

Comment

'*Varius multiplex multiformis*': Impressions of Federico Fellini's *Satyricon*

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Fellini attempted to be painter, poet and musician in making *Satyricon*, a 'free adaptation of Petronius's classic', as the subtitle indicates. The film can be divided into three parts. The central section of the triptych is devoted to a hermaphrodite character. This figure, borrowed from Ovid,¹ is the incandescent heart of the film, in which very many types of the dual and ambiguity are required to embody all the varieties of love and death. Hermaphroditus sums up the poetic, plastic and philosophical intentions carried by these figures. He also draws the shadow of their strange silhouette towards a proto-Christian horizon, which the film's three-part construction sets out to reveal.

For Fellini's *Satyricon* is another *Banquet of Love*² which, having passed through the distorting prism of the Italian director's art, assumes a similarity to the *Last Supper*. The kaleidoscopic aesthetic is taken on by the troop of obscure characters who cross the screen and the point of balance seems to be positioned in the encounter between the androgynous couple and the hermaphrodite. We shall be analysing this meeting and attempting to decode its symbolic charge.

Finally, since *Satyricon* is a picture gallery, a succession of tableaux among which the onlooker strolls, we shall be passing these images in linear fashion, following the Ariadne's thread of thought as the spectator follows the eye of the subjective camera, focusing on the viewpoints of Encolpius and Ascyltus.

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059489

The *Satyricon* triptych

Section One: *Giton*

The sole backdrop to the prologue is a wall covered in graffiti. The writing, which turns into a picture, is the first tribute Fellini pays to Petronius. Within this earth-coloured fresco we discover Encolpius, a student crazy about literature, cursing Ascyltus who has just stolen his lover Giton, who since Petronius has been the model of the beautiful young man, the incarnation of Eros, acting the roles of Helen, Penelope and Cornelia on the boards. For, as indicated by the reference to the theatre, this first section is the site of all love-making and all death. Within its frame, which is the widest since it takes up more than half of the film, Eros meets Thanatos and it is hard to distinguish the mask of each of the two gods in the fatal embrace.

Ascyltus and Encolpius are lovers. One is dark as night, the other fair as day. Fellini is following in the wake of late 19th-century decadent and symbolist literature. That period read *Satyricon* voraciously³ and saw the androgyne as one of its characteristic figures, able to symbolize the great questions of the time. There are innumerable poems and works of fiction in which the Platonic allegory is embodied in a bipartite couple, day and night, whose relationship includes attraction and repulsion. Though the day half is feminine and the night half masculine, each of these parts has an independent existence and is a mixture of grace and strength. An example is the couple dreamed up by Rachilde in her novel *Les Hors Nature* (1897). Another is the relationship between the two heroes of the film, Encolpius and Ascyltus. They make a couple that is perfect in both its virility and its beauty, even though strength is more inclined to belong to the faun-like Ascyltus and grace to the feminine Encolpius, who is outrageously made up.

However, the couple's androgynous unity is damaged by the intervention of the young Giton, over whom the two men fight throughout this initial scene. Giton is a 'soul' or 'another me' for Encolpius, who in using this language claims to believe in Diotima's ideal discourse, whereas it is Aristophanes, defender of love between androgynous bodies, that he embraces.

The characters, fraternal enemies and lovers, go to look for Giton, who has been sold to the actor Vernacchio. In *Satyricon*, Eros is for sale because the gods are bought. This theatrical episode provides a remarkable *mise en abyme* of the film's aesthetic and diagetic conflicts: the hybrid nature of the registers reaches its peak, since comedy comes extremely close to tragedy. Vernacchio, disguised as a pig and playing the lute as Apollo would, breaks wind when a thief's hand is actually being cut off. A symbol of the coarse nature of love that can be bought and the ontological separation described by Plato, this scene takes place in a noisy chaos of great modernity, close to the art of someone like Barraqué, Xenakis or Aperghis. Matching the syncopated character of the sounds is the way a 'cut' is made. Then on top of some inaudible words, a mixture of Greek and Latin, there comes a barbaric German whose sounds seem incongruous in this Roman context. The language of the north introduces the motif of barbarism, contrasted with Latin culture and the death throes of its decadent art, which was already a subject for Petronius. In the late 19th century Verlaine celebrated the gulf in his poem 'Langueur' when he wrote: 'Je suis l'Empire

à la fin de la décadence / Qui regarde passer les grands barbares blancs' (I am the Empire at the end of the period of decline / Watching the tall white barbarians go by).⁴ Disaster is near at hand, the theatre will be burnt down unless Giton, lovely as a courtesan, is returned to Encolpius.

