

## Art Cinema: *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969)

### Introduction

So far the discussion of the representation of antiquity in cinema has focussed on popular, commercial films. However, there is another genre of film practice that is equally interested in antiquity. This is the genre of 'art films'. As we shall see, the self-consciously distinctive nature of these films makes it difficult to define what constitutes an 'art film'. Part of the problem with definition is that it is easier to recognise what these films are not (i.e. widely-distributed, industry-driven products with a broad appeal) than identify the constituent elements that unify them. People tend to know one when they see it, but drawing up a list of criteria to define what constitutes an 'art film' is practically impossible. Some films have large budgets involving multiple personnel, others are made on the most meagre of resources using only a few staff. Some prove widely popular with audiences, others are only beloved by a select group of critics. Even the terminology proves difficult. Some dislike using the term 'art film' in a broad sense preferring to restrict its use to only high-culture films from the early part of the twentieth century, the films for which the term 'art film' was coined. Some prefer to use a designation that stresses place of production ('European cinema'), others stress the place of reception or the mode of distribution ('arthouse' or 'indie' films), still others prefer to characterise them by the intellectual movements to which the films seem affiliated ('modernist' or 'avant-garde' cinema).

One of the few common elements in the 'art film' is the strong presence of an 'auteur' (French: 'author') whose vision dominates the final product. Underpinning the notion of auteurist cinema is the idea of film as the projection of a particular and unique personality, a personality who is free to act without (e.g. commercial, moral) restraints. Although, even this is not always straightforward. On the one hand, in theory, every film has an 'auteur' in the form of its director. On the other hand, almost no film is just the product of one man. Even the most dictatorial directors find that the ideas and decisions of set-designers, composers, costumiers, casting agents, cameramen, lighting-directors and producers become inevitably incorporated into their films. The long list of credits that come at the end of the film are not an empty ritual, but are a highly-regulated testament that precisely quantifies the wide range of contributions made by members to a finished cinematic product.

## 7. Art Cinema: *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969)

The origins of the intellectual analysis of the role of the auteur and auteurist cinema can be traced to François Truffaut's famous essay 'On a certain tendency of the French cinema' in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1954. One of Truffaut's aims was to reclaim the title of 'art' for film. The term 'art film' had been around since the earliest days of cinema, and many artists were attracted by the potential of cinema when film first began. However, the rise of large professional studios and the increasing use of generic formulae in popular cinema had debased the notion of cinema as art. In reasserting cinema's claim to art, Truffaut stressed the contribution of the director's personal style as being crucial for the appreciation of the film. The rest of the personnel, most notably the scriptwriter, thus became completely secondary. Criticism should centre around the director's distinctive style. In such a scenario, film becomes a particularly personal expression and the cultivation of personal style is the implicit aim of the director's art.

Such analysis prompts two questions. First, how does one create a sense of personal style? The answer to this lies in the various cinematic techniques available to the director to make the film distinctive from other cinematic products. For example, this could include such elements as a predilection for a certain type of shot such as extended tracking shots or extreme close-ups. Alternatively, it can be through the use of recurrent thematic motifs or a preference for certain types of narratives, especially non-linear narratives. Even certain types of production techniques (e.g. the use of improvisation) can contribute to making the film distinctive. Whatever technique is used, the aim of the director, if they want their film to be regarded as art, is to distinguish it using such techniques from mainstream fodder.

The second question concerns how such a style should be assessed and is much more difficult. It requires analysis not only of how a film distances itself from other similar treatments, but also how the film fits within a particular director's oeuvre. In the case of the representation of the ancient world, this means that films should not only be analysed against other depictions of Greece and Rome, but also located within a body of work in which the depiction of the classical world may rarely feature.

Superficially, the economic position of art cinema looks bleak. By their very nature, unique and idiosyncratic films tend to be less popular than industry-made commercial fare. They inevitably take more risks and with risk comes a greater chance of failure. Yet, the cultivation of a distinctive style does have certain commercial advantages. Once a certain style is developed it can be used to market a film. Audiences know, on one level, what to expect even if that expectation is to expect the unexpected. Most art cinema directors would shudder at the notion that they represent a brand. Yet, as we shall see in the case of *Fellini-Satyricon*, the director's name was an important part of the marketing of the film and ensuring its production and distribution.

The term 'art cinema' was first coined to describe films of stage production and adaptations of literary works. Although the genre has expanded to include a much wider range of films, work that adapts or derives inspiration from literary texts still constitutes a significant strand in 'art films'. This has important consequences for the representation of antiquity because the intellectual sophistication and consequent high prestige attached to classical texts has ensured that they have regularly been the subject of cinematic reworking.

We can see this process most clearly in relation to Greek tragedy. Over fifty films take one of the Greek tragedies as their starting point. Sometimes these films employ a relatively straightforward theatrical aesthetic in their cinematic versions of the tragedy. A good example of such a film is Jean Prat's *Les Perses* (1961), a film adaption of Aeschylus' play, *The Persians*, produced for the French national television broadcaster. The film is characterised by the 'staginess' of the production. The set is modelled on a Persian palace, but the broad balconies and ramps mimic a stage-set. Even the traditional three doors of the classical stage are preserved in the set. Adding to the sense of theatre, the characters wore masks and the camera shots largely imitated natural viewing patterns. The production stuck reasonably faithfully to the original script and was well received by critics. Particularly popular were the chorus of Persian noblemen whose masks were derived from Achaemenid art. The soundtrack by Jean Prodromidès went on to become one of the best sellers of the year.

In contrast, other directors prefer to take a more interventionist approach to their versions of Greek tragedy, ensuring that they firmly leave their stamp on the work. One of the most intense engagements with Greek tragedy can be found in the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). Novelist, poet, and filmmaker, Pasolini exerted tremendous influence over Italian avant-garde culture from the 1950s until the time of his murder seemingly at the hands of a hustler in 1975. One of the central themes in his cinematic works was a desire to engage with the central texts of western culture. He directed films based on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, the *Gospel of Matthew*, and the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. It was natural that Greek tragedy should also come within his view. Pasolini produced two works based on tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* (Italian title: *Edipo Re*, 1967) and *Medea* (1969) along with a documentary about preparations for a cinematic version of the Oresteia set in Africa, *Notes for an African Orestes* (*Appunti per un' Orestide africana*, 1970). Both of Pasolini's tragedies are distinguished by the incorporation of a large amount of extra-textual material (particularly scenes from the mythic history of the characters prior to the events depicted in the tragedy) as well as a free approach to the text. *Oedipus Rex* (1967) includes material from both of Sophocles' Oedipus plays – *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In both

*Oedipus Rex* and *Medea*, the sources of Pasolini's inspiration range widely. The sets evoke North Africa as much as Greece. The costumes are influenced by African, Papua New Guinean, and Georgian tribal designs. The soundtrack includes elements of Romanian, Georgian, and Japanese music.

A mid-position between these two extremes is presented by directors who remain faithful to the original play, but blend new elements and cinematic techniques so that they produce unique cinematic versions of the original tragedy. The Greek director Michael Cacoyannis' (1922-2011) three films based on Euripidean tragedies (*Electra*, 1962; *Trojan Women*, 1971; and *Iphigenia*, 1977) capture this approach. Assisted by the Greek government as a method of boosting tourism, these films were tremendously popular. In producing the film, the crew enjoyed unique access to important sites. *Electra*, for example, is shot in the ruins of the Bronze Age citadel of Mycenae. They had distinguished casts. *Trojan Women* stars Irene Papas, Katharine Hepburn, and Vanessa Redgrave. They also enjoyed critical success. Both *Electra* and *Iphigenia* were nominated for Oscars for 'Best Foreign Language' film as well as winning numerous international film awards.

The adaption of classical texts is not the only way the ancient world has impacted on 'art cinema'. Other aspects of classical culture, most notably mythic narratives have also been very influential. The archetypal status of Greek myths has seen many directors drawn to them for inspiration. For example, the important French avant-garde director, Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) produced a trilogy of black-and-white films based around the Orpheus myth.

