

Fellini in Memoriam – The Absurdist Elements of Fellini’s Cinema as a Reflection of our Disrupted COVID-19 Reality

Jytte Holmqvist

HBU/UCLan School of Media, Communication & Creative Industries
UK

Abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need to “think outside the box”. As societies across the planet gradually become more interconnected, the dominance of outmoded social practices surrounding human interaction, work, leisure and space is being challenged on a daily basis. Mediatic productions such as film have always presented opportunities for expanding the reach of particular messages and disseminating topical views and perspectives. In honour of Federico Fellini (1920-1993) on the 100th anniversary of his birth, this paper undertakes a comprehensive comparison between the bold and absurdist cinema of the Post-Neorealist filmmaker and today’s also strange and perplexing social environment. Contextualising his cinema within an auteurist framework, we highlight how ground-breaking Fellini was in embracing the unconventional; by doing so he provided a practical guide for navigating contemporary reality. With productions that seduce and impress viewers worldwide, Fellini defied established cinematographic practices, as exemplified by his experimentation with overlapping narrative styles. His films bestir a new way of thinking by generating an anomalous world, one where events take place beyond the scope of what the viewer anticipates as “natural”. But the appraisal of what is “natural” is contingent upon the viewer’s belief structure: by presenting a world where events happen outside the realm of practical expectations, Fellini’s timeless cinema questions outdated belief systems and sets the guidelines for how to navigate the unanticipated complexities of the contemporary world. Reality and fiction merge into one.

Keywords: absurdism, COVID-19, Fellini, interrupted realities, reality resembling fiction

Introduction and Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to pay tribute to Federico Fellini (1920-1993) in consideration of the 100th anniversary of his birth in Rimini (1920), and to draw analytical parallels between his absurdist cinema and our surreal contemporary reality. The Italian filmmaker has been credited with creating his own style of cinema, where he broke with his Neorealist predecessors and mentors like Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977). Rossellini harnessed Fellini's skills in films like *Paisà* (1946) and provided the former cartoonist (who in a 1960's interview explained that he was "born for the cinema" but that he didn't choose "the career of the film director with any premeditation") (Levine and Fellini 1966, p. 77) with a platform that allowed him to draw from more formalist traditions and eventually venture beyond the boundaries of neorealism. Delving into surrealism, Fellini used psychoanalysis to represent and explore other, part realistic, part confusing and incongruous, worlds and spaces, thereby creating his own cinematic style and reaching fame as an auteur in his own right. Labelled "the master of absurdism" (Shrayber, 2020, title) and "the Italian master of absurdity" (Dunne, 2016, para. 1) – much like his contemporary Albert Camus would be called "the master of the absurd" (Cavanaugh, 2013) – Fellini invites us into a different realm where he challenges conventions and constructs a new representation of reality. With that, he "leaves the neo-realism with its social ideology to express a personal world" (Indico, 2019, para. 2).

Fellini's reconstructed dreams merge with reality and present alternative outcomes. Childhood memories are often represented on screen, where they translate into feelings, attitudes and behaviours among stock characters that symbolise certain stereotypes within Italian society. But the characters that populate Fellini's surreal universe are never conventional. Rather, they range from underdogs and antiheroes who provoke our sympathy, to absurd, ridiculous, even grotesque. Always blending fantasy and realism, Fellini was "an evocative visual artist whose drawings were integral to his creative process" (Wolfe, n.d. para. 1). He was fascinated by clowns and saw them as "the caricature of a well-established, ordered, peaceful society." Commenting on the absurd and fleeting aspects of contemporary society, Fellini continued by declaring that "[b]ut today all that is temporary, disordered, grotesque. Who can still laugh at clowns? Hippies, politicians, the man in the street, all the world plays the clown, now" (Fellini, as quoted in Free, 1973, p. 214).

In his repertoire Fellini draws from public ridicule and the macabre to confront us with our own inadequacies, fears and anxieties – often delivering a pun on authorities and political movements like Fascism. Both his characters and his viewers, by extension, partake in a circus-like alternative reality. In our own incongruous, unpredictable, ominous and bewildering pandemic times, Fellini's absurdist cinema feels strangely relevant. Not only are his characters often irrational and absurd, but the absurdist elements in, for example, the self-referential *8½* (1963), *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), *I Clowns* (1970), the semi-autobiographical *Amarcord* (1973), *Casanova* (1976), *La Città delle donne* (1980) and even Fellini's *Roma* (1972), are constantly highlighted in a set of characters lost in a chaotic and irrational universe. It has been held that "the Absurd arises out of the conflict between our search for meaning and the apparent random nature and meaninglessness of the universe" (Knoll, 2020, para. 2).

