

## The Fellini Manner: Open Form and Visual Excess

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## The Fellini Manner: Open Form and Visual Excess

by John C. Stubbs

Probably the most salient fact about Federico Fellini's work is that viewers who have seen two or three of his movies feel confident they can identify any other of his films or can correctly designate films by other filmmakers as *felliniesque*. They feel, in other words, that they can recognize Fellini's particular way of putting together his movies: his manner.

The issue of a filmmaker's manner is a complicated one in that a filmmaker may be supposed to have a narrative manner and a visual one. *Narrative* manner refers to the filmmaker's way of playing out his story material to his viewers, what theorists have called the "discourse" or the *syuzhet* of a work.<sup>1</sup> A study of a filmmaker's discourse or *syuzhet* would typically involve asking questions like the following: Does the filmmaker pursue a strictly chronological order in telling his story, or does he begin *in medias res* and allow the past to unfold through flashbacks, for example, as the work moves toward its conclusion in the future? Is there a cause-and-effect pattern between the sequences that leads us from one initial problem through its complications to a final solution (a discourse of *resolution*, as generally favored in classical Hollywood films), or are the sequences linked more loosely according to some other principle, say, the desire to investigate a diverse range of material about a theme or character (a discourse of *revelation*, as sometimes favored in certain European films, especially those connected with the art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s).<sup>2</sup> The visual manner of a filmmaker is more often called his style. It could involve such elements of *mise-en-scene* as costumes, sets, lighting, and the blocking out of character movement before the camera; or the filmmaker's use of the camera itself; of his method and rhythm of editing his shots within a sequence and his method of editing his sequences within the structure of the entire film.

In Fellini's case, it might make good sense to discuss an evolution of his narrative and visual styles as he and members of his production team have changed over the years. We might be able to trace a curve—and a fairly familiar one at that—from simplicity to complexity to self-parody. However, it is probably more interesting and more useful to hypothesize a manner that is perhaps never perfectly attained in any particular film but is approached from one angle or another in almost all of Fellini's movies. This manner depends on an open

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narrative form of revelation and a visual style of excess. Although I will consider each of these two elements separately, I would insist that the intermingling of the two is finally the decisive factor for the Fellini manner.

This manner seems to rest on Fellini's assumption that life is mysterious and ineffable. The idea does not frighten Fellini; rather it intrigues and stimulates him. His antagonism toward certain aspects of the Catholic religion in which he was raised is well documented in his films. In *La Dolce Vita* and *Nights of Cabiria*, Fellini depicts false miracles that raise hopes in the worshippers, only to disappoint those hopes. In *8½*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, and *Amarcord*, he presents scenes in which his protagonists encounter harsh admonitions of one sort or another from church figures against human sexuality, admonitions which prove finally to be life-denying. And the religious procession in *Roma*, at first a kind of fashion show, turns into a dance of death at its conclusion. Throughout his career, however, Fellini has clung to a sense of religious mysticism and has come to associate that mysticism more and more with the creative process. He has commented recently in an interview:

I believe I am naturally religious, since to me the world and life seem wrapped in mystery. And even if I hadn't been fascinated as a child with that mystic feeling that penetrates existence and makes everything unknowable, I think the profession I practice would have led me naturally to religious sentiment. I create a dream, or rather with open eyes I abandon myself to imagining something. . . . Who guides us through the creative adventure? How could it happen? Only faith in something, or someone, hidden within us, can inspire the mysterious work of creation—someone little known, a wise and subtle part of us, working within us. We help that unknown part by trusting in it, by accepting it, by letting it work for us. That feeling of trust, I think, can be defined as religious feeling.<sup>3</sup>

On a secular level as well, Fellini has demonstrated an interest in the mysteriousness of life beyond the rational and the normative by his interest in mediums and spiritualism and in Jungian depth psychology, which, of course, involves a journey into the collective unconscious that finally, beyond the anima/animus level, is unknowable.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Fellini may have been first attracted to the writings of Jung in the 1960s out of a need to replace the Catholic belief system in his life with something analogous but other. The belief system of Fellini, however, whether secular or religious, always depends on the idea that there is an essential mystery that we can approach but not grasp or image forth directly. His manner, however, serves to suggest almost constantly the ineffable quality of life as Fellini perceives it.<sup>5</sup>

