

## FELLINI AND POPULAR MUSIC

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The purpose of this essay is to highlight, through some examples, a peculiar aspect of Fellini's relationship with music, namely the director's attitude towards popular music, which plays a particularly relevant and original role in his films. In my opinion, this is a topic that goes beyond that of the rightly celebrated collaborations between the director and his composers, and deserves to be studied apart from the Fellini-Rota or Fellini-Piovani relationships, as it reflects the Italian filmmaker's idea of art in an exemplary way. To narrow down the field of analysis, I will focus on the circumstances in which Fellini inserts in his movies the popular music of his time<sup>1</sup> and its classical counterpart, limiting my investigation to three works in which the presence of popular genres appears to be more significant: *Nights of Cabiria*, *La Dolce Vita* and *The Voice of the Moon*. From *Cabiria* to *The Voice of the Moon*, Fellini's testament, thirty-three years elapse, some shifts occur, yet these constant motives still remain.

First of all, it would be appropriate to define what is meant by popular music, however, an attempt to establish boundaries would somehow contradict the conclusions to the ideas contained in these pages. In fact, it is not always possible – or rather: it is not always correct – to make strict distinctions between art music and popular music, and Nino Rota himself

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<sup>1</sup> I mean the popular music which was popular in the years when the movies were shot. In fact, I will focus especially on North and South American popular music (mambo, rock, pop), besides several other kinds of popular music featured in Fellini's films, such as Italian and European popular and folk music (*La Titina*, Fucik's march, the *Bersaglieri* fanfare, marching bands, devotional music, etc.).

is a brilliant example of how these categories can always be contaminated<sup>2</sup>. For both Rota and Fellini – two artists who seem to work in a symbiosis in which they influence each other – the dichotomy art music-popular music continually appears and disappears.

In Fellini's films, the presence of music is continuous. In *La Dolce Vita*, for example, it pervades almost every scene. Emilio Sala has counted 67 musical pieces in this film, and written about the director's "sound obsession"<sup>3</sup>. "In an almost three-hour movie – remarks Maurizio Corbella – the average pause between any two pieces of music lasts only about three minutes"<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, music was truly an obsession for the Maestro:

How mysterious music is for me ... I am fascinated and afraid of it, so much so that my anxieties have become a legend in restaurants, as soon as I see itinerant players coming towards me, as if they had a machine gun instead of a guitar or an accordion ... [...] it would take a psychoanalyst of genius to try to identify what it is that attacks me in such a way that I prefer to escape it. There are four or five melodies, always the same, that I used to hear as

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<sup>2</sup> I will not deal here with Nino Rota's production imitating commercial song – there are examples of this in Fellini's own films (*Bevete più latte* in *Le tentazioni del Dottor Antonio*, an episode of *Boccaccio 70*, to mention one). The "light" vocation of this extremely sophisticated composer is however evident: just think of the *The Godfather's* love theme, that goes beyond the dimension of a soundtrack to become a classic of international song.

<sup>3</sup> Emilio Sala, *Ossessione sonora, mimetismo e familiarità perturbata nelle musiche di Nino Rota per La dolce vita di Fellini*, AAM – TAC Arts and Artifacts in Movies: Technology, Aesthetics, Communication, 7 (2010), pp. 127–40.

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Corbella, *Notes for a Dramaturgy of Sound in Fellini's Cinema: The Electroacoustic Sound Library of the 1960s* in "Music and the Moving Image", Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2011), pp. 14–30. [https://www.academia.edu/1807192/Notes\\_for\\_a\\_Dramaturgy\\_of\\_Sound\\_in\\_Fellinis\\_Cinema\\_The\\_Electroacoustic\\_Sound\\_Library\\_of\\_the\\_1960s](https://www.academia.edu/1807192/Notes_for_a_Dramaturgy_of_Sound_in_Fellinis_Cinema_The_Electroacoustic_Sound_Library_of_the_1960s). Some remarks on this matter can be also found in: Fabio Rossi, *La partitura acustica della Dolce vita: dalle parole al rumore*, in *Mezzo secolo di Dolce Vita*, edited by Vittorio Boarini and Tullio Kezich, Bologna-Rimini, Edizioni Cineteca di Bologna-Fondazione Federico Fellini, 2009, pp. 129–139 (the text is both in Italian and in English).

a kid: the *Entrance of the Gladiators* at the circus, *La Titina* [*Je cherche après Titine*] and the rumba, which were three traumatizing motifs<sup>5</sup>...

