Whose *Dolce Vita* is this anyhow? The Language of Fellini's Cinema

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It is not memory that dominates my films. To say that my films are autobiographical is an overly facile liquidation, a hasty classification. It seems to me that I have invented almost everything: childhood, character, nostalgias, dreams, memories, for the pleasure of being able to recount them. In the sense of the anecdotal, there is nothing autobiographical in my films . . . I could easily make a film composed of memories and nostalgias on Turkey, a country that I do not know at all.

Federico Fellini *Panorama*, 18, Jan. 14, 1980

These comments by Fellini concerning the relationship of his filmmaking to memory call attention to an issue in the semiotics of cinema that complicates any notion of the usefulness of film as a locus for personal or collective memory. In the following pages, I will argue that while a film like *La Dolce Vita* is highly relevant to an investigation of autobiographical discourse, Fellini's suggestion that his project does not stand in any hierarchical, mimetic relation to memory should be taken seriously.

First, though, I will argue that his title—*La Dolce Vita* or “The Sweet Life”—can be construed literally as well as ironically. Notwithstanding the dismay of many high-ranking members of the Italian government and press who wanted Fellini to make substantial cuts in the film in order to mitigate what they took to be its scandalously negative portrait of late 1950s Italian society, the film may be viewed as a positive as well as a negative expose (Liehm 177). As an analogue, think, for example, of the fourteenth-century vernacular Italian poem that offers a scandalously negative portrait of late fourteenth-century Italian society under the ironically literal title *La Commedia*—the Comedy.¹ One of the principal issues in Dante's poem, as many readers have noted, is the effect of its new medium, vernacular Italian, on the way the world and the self are understood (Waller 58–62, 143). By promoting Italian to the status of a language in its own right, not simply a degraded form of the hegemonic Latin which was the official language of Church and state throughout Europe, Dante remapped his contemporaries' understanding of both languages. Latin began to lose its privilege and the appearance of universality that went with it. Both languages appeared more obviously to be technologies of signification, equivalent in their contingency and materiality, though endlessly and suggestively different in their grammatical, syntactical, and lexical idiosyncracies.

Fellini's refusal to take memory as the ground of his films and his disinclination even to call them autobiographical are, in effect, rigorous comments on the nature and status of his cinematic language. Like the *Commedia*, Fellini's film enacts the potentially profound and happy impact of a new medium, a whole new set of signifying possibilities, upon the ways of patterning experience—as it is lived and as it is remembered—that have been elaborated through other, older signifying practices. Fellini's love affair with moving pictures can have “happened,” but it cannot be “remembered” insofar as it successfully transforms the terms of historical and autobiographical “knowledge.” It is possible, of course, to bend the distinctive grammar and syntax of a new medium like cinema to fit older ideologies and structures of perception rooted in verbal, and especially written, culture. I will have more to say later on about Fellini's brilliant use of the American actor Lex Barker, one of Hollywood's Tarzans, and Anita Ekberg, the Hollywood sex symbol, to parody the retrograde cinematic language of the American film industry. But Fellini's abandonment of “himself” to “the pleasure of being able to recount” in ways that are fundamentally and innovatively cinematic is a project or a decision or an event—verbal terms are interestingly inappropriate here—that cannot, rigorously speaking, be presented as part of, or continuous with, the portrayal of life outside of filmmaking.²

My starting point, therefore, will be a rudimentary discussion of some of the properties and possibilities of cinematic signification in general, following which I will look in greater detail at what might be called the “poetics” of *La Dolce Vita*. The fundamental property of moving pictures is, one keeps needing to remind oneself, that they move. That is, whether or not the *image*, moves, the *film* is always in motion. Twenty-four frames in current sound film production, move through the pull-down mechanism of the camera, or its mirror image the projector, every second. This constant physical movement of the celluloid itself allows a great many thing to happen. One of the most striking, as theoreticians of the kind of editing known as “montage” have rightfully emphasized, is that visual images not contiguous with each other geographically or chronologically, not shot in the same scale, through the same lens, from the same angle, or in the same light, may become intimately related to each other, much more intimately and dramatically related than images within the same frame. This is in part because the audience is drawn to participate in relating them. To take a special case, sometimes known as “separation,” where two people talking to each other are shown alternately in separate framings, the audience will combine the alternating shots to form a mental picture that includes both figures (Sharff 59–79).

