

News From Africa: Fellini-Grotesque

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The true iconoclast is the image itself which explodes . . . allegorical meanings, releasing new insights. Thus the most distressing images in dreams and fantasies, those we shy away from for their disgusting distortion and perversion, are precisely the ones that break the allegorical frame of what we know about this person or that, this trait of ourselves or that. The "worst" images are the best, for they are the ones that restore a figure to its pristine, numinous, power. . .

James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*

There is a nature that is grotesque within
The boulevards of the generals. Why should
We say that it man's interior world

Or seeing the spent, unconscious shapes of night,
Pretend they are shapes of another consciousness?
The grotesque is not a visitation. It is
Not apparition but appearance, part
Of that simplified geography, in which
The sun comes up like news from Africa.

Wallace Stevens, "A Word with Jose Rodriguez-Feo"

I

"Fellini-Grotesque." The two words seem inseparable—like *Fellini-Satyricon*. When Philip Thompson, a Methuen critical idiom series book on the grotesque, seeks to name a filmmaker for consideration, it is, of course, Fellini who comes to mind. Jamake Highwater, considering the "contrariness" of American Indian sacred clowns, known for their scatological and obscene parodies of tribal holy men, naturally thinks of Fellini when he seeks to explain the revulsion missionaries experienced confronting the clowns' obscene behavior (44). ("The shock techniques of Dadaism and the late films of Federico Fellini," Highwater writes, "have a great deal in common with the contrariness of sacred clowns, especially those of the Southwest.") And Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks*, to cite another example, refers to Fellini's movies almost routinely as a test case in his exploration of the human mind's fascination with deformity. Whenever the word appears, Fellini's name is likely to accompany it; and yet his fondness for the grotesque has customarily been the stuff of allusion and not, with a few exceptions, a matter for investigation or understanding.

At the very least we must remember, as William J. Free has reminded us, that the grotesque is multi-faceted. In a discussion of the grotesque in Fellini's *I Clowns* (1972), Free argues that its "fanciful and sinister" nature actually has *two* distinct faces, perhaps best represented visually in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel and Hieronymous Bosch. For Free, Brueghel's art exemplifies an essentially comic "irreverent attitude toward his subject" and conveys "the artist's joy at contemplating the hurly-burly confusion of life which swallows up any attempt of history to impose meaning on it," which Bosch's "terrifying grotesque," on the other hand, exhibits an "insanely demonic world peeping from beneath the order of life and threatening to destroy it in disgusting violence" (191). Free's analysis of Fellini's fascination with clowns makes it impossible for a careful viewer to any longer mistake Fellini's work as Boschian. But must we accept Free's conclusion that grotesques is, therefore, essentially Brueghel-like? Free, after all, offers us only "Northern" choices.

Within the human soul there lies an imaginal geography, as Hillman shows in *Re-Visioning Psychology*. But its basic directional opposition, as customarily understood, is charted incorrectly—is, in fact, as misleading as the Mercator projection. The human mind does not divide, as the received wisdom teaches, between East and West. The real dichotomy, rather, is North/South: a polarity of "light and shadow, conscious and unconscious, a vertical division between what is above and what is below, a reflection in imaginal geography of our cultural history."

Historically, culturally, and economically dominant—a dominance the Mercator illusion was designed to substantiate—Northern consciousness, aspires to total objectivity/rationality. The Southern, long historically "subjected" to Northern hegemony, embraces subjectivity/imagination. While the Northern soul seeks to "align . . . with religion and its morality, using psychology to support collective canons," the Southern instead attempts to see through official religion and its morality as to subvert collective canons through psychologizing" (260). The Northern soul, in other words, is "monotheistic" in Hillman's terms, the Southern "polytheistic."

According to Hillman, the pre-Roman soul in the Western world was "polytheistic," that is, able to embrace multiple perspectives and multiple personality, able to believe in the "little people of the psyche" [Jung] and in the truth of the imagination. But the monotheistic soul, born out of a fusion of "Roman ego" and Christianity, instead seeks (in the words of a patristic father) to "take prisoner every thought for Christ": seeks, that is, to eliminate the many voices of the psyche and bring them into line behind a single conception of the self. Freud's advocacy of the formula "Where Id is, there let Ego be," Hillman notes, is a modern version of the same monotheistic tendency.

