was understood to be a political art. In an artistic climate where the auteur *had* to pick sides, where the concern for exposing and condemning socio-political issues was paramount, they could not fully accept that a story about indulgence and failure could say anything meaningful.

But this film also marked an important shift in Italian cinema. In her essay “The Spleen of Rome: Mourning Modernism in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*,” Alessia Ricciardi writes, “Frank Burke aptly characterizes the film's spirit when he remarks that *La Dolce Vita* presaged postmodernity ‘not because of any authorial intent but because the film was exploring a contemporary world verging on postmodernity’” (203). The voyeuristic cult of celebrity that

Fellini documents in *La Dolce Vita* was in its infancy in 1960. Soon, it would grow, and would go on to reach new extremes at the turn of the millennium.

Postmodernism can mean a number of things. In the simplest sense, it refers to the artistic and cultural moment that followed modernity. In art, it often refers to works that make use of self-reflexivity, pastiche, or a strong sense of irony. It also means a rejection of simple and satisfying endings, as well as traditional black-and-white themes. *La Dolce Vita* could be considered postmodern in all these senses. The film uses characteristically postmodern techniques to tap into problems surrounding wealth, progress, and the civilized life without resolving them. In one scene, we see the RAI television network set up to broadcast a “Fake Apparition of Mary,” directing worshippers and staging a supposedly organic, “real” event. We watch as they watch, and in so doing become distinctly aware that what we see is just as manipulated as what they do. In another scene, an Italian interviewer asks Sylvia, an American actress, whether she thinks Italian neorealism is alive or dead. Fellini, a filmmaker who was born of the neorealist tradition but starting to break away from it with this movie, has a little laugh at the expense of his colleagues: instead of having the translator translate the question to Sylvia, Fellini has him remark quickly, “Just say alive.”

The movie tells a story about society’s confrontation with modernity and newfound economic freedom without any pretense of resolution or insight. At the time, this was something entirely new. Today, however, the film’s deliberate coquetry seems oddly contemporary. Marcello’s story, the story of the wandering antihero, is one we know very well. Movies like *Lost in Translation*, *Garden State*, *High Fidelity*, and almost every Wes Anderson film ever made, with their loose plots, witty dialogue, mostly unsatisfying endings, and desensitized male protagonists, all tease us in their own droll ways, promising but never providing closure. In Anderson’s *The Darjeeling Limited*, we watch as three estranged brothers board a train in India to go visit their mother, a housewife-turned-Catholic nun. The brothers are endearing in their sincerity, and even though their mother runs away again and they never really become a united family, the film leaves us almost at peace with the idea that things can’t always be fixed. The wandering antihero has found a soft spot in our postmodern hearts. What R. M. Franchi condemned as a movie “about nothing” is now a celebrated and lucrative franchise (56).

But perhaps the most important distinction between audiences today and in the 1960s lies in the nature of celebrity itself. Before, the voyeurism was restricted to large audiences following a select few celebrities. Now, large audiences watch each other. Today, the “celebrity” lifestyle, or at least some

shadow of it, has been democratized and liberated, spread among the masses. As Tomas de Zengotita notes in his essay “Attack of the Superzeroes: Why Washington, Einstein and Madonna Can’t Compete with You,” what Facebook, Twitter, and reality TV all have in common is “the celebration of people refusing to be spectators—all the mini-celebrities, for example, who dominate chat rooms and game sites, and the blogs, the intimate life journals” (162). In our highly public and publicized lives, the sweet life in the fullest sense has become ever more elusive, but a taste of it has become much more accessible. Just as Marcello goes from party to party with his many nameless and interchangeable “friends,” so, too, can we barely recognize most of our 800-plus Facebook friends, their profiles offering only a shallow window into who they are. Every time Marcello shoos away his colleagues, we are reminded of the uncomfortable feeling we get when we see compromising pictures of us online, posted by others without our consent. We are both victim and accomplice in this crime.

Across our interconnected, postmodern media landscape, “we are inundated with stories of ordinary folk as protagonists in extreme circumstances—shattered by drugs, stricken by disease, captured by mullahs,” writes De Zengotita (163). So why do we celebrate the wandering anti-hero, or what he calls the “superzero”? It’s about self-recognition. Though we may never have been “abused by [our] Siamese twin,” we still *feel* as though we have (163). For these people, “the specifics of the case,” he writes, “are symbolic condensations of the amorphous afflictions that burden them, especially the pain of anonymity” (164). As is the case with Marcello, it’s all about us, even when it’s not about us.

