Film and the Heat of Life

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INTRODUCTION: ME AND FILM

I was brought up in a language family. My dad was a professor of French and a distinguished scholar of Renaissance literature, as well as an outstanding faculty administrator, skilled at gathering around him, in our family living room, literary scholars and eminences from France itself. It never occurred to me, as I woke up to the world, that I was absorbing all the assumptions of European logocentricity.

The story I could build, on that word-world assumption, could easily replace the following book with its own personal perambulations, but I want to hone in on the tiny role film played in the life of a logocentric child and teenager. It's a tiny role, yes, and even its juvenile origins are obscure to me. A few return. Charles was my age-mate, and throughout grade school and junior high used to come to my house, on the next block from his, at least once a day. Together we played authors and baseball, studied Norwegian and Sanskrit, and organized softball and high-jumping tournaments across the street from my father's house. One day we began making a film studio out of cardboard boxes. As I recall, we wrote a story, copied it out in twenty- or thirty-sentence blocks, taped those blocks together to make a long strip, attached the end of the strip to a metal crank—shaky there—and slowly pulled the reel through the aperture in the front of our film box, so that we were truly able to watch our story as a 'moving picture'. To me it seemed a thrilling achievement—we were eleven or twelve then—and I still watch films through a deep half-sense of the kind of mechanical 'trickery' they are based on, a trickery to which in my mind I always contrasted what I took to be the reliability, or honesty, of the written word.

Sometime in my late grade school years, I went to a play with my mother. It was a play for maturing children, and I was that; fascinated by the unusual circumstances, leaving school in mid-afternoon to go downtown to a local theater, which was sponsoring the play. Suddenly I was plunged into darkness, as the first curtain call resounded. I was fixated on a dark curtain, full of infinite promise and threat, when slowly a crack of light began to announce itself between the curtain and the stage floor. I was thrilled by the potential of that strip of light, which promised a totally fresh and unpredictable world inside it. I have no idea, today, what was on the

other side of that curtain, but I know, in a deep place which is still there in me, that I was entirely given up to the passage into that crack of light and beyond.

Another episode, from early in my first marriage, will speak directly to 'me and film' and 'me and theater.' Now it is a June evening in Bloomington, Indiana, and my parents have given us newlyweds some hot cash to go downtown to the movies. We are excited, for daily life, recently married and visiting the parents for the summer, has rather worn us down. Furthermore, the magic of the cinema is for me a vivid game-changer, undermining any dullness of the daily. At least one of us—probably me—is excited about popcorn and an evening in an unknown movie theater, watching *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Indeed I *was* excited! From the time we entered the 'theater' I was transported, even by the mystique of the blank screen in the empty theater. When the film began to roll, I was lost in that double-take of watching—while replaying the written texts you have in mind at the back of your eyes. That was the beginning of my musing, on why film does not lead you to think about the text beneath it, while Traven's text, in this case, struck me as the trigger for the film I was watching. Isn't writing like primary human doing, shaping a place in existence for yourself, while moving pictures remain, ontologically and not just historically, derivates of writing's work?

In the sixties, the Famous Sixties, something happened to all of us in American universities. We got excited about the development and values of the world we were, supposedly, about to bring our own trained understanding to. There was a whole lot in the air around university campuses, and the talk about it rivalled the desire to do something about it. I was at the University of Iowa from 65–70, a hot time culturally, during which I went to the movies with people like José Donoso, to a writer's conference with Kurt Vonnegut, to do collaborative work in Eastern European (Polish, Hungarian) Writers' Unions, and to talk talk talk about aspects of new world culture, experimentation in the arts, and the rights of all people. This was a deeply moving period that brought out open discussions and sometimes violent dissent when it came to the moves of our own government, where it was apparently thought that Yankee power could succeed in a Viet Nam that had buried the French army at Dien Bien Phu.

It was during this period that the relevance of the movies to the living heart of culture hit me. It wasn't just like the thrill of the cinematic or theatrical enlightenment, such as woke me in my grade school and teenage years. It was like recording the energies, conflicts, and dangers of the sixties, which flowed naturally into the awakening conflicts we were having about these events. The movies—which for me at that time, in mid-sixties

Iowa City, meant Godard, Bergman, de Sica, Resnais—came to seem a locus for discussion, argument, expression. Culturally we were coming into the period of independent filmmaking, and campuses teemed with aspiring directors. During this period I felt the dynamic and the linkage between the time I was in, and the corresponding 'dynolink' possibilities I was being offered in my time. (By dynolink, I mean the hot-wiring of the individual, private but conscientious, to tumultuous world events in politics, war, society, and the arts.) It was out of this time, obviously, that I worked my way from the hot-wiring of the individual to the title of this book. It will be seen, from the dates of the films I visited at this time, which fill the table of contents of this book, that the majority of these works were products of the fifties through the seventies.

Me and film is about to be history. My compressed sense, from living the Sixties, was that my brush with film as politicization and thought-point and intense personal enlargement, was about to merge into daily life. It did. From the end of the Vietnam War until about 2010 I probably went to three or four movies in a movie theater—the best one was *Borat*—and otherwise settled for evening sitcoms. I've probably watched *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Three's Company*, and *I Love Lucy* more than any other person, and with pretty untiring admiration. (This spate of visual imaginations replaced the dynolink trip into the eye as the politics of the eye.) Another event, rich in consequence for me, was about to open phase *now* of my spotty life-adventure replaced in film.

