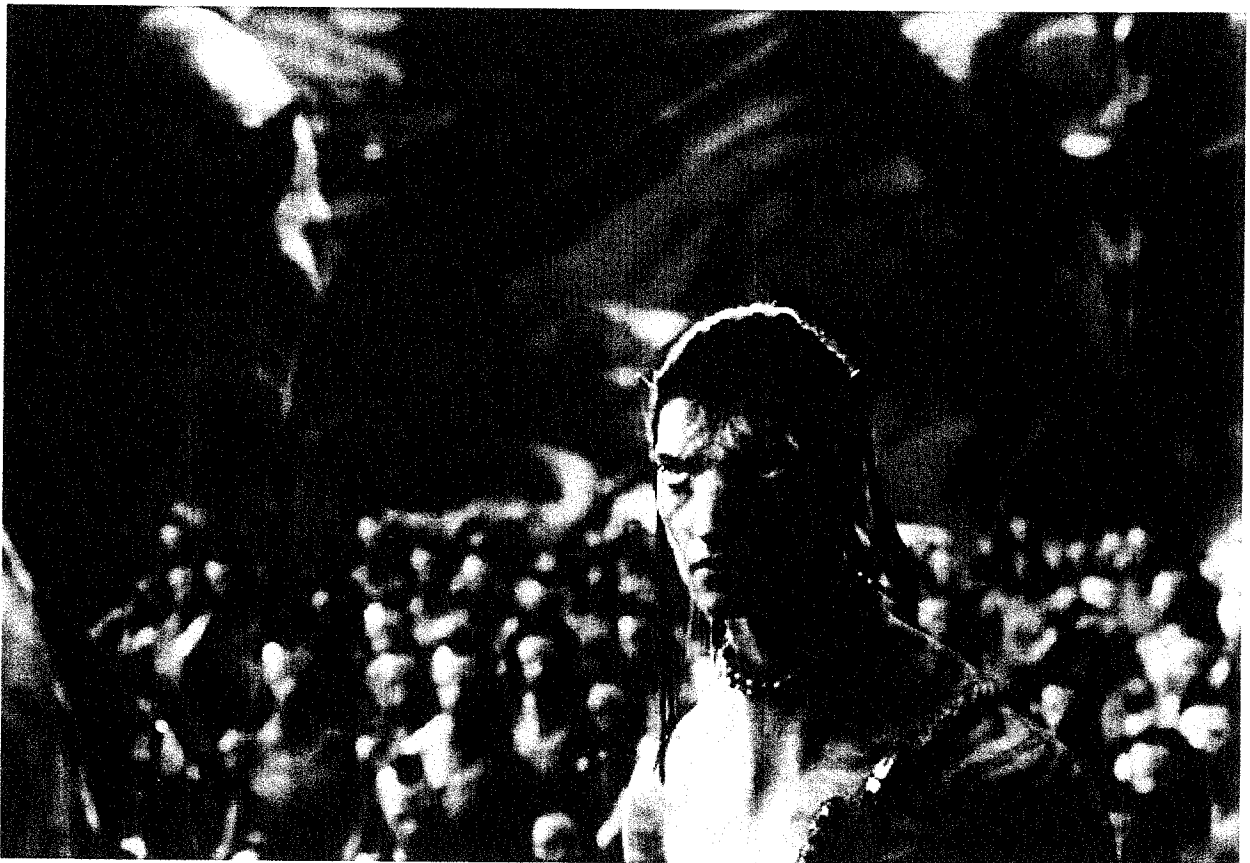


ISSN 1073-0427

Film and Philosophy



Volume 16
2012 Special Interest Edition
Ethics and Existentialism II
Dan Shaw, Editor

Table of Contents

Editor's Introduction	ii
More Than a Windshield Wiper: A Beauvoirian Analysis of Project and Other in <i>Flash of Genius</i> GWENDOLYN DOLSKE	1
<i>It's a Wonderful Life</i> : Pottersville and the Meaning of Life AARON SMUTS	15
Who Would You Be in a Zombie Apocalypse? ERIN KEALEY	34
<i>The Nights of Cabiria</i> as a Camusian Existentialist Text IDDO LANDAU	53
Sartre's Existential Analysis of Moral Dilemmas through <i>Gone Baby Gone</i> WILLIAM J. DEVLIN and SHAI BIDERMAN	70
Epistemology as Ethics: Skepticism in <i>Blade Runner</i> MARIO SLUGAN	82
Rooting for the Fascists in James Cameron's <i>Avatar</i> JOHN MARMYSZ	101
Blacker Than Noir CHARLES W. MILLS	121
In and Out of Character MURRAY SMITH	139
Film Noir, Realism, and the Ghetto-centric Film TOMMY L. LOTT	148
Response to My Critics DAN FLORY	162



The Nights of Cabiria as a Camusian Existentialist Text

I

Federico Fellini's 1957 *Le notti di Cabiria* (*The Nights of Cabiria*), at first appears to be an innocent narration of some experiences of an Italian prostitute in Rome.¹ But a closer look will show that the film effectively explores several existentialist themes, and that in it Fellini employs some of his most sophisticated and clever means—to a greater degree, I believe, than has been hitherto recognized—to do so. The film has probably been influenced by a variety of existentialist sources, but I suggest that its closest affinity is to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, on which I will focus here.

