

George Porcari
gporcari@earthlink.net

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Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant for this world. A plague on both your houses! What? A dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat to scratch a man to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain that fights by the book of arithmetic!
Shakespeare (Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet)

FELLINI'S FOGOTTEN MASTERPIECE: *TOBY DAMMIT*

Fellini's *Toby Dammit*, a forty minute film made in 1968, is one of three short films adapted from stories by Edgar Allan Poe that were distributed together in Italy as *Tre Passi Nel Delirio*, in France as *Histoires Extraordinaires*, and in England and the U.S. as *Spirits of the Dead*. The other two short films are *William Wilson* and *Metzengerstein* adapted by Louis Malle and Roger Vadim respectively. Fellini's film is an adaptation set in contemporary Rome of Poe's *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* published in 1841. Poe's work is a brief comic satire of the transcendentalist movements that were then popular in Europe and America. Fellini's work takes two elements from Poe's story: First the plot of a drunk who confronts a mysterious stranger on a bridge and bets him his head; the man fails to see that the stranger is the devil who subsequently wins the bet. Second Fellini takes the name Toby Dammit, Toby being an English slang term for ass in Poe's time.¹ In short Toby Dammit is a dammed ass.

The film begins with a sudden shift from day to night. The opening hand held shot is of a romantic late afternoon sky that then abruptly cuts to a static night shot of the interior of a jet's cockpit. The only color in the following shot, and almost all subsequent shots for the next six minutes, will be monochrome, using red, yellow, blue and orange filters. On the soundtrack the sound of a jet is too prominent for an interior shot. In the plane's cockpit we see the landing lights of an airport at night directly behind the windshield as

in a flight simulator. We hear the voice of Toby Dammit, a British actor played by Terence Stamp before we see him – his voice is decadent, laconic, resigned, exhausted: - *The plane grew closer and closer to Rome. I knew she would be there waiting for me with her white ball.*

The landing lights of the airport recede mechanically into blackness. We sense the forced simulation of motion that these devices are meant to convey rather than any sense of actual speed. There is a sudden cut to a series of shots, some documentary and some created in the studio, that show the interior of an airport. Each is shot using different color filters and different camera movements that in the editing do not match – and it is clear that this is done intentionally – but to what end? We seem to have only fragments of scenes – nothing is complete. There are abrupt shifts in visual syntax using a variety of cinematic techniques that refuse to cohere, that in fact contradict each other, as if incompleteness itself were the key factor in organizing the film's narration. For example a brief shot of a black woman who acknowledges the camera as it moves past her seems to be filmed using a conventional documentary form. That is, she is forced to step back to let the camera past her, the background action is a real airport, and it is shot at eye level. But rather than the familiar hand held motions that would typically accompany such a shot Fellini uses a smooth dolly on tracks, which glides through the space, throwing into doubt the sense that it is a documentary shot. Throughout the film one cinematic convention cancels the effects of another by making the illusion it seeks to create null and void. In *Toby Dammit* the encyclopedic technical devices, the rapid shifts in cinematic convention and the self consciously awkward camerawork and editing suggest that there are a multiplicity of realities in unresolved conflict. The density of information each short scene contains makes it difficult to see where the scene will go from second to second. There seems to be a resistance on the part of this opening sequence to narration itself. Fellini seems to have sought every possible stylistic convention available to him, yet meaning always seems consciously mediated by a cinematic technique that is

inappropriate to the content. His deployment of oblique framings, complex intersecting planes and ambiguous reflections reinforce and make very clear that we are seeing a highly conscious visual strategy. Every time a scene is on the verge of clarification, or a resolving moment seems about to occur it is frustrated by a cut.

