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## **BETWEEN HISTORY AND DREAM: DECODING FELLINI'S "AND THE SHIP SAILS ON"**

### **Abstract**

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*In this paper, we aim to explore the cultural and historical dimensions of the film "And the Ship Sails On", with a particular emphasis on the collective role assigned to the Serbian people. While the importance of the film may initially appear to lie solely in its artistic expression and surreal metaphor, we argue that Fellini's version of historical events deserves special attention. Therefore, in addition to presenting the most important symbolic messages, we undertake a comparative analysis between the historical narrative and the representation crafted by the Italian director. We conclude that Fellini's vision perfectly correlates with contemporary geopolitical trends, and we emphasize the need to initiate a historical revision for a better understanding of the role and place of the Serbian people in European culture.*

**Keywords:** *Federico Fellini, "And The Ship Sails On", Belle Epoque, Great War, Young Bosnia.*

Premiered in 1983 at the Venice Film Festival, the film received standing ovations and represented Italy in the Oscar competition. Despite grand announcements, a successful premiere, and the high expectations of the director himself, "And the Ship Sails On" will never achieve the

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fame of previous classics such as *La Strada*, *8½*, *Amarcord*... There will be no specific debate or controversy about the film. The relative lack of success will testify to the sad reality of Fellini's final stage of work – the audience no longer cares about the art of the Italian master; they are solely interested in his personality. For Fellini's biographer, this is a clear proof that "Italians talk much more about culture than they think about following its product"<sup>1</sup>

Classified as a drama-comedy, "And the Ship Sails On" is primarily a historical documentary about the European establishment and the social atmosphere just before the Great War started, with an epic allegory of the Sarajevo assassination. The event, closely related to Italian historiography, especially due to the presence of numerous political assassins among its own ranks. As in the case of Serbia, Italy's struggle for national unification was directed toward Vienna, the imperial family, and everything it represented. In this context, it is entirely understandable why Italy perceives the national aspirations of the southern Slavs as its own. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, Italy, despite its neutral stance, dispatched volunteers to Serbia, who would become the first Italian casualties of the Great War.<sup>2</sup> Italian solidarity with Serbia was mutual. One of the most popular public journal in pre-war Belgrade was named "Piemonte", after the region that played a decisive role in Italian unification. Also, the revolutionary Garibaldi was an idol among the Serbian youth. However, despite the historical affinity between the two nations, Belgrade in the early 20th century was no more than a provincial center, particularly when compared to Rome – the primary hub of European bourgeoisie and the epicenter of Renaissance art since the 15th century. Due to its geographical position, Italy had a unique historical background, equally influenced by European enlightenment and Balkan rebellious spirit. Consequently, there was a profound understanding of the root causes of the Great War, an intuitive perception that "the Serbian terrorist targeted not only Franz Ferdinand's chest but the very heart of Europe".<sup>3</sup>

In his own distinctive manner, Fellini presents to us the Italian 'cultural memory' regarding the causes of the Great War, what the 'heart of Europe' truly symbolizes, and against whom the 'Serbian terrorist'

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<sup>1</sup> Tulio Kecig (2013), *Federiko Felini zivot I film*, Novi sad: Kiša, 481.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio D'Alessandri (2018), "Italian Volunteers in Serbia in 1914", *Balkanica*, Institut for Balkan Studies 17-27.

<sup>3</sup> Luigi Albertini (1980), *The Origins Of The War Of 1914*, Wesport Connecticut: Greenwood press.

is actually fighting. The use of the journey metaphor enables him to portray the entire historical era in its most dynamic and intense manifestation. Consequently, we can grasp the spirit of the times with all its contradictions. The audience rapidly discerns the prevailing value system, interpersonal dynamics, and the class-based social hierarchy embodied by the ship's captain, crew, regular workers, and rich passengers.

## FELLINI'S TITANIC

Fellini's aim to provide us with essentially a documentary becomes apparent in the opening scenes, devoid of sound and color, purportedly captured using a first-generation film camera. The black and white images depict the boarding of passengers on the cruiser *Gloria N* individuals who "represent the highest values in the fascinating world of show business and art". This initial impression of social inequality and discord between the bourgeoisie and the ordinary people will persist until the very end of the film. Meanwhile, through the journey itself, we will be guided by a charming journalist assigned to "report the news, tell what happens". Only as the ship leaves the port, does the film gradually gain color and sound. However, the colors in the film will never reflect the contrasts of pure reality; instead, they chromatically present a blurred reality that primarily resembles a pale memory, akin to a dream. "A voyage through life is not told, it is made", notes the journalist. It is essential to have in mind that Fellini has long abandoned neorealism, and he is interested in psychoanalysis, Carl Jung, and the unexplored depths of the collective unconscious. Only in this context, we can understand the extravagant role of Pina Bausch, the renowned German neo-expressionist ballerina. In the role of the blind countess, she reveals to us that every note, every voice has its color. While listening to music, she actually sees a rainbow.

