

Article

Catwalk Catholicism: On the Ongoing Significance of Federico Fellini's Ecclesiastical Fashion Show

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Abstract: In *Fellini-Roma* (1972), the film director Federico Fellini includes a sequence about an imaginary ecclesiastical fashion show, a display of ever more outlandish clerical clothing designs. Fellini brought together various elements that, in conventional cultural coding, do not seem to fit together: secular fashion design and catwalks, and Catholic practice and ceremonial. The sequence juxtaposes and intermingles these apparent incompatibles. Surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the nature and significance of this sequence. Yet it is complex, being simultaneously satirical and empathetic, as well as camp and carnivalesque. The paper reaches back in time, reviewing the history of Catholic vestments, to show that the sequence also dramatizes the fact that sartorial fashion and Church garb have overlapped and informed each other historically. The appeal of the sequence for various types of audience has been enhanced in the internet age, and the paper considers how it has become an increasingly ubiquitous reference-point for the fashion industry, bloggers, and cultural critics, especially when the latter want to thematize controversies about male homosexuality in the Church today. Fellini's presentation of catwalk Catholicism is both a rich object of scholarship, and a multivalent vehicle used by actors for various contemporary purposes.

Keywords: fashion; dress; vestments; Catholicism; Catholic; papacy; Fellini; film

1. Introduction

In 1972 the celebrated director Federico Fellini released his film *Fellini-Roma* [also known as *Fellini's Roma*], a collage of vivid and sometimes bizarre sequences depicting various aspects of the city he had lived in all his adult life. The film primarily encompassed the contemporary period and the late 1930s—when Fellini first arrived in the metropolis—as well as gesturing towards the ancient and papal history of the city. The film contains one of 'the great Fellinian set-pieces' (Baxter 1994, p. 274). This is a sequence about an imaginary ecclesiastical fashion show, a display of ever more outlandish clothing designs worn by priests, nuns, archbishops, cardinals and finally the pope himself.

In this sequence, Fellini brought together various elements that, in conventional cultural coding, do not seem to fit together at all: fashion design and catwalks on the one hand, and Catholicism, the Catholic hierarchy and the papacy on the other. The sequence gleefully conjoins the apparently opposed poles of the sacred and secular, the holy and profane. It is a seemingly bold iconoclastic gesture on the behalf of a filmmaker already known for his provocative and sometimes mocking presentation of the institutions of the papacy and Italian Catholicism in his earlier films. Yet his juxtaposing and combining of Catholicism and sartorial fashion, while visually striking, was also not particularly surprising. In postwar Italy, two of the most important institutions were the Catholic Church and the fashion industry (Ginsborg 1990; Paulicelli 2016). Bringing them together was a logical move for an Italian filmmaker of the period. This was especially so for Fellini, who was fascinated by,

and liked to present in his films, lavish spectacles, whether connected to the theatre, circus, fashion catwalk or Catholic ceremony.

With the honourable exception of [Paulicelli \(2010, 2013, 2016\)](#), whose work we build on here, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the nature and significance of Fellini's ecclesiastical fashion show. Moreover, almost no academic analysis exists of the rich and peculiar afterlife the sequence has today. In the age of YouTube and blogging, the sequence has become a much commented upon and often admired Internet meme, as well as a resource for cultural critiques of the Church, as will be seen below. Both older (e.g., [Foreman 1980](#)) and more recent (e.g., [Trentin 2016](#) scholarship dealing with Fellini and *Fellini-Roma*) tends to ignore or underplay the fashion show sequence. This is a pity, as the more one thinks through the sequence—in terms of what factors underpin it, what it conveys, and how different people have subsequently made sense and use of it—the more fascinating, if not profound, it becomes. Considered appreciation of the sequence can facilitate further understanding of Fellini, his artistry, and the Italian context from which they sprang, and can also illustrate much broader issues to do with sartorial fashion and Christianity, clothing and Catholicism.

We will argue that the sequence is more than just a simple exercise in satire or iconoclasm. This is so at the level both of Fellini's intentions, insofar as they can be reconstructed, and of the broader forms of significance that the sequence may have. Fellini, wittingly or not, reactivates long-standing critique of 'luxury' in the Church, especially regarding clerical garb, such criticisms historically coming from both outside and inside the Church itself. He does so with a certain sympathy that is irreducible to purely hostile satirical dispositions. We suggest that Susan Sontag's appreciation of the aesthetics of 'camp' helps with an understanding of what Fellini has conveyed in the sequence, as does a nuanced utilization of notions of 'carnavalesque'. More broadly, we will suggest that sartorial 'fashion' and 'Catholicism', as complex sets of phenomena, are seemingly strongly divided and opposed, but that the historical record we will allude to shows that things are not quite so simple, and that they have in fact overlapped and interpenetrated over time. Fellini's sequence, regardless of the explicit authorial intentions, colourfully illustrates and dramatizes this situation.

Throughout the paper, we attempt to depict the wider significance of the sequence, both in its contents and the later deployments of it by diverse actors, for the purposes of shedding some new light on the broader interface of fashion and (Catholic Christian) religion.¹ We begin by considering the location of the sequence within Fellini's oeuvre and wider aesthetics. We then set out the central features of the sequence. We proceed to place the depiction of clerical vestments in the sequence within the actual history of clothing in the Church. After that, we subject the sequence to a reading in terms of concepts of camp and carnivalesque. The final substantive section considers the various afterlives of the fashion show sequence, illustrating the diverse meanings attributed to it, and uses made of it, by different sorts of people today, including in the fashion industry and the world of cultural criticism.

¹ The paper takes an essayistic approach to the subject matter, rather than the form of a 'scientific' paper replete with detailed accounts of methodology and data collection. However, for readers curious about such matters, the idea behind the paper took shape when the authors were struck by the relatively large numbers of different uploads of the fashion show sequence that diverse people had posted on YouTube, and also by the fairly voluminous, and almost completely positive, comments that other posters had left after viewing a given version of the sequence on that site. A targeted keyword search for the terms *Fellini, fashion show, catwalk, Catholicism, Pope, Papacy* and similar words revealed a widespread discussion of the sequence across the Internet. Our interest in the potential contemporary sociological significance of the sequence thus piqued, we then took the following steps: discussions of the sequence in locations such as blogs and film review websites were collated; a close reading of the sequence was undertaken; Sontag's understanding of camp aesthetics, already known to the authors, came to mind as the viewing was done, and came to inform our interpretation of the sequence; then relevant literature on Fellini in general, and *Fellini-Roma* in particular, was collated and read; after that, a systematic literature search was done on the history of Catholic clerical clothing, in order to contextualise the sequence historically; finally, Martel's recently published book, widely publicised in early 2019, was scrutinised for reference to Fellini and the sequence—serendipitously, this yielded much more material than the authors had assumed.

2. The Style of Fellini

In a retrospective assessment of Fellini's career, [Adair \(1995, p. 152\)](#) noted that 'rarely, in the history of a medium reputed to be of collective, collaborative inspiration, has a series of films been so intimately, exclusively, identified with the man who directed them'. The term *Felliniesque* was in use by the early 1960s to describe the typical themes, tropes and visual strategies that Fellini honed and returned to time and again throughout his career ([Sbragia 2015](#)). The trajectory of his filmic career could be summarised as a movement 'from simplicity', in the early to mid-1950s, 'to complexity', in the late-1950s and early 1960s, 'to self-parody', from the mid-1960s to the end of his career in 1990 ([Stubbs 1993, p. 49](#)). The film we are concerned with is firmly located in the latter period, which many critics understand as the time of Fellini's greatest self-referentiality, if not self-indulgence, in filmmaking terms.

