

LA DOLCE VITA: FELLINI'S FAREWELL TO THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

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Looking directly into the camera and smiling sweetly, the young woman introduces herself as Steiner's wife and, turning around, ceremoniously opens large white double doors to reveal a grand salon furnished with intriguing *objets d'art*, shelves of leather-bound books, curtained picture windows, and charmingly eccentric party guests. Following their hostess into the salon, Marcello Rubini and his wide-eyed fiancée, Emma, are welcomed by a genteel, sharply-dressed Steiner, who skillfully initiates them into the eclectic mix of guests. The camera moves along to examine the scene in detail, presenting a masterfully-posed assemblage of *soirée* attendees: a lanky, bespectacled man with a furrowed brow, an attractive, tomboyish woman perched upon the top of a chair, a carefully coiffed lady fanning herself on the sofa, and a jovial, slightly disheveled elderly man. They are listening intently to the gentle, sorrowful song of a dark-skinned woman strumming a guitar and sitting cross-legged on a velvet cushion. Draped in a diaphanous, toga-like gown and adorned with a gold headpiece, the woman is undoubtedly a hired performer, set apart from the others by her exotic appearance, her place on the floor, and her exclusion from conversation. As her song softens to a close, the elderly man abruptly proclaims, "[t]he only real women are from the Orient. After all, where was Eve? In the Garden of Eden . . . Mysterious, maternal, lover and daughter in one" (*La Dolce Vita* 1:17:08). And thus the evening continues, resembling just what one expects when imagining a mid-twentieth century *soirée* for European aristocratic and artistic circles. Marcello, too, fits an archetypal profile, one that emboldens an already outspoken American poetess to offer him counsel, declaring: "Steiner says you have two loves and you don't know which to choose: journalism or literature. Beware of prisons! Remain free, available. Like me. Never marry anything. Never choose. Even in love, it's better to be chosen. The great thing is to burn and not to freeze" (1:19:39). With the delivery of the last line she sits

upright and widens her eyes, as if overcome by a great epiphanic awareness, only to slump back into the sofa with an air of resignation. It is a tiresomely clichéd scene. The suave host, the objectified exotic woman, the crusty old curmudgeon, the aspiring man of letters, the eccentric artist; all are expected, none beguile.

And yet, one hesitates to label the scene as cliché, as something one has already seen and can therefore dismiss. Situated towards the beginning of Federico Fellini's 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, the soirée scene is one of seven distinct episodes which, together with a prologue and an epilogue, form the structure of the film. Characterized by a fatiguing search for entertainment, the film's apathetic ethos is interrupted momentarily with the tragic suicide of Steiner, the high-modernist intellectual (and soirée host) whom Marcello modeled himself after in his efforts towards self-actualization. Though Steiner's death is the only literal one in the film, there are many more symbolic deaths throughout the course of *La Dolce Vita*. Filmed on Rome's iconic Via Veneto, a bright avenue teeming with celebrities, sports cars, and paparazzi, *La Dolce Vita*—"the sweet life" in English—could be interpreted as a film about the death of *la dolce vita*, the destruction of idealized conceptions of life.

The film's protagonist, gossip columnist Marcello Rubini—played by Marcello Mastroianni—has moved to Rome from the provinces with aspirations to an influential journalistic or literary career. Marcello has built Steiner up as the ideal man, one whose external circumstances shape Marcello's personal conception of *la dolce vita*, of what it means to live a good life. Following him onto the terrace during the soirée, Marcello asks Steiner to invite him to more such gatherings, explaining, "Your home is a refuge. Your children, your wife, your books, your extraordinary friends. I'm wasting my life. I'm not going anywhere. I had ambitions once" (1:26:59). Steiner, aware of the esteemed position he holds in Marcello's eyes, gravely warns him in response: "The answer isn't being locked up at home. Don't do what I've done . . . It's peace that frightens me. I fear peace more than anything else. It seems to me like it's just a façade with hell hiding behind it" (1:27:13). The film's aesthetic effect could be described in much the same way; its peacefulness, beauty, and gaiety induce a cathartic uncasiness and sorrow that betray the suffering

behind the characters' composure, the brokenness behind Rome's society, and the danger behind ideals.