The action of the film takes place on the open sea, which, according to the director himself, is meant to symbolize a cosmos through which *Gloria N* cruises, resembling a cosmic ship. Indeed, *Gloria N*, with its impressive appearance and size, gives the impression of unstoppable technological progress. The interior of the ship, dining rooms, evening salons – everything is at the highest level, elegant and luxurious. The crew of the ship is accustomed to tirelessly working and fulfilling every request with swift movements. The highest achievements of human civilization in the realm of transportation and service are fully at the

disposal of first-class passengers. With graceful and aristocratic bearing, they appear as modern deities. At first glance, Fellini's ship gives the impression of perfect organization, an ideal blend of tradition and modernity, a socio-technological harmony in pursuit of utopia – a remote paradise island, where the recently departed singer with a 'divine voice' finds eternal repose.

However, when we scratch the surface and get to know the passengers better, we realize that the grandiose external appearance is just a mask hiding various forms of frustration and repressed traumas. We quickly discover that the "people from the fascinating world of show business" are actually mentally disturbed individuals. "Foolishness, arrogance, and conceit reek from them. Their physical and spiritual deformities evoke a sense of disgust. They keep an eye on each other, gossip, slander, and hate one another".<sup>4</sup> It's evident that social and cultural development hasn't kept pace with technological progress, that financial prosperity doesn't have a positive impact on personality, and that European society is in a profound crisis.

Fellini's ship is, in fact, an allusion to the famous Renaissance painting "Ship of Fools" by Sebastian Brant. The difference is that "Ship of Fools" symbolizes the end of the Middle Ages with its clergy and ecclesiastical establishment, while "The Ship Sails On" symbolizes the end of the modern era and its bourgeoisie. Comparable to the shift from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, we observe the decline of the modern times. Of all passengers, only the Austro-Hungarian grand duke feels that the world is heading towards an abyss and that "we are sitting on the mouth of a volcano". The other passengers, completely oblivious to the historical moment the world is in, are solely focused on their performance, which they enthusiastically demonstrate to the ship's staff. Captivated by the extraordinary musical talents of the guests, the workers don't contemplate rebellion or a strike, even though they work in exceptionally inhumane conditions.

The monotonous routine of the *Gloria N* is disrupted when, one day, Serb refugees appear on the ship's deck, fleeing the Austro-Hungarian pogrom due to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The new passengers, dressed in their traditional attire, hungry and thirsty, are desperate and disoriented, unsure of their whereabouts. Their presence on the ship symbolizes "close encounters of the second kind", a dialogue

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<sup>4</sup> I. S. Makarova (2008), "Ritually dal'nego plavaniya Goldinga v fil'me Fellini I korabl' plyvet", *Izvestiya Rossijskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. A. I. Gercena*, 235-238

between two different worlds, the Western and the Oriental. The encounter with the unknown frightens the European bourgeoisie, leading them to believe it's necessary to hide valuables under the beds and draw curtains during meals to shield themselves from curious glances. When asked what the Serbs will eat, some respond that it's "God's will", not theirs. There's even expressed concern for their safety, suspecting that among the Serbs are "anarchists and professional killers". They demand the captain to expel the refugees and return them to the open sea. In response to this absurd request, the ship's crew states, "The captain must rescue shipwrecks following the basic principle in the Naval Code". As a compromise, they decide it's best to restrict the movement of the Serbs to a small part of the deck. The taut rope, which separated the Serbs from the other passengers, symbolized racial segregation and apartheid, something that was entirely normal at the beginning of the 20th century.

The ship's atmosphere remains tense until one evening when the Serbs, accompanied by the sounds of traditional instruments, start a dance and celebration. It's not a traditional circle dance but rather a mystical dance resembling a dervish's whirl. Regardless, passengers feel the rhythm and gradually join the dance. Initial reservations and distrust transform into a completely different extreme. Individuals from the entertainment industry become relaxed and jubilant, displaying a natural behavior for the first time instead of an artificial one. A passenger, visibly thrilled, suffers a heart attack. Experiencing no immediate danger to his life, he reveals that the Serbs are presently participating in a "spiritual dance of friendship". The magical night under the clear sky and the sounds of ancient musical instruments have erased the divisions between the rich and the poor, the civilized and the barbarians, attesting to the shared nature of all people.