The Humanities Institute entered my life and work. I extended my curricular contributions from literature to film and wrote film profiles of many Bergman films, of which eight remain in the collection found in the second part of this book. This was a new look, for me, at what was once the dynolink dimension of my past, what I learned and what I felt at that time; Bergman, almost unknown to me in the 1960s, when he was strong, opened out a whole visual panopticon in the midst of which, film after film, I found myself urgently embedded. That retrospective Bergman experience then had its exfoliation as I was invited out into other directors, and worked a wide field, for many months, only to bring home, as temporary harvest, many of the titles listed in the table of contents—and many more, for during one transporting summer in Nigeria, when the rainy season turned minds inward, I was able to hole up with virtually a suitcase full of dynolink-era VCDs, and to come out of it with a collage of impressions which I knew took over my world picture from the untrained eye that had meandered into the labyrinth a few months before.

And in what form did this dyno experience emerge, in its reach toward others? The experiences may have been steaming hot, as the world in

question was, now and then, truly on fire. But the mold into which I tried to pour them, dictated as it was by an online university format, was consistent, regular, and cool. (The goal of these entries was to facilitate the efforts of our students to be, while orienting them in the contemporary world, developing their own capacities to write with insight about landmark experiences in the formation of that world.)

As it turned out, this effort morphed into an ambition to share the following film profiles with a wider reading audience, not just students, for whom there could possibly be pleasure and value in exploring another person's travels in film. In the course of testing that possibility, and out of respect for the idea of the folder or the order driver, the author supposed he found patterns forming, in at least his reading of the thirty-seven films profiled herein.

The topic captions under which the following film profiles fall are pretentious, I know; in fact, I make no effort to fine-tune the sense in which any of the films included here precisely fits the category in which it appears. Still, there is a rough matching, much of it carried out after the films had been chosen for their intrinsic interest. My intention was broader, and messier, than the strict topic approach might imply. It linked with the dynolink issue, which concerns the thrusts of awakening that the Sixties, or shall we say the period from 1945–1970, provoked in this sleepy midwestern ariser. The films that found their ways into the view box of my eye-set during those years were all sizzling with the omnipotent energies that defined the time.

And does not the modest testimony that I offer in these profiles, to the brilliant paths that hooked my attention, oblige me for a last time to explain just what kind of texts are about to follow? I was producing for an educational institution and aiming for clarity and consistency. At the same time, especially as I became more familiar with what film and I have to offer each other, I became bolder and more personal and risking in my commentaries, while still attempting to meet the challenges of a template, a learning form unfailingly useful to me. For the forging of that particular template—*overview*, *characters*, *story*, *main character*, *parallels*, *illustrative moments*, *discussion questions*—I am grateful again to the Humanities Institute. The template, despite being—or perhaps because it was—very simple, was just right for me, asking, as the most provocative toys do, to be molded, reinterpreted, and whipped into a fine froth.

THE FILMS

I. BEING IN LOVE

1. *Summer with Monika*, dir. Ingmar Bergman (1953)

Overview. *Summer with Monika* (1953) is one of Bergman's early films, and harks back to the splendid evocations of a bare, austere Swedish landscape, especially at times of dawn and dusk, which had been the trademark of Bergman's film-master Sjostrom. Against this backdrop a lusty but unsure young man, Harry, takes his hot and adventurous girlfriend, Monika, for a summer in his dad's boat, an escape into the lakes of the Baltic peninsula, during which the two late teenagers discover sex, violence, and the limits of their mutual relationship. Their return to the city and to their mutually abusive families drives the couple apart, and the summer idyll wraps up darkly.

Character. From the get-go, Monika is adventurous, lusty, aggressive toward her boyfriend, with whom she bonds on several scores—they are both working-class youngsters caught in despairing family situations, they both hate their jobs, and they are both up for discovering what life is all about. When she is kicked out of her chaotic family home she turns to Harry, whose recourse—as he too is going crazy living with his neurotic dad—is to take Monica down to where his's dad's motorboat is tied, and to 'borrow the boat for the summer.' The bulk of the film concerns the unquiet summer idyll of the two youngsters on the lakes of the Stockholm Archipelago, an idyll during which Monika fully unfolds her sexuality, proves her toughness, and explains the limits of her commitment to Harry.

Parallels. Young or first love is the most commonly visited theme of the arts, and in literature makes itself almost unbearably poignant in characters like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, who, while reading a romantic book together, fell hopelessly—and sinfully—in love. Romeo and Juliet paid even more heavily for their youthful sin and for their miscalculation. (The great French 'cynic', Stendhal, devotes *De l'Amour*, 1822, to a demystifying account of the 'crystallization' which precedes the effect of 'feeling in love'; bad judgments, he makes clear, are an inevitable result of the lovers' inevitable confusion.)

Illustrative Moments

Planning. Monika meets us as she takes a smoking break from work. She is in a local Stockholm bar, and cozies up to her boyfriend, Harry, who is griping about his work as a stock clerk in a porcelain factory. Monica is pissed off by her work life, which exposes her to a lot of unwanted male attention, and by her family life, with siblings falling over one another and brawling parents. Out of the blue Monika suggests to Harry that they should travel, wander together, discover the wide world together. He is listening, but cautiously.

Chaos. We see Monika waking onto the early morning scene of her family flat, and understand why she wants to flee—and why her family has no time for her needs. Her first act on waking is to reactivate a cigarette stub and start smoking, while around her—all this in one room—her smaller siblings scream and shout, jump on the beds and furniture, and laugh as their mom goes quietly nuts. Monika is impatient to be free of all this, and throws herself on Harry's mercy by parking herself at the front door of his apartment. His response will be to swipe his dad's motorboat.

Housewife. Although she is not ready for the roles either of housewife or mother, as we will see at summer's end, Monika flirts with the anticipated pleasures of 'caring for her man.' One morning she rises early in the motorboat, which is beached on a lake front, and prepares coffee from pieces of driftwood. She spoils the still-sleeping Harry by waking him with the unexpected smell of java, and both of them have a brief idyll of imagining what a normal family existence would feel like. Monika needs more years under her belt before she will be able to live a sustained reality of this sort, but at this moment on the shore she enjoys a brilliant hope.

