

# Petronius

A Handbook

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12

*Fellini-Satyricon*

## Petronius and Film

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*When watching Fellini-Satyricon, the audience must fight as never before ... their preconception about movies having to tell them a story with a start, a development, an end; preconceptions about historical pictures; preconceptions about myself, personally, because they know that before, Fellini always tells them some story. This is not a historical picture, a Cecil B. DeMille picture. It is not even a Fellini picture, in the sense of La Strada, or Nights of Cabiria, or even La Dolce Vita. They ask me why I make it. How do I know? Because, as a little boy, in Rimini, my papa took me to my first film, and it had Roman gladiators in it? Because for thirty years I have enjoyed Petronius, and now the moment comes right? I cannot answer. (Federico Fellini, quoted in Murray 1976: 178)*

The desire for answers, and the powerful influence of our preconceptions – about antiquity, and about the cinema – combine to make the experience of watching *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) alternately frustrating, provocative, and rewarding. The Italian director's vision of ancient Rome, adapted from Petronius's *Satyricon* and yet an intensely personal creation, is a challenging film. It challenges our ideas of conventional cinematic narratives, and of a conventional cinematic ancient Rome which, for today's audiences, is more familiar from movies such as *Gladiator* (2000) than the Hollywood spectacle of DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934), though both are equally distant from the bizarre, even nightmarish image of the past in Fellini. As Fellini himself recognized, our ideas about the director himself may also affect our response to the film, though, for audiences accustomed to mainstream Hollywood produce, these preconceptions are as likely to be based on unfamiliarity with his work as they are on the familiar expectations assumed by Fellini in the above quotation.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to provide a companion for those watching *Fellini-Satyricon* that will help the viewer negotiate his or her way through its challenges (though without presuming to provide any easy answers or explanations). Much has already been written about this film, especially from a film studies perspective, and this discussion will pay attention to how *Fellini-Satyricon* works as a piece of cinema. But it will also examine the film as a reception of the ancient world – and of Petronius in particular – which might help us gain some insight into how Fellini interprets the modern world's relationship with our ancient past. The intention is not simply to list differences and similarities between Fellini and Petronius (or Fellini and other ancient sources), to applaud what the film gets “right” and to condemn its “mistakes.” Such an approach, best represented by the classicist Gilbert Highet's enquiry “Whose *Satyricon*? Petronius's or Fellini's?” (Highet 1970), has its uses, and Jon Solomon also helpfully outlines continuities between text and film (2001a: 274–81) – but it is important to go beyond straightforward comparison. Much of Fellini's film is interesting and intriguing precisely because it departs so radically from the text of the *Satyricon*, and yet it is Petronius's text that remains the springboard for Fellini's cinematic flight of fantasy, the fertile source for what is undoubtedly “one of the cinema's most provocatively individual approaches to the ancient world” (Solomon 2001a: 274).

**Fellini and the Birth of *Fellini-Satyricon***

Federico Fellini (1920–93) occupies a place in the pantheon of world cinema as one of the most revered directors of the twentieth century. Born in a northern Italian city, Rimini, he began his career as a writer, working with the leading figures of Italian filmmaking in the post-war period. At this time, Italy was a considerable force in world cinema, renowned for its confrontation of social problems in films such as Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), for which Fellini was a scriptwriter. In the 1950s, he began directing his own films, and would make over 20, including *La Strada* (1954) and *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Seen as a distinctively Italian filmmaker, preoccupied with his native Romagna and his adopted city, Rome, he soon moved away from the social concerns of neo-realism towards a more personal, subjective approach. Partly fed by his interest in psychoanalysis, his films from the sixties onwards were inspired by dreams, inner

life, and memory. With this came a desire for total control over his creations, such that often entire outdoor locations – such as Rome’s Via Veneto in *La Dolce Vita* – would be recreated inside Cinecittà studios.

The idea of filming Petronius’s *Satyricon* first came to mind in 1942, when Fellini was working for a satirical magazine and developing a project with the famous Italian actor Aldo Fabrizi, with whom he had become friendly. When the idea resurfaced in the sixties different cinematic styles were considered – perhaps even a musical, according to one account (Giacovelli 2002: 125–6). But once the project was underway, with Alberto Grimaldi as producer, it developed according to Fellini’s own unique vision. Being a strong believer in the importance of original screenplays, it was perhaps surprising that he would now turn to literary adaptation; but it was the uniquely challenging nature of this literary source – as the next section will show – that appealed to Fellini, who was at that time experiencing something of a personal and creative crisis of confidence, and wanted a project that would revive his imaginative powers (Bondanella 1988) (fig. 12.1)

Slavery to ancient sources or to academic expertise was never a guiding principle in the making of *Fellini-Satyricon*. A certain amount of research occurred during pre-production (Fellini was said to have been reading scholars such as Carcopino, Vogt, and Marmorale, and he consulted the Italian classicists Ettore Paratore and Luca Canali), and, perhaps as a result, unexpected fragments of the ancient world do emerge in the film, as we shall see. But it was not Fellini’s style to revere the academic authorities. In one account, his visit to Paratore is presented as paying mere lip-service to the Petronian authority, with Fellini and Bernardino Zapponi (his script collaborator) subdued and uneasy in his presence (Zapponi 1970: 35–6). Scholarly consultation had a role to play in shaping Fellini’s methodology, but a mostly perverse one: “*voleva conoscere bene quel che si apprestava a deformare*” (“he wanted to know well that which he was getting ready to deform”) (Giacovelli 2002: 126). This claim to know the past well may jar with some of the interpretations Fellini would later offer for the film – that it dramatizes the imperfect and incomplete state of our knowledge – but if so, it would be only the first of a number of contradictions surrounding Fellini’s concept of the film.

