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8½
Italy 1963 135 minutes Black & White

Directed by Federico Fellini. Produced by Angelo Rizzoli. Production Company, Columbia/Gala. Script by Federico Fellini, F. Pinelli, E. Flaiano, & B. Rondi. Photography by Gianni di Venanzo. Music by Nino Rota. Editing by Leo Catozzo. Print provided by Corinth Films. Cast: Marcello Mastroianni, Claudia Cardinale, Anouk Aimee, Sandra Milo.

8½ As An Anatomy Of Melancholy

Timothy Hyman

Unlike Truffaut's *Day for Night*, *8½* is not centrally about film-making, any more than it is about the Artist, or even about Fellini himself: it is about much more general processes of experience. The key concept with which this essay will be concerned is that of temperament, and the way the awareness of an inner world affects the language of film. *8½* demonstrated how a film could be about a temperament: the events it dealt with were interior events, and its most important episodes happened outside time, in fantasy, dream and vision. In *8½*, Felini renounced the political or social emphasis of neo-realism, and the new relation between the artist and the outer world that resulted has since become fundamental to much Italian cinema. Guido, groping blindly from within toward his millennial vision, is the blueprint for a new kind of film director, whose ideology originates not in any analysis of society, but in the artist's own constitution. Yet *8½* stands apart from all that has followed, even from Fellini's own subsequent work; and an understanding of *8½* can help us to pinpoint the change in orientation, which has generally been felt to be a 'falling off', not only in Fellini but in Pasolini, Antonioni and Visconti also.

Everyone would perhaps agree that each one of us has a fundamental and recurrent 'pattern', to which his experience largely conforms. I take *8½* to be the description of one such pattern, the mapping-out or 'anatomising' of a particular constitution. In every way, Guido's pattern defines the film; both its structure, since in the course of the film Guido works through one complete cycle of experience; and its subject, because Guido's predicament is shown to be caused by a conflict between his pattern and his conscious self.

8½ is about an inner process which takes place in Guido on several levels, his reaching for artistic potency, for intellectual consistency and for spiritual purity. But Fellini shows Guido's development as occurring, not through his conscious will or intellect, but rather as springing directly from some interior bodily rhythm, to which Guido remains almost passive. His experience is given. While, on the one hand, this view brings us close to a religious or mystical philosophy, with Grace as the key to experience, it also approaches the mechanistic; and this dichotomy is reflected in the language of *8½*, which is very direct and physical yet which also tends towards an abstract language, of pattern and interval. The riddling title, *Fellini 8½*, goes far to clarify the film's problem; it points, beyond the opus number, to a fusion of the film's conflicting polarities, not only Life and Art, but physical and abstract, person and pattern—that is to the 'solution', the state of integration momentarily achieved at the end of the film.

Film is the ideal vehicle for the kind of experience Fellini wants to convey here—the sense that every event is subordinate to a prevailing inner rhythm. Film photographs the actual world, yet can present it to us shaped like music. And in film it is a potentially very internal, visceral relation that exists between spectator and artist. As we sit in the darkened space of the cinema, it is as though we were watching images projected upon the dream-screens of our own minds (the mechanism of the shutter echoing our life-pulse). Nietzsche defined art as the 'code tapped out by our nervous systems'; and watching *8½*, one is

peculiarly aware of film as a 'total art', harnessing enormous and diverse powers so as to bring the spectator into the fullest possible relation with the director's most personal experience.

But in an interview with Gideon Bachmann in 1964, a year after completing *8½*, Fellini contended that this power in cinema—the tour de force inseparable from the medium—can only be validated in the context of a clear moral intention:

'In the hands of traditional film-makers, the cinema has become a form of art which allows no space for meditation . . . Films made after a formula, factory films, are of course the maximum point of degradation. But cinema contains in its nature the danger of psychological suggestiveness. It isn't just a meditative form: it is potently naturalistic. A pistol shot in a film is a pistol shot that you hear—boom!—with your ears. All representations of reality in film appear to be objective, but in fact they are coordinated to assail the spectator from a definite point of view. It is much more difficult for a film-maker to be sincere than for a writer or painter, because the means he uses are extremely dangerous. They are means—camera, editing, sound, movement—which tend to function directly on the plane of intellectual and psychological aggression . . . Now, when this fantastic power is used for the liberation of the spectator, in other words when it is white magic, it is all right. But when it is used as black magic, it can lead to terrible results.'

