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Bazin on Early Fellini: Three Original Reviews

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The Profound Originality of I Vitelloni

Without question, few films in the history of cinema have captured their era and exercised their influence more subtly than I Vitelloni (1953). Chaplin’s films operated through the miraculously universal character of the Tramp. Films like The Threepenny Opera (1931) owe their audience, and the mark they have left on an entire generation, in part to the particularly successful marriage of music and cinema. By contrast, nothing in I Vitelloni seemed capable of impressing itself on the viewer’s memory: no famous actors; not even, as in La Strada (1954), a poetically original and picturesque character around which the film is built; no story, or almost none. And yet the term “vitelloni”¹ has become a common word: it now designates an international human type, and, what is more, some of the best films each year remind us of Fellini’s own (most recently, Delbert Mann’s Bachelor Party [1957]).

Recently I saw I Vitelloni again, and I was deeply struck right away by the fact that, despite some minor weaknesses, the film had not only not aged, it had even matured with time, as if its message hadn’t been able, upon initial release, to reveal the full scope of its richness, and as if we had needed some time to gauge its importance. Of course, it is true that three subsequent Fellini films have helped to give the earlier one more trenchancy, depth, and nuance.² But I think that everything was already contained in I Vitelloni and set out there with magisterial genius.

Much has been written about this film’s message and its moral as well as spiritual significance; so I’d prefer to underline what the repercussions of this message are, not exactly for film form (never has the distinction between form and content been revealed to be more artificial than in I Vitelloni), but for the idea of cinematic “spectacle.” From this point of view, the profound originality of I Vitelloni seems to me to reside in its negation of the norms of storytelling on the screen. In almost all films, our interest is aroused not only by the plot or the action, but also by the development of the characters and the relationship of that development to the chain of events. Granted, neorealism had already changed matters by succeeding in interesting us in small events that seemed to have no dramatic import (as in Bicycle Thieves
[1948] and Umberto D. [1952]). Still, the action was carefully portioned out and the main character, whose personality was otherwise given or was determined by his environment, did evolve toward a dénouement.

With Fellini, it's different. His protagonists don't "evolve"; they mature. What we see them do on the screen is not only frequently without dramatic value, but also without logical meaning in the narrative chain. Most of the time it is pointless "agitation," which is the opposite of action: stupid strolls along beaches, absurd divagations, ridiculous jokes. And yet, it is through these gestures and activities, which appear so marginal that they are cut in most films, that the characters reveal themselves to us in their innermost essence. Not that they reveal to us what we conventionally call "a psychology." The Fellinian protagonist is not a "character," he is a mode of being, a way of living. This is why the director can define him thoroughly through his behavior: his walk, his dress, his hairstyle, his mustache, his dark glasses. Such anti-psychological cinema goes to the protagonist's soul. The cinema of the soul focuses most exclusively on appearances; it is a cinema in which the viewer's gaze is most important. Fellini has made positively ridiculous a certain analytical and dramatic tradition of filmmaking by substituting for it a pure phenomenology of being in which the most commonplace of man's gestures can be the beacons of his destiny and his salvation.

Notes

This review was first published in French in Radio-Cinéma-Télévision (Oct. 1957), then reprinted in Vol. 4 ("Une Esthétique de la réalité: le néoréalisme") of Bazin's four-volume Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-1962), pp. 143-45. Translated here, for the first time, with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

(All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.)

1. "Vitelloni" literally means "big slabs of veal" in Italian but, in reference to this film's five prankish layabouts, the term is perhaps best translated as "overgrown calves."

2. La Strada (1954), Il Bidone (The Swindle, 1955), and The Nights of Cabiria (1957).
A grey and melancholy sea echoes the restless, idle loneliness of the titioli. (From Il Vitelloni)

Pictures courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art (New York) Film Stills Archive.

