“Beyond Passions” — A Foucauldian Reassessment of the Role of Sexuality in the Films of Federico Fellini

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“We must get beyond passions, like a great work of art. In such miraculous harmony. We should love each other outside of time... detached.”

– Steiner, *La Dolce Vita*

“This is like a scene in a Fellini film.”

– Federico Fellini in conversation with Roger Ebert

“A great sexual sermon – which has had its subtle theologians and its popular voices – has swept through our societies over the last decades; it has chastised the old order, denounced hypocrisy, and praised the rights of the immediate and the real; it has made people dream of a New City. The Franciscans are called to mind.”

– Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*
Introduction – Fellini, Sexuality, and the Problem of the Inner Pull

Ambiguity is the singular quality of the films of Federico Fellini upon which nearly everyone can agree. Despite his distinctive cinematic milieu which characteristically, almost compulsively, deployed hallmark imagery, Fellini remains to this day a mysterious director whose intentions and narratives are far less clear than his visual flair. He belongs to a filmic pantheon of great directors, yet much of the substance of his work is clouded by differing interpretations. Both in his own time and in retrospective work done since the director’s death, critics and academics have offered diffuse and contradictory opinions on the nature of his work. He was a realist yet he often pointed his camera towards the phantasmagorical. At different points throughout his career, Fellini was cast by the Catholic Church as a moral arbiter of Italian culture in the post-war era and, alternatively, as a lecherous hedonist dedicated to debasing the Italian people through his uncritical and orgiastic productions.¹ He was seen as a Catholic who was sometimes applauded by the Marxists and a Marxist who was sometimes applauded by the Catholics.² All of this serves to show that Fellini’s message was never consistent or obvious.

Since just slightly before the Italian master filmmaker’s death in 1993, a small episteme of critical thought has grown around this ambiguity. The general consensus: Fellini began as a traditional Italian Neorealist, but suddenly underwent a rapid transition in devotion from realism to fantasy with La Dolce Vita (1960) serving as a career-defining bridge between these two cinematic approaches.³ The conventional wisdom holds that this development is explicit to even

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¹ Tullio Kezich explores the sort of politicking with the Vatican which some of Fellini’s films required in order to premier at festivals and screen in Italy, focusing on Fellini’s Catholic advocate Father Angelo Arpa. Tullio Kezich, Federico Fellini: His Life and Work, trans. Minna Proctor (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2006), 185.
² Eugene Walter summarized this contradiction at the time: “Fellini is hard to pin down: the Communists consider him a capitalist while most of the Roman upper crust consider him a flaming Communist: (He’s completely apolitical.).” Eugene Walter, “Dinner With Fellini,” The Transatlantic Review no. 17 (Autumn 1964), 47-50.
³ La Dolce Vita’s significance as a canonical signifier of change for the director informs the structure of Frank Burke’s Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita. Frank Burke, Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 101.
the untrained viewer – Fellini’s earlier films utilized an on-location neorealist mise en scène while his later work moved inside the Cinecittá studio. Even Fellini’s beloved and ubiquitous shots of the ocean were eventually replaced by with shots of artificial plastic waves. This interpretation shapes almost all other insights about Federico Fellini’s oeuvre. Frank Burke interprets this development as a lived narrative of postmodernism, using Fellini’s increasing infatuation with the nature of representation as a Launchpad for a Lacanian exploration of the linkage between reality/representation/signification. Prolific Fellini scholar Peter Bondanella identifies triadic lumps within Fellini’s filmography to chart the director’s changing relationship with his own Catholicism, psyche, and artistic vision. Biographer Hollis Alpert describes Fellini’s journey as a quest for true virtuosity, an unflagging pursuit of fidelity guided only by the director’s commitment to the art of his medium. Others have used the Neorealist to fantasy-purist Fellini trajectory to explain everything from the use of space in 8 ½ (1963) to the role of the circus in La Strada (1954).

The ambiguous intellectual spaces formed by Fellini’s perceived journey as a filmmaker have been occupied time and time again by varying discourses. Nonetheless, a vast majority of the ink spilled over Federico Fellini has in some way or another yielded to the power of what is best described as the director’s “inner pull.” Any given person who writes about Fellini must, it

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seems, give weight to the autobiographical elements and dense psychological interiority of his cannon. An analysis grounded in this “inner pull” is strengthened by the ambiguous yet clearly personal subject matter of films like 8 ½ and Amarcord (1973). But it inevitably leads such analyses towards a point of diminishing returns because it magnifies the autonomy of the auteur. This makes any postmodern analysis of the subject or psychoanalytic interpretation of fantasy at least an investigation of Fellini’s own headspace. Whether embarking on a critical look at circuses, oceans, nightlife, parades, dreams, women, religion, clowns, automobiles, childhood, schools, hospitals, theater, family, marriage, or the cinema itself in Fellini’s movies, the “inner pull” treats the director as if he exists in a vacuum. In light of the second half of Fellini’s development, in which his camera supposedly disappeared into his own imagination, the beginnings of his career are to be understood as hints of a subjective totality repressed underneath a veil of neorealist constraints. The portrayal of marriage in The White Sheik (1952) is merely Juliet of The Spirits (1965) with Neorealist drapery; Nights of Cabiria (1957) is just an early attempt at La Dolce Vita sullied by the socialistic contributions of Pier Paolo Passolini.

Any social value to be found in working with Fellini’s films is overlooked due to an allegiance to the director’s own interior.

Few aspects of Fellini’s cinema have been more analytically curtailed by this phenomena than the role of sexuality in his movies. Academic perspectives on Fellini’s oeuvre reliably skew towards the psychoanalytic, often citing Fellini’s explicit relationship with the theories of Carl Jung, such analysis of sexuality in a Fellini film fixates on the director’s proclivities and

10 John C. Stubbs, Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of his Films (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 70.
11 La Strada’s eccentric and stylistic disavowal of Neoreal convention draws out this analysis most fully from critics. Millicent Marcus goes as far as to make the claim that “Fellini’s refusal to consider the historical forces that shape the social order and his mystical abdication of control over human destiny [in La Strada] makes him a traitor to the neorealist cause and an agent of its possible demise.” Marcus, Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism, 145.
obsessions as they played out in his films. Drawing on select passages from interviews about his childhood or his views on marriage, critics select key cinematic sequences involving erotically charged heterosexual encounters/fantasies to construct interpretations of the value of sex in Fellini’s work that emphasizes the role of Catholic repression in producing a neurotic sexuality.12 Teresa De Lauretis and Marga Cottino-Jones have employed feminist psychoanalytic tools such as the gaze, the oedipal complex, fetishism, or phallocentrism to understand Fellini’s cinematic language of sexuality.13 Felliniesque sexuality is explained without being explored. For example, the famous Harem sequence in 8 ½ is indicative of Guido’s strict Catholic upbringing which led to his virgin/whore understanding of women; the violent relationship between Zampanó and Gelsomina in La Strada is a spiritual bout between feminine purity and masculine deviance; Casanova’s ceaseless libidinal insanity in Casanova (1976) reflects Fellini’s own discomfort with meaningless sex, Titta’s advances on Gradisca at the movie theater in Amarcord demonstrate the mimetic sexual relationship between screened content and the psychosexuality of the viewer.14

With a conventional approach to Fellinesque sexuality, every sexually charged moment of any of Fellini’s films receives its own prepackaged explanation. Much has been written in various books about the sexuality at play in his oeuvre, yet the majority of it has been relegated to myopic interpretations of elements from specific films. Such interpretations, while well-calibrated to produce meaningful insights about a limited subject matter, cannot hope to accomplish a well-rounded investigation of the sexuality at play in the whole of Fellini’s work.

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12 John C. Stubbs provides a typical example of this thought process. Stubbs, Federico Fellini as Auteur, 37.
Fellini scholarship has failed to deliver a satisfactorily cohesive account of Fellini’s approach to sexuality in part due to the intransigent ambiguity of the maestro’s work and in part because of the widely-held belief that Fellini’s bifurcated journey as an artist and his psychological profile should serve as the guiding principles of any such analysis.

To produce a comprehensive theory of the sexuality of Fellini’s cinema, it is therefore necessary to break from several established conventions of interpretation. Fellini’s own psyche should not be understood as the only, or even primary, meaningful perspective from which to mine a rich understanding of sexuality in his films. His growth as an artist should not be made to mask persistent sexual themes present from his very earliest to his very last films.15 Rather, sexuality in the Fellini universe needs to be unpacked as a complex foray into the nature of relations and culture, one that is indeed deeply indebted to Fellini’s own perspective but that also reveals the larger social forces at play both on the screen and behind the camera. Fellini’s films must be reclaimed from his inner pull. The narrative of his development as a filmmaker must be recast to reflect the director’s ongoing commitment to cinematically exploring the social role of sexuality at play in marriages, families, cinemas, schoolrooms, churches, police stations, and cities.

Another man committed to exploring sexuality as it existed in these spaces was the French critical theorist Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1976), Foucault challenged essentialist psychoanalytic notions of sexuality. He argued that sexuality exists only as a form of social knowledge inscribed in individuals and groups by a vast web of institutional and relational social powers. *The History of Sexuality* interrogates similar sites of sexual

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15 Frank Burke comes closest to achieving this in his chapter “Politics, Gender, and Fellini’s Critical Reputation,” but by honing in on La Cita delle donne ends up falling into a predictably split narrative of the sex in Fellini’s films. Frank Burke, *Fellini’s Films: From Postwar to Postmodern* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 320-342.
formation that Fellini’s camera did – the school, the church, the family, etc. – to prove that sexuality in the modern western world is understood both by religious and secular institutions as the one true route of understanding the ontological truth contained within human beings.

Foucault describes psychology, the religious confession, the schoolteacher and the parental interrogation as methods by which these socially-constructed truths are formulaically extracted from individuals for the purpose of social control. This is “a policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses.”

Incorporating Foucault’s notions of sexuality into film analysis reveals that Fellini’s oeuvre, which could be described as a perpetual oscillation between the confession booth and the psychologist’s couch, always battled with the institutional formulation – rather than just mere institutional repression – of sexuality. Unlike repression-based analysis, in which cinematic sexual liberation for his characters is the director’s consummate ambition, a Foucauldian approach to Fellini’s cinesexuality offers a more complicated, more complete understanding of how sex actually works in his films. Beyond the purely psychoanalytic, beyond the inner pull, lies a new and fertile realm of theory which combines Fellini’s camera as it viewed cinema, society, and sexuality with an analytic framework that places newfound priority on the social powers of the world that the director lived and made films within. Though the majority of Fellini’s iconic films were released before Foucault published *The History of Sexuality*, and it is doubtful that the self-described anti-intellectual director ever read Foucault’s work, the sexuality which emanates from Fellini’s screen holds so much in common with Foucauldian thought that ignoring their similarities diminishes the overwhelming social and sexual value of Fellini.

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17 For a sample of Fellini’s self-confessed unfamiliarity with academia and high art, see his conversation with Costanzo Costantini regarding the relevance of Joyce and Kierkegaard to 8½. Costanzo Costantini, “Interview with
Fellini’s camera, like Foucault’s writing, was obsessed with a social knowledge of sexuality that gripped and controlled people, which seemingly cast a magic spell over its subject, and turned all their desire for inner truth towards sex. For Fellini and Foucault, this obsession manifested itself into a double fixation with the marginalized sexualities of the transient, the mentally ill, the juvenile, or the deviant on the one hand, and with the normalized sexualities of marriage, the church, the school, and the family on the other. The shared sexual world of Fellini and Foucault is one of homeless prostitutes and overbearing mothers, vagabond circus performers and famous movie stars, precocious children and sexually-obsessive adults, didactic doctors and ascetic priests. All such figures participate in the social creation of a sexual knowledge which burdens Fellini’s characters and fascinates Foucault. This sexual knowledge creates and sustains a linkage between a false “sexual liberation” and a true liberation of the self. The complex process of confession, key to both Fellini and Foucault, turns sexuality into a socially useful discourse which surreptitiously encourages and documents a plethora of supposedly repressed sexual activities. In 8 ½, for example, a visit with a church official causes Guido to bask in the sexual memories of his childhood. In Amarcord, the process of confession gives young Titta an erection. These techniques of social power, filmed by Fellini and investigated by Foucault, turn the individual’s search for inner truth towards sex while unearthing a multitude of deviancies and converting them into pliable discourses.

18 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 78.  
19 Ibid., 101.  
20 Ibid., 59.  
21 In analyzing this particular sequence of Amarcord, Bondanella actually establishes a relatively Foucauldian connection between the priest’s concerns about juvenile onanism, Tita’s encounter with Gradisca at the movie theater, and the town’s imprudent ecstasy over fascism. Peter Bondanella, The Films of Federico Fellini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132-134.
"She Lives the Life" – Cabiria and the case for Foucault in Fellini

No Fellini character struggles with the meaning of their sexuality more so than Cabiria. Though many of the filmmaker’s other protagonists seek out spiritual fulfillment and personal happiness through sexuality, Cabiria’s sexuality in Le Notti di Cabiria is an explicit issue of both literal and spiritual survival. As a near-transient prostitute, Cabiria understands the truth of her life through the status of her clientele and the profitability of her trade. Later, as a vulnerable bride-to-be, Cabiria flaunts a newfound sense of legitimacy loaned to her by a man and by the state. In both instances, Cabiria is submitting to a Foucauldian “truth of sex” in which her ontological worth derives from sex-based power relations. Bookending the film with mirroring scenes of betrayal in which Cabiria is nearly killed, first by her John and then by her fiancée, Fellini finds – as he later reiterated in 8 ½ – that the cultural distinctions between marriage and prostitution are largely meaningless. Yet Cabiria is not to be read as a perpetual font of victimhood. She is in fact the strongest and most feminist character that Fellini ever contributed to cinema, and the violence that befalls her in the film does not offset the radical agency which the filmmaker invested in her. Foucault, in discussing the “Rules of continual variations” of the deployment of sexuality as a social tool of power, warned his readers that “We must not look for who has the power in the order of sexuality (men, adults, parents, doctors) and who is deprived (women, adolescents, children, patients); nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to remain ignorant.” Instead, he offers, we must examine “the pattern of modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process.” Cabiria’s endangered position

22 Edward Murray describes the structure of Cabiria as “circular” due to the repetition of her betrayals by different men. Murray notes, as have many other critics, that this particular film straddles the line between “realistic” and “lyrical,” making the film a problem for the narrative of Fellini’s career which requires a clear point of departure between the two. Edward Murray, Fellini: The Artist (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Company, 1985), 109.
in society is not constricted to a top-down implementation of oppressive patriarchal power, but in fact moves fluidly alongside her as she attempts the transition from prostitute to wife. Cabiria’s treacherous approach towards a marriage-based liberation is initiated by her own misguided notions of sex and selfhood, notions which she in turn receives through gratuitous yet diffuse cultural instruction. In Cabiria’s self-imposed journey towards what she sees as a position of legitimate womanhood can be seen the machinations of a Foucauldian sexual discourse at play in Fellini.

For this reason, *Le Notti di Cabiria* is the logical film upon which to begin this study. While not as culturally sprawling as *La Dolce Vita* and *I Vitelloni*, or as psychologically dense as *8 ½* and *Giulietta Degli Spiriti*, Federico Fellini’s intimate and occasionally magical urban portrait of the prostitute shines a spotlight on all of his finest qualities as a director while effectively tying together the many components of his vastly complex cinesexuality. Acknowledgement of *Le Notti di Cabiria* as a standalone testament to Fellini’s genius has been severely hampered by its position in the director’s catalog, as critics often direct their attention towards the 1956 film to locate it on a developmental roadmap between 1954’s *La Strada* and 1960’s *La Dolce Vita*. While such contextualization is both truthful and necessary, it latently discards the possibility that this film could be just as significant to the philosophy and career of Fellini as the two films which it is often situated in between. Bringing into play many of the

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24 Burke certainly is guilty of this, stating that “Cabiria… serves to redeem Gelsomina” and that “*The Nights of Cabiria* is the natural outgrowth of [Fellini’s less successful 1955 film] *Il Bidone*… Moreover, the character of Cabiria continues a progression in individuality and assertiveness that can be traced from the ultradependent and conventional Checco, Ivan, and Wanda, through the aggressive isolate Zampanò.” Burke makes the debatable claim that “By seeing Cabiria through to liberation, Fellini seems to have liberated something within himself. Following *The Nights of Cabiria*, his films have a richness and explosive power only hinted at in his earlier work.” This is exactly the sort of claim which understates the continuity of “richness” and “power” in all of Fellini’s cinema, especially in regards to sexuality. Burke, *Federico Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita*, 69, 82-83.

25 For a refreshing perspective on Fellini’s development in relationship to *Le Notti di Cabiria* which forgoes the traditional Neorealist-to-fantasy narrative of Burke, Bondanella, Marcus, and countless others, I would direct the reader towards Suzanne Budgen’s writings about Cabiria in 1966: “Fellini was accused more than once of making
central pillars of Fellini’s unintentionally Foucauldian version of an Italian cinesexuality (Catholicism, medicine, performance, etc.), *Le Notti di Cabiria* deserves to be recognized as one of the director’s most profound and subtle statements on his culture’s sexuality. Neither fully Neoreal nor entirely auteur liberationist, it manages to inject the issue of sexuality into its every frame without drawing on the lavish displays of *La Dolce Vita* or the revealing dreamscapes of 8½.

In fact, it is in part the very unsexiness of *Le Notti di Cabiria* which makes it one of Fellini’s most compelling films about sex. Having cast his childlike wife Giulietta Masina in the role of the titular prostitute, Fellini could have easily gone the way of Guido in 8½ or Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*, eroticizing the role of the prostitute for his own male fantasy-fulfillment. Instead, he holds back on exploitation to ponder the relationship between the prostitute and the society which she services. Masina’s Cabiria, in keeping with the character’s appearance in *Il Sceicco Blanco*, is a decidedly unsexy character who appeals to the heart rather than other organs.26 Her Chaplinesque body language and expressive comedic face connote a classically cinematic form of female innocence which cannot be spoiled or defiled even by working in the sex trade, and her body is never used to provoke arousal. As Bazin noted, Cabiria defies the classic archetype of the “whore with the heart of gold” in that she is neither constructed for the audience’s pity nor depicted as an object of desire for a “good man” to gift salvation upon via his own erotic approval. “Her desire to ‘get out’ is not motivated by the ideals of bourgeois

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*Notti di Cabiria* in an attempt to repeat the success of *La Strada*, but in this film he seems to have returned to something that had been in his mind a long time.” Suzanne Budgen, *Fellini* (London: The British Film Institute Education Department, 1966), 20.

26 This much is evidenced by the fact that Cabiria, despite being a prostitute, never seems to sleep with any men over the course of the film. Masina’s sexless Gesolmina in *La Strada* has more explicit sexual contact than does Cabiria. John Baxter describes Masina in these early films as “a beaming androgyne, clown-like and sexless.” Contrasting both Gelsomina and Cabiria with the curvy women of Fellini’s later films, he declares that “Gelsomina and Cabiria are a child’s vision of sexuality: half playmate, half puppet, sexually neutral.” John Baxter, *Fellini* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1993), 24.
morality,” Bazin observes, “She does not hold her trade in contempt.” Bazin’s limited understanding of Cabiria’s motivations does not account for Fellini’s nuanced depiction of cultural coding in this film, but his overall point stands. Here is a character for whom sexuality appears paramount and causal, yet whose sex work does not disgust or humiliate her. This is a seemingly insurmountable contradiction which is nonetheless solved by Fellini’s compassionate brand of filmmaking.

Fellini begins *Le Notti di Cabiria* by wordlessly showing Cabiria’s boyfriend Giorgio pushing her into the Tiber and stealing her purse. Unable to swim, Cabiria nearly drowns before being rescued by locals. Irritated at her abandonment, she leaves her rescuers in a huff and without thanks, establishing her plucky and brash brand of individualism. She returns to her one-room house on the rural outskirts of Rome and burns everything that Giorgio had kept at her place. Cabiria’s house, despite being a hovel, is a symbol of her undaunted pride and determination. She brags often of her limited self-sufficiency by announcing her ability to afford the place with the money she makes from sex. Later, as Cabiria is trying to pick up trade in Rome’s Passeggiata Archeologica, Fellini ties this theme of female self-sufficiency to the automobile, suggesting that a mobile site to house the sexual act serves a similar material purpose to the shack where Cabiria services her clients. Through the elaboration of notions of survival and economic ability, Fellini creates separate worlds within *Le Notti di Cabiria* whose border is determined by class. A lengthy episode introduces Cabiria to the greying movie star

28 For an insightful breakdown of the content and structure of *Le Notti di Cabiria* and how it relates to the general form of almost all Fellini films, see: Stubbs, *Federico Fellini as Auteur,* 11-15.
29 The 1958 Merlin Law ended over a century of legalized brothels in Italy. This meant that Fellini’s depiction of streetwalking prostitutes who roamed Rome’s nightlife and worked in cars was a radical departure for most Italians who saw the film. Fellini plays up the image of the outdoor prostitute on purpose, unintentionally weaving a deviant sexuality into a public discourse in a manner befitting Foucault. Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini,* 25.
Alberto Lazzari, a girlfriend-slapping nightclub hopper who feels like a figure that Marcello forgot to cover in *La Dolce Vita*.\(^{30}\) Fellini plays Cabiria’s cheap wardrobe and rough appearance off against Alberto’s chic aesthetic and luxury car in a manner reminiscent of Chaplin’s tramp. When Cabiria dances with him at a nightclub she cannot control her childish glee. When she and Alberto drive past fancier prostitutes than herself, she shouts at them to see that she is now with a glamorous man.\(^{31}\)

Foucault formed his ideas about class-based sexuality around his resistance to a repression narrative of taboo and sexuality. Turning his back on a Marxist interpretation, he wrote that the deployment of sexuality was established “as a new distribution of pleasures, discourses, truths and powers; it has to be seen as the self-affirmation of one class rather than the enslavement of another: a defense, a protection, a strengthening, and an exaltation that were eventually extended to others – at the cost of different transformations – as a means of social control and political subjugation.”\(^{32}\) Fellini presents the sexual relationship between Cabiria and Alberto as fundamentally incompatible in a sexual society which maintains distance between classes. Alberto only ever picks up Cabiria as an insult to his girlfriend, Jessi, and when he brings Cabiria back to his sprawling mansion it is clear that the two of them will never actually have sex. Wealth fascinates and perplexes Cabiria, as Fellini shows when he films her through the mansion’s absurd bird enclosure, but it bores Alberto and in the end alienates both of them. Before anything can happen between the two of them, Jessi shows back up and makes passionate melodramatic love to Alberto. Cabiria hides all night in the adjacent bathroom, sneaking out in

\(^{30}\) Alberto Lazzari’s namesake derives from the actor who played him, Amedeo Nazzari. The distinction between Nazzari and Lazzari was blurry both in phonetically and substantively. Nazzari was, like his character, well-known for his love of sports cars, love affairs, and large mansion. Kezich, *Federico Fellini: His Life and Work*, 182.

\(^{31}\) Burke suggests that “Through Lazzari, Cabiria refines four different ways of getting beyond herself: role-playing, vision, projection, and make-believe.” All of this serves to say that Cabiria views sex with this man as a means of status-elevation and life-fulfillment. Burke, *Fellini’s Films*, 87-88.

\(^{32}\) Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 123.
the morning with a signed photo of Alberto to prove to her friends that she netted a famous client and thereby gain status. Sex between the classes is flirted with but never achieved when Fellini subscribes to Foucault’s notion of social sexuality as a technique of insulation which protects the classes from each other.

After the night with Alberto, *Le Notti di Cabiria* explodes in a fit of spiritual humanism. Back at the Passeggiata Archeologica, Cabiria witnesses a Catholic procession before randomly accompanying a nameless man as he wanders around the outskirts of Rome delivering food to homeless people in caves. This episode was no doubt a contribution by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who advised the screenplay as an expert on Rome’s lowlife and inserted an element of socialism into the film’s flavor. Though it is somewhat inconsistent with the film’s overall narrative and direction, the encounter with the cave people leads Cabiria back to the church and spiritual salvation. She and a handful of her fellow prostitutes make a pilgrimage the Virgin Mary at a sanctuary on the Via Ardeatina, accompanied by the crippled uncle of a pimp who prays to be healed. Surrounded by lamenting Italian Catholics, Cabiria is suddenly overcome with the desire to pray for spiritual wholeness, begging a portrait of the Virgin Mary: “Help me to change my life.” The involvement of Catholic ritual in both medical and sexual discourses in this scene points towards Foucault, signaling the creation of desire out of power. Believing that her own spiritual emptiness is akin to the uncle’s physical deformity, Cabiria brings her desire for sexual normalcy into a religious and medical discourse which bends her to power. Cabiria’s desire is inculcated by a mass social performance, and her language underscores the fact that society does not differentiate between one’s sexuality and the content of one’s life. It is here that Fellini reaches his most Foucauldian, showing a non-repressive sexual institutionalism that does not

make Cabiria ashamed of her sexuality yet which channels the energies of individuals into a flexible framework of compliance and deviance.\textsuperscript{35}

This unintended Fellinian Foucauldianism reaches a climax in the film’s turning-point moment, when Cabiria attends a vaudevillian magic show at the rundown Lux Theater. There, in front of a noisy crowd of typical Italian men, Cabiria is dragged onstage and hypnotized by a powerful magician who creates for her an imaginary romantic scenario. Cabiria’s fantasy leads her to confess to the crowd her “true desire” when she imagines an ideal gentleman named Oscar, who marries her and takes her away from the treacherous world of Italian prostitution. While the loud crowd mocks her when the conjuror releases her from the stupor, one man from the audience stalks Cabiria after the show and introduces himself as the real-life “Oscar.” The remainder of the film is driven by Cabiria’s dangerous delusions of paradisiacal coupling with Oscar. She sells her proud home and all her worldly belongings, seeks out a confession with a priest before marriage, and throws her life into Oscar’s manipulative grip. Oscar, like Giorgio before him, nearly kills Cabiria. He reluctantly backs down from throwing her off of a cliff, making off with all of her money. \textit{Le Notti Di Cabiria} ends as Cabiria walks away from the site of her betrayal, walking firmly on a country road as she is mysteriously joined by an impromptu parade. Smiling, she beams into the camera in the film’s final moments, signifying a transcendent moment of self-knowledge independent of any man.

