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Title	Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern, by Frank Burke
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Publication date	2020-11-01
Original Citation	Brizio-Skov, F. (2021) 'Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern, by Frank Burke', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 20, pp. 254-259. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.22
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.20.22
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Download date	2026-11-06 04:45:47
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10983



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 20, 2020, pp. 254–259
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.22

Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern, by Frank Burke. Intellect, 2020, 366 pp.

Flavia Brizio-Skov

Revisiting his 1996 book entitled *Fellini's Films: From Postwar to Postmodern*, Frank Burke has published an updated analysis of the director's films, adding to the original treatment a preface and a new chapter on Fellini's commercials. The occasion of the revival is, of course, the centenary of Fellini's birth. This volume and the 2020 edited collection *A Companion to Federico Fellini*, which Burke coedited with Marguerite Waller and Marita Gubareva, are most welcome as a counterbalance to the notable underappreciation of Fellini's production in Anglo-American film studies in the past, where feminists dismissed Fellini's works, disapproving of his construction of gender, even if a more careful analysis would have revealed the complexity of such a construction in his filmic universe. The hyper-intellectualism of French post-1968 semiological theory, in conjunction with a puritanical British counter-cinema that rejected cinematic pleasure, marginalised not only Fellini, but a good deal of Italian cinema. French-infused British theory was incapable of reading Fellini's work in the light of his own culture, and of a vast sensual tradition of Italian visual art. Dismissing them a priori on theoretical grounds, the academic theorists did not pay close attention to Fellini's films.

Fellini's cinematic output, however, was appreciated by the public and critics at large whose international admiration made him the recipient of five Oscars. Fellini's distinct style has delighted generations of viewers and has inspired many filmmakers around the world. *Fellini's Films and Commercials* starts with an introductory theoretical chapter that explores Fellini's development from modernist reflexivity to postmodernism, followed by a film-by-film analysis of the director's cinematic production. Burke addresses the contemporary relevance of each film in contexts ranging from politics, gender, race, sexual orientation, individuation, Jungian study of dreams, and theoretical frameworks, highlighting the recurring themes, patterns, influences, the filmmaker's unique forms of cinematic expression, critiques and various interpretations.

In order to illuminate the complexity of Fellini's signifying practices, I will concentrate on the Introductory Chapter, "Fellini in Context", on Chapter Eleven, "Fellini's Commercials", and on Chapter Twelve, "Politics, Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation". The core of the volume is formed by Burke's critical readings of each film. I encourage the reader to explore each film analysis according to their own interest, because each chapter can be enjoyed separately. The theme of the first several chapters is individuation, a notion

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popularised by Carl Jung and embraced by Fellini, according to which the goal of life is to become a whole and fully individualised human being. Individuation becomes, in Fellini's films, an aesthetic process in which his characters begin to relate increasingly to concrete reality in psychological, symbolic and creative terms, in other words, on the level of the imagination, where, according to Fellini early in his career, we are all artists and we all can become whole. Following the making of *Giulietta degli spiriti* (*Juliet of the Spirits,* 1965), Fellini experienced a creative block, fell into a depression, became physically sick and had difficulty finding economic support for his projects. As a consequence, individuation in his films began to disappear. The effects of this crisis are reflected by the fact that Fellini made fifteen films in his first twenty years as a director, and only nine in his last twenty-three. Paradoxically, the decline of Fellini's ability to make films coincided with high points in his career: US television contracted Fellini to make a film about himself in 1969, an American journalist wrote a book about the making of *Fellini Satyricon* (1969); a movie about the filmmaker came out in 1970 (*Ciao, Federico!*, Gideon Bachmann) etc. In 1976, with Visconti dead, Fellini was Italy's king of cinema. On the other hand, by the 1970s Italian cinema and European art film were in sharp decline, and the crisis accelerated Fellini's questioning of the autonomy of art and the artist. After this period, Burke asserts, the emphasis in Fellini's films began to shift from individuals/artists in search of authenticity to art about art, a development that Burke characterises as the shifting from a relatively realist aesthetic to a self-conscious concern with issues of representation and meaning, making his films some of the most self-reflexive in the history of the medium.

