

“Those Crazy Greeks!”: Federico Fellini’s Reception of Greek Culture in *Fellini Satyricon*
(1969)

Scholars have remarked on how Federico Fellini’s 1969 film *Fellini Satyricon* presented “an extraordinary challenge to Hollywood’s cinematic vision of Rome” (Wyke 1997: 188) and how his vision was a “creatively imitative” (Solomon 2001: 275) version of Petronius’ novel rather than a direct translation. By Fellini’s own account, his version of ancient Rome is “a science fiction picture... projected into the past, not the future” (Hughes 1969: 57). The bizarre, fragmentary narrative was especially so for contemporary Italian audiences, who felt a special connection to antiquity (Fellini 1970: 25). This paper looks at an under-analyzed but important aspect of that film, the representation of Greek culture. Where Fellini truly achieves his aesthetic goal, cognitive estrangement – a term coined by science fiction scholar Darko Suvin (1979: 7-8) – is not in ancient Rome, but in ancient Greece.

This paper explores the valences of Greek culture in *Fellini Satyricon* by focusing on three moments of the film: the visit to the art gallery, the Homeric performance at Trimalcione’s dinner, and the mock gladiatorial combat between “Theseus” and the “Minotaur.” For Fellini’s Italian audience these episodes result in even more cognitive dissonance than the scenes set in Rome because they recall the peplum films churned out at the studio Cinecittà that had been so popular with Italians during Fellini’s youth and in the years just before *Fellini Satyricon* was released (Lagny 1992).

Material derived from Greek culture is represented as estranged from the values of contemporary society, irrelevant, or inappropriate, not only to the diegetic world of the film, but also to the extradiegetic world of the audience. During Encolpio’s visit to a gallery with pieces derived from Greek and Roman art, including an Athenian red-figure vase and a painting from

the Tomb of the Diver, the poet Eumolpo laments that his contemporary Romans don't care about "those crazy Greeks" like Phidias or Apelles, who pursued virtue over money. These remarks position Greek culture as the antithesis of the film's Roman characters. At Trimalcione's dinner three actors perform a passage from Homer, but while other poetic passages, such as Trimalcione's plagiarism of Lucretius, are spoken in Italian, Homer remains in Greek. In Fellini's own remarks on the script, these lines are "incomprehensible and harmonious" (Fellini 1970: 143) – valued aesthetically, but not understood, either by the boorish internal audience or by the contemporary Greek-less external audience. In a later scene Encolpio is forced to confront a man wearing a Minotaur mask in an arena. When Encolpio shouts for mercy ("I'm not a Theseus, worthy of you"), the gladiator reveals this has all been a prank in honor of the god of mirth to the audience's raucous laughter. Encolpio is then humiliated when he is unable to copulate with the woman playing Ariadne. As Sullivan notes, Fellini invented this scene, inspired by several ancient sources (2001: 161-2); that he created this, going beyond Petronius, underscores his interest in using ancient Greece to alienate.

These three episodes demonstrate that Fellini situates the true Other of his film in Greek culture. This gives us insight into how ancient Rome and ancient Greece have been used to estrange modern audiences differently. Moreover, looking at the contemporary Italian reception of *Fellini Satyricon* allows us to glimpse how Italy's unique history shaped its response to the use of Greek materials differently than other national traditions.

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