

## HISTORY TO HYSTERIA: FELLINI'S *CASANOVA* MEETS BAUDRILLARD

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*Identity is untenable: it is death, since it fails to inscribe its own death.*

Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>

The untenability of identity is the nucleus around which Fellini's *Casanova* orbits. There is no subject, history or myth in this film, there is only simulation. In addressing this movie we will be informed by the following guideposts: 1. The presence of the simulacrum means the absence of history and a subsequent ungrounding of any real referents for the subject. 2. The only avenue left for the subject who desires the affirmation of its being is the "hysteric production" of signs of the real: the creation of hyperreal effects and, in essence, a hyperreal subject. 3. Hysteric production takes the form of a search for referentiality that can only end in failure because the object of the search is a phantom reality created from the subject's desire for the real.

Though Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum will prove crucial to our consideration of Fellini's *Casanova*, we will not simply employ the former to explain the latter. Rather, we will play one off against the other. More precisely, we will play the figure of Casanova through the simulacrum in order to write a critical third text out of the two (Baudrillard, Fellini) before us.

History to Simulation: Evolution and Disarticulation

Central to our discussion is Baudrillard's simulation-related notion of "the structural law of value" — a "law" which evolves from and seeks to replace its two antecedents: the natural and the commodity laws of value. Also important is the *relationship* of these three laws, which form what Baudrillard terms the "Three Orders of Simulation": the *counterfeit*, *production*, then *simulation*.<sup>2</sup> It is the third order that primarily interests us, with the *progression* of the various simulacra being particularly important for several reasons. 1. The progression from a natural to a structural law of value can serve as a model for a similar movement from history to simulation via myth. 2. Simulation today, severed as it is from the real and history, has nevertheless built upon the ruins of its predecessors. Simulation thus has to be understood as having important (though admittedly tenuous and tangential) connections to history and, in particular, with myth. 3. The order of simulation makes clear the fact that history is lost to simulation. The disarticulation of the real and its simulation is foregrounded and the way is cleared for the creation of hyperreal effects.

The movement from history to simulation takes place through a series of evolutionary disarticulations. In Fellini's *Casanova* the protagonist is decidedly not represented as an historical figure. Fellini himself describes his film as "a film on nothingness: there is no ideology, sensation, feeling; there are no emotions of even an aesthetic character; there is especially no eighteenth century and, consequently, no historical point of view of a historical-critical or sociological nature".<sup>3</sup> Here, in one grand statement, Fellini has dismissed Casanova from the burden of representing history in any manner whatsoever. This dismissal moves Casanova into the realm of the mythic:

(I)t is clear why (Casanova) has become a myth, because he is a nothingness, a universality without meaning ... a complete lack of individuality, the indeterminate — that's it. In the indeterminate, there always resides a great fascination, because the indeterminate is the great collectivity that gathers everything together, confirms everything, exalts everything, breaks up everything in a system of coercive and unalterable exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Fellini's conception of Casanova's mythic status moves Casanova beyond myth and into simulation. The "system of coercive and unalterable exchange" that he mentions is what we have earlier encountered under the guise of the structural law of value. Myth cannot be said to be indeterminate or a nothingness because it has specific meanings for the culture that produces it and can only exist for as long as it is usable by that culture. Myth also depends on history for its generation (and society for its "use value" and perpetuation) whereas simulation has no need of history. Barthes has this to say on myth and its relation to history:

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(O)ne can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things.<sup>5</sup>

The connection (and evolution) of myth to history is clear and what Fellini is discussing should not be considered to be myth but simulation.

It seems appropriate here to clarify the evolution of history to myth to simulation by means of a chart.

