"Variety Lights," "The White Sheik," and Italian Neorealism

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Some of the material on Variety Lights *contained in this essay has appeared, in a much different context, in an essay by the same author entitled "Fellini's* Luci del varieta: *The Limitations of the Stage and the 'Morality of Movies,' "* Italica, *Summer 1978, pp. 225-235.*

Although Federico Fellini's career in movies originated in his collaboration with Roberto Rossellini on *Rome: Open City, Paisan*, and *The Miracle*, Fellini's own movies have never been strictly neorealist. In fact, throughout his career as a director, his movies have made him a recurrent target of neorealist demogogues—those Italian critics who have felt that, in order for movies to be socially and politically significant, they must conform to some orthodoxy of neorealism presumed to exist (or, more accurately, invented by) those critics. Yet, while Fellini has never adhered to any orthodoxy other than that of his creative imagination and while his vision has, consequently, been wholly unique, that vision does emerge in part from the influence and ambience of neorealism. (This is particularly evident in his movies prior to *La Strada.*) A close look at *Variety Lights* (1950) and *The White Sheik* (1952), followed by an examination of their relationship to neorealism, will reveal to what extent Fellini's earliest movies are rooted in and nurtured by the tradition in which his cinematic career was born.[1]

I
Variety Lights
The Plot

Variety Lights focuses on the activities of Checco dal Monte (Peppino de Filippo), Liliana Antonelli (Carla del Poggio—Lattuada's wife), and Melina Moor (Giulietta Masina—Fellini's wife). Liliana, obsessed by show business ambitions, joins the third-rate vaudeville troupe which includes Checco and Melina (Checco's fiancee). Checco becomes increasingly infatuated with Liliana, not only as a woman but as a symbol for the fulfillment of all his unfulfilled fantasies. When the troupe travels to Rome, Checco and Liliana abandon it—hoping to sell themselves as a "team" to a major show business

impresario. Liliana becomes the constant companion of Adelmo Conti—an associate of the impresario Parmesani—and she ends up signing a contract with Parmesani and abandoning Checco. At the end of the film, Liliana is on her way to success as a soubrette in the Parmesani Revue, and Checco is on his way back to the provinces, having rejoined Melina and their old troupe—in body, if not in mind.

The Central Pattern

The opening moments of *Variety Lights* introduce a pattern of change that will characterize the movement of the film as a whole. The movie opens with the camera eye: (1) viewing then rapidly abandoning the image of a clock; (2) focusing on an empty street outside a theatre; (3) revealing the appearance of a hunchback and his immediate gravitation toward a photo display advertising the show inside the theatre; (4) viewing in closeup the hunchback's fascination with the photo display; and (5) moving into the theatre and up on stage to observe the theatrical activities of Checco and the variety troupe with which he performs. Implicit and recurrent in all this activity is the abandonment of practical reality and the world of physical necessity for a world of stage reality—or illusion, artifice, fantasy. It's evident in the camera eye's movement from the clock (practical reality) and the hunchback (physical necessity) to the world of the stage. It's apparent in the hunchback's immediate gravitation toward the photo display. And it's subtly present in the fact that, except for the hunchback, the street is deserted, while the theatre is packed—leaving the impression that virtually an entire town has fled the world of everyday reality for the make-believe world of theatre.

The movement from practical reality to stage reality—from fact to fantasy—which informs the film's opening moments will also inform the film's three major movements or developments: the geographical movement from the provinces to Rome, the evolution of Liliana from a child of the provinces to a soubrette in the impresario Parmesani's Revue, and the career of Checco as he tries, via Liliana, to break free of Melina and his variety troupe and attain Love, Renewed Youth, Success, Acclaim as an "Artiste," Power, and so forth.

From the Provinces to Rome

The movement from the provinces to Rome is imaged in the film as a movement from a world in which natural, physical existence still predominates, to a world in which all is artifice. The provinces are imaged largely as a world of physical activity (walking, in particular), physical needs and processes (hunger, thirst, eating, drinking), and physical environment (extreme heat, torrential rain, and so on).[2] In contrast, the Rome of *Variety Lights* is a world of overwhelming artifice and illusion, comprised almost solely of artists' hangouts, decadent nightclubs, and theatrical rehearsals and performances. It's a world of "International Fantasy" (to borrow the title of one of Checco's numbers) populated by Bohemian artists from distant lands—each one lost in a private, art-for-art's-sake, escapist vision. (The epitome of this is the Hungarian choreographer hired by Checco who, unable to communicate the "great significance" of her ballet to

her dancers, reduces them all to total stasis!) The appropriate, almost inevitable, culmination to the film's Roman phase is the presentation of Parmesani's Revue: a mechanically controlled compendium of illusions, illuminated by the artifical light of a make-believe sun and informed by the sentiments of a song which in sick romanticism surpasses even the worst music Checco's troupe has to offer.

