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## The Surreal Scenes in their Importance in Fellini's Movies

The greatest scenes in Fellini films are often the most surreal. In *8 ½*, Fellini depicts the creative process (and correspondingly, the creative block), a famously surreal subject in and of itself. Perhaps one of the most iconic scenes in cinematic history is the beginning dream sequence, in which a director, Guido (played by Marcello Mastroianni), is inexplicably trapped in his car in the midst of a traffic jam, struggling to escape as a bilious cloud of smoke slowly asphyxiates him. This introductory scene perfectly captures the stifling inner anxiety Guido will experience throughout the film, a contained panic that manifests itself in ways seemingly unnoticed or trivialized by those around him. While he pants and slams futilely against the car windows and doors, the camera pans over the surrounding cars, in which his gridlock neighbors stare blankly with bystander detachment. Some continue on with their own activities, sleeping at the wheel or lewdly grabbing at their young, voluptuous female passengers as one older male demonstrates, all unresponsive or oblivious to Guido's muffled, increasing desperation. Then for a moment, all human noise drops out to foreground the soft sound of wind, and Guido is shown escaping through the sunroof and floating away from the ghostly impasse and toward the heavens. The clouds swirl about him in the same manner as they briefly swirl around a monstrous launch pad structure, and we then see that he is suspended above a beach. Two film industry professionals from below look up and notice him; one snaps at him as if calling him back to earth and reality, before laughing and tugging at the kite string tied to Guido's leg. He pulls Guido down, who is unceremoniously dumped into the ocean in an effectively nightmarish sequence. Then sound returns, and Guido awakens with a gasp, hand outstretched, into a new sort of congestion. At present he is in a creative standstill, this time surrounded by detached industry professionals bussing about, tending to his health with incessant questions and hounding him with concerns about his upcoming film project.

This strongly self-referential Fellini film is loaded with symbolism. On one level, this beginning sequence lends itself to continuing the endless reflexivity that defines *8 ½*—it is a dream that parallels actual conflicts in Guido's waking life, in which his attempts to direct a film (specifically, the film *8 ½*) ultimately serve as the plot of *8 ½* itself. Guido dreams of being reborn, and his emergence from the car represents a birth experience. The film essentially documents his spiritual death and resurrection, and in one of the last fantasies, he commits suicide before calling off the film in real life and subsequently reaching a sort of enlightenment. In the introductory dream, Fellini releases Guido from the car and sends him flying across the sky, much like the statue of Christ in the beginning of *La Dolce Vita*, furthering this theme of death and resurrection.

The traffic jam in the dream is analogous to his creative gridlock; he is trapped by his mind (one

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could see imagination as a mental vehicle) just as he is trapped by the self-destructive car. His state of confusion is caused by his inner conflict, suffering, and emptiness, which stagnates and confines him within his creative block. The noxious gas in the car, the traffic jam, the manager and publicist of Claudia Cardinale (who yanks Guido into the ocean), the monstrous, imposing structure on the launch pad—everything on earth is representative of the film industry's suffocating presence in Guido's life. The machinery of filmmaking reels Guido back down to earth with a rope indicative of the near-total control and ownership that the industry has over his life (later on during the screen tests Guido fantasizes that this same rope which constrains him is instead turned onto his disapproving co-writer, Daumier, for a delicious lynching). In every way, Guido's close brush with death in his dream is intimately tied to the overwhelming sense of stagnation and deadness in his waking life, in which he is trapped in the infinite regression of truth and lies that comprises 8 ½. He is a man acutely aware of his age and mortality, incapacitated by creative exhaustion, and utterly confused by his seeming inability to love.

Guido is surrounded by a mob of yes-men eager to capitalize on his next surefire hit. His name has allowed him an excess of artistic license that has set the machinery of production into motion without even a prerequisite script to show for it. The titanic shuttle that has been erected in the faith of his ability appears in both his dream and reality, highlighting an artistic insincerity and pretense that has come to rack his conscience. Fellini writes of his own guilt-ridden director's block, "...I was stammering and saying nonsensical things when Mastroianni asked me about his part. He was so trusting. They all trusted me." Guido becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea of purity and cleansing that only Claudia can bring to the tainted set. In his mind, her arrival is the only justification for his film, and the only salvation for himself. In the traffic jam dream, he is shown cleaning away at nothing in particular in his car—a wiping motion that will be mirrored by his mother in his father's grave scene, and an obsession for rebirth epitomized by his weighty question to Claudia: "Could you leave everything behind and start from zero again?" Guido is so far into this production process that the launch pad is essentially his Rubicon and his Tower of Babel—a point of no return and a symbol of his arrogance—and the desperation of his predicament leads to his construction of an implausibly panacean image of Claudia.

