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## Fellini's 'Satyricon'

# A Pagan Dolce Vita: 'Faces Are My Words'

by Angelo Quattrocchi  
and Jill Neville

ROME—In a city which invented the Virgin Mary, Federico Fellini is the Italian avenger, the pagan Pope, adored.

His new movie, "Satyricon," is a free adaptation of the book by Petronius, "arbiter of elegance" in Nero's Rome. The ads show faces, faces of another time, when all roads went to Rome and Christ was still a myth of freedom from slavery.

*Flashback:* The set, it's

rumored, is "one continual orgy." The homosexuality and the lesbianism have caught the frustrated imagination of the Romans.

Fellini is on the set. Encolpius the wandering hippie may fight the Minotaur this morning.

*Long shot:* Fake Roman sand-caves on real Roman dust. Extras in soiled terry-towel dressing gowns frown at untypical cloudy sky. Fellini on high stool, surrounded by scampering people, wondering what he is going to do next.

Very touchy, he is, the minions say, pouring the water of phony myth over the blood of his ebullience. The film is an unparalleled orgy, say the minions between the lines, the echo of world audiences in their pointed ears. Like the men around Saint Peter who sell you postcards of saints but you know they have the dirty ones in their pockets.

Fellini sits high among the technicians, who wear surgical masks because of the dust; cardboard Rome waits perilously on one side, unglamorous under the gray sky and all too two-dimensional. There is nowhere to sit. Now Fellini sees us; he comes over to where we wait with the publicity manager.

*Close-up:* Fellini smiles down on us benevolently. Kind eyes. A solver of problems.

Fellini: "We're waiting for the sun. Just waiting for the sun."

We look up to Fellini who looks up for the sun. The publicity manager had warned: don't ask Fellini questions, he'll go up the wall.

Fellini: "Well, aren't you going to ask me questions?"

A. Q.: "You are supposed to be touchy. Shall we talk now?"

Fellini: "Touchy? I'm not touchy. You can touch me."

He holds out his arm. A. Q. grabs it, just below the elbow. In the moment of stillness, Petronius, provider of pleasure for art's sake, of art for pleasure's sake, smiles upon me.

J. N.: "Now sell your hand."

Fellini looks at J. N. with a casting shrewdness.

Yes, Fellini changes plans every day. Yes, nobody knows what he's going to do next. No, they don't know if there is a good English translation of Petronius's "Satyricon." No, of course he isn't following the "Satyricon" closely.

We are on the red sand of the set, the red of the Roman houses, the red of lascivious afternoons after spaghetti and wine. He goes back to the pit. We wander about. In Fellini-land where all you dream can become cardboard, we sit on a giant Freudian purple aubergine and it cracks ominously. One huge gladiator is trudging up and down on the sand, as lost in his boredom as a zoo lion.

We confront a badly pock-marked extra wearing a dusty white toga.

"Where do you come from?"

"Naples. I was chosen for my face."

*Close-up:* He turns his face toward us and allows us an uninterrupted stare. It is

pock-marked completely—the forehead, the cheeks, the chin. He watches us watching his face. His hooded eyes have long since stopped expressing anger at the gods or suicidal despair. They are simply stony. They present us the face as if presenting us one of the tourist sites of Rome.

A Portobello Road hippie, Max Born, plays the male tart, Giton. "Fellini," he tells us, "is the only Italian abstract painter of any note at all (the social realist painter is Antonioni)... I was grooving in London when that woman chose me. It's the first quiz thing life chance I've won." Delicately featured Max takes a swig from our whisky bottle. "You see, Fellini is doing his thing. The rest of us are all doing Fellini's thing."

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Old workman approaches and shakes Max by the hand. It is a long leering handshake. Max says, "He was thrown off the set for indecent exposure. We all bet him he wouldn't show his thing and we'd just got him to unzip, and Fellini's wife saw him and he was thrown out."

But the publicity manager wants us to talk to the other big English star, Dennis Potter.

*Extreme close-up:* Dennis Potter, the Golden Boy from Hampstead Playhouse, has honey on his lips and red dirt over his very classic chest. He is absurdly beautiful. His self-mocking voice includes us all in his own set.