The first film in the sequence is *The Blood of a Poet* (French title: *Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930) which takes the form of loosely-connected surreal sequences. The film opens with a bewigged artist drawing a face on a canvas only to see the mouth start to move. Alarmed, he rubs out the mouth only to discover that the mouth transfers itself to his hand. In desperation, he wipes his hand on a statue which transfers the mouth to the statue and allows it to speak. The statue, an imitation of the Venus de Milo, instructs the artist to leap through a mirror in the wall, which transports the artist to a long corridor full of locked doors. Looking through the keyholes, the artist sees a series of bizarre scenes including a slow-motion execution of a Mexican, the flagellation of a child covered in brass bells, and a striptease performed by a disembodied hermaphrodite reclining on a chaise-lounge. Suddenly a hand appears and gives the artist a revolver and commands that he shoot himself. This he does, but the bullet does not kill him, it just transforms him into a blood-splattered classical poet. The artist then turns around and returns through the mirror to confront the speaking statue. Grabbing a hammer, he smashes it to pieces causing a cloud of fine plaster dust to rise up. The dust transforms into a snow-filled scene and we find ourselves observing a snowball fight between children. As the fighting continues, it becomes

increasingly more violent. One boy's leg is broken. Another is strangled by a scarf. Finally, one boy throws a snowball of such solidity that it knocks one of the boys unconscious. Terrified, the children scatter, leaving the boy to bleed to death in the snow. The last scene of the film involves a card game being played over the corpse of the boy while an audience applauds from opera boxes above. Finally one of the card-players pulls out a gun and shoots himself dead. His female companion walks away from the table leaving his body in a pool of blood.

As one can see from this synopsis, this film is no straightforward retelling of the Orpheus tale. Instead, it chooses to adopt motifs drawn from the mythic story of Orpheus to tell its tale of a poet and his relationship with his work. For example, the journey through the mirror represents a descent into the Underworld. This particular motif proved popular with critics and Cocteau reprised it in his second Orpheus film, *Orphée* (1950). This second film, while set in contemporary Paris and including a number of experimental elements was designed to be more recognisably based on the myth of Orpheus and his attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice from Hades. *Orphée* told the story of a poet whose beloved is killed by the chauffeur of a princess (representing Death) and who journeys into a dreamscape to retrieve her. In the final film in the sequence, *Testament of Orpheus* (1959), Cocteau returns to the more avant-garde aspects of *Blood of a Poet* to give an account of poetic inspiration. Featuring a cast of well-known figures such as Pablo Picasso and Yul Brynner, this film shows a poet travelling through a series of landscapes in pursuit of poetic truth.

Cocteau's trilogy demonstrates that even when a single director confronts the same sets of issues in a series of films, his versions will often vary dramatically in terms of form, style, and content. It is easy to spot the differences in approach in Cocteau's three films. Despite their common origins in the myth of Orpheus, scenes from one film do not easily transpose themselves into another. They share a common sensibility and approach to filmmaking, but are independent products. For such reasons, it is difficult to generalise about art film as a genre. Each film needs to be taken on its own merits and be seen as a unique product.

### Background to case study

On 10 August 1968, the *New York Times* published an announcement about the next project by the celebrated Italian director, Federico Fellini (1920-1993). The film would be an adaptation of Petronius' *Satyricon* and feature 'a vast fresco of comedians old and young portraying the bawdy days of Petronius Arbiter in ancient Rome'.

It is hard to determine precisely what expectations this announcement created for the cinema-going public. Petronius was hardly a household name. In the popular imagination, the figure of Petronius, the emperor

Nero's confidante and so-called 'arbiter of taste', was most closely associated with his appearance in *Quo Vadis* (1951). Leo Genn won plaudits for his portrayal of this disillusioned courtier who finally tires of the corruption of Rome and commits suicide after penning a letter denouncing Nero's depravity and lack of talent. Indeed, Henryk Sienkiewicz's depiction of Petronius in his novel *Quo Vadis* determined the popular understanding of the figure for the twentieth century. In the commendation for the award of Sienkiewicz's Nobel Prize for literature in 1905, the awarding committee singled out his depiction of Petronius for particular praise: 'Sienkiewicz has constructed a psychological picture that gives a strong appearance of truthfulness and is extremely penetrating ... The entire description is perfect in its genre.' Similar praise was handed out by Harry Thurston Peck, Professor of Latin at Columbia, in his influential essay 'Quo Vadis as History' (1898): 'As to the delineation of historical characters, high praise must also be given here. Petronius ... is a picture filled out with plausibility and skill from the slight sketch preserved in Tacitus.'

If most readers of the *Times* would have had only a vague idea about Petronius, they would have been even less familiar with the content of the *Satyricon*, the Latin novel which since the sixteenth century had been attributed to Petronius. The novel exists in a fragmentary state. Both the beginning and the ending are missing. Sometimes we only have a single sentence out of a chapter. The amount that survives represents a small proportion of the complete work (parts of three books out of possibly twenty-four). The over-arching narrative of the work concerns the, often erotic, adventures of the principal narrator Encolpius, in particular his obsession with the boy Giton and his attempt to secure his love against his rival Ascyltos. Along the way, numerous vignettes are sketched out. The most famous among them is the detailed description of the banquet held by the boorish, wealthy freedman, Trimalchio (the so-called *Cena Trimalchionis* 'Dinner of Trimalchio').

Adaptations of the text for American audiences were few. However, Fellini's promise of a humorous offering follows an established trend. Previous popular representations of the text had a propensity to stress the work's eroticised content and its humorous nature. One of the earliest of the twentieth century's comic *Satyricons* was Randolph Carter's *Arms for Venus* (1937), which ran on Broadway and was described by *Variety* as 'an orgy of laughs'. Seven months before the US release of Fellini's *Satyricon*, the *New York Times* in its review of William Arrowsmith's translation of Petronius' text introduced the work to American audiences by describing it as 'a Roman Vaudeville'. Two years after Fellini's film opened, the composer Bruno Maderna's musical version of the *Satyricon* proved a comic hit with audiences.

The cast list that Fellini proposed for his adaptation of the *Satyricon* seemed to confirm this strongly comic vein. Mae West was said to have been signed up to play a part along with Groucho Marx, Jimmy Durante,

and Danny Kaye. *The Beatles* were supposed to have agreed to provide some of the music and also act in a few scenes. A couple of months later Fellini confirmed this cast list and even added a few extra names such as Terence Stamp and Mickey Mouse. These stars would be combined with 'many Italian comedians' to produce a unique version of Petronius' text. Given such casting discussions, it was perhaps understandable that many thought that Fellini's *Satyricon* was destined to be a light-hearted romp. Indeed, this perception lasted right up until the release of the film in the US. The film had its opening in the US at the Little Carnegie Theater on 11 March 1970. In the promotional material for the launch, the film was described as an 'Italian-made comedy-drama'.

In fact, what Fellini produced was a film that was much darker and more challenging than many expected. The change in casting provides a means through which it is possible to trace the changing conception of this project from its initial planning to final delivery. None of the names floated by Fellini in his early interviews about the *Satyricon* ever made it into the film. The accessible popular ballads of the Beatles gave way to the more avant-garde and experimental electronic work of Nino Rota and Andrew Rudin. Sometimes these casting changes were for entirely practical reasons involving the availability of the actors. According to her biography, Mae West (who Fellini had also tried to hire for his *Juliet of the Spirits*) cooled on the idea of involvement in the project when she discovered that the 'erotic witch' (Oenothea/Enotea) that she was being asked to play was a mother. Terence Stamp proved too expensive. However, these changes in personnel also reflect a change in the nature of the project.

At the start of the planning of the film serious consideration was given to making the film a musical. Fellini had earlier toyed with the idea of producing a musical based on the *Satyricon* while still a law student at university in Rome in 1939. The musical was supposed to offer a satire on the rise of fascism in Italy in the 1930s. However, the problem of censorship and fitting the political content of the satire with the text had dissuaded Fellini from proceeding with the musical proposal at the time. He revisited the idea in the initial stages of brainstorming for the film. The idea of a musical also suited one of the sources of the inspiration for the film – Fellini's childhood experiences with sword-and-sandal epics.

Cinematic depictions of the ancient world had exerted an important influence on Fellini. On a number of occasions, Fellini told about the impact of going to see movies featuring ancient Rome with his father. His very first movie was a gladiator epic, which he saw at the age of six at the impressive neo-classical cinema, the Fulgor, in the main street of his hometown in Rimini. The experience stuck in the mind of the young Fellini, eventually reappearing a couple of years after his *Satyricon* as a reworked scene in *Roma* (1972), Fellini's largely autobiographical film about moving as a child from Rimini to Rome. In the scene, the young child is captivated by a black-and-white gladiator film about scandalous events

during the reign of Claudius. The film exerts such an influence on the imagination of the child that when he later hears gossip that the wife of the pharmacist is 'worse than Messalina', he can only imagine her in terms of the wicked empress of the cinematic orgies that he has seen on screen. Another image that had impressed itself upon the director came from his experience of going as a young reporter in the early 1940s to the great Italian film studio of Cinecittà and seeing the extras from one of the numerous historical epics produced in the period. What struck him was the humorous juxtaposition of actors dressed as gladiators and soldiers in togas, helmets, and breastplates sitting around the studio bar drinking fizzy lemonade. The cinematic potential of this blend of mundane modernity and the exoticism of antiquity appealed greatly to the director.