Of all Fellini's films, *8½* is the one in which the cathartic intention—the use of the 'white magic' of cinema to 'liberate the spectator'—is most explicit. The earlier part of the film is an intentional oppression of the spectator, a kind of 'black' magic that is only justified as the necessary preparation for the literally white, liberating vision (the sequence which, as Fellini has emphasised, constituted his 'whole reason for making the film').

Correspondingly, the language in *8½* has an urgency unique in Fellini's work. In *La Strada* or *La Dolce Vita* the script, in *Giulietta* and his subsequent films the sets and costumes, have the central role, which here belongs to the exclusively cinematic means of sequential juxtaposition and rhythm. It is the oscillation of light and dark, the precise length of their duration, which finally shapes *8½*; and this music of interval is combined to maximum effect with the actual music of Nino Rota, whose theme tune, an extrovert braying march, transforming into a wistful circling melody, itself incorporates the double rhythm of Guido's experience. The syntax of the film becomes the embodiment of Fellini's doctrine: that our experience is cyclic, that pleasure comes out of pain, true out of false, comedy out of tragedy.

The cyclic structure of Guido's experience is announced at the outset of *8½*, in the Crisis, Liberation and Fall, archetypally enacted in Guido's dream. In the sequence immediately following, the cycle is reenacted in the real world. First, Guido wakes to find himself in a hotel bed, surrounded by intrusive and alien people, a situation which obviously recalls the traffic jam in the dream; then, in the hotel bathroom, at last alone, he experiences a self-awakening, corresponding to his dream flight; and then, exactly as in the dream a rope had tugged him down, so here the buzzing of the telephone intrudes, making him sag into alienation. This sense of a succession of 'corresponding' sequences, with a common pattern, is maintained throughout the film. When Guido entered the hotel bathroom, fluorescent lighting suddenly flickered on, flooding the screen; and the recurrence of this motif, the sudden welling up of light, will give the film its overall continuity.

This pattern, of crisis, liberation and fall, is the key to Guido's behaviour. Just as the necessity of waiting on liberation forces on him his indecisive and conditional manner of action, so the mysteriousness and unreasonableness of his experience enforces his ambiguous ideological stance. He is caught in a machine, yet his moments of liberation seem evidence of a *deus ex machina*. The bleached and dazzling light which floods the screen at moments throughout the film conveys to us not simply Guido's heightened consciousness, but also his sense of an overwhelming but totally mysterious force, at work in an un-

stable world.

I think that Fellini is being no less than precise when he defines 'this business of making a film' as 'giving an account of his melancholy.' For the pattern of *8½* is that of melancholy; the ambiguous commerce between archetypal and real is typical of that state; and Fellini has himself described the mood of *8½* as 'melancholy, almost funereal, but also resolutely comic.' The tradition surrounding the melancholic is very relevant to Guido. The melancholic is to be seen, on the one hand, as a sick man, afflicted with a cyclic madness; but on the other, as one singled out to be vouchsafed, at the expense of suffering meanwhile, moments of vision or exceptional power. There is a 'double potentiality in melancholy, for Good or for Evil.'

Now it seems to me that this double potentiality provides the structure of *8½*: we are made to see Guido first as a sick man, then as a visionary artist. Guido's crisis, his inability to begin his film, results from his own interpretation of his experience as being fundamentally diseased, false: doubting its validity, he cannot express or reflect it in his art. And because the white episodes (the moments of liberation that are clearly also the inspirations given to Guido as an artist) are inextricably bound up with, are even the product of, his moments of sickness and crisis, he refuses his inspiration as tainted. Fellini's theme can be summed up, that liberation consists in our acceptance of the interdependence of contrary states within our experience; only his failure to accept distinguishes the impotent from the creative individual.

