Introduction

This chapter surveys the work of Roberto Rossellini, Federico Fellini, and Michelangelo Antonioni as they moved away from the post-war problems of working-class people struggling against poverty and unemployment. The artistic and commercial success of Italian films after the neorealist period was primarily the result of two major factors developed by the Italian film industry. One was the popular appeal of genre films, mostly romantic comedies and westerns that competed with American films on the international market. The second was the emergence of highly profitable “art” films from Italian filmmakers such as Visconti and Fellini, whose highly personal cinematic styles rose above their neorealist concerns to earn prestigious film awards at major international film festivals. Rossellini was the leader of this new perspective; his films examine the psychological traumas of contemporary marriage and the resulting emotional alienation and despair. Following Rossellini’s lead, Antonioni and Fellini began to create a cinema of Reconstruction with their own personal films on the effects of solitude and alienation upon human beings. Both these directors introduced new narrative techniques blending a surreal fantasy with reality. Fellini’s major works of this period are La Strada (1954), La Dolce Vita (1960), Otto e Mezzo / 8½ (1963) and Giulietta degli Spiriti / Juliet of the Spirits (1965).

Antonioni produced a highly acclaimed trilogy—L’Avventura (1960), La Notte / The Night (1961) and L’Éclisse / The Eclipse (1962)—that broke away from more conventional narrative techniques to explore the emotionally sterile lives of characters alienated by modern society. In Blow-Up (1966) Antonioni plays with camera images whose visual aspects displace the narrative, shifting it toward abstraction and an ambiguous relationship to one’s identity.

Rossellini’s Break with Neorealism

Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977) began the shift away from neorealism with his production of The Miracle, written by Fellini, in 1947. This story is about a simple-minded peasant girl, depicted by Anna Magnani, who believes she is made pregnant by a man she takes to be St. Joseph. Rossellini relies on the virtuoso performance of Magnani to bring this religious allegory into focus. More important is Rossellini’s belief that modern society has lost touch with an understanding of a religious experience. In his next film Rossellini explores the theme of a “saintly fool” in Francesco, Guillare of God (1950). This theme is later transposed by Fellini in his two early films La Strada and Le Notti di Cabiria / The Nights of Cabiria (1956). Rossellini also began developing a new cinematic technique, plan-sequence, in which the director organizes the action into a long single take to concentrate on an actress to reveal her psychological state of mind. His reliance upon professional actresses continued as he cast his wife, Ingrid Bergman, in a series of films that explored the pain and suffering of a woman
alienated and estranged by a modern marriage. Rossellini directed two robust films in the early 1950s, Europa 51 (1952) and Viaggio in Italia / Voyage to Italy (1953) that completed the break with the neorealist aesthetic. In these films, Rossellini’s mise-en-scène techniques use the natural locations and sites as impersonal realities that mirror the estrangement of the central characters from an emotional life. With these films Rossellini “shifted the focus of Italian neo-realist perceptively toward psychological analysis and emotional behavior and away from themes directly associated with the war” (Bon-danella 1993, p. 108). Such a decisive shift of

In Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow-Up (1966), David Hemmings as a mod fashion photographer checks film strips (opposite), and mounts model Veruschka for an orgiastic photo session in the “swinging London” of the 1960s.
Italian neorealist cinema evolved toward a post-war Italian cinema characterized by an existentialist examination of solitude and alienation in the work of Fellini and Antonioni and their own anti-linear film narratives. Fellini works within parables while Antonioni takes on ideological, existential constructs.

Rossellini recovered critical approval in the later 1950s, first with his documentary India (1958), then with Il Generale Della Rovere / General Della Rovere (1959), starring Vittorio De Sica as an Italian Resistance fighter, signaling a return to the neorealist style. Rossellini’s interest in historical docudramas brought him into French and Italian television where he directed L’Eta del Ferro / The Age of Iron (1964), Atti degli Apostoli / The Acts of the Apostles (1968) and La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV / The Rise of Louis XIV (1966), which received critical praise in its theatrical release. His detached style, using a mise-en-scène with extensive long takes emphasizing slow zooms and panning, presented his elliptical narratives with remarkable historical detachment and authenticity as in The Age of the Medici (1972) and Blaise Pascal (1974). By then Rossellini had achieved canonization by New Wave filmmakers, like Godard in France and Bernardo Bertolucci in Italy, as a man devoted to the persuasive uses of the cinema.

