

# The Cultural Experience Abroad: Spotlight, Shadow and Illusion

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## Introduction

I believe that, for both students and teachers, the cultural experience abroad brings different learning challenges than those usually brought to the fore. Some common tests are overstated – and to a certain extent, misinterpreted. This is the ‘spotlight’ constructed by the discourse on international education and cultural experience. Conversely, other, often specular, learning abroad difficulties remain in the ‘shadow’. Hence, students can be partially misguided and concentrate their efforts on shadowy educational and cultural paths. Here I will discuss some topics that – at different levels of abstraction and importance – fall within the cone of the educational spotlight abroad in Italy: food, cultural shock and stereotypes. Remaining in the shadows are geography, history (modernity and late modernity), and a thicker idea of stereotype and cultural narratives in general. Sometimes emphasis on cultural specificities leads to hyperbolic statements. Taken together these can construct a deceptive map of social reality. This map does not support and orient students’ explorations but often creates ‘cultural illusions’.

## The art of eating: a cultural passe-partout

Public opinion’s focus on food culture – linked with the ideals of health and taste – has grown enormously at the turn of the century. Global media are loaded with food images and narratives in all possible formats: movies, documentaries, reality shows, blogs and social media. The obvious connection between food and journey – seeking the authentic ‘taste of the Other’ – swiftly became a *topos* for the Italian cultural experience abroad. Suffice it to think about the role of Italian food and cuisine in the global “Master Chef” format, or the widespread presence of Italian restaurants worldwide. The experience of Italian food is often articulated

with the idea of genuineness and freshness, hence healthy lifestyle. Moreover, practices of identity distinction are almost simultaneously activated: the consumer of Italian food-culture becomes a connoisseur, a worldly, refined person, someone who has good taste. Food culture has joined the older and eternal Italian narrative pillar: the experience of art. I believe that the social and academic discourse on food-culture and art-culture has common conceptual denominators that I would like to articulate here.

The US sociologist Howard Becker coined the expression 'art worlds': "The network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produce(s) the kind of art works that the art world is noted for" (Becker, 1982, X). This tautological definition and systemic approach, apparently trivial, has interesting consequences summarized in the statement "A work of art is what people say it is". The Art-world's gatekeepers – and soon probably social media influencers too – have the rhetorical power to steer popular opinion on the aesthetic value of an artwork. The same, as we will see, goes for tastemakers within the world of food-culture production and consumption.

Art worlds and art markets follow opaque and evanescent rules, often linked to the preferences and idiosyncrasies of a limited number of opinion leaders. They orient taste and define what is valuable in aesthetic terms, and therefore in monetary terms too.<sup>1</sup> Concerning food production and consumption, the discourse is declined in a different way but does not change much. Even in this field the game is about orienting or re-orienting consumers' habits and – following the French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979) – practices of distinction. People's sense of identity can be reinforced, and sometimes shaped, through the consumption of a product. This is the case of the "veg-veg" (vegetarians and vegans) culture, but the consumption–identity dynamic can also be seen at work in diet regimes clearly linked to a specific idea of the aesthet-

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1. This top-down model will endure over time. Yet, it is already showing its limits, especially in financial terms. For instance, this sort of oligopoly leads to a very limited use of the art market's potential.

ic beauty of the body.

If scientific criteria to define an artwork are opaque, in the field of nutrition ‘science’ comes into play in a strong and pervasive manner. Nutrition means health; it means drugs or herbal extracts; it means wellness. However, a scientific criterion is often bent in one direction or another, and it is frequently supplanted by another based on new discoveries.<sup>2</sup> Scientific fields are not immune to the struggle for power and money. And the ‘scientific’ can become a means of launching a product or a long-term consumption trend. Science, then, plays a rhetorical function within the marketing discourse.

The authority of science derives from scientists’ ability to provide unbiased and trustworthy knowledge. This is the standard view of science (Bijker, 2001): the public and popular discourse considers science as universal, disinterested and value-free. Nevertheless, Michel Foucault – among others – tells us how scientific knowledge cannot be considered objective by definition; it can indeed become instrumental to the advancement of particular interests by certain social groups. More precisely, Foucault (1980) pointed out how categories of thought initiated by scientific discourse can shape the government of people’s lives and individuals’ understanding of themselves.

