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AND THE SHIP SAILS ON

by George Paul Csicsery

And The Ship Sails On opens with a series of still photographs that begin to move to the accompanying sound of a hand-cranked antique movie camera. The people, children, and cars moving through the piazza appear to be a random assortment of urban Europeans circa 1914 accidentally caught by the camera in a public place. Gradually some of them become aware of the camera and start coming back into the picture from the sides, mugging the way people in home movies always do. More and more different types crowd into this confusing series of shots. Lots of children greet cars. Well-dressed dandies, old gentlemen wearing official ribbons, and turbaned and befeweled ladies step out of shiny old cars.

Then we see the side of a monstrous luxury liner, and finally a funeral procession approaches the loading dock. We begin to connect up the crowd, the ship, the cortege, the ship's band forming up to play a dirge. As the music begins to intrude on the sound of the camera, there are flickers of color inside some of the clothes, and we become more conscious of the fact that what began as black and white has been fading from green to sepia and straining towards color for some time until it begins to resemble very lightly tinted photographs. Whatever doubt there was that the material is just a Fellini montage of old found footage and stills disappears with the first note of music. It is opera music, and within seconds we hear finely developed soloists in synch sound filling up the track as the colors pour in to fill up the picture.

It is a wonderful introductory sequence that has spanned the entire history of photography from the earliest scenes of streets with anonymous strangers in the distance to the full dolby wide screen color extravaganzas of today --- all in less than three minutes. The obvious question about such a remarkable technical odyssey is how to follow it up? What next? Video? Remember it's still 1914.

Fellini transfers the emphasis to the operatic - dramatic scale. It is quite simply amusing to see all of the characters who had gathered in the stills and the jumpy B&W shots start to sing along with the soloists in various choral groups. Fellini then tops everything by having his passengers begin boarding the ship.

They move up the stairs in slow measured cadences accompanying the music, but each one is in step with all of the others. If they were wearing uniforms this would look like a parody of tin soldiers on the march in a long single column. But they are all dressed differently. The opera music and the shot of all these Fellini characters moving up that gangplank like so many chocolate soldiers on a conveyor belt is hilarious because it introduces the child's point of view. It is a kind of structured uniformity that only a child would impose on reality as a way of organizing it into something that can be manipulated as a single entity. A file of soldiers, a file of people boarding a play ship like toys. The only other place this kind of simple organization of reality occurs in cinema is in Modern Times, and in the Busby Berkeley spectacles where mechanistic assembly line conceptions of the world were translated into ballet and plot motifs. But Fellini's fantasy is not mechanistic, it really is more a child's need to make some semblance of order in a chaotic universe. It is a device that combines well with the exaggerated dream sets and stagy effects that serve to remind us that Fellini does not really want to fool us into thinking we're seeing 1914. The film like many of his others is structured like a dream with constant reminders that we're going to wake up when it's over.

Fellini's most recent film has a number of rare qualities, most of them admirable because they involve techniques and dramatic elements that have been bungled so often by lesser talents. First among these is that And the Ship Sails On is an extremely nostalgic film without being stupid. I say that because most films that are tear-jerkers with a strong bite of nostalgia are trite and stupid. Terms of Endearment, for example, is designed to appeal to anyone who will cry when they see someone on screen doing the same. And the ship sails on is nostalgic and emotionally touching in a completely different way; a much more intelligent way, in which the sympathetic threads between the characters and one's own emotions are attached in much more complex patterns.

And The Ship Sails On is a dream chronicle of a fantastic voyage in the ominous summer of 1914. A group of mourners embark on a luxury ocean liner conveying the ashes of the divina soprano Edmea Tettua to be cast to the winds at sea. The ship itself is a titanic metaphor for the last days of the belle epoque. It is a lavish fantasy set designed by art director Dante Ferretti, each element of which contains its own humorous exaggerations and commentaries that reverberate constantly.