Unfortunately, the newfound friendship didn't last long. The next morning, an Austro-Hungarian cruiser appears on the horizon, demanding the surrender of the Serbs under the threat of force. Unable to resist, the captain of the *Gloria N* is compelled to hand over the Serbs, and the European bourgeoisie begins the performance of *Traviata*, an opera symbolizing the lost and discarded individual. On the other side, the Serbs have no plans for a peaceful surrender. As the hostile cruiser approaches, one of the bravest Serbs pulls a bomb from his sleeve and, with a precise shot inspired by Gavrilo Princip, hits it right in the center. The cruiser begins to sink, unleashing firepower from all available weapons. With a musical crescendo, fireworks, cannons, and the evacuation of

the passengers of the *Gloria N*, this epic epilogue foreshadows not only the Great War but an inevitable apocalypse and the end of civilization.

## IN THE END, ALL PASSENGERS WERE SAVED

“And the Ship Sails On”, similarly to “Titanic”, can be viewed as a disaster that could have been avoided if more attention had been paid to Serbs – the terrorists. Additionally, it can be seen as a promotion of colonial orientalism employed by the West to justify dominance over allegedly threatening and uncivilized peoples. In this context, Fellini’s film would serve as an introduction to anti-Serbian propaganda and NATO intervention during the 1990s. However, the Italian director is actually trying to convey something entirely different, and one Serbian cultural historian is on the right track: “The Serbs on the deck are Serbs in Austria-Hungary, the only people capable of spiritually transforming Austria-Hungary at that time.”<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, in the Serbian vitality and sense of the natural rhythm, Fellini perceives the sole escape from a mechanized and dehumanized civilization.

As we mentioned, in the final stages of his work, Fellini abandons realism and turns to avant-garde. In the cultural landscape of the 19th century, this meant abandoning faith in the enlightening mission of reason and seeking solutions within oneself. Intensifying this subjective sense of reality, avant-garde artists attempt to awaken the audience and encourage a reexamination of the human nature. In the struggle against European rationalism and positivism, they find allies in the peoples of the Orient, those who have preserved their ‘elan vital’. That’s why renowned artists like Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso venture to Polynesia and Africa, while Louis-Ferdinand Celine believed that the “only salvation for the white man is a return to the state of the caveman”.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Fellini, examining the Sarajevo Assassination, he indicates that the creative energy is located in close proximity, right on the borders of the European continent.

Fellini does not attribute responsibility for the Great War to the imperialism of any particular nation but rather to the parasitic and consumerist bourgeois culture that fosters chauvinism and pettiness. Like other representatives of the avant-garde, Fellini sharply criticizes the so-called Belle Époque – the historical period between 1880 and 1914,

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<sup>5</sup> Žarko Vidović (1999), *Romani Djordja Ocića: poetoflozofija I komentari*, Beograd: Znamen.

<sup>6</sup> Selin Luj-Ferninad (2016), *Bagatele za jedan pokolj*, Beograd: Ukronija, 169.

often described as a time of flourishing culture and science, and a period in which “European civilisation achieved its greatest power in global politics, and also exerted its maximum influence upon peoples outside Europe.”<sup>7</sup> By demystifying the Belle Époque, Fellini actually reveals that the true cause of the Great War lies in modern culture and that the “gentlemen from European palaces”, collectively deserved the fate of Franz Ferdinand.

After watching “And the Ship Sails On,” an Italian critic concludes: “Thanks to Fellini, I start thinking again about the origins of that war which did not end in 1914 and which will not end even in 1984. It is our hundred years war.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly, the title suggests that even though the ship, along with the jewels of the European Belle Époque, sinks by the end of the film, in truth, the Ship perseveres on its journey. By chance, the passengers we got to know are rescued by another ship named the “North Star” (a symbol of constancy and unchangeability). Fellini is trying to say that the socio-cultural causes of the Great War have not been eliminated and that the final epilogue is yet to come. Criticizing the past, Fellini is, in fact, criticizing the present, especially considering that the film was made during the “Years of Lead” – a social crisis that shook Western Europe, characterized by a low-intensity civil war primarily centered in Italy. Drawing historical parallels with the pre-war and contemporary crises, we come to the conclusion that challenges of modern society are deeply rooted in the fundamental understanding of civilization and what it represents.

## THE SERBIAN ROLE

Capturing the essence of Europe in the early 20th century, Fellini conveys, much like Svetozar Marković, that “Serbia is in the East”, among the unawakened nations of the Orient who should not follow the ‘evolutionary path’ of Europe but forge their own way. In this context, the Serbs from the deck who symbolize Young Bosnia have a world-historical mission – to create a new world on the ruins of the old. They are neither liberal republicans nor conservative monarchists; the Young Bosnians are barbaric heroes of untamed masculinity who refuse to integrate into the decaying bourgeois civilization. Fellini’s film shows us

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<sup>7</sup> L. Kramer et al. (2013), *A History of Europe in the Modern World*, McGraw-Hill Education.