But Fellini's musical obsession is not only expressed in the great sound density of *La Dolce Vita*. It had previously been a distinctive feature of *Nights of Cabiria*, the first of the three films that I would now like to focus on.

### **NIGHTS OF CABIRIA: A MAMBO ON THE STREET, A MAMBO IN THE NIGHTCLUB AND A PICNIC WITH NO ROCK AND ROLL**

The sound-related aspect of the film with Giulietta Masina in the main role of the prostitute has attracted various scholars' attention since its release. In a publication from 1957<sup>6</sup>, Lino Del Fra dedicates a few pages to *Cabiria*'s music, identifying five themes in the movie soundtrack, which are repeated throughout the film in different guises. The author reports a statement by Rota, according to which the protagonist's musical motifs are conceived "to substantially affect the structure of the story"<sup>7</sup>, confirming what will later be the thesis of a brilliant and profound essay by Claudia Gorbman: "music is, in fact, *the* subject of the film"<sup>8</sup>. The scholar speaks of four recurring melodies ("the fifth is silence", she writes), however also noting the presence of "a few pieces of music occurring only once, such as on two occasions over a radio, two songs played by a nightclub orchestra, music performed

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<sup>5</sup> The statement is taken from a radio broadcast aired on RaiStereoDue on 25 October 1990, during which Fellini talked about music with the singer-songwriter Lucio Dalla. A recording can be found at this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5G-ZeAFUa7To> (accessed 24.03.2021) and a partial transcription can be found here: <https://www.rockit.it/articolo/fellini-dalla-conversazioni-radio> [accessed 24.03.2021]. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Notti di Cabiria di Federico Fellini*, a cura di L. Del Fra, Cappelli Editore, Bologna 1957.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201–202.

<sup>8</sup> C. Gorbman, *Music as Salvation. Notes on Fellini and Rota*, "Film Quarterly", Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 1974–1975), p. 17. Gorbman surely wasn't acquainted with the book by Del Fra.

at a variety show<sup>9</sup>, and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony<sup>10</sup>". But to these music pieces we must add three devotional folksongs (*Canto del pellegrino, Mira il tuo popolo, È l'ora che pia*). Thus, Nino Rota's themes continuously intertwine with each other and with other occasional music. If we also consider "the already tight interweaving of dialogues and ambient noises [...] the overall result appears chaotic indeed", claims Sergio Miceli<sup>11</sup>.

We will return to the significance of this chaos later on. In order to reconstruct Fellini's relationship with lowbrow music, for the moment I would first like to focus exclusively on some moments of the film – but they are not the only ones – in which we find the popular music of the period (even if, in this case, it is not pre-existing music, but a score specially written by Rota). Popular music at the time of *Cabiria* was gaining some interest among Italian intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini, who collaborated to the screenplay for this movie. Generally, it is assumed that Pasolini's contribution is circumscribed to the drafting of the dialogues in *romanesco* dialect, but the poet's input appears much wider<sup>12</sup>. Actually, Pasolini may have influenced the presence of popular music in the film, but the reverse may also be true. When in 1956, in "Avanguardia", a magazine directed by Gianni Rodari, the question appeared why Italian song lyrics could not have greater "dignity" (sic!), the poet replied: "I believe that I would be interested and amused to apply verses to beautiful music, be it tango or samba<sup>13</sup>". In *Nights of Cabiria*

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<sup>9</sup> Sergio Miceli lists the music pieces played in the theatre: *In a Persian Market* by William Ketelbey, the *Entrance of the Gladiators* by Julius Fucik, the *Song of the Volga Boatmen*, and *Die lustige Vittoe waltz* by Franz Lehár. See S. Miceli, *Musica e cinema nella cultura del Novecento*, Sansoni, Firenze 2000, p. 427.

<sup>10</sup> C. Gorbman, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> S. Miceli, op. cit., p. 427.

<sup>12</sup> C. Romanelli, *Pasolini collaboratore di Fellini. Analisi del contributo dato da Pier Paolo Pasolini alla scrittura de Le notti di Cabiria*, "The Italianist" Volume 35, 2015, Issue 2, pp. 212–233. Concerning the presence of the music in this movie, it might be interesting to note that Pasolini did not like the idea of music and dance in the scene at the Passeggiata Archeologica (see Romanelli, p. 220).

