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The Key to the Treasure in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*

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Like the riderless horse from *La Strada* (1956) and the peacock from *Amarcord* (1974), the phrase “asa nisi masa” in Federico Fellini’s *8 1/2* (1963) carries contextual meaning that is neither explained nor repeated. This is a common motif in Fellini’s filmography. The phrase, brought up during the dining sequence outside Guido Anselmi’s hotel, is read aloud from his subconscious by a clairvoyant party entertainer. When asked by the clairvoyant’s non-psychic partner what the phrase means, Guido walks away. The film then transitions into a flashback to Guido’s childhood. Here, surrounded by his loving nannies and vibrant, happy family, he is given an intimate wine bath and lovingly tucked into bed. One of his sisters sits up and tells him that “tonight’s the night the eyes in the painting will move.... Uncle Agostino will look in a corner and the treasure will be there.” She tells him to repeat the phrase “asa nisi masa.” The sequence ends with a closeup on the fireplace and the ethereal, dreamlike sound of whistling wind.



The Anima

“Asa nisi masa” is the key to the treasure. What is “asa nisi masa”? It’s a nonsense phrase but, as with Pig Latin, its meaning is obscured by added syllables. Remove “si” and “sa” and the phrase is simplified to “anima,” the Italian word for soul. It has a double meaning, however, tied to the psychoanalysis of Carl Jung. Fellini was fond of Jung for his studies on dreams and their subconscious meanings. The director famously incorporated his dream life into his films, blending fantastic and realistic elements. Put simply, according to Jungian psychoanalysis, the anima represents the repressed, unconscious, feminine traits in the male. Jung writes:

The projection-making factor is the anima, or rather the unconscious as represented by the anima. Whenever she appears, in dreams, visions, and fantasies, she takes on [a] personified form, thus demonstrating that the factor she embodies possesses all the outstanding characteristics of a feminine being. She is not an invention of the conscious, but a spontaneous product of the unconscious. Nor is she a substitute figure for the mother. On the contrary, there is every likelihood that the numinous qualities which make the mother-imago so dangerously powerful derive from the collective archetype of the anima, which is incarnated anew in every male child.¹

The anima is both a personal complex and an archetypal image of a woman in the male psyche that represents his repressed feminine attributes. Jung describes the “mother-imago” (where “imago” is the mental image of a woman that provokes the psychic return of an old relationship or type of relationship) as dangerously powerful. The mother-imago is the “enveloping, embracing, and devouring element [that] points unmistakably to the mother, that is, to the son’s relation to the real mother..., and to the woman who is to become a mother” figure to him.² The child hopes to be subsumed into the mother-imago because he seeks its protection and nourishment to relieve him of care and worry. It’s intoxicating, as it “forces happiness upon him.” Should a man become obsessed with the mother-imago, he will reach a “psychological stage [in which he lives] regressively, seeking his childhood and his mother, fleeing from a cold cruel world which denies



him understanding.”³ In this case, the obsessed man halts his own development so that he may never grow up and get married. As the flashback sequence makes clear, Guido’s relationship to his mother figures (his nannies) evokes the intoxicating allure of the traits that make the mother-imago so dangerous. The nostalgic tone of the wine bath sequence and the exaggerated

1 C. G. Jung, “The Syzygy: Anima and Animus,” *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 9 (Part 2), trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Gerhard Adler et. al., Princeton University Press, 1979. Par. 26.

2 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt. 2), par. 20

3 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt. 2), par. 21

shows of affection displayed by his nannies imply that Guido is hopelessly trapped in the search for his childhood, hoping to rediscover and perhaps even recreate the problematic (and rather creepy) levels of affection, nourishment, and protection his mother-imagos gave him. This same longing for maternal love will appear later, in the film's harem sequence.

