

loans, especially short-term loans to meet current expenses. Anticipations of the large tax revenues that would materialize to meet those loans were entirely unwarranted, however. Naturally, considerations of interest earnings, federal tax exemptions, underwriting fees, and, to give them the benefit of the doubt, a buoyant optimism about things eventually being curable by governmental expenditure blurred the bankers' customary discretion. Toward the end, in 1974-75, when more than half of New York City's capital budget was going for current expenses and 27 percent of the nation's short-term borrowing was done by the City of New York, most of the banks started what the SEC called "a policy of trying to reduce or eliminate their holdings in city notes," which some labeled "dumping."

The multiple horror stories of mismanagement, overgenerous labor contracts, featherbedding, and the crippling of an efficient personnel policy through civil service, could occur only because of the complicity of politicians and bankers in uninhibited deficit financing. Even the New York Conservative party, ostensibly a watchdog of the public purse, was in on the act, with its endorsement of expanded pensions for police and firemen, who were part of their electoral constituency. Alas, how ironic that the temporary salvation of the city government, that is, the purchasing of the bonds issued by a state-created emergency financial control board, came about in large part with help from the enormous, municipal employees' pension funds—their initial growth had helped bring on the governmental deficit.

Remarkably, Auletta's book pays hardly any attention to the U.S. senators from New York, except for Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whose inconsistencies are glaringly displayed. It seems peculiar to read a study of New York politics of the 1960s and the 1970s, especially fiscal politics, that includes only a single reference to Robert F. Kennedy and no mention at all of Jacob Javits, scarcely an innocent in matters of government finance. Lastly, since Auletta admits at the end of the book that he is increasingly inclined to support a declaration of bankruptcy by the city rather than sleight-of-hand postponements of the inevitable, one would think he would note former Senator James Buckley's suggestion along those lines back in 1976, a recognition of realities that contributed in no small part to Buckley's defeat.

F I L M

ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL,
directed by Federico Fellini.

WOYZECK, directed by Werner Herzog.

Cast a cold eye

STEPHEN HARVEY

AMONG FEDERICO FELLINI'S signature traits, a sunny outlook on the Human Condition has long been conspicuously absent. Whether the frame of reference is pre-Christian Rome, the Age of Casanova, or the waning twentieth century, Fellini's vision of our moral landscape grows ever dimmer. (Partially absolved from censure, however, has been the Mussolini epoch; despite fascism and its attendant unpleasantness, in retrospect it has

STEPHEN HARVEY is *INQUIRY's* film reviewer. He is coordinator of the film study program, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

its charm as the backdrop for the nurturing of the Artist as a Young Man.) Frequently he's camouflaged his dourness by daubing it with lurid tints from his psychic paintbox: Fellini's *Dreamland* may have been forbidding, but monochromatic it wasn't, and the seductiveness of its presiding spirits, sex and religion, managed to take some of the edge off the pervasive chill.

His new and glacial *Orchestra Rehearsal*, however, stands apart from all of his past work. Uniquely, for him, it was generated by his feelings about a specific topical event, the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, which had implications too strong, apparently, for fantasy. This is gallows humor at its bleakest, and is also astonishing in its self-contained austerity, at least in light of what we've come to expect from Fellini. Taking place almost exclusively within one confining set dressed and photographed in neutral colors, *Orchestra Rehearsal* consists of one single-minded metaphor extended over a scant seventy minutes: musical dissonance as irreparable political disharmony.

Though its topical content remains on the implicit level throughout, the Italian press had no trouble parsing the symbolism. Interpreting it proved to be something else entirely. At home, *Orches-*



tra Rehearsal turned out to be a kind of celluloid Rorschach test, and its critics often revealed more about their own political allegiances than about their personal insights into Fellini's intentions. Ironically, this film about social disintegration managed momentarily to unite a wide spectrum of Italian political adversaries—if only to condemn it. Since Fellini gives no quarter to any faction whatsoever, reactionaries, radicals, and a multitude in between greeted *Orchestra Rehearsal* with horror and disdain.

Fellini's self-detonating world in microcosm is located (where else?) on deconsecrated religious grounds now used for concerts; a decrepit caretaker wanders in the tenebrous light of the cloister making ready for the musicians' run-through while babbling nostalgically of the days when the audience was composed of glamorous aristocrats and musicians knew their place. The instrumentalists begin to trickle in, a broad array of differing types and temperaments; feckless individualists all, they are quite as engrossed in their personal avocations—flirting, boozing, bickering, and speechifying—as they are in their particular and collective musical endeavors. A TV crew is darting about the hall conducting fatuous spot interviews with members of the troupe, while a representative of the musician's union stands by, alternately giving dubious succor to his comrades and rushing to the phone to further his personal ambitions.

