

Thought was born blind, but Thought knows what is seeing.

Fernando Pessoa

The cited brief and concise text by Aleksander Jackiewicz, published some 13 years ago, captures the essence and meaning of *La Strada* and, at the same time, of the whole Fellini oeuvre. By analysing details in several approaches Jackiewicz offered the reader a synthesis, and while referring to the “Charlie and Gelsomina” comparison he warned us against superficial perception. Stressing the similarities and differences he declared: be careful. “Charlie and Gelsomina” – *La Strada* by Fellini. The same cinema, but simultaneously so very different. Thanks to *La Strada* we are at the same spot, along the same road, but further on.

La Strada appears to be a film most resilient and least susceptible to analysis. It is the most “closed”, complete and consistent of the director’s accomplishments, simple and complex, perfect. But not in a manner that would make it possible - slightly twisting Jackiewicz’s reflections - to describe it as a cold film.

I am fully aware that just as there exists a vast literature and myriad analytical and interpretation tracks in reference to Fellini’s entire oeuvre and its particular stages the same could be true in the case of *La Strada*. I used the words: “could be” because in contrast to other films by this great poet and visionary of the cinema in the case of *La Strada* I find them less interesting and they appear to be least necessary.

Is it possible to say something new about *La Strada*?

I do not need to “know” anything about the film. Nor do I require a key.

I prefer to keep my attention focused on the imagery, which has left a deep imprint on my memory. I would rather consider its powerful force, which I experienced seeing it for the first time.

Would such an attitude not be closest to the challenge made by the director himself, about whom (citing Dante) Cardinal Silvestrini wrote that in the first song of *Paradise* the poet says: «*To soar beyond the human cannot be described in words. Let the example be enough to one for whom grace holds this experience in store*». *Transhumanation denotes transcending that, which is human. Federico sought, examined, and followed this invisible dimension, which he conjectured in man, claiming that nothing is known and everything is imagined. Woe to those who wish to understand – one must merely listen.*¹

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Such an approach is not concerned with exclusiveness. In this respect – I am well aware – I share the same experience with other authors writing about Fellini. Each has his “own” Fellini, his “own” *La Strada*.

ZBIGNIEW
BENEDYKTOWICZ

Road Movie – a Poem about the Pebble

To Piotr Skrzynecki

This is why apart from Jackiewicz I shall refer to only several texts published in “Kwartalnik Filmowy”, rendering them the prime point of reference. Already a comparison of those opinions would require the introduction of an amendment. It turns out that this particular film, which we would be inclined to describe as “closed” and complete, remains, and actually is, open and incomplete. The number of interpretations depends on the number of their authors.

La Strada is not a mere metaphor or a fairy tale:

The lifeless, cloudy autumn landscape offers no joy. Winter brings death. It is not true that the processions, nuns, wedding, Nature, Gelsomina, the embittered philosopher “Il Matto” are mere symbols, as some would have it. (...)

This is a real, cruel and irreversible drama, treated quite seriously and unfeelingly. (A. Jackiewicz)

Petr Král² called Fellini the greatest showman among poets and the most poetic author among showmen. He stressed the entropic character of Fellini’s imagination and film narration while taking as a point of departure the spectacle, and in particular the type of spectacle produced by the American cinema, and then referring to the specific, i.e. European spectacular qualities of films by the author of *La Strada*, enhanced with the experiences of aesthetic and cultural tradition. (A Fellini spectacle differs from loud show business and the smooth, cold American show due to the fact that alongside the presence of this cultural memory, referring to centuries of images, visions, and symbolic depictions it resonates with extraordinary force with sounds and images borrowed from the artist’s *most personal treasury*. The prominent elements of Fellini’s film stories are also European individualism and subjectivity. Importance is attached, especially in the case of this sort of entropic narration, to marginal images (the role of the backstage) alongside the *personal treasury*. From this point of view – not surprisingly – an evaluation of *La Strada* turns out to be not the best (although, contrary to Jackiewicz, it reveals its “passionate” aspect):



the master of observation, embedded in Fellini, differs not only from the showman – he is also no ordinary teller of stories. The majority of this director's films in which the most important is the story and the scenario becomes, in the American mode, the very axis of the film and includes alongside his "manneristic works" also those regarded as inferior in the Fellini oeuvre: the tearful psychologism of *La Strada* (1954) is by no means more convincing than the linear character of *Orchestra Rehearsal* (1978) or *And the Ship Sails On* (1983).³

Finally, a third opinion, that of Andrzej Werner⁴, who warns us against an a-intellectual (refusing to use the intellect) or unthinking, stereotypical reception and perception of Fellini's work:

In this way, there emerged a legend about a charming and brilliant primitive who fell in love with everyone and must be loved by all in return. Extremely useful proved to be the kindly donnish – and otherwise useful – tendency towards referring the object of the analyses to a context characteristic only for him. To his birthplace, the folk culture within whose range he grew up, or the circus which he visited to remain once and for all within the limits of its arena.

A little boy in the middle of the arena, standing in the spotlight together with the creatures dancing around him - the products of his imagination and love, and the bane of his future life. Who does not remember the closing frame of 8 1/2, who does not recall Gelsomina and

Zampanó, that innumerable procession of musicians, acrobats, clowns, strongmen without whom Fellini would not be himself. Now, let us add friends from his hometown of Rimini, Gradiska, third-rate whores from the suburbs of Rome, all those failed actors, singers and dancers ... and we have a complete portrait: the type of culture in which he grew up, to which he was attached, the protagonists of an ensuing beautiful and poignant story. He stands in the middle, already grownup, a magus, a great magician, intuitive, emotional – the opposite of the scientific mind. Asa Nisi Masa.

*After all, such an approach is feasible. It probably contains a great amount of truth that will always remain inaccessible for me. For all practical purposes I am arguing about the manner in which art is seen, the contact with it. One can relegate all problems or even see them clearly, but they still do not seem to pertain to me.*⁵

Comparing those several opinions one could ask: is *La Strada* a cold film? , "passionate"?, emotional? (tearful), realistic? A commonplace (linear) story? Is this a film that can be interpreted and examined in a closer or more distant context? A psychological film: a story about concrete people? Or a symbolic film, concealing under the outer realistic stratum something more? A film about transhumanation, the process of transcending beyond that, which is human? A film that seeks, studies and follows the invisible dimension foretold in man...?

Important questions. It would be absurd, however, to propose a single answer and to recognize that only it is correct and genuine. Each of those statements, in my opinion, contains some sort of an essential, partial truth about *La Strada*. All show just how ambiguous this film, ever evading our divisions into that, which is veristic, psychological, and symbolic, actually is. In this respect, *La Strada*, an ambiguous film or one with many meanings, can be an excellent example of concurrence between the nature of film and the symbol, as described by Heinz Politzer, maintaining that the significance of the symbol consists of a capability of crossing its limits. It is a sign both secret and visible, proclaiming a general truth; the possibilities of commenting on the latter are just as great as the number of its interpreters. *Quot capita, tot explicationes*. This is true symbolism, Goethe declared in: *Maximen und Reflexionen über Literatur und Ethik, where the particular represents the general, not as dream and shadow, but as a live and immediate revelation of the unfathomable*⁶.

In this respect, *La Strada* as a symbol combining assorted spheres of experience and levels of reference in its capacity as a living momentary revelation of the unexamined, accessible both to “simpletons” and intellectual giants.

It is as a symbol⁷ uniting the individual, concrete, sensual, emotional and historical with the supra-temporal, abstract, and intellectual that *La Strada* speaks to us in a particularly visceral manner.

One has to ask the poets why the world is suffering (David M. Turoldo⁸).

In *La Strada* we find ourselves in the very centre of that question. It would be difficult to pretend that it does not concern us.

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La Strada is a fundamental structure of Fellini’s entire oeuvre, a milestone along the path of the development of his artistic vision and film. In *La Strada* we remain at the very source of all the images of the director’s cinematic accomplishments and come across all his past and future imagery (a foretaste of future films). One could classify and name the images in a purely scientific manner as: antecedent, precedent and “first”, forecasting future continuations and developments, as well as distinguish the domain of the unique ones.

Let us concentrate on a single example: the sea. The sea appears and is present throughout *I Vitelloni* and subsequently in many other films, all the way to *Casanova*, where it is most artificial (the almost rustling waves are made of black plastic) but, paradoxically, moving and true. Nowhere, however, was it present with such poignant and startling force as at the beginning and end of *La Strada*, particularly in the finale. The same holds true for other images: the road, distant places passed along the way, suburbs, and towns. In

La Strada we find ourselves in precisely such a suburb, but it turns out that actually “we are in Rome” before *Rome came into being*, as if before *ab urbe condita*, prior to the construction and development of the whole image of the town. In *La Strada* – (Rome is an excellent example) – presence that becomes voluble *via* absence is particularly poignant. This is the absence of someone or something. We are as if afore time or at the beginning of time, in a concrete place and outside it, on our way, down a road (before, as in *Roma*, we find ourselves in a traffic jam on a highway). The same applies to other images, motifs, and characters.

