Directed by Federico Fellini
Screenplay by Tonino Guerra & Tullio Pinelli
Cinematography by Tonino Delli Colli and Ennio Guarnieri

Giulietta Masina...Amelia Bonetti / Ginger
Marcello Mastroianni...Pippo Boticella / Fred
Franco Fabrizi...Show host
Friedrich von Ledebur...Admiral Aulenti
Jacques Henri Lartigue…Brother Gerolamo


TULLIO PINELLI (24 June 1908, Turin, Piedmont, Italy -7 March 2009, Rome, Italy, of natural causes) wrote for 84 films and tv series, some of which were Viaggio a Tulum (2009), La voce della luna (1990), Ginger e Fred (1986), La voce / The Voice (1982), Alfredo, Alfredo (1972), Francesco d'Assisi / Francis of Assisi (1966), Giulietta degli spiriti / Juliet of the Spirits (1965), 8½ (1963), Boccaccio '70 (1962) (segment "Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio"), La dolce vita (1960), Le notti di Cabiria / The Swindle (1957) # Il bidone (1955) (writer), La strada / The Road (1954), I vitelloni (1953) (story), Lo sceicco bianco / The White Sheik (1952), Luci del varietà / Variety Lights (1950), Senza pietà (1948) (writer), Il passatore / Bullet for Stefano (1947), and Le miserie del Signor Travet (1945).


TONINO DELLE COLLI (20 November 1922, Rome, Italy -16 August 2005, Rome, Italy, of a heart attack) did the cinematography of 138 films, some of which were La vita è bella / Life Is Beautiful (1997), Facciamo paradise / Looking for Paradise (1995), Death and the Maiden (1994), La voce della luna (1990), L'aficana (1990), Stradivari (1989), Intervista (1987), Der Name der Rose / The Name of the Rose (1986), Ginger e Fred (1986), Once Upon a Time in America (1984), Viaggio con Anta (1979), Primo amore / First Love (1978), Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma / Salò, or the


**JACQUES HENRI LARTIGUE** (13 June 1894, Coursevoie, France - 12 September 1986, Nice, France) was one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century.}


Italian director and scenarist, born in Rimini, a small town on Italy’s Adriatic coast, son of Urbano Fellini, a traveling salesman, and the former Ida Barbiani. The four or five years he spent as a boarder at a school run by priests in nearby Fano were rigorously formative. A regular punishment was to make the culprit kneel for half an hour on grains of maize, and a wintry Sunday treat was to be marched to the beach, there to kneel and gaze at the sea while reciting a prayer. Priests were to find their ritual place in many of Fellini’s films, as was the circus that he encountered for the first time on a stolen day off and where he remained, entranced, until his trucancy was discovered and he was returned to the school. The only aptitude Fellini showed at school was for drawing. In his final year, he and some of his friends were frequent truants, leading the idle, aimless street life he was to recall in *I Vitelloni*.

This, at any rate, is an approximate account of Fellini’s childhood. He enjoys obfuscation, and his own recollections vary according to whim. At some point in his late teens—in 1937 or
1938—like Moraldo in I Vitelloni, Fellini escaped from the hopeless limbo of Rimini. He made his way first to Florence, where he worked as an illustrator for a comic-strip story magazine. After six months he moved on again to Rome, joining a Bohemian set of would-be actors and writers. He began to sell stories and cartoons to the humorous weekly Marc’ Aurelio, and before long was hired as one of the writers of a radio serial based on the magazine’s most popular feature, which retailed the marital misadventures of Cico and Pallina—Italy’s answer to Blondie and Dagwood.

In 1939, tiring of this chore, Fellini joined his friend, the comedian Aldo Fabrizi, on an odyssey across Italy with a vaudeville troupe. Fellini himself earned his keep as a sketch writer, scenery painter, bit player, and “company poet.” Years later he told an interviewer that this was “perhaps the most important year of my life….I was overwhelmed by the variety of the country’s physical landscape and, too, by the variety of its human landscape. It was the kind of experience that few young men are fortunate enough to have—a chance to discover the character….of one’s country and, at the same time, to discover one’s own identity.”