The trajectory of Fellini's career is nicely captured by [Monsiváis \(2009, p. 186\)](#), who highlights the importance of circuses, variety shows and theatrical spectacles in general throughout Fellini's oeuvre:

Fellini move[d] from the neorealism of his youth (*I Vitelloni* [1953], *La Strada* [1954], *Il Bidone* [1955]) to the riotous noise of a popular neobaroque nourished by the Hollywood extravaganza; he juxtaposes Catholic trappings with circus iconography to suggest the overwhelming insanity of urban culture. In *La Dolce Vita* [1960], *Satyricon* [1969], *Fellini's Roma* [1972], and *E La Nave Va* [1983], Fellini celebrates the eternal catwalk on which the world parades, a world that exhausts its resources as it is transfigured into a gigantic votive painting... In a circus of innumerable rings ordered according to the melancholy music of Nino Rota, a helicopter transports a cement statue of Christ, the garments of priests clamour to be displayed in a fashion show, and the terminus of a bacchanalian party is an appointment with a confessor at eight in the morning. Each sequence is a piece that signifies a whole society.

Fellini's own comments on his art should be taken with caution, as he was a self-admitted fabricator of fantasies and tall tales, including in interviews. But his assertion that 'a lie is always more interesting than the truth. Lies are the soul of showmanship and I adore shows . . . Fiction has a greater truth than everyday, obvious reality' certainly captures a great deal of what his cinema is about (cited at [Cameron 2015, p. 103](#)).

In such an aesthetic, it is no surprise that the visual elements are prominent, taking increasing precedence as time went on over nuances of character, the veracity of social backgrounds, and other elements of the neorealist movement that was dominant in Italian filmmaking when Fellini started directing in the early 1950s. The characteristic visual style of Fellini in the 1960s and 1970s was one of abundant and overflowing forms, textures and colours, 'highly charged with movements, contrasts . . . and . . . surprises' ([Stubbs 1993, p. 55](#)). *La Dolce Vita* was described by some contemporary critics as a 'gaudy and baroque spectacle' ([Sbragia 2015, pp. 665, 669](#)). The highly influential director, author and critic Pier Paolo [Pasolini \(1984, pp. 68–71\)](#) wrote that the film's 'decadent style' was typified by 'exaggerated imagery, unusual and morbid', involving the intermingling of wild caricatures with scenes of documentary reality, and was 'excessive, overcharged, lyrical, magical... grotesque, violent, visceral, distorting', adding up to a new form of 'baroque'.

Fellini's vision throughout the 1960s was ever more concentrated on visual and auditory excess. This was enacted through means such as constantly prowling camera movements and intrusive sound effects ([Stubbs 1993, p. 51](#)). A whole academic literature exists on how Fellini drew upon, and may be located within, different traditions of painting, including more grotesque, baroque and rococo styles ([Aldouby 2013](#)). One common viewpoint claims that 'Fellini is clearly in the school of Bruegel the Elder, which turns on caricature, exaggeration, and the amassing of figures. In Fellini's films, there appear giants, dwarfs, hunchbacks, large fleshy women, transvestites, and characters with large noses or hollow-sockets' ([Stubbs 1993, p. 56](#)). Fellini liked to populate his films with multitudes of nonprofessional actors (or, more accurately, models), chosen for their distinctive, unusual and striking faces and body shapes ([Burke 1989](#)). He particularly liked pairing very large and very small people and

objects together, to call the viewer's attention to deviations from the norm. This revelling in disjunction and incongruity recalls for some the work of Salvador Dalí (Stubbs 1993).

The strong emphasis on heightened visuals in Fellini's films, especially those after *La Dolce Vita*, in part derived from the director's earlier career as a cartoonist for Roman newspapers and magazines in the wartime and immediate postwar periods (Baxter 1994). People in Fellini films often resemble caricatures or parodies. The director's notebooks were crammed with the caricatures and portraits he incessantly drew. Fellini once rhetorically asked himself this question:

Why do I draw the characters of my films? Why do I sketch faces, noses, moustaches, ties and hand bags? ... These almost unconscious, involuntary doodlings ... the creation of puppet-like figures that stare back at me from every corner of the page ... the decrepit faces of cardinals, and candle flames and breasts, and bottoms, and countless other squiggles ... I wonder if all this graphic junk, rampant, inexhaustible, a psychiatrist's dream, is perhaps a kind of tracing, a thread, at the end of which I find myself on the first day of filming, under the glare of the set's lights' (Fellini 2004; publishers' translation).²

If caricatured and heightened faces and bodies were central to Fellini's art, so too were the clothes his characters were dressed in. In the early film *Lo Sceicco Bianco* (The White Sheik) from 1952, Fellini 'focuses on the nuances and meanings of dress in its emotional and social impact, relating it to the world of appearances, rituals, and religion' (Paulicelli 2013, p. 149). In *La Dolce Vita* (1960), the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg, playing a sex-bomb movie star, and therefore playing a parodic version of herself, in one sequence wears a dress made to look like a male priest's garb, a somewhat profane and mocking gesture towards the Church, but also an acknowledgement of that institution's centrality in the social life of Rome. The idea for this garment came from a famous dress, the 'pretino' (little priest), designed a few years earlier by the Fontana Sisters, well-known Roman couturiers, worn for publicity purposes by the visiting American film star Ava Gardner (Paulicelli 2013).

Stubbs (1993, p. 61) notes that 'the basic principle often at work in Fellini designs is that the characters, especially the women, will put on costumes that make them overflow the lines of their bodies. The women wear feather boas, oversized hats, enormous wigs, and ruffled dresses. Stage performers are plumed and feathered. And the males ... [often] wear capes' and other types of garment that by the later 20th century had become unusual. Likewise, the colours of the characters' clothes were carefully chosen by Fellini and his design team. In many of the colour films – that is, from *Giulietta degli Spiriti* (Juliet of the Spirits) (1965) onwards—Fellini 'follows the accepted notion that the cool colours (blue, green, and violet) produce moods of serenity and pleasantness if the colours are rendered in light hues and that the warm colours (red, yellow, and orange), if in dark hues, produce more intense moods. Pleasant memories and fantasies ... are [often] shot in a light blue light ... [while sexually-charged scenes are sometimes] done predominantly in costumes and decor of reds of various hues from scarlet to shocking pink but all influenced by the sombre juxtaposition of blacks' (Stubbs 1993, p. 61).

3. Fellini-Roma and the Ecclesiastical Fashion Show

Fellini-Roma (1972) is the middle-aged Fellini's depiction of his home city in the early 1970s. The title's foregrounding of the director's name gives a good idea of the film itself. It is above all about Fellini's highly personal vision of the city he had lived in for almost all his adult life. There were no star actors featured, except for very brief cameo appearances by the iconic performers Anna Magnani—widely understood to be a quintessentially Roman figure—and Fellini's long-time

² https://www.laterza.it/index.php?option=com_laterza&Itemid=100&task=schedalibro&isbn=9788842074540.

collaborator Marcello Mastroianni, who had appeared in two of Fellini's most famous films, *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963), playing Fellini's alter ego in the latter (Baxter 1994).

The film's narrator, which viewers would likely assume is Fellini, says towards the beginning that the film will be a 'mixture of strange, contradictory images' (Prats and Pieters 1980). The film is made up of very loosely connected set-pieces. As Trentin (2016, p. 231) puts it, 'the film's diegesis does not follow a linear pattern and keeps floating from sequences capturing 1970s Rome to sequences depicting the city in the 1930s or 1940s, that of the author's youth. The vaudeville theatre, the brothel, and smoky theatres typical of 1930s and 1940s Rome are counterposed against grotesque traffic jams, the geological perforation of the underground for the construction of metro tunnels, or the hippies' peaceful occupation of Piazza di Spagna' in the film's contemporary period.

Given its sprawling and episodic nature, the film 'encompasses history, culture, ethnicity, religion, art, movies, government, geography, and so on ad infinitum' (Burke 1989, p. 46). Like many other Italian film directors of the postwar period, Fellini emphasises how what 'was once the "Eternal City"—a palimpsest of classical and baroque buildings, of ancient ruins and monuments, and of narrow medieval streets—has been transformed into the clashing amalgamation of a degraded historical city with its ugly modern periphery' (Trentin 2016, p. 224; also Pugliese 2015).