Camus famously opens his *The Myth of Sisyphus* by discussing suicide, which he takes to be the only “truly serious philosophical problem.”² He relates suicide to the feeling of absurdity, or the meaninglessness of life, that many people experience. Among other expressions of this feeling of meaninglessness or absurdity, he mentions alienation (not only from society, but also from other individuals and from the physical world).³ He focuses on the process of aging (which Camus calls “the revolt of the flesh”), describing it as uncontrollable and advancing despite our will;⁴ on death;⁵ and on our inability to achieve absolutely clear and unified knowledge that will explain everything.⁶ Camus emphasizes

that neither the world in itself nor the mind in itself are absurd. The absurd arises, rather, in a “divorce” between the demands of the mind on the one hand, and what we can find in the world on the other.⁷

Camus discusses various inappropriate reactions to the absurd. One is to deceive oneself that the absurd is not there, thus succumbing to “the force that leads...back toward the common path of illusion.”⁸ People may be led to this inauthentic state by succumbing to the general culture and social order: “Everything is ordered in such a way as to bring into being that poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations.”⁹ A second way, also involving self-deception, is to try to find consolation in religion or in some types of theoretical philosophy that propose absolutes and suggest that life is, in the final analysis, non-absurd. Camus rejects these forms of “philosophical suicide” as well.¹⁰ Yet a third wrong reaction is to acknowledge the absurd and adopt a despaired and dissatisfied mode of existence.¹¹ A fourth form of reacting to the absurd is to commit suicide, the theme with which the book begins. It too, however, is rejected by Camus.¹² All these ways refuse to embrace human reality as it is and acknowledge its absurd nature.

For Camus, the right way of engaging with the absurdity and meaninglessness of life is to rebel against it. One should acknowledge the absurd and the bitter pain it produces, yet defy it. One should not, then, deny the absurd or pretend it is not there: the absurd is part of reality, and should not be avoided. To ignore it is to engage in insincerity and self-deception. But one should refuse to be broken by the painful gap between what one needs and what one finds in the world. While bravely acknowledging the absurd and its painfulness, one should persist in finding or creating contentment in a frustrating and painful world, thus making one’s existence worthwhile and becoming an absurd hero. Camus speaks of this revolt in very positive terms, as offering a form of satisfaction despite our inability to change the meaninglessness of life.¹³ At the same time, however, it continues to be a painful experience: Camus also talks about a “harrowing passion,”¹⁴ “conscious dissatisfaction”, preserving “the very thing that crushes me,”¹⁵ and contemplating one’s torments.¹⁶ While defying the absurd one keeps it alive and contemplates it, since “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.”¹⁷

Note, however, that making life worth living does not render it, in Camus’s terminology, also meaningful. Camus distinguishes between the two concepts.¹⁸

Indeed, defying the absurd cannot be seen as a meaningful condition by Camus because, in this condition, one does not deny or obliterate the absurd but rather acknowledges it while rebelling against it, and the absurd is the opposite of meaningfulness. Acknowledging that life is meaningless or absurd, however, does not mean that it is not worth living and that we should commit suicide since, for Camus, a life that is meaningless or absurd can still be of much worth.¹⁹

Thus, there is a somewhat pessimistic element to *The Myth*. Typical of pessimist thought, *The Myth* presents life as meaningless and painful, argues that these aspects cannot be avoided, takes them to be central elements of life, and claims that we should fully acknowledge, rather than overlook or repress, them. However, Camus rejects pessimism by refusing both the option of suicide and of despair, and in calling on us to realize the worth of life and to experience some of its joys by defying the absurd.²⁰ Once one gives up the search for meaning, and substitutes sheer quantity and diversity of experiences for the fruitless quest for quality, one can become what he calls “the absurd hero”.

He famously employs the Greek myth of Sisyphus to describe what he takes to be the absurdity of the human condition, and its defiance.²¹ In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by the gods: he had to push a very heavy rock uphill, and when he had almost reached the summit, the rock would roll down, and Sisyphus would have to descend and push it uphill anew, time and again.²² Camus takes this to be a parable of the absurd condition, but in his version of the myth Sisyphus does not just suffer this meaninglessness: he defies it. Thus, “the absurd man says yes.... This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”²³

Camus also emphasizes that he wishes us to relate to the issues that he discusses not academically and impersonally but practically, sincerely, and personally, since “for a man who does not cheat, what he believes to be true must determine his action.”²⁴ He does not merely wish to tell us some new facts, but also wants what he writes to be encountered authentically, that is, to become relevant and significant for our own self. Thus, he begins his *The Myth of Sisyphus* by saying that it is not important to know how many dimensions the world has, or whether the mind has nine or twelve categories; the only important question is this: Is life worth living? After all, people have committed suicide because of this question, but not because of the former ones.²⁵ Camus goes on to present the various faces of the absurd