Ultimately, the Roman world traps both Liliana and Checco in illusion, cutting them off from a world of natural vitality and destroying all possibility for vital engagement to the world around them. (Though Liliana and Checco are in the process of leaving Rome in the final scene, the movie concludes without showing either of them actually getting out—revealing in effect that their departure from Rome and from the world of illusion it embodies is, itself, an illusion.)

Liliana

Liliana's urge to become absorbed in the kind of illusion that Rome embodies is evident from her initial appearances in the film. Her major ambition is to get into show business which, as it functions in *Variety Lights*, is a world of escapist fantasy. And, perhaps even more important, she wants to become a STAR—an ideal or abstraction whose realization depends less on her own talents than on the arbitrary, uneducated opinions of others. (This is underscored by the fact that the closer Liliana gets to stardom, the less she exercises or seeks to refine her musical talents—which are negligible to begin with.) Her attainment of stardom by the film's end constitutes her total absorption by a world of illusion. And her growing absorption by illusion manifests itself through her growing loss of identity and through her radical dissociation from the world around her.

Liliana's loss of identity is suggested both when she abandons her dress with her initial "L" on it midway through the film and when Checco changes her name from Antonelli to "Lilli" for poster advertisements of the international troupe he's attempting to assemble. Along with the loss of her initial and the alteration of her name, she suffers the virtual surrender of her image and femininity as she adopts an unflattering, short hairdo midway through the film and begins to wear tailored suits—both of which accompany and accentuate a growing hardness and masculinization of her facial features. At the same time, she sacrifices the independence, energy, and mobility that clearly defined her as an individual early in the film. This is particularly evident in her appearance at Parmesani's Revue, where she is dressed in an absurd outfit, hoisted mechanically to her position on stage, reduced to mere decoration at the side of an aging soubrette, and forced merely to pose rather than to sing or dance. Though her stardom is imminent, as is evident from crowd reaction to her, the price of stardom is total objectification in Parmesani's world of mechanized illusion.

In addition to loss of identity, Liliana's rise to stardom entails total loss of connection with her world. The first time we see Liliana, she is in the midst of a crowd of people, shot in high angle to emphasize her centeredness within her world. And her activity early in the film manifests a genius for making connections and for moving into

the center of things. At Parmesani's Revue, however, she's high on a stage (removed from an audience instead of in one as she was at the film's beginning), and as her act concludes, she draws back from the audience and is detached from it by the closing curtain. In the final scene, she is far above Checco in her first class compartment, cloistered in a fur coat that's far more ample than weather would demand. And her presence in the film concludes with rapid additional separation from Checco, as she is borne by her train beyond range of sight or hearing.

Checco

Just as Liliana becomes wholly absorbed by the illusion of stardom in the course of *Variety Lights*, Checco becomes absorbed by the illusion of characters. "Checco," particularly as the name is pronounced in the film, strongly suggests "cieco"—the Italian word for "blind"—and Checco clearly becomes blind to reality through his involvement with Liliana.[3] "Liliana" recalls "Lilith," a demon of the night in mythology, and she acts upon Checco as a demon of darkness, delusion, and consequent blindness. She activates all his powers of fantasy and bewitches him into believing she possesses the key to all he'd like to have and be. (She does most of this unintentionally; Checco's bewitchment is primarily the result of his susceptibility to self- delusion.)

As the movie progresses and as Checco becomes blinded by his entrancement with Liliana, he projects more and more value onto Liliana, viewing her increasingly as a symbol and agent for his own advancement rather than as a concrete individual (a process which is facilitated by Liliana's own growing de-individualization). By the time he has arrived in Rome, he has begun to see Liliana almost solely as the embodiment of Fame, Artistic Acclaim, Success, Power—values which, unlike sexuality and beauty, she does not inherently possess, and which, unlike love, she doesn't have the capacity to confer.

Checco's susceptibility to Liliana and to the mental delusions she inspires manifests itself in the film largely as a problem of the head. Checco reveals himself to be excessively "heady" right from the beginning—insisting he's a "*capo*comico" or "*head* comic," dissociating his head from his body by keeping the top button of his coat buttoned, and adorning his head with a ridiculous beret. Moreover, it's established early in the film that Checco has a "sick" head—when he complains of a fever and Melina, by placing her hand on his head, accurately designates the head as the source of his illness.

