

By Chris Nashawaty 12th November 2018

Fellini has four films in BBC Culture's poll to find the 100 greatest foreign-language films, but some critics dismiss him. They're wrong, writes Chris Nashawaty.

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By the time of his death in 1993, Federico Fellini had won four best foreign language film Oscars, tying him with his countryman Vittorio De Sica for the most wins by any director. But 25 years after he died, the long shadow of his legacy reaches far beyond awards and accolades (although, if you keep reading, you'll see he's just earned another one here). After all, not only was the maestro's vision so singular and hypnotic that it introduced its own carnival-like adjective into the cinéaste vernacular ('Felliniesque'), his movies also showed generations of film-makers the way forward – how to experiment and take risks by marrying confessional storytelling with bizarre flights of imagery.

Read more about BBC Culture's 100 greatest foreign-language films:

- [*What the critics had to say about the top 25*](#)
- [*The full list of critics who participated – and how they voted*](#)
- [*Why Seven Samurai is number one*](#)
- [*Foreign-language masterpieces you may not know*](#)
- [*Have women been 'excluded' from film history?*](#)

Martin Scorsese, for one, recently admitted that he re-watches Fellini's 1963 masterpiece *8 1/2* every year. "*8 1/2* has always been a touchstone for me, in so many ways," he said. "The freedom, the sense of innovation, the underlying rigour and the deep core of longing, the bewitching, physical pull of the camera movements and the compositions." As testimonials go, that's a hard one to top.

As for the rest of us, the ones who pay to sit in darkened theatres and gaze up at the screen in the hopes of being enchanted and transported, it's no exaggeration to say that Fellini turned movie-goers on to an entirely new way of seeing. He took us (and still continues to take us) to destinations beyond the English-speaking world – destinations we'd never imagined in our wildest fantasies. He created a personal style of cinema that mysteriously and miraculously felt universal, making our planet seem somehow smaller and more intimate.

And yet – there's always an 'And yet', isn't there? – it gives me no joy to say that the critical community has always had a more *complicated* relationship with Fellini. In her review of *8 1/2*, a lyrical and thinly-veiled autobiographical reverie about a director with

creative block, Pauline Kael grabbed her sniper's rifle and put the film in its crosshairs: "Someone's fantasy life is perfectly good material for a movie *if* it is imaginative and fascinating in itself, or if it illuminates his non-fantasy life in some interesting way," she wrote. "But 8 1/2 is neither; it's surprisingly like the confectionery dreams of Hollywood heroines, transported by a hack's notions of Freudian anxiety and wish fulfilment." Ouch.

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Kael was by no means the first heavyweight critic to be put off by Fellini's films, dismissing them as empty vessels whose arty symbolism and grotesque surrealism hinted at a depth they didn't warrant. Nor would she be the last. In his 2008 anthology, *Have You Seen...?*, David Thomson writes, "It's not that 8 1/2 could or should go on forever, just that it feels as if it does." He doesn't quit there. Elsewhere in the book, Thomson says of 1974's *Amarcord*, "Fellini can make a scene in his sleep – but does he have to?" About 1960's *La Dolce Vita*, he sniffs, "Nothing happens, except for flatulent set pieces, epic reaches of symbolism, and teary-eyed larger metaphors." And in his entry on 1957's *The Nights of Cabiria*, which features Fellini's wife and muse Giulietta Masina in one of the most gut-wrenching performances I've ever seen, he writes, "For my shoddy part, I still find her a cloying actress." Well, at least he got the "shoddy" part right.

I'd argue that Kael and Thomson aren't just wrong, their judgements are nonsense on stilts. With the possible exception of De Sica, whose *Umberto D* still reduces me to fits of ugly-crying, Fellini has always been Italian cinema's most introspective, most artful, and yes, deepest film-maker (sorry Antonioni partisans). No one mixes the bitter and the sweet with a lighter touch. And apparently I'm not the only critic who feels this way. In [BBC Culture's poll of the 100 greatest foreign-language films](#), Fellini wound up tied for second place among directors with the most movies on the list. He had four; only Ingmar Bergman and Luis Bunuel have more, with five each. For those of you keeping score at home, the Fellini films that made the cut are, in descending order: 8 1/2 at number 7; *La Dolce Vita* at number 10; *La Strada* at number 83; and *The Nights of Cabiria* at number 87. The nostalgia-infused *Amarcord* just missed the cut, coming in at a close-but-no-cigar number 112.

Circus performers and streetwalkers

Born in 1920, in the seaside town of Rimini on the Adriatic coast (a geographical Rosebud that he would return to time and again in such films as *Amarcord* and *Roma*), Fellini began his film-making career as a screenwriter on Roberto Rossellini's Neo-realist 1945 classic *Rome, Open City*. A decade and a half later, it would be hard to imagine someone who would turn his back on realism (Neo- or otherwise) more absolutely than Fellini would. His early, Rossellini-inspired films such as 1953's *I Vitelloni* were cast aside for the more sentimental picaresques of 1954's *La Strada* and 1957's *The Nights of Cabiria*, which thrummed with an aching sense of humanity among underclass circus performers and streetwalkers.

Then, of course, came *La Dolce Vita* – a dizzy after-hours ramble through the spiritually numb high society of Rome’s Via Veneto set. It was a masterclass in existential yearning and post-war hedonism, fuelled by the debauched charm of its world-weary hero Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and a handful of indelible images such as a Christ statue being airlifted over the city and Anita Ekberg frolicking like a blonde-bombshell Venus in the Trevi Fountain. The final shot of an innocent young girl on the beach offering a secret Marcello can’t quite make out is devastating. *La Dolce Vita* would catapult Fellini into the rarified ranks of the world’s most famous directors.

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Perhaps not surprisingly, it also led to a spiritual and artistic crisis (how do you follow up the biggest success of your career?) that became the narrative fodder for his next project, *8 1/2*. Talking through his on-screen alter ego, Mastroianni once again, Fellini turned *8 1/2* into his most reflective and one of his funniest films. It was like a black-and-white diary entry, left open to be read by his fans, a stream-of-consciousness exhumation of an artist’s past in the hopes that he may find the key to unlock the future somewhere inside the riddle of it all. It would begin a new chapter in his career where narrative was secondary to spectacle. And what spectacle, it was! I could watch his lysergic pagan magic-carpet ride through Nero’s Rome, 1969’s *Satyricon*, once a year – and I do.

I don’t want to suggest that all of Fellini’s films from the late 1970s on deserve the same ‘classic’ status. They don’t. But even those lesser later titles offer an embarrassment of celluloid riches if you simply listen out for Nino Rota’s infectiously playful scores and watch out for Danilo Donati’s eye-candy sets. Still, I think the Academy got it absolutely right when, in 1993, it awarded Fellini an honorary Oscar. Walking on stage to receive his statuette, less than a year before his death, the 73-year-old was heartfelt and to the point, saying *grazzie* and telling his wife, Giulietta, to stop crying. And what more really was there to say? His films had already said everything.