through experiential examples that are, presumably, familiar to the reader from his or her own personal experience.²⁶ And while discussing his views, he moves from the third person to the first person plural and first person singular, thus suggesting that he is also discussing his own personal experiences.²⁷ Similarly, he distinguishes between, on the one hand, blind reason,²⁸ universal reason,²⁹ idea,³⁰ and learnt and classical dialectic,³¹ and, on the other hand, thought,³² understanding,³³ and common sense.³⁴ In his view, the former, theoretical-logical capacities lead us astray, and allow us to deny and ignore the absurd. We should employ thought, understanding and common sense, which have to do with introspection and sensitivity to one's experiences. Thus, *The Myth* aims not only to present some information: it aims to change us by having us realize the absurdity of life, which we have been ignoring, and then by instructing us how to cope with that absurdity; it is "a lucid invitation to live and to create in the very midst of the desert."³⁵ The theme of the book is, to a large extent, the process of self-transformation that it calls us to undergo after inviting us, at the beginning of the book, to introspect and acknowledge the absurdity in our lives. As I will now demonstrate, many of these themes are present in *The Nights of Cabiria*.³⁶

II

The film begins with Cabiria and her lover, Giorgio, on the bank of the Tiber. Giorgio snatches Cabiria's purse and pushes her into the water. She nearly drowns, but some inhabitants of this poor, God-forsaken area of Rome manage to save her. The rest of the film presents four more stories of the same theme: in all five stories Cabiria looks for love or redemption, but her yearning is frustrated. In all five stories we feel that the world is insincere, but despite her alienation, Cabiria continues to seek love and human contact. Moreover, in the course of the film, we evolve from being disinterested spectators of what Cabiria undergoes to empathetic caring for her. The film arouses in us a process of self-reflection and self-transformation because, in all five stories, Fellini sends us mixed messages and makes Cabiria look partly ridiculous and partly tragic. But he slowly changes the tone of the film, presenting her as more ridiculous at the beginning, and as more tragic, even noble, toward the end.

In the first version of the story, Cabiria's love and misfortune are presented in almost comic terms. We meet her behaving in a somewhat melodramatic manner, kissing Giorgio over-romantically in the highly unromantic setting of an ugly, flat,

and brightly sunny spot at the river; the contrast between the act and its setting makes it slightly funny, as does Cabiria's theatrical gesture of bending her foot at the knee while kissing—a gesture she might have seen in romantic films. Fellini does not wish us to identify with Cabiria at this stage. We have not seen anything of their love affair before Giorgio throws her into the Tiber, and thus have not yet developed any more of an attachment to her than we have to him, nor are we yet fully impressed by the nastiness of his act. Her rescue, and her reaction to her rescuers, is also not presented in such a way as to induce any great sympathy toward her. Rescue scenes in films are frequently presented as heroic, suspenseful, and sometimes romantic. Fellini, however, presents this rescue as somewhat silly and eccentric. We hear that a certain Romulo, who could have been helpful in this situation, is not there because he has gone to the city hall. The two boys who draw Cabiria out of the water do so quickly and easily. The people who try to bring her back to consciousness seem as though they do not really know what they are doing, and they, and the small crowd that gathers there is composed of an odd collection of characters. Regaining consciousness, Cabiria does not thank her rescuers but, somewhat unpleasantly, screams at them. All this creates an emotional distance between us and Cabiria: at this stage we find her a bit farcical and do not like her very much.

Fellini continues to instill in the viewer a somewhat distant, even mocking attitude toward Cabiria by having her go on, bizarrely, to caress a hen—an animal that does not usually enjoy being stroked.³⁷ She also shouts rudely at her friend Wanda and refuses to report to the police what Giorgio has done because, she says, she is not a “stool pigeon.” This sounds almost stupid: to us it seems justified, even morally required, to report such a theft and attempted murder. Those who are unwilling to inform on others seem foolish, or even to be endorsing a moral code characteristic of criminals.³⁸ Cabiria's initial refusal to admit to herself and to Wanda that Giorgio had just pushed her into the river (she first tells Wanda that she just fell into the Tiber; Giorgio allegedly was frightened and ran away) decreases our respect for her even further. Later, Fellini also has Cabiria enter into a slightly vulgar and comic physical fight with another prostitute.

True, Cabiria's lot is represented as tragic as well as comic. She has been forsaken and has almost died, and Fellini does show her crying, asking herself what would have happened had she drowned, and how a person could have tried to kill her for just forty thousand lire. But at this point in the film such doleful

questions, which might have aroused our compassion for Cabiria, are almost lost in the other, more comic representations of her misfortune. When Wanda asks Cabiria how she could have trusted a man she had known for such a short time, a man who never told her anything about himself and only used her, we also feel that Cabiria is overly gullible and deserves a reprimand.

III

The second part of the film is also tragic, but its tone is still largely comic. Cabiria happens to meet Alberto Lazzari, a famous movie star, who has just quarreled with his glamorous blonde girlfriend. He takes Cabiria to a nightclub, where she becomes entangled in a large curtain and cannot extricate herself until, eventually, the doormen help her out. She does not know what to do with her purse (or, later in Lazzari's house, with her umbrella) and is ignorant of the function of a cloakroom. Fellini also keeps us at an emotional distance from Cabiria by having her make vulgar gestures at other streetwalkers (who have previously ignored her) in a way that we perceive as both funny and somewhat coarse.