Once more beside his young lover Encolpius is walking in a maze. The travelling shot, sweeping across the space from left to right, propels the viewer through the twists and turns of an unbelievable whorehouse. The blood-red walls evoke the paintings at Pompeii, the geometric compartmentalization of the rooms and their arrangement leading one into another recall the empress Messalina descending by night into the brothel, as recounted by Juvenal. All the love-making is glimpsed through the windows that intrude upon the privacy of each room and which the laughing lovers pass. The geometric precision of floor plans, a mixture of cubist and primitive spirit, combined with the boldness of the very crude colours, primary red, yellow and blue, are part of the episode's extreme modernity, accompanied as it is by a soundtrack akin to twelve-tone harmony.

Memories of visual works invade the viewer's consciousness as the psychedelic visions go by: a man defecating evokes Bosch's *Temptation of St Anthony*, a reclining woman recalls a sphinx borrowed from Burne-Jones or Gustave Moreau, shapes crowned with roses gliding over black water call up Watteau's *Voyage à Cythère*.

This maze of love takes up the space in both horizontal and vertical planes. The camera's eye dives upwards from ground to sky and the viewer discovers a tower that could be reminiscent of Babel. At this precise moment the various languages become confused in the same babble of sound as that described earlier. Lips move and produce no sound.

This is the moment when the two lovers make love. The scene where they embrace ends by melting into blackness. We should note that Fellini chooses to draw a shadowy veil across all the scenes that would be condemned by Christian morality. Here it is homosexuality, elsewhere anger and greed. Thus the play of light represents the deadly sins which, because they are not seen by viewers, turn them into voyeurs and Fellini into a saint.

Then Giton decides to leave Encolpius for Ascyllus. Union is impossible. The tower crashes to the ground. Babel is no more. All is confusion and chaos. The androgyne is a figure of the fall who brings with him other myths signifying loss of a primal unity like the tower of Babel's. Dust and bricks cover the bodies of humans and animals, corpses scattered over the ground in the poses of statues.

Without any transition Encolpius is in the art gallery of the poet Eumolpus, who is bemoaning the decadence of the times. Art and beauty are losing out to commercial values. The poet compares his unique genius with the vulgarity of the parvenu Trimalchio.

Walking along in front of the pictures, he reminds Encolpius, who knows all too well, that 'all legends speak of love'. And the images they are looking at, which should be seen as so many metadiscourses in relation to Fellini's action, relate the fables of 'Ganymede', 'Narcissus', 'Apollo'. The mirror is as true as hell: Narcissus sees himself as he is.

Under a fiery sky like the one over Rome when it was torched by Nero, or the one described by St John in the Apocalypse, they are walking towards Trimalchio's

palace. Thousands of bodies leap up like huge candles towards the red of the sky. A dense steam surrounds them and the space is like an enormous spa: aestheticized hygiene will not prevent filth. Trimalchio is the false poet, the 'new Horace' to some, the parvenu condemned by Petronius to others. The character's *hubris* can be read in the great portraits of him that are pastiches of Roman mosaics and cover the walls of his house. The feast he organizes is the longest sequence in the film. In the midst of the orgy of food and drink the sexual orgy takes place. This *Banquet of Love* in reverse, where wine, like words, flows in rivers, reminds us of Plato. But it is merely a grotesque caricature of its philosophical model. All types of love are enacted: lesbianism, pederasty, paedophilia, gerontophilia, bestiality. Two twin Adonises, wreathed in flowers, symbolize the false symmetry of the place where everything is but baroque confusion aiming to represent excess, when hysteria remains the symptom of each person's loneliness. Invited to Trimalchio's table Aristophanes would certainly have laughed and Diotima would have wept.

After the orgy it is necessary to die to be reborn. Thus Fellini introduces the motif of resurrection, but in grotesque mode. We know Orpheus is a proto-Christian figure. The descent into hell by the Thracian poet, who has to bring Eurydice back to life, prefigures Christ's Easter Saturday. But Trimalchio is a bogus poet who plunges without falling into the abyss of a bogus hell. This takes place in a tomb open to the sky. The chthonic metaphor recurs throughout the film. The tomb has to be empty if, as we think, the action is moving towards a Christian denouement. The dead bodies always get up again in *Satyricon*. But Trimalchio's resurrection is one of Having. Trimalchio is the 'new Mecenás' celebrated by a bunch of scrawny artists. Just when the kingdom of the dead is confused with that of the living through this comic sketch, a transvestite tells the story of the widow who loved a soldier. The figure of the transvestite takes on a new narrative, a story within a story, and the principle of doubling is emphasized by the antithesis of life and death, the symbolic heart of this allegorical tale.