The ecclesiastical fashion show is one of the most striking vignettes in the entire career of the director, whose *modus operandi* in the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by the presentation of self-contained sequences within the loose overall frameworks that make up the totality of specific films, ranging from *La Dolce Vita* in 1960 through to *La Città delle Donne* in 1980 (Stubbs 1993). It is perhaps not surprising that Fellini would have come up with the idea of devoting one segment of his film to a clerical fashion show. Priests, nuns and other Catholic clergy had long been one of his obsessions (Bachmann). By the late 1960s, Fellini was often talking admiringly of Catholicism's splendid religious choreography and its concomitant 'accessories—the most beautiful there can be: brocades, golds, silks, plumes, mitres, sparkling capes, barbaric precious stones; think of what Serge Diaghilev could have done as a director attached to the Vatican!' (cited at Baxter 1994, p. 274).

The fashion show is presented towards the end of *Fellini-Roma*. This makes it, for some viewers at least, the apotheosis of the film (Paulicelli 2016). The full sequence lasts around 15 minutes. But the first 6 minutes is taken up with presenting some select members of the audience, namely the elderly Roman princess who is the hostess of the event, and the sunglasses-wearing cardinal who is the guest of honour. Then there is a 9-minute sequence, where various members of the clergy parade in costume along a rectangular catwalk. These models range from more lowly priests and nuns, to higher functionaries like bishops, and then, at the climax of the show, to the pope himself. The show's visuals are accompanied by the 'sinister jigs' of Nino Rota, Fellini's regular composer (Sala 1969).

The German-born cineaste Gideon Bachmann's review of the film when it came out in 1972 vividly describes how the fashion show sequence plays out. For Bachmann (Bachmann, p. 37), the presentation of the show makes it wildly caricatured but 'almost believable' at the same time, such that 'the mixture of fantasy and reality . . . is so strong, that you are almost goaded into believing what you see'. What you see is this:

Fantastic and increasingly morbid religious costumes pass, like floats in an eerie parade, before an audience composed half of cardinals with their ladies and half of Potemkinian puppets. As the costumes become bigger and bigger, their carriers' protruding heads become smaller and smaller, until in the end Paco Rabanne-type chain-mirrors and neon-tube flashy popes' robes fly by in a wave of cold smoke, totally empty. Each model has its particular, secular characteristics: a model for the tropics demonstrated by a couple of embracing nuns in tropical helmets; a model for provincial towns with bicycles; finally, flaunted by a camp pair of monks on roller skates, a model called *Au Paradis Plus Vite!*. (Bachmann, p. 37).

As with a 'real' fashion show, the sequence begins in a relatively modest manner, presenting models clothed in ways that are slightly heightened versions of clerical dress, such as two priests with long

coats cut at the back, so that they do not get tangled up in the wheels of their bicycles, and two nuns whose white wimples are cut such that they look like the bobbing wings of elegant birds. The costumes of the roller-skating priests, who skate around the catwalk holding each other's hands, are not notably outlandish, even if their mode of transportation and their apparent physical intimacy are. Yet also like a bona fide fashion show, the sequence builds up as it goes along to encompass ever more outlandish and outrageous sartorial ideas: cardinals' hats become ever higher, their coats and fur stoles become ever more enlarged and heightened, some costumes are decorated with the kind of flashing lightbulbs one associates with funfairs, and the models themselves become increasingly peculiar-looking and grotesque. As [Paulicelli \(2013, p. 256\)](#) summarises the display:

... elements of theatricality, intricate dress, colour, and texture, typically associated with the elaborate rituals of the Catholic Church, are revisited with a surrealistic turn ... [The sequence] also conveys a haptic and optical experience of clothing and fabric replete with silk, laces, light hats and veils, exquisite attention to detail and workmanship, crystals, beading, glitter, and sequins that cover the bodies of the unusual models.

The parade of clothes and models becomes more outlandish and bizarre as it goes on. The costumes increasingly seem to overpower the models, with the faces of the latter becoming more indistinct, or models are replaced altogether with the ornate clothing moving past the audience on empty frames, seeming to convey the message that the dress is more important within the Church than any particular human being who might wear it and inhabit the role it signifies. 'The human models become machines, robotic forms by which clothes walk by themselves, empty of human bodies ... [and] costumes become independent forms' ([Paulicelli 2013, p. 256](#)).

A carnival float of skeletons appears, a particularly macabre form of memento mori. This then leads into the climax of the show, where the pope himself appears. He is represented as a bespectacled and totally motionless elderly man, sitting on the traditional papal throne, the *sedia gestatoria*, directly in front of a huge sunburst, which is composed of large moving elements representing the blazing light of God. The appearance of the pope at the end of the show replaces the traditional appearance of a bride figure, which would often signify the closing of real fashion shows at the time ([Paulicelli 2016](#)).

As the resplendent tableau of the pope appears, the clerical sections of the audience fall to their knees in awe, while the Roman nobility only minutely incline their heads in his direction. According to [Baxter \(1994, pp. 274–75\)](#), the representation of the pope here was intended by Fellini as a parody of Pope Pius XII, who reigned from 1939 to 1958. Born Eugenio Pacelli, he was himself of the Roman nobility, and Fellini indicates with the aristocrats' response to his appearance that they acknowledge him as their social equal, but not as their spiritual superior, unlike the massed and uniformly-clothed ranks of Church functionaries who also comprise the audience of the show, and who by contrast adulate their spiritual master.

Fellini designed many of the ecclesiastical garments himself. A director with a more bluntly satirical and unambiguously anticlerical purpose may have left the clothing wholly to the film's design crew. But in this case Fellini worked closely with Danilo Donati, his long-term set and costume designer, to plan the look of the garments. Donati in turn worked with the well-known Roman costumiers Farani and Tirelli to make the garments. While Fellini was the general 'creator of illusions', Donati was the more pragmatically-oriented 'magician' who conjured the designs into tangible existence ([Paulicelli 2016, p. 179](#)). For example, for many of the more spectacular costumes, fabrics were eschewed in favour of paper gift wrap; the lace worn by the parading cardinals was in fact manufactured from paper doilies, and the flashing lights on some prelates' costumes were scavenged from an old amusement park ([Paulicelli 2016, p. 179](#)).

4. Background: The History of Ecclesiastical Dress

Fellini and his collaborators in the late 1960s and early 1970s were working both within and against more than a millennium and a half of history of ecclesiastical dress. They variously drew upon,

represented, exaggerated and subverted that tradition. To understand their relationships to it, we now consider that history.

The dress of any religious functionary can be understood as ‘theology sartorialized’ (Keenan 1999, p. 390). As Keenan (1999, p. 390) puts it, ‘the “garments of divinity”’ have for centuries been ‘the exclusive occupational liveries of a priestly caste, and [they] are a key part of the ritual culture and visual display of specialists in supernatural communication’. Clerical clothing has ‘animating and constitutive power’, in that a cleric in a deep sense *becomes* an intermediary with the Divine, precisely by putting on what is widely held to be the appropriate garb (Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 1). Clerical dress is divided into various main categories: liturgical dress, worn in and for ceremonies; more everyday sorts of garments, intended for nonceremonial usage; and heraldic dress, indicating function, status and rank (Bailey 2013; Dickie and Pye 2018). The liturgical and heraldic modes may be combined in, for example, the garb of an archbishop performing a Mass.

The most obvious and stereotypical division in the history of Christianity in the West involves the divide between the ‘Catholic sumptuary’—involving the often-times extravagant clothing of higher-level figures in the Roman Church—and the ‘Puritan plain’—encompassing the various forms of Protestant reaction, during and after the Reformation, to the perceived unseemly elaborateness of Catholic dress and ceremonial practice (Keenan 1999, p. 392).