Madness. Back in Stockholm, at summer's end and in her flat with Harry and the baby—she got pregnant over the summer—Monika begins to lose it. The baby is awake at night and exhausts her mother, who is not prepared for the life change. Harry gets a job in another city—to bring in some income—and is away for several days a week; though the baby is taken care of by Harry's aunt during Harry's absence, Monika cannot imagine what to do with her free time. She grows more and more restless, starts going out to dance bars during the day, and totally loses her appetite for the fresh-faced but hard working and (now) conscientious Harry, who is trying to support his family.

What We Are Doing. We are telling the story of a film. Is that possible?—Does the verbal narrative ever equate to the visual experience? Has our narrative a point? Yes, but it will take the whole book to establish that point. It will take the understanding of the five 'being-ins' plus the intake of the author notes, to establish this point.

Discussion Questions. Is Bergman critical of Monika, as in the end she loses her interest in Harry and, more or less, in the baby herself?

In the midst of their summer idyll, Harry and Monika endure a savage attack on their boat and themselves, by a jealous former lover of Monika. Why do you think Bergman inserts this violence into the midst of the 'summer with Monika'?

Does Harry emerge stronger and fitter for mature life after his summer with Monika? What has he learned from her? How has he changed?

2. *The Little Soldier*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1960)

Story. *The Little Soldier* (*Le Petit Soldat*) is a film about a French photojournalist who has deserted his native country for Switzerland in order to avoid conscription during the Algerian War of Independence, which came to a close in 1962. In other words, it is a political film about a man who has done what he could to avoid political turmoil. Could one film digress more greatly than another than this one does from *Summer with Monika*?

Trapped. However, in Switzerland he is entrapped by a pro-French anti-Algerian clique, which coerces him to fight for the continued French occupation of Algeria. The pressure brought by this group intensifies when they suspect the photojournalist of being a double agent, in fact working for the Algerian Revolution. He is himself not political—the main reason why he abandoned his own country—but having been unable to disassociate himself entirely from France, he finds himself under intense pressure from his French managers to prove his loyalty to his own land by killing a prominent member of the Algerian Liberation Front (FLN). Bruno is to drive his car alongside the Algerian's vehicle and to shoot him from window to window, then escape at high speed in his own vehicle, which carries the plates of another nation.

Hassle. Bruno—his name is Bruno Forestier—is extremely reluctant to carry out the killing demanded by his own nationals. Like many of his countrymen during the Algerian War, Bruno is ambivalent about the French position in Algeria, essentially a long-standing colonial occupation going

back to the early nineteenth century. He feels the same reluctance many Americans felt during the same 1960s about the Yankee incursion into Viet Nam, a former French colony. Bruno is neither an activist nor a friend of killing, with the result that he keeps letting obstacles prevent him from driving beside the vehicle whose driver he is to kill.

Complications. Two different complications coincide as Bruno pursues his beleaguered exile existence in Switzerland. The first is that the FLN operatives become more concerned by Bruno's role, and decide to extract information from him, particularly the phone numbers and addresses of fellow French allies working for the French government. The other complication is a love affair which rivetted Bruno, early in his residence in Switzerland, to Veronica, a lovely, French-speaking, Danish-Russian girl, thanks to whom Bruno's experience of the political will ultimately prove to entail fatal consequences.

Torture. FLN operatives capture Bruno with the intention of extracting crucial information from him under torture. (The painful scenes that follow, at this point, caused the French Government—itself under international condemnation for torture—to ban *The Little Soldier*, which was completed in 1960 but not released until 1963.) Though Bruno will survive the torture, it will haunt the audience, particularly the bathroom scenes in which electrodes are attached to the head of the water-immersed victim, etc.—scenes Americans think of today as waterboarding.

Romance. Bruno's love affair with Veronica is both romantic and testy, for under its surface lies the unmistakable evidence that the two are on opposite political sides. Like Bergman in *Summer with Monika*, Godard targets tension and conflict through romance. In romance lies the challenge of individual growth, and romance is where the '*petit soldat* and Harry will converge on our lens.' As it turns out, Veronica is working with the FLN, because she believes in the justness of their cause. In the end, and in effect this is the end of the film, she is discovered by the French authorities working in Switzerland, found to be a secret agent for Algeria, and tortured to death in an effort to wring political secrets from *her*. Harry and Bruno are auscultated by love, to reveal their true natures.

Themes

Love. Bruno's friend, Jacques, bets him fifty dollars he won't be able to resist falling in love with Veronica if the two of them go out on a date.

Jacques wins the bet, because Bruno goes out with Veronica and then can't get her out of his mind. He falls in love with her, and as they get to know each other he incessantly photographs her—remember he is a photojournalist, and for him the hot presence of the world, second by second, is best understood and depicted by the camera—while incorporating love talk and seduction into the anxious chitter-chatter about photography.

Fear. Bruno is afraid to carry out the killing that his undercover boss, in Switzerland, requires of him. Is this fear, or political reluctance, or simply the force of circumstances, the cars that keep intervening between Bruno and his target? Bruno admits that he has killed before, and yet in the present circumstances he is politically ambiguous and hasn't the necessary passion. Is this fear? Hard to say. Remember that Bruno was quite fearless—or is it numbed or dumbed?—when he was being tortured. Harry forges ahead, where Bruno faltered.

Cruelty. The thirteen-minute portrayal of torture, in a hotel bathroom, is ample to prove the cruelty of the Arabs who were holding Bruno hostage. Waterboarding, water-soaked hoods, electric devices generating sporadic shocks: all these techniques—which were indiscriminately employed by both the Algerians and the French, and concerning which the latter were extremely sensitive—are boldly shown in the film.