The sequence of the descent into hell is swept away by the return of the sun accompanied by Giton's radiant face. The three men – the three lovers – are forced to board a galley. They are to be the sex objects of Lica, who has fallen for Encolpius and wishes to marry him. Lica's bridal dress will be blood red, which has menstrual connotations. The voyage is an Odyssey in reverse. Ulysses' manly virtues are scorned, distorted by the inversion of all the male characters in the episode. A scene where hundreds of naked men's bodies are lying as if wedged in, hunched up in the cells formed by the ship's hull, is reminiscent of the orgy scene in Visconti's *Ludwig*. Lica, married to Encolpius, has a dead eye. Being a cyclops, he will be beheaded like John the Baptist, and his head will disappear in the water of a false Jordan. On the wedding day a huge whale is caught. The scene is weird. It reminds us of the fish that swallowed Jonah in the Old Testament. But the image may also evoke the *Thousand and One Nights*, since Sinbad escapes from the whale before overcoming the cyclops. The road to the Christian era is still long and dangerous, for the semantics of the sequences becomes confused in the multiple interpretation of its forms. And if in the bowels of the galley Encolpius is a kind of Jonah, Giton is compared to Persephone, carried off by Hades. In this respect, though the action takes place in June just before the 'Calends', Fellini invents a snowstorm that envelops the ship in

white. Thus the tensions between paganism and Christianity are extreme and the film's cosmology points this out to us through the metaphor of the confusion of the seasons.

We should emphasize the fact that, in the works of Lorrain (*Le Vice errant*, 1902), Lombard (*L'Agonie*, 1888), Rachilde (*Le Meneur de louves*, 1905) and closer to our time Artaud (*Héliogabale ou l'anarchiste couronné*, 1934), the androgyne insistently poetizes this dialectic. Which is understood philosophically because Plato is the source for the philosophy of Ficino, to mention only him, the author of a *Commentary on the Banquet of Love*. That book aimed to rid the original text of all suspect pagan elements, with Ficino favouring Diotima's discourse over Aristophanes'. For his part Fellini accepts the tension.

In the street wreaths of incense rise up to the sky, a din of trumpets and cymbals mingles with the roar of elephants on whose backs are enthroned the members of the imperial family. Under a lowering sky there are crosses with the crucified hanging from them. The macabre procession moves forward in the gloom that recalls Good Friday. Away from the confusion on the highway a couple, whose martyr-like forms evoke the first Christians, are about to commit suicide. They have just freed the slaves of the house. A new era is heralded by the drama's symbolism. The images are saturated with white and pale pink. We are struck by the stoic serenity of the man who is about to slit his veins. No music. No pathos. Two peacocks on the atrium floor pass by and the delicacy of the shot makes us think of the Ravenna frescoes. We remember the suicides of Socrates (linked with the figure of Christ by the Church Fathers), Seneca, Petronius himself. Christ's suicide' too, when the images of the crucified invade the viewer's immediate memory. Indeed the face of the man who is killing himself is strangely Christ-like. The peace emanating from the spot confirms the calm appearance of the unmarked profile, while we can hear at the end of the garden the circus torches and the trumpeting of the elephants pulling the chariots. The atmosphere could be as painted by Jean Richepin in his poem 'Elagabal' (1898), about the androgynous emperor and his indiscretions. In *Satyricon* two worlds come face to face and experience tragedy: the Empire lives out its last hours in lucre and debauchery; the first Christians expire on the cross and their naked bodies are contemplated by an eye that might be ironic.

Encolpius and Ascyltus discover the couple's corpses. Greek words rend the air. Roman busts fill the space: chronologies and languages become confused. Relationships too. The two characters chase a nymph through a maze. Love is played as a threesome. The moon (Ascyltus), the sun (Encolpius), the earth (a young woman), the whole cosmogony of the *Banquet*, which is indispensable to the composition of the androgyne fable, is reviewed. The young bodies come together in the water, in the pool of an atrium, and so introduce the second section, devoted to Hermaphroditus.

Section Two: Hermaphroditus

The two friends are crossing a desert. A sandstorm blots out space and sounds. Desolation. A hysterical woman is tied up in the bottom of a chariot. She is writhing.