Emile Durkheim prefigured the relationship of authority-opinion in the way we contemplate science. He brought to our attention how science is often considered the antagonist of opinion, whose errors it combats and rectifies. But science “cannot succeed in this task if it does not have sufficient authority, and it can obtain this authority only from opinion itself. If people did not have faith in science, all the scientific demonstrations in the world would be without any influence whatsoever over their mind.” (Durkheim, 2008/1912, p. 208)

Getting back to the fields of art and food, we can identify shared

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2. Years ago, I was put on a diet to manage my cholesterol levels, and the well-paid nutritionist told me: “Egg is a poison for you.” I recently discovered that the new nutritionist mantra is “an egg a day keeps the doctor away.”

mechanisms regulating both fields. By using a simple formal abstraction, we can recognize the opaque blend of scientific and aesthetic judgement as a common governing criterion that contributes to defining a common battlefield of trends, fashions and therefore wealth.

The distinction practices wind through what is valuable (in aesthetic and scientific terms) and what is valueless (and, in a certain sense, false or sugar-coated). Let's consider the strategic distinction operated within the tourism industry between travellers and tourists. Here the declared goal is to sell an authentic experience to the tourist – MacCannel (1973) calls it “staged authenticity” – be it food or art, so as to make the tourist feel like a traveller, a connoisseur: namely, a person who possesses 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 the last thirty years or so, academe has started to take the food-culture topic seriously – creating the new disciplinary field “food studies” – and higher education courses have started to be offered (both in Italy and abroad). The role of food as a cultural entry point is obviously emphasized during the semester abroad. Knowing how and what locals eat gives precious cultural insights to the foreigner. This is incontestable. However, another observation is undeniable: the symbolic meanings leading to cultural knowledge incorporated by food are rougher, less articulated and developed than, for instance, literature. The food discourse can accompany but cannot substitute classical education. And in the case of studying abroad, the intellectual itinerary to understand “where we are” calls for two fundamental, albeit, sadly often neglected disciplines: geography and history. Italian culture (Italy) and its key role within Western civilization cannot be understood without reference to the strategic position of a peninsula that from the Alps stretches down into the heart of the Mediterranean Sea: a natural and symbolic bridge between North (Europe), South (Africa) and East (the Middle East).

The success of food in the learning itinerary abroad is easy to understand. Eating is universal, it is always part of everyday life and it is by far one of the most accessible ways to experience something of a local culture. Eating Italian is easier than speaking the language, interpreting an artwork or a piece of literature. However, the legitimate and interesting knowledge about “how a culture eats” often appears to be transformed into “eating a culture”. The place of this new educational practice in higher education cannot be made at the expense of other fundamental disciplines. Thus, an excessive emphasis on food-culture can become an obstacle rather than a blessing for true intellectual and critical cultural knowledge. Food can open a number of doors on Otherness, but it is not a cultural *passe-partout*. This would be an exaggeration.

### **Culture shock and cultural illusion**

‘Culture shock’ is another overstatement and a commonplace in the academic discourse on studying abroad. Firstly, I hope that none of my students will ever experience a “culture shock” (Oberg, 1960) during their semester in Italy. Furthermore, I do not see any educational point either in provoking or protecting students from something that – with the same counter-emphasis – does not exist. As we have seen with food, the rhetorical overstatement ‘culture shock’ taken literally leads to what we can call a “cultural illusion” or “cultural mirage”.

Oberg coined the expression culture shock to describe the anxiety resulting from losing one’s sense of “when–to–do–what–and–how” in a new culture. A visitor to a foreign culture experiencing culture shock discovers that familiar cues have been replaced by strange or unfamiliar ones. Oberg mentioned six features of culture shock: (1) strain, resulting from the effort of psychological adaptation; (2) a sense of loss and deprivation, referring to former friends, status, profession, and possessions; (3) rejection by or of the culture; (4) confusion, referring to role, role expectations, feelings, and self-identity; (5) surprise, anxiety, disgust, or indignation regarding the cultural differences between old and new ways; and (6) feelings of impotence, as a result of the inability to cope in the new environment.

By opening any English dictionary, in this case the New Oxford American Dictionary (2010), we see that ‘shock’ is described as a “sudden upsetting or surprising event or experience; a feeling of disturbed surprise resulting from such an event”. An example for shock is in the sentence “her death gave us all a terrible shock”. In a medical sense, shock is “an acute medical condition associated with a fall in blood pressure, caused by such events as loss of blood, severe burns, bacterial infection, allergic reaction, or sudden emotional stress, and marked by cold, pallid skin, irregular breathing, rapid pulse, and dilated pupils.” Example: “He died of shock due to massive abdominal hemorrhage”. Other meanings are related to economy – “trading imbalances caused by the two oil shocks”, or in the case of ‘electric shock’ “violent shaking movement caused by an impact, explosion, or tremor”. Nothing relevant changes if we take the verb ‘shock’ into consideration.

