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Cultural Experiences in Florence and Italy: The Grand Tour Narrative in the 21st Century[1]

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Abstract. In this article I explore various current myths that lead foreigners, especially North Europeans and North Americans, to choose to visit/live in Florence or Tuscany for a while or forever. Is it possible to discern any shared, collective representations? If so, how do such myths fit into the contemporary everyday life of the city? Can we identify a pathway from the aesthetic quest for "authentic" Italian life to cultural encounters with Italians in the flesh? My hypothesis is that one of the leitmotifs of foreigners' experiences is a romantic, and to a lesser degree, intellectual approach towards "Florence without Florentines". If so, there is nothing new "Under the Tuscan Sun": the Grand Tour narrative is alive and kicking. Contemporary experiences of Florence and Tuscany continue to be shaped by the social imaginary inherited from the early nineteenth century. Travellers and sojourners come to Florence with a set of expectations shaped through filmic and literary representations and see what they expect to see, not least because the Italians are equally complicit in performing their part in this ritualised experience.

Keywords. Grand Tour, narrative, culture, travel, experience, romantic myth, Florence and Italy.

INTRODUCTION

The reflections in this article originate from analysis of influential literary and filmic representations of Florence (Tuscany, Italy)[2] and tourist guides. They also stem from my ethnographic observations in the city of Florence and surroundings, and from my experience as docent with young American students during their semester abroad. Furthermore, the analysis of 25 autoethnographic essays written by a group of international master students in Florence helps to reconstruct the images they had of the city of Flor-

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[2] The 'myth' analysed in this article – conceived as having an imaginative and hermeneutic link with other older and newer representations of Italy – is applied to Florence and Tuscany, but I believe it can be partially generalized to other parts of the peninsula. It's not the objective of this article to draw geographical lines in this sense; however, for example, I would not include Milan (probably the most European city in Italy) in this cultural scenario. Below in this article, therefore, references to Florence are implicitly extended also to Tuscany and, to a varying degree, other parts of Italy too.

ence, Tuscany and Italy in general.[3]

Living in the "Cradle of the Renaissance" gives the cultural sociologist a privileged ethnographic vantage point, since besides millions of tourists per year, the city hosts around 45 American colleges and several other international academic institutions. Considering the small size of the city centre, the density of foreign students and scholars in Florence is one of the highest in the world. A study conducted by IRPET (Regional Institute for Economic Planning of Tuscany) estimated the presence of 8,000 American students studying and living in the centre of Florence (Prebys, 2013).

This contribution, with its historical perspective and "non-presentist" slant (Inglis, 2014), can be considered a "diagonal" approach within the field of cultural sociology (Darmon, McCormick and Prior 2017: 8). The Grand Tour[4] narrative still appears to be the beacon for foreigners coming to Florence. The key themes guiding the experience of the privileged class of the past (channelled through bestsellers, movie adaptations, tourist guides, study abroad programmes and food consumption) constitute the script for the experience of 21st century (middle, upper middle and upper class) North American/European and global visitors. The Grand Tour can be considered a transnational cultural script. The story, told and retold for centuries, is now part of a popular global-scale 'social imagery'.[5] This article digs into the literary resources that shape the image of Florence-Tuscany in the minds of prospective and actual sojourners and tourists, providing an interpretation of

the symbolic and imaginary framework of the cultural experience abroad.

THE SELF-PERPETUATING ROMANTIC PERSPECTIVE

There is perhaps no other city [than Florence] in which the overall impression, vividness and memory, and in which nature and culture working in unison, create in the viewer so strong an impression of a work of art, even from the most superficial point of view (George Simmel [1906] 2007a: 39, *emphasis mine*).

One of the many acquisitions sprouting from the Renaissance[6] cultural recast is the revolution of the human conception of space: from heaven to the landscape beyond. We might ponder this as a major shift toward anthropocentric representations in the arts (such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*) and an imaginable turning point for modern scientific thought: the "observer/observed" distinction (Francis Bacon 1620 [1889]). Or, to extend the speculation, as the beginning of the "disenchantment of the world" (Friedrich Schiller 1794 [1910]; Max Weber 1904–1905 [1930]); which is exactly the opposite of the ongoing "re-enchantment" dynamic sustaining foreigners' experience of Florence.

I venture to formulate the hypothesis that these *are not* common interpretative frameworks for the typical foreigner, especially North American and North European, visiting Florence nowadays; intellectual[7] travellers probably have other ideas in mind too. I believe, instead, that Florence – Tuscany, Italy and potentially Southern Europe in general – is experienced and interpreted through the eyes of Frances, the protagonist of the bestselling book and successful movie *Under the Tuscan Sun*. If this is the case, as I will try to argue, there is nothing new under the Tuscan sun.

The 1996 memoir by American author Frances Mayes was the New York Times notable book of 1997 and New York Times bestseller for more than two and

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[3] The qualitative and comparative research project "The Cultural Experience of International Students: Narratives from North and South Europe" analyses 50 narratives written by international master students. Prompted by informal meetings and in-depth interviews between 2016 and 2017 I collected 50 autobiographies – autoethnographies – autoethnography being the description of self as seen within another culture (Ellis and Bochner 2000). The main objective of the study was to interpret the biographical (and generational) meanings attributed by a group of international master's degree students to their educational, cultural and overall life experience abroad in Finland and Italy. Participants in the research were a group of 25 international master students at the University of Helsinki (Finland, representing Northern Europe) and 25 at the University of Florence (Italy, representing Southern Europe). Overall, I was able to achieve a balance in terms of age (average 26) and gender, and to involve students from all inhabited continents. The anonymized narrative passages in this article come from the group of students in Florence.

[4] The Grand Tour was the traditional journey through Europe undertaken mainly by upper-class European young men. The custom flourished in the eighteenth century and was associated with a standard itinerary. It served as an educational rite of passage. See, among others, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour* (Chaney 2014) and Black *The British and the Grand Tour* (Black 2010).

[5] Enabled and empowered by mass-mediated master narratives, imaginaries (especially tourism imaginaries) became global (Crouch, Jackson, and Thompson 2005).

[6] Here I present Florence as the embodiment of the 'Renaissance' because I am interested in the layman's generic idea of the concept, thus I do not articulate the highly malleable concept 'Renaissance' and its different versions since its appearance in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, I am aware that the concept 'Renaissance' was not articulated by Grand Tour visitors of the eighteenth century. See, among others, John Hale's *England and the Italian Renaissance* (1954) to engage in the historical and cultural debate of when and how the concept of the Renaissance as we know it came into being.

