



Ordinary Returns in *Le notti di Cabiria*

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Never love anyone who treats you like you are ordinary.
—Oscar Wilde

I

I begin by presenting not a thesis but a smile. In the final scene of Federico Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria* (1954b), Giulietta Masina's Cabiria looks directly at the camera and hence at us, gratefully, just a moment before “*Fine*” appears on an otherwise black screen (Fig. 7.1):

As far as smiles go, one would be hard pressed to find a better one in the history of cinema. Or a more curious one. That Fellini has Messina direct herself to the audience tells us that the film intends to make the smile bear upon our world as well as hers. Cabiria *addresses* us through it. Yet what does her expression convey? At the very least, it tells us that the end of the film is not the end of Cabiria: the catastrophe Cabiria just endured has not defeated her. Without this smile and the immense sweep of emotion it displays, the final moments of the film would have been, as

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Fig. 7.1 Cabiria contented

it were, categorical, indicating the conclusion of both the story and its protagonist, the latter at least in respect to her quest for a life she finds worth having. It is true that surrounding Cabiria is a supremely improbable procession of joyous youths, dancing, singing, playing instruments, and enjoying their Vespas—the scene is “carnavalesque,” in the sense that that word is at home in Fellini criticism. But this characteristically Fellinesque coda uses the conventions of theatricality and resources of cinematic spectacle to conclude on a note not of absurdism but moral and emotional conversion.¹

It is solely by virtue of Cabiria’s smile that the parade of ecstatic youths does not function to heighten the sense of her alienation from the world that it had established so powerfully just a moment before, when she found herself in a dark wood, abandoned, destitute, and begging for her life to end (“*Non voglio più vivere! Ammazzami!*”). As Cabiria ascends from the wood to find herself among the revelers, she is, as are we, at first nonplussed, then curious, and finally deeply moved as she receives a sincere “*Buona sera*” from a young woman. The image of Cabiria smiling immediately follows this greeting and functions to situate her now fully in this peculiar current of exuberant life. Hence the smile infuses the scene

with a sense of forward motion and shows Cabiria to be newly attuned to the world around her. She can go on.

Yet what will continue, exactly? Her change in outlook notwithstanding, one assumes that much of what will go on are the chronic disappointments, humiliations, and struggles of Cabiria's ordinary life, to which the film's conclusion suggests she will be returned. After all, the film just made it clear that Cabiria hasn't escaped any of the unflattering features of her daily existence: the poverty, the lovelessness, the social invisibility, among much else. The entire film tells us that Cabiria wishes to escape this existence, preferably through marriage, and she nearly does, though, as we know, this turned out badly indeed. As Cabiria is "in the life," the film trades on the common image of a sex worker as the object of a desire that refuses to grow into love. Since the narrative of the films begins and ends with an apparent lover prepared to murder Cabiria in an act of theft, what occasions her conversion surely cannot be the prospect of finding a new man. Her smile bespeaks newly acquired courage, even wisdom, and only a grossly unfair interpretation would make any such silly hope the proximate cause of her contented expression. So we must assume that Cabiria's smile represents a form of acceptance of this world more or less as it is. But if Cabiria's smile indicates an emotional realignment with her world, the question is why? She will be returned to her everyday life but now even worse off—she has just lost everything—and we need to ask what Fellini has given us to explain how this life could occasion a smile when he had hitherto represented it as a kind of prison, even if a comical prison (as the film is a picaresque, the rough business of life necessarily receives a light touch: hence the much-discussed role of mambo dancing in the film).²

If there is any doubt as to whether Fellini wishes us to see Cabiria's conditions of everyday life in partially penal terms, this early image from the film should settle the matter (Fig. 7.2): Here we see Cabiria returning home after nearly drowning, trying to find a way into her shanty after having her keys stolen, with Wanda haranguing Cabiria to get her to acknowledge that Giorgio, the man she had presented as her beau, in fact pushed her into the Tiber so that he could abscond with her purse. This is the first insight we have into the structure of Cabiria's everyday world, and everything from the stripes of Cabiria's dress to the cell-like appearance of her home tells us something crucial about the character of Cabiria's life. Even the banter with Wanda at moments feels as though it is between two inmates only one of whom has accepted her sentence. Fellini and Masina were great admirers of Charlie Chaplin, and one can detect faint references