Desire consumes her. To save her, it is explained to the travellers, she has to meet the god Hermaphroditus. The two lovers go off to seek him out. The quest is for ambiguity incarnate, the body to be offered to the sick woman is that of the obvious double in which male and female are joined.

Encolpius and Ascylltus enter the cave of 'Aphrodite's and Mercury's son'. The first image in the sequence is a reflection of the sky in the atrium pool. Once more the high encounters the low, unless it is the reverse. The wave shivers. Fellini is paraphrasing Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The young god is lying in a cradle of reeds in the middle of a pool. Since Ovid, Hermaphroditus has been associated with the liquid element because he joined with the nymph Salmacis, much against his will, in the waters of the river Salmas. Originally this was a union that was unfortunate because undesired. Literary tradition since Ovid has made the hermaphrodite a weak, sickly creature.

The figure does not appear in Petronius, even though the Latin text is full of androgynous or transvestite characters. This monster of nature has no place there. Fellini's addition makes sense, for the figure has to concentrate together all the motifs in the film connected with sexuality and theology. Can we not detect in this god a double of Moses, discovered on the Nile also lying in a reed cradle, a child before whom a whole people kneels and waits? Furthermore, with Hermaphroditus the ambiguity is visual. Morphologically the creature displays both sexes. With the other ambiguous figures (androgynous and transvestite) the expression of the double remains an epiphany: it has to be decoded. So the allegory dazzles and it is in the momentary blindness and its oscillations that the interpretation lies and with it the element of spectacle Fellini seeks. But in creating the biggest departure from the original text the film-maker imposes his vision with determination and with it the intention it upholds more radically: the transition from pagan to Christian world.

The hermaphrodite is asleep. He groans, he seems ill, on the brink of death. We have come to see him in this cave, which is a kind of court of miracles similar to Lourdes. The creature's pose, when it is lifted up from the cradle to be presented to the visitors, suggests Botticelli's *Venus* rising from the water because of its chalky colour, or a *Pietà*, for the emaciated body, both male and female, is wrapped in gauzes, a pastiche of the drapery of a shroud. Presents are brought to the sleeping child. Ovid's cave becomes a manger and the cripples, idiots, amputees, beggars turn into wise men. *Alpha* becomes confused with *omega*. The cradle is also a grave.

The two men steal the god just as Prometheus stole the fire. But it is the sun's fire which kills the hermaphrodite. With Hermaphroditus the gods and the ancient world die. Fellini cries with Plutarch: 'The great Pan is dead!' Unwittingly the androgynous couple kill the creature of water and night. Each is greatly downcast after this loss. An irreparable mistake has probably been made.

Over centuries of literary history the androgyne, who is eminently a sun figure, has been contrasted with the moon figure, watery and weak, of the hermaphrodite. For instance, we remember the pathetic creature invented by Lautréamont in his *Chants de Maldoror* (1869). Symbolist literature, in which androgyne and hermaphrodite proliferate, invented a personal mythology and nearly always arranged the slaying of the hermaphrodite by the androgyne.

The hermaphrodite's death gives rise to a crucial scene. The body of the

hermaphrodite is laid in a chariot which is left in the centre of a great hole, a sort of grey dusty crater. The scenery is lunar and realizes the idea of disaster. The décor's rounded greyness in the white then black rectangle of the sky reminds us of some theogony at the time in fact when, shortly before his suicide, Mark Rothko was painting his big lunar canvases in which the octagon of his chapel in Huston is flanked by three black monochrome triptychs. Rothko's paintings are ancient tragedies according to the artist, who fed from mythological sources to create. And the aesthetic chosen by Fellini, tending towards geometrical violence and the diagrammatic, evokes the New York painter's art.

The death of the son of Hermes and Aphrodite is a disaster, and his disappearance retells, yet again, what Wagner expressed in music and Elémir Bourges⁶ in words about the death of gods: the decadence of civilizations. The death of Hermaphroditus is consubstantial to the catastrophic discourse of the poet Eumolpus.

Section three: the great mother goddess, the resurrection of Encolpius

After Hermaphroditus' death the film's sequences follow one another anarchically. Lack of diageitic coherence becomes the metaphor for ontological failure. The idea of barbarism spreads, in this final tableau, through scenes of a wild paganism that cancels out the progress, if any, achieved by the march towards a Christian dawn. After the encounter with the hermaphrodite Encolpius loses his virility. The last part of the film is devoted to a quest. An ontological and metaphysical one.