Back in Rome, Fellini began a new career as a gag writer for the movies, and in 1942, when Aldo Fabrizi was offered the lead role in a film comedy, Fellini supplied the storyline, going on to a growing success as a film comedy writer. Meanwhile, a new actress, Giulietta Masina, had taken over the role of Pallina in the radio series. Intrigued by her voice, Fellini began a four-month courtship that led to their marriage in 1943. Her distinctive personality, puckish, vulnerable, but resilient, clearly fired Fellini’s creative imagination, and together they were to forge a unique alliance in the Italian cinema. In 1944 Masina gave birth to a son who lived for only three weeks.

With the liberation of Rome, Fellini and some of his friends opened the “Funny Face Ships,” supplying caricatures, voice recordings, and other mementos for the occupying Allied soldiers to send back home. One day Roberto Rossellini came into Fellini’s shop and invited him to collaborate on the script of Open City (1945), a landmark in the development of neorealism and the revival of the Italian cinema, and also the film that made Aldo Fabrizi’s reputation as a dramatic actor.

Fellini’s collaboration with Rossellini continued with Paisan (1946), on which he served as both coscenarist and assistant director. Two years later, after Rossellini had made a short film based on Cocteau’s “La Voix Humaine: and needed a companion piece to make up a feature-length picture, Fellini wrote and acted in Il miracolo (The Miracle). He played the part of a mute vagabond whom Anna Magnani, as a deluded shepherdess, takes to be St. Joseph and by whom she becomes pregnant. The film was a success de scandale, outraging Catholic opinion everywhere.

During the same period Fellini started to work with another director, Alberto Lattuada. He collaborated with Lattuada on the screenplays of two notable successes: Senza pietà (Without Pity, 1948) and Il mulino del Po (The Mill on the Po, 1949), and then with Pietro Germi on In nome della Legge (In the Name of the Law, 1949). Back with Rossellini, he worked as scriptwriter and assistant director on Francesco, giullare di Dio. After that his chance came, with Lattuada, to codirect Luci del Varietà (Variety Lights, 1950).

Nowadays, Fellini is no longer certain who directed what in the film. “I wrote the original story and the screenplay and I chose the actors. And the tawdry vaudeville routines I’d recalled from a touring troupe with Aldo Fabrizi. I can’t remember exactly which scenes were directed by Lattuada and which by me, but I regard the film as one of mine.” Certainly the work is dense with moments and images that bear the Fellini stamp: the old hunchback who guides the camera to the advertising display outside the theatre where Checco (Peppino De Filippo) is presenting his show; the vivid detail of the company’s arduous trek through the provinces to their dubious Roman goal; the progress of Liliana (Carla del Poggio) from ambitious provincial amateur to opulently befurred Roman soubrette; and, above all, Checco’s hopeless bid to possess Liliana and thereby recapture his waning powers and youth.

It is significant that in this partial directorial debut Fellini had already enlisted several of the colleagues who were to work with him with remarkable consistency throughout his future career: the cinematographer Otello Martelli and the screenwriters Ennio Flaiano and Tullio Pinelli. Giulietta Masina appears as Checco’s fiancée Melina; the film seems to have been very much a family affair as Carla del Poggio was Lattuada’s wife and Masina, of course, Fellini’s.

Fellini’s first solo work as director was Lo sceicco bianco (The White Sheik, 1953), based on a story by Michelangelo Antonioni which the latter had hoped to direct himself. It was inspired by the fumetti, the enormously popular magazines telling romantic stories in photo-strip form. Fantasy and reality disastrously intermingle as in many of the director’s later works, but here the vein is more comical, sometimes even farcical. Alberto Sordi plays the absurdly vain fumetti star in whom a provincial bride, honeymooning in Rome with her boring husband, temporarily invests her romantic dreams….Fellini’s subtle guidance of his actors is already evident, and the plight of the romantic young wife (Brunella Bovo) emerges as both funny and touching….Several critics have pointed out the resemblances between this film and Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, another story about a woman who prefers illusion to bourgeois reality.