Such biographical information is important because one of Fellini's distinctive characteristics as a filmmaker is the way in which he imports and translates personal experience into cinema. Fellini has always resisted the label that his films are strictly autobiographical. However, it is undeniable that he repeatedly draws on personal memories to create his scenes.

The most clearly autobiographical film by Fellini is *Amarcord* (1973), a film set in the Rimini of Fellini's youth and featuring a coming-of-age story that draws heavily on his own childhood. The title, which means 'I remember' in the local dialect, indicates that this is a very personal reminiscence. Yet this autobiographical sensibility can be seen flowing through Fellini's career from his earliest works. Fellini's first commercial and critical success was his film *I Vitelloni* (1953). The title of the film ('little calves') is slang from Fellini's hometown of Rimini and refers to 'lazy, spoilt, feckless youths'. The movie traces the meanderings of a group of over-indulged friends as they waste their time in an Italian provincial town. Fellini, who was once berated for being a 'vitellone' by an elderly citizen upset at his behaviour, drew heavily on his childhood in Rimini and his experience of the youths of his hometown in constructing the story. Similarly his experience as a filmmaker and journalist have been imported into a number of films, most notably *8½* (1962) and *La Dolce Vita* (1960). The former is a film about a director suffering from 'director's block' as he makes a post-apocalyptic science-fiction film and the latter is the story of a journalist's adventures in Rome's demi-monde.

Given its origins in childhood pastimes and comic juxtapositions, it is understandable that the initial tone of the *Satyricon* should have been light. Of course, Fellini's *Satyricon* was never going to be standard comic fare, but what turned it into a more serious, abstract, and imaginative film was another desire that had been pressing upon the director. This was the idea of creating an alternate world, a complete vision that could mimic the director's dreams. Just as he was about to start production of *Juliet of the Spirits* (*Giulietta degli Spiriti*, 1965), Fellini expressed this desire to make a new kind of film:

Up until now, I've always done stories where the requirements of the plot, or the setting, or the fact that the action is meant to be taking place in the present day, have prevented me from transfiguring everything in the way that I'd like – the furnishing of a room, the face of an actor, the general atmosphere of a scene. That's why, from time to time, I dream of making a film with historical costumes and in color to tell a fable relating solely to the imagination, which would not have any clearly defined intellectual, ethical structure: reality within the imagination (Canby 1984: 15).

This idea of a version of reality that claimed to be historical, but in fact escaped normal conventions and operated outside the bounds of traditional narrative found its fulfilment in the *Satyricon*.

Part of the reason that the *Satyricon* should prove the vehicle for the director's desire to create an entirely fantastic world was Fellini's discovery about the great potential for his imagination that setting a film in ancient Rome would provide. Fellini read widely on the topic and had the advantage of advice from the classicists Luca Canali and Ettore Paratore, the latter one of the leading authorities on Petronius. Yet, what struck him after his enquiries was the incompleteness of our knowledge about the ancient past and the licence that this gave him:

Suddenly, I realize that we don't know one damn thing for sure about Rome thousands of years ago. It is one big *nebuloso*, full of myth, fairy tale, Cecil B. DeMille information. Now I am excited, because I know that the picture will be a trip in the dark, a descent by submarine, a science-fiction, a psychedelic picture! I know that I want no help from books, from archaeology, and I feel better. A voyage into total obscurity! An unknown planet for me to populate! (Burke 1970: 99).

This idea of Fellini's *Satyricon* as a 'science fiction' set not in the future but the past has proved popular with critics. It captures the sense of alienation one feels in watching this film. Whatever past Fellini is showing, it is not one shared by the audience.

This reorientation of Fellini's cinematic project towards 'a trip in the dark' is reflected in the move away from well-known actors in the film's casting. Fellini wanted to start with a blank slate. 'I want people to look at the picture without the help of a star to guide them ... I realize that if I put in some well-known actor, the audience identifies with him and his past roles ... For *Satyricon* I do not even look for actors with strong charisma; just interesting faces', he said in the same interview. In this instance, nothing was to detract from the director's vision.

If the faces weren't to have charisma, that didn't mean that they shouldn't be pretty. A desire for beautiful boys to play the male leads can be traced to early in the film's production. At one of the interviews where Fellini was still talking about casting Mae West, the interviewer noted that a casting call had been made for 'beautiful boys' for the film. A good number turned up, many of them inexperienced at acting with only a sense

of their own good looks making them think that they were suitable for the film. A few were deluding themselves. 'Some of them are so ugly ... Almost as ugly as those who were here when he was casting the freaky ones', whispered one of Fellini's assistants to the reporter who had stumbled into the casting (Shivas 1968: D21).

In the end, no Italian boy proved beautiful enough for the male leads, although a number did make it into roles as extras. Fellini had always tried to mix amateurs and professionals in his films. 'I like actors, but amateurs make things more credible', he declared. For the cast of the *Satyricon*, Fellini recruited local meatworkers, peasants, gypsies, green-grocers, and market gardeners. This preference for amateurs and the unknown continued into the casting of the lead roles. The roles of Encolpio (Encolpius), Ascilto (Ascylltos) and Gitone (Giton) were given to Martin Potter, Hiram Keller and Max Born respectively. Potter was a British actor who, prior to the *Satyricon*, had enjoyed only minor roles in major stage productions and television series. Similarly, neither the American-born Keller nor the British Born had any substantial film experience before the filming of the *Satyricon*. All actors shared a similar love of alternative theatre. Prior to filming the *Satyricon*, Keller had starred in the Broadway production of the counter-cultural musical *Hair*. Max Born arrived on set with shoulder-length hair, a love of Eastern mediation, and a desire to 'chuck all the old ideas away and start understanding things' (Zanelli 1970: 5). For Fellini, their lack of experience and even their lack of Italian was an advantage. It was all about the look. 'Their faces are right. So they don't speak a word of Italian, it makes no difference' (Burke 1970: 99). This sense of the lack of force of personality was only intensified by the casual dubbing of the actors that gives their presence a dreamlike and insubstantial quality, an effect further exacerbated by the slight distortion produced by the use of anamorphic camera lens which produce a much flatter, shallower depth of field so that characters seem to be moving in more distinct, slightly unreal planes.

The filming of *Satyricon* took place almost entirely in the studios of Cinecittà. The few outside scenes were shot nearby; Focene on the coast near Rome's Fiumicino airport served as the location for the beach scenes. Cinecittà was a studio with which Fellini had a particularly close association. Large sections of *La Dolce Vita* had either been filmed or produced there. Cinecittà also had a strong association with films set in the ancient world. The studio had been founded at the instruction of Mussolini in 1937, and had become the home of large-scale Italian cinema ever since that time. In the 1950s, the lots had been used for the filming of ancient epics such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Cleopatra* (1963). More recently, the studio's association with the ancient world has been strengthened with use of the studio for the filming of the HBO TV-series, *Rome*. It was a studio that was used to handling large sets. For *Satyricon*, a number of very big sets were constructed under the

direction of the architect Luigi Scaccianoce and the designer Danilo Donati. Fellini only had a limited budget for the film and constantly felt its restrictions. Financiers, principally the United Artists studio, had raised around 2 billion lire (US\$ 3.3 million). Fellini worried that such money would barely fund the credits for what he intended. At one point in production, Fellini joked about a solution to his money problems, '[We will have] very beautiful credits. The rest of the time the screen will be blank. We lock the doors and the audience must imagine its own film. It is very creative for them' (Shivas 1968: D21). Yet, despite these financial constraints the production values of the film did not suffer. This was largely due to the ingenuity of Donati who was often able to find cheap substitutes for expensive-looking props and finishes. For example, the large mosaic of Trimalchio is composed entirely of candy. Donati, who had just a year previously won acclaim (and ultimately an Oscar) for his work on the costumes for Franco Zeffirelli would become one of Fellini's favourite designers. They would collaborate a number of times, including Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) for which Donati would win his second Oscar.