In *Inter Views*, Hillman announces his own allegiance to Southern consciousness generally and singles out for special praise a particular facet of it which he deems "The Italian Imagination": a "fantasy that the Italian mind, heart, or anima responds to a more aesthetic kind of thinking." Committed to such a "fantasy" himself, Hillman goes on to say,

I don't care so much if I make mistakes, like being sentimental or cloudy or decorative or overcomplicated and baroque. . . . They are anyway better than German, Northern mistakes, or that French foolishness about clarity and their semantic obsessions. I always loved Vico for his hatred of Descartes and the French mind. America has the "French disease"--structuralism, Lacanism, Derrida and when

they don't have that they get the German measles: Heidegger, Hesse, to say nothing of German depth psychology. . . . I wish they could get infected by Italy. (2)

Not surprisingly, Hillman has expressed his great admiration for the films of Fellini, who has, in turn, acknowledge the powerful influence of archetypal psychology, from Jung to Hillman, on his own imagination.

"It was like the sight of unknown landscapes, like the discovery of a new way of looking at life: a chance of making use of its experiences in a braver and bigger way, of recovering all kind of energies, all kinds of things, buried under the rubble of fears, lack of awareness, neglected wound." These words are Fellini's, attempting to explain the profound, "determining effect" of Jungian thought on his own artistic perspective" (*Fellini on Fellini* 147).

The Fellini-grotesque, product of a Southern consciousness, trusting in imagination and in the movies as its vehicle and "unable to distinguish the seconding coming from the return of the repressed" (Hillman, *Revisioning* 136), iconoclastically seeks to save the appearances, even the "worst" ones. After viewing Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (1957), André Bazin had already foreseen that Fellini's journey as a filmmaker would take him to "the end of neo-realism" and to "the other side of things" in search of a new "realism of appearances." From the other side, it would seem, the grotesque is simply how things look. For Fellini, the grotesque is "*not* a visitation"; it is "*not* an apparition but appearance" (my emphasis).

II

Fellini himself, not surprisingly, insists that his works are not really grotesque at all. He has explained, for example, that

When I introduce rather odd characters into my films, people say I'm exaggerating, that I'm "doing a Fellini." But it's just the opposite; in comparison with what happens to me all the time, I feel I'm softening things, moderating reality to a remarkable degree. (Strich 52)

To Eileen Hughes' complaints about the monstrous qualities of the characters in *Fellini-Satyricon*, Fellini has retorted, "But they are not monsters. They are innocent. You are less innocent" (62) According to reports, news that Fellini is about to begin shooting results in a pilgrimage to Cinecittà Studios in Rome of the city's grotesques--all dreaming of being cast by their "patron saint" as "Fellini freaks."

It is interesting to compare Fellini in this regard to that of the American photographer Diane Arbus, certainly her medium's most profound explorer of the grotesque. "You see someone on the street," Arbus confessed, "and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw" (quoted in Sontag 34). According to Susan Sontag, Arbus was always able, in her estranged idealism, "to insinuate anguish, kinkiness, mental illness with any subject" (34)--a drag queen, a hermaphrodite (with a dog), nudists, mental patients, twins, giants, dwarves. Confronted with the self-same subjects, filming even at the same moment, Fellini's camera would not doubt witness something quite different, not just because it would be

able to free the innate grotesquery of frozen images into a world of motion, but because Fellini's vision remained throughout a long career essentially non-judgmental.

In the opening, autobiographical sequence of *I Clowns*, the young Fellini awakens in the middle of the night to the clamor of the circus's arrival. His excitement over its appearance is short-lived, however, for later we seem him carried away crying from the big-top, brought to tears, we learn, by his inability to distinguish between the circus' theatrical grotesques and the real grotesques of his home town. The circus is a threat to his whole frame of reference. We hear the mother warn him that he must be careful for "the Gypsies will carry you away," and the fear thus instilled makes it impossible for him to be carried away instead by the circus' magic; unable to suspend his disbelief, he cannot surrender to the imagination's need to enjoy the spectacle before him. Only by the movie's end has he learned to yield to the ebullient, grotesque spectacle of the center ring. Only "white clowns," congenitally Northern, are grossed out by the grotesque, and Fellini's Italian imagination--is there any doubt--is Auguste.

Of course, Fellini's critics, more interested in ridiculing the director's "Italian mistakes" (as Hillman calls them), have endeavored to see the grotesques of his films as he himself sees it. Most have tended to think of the Fellini-grotesque according to more traditional idealistic and judgmental aesthetic, perhaps best articulated by Wolfgang Kayser in his *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. For Kayser, and for many of Fellini's critics as well, the grotesque is

The expression of the estranged or alienated world . . . [it] is a game with the absurd, the sense that the grotesque artist plays, half laughingly, half horrified, with the deep absurdities of existence. The grotesque is an attempt to control and exorcise the demonic elements of the world. (185).