"It's like this, you see, after fighting this Minotaur I have to screw a whore in the middle of the Forum. Of course that makes me impotent. Then I go and see a dwarf with a permanent erection. Then I'm suspended in a basket all night. Then I meet an old mother-earth with the biggest pair of tits you ever saw—a whore from Bologna—Fellini brought her down to play the part—and with her I eventually manage it. Technicians trundle by with something. Dennis Potter: "You'd better move, or you'll fall in the wind machine."

Potter plays Encolpius, student of life, who takes the road south with his friend Ascylltus in pursuit of pagan pleasure. Echoes of the sunniest wandering hippies... myths fed by Nero's legend, the burning of Rome, the Christians made human torches to illuminate the way to the Forum, and Caligula's horse made a senator, and the cult of the phallus, and Nero making love to his mother in a carriage on the way to market.

Arab silk stained by blood of pleasure and communal rites of fornication in private and public baths with Roman tiles and ointments from Syria, when

every expedition into the barbarous countries brought back gold and amber, flower virgins, and Negroes to be used as live-size statues at a debauched scenario. And the ships sailing into a sea of Falerno wine, and a thousand feathers to adorn and to vomit with, to tickle and to excite.

It's near lunchtime. The gods haven't given Fellini any sun and our half-bottle of whisky is a bright moon. We share it with Max. "Fellini is a great head-friend of mine," he is saying.

*Cut:* Inside small plastic-tabled Caravan on the set with naive flowered curtains.

Fellini (huge as his myths, hugs J. N.,: "Take off those dark glasses, I want to see your face."

Hasn't he had enough of faces? He pads the streets of Rome at night searching for them, finding them in the Coliseum, in bars, in the slaughterhouse... a long procession of faces: pagan faces non-marked by the alienation of our time, fixed in an atemporal grimace, in an inescapable destiny; the faces of Petronius, of Apuleius, the faces of Rome when Rome was a circus awaiting its inevitable doom. So the search for faces started. And it was frantic, absurd, often comical, a pastiche of Hollywood and Trastevere. In the Roman slaughterhouse where he had filmed a horrifying sequence for NBC of the animals being slaughtered (shots of the empty tables and instruments, while you hear the animals' cries) he found porters and workers for his Roman crowd. The enormous dignified-in-her-obscenity woman reminiscent of the whore in "8½," he found her in Bologna and she'll play a whore too. For the plebs he has faces marked by one destiny and rags always gray. For the aristocrats, he has faces of men bent on total pleasure with the nobility of unconcerned amorality.

"Faces are my words," he says.

*Camera pans slowly around*

table. J. N. is still being hugged as Fellini hugs everyone, either with his arm or with his mind. But there isn't room for them all in his bear-like embrace. On the opposite side of the table two worried men watch Fellini with a wounded look. A. Q. is laughing at Fellini's Italian-esque gesture. Italians are Italians, n'est-ce pas?

Fellini (hesitant, sensitive): "This is my scriptwriter. He is tired because each day he has to re-write the script."

The first worried man nods to us. Ah, the fatigue of having to re-write what you re-wrote from a re-write...

Fellini: "And this is the Professor from Pisa. I need him because I have decided that the whole film is to be spoken in Latin." But does he know they are going to promote "Satyricon" as a jumbo-set orgy, a Roman-style romp, with the ambivalent boys, the food and communal sex and Roman groupies and lascivious garments all in one spicy stew to titillate the popcorn eaters from Nebraska? He must. So he strikes back with Latin.

"With sub-titles of course?"

Fellini: "Sub-titles? Of course there aren't going to be any sub-titles. Why should there be?"

The professor from Pisa looks at him with exhausted love, nostalgic, maybe for the Groves of Academe, the unchanging curriculum.

Fellini: "After all, it's easy to see what's going on on the screen."

Easy to see why a man so obsessed with purity makes a film

about an excessive lack of it.

You have Encolpius and Ascylltus (played by Hiram Keller, straight out of "Hair"), two young queers in search of instant fortune. And you have Giton, the adolescent boy contended by the two and loving only what is there. You have Capucine as Tryphaena, talented in debauchery and companion of a tight-lipped vicious patrician. And you have an Italian called Mario Romagnoli (owner of a Roman restaurant called Moro) who plays the part of the vulgarian Trimalchio; once a slave, freed for his sexual services to both master and mistress, now enormously wealthy, would-be poet and literate among the orgiastic rabble.