Filming began in November 1968, mostly inside the great studio complex in Rome, Cinecittà (where it was apparently the biggest production since William Wyler directed *Ben-Hur* there 10 years before). The 26-week shoot was completed by July, having unfolded relatively smoothly but for one potentially catastrophic obstacle – a rival *Satyricon* which had been filmed



Figure 12.1 Federico Fellini and Donyale Luna (Enotea) on the set of *Fellini-Satyricon*. (Photo: akg-images, London.)

in 1968, directed by Gian Luigi Polidoro. It was released in April 1969, but the filmmakers were soon hauled into court on charges of obscenity and corrupting minors. They received suspended sentences, and Fellini's distributors, United Artists, bought the rights to Polidoro's film for US\$1 million, in order to keep it out of circulation. It was quickly apparent that the rival project would scarcely affect Fellini's chances of success, though it did have a permanent impact on the film's title. Since Polidoro's producer had secured the rights to the title *Satyricon* in 1962, Fellini had to come up with something different. A number of alternative titles were considered (Giacovelli 2002: 130), but the final (and, as we shall see, apt) choice was *Fellini-Satyricon*.

The film was released in Italy in September 1969, premiering on the last night of the Venice Film Festival (though not as part of the competition). The rest of the world greeted the film in 1970, with the New York premiere at Madison Square Garden directly after a rock concert occupying a hallowed place in *Fellini-Satyricon* history (or mythology). In 1983, Fellini recalled the audience as an orgy of 10,000 hippies, with whom he was so fascinated, and whose culture had certainly influenced the film: "many slept, others made love ... Unforeseeably, mysteriously, in that most improbable setting, *Satyricon* seemed to have found its natural position" (quoted in Cordelli and Costantini 2004: 136). Fellini received an Academy Award nomination for Best Director, but initially *Fellini-Satyricon* met with some critical caution and relatively modest success on its wider release. The director himself had heralded the film as a journey into "unknowingness" (*sconosciutezza*), so it was no surprise that many audiences were baffled, entranced, and repulsed in equal measures by what they saw and heard. For Fellini, this was precisely the point.

### The Narrative of *Fellini-Satyricon*

As Fellini acknowledged in our opening quotation, one of the biggest challenges of *Fellini-Satyricon* is its narrative – disjointed and incoherent, it is not easy to track what is happening (cf. Slater *READING THE SATYRICA*, p. 17). The following synopsis serves as an *aide-memoire*, and as an illustration of the narrative fragmentation, with an indication of where (if at all) the film episodes relate to Petronius – this is necessarily approximate, as the ensuing discussion will make clear (cf. *INTRODUCTION*, p. 10). (The names of the characters are given as they appear in the

film – that is, Italian versions of the Latin; see Bondanella 1988: 195–7 for a longer synopsis.)

- Encolpio rages that Ascilto has stolen Gitone from him and sold him to an actor (cf. §9–10).
- Gitone appears on stage with Vernacchio, the comic actor; Encolpio forces Vernacchio to return him.
- Encolpio and Gitone walk through the seedy streets of the Suburra, a district of Rome.
- Ascilto arrives at the tenement block where Gitone and Encolpio are (cf. §11). Gitone leaves with Ascilto, and the tenement collapses.
- In an art gallery, the poet Eumolpo laments the state of society to Encolpio (cf. §83–8).
- The two men make their way to Trimalcione's dinner past a candle-lit bath.
- At the dinner, a succession of strange and marvelous dishes is brought in; there is dancing, poetry recital, and Trimalcione holds forth in front of his guests (cf. §26–70) (fig. 12.2).
- After dinner, Trimalcione conducts a mock funeral (cf. §71–8), before the story of the widow of Ephesus is staged (cf. §111–12).
- Encolpio finds himself in a barren landscape with Gitone and Encolpio; they are taken onto a ship in a chain gang.
- On board ship, Encolpio is made to fight, and then to "marry" its captain, Lica, before Lica is killed (cf. §100–10).
- In a villa, a noble couple free their slaves and children before committing suicide; Encolpio and Ascilto then arrive and cavort with the remaining slave-girl.
- In a desert landscape, a nymphomaniac is taken to the hermaphrodite oracle.
- The oracle is stolen from the temple by Encolpio and Ascilto, but dies.
- Encolpio is made to fight a minotaur at the "Festival of Mirth" in front of a crowd. When he encounters "Ariadne," he suffers from impotence (cf. §126–32).
- Now with Eumolpo again, a visit to a brothel cannot cure Encolpio's impotence and he is directed to see Enotea, a sorceress of shifting appearance. Encolpio begs for help and is cured (cf. §134–9).
- By the sea, and Ascilto and Eumolpo are dead. As Eumolpo's will is read, and his friends cannibalize his corpse, Encolpio leaves with a group of youths (cf. §140–1).



