



La dolce vita

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In an age when few arthouse films cause riots or give rise to parliamentary debates, it's difficult to envisage the sheer seismic force of the Italian release of Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* in February 1960. In Milan, the glass doors of the Cinema Capitol gave way in the crush to get in; a few days later a rightwing parliamentarian stood up in Italy's lower house, the Camera dei Deputati, to deplore the 'corrosive' effects of a film that 'infiltrates the worm of a materialist easy life, devoid of ideals, into our young generations, contributing to the destructive work of subversive political forces.' The Vatican newspaper even printed a letter from an indignant reader suggesting that Anita Ekberg should be prosecuted 'on the basis of article 498 of the Penal Code' for dressing up as a priest. But the controversy only contributed to the film's success. In the end, 12 million Italians would see *La dolce vita* in cinemas – around one in three of the country's adult population.

Missing the point, as those early polemicists did, has been a feature of the film's reception ever since. This is Fellini's most celebrated work – but also, in a way, his least understood. Everyone remembers pneumatic Anita Ekberg in her strapless black dress amidst the gushing water of the Trevi Fountain. Few recall the tragic Steiner episode, or the false miracle, or the first appearance of Paola (Valeria Ciangottini), the fragile adolescent beauty who lights up the film's oneiric finale. Then and now, readings of *La dolce vita* are too often clouded by its setting – the Via Veneto scene of 1958-59, with its snapping paparazzi and inebriating round of late-night parties and casual couplings – as opposed to what it is really about.

Fellini was a willing accomplice in this mystification. The fact that his journalist protagonist played by Marcello Mastroianni is called Marcello is just one of the fact/fiction blurs that Italian cinema's most able showman deliberately set up; another is the film's use of non-professionals playing (more or less) themselves, like the aristocrats in the tenebrous Palazzo Odescalchi party scene, or the local and expatriate journalists, poets, artists, musicians and intellectuals who appear at the Palazzo, at the Sylvia press conference, at the Steiner house and in the Fregene 'orgy' sequence towards the end.

Even the shooting process was a calculated part of the show that walked the tightrope between true and false. *La dolce vita* was inspired by Via Veneto, yet Via Veneto was entirely reconstructed, down to the smallest detail, inside the director's beloved Teatro 5 sound stage at Cinecittà. The Trevi Fountain we see in the film, on the other hand, is real – but it's lit to make it look fake, as if knocked up earlier that day by the studio carpenters.

Fellini was in his element the night they shot there, playing to the crowd of onlookers that had gathered to see the Swedish diva get her frock wet. From his director's chair, he turned his megaphone on his 'audience' to comment in Roman dialect, half approvingly and half ironically: 'Where would you find another woman like this? I've made her do things even a circus horse wouldn't do – and now I'm going to throw her in the water.' He wasn't just playing to the crowd, of course – he was playing to the journalists who had been invited along to witness the spectacle, entering into that complicity between media and subject that is one of the film's major themes.

I've always felt that *La dolce vita* is one of the greatest of Fellini's films. It comes without the tang of self-conscious now-I'm-going-to-make-a-masterpiece artsiness and self-indulgent autobiographical symbolism that mars the overrated *8½* (1963). And aside from a few moments, it's also refreshingly free of sentimentality. Fellini

was able to harness the Hallmark side of his artistic character successfully only once – in *La strada* (1954) – but it furs up the almost great *Amarcord* (1973) and sugar-coats the emotion in *Nights of Cabiria* (1957).

For me then, *La dolce vita* is up there with *I vitelloni* (1953) as *il maestro's* most consummate performance. The two films have much in common: the blurring of actors' and characters' names; the theme of men who are lost and know it, but are too lazy, cynical or self-hating to do much about it; the *bella figura* and modern attitudes that Italians still smarting from the war showed off in company, contrasted against the squalor, poverty and reactionary attitudes of their home and family lives; and above all, the loose, episodic structure.

Fellini was not a fantasist but an uncompromising Latin realist. This, he suggests, is how life flows: between meetings with friends in bars and billiard saloons, small flirtations and deceptions, full of plans for tonight and tomorrow night but without the clean dramatic structure that allows for much in the way of turning points or tragedies. Big moments are constantly undermined in both films, robbed of their place in the sun: Olga's departure with her lover in *I vitelloni* is only just caught by her brother Alberto as he rolls in drunk from a Carnevale party, having singularly failed to anticipate the event; in *La dolce vita*, the devastating drama of Marcello's announcement to Steiner's wife that her husband has killed himself and their two young children is turned into just another piece of media pornography by the flashes of the news photographers who have got there first – and, of course, by the fact that these photographers are friends of Marcello's. He makes a living out of their carrion tactics.

