Fellini's *La Strada* and the Cinema of Poetry

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It is difficult to understand either the artistic and historical significance of *La Strada* or the immediate critical response to this film without reference to the cinema movement known as neo-realism. Fellini's career as a film-maker had its start in the immediate postwar period in Italy at the same time that the world noticed a dynamic new film style emerging from the dissipating smoke of the only recently silenced guns and bombs. With directors such as Roberto Rossellini (*Open City*, 1945; *Paisan*, 1946), Vittorio De Sica (*Shoeshine*, 1946; *Bicycle Thief*, 1948; *Umberto D.*, 1951), Luchino Visconti (*La Terra Trema*, 1948), Giuseppe De Santis (*Bitter Rice*, 1948), Luigi Zampa (*To Live in Peace*, 1946), Alberto Lattuada (*Without Pity*, 1948), and Pietro Germi (*The Path of Hope*, 1950), it seemed to critics both inside and outside Italy that the cinema had suddenly abandoned the Hollywood "dream factory" for the actual streets and squares of war-torn Europe.

Film critics and film historians of this period believed that the neo-realist prototypes constituted a victory of social realism over fantasy and fiction. The necessary characteristics of neo-realism that emerged from their writings stressed a definite social context; a sense of historical actuality and immediacy; political commitment to progressive or even violent social change; "authentic" on-location shooting as opposed to the "artificiality" of the studio; a rejection of classical Hollywood acting styles, generic codes, and cinematic conventions; extensive use of nonprofessional actors whenever possible; and a documentary style of cinematography, aiming at a faithful reproduction of Italian life and

popular culture. The best critic of the era, André Bazin, proclaimed neo-realism as a cinema of "fact" and "reconstituted reportage" which rejected both dramatic and cinematic conventions and which "respected" the ontological wholeness of the reality it captured, just as the narrated screen time in neo-realist films often "respected" the actual duration of the story. Bazin sharply distinguished the style of Rossellini and his Italian contemporaries from the montage style of Sergei Eisenstein with its ideologically motivated juxtaposition of images, seeing the new Italian school as closer in spirit to the deep-focus, extended shot techniques of Orson Welles and Jean Renoir.[1]

Less well known outside Italy was the existence of an important Italian literary current, best represented by the early novels of such writers as Elio Vittorini (*In Sicily*, 1941), Cesare Pavese (*The Harvesters*, 1941; *The Moon and the Bonfires*, 1951), Carlo Levi (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945), and Italo Calvino (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, 1947). Italian neo-realist cinema was part of a larger revitalization of Italian culture after the defeat of the Fascist regime, which had attempted to monopolize Italian culture from its seizure of power in 1922 until its downfall in 1943. If film critics and film historians in the immediate postwar period had approached neo-realist cinema from a broader cultural perpective, their emphasis upon the "realism" of such films might well have been tempered. They would have been forced to recognize that the major works of neo-realist fiction which appeared almost contemporaneously with the best films embodied an esthetic that could not be encompassed simply by traditional notions of "realism." The novels of Levi, Vittorini, Calvino, and Pavese all deal with social reality in a symbolic or mythical fashion, and all employ a subjective and often unreliable narrative voice, thereby embracing a clearly antinaturalistic narrative stance quite contrary to the canons of literary realism established by the novel in the nineteenth century.

An additional problem arose within Italian criticism of neo-realism between 1945 and 1955. Whereas almost all critics, no matter what their ideological persuasions, stressed the "realism" of Italian neo-realist cinema in the immediate postwar period, an especially influential and highly vocal group of Marxist critics turned this *description* of neo-realism into a programmatic *prescription* for all Italian films. Led by Guido Aristarco, the foremost Marxist film historian in Italy and the editor of the influential journal *Cinema Nuovo*, this group of intel-

1. For Bazin's seminal essays on Italian neo-realism, see *What Is Cinema?: Vol. II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles University of California Press, 1971).

lectuals advocated a "realist" cinema as a dynamic social force working for radical social and political change in Italy. Their writings attempted to replace the generally Catholic tone of prewar Italian culture with that of Marxist ideology, and they would be especially insensitive or opposed to any film that ignored concrete social and economic concerns or embodied a nonmaterialist view of Italy.

