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THE MINNEAPOLIS SOCIETY OF FINE ARTS MEMBERS' FILM SERIES

"THE FILM AS ART"

Program Notes  
Film Number Four  
February 9, 1960

I VITELLONI (Italy, 1953)

Directed by Federico Fellini

Cast: Alberto Sordi  
Franco Interlenghi  
Leopoldo Trieste  
Franco Fabrizi  
Leonora Ruffo

Written by Fellini, the tale of The Miracle is one of the masterpieces of the cinema. In it the author himself appears as "Saint Joseph", quiet, strange, unfathomable. His face emerges from memory whenever one watches a motion picture he directed, as though the miracle that transfigured the stranger into a saint in the dim mind of a shepherdess, was manifesting itself again in another guise. This poetic transcendence pervades his every creation. The pathos of his drifting or driven characters is relieved as by an act of grace. If there is a suspicion of irony, there is also the presence of love and understanding.

Fellini's people are lonely creatures, even in their passionate embraces, their loves and hatreds and fears and desires. They are futile, aimless, frustrated, inarticulate people; but there is a human residue that remains inviolate and forever undefeated. Neither hope nor resignation, neither rebellion nor surrender, it is simply an acceptance of the unintelligible or inevitable in whatever form it happens to strike. The girl in La Strada dies peacefully by the roadside; the girl in The Miracle bears her "blessed child"; the girl Cabiria returns to life with a smile. The guilt of these people is not in the nature of the act they commit or in the deed they omit; they are unaware, hence irresponsible; they are guileless, hence innocent. It is a world of pathos without ethos. The procurer in religious ecstasy, the village idiot as saintly martyr, the prostitute before the Holy Virgin, are not blasphemous sinners, but souls in agony whose ultimate resort is faith. Indeed, Fellini's films may be interpreted as religious allegories; they hurt and shock and disturb, but they never offend.

Yet each Fellini work has its specific theme and action, its unique spirit, mood and pace. Vitelloni is the most direct and overt in subject matter and presentation. The term, Vitelloni (little calves), means aimless young men, not properly weaned, not sufficiently grown up for their age, dependent and resentful. They are neither bums, nor criminals, nor "beatniks", but idlers and wastrels, with nothing in common but their lacks and, if one may say so, their isolation. They have time but no task, ambition but no direction, education but no wisdom, talent but no drive, adult pretensions but no maturity, self-interest but no insight, desires but no love. They have vague plans for the future, but not the energy or conviction to work for it. Thus they drift on the accidental currents of the daily events and encounters. Only one of the group, the most sensitive, observant and critical one, finally breaks away--- at least, he makes the first step. It is an inconclusive story, told with rigorous

objectivity and detached observation. Entirely built of incidents, it coheres through the consistent quality of mood, rather than by means of narrative or dramatic structure.

Fellini's gift of observation is uncanny, although he is never absorbed by pure pictorial qualities or merely descriptive minutiae. He forces attention upon details that are always meaningful, revealing and right, no matter how seemingly insignificant. He chooses the aspect of things that are ordinarily neglected, the fragments of conversations that are usually thrown away, the sights of the town that are least spectacular, the silences that have been forgotten since the advent of sound, and the sounds that are often drowned in floods of music. An empty street, a large desolate square, a deserted beach are just as exactly seen as milling crowds and dancing couples. He finds the setting that seems made for the purpose, the incident that is most forcefully suggestive, the gesture that is just right, the half-expression that remains desultory and unfinished. Yet, the director's guiding hand is quasi invisible; one is never aware of an intention or an emphatic point. His is indeed the most artfully controlled casualness imaginable. And in the end, miraculously, it is as rich and beautiful as a poem whose full meaning transpires long after it has been read or heard.

Filmography of Federico Fellini: The White Sheik (1952), I Vitelloni (1953), La Strada (1956), The Nights of Cabiria (1957)

Next Film: The Medium (U.S.A. 1951), Opera by Gian-Carlo Menotti

Notes prepared by George Amberg