<sup>13</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Rinnoviamo i canzonieri!*, *Le parole dei poeti. Una proposta di "Avanguardia" per la maggiore dignità della canzone italiana. – Il parere di Pier Paolo Pasolini, Mario Socrate, Nino Oliviero*, "Avanguardia", IV, n. 14, 1 aprile 1956 now in Pasolini, *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, ed. W. Siti, S. De Laude, Mondadori, Milano

Fellini's "magical" element adds to Pasolini's realist attitude<sup>14</sup>, creating a series of ambiguities between fiction and reality. In this game, music plays a fundamental role, since, even through various slips between the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels, it creates a further artifice, "a squared artifice"<sup>15</sup>.

Let's retrace the most significant moments of the relationship between the character played by Masina and music. After the first scene, without music, in which her boyfriend steals her money and throws her into the river, we see the protagonist at home seeking consolation by listening to light music on the radio. Later, we find her on the *Passeggiata Archeologica*, near the Baths of Caracalla. Prostitutes, clients, pimps, various people, all around the new car of one of them. Cabiria joins the group. We hear a mambo, whose appearance is underlined by a scream of the protagonist. The script tells us that the music comes from the small car radio, but the mixing of the sound planes here does not help to identify the source (as also noted by Gorbman, "the theme on the sound track sounds too loud and too clear to be coming from the car's meager loud speaker"<sup>16</sup>). A young man (who

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1999, II, pp. 2725–2726. On Pasolini and the song see also: Umberto Fiori, *I poeti italiani e la canzone*, "Musica/Realtà" n. 59, luglio 1999, pp. 97–113.

<sup>14</sup> Pasolini was "among the first Italian-language authors to re-evaluate popular heritage as an artistic-cultural phenomenon on par with so-called "high" literature" (S. Ferrari, *Pier Paolo Pasolini and the medium of song: Texts written for Laura Betti for the Giro a vuoto show*, "Modern Italy" volume 17, issue 3, 2012, p. 325). In 1955, he published *Canzoniere Italiano*, an anthology of folk poetry, while his screenplay for *La Nebbiosa*, written in 1959, was an insight in the world and music of teddy boys from Milan. Shortly thereafter, Pasolini and other intellectuals such as Franco Fortini, Alberto Moravia, Alberto Arbasino and Ennio Flaiano (co-author of Fellini's screenplays from 1950 to 1965), would compose the lyrics of some songs for Laura Betti. Pasolini contributed with three songs in *romanesco*, the protagonist of which is always a prostitute.

<sup>15</sup> S. Miceli, op. cit., p. 426.

<sup>16</sup> As explained by Thomas Van Order, this is an example of subjective sound, something that Fellini began to experiment with in *La strada*. In the scene at *Passeggiata Archeologica* "we do not hear the physical translation of the sound waves that Cabiria hears through a precise reproduction of point of audition sound; rather, we hear a subjective reproduction of the protagonist's experience of sound". We are hearing the entire scene from Cabiria's point of audition, she is closer to the car, hence the music

defines himself as “*er mejo tacco de Roma*”, the best dancer in Rome) joins Cabiria in the dance, but the performance is interrupted when she starts to fight with another prostitute, Matilde, whose insults have been continuously audible throughout the scene. In the next scene, Cabiria is taken to the elegant Via Veneto area. Here, near the Rivoli cinema, “she is attracted by a syncopated music that comes out, suffocated by a small glass door, which Cabiria had not noticed. She stops, listens<sup>17</sup>”. Music is therefore still the origin of Cabiria’s next adventure: the famous actor Alberto Lazzari (Amedeo Nazzari) will come out of a nightclub. And the music will still be crucial in two scenes with Masina and Nazzari. In the first, Cabiria finds herself again dancing a mambo, announced by the orchestra leader as “mambo number 26” – this time in an elegant nightclub in the company of the famous actor. The rhythm is the same, but the environment is completely different, and Cabiria’s uninhibited dance appears out of place in this context. Here and in the following scene, Cabiria’s identification with popular music is reinforced through contrast: at the nightclub, the rich attendants look at her dancing with some indulgence; later, at Lazzari’s residence, when he puts on the turntable Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (and declaims Shakespeare), music itself underlines the distance between the prostitute and the actor.