Fellini's shift from realism to representation reflects a renunciation of the real and a turn toward self-questioning art, typical of aesthetic modernism. The focus of art shifted from what was represented to how to represent it. Fellini, moving from realist to self-reflexive filmmaking, progresses from representation to signification. As we know, with postmodernism the relation between the sign and the referent is dissolved, we speak of signification and not of representation. In fact, reality begins to dissolve in such films as *Histoires Extraordinaires* (*Toby Dammit,* 1968), *Fellini Satyricon*, and *I clowns* (*The Clowns*, 1970), and, finally, to the point where, from *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini* (*Fellini's Casanova*, 1976) to the end of his career, signification becomes paramount. Considering the difficulty of pinpointing what really are gradual changes, the best way to approach this development in Fellini's work, according to Burke, is a close analysis of individual films, in order to explore the complex relations between representation and signification, modernism and postmodernism in each film, rather than trying to pigeonhole Fellini's production in neat compartments as other critics have previously done.

To the reader approaching Fellini's films, Burke suggests that *Luci del varietá* (*Variety Lights*, 1950) offers a useful introduction to his oeuvre. The filmic title itself is referring to a world of illusion, art and enlightenment, a topic that will become a major concern to Fellini in movies such *Le notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*, 1957), *8½* (1963), and *Juliet of the Spirits*. The presence of an alienated ego will confront all Fellini's major characters from *Lo sceicco bianco* (*The White Sheik,* 1952) through *La voce de la luna* (*The Voice of the Moon*, 1990), his last film. *Variety Lights*, even if relatively conservative in terms of cinematic style, foreshadows the extraordinary importance that the camera eye will come to play in his later films. The increase in creative capability on the part of Fellini's

characters is accompanied by a growing emphasis on redemption and resurrection. Implicit in the film is a sense that the past can be recreated, and ultimately transcended by acts of imagination.

Later in his career Fellini made five advertisements for Campari (1984), Barilla (1986) and Banca di Roma (1993). They appeared on television only in Italy, and had limited exposure in North America, but they are now available on DVD. For Burke, Fellini's commercial work, late in his career, marks a return to origins: the commercials employ signifying strategies that are consistent with those found in his films. They are a "critique" in the sense that they constitute a case of "opposition from within that which one seeks to criticize" (283). The commercials are self-reflexive, dealing with topics that Fellini could be identified with such as celebrity, cinema, dream, psychology, masculinity and the representation of women. They are a sort of live-action cartoon that brings the viewer back to Fellini's work as a satirical journalist, and recall his strong comic sensibility. Burke provides an "Interpretative Summary" for each commercial, describing in detail the shots as they appear on screen, followed by an "Analysis", in which the critic instead of offering an interpretation, opens up the text to various possibilities, offering the reader the opportunity to explore the text further, beyond the author's own reading, in a sort of never-ending interpretative process. For Burke, the commercials are open-ended, full of winks and double entendres that, combined with other cinematic strategies, can be read in multiple ways, even if the characters and the words suggest the opposite. The TV spots are linked to Fellini's sense of wonder at the mystery of experience. In the commercials, Fellini's looking at the world with childlike wonder gives way to the cynicism of the adult artist who discovers that the world of wonder has been manipulated, constructed, and exploited for commercial ends. Burke speaks of magic realism for Fellini's early films, of magic self-reflexivity in films about films, art or memory, and of magic kitsch starting with *Fellini's Casanova* and continuing till the end of his career, including the commercials. For the author, Fellini's kitsch is "a parody of both his sense of wonder and his inventiveness. It is a form of strategic bad taste to prevent him and us from ever getting caught (again) in illusion of authenticity, originality and creativity […]. Yet it is important not to underestimate the magic of the kitsch" (318).