In Fellini's personal universe – which spills over into our own incoherent pandemic reality – characters are often trapped in a world that makes little sense. Such is the case of pure and childlike Gelsomina in *La Strada* (1954) who embarks on a road trip without real purpose, naively going with the flow and leaving the familiar behind until she breaks down in the face of human injustice. Indeed, the itinerant world of *La Strada* conveys life on the road and the

rootlessness of its three lonely main characters and “finds one never at home, scarcely ever at rest.” (Grunes, 2007, para. 3). The character Il Matto (“The Fool”) lives life hedonistically and meets a gruesome death. Likewise, in the perplexing visual landscape of *Fellini Satyricon*, the grotesque and macabre dominate the opening scenes, where repulsive characters parade exhibitionistically across the screen to stimulate our visual senses – for better or for worse. As has been generally declared, “[a]bsurd worlds and universes, by definition, allow a degree of unexplained circumstances for characters to be victim to, propagators of, or to explore” (Davie, 2021, para. 2). Fellini’s characters, including his own alter ego in a film like *8½* – which according to Roger Ebert “weaves in and out of reality and fantasy” (Ebert, 2000, para. 5) – struggle to make sense of their own reality only to find that the reality in which they find themselves refuses to be readable or readily understood.

With this as a point of comparison, we argue, in this paper, that Fellini’s world in many respects reflects our own. His cinema is both timeless yet by the same token timely and relevant in the context of today, a period of inherent unpredictability and rapid departure from what was familiar. As we continue to navigate our COVID-19 present there is a sense of interrupted or suspended reality, which reminds us of Fellini’s surreal version of reality or the alternative reality which is evidenced in his films. Such a version of reality throws us into the realm of the peculiar and the bizarre – a space unlike anything we’ve ever known; we seem to “shed one sense of self and inhabit another” (Bowles, 2020, para. 3). Can Fellini’s films help us navigate some of the many complexities of our own off-screen, but increasingly cinematic reality? Fellini reassuringly shows us a way forward by introducing darkly comical, caricaturised characters who, like us, often try to make sense of their bewildering reality.

Fellini’s Surrealist Cinema and Tributes to his Work: Centenary Celebrations and New Publications

As the world tries to make sense of the new reality brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, people turn to cinema to escape the confusion. Therein we discover a world that partly resembles our own – a world where the surreal takes over and reality and fiction meet and merge. It has been stated that “with a global event as impactful as the pandemic, perhaps it’s actually not surprising – and maybe even inevitable – that our reality would seep into our escapes.” (Volpe, 2021, para. 19). When we voluntarily allow media to become our current escape route, the strange visual landscapes we flee into become safe havens where we find a sense of refuge. And the movie set, as Gary Susman argues, thus becomes a place where “one could resolve through art problems that are intractable in real life” (2013, para. 13).

In our extended states of lockdown, we now have the opportunity to celebrate a filmmaker who created a whole new world of his own, screened for the delight of our senses. The 100-year anniversary of Fellini’s birth in Rimini 1920 was acknowledged worldwide in 2020, with cities paying tribute to a true artist whose films continue to impress. It is a cinema that challenges norms and conventions. Our own COVID-19 reality being anything but conventional, Fellini’s films strike a particular chord and the centenary was timely, even opportune, in the sense that it coincided with a pandemic that has made us question, re-examine and reinterpret what is or was once considered normal.

Viewers are now invited to rediscover the specifically Felliniesque universe of the bizarre, the flamboyant, the irrational, absurd, and grotesque – yet at the same time the irresistibly alluring. Specifically in the UK, in 2020, the British Film Institute, in partnership with Cinecittà, “announced a major year-long celebration to mark the centenary of one of cinema’s most exuberantly playful filmmakers” (BFI, 2020, para. 1). Hong Kong, in turn, organised a full

retrospective of Federico Fellini's works and other classics conjuring cinematic illusions that mirror today's reality (HKIFF, 2020). Also in New York, museums, theatres and exhibitions revisited his films. Finally, in Australia, to mention but a few major celebrations, Sydney and Melbourne held their own special Fellini retrospectives (at the Instituto Italiano di Cultura, and the Classic Cinemas in Elsternwick, Melbourne, respectively). This filmmaker who carved a space for himself as a creator of his own peculiar cinematic universe and bent conventions of genre, movements and style, invites us into a parallel space where dreams and reality overlap. As established by long-term Fellini scholar Peter Bondanella,

[f]or Fellini, the cinema exists solely for the purpose of individual self-expression; fantasy, rather than reality, is its proper domain, because only fantasy falls under the director's complete and absolute artistic control. (Bondanella, 2004, p. 231)