The marketing of the film placed great prominence on Fellini's name. 'Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini.', declared one of the most prominent film posters. (In fact inaccurately: the *Satyricon* is set in a world that although indeterminate is after the birth of Christ.) The film was actually released under the title of *Fellini-Satyricon*. However, this had less to do with the marketing cachet of the director's name than the fact that the release of Fellini's *Satyricon* coincided with another rival *Satyricon* project by Gian Luigi Polidoro (director) and Alfredo Bini (producer). At the time, there was some suggestion that these two filmmakers had produced their film in an attempt to cash in on Fellini's project. Such accusations were unfair. The pair secured the rights to the name *Satyricon* before Fellini (hence the need to devise a new title for Fellini's film) and far from being a cheap rip-off, the film actually had a budget of \$1.6 million.

While Polidoro and Bini had been successful in securing the rights to the name *Satyricon*, this seems to be the only real success that they enjoyed with this rival *Satyricon* project. The film opened before Fellini's, but its run was short – only four days. Authorities objected to the obscene content of the film, and shut down the film, arresting Polidoro and Bini on the charges of making an obscene film and corrupting the morals of a minor (one of the actors). This second charge was dismissed by the court and, while the court did rule that the film was obscene and ordered the removal of about 100 feet of film, both Bini and Polidoro were handed suspended sentences. The film was then released to Italian audiences, after the necessary cuts had been made. However, despite the fact that punishment of the producers and the confiscation of the film made it briefly a cause célèbre for Italian liberals, the film sank without a trace. It was largely ignored by Italian newspapers. The film was never seen outside Italy. In the end, in order to safeguard the Fellini film, United

Artists bought the world rights for Polidoro and Bini's film and refused to release it, ensuring that the only *Satyricon* available to international audiences was Fellini's.

Despite the director's deliberate attempt to present an alternative and idiosyncratic version of ancient Rome, there was much that was deeply conventional about the marketing of the film. In particular, the strong associations between Rome and sexuality were stressed. Trailers for the film presented audiences with scenes of writhing bodies and promised scenes of depravity and excess; all the standard tropes of the popular conception of the Roman empire. As we have seen earlier, the genre-defying nature of the film made it difficult to describe to audiences and the marketers of the film can perhaps be forgiven for turning to hoary old clichés to promote the product.

Fellini did not expect his film to do well at the box-office. On set he joked about this, describing the film as 'one long suicide' (Zanelli 1970: 10). The reaction to the film was mixed. Critics were divided in their responses. The film won the Critics Prize at the Venice Film Festival and a number of critics praised the film and listed it amongst the best films of 1970, although one did note that while he included it on his list, 'this has not been an especially brilliant year for movies' (Canby, V. in *New York Times* 27/12/1970: 61). Others were not as kind. John Simon in a review entitled 'A spanking for *Fellini Satyricon*' was extremely critical. Describing the film as 'a gimcrack, shopworn nightmare', he criticised the liberties that Fellini had taken with his original text:

There is no excuse for the chaotic magpie's nest that Fellini has made of the work, depriving it of any meaningful structure, tossing into it garbled bits of literature, history, art history, languages from ancient Greek to modern German, obviously self-serving allusions to his own earlier films – everything out of whack, topsy-turvy and gratuitous – unless astounding the bourgeoisie can be called a valid motive. (Simon 1970: 99)

Four years later, he returned to this theme. In a retrospective piece on the director, he singled out *Satyricon* as the start of the 'tragic deterioration of Fellini's genius'. Others were happy to endorse Simon's verdict. Willard Van Dyke, Director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art wrote that 'this Fellini film lacks the sense of style that was so apparent in *8½*, but it also lacks the dramatic values. Instead, it substitutes the stylishness of interior decorators and acting below the level of a high school pageant' (Van Dyke 1970: 80).

The film has similarly divided classicists. Gilbert Highet, popular critic, professor at Columbia, and well-regarded writer on the classical tradition, liked the film with some qualifications. Highet relished the fact that it avoided the standard errors of most motion pictures in making 'everyone too straightforward and too modern'. In his review entitled 'Whose *Satyricon* – Petronius' or Fellini's?' he drew attention to the wide variety of

classical texts which influenced the film. Other critics have been only too happy to join him in pointing out this variety of texts that *Fellini-Satyricon* draws upon. These include not only Petronius' text, but also Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Horace's *Odes*, Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, and Tacitus' *Histories*. Indeed, this lack of exclusive fidelity to Petronius' text has become a divisive issue for critics. In one of the first reviews of the film in the *New York Times*, John Simon drew attention to the fact that the wife of the suiciding couple cites Hadrian's epigram on his departing soul even though the line was composed a century too late to be included in Petronius' text. For him, this typified Fellini's sloppy pretentiousness. In contrast, Thalia Pandiri and Robert Baxter from the Department of Classics at Smith College wrote to the *New York Times* defending Fellini's techniques, praising this practice of quotation, and arguing that it had excellent classical precedent in the work of many Roman writers such as Virgil who had been happy to quote other authors. For them, Fellini's use of multiple allusions to other texts only added to the film's richness.

### Plot summary

*Fellini-Satyricon* eschews a traditional plot in favour of a series of loosely connected episodes. The film begins with Encolpio (Martin Potter) raging that his fellow student with whom he shares an apartment, Ascilto (Hiram Keller) has stolen his slave lover Gitone (Max Born) from him. Encolpio confronts Ascilto at a bathhouse. A fight ensues and Ascilto confesses that he has sold Gitone to the actor, Vernacchio (Fanfulla). Encolpio then visits Vernacchio's theatre and witnesses a macabre theatrical performance in which one of the actors has his hand cut off. Vernacchio is initially reluctant to return Gitone to Encolpio, but is forced to do so when a magistrate in the audience threatens him with punishment.

Gitone and Encolpio then walk through the streets of Rome on their way to Encolpio's apartment. Along the way, they encounter many fantastic scenes of Roman life. A detour takes them through one of Rome's brothels. Eventually, Encolpio and Gitone arrive home and make love to celebrate their reunion.

Their peaceful co-existence does not last long. Ascilto bursts into the apartment and wakes up the sleeping lovers. Both Encolpio and Ascilto agree that they can no longer bear each other's company and agree to go their separate ways. They divide their possessions, but when it comes to the ownership of Gitone, they let the slave decide. Unexpectedly, Gitone chooses Ascilto and he and Ascilto depart leaving Encolpio distraught.

Suddenly, an earthquake erupts and Encolpio's apartment block is destroyed. The scene jumps abruptly to a light-filled art gallery in which Encolpio encounters the poet Eumolpo (Salvo Randone). Encolpio accompanies Eumolpo as he makes his way to the villa of his patron, Trimalcione (Il Moro, Mario Romagnoli).

While at the villa, Encolpio and Eumolpo enjoy a sumptuous feast and a variety of entertainments. Unfortunately, Eumolpo is unable to endure a life of flattering his patron and his poetry any longer. Drunk, he accuses Trimalcione of plagiarising his verses from Lucretius. Enraged, Trimalcione orders his slaves to throw Eumolpo into the furnace in the kitchen. Eumolpo is dragged off to meet this ghastly fate.

The scene shifts to outdoors as Trimalcione's party makes its way to view the tomb that Trimalcione is constructing for himself and his wife. Trimalcione then acts out his funeral and demands that his guests mourn for him. While at the tomb, one of the guests tells the story of the 'Matron of Ephesus'. The film retells this darkly humorous story about a woman who is forced to desecrate the corpse of her husband to save the life of her new lover.

We then see Encolpio and Eumolpo wandering through a field. Eumolpo is still alive, but has been severely beaten by the servants in the kitchen. Exhausted, Encolpio collapses and falls asleep. No sooner has he closed his eyes, than he is roughly woken. The scene has shifted to a beach and Encolpio, Ascilto, and Gitone (now reunited) have been captured by the slaver Lica (Alain Cuny) who searches the world for people and objects that he thinks will please the emperor. The three companions are loaded onto Lica's ship. During the voyage, Lica takes a fancy to the beautiful Encolpio and arranges to marry him on the deck of the ship. Unfortunately for Lica, a palace coup forces the emperor to commit suicide before the slaver can deliver his valuable cargo. The new emperor's forces seize Lica's ship, Lica is killed, and Gitone is taken.

The scene shifts to a villa where a wealthy couple make preparations as a result of the changed political circumstances. The slaves are freed and the children are sent off to safety. Once these arrangements have been made the couple commit suicide. A little later Ascilto and Encolpio stumble onto the scene. They discover the corpses of the couple and explore the now deserted villa, encountering a slave girl whose sexual favours they enjoy.

