

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Amarcord 1973 Federico Fellini. 1920-1993

STORY

Amarcord was Fellini's third successive movie to deal with his childhood. *The Clowns*, 1970, was made for television, and dealt with circus clowns. *Roma*, 1972, dealt with changing images of the Eternal City. *Amarcord* (which means 'I remember') is the most retrospectively rich of the three films, and is the most devoted to the mixture of documentary with fiction.

Opening. The film opens on a rich but gentle note; the annual falling of the puffy tree seeds, which will hang like tiny magic lanterns in the streets of an imagined city on the northern Adriatic coast. The falling of these puff seeds exercises a kind of magic on the children of the city, who dance back and forth, collecting them; as do even their parents, whom this natural gift inspires with their own childhoods. Shortly after this gift of magic, the streets fill with another reminder of nature as rite. The annual bonfire of the 'wicked witch,' heralding in the driving away of the spirits of winter, brings out the collective passions, and ancient roots, of this fictional city by the sea. We are being forewarned: this memory film is no childhood fairy tale.

Childhood. Childhood memories, to be sure, are the stuff of *Amarcord*, in which Fellini—through his surrogate kid, the himself who is Titta—lives it out in a turbulent middle class family. In that embrace Titta is surrounded by hot arguments, much familial love—at best—and on all sides emergences of rampant sexuality; spontaneous assaults on authority—the mocking of the local priest, as he attempts to extract confessions of masturbation ('touching himself') from Titta; the riotous manipulation of gullible teachers, as they attempt to inculcate the rudiments of Greek verbs or mathematic formulae; the intrusion, onto the community, of black shirted Fascists, as they march through the city streets or, in a painful close up, interrogate Titta's own Socialist dad, making him drink castor oil for his sins, and leaving behind them the after sense that the childhood on display here has been amply threaded through with dark and oppressive themes, as well as with unique magic. The darkness of authority, and the mute power of nature play together, into the brilliant visuals and aural, of this film, to create a hypnotic past-fixation which only a film like Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979) can vie with.

Senses. Fellini's film is a fictional documentary, if one accepts the genre. Holding it together, through splashes of episode, and a constant querying of the role of authority in life, is a camera avid to accent the power of a city's past, as one boy's life brings it back to life.

What would the well guided reader retain, from the argument of his senses with the passing of time, but the superb stillness of the puffy tree seeds, always just teasing the reaching fingers of the excited boys and girls; the architectural intricacies of a once distinguished baroque façade, history outspoken in the mouth of a constantly popping up local historian, who is forever in your face to recount; a thrilling town outing, through nighttime fog, to see, like a mythical creation, the passenger boat *Rex*, lighted to the teeth, appearing as a harbor apparition, dwarfing the neck-craning locals as they peer through darkness from their narrow skiff; or, finally, the apparition of a golden peacock in the snow perched in the half light of a magical *Amarcord* evening.

THEMES

The past. The intricacy and vivacity of the social past, filtered through the perceptions of a young guy in his early teens, makes for a tapestry of memories, fears, anxieties, lusts, and rebellions. This social past, as once the same kind of past of Marcel Proust, is inseparably close to the maker of the present film. To the question, does literature or film better restore the past, a vote for film could hardly fall on a more fitting example than *Amarcord*, which brings all the senses to a fine point on the detailed print of history.

Family. Titta's family is distinctive—aren't all families?—for its readiness to 'lay it all on the table.' Mom and Dad, and Titta's uncle and grandmother, burst into argument at little provocation, and Titta himself grows up both adolescent shy and open to the basically benign world around him.

Authority. The chief theme of the film is authority: the authority of church, family, teachers, the state—for the era of Il Duce was pressing on this community where martial music, loudspoken propaganda, and black leather boots were becoming the benchmarks of the time.

Death. The death of Titta's mother, who gradually wastes away, takes her son by surprise. Alone with the news, which means for Titta the end of an era, a nostalgia building sadness, the boy wanders along the sea shore among clusters of blowing seed pods, the closing of the annual natural cycle for Amarcord.

CHARACTERS

Titta Titta is the eye of the camera, and, within it, the voice of the teen age youth feeling out the texture of his past, in an almost mystical seeming city in northern Italy. The world passing around Titta—the locus of his family experience, his awarenesses of authority in church, school, politics—is suffused with nostalgia, though it is not all pleasant memories. Taking on this temporal passage, with Titta, means sharing Fellini's subtle and passionate *Bildungsroman*.

Titta's father is an irascible, high strung bricklayer, a strong Socialist who is suspect when the Socialist International is played from the bell tower of the Church. His penalty is this, to have his mouth washed out with castor oil, by the scornful Fascists in town.

Titta's mother is as temperamental as his father, and, like his father, regularly pushed aside by the rest of the family, so they can continue unimpeded with their own antics.

Tobacconist. This woman with the massive breasts is a major sexual indoctrination for Titta. On the occasion in question she closes the doors of her shop, pulls aside her blouse, and enfolds Titta in her gigantic pink boobs. Sucking away, he barely survives, until she gets what she wants and throws him out the door.

TITTA

Character Titta, the main character, is from the beginning a mid-teener seen in a crowd of celebrants, rejoicing in festivities for the end of winter. We soon know that his will be the voice and camera eye of the entire film, a commenter on the past, and a deeply absorbed participant of that past, in which he is coming into his manhood. That *Bildungsroman*, in which Titta is playing the main role, is essentially a passage through a variety of forms of authority, each of them—church, teachers, parents, military—attempting to oppress and suppress the young man. Does Titta survive all these challenges, and become the adult the *Bildungsroman* is pushing him toward? We might say that Titta is Fellini, the mature retrospective voice that underlies even Titta's quiet voice, and that holds Titta in his embrace.

Parallels. The model, of the young man's passage into adulthood, pervades world literature, celebrating life with particular vigor when one obstacle after another is surmounted. Figures like Telemachus (in the *Odyssey*), Pip (in *Great Expectations*), Tom Sawyer on the Mississippi, Siddhartha (in Hesse's eponymous novel), or even Orestes (in the *Oresteia*) all represent guys challenged to assert their manliness in the face of difficulties. Distinctive about Titta's passage is that he both shows us his world challenge and tells us about it, at the same time.

Illustrative moments

Charmed When we first see Titta he is staring in charmed delight at the trees' seed puffs, which are floating down through the early spring air. At the film's end, he is staring into the wonder of snow flakes.

Malicious. Along with his teen aged buddies, Titta indulges freely in mocking and teasing his teachers, his naïve priest, and his parents.

Confessing. Titta goes easy on himself, when his priest prompts him to confess any carnal sins such as the sin of 'touching himself.' Titta seems delightedly aware that he already knows more about sin than does the father confessor.

Seduced. Titta has been fascinated by the village femme fatale, Gradisca, but his true indoctrination, into the mysteries of the boudoir, is provided by the tobacconist, who nearly buries him in her breasts.

Discussion question

Is *Amarcord* an autobiography? Is it a fictional history? Or is it a different genre, a kind of visual prose poem? Has the film a point? Or is it like a great painting, showing us panels of an unfolding set of moods and visions?

What relation does Fellini have to Titta, in the film? Is there any critical gap between the two, in which Fellini is praising or judging the young man?