

## **Some Reflections on the Art and Design of Fellini's *Amarcord***

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### Introduction

My initiation to Fellini's cinematic kingdom was *Amarcord* which I watched when I was a student of architecture at Cornell in our campus cinema in Ithaca, New York in the early 1980s. Fellini, and more broadly Italian art and culture since has been an important source of inspiration for my study – not only for the Italian Renaissance art history and theory classes, but also later a year's enrollment in the Italian language course before my graduation. Some of my best college friends were Italian immigrants to the United States, and to this date I still take my reference models of liking and taste from Italian sources. This paper will examine the movie *Amarcord* itself in terms of its artistic conception which Fellini developed with his unique talents as both visual artist and film director for the portrayal of characters and design of movie scenes. As a conceptual framework, the paper attempts to outline a few directions that art and design in film could be approached and analysed.

### From Characters to Scenes

Fellini was a great cartoonist and used drawings to develop his characters and scenes for his films. This connection between sketching and storytelling (or plots and narratives) provides a wonderful parallel with the process of visualization of ideas and “parti” (a more academic term with Beaux Arts origin) - in design and architecture. A recent exhibition in Essen featured some of these sketches from *Amarcord*: with Tita and his friends, his father Aurelio, and his mad uncle, Teo. There was also a beautiful sketch of pump ladies on bicycles, depicted in the movie with their curvaceous buttocks mounting the bicycle seats.<sup>1</sup> In hindsight, one might be surprised to find out how closely the final characters in the movie resemble these depicted cartoon characters, or how real the visual effect of these drawings conveyed by the cinematography on screen!

Although the film is set in his hometown Rimini, Fellini shot most of the scenes in the Cinecittà studios in Rome, including reconstruction of the town of Borgo San Giuliano by his Art Director Danilo Donati, and the staging of the Grand Hotel in the Paradiso Sul Mare in Anzio. One of the spectacular scenes in the movie was the reception of the passage of the Italian ocean liner SS Rex on its return from America, awakening the villagers who sailed out in groups of small boats waiting in the sea until mid-night to greet her. The appearance of the great ship in the dark with its bright lights and gigantic scale represents a great moment of triumph of modernity in contrast to the vernacular memories of the people and culture of the Borgo, which Fellini skillfully and successfully captured with the perspectival set up of the ship model in the studio.

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<sup>1</sup> “Federico Fellini. From Drawing to Film”. Folkwang Museum in Essen, November 12, 2021 to February 20, 2022. Drawings from: [Fellini: The sketches behind the films – DW – 11/15/2021](#). Accessed August 14, 2023.

## Iconic Objects, Design and Architecture

The movie also features some objects and designs that became iconic of the storyline: the papier-mache head of Mussolini made as a floral plague in the military parade that becomes the symbol of the regime that even young marrying couples would make their vows to; the interior of the Grand Hotel and in particular the grand staircase that Gradisca stealthily ascended; the pink salon where the Prince resided and where Gradisca fulfilled her role that destined the change of her name; and finally the typographic design of the letter fonts of the film title and Fellini's name that became the characteristic Amarcord font that reflects the comic and carnivalesque atmosphere of the movie.

Although Rimini is a city that has many important and significant architectural heritage, for example, the Tempio Malatestiano was one of the few built works by the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti, they were not featured or used in the movie. Even the original Grand Hotel, which is a much grander structure than the Paradiso Sul Mare, was not used simply because its facade was too grand to suit the purpose of shooting the scene of Biscein being smuggled into the hotel by the concubines.

## Sound, Music, and Memorable Spectacles

The movie integrates beautiful sound effects and music scores by Nino Rota, which contributed significantly to its success. Even the short pieces of flute or accordion played by the Barber, Biscein, and the Blind Musician were very delightful and accompanied a very vivid visual annotations to the spectator. But in association with sound and word, there were two scenes that struck me as a Chinese viewer, which perhaps might also have amused Fellini had he lived today. The first was one of the earlier classroom scene where the physics teacher was teaching students about the pendulum, and the whole class responded to the swinging movement of the pendulum with two words: "Tik Tok"; the second was when Volpina cried out on the beach with the name "Fu Man-chu" when he saw the motorcyclist Scureza whereby the notion of Chinese was linked with the wild and scary image of the extraordinary.

But an analysis of memorable spectacles from the movie would not be complete without the scene of Tita being overwhelmed by the big breasts of the Tobbaconist in her shop. This spectacle, for all young male viewer including myself, was a very strong and indelible visual impact for an adolescent curiosity with sexuality. It is contrastingly comparable, and I believe it was Fellini's intention also, to the scene with Tita's younger brother Oliva facing the bull in the winter fog, representing the bare and direct gaze of human and wild nature at each other.

## Conclusion

Almost half a century has passed between the time when I first saw *Amarcord* and recently when I reviewed it again to write this paper on the invitation of the Fellini Foundation. As a classic movie about childhood memories, it has much more to offer in its superb composition as a piece of art. What I have outlined above is my personal appreciation of the genius of Fellini as a teacher in art and design. There could be more or other forms of combination of the various categories of analyses. Although the movie is a personal account of the memories of Fellini about his hometown and friends from his childhood, the movie could easily be appreciated by the audience with sympathetic associations of any personal or collective memories from any contemporary cities. We seem to know of many of the movie characters in our own family, friends, and the societies we live in and may identify the Gradisca, Aldina, Ciccio, Uncle Teo, the Lawyer, Volpina, the Tobbaconist, the Priest, and the Carabinieri etc. of our particular place and time, don't we?