The Films of Federico Fellini

Though Federico Fellini (1920–1993) adopted the cinematic techniques of mise-en-scène and the long take, he followed the aesthetic of the neorealists. His first film Luci del Varietà / Variety Lights (1950), co-directed with Alberto Lattuada, displays his great interest in music halls and vaudeville acts. He combined this interest with early mating games of young men in
Lo Sceicco Bianco / The White Sheik (1952) and I Vitelloni (1953). In two of his most popular films of the 1950s, La Strada and Nights of Cabiria, both starring his wife, Giulietta Masina, in the leading role, Fellini adopted Rossellini’s theme of the “saintly fool.” Yet while Fellini uses neorealist themes, these two films add a sense of surrealism to the mystery and spectacle in the life of a street performer. La Strada, a parable about a young woman sold into bondage to a circus strongman, was the turning point in Fellini’s film career when the film won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film and brought him international acclaim.

These films are motivated by Fellini’s recurrent theme of finding some meaningful spiritual values that will convert or redeem one’s existence in a world of spiritual poverty and alienation. His films indirectly touch upon the economic and social forces that act upon human relationships, but they focus on the human values of self-worth and faith necessary to sustain existence amid a harsh, insensitive world corrupted by personal greed and selfishness, one devoid of human compassion and understanding. In both La Strada and Nights of Cabiria, Fellini uses allegory to demonstrate how the gifts of life and love are destroyed by the forces of ignorance, greed and selfishness. This baseness and cynicism of the adult world is personified by the two male characters, Zampano, the strongman in La Strada, and Oscar, a would-be marriage partner in Nights of Cabiria. In both situations, the childlike innocence of the woman is shattered by the betrayal and duplicity of the man. In La Strada, Gelsomina is abandoned, her gift of love destroyed by Zampano. Rejected, she now drifts in a world made meaningless, without comfort or compassion, to die alone. Yet Fellini shows us that in the end, even the brutish Zampano, in his own loneliness, will finally be touched by
the selfless love of Gelsomina. The ending of *Nights of Cabiria* differs greatly from *La Strada*. Cabiria is not defeated nor set back by Oscar’s betrayal, but instead she is redeemed by an awareness of a life-affirming vision. Thus, Cabiria recovers her self-esteem as she meets a procession of youthful players starting down a symbolic road of life we all travel.

In his films of the 1960s and 1970s, Fellini’s stature as a filmmaker grew with each successive film. *La Dolce Vita* (1960) or “the sweet life” achieved huge profits at the box office in Italy and abroad for its controversial depiction of the decadent lives of Italian intellectuals and the bourgeoisie, and its anticlerical stance toward the Church. The Vatican newspaper quickly classified the film “unsuitable for all” for its debasement of family values and its depiction of casual sex and suicide. Moreover, the Italian government decried the way Fellini satirized the Church and the TV media for manipulating human spectacles for their own interests. Throughout the controversy raised by this film, Fellini maintained that he used the cinema as a means toward a personal expression, a vision that affirmed and accepted a person’s humanity in the celebration of life. Thus, Fellini attacked those institutions and social conventions that inhibited the freedom of a person toward self-fulfillment. Fellini (1976) contends that:

> What I care about most is the freedom of man, liberation of the individual man from the network of moral and social conventions in which he believes, or rather in which he thinks he believes and which encloses him and limits him and makes him narrower, smaller, sometimes even worse than he really is [pp. 157–158].
In his later films, Fellini combines the energizing forces of life to emancipate his central characters from the decadent and life-inhibiting mythologies and institutions of modern society. In all his works, the city of Rome becomes the center for an unending conflict between decadence and rebirth. Thematically, the contradictions of modern life encouraged Fellini’s directorial imagination to develop his love of the circus, a place of mystery and magic, into a metaphor of modern life, where one kind of activity or illusion overlaps with another in a continuing cycle without any apparent beginning or end. In many of his films, the corruption and prostitution of life for material rewards is countered with the childlike innocence of his characters, who provide us with an insight on and faith in the wonders of existence.

*La Dolce Vita* is organized around the quest by a reporter, an alter ego of Fellini played by Marcello Mastroianni, seeking life-supporting values in the hedonistic world of modern Rome. There are many encounters with different representatives of this society but each experience demonstrates how gravely modern humanity is disconnected from the generative source of psychic energy that focuses meaning in life. In its place Fellini depicts several artificial social structures that impede meaningful communication. Christian mythology appears hollow and reflects the emptiness of human values in modern life. The absurdity of existence is personified in the suicide of the intellectual Steiner, who has detached himself from human needs. The tawdry love affairs are sexual games performed without passion by Mastroianni as public relation stunts.

