

La Dolce Vita-1960: Where we discover it's not so sweet, not so livable....

I'd been out of school for two years when this film was released in Australia. The only reason I heard about was because of all the fuss from the very conservative press and pulpits, at that time. In fact, I think the film was severely restricted in where it could be shown; and, as I recall, many called for an outright ban. As things turned out, I couldn't make the time available to see it.

Years passed, and I finally got to see this one when it arrived on DVD a few years back. And, just last week, I had another viewing, to refresh my memory.

First, if you like Italian cinema, you'd find it difficult to dislike this narrative and film. But even if you do dislike it, it would be even more difficult to deny Fellini's genius for producing socially appealing and philosophically introspective masterworks.

Beginning with the title – The Sweet Life – Fellini strips away, with heavy irony, all that is false and inconsistent about the human condition. This is an episodic narrative, in roughly ten scenarios, all designed to show the vacuity, hypocrisy and blatant dishonesty of our so-called civilization. The fact that the story is set in Italy is irrelevant; this is for everybody in any “civilized” city of the world.

Is this anything new, anything you don't already know? Probably not. Because this story is simply a week or two from the life from a man, Marcello Rubini (Mastroianni), a tabloid journalist who's trying to find his place in an increasingly unpleasant world. We're not all journalists, but we've all been there, I think. And that's why this movie has such an appeal and why it's as relevant today, as it was in 1960.

I won't go into the plot – the actual sequence of events in this story; that's for you to discover when you see it, or to refresh your own memory. What I'd like to do is comment on some of the more compelling metaphors, symbols and other narrative tricks Fellini used.

One of the most striking scenes – and one that is often shown in film clips and in other contexts – is that of Sylvia (Anita Ekberg) at a party in her honour, as she dances with various people, including an actor (in the story) who's dressed up to look vaguely like a satyr. Now, it was George Bernard Shaw who said that dancing is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire. In this sequence, however, Fellini turns it on its head, literally, when the actor-satyr stands on his hands and lets Sylvia continue to dance in a suggestive fashion thus conjuring up the image of sixty-nine. Little wonder that there was much fulmination from self-righteous pulpits.

Shortly after, Marcello and Sylvia scarp off in his Triumph TR2A (I think) sports car to finally end up near one of Rome's most famous fountains – the Fontana di Trevi – where Sylvia decides to take a swim, or shower, depending on your point of view. She invites Marcello to join her in her harmless frivolity, and as he approaches he murmurs words

like, “I see how wrong we all are; love is the answer.” And, as he joins Sylvia, knee deep, she takes a handful from the surface and sprinkles it over his head, in a symbolic rebirth and baptism. Oh, my, more fulmination from certain quarters again, no doubt.

Perhaps the most devastating of Fellini’s indictments is the media circus that results from the supposed appearance of the Madonna at a certain tree on the outskirts of the city and where Fellini’s satire spares nobody, reviling them all: the media for its crassness, the crowds for their greed, the church for its tacit complicity in the deceit and conceit. The final scene of the crowd tearing the “sacred” tree to pieces for souvenirs must rank as one of the best of its type on film. And, when the crowds are going or gone, only a lone woman – ignored, unseen - struggles to pray for her daughter’s life nearby....

Through all of this journey, Marcello learns much about what motivates him but fails in the one thing that should: like many men, he can’t make any firm commitment to any of the women in his life. Of particular note is the long-suffering Emma (Yvonne Furneaux), Marcello’s devoted girl friend who pines for marriage with him. Mention must also be made of the blonde and very attractive young waitress at the seaside café where Marcello tries to rejuvenate his writing. Which makes the final scene all the more poignant....

Produced in stark black and white and with a contemporary score of popular tunes, this is cinema at its best, with a cast that is about as perfect as you can get. Even Lex Barker’s short appearance made the scene right as Sylvia’s aggrieved husband, Robert.

Oh, yeah: and this is the film that gave the bad name to publicity photographers and gave the world the term ‘paparazzi’ from the character Paparazzo (Walter Santesso).

Finally, this is one of the very few films that, for me, rates a ten.

25th November, 2007.

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