Politics. Politics has a profound place in the present film. Bruno and Veronica enact their commitments, and their ambivalences, in a late-fifties/ early sixties Western world embedded in global change. nationalist power struggles, cries for independence. Bruno, like Godard himself, is fundamentally apolitical. Godard said of the film: 'politics are talked about in it, but it has no political bias.' And yet politics are more than talked about in the film: They are, you might say, the pervasive element in which you can conclude you are apolitical simply because of the depth of your involvement in the political. Harry takes the individual route into the test of manhood, Bruno the collective.

Photography. The main protagonist, Bruno, is a photojournalist, who is constantly on the *qui vive* for scenes or events which betray the instantaneous character of the moment. For Bruno, 'photography is truth, and cinema is truth 24 times per second.'

A Closer Look at Bruno. Bruno is the main character. He is a French photojournalist who has exiled himself to Switzerland to avoid conscription

in the French Army. He is neither disloyal to France nor drawn to Algerian nationalist movements, but is rather an aesthete and globalist, who wishes to testify to the intense historical moment he lives in. In Switzerland he is entrapped by French secret police, by whom he lets himself be employed; and in that role he arouses suspicions of being a double agent. He is assigned the challenge of killing a redoubtable member of the Algerian underground, but is instead captured and tortured by the Algerians. The brightest spot in his life is the beautiful Veronica, with whom he falls in love. She, however, turns out to be working with the Algerians, and gets tortured to death before Bruno can so much as react.

Illustrative Moments: Snapshots of Bruno

Torture. For thirteen minutes we follow Bruno Forestier under torture, in the bathroom of the hotel where his Arab captors have sequestered him. Bruno sustains himself by struggling to think of positive scenes, and by trying to distract himself from what is happening to him.

Homicide. In Switzerland Bruno is given the assignment to kill one of the leading figures in the NLF. He makes a number of efforts to drive his loaner car parallel to that of the Algerian, so that he can shoot the man while driving. But obstacles keep cropping up, and Bruno's jacked-up will to kill has to be put back in the box.

Romance. Bruno talks incessant love chatter to Veronica, as he is turning her this way and that for a photo shoot. It is his subtle, seductive strategy for getting inside her mind and employing her careful vanity for his own ends.

Dubiousness. Bruno's French secret service enforcer, who is checking Bruno out as a double agent, sits quietly with him in a limousine, giving him his assignment for killing the Algerian operative. We closely follow the ins and outs of Bruno's response. He is prepared to comply but when the proposition becomes very tangible he panics. He is doubtful whether his whole adventure into a political drama which he tells himself he doesn't believe is worth it.

A Thought. Bruno's inability to kill degrades his historical-existential mission. Harry simply slips into his mission, taking on manhood after Monika slips out, as though it were simply waiting there inside him.

3. *Nights of Cabiria*, dir. Federico Fellini (1957)

Story. This is the story of a hard-luck kid, a 'girl woman' prostitute from the inner darkness of postwar Rome, and her adventures with complex high rollers, abusive and cynical boyfriends, scenarios of the Eternal City and the salvation it promises. (There is even a saintly figure carrying out nocturnal rounds, in support of the city's poorest.) In the course of some rich nights in her hand-to-mouth existence, she reminds us of the fake glitter of the nocturnal city, the sadnesses and distortions of personality that ride its streets, and the spirit of sassy joy which preserves in this woman the ability to survive it all. She takes the life-love challenge more effectively than Bruno, more maturely than the kid Harry. Bruce Lee's 'be water' has something to do with her success.

Themes

Wounds. Cabiria (played by Giulietta Masina, Fellini's wife, who also played Gelsomina in *La Strada*, film #30 in our list) is a prostitute living off her boyfriends and her nocturnal earnings in the lowest streets of Rome. When we first see her, she is being robbed by her fleeing boyfriend, who has just pushed her into the river, in which she is close to drowning. (Little boys pull her out. When we last see her she is being robbed—one might say nearly murdered—by a new boyfriend, who has elaborately deceived her into thinking he loves her. She survives both near-fatal experiences, thanks to her resilience and her *joie de vivre*. (A bit like Harry, in *Summer with Monika*?) Stable and happy she remains, though sorely tested, and in the end, as a person of faith and trust, she emerges a beaten victor over her setbacks. What happens in between? What is it that makes for the fascinating toughness of this lady? See how sharply she contrasts with Bruno, who was devoted to the photo precision of the moment but unable to perform his 'killing' assignment when the chips were down?

Vitality. She is irrepressible. Just recovered from her runaway boyfriend's attempt to drown her, Cabiria takes us with her into the streets, especially the night streets, where her profession transpires. After recovering from near-drowning she is loudly and aggressively back in her home neighborhood, shouting at her fellow professionals. (Whore jokes, buzz of the trade, Cabiria comes on irrepressible.) On the very night of her rescue from drowning, she finds herself picked up by a rich celebrity who has just broken up loudly with his girl. He drives Cabiria first to an exotic night club and then to his own house, where he treats her to a champagne dinner and much

welcome understanding. She can deal even with bounty, as she does on this occasion, with puckish modesty and wide-eyed attention. (Her own house has one room; this house has several hundred.)

Panoramas. On her way home from this dramatic and sexless night, Cabiria runs into a religious street procession, in honor of the Virgin Mary. The mostly female crowd wends its way toward a city church, where kneeling, adoration, and public search for compassion turn the city quarter into a passionate plea to which Cabiria joyfully adds her small voice and large eyes. Further along her homeward journey, Cabiria finds herself on the distant, hillocky outskirts of the city, an area of caves. She meets a dark and shadowy man who is driving from one cave to another through the night, distributing foodstuffs to the homeless people scattered about among these suburban dugout hideaways. A new register of love infiltrates our survey.

