

Annie van den Oever

Federico Fellini and the experience of the grotesque and carnivalesque – Dis-covering the magic of mass culture

2013

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15114>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

van den Oever, Annie: Federico Fellini and the experience of the grotesque and carnivalesque – Dis-covering the magic of mass culture. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 2 (2013), Nr. 2, S. 606–615. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15114>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2013.2.VAND>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

About the author

Francesco Di Chiara (University of Ferrara)



© 2013 Di Chiara / Amsterdam University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Exhibition: Fellini – The Exhibition (EYE Film Institute Netherlands, 30 June 2013 – 22 September 2013)

Catalogue: *Fellini* (Amsterdam: Eye Amsterdam & Amsterdam University Press, 2013), written and edited by Sam Stourdzé; edited for EYE by Marente Bloemheugel and Jaap Guldemond

Federico Fellini and the experience of the grotesque and carnivalesque

Dis-covering the magic of mass culture

Annie van den Oever

The Fellini exhibition at EYE Film Institute Netherlands presented the lasting visual magic of his work as it spans over four decades, from the 1950s until the 1990s. It showed his start as an actor and assistant director in the Neorealist era of the 1950s; the acclaimed earlier and mid-career masterpieces, among them *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), *Roma* (1972), and *Amarcord* (1973); and the extremely interesting late career re-interpretations of his earlier work within the context of popular television in *Ginger e Fred* (1986), with his wife and muse, Giulietta Masina, and his alter ego, Marcello Mastroianni.

Art, perhaps, is measured by its ability to enrich our understanding, but is also measured by its capacity to provide evidence for the falsification of whatever theories we arrive at. – Geoffrey Galt Harpham

To understand the unique role Federico Fellini was to play in the golden age of Italian cinema, it is important to acknowledge that the accounts of the history of this national cinema were always dominated by the critical centrality of a cluster of films made between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s which are commonly described as Neorealist. Fellini was only a very young assistant director then. The corpus of Neorealist films constitutes almost 100 titles (which is only about 10%

of the entire production in those days) and their impact on contemporary debates was substantial. Neorealism set the agenda for theoretical, methodological, and historiographical discussions for decades to come; this was due in part to André Bazin's highly influential reflections on the topic. In addition, many critics feel that this particular group of prized Italian films was kept on the post-war agenda to wipe out the shameful days of Italian fascism.¹

For some later directors such as Fellini (one may also think of Sergio Leone and others), it was not all that easy to enter the scene. Until the mid 1950s, Fellini was part of the Neorealist movement with such films as *Luci del Varietà* (co-directed with Alberto Lattuada, 1950), *I vitelloni* (1953), and *Il bidone* (1955). However, to truly carve out a place for themselves in the Italian cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, Fellini and his contemporaries had to tease out the differences between their aesthetic preferences and the well-established aesthetics of Neorealism (long takes, deep focus, improvised and naturalistic acting, natural light, location shooting, low budgets, black and white cinematography, social and political commitment, etc.). The new generation of directors had to break the spell of Neorealism. In retrospect, one is tempted to argue that their films had to be 'spectacular' and 'magical', and very different from Neorealism, in order to earn a place next to the directors of such monumental films as *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and *Roma, città aperta* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). Leone succeeded by reinventing the Western, with its typical widescreen landscapes and amazing (extreme) facial close-ups, uplifted by the extraordinarily prominent musical scores composed by Ennio Morricone. Fellini is memorable for other reasons, among them his spectacular, dreamlike parades of grotesque figures faltering along the streets of Rome (or Rimini) to the quirky musical scores composed by Nino Rota. In the long run, these grotesque figures and dissonant tones were to become the most characteristic feature of Fellini's cinema – aka 'circus Fellini'. Though one may well argue that this spectacular dimension lies at the core of his filmmaking from the very beginning, it was far more pronounced, ludicrous, and colourful in his middle and later career.

