

# Fellini-Satyricon

( aka: "Satyricon" )

Italy / France : 1969 : dir. Federico Fellini : PAA / UA / PEA

: 129 min

prod: Alberto Grimaldi : scr: Federico Fellini, Bernardino Zapponi

& Brunello Rondi : dir.ph.: Giuseppe Rotunno

Max Born; Martin Potter; Hiram Keller; Mario Romagnoli; Capucine; Salvo Randone;  
Donyale Luna; Lucia Bosé; Gordon Mitchell; Alain Cuny; Fanfulla; Magali Noel; Tanya Lopert

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*All the lip-smacking debaucheries of imperial Rome. Here an albino hermaphrodite is invoked as a cure for loss of virility. Source: The International Encyclopedia of Film*



*As forty years earlier, in the lavish inventories of decadence filmed by Cecil B De Mille, all of the "wickedness" here is implied rather than exhibited – and not for reasons of taste or restraint either. A quickie cover version of the film released just in advance of this one was immediately impounded by the Italian authorities. See further details below.*

*Source:*

**Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:**

"Opinions vary on the merits of this visually stunning but overindulgent spectacle on ancient Rome, but if you love Fellini, you'll be more receptive than most viewers to his unique panorama of colourful and bizarre characters. Shot in Panavision. \*\*\* "

**Halliwel's Film Guide review:**

"Sexual adventures of a Roman student<sup>1</sup>. Garish, sporadically enjoyable sketches on a very thin thread of plot: a more benevolent version of the usual Fellini nightmare. Scr: Federico Fellini & Bernardino Zapponi. Academy Award nomination: Fellini, Best Director. \* "

"A picaresque satire in fragments... a series of tableaux which carry the poetry visually at the price of coherence."

<sup>1</sup> Umm, they had "students" in classical Rome, yes?

– Mike Wallington, **NFT bulletin**

"Part of the gradual decomposition of what once was one of the greatest talents in film history... a gimcrack, shopworn nightmare"

– John Simon

**Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide review:**

"In Rome circa 500A.D. two students (Potter and Keller) go their different ways after fighting over a pretty boy (Born). They have many adventures before meeting up again, some of which a drunken orgy, imprisonment on a galley ship and a duel with the Minotaur. This adaptation of Petronius' witty fragment is overblown and over-indulgent, but with one or two moments of the director at his grotesque best. It is really "**LA DOLCE VITA**" in Ancient Rome, with Fellini looking ponderously and with assumed disapproval at the immoral goings-on of a pre-Christian society (and by implication today's), and the "spiritual" episode is not far from Cecil B De Mille territory."

**The Companion to Italian Cinema** note:

“Though opposed in principal to literary adaptations, Fellini has adapted a series of texts, beginning with Edgar Allen Poe... Petronius’ *"Satyricon"* attracted him as a series of fragments whose gaps begged to be filled in, and the lists of sexual conquests in Casanova’s *"Memoirs"* (which Fellini found as boring as a telephone directory) invited his demystification (*"CASANOVA"*, 1976)..."

**The Critics’ Film Guide** review:

“A handsome young student (Martin Potter) enters into the pagan spirit [*sic*] of Ancient Rome. Big, bold, boring, repetitive movie about Ancient Roman debauchery, which Fellini unsurprisingly finds A Bad Thing. The trouble is that he also revels in it, which confuses his message; there’s hardly any characterisation or plot, and the whole thing is grossly over-length. **4/10**”

**Pro:**

“It remains a film about images, not about stories. Some shots are as carefully composed as a 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting... And hardly any of this is done artily.”

– Paul Barker, **New Society**

“From Petronius, Fellini has taken a title, names and episodes, a loose picaresque framework, but the preoccupations, emphases, and the peculiar quality of joyless zestfulness are quintessentially his own... As the film so slowly unrolls, the impression is of sameness rather than variety: a sameness of excess, of masks and grotesques, entrails and decapitation, blubbery flesh and billowing costumes.” – Penelope Houston, **Spectator**

“Translates this decadence into visual terms so stunning and fantastic that one can only conclude Fellini is a marvellous madman... The film doesn’t have a plot [but]... the landscape of fantasy doesn’t need plots... A work of genius.”

