

# *Mapping the Modern Sacred* in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* (2013)

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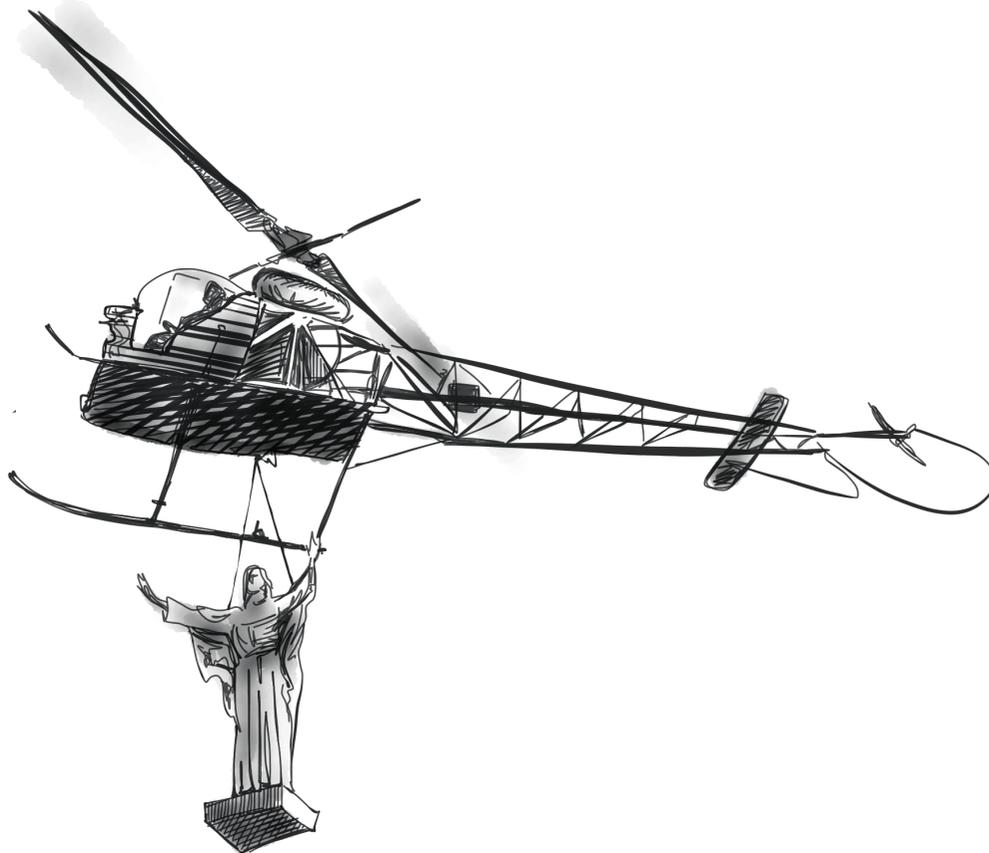


Fig 1. Illustration of the opening sequence of *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini 1960) (the author 2021).

The assumption we live in a secularized world is false.  
The world today ... is as furiously religious as it ever was.  
—Peter Berger<sup>1</sup>

In his seminal work *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (1999), Peter Berger challenges the assumption that modernisation means secularisation. Following Berger's repudiation of the secularisation thesis, a 'postsecular turn' has, in recent years, appeared in many fields of scholarship, from political theory and sociology to religious studies and cultural history. Largely popularised by Jürgen Habermas, 'post-secularism' seeks to accommodate the place of religion in modern society, rather than occlude one in favour of the other. Although I cannot cover the theoretical nuances of this elusive concept in the space of this article, I wish to stage the question of the secular and the sacred using two Italian films from very different time periods: Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* ('The Sweet Life', 1960) and Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* ('The Great Beauty', 2013).

*La dolce vita* chronicles the colourful spectacle of modern Rome through the world of Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni), a suave journalist-cum-gossip-columnist, whose aspirations as a writer are ultimately drowned out by the glamorous spectacle of Roman nightlife, Hollywood stars, declining aristocrats, and jaded intellectuals. Marcello descends into bitter, Dionysian revelry and self-serving hedonism.

Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo), protagonist of *La grande bellezza*, is not unlike an older version of Mastroianni's charismatic journalist. We meet Jep at his sixty-fifth birthday. Despite early success in his career, Jep has only written one book. Since then, he too has been seduced by 'the sweet life', living, like Marcello, between the dizzying late hours of the Roman nightclubs and the lonely, hungover moments of clarity that accompany the light of dawn. Although both characters never quite part ways with their cool cynicism—we may think of *La grande bellezza*'s final words, 'in fondo, è solo un trucco' ('after all, it's just a trick')—both films end with a possible glimmer of hope. In *La dolce vita*, the angelic waitress Paola (Valeria Ciangottini) waves on a beach to Marcello, who has just emerged from a night of partying. Though he seemingly cannot understand her, she proceeds to look directly into the camera. Even if she cannot reach Marcello, she extends her mysterious, salvific gesture to us as spectators, and the film fades to black. *La grande bellezza* similarly ends with a saintly figure and a beach. In Rome Jep meets Sister Maria (Giusi Merli), a missionary nun and proclaimed 'Santa' ('Saint'), unambiguously a parody of Mother Theresa. Jep then leaves Rome and returns to the island where he consummated his first relationship, with a girl named Elisa. In a direct evocation of Fellini's final shot, Elisa now looks into the camera. It is here, in turn, that we hear Jep read in voiceover the opening of his new novel. As his words spill beyond the film frame through his disembodied voice, they suggest the genesis of a wholly new medium, yet to be written—yet to be told.

Produced during a period of unprecedented Italian economic growth known as the 'Economic Miracle' (1958–63), *La dolce vita* juxtaposes the secular with the sacred from its outset. In the opening sequence (fig 1), a helicopter carries a statue of Jesus above the peripheral ruins of a Roman aqueduct. It then turns towards the city centre. As this buzzing emblem of modern technology heralds the arrival of the sculpture, the effigy casts its shadow over awestruck construction

workers and glamorous sunbathers. When the flying statue finally arrives at the Vatican, we witness, quite literally, a migration of the religious icon into the modern city. Decades later—and arguably now at a time that no longer grapples with the question of the modern but dwells instead in the postmodern—Paolo Sorrentino alludes to this moment in his television series *The Young Pope* (2016): in one scene, the camera hovers over the dome of St Peter's basilica, the humming of a helicopter audible offscreen.

Throughout his works, Sorrentino sets himself in dialogue with Fellini. Sorrentino's intertextual playfulness is particularly apparent with regards to Fellini's thematic and formal penchant for repositioning the sacred into the secular. Rather than opposing the religious and mundane worlds as irreconcilable,<sup>2</sup> both directors use stylised tableaux, cityscapes, and panoramas to show how religious icons and rites move into the everyday, urban landscape—how they move, as it were, from the otherworldly sublime into the earthly quotidian. This use of setting is especially evident in Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* and Fellini's *La dolce vita*. The backdrops of both films, of which Rome is the central one, become the locus for the shift between sacred and secular. Using the city as a metonym for modernity, both Fellini and Sorrentino foreground the figure of the flâneur through an urban, secularised landscape, mapping the shift of religion in modernity through distinct, juxtaposed topologies. By emphasising the geographies of the modern cityscape—and its antithesis in the natural seascape—both Fellini and Sorrentino trace the relocation, rather than the disappearance, of the sacred into the secular.

The narratives of *La dolce vita* and *La grande bellezza* feature protagonists who correspond to the Benjaminian/Baudelarian model of the 'flâneur', the quintessentially secularised aesthetic figure of the modern urban experience. As artist figures who have become creatively impotent over time, Marcello and Jep wander through Rome in a series of loosely connected vignettes. Even the episodic structure reflects a kind of 'flâneurship': it is propelled by the meandering movement between accumulative long takes and by non-causal narratives. Aligning themselves with the camera, Jep and Marcello tend to adopt a detached, passive viewership of the city. Significantly, the flâneur is a product of modernity, pursuing 'the modern only through a fundamental passivity'.<sup>3</sup>

In Walter Benjamin's terms, the Baudelairean flâneur receives 'profane illumination' and 'materialistic, anthropological inspiration' through his 'overcoming of religious illumination'.<sup>4</sup> I propose that the flâneur is a modern-day foil to the pilgrim. Unlike the flâneur, the pilgrim performs an ultimate act of 'sacrifice' through movement, as Giorgio Agamben points out, reestablishing 'the right relationships between the divine and the human by moving ... into the sacred sphere'.<sup>5</sup> Though Agamben contrasts this process with the tourist's 'destruction of all possible use', the flâneur—even more so than the tourist, another recurring motif in Sorrentino's works—aestheticises the world around him in a way that is purely self-serving.