First, as a sick man. Fellini makes us not only observe Guido's descent, but also participate in it. The pattern of crisis endlessly repeated soon becomes as alienating for the spectator as it is for Guido. And that initial ambiguity of dimension, of our entering in the middle of the traffic jam of Guido's dream, which we assumed to be reality, persists. Not only do memory and dream, fantasy and reality, slide into one another, but there is also a threat that we are watching, not Guido's immediate experience at all, but merely episodes from the film he hopes to make. What is put before us is not to be trusted; and in such a context Fellini's splendid formal compositions appear grandiose, self-parodying, false. Everything works to confirm the spectator in this view of Guido, as an artist who has lost his way and whose labyrinthine experience will never lead him to the reality he is looking for.

The white episodes continue to well up, like coherent messages from the unconscious, and with their slower rhythm and narrative unity, each offers a momentary respite against a present world where consciousness is staccato and fragmented. Each presents Guido with some variant of a visionary reality. First, in a mock vision: Guido's walk in the spa is presented as a burlesque parnassus (to be paralleled later by the burlesque Hades of the underground baths). But in the ASANISIMASA sequence, the most serious of the film, Guido seems to find the authentic 'ANIMA' or soul he has looked for; it is in the sensations of early childhood, the image of a communal society in a condition of love. The intimation is drained of much of its talismanic significance, however, when Guido's fantasy of the Harem takes place in the same primitive or tribal farmhouse, and the child's sacred rituals are knowingly perverted and trivialised by the adult's infantile self-love.

The central part of the film focuses on Guido's attitude to the Church. He first encounters the Cardinal in the hotel lift, and the alternation of darkness and light, as the lift descends past each floor, marvellously conveys Guido's fluctuating faith. Guido's key memory-inspiration proves to be ambivalent. If, at the seminary, the child turned from the saints to Saraghina, yet the dance of the prostitute beside the glittering sea provides an intuition of some primitive or natural worship, leaving him closer to the Church than to her materialist opponents. Inevitably, such ambiguity is condemned, first by the Marxist critic ('You begin intending to renounce, but you end as an accomplice'); then by the Cardinal's attendant, who has read Guido's script and complains that it 'mingles sacred and profane love far too freely.' These sequences end in Guido's fantasy of Hades where, as a shutter comes down, the Cardinal pronounces

'extra ecclesiam nemo salvatur—outside the Church, no one shall be saved.'

As each alternative fails him, Guido's hope of redeeming his experience comes to reside more and more exclusively in film he intends to make. Allusions to it were present in his dream, for the film will concern a corrupt and exhausted mankind (that of the traffic jam), and the effort of a few to escape (via the rocket-launching tower, glimpsed by the dreamer in his flight through the clouds) so as to begin a new life on some new planet. Clearly, then, Guido's film is an allegory of his own predicament. His wish to commit his will to the Church, or to his marriage, or to ideal love, is a wish to escape to so many 'new planets', to be liberated once and for all from the wheel of his temperament. This wish is what has defined him, and the making of the film itself is the last remaining hope of its fulfilment; so that his abandonment of it at the press conference really does constitute his personal extinction, the 'suicide' shown us.

Then, as visionary artist. For it is only here, when Guido, in losing each of his alternatives, has been stripped of his ego, that the real protagonist of the film, not the personality of Guido but the fatality of his temperament, is able to assert itself. These final minutes entirely alter our view of what has gone before. Unfurling out of Guido's extinction, the emergence of the vision unifies the film's interior oscillation into a single cathartic motion of crisis transformed to liberation. It is as though the movement of the whole film were to trace out this transformation as a kind of graphological curve; to define the rhythm by which sickness becomes vision.

'But from whence comes this joy of life?' asks Guido, as the white figures first appear. The vision is an affirmation of the temperament, as a creative centre beyond the personality. The white smiling figures walking across the plain; the unveiling of the rocket-launching steps, on which the entire cast of the film are assembled as though they are indeed that remnant, just arrived on that fresh new planet; and the final ritual, by which all these figures form a dancing circle: each of these sequences has its dramatic rightness, in resolving the conflicts established earlier, within a new dispensation.

