

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Billy Liar by John Schlesinger, Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall

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The memorable concluding scene of Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

first and last sequences (Guido trapped in the traffic jam, the circus at the spaceship) and it would work, but as a much darker film.

Aside from that random player, not much else is missing from this typically rich and careful Criterion production. It's a minicourse in Fellini that should keep your evenings occupied for most of the week (even if you watch the film only once).

The commentary track skillfully interweaves three different tracks. There's no indication who wrote the competent essay read by actress Tanya Zaicon, but Antonio Monda teaches film at NYU and Gideon Bachmann was a longtime friend and colleague of Fellini. A telling line from Gideon Bachmann: "Everyone loved being used by Federico. Including myself."

Their additions make the commentary track less of a lecture, more a discussion. (The Terry Gilliam introduction is just decoration: the premise was that both he and Fellini started as cartoonists.)

The transfer is up to Criterion's usual high standard, made from "a 35mm fine-grain master made from the original negative." (Although I still prefer Criterion's laserdisc edition—but that's another story.)

The 'extras' on disc two are remarkable. *Fellini—A Director's Notebook* is the documentary he made for television in 1969 dealing mainly with his inability to make *The Voyage of G. Mastorna* several years earlier: a case of life imitating art (except that producer Dino Di Laurentiis sued Fellini for the expense of the sets that had been built). It is cloying and silly—but his only chance to amortize the cost of the *Mastorna* sets.

The documentary on Nino Rota is

essential viewing if you believe, as I do, that Fellini would not have been possible without Rota. (This is a film from German television made by Vassili Silovic.) The interviews with Lina Wertmüller (an uncredited Assistant Director on *8 1/2*) and cinematographer Vittorio Storaro (who never worked with Fellini) are both worthwhile.

But the real jewel of the extras is a twenty-six-minute monologue by Sandra Milo. (This is one of the interviews apparently shot especially for the DVD.) Milo played Carla, Guido's mistress, in *8 1/2*, and then had a seventeen-year affair with Guido's alter ego, Fellini. The interview is an eerie mirror of the forty-year-old movie. Milo paints breathless word pictures of life with Fellini. She didn't want to make the film, at first. One day Fellini arrived at her apartment with cinematographer Gianni di Venanzo, designer Piero Gherardi, camera, and costumes. "We're here to make your screen test," he announced. Her housekeeper dragged her out of bed to meet him.

A few years later he offered her the role of Gradisca in *Amarcord*. She describes how the two of them worked out the character on a cold, dark soundstage at Cinecittà in the dead of winter. But her husband wouldn't let her make the film. The role was eventually played by Magali Noël, imitating Milo (imitating Carla).

At the end of these stories she puts a period: "This is my story with Federico Fellini." But the camera rolls on. After a few seconds she adds:

"When I go to Fregene I think I see him among the trees." (Fellini died in 1993.)

A few beats. Her smile crumbles; a tear forms; she sways.

"Sometimes he calls me, and laughing, he asks me to chirp." (She laughs.) "As if I were a bird, and could go on the trees, too!"

Another long pause. Another false ending.

"But I cannot tell you more. There is a part, a little secret and mysterious, I believe is for me alone."

She blows us a kiss goodbye.

It is a strangely moving moment. 'Fellinesque.'

I'd like to have seen Sandra Milo play Tosca. You can almost hear her singing the great aria "*Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*." ("I lived for art, I lived for love.")

With its self-referential quantum psychology, *8 1/2* remains a key postmodern work. But it's more. With hindsight it also shows us the way beyond postmodernism to a time when sentiment—such anathema to modernists and postmodernists alike for a hundred years—will return. Like his nineteenth-century *paisani* Verdi, Puccini, and the other maestri, Fellini/Rota understood the transcendence of celebration: feeling together.

In the last scene of *8 1/2* all the characters in Guido's life descend from the rocket gantry to the circus ring as he orchestrates them. The last words of the film: "*Tutti insieme!*" "All together!"

It's a line and a moment out of the opera houses of the previous century. The spotlight narrows, the music fades. The celebration is over: *La commedia è finita!*

—James Monaco

Billy Liar

Directed by John Schlesinger; screenplay by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall; cinematography by Denys Coop; music by Richard Rodney Bennett; edited by Roger Cherrill; starring Tom Courtenay, Julie Christie, Wilfred Pickles, Mona Washbourne, Finlay Currie, Leonard Rossiter. B&W, 98 mins., DVD. A Criterion Collection release.

John Schlesinger is a British director who has had an extremely uneven career. For a number of years he worked in Hollywood where most of his films, like *Day of the Locust* (1975) and *Marathon Man* (1979), were either pedestrian or shrilly over-the-top. But then one remembers his haunting evocation of a rotting, melancholy Times Square in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969).

His early work in Britain, such as *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Billy Liar* (1963), includes some of his best films. *A Kind of Loving* was probably the most understated and least melodramatic of the New Wave of British working-class social-realist films of the early Sixties. *A Kind of Loving's* central characters are neither angry, rebellious males nor social outsiders, but ordinary white-collar workers, who are pressured to marry and then struggle to resolve their conflicts to create a workable marriage. It's a world where aspirations and passions are



Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie star in John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

doused, and people try to make the best of it amidst the constriction and dreariness.

