Sarah Adamson

Hanlon

World Cinema, Last Essay Prompt

Due – 28 April 2017

**Nation-State in La Strada**

In Federico Fellini’s Italian drama *La Strada*, he uses the concept of the nation-state. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy of the representation of the nation state through first society also inspires Fellini’s *La Strada*. This concept is also echoes through excerpts in the film *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and the video game *Skyrim*. My paper will be addressing the claim that the family is the model of the nation state primarily in Fellini’s *La Strata*, but also through other visual representations.

The concept of the first society originates from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy on how society operates. The whole theory basically explains how the first family’s routine became the basis for society. Even after people mature and no longer become dependent on their parents, they stay and respect their parents. Thus, the family “may be called the first model of political societies” (*Social Contract*) since they work as a unit. This concept is used in film *The Marriage of Maria Braun* and video game *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*. In The Marriage of Maria Braun, the main character Maria’s life revolves around her husband. Even though Maria’s husband is presumed dead, she restarts her life as a prostitute and fancies an American man. However, once her husband returns, she immediately kills her lover and declares her love for her husband. Despite being stable in finances and relationships, she drops all of it for a man who was there for her in the beginning. Although not necessarily a bad thing—besides the murder—it depicts the concept of the first society and nation state. In the video game, *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, the developers altered the concept to fit their storyline. In the realm of Skyrim, the people depend on High King Toryyg. The High King gets murdered, however, and puts the country in a state of chaos by forcing people to choose sides and declare loyalty. The rebels in the game, the Stormcloaks, try to convince the people that they do not need to rely on tyranny, whilst the previous Imperials insist that the country needs unity and to honor a new High King.

Fellini’s drama *La Strada* also uses the concept of the nation-state. The film was made during the Italian Neo-Realist period and depicts the poverty and simplicity of everyday people in Italy. The film follows Zampanò and Gelsomina. Fellini depicts Zampanò as the typical maciste in power, whilst portraying Gelsomina as the model of the family unit. Gelsomina represents the family because she provides money through Zampanò to support her family. However, Zampanò proves to be an abuser in their relationship and a less-popular performer. The crowd appears to enjoy Gelsomina more so than Zampanò and she gains enough independence to leave him. However, Gelsomina returns to him even after no longer depending on him, which reflects Rousseau’s philosophy on the family unit. The film reflects neorealist concepts through masculine identity, editing techniques, and portraying the way people lived. Italian Neorealism focused on how socioeconomic status was viewed, and this idea is reflected in *La Strada*. In the beginning of the film, poverty is so extreme that Gelsomina is basically sold to Zampanò to work as an assistant. The masculine identity-crisis idea is reflected through Zampanò; for example, he constantly abuses Gelsomina for her ignorance. He will say things such as “Do only what I tell you”, yet oddly introduces her as his wife. I suppose having a partner of the opposite-sex who is not your wife accompany you in a wagon everywhere appears scandalous. However, when Zampanò meets a flirtatious woman named Red, he refers to Gelsomina as his side kick and abandons her at the bar. Even though Gelsomina resents Zampanò, she appears to suffer from some sort of Stockholm syndrome that influences her to be attracted to Zampanò. Eventually Gelsomina receives enough courage to leave Zampanò, but forcefully returns to him. Even when Zampanò gets thrown in jail, Gelsomina convinces herself that she loves Zampanò and that she is the only person who is willing to stay with him. The concept of nation-state shapes Gelsomina in this sense that makes her feel responsible for the family unit. In a sense, the nation-state shapes Gelsomina’s character into an-almost wife persona towards Zampanò. However, as she ignores her wants and needs to work around Zampanò’s temperament, she loses her sense of identity as it gets destroyed by these ideals. Gelsomina cares about Zampanò because she believes that she will be the only one to care for him, but eventually goes mentally insane because of his actions. This could be seen as another model of the first society, for even though Gelsomina no longer relies on Zampanò anymore, she chooses to stay and support him. However, Zampanò kills a man whom Gelsomina contemplated running away with and the guilty conscious overtakes her. Even though she intended to care for Zampanò, his actions destroyed her and he finds himself abandoning the only person who loves him. This turn of events ruins the family dynamic between these two, and Zampanò later discovers Gelsomina dies. Her death is still representative of the first-society model of the nation state; her death represents that the family module cannot persevere without the man supporting them.

Backtracking in *La Strada*, Gelsomina and Zampanò join a travelling circus as performers. The shot consists of the old man who hired them standing in the foreground with Gelsomina, and Zampanò looming in the middle ground. The background consists of unknown female performers, presumably a part of the circus. The shot shines a light on the old man, who invited Gelsomina to stay with the circus after Zampanò was exiled from it for fighting. The light could represent that he is Gelsomina’s last hope in finding a something beyond Zampanò. Gelsomina—painted as a mime—grasps her hands together in worry. Although her makeup presents a shocked expression, her true composure hides behind the façade. Gelsomina constantly fights an internal battle with herself to stay with her abuser or give herself a more fulfilling life. However, her doe-like eyes reflect her childlike innocence and she does not see the world quite so dimly; Zampanò’s abuse does not bother her as much as it probably should. Zampanò stands behind them intimidatingly, holding his chains and dressed as a gladiator. His expression appears menacing and his position in the frame makes him even more frightening. The mise-en-scene of the shot reinforces the idea that Zampanò is a man of power who constantly looms behind Gelsomina, holding her metaphorical chains in his hands. Zampanò is also placed in the shadows in this shot to probably emphasize how dark of presence he is for the bubbly Gelsomina. The fact that the three characters mutually look upwards metaphorically shows how they all see the future that could have been: Gelsomina in the circus with the old man, and Zampanò brooding alone.

In conclusion, Federico Fellini’s Italian drama *La Strada* used a concept of nation state throughout the film. Fellini used the philosophy of the first society or “family” through his characters Zampanò—to represent the father—and Gelsomina, the family. The concept of first society branches off from nation state, and is used in other media surfaces such as films and video games. The concept of first society explains that the family is the first, functional form of society; the father is in charge and the family is his responsibility. However, once the children mature they no longer need to be cared for by the father, but stay with to take care of him in return. Fellini’s film also uses Italian neorealist techniques, such as simple costuming and showing Italy’s socioeconomic issues as they were. The first-state concept destroys the characters in the end, for they both have no one to care for. The film was an interesting one and broadcasts multiple personalities, as well as issues within Italy during that time period.

Works Cited

Barker, Ernst. Gerard Hopkins, John Locke, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Social*

*Contract: Essays by Lock, Hume, and Rousseau*. London: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

*La Strada*. Dir. Federico Fellini. Perf. Giulietta Masina, Anthony Quinn. Ponti-de Laurentiis,

1954.

Martelli, Otello, and Carlo Carlini. *La Strada*. 1954. Italy. *Alamo Drafthouse Cinema*. Web. 20

Apr. 2017. < <https://drafthouse.com/show/texas-tech-international-film-series-presents->

la-strada>.