Fig. 7.2 Cabiria & Wanda

to *Modern Times* (1936) in this early scene—again, destitution is treated as comically as it is tragically in *Le notti di Cabiria*. Yet it becomes an unambiguously serious matter at the end of the film, certainly for the viewer, since we must see Cabiria's smile bringing under its scope even Wanda and this context of daily life.³

It is part of Masina's brilliance as an actor that in this smile seems to be implicated an answer to a great question, and part of Fellini's restraint as a director is that the film refuses to answer it, since an answer would amount to an intrusion of didacticism. Fellini is a director of suggestion, and he is fundamentally poetic in his commitment to guiding thought through the use of images instead of the conventions of cinematic realism, dialogue, and dramatic declaration. I want to make a case for regarding this film as a reflection on the everyday and the final image of Cabiria as an achievement in understanding how art can explore it. These features of Cabiria's expression tell us something about how the everyday can be accepted even

when it is, in its core features, intolerable, and it hints at why the aestheticization of it in film matters. These achievements ultimately bring into relief a striking way of thinking about medium- to large-sized philosophical issues concerning not just the nature of the everyday and its significance but, crucially, how film can make of it an object of aesthetic and philosophical understanding.

II

It is fairly easy to state what the artistic achievement consists in and highlighting it will help stage a more ambitious philosophical point. First things first, *Le notti di Cabiria* is the last in an early trilogy of films through which Fellini came into his own as a director, and in these films he is working through his complicated relationship to the neorealist tradition in which Italian cinema is at that moment steeped.⁴ The film's famous ending relies on a form of cinematic abstraction—in this case, an employment of “visual excess” (Stubbs, 1993, p. 49) to effect a “spectacle-driven” (O’Healy, 2020, p. 465) embellishment of reality—and represents Fellini’s considered response to this tradition. As neorealists such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and Luchino Visconti (and John Cassavetes, in an American context) were pursuing an “actorless” realism that was so committed to the representation of authentic lived experience that they frequently took their performers as well their subject matter from everyday life, Fellini discovers, most perfectly in this final scene of *Le notti di Cabiria*, a new, if you will, mode of inheritance. The ending signals Fellini’s acceptance of neorealism’s commitment to the everyday but shows, remarkably for a filmmaker working in his milieu, that abstraction and not a form of representational hyperrealism—or *any* form of realism—is required for its exploration.

This immediately raises a philosophical problem: how could such an artistic maneuver possibly *present* the everyday? Plainer still, how could a scene so extraordinary in nature deliver *the ordinary*? These questions of course track those great general philosophical puzzles about how artworks of any sort can represent life fairly or fully, that is, without importing to life, in the very act of artistic presentation, more than it naturally bears. The desire to offer an artistic solution to these problems commonly leads artists to find a way to get the form of their works to match the form of the bit of the world with which they are concerned: music delivered through staccato and atonal sounds so that it may capture the cacophony

of modern life; poetry presented in free verse with an associative style that, one hopes, suffices to yield the actual flow of subjective thought; dance that embraces the inelegance and frenetic fits and spurts of our daily motions, and so on. Neorealism is just one instance of how artists try to get their works to match the rough edges of the world, and this is never a simple affair, since the aestheticization of life always risks bestowing too much beauty, form, and meaningfulness upon subjects that are often inherently messy, riddled, and imperfect. Even environmental aesthetics struggles with the issue of how the necessary acts of framing and selection that go into painting could ever permit us to experience nature *as it naturally is* in representations of wilderness and the like.⁵ The worry is much the same when it comes to artworks that try to capture the everyday. The risk of falsification is great, since the very aspects of an artwork that make it an aesthetic object can seem all wrong for a faithful presentation of the ordinary *as* ordinary.