It's Checco's dissociated, sick head that falls victim to Liliana and her charms during the movie. It's awakened to Liliana when she pokes him with an umbrella as he sleeps, initiating their relationship. It's captivated by her both physically and psychologically when she plants a kiss on it and seizes it in her hands at a party given by the lawyer Larosa early in the film. And it surrenders to her completely in a late-night scene at her *pensione* when she fills his head with visions of theatrical glory.[4] (Checco's surrender of his head and mind is so complete at this point that he begins to suffer hallucinations—"hearing" the sound of applause as he moves away from the *pensione*.)

The culmination of all this is the virtual lobotomization of Checco when Liliana tells him she's leaving him. His head is blown by the news as he passes out—going totally out of his mind and losing all contact with reality.

The full extent to which Checco loses touch with reality and sacrifices his head to illusion during the film becomes clear in the final scene, as he briefly encounters Liliana, who is en route to stardom, and then boards a train with Melina and his old troupe, who are en route back to the provinces.[5] Throughout the scene Checco insists on living a life of total pretense. When he sees Liliana, he pretends he's become a great success. (The troupe's destination clearly undercuts this.) He pretends his troupe includes a Viennese ballet. (There's no evidence for this whatsoever.) He pretends to Melina that he loves her. (His comment is contradicted immediately by his flirtation with a young girl.) He pretends to the girl with whom he flirts that she has initiated a converstation. (The opposite is the case.) And, in trying to impress the girl, he pretends he's an impresario. (At best, he's merely back to being a "capocomico.")

In doing all this, Checco is imposing on his world all the illusions he has associated with Liliana: Success, Love, Power (i.e., being an impresario), Artistic Acclaim (now projected onto the mythical Viennese ballet), and the capacity to connect with Youth and Feminine Beauty. By this point in the film, Checco has become competely "cieco." Having lost himself via Liliana in a stage world of fantasy and empty wish fulfillment, he is incapable of seeing things as they are. He can no longer encounter experience without enveloping it in the delusions of his disconnected ego. Indicative of his total self-abandonment in a stage or make-believe reality is the fact that he can only converse with the young girl in terms of theatrical roles and functions ("You're an actress?" "I'm an impresario," "I have a variety company"—p. 85).

Perhaps the most accurate description of Checco's condition in the film's final scene is provided by Checco himself in a seemingly simple comment which says much more than he suspects: "I'm in the theatre" (p. 85). As *Variety Lights* comes to a close, Checco, through sitting on a train, is indeed "in the theatre"—the theatre of his dissociated imagination. In total defiance of the realities that surround him, he has manufactured a make-believe vision of life in which all the world's a theatre and he's the main attraction. In so doing, he has fulfilled more completely than anyone else in his world the impulse to abandon the reality that was present in the camera eye's initial movement in the film, in the vaudeville troupe's journey to Rome, and Liliana's self- surrender to the Roman world of illusion.

II
The White Sheik (1952)

The Plot

Ivan Cavalli (Leopoldo Trieste) and his bride Wanda (Brunella Bovo) arrive from the provinces for a honeymoon in Rome. Ivan, a petty tyrant, has their stay completely mapped out: they are to tour all the Roman landmarks with Ivan's relatives, who function as his

extended family in the film. In particular, they are to "visit" the Pope for one of his regularly scheduled audiences with newlyweds. However, while Ivan is napping, Wanda escapes from their hotel to visit the "White Sheik" (Alberto Sordi), a hero of the Italian *fumetti*—comic strips whose visual illustrations are comprised of photographs rather than of drawings. She visits the offices of *Blue Romance*, which publishes *The White Sheik* comic strip, and is led off to the beaches outside Rome where a forthcoming sequence of *The White Sheik* is to be photographed. There she meets her White Sheik. She ends up playing the role of an insipid lovelorn slave ("Fatma") in the sequence being shot, and in keeping with her role, is led out to sea in a sailboat by the Sheik—where she is clearly seduced in head though not in body.

Ivan, meanwhile, awakens to discover Wanda gone and spends the rest of the day trying to conceal her absence from his relatives and trying to track her down. In attempting the latter, he calls upon the police—who do nothing other than drag Ivan's name and family relations from him (he'd wished to remain incognito) and pronounce him nuts. Late at night, unable to uncover any sign of Wanda, Ivan wanders into a desolate plaza where he encounters two prostitutes—one of whom maternally leads him off for the night.

When Wanda and the White Sheik return to shore and encounter the Sheik's Director and wife—both of whom are enraged—the Sheik blames everything on Wanda. Heartbroken and grief-stricken (to use the language of the *fumetti*), Wanda runs away. Later, having returned to Rome but unable to face Ivan, she tries to drown herself at the Tiber's edge by jumping into about six inches of water. She is "rescued" by a fisherman and whisked off to an insane asylum.