Thus, if we follow the English language, the term ‘shock’ is associated with a traumatic event that causes a sudden and violent disturbance in the emotions. If this use of the term makes sense, American students do not experience “cultural shocks” while they are studying abroad in Florence. Or, to put it another, more sociological way, I do not see this group of people particularly exposed to such a threat – I mean no more than any other social group.

As a sociologist and cultural anthropologist, I would not start studying the topic “American Students Abroad” from such perspective. That is why I am always amazed when in class a student uses the expression ‘culture shock’, almost like a mantra. The students’ auto-ethnographical papers<sup>3</sup> reveal that they were prepared and socialized to this pseudo-theory, and they are applying it as ‘the’ interpretative paradigm for their acculturation process abroad.

I believe cultural shock is an inappropriate terminological choice; I would consider ‘cultural malaise’ or ‘cultural frustration’ or ‘cultural anx-

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3. I ask my students to write a partial autobiography-autoethnography – autoethnography being the description of self as seen within another culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

iety' or 'cultural stress' as more accurate expressions. In sum, I consider the locution 'culture shock' referred to the average American youngster who is studying in Florence to be a hyperbole – one of the many; this essay focuses on some of them. Moreover, how would one then describe a truly traumatic event? Cultural 'super-shock'? It is my conviction that there is a profound difference between frustrating and traumatic events. And within psychological literature 'acculturative stress' has become the preferred expression for other reasons; mainly because "it is closely linked to psychological models of stress as a response to environmental stressors" (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 298). Anyhow, we are talking about stressors, not shockers. Acculturative stress is defined as a negative psychological reaction to the experiences of acculturation, often characterized by anxiety, depression and a variety of psychosomatic problems. Berry (2004, pp. 27–34) prefers to use the expression 'acculturative stress' for two more reasons.

Firstly, the notion of shock is essentially negative, whereas stress ranges from positive to negative. Since acculturation has both positive and negative aspects (for instance, new opportunities *vs.* discrimination) the concept of stress is better fitted to the experience. In addition, unlike shock, the concept of stress has been addressed and developed in cultural and psychological theory (stress–coping–adaptation).

Secondly, the origin of the phenomena being explored is intercultural rather than cultural. The term 'acculturation' emphasizes the fact that two cultures are interacting to produce these phenomena.

I also have to mention two other hermeneutic problems I find in applying Oberg's five-stage process to the American students in Florence – another 'mantra' in my teaching and researching experience. The initial contact, or the so called "honeymoon stage," is when the newly-arrived individual experiences the curiosity and excitement of a tourist without any corresponding sense of responsibility for his or her own behaviour. The second stage involves disintegration of familiar cues and overwhelms the individual with the requirements of the new culture. The individual typically experiences self-blame and a sense of personal inadequacy about the difficulties encountered. The third stage reintegrates new cues

with an increased ability to function in the new culture. However, the emotions associated with this third stage are typically anger, blame, and resentment toward the new culture for having caused difficulties unnecessarily. The fourth stage continues the process of reintegration toward gradual autonomy and increased ability to see both bad and good elements of the old and new cultures. The fifth stage is when the individual has achieved a bicultural identity and is able to function in both the old and the new cultures.

What's my problem with such a sequence? I simply never met a student that went through anything like that and in that order. Moreover, this sequence is considered by some scholars controversial and simplistic. According to Furnham and Bochner (1986) the U-curve theory first does not consider several important variables in the adjustment process – such as depression, loneliness, homesickness. And each subject might experience cultural stress in different moments of the adjustment process. That is, you might be “stressed” as soon as you get off the plane and experience feelings connected with the honeymoon stage at the end of your sojourn.

The U-curve model does not even address differences in time, location, and intensity of the sojourn – predicting the same curve for people who experience small or significant culture gaps. The U-curve and its variations – W-curves, but I can easily imagine other kinds of curves appearing in the near future (M, Z, K, and X-curves) – are largely anecdotal and fail to describe other types of sojourners: those who fail to adjust, who return home early.

Finally, why are cultural challenges, or whatever you want to call them, considered in a negative way? Why do critical cultural encounters have to be weathered in advance? Why not consider them as positive experiences within the overall identity development of the youngster abroad? Isn't becoming cosmopolitan – or, as Americans prefer to call it, “a global citizen” – about being exposed to and overcoming cultural obstacles?

Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut told us that “optimal frustration” is vital for child's growth – and, I would add, the same goes for adolescents and young people. Kohut asked “Can abiding functions be acquired

by the self without a preceding frustration, however tiny and/or fractionated from the side of the self-object?"<sup>4</sup> (Kohut, 1984, p. 100). His answer was no. He described a three-step process: "1) need-activation and optimal frustration via 2) nonfulfillment of the need (abstinence) and 3) substitution of direct need fulfilment with the establishment of a bond of empathy between self and self-object" (*ibid.*, 103).

Therefore, optimal frustration is a kind of bearable frustration. When a child wants a self-object that is not accessible, he/she experiences frustration. Such frustration is optimal when it leads to the development of new coping abilities. A typical example is the pacifier taken away from the baby who can later do without it. The consequent plausible question to ask is: Why deprive the twenty-year-old of optimal 'cultural frustration' – almost a developmental need in times of globalization – by introducing the 'cultural gratification' pacifier?

One last consideration. It is pretty remarkable to observe how this expression continues to be so widely used in the academic-abroad discourse. Even 20 years ago, a clear and systematic critique was made of the 'culture shock' pseudo-theory. A reasonable interpretation is to imagine a sort of 'divorce' between those who manage/work and those who scientifically study international education. If this rings true, we can envision an explanation for this apparent intellectual disconnect. Culture shock is a catchy expression that 'works well' in the studying-abroad world. Thus, more than divorce we can speak of two different criteria pivoting scientific and rhetorical discourse on international education: pursuit of truth *vs.* pursuit of persuasion.

### **Stereotypes: drawing the individual/group line**

According to cultural analyst Michael Pickering (2001), 'stereotype' can be conceptualized as a commonly held public belief about specific

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4 In psychoanalytic literature, Self-objects are people. Father, mother and close relatives are the most significant Self-objects for the child. However, for Kohut (1971, 1984) Self-object is the function rather than the person. Thus, it is plausible to consider certain cultural experiences, capable of encapsulating strong symbolisms, as Self-objects (Birindelli, 2014).

social groups, or types of individuals. He adds that concepts of stereotype and prejudice are often confused. Basically, a prejudice always casts negative light on people belonging to a cultural group. A stereotype, instead, can be either negative or positive. Students<sup>5</sup> are trained and socialized to consider stereotype only as a negative, derogatory and labeling mechanism. This intellectual “simplification of a simplification (the stereotype)” generates confusion and does not allow students to interpret the concept in depth. The problem raised by the use of stereotypes does not lie in their intrinsic negativity – they can highlight positive attitudes and features – but in their rhetorical simplifying and concealing power: the Other becomes a mask on the cultural stage of the studying abroad play.

“Asians are good in math” is a typical example that students bring to my attention in their auto-ethnographies. Trying to support critical thinking, I discuss how the term ‘Asian’ is already a simplification for all the people coming from the largest continent – say a Japanese, an Indian and someone from Iraq. The key point I want to emphasize is precisely that stereotypes are standardized (hence simplified) ideas of groups based on certain prior assumptions. And even if the alleged characteristics are commonly considered ‘positive’, the structural result of how stereotypes work is the same. We can imagine a stereotype as a theatrical spotlight illuminating what falls under its light cone. The rest of the scene remains in the shadow. This is the most (or one of the most) important social consequence of stereotypes.

The Greek origin of the term (*στερεότυπος*) means ‘solid impression’ but its contemporary psychosocial meaning is quite recent. Walter Lippmann first used it in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*. Before that, the meaning of stereotype was restricted to the printing world – *cliché* was in fact the French word for the printing blocks from which numerous reproductions could be made. Walter Lippmann described stereotypes as “pictures in our heads”; in key passages of his book he specifies a core

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5. In my teaching and research experience I did not notice any substantial difference between international students from the United States and other nationalities, undergraduate or graduate.

conceptual meaning: “Whether right or wrong... imagination is shaped by the pictures seen.... Consequently, they lead to stereotypes that are hard to shake” (Lippmann, 1922/1965, pp. 95–156).

Lippmann considers stereotypes as both necessary and undesirable modes of representation. The complexity of modern social life with its overwhelming data demanded informational shortcuts and provided a fertile bed for the cultivation of stereotypes. Late modernity, with the Internet and social media, did not bring informational clarity: media and social media endorsement boosts the rhetorical force of stereotypes. Thus, if on the one hand a stereotype is an obstacle to the understanding of other social groups and categories, on the other such mental categorization (labelling) is required and almost unavoidable in people’s contemporary everyday life. Stereotypes allow us to simplify and overcome the difficulty of embracing the complexities of late modern social life. However, once a stereotype is created, it obstructs facing up to unexpected meanings about individuals belonging to different groups. By the same token, it satisfies the human need to predict people’s behavior.

