

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

8½

Saturday, January 29, 4:15 p.m.

1963, 138 mins. 35mm print source: Corinth Films.

Directed by Federico Fellini. Written by Fellini, Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli, and Brunello Rondi. Produced by Angelo Rizzoli. Photographed by Gianni Di Venanzo. Edited by Leo Cattozzo. Production design by Piero Gherardi. Costume design by Gherardi and Leonor Fini. Music by Nino Rota.

Principal cast: Marcello Mastroianni(as Guido Anselmi), Claudia Cardinale (Claudia), Anouk Aimee (Luisa Anselmi), Sandra Milo (Carla), Rossella Falk (Rossella).

From essay by Alexander Sesonske for The Criterion Collection:

8½: a bizarre and puzzling title, but one precisely appropriate for this film which announces in its first frame that modernism has reached the cinema. If the mark of modernism in art is self-reference, *8 ½* surely goes beyond any predecessor in having itself as its subject. Before 1963 Federico Fellini had, by his count, made seven and a half films; hence “*8½*” is like an opus number: this is film number *8½* in the Fellini catalogue. Self-referential enough, but only the beginning. *8½* is a film about making a film, and the film that is being made is *8½*. Notice how everything Guido says about the film he is making turns out to be true of *8½*, even the sailor doing a soft-shoe dance, how all the screen tests are for roles in the film we are seeing, how some camera movements create an ambiguity between Guido, the director in the film, and Fellini, the director of the film, thus taking self-reference one step beyond the work to its maker.

It was perhaps this last level of self-reference that led some critics in the mid-1960s to dismiss *8½* as

autobiographical trivia, brilliant on its surface but devoid of significant content—a criticism already made within the film by Daumier, the writer. The world-wide success of *8½* and its current status high on the list of the greatest films ever made have long since refuted such critics, but they were right on two counts: *8½* is both autobiographical and brilliant. Its surface flow of images dazzles us with sharp contrasts of black and white, startling eruptions from off-screen, unexpected changes of scene and a virtuoso display of all the possibilities and effects of camera movement. We find almost a catalog of humanity in its stream of faces; some of them are momentary visions while others persist through the film and long after in our memory, such as Saraghina, that lumbering monster transformed into the embodiment of joyous life and movement. But Fellini’s brilliance reaches beyond the surface to include an intricate structure of highly original, highly imaginative scenes whose conjunction creates an unprecedented interweaving of memories, fantasies and dreams with the daily life of his hero and alter ego, Guido Anselmi. This more than anything, probably, made *8½* the most influential film of the 1960s, liberating

filmmakers everywhere from the conventions of time, place, and mode of experience that had prevailed in cinema for decades.

In a film in which almost every scene is memorable, within its own pace and ambience, its characteristic forms of movement and emotional tone, some scenes are extraordinary: a childhood reminiscence of a farmhouse overflowing with warmth, love and security, with an ascent into an enchanted darkness where the magical words “asa nisi masa” promise wealth and happiness; a boyhood flight from the stifling confines of a Catholic school to the voluptuous marvels of Saraghina’s rhumba, with its grotesque aftermath of cruel punishment and guilt; young Guido being told that Saraghina is the devil, though a Dantean descent into Hell reveals a cardinal enthroned at the center of the Inferno, solemnly repeating that there is no salvation outside the church; a whirling, riotous harem scene which mocks the absurdities of male fantasy.

Federico Fellini began his career in the motion picture world in 1945, as writer and assistant to the neo-realist director Roberto Rossellini, but by the time he directed his own first film his vivid imagination had begun to replace reality as the central source of his inspiration. Through the 1950s he explored the fantasies and illusions which both sustain and destroy us; in films peopled with characters whose lives run outside the normal streams of everyday experience; circus performers, swindlers, prostitutes. Then *La Dolce Vita*, a huge sprawling evisceration of contemporary urban high-life, made him an international celebrity and faced him with that most stultifying challenge for an artist: After such a success, what can you do next?

Fellini responded, finally, with *8½*, making the challenge itself his subject and expressing the stultification in his alter ego Guido’s confusion and inability to choose. He made this an opportunity to

probe the mystery of artistic creation and the problems of human relations created by a society whose traditional education portrays women as either sacred or profane, either mother or whore. Serious problems, but his film is comic. Hence none of the questions posed is ever really answered; for, as Guido/Fellini tells us, he has nothing to say. But his complete mastery of film technique and form speaks for him, shaping a purely formal solution for Guido in an imaginary dance of acceptance and communion which leaves us, the spectators, feeling a glow of happy resolution as young Guido, now dressed in white, leads his clown band into the darkness.

One puzzle which remains unresolved for most viewers of *8½* is the meaning of “asa nisi masa.” “say the magic words, then when the picture moves its eyes, we’ll all be rich.” The words derive from a children’s game, like pig latin, in which one takes a word, doubles each of its vowels and then puts the letter “s” between the two. So, run backwards, the root word is “anima,” the Italian word for soul or spirit. Daumier dismisses all this as another idle childhood memory, devoid of all poetic inspiration. Yet in the film the utterance of “asa nisi masa” works like magic, releasing the marvelous flow of the joyful life of the farmhouse scene. And the childish promise is hardly idle; for it was indeed when the picture moved its eye—when Fellini found his true métier in motion picture—that we all became enriched.

From Fellini’s *Comments on Film* (ed. Giovanni Grazzini, 1988):

Fellini had considered cancelling the film project and had even begun to write a letter to the producer. Before he finished the letter, a technician invited him to celebrate the beginning of the shoot:

The glasses were emptied, everybody applauded, and I felt overwhelmed by shame. I felt myself the least of men, the captain who abandons his crew. I

didn't go back to the office where my half-written copout letter was waiting for me, but instead sat down, blank and emptied, on a little bench in the garden in the middle of a great coming and going of workers, technicians, actors belonging to other working troupes. I told myself I was in a no exit situation. I was a director who wanted to make a

film he no longer remembers. And lo and behold, at that very moment, everything fell into place. I got straight to the heart of the film. I would narrate everything that had been happening to me. I would make film telling the story of a director who no longer knows what film he wanted to make.

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