

## Fellini Goes To The Beach

George Porcari (*Cineaction* 75 2008)



Characters in Fellini's films often end up at the beach where they seem to arrive at some sort of self-realization that is intuitive and physical; the relationship between them and the sea seems to act as a catalyst for a certain kind of knowledge. The ocean—after so much art photography and film—has come to symbolize “nature”, the “eternal”, the “origin of life”. The sea is always the same and never the same; it is beautiful and terrifying; it is sublime and banal; ripples that last a few seconds on film suggest a geologic time that stretches back beyond our common human history. Yet paradoxically the sea is always absolutely physically present as a particular place: St Tropez in the 1960s is not the same as Liverpool in the 1930s. Location and seasonal referents are not the only ways we read images of the sea. The photographic emulsion used also figures in the equation of how an image feels and what time period it seems to belong to. It is impossible in that sense to see the sea—once it is represented we must see it through a variety of cultural conventions that have their own baggage and emotional connotations. But what is the nature of this realization,

this knowledge that characters in Fellini's films experience when they see the sea? What happens to Zampano at the end of *La Strada*? What is going on with Marcello as he shrugs his shoulders and slouches away in *La Dolce Vita*? What does Leopoldo's sexual panic in *Il Vitelloni* mean when it takes place by the sea? What is Saraghina's wild dance on the sand in *8 1/2* about?

Fellini's work was, as he said in an interview, very much informed from his reading of Jung that influenced much of his work in the studio from *8 1/2* to *The Voice of the Moon*, his final feature film. It was at that point that he started to consciously create archetypes on the set, rather than go to a location and film the passing moment. That is, the "ocean" rather than a particular seashore at a particular place and time. This sense of the essentialist, the absolute, which is found in the archetype, is the opposite of a realist tendency in which a temporal material reality in the present tense is all there is. Both tendencies are to be found in Fellini throughout his work and he seems to favor one or the other depending on the material. Yet his body of work does have a trajectory: it moves from his beginnings in Neo-Realism up to *La Strada* then shifts to favoring archetypal studio creations, from *Juliet of the Spirits* onwards. *La Dolce Vita* and *8 1/2* straddle both worlds, and in part for that very reason may be his most interesting films. Yet the sea in *The White Sheik*, an early work, is totally theatrical despite the fact that it was shot on location, because of the context, while the sea at the end of *Satyricon*, a middle period work, is very real—in a documentary sense—and gives weight to the fantastic narrative. So in effect there is no clearly systematic approach that one can use to understand Fellini's use of the ocean in his work—let us then look at individual works.

In *The White Sheik* the variety shows actors are on a beach that is highly individualized as belonging to the Mediterranean world. The fantastic sight of the Sheik in full costume creates a dichotomy between his theatrical poses, his artificiality, his buffoonery and the naturalness of the landscape. The landscape in effect puts into question the Sheik's integrity, it creates a context that enables us to see through the façade of a pompous playboy in a way that the character of the young woman who lusts after him cannot. When we see the Sheik rocking on a gigantic swing—his sex prominently seen from below—we know we are seeing him through her eyes. At the same time the swing turns the Sheik into a boy playing with exotic costumes and children's toys. Her lust becomes both comical—because it is based on a fantasy image that we can see through—and moving because the ocean turns her sexual need into an archetype of fertility. It is nature itself expressing itself through cultural conventions. Her passion for the Sheik has historical roots in Western culture. In the early 20th century "eastern" looking males and females could be overtly sexualized—as was the case with Valentino and Pola Negri in the Hollywood of the twenties—in a way not available to westerners in the popular arts. Theirs was a mythical personae that was free, sensual and given fully to the taking and the giving of pleasure without guilt. This fantasy is a powerful sexual stimulus to the imagination throughout western history, from Delacroix's imaginative "Persia"—created in Paris, to Josef Von Sternberg's "Shanghai"—created in the deserts of Los Angeles.