At Rome's Leonardo Da Vinci Airport the full color spectrum returns as Toby Dammit stumbles onto a bunch of flowers, suggesting both a wreath and a bouquet. Toby's face is ashen, his matted hair is bleached blonde and he walks forward uncertainly as if afraid to fall. Strobe lights flash from paparazzi as they run for Toby who escapes to the top a nearby escalator – strangely the paparazzi do not follow. Toby steps off into a mezzanine alone where he mimes the gesture of taking someone by the hand. He asks with gravity to no one:

-Why did you come here?

In conventional Hollywood films such as *The Cell* the multiplicity of contradictory styles, the purposely exotic imagery and the manic shifts in tone are meant to be interpreted as mimicking a mind in the process of disintegration – that is – one that is no longer able to distinguish between perception, memory and imagination. The collage effects aesthetically represent the essence of this confusion and allow us to understand its cause if we examine the meaning (usually Freudian) of the images. In a more complex work such as Bergman's *Persona* the same is true but the relation of “normal” to “sick” is consciously thrown into doubt because Bergman asks questions regarding the nature of identity rather than illustrating “madness”. In conventional Hollywood films the past determines the present and the future in a systematic way. That is something that is foreign to Fellini; his sense of delight in the chaos of the present moment allows at least for the possibility of something new and unforeseen to occur that is not historically determined. For Fellini collage effects do not mimic the mind only, but rather the friction between the mind and a physical reality that resists summarizing truths. Within a single image we find essentialist metaphors (such as a flock of sheep in a cul-de-sac) which

direct our attention to symbolic motifs, yet these elements constitute only part of the content of the image. These metaphors are forced to exist in a reality that is overfull of visual information, interruptions, delays; a world of complexity and randomness that remains unresolved and without essential meaning. These fragmented partial views consist of unfinished actions and uncertain conclusions. The narrative that they embody is episodic, not as in Bergman, tragic. In Fellini we experience a world of faces, voices gestures, all moving in and out of the frame, all with their own unique characteristics. There seems to be no place in such a world for essences but only for the temporal confusion and the spatial mess of provisional truths. The confusion and the mess are in fact what the film is partially about. From realist filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio DeSica Fellini learned what Martin Scorsese insightfully refers to as a “Franciscan” respect for the world of physical reality. Realists as different in temperament as Jean Renoir and John Cassavetes have tremendous respect, first, for the world of the senses, of the body, of expression, of action; and secondly, for the social context that a particular individual is in. But Fellini is not a realist – rather he delays our essentialist reading of his work by using realism and he does the same to a realist reading by using luscious symbolic references and theatrically comic digressions often within the same frame. In short what we have here is a cinema of paradox

In an alcoholic stupor Toby Dammit rides in a limousine taking him from the airport to Rome; he sits between a priest, who is the producer of the film Toby will make and a woman who is his translator and explains the film he is to make in a humorously monotone voice:

-This is to be the first Catholic Western. Man is given another chance at redemption as Christ comes back to earth as a cowboy. It will be done with the minimum of sets and shot like Pasolini...

Toby lurches toward the producer not having heard a word and asks:

-Where's the Ferrari the production office promised me?

Toby's role as Christ in this intended Catholic Western (where Pasolini will be reduced to a style in the manner of advertising) is playfully subverted by having Toby's only interest in the proceedings be a car. The central motifs of the Western: violence, men and landscapes; the struggle of man against nature, of good against evil, of civilization against anarchy, all play themselves out in the film we see but not as it was conceived by the priest/producer. This is an inspired doubling of roles for he is both the intermediary between man, God and the financing of the film. His power is tangible - he rides in limousines - yet Fellini goes to great lengths to show us this man as a modern buffoon, as well fed and self obsessed as any rock star. His enthusiastic gestures as he pontificates about the film, the sweat running down his chubby face, his arrogant earthy laughter, all comically undermine any possibility for transcendence which is presumably the point of his profession, and the theme of the Catholic Western they are to make. As in so much of Fellini's work the face is more eloquent than the words that come from it, betraying the delusions of the speaker by allowing us to see what lies underneath the effects and the facade. For example Zampano's macho posing as a self-contained and freedom loving gypsy in *La Strada* is betrayed by a face that is uncertain, hurt and lost. Gelsomina, his partner, enjoys posing as a worldly artiste to small town workers, but unlike Zampano she does not take the posing seriously. Fellini superbly conveys this delicate balance between shifting identities, between interior and exterior, often to create an extraordinary sense of the comic and the tragic simultaneously.

