

## *Nights of Cabiria* by Federico Fellini (Anthropological Notes)

In Federico Fellini's film *Nights of Cabiria* I distinguish three thematic sequences as well as a "prologue" and an "epilogue".

### "Prologue": River

**C**abiria and Giorgio, a balloon salesman, are on a date and strolling along a river. Suddenly, the young man pushes the girl into the water and snatches her purse containing 40 000 lire. Drowning, Cabiria calls out for help and sinks in the river. She is rescued by three boys, who pull her out onto the riverbank (not the one along which she was originally walking, but the opposite one).

The mythological context of this scene is rather obvious. The river is a boundary whose crossing denotes transformation, especially considering that this is the Tiber. (In addition, Cabiria is a prostitute; cf. Latin: *lupa*). The incident in the film resembles a *sui generis* rite of submersion and brings to mind baptism. This ritual-initiation meaning of the scene is underlined by the comments made by the girl's saviours and the numbers they mention: *Did she go under? - Three times. - At least seven times! - Ten times!*

Cabiria loses consciousness, a state that depicts death (*Looks dead to me* – says one of the rescuers). Before she regains consciousness (*She opened her eyes*) she is lifted in a comical manner by her legs, which accentuates the abnormal and upside-down character of the situation in which she has found herself.

During the fatal crossing of the river Cabiria loses a shoe. This is an obvious suggestion that we are dealing with a transformation of the Cinderella myth, from which the interpretation performed by Fellini extracted deeply concealed and, as a rule, ignored strata.

The prologue of the film could be interpreted as an image of an initiation experience composed of symbolic death and rebirth. In this case, however, the scene is barely an "opening", the beginning of the path, with Cabiria attempting to change her life. The loss of a slipper (similarly as in the tale about Cinderella) guarantees that a return to the normal world would not

be final. The river also concludes the story in the epilogue: Cabiria once again finds herself next to a river, this time on a high escarpment, together with a fiancé whose love she does not doubt.

Now, however, Cabiria is at the onset of a dangerous journey across a world possessing the multiple features of a menacing netherworld. This is why in the story's composition the world of Cabiria succumbs to *sui generis* metamorphoses and gains the traits of an alien reality. Take the chronologically first example: when she returns home after the incident Cabiria is compelled to enter not through the door (the keys are in the lost handbag) but through a window.

It is only then that she realises just how close she was to death. *What if I had died?* – she wonders. It is precisely the experience of death that inclines her to make a decision about forsaking her former life. (*Can't you see I had enough?*), confirmed by burning all of Giorgio's belongings outside the house (purification by water is thus followed by cleansing by fire).

At this point, Cabiria emulates the gesture (dignified, by the standards of a suburban prostitute) performed by the despondent Dido abandoned by Aeneas – a ritual whose purpose in the *Aeneid* is revenge upon an unfaithful lover (sympathetic magic of sorts) and preparation for own death. Dido asks her sister:

Build a pyre, secretly, in an inner courtyard, open to the sky,

and place the weapons on it which that impious man left

hanging in my room, and the clothes, and the bridal bed

that undid me: I want to destroy all memories  
of that wicked man ...

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV, 494-498

(In the course of this ritual, Dido has *one foot free of constraint*). Cabiria, who in this fashion severed her ties with the past, is now facing three trials.

### **Trial I: Hell – Heaven (À La Hollywood)**

Cabiria is a lowly prostitute whose rank is expressed by her place of work: *Passeggiata Archeologica*. True, she is treated by the habitués as slightly odd and flip-pant, but here she feels "at home" and unrestrained. On this particular evening Cabiria resolves to set off exceptionally to the exclusive *via Veneto*, where elegant prostitutes promenade next to equally stylish venues. For a girl from the provinces this is a totally alien terrain, she feels awkward and does not know how to behave (and almost falls under a car). Her escapade can be perceived as a first act and attempt at abandoning her tawdry life and a quest for something new and better.