The next morning, Ivan returns to the hotel and is informed by phone of Wanda's whereabouts. He passes out, come to, forestalls his relatives, and rushes off to the insane asylum where, in the name of his "family honor," he insists that Wanda dress herself and accompany him to meet his relatives for the day-late audience with the Pope. In the final scene, Wanda is absorbed into Ivan's extended family in St. Peter's Square. Then, as Ivan and Wanda conceal from each other their activities of the preceding day—and as Wanda closes her eyes to life and proclaims that Ivan is now her "White Sheik"—the whole bunch marches off, two abreast, in a ludicrous canter toward St. Peter's.

The White Sheik *and* Variety Lights

To a certain extent, *The White Sheik* is a "remake" of *Variety Lights* functioning in remarkably similar ways. Much as the title of *Variety Lights* suggested that the world of the film was one of artifice and illusion, the title of *The White Sheik*—derived from the name of a comic strip in the movie—suggests that its world is ultimately a comic strip world and that Ivan and Wanda are ultimately nothing more than comic strip characters. Just as *Variety Lights* presented the surrender to illusion on the part of its major male and female characters, *The White Sheik* reveals Ivan surrendering to the illusions of respectability, orthodoxy, and convention, and Wanda surrendering initially to the illusion of the White Sheik and eventually—after her

individuality has been wholly compromised by her encounter with the Sheik—to the illusion of Ivan-as-White-Sheik. Rome in *The White Sheik*—like Rome in *Variety Lights*—is the headquarters of illusion, housing as it does both the Pope (the high priest of orthodoxy) and *Blue Romance* magazine which gave birth to the White Sheik (the high priest of romantic fantasy). And the structure of male-female relationships in the two films are virtually the same, as both films move from an engagement or marriage (Checco and Melina, Ivan and Wanda) through a temporary "divorce" (as Checco pursues Liliana and Wanda pursues the White Sheik) to an inauthentic reunion, based on pretense (Checco's pretense that he loves Melina, Wanda's pretense that Ivan is now her White Sheik).

Even the symptoms and consequences associated with the surrender to illusion in *Variety Lights* reappear in *The White Sheik*. Like Checco, Ivan and Wanda suffer from sick and dissociated heads: Ivan, a hat fetishist like Checco, emulates him by losing his head and passing out near the film's end, and Wanda is accurately diagnosed at one point as suffering from a headache that pills can't cure. (In *The White Sheik*, cerebral sickness and dissociation are even more severe than in *Variety Lights*, as is evident when both Wanda and Ivan end up in an insane asylum just prior to the film's conclusion!) And like Liliana, Ivan and Wanda surrender their identity in the course of their activities. (In *The White Sheik*, the surrender is presented largely through a "seduction/rape" motif. While the *fumetti* episode being shot focuses on a mass "rape," and while Ivan's relatives are enjoying the seduction-filled opera *Don Giovanni*—a scene crosscut with Wanda's seduction-in-spirit by the Sheik—Ivan is being seduced of his identity by the police, Wanda is being seduced of hers by the world of the White Sheik,[6] and Ivan and Wanda are both in the process of relinquishing their individuality to become mere roles—husband and wife—in the institutionalized world of Ivan's relatives.)

Finally, underlying the activity of the major characters in both *Variety Lights* and *The White Sheik* is a quest for love which becomes perverted and transformed into something else. Checco, in getting turned on to Liliana, initially sees her as a creature who can fulfill his need for love. Likewise, Wanda in pursuing the White Sheik and Ivan in pursuing the missing Wanda are each chasing figures who function, at least in the eyes of the pursuers, as potential bearers of love. (In Wanda's case this is blatant, in Ivan's it's implicit in the fact that he's just married Wanda.) But just as Checco's quest turns into a quest for Fame and Success, Wanda's quest becomes virtual prostitution to the demands of a wholly unlovable and unloving Ivan, and Ivan's quest becomes merely the passion to preserve his family's name and honor and thus conform to orthodox conventions and expectations.

Beyond Variety Lights

While *The White Sheik* is partly a re-creation of *Variety Lights*, it is also a quantum leap beyond it. It handles with infinitely greater complexity the material that was present in *Variety Lights*, and it accomplishes infinitely more than the earlier film accomplished.

This is perhaps clearest in *The White Sheik*'s expansion and refinement of the illusion problem at the center of both films. In

Variety Lights, the problem of illusion was pretty much confined to the theatrical world which was its major embodiment. In *The White Sheik*, while there's an equivalent to the theatrical world of *Variety Lights* in the world of the *fumetti*, illusion is extended both through and beyond the *fumetti* to include the entire Roman world of institutionalized authority—a world of male hierarchies epitomized by the institutions of Church and State.

