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Amarcord
Nostalgia and Politics

It is has long been a critical commonplace that Fellini has no interest in broader social questions or politics. Certainly, he has often expressed a distaste for ideology (which, as we have seen, he defines as a willful lie designed to befuddle common people): "Especially as regards passion for politics, I am more Eskimo than Roman. . . . I am not a political person, have never been one. Politics and sports leave me completely cold, indifferent."[1] Moreover, Fellini has frequently proclaimed his belief that he would have been best served to have lived as an artist during the great periods of papal patronage, when he could have found support for his art without regard to ideological considerations: "I believe a person with an artistic bent is naturally conservative and needs order around him. . . . I need order because I am a transgressor . . . to carry out my transgressions I need very strict order, with many taboos, obstacles at every step, moralizing, processions, alpine choruses filing along."[2] His early interest in the exploration of a private fantasy world of his own making, such as we have analyzed in *La strada,* obliged Fellini to move beyond the typical neorealist attention to critical social issues that was the favored thematic content of the films widely praised by the more ideologically oriented film critics of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Since Fellini's early works did not easily fit into this kind of programmatic realism with a social purpose, it became easy to pigeonhole Fellini's films as extravagant fantasies, baroque metaphors, or self-

indulgent autobiographical recollections with little or no relevance to the current events of the times.

However, the fact that Fellini has never enjoyed the national pastimes of Italy – soccer and arguing about political ideology – should not be confused with a complete disinterest in questions of broad social concern. On the contrary, even the early films that Fellini produced in the 1950s and that were criticized by his ideological opponents for their "betrayal" of neorealism are today screened for their brilliant evocation of what provincial life during that period was like in Italy. A case in point would be *I vitelloni*, which continues today to be one of Fellini's most popular works in Italy precisely because it has revealed, after almost five decades, its authenticity as a wonderfully accurate portrait of daily life in the country's small towns just before the impact of the "economic miracle" and the transition of the peninsula to a modern, industrial nation. Moreover, other important films of his career, from *La dolce vita* (an anticipation in 1959 of the media-oriented consumer society that only now dominates Italian life) to *Ginger e Fred* or *La voce della luna* (both devastatingly accurate portraits of the negative effects of television and advertising in Italy) could be cited as not only faithful representations of Italian "reality" but even prophetically accurate ones that pinpointed problems in Italian society long before other less perceptive artists or social critics had begun to grapple with them.

This kind of sensitivity to the culture of Italy that has always characterized Fellini's cinema is exactly the quality that has moved another Italian filmmaker with far more overt ideological pretensions, Lina Wertmüller, to remark: "Federico has given us the most significant traces and graffiti of our history in the last twenty years. He declares he is not concerned with politics and is not interested in fixed themes or ideological lay-outs, but he is, in the final analysis, the most political and sociological, I believe, of our authors."[3] Fellini has also been quite caustic in his comments about the so-called political film in Italy – that is, a work of art whose primary function is to make a political, not an artistic or aesthetic, statement. As he has declared,

> Good intentions and honest feelings, and a passionate belief in one's own ideals, may make excellent politics or influential social work (things which may be much more useful than the cinema), but they do not necessarily and indisputably make good films. And there is really nothing uglier or drearier – just because it is ineffectual and pointless – than a bad political film.[4]

Because Fellini is primarily an artist and not an ideologue, it is not surprising that the few basic beliefs he holds in this regard are rooted ultimately in his aesthetics. As we have seen from our discussion of *8 1/2,* Fellini locates the focal point of creativity in the individual and his fantasy life. Consequently, anything that deforms, obstructs, represses, or distorts this creativity or the growth of a free consciousness within the individuals making up society is to be opposed:

> I believe – please note, I am only supposing – that what I care about most is the freedom of man, the liberation of the individual man from the network of moral and social convention in which he believes, or rather in which he thinks he believes, and which encloses him and limits him and makes him seem narrower, smaller, sometimes even worse than he really is. If you really want me to turn teacher, then condense it with these words: be what you are, that is, discover yourself, in order to love life.[5]

This belief in the dignity and even the nobility of the individual human being derives in Fellini not from some clearly formulated political doctrine but, rather, from an instinctual aversion to all forms of autocratic control.