At a turning point in the movie, Marcello watches his good friend Steiner—the only person in the film whose peaceful, intellectual lifestyle provides an alternative to the underworld—fall victim to the suffocations of civilized life. While it is hard to imagine one’s only model friend committing infanticide and suicide, and especially hard to imagine having to go tell his wife personally, we can understand how this may have shattered Marcello’s hopes of finding a different path. It is without a doubt the most tragic episode in the film, but as De Zengotita notes, “there is a huge fan base . . . for trauma stories” (163). Somehow, we find comfort in these disappointing and tragic stories. At the very least, they remind us of how lucky we are.

We can also sympathize with Steiner himself, a character Fellini uses to demystify the notion that a reclusive and academic life is any more fulfilling than a wild one. He shares his discontents with Marcello at one of his parlor parties: “At night this darkness weighs upon me. It’s the peace that frightens

me. To me it seems only an outer shell and hell is hiding behind it.” Though we may not be as extreme as Steiner, we can recognize the anxiety he describes—after all, we have the suburbs. In Beck’s “superzero” anthem “Loser,” we hear this message of emptiness loud and clear: “With the rerun shows and the cocaine nose-job / The daytime crap of a folksinger slob / He hung himself with a guitar string / A slab of turkey neck and it’s hangin’ from a pigeon wing.” One need look no further than nineties rock to hear Steiner’s quiet angst belted out over and over again. Fellini gives us competing anti-heroes in Marcello and Steiner, but both suffer from a similar malaise: the ennui of modern life, where comfort rules all, and everyone is a winner.

R. M. Franchi complains in his review of the film that “it is all too glib and superficial to be real” (56). His biggest criticism is that *La Dolce Vita* is too obvious—its concerns, too shallow. What he fails to see is that in this movie about nothing, Fellini shows us everything. He gives us, the postmodern viewer, reality as we have come to accept it. Life *is* often superficial; with the expectations we carry, it can often be unsatisfying as well. In real life, as in the movie, we do not get a window into people’s true thoughts or feelings. We project things onto them, writing them up like gossip columnists. Most of the time, we project ourselves. We appreciate that Fellini has left his characters this way, denying the confessional booths cynically employed on every reality TV show. We appreciate that the movie is, in its own way, reality TV. As Tullio Kezich writes, “The director seems to be saying: Let’s try to see things as they are, and the clouds will disappear from the horizon” (13). So do the skies indeed clear at the end? Is there any hope for enlightenment? The last scene shows a drunken Marcello, one who has fallen into the rabbit hole, standing on the beach with his fellow partiers and gazing at a monstrous dead fish. They marvel at the disgusting animal in the same way that we as an audience watch them in their drunken disgrace. They are unable to recognize their own monstrosity in the fish, but Marcello seems uncomfortable at the sight of it. A girl from across the water starts calling for him; it is the same waitress from Perugia he once met at a beach restaurant near Rome. She tries to act out to him how they know each other, but her pantomime is futile. The movie ends with a close-up of the girl. She smiles curiously at the drunken Marcello, her eyes following him as he stumbles off. Then, in a most peculiar way, her gaze turns towards us, penetrating the screen that separates the viewer from the actor.

Her look is a look of recognition. The movie resonates with the postmodern superzero—the figure of false celebrity and celebrated falsity. We do not leave frustrated with this coquette, as Franchi and Rhode did. We leave

grinning, just like the girl on the beach, just like the brothers on the Darjeeling Limited. It's a peculiar grin, one perhaps sympathetic with Daria—an animated teenage misanthrope from the '90s—who says, “Watching a dead fish wash up on the shore always puts *me* in a good mood” (“Fire!”). Or perhaps it's as Kezich puts it when he says that “the ambiguity of *La Dolce Vita* doesn't . . . stem from an urge for self-protection or an attempt to sidestep judgment. It comes instead from the awareness that any human judgment is tenuous and reversible—no one is entirely good or entirely evil” (14). That “ambiguity” offers comfort for a culture to which comfort is overwhelmingly understood to be false hope. What is for Marcello a final disappointment is for us a relief: it is something we can trust, because it is something we recognize.

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