The *fumetti* themselves subtly bear the influence and authority of the Church. With their White Sheik "god" who descends from on high in his first appearance, with episodes entitled "Sins of Damascus" and "Souls in Torment," and with characters such as "Fatma" (Cf. Our Lady of Fatima), they are little more than Catholic mythology rudely transformed into romantic fantasy. Thus Wanda, in submitting to the world of the *fumetti*, is submitting unawares to Catholicism-in-disguise—a fact which helps "explain" her later submission to the overt Catholicism embodied by the papal audience and the world of St. Peter's.

Present "undercover" in the world of the *fumetti*, male institutionalized authority is blatantly evident as a source of illusion and fantasy within Ivan's sphere of activity. As Fellini has said: "while Wanda follows the White Sheik as her dream romantic hero [Ivan] follows his own mythology, consisting of the Pope, decorum, respectability, *bersaglieri*, the nation, the king."[7] Two of Ivan's most precious goals are to visit the Pope and please his authoritarian uncle, a Vatican offical. His most romantically impassioned moment in the film comes when he envisions visiting the "Altar of the Fatherland" at twilight. Another impassioned moment is his patriotic response to a *bersaglieri* marching band which, while celebrating a national holiday,[8] almost runs Ivan over. And, when he's unable to function on his own authority, Ivan throws himself upon the mercy of the police—the most obnoxious embodiments of institutionalized authority in the film—whose bureaucratic rationalism Ivan seeks to substitute for his own power of investigation and discovery.

In expanding illusion to include the institutionalized male hierarchies of Church and State, *The White Sheik* deals not just with the personal fantasies of escapist dreamers, as did *Variety Lights*. It lays bare the chimeras of an entire nation (Italy) which, in Fellini's eyes, tends to seek out the illusion of security and protection that accompanies abject dependency on a Heavenly Father; on his earthly representative, the Pope; and on political father figures like Mussolini. More than that, since the institutions of Christianity, civil patriarchy, and bureaucratic rationalism that typify the Roman world Ivan encounters are, in effect, the very cornerstones of the religious, political, and intellectual traditions of Western civilization, *The White Sheik* images a world in which the illusions of the main characters are no less than the illusions of our entire Western heritage and culture.

Dependency, the Family, Marriage, and "Anti-Marriage"

As Ivan's unproductive reliance on institutionalized authority and Wanda's absurd enslavement to the *fumetti* might indicate, illusion in *The White Sheik* is equated with blind dependence on any external authority or source of fulfillment that becomes a substitute

for individual initiative. The widespread reliance of people on external powers is most clearly imaged in the film by the proliferation of uniforms—clothing that invests the individual with a borrowed sense of importance by plugging him or her into some external power source such as the Church, the Army, the Middle Class, and so forth. (Though it may not at first be apparent, even Ivan is uniformed throughout the film, for his suit, tie and hat comprise the uniform of the Respectable Bourgeois Citizen.)

Dependency also manifests itself in the urge of the main characters to become or remain a child within some sort of family unit—a hierarchical structure that enfolds them and provides parental protection. Ivan's activity in the film is little more than a sustained search for the Father—his uncle and the Pope being the two primary embodiments of that parental figure. Wanda initially seeks inclusion in the "family" comprised by the crew making the *White Sheik* cartoon—a family presided over by a clearly paternal/patriarchal Director. When that doesn't work, she settles for inclusion in Ivan's extended family. Ivan's uncle, of course, is a child within the family of the Vatican, and he too is off to see the Father (Pope) at the film's end. Even the White Sheik is revealed to be nothing more than a child when he and Wanda return to shore and he must answer to his "parents"—the Director and the Sheik's blatantly maternal (rather than connubial) wife.

In *The White Sheik*'s world of illusion and childish dependency, the institution of marrige proves to be a major embodiment of each. In fact, by centering on honeymooning newlyweds and by concluding with a wedding procession of sorts heading toward Papal authentication of the newlyweds' marriage, *The White Sheik* makes marriage the focal point in its examination of childish fantasy and self-deception.

