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ALTHOUGH IT WAS MADE FORTY YEARS ago, La Dolce Vita remains a very contemporary film.

Directed by Federico Fellini at the height of his creative powers, it offers an extraordinary panorama of aspects of Roman life at the very moment when Italy was shedding its rural past and becoming a turbulent industrial society. Such is the stylistic appeal of the film that images and scenes from it continue to be copied and re-cycled in magazine articles, fashion spreads and advertisements. The film's louche image, symbolized by the sharply-dressed and sunglasses-wearing decadents Marcello Mastroianni and Anouk Aimée, is widely used in reportages on nightlife, club land, and pop music promotion. The film brought to light the phenomenon of the unlicensed celebrity photographer (who from then on became known the world over by the name of one of the film's characters, Paparazzo). It gave a commercial boost to Italy's hitherto underdeveloped fashion industry and it fuelled a wave of tourism to the Italian capital which continues to this day. At the time of its 1960 release, the film gave rise to a fashion for roll-neck sweaters (an item still known in Italy as a dolcevita). Regularly, at ten year intervals, it is evoked, discussed and its influence assessed. Possibly more than any other film made in Italy since 1945, it has given rise to memoirs, novels, documentaries, accounts, television specials and photographic exhibitions.

Part of La Dolce Vita's appeal derives from the film's complex relationship with the new image of life and society communicated to a mass readership through illustrated magazines like Oggi, L'Europeo, Lo Specchio and the news weekly L'Espresso. These publications did not merely report facts and events; they offered a parallel world made up of movie stars, images of high society, media events and publicity stunts that bore little

obvious relation to everyday life. The film shows a sequence of tenuously-linked set piece scenes which include the arrival at Ciampino airport of an American movie star, nightclubs, parties in the palaces of the Roman aristocracy, celebrity-chasing photo reporters, nightriders in open-topped sports cars, encounters with prostitutes and an orgy. These moments are interspersed with others of a somewhat different nature: the journey over Rome of a helicopter from which hangs a large wooden statue of Christ, the media circus surrounding the apparent appearance of the Madonna to two children, meaningful discussion in an intellectual salon, a trip to the seaside. Through all this, the aspirant writer turned-gossip-columnist Marcello Rubini (Mastroianni) weaves his course, alternating frivolity and debauchery with moments of melancholy and reflection. He escorts the stars, hangs out in nightclubs, liaises with photographers and chases women, but he also argues with a highly-strung lover who waits for him at home and discusses philosophical questions with Steiner (the wealthy intellectual whose pessimism leads him to commit suicide after killing his two small children). In two moving scenes, Marcello is briefly offered alternatives to his empty life in a meeting with his father and in a chance encounter with an innocent young girl who waits at tables in a seafront café.

Initially Fellini had planned to make a rather different sort of film. He intended to follow up his darkly humorous analysis of the limitations of provincial life, *I Vitelloni*, by looking at the career in the capital of Moraldo, the one member of the quartet of lower middle-class young men featured in the film who actually manages to leave his home town. The director wanted to situate Moraldo in the bohemian milieu of Rome's Via Veneto, which in the early 1950s was the regular evening gathering point of journalists and literati. But Fellini and his collaborators, Ennio Flaiano and Brunello Rondi, soon realised that the Rome they had intended to depict had been replaced by another city, more brash and cosmopolitan. By the later 1950s, the night spots of the Via Veneto were no longer solely the haunts of writers who had migrated from the provinces; they were the pleasure grounds of Italy's booming film industry and of the many American actors and actresses who came to work and play in Hollywood on the Tiber. Instead of the bicycles that, following Vittorio De Sica's classic neo-realist film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), symbolized the aspirations of the city's working-class, outsize American automobiles signaled the wealth of the fortunate few. As Rome became the leading European center

for American location films, so a sizeable movie colony sprang up that included both former stars at the end of their careers like Laurel and Hardy and established names such as Kirk Douglas, Deborah Kerr and Ava Gardner. Thanks to the stars, Rome became once again an outpost of international café society, a gathering point of exiled foreign royalty, speculators, playboys, socialites and artists.