Fellini's general method is to "defamiliarize" us, as formalist critics would put it, from our world and have us see it afresh as something exciting and mysterious, something that can't quite be contained in the standard forms. In his well-known essay "Art as Technique," the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky has put the matter this way: "The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself."<sup>6</sup> Shklovsky feels

that the function of art is to remove objects from the conventional forms of presentation so that our perception of them is not automatic and minimal, but attentive and searching. Fellini would seem to go a step further. He would have us notice an ineffable quality that can't be grasped or even suggested by conventional forms. Most obviously, Fellini plays against our standard expectations for receiving material in films. The classical Hollywood studio film of the 1930s and 1940s constituted the dominant film form when Fellini was growing up. It offers a tight, closed narrative, with all story elements determined by their relevancy to a central, cause-effect plot line.<sup>7</sup> Fellini, on the other hand, tends to follow a more episodic, open narrative form, as in the films of Jean Renoir and in some of the films of the Italian neorealist movement in which Fellini served an apprenticeship.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the classical Hollywood studio film has been said to compose its visual images toward the center of the frame, to balance its compositions carefully in an uncluttered, orderly way from left to right, and to keep the action on a single plane, all for the purposes of quick comprehension, Fellini often uses a kind of layered composition, similar to those composed in deep space by Orson Welles, William Wyler, Stanley Kubrick, and Jean Renoir but more teeming with elements and contrasts, and he often emphasizes tactile elements, intrusive sound, and constant motion in the manner of Josef von Sternberg and Max Ophüls. His visual manner, taken all together, can only be called a style of excess. It seems deliberately intended to exceed the classical Hollywood norm at every opportunity. The chief elements of the Fellini manner, then, are the open narrative form of revelation and the visual style of excess, and their common denominator is Fellini's motive of defamiliarizing us from the world he presents and making it seem too various, too mysterious, to be contained adequately in more conventional forms.

**The Open Form.** The basic element of a Fellini film is the sequence. Like a short story writer or a lyric poet, Fellini excels at rendering a single event and teasing from it all its richness. His forte is the ten minute, self-contained episode that becomes a kind of story within the main story. This gift, in my opinion, is a fortunate one in that it serves well Fellini's aim of pushing against conventional boundaries. As his career has progressed, Fellini has tended more and more to privilege the individual parts over the whole. In retrospect, the tendency is apparent in embryo form even in his early, more highly plotted comedies, but by the midpoint of his career, say *La Dolce Vita* (1959), it is a dominant aspect of his films.

The form that Fellini uses I have called "open," using Leo Braudy's distinction between "open" and "closed" in *The World in a Frame*.<sup>9</sup> In the open form, according to Braudy, the main emphasis is on looseness and diversity. Its unspoken or deeper assumption—as I have suggested is the case with Fellini—is that life cannot be reduced; it is too various, it overflows the frame that the movie temporarily puts around it. If a minor character appears in an open film, he or she may well play a role in the forward push of the discourse,

but the character may also present us with traits that tell us something about the character's past and make us wonder about his or her future, material that is ostensibly outside the discourse of the film. Digressions from the main action are not merely permitted, they are virtually mandated. As mentioned earlier, the open film tends to be revelatory, rather than concerned with resolution. It pauses to show us a variety of things about its subject matter, and, of course, in so doing, it tends to privilege the individual sequences over the central structure of the whole or over strict adherence to a central line of cause-and-effect relationships such as the closed form tends to employ. The open form promises to tell us several things, but not everything, about its subject matter. In this, it is opposed to the closed form, which raises questions at the beginning and answers them all by the end. The closed form promises rational solutions; the open form implies a world that can't be reduced to such a schema. Finally, the open form requires from its viewers a certain amount of patience and willingness to speculate and muse. In the language of Roland Barthes, it tends to produce a "writerly" text in which the reader can participate imaginatively.<sup>10</sup> The open form is, of course, a narrative manner used in various ways by other filmmakers, along with Fellini, in the European art-cinema group of the 1950s and 1960s, but it is Fellini's particular use of the form that concerns us here.

At this point, I want to look briefly at a specific Fellini film that illustrates his use of the open form as its organizing principle. I have chosen the relatively early movie *Nights of Cabiria* (1956) as my example. The central character of this film is Cabiria, the small, gamine-like prostitute played by Giulietta Masina, and Fellini seeks to demonstrate, among other things, her wondrously resilient spirit. The film consists of five major parts, each a separate adventure of Cabiria. These are "The Giorgio Section," in which Cabiria's lover snatches her purse and pushes her into the Tiber; "The Night with a Famous Movie Star," in which Cabiria's glorious date with an actor is ruined by the return of the actor's mistress; "The Pilgrimage to the Shrine," in which a hoped-for miracle fails to occur; "The Vaudeville Performance," in which the hypnotized Cabiria meets an imaginary suitor named Oscar, only to wake from her dream before a jeering audience; and finally, the longer "Oscar Section," in which an unscrupulous member of the vaudeville audience woos Cabiria under the name of Oscar, steals her money, and tries to push her from a promontory outside Rome. The movie, as I have described it so far, could be diagrammed as in Figure 1.<sup>11</sup>