[7] By 'intellectual' I mean a person with elevated cultural and symbolic capital. Obtaining a college degree (up to PhD) and being exposed to cultural entertainment does not necessarily entail a critical-creative approach to travel experiences. We can indeed imagine an intellectual traveler's ideology alongside the overt and axiomatic mass tourist's ideology. See Calhoun (2002).
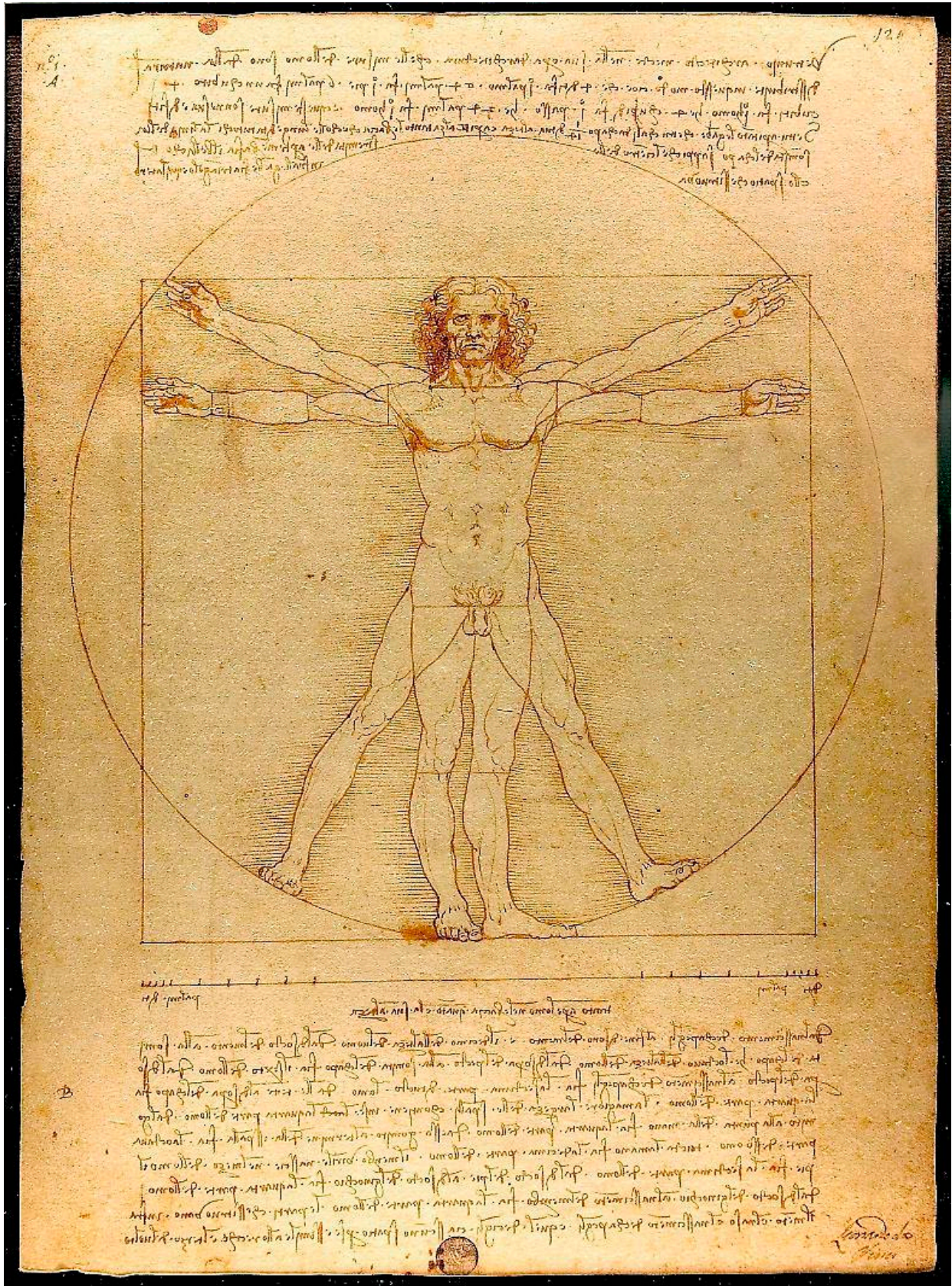
a half years. It has been translated into 18 languages and the film adaptation by Audrey Wells (2003) was a box office success earning $43,610,723 domestically and a further $15,268,000 internationally, totalling $58,878,723 worldwide.[8] All of this to say: the story has been read and seen by many people all over the world (and especially in the US). The book includes several chapters of recipes, and this choice, as we will see, is closely connected to the quest for the "authentic" Italian experience, where food & wine are essential elements of the romantic approach I am trying to describe.

Frances is a writer suffering from writer's block; she isn't sure what to do with her life after her divorce; she is emotionally crushed. How (i.e. where) can she start a new life? Where can she find new existential meanings? What place on earth will favour an emotional rebirth? The answer is simple: Florence, of course.

Simmel interprets Florence[9] in exactly the opposite way: the perfect place for those who are at peace with themselves and with their lives, either because they have achieved what they wanted or because they have somehow accepted their life as it is.

> *The inner boundaries of Florence are the boundaries of art. Florence is not a piece of earth on which to prostrate oneself in order to feel the heartbeat of existence with its dark warmth, its unformed strength, in the way that we can sense it in the forests of Germany, at the ocean, and even in the flower gardens of some anonymous small town. That is why* Florence offers us no foundation in epochs in which one might want to start all over again and to encounter the sources of life once more*, when one must orient oneself within those confusions of the soul to an entirely original existence. Florence is the good fortune of those* fully mature human beings who have achieved or renounced what is essential in life*, and who for this possession or renunciation are seeking only its form* (Simmel 1906 [2007a]: 41, *emphasis mine*).

Simmel never clarifies, here or elsewhere, who these "fully mature people" are. However, we can imagine that he considered this stage of human development in an exclusive manner. Podoksik, interpreting Simmel's essay, states: "Florence's combination of ripe cheerful-

ness with seclusion reminds us of the Nietzschean asceticism (Nietzsche 1887 [1994]: 80–5) of fresh air" (Podoksik 2012: 112). Thus, Florence may be thought as a fit retreat for the Nietzschean ideal man. Simmel focuses on Nietzsche's "pathos of distance" as a way of cultivating a better human being, a status that is not attainable by default, following a set of procedures or a method. He tells us that the subject needs to stand apart from society to pursue this ideal of humanity (Simmel 1917 [1950]: 63–4). And according to Podoksik, Simmel's essays on Italian cities reflect "his concern with whether and how culture in general, and works of art in particular, may help the modern personality reconcile itself with the world". Podoksik frames Simmel's thought in an unorthodox way, pointing out a sort of inner unity of his philosophy, pivoting on his immersion in the "tradition and ideal of self-cultivation, or *Bildung*" (Podoksik 2012: 101). The core question of modern *bildung* is "a synthesis between integrated personality, on the one hand, and the manifold external reality, on the other" (*Ibid.*, 103). In a secularized modern world, the reconciliation between fragmented reality and subjective personality cannot count on the integrative function of religion. Thus, it is up to the modern human being to perform this reconciliation. Podoksik believes that, aside from minor scholarly distinctions, the strategy for the realization of the *Bildung* ideal consists in a two-phase movement: "first, objectification, or self-alienation, that is, when a person goes beyond himself, immersing himself in the variety of the world; and then a return to himself, with variety now becoming a new unity, though on a higher level" (*Ibid.*, 104). Simmel named this development 'culture' (*Kultur*) described as the path "of the soul to itself … from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity" (Simmel 1911 [1968]: 27, 29).

