

Imitations of Life and Art



Girl with a Mandolin by Pablo Picasso, 1910

by [Kenneth Francis](#) (January 2022)

A few years ago, while on vacation in Portugal, I got talking to an American couple one evening while having dinner alfresco. Both Americans were sixty-something medical doctors and they reminded me of characters in a scene from the 1970s' British TV hit comedy, *Fawlty Towers*.

In the scene, a middle-aged married couple (male psychiatrist and female pediatrician) visit the Fawlty Towers' hotel and all hell breaks loose when the ultra-prudish hotel manager, Basil, misinterprets, out of context, the psychiatrist's pleasantries, believing he is prying into his sexual life. He also suspects a playboy guest has sneaked his girlfriend into his room. Such an occurrence didn't happen over our dinner in Portugal, but introducing themselves reminded me of the hilarious sitcom.

I was also reminded of another *Fawlty Towers*' scene (which I'll come to later) in which German guests arrive at the hotel and mayhem ensues when a concussed Basil goes crazy. But to return to the couple in Portugal, we got talking about the occasional struggles of heterosexual relationships, in terms of *viva la difference* and how we complement each other, despite the battle of the sexes.

We laughed when I told them about certain traits of my partner and how she, in an endearing way, is 'she who must be obeyed', to which the male doctor said: "Oh, so it's universal?" He, too, could empathize with the well-meaning dictates of the female of the species who is usually more organized and pragmatically manage the home more efficiently as well as dealing with most domestic matters. However, I told them that I always get to say the last two words at the end of an argument: "Yes, dear."

But in terms of life imitating art, as mentioned above, I recall another *Fawlty Towers*' episode called, 'The Germans', in which I perceived the first half of the show a snapshot, metaphor microcosm of an everyman living with his

wife/partner.

During the episode, Basil's wife, Sybil, is in hospital and she rings Basil many times to remind him to carry out several tasks to the hotel, including hanging a stuffed moose's head on the wall. Sybil's constant reminders drive Basil crazy, when suddenly, a series of events cause chaos at the hotel, including a fire in the kitchen, culminating with the moose's head falling off the wall, hitting Basil on the head and knocking him unconscious.

I told the couple about this episode and they agreed, lightheartedly, on the similarity of dictates, petty arguments and situations in their own domestic co-habitation and how life sometimes imitates art – without the moose's head, of course!

In the movie *Niagara* (1953), a young couple of newlyweds decide to visit the great waterfall for their honeymoon, where nature and life seem to imitate art. While there, they meet an older couple plagued with a deluge of marital infidelity and financial problems. Talking to the newlyweds who he meets, George (played by Joseph Cotton), says of the Falls:

“Let me tell you something. You're young, you're in love. Well, I'll give you a warning. Don't let it get out of hand, like those falls out there. Up above... d'you ever see the river up above the falls? It's calm, and easy, and you throw in a log, it just floats around. Let it move a little further down and it gets going faster... Why should the Falls drag me down at 5 o'clock in the morning? To me [to show me] how big they are and how small I am? To remind me they can get along without any help? ...”

The scene would've worked better without George spelling out the metaphor, but Hollywood probably included it for the benefit of the groundlings. On a grander scale cinematically, it's been said in some reviews of the movie *The Godfather*,

that the classic film is an insightful sociological study of how the world works. Scenes of violence, power, corruption and crime in America permeate the plot, with the 'honorable' crime family serving as a metaphor for the way business is conducted in capitalistic society, profit-making corporations and politics.

Another movie where life imitates art, is *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), a Roman Polanski film about a pregnant woman who fears her husband has signed a pact with a Satan-worshipping cult, offering her unborn child as a sacrifice in their rituals.

Coincidentally, some events in the movie played out to some degree in reality, when Polanski's pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, was, in 1969, ritualistically murdered in her home by members of the Manson Family cult.

The overall themes of *Rosemary's Baby* are conspiracy and evil; thus, it details the torment of a young pregnant woman who finds herself manipulated by a coven of high-society witches and warlocks at a New York City apartment block. This satanic elite, mostly elderly 'pillars of society' (doctors, theatregoers, etc) don't want Rosemary asking any questions or doing any research on them or their motives.

The evil coven in sheep's clothing, who want to see Rosemary in lockdown and keeping socially distanced from her friends, keep telling her what's best for her health. (SPOILER ALERT!) When she discovers her own doctor is one of them, she rings another medic, Dr Hill, from a street phonebooth. She says: 'Please, let me talk to you... They will be looking for me. There is a plot. I know that sounds crazy, doctor, and you you're probably thinking, My God, this poor girl has completely flipped, but I haven't flipped, doctor, I swear by all the saints I haven't. There are plots against people, aren't there?'

To which Dr Hill, who's also involved in the conspiracy, replies: 'Yes, I suppose there are.' Rosemary is eventually forced against her will to get a needle jabbed into her arm in order to control her.

In the movie, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), most of the population of a town is replaced by obedient, zombie-type alien duplicates, similar to today's hypochondriacs hysterically pointing at, and shouting at, healthy people in stores demanding they wear a facemask.

Aside from movies, in literature, perhaps one of the most tragic cases of life imitating art is a 1898 novella called *Futility* ('*The Wreck of the Titan*', by Morgan Robertson). This story is about a massive, luxurious ocean liner that strikes an iceberg, killing almost everyone on board. Published 14 years before the doomed Titanic voyage, the liner in *Futility* has many parallels with the former ship's size, capacity, geographical location, month of tragedy, etc.

Then there's life imitating nature. In a co-habiting relationship, a domestic argument, or a time of turbulent events, can resemble a storm: Starting off slowly then reaching a crescendo before dying down again to a calm situation.

The concept of life imitating art, goes all the way back to ancient Greece in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, culminating and made popular in Oscar Wilde's 1899 essay *The Decay of Lying*, where he claims that "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life."

In buildings, I've often wondered do the biomimetic designs in architecture imitate the biographical residue of past memories in the architectures' psyches, thus, manifest in the design of such structures. I'm not suggesting the designer of Sydney Opera House was, as a child, forced to dry crockery and stack them in the dish-holder while his mother sung 'Un Bel Di

Vedremo' from *Madam Butterfly*, but in less-appealing structures where the spectacle of Brutalist monstrosities elsewhere makes one wonder is there some kind of subconscious architectural revenge on a city's streetscape where ugliness is promoted with great gusto.

There's no doubt some architects are inspired and imitate nature in their work. One example of many is the 30 St Mary Axe in London. This 590ft building, designed by Norman Foster, is informally known as 'the Gherkin' because of its shape, despite being modeled after the Venus' flower basket sea sponge. Instead of filtering water through its surface, the building filters air to reduce the need for air-conditioning. And despite being an eyesore in my opinion, many other buildings worldwide make use of similar techniques based on imitating the giant mounds built by termites.

Finally, what about biological nature imitating the Spiritual, or at least hinting at it? There's a cell(s) in our bodies called the laminin that is shaped like a cross. Some Christians have referred to it as the 'fingerprint of the Creator'. It has many functions, but is primarily a protein that provides support and attachment for cells inside organs, a kind of 'glue', if you will, that holds our bodies together. Colossians 1:17 tells us: 'He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.'

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