Figure 12.2 Dining at the “feast of Trimalchio”, *Fellini-Satyricon*. (Photo: akg-images, London.)

Even from the synopsis, a sense of narrative fragmentation emerges. The episodes of the film are by no means entirely unconnected; Encolpio, of course, links them all, and, especially in the opening portion, the competition for Gitone’s affections provides some motivation for the action. But any sense of narrative coherence quickly ebbs away, with sudden cuts between disparate settings jolting the viewer. The ending underscores the fragmentation, with Encolpio’s voiceover ending mid-sentence: “... and on an island covered in sweet-smelling grass, a young Greek told me that in years ...”

It is interesting and important to note that, by comparison, Fellini’s lengthy treatment of the film – the narrative outline written prior to the screenplay (Zanelli 1970a: 43–90) – is relatively coherent. A good deal of explanatory narrative and dialogue help to orientate the reader, and the connections between episodes are often made more explicit. For example, in the finished film, the narrative rupture between the dinner at Trimalchio’s and the voyage on Lica’s ship is marked; in the treatment, though, Encolpius is introduced to Lichas and his wife Tryphaena (the English translation retains the Latin names) at the dinner and converses and cavorts with them, before, as the party ends at dawn the next day, Lichas stops his chariot to tell Encolpius, “I was looking for you ... Our boat is ready to sail. Are you coming?” (Zanelli 1970a: 65) Since Lichas and Tryphaena play no part in Petronius’s Trimalchio episode, it is possible to argue that the treatment, at least, seeks to *increase* the coherence and unity of the original text rather than emphasize its fragmentation. Why this should be so is hard to say with any certainty, but we should perhaps beware of setting too much store by the relative coherence of the treatment. This kind of prose narrative is just one part of the pre-production process, and since a treatment is often part of the “pitch” – the selling of a film to a studio or producer – it might be desirable for it to be accessible and comprehensible. Elsewhere, the emphasis remains firmly on fragmentation. The screenplay (included in Zanelli 1970a: 93–274, with the editor’s notes making quite clear that this was the shooting script devised at the beginning of production, which would undergo some revisions in the final cut) outlines a thoroughly disjointed narrative, and even the treatment itself ends with “And here the story disintegrates; it splits into tiny fragments, which are however the best conclusion to this vast, incomplete mosaic; a mosaic of which we have reconstructed only a few small episodes.” (Zanelli 1970a: 90)

Therefore, it seems fairly clear that fragmentation was a guiding principle from the outset, and even if it became more and more important as filming progressed, the fact that the coherency of the treatment would be “modified on

a massive scale during the actual shooting of the film" (Bondanella 1988: 186) should not come as a surprise. The fragmentary narrative reflects both the fragmentary state of the extant *Satyricon* and, more profoundly, the fragmentary state of our knowledge of antiquity (Wyke 1997: 189). Our inability to orientate ourselves in the *Fellini-Satyricon* world is a conscious and important effect created by the film through its narrative and the visual disorientation that will be discussed in due course. We could almost wonder whether Fellini chose the *Satyricon* largely *because* of its incomplete survival. Doubtless there were other various and shifting reasons, but it does seem that the damaged state of the *Satyricon* was both attractive and a headache, and Zapponi, certainly, thought that the gaps should be widened, not bridged (1970: 34). Fellini, too, saw his relationship with Petronius as something quite different to the conventional idea of adaptation. Cinematic versions of literature are sometimes disregarded as secondary, inferior even, but Fellini was quite clear that his film was in no way to be seen as a slavish homage to a revered original. It is Petronius, but "a free adaptation of the Petronius classic," as the opening titles announce, and "a complete departure from the adjectives usually thrown around when talking about Petronius: picaresque, allusive, sarcastic, modern, spectacular" (Zapponi 1970: 34). It is also a whole lot more besides Petronius, much of it the product of Fellini's rich imagination. The director himself described the film as 80 percent Fellini and 20 percent Petronius – a rather crass statistical analysis which needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, especially given Fellini's own interest in downplaying any rival to his creative authority, but revealing, and not without some accuracy, nonetheless. The advertising tagline "Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini" also loudly declares Fellini's ownership of the film (and responsibility for creating its world) over Petronius's.