I Vitelloni (The Wastrels, or, in England, The Spivs, 1953) gained Fellini his first distribution abroad and won the Silver Lion at Venice. The term “vitelloni” lacks an exact equivalent in English; meaning literally “overgrown calves,” the expression was current in Fellini’s native Rimini to describe the goalless sons of middle-class families—idlers content to hang around bars or the fountain in the square hoping to encounter an amorous adventure….Fellini depicts his provincial scene with a humor that is never rancorous, and is perfectly served by the musical score by Nino Rota—a composer who was to make an invaluable contribution to all of Fellini’s films thereafter until his death in 1979….Acknowledging the film’s value as a social document, other critics nonetheless see it as a step away from the social preoccupations of neorealism and toward the development of Fellini’s conception of character. He himself says that he was portraying not “the death throes of a decadent social class, but a certain torpor of the soul.”
After an eighteen-minute episode entitled “A Matrimonial Agency” in Zavattini’s neorealist production Love in the City (1953), Fellini embarked on a film that was to earn him worldwide acclaim, La Strada (The Road, 1954).

Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina), a diminutive and simple-minded peasant girl is sold by her mother to Zampanò (Anthony Quinn), a street entertainer performing a strong-man act who needs her as his assistant. A brutal and morose character, he subjects her to harsh training as they move from town to town, and also rapes her. Nevertheless, in her clownish fashion, she loves him and tries to establish a human relationship with him, but he always rejects her. She is befriended by a tightrope walker (Richard Basehart)—an ambiguous Christ figure whom Zampanò accidentally kills, causing Gelsomina to lose her tenuous hold on sanity. It is only after her death that Zampanò realizes the extent of his emotional dependence on her. The film ends, as it begins, on a beach, where Zampanò, in Edouard de Laurot’s words, “is finally struck down by a cosmic terror and realizes, in his anguish, man’s solitude in the face of Eternity.” It is a kind of redemption, earned by Gelsomina’s love and self-sacrifice.

...Suzanne Budgen in her book on Fellini writes: “The tenderness that [this key work] ...shows for the dispossessed, its great comic fancy, its preoccupation with circuses and circus people, the importance in it of the sea, and perhaps above all, its air of mystery...mark it as belonging to the very nerve-centre of Fellini’s creative talent.” Arthur Knight thought that La Strada was neorealism on a new plane, a mixture of realism and poetry. La Strada is Fellini’s own favorite among his films, and is regarded by may as his masterpiece. It received more than fifty awards, including the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and an Oscar as best foreign film.

Il bidone (1955), which followed, aroused curiously little critical interest....Il bidone was followed by a resounding success, Le notti di Cabiria (The Nights of Cabiria, 1956). The character of Cabiria, sketched by Masina in The White Sheik, reappears as the star of the show. She haunts the Roman periphery, a lonely irascible little prostitute with a grave professional handicap—a tendency to fall in love, and with men whose main concern is to shove her into the Tiber or over cliffs in order to acquire her modest savings....And yet, as Fellini says, Cabiria is in the grip of “an incoherent, intermittent force that cannot be gainsaid—the anguished longing for goodness.”...Masina won the award as best actress at Cannes, and was described in Newsweek as “the best tragi-comedian since Chaplin.”...To those who found Cabiria overly episodic and unstructured, André Bazin replied that Fellini had introduced “a new kind of script,” based not on dramatic causality but on the revelation of character by an accumulation of episodes and examples: it is “the long descriptive sequences, seeming to exercise no effect on the unfolding of the ‘action’ proper [that] constitute the truly important and revealing scenes....Fellini’s hero never reaches the final crisis (which destroys him and saves him) by a progressive dramatic linking but because the circumstances somehow or other affect him, build up inside him like the vibrant energy in a resonating body. He does not develop; he is transformed; overturning finally like an iceberg whose center of buoyancy has shifted unseen.”...