As brief as my summary is, it is enough to demonstrate the basic narrative organization of *Nights of Cabiria*. The film could be described as five short stories. There is no real linkage of cause and effect between the major sequences with the exception of parts 4 and 5, in which Oscar uses information learned in part 4 to hoodwink Cabiria in part 5. In the main, each segment seems to give us a kind of fresh start. What does hold the segments together is the character of Cabiria and the notion of parallelism. Each segment contains some moment of happiness or self-fulfillment for Cabiria, followed by a disappointment. In each episode after the first, she approaches the moment with a good deal of

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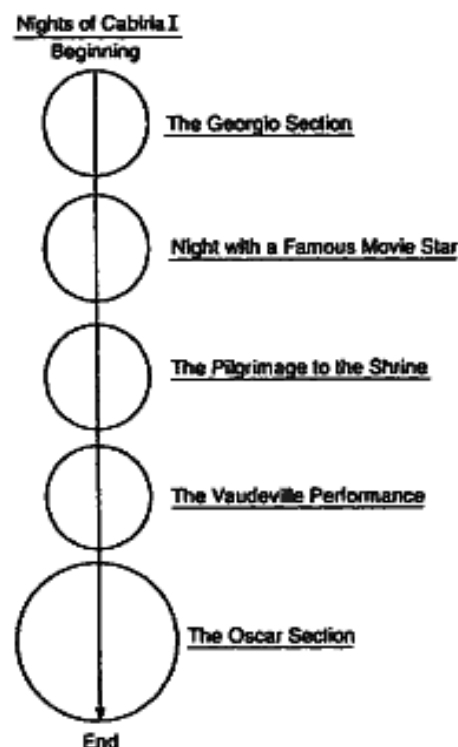


Figure 1. *Nights of Cabiria I*

skepticism before giving in eventually to its lure. Cabiria is thus presented to us as both skeptical and gullible, as both a feisty battler and a woebegone loser. Fellini, though, chooses to emphasize Cabiria's ability to bounce back from the disappointment of each sequence with fresh vitality in the next. The fact of her resiliency is made clear by the movie's ending.

It is time now to admit that my description and diagram of the movie are incomplete. Two additional elements need to be added: a series of four short scenes in which Cabiria plies her trade of prostitution on the *Passeggiata Archeologica* outside Rome and the movie's four-minute coda. A more complete diagram, then, would be Figure 2.

The series of four short scenes serves a variety of purposes. The first two scenes are transitional resting places between major episodes, and the other two provide punctuation for the long fifth section. In the first, A, Cabiria arrives at her station, inspects a new car bought by another prostitute, dances a mambo to the car radio, and then fights an Amazon prostitute in a leopard-spotted dress who taunts her about the loss of Giorgio. In B, Cabiria is teased by the other prostitutes about her story of spending a night with a movie star and is drawn