Given what has been said above, one might wonder why Fellini did not continue this declaration of ownership with the title *Fellini's Satyricon* (for anglophone release, at least; admittedly, it would never have looked this way in Italian, which does not denote possession using apostrophes). But though the origins of the title *Fellini-Satyricon* might have been rather prosaic, it still reflects interestingly on the relationship between film and text. Though the sense of the director's possession of the *Satyricon* seems less obvious, still, yoking the two together in this way may imply that this is a *Satyricon* authored by Fellini and no one else: he has in effect replaced Petronius. The running together and hyphenation of the two elements could be even more radical in its effects: it is not so much that Fellini owns the *Satyricon* now, but rather that the two are one and the same. The fantasy

world on screen is not just *by* Fellini but is, somehow, a visceral expression of his psyche. Or, on yet another reading, as Bernard Dick argues, the hyphen could be read as not conjoining but separating the two elements as adversaries: this is "Fellini confronting the *Satyricon* [...], the present confronting the past" (Dick 1981: 145), an argument that is strengthened when we note that the hyphen was not present in all releases of the film world-wide. Indeed, the original trailer intercuts images from the film with the words "Fellini" and "Satyricon" flying across the screen separately, only displaying them together at its very end. However we interpret the title, though, it is surely the complex and tangled linking of the director with his ancient source that we are meant to notice, whether the relationship is one of ownership, co-identification, antagonism, or all three.

Fellini's autonomy from Petronius is further illustrated by the range of other ancient texts he uses to feed his imagination – chosen arbitrarily, he says (Fellini 1970: 44). He mentions Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (also known as the *Metamorphoses*), Horace's *Satires*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*, but offers no clue as to what role they actually played in the film. For that, Sullivan provides the necessary source criticism, identifying a range of intertexts from the significant (similarities between Encolpio and Apuleius's Lucius, who is also tricked during a "Festival of Mirth" and coerced into copulating in public), to the less obvious, such as Juvenal's description of Roman tenements collapsing (Juv. 3.193–6), which Sullivan observes as a possible influence early in the film (Sullivan 2001). What becomes clear, from Fellini's vague comments and Sullivan's more detailed investigation, is that Fellini's use of non-Petronian material is as shifting and elusive as his use of the *Satyricon*, with neither open to easy identification. This should not matter in the slightest, for it is but another illustration of the complexities of our relationship with the past. There is no easily discernible connection between ancient and modern but rather a *mélange* of ancient texts – and images, ideas, people, events – which "Fellini invents, blends, reworks, and borrows" (Dick 1981: 151). The recital of poetry at Trimalcione's feast neatly exemplifies this: even in Petronius, Trimalchio introduces his Homeric recital with a garbled account of the story (§59), and in the film, when Trimalcione declaims his poetry, Eumolpo accuses him of stealing it from Lucretius. Behind-the-scenes accounts also reveal that the poetry actually being recited is still further from what it seems: Trimalcione and Eumolpo are not reciting ancient poetry but, respectively, Pirandello (an Italian writer and poet) and the menu from the actor's restaurant!

On the level of narrative structure and detail, Petronius's impact is only partial. Thematically, though, it can be argued that *Fellini-Satyricon* is more "Petronian" than anything else. Of course, we might not agree on what being "Petronian" means, but it does seem that the director saw in Petronius's portrait of first-century AD Rome something that resonated with his own world-view, which he might try to bring to the screen – albeit with a healthy dose of his own perspective. The question of moralizing is central here. Critics have long debated the extent to which Petronius offers a moral critique of his world in the *Satyricon* – and it should not go unnoticed that these debates sometimes emerge from the context of Petronian receptions themselves. Walsh argued that readings of Petronius as a "serious analysis of the sicknesses of Roman society" (Walsh 1996: xx) were influenced by T. S. Eliot's use of the *Satyricon* in *The Waste Land*, and that the arguments of scholars such as Bacon, Hightet, and Arrowsmith were formed "under the impulse of urban discontents," their experience of squalid (mainly American) cities encouraging them "to see in the *Satyricon* a descriptive analysis of a society choking with its own vices" (Walsh 1974: 189). It is interesting that Walsh was moved to pose the question "Was Petronius a Moralist?" in 1974, soon after the film's release. Had Fellini brought the issue of Petronius's moral stance to the fore again, and was he also reading and recreating the novel as a moral indictment of society's vices (in much the same way that modern novelists sometimes do, according to Stephen Harrison's contribution to this collection)? The evident pleasure Fellini took in recreating this vice and depravity might suggest not. Even closer to the film's release, in 1971, Zeitlin had argued that the *Satyricon* "sees only a disordered world unsupported by the rational guidance of the gods or their substitutes" (Zeitlin 1971: 677) rather than a wicked, sinful world. The Petronian world of anarchy and confusion outlined by Zeitlin, and then Walsh, seems to fit well with the amoral, rather than immoral, world of *Fellini-Satyricon*, in which irrationality and illusion are also king. Fellini himself noted the similarities between Petronius's world-view, as he understood it, and his own, seeing analogies between the novel's depiction "of a society at the height of its splendor but revealing already the signs of a progressive dissolution" and the modern world (Fellini 1970: 43). He called these analogies "disconcerting," which suggests a morally-fearful standpoint, but *Fellini-Satyricon* is not an out-and-out moralizing film. Though Fellini expressed dissatisfaction with the world around him, he was also fascinated with hippy counterculture, the "natural innocence and splendid vitality" that he saw in "Encolpius and Ascyltos, two hippy students, like any of those

hanging around today" (Fellini 1970: 44). Their amoral, "free love" antics, were not coming in for criticism; if anything, disapproval is reserved for the greedy and vulgar older generation represented by Trimalcione and Eumolpo's friends who, at the end of the film, are literally cannibalizing the dead poet. Encolpio and his new companions are celebrated for sailing away, leaving such rapacious behavior behind.