The later films of Fellini, especially *8½* and

Marcello Mastroianni, as director, makes up his mistress as a prostitute so that he can engage in his own sexual fantasies in *8½*. 
Amarcord (1974), are a combination of autobiographical details and childhood fantasies that contrast a sense of wonder and joy in the mysteries of life with a sense of malignant, nameless images that emerge from the darkness threatening or even destroying life. These shadowy figures appear and reappear constantly in the action of 8½. They are surreal phantoms that psychologically condition human response. Amarcord serves Fellini as a nostalgic return to his boyhood days in Rimini when fascism was on the rise in Italy. Part of the film is his examination of the social and political causes of fascism. He concludes that fascism arrests development of a person during adolescence, where children remain children for eternity, leaving responsibility to others, and feeling a sense of security in having someone else do one’s thinking, first one’s mother, then, in another time and place, Il Duce.

While both Amarcord and 8½ draw heavily upon autobiographical experiences, 8½ spotlights a director’s struggle to find the creative inspiration required to bring about his own spiritual redemption. At times it is a surreal fantasy in which Guido, as portrayed by Mastroianni, is a film director attempting to escape from the reality of the film’s production. In this manner, the film is self-reflexive on the fears that the director must face as he develops the script for the film. With no apparent solution at hand, Guido attempts suicide to escape from his inability to resolve the terrifying conflict between his commitment to his art and to the commercial demands of his new film. Some critics have considered this motion picture a
“film within a film,” but that explanation overlooks the exploration by the director of his past nightmares, fantasies and fears that have produced the material that is the basis of this midlife crisis.

Fellini says that 8½ is a “film in which parts of the past and imaginary events are superimposed on the present.” The episodic narrative is structured like a three-ring circus with the director’s alter ego, Guido, as the ringmaster, moving characters from present events to memories, then to fantasies. Again, Fellini uses the circus as a metaphor for a human comedy that objectifies his own subjective state of mind.

The director Guido, wondering where he is as he recovers from a nightmare in a fashionable health spa in 8½.
The film centers on his quest for identity, self-definition and liberation from the restrictive codes and conventional forces of society, from his parents to his schoolteachers to his wife and associates. Entrapment occurs in the first surreal sequence that opens the film. In this scene Guido is trapped in his car, then magically he escapes into the clouds only to be pulled back to earth by his producers.

Throughout the film, Fellini dramatizes episodes in which he fantasizes how these various forces, from church to family, tyrannize him. In Guido’s first appearance at the hotel, we realize that “dream spaces” exist side by side with “real” spaces depicted in the film. Episodic scenes flow into one another repeating the theme of the self-reflexive spirit seeking to unlock the mystery of creativity. In the end, Guido understands that his film must include all of the past obsessions and experiences of his authentic self.

Guido, as director and Fellini’s alter ego, awakens to the fact that his quest for spiritual renewal resides in the circus, a spectacle where magic and mystery energize his imagination. In this arena, the conflicting forces of illusion and reality, innocence and experience meet and restore order to his life. The circus also brings together the opposing forces of containment and liberation representing the psychic wholeness of union. Thus, the director symbolically returns to life as he disregards his critics and strikes up the band. Then he unites all hands, family and cast alike, into a magical circle to reaffirm the joyous forces of life itself (Afron 1990, pp. 109–124).

Fellini’s later films of the 1970s and 1980s were equally self-reflexive as he turned to Italian literature to seek comparative social satires that brought into play memories of containment and flights into liberation. He began with Juliet of the Spirits (1965), which contained a strong feminist tract on the role of a housewife fantasizing her escape into new worlds. This was followed quickly by his adaptation of the Satyricon by the Roman author, Petronius. Fellini Satyricon (1969) is a sensuous odyssey of two young men first joining, then escaping from the myriad bacchanals within the Roman empire. More phantasmagoric in surreal, dream-like spectacles than Fellini’s previous films, Satyricon shifts between the imaginary and symbolic restrictions on the libido that jeopardize the lives of these men as they travel through ancient Rome.

The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni

The films of Michelangelo Antonioni (b. 1912) also evolved from his awareness of the existentialist crises in modern life. Where Fellini informs his films through his own visions of Christian humanist philosophy, Antonioni avoids the romantic, fantasy world constructed within the powerful imagination of a director. In its place his films project the existentialist dilemma facing displaced characters searching for identity in a completely alienated, urbanized society. Antonioni’s films thus contemplate what happens to men and women when moral systems are absent from human relationships. In the same year that Fellini’s La Dolce Vita appeared, Antonioni released his film L’Avventura, starring Monica Vitti. The film deals with bored middle-class people whose loss of contact with each other leads to promiscuity and philosophical speculation. The plot of this film is a simple one: A woman mysteriously disappears and her two friends go on a search for her. After a time, the two friends forget about the missing person and instead begin their own love affair. Thus, the “search” for someone becomes a thematic excuse for Antonioni to transform traditional narrative cinema into an exploration of feelings between a man and a woman caught in their own psychological landscapes. Suffering from a sense of meaninglessness, absurdity and boredom, they respond by attempting to find relief through sexual liaisons. But these sexual encounters fail to overcome their own need for some meaningful human relationship and the unexplained absence of the other.

