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Satyricon'--a Fellini Side-show [A review of the film "Satyricon", Milwaukee]

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IRS
'Satyricon'--a Fellini side-show

by Curtis L. Carter

Occasionally a film is interesting enough to drive the viewer to the literary source from which it springs. Fellini's Satyricon, showing at the Varsity theater, is this kind of film.

The images in the film are sufficiently intriguing to invite further investigation. The literary fragments which inspired Fellini's Satyricon are themselves engrossing reading. Written in the first century A.D. by Polonius Arbiter, a close intimate of the emperor Nero, the fragments called Satyricon contain elements of comic satire directed against the Roman nouveau riche and many other aspects of Roman social life.

Neither Petronius' text nor the film presents anything more than a loosely integrated string of events. The point of Petronius's work is reasonably clear: It presents for comic satire the excesses of Roman Life which Petronius knew so well from his own first hand experiences.

Fellini's purpose is more difficult to discern. He offers a set of spectacular film images which are exceedingly rich as isolated images.

He captures in unforgettable detail the essence of a Roman banquet at the palace of Trimalchio, a wealthy but tasteless member of the nouveau riche. No excess is spared. The setting is lavish as guests lounge around to eat, drink, and watch the goings-on.

Most of the people in Fellini's Satyricon are presented in side-show fashion. They exhibit bizarre features emphasizing distortion and excess in one direction or another.

An exception -- not the only one -- is found in Encolpius, the narrator, through whose eyes we see events in Satyricon. The handsome Encolpius is a sort of anti-hero who is more distinguished for what happens to him than for what he causes to happen.

On through seemingly endless episodes he "dies" or "is killed" several times only to reappear again.

After we have surveyed the spectacular images, what else is left? Possibly a clue lies in the scenes that take place in the house of the dramatist. There the people are dressed in theatrical array, giving the impression of being characters performing in a drama.

But what appears to be going on "on stage" is in fact going on in the lives of the "actors" as real events. The characters act out their bizarre events as if they were on the stage, but in reality the events are happening in "life".

Seen as theatrical illusions, the events in the theater have a peculiar way of preparing the viewer to accept the even more strange events that go on in the world outside the theater.

Is Fellini simply playing tricks? Or is he making a statement about the relation of the art of the theater to other life events? I incline toward the latter view. This interpretation provides a framework in which to place the seemingly unrelated images of Satyricon.

If I am correct, Fellini's purpose is quite different from that of Petronius. He simply takes the events of Petronius's Satyricon, which were meant as comic satire on the life of Rome, and uses them as elements to explore an aesthetic problem: The relation of the life "on the stage" to that in the world outside. In doing so, he also manages to evoke some interesting analogies concerning the essential inhumanity rampant in the behavior of mankind.