In the course of the film, marriage reveals itself to be nothing more than divorce-in-disguise—an illusion people adopt as a mask for their inability to communicate and as a substitute for an authentic marriage of hearts and imaginations. This is discernible even in the marriages of secondary characters in the film such as Ivan's aunt and uncle and the White Sheik and his monumental Rita. But it's most evident in the relationship of Ivan and Wanda. At the beginning of the film they manifest little in common and no capacity whatsoever for communication. (Ivan yells orders and reads his appointment book at Wanda while she gazes abstractedly away, absorbed in anticipation of shedding Ivan and pursuing the White Sheik.) Their honeymoon, if such it can be called, is marked by wholly dissimilar experiences which leave them with even less in common at the end than they had at the beginning. And their reunion is marked by complete refusal to acknowledge and share their experiences by communicating openly. In fact, their reconciliation is based on lies, for they both proclaim their innocence while clearly having "sinned" within the context of their conventional morality: she has been seduced in spirit by the Sheik; he has spent the night in the company, and perhaps the bed, of a prostitute. As a result, at the film's end Ivan and Wanda are blindly caught in paradox: living lives of total spiritual divorce, they are nevertheless en route to the confirmation of their marriage as an institutionalized abstraction and illusion.[9] (Their total divorce—

the institutional facade of marriage notwithstanding—is visually emphatic in the final scene. During their conversation, they are never presented in the same shot; the camera eye keeps cutting from one to the other, segregating them in wholly separate worlds.) Reduced to an institutionalized illusion, marriage constitutes just one more externally sanctioned haven within which Ivan and Wanda, in their childish dependency, seek security.

Marriage-as-illusion and marriage-as-virtual-divorce do not exist merely as personal or romantic problems in *The White Sheik*. The personal, romantic divisions between male and female in the film are one manifestation of a much more comprehensive division. The entire universe of the film is split into irreconcilable worlds of male and female, and the sham marriage or virtual divorce between Ivan and Wanda serves as the major embodiment and expression of this.

Ivan and everything he's associated with (aside from Wanda) comprise a world distinctly masculine in character. His world is one of the Father, of Reason and Thought (Cf. his notebook and the petty-bureaucratic rationality it bespeaks), of the patriarchal Occident, of Classicism, and of the Manmade or Architectural (St. Peter's and the highly structured world of Rome in general). In contrast, Wanda and everything she's associated with (except Ivan) comprise a world distinctly feminine—a fact immediately suggested by the White Sheik's effeminacy. Hers is a world of the Mother, ruled over by the matronly editor of *Blue Romance* (Marilena Alba Velardi), and by Rita—the power behind the Sheik. And it's a world of Fantasy and Emotion, of the Orient, of Romanticism, and of Nature (The Eternally Feminine, quintessentially Romantic sea).

Because Ivan and Wanda embody values and worlds that ultimately extend far beyond the solely personal, the submission of Wanda to Ivan at the insane asylum— and to his world in St. Peter's Square—is much more than the submission of a woman to a man. It's the subjugation and absorption of all that is feminine in the world of the film: the total prostitution of feminine values to rigid, patriarchal, institutionalized masculinity. (The first view we're given of St. Peter's Square is comprised of a long tilt down the length of gigantic phallic obelisk—an image which establishes clearly the nature of the world Wanda is about to enter.) When Wanda capitulates to Ivan, it spells the death of all that is natural, fluid, spontaneous, and emotive in the world of film. It also spells the death of romantic wonder and envisionment—a fact that is pathetically evident in Wanda's alteration of her White-Sheik vision of love to fit her loveless marriage to the hopelessly conventional Ivan. Finally, and most important (as Wanda's alteration of her vision suggests), it spells the death of the most vital Feminine Power of all: Love.

Much of the above is suggested by the film's final image. As Wanda and the powers she embodies are neutralized to accomodate Ivan's world, and as she loses herself in the thrusting phallic march toward the male-ruled womb of St. Peter's (a marvelous image of masculine self-copulation!), the camera eye sweeps up and away to conclude the film with the image of a solitary rooftop angel—an image that embodies fully what the world of the film has come to embrace. Male, rigid, lifeless, and dissociated, the angel is a consummate image of masculine dominance and divorce—and of the individual ossified by

institutions. Moreover, in a world in which both Ivan's Pope and the Godhead represented by that Pope are conspicuously absent, the aloof and distant angel functions as the virtual embodiment of what Ivan's God-Pope would be. Exerting a cold, detached authority from on high, the angel constitutes the perfect concluding image for a film-long process in which the forces of masculinity have fulfilled their passion for supremacy at the cost of vital interaction and wholeness.

III

Variety Lights, The White Sheik, *and Neorealism*

At first glance, *Variety Lights* and *The White Sheik* appear to diverge sharply from the Italian neorealist tradition. For one thing, they lack the quasi-documentary "gritty" realism championed by Cesare Zavatini and evident in so many of the neorealist masterpieces of the 1940s. Moreover, the prevalence of comedy and satire in each is in marked contrast to the serious and ultimately tragic cinema of neorealism. (Not that neorealist movies are humorless, but their prevailing mood is clearly not comic.)

