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LA DOLCE VITA
~~(Italy)~~ 1961 - 180 minutes

Directed by Federico Fellini; photography by Otello Martelli;
music by Nino Rota. With Marcello Mastroianni, Anita Ekberg,
Anouk Aimee, and Nadia Gray.

This is the story of a young man in Rome, perhaps Fellini himself. The situations in which he finds himself, the characters he meets, help the young man, Marcello, form his conception of himself. Marcello is passive and is acted upon as a statue is created from stone, by the many characters he meets. It is unfortunate for him that his environment is not conducive to what we would normally consider success and happiness. The orgy is not amusement, but a desperate seeking for amusement.

Marcello's world is "neo-decadent," full of false miracles, stripteases, orgies, and sordid adventures. It could have easily been a poor movie, but Fellini makes it a human, complex world full of life and even innocent joy. Sylvia, acted gorgeously by Anita Ekberg, is a fresh and overpowering sensuality whose luxuriance is radically contrasted to the dark, narrow streets. The baroque Fountain of Trevi highlights her opulent, expansive body and personality. Frankie Stout, the actor-dancer-satyr friend of Sylvia, is a perfect match for her energetic animalism and their dance is a Rubens gone as mad as Breugel.

In extreme contrast is Maddalene. Her fire burns white-hot within her but never flames. Each love brings her more intensity and more passion, but it is directed inward. One feels that sex is to her an intra-personal event, not a conjugal one. Anouk Aimee interprets her with a sorrowful sensitivity.

These actresses do excellent jobs in roles that perhaps were created just for them. Alain Curry does a good job as Steiner, but the character has received considerable criticism. He is ostentatiously portrayed as a "gelehrte," fond of nature and children. His part, his lines are too far-seeing, exalted, and moody to be acceptable at face value, and we don't get background or preparation for his acts. A major question, and it is a major fault of the movie, is his motivation. Further, his action is an integral influence on Marcello, so he cannot be overlooked. (He reminds one of an unsuccessful "Stein" in Lord Jim.)

The innocent blonde teen of the cafe has much thematic value and should be thought of as an image of youth, innocence, purity . . . perhaps Divine Grace. She contrasts strongly with Sylvia, Maddalene, and the large fish. The water between her and Marcello is a stagnant barrier to communication.

The theme of La Dolce Vita is one familiar by now to all America. Among the better copies of this film are Alfie, Georgie Girl, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, and Darling. A decadent society with its corrosive influence on the young is popular with the young who feel cheated of their cultural inheritance, and, strangely enough, it is also popular with the older crowd who maybe get a kick out of such a colorful confession. In any case, the young have little to expect from their fathers, as Marcello has very little from his father. The Steiners cannot survive in this world where they are stifled in orgies on one hand and "organization" on the other. Most of us, like Marcello, choose between Emma with her kitchen and bedroom and the sweet sins of decadence. Both demand the resignation of healthy ambition and personal growth.

(Film notes by Tom Loveday)