

*“La Dolce Vita aspired with unprecedented ambition to make film a core media of high modern art, and the cultural conditions of its production could not have been more auspicious for such an ambition.”*

## FILM AS HISTORY

### *Fellini's La Dolce Vita as a Historical Artifact*

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IN 1960, ITALY WAS A COUNTRY IN RAPID CULTURAL TRANSITION. NOWHERE WAS THIS CULTURAL CURRENT, THIS EBB OF CONSERVATIVE ITALIAN VIRTUE AND FLOW OF FLASHY ITALIAN CONSUMERISM, MORE EVIDENT THAN IN ITALY'S AGE-OLD SEAT OF POWER: ROME. DURING THIS TIME, FAMED DIRECTOR FEDERICO FELLINI UNDERTOOK TO ENLIST THE ELEMENTS OF HIGH-MODERNISM AND AUTEURISM IN THE CREATION OF A WORK OF ART THAT WOULD CAPTURE SOMETHING OF THE NEW CULTURE RISING IN ROME. THE RESULT WAS THE NOW CANONICAL FILM *LA DOLCE VITA*. INFAMOUS FOR ITS SENSUALITY, BUT EMINENT FOR ITS MASTERLY ARTISTIC STORY-TELLING, FIFTY YEARS HAVE SEEN THE VALUE OF FELLINI'S FILM FOR FILM CRITICS AND HISTORIANS ALIKE INCREASE SUBSTANTIALLY. HERE, THAT VALUE WILL BE ASSESSED BY AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM'S RECEPTION AT THE TIME OF ITS RELEASE, FOLLOWED BY A CLOSE LOOK AT THE FILM ITSELF. AN EXPLORATION OF HOW *LA DOLCE VITA* SIMULTANEOUSLY CAPTURES AND CRITICIZES THE PERIOD OF ITS PRODUCTION DEMONSTRATES THIS WORK OF ART'S INVALUABLE STATUS AS A HISTORICAL ARTIFACT.

## INTRODUCTION

As Federico Fellini's infamous film *La Dolce Vita* begins, a helicopter suspends a statue of Christ as it flies over the city of Rome. The helicopter, a man-made marvel, passes an ancient Roman aqueduct as it nears historic St. Peter's Basilica. With this powerful visual, Fellini immediately alerts the viewer to the distinction between the old Rome—the Rome of ancient structures, monuments, and churches—and the new, modern Rome. This opening alerts the audience that the film will consider and reflect on the new Rome. Fellini himself acknowledged that, while intending to make a very different type of film after his previous film, *Nights of Cabiria*, he came to “realize that the Rome he had intended to depict had been replaced by another city, more brash and cosmopolitan.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, Fellini made the canonical film, *La Dolce Vita*, of equal value to film critics and historians alike. As an eminent work of its time, the film and its reception elucidate the climate which produced it; but the film also reacts against that climate in ways which have become historically fascinating in the decades since its release. Indeed, *La Dolce Vita* crystallized something of Italy's understanding of salvation in 1960, and remains, therefore, an invaluable artifact.

*La Dolce Vita* documents the tale of gossip columnist Marcello Rubini, and something of that tale should be told here prior to a discussion of the film. Having left his dreary, provincial existence behind, Marcello wanders through an ultra-modern, ultra-sophisticated, ultra-decadent Rome. He yearns to write seriously, but his inconsequential newspaper pieces bring in more money, and he is too lazy to struggle against this condition. Instead Marcello attaches himself to a bored socialite whose search for thrills brings the pair into contact with a number of fantastical characters. The events that follow form seven distinct episodes of action that are loosely threaded together. Throughout all his adventures, Marcello's dreams, fantasies, and nightmares mirror the hedonism of his waking life. It is these moments of unreality that unify the seven episodes into a coherent whole, culminating with a shrug: while his lifestyle is shallow and ultimately pointless, there is nothing he can do to change it, so he might as well enjoy it.