Fellini's distaste for authoritarian institutions or ideas can be traced back to his childhood, two decades roughly contemporary with the life of the regime itself (1922–43). During Fellini's formative years, the Fascist government attempted, actually with a great deal of success and popular support, to regiment almost every aspect of Italian economic, political, and cultural life. Even after the fall of the Fascist regime and the establishment of a democratic republic in the wake of the Allied liberation of Italy, the most dominant forces contending for control of Italy represented anything but liberal democratic political philosophies. On the conservative Right, political institutions were dominated by the Christian Democratic party (DC), which was far too closely aligned with an extremely conservative and even reactionary pre–Vatican II church to suit Fellini's tastes. It must also be said, however, that the Christian Democrats made two fundamental decisions that would guarantee Italy's future as a free and democratic nation: The party sponsored Italy's membership in NATO, protecting the country from the very real threat of external subversions and internal upheaval; and it helped lead other European nations toward the creation of a Common Market, a decision that ensured the existence of a free-market

economy in a country that had always been controlled by political regimes hostile to any kind of economic freedom. On the Left, the opposition was led by an Italian Communist Party (PCI) that had been created precisely to oppose social-democratic tendencies in the socialist movement. In the two decades after Mussolini's fall, it continued to retain its Stalinist, nondemocratic character within its central committee, while at the same time, it quite successfully convinced gullible foreign observers of the Italian scene that the party was like every other European democratic institution. In many respects, the PCI was as conservative in social matters as the DC, but it carried out a very successful campaign, as a result of puffing up its record during the Resistance, to bring Italian intellectuals into its fold. One of the party's founders, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) had advocated a policy of obtaining intellectual hegemony in Italian society before gaining political power. Although urging the primacy of cultural over economic forces represents the exact opposite of classical Marxist theory, this theory of hegemony was highly successful as a practical policy. Italian intellectual life was thoroughly dominated by the Marxist Left much as the non-Marxist Right controlled the church and the state.

All of Fellini's films, as the director noted in a letter about *Amarcord* to the Italian critic Gian Luigi Rondi, "have the tendency to demolish preconceived ideas, rhetoric, diagrams, taboos, the abhorrent forms of a certain type of upbringing."[6] Because of his contrarian spirit, Fellini was uncomfortable as a young man in Fascist Italy:

> Commitment, I feel, prevents a man from development. My 'antifascism' is of a biological kind. I could never forget the isolation in which Italy was enclosed for twenty years. Today I feel a profound hatred – and I am actually very vulnerable on this point – for all ideas that can be translated into formulas. I am committed to noncommitment.[7]

Because of this aversion to politics, it is not surprising that during the immediate postwar period, when he first began writing scripts and directing his early films, Fellini ran afoul of critics on both sides of the political spectrum, especially those following the PCI's cultural directives that advocated only "progressive" films embodying an aesthetic bordering on socialist realism. The postwar period in Italy was thus marked, in many respects, by pressures toward social and cultural con-

formity that recalled the more obligatory compromises enforced upon intellectuals and artists during the Fascist period. Fellini's childhood and adolescence unfolded during a dictatorship. More than most of his contemporaries, Fellini sensed the continuities between those dark years (*il ventennio nero* or the "dark twenty years," as Italians call it) and the postwar period. He believed that Fascism arose in Italy because of a particular Italian character defect.