The time was ripe for the ebullient Fellini to embark on a more ambitious project. The turbulent publicity that surrounded the making of La Dolce Vita (The Sweet Life, 1959) was an expression of the spirit of Rome at the time, poised to take over the mantle of Hollywood. The Via Veneto was becoming the Roman Sunset Strip and Hollywood Boulevard combined; actors whose American careers were on the wane flocked to Rome in the hope of achieving a professional renaissance there....Perhaps the chief, and very considerable, merit of La Dolce Vita nowadays is as a testimony to a particularly turbulent period in the cinema’s history which changed, during its heyday, the character of an ancient city....

An episode in a mammoth production entitled Boccaccio ’70 followed in 1962. Visconti, de Sica, and Monticelli also contributed, though for reasons of length Monicelli’s episode was deleted from the film’s first showing at the Cannes Film Festival. Fellini’s section was entitled “Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio.” Concerning a predatory temptress (Anita Eckberg) who materializes from a black board to provoke an aging puritan....After the lip-smacking publicity surrounding the making of La dolce vita, Fellini retreated into complete secrecy about his next film, Otto e mezzo (8 ½, 1962). Whereas, formerly, his Roman offices near the Spanish Steps were a milling beehive of journalists, friends, and well-wishers presided over by Il Maestro with evident enjoyment, joie de vivre, and a word for everyone, now the order of the day was silence and the sets were closed to visitors. His enemies often labeled Fellini a bugiardaro, a big liar—even his wife said that he only blushed when he told the truth. But his friends discerned in him a rare sincerity. I wondered whether this new silence concerning 8 ½ was a calculated publicity ploy to offset the hysteria surrounding La dolce vita. On behalf of The Sunday Times I went to Rome to ask him about it. We talked in the stifling heat but merciful quiet of the Roman summer when everyone else had repaired to the beach.

“I couldn’t talk to people about 8 ½”, Fellini declared, “the film wasn’t clear even to me. I had a vague idea of it even before La dolce vita: to try to show the dimensions of a man on all his different levels; intermingling his past, his dreams, and his memories, his physical and mental turmoil—all without chronology but giving the impression that man is a universe unto himself. But I couldn’t resolve it and so made La dolce vita instead. Then I thought of an end: the man must find himself at a point of complete mental and physical crisis: an awful, mature stage of doubt when, devoured by his complexities, his incapacities and impotence, he is forced to try to understand himself. Then, when suicide seems to be the only solution, all the characters, real and imagined, who had contributed to his confusion reveal their positive aspects to him and invest him with new hope.”...

Timothy Hyman writes that “8 ½ demonstrated how a film could be made about a temperament: the events it dealt with were interior events....In 8 ½, Fellini renounced the political or social emphasis of neo-realism, and the new relation between the artist and the outer world that resulted has since become fundamental to
much Italian cinema….the transition from neo-realism to what might be called neo-symbolism.”...8 ½ won first prize at the Moscow Festival, and both an Oscar and the New York Film Critics’ Award as best foreign film.

Giulietta degli spiriti (Juliet of the Spirits, 1965), like 8 ½, explores an inner landscape, but this time that of a woman, played by Giulietta Masina. Was this, then, Masina’s 8 ½? Fellini was characteristically ambiguous: “This woman, Juliet, is not precisely, my wife, the marriage is not precisely my marriage.”...Throughout the film, as in 8 ½, the narrative is densified by her visions, fantasies, memories, and dreams….Fellini himself said of the film that “the story is nothing. There is no story.Actually, the picture can be described in ten different ways. Movies have now gone past the phase of prose narrative and are coming nearer and nearer to poetry. I am trying to free my work from certain constrictions—a story with a beginning, a development, an ending. It should be more like a poem, with meter and cadence.”....

In 1967, abandoning a long-projected film called “The Voyage of G. Mastorna,” Fellini became seriously ill, suffering what was called “a total physical collapse.” He went back to work the following year, directing an episode in a three-part French production, Histoires extraordinaires (1968), based on stories by Edgar Allan Poe. Fellini’s contribution, “Toby Dammit,” starred Terence Stamp as a film star whose hallucinations on a trip to Cinecittà led to his death. The most admired of the three episodes, it seemed to Penelope Gilliatt “fluently comic, sober, barbed, a little desperate, with a droll and perfectly earnest belief in Heaven and damnation.”