Tragedy. The most absorbing and deeply fateful event in Cabiria's (almost time-free) return through the night to her one-room house is still ahead: As always, drawn further into the night and its tinkly, glittery transformations of the ordinary, she stops off at what presents itself, a vaudeville show, in which she lets herself be inveigled into playing out a romantic pantomime role. After the show, in which she correctly feels she has been humiliated, she is consoled by one of the other participants, who makes his way into her heart. His invasion of her heart takes a careful course, during which the two of them meet at bus stations and train stops over the course of a few weeks; until finally he proposes. She accepts—amazed and thrilled—and a final appalling chapter in her life starts to write itself. The two have agreed that they will collect their savings—which are in fact her savings—and put the money down on a house. She brings the cash to their next rendezvous, he steals it from her and leaves her, and she is left once again to crawl back out of hell.

Survival. So much for the irrepressible in Cabiria. She starts the long walk back toward the city, and to her amazement falls in with a parade of rowdy young people, who are riding motorcycles, singing, and cutting up into a strange urban bacchanal. Joining them slowly, Cabiria finds a tiny slice of smile forming around her lips.

Characters

Cabiria. The prostitute who dominates the film with her gritty *joie de vivre*. We see her in many moods, from joy to despair, but she never gives up. She

and Harry belong to the world she takes seriously. She is the ever-central spirit of the film, the diminutive, feminine, sprightly, and gutsy central figure. Cabiria is a prostitute, friendly to all, highly romantic and religious sensibility, and a loyal friend. While perceptive and intelligent, she is nonetheless vulnerable to boyfriends and fast talkers. The final lover of the film steals her precious life savings. 'Lover', here, as often, is a different species from 'a person who loves.'

Movie Producer. As Cabiria starts out onto the streets, after having been rescued from her near drowning, she is picked up by a super-rich movie director, who takes her off to his mansion for the night. Nice guy. No sex, plenty of champagne.

The False Lover. We speak here of the last of Cabiria's lovers in the film. He consoles her when she feels she has been humiliated at the vaudeville show, and ever after woos her, finally (though hypocritically) claiming that he wants to marry her. In fact, all he wants is her money.

Illustrative Moments

Survival. At the end of her 'nights', as she has shared them with us, Cabiria starts back toward the city on foot, and is buoyed by the street parade of young people, who catch her up in the magic of their life. I'm plunged into her immersion.

Sex. Sexual behaviors are Cabiria's bread and butter, and yet she remains an ardent romantic, one who would remain untouched by corporeal grossness. She dreams her way through life. Her contrast with the dark stranger of the caves breaks the mold of earthly love.

Compassion. Cabiria is deeply and instantly caught up in the popular cult of the expressions of the Virgin Mary's compassion. Significantly, Cabiria goes on immediately to bond with the saintly man delivering urgently needed foodstuffs to the cave dwellers on the outskirts of Rome.

Roughness. Cabiria has a heart of gold, but we know well, from the early scenes around her one-room house on the distant outskirts of Rome, that she can take care of herself and is a pushover only to her own heart.

Parallels. The theme of the irrepressible 'girl of the streets', 'flower-girl', or loveable whore is of constant appeal, for the wide register of basic human

feelings it arouses: sympathy, humor, faith in the indomitably human. An early example of this theme in English literature is the film *Pygmalion* (released 1938), based on the play by George Bernard Shaw, which dramatizes the efforts of a donnish Professor of Phonetics to train a street girl to speak the Queen's English. The film *Never on Sunday* (1960) starred the sexy-but-street-smart actress Melina Mercouri, who knew how to live her sensuous life and made it a point to come out on top of her various opponents. *Sweet Charity* (1969) was written by Neil Simon, modeled on Fellini's *Cabiria*, and gives us an American template for the inwardly happy streetwalker of our culture. Remember Bruno? See how many faces love has!

A Closer Look at Cabiria

Resilience. We first meet Cabiria as she barely escapes drowning, then returns to her small house, furious with her robber boyfriend. She does not sulk very long, though; soon we see her out on the streets with her girlfriends, hustling. Open to what comes, she gets herself picked up by a rich movie director, who takes her home for the night. While he ends up sleeping with his own girl, whom he fought with earlier, the director opens his mansion to Cabiria, who wanders in excited absorption through the corridors of the rich and famous.

Credulousness. Cabiria is a believing Catholic, taking buoyancy and confidence from this belief, and on a central occasion follows a crowd of devotees through the streets of Rome to an altar where the faithful are expressing their devotion to the Virgin Mary. Timidly at first, then more ardently, Cabiria commits herself to the passionate mood of the moment, which sweeps her up, brings praises of belief from her. We see the intensity of her search for meaning and the distinctive way it gives her pleasure. She is open to whatever raises her spirits and gives her a sense of the value of her life.

Joy. Cabiria's openness to goodness and purity, even in the midst of her own bottom-feeding career, takes a fascinating turn when she meets a saintly stranger out in the fields beyond the city, who is taking a regular consignment (his own initiative) of foodstuffs to the residents of the caves outside the city. These marginalized semi-homeless have made their living in the sides of hills and are pitifully grateful to the salvation-bringing gent, whom Cabiria follows on his rounds, astonished by the power of goodness and made joyful by it. This mystery man remains with her, as part of her

inner life-power.

Triumph. At the end of the film Cabiria is once again betrayed by a boyfriend, this time for all the money she has in the world, her only security. She returns to the city alone, along the path she had taken through the woods with her guy shortly before he abandoned her. Out of the thickets, before her, emerges a small but growing band of high-spirited young people, riding bikes, singing, horsing around, and as Cabiria joins them her spirits rise and she melts into the joviality of the scene, with the same kind of 'going beyond it all' she had shown at the beginning of the film when she overcame her near drowning to hit the streets.

Discussion Questions. Do we assume, at the end of the film, that Cabiria has learned her lesson, discovered why she keeps being taken, or is she impervious to that kind of learning while staying true to her own basic optimism and hope?

