

Sex, drugs, death and debauchery: how *La Dolce Vita* really began

A 1950s gossip writer who was an inspiration for Fellini's classic film has decided to tell his own tale of a glitzy era

by Tom Kington

Rome

When the gossip columnist Victor Ciuffa emerged blinking from a private viewing of *La Dolce Vita* in Rome in February 1960, he had one thought in his mind: the film he had just watched amounted to his life played out on the screen.

Federico Fellini's classic depiction of decadent American starlets and persistent photographers changed cinema forever. Now the journalist who chronicled 1950s life on Rome's glitzy Via Veneto and briefed Fellini for his film has decided to give his own definitive account of the era. As far as Ciuffa, now 77, is concerned, 50 years later he is setting the record straight, by writing *La Dolce Vita, Minute by Minute*.

"The real *Dolce Vita* started in Rome years before the cafés opened on Via Veneto and had as much to do with mysterious deaths, drug abuse and debauched Roman aristocrats as with Hollywood," he said. While photographers such as Tazio Secchiarioli have long been seen as inspirations for Paparazzo, the character in *La Dolce Vita* who gave celebrity-chasing photographers their name, Ciuffa claims he provided source material for the cynical columnist-about-town, played to laconic perfection by Marcello Mastroianni. "Ciuffa lived that period intensely; I am sure Fellini was inspired by the work he was doing," said Elio Sorci, another photographer who prowled Via Veneto at the time.

Like Mastroianni's character, Ciuffa enjoyed a middle-class provincial upbringing before plunging into the Rome demi-monde by chance. His first big assignment as a cub reporter was the mysterious death in 1953 of Wilma Montesi, a 21-year-old whose body was found on a beach at Ostia, Rome's port. Witnesses suggested Montesi had been dumped in the sea after overdosing at a sex-and-drugs party attended by the cream of Rome's aristocracy, held at a hunting lodge on land owned by Italy's former royal family, the House of Savoy.

"The *Dolce Vita* started at that party," said Ciuffa. "I noticed that witnesses were regulars at a bar on Via del Babuino, which was the hangout for existentialists and artists living on Via Margutta, led by the artist Novella Parigini, who caused a stir when she put America's first transsexual, Christine Jorgensen, in a horse



Anita Ekberg faces the press in *La Dolce Vita*. Paparazzo, a character in the film, gave his name to celebrity photographers. Rex

'A pusher got into a fight and the police arrested a marquis, a prince and a count'

Victor Ciuffa, gossip writer

buggy and paraded her round Rome." The city's aristocrats were prowling for foreign girls to invite back to their palazzi, a scene later recreated in *La Dolce Vita*. A then unknown Ursula Andress dated a count until he threw a bottle at her head during a row. The Felixstoweborn actress Dawn Addams became a princess in 1954 when she married into a family descended from a general in the Roman empire.

Fifty years on, for Ciuffa the memories are still fresh. Such as the time, in June 1956, when a well-known pusher who had been exiled by Mussolini to Calabria before the war got into a fight in a bar. He was accused of passing off bicarbonate of soda as cocaine. "The police arrived and arrested a count, a marquis and a prince,"

said Ciuffa. The bar owner decided to shut down, but in 1958 quietly reopened for business at the Café de Paris on Via Veneto, which became a magnet for US actors arriving at the big hotels on the street. As the *Dolce Vita* took off, Hollywood was discovering the low cost of film-making in Rome and the high jinks to be had.

Soon working as a gossip columnist at *Corriere d'Informazione*, Ciuffa was first to write up a scandalous striptease by a Turkish dancer in a Trastevere nightclub in November 1958, which finally alerted the world to the licentious and wealthy lifestyle that became known as the *Dolce Vita*. On that particular night, the Swedish actress Anita Ekberg danced barefoot, a scene she would recreate in Fellini's film, before Aiche Nana stripped to her knickers, egged on by the usual crowd of "aristos", who fled when the police arrived.

"I received the photos taken by Tazio Secchiarioli the next morning and rang the police. 'Nothing happened,' they said. 'If you journalists don't talk about this, nothing happened.' I wrote a long story and by lunchtime news vendors in Milan were yelling 'Scandal!'" By this time Ciuffa was meeting Fellini regularly at the Café de Paris before the director

started filming *La Dolce Vita* in 1959. "He wanted to hear about the parties that I was going to."

As the appetite for celebrity gossip exploded, stars grinning at the camera were no longer good enough. "Many shots of actors brawling with photographers were arranged by both parties in advance," said Ciuffa, who was not shy of creating news on a dull night. "We found two cigar-smoking Cubans at the Café de Paris who agreed to deliver roses at 2am to Ava Gardner's address. Her assistant called the police, who arrested the Cubans. Sometimes you needed to make it up."

