

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Fellini at work</b>
Author(s)	Hollis Alpert
Source	<i>Saturday Review</i>
Date	1969 Jul 12
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	14-17
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Fellini, Federico (1920-1993), Rimini, Emilia-Romagna, Italy
Film Subjects	Satyricon, Fellini, Federico, 1969





# FELLINI AT WORK

by HOLLIS ALPERT

I was pleased when, a few days ago, an announcement from United Artists reported that "Fellini's *Satyricon*, a film spectacle based on the bawdy Roman comedy by Petronius," had completed its principal photography in Rome. In movie parlance, this meant that the picture had been wrapped up, the sets struck, and what remained to be done was the arduous process of editing, mixing, laboratory work, dubbing, and looping that would require another several months of intensive supervision on the part of Federico Fellini. I was pleased not only because the announcement meant that in a reasonable time, by Fellini's method of counting, I would be able to see his opus eleven, but because when I visited him in Rome a few months ago he had expressed some doubt as to whether he would ever be able to finish the picture.

At that time, he was in the midst of filming Trimalchio's banquet on a Cine-

citta set designed according to his conception of what a rich, vulgar "freedman's" dining hall would have looked like nearly 2,000 years ago. The director, now forty-nine, acknowledged the world over as one of the great modern masters of the cinema, was in full, lively command of a respectful and obviously competent crew of technicians. A young woman, writing for *Life*—and also contracted to a publisher to write a book on the making of the film—hovered near, incessantly jotting shorthand notes on a pad. A "slave" beat just as incessantly and monotonously on some odd-looking cymbals, meant less as a sound-track accompaniment than as atmospheric and vaguely period "music" to help the mood. And probably the most decadent-looking group of dinner guests ever assembled lolled on large cushions, with huge trays of sweetmeats in front of them, waiting for directions from the master. There, too, were the

two principals, Martin Potter as Encolpius and Hiram Keller as Ascylltus, listening to their host—in real life Mario Romagnoli, a restaurateur—regale them with anecdotes.

As was fitting for so storied a banquet, Fellini was spending several weeks on the filming, and he seemed particularly proud of the huge roasted sow—a facsimile made by the production department—that waited on a barrow for its carving by Trimalchio's cook, standing ready with upraised sword. Incense-like smoke from salvers drifted over the scene as an assistant with a clapboard that said merely FELLINI and gave the number of the scene and the take moved in close to the camera, then withdrew. On Fellini's signal, the cook raised the sword and chopped down on the sow's head, which fell away on its ingenious hinge. It took several such cleavings and several camera positions before Fellini was satisfied the sow was properly de-



capitated, after which it was time for the lunch break.

It was nearly four years since Fellini had last made a feature film, *Giuletta of the Spirits*. He had visited New York for its opening, and, when I happened to encounter him during his visit, he had generously invited me to watch him work, should I ever be in Rome when he was filming. During the interval he had been hospitalized with a long, serious illness; he had begun work on a few tentative projects; he had made a forty-minute segment for a three-part film (not yet released here); and, fully recovered at last, he was doing the film he had long wanted to do, his own interpretation of the *Satyricon*, based on a lengthy script he had evolved with two co-scriptwriters. The producer was Alberto Grimaldi, recently risen to eminence by way of several gory Italian-Spanish Westerns starring Clint Eastwood, and now partnered with United Artists in the production of the Fellini film.

I had expected, when I journeyed from my hotel to the Cinecitta Studios, that I would find Fellini surrounded by friends, hangers-on, and spectators while he worked, for I had heard that he enjoyed working in the midst of controlled chaos, but this was not the case. In fact, a strict control over who could be admitted to the set had been instituted by the British publicity man, a fussy fellow in the employ of United Artists, who informed me that the rigors of the production were such that only one reporter and/or a press photographer could be admitted to the set at any one time, this on Fellini's own instruction. His job, however, was complicated by the fact that Fellini, without notifying him or anyone else, would invite friends, casual acquaintances, or just about anyone who asked him—often actors looking for work—to see him on the set. Just the previous day, a party of fifteen Japanese photographers, flying from Tokyo in a body, had had to be accommodated. They were allowed to click around the set for three hours before they were politely but firmly shooed off.

Busy as he was, Fellini made me welcome. He may have a little trouble with names, but he seldom forgets a face. He remembered mine, ordered a chair to be brought for me, and, once the sow's head was chopped off to his satisfaction, invited me to lunch with him in his private quarters at the studio. The publicity man was ordered to send up a translator, just in case his English, which now and then fails him, needed bolstering. Also

present was a sharp-featured Italian woman, who, I gathered, was his secretary. It is sometimes difficult to know just what relationship anyone bears to Fellini; the waiter who served us lunch appeared to be one of his closest friends and sometimes paused to listen with absorption to whatever he said.