Yet if we look beyond the style and tone of the two films and examine them within the context of neorealist moral values and ooncerns, we find that *Variety Lights* and *The White Sheik* have much in common with the movies of Rossellini, DeSica, Visconti, et. al. Three of the principal components of neorealism as a moral force were: (1) rejection of false middle and upper class ideals—escapist illusions, reactionary abstractions—that prevailed not only socially but cinematically (in the so-called "white telephone" films) prior to neorealism; (2) rejection of the rigid authoritarianism that grew out of bourgeois morality, promoted bourgeois illusions, and manifested itself politically as Fascism; and (3) insistence on renewed connection among individuals—a revitalized social consciousness that would dissolve class distinctions and facilitate the liberation of the common man. These three neorealist concerns are also the principal moral impulses at work in Fellini's first two movies.

Variety Lights is particularly overt in its negation of bourgeois illusion and escapism. All Checco's ideals—Success, Fame, Wealth, Beauty and even Love as Checco perceives it—are bourgeois panaceas designed to provide Security (the ultimate bourgeois ideal) and to protect Checco from the responsibility of individuation. His dreams are identical to those fostered by the "white telephone" movies which neorealism repudiated, and *Variety Lights* reveals the full moral bankruptcy attendant upon submission to such dreams.

Less evident but present nonetheless in *Variety Lights* is the rejection of authoritarianism—"fascism" in all its manifestations: moral, social, and economic as well as political. There are four principal "fascists" in the movie: Checco himself (who is perpetually trying to control and manipulate other people), the lawyer Renzo LaRosa (who, in attempted seduction of Liliana, invites the entire troupe to his mansion for a lavish dinner, then kicks them out when Checco interferes with the seduction), Signor Edmundo (the Roman landlord who evicts Checco for not paying his rent), and Parmesani (the god figure of Rome whose Revue is the paradisal apotheosis of

bourgeois fantasy). Each is unremittingly negative within the movie—as is the fascistic authority which each embodies.

A commitment to vital social connection is, of course, present implicitly in *Variety Lights*' rendering of what happens to individuals who *fail* to relate authentically to others. Underlying all Checco's moral limitations within the movie is his inability to love. (Not merely in a sexual or romantic way but in a communal and spiritual way as well.) It's in his total refusal to connect concretely with others that Checco fails most miserably as an individual and falls prey to the radical dissociation that characterizes his devolution as a character.

The problem of social connection is also examined within the context of class dinstinction in *Variety Lights*—providing yet another link between the movie and neorealism. When the consummately bourgeois LaRosa plays host to the troupe, the spaciousness of his mansion and the abundance of food and drink hoarded within it contrast sharply with the cramped living conditions and perpetual starvation of Checco and his fellow entertainers. And when Checco and his troupe are in Rome, the baroque munificence of the night-club and theatre world of Parmesani is sharply contrasted to the squalor of a doss house, in which the lower class homeless drifters of Rome must spend their nights.

Interestingly, while *Variety Lights* was co-directed by Alberto Lattuada—a filmmaker whose work in the '40s was clearly in the mainstream of neorealist cinema—*The White Sheik*, which Fellini directed unassisted, is even more blatant than *Variety Lights* in its rejection of bourgeois illusion and authority and in its implicit insistence on social connection devoid of class prejudice.

Unlike neorealism and *Variety Lights*, both of which tended to center their moral concerns in an examination of lower class existence (focusing on the *victims* of fascist and bourgeois control), *The White Sheik* examines the idiocies of bourgeois existence itself, focusing on the victimizers rather than the victims. Ivan, as we noted in our discussion of the film, is the perfect bourgeois male fascist, with all the appropriate abstractions: Respectability, Order, Security, Family, the Nation, the Church. And Wanda is the perfect bourgeois wife, who despite initial attempts to free herself from Ivan (to realize *her bourgeois fanta*

bourgeois fantasies), ultimately succumbs to his stiflingly conformist world. Moreover, Ivan's uncle and the Director of the *fumetti* epitomize, through the control they exert over their respective worlds, the petty fascism at the root of all bourgeois attempts to lead a wholly ordered existence.

The problem of class distinction is even more pervasive and thoroughgoing in *The White Sheik* than in *Variety Lights*, in the complete dissociation between Ivan and the working class people he encounters in the movie, and in the abject surrender of the working class actors and actresses who comprise the cast of the *fumetti* to their imperious bourgeois Director and his equally imperious assistants.

