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By Frank Pierson

# FELLINI'S MAGICAL '8½'

*Celebrating the muse in one of film's most satisfying endings*

**A**CTORS, AND MOST DIRECTORS, want to experiment, improvise, fly on gossamer wings of inspiration into all kinds of irrelevancies and distractions. The story is, to them, a series of situations to embroider and exploit. The screenwriter's job is to throw cold water on all this and try to keep everyone focused and on track. The screenwriter becomes something between a conscience and a critic—an irritating, nagging presence, defending the director against the director's own wonderful, but irrelevant, ideas.

In forcing the director to firmly ad-

The letter lists a few of these and goes on to generalizations about themes, moods and tone. It is to be a comedy, making fun of the predicament of a very serious, but terribly flawed, man.

The character of the screenwriter, Daumier, in *8½* is played by a prominent writer, Jean Rougeul. With a hawkish, disapproving face, he carries himself with authority. Like his namesake, the 19th-century caricaturist, Daumier hates and derides pretentiousness, sentimentality, stupidity and betrayal of intelligence by seductions of mystery and sex. He is a tough guy.

Daumier is also ugly, as Guido (Marcello Mastroianni), the director of the movie-within-the-movie, is not. Daumier is a man whom women have always ignored in favor of the Guidos of the world. Thus, he is always ready to remind Guido of the way in which Guido's sensuous appetites undermine his sense of who he might become, and what his true powers might be.

Two ugly men are as aware as Guido of magic and mystery: Daumier, the screenwriter who insists upon reality, structure, form, sacrifice and truth; and Maurice, the moth-eaten magician with false teeth, whose feats of mind reading he himself is amazed at—when they work. As with Guido, his art is a mystery to him.

Daumier remains earthbound by logic, and he will never know the joy Guido experiences through his magic. As the closing scene of *8½* begins, with the scaffolding of the spaceship set and the beach in the background, the magic seems to have deserted Guido, forcing him to abandon the movie.

Fellini has gone out of his way to explain that *8½* should not be interpreted to mean that only mystery and emotion are the keys to truth and happiness. Emotion without conscience leads to the hedonistic, useless world he held up to scorn in *La Dolce Vita* (1960). "The sleep of reason produces monsters," Goya wrote. That is,

in a sentence, what Daumier the screenwriter is saying to Guido the director.

As the final scene progresses, Fellini weaves a wonderful counterpoint between picture and dialogue that is, to me, one of the high points of cinematic craft. Stylishly but invisibly, he moves the audience to a new perception.

As Guido walks away from the abandoned set—his dream which is already being demolished—his body is shrunk in despondency. The camera cuts to Daumier, erect and proud, disdainful and correct, waiting by the car in the parking lot. Daumier begins a monologue, as the center and point of view of the scene.

Guido is passive, listening. Fellini makes him almost invisible to us, while Daumier fills the screen and, talking, talking, gets into the car. Now, Guido is only half-seen—outside the car, walking around, finally getting in, too bereft of will to start the engine. All the time Daumier is speaking of the weakness of his vision, the uselessness of the picture, the silliness of his conception. Daumier says that the only right thing he has done is what he is doing now—abandoning the film. But with each cut and camera move, Daumier becomes less and less visible. Conversely, Guido, sinking deeper into himself, gathers inner strength and becomes the focus of the scene.

Daumier is filmed now through the windshield of the car, so that reflections half-conceal him. He is a talking shadow, while Guido fills our field of vision with his pain and concentration.

Something is happening inside Guido, in reaction to the writer's denunciation of his character and art. We begin to anticipate Guido's reaction. Our curiosity becomes so acute that we, like Guido, are no longer listening to Daumier at all. As the writer grumbles on, unaware of the apparitions gathering around them, he finally becomes invisible to the audience as well as Guido.

The resolution to the film arrives



FELLINI WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POWERS. WHEN HE DIRECTED *8½*, FROM A SCREENPLAY HE WROTE WITH ENNIO FLAIANO, TULLIO PINELLI AND BRUNELLO RONDI, BASED ON A STORY BY FELLINI AND FLAIANO.

dress story problems, instead of just having fun, the writer often comes to be perceived as the story problem. Then a new writer is hired, one who will shut up and do as he or she's told.

Fellini's first treatment of the screenplay, *8½*, was not a story at all but a short letter to Brunello Rondi, one of the credited writers of the movie. Fellini describes a confused film director facing a picture he wants to make, for which he has only the intimation of a feeling, and a few characters, in mind.



with Maurice, Guido's magical alter ego, who dances up beside the car and begins to summon all of Guido's creatures from the past. Guido has a rush of feeling, as his magic powers as an artist start to return. "What is this sudden joy that makes me tremble," he asks, "gives me strength, life?"