### The Three Orders of Simulation (after Baudrillard)

Order of Simulation	Dominant Scheme	Law of Value	Representational Manifestations
<i>First</i>	<i>Counterfeit</i>	<i>Natural</i>	<i>History</i>
<i>Second</i>	<i>Production</i>	<i>Commodity</i>	<i>Myth</i>
<i>Third</i>	<i>Simulation</i>	<i>Structural</i>	<i>Hyperreal</i>

The fourth column is our addition and is titled as it is in order to emphasize the fact that it deals with modes of representation as they occur within each particular phase of simulation. For example, the dominant form of representation in the third order of simulation is the creation of the hyperreal. This must be distinguished from the first and second order's representational manifestations, which are, respectively, history and myth. The fourth column proposes that there are differing modes of representation in the various orders of the simulacra. These varying modes should not be taken as absolutes, but are useful if considered as dominant within their particular order of simulation. Reading the chart horizontally yields a "syntagmatic" view of a particular order of simulation. The first order takes on an historic discursive form by way of the counterfeit of seemingly natural events. The second order of simulation is marked by the production, by way of "commodification", of mythic discourses. Finally, and of greatest interest to us, the third order of simulation's structural orientation begets a discourse that is hyperreal. Because the fourth column is intended to indicate modes of representation the term "hyperreal" is preferable to "simulation". It is important, however, to note that simulation may also be used in reference to the discourses that the third order of simulation produces. Hyperreality can be thought of as a result of a simulational world and as such it becomes a specific subset of it.

The difference between simulation and hyperreality is to be found in their differing focus in relation to signs and reality: where simulation is concerned with reference, hyperreality is concerned with representation. We have changed the orientation of simulation and hyperreality here from states of being or situations into means by which to understand those states

of being. It is for this reason that we may speak of simulation as having a "concern" or "focus". It is, of course, ourselves that do the focusing by way of employing simulation and hyperreality as critical tools. Nevertheless, it is along the aforementioned lines that the division of hyperrealism and simulation will be drawn.

Reading the chart vertically reveals its "paradigmatic" dimension, which is to say, its evolutionary connections. What concerns us here is our addition to Baudrillard's scheme; that of the movement from history to simulation via myth. As Barthes noted, myth is founded upon history. In our scheme it could be said that myth "evolves" from history and that the logical extrapolation is that simulation (in the form of hyperreal representations) evolves from myth. Baudrillard echoes this in a discussion of the order of simulation when he says; "each configuration of value is resumed by the following in a higher code of simulation. And each phase of value integrates into its own apparatus the anterior apparatus as a phantom reference, a puppet or simulation reference".<sup>6</sup>

Fellini's *Casanova* is a simulational representation precisely because it begins with the mythic and not with the historic. Myth has a certain value as a commodity for society because it is traded amongst its members through various discourses. Simulation, on the other hand, is not placed under this controlling structure of exchange. Instead, it becomes a controlling structure itself for the culture that has entered into the age of the hyperreal. The hyperreal's "phantom reference" is myth; "history" is the myth that preceded *it*. At this stage myth, as a vessel of abstract cultural values, becomes reality — and the "phantom reference" for the hyperreal. It is exploded into self-parody as it is broken down and freely exchanged in the simulacrum. Its ties to history are severed and with the loss of those ties the cultural value that myth once (supposedly) had is also lost.

Accordingly, the figure of Casanova ceases to be historic and his mythic status becomes ridiculous and self-effacing. Fellini can call Casanova both a nothingness and a universality because, as a figure, Casanova is an absence given presence through a process of being "written". Casanova's "nothingness" is a result of his hyperreality, his existence only as sign. His "universality" arises from the infinite associations that may arise from his sign quality. Casanova is universal insofar as he is open to exchange within the simulacrum.

### Semantic Cancellation: Subject and Hysteric Production

#### *Identity and Cancellation*

The question now raised is how the subject (represented for us ultimately by Casanova) seeks identity under such conditions. With history lost and the myths produced from that history exploded, the simulacrum becomes the territory of human action, replacing the lost territory of the real. Identity becomes a process by which the subject creates a sign-construct that

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is intended to be identical with that subject. Identity becomes the loss of one's territory of subjectivity and its replacement as a place in the simulational map. Identity is thus sought in the association of the body with an identical, hyperreal version of the subject in the simulacrum.