The precedence is Gelsomina, but do her sensitivity, simplicity, naiveté, surprise at the world, need of love (take the scene of imitating a tree, her dancing gait, her solitary dance in a deserted location) not bring to mind – though I realize that this is an inappropriate expression so let me put it differently: are they not a foretaste of another solitary dance, performed in the mist, “in the dead season” in *Amarcord* (young men pretending to be dancing with female partners). *Gelsomina* ... – do we not find her, albeit in a different costume (no longer rags) and wearing a magnificent turban (what wonderful hats!), busy cultivating her flowers: in other words, do we not discover her in *Giuletta* finding out about her husband’s infidelities in “manneristic” *Juliet and the Spirits*? Two scenes: does Gelsomina, led to a sick child, and *Giuletta*, led to a seer-hermaphrodite, not perceive the world with the same fear and astonishment? “*Giuletta and Gelsomina. Who has not sat before his own heart’s curtain?*” (Rilke⁹). What about *Ginger and Fred*? Although thanks to Jackiewicz we already know how illusory external similarities can be (Charlie and Gelsomina) in this case we do not have to be excessively cautious¹⁰. We are on the same path, but much further on. *Gelsomina, Gelsomina*.

The texts about *La Strada* known to me are dominated by an approach interpreting the film from the viewpoint of familiarity with the completed Fellini oeuvre. Teresa Rutkowska wrote:

*La Strada is in its entirety a parable about roaming. As in the Baroque novela picaresca the journey across the geographical space of Italy in rain, mud, heat and frost is actually a spiritual journey, an individual quest for oneself in an eschatological perspective*¹¹. Jacek Trznadel¹² drew attention to the presence in *La Strada* of even older forms: the *commedia dell’arte* (after all, the nickname “Rifle” given to Zampanò comes from a scene enacted by him together with Gelsomina and announced as *the newest farce*; the *commedia dell’arte* is thus distinctly cited), references to the late mediaeval morality play, *theatrum mundi*.

But even interpreted and deciphered *via* the Baroque *La Strada* does not possess a Baroque nature. This is a film that is almost ascetic and crude, especial-

ly in comparison with Fellini's later works. *La Strada* is deeply immersed in its contemporaneity but takes place, as we have said, beyond time, as if prior to time. We find ourselves at a crossroads of time, somewhere between realism or, as historians of the cinema are in the habit of saying, Italian neorealism and its later vision. Its symbolic, one would be inclined to declare, is much more natural, organic.

In *La Strada*, just as in a grain of sand¹³, we can see the whole Cosmos registered "earlier" and "later" in Fellini's works.

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La Strada is a road movie about people of the road, migratory birds - *le gens du voyage*¹⁴. This is a film about Artists. Who can forget the magnificent imagery from *La Strada*: the scene of the calling, when we see Gelsomina running out from behind a dune against the backdrop of reeds waving in the wind, rushing further along a beach towards the sea. Faster, faster! She is accompanied by a crowd of intrigued children, urging her on. The joy of the calling is accompanied by news about the death of her older sister. Pain becomes combined with joy. Gelsomina must make decisions "all alone", although everything seems to have been resolved and settled without her. She is uncertain, does not know what to do, and wavers. After all, the money obtained from selling her will provide food for the children. From the very first scene we witness uncertainty, ambiguity, a mixture of sadness and joy, farewells, partings and facing the unknown, the different, the new, that, which is ahead of us and will accompany us constantly along this path.

Yes, the world depicted in *La Strada* is cruel, but who can forget the happiness with which Gelsomina hurries to inform her neighbours that she will become an artiste?

Who can forget Zampanó! That ritual announcement, bursting with pride: *Zampanó e arrivato!*, a proclamation of something that we shall witness in a moment, something unusual and grand but also, at times, painfully ironic and comical, combined with a curious home-vehicle (*a real American Davidson*) and that, which we shall see in a minute... (*Whenever I see him I have to tease him* – says "The Fool"). Who does not recall that tragic image in which Zampanó, having found out about Gelsomina's death, now all alone, head bent low, walks around the circus arena announcing his act in a guttural voice totally at odds with his part.

I know of no more genuine and moving scene of drunkenness than the one from *La Strada*, with Zampanó causing a fight, being thrown out of a bar, fighting with his own shadow (we can only imagine what he is experiencing). Perhaps a similar image could be encountered only in literature – e.g. in *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry, where in the deep recesses of

a bar one of the intoxicated customers keeps on repeating: *Mozart was the man who wrote the Bible*.

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La Strada – a road movie, about people of the road, itinerant artists.

But who are they, tell me, these Travellers, even more transient than we are ourselves, urgently, from their earliest days,

*wring out for whom – to please whom,
by a never-satisfied will? Yet it wrings them,
bends them, twists them, and swings them,
throws them, and catches them again: as if from oiled
more slippery air, so they land
on the threadbare carpet, worn by their continual
leaping, this carpet
lost in the universe.*

*Stuck on like a plaster, as if the suburban
sky had wounded the earth there.*

And scarcely there,

upright, there and revealed: the great

capital letter of Being.....and already the ever-returning

*grasp wrings the strongest of men again, in jest,
as King August the Strong would crush
a tin plate (...). [Rilke¹⁵]*

People of the road.

Zampanó. Where do you come from? Gelsomina asks him. *Zampanó: From my part of the country.*

Gelsomina: Where were you born?

Zampanó: In my father's house.

Once "The Fool" finds out from Gelsomina that after a brawl there is no longer any place for him or Zampanó at the circus he declares:

- I have no home and no roots... And nobody will care.

- And your mother?

- ... What will you do? Are you staying or are you going?

La Strada is a register not only of Fellini's future films – that symbolic fleeting figure of Zampanó is the black clad motorcycle rider who crosses a small town in *Amarcord* to vanish in the distant darkness. The landscapes, small towns, suburbs, and roads swallowed up by Zampanó's strange vehicle divulge also the future American road movie. Are the protagonists from *Easy Rider* and *Scarecrow* not Zampanó's distant American cousins?

La Strada, a film about people on the move, is a record of much more. This holds particularly true for the artists. Those in *La Strada* are unique. In the first encounter between Gelsomina and Il Matto ("The Fool") after her departure or rather escape from Zampanó she notices the acrobat high overhead, a high-wire artist with the wings of an angel walking on a tightrope suspended between houses in the very centre

of a town, not somewhere in the suburbs. We too see him – this is high, sophisticated art. He even invites the spectators to join him for supper while in the air... Can there be any comparison between Il Matto and Zampanó? It would resemble a comparison between Heaven and Earth. What a crowded audience fills the street! Suffice to look – lights, spotlights, a beautiful and elegant woman dressed in a black dress with jets glistening in the spotlight and with a coat draped across her shoulders announces the show. After the performance “The Fool” seeks refuge in a car from the enthusiastic crowd, his adoring audience. Separated by a windowpane he glances at Gelsomina staring at him. Is any sort of a comparison possible: the artist’s car and the dress decorated with jets, on the one hand, and the pitiful vehicle used by Zampanó and Gelsomina’s cape, on the other. (True, we shall later see how much pretence and pretentiousness there is – “The Fool” will attempt to find out whether he is still permitted to work at the circus – and that reality is quite different. But then such is the fate of the artist: one day at the top, the other - at rock bottom).

Upon numerous occasions¹⁶ emphasis has been placed on *La Strada*’s connections with *commedia dell’arte*, Baroque forms, and *theatrum mundi* together with their characteristic principle: the performance of social types – stock characters. As long as drama originates from the unity of life and remains «*sacer ludus*» it portrays the motion not of individuals but types, the ideal representatives of the motion of life (Gerardus van der Leeuw¹⁷). In order to illustrate the presence of this principle in Fellini’s *Ginger and Fred* Jacek Trznadel cited typology borrowed from Cervantes:

Come, tell me, hast thou not seen a play acted in which kings, emperors, pontiffs, knights, ladies, and divers other personages were introduced? One plays the villain, another the knave, this one the merchant, that the soldier, one the sharp-witted fool, another the foolish lover; and when the play is over, and they have put off the dresses they wore in it, all the actors become equal.

Yes, I have seen that, said Sancho.

Well then, said Don Quixote, the same thing happens in the comedy and life of this world, where some play emperors, others popes, and, in short, all the characters that can be brought into a play; but when it is over, that is to say when life ends, death strips them all of the garments that distinguish one from the other, and all are equal in the grave.