This extraordinary and almost magical world appears to be conducive for Cabiria: a miracle happens. After a quarrel with his fiancée, a famous film star Alberto Lazzari (played by an actor named Amadeo Nazzari) beckons her, standing nearby and observing the incident with interest, to his smart convertible. The meaning of the following scene - filmed according to a Hollywood recipe but clearly featuring the features of a pastiche (the smiling and happy girl-Cinderella rides at the side of a magnificent man of her dreams in a beautiful car, to the accompaniment of suddenly different, romantic music) - is multi-storeyed: it depicts both the true mood of the overjoyed Cabiria as well as her naïveté and the illusory character of the whole sudden transformation.

During her fairy-tale journey Cabiria visits two places: subterranean hell and heaven, both extremely attractive.

The first stage is an elegant NIGHT CLUB. Entering it is by no means an easy feat just as the unauthorised crossing of the boundary of the netherworlds: it is protected by fierce Cerber-guardians. A while later Cabiria is unable to extricate herself from drapes concealing a passage. She overcomes both obstacles thanks to her "divine" guide.

Inside the "infernal" club a band plays exotic rhythms, with dark-skinned female dancers moving to the beat. The ambiance is rather artificial and stiff, and the behaviour of all those present is slow-motion and unnatural. The still faces of the women sitting at the tables, as if lifeless, express surprise at the presence and conduct of the intruder, who is the only person to spontaneously express her joy and feelings once the couples begin to dance.

From the infernal underworld the path leads to THE ACTOR'S HOME – a villa on the edge of town. The most sacred interior of this temple, the bedroom, is on the first floor. The steep stairs leading to it, in the manner of Jacob's ladder or the *Scala sancta* in a Roman sanctuary, seem to reach the sky and their upper part glistens with unusual light. Here too, along the boundary, we encounter Cerber-guardians: two dogs run down the stairs.

The entire villa, in particular the bedroom, is full of assorted plants, trees, parrots and fish, comprising a setting straight out of paradise. It also brims with diverse wonders: a wall decoration resembles a monstera, a wardrobe opens automatically, the music is of a variety that Cabiria has never heard before, and the served dishes are unfamiliar and strange. The bed, in the manner of an altar on which a deity reclines, has a baldachin supported by characteristically twisted columns copied from the altar in the basilica of St. Peter in Rome (this element was preserved by Bob Foss in an American remake of Fellini's film).

Partaking of supper at this bed-altar Cabiria weeps with joy: *Who's gonna believe this when I tell 'em?*

If the film were to adhere to the Hollywood convention it would end right here. But then we would be dealing with yet another version of the Cinderella-story scenario for *Pretty Woman*. The Fellini film, however, keeps its distance towards the myth and breaks it or rather grants it the rank of existential authenticity.

The miracle vanishes. Illusion is defeated by truth. Alberto's fiancée returns. Throughout the whole night the idol conceals Cabiria in a bathroom and then sends her away. The girl refuses to accept money; this would, after all, ultimately break her unexpected connections with this heavenly world, but she is to be robbed also of this illusion – Alberto insists on paying her and the festivity turns into ordinary service rendered. Cabiria leaves the netherworld, hurting her nose against the invisible glass door of the palace. She goes back home. Nothing has changed.

### ***Trial II: holy mountain***

this time the trial is openly religious: a pilgrimage to a Marian sanctuary. The essence of its failure, however, remains the same: falsehood, lack of authenticity, and artificiality just as great as in high society stylised to resemble the American cinema.

Initially, when the habitués of *Passaggiata Archeologica* (including a cripple counting on a miraculous cure) plan with religious fervour a Sunday trip to Madonna del Divine Amore, Cabiria remains unconvinced. Apparently, her experiences with death (the river, the lost slipper) make it possible to suspect the unauthentic nature of the whole enterprise that, contrary to appearances, does not surpass daily life. Ridden with doubt she turns to a friend: *What am I asking for?* but decides to join the pilgrimage when she sees a procession walking down the street, a sight that apparently instilled some hope.