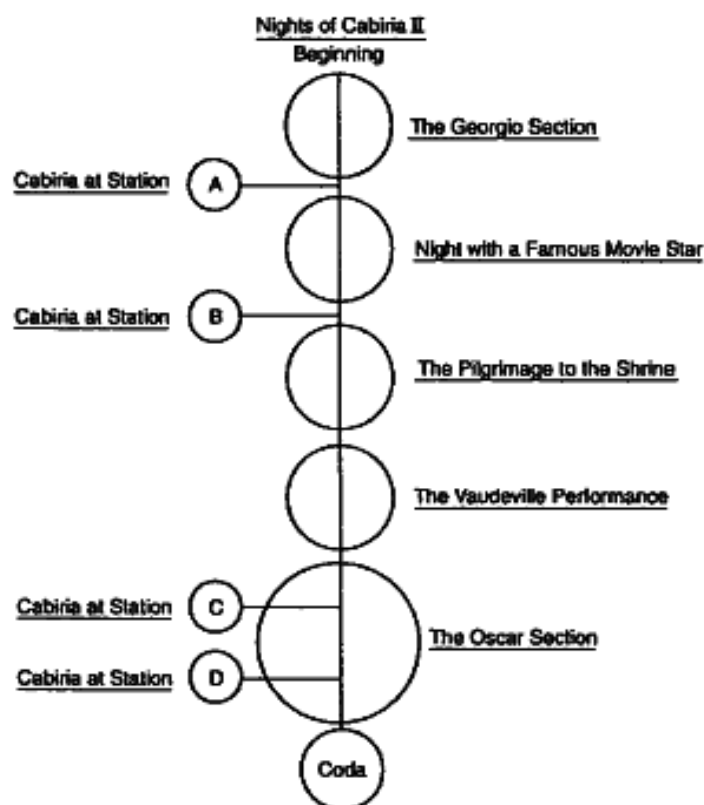


Figure 2. *Nights of Cabiria II*

into conversation about attending the festival of the Madonna at which the crippled uncle of a pimp hopes for a miracle. In C, Cabiria passes out chocolates from Oscar to the other prostitutes and tells them about the movie he took her to. The scene ends with a police raid that scatters the group and frightens Cabiria. Finally, in D, Cabiria stands in the rain beneath her umbrella and smokes a cigarette, lost in thought. None of the scenes runs more than four minutes. All serve to underline some character trait of Cabiria: high spiritedness, combativeness, curiosity, hopefulness, vulnerability, or wistfulness. Taken together, the scenes provide a sense of continuity through repetition. All take place at the same location, and, in all, Cabiria wears the same uniform (a ratty fur jacket, a tight skirt, a cinch belt, bobby sox, and sandals, with a collapsible umbrella as accessory). Most important, though, the four brief scenes give us a feel for the on-goingness of Cabiria's quotidian life. We may pause five times, in the major segments, to examine some events in detail, but we are also very much

aware that Cabiria's life contains many more potential adventures and character relationships than the movie can treat.

The movie's four-minute coda constitutes one of Fellini's best endings. In this sequence, Cabiria walks along the road away from the promontory where Oscar abandoned her. She is overtaken by a group of festive young people who circle her and cheer her up. Cabiria looks toward the camera and smiles softly. Thus, Fellini ends with the upward turning of a new cycle, just as, conversely, he began the film with the downward turn of the first cycle.

The film, then, is held together by its parallelisms, which are fiercely symmetrical at beginning and end, if we compare Cabiria's rhyming affairs with Giorgio and with Oscar. The beginning and ending cannot be changed. They bracket and enclose the movie. But the middle could be expanded greatly, like a picaresque novel, or it could be contracted. We could, for example, remove the episode of "The Night with a Famous Movie Star" and the narrative would still make perfectly good sense and even give pleasure. By the same token, we might add several more episodes. Here, we need only be bound by the rules of making the episodes parallel to the others in terms of moving Cabiria toward a moment of happiness or self-fulfillment and then snatching the moment away. (As Fellini's career progresses, he will become less insistent on the exactness of his parallels, and therefore we might want to consider his narrative structures less regulated and even more open.) The string of episodes in *Nights of Cabiria* need end only when we feel that we have seen enough of the character of Cabiria for one sitting and that the revelation of her character is sufficiently done. With the open form, we are well aware the revelation cannot be complete.

**The Style of Excess.** The most important aspect of Fellini's visual style is the sense viewers have that they are receiving images of life that are highly charged with movements, contrasts, textures, colors, and, above all, surprises. If, as I argued earlier, Fellini wishes to defamiliarize the world and make it new, startling, and mysterious again, the visual strategy he has followed is that of giving viewers more than they are accustomed to receive in movies. The style of excess is designed to burst the conventional limits and make us aware of their incapacity to contain enough of experience. This visual style may be examined under four different headings: Layered Compositions; Galleries of Grotesques and Pairing of Characters; Disjunctions and the Surreal Effect; and Overflowing Forms, Texture, and Color.

**Layered Compositions.** Fellini often likes to compose his images in deep space. To do this, he sets up figures or elements in the foreground and another group of figures in the distance with appropriate perspective cues to let us know the composition exists on at least two planes. He will, in effect, layer his composition. To be sure, all conventional Hollywood movies make use of background movement. The point to be made here, however, is that Fellini exceeds the norm. For example, in a scene from *Nights of Cabiria* mentioned



earlier, when Cabiria is hypnotized at center stage of a vaudeville hall, she must vie for visual dominance with a considerable amount of backstage activity. Because the camera is set at oblique angles, we can see into the wings. On the left, we see a clown with a derby, overalls, and sneakers converse with a woman in a harem costume. One or both appear in the background ten times. The clown, in particular, stands out when he fans himself with his derby. Deeper into the background on the left is a female singer in an evening gown who appears six times and draws attention by adjusting her long gloves and her gown. To the right, seen in reverse-angle shots, is a man in tails and a female dancer in tights. One or both of them can be seen in the background of eight shots. He smokes a cigarette, and she straightens the seams of her stockings and adjusts her plumes. All this while Cabiria is making her most intimate revelations in the foreground! Of course, Fellini can alter the camera angle, change the lighting, and restrain the background action at key moments, but, for the most part, Giulietta Masina as Cabiria must battle to make her presence felt in a frame with activity on several planes.