Another abrupt cut takes us to the interior of a television studio where the canned reactions of a simulated audience are controlled by a television director. Toby sits uneasily between a massive black and white photographic collage of himself that serves as a backdrop and the television camera, which hydraulically glides around the room with a comically sovereign power. The pixie announcer crawls along the floor on all fours, by Toby's feet, out of camera range. Arriving at her proper place she begins to contort her

face wildly in order to exercise her facial muscles before going on camera. On cue (an applause track) she announces Toby to the simulated audience as a great Shakespearean actor. She asks him:

-Do you believe in God?

-No.

-And in the devil?

-In the devil yes.

-Can you tell us what he looks like?

We cut to a simultaneous track and zoom, which occur at different rhythms creating a very awkward movement, of a little girl holding a white ball. The soundtrack is turned off, isolating this image from the rest of the film. Her face is theatrically painted with white make-up and there is a very bright spotlight that shines directly on her eyes making them appear bloodshot. She wears lipstick and her face suggests an adult sense of corruption. Her meticulous Victorian clothes come from Poe's time and suggest the duality of innocence and madness that is found in the Gothic sensibility of that time. Her make-up and the malevolent expression on her face come from the iconography of Romantic painting depicting evil incarnate in human form: Fuseli, Bocklin and Goya all have done versions of malevolence and death personified by a specter. Because of the intense light and the seamless background it is clear that she is in a studio interior, yet in the following medium shot we see that she is standing in the lobby of the airport we saw earlier- now strangely deserted. The white ball bounces the wrong way on the escalator in slow motion. At the top of the escalator, as in the beginning of the film, is Toby shot from below through an orange filter. We see him bowing to her in acknowledgment, the bow of a Restoration dandy -it is a formal gesture of greeting a familiar nemesis.

-To me she looks like a little girl.

There is simulated laughter and applause. Toby turns his back to the television camera and the photographic collage of him has been removed to reveal the stage for a

commercial. It is the set of a modern kitchen where there is a model wearing an apron and holding a mop as if to clean a perfectly polished floor. Nino Rota brilliantly mimics the banal happy music of a commercial as she turns her head mechanically towards Toby who whispers to her:

-Will you marry me?

There is a reaction close-up of the model who is now a mannequin that begins to rotate in place anticipating the doll in *Casanova*. The sexualized doll was first seen as a subject of fiction in *The Sandman* written by Poe's contemporary E.T.A. Hoffman. This short story features a female automaton that sometime later became Freud's first example of "the uncanny", which he defined as "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light". In the 1920's *The Sandman* inspired various filmmakers, writers and artists to deal with that aspect of the story that centers on the mechanized sexuality of the automaton. This was a way to articulate the dysfunctional sexuality that seemed contiguous to the speed and corruption of contemporary metropolitan life. Among the most brilliant examples are Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and George Grosz's drawings of prostitutes as mechanized dolls. Surrealist artists and writers were also influenced in the 1930's, when the mannequin (suggestively dressed and posed to presumably shock the middle classes) became a required motif in Surrealist expositions. Of more lasting interest are Andre Breton's *Nadja*, and Hans Bellmer's tinted black and white photographs of doll parts in various poses suggesting a macabre sexuality.