Further divisions have operated within Catholicism itself over at least the last millennium. One divide pertains between more ascetic religious orders—paradigmatically reclusive monastic groups, whose simplicity of lifestyle goes together with plainness, if not austerity, of dress—and those groups such as cardinals and archbishops, whose richer, more elaborate dress style fits the purposes of attending grand ceremonies (Dickie and Pye 2018). These sorts of clerics wear ‘ecclesiastical robes and vestments of rich beauty’, usually during ceremonial activities that are aimed at various publics external to the particular religious institution in question (Rucker 1920, p. 459). This division partly maps onto the differences between religious specialists who are, in Max Weber’s terms, either more this-worldly or more other-worldly in orientation (McRoberts 2003).

Another major division within Catholicism, especially apparent in the later 20th and 21st centuries (see below), separates conservatives—often oriented towards richer and more ostentatious modes of dress, understood as visible forms of adherence to longstanding ‘tradition’—and various sorts of liberals and radicals—who tend towards plainer and simpler sartorial forms. (Keenan 1999, p. 393). This division has created a potential source of antagonism that has erupted in various guises over the centuries, between those who revel in the elaborateness and sumptuousness of certain sorts of clerical garb, and those who sternly reject both such dress and the broader lifestyles associated with it. The austere critique of clerical finery has erupted constantly over the centuries, from within and outside the Church, and from both religious and secular sources (Dickie and Pye 2018). The tension between ornate priestly clothing being read as either appropriate to the glorification of God, or alternatively understood as damning testament to the power and wealth of the Church hierarchy, has persisted for more than 1000 years (Bailey 2013).

The enormous variety of clerical garments that developed over the centuries across Western Christendom is striking. The general point to note here is the astonishing number of sartorial variations, and rules governing them, that sprang up within the Church across the centuries. As the Catholic Church grew in extent, prestige and influence in the first few hundred years of its existence, the clothing of its functionaries, especially the higher-level ones, became more elaborate, evolving well beyond the original situation where vestments barely distinguished priests and laity (Dickie and Pye 2018). As Rucker (1920, p. 460) points out, ‘like officers on the military field, church dignitaries were of different rank, and distinguishing features of dress were the simplest and most natural solution’ to the problem of making visible gradations in the pecking order. Thus, from simpler beginnings, ‘there grew up in the Roman church a rather complicated system of ecclesiastical vestments, each piece having special significance as to colour, form and ornament’ (Rucker 1920, p. 460). As Beck (1905a, p. 282)

notes, nothing sartorial 'is too great ... [or] too small ... to be the subject matter of an ecclesiastical privilege'.

As cathedrals and other places of Christian worship became larger and more ornate, an additional reason for the more elaborate clerical vestments became apparent: 'Apart from the obvious reason for seeking the effect of imposing grandeur in the ritual ... the dim and mysterious light of the vaulted cathedrals ... played a part in the choice of contrasting robes' worn by the participants. The 'sombre walls' of cathedrals were ideal foils 'for the magnificence ... [and] splendour ... of ceremonies performed by dignitaries in vestments of rich fabrics elaborately adorned with embroidery' (Rucker 1920, p. 460; see also Bailey 2013, p. 31).

As time went on, ever more types of garment were added to the panoply of forms of attire available for the use of Church officials, especially those dignitaries at the upper end of the hierarchy. Albs (a type of tunic), stoles, scarves, chasubles (a kind of mantle), collars, copes (processional vestments), mozettas (capotes worn over the cope), cassocks, zimarras (over-cassocks), surpllices, sashes, collars, stockings, skullcaps, birettas, amesses (head coverings of fur or silk), to name just a few, became part of the expected garb of popes, as well as bishops and cardinals in some cases (Beck 1905d, 1905e, 1906). Meanwhile, a complex system of colour-coding, attached to particular garments, also developed: 'white, to denote purity and truth; black, sorrow; violet, love and pain in penitence, also sorrow; green, life; red, warm burning love' (Rucker 1920, p. 460). There were also increasingly complex rules and sumptuary laws as to who could wear which vestments, in which colours, during which ceremonial and other contexts, and at what times of the day, week and year (Kuper 1973). But whether these sartorial rules were in fact observed or not depended on specific circumstances, and multiple deviations from the regulations were observed and contested (Beck 1905b, 1905c, 1905d). Some specific practice being forbidden was of course a sign that it was in un- or semi-official use on the ground (Beck 1905b, p. 447).

What we today would call the 'accessories' worn by popes, cardinals and other dignitaries also became ever more elaborate and symbolically important. The pectoral cross was a relatively recent innovation, dating from the early seventeenth century. Nonetheless, a complex of regulations sprang up as to who could wear which types (Beck 1913b). Rings were important earlier on, and rules for their wear developed for various strata of the higher clergy (Beck 1905e, p. 198). Hats, too, came in a great variety of shapes and forms, all of which were governed by complicated rules (Beck 1905e, p. 201).

Going alongside official prescriptions and prohibitions as to which sort of functionary could wear which sort of garment, trends developed that the relevant local or Roman authorities either turned a blind eye to or struggled to deal with. We can say that 'fashions' in clerical dress ran together with, existed despite, and sometimes were unintentionally fostered by, official pronouncements and regulatory regimes. For example, until about 'the end of the 16th century the wearing of a hat was interdicted to the great body of the clergy. When the hood went out of fashion a cap came in vogue for outdoor use' in some places. '[I]n the second half of the sixteenth century the hat seems to have been coming into fashion, for it was forbidden by synod after synod, exception being made in favour of those who wore it on account of health or "other good reason" ... [to do with excessive] sun or bad weather' (Beck 1913a, p. 338).

How more precisely to understand the historical relations between Catholic dress and sartorial 'fashion', beyond noting empirical changes over time and trends in one direction or another, is a vexed issue. It is of course dependent on how one defines 'fashion'. On the surface, no two sets of phenomena could be further apart—one seems to be about (relatively) unchanging orientations to sacred matters, while the other apparently is all about rapid, superficial and wholly secular changes in taste and practice. If fashion is defined that way, then one can conclude that over the centuries 'clerical clothing changed, but not rapidly and not for the sake of novelty', and therefore not for reasons of 'fashion' (Miller 2014, p. 9).

Conversely, Bailey (2013) argues that there was a clear tendency towards more ornate designs, richer materials and more diverse and bright colours among the higher clergy, as new fabrics, techniques

and dyes became available over the period from the 13th to 16th centuries. This was due to new trade routes from the East and new domestic industries appearing. Many of these new forms of elaboration went into clerical clothing accessories. For example, in terms of mitres, very large sums of money were being paid for richly ornamented types by higher clergy in the 13th century. There had already been changes in the 12th century towards lower, more pointed styles (Beck 1913b).

Such changes can, with some caution, be construed as the products of 'fashion', in the sense that sartorial innovators were copied by others, and a specific style of garment was accordingly diffused outwards to other adopters. Silks, damasks and brocades woven in France and Italy were in wide use from the 15th century onwards, encouraging further elaborations and diffusions of trends (Bailey 2013). By the 17th century, in the period of the Baroque, itself part of the Catholic Counter-Reformation against Protestant heresy, secular and ecclesiastical dress styles influenced each other, exchanging 'rich and flamboyant designs ... floral pattern[s] and lighter colours and much gold ... all reflecting the fashions of the day' (Bailey 2013, p. 34).

Given all this, it is too simplistic to characterise the eruption of 'fashion' into clerical dress as mostly or only a modern or postmodern phenomenon (Keenan 1999). The interplay between such dress and recognisably fashion-like social dynamics has a much longer and more complex history than one might assume (Almila and Inglis 2017). So, it would be misleading to say that Fellini's innovation in the fashion show sequence is merely to bring fashion and Catholicism together. Even if that was the only thing that he thought he was doing, he was also in effect doing something more, and arguably more profound—namely, dramatizing the real historical interplay between those two realms.

We might expect 'fashions' in clerical garb to be more likely in periods where fashion trends were notable in wider society, especially among the upper classes. Given that this was certainly the case in 16th- and 17th-century Italy and France (Cox-Rearick 2009), finding 'clerical fashions' in Rome or Paris at that time is not surprising. The dress of higher-level Catholic functionaries of those periods is very much reflected in the work of the director and his collaborators in *Fellini-Roma*. This was an era of what we might today call 'power-dressing' by elites, both secular and clerical, to represent and assert religious, political and cultural allegiances, with more elaborate forms of dress and visual self-presentation usually signifying more orthodox 'Catholic' dispositions and affiliations, as against more heterodox or (in the case of Protestantism) heretical ones (Cox-Rearick 2009).