73 Cardullo
The traditional iconography of the middle-class wedding of the 1950s (left to right: Riccardo Fellini, Franco Interlenghi, Eleona Rutio, Leopoldo Triesta, Franco Febrizi, Paola Borboni, Enrico Viarisio, Jean Brochard). (From Il Vitelloni)
La Strada: A Phenomenology of the Soul

The vitality of the Italian cinema is confirmed for us once again by this wonderful film of Federico Fellini's. And it is doubly comforting to declare that the rest of the critics have been nearly unanimous in singing the praises of La Strada (1954). Perhaps without this support, which hasn't hesitated to enlist snobbism on its side, the film would have had some difficulty in bringing itself to the attention of an otherwise inundated and undiscerning public.

Fellini has made one of those very rare films about which it can said, one forgets that they are movies and accepts them simply as works of art. One remembers the discovery of La Strada as an aesthetic experience of great emotion, as an unanticipated encounter with the world of imagination. I mean that this is less a case of a film's having known how to attain a certain intellectual or moral level than of its having made a personal statement for which the cinema is most surely the necessary and natural form, but which statement nevertheless possesses a virtual artistic existence of its own. It is not a film that is called a film; it is La Strada that is called a film.

In connection to this idea, Chaplin's last film also comes to mind, although in many ways it is quite different from La Strada. One could just as well say of Limelight (1952) that its only adequate embodiment was the cinema, that it was inconceivable through any other means of expression, and that, nonetheless, everything in it transcended the elements of a particular art form.

Thus La Strada confirms in its own way the following critical premise: to wit, that the cinema has arrived at a stage in its evolution where the form itself no longer determines anything, where filmic language no longer calls attention to itself, but on the contrary suggests only as much as any stylistic device that an artist might employ. Doubtless it will be said that only the cinema could, for example, endow Zampanò's extraordinary motorcycle caravan with the significance of living myth that this simultaneously strange and commonplace object attains here. But one can just as clearly see that the film in this case is neither transforming nor interpreting anything for us. No lyricism of the image or of montage takes it upon itself to guide our perceptions; I will even say that the mise en scène does not attempt to do so—at least not the mise en scène from a technically cinematic point of view.¹ The screen restricts itself simply to showing us the caravan better and more objectively than could the painter or the novelist. I am not saying that the camera has photographed the caravan in a very
plain manner—even the word "photographed" is too much here—but rather that the camera has simply shown the caravan to us, or, even better, has enabled us to see it.

Surely it would be excessive to pretend that nothing can be created by virtue of cinematic language alone, of its abrasive intrusion on the real. Without even taking into account almost virgin territory such as color and the wide screen, one can say that the degree of relationship between technique and subject matter depends in part on the personality of the director. An Orson Welles, for instance, always creates by means of technique. But what one can say without question is that henceforth advances in the cinema will not necessarily be tied to the originality of the means of expression, to the formal composition of the image or of the images in relation to one another. More precisely, if there is a formal originality to La Strada, it consists in the film's always staying on this side of cinema. Nothing that Fellini shows us owes any supplementary meaning to the manner in which it is shown; nevertheless, what we see couldn't be seen anywhere but on the screen. It is in this way that the cinema achieves fruition as the art of the real. One knows, of course, that Fellini is a great director, but he is a great director who doesn't cheat on reality. If the camera doesn't see it, it isn't in his film. It wouldn't be in his film, in any case, if he hadn't first acknowledged the fullness of its being in the world.

In this sense La Strada doesn't depart at all from Italian neorealism. But there is a misunderstanding on this subject that requires clarification. La Strada has been received in Italy with some reservation by the critical guardians of neorealist orthodoxy. These critics are situated on the Left, which in France is called "Progressivist," although this term is misleading, since the Italian critics are both more Marxist and more independent than French Progressivists. There are certainly Communist critics in France as well, and some of them are cultivated, intelligent, and well-informed, but their point of reference seems to me to be only marginally that of Marxism. The tactics and the watchwords of the Party do play a more obvious role in their writing, however, when the work of art in question draws its substance from the political arena, for then Party ideology takes over in spite of everything in the work that resists it. The criticism consequently does no more than render a good or bad judgment on the work according to whether its author's political views are "correct" or "incorrect." As for Progressivist criticism, it is either equivalent to the worst Communist criticism in slavishness and intellectual emptiness, or else it isn't Marxist and in that case has some scope.