The "unity of perspective" attained by all grotesque art thus has its source, as Kayser would insist, in the belief that "the divinity of poets and the shaping force of nature have altogether ceased to exist" (186).

But does not Fellini, who has praised Toulouse-Lautrec's capacity for loving the "disinherited and the despised. . . those who are designated as depraved by "respectable" people" and applauded the painter's conviction that "the purest and loveliest flowers thrive on waste land and rubbish heaps" (Fellini on Fellini 56), experiences the grotesque in an entirely different light? Like a Toulouse-Lautrec or a Sherwood Anderson, Fellini seems to be drawn toward the grotesque by an intuitive sense that the "gnarled apples" of experience are a prime shaping force for the imagination, an entry into "mystery."

In the standard response to the grotesque, hidden, transcendental, Northern biases become embarrassingly obvious. When for example, Mary Cass Canfield declares that the grotesque testifies that "The artist is ill. Life is too literal and he takes to his fancy. Life is too pervasively discordant and *so his fancy does not soar*, does not sanely and safely create beautiful rhythms, but becomes infected with unrest, turns *ape to the actual*, is rebellious slave to what it would be free from" and claims that all "grotesques are damned" (9-10; my emphasis); or when Stuart Rosenthal preposterously suggests that the midget nun in *Amarcord* is "unbalanced and threatening" (37), thereby yielding to the same childish fear that haunts the young Fellini at the circus at the beginning of *I Clowns*, they testify only to their own Northern tendency to judge the creation itself. The grotesque is for them only a

mirror which shows back their own reflections. Canfield's diction is itself a revelation: the grotesque prevents the artist from "soaring" (presumably above the earth, as Guido, seeking to escape his earthly fate, erroneously tried to do in *8 1/2's* famous opening scene) condemning him to the mimicking or "aping" of the actual, from which Canfield's Northern (and Platonic) mind-set feels he should be free. Canfield's ascensionism is, however, strangely correct. The grotesque is, as she insists, a revelation of immanence; it is stamped "on the observe of the medal of idealism" (3).

Of all the "useless baggage" which Fellini claims was laid upon him a child, none merited more of his ire than Western civilization's emphasis on the ideal. When he talked or wrote of it, his eloquence revealed the same kind of emotional coupling of anger and disbelief that brings Grandfather out of his seat in *Juliet of the Spirits* to stop the pageant yelling "What are you teaching these poor little girls?" Idealism is to Fellini the curse of the West.

In a 1965 interview, given during the filming of *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), for example, Fellini denounces the ideal because it

imposes impossible standards and unattainable aspirations that can only impede the spontaneous growth of a normal human being, and may conceivably destroy him. You must have experienced this yourself. There arrives a moment in life when you discover that what you've been told at home, at school, or in church is simply not true. You discover that it binds your authentic self, your instinct, your true growth. And this opens up a schism, creates a conflict that must eventually be resolved or succumbed to. In all forms of neurosis there is this clash between certain forms of idealization in a moral sense and a contrary aesthetic form.

Fellini's imagination resolves this clash on the side of the 'aesthetic' in the original Greek sense of the word; he side with experience against judgment. He sides with the grotesque.

III

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin shows that in the past four hundred years a preoccupation with politeness, taste, manners, and rational, institutional values has eclipsed an earlier, pre-modern fascination with the "grotesque body," imposing a "bodily canon" on expression and on perception itself (319).

This earlier wonder at the "earthy"—created and sustained by folkloric imagination—is readily apparent, according to Bakhtin, as the shaping force behind the exuberant but thoroughly grotesque genius of the French priest. The "grotesque" body depicted in pre-Renaissance art in general and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in particular is one which, according to Bakhtin, unashamedly "fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying" (319).

The "bodily canon," however, asserts instead that human beings exist outside the hierarchy of the cosmos. It stresses that we are finished products, defined characters, and in its reductionism attempts to seal off the bodily processes of organic life from any interchange with the external world. The bodily canon therefore seeks to: 1) close all orifices; 2) stop all mergers of the body with the external world; 3) hide all signs of inner life processes and bodily functions (hence, for example, prohibitions against farting or

belching in public); 4) ignore all evidence of fecundation and pregnancy; 5) eliminate protrusions; 6) present an image of a completed, rational, individual body.