I find Simmel's interpretation illuminating; nevertheless the pathway to Florence and Tuscany is well-trodden and has been exhaustively sketched over centuries of other kinds of storytelling, giving shape to different existential meanings: *Under the Tuscan Sun* moves along a cultural highway that resonates[10] deeply with the North American/European (and now 'global') reader-viewer-traveller. The sound of this music is far removed from Nietzsche's "pathos of distance", or Simmel's standing apart from society: the sounds of the Italic sirens draw the protagonist even closer to herself.

The plot of the bestselling book continues in the same vein. Patty, Frances' best friend, gives her a ticket for a two-week tour of Tuscany. Through a series of

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[8] "Under the Tuscan Sun", *Box Office Mojo*: boxofficemojo.com. Retrieved October 10, 2019.

[9] Simmel in three essays (1906 [2007a], 1898 [2007b], 1907 [2007c]) sought to delineate the aesthetic meaning of Florence, Rome and Venice. In Rome different time periods coexist and its unity still expresses a tension between ancient and modern culture. In Florence nature and spirit come together through culture to shape the natural surroundings of Tuscany, and the city's unity stems from life and culture itself. The unity of Venice is instead a facade; life is disguised and so the appearance is necessarily artificial. See also Simmel's *Philosophy of the Landscape* (1913 [2007d]).

[10] According to Schudson (1989) "resonance" is one the five dimensions of potency of cultural objects represented in the media. I will articulate this point in the conclusions.

apparently serendipitous events, Frances purchases a decaying villa in the Tuscan countryside and – in a simple-to-grasp metaphor for the reconstruction of her Self-identity – decides to restore it. Naturally she has an affair with an Italian man, Marcello,[11] but obviously (as we shall see) the story is short-lived. Moreover, again unsurprisingly, after having experienced the unfamiliar and unknown, the protagonist's sentimental adventure ends with a return home. At the end of the story, Frances falls in love with an American man (who is also a writer): the totally safe and familiar, in terms of both culture and class.

We can find more or less the same characterization and plot in *The Portrait of a Lady* (Henry James; film adaptation by Jane Campion, 1996) and in *A Room with a View* (Edward Forster; film adaptation by James Ivory, 1985). The protagonist is always a woman[12] (American or English) in search of her Self-identity. And the common subtext of all these stories – or rather, the *Grand-Tour-Grand-Theme* with its articulations – is pure dichotomy: the New World and the Old. The modern, rational, civilized, "cold" New World (or northern Europe) *versus* the irrational, uncivilized but passionate and romantic Old World: Italy.[13]

Florence and its surrounding landscape – obviously including the Chianti region, which is incidentally only a tiny part of the extremely varied region of Tuscany – are the idealized places (better: settings or movie 'locations') for the emotional journey into the past: to the roots of Western civilization. Within this never-changing land the traveller will be able to find and freely express herself again, revitalizing the natural, genuine and primary union with human nature.

Florence is the place where everybody slows down and enjoys life, eating every day with the extended family for six hours (three at lunch and three at dinner): all of my American students came with this image and most of them brought it back home intact – despite all my attempts to deconstruct the stereotype or to enrich it.[14] Needless to say this is a notion of a pre-modern, traditional Tuscany (Italy) that does not exist and, incidentally, never did exist. No one with even a smattering of historical knowledge (or a sense of reality, if you prefer) could imagine an Italian peasant – or indeed a peasant anywhere in the world – having sufficient time and money to slow down and enjoy life. Any person with a viable balance between the pleasure and the reality principle (Freud 1920 [1975]), can interpret the romantic traditional Italian image as a *topos* in the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen 2011).

Nevertheless, this archetypical[15] narrative – a sort of Italian Dream – written centuries ago still has an iron grip on foreigners' experiences of Italy: the self-perpetuating myth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968). Hence, regardless of its adherence to social reality, the Grand Tour script is a fundamental template for understanding foreigners' experiences in Florence (Tuscany, Italy, Southern Europe). It is the theorem of the definition of the situation that lies at the centre of the *locus foci* interpretation: "It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct…. If men define things as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas 1923: 42).[16] The foreigners' *Will to Believe* (James 1956) is viable to the extent that the potential local *controcanto Will to Doubt* (Lloyd 1907) is equally acceptable. Although it is not my purpose here to theoretically analyse the relation between beliefs and reality, it is evident that people tend to reduce cognitive dissonance by altering existing thoughts or adding new ones to create consistency

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[11] Even the choice of the name sounds strategic: Marcello Mastroianni was a famous Italian actor and romantic icon in Fellini's movies.

[12] Another influential movie is "Eat, Pray, Love", starring Julia Roberts. In this case too, it's a memoir (2006) by the American writer Elizabeth Gilbert. The memoir naturally records the author's trip around the world after her divorce. Julia, a sort of globetrotter in search of self-identity, visits Rome but her cultural experience in Italy is confined to "eating", in order to find spirituality she has to go to India and finally to Indonesia to find love. American comedy writer Andrew Gottlieb wrote a parody of Gilbert's Book, titled *Drink, Play, Fuck: One Man's Search for Anything Across Ireland, Vegas and Thailand*. Gottlieb, in a 2010 interview with The New Yorker, said, "I was mystified by the success of *Eat, Pray, Love*, and I felt that the book, and its Oprah-sanctioned ubiquity, needed to be made fun of."

[13] It is interesting to observe how this North-South Europe dichotomy constitutes a historic reversal of the classic distinction "civilized south *vs.* uncivilized north". The Nordic "barbarians" (such as the Germanics, Celts, etc.), originally compared to the Hellenistic Greco-Roman civilisation, were considered uncivilized or uncultured people. The etymology of the word "barbarian" reveals a constant historical shift. From Medieval Latin *barbarinus* (source of Old French *barbarin* "Berber, pagan, Saracen, barbarian"), from Latin *barbaria* "foreign country," from Greek *barbaros* "foreign, strange, ignorant". Greek *barbaroi* meant "all that are not Greek," but especially the Medes and Persians. Originally not entirely pejorative, its sense darkened after the Persian wars. The Romans (technically themselves *barbaroi*) took up the word and applied it to tribes or nations which had no Greek or Roman accomplishments. The noun is from late 14c., "person speaking a language different from one's own," also (c. 1400) "native of the Barbary coast;" meaning "rude, wild person" is from 1610s.