Cabiria’s pivotal confession at the Lux is a Foucauldian moment captured on film. She is compelled into a discourse on her sex which appears to emanate from within herself, but which in reality is imposed upon her by power.\textsuperscript{36} The events resulting from her disclosure at the Lux

\textsuperscript{35} See Foucault’s notion of the “\textit{Incorporation of Perversions},” Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality Volume 1}, 42-43.

\textsuperscript{36} In analyzing the magic show scene, Burke suggests that “when the topic of Oscar is introduced, Cabiria in a subtle but crucial way \textit{chooses} to become entranced.” Like Bondanella, Baxter, and Stubbs, Burke interprets Cabiria’s confessed desire as earnest, a discovery of “the redemptive powers that have been growing within her.” Fellini no
prove Fellini’s bitter proto-feminist outlook on Italian sexuality, as she is no safer in trying to marry than she is in trying to sell her body on Rome’s streets. At the end of Cabiria’s nights, the prostitute’s sudden compulsion to marry, spurred on by the Church and the hypnosis at the Lux, leaves her stripped of everything that made her strong. Cabiria’s innocent sexuality, embodied through her love of Oscar, becomes a point of friction between fantasized desire and cold reality, and the deleterious effect that her own desire has on her life suggests that Fellini understood desire as separate from true fulfillment. Though the admission at the Lux seems to convey the character’s inner desire, the social setting of its extraction reveals that Cabiria’s desire for legitimate marriage is fundamentally shaped by powerful forces beyond her control. The magician’s power over her mimics society’s own, compelling her to seek out the truth of herself in sex. Fellini depicts the prostitute’s life as a cultural event for Italians in Le Notti di Cabiria, using the Lux sequence and its melodramatic fallout to underscore a marginal sexuality circumscribed by larger cultural forces.

doubt intended this scene to be the denouement of Cabiria’s romantic progression towards purity, and for the confession to be taken as honest. However, if we refuse to ignore the entrancing effect of power and sexuality at play in the theater, we can accept Cabiria’s “choice” to become entranced with the imaginary Oscar while still holding onto a Foucauldian reading of Cabiria’s trance. Burke, Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita, 75.
“The Subtle and Disturbing Pleasure” – Approaching Fellini’s Sexuality from Foucault

Social Institutions – the Lux Theater, the Catholic Church, the fascist state, the provincial family, the silver screen, or the classroom – often cause Fellini’s characters to behave according to certain socio-sexual scripts. The inveterate womanizer Fausto in I Vitelloni (1953) seeks extramarital liaisons three times over the course of the film: once while at the movies with his wife, again with his boss’ spouse while working at a store filled with Catholic fetishes, and lastly at a stage performance when he gazes upon a dancer dressed in the Italian tri-color and fitted with a fabulous headdress made out in the shape of a shining castle, the fortress of the state. Fausto’s uncontrollable polyamorous desires are not irrepressible masculine urges held back by a repressive culture, but codified social instructions that manifest themselves most strongly in situations involving an explicit cultural cue – the Italian flag or a magic performance. Acting as a foil to Cabiria’s experience at the Lux, Fausto responds to public performances by seeking out deviant non-monogamous pleasure. Throughout the Fellini cannon, the sexual desires of characters are systematically channeled into social regimentations which reside both inside and outside of marriages. Though psychoanalytic issues of sexual repression and its relationship to spiritual repression are certainly useful in understanding Fellini and sexuality, they no longer retains primacy when sexual desire is reevaluated as a force subject to social influence as Foucault encourages us to do. Fellini spoke in interviews of the repressive tendencies about Italian sexuality, particularly in relation to the Catholic Church and the fascist period. However, he also expressed an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between cultural

37 Burke, Fellini’s Films, 38-40.
38 Take for instance his comparison between fascism, Catholicism, and the sexual immaturity of adolescence: “Even before fascism, the fault of this chronic insufficient development, this arrested development at a childlike stage, lies with the Catholic Church. Living in this kind of environment, each person develops not individual characteristics but only pathological defects.” Federico Fellini, “Amarcord: The Fascism within Us, An Interview with Valerio Riva,” in Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism, ed. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22.
repression and rebellion, an understanding that Foucault would also enunciate in his later writings.

The sexual and psychological liberation that Giulietta in *Juliet of the Spirits* and Guido in *8 ½* achieve at the end of their searches for meaning is not born merely out of a successful rebellion against social repression. Similarly, when Marcello fails to find meaningful liberation at the end of *La Dolce Vita* or when Casanova narcissistically succumbs to his own pitiful fantasies, they are not simply failing to rebel. The success or failure of a Fellini character’s struggle does not hinge on an ability to overcome neurosis, but rather on the recognition that one’s sexuality is not determinant of the ontology of selfhood. When Giulietta the housewife is finally freed of the spirits that plagued her, when Guido the director is at last free of creative repression, when Cabiria the prostitute triumphantly directs her gaze into the camera, Fellini creates moments of liberation that subtly problematize the notion of a sex-based repression. These liberations cast off the perceived sexual repressions of church and childhood not by direct overthrow, but by denouncing the epistemic authority of society’s claim to sexual knowledge. Guido does not abandon his mistress or his wife Luisa in the finale of *8 ½*. Instead he joins them together in a fantasy film of Fellini’s own creation, holding Luisa’s hand in a grand human processional which rejects the very notion of repression. Catholicism, family, and childhood trauma all become irrelevant once Guido no longer believes that his sexual desires make him a bad person.

It is this false hope of desire, this longing that only perpetuates confusion, which ties all of Fellini’s stories together in a common exploration of sexuality. Though changing visually and thematically over the course of his career, Fellini’s films exist as an interrogation of the nature and control of desire. The dreams by which he was so famously enthralled, and which he began
to incorporate *en masse* into his own cinema by the 1960s, are not to be digested by the viewer as the single-minded fantasy projections of an unchained artistic spirit. Rather, they are cinematic laboratories in which Fellini sought to uncover the powers which control desire. The desires interrogated in his oeuvre are not merely his own (*8 ½*), they are the desires of women in a patriarchal society (*Juliet of the Spirits, The White Sheik*), the desires of children (*Amacord*), the desires of the typical masculine archetypes of his society (*I Vitelloni, La Strada, Casanova*), and the mass desires of his entire civilization (*La Dolce Vita*).

Foucault centers his studies on some of the very same figures, and concludes that “one should not think that desire is repressed, for the simple reason that the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated.”39 Taboo and hedonism are to Foucault opposite ends of a selfsame structure of longing, which coerces individuals into believing that their deviant desires are somehow lawbreaking transgressions. To recognize this persistent longing in Fellini is to deconstruct and reinterpret the significance of his change from realism to fantasy, as well as to break from and reconvene with basic psychoanalytic tenants as they are traditionally employed to understand Fellini. A heterodox approach such as this – one which incorporates a Foucauldian framework for film analysis – will breathe entirely new meaning into the maestro’s body of work.

The irony of this new approach is that it has come so close to being accomplished by prior Fellini scholarship. Some postmodern studies have been done on Fellini in the past few decades, and Marguerite Waller has gone so far as to single out Michel Foucault as having a particular relevance to Fellini’s films.40 Nonetheless, Foucauldian theory has only been

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employed in conjunction with predictable postmodern “death of the subject” arguments, which often orbit reliably around Lacanian interpretation.\textsuperscript{41} Despite the sporadic recognition of the significance of sexuality in Fellini’s cinema, and the vast amount of academic thought that Foucault gave to sexuality, the theoretical trifecta between Fellini, Foucault and sexuality remains unmapped. Fellini’s significance to the study of sexuality in cinema has been largely unrecognized, in part because the prior frameworks employed to study it have proven inadequate. They have led academics to believe that everything that can be said about the sexuality in Fellini’s movies was already voiced by the director himself, by the characters in his films, or by the intellectual school that influenced Fellini. This impression is an echo chamber. It produces no substantive meaning beyond the meaning that is already present on Fellini’s vastly complex screen. Foucault encourages us to dig deeper.

Psychoanalysis assumes that the neurotic struggles of individuals are caused by a tension between inert sexual desires and a repressive force on the individual. Foucault argued that modern sexuality can only exist in relationship with the society that inscribes it with meaning. In *The White Sheik, I Vitelloni, La Strada, Nights of Cabiria, La Dolce Vita, 8 ½, Juliet of the Spirits, Amarcord,* and *Casanova,* Fellini delivers to his audience a complex understanding of sexuality that incorporates elements of both seemingly contradictory schools of thought. His characters wrestle with the consequences of psychic blockage and sexual neurosis, yet ultimately they can only find true resolution outside of the binary between repression and liberation, a liberation from the concept of liberation itself. Whether or not Fellini understood Foucault is

irrelevant. What matters is that his films demonstrate key Foucauldian ideas about sexuality through their own unique exploration of psychoanalytic mythology and socio-sexual power.

This thesis surveys a large portion of the Fellini filmography, ranging from his beginnings to his later films, in order to better understand the persistent concepts of sexuality at play in the director’s work. By introducing the analytic framework proposed by Michel Foucault, this thesis aims to add a complex voice to Fellini scholarship which decenters the psychoanalytic and Lacanian thinking which currently dominates the small field. It also argues that the sexuality in Fellini’s films deserves larger investigation by both feminist film theorists and other academics invested in studying sexuality as it relates to cinema. Fellini and Foucault present some of the most dynamic and complex perspectives on sexuality in the history of cinema and academia respectively. They sought to explore sexuality not just as it exists in the bedroom or in the mind, but as it exists in the world. To confine analysis of Fellini’s cinesexuality inwards, towards the minds of the characters and the mind of the filmmaker, is to filter out all of the rich cultural noise that informs the sexuality on screen.

The defense of this position must concede a few obvious points. Fellini’s ideas about sexuality are not perfectly aligned with Foucault’s, and his films cannot and should not be interpreted as vehicles of pure Foucauldian intent. The director’s obsession with sexual liberation and sexual repression would seem to be at odds with what Foucault had to say on the nature of institutions as they affected sexuality, and the characters of Fellini’s films often seek an escape from repressive norms by a spiritual transcendence attained in part through sexual self-fulfillment. Guido Anselmi of 8½ and Marcello Rubini of La Dolce Vita – both portrayed by the prototypical Latin lover Marcello Mastroianni, who served as an avatar for Fellini himself –

42 Irving Levine, “I Was Born for the Cinema – A Conversation with Federico Fellini,” Film Comment, Fall 1966, p. 80.
best display this motivation. Marcello’s absurd journey through modern Rome finds him weaving in and out of Catholic ritual and hedonistic orgies, while Guido’s path towards creative and spiritual wholeness lurches between obfuscated meetings with Catholic officials, repressive childhood memories of ritual punishment for sexual exploration, and chaotic sadomasochistic fantasy.\textsuperscript{43} The male leads in these movies are prevented from achieving a holistic self-comprehension by a sex-fearing retroactive culture which condones a seemingly irrepressible desire. One could easily take the two films together as a cinematic screed by Fellini against the repressive ideology of the Catholic institution and the Italian society at large, and many who have studied Fellini have arrived at such conclusions with authority and conviction.\textsuperscript{44} Reading Fellini in this way forgoes the relevance of Foucault.

Likewise, Fellini can hardly be considered a feminist filmmaker. Both in interview and on screen, Fellini expressed a quixotic view of gender roles and sexuality that essentialized women as passive vessels of purity and men – like the \textit{Vitelloni} – as active fetishists/sexual animals.\textsuperscript{45} Gelsomina of \textit{La Strada} typifies the fragile and martyred Fellini female, but we also see shades of her in \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s Paola, \textit{The White Sheik}’s Wanda, and, arguably, the eponymous protagonist of \textit{Juliet of the Spirits}. In 8½, Guido finds this idealized feminine form in Claudia, a woman so pure that he cannot figure out what to do with her.\textsuperscript{46} One of Fellini’s least successful films, \textit{City of Women} (1980), finds its protagonist besieged by modern women

\textsuperscript{43} Writing on Mastroianni’s prolific Italian masculinity as embodied by these iconic roles, Jacqueline Reich draws specifically upon Michel Foucault to argue that “the roles Mastroianni played reflected an Italian masculinity in crisis in post-war Italy.” Jacqueline Reich, \textit{Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), xiii.

\textsuperscript{44} Donald Costello, for example, interprets the dead fish at the end of \textit{La Dolce Vita} as a clear sign of a “Christ/God” who is “enclosed in bonds; we view the fish symbol through the bars of a fishnet, so like the many networks and cages which have imprisoned the people of the film.” Donald P. Costello, \textit{Fellini’s Road} (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 74.


who mock and torment him at a feminist convention. The implication is that a successful feminist revolution would result not in gender equality, but rather in a brutal inversion of patriarchy, where women police beat and even rape men.\(^47\) Hailing from a highly masculine Italian culture and finding his artistic voice in one of the most male-dominated scenes in the history of the cinema industry, Fellini was probably unlikely to advance a feminist vision for film.\(^48\) Laura Mulvey, whose seminal 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” broke ground for the emergent feminist film theory movement, would no doubt find many parallels between the male gaze of Fellini’s camera and the male gaze which she identified in Alfred Hitchcock’s works.\(^49\) Such a reading of Fellini would deny the subtle feminism of his work.

Yet in the best-known moment of Fellini’s career when the sex-goddess Sylvia wades into the Trevi fountain in \textit{La Dolce Vita} to lasciviously display herself, the attentive viewer will understand that the filmmaker is engages in a unique form of double coding that is neither feminist nor anti-feminist. The tantalizing shots of the busty blonde Sylvia against the seventeenth century fountain drenched up to her thighs and sparkling like a water nymph comprise the most famous scene which Fellini ever created for two good reasons. In the fountain, Fellini consciously aped the male gaze which he admired in classic Hollywood cinema and milked its conventions to perfection, creating an iconic moment. More importantly, in adopting the sexually voyeuristic posture of a classic film, Fellini mocks the male gaze with which the

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\(^{47}\) Bondanella reminds us that Fellini meant – in his words – for this film to be a parody and for Snáporaz to be “a comic figure, because the mistaken notions he has about women are all generated by his own failure to appreciate women as unique individuals.” Peter Bondanella, \textit{A History of Italian Cinema} (New York: Continuum, 2009), 303.

\(^{48}\) For an unpleasant recounting of Fellini’s piggish brand of misogyny, see John Baxter’s account of Charlotte Chandler’s experiences with Fellini. Baxter, \textit{Fellini}, 323-324.

scene is constructed. Setting aside the power of the image itself, burned into the minds of a million moviegoers by the film’s lobby poster, the scene’s sexual dynamics center around the deflation of Marcello’s own ego and arousal. When our male protagonist breaks the seal on Sylvia’s ephemeral instance of wet-hot virgin appeal by jumping into the fountain to join her, the fountain’s jets abruptly wither and the sun rises on a flustered Marcello whose fantasy-fulfillment has been dashed to pieces by his own moronic attachment to an ideal woman.

Earlier at the nightclub, he had told Sylvia in a whining plea that she was “everything.” In the daylight he discovers that neither of them are anything. Marcello, in ascribing to Sylvia the indelible significance as a bearer of total meaning, took the bait of sex which Foucault details. He seeks truth in sex and finds none.

The Trevi fountain sequence encapsulates Fellini’s vivid brilliance as a filmmaker. It bridges the gap between his on-location realism and his in-studio postmodernism: a highly artificial cinematic climax that was actually filmed at the real Trevi Fountain. Contrast this with the film’s depiction of Via Veneto, which seems documentarian but was shot on a carefully constructed set in the Cinecittá studios. The fountain scene also gives a vivid sexual image to the clash between modern and archaic Rome established in La Dolce Vita’s opening helicopter sequence and reinforced consistently throughout the film. Most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, it invites the viewer to drink in Sylvia as a fantastic object, yet ultimately neuters Marcello for trying to touch that which he should only see.

Sylvia’s drenched figure, when

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50 Sylvia, a female sex icon consciously in the style of Marilyn Monroe, would fit Mulvey’s bill for a “privileged image” which “has its source in male anxiety and desire projected onto an uncertainty about femininity.” Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 40 – 50.


53 For a photograph of this set, see: Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, 140.

54 The dichotomy between sight and touch is an invaluable element to both Fellini’s cinesexuality and to Linda Williams’ incorporation of Foucault into feminist film theory. Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 20.
observed in the proper light, elucidates the genius of Fellini’s celluloid sexuality. While certainly not a cinematic victory for feminism, Anita Eckberg’s inviting figure teases and impales Marcello’s embodiment of impotent Italian masculinity. This is the crux of Fellini in the light of feminist film theory: that he puts on sexist airs in order to lampoon male power and desire. His female characters are often flat and sexualized, normally virgins or whores, but their roles are best understood as fantasy projections of the flawed male protagonists who desire and abuse them.\(^{55}\) Fellini’s men are, especially in the case of the violent rapist Zampanó, hideous modern monsters whose patriarchal trappings deceive and frustrate them endlessly. \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s value as a modern epic partly derives from its refusal to accept sexual desire as a natural personal force unconstrained by social powers. The film is a testament to the folly of male control, questioning the nature of want and uncovering the structures and technologies which construct it.

With a working understanding of the significance of the Trevi Fountain sequence in \textit{La Dolce Vita} as a foundation, it becomes easier to elaborate on what makes Fellini’s unique sexuality so fascinating. The woman in the fountain draws upon all the basic components of the sexual struggle in any given Fellini film. She represents the futile search for meaning in sexual desire which protagonists dependably seek. She is a movie star whose sexual appeal – much like the White Sheik’s – has been inculcated in Marcello and all men through socio-technological methods. She is the mother-virgin-whore which the 20\textsuperscript{th} century Italian male has been taught to love-desire-punish through Catholic instruction and brothel experience. Like Wanda’s White Sheik, Cabiria’s imagined Oscar, Guido’s ideal woman, Titta’s Gradisca, Casanova’s robot, or Dr. Antonio’s temptation, Sylvia is an entity created by and for desire. Marcello’s desire for

\(^{55}\) Fellini, in discussing this aspect of his films in relation to \textit{City of Women}, admitted that he “was driven by women to make films.” Costanzo Costantini, \textit{Fellini on Fellini}, trans. Sohrab Sorooshian (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 112.
Sylvia is his eternal confession, the sexuality which the Western world has taught him to prod at without end in order to produce knowledge and truth about himself. Foucault wrote critically that “It is through sex – in fact an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality – that each individual has to pass through in order to have access to his own intelligibility… to the whole of his body… to his identity.” In writing this, he unknowingly described the journey of the Fellini protagonist who seeks out the meaning of themselves through sex in a world which governs sexuality through interlocking social technologies and discourses.

Linda Williams’ *Screening Sex* suggests a way to introduce Foucault into film analysis. Though largely focusing on the American film canon in scrutinizing cinesexuality, she argues that “The rise of sexual explicitness in movies cannot be viewed as a transgressive exception to the rules of previous repression, but as the continuation, in Foucault’s sense, of a larger discursive explosion of perverse sexuality.” Combining a Foucauldian understanding of sexuality as an apparatus of social power with elements of psychoanalytic theories and a Walter Benjaminian idea of tactile sensuousness in the viewing experience, Williams charts the evolution of sexual content in the cinema over the course of the twentieth century. We could use this approach as a Foucauldian template for understanding how Fellini approached sex in his films.

The gradual shift in the depiction of sexuality in Fellini’s films roughly corresponds to the general move from coded sexuality towards explicitness that Williams detected in American cinema history. *The White Sheik*, *I Vitelloni*, and *La Strada* dance around topics of infidelity and rape with the taboo-minded caution of most films of the 1950s. *La Dolce Vita*’s significant striptease sequence paved the way for Fellini’s camera to investigate graphic homosexual and

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even group acts from *Amarcord* to *Casanova*. Themes of sexual liberation become more apparent as the director progressed into the 1960s and 1970s, as Williams would no doubt predict, yet the meaning of sex – both its act and its cultural construction – remained constant in his work. It would be a mistake to look at the orgy scene in *Casanova* and assume that Fellini always yearned for this sort of confrontational sexual explicitness in his movies but was held back by norms and censors. Though norms and censors certainly would have prevented such a film from being made in 1954, Fellini was invested in other equally valid means of exploring sexuality in that era. Fellini was not merely an iconoclastic transgressor of repressive Italian Catholic norms, he was a playful interrogator of the nature of sex. Through multifaceted cinematic techniques, he teased and flirted with the erotic structures of Western society, using what Williams calls “the film’s body” to arouse both desire and outrage.

This duality of sex in Fellini’s movies, this arousal/outrage binary, contributes to the characteristic ambiguity of his work. This was what allowed him to produce movies that at turns pleased and offended both church officials and cultural radicals. This duality drove him to understand sexuality not merely in terms of repression and liberation, but by the hidden sex buried by his culture into the quotidian bedrock of society. Fellini finds sex in automobiles and brothels, in macho Italian masculinity and vulnerable feminine sensuality, in pretentious fascist appetites and mass culture journalism, in parades and movie showings, circuses and marriages, confession booths and orgies, in psychoanalytic mumbo-jumbo and insane asylums. Fellini’s cinema, like Foucault’s writing, asks a simple question: how are we to understand our culture as sexually repressed if from its every dark corner it broadcasts sex? Foucault describes the modern Western culture as one which “speaksverbosely of its own silence, takes great pains to relate in

detail the things it does not say.”

Fellini’s characters are caught up in the maddening contradictions of this cultural condition. Their redemption depends on their successful navigation of the deafening silence surrounding their sexual bodies. Marcello, looking to the Umbrian Paola in whom he sought sexual and spiritual redemption, cannot hear her words over the sound of the ocean and thus finds no meaning in his life.

Foucault argued that the power structures governing the creation of sexuality intended for minor acts of transgression to take place within a larger normative system of heterosexual procreation, that in fact the pleasure of “sexual rebellion” is made attractive to individuals by a society which nonetheless maintains total control over the knowledge of sex. “These attractions, these evasions [of power],” Foucault wrote of deviant and rebellious sex, “these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure [emphasis added].” Such spirals are the stuff of Fellini, who crossed back and forth over boundaries knowing that they were meant to be crossed. “I am not greatly attracted to rebellion, but it is Catholicism that has given me that roguish streak which redeems me.” Fellini once observed of himself in an interview, “Catholic ritual acts as a stimulant: it lends the subtle and disturbing pleasure to breaking the rules and infringing the prohibitions that it sets.”

His work in cinema deserves to be recognized as a tribute to this subtle and disturbing pleasure, this roguish streak which redeems.


60 For further interpretation of this scene, see Marguerite R. Waller’s breakdown of it. Waller, “Whose *Dolce Vita* Is This, Anyway?,” 110-111.


62 Burke makes a similar connection between spirals and the nature of narrative and character in many of Fellini’s films, actually presenting his readers with an illustrated spiral in the middle of his writing to explicate *Le Notti Di Cabiria*. Frank Burke, *Federico Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita*, 106.