A more complicated example from *Amarcord* will illustrate further the principle of layering the composition. In the "Rex Sequence," Fellini uses a tracking shot to follow some townspeople to the harbor. The shot lasts only fifteen seconds, but much is injected into it. As the shot begins, the camera tracks from right to left following a line of school children on the far side of the street. The camera tracks at approximately the same speed as the children. Into the frame from the right, on the near side of the street, come a horse and buggy, a woman on a bicycle, and another woman with a large straw hat. They, in effect, overtake the camera. As they pass out of the frame on the left, still traveling faster than the camera, the camera itself overtakes a portly gentleman in a two-piece bathing suit. With his overblown form, he is the comic surprise of the shot. Unconcerned with the movement around him, he strolls at his own pace, slower than the school children and slower than the camera, down the middle of the street. A car whizzes between him and the camera for a moment. And finally the camera slows and stops, allowing the bather to exit the frame to the left. Technically difficult, the shot owes its effectiveness to the different speeds of the figures on their different planes, in relation to the speed of the camera on its plane. The camera makes discoveries by overtaking and by being overtaken. We can scarcely know which edge to watch or which depth plane.

**Galleries of Grotesques and Pairings of Characters.** Also important to Fellini's style is his use of visual grotesques as minor characters in his movies. Wolfgang Kayser, in his landmark study *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, divides grotesques into two schools: that of Hieronymous Bosch and that of Pieter Brueghel the elder.<sup>18</sup> Fellini is clearly in the school of Brueghel, which turns on caricature, exaggeration, and the amassing of figures. In Fellini's films, there appear giants, dwarfs, hunchbacks, large fleshy women, transvestites, and characters with large noses or hollow-socket eyes. These are Fellini's "freaks,"



Pieter Brueghel, *Mod Meg*, 1563, courtesy of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp

his "grotesques." They can appear at any time in a film, keeping viewers off balance, as we have seen in our discussion of the portly bather in *Amarcord*. But quite frequently, Fellini uses galleries of one sort or another. The teeming quality of the paintings of Brueghel is also part of Fellini's visual strategy. A gentle version of a gallery of grotesques is the photographic portrait scene of the school children in *Amarcord*. Here, Fellini simply draws on the odd proportions that adolescents in the throes of irregular growth spurts are doomed to exhibit. There are those who have not lost their baby fat and those who have, those who have shot up in height and those who have not. Irregularity is the rule.

But, in the main, Fellini's galleries come in sequential order as a protagonist passes among the grotesques. Our view is often the subjective one of the protagonist. We are often placed uncomfortably close. And often the camera moves just a little too fast for us to see the grotesques long enough to gain a sense of comfortableness with them. This is certainly true when Guido and the camera move among the elderly, overdressed guests at the spa in *8½*, or when Juliet moves among the guests at Suzy's party in *Juliet of the Spirits*, or when Encolpius and Giton walk by the stalls of the prostitutes in *Satyricon*.

A fairly representative Fellini gallery comes in a scene in *Roma* when the young protagonist arrives in the city for the first time and is shown through the pension where he has arranged to live. He meets, in rapid succession, a Chinese man cooking spaghetti who bows to the young man, a little boy wearing glasses and sitting on the toilet who announces, "I've done it!" a tiny grandmother hunched in her rocking chair in the attic, a ham actor with tinted glasses and a broadbrimmed hat, an overweight beauty drying her long black hair, an old man with the bald head and jutting chin of Mussolini who recites the doctrine of Il Duce, and the enormous, block-figured mistress of the pension who lies abed with inflamed ovaries and is eventually joined by her sunburnt, grown-up son in an odd parody of an oedipal situation.

The gallery of grotesques has become a trademark of Fellini's later, longer films, but his early films, too, have their collections of odd characters or characters in odd costumes. All are examples of Fellini's tendency to break down the rational norm at some point in his films.