[14] The presence of a stereotype bars the processing of new or unexpected information. The stereotyping in certain cases is a selective idealization of others. Such images might appear positive, but they are still one-sided projections and may confine the other to a set role or ability (Pickering 2001).

[15] My use of "archetype" here is not in the Jungian sense, but purely its etymological meaning: Greek arkhetupon ἀρχή (archē,) "beginning, origin" and τύπος (tupos), inter alia "pattern, model, type".

[16] This echoes Walter Lipmann's "picture in our heads" metaphor of a stereotype: "Whether right or wrong,... Imagination is shaped by the pictures seen… Consequently, they lead to stereotypes that are hard to shake" (1922: 95).

(Festinger 1956). Moreover, as I will argue, the romantic idea of Florence is reinforced by tourist guides and by the locals themselves, who are not the passive recipients of foreigners' representations and projections. Locals are indeed playing on the same stage following the same script but with different roles and objectives: they make money out of the romantic narrative.

The self-perpetuating narrative has a profound adherence to the social reality even from a conventional sociological viewpoint. If we look at intra-cultural weddings in Florence (both partners from a foreign country), Great Britain is in the first place with 309 weddings (followed by the US with 255).[17]

As I see it the romantic appraisal of the Renaissance is still the dominant image of Florence. More precisely, the aesthetic appreciation of the Renaissance. Other social, political and philosophical aspects of the Renaissance, and their relation to the present, are overshadowed, creating a sort of reversal of the Renaissance *Weltanschauung*, from "Cradle of the Renaissance" to "Museum" or "Sepulchre of the Renaissance".

Are there any other modern myths guiding tourists and foreigners to Florence? We will see that these "Made in Italy" representations connected with the cult of authenticity do not differ from the never-ending romantic myth. A modern or postmodern myth does not exist. The main narrative for foreigners coming to Florence and Tuscany is still that of the Grand Tour travellers, which inevitably led, and still does, to the quest for "Florence without Florentines". The foreigners romantic *coup d'oeil* may induce a deceptive vision of Italian life and social reality. If so, there is nothing new "Under the Tuscan Sun": the Grand Tour archetype and narrative is alive and kicking.

THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CITY

If instead of Frances-Under-the-Tuscan-Sun – or Elizabeth and Robert Barrett Browning, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, James Joyce, Ezra Pound[18] – you take as literary guide Marco Polo, the protagonist of Italo Calvino' *Invisible Cities* (1972), the cultural and imaginative perspective will change a lot. Marco Polo will indeed lead you nowhere – let me repeat this: nowhere! Marco Polo in his conversation with the Kublai Khan

describes 55 cities, or, better, the imaginative potential of those cities. At one point of the story Kublai Khan starts to notice that all Marco Polo's cities look alike. Kublai interrupts Marco and asks for more precision, more adherence to reality: "Where is it? What is its name?" Marco Polo replies:

> It has neither name nor place. I shall repeat the reason why I was describing it to you: from the number of imaginable cities we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. *With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else* (Calvino 1972: 43, *emphasis added*).

"I have neither desires nor fears," the Khan answered, "and my dreams are composed either by my mind or by chance." And Marco:

> Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls... You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours... Or the question it asks you, forcing you to answer, *like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx* (Calvino 1972: 44, *emphasis added*).

Italo Calvino brings back to the centre of the discourse the traveller's self-identity, his/her biography and the subjective-existential questions posed to the visited city-country. Thus, in a certain sense, Calvino gives more autonomy and freedom to the traveller. He can get off the beaten track, paved with the city's "seven or seventy wonders" – that is: anything that is supposed to be worth seeing – and freely ask whatever he/she wants. Nevertheless, the city (life, reality) cannot be at one's disposal. The city has its own identity, story and autonomy. You can ask the city anything you want, but you may not receive the expected answers nor can you expect the city to mirror your narcissistic projections.

The Sphinx guarded the entrance to the Greek city of Thebes and in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* before allowing travellers to pass she set them a riddle. Oedipus can be seen as a threshold figure not only in the transition between the old religious practices, represented by the death of the Sphinx and the rise of the new Olympian deities, but as a character in a liminal transition. The Oedipus-traveller undergoes a trial attempting to change his alien status. We could imagine the riddle as the narrative, the myth that consciously or unconsciously is

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[17] Weddings between foreign citizens of the same nationality celebrated in the city of Florence between 2006 and 2012. Source: Florence City Council – Demographic Services Department.

[18] Some examples of the non-automatic link between high cultural capital and sociological imagination: these authors have alimented the Grand Tour romantic narrative.

guiding foreigners' cultural explorations in Florence. The riddle needs to be unravelled in order to acquire a critical awareness of the ongoing experience of otherness.

Therefore, a critical warning is required for those attempting to experience the city in an autonomous and active way. The city-museum of Florence is probably not the best place in the world for those seeking a vital turning-point, an existential change. It is worth recalling again George Simmel's interpretation: "Florence is the good fortune of those fully mature human beings who have achieved or renounced what is essential in life, and who for this possession or renunciation are seeking only its form" (Simmel, 1906 [2007]: 41).

Continuing to pursue Calvino's passage and Simmel's viewpoint, Florence asks the traveller from the North: "Are you at peace? Have you done what you wanted? Or if you haven't, can you give up and just live?" Florence has given the Renaissance to humanity, now she is resting, peacefully. Did the visitors find their own peace?

Books and movies keep telling us another story. Escaping the rigid grid of the Protestant life of northern Europe and North America, people come here to find passion, romance, love. Florence has a "connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse" and the city keeps giving the same responses to foreigners who keep asking the same questions, guided by the same desires and fears. Are the answers satisfactory? Even in the Grand Tour romantic narrative the answers to love and work are somewhere else: back at home.

THE INVISIBLE SOUTHERNER

There is a powerful potential "mythical engine" – or *mythomoteur* (Smith 1986) – for young and adult people who decide to visit or sojourn in Florence. I posit that the Grand Tour archetype and narrative[19] – translated

into modern and late-modern terms – is still the guiding light of foreigners' experiences in Florence. The Romantic myth of Italy and Southern Europe that persists to the present is constructed upon a polar meta-narrative, a sort of grand dichotomy: rational and progressive cultures of North Europe (where the modern *homo fictus* lives), *versus* the irrational, backward society of the south (Italy), inhabited by the southerner *homo naturalis*. Northerners visit the warm climate of the mainly Catholic south (primarily on vacation or sabbatical) to immerse themselves in an apparently chaotic and sensual lifestyle in an attempt to whet their imaginative appetites.