Discussion over whether the *Satyricon* was intended to be comic and light-hearted or not also shaped responses to Fellini's take on it. Though Zeitlin took a fairly serious view of the *Satyricon* and its purpose, Walsh and others see the text as essentially humorous. The classicist Erich Segal thus criticized Fellini for taking Petronius's "lustful, amoral, life-oriented" novel and making "a film that croaked *memento mori*" (remember your mortality) (Segal 1971: 56). Certainly, reviewers found the mood of the film downcast rather than uplifting: the *Corriere della Sera* called Fellini's Romans "an unhappy race searching desperately to exorcise their fear of death" (September 5, 1969), and for *Panorama*, "The atmosphere is almost always morbid, claustrophobic, and nocturnal" (September 18, 1969). Yet one of the reasons why Walsh was keen to see Petronius as comic – the emphasis on performance – persists in Fellini. The *Satyricon*'s engagement with notions of theatrical performance, particularly mime, has been discussed elsewhere in this volume (by Shelley Hales, *FREEDMEN'S CRIBS*, p. 174, and Richlin, *SEX IN THE SATYRICON*, p. 96; see also Panayotakis 1995), and Fellini too embraces this theme wholeheartedly. Important episodes are presented as staged performances, whether literally so – the opening scene in the theatre, or Encolpio's (lack of) "performance" at the Festival of Mirth – or more subtly, as with "The Widow of Ephesus." This episode appears simply to be narrated by a character (as it is narrated by Eumolpus at §111–12), its visualization presented purely for the benefit of us, the cinematic audience; but at its end, it is revealed that it has also been playing out in front of Trimalcione's dinner guests (who have enjoyed a banquet-as-performance in Fellini as much as they do in Petronius, as Shelley Hales shows elsewhere in this volume, p. 174). The theme of performance pervades the whole film, in fact. The characters continually watch each other (and us), and (are sometimes forced to) pretend to be what they are not (Encolpio as Lica's "bride," for example, or as "Theseus" fighting the Minotaur), blurring the boundaries between real and illusory (Dick 1981: 154–5; Wyke 1997: 189). For the most part, though, the effect is not so much comic as another way in which the film unnerves and destabilizes an audience.

### The Sights and Sounds of *Fellini-Satyricon*

When discussing cinematic adaptations of literary texts, it is easy to concentrate on the “literary” aspects of the film – narrative, dialogue, and so on – and to forget that cinema is also a visual (and aural) medium; and perhaps, in the case of *Fellini-Satyricon*, primarily a visual (and aural) medium. The visual dimension is absolutely key to communicating Fellini’s intentions. Though no more coherent or readily intelligible than the narrative, the images have an immediate and sometimes shocking impact, compounding the destabilizing effects of the disjointed narrative. For the film’s *mise en scène* – the overall appearance of what we see – Fellini wanted:

Lots of corridors, rooms, courtyards, alleys, stairways, and other such narrow, frightening passages. Nothing luminous, white, or shining. The clothes all of dingy, opaque colors, suggesting stone, dust, mud. Colors like black, yellow, or red, but all clouded as if by a constant rain of ashes. In the figurative sense, I shall try to effect a conglomeration of the Pompeian with the psychedelic, of Byzantine art with Pop art, of Mondrian and Klee with barbaric art. (Moravia 1970: 28)

The claustrophobia of the interior spaces and the unreality of even many exterior ones was achieved by confining much of the filming to the studios at Cinecittà. Nor is it a recognizably Roman scene – at least, it is not the “luminous, white, or shining” Rome recognizable from mainstream cinema. The mention of Pompeii also marks Fellini’s antiquity as distinct from the popular vision, which usually fixates on Rome. In one way, it indicates alignment with Petronius, whose action is assumed to play out, in part at least, on the Bay of Naples; but the narrative location is not the only reason why Fellini includes Pompeii in his eclectic vision of the past. Though a number of features of *Fellini-Satyricon* have been identified as “Pompeian” – Trimalcione’s dining-room as Pompeian *triclinium*, the baths as Pompeian *thermae*, and the graffitied walls as Pompeian city walls, to name a few examples (Dick 1981: 154 n. 7) – this is of limited usefulness for understanding Fellini. If we attempt to find sources for such features, Pompeii is bound to come to mind first, since there is nothing else that provides evidence for ancient domestic and everyday urban life quite so vividly. Moreover, Fellini himself was somewhat flippant about the site: “I never knew exactly how much my fascination and enthusiasm