Interestingly, all the other truly great masters of Italian cinema in this era – Antonioni, Pasolini, Visconti – treated their audiences to spectacular cinematography and prominent music scores. This should remind us that they initially had to compete with yet another rival: television. In the early 1960s, in Italy, television developed into a (mass) medium that was soon felt to compete with the cinema for the attention of the viewers who craved 'realism' and were now given a 'window on the world'. In this way, as Vito Zagarrio suggested, television could become 'the centre of virtually every family on the globe'.² Television created a moment in history in which 'the cinema' was supposed to die – but it did not. At this point in time Fellini, Leone, Antonioni, Pasolini, Visconti, and others reinvented the cinema as a post-war 'art cinema' which was distinctly 'European' (and more

specifically continental) and typically author-driven and aesthetically innovative.³ Nevertheless, Neorealism still dominates the (research) agenda.



*Fig. 1: Federico Fellini on the set of Amarcord.
Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.*



*Fig. 2: Federico Fellini. Photograph by Tazio Secchiaroli.
Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.*



*Fig. 3: Federico Fellini on the set of Roma.
Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.*

The Fellini exhibition at EYE Film Institute Netherlands presented the lasting visual magic of his work as it spans over four decades, from the 1950s until the 1990s. It showed his start as an actor and assistant director in the Neorealist era of the 1950s; the acclaimed earlier and mid-career masterpieces, among them *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), *Roma* (1972), and *Amarcord* (1973); and the extremely interesting late career re-interpretations of his earlier work within the context of popular television in *Ginger e Fred* (1986), with his wife and muse, Giulietta Masina, and his alter ego, Marcello Mastroianni.



*Fig. 4: Giulietta Masina and Marcello Mastroianni in Ginger e Fred.
Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.*

Parts of the exhibition (as well as parts of the catalogue) were already presented at the earlier Fellini exhibitions in Paris and Moscow, curated by Sam Stourd . The original concept was reworked in Amsterdam by Marente Bloemheugel and Jaap Guldmond for the truly amazing presentation in the huge exhibition space in EYE. Moreover, a complete retrospective of his films accompanied the exhibition as well as an extremely rich, slightly reworked catalogue presenting dozens of full colour stills and drawings by Fellini. As in Paris and Moscow, the EYE organisers opted for a truly ‘Felliniesque’ parade of grotesque visuals and sounds – film fragments, stills, photographs, drawings and dissonant music (by Rota). The abundance of visual material was presented along four thematic lines: Popular culture; Fellini on the set; *La Citt  delle Donne* / The City of Women; and Fellini’s Biographical Imaginary. In this way, the exhibition was designed to create an experience of the Felliniesque world in its own right. Basically, that world is grotesque, clownesque, and carnivalesque; nothing is normal, proportionate, or orderly; everything is distorted, deformed, disproportionate, enlarged, re-coloured, exuberant, abundant, comic, energetic, and vivid. Every character is made strange in some way. A famous example is the voluptuous female selling cigarettes to the baffled young hero in *Amarcord*. She is all breasts, belly, and bottom, and big enough to make him sweat when he tries to lift her up.



Fig. 5: *Poster for Amarcord.*
 Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.



Fig. 6: *Production still from Amarcord.*
 Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.

Another famous example (and a strong start to the exhibition) is the screening of that crazy parade of nuns, bishops, and cardinals showing off their silly costumes on a catwalk in the Vatican, as in a fashion show, with the nuns looking like aliens and the cardinals looking like schoolgirls. This scene from *Roma* instantly recalls how Fellini successfully tapped into the already theatrical and visual exuberance of the Catholic tradition, with its processions and rituals and abundant imaginary, to create his even more theatrical and slightly perverted version of life in Rome. In Fellini's world everything is larger than life, from these enormous female figures to the dwarf nun in close-up (in *Roma* and in *Amarcord*). The exhibition convincingly shows that Fellini tended to stay at the comic side of the grotesque spectrum. To make his characters look slightly ridiculous, he would typically enlarge and distort their bodily proportions. They provoke a leap into the fantastic and pull the viewers into the Fellini imagination and the realm of mixed emotions in response to it; they are comic, yet rarely make the audience burst into laughter. Fellini's world is a dream world, and the shift from real to imaginary, as in dreams, is typically a sudden and disorienting one which destabilises the viewer. These are the basic ingredients of the aesthetics of the grotesque. As the German expert Wolfgang Kayser already stated in his standard study on grotesque art: 'it is our world – and it is not'.⁴ Exactly as Fellini himself would argue over and over again: it is Rome (or Rimini), and it is not.