Joseph Luzzi, in his essays *Italy without Italians: Literary Origins of a Romantic Myth* (2002), analyses, among others, J.W. Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (1796 [1989]) and Germaine de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807 [1999]), articulating the Grand Tour "Modern North / Ancient South" meta-narrative in four main themes:

1) Italy's majestic cultural residue from antiquity and the Renaissance overwhelms any signs of cultural (social, political) activity in modern Italy;
2) Italy and its people are effeminate, and this gender characteristic explains their aptitude in the imaginative sphere, in creative fields;
3) Italians are primitive and violent people, nevertheless this primitive nature contributes to their creative accomplishments;
4) Italian society and public order do not exist.

The Grand Tour provided North Europeans aristocrats with first-hand experience of cultural materials studied only in books. This high-culture encounter was accompanied by the socio-anthropological stumbling upon the Italian savages; the magnificent and vital Italian past is always opposed to the waning of contemporary Italy. The Grand-Tour-Grand-Dichotomy (North/South) is enriched with other binary oppositions: male/female; living/dead; freedom/oppression.

Another dichotomy – Protestant/Catholic – can provide us with a fundamental interpretative key. Goethe suggests a link between Catholicism and the Italian propensity to murder: "The murderer manages to reach a church, and that ends the matter" (24 November 1786). On the other hand, Goethe celebrates Italy as the "world's university". Luzzi points out that, like a university, Italy represents: "A locus of education and self-exploration, at a physical remove from the confines of

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[19] The Grand Tour, the romantic rediscovery of Italy in the 19th century, and how the Peninsula is experienced in the 20th and 21st century can be seen as separate phases underpinned by the obvious historical differences. The objective of this contribution, however, is to keep them yoked together, trying to find a connecting narrative thread framing cultural experiences in a similar vein (again with all due social and historical differences). Here the Grand Tour and romanticism are intentionally conflated. Bearing in mind that the idealization of the Tuscan countryside and the idea of the relaxed Tuscan family is a 20th century phenomenon, I believe that the origins of such images lie (not exclusively, of course) in the Gran Tour narrative. Those who wish to engage in greater historical detail with the considerable amount of scholarship on the fascination that Italy – and Florence in particular – has exercised over northern Europeans, can consult the key book *Florence 1900: The Quest for Arcadia,* by Bernd Roeck (2009). See also Rosemary Sweet's *Cities and the Grand Tour* (2012) and Robert Holland's *The Warm South* which explores the enduring allure of Italy and the Mediterranean in general for the English and North Ameri-

cans and the underlying continuity of tropes established during the eighteenth century. Apropos the "story of the history of Florence" see Marcello Verga *Firenze: retoriche cittadine e storie della città* (2011).

one's normal life (for Goethe, Weimar), and of *limited temporal duration* (for European aristocrats, the length of the Grand Tour)" (2002: 61, emphasis mine). The "limited temporal duration" is a crucial point: Italy is, technically, a vacation from the everyday life of northern Europe and North America;[20] but "never take a joke too far": real life is back at home, in the North.

If Italy was an educational forum and recreational moment, Italians were the unworthy, paltry inhabitants of this splendid stage: "The only thing I can say about this [Italian] nation is that it is made up of primitive people who, under all their splendid trappings of religion and the arts, are not a whit different from what they would be if they lived in caves or forests" (Goethe, 24 November 1786). A "primitive" nature supports cultural creativity and imagination, a sort of Rousseau primitivism: "By describing Italians as primitive and violent, Goethe implies that, like Schiller's naive artists, the Italians remain capable of the powerful aesthetic visions of their remote ancestors" (Luzzi 2002: 64).

The contrast between glorious past *versus* decadent contemporary society is underlined also by Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818 [1936]): "Italy is 'Mother of the Arts' and 'Parent of Our Religion'; Europe shall redeem [Italy] and conquer the 'barbarian tide' that threatens it" (xlvii. 415, 417, 419, 422). Here Italy, through a female archetype, is seen as the source of Europe's culture and faith. But if you just step outside the churches, such culture disappears.

> In Santa Croce's holy precincts lie
> Ashes which make it holier, dust which is
> Even in itself an immortality,
> Though there were nothing save the past, and this,
> The particle of those sublimities
> Which have relapsed to chaos:—here repose
> Angelo's, Alfieri's bones, and his,
> The starry Galileo, with his woes;
> Here Machiavelli's earth return'd to whence it rose.
> (LIV 478–86)

Santa Croce has inspired many famous travellers. A few years after Byron, Stendhal visited the cathedral and became overly emotional.

> *I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence,* close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. *Absorbed in the contemplation of* sublime beauty.... *I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensa-*

tions.... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call 'nerves.' Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling (Stendhal, 1817 [1959]: 89, emphasis added).

It's the "Stendhal syndrome" (Magherini 1979)[21] – also known as the "Florence Syndrome" or hyperkulturemia. Anyhow, whether the traveller is more or less overwhelmed by the sublime beauty of tombs, Italy is recognized as a collective sepulchre; and in this celebration of the distant past, Italians seem to disappear: "In Rome, at least in the first enthusiasm of your recognition of ancient time, you see nothing of the Italians" (Shelley, 1818 [1912]: 119). Italy's graves are the perfect setting for a solitary meditation, hence: "Italy without Italians". And this is considered by Luzzi as a "*locus classicus* in the foreign gaze at Italy" (2002: 56).

Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, ou l'Italie* is the story of the love affair between a half-English and half-Italian poetess and her noble Italian Grand Tourist Oswald. For the latter, as for Goethe, Italy represents a physical remove from his "real home" and "real self"; the Grand Tour is a period of exploration, of play: in short, a vacation. The North/South divide is well described through Oswald's accounts: Italy is "intoxicating", England is "rigid"; Italy "strikes the imagination", England "enters into the soul"; Italy represents the "arts", England embodies "opinions and tastes". Even the gender archetype, with all its corollaries, is obviously present: Italy is the "Woman of the world".

The lack of a public sphere and of moral regulatory principles in Italy is clearly pointed out by de Staël: "Since society does not set itself up as a judge of anything, it allows everything" (vi.2). On the other side, this society-less Italian culture fosters an attitude that, according to de Staël, is missing in modern northern Europe: the triumph of personal, emotional justice over public, rational law.

Luzzi finally analyses Ugo Foscolo's *Lettere scritte dall'Inghilterra* (1817), where the Italian poet tries to reorient the foreigners' gaze upon Italy, uncovering those features of Italian society and culture that have been hidden from view by the Grand Tour narrative: the Italian language, the social customs of the Italians themselves, the historical events that shaped the Italian nation.