At Lazzari's house, just as he and Cabiria start becoming closer, Lazzari's glamorous girlfriend returns, wishing to make amends. Lazzari pushes Cabiria into the bathroom until he can get rid of her. Jessie, however, stays over, and it is she, rather than Cabiria, who spends the night with Lazzari. Cabiria, in contrast, spends the night locked in the bathroom, lying on the hard floor rather than in a soft bed, and hugging a small dog instead of a person. Her situation is ridiculous and more than a little humiliating, because it evokes associations of lewd jokes about male lovers who, upon the unexpected appearance of husbands, find themselves in closets, under beds, or in bathrooms. But here it is a woman who has to spend the night that way.

Lazzari relies on Cabiria's docility (otherwise he might worry about her raising a row) and is so totally unconcerned with her feelings as to keep her locked in the bathroom all night. In the morning, after he gives her some money (which she initially refuses but finally accepts, giving in to Lazzari yet again), and after she bangs her head into a big glass door in an act of pure slapstick that makes us laugh, she leaves. Fellini's insertion of comic elements into most of these early depictions of Cabiria's misfortunes is important, since tribulation jokingly recounted does not typically arouse our compassion. Jokes frequently desensitize us to the pain and frustration they describe, allowing us an emotional distance from the characters the

jokes are about; we do not regard ourselves as heartless when we laugh at someone who slips on a banana peel or, while looking forward, drives backward and crashes into a wall. By depicting Cabiria as somewhat ludicrous, Fellini succeeds to some extent in numbing us to the sadness of her misfortunes. Moreover, he presents her in a way that makes us feel that we are more sophisticated and experienced in the ways of the world, and that we would have known how to behave appropriately at the night club or at Lazzari's house.

Although, at this stage, we are still largely distant and alienated from Cabiria and her suffering, we cannot but recognize that she is a genuine person, that is, authentic in her actions and not alienated from herself or others. Cabiria is not "putting on an act" in the nightclub: she dances happily without first checking, as many people would do, to see how others are dancing or whether her manner of dancing is appropriate to the occasion. She dances simply because she enjoys it and because it expresses her vivaciousness. Nor does she try to impress Lazzari or get anything from him—unlike the actress who approaches him in the nightclub, wishing to introduce him to friends and interest him in a project. However, at this stage in the film, we do not yet respect these qualities in Cabiria. She seems ridiculous precisely because she is herself, and does not try to imitate inauthentically what others do in order to be "proper," as many, perhaps even we, might do in similar circumstances. In a similar vein, Cabiria's naiveté and sincerity is contrasted with Jessie's more manipulative behavior: Jessie knows how to start sobbing at the right moment, mumbling that Lazzari does not really love her. But at this stage, we do not yet appreciate Cabiria's authenticity, and are ready to prefer the ways in which clever Jessie wins the competition and gets the man she wants.

IV

The third part of the film shows Cabiria and her prostitute friends, the pimp of one of the prostitutes, and his uncle, in the Church of the Madonna of Divine Love.³⁹ Cabiria expects to undergo a spiritual experience that will change her life. This, however, does not happen. Like Camus, Fellini has a negative view of established religion. With the church in the background, Fellini shows a flock of sheep, possibly comparing people in the church to this undifferentiated herd. In the church, the believers are indeed pressed against each other like sheep or cattle, and herded from one room to another. There is a close-up of a noisy loudspeaker, emphasizing the mechanical, impersonal aspect of the event. Near

the church, people are being photographed, as if at a fair. The clergy in the church are presented as alienated from the believers, and they conduct the rites in a routine and inauthentic manner. What happens in the church seems as a big show. The pimp's uncle, who had hoped for a miracle that would allow him to walk without crutches, does not actually believe that the miracle will happen, and when those holding him remove their support, he falls to the ground, hurting his head. Cabiria, who prays to the Madonna that she will experience renewal and personal change, also remains as she was: no miracle happens.

Unlike the rest of the company that went with her to church, Cabiria sincerely believed that a miracle, or a spiritual transformation, would happen to her. She *meant* it. Thus, while the others seem neither shocked nor surprised when nothing happens, Cabiria is deeply disappointed. Again, her authenticity makes her more vulnerable to disappointment and pain. This becomes apparent also in the picnic that takes place after the visit to the church. Everyone seems to accept what has happened—or, rather, not happened—quite calmly, since they had not really expected that a transformation would come about. Cabiria, however, does not conceal how strongly she had hoped for redemption or her disappointment in not receiving it, and vents her frustration loudly, embarrassing her companions. Again, while others routinely live in that inauthentic state that Camus describes as “poisoned peace produced by thoughtlessness, lack of heart, or fatal renunciations,”⁴⁰ Cabiria does not. As in other instances, part of Cabiria's pains, as well as her vocal and unrestrained, at times even vulgar behavior, also have to do with her being who she is, rather than trying to do what is “proper.”