Fascism represents the central historical event of the twentieth century in Italy, and arguments about its origins, its policies, its responsibilities, and its legacies continue unabated to the present day. Numerous learned books advance a variety of theories for Italian Fascism (which, first of all, would do well to distinguish the Latin variety from the German brand). As A. J. Gregor and Renzo De Felice had pointed out in surveys of such explanations, a number of the explanatory theories first advanced even before the fall of the regime spoke of moral crisis, of the intrusion of the masses into history, the Stalinist theory that Fascism was a tool of the capitalist class to suppress the class struggle, or Freudian and neo-Freudian theories of social psychology that saw individual Fascists produced by sexual deviance stemming from childhood.[8] Popular images of Fascism in the postwar Italian cinema tended to follow either the Marxist line or the neo-Freudian line. In the hands of a director of genius, such as Bernardo Bertolucci, films reflecting these theories could transcend the realm of propaganda and create original images of Fascism with aesthetic appeal to the most apolitical film spectator. Thus, Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (*Il conformista*, 1970), explains the protagonist's adherence to the Fascist Party through sexual theories indebted to Wilhelm Reich and sets this portrait within one of the most visually stunning films of the period. His later epic – what might well be called a Marxist *Gone with the Wind,* set in Emilia–Romagna and entitled *1900* (*Novecento,* 1976) to underline its attempt to explain the entire sweep of twentieth-century Italian history – combines both Marxist and neo-Freudian views of the development of agrarian Fascism in the province that produced both Fellini and Bertolucci.

Although Fellini's views on Italian history are far less dogmatic than Bertolucci's, they embody a consistency of thought with links to his first works, and his thinking on the vexing historical problem of Italian Fas-

cism represents anything but a naïve perspective. *Amarcord* (1973) pictures the life of a provincial town very similar to Fellini's Rimini during the 1930s. Though made some two decades after *I vitelloni, Amarcord* must be placed chronologically before *I vitelloni* as a companion piece, since the young boys of the second film during the Fascist dictatorship grow up to become the adult slackers in the first film. Numerous elements in both films link them together. The town idiot, Giudizio, appears in both films without aging. The events in *I vitelloni* that mark off the tourist season in the Adriatic resort town from the rest of the boring, touristless year – the Carnival, the election of Miss Siren, the arrival and departure of the tourists, the passing of the seasons – are in *Amarcord* either repeated (as with the tourists and the seasons) or modified by giving communal events a political twist – the passage of the *Rex,* the regime's stupendous ocean liner; the arrival of the Fascist official on 21 April to celebrate the mythical foundation of ancient Rome. Pataca, the Fascist gigolo who picks up Nordic tourists offering him "posterior intimacy" during the tourist season, seems to be an earlier and even more immature version of Fausto, the archetypal *vitellone* who cheats on his young wife on every occasion he can manage. Perhaps most disturbing, however, is that in *Amarcord,* there is no equivalent of Moraldo, the only real positive character in *I vitelloni,* who not only senses that the provincial life the *vitelloni* lead is empty and meaningless but who also leaves town and heads for Rome to look for something new. With his departure, Moraldo becomes the prototype of Marcello, the provincial who is the writer-journalist in *La dolce vita,* whom Fellini develops from a script entitled *Moraldo in città* that he wrote but never filmed.[9] In *Amarcord,* however, an entire generation of Italians, and not just a few slackers, is enshrouded in a fog of ignorance that is vividly portrayed in one of the film's most memorable sequences. In the lives of both the postwar *vitelloni* and the prewar Amarcordians, the myth of the cinema plays a vital role in shaping their behavior and their aspirations.

Fellini's portrait of the provinces during the Fascist period avoids the facile juxtaposition of "good" (i.e., anti-Fascists) and "bad" (i.e., Fascists) that characterizes most Italian political films on the subject. Rather than the jack-booted army veterans who attack the peasantry and workers during strikes, or the wealthy farmers of Bertolucci's *1900* who hire them, Fellini's Fascism is populated by a number of comic fig-