"I want to make order - I want to clean. " says Claudia in *8 1/2*. In *Toby Dammit*, six years after that film, this domestic sensibility has a different meaning. It is as if Fellini wished to perform a taxidermy on the previous character and place it in a television studio to sell soap, to show this image debased and corrupt, but with its archetypal power still mysterious and intact. So much so that Toby asks the mannequin to marry him. His ironic smile tells us that Toby is fully aware of his absurdly rhetorical question. It is at

that point that he turns away from both women, the television announcer in front of him and the mannequin behind him, and whispers the most significant lines in the film to himself:

-What a waste!

The awards' ceremony that follows is held in an artificial cavern that seems to serve as a night- club, a fashion runway, and a theater. Toby is led to a waiting area and made to sit; when he asks for a drink he is told "no" with a disapproving parental shrug. Toby is treated as if he were a child throughout the film because despite Toby's associations with drinking, speed and abandon he is essentially a passive character. He slouches like a bored adolescent in the limousine while the realities of the city pass before him; he sits in the television station answering questions like a spoiled child, at one point sticking his tongue out at his interviewer; he passes the award's ceremony in an alcoholic haze, sleeping in his chair. Toby Dammit's character is further revealed in T.S. Eliot's study of Poe that defines him as "irresponsible and immature...with the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty. All of his ideas seem to be entertained rather than believed."² As Ray Charles' *Ruby* plays on the soundtrack a beautiful woman comes and sits at Toby's side whispering:

-I am the one you have always been waiting for...we shall have a perfect life together...you will never be alone again.

The band strikes up an uplifting introduction number as a harsh white spotlight finds Toby slumped sleeping in his chair, suggesting that the woman was a dream. He gets up and forces a grotesque smile to the cameras and the fans as he stumbles to the stage. An announcer announces:

-Toby Dammit! Not only a great star but a great actor!

Everyone kisses him to bits. From loud applause there is absolute silence suggesting the audience is simulated, yet we see them, silhouetted figures in the midst of smoke that seems to hang in the air. Toby recites from *McBeth*:

-A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury...

He begins to babble clutching the microphone stand for support, significantly forgetting the end of the line: "signifying nothing." Toby runs from the smoky award ceremony to the foggy street as a mysterious figure appears with the keys to a gold Ferrari. Toby jumps into the topless car and drives off madly into the night. The streets of Rome become a labyrinth – one of Dante's rings - blurred by speed and Toby, exhilarated by it, comes to resemble the middle aged Poe. As the lights reflected on the narrow windshield spin by the car bounces in place like a toy, and Toby's flying hair and furious shifting become a comedy of simulated forward movement. There is a similar shot in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* where the point of view shot from the car turns the frame into a tunnel, into which one point perspective seems to recede endlessly into a Futurist dream of speed, power and freedom. But unlike Kubrick's film – which openly delights in the fantasy - this dream is shown to be a simulacrum. The shots of the car are obviously stationary because, despite the wind effects and the street-lights flashing by on the windshield, the overall lighting remains static and consistent. Another way that we notice that the car is not moving is that the relationship of the camera and the car is highly elaborate and precise: The camera delicately pans the metallic surface of the Ferrari, gliding over its small curved windshield. It is as if one machine (the camera) were lovingly playing with another (the car) in a macabre dance. Once again Fellini evokes a cinematic convention (the freedom of speed and the open road) and proceeds to negate it at the same time.

As Toby drives around a fountain in the middle of a square the car's headlights illuminate a cardboard dog. Fellini shows much of the "reality" which Toby encounters, including people, to be props. Near a restaurant a waiter stands as if paralyzed with fear on the edge of the sidewalk. In a long shot we then see the Ferrari hit a mannequin dressed as the waiter and speed off. Like the actress in the cleaning commercial