The Sheik's persona as a Latin lover is already dated by 1952—the year Fellini

made his film. The Sheik—as a cultural artifact—finished his days in provincial variety shows and the photo-serials that are the subject of the film. Fellini would—from the beginning—show enormous sympathy for his characters and allow us to see the world through their eyes, while simultaneously using landscapes as a counterpoint to their cultural prejudices and their acceptance of social conventions. The film charts their passions and the role that fantasy—unbeknownst to them—plays in their search for love and fulfillment.

In *La Strada* the seashore at the end of the film into which Zampano sheds his tears is a particular ocean, although we see only a small segment of it because it is night, the waves that wash up behind Zampano's body as he looks around helplessly on his knees are shot realistically using high contrast black and white film. The rhythm of this ocean, the sounds it makes, and the emotional exchange between this particular part of the ocean with this character create a whole world into which we may not only "read" but feel Zampano's loss. Gelsomina—his ex-partner is someone that he in a sense both liberates from poverty and emotionally devastates. The only clue that she ever existed is the song that she sings throughout the film and that she has passed on to the woman that took care of her towards the end of her life. Recognizing that song is how Zampano begins the process of recognizing his own loss. When he drunkenly screams to some men throwing him out of a bar that he doesn't need anyone, we know it is not true in large part because the ocean is there as a reminder of Gelsomina's truth: in nature needing others is a biological necessity. The landscape at night makes Zampano's isolation dramatically intense because it reiterates Gelsomina's emotional needs without ever making them explicit. The ocean here functions not so much metaphorically—as in the sentence "an ocean of tears" but rather metonymically: The ocean is both organic and fertile and a void of black space of nothingness. The two brilliantly fuse and we sense the interconnectedness of life and death, not in any obvious way, but as an inevitable conclusion to our understanding of Zampano's temperament and how it led to his failure to connect with the one person that cared for him.

At the end of *La Dolce Vita* there is a contrast between the seashore, which is as real as the one in *La Strada*, and the monstrous fish that washes up on it, which is an archetype for the pre-historic gelatinous origins of man; fertile and feminine, grotesquely stuffed with other fish, it is dead, yet its one eye still "looking" at the guilty Marcello and his bored party of Moderns. Fellini brilliantly assembles what look like partygoers in an Antonioni film that has gone on too long—walking in a daze toward the beach as if to renew themselves. What they find is a monster that brings with it a sense of geological time, in which the brevity of human life is forcefully expressed; it is a memento mori from the depths of the ocean. The subtle interplay between the waves, which are real, and the sound of the wind, which is not, magnificently intertwines realism and archetypes into a seamless artistic reality.

The one moment in *La Dolce Vita* where we see Marcello working as a writer happens at the beach in an open cabana style restaurant. There is a jukebox playing contemporary pop music and there is a girl that looks to Marcello like "an angel in an Umbrian church". While cleaning (a running motif in Fellini's

work: the woman that brings order and harmony) the girl expresses her modest aspirations to find a better job as a typist in Rome. Marcello looks sardonic and amused but also sympathetic. In a sense the "angel" wants to participate in the process of writing however modest—this modesty both distinguishes her from the other characters in the film and draws attention to Marcello's sense of entitlement divorced from any hard work. The empty restaurant radiant with "natural light", the sounds of the nearby beach, the pop music that suddenly starts and stops all convey an atmosphere of radiant health, (physical and psychic) of youth, of promise. It is the one moment where the film pauses as if to catch it's breath as Marcello regards the profile of the "angel". The young girl is also at the beach at the end of the film separated from Marcello and his party by a shallow inlet. She seems to be invisible to all but Marcello; they make an attempt to communicate over the sound of the ocean but fail. Finally the girl uses her hands to signify "walking together". Marcello can't or won't understand her meaning—his body language suggests that he is exhausted and resigned—he doesn't cross the small body of water between them to reach her—he slumps to his knees and shrugs his shoulders—essentially throwing away that gift. The girl is associated with his talent, with his integrity, with the best part of him. His inability to communicate—the essential theme of the film—is also an inability to communicate with his own muse or his own voice. Fellini chooses one particularly banal moment one that Marcello might not even remember in a few months: finding a girl on a beach and choosing not to go walking with her as the privileged moment where we see him throw his creative life away. His shrug says essentially "I don't have it in me to be a writer, but it doesn't matter, nothing does". Fellini is a moralist who understands that a choice is being made. That choice—in an almost moral/religious sense—is at the heart of Fellini's work. For Marcello at that moment all is lost—and his loss is not only personal but belongs to a whole post-war generation who sold their promise—as we see also in Antonioni's *La Notte*—for a place in the corporate technocracy that was then in the process of being formed. *La Dolce Vita* (a title Fellini always insisted was never meant ironically) ends with a close-up of the girl waving goodbye—to Marcello and then to us. The sound of wind and surf fill the soundtrack because they belong together with that image, as much as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* is linked to the ocean—and to fertility—so the "angel from an Umbrian church" is linked to the sea—and to renewal through faith. Her smile is forcefully innocent—asserting that innocence in a physical way as a rejoinder to Marcello's shrug. It is the yes to Marcello's no.

