

## **8½ and the Pitfalls of the Remake**

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*Why deceive us? Or is it really a deception? In the realm of doubling visions and mutating images, which is precisely what the culture that favors the remake should be, the question, Why wouldn't a filmmaker admit to remaking a classic? could be only another way of phrasing the questions, Why remake classics at all?.*  
– M. Brashinsky

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to provide an archetypal instance of the problematic phenomenon of film remaking. In analyzing Fellini's 8½ and Marshall's remake of it, *Nine*, the article defines film remaking as a variable concept pulled in every direction by the remaking director's acumen and their views on the film's role in the world of local cinematic industries, critics and audiences. It also seeks to address a fundamental critical issue in the discussion surrounding the remake: the cultural differences between the source film's audience and the remake's target audience. This article takes an interest chiefly in the manner in which cultural and historical differences that separate the source film (8½) from the remake (*Nine*) determine the director's expectations regarding the film's target audience. And, moreover, how those expectations are instrumental in the film's fundamental characteristics.

**Keywords:** Federico Fellini, Rob Marshall, 8½, *Nine*, remakes, Italian cinema, Hollywood

## Introduction

Hollywood remakes of classic films can turn out to be superficial spectacles that strip the classic of its original depth and style. Such films are fiascos because they seem to follow a much too simple reasoning: if a film was a hit, let us go ahead and do it again! There is also the idea that, under novel circumstances (new social environments and a new public with a new mindset), the exact same original work can be copied and it will not be considered a remake, but an original in its own right. Jorge Luis Borges's Pierre Menard, writing an exact copy of *Don Quixote* in the XX century, accomplishes an original work precisely because he is a modern individual writing for a modern audience: every word in *his* work traverses a different cosmos from that of Cervantes, who wrote *his* Quixote in the seventeenth century. Moreover, in light of our modern consumer culture, where the “new” is invested with a particular glow of freshness and with the power to rescue an original work from the undercroft of irrelevance (through technological advances and “corrected” viewpoints, for example), remakes are often seen as improvements. Yet, while some remakes can be understood as a savvy enhancement of a previous work (one can think of Hitchcock's remake of his own *The Man Who Knew Too Much*), remakes can, and often do, turn out to be shallow copies of more profound works.

## The Pitfalls of Imitation

A prime example of a flawed imitation is the copy of Federico Fellini's film *8½* (1963). This is a self-referential film whose title, in a certain way, points to itself as its main subject. “By 1963 Federico Fellini had made, by his own count, seven and a half films. Hence *8½* is like an opus number: this is film number eight and a half in the Fellini catalog” (Sesonske, 2010, n.p.). Fellini's film underwent a disconcerting remake in Hollywood with Rob Marshall's *Nine* (2009). Marshall's unabashed recognition of the act of copying Fellini, reflected in his remake's title, forces the audience to view *Nine* through the rearview mirror, so to speak, looking back at the original, viewing the remake through the arbitrating presence of its source text. When doing so we see that, while both films recount the complications in the life of Guido Anselmi, a troubled and struggling Italian director, the similarities end there: even a cursory comparison of *8½* with *Nine* can establish a sharp difference between the cinema of bliss (*8½*) and the cinema of pleasure (*Nine*), respectively; these differences can be best noted in A – the overall atmosphere of the film and B – key shots, scenes and sequences such as those involving the gathering of all of the women in Guido's life as well as those in the finale.

## The Cinema of Bliss

The cinema of bliss and the cinema of pleasure are two very different approaches to reading a particular film. On one hand, a film can be classified as cinema of bliss when it provokes the audience into thinking and analyzing; by feeling dissatisfied, the audience is forced to be an active participant in the composition of the film's meaning. This type of film disallows comfortable, passive viewing. The cinema of bliss can also be considered “meta-cinema” or “counter-cinema” in that it disrupts the conventions of filmmaking and makes the filmmaking process visible to the audience. Fellini's *8½* is the prime example of the cinema of bliss, as are many other Italian films of this period.

## The Cinema of Pleasure

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a film can be classified as cinema of pleasure when its aims are to please the audience. By making the overall happiness and satisfaction of the viewer its goal, the cinema of pleasure turns the viewer into a consumer rather than an active participant in the interpretation of the film. Marshall's *Nine* is a prime example of the cinema of pleasure, as are most Hollywood films. Perhaps due to the intellectually undemanding nature of its productions, and in comparison to the challenging nature of the cinema of bliss, the cinema of pleasure is dominant and more mainstream. Furthermore, the cinema of pleasure will focus on the principal male character as a dashing hero, incorporating his inevitable, flattering close up shots, while the cinema of bliss will portray the man as flawed and troubled in some way, eschewing those close ups. In its original form, *8½* is a leading example of a film that represents the cinema of bliss, its remake *Nine*, diagonally opposed to it, is just another "cinema of pleasure" Hollywood production.