In his essay "The Psychology of Art," Lev Vygotsky stipulates that an antagonistic relationship between content and form generates catharsis—the coexistence of contradicting emotions resulting in mutual annihilation, a psychological process essential to the success of film as an art work. Regarded in this light, *La Dolce Vita's* success and continued influence in film, art, and culture is unsurprising; each scene of the film is replete with emotionally incompatible elements. Returning to the soirée scene with an understanding of the cathartic process, one begins to identify the elements that formerly aroused suspicion and discomfort: the warmth of the salon is chilled by an ominous, flashing light from beyond the window; Emma's earnest, romantic advances towards Marcello are met with icy indifference; a vague heaviness threatens to pop the air of lightheartedness buoying the guests' conversations; philosophical discussions are continually stifled by a mutual, but unspoken, awareness of their meaninglessness; witty jokes seem to betray an underlying naïveté. Film critic Roger Ebert observed a pattern of descents and ascents, nights and dawns in the film, a formal pattern which finds its narrative counterpart in the building up and tearing down of idealized characters, places, and ideas.

The pattern continues. Liveliness, intellectual stimulation, and genuine feeling rise up only to be vanquished. The viewer's growing uneasiness conflicts with the familiarity that the soirée scene had initially promised. Expecting another society portrait from the European literature of decadence, the viewer finds himself in the middle of a war zone between content and form, one in which form unapologetically wins every battle. The victory of form over content is central to German philosopher Friedrich Schiller's conception of effective catharsis, which holds that "the secret of a master is to destroy content by means of form; the more majestic and attractive the content, the more it moves to the fore, and the more the viewer falls under its spell, the greater the triumph of art which removes the content and dominates it" (qtd. in Vygotsky 518). Thus Fellini's visual intelligence and resonant aesthetic voice overcome the iconographic images, archetypal figures, and platitudinous dialogue of the characters who populate each scene.

In her essay "The Spleen of Rome: Mourning Modernism in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*," Alessia Ricciardi proposes that Charles Baudelaire's treatment of Parisian *fin-de-siècle* society might serve as Fellini's model for modern Italian and European society. Both artists, Ricciardi observes, "shared an inclination towards 'decadence' as the grounds or root of their work" from which broader cultural criticism can depart (204). Thus *La Dolce Vita* may be understood as "the vigorous return of a taste and of a stylistic ideology which have characterized the European literature of decadence" (204). Fellini's return is a strategic one, one that portrays a society of decadence in order to dismantle it. The society presented in *La Dolce Vita* closely resembles what Guy Debord interrogates in *The Society of the Spectacle*; Debord's epigraph could very well serve as an epigraph for Fellini's film. Reproduced from Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, it reads:

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence . . . *illusion* only is sacred, *truth* profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness. (Debord 1)

Sacredness and profanity, representation and reality, appearance and essence: all are central to Fellini's work in *La Dolce Vita*, dualities paradoxically held in opposition and blurred in distinction.

La Dolce Vita's effectiveness as an artwork may rightfully be attributed to what Walter Benjamin would identify as its "embeddedness in the context of tradition" (Benjamin 105). The film's title and central concern, *La Dolce Vita*, is itself rooted in philosophical debates about "the good life" that can be traced back to Aristotle. Embedded within the traditions of Catholicism, Italian culture, the European literature of decadence, Hollywood, and the modernist sensibility, *La Dolce Vita* strips these traditions—and itself—of their majestic veil, their aura, replacing cult value with immense political potential.

A 1965 NBC interview with Fellini reveals that the auteur was very much aware of the political potential of *La Dolce Vita*—as well as that of film as an artistic medium—throughout its production. When asked about the

considerable influence of post-World War II Italian films on the industry, Fellini explained that:

Cinema, like all other arts, was constrained under fascism. The psychology of the Italian people and its artists was blocked and shut up within a sort of wall that prevented an authentic contact with life . . . When these walls c[a]me crashing down as dramatically as they did for us . . . we discovered our country . . . with new, unsullied eyes, with the enthusiasm and vibrant energy of a newborn child. (00:17:39)

With unsullied eyes and vibrant energy, Fellini suggests “to modern man a road to inner liberation” by getting “people to accept and love life the way it is, to stop idealizing it or conceptualizing it, to stop projecting oneself in idealized images on a moral or ethical level” (00:22:14). The road to liberation as Fellini describes it is paradoxical in nature: “We have to make a statue, break it, and recompose the pieces. Or better yet, try a decomposition in the manner of Picasso. The cinema is narrative in the nineteenth-century sense, now let’s try to do something different” (Ricciardi “Spleen” 201). It is in this way that Fellini’s stylistic approach to *La Dolce Vita* mirrors and complements his ideological intentions for the film as an artwork. By breaking from the traditional narrative structure of cinema, Fellini encourages an unconventional reading of his seemingly conventional characters and scenes.