– Lorraine Alterman, **Rolling Stone**

“An explosion of madness and perversion [*sic*], designed like grand opera of the absurd – a homosexual odyssey in which the creatures of Fellini’s mind writhe about like sequined snakes toward some surrealistic damnation of the soul. Every frame is filled with lust, greed, avarice, sacrifice, pain and human torture...”

There is no point in trying to analyse *"SATYRICON"* in terms of theme, plot or character development. Scenes melt into each other without connection or cohesion. It is Cocteau out of Dali, an exercise in mind expansion which is a major requisite for anyone who sincerely cares about movies and the direction in which they are going.”

– Rex Reed

**Mixed:**

“Certainly his technique stupefies us. But his ideas are too confused or too personal to engage us.”

– Michel Capdenac, **Lettres Françaises**

“For the final half-hour and more bewilderment has set in. Yes, it is boring all right, boring because it is not only long but disconnected, allowing no sympathy for its characters, admitting no development of anything... In the cinema, Fellini’s *"SATYRICON"* grows wearisome. But in retrospect the film suddenly isn’t boring... it is a brilliant curiosity.” – **Dilys Powell**

**Anti:**

“Barely satiric and a huge con... Part of the gradual decomposition of what once was one of the greatest talents in film history... A gimcrack, shopworn nightmare.” – John Simon

“In *"LA DOLCE VITA"*, he used the orgies of modern Rome as a parallel to ancient Rome, and now he reverses the analogy to make the same point – that man without a belief in god is a lecherous beast. The film is full of cautionary images of depravity [*sic*] that seem to come out of the imagination of a Catholic schoolboy: an unconscionable number of performers stick out their evil tongues at us, and there are leering cripples, fat freaks with hideous grins, and so on. Fellini draws upon his master-entertainer’s feelings for the daydreams of the audience, and many people will find this film eerie, spellbinding, and even profound. Essentially, though, it’s just a hip version of De Mille’s *"THE SIGN OF THE CROSS"* (also a photogenic demonstration of the highly dubious proposition that godlessness is lawlessness), and it’s less entertaining than De Mille’s kitsch – maybe because no-one is given a role to play; Fellini is the only star.”

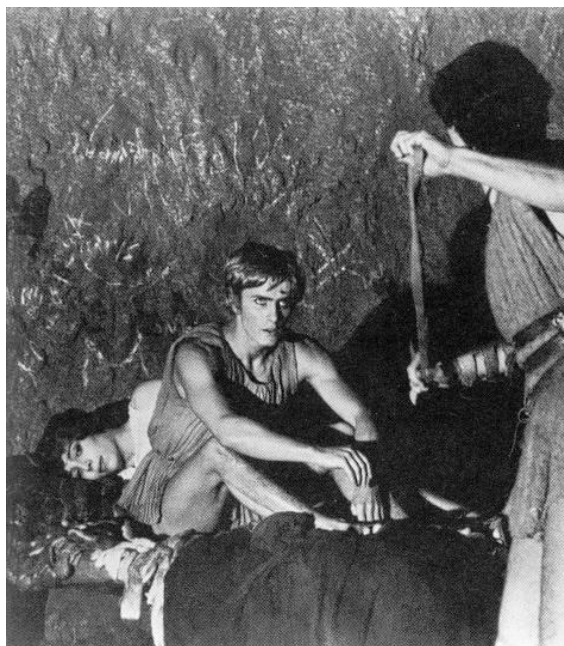
– **Pauline Kael**

**The Good Film and Video Guide** review:



“The retitling of the *Satyricon* is well-judged (if nothing else is) since this is less Petronius' licentious and witty satire than

an abstract jumble typical of its director. In some superb settings carefully lit extras jump up and down while in the foreground