In this part, too, Fellini offers mixed messages. On the one hand, when he describes what happens in the church, we wonder how Cabiria could have ever believed that anything good would happen there. Her expectations seem unrealistic, and she is shown as gullible. Yet, Fellini is careful to depict Cabiria in this part of the film as significantly less ridiculous than in previous ones. She is vocal, but nothing she does is ludicrous. Although she is naïve, she is not silly or ridiculous. Her prayer to the Madonna of Divine Love to change and to find love is beautiful; and this is perhaps the first time in the film that we identify with her and appreciate her longing to be loved. The events at the church are depicted in such unpleasant terms that, when Cabiria loudly expresses her anger, we understand her. Her loudness and somewhat exaggerated reaction still keep us somewhat emotionally distant, but our compassion for her is growing. Her authenticity has gained our

respect, and the pains she suffers because of this authenticity no longer seem silly (although her manner remains somewhat funny, even aggressive). Furthermore, at this stage we start noting a pattern: despite her efforts, the world does not give Cabiria what she needs and wants. While we may expect people to learn to accept one or two disappointments as part of life, the cumulative effect starts making us feel that her life is indeed absurd. And as the joke repeats itself, it stops being funny, and thus the pain in the story is more easily felt.

V

In the fourth part of the film, Cabiria leaves the church area and, after wandering in the streets, enters a cheap entertainment hall where a hypnotist is performing. Under hypnosis, some people are told that they are on a shipwrecked vessel, and they make fools of themselves by screaming for help and throwing up. The hypnotist notices Cabiria, brings her onstage, and hypnotizes her. To the jeers of the audience, he makes her reveal where she lives and what her work is, and then makes her believe that, like the Blessed Virgin, she is called Maria, and is being courted by a man called Oscar, who loves her. It is at this point that Fellini makes Cabiria look most beautiful, pure, and elevated. Her longing to be loved is strong and inspiring. She is photographed so that the light is behind her head, thus forming a saintly halo.⁴¹ Cabiria's beauty, purity of heart, and deep sense of longing are made to look wonderful, almost holy. When, under hypnosis, she asks the imaginary Oscar whether he *really* loves her, we identify with her and feel compassion. We also feel that it is a sin to take advantage of her, as the hypnotist has done, and to invade her privacy. The hypnotist, too, recognizes from Cabiria's question that he has gone too far. He wakes her up, and she realizes that she has been abused.⁴² She runs away. Note that in this section of the movie, Cabiria is again shown as overly naïve; she makes wrong decisions that we, the viewers, would probably not have made. We would not have entered that cheap entertainment hall in the first place (even the rude cashier, sitting in his undershirt, is reluctant to commit himself to the quality of the show), would probably not have remained in the hall as the only woman in a crowd of men, and would never have volunteered to go onstage to have experiments performed on us before everyone's eyes. But at this point we do not judge Cabiria; we only identify with her pain and feel anger toward those who heartlessly took advantage of her naiveté and her longing for love.

This fourth story is indeed tragic. Fellini portrays Cabiria in all her pain and nobility, as a good and beautiful person who is treated callously. She is no longer ridiculous. In a kind of synoptic move, we now also notice the similarity between this incident and the previous ones. Moreover, we now also realize that earlier, when watching previous parts of the movie, we were not that different from the jeering, cruel crowd. Since the materials of comedy and tragedy are so similar—they both describe human failures and frustrations, but with opposite attitudes—Fellini can easily make us slide from the comic to the tragic. While we are seeing Cabiria's story as tragedy, we reflect uneasily on our earlier acceptance of her life as comedy. Thus, Fellini forces us not only to consider and pity Cabiria, but also to reflect on *ourselves* and to feel remorse for our previous reactions. The film leads us, then, through a process of self-examination which shows us to have been less compassionate than we would have hoped.

Notice also that while altering the tone of his depictions of Cabiria's life, Fellini also slowly modifies the way in which he depicts the life of the prostitutes. In the first depiction their lives are depicted lightly, as if they were almost pleasant. The streetwalkers are shown talking, joking, dancing, and having fun; they almost seem to be having a night out. One of them has bought her own car and does not appear to be at all dominated by her pimp.⁴³ As the film progresses, however, Fellini depicts less pleasant aspects of their lives. They are hunted down by the police and have to hide in the bushes like small frightened animals. They stand in the rain in the pitch black, waiting to be picked up by coarse men who drive them somewhere in big trucks; we cannot help but sense the unpleasantness and danger of this occupation, which Fellini has cleverly ignored in earlier scenes.

VI

After the episode with the hypnotist, Cabiria has to hide till the mocking throng leaves, but then, in the fifth part of the film, she meets a man who has been looking for her. He was in the crowd too, but his reaction was apparently different from that of the others. He found the show not funny but shocking, and sees Cabiria as both beautiful and noble. His name, as it happens, is Oscar, and he asks permission to invite her to a café where he might get to know her better. Oscar looks very different from the other men in the crowd, who are mostly younger and coarser in their clothes and manners. He speaks softly, and behaves respectfully and sensitively toward Cabiria. He seems a bit of a geek, but after Giorgio, Alberto

Lazzari, and the hypnotist, geekiness has become almost a recommendation in this film. And Oscar seems to have important advantages over Giorgio, Lazzari and the hypnotist: unlike them, he appears not to be alienated from Cabiria but to care about her, and to be sincere and authentic.