In this manner, Antonioni creates similar situations that illustrate a variation on the problems inherent in today’s society. Antonioni does not advocate any predetermined solution. As a documentary filmmaker, he uses the long
take and long focal length lenses that flatten the space and confine his characters in an environment while distancing his camera from the action. In his presentation of the enigma of modern life, his characters appear to be displaced within the theatricality of an outdoor setting. They are like “found objects” lacking identity, purpose or meaning. They are stranded in a new kind of existence in which significant action within moral standards and human values have atrophied. These characters have been cast adrift in the time-space medium of cinema, into the absurdity of modern technological life where images and appearances control social activities.

In his own minimalist style, Antonioni has explored the existentialist dilemmas of Sartre and Camus: one, that life is merely a sum of the actions one lives; two, that our modern society depersonalizes and alienates us from ourselves and each other insofar as the ability to communicate meaningfully with one another has failed; three, that our faith and belief in the purpose of life has been lost, and with it our ability to distinguish between love and lust.

L’Avventura, La Notte and L’Éclisse form a trilogy advancing the same theme of alienation. They entertain the ambiguities of modern life in the midst of uncertainty and change and the pervasiveness of chance and disorder. The film narratives are tautological and thus the action is circular. The characters end up where they have started without being able to come to grips with or advance any answers to the socio-political problems they encounter in their journey through an urbanized Western world.

A spectator’s response to their explorations makes us more aware how a person’s life in a post-industrial society becomes sterile. Destructive acts of sex are seen in this cold and empty world as diversions through which anxieties are discharged. In Professione: Reporter / The Passenger (1975), chance happenings and puzzling accidents are the means for a TV reporter to make contact with revolutionaries, but in the end all significant actions become self-centered or self-inflicted, as seen in his interview with the rebel leader who reverses the questions asked. In this film we become passengers, and like the TV reporter, willingly exchange identities in hopes of entering a new world of political adventure and daring.

Although his early trilogy gave Antonioni international prominence as a filmmaker, popular acceptance of his films occurred with the release of Blow-Up (1966), made in England for MGM. Again, Antonioni takes us on an extended search, this time with a photographer who tries to find some meaning and connection through a series of still photographs. Behind this narrative, the director clearly indicates how our lives are shaped by our fragmentary ways of seeing, and the manner in which we attempt to construct meaning from supposedly documentary facts. However, the true drama of Antonioni’s films depends upon our emotional reactions to the undecipherable chance occurrences one encounters in life itself.

Blow-Up is an English adaptation from Julio Cortazar’s short story, “Las Babas del Diablo,” or “Devil’s Drool.” As Spanish slang, the title refers to a person having a close call with evil. The moral of the story involves saving the soul of a human being from Satan.

In the film version, Antonioni follows a storyline with a photographer, Thomas, as a voyeur who gazes upon a lovemaking tryst and takes a series of photographs of the primal scene. But a spectator’s attention to Thomas’ acts of voyeurism, which lead to a possible enactment of an Oedipal plot, is only an entry into understanding some of the actions in the narrative. In his many attempts to interpret these photos, Thomas realizes that he was a witness to more than just an embrace of lovers alone in an Arcadian setting. Thomas proceeds to blow up several shots, then sections from these shots, without revealing to the audience any connections. Then, when the camera pans to view these series of blow-ups in a particular sequence, a story unfolds. To enjoy Blow-Up, one must realize that these images are susceptible to various interpretive acts by the viewer. They do not depend so much on the replication of external reality, but more upon the social contexts in which they are perceived. Thomas, after witnessing a primal scene,
attempts to understand his unconscious reactions to this scene. Here the interplay between past memories and consciousness comes into play, between the voyeur and the image, since Antonioni demonstrates how such images of real events symbolically alter how we respond to their reality. Thus, the true subject of this film concerns understanding how one’s consciousness of self is shaped by an imaginary fantasy of desire which misrepresents one’s fragmentary ways of perceiving the outside world, whether from a journalistic, objective stance or by accepting a given interpretation of this world through the images of another (Eberwein 1990, pp. 262–281).

References


