

Theme term paper example

[Transportation](#), [Road](#)



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Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954): The Components of a Critical Essay on Film

Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954): The Components of a Critical Essay on Film

The goal of a filmmaker is to make use of narrative to match well with cinema's natural formalistic techniques. Cinema, as André Bazin has noted has its own ontology of being both an objective representation of reality seeing through the subjective lens of the preserved image. It has a unique way of both representing reality, by preserving life through a representation of life (Bazin 2004, p. 10). Filmmakers not only communicate meaning on the horizontal axis of the cinema strip through storytelling, but also on the vertical axis they communicate meaning through images. What makes a good film is not only the story alone, nor the images alone. It is the dance of the two. In this paper, Fellini's *La Strada* will be critiqued in its use of narrative techniques as well as imagery by evaluating the aesthetics of the film through a formalist and realist critical approach to film along the lines of <https://assignbuster.com/theme-term-paper-example/>

Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Film* (2013).

Federico Fellini's *La Strada*, or *The Road*, is an excellent example of fine cinema that marries narrative and image. The film catapulted Fellini onto the world stage, and his film marked a triumph for Italian cinema (Giannetti 2010, p. 199). Fellini creates a tragic story. Tragedy is made beautiful by his images. Fellini's film is both a realist masterpiece as well as a study in formal beauty. By realism, it is meant the way in which the film says something about external reality (Giannetti 2013, p. 499). Fellini is unfettered in the way he presents the life of a travelling circus. While completely fictional, Fellini can make us believe we are on the caravan going from town to town, witnessing what the characters witness in a visceral, yet emotive way. Ostensibly, *La Strada* is a brutal love story. Or rather, it is a story of not realizing love when it is in your presence. The tragedy of the film and its claim on realism, is that it heart wrenchingly depicts how human beings miss out on love, and can only recognize it after it has passed away. However, *La Strada* is not only a realist masterpiece, it is also a formalist masterpiece. If realism is how the film makes us feel like "a fly on the wall," formalism taps into the dreamlike imagery of cinema. *La Strada* is not merely a narrative of a circus troupe in Italy, but it is an example of the placement of imagery, mise-en-scene, and montage to create both a realistic portrayal of journey, but also a surreal depiction of human suffering, sensory pleasure, and the brutal life of a troubadour.

Synopsis

At the level of story, *La Strada* is deceptively simple. It's about a young woman who inadvertently becomes the assistant to Zampanò's one-man

circus wagon. Her mother gives her way to replace Rosa, Zampanò's first wife who is dead. The bulk of the film chronicles Zampanò and Gelsomina's time together. The film is bookended by the first sequence, telling the story of how Gelsomina became employed by Zampanò. The central part of the film is their life together on the road. Gelsomina has no idea how to be a circus performer, and Zampanò treats her harshly. Gelsomina is innocent. Zampanò is her harsh taskmaster.

The two forge an intimate bond, even though Gelsomina feels trapped by Zampanò's tendencies to control her. A fellow performer, Il Matto, notices how Zampanò treats Gelsomina and tries to persuade her to leave him. But Gelsomina, in a kind of Stockholm Syndrome continues to take abuse from Zampanò. After Il Matto embarrasses Zampanò, the strongman takes it personally and in a tragic sequence kills him on the road with a wrench. Soon after, Zampanò leaves Gelsomina on the side of the road. The ending sequence is a flash forward, long after the central events of the film has transpired. Gelsomina is presumed dead, and Zampanò realizes he loved her. In the final act, Zampanò performs his strongman performance one more time, but the convergence of emotion is too much for him and the film ends just the way it began, except characters and mood are reversed. Instead of a simple Gelsomina on the beachside collecting reeds, Zampanò collapses in despair on the beach, the waves lapping irresolute to his suffering.

The human condition in which Fellini hoped to publicize was the state of Italy after the war. The historical circumstances of the aftermath of the Second World War influenced both cinema, art, and literature to such an extent that

it is not possible to interpret Gelsomina sitting in an abandoned city square, scraps of paper whirling about her, and the lone stanchion of lights on a circus arch without calling to mind the desolation of war, the realignment of values the war brought, and the plight of individual people. Still, there is no mention of the war in the film, and the story could be anytime. The only indications of time period are in the labels of the Esso gas stations, the cars used, but other than that the story could easily be shot during the war as well as after it. The point of history is not explicit. The central theme of the story, however, is not meant to document post-war Italy, but rather showcase the denizens of its destruction. Fellini, as Thomson actually notes, is a humanist, and he tries to show individual lives set against the aftermath of this war and how isolation is thrown in relief. Anthony Quinn's character of Zampanò is shown in a negative light because he represents the failed patriarchal order, while Gelsomina is represented in a positive light for she gives film its one ray of hope. Holding all of this together is Fellini's clever use of the road that acts as an interesting metaphor throughout the film and holds the film together thematically.