This “picture” need not be visual, though for visually-oriented people it often is, but has to do with relating the separate images conceptually. (One figure, shot closer up or from a lower angle than the other, may be read as dominant, for example.) Once this process is set in motion, once the audience has been empowered to create such mental images, the filmmaker is further

empowered to play subsequent screen images off against these mental images, and to play mental images off against each other as well. Since the scene constructed in the mind's eye need not resemble any pre-existing or already known physical space, it will itself change dimension and density as the tones of voice, lighting, angles, and distances of the camera are varied. In other words, the physical movement of the film may ultimately become translated into a complex variety of conceptual movements. Many filmmakers make it a rule of thumb to end such a sequence with a resolution of some kind, often a shot of the two characters in the same frame. This resolution both lessens the audience's involvement and tends to direct the play of signifiers in the sequence toward a particular conclusion.

In *La Dolce Vita*, by contrast, separation sequences are lovingly belabored, but frequently unresolved. Marcello's recurring, inconclusive telephone conversations with his unhappy mistress, Emma, are paradigmatic of the film's refusal to resolve, either visually or narratively, the sexual and political conflicts it unfolds. Madalena's unanswered proposal of marriage to Marcello in the whispering gallery of a fifteenth-century palazzo even more pointedly diagrams, but refuses facilely to resolve (to "marry"), the forces at play in the sequence. The fact that Maddalena simply drifts into an embrace with another man in the midst of her extraordinarily dramatic exchange with Marcello suggests that resolution and release are not the natural and inevitable products of the processes set in motion by separation. On the contrary, the curtailment of these processes may always involve the intervention of a noncinematic, and in that sense, arbitrary, requirement that disparate visual and mental elements coalesce in a stable, atemporal or extratemporal, unity—a unity that film is ill-suited to convey because film is always in motion and this motion is always governed by time.

The suggestion raised by the whispering gallery scene is more than borne out by the tour-de-force of the final scene of *La Dolce Vita*. There, not only is separation used to suggest a certain closeness between the two characters, Marcello and the young waitress Paola, but separation sequences alternate with wide angle long shots to suggest a simultaneous distance. The two ways of shooting, in other words, themselves operate in separation to create a kind of separation-to-the-second power. The associations and cross-referencings that become possible as long as these separations are not resolved—and they never are—present themselves as fast and as furiously as we can make them, though the screen images themselves are unusually austere. A few examples of how this scene is working will indicate the difference it makes, especially in how we come to terms with the thematic issues raised in *La Dolce Vita*, that the processes set in motion by the motion of film not be curtailed.

Two medium close-up shots, one of Marcello and the other of the young waitress Paola, each seen from the other's point of view, signal that each recognizes and remembers the other from their earlier encounter in the sea-side restaurant where Paola works. Neither shot gives us a clear sense of how far

away from each other they actually are. Variations in the screen sizes of their images in subsequent shots indicate instead when something—a reaction or realization—is being underlined or emphasized. Interspersed with sequences of this kind there are shots of Marcello and Paola in the same frame, taken through a wide-angle lens from an oblique angle behind Marcello's back. In these shots both lens and angle horizontalize the relationship between the two figures, while their placement within the same frame interrupts the current of their exchange as it is shot in separation. These visual interruptions are reinforced by, though not necessarily synchronous with, alternations on the sound track between moments of deafening wind and wave noise and moments of quiet in which Marcello's words suddenly become clearly audible. Both kinds of interruption—audio and visual—begin to signify, not as naturalistic representations, but as relevant conceptual cues, when we realize that neither the noise of the wind and waves nor the distance between the two figures can be blamed for Marcello's incomprehension of Paola's hand gestures. He can see her hands perfectly clearly, we realize, and, in any case, nothing prevents him from walking closer. The obstacle to his deciphering her gestures is not physical but mental (as Paola indicates when she points to her head). Either he does not remember, or he failed to register in the first place, that she has asked him to teach her to type.