There is another abrupt transition and we find Ascilto and Encolpio in a desert landscape. In a nomadic caravan lies a woman with an insatiable desire for sex. Ascilto joins the long list of men who try to bring her relief. Meanwhile, Encolpio learns that the companions of the woman are taking her to a hermaphrodite who has miraculous powers.

Ascilto and Encolpio hatch a plan to steal the hermaphrodite and sell him for a fortune. Killing his attendants, they escape with the hermaphrodite. However, the hermaphrodite proves too sickly to travel and dies as they transport him away from his shrine.

We next see Encolpio fighting a man in a minotaur costume. Hunted through a labyrinth, Encolpio collapses at the minotaur's feet begging for mercy. At this point, it is revealed that the combat is all an elaborate ruse, part of a rite to the god of laughter. Encolpio is rewarded with a woman, but discovers that he has been cursed with impotency. Onto the scene

comes Eumolpo who has recovered from his beating and risen to be master of a nearby city. He promises to arrange a cure for Encolpio's condition. This is eventually achieved when Encolpio sleeps with the witch Enotea (Donyale Luna).

While Encolpio is seeing Enotea, Ascilto gets into a fight and is mortally wounded. Encolpio wanders on alone and arrives at the seashore in time for the funeral of Eumolpo. At the funeral, Eumolpo's will is read in which he promises a share of his fortune to any who is prepared to consume his corpse. Greedy mourners begin to devour the flesh. Disgusted, Encolpio leaves the scene in a trading ship that Eumolpo had chartered for a trip to Africa. A voice-over begins to recount Encolpio's voyage. The film ends mid-sentence.

### Key scenes and themes

#### *The joy of the fragmentary*

The lack of linear narrative and the desire to embrace the fragmentary are often seen as two of the most distinctive features of Fellini's film. This reaches its climax at the end when, as the screenplay declares, 'everything cracks and crumbles ... It is all transformed into an antique fresco; a discolored fresco in Pompeiiian colors' (Zanelli 1970: 273). In the final act of the film, Encolpio is literally transformed into a fragment of wall-painting and, as the camera pulls back, we can see other scenes and characters of the film have been rendered into frescoes. The fresco of Encolpio joins with a depiction of Gitone, Ascilto and Vernacchio. Another fragment contains a depiction of Trimalcione, his wife Fortunata, and Eumolpo. Enotea and the wizard who cursed her make up another fragment. In front of them stands yet another fragment of fresco depicting the suicidal couple. As the camera pans back still further, we see that these frescoes form part of a now dilapidated structure perched on a cliff above the sea. The organising principle of the film is displayed. We have been witnesses to a ruin. The disconnected scenes are just fragments from a large whole. Fellini intended this final scene to be revelatory. Yet, in many ways this last dénouement is just the final instance of a motif that has been building up throughout the film.

The scene in the gallery is introduced by an abrupt transition [see box: 'The scene in the gallery']. Indeed, none of the other transitions between scenes in the film can rival this one in violence. One moment we see Encolpio's apartment block being torn asunder by an earthquake. Men and women are screaming. Walls are crumbling. Frenzied horses run wild. And the next moment – silence. The darkness of Encolpio's quarters in the Suburra gives way to a brightly-lit gallery [Fig. 15]. Only gradually does sound return to the scene and when it does, it is gentle and melodic. We find Encolpio on the left of the screen. The camera moves – having briefly lost him – to reinsert him into the centre of the action.

#### **The scene in the gallery**

Encolpio wanders around a brightly lit gallery. On the walls are paintings from all different periods of classical art. Still smarting from losing his beloved Gitone, Encolpio scoffs at the scenes of love that are depicted. His obvious derision of the scenes catches the attention of the poet, Eumolpo. These fine works of art cause the poet to lament the current state of the arts. Such work would be impossible to produce today. People are too obsessed with money. No one is prepared to suffer poverty as artists did previously to achieve greatness. Our love of food, drink, and sex has made contemporary audiences forget the arts. Romans would prefer a bag of gold to the works of Apelles and Phidias, laments Eumolpo.



15. Learning to love the fragmentary. Gallery scene, *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969).

All around Encolpio are famous works of art. They are supposed to be recognisable to the viewer. Fellini intended that the audience should have a sense here that they had seen them before. Knowledgeable viewers will spot reproductions of well-known frescoes from Pompeii and Herculaneum, depictions of maenads and couples from Attic vases, a slab of enlarged cuneiform script, a medallion portrait showing Septimius



Severus and his family, and frescoes from Knossos, to name just a few of the images. In a film which has been characterised by an aesthetic that rendered the ancient world as foreign and alien, the images are a welcome sight, a reassuring vision of the ancient world as we know it and see it in museums and galleries.

In spite of the diversity of their origins, one element unites these images. All are fragments. Some are more damaged than others, but none is complete. In these fragments of art, Fellini found a metaphor for his mutilated text. Fellini found inspiration for his *Satyricon* in the work of the archaeologist. In numerous interviews he compared his role as a director to that of an archaeologist. His film would reconstruct Rome 'as the archaeologist does, when he assembles a few potsherds or piece of masonry and reconstructs not an amphora or a temple, but an artifact in which the object is implied, and this artifact suggests more of the original reality ... Are not the ruins of a temple more interesting than the temple itself?' (Zanelli, 1970: 4).

In a meta-theatrical moment, Fellini even includes such an archaeologist working on a fragment in this gallery scene. In the centre of the room, we see a restorer attempting to repair a broken image on the canvas. The image is taken from a black-figure vase by the Amasis painter in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. It depicts two maenads. One has thrown her arms around the other in an ecstatic embrace. The other maenad stands holding out a hare, a traditional lover's gift. In the original vase, the hare is being offered as a gift to Dionysus.

Contemplating these canvases is designed to teach us how to watch this film. The experience of the film is like viewing the frescoes of Pompeii: moments of perfect clarity in which every detail is crystal clear are interspersed with unbridgeable gaps. The mind tries to make sense of the absences. It tries to bridge these gaps to make a complete picture. Sometimes it succeeds, more often it fails. There are limits to the power of the restorer. In the same way, the viewer can see that the various scenes of *Satyricon* are connected and it is possible to construct a rough over-arching narrative, but some doubts remain. Some scenes stubbornly refuse to fit. It is impossible to say with certainty where every scene belongs. There are questions that can never be answered.

Numerous critics have praised Fellini for his desire to embrace the fragment. Where others had only seen the text of Petronius as flawed by its corruption, Fellini seized the opportunities that such a mangled text provided. It is worth noting that Fellini was not the only artist to see the potential of the fragment expressed in the *Satyricon*. At precisely the same time as Fellini was producing his *Satyricon*, Stanley Silvermann and Peter Raby were producing a musical-opera version of the *Satyricon* for the Stratford Opera festival. It is striking that this production also eschewed narrative in favour of the fragment. The fragmentary nature of the piece was highlighted by the decision to have each different scene composed in

a contrasting style from electronic to pop to grand opera. Fellini's film coincides with a time in which many in the arts were finding beauty in the damaged and discarded. To the attuned sensibility, the *Satyricon* reminds you of the pleasures of the partial and incomplete. Absence stimulates the audience, goading them on. Fellini wanted his audience to struggle with the film: 'They must fight preconceptions about movies having to tell them a story with a start, a development, an end; preconceptions about myself personally, because they know before that Fellini always tells them some story. This is not an historical picture, a Cecil B. DeMille picture' (Burke 1970: 99).

These fragments are not just celebrated here for their form. Their content also matters. The images resonate with the content of the film. Maenads capture the wildness of the women. The numerous intertwined couples echo the film's erotics. In one canvas in the corner, we see a reproduction of a famous comic play, the *Amphitryo*, which celebrated Zeus' seduction of Alcmene through the ruse of assuming the guise of her husband. The story of adulterous gods using their powers to create confusion and mischief among mortals reminds us just how far this world is separated from the world of Christianity. A number of these images have strong homoerotic connotations. In addition to the coded lesbianism of the maenads in the central canvas, figures from Greek myth who were beloved by homosexuals sit alongside scenes of homosexual love such as the reclining male couple positioned under the window taken from the Etruscan Tomb of the Diver. Encolpio recites the names of these figures. First is Ganymede, the Trojan youth abducted by Zeus to Mount Olympus where he spent the rest of his days serving his lover as a cup-bearer. Next is Narcissus, the man who died after falling in love with his own reflection, a figure who thanks to psychoanalysis has become the paradigm of homosexual desire. Finally, he identifies Hyacinth, the boy beloved by Apollo who died as the result of a contest between Apollo and Zephyr, the West Wind, over the boy. As he died, Apollo turned him into a flower. These themes of homosexual love as dark, passionate, and often tragic flow through the film. The walls of this gallery contain all the stories that this film wishes to tell us.