63 Costantini, *Fellini on Fellini*, 114.
Though offsetting the previously referenced inner pull of Fellini’s own personality and life is crucial to reinterpreting his canon in the light of Foucauldian sexuality, some of his background will nonetheless serve to prove the filmmaker’s longstanding commitment to exploring sexuality. Born in 1920 and raised in Rimini, a coastal Italian town along the Adriatic, Fellini recalled his upbringing both in his interviews and in *Amarcord* and *I Vitelloni* through a disjointed series of individuated memories. These memories were at turns openly sexual and physically repressive, swerving between sexual encounters and tortures inflicted by pious church officials. The consequential components of Fellini’s first years on earth are as such: his family was mildly bourgeois, he came of age under Mussolini, he was not close with his father, and he frequently recalled anecdotes about running away from school to see the circus – though it is unclear whether such stories were facetious fabrications. He enjoyed movies. Then came his shift to Rome, a moment in the Fellini legacy which biographers and scholars deem nearly as significant as his later move from neorealism to postmodernism. In 1939 at less than 20 years old, Fellini gained employment as a writer and cartoonist for Rome’s relatively esteemed *Marc’Aurelio* humor magazine. Fellini’s three-year tenure at *Marc’Aurelio* is usually only hit upon by scholars who wish to trace his unconventional path toward filmmaking, as it was through his work for the magazine that Fellini first established connections with a slew of future Italian film figures, including Aldo Fabrizi, the Don Pietro himself. However, some of Fellini’s non-filmic work from this period deserves to be recognized as canonically compatible with his later work in movies. A comic postcard which he drew for the *Domencia del corriere* in 1938, even before his departure to Rome, depicts a jealous animal trainer in a circus who fears

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65 Kezich, *Federico Fellini: His Life and Work*, 3-16.
infidelity on the part of his acrobat wife – a clear Zampanó prototype.\textsuperscript{67} \textit{La Famiglia}, an unproduced manuscript that Fellini drafted somewhere between 1947 and 1950, contained comic sketches indebted to his time at \textit{Marc’ Aurelio} that reflected Fellini’s cartoon-influenced interpretation of bodily comedy and indicated a thematic obsession with the sexual institution of marriage which he never abandoned. Regardless of his career or age, Fellini sought to interpret the absurdity of human sex through caricature.\textsuperscript{68}

Fellini landed rather gracefully in the downfall of fascism. After Allied liberation in June of 1944, Fellini relied on his tendency to capture distinct faces. He opened a brief-lived caricature shop which serviced American soldiers and Fellini’s creativity. While many of his countrymen suffered through the death throes of fascism and subsequently the bleakest of economic conditions, Fellini married Giulietta Masina, expanded into radio and screenplay writing, and co-authored Roberto Rossellini’s tremendously successful \textit{Roma Citta Aperta}. It seemed as if the more that Italy struggled the more Fellini succeeded. 1945 was not without its bitterness for Fellini, however. He and Masina lost two infants, one to miscarriage and one to brain inflammation in its first month of life. The child who died outside the womb was named Federico. After the infant’s death, Fellini sought a different route of parenthood. In copious interviews later on in his life, Fellini pronounced a seemingly rehearsed mantra: “My films are my children.”\textsuperscript{69} This declaration should be taken seriously. His films were made with a fervent passion, often with his wife, and always with legacy in mind. Fellini’s films, like another man’s children, were what he left behind. Foucault wrote that the modern deployment of sexuality instructed the Western bourgeois to scrutinize sex as it existed within their own families.\textsuperscript{70} If

\textsuperscript{67} Bondanella, \textit{The Cinema of Federico Fellini}, 11.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{69} Chandler, \textit{I, Fellini}, 45.
\textsuperscript{70} Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality Volume I}, 108.
Fellini’s family consisted of Giulietta Masina and the films that he made, then Fellini’s approach to familial sexuality was inverted and self-conscious in a manner that Foucault would have appreciated.

Even in his early screenwriting days, the future director displayed an uncanny ability to capitalize upon both the Italian and the Western mindset. His script, written with neorealist Sergio Amidei, plays up Italian resistance to Nazism through Alberto Sordi’s quintessentially Catholic Don Pietro and Anna Magnani’s sexually captivating Pina. Rossellini’s film provided an escape route for the Italian psyche, which desperately sought to deny its collaboration with a freshly defeated evil. Pina, pregnant out of wedlock and already a mother, is the sort of mother-whore who Fellini and his fellow Italians loved to secretly root for. Her martyrdom at the hands of Nazis mirrors Don Pietro’s own. This linking of earthly sexuality to heavenly devotion is a cinematic and cultural sleight of hand characteristic of Fellini.

Intertwined themes of Catholic faith and sexual desire were even more obvious in Fellini and Rossellini’s later collaboration, the controversial Il Miracolo (1948), which featured Fellini in one of his few onscreen roles as a bearded transient who impregnates a mentally disabled woman. She believes him to be Saint Joseph and her pregnancy to be the second coming. Such an irreverent plot was bound to inflame both Italian and American institutions of cultural surveillance, and it is telling that Fellini would play the role of the heretical impregnator whose actions brought about so much prudish disdain. Il Miracolo, with its blunt confrontation of homelessness, mental illness, religious institutionalism, and sex acts is a Foucauldian vehicle through and through, tying together diverse notions of physical and spiritual deviance with the idea of a larger powerful sexual conformity to which the protagonist fails to comply.71

Society’s aversion to address the very subject which universally fascinates it was to Fellini what the hypocrisy of the bourgeois was to Fassbinder or what nihilistic suffering was to Bergman: a fundamental problem that the director needed to solve again and again with filmmaking. The scaffold is a strong visual in Fellini’s major films. Though prominently used in the promotional artwork for 8 ½, some form of wiry tubular structure appears in La Dolce Vita, The White Sheik, La Strada, Nights of Cabiria, Fellini: A Director’s Notebook, and The Temptations of Doctor Antonio. Sometimes scaffolding is innocuous and logical, as in the setup for the photo shoot in The White Sheik. Other times, it is bafflingly prominent, seemingly without purpose, as is the case with the ramshackle collection of tubes assembled outside of Cabiria’s shack. Some film scholars have explained such imagery as a visual callback to the methods of filmmaking themselves, as a clever acknowledgement by Fellini that the worlds of his stories are held together by flimsy and artificial means.

But perhaps the explanation lies deeper still. The scaffold signifies not just the medium of film, but social power at large. As Foucault described it, it is a vast and amorphous edifice of interconnected structures, bolstering and supporting itself under its own weight while creating the illusion of form. In La Dolce Vita massive scaffolding swallows up and creates the gruesome and false spectacle of the Madonna sighting, where a sick child is brought to be healed but is trampled to death by the mass culture that brought him there in the first place. In the Temptations of Doctor Antonio, scaffolding is used to uphold the gigantic scintillating image of Anita Ekberg which arouses/outrages the titular doctor. The social scaffolding that Fellini consistently turns his camera towards is a diffuse architecture of distribution, a vast network of influence truly worthy of Foucault. The sexuality that Fellini constructs within the world of his film mimics this scaffolding, self-consciously enshrouding the characters in a structure of influence of which they
are only dimly aware. With cameras flashing, mirrors reflecting, cars speeding, oceans churning, music playing, and parades rushing past, Fellini characters engage in perplexing struggles which bring to light the constructed nature of sexuality as it exists in their modern world.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} Budgen’s refreshing book on Fellini, which predates most other Fellini scholarship, also picks up on the director’s prominent use of scaffolding. Though her interpretation veers slightly from this one, it is worth including: “Fellini is essentially urban and enriches us, not with visions of a life removed from everyday surroundings, but by showing us the magic that lies in buildings, in towns, in machinery, in scaffolding, in neon signs, in all things which we are so often invited to see as ugly or intrusive, as erecting a barrier between us and a natural way of life. [emphasis added].” Replace the word “magic” with “power” and Budgen’s observation concurs with this thesis’ Foucauldian metaphor. Budgen, \textit{Fellini}, 44.
“Real Life is the Life of Dreams” – Constructing Sex in Lo Sceicco Bianco and I Vitelloni

Though this analysis will not take a directly chronological approach to exploring Fellini’s canon, two of his earliest films lay bare crucial elements of his outlook on sexuality. 1952’s Lo Sceicco Blanco and the following year’s I Vitelloni are both small-scale modernist farces with pitiful petit-bourgeois characters whose desires and fascinations constantly bring them to the precipice of ruin. Sceicco’s newlyweds, Wanda and Ivan Cavalli, are beset with the dueling cultural forces of mass produced pop culture romance and state sanctioned monogamy. Moraldo, Alberto, Fausto, and Leopoldo’s quotidian exploits in a nondescript provincial town (no doubt drawn from Fellini’s Rimini) trace lazier circles than the conventionally tight plot of Fellini’s directorial debut, yet their lethargic episodes reveal similar themes: conflict between the individual and society, tension between marriage and extramarital eros, irreconcilable hypocrisy in a culture that endorses both ascetic principles and hedonistic indulgence. Sequestered within these films is a cunning indictment of the Italian sexual psyche and Italian marriage, which eats away at both Fellini’s men and women. In both movies, marriage is contrasted with a panoply of perverse delights which invade the hetero-monogamous institution, leaving a neurotic and desperate couple who cling to each other amidst a storm of sexuality without really knowing why.

It is in these initial works that Fellini’s nascent ideas about sex begin to take a cinematic form. Mimicking Foucault’s notion of a “deployment of alliance” that conscripts the family into the deployment of sexuality, Fellini delivers hints at the influence of cultural institutions over the erotic desires of individuals through the manner in which the characters’ sexuality is

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73 Virginia Picchietti, “When in Rome Do As the Romans Do? Federico Fellini’s Problematization of Femininity,” in Federico Fellini: Contemporary Perspectives, ed. Frank Burke and Marguerite R. Waller (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2002), 93.
circumscribed by family, church and state. Additionally, they begin to see the meaning of sexuality as it is drawn out of individuals for the viewing audience. When a character deviates from sexual instruction, they are accused of pathological corruption or spiritual contamination which compromises their value to society. Wanda and Fausto’s childish sexual misadventures are seen to endanger not simply themselves, but the fabric of an Italian society built on the rigid marriage. This is why they are punished by the striking hand of the father or by the insane asylum. So it is that Fellini’s first forays into filmmaking concur with a central claim of Foucault’s – that sexual knowledge derives from the power which institutions exert over sexuality. To depart from the powerful norms of Italian culture as Fausto and Wanda do is to be a criminal or a lunatic whose actions must be interrogated and turned into knowledge, which in turn can be used to violently reestablish marriage and heterosexuality in the final act.

Enter the timid alliance of Ivan and Wanda Cavalli, the first of Fellini’s many unhappy imaginary marriages. Lo Sceicco Blanco establishes itself as a quintessentially Roman film within its opening minutes, situating its central protagonists as overwhelmed tourists with conflicting motivations for visiting Fellini’s grand city. The petty and frantic Ivan wishes to establish himself among the ranks of the Italian middle class with his marriage to Wanda, parading her in front of his unsuspecting family while perfunctorily touring all of Rome’s

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75 By “sexual instruction” is meant the full range of sexual norms implemented by power relations in the societies which Fellini depicts. Foucault describes an “exigency of normality” which emerges in the modern era which is satisfied through the discourses of medical, secular, familial, and religious authorities. This is a concept that will pop up from time to time throughout the thesis, as Fellini frequently filmed scenes of sexual instruction between families, priests, doctors, and even neighbors. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 117.

76 Rigid is frankly putting it mildly! Frank Burke notes that “Fellini’s view of marriage [during the filming of Lo Sceicco Blanco] was no doubt inspired at least in part by the harshness of Italian marriage laws at the time. An annulment – the only form of divorce acknowledged in Italy – was virtually impossible to get, leaving numerous people trapped in loveless relationships that were really divorces without sanction.” Frank Burke, *Federico Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita*, 16.

77 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 100.
essential features. He is most emphatically obsessed with visiting the Pope and paying respects at the Altar of the Fatherland, a tellingly patriarchal nomenclature for a monument. Wanda, childlike and serenely emptyheaded in the style of many Fellini females, is secretly dying to meet “The White Sheik,” the Valentinoesque star of her favorite fotoromanzo. Fotoromanzo were successful cheaply-produced Italian entertainment for women in the post-war years, essentially a romance comic book with photographs instead of illustrations. The naïve Wanda steals away from her husband to visit the studios, but gets caught up in the fantasy of the production and finds herself on-location for a photoshoot miles away from her husband and Rome. His wife whisked away by the gilded charms of Alberto Sordi’s buffoonish and adulterous White Sheik, the panicked Ivan assumes that he has been cuckolded and sets about comically covering up his presumed embarrassment by lying to his family. The comedy of this film rests in the marital contrast between Wanda’s unconcerned wandering and Ivan’s emasculating hysteria.

Wanda finds herself aboard a boat with the overbearing White Sheik and realizes she is about to be seduced or possibly raped before a boat mishap forces them to come back to shore. Upon arrival, the White Sheik’s wife confronts Wanda and assaults the presumed couple. Disillusioned and dejected, Wanda receives a ride back to town from a gross Italian man who

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78 Fellini’s script, in introducing Ivan, declares that “It is clear that for Ivan the most important thing in life is respectability.” Federico Fellini, Early Screenplays, trans. Judith Green (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), 90.

79 Mary Ann McDonald Carolan effectively traces the continuity between Rudolph Valentino’s Sheik character, Alberto Sordi’s White Sheik, and later American pastiches in the work of Woody Allen. Her argument attests to the seductive erotic architecture of popular technologies in Italian culture: “Wanda succumbs to the glamour and the exoticism suggested by The White Sheik in the same way that women had fallen for images of Valentino’s Sheik on Screen.” Mary Ann McDonald Carolan, The Transatlantic Gaze: Italian Cinema, American Film (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 18 – 24.


81 Fellini describes this scene as the first time that he ever directed a film set. Costantini, Fellini on Fellini, 27.
calls her a slut when she refuses to get dinner with him. While the defeated Ivan has a sexually
tense but sex-free encounter with Giulietta Masina’s Cabiria, a prostitute who will later star in a
superior Fellini feature, Wanda melodramatically attempts suicide in the Tiber but finds that the
water is too shallow. She is rescued by locals and placed in a mental hospital where Ivan finds
her. Reconciling wordlessly, the fatigued couple rushes to meet Ivan’s family at the Vatican,
where the final shot finds Ivan and Wanda marching brusquely to a meeting with the pope while
the camera pivots upwards to an angel statue which embellishes the roof of a papal edifice. The
director leaves us with what will become his signature bittersweet outlook. Our heroes are
reunited in what looks and sounds like a happy ending, thanks in part to Nino Rota’s score. Yet
the viewer cannot help but fear for Ivan and Wanda, who are still hopelessly mismatched and
unacquainted. Our heroes end up back together, but they don’t know why. Like their fluttering
hurry to meet with the Pope, their relationship seems rushed.

Several key sequences of Lo Sciecco Blanco demand to be unpacked with regards to
sexuality, the most glaring being Wanda’s romantic first glimpse of the White Sheik as he
swings idyllically about in the trees high above her. Fellini’s camera fantastically embellishes
Sordi’s figure to match Wanda’s perspective, appropriating what could easily be called a female
gaze to convey her highly pent-up desire for him. Wanda’s longing for the White Sheik is
both sexual and pure. Her fotoromanzo have taught her to desire this man while her husband and
the Italian culture that validates him have instructed her to be pure. Wanda finds a way out of
this contradiction by means of an innocent eros which places the White Sheik out of her reach –
an object to be captivated by but never attained. At the offices that Wanda visits, a snappy

82 Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” in The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality (London:
Routledge, 1992), 277-287.
83 The screenplay literally refers to her action in this scene as a “gaze.” Fellini, Early Screenplays, 124.
female producer tells her that “dreams are our true lives.” Wanda absorbs this maxim to live with her desire, sustaining her acceptable romantic fantasies and her acceptable romantic reality until the former invades the latter and both become unacceptable. It is only once the White Sheik comes down to the ground with her that Wanda’s eros becomes a problem. She transgresses the permeable barrier between reality and fantasy that society has built for her to cross, finding in the end that her dangerous fantasies will only drive her back into the arms of her husband. In Fellini’s bourgeois society, as in the “society of blatant and fragmented perversion” that Foucault describes the 19th century European bourgeois as, what seems transgressive and dangerous at first ends up reinforcing the traditional sexual institution maintained by power.

Ivan’s role as a neurotic counterpart to Wanda’s gushy romantic makes many of his scenes illustrative of the theme of institution in its relation to sexuality. A shot midway through the movie finds Ivan’s face pressed up to a booth at the information desk of his hotel as he grills the porter about his wife’s disappearance. In this shot, Ivan’s sweating and frightened countenance is positioned directly next to a series of postcards from Rome, producing a brief and dream-like contrast of scale between his bug-eyed expression and the serene city. Here, Fellini’s camera is telling the viewer everything they need to know about Ivan and the movie as a whole. He is a man who feels compelled to ingratiate himself with society, yet is completely out of place in the madness of Rome.

When searching for Wanda on the streets, he finds himself caught up amidst an unexpected parade, dodging comically through society as it rushes past him a la Buster Keaton. Fellini will return to the visual motif of parades again and again in his films, most notably in Le

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84 Ibid., 102.
85 Foucault frequently underscores the issue of desire as it relates to power: “Where there is desire, the power relation is already present.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 81.
86 Ibid., 47.
Notti di Cabiria and 8 ½, using the aesthetics of procession to situate characters in relation to society, life, and its implied structures. Here, in the first instance of the Fellinian parade, is a character who braces nervously against the onslaught of a post-war culture. His search for Wanda has consumed his every thought, and the intrusion of festive spectacle unnerves him even further. Ivan’s reaction to the parade underscores the extent to which his obsession with marriage’s appearance has stifled him. Though Wanda has not really left him, the appearance of abandonment is what really matters to him. This in turn prevents Ivan from enjoying the society which he vehemently claims to desire a part in.

Ivan’s fall from grace as a result of Wanda’s presumed dalliance eventually leads him to yet another familiar figure in Fellini – the prostitute. Cabiria’s appearance in Il Sceicco Blanco indicates Fellini’s consistent commitment to putting a spotlight not only on sex work, but on the sexuality of the marginalized. Cabiria and her fellow prostitute are outcasts who stumble upon Ivan at the nadir of his despair and ironically attempt to comfort him with their own advice about his seemingly doomed marriage. In imparting wisdom about the state-sanctioned sexuality of marriage, these prostitutes are playing their part in a Foucauldian rendition of sexual knowledge which exists on a bipolar axis between Victorian norms and criminal deviance. By presenting as the extreme opposite of the monogamous Wanda and Ivan, these shabby characters reveal how the sexuality of Italian culture operates with a working knowledge of both marriage and prostitution. Ivan’s conversation with the prostitutes is tragicomic because he entered a marriage specifically to avoid the ostracized world he now finds himself in, giving the viewer the sense.

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87 Bondanella, A History of Italian Cinema, 294.
88 Fellini, Early Screenplays, 112.
89 Bondanella, The Cinema of Federico Fellini, 57.
90 Cabiria and her friend present a classic example of Foucault’s “other Victorians,” who “surreptitiously transferred the pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 4.
that Italian marriage exists in direct opposition to Italian prostitution, with both institutions playing their own role in the enactment of an Italian sexuality.

The police station, the asylum, and the church all play striking roles in reuniting Wanda and Ivan and the conclusion of Il Sceicco Blanco, and Fellini’s presentation of these three institutions invites a Foucauldian framework. First, when Ivan attempts to track down his wife via the surveilling power of the local Roman authorities, he unwillingly finds himself at the center of an interrogation over the more personal aspects of his fledgling marriage.91 Squirming under the questions of an investigator, Ivan presents a classic picture of an individual subjected to the sexual confession – whereby the dominant power (in this case the police) indiscriminately extracts knowledge of sexuality from both the deviant and the conforming.92 Fellini presents the police station as a sinister place of authoritarianism where enormous and meticulous filing visually demonstrates the relation of power to the increasingly claustrophobic Ivan. Furthermore, Ivan’s graceless and fruitless exit from the police station reveals a commonality between Fellini’s understanding of the powers of the surveillance state and the theories that Foucault expressed in Discipline and Punish, wherein the theorist articulated a notion of the prison as a microcosm of larger social control predicated on panoptic authoritarianism and rigid bodily control.93 Additionally, Wanda’s awkward reunion with Ivan at the asylum underscores Fellini’s frequent correlation between sexual indiscretion and mental instability. In La Dolce Vita, 8 ½, Casanova, and other later Fellini features, characters who struggle with monogamy (or whose partners fail them) find themselves in hospitals, mental institutions, and health spas. Sexuality, Fellini implies through use of the police and the asylum, is an issue of both national security and

91 Fellini, Early Screenplays, 153-161.
national healthcare. Lastly, the final shot that reinstates the heterosexual and monogamous institution places the role of the Vatican front and center. This last minute reassertion of religious institutionalism is consistent with both Fellini’s and Foucault’s interpretation of the sexual society which structures its knowledge from within both religious and medical establishments.

Before moving forward to scouring 1953’s *I Vitelloni* for further clues about Fellini’s understanding of Italian sexual culture, it might prove pertinent to readdress and further distance ourselves from what I have previously called Fellini’s inner pull. In his recent study of Fellini’s influences and collaborators, Federico Pacchioni recognizes the “theoretical impasse” that results from applying a “single-authorship” interpretation of Fellini’s films.94 Though it is easy to see his films – particularly those like *Amarcord* and *I Vitelloni* – as reflective of a singular perspective and memory, Fellini was never the sole author of his scripts. Pacchioni’s emphasis on collaborators calls our attention to the role of Fellini’s films as synthesized works of cultural significance. The view of Italian marriage presented in *Il Sceicco Blanco* and the coastal setting of *I Vitelloni* do not belong to Fellini alone, but were created with the contributions of Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano. Pinelli’s soft and synergistic role in shaping the outlook of *I Vitelloni* and *Il Sceicco Blanco* infused the scripts with an orthodox spiritual flavor revolving around themes of redemption and sin which Fellini gradually moved away from in later works.95 Flaiano’s more transgressive methods of capturing Italian society and his mystifying approach to sexuality aligned with Fellini’s desire to humble characters and reveal spiritual and social hypocrisies. Pacchioni suspects that Flaiano’s influence on *La Dolce Vita* shows through in the

95 Ibid., 23-24.
film’s depiction of Sylvia, particularly in the aforementioned fountain sequence. The tension between Pinelli’s traditionalism and Flaiano’s postmodernity is on display in _Il Sceicco Blanco_ and _I Vitelloni_, films where the drama of human sexuality is built on an unstable foundation that mixes institutionalized desires with the immutable allure of transgression.

Such drama is undeniably the stuff of _I Vitelloni_, Fellini’s earliest foray into the episodic world-building that he would perfect in _La Dolce Vita_ and _Amarcord_. The film aims to capture Italian masculinity at its rawest and most vulnerable, examining a quintet of lackadaisical 20-something men whose personal lives in a small coastal town weave between the mundane, the outrageous, and the narcissistic. The lecherous Fausto, the preening intellectual Leopoldo, the mama’s boy Alberto, the performative Riccardo and the passive Moraldo round out a central cast which Fellini deploys as a surrogate for Italian manhood. Hollis Alpert’s biography of Fellini explains the title of the film in Fellini’s own words: the _Vitelloni_ were “the unemployed of the middle class, mother’s pets.” The characters’ lack of development is crucial to Fellini’s interest in them. Each one will, over the course of the film, divulge fatal flaws of character, flaws which the attentive viewer will interpret as the result of their immature and unambitious society. The pent-up sexuality and stunted emotional intelligence of these five friends is the driving energy of the film, ultimately leading to its conclusion when Moraldo finds he can no longer develop as a person without escaping his hometown and leaving his sheltered friends behind.

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96 Pacchioni makes a strong connection between Marcello’s outlandish deification of Sylvia and a passage from _Tempo di Uccidere_, one of Flaiano’s novels. Staring at an exotic African woman, the male protagonist thinks to himself that “She perhaps still knew all the secrets which I had rejected without even examining them like a paltry legacy, in order to content myself with boring trite truths. I looked for knowledge in books and she had it in her eyes, which looked at me from two thousand years away like the light of certain stars which take that time to be picked out by us.” Such a longing for truth in the guise of sex, especially in a colonized and exotified African body, will always be a trap according to both Foucault and Fellini. Ibid., 74.

97 Alpert, _Fellini: A Life_, 81.

98 Moraldo, as many Fellini scholars have pointed out, is a recurrent archetypical character in the director’s films. A surrogate for Fellini’s own experiences as an Adriatic provincial who moves out to Rome, he can be read into Marcello in _La Dolce Vita_ and appeared explicitly in the unproduced Fellini script _Moraldo in the City_. Peter
**I Vitelloni** opens on a scene of state-endorsed sexuality in the form of a local beauty pageant for “Miss Siren 1953.” The beauty pageant scene in postwar Italy was a crucial culture-maker before the ascendance of the Italian “Hollywood on the Tiber” film studios in the later 1950s, where emergent female sex icons (Silvana Mangano, Gina Lollobrigida, Sophia Loren, and Silvana Pampanini, to name a few) could garner national attention before making their way into films.99 Fellini’s depiction of the Miss Siren contest as a commonplace spectacle is thus a nod to its prevalence and significance at the time, just as his later depiction of late-50s early-60s movie stardom with Sylvia in *La Dolce Vita* will again find the Italian cultural mind obsessed with another form of authoritative sexuality.100 Sandra Rubini – Moraldo’s sister – wins the pageant but faints shortly after receiving the award. The arrival of a doctor and the fretting of a panicked Fausto signals that Miss Siren 1953 is pregnant out of wedlock with the child of a known womanizer. Under the scornful eye of his traditionally patriarchal Italian father Francesco, Fausto agrees to marry the mother of his child.101 Fellini’s camera gazes over a rushed wedding ceremony with a bemused skepticism. The viewer finds the middle class attendance sparse, a clear gesture to the emptiness of Fausto’s own commitment. “It was a lovely wedding,” says Fellini’s anonymous narrator, “even if it was prepared a little hastily.”102

The establishing sequences of *I Vitelloni* as they relate to the inveterately fornicating Fausto already invite the viewer into Fellini’s own developing philosophy of sexuality. Firstly,

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101 Fausto would have been, under Italian law of the time, subject to arrest otherwise. Thus the state and society converge upon his sexuality to normalize it.

we see that sexuality is both a performance and a social event when we witness the crowning of Miss Siren. Moreover, the appearance of a medical authority in response to Sandra’s scandalous pregnancy implicates the role of medicine and knowledge in the construction of an Italian sexuality. Sandra’s sexuality must not only be made a part of the cultural hegemony through ritual showcasing, it must also be probed at by the powers of medicine because it is a matter of public health and safety. Lastly, Fausto’s father centers the role of the Italian family in the creation and distribution of sexuality by violently coercing his son into a monogamous commitment. The abuse of Fausto is an instance of family begetting family, the deviant sexuality is conscripted into the conformist structure of marriage and family by the deviant’s own family. Fausto’s relationship with his father, along with Alberto’s controlling relationship with his sister (who pursues a married man) and Moraldo’s ambivalent relationship with Sandra, reveal a Fellinian interpretation of the family which holds much in common with Foucault’s own – the Italian family is shown as a center of power wherein sexuality is constantly scrutinized and controlled.