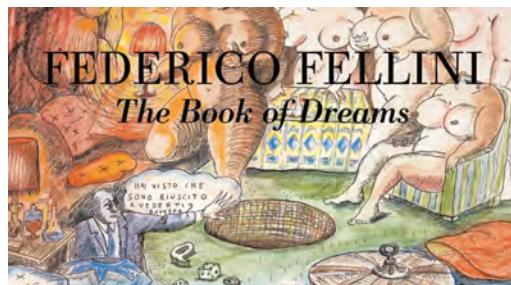
Challenging the conventions of neorealism and partly abandoning this movement while he explores the surreal, Fellini leaves a mark on a motley crowd of characters ranging from cartoonist and parodic, to whimsical, dramatic, grotesque, carnivalesque, provocative, and seductive – as in the case of Sylvia (Anita Ekberg) in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) who embodies both of these last traits. Anything but stereotypical and challenging norms and conventional behaviour, they stand out and stand apart, drawing us into narratives where many of these characters and the stories they are part of often lean towards the farcical and exaggerated – again, much like the bewildering times we ourselves have now unexpectedly been catapulted into. Caricature portrayals of characters whose perplexing world makes little sense to the audience, Fellini's films hold a special allure; they fascinate us on a subconscious level and pull us in.

In parallel with the cinematic focus on Fellini in 2020, recent books do their part to shed further light on a filmmaker who has caught our attention and entered the public imagination. The year after Bondanella published *The Italian Cinema Book* (2019) and Gremese International came out with the collection of essays *Tutto Fellini* (edited by Enrico Giacovelli), *Federico Fellini: The Book of Dreams* (Rizzoli, 2020) landed on the bookshelves. It was promoted as a new edition of Fellini's own 1960-1990 diaries “to represent his nocturnal visions in the form of drawings, scribbles and ungrammatical notes” (Amazon, 2021). Also noteworthy is *A Companion to Federico Fellini* (John Wiley & Sons 2020), the republished and updated *Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern* (Frank Burke, 2020),¹ DVD set “Essential Fellini” (the Criterion Collection), as well as earlier “Scola racconta Fellini: Che strano chiamarsi Federico” (DVD documentary, 2014) which importantly covers Fellini's career from his early years as a cartoonist until his death in 1993. Again, from a screen perspective, the Italian Contemporary Film Festival in Toronto, in turn, chose Silvia Giulietti's *Fellinopolis* as its opening film 2020 (Biglands 2021).

¹ Burke here “addresses the contemporary relevance of each film in contexts ranging from politics, gender, race, sexual orientation, individuation, Jungian study of dreams, and theoretical frameworks, highlighting the recurring themes, patterns, influences, the filmmaker's unique forms of cinematic expression, critiques and various interpretations” (Brizio-Skov 2021).

Image 1

The New Compilation of Fellini's Images and Diary Entries, “The Book of Dreams” (2020)
<https://www.frieze.com/article/book-dreams>



A January 2020 issue of *The New Yorker* further focuses on “A 100 years of Fellini” (Lane 2020) and defines Fellini’s cinema as a “record of the human visage.” Fellini himself called “spontaneity” the secret of life and is said to have claimed that “[a]t the start I’m directing the film. Then the film starts to direct me” (IMDb 2021). Defying narrative conventions and stepping away from neorealism, Fellini acknowledged the ultimate universality and timelessness of a film like *Fellini Satyricon* which, even if set in ancient times, “is … not a film about the Roman world but about antiquity, and by antiquity I mean something completely unknown, deep within us” (Fellini 1983, p. 240). In an interview about the same film with a Stuttgart newspaper, the director responded that he “showed ancient Rome but if you want to see a mirror of our own times in *Satyricon*, I wouldn’t contradict you” (Tornabene 1990, p. 93).²

Image 2

Fellini Satyricon (1969). *The Italian Theatrical Release Poster*



Wikipedia Commons:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellini_Satyricon#/media/File:Fellini_Satyricon_poster_italian.jpg

In these times of lack of control and confusion where we collectively shape a new narrative and take stock of the past, the celebrations of Fellini included the establishment of a Rimini museum hosting Fellini’s archive materials. Originally scheduled to open in December 2020 (MacKay, 2020), it was postponed to 2021 (Chiamamicitta 2020). And the aforementioned 2020 Classic Cinemas Fellini retrospective in Melbourne was likewise cancelled when stage four lockdown ground the screenings to a halt. All films except the 1987 drama-comedy and documentary *L'intravista* were eventually screened, with the last film highly innovative and multimedial film *E la nave va* (And the Ship Sails On) – a “stylized re-creation of a decadent, bygone era” (Criterion Collection). Fellini here explores film as a medium of communication

² Note that Francesco Tornabene here makes reference to Reisfeld, “Ein mesterhafter Alptraum”, p. 36.

in a meta-film where music does much of the talking (Pina Bausch is referred to, as are Austro-Hungarian flagships, visualised as a cardboard-like silhouette against the horizon) and he stretches cinematographic and narrative possibilities. The film moves from black and white, from silent movie to sound and features an omnipresent narrator or chronicler who establishes a direct dialogue with the audience and becomes our ears and eyes. We are actively engaged in this cross-disciplinary film within a film but identify with no one specific character.