Bumping into his film-critic friend Renzo Renzi at Cinecittà halfway through the shoot, Fellini complained that he didn't feel he'd achieved the necessary artistic detachment from his material, saying: 'It's like describing a fuck to someone while you're doing it.' But this messiness is all a part of the film's appeal. Co-screenwriters Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano (the latter one of the great unsung heroes of Italian cinema's golden age) were working out as they went along how to detach a film's structure from the usual Aristotelian dramatic arc and instead give it a more hybrid form – superficially like that of the newspapers that many of the stories recounted here were based on, but connected on a deeper level by a series of symbolic, thematic and moral resonances. Fellini, Pinelli and Flaiano were working towards film as fresco cycle rather than as narrative painting – an operation that would continue in debased form in the strand of Italian 'magazine' B movies popularised by *Mondo cane* (1962), but which would also re-emerge (in more controlled, Aristotelian form) in contemporary multi-linear US dramas from *Magnolia* to *Crash*.

As for what *La dolce vita* is really about, well, one answer could be: varieties of modern damnation and salvation. Perhaps this is why the film has played less well, or been partly misunderstood, outside Catholic countries. Pauline Kael famously lumped it together with *La notte* and *Last Year in Marienbad* in her *Massachusetts Review* essay 'The Come-Dressed-as-the-Sick-Soul-of-Europe Parties'.

But Fellini's film has none of the solemnity of those travelling companions. On one level it's a savagely wry Dance of the Dead, a debased version of *Inferno* in which Dante's serious pilgrim is replaced by an ethically compromised chronicler who doesn't so much observe and pity the damned as get into bed with them. Yet at the same time the film is imbued with the heady sense that an old, repressive order is changing. And we also feel that, however misguided and short-lived the protagonist's attempts at redemption are, he might just one day find one that works and lasts. Or then again, he might not. Last time I watched the film, it suddenly struck me what this spirit of 'hopeful farce' reminded me of. It's Chekhov, of course. *La dolce vita* is one of the most truly Chekhovian films in the history of cinema.

Lee Marshall, *Sight and Sound*, May 2010

LA DOLCE VITA

Director: Federico Fellini
Production Companies: Riama Film, Cinecittà, Pathé Consortium Cinéma
Production Company: Gray Films *
Executive Producer: Franco Magli
Presented by: Giuseppe Amato
Producer: Angelo Rizzoli *
Production Supervisor: Clemente Fracassi
Production Managers: Nello Meniconi, Manlio M. Morelli
Unit Manager: Alessandro von Norman
Production Secretaries: Mario Basili, Mario Di Biase, Osvaldo De Micheli
Artistic Collaborator: Brunello Rondi
Assistant Directors: Guidarino Guidi, Paolo Nuzzi, Dominique Delouche
2nd Assistant Directors: Giancarlo Romani, Gianfranco Mingozzi, Lili Veenman
Script Supervisor: Isa Mari
Story/Screenplay: Federico Fellini, Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli
Screenplay Collaborator: Brunello Rondi
Story: Federico Fellini, Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli
Director of Photography: Otello Martelli
Camera Operator: Arturo Zavattini
Assistant Operator: Ennio Guarnieri
Editor: Leo Catozzo
Assistant Editors: Adriana Olasio, Wanda Olasio
Art Director: Piero Gherardi
Assistant Art Director/Costumes: Giorgio Giovannini, Lucia Mirisola, Vito Anzalone
Costumes: Piero Gherardi
Make-up: Otello Fava
Assistant Make-up: Sergio Angeloni
Hairdresser: Renata Magnanti
Music: Nino Rota
Music Collaborator: Armando Trovaioli
Music Performed by: Campanino, Adriano Celentano
Music Director: Franco Ferrara
Sound: Agostino Moretti, Oscar Di Santo
Technical Equipment: Cinecittà
Sound System: Western Electric
Studio: Cinecittà
Cast:
Marcello Mastroianni (*Marcello Rubini, newspaperman*)
Anita Ekberg (*Sylvie, Hollywood star*)
Anouk Aimée (*Maddalena*)
Yvonne Furneaux (*Emma*)
Magali Noël (*Fanny*)
Alain Cuny (*Steiner*)
Annibale Ninchi (*Marcello's father*)
Walter Santesso (*paparazzo*)
Valeria Ciangottini (*Paola, innocent girl*)
Riccardo Garrone (*Riccardo, villa owner*)
Ida Galli (*debutante of the year*)
Audrey McDonald (*Sonia*)
Polidor (*tabarin clown*)
Alain Dijon (*Frankie Stout*)
Enzo Cerasico (*3rd paparazzo*)
Giulio Paradisi (*Tiziano, 2nd paparazzo*)
Enzo Doria (*4th paparazzo*)
Enrico Glori (*Nadia's admirer*)
Adriana Moneta (*prostitute*)