The many images in the exhibition (and catalogue) seem to indicate that drawing helped Fellini to create his strangely comic world. It is as if Fellini first digested the ephemeral stream of visuals of the day, pen in hand (women, dwarf nun,

schoolgirls, street life, pompous headmaster, nosy teacher, white sheik, Catholic procession), then coughed them up in his films in a unique way.⁵ Fellini may have developed this creative method in a very early phase in his career, when he worked for a satirical magazine as a graphic artist. Interestingly, most of the creative team of that magazine (*Il Marc'Aurelio*) eventually migrated to film production. Fellini himself already combined comical effects with deformation in these early drawings (vignettes). Obviously, graphic art helped him to develop a grotesque stance toward reality.

The same creative method seems to have been used effectively by Fellini in a new way in his later films, for example in *Ginger e Fred*. In this film, Fellini shows what aging itself does to people – no pen or distorting lens needed: aging itself deforms and distorts them, makes their bodies brittle and shapeless, their movements silly and pathetic. The movie was not well received when it premiered, but in retrospect the ‘working over’ of two of his favourite stars is really quite amazing (see Figure 4). This clearly shows Fellini’s keen understanding of the merits of distortion already present in popular (television) culture itself, yet blown out of all proportions in this film.



Fig. 7: Poster for the Fellini exhibition at EYE, with Anita Ekberg.
Courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.

Within the Fellini realm, a classical beauty such as the Swedish photo model Anita Ekberg (who is featured in the famous Trevi Fountain scene in *La Dolce Vita*) was sure to have a strong effect on the viewers. Fellini understood perfectly that enlarged on a wide screen, a model turned into a movie star – and Ekberg would definitely become ‘bigger than life’ and a dream figure if ever there was one. In fact, this was exactly her role in *La Dolce Vita*. Later she reappeared as a gigantic and slightly horrifying billboard monstrosity in the short film *Le tentazione del Dottor Antonio* (included in the anthology film *Boccaccio '70* [De Sica, Visconti, Fellini, Monicelli, 1962]). In light of Fellini’s grotesque poetics, it was in many ways a stunning choice to have the elderly Ekberg open the exhibition in EYE and to have the younger version of the star – from her Trevi Fountain appearance – on the gigantic poster looming above the EYE building, much in the style of the billboard in *Le tentazione del Dottor Antonio*. Fellini once recalled the first moment he saw Anita Ekberg.⁶ She came walking from an airplane staircase, approaching slowly as if straight from a dream, looming high above everyone, Scandinavian, blonde, tall – a few inches taller than the Italian standard, already ‘just one step into the imaginary’, as the poet Rilke wrote about the pink flamingo.

Seeing the large amount of visitors at the exhibition quietly taking in the crazy parade of images may easily remind film scholars of Noël Carroll’s famous words that, from ‘a merely statistic point of view, the grotesque is one of the leading forms of mass art today’. Having been a more marginal presence in (visual) culture for many centuries, the grotesque all of a sudden ‘seems omnipresent’.⁷ Today one could, without much effort, ‘given the composition of contemporary mass culture, find something to quench one’s thirst for the grotesque every hour on the hour every day of the week’.⁸ Carroll argues that this is due to the ‘quickly accelerating entertainment industry’, simply because when the industry demanded the mass production of an endless variety of figures to trigger sudden and strong emotions in audiences, the aesthetics and tradition of the grotesque came in handy. The tradition – with its birthplace in Rome, Fellini’s home town – is characterised by the creation of fantastic, hybrid beings and deformed, disproportionate, distorted, and enlarged, human-animal and human-plant figures, and is particularly known to ‘elicit certain affective states, namely, horror, comic amusement, and awe’.⁹ It does so mainly because they mix distinct and basic biological and ontological categories. One could indeed draw an endless list of examples from the gaming and television industries, as well as from film, given the current stream of horror and slasher movies, vampire films, cartoons, manga, computer-generated 3D productions, and films by directors such as David Cronenberg, David Lynch, and Tim Burton, to name but a few of the directors impacted by Fellini’s work. One may indeed frame the obvious attractions of the Fellini exhibition in this wider perspective and consider the grotesque as an eccentric and critical vision on real-

ity – or the versions of it presented by the mass media – teasing out its perversions, as recent Italian reflections on Fellini and his politics do.¹⁰