Following their honeymoon, Fausto and Sandra return to their hometown where Fausto immediately begins to jeopardize his marriage through a series of extramarital pursuits. As previously mentioned, Fausto at one point tactlessly sets his sights upon a woman in a movie

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103 An examination of the script’s language in this moment shows the power of medical authority and sexual paranoia in this moment. “At the doctor’s words, the mother is struck by a sudden suspicion.” Ibid., 15.
104 This fits in neatly with what Foucault calls “The medicalization of the effects of confession” – the role of sexuality being placed into a position where “sex would derive its meaning and necessity from medical interventions.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 67.
105 Fellini, Three Screenplays, 22.
106 This control is best understood along the “husband-wife axis” and the “parents-children axis.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 108.
107 Zygmunt G. Baranski suggests that Fausto’s inability to fulfill his marital commitment ties into a larger theme of the film which all of the men face: “the inability of the individual to come to terms with his social commitments.” Zygmunt G. Baranski, “Antithesis in Fellini’s I Vitelloni,” in Perspectives on Federico Fellini, ed. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: GK Hall & Co., 1993), 73.
theater in the presence of his wife, leaving Sandra alone in the dark to go after this alluring stranger with a flimsy excuse. Though this episode does not result in sex, Fausto’s sudden enchantment in the movie theater mirrors the interaction between Titta and Gradisca in *Amarcord* that Fellini would film a full two decades later, in which the sexually spectacular Gradisca allows Titta to touch her while she stares at Gary Cooper on the screen.\(^{108}\) Fellini’s deliberate attention to the relationship between tactile sensation, sexuality, and the cinema in both of these films recalls Linda Williams’ writing while implicating the role of a social technology in the creation of perverse desires.\(^{109}\) Fausto’s later chauvinistic attempts to seduce Giulia, the wife of his boss, stem from a similar moment of socio-visual sexual incitement at an annual masquerade ball, where Fellini combines his visual obsession with facial features with his penchant for filming festivals and circuses. Once again, a scene of heightened social import does not encourage Fausto to act monogamously but in fact does the opposite.

Inappropriately groping Giulia at the store while surrounded by articles of Catholic devotion leads to Fausto’s firing. He attempts to salvage his humiliation through an absurd scheme with the agreeable Moraldo to steal a statue of an angel from the shop, but this plan is thwarted when a prudent monk refuses to purchase the statue off of them. Fausto dumps the angelic weight of his own stupidity on an unsuspecting peasant, yet another developmentally disabled vagrant in the Fellini cannon who basks in religious purity. Fellini’s brand of Catholicism, and the varying cinematic techniques he employed in his films to convey it, has been adequately explored by previous scholarship.\(^{110}\) His mixture of the secular and the spiritual

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\(^{109}\) Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*, 20.

will become more relevant in tackling films like *La Strada, La Dolce Vita*, and *8 ½*, but already in *Lo Sceicco Blanco* and *I Vitelloni* it plays a crucial role in his social portrayal of sexuality. Catholicism is as essential to the lifeblood of Fellini’s work as the nation of Italy itself, and it would be a mistake to construe its thematic significance as yet another social institution which constructs sexuality.\(^{111}\) This being said, in the case of Fausto, the Catholic fetish shop – and the angel statue which he steals in particular – serve to draw out the perverse oxymoron that is Fausto’s sexual desire. The more that the character is implored to behave as society expects him to, the less capable of conforming he becomes. This becomes most obvious towards the end of the film, when Fausto finally betrays Sandra in full after setting his hungry gaze upon the body of the aforementioned actress dressed in Italy’s colors. At the variety show that leads Fausto to cheat on his wife, his sexual desire becomes conflated with patriotism as a direct result of the structures of power which grip him. Fausto’s act is not the affront to society and God that it appears to be, but rather an intended outcome of a system which accounts for his cheating.\(^{112}\) The end of the film finds Fausto in the position of a masochistic Sisyphus – beaten once more by his father for the very same sexual indiscretion for which he was punished at the start. This time, an enraged Sandra becomes an active part of the coercion, threatening Fausto herself should he bring any further shame.

The detestable Fausto, through his repetitious defilement of Sandra, comes to play his own role for the Italian society. He becomes yet another example of the hapless Italian man who can’t control his penis, another individual transformed into a social example that only serves to

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111 In Fellini’s own Jungian words: “I cannot escape the amniotic sac of Catholicism. How can one manage to say that one is not a Catholic, how can one succeed in freeing oneself from a view of life that has lasted for 2,000 years?” Costantini, *Fellini on Fellini*, 114.

112 This is Foucault’s “uniformity of the apparatus” – that “power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels.” Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 84.
reinforce the cultural commitment to an authorized form of sexual knowledge. Fausto is not the only character whose exploits reveal the structures of sex at play in *I Vitelloni*. As hinted at earlier, the irritating and effete Alberto’s concern for his sister’s honor plays upon the same themes of familial hegemony as Francesco’s stern hand. The hypocritical Alberto attempts to control the actions of his sister, yet he lives at home with his mother and shows no ambition to establish any sort of legitimacy (either sexual or professional) for himself.113 Leopoldo’s attempt to break into the literary world by courting the attention of famous dramatist Sergio Natali turns ugly when the homosexual Natali attempts to seduce him. This turn of events not only leaves Leopoldo disillusioned and depressed, but implies the persistence of perverse sexuality within the upper layers of social institutions – in this case the literary world. Interviews with Fellini and various persons who surrounded him reveal shades of his conflicted and changing opinion on homosexuality. Though he seemed open to gayness by the mid-1960s, sources indicate that during the filming of *I Vitelloni* he held the traditionally homophobic views of the average Italian male of the time.114 It is therefore best to understand Fellini’s portrayal of Sergio’s gayness as a mild evil whose presence in the art scene is intended to confront Leopoldo’s assumptions about literature as an escape from the mundane and apathetic society of his hometown. As in *La Dolce Vita*, the figure of the sexual deviant is not seen as a threat to Italian society in Fellini’s eyes, but is rather understood as a crucial though unspoken component of Italian society.115

113 Budgen suggests that fear of wage-earning ought to be tied into fear of marriage when assessing *I Vitelloni*. Her observation that pleasure and labor are placed in opposition to each other in this film ties in neatly with Foucault. Budgen, *Fellini*, 28.
114 Some sources suggest that Fellini was unsettled by colleague Pier Paolo Pasolini’s open homosexuality, and occasionally felt his own heterosexuality was threatened by a subtle attraction to the man. Pacchioni, *Inspiring Fellini*, 120-121.
115 As Bondanella puts it when discussing an orgy sequence that involves homosexuals and trans individuals: “Perhaps the most original aspect of *La Dolce Vita* is that its creator is absolutely not morally outraged by the world he depicts and finds it incomprehensible that others are.” Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini*, 80.
Moraldo’s journey through *I Vitelloni*, which finds him assisting in the deception of his own sister and passively observing the sad antics of his man-child companions, serves as the first obvious Fellini-stand-in in his filmmaking, a template for the Marcello and Guido to come. His curious recurrent meetings with a young boy serve to elucidate the true nature of his character. He possesses the keen observational abilities and wide-eyed innocence of a younger child, characteristics that have been dulled out in Moraldo’s companions by years of complacency.116 Moraldo’s final flight from home at the conclusion of the film, where the young boy waves him off, is a gripping moment of cinema that demonstrates both Moraldo’s and Fellini’s intense social perceptivity. As Moraldo’s train car departs from the station, the camera mimics its movement but transitions in and out of the bedrooms of all of his friends, all while the sounds of the train dominate the soundtrack. The result is a surreal interpretation of passage that collapses space to eliminate the distinction between public and private. Fellini’s camera makes the inner lives of Moraldo’s acquaintances a rotating spectacle of the sort one would view from the window, reveling in the performed spectacle of the Italian home.117 The train sequence is a strong precedent in Fellini’s signature style of camerawork, a lofty tracking shot, cloudlike in its movement, which blurs the line between social reality and interior fantasy by juxtaposing obviously real shots of town with segments from either the real world or Moraldo’s imagination of the real world (Fellini never reveals). It is worth noting that Fellini’s initial ending for *8 ½* featured a dream sequence in which Guido passed through a train car containing all of the people

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116 In *Queer Bergman*, Daniel Humphrey relays a theory from some of his queer colleagues that the relationship between Moraldo and the young boy is essentially homoerotic. While this is an interesting conjecture which would further emphasize the influence of perverse sexuality in shaping the world of *I Vitelloni*, I am doubtful that Fellini intended this reading. Daniel Humphrey, *Queer Bergman: Sexuality, Gender, and the European Art Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 49.

117 This ending, which blurs all of the characters’ interior lives into one connected sequence, supports Foucault’s notion that the modern family is “a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships.” Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 46.
of his life. Like the parade or the circus, the train presented Fellini with a weighty symbolic vessel through which the filmmaker could interpret the society surrounding his characters.

The contrast between *Il Sceicco Blanco* and *I Vitelloni* serves to elaborate the scope of Fellini’s abilities as a filmmaker. *Il Sceicco* is an urban movie with a conventionally structured plot, while *I Vitelloni* represents Fellini at his looser and more provincial. The binaries between rural vs. urban, world-building vs. character-driven, and loose structure vs. tight storytelling are almost always at play in Fellini’s more successful works. In this way, we can see *Il Sceicco* as a predecessor to the fast paced cityscapes of *Le Notti Di Cabiria*, *La Dolce Vita*, and *La Città Delle Donne*, while *I Vitelloni* foreshadows the disjointed scenes of pastoral life in *Amarcord*, *8 ½*, and *La Strada*. Differences aside, the two early films’ commonalities invite the student of cinesexuality to wonder at Fellini’s already trenchant depiction of social structures in relation to sex. *Il Sceicco Blanco* and *I Vitelloni* are subtly deconstructing the artifices of desire as they are enacted by the family, the state, and the church. Their worlds are infused with a Catholic brand of patriarchal sexual knowledge which relentlessly forces their characters towards capitulation in the form of marriage. At times these films even make the performativity of Italian sexuality the central premise of their plots – as with Ivan’s desperate search for Wanda or Sandra’s stern threats to Fausto.

With his first two films as a lone director, Fellini exhibited an energetic Italian Eros that was created by the friction between colliding social structures. The softly pornographic romance of the *fotoromanzi* and the stern Catholic patriarchy wrestle for control over Wanda’s desires, while the libidinous temptations of public spaces are at odds with a vengeful father figure and an

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innocent wife in a contest for Fausto’s sexuality. The result is a carefully sculpted Italian sexuality born out of this artificial struggle between forces which appear in conflict but which in fact collaborate to dominate the individual. Whether intended or not, *Il Sciecco Blanco* and *I Vitelloni* submit a pleasure-politic to the viewer which challenges dominant Italian norms by implying that deviance and non-monogamous desire are performed acts drawn out from individuals by a powerful fabric of social structures which holds all of sexuality within its grip. ¹²⁰ Though Fellini spoke often of the irrepressibility of the sexual urge, as well as of the difference in libido between females and males, his films betray this notion by centering institutional didacticism in the social channeling of sexual energies. ¹²¹ The characters to which the viewer gains interior access in Fellini’s initial forays are guided by desires over which they have little to no control. Whether they pledge allegiance to monogamy and the state or seek out forbidden pleasures, their bodies and persons are controlled – at a fundamental level – by a complex combination of social forces. As we shall see with his other films, this rigorous possession of selfhood by a conspiracy of institutions devoted to controlling and knowing sex will remain a central conceit of Fellini’s filmmaking.

“Mother, sister, lover, friend, angel, devil, earth, home” – Eros, Civilization, and the Italian Male in La Dolce Vita and Casanova

The initial products of Fellini’s fledgling career in film obliquely disclose the director’s passion for situating sexual desires within larger societal contexts, but it is in his later films that we will witness the full extent of this thought process. As he matured artistically, Federico Fellini’s eternal struggle with Italian sexuality blossomed into a radical and unique method of cinematic thinking which capitalized on a dualistic process of world building contrasted with character development.122 Most of Fellini’s films after Le Notti Di Cabiria combined scenes of explicit inner fantasy with a cold and uncomfortable exterior world to give voice to the abstract anxieties of characters who are caught in between these two opposing forces. As mentioned previously, this transition from the real to the imagined has been highlighted by various scholars as a means of construing various narratives of Fellini’s life/career/psychology as an escape from Neorealism, but this reading does little to help us understand the consistent sexual politics of his work.123 To that end, it is best to look at two extreme instances of Fellini’s filmmaking that invested heavily in social commentary and world building to make the case for a Fellini whose message on sex extends out beyond his own inner pull. In these two films, we shall see a cinematic view of sex which combines the Lacanian notion of the sublimated woman with a larger Foucauldian analysis of the sexual civilization.

At a surface level, La Dolce Vita and Fellini’s Casanova are almost irreconcilably different Fellini projects. In look, tone, and cultural status, these two movies occupy opposing ends on the Fellini spectrum. La Dolce Vita is an unreal feat of cinematic mastery, a towering aesthetic achievement which deserves to hold the distinction of being Fellini’s most well-known

122 Stubbs, Federico Fellini as Auteur, 27.
123 Bondanella, A History of Italian Cinema, 229.
and most-beloved movie. Its 1960 release was both a landmark moment for Italian culture and a significant event in the history of global cinema, pushing the boundaries of sexual content in cinema by placing a sex-crazed Italian nightlife at odds with a conflicted Catholic consciousness in the signature Fellini fashion.\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Fellini’s Casanova} is an absolute mess of a film. Ugly, despondent and flatulent in its depiction of 18\textsuperscript{th} century Europe, the film was released in 1976 to critical panning and audience disinterest. The fundamental dissimilarity between these two films is best embodied by the writing – or lack thereof – done on them. Edward Murray’s \textit{Fellini: The Artist} embodies the typical critical approach to both films. \textit{La Dolce Vita} is a timeless portrayal of the quest of meaning, “an absorbing panorama, infused with love and disgust, with pity and humor, with reverence and mockery,” according to Murray.\textsuperscript{125} The chapter on \textit{La Dolce Vita} is at the very center of his book, claiming the longest page count, while a still from the film’s Trevi fountain sequence graces the cover. On the subject of \textit{Fellini’s Casanova}, which does not earn its own chapter, Murray is concise in his summation: “Is \textit{Fellini’s Casanova} a good film? The answer to that question, unfortunately, is no.”\textsuperscript{126,127}

Yet at their erotic center these two films, separated by both reputations and decades, contain a shared need to probe at the problematic essence of the Italian male sexuality. Fellini created Marcello Rubini in his own image, consciously modeling him as a weary and matured version of the Moraldo character who appeared in \textit{I Vitelloni} and several unproduced scripts.\textsuperscript{128} He actively loathed Casanova, and his portrayal of this man’s sexual odyssey takes a markedly

\textsuperscript{124} As Daniela Treveri Gennari points out, the Catholic community’s opinion of \textit{La Dolce Vita} was divided. Some Catholics found a spiritual voice in the film and ended up siding with the Italian communists of the day. Daniela Treveri Gennari, \textit{Post-War Italian Cinema: American Intervention, Vatican Interests} (New York: Routledge, 2009), 115-116.

\textsuperscript{125} Murray, \textit{Fellini: The Artist}, 133.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 232.

\textsuperscript{127} The title of Baxter’s chapter on \textit{Casanova} is even more to the point: “‘The Worst film I ever made’: \textit{il Casanova di Federico Fellini}.” Baxter, \textit{Fellini}, 291-314.

\textsuperscript{128} Bondanella, \textit{The Films of Federico Fellini}, 122.
contemptuous attitude at odds with the semi-sympathetic acceptance of Marcello’s actions in *La Dolce Vita*. Nonetheless these are two men whose sexual desires appear to the audience as ontologically orchestrated by the times which they inhabit. Rome’s jarring modernity – sometimes splendid and festive, sometimes harsh and amoral – is one of the central themes of *La Dolce Vita*. The film was at one point to be melodramatically titled “Babylon 2000 years after Christ,” though fortunately this never happened. Its rich contrast between old and new, established immediately by the famous opening sequence of a helicopter carrying a statue of Jesus over the aqueducts of ancient Rome, is meant to elicit a discomforted moral response in the modern viewer. The audience of *La Dolce Vita* asks itself: “What is this modern world that we have all accepted? Is it better or worse than the ancient civilizations from which we emerged? What if it is no different at all?” That *La Dolce Vita* subtly adopts the storytelling structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to episodically explore orgiastic life in the modern city further problematizes the notion that 20th century society has progressed out of the past, implying a cyclical social return to ancient morals without the possibility of escape.

The Europe of the 1700s, where Casanova finds himself, comes off less ambiguously in Fellini’s eyes than did modern Rome. It is a cesspool, a hellish world of drab aristocratic interiors and hazy colorless landscapes. In *Fellini’s Casanova* the director found himself engaged in total warfare against the romantic era and against the concept of romance itself, unpacking his artist’s pallet with the intent to besmirch the traditional Latin lover and reduce him

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129 Fellini, in interview, is constantly drawn to the “emptiness” of the character of Casanova. Joseph Markulin remarks that “For Fellini, for the other characters in the film, and for the audience, Casanova is of interest only as sexual performer.” Joseph Markulin, “Plot and Character in Fellini’s *Casanova*: Beyond *Satyricon*,” in *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: GK Hall & Co., 1993), 143.


to a pitiful sex machine manufactured by and for the powers that be.\textsuperscript{133} Whereas the well-known production methods of \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s Rome had been a fabulous combination of elaborate soundstages in Cinecittá and on-location work, \textit{Fellini’s Casanova} is loudly artificial in its totality, with fake-looking sets and a plastic ocean.\textsuperscript{134} The effect is repulsive both visually and thematically: a soulless protagonist in a dank and dismal world. The mystic spirit of \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s world is notably absent here, and in its place is a nihilistic interpretation of the past which refuses to kowtow to naïve nostalgia for a long-lost era of passion. The worlds of both Marcello and Casanova are presented to us by Fellini as profound and bleak, full of orgies and spectacles of incomprehensible scale. More so than in his earlier filmmaking, the director advances a strategy of cinematic world-building which engulfs and overpowers the individual will of the male character. Both men will fail, in the end, to overcome the gulf between true happiness and the masculinity prescribed for them. By filming the internal struggles for meaning of the protagonists in \textit{La dolce Vita} and \textit{Fellini’s Casanova}, Fellini deftly fingers out the forces that rigidly confine the erotic masculine figure in an unfathomable sexual civilization.

There is no succinct way to analytically tackle a subject as massive as Fellini’s \textit{La Dolce Vita}, a film in competition with \textit{8 ½} for being Fellini’s true magnum opus. Approaching the film from the perspective of sexuality does little to reduce the task at hand, as sex permeates the entire body of the film itself. Both within the world of the film and in the context of the real world that the film was released into, the friction of sex – its unrepentant disclosure rubbing up against the cultural need to conceal it beneath taboo – characterizes \textit{La Dolce Vita}. Its release in Italy is in and of itself a practical study in Foucauldian sexuality, as the film’s sexual content made it both

\textsuperscript{133} Costantini, \textit{Fellini on Fellini}, 90.  
\textsuperscript{134} Burke calls \textit{Casanova} “Fellini’s seeming leap into postmodern realms of simulation and signification.” Burke, \textit{Fellini’s Films}, 236.
a scintillating unavoidable cultural product and a target of Catholic denouncement.\textsuperscript{135} The film captures a sexual world not solely of Fellini’s imagination, but one which was very real to the vast majority of Italians who observed their own culture. As the film was being shot at the close of the 1950s, Italy began to undergo a long-awaited process of reindustrialization later called “the economic miracle.”\textsuperscript{137} This sudden growth in capital coincided with a lapse in American film markets as well as a loosening of the 1949 Andreotti censorship law in Italy, encouraging international film studios to turn Rome – and Fellini’s Cinecittá studios in particular – into “Hollywood on the Tiber.”\textsuperscript{138} \textit{La Dolce Vita} is rife with allusion to the lurid capitalist popular culture of its day, from the highly public Roman extramarital affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton during the production of \textit{Cleopatra} to the infamous 1953 death of Wilma Montesi, a 21-year-old Italian murder victim whose death initiated a scandalous investigation into the drug-fueled world of high class Roman sex parties.\textsuperscript{140} Additionally, Fellini’s masterpiece coincided with two other monumental and controversial Italian films: Antonioni’s \textit{L’Avventura} and Visconti’s \textit{Rooco e i suoi Fratelli}.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{135} Take in the language of one review from the time: “Three-hour, three-million gross, triple-goddessed, Church-banned, mythpacked, and Totalscoped, \textit{La Dolce Vita} amazes indeed the very faculty of eyes and ears.” The film’s sexual iconography and its status as a controversial film are, to the reviewer, two elements of the same packaging. Norman N. Holland, “the Follies Fellini,” \textit{The Hudson Review} 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1961): 425-431.

\textsuperscript{136} For an intimate account of the political/moral crisis which \textit{La Dolce Vita} initiated in Italy amongst the San Fedele Jesuits, Catholic Action board, and Christian Democrats, see Kezich, \textit{Federico Fellini: His Life and Work}, 207-220.

\textsuperscript{137} Carolan, \textit{The Transatlantic Gaze}, 12.

\textsuperscript{138} Liehm, \textit{Passion and Defiance}, 160, 182-183.

\textsuperscript{139} It is important to note, as Daniela Treveri Gennari does, that “Hollywood on the Tiber” was certainly not the first instance of Americanization sweeping Italian culture via cinema. Though perhaps presenting a heightened moment of cross-cultural exchange, America’s deep cultural influence over Italian film audiences extends back to 1943 with the American occupation/liberation of Sicily. Treveri Gennari, \textit{Post-War Italian Cinema}, 30-31.

\textsuperscript{140} For a pre-\textit{La Dolce Vita} contemporary account of the cultural significance of the Montesi affair, see: Melton S. Davis, \textit{All Rome Trembled} (New York: Putnam, 1957).

\textsuperscript{141} Pierre Lephrohon describes the cultural significance of these three films in terms of questions. “What will our feelings be? Asks Antonioni. What will our morals be? Asks Fellini. And Visconti poses the question: What will our society be?” This interpretation is reductionist, as \textit{La Dolce Vita} asks all three of these questions. Lephrohon, \textit{The Italian Cinema}, 170.
The ecstasy and agony of Marcello’s indulgent orgy at the end of the film eventually leads the protagonist to wander wearily down to the beach, the site where Montesi’s body had been discovered back in 1953. Such a detail would have escaped few of Fellini’s contemporaries, and the film succeeded both as a personal narrative of a spiritual quest for fulfillment and as a sweeping cinematic encounter with modern Rome. Winding through the homes of intellectuals and prostitutes, churches and streets, movie stars and tabloid journalists, *La Dolce Vita* became emblematic of the moment. Nino Rota’s score became a throbbing Americano-infused anthem to the beautiful triumph and spiritual tragedy of Rome’s emptyheaded nightlife and Sylvia’s full figure and blonde curls became the ideal object-desire of a metropolitan male sexuality. The film’s own title – *La Dolce Vita* – became a universal descriptor for the lives of luxury performed by Rome’s sex-crazed elite, a sardonic jab at the emptiness of modern pleasure akin to the “Gilded Age” which Mark Twain described in American society at the close of the 19th century.