#### What is Rome?

Arguably Fellini's favourite subject is Rome. Although born in Rimini, Fellini lived almost all of his adult life in the Italian capital and a number of his films depict the city. The most obvious film dedicated to Rome is – as the title suggests – *Roma*, but other films are also keen to explore the city, its sights, and its regions. Both *La Dolce Vita* and *8½* feature sequences that either take the viewer through the city or help capture its unique aspects. It is within this context of explorations of Rome – the city as opposed to the civilisation – that we should locate the *Satyricon*. Fellini is interested in giving a sense of place as well as time and values.

**A trip through the Suburra**

The camera follows Encolpio and Gitone as they walk through the streets of the Suburra quarter in Rome. Around one corner, we see a colossal head of an emperor being transported by horses. Fires burn in the streets. Encolpio and Gitone joke with an old prostitute seated outside a brothel. Catching sight of the magistrate who has been pursuing them since the theatre of Vernacchio, they duck through a door heading towards the nearby brothel.

As they wander through the door, they first catch sight of a man sacrificing an animal to discover if his wife is fertile. A pimp soon ushers Encolpio and Gitone into the depths of the brothel. Nearby aristocrats arrive by rafts through the sewers, all eager to obtain a night's pleasure. The brothel is composed of a series of rooms in which every sort of sexual desire is satisfied. Scantily-clad young children dance around an old man. Satisfied customers walk out of the rooms leaving indifferent prostitutes behind them. Rows of men stand around muttering inarticulately. Hawkers offer strange wares to passers-by.

Leaving the brothel, Encolpio and Gitone arrive at their apartment block. The block is built around an *impluvium*, a wide low basin which is designed to catch rainwater. A woman washes her clothes in the water. In order to reach their apartment, Encolpio and Gitone are forced to climb a steep staircase. As they climb the stairs and make their way through the galleries, we catch glimpses of the lives of the other inhabitants of the region. In one apartment a woman lies naked alone. Another is crowded with people and a fight between men spills outside. Suspicious neighbours stare out at us as we pass by. In one room a fire threatens to break out. A bandaged man calls out to his wife from another apartment. A man is seen defecating in the corner of his apartment while outside a man plays a soulful tune on a lyre. The shot changes and the camera pulls back from Encolpio and Gitone to give a complete view of the apartment block. We can see it bustling with activity as the camera pans to the sky.

Fellini had no time for the conventional Rome of epic cinema. Instead of epic's gleaming white marble, he offered a darker more gritty view of the city. The soundscape of the Suburra scene [see box] also defies convention. There are no fanfares of trumpets here. Instead, there is a discordant mix of sounds. Electronic notes cascade. Primitive drums beat an urgent tempo. Cymbals clash and gongs sound. Horses gallop furiously, but produce no noise.

In choosing to show life in the Suburra quarter, Fellini avoided more typical locations such as the Forum or the palaces of Palatine or the temples of the Capitoline. In antiquity, the Suburra was regarded as a notorious area for its prostitution and cheap accommodation. Epic film had, of course, ventured out of the imperial palaces before. Trips to the Christian catacombs were a regular feature of the genre. However, these trips beyond the Palatine were more about formalising a sense of pagan/Christian opposition than creating a sense of the reality of life in the

ancient city. In the same way as the dull, homespun fabrics of Christian costume contrasted with the rich colours and elaborate embroidery of imperial garb so too did dark, simple Christian dwellings contrast with the impressive bright gleaming marble palaces and temples of Rome's pagan rulers.

In this sequence, Fellini picks up the cosmopolitan nature of life in Rome. The cityscape is designed to evoke North Africa as much as classical Italy. Fellini took seriously the notion of Rome as 'world capital'. The Suburra sequence is designed to show what such a lofty description might look like on the ground and in the alleyways of the city. Filmed in the largest of the studios of the Cinecittà complex, the magnitude of the ancient city is made apparent. The size of the city and the idea of journeying through it are emphasised by the use of a tracking shot that follows the actors through the quarter. This is one of the few tracking shots that Fellini allowed himself in the film. Even here, the shot is not a conventional tracking shot. It fails to keep track of Encolpio and Gitone. Losing them in the crowd, the camera becomes distracted by some incidental detail. Initial plans for the film specified no tracking shots. In keeping with the contemplatory nature of the film, Fellini wanted his film to be composed exclusively of static shots with no camera movement. Although this stricture was soon broken, no other sequence gives as great a sense of movement as this one.

The Suburra is not only large, it is also rich in diversity. Every age, body-type, and ethnicity is found here. The *Satyricon* is polyglot. Numerous languages occur throughout the course of the film. Characters speak Italian, Greek, Turkish, German, Latin of varying degrees of proficiency, along with invented and nonsensical tongues. Even the inscriptions and graffiti reflect this linguistic diversity. The Latin is deliberately ungrammatical to give the impression that it is written by someone for whom Latin is not their first language.

The sequence begins with Encolpio and Gitone watching a colossal head of an emperor being drawn through the city. The image replays an earlier sequence of Fellini's from *La Dolce Vita* (1960) in which he has a giant statue of Jesus fly through Rome carried by a helicopter. Here appropriately Christ has been replaced by the emperor. In *La Dolce Vita* the transportation of the statue of Jesus is all about the installation of a new monument. Here we are not so sure. Is this head being taken to complete a statue or has the statue been torn down? Similarities have been noted between the scene and the dragging of the body of the emperor Vitellius through the streets of Rome after he was deposed.

Roman politics begins the shot, but Roman pleasure dominates the scene. The majority of the scene involves wandering through a crowded, labyrinthine brothel. Roman erotic art provided the inspiration for a number of the images within the brothel. One of the works that stimulated Fellini's imagination was the collection of erotica assembled in Jean



16. Rome without its grandeur. Brothel scene, *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969).

Marcadé's *Roma Amor* (1961). One of the features of this work is the attention that it pays to Pompeian frescoes of couples performing intercourse. Such frescoes which feature isolated figures in sparse undecorated rooms clearly influenced the design of the film [Fig. 16]. Indeed, flicking through the pages of *Roma Amor* produces an effect not dissimilar to wandering through Fellini's brothel as scene of intercourse gives way to yet another scene of intercourse. The inscriptions that adorn the brothel are also borrowed from Pompeian archaeology. Outside one of the booths, we see the inscription 'Bacchis II XXXVII', an abbreviated message inspired by actual examples meaning 'the second prostitute called Bacchis, her price is 37 pieces of silver'.

When discussing Fellini's depiction of sex, one critic observed 'There's always something prudish about sex in Fellini's films, it's almost anti-erotic, possibly because sex so often has its roots in adolescent fantasies that have nothing to do with love' (Canby 1993: C15). It is an acute observation. Even in the Roman brothel scene, a lot of the imagery came not from Roman material, but from Fellini's puberty. Whilst he was a young man in Rimini, conversation among Fellini's friends would often

## 7. Art Cinema: *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969)

turn to sexual fantasies. A number of the various scenarios imagined by Fellini and his companions were included in the scene. This juxtaposition of modern sexual fantasy and ancient sexual aesthetic creates a unique amalgam, a recipe for Rome that stands outside of time. It is another way of making Rome an 'eternal city'.

### *A world before Christ*

The advertising for the *Satyricon* proclaimed that this was a film 'Before Christ. After Fellini.' The director seems to have risen to the implicit challenges in both statements. Not only is this film a distinctly personal vision, but it is a vision which is serious about capturing a world before Christianity. For Fellini, it was through the pagan mindset that it would be possible to re-capture Rome and it was this idea that drove him through the project: 'It is always difficult to identify the reason why you do something ... what stimulates me is to try to create characters of the same psychology before Christ, before the invention of conscience, of guilt ... That's the real reason to do the picture. To see what people were like 2,000 years before Catholicism' (Shivas 1968: D21). For Fellini, this was not an idle exercise in ancient history, but a project with contemporary urgency. It was from the pagan pre-Christian past that we might learn to live in a modern godless post-Christian world.