Contrast is important, too. Fellini likes to pair large characters with small ones for the jarring effect produced. The giantess in *Casanova* is attended by two midgets, and the extremely tall Uncle Theo in *Amarcord* by a midget nun. The adolescent Guido is paired with the huge prostitute Saraghina in *8½*, and Matt with the equally large tobacconist in *Amarcord*. Furthermore, the short, underdog characters played by Giulietta Masina are contrasted with the hulking Zampano in *La Strada*, with the large fellow prostitute Wanda in *Nights of Cabiria*, and the tall, voluptuous neighbor Suzy in *Juliet of the Spirits*. There are, of course, issues of power involved in some of these pairings, but here, we should note that the pairing of the very large with the very small is a visual means of calling attention to deviations from the norm at both ends of the scale.

**Disjunctions and the Surreal Effect.** A large measure of Fellini's style depends on surprise. Fellini enjoys startling viewers by putting together images that are in some way disjunctive. This principle appears in its most obvious manner in the small shocks with which he frequently begins sequences. For example, a sequence in *I Vitelloni* starts with the shot of a child in a sultan's garb being walked between two parents as if he were a pet monkey. The camera pulls back to reveal that they are figures in a parade, and the narrator's voice tells us that we are at Carnival. In *8½* a sequence begins with the shot of a puzzling silhouette against the background of a window. Suddenly a light is turned on, and we see that the form is Carla, Guido's mistress, with her head wrapped in a scarf.

Along the same lines is the appearance of what I will call a "surreal object" in a scene in which it does not logically belong. This is an object like the café table with three glasses on a tile floor in the middle of a desert in Salvador Dalí's *Solar Table* (1936), or it is a figure like Giorgio De Chirico's wardrobe in a realistic, if simplified, valley landscape. The purpose of such objects in surreal art is to break down our assurance that reality is rationally predictable. Such objects are virtually impossible to account for. In Fellini's films, the objects are usually just puzzling for a moment, until we can concoct a rational explanation for them after the fact; but at the moment of initial impact, they, like their counterparts in surrealist painting, create a moment when the assumptions of the rational world seem suspended. Perhaps the best-known example of such a moment is the sudden appearance of the White Sheik on his trapeze in the woods to his admirer Wanda in *The White Sheik*. We have been led to expect actors in exotic costumes, but the Sheik's appearance on the trapeze is startling, nevertheless, until we invent the explanation that the trapeze must be part of a set-up for a camera session. Important to the impact of the shot is the contrast between the Sheik's costume and Wanda's utterly practical, tailored suit.

Equally unexpected and arresting are the appearances of three musicians who march along an empty field playing their instruments in *La Strada* and of a dapple-gray horse in the midst of a traffic jam on the superhighway leading into the city in *Roma*. After the fact, we may explain to ourselves that the musicians have been hired to lead people to the festival in the nearby town (indeed, they perform this function for the heroine Gelsomina) and that the horse is making his way from pasture to stable as he has always done since before the highway was built, but these explanations do little to diminish the sense of strangeness we feel initially on seeing the musicians and horse in landscapes where they don't usually belong.

**Overflowing Forms, Texture, and Color.** Fellini is fond of overflowing forms. I refer not so much to the large-breasted, round-buttoxed women he peoples his movies with as to the costumes he puts on these women and on other characters as well. In particular, Fellini likes to use winged shapes. These appear in the headdresses of nuns in various films and in the hats of secular characters such



Salvador Dalí, *The Solar Table*, 1936, courtesy of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam

as Juliet's sister Adele in *Juliet of the Spirits* and the two daughters of Dr. Moebius in *Casanova*. Suzy, the seductive neighbor in *Juliet of the Spirits*, even wears wings of tulle on her gown. But we need not confine ourselves to specific lines or shapes. The basic principle often at work in Fellini designs is that the characters, especially the women, will put on costumes that make them overflow the lines of their bodies. The women wear feather boas, oversized hats, enormous wigs, and ruffled dresses. Stage performers are plumed and feathered. And the males, when costumed as the White Sheik and Casanova are, wear capes.

The element of texture is also important to Fellini. Many of his shots have a tactile quality. In painting, this quality is produced mainly through the rendering of light on surfaces in terms of apparent opaqueness or luminosity. Fellini uses this technique too, but, given the medium of film, he is also able to use movement. He gives an impression of how much a fabric weighs and how flexible it is by showing us how it moves. Thus, as we watch the characters move, we know at once how heavy and still is the brocade gown of the mechanical doll in *Casanova* and how light and flexible the dress of the woman in white in *8½*. Yet texture is not confined to costumes alone. Often in the background of Fellini shots will be fabrics that rustle in a breeze or lie limply and fabrics that absorb light or reflect it luminously. Most striking in this regard is a scene near the end of *La Strada* when Zampanò questions a woman about Gelsomina. The woman is hanging her wash, and, as she talks, it flutters and glistens around her. We can almost feel the warm, pleasant breeze, which contrasts with the sadness of her message to Zampanò that Gelsomina has died.