A fine comparison! said Sancho; though not so new but that I have heard it many and many a time...¹⁸

Naturally, we could search for such *tipi fissi* in *La Strada*, a form much more ascetic and closer to the *commedia dell’arte*, had it not been for the problem accompanying us from the very onset, namely, that whatever we would like to say it constantly evades us and leads us further on. But let us once again take a closer



look. It is possible to seek in “The Fool” and Zampanó two types of harlequins, who appeared on circus arenas during the 1870s – the so-called white clown: *carefully dressed, witty, and making refined jokes, and his partner, the so-called foolish Auguste: simple-minded, dull, naive, and humble, who allows himself to be dominated by the tyrannical white clown*¹⁹. Straight away, however, it becomes obvious that nothing matches. “The Fool” could be the white clown but the dim-witted “animal”, “beast” Zampanó (Auguste?!) is not really so foolish, not to mention humble and simple-minded. Perhaps the Zampanó–Gelsomina couple? Just as impossible. Black Zampanó cannot be the white clown. The protagonists of *La Strada* outgrow the costumes of typical *dramatis personae* and one would like to say that they are living people and not marionettes. In the case of *La Strada*, therefore, we may speak about the presence of those forms only within a certain frame. The principle, on the other hand, would consist of the image constantly transcending that frame.

In other words, the most often and best applied is not the principle of the game played with social types but another, highly characteristic for the *commedia dell’arte*, namely, the coexistence and co-appearance of *parti gravi* and *parti ridicoli*. The score of *La Strada* is written with laughter and gravity, the best example being the significant and outright breakthrough conversation held by “The Fool” and Gelsomina. Prior to the “serious part”, i.e. “the parable of the pebble” Il Matto teases Gelsomina; leaping from place to place, wriggling, almost dancing or performing his dance in front of her, doubled over with laughter, he derides and makes fun of Gelsomina:

– What a funny face you have. Are you sure you’re a woman? You look more like an artichoke. (...). But how did you end up with him?

– He gave 10 00 lire to my mother.

– That much?! ... I wouldn’t keep you a single day.

Later, when the serious scene, *parti gravi*, the conversation about the pebble, subsides to total silence Gelsomina takes over and starts speaking like a “true”

woman and “wife”, causing “The Fool’s” even greater, authentic (tinged with a note of admiration) laughter.

One of these days, I'll take a match and set fire to everything. Mattresses, blankets, everything. That'll show him. I never refused to go with him. He paid 10 000 lire. I do my work and he hits me. That's not right. He doesn't think. I tell him, and what does he do? What good does it do? I'll put poison in his soup too. I'll set fire to it all! All! If I don't stay with him, who will?

Just like *commedia dell'arte*, *La Strada*, composed of *parti gravi* and *parti ridicoli*, contains a brilliant synopsis of that, which is human²⁰ but without actually being *commedia dell'arte*. In *La Strada* and its protagonists, itinerant circus artists and masked clowns: the rough-hewn Zampanó, the “The Fool” as garrulous as Capitano, and the fragile Gelsomina, we may recognise only *commedia*'s essential features, bare outlines of the characters described synthetically by van der Leeuw.

Maschere are predominantly zanni, known under a variety of names: Arlecchino, Truffaldino, Pasquino, Scapino, Pierrot, Punch, Hanswurst, and Jan Klassen. Regardless of their names they belong to two types: intelligent and sprightly (Figaro) or a foolish sluggard. Then there is Pantalone, angry and grumbling. The plot involves love scenes, petty intrigues, feigned pedantry and, above all, numerous brawls - quite an apt synopsis of human life. The simpleton, bearing a common name, is funny but receives lashes. Frequently, it seems that the whole world is composed only of those who deal blows and those who receive them. Within this small world everything is constant: Capitano always babbles. Apparently, habits and characteristic traits belong to people due to their ranks: the fool, the glutton, the miser, the harlot, the nurse, the cuckold, the young lover – all are defined solely by their name. Customs and attributes, deeds, thoughts and emotions hang on us in the manner of clothes. The actor does not play the role of a person but the part of a role²¹.

It would be difficult, however, to speak in this way about the protagonists and actors of *La Strada*. The former constantly oscillate between the model-like characters of the *commedia dell'arte* while remaining human and continually revealing some unexpected trait of their personality.

Who are Zampanó, “The Fool”, and Gelsomina?

In *La Strada*, a film about artists, the latter are not equals. Suffice to compare “The Fool” and Zampanó. Can they be likened? “The Fool” – an Artist, ethereal, sophisticated, a dancing tightrope walker. Zampanó - unsteady on his feet once he becomes drunk, impetuous, ready to start a fight, a brawny strongman.

In *La Strada* – in contrast to Cervantes' *theatrum mundi* – once the comedy comes to an end and everyone takes off his costume the actors are by no means alike.

The art represented by Il Matto is celestial, refined, full of lightness and talent. The art of the other is suffused with effort and powerful, the sort that calls for an announcement addressed to the spectators: *If there are any squeamish people in the audience I advise them not to look.*

In *La Strada* the blows were painful and aimed not at the body of a puppet but at human feelings.

In *La Strada* – once again by way of contrast to Cervantes' *theatrum mundi* – not everyone descends into a grave, and if death does remove the costumes that differentiate them not all will go into a grave identical and in the same way.

Fellini enclosed a psychologically penetrating and all too human depiction of the artists' life and milieu. Artists are not equal but perennially compete. “The Fool”- imaginative, talented and well aware of his flair, must at every step of the way demonstrate superiority over Zampanó and point out the latter's frailties and the inferiority of his art; he is unable to walk past without ridiculing and constantly provoking. He tries to steal Zampanó's partner, Gelsomina, who is not worth five cents in his opinion but whom he would readily include into his stage performance. On the other hand, despite petty intrigues, Signor Giraffa, the owner of the circus, is right when he says that all artists form a single family. After all, it is “The Fool”, unable to unravel why Zampanó keeps Gelsomina at his side, who shows her true vocation and the reason for remaining on the road with him: *He told me to stay with you.* *La Strada* portrays the complicated world of artists: *We're all one big family here, we all work together ...*

In the conflict between the regal, proud Zampanó who strenuously and with toil works for the sake of his art and celebrates it, and who respects inner hierarchy and the hierarchy of the world (while regarding Il Matto as a *tramp*, *the bastard son of a gypsy*), and the constantly provocative, light-hearted, surprising, full of fantasy, talent and lightness “Fool”, to whom art comes so easily, we can recognise a clash involving two other artists. *Toutes proportions gardées*, Zampanó and Il Matto are the Salieri and Mozart of the art of the circus.

La Strada is a record not only of Fellini's entire *oeuvre*, his forthcoming works, and the American road movie of the future, but also of visions and themes embarked upon and subsequently developed by masters of world cinema. *La Strada* contains a discernible forecast of images, a seed planted once and for all, a base for all future films about artists, a prognosis of *Amadeus* by Milos Forman²² and *Babette's Feast* by Gabriel Axel after Karen Blixen²³. Who can forget a meeting in *La Strada*, brimming with mutual respect, tact, and fascination and involving two, ostensibly competing paths: *via activa* and *via contemplativa*, the encounter of a nun and an itinerant Artiste (a meeting of reli-

gion and art) who recognized in each other the two evangelical sisters: Mary and Martha²⁴. Who can forget that gaze with which the nun and Gelsomina look at each other, discovering in it (for us and in front of us, the spectators) the deepest possible community shared by them [nun to Gelsomina]: *You follow your bridegroom, I follow mine*.

La Strada also has a scene in which we descend into the innermost recesses of time, beyond the Baroque image of *theatrum mundi*, *commedia dell'arte*, and the mediaeval morality play, a scene in which they can be of no further use and render no further assistance. In order to arrive at this scene we must first climb upwards, bypassing the overlapping and mutually permeating images of monumental Nature with its eternal majesty, as if we were descending to the roots of time, beginnings close to the creation of the world (*genesis*), seeing on the way a lake encircled by mountains, and then, right around the corner, driving down into a gentle valley with three trees in order to notice, oh, we have just passed it: a wrecked car - "The Fool's" defeat. Now we have to stop and turn off the engine so that it would stop rattling and total silence could reign... This is a scene in which the music by Nino Rota comes to a complete standstill – it has been accompanying us along the way, frenzied, captivating, pushing us forward, unwinding

the surface of the road before us: a ribbon composed of swallowed-up images, appearing and vanishing, passed in front, in the back, and on the sides. In this scene the music comes to a standstill as do all *parti ridicoli* and *parti gravi*, and even the most delicate tone vanishes so that we could experience silence and terror from centuries bygone despite the birdsong and scenery straight out of paradise. In *La Strada* Fellini recorded this image and guided us toward it. A terrifying image: the fratricide of an artist (as if there was not enough room in the world for both, as if they could not live alongside each other under the same Sun). Fellini lets us know that watching the story of Zampanó and "The Fool" we are taking part in the story of Cain and Abel²⁵.

In *La Strada* Fellini wrote the Bible.