Fellini also pushes archetypes to the point at which they are in dialogue with each other as also happens in the films of the French New Wave—despite their obvious differences they have a playful self-reflexivity in common. Let's see when Fellini also "lays bare" the technique and the artifice: *And The Ship Sails On* ends with a sequence where we see how the various sets, including the ship itself, have been built. We see the workers in overalls operating the hydraulics that control the machinery that creates the illusion of movement. We see behind the facades that are made of plywood and have nothing behind them but sand bags on the floor to keep them from toppling. We see artifice. Fellini shows us these devices not because he wishes to expose our foolishness (you thought the boat was real but you see it's all fake!) for the obvious reason that the theatrical

aspect of these archetypes was clear from the beginning. We knew it was a fake—Fellini understands that we are able to suspend disbelief and critically see through our own suspension at the same time. Godard plays with our abilities in much the same way in *Une Femme Est Une Femme* where the characters slip into and out of the genre of the Hollywood musical while Godard uses various devices such as direct address to the audience, sudden shifts in lighting to highlight the artificiality of the form. In Godard and in Fellini's work the scenes in which we see the machinery of illusions is simply one more pleasure added to those already served, it is the dessert at the end of the meal.

In *Il Vitelloni* a very young Leopoldo is horrified when he is propositioned by an older "man of the theatre". The scene takes place by a provincial Italian beach. Fellini grew up in Rimini, an Italian town on the coast that he re-creates in various films—most spectacularly in *Amarcord*. The landscape in *Il Vitelloni* again acts as a counterpoint to Leopoldo's panic as he confronts sexual feelings that he cannot understand so he flees. His panic belies his professional aspirations to be a playwright—that is to in some way understand the human condition—as he is not able to come to terms with his lack of experience, his fears and doubts. The ocean acts as a sounding board to the scene, suggesting the playing out of such scenarios throughout human history and gives a perspective that, for different reasons, the young man in a panic and the older man laughing, both lack. Leopoldo's dream of success in the theater crumbles away as he runs from the one person who can help him. The older man's laughter and the sound of the sea intermingle and follow Leopoldo back to his life as *Il Vitelloni*.

In *Amarcord* the townspeople who go out to meet the Ocean Liner "The Rex" as the sun sets—from the blind accordion player to the young woman searching for her "Gary Cooper"—like Leopoldo carry their dreams of fulfillment literally to the sea. The scene is shot in a studio and the ocean liner is a prop making us conscious throughout the proceedings that we are seeing something constructed. When "The Rex" finally makes an appearance it is night. The ocean liner is seen as a vast dark mass threatening and mysterious—theatrically lit and magnified out of all proportion by the scope of the aspirations of the townspeople on dingies and small fishing boats. The cruise ship, essentially a luxury hotel with an engine that moves it across water, beautifully plays off the working skiffs and homemade boats that barely hold the dreamers in *Amarcord*. The vast gulf between classes has never been more beautifully expressed—certainly not by any Marxist works. The reason Fellini is so successful is that his primary interest is the emotional content of the scene rather than the ideological ramifications of it. The variety of individual responses to the sheer overabundant wealth of "The Rex" is something that he orchestrates beautifully creating a kind of chamber work for voices—working people and their aspirations—with the counterpoint being the vast funnel-like siren of "The Rex"—the sound of a triumphant machine. The two kinds of sounds intermingle with the sound of the water and the wind bringing the orchestration of sounds—the Wagnerian pomposity of "The Rex" and the Mozartian humor of the fishing boats towards the sublime. The ocean liner leaves a series of waves behind it causing the small boats to rock and bring the dreamers back to their reality: being in the ocean at night just outside of a small town to which they must return.