## RECEPTION AS A GAUGE OF CULTURAL CLIMATE

Upon its domestic release, the film immediately caused controversy. A segment of the Italian population was morally outraged, resulting in “protests on the streets as well as in the papers.”<sup>2</sup> Conservative opinion leaders denounced

the film as licentious and morally depraved, labeling it “the work of a Communist.”<sup>3</sup> Soon after the Vatican—which originally accepted the film—retracted its approval and condemned *La Dolce Vita*, swiftly bringing the clerics who had initially approved of the film into accord with official policy. The press assiduously documented these censures, captivating public consciousness and, ironically, turning “*La Dolce Vita* into a social and cultural event.”<sup>4</sup>

Partly as a result of the controversy, the film became an immediate box-office success in Italy and internationally upon its release abroad.<sup>5</sup> Italians lined up to see the film upon its release. It was a cultural sensation, ultimately grossing over 2,200,000,000 lira. Reflecting on the decade in film, *The New York Times* hailed *La Dolce Vita* as “one of the most widely seen and acclaimed European movies of the 1960s.”<sup>6</sup> The public's clamor to see the film was accompanied by ovations from a majority of prominent critics in Italy and the rest of Europe. *La Dolce Vita* earned the Palme d'Or (Golden Palm) at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival. *The New York Times* reported that the festival ended “with Italy's *La Dolce Vita* as the unanimous choice for the Golden Palm first prize,” its presentation being so overpowering that it had “set the tone of the whole festival.”<sup>7</sup>

When the film was released in America the following year, the film again received praise from critics with some minor exceptions, among which was a notable review in *Time* magazine: “For all its vitality, the film is decadent, an artistic failure,”<sup>8</sup> and ““worst of all, *La Dolce Vita* fails to attract the moviegoer as much as it repulses him, fails to inspire his sympathies as well as his disgust.”<sup>9</sup> Most critics, though, like Bosley Crowther, a writer for *The New York Times*, concluded that the film “proved to deserve all the hurrahs and the impressive honors it has received.”<sup>10</sup> In his review, Crowther writes that the film is an “awesome picture, licentious in content but moral and vastly sophisticated in its attitude and what it says.”<sup>11</sup> *La Dolce Vita* was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Director—winning for Best Costume Design: Black-and-White—and received a New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Foreign Film.

Fellini's film was received positively in America due in part to the intellectual climate into which it was released. In the 1950s and 1960s Fellini became, as Joseph McBride puts it, the “director as superstar”<sup>12</sup> for academics as well as the public.<sup>13</sup> Fellini achieved such superstardom primarily because his work as a director—epitomized in *La Dolce*

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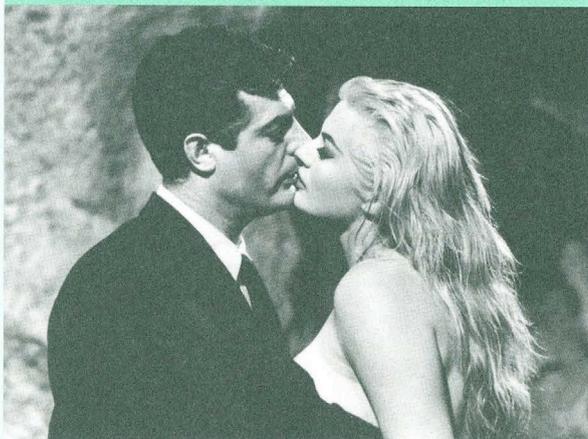
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LA DOLCE VITA BROUGHT THE ALLURE OF ITALIAN CULTURE TO CINEMAS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.

*Vita* – “dovetailed with three major movements in the arts and in film in the 1950s and 1960s: high modernism, the art film, and auteurism.”<sup>14</sup> High modernism refers to the alignment of modern art with high (versus popular) culture, marking a clear distinction between innovative, exclusive “high” art and art appearing in pop culture, favoring the former. Art film, especially in American vernacular, refers to a film that presents itself as a piece of high art, with such films generally being directed by an auteur, or a filmmaker whose films are primarily guided by his own creative vision. All three of these movements were interrelated and all three were fundamental to Fellini’s international success with *La Dolce Vita*.