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[20] In a certain sense, the Italian myth has points of contact with the three recurrent myths of tourism in developing countries identified by Echtner and Prasad (2003): the myth of the unchanged, the myth of the unrestrained and the myth of the uncivilized.

[21] Since Stendhal's account, there have been many of cases of people experiencing similar psychosomatic effects – mostly at the Uffizi Gallery. In 1979 the condition was labelled "Stendhal Syndrome" by the Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini (head of psychiatry at Florence's Santa Maria Nuova Hospital at the time). She observed that many tourists seemed to be overcome by symptoms ranging from temporary panic attacks to bouts of madness – lasting only two or three days.

The attempt had little success according to Luzzi. The Romantic generalizations about Italy – feminine, premodern, sepulchral space, whose present cannot escape the burden of its past – were to be repeated by Elizabeth and Robert Barrett Browning, D.H. Lawrence, Henry James, James Joyce and Ezra Pound. They would travel to the Peninsula in search of that same Italian-less Italy.

ITALIAN CULTURE ON AND OFF STAGE

As we have seen, since the Grand Tour the leading themes of foreigners' experience in the peninsula are connected with a dreamy, and to a lesser degree intellectual, approach towards "Italy without Italians". The social discourse clearly pre- and per-forms an attitude towards the construction of the experience agenda.

In the first place we can detect a travelling criterion moulded on the canon of "worthiness." Roland Barthes (1957 [1972]) described the Blu-Hachette guides (comparable to today's Lonely Planet) as fetish objects of contemporary tourism. The tourist is led by the guide to places where it is "worth going." The "worth" canon, according to Barthes, makes all trips, at least structurally, standardised.

For the sake of critical observation, it is necessary to point out some hermeneutic risks that might cripple the ability of northerners (from Europe and the US) to understand who the Italians are. Again following Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, "identification" is one of the key figures of the rhetoric of myth regarding other people and cultures. The identification process reveals the inability to imagine the Other; in the experience of confrontation otherness is thus reduced to sameness. In short: the foreigner projects his/her images (acquired through the media and the ongoing social discourse) on the other. The recognition dialectic is therefore blocked, crystallized around a number of stereotypes. Sometimes, when the Other cannot (because the vividness of the reality is enormously incoherent with the myth) or refuses to be reduced – some Florentines might reject the image of the magnificent artistic past seeing it as the terrific immobile present – a rhetorical figure comes to the aid: *exoticism* – "The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown" (Barthes 1957 [1972]: 152).[22]

Another mechanism identified by Roland Barthes is the "deprivation of history". In our case, the features that usually compose the Italian *anima locus* are sun,

art, wine, olive oil, fashion, dolce vita, passion, etc. All these aspects are certainly part of the Italian identity, but they are by no means all of it: there is more to say and the representation needs to be updated. For instance, the image of the Italian extended family that gathers every day around the dining table, with several children running around the house, is false: Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world and that extended family exists only in a mythical rural past.[23]

Italians are thus "deprived" of (at least) 150 years of their history. It is obviously impossible to grasp Italian-ness bracketing out: how it became a republic, two World Wars, Fascism, the strongest Communist party in the west, terrorism, a compressed modernization process, corruption,[24] organized crime, cultural backwardness (not only of the south) and a middle class with low cultural capital and a weak sense of the public good (Birindelli 2019) and so on. Thus the interpretation of "the Other", the locals, seems to be trapped in a distant past.

This does not mean that the Other – in our case Florentines and Tuscans – is a "victim" of the tourist gaze; natives make profits, they sell and are active players on this stage. As social scientists, we need to reconstruct the script of the play, to identify the frontage and the backstage. Adopting Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach (1959), we can interpret the interaction between foreigner and locals as a play, where Italians and foreigners are both playing their parts. I see this as a more fruitful (and realistic) interpretation; a much more heuristic strategy than the one portraying Florentines as passive creatures labouring under the burden of the colonizing North Europeans and North Americans.

STAGED AUTHENTICITY AND SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

A few years ago I was interviewed by a journalist from *The Florentine*, the local English newspaper.[25] She wanted to know my opinion about an interesting commercial operation. The once abandoned Castelfalfi, an

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[22] In this sense tourism can be considered "the quintessential business of 'difference projection' and the interpretive vehicle of 'othering' par excellence" (Hollinshead 1998: 121).

[23] The Fertility rate in Italy, from the latest available data (2017), is 1.320. Only Spain, Malta and Korea score lower. OECD (2019), Fertility rates (indicator). doi: 10.1787/8272fb01-en (Accessed on 07 October 2019)

[24] Italy ranks 53/180 and scores 52 in the world corruption perception index 2018 (transparency.org, retrieved 07 October 2019). The index is made by experts and businesspeople. They rank 180 countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption using a scale of 0 to 100 (0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean). In the latest index two-thirds of the countries score below 50. The average score is 43.

[25] "Sleeping Beauty: Castelfalfi Returns to Life" (Kirsten Hills, *The Florentine*, November 25, 2011): theflorentine.net/news/2011/11/sleeping-beauty/.

800-year-old Tuscan village, was being reborn. Europe's major travel group, the Germany-based company TUI, bought the entire village and surrounding 2,700 acres of countryside. The project, one of the largest in Europe, promised to bring the village back to life by offering visitors an "authentic taste of Tuscany". TUI renovated 41 properties in the village, 3 hotels, and 29 villas in the surrounding area. The resulting self-contained resort has a 36-hole golf course, three swimming pools, tennis courts, at least eight shops, spa, pizzeria, cookery school and restaurant. The Catholic church will also be asked to revive Sunday services. Although TUI is targeting American, British and German buyers, the company is aiming for a goal of one-third of its sales to Italians, in order to retain the "authentic Italian feel".

The journalist asked me a loaded question: "How can a village created for foreigners retain any kind of genuine authenticity?" I answered as expected: "There is of course the chance this will become a Disneyland version of an Italian village." If this point was clear for the English journalist, it took me almost half an hour to explain the rest of the story. As I finally pointed out in the interview:

> Italy is used to trading on its history and past; we've been doing it since the times of the Grand Tour. We Italians are not passive in projects like this. It is not colonization by the British or Germans, everyone benefits. The tourists get great food, weather and views, and we Italians get money and other profits from it (The Florentine, November 25, 2011).

Following Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the "trade" between North Americans/Europeans and locals takes place in Florentine everyday life. The interaction between actors can be interpreted as a "performance," moulded by location and audience, created to provide others with "impressions" that are consonant with the desired goals of the actors.

MacCannell (1973) tells us that tourists are motivated by the desire for authentic experiences. But it is very difficult to understand whether the experience is authentic: "It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation" (597). Tourist settings can be arranged in a continuum starting from the frontstage and ending at the backstage, reproducing the natural trajectory of an individual's initial entry into a social situation. Goffman's front region – the social space tourists attempt to overcome – might lead to a tourist front region that has been decorated to appear like a back region.