ures, some of whom are clearly related to the clown figures of his earlier films. Much, but not all, of the film focuses upon a typical family of the period that may also have autobiographical overtones: Aurelio (Armando Brancia), an anti-Fascist worker who has become a foreman and a relatively wealthy man; his wife Miranda (Pupella Maggio), a somewhat hysterical and stereotypical Italian mother who dotes on her son and worthless brother; Lallo, nicknamed Il Pataca (Nando Orfei), the gigolo who parades in his Fascist uniform but is interested only in picking up Nordic tourists; and Titta (Bruno Zanin), a figure often identified with Fellini himself but actually based on Fellini's best friend during his adolescence.[10] The family also includes a maid, another son, a crazy Uncle Teo in an asylum (Ciccio Ingrassia), and Titta's grandfather (Peppino Ianigo) whose life continues to be dominated by his sexual fantasies. Related to this cast of comic figures, indebted to Fellini's familiarity with the world of cartoon strips, is a group of grotesque individuals in Titta's school. Both Titta's classmates and his teachers are cut from the same cartoon cloth. They are clearly caricatures and gross caricatures at that, with no effort whatsoever made to create believable or realistic portraits of this provincial world. Even the figures in the town who are obviously linked directly to the regime – the local Fascist *gerarca* and the Fascist *federale* who visits the populace on 21 April to celebrate their "Roman" origins – are clownish figures. They are joined by a nymphomaniac named Volpina; the village idiot Giudizio; the village beauty Gradisca, the object of desire of every male in the town, especially Titta; a priest named Don Balosa, who seems more concerned over the masturbation of the young boys who dream of Gradisca than with real sins; the owner of the local Cinema Fulgor (the theater for which the young Federico Fellini designed lobby cards), who calls himself "Ronald Colman" in homage to the American cinema that is the town's source of shallow dreams; a blind accordionist; and a talkative lawyer who often addresses the camera to provide the viewer with explanations.

This enormous cast of truly amusing characters interacts together on a number of occasions: During the first important sequence of the film, when the town's populace burns a witch in effigy to celebrate the coming of spring on Saint Joseph's Day (19 March); when everyone assembles in Fascist uniform to greet the *federale* to celebrate the "Roman" aspect of the Fascist state; and when the entire town sails out to sea to

Outside the Cinema Fulgor in Amarcord, Gradisca (Magali Nöel), "Ronald Colman" (Mario Liberati), and a number of the townspeople of *Amarcord*

gather before the shrine to Hollywood mythology in the Italian provinces. [*Photo:* The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

The passage of the ocean liner *Rex*, symbol of the Fascist regime in *Amarcord*. [*Photo:* The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

witness the passage of the *Rex*, the ocean liner that the Fascist regime actually constructed and that conquered speed records for transatlantic crossings between Italy and America during its heyday. Fellini employs the juxtaposition between the glimpses we are permitted to see of the

private lives of these stock comic characters and their public, group activities to make an important comment on the nature of Fascism within the Italian provinces. As Fellini notes, living in a repressed state such as Fascism promoted during his adolescence, "each person develops not individual characteristics but only pathological defects"; examined individually, these comic characters seem to exhibit only

> manias, innocuous tics: and yet, it is enough for the characters to gather together for an occasion like this [the *federale*'s visit], and there, from apparently harmless eccentricities, their manias take on a completely different meaning. The gathering of April 21st, just like the passing of the *Rex,* the burning of the great bonfire at the beginning, and so on, are always occasions of total stupidity. The pretext of being together is always a leveling process. . . . It is only ritual that keeps them all together. Since no character has a real sense of individual responsibility, or has only petty dreams, no one has the strength not to take part in the ritual, to remain at home outside of it.[11]

Beginning with this collection of grotesque individuals, Fellini builds upon their tics and eccentricities to paint a collective portrait of Italian Fascism:

> The province of Amarcord is one in which we are all recognizable, the director first of all, in the ignorance which confounded us. A great ignorance and a great confusion. Not that I wish to minimize the economic and social causes of Fascism. I only wish to say that today what is still most interesting is the psychological, emotional manner of being a Fascist. . . . It is a sort of blockage, an arrested development during the phase of adolescence. . . . Italy, mentally, is still much the same. To say it in other terms, I have the impression that Fascism and adolescence continue to be, in a certain measure, permanent historical seasons of our lives: adolescence of our individual lives, Fascism of our national life.[12]

In his letter to Gian Luigi Rondi, Fellini defined *Amarcord* as

> The story of a place which could be in any region of Italy in the 1930s, under the control of the Church and Fascism. It is the tale of the lazy, impenetrable, enclosed existence of the Italian provinces; of the slothfulness, the small-mindedness and the rather ridiculous aspirations buried there; the fascinated contemplation of a mythical *Rex* as it sails by, inaccessible and useless; the American cinema with its false prototypes; the 21st of April, birth of Rome. Here it is, Fascism,