In Italy, by contrast, it is Marxist criticism that occasionally gives evidence of a certain independence with regard to the interests of the Party, and without sacrificing the stringency of its aesthetic judg-
I am naturally thinking of the group around Chiarini and Aristarco at Cinema Nuovo. In the last two years their criticism has, I dare say, rediscovered the concept of neorealism, which was held in so little regard at one time, and is attempting to define the term and give it an orientation. (Zavattini is the figure whose work most conforms to neorealism's idea, which conceives of a film, not as a fixed and tame reality, but as a work in progress, an inquiry that begins with certain givens and then proceeds in a particular direction.) I don't feel that I have the competence necessary to give a clear description of the evolution of neorealism as seen by these Marxist critics, but I also don't believe that I am distorting matters to call neorealism, as they define it, a substitute term for "socialist realism"—the theoretical and practical sterility of which, unfortunately, no longer needs to be demonstrated.

In fact, as far as one can trace it through the various tactical changes in the Party line on art that have occurred, socialist realism has never created anything very convincing in itself. In painting, where its influence is easy to determine because it stands in opposition to the whole course of modern art, we know that it hasn't produced any results. In literature and in cinema, the situation is confused, since we are dealing here with art forms from which realism has never been eliminated. But even if there are good films and good novels that don't contradict the precepts of socialist realism, it is still rather doubtful that these precepts had anything to do with the success of these works of art. On the other hand, one can well see the extent to which such precepts have eviscerated many other works.

The truth is that theories have never produced masterpieces, and that creative outpourings have a deeper source in History and in men. Italy had the good fortune, like Russia around 1925, to find itself in a situation where cinematic genius began to flourish, and this genius was moving in the direction of social progress, of human liberation. It is natural and legitimate that the most conscientious among the creators and judges of this important movement are anxious today to keep it from falling apart; they would like neorealism to continue along the revolutionary path on which it set out around 1945. And surely neorealism can, at least in the cinema, be a valuable substitute for socialist realism. The number of successful neorealist films and their oneness in diversity supply the Marxist aesthetcian with food for productive thought, which is the way it should be. If the time comes, however, when such thought outstrips production itself, then neorealism will be in danger. Happily, we are not yet at that point. Nevertheless, I am worried about the intolerance that Marxist criticism is beginning to show toward those who dissent from, let us call it, socialist neorealism—namely, Rossellini and Fellini (who was Rossellini's assistant and in many ways remains his disciple).
“Italy is ever and adamantly the country of Catholicism: whoever is not on the side of Peppone must be in league with Don Camillo.” In response to this criticism from the Left, Italian Catholics run to the defense of those neorealist films whose ambiguity lends itself to Catholic coloration. The Congress of Varese, it could be said, is doing battle here with the Congress of Parma. Needless to say, the results of this Catholic effort have been rather pitiful. But because of it, Rossellini and Fellini find themselves in a very difficult situation. It is true that their recent films could not be perceived as socially oriented. These works are not concerned at all with the transformation of social institutions; they aren’t even genuine social documents. Their makers, as Italian citizens, don’t flirt with Communism, but neither do they let themselves be taken in by the Christian Democrats. The result for Rossellini is that he is denounced by both sides. As for Fellini, his case is still under litigation, although the success of La Strada gives him the benefit of a favorable reception from both sides at the same time—a reception marred, however, by uneasiness and pronounced reservations on the part of the Marxists. Of course, political bias is just one part of a critic’s makeup, with greater or lesser weight attached to it depending on his personality. It may even occur that a critic will set aside his political bias: we have seen Chiarini, for example, defend Rossellini’s Flowers of St. Francis (1950), whereas Cinema Nuovo was divided over Senso (1954), which was directed by the Communist Visconti. But the precedent set by such instances certainly does not contribute to a softening of theoretical positions when these are synonymous with political distrust. Thus both the Marxists and the Christian Democrats threaten to evict Fellini from the neorealist pantheon as each defines it, and to hurl him out into the darkness already inhabited by Rossellini.