### *8½*

Fellini's *8½* has a unique atmosphere that is able to emphasize the film's essence as auto analysis of Fellini's own life, as exploration of the Italian male psyche and of the cinema itself, thus making it a prime example of the cinema of bliss. This is evidenced by the fact that the entire film is essentially the main character Guido's stream of consciousness. Furthermore, the film uses what Robert T. Eberwein (1984) has characterized as the *dream screen* strategy, a technique that makes the audience question where (or when) they are in any given scene. This is a technique that Fellini very elegantly employed in a subsequent film, *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965). Eberwein explains the concept of dream screen as it is employed in this film:

Early in the film, after demonstrating her abilities to call up fantasies at will, Juliet (Giulietta Masina) appears before us sitting in a chair near the water and wearing an enormous white hat. As the camera moves closer to her, she falls asleep; her head moves down in such a way that the white hat overwhelms the entire screen. Fellini then cuts to her dream, a frightening narrative in which she sees bizarre figures and decrepit horses emerge from the sea. She seems threatened by the figures who seem to be ill, but calls in vain for aid to her doctor who refuses to help her. As the dream concludes, she sees a particularly menacing figure with a club, but then is awakened by the sound of a jet plane. The last object that Juliet sees before going to sleep is the white hat, the object that precedes *our* vision of the dream she is having. This seems very much to be the case where a surrogate object has functioned as a characters' dream screen, especially since the object takes over the cinematic dream screen that we are watching. (1984, p. 214)

In *8½*, due to this *dream screen* style, the audience must take a second and situate themselves in the film by asking: Am I in the film's reality or in Guido's mind, fantasy, or flashback? Fellini cleverly tips off the audience by indicating the transition from reality into fantasy; he does so by including shots throughout the film of Guido touching his glasses or nose right before he enters into one of his fantasies or flashbacks. All of this works to better portray the profound complexity of the main character's (and Fellini's) psychological makeup.

In this regard, Eli Rozik sees that

The director Guido (probably representing Fellini himself) is characterized by a series of iconic depictions of mental events such as dreams, a memory, a fantasy, to such an extent that this film should be perceived in terms of “stream of consciousness,” meaning that the entire film is the conventional representation of what happens in the character/director's mind, including reflections of reality. (2011, p. 189)

This need to locate oneself in the film creates a complexity for the viewer, in which the viewer can actually feel as though he or she is in Guido's mind. As a result, the density offered by the film forces its viewers to be active in the events of the film, as opposed to the audience simply watching the film at face value in order to feel content or satisfied. This film's unique atmosphere also allows it to function as an auto analysis of cinema in general by allowing the audience to see the editing effects, in contrast to Hollywood films in which the audience would never notice the editing because it is invisible. Additionally, Fellini puts the audience on the set of the movie that Guido is making by allowing set pieces, lighting structures and auditions to be parts of various scenes throughout the film. These particular characteristics of the film allow it to be considered “meta-cinema” or cinema about cinema, thus making it, in yet another way, an example of the cinema of bliss.

### *Nine*

In contrast to its predecessor, *Nine* has an atmosphere that makes it a glamorous spectacle rather than a complex subject for thought, so it may be categorized as an example of the cinema of pleasure. Very similar to its precursor, this film follows the downward spiral of Guido. However, unlike the elaborate imaginative involvement required of the audience in *8½*, this film allows the audience outwardly to *see* Guido's struggle, but not inwardly to *feel* his struggle; viewers become mere spectators rather than participants. As an illustration, we notice that the surreal aspects of the film, such as Guido's flashbacks, thoughts or fantasies, are not sprinkled randomly throughout the film so that the audience can sense the same feeling of complexity as the main character. Instead, they are predictably shown whenever Guido is physically on location at his sound stage and not throughout the comings and goings of his everyday life. It is as if the surreal moments are staged, which is not the way humans daydream, think or have fantasies; this makes Guido's thoughts and flashbacks irrelevant to the audience, thus automatically disconnecting them from his intricate psychological gymnastics. Furthermore, Guido's flashbacks are interrupted by musical and dance numbers about the flashback or thought in question; such enhancements make the entire scene or sequence an unblushing spectacle. It seems difficult for the audience to feel puzzled, dissatisfied and ultimately connected to the struggle of Guido when it is being dazzled and distracted by garish musical numbers that do nothing to enhance our perception of the character's interior workings. Taking all of these aspects into account, it is apparent that *Nine* is the quintessential Hollywood film of the cinema of pleasure. From its predictably-situated flashbacks and its glamorous musical numbers, it is clear that this director's agenda is to impress and satisfy the audience, as only the cinema of pleasure can do.

