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# Fellinian Dream Substitution

*La cantina (Banca di Roma) and Il libro dei sogni by Federico Fellini.*

di [Frank Burke](#) – 17 Febbraio 2020



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In conjunction with the [centenary](#) of Fellini's birth and a new [Mondadori edition](#) of *Il libro dei sogni*, I am turning my attention to Fellini's wonderful and challenging dream book. Eventually, I hope to find ways to celebrate its uniqueness, but as a point of departure, I would like to address a strategy of narrative "substitution" that one can find in certain of Fellini's films and television commercials – as well as in some of the more extensive dreams or dream-cycles in *Il libro dei sogni*\*. Given the brevity of this intervention, I will disregard his films and limit myself to one of his Banca di Roma "dream" commercials and to two of his entries from *Il libro dei sogni*. **By narrative substitution I mean the way in which characters and events replace one another along a symbolic path that charts either an enhancement or a diminishment of promise and/or of self-awareness for the protagonist.** This principle of substitution is, of course, fundamental to our dreams, as situations suddenly transform themselves into others in a way that may seem irrational but is often driven by a powerful logic and a profound examination of issues not initially obvious to the conscious mind.

In the second of Fellini's three **Banca di Roma commercials**, *La cantina\*\**, the **substitutional process occurs both within the dream and between the dream and its postscript**: the dreamer's visit to his psychoanalyst and then his relocation to the Banca di Roma. It should be noted that in the Banca di Roma commercials, Fellini is not applauding the kind of Jungian psychoanalysis practiced by his mentor in the 1960s, Ernst Bernhard. He is parodying Freudian-style psychoanalysis in the service of institutional power.

The commercial goes as follow (my summary): a middle-aged man dressed as a little boy in a sailor suit follows an older woman, who is carrying a bucket downstairs into a cantina. He whispers breathlessly in voiceover "La Signora Vandenberg! She was the most beautiful woman in the world. She was Dutch and lived above us when I was in high school." Then, he calls out to her, "Signora, let me help; I will carry the bucket for you." She turns and says in Dutch, "You're not up to it; you're still a little boy." He clearly understands because he responds, "But I'm not still a little boy; I'm the director of a company – a man who is important, respected, feared." She responds, again in Dutch, "you have remained a little boy" and moves off, not to be seen again. This time, he doesn't understand. He looks backwards and off screen and asks, "Please, is there anyone who can translate?" A gate swings open in the darkness, and a voice says, "Yes, I can. She says that, deep down, you have remained a little boy." A lion enters through the gate. He jumps down from a ledge. We see tears coursing down from the right eye of the lion, and the protagonist rubs tears from his left eye and turns away. Fade to black. The protagonist turns on his light whimpering "why, why?". The doctor pontificates, "But why are you keeping your lion in the cellar, humiliating it, degrading it. Come on, don't make it cry. Sometimes, pride, dignity, even a certain aggressiveness, can make you feel more secure in life. The same secureness that the Banca di Roma can give you in many other situations." The commercial then zooms into a picture on the wall of the psychoanalyst's office wall that then is transformed into the lobby of a bank, where the protagonist has moved his bedroom furniture. We hear his voiceover proclaiming his happiness to be there and his desire for serene nights. He rubs his hands together gleefully and takes a flying leap into his bed.

**The principal substitutions that occur here are the protagonist's misrecognition of the Signora for the Signora herself, the lion for the Signora, the psychoanalyst for the protagonist, and the Banca di Roma for the psychoanalyst.** The cantina serves as a fairly obvious and affirmative representation of the unconscious. It is a dark place where one can store things when they are not needed and retrieve them when they are – and where one can draw upon hidden wellsprings, implied by the bucket and the sounds we hear of water. Moreover, it includes or at least offers access to a space

beyond, into which the Signora disappears, implying a realm of otherness that, in Fellini, is often quite positive. **The Signora herself embodies movement, energy, and force: powers that the protagonist desperately needs.** She is an incentive for change, capable of leading the protagonist, in every way, beyond the scene/seen. She moves insistently toward the rear of the cantina, bucket in hand, in order to exit it. She proves uncontainable, and she quickly disappears. **She is, we may posit, a spiritual, not material, resource.**

The protagonist sees things differently. He fixates on her instead of giving himself over to her guiding energy, and he seeks to stop her with his insistent voice. He succeeds only briefly, and she never remains still. He, on the other hand, manages to stop himself entirely, quickly, and only part way into the cantina. He then begins to look behind him rather than forward, in search of a “translation,” indicating that he has very quickly lost the capacity to understand, literally and figuratively, his potentially transformative guide.

