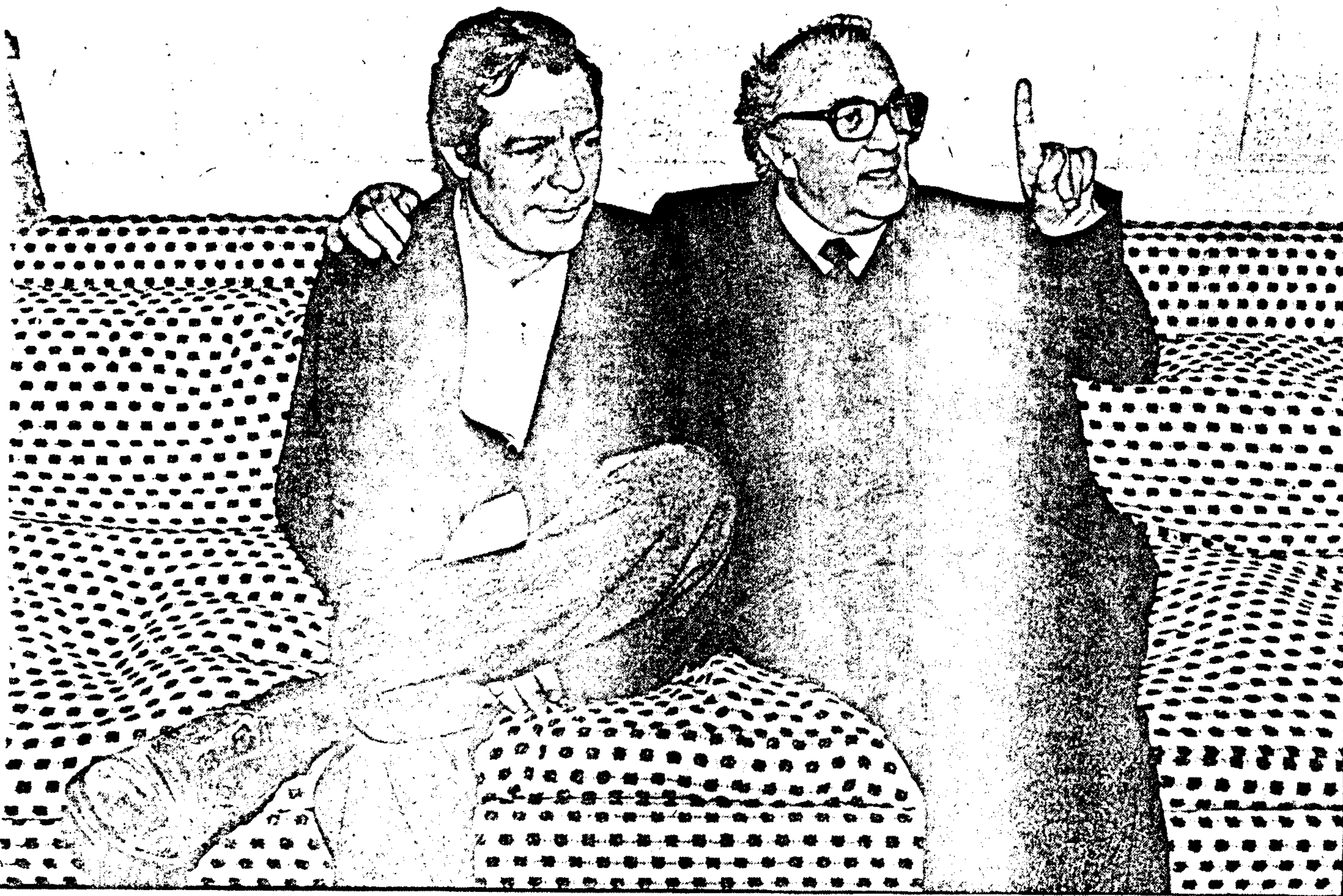


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Federico and alter ego: believe the tale rather than the teller