Obviously everything depends on the definition we give to neorealism from the start. Definition or no definition, however, it seems to me that La Strada doesn’t contradict Paisan (1946) or Open City (1945) at all, any more than it does Bicycle Thieves (1948), for that matter. But it is true that Fellini has taken a route different from Zavattini’s. Together with Rossellini, Fellini has opted for a neorealism of the person. To be sure, Rossellini’s early films, Paisan and Open City among them, identified moral choice with social consequence, because these two spheres had been equated during the Resistance. But his Europe ’51 (1952) to some degree retreated from social responsibility into the realm of spiritual destiny. What in this film and in La Strada nonetheless remains neorealist, and can even be considered one of neorealism’s genuine achievements, is the aesthetic that informs the action, an aesthetic that Abbé Amédée Ayfre has judiciously described as phenomenological.
One can see very well, for example, that in *La Strada* nothing is ever revealed to us from inside the characters. Fellini’s point of view is the exact opposite of the one that would be taken by psychological realism, which claims to analyze character and finally to uncover feelings. Yet anything can happen in the quasi-Shakespearean world of *La Strada*. Gelsomina and the Fool have an air of the marvelous about them—which baffles and irritates Zampanò—but this quality is neither supernatural nor gratuitous, nor even “poetic”; instead, it comes across simply as another property of nature. Furthermore, to return to psychology, the very being of these characters is precisely in their not having any, or at least in their possessing such a malformed and primitive psychology that a description of it would have nothing more than pathological interest. But they do have a soul. And *La Strada* is nothing but their experience of their souls and the revelation of this before our eyes.

Gelsomina learns from the Fool that she has a place in the world. Gelsomina the idiot, homely and useless, discovers one day through this tightrope walker that she is something other than a reject, an outcast; better, that she is irreplaceable and that she has a destiny, which is to be indispensable to Zampanò. The most powerful event in the film is, without question, Gelsomina’s breakdown after Zampanò murders the Fool. From this point on, she is beset by an agony situated in that instant in which the Fool, who had virtually conferred her being on her, ceased to exist. Little mouse-like cries escape uncontrollably from her lips at the sight of her dead friend: “The Fool is sick, the Fool is sick.” The stupid, obstinate, and brutish Zampanò can’t realize how much he needs Gelsomina, and above all he can’t sense the eminently spiritual nature of the bond that unites the two of them. Terrified by the poor girl’s suffering and at the end of his patience, he abandons her. But just as the death of the Fool had made life unbearable for Gelsomina, so too will Zampanò’s abandonment of her and then her death make life unbearable for him. Little by little this mass of muscles is reduced to its spiritual core, and Zampanò’s ends up being crushed by the absence of Gelsomina from his life. He’s not crushed by remorse for what he did, or even by his love for her, but rather by overwhelming and incomprehensible anguish, which can only be the response of his soul to being deprived of Gelsomina.

Thus one can look at *La Strada* as a phenomenology of the soul, perhaps even of the communion of saints, and at the very least as a phenomenology of the reciprocal nature of salvation. Where these slow-witted individuals are concerned, it is impossible to confuse ultimate spiritual realities with those of intelligence, passion, pleasure, or beauty. The soul reveals itself here beyond psychological or aesthetic categories, and it reveals itself all the more, precisely because one can’t
bedeck it with the trappings of conscience. The salt of the tears that Zampanò sheds for the first time in his sorry life, on the beach that Gelsomina loved, is the same salt as that of the infinite sea, which will never again be able to relieve its own anguish at the sufferings of men.

Notes

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(All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.)

1. Mise en scène literally means “putting on the stage.” In a French theater program, the credit for “directed by” would read, “mise en scène de.” This term has been loosely adapted for use with reference to the cinema, and covers such areas as visual style, movement of the camera or the actors, disposition of the actors in relation to décor, uses of lighting and color, etc. When Bazin speaks of “the mise en scène from a technically cinematic point of view,” he is referring to camera position (e.g., close-up), angle (e.g., low-angle shot), and movement (e.g., swish pan) that call some attention to themselves.