Yet another weapon in Fellini's arsenal for his later films is his use of color in non-naturalistic ways. He bathes scenes in certain lights or chooses colors for costumes and sets for the psychological effects color can have on viewers. Generally, he follows the accepted notion that the cool colors (blue, green, and violet) produce moods of serenity and pleasantness if the colors are rendered in light hues and that the warm colors (red, yellow, and orange), if in dark hues, produce more intense moods.<sup>25</sup> Pleasant memories and fantasies of women in *City of Women* are shot in a light blue light. On the other hand, Suzy's party in *Juliet of the Spirits*, where Juliet is sexually tempted, is done predominantly in costumes and decor of reds of various hues from scarlet to shocking pink but all influenced by the somber juxtaposition of blacks.

All of these practices are, of course, employed by other directors. Indeed, this is the case, as I've suggested earlier, for most of the stylistic practices discussed here. But what makes certain movies clearly Fellini's or at least *felliniesque* is the use of many of the elements simultaneously to create an impression that is strong to the point of excess. An example of a scene that uses overflowing shapes, texture, and color (as well as the contrast of the large with the small) is the walk through the forest by Juliet and her family in *Juliet of the Spirits*.

In this scene, Fellini wishes to play Juliet off against her two sisters and her mother, all of whom dominate Juliet in one way or another. Giulietta Masina

in the role of Juliet is a short woman. The costume she wears makes her look even shorter, for a coolie hat tends to diminish her to the level of its low brim. A plain white pajama suit makes her seem colorless and maybe even unfeminine in that her figure is completely hidden. By contrast, her two sisters—Adele, played by Luisa Della Noce, and Sylva, played by Sylva Koscina—and her mother, played by Caterina Boratto, tower over Juliet. Their size is increased by the hats they wear. Adele and the mother have on winged-shaped hats, and Sylva a large, ornate disk shape. In color and texture, also, they dominate Juliet. Adele wears a pink maternity dress that glows in the sun. Sylva has on a turquoise dress, with several light, overlapping layers that flutter as she moves, and she carries a luminous, turquoise parasol, which she opens, twirls, and closes. The mother wears a heliotrope cape, a string of pearls, and a large, airy, white veil. Each is more stereotypically feminine than Juliet in a different way. Adele is more maternally fruitful; Sylva more playful and girlishly seductive; and the mother more elegant. When Fellini puts Juliet in the same frame with Sylva, Juliet is dominated by the height of her sister, the color of her dress and hat, and the busy texture of layers on her sister's dress; Juliet is almost crowded from the frame. Visually, she is an underdog figure for whom we must have sympathy. Here, the Fellini mannerisms work to create character as well as to create an identifiable Fellini world.

As we have seen, the Fellini manner involves the open form of revelation and the visual style of excess. On the level of story telling and character presentation, each of Fellini's movies may be relatively different. But at the deeper structural level of manner, his strategies in terms of how he organizes discourse and how he presents visual material are strikingly similar. The strategies, in turn, are directed at defamiliarizing the material presented and at exceeding boundaries. These goals are what the strategies have in common. I have argued that Fellini has gravitated to this kind of manner out of belief that, at base, life is mysterious and ineffable. By definition, the mysterious and the ineffable cannot be described clearly. They can, however, be suggested. One very good way to suggest the mysterious and ineffable dimensions of life is to show an art form straining at its limits, fretting with them, as it were, to get at something which can't quite be contained within the limits. The filmmaker or artist may not show us the thing itself but may very well convince us of his or her effort to push the art form out toward it, and that effort, in itself, may be enough to persuade us that the thing is there, at least for as long as we are engaged with the work. In this way, by means of the Fellini manner, the films of Federico Fellini make the same assertion over and over.

## Notes

1. I draw here on two seminal works: Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); and David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin

Press, 1985). Following French structuralists, Chatman distinguishes between story and discourse in a manner similar to, if not precisely the same as, Bordwell's distinction, taken from the Russian formalists, between *fabula* and *syuzhet*. For Chatman, "Story is the content of the narrative expression, while discourse is the form of that expression" (23). Bordwell calls the *fabula* "the imaginary construct we create, progressively and retroactively [as we read a text]" in "a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events" and the *syuzhet* "the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula*" in the text (49-50).