*La Dolce Vita* encapsulates the high modern movement in film, being an art film in every sense of the word, especially as it was made under the direction of the auteur. In producing *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini attempted above all else to craft the film into a piece of high art. He drew on modernist literature and experimented with modes of narrative: the film presents seven loosely connected episodes, resembling a collection of short stories that are only marginally bound. Together, this modernist narrative technique, unconventional in film at that time, “confirmed Fellini’s reputation within high modernist circles of the time”<sup>15</sup> and led critics to consider the film one of the greatest art films ever produced. Fellini hoped that *La Dolce Vita* would become a cinematic poem, and most contemporary critics felt that he had done so. Moreover, Fellini’s control over the direction of the film was unprecedented and is rare even today. He crafted each detail of the film so that it truly became his piece of art. Film critic Peter Bonadello compared Fellini’s

THE FILM’S PORTRAYAL OF LOOSE SEXUALITY RESONATED WITH AMERICAN AUDIENCES IN THE 1960S.



construction of his films to “the art produced in the workshop of a Renaissance painter . . . virtually every detail—costumes, makeup, lighting, sets—of every film was minutely sketched out by Fellini with his famous felt-tip marker.”<sup>16</sup> *La Dolce Vita* aspired with unprecedented ambition to make film a core media of high modern art, and the cultural conditions of its production could not have been more auspicious for such an ambition. One begins to understand the critical acclaim.<sup>17</sup>

The cultural climate in America also contributed substantially to the film’s reception by the public, for it enjoyed considerable box-office receipts of over \$19,500,000 in America. This success is tied to the timing of its release, which coincided with a rise in the American people’s interest in international films. As film critic Frank Burke writes, there existed “widespread postwar American movie interests overseas”<sup>18</sup> and Italian (and French) cinema experienced considerable success in American markets. This popular reception reflected two movements in American culture.

First, the reception of *La Dolce Vita*—and Italian film in general—represented a larger cultural fascination with Italy. During the 1950s and 1960s, what America wore, what its citizens drove, and how they looked, was influenced considerably by Italy’s trendsetters, which included fashion designers, film directors, and automakers. If it came from Italy, and the designer’s name ended in a vowel, the American public was buying it. Even First Lady Jackie Kennedy, an icon of America’s style, was enamored with Oleg Cassini designs. This fascination with Italian culture coincided with a peak in American interest in film. In this cultural climate, it is not surprising that Fellini – the Italian director – and his masterwork *La Dolce Vita* experienced such popular and critical success in America.

Second, the reception of the film occurred in the midst of an evolving cultural and sexual revolution in America. Not released in America until 1961, the reception of the film was preceded by three significant events in American cultural history: the issuing of the Kinsey reports (1948 and 1953), the election of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (January 1960) and the development of the pill (May 1960). The Kinsey reports, two studies by Alfred Kinsey exploring male and female sexuality, challenged widely held beliefs about human sexuality, including prevalent medical literature that posited that women were not sexual beings. More than any previous book, Kinsey’s studies placed sex on the national stage and inspired public dis-

course on American sexuality. These reports had begun to transform American's perceptions of sexual behavior, but by 1960 with the election of the glamorous and sexy Kennedy family, Americans had an entirely new understanding of sex. Unlike ever before, Americans were remarkably open about and interested in sex. This new perspective on sex affected critics' perception of the promiscuity in *La Dolce Vita* and drove the public to the theaters, wanting to see its curiosity played out on the big screen.