Just as in the Writ, so here too we see and witness jealousy, fervent competition, wounded pride, and humiliation, revenge, *teaching him a lesson*. We shall watch the undeserved *death of the Innocent*. By accident? We shall see Zampanó's pure, biological, "animal"-human fear portrayed with complete realism. The terrifying *fear of man*, fear of punishment. (From that moment: *A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be upon the earth!* / Genesis 4,12/). Loneliness, Escape. We observe realistically described, incomprehensible death that can be never understood or appre-





hended with the mind, unnoticed death, of which we are still unaware, death that will arrive in a moment: – *Hey, you broke my watch!*, death with which we cannot come to terms to the very end, which we cannot believe (*Come on, get up - don't act like a clown!*), the “foolish” death of an artist, an actor, a clown. In the *La Strada* scene of Il Matto's death the experience of death has been recorded with the entire realism and force of the image:

*We know nothing of this going away, that shares nothing with us. We have no reason, whether astonishment and love or hate, to display Death, whom a fantastic mask of tragic lament astonishingly disfigures. Now the world is still full of roles which we play as long as we make sure, that, like it or not, Death plays, too, although he does not please us. But when you left, a strip of reality broke upon the stage through the very opening through which you vanished: Green, true green, true sunshine, true forest. [...]*²⁶

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[On the margin:] Despite its entropic imagination disintegrating into as if independent images *La Strada* has an uncommonly precise construction and narration. On the one hand, even if something appears and becomes established we cannot be certain that this is the way things are going to be. Take the example of the afore-mentioned automobile belonging to “The Fool”, perceived and described as a status symbol of his superiority – as if it could be the object of envy! – that breaks down and becomes the direct cause of his death. It is outright strange and inconceivable that Zampanò's rickety contraption does not stop working even once in the film. On the other hand, despite the fact that *La Strada* seems to be governed by cast iron rules taken straight out of Chekhov's drama, and that we should know right from the beginning that if a gun appears then we can be certain that it will be fired, it turns out to be just as inconceivable that right to the finale we shall be shocked, startled, and taken by

surprise. This holds true for the construction of the film, its structure and dramaturgy – in *La Strada* Fellini had written the Bible of the cinema.

*

One has to ask the poets why the world is suffering.
In *La Strada* we find ourselves in the very centre of that question.

This is why if one were to seek some sort of a counterpart of the film – a film about artists in which the latter, having cast off their costumes, do not remain equal nor when after death tears off their costumes they do not all descend into the grave identical – then much closer than Cervante's *theatrum mundi* would be another fragment of the global theatre: that from *El gran teatro del mundo* by Calderon, evoked by Carlos Saura in his film: *Elisa, My Life*. This fragment appears in Saura's film as a school spectacle performed by little girls and allows, urges, and helps us to think of a poor girl surrounded by children and somehow a child herself (*Are you sure you're a woman?*), abandoned by us. Poor Gelsomina, left in deserted ruins at the edge of some road:

[Girl WORLD] *Come, mortals, come! Prepare for the World Theater Performance. Speak, Supreme Maker.*

[Girl AUTHOR] *If man could choose, none would ever choose pain. All would choose a role of power unaware that it is only a role. They believe it is life. Supreme Maker, know which role suits you. Paquita, thou shalt be King.*

[Girl KING] *I as King shall govern and be worshipped. Give me your gold.*

[Girl WORLD] *Why gold?*

[Girl KING] *Such is my role.*

[Girl AUTHOR] *The Fair Maiden of Beauty will be Conchi.*

[Girl LADY] *Great is my joy! I am Beauty itself! Give me jasmine, musk and roses. Mine are the stars in heaven, the envy of the sun.*

[Girl AUTHOR] *Antonia will be the Rich and Powerful.*

[Girl WEALTHY LADY] *Mine are riches, luxury and pleasure*

[Girl AUTHOR] *Angeles, the Worker.*

[Girl PLOUGHSMAN] *The Worker? I object!*

[Girl AUTHOR] *The Worker. You'll work from dawn to dusk. I command you.*

[Girl PLOUGHSMAN] *I object!*

[Girl AUTHOR] *I command you.*

[Girl PLOUGHSMAN] *I object.*

[Girl AUTHOR] *Take thy plow. Sofía, thy role is discretion. Rosa María, the Poor and Miserable. María Jesús, the Unborn Child.*

[Girl CHILD] *An easy enough role...*

[Girl Word] *Take thy place.*

[Girl THE POOR] *Why am I the Poor in this comedy? Why give tragedy only to me? Why can't I be King? Or Rich? Are they better men, to be given better roles?*
 [Girl AUTHOR] *The Poor. I give you nothing, for that is your Worldly reward. I strip thy garments. Thou shalt walk naked. All must play their part in this Comedy. The better man plays better his role, be it Rich or Poor. The remuneration shall be earned if merited. On this stage, life is but a performance.*
 [ALL] *On this stage, life is but a performance.*²⁷

*

Writing and reflecting upon the hundredth anniversary of the cinema about *La Strada*, in which we discover successive forms of the *theatre of the world* (the film registers yet another unrealised image: *The great Theater of Oklahoma calls you! . . . Everyone is welcome! . . .* from Kafka's *Amerika*, which Fellini planned to screen), it is impossible to forget the director's favourite image of the *world of the circus*, permanently present in his *oeuvre* and in particular in *La Strada*, which it organises and in which it appears in an extremely significant manner. Take the example of the magnificent scene of rolling up the tent of Signor Giraffa's circus, the announcement appearing at the end of the film: *Everybody come to the circus!... This evening - a great spectacle*, and the image of the arena against the backdrop of the sea. *La Strada*, a story about itinerant artists, seen today against the background of the entertainment proposed by the present-day cinema – that "art for the poor" – leads us to the suburbs, takes place somewhere on the side, far from main street, the centre, the principal current, the market-place-fairground with which contemporary art tempts us and which it values so highly. In *La Strada* Fellini guides us to the side-lines in order to show us that ultimately something actually does exist. This is why it is difficult to keep silent about yet another image portrayed by the poet and accompanying us from the very beginning. In it we are capable of capturing the essence of that particular predilection of the author of *La Strada* and, finally, the very essence of the portrayal of the world contained therein.

(...) *Strange, though, alas, the streets of Grief-City, where, in the artificiality of a drowned-out false stillness, the statue cast from the mould of emptiness bravely swaggers: the gilded noise, the flawed memorial. O, how an Angel would utterly trample their market of solace, bounded by the Church, bought ready for use: untouched, disenchanting and shut like the post-office on Sunday. Beyond though, the outskirts are always alive with the fair. Swings of freedom! Divers and jugglers of zeal!*

*And the figures at the shooting range of easy luck, targets that shake tinnily whenever some better marksman hits one. From applause at his luck he staggers on further: as booths for every taste are wooing him, drumming, and bawling. Here's something special, only for adults, to view: how money is got, anatomy, not just to amuse: the private parts of money, all of it, the whole thing, the act, - to instruct and make potent.....O, but just beyond behind the last hoarding, plastered with adverts for 'Deathless', that bitter beer that tastes sweet to its drinkers, as long as they chew fresh distractions along with it..... just at the back of the hoardings, just behind them, it's real. Children are playing, lovers are holding each other – to the side, sombrely, in the sparse grass, and dogs are following their nature. (...)*²⁸

The protagonists of Fellini's film include grass, rain, snow, the landscape seen along the way, side roads, the people we pass while travelling. Gelsomina is often accompanied by children, who from a distance look at her with curiosity; at one point, a child even shows her a gate through which she can enter a garden. It is not true that *La Strada* depicts only a cruel world. When Zampanó abandons Gelsomina for the night and goes off with a prostitute, someone brings her a bowl of soup while she is waiting in the street, and a little girl approaches her. In *La Strada* we are led to the side where in the sparse grass dogs run freely, where at night a horse passes us in the street and in the morning we are awakened and frightened by the sound of a braying donkey. When Gelsomina finally leaves Zampanó and examines an ant, three musicians, "angels", as if straight out of landscapes with Tobias, walk by on their way to a festivity held in town; she will follow them. At a wedding children beckon to show her a concealed secret and lead her to Osvaldo, a child suffering from hydrocephalia, so that she would make him laugh. Having performed her dance, Gelsomina tilts her clown's hat for him.

A nun asks Gelsomina whether she would like to stay at a convent. The same happens when Zampanó lands in jail and the circus people propose that she go with them. A girl embraces her, saying that they could live together. "The Fool" drives her to the jail, takes off his blessed medallion and hangs it on her neck.

In *La Strada*, that cruel reality on the side roads of the world, people passed on the way are interested in



each other and sometimes even demonstrate tenderness, even if only expressed in the specifically Italian gesture of waving a hand while saying farewell when, contrary to the parting, they seem to be halting the moment of departure, as if wishing to keep the world still for as long as possible. *La Strada* is a record of the cruelty of the world but also of its gentleness. (And this is possibly the reason why the film causes so much pain). Here, on the sidelines, we witness how the bypassed people, the itinerant artists: Zampanò, “The Fool”, and Gelsomina (as in *Death Experience*) play *Life rapturously, not thinking of any applause*.

