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# Tutto Fellini

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## Federico Fellini: A Remembrance

by Albert Johnson

Federico Fellini, a master of cinematic dreams, realized in his later years that there were still too many reveries left unfilmed. His vast collection of poetic images and his landscape of Italian faces has already confirmed his position as one of the world's unforgettable film directors; there is an indelible part of Fellini submerged in the psyches of those devoted to international cinema. An overview of Fellini's work now lies before us like a splendid visual feast, with a panoply of human emotions inherent in each cinematic bill of fare. Here is an opportunity to study, to relive, and to appreciate a particular kind of dramatic humanism: a filmic pizza, heavily spiced with life.

My personal association with Federico Fellini began when I wrote to him about a film series I had arranged on the Berkeley campus devoted to his work thus far. He had completed only six features at that time, and his seventh, *La Dolce Vita*, was the scandal of the continent, with rumors that the Vatican's disapproval might cause a censored version to be shown abroad. The American premieres of *The White Sheik* and *Il Bidone* were among the Berkeley series, and Fellini generously responded to my letters, sending photographic materials and encouragement for those programs.

My admiration for Fellini grew with each successive work, as the enormity of his imagination was acclaimed by the international film world. In 1970, after teaching abroad, I contacted Fellini, who invited me to join him on the set of *The Clowns*. It proved a memorable three days during which I could watch him at work. Expansive, full of good humor and adored by his actors and crew, Fellini's personality dominated the surroundings. At lunchtime we all went to a restaurant in town, where Fellini ordered every entree on the menu. He was amused when I told him that the very austere, aristocratic "white clowns," in their forbidding makeup, were frightening to behold as they glared at me over their plates of pasta. As I watched him on the sound stages of Cinecittà, I realized the extent of his inventive ability to transform a world of fantasy to suit his particular reality, dredged from his memory of the circus and the tragicomedy of clowns.

Good fortune would allow a friendship to develop between myself, Fellini, and his wife, the great actress Giulietta Masina. In the following years, my annual visits to Italy for various film festivals always included conversations with the director at the Cafe Canova on

the Piazza Di Popolo, where Fellini often had morning coffee; at his apartment on Via Margutta, or the Fellini summer place in Fregene. During the shooting of *Roma* I sat among the hippie-extras as Fellini filmed us on the steps of the Piazza di Spagna, and even later, watched Masina and Marcello Mastroianni imitating Astaire and Rogers on the set of *Ginger and Fred*.



Federico Fellini and Albert Johnson, Rome, 1970

In 1980 I was able to fulfill a long-cherished dream—to present the first public tribute to the career of Giulietta Masina at the San Francisco International Film Festival. The responses of the audiences there, and at a subsequent Pacific Film Archive evening, were tumultuous, filled with love between an artist and her admirers. Masina never forgot those experiences, and after that, she was finally acknowledged in Italy (at the Taormina Festival) with an award as one of the cinema's greatest actresses.

It would be impossible to disassociate the genius of Masina from the world of Federico Fellini. Part of their mysterious sense of drama and characterizations could only be expressed by that somewhat occult phrase, "Asa Nisi Masa," that Fellini invented in 8-1/2, a phrase that could evoke the past and move one into a world of magical things. (I always ended my letters to Fellini with this phrase, or used it as we said goodbyes in Rome.)

When he received the special Oscar at the Academy Awards ceremonies in 1993, I phoned Fellini to see if, possibly, he and Giulietta might stop for two days in the Bay Area for an appearance on campus. It could not be managed, and he was in good spirits. I never thought that it would be my last conversation with both of them.

This film series will bring everything back again: the White Sheik swinging through the trees; Zampano and Gelsomina performing at the fair; the music of Nino Rota, defining the sweet life; the erotic visions of *Satyricon*; night-waders in the Fontana di Trevi; the lusty humor of Rome itself. A peacock in the snow, and Masina's smile as Cabiria.... "Asa Nisi Masa."

## Fellini's Casanova

*Federico Fellini (Italy, 1976)*

Fellini's version of the life of Casanova, the profligate seducer of 18th century Italy, is similar to an effulgent carnival. The film is permeated with a grandiose style, so brilliant in visual effects that the sexuality of the hero becomes more comic than concupiscent. Although Fellini had read most, if not all, of Casanova's autobiography (twelve volumes!), he makes the episodes of seduction a showcase for his own philosophies of life from youth to old age.