As Rietbergen (2006, p. 181) argues, 'with its emphasis on stylised acts and emotions ... ceremony was the lifeblood of the papal capital'. The most esteemed guests were allowed the great privilege of attending the pope in his private chambers and assisting in the undressing of his ceremonial vestments. Going backstage after being in a front-row seat for the stage spectacle offered to the papal court—a ceremony centred upon resplendent forms of dress, and possessing certain catwalk-like attributes—was regarded as a great mark of distinction for the special visitor, just as today an especially honoured guest may be allowed to penetrate otherwise prohibited backstage spaces (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006).

Central to the success of the stage performances of the court were the Vatican's masters of ceremony, who were 'choreographers of the ballet of papal power', a 'majestic theatre' within which 'not merely grand but also eminently visible propaganda' was deployed, in order to impress the omnipotence and grandeur of papal power upon both visitors and the local populace (Rietbergen 2006, pp. 190, 192, 195). Given the constant presence of these theatrical performances, the baroque, counter-Reformation Rome of the popes was 'a city where forms of highly expensive and yet supremely ephemeral architecture were erected for almost every festive occasion', in front of which the richly dressed clergy paraded, and at the apex of which was the mightily garbed pontiff himself (Rietbergen 2006, p. 196). All of this is reflected and heightened in the Fellini ecclesiastical fashion show sequence.

As Rietbergen (2006, p. 190) indicates, over time the masters of ceremony put together ever longer procedural lists, 'which detailed the dress code for each and all of the ... courtiers ... from the pope himself down to the lowest deacon'. The stipulated procedures varied, depending on which day of the week, month or year it was. The lists 'spelled out the manner in which courtiers and visitors were to behave in the papal presence: how many steps after entering the Papal Chapel, when to cover one's

head, and when to uncover it, when to kneel, when to stand, when to sit—for the major ambassadors and the cardinals on their stools, and for important female visitors on their cushions, for only the pope sat in a proper chair' (ibid.). Of all those present, it was the popes who were most constrained by the specified procedures, especially in terms of their dress. 'Each day, and sometimes several times a day, they were dressed for the specific function they had to perform . . . If they presided over a Pontifical Chapel, the dressing ceremony was a public one, and a bevy of cardinals assisted them in their vesting' (Rietbergen 2006, p. 191).

In the ecclesiastical fashion show, Fellini and his collaborators represented much of what was described above, albeit in heightened and exaggerated ways. Different sorts of clerical uniform were on display, in manifold colours and combinations. Relatively plainer garments for the lower clergy were shown, as were markedly more extravagant costumes for the higher-ranking. The fashion show itself is set up as a display of the richness and grandeur of the Church, albeit taken to the point of absurdity. In all of this, Fellini's vision remained in a certain sense true to the historical realities of the Vatican, its masters of ceremony, and the Church more broadly. There was nothing totally fantastic or wholly imaginary on display. In this way, the fashion show presents, in an unofficial manner, the official side of the Church as it has existed and expressed itself sartorially and theatrically over many centuries. As Bachmann (Bachmann, p. 37) noted at the time of the film's release, the show and the accoutrements that constitute it are outré but still 'almost believable'.

5. Questions of the Carnavalesque and Camp

Fellini and his co-workers added to the historically situated actualities of Church dress certain carnivalesque elements. In claiming this we must be cautious when invoking the highly idealised account of medieval and early modern carnival famously advocated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), and often rather uncritically utilised by some subsequent scholars, as if it were a straightforward description of 'real' carnival activities rather than a highly coloured (re-)imagining of them.

Nonetheless, carnival time was an important period in the Church calendar, and certainly in Rome, as we know from the contemporary account offered in 1788 by Goethe (1970, p. 447). He noted that 'unlike the religious festivals in Rome, the Carnival does not dazzle the eye: there are no fireworks, no illuminations, no brilliant processions'. The historical carnival was therefore not akin to how many subsequent authors and artists have imagined it. That later carnivalesque imaginary is well captured by Keenan's (1999, p. 394) description:

... out into the streets [come commoners dressed as] [P]opes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, mother superiors, vicars, nuns and sisters in every cut and colour of religious dress, worn by bodies that are variously bent upon lampooning, ironizing, desecrating, teasing or otherwise 'profaning' the religious state. For such revellers, religious dress modes provide the opportunity for caricature, street theatre, and fun and games . . .

Despite the fabricated nature of this imagery, which does not reflect actual, historical Roman carnival activities, the lampooning and ironizing tendencies of such a carnivalesque imaginary are nonetheless present in the ecclesiastical fashion show sequence. The models and their garments are grotesque and parodic. Fellini and his collaborators are to some extent having fun at the expense of the Church, undermining the presumed dignity of its dignitaries.

Yet the fashion show cannot, we argue, be understood solely as a carnivalesque parody. We agree with Paulicelli (2013, p. 256) that Fellini's purposes in the fashion show sequence are as much benign as satirical. On her interpretation, his primary aim was to show how 'dressing up calls [our] attention to . . . illusionism, distortion and representation . . . [which] are . . . integral part[s] of reality and its construction'. The implication here is that Fellini is pointing towards how the Church creates its own realities through the means of dress and costuming, which may be more pragmatic or more luxurious, depending on who is wearing it and for what purpose. The Church is shown to be essentially an exercise in theatricality and the performance of its own magnificence to an audience, including the

lower clergy upon whose continued labours the ongoing reproduction of the Church depends, as well as the laypeople upon whose continuing belief the existence of the Church relies.

We can say more about the nature and significance of the ecclesiastical fashion show by considering it in light not only of carnivalesque aesthetics but also of ‘camp’ aesthetics. Clearly, many people watching the sequence today might respond to it by labelling it as ‘camp’. A classic discussion of camp taste is offered by Susan Sontag (Sontag 2013), and her reflections on camp are highly relevant here, as they seem to resonate thoroughly with Fellini’s aesthetics, sometimes explicitly and directly so.

‘As a taste in persons’, argued Sontag, ‘camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated [or] ... the strongly exaggerated’ (Sontag 2013, p. 262). Examples of the attenuated would be the legions of dwarves with whom Fellini populated various films, while Sontag herself gives as an example of the camp love of the highly exaggerated the ‘sex bomb’ sexuality and sensuality that Fellini created through his presentation of Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita*. That film, and others too, were populated by male actors expressing, and/or strongly associated with, the ‘exaggerated he-man-ness’ of ‘beefcake’ stars of the 1950s, such as the former Tarzan Lex Barker, a deliberate counterpoint to the ‘corny flamboyant female-ness’ of Ekberg. Sontag also cites as cinematic instances of camp ‘the series of Italian colour spectacles featuring the super-hero Maciste’ made during the 1950s. Fellini revelled in such spectacles as a filmgoer, and indeed he often mentioned that the first film he remembered being taken to as a child was a silent version of the adventures of the Maciste character (Baxter 1994). Relevant here too is Sontag’s citing of ‘the rococo churches of Munich’ (ibid., p. 264), and, more broadly, the strikingly ornate and elaborate Church architecture of the counter-Reformation, as instances of cultural objects that were not intended by their makers as camp, but can be read as such by people in subsequent generations.

Some of Sontag’s more basic points about camp aesthetics clearly apply to the fashion show sequence in uncontroversial ways. ‘Camp is the attempt to do something extraordinary. But extraordinary in the sense, often, of being special, glamorous ... [t]he curved line, the extravagant gesture’ (p. 267). Fellini’s ecclesiastical fashion show is most certainly a product of, and replete with, extravagant gestures. If ‘the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration’ (p. 259), then the sequence is a telling instance of camp aesthetics, because it is clearly an exercise in extreme exaggeration of a represented reality, here the nature of historically situated clerical and papal dressing.

