

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## **Marcello** (in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*)      open/curious

**Overview** First released in 1969, and a sensation from the start, *La Dolce Vita* began its awards career with the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes. Sensuality is the life breath of this film, which takes its place in Fellini's enduring catalogue of erotics and decay in modern society. As with *La Strada* this great film has little structured narrative, but an emotionally coherent sequence of encounters. The one who encounters is Marcello, a competitive gossip and society journalist writing from the moral wasteland of immediate WW2 Italy, and on assignment to scan life in Rome at its 'hottest.' The emotional movement of the film follows some seven encounters of Marcello, with the glitz, glam, erotics, and pathos of this Vast Eternal City, whose tastes for pleasure begin with the voluptuaries of Nero's Rome, and never end.

**Character** It is of the nature of *La Dolce Vita*, I suppose, that in the end there is no stable character, but that wisps of character formation are forever passing across our consciousness. Marcello, the handsome, curious gossip journalist on assignment, is in any case the guiding consciousness of the film. It is he who follows every invitation to a new experience. Marcello is the type of the self-aware, sensuous and sensual, perceptive figure of 'modern consciousness.' He envies the intellectual life he intuits in his friend Steiner, and their coterie, but he is also fundamentally a journalist, a person exposed to the events of the day and to whatever the day brings.

**Parallels** The photojournalist, like Marcello, is ideally placed to observe and at least virtually live a wide range of contemporary events, and Fellini's Marcello is a good example, involved and yet basically an observer. There are many variants on this natural topic for filmic concern. In *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) an Australian journalism covers a violent (and unsuccessful) effort to overthrow Sukarno in Indonesia, and in the course of enacts the many invasive, investigatory, and self-risking roles the journalist plays in modern culture. In Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) the post-Vietnam era spawns a thriller in which Army Special forces veterans—all inquiry, like journalists—disappear into the jungles of Cambodia, in search of an ex-army rogue cult leader. The search, even search and rescue, theme is developed in *The Killing Fields* (1984) in which a Cambodian and an American journalist plunge together into the unpredictable havoc create by Khmer Rouge governance.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Transport** The film opens with a daily event in the work life of the gossip journalist Marcello. As a member of a television news crew Marcello (in his company helicopter) is following a transport helicopter, which is ferrying a huge statue of Jesus Christ to be deposited in Saint Peter's Square. The transport helicopter passes over an ancient aqueduct of the city of Rome—two thousand year flashback—then circles down onto the square where orthodox Christian belief maintains that the 'first Christian,' Christ's disciple Peter, was buried. Fellini smashes together multiple layers of historical setting, and embeds the wide-eyed Marcello in a vast magma of human experience.

**Duplicities** In a night scene, following in imaginative time on the helicopter transport, Marcello meets a ravishing divorcee, Maddalena, and mutual fireworks are set off. They walk through Rome, bathe in the Trevi Fountain, make the Eternal City into their playground. But upon returning to his flat, Marcello realizes that his girlfriend has overdosed, and he must rush her to the emergency room. While attending to her there, he makes a hurried phone call 'to set something up' with Maddalena. Our hero is both a committed lover and a lover on the loose, betraying himself and others in a frantic ballet of momentary self-satisfactions.

**Vision** Marcello accompanies his girlfriend Emma to the site where an apparition of the Virgin Mary is said to have occurred. Next day the event, though discredited by the Catholic Church, is much discussed on national TV, and a tree in which the Virgin is said to have been sheltered is dismembered and removed as sacred memorials. Emma prays to the Virgin—for control of Marcello's heart—but he is of course a stand off in the whole situation, ready to be credulous, dubious of everything, the modern man not knowing which way to turn.

**Dawn** In a dawn sequence, which brings to wrap-up the multiple scenes of desire, longing, ambition, even idealism which construct the personality of Marcello, the journalist finds himself on the sea shore near the villa of a friend. He walks on the beach, and studies the catch of a fisherman's net, a huge primitive stingray which in its death is staring directly at Marcello, frozen eyed. Marcello's growing sense of the futility of life gels in this frigid glimpse of the deeply anti-human that burrows deep in consciousness. The sea creature, Marcello's own bond to the first movements of humankind out of its oceanic origins, chills our quasi-hero, as we are chilled by any close up aquarium visit, in which we press our faces against the narrow glass dividing us from the heartless primitive inside us.

### **Discussion questions**

Fellini directed and wrote many films. Do you see any common traits of the 'Fellini imagination' in the Fellini works we have dealt with?

Do you see a moral perspective in Fellini's work? Is he creating inside a 'religious perspective'?

What kind of historical sense does Fellini project, creating the present film, as he does, against the backdrop of an *ancient* and still vibrant city? What role does Rome itself play in the film?