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There is a priest who came up with a fairly accurate definition when he said: "When the silence of God falls upon mankind!" Well, aside from that which is solemn and biblical in this definition, at bottom, yes, *La dolce vita* could truly be viewed in this light. Indeed, there is the silence of God, for love is lacking. They only talk about love, but they are barren, unable to give it. Thus even *La dolce vita* is a deeply Christian film.

(*Ibid.*)

THE SCANDAL OF *LA DOLCE VITA*

Federico Fellini sits down on the couch. Stately, Roman, and resigned. He is surrounded by vases full of red roses, carnations, and lilacs. Beneath his windows, the Rond-Point of the Champs-Élysées. A hum rises from the staircase, the dull clamor of a big hotel.

Behind an inexorably silent door, one can divine the presence of Giulietta Masina. Pinelli, Fellini's co-scriptwriter, and his assistant, Dominique Delouche, are close by the couch, ready to aid their director. It was the photographer who had insisted upon the couch. Because of the lighting, "On the couch!" Fellini remarked. "Like an odalisque?" The photographer made a gesture of despair. Fellini thus accepted the couch; a rose patted him on the neck. He pushed it back with the same kind of gentle but firm tap one gives an overly familiar cat, and made himself comfortable, sunglasses hooked on his left pocket, eyelids half closed, waiting for what was going to come next.

What is going to come, naturally, is the question involving the opening of *La dolce vita* in Paris, in the beginning of May, 1960 (it opened at the same time in London and Berlin)—the question about the scandal. . . . He raises his eyebrows just slightly, pushes further down into the cushions of the couch, and launches into a linguistic melting pot of Italian, French, and English. . . . Fellini starts off a sentence in French, cannot find the right word to express a certain subtlety, hopes that English will be more effective, realizes that this isn't so, tries again in French, breathes what sounds like a final sigh . . . and ends up by charging ahead at a hundred miles an hour in an Italian that even Pinelli and Dominique, to whom he

throws a glance that is both imploring and commanding, must work together to translate:

"I wanted to make a film, just a simple film. The scandal was so completely unexpected! I was astounded, almost a bit disgusted! But what's the matter with some people? It's as if they are interested only in things in the—the—"

An imploring glance toward Pinelli.

"Context!" suggests the latter softly.

"Context!" repeats Fellini. And then, suddenly, enthusiastic: "That's it, in the context of scandal. In the beginning, they didn't see the film at all the way they should have. The whole time they were waiting for something scandalous. It becomes awful, you know. If a character says, 'What beautiful sunshine!' they look for another implication. So that the real meaning of the film dissolves. . . ."

"And what is the real meaning of the film?"

Long moment of silence. Everybody, obviously, hates this question. Especially Fellini. Only, as he is very polite, he merely replies gently:

"I don't like this question very much. It always bothers me. I am not at all the sort of man who dashes off messages. You know, I do not have any very precise ideology. And if I wanted to be profoundly sincere in this latest film, it was simply from the need of telling a story. That is how the troubadours operated. They listened to life—and then they described it, stamping it with their own imprint. What is going on in this moment of crisis, what has happened to them, what happens to me; when you describe your epoch, no matter how impartially, you notice that there are emergencies, events, attitudes that strike you more than certain others and that are, fundamentally, the most important. . . ."

Another pause. Fellini has decided once for all to speak only his native language.

"So you unconsciously become a moralist. If *La dolce vita* has a meaning, it came all by itself; I did not go after it. Besides, a rather amazing phenomenon occurred. The Italian public came to see it, for the most part,

because of the scandal. But when they had viewed the film itself, their reaction changed. They felt themselves concerned. Things took back their real proportion. At bottom, it is always the human anguish that excites and fascinates me. What interest do I have in scandal?"

Fellini rises from the couch of the odalisque. He passes from the window on the left that overlooks the gardens to the window on the right that faces the avenue, and continues in his Italian, in a voice rumbling with ancient civilizations:

"How could I be interested in scandal? This film is linked to all the preceding ones. Contemporary man is filled with contradictions: a frantic, tense, exciting life and, in fact, a terrible emptiness, an immobility. You toss and splash about. . . . Men, for example, go from one woman to the next, from adventure to adventure. And all this, only to end up revolving around oneself without really budging.

"*La dolce vita* is only a substitute title. I wanted to call it *Babylon, 2,000 Years After Jesus Christ* to bring out the element that is permanent, outside time and space, in a story that has been wrongly seen as controlled only by contemporary phenomena. That is really why I chose Rome to be the star. For, don't be mistaken, the star of my film is Rome, the Babylon of my dreams. Rome that never budges, the accomplice, partner, and judge. There is a complicity psychosis about Rome. . . . I chose it for its permanence. Rome is there like a symbol. Any big city in any epoch could have served as a background for my film. . . .

"That is the trouble with 'film mirrors.' In *La dolce vita* everyone can see his own face—that is, if he looks for it. I had an astonishing experience in this regard. At the opening of the film in Milan there was a very chic audience, the Milanese upper bourgeoisie, conformist, hypocritical, and degenerate. The showing went off fairly normally, in spite of certain snickers and a twist of nervousness. Only at the end did they explode. Women covered with pearls and the men in dress clothes rose from their seats roaring, 'Enough! Enough!' Do you know what it was that they could not tolerate?"

"No, I don't. I haven't seen the film," and I sigh discreetly.

"It is the scene of the orgy," thunders Fellini. "It upset them; they found it insupportable; they were in agony at seeing themselves in the mirror. All of what is called the 'scandal of *La dolce vita*' is based on the same shame or the same folly. Some howled because they saw themselves in the film, with horror, the others out of their own fundamental cowardice."

(Remarks collected by Martine Monod in *Les Lettres françaises*, April 21, 1960)

THE GAME OF TRUTH

If you had to begin your life all over again, what career would you choose?

The cinema.

What actor would you have liked to direct?

Charlie Chaplin.

Your favorite musician?

Stravinsky and of course Nino Rota.

Your favorite painter?

Botticelli.

Who are your masters in the cinema?

Chaplin and Rossellini.

What literary works have marked you the most?

Kafka's works, *Orlando Furioso*, and the treatise on magic by Eliphas Levis.

Whom in history would you have most liked to meet?

Jesus, Cagliostro, St. Francis of Assisi, and Satan.

If you were granted the power to commit any three acts you wanted?

They would not be good deeds, but acts committed out of curiosity:

(a) I would die for a day in order to live the reincarnation of souls;
(b) I would incarnate myself in an animal, a snake; (c) I would incarnate myself in a tree.

The period and country you would have most liked to live in?

Each and every one.