A large reason for this film's popular appeal was its sex appeal. International films had more nudity and were generally more risqué than American films. *La Dolce Vita* did not disappoint. The so-called "orgy scene," the final scene of the film excluding the epilogue on the beach, in which Marcello conducts the revelers, was wholly unprecedented in film. Even *The New York Times* reviewer, who lavishly praised the film, noted that the film was "licentious."<sup>19</sup> Roger Ebert postulated that the popular reception of the film was due largely to this element of the film: "We are afraid that, despite the almost extreme good taste with which the movie was filmed, we are afraid that many of the thousands who queued up before the theatre had rather elementary motives."<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the reception of the film also coincided with serious economic development in America. Given the corresponding social effects of that development on 1950s America, the materialistic Rome that Fellini presented in *La Dolce Vita* was not entirely foreign to American moviegoers; American audiences could relate to the film and its social commentary. By 1949 in America, despite the continuing problems of postwar re-conversion, an economic expansion had begun that would continue with only brief interruptions for almost twenty years. Among the most striking social developments of the immediate postwar era was the rapid extension of a middle-class lifestyle and outlook to an expanding portion of the population. As historian Alan Brinkley remarks, "At the center of middle-class culture in the 1950s was a growing absorption with consumer goods."<sup>21</sup> By 1960 America and Italy had experienced an economic revolution, and portions of both populations were concerned about the social effects of the transition. These Americans viewed Fellini's social commentary as relevant and poignant; Bosley Crowther, a writer for *The New York Times*, captured this feeling in his review of the film: "Of all the intelligent filmmakers who have been trying in recent years to give us a comprehensive picture of the frantic civilization of the present day, it looks as if Federico Fellini has come closest to doing it in

his great Italian film, '*La Dolce Vita*.'"<sup>22</sup> Crowther even suggests that the ills that Fellini portrays are applicable to "almost any highly civilized realm." Crowther's comments, like those from the previously mentioned contemporary critics, reveal the political, social, and cultural climate in which the film was produced.

#### LA DOLCE VITA AS A CULTURAL CRITIQUE

The telling nature of *La Dolce Vita*'s reception suggests its importance to history as a cultural artifact. but beyond documenting the climate of the period, the film offers a commentary. And in the years preceding the production of *La Dolce Vita*, Italy experienced radical changes. During those years, Italy entered a new phase of growth and change. As film critic Stephen Gundle writes, "No longer the predominantly agricultural and only primitively industrial country that had emerged from the Second World War, [Italy] was rapidly developing into an industrial society with a profile of its own."<sup>23</sup> In the immediate post-war period, Italy had experienced a devastating depression, but by the end of the 1950s Italy's economic fortune had turned around, in part due to its newfound allies and newfound resources. In the 1950s, Italy became a member of the NATO alliance—benefiting immensely from the funds allocated by the Marshall Plan—and a member of the European Economic Community (which later became the European Union). Aided by these new allies and the discovery of methane, which reinvigorated the Italian steel

*"The film is undoubtedly a reaction to the turbulence facing an Italy in transition, but the film also constitutes a response to calamities facing Fellini, in transition himself."*

industry, Italy experienced an impressive economic revival and growth. Suddenly, in the wake of a serious depression, Italians experienced unprecedented prosperity. This economic development, later entitled the "Economic Miracle,"

insight into Italy's conception of—or rather struggle to contemporize—salvation.