2. Guido Aristarco (1918-1996) was long the editor of the Italian film journal Cinema Nuovo (New Cinema). Among his books are The Art of Film (1950), History of Film Theory (1951), Myth and Reality in the Italian Cinema (1961), and Marx, the Cinema, and Film Criticism (1965). Luigi Chiarini (1900-1975) founded the famous Italian film school Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935 and, in addition to contributing to Cinema Nuovo, he founded his own journal, Bianco e Nero (Black and White), in 1937, remaining its editor until 1951. Among his books on film theory are Five Chapters on Film (1941), Problems of Film Art (1949), The Battle of Ideas in Film (1954), and The Art and Technique of Film (1962). In his day Chiarini was considered by many to be the dean of the Italian cinema.

3. Cesare Zavattini (1902-1989) emerged in the 1940s as a key figure of Italian neorealism with his theoretical writings and with his screen plays for some of the most important productions of the movement, notably the films of Vittorio De Sica (e.g., Shoeshine [1946], Bicycle Thieves [1948], Miracle in Milan [1950]).

4. Don Camillo, an eccentric Roman Catholic village priest, and Peppone, the village’s militant Communist mayor, conduct a running war to gain the favor of the local populace in a series of novels by Giovanniino Guareschi (1908-1968). The most famous of these novels, which satirize the politics of both the left and the right, was the first one: The Little World of Don Camillo (1948). This was made into a film in 1952 by the French director Julien Duvivier (1896-1967), with the French actor Fernandel (1903-1971) in the role of Peppone. Duvivier also directed The Return of Don Camillo (1953), the sequel to The Little World
of Don Camillo. Several other films followed in what became the internationally popular "Don Camillo" series.

5. Bazin is referring to the various congresses held in the 1890s by the Catholics (in Varese, among other cities), on the one hand, and the Italian Socialist Party (in Parma, among other cities), on the other hand. The following is a description of Catholic politics of the period as it differs from Socialist politics:

Leo XIII’s famous encyclical of 1891, Rerum Novarum, not only condemned the existing liberal capitalist society, it ordered devout Catholics to transform it, and this seemed particularly apposite at a time of agricultural crisis, industrial depression, and high emigration. Employers should pay a "just wage," enough to permit the worker to save and acquire property. The State might legitimately intervene to safeguard workers' rights and prevent blatant exploitation, but essentially reforms should come by mutual agreement, through a series of "private" associations. Mutual-aid societies, cooperatives, and mixed "corporations" of workers and employers were the most favored kinds of association, but workers' trade unions were also permissible provided they did not engage in the class struggle. One of the purposes of this "Papal Socialism" was to combat the ever-present threat of Red Socialism. To the Catholics, Socialism would be a disastrous replacement for liberal capitalism, denying God, family life, and the right to property; under the mask of emancipation it would prepare an even more cruel and universal servitude. The remedy was "corporations"—i.e., guilds of employers and workers—profit-sharing in industry, small landownership, sharecropping or long leases in the countryside, cooperatives to organize commerce, and banking to be run as a public utility. Catholics looked forward to a Christian democracy of the twentieth century, in which all classes would work together in social harmony. (Drawn from Martin Clark, Modern Italy, 1871-1892 [London: Longman, 1984], p. 106.)

6. Fellini co-scripted Paisan and Open City for Rossellini; Zavattini wrote the screenplay for Bicycle Thieves, as I indicate in note 3 above.

7. Amédée Ayfre, a contemporary of Bazin’s, was a French ecclesiastic (a Jesuit priest) and critic. He is the author or co-editor of the following books: God in the Cinema: Aesthetic Problems of Religious Film (1953), Truth and Cinema (1969), Cinema and Mystery (1969), and The Films of Robert Bresson (1969).