What was foremost on his mind at that moment, as it is with other film artists who must equate what they want to do with the resources available, was money. "I don't think this picture will ever be finished," he told me gloomily. "There is not enough money. United Artists is—how do you say it—too cheap. They have given us for this picture *such* a little money, really a mortifyingly small amount, enough to make the credits." He

sighed deeply. "Well, *buon appetito*."

The secretary looked uncomfortable; the waiter smiled. The picture would, of course, be finished, but this was Signor Fellini's way of expressing his discontent.

Earlier, I had chatted with Eugene Walter, who serves as Fellini's dialogue director and English coach—this because Fellini often uses English-speaking actors and sometimes needs to have his directions translated. Walter had mentioned that Mrs. Fellini (Giuletta Masina) claimed that "the only time Federico blushes is when he tells the truth. He has the reputation—which he is proud of—of being the biggest liar in Italy. But he respects the truth more than most people." Thus forewarned, I did not take Fellini's complaints about money too





seriously either. However, the matter remained on his mind.

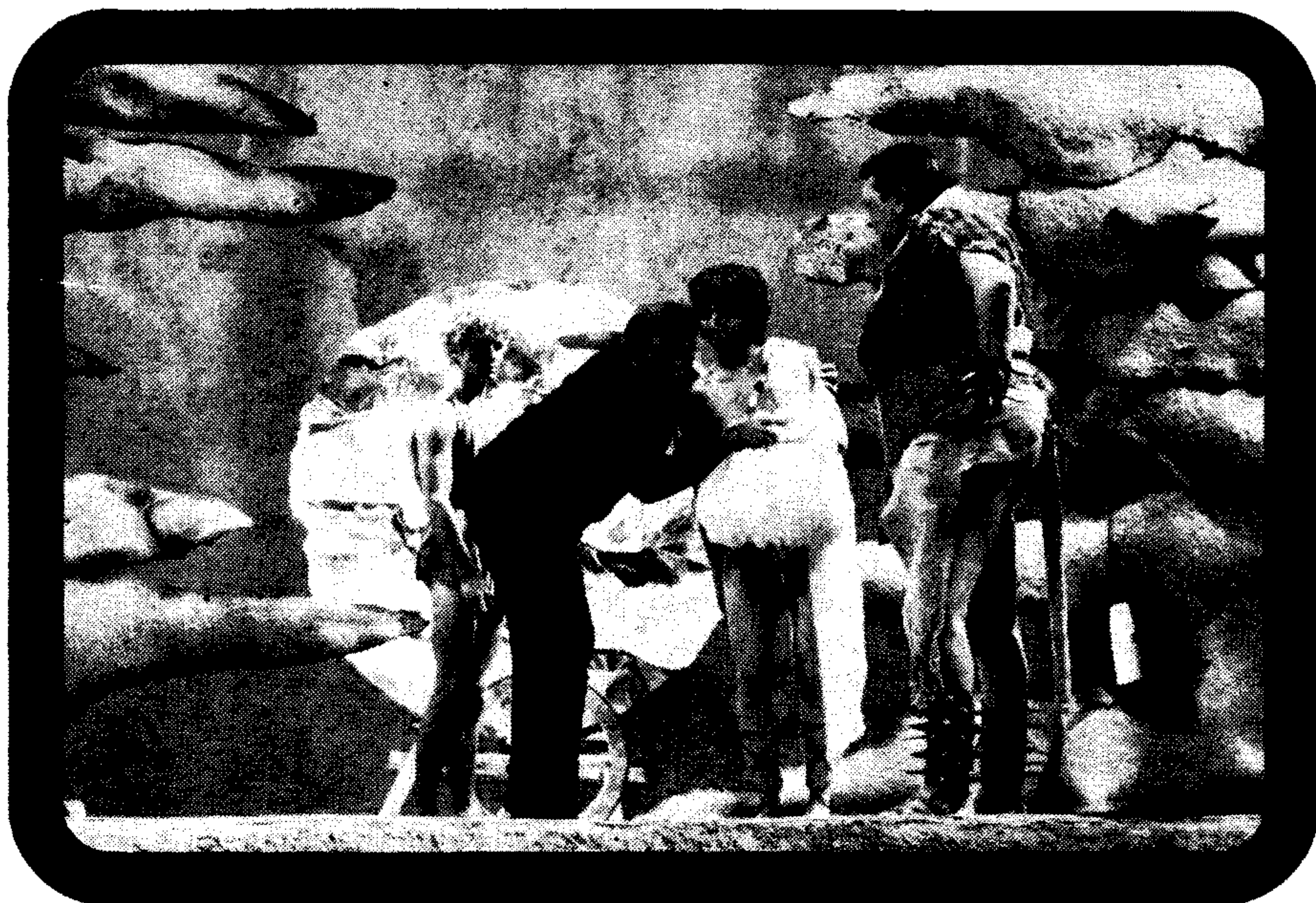
"There are rumors of a \$3-million budget," he said. "Lies, just lies. It is much, much less."

