

From *Movie Reviews* – The New York Times

Fellini Film Lives Up to Foreign Hurrahs

By Bosley Crowther

April 20, 1961

FEDERICO FELLINI'S "La Dolce Vita" ("The Sweet Life"), which has been a tremendous hit abroad since its initial presentation in Rome early last year, finally got to its American premiere at Henry Miller's Theatre last night and proved to deserve all the hurrahs and the impressive honors it has received. For this sensational representation of certain aspects of life in contemporary Rome, as revealed in the clamorous experience of a free-wheeling newspaper man, is a brilliantly graphic estimation of a whole swath of society in sad decay and, eventually, a withering commentary upon the tragedy of the over-civilized. The critic is faced with a dilemma in attempting to assess and convey all the weird observations and intimations that abound in this titanic film. For Signor Fellini is nothing if not fertile, fierce and urbane in calculating the social scene around him and packing it onto the screen. He has an uncanny eye for finding the offbeat and grotesque incident, the gross and bizarre occurrence that exposes a glaring irony. He has, too, a splendid sense of balance and a deliciously sardonic wit that not only guided his cameras but also affected the writing of his script. As a consequence there are scores of piercing ideas that pop out in the picture's nigh three hours and leave one shocked, amused, revolted and possibly stunned and bewildered at the end. Perhaps the best way to give the reader a hint as to the flavor of this work is to describe its amazing beginning. A helicopter is seen flying toward Rome with an uncertain object dangling beneath it by a rope. As the machine comes closer, we see the object is a statue of Jesus, arms outstretched as if in blessing, a sweet, sad expression on its face. Casually, the whirring "chopper" flies past an ancient aqueduct, the modern machine and its strange burden looking incongruous against the ruin. On it goes past piles of buildings, the ugly post-war apartment houses on the fringe of Rome and over the heads of a bevy of voluptuous females sunbathing in Bikinis on a penthouse roof. Then alongside it comes a second helicopter bearing our young newspaper man and his persistent photographer recording the bizarre scene. Here is the flavor of the picture and, in a fast glimpse, its theme. Dignity is transmuted into the sensational. Old values, old disciplines are discarded for the modern, the synthetic, the quick by a society that is past sophistication and is sated with pleasure and itself. All of its straining for sensations is exploited for the picture magazines and the scandal sheets that merchandise excitement and vicarious thrills for the mob. This is Signor Fellini's comment, not put into words, of course, but fully illuminated in his accumulation of startling episodes. It is clear in the crazy experience of his questing newspaper man (played brilliantly by Marcello Mastroianni) with a visiting Hollywood movie star (enacted by Anita Ekberg with surprising personality and punch.) It comes through with devastating impact in an episode wherein two frightened kids are used to whip up a religious rally for the benefit of television. It is implicit in the contact of the hero with a strange and motley mob of jaded aristocrats and worldlings at an all-night party in a palace outside Rome. It finally comes home to the hero (at least we think it does) when he sees

his own pack of voracious photographers trying to make a sensation of the suicide of his most respected friend (Alain Cuny) for whom the "sweet life" becomes too grim. And it is evident in unmistakable symbols at a mammoth orgy the hero attends with a gang of depraved sensation seekers who face their loneliness and emptiness in the dawn. Possibly Signor Fellini has rambled a bit in his film. Possibly he has strained logic and exaggerated somewhat here and there. (He has a character say "The public demands exaggeration," which does support the theme.) In sum, it is an awesome picture, licentious in content but moral and vastly sophisticated in its attitude and what it says. An excellent cast performs it. In addition to those named above, Yvonne Furneaux as the hero's mistress, Anouk Aimee as a nymphomaniac, Annibale Ninchi as the hero's father and Magali Noel as a night-club chorus girl make most vivid impressions in a stupendous cast. An all-purpose musical melody, as persistent and haunting as the memorable "Third Man" theme, is aptly played in the right places. The use of multilingual dialogue (the French and Italian translated with English subtitles) makes the yakkity-yak really sound like Rome. If the subtitles are insufficient, the picture itself speaks louder than any words.