Is this causing a loss of cultural authenticity and producing a sort of "McDisneyisation" (Ritzer and Liska 1997)? According to MacCannell local cultures construct "staged authenticity," a kind of commodified authenticity that inevitably thwarts the modern tourist's search for the authentic. On the other hand, commodification brings money into communities and revives traditions that would otherwise die out. The quest for authenticity can be interpreted as being "one of them":

> Being "one of them," or at one with "them," means, in part, being permitted to share back regions with "them." This is a sharing which allows one to see behind the others' mere performances, to perceive and accept the others for what they really are…. Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives, and, at the same time, they are deprecated for always failing to achieve these goals (MacCannell 1973: 592).

But MacCannell warns that under certain conditions it is difficult to separate frontstage from backstage and that these are sometimes transformed into each other. Furthermore, distinction practices (Bourdieu 1979 [1984]) wind through what is valuable, in aesthetic and cultural terms, and what is valueless and, in a certain sense, false or sugar-coated. The tourism industry operates a strategic distinction between travellers and tourists. The declared goal is to sell an authentic experience to the tourist, be it food or art, so as to make the tourist feel like a traveller, a connoisseur: a person who has knowledge, experience and taste in a particular field. One result of such a dynamic in a culturally globalized world is that people feel more cosmopolitan and less provincial. This apparently superficial and trivial identity attribute is pursued tenaciously by both tourists who want to be travellers and travellers who do not want to be tourists. In this case the "spatial appropriation" of the traveller – a subjective orientation generating a particular relationship between practices and contexts – is similar to Jansson's *antagonist* mode, which "conforms to the archetypal, objectifying principle of the tourist gaze", while the *symbiotic* mode is of those who "want to avoid being identified as gazing tourists, or visitors" (Jansson 2002: 433).[26]

A better idea of the 'authenticity' concept can be grasped taking into account the shift between a modern objectivistic notion and a late-modern (or postmodern) relativistic meaning of the term.[27] According to Jansson (2002: 439) the former implies that "landscapes and socioscapes of visual consumption should preferably be

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[26] According to Jansson the symbiotic mode is common among people with high cultural capital while the antagonist is more widespread among those who are less culturally refined.

[27] On the modern notion of 'authenticity' see Boortsin (1992), for the postmodern meaning see Wang (1999).

manifestations of lived history" while the latter suggests that "the authenticity of a tourist destination may be defined in terms of how well it meets the customer's own ideas of what the particular destination is about." Jansson calls it *symbolic* authenticity: "an authenticity, which to a significant extent is shaped within the representational realm" (*Ibid.*)

A heuristic way to unravel the authenticity riddle is to be aware of the narrative, the script sustaining the quest for authenticity. As I have argued, I believe the leading themes of the Grand Tour are still alive. Therefore, the search for the authentic Italian life leads to precise places. Thus, to "get off the beaten path" means denying what resonates with the American, northern European, and now global idea of Italian life. Is this desirable for the northerners who are visiting Florence? Since they are not anthropologists or sociologists, my answer is negative.[28]

Nowadays we can find the same Grand Tour themes in the way Italian food is presented. A semiotic interpretation of Italian restaurants in the US tells us that Italian-ness is connected with the idea of rusticity and marketed to reassure the consumers of the genuine "ethnic experience" (Girardelli 2004). The study, analysing verbal and non-verbal communication[29] strategies, came to the conclusion that the constituents of the myth of Italian food are: romance, family, rusticity, Old World memory-nostalgia, slow-paced lifestyle, genuineness-unadulterated and expressivity. The similarity between these traits and the leading themes of the Grand Tourer of the past is evident. And even in the case of international master students, we can detect similar iconic images moulding the script of their everyday performances abroad.

I had the image of coming here and riding a Vespa … and ride with the Vespa around Florence, to the seaside, to the market to buy fresh fruit. I think I had this image from Italian restaurants in ***. They décor with images of Vespas…. And I remember watching the movie Under the Tuscan Sun. Besides that, it was history of art, history of architecture. We had so many images of Florence and Italy in our textbooks (female, EurAsia).

Direct references to *Under the Tuscan Sun*, to fresh fruit and historic past. The Vespa is another recurrent

cultural object (Griswold 1994) in foreign movies portraying Italian life, and it is easy to link the Vespa with ideas of a vacation in a fun and at the same time sentimental past. In this case the movie-matrix is clearly the famed *Roman Holiday* starring Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn.[30] The movie is explicitly mentioned by more international students as a narrative that shaped their imaginary about Italy, for instance: "I remember Roman Vacations, I mean *Roman Holiday*, a story about a princess in Roma" (female, Eastern Asia); "That movie where she rides the Vespa close to the Colosseum, Roman Holiday?" (male, South America)

According to the American cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander "Behind every actor's social and theatrical performance lies the already established skein of collective representations that compose culture – the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws." (2004: 550) And Alexander tells us that performances in complex societies "seek to overcome fragmentation by creating flow and achieving authenticity." Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics argues that early societies with shared narratives, beliefs, and values maintain a high degree of fusion as regards social performance. In complex and fragmented societies, the components of social performance have become de-fused, to perform successfully actors have to re-fuse them to avoid them appearing inauthentic: "Failed performances are those in which the actor, whether individual or collective, has been unable to sew back together the elements of performance to make them seem connected seamlessly" (*Ibid.* 529).

What I am exploring here is whether the social-cultural performances played out in Florence by North Americans/Europeans are fused, de-fused or, as I argue, re-fused. According to Alexander there are several elements that must be fused in order for the performance to succeed in both communicating its meaning and establishing its authenticity. If we imagine Florence as the stage of a social-cultural performance, the *background representations* – the shared narratives, convictions and symbolic repertoire of a particular group – are there and very active: the experience of travelling and being on stage in Florence, and in Italy in general, is rooted in the cultural bedrock of the Grand Tour narrative – a stratification of meanings sedimented over centuries. And even the *scripts*, or *the* script – the salient background features called up in each social performance – is to hand and functional. The Grand Tour scripts and those acted out by

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[28] Even in this case we can find continuity with the experiential attitude of the past. The eighteenth-century travellers sought recognition and confirmation rather than discovery or to be challenged (Sweet 2007 and 2012).

[29] The green, white, and red colour combination; the use of vegetables and the rustic kitchen/bistro theme evoking the Italian relaxed, family atmosphere; the old-world theme, such as black-and-white photos evoking nostalgic feelings.