Fellini, like every other artist with worldly concerns, develops artistic strategies for negotiating these worries. The exact feature of the neorealist conceit *Le notti di Cabiria* tries to subvert is the idea that if art is to engage with ordinary life, it must go about its business, as Michael Fried puts it, “in the mode of near documentary.” (2007, p. 524) For Fried, as for many others, the everyday is best represented, “in antitheatrical (and implicitly absorptive) form.” (2007, p. 519) Hence the actors culled from the streets, filmed on location in their common haunts, speaking their ordinary dialects, and captured by a camera that tries desperately to efface its presence. The neorealist conceit is just one instance of the general belief that a retreat from distinctly artistic modes of presentation is demanded of art of the everyday, and it is just one example among thousands in the history of art of how artists think critically about whether their practices can at once be artistic and revelatory not just of “the world” but something rather harder to represent: the actual conditions of lived human experience.⁶

There are problems with this conceit.⁷ We can admit that neorealism and kindred movements have devised strategies for offering the impression of encountering the everyday in film. But if we think that art of the everyday must be antitheatrical and committed to nearly documentary modes of representation, a skeptical worry will lurk that even neorealism is doomed to just a lesser degree of failure in its attempt to make ordinary life present in art. These commitments can likely never be fully satisfied, since the framing of the world *through* film will inevitably open up some degree of a distorting gap. Or so skeptics will argue, and they will add that

it is in the very nature of the everyday that this be so. Think of the respects in which your life unfolds in everyday contexts, by way of your engagement in ordinary affairs, and through your participation in common, typically very common, forms of sociality. Whatever you have precisely imagined, put it into words and what you've described is probably just uneventful. Your description might produce boredom, or curiosity, or sympathy; but it likely won't reproduce, in addition to the recounted events, the *everydayness* of them. The concepts of the ordinary and the everyday mark a particular manner of experiencing the things and stuff of life, the spaces in which we encounter them, the weight of time as we pass between these spaces, and, especially, the feel of a life that is unfolding in and amongst all of this. How could one *represent*, in a plainly realist and documentary manner, our sense of the sheer presentness, unburdened understanding, and untroubled belonging that we have of the pieces of our everyday world and how they fit together into a pattern of familiar life? One can *show* these pieces; but that ordinary glue which binds them into a lived context of everydayness won't thereby be made present. Their experiential quality is their defining feature, and fine-grained forms of phenomenological understanding simply aren't the sort of thing that can be communicated in a literal description or realist depiction. The concept of the everyday, unlike the concept of a particular person or place, does not even appear to indicate a kind of thing or object that *could* be depicted or represented in any straightforwardly realist manner. Or so an artist or philosopher might reasonably think.

There is much more that can be said about these claims, and of course they are all contestable. Here's the point. The cinematic abstractions of the final scene of *Le notti di Cabiria* suggest that the skeptical worries just canvassed are misplaced because the artist of the everyday need not embrace such commitments and thus the failure to satisfy them tells us little about the limits of film. The skeptical worries only go through if we are committed to thinking about the matter *representationally* and, even then, as literalists about the "documentary mode" and the forms of verisimilitude it demands ("take your actors from the streets," etc.). This is at root the problem with the neorealist conceit. For Fellini, this realization is a moment of artistic liberation, since it amounts to the discovery that he is free to harness the formal, fictionalizing, theatrical, and properly imaginative dimensions of film without thereby destroying the bridge that runs between art and ordinary life.⁸ Fellini discovers for film what certain philosophers in a very different context have discovered about their theories:

the ordinary and everyday are brought to view not by tediously documenting our diurnal habits but by prompting in the reader forms of essentially imaginative experience that return understanding back to the rough ground of everyday life. This “return” puts the reader on the road to the desired destination; it doesn’t *show* this destination. Forms of abstraction, fictionalization (often as what philosophers call “thought experiments”) and a measure of *participation* on the part of the reader are required for this. We need images whose often fantastic departures from actual human conditions of speech and action in some manner permit us to return to the latter with a sense of clarity about what the everyday is and how thought, speech, and feeling find themselves at home in it. Let me explain.