Open upon Marcello, a dissatisfied pulp journalist chasing tail and glamour in equal measure across Rome’s sensuous streets. We first see him in a helicopter, following the story of the airlifted Jesus, but his attention is diverted as he spies bikini-clad women on a nearby rooftop and hovers over them to flirt. He cannot hear them over the loud motor that keeps him aloft – a clever metaphor for both the incommunicative masculine sexuality he embodies and the machinery of culture that sustains it. The choice Fellini presents to Marcello at the outset is clear: Jesus or vagina, meaning or sex. Well-conditioned by his culture, Marcello fails to make the

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142 For a retrospective that incorporates the Montesi scandal into a larger cultural analysis that includes Fellini, see: Karen Pinkus, *The Montesi Scandal: The Death of Wilma Montesi and the Birth of the Paparazzi in Fellini’s Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
143 Sylvia’s brand of cinematic sexuality was drawing direct parodies in Italian films within three years of *La Dolce Vita*’s release. Maggie Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 91.
distinction. As *La Dolce Vita* plays out its gigantic three hours, he will find himself again and again staring at women that he cannot speak to or touch. These will be the vessels that he infuses with meaning.¹⁴⁴

A dramatic cut to a mysterious masked face and a primal scream shifts the viewer’s attention to an exotic woman performing an erotic dance accompanied by muscled men with scimitars in one of Rome’s ubiquitous nightclubs. In a single take, the camera pans from this display to an unenthused Marcello who is clearly anesthetized to the performative and exoticized sexuality of his times. In this shot, Fellini establishes the world of the Via Veneto nightclub scene to which he will return again and again throughout the film: an overbearing arena of libido which invites Rome’s finest to bask in their own sexual self-indulgence.¹⁴⁵ The difference between the masked face of the woman and the unmasked face of Marcello tells the viewer everything they need to know about the issue of gender in this film. Women’s bodies and faces are mysterious loci of male attention, while men’s faces effect the power of the gaze. Such a notion is clearly not unique to Fellini’s cinema, as Laura Mulvey has made certain to prove, but the directorial choice to shoot this sequence in a nightclub emphasizes a form of double-consciousness that draws the viewer’s attention to the roles being played between the performer and the performed-for.¹⁴⁶ Marcello’s job is journalism, and it is his duty – in theory – to synthesize the wild world of Rome within himself and produce a meaningful narrative of insight for his readers. That he is fundamentally incapable of doing this not only drives his character to seek fulfillment over the course of the film, but also suggests that no one is really capable of

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¹⁴⁵ Fellini had previously filmed nightclub scenes in parts of his previous film, *Le Notti Di Cabiria*, including one scene which similarly eroticized a female African dancer surrounded by bored Italian men.
¹⁴⁶ Jacqueline Reich makes the intriguing argument that Fellini’s attention to Italian male fashion and Roman geography plays an important role in distinguishing Marcello as a hollow and scopophilic “Inetto” (The Italian version of the schlemiel/antihero archetype): “he is the passive and ironic spectator of the modern world, self-consciously aware that his search for self-identity will ultimately fail.” Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover*, 41.
making sense of the modern world. Marcello ignores the performance and seeks out the alluring and bruised heiress Maddalena, taking her to a random prostitute’s house to sleep with her in the only setting that can truly arouse both of them.  

When Marcello arrives back at his apartment, his hysterical fiancé Emma has attempted suicide via overdose out of the fear of abandonment and in an attempt to manipulate him. Marcello rushes Emma to one of the strangest-looking hospital sets in the history movies, a bright modernist garage which he shoves his sleek little Italian car into. Medicine is once again implicated in the sexual roles of Fellini characters: it is the method by which Emma attempts to calm her sexual anxiety and it is the solution which Marcello seeks to the problems he has created for himself in his relationships with women. That nuns and priests operate the sleek institute further reinforces the binary between old and new in La Dolce Vita while also inserting yet another form of social institution directly into the modern sexual relationship. Emma’s comatose body lies in the infirmary under the protection and gaze of experts – both religious and medical. Emma’s rare appearances later in the film speak to her peripheral role in Marcello’s life, which is primarily dominated by childish obsessions with other women. When he takes her with him on assignment to a reported sighting of the Madonna, she prays in desperation to the Virgin Mary to be the sole object of Marcello’s affection. Driving together on the outskirts of Rome towards the close of the film, Marcello tells her that her maternal and controlling love smothers his masculine passions. He forcefully ejects her from the car. Left

147 Fellini is, once more, crossing back and forth over the boundaries which separate “Victorians” from “Other Victorians.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 4.
148 The automobile was central to Fellini’s understanding of masculinity, both within his films and in his actual life. Alpert, Fellini: A Life, 100, 156, 246-247.
149 See Foucault’s notion of “a completely new technology of sex.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 116-119.
alone in the dark to await his return, Emma picks flowers.¹⁵⁰ She is, like Marcello, merely a familiar role being played by a sexual society that grips and controls her nervous body. He is the Latin lover. She is the fretful wife. It is hard not to connect La Dolce Vita’s Marcello and Emma to the real Federico and Giulietta – men and women struggling with a monogamy that seems impossible to sustain in a mass culture which lures men away from their wives at every possible turn.¹⁵¹

Another abrupt change in scenery brings the voluptuous movie star Sylvia bursting into Marcello’s world. Scores of men point their cameras towards her body and the audience instantaneously understands Sylvia’s role as an object of mass sexual attention a la Marilyn Monroe. After landing in an extended airplane arrival sequence, Sylvia insipidly answers empty questions at a reporters’ function while Marcello calms an exasperating and sexually demanding Emma on the phone while gazing at the blonde sex-idol.¹⁵² Later he collides with Sylvia when she huffily departs from her drunken and abusive husband Robert at a club. Her extended dancing sequence at this club far surpasses the fountain scene in running time, and it is an equally-rewarding insight into La Dolce Vita’s sense of sexuality. The club itself is a total fiction crafted out of the real-life Baths of Caracalla, a Fellini-sized project of set-design in which Sylvia’s naturally radiant sensuousness intermingles erotically with the frantic beat of American

¹⁵⁰ In Fellini’s previous film, Le Notti Di Cabiria, the magician tells Cabiria that “picking flowers indicates a gentle soul.” The image of a woman picking flowers (though pantomimed in Cabiria’s case) appears to be a minor visual motif which Fellini connects to feminine victimhood and purity. Burke, Fellini’s Films, 90-93. ¹⁵¹ Fellini’s fame combined with his loudly sexual personality to make him a famously faithless partner to Masina. It is well known that the affairs of Marcello Rubini and Guido Anselmi mirror Fellini’s own. Nonetheless the two remained married for 50 years, until his death. Chandler, I, Fellini, 95. ¹⁵² Bondanella sums up Sylvia’s oxymoronic role in the film thusly: “she serves both a highly symbolic function in the film, bearing the weight of a number of key ideas that inform the entire work, and she is also a shallow figure, a bubble-head actress whose interviews underscore her ignorance and her complete naiveté.” Bondanella, The Films of Federico Fellini, 83.
Rock and Roll and the mystic spirituality of ancient Rome. The Caracalla sequence is a direct prelude to the even more effective Trevi sequence, wherein Fellini unapologetically basks his own film in Sylvia’s hypnotic, even animalistic, appeal. Sylvia’s violent exit from the film at Robert’s hands directly after the end of the Trevi Fountain sequence has clear implications for Marcello – Sylvia, like the later Paola, is meant to function as a temptation only. Her desire to be her own person with her own motivations can only lead to debasing punishment at the masculine hands of an insecure man.

One could continue to describe La Dolce Vita beat for beat until its conclusion and encounter an unending bounty of material for analysis. However, to understand Fellini’s particular brand of sexuality within this film, nearly all of the parts have already been assembled in its opening minutes. In applying a Lacanian interpretation of psychosexuality to European cinema, Fabio Vighi singles out Marcello’s behavior in La Dolce Vita as a suitable example of Lacanian sublimation, which elevates the status of an object of desire (read: woman) into a sublime object of pure fantasy. The three female figures established in the first 20 minutes of the movie fracture the process of sublimation into key identifiable components, Vighi argues.

… the leading character is faced by three potential and frustratingly unsatisfactory relationships with (at least) three different women… These are Maddalena (Anouk Aimee), a rich and dissolute heiress dissatisfied with life, Emma (Yvonne Furneaux), Marcello’s possessive fiancée, and of course Sylvia (Anita Eckberg), the sensual Swedish-American movie star. At different points in the film the three women present for

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153 Set designer Piero Gherardi deserves immense credit for his “special genius for knowing what was in Fellini’s mind.” Alpert, Fellini: A Life, 131-132, 135-136.
154 Lex Barker, the actor who played Robert, was best known for playing Tarzan in the 1950s. Paparazzo and his companions make reference to Robert “looking like Tarzan” when they attempt to photograph his brawl with Marcello, blurring the line between La Dolce Vita’s world and our own while implicating the role of a violent male sexuality within the Hollywood mythology. Bondanella, The Films of Federico Fellini, 87-89.
Marcello – Fellini’s alter-ego – the prospect of the relationship. The first thing to do apropos these women is to detect in each of them a specifically masculine characterization of femininity (often labeled as typically Italian or, by extension, Latin): Maddalena is woman *qua* prostitute; Emma embodies the opposite cliché of the faithful and maternal wife; Sylvia, finally, stands for a modern version of the Lady of courtly love [a Lacanian concept], the radically elusive object of desire.156

Lacan’s and Foucault’s frameworks of analysis are almost mutually exclusive ways of looking at sexuality, as Foucault’s interpretation bases itself off of rejecting a notion of a repressive hypothesis while Lacan centers his theories around a repression-based narrative to explain the relationship between the real and the imaginary.157 Nonetheless, *La Dolce Vita*’s unique vision of sex proves that the notion of Lacanian sublimation can be made to work in tandem with a Foucauldian grand view of civilization. Keeping Vighi’s correct analysis of the female characters in mind, the viewer can see that *La Dolce Vita* presents its viewer with a densely-layered world carefully assembled by technologies of power which range from religion to medicine to pop culture while simultaneously demonstrating how women in this world are systematically erased and replaced by fantasy versions of themselves.158

A few more elements and scenes will lay bare all of the threads which *La Dolce Vita* weaves into a social fabric. Despite (or perhaps because of) the many iconic female figures in this film, Fellini’s masterpiece is at its heart a meditation on the Italian male. To this end, Marcello’s relationships with his father and with the intellectual Steiner exemplify different paths by which Italian men attain selfhood. The desire to read Fellini’s own personal experiences into these parts of the film is justified – the director’s father, Urbano, died shortly before the making of the film and Fellini’s relationship with Italy’s intellectual left is undeniably influential

158 Marga Cottino-Jones calls the different women in this movie “equally traditional images of patriarchal womanhood.” Cottino-Jones, *Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema*. 
on the Steiner scenes – but these characters also have an intrinsic value that makes them relevant at a larger scale. Marcello’s father, unnamed and short of words, is another take on the Italian patriarch. This time he is not fiery and spiteful like Francesco from *I Vitelloni*, but castrated and pitiful, adrift in the metropolitan sea of nightclubs and sex to which his son has abandoned him. Marcello cannot communicate masculinity without sex, which is why he gifts his father a night with the dancer Fanny. Marcello’s childlike admiration for Steiner is likewise a misplaced attempt to find a real father figure and real meaning. Steiner’s cold world of academic accomplishment stokes Marcello’s jealousy, as Marcello finds his own world of tawdry pulp journalism infantile and emasculating by comparison. Yet Steiner’s life and mind are obviously hollow and dark, as he ultimately kills his children and himself, becoming yet another subject of popular morbid fascination for Marcello’s profession to digest. Steiner’s pretentious party, where he airs anxieties about nuclear warfare and forces his guests to listen to pre-recorded nature sounds, serve as a loquacious counterpoint to the stern and silent masculinity presented in the form of Marcello’s father. Both men demonstrate aloof and empty versions of Italian manhood, and though Marcello feels an inherent need to connect with them he fails both times.

This failure on Marcello’s part to connect – sexually, intellectually, and spiritually – is the central theme of *La Dolce Vita*. The viewer comes to understand that Marcello and Italian

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159 Baxter, *Fellini*, 128.
160 Kezich, suggests that Alain Cuny’s suicidal Steiner was inspired by Fellini’s friend, the tragic intellectual Luigi A. Garrone whose death was prolonged and lonely. Pacchioni offers up Cesare Pavese, a friend of Tullio Pinelli who took his own life, as another plausible influence on the character. Either way, the character clearly invokes a specific pretentious scene with which many chic Romans were intimately familiar. Pacchioni, *Inspiring Fellini*, 34.
161 Fellini’s own words: “In *La Dolce Vita*, Marcello overlooks his father’s dalliance with the chorus girl, even encourages it, while the father perfunctorily rebukes the son on the hazards of living with a woman not his wife. In Italy, the straightjacket of hypocrisy is loosely worn.” Chandler, *I, Fellini*, 125.
162 In an intriguing piece of criticism, Robert Richardson argues that this thematic emptiness connects *La Dolce Vita* to T.S. Elliot’s “The Waste Land.” Though Richardson’s purpose diverges from that of this thesis, many of the
culture are jointly responsible for this failure. Rome’s dizzying and isolating milieu makes it impossible for a meaningful politics of erotic and romantic attachment and Marcello too willingly accepts the template of life that Rome has given him. Three “spectacle sequences” – as I shall refer to them – are the essential ingredients which Fellini makes use of to convey to the reader a sense of cultural accountability. They also tie the film directly to his later work with Casanova. The “Miracle” sequence, when Marcello and his photographer Paparazzo cover a story involving two children who claimed to see the Madonna, involves mass media in the construction of an institutional spectacle. Fellini’s aforementioned penchant for scaffold imagery here takes the form of a massive media encampment which surrounds the supposed site of the miracle, a fortress of wiry tubing which transforms an intimate spiritual moment into a spotlighted television event.\footnote{Costello recognizes the cynicism of this scene as another instance where Fellini rebukes the traditional routes through which Italian men seek meaning: “if not in woman, where else would an Italian – or anybody – look for meaning? Perhaps in religion?” Costello, Fellini’s Road, 49.} When rain pours down on the event, the crowd drawn to the spot of the sighting turns on itself, trampling to death a sickly child who had been brought for healing. Fellini’s intentions here are clear: the technology and spectacle of modern Italian civilization blocks one’s path to true spirituality. That Emma, as was previously cited, prays at this event for the monogamous commitment of her fiancée reinforces the notion that Italians seek the support of false constructs to understand their own sexual identities and relationships.\footnote{For a succinct description of Emma’s relation to Marcello, see: Cottino-Jones, Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema, 116.} Fellini staged a remarkably similar scene for the opening of his Casanova, where a different cultural spectacle invited the gazes of masked observers.

sexual content at the time and drew the contempt of the Catholic Church. The orgy itself is a celebration of the socialite Nadia’s divorce, and her striptease is at once a climax of the pleasure-seeking lifestyle which Fellini delivers to his viewers and a libidinous testament to the impossibility of marriage in the modern world. An aged and lost Marcello, who has either abandoned Emma at this point or continues to provoke her histrionics with his sexual escapades, is the ringleader of the orgy, throwing pillow feathers about the room and riding a woman like a steer. He has crossed over from being a professional observer of Italy’s mad happenings to a vital instigator in its inglorious affairs. In the fallout of this cataclysmic celebration of erethrism, Marcello wanders down to the beach where he reencounters Paola – the Umbrian angel whose innocent face speaks to Marcello’s need for pure meaning. Clad in a white suit, Marcello cannot hear Paola’s words over the sound of crashing waves while nearby fisherman drag a monstrous dead fish – a symbol of Christianity – from the sea.

Marguerite R. Waller’s postmodern interpretation of Marcello’s final encounter with Paola highlights the themes of non-communication and lack of spiritual fulfillment which characterize La Dolce Vita while tying elements of the orgy spectacle sequence to the third spectacle sequence – the party at the Bassano di Sutri palace which precedes the final orgy. Waller suggests that Marcello’s (and the audience’s) inability to hear Paola’s words is Fellini’s way of separating the auditory from the visual for the purpose of disembodying the characters of the film. At the previous party which we see Marcello attend, the opposite problem occurs for him. In one of the palace’s echo chambers, Marcello finds that he can hear Maddalena’s voice.

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165 In looking at the most controversial aspects of this film, it is useful to recall Tullio Kezich’s understanding of Fellini: “Federico might condemn every present moment, but that doesn’t mean he hates or fears it. He simply depicts life as a source of nourishment and new experience.” Kezich, Federico Fellini: His Life and Work, 206.

166 Fellini’s obsessive quest to find the perfect face for Paola shows just how important the face was to his cinema. He spent months, and looked at 5,000 different teenagers, before he found Valeria Ciangottini at the last minute. Edward Murray, Fellini: The Artist, 114.

167 Waller, “Whose Dolce Vita Is This, Anyway?,” 111.
without seeing her. In one of Fellini’s most erotically charged and discomforting cinematic moments, Marcello hears Maddalena ask him to marry her while the audience sees that she is embracing and kissing a different man in another room. Fellini makes a spectacle out of lack of sight. Marcello responds to her by admitting his love for her, but she is already lost and we never see her again in the film. Maddalena’s flippant treatment of marriage and Marcello’s uncharacteristically cloying moment of earnestness combine in a dismembered cinematic experience of sexuality that pits sensations against each other.\(^{168}\)

Waller’s dissection of this scene alongside her analysis of Marcello’s final meeting with Paola unravels the knotty strands of \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s sexual world. Marcello is both a victim of and a participant in a highly constructed society where sex is regulated through interplaying technologies of power.\(^{169}\) His role as journalist allows him to document the sex lives of the Via Veneto set which Italians long to know of, and his photographer companions use their technology of choice to capture and communicate a vivid image of perfect sex – Sylvia.\(^{170}\) Yet Marcello’s inability to remove himself from the trivial sexualities which he covers in his stories means that his privilege as a constructor of social sexuality does not place his identity outside of its reach. He is just as susceptible to the images and notions of sex as any common Italian, and

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 110. 
\(^{169}\) Waller’s language on the subject of Marcello and Steiner’s social power is too perfect not to include: “Marcello and his older existentialist friend, Steiner, fail to recognize their own violence as they reduce the world, including its women and children, to acontextual, two-dimensional objects. Consequently, it goes without saying, they also fail to make the connection between that violence and their increasingly virulent social and domestic claustrophobia. To do so they would have to relinquish their privileged (and well-paying) positions as knowers of truth and arbiters of culture.” Ibid., 113. 
\(^{170}\) Bondanella actually offers a compelling migratory explanation for why Sylvia’s blondness was so appealing to Italian men in particular: “Fellini certainly did not invent the fact that Italian men have long been attracted to blondes, since this has been the case as long as Italy has been a favorite spot for northern visitors. Certainly one of the most vivid memories Fellini retained from his childhood in Rimini, where the Italian men would engage in contests during the tourist season to see who could seduce the most foreigners, was the mysterious Nordic beauties who inhabited the grand hotel there.” This passage connects \textit{Amarcord}’s sexual reminiscences, \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s buxom blondes, and \textit{Casanova}’s sexual contests in a way which clearly illustrates notions of a sexually instructing culture. Bondanella, \textit{The Films of Federico Fellini}, 81.
his battle with the words and images of women in the end defeats him. Like Fellini’s words and images, Marcello’s spirit is disassembled by a powerful Italian culture, and when we finally see him middle-aged and delirious at the end of the film we know that he is lost to the Via Veneto dream which he wrote for the newspapers. *La Dolce Vita* is a tragic comedy, an “art film spectacular” as Bondanella put it, where the hero is consumed by that which he labored to capture with his writing – sex and women.\(^{171}\)

*Fellini’s Casanova* is an epic tragedy of a similar caliber, and the fact that more Fellini scholars have not endeavored to connect the films is a mystery. Not only do both films revolve around a relatively plotless form of milieu-building to construct a macroscopic narrative, both protagonists share an incredible amount in common. It would be a stretch to argue that Casanova is an 18\(^{th}\) century Marcello, since *La Dolce Vita* reserves a pitying form of reverence for its protagonist which Casanova never receives from Fellini. Nonetheless, both men are classic forms of the Latin lover archetype. In fact, Fellini once remarked with disdain that he considered Casanova to be “really an Italian, the Italian.”\(^{172}\) They are mindless sex machines, driven to obsess over the intricacies of sexuality and lost to the larger spiritual pleasures of life which Fellini holds out of their reach. Though their movement through society appears uninhibited, and they seem to sleep with whom they please, both Marcello’s and Casanova’s libidos are shown to be largely controlled by cultural powers outside of their control – the gossipy world of tabloids and movie stars for Marcello, and the indulgent world of aristocracy for Casanova.\(^{173}\) Like Fellini’s portrayal of Marcello, Casanova suddenly ages right at the end of his film to reveal the

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\(^{171}\) Ibid., 65.


\(^{173}\) Fellini explicitly referred to Casanova as “a mechanical man” and “a puppet,” further underscoring his hollow and malleable masculinity. Chandler, *I, Fellini*, 190.
depths to which he ultimately sinks. It could even be said that Marcello and Casanova hold the same *occupation*. While Giacomo Casanova is not a journalist per se, he makes a living by writing accounts of his sexual dalliances intermingled with amusing portrayals of European high society.\(^{174}\)

But Marcello Mastroianni’s Marcello is handsome and sympathetic, while Donald Sutherland’s Casanova is a repulsive sexual freak, decked out in exaggerated makeup and prosthetics which render his skin pale and his face cartoonish.\(^{175}\) This difference may sound superficial, but it undergirds a meaningful distinction between the two movies. Fellini agreed to film an adaptation of the memoirs of Giacomo Casanova before reading them, and after processing Casanova’s writing decided that he hated the man and desired to portray him as an emotionless semi-sociopath.\(^{176}\) The result is a film almost as unlikable as its protagonist that nonetheless offers Fellini’s most fascinating and outwardly Foucauldian depiction of sexuality. It may be pure coincidence that *Fellini’s Casanova* came out in 1976, the same year as the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. It may be further coincidence that both works closely examine the increasingly perverse sexuality of continental Europeans in the 18th century. However, we cannot passively accept that there is nothing significant about the shared worldview which both Foucault and Fellini expressed in 1976. The aristocratic Europe of the 1700s which Fellini built inside his Cinecittá studio is an unconscious testament to the

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\(^{174}\) Fellini’s own outlook on both the writings of Marcello and Casanova seems one and the same: “How could I have liked [Casanova] after I had undertaken the task of reading his *Memoirs*? They are deadly dull, written with such fastidiousness that one never understands what he’s talking about.” Costantini, *Fellini on Fellini*, 90.


\(^{176}\) Fellini, *Casanova: An Interview with Aldo Tassone*, 27-29.
Frenchman’s theories – a matrix of invested social powers which enact total control over the body of Giacomo Casanova. Michel Foucault picked the erotic novel *My Secret Life* as evidence that from the 17th century into the 20th there has been a “veritable discursive explosion” in the cultural discussion of sexuality – both of the accepted and of the perverse variety. As Fellini’s film proves, Foucault could have just as easily picked Casanova’s *Historie de ma vie* to make his point.

Fellini opens his *Casanova* on a masked carnival in Venice where the audience watches as a large statue of Venus – goddess of love – rises partway from the water before falling back into the water. Such heavy handed imagery fits Fellini’s outsized vision for this movie – an erotic fetish which only ever reveals itself halfway and never comes to fruition. Casanova appears for the first time sailing to an island so that he can have sex with a woman dressed as a nun in a bizarre room decorated with obscene illustrations on the walls. Casanova performs a violent and circuslike pantomime of sex in coordination with his Freudian little machine/fetish of a bird which thrusts up and down in time with his penis, establishing the act as ugly, performative, and mechanical throughout the film. Importantly, Casanova and his partner perform knowingly for a powerful voyeur, who gazes at them through a peephole cut out of the eye of a painted fish – once again, a symbol of Christianity. Having fulfilled his deed through climax (which Fellini indicates through a rather unnecessary shot of Sutherland’s sweating and grimaced visage pumping in and out of the frame), Casanova turns his attention to his anonymous surveyor and awkwardly attempts to proposition him for political/academic influence. Sex has never been as explicitly Foucauldian in the cinema of Fellini as at this

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178 From the same interview where Fellini called Casanova a “puppet”: “He is so engrossed in his own sex act that, really, he is a mechanical man, like the mechanical bird he carries about.” Chandler, *I, Fellini*, 190.
The audience is meant to understand sexuality as a subject of vast interest for the aristocracy, a subject of knowledge with immense bargaining potential which Casanova seeks to use for his own benefit. Foucault writes that the 18th century saw the dawn of “The Perverse Implantation,” wherein powerful institutions centered their discourses and interests on sexuality outside of marriage as a means of incorporating the sexually deviant into a grand arithmetic of population. Casanova is an explorer of what Foucault would call the emerging “world of perversion,” where sodomy, bigamy, pedophilia, and everything else imaginable are of immense import. Casanova’s quick transition from having sex to discussing economics and politics with a distinguished European official implies a continuity between these subjects which supports Foucault’s conclusions, particularly regarding the relationship between the act of sex and the economics of population.

Casanova sails away from island on a condom-like sea of obvious plastic and is immediately apprehended by authorities and placed in a rotting prison cell for his well-known sex crimes, where he reflects on his past sexual escapades with a seamstress and her servant. Fellini here once more aligns with Foucault’s notions of incarceration and confession as elaborated in The History of Sexuality and in Discipline and Punish: the individual is compelled by the state to revisit past sexual transgression as a means of knowledge/discourse-formation that ultimately benefits the powers-that-be rather than the transgressor. In constructing Casanova’s reminiscence, Fellini takes pains to show the role of bloodletting and other 18th century medicine

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179 In particular, the garrulous Casanova embarks on a wordy soliloquy about the economics of population – a newfound political language in the 18th century which Foucault fixates on: “The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 139.