Once the vision has reaffirmed Guido's integrity, we see that his sliding from dimension to dimension may have been not evasion or confusion, but the necessary completion of a journey towards a view of life that must include several distinct worlds, a 'multiverse'. Saturn was identified with melancholy because its orbit, wider than any other in our system, included all the rest; and it is the principle of inclusiveness that is upheld by Guido. The condition of love embodied in the vision (and confirming the paradisiac experience of childhood) will indeed 'mingle sacred and profane', just as within its circle Communist and Christian, wife, mistress and Ideal, the Cardinal and Saraghina, can link hands. It is in this sense that Guido is right when he declares to Rosella that 'at bottom, I have nothing to say.' It is an experience where meaning is not particular but resides in the unfolding of life itself.

William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience,* names Melancholy as (with conversion) 'one of the two main phenomena of religion.' The essentially religious nature of *8½* is seen in its structure, which may be likened to the Eucharistic Mass, processing us through various levels of descent, into a realisation of spiritual death; the state where we are most ready to receive Grace, and to partake of the communion (to which the vision clearly corresponds). Guido's spiritual development is shown as fused with the creative process. 'Unless the seed die, it shall not be born again.' At the beginning of *8½*, Guido has his seed, his idea of a film; but it is only when he has accepted its extinction that the flowering, the vision which is the true film he has to make, is able to appear. And in this affirmation Fellini's monumental fresco imagery at last finds a content fitting to its epic scale.

Thus *8½* is the 'simple thought' promised to Rosella, a 'film which would help us to bury every dead thing that we carry around in ourselves.' There is an interesting account in Laing's *The Divided Self* of a girl patient whose identification with Gelsomina in *La Strada* was decisive in her recovery of reality.

8½ achieves a similar liberation, but it does so by far more direct and astonishing means; it takes us bodily up in a rhythm, which carries us through catharsis to peace and self-acceptance.

8½ is pivotal in Fellini's work. What had remained implicit in the earlier films, a core of the personality, a certain rhythm of experience, here becomes explicit. In exposing this core Fellini may have said in *8½* all that he urgently had to say. But in subsequent works he has dared to pass so to speak inside this core, into the stifling enclosed world of his temperamental archetypes.

It is a reversal common to much Italian cinema, the transition from neo-realism to what might be called 'neo-symbolism'. The critic in *8½* is the voice of neo-realism, who regards the subjectivity of Guido's script as evidence that 'Cinema is fifty years behind the other arts.' One can see what he means; the film works by symbols (whiteness, clowns, tower, etc.), and together with the episodic form by which Guido, like Peer Gynt or Baal, enacts a quest for self through various dimensions, it must have seemed to point back to 1910, or beyond.

But in the event, of course, the critic was wrong; the discarded aesthetic has become the new, and the last ten years have seen a general movement in the arts away from the idea that an 'objective' or purist aesthetic alone represents progress. If it affirms anything, our present culture affirms the right to private worlds. The revival of Art Nouveau can be taken with the popularity of writers such as Hesse and Tolkien, and with drug-taking and the art associated with it, as related phenomena; and, whether we like it or not, Italian cinema, which once stood for an art of social realities, is now a key disseminator of this art of the Fantastic.

In varying degrees, films like *Pigsty, The Spider's Stratagem, Death in Venice, Juliet of the Spirits* or *Blow-Up* explicitly reflect a vision personal to the director. But while the neo-realist aesthetic entailed conflict between documentary and myth, between reality and the director's temperament, the resolution of this conflict in these later films has involved some loss of urgency. To what extent *should* the artist's temperament dominate his material? In an interview given in 1962, the year before *8½* was made, Pasolini admitted that Fellini and he shared a basic affinity of temperament, although his own view was 'societal', whereas Fellini's was 'personalist'. He went on to define this affinity as: '. . . a kind of emotivity, a tendency to see reality always in a fabulous or distorted way. There is a difficulty in submitting to real empirical contact with objects, with what they are, personalities, facts of life. A tendency always to look behind objects . . .'

At the time that this was written, however, Fellini and Pasolini were still making very different films; and when we compare *Accattone* (1960) with *La Dolce Vita* (1961) this difference is exactly defined by the director's world view, respectively the societal and the personalist. It is only now, many years later, their temperaments fully indulged, that their affinity has become obvious (and not only theirs; Pasolini's words can serve as a description of almost all recent Italian cinema). To indulge the temperament has meant to blur distinctions which may be not more fundamental, but more interesting.