2. My distinction between the discourse of resolution and the discourse of revelation comes from Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 48. Chatman writes: "In the traditional narrative of resolution, there is a sense of problem solving, of things being worked out in some way, of a kind of ratiocination or emotional teleology. . . . 'What will happen?' is the basic question. In the modern plot of revelation, however, the emphasis is elsewhere; the function of the discourse is not to answer that question nor even to pose it. Early on we gather that things will stay pretty much the same. It is not that events are resolved (happily or tragically), but rather that a state of affairs is revealed." Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, finds the classical Hollywood film to be defined in part by a narrative structure similar to the discourse of resolution, and he argues that Italian neorealist films and those of the European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s are defined, again in part, by a structure similar to the discourse of revelation. He does not, however, use the terms "resolution" or "revelation." See *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157-62, 206-13.
3. Giovanni Grazzini, ed., *Federico Fellini: Comments on Film*, trans. Joseph Henry (Fresno: California State University Press, 1988), 87-88.
4. Fellini's interest in mediums and spiritualism and in Jungian psychology is discussed in some detail in Hollis Alpert's recent biography *Fellini, A Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 168-70, 179-80, 182, 245-46, 261-62.
5. The most interesting treatment of how the ineffable is rendered in literature is Bruce Kavin, *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). Kavin makes the point that the ineffable can only be presented obliquely, say, through a secondary character/narrator who perceives the ineffable quality of the life of a major character or through the author's demonstration of the failure of literary form to capture all that there is to a given life situation. Fellini's method in films seems close to the second of these two approaches.
6. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. and trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.
7. My capsule summary of the narrative and visual conventions of classical Hollywood studio films is taken from David Bordwell, *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 25-26, 37-38. Bordwell's intent is to show the ways in which Dreyer plays off the Hollywood norms, as I hope to demonstrate Fellini does. The American films of the 1930s and 1940s, part of the so-called "classical" period, seem to offer a logical point of departure to use for Fellini since they were the influential movies he watched as he grew up. See also Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-84, for a fuller discussion of the stylistic norms of the Hollywood studio films.
8. Fellini is, of course, not alone in moving against the dominant form of the classical Hollywood film. Indeed, virtually all of the filmmakers in what has now become known as the European art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s could be said to have done the same thing. This group of filmmakers would include Luis Buñuel, Francois Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni, along with



Fellini. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell has outlined three major areas in which these filmmakers have moved away from classical Hollywood filmmaking: experimenting with objective reality (e.g., location shooting, *temps mort* in scenes), placing subjective reality on equal footing with objective reality (e.g., flashbacks, flashforwards, dreams), and rendering the narration in a self-consciously overt manner (e.g., an unusual camera angle, a stressed bit of cutting, an unrealistic shift in lighting, a disjunction on the sound track). Depending on the films considered, Fellini could easily be shown as participating in each of these three activities with other members of the European art-cinema group. (In *La Strada* he experiments with location shooting and *temps mort*; in *8½* with dreams and fantasies; and in *Amarcord* with overtly self-conscious narration.) What I am concerned with in this essay, however, is the particular mix of elements that defines Fellini's manner. I cannot, of course, distinguish here his mix from that of each of the other filmmakers in the European art-cinema group, for that would require extended case-by-case comparison. Such a project, though, would be an intriguing one, and I would insist that it could be done. See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 205-33.

9. Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), 44-51, 94-103. For a more generalized discussion of the open form in music, painting, and literature, see Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 47-66. Eco is concerned more than Braudy with the role of the performer/viewer/reader participating in the making of the text.
10. Roland Barthes puts it: "The writerly text is a perpetual present . . . ; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world . . . is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system . . . which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages." Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5.
11. This diagram and the one that follows it are simplified versions of those employed by Seymour Chatman in his general discussion of how narratives are organized. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 53-56.
12. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 32-37. See also William Free, "Fellini's *I Clowns* and the Grottesque," *Journal of Modern Literature* 3, no. 2 (April 1973): 214-27. So well does Free cover the subject of Fellini's use of grotesques that I have attempted here only to draw his ideas into my general argument about style and to add my own notion about Fellini's galleries. I might add that Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "carnavalesque" is often invoked in reference to Fellini's work. Indeed, the medieval and renaissance folk festivals, as described by Bakhtin, did privilege grotesques—"the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers"—in a way that invites comparison with Fellini's world, but because my emphasis is on visual style here, I have chosen to concentrate on the art history tradition outlined by Kayser rather than to deal with Bakhtin's more literary one. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
13. See, e.g., Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 21-22. Giannetti presents the theory clearly and sensibly. However, he does not deal with the idea of hue. Certainly, a scarlet tending toward black will have a different psychological impact than a pink tending toward white, although both hues could be classified under the color red.

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