In their haste to canonize certain stylistic traits admittedly present in the greatest of neo-realist films, as well as their progressive, reformist, or even revolutionary content, Aristarco and other like-minded leftist critics usually overlooked or minimized the creative imagination and artistic motivation that had produced the best of these "realistic" films. Moreover, in their desire to see a particular ideology prevail within Italian cinema, such leftist critics tended to believe that neo-realism was a movement based upon universally agreed-upon stylistic principles and thematic concerns. Thus, when a director such as Federico Fellini expanded the boundaries of the critics' definition of what constituted neo-realism and began producing films that seemed to reflect an individualist, nonmaterialist perspective, it was construed by them as a "betrayal" and bitterly opposed in polemical reviews and essays. Of course, a few Italian directors (especially Luchino Visconti and Giuseppe De Santis) were Marxists and saw film-making as a means of changing Italian society. But it was primarily the Marxist film critics, far more than any directors or scriptwriters, who not only insisted upon the "realism" of Italian neo-realism but also advanced the sometimes dogmatic claims for cinema as a political force that should agitate for radical transformations in Italy's social and economic order.

Some four decades after the appearance of Rosselini's *Open City*, which was universally hailed as the first masterpiece of a new cinematic "movement" by critics in Europe and America, our understanding of Italian neo-realism has changed considerably. In retrospect, it now seems clear that the early critics' rather simplistic view of neo-realism as a cinema of pure, unmediated realism was never a satisfactory description of its great variety or its originality. Nor do the very different works of such directors as Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti, to mention only the most important directors, reflect a single unified style or thematic content. There never existed a self-conscious neo-realist "movement" as such, except in the writings of the Marxist ideologues who used that notion to attack directors and films that did not fit their prescriptive norms.

In fact, Italian film-makers were trying to accomplish in the cinema not unlike what their contemporaries in Italian literature hoped to achieve: the creation of a

new artistic language that would enable them to deal poetically with important social and political issues. Italo Calvino perhaps expressed this desire best when he wrote that neo-realists in both film and literature "knew all too well that what counted was the music and not the libretto . . . there were never more dogged formalists than we; and never were lyric poets as effusive as those objective reporters we were supposed to be."[2] Calvino goes on to suggest that since the neo-realists were so far removed from the canons of traditional literary realism, "perhaps the right name for that Italian season, instead of 'neo-realism,' should be 'neo-expressionism.'"[3] Cesare Pavese seems also to be describing the Italian film-makers or novelists of the postwar generation when he says that American novelists sought to "readjust language to the new reality of the world, in order to create, in effect, a *new* language, down-to-earth and symbolic, that would justify itself solely in terms of itself and not in terms of any traditional complacency."[4] Men such as Rossellini and De Sica were, above all else, attempting to see their world afresh from novel perspectives, thereby creating a "new" reality in their art.

Certainly, the best neo-realist films and novels dealt with universal human problems, contemporary stories, and believable characters from everyday life. But in spite of these general and rather vague similarities that united directors of very different artistic or political temperaments, Italian neo-realist films never completely rejected the conventions of Hollywood codes, nor did they completely obscure the role of fantasy and imagination (as opposed to documentary "facts") in their works. Many of the best neo-realist films (in particular the films listed above by Germi, De Santis, Lattuada, and De Sica) reworked Hollywood genres (the western, the gangster film, the musical), and most used professional actors, even stars, in their films.[5] The basis for the fundamental change in cin-

2. Italo Calvino, preface to *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, trans. Archibald Colquhoun (New York: Ecco Press, 1976), p. vii.
3. Ibid., p. xi.
4. Cesare Pavese, *American Literature: Essays and Opinions*, trans. Edwin Fussell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), p. 197.
5. The classic study of Italian neo-realism in English, primarily a reflection of the "realist" approach to the subject, is Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism: A Study of Italian Neo-Realism* (Cranbury, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1971). Other influential books on Italian cinema which view neo-realism from a realist perspective include: Carlo Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano 1895–1979*, 2 vols. (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1979); Pierre Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema* (rev. ed. of 1966 French ed.; London: Secker & Warburg, 1972); and especially the essays of the major neo-realist scriptwriter, Cesare Zavattini, in *Neorealismo ecc.*, ed. Mino Argentieri (Milan: Bompiani, 1979). An

ematic history marked by Italian neo-realism was less an agreement on a single, unified cinematic style than a common aspiration to reject Fascist cultural prescription and view Italy afresh, employing a more honest, ethical, but no less poetic cinematic language in the process.