It is here that there will emerge the strange Orphic motif, which will knock Zampanò off his feet. Who can forget the scene in which Zampanò, older, with greying hair and traces of exhaustion after a rough night, leaves the circus wagon for a morning-afternoon walk and strolls along a wide street of some port town, passing other pedestrians. A car drives by, someone rides a bicycle. Zampanò stops, orders ice cream, asks for an additional lemon flavoured portion, walks on ... and then, across the distant sounds of ships and the street Gelsomina’s song reaches him. A woman sings it while hanging laundry, white bed sheets, on the other side of a nearby fence. Next to her, three children, holding hands, play, dance, spin on a shabby lawn. Zampanò finds out about Gelsomina’s death:

Oh, a girl who was here a long time ago used to sing it... she seemed crazy ... My father found her one evening on the beach... she was sick, poor thing. She had a fever. We brought her inside the house... When she was a little better, she used to sit outside ghee in the sun ... and play her trumpet.

What a strange scene: Eurydice sings. And what a strange Orpheus: he did not search for her and she found him!

*

Who is Gelsomina?

We waited long to pose this question. She resembles the entire film and incessantly evades our grasp. We are in the same situation as in the case of a road movie. We would like to describe and interpret it, but meanwhile it turns out that new images continue appearing – *In a hundred places there is still a beginning*²⁹:

*And we: onlookers, always, everywhere,
always looking into, never out of, everything.*

It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.

*We arrange it again, and collapse ourselves.*³⁰

Nevertheless, let us try and say: Gelsomina. Thanks to her presence in this film-world we see something more: that, which in her naiveté or innocence she does not notice, which she barely and ineptly sup-

poses, and which for us is obvious and at a glance visible (after the incident with the prostitute she timidly asks Zampanó: *So you're the kind of man who runs around with women?*). On the other hand, thanks to her sensitivity and astonishment at the world, and seeing how she commiserates with the world, imitates a tree while actually becoming a tree, talks with fire, and feels the rain, we are able to perceive something that we would otherwise never notice or touch. Gelsomina is an extraordinary artist because she does not belong to either world. She is neither part of the world of "normal artists" nor of the world of "normal people" and undermines all our expectations; one can really say that *she is not of this world*.

As a rule, Gelsomina is presented as a personification of Goodness in a battle waged against Evil (Zampanó). Meanwhile, she remains as if beyond Good and Evil. In the film she is described in various ways: *It's not my fault, poor thing, that you're not like the other girls*. And just as in the film, when it seems that we are close, that we have named and understood something, it appears that we comprehend nothing. She endlessly astonishes us and topples our habits and the stereotypes and formulas in which we would like to enclose her and the film. She is capable of startling Zampanó, who, we are entitled to presume, has seen a lot. When it is necessary to drive on in a hurry she plants tomatoes on the side of the road. Tomatoes! Even Zampanó's face shows astonishment and lights up in a smile. I am not certain whether "Good" is the best way to describe her.

She is Difficult and Demanding. At times, she can even irritate, e.g. when she is late and, gazing into the distance, does not play the trumpet at the suitable moment she manages to annoy even Il Matto, an artist with the wings of an angel. On the other hand, once she does play she immediately delights him. When she performs for a nun we cannot say more than the listener, who exclaimed: *How well you play!* (Once again, she will amaze and evoke, even on Zampanó's face, a look of surprise with an admixture of anxiety and fear). We feel that in her presence we should be particularly careful. Her very presence, that of a person who cannot even make soup but plays the trumpet, shows how our customs and attributes, deeds, thoughts and emotions hang both on us and the characters in the world around her in the manner of actors' costumes, and how great is the number of the roles that we perform (take the splendid scene with a widow at a wedding, who is responsible for the whole household */I always eat on my feet/*). In her presence we realise just how careful the vocabulary of our learned interpretations should be while tackling the task of capturing her essence, apparently already close to the target but in effect forcing her (and the message of *La Strada*) into unambiguity and ready made formulas. One of the in-

terpreters wrote that Gelsomina is what the Gospel describes as a "simpleton". The French use the term: simple d'esprit, signifying a special sort of simplicity, close to sui generis "Matto'ism" due to its distance from the world and a tendency to remain within inner mimicry.

Owing to a meaning created by permanent mimed features depicting not so much emotions as psychic traits, Gelsomina becomes the opposite of Evil. As befits a certain philosophy of the world she is defenceless and not always self-aware Goodness, forever weaker than evil because she does not have at her disposal the latter's Energy and Focus. Refusing to accept, Gelsomina actually does so because she conceives protest as some sort of evil.

Gelsomina is a child albeit a make-believe one. She does not possess a realistic mind but her defenceless sensitivity is impeccable (she will succumb to true psychosis, some sort of a defence variant, only after Zampanó kills the Fool). We realise that only Gelsomina knows something about sensitivity. The ensuing image of the world contains its fundamental evil, and the spectacle enacted by *theatrum mundi* always ends with the victory of evil. Goodness plays the passive role, as in the Evangelical: *non resistere malo*, and there is a slight chance that in spite of everything evil could become "infected" with goodness. The beast-Zampanó sobs all alone on a beach, but we may doubt whether he will join goodness; it is much more likely that evil will devour also itself, in other words, that which was still human in Zampanó, who will perform an act of self-annihilation. The death of the Fool is supposed to accentuate the distinctness of the film's main couple since *Il Matto* emphasizes the helplessness of Goodness and just like Gelsomina suffers defeat.³¹

An outright Manichaean vision. A harsh verdict. But *La Strada* is not like that.

Where is Gelsomina in all this? Where is her Face? Where has she - almost a girl - vanished? ? We were so close, it seemed that we understand something, and now it turns out that we comprehend nothing. The problem with Gelsomina consists of the fact that the moment we call her "Good", "Simpleton" or "the simpleton type" we set into motion a whole sequence of concepts into which we would like to force her. True,



Gelsomina is “foolishness in the eyes of the world”, but this is no reason to immediately put her into a straight jacket of formulas safe both for us and our interpretations. What does it mean that Gelsomina is helpless Goodness, not quite self-aware? In the film she demonstrates self-awareness, and a rather painful one at that, when she answers Il Matto’s question whether she will leave with the circus or go off with Zampanó: *It doesn’t make any difference what I do. I’m just no good to anyone. I am tired of living.*

What does it mean: refusing to accept, Gelsomina actually does so because she conceives protest as some sort of evil? After all, she runs away from Zampanó, and then after the murder of “The Fool” confesses to him: *I wanted to run away. He told me to stay with you.* Perhaps Gelsomina does not have a realistic mind (although here too we could ask: does this signify matching our habits and corresponding to our criteria?), but she does think very concretely, even if “unrealistically”. When Il Matto speaks to her, indicating with his glance a pebble: *Take ... this stone, for example,* Gelsomina asks: *Which one?. Any one,* “The Fool” answers, picking it up from the ground and handing it to her.

Quite possibly, this is known as the genuine variant of psychosis - the psychosis of defence. In *La Strada*, however, which is a great drama about suffering and in which we find ourselves in the very centre of the question: why does the world suffer? and which resounds with the echo of voices saying: *Where is thy brother Abel? – Am I my brother’s keeper?*, the fact that Gelsomina keeps on repeating: *The Fool is hurt*, thus protecting herself against saying: “he is dead”, does not alter the essence of things, i.e. that evil is called by its true name: *You killed him*. Gelsomina will say this as only she can: with determination but gently, as if an Angel was speaking. Would it help to treat her as a “medical case” and describe her as “ill”? Would that bring us a single step closer? The light and darkness in *La Strada* created too much of an uneven pattern to explain Gelsomina easily by means of Manichaeism. *La Strada* conceals so many mysteries. We could say, if that were not to once again trap us in a stereotype, that *La Strada* has a certain symptomatic Franciscan trait – after all, this is the “poor theatre” albeit envisaged as great drama, the suffering of the Cosmos. This is the trace followed by Il Matto when he puts Gelsomina to a test in order to find out what she can do and causes her to cry: *Why was I put here on this Earth? – Zampanó wouldn’t keep you if you weren’t useful to him (...)* Now, *why didn’t he let you go? Unless, of course... Maybe he loves you? (...)* *He’s like a dog. He looks at a man and even when he wants to talk, he barks (...)* Still, *if you don’t stay with him, who will?...*

The commentator says that *there is a slight chance that in spite of everything evil could become “infected” with*

goodness (!?) But here evil is in love with goodness! Is Zampanó supposed to be her “wolf of Gubbio”?

We have already strayed off the main track and lost enough time in the “Good-Evil” trap. Time to turn back. *La Strada* and Gelsomina constantly astonish us. Was our earlier reflection that she remains outside the range of our conceits of “good” and “evil” not more significant? Was it not better to say at the very onset that Gelsomina is not any sort of “type” and is thoroughly untypical? We have already seen how everyone wanted her to stay with him/her. Everyone wished to have her at his/her side, to keep her. Gelsomina is unique. She is as eternal as grass.