Pickering’s interpretation of stereotypical fallacies (essentialism and individualism) constitutes another crucial step for a deeper understanding of this concept. Students, besides being socialized only to stereotypes as stigma, acknowledge only one aspect of the concept. Any person assigned to a stereotype is recognized primarily, if not solely, through the assumed characteristic of the group. This is the fallacy of essentialism, where Other-identity (or Self-identity) is totally absorbed by the group: “He/she is his group”, or “I am my group”. Identities are seen only through the conceptual lenses colored by the highlighted characteristic, becoming the natural (thus unalterable) consequence of the assumed cultural trait. Individualism is essentialism in reverse: “I (he/she) share nothing with my group”. The fallacy lies in its view of identity as subjective uniqueness. For obvious social, cultural and historical reasons, individuals always share some characteristics of the group they belong to, in which they grew up and/or were socialized.

The implicit/explicit quandary raised by the two fallacies is: Where

should we draw the line between group membership and individuality? A clear and definite answer to this question is out of reach for serious social and cultural analysis. The attempt to find the formula, the equation establishing once and for all the individual(s)–group(s) boundary, falls outside the scientific domain. It is obviously a field of inquiry for social scientists, but mainly as the study of the normative attempts to establish boundaries for power purposes (political, religious, ethnical, moral etc.). This is the intrinsic epistemological and gnoseological nature of human intellectual investigation, especially within human and social sciences. George Simmel tells us that the prosecution of historical studies necessarily involves a plurality of different principles, which not only organize the historical materials in different ways but even prescribe different criteria of truth: “The kind of science humanity has at any given moment depends on the kind of humanity it is at that moment.” (Simmel, 1910/1959, p. 290). For Simmel, the best we could do, both as reflexive actors and as social scientists investigating such reflexive actors, is to step over different forms of boundaries. Simmel’s “double boundary dialectic” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1989) can shed sociological light on the theoretical individual/group impasse raised by a thick interpretation of stereotypes.

The individual who investigates his/her own being discovers irresolution, incompleteness and paradox. The “formal structure of our existence”, which is manifested “in countless ways in the diverse provinces, activities, and destinies of human life”, is to stand “at every moment between two boundaries.” No aspect of our existence can be defined unilaterally: “By virtue of the fact that we have boundaries everywhere and always, so accordingly we are boundaries” (Simmel, 1918/1971, p. 353). The very essence of our existence is to be boundaries, but that does not mean that we are determinate or fixed within rigid limits; the actor is a meditative human being. The question inherent to international students is what kinds of boundaries the citizen of our globalized world (or training to become so) truly crosses and therefore, what kinds of social groups and cultures he/she mediates.

If boundaries cannot be evaded once and for all, “every single de-

terminate boundary can be stepped over”, thus creating a new one. Ultimately, we might say that boundaries are made by those who cross them (Birindelli, 2018): “For only whoever stands outside his boundary in some sense knows that he stands within it” (Simmel, 1918/1971, p. 355). In Simmel’s conception, the acknowledgement of a boundary opens the way to its transcendence. It is the human reflexive ability to transcend mental limits while remaining within them: any phase of human existence can only be known from a position that is outside it and yet remains within it.

Simmel considers society to be one of those encompassing boundaries that human beings cannot escape, yet social actors need to distance (or even to isolate) themselves from society in order to participate in it as fully aware and reflexive actors. Society, therefore, lies on the boundary between nature and convention:

We neither belong to it as members of an organism nor do we contrive it out of our isolated individualities. Instead, we co-constitute society as a boundary that we continually transcend as we remain within its confines. We cannot dispense with it, but we do dispense with it. (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1989, p. 52)

### **Narratives, stereotypes and cultural maps**

As we have seen, the hermeneutic approach to the concept of stereotype needs to be problematized for a richer and in-depth interpretation of social and cultural experience. In a more colloquial register, we could point out that the professors’ task is not to say “stereotypes are bad”, but rather to study what a stereotype is and how it works. Stereotypes are preconceptions and mental schemas, means of cognitively mapping the world and negotiating different situations and circumstances – both familiar and unfamiliar. Exploring and interpreting the set of stereotypes used to represent people from a specific culture allows us to reconstruct a “cultural map”.