The actor seems enraptured by the music; then he asks Cabiria.

ACTOR: *Do you like it?..*

Cabiria, who was listening in awe, still tries to maintain an aloof tone, as if in defense.

CABIRIA: *I don’t know much of this stuff...*

The actor explains, with benevolent condescension.

ACTOR: *Beethoven... the Fifth...*

Then, after a moment, he adds:

*It’s my passion...*

And, as if dragged by poetic inspiration, he gets up to sit on the bed and begins to declaim a poem by Shakespeare in English, following the rhythm of the music.

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is louder (T. Van Order, *Listening to Fellini: Music and Meaning in Black and White*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Cranbury 2009, p. 92).

<sup>17</sup> *Le Notti di Cabiria*, op. cit. p. 93.

Another important moment is the scene of the picnic during which a drunk Cabiria screams to her companions the disappointment for their lack of grace after the visit to the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Divino Amore. Gorbman considers this scene as pivotal and emphasizes its parallelism with the final sequence: both contain the same theme, played by the same instruments. But the performance in the final scene is “harmonically simpler” and, according to Gorbman, it terminates Cabiria’s quest: “it is salvation<sup>18</sup>”. In the picnic scene, initially music appears as extra-diegetic, then we see that on the screen, among the characters, in the background, there are two boys playing guitar and accordion, while a third one is beating the rhythm on a stool. They are playing all the film’s themes. At some point, their presence is further emphasized by the fact that one of the prostitutes’ companions addresses them directly, saying: “This music is boring! Play some rock and roll!<sup>19</sup>” Therefore, the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic music is here broken down at a further level, the “squared artifice” mentioned earlier. In the picnic scene, we initially hear music that could be the movie soundtrack, and this is a first level of artifice; on a second level, we see that the musicians are on the stage and the music is not external; on a third level, a character tries to interact with the musicians by asking them to change the music. This game of ambiguity can be found in other moments of the film and reaches its apotheosis in the finale, where the mechanism of the first two levels is similar: first we hear the music, then we see that it is played by the characters of the film. In the case of the last scene, the third level occurs when the protagonist looks directly into the camera towards us spectators. It seems significant to me that in the picnic scene, rock is the music evoked to break the wall, even if eventually the players keep playing what they were playing before. I will return to this idea in the conclusions of the present essay.

In all these scenes, we can see not only that music “drives” Cabiria in many different circumstances, but also that she identifies with the popular music of her time. This is one of the conclusions reached by Gorbman<sup>20</sup>,

<sup>18</sup> C. Gorbman, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> This line does not occur in the screenplay published by Del Fra.

<sup>20</sup> C. Gorbman, op. cit., p. 20.

even though it was already highlighted by Lino Del Fra after an interview with Rota:

In the soundtrack of the film the *ballabili* prevail. The Neapolitan song, the mambo and, above all, the 1920s rhythm aim to reflect, with their “popular” nature, a character like Cabiria, who has been deeply immersed in this kind of taste. The *ballabili* – says Rota – are as simple as all desires dreamed of, they use the elementary language of the heart, they represent the testimony of what we do, they speak directly to our lost condition ... Too bad – concludes Rota – these are not my words. I’m quoting from Auden. However, I wanted to look at some of the motifs from the movie in this way<sup>21</sup>.

## **DOLCE VITA AND ROCK AND ROLL**

While for *Nights of Cabiria* Nino Rota wrote pieces imitating popular music or re-elaborated already existing songs, in *La Dolce Vita* Fellini left some space for the popular music of the time. In the soundtrack there are recurrent popular tunes of the 1950s, such as the instrumental *Patricia* by Perez Prado (again, a mambo) or the hugely famous song *Arrivederci Roma*. The soundtrack is divided between Rota’s music – including pieces in the tradition of most “serious” music, as in the opening credits – and “consumer music of the most banal sort, divided [...] between ambient connotation and mere spectator entertainment<sup>22</sup>”. Furthermore, in this film there is again a scene in which classical music has a particular function, namely that of introducing to us the character of Steiner (Alain Cuny), while he is playing on the organ the Toccata and Fugue in D minor BWV 565 by Johann Sebastian Bach. There could not have been a more banal choice, and Miceli reports the chorus of criticisms that it aroused, however, closing with a reflection: “it is the global choices – ‘high’ and ‘low’ – in *La dolce vita* that speak of an artistic nature whose expressive egocentrism acts as an uncritical element in a particular field looking for strong external suggestions, regardless of the musical genre touched<sup>23</sup>”. Actually, Fellini moves inside a popular paradigm and remains

<sup>21</sup> *Le Notti di Cabiria*, op. cit., pp. 202–203. The quotation is from Auden’s *In time of War*, sonet XXII.