La Strada, “cinema mundi”, “film-world”, a film about people on the move, migrating birds and artists appears to say to us: despite its toil, misery and shattered dreams this is a beautiful world.

Who is Gelsomina?

We are standing upon the threshold of a greater, strange mystery involving God and man, the world. Eurydice sings behind the curious Orphic motif emerging at the edge of the road. He did not seek her, and she found him! We hear an even more powerful voice: *I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not* (Isaiah 65,1)³².

*

In the very centre of *La Strada* there appears a symbol, a living, temporary revelation of the unexamined.

It makes an appearance in its entire directness, simplicity, complexity and depth. A pebble. Il Matto picks it up from the ground and hands it to Gelsomina. - *... If you don’t stay with him, who will? You may not believe it, but everything in this world has a purpose. Even this pebble... Even you have a purpose, even you with that artichoke head of yours.*

Gelsomina takes the pebble and gazes at it. Then she repeats this gesture, saying: *... If I don’t stay with him who will stay... .* When she stood in the shade, the stone was grey; now, the second time round, when she stands on another spot, in a stream of light, it becomes white.

I am in the fortunate situation of being able to show the direct impact and experience of the symbol, that what the pebble tells us. I have in front of me a description of an unintended experiment, a lesson born *under the impact of an impulse, the mood of a moment*, as its author wrote. This is a lesson taught by children. Before reaching for a more profound backdrop of the symbolic meanings of the pebble listen to the children and their teacher. Ewa Korulska wrote:

When lessons were held in the countryside I spent some time with the children by the sea. Enjoying the warm weather we went to the beach, taking a textbook entitled: To lubie! I wanted to read together with the fourth-form pupils The Decalogue of St. Francis, which harmonised



with the sound of the waves. The children sat around me on the sand and played with pebbles. When I proposed: perhaps we should listen to the stones for a while? Maybe they too have something to say? they obediently closed their eyes (You too, Miss! Why are you peeping?) and a moment later started describing what they heard the pebbles say. I tried to take notes, barely keeping up with the children.

[Here are fragments of the statements, including monologues of the pebbles written by the children (the names of the authors are in parentheses)]:

The sand is speaking to me. Once I was young and strong, but now am old. I was capable of overcoming a lot, a king, the toughest of all. Now I am sand, blown by the wind and devoured by the sea. I am helpless. A stone lives in the same manner as man does and reminds us about the existence of old age ...

... The stone says: I am lonely. I can be divided into grains of sand; the stone feels. It tells the story of the sea, keeps mum, but speaks and should be heard. It tells its story: it asks: "Don't break me! Throw me on the surface of the seawater; I feel good here; it is beautiful and I have my friends", but also: "I'm unhappy here and would like someone to take me home because the sea is so cold..."

...Everyone thinks that I am "ordinary" and ugly. But when I lie in the Sun then immediately the part of me that is covered with fool's gold starts to glisten. I am hard and rather sharp. This is not to say that I am evil. Now, I shall tell you the story of the sea. Once upon a time, Mr Glacier went for a walk. I don't know what he was doing here, but he carried some rocks. Finally, he brought me and said: - Now I shall die and you, dear stones, will live on here. Every stone has its rights. Suddenly, he began to melt and I think he wanted to drown me. Then I was cast off onto the shore, and became cold and wet. I underwent my baptism

and lay on the shore, thinking: - I'm so small and the world is so huge. (Magda Kaczyńska, aged 10)

... I wonder where my home is. Perhaps I come from the sea? No, probably not. I must have fallen from the sky or emerged from the ground. I would like to return home, to my birthplace. (Bartek Kraciuk, aged 10)

...I am a stone! Catch me! Take me, please! Perhaps physically I am silent but I speak! Although silent, I speak... I ask that someone touch my ego. I am not a mere stone but a pebble with an ego of my own... I resemble people! You don't believe me? When young and strong I overcame all obstacles, broke the waves and vanquished the wind. But there comes a time when I lose my personality and change into sand. Everyone ignores me, tramples over me as if I were nobody. But I am still a stone! (Kamila Raczyńska, aged 10)

... I am a pebble and would like to be with you and no one else. I want to be warm and to sleep at night in a house and not here, on the beach. I took a liking to you the very first time I saw you. You are my only friend. (Maciek Dolindowski, aged 10)

... Polished by water, each pebble is different. Its interior contains rain and rainbows, mountains and birds – or perhaps not? (...) Maybe a desert, total emptiness, someone's dreams immersed in the rain ... (Ula Brykczyńska, aged 13)

... If it could speak, it might tell me that once it was a Volcano, a Cave or perhaps even a Pyramid, the realm of Poseidon. No one knows (Agnieszka Janiszewska, aged 13)³³.

Among the great variety of Biblical meanings associated with stones the New Testament mentions basically two: precious stones (Greek: *lithos timios*) and the mysterious white stone (Greek: *psephos leuke*) in the Revelation of St. John: *To whom that overcometh I will*

give the hidden manna and I will give him a white counter; and in the counter a new name is written, which no man knoweth but he that receiveth it (Revelation, 2, 17).

The white pebble could be identified with assorted objects used in antiquity: an entry voucher or a tablet issued by a court of law testifying about the payment of a debt³⁴. At that time, a white pebble was a good sign: in court procedure it denoted acquittal of the accused, in wrestling it was awarded to the winner, and in elections to an office it marked the desirable candidate. Joyful days and festivities were also designated with white pebbles³⁵.

The colour white is a symbol of good fortune (Pliny the Younger: an auspicious day is marked with a white pebble) or triumph³⁶.

I cite only certain essential tracks among the great variety of meanings associated with the symbolic of the stone, and choose in particular those in which we may discern a more profound meaning and a more complex background for the symbol appearing in *La Strada*.

A stone is usually distinguished amidst natural objects by its rough, hard, and permanent material and often its mysterious shape indicating the existence of supernatural might; this awareness filled primeval man with religious fear. A stone, and in particular a majestic rock, revealed some sort of higher existence free from all change and offered a premonition of an absolute being superior to frail

*human existence. The pious fear of primeval man, therefore, referred not to the stone as such as to the reality concealed beyond this material phenomenon, to that which is "different" and belongs to a higher world.*³⁷

A stone reveals the presence of God; it is theophany, a place for a possible bond between the earth and heaven, the homestead of God and the gate of Heaven, in the manner of Bethel where Jacob fell asleep to experience the presence of God: *And when Jacob awaked out of sleep, he said: Indeed the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not. And trembling he said: How terrible is this place! This is no other but the house of God, and the gate of heaven. And Jacob, arising in the morning, took the stone which he had laid under his head, and set it up for a title, pouring oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of the city Bethel* (Genesis 28, 16-19)³⁸.

In Biblical tradition, the Stone-Rock-Bedrock belongs to the range of the symbols of God, a fortress that cannot be captured, a refuge for His people, bedrock that enables man to feel safe. Moses chiselled God's commandments on stone tablets: *And when Moses had lifted up his hand, and struck the rock twice with the rod, there came forth water in great abundance ...* (Numbers 20, 11; also: Exodus 17, 6; Psalm 114, 8).

A certain Jewish legend has it that this rock accompanied the people throughout the entire wandering in the



desert. Some believed that it was not a rock but a tiny pebble carried by Miriam, the sister of Moses.³⁹

Christ is the cornerstone, the stone, which the builders rejected (Psalm 118, 22; Mathew 21, 42-44).

The Christ-rock-resurrection perspective is to be found in commentaries to the *Canticle of Canticles*, and their essential concept appears already in the writings of St. Ambrose: "My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall, shew me thy face. Let thy voice sound in my ears (...) (2, 14)". The cracks in the stone and the fissures in the chasm are the holy wounds of the Resurrected. They are the refuge and permanent abode of the Beloved⁴⁰.

[Certain images in this dramaturgy and in that of *La Strada* appear to consistently refer to this background: Gelsomina gazing at a pebble white from the glare of light must be awakened, as if from deep slumber, by the whistling "Fool" so that she would return to reality; he even says to her: *Gelsomina, wake up*. The last time we saw her she was falling asleep in a spot of sunlight in some roadside stone ruin full of crevices and holes; she had been abandoned, left there by Zampanó. The woman singing Gelsomina's song hangs white bed sheets to dry, and for a moment during her conversation with Zampanó a sheet covers her, so that we see only her trembling shadow on the fabric.

It is not our intention to prove or point out anything. We have arrived at this stage guided by images and an ensuing unclear affiliation that cannot be explained "to the very end": the mystery of the symbol's essence. *It is not true that we embellish our experiences with symbols; actually, it is they that cooperate with our experiences via processes of affiliation, which we understand only partially.*⁴¹

We do not wish to demonstrate anything or indicate anything apart from the fact that the simple Anthropology contained in this existential, realistic, visionary and metaphysical film: *even you serve some purpose*, recorded in the "parable about the pebble", has solid foundations grounded in the shared experience of human depiction.