Despite keeping a satirical tone in his articles, Ciuffa was taken aback when he saw *La Dolce Vita* at a preview held by Fellini. "When I saw the film, I realised how celebrity warps characters and the stars who flocked to Via Veneto saw themselves as gods," he said.

From that day on, Ciuffa adopted the pen name Ugo Naldi for his gossip column. "I really considered stopping, but I needed the money. My editor was in the habit of calling up to say, 'Send me a piece that will give this paper an erection!'"

AVA GARDNER GOES OUT ON THE TOWN

Taken from *Corriere d'Informazione*, 24 October, 1959
by Victor Ciuffa

Ava Gardner has come to Rome to make a film and does not wish to be disturbed by journalists and photographers...

...In Piazza di Spagna, the actress's secretary confronted a photographer, Lino Nanni, forced him off his moped, yanked his camera from his hands and broke it over his head. The photographer has reported the attack to the police.

Shortly after making her protest, Gardner appeared in a black chiffon outfit and a black fur in a nightclub in Via Emilia.

Sitting at a table with her secretary, she appeared euphoric. When she felt the need to dance, the elderly secretary was unable to oblige, prompting Ava to choose a Roman gentleman.

The actress left the nightclub at 3am. Hailing a cab, she got in with the unknown gentleman and two photographers. That is when the real merry go round began...

Ava decided to make her first stop at La Cabala nightclub in the old part of town... Ava continued to appear strangely euphoric, keeping the club open until after 4am.

By that time, only Ava, her secretary and the gentleman remained, but they were unable to leave because of the photographers blocking the exit. Inside, the actress began to become extremely agitated.

Outside, the photographers began to argue with the unknown companion, and by the time she came out it was 5am. More horseplay in the streets of the centre. Protests from the secretary and a few policemen fell on deaf ears. Ava was forced to suffer the siege, but eventually her taxi managed to lose them. At precisely 6am, the actress reappeared at the entrance to her hotel.

Gardner turns on a photographer at Rome's Ciampino airport. AP



Tyrant's son to pay £14m to his victims

by Tracy McVeigh

Chief Reporter

The American-born son of former Liberian dictator Charles Taylor has been ordered to pay more than £14m in compensation to five people tortured during the West African country's civil war.

A judge in the US made the order a year after the same Miami court sentenced Charles McArthur Emmanuel Taylor, known as Chuckie, to 97 years in prison for his role in one of Africa's bloodiest chapters; he was the first person to be convicted by a federal court of committing offences outside the US.

The 32-year-old led the notorious Anti-Terrorist Unit, a band of pro-government paramilitaries nicknamed the Demon Forces who carried out murder and torture during his father's presidency from 1997 to 2003.

Witnesses at his criminal trial in 2008 spoke of hearing him laugh as prisoners were abused and how the Anti-Terrorist Unit "did things like beating people to death, burying them alive, rape - the most horrible kind of war crimes".

His father, also Charles Taylor, is currently on trial at the Hague facing 11 counts of crimes against humanity. The former warlord's regime was accused of involvement in murder, rape, gun running and diamond smuggling in both Liberia and neighbouring Sierra Leone.



'Chuckie' Taylor is said to have laughed as prisoners were abused by 'Demon Forces' paramilitaries.

The trial - in which Taylor denies all the charges - has been going on since June 2007.

"Chuckie" Taylor was the result of a teenage romance when the former president was at college in Boston, Massachusetts, and lived in Florida with his mother until he was a teenager when he went to live with his father in Liberia. He was first arrested on a fake passport

charge at Miami airport in 2006 but later indicted under the 12-year-old anti-torture law, the first time it had been used.

This latest civil case heard that five Liberians had testified before the court that they had been tortured and abused by the Anti-Terrorist Unit.

They described being held in jungle pits that were filled chest-high with water, being exposed to electric shocks to the genitals and other body parts and witnessing Taylor's men killing other people.

At the end of the civil trial last week, Taylor, who is currently in prison in Illinois, dismissed the torture allegations as deceptive propaganda.

However, human rights groups have welcomed this latest ruling against him. They say it is a move that might serve as a warning to others who commit similar abuses that they will be held accountable for their actions.

A spokesman for United States immigration and customs enforcement said that it was a "clear message the US would not be a safe haven for human rights violators".



Transforming lives How extended services benefit all

It's five years since the introduction of extended services and now 94% of schools and their partners are signed up. In a special supplement in Education Guardian on Tuesday, we look at the impact services are having, the lessons that have been learned and the challenges ahead.

theguardian

