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FILM REVIEWS

FILM IN REVIEW APRIL 1977

FELLINI'S CASANOVA

The credits for this film announce it is a portrayal "freely drawn from *The Story of My Life* by Giacomo Casanova." That means, stamped with a personal vision, eccentric and individualized, a cinematic revelation of the excesses and the folly of the Eighteenth Century. This is not, simply, Casanova, but, as the title proclaims, *Fellini's Casanova*. Those who want Casanova's Casanova can find him in the *Histoire de ma fuite* (1788) and the twelve-volume *Memoires ecrits par lui-meme*. This film is not intended, therefore, to be either history or biography, but a personalized vision of history, and will only make sense in terms of the integrity and coherence of that vision.

And it *does* make sense; the more one has seen of Fellini's other works, the more sense it will make, for it extends the personal symbolism he uses time and again (huge, bloated, sea-creatures, for example, here presented by a human procession into the bowels of a whale for a Leviathanic magic-lantern show) and develops a weave of moral and thematic grotesqueries into an iconographic tapestry that reflects the state of the mind and imagination of Fellini. Those who disapprove of him may be expected to protest its indulgence.

But those who approve of Fellini

will be interested in his impression of the world of the "Enlightenment," a world of systems and licentiousness, and what he imagines it to signify. Fellini creates in this film a systemic universe, governed by the idea of perfection, but also a dehumanized world, a mechanical world of non-value. Fellini's Casanova becomes a spokesman for this world. He is an aristocrat, inventor, student of alchemy, political theoretician, man of letters, philosophe, dehumanized robot, and a moral fool. He wants recognition and respect as a gentleman and an intellectual, yet his reputation, more appropriately his notoriety, depends more upon his loins than his mind. This prodigious copulator is the "Great Lover" ironically incapable of love. His life is structured upon a series of orgasmic encounters, each an end in itself, demonstrations of sexual prowess and nothing more, all ultimately pointless. There are no *human* encounters in the film. Women are dehumanized and viewed merely as desirable objects, orifices.

The film becomes a hideously satiric demonstration of human vanity and egotism. Twice in the film Casanova mentions his "great loves," but these are women whom he cannot possess and exploit fully. The ideal woman he

discovers in Germany, the country that gave us mechanical precision, the mentality that gave us the cuckoo clock. She is not *quite* a woman, however, but a glazed, life-sized, mechanical doll. It is grotesquely appropriate that Casanova regards her as an object of sexual desire, and he is able to organize her mechanism and turn her on to the point of orgasm.

Fellini's portrait reveals the sadness of a personality defined by genital acrobatics, whose only fulfillment seems bestial indulgence, and the sadness of a man who, because of shallow vanity, is never quite capable of recognizing the sterility of his existence. The film is necessarily pathetic because the central character lacks tragic dimension. He can be nothing more than an heroic shell. Significantly, Casanova is fascinated by Fellini's Earth-Mother figure in this film, a gentle giant woman symbolizing fertility. But he cannot number her among his conquests; he can only observe her voyeuristically while she bathes herself, somehow innocently, with her attendant twin dwarfs. Like life itself, she passes him by.

The film opens with a spectacle in Casanova's native Venice, a montage establishing atmosphere, with symbolic fireworks displayed as the head of a pagan idol with dull, mute eyes is hoisted from the depths of the canal as if, momentarily, to observe the festivities, before again being submerged. *Casanova* ends with an extended dream-montage that is "pure" Fellini — a hollow wind blowing on the sound track as the ancient, forgotten Casanova remembers his beloved

Venice (to which he can never return, having escaped the Inquisitor's prison), his lost love Isabella, his lost youth. He is reunited in this dream with his "perfect" love, the glazed, mechanical doll. The two embrace, mechanically, then turn slowly, as if partners in a dance of mechanistic futility. This final dream is cued by the red-rimmed eyes of a very old man, an imperfect observer of the world, held in close-up, and it represents a final symbolic conflation of inner and outer reality, the one intelligently springing from the other.

Not much, I think, can be said of Donald Sutherland's performance as Casanova, for he is obviously used as Fellini's tool. This is a director's and not an actor's picture. In *Casanova* Fellini takes the world of *Satyricon* and advances it by several centuries; but it is essentially the same debauched world. The film seems to represent a cynical denial of the potential for human progress. It is, finally, a disturbingly bleak vision of the human animal trapped in a systemic universe. JAMES M. WELSH