<sup>22</sup> S. Miceli, op. cit., p. 428.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.



popular-oriented even when he deals with classical music. Scholars like Miceli may be disappointed with his choices, because from a high-brow perspective Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in *Cabiria*, Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor and – three decades later – Johann Strauss's *The Blue Danube* in *The Voice of the Moon* are the most predictable solutions for the respective scenes and may look facile; nonetheless, from a middle-brow perspective they are just avatars of classical music. In fact, the choice of the Bach piece is just as banal as that of the two already mentioned great hits of the mid-1950s, *Patricia* and *Arrivederci Roma*, and I'm not sure whether Fellini did choose these pieces to bring “that Italian look so appreciated by the US market, towards which the production of *La Dolce Vita* had many ambitions<sup>24</sup>”. Still, apart from this, the function of the character played by Alain Cuny, who unexpectedly kills his children and then commits suicide, is to highlight the idea that the answer to moral and cultural chaos will not be found in the “classical” order of the highbrow culture that Steiner symbolizes.

Let's focus only on one scene from this film, the one of the party, attended mainly by Americans, to which Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) accompanies Sylvia (Anita Ekberg). Like in the picnic scene in *Nights of Cabiria*, the characters ask for a rock and roll to be played. This time the request is granted: the singer Adriano is called on the scene and immediately strikes up *Ready Teddy*, but with invented words. The scene mirrors that of the mambo at the *Passeggiata Archeologica* in *Cabiria*, following the same mechanism: popular music, evoked by the characters, is transformed into a dance that unblocks a static situation. In *Nights of Cabiria*, it ends with the brawl between Cabiria and the other prostitute; in *La Dolce Vita*, with a wild dance, which triggers the quarrel between Sylvia and her partner Robert (Lex Barker). However, more generally, Adriano appears as a lively popular response to a weary and false old world. At the time of the film, the singer Adriano Celentano, who plays himself here, was the rising star of Italian popular music. According to Celentano's wife, Claudia Mori, Fellini was fascinated by that young man “perhaps because he sensed that he was the representation of how much the society was changing. His *La Dolce Vita*

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 434–435.

pointed out to us what kind of society we were living in: but young people preserved the hope of how it should change<sup>25</sup>". In the opinion of a Spanish journalist, Quico Alsedo, in this film "rock is a baby in the arms of a wiser man, Fellini. A drop of innocence in seas of dissatisfaction<sup>26</sup>".

### **THE VOICE OF THE MOON: STRAUSS AT THE RAVE**

In Fellini's last film, *The Voice of the Moon* (1990), the reflection on the sounds that surround us remains linked to what the director had expressed in his previous films, however, the auditory theme is brought to the fore. The sound, in all its nuances and variations, from silence to noise, is the leitmotiv of the film, from the title to the final sentence ("if we all created more silence, maybe we'd able to understand something"). The first character who tells his story, the oboist, says that "music should be prohibited by law", once again underlining the director's autobiographical sound obsession, according to which music can be treated like noise. "The spectator – writes Matteo Martelli – is faced with multiple levels of noise: sound as attraction, as mystery (the voice of the wells, the soundtrack of the countryside and, in part, the voice of the moon); then we have another level of urban sounds, or sounds of the contemporary world, which invariably create an obstacle, a cognitive block (also witnessed by the many and very noisy road works, or by the crowd); and, finally, noise as absence: the empty room of Salvini's house, the room of inner ghosts and demons and, perhaps, the silence evoked by the last line of the film<sup>27</sup>".

