

FELLINI:

CIRCUS OF LIGHT





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exhibition *Fellini: Circus of Light*.

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Photo of *The Clowns*, 1971

Collection of the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema

Back Cover

Drawing by Fellini on a napkin referencing *Prova d'Orchestra*, 1979 original, 50 x 50 cm,

Collection of the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema

FELLINI: CIRCUS OF LIGHT

**A
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Foreword

Vibeke Sorensen

During a 1983 interview, Federico Fellini expressed to Stéphane Marti his vision as one that strove to preserve the cinematic image as an enduring form of expression in his work. The proliferation of television as a mainstream form of entertainment, coupled with changing tastes of a quickly developing contemporary society have changed the way visual images were being consumed. But to Fellini, cinema was not merely just a ritual or a pastime, but a rigorous practice that sought to overcome generational arguments around the restraints on creativity.

The exhibition *Fellini: Circus of Light* can be said to be such an endeavour. It is also a testament to the Italian maestro's diverse body of work that had transformed the way images are being perceived as well as discussed in 20th century film discourse.

The showcase of more than 50 photographs, movie posters and original drawings from the collection of the Fellini Foundation for Cinema, document Fellini's vast oeuvre, drawn from more than three decades of his filmography. This includes his classics such as *La Strada* (1954), *8½* (1963), *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), *Satyricon* (1969), *The Clowns* (1971), *Amarcord* (1973), *Fellini's Casanova* (1976), *Intervista* (1987), among others. The School of Art, Design and Media is proud to partner with the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema to present this exhibition, with their valuable collection that has helped illuminate the lesser known processes of Fellini's filmmaking.

Another critical component of the exhibition shows how the universe of Fellini – primarily seen on film – is being translated into other modes of representation that deepen the understanding of his works. In the exhibition, artists from the School of Art, Design and Media, from across disciplines of fashion, graphic, product, sound and visual effects design, as well as film, animation and puppetry, have come together to uncover the complexity of the filmic works of one of the most compelling and enduring auteurs of the 20th century.

Created within the exhibition are immersive spaces that draw viewers into Fellini's world. A carnivalesque room that explores Fellini's fascination with the circus, reveals vignettes of his important films in a three-dimensional spatial environment. The aural dimensions of Fellini's work are accentuated through sound design that highlights the mood, melody and

indeed, mayhem in his films. Fellini's characters are brought alive through life-sized models, designed by faculty members specialising in fashion and puppetry. These creative efforts and initiatives complement the collection of the Fellini Foundation for Cinema, and extend the experience of the world of Fellini.

The School of Art, Design and Media is grateful for the support of the Embassy of Switzerland in Singapore, the Embassy of Italy in Singapore and the Italian Cultural Institute in Singapore, and would like to thank all the collaborators and artists involved, for helping to realise this exhibition.

Vibeke Sorensen
Chair, School of Art, Design and Media
Nanyang Technological University

Message from the Embassy of Switzerland in Singapore

Thomas Kupfer

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition, *Fellini: Circus of Light*, jointly organised by Nanyang Technological University (NTU), School of Art, Design and Media (ADM) and the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema.

Initiated under a cooperation agreement signed between the NTU School of Art, Design and Media and the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema in August 2015, the exhibition opens a series of cultural activities and exchanges revolving around the renowned Italian film director.

This first cultural collaboration, involving the joint efforts of NTU, Singapore, and the Embassies of Italy and Switzerland in Singapore, gives an overview of Fellini's work accessible for the first time to students and cinema-lovers in Singapore and to a further extent, to Southeast Asia.

But you may wonder: how is Switzerland involved with the iconic Italian film director Federico Fellini. The Fellini Foundation for the Cinema was established in 2011 in Sion, Switzerland, after it had acquired, with the support of the State of Valais and the City of Sion and Loterie Romande/Valais, Swiss film producer Gérard Morin's huge private archive on Fellini. Gérard Morin had worked from 1971 to 1977 as Fellini's assistant, and his admiration for the Italian maestro prompted him to collect every possible object related to Fellini.

Today, the collection has been completed with a great number of new acquisitions and comprises some 15,000 items such as original documents, letters, film scripts, photographs, drawings, posters, films, costumes and props on Fellini. To date, this collection represents the world's first private archive on Fellini.

I'm very proud of the collaboration of the Singapore institution and the Swiss foundation as it also reflects the excellent bilateral relations between both our countries. Over 5,000 Swiss citizens live and work in Singapore; more than 400 Swiss companies established their headquarters here; and many Swiss students come to study in the City-State. All these show Switzerland's important interest in Singapore.

Furthermore, with this collaboration, I see a great potential to develop further the cultural relationship between our two countries. Switzerland has a thriving arts scene reflecting its multilingual and multicultural identity in the heart of Europe. The Embassy of Switzerland helps to promote

Swiss culture in Singapore and to foster cultural cooperation between organisations and artists of both countries by organising activities throughout the year, often in partnership with local institutions, Presence Switzerland, the Swiss Arts Council PRO HELVETIA or private sponsors. The presence of Swiss culture in Singapore has been growing recently and its increase is very promising.

On a personal note, I'm particularly delighted to support this exhibition, as I have always been a great admirer of Fellini. Even more important, my Italian spouse Fiorella's home is very close to Fellini's home-town, Rimini.

With this first exhibition in Asia on the art of Fellini, the Italian director's legacy will now be open to new generations at the other end of the world.

I look forward to the exhibition and wish it a great success.

**Thomas Kupfer, His Excellency
Ambassador of Switzerland in Singapore**

Message from the Embassy of Italy in Singapore

Paolo Crudele

After the very successful month-long retrospective of Federico Fellini's films in 2010 at Singapore's National Museum, this year the City-State is hosting a special exhibition, *Fellini: Circus of Light*, a demonstration of the maestro's cinematography and his relationship with circus arts, a *leit-motif* that appears in several of his films.

Thanks to the joint cooperation between the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), School of Art, Design & Media, the Federico Fellini Foundation for the Cinema in Sion, the Embassies of Italy and Switzerland as well as the Italian Cultural Institute in Singapore, this exhibit will be Southeast Asia's first ever tribute to Fellini's love and fascination for the circus arts and will showcase the profound influence that the "circus life" had on Fellini's moviemaking.