The boy's mother is his first love and thus his first anima projection. Regardless of the psychological state in which a grown man finds himself, he will always see aspects of his anima in actual women: "Though the effects of anima...can be made conscious, they themselves are factors transcending consciousness and beyond the reach of perception and volition. Hence they remain autonomous despite the integration of their contents, and for this reason they should be borne constantly in mind."⁴ The constant and unintentional "integration" of the anima's "contents" in relation to women is known as projection. When a man becomes attracted to a woman, he sees the unconscious feminine traits of his anima in her and projects them unknowingly onto her. Anima projections "...appear spontaneously in dreams... and many more can be made conscious through active imagination."⁵

Jung distinguished four stages of the anima, personified as Eve, Helen, Mary, and Sophia.⁶ In the first stage, Eve, the boy's anima is his mother. Created out of necessity for a close connection to a woman, this stage of anima development is characterized by the mother-imago as the faithful provider of nourishment, security, and love. A man in this anima stage cannot function well without a vital connection to a woman, and he is prone to be controlled by it. The second anima stage, Helen, is personified by the historical figure Helen of Troy. She is the sexualized image of woman in the collective unconscious. In terms of anima projections, Helen is all sexually attractive women wrapped into one. A man in this anima stage seeks out sexual encounters on a regular basis. The problem with this stage, however, is that no woman can live up to the expectations that go with the unconscious, ideal image of Helen. Hence, relationships tend to be short-lived. Helen is characterized by an inability to commit to one woman. Guido is stuck here, exemplified by his acts of adultery with Carla and his apathy toward his wife. The third stage, Mary, manifests in religious feelings, a capacity for genuine friendships with women, and lasting relationships with people of any gender. At the end of *8 1/2*, Guido transitions from Helen to Mary through the killing of his persona. By imagining Guido shooting himself in the head and relinquishing his film project, Fellini shows that his on-screen alter ego no longer identifies with its arrogant, pedantic, womanizing persona. Jung writes:

Identity with the persona automatically leads to an unconscious identity with the anima because, when the ego is not differentiated from the persona, it can have no conscious relation to the unconscious processes. Consequently, it is these processes; it is identical with them. Anyone who is himself his outward role will infallibly succumb to the inner processes; he will either frustrate his outward role by absolute inner necessity or else

4 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt. 2), par. 40

5 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt. 2), par. 39

6 C. G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Transference," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 16, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Gerhard Adler et. al., Princeton University Press, 1966. Par. 361

reduce it to absurdity, by a process of *enantiodromia*. He can no longer keep to his individual way, and his life runs into one deadlock after another.⁷

The constant running into deadlocks is a key aspect of Guido's character. He identifies as a kind of caricature of himself—the famously self-absorbed, tormented artist. The moment he swallows his pride and shoots his persona is the moment he frees himself from the grip of his anima, allowing for the transition from the Helen stage to the Mary stage.

In the fourth and final stage, Sophia, the man's anima functions as a guide to his inner life. Sophia facilitates the search for meaning. It is the source of inspiration (or the muse) for the artist. It could be interpreted that Guido also reaches this stage at the end of the film, though there is little proof of this outside the fact that he is a struggling artist suffering from a creative block, which is then rectified (through the destruction of his persona and his willingness to let go of the lost cause that is his film), allowing him to start again with newfound inspiration. This could indicate the muse function of Sophia. The film leaves us uncertain, however, about whether he really is a changed man. And the process of reconciliation implied when he apologizes to his Luisa imago leaves a seed of doubt, which doesn't fit in with the seemingly enlightened Sophia anima stage. So, for the purposes of this analysis, the film's representation of the fourth stage is less relevant.

Ideally, a man will transition from stage to stage as he grows older. When internal dissonance and adaptation to outside circumstances demand it, the psyche will move to the next stage. As much as the psyche promotes growth and development, however, it is also stubborn, refusing to give up what it knows. In Guido's case, his psyche's reluctance to change is the result of his identification with his persona, which is shown by his inability to move beyond the second stage of anima development (indicated by his immaturity, narcissism, and womanizing as well as his obsession with his mother-imago). To summarize his psychological state, then, he is simultaneously stuck in the Eve and Helen stages of anima development. A psychological crisis is common in men past mid-life in need of transition. It is much easier for younger people to lose their animas in the anima transition process because it involves the development of boys into men (a natural occurrence). However, "after the middle of life..., permanent loss of the anima means a diminution of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness. The result, as a rule, is premature rigidity, crustiness, stereotypy, fanatical one-sidedness, obstinacy, pedantry, or else resignation, weariness, sloppiness, irresponsibility, and finally, a childish *ramollissement* with a tendency to alcohol."⁸ Guido, nearing his mid-life at the age of forty-three, exemplifies just about every one of these descriptors. Because of the psyche's stubbornness, depending on what is required to satisfy his current dominant conscious attitude, a man will be in contact with many imagos at any given time. A man may find it difficult, then, to determine which imagos dominate his relations with women as well as when