Amidst all this, there is the long sequence of the disco, which, with a spectacular solution, appears all of a sudden. In the middle of a hitherto silent and deserted countryside, two huge mirror-walls slide open in front of the two protagonists – the meek and candid Salvini (Roberto Benigni) and the "prefect" Gonnella (Paolo Villaggio), hateful and obsessed with

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<sup>25</sup> [molleggiato], *Il centenario di Federico Fellini – Quando Celentano apparve ne La dolce vita*, <https://www.acfans.it/blog/articoli/il-centenario-di-federico-fellini-quando-celentano-apparve-ne-la-dolce-vita-video/> [accessed 25.03.2021]

<sup>26</sup> Q. Alsedo, *Celentano y Fellini, el rock y la inocencia*, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/11/14/rockandblog/1226657194.html> [accessed 25.03.2021]

<sup>27</sup> M. Martelli, *I rumori di fondo. Alterità e forme di conoscenza da Il poema dei lunatici a La voce della luna*, "Romanica Wratislaviensis" 60, 2013, p. 120.

a persecution complex –, letting them into an environment full of young people dancing to the rhythm of Michael Jackson's *The way you make me feel*. Salvini joins a group of girls, finding an euphoria in dance and female company. Meanwhile, Gonnella enters the DJ booth and, taking the microphone, shouts:

Barbarians! Destroyers! Even music you are killing! Drums of Hell! Scrap metal! Singers of death! Silence! Be silent!

After being carried out, he says:

What can you know of it? Have you ever heard the sound of a violin? No, because if you had listened to the voices of violins as we heard them, now you would be standing in silence and wouldn't have the impudence to believe you are dancing. Dance is an embroidery, it is a flight, it is a glimpse of harmony from the stars, it is a declaration of love. Dance is a hymn to life.

Then the Michael Jackson's music stops, and in the silence the "Duchess of Alba" (Lorose Keller), an old flame of Gonnella's, appears. The man bows, inviting her to dance. A few sounds on a celeste introduce *The Blue Danube* waltz by Johann Strauss II, in the orchestral version. In this dreamlike episode, the couple dances in front of the astonished and silent crowd of the young disco attendants, who eventually cheer Gonnella and the lady, but very quickly move towards them and cover them, while Strauss's waltz is once again replaced by Michael Jackson's music.

The scene underlines the contrast between the two main characters of the film through their opposite reactions to popular music. As it happened in *Nights of Cabiria* in the scene at Lazzari's house, classical music and popular music reflect the opposite personalities of two characters who, at some point, find themselves close to each other. This time Fellini's message could appear conservative, and popular music could be intended as a part of those contemporary world sounds that create the "cognitive block" mentioned by Martelli. The final words on silence, pronounced by Salvini, seem to hint at this. But rather than disapproving popular music itself, it feels like Fellini is criticizing – in line with what he did in his last films, since *Orchestra Rehearsal* (1978) – the masses, with which he contrasts the relationality of the two individuals dancing. Therefore, not even in this film is Fellini's relationship with music is dualistic (classical versus popular).

It is not a question of genre: for Fellini no music is noise, or any music is noise – it depends on the context and characters. It is true that Salvini hopes for silence in the finale, still it was him who, shortly before, was finding comfort in Michael Jackson’s popular music, a bit like Cabiria did before, while she was listening to songs on the radio or dancing the mambo. On the other hand, by dancing Johann Strauss’s waltz, Gonnella shows us the distance, the difference between that music, that world, and the music and the world around us. In Millicent Marcus’ interpretation is protest “offers the more obvious indictment of postmodernism in its failure to acknowledge a hierarchy of culture<sup>28</sup>”. But this is the position of a character, Gonnella, who is not able to reconcile what he sees as two opposite poles – a character entirely built on the opposition between himself and the others. Surely he also embodies Fellini’s nostalgia for the old times: from this perspective the character played by Paolo Villaggio is Marcello from *La Dolce Vita* thirty years later, now completely estranged from current mass culture.

## CONCLUSIONS

Music also contains some sort of warning, in its perfect laws, evoked and expressed. With these subtle laws, it alludes to a kingdom that you cannot inhabit, but it also seems to me that it has something moralistic, that wants to admonish us. Which recalls a heavenly, perfect world. I want to be imperfect, ramshackle, I want to live like a dog that sniffs the bags left and right<sup>29</sup>.

Fellini’s approach to music reflects his holistic, omnivorous approach to cinema and life, even if the presence of somebody governing chaos appears – starting from *Orchestra Rehearsal*<sup>30</sup> – as increasingly necessary. Let’s see

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<sup>28</sup> M. Marcus, *Filmmaking by the Book. Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 237.

<sup>29</sup> G. Guandalini, *Federico e la musica*, <https://www.apemusicale.it/joomla/terza-pagina/8839-omaggio-a-federico-fellini> (accessed: 25.03.2021).