The Melbourne Classic Cinemas festival repertoire included movies released at important junctures of Fellini's career and that highlight the unconventional aspects of his cinema: the Carnivalesque *Lo sceicco bianco* (The White Sheik, 1952),³ where Fellini lays bare the difference between real and artifice when at the end he reveals the face behind the mask of pretence;⁴ the not to be overlooked film *Il bidone* (1955); the stark social fable *La Strada* (1954); the interconnected masterpiece *Notti di Cabiria* (1957); the canonical *La Dolce Vita* (1960), Fellini's iconic tribute to a capital city as nostalgically decadent as the busty actress making an entrance into the Rome landmark Fontana di Trevi; the autobiographical *8½* (1963); *Fellini Satyricon*, where Fellini "felt compelled to present an incoherent, inaccessible Rome that was neither the true past nor the present either" (Seagal, 1971, p. 56); the semi-autobiographical *Roma* (1972); the multi-award winning *Amarcord* (1973); and Fellini's *Casanova* (1972). The absurd and the farcical dominate most of Fellini's narratives, with Giulietta Masina adding a burlesque touch to a string of movies (she was cast in *Lo sceicco bianco*, *La Strada*, *Notti di Cabiria*, *Giulietta degli spiriti*, and *Amarcord*). According to Vernon Young, "this woman is patently linked with the great clowns of repute and her art must be apprehended, not subsumed, by the relation it bears to the art of Chaplin or Barrault or Marceau" (Young, 1956, p. 443).

Fellini as an Auteur

A cinematic icon and with a bold approach to cinema as an artform, Fellini was a groundbreaking auteur, with an idiosyncratic style that set him apart from the rest. Writing for the Massachusetts Film Review already at the early stages of Fellini's career, Anne Paolucci called him:

the most talented of the Italian filmmakers ... he has captured the complexity of the modern soul and the paradox of human existence with more feeling and sympathy than any other contemporary film artist. (Paolucci 1966, p. 564)

Fellini, nominated for 12 Oscar Academy Awards (winner of five) over the course of his illustrious career, was also conferred a Palme d'Or for *La Dolce Vita* in 1993, and an honorary Lifetime Achievement Award at the 65th Annual Academy Awards the same year. Decidedly going his own way yet drawing from realist elements and acknowledging the artistic endeavours of his predecessors, Fellini created a world parallel to reality as we know it – a landscape rich in surrealist images and on-screen fantasies. With a "bold and brilliant visual style" (Farr, 2014, para. 4), Fellini embraced topics and themes that are locally important and likewise globally relevant, establishing a dialogue with cinema goers in Italy and abroad. Often timeless in character, his narratives, the characters and the plots are steeped in Italian traditions

³ According to Vernon Young, this early comedy by Fellini is "[t]he most artful Italian comedy short of *Miracle in Milan*" (Vittorio De Sica, 1951). (Young, 1956, p. 437).

⁴ Note that Mary Ann McDonald Carolan's 2014 comparative cinema analysis *The Transatlantic Gaze: Italian Cinema, American Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013) features a chapter dedicated to Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco*.

while at the same time they speak to the world outside. Fellini's characters resonate with people at a time when the abnormal has become the new normal. Distinct Fellini features like the grotesque, the burlesque and the absurd have become signpost words also for a year of COVID-19 that has turned the world upside down and where absurdist elements travel from the screen and enter our new, unpredictable reality. "The grotesque work of art", in the words of William J. Free, "evokes an estranged world which defies our powers to explain its coherence and order, one which disobeys the common sense of laws of cause and effect which we have come to expect of reality" (1973, 2016, p. 215).

In Fellini's cinema, life resembles not so much a cabaret as a confronting circus show where the lines between normality and abnormality are blurred. "Fellini's world was so real it was bizarre" writes Caryn James (1993, p. 26) and with that she points also to the odd and peculiar elements of current society and the world at large. In our unprecedented times of disrupted realities, the ripple effects of a virus that disregards rank and social standing are felt at all levels: socio-politically, culturally and psychologically. We now face the daunting task of having to reconstruct our lives and find sense in the patchwork of different elements out there. In the midst of the global disruption and emotional turmoil we would be wise to seek common ground and a sense of inclusion with others – realising that we are, in fact, not all that different after all. If Fellini's diverse characters can find common ground, why can't we?