According to Sontag, within camp aesthetics the quality of things is measured ‘not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization’, criteria that the clothes in the sequence clearly meet (p. 260). Camp taste ‘is the love of the exaggerated, the “off”, of things-being-what-they-are-not’ (p. 262). In this case, clerical clothes are still recognisably ‘clerical’, while being ‘off’ in various ways. ‘Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content ... [offering] a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form’ (p. 261). This is precisely the effect achieved by the Fellini/Donati designs, which combine a sumptuous look with wildly exaggerated features.

Sontag also nicely captures how the fashion show operates between two different levels of meaning: ‘the Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice’ (p. 264). The exaggerated ecclesiastical clothing is clearly intended for, and representative of, clerics, religious vocations and the Church; it is also simultaneously utterly artificial and beyond quotidian concerns. Even when the garments are redesigned so as to be supposedly ‘practical’—vestments that work with roller skates, roller skates that get you to Paradise faster, coats with large sections of the back cut out so that a priest can cycle to work without being entangled in the wheels—the supposedly practical design and cutting are so outrageously heightened as to seem to subvert true practicality altogether. Pragmatic considerations are reinvented to become

their opposites, a reversal that could easily be defined as ‘camp’ in Sontag’s terms, or alternatively as a carnivalesque inversion of reality.

Sontag’s reflections on camp also indicate a kind of ambivalence that may well be germane in understanding Fellini’s approach to the ecclesiastical fashion show. On the one hand, ‘the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious’ (p. 271). Thus, camp aesthetics ‘is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness’. Certainly, the papal fashion show is an exercise in the playful. On the other hand, ‘camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious”. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious’ (p. 271). The latter phrase sums up rather well what Fellini seems to be doing. It is not only that more ‘serious’ points—concerning how the Church enacts and relies upon sartorial and other forms of artifice for its power and efficacy—are at odds with a frivolous visual sensibility. It is also that the frivolity and the seriousness are indissociable, with the one informing and illuminating the other inextricably. It is this complexity—of likely directorial intention, and of visual effect—that means that the fashion show is not simply, or simple, satire.

This complexity is reflected in the ambivalence detectable both in Fellini’s films (McKenna 2006), and in his personal pronouncements, when religious faith is dealt with (Solmi 1968; Vanelli 2017). How Fellini presents the fashion show certainly has anticlerical, satirical elements and impulses. As Stubbs (1993, p. 50) remarks:

His antagonism toward certain aspects of the Catholic religion in which he was raised is well documented in his films. In *La Dolce Vita* and *Nights of Cabiria* [1957], Fellini depicts false miracles that raise hopes in the worshippers, only to disappoint those hopes. In *8½* [1963], *Juliet of the Spirits*, and *Amarcord* [1974], he presents scenes in which his protagonists encounter harsh admonitions of one sort or another from [C]hurch figures against human sexuality, admonitions which prove finally to be life-denying. And the religious procession in [*Fellini-*] *Roma*, at first a kind of fashion show, turns into a dance of death at its conclusion [i.e., with the appearance of the skeleton-bearing carnival float].

Fellini could sometimes present himself in a markedly Enlightenment-influenced, anticlerical frame. For example, in an interview dating from a few years after the release of *Fellini-Roma*, he claimed that it is ‘evident that unmasking the lie, identifying the inauthentic, and taking apart the indefinite or false absolutes continues to be, for now, the only corrective resource—a mocking, inexhaustible safeguard—against our bankrupt history while we are waiting to be prepared to propose and to live under a new hypothesis of the truth’ (cited at Bondanella 1978, p. 35). In other interviews, Fellini set out a radically individualist philosophy wherein the authentic core of the person was seen to be hemmed in by social institutions, especially religious ones: ‘the only thing which exists is yourself, your true individual self in depth, which wants to grow spontaneously, but which is fettered by inoperative lies, myths and fantasies proposing an unattainable morality or sanctity or perfection’ (cited at Burke 1989, p. 38).

The notion of Fellini as an anticlerical polemicist was certainly furthered by some of the contemporary critical responses to *La Dolce Vita*. The official Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, branded it ‘disgusting’, and Catholics were banned by the Church from watching it. Catholic and non-Catholic reviewers, both in Italy and outside, vehemently debated whether the film itself was immoral, or was rather a condemnation of the immorality it purported to represent. Did it express a ‘decadent’ vision, or a Catholic denunciation of such decadence (Demers and Demers 1984)? Fellini’s peer Pier Paolo Pasolini (1984, p. 70) argued that the film, and Fellini’s aesthetic outlook more generally, was in fact expressive of a conventional and parochial Catholic moral sensibility, the film being the ‘highest and most absolute product of Catholicism’ of its times.

So, while Fellini sometimes played the anticlerical card in his films, such as in scenes depicting fake miracles hyped by both the Church and the media, it remained unclear how wholly anticlerical his vision really was. Stubbs (1993, p. 50) reflects the views of other critics and scholars when he writes

that ‘throughout his career ... Fellini ... clung to a sense of religious mysticism and ... [came] to associate that mysticism more and more with the creative process’ of filmmaking itself. Thus, in other interviews he would stress his ‘religious’ dispositions:

I believe I am naturally religious, since to me the world and life seem wrapped in mystery. And even if I hadn’t been fascinated as a child with that mystic feeling that penetrates existence and makes everything unknowable, I think the profession I practice would have led me naturally to religious sentiment. I create a dream, or rather with open eyes I abandon myself to imagining something.... Who guides us through the creative adventure? How could it happen? Only faith in something, or someone, hidden within us, can inspire the mysterious work of creation - someone little known, a wise and subtle part of us, working within us. We help that unknown part by trusting in it, by accepting it, by letting it work for us. That feeling of trust, I think, can be defined as religious feeling.

(cited at [Grazzini 1988](#), pp. 87–88)

On occasion, when asked by an interviewer if he was ultimately a Christian believer, Fellini would reply along these lines: ‘If by Christian you mean love toward one’s neighbours, it seems to me that ... yes, all my films turn upon this idea’ ([Fellini 1976](#), p. 56). This sort of comment seems to confirm a comment made by some students of his work: ‘Fellini left the Church, but the Church has never left him’. Indeed, in a review of *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969), the film about ancient Rome that Fellini made immediately before *Fellini-Roma*, the critic and novelist Erich [Segal \(1971, p. 57\)](#) alleged that the director’s ‘emotional archaeology dares not dig below the floor of the Vatican City’, precisely because of lingering and deeply-felt affiliations to the Church.

Within a year of that review, the fashion show in *Fellini-Roma* was in fact directly concerned with goings-on within and around the Vatican. But the emotional and rhetorical tenor of the sequence seems to align partly with Segal’s claim. If Fellini was ambivalent about religion in general, and Roman Catholicism in particular, that ambivalence is certainly on display in the fashion show sequence. It is not straight satire; there is also some appreciation of the Church too. At the very least, the Church knows how to put on an impressive spectacle, a major reference point in Fellini’s personal pantheon. [Sontag \(Sontag 2013, p. 274\)](#) intuitions about camp aesthetics gesture towards appreciation of that point:

Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it’s not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.)... [Camp] is a kind of love ... It relishes, rather than judges ... [It] identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ... camp ... [T]hey’re enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling.

We would argue that the anticlerical and satirical elements in the fashion show run alongside more sympathetic dispositions. The satirical and the empathetic, the caustic and the tender, exist in contradiction in the sequence, but also are melded with each other into a totality that cannot be reduced to either of them. The fashion show is not just an exercise in anticlerical satire. It can be viewed as part of a much broader strategy, found in his other films, too, whereby ‘Fellini exaggerates an incident to the very edge of absurdity while retaining not only a foundation of reality but also an element of pathos’, and thus a certain sympathy for the people, objects and ideas being represented ([Baxter 1994, p. 274](#)).