In describing neorealism as phenomenological, Ayfre means what Bazin says in the first sentence of the next paragraph: that "nothing is ever revealed to us from inside the characters" in the quintessential neorealist film. In philosophical terms, neorealism limits itself to a description of characters' interactions with one another ("neorealism of the person," according to Bazin) or with their environment ("socialist neorealism," according to Bazin). What neorealism does not do is emphasize characters' particular psychological problems or obsessions.

8. The Fool is an artiste— violinist, high-wire performer, clown—who is known only by his stage name in the film.
The communion of saints is, in the Roman Catholic Church, the union between the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in Heaven, by which all are members of the same mystical body under Christ, its head, and partakers in a community of spiritual works and gifts.
Above: The duo in the making: Zampono explains the art of trumpet playing (Anthony Quinn and Giulietta Masina). (From La Strada)

Upper Left: The wandering players chat inside the Big Top: puzzled but poetical (Richard Basehart, Aldo Silvani, and Anthony Quinn). (From La Strada)

Lower Left: The strongman: teeth of granite, bare chest, leather belt studded with tin bosses... (Anthony Quinn). (From La Strada)

83 Cardullo
Il Bidone, or the Road to Salvation Reconsidered

When I heard one of my colleagues cleverly sneer, "It's a swindle!" to a countryman after the screening of this film at the Venice Festival, I didn't feel very proud of being a French critic. But these "wise guys" weren't as harsh as most Italian critics, for I have also heard the most esteemed among them declare that Il Bidone (The Swindle or The Swindlers, 1955) definitely proved that those who had praised Fellini's La Strada (1954) had been mistaken. For my part, I admit that the Venice screening left me perplexed because I don't understand Italian: some long sequences therefore appeared to me to be doubly questionable. But, far from negating my admiration for La Strada, Il Bidone seemed to me to confirm the genius that was manifested in the earlier picture. Even if Fellini's latest film was relatively unsuccessful, it still suggested a power of invention, a poetic and moral vision, that was by no means inferior to that of La Strada or even I Vitelloni (1953).

But Il Bidone is not an unsuccessful film. I realized this today after seeing it for the third time—subtitled at last—and rid of a few scenes, which were indeed unnecessary. Not that they were unjustified from a certain point of view. In fact, the film is now too short, for Fellini had intended to develop these scenes further, which would have been useful to a full understanding of the characters' destinies; but he finally gave up on doing so. So the excised scenes were superfluous, and it was better to cut too much than not enough. This is not at all comparable, fortunately, to the mutilations undergone at a certain point by a print of La Strada, nor is it comparable, even more fortunately, to the mutilations allegedly intended for Il Bidone by the French distributor: these were supposed to do nothing less than radically transform the meaning of the dénouement.

Augusto, the protagonist of the film, does indeed die for having tried to con his two pals into believing that he has taken pity on the paralyzed girl, whose parents the three of them have just swindled. In fact, he wants to keep the money for himself, so that he can help his own daughter pursue her studies. The other swindlers beat him up in revenge and leave him to die on a stony hillside. We can see that if Augusto had really let himself be moved by the poor peasant girl, he would have been redeemed and would have died an innocent man, much to the great satisfaction of the Manichaeism that presides over all commercial happy endings.

Does his behavior make him fundamentally good or evil? Fortunately, Fellini never places himself on the level of such moral
People are what they are—beings—and what they become, not what they do; their actions, whether good or evil or filled with purity of intention, don’t permit them to be judged any more objectively than subjectively. The purity of the man lies deeper: for Fellini, it is essentially defined by the transparency or the opacity of the soul, or even, if you will, by a certain perversiveness to grace. Naturally, those who are perfectly transparent and open to other people’s love want to do good and generally do so (although this type of “good” often has very little to do with morality in the strictest sense); but we are dealing here with the consequences of essence, not just the causes of action. So, we may believe that Augusto is saved, just like Zampanò in La Strada, even though he has intended and done evil right up to the end, because he at least died in a state of anxiety. It’s true that his conversation with the paralyzed girl did not move him at all in the psychological sense of the word. On the contrary, far from making him comprehend the shame of betraying a child’s confidence, it doubtless gave him the courage and determination to swindle his accomplices. At the same time, however, his conversation with the paralyzed girl introduced turmoil to his soul; it made him see, finally, not so much the accidental lie of his actions as the essential imposture of his life.