7 C. G. Jung, "Definitions," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 6, trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Gerhard Adler et. al., Princeton University Press, 1971. Par. 807. "Enantiodromia" is defined as "the process by which something becomes its opposite," in *OED Online*, March 2022, Oxford University Press.

8 C. G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 9 (Part 1), trans. R. F. C. Hull, ed. Gerhard Adler et. al., Princeton University Press, 1981. Par. 147. An apparently obsolete pathology term, "ramollissement" is defined as a "softening," especially of the brain, in *OED Online*, March 2022, Oxford University Press.

it's time to transition to the next anima stage. Yet such questions can be actively explored through dreams and the imagination. The "contents of the anima and animus [...] appear spontaneously in dreams and so on, and many more can be made conscious through active imagination."⁹ Fellini includes sequences in which Guido slips into fantasy in what viewers familiar with Jung may interpret as an attempt to bring the contents of the anima to consciousness.

The harem sequence in *8 1/2* is one such fantasy. In the dream sequence, Guido's anima projections adore him at first, then come to resent him for the demands he makes of them. They are to coddle and baby him as the collective Eve imago even as they act as his sex servants, as the collective Helen imago, despite the fact that he doesn't return their affection. They're slaves to his persona and mother-imago obsession, and his unwillingness to let them revolt shows that his persona is preventing the transition to the Mary anima stage. Yet their attempt at revolt, albeit unsuccessful in this sequence, is in itself indicative of the psychological crisis that will prompt the suicide of Guido's persona at the end of the film and his subsequent resurrection into the Mary anima stage.

The following analysis of the harem daydream sequence will deconstruct its Jungian influence—its allusions to Guido's obsession with his mother-imago in direct comparison to the wine bath flashback sequence, his stagnant persistence in the Helen anima stage, and the manner in which he projects his anima.

The Harem

Guido slips into the harem daydream after his wife, Luisa, and friend, Rosella, scold him for his adulterous affair with Carla. Luisa seems more hurt by than angry at Guido's childish ignorance and blame-shifting excuses. She only wants him to tell the truth about Carla, but the pride dictated



by his persona—which he identifies with and which forms the foundation of his inability to love—is so strong and stubborn that there's no point in arguing with him. Luisa's frustration with Guido and his inability to acknowledge it prompts his slide into a daydreaming fantasy in which he imagines all his imagos living in harmony with him as if he's a sultan with a harem. The

fantasy is, at first, an escape for Guido from a deeply uncomfortable conversation with his wife, but the pleasant escape into fantasy turns menacing with the attempted uprising by his imagos, revealing the fractured state of his anima. Though he manages to literally whip them back into subservience, it's clear the daydream presages an imminent course correction for him on the path toward an eventual transition to the Mary anima stage.

9 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt. 2), par. 39



Guido boyishly crosses his fingers and melts into his chair as he watches Carla, shot in wide, perform operatic vocals in her chair. This is the first wide shot following the tightly framed argument sequence preceding it. Tight framing is a motif in *8 1/2*, representative of Guido's mental state. He feels trapped by his anima, his relationship with the women in his life, and the creative block piling on more responsibilities—hence the restrictive framing. The transition from tight closeups to wide shots brings a tonal shift, establishing that the film has entered a dream sequence. The shot of Carla singing in her chair is a callback to the shot of Saraghina singing on the beach during his sexual awakening. It's a visual motif drawing a connection between Saraghina and Carla as sexual imagos representative of his Helen anima state. Early in the film, Guido and Carla attempt a sex roleplay during which he does her eyebrow makeup in the same style as Saraghina's, showing that he projects Saraghina's imago onto Carla. And because Guido is also obsessed with his mother-imago, he projects it onto his wife, whose imago in his daydream is by no means sexualized. She is a mother figure to him in the same way his childhood nannies were, and his Luisa imago fulfills her exact role as the adoring homemaker who keeps out of the way. His harem consists only of women imagos, each fulfilling their roles as Eve and Helen, with Luisa as his mother-imago.