Not only do *Variety Lights* and *The White Sheik* embody the moral (and concomitant social) concerns that informed and sustained neorealism, they share implicitly—through the negative processes they

image—something even greater: the very spirit of neorealism. Fellini has identified this spirit in an oft-quoted description of neorealism: "For me neorealism is a way of living without prejudice and a means of liberating oneself completely from bias; in short, a way of facing reality without preconceived ideas."[10] Here, with characteristic insight, Fellini has penetrated to the heart of neorealism: its quest for total openness and, in effect, total love, in all areas of human experience. It's this urge for openness that underlies Zavattini's neorealist pronouncement: "to exercise our own poetic talents...we must leave our rooms and go, in body and mind, out to meet other people, to see and understand them. This is a genuine moral necessity...."[11] And it's the urge that underlies the neorealist revolution in all its facets: the aesthetic revolution against the closed studio world of the white-telephone films; the moral and social revolution against the closed middle class mind of the bourgeois; the political revolution against the closed authoritarian world of the Fascists.

The moral demise of the main characters in *Variety Lights* and *The White Sheik* is occasioned, above all else, by their lack of openness—their inability to "liberat[e themselves] completely from bias," to "fac[e] reality without preconceived ideas," and to "go, body and mind, out to meet other people, to see and understand them." And the moral vision of both films—that moral and aesthetic necessity which insures the ultimate spiritual bankruptcy of the main characters—lies in the very same commitment to openness and love that is the spirit of neorealism and the empowering force within all Fellini's movies.

It is in their mutual commitment to open and unprejudiced existence that the films of Fellini and those of his neorealist predecessors most fully converge. That shared commitment is the most authentic and important link between Fellini and the tradition in which his cinematic career was born. And it's the ultimate proof that, though Fellini's movies are the product of a richly singular imagination, they are also the offspring of neorealism: the work of an artist who on the one hand can assert (and prove through his films) that "the only real realist is a visionary"[12] and who on the other hand can remain faithful to the moral and spiritual impulses which gave rise to neorealism.

Notes

[1] Although Fellini shared directing responsibilities with Alberto Lattuada, *Variety Lights* is clearly Felliniesque in vision and tone. Furthermore, Fellini has expressed a strong sense of authorship in discussing the movie: "for *Variety Lights* I wrote the original story, wrote the screenplay and chose the actors. Moreover, the film recalls some worn-out routines I saw presented by a vaudeville troupe with Aldo Fabrizi....I can't remember exactly what [Lattuada] directed, but I regard the film as one of mine" (Charles Thomas Samuels, *Encountering Directors*— New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1972—p. 118.)

[2] Checco and his troupe manifest dissociation from the natural world even in the provincial sequences—avoiding it as much as

possible, complaining about having to walk in it, objecting to the steepness of its paths—but at least the natural world is still clearly in evidence.

3 Checco's last name, dal Monte ("of or from the mountain"), though not as prominent as his first name in the film, is just as significant within the context of his character. Checco does indeed live in a mountain-top world, divorced from a ground-level encounter with reality.

4 "What success lies ahead!...In every theatre we'll play in. With huge colored posters...and my name this high...and yours too, in lights up on the marquee..." (*Federico Fellini: Early Screenplays*, trans. Judith Green—New York: Grossman, 1971—p. 60.)

English translations of the Italian dialogue will be quoted from this screenplay edition. Page numbers will hereafter be included in the text.

5 At first it might appear that he's back in touch with things, since he has rejoined Melina and his old troupe. However, while he seems to be reunited physically, he is clearly divorced mentally. And actually, a close look reveals him to be divorced even physically. He's alone on the station platform the first time we see him. He's the last one of the troupe to get on the train. The only member of the troupe with whom he associates is Melina. And, by the final shots, even she has disappeared—leaving him alone in the frame and radically isolated.

6 Indicative of her loss of identity in the world of the White Sheik is the fact that Wanda is known in that world only by "aliases": "Fatma" and "Passionate Doll." (The latter is her *nom de plume* in corresponding with the Sheik.)

7 Samuels, p. 125.

8 The day Ivan and Wanda arrive in Rome is a national holiday—emphasizing the fact that they live in a world veiled by a pseudo-myth of nationalism. (Also, in the Italian screenplay— though not in the movie itself—it's revealed that Ivan's relatives are staying at the "Hotel National.")

9 In recognizing the harshness with which *The White Sheik* treats institutionalized marriage, we should bear in mind the harshness of Italian marriage laws at the time. When the film was made, an annulment (the only form of divorce legally acknowledged in Italy) was virtually impossible to obtain, leaving countless couples trapped in loveless marriages that were, in effect, divorces-without-sanction.

10 Quoted by Angelo Solmi, *Fellini*, trans. Elizabeth Greenwood (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), p. 16.

11 Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," *Sight and Sound* (October, 1953), rpt., Richard Dyer MacCann, *Film: A Montage of Theories* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966), p. 228.

12 Samuels, p. 126.