Also in 1968, a director’s notebook by NBC-TV, made a seldom-seen 54-minute film called A Director’s Notebook. It includes a glimpse of what the uncompleted “Mastorna” might have been like, scenes from Fellini’s Rome, a passage cut from Nights of Cabiria, Fellini’s reminiscences of his childhood moviegoing, and a long concluding sequence showing a collection of bizarre characters auditioning for his next film, Satyricon. Joseph McBride claims that if, at first glance, the Notebook seems to be “a disconnected grab bag of gags, skits and memorabilia, it is actually a rigorous development of the theme of artistic stasis which Fellini pursued in 8 ½.”

Fellini Satyricon (1969) is an uninhibited and extremely loose adaptation by himself and Bernardino Zapponi of Satyricon, the satirical romance written in the first century a.d. by Petronius, Nero’s master of the revels….Fellini himself has been even more than usually obscurantist in his comments on Satyricon, in some interviews pointing out similarities between pre- and post-Christian Rome, in others asserting that the film’s atmosphere “is not historical but that of a dream world”; claiming it as autobiographical and as anything but. He has more consistently stressed the objectivity and detachment of the film, saying “I have made no panoramas, no topography, only frescoes, and so the cutting is very fast. It has no real time. It is like riffling through an album. There is no psychological movement in the characters.” It is also “a film made up of static shots—no tracks, no camera movements whatsoever.”

...With I clowns (The Clowns), commissioned by the RAI network and first shown in Italy in 1970 as a Christmas offering on television, the critical atmosphere warmed considerably….Fellini’s Roma (1972) is an evocation, mingling memories and fantasies, location shooting and elaborate studio work, of the city which has done so much to fire his imagination….Roma had a mixed reception. Most reviewers found something to praise—sequences rich in Felliniesque humanity—but many thought it too long and too diffuse. Richard Schickel said that he was tired of being fed Fellini’s “visions of Rome as combination brothel, freak show and symbol of the decline of the West.” Difus Powell called the film “a huge dream, an offshoot from his Satyricon, grotesque, horrible, beautiful.” She hoped that Fellini might now find his way back to “the mysterious organism, more complex than Rome—the human being.”

This he did with considerable success in his next film Amarcord (1973), which in the patois of his native Rimini means “I remember” (a-m’arcord). We are back in the provincial town of I Vitelloni, though this account of four consecutive seasons there throughout the Fascist 1930s was shot mostly on vast sets constructed in the Roman studios…..There are many passages that reveal the director at his imaginative best, such as the one where a frightened but defiant old man is interrogated and tortured by the fascisti, or the ludicrous family trip to the country with an idiot relative who climbs to the top of a tree screaming “I want a woman” and who is eventually reclaimed by a severe midget nun....

Earning an Oscar as best foreign film, among many other awards, Amarcord was found uneven but rewarding, less strident, more mellow and affirmative than Fellini’s other recent films. But the decline in his reputation continued with Casanova (1976), freely drawn by the director and Zapponi from the memoirs of the famous Venetian libertine, and featuring in the title role the utterly un-Italianate Donald Sutherland equipped with a strangely heightened forehead. Fellini’s conception of Casanova as a victim of his own legend, a joyless coupler with everyone from a libidinous nun to the mechanical doll which seems to provide him with the greatest satisfaction….

Three years elapsed before Prova d’orchestra (The Orchestra Rehearsal, 1979). “I’d like to do more little films, “ Fellini told an interviewer, “but if I go to a producer with a very low-budget story, I see the lack of interest, the humiliation on his face. For him Fellini should shoot a ten million-dollar film. The film doesn’t count at all, what counts is to build a business on me, the Fellini affair, and then to construct an immense financial edifice. And there I am, rooted in my film with all the problems it poses for me, and next to me is growing this huge labyrinthine construction to satisfy producers’ appetites, piranha-distributors who hope to make the deals of their lives.”...

La città delle donne (City of Women, 1980) found Fellini back in the superproduction category and once again generally out of favor with the critics. “I have the feeling that all my films are about women,” Fellini declared at the time. “Women represent myth, mystery, diversity, fascination, the thirst for knowledge and the search for one’s own identity…I even see the cinema as a
woman... Going to the cinema is like returning to the womb; you sit there, still and meditative in the darkness, waiting for life to appear on the screen.”