A dissolve transition brings back the familiar fireplace from Guido's childhood home. His mother-imago, Luisa, takes the stew off the fireplace, dressed in a matronly headcloth and gown, then alerts the others to Guido's return. Her outfit visually conveys Luisa's role as the subservient mother-imago and a reflection of his nannies from the wine bath flashback sequence. Guido walks in, handing out gifts to his attractive imagos. Luisa breaks the fourth wall to say, "He's a darling!" At this point, it's clear that the intoxicating amount of coddling shown in the wine bath sequence sets the groundwork for his harem. He expects all his imagos to be his nannies. His limited view of women, resulting from his Helen complex, is also shown in this sequence through his coercive use of gifts to get what he wants. It's an odd and uncomfortable depiction of the anima of a man who never grew past the Eve or Helen anima stages. By returning to his childhood home in his dreams, Guido is regressing, "seeking his childhood and his mother" to flee from the "cold, cruel world which denies him understanding."



He never learned to be independent. This creepy man-child fantasy becomes more depressing when one of his imagos says, “We’ll draw your bath right away.” It’s even more depressing considering that, most likely, the only woman he projects his anima on that he even remotely knows is Luisa. Except for her, the imagos of his harem dress and act how they did in the short and meaningless interactions he had with them in the real world. They’re only here because he thought they were hot and imagined them acting out his sick mommy kink. For example, he asks, “Who’s that little



black girl?” The imago behind him tells him that she’s from Hawaii. The “little black girl” performs a sexy dance to Saraghina’s dance music (making her a Helen imago) to jog his memory, which convinces him that she belongs. He even thanks Luisa for adding her to the harem. Because Luisa is his mother-imago, I interpret his gratitude to her for this otherwise disgusting (and racist) objectification as the result of his obsession with his mother-imago. The

mother, a boy’s first love, sets the standard for every other girl onto whom he projects his anima, so it seems understandable (if objectionable) that Luisa would be the one responsible for the addition of more imagos to his Eve/Helen anima harem.

Wrapped in a towel like a little boy, Guido walks up the bath steps and notices Rosella, who isn’t an Eve or Helen imago. In dreams, the anima can manifest into many different archetypes, from mother, sister, and friends, to seductresses and spiritual guides: “The anima is not the soul in the dogmatic sense, not an *anima rationalis*, which is a philosophical conception, but a natural archetype that satisfactorily sums up all the statements of the unconscious, of the primitive mind, of the history of language and religion. [...] It is always the *a priori* element in [a man’s] moods, reactions, impulses, and whatever else is spontaneous in psychic life.”¹⁰ Whatever the unconscious dictates (based on its previous experience of desire in relation to social contexts) will manifest as an archetype. Given that Guido is dealing with a various repressed, conflicting feelings emerging from his underdeveloped anima, the presence of Rosella fills the spiritual guide archetype. This is demonstrated when she tells Guido that she is “Playing Pinocchio’s talking cricket.” The talking cricket from *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is the guiding spirit who attempts to help Pinocchio through his self-destructive tendencies. Guido asks why she’s here laughing at him, and she responds the way a work consultant would: “I just want to see how you manage.”



10 Jung, *Collected Works* Vol. 9 (pt.1), par. 57.



As Guido is lowered into the bath, Rosella asks, "...aren't you a little afraid?" Guido doesn't see a reason to be, despite the obvious red flags in the way he neglects his anima harem (expecting them to be Eve and Helen, nannies and sex objects), refusing to acknowledge how they may feel, and ignorantly performing his persona as the king of their world. Instead of trying to understand the state of his anima and accepting the need for change, he uses it to escape from the world he doesn't understand so that he can relive his childhood. Yep... nothing wrong with that.