Cabiria is extremely hesitant at first, but slowly accepts Oscar's attention and interest. As the plot develops, she tells her friends how he brings her chocolate and takes her to films without asking for anything (carnal or otherwise) in return. He says that he loves her and does not care about her past. Finally, he proposes, and she gladly accepts. Nino Rota's film score at this point is happy, leading us to believe that the film has now reached a satisfying conclusion; Cabiria is happy and we, too, are happy.⁴⁴ Finally, after all her troubles, Cabiria has made it. As viewers, we feel the film joining the simple but emotionally satisfying and effective genre of romances that we know so well and enjoy so much, from Cinderella onwards, in which a hero or a heroine, after much pain and frustration, finds true love and lives happily ever after. (Fellini even suggests associations with Cinderella at the beginning of the film by having Cabiria lose her shoe.) When Cabiria ecstatically informs Wanda that she is now loved, we rejoice. Fellini is careful to insert even into that happy scene an element that could have slightly distanced us from Cabiria; she makes a somewhat obscene gesture with her hands; but at this stage, this seems cute.

Soon, we learn that Cabiria and Oscar are going to sell everything they own in Rome and move to Grotta Ferrata, a small place away from the city, to buy a store there and start a new life. Cabiria does sell her home and take all of her savings, built up over many years, out of the bank. All her earthly belongings are now in her purse, and in the next scene we see her with Oscar, on the terrace of an attractive café in the countryside. This seems to be the opposite of the opening scenes with Giorgio: now there is pleasant music in the background, and the sunlight is much softer than in the opening scene of the film. This is the way a romantic setting should look. Slowly, however, we become slightly tense. According to the genre of romantic films that Fellini follows but is diverging from, the film should have ended by now. There should have been a finale with a kiss or, perhaps, a wedding. Yet the film continues, and Fellini scatters subtle clues in the narrative that make us restless. Oscar is more silent than he should be, and Cabiria more talkative. She says that she has four hundred thousand lire in her purse, and this number resonates too well with the forty thousand lire that she had in her purse in the scene

with Giorgio. And Oscar is now wearing sunglasses, just as Giorgio did at the beginning of the film.

The couple leaves the café and walks into the woods, where Cabiria picks flowers. Again Fellini alludes to a children's tale, but this time the association is with Little Red Riding Hood, innocently picking flowers in the forest just before she meets the wolf. Oscar knows a shortcut through the woods, and we wonder what previous occasions have given him the opportunity to become so familiar with the place. Although they kiss along the way—mostly on Cabiria's initiative, just as in the beginning of the film—Oscar seems physically distant from her.

Finally they reach the cliff, and we start to feel even more restless. Seeing the water down below reminds us even more strongly of what happened at the beginning of the film. Again Cabiria has a purse, and we know that all her money, all her savings from many years of unpleasant work, as well as the money from her house that she has sold, are in it. If she loses her money, she will fall even further, down to the level of the prostitutes who live under bridges (whom she talked about at Lazzari's house). To make us even more uneasy, Fellini photographs Cabiria from the back; the gorge is in front of her, and the frame is such that Oscar, who is behind her, could topple her over the cliff with just one small push. Such an image would evoke tension in any circumstances, but in this context the tension is all the greater.

Then the worst happens. Oscar's silence and expression, and a question he asks about her ability to swim, makes Cabiria frightened and restless. She confronts Oscar and understands that just like the others, he was not sincere. He, too, has been pretending. He does not really love her.⁴⁵ He has fooled her, and he has also fooled us. This devastates her and she wishes to die. Oscar then pushes her to the ground, steals her purse with all her money, and runs away.⁴⁶ Cabiria remains lying on the ground for a long time. Now she has nothing: no love, no home to return to, and no money. Once again, the world has refused to grant Cabiria what she wants and what she needs. We too feel very heavy at heart. Once she begins moving and stands up we wonder whether she will commit suicide. She said earlier that she wanted to die and the option is readily available for her since she is close to the edge of the cliff. But she starts walking (like Sisyphus, she walks uphill). We wonder what her future will be like, and whether she will now fall into despair, or perhaps accept the condition of "lack of heart, or fatal renunciations" that Camus talks about.⁴⁷ At first, it seems that this might happen

since, as expected, she looks, extremely unhappy. But as Cabiria walks along, she meets a group of young people singing, playing instruments, and making merry. One of them greets her with a *buona sera*. Although she is in tears, she returns the greeting, smiles back at the young woman who greeted her, at the young people, and also at the camera.

The film refuses to offer us the typically optimistic conclusion, a romantic happy ending that gives us the feeling that, despite temporary disruptions, everything falls into its proper place in the end. Rather, the film deliberately arouses the expectation for a happy ending and then frustrates it, as if telling us that we should acknowledge that life is frequently painful and absurd, and that we should reject our illusionistic tendency to believe or pretend to ourselves that it is not so. There is no love for Cabiria, only frustration and disappointment, and it seems that she can believe no one. But as in Camus, it would be wrong to see the film as having a wholly pessimistic message. Its pessimism is mingled with a measure of optimism which does not disregard or underestimate the pain, but rather acknowledges it. While experiencing pain, Cabiria is still smiling and still has rapport with the youngsters around her as well as with us. Like Sisyphus at the end of Camus's essay, Fellini has his Cabiria continue to roll her stone uphill. Note also that the film does not provide closure: we do not know what Cabiria will do next.⁴⁸ But that too conveys the sense of Sisyphus's ongoing, repetitive efforts.