The sociologist Ulrich Beck (2006) represents the ideal cosmopolitan person as someone who constructs bridges instead of walls through the substitution of the “either-or” with the “both-and” logic. He imagines

bridges constructed through active tolerance of the cultural other. In his view, stereotypes are probably obstacles *tout court*. I believe that only the unconscious, or automatic, or unthought use of a stereotype creates walls between people. Instead of pretending we do not use them – that they are “bad, bad, bad, period” – conscious, thoughtful discussions and interpretation of a stereotype can potentially create dialogic bridges between people: the purpose of bridges is to connect both ways.

Walter Lippmann, in his influential work on public opinion, again makes an important point: “We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception” (Lippmann, 1922/1965, p. 59). If we acknowledge the literary construction of our social imaginary – that, so to say, “we read about the world before knowing it” – we can argue that “national images in their function as commonplaces refer primarily not to the nation in question but to the currency of other, previous images about that nation” (Leerssen, 2000, p. 280). This speculative manoeuvre allows us to break-down the simplistic idea that we need to measure the significance of a stereotype (any concept or ideal-type) against ‘social-reality-as-it-really-is’, regardless of the fact that the status of ‘real social reality’ is also the result of a historical narrative, it is a social construction.

In ‘imagology’ – a branch of literary studies developed mainly in France and Germany – national characterisation is studied within the interpretative field delimited by aspects of their commonplace nature: intertextuality, recognisability, and *vraisemblance*.

Rather than study Mme de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* as to its fidelity to a ‘real’ Germany (to which access could be gained only by way of other mediations and representations), imagologists have opted for the more promising approach of *studying such a text historically and intertextually against a whole tradition of texts* dealing with Germany, starting with Tacitus’s *Germania* and subsequently leading to the germanophilia of French Romantics like Gérard de Nerval. It is from

this intertext that the functional effectiveness of Mme de Staël's text can be assessed (Leerssen, 2000, p. 281, emphasis mine).

The narrative account is indeed the primary and most potent interpretative and cognitive tool that human beings, as socially and culturally situated subjects, can utilise to make sense of their life experiences (Bruner, 1990, 1991). The human being is traditionally defined as *zoon logikon*, an animal provided with reason. Today, a more concrete definition would be that of a symbolic animal: coming before the posterior 'logos', which stems from scientific understanding and the related written production, is the anterior 'logos' of the narrative discourse. People have been telling stories since the beginning of the world, long before they began to piece together the structure of mathematical physics. Discourse, articulation through words (*logos*), is what distinguishes man from all the other animal species. Since the *logos* of the story precedes that of theoretical discourse, the *zoon logikon* of Greek philosophy could be translated as 'narrating animal'.

The interpretative path taken leads us to wonder if stereotypes stemming from cultural narratives are inevitably obstacles, or if they can also facilitate the understanding of a society – in our case that of Italy. Benedetto Croce was one of the first Italian scholars to criticise all forms of typing, and in particular those relating to the concept of national character. According to Croce, placing the emphasis on character prevented grasping the revelations of a profound historical narrative, falling into the trap of separating a people from its history: representing first the character with the idea of subsequently seeking how it acted and reacted to events, that is, what history it had. But, Croce argued, there can be no historical narration if the character is posited already fully-fledged (Croce, 1922).

Unlike Croce, Anglo-Saxon scholars of anthropological history did not view either typing or stereotyping negatively. The stereotype is not an obstacle, but an aid in the process of reconstructing a culture. Peter Burke sees the very term 'stereotype' as a disparaging way of referring to what sociologists and anthropologists call a model; in other words,

a useful simplification to understand the complexity of social reality. Examples of such stereotypes or models could be feudalism, capitalism, the culture of shame, performance society and so on, and even adjectives such as 'English' or 'Italian' when used with reference to styles or behaviour (Burke, 1987).

Burke is not addressing the scientific status of a stereotype *strictu sensu*, which is (especially from a positivist approach) simply a false or pre-scientific representation of social reality. Pickering (2001), among others, underlines how the presence of a stereotype bars the processing of new or unexpected information, but at the same time, as we have already seen, he refers to Lippmann's Dilemma: stereotypes are both necessary and undesirable modes of representation in modern societies (Lippmann, 1965/1922). In modern life, the proliferation of social and cultural relations calls for shortcuts of discourse and representation to help process an amount of data that would otherwise be overwhelming. However, the fixed nature of widely accepted stereotypes can diminish or blur our understanding of other social groups and categories.