Fellini writes regularly about the poorest of the poor in Italy. Is he a social critic? A friend of the marginalized? Is there any political tenor to Fellini's thinking?

What seems to be Fellini's own attitude toward the 'religious scenes' he introduces in *Cabiria*? Is he mocking? Credulous? Or simply nodding toward the obvious psychological health to be derived from making the best of your world?

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Author's Note

Are we acquainted? Have I earned the privilege of introducing my method, if not my cat? I hope the first part of all this, 'Me and Film', made at least my innocence evident, and that you are willing to exonerate me of any film-jockey suspicions. The fact is, as you have seen, that I am no film hound, no buff, but a literary guy who has always—until maybe those Sixties—taken film very much as fun. In the Sixties, so to speak, I began to spit the blood of undiscipline, launching so far into my ineptitude as to have a lasting affair while deep in my second marriage. The pleasure principle had so long been trashed, that daily life, and above all daily work, churned ahead almost obliviously, as though unrelated to the ethical texture of daily life. This compartmentalization, which has in later life self-unified, I think—after the chips have fallen, and the hair has grown gray throughout my set, this compartmentalization was viable and lasting in its time—

because it was instituted in the childhood conviction that delight and the testimonies of writing and thinking were mutually supportive. My loves were one life, forged in narcissism and cognition.

Films hit me, and stung through into the present text, at the point when cultural revolution was taking over both the nation and the nation of my person. Film was where the heat of life regenerated me, and the little shows I make here, from a summer of film watching, were testimonials to the cultural throes on which we were all afloat. It was the moment of the movie, hot on the eye, directly read off events, as hot as blowing up railway cars on a partisan siding, storming Winter Palaces, walking through the ruins of a bombed-out Deutschland, or falling in love in the ruins of Hiroshima. It was a time to live from your erotics and to move copiously into the 'fyre' of a time that was noisily proclaiming its novel role—most unexpectedly, it turns out, in an internet hell-bent on introducing a new kind of world-concept.

The self I found hammering me into form, as I watched a Nigerian rainy season full of films, was almost unrecognizable to me. It threw me back on my gender. Male and female loves differ. Look at Bruno, living his culture, politics, and love as a single lifestyle; his beloved cut from him by political commitment, his love for her hard-edged, part of working through an existential commitment to the development of society. Monika too lives her love, her desire, as part of a sense of the life-world she would love to be part of—the fantasy world of that middle-class housewife she will probably never be allowed to become. (Her boyfriend, after all, lives Bruno's love, one of commitment, though Harry is only at the start of discovering what that commitment will require of him.) Cabiria is committed only to herself, loves only herself, but because she herself is a world of compassion and life love, her self-absorption is life-absorption.

The kind of love you get, and give, depends on who you are and what you can afford. When I watched these films I felt both inspired to let myself go more widely into a spiritual love of the world. I also felt how limited my capacity to love is. I am inescapably private and selfish. Here in big-time Jesus country, southern Nigeria, where all is done for the blood of the Lamb, where bumper stickers celebrate that glorious gory sacrifice, I rein in hard, hang on to the Church of Rome, pray while meditating, stick with Reinhold Niebuhr's thought that 'the world could not exist at all if it were not good.' I cannot seem to run free with these consolatory thoughts, but must forever rassle them down, and take ease wherever I can find it.

4. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974)

Story

Setting. It is a rainy night in the German city of Munich, inside a working man's club type bar. In the bar there are few people, a buxom bar lady, a couple of *Gastarbeiter* (immigrant workers) typically—as in the present case—from North Africa. The juke box is playing Arabic pop music and two guys are chatting over a beer. In comes a lady on the far side of middle age, though expressive and attractive in her way; she takes a seat at a table near the door. It is pouring outside; that is the explanation for her presence there, and we assume she is going to wait it out until the rain stops.

Dance. Interestingly enough, one of the two guest workers, who are chatting near the bar, suggests the other should invite the lady to dance—she is fifteen or twenty years his senior—and he, Ali, takes the suggestion. The pair dance formally but fondly, and when they have finished Ali escorts her back to her seat. As she prepares to leave, Ali hurries to her, insisting that she must not go home alone; he escorts her to her apartment building, she invites him up to her flat, and they drink a few glasses of brandy before he accepts her invitation to spend the night there. Are not these words themselves pictures?

Marriage. After the briefest of times together, the two give in to their reasons for valuing one another and decide to get married, though by this time—and far more right after their marriage—it becomes evident that they have a rocky road ahead of them. From the first night on they are spied on by the most jealous, hate-filled, and bigoted co-residents of Emmi's apartment building, and when it comes around, a few days later, to announcing the marriage to Emmi's unsuspecting children, the couple realize how violent a reaction their behavior has triggered.

Nationalism. Emmi's children desert and disown her, and neither Emmi nor Ali—for different reasons—fully grasps the intensity of her children's reaction to their decision to marry. To all of which must be added that Germany was, at the time of the filming of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, in the midst of its involvement with *Gastarbeiter*, contractually engaged unskilled workers from all over Europe, North Africa, and Turkey—cheap labor imported to support the postwar *Wirtschaftswunder* (industrial miracle) in Germany. As in other countries, including many today, the indigenous

rejection of the foreign was a dominant societal theme. The issue of movement across borders and permanent immigration remains contentious throughout Europe at this moment, fifty years later; it is an intensely significant trait of global society.

Love. Emmi and Ali face obstacles. For a long time—though not forever—Emmi's children reject her. For a long time their neighbors turn their noses up at the pair, implying that Emmi's condo is filthy because of the 'scum' who houses with her, or that the occasional Moroccans who visit them are drug addicts or subversives. Emmi's fellow workers, cleaning ladies in a city building, scorn her new lifestyle, and the fact that she persists—discouraged many times, jealous many other times—is plentiful evidence for the durability of her feelings, right through to the last dance in the bar. Ali is equally faithful, though harder to read. From beginning to end he is sensitive and responsive to Emmi, and though his determination crashes on one occasion, he seemingly remains true to what matters most to him—someone who, in a rough and angry immigrant milieu, where innumerable migrants (like himself) end up with dangerous ulcers, is willing to accept him for what he is. Mutual tolerance is essential for the survival of love, in an environment where the world's dangers leave little room for romance.