Fellini did not choose, as he could easily have done, to play up the more morbidly grotesque elements of Catholic dress, as some other artists have done. He did not, for example, draw a contrast that Oscar [Wilde \(2003\)](#) did in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In that story, we are told that Dorian ‘had a special passion ... for ecclesiastical vestments’. He collected ‘many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ, who must wear purple and jewels and fine linen that she may hide the pallid macerated body that is worn by the suffering that she seeks for, and wounded by self-inflicted pain’ ([Wilde 2003, p. 134](#)). While Wilde’s imagery starkly contrasts rich and colourful clerical garments with the pale, mortified flesh they hide, this was not a strategy Fellini pursued. Such

imagery is perhaps hinted at in the skeletons' carnival float in the fashion show, and in the ghostly Bride of Christ figure that leads the procession at the very start of the sequence, but otherwise it is eschewed. The clergy are not presented as the desiccated voluptuaries of Wilde's imaginings.

Significantly, such grotesque imagery was in fact deployed in his prior film. The pope, cardinals, bishops and other functionaries are satirized, but they are not shown in a manner akin to the way Fellini represented ancient Romans in *Fellini-Satyricon*, where members of all social classes, and especially the aristocracy, were filmed as 'gargoyles, not people' (Segal 1971). This was a visual sensibility that Fellini could easily have reproduced when he turned his attention towards the Vatican. But in *Fellini-Roma*, the Church hierarchy was spared such a fate. Papal Rome got a much easier ride from Fellini than did its ancient, pagan counterpart.

6. The Afterlives of the Ecclesiastical Fashion Show

Fellini's ecclesiastical fashion show has enjoyed a set of rich and often curious afterlives since the film of which it was part was released in 1972. It has been taken up in various ways by diverse actors in the fashion industry, in the blogosphere, and by social and cultural critics.

In terms of the fashion industry, Paulicelli (2010, 2013, 2016) has indicated that the sequence's aesthetics foreshadow some of the work of major designers like Alexander McQueen and John Galiano. It has also explicitly and directly inspired collections by the fashion houses of Dior, Dolce and Gabbana, and Valentino (Paulicelli 2016). The sequence became bound up with broader cultural trends, as the fashion industry throughout the 1990s and after 'raid[ed] the wardrobe of religion for decidedly worldly and "fleshly" purposes' (Keenan 1999, pp. 389–90; also Stanley 1998). Examples here include 1990s Benetton advertising campaigns, with models (un)dressed as nuns and priests displaying an underwear collection, and the marketing for Diesel jeans showing 'before a statue of Mary, a number of figures clad in skin-tight jeans, rosary beads in hand, wearing religious habits above the waist', an advert that was banned in several (nominally) Catholic countries (ibid., p. 396). Clearly, such imagery is not far from the spirit of Fellini, and may have been partly inspired by his fashion show sequence. But, in the early 1970s, Fellini did not want, or did not dare, to sexualise clerical vestments in such an obvious manner as these later advertising campaigns did, despite the notably bawdy tenor of other sequences in *Fellini-Roma*.

More recently, when the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018 put on a major exhibition entitled 'Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination' (Metropolitan Museum of Art MMA), it was a testament to the fashion show sequence's increased visibility and ubiquity in cyberspace that it would feature centrally in that exhibition and the marketing for it. The sequence had by this time become a seemingly unavoidable reference point for anyone wanting to comment on the relations between Catholicism and sartorial fashion specifically, as well as Christianity and clothing more generally.

Reviews of the film in compendium-style guides in the period from the 1970s to early 1990s tended to give honourable mention to the fashion show sequence as one of the highlights of the film (e.g., Bergan and Karney 1992). During that period, academic appreciations of Fellini discussed the film itself in some detail, but often omitted significant discussion of that specific sequence (e.g., Foreman 1980). But with the appearance of widely available DVD copies of the film in many countries in the later 1990s, and then with the appearance of segments of it on websites in the 2000s, both the film and the fashion show sequence have once again become objects of wider appreciation and discussion. At the time of writing, multiple copies of the sequence are available to watch for free on YouTube, testifying to the devotion of posters who want to share it with others. Comments from viewers are highly patterned, tending towards either appreciation of Fellini's visual genius, or the making of sociopolitical points critical of the Church.

The relative ease of availability of the sequence has also meant that many bloggers, interested in either fashion or film, or both, have posted appreciative analyses of the sequence (see e.g., Battista 2008; Guzman 2012; Gilson 2019; Pinchetti n.d.). Much of the blogger commentary fits with Sontag's

depiction of how the appreciation of camp art is vocalised by its aficionados: statements abound as to the sequence being, in a positive way, ‘really outlandish . . . too much . . . too fantastic . . . not to be believed!’ (Sontag 2013, p. 266). A later student of camp aesthetics, Wayne Koestenbaum (1993, p. 117), notes that the appreciation of camp often involves a sense of delight at discovering the object in question. This may encompass the feeling that one has somehow been chosen by the object itself to be its discoverer and celebrant, and to be the agent of the cultural recuperation of ‘fragments held hostage by everyone else’s indifference. No one else lived for this gesture, this pattern, this figure, before: only I know that it is sublime’. This may help explain the widespread contemporary sharing of the sequence by bloggers and other online participants through electronic networks: it seems both too outré and too precious not to share with others, known and unknown, who might also appreciate it. In the online gift economy of the blogosphere (Elder-Vass 2015), the fashion show sequence has become an important visual gift to pass on to others deemed to be appreciative of such a strange but compelling vignette.

The final way in which Fellini’s fashion show continues to live on in the present day is its deployment by social and cultural critics as a method for framing current, highly politicised issues within and about the Catholic Church. In this framing, the interplay between clerical clothes and sartorial fashion is used to comment on a complex of issues. These encompass the conflicts between liberals and conservatives within the Church—most dramatically represented in the public antagonisms between followers of Pope Francis and the retired Pope Benedict XVI—as well as intersecting controversies over homosexuality and closeted gay male clergy. The theologically conservative Benedict during his reign very much favoured the return of grand papal dressing, the norm before the 1960s, but in large part increasingly phased out after the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s, which stressed more sober styles of dress for senior members of the hierarchy (Conway 2013). In the period after the death of John Paul II, theological conservatism went together with extravagance in dress, in ways unthinkable to Protestants, for whom conservatism in thought would likely also imply strict sobriety in sartorial terms. This gave rise to an apparent paradox: the intellectually and characterologically austere Benedict revelled in sartorial grandeur, while the more apparently liberal Francis frowns upon it, and has reportedly tried to tone down once again how senior figures appear in ceremonial occasions, allegedly stating that ‘the carnival is over!’ (Martel 2019, p. 27).

During Benedict’s reign, his increasingly ornate costumes caused much comment in the press and on the Internet. One theme particularly pursued by journalists was whether the pope, and not just the Devil, wore Prada. Meanwhile, *Esquire* magazine voted Benedict the Best Accessorizer of the Year in 2007 (Martel 2019, p. 432). While his reasons for dressing in elaborate, bejewelled, richly coloured vestments were ostensibly for the glorification of God—intentions that would have been widely accepted by the wider Catholic world in the 1960s and earlier—by the 2000s both Catholic and secular observers read the ornate garb in quite different ways. On the one hand, Benedict’s dress choices could now be understood as fashion statements, with him understood as ‘a truly bling Pope’ (Conway 2013, n.p.). On the other hand, his style could be construed not only as highly camp, but also as actively effeminate, and thus indicative of closeted homosexuality. Many critics saw this as particularly ironic, if not downright hypocritical, given Benedict’s generally hostile statements about, and policies towards, male homosexuality. In these ways of thinking, ornate clerical dress could not, or could no longer, simply be just clerical dress, which had been the general assumption for hundreds of years previously. Instead, such dress was not only read through cultural codes of fashion and of male homosexuality, but was also interpreted such that the attribution of fashionability to those vestments implied the homosexuality of the wearer too.