<sup>30</sup> M. Combes, “*Ma chi è il Direttore?*” *Conductor(s) in Federico Fellini’s Prova d’orchestra*, translated by M. Jones, “*Transposition. Musique et Sciences Sociales*”, 5, 2015, p. 2. “We believe that the conductor should be seen less as an allegory of the political tyrant and more as one of the possible faces of the filmmaker himself”.

one more passage from his radio conversation with Lucio Dalla. The director tells the musician:

The first time I saw you, I saw you in a vision that was a bit hellish, a bit like the disco in my last film, *The Voice of the Moon*. It was at the Tenda Theater. I went in and (...), amidst a great smoke, I saw you at the end of a stage. In front there was a screaming, strident audience, yelling and screeching like bats, with unreachable decibels... there you were, behind a keyboard with your beret on your head. You looked like one of Salgari's characters, a corsair, a pirate, a Sandokan, especially since the clangs coming from your keyboard could sound like broadsides, or cannon shots. I saw that you controlled the situation; it was you who unleashed that enthusiasm<sup>31</sup>.

Encouraged by composers such as Rota and Piovani, who, despite their classical training, show no problem “tainting” their music with popular elements, Fellini presents a kaleidoscope of various sounds and music in his films. According to Sergio Miceli, the insistence on songs that we find in the soundtrack of *La Dolce Vita* suggests “a certain satisfaction, a visceral subjugation that, even before catching *Cabiria*, caught Fellini, who in this case was unable to balance ‘high’ and ‘low’ music in a lucid and measured way<sup>32</sup>”. Fellini’s inability is not to be understood in a technical sense, but in an existential one. We could say that, through sounds and images, the director wants to show “the dance of life” not only to our eyes, but also to our ears: dance is in fact a way through which the characters ‘process’ popular music (including Strauss) in all the three films here examined<sup>33</sup>.

However, it is worth noting that some elements linked to the presence of popular music, that we can find in *Nights of Cabiria* and *La Dolce Vita*, return many years later in *La Voce della Luna*, set in a contemporary world in which many things have changed, but the issue of listening has remained

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>32</sup> S. Miceli, op. cit., p. 427.

<sup>33</sup> It would take another essay and another scholar to analyze the role of dance in Fellini’s films. Here I can just recommend, as an introduction to the topic, the second chapter of Jacopo Tomatis, *Storia culturale della canzone italiana* (Milano 2019) for a brilliant presentation of dance music (*ritmi*) in Italy during the 50’s, with plenty of references to films from the same decade.

important. Popular music appears in some crucial moments of these films, comes to unblock a stalemate and creates a situation of turmoil: the fight between Cabiria and Matilde, Sylvia's fight with her partner, and Gonnella's fight with the DJs. Moreover, rock music is the codeword that breaks the fourth wall in the picnic scene in *Cabiria*, as well as the walls of incommunicability at the party in *La Dolce Vita*; and also in *The Voice of the Moon* this music appears as we see two big mirrored sliding walls on the screen. The appearance of popular music is often "magical" and cannot be clearly defined within the two categories of diegetic and extra-diegetic. All in all, it is a generator of life and has a liberating effect, even if, for a character like Gonnella (or even Steiner), a fanatic of order, it is a generator of death and destruction. Yet, in this case Fellini, who is generally more at ease in chaos, cannot share his character's point of view, although there is a phrase from Steiner that may reflect the director's point of view: "The most miserable life is better, believe me, than a sheltered existence in an organized society where everything is calculated and perfected".

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### Abstract

Through some examples taken from *Nights of Cabiria*, *La Dolce Vita* and *The Voice of the Moon*, the essay explores Federico Fellini’s attitude towards popular music, which plays a particularly relevant and original role in his films. Characters like Cabiria or Salvini identify themselves with popular music and are immersed in its particular taste, in contrast with other characters represented by classical music (Lazzari, Steiner, Gonnella). Popular music appears in some key moments of the three films and comes to unblock a stalemate on the level of the plot. Moreover it

often creates “magical” moments in which the fourth wall is torn down and diegetic and extra-diegetic levels are messed up.

**Keywords:** Federico Fellini; popular music; film music; diegetic music; highbrow/lowbrow; Pier Paolo Pasolini; Nino Rota

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