Mise-en-Scène

Fellini sets the stage in his use of mise-en-scène. *La Strada*, as its title suggests, plays on the theme of the road. The setting of the road looks desolate. Most of the places Gelsomina and Zampanò visit are meager and run-down. The motorcycle turned into a truck is battered, and the two make do warming up by a barely active fire. Even the tents where they perform look bedraggled, but most of the time they perform on the side of the road. The men are dressed in suits, and people seem to have a somber

acceptance of the travelling troupe's performances. The theme of the journey is not one of completing the journey, but rather the theme of the journey is cut short. The road does not have a nicely tied-up conclusion. The motif of a road film is not a conventional one. The road leads nowhere, Fellini seems to say, in his setting of under-served gas stations, women putting clothes on the line, children in need of sustenance, and road side diners that seem to be still ravaged by war. Fellini chooses to depict post-War Italy as still in the grip of war, before the reconstruction of towns and villages, where life is cheap, and people are barely able to feed their bellies. It is not a film of grandiose buildings, and even though the setting of the towns and cities are on the outskirts of Rome, the feeling is one of destruction, and not of the Eternal City. Civilization feels far away under the lens of Fellini's cinematography.

Dramatization

Giulietta Masina's performance is all in her face. Her portrayal of the vagabond Gelsomina is one of inexplicable suffering seen through the painted face Zampanò makes her wear for performances. Sloan rightly characterizes her as having the face of a child: " She is an odd little person, with the temperament of a small child and the face, she is told, of an artichoke" (2013, p. 126). Fellini makes the choice to have her hair cut short which only accentuates her childlike innocence. The way cinema captures reality, different from other's art forms, is that the face does not hide behind the artifice. In the novel, the reader would have to conjure an image of Gelsomina to match words on a page. In a painting, the viewer would have to make a value judgment on the painter's use of color. The cinema borrows

from photography in that the face cannot lie on a film, and even in the painted up face of a clown; Gelsomina is realistic. The film is shot in black and white, and it actually brings out the realism of the story rather than down play it. The colors of the clown are suggested rather than shot in blazing technicolor. In this movie, the protagonist is certainly Gelsomina, and her antagonist is Zampanò. But the movie belongs to her.

In fact, the opening image belongs to her, and Masina's immediately evinces the image of a pheasant collecting reeds surrounded by children. Everything is in her face as she realizes her mother will give her away to the silent strongman, Zampanò, played by Anthony Quinn, who will take her away to be his assistant on the road. Gelsomina is practically sold by her own family for 10, 000 lira. It is a shocking opening only because Gelsomina does not resist. She accepts her fate. Gelsomina knows nothing of the art of showmanship. In her whimsical scenes, she blows on a trumpet, and knows nothing of the subtlety of the sound of a drum. Yet she learns quickly enough, and the trumpet becomes her symbol. To contrast two image, compare the image of Gelsomina hitting the drum crying out in a plaintive plea, "' È arrivato Zampanò!", and it is evident that she is unhappy. The camera slowly pans inward to see her face as she repeats the words that the strongman has told her to deliver on command. The camera zooms in close to show Gelsomina's despair and sadness many times in the movie. For example, when later, Zampanò leaves her on a street corner while he has sex, the camera is positioned at street level, and the morning sounds of birds calling and pedestrians walking by seem eclipsed by Gelsomina's sadness. It is pathetic that she cheers up when Zampanò finally does arrive. It is a story

of abuse, and it is obvious that Gelsomina has become no more than a slave. The scene is eerie because the mise-en-scene places children behind her and a woman with a baby who do not interact, a divide between the world of the road and the world of an Italy being rebuilt.

However, the film is more than just a story of a man who buys himself an assistant. It is clear that the two are studies in contrast. Gelsomina, the artless clown with a tinge of innocence, and Zampanò the artificial strongman. Both actors play with the conceit of masks; Gelsomina dressed up to look like a clown hides thinly her fragile existence being with Zampanò, while the strongman's strength is a facade. He has only one trick to amaze the masses, and Anthony Quinn can bring age, regret, and the need to keep up a masculine front in his portrayal of Zampanò.

