

***JULIET OF THE SPIRITS (Giulietta degli spiriti)*. Dir. Federico Fellini.
Italy, Rizzoli Film, 1965. 137 min. Color. DVD, Criterion, 2002.**

After fifteen years of marriage, Juliet seems to have it all: a beautiful villa in the Roman suburb of Fregene, the latest designer fashions, a talented housekeeper, interesting neighbors, and good friends to help celebrate her wedding anniversary – if only her handsome, wealthy husband would remember. The woman who seems to have it all is about to have a midlife crisis.

It's the kind of crisis that many successful couples experienced, especially in the culturally turbulent 1960s, and one that director Federico Fellini (1920-1993) went through with his wife of fifty years, the actress Giulietta Masina (1912-1994). After twenty years of marriage, and a series of critical successes that earned him the first Academy Award ever given for Best Foreign Language Film, for *La Strada (The Road, 1954)*, where Giulietta played the memorable waif Gelsamina, Fellini had reached the peak of his career with *La Dolce Vita (The Sweet Life, 1960)* and *8½ (1963)*. From his beginnings as a screenwriter at Rome's Cinecittà studios, where he had his first success with the post-war classic *Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta, 1945)* directed by his mentor Roberto Rossellini (1906-1977), he had become the acknowledged *maestro* on the film set who would later lord it over everyone in *Intervista (Interview, 1987)*. The famous opening of *8½*, where he rises above Rome's rush-hour traffic like an angel in an overcoat, represents nothing less than the apotheosis of the film director.

The Fellinis' domestic arrangements at the time were not unlike those of Juliet and her voluptuous neighbor Suzy. Their suburban villa had two distinct living areas: a tidy one for Giulietta and a raucous one for Federico and his associates, many of them gay or bisexual. (The Fellinis had no children.) She had not performed in a major role since Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria [Notti di Cabiria, 1957]*, where she played the title character, and was happy in the role of his chief confidante off the film set. Meanwhile, he was experimenting wildly. He had affairs, including a longstanding liaison with the actress Sandra Milo (b. 1935), who plays Suzy in this film. He tried drugs, including LSD, to which he attributed some of the film's phantasmagoric images. His personal vision seemed dangerously misogynistic at times, notably in the woman-herding scene from *8½*. Nevertheless, he wanted to make a film for and about Giulietta.



Sandra Milo and Giulietta Masina

At the most basic level, *Juliet of the Spirits* asks how a devoted housewife can remake her life if her husband leaves her. The answer, while generous, seems to be as much a male fantasy as *8½*. Off the set, Fellini's wife insisted that women are different than men, that they

cannot simply pick up the pieces after a divorce and go on to the next stage in their lives. Fellini wanted it to be otherwise, and his filmscript ends with the note of curious calm in a woman whose husband has just left her: *Giulietta sorride, liberata, tranquilla* (Juliet smiles, freed and tranquil). The critics have sided with Signora Fellini, for the most part. (Roger Ebert wrote that she looks strangely sad in the film.) Fellini never changed his mind about the role, but he told his American biographer Charlotte Chandler that he was grateful to Giulietta for never saying, I told you so (*I Fellini*, 1995).

One of the story lines that Fellini considered for the film was a biography of a psychic. Both he and his wife believed that spirits exist and intervene in human lives. (He told Chandler his own guardian angel was always a woman, and usually shook a finger at him.) In response to the growing indifference of her husband Giorgio, played by Mario Pisu (1910-1976), Juliet consults a psychic and listens to the fantasies of her neighbor Suzy. As the story moves from a forgotten anniversary to a garden party that marks the end of her marriage, she is haunted increasingly by visions. They stop only when she accepts her “liberated” state.

Wanting to capture the visions as brilliantly as possible, Fellini worked with the ensemble of designers, composers, and cinematographers who had produced the fantasia of *8½*. Visually, at least, *Juliet of the Spirits* is absolutely stunning. Most of the film’s nominations for awards turned out to be for set and costumes; however, it won the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Film of 1966.



Mario Pisu and Caterina Boratto,
as Juliet’s husband and mother,
with Giulietta Masina (right)

As a screenwriter for Rossellini, Fellini had learned about censorship at first hand. When he wrote a parody of the nativity story for *L’Amore (The Ways of Love)*, 1948, religious authorities went to court on both sides of the Atlantic. The film was banned in New York after the Catholic League of Decency filed a complaint, but the American distributor took the case all the way to the Supreme Court. The Court’s opinion (in *Burstyn v. Wilson*, 1952) reversed a 1915 ruling that film was a strictly commercial product, not protected by the First Amendment. It also disallowed “sacrilege” as a suitable criterion for film censorship. From this experience, Fellini reached his famous conclusion that censorship is nothing but “advertising paid by the government.” Perhaps because no government “advertised” *Juliet of the Spirits* – or because Federico didn’t listed to Giulietta – the film was a commercial failure.

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