Without any transition Encolpius finds himself outside the crater, out of the hole and projected from the top of a phallic mountain, which is crowned by a sun idol. He rolls down the muddy slope like Sisyphus' rock. This is the start of his calvary.

The hero's disorientation is shown via the image of the labyrinth. A gladiator wearing a bull mask mistakes him for Theseus. The director replays the Minotaur myth in burlesque mode. The bogus Theseus begs for *mercy*. He is only a student unskilled in combat. He makes friends with the monster. The circular nature of the crater in the previous section is replaced by that of the circus. The student must sleep with Ariadne, a nymphomaniac with painted eyes. But he cannot honour her. He is the laughing stock of the circus. Their union takes place in a hole that resembles a tomb. According to Ariadne he is nothing but a 'wuss', or even 'worse than a dead man'. Necrophilia was missing from the catalogue of forbidden unions. Now it has happened.

Reduced to nothing Encolpius goes off with Ascylltus in search of his lost virility. He is led by the poet Eumolpus to the Gardens of Delights. We have already met Bosch in the first section. Here we encounter the Flemish painter again. Scenes of pink and blue sugared almonds evoking Indian mythology and the Kama Sutra are painted on the walls of this strange city. While Ascylltus experiences sex and all its positions on a huge swing that would not have had the audacity to sprout from the mind of Fragonard, even at the supreme period of his artistic libertinage, Encolpius is whipped by some women. He is Orpheus torn apart by the Bacchantes or Pentheus, maybe Dionysus. They all had their limbs torn off – like Plato's spherical beings – and they were all androgynous figures. The hero's integrity is extremely

problematical and this confusion makes him despair. He must lie with the Earth. Find the Mother Goddess in order to be reborn to himself and perform his resurrection.

With this purpose in mind he is introduced to the female magician Enote, who gives fire to men, fire that is situated between her legs. The hero must lie with this female Prometheus. We remember Encolpius and Ascyltus carrying off Hermaphroditus and seen as avatars of Prometheus. Fellini feminizes the Greek myth and invents a twofold portrait of Enote. Before their union she gives Encolpius a smile and behind the flames shows him a radiant face then a putrefying mask: the earth is both death and rebirth.

Encolpius is united with Enote, who is metamorphosed into a powerful mother figure, prototype of Fellini's actresses. All the film-maker's fantasies are concentrated on this flesh, in this formidable union culminating in the brilliance of two parted knees.

After they have become one the hero gets his virility back. He can embark for Africa on the ship belonging to the poet Eumolpus, who has just died. Ascyltus is dead too. The friend disappears without explanation at the end of the third tableau, like Giton who did the same at the end of the first.

The epilogue shows water, sky and earth the same grey gold colour, symbol of the harmonious union of opposites. The strength returned to Encolpius is connoted by the presence of a dolmen on the shore. In his novel *L'Agonie* Jean Lombard had already expressed the tensions between paganism and Christianity through the androgyne and resolved the dialectic with a monolith, 'the androgynous black stone', idol of the followers of a god who was new and one: Kreistos, the novel's avatar of Christ. We should add finally that the phallus and Christ are often closely associated in art and that there is a whole phallophany on the question of the flesh and the sacred.⁷

Then, in the film's final moments, Eumolpus' will is read, commanding people to eat his body if they wish to inherit his belongings. Eating the Being to distribute the Having. But above all possessing oneself. Through the cannibalistic rite, in this last scene, which is perhaps an *agape*, another version of the Last Supper, Encolpius will have found himself.

With this free adaptation of Petronius' novel Fellini provides a kaleidoscopic vision of Plato's *Banquet of Love*. Perhaps the different types of love that are debated over wine call for this polymorphic treatment. So the aesthetic of *Satyricon*, combining extreme modernity with the most classical mythological content, gives a vision of many-sided love, and the constant anamorphoses of Eros are probably the most realistic way for Fellini to deal with the subject.

In addition, Fellini makes a profession of faith by structuring the action around figures from Ovid and Plato who markedly move his argument conspicuously from a panicky fascination with orgy towards Christianity's exaltation of pain.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV.
2. Plato, *The Banquet (Symposium)*, see the 'Fable of the androgynes' told by Aristophanes and Diotima.
3. See Huysmans (2003), among others.
4. Verlaine (2003).
5. On this topic see Dauzat (1998).
6. E. Bourges, *Le Crépuscule des dieux* (1884).
7. See Leupin (2000).

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