When we bring up the subject of Federico Fellini, we are talking about one of the world's most iconic film directors. Volumes have already been written about the beloved author of *Amarcord*, *La dolce vita* and *8½*. We cannot overestimate the legacy and the impact of this great Italian filmmaker – as well as his influence on Italian and international cinema – had on past and will have on future generations of film students and young filmmakers all over the world. This on-going interest in Italian cinema is mirrored in Italy by a new and deep interest in Southeast Asian films which have been consistently invited to participate in Italian film festivals. Italian universities – such as the University of Turin and the University of Bologna DAMS – are now offering degrees in Asian Film Studies. It is a great satisfaction to witness how the School of Art, Design and Media of NTU is considering the launch of a Federico Fellini's Digital Archive and it is now hosting this unique multimedia show that will provide NTU's students and the Singaporean public at large a chance to look into one of Fellini's major sources of inspiration. With the Fellini's Digital Archive and this exhibition as well as the upcoming launch of a Ph.D course in Federico Fellini's filmography, the Nanyang Technology University is at the forefront of Italian film studies in Singapore and in Southeast Asia.

It is noteworthy that the positive cooperation of all institutional parties involved, representing Singapore, Italy and Switzerland has created the perfect synergy resulting in this original exhibition as a testimony that the art of cinema remains one of the most effective ways to connect people across the globe and to provide a better understanding of cultural diversity.

**Paolo Crudele, His Excellency
Ambassador of Italy in Singapore**

Message from the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema

Stéphane Marti

The Fellini Foundation for the Cinema A worldwide and cultural platform for new generations

Established in 2001 in Sion (Switzerland), the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema (FFC) owns the largest collection of memorabilia in the world, related to Federico Fellini and numerous other directors. These 15,000 documents, that include drawings, photographs, scripts, letters, posters, artefacts, costumes, production documents and press releases, were presented by the Foundation in more than seventy exhibitions and events around the world: to name a few, Paris (Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume/ Louvre); Festival de Cannes, Rome (MACRO, Teatro dei Dioscuri); Venice (Palazzo Benzon and Mostra del cinema); Milan (Gallery Cartiere Vannucci); Madrid and Barcelona (la Caixa Centres); Warsaw (Mazowiecki Instytut Kultury); Krakow (Galeria Solvay); Moscow (House of Photography); New York (Center548); Toronto (TIFF); Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Instituto Moreira Salles); Ludwig Museum Koblenz; Eye Museum Amsterdam; Switzerland (Musée de l'Elysée); and Sion, where the Foundation is based and has its cultural centre.

The FFC has developed its activities in many directions: conservation of the cinema patrimony; organisation of events and international exhibitions; support for an educative programme (*L'Atelier du regard*); archiving for academic research; and digital technology for culture. The exhibitions took on a new importance since the establishment of the cultural centre of the Foundation, *La Maison du Diable Cinéma & Culture Visuelle* (MDD)¹ in 2011 in Sion. Here, exhibitions were presented in world premieres with the most important partners such as the Cinémathèque Française. Over the past five years, exhibitions such as *Otto e Mezzo*; *Let us interrogate the Fantastic Films*; *International Film Shootings – Paris, Berlin, Hollywood, 1910-1939*; *Audrey Hepburn: Itinerary of a Star*; *Fellini, an artist of the 20th century*; *Stephanie Cornfield: Nomadic Mirrors*; and *Panorama of the Mountain films*, made the MDD, situated as it is in the heart of the Swiss Alps, an international location for cinema. The FFC produced 25 publications including two books and monographs by the prestigious publisher Gallimard in Paris. The FFC established partnerships with other arts: Maurice Béjart produced a world premiere ballet named *Ciao Federico* for the first international exhibition of the FFC, *Fellini Maestro del cinema* (Palais de Beaulieu Lausanne) in 2003. The FFC also produced several

short films as well as video documentaries, such as *Dialogue literature/ painting* by artists Michel Butor and Luc Joly.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Arts is an industrial art in the sense that it is produced in an era when economy and technology became interdependent. The close alliance between cinema and economy is evidenced by the unwavering support of firms and businesses for the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema. For instance, in 2011, Center548 in New York welcomed the exhibition *Persol Magnificent Obsessions* as a tribute to Fellini and Terry Gilliam with the support of the Luxottica Group. The Fellini Foundation for the Cinema established a cultural network in Switzerland and around the world with different partners who share its cultural vision. With the institutional support of the City of Sion, the Bourgeoisie de Sion, the Canton of Valais, the Swiss Lottery, and private partners, the FFC has taken up the role of a cultural ambassador for the economy. The exhibition, Fellini's *Otto e Mezzo* at the Palais Benzon in Venice, organised with the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano (August-September 2012), was supported by the Department of Economy of Valais. The Foundation also produces interactive magazines for iPad especially designed for its exhibitions: the visitors receive free access to archives, photos, sounds and music from its own collection, including interviews with Federico Fellini, Marcello Mastroianni, Claudia Cardinale and Sandra Milo.

Over the next several years, we intend to forge strong links in this worldwide network, especially with centres of creative know-how in order to benefit from cinema's heritage and expertise. On behalf of the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema, I express our gratitude and I am proud to launch such a strong cultural partnership with the NTU, all made possible thanks to the name and the spirit of Fellini the Maestro. In this way all our activities become open to future generations in a fruitful dialogue of cultures. This Fellini adventure is now your adventure too.

Stéphane Marti
President of the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema

¹The cultural centre of the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema, La Maison du Diable Cinéma & Culture Visuelle, owes its name to an ancestral and romantic legend related to this patrimonial residence, Domus Supersaxo, built at the beginning of the 14th century to receive the ambassadors of the nearby countries. Nicolas Rouiller is the director and the curator of the centre.

Curatorial Note

Heitor Capuzzo & Stéphane Marti

The exhibition *Fellini: Circus of Light* brings some clues to Fellini's universe. Conceived as an introduction to Fellini's films, the exhibition is divided into two segments. Situated in ADM Gallery 2 are approximately 50 pieces from the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema collection documenting Fellini's work. Among the exhibits are still images from his original films, daily life in film studios, along with posters, objects, and original drawings by Fellini. The selections work like *pentimenti*, fading frescos, surrounded by sounds, light and music as indexes for his creative process. The space in which they are presented is conceived as a labyrinth, alternating in light and shadow, with images suggesting a symbiosis between the grotesque and the sublime, the sacred and the profane.