In my interpretation, Burke's point is that *a stereotype at once blocks and reveals cultural meanings*; in particular, a stereotype might disclose the beliefs of a people and about a people. In a sense, what we are recalling here is Durkheim's thesis that opinion is eminently a social fact and, as such, it is a source of authority (Durkheim, 1912/ 1965).

Furthermore, if we interpret a stereotype through constructionist conceptual lenses (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), a cliché can be said to be what certain groups of people regard as 'real' or an adequate representation of the social reality: "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, p. 42). The beliefs springing from a stereotype contribute to shape the cultural image and sense of identity of a given collectivity. Basically, the cognitive approach to social reality fostered by a belief disregards, without necessarily excluding, the experimental method that western culture, from Galileo on, has set as an essential condition

of scientific knowledge (Prandi, 2007).

Now, connecting back to the considerations on the hermeneutic power of narratives, we can consider the stereotype also as a myth, a story. A specific stereotype, such as “Italians are familist”, can thus be seen as an archetypal narrative persisting through the centuries that still has an iron grip on the interpretation of Italian culture: the self-perpetuating myth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968). The familist 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). Hence, regardless of its ‘scientific’ adherence to social reality, the familist script is a fundamental story for the indigenous and allogeous (lay and scientific) interpretations of Italian culture.

These reflections make even more sense if we agree with, or accord scientific status to, the semiotic approach of Clifford Geertz,<sup>6</sup> who defines 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’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 89, emphasis mine).

It is precisely a deep anthropological interpretation that Carlo Tullio-Altan proposes (1986, p. 29) when he emphasises the importance of what is now widely referred to as ‘mentality’. The latter is shaped by a historic combination of economic, social, political and specifically cultural factors, attuned to the needs that this combination expresses. These constructs stem from the furrows of history but in the long term may become causal factors in the evolution of history. The mentality consolidated in a certain guise survives the conditions that generated it and, in its turn, becomes a relevant factor affecting subsequent economic, social and political events: a viscous and resistant cultural reality.

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6 ‘The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

The mingling of ‘mental’ factors, historic memory, language and collective values translates individual identity into that of the group and into the national identity *tout court*, making an Italian an Italian and not a German. In this sense – as a combination of historic, political, ethnic, religious, anthropological and cultural stratifications – we can identify unifying elements of Italian-ness, as a sort of Kantian metaphysics of customs.

On the other hand, what are we talking about when we use the term ‘Italian Identity’? And what do we mean or imply when we use the expression *all’italiana* – the Italian way? According to Luigi Barzini (1964), most Italian social practices are not ‘in the Italian way’; nevertheless this observation does not lead him to consider the phrase as a superficial stereotype, but rather as a valuable sociological indicator, helping to explain how and why things went the way they did in the past and will continue to determine the future. The sensation of there being no way out explains why, beneath its sparkling and lively surface, Italian life reveals a fundamental sense of bitterness, disappointment and infinite melancholy.

According to the Italian sociologist Alessandro Cavalli, the label ‘Italian national character’ can be used to group together negative traits normally used to define Italians (both at home and abroad) – such as individualism, familism, particularism, localism, clientelism, fatalism and scepticism about institutions – knowing that it is an ideal type: “A tool for interpreting reality that should not be mistaken for reality itself”.

We will never find a flesh-and-bones pure example of the ideal type; there does not exist a ‘certified’ Italian, not even the Alberto Sordi of the comedy of manners ‘All’italiana.’ Each Italian embodies only some traits of the ideal type, and there are probably some Italian citizens that do not possess any of them. *Understood properly, the concept of a national character nevertheless has heuristic value.* We can empirically discern the presence and intensity of specific features, and we can map their average distribution in the various cultural areas of the country, in combination with other purely local facets of character. We may speculate that some traits are more often found

in the South than in the North, but the differences are probably not dramatic (Cavalli, 2001, p. 125, emphasis mine).

Thus, the ‘Italian national character’ can be seen as an ideology, and “Like all ideologies, the negative image of the ‘Italian national character’ is neither all true nor all false, but represents a distorted representation of reality” (Cavalli, 2001, p. 127).

The symbolic power of a stereotype goes beyond its ability to reveal or conceal how social reality ‘really is’. Ideas and beliefs permeating a culture – and, in the case of studying abroad, from both inside and outside – can become concrete elements of exceptional hardness and consistency. Basically, what I have introduced here is the first principle of social constructionism: “Groups are real if people think they are: they then behave in ways that assume that groups are real and, in so doing, construct that reality. They realise it.... Groups may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary” (Jenkins, 2014, pp. 11–12).