Federico Fellini has consistently maintained that he was influenced by Roberto Rossellini more than any other single film-maker. He has always insisted, however, that the legacy of Rossellini was not merely stylistic. Instead, in Fellini's words, what Rossellini taught him about film-making was a moral attitude, an "example of humility, or better, a way of facing reality in a totally simplified way; an effort of not interfering with one's own ideas, culture, feelings."[6] For Fellini, Italian neo-realism meant primarily a way of seeing the world and its problems honestly and without prejudice, but it also required remaining open to the poetic potential of even the most banal daily events. And Fellini was not the first or only Italian director who began his career in the neo-realist era but eventually felt constrained by the ideological demands of leftist critics for films which would follow a particular political slant or embody a specific "realist" style. Many other directors also began to view such demands as an imposition upon their artistic freedom.

Perhaps the most important theoretical issue which emerged in reaction to the ideological strictures of the leftist critics concerned the concept of film character. Most neo-realist films, regardless of their stylistic or thematic content, usually viewed their characters from a strictly social perspective. Environment shapes and ultimately determines a character's fate. The unemployed worker in De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, a classic example of a neo-realist protagonist, derived almost all of

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anthology of writings following this traditional approach may be found in David Overbey, ed., *Springtime in Italy: A Reader in Neorealism* (Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books, 1979).

A number of important recent publications alter radically the traditional "realist" interpretation of Italian neo-realism in favor of a more balanced approach stressing the element of fantasy and the use of traditional cinematic codes and conventions in Italian neo-realism. In particular, see: Lino Micciché, ed., *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1975); Ben Lawton, "Italian Neorealism: A Mirror Construction of Reality," *Film Criticism* 3 (1979):8–23; Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York. Frederick Ungar, 1983); *idem*, "America and the Italian Cinema," *Rivista di Studi Italiani* 2 (1984):106–25; Robert P. Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

6. Federico Fellini, "My Experiences as a Director," in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). p. 3.

his pathetic dramatic force from the fact that without a bicycle, he would lose his hard-won job hanging posters on city walls, and without his job, his family would be doomed to a life of deprivation. His material circumstances determined much of his essential nature. Moreover, since he was typical of the workers in Italy immediately after the end of the war and before the economic boom that thrust Italy into the vanguard of newly emerging industrial nations, he could also be seen as a social *type*, a figure typical of an entire class or generation of Italians.

Roberto Rossellini, universally (Marxists included) acknowledged as the father of Italian neo-realism, became concerned about the unidimensionality of such characters. In 1954, the same year *La Strada* was released in Italy (where it was greeted by a chorus of hostile attacks from the Left), Rossellini declared that neo-realism had to be transcended if Italian cinema was to progress and to reflect the much altered "reality" of the postwar world: "One can't help being interested in other subjects and problems and trying new directions; one can't forever shoot films in bombed cities. . . . Life has changed, the war is over, the cities have been reconstructed. What we needed was a cinema of the Reconstruction."[7] As early as 1949 in *Stromboli* and later in such films as *Voyage in Italy* (1953), two works starring Ingrid Bergman, Rossellini moved toward a cinema that explored dimensions of the human condition unrelated to strictly social or political problems—in particular, human loneliness, alienation, and the search for meaningful emotional relationships between men and women.

Michelangelo Antonioni was equally impatient with the leftist critics' demands for more and more "neo-realistic" treatments of Italian life and responded directly to their insistence upon the portrayal of social *types* in the cinema. And it is significant that in his discussion of this issue, he focuses specifically upon De Sica's unemployed worker who is forced to steal a bicycle after having lost his own:

> The neo-realism of the postwar period, when reality itself was so searing and immediate, attracted attention to the relationship existing between the character and surrounding reality. . . . Now, however, when for better or worse reality has been normalized once again, it seems to me more interesting to examine what remains in the characters from their past experiences. This is why it no longer seems to me important to make a film about a man who has his bicycle stolen. That is to say, about a man whose importance resides (primarily and exclusively) in the fact that he has his bicycle stolen. . . .

7. Cited in Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, p. 105.

> Now that we have eliminated the problem of the bicycle (I am speaking metaphorically), it is important to see what there is in the mind and the heart of this man who has had his bicycle stolen, how he has adapted himself, what remains in him of his past experiences.[8]

Like Rossellini's films of the late 1940s and early 1950s, Antonioni's films in this same period (*Story of a Love Affair*, 1950; *The Vanquished*, 1952; *The Girl Friends*, 1955) moved away from strictly social or economic problems and toward an analysis of individual solitude and alienation. Moreover, Antonioni's characteristic camera style avoided the documentary effects usually associated with neo-realism in favor of a modernist and abstract photographic style.