Though budget considerations seldom have much to do with the artistic quality of a picture, I later checked with a United Artists executive, hoping to clarify the money question. It was almost too much for him. "Financing Italian films has a way of being incredibly complicated," he said. "We made our arrangement with Grimaldi, but the money allotted to Fellini's picture is tied in with others on Grimaldi's schedule. However they choose to interpret it, the picture *will* cost at least \$3 million. Our share takes in the rights outside of Italy. All I can say is that we've kept our part of the bargain."

Fellini, in advance, could see the company point of view. "Our own industry hardly exists any more," he said. "So we make pictures with American money, and the one who takes money from the other has, in a sense, to prove he is not a thief. We are good friends, but I think they are a little fearful. They don't trust us. For this reason, maybe, they have given my producer less money than what, in a real way, the picture costs. Grimaldi is a very nice man. Indeed, he's so nice and gentle that I don't see how he can last very long in our jungle."

One wonders how Fellini has lasted, too. Throughout his career he has been embroiled—again because of the Italian film financing practices—with producers and with legal suits over who owned what part of his films. In the case of his monumental *La Dolce Vita*, he wound up with no vested interest in its enormous financial success. Then there is censorship, in Italy and elsewhere. "The picture industry is still so vulgar," he said, "that if the film author tried to oversee what happens to his work he would quickly die of a broken heart. Between censorship, the vulgarity of the advertising, the stupidity of exhibitors, the mutilation, the inept dubbing into other languages—when I finish a picture I just don't want to know what happens to it. Some theaters will present it as a pornographic picture, others will cut out a reel or two in order to cram in more showings. It's better to forget you ever made it."

And now he has another problem, one which enjoined him from even using his title, *The Satyricon*. That was the reason the clapboard had FELLINI as a title. No sooner had he announced his intention of making the Petronius work when another Italian producer registered the title for a quickie of his



own. "We're both using the same laboratory, and while waiting for a court ruling we had to give ours another title to avoid foul-ups in the processing. Privately we call ours 'The Fellinicon,' but at the lab it's simply 'Fellini.' If I had my way I would give it the perhaps boring title 'Myths and Legends of Ancient Rome.' For that's what it is." (The title matter apparently has been resolved with "Fellini's Satyricon," and meanwhile the other "Satyricon" has been seized by the Italian censors.)

Pointing out that it would be totally impossible to know what life was really like in ancient Roman times, and that the Petronius work represented only, at most, a 10 per cent fragment of the original, Fellini emphasized that for him the book "serves as a pretext to make fantasy, almost a science fiction. What I was taught at school, during the Fascist period, was stupid and boring. Archaeology adds to the past a theatrical and phony dimension. And then came the movies! Those huge vulgarizations that further destroyed our chances to conceive of the past. I've had to try to clear my mind of all that, to reinvent, freely and virginally, the phantoms of 2,000 years ago. But with such *cheap money*! It's really very difficult."

Not that he was, in any way, attempting to make the bawdy spectacle mentioned by United Artists. "Perhaps I can describe it as a sort of fresco of pagan times. I have had a certain dream. And, now that I've imagined it, my job on the set is to materialize what I have imagined." This was one of the reasons for a more rigorous control of who could visit the set. "I am working differently this time," he

said. "A much more detailed script, for one thing. Previously, I allowed room in the scripts not for improvisation necessarily, but for suggestions that would come from what was being filmed. For example: the aristocrat's party in *La Dolce Vita*. We worked in a real castle, we used real aristocrats. I was able to take blood from them, so to speak. I kept myself open for what could arise during the filming of the situation. Here that isn't possible. Every detail must be known in advance. Having to invent what I do not know is very exacting, even dangerous. The concentration required from me is greater."

Even more important to him was fashioning "a pre-Christian dimension. Put another way, I've tried to do a story in which there is the absence of Christ. Most of Western art, movies included, is pervaded with moral and psychological conceptions brought about by Christianity. But pagan Romans, having no conception of a Christ figure, unaware of the consequent spirituality, morality, dogma, truly existed in another time dimension—which is why I liken this film to science fiction. For those Romans, any debauchery was worth trying. Their cruelty, so extraordinary to us, was casual to them. After all, for an afternoon's pleasure, they would slaughter hundreds of people in the Colosseum. *The Satyricon* is a story of a society with a pre-Christian character. One must find a *virginal* way of placing oneself in such a time, such a dimension."