By the fifth part, we have overcome our alienation and identify with Cabiria. Again she has been duped, and has behaved naively; just like Giorgio, Oscar disclosed very little of his past and never introduced her to his family or friends. But we have been fooled too; we are just like Cabiria.⁴⁹ We wanted her to find love this time, and we feel her pain. In the very last scene, Fellini plants yet another image that could have made us mock Cabiria: because she has been crying, her mascara has now spread across her eyes the wrong way, and she looks (to some extent) like a clown.⁵⁰ But this flaw does not lead us to feel less compassionate. On the contrary, we empathize with her tears. By now we have changed, and we completely identify with her and her suffering, experiencing her situation as terrible. When, despite everything, she smiles and looks us straight in the eye—a rare gesture in films—we may feel that Cabiria has been completely transformed for us, from an object from which we were distanced into a subject about whom we care and with whom we interact.

While Cabiria has been transformed for us, we have also been transformed.

The fifth part brings not only Cabiria's story to a climax, but our own personal transformation as members of the audience is now complete. The film changed something in us: from being alienated from Cabiria we have become unalienated from her, and at the same time less alienated from the humane part of ourselves. From a position in which we refused to confront the absurdity of existence that Camus describes (considering Cabiria's pains and misfortunes as somewhat funny), we have gradually become conscious of the absurdity of her plight. From mere spectators who bemusedly observe the misfortunes of others, we have come to empathize with Cabiria's struggle. From an audience who refused to examine ourselves, we have become introspective people who consider with unease our own, initially heartless, reactions to Cabiria, moved to reflect on incidents in our own past where we have been hurt—just as she was. Far from considering ourselves as superior to Cabiria, we have advanced to taking her to be not only a person with whom we empathize, but also as someone who can teach us a Camusian lesson about the power to endure the pointlessness of our strivings.⁵¹

The film can thus be seen as having two themes: one revolves around Cabiria, and the other around the changes *we* go through. Very cleverly and with great mastery, Fellini succeeds in manipulating us first into a mocking, perhaps even slightly callous attitude, and then, when we have become more compassionate, toward a process of self-reflection in which we feel uneasy about our earlier emotional responses. We undergo a significant change in attitude during the film, and we gain some knowledge of ourselves, but it is an experiential knowledge in the first person.

VII

In summary, then, I have shown that *The Nights of Cabiria* presents several existentialist themes: alienation and non-alienation (in the life of Cabiria and her environment, as well as in our reactions toward her); reacting to what we encounter not in a theoretical, impersonal manner but in an experiential, personal one; authenticity; self-reflection; the absurd and its emergence from the gap between what we need and what the world provides; the continuation and appreciation of life despite repeated failures and frustrations that may well never disappear; a pessimistic attitude (which, although persistent, is balanced with an acceptance that transcends the pessimism); the Sisyphean model; and the options (which

should be rejected) of suicide, despair, and suppression of the absurd.

The Sisyphean model of repetitive efforts that are continuously disappointed is particularly prominent here. Fellini expresses the precise mixture of bitter pessimism and lucid acceptance that Camus championed. *Nights of Cabiria* clearly embodies Camus' view of the absurd as emerging from the gap between our needs and the world (rather than, say, a Sartrean absurd that emerges from the lack of foundation for our choices, or a Kierkegaardian absurd of an eternal God who is also a temporal human and the dread arising from radical existential choices). It shares Camus' emphasis on continuing to appreciate life within the absurd and despite it, and explores the options of suicide, despair, or suppression of the absurd. All of this suggests that Camus's existentialism, as expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was a significant influence on Fellini's *The Nights of Cabiria*. The story of Cabiria, who despite everything finds the power to smile and reaffirm her belief in life, is very much a story of a Camusian absurd hero.⁵²

Iddo Landau

Notes

- 1 Screenplay by Federico Fellini, with the collaboration of Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Music by Nino Rota. Produced by Dino De Laurentiis. 117 minutes.
- 2 Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1969), 3. Hereafter cited as MS.
- 3 MS, 12–15.
- 4 MS, 13–14.
- 5 MS, 15–16, 18.
- 6 MS, 17.
- 7 MS, 21.
- 8 MS, 102.
- 9 MS, 20; see also MS, 58.
- 10 MS, 32–50.
- 11 MS, 31
- 12 MS, v, 30–31.
- 13 MS, 54, 55, 70, 93, 115, 121, 123.
- 14 MS, 22.
- 15 MS, 31
- 16 MS, 123.
- 17 MS, 122. See also MS, 54.
- 18 MS, 53; see also MS, 58, 102, 117.
- 19 MS, 52, 64, 70, 93, 95, 121, 123. This commonly accepted interpretation of Camus, suggesting that he aims at a state in which life is worth living but is *not*

meaningful, is complicated by his occasional employment of the term “meaning” in ways inconsistent with his usual use. For example, Camus writes that in the desired condition “man’s fate henceforth assumes its meaning” (MS, 21) and has what he calls “the conqueror,” one of his illustrations of the absurd hero, say “this world has a higher meaning that transcends its worries, or nothing is true but those worries” (MS, 86; see also MS, 88). These inconsistent employments of “meaning” notwithstanding, most employments of the term comply with the interpretation above.