In the last chapter of the book, "Politics, Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation", Burke enters into a dialogue with various renowned critics, dealing with what we could call the thorns in the side of Fellini's career. These areas of conflict, highlighted in the title of the chapter in question, are the issues that have generated most heated debate. Fellini's output has been seen as an example of bourgeois individualism, of depoliticised high modernism. To skirt the accusations of a lack of "politics," Burke revealingly focuses on aspects of different films, dividing the director's production into three broad categories that are related to the study of power relations within society, of social issues, and of the possibility of change within social relationships. He defines the films from *Variety Lights* through *La dolce vita* (1960) as insistent social critique; films such as *Amarcord* (1973) and *Prova d'orchestra* (*Orchestra Rehearsal*, 1978) as films that deal with specific political moments; films from *Le tentazioni del Dottor Antonio* (*The Temptation of Dr. Antonio*, 1962) through *The Voice of the Moon* as films that analyse representation and signification. *I vitelloni* (1953), *Il bidone* (1955) and *La dolce vita*, for example, offer a critical image of post-war Italy under the

influence of American materialism moving toward a society of the spectacle; *The Temptation of Dr. Antonio* and *8½*, sought to represent the crippling influence of Catholic Italian society in the formation of individual consciousness. *Juliet of the Spirits* provided a parody of the Italian economic-boom bourgeoisie and of contemporary middle-class women's roles. *Amarcord* looked at the 1930s and Fascist Italy, *Orchestra Rehearsal* at the 1970s, Italian terrorism and the kidnapping of Aldo Moro. In those films that explore issues of representation and signification, the individuals are products rather than producers of culture, they talk about the circulation of meaning in relation to power and to different forms of cultural production like writing (*Fellini's Casanova*), opera (*E la nave va* [*And the Ship Sails On*, 1983]), dream (*La cittá del donne* [*City of Women*, 1980]), television (*Ginger and Fred*, 1986), and film (*Roma* [1972], *Intervista* [1987], *And the Ship Sails On*).

Throughout the volume, Burke considers politics, Italian society and Fellini in relation to 1970s cultural theory. In regard to more recent theory like multiculturalism, cultural difference, the "other", and to the fact that Fellini's films have been charged with Eurocentrism, accused of projecting the perspective of traditional white European culture, Burke quotes other critics like Marguerite Waller and Shelleen Greene, who have unpacked the complexity of the representation of blackness in Fellini's films. By introducing the critical perspectives of Waller, Greene, and others, the author broadens the field of discourse, opening up the discussion to further explorations and interpretations.

When it comes to gender, the extravagant portrayal of women in his films made Fellini a target. However, Burke points out that Fellini's willingness to focus on female protagonists set his work apart from mainstream male-dominated cinema, and that the director had significant insights into sexual exploitation, issues of abuse and commodification of women. As Burke underlines, the problem of Fellini was not the visibility of women in his films, but the "nature" of such a visibility, because most of his female protagonists do not seem to have any agency and are victims of men (217). However, the richness of Fellini's female creations is complex, and his representation of women should be read vis-à-vis the larger context of male crisis that took place in post-war Italy. For the author, *City of Women* constitutes Fellini's response to feminism (217–28), and the author's thesis in this section is, in my opinion, one of the most fascinating parts of the study. Fellini, in his filmic "dream", takes feminist discourse seriously, but his city of women highlights problems constructed and dreamed by men, and therefore are far different from those that would be the focus of a woman author, or dreamer. Burke concludes by affirming that women represent for Fellini the unknown. As a consequence, the relationships of men to women for Fellini is metaphysical. This relationship is always under "erasure […] and ruptures" and is "mystifying, frightening, enticing, and […] irresolvable," and, basically, part of the enigma of living (227).

Burke's book documents the enormous cultural impact that Fellini had in the second half of the twentieth century, and finally gives Fellini the visibility that he deserves, showing the cultural and geographical range of the director's influence. The volume is a wonderful tool for scholars of Fellini, specialists of cinema studies, students and film buffs who approach Fellini's films for the first time. Any reader can enter and be guided through Fellini's complex and fascinating cinematic universe. The work offers a valuable and

interesting approach to one of the most famous Italian directors and is the ideal vehicle for celebrating the centenary of Fellini's birth.

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Suggested Citation

Brizio-Skov, Flavia. "*Fellini's Films and Commercials: From Postwar to Postmodern*, by Frank Burke." Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20, 2020, pp. 254–259, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.22.

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