The phallic nature of the structure further suggests his sexual arrogance and infidelity. One can easily imagine Guido's anxiety when the producer jokes rather threateningly about the millions the set has cost him. Fellini voices Guido's economic concerns through his own fretful experience, "I was about to cost all of these people their jobs. They called me the Magician. Where was my magic? Now what do I do?" Guido continues to coast along with increasing heaviness, aware that his Potemkin film is soon to collapse. The dread that weighs upon Guido manifests itself in his continuous references toward truth in his film—"And above all... I don't feel like telling another pile of lies." He wishes to "bury all that is dishonest in us," and yet before him stands this massive scaffolding of indecision and dishonesty, a structure which cannot be

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buried. The dream sequence seems to satirize his reality with increasing accuracy, as the industry professionals who gridlock him literally watch his public display of a meltdown, though nobody seems to acknowledge it, and nobody will properly criticize him for his lack of progress (in order to guilt Guido into cooperation at one point, the producer even argues that he has been paying for Guido's breakdown). Unbeknownst to all, Guido has no script, no film, and is plagued with self-doubts about his artistic integrity. He feels a deep desire to say something new, original, and profound in his new film, but wonders if he has lost his artistic impulse—or if he ever even had one. Towards the end he says aloud, "I thought I had something so simple to say. Something useful to everybody... When did I go wrong? I really have nothing to say, but I want to say it all the same."

In addition to the tremendous professional pressure, Guido is racked with chaos in his personal life. He has difficulty reconciling his sincere love for his wife with his sincere attraction to every woman in his life. He is noticeably disgruntled when remarks are made about his inability to love (i.e., the two nieces tease that he can't make a movie about love, and Claudia sweetly refuses any other excuse for his inability to create a film). Guido's creative life force seems indeed to be tied to his romantic life, and his fear of decreasing professional relevance through aging helps engender his creative impotence. The lascivious old man groping his female passenger in Guido's dream is equivalent to Guido's friend Mezzabotta, who embodies Guido's fear of aging as he pathetically attempts to recapture youth through an engagement with the much younger Gloria. Mezzabotta's actions send Guido's male neuroses into overdrive, as his dreams focus almost entirely on creative and sexual virility, suggesting that they are one and the same.

This emphasis on the female is seen in Fellini's films *La Strada* and *La Dolce Vita* as well, particularly in symbolizing a dichotomy of purity and sexuality. Giulietta Masina's character, Gelsomina, is the embodiment of innocence in *La Strada*, set in direct opposition to the brutish, worldly amorality of Zampano. It is her mental destruction and loss of spirit that leads directly to the once unshakable Zampano's emotional breakdown. In *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini creates a personification of innocence through the youthful blond waif Paola, who waves at the Marcello in the end across an inlet, as if offering the lost wastrel an image of purity he once could have attained. This vision of female innocence offering salvation is a significant archetype in Fellini's films, as Guido also constructs an image of Claudia Cardinale as a type of *deus ex machina*, though in the end, he does not find his salvation through her either. The women Marcello lusts after in *La Dolce Vita* fall into stock categories of eroticism. One example is Anita Ekberg's Sylvia Ranken, an icon of voluptuous femininity who radiates joyous sexuality similar to that of Carla in *8 1/2*, Guido's adult version of his childhood fascination, Saraghina. When Carla is shown in a feverish sweat at the hotel (reflecting her intemperate nature), it is hard not to visually link her to the Saraghina through her running makeup, flashing eyes, animalistic open mouth, and wild hair. Fellini furthers this Madonna-whore complex through his desexualization

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of Luisa, which included having Anouk Aimee's long eyelashes cut and directly associating her distinctively mature, soulful character with Guido's mother in a dream sequence. Luisa's boyish haircut, practical attire, and intellectual glasses also visually juxtaposes her with the oversexualized, gaudily dressed, childish and gluttonous Carla.