Both the very loud sound and the extreme long shots, then, can be associated with Marcello's inability to make the connection between what Paola asked him earlier and what she is signaling here. Recalling that encounter at the restaurant, we can understand more about why this connection does not get made. (Cinematically, in fact, Marcello's bewilderment may work to stimulate our recollections of the earlier scene.) Marcello's side of the earlier conversation turned upon the waitress's resemblance to the angels painted by the Umbrian artist Raphael. Marcello's elegantly turned compliment, though, betrays a significant pattern in his treatment of both art history and the young woman., Raphael's angels look the way they do in part because the Umbrian physiognomy served as his model. The waitress is Umbrian. Therefore it might have been more appropriate to note that Raphael's angels resemble the waitress. By putting the case the other way around, Marcello avoids the recognition that even the most sacred or captivating cultural icons have their local, historical roots. First by lending Raphael's angels the status of a disembodied ideal and then by assimilating Paola to that ideal, Marcello does just the opposite of what Fellini's film does. He flattens her into a static, two-dimensional image (quite literally when he has her pose for him in profile) and detaches that image from the context that presented it to him. He decontextualizes and dehistoricizes both Raphael's art and the young woman in front of him—a dislocated, homesick young woman who needs to acquire an empowering skill, not fatuous compliments, if she is to find a place in modern Italian society different from that of the dependent and battered women who otherwise inhabit Marcello's world. The fact that in

this earlier scene Marcello was already seeing Paola not as a signifying being, but only as a sexual and aesthetic object makes his later "degeneration" from journalist to publicist seem to us less a change of direction (as he feels it to be) than an externalization of literalization of what he was, in effect, already doing. Eventually it will become Marcello's, and by extension the Italian mass media's, profession to turn people into commodities and submit them to the "hasty classification" and "facile liquidation" from which Fellini distinguishes his own work. The blindness of such a position is deftly figured by Marcello's inability to "read" the gesturing he can so clearly "see" in the final scene.

Marcello experiences external forces over which he thinks he has no control and for which he assumes no responsibility. But the film shows us that it is Marcello's own "noise" and "distance," rather than the noise and distance which seem to him to be external conditions, that separate him from Paola. Once we recognize that we do not have to identify with Marcello, but are freed by the cinematic text to make our own connections, many further potent rearrangements of the elements of this and other scenes suggest themselves. Determinations of center and periphery, foreground and background, actions and setting, may shift dramatically. As the women in the film are emancipated from Marcello's gaze, their actions and words take on new significances in relation to each other. Marcello's phone calls with Emma at the beginning and end of his first meeting with Paola, for example, strongly link Emma's unhappiness (precisely what Marcello was trying to get away from by bringing his work to the restaurant) and Paola's situation. This linkage suggests that Emma's needs and anxieties are not necessarily innate, individual, or unilateral, but readable also, or instead, as products of the economic and sexual politics of the world represented by and through Marcello (a suggestion confirmed elsewhere, when Emma, abandoned by an angry Marcello at the side of the road, is shown contentedly picking flowers). The situations of the women in the film, every last one of whom is beaten or brutalized in some way, speak eloquently, in turn to the malaise from which the men are suffering, a connection it is in the nature of the men's malaise not to be able to make. Marcello and his older existentialist friend, Steiner, fail to recognize their own violence in their reduction of the world, including women and children, to acontextual, two-dimensional images. Consequently, it goes without saying, they also fail to make the connection between that violence and their increasingly virulent social and domestic claustrophobia. To do so they would have to relinquish their privileged (and well-paying) positions as knowers of truth and arbiters of culture, a position that Marcello can still, nevertheless, sense to be implicated in his behavior toward Emma when he construes her suicide attempt as an attempt to "ruin" his journalistic career.

