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# Stanley Kauffmann on films

## Amarcord

(New World)

For Federico Fellini, differing with Eliot, April is a bittersweet month, but it still mixes memory and desire. In April, when the puffballs float through the air, his new film begins—in the town of Rimini, presumably, where he was born; and it ends a presumable year later as they float again. Within the year he has given us an album—"Amarcord" is local dialect for "I remember"—rich with memory and desire for memory and memory of desire. He has remembered it all so feelingly and so well that, like all memoirs made with good art, we possess it at once. It becomes our past too.

His past has always been unusually potent for Fellini. The best film of his early realistic days was *I Vitelloni*, also presumably set in Rimini. The most authentic moment for me in *La Dolce Vita* was the visit of the hero's father, who brought to Rome the touch of such a town. Lately Fellini has been sidling toward a real confrontation with his youth, to some effect in *The Clowns*, to much less effect in *Roma*. Now, as other artists have done in other arts, he has finally faced the matters that have been haunting him all his adult life, nagging to get into his work, and he has given them a whole film. He has long been a supreme stylist of his own style; now this total surrender to his ghosts has provided the best chance to use that style since the masterly *8 1/2*. *Amarcord* is lovely.

This time Fellini has made firmly the esthetic choice he was fiddling with in *The Clowns* and *Roma*: he has discarded narrative and opted for character and texture. Americans may think of *Winesburg, Ohio* or *Spoon River Anthology* or, in moments where the camera is addressed, of *Our Town*; but the basic decision was to ingest a literary process into cinema, as—quite differently—Antonioni has done. It can hardly be a coincidence that his collaborator on the script was Tonino Guerra, the novelist and poet who has often worked with Antonioni but, I think, never before

with Fellini.

At the beginning the puffballs float through the town square; at the end, after a wedding party on the town beach a year later, the puffballs float out to sea. The year between is in the 1930s. We see: the teachers in the school (an especially superb series of vignettes), the adolescent schoolboys including of course a lovelorn fat one, the town vamps, the town ladykillers, the priest, the local film-theater manager (called "Ronald Colman" who laughingly concedes his imitation), the balloon-breasted lady tobacconist about whom the boys fantasize, the local fascist leaders and the visit of a bigwig fascist from Rome, an unidentified motorcyclist who vrooms through once in a while, a visit to a local insane asylum, local grandeur, local misery. A lawyer, something like Wilder's Stage Manager, talks to us about the town once in a while. Every person of any consequence is seen more than once: with some of them there is development through the year, changes in their lives; with others, their lives simply become familiar to us. There is no protagonist, but in aggregate the film tells us most about a boy of 15 or 16, (possibly Fellini), his socialist father and his strong mother who love each other by arguing with each other, his neat little libidinous grandfather, his younger brother, his lounge-lizard uncle.

Every person in the film, if there only for a second, is superbly *seen*. It is Fellini's ability to *see* them that tells us all we need to know about them, more interesting and pertinent than dossiers. The town's "hot number," Gradisca (played by Magali Noel), is never grounded in family or job; but she is seen so vividly, so affectionately, so tellingly, that we don't want her data: we have her being, her pathos, her pride, her red beret almost vertical on the left side of her head, her behind in her tight skirt knocking the men dead as she walks up the street. The old blind accordionist who turns up at all festivals and parties, why is he so terribly bad-tempered? I have no idea, except that it's marvelously anti-sentimental to have an old blind accordionist who is a son of a bitch. (Just as it's pleasant that the lawyer gets harassed from off screen when he talks too much to the camera.) Who is the motorcyclist? Who is the curvy maid in the boy's household who keeps singing "Stormy Weather"? I don't know.

But I do know. They went into Fellini's mind, not as social studies but as ele-

ments in a tapestry, as vessels of lost time. He sees them now as he saw them then—as bearers to him of marvelous mysteries: but now he knows *how* he was seeing them then and, now with Danilo Donati's costumes, he articulates his recollections with highly theatrical, humorous, mature poetry. One night a lot of the townsfolk pour into boats and go out past the harbor to see the pride of Italy pass by, the new magnificent steamship *Rex*. The ship is seen as the boy saw it then, plus Fellini's knowledge of how the boy was seeing it and how the townsfolk needed to see it.

Giuseppe Rotunno, the camera wizard of Visconti's *The Leopard* and Fellini's *Satyricon*, has worked wonderfully well to implement the director's vision, particularly with those typical traveling shots of groups of people (moving usually to Fellini's omnipresent sea), particularly in glimpses of people living, of *having been* alive once—people seen through café and shop windows or isolated in the middle of great fields or dancing romantically at the town's luxe hotel. Ruggero Mastroianni, Fellini's longtime editor, has composed without heavy emphases and without flash, ending each "chapter" with a fadeout just slow enough to imply the curves of conclusion and continuity. The score by Nino Rota is modeled on the strophes of his *8 1/2* score, not quite as tuneful but with the right caresses and life-is-a-circus quality.

So many, many episodes last in the mind: the grandfather bewildered in a thick fog that is like a prevision of his death, then his young grandson be-

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## Films Worth Seeing

*Chinatown*. Roman Polanski sees a Hollywood '30s private eye with a mod eye. More flavor than mystery, but pretty well done.

*Harry and Tonto*. Adventures of a 72-year-old New Yorker seeing the US. Not often too sentimental (though he does have his cat with him), mostly moving and funny.

*The Saphead*. Buster Keaton. Made 1920, not seen since 1928. Demand that your local theater book it, along with two accompanying shorts, *Convict 13* and *The Bellboy*.

*The Seduction of Mimi*. A non-hero sandwich of politics-crime-and-sex, Sicilian style. Well acted, generally intelligent and amusing.

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