III

Though there is no indication that Fellini followed any of it, there was an explosion of philosophical work on the everyday in the three decades prior to *Le notti di Cabiria*. Marxists such as György Lukács and Henri Lefebvre were developing significant literary and political accounts of it, Martin Heidegger had already given it its most influential phenomenological treatment in *Being and Time*, and ordinary language philosophy was flourishing in those regions of philosophy we now call “analytic.” Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, surely the most influential text of “high” ordinary language philosophy, was first published in 1953, just four years before *Le notti di Cabiria*. It is this text that offers the view of the everyday most useful for the point I wish to make. The following will be an exercise in making a long story very short.

For Wittgenstein, the project of ordinary language philosophy is to, “lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (2009, §116).⁹ For our purposes, the metaphysical may be thought of as where the philosophical imagination surrenders to its dissatisfaction with the everyday. If we wish to find a sturdy foundation for the meanings we produce, the values we embrace, the conceptual schemes with which we confront the world—and much else besides—their ordinary forms of support strike much traditional philosophy as too rough, ephemeral, and contingent, too shot through with ambiguity, vagueness, and mere practical interest to ground anything more than, crudely, an account of what people in Cleveland say and believe, and only some of them at that. On Wittgenstein’s diagnosis, philosophers turn to metaphysical explanations when they commit the error of believing that truth, logic, and normativity

demand more than this untidy everyday can offer. Think of this as the philosophical analogue to that familiar thought, perfectly exemplified by Cabiria, that “life is elsewhere,” where by “life” we gesture generally in the direction of the objects of meaning and value that we deem essential to our being able to go on (in philosophy, in moral life, etc.) but which we come to feel are unavailable to us *here*, that is, in the context of life that happens to be our own.

In a theological register, heaven represents one such beyond, as a domain that yields not merely an extraordinary but an otherworldly source of authority. In philosophy, various forms of Platonism seek to ground meaning and value in just a more intellectually sophisticated kind of an elsewhere: abstracta that behave like Plato’s eternal and immaterial forms. Less dramatically, even the attempt to devise a crystalline formal language, shorn of the roughness of our everyday habits of speech, represents one such beyond, as do “transcendental” theories that make of all this a matter of idealized categories of the human mind. The flight from the everyday we see in metaphysics is, on this picture, the philosophical inflection of this common human yearning for a perfected elsewhere. All such searches for a metaphysical beyond represent an ironic view of our epistemic condition. Much like Socrates, who thought that only in death could he acquire knowledge, we come to see the ordinary as a kind of prison house, at any rate as a barrier to the world rather than our point of entry into it.¹⁰

Friedrich Nietzsche once said that “mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is, they are not even shallow,” (1999, §126) and for Wittgenstein this is true of metaphysical theories generally.¹¹ The *Philosophical Investigations* is an attempt to show that flights from the ordinary conditions of speech and thought always risk putting language “on holiday”¹² and, as such, at best produce the semblance of depth but never deliver actual insight. This is because it is only in the context of the ordinary that we find the forms of social attunement and cultural agreement that alone can create and sustain shared meanings. As Wittgenstein tells us, this is a matter of “agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.” (2009, §241) We disagree as a matter of daily course about this or that; for Wittgenstein, the ordinary provides a shared stage upon which we can intelligibly rehearse these disagreements. The ordinary comes in at this epistemically “soft” level, designating not truths we all must accept but, in effect, tools we must share if we are to succeed in reaching out to one another in thought and language. Absent the forms of sociality through which you and I can come together in language and render

ourselves intelligible to one another, we are—as Cabiria discovers through her lovers’ promises of escape—alone, even if together.

Consider this passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*, which tells us as much Wittgenstein ever will about what his “method” amounts to:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words.—Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A *perspicuous representation* produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*.