were owing to the frescoes and how much to a magnificent Swedish woman who was walking in front of me” (quoted in Baxter 1993: 241). It is, rather, the imaginative importance of Pompeii that Fellini exploits when he mentions it as inspiration. Its obvious associations with death and destruction contribute to the film’s morbid atmosphere, encapsulated in one shot (in the Suburra sequence) of a still body looking simultaneously like a corpse covered in a “rain of ashes” and one of the famous plaster casts of Vesuvius’s victims. In addition, Pompeii’s status as a piece of antiquity which simultaneously seduces us with its apparent completeness, intelligibility, and immediacy, and yet requires excavation and imagination to make any sense of it, makes it an ideal reference point for Fellini’s exploration of our route to the past.

Deciding which actors should embody Petronius’s characters also became an important visual strategy for Fellini. When production began, the most unlikely names were tossed around, including “[Elizabeth] Taylor, [Richard] Burton, [Brigitte] Bardot, [Peter] O’Toole, [French actor Louis] de Funés, Jerry Lewis, [Marlon] Brando, Lee Marvin, the Beatles, the Maharishi, Lyndon Johnson and de Gaulle” (quoted in Baxter 1993: 240). Though most of this was clearly a flight of fantasy and free association, some grand names were in fact approached, including Groucho Marx and Boris Karloff (both declining). Such well-known faces – whether part of a realistic wish list or not – were appropriated as yet another destabilizing ploy: recognizable celebrity faces would offer the appearance of familiarity and accessibility, while also appearing jarringly out of place in Fellini’s bizarre ancient world. Accordingly, the alternative to this starry cast was “no one, not a known face, to increase the sense of foreignness” (quoted in Baxter 1993: 240), obscure actors who would provide “abstract and unnerving masks” (Zanelli 1970b: 11). Although some of the eventual cast were well known (for example, Alain Cuny, playing the ship’s captain, Lica), the main actors were not at all prominent in film and, in the case of Max Born (Gitone), plucked from a street corner in London.

Though the main protagonists’ appearance is relatively normal, allowing some audience identification with them, the extensive cast of supporting characters sport deliberately peculiar and unsettling appearances, so as to disorientate and bemuse the audience (fig. 12.3). In the walk through the Suburra, Encolpio and Gitone pass an array of bizarre characters encompassing every kind of human appearance and behavior: old, young, obese, crippled, dwarves, all confronting the audience (internal and external) with odd gestures and mannerisms, such as the flickering tongues of the female





Figure 12.3 Guests at the “feast of Trimalchio”, *Fellini-Satyricon*. (Photo: ak-images, London.)

characters, or the man squatting to defecate in a corner. Added to this are the characters around which later episodes pivot, many marked out by extremity or perversity: the nymphomaniac encountered in a desert whose lust has turned her into a slaving, snarling woman chained to a cart; or the sacred hermaphrodite Sibyl, a fragile albino killed by the heat of the sun. Such use of grotesque characters or “freaks” is a recognized hallmark of a Fellini film, a way of illustrating his belief that life is “mysterious and ineffable” by “defamiliarizing the material presented and [...] exceeding boundaries” (Stubbs 1993: 62). But it gains especial force in this film, suggesting that our ancient past is even more mysterious and ineffable than the present. In fact, ineffability produces a cinematic device of its own here, since the dialogue throughout the film, though in Italian, is made strange by deliberately out-of-sync dubbing. The profound feeling of dislocation that this induces is one of the most direct ways in which *Fellini-Satyricon* explores the impossibility of the past speaking directly to us. (One can only imagine how much more pronounced this effect would have been if Fellini had stuck

with his original plan of using a harsh Latin for the dialogue.) In addition, the disturbing soundscape is enhanced by the film’s score, which uses a variety of discordant sounds and musical styles – mixing synthesized music with, among others, fragments of Balinese and African music, and is far removed from the conventional grand score of the Hollywood ancient world (Solomon 2001b; cf. Rimell, *LETTING THE PAGE RUN ON*, on the use of sound in the *Satyricon*).

Among the curious, sometimes overtly hallucinatory qualities of *Fellini-Satyricon*’s visuals, one particular motif takes center-stage in determining audience response to the film. The image of the fragment is readily understood as an effective way of representing the loss and inaccessibility of the past, and we have already seen how the film’s narrative uses the fragment as an organizing principle to just that effect. Visually, too, the recurrence of fragments – in the fabric of the city and its people – depicts Fellini’s ancient world as one that is as broken, disjointed, and as ruined as its narrative. A piece of a giant sculptural head is drawn along by horses and the gallery scene shows its art in pieces. The towering tenement block in the Suburra crumbles into a ruin, and the protagonists, on the way to Trimalchio’s, pass by broken blocks of monumental masonry that spell out “Trimalchio”.