180 Ibid., 36-49.

181 Ibid., 40.

182 “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow of existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret [emphasis not added].” Such a description applies strikingly to the society Fellini envisioned for Casanova. Ibid., 35.
in controlling women. The seamstress’s servant is subject to fainting spells, and Casanova seeks out a doctor to ensure that he can have as much sex with her as possible without endangering her. As in all previous Fellini films thus far examined, medical experts prove crucial to the sex lives of characters, once more affirming Foucault’s idea that medicine worked in collaboration with religion, politics, and economics to create a powerful social knowledge that defined sexuality.\textsuperscript{183} In this way, the “panel of experts” that Foucault described in \textit{Discipline and Punish} sentences Casanova to imprisonment, but it also plays its role in his bedroom activities.\textsuperscript{184}

Escaping from prison, Casanova embarks on a continental sexual odyssey that takes him out of Venice and into the various courtrooms and palaces of the aristocracy. In Paris he encounters the Madame d’Urfé, who believes that a mystical sex ritual done with Casanova will transform her into a man. In another court Casanova watches the powerful Count Du Bois perform a homoerotic dance with a young man who is clearly his lover. At that same court he briefly falls in monogamous love with the alluring Henriette – an 18\textsuperscript{th} century iteration of Marcello’s Maddalena who quickly leaves him. In London he is beaten and robbed by women who mock his sexual ability.\textsuperscript{185} Later, at Lord Talou’s party in Rome, Casanova defeats a common stage coach driver in front of an audience of aristocrats in a contest to see who can have more orgasms. In Switzerland he falls in love yet again with Isabella, the daughter of an alchemist. Like Marcello he dodges his own inclination to commitment, fleeing this time to Dresden and participating in an orgy far wilder and disgusting than anything Fellini had been

\textsuperscript{183} Illustrated in many of Fellini’s films, but most emphatically stated in \textit{Casanova}, are Foucault’s four methods of sexual discourse in the modern era: A hysterization of women’s bodies, a pedagogization of children’s sex, a socialization of procreative behavior, and a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure. Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality Volume I}, 104-105.

\textsuperscript{184} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 21.

\textsuperscript{185} Bondanella interprets all of Casanova’s life and behavior, as laid out by Fellini in this scene, as “the product of a sense of inferiority when confronted with the female and her potential for procreation.” Bondanella, \textit{The Cinema of Federico Fellini}, 313.
able to film for *La Dolce Vita*. He then finds himself in the court of Wurttemberg, where the German aristocrats, like the voyeur from before, satisfy their own pleasures without paying heed to Casanova’s attempts to establish himself as a serious cultural figure. Casanova is frustrated by his experiences in Wurttemberg but finds sexual solace in meeting his ultimate woman – the anachronistic 18th century automaton Rosalba.\textsuperscript{186} After sleeping with the wooden sex robot, Casanova retires to Bohemia to become the lonely librarian of Count Waldstein. No one there respects him or the memoirs that he published, and two homosexual servants tear a portrait of Casanova from his published work and stick it to a wall of the castle with their own feces. Casanova is disgraced and unfulfilled far more so than Marcello is on the beach at the end of *La Dolce Vita*. Whereas Marcello was spiritually lost in modern cacophony, Casanova is a lecherous and pathetic excuse for a man at the end. His mechanical life of sex leaves him longing for phantoms of a machine as he fantasizes about reuniting with Rosalba in the film’s closing moments. It is, quite literally, an empty dream of an empty dream.\textsuperscript{187}

Casanova’s bumpy sexual journey leaves a vast array of material to unpack. Fellini is perhaps most sexually inventive in portraying Madame d’Urfé’s unusual beliefs about sex and its relationship with gender identity, combining an air of what Foucault labels the “ars erotica” of ancient sexual mysticism with the modern-age “Scientia Sexualis” of the 18th century nation state.\textsuperscript{188} Her profound conviction in the working magic of sex testifies to the “truth” of sexuality that Foucault argues the powers of the Western world sought out through the technologies of

\textsuperscript{186} Fellini describes the shooting of Casanova’s sex scene with Rosalba as arduous and disturbing: “The workers on a Roman film crew are the children of the people who went to the Circus to see lions eat Christians, but when I shot this scene these hard types became silent, terribly concerned, even moved. I believe the scene materialized for them a childish dream of possessing such a woman and, at the same time, awakened a sort of remorse that was typically Italian; remorse at considering a woman as something dead, to be made love to or to be placed on the mantelpiece.” Baxter, *Fellini*, 298.


\textsuperscript{188} Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 53-73.
science and confession. Similarly, the perversity on display in the houses of Du Bois and Talou speaks to the aristocratic fixation with deviant sexuality that Foucault describes as arising in the 18th century.\(^{189}\) Du Bois’ unabashed homoeroticism flourishes in the halls of power, while the Roman aristocracy itself provokes Casanova into his contest of pleasure.\(^{190}\) The implication of a class-based sexual deviance, particularly in the second example where the rural Righetto stands in for the whole of his lower class, feeds into the notion that the privileged upper class of this period were involved in the creation of a power-based sexual politics wherein the bourgeois/aristocrat class instructs the proletariat in sexualities both deviant and non-deviant. Foucault writes that it was at first only the aristocrats who found themselves “surrendering to fears, creating remedies, appealing for rescue by learned techniques, generating countless discourses, it was the first to commit itself to sexual erethism.”\(^{191}\) Such an erethism clearly grips the sex-crazed high society which Fellini paints the European aristocracy as.

Casanova’s sexuality is essentially governed by an aristocracy which is engaging in Foucault’s concept of the deployment of sexuality. “In the space of a few centuries,” Foucault wrote, “a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of who we are, to sex.”\(^{192}\) Casanova is hopelessly lost to this inclination, putting his body at the mercy of an 18th century social architecture that was highly invested in cataloguing the bizarre margins of human sex. The very act of Casanova’s written disclosure in the form of Historie de ma vie is a testament to the gripping power of modern sex, which invests in the sexual confession as a means of locating personal truth. The confession “plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, family relationships,

\(^{189}\) Foucault argues that the modern fascination with sexuality is “historically bourgeois.” Ibid., 127.
\(^{190}\) As Bondanella points out, this contest is explained by its host as a “test of whether the ‘noble savage’ exalted by ‘that great bore Rousseau’ can match a ‘gentleman with style and culture.'” Bondanella, The Cinema of Federico Fellini, 312.
\(^{191}\) Foucault, 120.
\(^{192}\) Ibid., 78.
and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life and in the most solemn writes; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.”

Fellini’s own relationship with the confession, as explored in 8 ½, combines with Casanova’s disclosing manner to illuminate the role of a supposed sexual truth in Italian – and Western – culture.

Casanova’s body is thus a vehicle of Foucauldian sexual power which ingests the aristocracy’s knowledge of perversion (of Du Bois and others) and transmits it to the masses (through his court visits, his orgies, his writings). Fellini’s unyieldingly libidinous protagonist is an agent of “biopower,” a modern form of power which employs “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” and which developed a “great technology of power” that included the deployment of sexuality as a sociological construct. Fellini makes this technology of sexual power literal in two crucial moments of the film, the more noticeable being Casanova’s obsession with Rosalba. Rosalba, introduced to Casanova in the court of power, is an actual technology of 18th century sexual knowledge whose purpose is to incite a feverish desire to which Casanova willingly succumbs. Her (or its) role is both Foucauldian and Lacanian. She is a location for the practice of scientific knowledge about sex, but she is also subject to the form of sublimation which she receives when Casanova dreams of her at the close of the film. The mechanical doll’s body is an intensification the mechanical sexuality which Fellini establishes with Casanova’s metallic fetish bird at the start of the film. The filmmaker is implying that Casanova is something of a sexual

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193 Ibid., 59.
194 Fellini’s profuse filming of deformed or otherwise deviant bodies to represent sexual mystery and depravity is not unique to Casanova, as Pauline Kael pointed out when reviewing his previous film, Fellini’s Satyricon. Pauline Kael. Deeper Into Movies (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 128.
195 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 140.
Frankenstein’s monster who internalizes the cultural knowledge of an emergent scientific civilization (note his frequent references to alchemy and economics) to the point that he himself becomes a robot deployed for the entertainment and research of the aristocratic class. His inability to stay with a single woman is not the result of his own sexual nature. Rather, it stems from the perverse uses that society needs of him.

Fellini interrupts his own narrative midway through *Casanova* to once more make a cinematic visit to the circus, and it is here that he makes a glaring reference both to the technology of sexual instruction in the 18th century and to the cinema itself. At a festival on the frozen Thames, Casanova encounters and spies upon a gigantic woman reminiscent of the humongous femmes which Fellini filmed in *The Temptations of Doctor Antonio* and recorded frequently in his dream journals.196 Women of unusual size are frequent in the director’s work, and thus this large body draws most of the attention of scholars who described the festival scene. Large women are Freudian indicators of male sexual anxiety, as their size-relationship with the male observer recalls the maternal.197 However, before he spies the large woman, Casanova enters the womblike carcass of a whale and observes a primitive magic lantern show wherein frightening images of the vagina are projected before him, including the famous *vagina dentata*. Fellini’s intention was almost certainly Freudian/Jungian in this scene, as the themes of fantasy and orality intermingle frightfully to shed light on Casanova’s classic Italian sexual complex.198 Yet technology and visual instruction are central to Fellini’s construction of the scene. The

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196 For a sketch of a giant woman from Fellini’s dreams, see: Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, 295.
197 Fellini exaggerates this symbolic imagery even further by having the large woman bathe with male dwarves. Stubbs, *Federico Fellini as Auteur*, 27.
198 Barbara Creed cites Lacan in explaining the cinematic significance of the *vagina dentata*, arguing that it is the ultimate cinematic indicator of male sexual anxiety: the “black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces.” Lacan noted that the oral orifice is a site of gendered ambiguity, and Fellini’s use of the face and mouth in his movies can be traced back to a deep-rooted sexual anxiety revolving around the threatening implication of the toothed cavern. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 106.
viewer receives the impression that Casanova’s fearful obsession with the vagina is given to him via the imposition of culturally mandated images.\textsuperscript{199} What is can be understood by Fellini’s visit to this primordial cinema is that sexuality is not an inherent force constricted by a repressive society but an intentionally crafted facet of the individual meant to divert and control its attention. Casanova gazes into this illusionary vagina monster and expects to find the true meaning of himself. The film’s end reveals through Rosalba that this expectation is the result of indoctrination, and that no personal meaning or truth can be found in sex.

This is the Foucauldian depth of both \textit{La Dolce Vita} and Fellini’s \textit{Casanova} – that Italian society motivates, or even forces, its individuals to seek out a truth in sex when in reality there is none to be found. For all their sexual transgression and confessional bluster, Giacomo Casanova and Marcello Rubini are hopelessly lost male figures who have absolutely no sense of themselves or even of sex. These films can be seen as grand expansions on the subtle notions of sex and power that were at play in \textit{Il Sciecco Blanco} and \textit{I Vitelloni}, civilization-sized epics which take on cultural notions through a grand cinematic scope that manages to anchor a lone masculine figure at the center. The women of these films are bodies appropriated by diffuse networks of power and sublimated by the male psyche, whose flowing locks and boundless curves transfixed Fellini’s audiences while cleverly problematizing the role of sex in Italian culture.\textsuperscript{200} Foucault wrote that in order to get a true grip of the modern cultural technologies which enforce and sculpt sexuality, “we must conceive of sex without the law, and power

\textsuperscript{199} Interestingly, Fellini said that the grotesquerie of his London scenes was carefully modeled after painted imagery from the time, particularly “in the milieu of Hogarth, according to the taste of Gustave Doré.” That such a moment of sexual education was aestheticized according to rigid historical guidelines further implicates the notion of a cultural mandate in the construction of sex. Stubbs, \textit{Federico Fellini as Auteur}, 228-229.

\textsuperscript{200} Marga Cottino-Jones totally fails to see the nuance of Fellini’s proto-feminism: “In his later films, and especially in his \textit{Il Casanova di Federico Fellini}, Fellini shows again his deep patriarchal pro-male bent by choosing to idealize a protagonist universally known to be an exploiter of women and even a sexual predator on young girls.” That she somehow came to the conclusion that \textit{Casanova} idealizes its protagonist is proof that she never read any interviews with Fellini on the subject. Cottino-Jones, \textit{Women, Desire, and Power in Italian Cinema}, 119.
without the king.” By this he meant that the forces governing sexuality were not merely restrictive but in fact often displayed the potential to be constructive. Sex without the law is not to be understood as a total freedom of the Eros but as a form of cultural regulation wherein perversity and insatiable heterosexual desire is accounted for and regulated to feed the power structures of a larger society.

Marcello and Casanova are incapable of conceiving of sex without the law, and thus believe that their petty fornications are somehow meaningful acts of defiance against society which will save their souls and liberate them. But Fellini, in the final acts of these films, shows to his audience that they could not be more trapped. Stunted in a Freudian/Jungian/Lacanian psychosexual sense as well as in a Foucauldian sense, these characters serve as Fellini’s warning to Italian men. With these films, the director advocates for reexaminations of both the old myths of romance as well as of the modern interpretation of sexual liberation. He arrives, through a mix of intention and subconscious tendency, at a complex and truthful depiction of modern-age sexuality that blends the psychoanalytic with the postmodern. Marcello tells Sylvia, in the height of his voyeuristic obsession, that she is “Everything - Mother, sister, lover, friend, angel, devil, earth, home,” embodying the Italian male who sees everything significant in the body of woman other than an authentic human being. In a single sentence he demonstrates the Lacanian need to put women on a lofty pedestal and the Foucauldian need for sex to explain everything important in his life. Though Fellini almost certainly had no intent to argue for Foucault’s theories

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202 Fellini, when discussing the sexual revolution of his times, seems concur at least somewhat with Foucault’s rejection of the repressive hypothesis: “Nowadays we are witnessing a frenetic, neurotic scramble for sexual fulfilment, but I don’t see any true liberation. We are always victims of Catholic education. I don’t know how many centuries it will take for us to be freed from it.” Costantini, *Fellini on Fellini*, 86.
regarding sexuality in *Fellini’s Casanova* and *La Dolce Vita*, Foucault and those who accept his analytics of sexuality would no doubt have seen in these two films evidence of his theories.
“Love is a Religion” – Fellini’s attempts at womanhood in *La Strada* and *Giulietta degli Spiriti*

While the majority of Fellini’s films, and particularly *La Dolce Vita* and *Fellini’s Casanova*, rely on a male protagonist and viewpoint to critique the social control of individual sexuality, the director’s filmography offers a handful of movies which approach this topic from his approximation of a feminine position.\(^{203}\) *La Strada*, the most iconic of his earlier films, and *Giulietta degli Spiriti*, an awkward and unsuccessful gender-swapped spiritual successor to his masculine *8 ½*, show Federico Fellini at odds with his own gender.\(^{204}\) While the director was a failure as a feminist, these two films nonetheless demonstrate that he was deeply concerned with the inner workings of patriarchy in Italian society.\(^{205}\) In a brief interlude on these two films, this thesis will explore how Fellini’s tenuous attempts to film female protagonists and struggles within the frame of an oppressively male Italian society once again found the filmmaker compulsively returning to the theme of socially constructed sexuality at play in nearly all of his films.

Let us return, briefly, to the first meeting between Wanda and her White Sheik in *Il Sciecco Blanco*. This curious scene, in which the woman looks up longingly at the man and the camera mimics her gaze, constitutes the first impactful example of Fellini’s gender-bending capability and desires as a filmmaker. Mary Ann Doane wrote of the female gaze in cinema that “both the theory of the image and its apparatus, the cinema, produce a position for the female spectator – a position which is ultimately untenable because it lacks the attribute of distance

\(^{203}\) For a breakdown of the mixed feminist response to Fellini’s depictions of women and sexuality, see: Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, 296.


\(^{205}\) In a *New Yorker* piece published soon after Fellini’s passing, Clive James suggested that the director was a sort of “feminist avant la lettre.” Clive James, “Critic at Large: Mondo Fellini,” *New Yorker*, March 21 1994, 160.
[from the female cinematic object] so necessary for an adequate reading of the image.”

Doane’s psychoanalytic feminist approach to film theory finds validation in Fellini’s approaches to female characters. Wanda’s shy gaze can, if properly read, teach viewers the manner by which Fellini understood female desire/pleasure and the techniques by which he portrayed it. The director never assigned his feminine characters with the voracious sexual appetites and fascinations so frequent in his men, but nevertheless he frequently delved into the profound mystery of womanhood. His female characters were almost never as fully dimensional or skillfully realized as his male ones, yet in La Strada and Giulietta Degli Spiriti we can see him wrestling with what Doane calls the “distance” between the object viewed and the subject viewing, between men and women.

Distance is an essential component of Fellini’s staging of gender in nearly all of his films, but none more so than his La Strada. Generally considered the most unquestionably “Neorealist” of his early period, La Strada opens on its lovable dullard protagonist Gelsomina (an iconic role for Giulietta Masina) as she wanders along the beach. The harsh cuts between her position on the beach and the high ground which the animalistic Zampanó assumes establish distance in their gendered relationship from the start. Zampanó, a macho muscleman who cannot control his own toxic brand of masculinity, will buy, rape, neglect, beat, abandon, and eventually kill the woefully innocent Gelsomina over the course of the film, and his relationship with her will always be broadcast to the viewer by Fellini in spatial terms. Gelsomina’s distance from

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206 Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing The Female Spectator,” in The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality (London: Routledge, 1992), 240. Doane also recognizes in this piece that “as Michel Foucault has demonstrated… femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations.” Ibid., 241.

207 Virginia Picchetti goes into further depth on the manner in which Wanda’s transgression of traditional feminine roles “expose[s] the paradox created when the different possibilities defining femininity in a particular culture are deemed conflictual.” Picchetti, “When in Rome Do as the Romans Do?,” 94.

208 Such a dichotomy of distance in a beach setting, as Marguerite Waller expanded upon, is also crucial in the closing moments of La Dolce Vita. Waller, “Whose Dolce Vita Is This, Anyway?,” 112.
Zampanó connotes a state of safety, purity, and happiness. When she is trapped in his claustrophobic travelling caravan she is almost sure to be violated, when she runs away from him she is at her most independent and free. The manner in which she dies – a physical abandonment wherein Zampanó literally imposes distance between himself and her until she disappears from existence – further expands upon this notion of distance as critical to the role of gender in the world of *La Strada*. When a penitent Zampanó finally realizes the errors of his ways, he rushes down to the beach where he first saw Gelsomina and cries to the ocean, closing the distance that he kept the whole film but doing so too late.

Gender and its performance are defining themes of *La Strada* which often get overlooked in discussions over the film’s significance to the larger Fellini canon. Performativity, especially in the sequences where Zampanó performs his manly chain-breaking stunt, is Fellini’s preferred method of delving into difference between genders as symbolized by the tension between Gelsomina and Zampanó at the heart of this movie. Gender is performed in spaces both public (the circus ground) and intimate (the bed), or at a provincial wedding which seems to fall somewhere in between the two. Gelsomina’s unintended meeting with a feeble child at this wedding – whose plight mirrors her own – further implies the role of procreation and sexuality in the construction and performance of a feminine identity within the wedding ritual. She is rushed from the room by a nun, and encounters more nuns later on at a convent, one of whom compares her position as a nun with Gelsomina’s own place as a pure woman. Earlier, in yet another one of Fellini’s symbolic parade sequences, the camera captures Gelsomina leaning

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209 Burke suggests that “compartmentalization” is another way in which we can think about distance and gender in *La Strada*. Burke, *Federico Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita*, 39.

210 Ibid., 50.

211 Murray, *Fellini: The Artist*, 63.

212 Burke connects this wedding sequence to larger societal ideals, noting that “the wedding sequence serves as the threshold between agrarian and the man-made world of the city.” Burke, *Federico Fellini: Variety Lights to La Dolce Vita*, 41.
against a wall with a poster of the “Immaculate Madonna” for contrast. The implication in all of these scenes is obvious in the traditional Fellinian way: Gelsomina is to be understood as a “pure woman” of the same sort that we later saw in Paola.\footnote{Bondanella, \textit{The Films of Federico Fellini}, 56.} \footnote{This understanding of female Fellini characters and nature contributes to the traditional “spiritual” interpretation of his films. André Bazin calls \textit{La Strada} “a phenomenology of the soul” based on Gelsomina’s naturalistic spirituality. André Bazin, “La Strada,” in \textit{André Bazin and Italian Neorealism}, ed. Bert Cardullo (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 154.} The Gelsomina character is Fellini’s vessel for a sort of social pantomime, as can be seen in the intriguing snippet of the film wherein she sees an oddly-shaped tree and extends her limbs to make her body fit the form of the nature around her.\footnote{For a satisfying breakdown of nature and bodily representation in \textit{La Strada}, see: Budgen, \textit{Fellini}, 10.} Keeping Foucault in mind, it can be seen that her mental infirmity and diminished social position as a woman combine to make her a malleable substance out of which a fragile form of womanhood is molded. Even her song, one of Nino Rota’s most endearing contributions to Fellini’s craft, is like her gender – a cheerful performance learned through public repetition.

The plight of woman as conveyed by Fellini in \textit{La Strada} is a world away from the psychological interiority of 1965’s \textit{Giulietta Degli Spiriti}.\footnote{Fellini described the overall conflict of \textit{Giulietta Degli Spiriti} as “the story of the struggle taken up by a woman against certain monsters in herself.” Bondanella, \textit{Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present}, 245.} This departure in tone and style is attributable in part to three largescale shifts in cinema and culture in the period between the releases of these films: the demise of Italian Neorealism’s fashionable popularity and the rise of second-wave feminism.\footnote{Millicent Marcus provides an effective retrospective on the significance of Neorealism in the introduction to \textit{Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism}. Marcus, \textit{Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism}, 3-29.} \textit{La Strada} sets its characters against a black and white post-war hellscape of poverty and dereliction typical of the Neoreal, while \textit{Giulietta Degli Spiriti} is Fellini’s first feature-length indulgence in color which dwells upon the stifling mediocrity of the housewife’s surroundings. Whereas Masina faced off against physical abuse and bleak material conditions as Gelsomina, as Giulietta she faces a more metaphysical obstacle – boredom and
lack of intellectual fulfillment. Though surrounded by the comforts of home, Giulietta is plagued by the “ spirits” of the sort of comfortable patriarchy which Betty Friedan had described in her 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, a text which kick started the second wave by calling attention to the domestic despotism which middle class women of the mid-20th century faced.\(^{218}\) A tertiary development which should be taken into account when assessing the differences between these two films is the “Economic Miracle” which Italy benefited from in the second half of the 1950s and which Fellini incorporated into the milieu of *La Dolce Vita*.\(^{219}\) In 1965 when Fellini released *Giulietta Degli Spiriti*, the unfathomable poverty and transience of the characters in *La Strada* would have been but a distant memory for his Italian viewers. Instead, Fellini found a spiritual drama in the hollowness of the modern home.

At the heart of the film is Giulietta’s failed marriage to Giorgio. Bondanella observes of the film’s opening scenes that “as Giulietta moves about the house, we catch glimpses of everything but her face.”\(^{220}\) To Fellini, the face of a character is their most cinematically valuable aspect.\(^{221}\) Additionally, Masina’s face was her most striking feature as an actress, allowing her to develop the characters of Gelsomina and Cabiria to their fullest. For Fellini to deny his audience of her face in this moment is striking in that it strips the character of identity, leaving her body an unsatisfactory shell where a character should be. Giulietta’s daily routine is assailed by the auspices of modernity – the many appliances to which she attends and the droning television whose noise fills the house.\(^{222}\) After discovering Giorgio’s affair through a hired detective,


\(^{219}\) Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 287.

\(^{220}\) Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, 301.

\(^{221}\) Chandler, *I, Fellini*, 92, 118, 153, 170, 190, 199, 210, 278, 284, 311, 334.

\(^{222}\) Marguerite Waller uses the opening shots of *Giulietta Degli Spiriti* to argue that Fellini’s camera problematizes the gaze and “deliteralizes or denaturalizes the shot and completely restructures the film’s mode of address to the spectator.” Marguerite R. Waller, “Neither an ‘I’ nor an ‘Eye’: The Gaze in Fellini’s *Giulietta Degli Spiriti*,” in *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: GK Hall & Co., 1993), 217.
Giulietta begins to suffer from hallucinations and daydreams similar to those experienced by Guido in Fellini’s previous film, 8½. In lush color, she dreams of the Greek God Iris who tells her to sleep with everyone and a vengeful spirit who scolds her for “whorish” desires. She vividly recalls Fanny, an alluring circus performer who seduced Giulietta’s grandfather, and later fantasizes about a woman who is a combination of Fanny and Iris. At the advice of her friends, Giulietta consults another one of Fellini’s sexualized exotic women (by this point a trope in his work): an androgynous Indian mystic named Bhishima who speaks of sex as a religion unto itself. Giulietta is unsettled by Bhishima’s rantings, and eventually argues that Bhishima is essentially arguing for Giulietta to prostitute herself.

Marriage and prostitution slowly become indistinguishable for Giulietta over the course of the film, as is indicated by her erotic relationship with her neighbor Susy. Fellini presents Susy as a lavish caricature of the sexually liberated woman. She operates her household like a bordello and she extends her hand to Giulietta in an act of lascivious sisterhood, encouraging the pent-up housewife to let out all of her sexual energy. Susy keeps a mirror on her ceiling so she can watch herself have sex, a detail which Lacan and Christian Metz would no doubt cling to but which actually has very little meaning outside of Fellini’s visual language of sexuality. Susy is joined in her sexual instruction of Giulietta by the sculptress Delores, who creates erotic art from

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223 Scholars, like Carolyn Geduld, have argued that Giulietta Degli Spiriti and 8½ “seem to be a composite of the Fellini Marriage, with Giulietta representing Giulietta Masina’s or Mrs. Fellini’s side of the story. Rumors about the directors marital difficulties at the time of the filming of Juliet lend support to this assumption.” Carolyn Geduld, “Juliet of the Spirits: Guido’s Anima,” in Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism, ed. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 137.

224 Once more the performative woman is presented by Fellini as a sexual construct who will inevitably seduce the Italian man. Think back to the nearly identical scenario which happens with Fausto in I Vitelloni.