*Top : The succulent slave boy Giton (Max Born), Fellini's "whore with an angel's face", over whose caresses the two young studs (not "students") Encolpius and Ascylltus have a falling out – precipitating the portmanteau of bawdy escapades which follows. Since Fellini was himself heterosexual, Giton does not conform to any accepted aesthetic of gay culture. He is the come-hither androgyne to which heterosexual men can best relate – a woman in a boy's body. Note that the costumes of Encolpius and Ascylltus look if anything more characteristically Greek than Roman.*

*Source: Films & Filming*

imaginatively accoutred grotesques loll on sofas, making aphorisms about art and poetry. Sex is daintily conveyed by some men fingering each other's arms."

**Images in the Dark – an Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film & Video review:**

"Set in Nero's decadent Rome, this wild and purposefully shocking phantasmagoria is a free-form adaptation of the Petronius book. Two handsomely athletic youths, the blond Encolpius and the grinning, raven-haired Ascyltus, are first seen fighting over the affections of Giton, a strangely pretty boy [*sic*]. The two meet up repeatedly in this dreamlike tale which takes them through wild adventures in a world peopled with hermaphrodites, dwarfs, a Minotaur, prostitutes, nymphomaniacs and homosexuals. Boldly bizarre and visually exciting, the film is imbued with homoeroticism, despite its mainly heterosexual story. Because of this, gay historian Tyler Parker once wrote that this was "the most profoundly homosexual film of all time"."

Excerpt from **The International Encyclopedia of Film** profile of Fellini:

"...The film which followed – "**FELLINI-SATYRICON**" (1969) – is a return to the purely baroque, an extravagant projection of the decadent world of Petronius, and elicited some hostile criticism..."

**Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89**  
review:

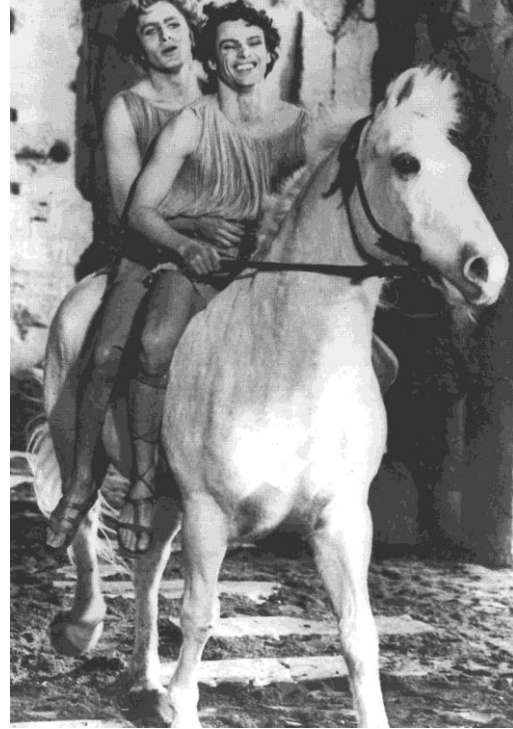
"Once again, Fellini dazzles the eye with a series of ghastrly, picaresque, beautiful, freaky, ravishing, bestial images as he turns his attention to recreating the world of Petronius Arbiter, Rome circa 50-66 A.D. But movie math finds that in this "**SATYRICON**" the whole adds up to considerably less than the sum of its parts. \*1/2 "

**A Pictorial Guide to the Talkies** note:

"1970: European films were easily holding their own against their American rivals and while those that made the most money were not always the best, the pick of the year included "**MY NIGHT AT MAUD'S**", "**BORSALINO**", "**THE THINGS OF LIFE**" and Bresson's "**AU HASARD BALTHAZAR**"... and it was impossible to ignore Fellini's visually stunning "**SATYRICON**"."