It's 2000 years away from the timidly vicious Catholic party in the ruined castle of "La Dolce Vita." That was the Rome of the last pathetic remnants of black aristocracy, half living under the musky shadows of a papal arrogance which is no more. Petronius's Rome, according to Fellini in a pensive mood, shares with our time that creeping sense of disintegration of all values which is the beginning of the collapse of an era. When the populace is cynical and the aristocracy given to pleasure in its

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impotence, then the empires fall.

Fellini: "Eat, Angelo, you must eat something."

Fellini's royal care and 1000 Italian mothers stuffing you to death dissolve in one lovely

sequence.

Fellini: "Have some of this cheese, it's aphrodisiac."

Had he been drying up? Four years went by after "Juliet of the Spirits." Much was said and little done about a film called "The Trip of G. Mastorna." He had shot some sequences with Marcello Mastroianni, but it didn't work, he didn't think Mastroianni's face was right for the part. He spent weeks looking for the right face for a character which existed only in his mind, for a movie which was only an embryo of a movie. Haunted, he went back to an old idea, the "Satyricon," the book which epitomizes for him, along with "The Golden Ass" of Apuleius, a Latin pagan vision of life. "It started when I was a schoolboy. Petronius was a constant and obscure temptation. But now it's become—it's a psychedelic arcane dream, like 'Alice in Wonderland.'" He started shooting again.

Fellini: "More beer?"

He searches around for another bottle, as solicitous as an heiress's nephew. He has the gift of total concern. One melts in the equatorial zone of his personality. He is a bus everybody tries to get on. But he is an Indian bus with people clinging to the roof. Sometimes he has to drop a few passengers.

Fellini: "Trying to describe it is like trying to describe a thunderstorm in the middle of a thunderstorm. I'll tell you the hardest part: in the middle of it all, not to close up, to keep myself open to all new things that will relate . . . You see this is the dream"—he touches the empty beer bottle, promoting it to a dream—"and this is the thing that relates to it"—he touches the toothpicks. "I have to let the objects choose me."

Like the derelict woman in the Coliseum whose fatness burst out like a broken dam—she chose him one night as he walked about Rome. Not like Richard Burton, Mae West, Groucho Marx, who have all been linked with the film. It was not their faces that chose him.

Fellini has to keep himself open to hear new bells ring. And it doesn't stop just because the film has started rolling, why should it? That worries people, like the scriptwriter here and the professor there, and the publicity manager.

Fellini (laughing, no longer the medium, earthing himself): "Well, I have to be a cold-hearted captain as well. Got to see all the nuts and bolts are right. There are no *minor* things. . ." He twitches back the floral curtains, revealing more of the sky. "Making this film is like sending a rocket up there . . ." He never finishes the image about how it is so many bolts and screws and faces and temperaments that by the time it goes off you are incredulous and anyway it's not yours. In mid-sentence, great cameraman Giuseppe Rotunno enters the Caravan.

Close-up: He is so big he fills up what space we have left. Swarthy, bright-eyed, happy about something. Begins talking in fast Italian to Fellini about yesterday's rushes. Yes, the rushes were good.

Fellini (standing): "I should go today, to see the rushes. Haven't seen them for a fortnight. Most directors go

every day but if I did I would only be"—he makes a gesture of confusion—"because the reality would not be like the dream. It never is." So he soldiers on, finishes the course, edits later.

" . . . We will continue our talk tomorrow." Beaming, he abruptly walks away, leaving a rosy trail of promises and reassurances.

Cut. Publicity manager (in his office): "If you come back tomorrow I'll commit suicide. Panorama is coming and three American journalists and . . . did you say all in Latin? The last I heard was that he was going to have Latin as a background murmur, a sort of Gregorian chant. No sub-titles? There's American money in this movie. Now we'll have to change all the hand-outs." We leave him groaning, trying to document Fellini's whims.

Cut. After. Roman square. Drinking.—So Fellini's trying to exorcise the Church of Rome, trying to bypass the Hollywood Church, bringing to life the pagan hedonism which 2000 years of Christianity tried to kill. And all of it very quickly, hoping to