Under these circumstances, identity indeed becomes untenable. For further insight on the matter, we again turn to Baudrillard. Here, he is discussing systems of power within the simulacrum, but his statements may be read as a discussion of the individual. (In our scheme the individual is a system seeking self-definition):

Any system approaching perfect operationality is approaching its own death. When the system declares: "A is A" or "two and two make four," it simultaneously arrives at the point of complete power and total ridicule — in other words, of probable and immediate subversion. At this point it takes only a straw to collapse the whole system.<sup>7</sup>

The process of identity-definition (the ability to state that a group of signs is synonymous with an existent being) is thus subverted by the simulacrum. The point at which the identity process aims is, in fact, also the point at which identity breaks down ( $A = A$ ). Because there can be no assured reference to reality in the simulacrum the assertion that a grouping of signs (under the name of identity) is directly related to some individual who exists in the real world simply cannot be made. In actuality these attempts merely serve to point out the construction of identity from signs and signs alone. Arthur Kroker picks up on this and describes it in this manner:

In Baudrillard's world, we are in flight through a vast, social apparatus which has, as its principle of motion, an inner, semiological transformation of every particle of experience — bodies, labour, power, money, speech — through an empty cycle of abstract, symbolic exchanges .... The rules surrounding the "cycle of liquidation" at the heart of power and the sign remain constant: a fantastic "semantic cancellation" at the centre of the exchange process; a relentless "semiological reduction" of experience to the tautology of binary language; the "satellisation of the real"; an "inner semiurgy" which works to impose symbols without original referents; the sovereignty of the "structural law of value".<sup>8</sup>

The key here is the term "semantic cancellation" for it embodies the duplicitous nature of the sign in relation to identity. Signs replace reality while representing it and thus is the original referent effaced. Identity in the simulacrum is thus "the liquidation of experience by the empty language of the sign".<sup>9</sup> Identity becomes the mere simulation of experience.

*Hysteria and Production*

Here we should recall Baudrillard's assertion that the hyperreal "becomes reality for its own sake, the fetishism of the lost object — no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination".<sup>10</sup> The lost object of fetishism in the simulacrum is the real, and its ritual extermination takes the form of its definition; the resulting semantic cancellation inherent in stating that  $A = A$ . Similarly, the subject assembles its identical self in signs in the hope that these signs represent and refer to reality. However, with the real lost, the inability to access the real merely begets an increase in the attempts to define, and hence, possess it. Baudrillard: "whence the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and overproduction of the real...What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it".<sup>11</sup> The production of meaning is purely circular as one definition leads to another and so on. Production becomes a kind of continual defense against collapsing  $A = A$  systems, a continual deferral of the inevitable realization of the nothingness at the centre of such systems. The systems referred to can be either power systems (i.e. the state) or personal (the subject and identity). The point is that sign production is simply that: the production of signs.

This is the world envisaged in Fellini's *Casanova*. It is a world wherein Casanova finds only chaos and non-meaning and enters into the hysteric production of a binding narrative. His memoir/narration is a method by which to create an identical/identity Casanova out of signs.

It is perhaps only here that history has any real meaning in the film. History is significant only insofar as it provides for Fellini the opportunity to obviate and ridicule hysteric production. Casanova, as an eighteenth century figure, comes to represent the Enlightenment and the beginnings of the rationalist project. Simulation, however, is the end of that project. No longer is it plausible to believe in the mighty power of the mind to discern eternal truths or fundamental laws upon which societies may be run. Casanova is thus awash in the simulacrum, caught by the undertow of hyperrealism and unable to free himself.

