

BOOK REVIEW

Fellini's Eternal Rome: Paganism and Christianity in the Films of Federico Fellini. By ALESSANDRO CARRERA. Bloomsbury Academic. New York, NY, 2019. Pp. 186. Hardback, \$102.00. ISBN: 978-1-474-29761-5.

Alessandro Carrera puts Fellini's depiction of Christianity and paganism in the context of Italian culture. This paganism is Christianity's Other and cultural complement, consisting of what Christianity transfers to it from the domain of its own concerns (e.g. illicit sex). Carrera traces the implications of this conception through Fellini's oeuvre especially as it intersects with the depiction of Rome. His approach merges the study of Fellini in general with classical reception in particular, while illuminating the Fellini oeuvre's engagement with Jungian theory and as object of study for Lacan.

Each chapter treats a group of films, major themes and relevant contexts, often with original interpretations. [Chapter 1] Carrera identifies Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 9, as a key reference for Fellini's paganism qua Christianity's co-present Other and complement. The Furies threaten to summon Medusa, prompting a panicked Vergil to cover Dante-pilgrim's eyes. Dante-poet notes that readers of sound mind will recognize the teaching hidden here. Carrera interprets: the pagan world remains co-present with the Christian, everywhere but in revealed truth, and Medusa embodies its power to overwhelm the unsuspecting Christian.

[Chapter 2] Carrera's analysis of Fellini includes his early work as writer and actor for Roberto Rossellini. This work shows concern for humility as an ethical act and a sense of Rome as an oscillating pagan-Christian space and pervasive figurative presence. In "Il Miracolo" (part 2 of *L'Amore*, 1948), the goatherd Nannina can be identified with Christian and pagan archetypes (Virgin Mary and pagan nymph). She encounters a satyr-like vagrant, played by Fellini, who intoxicates her and rapes her in her sleep. Becoming pregnant, Nannina processes the attack, which she doesn't remember, through spiritual fantasy. She decides that the vagrant was Saint Joseph and her pregnancy is miraculous. Her Catholic conceptual vocabulary operates in a complementary pagan way, resexualizing chaste Joseph and reconfiguring Mary's virginal conception as pagan divine rape. The film

exhibits humility vis-à-vis Nannina by avoiding caricature and instead imbuing its depiction of the birth event with her perception of it as a Christian transfiguration.

[Chapter 3] *Nights of Cabiria* (1957) and *La Dolce Vita* (1960) contrast attempts to accumulate sweetness in life and avoid bitterness with an existence freed from this frenetic economy, evocative of eternity and the lives of animals. Underworld motifs in *Nights of Cabiria* keep the sense of eternity close. At the end, sex worker Cabiria's suffering dissipates in a surprising, celebratory sequence, amidst which her contented final gaze, as though situated in eternity, meets ours. *La Dolce Vita* ends after *paparazzo* Marcello finds an immense, staring sea creature on a beach. A monstrous embodiment of the Christian *ichthys* acronym (spelling fish, but meaning Christ), this creature is the Medusa figure that, unlike in *Inferno*, immobilizes the pilgrim in his pursuit of sweetness. Paola, a beachside waitress, is its angelic, Persephone-like counterpart. Empowered to guide Marcello, she calls to him, but he departs without understanding. Paola turns her gaze, again as from eternity, to the viewer.

[Chapter 4] *8 ½* (1963) evokes the Diomedes episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Film director Guido asks a cardinal about psychological complexes connected with Catholic upbringing. The cardinal, hearing a bird (a diomedea), interrupts to recount how these birds got their name by singing a funeral lament for Diomedes. In Ovid, the birds are originally Diomedes' men, transformed because one of them disparaged Venus. The prelate's birdlike appearance and the disparagement of sex ("Venus") built into his role as an exponent of Catholic doctrine connect him to the Ovidian metamorphosis omitted from his retelling. It likewise connects Ovid to the film's extensive avian and flight imagery.

[Chapter 5] *Fellini Satyricon* (1969) defies the humanistic ideal of continuity between present and past. Eschewing metaphors identifying past with present, Fellini deploys alienating cinematic analogies that evoke both the past's separation from and vivid relevance to modernity. [Chapter 6] Jungian Ernst Bernhard, an influence on Fellini, argues that the "Mediterranean Mother Goddess" is Italy's preeminent post-Renaissance archetype. This Mother forgives her children's wrongs, perpetuating their immaturity. Encolpius, punished with impotence for causing the death of an oracle, is cured (and thus forgiven) through sex with Oenothea, a Mother goddess. Yet, this quasi-incestuous cure doesn't reverse another impotence, his incapacity for moral self-transformation – a trait common in Fellini males. Encolpius, however, is an ancient pagan. Anxieties native to post-antique Catholic Italy don't impede him.

[Chapter 7] Fellini's Rome is an insistently maternal space. Accordingly, in *Roma* (1972) incest trauma overtakes excavators tasked with penetrating a sealed, Roman-era chamber. As a large drill cuts through, one man looks distinctly ill. He remains outside, but we clearly see his face among figures on an ancient fresco inside the chamber. Soon after they enter, collective trauma engulfs both the horrified team and the chamber alike when the outside air causes the frescoes to dissolve. [Chapter 8] In his uneven last phase, Fellini addresses some of his major themes: an unproduced, 1980s television adaptation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, depicts Zeus as a *vitellone* (immature male idler), the Olympian version of a type found throughout Fellini's films. Strikingly, *The Voice of the Moon* (1990), Fellini's final film, suggests that the archetypal Mother goddess fails as a pagan alternative to the Church.

Carrera's book is learned, witty and briskly paced. It would have benefited from more extensive discussion of race in Fellini's complex classicism, especially with regard to *Fellini Satyricon*. Fundamentally, however, this book is a tremendous achievement that enables its readers to discuss the entire Fellini oeuvre from the standpoint of classical reception.

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