Image 3

Split Personalities at a Time of Interrupted Realities



Pixabay: <https://pixabay.com/illustrations/self-knowledge-mask-anonymous-2817857/>

Fellini's Trajectory from Neorealist Beginnings to a Complete Personal Universe

Gradually breaking away from his predecessors, Fellini commenced his career as an adept of Rossellini, collaborated with the latter on *Roma città aperta* (Rome, Open City, 1945) and the aforementioned *Paisà*, and like the older Italian master was promoted in his work by the gigantic and prosperous Cinecittà media apparatus. Fellini later largely defied neorealist trends and "always viewed neorealism as a moral position rather than a true movement" (Bondanella, 2004, p. 114). While Rosellini's *Roma città aperta* fits neorealist criteria with a focus on extreme urban poverty, the use of non-professional actors, and scenes shot in natural light, in the opening scene of *La Dolce Vita*, a visual and sensorial feast where the narrative is inspired by Jungian dream theories, Fellini initially plays with notions of time and place when in one and the same frame he juxtaposes ancient history, Christianity, modernity and present in what has been called an "aesthetic of disparity" (Richardson, 1969, p. 114). Fellini created a cumulative impression of elements that at first seem disjointed but that when they come together in a montage shot strangely seem to fit and make sense. This and other scenes of *La Dolce Vita* makes for a visual kind of literature that effectively interconnects past and present in a highly hybrid manner.

Image 4

BFI Poster for “*La Dolce Vita*” (1960)⁵



“Fellini’s Masterpiece” Daily Mirror. BFI poster ad on Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/BFI/status/1215246601284878338/photo/1>

A character larger than life, Fellini was guided by a vivid imagination, with a style that broke cinematic and narrative conventions. In an interview with Gideon Bachmann (1994), Fellini explains:

The stories are born in me, in my memories, in my dreams, in my imagination. They come to me very spontaneously. I never sit down and decide to invent a story; it's not a programmed activity. Often it's a suggestion that comes from something read or from a personal experience. These things encounter a pretext; they meet in my mind with some triggering thing, like a face that suddenly looms up in front of me in the subway or a smell that reaches my nostrils, a sound that suddenly occurs, which somehow evokes my fantasy, and I create characters and situations that seem to organize themselves, to take shape in my mind without my active intervention. (Bachmann & Fellini 1994, p. 3)

Fellini’s auteurism, covered in depth by John C. Stubbs in his comprehensive analysis *Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of His Films* (2006), is one of a different kind. While in the case of filmmakers Michelangelo Antonioni, Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica their films were shot in a more or less neorealist vein, the auteurism and authorship of Fellini is, rather, one that fits the definition of David Bordwell, that is, the “authorial expressivity” of the “art film” (Bordwell 1979, p. 57). Speaking of Fellini and auteurism in *Giulietta degli spiriti* (Juliet of the Spirits, 1965), Bordwell notes that the film “shows how the fore-grounding of authorial narration can collapse before the attempt to represent character subjectivity” (p. 60). Fellini’s both artistic and authorial expressivity is reflected in films like the earlier 8½ where the director’s screened alter ego explores the fluid landscape between past and present, dreams and represented reality.

As Fellini lends his own experiences to the plot development, he becomes a character in his own film and with that proves to what extent auteurism is at work in his cinema. In 8½,⁶ protagonist Guido Anselmo (again played by Mastroianni) virtually and metaphorically steps into the shoes of his cinematic creator when he moves between alternative realities – we, too, having learned to do the same in these times of parallel realities and lived (science) fiction. As Anselmo faces a both creative and existentialist crisis as a filmmaker, the metanarrative of this film within a film reflects the parallel crisis of Fellini in his own career. He was dealing with a stream of memories and, in a way, faced his own demons at the time of shooting the film,

⁵ “Fellini’s Masterpiece” Daily Mirror. BFI poster ad on Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/BFI/status/1215246601284878338/photo/1>

⁶ The title 8½ “refers to the fact that, up to then, Fellini had made seven features and two episodes in composite films that added up to about a half” (Malcolm, 1999, para. 4).

including going through what has been regarded a midlife crisis. One of the finest examples of Fellini's creative vision and a cinematic masterpiece, *8½* received two Academy Awards (for Best International Feature and Best Costume Design, in 1964). It draws from fantasy and real memories, combining these elements into a cocktail of images and emotions. Experimenting with notions of time and space, Fellini sets the tone for the fluid narrative to come from the very start, with an opening scene featuring a dystopic and drawn-out black and white dream sequence "woven into a film in which dreams and fantasies are manufactured as a way of escaping dreary reality" (*The Guardian*, 2020). The scene highlights feelings of entrapment and the protagonist's struggle to break free (from himself, from the collective and, by extension, from societal norms and conventions). Fellini's personal ponderings and queries spill over into the cinematic realm with a story that plays with notions of the double; through Fellini's alter ego, and through his on-screen lover Carla, played by Sandra Milo who was Fellini's real mistress and muse while Giulietta Masina remained his spouse and lifetime confidante. And thus, art becomes a reflection of life. As explained by Michael Newton of *The Guardian*, *8½* draws us into a hall of mirrors, where reality and art prove indistinguishable from each other. We gaze into an endlessly receding abyss, and yet (and this is the miracle of the film) we can perceive how that abyss overbrims with abundance (2015).