Created in the ADM Gallery 1 is an immersive environment dedicated to Fellini's characters. The frozen characters are wandering the sky above the circus arena, looking for the maestro.

This exhibition is the collective result of a number of creative artists from School of Art, Design and Media, NTU: Puppeteers, sound designers, visual effects supervisors, graphic artists, product designers, webmasters, filmmakers and fashion designers, working together to introduce the complexity of the filmic works of one of the major artists of the 20th century.

The curator from the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema was responsible for the selection and framing of the original materials, and the curator from the School of Art, Design and Media, NTU, was responsible for conceptualising and overall design of the exhibition.

A Sphinx named Federico

Heitor Capuzzo

Federico Fellini started work as screenwriter in Italian film productions in 1942, one year before the fall of Benito Mussolini leadership in Rome.

At that time the roots of the upcoming neorealist film movement were already cultivated by several Italian film directors as Luchino Visconti, Mario Soldati and Vittorio De Sica among others. The international impact of *Rome Open City* (1945) and *Paisà* (1946) by Roberto Rossellini was essential for the starting of a new era in the Italian post World War II cinema.

Although the Italian neorealist movement produced a list of films with different styles, approaches and visions, they shared one point in common: understanding the process underlining the destruction of Italy and the urgent need to approach the reconstruction of the country.

Many forces were involved in that complex time of tensions and struggles. Separatist armed movements revealed that the possibilities of a civil war were on the table. At same time, the Italian infrastructure was basically destroyed by the war and many people were literally starving.

The hard dialogue between conflicted ideologies had to be established and the Catholic Church played a fundamental role in that process. Mediating those opposite visions, the Catholic Church embraced the human condition as a priority.

The Italian neorealism was shaped under that complex debate, finding common points in a civilisation with a millenary heritage that faced many moments of destruction and reconstruction in its history.

Either as a screenwriter or assistant director, Federico Fellini participated in many important Italian neorealist films, working mainly with Roberto Rossellini, Pietro Germi and Alberto Lattuada.

It is possible to detect a discreet Fellini touch in those films. There are some irreverent moments, imbued with a kind of anarchic humour. A good example of this is found in *Rome Open City* (1945), where the priest enters an antique store. While he waits alone for a secret delivery, before his very eyes, stands a sculpture of a nude woman body. It is a clear moment of conflicting emotions: the character, in spite of his ordained status, faces his human condition.

Fellini's approach to humanism is based on his personal experiences blended with fictional narratives. There are moments alternating between the grotesque and sublime that suggests that they are faces of the same coin. This juxtaposition of sublime and grotesque is a



key strategy to afford a three-dimensional representation of life. It can be considered the basis of Fellini's poetry.

His first films are based on real locations. If the landscapes reminds of the Italian neorealism aesthetic, the atmosphere is highly subjective. More than just presenting the geographical locations, the landscapes become extensions of the characters feelings.

The friends in *I Vitelloni* (1953) are familiar with their provincial city. There are few possibilities to escape from that sweet routine of peace. Their drunken moments in the main square at late nights are always followed by walks on empty and dark streets where nights are longer than days.

Some point in that routine brings the group to the seafront. That is the limit: to trespass the "sea barrier" requires their squarely facing the challenges of their future.

One important subject in Fellini's films is the characters struggle for a possible transition between their lives in the province and their dream of moving to a dynamic metropolis. In Fellini's films the emotional distance between Rimini (the city in which he was born) and Rome is bigger than the geographical one. The feeling of loss at some point can become a painful trauma.



In *La Dolce Vita* (1960), there is a sequence where the elegant reporter meets his father (who lives in a small city) in a nightclub in Rome. Although they want to exchange their feelings cheerfully, an abyss lies between them. They are "strangers when they meet."



The way that big cities shape its inhabitants is open territory to romanticise the past. *Amarcord* (1974) is structured as a memory album, an idealistic travel time to an imaginary past in the provincial Rimini, reconstructed according to Fellini's poetry. This artificial reconstruction of memories alerts us that we are consuming a representation that seems to match the facts based on real observations, but which has in reality been manipulated according to the vision of a seducing liar. That fragmented mosaic reveals impressions about the past as the result of a rehearsal of our own memories.



When the characters of *Amarcord* take the boats out to the open sea to wait for the transatlantic *Rex*, that imaginary reconstruction touches us deeply. In reality, it is but a collection of lies. *Rex* never passed through Rimini. Those characters were loosely based on stereotypes of different people, and the entire Rimini, including the sea and *Rex*, was staged in the Cinecittà studio in Rome. In Fellini's films the concept of real is the real of the screen. Few sequences were able to touch so deeply the public as this particular one. Certainly there is more than one possibility to explain this phenomenon, but it would be a frustrated exercise. Poetry was not created to be explained.

There is a sense of incompleteness in the way that Fellini's proposed his poetic vision of cinema. The gaps are not there to be minded. They are the subjective results of his life experience, something vague that is metaphorically parallel to a circus experience.

A circus programme is a collection of artistic numbers mixing jugglers, trapezes, trained animals, magic, tightropes, clowns and musicians, all inside an arena covered artificially by a tent that imitates the sky.

There is a grotesque side in the circus experience: the animals suffer; the artists risk their lives for the sake of show in cheap exploitation; the fake happiness of the clowns can be easily detected during the intermissions; and the ballerinas are overly made-up.

But this absence of refinement does not break the magic of the show. The public knows exactly what to expect and sometimes a sublime moment comes out of the gaps. It can be either a facial expression of one of the clowns or a well rehearsed number. Circus can be a metaphor about our human condition, a narrow line between splendour and ridicule.

The fascination of Fellini with the circus is also a good starting point for the immersive experience of his works. Where they appear, he keeps to one main revelation about the clowns. He embraced the archetypal construction of the clowns' universe as divided in two types: the White clowns with their obsession to attain success in their competition to imitate the other circus artists. They are always irritable and authoritarian, disconnected with the public. The second is populated by the Augusto clowns who are not that stupid as they appear. They are colourful, happy and energetically connected with the public. But of course, they are always distracted, failing in everything that they are trying to do.