In *City of Women* the young woman strolling with feigned casualness to her cabana is obviously in an indoor set. The flat ocean behind her and the overly polished, highly composed theatrical props tell us that this ocean is not in a particular time or place—it is meant to stand in for all oceans and this woman is Woman standing in for all women throughout all times and all places, and the boys prowling around her are standing in for all boys who have just discovered their own sexual feelings as well as for all the myths associated with the awakening of sexuality. With archetypes the symbolic comes forward and the scene becomes immediately a metaphor. The characters, reduced to highly organized and symbolic *tableaux vivants*, become merely a part of the symbolic order being illustrated. That symbolic system becomes the central focus of the work rather than the emotional content of the narrative. Unfortunately archetypes more often than not reduce complex realities to the simplicity of an essence—a concept—that organizes the world for us and reduces it to a cliché. Albeit the archetypes in Fellini's work are seen through the prism of early 20th century burlesque, with which Fellini grew up and to which he remained faithful throughout his career. The cultural weight of archetypes cannot be supported for long before becoming simply "the fantastic" or "the sublime" or "the grotesque". In short they become illustration—the image is bound to the Idea or the concept—and never comes to life—its poetics are flattened out as in advertising or conceptual art. In *City of Women* the metaphorical images congeal the moment they are projected and not even Fellini's sense of humor can save them.

Saraghina's dance on the beach in Fellini's *8 1/2* is awkward—really full of ridiculous gestures, embarrassing mannerisms—yet also beautiful, erotic and touching. The sea sparkles intensely behind her, refracting light as if we were seeing everything through a prism aimed directly at the sun. We see a woman—who is and is not "Woman"—weighed down by flesh, by matter, playing at being a Goddess. Again we are reminded of the Birth of Venus but now brought into a harsh unforgiving light that mocks the fantasy and reveals both its sordidness and its innocence. Only a child would fall for it—so she performs for children—and for us. The boys in tight constricting uniforms that make them look like little policemen with capes are the perfect foil for the barely dressed Saraghina. The fact that she is comfortable with her body—with her mortality—with the awkwardness of the erotic—that she takes pleasure in being in her own skin—that her attitude exudes (as with the "Umbrian Angel") psychic and physical well being makes her the enemy of the priests. This is because she has discovered that the creative links between imagination and erotic play lead not only to pleasure but to a communion with fellow humans that is essential. For the priests such an acceptance of fleeting mortal pleasures throws their very teleology into doubt. Saraghina is the Devil—the priest tell the children—and they mean it. They are the ones that pull Marcello down at the beginning of the film as he flies—falling to earth. The whole film might be that "fall" with a redemptive coda at the end of reconciliation and acceptance. In that wild dance on the beach Edra Gale—who plays Saraghina—and Fellini—tell us more about our self-delusions, our hopes, our mortal and moral limits than countless essays and philosophical tracts could ever accomplish. How we look when we dance and are pulled down by gravity (perhaps the defining essence of movement in film)

has never been more beautifully expressed. On the soundtrack during the screen tests near the end of *8 1/2* we hear Fellini whispering: "Saraghina..." calling to her as when he was a boy. Fellini in effect returns the favor—sexual pleasure linked to imaginative play—that Saraghina once gave him. That sense of freedom linked to an eroticized imagination is a gift Fellini is able to give back to us—in the film *8 1/2*.

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