

Charlie on an Italian Road*

The name of Chaplin is constantly mentioned in connection with Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). Behind the flaxen head of Gelsomina and her face of an old child there emerges Charlie's mournful countenance despite the fact that *La Strada* is not Chaplinesque. On the contrary, it is a polemic with Chaplin.

Charlie and Gelsomina. In both cases, a small figure with a funny gait. A face showing limited expression, with the exception of the twitching eyebrows and evocative eyes. In the first case, the white make-up stresses the expressive eyes, and in the other the eyebrows are painted on together with the make-up of a clown and an equally pale complexion. Charlie displays repeatedly identical make-up and is always a clown or a puppet, but Gelsomina puts on make-up only during her circus performances, and in the manner of Baptiste in Marcel Carné's *Les Enfants du Paradis* sometimes wears it after the performance while experiencing problems that are not make-belief or a part learnt by heart. Here, I perceive the first stage of a polemic with Chaplin: Gelsomina is not a puppet or a metaphor and her story is not a contemporary fairy tale.

Further on everything resembles the author of *The Kid*. In his case: a bowler hat, a tight topcoat and baggy trousers, in hers: a well-worn cape or an ill-fitting coat with a moth-eaten fur piece. Gelsomina, just like Charlie, is fond of life. When she is sad she is extremely mournful, but when she is happy she expresses joy with her whole face and body. She carries happiness within. Both are content as long as no one hurts them; when wind or anger cease for a moment and the Sun starts to shine – they immediately start adjusting their pitiful clothes. Charlie rubs his hands gleefully and pats his narrow chest. Gelsomina smooths her flaxen hair, blinks and smiles to herself. Along a wide highway, far from other people, Charlie regains his good mood and his normal gait ends with a joyful leap. Left all alone in a field Gelsomina smells the flowers, stands in front of a scrawny tree and waves her arms to emulate the motion of the bare branches. She wanders in the empty landscape in the manner of a playful puppy and overjoyed listens closely to a resounding telephone pole.

Both are not of this world, although Charlie is a guest and Gelsomina a permanent resident. This difference becomes most conspicuous in the love life of the two characters. Both love lyrically, but Charlie is capable of renouncing emotions and resigning for the sake of a moral; after all, he is part of a fairy tale. Gelsomina's love is difficult, human and tragic. She has nowhere to seek refuge from it and is familiar with only one world.

Charlie's loves are sweet girls from children's textbooks, and his enemies are foolish and strong brutes whom he can easily deceive because reality in Charlie's

films is greatly amended. The land in which Gelsomina lives is modern Italy. The drama of *La Strada* is not a metaphor, as in the case of Charlie; it is real, cruel and irreversible, treated seriously and unfeelingly.

Fellini replaced Charlie's sweet maidens with a Chaplinesque brute, but this is a living brute whom Gelsomina loves; the blows are painful and aimed not at the body of a puppet but at human feelings. Fellini introduced his Charlie not into Chaplin's conventional reality but into the real world. In this film hunger is real and he who feeds the hungry demands to be paid in return. Here, a friend does not render help, but will perish from blows dealt by the stronger. The lifeless, cloudy autumn landscape offers no joy. Winter brings death. It is not true that the processions, the nuns, the wedding, Nature, Gelsomina, Zampanò, and the embittered philosopher "Il Matto" are mere symbols, as some would have it. If *La Strada* were a symbolic film it would not speak to us in such a heartrending manner. *La Strada* is not even Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*, whose conventional and allegorical form is a challenge for good old Charlie. *La Strada* seems to be saying: here is Charlie facing contemporary life, contemporary art, and contemporary philosophy. Here is your lyrical tramp ambling down an Italian road of the mid-twentieth century!

* Aleksander Jackiewicz, *Moja Filmoteka. Kino na świecie*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 30-33.

OBRAZ ZREMASTERYZOWANY

"Ten film jest dowodem na to,
że Fellini to geniusz"

THE INDEPENDENT

"Bezkonkurencyjny"

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

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