Masina not only performs her role through her face, but also in the intonation of her voice. When she cries out his name "Zampanò!" it is lyrical in its beauty, even though we know it is a classic story of unrequited love. Masina does not, however, allow the viewer to have pity on Gelsomina. For example, in a scene mid-way through the film, after Il Matto has humiliated Zampanò on stage, Masina portrays Gelsomina as both obedient to her master as well as broken by the experience, as if she feels what Zampanò cannot express. The realist imagery is also betokened by the verisimilitude of a circus tent, with the documentary feel of what a small town circus event would have looked like in Italy post-World War II. Masina is painted to look like a clown, and when she dribbles the drum with her sticks, to accentuate Zampanò's performance she is both serious and anxious. Masina plays off Anthony Quinn's ability to play a wounded masculine hero. While it is easy to

stigmatize Zampanò, Quinn evinces emotion for him seen through Masina's ability to show authentic feeling.

Dramatization is often displayed best by what is not said in dialogue. For example, at the end of the film, when Zampanò realizes that Gelsomina is dead, it is not explicitly stated. He hears about her fate second hand through a woman who knew Gelsomina. Fellini makes the choice, however, to not make it absolutely clear that it is Gelsomina who is dead, but only a vagabond who resembles Gelsomina by description. The scene exemplifies dramatization because Anthony Quinn and the audience know that Gelsomina's death profoundly affects him. The scene immediately prior to this scene is the moment Zampanò leaves Gelsomina on the side of the road. Fellini chooses not to reveal Gelsomina's reaction to being left behind on the road. It is evident that almost every preceding shot of Gelsomina depicted alone on the road foreshadows the last shot of her sleeping with a rough torn blanket and a tiny fire. Masina dramatizes Gelsomina's act of being deserted from the very beginning of her performance, when she hangs her head low when her mother gives her away, to her anxious look she communicates when she tries to be the best sidekick she can be.

It is not necessary to dramatize Gelsomina's reaction to being abandoned because Fellini has embedded the dramatic act already in every shot of Gelsomina's isolation. Compositionally Fellini has paired a shirtless strong, muscle man who is nearing the end of his career, with the image of a slightly young girl who learns to mimic her lines, and in the process becomes her own person. What is striking about the movie is its insistence of pairing these images together, of the strongman with the clown, that it is jarring in the end

that we are only left alone with Anthony Quinn. Since the composition of the film has played out three-quarters of the film with their interaction, it is heartbreakingly sad to see Gelsomina absent, and even though Zampano has treated her badly, we feel for himself as well because the structure of the film has been torn by their separation.

Catharsis

The central question of this film is why it evokes such sadness, and why Fellini can evoke sympathy and catharsis. Why does the film evoke such sadness, because Fellini has already shown us through the formalism of imagery isolation at every turn. Part of the answer has to do not only with his stylistic choices, but his innovative use of images incongruently blended together. The best movies are made because they situate themselves in a world and inhabit that world relentlessly. The movie does not retreat from the world that Zampano and Gelsomina inhabit. Realism is brought out by completely enveloping the characters on the road. The trope of the clown is not funny, and the trope of the strongman is not strong. Conventional tropes are turned upside down and made strangely. The choice to make Gelsomina a clown masks her unhappiness. The choice to make Zampanò, a strong man who breaks free from chains in act of trickery shows he his not as strong as he makes himself out to be to others. And by showing that he is affected by the news of Gelsomina's apparent death makes sense because he hears of it from a stranger, from someone he does not know, and the lingering affect it has on Fellini's choice to make Gelsomina's death ambiguous.

In the scene where Zampanò murder Il Matto, Fellini shows himself as a master of movement. Fellini shows violence in an understated way. The film

has led us to the conclusion that Zampanò's temper will not end well. The introduction of Il Matto portends to be the death knell of this character. When Il Matto escapes, and only to return again in the second act, his death comes as a surprise. Zampanò hits him on the head with a wrench, but the movement implies that he did not intend to kill him. The actor who plays the fool also convinces through movement that the blow to his head was not fateful, and true to his character he sings a song. In a moment of absurdity, Il Matto says his watch is broken, and then he falls down and dies. It is a brilliant moment in the film for it is absurd, but it is also apt to the line. Time has stopped. The film has reached its turning point, and after this scene Gelsomina is despondent, and it is only a matter of time before she is left utterly alone. Il Matto dies, and the viewer is slightly surprised by this because the movement is so prosaic and there is a moment when it might be possible that he will rise up from the dead. However, the blow was fatal, and when he falls to the ground, Fellini chooses not to over-dramatize the scene. In a way, it is only Gelsomina's cry of astonishment that the troubadour is dead that shocks us. There is no gory blood scene, and the act is rather expedited quickly as Zampanò disposes of the body.