Rosella sticks around under Guido's condition that she obeys the "rule." After Guido is dried off and paraded around, one of his oldest imagos, Jacqueline the line dancer,

emerges, pleading to stay downstairs with the younger imagos. Here, the rule is revealed: "whoever exceeds the age limit shall go to the upper floor, where she shall be treated equally well and bask in her memories." Through the course of 8 1/2, Guido is depicted as afraid of his encroaching old age. This is apparent through his general disregard for the feelings of elderly characters and the stress his health condition causes him. In the opening dream sequence of the film, he imagines himself as an old man with a young woman (who is not his wife). He imagines himself having sex throughout the remainder of his life, indicating that he never expects to leave the Helen anima stage, which should be short-lived because no woman can live up to the expectations of men in this stage. Since he is a world-famous auteur filmmaker, however, circumstances have granted him the ability to indulge in sexual liberties. He identifies with the persona of the playboy artist, prolonging his Helen anima stage to mid-life. (Women willing to indulge his excesses are apparently readily available.) Most men grow out of the Helen anima stage, but Guido grows into it past middle life. Fellini encourages us to see Guido as an aging lothario in bad health whose sexual fantasies and regressions are increasingly inane. He is desperately in need of anima transition. Because he is so stuck in his ways, however, and past middle life, the act of transition is manifested through a psychological crisis. In the harem sequence, that crisis is the rebellion of his imagos against his tyrannical rule.



Despite his increasing age, he still expects attractive women to be young, which his imagos understandably resent, given the irony of the rule. As “Flight of the Valkyries” plays in the background, the imagos rise up and actively defy him. Because his psyche is stubborn and unwilling to change, however, Guido equips himself with a whip and lashes them all into submission. During this, the Luisa imago tells Rosella that he does this every night. If he needs to suppress the revolt of his imagos on a nightly basis, it’s clear that his escapist and infantile fantasies are failing him. Without them, he’s bound to burn himself out trying to achieve a level of comfort that is no longer possible without change. The harem sequence foreshadows Guido’s need for transition to the Sophia anima stage, demonstrating the external and internal circumstances that demand it. The only way out of this fantasy-turned-nightmare is to change.

The Treasure

The major conflict in *8 1/2* is Guido’s creative block, which itself is the result of failing mental health owing to a poorly developed anima. As the wine bath flashback sequence demonstrates, Guido was raised in an intoxicatingly overprotective and nourishing homelife, coddled and favored by his mother figures—his nannies. The wine bath memory, it seems, was the highlight of his life and his purest experience of luxury. This resulted in his obsession with his mother-imago, catapulting him into a lifelong search for his childhood and his mother—a regressive way of life that shields him from the real world and the important learning experiences that could’ve helped him to become an independent, functioning adult. Because of his obsession with his mother-imago, he never grew out of the first stage of anima development, Eve, leaving



him unable to function without the protective and nourishing presence of a woman. Guido is also trapped in the second stage of anima development, Helen, which is characterized by a constantly active sex life and an inability to commit to one woman. This is the result of his circumstances as an auteur filmmaker, leading him to identify with the self-absorbed playboy persona it granted him, extending to midlife the anima stage that should not have lasted past his early twenties. Mired in a dual anima that has rendered him unable to function without the loving presence of a woman and unable to commit to one, Guido creates a fractured psyche where he is, as suggested multiple times in the film, unable to love. With his encroaching age and health issues, Guido is unable to satisfy his Helen complex. And because his dual anima has led to the destruction of most of his relationships, his anima is in desperate need of transition. The harem sequence showcases the state of his anima as well as the psychological crisis (exemplified by the defiance of his imagos) that he deals with on a nightly basis as someone whose psyche is stubborn and unwilling to change. At the end of the film, he shoots his persona in the head and resurrects into the third stage of anima development, Mary, resulting in a capacity for genuine friendship with men and

women. The treasure is love, which itself encompasses several issues with Guido's character: his overattachment to and objectification of women, his fear of growing old, his failing relationships, his stubborn pride, and the starting point of the film's plot, his creative block. "E

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