I feel it is significant that these recent films have employed lush colour. It was Fellini himself who had earlier declared that 'colour in film is like breathing under water,' and that 'film is motion, colour is immobility.' The kind of imagery we have come to expect from the masters of cinema, where each frame is individually meaningful, tends in colour to effects of dissociation, which narrow the range of emotion. As in 19th-century symbolism, the artist's sense of unreality threatens to become the sole subject of the work. The static tableaux of *Fellini-Satyricon,* unfolding in a dream space, point towards a completely 'anti-real' cinema. But while, in its incorporation of many modes, *Fellini-Satyricon* can be seen as developing from the 'multiverse' implicit at the end of *8½*, what it significantly does not do is to create a structure to reconcile all these modes, or to give them meaning, to close the circle, or to achieve catharsis. And without that catharsis, are we not perilously

close to 'black' cinematic magic? By contrast, Guido's vision, although it does assert the triumph of the temperament against any objective 'reality', gains conviction from its difficult emergence out of conflict. It retains some of the tensions of neo-realism; just as it employs the absolute polarities of black and white.

8½ is, in the phrase P. W. Martin coined for Jung and Eliot, an 'Experiment in Depth'; like *The Waste Land,* it descends into a Jungian inner world, seeking some primary contact with experience, so as to return renewed to the outer. In a wider view, it may be that the main movement of Italian cinema will come to be seen in these terms; that finding, like Guido, an impasse in the external world, Italian directors embarked on a 'return inward'. The question then is, when will they re-emerge?

What we have to accept meanwhile is the lack of any glimmer, in a work like *Satyricon,* of wholesome reality. It exists solely, as Fellini says, to 'realise his fantasy'; the inner world is presented not, as in *8½*, as part of a process, but as though it were sufficient in itself. The distinction is close to Coleridge's 'Imagination' and 'Fancy'. It was the additional dimension, by which Guido and Fellini were separate, that helped to give *8½* its vitality; as the objectivisation of a temperament, the film could draw on deep levels of dream and fantasy, while remaining still an examination of the external, 'real' world.

Yet while *8½* defines the moment of perfect balance in Italian cinema, the subsequent descent into self, into archetypal realms, has resulted in a kind of profundity. The obvious parallel is with Mannerism; it arouses the same ambiguous responses, and it may, like Mannerism, become more fascinating to future generations, less starved of an art of above ground, and less nostalgic for the achievements of the High Renaissance of cinema that the years of *8½* now seem to represent. Do we see Mannerism positively, as an experiment, a 'return inwards' which initiated the modern era; or do we see it negatively, as the decline of the Italian tradition, a 'failure of nerve'? Do we see Mannerism's concern with the 'dangerous' areas of subject matter as morally courageous (Fellini hoped that even *Satyricon* would be 'liberating'); or do we suspect a search for the bizarre or troubling as a substitute for a less superficial kind of originality?

There is a kind of apostolic succession in Italian cinema; just as the hand of Fellini as assistant is visible in Rossellini's masterpiece *Francis, Jester of God* (1949), so *Francis* is closely echoed in Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), which in turn provided an apprenticeship for the young Bertolucci. In this succession, Bertolucci appears rather like the antichrist of the Apocalypse. His films have been the most successful to come out of the Italian tradition in recent years, because he has so dazzlingly exploited the potential for negation in a Cinema of Temperament. Since his subject is Fascism or naked brutal power, his style is intergral. The Nietzschean intensity for intensity's sake, the overwhelming physical presence of his people, the gratuitous brilliance and power and beauty of his imagery, are fully at one with his subject. All the signposts, such as the Francis Bacon titles at the beginning of *Last Tango,* or the frequent 'empty' shots, point to the same unambiguous destination. It is a self-knowing, self-reflecting, self-condemning art, where decadence, aestheticism and so forth are all taken into account because the stories all speak about what such attitudes mean in political terms—absurdity, treachery, guilt, violence, death. And if the greatness of Italian cinema meets its death in Bertolucci, it will at least be a death confidently embraced.

—*Sight and Sound,*
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