**The protagonist’s reliance upon language and his need to “understand” the Signora suggest a need to mediate her immediate and initially non-verbal force.** More than that, he sexualizes her, treating her as an objectified manifestation of his own desire instead of as an incitement to a creative encounter with otherness, difference. Once he loses her, she is replaced by the lion, whose role as intermediary is highlighted by the call for translation. On the one hand, **the lion is quite gifted.** He not only has language skills (Dutch and Italian), he conveys a sense of self-confidence and maturity lacking to the protagonist. He understands not just the words of the woman but the lost opportunity, embodied by the dream, hence his copious tears. **Like the woman, he can be read as part of the protagonist/dreamer: embodying not the capacity to access the unknown as did she, but at least the capacity to acknowledge the tragedy in not so doing.**

Despite his attributes, he marks deterioration in the creative possibilities of the narrative dream. Spatially as well as psychologically he is further removed than the woman from any implied source of replenishment or wholeness. He is clearly domesticated, a circus lion so tame he has no need of a trainer, a wild animal for whom submissiveness has become habit. **Gender-wise, he replaces Signora Vandenberg’s otherness as woman with the “feminine side” of a male.** This is reflected in his sensitivity but also suggested when, as soon as he appears, we begin to hear the sound of water, the presumed “feminine principle.” His tears become what remain of the regenerative source, for which we might assume the bucket, in the logic of the dream, was intended. He may be positive in terms of what he retains of the Signora, but he

displays none of her energy or humor; **he is listless, sad, resigned – like the protagonist in his waking life.**

Once the protagonist awakens, the Signora, the lion, and the dreaming unconscious have been left behind, and we are left with the therapist. **The protagonist makes no effort to address his dream, and the therapist proves woefully inadequate.** Not only does he ignore everything except the lion, he misses all the virtues and complexities of this interesting creature. He reduces him to a symbol of the protagonist's repressed "pride," "arrogance," and "aggressiveness" and ignores the fact that Signora Vandenberg possessed all three qualities (substituting "assertiveness" for "aggressiveness") without any sign of repression. Moreover, his advice contains a fundamental contradiction: the protagonist should a) be more aggressive, and b) put himself in the hands of the Banca di Roma. And, in fact, **the final substitution of the film sees the protagonist in bed in the lobby of the bank – a sterile environment designed to provide serene but no doubt dreamless nights and a life lived without imagination, mystery, or risk.**

**There are significant differences between Fellini's consciously constructed dream narratives, such *La cantina*, and the recorded dreams of *Il libro dei sogni*.** The latter originate as true dreams that, as recordings, do undergo conscious intervention and shaping. Nonetheless, they have the air of greater spontaneity and freedom – and of less conscious planning – than his filmed narratives. At the same time, because the dreaming unconscious often if not always works through narrative substitutions, it is not surprising that we find the kind of a similar kind of substitutive process in both. I would like to offer two examples from *Il libro dei sogni*. A dream of 19/1/1962 goes as follows:

With our hearts swollen with sadness Giulietta and I decide to end our days in the house at the end of Via Nomentana, built specifically for retirement. Down there the end of everything awaits us. It's raining. What melancholy. I experience a last weak spark of rebellion, but Giulietta says that it would be better "not to draw too much attention from people" and we decide to go into that house. My God what sadness! Giulietta gets undressed. Here we are, we've reached the end! I cry disconsolately; haven't I gotten better? This morning I was happy, now I'm crying desperately. Oh, if only Giulietta had listened to me and we hadn't come to close ourselves down here! In the bathroom, while I'm peeing, I hear the voice of Leopoldo Trieste telling his sister the title of a book by a Swedish author "What must

one kill?". "Not you I hope!" says the sister with a trembling voice, and finally this little woman who until then I had only heard over the phone appears. She's small, dressed in black like a lay sister, with little red braids around her head, her face sprayed with freckles. "Don't overdo the innocence with me!" says Leopoldo, who I can now see seated behind a desk with the air of a good, tolerant schoolteacher. Before him there's a naked, smiling lady; I wink at Leopoldo in solidarity. "You mean that your sister shouldn't exaggerate in playing the part of the innocent, right?" I ask. Leopoldo smiles and nods (*Fellini 2013, Vol. 1: 88-89*).

**This dream evolves from sadness and melancholy to pleasure and upbeat camaraderie on the basis of consecutive coupling:** it begins with Fellini and Giulietta, Leopoldo Trieste and his sister arrive, and we end with Fellini and Leopoldo. The dream begins in melancholy and, even more oppressively, with a heart-swelling foreboding of death. However, there are two hints of potential change early on: Fellini's "spark of rebellion" and his recollection that "This morning I was happy." These seem to give rise to Trieste, who is often an upbeat figure in Fellini's dreams, and the sister. I associate the fact that Fellini is peeing to his being in touch with his bodily aliveness, in contrast to the deadly drift of so much else at the start of the dream. This, like his rebellion and earlier happiness paves the way for narrative transformation.