In City of Women, the merely (and chauvinistically) male hero is once more played by Mastroianni, here called Professor Snàporaz. He is traveling in a train that unexpectedly stops and like a latter-day Alice, is lured through the fields to his Wonderland not by a cloathed rabbit but by an exotic fellow-passenger…. The film inspired a very successful Broadway musical, “Nine.”

In 1983 Fellini made E la nave va (And the Ship Sails On). He described his film as a dream, an evocation of the subconscious. “I want people to see it without trying to understand it.” …

Fellini’s latest film, Ginger e Fred (Ginger and Fred, 1985) unites Mastroianni, once again as Fellini’s alter ego, and Giulietta Masina, Fellini’s wife, for the first time in their careers. It reveals Fellini, now in his sixties, in a mood paradoxically both more sour and more mellow. Sour in the way he portrays television as an imitational purveyor of garbage, a world run by ghouls, and Rome itself as a putrescent dump; mellow in the way that he depicts his protagonists as finally capable of affection, of fleeting tenderness, united, momentarily, against the crass world that surrounds them.

Amelia and Pippo are two ex-variety artists who, long ago, were a touring team performing their mediocre imitations of the Astaire-Rogers routines. Lovers for a time, they had split up in the 1950s and had never met since. Now they are invited to make an appearance on a nostalgic TV Christmas Special, resided over by an unctuous veteran played by Franco Fabrizi, the shiftless young husband in I Vitelloni. Amelia is now a faintly prim provincial housewife in late middle age. Pippo has become a boozy, arthritic door-to-door salesman, and at their first meeting fails to recognize her. They find themselves in an alien city, rife with vagrants and junkies. The television show in which they are booked to appear is an assemblage of freaks, celebrity lookalikes, a levitating monk, and a miracle woman who has endured for three months the agony of not watching television. When Amelia and Pippo eventually perform their dance routine it is, despite a stumble on his part and a studio blackout, strangely touching. For a brief moment the couple experience a flickering of their old intimacy before once more setting off on their separate ways.

Orson Welles said of Fellini in 1967 that his “limitation—which is also the source of his charm—is that he’s fundamentally very provincial. His films are a small-town boy’s dream of the big city. His sophistication works because it’s the creation of someone who doesn’t have it. But he shows dangerous signs of being a superlative artist with little to say.” As Joseph McBride points out, “Welles undoubtedly picked up that last line from Guido’s declaration [in 8½] that he has nothing to say but he is going to say it anyway.” And so, fortunately, is Fellini. “Does Fellini always make the same film?,” asks Aldo Tassone, “Certainly! But the language of the different chapters of this unique film is incessantly renewed…. It is precisely because it repeats recurrent motifs that Fellini’s fantasy appears unsurpassed,” Casiraghi writes very correctly.


CC: Is it true that the few prints already prepared of Ginger and Fred are kept under guard in a darkened room, protected by security guards in bulletproof armor, as if they were copies of the Holy Shroud?

FF: The pirates are lying in ambush. The pirate video copies of City of Women and The Ship Sails On were already in circulation before the film was released. I wouldn’t even let my dearest friend see Ginger and Fred; it’s the only way I can feel safe in this period of interregnum between the completion of a film and its release….

CC: How come the film was shown in France, Germany and America before it was shown in Italy?

FF: The reason is very simple, or very complicated. It is not a discourtesy toward my country. Ginger and Fred is the fruit of a collective production on an international, if not planetary sale. It was financed by Alberto Grimaldi, who for some years has been resident in America, by the French, the Germans, the Turks and by organizations of every kind, public and private, national and multinational. All I can say is that I’m glad to have made it. It is a film about our contemporary life, as long as that phrase doesn’t sound presumptuous. A film about television, or, rather, the inside of television. A film that contains an unusual love story, or at least for the kind of cinema I produce. I enjoyed making it and I hope that others, too, will enjoy it. I have taught it every trick of seduction and I hope it knows how to use them….