**The Time Out Film Guide** review:

"Sprawling and conspicuously undisciplined, this is less an adaptation of Petronius than a free-form fantasia on his themes. Fellini's characteristic delirium is in fact anchored in a precise, psychological schema: under the matrix of



*Frightening the horses was no impediment in Nero's Rome – even though one of them (Incitatus) had been a Senator under his predecessor Caligula.*  
Source: Fellini

bisexuality, he explores the complexes of castration, impotence, paranoia and libidinal release. And he pays homage to Pasolini's ethnographic readings of myths. It's among his most considerable achievements. Video: Warner VHS PEV 99285 "

**Video Movie Guide 1993** review:

"Federico Fellini's visionary account of ancient Rome before Christ<sup>2</sup> is a bizarre, hallucinatory journey. Imaginative art direction, lavish costumes, and garish makeup create a feast for the eyes. Composer Nino Rota's brilliant score is another plus. Italian dialogue with English subtitles. Not rated, contains nudity and violence. \*\*\*1/2 "

<sup>2</sup> circa 50-66 A.D...



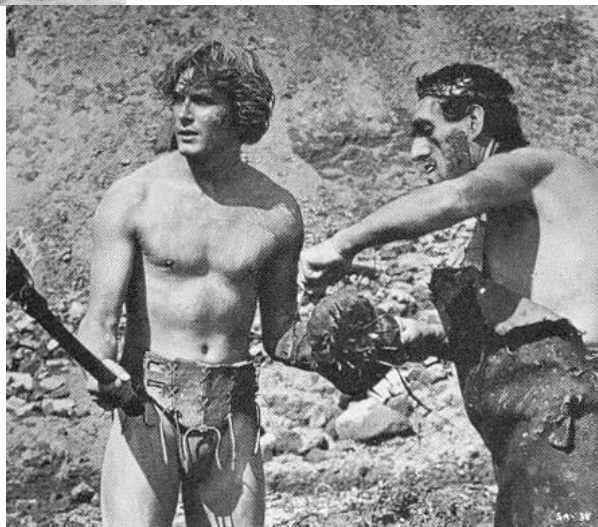
The Virgin Film Guide review:

“Orgy, anyone? The bizarre characters and situations that had filled the films of

Federico Fellini since his early "**VARIETY LIGHTS**" found their ultimate expression in this dreamy, hallucinatory depiction of



*If Fellini's film is, as suggested, a kind of pot pourri of bewitching scenes and images without structure or context, then we must let the images speak for themselves as best they can...*





*Heavenly Creatures – Mary Quant wig...*

*Source: Fellini*

ancient Rome. Based on the first century A.D. fragment of a drama by Gaius Petronius (with added inspiration from other writings of the period), this film strips away all the glamour and honour associated with the early Romans to expose a society in which conventional morality has little or no significance<sup>3</sup>. But Fellini's desire was not to criticise Rome,

<sup>3</sup> Self-evidently, where a morality has "little or no significance" to a society, it can scarcely be said to be "conventional"

nor was it to set the history books straight; rather, he found the perfect setting with which to parallel the youth culture of the 1960s.

Encolpius (Potter) and Ascyltus (Keller) are two students whose adventures in a hotbed of decadence are the excuse for the threadbare plot that holds this extraordinary spectacle together. Their sole aim is the pursuit of hedonistic desires, and hedonism is just what Fellini

gives us – there are concubines, nymphomaniacs, hermaphrodites (in the form of an albino infant with magical healing powers), sadism, masochism, and no doubt a few more "isms" as well amidst all the group sex going on<sup>4</sup>.

