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La Dolce Vita

By GIORGIO MOSCON

ROME

It is impossible to understand the Italian postwar cinema, either in the 1945-49 neo-realism explosion, or in the currently flourishing period which has culminated in the success of Federico Fellini's *LA DOLCE VITA*, if two factors are not borne in mind. First of all, the particular state of ignorance (not to say something else) in which Italians were constrained by Fascism for twenty years, making difficult any exchange of ideas with foreign countries and preventing the diffusion of the most important and newest artistic achievements produced by the culture of other countries. Secondly, the forced optimism which, during all the period, was obligatory for the Italian press and cinema, rejecting the vision of reality and the crude aspects of life.

When the war was over, in the climax of reconquered freedom, the best Italian directors faced with a fervor--at times even iconoclastic--the aspects of society until then forbidden in the country. It was a splendid season which gave important achievements to the cinema, but it vanished rapidly for political and economic reasons. Afterwards, there was a long period of uncertainty, during which the few good films which did appear were a matter of isolated cases, and not real expressions which could be connected to a general and well-defined current. Nevertheless, during this period, 1950-57, some new personalities appeared, amongst them, shining for brightness and capacity of imagination, Federico Fellini (b. 1920). In his early films, such as *I VITELLONI* (1953), Fellini focused the new type of self-criticism and bitter comedy which radiates from the central character, making of him almost a sample of the vices and defects evident in a certain side of the Italian temperament. And just as *I VITELLONI* shows the interest with which the young Roman film director inquires into the subjects offered by the way of living in the Italian provinces, he shows a similar interest in the stories of city life as revealed in *LA DOLCE VITA*.

After 1958 the political and economic situation of the Italian cinema began to change. Many young film directors, partly as a natural reaction against the official conformism, emulating the example of their French "new wave" cousins, directed a group of films, both audacious and full of ferment, which achieved a high degree of public success (and which could be gathered together under the formula "neo-decadentism").

LA DOLCE VITA inserts itself in this new fervor, and its public performance provoked a scandal of international magnitude with the interventions of cardinals, discussions in the Italian parliament, protests of the Vatican newspaper, *L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO*, and ferocious polemics in the press. The entire controversy absolutely disproportionate to the theme of the film, which describes with hardness only a limited part of Italian society, a society more artificial than important, the one usually called the "café-society."

The thematic address of the film is vaguely Catholic (it is opportune here to mention that in this vagueness Fellini is typically Italian. That is to say, Catholic in his own way, as all the rest of his countrymen who adapt religion to their particular ideas or, more so, to their own convenience). Only Divine Grace can save the protagonist Marcello, at the end of his wandering among the corrupt Roman society. Otherwise nothing will remain to him but the rejection of any hope and the sinking of himself lower and lower into vice. It is clear that Marcello can save himself from degradation only if redeemed by Divine Grace, symbolized perhaps by the only clean face in the film, the one of the little girl on the beach who looks "like the angels of Perugino." It is Divine Grace that can lighten the sad heroes of scandalous life.

Once entered upon the spirit of this conception, it will be easier understood why a very powerful Italian Cardinal and the most perspicacious part of the clergy have defended the film against the Vatican, angry for the frankness with which Fellini described false miracles, stripteases, orgies and scandals of the Italian capital, overlooked by the imposing Dome of St. Peter.

It would be practically impossible to tell the story of the film, which is composed of several unrelated scenes, were it not for the protagonist Marcello (portrayed by Marcello Mastroianni), the young journalist for a scandal magazine, who acts as a connecting link. *LA DOLCE VITA* consists of a series of fragments tied together and supported by two pillars of logic that give reality and cohesion to the story. These are the two episodes of Steiner: the introduction and the evening at his home, then his tragic death. It is precisely the character of Steiner that should offer the key to the film, and it is his tragic end which provokes the collapse of all Marcello's illusions, thus abandoning himself to the dissolute life without restraint.

But it is here that the film yields, for who is Steiner? Who is this man, "professional among amateurs, and amateur among professionals," as he described himself? Nobody knows. Nor is it possible to determine what sort of work he does. Perhaps he is a writer, but the film is rather vague as to the kind of writer he is.

Marcello's jealousy and admiration would be more justified were the character of Steiner delineated with more precision and depth.