There were great expectations when Fellini announced this project. Most people felt that Alain Delon, the French heartthrob, would have made a perfect Casanova (in 1991, he did portray this character); Fellini preferred Marcello Mastroianni (he played the role in another film, too). The producer wanted Robert Redford (who almost got the part). The preparations for *Casanova*, with its huge budget, dismayed the original producer, and the cinematographer and art director worked closely with Fellini before the money was even available to start filming. The casting, mostly from open calls, exhibits the director's quest for unusual faces, and *Casanova* is a gallery of grotesques. There seems to be some conjecture about how Donald Sutherland was cast as Casanova, because his enactment of the role is strictly symbolic.

The very opening sequence of the film, with its stunning imagery of Venice at carnival time, with the gigantic head of Venus rising from the Grand Canal, prepares one for an onslaught of memorable images. Casanova's priapic adventures are not romantic, they are either demonic revelries, wrestlings with whores and hunchbacks, or sinister freak-shows where figures enter through the mouth of a whale. The true hero of the film is Danilo Donati, whose sets and costumes continually astonish the eye.

*Casanova* was badly served by its American distributor who insisted that an English soundtrack be dubbed on the film, and this was too much to bear for American devotees of Fellini's films, as criminal a distortion as wrapping the Pieta in chintz. *Casanova* should revive itself as Fellini's most extravagant and courageous dream.

## The Voice of the Moon (La voce della luna)

*Federico Fellini (Italy, 1990)*

Although *Intervista* had won a special prize at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival, it did not get an American distributor at that time. This was a severe blow to Fellini's belief in the appreciation of his work abroad, and when the same fate happened in 1990 to *La voce della luna*, which was shown out of competition at Cannes, Fellini was absolutely crestfallen. This film had been the culmination of an idea that he had considered in the past, with a theme concerning a possibility that true

insanity was really one's protective armor against depressing circumstances. Fellini wrote the script himself, using some of the background of his childhood, and completed a dreamy, almost Beckett-like story about a young wanderer, a moonstruck figure, Ivo, played by the comedian Roberto Benigni. Benigni had attracted attention because of his woebegone, comic persona, seen on television in Italy and already known to American audiences after his work in Jarmusch's *Down By Law*.

The mood established in *La voce della luna* reminds one of similar moonlit moments in *Intervista* and *Casanova*, but here, the characters are more remote. The landscape is not identifiable, and Ivo, with his friend Gonnella (Paolo Villagro), a plump, aging actor, wander across the fog-strewn fields, encountering characters who form the basis for their lunar fantasies. A pallid blonde, Aldina, is Ivo's dream-girl, illuminated by moonlight; a marriage between Nestore and the town manicurist, Marisa, becomes an erotic romp reminiscent of *Casanova*, with its insatiable odalisques. The decadent effects of the mass media are attacked, too. A so-called "Gnocchi Festival," and a gigantic discotheque in a factory, where mobs of youngsters gyrate to Michael Jackson's music, are extraordinary set pieces in the film. Eventually, even the moon itself is "captured" in a huge harvesting machine. Although the peasants may worship it, the intellectuals are only argumentative and the church, resigned to this phenomenon. Ivo and Gonnella, a sort of Laurel and Hardy, move toward silences against the sounds and fury of the world, hoping to understand the meanings of life. To Ivo, the moon speaks in the voice of womankind.

All of this bewildered the critics, who apparently wanted something else from Fellini; exactly what, no one ventured to say. Fellini was undaunted, however, harboring unrevealed dreams.

## Orchestra Rehearsal (Prova d'orchestra)

*Federico Fellini (Italy, 1979)*

One of Federico Fellini's pleasures as a film director was working with the composer Nino Rota. It was his memory of attending the recording sessions of *Nights of Cabiria* and particularly *La Dolce Vita* (perhaps the most famous of Rota's scores) that encouraged an idea of making a film about orchestral activities. The tensions and temperaments of musicians at work inspired the mischievous side of Fellini's personality. There was always a sense of satire behind these observations, and Fellini made a series of pen-and-ink sketches of Rota's fluctuations of patience during rehearsals. The possibilities of uproar and violence, while playing the most dulcet tones, appealed to the director's imagination.

*Orchestra Rehearsal* has the elements of a documentary, but with many whimsical touches: the rehearsal hall was once an old chapel, where popes and prelates are buried, and the musicians are far from humble in their respect for the conductor. Only some of the musicians were professional. Fellini had to have his "faces," including a nonagenarian and the lady hunchback from *Casanova*. A Dutch actor (Baldvin Bass) was assigned the role of the beleaguered conductor, and he is superb as the more dire events rise to a crescendo of chaos. Gluttony and sex even manage some expression, as well as sudden death. The viewer establishes a rapport with the closeups of the characters despite the atmosphere of Hellzapoppin amid the music stands. The musicians speak in different dialects and when the film was first shown, Fellini was accused of political favoritism regarding various government parties. Most of all, *Orchestra Rehearsal* is consummate fun.

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