Billy Liar, the more ambitious of the two films, conveyed a sense of the profound limits of lower-middle-class life. Its protagonist's most exhilarating moments were lived in fantasy rather than reality. The film, based on Keith Waterhouse's successful novel and play written in collaboration with Willis Hall, later became a musical version, and then a sitcom on British TV. The film centers on Billy Fisher (Tom Courtenay), a bright, tense, twenty-year-old funeral parlor clerk. It is set in a dreary Northern English industrial city where Billy works at a job he hates, and lives with his parents, and a grandmother on the edge of senility, in a comfortable semidetached house.

Billy is a compulsive liar and fantasist, who seeks refuge from a gnawing sense of ordinariness and entrapment through fantasies about a mythical country he has created—Ambrosia—where he struts around in a military uniform, wielding total power and giving speeches to massive, cheering crowds. His fantasies are not only about heroism, power, and fame, but also about having a different set of parents—an upper-class couple who speak in exaggerated posh accents and indulge his every whim. These are parents utterly unlike his own lower-middle-class ones—a well-meaning, soft-spoken mother and a sour, irascible father, who is in a constant rage at Billy for turning out to be somebody much less conventional and responsible than he wanted. In his flight from everyday drabness, Billy mimics Churchill's grand oratorical cadences and the portentous speech of the ancient funeral parlor director, Councilor Duxbury (Finlay Currie). He also pretends to be a blind man crossing against the traffic, and playacts with one of his fellow clerks, doing a soft-shoe

routine. His mimicry and playacting exhibit some imagination and whimsy, but he is too fearful a boy/man to do anything more than daydream and lie—machine-gunning in his mind anybody who angers him, and gratuitously making up stories about having a sister, just to break the daily routine.

Billy Liar is set in an England that is undergoing a social transformation. The city Billy lives in is being rebuilt, and much of its past demolished. Pop and consumer culture has begun to dominate—in place of class culture—and Billy's daydreams are built on images from popular films and television (his stated aspiration is to become a script writer for an unfunny comic with a mechanical smile). The new world is embodied in the character of the radiant Liz (Julie Christie in a striking debut)—the embodiment of 'swinging England.' Liz is more a symbol than a three-dimensional figure—a provincial girl who won't allow the environment to stifle her, but takes off for other places whenever she feels like it. In Billy's envious words, "She enjoys herself—she's crazy."

She's introduced to the audience in the film's most famous sequence, the camera tracking after her as she walks jauntily, swinging her large handbag, through the city's shopping district. Liz represents a new generation of young people, who have begun to sever their connection with the past, and are liberated sexually. The film depicts her naturalistically—little make-up, hair uncombed—an expressive, empathetic woman who, inexplicably, sees the frightened Billy as a kindred soul that she is ready to marry. Liz's luminousness is heightened by the fact that the other women that Billy is seeing (the two 'fiancées' he juggles) turn out to be unappetizing stereotypes—a harsh, vulgar, gum-chewing waitress, Rita, and the

plump, chaste, banal, dimly respectable Barbara. For Billy, Liz is an avatar of the self-confidence he lacks and the freedom he is incapable of choosing.

Billy Liar uses the same locations (e.g., the dance hall, the moors) as many other British New Wave films, such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *This Sporting Life* (1963), and, like them, explores the hopes and desires of their working-class protagonists and their ambivalent relationship to working-class culture. In fact, rather than projecting overtly political agendas, the New Wave films usually emphasized the autonomy of the individual hemmed in not by poverty and social exploitation, but by the tedious and cramped nature and conformity of the world they confronted daily.

What differentiates *Billy Liar* from most other New Wave films is the strain of social satire—Billy's oily boss, Shadrack (Leonard Rossiter), wants to modernize the funeral business by using plastic coffins—and a central figure whose fusion of vulnerability, intelligence, resentment, and pathos carries a strong element of humor. The character's complex emotional mixture is evoked brilliantly by Tom Courtenay, who appears in every scene. The film's intercutting of daydreams may not be especially imaginative formally, but none of the other New Wave films used dream sequences, being content to root themselves in everyday reality.

The Criterion Collection DVD provides a new wide-screen digital transfer of the film that gives intense clarity to its black-and-white imagery and its use of deep focus. The DVD's special features include the film's original theatrical trailer, and an informative excerpt from a BBC documentary—*British Cinema in the Sixties*—that features interviews with John Schlesinger, Julie Christie, and scriptwriters Waterhouse and Hall discussing aspects of *Billy Liar* (e.g., "the war of generations") while walking the streets of the city in which it was originally filmed.

Seeing *Billy Liar* today, nearly forty years after my first viewing, no longer carries the same emotional impact for me. Still, if Billy's daydreams now seem repetitive and the scenes with his 'fiancées' cartoonlike, the film remains deeply affecting. At its conclusion, Billy continues to fantasize about leading the Ambrosian Army, but is incapable of taking the train to London with Liz. He remains paralyzed—left only with his fertile imagination to sustain him in a cheerless provincial world.—Leonard Quart

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