From here arises the misunderstanding in which the audience cannot fail to avoid: the terrible gesture of Steiner and his tragedy are interpreted as a pathological case. On the contrary, according to Fellini's intentions-- as the film director himself declared in a book which tells the phases of the film. But not even the book explains with absolute clearness why Steiner kills his sons and then kills

himself (the story is inspired by a similar incident which occurred in France where a young man, happily married and devoted to his children, suddenly goes home, kills his children and then throws himself from a tenth story of a building). In Fellini's attempt, if I am not mistaken, Steiner represents a sort of Hamlet, guided by an unusual logic: "It is not madness that I have uttered." It is not insanity which drives him, but the extreme consequence of an implacable reasoning which should find a root and a justification in the last words pronounced on his home terrace when he reveals to Marcello the most secret part of his soul (words which in any case coming from someone we do not know, and who, until that moment, appears as a quiet humanist, with a comfortable home, beautiful children and a sweet wife-- are, I think, useless):

Sometimes at night this darkness, this quietness weights over me, it's peace which frightens me. Perhaps because I fear peace above all. I have the impression that it is nothing but an appearance which hides a danger. I also think of what my sons will learn. They say that the world is wonderful. What is the meaning of it! A telephone call is sufficient to make everything lost.

A talk full of existential grief and also of a certain decadentism (which, after all, is usual in Fellini's personality), from which derives the choice of the carnage of his children, rather than allow them to grow up at the mercy of some fanatic. But I do not think that from these few words the character of this man in crisis is clearly explained. And for this reason, in my opinion, the personage of Steiner is neither complete nor justifiable, nor above all exemplar. His death is casual; he chose murder and suicide, but it is as if he had died by any accident, or really, caught by folly. His affairs, his problems, his griefs are not clearly justified or understandable.

Therefore, the intimate moral drama of a disarmed prophet that Steiner should represent is not perceivable, and that is why Marcello's defeat appears to be obvious and normal (upon which Steiner's death cannot pretend any logical influence, being provoked by an irrational and inexplicable gesture). Marcello forgets his apprehension and dissatisfaction in the warmth of the sweet life, where it is not necessary to think or to make any effort to understand. In this light, the final feature of the film takes a completely different aspect-- not so much the impossibility of communication between the innocence of the little girl and the vice of Marcello, as the simple refusal of the latter to make even the slightest intellectual effort to take himself out of the sweet life.

From a different point of view, the character of Marcello does not appear to be perfectly balanced. It is essential to understand the personality of this journalist who has ambitions of being a writer, even if only an unsuccessful one. He has an absolutely empty house, without a book, a piece of furniture, record, even a newspaper. Squalor, even if diluted by the presence of Emma, Marcello's mistress, who lives only for him, and has no other interests of any kind, does not contribute in the least to determine the character of this man.

If I talked a lot about Steiner and Marcello, it is not only because they are the

most important characters in the film but also because Steiner, in particular reveals Fellini's greatest fault: a certain ambiguity, which leaves incomplete or unfocused the character without giving to him a strict logic and a systematic background. What I believe to be lacking in Fellini is a strong sensitiveness, cultural, I would say, which can prevent him from the nebulousness of *La Strada* and the inconsistency of the intellectuals in Steiner's home.

But where Fellini overwhelmingly discovers his genius is when he abandons himself to his instinctive feelings of a poet of a humanity, complex and difficult, but lively and genuine. We see this illustrated in the extraordinary character of Maddalene-- interpreted with a sorrowful sensitiveness by the excellent actress, Ainouk Aimee-- so frank, so honest and undefended in her moments of generosity of the passions of her weaknesses. We see it again in Sylvia, portrayed by Anita Ekberg, whose being is sunk in a fresh, overpowering sensuality which spreads all over the episode and culminates, after the splendid sequence through the sleepy streets of old Rome, with the triumphant bath in the Fountain of Trevi, the majestic baroque scenery, which is a perfect frame to the opulence of the very blonde star. Then there is the witty and sharp character of Lex Barker, Anita's fiance, who bears with bitter dignity his consciousness of cocu. But remarkable above all is the creative imagination with which Fellini invents the un pitying episode of the aristocrat's party, which he divided into three parts, the introduction and the commonplace, the spiritism and fornication with the big finale punctuated by aulic music, and the squalid procession filmed from behind. Or the sweet and sour sequence of Maddalena and Marcello in the prostitute's house. Or that sort of bitter "sacred representation" of the false miracle typical of a pagan and idolatrous people, with the ferocious dismembering of a tree, the branches of which have become disputed relics, and the desolate comment of the priest who rejects the miracle (powerless sorcerer's apprentice who can do nothing against the fanatism too often tolerated among the Italian simple people for sad social purposes).

There is then the episode of the final orgy described with a cold and perhaps a little abstracted cruelty, an example of the disintegration of a society which, most probably, is even more putrid and weakened than that of Vicomte de Valmonte and Marquis de Merteuil. These are the real LIASONS DANGEREUSES 1960, rather than the pale illustrations of the too-celebrated film by Vadim. Now that (at least in Italy and France) the polemics have calmed down, it is possible to judge this film more objectively. There is no lack of unbalance-ments and weaknesses but, it is an extraordinary work of great importance, wonderfully interpreted and completely pervaded by the feel of deep pity with which Fellini looks at his characters. I believe that this constitutes an important proof of the vitality of the Italian cinema.

(Giorgio Moscon is an Italian literary and film critic)

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