

The Cinematic Art History of Federico Fellini

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National
Gallery of Art



What would I have wanted to do in this film [*Fellini's Casanova*]? Arrive once and for all at the ultimate essence of cinema, at that which for me is the total film. To succeed, that is, in turning a film into a painting.¹

Federico Fellini

For many film historians and viewers alike, post-WW II Italian cinema continues to be regarded as a golden age. It is populated by a small group of auteur filmmakers who produced a canon of great films. Vittorio De Sica (1901–1974), Luchino Visconti (1906–1976), Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977), Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), and Federico Fellini (1920–1993) reside at the center of this circle of directors who defined the major tenets of Italian neorealism and expanded the subsequent language and goals of Italian cinema.²

A common thread linking all these seminal filmmakers is their early interest and training in other areas of the visual arts, most notably painting, drawing, and an in-depth knowledge of art history. De Sica began his career as a theater actor. Visconti was raised in a privileged Milanese household steeped in the love of art, theater, music, and opera. Rossellini grew up in Rome, imbued with the city's historic and religious past. Antonioni was a gifted child violinist and life-long student of architecture and drawing. Pasolini studied art history under Roberto Longhi at the University of Bologna. Federico Fellini spent much of his youth drawing and staging puppet shows in home-

made theaters, later earning his living as an illustrator and caricaturist. For these filmmakers, a love and understanding of art history fueled their artistic passions and cinematic styles.

The National Gallery's Fellini retrospective, postponed in 2020 due to the pandemic, joins the centennial tributes known as *Federico Fellini 100 Tour*. The retrospective reveals the director's ongoing dialogue with art history and his creation of a free and imaginative personal universe. Fellini's greatest successes include the simple directness of his neorealist masterpiece, *La Strada* (1954); *La Dolce Vita* (1960), the start of his collaboration with

Marcello Mastroianni; *8-1/2 (Otto e mezzo)*, (1963), with its fantasy and surrealist humor; *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1965), his first color film, with its eroticism and ironic comments on Italian society; the historically multilayered *Roma* (1972); and finally, the full-blown baroque opulence of *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* (1976).

Throughout Fellini's oeuvre, visual imagery inspired by art history includes references to classical antiquity, Byzantine mosaics, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt, Pietro Longhi, the Pre-Raphaelites, Italian symbolism, Gustav Klimt, Giorgio de Chirico, the Surrealists, Chaim Soutine,

Pablo Picasso, and Francis Bacon. Fellini referred to his film *Satyricon*, for example, as "a film made of fixed, immobile pictures."³

Fellini's knowledge of art history was deep and sophisticated. His private library contained well-thumbed volumes dedicated to major European artists and movements, many of them annotated with comments, text translations, and notes regarding specific visual effects achieved by an artist in a painting. Fellini the filmmaker approached his art as Fellini the painter, with the two creative processes in constant dialogue with each other. He writes: "In dreams, color is idea, concept, feeling, as in

truly great painting.” To make the analogy between the painter at his easel and the director behind his camera, Fellini often refers to film as a “picture.”⁴

“I asked myself what I believe is the important question about creating something. It’s simply this: Is it alive or it isn’t? . . . I don’t think my films changed much over the years—maybe a little. In the beginning I emphasized plot more. I adhered to story and was more literary than cinematic. Later, I placed more faith in images. I found my films related to painting, discovering for myself that light, rather than dialogue, reveals a character’s state of mind, as well as the director’s style. My ideal is to make movies with the freedom of a painter. A painter

doesn’t have to say what the painting will be. He must be in his studio with his canvas and his colors. The painting takes shape and fills itself in. If there is a change in my work, that is it. I have become more free of the plot, letting it develop, going closer to the pictorial.”⁵

As a result, Fellini’s films embody a wide array of visual sources both historical and personal—images from art history, mythology, religion, nature, fantasy, humor, popular culture, and most especially, from Fellini’s own dreams and childhood memories.

Fellini often referred to his *Book of Dreams*, a set of notebooks begun in the 1960s, in which he drew and wrote about his dreams.⁶ Keeping

this personal journal had been suggested to him by his psychoanalyst, Ernest Bernhardt, a disciple of Carl Jung. Many of the most unforgettable scenes in his films have their origins in the notes and drawings from the *Book of Dreams*, as do many of Fellini’s obsessive preoccupations with the sources of creativity; Jungian archetypes; human sexuality; the theater and the circus with their marginalized performers; illusion, magic, metamorphosis, and fantasy. Taken as a whole, this personal alchemy of sensibilities, obsessions, and visual, thematic, and creative stimuli coalesces into a unique view of the world—or said another way, a “Felliniesque” view of the world.

Notes

- 1 V. Riva, “Intervista à Fellini,” *L’Espresso* (26 May 1976), quoted in T. Kezich, *Fellini* (Milan, 1987), 463.
- 2 D. Gariff, *National Gallery of Art Film Notes*, <https://www.nga.gov/research/film-archive.html>.
- 3 F. Fellini, *Fare un film* (Turin, 1974), 107. Cited in H. Aldouby, *Federico Fellini: Painting in Film, Painting on Film* (Toronto, 2013), xv.
- 4 Fellini, *Fare un film*, 94. Cited in Aldouby, 22.
- 5 C. Chandler, *I, Fellini* (New York, 1995), 250–251.
- 6 Fellini, *The Book of Dreams* (New York, 2007). See also *Y Fellini soñó con Picasso (And Fellini Dreamed of Picasso)*, Audrey Norcia et al. (Málaga, Museo Picasso, 2018).

Front: *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), directed by Federico Fellini.
Shown: Sandra Milo, Giuletta Masina, Rialto/Photofest,
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Page 2: Federico Fellini, 1962, Photofest

Back: *8-1/2* (1963), directed by Federico Fellini.
Shown: Sandra Milo, Embassy Pictures/Photofest,
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