Within this new semiotic context, Fellini’s ecclesiastical fashion show has taken on a new significance. Given the easy availability of it on the Internet, it has become a widely shared reference point when talking about homosexuality within the priesthood. This is dramatically illustrated in the recent book by the French journalist (and erstwhile sociologist) Frédéric Martel (2019), which was published simultaneously in multiple languages to much fanfare and widespread journalistic interest in early 2019. Martel’s book, based on extensive fieldwork and hundreds of interviews with Church

insiders, is intended as a serious, quasi-sociological exposé of the hypocrisies of the Church concerning homosexuality. Its central thesis is that the most homophobic of the Catholic hierarchy around the world tend to be closeted gays themselves.

Martel hypothesizes that large numbers of closeted gay men take up priestly vocations because they are attracted to Catholicism's 'processions ... robes ... vestments' and accessories, as well as the camp paraphernalia of 'the sung vespers, the men's voices and the sonority of the organ' (Martel 2019, p. 7). The tendency of more conservative cardinals, and Pope Benedict, towards more ornate dress choices is assumed to signify closeted or latent homosexuality. Conservative cardinals dressed in 'bright-red, goose-poop or marron glacé outfits ... could ... try their chances in *Drag Race*, the TV reality show that chooses the prettiest drag queen'. (ibid., p. 29). The jewels, cufflinks, designer watches and rings of senior clergy are read as compensation mechanisms for closeted clergy. The latter are said to be akin to veiled Muslim women in that, being hemmed in by strict religious expectations, they transfer their need for sensuality and elegance to their clothes (ibid., p. 368). Clerical accessories perforce indicate hidden sexual dispositions, as in the case of 'strait-laced prelates wearing spectacular pectoral crosses, with their diamonds, and twisting or interlaced biblical creatures, making them look as if they've come out of a drawing by Tom of Finland' (ibid., p. 367).

In this rhetorical context, Fellini's fashion show is regularly referred to by Martel, working as means to illustrate and reinforce the thesis that *ornate dress + conservative theology and morality + hostility to gays = closeted homosexuality*. At the end of a visit to the residence of the ultraconservative American cardinal Raymond Leo Burke, one of Francis's most outspoken opponents, Martel (ibid., p. 27) surveys the backstage of the host's living quarters. Upon seeing 'the hatboxes ... headdresses ... fake fur coats, and ... red trapezoid outfits', he remarks that 'I feel as if I'm behind the scenes of the film *Fellini[-]Roma* when they are preparing the extravagant ecclesiastical fashion parade. Soon some priests on roller-skates will appear'.

Cardinal Burke's extravagant dress style, which wholeheartedly embraces pre-Vatican II stylistics, has been much commented on and mocked on social media. When Martel (ibid., pp. 26–27) describes his attire, it is clear that he has Fellini's ecclesiastical aesthetics in mind:

The diva cardinal, the dandy cardinal, the drama-queen cardinal ... sitting on an asparagus-green throne twice as large as he is, surrounded by silvery drapery. He wears a fluorescent yellow mitre in the shape of a tall Tower of Pisa, and long turquoise gloves that look like iron hands; his mozzetta is cabbage-green, embroidered with yellow, lined with a leek-green hood revealing a bow of crimson and pomegranate lace. The colours are unexpected; the accoutrements unimaginable; the overall image eccentric and very camp ... [I]n his full plumage ... [he wears] a cape of red moiré silk, with a hood buttoned by the neck and fastened at the front (the hands emerge from a slit) and involving a train which is said to vary according to the solemnity of the occasion ... [and which] can reach a length of 12 metres.

Martel concludes his discussion of Cardinal Burke with the remark that 'it is easy to caricature a caricature' (ibid., p. 27), possibly reminding some readers of Fellini's dispositions towards caricaturing those he represented. The Fellini references in Martel's book back up the allegations of the Cardinal's alleged outrageous hypocrisy: Burke 'can stroll about in full sail, in his *cappa magna*, in an unthinkably long robe, in a forest of white lace or dressed in a long coat shaped like a dressing gown, while ... denouncing in the name of tradition "a Church that has become too feminized"' (ibid., pp. 28–29). A German drag queen tells Martel that the fetish of Burke and like-minded associates for the biggest, longest or tallest versions of specific garments is part of drag queen codes, involving a rejection of realness and the embracing of self-parody and camp irony. All of these are present and correct in Burke's outfits, which are constituted from clothes that Martel notes 'could have been worn by Lady Gaga' (ibid., p. 30)—or indeed designed by Fellini and his collaborators.

Martel's analysis of the Church and homosexuality returns repeatedly to cinema in general, and Fellini in particular. At the more metaphorical level, the description of Benedict's arranging

of a spectacular ceremony for the elevation of his right-hand man, Georg Gänswein, to the role of archbishop, likens the notoriously handsome German prelate to Helmut Berger, the beautiful and effete actor who starred in several of Luchino Visconti's films of the same time period as *Fellini-Roma*, and was the director's muse and reported lover. The ceremony was so Felliniesque in its unbridled camp extravagance that, according to Martel, even Fellini himself 'would never have dared go quite so far' (ibid., p. 433). The ceremony's subsequent notoriety also helped solidify the journalistic and online reputation of Benedict—whose original name is Joseph Ratzinger—as the 'prelate for paparazzis'—which is a pun on the slang term *Papa Ratz*, as well as a reference to *La Dolce Vita*, in which the phrase *paparazzi* was coined (ibid., pp. 435, 438, 443).

At a more literal level, during his many interviews with clerics, ex-priests and multiple others, Martel (ibid., p. 378) learns from informants that the simultaneously anticlerical but ambiguously pro-Christian films of Pasolini from the 1960s are still watched and discussed by priests, while the fashion show from *Fellini-Roma* had yet another afterlife. While at the time of its release 'the Vatican demanded that the film be banned', Martel (ibid., p. 27) indicates that numerous well-placed interviewees told him that the ecclesiastical fashion show sequence 'was shown in loops in the gay-friendly dormitories of certain seminaries' in Rome and elsewhere, both at the time of the film's release and possibly for quite a long time afterwards too. Today, of course, a seminarian can watch the sequence on an iPad any time they might wish. Finding out whether any in fact do so is a question for future empirical research.

7. Conclusions

This paper has examined the nature and significance of Federico Fellini's ecclesiastical fashion show from a range of angles. It is an important element of the director's overall work, and a quintessential expression of his aesthetics. It is ambivalently placed between Fellini's occasional anticlerical postures his espousal of some variety of Christianity, and his sometime embrace of the Church. It is simultaneously satirical and empathetic, a position that some ideas associated with the camp and the carnivalesque assist us in grasping. It can be understood as Fellini's ambivalent tribute to the Catholic Church. Even if it is partially a backhanded compliment, it is not fully so. The sequence also draws upon, represents and comments on various aspects of Catholic dress over the centuries. It juxtaposes and mingles sartorial fashion and Catholic practice and ceremony. It also dramatizes the fact that these have overlapped historically rather more than conventional wisdom allows.

The film segment's appeal to various audiences has been significantly augmented in the Internet age, becoming an increasingly ubiquitous, if not obligatory, reference point for the fashion industry, bloggers of diverse interests, and cultural critics when they want to thematize various topics. The latter include controversies about male homosexuality in the Church and associated conflicts between conservatives and liberals, as well as reflections on how sartorial fashion has created, and continues to generate, interfaces with Catholicism specifically and Christianity more generally. Fellini's ecclesiastical fashion show reveals and illustrates these interfaces, including for academic analysis of the kind offered here, while providing rich materials for a wide range of non-academic actors to think through their own concerns, be those sartorial, aesthetic, historical, political, sexual or theological.

Although Fellini could hardly have guessed as to the many afterlives his framing of what one might call "catwalk Catholicism" would come to have, we strongly suspect that the old provocateur would have been delighted by the diverse forms of attention it still attracts today. It is one of Fellini's most lingering and resonant contributions to contemporary cultural life, and an important resource for scholars, enthusiasts and polemicists alike, especially those concerned with the interplay of fashion and religion.

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