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Rippled Raptures



Fellini wearing Casanova's crown

Robb Baker

(Fellini's Casanova)
Cinema I

Opening image: a festive carnival reflected in the shifting waters of a canal. Enter Fellini's Casanova, with time (mid-18th century), place (Venice) and mood (tinsel gaiety and masked indentities) all established through the clear but not-quite-steady surface of a moving mirror.

Fellini's Casanova is all air and water, fire and fog—instability, insubstantiality. Reality is rippled, reflected, never confronted head-on—a world of visual bombast, of eccentric grotesquerie, distorted images that by their very excessiveness manage to at once distance and transcend reality. As always, Fellini gives us a film comprised of chunks and virtuoso turns; any attempt at superimposing a structure, an overall narrative thread on the fragments and anecdotes would defeat the whole thing. Like a week, a year, a day in any man's life, *Fellini's Casanova* is infuriatingly unorganizable: it has too much and too little detail; it is too long and too short; it's a jigsaw jumble with a lot of pieces missing and several included which don't seem to fit at all. Which is exactly as it should be.

Casanova himself fits perfectly into Fellini's earth-shy depiction of reality. He floats innocuously through a world of pastel-backgrounded opulence, scattering his promiscuous presence as he goes—its superficial gloss making about as much difference to the waters as a pebble might, dropped back in the canal.

Fellini chose Donald Sutherland to play the egocentric womanizer, he's said, because Sutherland's "moonface seems to be an erased face, a face with features like water, that exist and don't exist" (the face, surely not coincidentally and certainly ironically, also bears a striking resemblance to Fellini's own, especially in profile). Sutherland's Casanova is far from handsome, certainly, and far from masculine, sensual, or earthy. He has that kind of artificial prissiness and self-regard which is variously dubbed foppish or faggish, depending on the sexual inclination of the man in question.

Casanova's inclinations are, of course, rabidly heterosexual (and just as rabidly anti-homosexual), and Fellini seldom

denies him his lady conquests—for what it's worth. Casanova mounts his partners like a bull on a trampoline. While a ridiculous mechanical-bird music-box plays Nino Rota circus muzak, Casanova (after no foreplay whatsoever) missionary-positions himself through a standard set of wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am acrobatics, sweating, groaning, rolling his eyes and lolling his tongue, and finally collapsing seemingly near-dead after each and every climax. The women appear to get off on it a bit, but poor Casanova himself takes so little pleasure in coming that it begins to seem miraculous that he makes it over the edge of ecstasy at all.

Fellini follows his cipher/hero through scene after scene "freely drawn" (as the opening credits acknowledge) from the real-life Casanova's long-winded autobiography. The opening seduction features a supposed nun (with scarlet hoop and petticoat under her habit??) who romps and squirms with Casanova while the French ambassador (who's actually a spy for the Inquisition) peeps through a hole in the wall. The rendezvous takes place during a violent storm in an old castle (the lantern-led trek through long dark passageways has become a kind of Fellini trademark) and Casanova's trip there from the moonlit carnival has all the trappings of a surreal Fellini nightmare—rowing through waves of black plastic.

Most of the best chunks of the film are non-sexual in nature: an elaborate dinner party where Casanova ridicules some Parisian occultists (one of the guests is a wonderful little brat of a prodigy who dismisses the theology of St. Augustine regarding the Virgin birth with three sharp swoops of her "logical" brain); another dinner hosted by a hunchback (Daniel Emilfork Berenstein) homosexual (complete with singing castrati and symbolic opera-ballet) where Casanova discourses on feminism while the out-of-focus camera surveys a large tray of sliced canteloupes; an audience with the Duke of Wurtemberg (Dudley Sutton) with Casanova trying to make his political platitudes heard over the sound of six bleating pipe-organs; Casanova's fascination with a circus giantess (Sandra Elaine Allen) who plays with dolls and takes a bath in a large barrel with twin midgets; an encounter between Casanova

and his mother in an empty opera house, after which the son carries the tiny old woman on his back out into a stunningly artificial painted snowscape.

But through all this comes the exhaustive catalogue of seductions: a countess (Daniela Gatti) who speaks of her buttocks in the third-person masculine, asking Casanova to discipline "him" with a riding crop; a skinny ethereal peasant girl (Clarissa Mary Roll) who faints and gets bled a lot until Casanova cures her with his healing staff; a fragile old alchemist (Cicely Browne) who offers Casanova all her gold in return for the "Great Work," a sexual symbolization of the alchemical marriage through which the aged woman is convinced she will conceive and be reborn a man from her own womb. Then there's a contest between Casanova (who deems himself "intelligence and wit") and a common coachman (animal passion, brute force) to see which of them can come more times during an hour of public performance; and later Casanova has an orgiastic night with a nymphomaniac hunchback girl while a whole grotesque troupe of opera singers look on, masturbate, and try to join in.

Casanova meets his nemesis, his perfect soulmate, at last: a Coppelia doll (Adele Angela Lojudice) whose cool mannikin mechanical performance (in life as in bed) is the true equivalent of Casanova's own.

Fellini could have left it at that (and should have), but added a heavy-handed postscript with Casanova grown old and cranky, a librarian for a Bohemian nobleman, still insisting that he's more than a laborious bore of a cocksman, that posterity will remember him as more than a dabbler in the magic, philosophy and politics of his time, that he's more than a portrait ripped from a volume of his own writings and smeared onto a lavatory wall with human shit.

Fellini needn't clobber us over the head like that; he's won the game already without insisting on trumping the final trick. He still does stunningly what he's always done, which is show us the layers of reality beyond his brilliant artifice—the black plastic waves, the painted snowscape, the giant head rising from the dark lagoon during the opening carnival, a shyster giving tours of the inside of a dead whale. Casanova's whole world of superficial wealth—wigs, bright costumes, ornate furniture, gold-and-silver table settings—are played off against backgrounds of pastel dullness, greys and browns, shades of off-white, a two-dimensional *trompe d'oeil* drop. It's Fellini's uncanny gift of genius to make us see this artificial real-world (which keeps struggling desperately to enforce its own shallow parameters) while at the same time delivering at least two alternate realities as well: the actual poverty/pestilence of 18th century Europe, and some higher realm of spiritual transcendence (the gnawing *possibility* of which is always present in a Fellini film). Giacomo Casanova scoffs at such mundane and other-worldly concerns, of course, which is part of what makes Fellini (his chronicler but never his worshipful *biographer*) great. ●



Under Casanova's robes, an adventurous nun



Casanova (Donald Sutherland) dines.