Synopsis – 8-1/2:

Many filmmakers love nothing better than making films about making films. Sometimes it works (THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL, 1952; DAY FOR NIGHT, 1973) and sometimes it sort of works (AFTER THE FOX, 1966). In the case of Federico Fellini's 8 1/2, it works darn near perfectly. Many critics slammed Fellini for being self-indulgent in the making of this picture about making pictures, but that was the entire idea! Film directors are, by nature, self-indulgent, otherwise they wouldn't enjoy ordering people around the way they do and tossing out the script when it doesn't please them.

The story of the film is about as close as anyone will be able to get to the inside of a human being's brain and how the creative process works. Mastroianni (in a thinly veiled characterization of Fellini) is a director coming off a big hit. He needs rest and goes to a spa-type hotel to regain his strength. While attempting to recuperate, his producer, Guido Alberti, won't let him be; he wants details from Mastroianni about the new sci-fi film for which they have committed. Hundreds of people are waiting in the wings for Mastroianni to get started. (It’s similar to the way Charlie Chaplin used to keep everyone on salary while he went to his Beverly Hills home and mused for months until he came up with an idea he felt was worth filming.) Mastroianni finds himself creatively blocked and fending off the inquiries of his actors, reporters, and his pain-in-the-neck writer, Rougeul. Totally confused about what he wants to do next, Mastroianni begins to fantasize. We're never sure if he's actually recalling what has happened before or whether it is wishful thinking. He remembers his dead mother and father, a sequence wherein he watches a fat hooker dance on a beach, snippets of what it was like to be in a 1930s Catholic school, and a fantasy showing him controlling a horde of women with a whip. Now reality intrudes with the entrances of his wife, Aimee, and his mistress, Milo. He begins to examine his relationship with both women as well as with the others who invade his life. Claudia Cardinale arrives. She is an actress who personifies every woman he has ever dreamed of. His attitude toward Aimee is boredom, and he has the age-old "my wife doesn't understand me" quarrel with Milo. He thinks he may be able to find happiness with Cardinale but is shattered to learn that she is as dumb and egotistical as she is succulent and desirable. This causes him to go even deeper into apathy and depression. He holds a press conference on the exterior set of a rocket ship which has been built for the as-yet-unwritten sci-fi film. The press barrages him with questions, none of which he can satisfactorily answer. He decides to forget about the sci-fi film and let the set disintegrate with time. He has one last fantasy in which he kills himself, and that act frees him of his misgivings. A group of circus clowns arrive. With them is Mastroianni as a child, Guglielmi, playing a flute. Now a parade begins and it includes everyone in his life, the living and the dead. They form a circle and start to dance as the picture ends.

Phew! What does it all mean? Who knows? Everyone who's seen 8 1/2 gets something different out of it, and Fellini will only shrug if you ask him what it was all about. He'd made three short films and six full-length pictures when he did this. Searching for a title, he added up the total of his work and it came to 7 1/2. This one made it 8 1/2. It's a film about a crisis in a man's life, and Fellini is using the whole world as his psychiatrist. He bares more in this than any other filmmaker had until that time. (Bob Fosse may have eclipsed him for self-revelation with ALL THAT JAZZ.) There are two prints of this, one at 140 minutes and one at 188 minutes. See the shorter one if possible. Less is more in the case of 8 1/2. Fellini has often annoyed and perplexed with his work, but as complex as this may be, the message he sends is clear: it isn't easy being a genius. (Note: One assistant director was Lina Wertmuller.) The film won Oscars for Best Foreign Film and Best Costume Design. Nominations included: Best Direction, Best Screenplay, and Best Art Direction.