

Document Citation

Title	La dolce vita
Author(s)	Giorgio Moscon
Source	<i>Art Film Publications</i>
Date	1961
Type	synopsis
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La dolce vita (The sweet life), Fellini, Federico, 1960

THE ART FILM

FELLINI'S

La Dolce Vita



LA DOLCE VITA

CREDITS

Directed by Federico Fellini
Story by Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano
Screenplay by Federico Pinelli, Flaiano and Brunello Rondi
Produced by Franco Magli
Cameraman Arturo Zavattini
Music Nino Rota

CAST

Marcello Rubini, third rate journalist Marcello Mastroianni
Sylvia, a Hollywood Star Anita Ekberg
Maddalena, nymphomaniac heiress Anouk Aimee
Steiner, Intellectual friend of Marcello Alain Cuny
Emma, Marcello's mistress Yvonne Furneaux
Robert, Sylvia's fiance Lex Barker
A priest at the 'Miracle' Alex Messoiedoff
Fanny, a chorus girl Magali Noel
Nadia, lady of the house Nadia Gray
The man with the brassiere Mario Conocchia

LA DOLCE VITA
by
Giorgio Moscon

It is impossible to understand the Italian postwar cinema, either in the 1945-49 neorealist explosion or the currently flourishing period which has culminated in the success of LA DOLCE VITA, if two factors are not borne in mind. First of all, we must remember the particular state of ignorance in which Italians were constrained by Fascism for twenty years, making difficult any exchange of ideas with foreign countries and preventing the diffusion of the most important and newest artistic achievements produced by the culture of other countries. Secondly, we must not forget the enforced optimism which, during all of the period, was obligatory for the Italian press and cinema and which threw out reality and the crude aspects of life.

When the war was over, in the climax of reconquered freedom, the best Italian directors faced with fervor (at times iconoclastic) those aspects of society they had not previously been free to deal with. It was a splendid season which gave important achievements to the cinema, but it vanished rapidly — for political and for economic reasons. Afterwards there was a long period of uncertainty when the few good films which did appear were a matter of isolated cases and not real expressions one might connect to a general and well-defined current. Nevertheless, during this period, 1950-57, some new personalities emerged, among them, brilliant and imaginative Federico Fellini (born 1920).

In his early films, such as I VITELLONI (1953), Fellini developed a new type of bitter comedy which centered around a character possessing the vices and defects evident in a certain side of the Italian temperament. And just as I VITELLONI inquired into some ways of living in the Italian provinces, so LA DOLCE VITA investigates one side of contemporary Roman life.

After 1958 the political and economic situation of the Italian cinema began to change. Many young film directors, partly as a natural reaction against convention, emulated their French "new wave" cousins and directed a group of films both audacious and full of ferment which achieved a high degree of public success. (These might be gathered together under the title "neo-decadentism.") LA DOLCE VITA inserts itself into this new fervor. Its public performances have provoked a scandal of international magnitude with interventions of cardinals, discussions in the Italian parliament, protests by the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, and ferocious polemics in the press. The entire controversy is absolutely disproportionate to the theme of the film, which describes with hardness only a limited part of Italian society. This is what we know as "cafe society", a society more artificial than important.

The thematic address of the film is vaguely Catholic, and in this vagueness Fellini is typically Italian. That is to say, he is Catholic, in his own way, as are all the rest of his countrymen who adapt religion to their particular ideas or, more accurately, to their own convenience. Only Divine Grace can save the protagonist Marcello at the end of his wandering among the corrupt of Roman society. Otherwise, nothing will remain to him but the rejection of any hope and the sinking of himself lower and lower into vice. It is clear that Marcello can save himself from degradation only if redeemed by Divine Grace, symbolized perhaps by the only clean face in the film, that of the young girl on the beach who looks "like the angels of Perugia."