Sound is most important in this film in two important ways. First there is the sounds of the circus, of Gelsomina's drums that pronounce the anticipation of the act. The sound of the crowd and the sound of the pattering circus truck that makes it seem it is about to shut down at any moment. The sound of the waves is the sound that introduces the theme of the film, for we hear the waves crashing on the beach in the film's opening sequence. The sound of the waves in the beginning is a formalist way to play with the conflict

inherent in the film between freedom and isolation. Gelsomina is depicted in a moment of freedom, and the sound of the waves enhances the feeling of her relative freedom protected by the life of her provincial Italian seaside existence. The ending sequence is filmed at dark, and the sound of the waves is menacing, and the sound of the waves crash around a despairing Zampanò. The movie is tragic because not only have the film's most beloved character's met their end, but Zampanò learns his lesson too late. The only sense of redemption is for the audience who has weathered through this story and made to feel in a cathartic way the pain of the travellers on the road.

Criticism

Thomson calls *La Strada* a "desperately portentous film" (1994, p. 236). In his criticism, he lambasts Fellini for trying to convey a "humanist" message in the character of a "circus brute." It is the challenge of the film, for it is unclear whether Zampanò is supposed to be a universal character or one that is reviled. Quinn, according to Thomson, overacts his role, which implies that the character of Zampanò is a parody rather than a realistic portrayal of a temperamental circus performer. However, what we remember of *La Strada* are the faces, and it is the extreme visual clues of the "strongman" and the "clown" that do make the film almost theatrical. Baecker in his essay "The Reality of the Motion Picture" continues with this observation and concludes that it is the expression captured in the way cinema can capture reality as the essence of the film's verisimilitude (1996, p. 560). Interestingly, McKenna critiques *La Strada* differently, and his analysis takes into account the trope of the crowd and the religious procession (. It is the

procession of the circus that Gelsomina follows, but it is not a religious procession, nor does it follow that road to salvation, but rather to violence and isolation. As mentioned above in this essay, McKenna also pays attention to the film's opening and closing shots of the beach. In this paper, the beach seems to evoke the tension between freedom and isolation, between fulfillment and loss, and between life and resentment. McKenna also sees the beach bookends as symbolic, and he sees it as a "threshold space."

The threshold space is between the powers that could have saved versus those that did not. It is a doleful reminder of Gelsomina's song she plays at the convent. The shot follows Gelsomina as she triumphantly takes the trumpet in which she has obviously practiced to play to perform the song which acts as the coda to the film. The scene in the convent comes before the scene of the death of the fool, and it shows Gelsomina in her last happy moments, before she becomes despondent and is left behind by Zampano. The song she plays is haunting, and Fellini certainly wants the image of Gelsomina playing such a hauntingly beautiful tune to harken back to the earlier scenes where she was so feckless in her ability to be a circus sidekick. What saves Gelsomina? It is her music that brings Zampano to recognize her again at the film's ending, which if this were a film of salvation, perhaps Gelsomina would have emerged an older but wiser woman, and the film would be a romance rather than a tragedy. But the beach does not symbolize the realism of the romance, but rather it symbolizes the realism of the tragic. The formal elements of the beach, its sounds, its wave, are what McKenna writes: "where the beach with which we identify Gelsomina's

potentially saving music is the site of a possible redemption for the brutish Zampanò, who can mourn the loss of Gelsomina and tremble at his solitude under the stars” (2005, p. 171).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Federico Fellini’s film *La Strada* is a remarkable work of filmmaking. Its message on the human condition is that human beings are isolated creatures albeit we attempt to make human connection and we strive for this connection even if it is doomed to fail. The value of the film for a universal audience is that it is both resonant of the conventional road flick, but it turns the trope on its head. In a way, *La Strada* comes from the tradition of the epic story of journey, but because of the historical context of the film, it shows the road as broken, and not continuous. The road to salvation is not promised. Travellers on the road are lone pilgrims.

Its documentary realism is in its recreation of a circus troupe. Fellini thoughtfully not only brings together the objects to make this come alive on screen, but he chooses actors who can convey emotion that seems on par with the film’s theme of isolation. The formalist elements are in the way Fellini plays with expected images and surprises through unconventional means. The story is not a documentary, but it hits at the emotional level by playing with familiar imagery. At the level of story it is a road movie, but the narrative is circumvented by the introduction of a road with pilgrims that have to find their salvation. It is a beautiful movie because it does not feel copied, and the images are evocative of both sadness and the human need to find a connection in a world that seeks to destroy it.

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