Massimo Busetti (*gossip on Via Veneto*)
Mino Doro (*Nadia's lover*)
Giulio Girola (*police inspector*)
Laura Betti (*Laura, blonde actress/singer*)
Nico Otzak (*sophisticated blonde in Via Veneto*)
Domino (*The Fregene night sequence*)
Carlo Musto (*2nd transvestite*)
Lex Barker (*Robert*)
Jacques Sernas (*film star*)
Nadia Gray (*Nadia*)

uncredited cast

Harriet White (*Edna, Sylvie's secretary*); Renée Longarini (*Mrs Steiner*); Carlo Di Maggio (*Totò Scalise, producer*); Sandra Lee (*Spoletto ballerina*); Gloria Jones (*Gloria*); Lilli Granado (*Lucy*); Cesare Miceli Picardi (*irritated man at dance*); Donatella Esparmer (*woman with irritated man*); Maria Pia Serafini (*2nd woman with irritated man*); Oscar Ghiglia, Gino Marturano (*pimps*); Tomás Torres (*Giannelli, journalist in hospital*); Carlo Mariotti (*nurse*); Leonardo Botta (*doctor*); Francesco Luzi (*radio commentator*); Franco Consalvo (*assistant 'sociale'*); Guglielmo Leoncini (*Scalise's secretary*); Sandy Von Norman (*interpreter at press conference*); Tiziano Cortini (*newsreel photographer*); Donatella Della Nora, Maité Morand, Donato Castellaneta, John Francis Lane, Concetta Ragusa, François Dieudonné, Mario Mallamo, Nadia Balabine, Umberto Felici (*journalists at press conference*); Fabrizio Capucci (*photographer at press conference*); Adriano Celentano (*rock 'n' roll singer*); Gondrano Trucchi (*waiter at Caracalla's*); Giò Staiano (*Pierone, effeminate youth*); Archie Savage (*coloured dancer*); Paolo Labia (*waiter at Maddalena's*); Giacomo Gabrielli (*Maddalena's father*); Giulio Questi (*Don Giulio*); Anna Maria Salerno (*prostitute's friend*); Rina Franchetti (*children's mother*); Aurelio Nardi (*children's uncle*); Alfredo Rizzo (*TV director*); Marianne Leibl (*Yvonne's companion*); Iris Tree (*poetess*); Vadim Wolkonsky (*Prince Mascalchi*); Rosemary Rennel Rodd (*English medium*); Ferdinando Brofferio (*Maddalena's lover*); Doris Pignatelli (*lady in white coat*); Loretta Ramacciotti (*woman in séance*); Antonio Jacono (*transvestite*); Tito Buzzo (*muscle man*); Leontine Van Strein (*matinee idol's girlfriend*); Leo Coleman (*coloured dancer*); Franca Pasut (*woman covered with feathers*); Eugenio Ruspoli Di Poggio Suasa (*Don Eugenio Mascalchi*); Daniela Calvino (*Daniela*); Henry Thody, Maurizio Guelfi (*journalist at press conferences*); Leonida Repaci, Anna Salvatore, Letizia Spadini, Margherita Russo, Winie Vagliani, Desmond O'Grady (*Steiner's other guests*); Ivenda Dobrzensky (*Giovanni*); Maria Teresa Vianello, Angela Giavalisco, Maria Mazzanti (*people at airport*); Gloria Hendy, Noel Sheldon, April Hennessy, Angela Wilson (*people on Via Veneto*); Giovanni Querrel (*man at nightclub*); Campanino (*band at nightclub*); Giulio Citti (*man at nightclub*); Lisa Schneider, Aldo Vasco, Francisco Lori, Romolo Giordani, Ada Passeri (*miracle sequences*); Nina Hohenloe, Maria Marigliano, Mario De Grenet, Franco Rossellini, Joan Antequera (*person at castles*); Orietta Fiume; Katherine Denise; Mario Conocchia; Umberto Orsini; Lucia Vasilico; Marta Melocco; Antoinette Weynen

Italy/France 1960
176 mins

4K digital restoration carried out in 2010 by Cineteca di Bologna – Laboratorio L'Immagine Ritrovata in collaboration with The Film Foundation

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