This thread I have followed from the shot construction and editing of Marcello's second encounter with Paola through some of the film's thematic elements is not intended to be exclusive or exhaustive. My interest lies rather in

the way the complicated, multidimensional, multidirectional operation of the film's own movement overwhelms and "ruins" the two-dimensionalizing — the dehistoricizing and decontextualizing — that many of its characters practice and most are victimized by. This is the "sweetness" so to speak, of the life subjected to the gaze of the moving picture camera. It is a sweetness explicitly, pointedly, and wittily opposed to the fetishized sex and violent action which, as Fellini is neither the first nor the most recent, but among the most interesting, to point out, are the mainstays of commercial Hollywood film. Through his use of the two Hollywood personalities, Anita Ekberg and Lex Barker (playing Sylvia Rank and her fiance Robert), Fellini comments upon the anti-cinematic nature of these pleasures and upon the self-destructiveness of a cinema that tries to pander to them. Recall, as one example, Sylvia's reaction when she returns to her hotel at dawn and Robert, awakened by the paparazzi stationed around his car, slaps her. She objects, "You shouldn't do things like that, especially in front of people." Her primary concern, in other words, is with the inviolate consistency of her image (an image, Fellini stresses through her provocative gestures and costuming, precisely of violability and promiscuity). She must always appear the same, off-screen and on. Neither off-screen nor on must there be any metamorphic encounter or exchange. To be affianced to Tarzan is fine, but only as long as the two images simply reinforce — not complicate and problematize — each other. A good sex *symbol*, it would appear, does not in fact really have anything to do with sex. The perfect finishing touch to this deliciously ironic portrait of the fetishized celluloid woman is delivered by Sylvia, who says, with her back to the camera, as if to emphasize the words, "I don't like men. They scratch you. They never cut their nails."

Analogously, the physically powerful, action-oriented male hero of Hollywood film — Tarzan, for example — simply repels whatever threatens his inviolable integrity. In the typical American action film there is very little of the kind of conceptual movement I have been describing. American film stops short at spectacle, the spectacle of larger-than-life, violent, on-screen confrontations that, like the image of the fetishized woman, evoke involuntary somatic reactions, but go no further. No conceptual problems are presented, the good guy/bad guy morality and politics of such films leaving nothing (which is to say everything) to be questioned and investigated. Fellini's joke on the Robert/Lex/Tarzan character is to remove him from his generic context and put him in a far more complex setting where the figures he happens to slug it out with are a woman and the physically unthreatening Marcello. Robert looks less than heroic slapping Sylvia and punching out Marcello, even as they look less than romantic being slapped and punched by Robert. As the three figures are "translated" by the film from one genre to another (Marcello's Latin lover persona already having provided a usefully amusing contrast to Robert's American macho; Sylvia's "sex-bomb" image and Robert's attempts to be a caveman having already proved wildly disso-

nant), we find ourselves in an interesting position as spectators. This is not the position of the knower, of one who thinks he sees through the details and confusions to what really is. It is, instead, the position of the mediator between languages (Deleuze 243–265).³

The kind of cinematic movement I have been describing is creative of a never before seen or experienced time and space—a space and time in which the fundamental activity is not representation, or even signification *per se*, but a perpetual production and confrontation of different systems and logics. The movement aspires to produce fragments, “little ruins,” each suggestive of a whole of which it might be a part (like a figure in a separation sequence), yet also free to combine and recombine with other similarly suggestive elements to create immense and unexpected new fields of analysis and action. It is about *how* we are empowered to see Rome or Turkey—in the relationships made possible by the production and confrontation of the fragments—not, or not merely, *what* can be seen. It disturbs the illusory coherence we lend to geographical, narrative, or dramatic contiguity when we seek to achieve a sense of cognitive mastery.

As a last, and general, example, consider the stunning, historically evocative opening shot of the film and the sequences that immediately follow. A longish, low angle shot picks up two barely discernable objects in the distant sky to screen right and follows them until they resolve themselves into two helicopters, from one of which dangles an open-armed statue of Christ. This odd combination flies past the ancient Roman aqueduct of San Felice, and is followed by the camera as it recedes screen left, casting a shadow on the wall of a new highrise apartment building being constructed in the suburbs of Rome. This opening suggests several ironies. The juxtaposition in the same frame of cultural artifacts from three such different eras, or dimensions, of Roman history is itself striking. We are invited, perhaps to laugh—I always do—and to ask what these artifacts and the cultures they represent have to do with one another. Though envisioning them simultaneously involves no violation of documentary realism—these alignments can *happen* in Rome—it does violate a habit of chronological compartmentalization call periodization that usually keeps helicopters and ancient Romans at a safe distance from one another. Is Christian culture casting a benign benediction on the Imperial Roman culture it has supposedly displaced, or does the Roman construction hugely and immovably remain to dwarf the silly pretensions of its heirs? Does the Christian icon mock the false transcendence of the flying machine? Or has Christianity been reduced to an empty, dead, outward form, taken in tow by a modern technological society? Who is dependent upon whom here, and what is dependent upon what?