*Spectacle: Venus and Venice*

The opening sequence presents, at the height of communal celebration, an unsuccessful attempt to raise the bust of Venus from the canals of Venice. The first images following the credits introduce us to the spectacle of simulated existence. Venice is not presented as history but as spectacle. Everywhere there are masks, humanity is effaced in favour of aestheticized representation. The individual is invisible in the sea of spectacle and similarity/repetition. It is not until the end of this sequence that we discover Casanova is also in the crowd. He alone is plucked out and individuated from the mass. In a sense, we already know the "identity" of this man since history and myth have often presented it to us. On the other hand, the

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film is about to reveal that the identity we know as "Casanova" is no more than a sign and that the subject to which it ostensibly refers (Giacomo Girolamo Casanova, b. 1725 — d.1778) is completely lost to us.

It is here that Casanova's narrative begins. Indeed, it is his narrative that brings Casanova forth. From now on we will only experience Casanova insofar as he exists as memoir (a point to be discussed in more depth shortly).

We must note here the connection between Casanova's emergence from the simulacrous world and the failed raising of the statue. The statue is lifted, and a poet reads aloud: "Venice, our Queen! Venus, our Queen!". Venus, goddess of love is immediately allied with the spectacle of Venice. The bust itself is an enormous crowned head of a woman. Sexuality, spectacle and art are conflated. This is the beginning of hysteric production.

Moreover as "Queen" the statue represents authority — initiating a quest for *originating* power and legitimation. Moreover, the bust is that of a woman, aligning women with origin. This introduces a crucial paradox within the film. Woman is, on the one hand, presentable only in aestheticized form (only as representation). Yet woman is not a subject within a simulacrum (as Casanova is) but representative of the unattainable goal of the real. Woman then = myth which, from the perspective of the simulation is (all that's left of) the real. The particular choice of Venus (goddess of love) as mother indicates that all women will serve as mother/origin figures — transforming Casanova's sexual exploits into a parable of a search for origins. The failure to raise the statue sets up the futility of the search for origin. Reality (even the reality of myth) remains inaccessible, submerged in the depths of simulation.

The fact that the bust is a work of art combines with its role as embodiment of origins to turn art itself into a means of accessing origins, a path to the real. (This, of course, is "self-denying" in that art is a creation of signs, making the "reality" accessed through artistic production itself no more than an aesthetic creation.) Art is a construction and surfacing of the real out of the glassy pool of possibilities. However, with the failure of the art work to "materialize," art (and representation in general) is denied its referentiality and instead is seen to be simulational.

The bust represents nothing. As the film progresses we will find no Queen, no origin, no real. The bust refers to nothing but itself and the desire of its producers to have icons of the real. Its subsequent raising thus becomes a raising of the mythic to the real. This all takes place within the space of spectacle. The entire action is an hysteric attempt to ground meaning, to find a centre for the discourses of art and sexuality, to establish the possibility of reference by imposing meaning on symbol.

All that emerges from the water before the bust is submerged are its eyes. Directed outward, the gaze of the statue reflects its own simulational being. There is nothing behind the eyes, no reality waiting to be accessed, no mystic authority to condemn or condone the festival's participants.

There is only the empty gaze of a sign construct, the singular nothingness of an attempted  $A=A$  equation.

Kroker, in a discussion on Magritte's painting *The False Mirror*, has this to say about the eye:

In the symbology of the disembodied eye, a mirroring-effect is in progress in which the *terms* of the relation (signifier and signified, but also all of the antinomies across the table of classical discourse) refract back and forth as image and counter-image in the endless curvature of a tautology.<sup>12</sup>

The eyes of the statue are thus simple reflections of the spectacle that produced them. There is no real to be accessed behind the gaze because all that lies behind those eyes is the reflected spectacle of their production. There is no seeing beyond the simulacrum, everything is contained within its systems of free exchange. Although the loss of the statue at first indicates a concomitant loss of the possibility of origin-access, it is really no loss at all. The loss of the real has already occurred since the entire episode takes place within the simulational world of spectacle. The loss of the statue simply means that one particular attempt at meaning production has been lost. The rest of the film is essentially a series of repetitions of this sequence: the desire for origins, the transfer of that desire onto an image of woman (often very maternal) and the subsequent loss of that image. The Giantess, for instance, is discovered at water's edge as Casanova is readying himself for suicide within the waters of simulation and the cycle of desire and denial is repeated.