225 Some of the dialogue from this scene, in which a man declares to a woman “No, your name is Sex,” explicitly recalls Foucault’s essential point about the formation of mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex through “the hysterization of women’s bodies.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 104.

226 As Murray points out, Fellini makes games out of prostitution in La Dolce Vita and 8½ as well. Murray, Fellini: The Artist, 168-169.
the bodies of male models and who tells Giulietta that God is “a beautiful body.” This remark harkens back to Foucauldian notions of the theological and technological composition of sex, triggering Giulietta’s most significant flashback sequence in which she recalls a school play in which she played a martyr who ascends to heaven and meets God because of her purity. Giulietta’s unreligious grandfather, the sexually crude Italian male who Fellini always finds on a path to self-ruination, interrupts the play and prevents Giulietta from seeing God. This experience is meant to explain the spiritual repression which we see Giulietta suffer throughout the film.227

Of the major Fellini scholars, Bondanella has written the most on this lesser film, and his analysis adheres to the dominant interpretation of Fellini’s major works in the later part of his career. “Giulietta, like Guido before her, can come to grips with her problems only when she resolves the conflicts in her distant past.”228 This is traditional Freudian/Jungian work applied to a filmmaker who no doubt intended his films to be seen in this way. However, if the notion of sexual repression is reworked with the framework offered by Foucault, a different understanding of Giulietta Degli Spiriti emerges. While Fellini himself invests in a notion of the sexually repressive society, he also shies away from endorsing sexual indulgence as an act of transgression.229 Susy, Iris, Delores, and Bhishima are false prophets offering a cheap form of liberation through the conventions of sexual power politics which Foucault describes: confession, medical expertise, recording of knowledge, and the act of sex itself.230 Giulietta ultimately reaches a spiritual fulfillment at the end of the film not simply by owning her own

227 Geduld ties Giulietta’s dream of the school play to Guido’s dream of the farmhouse bath, arguing that they are both infantilizing moments of memory/fantasy which underscore sexual repression. Geduld, “Juliet of the Spirits: Guido’s Anima,” 142.
229 Costantini, Fellini on Fellini, 86.
230 These characters are, in a sense, upholding the wrongful philosophy of Wilhelm Reich’s Sexuality in the Culture War which Foucault rejects. Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 130-131.
sexual desires, but by escaping from the notion of sexuality as an ontological prescription for her very nature. She rejects her dissatisfying marriage, but she also rejects Susy’s way of living. She has been trapped not in the simple repressive state which Freud and Jung detailed, but in the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure which Foucault described. The psychosexual conflicts of the distant past which Bondanella argues must be resolved for the protagonist to achieve self-actualization are actually less important than Giulietta’s recognition that sex is not everything, though Fellini himself would not have understood this. Fellini did not know it at the time, but with Giulietta Degli Spiriti he created a Foucauldian parable out of a muddled attempt at a cinematic lesson in Jung.231

“While all of Fellini’s works have something of significance to offer the viewer on the topic of women and sexuality,” Bondanella admits, “Giulietta degli spiriti, Casanova, and La Citta delle donne focus in large measure on these issues, and each film reflects an important stage in the evolution of Fellini’s thinking on the matter.”232 The phrasing of this sentiment cuts to the core of the problem with the majority of scholarship done on Fellini in regards to sexuality.233 The notion that women and sexuality should be linked when examining Fellini is false. Sexuality, of men, women, and occasionally even of other genders, is a constant presence in all of Fellini’s work. Gauging one film as more sexually significant in his cannon than another is understandable but wrongheaded. Additionally, all three of the films which Bondanella selected came from the latter half of Fellini’s career as a filmmaker, by which point he was reading and talking about Jung.234 Pettily acknowledging that “all of Fellini’s works have

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231 “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power,” Foucault warns. The enlightened Giulietta at the end of Fellini’s film does not need to say yes to sex in order to overthrow the powers which stifle her self-determination. Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 157.
234 Chandler, I, Fellini, 142.
something” does not undo the damage caused by suggesting that *Giulietta Degli Spiriti* and other Jungian Fellini vehicles are the most suitable films for interpreting Fellini’s understanding of sexuality. Our notion of Fellinian sexuality is effectively bifurcated by this thinking, leaving us with an early Fellini who was interested in sex but had no intellectual tools with which to engage it and a later “enlightened” Fellini whose experiences with Jung made him a cinesexual expert in repression and fantasy. This narrative is inaccurate. There was only ever one Fellini, and though his sexual and cinematic thinking may have developed over time and incorporated psychoanalytic tennent, it remained committed at its core to the process of unearthing a socially performative and richly complex sexuality.

Bondanella was fundamentally right when he summed up the real importance of *Giulietta Degli Spiriti*. “Although criticized by some feminists,” he wrote, “*Giulietta Degli Spiriti* represents Fellini’s sustained attempt to understand the female psyche.”

The key term in this sentence is “attempt,” since it is sometimes Fellini’s intentions, rather than his accomplishments, which best prove the uniqueness of his cinesexuality. Though *La Strada* is both more coherent and generally more beloved than *Giulietta Degli Spiriti*, I would argue that both films find Fellini at his least successful because of his awkward approach the feminine essence. One senses in these characters an apologetic desire on the director’s part to escape the trappings of Italian chauvinism by tapping into a mystical/virginal/victim vision of femininity.

At the close of this thesis we will visit Fellini’s only masterful fulfillment of this desire, but for now let us gaze into the intellectual wealth that can be harvested from his misfires. Hailing from two different eras of Fellini’s life as a filmmaker, *La Strada* and *Giulietta Degli Spiriti* share Fellini’s philosophy that

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236 This sense is reaffirmed by Fellini’s interviews on the subject of women in his films: “Cinema is light and shade like a woman. How can one describe darkness without illuminating it?” Costantini, *Fellini on Fellini*, 113.
the position of womanhood is a unique cinematic opportunity to explore the immense powers that shape society. But one need not read psychoanalytic, postmodern, or feminist texts to understand Fellini’s views on womanhood and manhood in Italian culture as conveyed by these two films. The face and body of Giulietta Masina are all that he, or we, truly need for either viewing. She, like Marcello or Guido or any of the other men, is tired. Tired of victimhood, tired of suffering, tired of the men in her life, and tired – most of all – of life itself. Fellini had not read any Jung at the time that he made La Strada, yet his concerns about sexuality, violence, performance, and power remain consistent between that film and his later “Jungian” work in Giulietta Degli Spiriti. This leads me to believe that Jung was not truly a foundational framework for the second half of Fellini’s career. Counterintuitive as it may seem, Jung’s writings on marriage and sex propelled the filmmaker in the Foucauldian direction which he had always been heading.
“Do you touch yourself?” – Memory, Fantasy, and the Interrogation of Desire in *Amarcord* and *8 ½*

Having established a working understanding of the Foucauldian sexuality in many of Fellini’s films, it is time to turn to two of his most ambitious and, for lack of a better term, autobiographical films. Enthusiasts and serious students of Fellini encounter a challenge in dissecting *8 ½* and *Amarcord*, for their subject matter seems to correspond so strongly with the content of Fellini’s own life as we know it, yet the director cautioned repeatedly against reading them as such.\(^{237}\) It is foolish to remove Federico Fellini’s personality and history from one’s analysis of any of his films, but with these two – a film about a young boy growing up under Fascism in a coastal town of rural Italy and a film about a womanizing director’s Catholic neurosis – this removal is practically impossible. Though hints of Fellini’s own life can be found in the jet set of *La Dolce Vita* or the lethargic slackers of *I Vitelloni, Amarcord* and *8 ½*, more than any of his other films, created and cemented the inner pull of his work. Lyrical blends of fantasy and reality, they earn the auteur his space as a master imaginer, the “born liar” whose flamboyant and unreliable recreations of things which *feel* raw and real to the viewer still manage to mask Fellini’s true consciousness within a fog of mystery.\(^{238}\) These films seem to offer up the filmmaker’s soul to the camera in an unbearably intimate act of cinematic disclosure, but this effect on the viewer is calculated and manipulative.

Rather than pry these films open for their autobiographical or non-autobiographical content, as has been done so frequently in previous academic discourses, it will be best to decenter Fellini in relation to the Italian culture which he engages with in these films.\(^{239}\) Laying

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\(^{237}\) On *Amarcord* specifically: “I am always a bit offended when I hear that one of my films is ‘autobiographical’: it seems like a reductionist definition to me… I felt that authorizing a view of *Amarcord* with an autobiographical ‘key’ would have been a grave error. So much so that at one moment I wanted to entitle it simply *Viva l’Italia!*” Fellini, “*Amarcord: The Fascism Within us,*” 24.

\(^{238}\) The 2002 documentary, *Fellini: I’m A Born Liar,* endorses this reading of Fellini.

\(^{239}\) To see a textbook example of connecting Fellini’s own life to his films, see: Alpert, *Fellini: A Life*, 167. For a more nuanced approach, see Kezich’s claim that “it’s important to remember that in *8 ½*, objectivity and
aside the question of Fellini’s life vs. his imagination, and the deeper question of reality vs.
representation which Frank Burke has meticulously explored, frees us to engage at a less abstract
level with these complex films. Without fully discounting the significance of Fellini’s
presence in his own films, one can observe that 8 ½ and Amarcord are films which question the
possibility of an autonomous and self-determined erotic desire, and which endeavor to shed light
upon a vast network of institutional pedagogy that shapes individuals. Separated by a decade,
these two movies tackle Italian sexuality as it struggles within (but, importantly, not against) a
doctrinal Catholic hegemony, using the Fellini doppelgangers of Guido and Titta to show how
sexuality is a valuable psychic territory governed by power.

French film semiologist Christian Metz’s essay “Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8 ½” is
a classic example of the sort of analysis which ought to be avoided if one is to gain a deeper
understanding of Fellini’s methods of filming society and power in 8 ½. Demonstrating the
sort of rigidly Lacanian framework of film criticism which he would expand upon in his book
_The Imaginary Signifier_, Metz’s understanding of 8 ½’s value is glued to the way in which its
playful structure pokes fun at Fellini’s life and the realm of the real world. Caught up in the
cleverness of its film-within-a-film-within-a-film-ness, Metz fixates on the Guido Anselmi
character as a conduit to Fellini’s own psyche, making valueless and occasionally contradictory
claims about 8 ½ in the process. Metz’s loose and wayward criticism serves to highlight the

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243 Metz writes, among other things, that the film is “doubly doubled,” that “It is not only a film about the cinema, it
is a film about a film that is presumably itself about the cinema,” and that, prior to claims made only a page prior,
the film is actually “tripling.” Such claims seem interesting but do little to promote a deeper understanding. Metz,
intellectual danger of succumbing to Fellini’s inner pull when approaching 8 ½. Like so many others who have sought to interpret this film, he allowed the structure, aesthetic, and philosophy of Fellini’s masterpiece to be defined by a rigid architecture of Jung and Lacan. That Fellini read Jung and sought to incorporate Jungian thought into 8 ½ is incontestable, but this does not mean that a Jungian outlook is the only way – or the correct way – to view this film. Indeed, 8 ½ harvested material from the director’s dream journals and marital life, delving into his unsatisfying erotic hedonism and his repressive childhood to exploit Fellini for Fellini’s own gain. 8 ½ is easily understood as a meta-referential embodiment of Fellini’s own psychological quest for spiritual authenticity and artistic freedom, but it is at a deeper and less easily understood layer that the film’s true value lies. To write in circles around the subject of 8 ½’s psychoanalytic features is at a certain point tautological, as the Metz piece demonstrates. Once desire, both in its creation and in its sustenance, becomes the proper subject of analysis, 8 ½ begins to bear its true fruits. 8 ½’s alternate titles during production were “The Big Confusion” and “I Confess,” titles which more actively point us in a Foucauldian direction.

8 ½ is not a film about film nor is it a film about Fellini. It is a film about desire in its true sense, desire as the social complex created by the interrupted rhythm between indulgence in and suspension of pleasure which Foucault describes. Fellini begins on desire as represented by the first of Guido’s many dreams. The director’s protagonist-surrogate imagines himself trapped in a car during a standstill traffic jam. Gazing about at the Italian milieu that surrounds him, Guido

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244 For a concise synopsis of Fellini’s discovery of Jungian theory, see: Baxter, *Fellini*, 171-172.
245 Bondanella provides a connection between Fellini’s Jungian interpretation of dreams and the content of 8 ½, noting that “Fellini preferred Jung to Freud because Jungian psychoanalysis defined the dream not as a symptom of a disease that required a cure but rather as a link to archetypal images shared by all of humanity.” This aversion to pathology may be seen as a tenuous link between Fellini and Foucault. Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini*, 94-96.
suddenly realizes that his car is suffocating him while also noting that in the car next to him an elderly man is making sexual advances on his mistress, Carla. He escapes his car and, with no accompanying soundtrack, flies away from the scene. Of paramount significance here is the role of the automobile in Fellini’s films. In _La Dolce Vita, I Vitelloni, La Strada_, men’s vehicles lend them a false sense of independence both sexual and geographical, allowing them to traverse women and landscapes but all the while governing their self-image and decision making. In his own life, Fellini was highly attached to large American cars and was known for driving them around Rome much like Marcello. Particularly in the opening of _8 ½_, Fellini depicts the car as a technology of power which compels the individual’s mind and body to remain confined by a rigid society. Like a movie-goer, Guido can only gaze. Looking at his titillated mistress, his automobile renders him a helpless cuckold as the world watches on. Society, technology, and sexuality converge in Guido’s imagination on Carla’s eroticized body, making the figure of the automobile emblematic of a sexual society which creates erotic desire through instruments which provoke arousal and prevent fulfillment. All that Guido needs to do in order to achieve a divine form of liberation – an orgasm of the spirit – is leave his car. He floats into the air leaving the car and society far behind and beneath him.

The dream ends when Guido is literally pulled down to earth by his producers. Upon waking, Fellini establishes that Guido is unwell in three parts: physically, psychologically, and creatively. Two doctors attend to Guido, poking at him with incessant interrogations on everything from his health to the state of his next film. One doctor asks Guido if he will make “another film without hope,” the other doctor looks over Guido’s headshots, admiring the faces

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248 In Fellini’s words: “I’ve always liked riding in a car, especially in Rome, whether I was the one driving or not… Many Italian men choose to prove their masculinity through driving. If that is how they choose to do it, perhaps it is the only way they can [emphasis not added].” Chandler, _I, Fellini_, 182.
of pretty women, and then prescribes him “300 grams of holy water.” This particular line should ring alarm bells for a Foucauldian, as it blurs the line between the realm of secular and religious authority on the body. These doctors are enacting a vague and powerful interdisciplinary knowledge in the treatment of Guido, attending to his body but also sexually surveying the reproduced faces of women and commenting on the nature of his films, all while endorsing holy water as a medical cure. Once joined by the pretentious intellectual Daumier, who often seems to be commenting not on the film-within-the-film but on 8 ½ itself, these figures of authority resemble Foucault’s “experts in normality” who channel social power onto the individual. What is more, Fellini hides Guido’s all-important face in this scene, making him a passive body upon which power operates. Fellini’s cynical portrayal of doctors at this crucial opening moment is even more powerful than the visions of medicine and the hospital he produced in La Dolce Vita, Il Sciecco Blanco, I Vitelloni, and Casanova. It demonstrates kinship between him and Foucault in critiquing the medical establishment, particularly in its relationship to sexual desire and religious pedagogy. Foucault began scrutinizing the social role of medical knowledge with The Birth of the Clinic, which came out in 1963 and coincided with 8 ½.

With this opening out of the way, 8 ½ assumes an episodic structure that is loose and tangential much in the same way that La Dolce Vita was, but engages the life, fantasy, and memory of the individual rather than the larger social milieu which that prior film undertook as its subject. Because of this, recounting the totality of 8 ½’s narrative is not essential to

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249 Fellini, 8 ½, 39-41.
250 The doctors’ constant pecking at Guido constitutes the “Clinical codification of the inducement to speak” which Foucault outlines as a part of the modern Scientia Sexualis. Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 65.
251 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 227-228.
252 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 41.
253 Burke suggests that Fellini’s later work, beginning with 8 ½, “is itself an implicit rereading of the earlier [films],” and that with 8 ½ Fellini “implies that individuality is such a complex issue that it evades representation.” Burke, Fellini’s Films, 155-156.
achieving an understanding of its erotic significance. Instead we can handpick a few key elements and iconic scenes which indicate familiar themes, all of which problematize desire. 8 ½, when understood as Fellini’s cinematic manifesto on male desire, underscores the central premise of this thesis. Despite representing Fellini’s crucial moment of Jungian realization, the film is nonetheless evidence of a profound Foucauldian bent in the director’s worldview.

This dichotomy between intended Jung and unconscious Foucault is most pronouncedly demonstrated by Fellini’s unsparing depiction of Catholicism in 8 ½. Fellini, adopting psychoanalytic views, understood the church as a sexually repressive institution which lay the foundation for his own neurosis. Guido’s sexual immaturity, his inability to “know how to love” as Claudia puts it, stems from his traumatic experiences as a Catholic schoolboy on the Adriatic coast. Guido’s vivid childhood memory of La Saraghina, an enormous prostitute whose look defines Fellini’s prototypical monstrous femme, is bookended by encounters with figures of Catholic authority. The flashback begins when Guido’s attention wanders away from a meeting with a Cardinal towards the bare legs of a nearby woman, and La Saraghina’s beachside dance is cut short by the arrival of priests who catch and punish the young Guido. Within Fellini’s psychoanalytic scope, this scene was meant to contextualize the grown Guido’s spiritual ennui, to explain his lack of development. However, the specific visual cues of sexuality and institution which the director draws upon play heavily into Foucault’s language. The Saraghina sequence is to be understood as a formative sexual experience not simply because Guido saw a thrusting voluptuous woman at a young age, but because a powerful authority made clear to him

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254 Interestingly, scholars have disputed the nature and severity of Fellini’s Catholic upbringing, claiming he may have either fabricated memories of persecution or even borrowed them from his brother Riccardo’s experiences. Stubbs, Federico Fellini as Auteur, 74.
255 For a good overview of the representation of Catholicism in many of Fellini’s key films, see: Budgen, Fellini, 45-51.
256 Note how love is framed as a knowledge concealed and controlled by institutions of power. Fellini, 8 ½, 175.
that her body was not something he was supposed to see.\textsuperscript{257} The schoolroom punishment, motherly disowning, and confession booth extraction are all played up in an elaborate rotation of cultural rituals which cement for Guido the centrality of his unholy sexual experience. The implementation of taboo – specifically around a child’s sexuality – is what creates the sexuality of 8 ½, and it is also one of the central arguments of Foucault.\textsuperscript{258} Outside of the language which power structures give us, we have no tools with which to assess ourselves or sex.\textsuperscript{259} Guido’s sexual and spiritual struggle is a confrontation with this realization, as evidenced by his meeting with a Cardinal who unsatisfyingly tells him that “There is no salvation outside the Church.”\textsuperscript{260}

\textit{La Saraghina}’s status as a prostitute connects her to a larger conversation on women that Fellini has with himself over the course of 8 ½. Early on in the film, when Carla has just arrived, Guido intentionally smears her makeup to make her look “more like a whore” in order to arouse himself.\textsuperscript{261} The prostitutionalization that Guido puts his partner through correlates with Marcello and Maddalena’s stay at a prostitute’s home and Susy’s mentorship of Giulietta, but it also has larger implications because of Guido’s status as a film director. Since, as Metz points out, Guido never completes the film-within-the-film which is supposed to be the centerpiece of 8 ½, Fellini depicts the majority of Guido’s job as having to do with looking at various beautiful women.\textsuperscript{262}

Whether in person, through screen tests, or via headshots, Guido’s work consists of affecting a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[257] Some critics speculated that the title for 8 ½ came not from its being the eighth of Fellini’s films (with a short-film accounting for the half) but from the age at which Fellini had his first sexual experience, one which supposedly occurred on a beach in Rimini with a large prostitute who sold herself to the local fisherman for sardines – “Saraghine” in Italian. Fellini found this explanation fatuous, providing a different age at which he had his initial sexual experience in an interview with Costanzo Costantini. For the critics’ speculation, see: Chandler, \textit{I, Fellini}, 262. For the real life Saraghina, see: Baxter, \textit{Fellini}, 22. For Fellini’s own account of his first sexual experience, see: Costantini, \textit{Fellini on Fellini}, 3.
\item[258] See both the \textit{Hysterization of Women’s Bodies} and the \textit{Pedagogization of Child’s Sex}: Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality Volume I}, 104.
\item[259] Ibid., 152-153.
\item[260] Fellini, \textit{8 ½}, 120.
\item[261] The screenplay refers to Carla’s actions as “she makes the ‘hooker’ face.” Ibid., 57.
\item[262] Metz, “Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8 ½,” 231.
\end{footnotes}
male gaze and little else. At one point, Guido even surrounds himself with actresses’ headshots in a masturbatory fashion when in bed.\textsuperscript{263} His need to control the appearance of women in his life and movie turns him into a cultural pimp, sacrificing female autonomy for the satisfaction of Italy’s misogynistic appetites.

Given the scopophilic tendencies which Guido learns from his encounter from with La Saraghina, Fellini implies that film itself is partially to blame for Guido’s impotence and frustration. During the screen tests at the end of the film, Fellini slips in shots of La Saraghina’s gyrations in between actresses’ auditions for a character who is clearly based on Luisa, Guido’s own wife. This not only blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, but also between prostitution and marriage. As we saw in Giulietta Degli Spiriti and as we shall see in Le Notti Di Cabiria, Fellini often depicted prostitution and marriage as two sides of the same coin.\textsuperscript{264} Luisa is 8½’s most grounded character, a woman who – even in Guido’s own fantasies – refuses to appease Guido’s pretentious machismo. When Guido surreally asserts control over her likeness in the screen tests scene he in essence prostitutes his own wife to the cinema. He also fantasizes about having Daumier executed in this scene, laying bare the mechanics of power-fantasy that Fellini sees underlying the technology of cinema.\textsuperscript{265} Desire, that persistent drive which confounds and entraps Fellini characters, is to blame for all of this. It is Guido’s desire to control himself through women that leads him away from his wife and towards the cinema. The spiritual escape which Guido seeks in his initial dream, the Jungian reunion of the “anima” which “Asa Nisi Masa” references, is perpetually thwarted by desire.\textsuperscript{266}

\textsuperscript{263} Fellini, 8 ½, 133.
\textsuperscript{264} “Catholicism did a great deal to make sex more tantalizing,” Fellini said in prefacing a formative encounter with a prostitute. “at that time, I was such a silly innocent boy, I believed I was in love with her, she whose name I don’t remember, and that she was in love with me, because it felt so good.” Chandler, I, Fellini, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{265} Bondanella, The Cinema of Federico Fellini, 174.
\textsuperscript{266} The “Anima” is Jung’s notion that within every man is an unconscious collection of feminine psychological qualities being repressed. Fellini took strongly to this notion in constructing his male protagonists. Interestingly,
Locating this sense of a constrictive desire allows for a Foucauldian reading of 8 ½’s two most powerful scenes: the Harem sequence and the finale. The Harem fantasy, triggered by Guido’s imagining of a cordial meeting between his wife and mistress, is a raw display of Fellini’s own caustic male ego and the mechanics of desire-repression. Set in the same farmhouse where we had previously seen a young Guido bathed by maternal figures, this fantasy finds Guido surrounded by all of the women of his life. The women coddle and infantilize him until Jacqueline, an aging performer who is to be sent “upstairs” for being too old, provokes an imagined rebellion. In a swirling choreography of camerawork, Fellini stages a theatrical uprising of women against the patriarchal Guido, who breaks out a whip and lashes out at his harem until he has subdued them. Bondanella interprets the women of this scene as representative of “Guido’s anima… distortions of a fully expressed and free feminine character.” Fellini’s understanding of sexual repression, gathered from Jung, is in full swing in the Harem sequence, but underneath it is an even more blatant Foucauldian notion of desire. Guido needs the women in his dreams to resist in order to project an imagined power over them. Despite the show of force, the Harem presents Guido/Fellini at his most pitiful and powerless. The power dynamics of sexuality, as defined for him by the discourses of social institutions, trap Guido even as he seeks to entrap women. He does not understand sex without resistance. In Foucault’s sense, He is incapable of conceiving of sex without law or power without a king.

John C. Stubbs notes that the phrase “Asa Nisi Masa” is extracted from Guido’s subconscious via a magic performance. When we get to Cabiria, we will see this use of magic as a powerful extractor even more explicitly played out in Fellini’s cinema. Stubbs, Federico Fellini as Auteur, 50-52.

Alpert, contradicting what Fellini said in interview with Costantini, describes Fellini’s first sexual experience as a bath given to him by a Nun, forming the inspiration for the earlier bathing scene. Alpert, Fellini: A Life, 17.


