Austin Film Society
Essential Cinema

AFTER 8 1/2: THE CREATIVE IN CRISIS

8 1/2
Directed by Federico Fellini

"Even if I set out to make a film about a fillet of sole, it would be about me." – Federico Fellini

Counterintuitively, success often breeds depression, and Federico Fellini was met with a tsunami of success following the release of LA DOLCE VITA, an international hit that won the 1960 Palme d'Or at Cannes. Not long after, the director went into psychoanalysis. It was there that he was turned onto the teachings of Carl Jung – and most especially Jung's emphasis on dreams.

THE TEMPTATION OF DOCTOR ANTONIO, Fellini's contribution to the anthology film BOCCACCIO '70, was the Italian auteur's first attempt at mining Jungian dream theory before he exploded the conceit in 8 1/2. (The title refers to Fellini's previous six features and three "halves," or short films.) 8 1/2 opens with a dream, with director Guido Anselmi (played by Marcello Mastroianni), trapped in a car that is slowly filling with noxious fumes. Panicky, Guido kicks out the car window and floats in the air serenely, until he discovers his leg tethered. "I've got him!" an unseen voice cries. Guido then plummets to the ground and wakes up gasping for air. Any armchair psychoanalyst can unravel the dream's meaning: Guido feels trapped.

Significantly, Fellini films Mastroianni at arm's length in these early scenes – from behind, or at a distance, in shadow or with his head ducked away from the camera. It's fully five minutes before we're afforded a close-up of Guido, all ashiness and sunken eyes – tiny gauze bags of sand were taped under Mastroianni's eyes to illustrate his stressed state – but we've already identified with the character from his first frantic breath, felt viscerally his agitation and angst. It's no mistake that the first really good look we get of Guido is through a mirror. What could be a more apropos introduction of a character who so nakedly mirrored Fellini?

The script initially envisaged the Guido character as more of an everyman; a later draft tweaked the part to make him a writer. It was only in the days leading up to filming that Guido became a movie director – a shocking last-minute swerve, considering both the film's now-canonical status as a movie about making movies – and being creatively stuck in the process – and how much of the film's gallows humor derives from that film-set milieu. On the subject of its humor: Fellini, still depressed, posted a note to himself next to the camera: "Remember, this is a comic film."

After the initial dream opening, “reality” picks up with Guido ensconced at a spa, where he hopes to restore his health even as he works doggedly to prep his latest film for shooting. The production team has set up offices at the hotel, and someone – the producer, the writer, a needy actress – is always haranguing him to make a decision, or to defend his half-formed idea for a sci-fi film that involves the costly construction of a rocket launching pad. Working off past commentary – and savvily anticipating more sneering critiques – Fellini and his team of writers put preemptive attacks/mea culpas into the mouths of the characters, most especially that of the screenwriter, Carini, played by the French writer Jean Rougeul, who snipes that Guido’s movie “lacks a philosophical premise” and is but “a series of gratuitous episodes, perhaps amusing for their ambiguous realism.” Fellini reportedly first tested for the screenwriter role actors who resembled Michelangelo Antonioni, whom Fellini biographer John Baxter determined was Fellini’s “personal model of the bloodless intellectual.”

There’s no understating the ongoing, dizzying “meta-ness” of 8 1/2 (to use a term that wasn’t yet in vogue when the film came out), although, interestingly, Fellini claimed in 1966 not to have experienced the same crisis of creativity as his alter ego: “You see, I don’t experience blank periods. It seems that ever since I started as a director, it’s been the same day – the same long, wonderful day. But am I at all preoccupied with failure or professional impotence? Naturally. As you know, 8 1/2 dealt with this preoccupation. But I don’t feel the day is near when I will be empty. When it happens, I hope I’ll have the humility and good sense to stop chattering.”

Still, 8 1/2 is an unabashedly personal work, a fact that is somewhat obscured by its dreamlike quality. In the film, Fellini moves seamlessly between the real, the imagined (fantasy), and the once-was (Guido’s childhood recollections). (Distributor Cineriz supposedly made prints for more provincial audiences, wherein the fantasy sequences were tinted sepia to denote their deviation from Guido’s reality.) Fellini was famously a fabulist, fudging his autobiography to journalists whenever it suited him, and freely mining that autobiography for his own movies, frequently to the distress of his family, friends, and professional acquaintances. One imagines his wife of 50 years, Giulietta Masina – an essential collaborator and forever-muse – must have shuddered at her alter ego here, Luisa (Anouk Aimée), Guido’s bitter, exhausted wife, and the parade of head-turning women who tromp through the film. (If that didn’t test Masina’s patience, surely his remarks three years later in a Playboy interview did: “Marriage as an institution needs re-examining. We live with too many nonfunctioning ideologies. Modern man needs richer relationships. ... Extramarital and premarital. Man is not basically a monogamous animal. Marriage is tyranny, a violation and mortification of his natural instincts.”)

Fellini tangles with monogamy most memorably in 8 1/2’s harem sequence, in which Guido imagines a household of disparate women all united in their devotion to his care and nurturing – then sees that household openly revolt against him. There’s plenty cause, here and in his other works, to ding Fellini for retrogressive ideas about women, but there’s also a lot to admire in the brazen way Fellini dumps his neuroses on a plate and unapologetically offers it up to the viewing audience for the chewing over. Prior to

the harem scene, Fellini illuminates defining moments of Guido's upraising – the profound comfort he felt being bathed and swaddled in blankets by a community of women, his erotic awakening at the altar of the wide, swiveling hips of Seraghina – and their rippling effects, too. Guido emerges from a hot bath to be wrapped in a sheet, toga-like, for his fantasy harem, while Seraghina's influence is keenly felt when Guido, ever the maestro, directs his curvy mistress (Sandra Milo) to mimic the seaside prostitute's garish makeup. Is it any wonder Guido's slim, sophisticate wife doesn't excite the same passions? And, truly, how many other pantheon directors (Hitchcock leaps to mind) have been so upfront about their sexual hangups?

Guido throughout is a man at war with himself; see: his sexual wants versus his sincere devotion to his wife, his childhood relationship with the Church versus his faltering faith, his exalted creative ambitions versus his day-to-day frustrations trying to funnel that creativity into a meaningful but tangible, marketable product. The epiphany comes, after a fantasy-suicide enacted at the doomed launchpad production site, when Guido resolves to stop trying to reconcile his warring halves. He is what he is. In Fellini's words: "He is at peace with himself at last – free to accept himself as he is, not as he wished he were or might have been. That is the optimistic finale to 8 1/2." Cue the caped young Guido, tootling on a piccolo to Nino Rota's enduring score, and the parade of life – Guido's life – falling in step after him with hands clasped. The warring sides shrug and agree to make peace, or at least muddle through together. What a beautiful dream it is.

SOURCES:

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