#### ***The hermaphrodite***

A pool shimmers, reflecting the domed mosaic ceiling above. We see a crowd of worshippers, kneeling or sitting on the floor. A veiled woman makes a prayer on behalf of her sick son. In front of her, two attendants stand over a wicker manger set against a grotto wall. The shot shifts to show the crowd of suppliants. A mad man dressed only in a loincloth and bonnet spins around erratically. A man on crutches limps towards the pool while an old man leaves a tray of offerings on the pool edge. We catch a view of the valley outside. A fat man staggers forward whilst a member of his party leaves gold chaplets for the hermaphrodite.

Singing fills the cavern as we again survey the crowd. A man with a bandaged head and a palsied hand stands at the back awaiting his audience with the blessed child. The attendants raise the child out of his manger. He is an albino and seems terribly weak, unable to stand without support. As he is shown to the crowd, the suppliants raise their hands in adoration or bow their heads.

Even within the context of a film replete with freakish bodies, the albino hermaphrodite is one of Fellini's most startling creations. The role was played by a genuine albino from Naples, Pasquali Baldassare. The scene involving the hermaphrodite was one of the first scenes shot by Fellini. It was also one of the most difficult. Fellini had problems getting precisely the right degree of languidness in the performance from the boy that he

desired. Language also proved a problem, with Fellini having to use the boy's father to translate into the Neapolitan dialect that the boy understood.

In his treatment for the film, Fellini makes clear that the inspiration for this scene was the site of Lourdes in the French Pyrenees. Its famous grotto became a site of pilgrimage for Catholics following appearances of the Virgin Mary there in 1858. The place is especially well-regarded by the sick, a number of whom claim to have received miraculous cures after visiting the site. Each year, thousands of pilgrims make the trip to Lourdes in the hope of being healed of illnesses and diseases which medicine is unable to cure. For pilgrims, the waters of the grotto have particular importance as it was this water that the Virgin Mary herself commended pilgrims to drink. Pilgrims bathe in the water as a sign of devotion and take flasks home as relics.

Initially, in both the treatment and the screenplay, this scene was intended to occur in a dilapidated temple of Ceres. There are still some elements of this original conception, most notably in the circular roof of the chamber. However, the associations with Lourdes have been strengthened by collapsing the temple into a grotto and making a feature of the large pool of water that separates the hermaphrodite from the worshippers.

Other Catholic imagery informs this scene. The moment where the attendants hold up the pale boy to the crowd references both the practice of the exposure of relics (Fellini was very keen that the genitals be exposed at this point) and the iconography of the *Pietà*, Michelangelo's celebrated depiction of Mary cradling the corpse of Jesus in the Vatican. The women cover their heads and kneel and pray in a manner reminiscent of Catholic liturgy. Even the votive offerings in the shape of the object of supplication, whilst based on ancient precedent, can also find their echo in contemporary religious practice in rural Italy.

This juxtaposition of Catholic rite and pagan context sets up a number of competing ideas. On the one hand, it is deliberately blasphemous. The mimicry of Jesus by replacing him with an intersex albino clearly mocks Christian faith. On the other hand, the scene is strangely comforting. Here is a world that despite its apparent strangeness is recognisable. Roman religion is not alien, but rather seems to operate according to known rules and adhere to an identifiable aesthetic.

Critics such as Erich Segal (1971) have criticised Fellini for his inability to escape his Christian sensibilities ('Fellini left the church, but the church never left him'). He was not alone in making such claims. In an interview with Fellini, Alberto Moravia suggested to the director that his version of antiquity bore a remarkable resemblance to the pagan world as imagined by the early Christians and that it failed to think outside the Christian paradigm (Zannelli: 29). Such scenes as this one seem to lend support to this claim. Yet this perhaps misreads this scene. The scene with the hermaphrodite is designed to feel disturbingly and scandalously familiar.

We are supposed to feel the presence of Christianity here. Elsewhere, rituals are staged to express the foreignness of Roman religion. When a fortune-teller interprets Trimalcione's future from the sound of his belching, the scene is comic, but also designed to allude to the ancient art of *cledomancy*, in which certain significant sounds or names can be interpreted to portend important events. This is a moment when the Romans seem definitely not like us.

The film is punctuated by such rituals, many informed by actual ancient religious practice. When Encolpio and Gitone make their way to the brothel at the start of the film, they encounter a couple who have asked a priest to interpret the blood of a sacrificial victim to determine whether the woman is fertile. The scene is based on the Roman (and Near-Eastern) practice of *haruspicy* in which the organs and entrails of victims were inspected to determine divine will. Although the ritual was limited to organs rather than blood, the film is accurate in its depiction of the motives of the couple. Questions about fertility and legitimacy of children represent a substantial proportion of the inquiries received by oracles in antiquity.

Later we see Trimalcione asking blessings from his household gods, three miniature gold effigies presented to him on a plate. Again Fellini focuses on a particular Roman religious custom. The gods that Trimalcione anoints are the *Penates*, Roman spirits associated with the inner parts of the house. Along with the *Lares*, they made up a group of familiar spirits or 'household gods'. Such gods were central to the religious life of the family. Famously, when Aeneas, the founder of Rome, flees burning Troy, one of few things that he takes with him are his *Penates*.

This desire to capture something of the religious life of the Romans can also be seen in the marriage between Encolpio and Lica. The scene is a dense set of allusions to ancient literary texts and practices. The idea of the marriage ceremony seems to have been inspired by the story of the marriage between the Roman emperor Nero and the slave-boy Sporus. The story is recounted in one of Fellini's favourite texts about ancient Rome, Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. In his biography of Nero, Suetonius recounts how Nero fell in love with a young Greek slave boy Sporus and dressed him as a woman and even staged a sham marriage ceremony with him, a rite Nero repeated later with another beautiful slave, Doryphorus. The outline of the marriage ceremony, Fellini borrows from Jerome Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, one of his regular source texts. This gave details of Lica's costume, the saffron robe and the veil fixed with a wreath, as well the sacrifices, the showering of nuts, and the cries of 'Felicitas'. Onto this was grafted other texts. For example, the suggestion that the husband put aside his boys now that he has a wife is taken from Catullus 61, one of the poet's marriage songs.

Even the fantastic 'mirth ritual' in which Encolpio is chased by a gladiator dressed as a minotaur has some basis in Roman literature and

ritual. The literary antecedent is Apuleius' *Golden Ass* in which the hero, Lucius suffers a number of shocking indignities as part of a celebration of the 'god of mirth'. While the *Golden Ass* supplies the ritual frame for the scene, we need to look elsewhere for the specific content. While there were no such religious rituals like the one depicted in antiquity, we do know that Romans often staged elaborate mythological pageants in which criminals were executed. Women might be tied to the horns of bulls to be stampeded to death in imitation of the death of Dirce, the woman punished for maltreating Zeus' beloved Antiope. Alternatively, a man might be dressed as Icarus and fired from a catapult. In such a world, the scenario of creating a replica labyrinth and staging the fight of Theseus and the Minotaur is not completely absurd.

Fellini's rituals are fantasies. Some are complete inventions. Some are borrowed from anthropological observations of distant tribal cultures. Others are a pastiche of ancient sources cobbled together to make a strange unity. Yet despite their divergent origins and widely differing form, they are united by a common purpose, namely to use sacred moments to make us rethink the categories of pagan and Christian so that the former become more familiar and the latter more distant.

#### Suggested further viewing

*Orphée* (dir. Cocteau, 1950)

This is the second in the trilogy of films that Cocteau made concerning the Orpheus myth. The film is set in 1950s Paris and tells the story of the encounter between the popular poet Orpheus (Jean Marais) and a mysterious woman known as the Princess (Maria Casares). Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that the Princess is the embodiment of Death who is assisted in her task of ending life by her henchmen, sinister leather-clad motorcyclists. Despite sensing danger Orpheus falls in love with the Princess and gradually his feelings for his wife Euridice (Maria Dea) start to flag. However, his passions are re-awakened when Euridice is killed by the Princess' henchmen and he makes a journey into the Underworld to retrieve her. The film is famous for a number of features, most notably its sequence where Orpheus travels into the Underworld through a mirror. Its combination of special effects and dream imagery helped make the film an important subject for artists and writers interested in the power of the subconscious and the archetypal status of myth.

*Medea* (dir. Pasolini, 1969)

Filmed in the wild, sparse landscape of Cappadocia in Turkey, this film loosely follows the plot of Euripides' tragedy about the foreign princess Medea who is abandoned by her lover Jason for another woman and who consequently murders her rival and her children by Jason. In Pasolini's version of the story, particular attention is given to fleshing out the

back-story of events prior to Medea's arrival in Greece. Indeed, many of the most notable scenes in the film occur in the first part of the film where the story of Jason's theft of the Golden Fleece from Colchis is told. Costuming, dance, and language all combine to construct ancient Colchis as a wild, tribal place. Crops are watered with the blood of sacrificial human victims. Pasolini's vision is clearly influenced by contemporary writings on anthropology and ritual. The film stars the opera singer Maria Callas as Medea and Giuseppe Gentile as Jason.