Most striking is Fellini’s use of the fresco, perhaps today’s most fragile remnant of ancient visual culture, so quickly does it fragment and fade. Besides the presentation of fragmented paintings in the art gallery, the film itself is conceived of as a series of frescoes. The use of Cinemascope (a filming method with a flattened, elongated frame and a relatively shallow depth of field) and sequences of long tracking shots help to achieve this effect. The Suburra scene is by far the best example, as the camera tracks Encolpio and Gitone walking along, rather than through, the city, passing a series of weird and wonderful sights that it allows us to look at but never to enter into the scene. Fellini’s characters themselves can become part of the fresco, though. A number of the extras have make-up resembling paint peeling from a wall (wonderfully evoking Petronius’s description of the *cinaedus* – “a man who likes to be sexually penetrated” – with flaking make-up, so “that you would have thought that a wall was flaking after being damaged by rain,” §23.5, trans. Walsh 1996), and the characters often appear against blank expanses of sky or wall (Dick 1981: 146). The metaphor is strikingly concluded at the end of the film, where the main characters are depicted as painted images on a crumbling wall on a seashore. “The solid wall which opened the film has become fissured and, with it, unity and wholeness on every level – from the narrative to the historical to the individual” (Burke 1989: 44).

### “The Meaning should Become Apparent Only at the End” (Fellini)

Since Fellini uses the fragment so effectively as a visual and narrative symbol of antiquity’s condition today, it is fitting that he should also use archaeology as a metaphor to help explain how, through film, we might encounter that fragmentary past and attempt to reconstruct it. Fellini described his adaptation of Petronius as having been achieved:

[...] not through the fruit of a bookish, scholastic documentation, a literal fidelity to the text, but rather in the way an archaeologist reconstructs something alluding to the form of an amphora or a statue from a few potsherds. Our film, through the fragmentary recurrence of its episodes, should restore the image of a vanished world without completing it [...]. The film should suggest the idea of something disinterred: the images should evoke the texture of ashes, earth and dust. (Fellini 1970: 45)

*Fellini-Satyricon*, the director claims, sets out to gather pieces of our knowledge of the past and present them in an approximately coherent way, but it does not claim that their original coherence can ever be regained, just as archaeology cannot recover complete and pristine artifacts. Moreover, these pieces are invested with new “meanings and resonances” because of their fragmentary state: “Are not the ruins of a temple more fascinating than the temple itself?” asks Fellini (Zanelli 1970b: 4). This is one way of explaining the film’s strategy, but it is perhaps not as effective as it might be – certainly, most archaeologists would not settle for seeing their work as allusive (or illusory) – and so Fellini turned to additional frames of reference. The film was once memorably described as “science-fiction of the past,” in order to suggest that the Romans are as alien and distant as Martians. Another recurring image was that of the dream. Fellini “tried first of all,” he said, “to eliminate what is generally called history [...], the idea that the ancient world “actually” existed [...], the ancient world perhaps never existed; but there’s no doubt that we have dreamt it” (Moravia 1970: 26). Antiquity is like a dream that, upon waking, we half remember, that remains faintly present throughout the day but slips our grasp whenever we try to confront it directly; or even a dream that is remembered clearly, but whose meaning escapes us. Without being able to fully remember or understand it, we cannot completely recognize or engage with antiquity either (Moravia 1978: 163).

It can be helpful to see these metaphors as, in a sense, “keys” to the film, providing some insight into why Fellini consciously made it so impenetrable. But it is also worth noting the doubtful responses of some film critics who decided that *Fellini-Satyricon* was still an unsuccessful presentation of the past and our relationship with it, despite – or perhaps because of – Fellini’s attempts to explain what he was doing. The director claimed that “the film demands a detached, cold and impassive approach” (quoted in Murray 1976: 182; see also Fellini 1970: 46), that he wanted to observe the Roman world in the same way that one might dispassionately observe the “habitat of trout” (Zanelli 1970b: 9), once again emphasizing antiquity’s distance. But he admitted that this attempted objectivity was “extremely difficult” for him, and many critics ultimately judged it a failed attempt, since an aloof, remote standpoint was so at odds with Fellini’s usual personal approach (Zanelli 1970b: 10; Murray 1976: 182–4). The film’s tagline has renewed importance for this argument: “Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini” discredits the idea of objective observation, and significantly introduces Christianity as a force to be reckoned with. Though Petronius’s temporal setting is, of course, not “BC,” it is a world in which (apparently) Christianity does not figure, and Fellini tries to reflect this on film, to “forget (*dimenticare*) 2000 years of Catholicism” (Cordelli and Costantini 2004: 141). But Segal was just one critic who thought Fellini unable to forget: “Fellini seeks Rome in Rome and cannot find it, for his emotional archaeology dares not dig below the floor of Vatican City” (Segal 1971: 57). Further problems were raised with Fellini’s repeated claims that analogies could be found between ancient and modern, apparently contradicting his assertions of the incomprehensible nature of that past. It is fair to ask how we are meant to “recognise all the principal characters in the drama,” as Fellini claimed we can (1970: 44), if we are not meant to understand that past: without comprehension, is recognition not impossible? But while some found fault with the director for this, others praised him for communicating the “supreme paradox” of antiquity as simultaneously alien *and* timeless (Dick 1981: 148).