By contrast, Picasso (whose story was abbreviated in the final version) is a nice, sensitive, sentimental man, always full of good intentions and always ready to take pity on others or on himself. But for all this, Picasso’s salvation is probably hopeless. Why does he steal? Because he “looks like an angel”; with a face like his, he couldn’t be suspected of anything. Incapable of truly responding to his internal fissures, of bridging them, Picasso is doomed to darkness and to ultimate downfall, despite the gentleness and love he displays toward his wife and child. Picasso’s actions do not make him evil, but he is lost, just as Augusto is probably saved, despite the fact that he is incapable of pity.

I haven’t used this Christian vocabulary intentionally—although a Christian inspiration is certainly undeniable in Fellini’s work—but such a vocabulary is undoubtedly the one that best conveys the nature of the realities that are the object of a film like Il Bidone. Whether constructed as metaphors or as metaphysical truths, the terms salvation or damnation, darkness or transparency of the soul, are the ones that impose themselves on me as I write, since they most accurately express the state of ultimate urgency in which our being is suspended as we otherwise conduct our lives.

Of these swindlers Fellini has said, I think, that they are aging vitelloni (“overgrown calves,” from Fellini’s film I Vitelloni [1953]). The phrase perfectly describes such second-rate con men whose art resides
solely in their huckster’s gift of gab; they can’t even get rich off their work, unlike the former colleague of theirs who is now a drug dealer and who invited them to celebrate New Year’s Eve at his luxurious apartment. This extraordinary sequence, in which the chief device of contemporary cinema, the surprise party, is once again to be found, is the climax of the film. If there can be talk of symbolism at the precise moment in *Il Bidone* where realism is at its peak, then one can say that Fellini doubtless wanted to construct an image of hell, and a rather scorching one at that, for these poor devils who will not be able to endure its fire for very long.

I realize I haven’t told much of the “story.” This is probably because I surmised that the reader had already read several summaries of it. One reason above all others for my omission is that the film doesn’t encourage plot summary. Full of strange and funny episodes, it goes beyond the merely picturesque, however; if I dwelt on that aspect, I’d only be treating the accessories. *Il Bidone* is built, or rather created, like a novel—out of the very nature of its characters. Fellini has certainly never conceived a situation for its narrative logic, nor even less for its dramatic necessity, and he doesn’t do so here. The events happen all of a sudden: they are totally unpredictable, yet somehow inevitable, as would have been the incidents that Fellini could have substituted for them.

If I had to compare this world to that of a well-known novelist, it would unquestionably be the world of Dostoyevsky, despite all the particulars that separate the two. In the Russian novelist’s work, as in Fellini’s, events are in fact never anything but the completely accidental instruments through which human souls feel their way, and nothing ever happens that is fundamentally connected to their salvation or damnation. Good and evil, happiness and anguish, are from this point of view nothing more than relative categories in comparison with the absolute alternative in which these protagonists are trapped, and which I can’t help but call, even if only metaphorically—salvation or damnation.

**Notes:**

1. This review was first published in French in *France-Observateur* (March 1956), then reprinted in Vol. 4 (“Une Esthétique de la réalité: le néoréalisme”) of Bazin’s four-volume *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-1962), pp. 129-133. Translated here, for the first time, with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.
Above: Picasso's trusting wife and the jaded cynicism of Augusto (Guilietta asina and Broderick Crawford). (From Il Bidone)

Following page: The simple, naive country folk and the greedy, cunning bidonisti, in a typical scene from the film, which marvellously shows Fellini's special talent for ruthless irony (Richard Basehart, Franco Fabrizi, Broderick Crawford). (From Il Bidone)

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87 Cardullo