> the dulling of intelligence, a conditioning which stifles the imagination, and any genuineness. Because the film concerns a town, is the history of a town, is the metaphor of an enclosure, it reflects above all what Fascism was, the manner of being a Fascist both psychologically and emotionally, and therefore of being ignorant, violent, exhibitionist and puerile. I consider Fascism to be a degeneration at a historical level of an individual season – that of adolescence – which corrupts and rots itself while proliferating in a monstrous fashion without the ability to evolve and become adult . . . the Fascist exists in us all. We cannot fight against it without identifying it with our ignorant, petty, and impulsive "self."[13]

If making a comic film about such a phenomenon as that outlined above is making a "political" film, then Fellini hastens to qualify this definition to Rondi:

> If, by "political" one includes the possibility of working for a society of individuals who respect themselves and others, a society where everyone is free to be and to become, according to their deepest hopes, to have their own ideas, to read what they want to read, to do what they want to do whilst realizing that their own personal freedom ends where that of others begins, then, in that case, my film is political because that is what it is all about; it denounces the absence of all this by showing a world in which it does not exist.[14]

What really separates Fellini from the other directors in Italy who have treated the Fascist period in the cinema is his comic perspective and his attitude as an accomplice of the vices he is attacking. This, of course, was precisely his attitude about the decadent world he created in *La dolce vita*. Fundamentally, it has frequently been argued Fellini begins his films as a witness for the prosecution but ultimately becomes a sympathetic witness for the defense. This sense of being an accomplice, of being placed in the same court docket as the accused, makes Fellini's attempts to attack a vice in humanity in part a lukewarm operation. Furthermore, Fellini views the past in an blatantly nostalgic light. Millions of adult viewers in Italy flocked to see *Amarcord,* making of the film Fellini's last major box-office success in Italy: Gradisca, the *Rex,* and numerous scenes in the film have passed into Italian popular culture and are recognized by people who have never even seen the film. The work was received in this manner precisely because of Fellini's approach to the material. As he notes, in spite of the fact that the world

depicted is ridiculous and reprehensible (in spite of its comic context), Italians also recognized that it was still a mirror of their private character and their private history. Although false values and misplaced loyalties dominated the Fascist epoch, it was, nevertheless, the only past Fellini and millions of Italians now reaching old age had ever known. Because of this, they were doomed to recall this past with a mixture of remorse and nostalgia but were unable to change it.

As Millicent Marcus has noted, there is a clear connection between the manner in which the Amarcordians view the cinema (particularly the American cinema) and the manner in which they relate to the political mythology surrounding two central events in the film, the visit of the *federale* and the passage of the *Rex*.[15] Both the cinema and politics in the provinces are linked to sexuality or, rather, repressed sexuality. Fellini has even defined the visit of the *federale* as the crucial sequence in the entire film.[16] It is a sequence devoted to a ferocious satire of the particular style of Fascist culture associated with one of the regime's most controversial leaders, Achille Starace (1889–1945), longtime leader of the National Fascist Party from 1931 to 1939 and the inventor of the Fascist "style" that so infuriated Fellini. Italians born after the war or foreigners unfamiliar with Italian culture will probably think that Fellini's satire of the Fascist "style" is based solely on his grotesque exaggeration of the regime's comic stance; but, in fact, the public meetings of the regime during Starace's tenure as head of the party – exactly the years depicted in *Amarcord* – were actually not so different than those Fellini attacks with his comic wit. For example, it was Starace (and not Mussolini) who invented the carefully choreographed mass demonstrations and public rallies where Italians, dressed in various martial uniforms, ran rather than walked or marched (to underline their youth, vitality, and discipline). Starace was fanatic in his insistence upon the use of the Roman salute (to replace the traditional bourgeois handshake) and even advocated the use of the Germanic goose step, which was defined in a face-saving manner as the "Roman" step! He frequently jumped over bayonets or horses to demonstrate his physical prowess and almost always marched at a trot rather than at a normal pacing step. Starace's Fascist "style" is reflected in the *federale*'s visit, which Fellini satirizes mercilessly as useless motion buttressed by unintentionally amusing ideological pronouncements, peppered with the kind of high rhetoric that has unfortunately frequently characterized