The sanctuary, this time ostensibly real (i.e. understood literally), is located on top of a mountain. A crowd of pilgrims, including Cabiria, climbs the slope. Holy stairs – holy mountain: in mythological categories they signify the same, i.e. the road to heaven. Unfortunately, here too sanctity is an illusion. The cripple calculates it into money, and women succumb either to the mood of fairground fun (*We're gonna get photos!*) or hysterical religiosity waiting for a miracle. Only Cabiria, just as in the nightclub, is distinctive due to the authenticity of her involvement. She prays: *Madonna, help me... to change my life. Bestow your grace on me too.*

After the service everyone enjoys a picnic, eating, drinking, and having fun, all with the exception of Cabiria, sad and lost in thought. The dialogue with her friend, Wanda, clearly demonstrates the sense of personal tragedy:

Cabiria – We haven't changed. Nobody's changed! We're all the same as before, just like the cripple.

Wanda – What do you want to change, Cabiria??

Cabiria – *You think this is the end? You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna sell the house. Everything. I'm leaving. . Good-bye... I'm through with all this!*

This part of the film ends just as it started: with a procession. This time, inebriated Cabiria jeers and accuses the women taking part in it of hypocrisy and falsehood, and calls them "little nuns": *Did the Madonna give you mercy?*

Fellini refuses not succumb to illusion. He traces falsehood even in those places, which claim to have exclusive rights to truth. A person desiring authentic transformation cannot preserve anything from his heretofore life, even a ready-made model of metamorphosis. Repeatable ritual is thus treated as a bogus phenomenon. Those incapable of abandoning all (see: Cabiria's evangelical words: *I'm gonna sell the house. Everything. I'm leaving...*) shall never change or reach heaven.

### **Trial III: magic and miracle**

each of the trials to which Cabiria is subjected, and which she takes on, is associative with entering space possessing all the features of the mythical netherworld: alienness, distinctness marked with a boundary difficult to cross, peripheral or central location, a variously understood sacrum, strangeness, and wonder. In the third trial this space is a variety show.

Here, the tawdriness and illusory character of the proposed metamorphosis are literal: the role of the priest is assumed by a magician-hypnotist in the guise of a sorcerer. It is, however, precisely in this manner – according to the principle of mutually exclusive opposites – that the events transpiring on stage seem to assume the traits of specific authenticity, especially when they cross the limits of the commonplace tricks performed by a magician. Something whose genuine character cannot be doubted, is taking place. In this respect, the whole situation brings to mind the celebrated scene from *The Master and Margarita* and even more so the spectacle given by an illusionist-hypnotist in Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician*. In the case of the Fellini vision, the most authentic in the circus tackiness of the *variété* appears to be the magician's *magnetic* force.

Cabiria takes part in a hypnosis spectacle. First a group of men crosses the sea (a recurrence of the motif from the "prologue"). As always, Cabiria is afraid and initially refuses the magician's invitation (*Mind you, I have my own house....*), and then she succumbs totally to the spell and returns to the days of her youth.

Right in front of the audience, the magnetiser forces Cabiria to tell the truth about her feelings, and then

arranges a "fantastic" date. Cabiria, now under the assumed name of Maria, experiences authentic ardent love for a fictitious young man named Oscar; they meet, she picks flowers to make a wreath, and conducts romantic conversations (asking with hope: *Then it's true? You really love me? Is it really true? You're not trying to fool me? Do you really love me?*). The sincerity with which she professes her feeling is so great that the magician (wearing a carnival hat with devil's horns) becomes disconcerted by the extraordinary outcome of his tricks and interrupts the séance. Cabiria collapses in a faint, and the gathered crowd greets her while laughing heartily.