Sequences from both *La dolce vita* and *La grande bellezza* echo this idea. In *La grande bellezza*, Jep peruses some of Rome's most

1 Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview' in Peter Berger (ed), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Eerdmans Publishing 1999) 2.

2 'Mundane' derives from the Latin *mundanus* (worldly/earthly).

3 Dimitris Eleftheriotis, *Cinematic Journeys: Film and Movement* (Edinburgh University Press 2012) 17.

4 Sigrid Weigel, *Body and Image Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin* (Routledge 1996) 17.

5 Giorgio Agamben, 'In Praise of Profanation' (2007) 10 *Log* 23, 31.

beautiful buildings with Ramona (Sabrina Ferilli), a stripper who in fact offers a much more profound relationship than any of Jep's friendships with glamorous literati. After attending a grotesque party at which a child prodigy is forced to perform action painting, Jep and Ramona leave with a friend who is entrusted with 'le chiavi dei più bei palazzi di Roma' ('the keys of the most beautiful palaces in Rome'). The three experience a kind of museum by night, and as spectators we are led through a montage of oil paintings, sculptures, and spectacular architectural works. While the wide-eyed Ramona faces the galleries with childlike awe, Jep is more apathetic. He turns away from the paintings with a cynical smile, retreating into the dark shadows of the candlelit corridor. In *La dolce vita*, Marcello visits a historic castle on an evening revel with the mysterious heiress Maddalena, with whom he has one of several profound yet melancholically doomed relationships. The two hold up a candle to an array of portraits. Marcello comments to a tipsy Maddalena, 'Che bello, hanno tutti gli stessi occhi, hai visto?' ('How marvelous, they all have the same eyes, did you notice?'). Maddalena, though, is more interested in playing with her veil than in examining the paintings.

It is important to note the axial connotations of the flâneur as one who moves horizontally. This meandering direction contrasts with the verticality associated with religion. As S Brent Plate observes, 'vertical sacred spaces aspire with their spires', whereas 'horizontal landscapes are bodies, circuitries that circulate and foster social communication'.<sup>6</sup> Sorrentino juxtaposes Jep's horizontal movement across the social circles of Rome with the vertical acts of penance performed by Sister Maria. Despite the caricatural vein that inevitably accompanies this postmodern use of the cliché saint figure, Sister Maria's presence in the final sequence of the film is striking. Sorrentino juxtaposes her penance with the opening of Jep's novel, spoken in voiceover. On her knees, the 'Santa' toils upwards, ascending the stairs towards the altar. Whereas Jep frequently has the advantage of looking down, surveying the convent courtyards from his terrace, the 'Santa' looks up towards the final step in a physically grueling act of humility. Furthermore, this vertical-horizontal axis undergoes a redemptory reversal in the flashback to Jep's 'prima volta' ('first time'). He often nostalgically recalls the event by looking up at the ceiling of his apartment in Rome. In a flashback, Jep also looks up at Elisa, who stands a few steps above him, filmed from a slightly low angle.