Perhaps this is a beginning that conceals the secret of our delight in the incessant procession of human fauna composed of *all those failed actors, singers and dancers, strange characters* with whom Fellini filled his films. And the fact that in a thus founded perception the Artist permits us to reach, together with him, the most inner, invisible dimensions of our humanity.

On the other hand, we are aware that our helplessness as regards our possibilities, problems, and difficulties with comprehending Gelsomina's experience, with describing it and thus capturing her character that keeps slipping out of our hands in the manner of a pebble, and, at the same time, the penetration of the world of *La Strada*, which we described as closed

and perfect, appears to be even deeper since our understanding and interpretations always remain fragmentary and we share experiences with others. This is a mixture of the voices of children from the Great Theatre of the World, the children attending a lesson on a beach, and the voice of a supra-human power, as in that fragment of a poem by Wisława Szymborska, which we originally wanted to describe as a conversation between Gelsomina and Zampanó:

Conversation with a Stone

I knock at the stone's front door

"It's only me, let me come in"

(...)

I'm not unhappy.

I'm not homeless

My world is worth returning to.

I'll enter and exit empty-handed,

And my proof I was there

will be only words,

which no one will believe."

You shall not enter. . .

You lack the sense of taking part.

No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part.

Even sight heightened to become all-seeing

will do you no good without a sense of taking part.

You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that sense

should be,

*only its seed, imagination.*⁴²

*

Nothing is known and everything is imagined..

*

In this manner we come to the last scene in *La Strada*.

Zampanó has found about Gelsomina's death. The "animal", the "beast" is now truly free and should rejoice. Finally free; is he the winner in this wrestling match? The sole witness of his crime is dead. After all, he did not want it to happen. Is the white bed sheet a lucky sign? It resembles a white pebble, a token for entering a new life, for freeing himself from an accusation and from someone (from Gelsomina?). Why is he unhappy? Why has he gone pale? May we assume that he will devour himself and perform an act of self-annihilation? He is an ordinary rascal, a Judas. He left her. So simple. What about that other rock, Simon Peter, who also refused to confess and betrayed? No, do not blaspheme! When did I see such an image, just like the one on the beach, that upward gaze? Just a minute, yes, it was *The Penitent St. Peter* by Ludovico Carracci of Bologna (1555-1619). No, he's sitting differently. Yes, but that look! Do you remember Gelsomina's last words: *We need a little more wood here. The fire is dying out*. He also ran away from the fire, afraid that they would recognise him... . You haven't understood a



thing in this film. He simply left and was unable to do anything more for her. After all, he wanted to drive her back home. He could have driven her. She did not want to go. What would she do there? He loved her and left her happy in that spot of sunlight. What more could he do? He set her free. Such a horrible place. She fell asleep. No angel. Simply fear.

Remember, he said that no one even thought about them. Yes, an empty heaven? Existentialism? The same as on that beach in the last scene. You must be joking. He did not mean that, simply that no one saw them or caught them. And she went on and on, repeating the same thing: *The Fool is hurt*. What more could he do? He set her free so that she could forget. Anyway, this is terrible. No one would want to be in his place. But finally he found her. He wasn't looking for her. It was she who found him!

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The last scene. We are at the seashore, the very edge of images. We can see only the beach, the shore, the sea: waves, low and high tide. Instead of an image of a child wanting to empty the sea, there is an old man collapsing on the sand, supporting himself with his hand: a three-legged animal. The prodigal son on a beach? Waves - low and high tide. No one else. The sea. The man looks up, towards the sky. He becomes overcome with terror, bends his head and sobs. Low tide - high tide. Next to him – waves. The sea. The eternal rhythm of the world?

O good God, what happens in a man to make him rejoice more at the salvation of a soul that has been despaired of and then delivered from greater danger than over one who has never lost hope, or never been in such imminent danger? For thou also, O most merciful Father, "dost rejoice more over one that repents than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance. And we listen with much delight whenever we hear how the lost sheep is brought home again on the shepherd's shoulders while the angels rejoice; or when the piece of money is restored to its place in the treasury and the neighbours rejoice with the woman who found it. And the joy of the solemn festival of thy house constrains us to tears when it is read in thy house: about the younger son who "was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found." For it is thou who rejoices both in us and in thy angels, who are holy through holy love. For thou art ever the same because thou knowest unchangeably all things which remain neither the same nor forever.

What, then, happens in the soul when it takes more delight at finding or having restored to it the things it loves than if it had always possessed them? Indeed, many other things bear witness that this is so -- all things are full of witnesses, crying out, "So it is". (...)

But it is also apparent in pleasures that are permitted and lawful: (...) in him who was dead and lived again,

who had been lost and was found. The greater joy is everywhere preceded by the greater pain. What does this mean, O Lord my God, when thou art an everlasting joy to thyself, and some creatures about thee are ever rejoicing in thee? What does it mean that this portion of creation thus ebbs and flows, alternately in want and satiety? Is this their mode of being and is this all thou hast allotted to them: that, from the highest heaven to the lowest earth, from the beginning of the world to the end, from the angels to the worm, from the first movement to the last, thou wast assigning to all their proper places and their proper seasons -- to all the kinds of good things and to all thy just works? Alas, how high thou art in the highest and how deep in the deepest! Thou never departest from us, and yet only with difficulty do we return to Thee!⁴³

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The camera soars and on the beach we notice the figure of a man - Zampanò, who sobbing bitterly fell on the ground. Seen from a distance the figure slowly grows motionless and in the darkness loses contours, changing into a dimmer shape, which from afar resembles a pebble lying on the sand at the edge of the sea.

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The last scene of *La Strada* could be described as: *Ecce Imago*. A scene in which we may feel, to cite the poet⁴⁴, *air without object. A gust within God. A wind.*

And Fellini shows this.

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Federico knew well who he was and whence comes the wind that blows so that man may be born of the Spirit. Even though sometimes people (and he too, at certain moments of his life), just like those who heard Paul in Athens, seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17, 27).

He sincerely wished to rest his head on a stone as if on a pillow and to see in his dream, just like Jacob, a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached heaven, the angels ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28, 12).⁴⁵

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The history of the cinema follows its further course. The floor becomes covered with newspapers, weeklies, folders, advertisement leaflets, letters, and old mail. In a moment there will appear a newspaper featuring a photograph of Federico Fellini – a press farewell, news about the director's death. It will immediately vanish under a pile of other newspapers, folders, advertisement leaflets... These are the first frames of Wim Wender's *Lisbon Story*, a tale of the titular town based on amassed images and sounds. The film contains the following image: an elegant older man stands in a recording studio surrounded by super-sensitive microphones and a team of sound engineers. He speaks in a

slightly husky voice, pauses, takes deep breaths and we hear each gasp one when he speaks in the beautiful language of his country, incomprehensible to us:

God exists. The universe was created by Him. But what good would the universe be if men, if humankind disappeared? The universe would be useless. Or is it possible that it has a purpose of its own, even without the existence of Man?

We want to imitate God. That's why there are artists. Artists want to recreate the world, as if they were little gods. They constantly rethink history, life, things that happen in the world, things that we think happened, but only because we believe. Because, after all, we believe in memory. Because everything has already passed. But who can be sure that what we thought happened really happened? Who should we ask? Therefore, this world, this supposition, is an illusion.

The only real thing is memory. But memory is an invention ... In the cinema, the camera can capture a moment. But that moment had already passed. What the cinema does is draw a shadow of that moment. We are no longer sure that the moment ever existed outside the film. Or is the film proof that the moment existed? I don't know. I know less and less about that. We live, after all, in permanent doubt.⁴⁶

Saying these words, he turns around, glues on a moustache and puts on Charlie Chaplin's bowler hat, leaves the studio, walks down a street imitating Charlie's gait, and, finally, at the end of the street, turns, performs a gleeful jump and disappears round the corner.⁴⁷ After seeing the film and glancing at a newspaper we might find out that this elderly gentleman is the famous director Manoel de Oliveira, a classic of the Portuguese cinema.

Despite the ironic frame and declared doubts we remain under the impression of his declaration. There remains the feeling that ultimately something actually does exist.

In this way, we have found ourselves along the same path and at the same point of departure: Charlie and Gelsomina.

Once again, we walk down the same road, at the onset of the cinema.

Ultimately something actually does exist. The cinema - despite its deceptive nature, toil, illusions, and shattered dreams - is a beautiful world.

A beautiful world.

The Wenders film contains an unusual definition of the cinema, one that we would seek in vain in learned dissertations and writings by experts (at least I have not come across it). Wenders applies the ambiguity of the English word: "move". He maintains that the cinema is not so much "moving pictures", i.e. pictures that are "in motion" as pictures that are "moving", "poignant".