CC: Why after twenty years have you felt the need, the longing, to have Giulietta once more in one of your films?

FF: Ginger and Fred was a story written for her. It was part of a series of six stories about women that were meant to have been directed by me, Antonioni, Zeffirelli, Dino Risi, Francesco Rosi and Luigi Magni, but then difficulties arose and the project came to nothing. And so I thought about expanding the story I was to have
directed and turning it into a full-length film. It possessed a wealth of situations that lent themselves to amplification. As a film it had a more convincing rhythm.

CC: You attack television and yet you use it in this film.

FF: It’s hardly the case that television is particularly generous toward those like me who try to highlight its power of plagiarism and the disastrous effect it has on its viewers. ...I am adamant when I insist that commercials destroy a film, that advertising is a new type of cataclysm, like the lava that destroyed Pompei, perhaps more dangerous than the atomic bomb itself. It destroys a human being’s intellectual integrity, just like the new cinema that comes from across the Atlantic.

CC: There’s something disloyal about your behavior toward television; television pays you, or finances your films, and you slaughter it, a bit like Goya did to Philip IV and his family.

FF: It’s not like that. Television finances my films, or co-finances hem, in an attempt to salvage its soul. It would like to give proofs of its intelligence, its liberty, its tolerance.

CC: But you are not tolerant on your part.

FF: Yes, of course. The hotel in which part of the action of Ginger and Fred takes place overflows with television, ever ready to ambush the characters. The whole film is constellated with televisions spewing out commercials, talk shows, gossip about gossip, to the point of bewilderment and stupefaction. At the climactic moment of the film, when Ginger and Fred are on the point of making their entrance to do their number, there is an explosion of commercials. For me, the most fascinating aspect of television is the implacability with which it can scrutinize a human face, and implicate millions and millions of viewers in this disturbing and brutal process. Television fastens on, spies on, transfixes a face in a way that is shameless, Cynical, sadistic, fierce. It’s something that no other medium can achieve: neither cinema, nor theater, nor photography. Only a great writer could perhaps achieve it, but only indirectly, through the medium of literature. Television falls upon a face like an implacable probe, like an X-ray, a laser. If I watch television, it is because of this terrifying power it has.

CC: In reality television has granted you a kind of “License to kill,” which in Ginger and Fred and Intervista you use freely and to the full, with rage, disdain and fury. Are you satisfied with Ginger and Fred? How do you place this film in the sphere of your filmography? Of all the films you have now made, which do you prefer?

FF: It’s difficult for me to say, especially because I hardly ever watch my films again. Every film corresponds to a precise moment, both objectively and subjectively. Personally, disregarding the approval they have obtained, trying to be passionate and detached at the same time, I would put 8½ first, then La Dolce Vita, Amarcord, and Ginger and Fred. Ginger and Fred represents me as I am today.

Federico Fellini His Life and Work, Tullio Kezigh, Faber & Faber Inc, NY 2002

Adding it all up then Ginger e Fred is Fellini’s twenty-second movie.

The title refers to Ginger Rogers (née Virginia Katherine McMath) and Fred Astaire (really Frederic Austerlitz), born in Omaha, Nebraska. They were the most famous dancing couple in American movies, and between 1933 and 1949 made ten musicals together, including Roberta, Top Hat, and Swing Time. The names Ginger and Fred are the ironic monikers assumed by the two bedraggled variety-show old-timers, Amelia Bonetti and Pippo Botticella (played by Giulietta Masina and Marcello Mastroianni respectively), who reunite after many years to dance on the television program Ed ecco a voi (Here’s to You).

Masina had made six movies with her husband, but they hadn’t worked together since Giulietta degli spiriti in 1965. Marcello had long been the director’s alter ego as the protagonist of La dolce vita, 8 ½, and La città delle donne. Masina and Mastroianni have connections beyond the director as well. Like Amelia and Pippo, they first acted together back at the university theater....

In some interviews, the director defined Ginger e Fred as “La dolce vita for the eighties,” but on other occasions he tried to downplay it and called it “a little movie.”...