The odd thing is that the excess seems visual and mythical rather than really sexual. (For one thing, we see very little sex.) The masterful cinematography and stunning use of colour, achieved through the use of deliberately artificial light sources, lend the film an almost hypnotic sheen. Even if you can't recall particular images, the look of the film is likely to linger in your memory. Dir.ph: Giuseppe Rotunno. \*\*\*\* ”

#### Screening the Sexes – Homosexuality in the Movies various notes:

“..The prime duties of a Greek or Roman citizen were to father a family and fight for his country in war; if he performed these duties he was free to seek what bedmates he chose from either sex... When homosexuality was ridiculed or condemned in the ancient world of the West, that was because it was a sensual abuse, like eating or drinking too much and making an unseemly public spectacle. The scene in "**FELLINI SATYRICON**" about the licentious old actor who buys Giton establishes the issue very clearly. When Roman Emperors had luxurious vices, erotic excess could easily be one of them; whether the excess was homosexual or heterosexual in character hardly mattered to the offended and the envious.”

“...Of course, with "**FELLINI SATYRICON**" one comes to explicit homosexuality in the two principals and notices that the beauty of the boy Giton, over whom the two quarrel, is very epicene...”

“...The existence of a hugely built Mother Goddess as object of mystic worship by both homosexual and heterosexual males is impressively, poetically illustrated in "**FELLINI SATYRICON**" when Encolpius' impotence can be cured only by union with the incarnation of the female principle: a

monumental black woman like a prehistoric Venus.”

“...To return to the "**SATYRICON**", this most profoundly homosexual movie in all history was made by a heterosexual, Fellini. The work's free-form fantasy is very personal and yet calculatingly liberal, not unconnected in this respect with Petronius' own spirit. Conventional criticism calls the prose work, obeying the overtness of its title, a satire. A satire, very properly, it is – on manners, however, not matters. Like the antique saturnalias, the original work is a celebration of sexual drives, their orgiastic and eccentric license. Fellini has not departed from the "line" of Petronius except by personalising the material, making it (in the way more current now than ever) a specialised charade rather than the objective satire it technically was.”

[no listing in "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Cinema Book", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993"]

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<sup>4</sup> Tch, somehow we forgot to mention the homosexuality, didn't we? Let alone pederasty. Don't want to put our readers off altogether, eh?



It is fully twenty-five years since I last saw the film, and more than ten since I read the Petronius source text it only thinly resembles, so a detailed review would be inappropriate. Suffice to say the consensus that it is a sprawling, self-indulgent wallow is not unfair, whatever its curiosity value as a parade of grotesques. Whether or not Fellini meant it as a barbed irony on the morality of the late sixties only he could answer. It seems on a more elementary level to restate his fascination with the circus, the carnival, the freakshow as parodies of ordinary life. The Rome he paints is quite unreal, wholly theatrical, and the characters flitting anonymously across his screen as abstract as circus clowns. Fellini's counterpart in contemporary cinema would have to be Peter Greenaway, much of whose work exhibits precisely the same strengths and failings. See for example **'THE BABY OF MACON'**, or **"PROSPERO'S BOOKS"**.

Another context in which to read it would be the bawdy historical trilogy of Pasolini's – **"THE DECAMERON"**, **"CANterbury Tales"** and **"1001 NIGHTS"** – all of which received a theatrical distribution in the UK, which they would be unlikely to get today. Those films too were lewd on the eye, loose in structure and laced with literary significance one generally had to take as read, allegories too subtle for the provincial brain. Perhaps, one reasoned, a good deal was lost in the subtitling. One left the cinema with a grumbling stomach, having expected a solid meal and been served a plate of tantalising scraps.

Actually the film's relevance here is only slight, since the part of Giton in the story is all too brief, and he's in any case played by a Londoner in his twenties. It is for all that a rare nod from commercial cinema at a point in history long before same-age homosexuality and its pederastic variant became acrimoniously divorced. Giton is a mere pouting sex object, of course, a shag machine in heavy mascara, and I don't recall that he spoke a word in the entire film, but he is elevated to the status of main prize amid all the lazy fornication, and there is something unique in that at least – the boy as "obscure object of desire".

See also **"BADKONAK-E SEFID"** and **"BASHU"** - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.