Both clowns are, again, different faces of the same coin: a unit that was split and condemned to look for their reunification, perhaps only possible at infinity. They are still travelling eternally in the labyrinths of our poetry.

The dichotomies in Fellini's universe are more than possible strategies for to address human condition. They are like a passport to enter the limbo, a fuzzy territory where the gaps are the content.

One of his main films is *8½* (*Otto e Mezzo*, 1963). Perhaps it is the most crucial art work introducing the public in the labyrinths of the artistic creative process. Nothing is conclusive in the narrative. A famous film director needs to start to shoot his upcoming production, but he has no idea what this new film could be. In his mind, there are fragments of his life in an allegoric representation blended with fictional moments. Everything is seductive, visually refined, but asking for some possible unit. The main character faces the same burden as the two clowns.

The gallery of characters in Fellini's films is one of the highlights of his legacy. The exotic figures were inspired by his

original drawings. His past experience as cartoonist helped to shape his style. Beside the emphasis on grotesque representations, his gallery also presents sublime moments.



Certainly Gelsomina, the female character of *La Strada* (1954) is the most celebrated one. Under the powerful performance of Giulietta Masina, this character was responsible for the international recognition of Fellini in the film scene.

Gelsomina reminds us of a female version of the famous tramp created by Chaplin. There is always a space for a lonely tear in the funny sequences as well as a discreet smile during the sad moments.



Another subject explored by Fellini in his films is the dichotomy sacred-profane. In *Nights of Cabiria* (1957), a prostitute tries hard to survive, believing that some miracle can rescue her from the cruel reality.

In despair Cabiria tries to follow a religious procession. The collective commotion suggests in her mind a moment of purification. Light and shadow frame her delirium where a prostitute can be sanctified.



In *Roma* (1972), Fellini alternates a sequence with nude prostitutes in a brothel during the post World War II era, with a procession in the contemporary days that is dedicated to the new clothes for the cardinals. Both parades reflect a city in continuous process of decadence, so far from its glorious past.

In *Satyricon* (1969), Fellini proposes a vision of Rome before the impact of Christianity. The Roman Empire is in decadence. The heavy heritage of the glorious times of Rome is a burden for the new generation. In this case the sacred-profane dichotomy is metamorphosed to the conflict between heritage and new horizons.



It is possible to consider Fellini's films as variations of the same subject. His works suggest a fragmented mosaic with many missing pieces. Our human condition is exposed with tenderness, passion, fury, rebelliousness and also fragility.

Fellini is still an indecipherable enigma. His legacy continues to inspire several generations of filmmakers. His name has become an adjective that qualifies poetry.

Heitor Capuzzo
Professor, School of Art, Design and Media
Nanyang Technological University

All images are from the private collection of Federico Grandesso.

The Maestro of the Cinema Circus

Stéphane Marti

When a circus makes a stop in a city, the big top seems to occupy the world in such an arena of dreams. The circus becomes this concentric circle without limits where everyone finds his or her childhood. Animals seem to speak with the people and the artists can fly over our heads. The circus is one of the last refuges of our enchantment, and the clown the High Priest of that wonderland. The clown expresses in full light the dark side of man. He transcends human stupidity in childlike style because his laugh is absolute. The clown is a circus in the circus.

The first scene of the movie *I Clowns* (1970) symbolises and condenses the life and the work of Fellini: a child wakes up in the middle of the night and looks out of the window to discover the installation of a circus in his small village. The large tent rising in the obscurity will never leave Fellini. This child stops the night dreams to continue another type of dream, the cinema. The circus was the secret heart of the Maestro's fantasy from his first drawings in the weekly magazine, *Marc'Aurelio* (1940), to the last movie (*La Voce della Luna*, 1990) when the moon learns flying trapeze in the night. Thus the screen of the movie theatre extends to the big top of this remote circus because they are both woven in the same material: the liberty of imagination.

Fellini used to remind of this first determining event of his life when he was seven years old (during the summer 1927): fascinated by the clown Pierino, he left his family for a few days to join a small circus company. Is this moment in his biography true or fictive? That doesn't matter: Fellini is a 'saltimbanco' artist as a modern and transgressive creator. One generation later the enchanted circus ring of his childhood became the famous Cinecittà's Studio 5 ("Il Teatro di posa 5"). Immersed in this great space the director transforms the set, metamorphosing it into cities (Venice for *Il Casanova di Fellini*, 1976; Rome for the *La Dolce Vita*, 1960). As a new Poseidon he changed the air in water (*E la Nave va*, 1983).

But the highest achievement in this Fellinian fantasy may lie in the fact that the Maestro called every section of the contemporary society into his private circus at Cinecittà: the symbols of the authority (the father and the Italian *Duce* in *Amarcord*, 1974); journalists (Marcello in *La Dolce Vita*); directors and cinema producers (Guido in *Otto e Mezzo*, 1963); seducers (Casanova, and Cazzone in *La Città delle donne*, 1980); even a moralist

(Il dottor Antonio in *Boccaccio 70*, 1962) and old stars of the show business (*Ginger e Fred*, 1986), converge together in the same place to continue a huge clown act.

To understand the affinity Fellini has to the circus, we need to examine his creative way of shooting - for the Maestro, a way of life. Fellini did not simply make his movies with technicians; instead he assembled a 'troupe' of artists - screenwriters (Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano, Bernardino Zapponi, Tonino Guerra and Gianfranco Angelucci); actors (Marcello Mastroianni, Giulietta Masina); set designers (Italo Tomassi, Piero Gherardi); a cinematographer (Giuseppe Rotunno); and lastly the musical genius whose career was not confined to the movies, Nino Rota - keeping this strange staff around him as a circus director. Thanks to this long partnership of great artists and strong craftsmen the work of Fellini have entered into our collective memory.

Let us cross into this magic cinema circus to hear Fellini speaking: "the clowns are the ambassadors of my vocation. [...] I believe in a cinema which can recreate even the sea in studio. My light is not the one that the sun can give." Certainly this exhibition represents in world premiere the best access to this extraordinary world.