During this period Italy entered a new phase of growth and change. No longer the predominantly agricultural and primitively industrial country that had emerged from the Second World War, it was rapidly developing into an industrial society with a profile of its own. Although few Italians could yet afford cars, Vespa and Lambretta scooters began to be seen on the streets, radios entered working-class homes and television broadcasts spread what would become a new common culture. In increasing numbers, peasants abandoned rural areas to seek a better life in the cities, young people embraced a culture fashioned by foreign-inspired sounds and fashions, and the values of consumerism came to be widely accepted. Although it would only be in the mid-1970s that the vast majority of households would possess a television set, a washing machine and a refrigerator, aspirations for these goods were forged earlier. The economic dynamism of the 1950s was evident in many ways, in the extraordinary boom of the building industry, in mass production, in the expansion of the mass media, in the transformations in family life.

As part of these changes, the celebrity phenomenon expanded greatly. Unprotected by the studios that in their heyday had been able to control completely the flow of news about their properties, foreign stars found themselves at the mercy of opportunist photographers who snapped them off-duty and sold the results to the scandal sheets. Their antics were a source of endless fascination to Italians who read about them and watched them in magazines and newsreels. Celebrities offered a larger-than-life version of the consumer lifestyle. Their hedonism, conspicuous consumption, leisure, mobility and child-like freedom from everyday constraints made them a focus for the dreams and aspirations of ordinary people. The implications of this were never fully grasped by Italy's elites. While religious spokesmen and the political left expressed grave concern about the consequences of the rapid decline of the countryside and the development of an American-style neo-capitalism, the ruling Christian Democrats complacently assumed that new values and cultures would dovetail easily with traditional ones to reinforce the

existing social hierarchy. In a series of ways, *La Dolce Vita* demonstrated that this was a vain hope.

Fellini always claimed that he was not a moralist, and had no intention of judging the new society that was emerging in Italy or even the particular fauna that he depicted. This is plausible in that the film does portray the seductive fascination of the café society as well as its intrinsic vacuity. Indeed, the long term impact of the film has mainly been in the area of style. But there seems little doubt that he wanted to say something critical about the change of culture that was occurring. If he was not moralistic then he was at least satirical. As in previous films, such as his first work *Luci del varietà* (*Variety Lights*), which dealt with the decline of travelling theatre companies displaced by cinemas, and *Lo Sciecco bianco* (*The White Sheik*), which explored the artificial world of the photo-romance magazines, he viewed the big city as an outsider. Like his character Moraldo, Fellini was a provincial who had migrated from the seaside town of Rimini to Rome. Despite his international successes (he won an Oscar for *La Strada* in 1955), Fellini frequently returned for inspiration to the experiences of his youth and the particular mentality and atmospheres of his hometown. *La Dolce Vita* presented a stark contrast between figures, behavior models and values belonging to an old world, which generally were endowed with a positive connotation, and those representative of a new world that had lost its soul. The use of black- and-white photography, several years after the first Italian color film, underscored this dichotomy.

Within Italy, the film was a watershed; marking a shift in what could be represented, and it heralded the replacement of the neo-realist aesthetic by a focus on the ephemeral and the superficial. For perhaps the first time in post-war Italian cinema, style triumphed over substance. For this reason the film was deplored by Roberto Rossellini, the father of Italy's post-war cinema and the director of *Rome Open City*, the influential 1945 film on which the young Fellini had collaborated.

Although Fellini had successfully lobbied to avoid any censorship of his film, *La Dolce Vita* was intensely controversial from the moment of its release. While some welcomed its exploration of the negative side of the economic boom, others, including conservative opinion leaders and the Catholic Church, denounced it as the work of a Communist. While the Rome première on February 4th, 1960, passed off peacefully, the

Milan première the following day was marked by a very different atmosphere. One irate spectator spat in the director's face; others accused him of being a clown and of having dragged Italy's good name through the mud. The depiction of a picturesque whirlwind of decadence and frivolity which implied that society was on the point of irredeemable degeneration led to questions in parliament and to calls for the film's immediate withdrawal. *La Dolce Vita* was attacked as immoral and subversive, and branded as a mock-trial that aimed to condemn Italian society as a whole and the capital in particular. Aristocrats who had taken part in the film found themselves ostracized by their peers, while those clerics who had initially seen it as a useful moral reflection were swiftly brought into line. The establishment was not united but a majority closed ranks against the film.

The controversy raged for weeks and turned *La Dolce Vita* into a social and cultural event. Although uncommonly high ticket prices were charged to see the nearly three-hour long-film, it proved a huge success. It broke all box office records, easily outclassing its main rival, Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*. It not only did exceptional business immediately after its release but was still making money five years later. The film scandalized well-to-do conservative audiences but intrigued people in the provinces and the south. An amusing example of this occurs in Pietro Germi's *Divorce Italian Style*, a comedy of manners set in Sicily which also starred Mastroianni. In one scene a group of men is seen in church looking up at the priest who is fulminating against the immorality of *La Dolce Vita*. In the next they are all seen gawping at a screen on which the film is being shown.