### **All the women**

One particular sequence in both films that is intended to be a complex auto analysis in *8½* but is morphed into a Hollywood spectacle in *Nine* is the one where all the women that Guido has

ever encountered come together in one of his fantasies. In Fellini's original film, this sequence is an auto analysis of Fellini and of the Italian male psyche, uncontaminated by external frivolities. The scene becomes an analysis of how the director (and by extension the Italian male mind) categorizes and sexualizes women. In this sequence, the audience sees all the women that Guido has ever encountered, from his wife to his mistress to a random showgirl, together in a house playing out very stereotypical roles. The women fawn over Guido as he enters the house, even bathing him like a child. Eventually, the showgirl drums up the support of the other women to rebel against the womanizer, reproving him for sending the "expired" women upstairs. This sequence is crucial to the theme of the film as it underscores the Italian male psyche with respect to women. The scene gains momentum for a brief moment as the women join to turn the tables on Guido, but then quickly become enchanted by him again: Guido's ability to womanize successfully is reaffirmed. Additionally, this scene addresses the models into which women are habitually typecast and how they guide Guido and the "Italian male" in sexualizing them. Owing to this scene's surreal, fantastic features, the audience can gain a sense of the psychological complexity and is able to draw conclusions on its meaning.

This sequence is not present at all in *Nine*, although its opening scene does include all the women in Guido's life singing, dancing and performing while Guido simply watches them. Fellini's complex scene is reduced to a cheesy opening number, with the male character (the male psyche) completely disconnected from the environment: the scene does not reflect his subjective microcosm. Here, Guido is a mere spectator. He, like the audience, is simply enjoying the gratuitous spectacle. Furthermore, the women have little to no connection with one another, a circumstance that removes their ability to stand together to address their roles in Guido's life. This powerful sequence of the cinema of bliss has been morphed into a Hollywood spectacle of the cinema of pleasure.

### **The finale**

Another scene that shows the transition from cinema of bliss to cinema of pleasure is the finale. The finale of *8½* is arguably one of the most famous scenes in the history of Italian cinema. It depicts all of the characters dressed in white and directed by Guido himself to dance together, making one giant circle. The surroundings fade to black and all that is left is the circus band and eventually young Guido by himself. The aesthetic significance of this finale lies in the fact that it is representing "meta-cinema" in its purest form, as we see Guido direct the cast. So we've been involved in a film narrative regarding the making of a film. But intricacy intensifies as Guido joins the dancing circle, becoming part of "another" film, Fellini's, and now the engaged viewers must re-situate their gaze as spectators of a film under Fellini's direction. What film has the viewer actually watched? At what point does one narrative fade into the other? "This blurring of boundaries has the effect of heightening our awareness of both the rational content of dream and fantasy and the fantastic element in what we call reality. It is sensitizing." (Pechter, 1987, p. 269). The film closes with a fade to black and young Guido left alone playing his instrument. By leaving the audience with only one character at the very end, Fellini is creating a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction, a characteristic essential for the cinema of bliss. Moreover, the circle or circus ring represents the amalgamation of the real (Fellini's film and consciousness) with the imaginary (Guido's film and consciousness); it also represents Guido's, and ultimately Fellini's, ability to resolve his conflicts and have his life back in sync. The audience watches the story of Fellini come full circle with the story of Guido while still feeling a bit empty at the very end, making this finale the perfect example of cinema of bliss.

The finale in *Nine* cannot be any more dissimilar to the finale of *8½*. Similar to Fellini's film, all of the characters in the film are together and are dressed in white. However, they just stand on various levels of Guido's film set as he looks on while an observable clapperboard reads *Nine*. Needless to say, there is no dancing in unison in a circular fashion, and inexplicably, little Guido runs in and sits on Guido's lap. This is the way the movie ends. Compared to *8½* the film can be said to complete the circle of shallow expectations. There is no hollowness, no desolation to give subjective complexity to the film. Although there are aspects of "meta-cinema", given that we see Guido direct a movie, the audience merely watches him do it. As the characters just stand around the set like mannequins, the film takes on the characteristics of artificial spectacle, adding to those same characteristics generated in previous scenes. This is why the audience has trouble connecting to the events of the scene: the audience is never provoked to think complexly. Additionally the fact that there is no circle negates a key component in the *8½* ending, which is to merge Fellini's story with Guido's and to coalesce the real with the surreal events. There is no such arrangement in this finale, making *Nine* another example of the glamorous Hollywood spectacle that is the cinema of pleasure.

## Conclusion

Although the general plot of Fellini's *8½* and Marshall's *Nine* are similar, there are clear differences in the 21st century remake that reduce it to a superficial spectacle, distancing it from Fellini's complex self-analysis and from the examination of the Italian male psyche present in the original. The self-referential character of *8½* is also largely absent in *Nine*. These specific differences reflect the disparities between the cinema of bliss, represented by *8½*, and the cinema of pleasure, represented by *Nine*. The overall atmosphere of both films, the sequence with all the women in Guido's life come together, and the finale allow us to assume that, in the overall outlook of film production, Italian cinema and Hollywood aim to affect the audience in very different ways: one makes viewers active participants in the creation of meaning, while the other makes viewers consumers. In *8½* one delves deep into the mind of a troubled director; in *Nine* one learns that Sophia Loren, somehow cast as "Mamma" in *Nine*, should have remembered her status and declined the offer to contribute to this attempted demolition of a compelling and momentous work of art.

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