Towards the end of *La Dolce Vita* we learn that Marcello has followed the American poetess’ counsel; he has married neither journalism nor literature, chosen to burn instead of to freeze, becoming a publicity agent whose chief responsibility, Benjamin might explain, is to foster the cult of celebrity and “preserve that magic of the personality” (113). Formerly a mere *flâneur*, Marcello now seems to have irremediably alienated himself from his values. In the film’s final episode Marcello throws a painfully debauched party at the home of one of his clients. Abandoning his former uniform of a classic black pantsuit and sunglasses, Marcello is now wearing an ironically all-white suit with a loosely-tied ascot. Once the most in touch with reality, he is now one of the most intoxicated, hurling insults and objects alike. He gives a toast to “the annulment of everything” in honor of the annulment of a party guest’s marriage and of his decision to abandon both journalism and literature (2:33:01). A synthesized Jingle Bells tinkles from the stereo; men in ballerina

tutus perform the cancan; women in pigtailed vandalize art; brassieres are taken off and worn as hats. Everything bores. The guests are restless. The party culminates with a violent act of sadism when Marcello preys upon "a nice chubby farm girl from the mountains," forcing her to the floor and riding her like a donkey (2:44:21). Guessing that she came to Rome to "try her luck," he complains, "If only you knew what rotten luck I've had" (2:44:37). Finishing this act of humiliation, Marcello pours a pitcher of alcohol on the girl and rips open a pillow, throwing endless handfuls of feathers onto her. The guests gather round in a circle and clap in unison as Marcello calls each by name, christening them with feathers as they spin and skip out into the morning.

The Marcello who dreamt of a life of meaning and influence appears to be symbolically killed, made into an effigy in the form of the "farm girl" whose innocence and ambition remind Marcello of who he once was. The course of the new Marcello's life, we can imagine, will resemble those of other fallen modernist heroes. A passage from Ernest Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" reads as if it were a prophecy of Marcello's demise:

He had had his life and it was over and then he went on living it again with different people and more money . . . You kept from thinking and it was all marvellous [sic] . . . You made an attitude that you cared nothing for the work you used to do . . . But, in yourself, you said that you would write about these people; about the very rich; that you were really not of them but a spy in their country . . . But he would never do it, because each day of not writing . . . of being that which he despised, dulled his ability and softened his will to work so that, finally, he did not work at all. (10)

Such an ending would be clean, *de rigueur* for a film about the plight of the modern man without a compass, but Fellini is uninterested in cleanliness. He shatters any certainty of Marcello's fate with a gentle, dream-like epilogue. Drawn to the sea as though by a preternatural magnetism, the party guests make a silent pilgrimage through the woods, their hair and clothes billowing in the wind. One spots a curious sight on the beach ahead; fishermen are heaving an enormous net through the shallows of the water. The guests quicken their pace to a light sprint, coming together again before the net. The camera offers a close-up of the enormous catch, violently destroying the

poetic mystery it formerly held with its repulsing grotesquerie. A giant, dead sea creature is anchored to the sand, its large black eyes open and unflinching. A small sand crab emerges and prances sideways across its face as an unknowing child might skip over a grave.

The symbolism of the great fish has been interpreted as a Christ figure, as Dante's Satan, and as "the sign of a grotesque and hostile cosmos," all of which hold validity given Fellini's noncommittal preference for ambiguity—in his interview he claimed that "what [I've] created should speak for itself. The filmmaker knows the least of anyone about it" (Ricciardi 44; Fellini 00:09:36). So it goes with the very last frame of the film. When a virginal, soft-spoken girl Marcello once knew calls to him from across the shore, he is unable to recognize or hear her. He ultimately gives up and turns away from the girl, joining a woman from his group to leave the beach. The camera closes in on the young girl's sweet, smiling face as she watches him walk away, lingering there until she shifts her gaze directly to meet the camera's.

Though it is misguided to rely too heavily on an artist's moments of self-disclosure—especially, perhaps, from one who considers them secondary, if not irrelevant, to the work itself—it is important to remember Fellini's desire to liberate the spectator from ideals. While this is certainly an ambitious goal, one that may even strike us as ironically idyllic, its inherent faith in the work of art's capacity for good is refreshing. The innocent, joyful gaze of the young girl is captivating, and Fellini's decision to end the film by placing the audience before her hardly seems incidental. Her gaze is hopeful, ultimately settling on the audience and thus including us in her vision of the future. Blackness spirals in over her face like the closing of a camera lens, leaving the audience alone in silent darkness to recover from the film's final confrontation.

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