Italian political speeches of any persuasion and not just those delivered by Fascists. The professor of mathematics, ordinarily a buxom woman who is first shown in her classroom as a tiger and the object of her students' repressed sexual fantasies, appears transformed in her military uniform as she runs in the parade with the rest of the townspeople, declaring: "This marvelous enthusiasm makes us young but so old at the same time. . . . Young, because Fascism has rejuvenated our blood with shining ideals that are very ancient. . . ."[17] Each of the townspeople who have been sketched out in comic caricatures before the *federale*'s visit is suddenly transformed by donning a uniform and joining others in what Fellini quite rightly considers an occasion for group stupidity. This is precisely Fellini's point: Fascism allowed perfectly normal people during his childhood to behave in completely unpredictable and dangerous ways.

It is important to note that Fellini does not merely explain mass behavior during the Fascist period as a regressive state of adolescence. It is a regressive state of adolescence that finds its highest and most dangerous expression in sexual repression. All the Amarcordians find themselves in a state of high anxiety over sexual matters. Sexual innuendo fills their conversation and occupies their minds, yet the only kind of concrete sexual expression tolerated by Fascist culture is either within marriage, with the local prostitutes (brothels were regulated by the state at the time, and almost all Italian males had their first sexual experiences there), with the town nymphomaniac, Volpina, or with visiting Nordic tourists during the tourist season. Every other kind of sexual expression outside marriage is severely condemned, including adolescent masturbation, which the local priest attempts to stamp out via the confessional, without success. Guilt accompanies sex at every stage of an Amarcordian's existence.

Ultimately, Fellini sees a causal connection between the repressed sexuality of his childhood, the Fascist culture of mass psychosis demonstrated during the *federale*'s visit, and the way the townspeople experience the cinema and its American myths as a source of relief from their tedious and provincial lives. The link of repressed sexuality and Fascism is made abundantly clear when Gradisca (Magali Noël), the object of desire for the entire town, goes into ecstasy over the very sight of the visiting Fascist dignitary. When Mussolini addressed a large crowd in his heyday, it was frequently reported that women left wet

underpants in the square, so sexually excited were they by his speeches and his personal charisma. Unbelievable as it may seem now, it was even common practice for Italian men to attend such rallies in order to meet women who were already in a state of sexual arousal! Gradisca responds to the *federale* exactly as a woman might respond to a lover. When Lallo, dressed in his black Fascist uniform, chimes in after the mathematics professor's remarks in the parade, his comment is a crude sexual summation of this attitude: "All I can say is . . . Mussolini's got two balls this big!"[18]

To underscore the connection between a misguided sexuality and the political regime that fostered such a prolonged state of adolescence, Fellini offers another example of this linkage during Gradisca's encounter with the passing ocean liner *Rex,* another excuse for the Amarcordians to gather together to demonstrate their immaturity. The entire town sails out into the Adriatic, hoping to catch a glimpse of the proud symbol of the regime. These shots in the actual ocean suddenly turn into a studio location, where obviously fake boats rock back and forth on an obviously fake ocean, produced by sheets of black plastic. When the ocean liner finally appears, it is an artificial studio creation, a fake cardboard ship with backlighting in its portholes that was erected at Cinecittà and actually stood abandoned on the lot there for many years after the film was completed until it rotted away from rain and wind. Once again, Gradisca becomes almost hysterical in her desire to reach out toward the ship, just as she had passionately desired to touch the visiting *federale* physically during the parade. After its passing, the townspeople fail to notice that the *Rex* is merely a flat façade that falls back into the ocean, revealing its status as both a movie prop and the embodiment of a false and mystifying image manipulated by an evil regime; but Fellini's film audience should grasp the message immediately.

