

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Guido (in Fellini's *Eight and a Half*) neurotic/anxious

Overview Widely considered Fellini's masterpiece, *8 ½* (1963) is a searching study of 'director's block,' a phenomenon slightly different from the already well-known 'writer's block,' because of the need for extensive teamwork and technical know how in the creation of a film; many and various skills must enter the director's repertoire, and Guido Anselmi, the famed Director representing Fellini in this film, has forgotten how to move forward into a strong pure statement of what really catches his imagination. The film itself takes us inside Guido's mind, as he rummages through his memories and fantasies, speaks with critics and old lovers, and tries, in the midst of the hubbub of paparazzi and self-questioning, to find his way—he succeeds—to a truly creative point in himself.

Character Guido has already established himself, as a renowned film director and script writer, with six feature films to his credit. (The two and a half films, which make up the eight and a half of the title, are documentary or otherwise less than full films, an indication that the director is losing his capacity for a 'major statement.') Not only is Guido anxious, because he is under financial and emotional pressure to complete the large project currently facing him, but he is temporarily unable to find his creative urge, and is not sure that he has anything to say anymore. The upshot of this last awareness is his readiness to withdraw from the present project, which would be a disaster for his reputation and self-image. Throughout the film he is anxiously trying to find his way through the problem of self-identity.

Parallels

Hamlet (1996 on stage; in film 2016) and *Oedipus* (on stage, 2008; in film 1968,) both come to mind, in the search for parallels to Fellini's masterpiece exploration of the problem of self-doubt. Guido is searching for a personal release from anxiety and menace, while both Hamlet and Oedipus are faced with personal and political pressures to act and solve the dilemma they face. (Each must somehow heal a state.) All three characters, however, are trapped in a neurotic stasis, searching for a needed crisis-solving solution. The way out of such a trap is inevitably violence, splitting the seams: into intense self-discovery—Oedipus or Guido, into self-destruction, Hamlet.

Illustrative moments

Needy Comfortably established in his seaside spa, the Director realizes it is time to get down to work on the large film project he is exactly on time to begin. As the moment approaches, he grows ever less sure of what he has to say. He has an outline to work from, and calls in a distinguished critic, to give him a frank opinion of this project. The critic shoots the director down, saying that his overall view is weak, uncommitted, and needs to be scrapped. In his already indecisive condition, this blunt opinion renders Guido more disturbed than before.

Self-analytical Driven deeper into himself, in search of the roots of his director's block, Guido returns into childhood memories—punishments, escapades, fears and joys—in an effort to draw on his interior strength. He has the temporary impression of escaping himself into a freer world, and decides it would be useful to turn to his best friend, a presence from that earlier world, and to make a confession to him. While his friend is willing, Guido finally is unable to carry through this confession, stopping in midstream without knowing what to say. He is ready to unburden his soul, but does not know how to do it.

Mocked In one of Guido's dream fantasies he assembles his old girlfriends, and is delighted, at first, to find them pampering, powdering, and fooling around with him. But as their pamper-

blows grow rougher he realizes that they are in fact mocking him, which further erodes his confidence. Not much later he calls both his ex-wife, and his hot girlfriend of the moment, to help him understand his situation, but neither of them believes in him any more and his anxiety grows.

Self-damaged Finally the inner crisis backs Guido against the wall. He accepts, within himself, that he lacks the creative power required to carry through on his master project. Far still from the final insight, which in the film's end will reveal Guido's return to himself, his acceptance of just what he is, and the consequent flow back of power into him, he decides to call off the film project, and absents himself worrisomely from a final party held on site, to celebrate the end of the effort. Guido climbs under a table, shoots himself in the head, not fatally, and awakens the attention he needs so badly. He has had to go through the hell of anxiety, then to act out, in order to get attention.

Discussion questions

Does Guido discover what it is he truly believes in creating? Has he, by the film's end, found simple self-release or has he found a theme for his work? What is that theme?

What contribution do the black and white filming, the signature Nino Rota background music, and the dubbed in sound—all trademarks of Fellini's work—make to the effect and point of the present film?

What ultimately was blocking Guido's work? What kind of self-confidence had he lost? Does he resemble Marcello, in *La Dolce Vita*, in the way in which he has lost his path?