

Fellini's Obsession With Obsession in *La Dolce Vita*

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Like an ornate mansion that contains starkly bare rooms, the beauty of the postwar Italian upper-class is a façade that Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* explores through the eyes of journalist Marcello Rubini. Over seven distinct episodes, Marcello loses more and more of himself to the shallow lifestyles of the rich and famous, discovering that underneath the glittering exterior, there is nothing but a hollow shell. Without a strong purpose or moral compass after the World Wars corrupt the foundation of Italian society, even its most affluent members turn to obsessions in order to fill that emptiness as they beg for answers to those everlasting, unanswerable human questions: who am I? What am I doing here?

Marcello seeks those answers through constant relationships with women. The four that he interacts with throughout *La Dolce Vita* all hold the key to something that he lacks. Emma, Marcello's fiancée, is the stable, maternal figure in his life, while Maddalena, the heiress, represents the spontaneity and seduction that he craves. Sylvia, the Swedish silver screen star, is akin to a spiritual symbol, and Paola, the fresh-faced waitress by the beachfront, can only be the innocence that he wishes to reclaim. Though they are all pieces to the puzzle, none quite complete him, only forming brief ties that cannot satisfy his need for a deeper connection. Sylvia perhaps comes the closest. During their night together at the Trevi Fountain, Marcello becomes particularly entranced by her boundless energy, whispering that she is "everything"—a kind of goddess made flesh that he hopes can grant him the salvation he desires. When morning comes, however, the spell is broken when the pair are discovered by Sylvia's enraged husband. As much as Marcello is infatuated with finding a woman that can make his life meaningful, he never does.

On the other hand, Marcello's fiancée Emma has one goal throughout the film: to get married and settle down into a traditional, nuclear household. To that end, she almost commits

suicide to get Marcello's attention, and constantly fusses over his well-being—at one point even forcing food into his mouth—as her way of showing affection. Despite his many infidelities, Emma believes that she will find happiness by being a loving wife, and when Marcello disagrees and wholeheartedly rejects her pleas, she accuses him of ruining what could be a perfect future. Emma is constantly alone at home while Marcello is out carousing with other women, but she clings on to their one-sided, toxic relationship in the sad hope that the man she has managed to catch will one day agree to be with her forever.

Fellini continues this thread of obsession by having notable scenes involve characters playing out their personal fixations. When Marcello stumbles upon his father in the street cafe, he is surprised by the suggestion that they go to a cabaret called the Cha-Cha-Cha Club, an unusual place for a father and his son to visit together. There, Marcello's father acts as if he is “one of the boys,” flirting heavily with Marcello's ex-girlfriend and ogling the other dancers as he plays out a fantasy to recapture his youth. Feeling stuck in a quiet town and a long marriage, Marcello's father wants to be youthful again, and tries his hardest to escape through pretense.

Likewise, the common folk that rush in a frenzy to see a tree and the children who claimed they saw the Madonna beneath it reveal their incredible desire for something greater than themselves—some sort of divine presence that can heal them of their postwar trauma. Though the way the children misdirect the crowd obviously exposes the artifice of their claims, the people nonetheless choose to pretend that there is a power there for them if only they can reach it; those who can do so end up desperately ripping the branches off of the holy tree.

Marcello's intellectual friend Steiner might best encapsulate the theme. Divorced from the struggles of the common man, he hunts directly for life's purpose and hints that his own life

is not as beautiful as it seems when Marcello reveals his yearning for Steiner's seeming prosperity. When Steiner's intense searching fails to yield results and his obsession with meaning leads him nowhere, he refuses to accept it and instead chooses to escape through death, murdering the children he so dearly loved in fear that they will come to the same conclusion.

The most self-aware obsession, however, is the relationship between the paparazzi and images. In *La Dolce Vita*, the paparazzi are portrayed as invasive and apathetic to the emotional struggles of their subjects, capturing a drunk Robert fighting Marcello, or taking pictures of Steiner's wife before she learns of the tragedy that has befallen her family. They are merely observers and recorders of unfolding events, detached from it all, because their life's work consists of finding the ultimate image that will make their careers. These traits parallel Fellini's absolute devotion to his films, which fed into a famously controlling persona where his reality was the *true* one. Perhaps Fellini was mocking his own dependency on visual representation and a fixation with the 'perfect picture' through the inclusion of the paparazzi?

Either way, the paparazzi's *idée fixe* is relevant even today, in this image-saturated society that captures every moment through a lens in order to legitimise experiences. We seek validation from others through the output of our addiction, and over fifty years divorced from the context surrounding *La Dolce Vita*, the same conclusions are reached. In the end, the characters all realise that the obsessions they have been using to try and fill the empty parts of themselves can never be a replacement for what they have lost. All of their avenues of escape—sex, drinking, religion, marriage, photography—are only temporary tourniquets for a larger wound. But when a grinning, youthful Paola appears at the end of the film, she acts a lighthouse in a sea of gloomy depravity: it is too late for most, but in children there still exists unfractured souls.