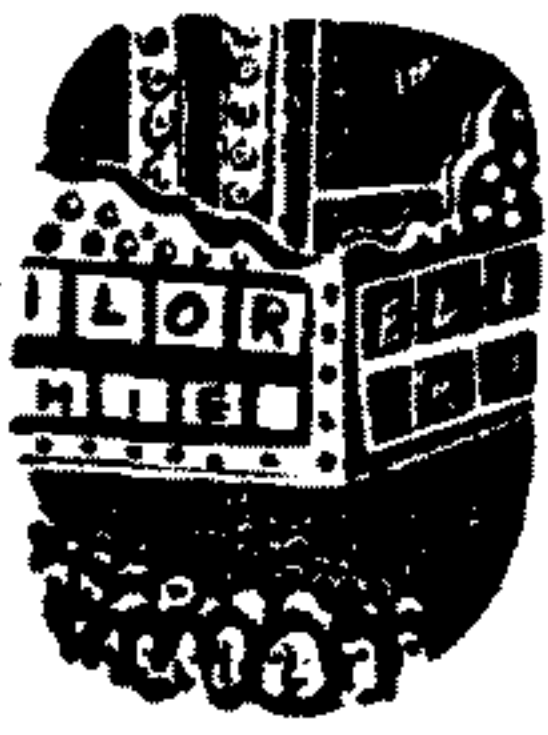


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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Adventures of a Journalist

"**L**A DOLCE VITA" is a motion picture by Federico Fellini that begins with a white figure of Christ being carried by helicopter over the roofs of Rome to the Vatican, and that ends with a monstrous, formless fish being stared at on the sand at Ostia. During the intervening three hours, Fellini gives us a mordant vision of contemporary Roman life, a parable of futility, a vista of spiritual decay, a swirl of corrupt pleasure in which his journalist hero eddies until he is lost in soulless emptiness. Call it an indictment, a warning if you like, but it is also the most fascinating three hours of cinema turned out in recent years, a culmination of the Italian realistic approach, the most brilliant of all the movies that have attempted to portray the modern temper. Viewed superficially, it is an episodic account of incidents in the daily life of a Rome newspaperman, in which the glint of satire is discernible but not unduly stressed. It can also be seen as an autobiographical statement on the part of the director—who was once such a newspaperman in Rome—but it is autobiography seasoned with mature wisdom and given significance by imaginative heightening.

The newspaperman, Marcello, is a young man with talent who makes his living reporting day-to-day sensation and gossip. In search of a daily story, he follows the Christ statue in another helicopter, dallies over a roof on which girls are sunbathing. At a nightclub he meets a nymphomaniac heiress who, in her boredom, takes him to the bedroom of a prostitute. His mistress attempts suicide during this all-night episode. But no sooner has she recovered than Marcello covers the arrival in Rome of an American movie star, chases after her as she indulges in gaities of monumental stupidity, and gets beaten up by her boyfriend for his pains. The connections between these seemingly disparate events soon become noticeable. Marcello is at once cynical and naïve, a man able to penetrate fraud and yet a dupe, partly corrupt and yet in search of some meaning that will relieve his internal anguish.

Has his friend Steiner the answer? Steiner is a dedicated intellectual who lives a seemingly good life, made pleasant by an intelligent wife, two beautiful children, witty artistic friends. But the very peace Steiner has found terrifies him, and soon enough he goes berserk, destroying himself and his chil-

dren, and with this deepening Marcello's despair. Religion? Marcello races to a supposed miracle: two children have had a vision of the Virgin, and around a little tree a large crowd gathers, indulging in pious nonsense with sickening abandon. The filial virtues? Marcello's father visits Rome, remains a stranger to his son while making a fool of himself over a cheap nightclub dancer. A sudden heart attack sends him back to his provincial town. Upper-class life? Marcello goes to a party held in a castle; there a bored, elegant flock drinks, fornicates, and finds even more boredom in the morning.

Marcello has the intelligence to discern the ironies in each of his adventures, but it is not enough to prevent him from participating. He berates his simple, pretty mistress not so much for what she does, but for what he is. Being able to condemn no one and nothing, he sinks into a slime of pleasure. In the end he has joined a group of the sophisticated and the perverse, makes money by publicizing anyone and anything, and is the leader at an orgiastic party, the most titillating point of which is reached when a



young woman does a strip dance in celebration of her just obtained annulment. Toward dawn the group leaves the house and goes to a beach, where the monstrous fish is just being dragged in by fishermen. One of the group notices that the monster has gorged itself on jellyfish. In all this weirdness, Fellini has saved one last glimpse of innocence for his hero. Across a little backwater there stands a girl he has met once before. She has the fresh, untainted face of an angel in a Renaissance painting. She waves and beckons, and tries to tell Marcello something. He shrugs foolishly. He can't hear.

Through all this, the viewer is held (and sometimes shocked) by vivid imagery, by rich details of gesture and dialogue. Throughout the flamboyance there is precision. What is said, what is done, is exactly right for Fellini's purpose. His actors have obeyed him so well that their performances add to the incandescence. Notice Anita Ekberg, hitherto not known for high acting

gifts, who, as the American star, is every movie star who ever fell for Rome. She dances at a nightclub in the ancient ruins of the baths of Caracalla, wades deliriously in the Trevi fountain, sends Marcello on a late-night search for milk for a kitten she has found, is glassily conscious of her fleshly endowments. There is Anouk Aimee, whose Maddalena is a remarkable portrait of a superior young woman of wealth, sensual, keen-minded, who finds her pleasure in the imaginative perverse. Most impressive of all is Marcello Mastroianni as the newspaperman, an actor of the highest sensitivity, his face a continual mirror of feeling and comment on the material of Fellini. Each in the crowded cast adds to the mosaic and helps make it an artistic whole. We can pick out Alain Cuny, Nadia Gray, Magali Noel, Walter Santesso for special notice, but there are at least a dozen others who quickly make sharp or poignant impressions, and then vanish.

Hovering constantly are the vulture photographers of Rome. They are like birds of prey, waiting to descend on hapless victims of tragedy, to surround a celebrity in a moment of embarrassment or idiocy. They are dreadful feeders on sensation, who share their catch with society at large. But there is a surprising lack of anger in Fellini's camera. It is almost as though he has come upon a pageant of life that is, for all its irony, haunting and strangely beautiful. The too lush sweetness is also caught in the musical score of Nino Rota.

"La Dolce Vita" flung all of Italy into debate about its merits. There have been many who have picked away at this extraordinary film, suspicious that Fellini has only wanted to perpetrate some gigantic fraud. Doing so is a way of escaping from the film's implications. If there is a message in it, it is that the modern loss of faith has resulted in a sapping of what the nineteenth century called the will. Is "La Dolce Vita" a faithful mirror of certain of society's ills? Does it matter? Truth is relative, artistic truth is the most relative of all. Fellini, who ranks with Bergman as the great film-maker of our time, infuses his subjects with an almost overflowing warmth, and with a profound feeling for the savor and anguish of life. Whether it be the little female clown in "La Strada," a lumpish young provincial in "Vitelloni," his pathetic prostitute in "La Notti di Cabiria," it is always someone intensely human. So is Marcello in "La Dolce Vita." His tragedy is the tragedy of an intelligent man who has lost a sense of meaning, and who takes pleasure as the easiest way out.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

APR 22, 61