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The Two Themes: Settings in Fellini's Films

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A "place" is unique among the range of architectural creations; it is both distinctive and conventional, both public and individual. It may be difficult for a designer to maintain the balance between these extremes, but the work of Italian film director Federico Fellini, who has created many memorable places on the screen by exploring these contrasts, provides some insight on how this might be done.

Fellini consistently uses two themes to elaborate settings in his films. A major theme is represented by a physical structure or an activity that dominates a place; a minor theme is depicted by incidental objects or activities. A minimum thread of logic ties

the overall setting to the incidental elements, relating the two themes. But the two themes represent two versions, public and personal, of a place. By making this distinction and juxtaposition, Fellini presents a layered, balanced portrait.

In films that depict real places (such as those that appear in Fellini's autobiographical films), the major theme tends to be represented by a conventional image of a location. The Piazza delle Erbe, for example, a setting in *Amarcord*, has a standard appearance that a person probably could have found in any 1930s Italian town: stone pavement, buildings with tall, gloomy facades, arcades, American movie



posters, public festivals, residents taking their customary walks during the evening and men girl-watching.

Images that relate to the minor theme gradually emerge. After a rare winter storm, a six-foot-deep snowdrift accumulates on the piazza and the dark, stone buildings appear to float on the raised, white, glittering surface. Townspeople walk around through paths dug out in the snow. The young Fellini follows a girl he secretly loved in the labyrinth. Finally, a large blue and golden peacock owned by a local count flies into the monochromatic scene. These extraordinarily personal, accidental and sometimes surreal images contrast with the familiar depiction of the Piazza delle Erbe. It is through such a bold juxtaposition of two visions that the Piazza gains intimacy and unusual character at the same time.

In *Roma* (1971), Fellini depicts Raccardo Anulare, the highway that rings the city, on the eve of a football game. In the film, Fellini and his crew are driving in dense traffic to shoot a sequence. Horns are heard from all directions; people curse each other — typical scenes on a jammed highway.

But as the scene unfolds we see that the sky is stormy; it starts to rain. A crew member fires signal flares into the dark sky. A roadside building is burning. A truck of livestock overturns and animal blood mixes with the now heavy rain. No one notices the moment at which the public reality is mixed up with this personal surreality. But isn't it true that through the interplay of these two themes Fellini created a memorable Raccardo Anulare?

Fellini, in depicting a real place, often portrayed the major theme from a public point of view while portraying the minor theme from an idiosyncratic view. But he tended to do the opposite

with dreamed or imagined places: The general setting he presents is a strange, distorted world, yet realistic details appear constantly, alluding to the world with which viewers are familiar.

In *The City of Women* (1979), the hero, dreaming, falls into a place that symbolizes the battlefield between the two sexes. The general configuration of the place is a dramatically distorted stadium with a huge altar in its center. Within this extraordinary environment, however, details such as cracks in the masonry wall, a picture of Queen Christina of Sweden, electric switchboards and graffiti are visible. As the hero tries to find his way around this misty nowhere, a telephone rings. Such a juxtaposition of realistic details and an eccentric background not only produces the ambiguity that is common to dreams, but also helps the viewer find a symbolic meaning in Fellini's personal fascination.

Divide a place into a major structure and minor details. Let the two themes depict the locale from two different perspectives. This is how one can freely express one's personal fascination about a place without disorienting an audience.

In this way, perhaps, architects can follow Fellini's admonition to create spaces that "bring together those features you associate with a place so it is immediately recognizable, and at the same time reproduce a feeling."¹

Note

1. Federico Fellini, *Cinecitta* (London: Studio Vista, 1989), p. 122.

Public and personal images of the Piazza del Urbe combine in the snowstorm scene in Fellini's *Amarcord*.
Courtesy New World Pictures.