For all his love of the cinema, Fellini believes that the repressed lives of the Amarcordians relied far too heavily upon the facile and superficial myths delivered weekly by the local movie theater, the Cinema Fulgor. Thus, before the sequence of the town parade for the *federale,* Fellini inserts two important sequences that help to explain why the townspeople react as they do to the regime's political symbols. In the first sequence, Titta and his friends go to confession, where the priest is solely concerned with whether the boys "touch themselves." The effect of the priest's questioning about masturbation has quite the op-

Titta (Bruno Zanin) unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Gradisca (Magali Nöel) in the Cinema Fulgor. [*Photo:* The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

posite result expected, for Titta begins to ask himself how it would be possible not to touch oneself with so many images of ripe womanhood around him – Volpina, the math professor, plump peasant women with enormous bottoms, and most particularly Gradisca. Within Titta's fantasy as he makes his confession (or at least pretends to do so), Titta narrates his encounter with Gradisca one afternoon as she was watching Gary Cooper in *Beau Geste,* smoking alone in the theater. Gradisca sits entranced, in an obvious state of aroused sexual awareness brought about by the image of the American actor. Titta enters the theater and moves closer and closer to Gradisca, finally placing his hand upon her leg. He is then devastated by her crushing remark when she breaks out of her trance and finally perceives his presence: "Looking for something?"

Fellini's point is that the mechanism that attracts Gradisca to Gary Cooper is not unlike the mechanism that attracts the crowd to the *fede-*

rale or to the *Rex,* symbols of the Fascist regime. Unhealthy sexuality can be expressed only in an unhealthy fashion, and such bottled-up energy can be channeled into potentially dangerous directions by a regime with expertise in manipulating symbols of a certain kind. Unrequited sexual desire and its repression by either the church or the state have extremely negative consequences. In Titta's case, his encounter with an enormous woman who sells cigarettes in the town provides one of the most hilarious moments of the film. He declares he is strong enough to lift this huge female, she challenges him to do so, and when Titta barely manages to lift her, she suddenly is carried away by a momentary fit of sexual passion and gives the young man her enormous breast to suck under a De Chirico–like poster of Dante with his brain exposed hanging on the wall (an advertisement). The shock of this encounter is so great that Titta takes to his bed, and his mother is forced to try to revive his energies with mustard plasters. An even more extreme example of how sexual repression can destroy a person's sanity is then provided by the family's visit to the local asylum to visit Uncle Teo, who climbs to the top of a huge tree and screams over and over, "I want a woman!" His cry might well be the motto of the entire male population of *Amarcord,* and it is not by accident that only a dwarf nun can bring Teo down from his perch, underlining the ultimate origin of this grotesque behavior and its source in sexual repression sponsored by the church.

To this point, our discussion of *Amarcord* has stressed the very significant ideas Fellini has about politics and the Fascist regime that underpin his narrative and motivate his imagery. It is important to highlight two facts about this wonderful film that are often overlooked. In the first place, the political "message" of *Amarcord,* if its interpretation of Italian Fascism as a state of arrested psychological development can be called such, is delivered not with the pompous rhetoric of the ideologue but with the exquisite imagery of a poet. The almost universal popularity of this film can only be explained by its visual power and not its thematic content. Like *La dolce vita, Amarcord* presents us with countless moments of great beauty and emotional appeal, even when the subject matter is not always so gratifying. It would be impossible to discuss them all, but a few examples will serve to demonstrate that Fellini's greatest "political" film is really one of his greatest "poetic" films. The sequences dealing with the visiting *federale,* the passage of the *Rex,* or Titta's encounter with Gradisca are not only important ve-

Titta (Bruno Zanin) tries to lift the enormous tobacconist (Maria Antonietta Beluzzi). [*Photo:* The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

hicles for carrying forward Fellini's arguments about how political ideology and cinematic myths operate upon our psyches, but they are also some of the most hilarious and beautiful metacinematic moments in the work. Titta approaches Gradisca in a movie theater; the *Rex* is a movie prop; and the Fascist visits what a careful observer will perceive as the major buildings of Cinecittà! Fellini used the Fascist-style movie studio as a ready-made prop, since its architecture (created as one of the Fascist regime's showplaces) was so typical of the regime's architectural style that he required very few props to complete the sequence. While the main argument of these three sequences concerns the link between personal behavior and mass behavior, the subtext of them all remains the cinema. In spite of Fellini's obvious distaste for the political regime governing the Amarcordians or the closed society that produced its sex-