The company of mourners is large in a way that only Fellini could handle without the audience losing its grasp of each individual. Fellini spends months looking for faces and physical types and then builds characters around them once he has found them. During the seventies there were documentaries and articles about his abuse of disfigured characters, but Fellini, who ran away to join the circus as a child cannot really be expected to understand hard political concepts such as 'exploitation.' And The Ship Sails On explains exactly why better than most of his films.

Fellini has always excelled at the large panoramic scene with dozens of characters interacting in small groups. The interactions seem random as the camera moves from one group to the next savoring a snippet of dialogue here, catching a magic trick there, moving on to a fat lady dancing with club-footed adolescent who has trouble following but is glad to be cuddled, and so on from midget to child to beauty to mother in law. In film after film, Fellini has saved the best of these meandering scenes for his conclusion. Everyone is always together at the end, dancing and sharing at some festive occasion to the music

of Nino Rota, the eternal circus music that has always signified the apotheosis in which everything is warm and forgiven at the end of a Fellini movie. Rota's perfectly balanced always injected that warmth to complete the magnificent harmony.

And The Ship Sails On is a bitter-sweet reminder of these masterpieces; from La Dolce Vita to 8½ and Amarcord. Although the entire film is like a grand finale from an earlier Fellini picture it draws attention to the absence of Rota (who died a few years ago) and to the gentle swaying tunes without which Fellini films may have been as mundane as those of Sergio Citti. Although the soundtrack to And The Ship Sails On may yet prove to be the most original and interesting of the year, the Verdi and Rossini operatic ~~themes~~ ^{tunes} to which lyrics were tailored by Gianfranco Plenizio and Andrea Zanzotto somehow leave Fellini a little more naked and show him shivering in the cold. The result adds to the film's sense of nostalgia Fellini's loss of his old colleague Nino Rota. It's a little like watching the opening credits to the Lone Ranger without the William Tell Overture.

Fellini manages to present dozens of unique characters effortlessly. The company of aristocratic eccentrics and artistic virtuosi include the divina's competitors, the world's leading tenors and a soprano who bristles with envy at the mere mention of the dead ultima's name, a pair of looney music teachers who perform a concert in the ship's galley played on water filled glasses, ex-lovers, a gigolo, her cousin, admirers, composers---in short, an eccentric collection of opera buffs and personalities, all of them fitting neatly into Fellini's usual collection of circus types. They are introduced and followed around by a journalist who has a secret lust for anything young and innocent that moves, but who also has a healthy appreciation of the foibles and idiosyncracies of his elite menagerie.

It is a decadent assortment of self-indulgent types luxuriating at the very tip of the that most synthetic of art forms and lifestyles created by European civilization at the very instant before that civilization begins to crumble. Fellini is playing with the absurdity of that instant just before the long and painful decline that has all but erased everything but photographs of the belle epoque and fin de siecle. To understand the world Fellini is showing, you have to read Robert Musil's Man Without Qualities or Marcel Proust. Fellini captures the essence of these people who represent the purest and most insane of the lifestyle that had no pragmatic purpose what so ever. Self-indulgent to the bone, these people could not imagine what or why a concept like "cost effective" would ever be introduced.

Each of the characters is lost in his/her own reverie on the dead soprano, but while the fantasies all revolve around opera, the personal twists are universal and touchingly human. Fellini has always been a master of evoking profound comments, or describing deep emotions with great economy through minor characters. Throughout, the music of Verdi and Rossini, dominates, coming to the fore in dozens of humorous scenes that culminate in opera-like crescendoes with a full chorus. In one hilarious sequence, the ship's officers escort their illustrious passengers into the cavernous bowels of the engine room. With furnaces belching fire and smoke, the sweating muscular coal and firemen demand that the soprano sing to them. Before long the singers are madly competing to see who can hit the highest note in different passages of "La dona e mobile."