Carl Gustav Jung declared that when a given image is poignant we are dealing with an archetype. Here,

emotion is a symptom, a sign that thanks to the intermediary of a given image, the arch-image, speaks to us.

Jung repeated and expanded a thesis by Gerhard Hauptmann: *Poetry evokes out of words the resonance of the primordial word*⁴⁸ so that it embraces creativity as a whole. Is it not worth recalling within the context of the poignant and stirring images from *La Strada* and its author that the expression used most often about him and his work is, despite numerous different interpretations proposed by particular exegetes, the one about which they all concur: Fellini is a poet. A poet of the cinema.

From this point of view, *La Strada* is a symbolic film employing the meaning of the symbol and the mythological image formulated by Jung. Since Jung's psychology and theory of the archetype have amassed numerous prejudices let us hear what he had to say, since, in my opinion, the following fragment about the force of mythological images allows us to discover the secret of the force of the images out which *La Strada* is built and with which it speaks. It is the secret that we encounter in Fellini's entire oeuvre:

In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history, and on the average follow ever the same course. It is like a deeply graven riverbed in the psyche, in which the waters of life, instead of flowing along as before in a broad but shallow stream, suddenly swell into a mighty river. This happens whenever that particular set of circumstances is encountered which over long periods of time has helped to lay down the primordial image.

The moment when this mythological situation reappears is always characterized by a peculiar emotional intensity; it is as though chords in us were struck that had never resounded before (...)

The impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthral and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night.

That is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking.⁴⁹

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Asa – Nisi – Masa⁵⁰.
Gelsomina – the lost and found drachma?

Endnotes

- 1 Cardinal A. Sivertrini's Sermon during the funeral service for Federico Fellini (Rome, Santa Maria degli Angeli, 3 November 1993), transl. Zdzisław Słuchocka, [in:] "Kwartalnik Filmowy", No. 5/1994, p.120
- 2 P. Kral, *Europejszczyk Fellini* (European Fellini), transl. Maciej Godzimirski, [in:] „Film Quarterly”, No. 5/1994 pp. 142-159 (orig. version printed „Le Messenger Européen”, Paris 1987)
- 3 Ibid, p.147.
- 4 A. Werner, *W tanecznym korowodzie*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy” („Film Quarterly”), no 5/1994, ss.128-139.
- 5 Ibid, p. 139.
- 6 H. Politzer, *Rzemiosło interpretacji* [in his:], *Milczenie syren* (Das Schweigen de Sirenen), Warszawa transl. J. Hummel, Warsaw 1973
- 7 Cf. special issue of "Polska Sztuka Ludowa", no. 3/1988 about the symbol, containing texts by Sergei S. Avierintsev, *Symbol*, pp. 149-150, Yuri Lotman, *Symbol w systemie kultury*, pp. 151-154, and my *Symbol w etnografii*, p. 145-148. Declaring that the symbol not only "means" but also exists in a dialogue.
- 8 A. Silvestrini, op.cit. p.122
- 9 R.M. Rilke, *Czwarta Elegia Duinejska* (a Fourth Duino Elegy), [in:], *Poezje, transl.* M. Jastrun, Kraków, 1974, p. 219.
- 10 Cf. J. Trznadel, *Federico Fellini – Giulietta Massina* („La strada” – „Ginger i Fred”) [in:] „Kwartalnik Filmowy”, nr 5/1994, pp. 164-168, where the author argues that in place of Zampano – Gelsomina, in “Ginger and Fred” one can see in old pair doubling of the Gelsomina's type.
- 11 T. Rutkowska, *Wędrowki Felliniego*, „Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa”, nr 3-4/1992, p. 23, see previous pages.
- 12 Cf., J.Trznadel, op. cit.
- 13 Cf. W. Michera his studies on symbol in film, W. Michera, *O wieloznaczności symbolu*, „Rocznik Muzealny” t. IV, Włocławek 1991, ss. 265-273. Where Author writing about the essence of the symbol quotes image of Blake's poetry: *To see a World in a Grain of Sand /And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand /And Eternity in an hour.*
- 14 See the study, essay of A. Wojciechowski on Harlequin, itinerant theater companies, circus performers, jugglers, in art from antiquity to modern art: *Wędrowni ptaki (Z dziejów pewnej legendy)* [in:] *Sztuka na wysokości oczu. Film i antropologia* pod red. Z. Benedyktowicza i T. Rutkowskiej, Warszawa 1991, pp. 33-46
- 15 R.M. Rilke, *Piąta Elegia Duinejska* (Fifth Duino Elegy), op.cit. 225
- 16 M. Kornatowska, *Fellini*, Warszawa 1989
- 17 G. Van der Leeuw, *Święta gra* (Sacer Ludus) [in his:] (*Holly and Sacred Beauty. Religion and Art.*), transl. Z. Benedyktowicz I S. Sikora, „Konteksty. Polska sztuka Ludowa”, no 3-4/1991, p. 7.
- 18 M. Cervantes, *Don Kichote*, transl. S. Ciesielska-Borkowska, Kraków 1949, after J. Trznadel, op. cit.
- 19 A. Wojciechowski, op. cit, p. 43.
- 20 Cf. G. Van der Leeuw, op cit.
- 21 Ibidem, p. 7.
- 22 Cf. D. Czaja, *Mozart i Salieri*, „Kino” nr 11-12/1990, pp. 32-35.
- 23 See block of articles, interpretations on “Babette's Feast” in this Anthology.
- 24 On this motive see Z. Benedyktowicz, *Maria and Martha ...* in this Anthology.
- 25 On this motive in *Amadeus* by Milos Forman and on this theme drew attention and developed his interpretation D. Czaja, in: *Mozart i Salieri*, op cit.
- 26 R. M. Rilke, *Doświadczenie śmierci*, (Death Experience), op. cit., p. 105.
- 27 Calderón de la Barca, *Wielki Teatr Świata*. (The Great Theatre of the World), fragment by soundtrack from the movie *Elisa, My life* by Saura, transl. S. Ułłowicz
- 28 R. M. Rilke, *Dziesiąta Elegia Duinejska*, (Tenth Elegy), op.cit., pp. 255-257.
- 29 R.M. Rilke, *Sonet do Orfeusza, Sonet X*. (Sonnets to Orpheus, Sonnet X), op. cit., p. 335.
- 30 R.M. Rilke, *Ósma elegia, Elegie Duinejskie* (Eighth Duino Elegy), Ibidem, p. 247.
- 31 Cf. J. Trznadel, op. cit., pp. 165-166.
- 32 The first polish translation I put after *Biblia Tysiąclecia*, the second version after *Biblia Gdańska*
- 33 E. Korulska, *Dzieci pukają do drzwi kamienia*, „Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa”, nr 3-4/1995, pp. 217-219.
- 34 X. Leon-Dufour SJ, *Słownik Nowego Testamentu*, transl., Rev. K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1981, p. 330.
- 35 D. Forstner OSB, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, transl., W. Zakrzewska, P. Pachciarek, R. Turzyński, Warszawa 1990, p. 128.
- 36 X. Leon-Dufour SJ, op. cit., p. 330.
- 37 D. Forstner OSB, op. cit., p. 125.
- 38 D. Forstner OSB, op. cit., p. 126.
- 39 Ibidem.
- 40 Ibidem p.130
- 41 R.R. Niebhur, “Harvard Divinity Bulletin”, October-November 1981, p. 3.
- 42 From the Volume *Sól*, 1962, [w:] W. Szymborska, *Wybór wierszy*, Warszawa 1964, p. 110-111.
- 43 Św. Augustyn, *Wyznania*, (St. Augustine, Confessions) transl.. Z. Kubiak, Warszawa 1982, p. 134-135
- 44 R.M. Rilke, *Sonet do Orfeusza, Część pierwsza, Sonet III*, op. cit., p. 269.
- 45 A. Silvestrini, op. cit., p. 122.
- 46 I've included the soundtrack and press material for the film *Lisbon Story* by Wim Wenders
- 47 In a statement the director of the film (ibid., in press releases), we learn about how this piece of film was created: “I would not allow myself to write the text for Manoel de Oliveira. We talked only about the meaning of the film and the context of the scene in which he had to attend. He asked me for time to think and after a while he said he was ready. We let the movement of the camera. When we finished, he asked the crew to be turned, stuck a mustache and improvised parody of Charlie Chaplin.
- 48 C.G. Jung, *O stosunku psychologii analitycznej do dzieła poetyckiego*, [in:], *Archetypy i symbole. Pisma wybrane.* Transl., J. Prokopiuk, Warszawa 1976, p. 374.
- 49 Ibidem, p. 375-377.
- 50 *Asa - Nisi - Masa* it is an anagram of the word, „Anima”, appearing in („8 and ½”) *Eight and a Half* by F. Fellini (A [sa] Ni [si] Ma [sa])