The final images of the film place Casanova on ice. The film finally achieves the ultimate representation of the "surficial" nature of simulation, the final implosion of A into A. Access even to the unlimited play of signs is denied since it is locked beneath the ice. Casanova is permanently preserved in the perfectly cold and static world of a simulational moment. Time is lost because there is no history, and Casanova exists as pure sign. He is no longer even a subject within a simulacrum, but has attained the status of sign itself. He is simply a term awaiting combination or exchange; he is a word. No longer Casanova, he has become effaced in the creation of the identity-giving, identical sign-construct, "Casanova".

### *The Subject of Narration*

There is another sense in which the image or concept of the eye operates in Fellini's *Casanova*. Fellini says of the film that there is a "total absence of everything ... there are only forms that are outlined in masses, perspectives articulated in a frigid and hysterical repetition".<sup>13</sup> This supports much of what has been observed, especially with regard to hysteric production. The important thing here is that Fellini is discussing the text's own production, rather than the world it represents. His statement makes it clear that the film is to be perceived as spectacle rather than history or

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psychological exploration. The film is presented as a narrative creation of the figure of Casanova. This statement has two meanings. First it can be understood to mean that the film is a story about Casanova by Casanova himself. This is, to some extent, true if we consider that the film is ostensibly based upon Casanova's memoirs. Second, it says that Casanova is a nothing that is, somehow, "narrativized" into existence. Casanova is no more than the creation of the narrative, and the narrative thus reflects back on itself as a kind of documentation of its own creative process. We can think of the Venus/Venice statue here and apply it to the film itself: the film is akin to the statue, a construct that holds no meaning beyond the reflection of its own production.

Throughout the film the only connecting thread between sequences is Casanova's "autobiographical" narration of events. Perhaps the most significant example is his escape from a Venetian prison. In lieu of an actual escape we are presented only with Casanova's narration of it. (We see him emerging through the roof of the prison, but we are not told how he got free of his jailers.) It is, in short, a simulated escape,<sup>14</sup> which, like so much else in the film, is "performed" in the theatrical rather than existential sense, thus condensing Casanova, as both narrator and protagonist, into the single term of performer. Moreover, the collapse of all event into narration means that Casanova's story is not *about* him, it *is* him.

In fact, Fellini's (and Casanova's) use of voice-over narration becomes the ultimate storytelling technique in the representation of simulated identity. Casanova becomes a figure of desire rather than of history: the desire of the narrator to be known and admired as "Casanova." A again becomes A as Casanova creates an identity out of signs (the narrative itself), then becomes identical with it.

The culmination of this process is Casanova's discovery, late in the film, of his image plastered by feces to a wall in the latrine of Waldenstein castle. At last Casanova has an image to point to of himself. (He calls it a "striking likeness" and becomes momentarily mesmerized by it.) He has become sufficiently "identical" that he can become a model for representation. More than that, he can enjoy endless reduplication and distribution (as can the copies of his memoirs and, in fact, Fellini's film). He has passed beyond the necessity of self-definition, hence he has passed beyond the need for narration. He can bring his story to a close and die (same thing).

Fellini captures much of this through a shot in which Casanova, walking away from the portrait, creates a shadow which covers it. This is a moment of complete reversibility. The image puts a face on the shadow and the shadow gives a body to the face. Both image and shadow are, however, incorporeal and as such point to the ghostly existence of Casanova. He becomes the portrait of a shadow, or as Fellini would describe it, "the indeterminate". This single shot gives us all of Casanova without giving us any of him and it is a crucial visual moment in which  $A=A$ .