From the start, people predict that Ginger e Fred will be the anti-television movie, and in a sense that’s true.... Fellini’s opinion on this matter [mainstream television and Silvio Berlusconi] is recorded in a brusque and uncharacteristic editorial in L’Europeo (December 7, 1985): “Television like that doesn’t deserve to survive.” He’s referring to privately held networks, a phenomenon that had taken off in Italy towards the end of the 1970s and proliferated wildly without restraint. Obviously, showing hundreds of movies for free each week on thousands of local stations is driving an enormous number of viewers out of movie theaters; and it’s understandable that a man of cinema like Fellini would be opposed. But what he finds most offensive—to the point of initiating legal suits to protect his copyrights—are the insane commercial interruptions inserted into the films.

“The continuous interruption of films shown on private networks are an outrage; it not only hurts the director and his work,
but the spectator as well, who becomes accustomed to this hiccapping, stuttering language, and the suspension of mental activity, to a repeated blood clot in the flow of his attention that ends up turning the spectator into an impatient idiot, unable to concentrate, reflect, make intelligent connections, look ahead; he loses the sense of musicality, harmony, and balance that are integral to storytelling. This disruption of syntax can only serve to create a race of illiterates on an epic scale.

...On January 13, 1986, Ginger e Fred opens in Paris with a gala reception in the Palais de Chaillot for Giulietta and Marcello. The French newspapers are almost unanimous that the old Fellini is back, and they are so enthusiastic that he is forgiven for skipping the gala (he was overcome by one of his sudden and uncontrollable urges to avoid ceremony). The Italians pay tribute to the film with a preview and gala at the Sistina in Rome on January 21, with lots of VIPs, live network coverage, and much applause. For the first time ever, the Italian press is unanimous in their praise. The reviews are also fantastic in the United States....

The whole movie, including the title, seems elegiac and nostalgic, a contrast to the brutality of the trash, neglect, and rampant rudeness of the contemporary universe. But let’s not forget that in the mid-thirties, just when Rogers and Astaire were on the silver screen, delivering their magical lessons in elegance, F. Scott Fitzgerald was raging against the vulgarity of the new world and grieving the loss of the grace and vitality of the previous decade. Nostalgia is a trap of age, and even though he surrenders to it just enough, Fellini also shows that he’s keyed into it. The director’s eye on Rome in the 1980s is the eye of a man who first discovered it when it was a less rough affair, whereas the imagery of Ginger e Fred could perfectly illustrate Pasolini’s last tracts against Rome, before he was murdered—long before he could grow old and nostalgic—on the outskirts of the metropolis. Amelia in the beginning of the film, trying to feel her way through a world that doesn’t belong to her, is a self-portrait of Fellini: shy, curious, vulnerable, impatient, angry, determined. The white-haired dancer, Pippo, on the other hand, represents the director’s most conciliatory qualities: lucidity, self-irony, and tolerance. Through a perfectly calibrated spectrum of emotions, the movie arrives at a fusion of Ginger and Fred—a symbiosis we can call Federico—and then adds a woman’s pragmatism and propriety, coupled with her partner’s buffoonery and refusal to be a tragic character. The two dancers are utterly different, at least as different as Giulietta and Marcello were in real life, but they find common ground in a faint romanticism, full of modesty, dignity, and loyalty. They are both trying unconsciously and in a modern, secular way to keep their eyes open, even though reality can be unpleasant....

Ginger and Fred allow themselves to be sucked into the flattery of this performance teetering on self-mockery, but once the show’s over, they have the pride of knowing that they made it and are even asked for an autograph. It would seem that Fellini thinks it’s better not to miss the opportunities that life in all its singularity offers, after all. Before shutting oneself up in desperation, it’s better to dance again, roll out the pranks, even if we have lived our lives like movies that we didn’t understand (Ginger never realized the intensity of Fred’s love) or watched them pass like a meaningless dream. The stoic message of Ginger e Fred is that perhaps there’s nothing to understand; we just have to live. You have to learn to float the way Marcello did in La dolce vita...even though the waters are slowly flowing into the River Styx like Mastorna—the film that was never made.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:
Apr 20 Michael Mann, Collateral 2004

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