Themes

Despair. Emmi and Ali are an isolated pair, in this film, set aside from those who belong—Emmi's co-workers and fellow-dwellers in her condominium, and Ali's buddies, whom we see from time to time, and few of whom are making that move toward the other that Ali chooses. Emmi, as the local person, feels cut off from the familiar, and is from time to time reduced to desperation, as on the occasion when she is sitting with Ali in the park, and the pair of them are being scrutinized by patrons of a nearby restaurant. It is as though the two of them are nothing but objects, and suddenly Emmi is reduced to weeping over the lack of support and warmth in her community. She is in despair, while Ali is in any case the outsider, and is used to being reified; there is, therefore, a disjunction between their moods.

Loneliness. Loneliness drives Ali to Emmi in the first place. In the bar, at the beginning, he is lonely for 'female companionship', but he is also keenly aware of her loneliness, and therefore responds at once to his friend's suggestion, that he should ask Emmi to dance. He continues to support her by escorting her to her house that rainy evening. At what point does love replace loneliness for Ali? Or does it? For Emmi loneliness is clearly the

driver, from the start. She has been a widow for several years, she lacks self-respect in her job as a cleaning lady, and she longs for authorization to value herself again as a woman.

Fear. There is a diffuse fear throughout the daily lives of Emmi and Ali. Their environments are not friendly to them. Ali speaks of the Arab worker as a 'dog' being mastered by his employer. Emmi will on occasion—when her neighborhood is more or less blacklisting her—wonder whether the familiar pattern of life can continue. The most explicit moment of fear experienced by the two lovers occurs when Emmi's neighbors call the police on them. The pretext for this intrusion is the 'loud' Arabic music which is emanating from Emmi's flat. (The music is not loud, but is used by Emmi's neighbors as a pretext to intimidate the couple.)

Love. As their environments begin to accept them, toward the end of the film, Emmi and Ali are only beginning to discover their love for one another. Until that point, the pair has been a mutual support team. They—especially Emmi—have endured many trials, and have survived them. They can now begin to discover one another.

Main Character: Emmi. Emmi is a conscientious, middle-aged widow who is lonely, has only her children to talk to, and who works long hours as a cleaning lady in a public building in Munich, a job in which she finds little satisfaction and no pride. She has no distractions in her life. She has several children from her first marriage, a small circle of female acquaintances in her apartment building, and two or three fellow workers whom she chats with in the building they all clean. Basically lonely, she happens by chance on another lonely human, and they join forces together. He is a Moroccan *Gastarbeiter*, and values her warmth and tenderness, while she falls for his gentleness and natural charm. They fall in love. They marry. They survive. Theirs is a story which puts them square in the middle of their time, as Bruno's did him, while Cabiria was out of her time in her time, a fee but a gritty one.

Parallels. The warmth of unexpected affection is beautifully captured in the 1989 film, *Driving Miss Daisy*, in which the rigor of racial prejudice is gradually thawed. Love and respect create a new understanding, as they do when Emmi and Ali find one another. The best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), is about the rays of hope love sheds in the enslaved world of Uncle Tom himself, who, like Ali, is grateful for any signs of graciousness from the enslaving world. Franz

Grillparzer's play, *The Waves of the Sea and of Love* (1831), is the most touching of the many accounts of the infinite but trouble-fraught love between two people whom circumstances separate.

Loneliness. Emmi is lonely from the start of the film, even before her first meeting with Ali. She is a widow with little self-esteem and few friends other than her co-workers and neighbors. When her relationship with Ali is made known, her loneliness is greatly increased. Everyone shuns her.

Shyness. From the start Emmi is not a self-confident individual. She is easily hurt. When she confides to her daughter and her out-of-sorts son-in-law that she is in love, she is unprepared for the mocking response she receives. Her shyness has rendered her unaccustomed to dealing with the attitudes of other people. In order for her to convince others that she has a particular personality, Emmi has to make some physical changes and movements: She must dress in a certain fashion, to move in this or that way. In these self-modifications she is unlike a literary character, who is constructed of words in somebody's head.

Rejection. Emmi is in a broad sense rejected by the social community she lives in. Her social milieu is on the whole critical of her; people conspire against her in her apartment building, stare at her (and her husband) in public, and mutter as she passes. The only break in this difficult reification comes after she has gone on vacation with Ali and returned to find her neighbors and co-workers mellower toward her—if only, as it turns out—because they want to exploit her.

Isolation. Lonely, shy, and rejected, Emmi is by nature resigned to leading a withdrawn life. Fassbinder shows great insight into the mindset of the older underpaid and overworked worker, compliant by necessity to the constrictions of the economy and the petty and indifferent attitudes of others. Isolation is a natural response to this set of limits. In the present instance, Emmi shows a remarkable capacity, from the start of the film, to let someone else reach out to her. Ali, even more isolated than she, is probably the only kind of person she would have been able to allow inside her perimeter.

Discussion Questions. Why do Emmi's neighbors relent in their attitude toward her and Ali? Do they change their minds toward this mixed couple? Or do they only seek their own advantage? The answer is that the guy on the street is fitfully congenial toward his neighbors, so that the only shit they

make him eat is difference. Is marriage an important venue for the expression of love in film?

Do Ali and Emmi love each other equally? Is one party out for personal advantage? Or have we here an example of parity in the partnership of marriage?