Fellini Takes On the Feminists

By Andrew Sarris

Federico Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni hit town last week to promote *City of Women* for ever-venturesome distributor-exhibitor Dan Talbot. A luncheon interview was arranged for me at the "21" Club with Federico and Marcello. As soon as we were led, with an interpreter, to a corner banquetette flanked in both directions by diners struck dumb at the sight of the director and the star of *La Dolce Vita* and *8-1/2*, I began to have misgivings about the whole ritual. It is hard enough to interview a shrewdly satirical and notoriously fanciful artist like Fellini under any circumstances. The language barrier made it hard to get beyond ceremonial banalities. In addition, my own position vis-a-vis Fellini was problematic in the extreme, inasmuch as I had blown hot and cold on his films for the past quarter of a century. I remain fond of his "classical" period that began with his directorial collaboration with Alberto Lattuada in 1951 on *Variety Lights*, followed by *The White Sheik* (1952), *I Vitelloni* (still my favorite), and "A Matrimonial Agency" episode in *Love in the City* (1953), *La Strada* (1954), *Il Bidone* (1955), and *Cabiria* (1957).

Fellini's "baroque" period, that began in my mind at least with *La Dolce Vita* in 1960, was another matter entirely. As I wrote back in 1961, *I Vitelloni*, *La Strada*, and *Cabiria* are bathed in a tragicomic lyricism that is intensely personal and reflects Fellini's compassion for the rejects of the modern world. After this impressive trilogy, Fellini undertook in *La Dolce Vita* to provide a Dantean vision of the modern world as viewed from the top instead of the bottom. Unfortunately, there is more to a great film than a great conception, and Fellini has enlarged his material without expanding his ideas. Consequently, the film is as bloated as the fish that terminates the orgy sequence.

"However, it can be argued that in terms of social impact *La Dolce Vita* is the most important film ever made. This does not imply a correlation with artistic merit, since by the standard of impact *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is superior to *Moby Dick*. The fantastic popularity of *La Dolce Vita* may be summed up in the beggar's comment in Bunuel's *Viridiana*: 'One must sin before one can repent.' Without being consciously hypocritical, Fellini has dramatized the fundamental injustice of social

morality. The poor creatures abandoned by Antonioni to their lives of necessity flock to *La Dolce Vita* to share Fellini's disgust with the sweet life, but the spectacle of corruption fills them with envy for the options of the hero. Confident of their ultimate righteousness, many spectators would like to slide along the infernal surfaces of fur and chrome before regaining their moral footing. If *La Dolce Vita* contributes to an awareness of the hypocrisy of so-called social morality, which denies to the peasants and the proles the sweet Faustian decisions of the Kennedys and the Rockefellers, the film may be forgiven for its intellectual and formal failures."

as much on our way to the banquetette, and he smiled agreeably. The vibes were already positive because of Molly Haskell's definitively insightful review of *City of Women* from Cannes in last summer's *Voice*. In fact, I had so little to add to her thoughtful critique that I was searching desperately for some journalistic gimmick in the interview itself. First, I tried the alter ego gambit with Fellini and Mastroianni in terms of their very close collaborations on Fellini-like protagonists in *La Dolce Vita*, *8-1/2*, and *City of Women*, but after a few struggles with the interpreter that line of questioning seemed to become counterproductive.

FILMS IN FOCUS

Subsequently, I was disappointed by the florid excess of "The Temptation of Doctor Antonio" episode in *Boccaccio '70* (1962), much preferring Visconti's utilization of Romy Schneider in "The Job" episode to Fellini's exploitation of Anita Ekberg. I then resisted the almost universal critical adulation for *8-1/2* in 1963, and was baffled and disconcerted by *Juliet of the Spirits* in 1965. The "Toby Dammit" episode in *Spirits of the Dead* (1968) struck me as Fellini on the upswing. But *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), *The Clowns* (1970), *Fellini's Roma* (1972), and *Amarcord* (1973) all struck me as recapitulations of all the stylistic and thematic elements that he had incorporated more intuitively in the masterpieces of his classical period. Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) was a fascinating disaster. Finally, *Orchestra Rehearsal* (1979) and *City of Women* (1980) are very explicitly political films that found more favor with me than with most of Fellini's erstwhile admirers. I can't help feeling that if *Amarcord* had opened the 1973 New York Film Festival with Fellini himself in attendance, the whole city would have been at his feet. The American film industry was loaded with Fellini imitators — Mazursky, Nichols, Fosse, Allen, Rafelson, among others.