Stéphane Marti

President

Fellini Foundation for the Cinema

Fellini and the Circus: When Life Imitates Art

Veronica Manson

"*La Strada* is a complete catalogue of my entire mythological world and is also a dangerous view into my inner being which was going through an unprecedented transformation at that time." This is how Federico Fellini described his beloved movie *La Strada*, which starred his wife, Giulietta Masina, and the American movie star, Anthony Quinn.

After filming *I Vitelloni* and *La Strada*, Fellini turns to one of his most cherished themes (some might say an obsession): the circus and its whimsical, out-of-the-ordinary life. The circus becomes a recurring element in several of his works: after *La Strada*, circus arts were depicted in *I Clowns* and *Amarcord* among others; several 'circus acts' even appear as cameos in other films such as *La Dolce Vita*. It is apparent that after his early works, the *Maestro* of Italian cinema broke away from neorealism and from there he began to film his fascination with the circus.

Why the circus? It is well known that Fellini, even before becoming a film director – was a gifted caricature artist while the inspiration for these sketches was derived from his own dreams. Many drawings of characters, decor, costumes and set designs were done before or during the shooting of his movies. In Fellini's long and well-documented collections of sketches and drawings we can find insight into this *leit motif* of Federico Fellini, further exploring his relationship with cinematic art and the life of the circus.

The circus gives viewers a glimpse into Fellini's mind and moviemaking, showing what inspired him and why circus arts, acrobats, clowns – and the whimsical fantasy and extravagance surrounding the circus – were, in Fellini's view, a perfect metaphor for life itself with all its mysteries and magic as well as the decadence of Italian society in the late 1950's with its pompous yet clownish characters.

When Fellini presented the project for *La Strada* to film producer Dino de Laurentiis – who ended up financing the film – he said that he "wanted to recount the impressions of a distant 1920s Italy, a secret yet still primitive land inhabited by people wandering about without any fixed destination." Which is befitting of the historical situation of Italy in the early 1950s: a country undergoing tremendous transformation after coming out of a devastating war and pushing towards a feverish and accelerated industrialisation. The so-called 'economic boom' of Italy in those years finds its representation in Fellini's movies where a long-past, dreamy, magic and vaguely idealised agricultural world is clashing with the new, industrial and modern Italy. The circus becomes a relevant metaphor of this transforming world, where characters juggle and struggle and try to survive because "the show must go on", where beauty, talent and tragedy go hand in hand.

It is telling that, while filming *La Strada*, Federico Fellini suffered a severe bout of depression and completed the shooting only after a series of sessions with a psychoanalyst. The 'circus of life' proved to be fascinating and exhilarating, yet sad and depressing at the same time, a perfect parallel of art imitating life.

Fellini returned to the circus in another film: *I Clowns* or *The Clowns*. Even in this instance, the story is an opportunity to reflect on life and its contradictions. The clowns are not happy characters living in a fantasy world; they are confronted with the difficulties of impoverished life, with an artistic tradition that while not actually dying, is certainly becoming *passé*.

With laughter and foolishness as a way to mask the tragedy of life, once again, circus clowns become a cinematic instrument for Fellini to explore the human condition, especially in a quickly and dramatically changing society.

Federico Fellini's interest in the circus arts comes from a long tradition of Italian literature and even Opera – suffice to remember the tragedy of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* – but he was also very attentive to and strongly influenced by the films he admired – films by Buster Keaton, Danny Kaye and the great Groucho Marx. For the film *The Clowns*, Fellini had even asked the great Charlie Chaplin to play a part in the movie. Chaplin declined because of age, but it is telling that film was really meant to be a tribute to the life of the circus.

Throughout his film career, Fellini returned to the circus *motif* in many of his films. In the iconic *La Dolce Vita*, which was Fellini's most recognised film internationally, along with *Casanova*, there is a cameo circus act in the famous nightclub scene. Again in *Amarcord*, Fellini gave an important role to one of Italy's most famous circus owners and directors: Nando Orfei.

In every film, from the very first produced with Alberto Lattuada, *Variety Lights* in 1950, until his last feature, *The Voice of the Moon* in 1990, quotations or references to the circus and circus surroundings including clowns, are constant and abundant. As Fellini once said in a famous interview "Cinema is a beat-up old car where somebody inside with a camera is shooting a clown moving along outside."

Veronica Manson
Director
Italian Cultural Institute

Reference: Tullio Kezich, *Federico Fellini, The Films*, Rizzoli, 2009.

Interview

Stéphane Marti with Federico Fellini, 16 March 1983

"If I've sometimes expressed a certain pessimism about the cinema, it's to do with what are essentially generational arguments around restraints on the expression of our creativity and the things we want to do. There have been times when I've felt that the kind of films we have always made, films made for love and identified with life, are no longer possible, probably also because nobody wants this kind of cinema any more. These are the kind of thoughts that can come over you at melancholic moments and let's hope that they will be beaten back by that age-old urge to keep doing something new. I think we need to look at several factors that have suddenly come to the fore... Here, I'm repeating something that I've often said to the gentlemen from the press: it seems to me that cinema, not just as a ritual, a pastime, a way of spending an afternoon or an evening, a meeting place, but also cinema and the cinematic image as a form of expression, cinema as that vast ectoplasmic screen on which huge shadows and immense faces appear, with its promises of the exotic and the unknown, it seems to me that this cinema has lost its prestige. The cinema used to exert a mysterious fascination, which it has now lost, not so much because of the competition from television, since films are also produced for TV, but because television shrinks the visual image and turns it into so much confetti. You could say that television has mutilated the visual image to some degree. A new type of viewer has emerged, one who is less captivated. Twenty years of relating to television have introduced a new power relationship. We are no longer enthralled by visual images as we were at the cinema. We own the images, we zap from one image to another, one channel to another. So we have to recognise that the suggestive cinematographic image has lost some of its shine, had some of its enamel chipped off. [...] I need to believe that the cinema is my life. I find it hard to fathom that we don't do cinema like that any more. So, here we are, standing on a hydraulic floor built by that great film-making institution known as Cinecittà, for what ought to be a final tribute, a goodbye to film making as it used to be. But I hope that the opposite is true, that I will be able to continue building these vast and very costly mechanised sets in Studio 5 and that I will be able to keep forging ahead."