When Federico Fellini turned from writing screenplays for neo-realist directors to making his own films in the early 1950s, his works began to distance themselves immediately from a conception of cinema that would be acceptable to Marxist critics. In the three films Fellini produced before *La Strada*—*Variety Lights*, *The White Sheik*, and *I Vitelloni*—the film character conceived of as a social *type*, the typical neo-realist hero, is modified and ultimately superseded. Rather than concentrating upon how a protagonist's environment shapes his character and his destiny, Fellini turned instead in this "trilogy of character" to reflect upon the significance of the clash between a character's social "role" or "mask"—how a character tends to act in society—and the character's authentic "face"—represented by his subconscious aspirations, ideals, and instincts.[9] With Fellini's subsequent "trilogy of salvation or grace"—*La Strada*, *Nights of Cabiria*, and *Il Bidone*, but most clearly in *La Strada*—we witness an even clearer transition from a neo-realist cinematic world, based upon character types who reflect social or economic conditions, to a more fanciful world of the director's own invention. Fellini shifts attention from a character's environment to a character's emotions, dreams, and psychology. Far from representing social types by their environment, the protagonists of these early Fellini films are totally atypical creatures, owing more to the world of adolescent dreams or to the personal myths of their creator than to any attempt on the director's part to represent a simple reflection of his society. *La Strada*, Fellini has declared, is "really the

8. Cited in ibid., p. 108.

9. For a more detailed discussion of Fellini's "trilogy of character" and his subsequent "trilogy of grace or salvation," of which *La Strada* is the classic expression, see Peter Bondanella, "Early Fellini: *Variety Lights*, *The White Sheik*, *The Vitelloni*, in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Bondanella, pp. 220–238; or the same author's more detailed treatment in *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, pp. 113–141.

complete catalogue of my entire mythical world."[10] In this film, Fellini completes his evolution toward a cinema of self-consciously poetic images and personal symbols or myths. While the surroundings of the film's characters are directly from a textbook definition of Italian neo-realism—stark landscapes, poverty-stricken peasant families, real locations in the small towns of provincial Italy, nonprofessional actors playing minor roles—no film could be farther from realist aims than *La Strada*.

Fellini agreed with both Rossellini and Antonioni that Italian cinema needed to pass beyond a dogmatic approach to social reality, dealing poetically with other equally compelling personal or emotional problems. Communication of information, especially information of an ideological kind, was not Fellini's goal in creating a film. As he has so aptly put it, "I don't want to demonstrate anything; I want to show it."[11] In contrast to what leftist critics maintained, Fellini suggests that there should be no privileged subject matter for the Italian cinema. If a director feels that he cannot express himself except in a realistic style, that is perfectly acceptable to Fellini, although he himself felt no strong commitment to create realistic films designed to convince audiences of the need for political change in Italy. Rather than viewing human relationships with a Marxist emphasis upon class struggle or social conflict, Fellini retains, in spite of his distaste for the institutions of the Church, a profoundly Christian emphasis upon the individual and the essential loneliness of the human condition. As Fellini has explained, "Zampanò and Gelsomina are not exceptions, as people reproach me for creating. There are more Zampanòs in the world than bicycle thieves, and the story of a man who discovers his neighbor is just as important and as real as the story of a strike. What separates us [Fellini versus his critics on the Left] is no doubt a materialist or spiritualist vision of the world."[12]

Fellini's interest in a poetic cinema rather than a "realistic" cinema is immediately evident in his choice of protagonists for *La Strada*. Far from wishing to portray characters who were products of their environment, Fellini's characters reflect a multilayered array of symbolic possibilities not exhausted by their socio-economic conditions. Gelsomina, the young woman who is bought from her impoverished mother by Zampanò, a performer and strongman in a traveling circus, is described by her mother as "a bit strange" (shot 9) and "not like the other girls" (shot 13). A more uncharitable view of Gelsomina might even call

10. Cited by Tullio Kezich in "The Long Interview" in *Juliet of the Spirits*, ed. Tullio Kezich (New York: Grossman, 1965), p. 30.
11. Cited in *Fellini on Fellini*, trans. Isabel Quigly (New York: Dell, 1976), p. 52.
12. Cited in Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, p. 134.

her retarded or dim-witted. Yet, this sympathetic waif who knows almost nothing about the real world possesses a special capacity for communicating with children, animals, or even inanimate objects. She knows, for example, when it is about to rain (shot 60). She has a strange affinity with nature and seems most at home by the seashore. Once, in a moving shot (133), Gelsomina walks by a solitary tree and imitates with her arms the angle of its only branch. Immediately afterwards, she listens enraptured to the almost musical sound of the telegraph wires that only she is capable of hearing. When she confronts Osvaldo, a truly freakish child in the farmhouse attic (shots 163–175), only Gelsomina understands the nature of his suffering, his loneliness, and his inner pain.