Critics complained that Fellini disarmed criticism of *8½* by putting the worst that could be said about it into the film itself. After Daumier's constant carping at Guido, what is there left to say? But they miss the point. An artist is not complete without the magic and mystery of art tempered by the craft and cunning of science—heart and mind together. The writer (in this case) is the cunning craftsman and moral conscience; the director (in this case) is the source of poetic inspiration, generosity and feeling. It is not a license to fly, free of all rules, nor of rigid adherence only to that which can be rationally explained. Art is a resolution of conflict. And it produces new, unexpected results—in this case, the most beautiful and satisfying ending of any film I know, with the possible exception of the ending of *Les Enfants du Paradis*.

It is also deeply satisfying to hear a screenwriter given full voice to lambaste the director; for screenwriters of the world to stand with fists upraised.

*Guido walks forward, then stops to take another look at the tower behind him. Daumier sits at a table.*

**DAUMIER** You did the right thing. Believe me . . . today is a good day for you. These are difficult decisions, I know. But we intellectuals—I say "we" because I consider you one—we must remain lucid right to the end. He turns and walks a few steps. The beach can be seen in the background.

**DAUMIER** There are already too many superfluous things in the world. It's not a good idea to add more disorder to disorder. In any case, losing money is part of the producer's job. I congratulate you! You had no choice!

*He opens the car door and gets in on the passenger side.*

**DAUMIER** And he got what he deserves. To have so thoughtlessly embarked on such a frivolous project! Be-

lieve me, you should feel neither nostalgia nor remorse. It's better to destroy than to create when you're not creating those few things that are truly necessary. And finally, in this world of ours, is there anything so just and true that it has the right to survive? For him, a bad film is only a fiscal event. But for you, at this point in your life, it could have been the end.

*Guido walks beside the car. He wears a fixed, sad expression.*

**DAUMIER** (offscreen) It's better to knock it all down and strew the ground with salt, as the ancients did, to purify the battlefields.

*Guido again looks up at the tower. The workmen on the platform throw down a tubular structure. It hits the ground.*

**DAUMIER** (offscreen) What we really need is some hygiene, some cleanliness, some disinfection.

*Guido gets into the car.*

**DAUMIER** We're stifled by words, images, sounds that have no right to exist . . . that come from the void and go back to the void. Anyone who deserves to be called an artist should be asked to make this single act of faith—to educate oneself to silence. Do you remember Mallarmé's praise of the white page? And Rimbaud? . . .

*Behind Guido, we see Maurice in long shot, running excitedly to Daumier's window.*

**MAURICE** Wait, Guido! Wait!

**DAUMIER** (to Guido) . . . A poet, my friend, not a movie director. Do you know what his finest poetry was? His refusal to continue writing and his departure for Africa.

**MAURICE** We're ready to begin.

*Close-up on the back of Claudia's head. She is walking on the beach, now dressed in the white costume of the girl of the springs. Various characters from the film reappear on the beach, dressed in white. Most of them look at Guido with love and compassion.*

**DAUMIER** (offscreen) If you can't have everything . . . true perfection is in nothingness. Forgive me for making all these learned references. But we critics . . . do what we can. Our true job is to sweep away the thousands of abortions that every day . . . obscenely . . . try to come into the world.

*High angle on Guido's mother and father standing in the field. Close-up on Daumier in the car, his face almost in shadow.*



**DAUMIER** (offscreen) And you would really like to leave behind you a complete film, just like a cripple who leaves behind his crooked footprint! *Claudia, smiling, moves along the beach.*

**DAUMIER** (offscreen) What a monstrous presumption, to think that others might enjoy the squalid catalogue of your mistakes!

*Close-up on Carla, smiling, with the Cardinal and his entourage in the background.*

**DAUMIER** And what good would it do you to string together the tattered pieces of your life, your vague memories, or the people you were never able to love?

*Pan to Guido's father and mother, Jacqueline, the Beautiful Unknown Woman, and Carla, walking forward. Guido rubs his head.*

**GUIDO** (interior monologue) What is this sudden joy that makes me tremble, gives me strength, life?

What screenwriter has not wanted to lay something like that on his director, and live to keep his credit on the screen? □

Frank Pierson directed *A Star Is Born* and is the author of *Dog Day Afternoon* and the forthcoming drama *In Country*.

THE RATIONAL AND EARTHBOUND WRITER DAUMIER (JEAN ROUGEUL, LEFT) IS A CONSTANT THORN IN THE SIDE OF MOVIE DIRECTOR GUIDO (MARCELLO MASTROIANNI), AS HE PERFORMS HIS MAGIC IN *8½*.