20 MS, v, 53–60.

21 MS, 119–23.

22 *Odyssey*, Book 11, 593–600.

23 MS, 123.

24 MS, 6.

25 MS, 3.

26 See, for example, Camus’s discussion of “sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us” (MS, 14) or “a man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show; you wonder why he is alive” (MS, 15).

27 See, e.g., MS, 13-16, 18-22.

28 MS, 20. See also MS, 51.

29 MS, 20-21.

30 MS, 116.

31 MS, 4.

32 MS, 116.

33 MS, 65.

34 MS, 4.

35 MS, v.

36 Interestingly, many discussions of *The Nights of Cabiria* completely or almost completely overlook its existentialist aspects, and completely disregard its Camusian ones. For example, Peter Bondanella (*The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 130) mentions merely that Cabiria experiences an existential crisis. André Bazin (“*Cabiria: The Voyage to the End of Neorealism*,” in Peter Bondanella [ed.], *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 95) alludes in passing to Sartre’s “basic project.” Many other works on the film do not mention any existentialist themes. See, e.g., Frank Burke, *Fellini’s Films: From Postwar to Postmodernism* (New York: Twayne, 1996); Claudia Gorbman, “*The Nights of Cabiria: Music and Film History*,” in Bondanella (ed.), *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, 80-94; Edward Murray, *Fellini the Artist* (New York: Fredrick Ungar, 1976); and Stuart Rosenthal, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (Cranbury, NJ: Barnes, 1976).

37 The hen may be a metaphor for the men in Cabiria’s life, who do not want her love. Or perhaps the hen is a metaphor for Cabiria herself. Hens, unlike pets such as cats and dogs, are generally kept not for love and companionship, but rather for instrumental use; to be slaughtered and eaten.

38 Fellini also has Cabiria wear a striped black-and-white dress in the early parts of the film, which may arouse associations with prison clothing in the viewer’s mind.

39 Fellini also filmed a sequence in which Cabiria meets a man who helps the neediest inhabitants of Rome with blankets, clothes and food. He gives Cabiria a ride home

in his car, but shows no romantic interest in her. This part was omitted from the screened version, which is why I do not discuss it here. However, it is included in some DVD versions of the film.

- 40 MS, 20; see also MS, 58.
- 41 This suggests that although Fellini, like Camus, is very much opposed to established religion, he may not be so opposed to religious sentiment as such. This is indicated also by his employment of other religious symbols, such as his use of the name Maria and the association with Mary Magdalene.
- 42 It is ironic, however, that in a way the hypnotist succeeds where the Church failed: he brings Cabiria's beautiful, delicate and sensitive self into the open and makes her feel happiness and purity.
- 43 This disagrees with Edward Murray's claim (*Fellini the Artist*, 101) that in this first depiction of the life of the prostitutes "Cabiria's existence—as that of the other girls—is shallow, mean, not far removed from the bestial level."
- 44 For a detailed and very helpful discussion of the function of Nino Rota's music in the film, see Gorbman, "The Nights of Cabiria: Music and Film History" in Bondanella (ed.), *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, 80-94.
- 45 However, it is not clear that at the beginning of the relationship Oscar was not interested in a sincere, loving relationship with Cabiria. He could have not guessed at that early point that she had money. He is also less decisive and ruthless than Giorgio and remains an interesting and unexplored character in the film.
- 46 I disagree here with Frank Burke's claim (*Fellini's Films*, 95) that Oscar "does not actually rob her [Cabiria]. He only takes the money she drops at his feet—money that is no longer of value to her." Although at the court of law Oscar might be argued to have technically only taken the money that the heartbroken Cabiria exclaimed she does not want, morally, in the context of the film, he steals from Cabiria her life's savings that are of much value to her.
- 47 MS, 20.
- 48 See Rosenthal, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, 19.
- 49 Note the difference between the depictions of the stealing of Cabiria's money at the beginning of the film and at its end. At the end, the snatching of the purse and the running away are shown from an unusual angle: we see neither Oscar's face nor his body, but only the purse on the ground, his hand snatching it, and then his legs as he begins to run. As Edward Murray (*Fellini the Artist*, 108) points out, this is the way that Cabiria, who is lying on the ground, sees the theft. In other words, we now see the event through Cabiria's eyes, in contrast with the way we viewed, as onlookers, Giorgio's snatching of Cabiria's purse and the push he gave her into the Tiber, at the beginning of the film.
- 50 With this image, Fellini also raises associations with Pierrot, the sad, naïve clown of the *Commedia dell'Arte* who always yearns for, but never wins, the love of Columbine.
- 51 Cf. André Bazin's claim that Cabiria's glance "is definite and direct enough, too, to remove us quite finally from our role of spectator" (Bazin, *The Voyage to the End of Neorealism*, 102). Bazin, however, does not develop this insight and does not show the significance of Cabiria's glance in the context of the gradual process of self-transformation that we undergo in this film.
- 52 I am grateful to Joseph Kupfer for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.