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental importance for us. It earmarks the forms of the account we give, the way we look at things.¹³ (2009, §122)

Though this is routinely overlooked, this passage shows that Wittgenstein’s method is not at all one of offering drearily literal descriptions of everyday linguistic exchanges, as though his is merely a philosophical version of Fried’s “mode of near documentary.” This would be empirical enough; but, for reasons mentioned above, it would hardly suffice to enliven our sense of the significance of the everyday and so prompt us to return to it in order to achieve the clarity that we once thought only a metaphysical theory could provide. In Wittgenstein’s work, perspicuous representations are standardly fantastical, fictional, and, on occasion, quite poetic: an oddity called a beetle box, a drawing of an expressive steaming teapot, a shopkeeper who enlists color charts when asked for five red apples, builders whose language consists exclusively of masonry terms (2009, §293, §297, §1, §2–21, respectively), to give just the most famous examples. In other words, Wittgenstein’s own method for delivering philosophy back to the rough ground of the ordinary does so through a philosophical form of *abstraction*: artificial and highly stylized scenarios that guide imagination in a particular manner, the point of which is to create the conditions in the reader for returning to the actual now with the resources to see it aright. These “intermediate links” do much more positive work in the *Philosophical Investigations* than this. But, for our purposes, the point is that Wittgenstein’s philosophical abstractions have worldly goals: they function to reanimate our sense of the everyday as a site of philosophical potential and as invested with the possibilities of meaning and value that we once thought only an elsewhere could provide.

IV

This Wittgensteinian story now told, we can return to Fellini and in conclusion say with more clarity what *Cabiria's* smile accomplishes in respect to the everyday.

First things first, I trust that my Wittgensteinian excursion offers a way of thinking about the cinematic achievement of Fellini's ending, as both a work of art and a response to the documentary conceit of neorealism. It would be silly to say that Fellini's ending functions *as* a Wittgensteinian perspicuous representation, since the movement between philosophy and art is always a looser affair than this. Wittgenstein offers a way of thinking about what is utterly mistaken in the belief that representational realism is demanded of a work, artistic or philosophical, that wishes to make of the ordinary an object of attention and value. And his work simply provides a vocabulary for making explicit what Fellini demonstrates perfectly well in cinematic terms: forms of abstraction can be required of the artist of the everyday, since they create the critical distance from the ordinary that permits us to see "connections" between a work and the everyday world, and it is good that this is so, since, as we have seen, everydayness might well not be the sort of thing can be represented, at least in a manner that captures the desired sense of its significance. To make one more obvious but important point, we also have a richer sense of what it means to say that Fellini's film, from the beginning until immediately before its final scene, *dramatizes* the allure of an elsewhere and the nature of disappointment in the everyday. Yet it does so in a way that film is arguably better suited for than philosophy, since film can give such a richer sense of—for lack of better terms—the existential, sentimental, and social reasons the ordinary can come to seem a kind of desert or prison. It therefore makes the prospect of staging a return to it all the more challenging, both artistically and philosophically, certainly on the assumption that poverty, alienation, and exploitation are rather harder to make alluring than Wittgenstein's ordinary practices of language use.

Fellini's ending suggests that exactly two things are required for this reanimation of our sense of the everyday as a site of potential meaning and thus as worthy of a return. Before stating what they are, we need to say something further about what it means to say that the ending of the film is an example of cinematic abstraction. The point is simple. It is an abstraction in the further sense that it removes *Cabiria* entirely from her life and places her in a purely cinematic—that is, artistic and aesthetic—space.

While it is certainly an event in the film, it is not an occurrence, as it were, in the story of Cabiria's life. It takes her out of life for a moment to reconstitute her as character so that she can be given access to two things that her everyday life has thus far denied her, in this way showing both her and us what is required for her to see it as now a site of possibility. Both of these two things are first presented *within* the film in Cabiria's exchange with the contented youth who offers her a sincere "*Buona sera*" and then, more completely, when she then turns to the camera and smiles, thereby reaching out of the film and implicating us in their provision.