*La dolce vita* frames the reversal of religious, pilgrim-like ascension even more clearly. The religious journey now transforms into secularised sightseeing. One scene was deemed particularly blasphemous by a reader of *L'Osservatore Romano* (*The Roman Observer*),<sup>7</sup> the Vatican's daily newspaper. In the scene, the film star Sylvia (Anita Ekberg) ascends the stairs of the Vatican. Dressed in a couture version of priestly vestments, her costume further emphasises the culture industry's desecration of religion and pilgrimage. Sylvia, as the figurehead of the 'cult of the sex goddess'<sup>8</sup> or 'cult of the star', replaces the saint as an object of reverence. She becomes yet another character that, like the flâneur, has transformed the acts of walking, aestheticising, and surveilling into a new modern myth. The enraptured Marcello comments, 'Tu sei tutto Sylvia! ... Tu sei la prima donna del primo giorno della creazione' ('You are

everything, Sylvia! ... You are the first woman of the first day of the creation of the world'). The flâneur is thereby attached to the secular 'cult of beauty'.<sup>9</sup> *La dolce vita's* Steiner (Alain Cuny) embodies this kind of detached intellectualism. He touts the rhetoric of an aesthetic avant-gardist but, as with Sorrentino's performance artist Talia Concept (Anita Kravos), this rhetoric masks emptiness. These spatially grounded figures, led by the flâneur, use the city to stage the shift between the religious cult and the modern ritual of secularised aestheticisation, rather than wholly nullifying the former.

Georg Simmel linked the city to modern spiritual anxiety in the early twentieth century, and many have followed suit. We can see Rome as a metonym of modernisation. Zach Zimmermann notes that, in *La dolce vita*, 'Fellini presents an image of [a] new Rome in which religion is absent and material and sexual impulses rule'.<sup>10</sup> Yet this assertion overlooks the pervasiveness of religious symbols, architecture, and rites. These still dominate Roman life, albeit in a secular mode. As Michel de Certeau quips, 'unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts'.<sup>11</sup> Rather than transforming into a wholly new, urbanised metropolis, Rome preserves its iconographic identity as capital of both Hellenism and Christianity. Jep's apartment, for example, is surrounded by the courtyards of a convent, but it also has a spectacular view of the Colosseum. Though set in the twenty-first century, Sorrentino's production shuns modern transport and urban movement in favour of the old model of the ambulatory flâneur. Fellini, on the other hand, juxtaposes Rome's new and old. Modern transport, in fact, pervades the film. Characters ride cars frequently, Sylvia flies in to the airport, and there is of course the helicopter opening sequence. Yet while Fellini's helicopter symbolises modernisation, it moves towards a historic destination: the Vatican. Thus, the opening sequence foregrounds the Vatican within the modern-day cityscape. Despite the dwindling religious participation brought by Italy's 1958–63 'Economic Miracle', the dome of St Peter's dominates the Roman skyline in *La dolce vita*.<sup>12</sup> Even today, Rome, as capital of the Catholic Church, cannot completely renounce its religious affiliations.

These religious symbols and institutions coexist with consumer-driven capitalism. This coexistence is the mode of survival for a postmodern Rome that persists today, in which, as Pierpaolo Antonello comments, 'l'unico ancoraggio simbolico viene dato da una estetica e dalle sopravvivenze del sacro nel contesto di un processo continuo di "profanazioni"' ('a symbolic undercurrent only appears through an aesthetic and perpetual process of "profanations" that allow the sacred to survive').<sup>13</sup> In one episode in *La dolce vita*, the debauched aristocrats wander through the ruins of a decaying palazzo which, as the smarmy host explains, was originally built for two popes. 'Due papi!' ('Two popes!') repeats his vapid German girlfriend, seemingly amused by the sacral history of the now-derelect building. Though the architecture survives, it is now a site

6 S Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Columbia University Press 2009) 68.

7 Tomaso Subini, 'La lagrimetta negata nel finale di *La dolce vita*' in Raffaele De Berti (ed), *Federico Fellini. Analisi di Film: possibile lettura* (McGraw-Hill 2006) 65.

8 Andrew McKenna, 'Fellini's Crowds and the Remains of Religion' (2006) 12/13 *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 159, 167.

9 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford University Press 1992) 669.

10 Zach Zimmermann, 'Film as History: Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* as a Historical Artifact' (2010) 6(2) *Elements* 42, 49.

11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Steven Rendall tr, University of California Press 1984) 91.

12 Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini* (Cambridge University Press 2002) 66.

