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Author(s)	Joseph A. Timko
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"Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
 But we've got our brave captain to thank,"
 (The crew would protest) "that he's bought us the best -
A perfect and absolute blank!" -Snark by Lewis Carroll

"8½" is a picture for symbol-minded people. Despite its labyrinthine circuitry, the film is comprehensible. Because of the subconscious organization, the film cannot be reduced to levels of understanding; but the central action, namely the production of the movie, provides a thread to keep one from getting lost. The inability to communicate, a holdover from "La Dolce Vita", is the force holding back the production. The director is plagued not only by the actors and the critics (the former understand art; the latter deny its existence), but by his own confusion. One especially gracious ghost in the film is Claudia. She seems to be his ideal of love, in Platonic terms the form of love. But just as each example one meets is an imperfect copy, so Guido encounters misunderstanding and distortion. The realization that Claudia is unreachable comes when the actress Claudia talks to Guido about her part. She is as interested in her role as the other actors. But after Guido tells her the story, she can find no sense in it. She doesn't match the ideal in his mind. She won't take him out of the world that frightens him. Instead she accuses him of not being able to love. And she does so three times, as solemnly as the Cardinal's "extra ecclesia..." His dream shattered, Guido explains to Claudia that he made the whole story up. There is no picture. There's nothing...nothing at all.

With his hope for transcendence gone, Guido doesn't know what to do. But before he can even think, his staff pull up and notify him of the press conference the next day. Knowing of the failure facing him, Guido is reluctant to go; but the threats of his producer and the arms of his assistants bring him to the conference, which is a chaotic and terrifying trial. But there's still a way of escape. Yet the instant before he fires a bullet into his head, he sees his mother running up to him by the shore crying, "Where are you running to, you wretched boy?" His pulling of the trigger appears to be transformed into nothing more than an admission of failure. Later, the nihilistic remarks of his collaborator Daumier are slight comfort. Here then, at the lowest point in the film, at the disassembling of the rocket tower set, a most grandiose escape mechanism, the magician (-something between a Bergman symbol and imagination incarnate) appears and cheerfully announces to the director that everyone is ready. The magician gestures into the distance; and as Guido looks out of the car, which has been his symbol of self-confinement and failure to communicate, he sees Claudia walking gently away from him. He feels freed. He has destroyed his wish for transcendence, for escape; and suddenly everything that he has known becomes real and vital. He no longer withdraws into his own doubts in order to try to communicate; for communication precedes and transcends the dead, objective and fixed reality of analysis. Insights grow from this leap into the present. Knowledge and thought must grow from love; love can not be induced by thought or fact.

One of the most dramatic points in the film occurs at the rocket sight on the night that Guido's wife visits him. The whole assemblage of girders, the mighty construction, on to which the rocket is to be optically projected - as an illusion - takes on the nature of the Tower of Babel. Guido is standing at the foot of the tower talking about his wife to the mystic, Rossella. The conversation shifts to Truth, where Guido asks, "now I'm totally confused, and with this (the rocket tower) on my hands... where did it all go wrong?" Rossella tells him that he's really free, but that he must decide and soon. At this point there is a long shot of the entire scene lit in the strange eeriness of spot-lights. Electronic music intensifies the science-fiction mood. Faint voices call to Guido from high on the tower, "Are you coming up?" He must decide.

But what is the decision? It seems to be rather the admission of guilt and failure in not having loved, in not having told the truth. With this admission comes the collapse of the wall between Guido and the rest of the world. He has ceased to tell them anything from within himself. He joins them in their dance; he has become a person to himself. The world has taken on the appearance of a circus, where no one really seems to direct the action all by himself...yet things happen all the same. It is at the very end of the film that Fellini's use of music reaches its peak. The strange, almost Prokofieff-like dance closes the picture like a curtain; nothing has really ended - on the contrary, it has just begun. The future is not behind the curtain, but in the world. "The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens."*

*Rilke. Letters to a Young Poet. translated by Norton.

Joseph A. Timko
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