<sup>8</sup> Cantisani Ludivico (2022), “Fellini alla fine del mondo – E la nave va secondo Italo Calvino”, *Birdmen*.

that the assassins of Franz Ferdinand should not be identified with other movements of Young Europe active during the 1830s. Their counterpart in Serbia are pro-western politician Ilija Garasanin, United Serb Youth in the 1860s, while Young Bosnia is a unique movement, part of an avant-garde culture ideologically rooted in Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and other left-wing radical thinkers. It's not without reason that the Bosnian youth named their movement after geographic rather than ethnic origins. For them, Bosnia is a mystical territory that brings together people of three different religions, thus resisting colonialism and bourgeois culture. For Austria-Hungary, Bosnia is "the key to the Orient", the first obstacle in its further "Drive to the East." Fellini's orientalist portrayal of Serbs is further supported by a 1912 Young Bosnia manifesto: "While other parts of our nation entered culture, we were being whipped (...) in our depths, we are primitive, harsh, and barbaric. We bear the marks of the young and unawakened".<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Fellini and the Bosnian youth, contemporary Serbian historiography, inspired by the Western model, constructs a myth about the Serbian Belle Époque – an elite high culture lasting from 1903 to 1914. The main reason of the Serbian revival is seen in the Serbs' openness to French and English influences. "Democratic and republican models of these countries were adopted by the Serbs to counter German and Hungarian political conservatism".<sup>10</sup> Fellini's film illustrates the absurdity of such conclusions and prompts us to think that the true strength of the Serbian people lies in its spiritual foundations. If we can talk about a Serbian cultural revival,<sup>11</sup> it certainly does not stem from the French-English liberal political model but rather in spite of them and against them. The May Coup and the Sarajevo Assassination symbolized resistance against bourgeois-colonial culture. For some, they were expressions of savagery and a lack of culture, while for others, they were a source of inspiration and evidence of Balkan 'elan vital'. The dilemma is resolved by the innocent and beautiful Dorothea (gift from God), who, in the end, falls in love with the brave 'Serbian terrorist' and, along with other Serbs, leaves the Gloria N.

After nearly half a century since setting sail from the film studio, Fellini's Ship still sails. "Years of Lead" and the seventies seem naive and

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<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Gaćinović (1956), *Ogledi i pisma*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Miloš Ković (2015), *Srbi 1903-1914: Istorija ideja*, Beograd: Clío, 15.

<sup>11</sup> A highly controversial thesis with which cultural figures of that time, such as Radoje Domanić, Branislav Nušić, and Vladislav Petković Dis, would strongly disagree.



democratic when compared to what we have today. Culture and art are reduced to social margins, while vulgarity and primitivism take center stage. The demand for what is human, essential, and natural has never been greater. In these cultural and historical upheavals, when “the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born”, the role of the Serbian people remains ambiguous and controversial. It is certain only that Fellini wants to awaken humanity, find the ‘lost paradise’ within it, and point out that modern society is moving in the wrong direction. The rhinoceros milk mentioned by the charming journalist at the very end of the film symbolizes the fluid of eternal life and fertility. It brings to the forefront some primordial aspects of human existence and creative energy that have the potential to resist a sterile and robotic society.

Now that we’ve decoded the ideological background of the film, it is clear why “And the Ship Sails On” is one of the most underrated films ever made by Fellini. The corpus of progressive ideas within this artistic work goes beyond the limits of European political correctness and earns the epithet of anti-civilizational. Fellini’s satire, surrealism, and strategic culture pose a dangerous threat to contemporary society and represent the most effective model for resisting Western cultural hegemony.

Unfortunately, Federico Fellini’s masterpiece remains unknown to the broader Serbian public. While everyone is familiar with “La Dolce Vita”, very few have heard of Fellini’s *Ship*. Quite often, during Fellini retrospectives in Belgrade, “And the Ship Sails On” is not even included in the program. It is evident that our cultural and academic elite is not comfortable with the image of ‘barbaric and wild’ Serbs intentionally starting a war against ‘civilized’ Europe, and they strive to justify Gavrilo Princip and highlight the alliance with the hypocritical Entente. One way to achieve this is by expanding the European myth of the Belle Époque onto Serbian cultural history, aiming to demonstrate that Serbia was already a full-fledged member of the European cultural community at the beginning of the 20th century. This wouldn’t be a problem if those same historians weren’t against Euro-Atlantic integrations and the collective West today. They lack the understanding that the cultural memory they reproduce does not align with current geopolitical shifts, such as Serbia’s pivot to the East and the rise of economic giants in other parts of the world. Luckily, we have Fellini’s masterpiece in front of us, which guide us toward a revision of traditional historiography and a search for the deeper causes of the Great War, a war that has yet to receive its epilogue.

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