The show is illusion, but Cabiria's feelings are true - there is no doubt that the importance of this event is greater than that of the two previous trials. This impression seems it be confirmed by the unexpected effect of the séance: the released force of emotions evokes a real Oscar who by accident (*As if guided by fate*, to cite his words) found himself in the audience and in that part of Rome.

A third chance for a miracle. Upon this occasion, a humble accountant from the provinces, an orphan, appears to be a man worthy of Cabiria and, at the same time, totally different from her acquaintances from *Passeggiata Archeologica*: well-mannered, discreet and gentle. Most importantly, he is truly in love. Apparently, three times lucky – this time Fellini will permit his protagonist to attain her goal.

Certain unrest is introduced by Brother Giovanni, a Franciscan. Met accidentally (?), he instructs Cabiria: *Everyone should be in God's grace. Whoever lives in God's grace is happy*. Since Brother Giovanni does live in God's grace he apparently possesses nothing else or has no need for anything more. He is God's fool, happy and free, who has truly renounced the heretofore world and experienced transformation. *I'm at the San Francesco Monastery, but I'm hard to find. I'm always running around*. Later, it turns out that he is not even a monk and thus cannot (or: does not have to) hear confession. He remains outside all formal configuration, even the Church. We feel that he had discovered the truth, while Cabiria has only started searching for it.

Meanwhile, the miracle still works and Oscar proposes marriage (Cabiria assures Wanda: *You'll get a miracle, like me*). This is the first time that she implements the earlier, constantly repeated decision: she abandons all. She even sells her house, the frequently recalled symbol of her stabilisation and the centre of her secure life, however pitiful it might appear. It is worth recalling that she already told Albert Lazzari: *Mind you, I have my own house... with water, electricity, bottled gas, every convenience. I got everything. Even a thermometer. See this one here? She never, ever slept under an arch*. (Note the interesting and recurring theme of the thermometer, an instrument making it possible to check concurrence with the norm).

While leaving, Cabiria takes almost nothing with the exception of a portrait of her mother. The severance is to be absolute. The gesture stressing this act involves small change handed to two poor children – a symbolic payment of all debts. Cabiria decorates her head with a wreath of sorts, a symbol of purity, and is ready to set off on genuine journey towards a new life. A bus takes her into the unknown.

### Epilogue. River, “Cursed” Wood And Carnival

The “Epilogue” is a *sui generis* repetition of the prologue. Oscar, strangely changed, wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigarette, now resembles Giorgio from the opening scenes of the film rather than his earlier self. Once again, the heart of the matter is money in Cabiria’s purse, but this time the sum is 350 000 lire.

Oscar takes Cabiria for a walk (*Let’s go. The sunset is beautiful in the woods*). They wander westwards, across a WOOD, which changes into the antechamber of HELL. Cabiria picks flowers, just like during the hypnotic trance at the *variété*:

Oscar – *Come. I know a shortcut.*

Cabiria – *Oscar! Where are you? What a bad boy you are! Look at these flowers. Like ‘em? They stink, but still. I never saw flowers like these before... What’s wrong? Are you sad? Why don’t we carve our initials on the trees?*

Oscar – *Let’s go. The sunset is beautiful in the woods.*

Cabiria – *The sunset, eh? Where do you wanna go?*

They reach a high river escarpment.

Cabiria: *What a strange light. Beautiful, isn’t it? I guess there is some justice in the world. You suffer, you go through hell but then happiness comes along for everyone. You’ve been my angel.*

By now we know that he is a fallen angel: Cabiria is wrong once again. Oscar’s hand, which she kisses, is ice cold. The question: *Can you swim?* confirms our suspicions about his intentions. The reply resembles the beginning of a journey whose end is now nigh: *Not me! I almost drowned once. But they saved me. Just imagine! I was pushed in!*

Back to the beginning: at this very moment Cabiria deciphers Oscar’s intention from the expression on his face: *What’s wrong? What’s the matter? You don’t want to kill me, do you? Answer me! You want to kill me? You want to kill me! Don’t just stand there. Say something! ... For... the money? For the money. Kill me! Kill me! Throw me off the cliff! I don’t want to live anymore.* Oscar flees with Cabiria’s purse.