*Mighty Aphrodite* (dir. Allen, 1995)

Billed as a modern comic-tragedy, this film stars its director Woody Allen as sportswriter Lenny Weinrib who becomes obsessed with finding the mother of his adopted child. It is a decision he soon begins to regret as his pursuit of the mother leads to a series of personal disasters for himself, his wife (Helena Bonham Carter), and the prostitute mother of their child (Mira Sorvino). Inspired by the story of Oedipus, with occasional nods to the myth of Pygmalion, this film plays with the conventions of Greek tragedy. So, for example, despite being set in modern New York, it features a masked Greek chorus who comment on events and pass judgments on characters' actions. The film also makes use of classical plot devices such as the technique of *deus ex machina* whereby seemingly insolvable problems are resolved by sudden, unexpected, and unbelievably fortuitous events.

Georges Méliès: Ezra (2000).  
 Gods on film: Winkler (2009b): 70-121; Shahabudin (2007): 114-16.  
 Special effects and animation: North (2008); Rickitt (2006); Wells (1998) and (2002): 1-29.  
 Ray Harryhausen – career and films: Harryhausen and Dalton (2004): esp. 286-7 (Harryhausen and ancient myth); Harryhausen (1972): 85 (Harryhausen on peplum films), 141 (on fantasy); Harryhausen et al. (2006): 96-127; Wells (2002): 90-101.  
 Primary sources for Jason and the Argonauts: Apollonius, *Argonautica*; Pindar, *Fourth Pythian Ode*; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.9.16-28; Diodorus Siculus 4.40-52.  
 Medea on film: Christie (2000): 144-65; McDonald (1983): 3-88; MacKinnon (1986): 146-54, 156-60.

### 7. Art Cinema: *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969)

*Fellini-Satyricon*: For an introduction to the film and the issues that it raises, see Paul (2009); Solomon (2001a): 274-80; Sullivan (2001); Theodorakopoulos (2010): 122-44; Wyke (1997a): 188-91. Zanelli (1970) collects a lot of useful material including interviews, film treatments, and a draft screenplay. Hughes (1971) provides a useful diary detailing numerous production details.  
 Art cinema: For an introduction to 'art cinema' and its features, see Bordwell (1999). See also the discussion of the terms 'art cinema' and 'auteur' in R. Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden and Oxford): 83-92; Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd edn (Abingdon and New York).  
 Cacoyannis: Although a little dated, the best discussion is still McDonald (1983). See also the discussion in Karalis (2012) and García (2008): 27-8.  
 Cocteau: For Cocteau's own vision of cinema, including a chapter on Orpheus, see Cocteau (1992), cf. Klawans (2011). Orpheus in the Underworld scene: Smith (1996).  
 Initial announcement: 'Fellini casts Mae West in film on debauchery', *New York Times* (10/8/1968).  
 Attribution of *Satyricon* to Petronius: For discussion, see Prag and Repath (2009): 5-10. Fragmentary nature of the text: Slater (2009).  
 Arms for Venus: 'Obituary: Randolph Carter', *New York Times* (26/10/1998): A19. Maderna's *Satyricon*: D. Henahan, 'Music: New "Satyricon" at Tanglewood', *New York Times* (7/8/1973): 29.  
 Terence Stamp, Mickey Mouse and extended cast: Mark Shivas, 'Fellini's back and Mae West's got him', *New York Times* (13/10/1968): D21; Hughes (1971): 8. Opening night: 'Fellini *Satyricon* to open', *New York Times* (13/2/1970).  
 Mae West: George Eels and Stanley Musgrove, *Mae West: A Biography* (New York): 270. Stamp and financial constraints: Zanelli (1970): 5.  
 Musical *Satyricon* in 1939 and early exposure to gladiator films: Shivas (1968): D21.  
 Fellini's autobiographical works: Bondanella (2001): 124-30, 241-5.  
 Luca Canali and Ettore Paratore: Highet (1983): 347.  
 On using unknown actors: Burke (1970); Zanelli (1970): 5. Beautiful boys: Shivas (1968). Max Born and Hiram Keller: Zanelli (1970): 5.  
 On the filming of the *Fellini Satyricon*: Zanelli (1970): 3-20 and Hughes (1971). Cinecittà: Bondanella (2001). Donati: Zanelli (1970): 14.  
 Poliodoro and Bini: A. Friendly, 'The "other" Italian "Satyricon" is out of court and on screen', *New York Times* (12/3/1970): 47.

Best of 1970 list: V. Canby, 'Critic's choice: ten best films of 1970', *New York Times* (27/12/1970): 61; cf. 'Notables name bests', *New York Times* (27/12/1970): 77; A.H. Weiler, 'Critics vote "5 Easy Pieces" best film', *New York Times* (29/12/1970): 31. For a contemporary cinematic defence, see A.O. Scott, 'Fellini's fever dream of Ancient Rome', *New York Times* (26/1/2001): E20.  
 Critical reception: Highet's essay was originally printed in *Horizon* (1970) 12: 42-7 and is reprinted in Highet (1983). On intertextuality in *Fellini-Satyricon*, see especially Sullivan (2001). Simon's criticism: Simon (1970). Defence of intertextuality: See Pandiri and Baxter's letter in 'Move mailbag: "Airport", "Satyricon", Women's Lib', *New York Times* (7/6/1970): 94; cf. John Simon's response in 'Movie mailbag: from "Patton" to "Satyricon" to "Chaplin"', *New York Times* (28/6/1970): 80.  
 Gallery scene: Hughes (1971): 119-21.  
 Suburra Scene: Hughes (1971): 79-87; Zanelli (1970): 11-14. Non-grammatical Latin inscriptions: Zanelli (1970): 12; Hughes (1971): 80. Head of Vitellius: Sullivan (2001): 264. Use of *Roma Amor*: Zanelli (1970): 4.  
 Filming of hermaphrodite scene: Hughes (1971): 44-66. Influence of Lourdes: Hughes (1971): 45; Zanelli (1970): 80. Post-Christian world: Zanelli (1970): 13.  
 Cledonomaney: Halliday (1903): 47-53. Sporus: Suetonius, *Nero* 27-9. Mirth ritual: Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 2.31-311. Mythological executions: Coleman (1990).

### 8. Satirising Cine-Antiquity: *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979)

*Monty Python's Life of Brian*: Cyrino (2005): 176-93; Cleese, Gilliam, Palin, Idle, Jones and the Estate of Graham Chapman (2005): 349-87; Elley (1984): 147; Solomon (2001a): 301-3; Sellers (2003): 1-24; Hewison (1981): 59-93, especially good on the blasphemy and censorship issues; Johnson (2008): a journal on the making of the film.  
 The ancient world in comic films: Solomon (2001a): 283-305; Cull (2001): 162-90; Malamud (2001b): 191-208.  
 Satire: Guilhamet (1987); Carpenter (2000).  
 Decline of cine-antiquity: Wyke (1997a): 183-8; Winkler (1995); Solomon (2001a): 15.  
*Cleopatra* (1963) and *Carry on Cleo*: Wyke (1997a): 100-9; Cyrino (2005): 121-58; Elley (1984): 93-5; Cull (2001): 162-90.  
*Mystery Science Theatre 3000*: Beaulieu et al. (1996).  
*Monty Python*: Cleese et al. (2005); Perry (2006); McCall (1991); Hewison (1981).  
*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: Cleese et al. (2005): 307-48; Elley (1984): 147; Hewison (1981): 38-9.

### 9. The Disney Version: *Hercules* (1997)

Disney and the Disney corporation: Maltin (1987): 29-82; Byrne and McQuillan (1999); Bell et al. (1995); Watts (2002); Sammond (2005). Financial statements: Information about the size and composition of the Disney corporation is provided by Disney Investor relations. Key documents include the 2010 Disney Fact Book and the 2010 Annual Report.  
 Disney and family therapy: Towbin et al. (2003).  
 René Clair: Finch (1995): 85.  
 Production history of *Hercules*: Thomas (1997): 164-99.  
 On the age suitability for the film: J. Benzel, 'Taking the children: you're a celebrity hero now, Herc, ya big lug', *New York Times* (29/6/1997): 22.

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