[30] See the blog post "There Must be a Vespa": pierluca-birindelli.blogspot.com/2013/10/there-must-be-vespa.html.

northerners abroad are substantially the same, and the narrative is underpinned by tourist guides. The *actors* of the social performance – tourists, scholars, students, their parents, home college and hosting institution abroad, peers that came before them etc. – generally have a modest self-consciousness about themselves as actors. Everybody is front stage, the backstage is apparently deserted: "For participants and observers, rituals are not considered to be a performance in the contemporary sense at all but rather to be a natural and necessary dimension of ongoing social life" (Alexander 2004: 535). And the locals act naturally too: far from being passive bystanders at the foreigners' performance, they are on stage and directly or indirectly making a living out of the romantic projection. In my case, the *audience* could be conceived as those who would wish to be there, and who subscribe to the significance even if they cannot be there: the dense psychological identification with the performance is endorsed. Being Florence, the *means of symbolic production* – the physical venue, the media, the costumes, the props – and the *mise-en-scène* (the staging and choreography) are inevitably fused. Regarding *social power*, the status of the foreign players is homogeneous and in this case too, the social performance is fused, or refused.

In Florence the "staged authenticity" is a fused social performance.

CONCLUSION: THE GRAND TOUR GLOBAL NARRATIVE

The skeleton of the Grand Tour narrative – with all its ramifications and appendices directly or indirectly reinforcing the story, such as the memoirs of divorced North American-European writers, the movie adaptations, the tourist guides, international institutions (universities) or local institutions (regions with their territorial marketing and the like) – can be considered a *global cultural script*. In other words the story, told and retold for centuries, is now part of world culture: a popular global-scale "social imagery". Of course, this does not mean that people worldwide read Goethe or watched *Under the Tuscan Sun* from start to finish; nonetheless the polyphonic socialization, or even just exposure, to certain images representing Florence through the same "matrix", leads to the construction of at least a consistent overall stage set for the play. Stemming from centuries-old travel narratives, these cultural scripts "Are not narrative texts that actors on the world stage can read from and act out…. People rely on mostly unarticulated mental images to make sense of the world and, moreo-

ver, work with a notion that others also think in similar images" (Alasuutari and Qadir 2016: 635).

Imaginaries can be considered unspoken schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies (Salazar 2012: 864) developing "upon implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices" (Gaonkar 2002: 4). Therefore foreign and local actors on the everyday stage of Florence do not so much act as *enact* (Jepperson 1991).

Cultural globalization processes entail the deepening and extending of reflexive global consciousness and an increase in global connectivity and density (Robertson 1992). If 'culture' can be understood as "the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation" (Tomlinson 1999: 9), 'connectivity' "furnishes people with a *cultural resource* that they lacked before its expansion: a cultural awareness which is, in various senses, global" (Tomlinson 1999: 15). In this sense the 'global' becomes a "Cultural horizon within which we (to varying degrees) frame our existence. The penetration of localities which connectivity brings is thus double-edged: as it dissolves the securities of locality, it offers new understandings of experience in wider – ultimately global – terms" (Tomlinson 1999: 15).

Electronic media expand our sense of the "generalized elsewhere" (Meyrovitz 1989) through increased awareness of other places and of non-local people. But the imagined elsewhere is not a "nowhere": it's an earthly "somewhere" people can imagine living in or visiting. Tales and images of Florence have a key place in universal social imagery and can be considered part of an unbounded global cultural repertoire: "Imageries are prevalent world-wide and are not culture-bound, similar to the symbols circulated globally by contemporary media that act as an unspoken backdrop to our thoughts, actions, and messages" (Schudson 1989: 155). The grand tour narrative about Florence constitutes an important part of the global collective imaginary: a distinctive somewhere. The result of strong and pervasive narratives about landscapes and socioscapes is the construction of mediated images becoming "the 'originals' against which experiences of simulated landscapes and socioscapes are measured" (Jansson 2002: 439): the mediascape, so to say, becomes the paramount reality.[31]

In order to participate in this "global play", certain conditions need to be met. Not every narrative or cultural object circulating in the global media breaks through. According to Schudson there are five dimen-

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[31] The concept of 'scapes' is also examined in Appadurai's typology: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes (1996).

sions of potency for cultural objects represented in the media. A rhetorically effective object must be *resonant* with the everyday life of the audience. Here, the ubiquity of images portraying "authentic" Italian life is evident. Suffice it to think about the role of Italian food and cuisine in the global "Master Chef" format, or the physical presence of Italian restaurants worldwide. Add to that movies and TV series that, in one way or another, portray Italian-Americans, organized crime etc.

The other four dimensions are: rhetorical force, retrievability, institutional retention and resolution. In our case *retrievability* (if a cultural representation is to influence a person, it must reach the person) is confirmed by the volume of Italian media images within reach for a worldwide audience. Even the *institutional retention* dimension is satisfied (meanings are conserved by institutions and enacted by the viewers-visitors): just think about Florence as an "open air museum". *High resolution* (stimulating action in concrete, visible ways) is almost self-evident, considering the millions and millions of tourists visiting Florence every year and all year round. Regarding the *rhetorical force*, Schudson wisely avoids entering such a vast field and restricts his observations to the fact that cultural objects do not exist by themselves: "Whether an advertisement or a painting or a novel appears striking to an audience will depend very much on how skillfully the object draws from the general culture and from the specific cultural field it is a part of" (Schudson 1989: 166). Here I would say that the rhetorical force of cultural objects symbolizing Florence is given by a sort of perpetual loan-credit with the unrivalled magnificence of the Renaissance as collateral.

Let me now conclude by tying this back to the main theme of this contribution. If it's true that people visiting or thinking about Florence are probably unconsciously or preconsciously drawing their meanings from a web of loose symbolic images without an apparent inner thread, it is also true that an inner thread exists and can be reconstructed, which was the main objective of this article.

The power of the Grand Tour tale resides also in the universal nature of "travel" as a metaphor for life. The essence of metaphors is to use the familiar to grasp the less familiar or ineffable, and 'travel' is the most common source of metaphors used to explicate transformations and transitions of all sorts. We draw upon the experience of human mobility to define the meaning of death (as 'passing'), the structure of life (as a 'journey') and changes of social and existential conditions through rites of initiation (of 'passage'). Therefore, we can consider travel as "the paradigmatic 'experience', the model of

a direct and genuine experience, which transforms the person having it" (Leed 1991: 5).

Finally, if we agree with Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as "An *historically transmitted pattern of meanings* embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973: 89, emphasis mine), we find the other main "power" of the Grand Tour narrative: its historical-cultural depth.

Behind any cultural object there is a story (Griswold 1994). And in our case the story has been told and retold over the centuries becoming a source of interpretive metaphors. The story has been increasingly standardized, conventionalized and abstracted, until it has finally been reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, icons, clichés or stereotypes (Slotkin 1986). Unlike the layperson enacting on the basis of scattered images, the social scientist is required to de- and reconstruct such stories so as to interpret them in depth.

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