Federico Fellini, during an interview with
Stéphane Marti at the set of *E la Nave va*,
Rome, Cinecittà, 16 March 1983

Exhibition Highlights

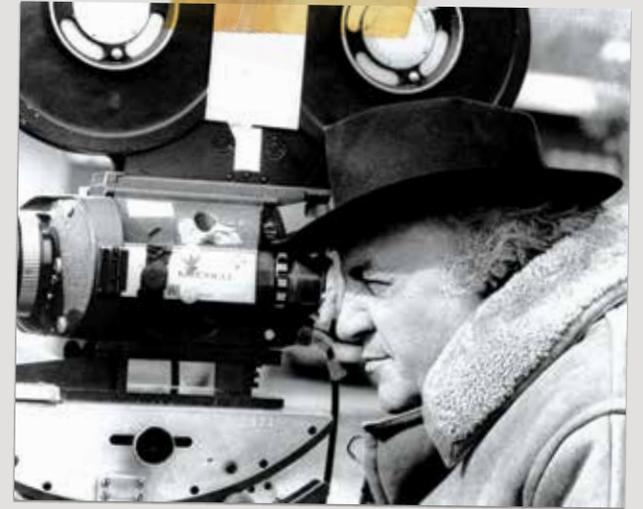
The exhibition *Fellini: Circus of Light* presents important pieces from the Fellini Foundation for the Cinema Collection. Please refer to page 56 for image details.



1

*Preliminary drawing for the movie *Il Casanova di Fellini**

Fellini with the camera Mitchell



2



3

*Gelsomina
(Giulietta Masina)*



4

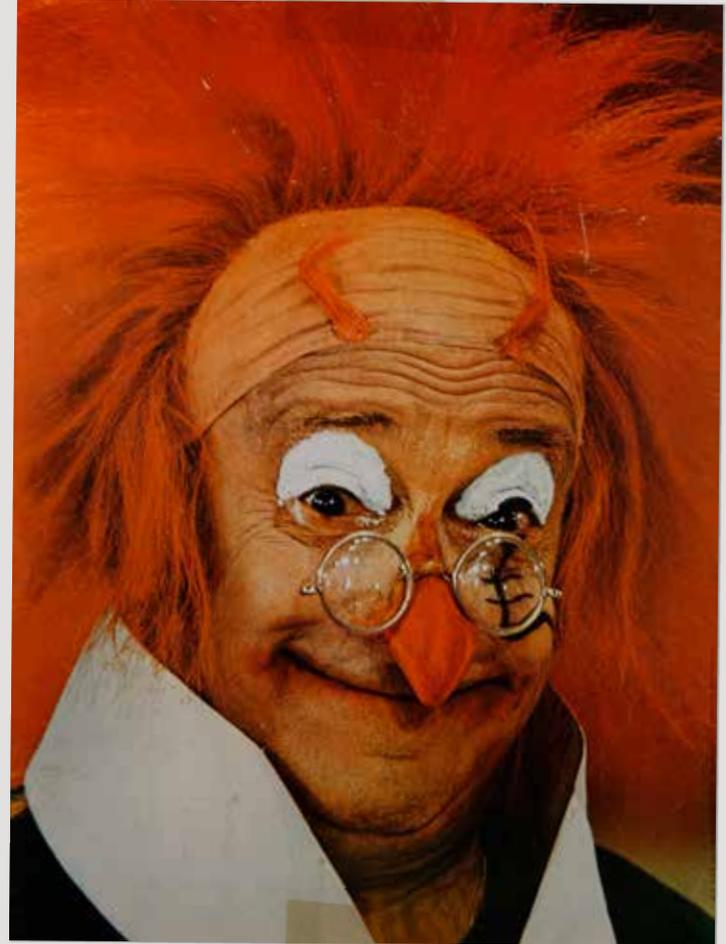
*Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina),
Lampano (Anthony Quinn) and
Ugo Giraffa*