*The Social Spectacle*

In the simulacrum there exists no higher authority that can confer its acceptance/power upon Casanova. Since everything exists in a free exchange of signs, power systems can only remain intact so long as they are recognized and supported by sycophants like Casanova. Every court Casanova visits is a chaotic spectacle wherein power and authority are absent and resurrected only through Casanova's dependency. The Pope is a childish, leering, buffoon who commands little obeisance — and then only through his position and the signs that surround it. The final authority figure, the Duke of Waldenstein, is, significantly, away on a trip.

Casanova's sycophancy is a direct result of his need for identity and for confirmation by a power that exists outside the simulacrum. Only such an originary power could enforce reference. Only something beyond the unlimited play of signs could definitively state that A does indeed equal A. Because there is no such authority Casanova's desire for real identity can never be affirmed, and the fear of "semantic cancellation" begets the hysteric and endless production of systems of absent power.

Conclusion

As implied earlier, Fellini's *Casanova* ends with a death. What dies in fact are the vestiges of the mythic incarnation of Casanova. (Historically, Casanova was dead from the outset, replaced with a mythic stand-in.) At the end of the film this mythic version also dies, affirming the the film's operation in the mode not of myth but of simulation. The voice-over ends here and we see Casanova's eyes, in extreme close-up. They recall the statue's eyes from the opening scene inasmuch as we may sense something behind them. But what it might be is unclear since Fellini has denied us any knowledge of Casanova as anything but sign throughout the film. We may impute terror, frustration, illness but these remain conjectures only. His physical death is pure hypothesis, pure sign, the ultimate glorification of himself as tragic hero/immortal. His narrative demands this sort of ending in order to complete the A=A process. This would be the ending of a typical myth-generating narrative, and could be taken as such, unless we consider that Casanova has already died the death of an erased referent.

If we interpret this scene in this manner then the concluding scene on the frozen canal becomes highly significant. Casanova is positioned now to be handed down through history as sign, and as such, he exists only in the rarefied atmosphere of the linguistic signifier. He looks partially as he did at the film's beginning. His youth is restored, but he now has the taut plasticity of a waxen image, a perfected representation. Authority, in the form of the Pope, finally confers its blessing upon him and he enters the illusory world of power (illusory because it too exists and is engendered only by the *signs* of power and obedience to those signs). He is reunited with his love: the mechanical doll who perfectly symbolizes the

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mechanized and masturbatory sexuality of the simulacrum. Most important, however, is the presence of his mother. Her appearance completes the search for origins that guides the film.

The "real" origin, however, is the sign itself and, more specifically, the sign of Casanova. The film loops back on itself and the end becomes the pre-condition for the beginning. Casanova's establishment as pure sign is a necessary condition for the functioning of all that has preceded it. The final scene brings all the major elements of the film together (origin, authority, individual, sign, sexuality) in one final act of simulation; the simulated dream. This scene can be read in at least two ways: 1) as the afterlife of a dead referent (Casanova as subject) who is reborn as sign (the hyperreal Casanova); or 2) as the final questing dream of Casanova who, on the brink of death, imagines the culmination of all of his desires to be the establishment and validation of his own hyperreal identity. Both interpretations are rich in implication but the significance of each is exactly the same. Either way one looks at it, Casanova remains a hyperreal subject condemned to semantic cancellation.<sup>15</sup>

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### Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "The Structural Law of Value and the Order of the Simulacra", trans. Charles Levin in *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters With the New French Thought*, ed. John Fekete (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 58.
2. "The Structural Law of Value," p. 61.
3. Aldo Tassone, "Casanova: An Interview with Federico Fellini", in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 28.
4. Tassone, p. 30.
5. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin Books, 1985), p. 110.
6. "The Structural Law of Value," p. 56.
7. "The Structural Law of Value," p. 58.
8. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 123.
9. Kroker/Cook, p. 123.
10. "The Structural Law of Value," p. 70.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 44.
12. Kroker/Cook, p. 81.
13. Tassone, p. 28.
14. This is particularly ironic since Casanova's escape apparently has some verifiable basis in fact, unlike most everything else in Fellini's reconstruction of Casanova's memoirs.
15. My thanks to Frank Burke for his editorial assistance.