As a flight from the reality of human embodiment, the anality described by culture critics from Sigmund Freud to Ernest Becker and Norman O. Brown is thus thoroughly modern, both cause and effect of the bodily canon. Rabelaisian man, if Bakhtin's thesis is correct, possessed "true . . . fearlessness" in the face of the human condition. Because he felt his own body to contain within it the presence of the cosmos, because he experienced his embodiment as "a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception," Rabelaisian man found himself at home in the world in a way that modern man finds difficult to imagine. Before the censure of the bodily canon, Bakhtin insists, even urine and dung could appear to be "gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter" (335) and not as *memento mori*. ("In the modern image of the individual body," Bakhtin reminds, "sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this new connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophic functions.")

Now the Southern imagination of Federico Fellini, dedicated to subversion of "collective canons" (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 260), clearly has no respect for the "bodily canon" as described by Bakhtin. Cinematically, Fellini resurrects the "grotesque body," accepting, affirming the below, the earthly, the earthy.

In a scene originally to be included in *Amarcord* but finally left out, the Contessa loses her diamond ring in a cesspool. A character named "Eau de Cologne" is called in to retrieve it. Submerged up to his armpits, he feels about in the pool for the diamond, which he does not find. The Count is repelled by the scene, but Eau de Cologne explains to him that he need not be, if he would only see things from his perspective.

For me there's no difference between a scent and a stink. Perhaps if we'd been taught that a stink is nice and scent nasty, the world would see things in a different light. God knows why there's all this fuss about a bit of shit! It's a human product, just as much as our thoughts are! (*Amarcord: Portrait of a Town* 36)

Obviously, Eau de Cologne's grotesque wisdom is shared by Fellini as well.

The scatological grotesque, for example, increases in prominence throughout Fellini's career, becoming his trademark. In *Fellini-Satyricon* Trimalchio and others void themselves at table. A mother at the burlesque show in *Roma* ushers her young son into the aisle to relieve himself (although another woman--obviously devotee of the bodily canon--complains, "What if we all started pissing?"). In the same film, the young Fellini, inspecting his new living quarters, happens on a jubilant young boy, triumphantly announcing from his perch on a toilet, "I've done it!" Though urination in *Amarcord* can function as a form of disobedience (Titta pisses on a prominent citizen's hat from the balcony at the movie, an act which, when discovered, earns him a beating from his disgraced father--and Berlouin prankishly but ingeniously creates a mysterious puddle at the feet of an unsuspecting nerdish boy trying to solve Signoria Leonardis' mind-boggling math problem at the blackboard). But elsewhere in *Amarcord*'s "I remember," urination is celebrated in the poem's recited by Grandfather ("There is something amiss/If a man can't piss!/"To be fit as a fiddle,/A man's got to

piddle"), functions as a social ritual (the boys water the dying embers of the Fogarazza), and takes place quite naturally (Volpina squats on the beach and mad Uncle Teo relieves himself in his pants).

As we would expect from an artist who expressed his great admiration for a "marvelous man" in his home town able to produce an unlimited number of farts on demand (*Fellini on Fellini* 24), flatulence and belching are also prominent, almost exhibitional, in Fellini's films: in *Fellini-Satyricon* at Vernacchio's and at the banquet (where Trimalchio's belches are even "read" by an interpreter), in the grotesque antics of the "augustes" in *The Clowns*, and throughout *Amarcord*: for example, the school boy controversy over the perpetrator of in-class flatulence during the art teacher's alcohol-aided lecture on "la perspective." Wind almost seems to beget wind in *Amarcord*. *Ovo* answers the "hot air" of a tedious lecture with wind of his own, and later on, at the family dinner table, Titta's grandfather does likewise: to the consternation resulting from the discovery of Titta's movie theatre urination, Grandfather has only one solution: he quietly leaves the room, which resounds with the threats and counter-threats of Aurelio and Miranda, and adjourns to the next room, where he grabs hold of a chair with both hands, bends slightly, and farts rhythmically, as if relieving himself of all the tension in the air.

Lusty, exuberant scenes of eating--in *I Vitelloni*, *La Strada*, *La Dolce Vita*--likewise reveal the grotesque body's exchange with its world, culminating in the gustatory exhibitions of Trimalchio's banquet, in the open-air restaurants of *Roma* (where a truly Rabelasian wisdom--"What you eat, you shit"--prevails) and in *Amarcord's* family dinner scenes.