transformed into a mannequin the waiter becomes a life size cut-out. The fact that Toby wants to “marry” the first and that he “kills” the second is significant. Unlike Toby, who is privileged, both the housewife and the waiter are subservient figures and Toby is shown in close-up looking at them before their transformation. These close-ups strongly suggest that the metamorphosis from human to mannequins and cardboard cut-out that people and animals undergo is a product of Toby’s imagination. Through Toby’s point of view we repeatedly see adults as grotesque caricatures driven by vanity, stupidity and greed. We are made to feel that these point of view shots are an honest assessment of the contemporary world, not despite the theatrical distortions, but because of them, for it is only then that we are able to see what lies underneath the surface of reality. Fellini in a sense has it both ways. Toby’s erratic point-of-view is treated as both an alcoholic withdrawal from a reality that is out of control, and as a justified indictment of a society that is spectacularly ridiculous when we see what it prizes. Fellini started his career as a caricaturist and he uses that talent with a scathing directness that can be seen as a comic moral critique along the lines of Petronius, Rabelais and Cervantes.

The crash comes against a barricade of oil drums and construction equipment. There is a shot of a tire spinning that is self consciously awkward, accomplished as before, by zooming and tracking at different rhythms. Toby gets out of the car and starts to walk down a modern highway in the middle of a deserted landscape as Nino Rota’s music abruptly stops. There is a fog and behind the fog there are only trees and mountains. Toby kicks an empty oil drum that rolls into the chasm. After a few seconds we hear a very distant crash at which point there is a close-up of Toby smiling. He looks up and sees the collapsed bridge between layers of fog, and on the other side of the abyss he sees the little girl dancing with her white ball. He shouts:

-I'm going to get across!

Toby backs the car up to build up speed and with a mad laugh he screams off. We lose the car in the fog but there is no sound of a crash. As the camera glides to the other side

of the chasm a white ball bounces in slow motion into the frame. The little girl catches the ball and picks up Toby's decapitated head from the ground. She smiles into the camera as Nino Rota's music returns to the soundtrack. We see the highway and the collapsed bridge at dawn as the street-lights that recede into the horizon are turned off (an inversion of Antonioni's *The Eclipse*).

Toby Dammit reverses the Christ story by having Toby visited by the devil who beckons him, literally from across a divide, into entering a space that is prohibited to men. What is this space? He drives his Ferrari headlong into an abyss, yet the depth of this abyss is an imaginary space since we never actually see it. It remains shrouded in darkness and fog, a space without boundaries; its incommensurability expressing the impossibility of apprehending all with the eye or of controlling all with the intellect. This “fall” is a version, at once Christian and Modern, of the mystery of original sin. The vertigo this space creates is not caused by a fear of falling to a finite point that is fatal, but rather of falling interminably into an endless void. That is why, despite the fact that we hear the oil drum crash after a few seconds, we never hear the sound of the car crashing; it never finishes falling because the cosmic and the psychic collapse into this void, an “event horizon”. This abyss disappears literally into Nature; a Nature that remains enigmatic, dangerous and ultimately unknowable. Hitchcock understood this impasse and linked it to memory and desire in *Vertigo*. Fellini links it precisely to the mysteries of nature which we cannot grasp by reversing the "leap of faith" so crucial to the Catholic imagination from Pascal to Kierkegaard and making it literal. Toby puts himself in the absurd position of having to use technology at its most sophisticated at that moment (a Ferrari) to attempt that “leap”. Yet this leap of faith is the negative of faith; it is faith with a modern face: It is ironic, self-conscious, arrogant, contemptuous, and self-loathing. The sudden and un-explained shift from day to night at the beginning of the film is our entrance into this space and the return to daylight at the end is our exit cue. The strangely futuristic road ahead of us that closes the film might be the vestige of a

civilization long gone, its metal retaining walls receding into the horizon, surrounded by nature, glowing red, simultaneously primordial and futuristic, as if the present had vanished - it's all as real and deep as a classical landscape and as flat and fake as a backdrop on a film set.

1. *The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* / edited by Stephen Peithman. Avenel, 1981

2. *From Poe to Valery* / T.S. Eliot / From: *On Poetry and Poets* / Faber & Faber 1984

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