Young Italians dream of an ideal Fascist marriage before a bust of Mussolini in a fantasy sequence of *Amarcord*. [*Photo:* The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]

ual repression and its cultural emptiness, once again the director cannot help but reproduce the memory of his past in beautiful, striking images. The appearance of the beautiful peacock in the snow entrances not only the townspeople but also Fellini's audience. Its almost magic arrival on the screen cannot but help to recall the equally magic and evocative appearance of the magicians or the horse in *La strada* or any number of similar surrealistic apparitions in other works. Still, this beautiful bird as it spreads it gossamer wings also serves as a harsh commentary on the life of the town, for the peacock has always served as the archetypal image of vanity and dangerous self-centeredness in Italian culture since the Middle Ages. Equally ambivalent are Fellini's caricature portraits of the entire town. Fascists resemble *august* (stupid grotesque) clowns, townspeople recall cartoon characters. While we can see the deleterious effects of the actions of such characters, their comic qualities also make us laugh and even forgive them their faults. Like Fellini, Fellini's audience slowly changes from witnesses for the prosecution to witnesses for the defense. Fellini's art is always a comic art, and that implies acceptance, understanding, even empathy, rather than mere criticism and exorcism of evil.

Thus, Fellini produces an important statement about politics and Italian political history with poetic images, not rhetorical speeches or ideological narratives. If his "political" film reflects his "poetic" style, however, it is also not merely autobiographical as some interpretations of *Amarcord* have claimed. The wonderfully evocative explanation of Gradisca's name is a perfect case in point. As Dario Zanelli has noted, in *Amarcord,* Gradisca supposedly received her name because she was brought to the Grand Hotel to sleep with a visiting prince in order to help the town receive funding for the harbor: When she invited the prince to enter her bed, she offered her body to him with the phrase "Gradisca" (meaning "Please do" or "Help yourself!"). In fact, Zanelli located the historic Gradisca and discovered that her name came from a place where her father was fighting on the Austrian–Italian frontier during the time of her birth, November 1915! Titta's own narration of his friendship with Fellini underscores how many of the so-called biographical events in *Amarcord* (like those in *8 1/2*) are often fictitious inventions of Fellini's imaginative fantasy. As the director has quite rightly stated, "my films from my past recount memories that are completely invented."[19] In spite of writing his memoirs about his adolescence in

Rimini and discussing many of the people who become his characters in *Amarcord,* Fellini refuses to consider his works autobiographical, rejecting a reductionist explanation of his life. Particularly in regard to *Amarcord,* Fellini finds explaining his art by his biography offensive:

> I'm always a bit offended when I hear that one of my films is "autobiographical": it seems like a reductionist definition to me, especially if then, as it often happens, "autobiographical" comes to be understood in the sense of anecdotal, like someone who tells old school stories.[20]

Yet, Fellini also realizes that fact and fiction have become so completely intertwined in his mind that he can no longer separate them:

> Now I can't distinguish what really happened from what I made up. Superimposed on my real memories are painted memories of a plastic sea, and characters from my adolescence in Rimini are elbowed aside by actors or extras who interpreted them in my films.[21]

While Zanelli's research into Fellini's past reveals that his characters in *Amarcord* are produced primarily by his fertile fantasy, as in the case of Gradisca's name, Fellini himself repeated the invented story of the prince in the Grand Hotel in his autobiographical essay "My Rimini," and the tale has become so popular that it is almost impossible to convince Fellini's fans that the invented story is not the true explanation.

Fellini has frequently declared that he is a puppet master, a complete inventor of everything about his life and his art:

> I'm a liar, but an honest one. People reproach me for not always telling the same story in the same way. But this happens because I've invented the whole tale from the start and it seems boring to me and unkind to other people to repeat myself.[22]

If Fellini's cinematic art rests upon such "lies," perhaps it is useful to recall Picasso's famous definition of art as a lie that tells the truth.