The canon's denial of sexuality and fecundity is overthrown by the sensuality and sexual passion exhibited by women characters like Sylvia in *La Dolce Vita*, Saraghina in *8 1/2*, Suzy in *Juliet of the Spirits*, Ariadne and Oenothea in *Fellini-Satyricon*, the druggist's wife in *Roma*, and Gradisca and Volpina in *Amarcord*.

Amarcord's schoolboys can think of little else but sex. They walk in procession behind Gradisca and her sister on the Piazza delle Erbe, keeping time to the swaying motion of their broad hips. They fantasize "posterior intimacy" with the statue of "Winged Victory." They attend the agricultural fair to watch the farm women mount their ample posteriors suggestively on their bicycles. And their mutual masturbation in a car, as each fantasizes about a particular woman of the town claimed as his sole possession, even ignites the vehicle's headlights. Of course, the boys only mirror the adults of the town. When new prostitutes arrive, all male eyes turn to watch. Even the effusively verbal Hegelian philosophy teacher stops his dialectic long enough to train his full attention on them, as does the lawyer/narrator, who seems to have just returned from a visit to the bordello. Moreover, Pinwheel's account of his orgy with the harem, Il Patacca and White Feather's lechery at the Grand Hotel ball, Grandfather's obsessional sexual memories and his still-alive interest in the maid, Gradisca's public-spirited giving of herself to the Prince, Volpina's nymphomania--all bear witness to the sexual fecundity of the town.

Guardians of the bodily canon--the priests at Guido's schools in *8 1/2*, for example, who equate the voluptuous flesh of Saraghina with Satan himself, and Don Balossa, the nay-saying priest in *Amarcord*--all strive to repress sexual energy, though to no avail. In the latter film, the body itself is thought of as such a powerful subversive force that Don Balossa must warn against the evil of even touching it. Hearing confession, he admonishes Titta that the other-worldly saints "cry when you touch yourself" and, looking into the eyes

of one boy, recognizes immediately that the penitent is a "toucher," as if it were the primal sin, all the while correcting another priest's flower-arranging in true anal-compulsive style and playing obsessively with his own repressed hands.

The bodily canon's prohibitions against open orifices and protrusions, its distaste for deformity and aberration, are further broken in Fellini's films. Even a cursory examination of Christian Strich's *Fellini's Films: The Four Hundred Most Memorable Stills from Fellini's 15 1/2 Films* will demonstrate clearly his total disregard for the bodily canon's simplistic obsession with perfect symmetry. Fellini's famous faces, which in *Fellini-Satyricon* even take on the quality of James Ensor or Francis Bacon images, the midget wrestler, gigantic and obese women, "tiny grannies," and hermaphrodites, the severed arms, legless and armless men, shapeless sea creatures ("Is it possible that nobody knows which is the front and which is the rear?" asks Pierone in *La Dolce Vita*), swollen heads (the macrocephalic boy in *La Strada*, Aurelio's huge wart in *Amarcord*), the wiggling out-thrust tongues (of most Fellini children, of the Polynesian youth at the entrance to the Insula Felices in *Fellini-Satyricon*, of Volpina and Titta's young cousin at Miranda's funeral in *Amarcord*)--all testify to the director's faith in a "fearful symmetry" beyond the ideals of the bodily canon, his attraction to the numinous power of the worst images.

IV

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo regales Kublai Khan with the story--one of five in the book designated as tales of "Cities & the Sky"--of Perinthia, a metropolis which, from its very inception, had been intended as a utopia, its ordering cosmologically inspired.

In Perinthia, we learn, all aspects of the city are laid out according to the highest wisdom of astrology and astronomy. Buildings, for example, are cited in such a way as to receive "the proper influence of the favoring constellations. The astronomers who oversaw Perinthia's development from the ground up guaranteed the city that it would, without question, "reflect the harmony of the firmament."

Reality, of course, turns out to be anything but ideal. For, Marco Polo informs us,

In Perinthia's streets and squares today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks, obese men, bearded women. But the worse cannot be seen: guttural howls are heard from cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads or six legs. (144)

Such grotesques bring the astronomer/architects of Perinthea to an intellectual impasse, one that crops up all through Calvino's splendid fictions/thought experiments:

Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters. (145)

In the grotesque cinematic world of Federico Fellini--Calvino's contemporary and countryman--clearly the second alternative seems the only viable one, and yet Fellini does not embrace it out of deductive necessity. Filmed on location in Perinthia, his movies

celebrate the revelation that "the order of gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters." They bring us "news from Africa."

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