One way to appreciate the Fellini exhibition is to just experience, as a (film) viewer, the extraordinary impact of his aesthetics in differentiation from the aesthetics of Neorealism. However, this time Fellini is experienced in a radically changed audiovisual context in which grotesques are no longer marginal figures but a dominant feature of those new and mostly excessively pictorial and fantastic worlds created with digital technologies. These new technologies seem designed to provide all sorts of awesome distortions, hence a paradigmatic experience of the (comically or horrifically) unnatural and monstrous. Moreover, these new technologies may typically trigger that ephemeral experience that media art is also known to provoke in gallery and museum environments, immersing the viewers in an experience of fascination mixed with a touch of confusion by making them sensitive to the material specifics of a medium all over again (its sheer colour or size, the surround sound effects, etc.). When one is over-aware of the medium, one is easily a bit lost in the (story) world. In other words, an exhibition like this one on Fellini, presented in a *film* institute but made by curators who come from the visual art (museum) world, effectively breaks down the barriers between the different types of venues and opens up the film experience as (media) art experience. This is not only interesting for audiences, in terms of the quality of the viewing experience they have, but also for the fields of film and media studies, as it effectively draws attention to the fact that the cinema experience is a complex (art) experience which plays a pivotal role in the history of film, and as such needs our full attention.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to sincerely thank Francesco Pitassio (University of Udine) for sharing his insights into Fellini's position in Italian film history and recent Italian studies on the topic, also Soeluh van den Berg and Carel Nelwan (EYE Film Institute Netherlands) for kindly providing the illustrations for this review.

Notes

1. There is consensus with regard to this argument. For a full development of this argument, see Simone Monticelli, from whose work I have been drawing here. Monticelli 1998, pp. 455-460. The percentages are discussed on p. 455. Monticelli already developed his argument in the late 1990s, but one may safely argue that the same goes today, certainly outside Italy, in the (mostly Anglo-American) world of film guides and textbooks introducing readers to Italian cinema and its history.
2. Zagarrío 1998, p. 99.
3. Most agree regarding the specific qualities of European (or continental) cinema and the directors who helped to constitute it. For an overview, see Vincendeau 1998, pp. 440- 448. Note that Vincendeau, though not exploring the relation with the sudden rise of television,

provides some essential insights into the post-war, author-driven, 'socially committed' and basically 'humanist' (p. 440) European cinema and its great directors, male and female.

4. See the conclusions to Wolfgang Kayser's standard work.
5. See F. Fellini in De Santi 1993.
6. Grazzini 1988.
7. Carroll 2003, pp. 293-294.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
10. Despite his crucial role in post-war Italian cinema, or maybe because of it, not much academic scholarship has been developed on Fellini in Italy recently, whereas piles of new memories and critical reflections appear on bookstore shelves all the time – mostly to disappear soon. Among the few remarkable exceptions, see Minuz 2012. For a close analysis of *La Dolce Vita* and its role in national filmmaking and national culture, see Costa 2010.

References

- Carroll, N. 'The Grotesque Today' in *Modern art and the grotesque* edited by F. Connelly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Costa, A. *Federico Fellini: La dolce vita*. Torino: Lindau, 2010.
- De Santi, P (ed.). *I disegni di Fellini*. Roma: Editori Laterza, 1993.
- Grazzini, G (ed.). *Federico Fellini: Comments on film* translated by J. Henry. Fresno: The Press of California State University at Fresno, 1988.
- Harpham, G. *On the grotesque: Strategies of contradiction in art and literature*. Aurora: Critical Studies in the Humanities, 2006 (orig. in 1982).
- Kayser, W. *The grotesque in art and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957.
- Minuz, A. *Viaggio al termine dell'Italia. Fellini politico*. Soveria Mannelli (CS): Rubbettino, 2012.
- Monticelli, S. 'Italian post-war cinema and Neo-Realism' in *The Oxford guide to film studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Vincendeau, G. 'Issues in European cinema' in *The Oxford guide to film studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Zagarrio, V. 'Theseus and Ariadne: For a Counter-History of the Cinema-Television Relationship?' in *Cinema futures, cinema futures: Cain, Abel or cable? The screen arts in the digital age* edited by T. Elsaesser and K. Hoffmann. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998.

About the author

Annie van den Oever (University of Groningen/University of the Free State)



© 2013 Van den Oever / Amsterdam University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.