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Dancing Away Atychiphobia: How *8½*'s Ending Conveys Rebirth

Guido Anselmi, film director, womanizer, and coward, is the subject of Federico Fellini's character-driven art film *8½* (1963). Existing in a perpetual state of surrealism, *8½* drifts seamlessly in and out of reality to convey the inner mechanics of Guido's psychology in all their gory details. Throughout the film, Guido grapples with conflicts, both personal and professional. His director's block subjects him to acrimony from producers and critics while lust-fueled affairs simultaneously put a strain on his marriage. Though antithetical in form both conflicts spawn from Guido's expectation of perfection and resulting inability to accept flaws both in himself and others. It is only in the film's final scene, as Guido joins his life's cast in a jovial parade, that he casts off the yoke of expectations and finds happiness in the chaos of a life filled with unabated self-acceptance. Only by embracing the chaos can Guido hope to confront his personal and professional conflicts. Only by embracing the chaos can Guido create art.

Viewers first meet Guido in one of his dreams. Stuck in a claustrophobic traffic jam Guido is suffocating as adjacent drivers expectantly stare. Eventually, he escapes and flies away only to be dragged back down to earth by characters from the science fiction film he is so desperately trying to make. Evidently, from *8½*'s onset, Guido is characterized as a man drowning in a sea of expectations, a plight seemingly worthy of sympathy. However, Guido reveals himself to be a coward whose insurmountable fear of admitting faults, accepting responsibility, and failing to meet expectations makes him the subject of audience loathing rather

than compassion. Indeed, Guido would rather throw away the words of criticism he himself solicited, actively avoid tough conversations with producers, and indulge in adulterous affairs than risk a confrontation with the problems which ail him. To do otherwise would be to admit personal imperfections. Guido's extramarital affairs strewn throughout the film act as manifestations of his pursuit of transcendence, and more concretely problem avoidance, through bodily pleasure. His lust occupies his mind in the form of idealized depictions of the perfect woman and dreams of possessing a harem of women eager to please, both of which are examples of the inordinate expectations Guido himself places on others. Once Luisa, his wife, learns of the sexual flings, Guido, ever the coward, resorts to overt, non-convincing lies. These conflicts culminate in the film's final scene, beginning with a press conference in which he is expected to speak about his hopeless science fiction production.

For Guido, the press conference represents a climax of expectations. Against his will, Guido is driven by the film producers to the event being held at the launch pad intended to be used as set dressing in his sci-fi picture. His vehicle is just one of many arranged in a tight grid and moving at a uniform pace towards the enormous structure, a callback to the film's opening panic-inducing traffic jam. The press conference is Guido's living nightmare. The camera pans upwards and holds on a shot of the launch mechanism's towering scaffolding which is quite literally a monument to Guido's failure as a director. Once on foot, Guido is guided, elbows interlocked, by the movie producers. He repeatedly drops to his knees and attempts to run away like a child en route to the dentist. But for Guido, there is no more hiding. The shot is filled with repeated close-ups of reporters making absurd inquiries. Dozens of talking heads surround Guido, asking questions and speaking into his ear as suspenseful music plays in the background, further adding to the sensory overload. The scene is a crescendo, a culmination of all that Guido

has so ardently avoided. Eventually, the sound dissipates as Guido begins to dissociate from his surroundings. In a moment of surrealism, he speaks with his wife whose image is presented upside down, reflected off the table at which he sits; she asks for a separation. Even as Guido's personal and professional conflicts simultaneously crest he remains unable to accept both himself and others, his perspective remains twisted, topsy-turvy, as portrayed by his and Luisa's upside-down reflections. Rather than face his problems Guido resolves to commit the ultimate act of avoidance when he crawls under the table, takes a pistol from his right-hand pocket, and kills himself.

The suicide, however, was merely a fantasy, and the next shot replaces the pandemonium of reporter's questions with a solemn monologue delivered by the dogged critic which brings into stark relief Guido's problematic thought patterns. "Destroying is better than creating when we're not creating those few, truly necessary things," the critic asserts thereby encapsulating Guido's expectation of perfection. As the monologue persists, the camera performs a short zoom to allow Guido's face to fill the screen. It is at this moment that Guido Anselmi is reborn. In the car with the critic putting words to the thoughts previously confined to our protagonist's mind, Guido learns to eschew expectations and to accept himself and others as they are, with all their wonderful faults. A shot of various characters from Guido's life shows them walking in unison towards the launch pad. In contrast with their previous garb, each is now dressed in all white, signaling purity though not perfection. The white signifies Guido's acceptance of them, flaws and all. Meanwhile, the magician, a capable mind reader, begins to organize the movie set following the will of Guido's thoughts. Finally, the reborn Guido speaks, or rather a narration gives voice to his inner mind. Just as the critic gave words to Guido's old perspective, the reborn Guido encapsulates his new dogma when he proclaims with child-like wonder, "It's so natural

accepting you, loving you.” He continues, “[T]his confusion is...me. Not as I’d like to be, but as I am.” This new perspective motivates Guido to proclaim, to his wife, “Life is a celebration. Let’s live it together!” an invitation that Luisa hesitantly accepts. Following Guido’s transformation, lively music is introduced courtesy of circus performers whose presence signifies Guido’s celebration of being alive.

The circus troupe marches around remnants of the sci-fi set with young Guido, previously introduced in flashbacks, in tow. Guido’s younger self now dons an immaculate white Catholic school uniform in contrast with the black version of the same outfit seen previously, yet another symbol of Guido’s newfound acceptance, this time of himself. From the stairs of the launch mechanism emerge the subjects of the film Guido must now create, a film that is personal, not perfect. From the ashes of Guido’s failure have risen the resources for success. Failure is something to be relished as an unavoidable byproduct of the artistic process the scene maintains. This group joins those characters adorned in white from Guido’s personal life hand-in-hand and arranged in a large circle. Guido seizes the moment, takes up his bullhorn, and shouts orders. “Everybody hold hands! Spread out!” he bellows into the megaphone which serves as a representation of Guido’s newfound power and confidence as a director. By eschewing his fear of failure Guido has ascended to the status of ringmaster, a director of a celebration of chaotic and imperfect life. Embracing the turmoil has allowed Guido, for the first time in the film, to create art. At Guido’s behest, the ring of people begins a dance-like march. Mustering newfound courage Guido himself joins the parade, a metaphor for his acceptance of life’s chaos in which every participant is flawed but nonetheless connected. The film cuts to a shot of young Guido now leading the circus players just as present-day Guido directs the dance. The rest of the troupe eventually exits leaving the young Guido alone, center-stage, and in the spotlight. Ending with a

showcase of young Guido reaffirms the protagonist's rebirth. Like a child, Guido has the opportunity to begin life anew, this time with a perspective of acceptance. The ending of *8½* is the beginning of Guido's new life.

Guido's rebirth does not entirely solve his problems. His new outlook erases neither the failure of his science-fiction film nor his adulterous past. But through a fundamental change of perspective in which suffocating expectations are replaced with an acceptance of flaws, Guido becomes capable of finding solutions. He earns his wife's forgiveness and becomes capable of creativity. He achieves the kind of permanent transcendence which ephemeral bodily pleasure is incapable of matching. The reborn Guido has escaped the traffic jam; he flies free above the clouds.

Works Cited

Fellini, Federico, director. *8½*. Cineriz, 1963.