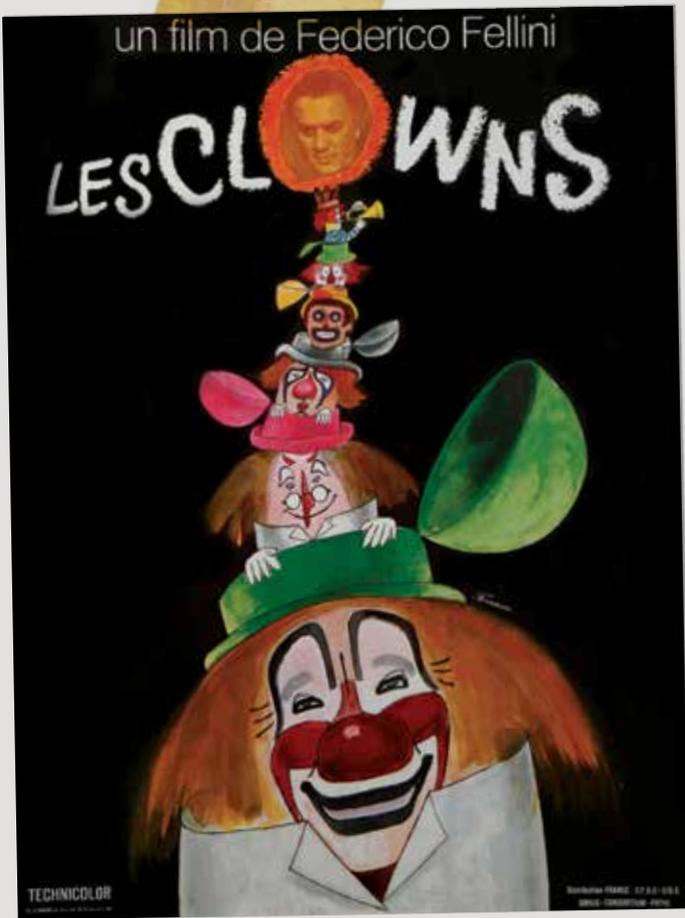
5

*The Mad
(Richard Basehart)
La Strada*

The Clowns: Photograph



6



7

The Clowns: Belgium poster



8

The minotaur and the clap



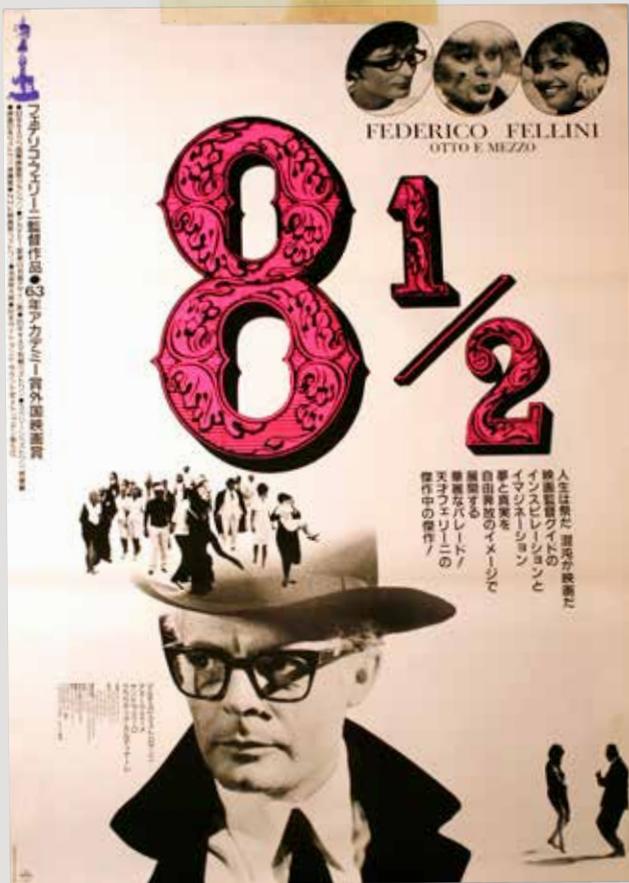
9

*Fellini on the set
of Satyricon*



10

Satyricon



11 *8 1/2: Japanese poster*



12 *Marcello Mastroianni
in 8 1/2*



*Fellini on the set
La Dolce Vita*

13



14

Roma: Italian photo material



Scene from the Carnival of Venice in Cinecittà

15

*Donald Sutherland between two shootings in Cinecittà, *Il Casanova di Fellini**



16

Lo Sceicco Bianco: Italian poster



17



*Original drawing by Fellini
on a napkin*

18



*Photo material
scene from E la Nave va*

19



20

The Clowns: photo material



21

*Intervista:
Italian poster
by Manara*

La Strada: Italian poster



22

*Fellini and the castings,
at the time of La Dolce Vita*



23

*Fellini with the Mad
(Richard Basehart)
on the set La Strada*



24

Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina)



25



26

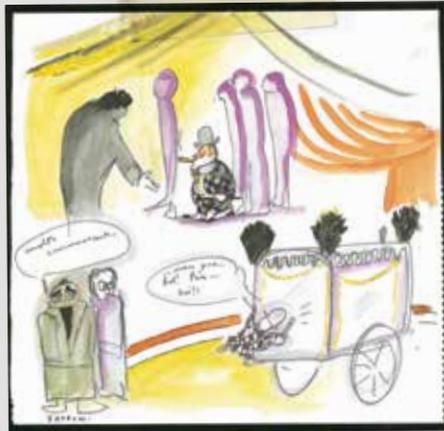
Drawing on a napkin by Fellini



27

*Giulietta degli spiriti:
Italian poster*

*Dream drawing, perhaps
telling of the death
of the last clown*



28



29

Le Clown: photo material

*La Dolce Vita:
Italian photo material*



30



31

The final sequence of 8½

*U Casanova di Fellini:
photo material*



32

*Donald Shuterland on the set
U Casanova di Fellini*



34

Amarcord: Italian poster



33



35

U Clown: photo material

*Fellini on the set
in Cinecittà, Intervista*



36

*Final scene
E la Nave va,
set in Cinecittà*



37

E la Nave va: German poster



38

Clowns, Japanese poster



39

*Drawing of characters
signed by Fellini*



40



41

*Fellini with the Gradisca
(Magali Noël) on the set
Amarcord*



42

*Fellini at the scene
of the Dex on the set
Amarcord*

*Amarcord:
German poster*



43



*Alberto Sordi and
Brunella Bovo
Lo Scicco Bianco*

44



I Vitelloni: French poster

45



*Original clap -
Il Casanova di Fellini*

46

1
Preliminary drawing for the movie *Il Casanova di Fellini*
1974–1975
Drawing
9 x 12 cm

2
Fellini with the camera Mitchell
Amarcord, 1973,
Photograph
8 x 24 cm

3
Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina)
La Strada, 1954
Photograph
18 cm x 24 cm

4
Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina) Zampano (Anthony Quinn) and Il Signor Giraffa (Aldo Silvani)
La Strada, 1954
Photograph
18 cm x 24 cm