The film, therefore, is an invaluable artifact. An assessment of the film's reception provides the historian an understanding of the social, political, cultural, and intellectual climate in both America and Italy in 1960. Analyzing the film itself allows the historian to move beyond simple characterization and to apprehend something of the feel and popular consciousness of the time. Hence, the historian can gain an understanding of the Italian people's search for meaning and salvation as their faith in Christianity eroded. Just so was Fellini's ambition consummated: not only is *La Dolce Vita* a masterful film, it is a masterpiece of art in the twentieth century.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Gundle (133)
2. Gundle (136)
3. Gundle (136)
4. Gundle (137)
5. Another factor contributing to the success of *La Dolce Vita* in Italy was the influence of Anita Ekberg; to Italian men, the beauty of a blonde woman is incomparable.
6. "Review Summary" *New York Times*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/27906/La-Dolce-Vita/overview>
7. Crowther (30)
8. "Cinema: The Day of the Beast," *Time Magazine*, April 21, 1961, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,895311,00.html?artId=895311?contentType=article?chn=us#ixzz0WZcRNk1D>
9. Like most of the negative responses, the *Time* review misinterprets the film, failing to see the underlying currents of satire and sharp criticism. (e.g. "good deal of the picture is out-and-out sensationalism, smeared on with a heavy hand to attract the insects...the film is vulgar and naive.")
10. Crowther (30)
11. *Ibid.*
12. Burke (1)
13. In the cultural and theoretical climate of subsequent decades, which came to deny the autonomy of the individual (i.e. structuralism) "the concept of the modern artist-as-romantic hero was debunked and Fellini became viewed as an egoistic anachronism" (Burke 1). Though, Fellini had been a "a favorite among many academics in the 1960s, he became an outcast among film academics of the 1970s and 1980s" (Burke 2). The development of scholarship on Fellini is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to understand that development occurred – further demonstrating that *La Dolce Vita* was filmed in shifting ideological climate.
14. Burke (7)
15. Burke (98)
16. Bondanella (3)
17. The intellectual climate not only influenced the reception of the film, but also the production of the film – for, the intellectual climate not only influenced the critics but also Fellini himself and the patrons that financed his film. The narrative structure of the film is entirely modernist, evoking "comparisons to T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and other major modernist writers" (Burke 103). Fellini had, indeed, read such literature and hoped to mirror it in film. These modernist sympathies ensured that Fellini received the financial backing necessary to create the project. At the time of *La Dolce Vita*'s production, American investment had become critical to Fellini's capability to make movies. And at the time, the Cold War was in full swing and Americans felt that the spread of liberalism "required not only money but the infusion of American ideology" (Burke 9). Accordingly, "American ideology enlisted high art and the cult of the artist as symbols of American individualism and freedom of thought" (Burke 9). Fellini, as an auteur and producer of high art, fit the bill, receiving significant financial support from American investors.
18. Burke (8)
19. Crowther (30)
20. Ebert (1961)
21. Brinkley (887)
22. Crowther, "La Dolce Vita: Fellini's Urbane Film Looks Askance at Life" (119)
23. Gundle (135)
24. Gundle (135)
25. Burke (8)
26. Gundle (135)
27. Gundle (137)
28. Gundle (135)
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. Costello (35)
33. Murray (116)
34. Gundle (139)
35. Gundle (139)
36. Gundle (139)
37. "Cinema: The Day of the Beast," *Time Magazine*, April 21, 1961, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,895311,00.html?artId=895311?contentType=article?chn=us#ixzz0WZcRNk1D>
38. Crowther, "La Dolce Vita: Fellini's Urbane Film Looks Askance at Life." (119)
39. As Fellini's style as a director changed with him. This film is a transitional piece between neo-realism and the aesthetic of his later work, the style that would later be termed Fellini-esque. The film, in many ways, is markedly not a neo-realist film: segments of the movie are filmed in a studio, the focus of the film is not upon the commonplace but upon the extraordinary and the wealthy, the films experimental narrative structure is a stark contrast from the mise-en-scene of neo-realist films. The film, though, retains the goals, if not the methods of neo-realist cinema. Like the neo-realists, Fellini intends for his films to bring about the "transformation of consciousness" (Murray

4). The neo-realists sought to bring it about by showing the negative consequences of the war. Fellini, instead, "sought to offer narrative models of transformation, rooted in the experience and imaginative growth of individual characters" (Murray 4). Likewise, in *La Dolce Vita*, Fellini does not yet embrace the dream sequences of his later films, not altering music, and simply presenting life as he sees it (although the life in focus is that of the wealthy not the impoverished). Like the neo-realist, he is simply directing the facts – even if his focus is different than that of the neo-realists.

40. Whether Fellini would agree with this assessment is questionable. Concerning the autobiographical element in his works, Fellini himself has been (characteristically) inconsistent in his remarks on the subject. As Murray notes, "On the one hand, he has said: 'an artist can only be understood through his work. ....what I have to say, I say in my work. My work can't be anything other than a testimony of what I am looking for. It is a mirror my searching.' On the other hand he has also said: 'I cannot remove myself from the content of my films. If I were to make a film about the life of a sole, it would end up being about me...there is autobiographical vain that is in all my work'" (Murray 4).

41. Murray (8)

42. Murray (9)

43. Costello (36)

44. Admittedly, this allusion is not perfect. Fellini, unlike Marcello, migrated to Rome only after living in Florence, where he was employed as a cartoonist for a number of years.

45. Murray (9)

46. Murray (6)

47. Costello (51)

48. Costello (53)

49. Costello (54)

50. Costello (69)

51. Costello (126)

52. Burke (86)

53. Costello (131)

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