Gelsomina thus possesses a Franciscan simplicity and a purity of spirit which more than compensates for her diminished intellectual capacity, and this emotional potential makes her the perfect vehicle for Fellini's poetic mythology. Later, she is photographed (shot 236) against a wall upon which is affixed a poster reading "Immaculate Madonna," for Gelsomina will become the means through which her companion Zampanò learns to feel—learns, in effect, what it means to become a human being. This vocation of Gelsomina's becomes clear to her in a conversation with the Fool, who relates to Gelsomina the celebrated "parable of the pebble" (shots 462–469): "I don't know what purpose this pebble serves, but it must serve some purpose. Because if it is useless, then everything is useless" (shot 466). Here, the Fool convinces Gelsomina that she must be meant to stay with Zampanò. In spite of his brutish insensitivity, Zampanò nevertheless cares for her a little. This realization confirms Gelsomina in her vocation until her death from grief over Zampanò's accidental killing of the Fool.

Fellini's complex characterization of Gelsomina is paralleled by an equally ambiguous portrayal of the two male figures in her life, the Fool and Zampanò. When we first see the Fool in the film, he is skillfully performing his tightwire act high above the crowd, wearing a pair of angel's wings (shot 244). Thus, the religious associations that began by picturing Gelsomina as a Madonna or Virgin figure continue with the Fool's initial characterization as an angel, the heavenly figure traditionally linked to the delivery of special messages from the other world, as in the case of Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. At first, the Fool seems to serve precisely such a function in Fellini's poetic mythology. But the Fool also possesses a darker side to his character, a touch of Lucifer as well as Gabriel. Although he is the vehicle for confirming Gelsomina in her spiritual vocation, delivering the message that all human beings need others and serve some positive function, he himself rejects this very same belief in his own life: "I don't need anybody!" (shot 473). In his claim that he can survive perfectly well without

others, the Fool resembles Zampanò in spite of his seemingly wise, even religious nature.

Much of the same kind of ambiguity can be found in the character of Zampanò. He is constantly compared to animals in his speech, his behavior, his coarse treatment of Gelsomina, and his promiscuous sexuality. Even his strongman routine seems devoid of any intelligence or style and focuses, instead, upon brute force and muscle. Unlike Gelsomina, who has a special affinity for children and nature, or the Fool, who is most at home in the air high above the admiring crowds as he performs his amazing feats on the high wire, Zampanò's element is the solid earth. It is there on his knees that he shatters the chains around his chest, and it is there he lies in a drunken stupor on not a few occasions. Although Zampanò embodies brute strength and may be contrasted to the agility and quick-wittedness of the Fool, both men nevertheless share a similar selfishness. Each of them feels that he can live without the love of his neighbor. When Zampanò staggers drunkenly out of a bar after learning of Gelsomina's death, his pathetic cry echoes that of the Fool earlier: "Cowards . . . ! I don't need . . . I don't need anybody! . . . I . . . I want to be alone . . . alone" (shot 740). But unlike the Fool, we soon realize that Zampanò does not mean what he says. As Zampanò staggers toward the beach, that special place frought with symbolic associations with Gelsomina, he slowly looks up toward the stars, overcome by emotion. And it is in that moment that we discover how Gelsomina has profoundly changed Zampanò's character. It is a mark of Fellini's genius that he never specifies exactly what kind of an experience Zampanò undergoes at the close of the film. It may well be a private revelation of an important truth. It may be the feeling of an emotion never before experienced. While such an event can perhaps most easily be paralleled to the religious experience of conversion, Fellini quite clearly stops short of providing his audience with a simple, unequivocal significance for his closing shot. There is no "message" to conclude the film. Rather, the film concludes on an eloquent and moving image—Zampanò, prostrate upon the beach as he grasps the sand in desperation and finally sheds a tear.

Fellini pursues his search for a poetic cinema on a number of levels—in his ambiguous characterization of the protagonists, in his imaginative choice of visuals, and in his heuristic collaboration with Nino Rota, the composer whose original music embellishes the majority of the films Fellini has made during his career. A number of the most familiar and most suggestive visual images in *La Strada* have already been discussed in connection with the three central protagonists. But it may be even more instructive in describing Fellini's cinema of