Images 5

Marcello Mastroianni in 8½ (1963), directed by Federico Fellin



Public domain: Wikipedia Commons

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/8%C2%BD#/media/File:Marcello_Mastroianni_in_8%C2%BD.jpg

It may be argued that *8½* offered a sense of therapeutic relief for a filmmaker obsessed with the workings of the mind; of Jungian analysis and the unconscious, and the psychoanalytical exploration of parallel realities. The film "assigns a vital role to the cognitive unconscious, which regulates personality by means of dreams and fantasies" (Conti and McCormack 1984, p. 292). Made at the peak of Fellini's career, *8½* was followed by a period of expressive hiatus, with Burke arguing that "from *8½* on there is an increasing undermining of authorship in the Fellinian text" (as quoted by Sbraglia 2015, p. 660).

The late 1960s saw the continuous release of aforementioned *Juliet of the Spirits* and *Fellini Satyricon*, and in 1972 *Amarcord* was released. Winner of Best Feature Film, *Amarcord*, with the title a univerbation of "a m'arcòrd" ("I remember") in Romagnol dialect, was nominated for two Academy Awards in 1976. With a seductive soundtrack by Nino Rota, Fellini's film reflects the lasting importance of memory studies in both cinema and other art forms. It delivers a commentary on the nature of his own medium and is about "all kinds of memory: autobiographical, historical, literary, cinematographic" (Marcus, 1977, p. 418). The shooting locations were reconstructed within the massive Cinecittà studios and the town of Borgo in the film makes symbolic reference to Fellini's own birthplace. Still, it is not so much the location that matters, as Fellini's exploration of a past and a rural place of nostalgic memories even if, at the same time, Fellini "satirizes the ritual of the provincial community" (Hay 1991, p. 12).

Amarcord also delivers an uncommonly political commentary⁷ in its open ridicule of fascism. Bondanella explains that:

Amarcord [and *Prova d'orchestra*] are unique in their concentration upon political issues. In *Amarcord* /.../ Fellini combines a nostalgic look back at his own provincial upbringings with a relentless dissection of the origins of Italian fascism that some critics initially defined as only a bittersweet remake of the provincial milieu of *I Vitelloni*. (Bondanella 1992, p. 37)

From our own perspective of interrupted realities and revised memories at a time of social absurdity and enforced lockdowns, where the lines between the external and the internal are blurred, “lesser” films in Fellini’s oeuvre might be easier for us to identify with. That is where *Fellini Satyricon* (or just *Satyricon*) holds real value in the pandemic context of today. A fantasy film loosely based on Petronius’ *Satyricon* and set in imperial Rome, it begins by establishing “Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini.” Fellini’s seals his authorship from the very start, declaring his on-screen capacity to revisit and reinterpret history and influence our perception of the classical era. *Fellini Satyricon* is a masterpiece in its own right. Despite its episodic structure, or what has been regarded as “[a]n episodic barrage of sexual licentiousness, godless violence, and eye-catching grotesquerie” (Criterion Collection: *Fellini Satyricon*) the film defies narrative traditions, going its own way and delving into the grotesque, the macabre and the absurd while it ultimately highlights the erratic aspects of a reality that makes little sense. The film’s storyline is less important than the faces we encounter in the crowd of repulsive yet fascinating characters, the random theatrical acts they engage in; the orgies, the urgent lust-seeking, and the pained expressions reflecting a mixture of pleasure and fear.

We can strangely identify with all this, only that in the context of a still anxiety-ridden 2022 our longing for renewed interconnectedness and urge for carnal pleasure at a time of lingering physical separation from each other, is not always openly expressed. In Fellini’s cinema, on the other hand, the macabre is written all over the show and the surreal world that envelops us is performative, exaggerated and illogical on so many levels yet it appears this is exactly what we need at present: to be shocked into acceptance and exposed to reckless frenzies as a way for us to give in and finally let go. Fellini’s dreamscape and the absurdist characters in *Fellini Satyricon* have become, to an extent, our own strange and outlandish, even nightmarish, reality – “We might be charmed and dazzled but often we can’t breathe” – writes Anthony Lane (2020, para. 13). Our lack of control, both as viewers and in our own pandemic society, is real and only by accepting that we cannot predict the future may we be better able to deal with the present.