Guido's inability to reconcile his desires for different women is seen in one hotel fantasy, in which Claudia Cardinale is stripped of her nurturing white nurse uniform and shown instead in a suddenly sexualized context, lying in Guido's bed stroking herself in a flimsy negligee with her hair down. Another fantasy reconciles his desire for the desexualized mother and the oversexualized lover in a humorous sequence between Luisa and Carla at the outdoor café, as both women complement each other delightedly while the approving Guido applauds from the side. These hallucinatory visions are brought to a climax in the harem scene, in which Guido reigns supreme over a farmhouse of all the women in his life (with the exception of Claudia), relegating those who are past his dictated age limit out to pasture in the upstairs confine, and glowing in the dotting attention of all his mistresses. Interestingly, the harem sequence is shot in the same farm setting as the Asa-nisi-masa memory (which fetishizes the innocence of youth), emphasizing Guido's desire for maternal comfort more so than eroticism in the harem. Indeed, by standards of male sexual fantasies, the harem scene is decidedly more concerned with capturing the beauty of childhood, a wishful desire for male regression and "control over an out-of-control reality," as critic Jacqueline Reich describes. Guido is bathed in both farm scenes by flocks of nurturing women, and among the many images the two sequences share is one of a burning hearth, which captures the sense of emotional warmth and security Guido idealizes.

However, unlike the idyllic childhood memory which runs smoothly and ends with fond nostalgia, the utopist order and rhythm of the harem sequence quickly disintegrates into a chaotic revolt by the women, who criticize Guido's ability as a lover much in the same way Daumier criticizes his ability as an artist. Guido is forced to resort to a whip to re-instate order, though in doing so he calls into question his own masculinity by resorting to an outside object, and furthermore, the ultimate phallic symbol. The scene ends on a palpably anxious note of melancholy, bringing the viewer back to Guido's present state of sexual doubt. It is worth noting, too, that while the childhood memory does not leave the viewer with as much unease, it also references Guido's actual state of impotence—artistically. In a magically haunting scene, the young girl in his memory tells Guido that the magic words, "Asa Nisi Masa," have the power to make the portraits move. In Guido's adult reality, it is precisely this ability to create moving pictures that he is trying so desperately to regain.

While Fellini is self-deprecating in his image of Guido as a creatively desiccated artist, his brilliant portrayal of this artistic crisis shows that Fellini himself is certainly not dried up. 8½ effectively demonstrates this difference between a film that has nothing to say, and a film about having nothing to say. Although Guido ultimately does not complete his project in the movie,

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Fellini has succeeded in creating a film with brilliantly portrayed messages about midlife crises, childhood, memories, desires, reconciling reality with fantasy, relationships, and more. As film critic Dan Schneider said, “[Fellini] delivers his exercise in introspection with such mastery of images, one has to be impressed by the vehicle as well as the passengers. This is not style over substance. This is profound substance delivered with consummate style. That the substance happens to be about inner psychic emptiness is irrelevant.” This distinction is important because *8 ½* is often criticized for a disjointed narrative, lack of cohesive unifying philosophy, and being over-indulgently nostalgic and self-referential (self-criticisms, in fact, that Fellini anticipates through Daumier’s attacks toward Guido’s nascent film). Toward the end, Daumier disparages, “Why piece together the tatters of your life—the vague memories, the faces—the people you never knew how to love?” Like *La Strada* and *La Dolce Vita*, many of Fellini’s films nostalgically draw upon autobiographical experiences, sometimes to a point that has been criticized as masturbatory. Indeed, *8 ½* is an unending hall of mirrors that reaches a new level of autobiographical intensity: his films almost always reference, in some capacity or other, his former circus experience, infidelity with women, high society events, inner angst, loneliness, anomie, disillusionment with the Catholic Church, and so forth. Yet, while the film does indeed have autobiographical elements, to oversimplify it into an autobiography would be missing Fellini’s very universal messages. He succeeds in sharing his life experience and personal insights in a way that impacts others in a profound way, which is truly brave and beautifully illuminating.