In the final reckoning, then, Fellini’s attempts to make sense of his film can seem as confusing as the film itself. But this in itself is a useful illustration of how *Fellini-Satyricon* works as a reception of Petronius and of the ancient world more generally. Fellini hoped (or at least appeared to hope) that by assuming an objective stance, turning his lens onto a distant and incomprehensible ancient world, he would be able to “deconsecrate the myth of antiquity which has hitherto prevailed and still prevails in Western

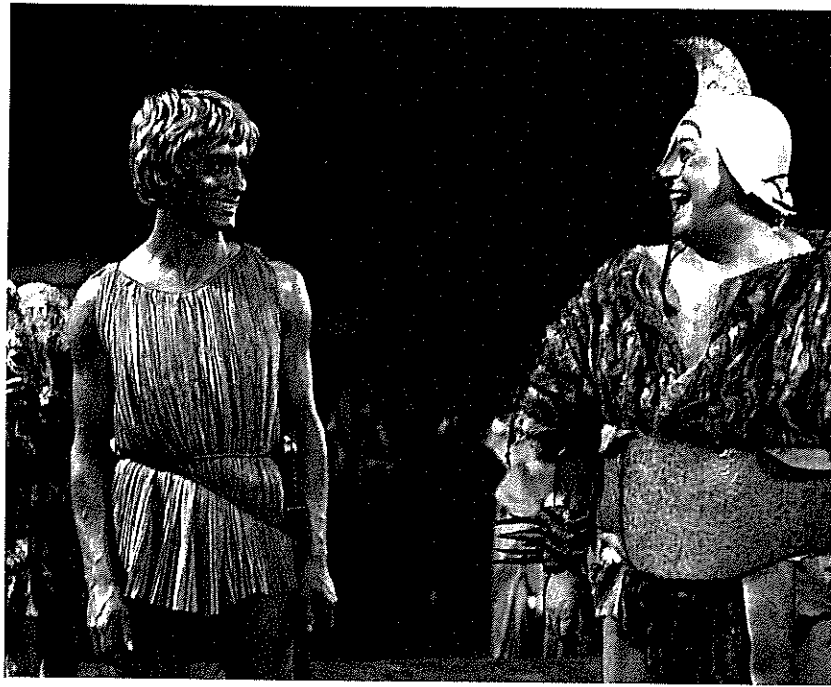


Figure 12.4 Martin Potter (Encolpio) and Fanfulla (Vernacchio), *Fellini-Satyricon*. (Photo: P.E.A./Artistes Associés/The Kobal Collection.)

culture” (Moravia 1970: 27; see also Wyke 1997: 191; Solomon 2001a: 280). As he remarked to Zanelli, “Our vision of the Roman world has been distorted by text books – we are the victims of aesthetic judgments” (Zanelli 1970b: 8), and so the film radically departed from the conventions of representing ancient Rome enshrined in the Hollywood epics of the fifties and sixties. But while *Fellini-Satyricon* might swerve away from the conventions of “the classical tradition,” it is at the same time adding another, provocative layer to the mass of Petronian receptions. As Dick suggests, “Petronius’s *Satyricon* is like the graffiti-covered wall that opens the film; the work is so overlaid with conjecture [...] and so obscured by critical debate [...] that its visual equivalent would be a marked-up wall” (1981: 146). Though *Fellini-Satyricon* strives, on one level, to remove that graffiti, to offer us a startling new vision of Petronius – and the ancient past – it is also, inescapably, itself another mark on that wall.

### Further Reading

A good deal of scholarship in recent years has concerned itself with the ancient world on film: though the focus has tended to be on Hollywood films, Solomon (2001a) and Wyke (1997) each provide brief but helpful overviews of *Fellini-Satyricon*; Sullivan’s contribution (2001) to *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* is also recommended reading. For detailed accounts of Fellini and his films one must look to the work of film scholars such as Bondanella (1988 and 1992); Baxter (1993) and Kezich (2006) are both useful scholarly biographies of the director.

It is unfortunate that the most useful contemporary account of the film (Zanelli 1970a) is out of print and not easy to come by, but the voices of Fellini and others who were closely involved in the making of film are preserved in the works mentioned above; his interview with Alberto Moravia (1970) is thought-provoking, and inspires some interesting ideas in Moravia’s later discussion of the film (1978). Cordelli and Costantini’s Italian anthology of interviews with Fellini (2004) also contains much of interest; Costantini (1997) is an English version.

Newcomers to the field of classical receptions who may wish to explore further the ways in which the modern world confronts and responds to antiquity should consult Hardwick (2003). Finally, for further viewing, *Fellini’s Roma* (1972) is a fascinating counterpart to *Fellini-Satyricon*, a cinematic portrait of Fellini’s city which draws on *Fellini-Satyricon*’s themes, but which finds still new ways to explore and represent the presence – or absence – of the ancient world.