Once agreed upon the spirit of this conception, it will be easier to understand why a very powerful Italian cardinal and the most perspicacious part of the clergy have defended the film against the Vatican, angry for the frankness with which Fellini describes false miracles, stripteases, orgies and scandals of the Italian capital, overlooked by the imposing dome of St. Peter's.

It would be practically impossible to tell the story of the film, which is composed of several unrelated sequences, were it not for the method of having Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni), a young journalist for a scandal magazine, act as a connecting link (The treatment of the various episodes is a kind of cinematic journalism paralleling, perhaps the format of Marcello's publication). Also, the series of fragments which make up LA DOLCE VITA are tied together by two pillars of logic which give further reality and cohesion to the story. These are the two episodes of Steiner: the introduction and the evening at his home, then his tragic end. It is precisely the character of Steiner that should offer the key to the film. His death provokes the collapse of all Marcello's illusions and he consequently abandons himself to the dissolute, sweet life without restraint.

However, the episode of Steiner reveals Fellini's greatest fault: a certain ambiguity which leaves a character incomplete or unfocused, one without a strict logic or systematic background. The personage of Steiner is neither complete nor, above all, exemplar. His death is casual; he chose murder and suicide, but it is as if he had died by

Giorgio Moscon is an Italian film critic.

mere accident or folly. His affairs, his problems, his griefs are not clearly justified or understandable. Therefore the intimate moral drama of a disarmed prophet that Steiner should pose loses force under scrutiny. Marcello's defeat doesn't seem quite so obvious and normal since Steiner's death turns out to be an irrational and inexplicable gesture. In this light, the final feature of the film takes a completely different aspect—not so much the impossibility of communication between the innocence of the girl and the vice of Marcello, as the simple refusal of the latter to make even the slightest intellectual effort to take himself out of the sweet life.

But Fellini overwhelmingly discovers his genius when he abandons himself to his instinctive feelings as a poet of humanity, complex and difficult, but lively and genuine. We see this illustrated in the extraordinary character of Maddalene, interpreted with a sorrowful sensitivity by the excellent actress Ainouk Aimee—so frank, so honest, and so undefended in her moments of generosity, passion, and weakness. We see it again in Sylvia, portrayed by Anita Ekberg, whose being is sunk in a fresh, overpowering sensuality which is magnificently highlighted, after the splendid sequence through the sleepy streets of old Rome, by the triumphant bath in the Fountain of Trevi. The baroque scenery is a perfect frame for the opulence of this very blond star. Then there is the witty and sharp character of Lex Barker, Anita's fiancé, who bears his conscience of cuckoldry with bitter dignity.

But remarkable above all is the creative imagination with which Fellini invents the episode of the aristocrat's party, divided into three parts: the introduction and the commonplace, the spiritism and formation with the big finale punctuated by aulic music, and the squalid procession filmed from behind. For me, this exceeded even the sweet and sour sequence of Maddalena and Marcello in the prostitute's house. Or that sort of "sacred representation" of the false miracle typical of a pagan and idolatrous people, with the ferocious dismembering of a tree, the branches of which have become disputed relics. (Who can forget the desolate comment of the priest who rejects the miracle—powerless sorcerer's apprentice who can do nothing against fanaticism too often tolerated?)

The final episode of the film describes an orgy with coldness and perhaps a little too much abstraction. It constitutes an example of the disintegration of a society which most probably is even more decayed and debilitated than that of Viscomte de Valmonte and Marquis de Merteuil. These are the real LIASONS DANGEREUSES 1960, rather than the pale illustrations of the too-celebrated film by Vadim.

Now that (at least in Italy and France) the polemics have calmed down, it is possible to judge LA DOLCE VITA more objectively. To me, there seems to be no lack of unbalance and weakness but ultimately it is an extraordinary work of great importance, wonderfully interpreted and completely pervaded by the feeling of deep pity with which Fellini looks at his characters. I believe that it constitutes an important proof of the vitality of the Italian cinema.

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Art Film Publications
Jerry Weiss, Publisher
Box 19652
Los Angeles 19, California
Printed in U.S.A