Like the sea monster pulled ashore just before the end of the film, this ensemble of images has no determinable head or tail. Not only are the three cultures thus ironized (like the movie stereotypes, made to appear nonhegemonic with respect to each other), but so is any attempt to depict historical

change or cultural difference in terms of stable subjects with stable narratives. Most notably, past and present are not opposed here. All three of the artifacts that we see are equally “present” physically. Their vertical arrangement, which can, in the first place, be read equally legitimately from bottom to top—ancient to modern—or top to bottom—modern to ancient, or from the middle outward in either direction, is clearly an optical effect created for a moment by the relationship between the camera’s placement and the helicopter’s trajectory. The sense that, however fruitfully allegorical, this visual moment is also highly contingent, is carried through in the framing of the shot which leaves the aqueduct without a ground and the helicopter blade pointing beyond the line at the top of the screen. The great stone arches do not signal the origin, nor modern technology the endpoint, of a historical continuum. Either one could as easily be the middle term suspended in a different triad. Most crucially, the very use of three contrasting objects rather than two in the construction of this scene works to challenge the binary logic that so thoroughly informs all the structures of information processing that I have been alluding to.

The shots following this shot begin to fulfill and extend these promises, clarifying the stakes involved in doing so in the particular socio-political milieu of Marcello’s Rome. Experiencing these shifts, experiencing the radical temporality and contingency of our perceptions from the outside, so to speak, is one of the greatest gifts and political tools film can give us. Though Fellini’s film actively denies us the position of cognitive mastery we might think we need, and feel we want, it does so because it takes this position to be conducive to a range of political and psychological ills. Where does this leave the self and autobiographical/historical knowledge? The film might as well be set in Turkey as in Rome in the sense that, fulfilling the logic of film technology itself, it works toward fragmentation and separation leaving new syntheses and unifications to the spectators to perform. We are empowered to *shift* focuses and perspectives, whether they are trained on Rome or on Turkey. In other words, the film’s politics need not be confined to its own setting. As well as knowledge about or memory of a particular self in a particular place, the politics of our perceptions of these particularities become readable. What we gain is an experience of the richness of social possibility—resilient to Marcello’s reductiveness or Steiner’s despair.

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NOTES

- 1 Many Italian Renaissance texts work ironically in this way (and have been misread by less ironic scholars, I would maintain). I am thinking especially of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* in which the yearning for less violent forms of government than that of autarchy seems to me unmistakable in the pattern whereby the efforts of every “prince” whose heinous deeds are

held up as "good" examples of what the "strong" ruler must do are rendered futile or worse by that figure's own violent and/or untimely death.

- 2 A reasonably helpful analogy, the one I hope my reference to Dante will have suggested, would be the trope of conversion. Another would be the Freudian trope of the psychoanalytical "cure." In both cases the self produced by the process of reading of telling of itself in a new way must reach a point of significant discontinuity from the self under spiritual or psychoanalytical analysis in order for the conversion or the cure to have happened. But in these two cases, unlike the case of cinema, the physical bodies of actors are not involved in signifying other, earlier incarnations of the self. Also, unlike the case of cinema, language remains the dominant medium, the medium through which alternative modes of visual and somatic signification are made accessible to interpretation. Thus the radical subversion to the ontological integrity or continuity of the self implied from the start of such projects remains, possibly, something of a verbal game. And if the language in which the game is played out is itself the ground of the subjectivity of which we are speaking, as numbers of philosophers and linguists have repeatedly suggested, then these discussions reconstruct and reinforce the "self" as fast as they can theoretically disassemble it. My sense of these issues is greatly indebted to informal discussions with my late colleague Elizabeth Bruss and to her article "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," Olney.
- 3 The notion of the spectator as a "translator," and film as a medium more involved with translation than with reference was suggested to me by Chapter II, "les figures ou la transformation des formes," of Gilles Deleuze's *L'Image-Mouvement*.

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