So what are these two things? The sincere greeting is an act of recognition, an acknowledgement of Cabiria's presentness as a person, that has a very specific consequence. It creates the conditions of sociality, much along the lines of what Wittgenstein calls "agreement," that is, as indicating that very basic achievement of attunement without which the everyday is of course experienced as a disappointment. When Cabiria then turns to us, her smile shows that she understands that she has been an object of concern for us all along, *visible* to us, and she in turns acknowledges our gaze and enlists us in establishing the sense of mutuality that this bizarre final scene effects remarkably well. The suggestion, then, is that the everyday can only be imagined to be place of potential meaning if we call to mind those basic forms of sociality and recognition without which social experience is a form of alienation and other people essentially a problem. Thus it isn't quite right to say that *Le notti di Cabiria* aestheticizes the everyday and reveals it to be tolerable, even alluring. It aestheticizes and in fact makes beautiful just the act of recognition and the creation of links of mutuality, and it suggests that this is required for a desire to return to the ordinary to be intelligible. The final scene abstracts from the everyday all but these two elements of it, and, with each in view, enjoins us to see the promise of community as present in both Cabiria's and our own contexts of ordinary life.

NOTES

1. Here I follow Peter Bondanella in seeing *Le notti di Cabiria* as a film "of grace or salvation" (Bondanella, 2002, p. 27), though I have no interest in the religious dimension of this. Hence my more neutral use of "conversion."
2. See Schoonover for an excellent discussion of this. Schoonover seems to take Cabiria's joyous bursts of physicality in the dance scenes to warrant

the conclusion that Cabiria, “rarely appears deflated by her circumstances.” (Schoonover, 2014, p. 98). On my reading this is clearly false, though we can both acknowledge that there is nothing incompatible in asserting that Cabiria both finds her life unacceptable yet on occasion asserts herself, perhaps heroically, through creative acts such as dance.

3. In an earlier scene, Cabiria, Wanda, and their friends seek grace at the Santuario della Madonna del Divino Amore. During a picnic afterwards, Cabiria shouts to her friends, drunk and distressed, that they haven’t changed at all: “*Siamo rimasti tutti come prima!*” (“We’re all just as we were before!”). Surely part of what the final smile registers is Cabiria’s sense that she has, in fact, finally changed. And this gets us close to an answer; but we still want to understand how this inner change can make an oppressive everyday now bearable, and we should say something more sophisticated than that she now has moral strength. That isn’t false, but it also isn’t particularly illuminating.
4. The other two films are *La strada* (1954a) and *Il bidone* (1955).
5. See Carlson (1979) for the classic statement of this problem.
6. I explore this in Gibson (2007). An excellent recent treatment of the issue is Pippin (2021), which has much to say about film.
7. See Yeazell (2008) for what is in effect a study of the history of this conceit in painting and literature.
8. As Fellini himself says, “[m]y films give the audience a very exact responsibility. For instance, they must decide what Cabiria’s end is going to be. Her fate is in the hands of each one of us. If the film has moved us, and troubled us, we must immediately begin to have new relationships with our neighbors. This must start the first time we meet our friends or our wife, since anyone may be a Cabiria.” As quoted in Salachas (1969, p. 108).
9. I am here rendering *föhren* “lead” instead of “bring” is more faithful to the original German and more clearly captures the future-directedness of the idea of “return” that is central to my argument.
10. For a prominent example of this sort of reading of Wittgenstein, see Cavell (1988). See also Mulhall (1994) and Hammer (2002) for excellent discussions of Cavell and Wittgenstein.
11. Wittgenstein believes this to be true not just of metaphysics but philosophical theories more generally. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explain Wittgenstein’s distinctive sense of “theory” and his model of properly reformed philosophical explanations do that such that they count as an alternative to noxious theories. See Gibson (2017) for an account of this. Also see Cahill (2011) for an excellent philosophical discussion of this. See Moi (2017), Ong (2016), and Zumhagen-Yekplé (2020) for discussions of this specifically in respect to literature, all three of which I am indebted to here.

12. “For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.” (Wittgenstein, 2009, §38).
13. My translation, which at key points departs from Hacker and Schulte in favor of Anscombe’s rendering of parts of this passage.

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