13 Pierpaolo Antonello, 'Rivalità intermediali e destino della letteratura in La grande bellezza di Paolo Sorrentino' in Denis Brotto and Attilio Motta (eds), *Interferenze: scrittori/registi e registi/scrittori nella cultura italiana* (Padova University Press 2019) 163.

for pagan séances and nighttime sexual escapades. Modern relics are displaced, even defamiliarised, into mundane settings. In *La grande bellezza*, ageing aristocratic 'principesse' ('princesses') are patrons of some of Rome's most beautiful buildings. However, surrounded by Rome's melancholy historicity, the 'principesse' spend their evenings playing cards and drinking whisky. In *La dolce vita*, miracle trees stand in a halo of cameras. In Sorrentino's *The Young Pope*, popes awaken under crucifixes to slip their feet into Havaiana flip-flops. The mise-en-scène of each tableau ironically juxtaposes religious symbols with secular, mundane objects of capitalist modernity.

While the city becomes the main site of modern secularisation, the sea represents its antithesis, a possible site of redemption and true spiritual experience. Andrew McKenna points out that in both *La strada* (1954) and *La dolce vita*, Fellini makes the beach a 'threshold space'. It offers symbolic redemption to Zampanò (Anthony Quinn) in *La strada* and to Marcello in *La dolce vita*.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Jep's nostalgic flashbacks to his 'prima volta' with Elisa take place on the beach of a depopulated island. Jep returns to this site by way of an oneiric ocean edited onto his apartment ceiling, a surrealist image that blurs time—as both a flashback and a diegetically present-tense daydream—and place—Jep's bourgeois interior merges with the faraway island. The simple horizons of these seascapes mark a formal contrast to the decadent baroque textures featured in both films. When Marcello first meets the angelic Paola at a seaside trattoria, he asks her to turn her head in profile. As a few rays of sunlight form a flat canvas-like background, she resembles a Cimabue cherub or Umbrian angel, and Marcello comments on this resemblance. Paola, as image, presents a stark contrast to the busy textures and depth of field Fellini uses for the decaying Roman palazzi. It is no surprise, then, that her reappearance at the end of the film occurs at the beach. Sorrentino makes an intertextual reference to this scene with Elisa. In a Caspar David Friedrich-like panorama, the sea aligns itself with biblical references and with the figure of the spiritual wanderer, but not with the flâneur. Rather than inviting secular aestheticisation, the seascape solicits self-reflection. The empty horizon has religious connotations and presents both Jep and Marcello with a chance for redemption and ascetic natural contemplation. In Marcello's case, though, this is seemingly lost. The waterscape is thus a visual, spatial, and (given its premodern simplicity) temporal foil to the cityscape. Read symbolically, the sea is an embodied setting for the Catholic 'grace' that Pier Paolo Pasolini criticised in Fellini's film.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, Fellini and Sorrentino thematise the migratory, modernised identity of religious symbolism through their formal language. They use tableaux to reflect the totalising effect of their modern worlds. Rather than being eliminated, the mystic ritual migrates into empty forms of 'pure art' and 'secular beauty'.<sup>16</sup> Mythical symbols survive in a modern setting by stripping themselves of their spiritual value, becoming objects that offer themselves to the secular aesthete and flâneur. For this reason, Jep Gambardella can proudly declare himself 'il re dei mondani' ('the king of high society', or 'the worldly king'). Yet despite the superficial appearance of his aesthetically opulent life, Jep has not found 'the great beauty' of the film's title. Thus, although Fellini and Sorrentino primarily adopt a formal method of juxtaposed coexistence, they use a thematically contrastive approach, mapping spiritual debasement—and rare pockets of hope—through a progression of symbolically imbued loci. Authentic spiritual enlightenment, on the other hand, peeks

through as a simple, silent, and uninhabited landscape. The words of a priest in *La dolce vita* capture this irresolvable dichotomy, exposing the mundane as cluttered, modernised chaos that occludes possibilities of individual contemplation. 'I miracoli nascono nel raccoglimento, nel silenzio ... non in questa confusione' ('Miracles are born in contemplation, in silence ... not in this chaos').

<sup>14</sup> McKenna (n 8) 171.

<sup>15</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The Catholic Irrationalism of Fellini' (Frank Demers and Pina Demers trs, 1984) 9(1) *Film Criticism* 63, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin (n 9) 669.