The assembly is momentarily becalmed by the arrival of the maestro, a deceptively frail, weary-eyed martinet among anarchists who commences their common labors by deriding the musicianship of his ensemble in German-accented Italian. The natives grow restive and a coffee break is called, during which the conductor, played by Baldwin Bass, retreats to his dressing room to discourse on his exalted calling with the quiet assurance of a demigod. He returns to the podium to find that the electricity has been sabotaged, while ominous rumblings from without are now reaching crescendo. The orchestra has become a seething mob, spouting inflammatory doggerel, scrawling graffiti in excrement on the walls, fornicating, and vandalizing. Defying the conductor's "fascist" rule, they replace him with a giant metronome, which they then demolish while hoarsely proclaiming their right to self-rule. An outsized wrecking ball reduces the hall to rubble and kills one of the musicians; passion suddenly spent, the rebels quietly sub-



mit to the conciliatory but firm hand of the conductor. Yet this new-found harmony contains a discordant note. *Orchestra Rehearsal* ends with a black screen and the conductor's voice hectoring the cowed gathering in fervent Teutonic cadences.

FELLINI'S IDEOLOGICAL atheism is ever apparent—no solutions suffice, no segments of this small universe elude his disparaging gaze. The media are frivolous parasites, and the labor spokesmen spout empty proletarian cant masking corrupt self-interest. As for the masses, as individuals they may be innocuous and even ingratiating, but united they constitute a senseless horde transported to madness by a brief whiff of self-rule. Consistently enough, even Fellini's surrogate artist figure comes in for his full share of culpability. In the past, his geniuses-in-residence were, to be sure, egocentric and tyrannical, but finally they were redeemed by their imaginative powers. Here talent and charisma are merely the tools for the exercise of force—art is no longer the last refuge in a chaotic world, as it was at the conclusion of *8½*.

At its Italian premiere, many of those offended by Fellini's refusal to render homage to the struggles of the People justified their displeasure by choosing to interpret the film as a call for authoritarian rule. Given Fellini's sinister conclusion, such a misreading is an act of willful myopia if there ever was one. Not that Fellini's unrelieved dirge doesn't

raise a few unresolved questions. For one thing, there's an inherent self-contradiction in making a film with the message Fellini seems to want to impart—after all, it's visible proof that coherent art can be forged out of the apprehended sense of chaos surrounding its baffled creator. Besides, I suspect there's a kind of masochistic comfort in the decision that Armageddon is nigh and nothing can stop it. The notion that you may as well submit to the inevitable derives more from a taste for facile cynicism than from a profound pessimism. In a way, a vision of doomsday is the easiest out of all; the perennial crisis mentality reigning in Italy, as elsewhere, is a wry object lesson that although strife may be pervasive, the sky resolutely refuses to fall and make an end to it. Fellini may be crying wolf again, but his voice is more eloquent than ever.

ON THE ADDITIONAL evidence of the current *Woyzeck* (as if it were needed), the young German director Werner Herzog shows himself to be another alienated artist, although precisely from what is hard to determine. There's a tendency among critics in this country to grant a period of grace to those rising cinematic lions from abroad who've made splashy debuts, however arid and unsatisfying their subsequent efforts might be—perhaps out of fear that the critical enthusiasm might have been misplaced from the beginning. Dazzled by the likes of *Aguirre*, *Wrath of God* and *Stroszek*,

many reviewers struggled valiantly to make sense out of *Heart of Glass*; its main distinction was that Herzog claimed to have placed his entire cast under hypnosis, a dehumanizing *coup de théâtre* that threatened to zombify the spectator as well. Now *Woyzeck* has been greeted in some quarters with a sheaf of extravagant claims having no discernible relation to what one sees on screen.

Woyzeck is the most glaring recent example I can recall of an utter paucity of imagination masquerading as sublime aesthetic rigor. In adapting Georg Büchner's celebrated play for the screen, Herzog has hewed to the letter while completely discarding the spirit. Uncompleted at Büchner's death, it has been pedantically mounted here as a series of discrete fragmentary vignettes. The camera is usually rooted, motionless, at a considerable distance from the characters, who are arrayed in one-dimensional tableaux. If this is intended in ersatz-Brechtian fashion to prevent the audience from involving itself with these figures on an emotional level, it succeeds brilliantly—but to what end? The plight of *Woyzeck*, a middle-aged *Untermensch* hounded by his army supe-

rior, exploited in guinea-pig fashion by a local scientist, and cuckolded by his mistress (played by Eva Mattes), hardly serves here as a symbol of the oppressed proletariat because as Klaus Kinski plays him, the character is too patently eccentric a patsy to represent anything but his cringing, posturing self. Nor does the film work as a dispassionate case history of a soul's descent into madness; from the start Kinski is such an emaciated apparition of eye-popping and teeth-baring that there are no depths left to plumb.

Then there's Herzog's alleged felicity of style, which to my eye consisted primarily of flooding every interior with a tidal wave of white light, night or day, whether the source of illumination is ostensibly the afternoon sun or a brace of tallow candles. This isn't expressive—as any film undergraduate can tell you, it's merely the cheapest and most expedient way to shoot a scene. Herzog's culminating innovation is to render *Woyzeck's* act of revenge on his errant lover in slow motion! Apart from the fact that this is about as novel as the freeze-frame fadeout, it's redundant since the previous hour's footage seemed to have

been taken under water.

Herzog has never exactly evinced much compassion for the travails of his characters, and here his habitual disengagement and the apparent desire to resist tampering with a classic proved a fatal combination. *Woyzeck* the film may be a sterile travesty of its own source material, but Herzog's career is itself starting to resemble an exemplary reworking of that other immortal literary classic, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. □

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