The film held up a mirror to the nation, offering a rare opportunity for a collective reflection on the state of society. But it was also a spectacle that appealed as entertainment, and employed a theme new to Italian cinema: eroticism. The film used far fewer well-known stars than Fellini had intended. Originally, Maurice Chevalier, Henry Fonda and veteran Oscar winner Luise Rainer were given roles, but the difficulty in securing adequate finance delayed shooting and made the participation of the former two impossible. Dino De Laurentiis, a prospective producer before the role finally fell to the Milan publisher Angelo Rizzoli, wanted the lead role to be offered to Paul Newman but Fellini insisted on Mastroianni. Although the film turned him into an international sex

symbol, Mastroianni was in fact chosen because he was familiar and reliable, a respectable and unexciting everyman with whom spectators could easily identify. His cordial and unexceptional features were the ideal vehicle for transporting audiences on a journey through a world of temptation and corruption. He was supported by a varied female cast including the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg, Anouk Aimée, Yvonne Fourneaux and Nadia Gray. Much of the film is permeated with sexual tension but two scenes in particular came to symbolize its daring novelty. The first comes early in the film when the voluptuous Ekberg, playing a visiting Hollywood star, decides to take a night-time dip in the Trevi fountain. Mastroianni, the press agent who is detailed to follow her, watches in amazement as the statuesque actress parades through the waters like a goddess. When he finally responds to an invitation to join her, he does not touch her but holds himself back, fearful that he will be lost if he succumbs fully to the fascination of a woman symbolizing a new world of consumption, ease and uninhibited behavior. With her child-like curiosity, irrepressible spirit and extraordinary physical presence, Ekberg transfixed Italians and added an important fantasy element to the film.

The film's second signature scene was less influential in the long term, but it contributed more than any other single factor to its *succès de scandale*. This was the 'orgy scene' towards the end of Mastroianni's progressive absorption into a decadent and inauthentic way of living. In the company of a heterogeneous band of aristocrats, foreign exiles, entertainers and homosexuals looking for something new to awaken their jaded appetites after a night of revelry, he breaks into a villa where an impromptu party is staged. The proceedings are enlivened by the striptease of an exhibitionist American, played by Nadia Gray. The scene is mild indeed by the standards of the 1990s, but in 1960 it carried a powerful charge of transgression. It was also seen as central to the alleged denunciation by Fellini of the corrupt indolence of the rich and powerful. In the film's final scene, the motley gathering, now transferred to the nearby beach, watch in amazement as a dead sea monster is hauled ashore. Many observers saw the rotting flesh of this creature as a metaphor for the putrefaction of a society on the point of collapse. At the end of the film, Mastroianni is seen dismissing with a careless wave the innocent girl from the seafront café. Despite a shouted invitation to join her, he cannot hear her words above the sound of the waves. Finally corrupted beyond redemption, he prefers the

company of the debauched and the damned.

Both the Trevi fountain scene and the 'orgy' provide examples of the way Fellini and his collaborators weaved reinterpretations of real events into the narrative of *La Dolce Vita*. Ekberg was required merely to act as herself. She had arrived in Rome in 1958 to make *War and Peace* and had immediately become a favorite of the illustrated weeklies. Her wedding to the British actor Anthony Steel in Florence received almost as much coverage as the marriage of Tyrone Power and Linda Christian in 1949. She had also been photographed in the Trevi fountain. The orgy was modeled on the strip performed by the Turkish dancer Aiche Nana at Rome's Rugantino nightclub in November 1958. What had originally been a rather sedate party had suddenly taken a bohemian turn when the ubiquitous Ekberg had cast off her shoes to dance. Nana took things several steps further and, as the women present mostly withdrew, she contorted to the jazz rhythms of the band in front of an audience that included several well-known young members of the aristocracy. Before the police intervened, Tazio Secchiaroli, the photographer on whom the character of Paparazzo was based, recorded the event in a series of images that appeared -- complete with strategic black strips to obscure the identity of those present and partially conceal Nana's nudity -- in the political weekly *l'Espresso*. The publication of these pictures caused an outcry and the magazine was impounded as an obscene publication.