Now for the last sequence of the film. Cabiria awakens on a riverbank. Holding a strange flower, a souvenir of death, she returns through the forest.

This time – only now! - she has lost everything: home, money, all the support in the world known to her, and, predominantly, the wish to live, all hope. Perhaps this third trial was a success after all?

Suddenly, there resounds surprisingly gay music. In the centre of the wood there appear several merry-makers, dressed in costumes and wearing tall hats resembling those of a wizard; someone is playing a saxophone, someone else a guitar, someone is singing, everyone is dancing. This woodland carnival should be comprehended as a sign confirming the rejection of heretofore observed norms, but also as a symbol of hope, transformation, renaissance (one of the revellers says: *Maurizio, hurry up! We’re leaving! We’re gonna lose our way going home!*).

The whole group surrounds Cabiria. All play for her and the guitarist barks like a dog. The words uttered by a girl in a hat, who smiling greets Cabiria: “Good evening”, as if welcoming her, new born, to a new world, assume special importance. Cabiria tearfully replies, smiling for the first time. With a small nod of her head she greets everyone, including the viewers - for a fraction of a second she gazes straight at the camera.

This barely discernible smile is a sign that Cabiria’s quest has ended successfully.

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Frequent mention is made of the ease with which Federico Fellini used to alter the details of his biography recounted to journalists. His stories resembled more the creation of the part of a film character than an official life story. Particular events, activity, words and statements recalled elements of a work of art, just like metaphors in a poem that cannot be treated literally.

A recognised and as it were confirmed biography denotes becoming accustomed, the subjection of one’s life to a certain scheme rendering us distant from ourselves and our truth, full of paradoxes and contradictions. This is why Fellini apparently attached utmost importance to a concession to naïveté and ridiculousness, a sign of the absence of adaptation and being injured.

One of the symptoms of searching for the truth is naive astonishment – so frequently demonstrated by Cabiria. She is surprised by that, which everyone else regards as obvious because it is “normal” and recurs according to an old scheme. Such naive wonder – extremely comical – is an indication of coming closer to the truth and even sanctity.

Contrary to all appearances, Fellini, a master of blasphemy, was simultaneously engaged in a quest for sanctity free of convention and hypocrisy. Blasphemy, or rather a state described by some as such, possesses, similarly to laughter, a purifying power. In my opin-

ion Fellini's films, starting with the most celebrated *La Strada*, tell about man's path towards such a state. The same holds true for *Nights of Cabiria*, a film about a poor Roman prostitute, naive or outright innocent, who, totally unaware of the rules of the game, seeks love, happiness and feelings. The dramatic consistency with which Fellini shows the tragedy lurking in the Cinderella myth is incredible. In doing so, he demonstrated that naïveté is tantamount to believing in a miracle produced by a good fairy. It is just as naive to believe in the love of a prince, who having completed playing the part of a lover returns to his mundane occupations.

Nonetheless, it is this naïveté, i.e. incessant roaming, that can ultimately guide Cabiria to a dark forest,

to the edge of a precipice and the world, where she loses absolutely everything and even forsakes all hope. Is this not, however, a situation in which we finally free ourselves from the illusions created by life and remain with the reality of our dreams?

Fellini is not a moralist but a teacher: when in the closing scene Cabiria's tearful face displays for a fleeting moment her distinctive and meaningful smile, and her eyes for a brief, almost unperceivable split of a second look straight at the camera, Fellini appears to be turning towards us, saying: have the courage to embrace naïveté – it will guide you all the way to this point. And it is here that true life begins.



Giulietta Masina in *Nights of Cabiria* by Federico Fellini