Fellini's ship full of 19th century aristocrats, their pet artists, lovers and all of their passions is headed for doom. Fellini signals the impending disaster of World War I through a bizarre set of characters headed by an obese Austro-Hungarian idiot princeling (Fiorenzo Serra) who is aboard the ship because he admired the dead singer. His blind prophetic sister (Pina Bausch), a sinister police chief, and a conspiratorial minister with a crew of ruffian-like body guards complete the Ludwig-esque prince's retinue. In a delightful scene parodying the weighty unworkable bureaucracy that characterized the dual monarchy, Fellini delivers his predictions of the coming disaster. When the prince is finally trapped by the journalist into saying a few words for the record, his imbecilic phrases are fought over by his Hungarian and German aides before they can be translated for the Italian reporter. Finally, the interpreter delivers an entirely ambiguous version that comes closer to prophecy than the prince will ever know.

The clouds surface soon enough in the form of Serbian refugee boat people taken aboard at night by the ship's captain. Suddenly the metaphors become sharper. There are contrasts between the social classes that lead to debates among the wealthier passengers on how to treat their unfortunate companions. The wake itself becomes a metaphor for the mourning of a civilization on its last superfluous fling.

The Serbian peasants are easily enough controlled, but they exert a strange unsettling influence on their aristocratic superiors. The inbred decadence and rarefied decaying emotions of the opera buffs cannot withstand the assault of raw passions and animal sensuality. In the end the wild democratic rhythms and sheer physical allure of the Serbian and gypsy dances seduces the best of

the mourners. The scene is a moonlit frenzied ballet, an orgy of unparalleled social commingling in which the old regime is consumed by the passions of raw youth and energy that have come from the revolutionary masses who have shaped life in our century.

Besides its naive but enriched allegorical text(which adds up to the kind of film that one can call entertaining without having to apologize for endless car chases, sex gags and cheap shots) And The Ship Sails On provides a series of technical treats worth calling attention to.

The use of old photographs to create atmosphere in period pictures has become somewhat hackneyed over the years. It worked because of its novelty in the sixties films like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Bonnie & Clyde, but by the early eighties, old stills in title sequences (or anywhere else in a film) had become a tired cliché. For example, the up scale pseudo-sophisticated sci-fi film Bladerunner contained a sequence of old photographs in a quiet drawing room setting that was a perfect demonstration of how gratuitous use of an otherwise harmless device can destroy a film and make the device itself look stupid. In Bladerunner the scene looked like it had been pirated from an art student's first film.

It is to Federico Fellini's credit then that he is able to take something so worn as the use of old photographs and inject new life into it, thus showing others how it's possible to do the thing right.

What comes through in the end as the most impressive quality of this and all of the best films made by Fellini is his ability to spin a total fantasy world that transports you --- the audience away into another world for even a few minutes. Fellini is a circus performer who takes the concept of entertainment seriously. His only purpose is to remove the barriers between the viewer and what is being woven and conjured by the magicians on stage and behind the camera.

The fact that he manages to convey an important psychological self-portrait that reflects and touches on universal themes in the process is a bonus. And The Ship Sails On, albeit a highly nostalgic work, does advance the main themes that Fellini has been pursuing throughout his career. It is pre-occupied with the artist's function in the world. It questions the accepted standards of sexuality and tries to speculate on exactly what constitutes true innocence?

The decadent upper bourgeois old regime types are innocent in their admiration of the raw animal magnetism of the Serbian boat people, and this innocence is consumed by the violence of political commitment and terrorism they will never understand. But Fellini does not indict the masses, the lower orders fighting for some basic freedom or right. He shows that the perverse intolerance self-righteous authoritarian bungling of the effete old regime is ultimately responsible for the inhuman fate of all, or at least as responsible as the impatient violence of the dispossessed.

Fellini's parable is fatalistic in the acceptance of all this as inevitable., and the film, like the moment of history it celebrates is like a jewel or delicate sweet that leaves an aftertaste of warmth and sadness. The melancholy comes from the facts of history that have removed certain emotions and looks and styles forever, but the warmth is the direct consequence of Fellini's childish dream commentary. And with Fellini, the ultimate entertainer, the knowledge that one has experienced such lost moments guided by a master makes the warmth the more valuable quality.

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