5. *Stroszek*, dir. Werner Herzog (1977)

Overview. Like *Aguirre*, *the Wrath of God* (1972) and other of his best films, Herzog wrote the screenplay for *Stroszek* in a short time, four days; presumably because, once he grasped his main theme, he knew just where to go. Of central importance in orienting him was the readymade presence of great real-life actors. He took them fresh off the street, as in the case of Bruno Schleinstein, the long-time mental patient and also the star of Herzog's previous film, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) (#20 in our list). It is this same natural actor, this time as himself—known at the time as Bruno S.—whom Herzog was able to place back on the streets of Berlin or Plainfield, Wisconsin. Knowing where he is going is Herzog's whole secret, whether in Berlin or on the street in Plainfield, Wisconsin, U.S.A., where Herzog's own car ran out of gas, and where he was heading north in order to visit the gravesite of Ed Gein, the serial killer who inspired the novel *Psycho* (1959). Herzog knew just where he was going, but no one else (except the actors) could have imagined that this idiosyncratic film, which opens as a prisoner is released from a Berlin jail, would end with the same guy going deliciously nuts in an amusement park in Wisconsin.

Story

The Unpredictable. The story of *Stroszek* intimates about itself from the get-go, the sense that anything can happen with the main character, who has just been released from prison, who has a well-known alcoholic background, and who seems at maximum risk to 're-offend.' The character is question is the street musician who acted the main role of Kaspar Hauser; here, as Bruno, he is as difficult to interpret as he was in *Kaspar Hauser*; seemingly fixated on the world, with little expression, unpredictable behavior jolts, a kindly attitude to all, and of course supreme vulnerability. His first step is into a familiar bar, where he gets a beer, then finds himself entangled with an attractive prostitute, Eva, whose two nasty pimps are in the process of beating her up because she has brought in little cash. One thing leads to another: Stroszek gives shelter to the girl in his flat, the pimps intervene now and then to terrorize the girl or Stroszek, and it becomes clear

to the couple—for now they are sleeping together—that they need to get out of town, ideally out of Germany.

Escape. As it happens, Stroszek's neighbor, the kindly old crank who has kept Stroszek's flat for him while he was in prison, is making plans to travel to America at the invitation of his nephew, who has a garage in a small town in Wisconsin. The trio decide to go together to the town of Railroad Flats, Wisconsin. Eva goes to the streets to screw her head off and make a ton of money in a short time, to finance the trip. And they are off!

U.S.A. In Railroad Flats, Stroszek, Eva, and Mr. Scheitz, the quiet eccentric neighbor who has kept Stroszek's mynah bird for its owner, and who is the ultimate in quirky gentleness, fit their ways into the community. Eva works as a waitress in the local coffee shop. Stroszek helps out as a mechanic while Mr. Scheitz travels the local region, conducting his unique experiments in animal magnetism. Matters proceed tolerably well until Eva, tired of the group's efforts to make a home in their brand-new trailer, runs off to Vancouver with a couple of truckers, leaving the two men alone together. She is wise to be gone, because just at this point the local bank, which the group borrowed from to buy their trailer, is complaining that monthly payments are in arrears. Stroszek and Mr. Scheitz, lacking a financial plan, have to sit by as their house is sold and they find themselves out on the street.

Robbery. Having decided that the bank is participating in a plot against them, the two men get in their beat-up pick-up truck, head to the bank with a shotgun, and steal $32. They run across the street with the money and are purchasing some household supplies when the cops arrive. The cops spot Mr. Scheitz and arrest him, but miss Stroszek, who gets back in the pick-up and drives off as soon as the coast is clear.

Finale. Stroszek drives down the road 'til his vehicle starts to run out of gas and spin in circles. He jumps out, takes his gun, and heads for the amusement center next door. There he puts some money in the slot, sets a dancing chicken into perpetual motion, finds the electrical switch that activates a perpetually rotating ski-lift, hops into a lift chair, and is seen for the last time disappearing into the distance.

Themes

Cruelty. Eva's pimps, who batter her and torture Stroszek, are into vandalism, theft, and sadism. They destroy Stroszek's flat and make him perform for them in humiliating positions. Like the character of Kaspar Hauser, also performed by Schleinstein in the film of the same name (#20 in our list), the character Bruno Stroszek is a natural target for bullies.

Humor. Comedy, of a low-key and quirky sort, abounds in this film. There is the quiet humor of the mynah bird's repetitions of snippets of conversation between Mr. Scheitz and Stroszek. There is the bizarre humor of the trio walking near the port of arrival in New York City. There is the crazy humor of Stroszek's fascination with the dancing chicken in the amusement arcade.

Tolerance. Stroszek, like Kaspar Hauser in his own life, puts up with a world that misunderstands him, which is easy to do. Kaspar Hauser was the nightmare of the bureaucrats who initially interrogated him—where are you from? Who were your parents?—and Stroszek is the despair of the police inspector who gives him final advice upon release from prison. Stroszek simply puts up, tolerantly, with all the advice and questions, and leaves the square-minded frustrated.

Survival. Stroszek has certain survival skills, as had Kaspar Hauser; both men live inside their own heads, do not understand or analyze others, and tend to keep on going, even when circumstances seem powerfully against them. Kaspar makes his own way, in his own fashion, quite well, until anonymous attacks fell him. Stroszek is never seriously derailed in his meandering course through life, even by the brutality exercised on him by Eva's pimps.

Characters

Stroszek. Stroszek is a mildly dysfunctional, but observant and subtle, victim of the German penal system. He is just being released as the film opens. He returns to drinking, gets beat up by his girlfriend's pimps, and eventually gets out of harm's way by going to Wisconsin, where even more fascinating challenges await him. Stroszek enters the love-project at a different point from the other characters discussed in this section—Harry and Monika, Cabiria, Bruno, and Ali and Emmi—all of whom relate as street-sensible consciousnesses, ready to take their blows, and without the