In *Fellini Satyricon*, as in other Fellini films, dreams inspire his art and art inspires us in turn, even if Fellini’s artistic expressions do not always make sense – nor are they supposed to. Fellini himself is generally known to have claimed that “[e]ither a film has something to say to you or it hasn’t. If you are moved by it, you don’t need it explained to you. If not, no explanation can make you moved by it.” Fellini’s exploration of alternative realms and realities in *Fellini Satyricon* – where he reinterprets myths and history at large and explores a visual landscape that made little sense to the viewer then but perhaps more to us today – corresponds with the

⁷ In the words of Lina Wertmüller, “Federico has given us the most significant traces and graffiti of our history in the last twenty years. He declares he is not concerned with politics and is not interested in fixed themes or ideological layouts, but he is, in the final analysis, the most political and sociological, I believe, of our authors” (as quoted in Faldini and Fofi, 1981, p. 275).

filmmaker's declaration that "it is not memory that dominates my films" (as quoted in Wagner, 2020) but that he has invented everything.

And according to Bondanella, Fellini stands apart as the archetypical case of the art film director. He calls the director a "master showman, whose poetic powers cause us to suspend our judgment in wonder at his skill" (Bondanella 2002, p. 75). Fellini's absurdist aesthetic philosophy and the notion of the bizarre is closely aligned with the auteurist elements of his cinema, as both relate to:

a wholly realized imagery straight from the mind of its creator – presenting dreams, as it were – film presents an unadulterated view of artistic purity. And since no rules apply in a dream, an artist will be free to deconstruct whatever meaning, characters, structures, visuals, or aural conventions that preceded her [or him]. (Critically Acclaimed, 2019)

It is in his apparent disregard for the rules that many of us hold as guidelines to abide by also within the field of art, that Fellini breaks conventions and goes his own way. Giving in to dreams and not holding back, Fellini shows us how our own lives become more multidimensional if we welcome the cinematic, the absurd and the unpredictable. His words turned guiding stars "There is no end. There is no beginning. There is only the passion of life", in his cinema Fellini takes us on a rollercoaster ride into the crevasses of his and our own minds. His characters shock, entertain and bewilder all at once and a film like voyeuristic *La Città delle donne* (City of Women, 1980) – where cinema becomes a spectacle and women, according to Laura Mulvey, are viewed exclusively through an objectified, heterosexual, male gaze (MacKay 2020) – also explore apparently extreme feminism. Ultimately, in this film Fellini overturns notions of masculinity and femininity only to reveal farcelike elements that draw us in and toy with our imagination, making us question what is real and not (as is also the case in *Fellini Satyricon* and *I Clowns*). *La Città delle donne* also points to the continuously increased questioning of traditional gender roles and a further liberalisation of women through the Feminist movement. At a time when Black Lives (still) Matter and the pervasive Me Too-movement calls for civil action and has triggered a resurgence in the fight for female rights across the globe, a film like *La Città delle donne* holds acute relevance also in the context of today. What some critics have seen as a misogynist representation of women should, as we see it, in fact be viewed as a bold visual and narrative commentary on gender norms and misrepresentations. Fellini's film ultimately overturns gender stereotypes, provokes the viewer in its exaggerated representation of women rebelling against the patriarchy, and challenges us to redefine the battle of the sexes. Fellini boldly probes deeper, posing questions, but it is ultimately up to us if we want to reflect more psychosocially on the real essence of the film.

In *La Città delle donne* roles are swapped and the male protagonist (played by an aging Mastroianni) haphazardly becomes an observer who voyeuristically beholds the woman while traveling through a landscape where females dominate the scene physically and symbolically. She herself observes the male protagonist. Thus, seeing, observing and occasional admiring happens on several levels and the male gaze is at work alongside the female – the man ultimately shocked into submission and defeat; bemused, perplexed and horrified all at once.

The spectacle that takes place at the level of cinematic fantasy spills over into reality and questions posed in the film concern us to this day. On a purely visual level, that of Fellini is a theatrical dream world prone to visual exaggeration, so specific to the filmmaker that it has given rise to the expression Felliniesque in much the same fashion as Almodovaresque refers

to the cinematic narratives and imagery unique to the iconic Spanish filmmaker – with a repertoire rich in postmodern elements.⁸ The two share commonalities: vivid colour schemes, absurdist narrative twists and turns, and what on several occasions have been called specifically European sensibilities. In Fellini's cinema the absurdist, non-conventional, farcical, and grotesque become intrinsic aspects of his screened representation of society. Off-screen, in the dystopic reality of today with societies in flux and turmoil, Fellini teaches us to use humour to deal with the tragic elements of this black farce of which we all play a part. Ours is a tragicomic world where the clown is dead and the artist seeks to “create a meaningful vision amid a grotesque and humourless reality” (Free 1973, p. 227). In the words of R.B. Gill, “Fellini's comic vision abandons the pathos of Neorealism in order to affirm meaningfulness in this world” (Gill 2007, p. 65), and Bondanella similarly recognises the auteur in a filmmaker whose style has become:

[s]ynonymous with any kind of fanciful, even baroque image in the cinema and in art in general. More than just a film director, Federico Fellini had become synonymous in the popular imagination in Italy and abroad with the figure of the Promethean creative artist. Like Picasso, Fellini's role as the embodiment of fantasy and the imagination for a generation of fans and film historians transcended his art: People who had never seen one of his films would nevertheless eventually come to recognize his name all over the world and to identify with that special talent for creating unforgettable images that is the heart of filmmaking. (Bondanella 2002, p. 8)

In our dystopic era of pandemonium – where, in the words of Leonard Cohen, the world is plunged in darkness and chaos – all the world's a stage and cinematic images seep into everyday reality. Only by welcoming Fellini's overall ethos: the absurd, the baroque and the hitherto seemingly unimaginable into our everyday reality and normalising these elements while finding sources of joy in spite of all the despair, may we be better able to cope with what has become another very rocky pandemic year. Fellini's cinema is here to teach us to become less fearful of the unknown, of the unconventional, of the going against the norm and of challenging conventions. If we view his cinema as a surreal extension to our own reality, we may be capable of interconnecting the two realms: reality and fiction. By allowing the cinematic to seep into our lives we are perhaps more readily able to embrace absurdism as something to draw from. The surreal elements of Fellini's cinema that we now re-experience in partial solitary confinement as we watch his movies within the comfort zone of our own homes while we try to keep the virus at bay, can be read as a commentary on the darker sides also of ourselves. His repertoire and the parallel realities we step into teach us to become more resilient and to take healthy distance from ourselves. As members of a collective of thinkers, worriers and eccentrics leading lives in the margins of normality, we should try to interconnect and be less fearful in general – and we have much to learn from some of Fellini's feisty characters.

Conclusion and Final Reflections

As we ourselves now face a reality out of synch with the lifestyles that we enjoyed before our current, lingering state of pandemic uncertainty, we have gradually come to realise that the surreal and contradictorily glamorous “freakshow” we are presented in a film like *Fellini*

⁸ A relatively recent critical tribute to Fellini's cinema holds that “Fellini became a brand, the adjective *felliniesque*, and his image was transfigured both in Italy and abroad by comics, films, murals, novels, and urban legends into the myth of the sublime art-director: a being made of pure inspiration, a sorcerer heroically facing the unknown, summoning rows of voluptuous women and fanciful atmospheres.” (Pacchioni 2014, p. 4).

Satyricon (where Fellini eliminates what is generally called history⁹ even if he draws inspiration from Petronius' *Satyricon*, and of which a rather unconvinced Pauline Kael writes that it “is all phantasmagoria, and though from time to time one might register a face or a set or an episode, for most of the film one has the feeling of a camera following people walking along walls”) (Kael as quoted by Ebert, 2011) contains characters and elements with which we can strangely identify. It could be held that ours, too, is a freakish reality where we have lost our footing; a world in turmoil where we are unable to tell what the future holds and where humanity is heading. Fellini's cinema embraces the unpredictability of human existence, challenges our perception of reality, and presents us alternative lifestyles, events and outcomes. It is a cinematic repertoire where his fluid treatment of time and space invites the surreal into the narratives and the dreamscape presents feasible alternatives.

A filmmaker who stirs, seduces, and impresses audiences worldwide, Fellini takes us on an exploration of the landscape of the absurd and the bizarre. In doing so he defies cinematic traditions and combines references to different beliefs, people, places, and eras in a refreshingly ground-breaking manner. “The cartoons, caricature sketches, and radio comedy that were his popular art métier brought him to the cinema as a gagman and scriptwriter” (Shanahan, 2002), influenced him in his art as a filmmaker and translate into films that criticise contemporary society while they sympathise with characters subjected to the parody of their on-screen realities. Universally applicable, Fellini's films count among the most aesthetically expressive made in cinema history. The previously mentioned DVD tribute to Fellini by Ettore Scola: *Scola racconta Fellini: Che strano chiamarsi Federico* serves to further understand a filmmaker who started off at a young age, was provided the right guidance then shot off to directorial fame having discovered his own particular idiosyncratic style. Breaking with cinematic conventions and traditions and finding inspiration in the world of theatre, Fellini recommends an “entirely new way of seeing” (Nashawaty 2018) as he embraces different narrative styles and crosses genres. In his cinema he presents us a world that steps away from the norm – paving the way for a whole range of exciting possibilities. With that we can enjoy a moment of respite from pandemic exhaustion and may be able to revive ourselves sufficiently in order to better tackle our own off-screen absurdist reality.

⁹ Fellini as quoted by Sullivan, J. P. (In Winkler, ed., 2001, p. 260).

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Corresponding author: Jytte Holmqvist
Email: Jholmqvist@uclan.ac.uk