Fellini himself has deemed Daumier’s character as Guido’s greatest adversary, marking the critic as the most castrating figure in the collection of those who hold back an artist. He seems to argue that while a critic’s remarks may often be intelligent (as Daumier certainly makes some legitimate observations), they are not always constructively shared, instead stifling an artist’s freedom to take liberties and make mistakes, without which there can be no great art. Fellini acknowledges the use of *8 ½* for his own intensive introspection through these self-mocking criticisms he writes into the film, but in doing so, diminishes their relevance in the protagonist’s greater search for meaning. The criticisms become just another secondary obstacle, along with the economic concerns of the producer and the incessant questioning of the actors, agents, journalists, and intellectuals, in what is principally a conflict between Guido and himself. Guido is a man who has lost the will to create—a loss of inspiration that calls everything else in his life into question. Without his primary generative force, all secondary conflicts are no longer applicable: the concerns of the film industry ride entirely on the expectation that Guido will produce a new masterpiece; with no film, all criticism and industry pressures are moot. Additionally, his artistic confusion is intimately linked to his sexual chaos—the primary source of his relationship struggles. For Guido then, creating is a first. For Fellini as well, this is precisely the case, and he delivers a remarkable film regardless of his stylistic idiosyncrasies and breaks from traditional narrative structure. In a sense, the primacy of personal creation is his justification for trying to escape from everybody and doing things his way in the end. Fellini sees his self-actualization

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and authenticity, creative or sexual, bogged down primarily by his impossible efforts to resolve the cutting criticisms of all those around him. “Happiness,” he once says through Guido, “is being able to tell the truth without ever making anyone suffer.”

Thus, the introductory dream sequence mirrors the overall theme of Fellini’s film, which is ultimately more about one man’s personal creative block than about the filmmaking process in general. When Claudia appears, she is the polar opposite of what Guido had envisioned: dressed in all black, she emerges from the shadows of the theatre rather than from light, accompanied by Saraghina’s song rather than the airy Barber of Seville theme, and proves psychologically and emotionally diametric to Guido—she laughs while he is anguished, she dislikes the “unreal” set location whereas he likes it enormously, she sits while he stands, she makes touchy jabs at his hat and age, and so forth. This distance and disappointment reaffirms that only Guido can provide himself salvation. When Rosalina channels her spirits, she reminds Guido that he is free after all, for he is the creator of his own confusion. Similar to his work in *Nights of Cabiria*, Fellini depicts his dissatisfied protagonist finding some sense of order and rightness in the world in the midst of a carnivalesque celebration. *Cabiria* is shown stumbling into some youthful festivity shortly after losing everything in life—newly destitute, homeless, heartbroken, dehumanized, and betrayed, she finds it within herself to smile once again, resilient and determined. In an inspired metacinematic gesture, the camera pans in on *Cabiria*, and she smiles directly at the audience for the only time in the length of the film. In that moment, the film acknowledges itself as film, in order to offer the audience the same sort of hope that this character has achieved. Likewise, Guido triumphantly reconciles fantasy with reality as all the disparate figures in his life come together in a large circus-like dance (the first sequence he actually directs in the film), celebrating the beautiful confusion that is his life.

This conclusion does not entail resolution of all his problems—he still yearns for his distant mother, has not reconciled his desire for Carla, and has not fully settled his marriage with Luisa. Nonetheless, his resolution is an embracement of these chaotic flaws in his life, empowering him to move on in life despite the continuance of elements that once paralyzed him. He accepts life as a continuous refutation of resolution, and finds solace in a world where one can create and live at the same time. This seems a markedly optimistic conclusion compared to that of *La Strada* and *La Dolce Vita*, in which the weight of life leaves both men defeated on a beach, with the main difference being that Zampano cares (for what, we cannot know for sure), and Marcello does not. Mastroianni’s protagonist in *La Dolce Vita* never comes to terms with his inner yearnings, instead abandoning his once higher aspirations of journalism and spiraling into directionless hedonism by the end, losing his soul one sunrise at a time. In contrast, Mastroianni’s 8 ½ protagonist, Guido, is rejuvenated from the same deadness that tormented Marcello, and in a moment of sudden insight and enlightenment, finds harmony and beauty inside this confusion that is his life—his film is inside this confusion. Upon this moment of understanding, the magician Maurice suddenly appears to him. “We’re ready to begin,” he

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