It had been suggested to him by those eager to interpret his work and place each film in a context with the others, that both a personal and contemporary meaning would be ex-



pressed in his new film. Fellini was benignly aware of all this world-wide *auteur* legwork by critics, some of whom saw autobiographical overtones in everything from *Variety Lights* to, of course, *8½*, in which the film-director hero wore a black, floppy hat exactly like Fellini's. "The American critics," he said, "I find the most practical. They do not try to see too much. The French, on the other hand, are the craziest. They sometimes strike me as delirious. But if they say good things I am happy. I don't want to appear morbidly humble, but it sometimes seems to me I am received with too much respect."

"And since an analogy will probably be made between the time of my *Satyricon* film and the present, I will make my own. The picture might suggest that we are living in a post-Christian time, but the analogy is not made in a schematic, cold, intellectual way. At this moment it strikes me that we are out of Christ and that we are waiting for something else that will have to become. It is a free adventure of people open to everything. Encolpius and Ascyltus are two students who are provincials, but half-beatniks, not dissimilar to those we can see in our times on the Spanish Steps; they go from one adventure to another without the slightest remorse, with the natural innocence and splendid vitality of two young animals. Their rebellion, like some of our own young, is translated into terms of absolute ignorance and detachment from the society in which they find themselves."

"But, it is a very chaste picture—the only naked thing in it is the pig you saw this morning. Not that I pretend to have an innocent eye. Yet, one can show the most unheard of things without becoming obscene. It is the sick eye of the watcher that makes something sick. I must be careful not to pass judgment on, to condemn, the Romans of that time. For it is we who have invented the conscience; we have given a moral value to things, aided by 2,000 years of Christianity—a Christianity which has made of us stuttering babes crying for our mamas, our church, our Pope, our political leaders. I will do my best to paint the pagan world free of the Christian conscience, and, if I am successful, it may have some clarifying value for our time. Perhaps it will even be seen as an allegorical satire of our present-day world."

As in all of Fellini's films, the faces will undoubtedly fascinate. But he has no Mastroiani this time, no Anita Ekberg or Claudia Cardinale to portray his flamboyant symbols of femininity. The only relatively known name in the film is Capucine, who plays the minor role of the debauched Tryphaena. The



major parts of Encolpius and Ascyltus, the two young rogues of the Petronius work, have gone, respectively, to young English and American actors. Neither had previously appeared in films, and Hiram Keller, the American, came straight out of the cast of *Hair* on Broadway.

Fellini, in his mood of the moment, claimed he chose unknowns because the financing precluded the use of stars. Otherwise he might have wanted Gert Frobe or Peter Ustinov for Trimalchio. But he is happiest when he feels free to search for his own faces. Ask him why he chose Potter or Keller, and he will simply say that he liked their faces. But why an American face and an English face? "Telling a story like this," he said, "it helps me to have foreign people, that is, to have for myself a feeling of their being foreign to me. Not speaking English very well, there is a strangeness between us. I want the audience to have that sense of the people being strange to them, of looking at a kind of people they have never met—almost as though they were Martians."

As for the language of the picture, he claimed that it would begin in the language of the period, Latin, which would then merge into the language of the country of its release. This sounded like a phenomenal dubbing job for each version, and it is more probable that there will be English, Italian, German, and French versions. But Fellini was not yet willing to give away his solution of the language problem. The half-hour or so of rushes he allowed me to view were spoken in English and Italian, were sometimes soundless, and yet were strange, beautiful, and haunting.

We returned to the set for the afternoon's work. Now, with the sow's head slashed off, two slaves rushed forward to bring out its innards. These proved to be not the entrails, but steaming heaps of sausages, goose livers, and little roasted birds. The Petronian specialties were heaped on brass platters and carried in triumph to the already sated and jaded guests, while Trimalchio watched the gourmand activity with plump and self-satisfied solemnity. Fellini, in between takes of the various angles, embraced a friend, joked with a member of the crew, debated with his cameraman, the great Giuseppe Rotunno, while smoke swirled and the cymbals sounded.

With the time for breaking near, I went over to Fellini to say good-bye, and to thank him for the visit. He kept me for a moment.

"As you can see," he said, "it is not a colossal picture. I must work very, very carefully, with the money they have given me." Then he smiled. "But I am happy—because with this one I have the feeling I am making my very first picture. I have no right to lament. I have always done what I wished to do, and I have always been very lucky. My secretary thinks I should tell you not to mention to anyone what I said about the cheap money. But say what you please. But, if you mention the money, add that Fellini said it smiling, but with sadness." He hesitated a moment, as though he had not given the precise direction. "Yes, smiling," he added, "but with very sad eyes."

They were not sad eyes, however. They were the eyes of a man of enormous talent, full of life and expressiveness, of a man hugely enjoying himself at his work.