5
The Mad (Richard Basehart)
La Strada, 1954
Photograph
18 cm x 24 cm

6
Photo of *I Clown*
1971
Poster
60 x 80 cm

7
Belgian poster *I Clown*
1971
Poster
60 cm x cm 80

8
The minotaur and the clap
Satyricon, 1969
Photograph By Pier Luigi Praturlon
18 cm x 24 cm

9
Fellini on the set of *Satyricon*
1969
Photograph by Pier Luigi Praturlon
18 x 24 cm

10
Scene from the set of *Satyricon*
1969
Photograph
20 x 30 cm

11
Japanese poster *8½*
1963
Poster
60 x 80 cm

12
Marcello Mastroianni in *8½*
1963
Photograph
18 x 24 cm

13
Fellini on the set of *La Dolce Vita*
1960
Photograph
18 x 24 cm

14
Roma photo material
1972
60 x 80 cm

15
Scene from the Carnival of Venice in Cinecittà
Il Casanova di Fellini, 1976
Photograph
21 x 30 cm

16
Donald Shuterland between two shootings in Cinecittà
Il Casanova di Fellini, 1975
Photograph by Pier Luigi Praturlon

17
Italian poster *Lo Sceicco Bianco*
Poster
1952
35 x 70 cm

18
Original drawing by Fellini on a napkin
1987
Drawing
50 x 50 cm

19
***E la Nave va* photo material**
1983
Poster

20
Scene from set of *I Clown*
1971
Photograph
30 x 40 cm

21
Italian poster *Intervista* by Manara
1987
Poster
60 x 80 cm

22
Italian poster *La Strada*
1954
Poster
60 x 80 cm

23
Fellini and the castings *La Dolce Vita*, 1960
Photograph
18 x 24 cm

24
Fellini with the Mad (Richard Basehart) on the set of *La Strada*
1954
Photograph
18 x 24 cm

- 25**
Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina)
La Strada, 1954
18 x 24 cm
- 26**
**Drawing on a napkin
by Fellini**
Undated
Drawing
18 x 22 cm
- 27**
**Italian poster *Giulietta
degli spiriti***
1965
Poster
60 x 80 cm
- 28**
Dream drawing
1969
Facsimile, Drawing
30 x 30 cm
- 29**
***I Clown* photo material**
1971
Photograph
30 x 40 cm
- 30**
***La Dolce Vita* photo material**
1960
Photograph
60 x 80 cm
- 31**
**The final sequence of *8½* by
Paul Ronald**
1963
Photograph
30 x 30 cm
- 32**
***Il Casanova di Fellini*
photo material**
1976
Photograph
18 x 24 cm
- 33**
Italian poster *Amarcord*
1973
Photograph
35 cm x 55 cm
- 34**
**Donald Shuterland on the set of
*Il Casanova di Fellini***
1976
Photograph by Pier Luigi Praturlon
18 x 24 cm
- 35**
***I Clown* photo material**
Photograph, 1971
30 x 40 cm
- 36**
Fellini on the set in Cinecittà
Intervista, 1987
Photograph
18 cm x 24 cm

- 37**
**Final scene of *E la Nave va
set in Cinecittà***
1983
Photograph
- 38**
**German poster of *E la Nave va
by Tardi***
E la Nave va
Poster
60 x 80 cm
- 39**
Japanese poster of *I Clown*
1971
Poster
60 x 80 cm
- 40**
**Drawing of characters signed
by Fellini**
Drawing
- 41**
**Fellini with the Gradisca (Magali
Noel) on the set of *Amarcord***
1973
Photograph by Pier Luigi Praturlon
18 x 24 cm
- 42**
**Fellini at the scene of the Rex
on the set of *Amarcord***
1973
Photograph by Pier Luigi Praturlon
18 x 24 cm
- 43**
German poster *Amarcord*
1973
Poster
60 x 80 cm
- 44**
Alberto Sordi and Brunella Bovo
Lo Sceicco Bianco, 1952
Photograph
9 x 12 cm,
- 45**
French poster of *I Vitelloni*
60 x 80 cm
- 46**
**Original clap of
*Il Casanova di Fellini***
1976
Object

Fellini's Filmography

As screenwriter without credits

- 1939: *Imputato alzatevi!*, directed by Mario Mattoli (as gagman)
1939: *Lo verdi come sei... Lo verdi come sei?!*,
directed by Mario Mattoli (as gagman)
1940: *Non me lo dire!*, directed by Mario Mattoli (as gagman)
1940: *Il pirata sono io!*, directed by Mario Mattoli (as gagman)
1942: *4 passi fra le nuvole*, directed by Alessandro Blasetti
1942: *Documento Z-3*, directed by Alfredo Guarini
1942: *I cavalieri del deserto*, directed by Gino Talamo and
Osvaldo Valenti (unfinished)
1943: *Apparizione*, directed by Jean De Limur
1945: *Tutta la città canta*, directed by Riccardo Freda
1946: *Aquila Nera*, directed by Riccardo Freda
1947: *Fumeria d'oppio*, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo
1951: *Persiane Chiuse*, directed by Luigi Comencini
1952: *Europa '51*, directed by Roberto Rossellini
1979: *Viaggio con Anita*, directed by Mario Monicelli

As screenwriter with credits

- 1942: *Avanti c'è posto*, directed by Mario Bonnard
1942: *Quarta pagina*, directed by Nicola Manzari
1943: *Campo de Fiori*, directed by Mario Bonnard
1943: *L'ultima carrozzella*, directed by Mario Mattoli
1945: *Chi l'ha visto?*, directed by Goffredo Alessandrini
1945: *Roma città aperta*, directed by Roberto Rossellini
1946: *Paisà*, directed by Roberto Rossellini
1947: *Il pastore*, directed by Duilio Coletti
1947: *Il delitto di Giovanni Episcopo*, directed by Alberto Lattuada
1948: *Amore*, directed by Roberto Rossellini
1948: *Senza Pietà*, directed by Alberto Lattuada
1949: *In nome della legge*, directed by Pietro Germi
1949: *La città dolente*, directed by Mario Bonnard
1949: *Il mulino del Po*, directed by Alberto Lattuada
1950: *Francesco*, Giullare di Dio, directed by Roberto Rossellini
1950: *Il cammino della speranza*, directed by Pietro Germi
1951: *Cameriera bella presenza offresi...*, directed by Giorgio Pàstina
1951: *La città si difende*, directed by Pietro Germi
1952: *Il brigante di Tacca del Lupo*, directed by Pietro Germi
1958: *Fortunella*, directed by Eduardo De Filippo

As director and screenwriter

- 1950: *Luci del varietà*, co-directed by Alberto Lattuada
1952: *Lo Sceicco Bianco*
1953: *I Vitelloni*
1954: *La Strada*
1955: *Il Bidone*
1957: *Le notti di Cabiria*
1960: *La Dolce Vita*
1963: *Otto e Mezzo*
1965: *Giulietta degli spiriti*
1969: *Block-notes di un regista*, TV documentary
1969: *Satyricon*
1971: *I Clowns*
1972: *Roma*
1973: *Amarcord*
1976: *Il Casanova di Federico Fellini*
1979: *Prova d'Orchestra*
1980: *La città delle donne*
1983: *E la nave va...*
1985: *Ginger e Fred*
1987: *Intervista*
1990: *La voce della luna*

Shorts films as director and screenwriter

- 1953: *L'amore in città* – episode: *Agenzia matrimoniale*
1962: *Boccaccio '70* – episode: *Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio*
1968: *Tre Passi Nel Delirio* – episode: *Toby Dammit*

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blogs.ntu.edu.sg/fellini

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