The imaginary Luisa explicitly recognizes this, going as far as to say that “He needs to act like this. He does it almost every night.” Fellini, 8 ½, 151.
The finale, a bombastic celebration of spiritual liberation, comes about once Guido has abandoned making his movie. All of the characters of Guido’s life hold hands in a grand parade which winds its way around the empty set of 8 ½’s unfulfilled film-within-a-film. As a medley of 8 ½’s music plays in a circus style, Guido directs everyone, including dead parents and younger versions of himself. Finally, Guido holds hands with Luisa and joins the parade, declaring that he has given up on finding truth and that he now only wishes to live his life. In leaving behind cinema, Guido is also relinquishing his struggle with desire and rejecting the notion that sex will provide him with a vital truth. Fellini’s own interpretation of this ending deviates from classic psychoanalytic notions, as he does not seek to resolve Guido’s neurosis in the final act. Instead, Fellini finds that “at the end of 8 ½ the protagonist realizes that his fear, complexes and anxiety are in fact a kind of wealth.” Without realizing it, Fellini’s conclusion rejects the repressive hypothesis. Guido’s mistake in the Harem was believing that liberation could be achieved through the power mechanisms of sexuality, and the finale serves as Guido’s repudiation of the Harem’s philosophy. “The irony of [sexuality],” Foucault wrote, “is in having us believe that our ‘liberation’ is in the balance.” In recognizing this irony, Guido escapes sexuality’s grip.

8 ½ shows its viewer a man obsessed with undoing society’s sexual repression who ultimately finds that this repression never really mattered. Amarcord shows a society which, though repressed under fascism, is vigorously sexual. Fellini, both in interview and in Amarcord itself, emphasizes Italian fascism as a form of “political puberty,” in which immature and gratuitous eroticism counterintuitively stems from a place of strict regulation and

270 Ibid., 183-191.
271 Costantini, Fellini on Fellini, 59
272 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 17.
273 Ibid., 159.
authoritarianism under the church and state.\(^{274}\) Surveying the provincial society of a coastal resort town much like his own Rimini, Fellini made an Italian film that was unique for its time in its assessment of fascism.\(^{275}\) While his contemporaries made films like *The Conformist*, *The Damned*, 1900, or *Saló*, which characterized fascists as German deviant lunatics hell-bent on destroying the good heterosexual people of Italy, *Amarcord* lays the blame for fascism on the quotidian populations of the “normal” townsfolk who are aroused (in every sense) by the blatant and powerful mechanics of the state.\(^{276}\) Additionally, Fellini consistently argued – in the face of critics’ readings – that the film ought to be read sociologically rather than purely autobiographically.\(^{277}\) Thus *Amarcord* makes a strong case for both the rejection of a traditional repressive hypothesis as well as a refutation of Fellini’s inner pull.

*Amarcord* is a culmination of several prior Fellini efforts. Like 8 ½ and *I Vitelloni*, it combines memory, maturation, and rurality.\(^{278}\) Like *La Dolce Vita* and *Casanova*, it uses a loose narrative to explore and critique a social landscape. *Amarcord* opens on the town’s bonfire celebrating the coming of spring, establishing notions of the public ritual and the normative society.\(^{279}\) Titta, *Amarcord*’s Moraldo-like protagonist, navigates a moronic world of yesteryear in which the rigorous taboos of family and school are challenged daily by a natalist state and

\(^{275}\) In a letter to Gian Luigi Rondi, Fellini stated that *Armacord* was “The story of a place which could be in any region of Italy in the 1930s, under the control of the Church and Fascism” and that “I consider Fascism to be a degeneration at a historical level of an individual season – that of adolescence….” Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini*, 128-129.
\(^{278}\) Stubbs, *Federico Fellini as Auteur*, 70-104.
\(^{279}\) At the bonfire, some townsfolk pull a prank on Giudizio, the town idiot, and almost burn him alive in front of everyone. In keeping with both Foucault and Fellini’s understanding of fascism, mental health is held under the highly public gaze of powerful authorities.
hypersexual town. At home, Titta’s father Aurelio is a loud and mildly violent instiller of order in the style of I Vitelloni’s Francesco, while his mother Miranda is a sympathetic defender of Titta’s juvenility. In school, Titta and his compadres receive dull instruction from humorless schoolmasters underneath portraits of Mussolini, the king, and the pope. Fellini paints the classroom as a coordinated site of both repression and resistance, with Titta and his friends engaging in crude and elaborate pranks (sometimes urinary in nature) to battle with the rigidness of institution. In town, Titta and his fellow teenagers participate in a larger milieu of public sexual immaturity in which Gradisca operates as the scopophilic centerpiece. A rotund Tobacconist, an animalistic nymphomaniac named Volpina, and various unnamed peasant women with fat bottoms all fascinate Titta.

Masturbation is a central socio-sexual mechanic in Amarcord which ties Fellini directly to Foucault while also providing key insights into the nature of power relations within the film. The onanistic potential of Gradisca’s presence as viewed by inexperienced young teenage boys is everywhere to be found in the film, providing a rationale for the director’s gratuitous usage of both sexual memory and fantasy sequences. It is implied that Titta masturbates to the memory that he has of touching Gradisca in the movie theater, as well as to various imagined scenarios of Gradisca seducing fascist officials and exotic sultans at the town’s Grand Hotel. Rumors turn

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280 As Baxter has pointed out, Luigi “Titta” Benzi was a real life friend of Fellini’s growing up in Rimini. Baxter claims that Fellini appropriated his friend’s life and family for Amarcord and Roma because his own life and family were “dull by comparison.” Baxter, Fellini, 20.

281 Many authors have valuable chapters or segments on the sexual fantasies and experiences of the young Fellini and the manner in which they resurface in his films. Baxter’s connects these various women characters to real life Rimini figures. Ibid., 19-29.

282 In Fellini’s own recollection of boyhood, he idealized onanism: “If I had to say what was different about the world of my boyhood and the world of now, I would say it is summed up in the former by the prevalence of masturbation. Masturbation symbolized a different kind of world. It was necessary to use your imagination. Total gratification in real life could not be instantaneous. Woman was mysterious because she was so unattainable – except, of course, for the prostitute, who would probably preside at your experience of initiation, and initiation which would be stupendous because it was hidden and forbidden, and with an emissary of the devil.” Chandler, I, Fellini, 13.
Gradisca’s body into a sort of cultural property for the town’s pent up erotic energies.\textsuperscript{283} Her name, which originates from one imagined encounter at the hotel, literally means “help yourself.”\textsuperscript{284} The masturbatory fervor of \textit{Amarcord}’s repressive fascistic Italian town, and particularly its children, is policed in a manner befitting Foucault’s theories. Foucault wrote that with the rise of a modern sexual knowledge came a pathologization and subjugation of children’s onanism which enlisted the structures of both pedagogy and confession.\textsuperscript{285} In \textit{Amarcord} Fellini presents us with officials of both the church and state who seem unreasonably preoccupied with preventing Titta and his friends from masturbating. At confession, Father Don Balosa tells Titta that “Saint Louis cries when you touch yourself,” and Titta responds that he cannot help but touch himself when he is constantly surrounded with such a sexually charged culture.\textsuperscript{286} In school, the chesty math teacher attempts to discipline students but at the same time arouses them with her body. Thus, masturbation to Fellini is not simply hedonistic pleasure-fulfillment, it is a sort of friction created by the architecture of frustrations produced by a society that is at once provocative and puritanical.\textsuperscript{287}

Masturbation also connects on a fundamental level with \textit{Amarcord}’s interpretation of fascism, as implied by one particularly explicit and comical masturbation scene in which several

\textsuperscript{283} Bondanella’s meditation on this role of Gradisca’s aligns her with \textit{La Dolce Vita}’s Sylvia: “Titta and the rest of the village have transformed Gradisca into an object of mediated desire, since their passion for her is determined by the model of the Hollywood movie star. Gradisca relates to Gary Cooper, her own sexual fantasy, in a similar manner, searching endlessly for the equivalent of a movie star in her own life.” Bondanella, \textit{The Cinema of Federico Fellini}, 274.

\textsuperscript{284} Bondanella, \textit{The Films of Federico Fellini}, 138.

\textsuperscript{285} For more, see Foucault’s detailed description of European boarding schools designed so that instructors could surreptitiously survey sleeping students to ensure they were not masturbating. Foucault, \textit{A History of Sexuality Volume I}, 28-29.

\textsuperscript{286} Bondanella, \textit{The Cinema of Federico Fellini}, 269.

\textsuperscript{287} It is nearly impossible to overstate the significance of masturbation to Foucault in his outlining of a pedagogical sexuality for male children: “by sexualizing childhood, the idea was established of a sex characterized essentially by the interplay of presence and absence, the visible and the hidden; masturbation and the effects imputed to it were thought to reveal in a privileged way this interplay of presence and absence, of the visible and the hidden.” Ibid., 153.
teenage boys masturbate together in a car before the camera abruptly cuts to the film’s lavish fascist parade sequence.\textsuperscript{288} Here, onanism is depicted not merely as a socially-framed practice of desire formation (the boys shout out what they are masturbating to each other), it is also a location of socio-technological sexual synesthesia.\textsuperscript{289} Fellini shoots the car rocking back and forth, its headlights flickering in time with the strokes of the young boys inside, creating both a crude visual joke and a subtle connection between the automobile and male ecstasy. Once more, Fellini centers the automobile as a social technology of self-definition and desire which powerfully conscripts the individual into a matrix of libido in keeping with society at large. The cut from the car to the rally does not frame the masturbating boys as exciting sexual outlaws but instead as puerile wimps produced in collaboration with an immature fascism. The arrival of the \textit{federale} incites a parade in which the entire town participates with enthusiasm. Titta’s priests, teachers, and even his uncle Lallo join the brash procession with gigantic smiles. Various characters turn directly to Fellini’s camera to shout their approval of fascism, with Lallo even screaming about how big Mussolini’s testicles are.

Gradisca responds to the parade in a manner that can really only be described as orgasmic. Similar to her reaction to the arrival of the \textit{SS Rex} off of the town’s coast later in the film, the disciplined coordination and proud uniforms of \textit{Il Duce}’s Italians send the town sexpot into a paroxysm of hysterical pleasure complete with moaning salutes.\textsuperscript{290} Performed fascism becomes a focal point for desire formation, and Gradisca’s sexual role as a town figure articulates a fascism that is not merely repressive but erotically powerful. Fellini strengthens his

\textsuperscript{288} Bonnigal, “Fellini’s \textit{Amarcord}: Variations on the Libidinal Limbo of Adolescence,” 140.
\textsuperscript{289} Lauren Rosewarne, \textit{Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self} (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 149.
\textsuperscript{290} Gradisca’s desire to reach out and touch the \textit{Rex}, a technological fetish of the fascist power, connects back to Williams’ notion of the cinesexual touch, especially because Fellini clearly used a hyper-fake model of the ocean liner for the shooting of this scene. Millicent Marcus, “Fellini’s \textit{Amarcord}: Film as Memory,” \textit{Quarterly Review of Film Studies} 2, no. 4 (1977): 418–425.
interpretation of fascism’s sexual discourse with one of the most Foucauldian scenes in all of his cinema, following up the parade with a disciplined demonstration in which children perform a rifle routine in synchronicity. The scene dissolves into pure fantasy when Ciccio, Titta’s fat little schoolboy friend, reimagines the demonstration as a wedding between himself and his crush, Aldina, officiated by Mussolini’s gigantic head. Though a clear commentary on the natalism of the fascist state and the complicity of other institutions (the head is made out of carnations, a nod to Don Balosa’s role as the town flower arranger), it is not a stretch to see Ciccio’s fantasy as another form of a masturbation scene. Ciccio’s imaginative childhood sexuality appropriates the forms of fascism and marriage to make his desire conform to power. Like Guido, he is incapable of conceiving of sex without law or power without a king. At the end of Amarcord, Gradisca is married off to a local police officer of the fascist state, conclusively tying the public sexual discourse that her body is located within to power.

The role of the family is situated awkwardly against the fascist regime of Amarcord’s inept townsfolk, and the way in which Fellini leaves this tension unresolved once again allows Foucauldian notions of medicinal and familial policing of sexuality to seep into the narrative. Lallo, who lives with Titta and his family, rats out Aurelio for having been an anarchist. The fascists force Titta’s father to drink castor oil as punishment, implicating medicine as a direct

291 See Foucault’s writings on the regulation of the body in Discipline and Punish: “The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’.” Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 170-194.
292 Foucault interprets Nazism as “a eugenic ordering of society, with all that implied in the way of extension and intensification of micro-powers, in the guise of an unrestricted state control.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 149-150.
293 Also worth noting is the fantasy sequence based on the town rumor that Gradisca gave herself to a fascist official at the Grand Hotel to secure government funds for the town’s harbor, which performs a similar objectifying function on Gradisca. Burke, Fellini’s Films, 209-210.
294 “Educators and doctors combatted children’s onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated,” Foucault says, tying back to earlier “What this actually entailed, throughout this whole secular campaign that mobilized the adult world around the sex of children, was using these tenuous pleasures as a prop, constituting them as secrets (that is, forcing them into hiding so as to make possible their discovery)... an entire medico-sexual regime took hold of the family milieu.” Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 42.
instrument of power. This is the furthest extent to which Fellini is willing to portray fascists as cruel or terrifying rather than infantile and absurd in *Amarcord*, and the family never suffers any real repercussions from the episode.

Titta’s petit bourgeois relatives, like his fascistic neighbors and overbearing schoolteachers, create a discourse around sexuality that enlists the individual. Titta’s grandfather constantly bemoans the loss of his own sexual ability while making passes at the maid while Lallo and his *Vitelloni* friends cruise the grand hotel for women, the two men embodying classic Fellini figures of arrested male development. Aurelio and Miranda, through their abrasive confrontations over their son’s behavior, implicitly battle for Titta’s sexual soul. The result is an archetype-heavy portrait of the Italian family painted in Fellini’s distinct hand which expects from Titta both confession and compliance in regards to sexuality. In one episode of the film, Aurelio retrieves his brother Teo from an insane asylum and takes him out with Titta’s family to the countryside, where Teo climbs a tree and screams “I want a woman!” repeatedly. He is retrieved from his perch by nuns.\(^{295}\) Fellini, like Foucault, returns again and again to the sexuality of the asylum and the sexual health of the individual. Foucault cites the work of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot to prove a collaboration between clinical institutions and familial powers in enacting a sexual mental health to police, and Fellini’s portrayal of Teo’s madness overlaps with this notion.\(^{296}\) Fellini’s lifelong obsessions with sexual desire and insanity intersect at the crossroads of medicine and family, as *Amarcord* proves.\(^{297}\)

\(^{295}\) As Edward Murray points out, both Aurelio and a male nurse refer to Teo’s condition as one which oscillates between “normal” and “not normal,” suggesting that psychological health is a matter of adhering to norms. Murray, *Fellini: The Artist*, 221.

\(^{296}\) Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 111-112.

\(^{297}\) See Fellini’s comments about mental illness and other deviance: “People have deformed ideas about deformity. We are taught to look away from what is deemed ugly, and we are taught through words and by example what we should perceive as ugly.” Chandler, *I. Fellini*, 242-243.
Amarcord and 8 ½ make a problem out of desire-based liberation by making the mechanics of social eroticism their subject matter. Putting into practice many themes and techniques established in prior films, Fellini returns to his Catholic roots in these films and in so doing discovers that repression and desire form a bipartisan politics of sexuality which dominate the individual and make liberation nearly impossible. Guido’s cinema and Titta’s town are both instances wherein social technologies render desire on the desirer’s behalf. Women in these films are carrots on sticks, dangled in front of men so that men will continue to pull the entire apparatus of desire forever. Ritual and discipline, implemented by mothers, fathers, priests, governments, and movies, form the backbone of a self-defeating eros that can never satisfy itself even as it attempts to escape the repressions imposed upon it. 8 ½ and Amarcord show power and desire in cahoots.

Foucault wrote that “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”298 This is what Guido realizes at the end of 8 ½ which allows him to march in harmony with life. Fellini, whether he knew it or not, made films which realize that seeking pleasure outside of desire is the only route to freedom. “What I care about most,” Fellini wrote, “is the freedom of man, the liberation of the individual man from the network of moral and social conventions in which he believes, or rather in which he thinks he believes, and which encloses him and limits him and makes him seem narrower, smaller, sometimes even worse than her really is.”299 This sentiment could be seen as endorsing a repressive hypothesis, yet Fellini’s films offer a route to liberation that does not require struggle against a repressive system. Instead, the maestro outlines unique escape routes in his movies, showing his viewers how freedom is attained not through rebellion but acceptance.

Conclusion: Fellini, Foucault, Feminism

This thesis has proven that a feminist Foucauldian perspective on sexuality in Fellini’s movies is simultaneously indebted to and usurping of prior scholarship done on the director’s work. By focusing their theories around Jungian traditionalism and the question of reality vs. representation in Fellini’s films, previous critics have submitted to Fellini’s inner pull in the process of forming their theories. Fellini’s psychology, his personal life, and his own authorial intent have guided us towards a narrow reading of the sensuous eroticism at play in his movies, a reading which overemphasizes the latter half of the director’s career and ignores the possibility of a legitimate post-structural analysis. Such a reading neglects the subtle sexual nuance which emerges from Fellini’s screen, viewing the institutions portrayed in his films as rigorously repressive while understanding his spiritually downtrodden characters as protagonists in a struggle for desire-based liberation. Fellini’s own notions of purity and repression support this reading, yet the maestro consistently cautioned viewers against taking his own opinions into account. Fellini understood that his films exist beyond himself, and he encouraged us to extend revitalizing new looks towards his cinema even as he ridiculed the intellectual work done on it.300

This is what connects Michel Foucault and Federico Fellini on a fundamental level – that despite producing verbose and specific literature on sex and sexuality, both men’s perspectives on the subjects are easily misunderstood. The apparent incompatibility of Fellini’s views on institutional sexual repression and his commitment to a continued Catholic spiritualism

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300 “I work in such an isolated state that I don’t give a thought to critical opinion,” Fellini once told Costanzo Costantini, “It’s extraneous to the germination of my ideas and their cinematographic realization.” Costantini, Fellini on Fellini, 55.
bewilders most of his acolytes.\textsuperscript{301} One might chalk this hypocrisy up to a meek Fellini’s unwillingness to totally abandon the religion that shaped him, but this discounts the extent to which Fellini’s Catholicism is compatible with and even necessary for the liberationist tendencies that take hold of his cinema. In a similar misconstruing, the value of Foucault’s theory on the role of social power in shaping sexuality is often misidentified by readers as falling into the unending debate over whether or not sexuality itself is socially constructed. Foucault detested this question. When asked in an interview whether he viewed homosexuality as an “innate predisposition” or as an orientation brought about by “social conditioning,” Foucault testily replied “On this question I have absolutely nothing to say.”\textsuperscript{302} Based on his films, Fellini almost certainly believed that sexuality was an inherent energy within the individual which was held back by repressive social institutions. Based on his writings, Foucault almost certainly believed that sexuality was built out of the discourses created by a vast network of social powers. However, these two conflicting beliefs are actually shallow distractions from a larger point of agreement between Fellini and Foucault.

What matters to both men is the primacy and the fallacy of sexuality as a category for assessing the individual in our modern society. Much of this thesis has dwelt upon the details of how Fellini depicts social institutions and powers operating upon the sexualities of his characters, but the important takeaway from all of this should not be that Fellini believed sexuality was holistically formed by power – he did not. Rather, what should be discerned from all these instances of sexual instruction and institutionalism in Fellini’s cinema is that the director was deeply concerned with the rationale of a modern Italian society which is so

\textsuperscript{301} La Dolce Vita’s opening, heavy with Christian symbolism, often provokes such bewilderment. Costello, Fellini’s Road, 72-74. See also: Pasolini, “The Catholic Irrationalism of Fellini,” 64-73.

intimately concerned with the sexuality and desires of individuals. This institutionalized sexuality which governs through social power is why Cabiria seeks marriage, Marcello wants sex with a movie star, and Wanda wants her fantasies to come true. Fellini and Foucault recognize in modern sexuality a codification of desire which, through imperceptible power relations, “penetrates and controls everyday pleasure” through a system that entails both refusal and incitement of pleasure. This is the tension at play when Gelsomina gazes upon the rural wedding scene in La Strada knowing that her mental abnormality and economic inability will never allow her such a legitimate pleasure. The institutional channeling of desire and pleasure is what burdens Guido with ennui, blocking his creative process and flooding his imaginary with retrogressive hypersexual fantasies. “The society that emerged in the nineteenth century – bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will – did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition.” Foucault emphasizes, “On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it.” Fellini finds this machinery in Amarcord’s movie theater and parade ground, in I Vitelloni’s festivals and homes, and in Giulietta Degli Spiriti’s assemblage of performative fantasies.

Michel Foucault’s lesser volumes in The History of Sexuality, despite dwelling mostly on Ancient Greek and later Roman eras of history, prove that he and Fellini were kindred spirits in the analysis of sexuality and society.

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303 Foucault, The History of Sexuality Volume I, 11.
304 Ibid., 69.
305 The second two volumes of Foucault’s History of Sexuality should be digested with a healthy level of skepticism due to their rough and unedited nature. Foucault introduces the second volume with a guilty admission: “This series of studies is being published later than I had anticipated, and in a form that is altogether different.” Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), 3.
306 Martha C. Nussbaum, reviewing The Use of Pleasure for The New York Times, was even more candid than Foucault: “The Use of Pleasure, the second of four volumes in Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality is both mediocre and a departure from views about the inseparability of ideas from social institutions that have been his
Casanova, by depicting lavish orgies of the rich and powerful in the 1st, 18th, and 20th centuries, plug Fellini’s Italian cinesexuality into a grand historical narrative of social power that insists upon a continuity between Roman and Catholic Italian civilizations. Likewise, Foucault insists at the conclusion of his second volume of the history of sexuality that “If one wanted to assign an origin to those few great themes that shaped our sexual morality (the idea that pleasure belongs to the dangerous domain of evil, the obligation to practice monogamous fidelity, the exclusion of partners of the same sex), not only would it be a mistake to attribute them to that fiction called “Judeo-Christian” morality, it would be a bigger mistake to look behind them for the timeless operation of prohibition, or the permanent form of law.”

Foucault’s opening to The Care of the Self fits even more snuggly in with Fellini’s outlook on sex. It breaks down in depth the role of sexual fantasies and images in Artemidorus’ The Interpretation of Dreams, a second century Roman text. Though neither of the second two volumes of The History of Sexuality is as theoretically useful or thematically relevant to Foucault’s overarching argument, their loose assemblage of ancient subject matter and consistent interrogation of power and desire across eras give them much in common with Fellini’s films.

Canadian film scholar Peter Harcourt, in the preface to Suzanne Budgen’s excellent 1966 book of criticism on Fellini, flirted with the dichotomy between realism and transcendent

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307 Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 251.
308 “The sexual dream uses the little drama of penetration and passivity, pleasure and expenditure, to tell the subject’s mode of being, as destiny has arranged it,” Foucault wrote of Artemidorus’ work. Such a description also befits Guido’s fantasies, Casanova’s life, and the contents from Fellini’s own dream journal. Michel Foucault, The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986), 33.
309 The Use of Pleasure and The Care of The Self are bitter texts for Foucault enthusiasts, as they were published after Foucault’s death from AIDS in 1984. The volumes, which were intended to extend out to six but which only ever reached three, seem to contradict the chronology and direction of much of his prior historical theory on sexuality. “At times, one has the impression of reading a working draft which should later have been completed and stylistically embellished.” biographer David Macey says of the second two volumes in a chapter titled “An Unfinished Life.” David Macey, The Lives of Michel Foucault (London: Pantheon Books, 1993), 466-471.
autobiographical fantasy which would later become a staple issue of Fellini academia. “On a pedestrian level,” he wrote “Fellini’s films derive from Neorealism… But on another level, Fellini seems more to belong to that great family of artists whose work transcends its social origins.” This thesis, by centering the theory of Michel Foucault, assumes a stance on Fellini’s cinesexuality which resists the binary between real and imagined, as well as the binary between repression and liberation. Harcourt’s preamble seems to fall in opposition to this stance, but at its conclusion it recognizes the fundamental value of artists like Fellini. “By looking into themselves,” he writes, “they have discovered the world.”

No matter the direction of his camera’s gaze, Federico Fellini was always engaged in the process of world-discovery. It is this quality of his work which lends his films both feminist and post-structural potential. In gazing at sexuality, Fellini captured the full range of power as it operated on individuals in Italy. Though he did not fully understand the Foucauldian implications of his work, he made films that problematized desire, which shone a spotlight on society’s controlling obsession with sex, and that implicated a wide variety of institutions in a powerful conspiracy governing the individual. Fellini’s stories show us what Foucault’s writings could only describe: that one’s sexuality is prescribed by innumerable forces containing arbitrary powers. The church and the school, the parent and the child, the movie theater and the city square, the prostitute and the wife, desire and reality, all of these places and things service as small theaters into which the power of sexuality is projected. Fellini’s camera takes us directly to them. In the opening of 8 ½, Fellini’s Guido escapes from a nightmarish traffic jam of social and carnal exhibitionism to float loftily above the earth. At the end of La Dolce Vita Marcello

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310 J. Peter Harcourt, Preface to Fellini, by Suzanne Budgen (London: The British Film Institute Education Department, 1966), 5.
311 Ibid.
wanders away from an orgy to stare at the endless waves of the ocean. Only in moments of solitude and detachment – often beside the ocean – can Fellini’s characters comprehend the extent to which sex has driven every element of their lives, and the powerlessness that has resulted from their capitulation to sex. Their lives, captured on celluloid, are cinematic sexual confessions unabashedly created by a filmmaker who wishes, in the words of Guido, to look us all in the eyes without shame.\textsuperscript{312} Foucault, Fellini, and feminism reveal to us the structures that create this feared shame, and in combining them we can see the full range of both power and liberation.

\textsuperscript{312} Federico Fellini, \textit{8 ½}, 183.
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