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8 1/2

1963

Directed by Federico Fellini; screenplay by Fellini, Ennio Flaiano Tullio Pinelli; cinematography by Gianni Di Venanzo; music by Nino Rota. with, Marcello Mastroianni, Anouk Aimee, Claudia Cardinale, Barbara Steele.

8 1/2 is usually sold as the "winner of an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language Film, Fellini's masterpiece, and one of the most personal films ever made." What they don't tell you is that it is usually a difficult film to understand and, unless some of the vagaries are cleared away, one leave the film with a sense of bewilderment rather than enchantment. First of all, the film is titled 8 1/2 because, up to the time of shooting, Fellinio had made precisely 7 films and 2 episodes. Moreover, what could seem more natural than to call a film which is purely autobiographical simply his 8 1/2 film?

This then is a film about Federico Fellini and, as Federico Fellini is a film director the narrative deals with the struggle of a film director (Marcello Mastroianni) trying to put ideas together to make his next film. At the beginning of the film we find him pressured and on the verge of collapse. He retreats to a spa where he can find the peace to collect his physical and mental energy. He, like all of us, is constantly interpreting his world for what it is in real life and (because he is a film director) for what it could be on the screen. The structure of the film then is much the same; there are several realities. There is the present, there are the memories of childhood and parents long dead, there are the daydreams which magically solve problems (one lovely moment when Mastroianni reconstructs the reality of the awful meeting between his wife and his mistress) and, as an extension of the daydream, there is the world of the creative imagination which includes fleeting glimpses of his muse, the girl in white, who when finally met is far less appealing than her image. Many of the details in images and themes will of course be lost on anyone who is not familiar with Fellini's earlier works. But, at the same time, his central conflicts are as clear here as in any of his previous films: the frustrations of Catholicism-guilt-sexuality, the interdependence of dream and reality, the compromise between intellect and sensuality (here embodied by wife and mistress). The genius of 8 1/2 then is not so much that it introduces any new concepts from Fellini's vision but that it integrates the separate themes and their respective realities into a whole which is at once intelligible and complete. Correspondingly, the joy of watching 8 1/2 comes not so much from profound concepts as from the way in which basic concepts like sex, religion, memory, fantasy and reality interreact with each other on the screen just as they seem to in our day-to-day lives.

J.H.