The theme of death recurs in the title of the novel Trieste mentions to his sister – "What must one kill?" – but death is defeated by the sister's "Not you I hope!". Since all characters in a dream represent the dreamer, this comment would extend not just to Trieste but also to Trieste as representative of Fellini. And Giulietta as well, though she disappears from the dream. In fact, the sister, being small and dressed in black like a lay sister, becomes a new manifestation of Giulietta, who is almost always tiny and innocent in Fellini's dreams. The sister's funereal attire reproduces Giulietta's seeming acceptance of retirement and death at the start of the dream. However, as we have noted, the sister rejects the notion of death in the novel's title, and her black dress is accompanied by red braids and freckles. Moreover, she turns into a "naked, smiling lady" – a clear transfiguration of the Giulietta who earlier got "undressed." This generates the final coupling of the dream, Leopoldo and Fellini. **In the context of the dream's trajectory, Trieste's "don't overdo the innocence with me" is an affirmation of Eros over Thanatos.** As a "schoolteacher," he is functioning as a mentor not just to his sister but to the Giulietta and Fellini of the dream. **Innocence in this context is seen as the suppression of vital desires and instincts and as role-playing – i.e., as socially inscribed behaviour that can be rejected.**

My second, somewhat edited, example from *Il libro dei sogni* entails a process of substitution that occurs over two dreams from 27 December 1960. The first is quite well known.

In flight, inside a small airplane sliding silently through a wintry sky. It is evening, the airplane is comfortable...and we...are comfortable together, happy and upbeat. The airplane lands in a north European city (Denmark? West Germany?)...A youngish, elegantly dressed lady (who I don't think I know) tells me she is the mother of a girl who worked in one of my films.... [She] shows me...a diary her daughter keeps scrupulously updated, on the cover (or on the first page) there's a well-wishing message, a line taken out of context from a letter I had sent the girl, two typewritten lines: the meaning was to suggest some kind of advice on how to face life. Now I'm seated behind a desk, I'm an important manager at the airport, responsible for running the place. Facing me, with a dignified air, is a mysterious-looking traveler of unknown race, who provokes subservience, fear, and revulsion in me all at once. Who is he? Where does he come from? What does he want from me? This person with Mongolian features could be an immigrant, he undoubtedly wants a resident's permit, a visa, from me. His attitude was that of someone who has no doubts about his own rights and is waiting faithfully. The dignity and strength that emanate from this person, miserable and filthy to look at, gave me a sense of...[page is cut] I told him that it wasn't possible for me to let him in. I wasn't really responsible for this, but I felt equally guilty all the same, I was cowardly, petty..."I'm not the real boss of the airport," I said, turning red. "I don't have the authority to let you in...". But I knew that I wasn't being completely sincere, and I was ashamed by my cowardice...The dream ends with a close-up of this mysterious face (*Fellini 2013, Vol. 2: 182*).

Not as well-known is another dream he has "that same night," 27 December 1960:

Immense Villa Borghese, all covered with rain, what a lugubrious night! All around in the darkness whores and prostitutes peek out from amid the bushes, tree trunks, and marble busts. I wander around, tense, agitated, I have a date with Delia Scala..., and now I am waiting for her so that we can

make love. Two night guardians on bicycles stop me. They scrutinize me....Pimps and whores who have emerged from the tenebrous humidity surround me, everyone snickers, the guardians and prostitutes are disgusted with me, taking me for a bizarre sleepwalker, a foreigner to their world. I move away from those scornful gazes... and I realize I am naked, white, thin. "Filthy faggot!!" they yell after me, snickering, "Homo!" And to me it seems like they're right (*Fellini 2013, Vol. 1: 9*).

**These two dreams present us with three Fellinis. The first is the comfortable, happy, European on the move**, capable of providing paternal advice to a young admiring actress. **The second is the Eurocentric authority figure**, no longer traveling but deskbound at an airport. He is no longer offering advice and is, in fact, refusing to offer assistance and preventing someone else from continuing his travels. He is intimidated by and closed to the cultural difference proposed by the foreigner. **The third Fellini is a reaction to the first two**. This figure is not protected by the cultural complacency of the first nor able to exercise the second's troubled Western complacency on an "Other." **This Fellini allows himself to experience the full brunt of the difference he could not accept in the "Other"**. He suffers the unrelenting sense of scrutiny that the foreigner would have felt in the preceding dream – and worse still the prejudice, contempt, and rejection that lay just under the surface of the second Fellini's rejection of the outsider. Commentators often cite the airport encounter in relation to Fellini's fears of his own xenophobia, but I have never seen an analysis that considers that encounter in relation to the first part of the dream or in relation to the second dream of 27 December 1960.

Upon hearing Fellini's dream of his encounter with the foreigner, Fellini's Jungian psychoanalyst Ernst Bernhard told him "the day you come to understand this figure here before you will be an extraordinary day" (*Fellini 2013, Vol. 1: 182*). It seems from Fellini dream of himself a "faggot," that, on some level, he understood instantaneously.

## References

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\* Fellini's commercials can be found on YouTube, but they have also been included in an excellent 2009 French dvd on the director: *Fellini au travail*.

\*\* English-language quotations from *Il libro dei sogni* are from Guaraldi Editore's digital version, *The Book of My Dreams*, First and Second Volumes, <https://www.guaraldi.it/Scheda4938.html?id=780>.

Federico Fellini, Rimini 1920 – Rome 1993