In 1981, however, Fellini seems to be basking in past glories. I was particularly shocked last year in Cannes to discover that even Europeans preferred Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz*, a garish Fellini imitation, to Fellini's own *City of Women*: I told Fellini

When I asked about the crisis in the Italian film industry, Fellini launched, with a surprisingly articulate English, upon an analysis of the lack of faith and confidence on the part of Italians with all their ventures. At times Fellini and Mastroianni seemed to be placing themselves outside that alleged national malaise, but on other occasions they seemed to be indulging it even in themselves. Fellini bristled when I brought up some of the old critical disputes over neorealism. "Neorealism was Rossellini and only Rossellini," Fellini insisted. "De Sica and the others were merely imitating French directors like Rene Clair and Julien Duvivier. But the neorealistic critics tried to put the Italian cinema in a straitjacket."

I suddenly recalled that Fellini had been Rossellini's scriptwriter from *Open City* onward, but that he, like Rossellini, had broken away from the Marxist hegemony of neorealism. Could it be that he is paying the price for his antianarchic fantasy in *Orchestra Rehearsal*, and for his rueful acknowledgment of feminism as a potent social force in *City of Women*? Fellini laughed as he recalled being virtually thrown out of a feminist rally in Italy. Suddenly a sexist bravado began to ricochet from Fellini to Mastroianni, and back again. The "interview" was disintegrating into a farcical skit in a Fellini movie.

I made one last try at playing interviewer with an academic question about *I Vitelloni*: With whom did Fellini identi-

fy? With everyone, he replied, but particularly with the old homosexual actor. Mastroianni burst into laughter. Was there some inside joke I didn't get? Was there anything, really, I could ask Fellini about *City of Women*? Not really. Fellini's films play all their cards face up, and there are seldom any hidden depths to probe. Fellini actually reminded me of Welles when he spoke of the necessary crises any serious artist must face if he is to function at all. Obviously, Fellini could never go back to making the "classical" films we once admired so much, but in making himself the center of his cinema he has perhaps used up too much of himself. The corrosion of subjectivity and all that.

Nonetheless, there is a great deal of Fellini's old spirit and fire in *City of Women*. I cannot see how anyone who has ever regarded Fellini film with the slightest affection could possibly resist its poignantly confessional tone and antic humor. Fellini remains the most prodigiously observant of all directors, and I think that women of all ideological persuasions will be amused almost in spite of themselves. There is really no malice in the film, only a bemused vision of chaos as Fellini wanders across the increasingly stormy landscape with both humor and nostalgia. Mastroianni is a big help in this endeavor as, yes, his alter ego. With a fabulist like Fellini, the admonition to believe the tale rather than the teller is particularly apt.

But I never expected Fellini to make my job as a critic easier at the "21" Club. I was just on hand to participate in a little bit of "La Dolce Vita" on my own. Just as our interview was being concluded, a bit of comedy relief turned up in the form of an elderly man presented to Fellini and Mastroianni by a younger man who turned out to be the elderly man's son. The elderly man turned out to be Maxwell Raab, the Reagan administration's ambassador-designate to Italy. Our interview took place a week before the assassination attempt. Fellini actually asked me what I thought about Reagan. After pontificating for a few minutes, I could feel Fellini's sardonic gaze impaling me upon one of his ironic shafts. Both he and Mastroianni had declared war on excessive seriousness a long time ago. Deep down they are both circus performers and magicians. Certainly, *City of Women* is as much a three-ring-circus as any previous Fellini extravaganza, but there is a mellowness there too. I cannot recommend the film too highly, interview or no interview, but I see no point in trying to describe it. It must be experienced on its own terms.