Although both of these key episodes in the film actually occurred, they were in fact examples of what Daniel Boorstin, in his 1962 book *The Image* called 'pseudo-events'. They were manipulated from an office on the Via Veneto, where the press agent Enrico Lucherini devised a series of stunts to publicize new films. These included Ekberg's dip in the fountain and events that mimicked aspects of the Rugantino scandal. Between them, Lucherini and photographers like Secchiaroli created the sensational image of Roman life that were Fellini's inspiration and fuelled Rome's reputation as a center for style, sex and scandal to which the film greatly contributed.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of the film's triumph as image was the utter disjunction of this from any critical judgment, moral or otherwise. In the promotional materials for the United States, exhibitors were encouraged to persuade local stores to use the idea of 'the sweet life' to sell chocolates, air fresheners or Italian products. Any satirical element

completely disappeared.

Long before the term 'Felliniesque' entered the English language, *La Dolce Vita* became a seductive cliché. Among foreign authors who set their work in a Rome reminiscent of Fellini's film was Tennessee Williams whose novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* was made into a movie starring Warren Beatty. Irwin Shaw's *Two Weeks in Another Town* was filmed there, with Kirk Douglas as an American film star in decline, while Muriel Spark wrote of a rising British actress in *The Public Image*, which for good measure also included an orgy. Among the many original films which traded on Italy's appeal to film audiences after *La Dolce Vita* was John Schlesinger's *Darling*, in which Julie Christie abandons a comfortable existence in London with Dirk Bogarde for an ultimately unhappy life in Italy that includes a brief marriage to an ageing aristocrat.

The success of *La Dolce Vita* at home and abroad heralded the end of the Via Veneto's popularity with movie stars, the aristocracy and the international rich. The celebrities fled as tourists flocked to the road in droves, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous and perhaps even receive an invitation to an orgy. But the city's louche reputation continued to be perpetuated by occasional events such as the scandalous affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton during the filming of *Cleopatra* in Rome in 1965. As the 1960s began to swing and youth emerged as a distinct cultural category, Rome was replaced as the leading center of fashion by London. Yet the Italian capital's appeal was never entirely eclipsed. Vespas, sharp suits and sunglasses all became a part of the British Mod look.

For two centuries, Italy had offered well-off foreign travellers a taste of excitement, mixing wonderment at the glories of its ancient civilization and artistic heritage with the ambiguous attractions of its more primitive passions. After *La Dolce Vita* the country was widely seen as a forerunner of the permissive society. In reality, however, Italian society continued to be closed and intolerant. Prior to the divorce referendum of 1974, which signaled an historic defeat for clerical conservatism, films were frequently censored and magazines seized. Artists and journalists were regularly tried on charges of outraging public decency. But, partly via Fellini, the country had acquired a sexy new image that refurbished its old glamour in the eyes of outsiders and definitively replaced both the residual memories of Fascism and the social and political concerns of the

immediate postwar years.

ADDED MATERIAL

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Barflies: Marcello Mastroianni and Anouk Aimée (in sunglasses) play the Roman decadents whose pleasure-seeking antics received acclaim and furious criticism.

Born to buzz: the Italian-made scooter, the Vespa, popularized in the film, became the post-war badge of freedom and mobility for Roman youth.

High jinks: Roman students live it up, 1963. *La Dolce Vita* both symbolized and coincided with Italy's escape from postwar austerity and gloom into prosperity.

Life is sweet: a garish poster for Fellini's louche masterpiece clearly conveys the film's atmosphere of frenetic partying.

Café-culture: these pictures of real-life jet-setters on the Via Veneto show how closely Fellini's film reflected reality.

Paparazzi: A photographer featured in the film lent his name to the modern phenomenon of the society snappers who stop at nothing to get the right picture.

Heavens above: Fellini's flippant treatment of religion, reflected in this shot, explains widespread Catholic hostility to his 'amoral' film.

Water nymph: screen goddess Anita Ekberg tempts Mastroianni to join her for a frolic in Rome's Trevi fountain, in one of the film's most famous sexy scenes.

Washed up: some of the film's key scenes take place on the beach, a symbol of the shallow hedonism of its characters.

FOR FURTHER READING:

John Baxter, *Fellini* (Fourth Estate, London, 1993); Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Penguin, London, 1962); Robin Buss, *Italian Films*, (Batsford, London, 1989); Tullion Kezich, *Il dolce cinema: Fellini e gli altri* (Bompiani, Milan, 1960); Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present*. (University of California Press, 1984).