From an anthropological perspective, *ethnos* is made by a configuration<sup>7</sup> of different social and cultural dimensions, which includes a common *epos* (the narration of a collective past, the historic memory). The script constructed by a stereotype is part of this story and contributes to shape how the Italian community is staged or ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983).

Hence, in this contribution I do not necessarily see stereotypes as an obstacle to be cleared from the analytical panorama. Pre-scientific assumptions can be considered fundamental sources of meaning for interpreting the cultural image of a collective identity. What I have mainly addressed here is not the question of whether a stereotype is ‘true’ or ‘false’. Even if a cliché such as ‘familism’ is considered an inaccurate representation of Italian cultural identity – namely, a stereotype – it has, neverthe-

<sup>7</sup> See among others Tullio-Altan (1986). Along with *epos* the other cultural and social dimensions are *oikos* (the homeland, the sense of belonging to a country), *ethos* (the shared values and rules), *genos* (the bonds of blood) and *logos* (language).

less, influenced the way foreigners think about Italians, and how Italians think about themselves.

### **Conclusions: Narrative gap and cultural illusion**

In this contribution I have focused on some ‘spotlights’ and ‘shadows’ created by the discourse on studying abroad and cultural experience. I wish to conclude by extending the hermeneutic gaze beyond the field of international education, trying to highlight a sort of ‘Grand Narrative’ for Italian society and culture. I believe that widespread images and representations of Italian-ness owe their rhetorical strength to a broader narrative, a sort of ‘highway of meaning’ to which each account is directly or indirectly connected. If we prefer to use a reverse aquatic metaphor: interpretative streams and torrents owe their power to the great river they are flowing into.

I believe that contemporary cultural experiences of Florence (Tuscany, Italy) continue to be shaped by the social imaginary inherited from the early nineteenth century. As I wrote elsewhere (Birindelli 2020), one of the leitmotifs of foreigners’ experiences is a romantic cognitive style guided by the Grand Tour narrative. Travellers and sojourners visit the Italian peninsula with a set of expectations shaped through filmic and literary representations. Consequently, they see what they expect to see. 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.<sup>8</sup>

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’ (Crouch, Jackson, & Thompson, 2005). The experiential pathway to Florence and Tuscany moves along a cultural highway that resonates deeply with the North American/European (and now ‘global’) reader-viewer-traveller; it is a well-trodden cultural itinerary and

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8. See, among others, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour* (Chaney, 2014) and Black (2010) *The British and the Grand Tour*.

has been exhaustively sketched over centuries. Florence and its surrounding landscape are the idealized places 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 him/herself again, revitalizing the natural, genuine and primary union with human nature.

The foreigners' romantic *coup d'oeil* may induce a deceptive vision of Italian life and social reality. Florence (Tuscany, Italy) is the place where everybody slows down and enjoys life, eating every day with the extended family: all of my American students come with this image and most of them bring it back home intact – despite all my attempts to deconstruct the stereotype or to enrich it. 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.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of this contribution, I mentioned how the history of Italian modernity remains in the 'shadow' of the study-abroad discourse. In *Mythologies* (1957/1972), Roland Barthes identifies the "deprivation of history" as a key figure of the rhetoric of myth regarding other people and cultures. There is a historical narrative gap: Italian culture and society are crystallized and trapped in a distant past, so that any sociological or anthropological consideration on contemporary Italy is lacking historical depth. Italians are 'deprived' of (at least) 150 years of their history. It is obviously impossible to grasp Italian-ness while bracketing out: how it became a republic, two World Wars, Fascism, the strongest Communist party in the west, terrorism, a compressed modernization process, cor-

9. According to the latest available data (2017), the Fertility rate in Italy is 1.320. Only Spain, Malta and Korea score lower. OECD (2019), Fertility rates (indicator). doi: 10.1787/8272fb01-en (accessed on 06 April 2020).

ruption,<sup>10</sup> organized crime, cultural backwardness (not only of the south), a middle class with low cultural capital and a weak sense of the public good (Birindelli 2019) and so on.

New educational offers in higher education – be it food, fashion, social media etc. – cannot be made at the expenses of other classic disciplines such as history. Let's keep studying how a culture eats without expecting to 'eat a culture'. With Foucault we have seen that scientific knowledge can become instrumental to the advancement of particular interests of certain social groups. We have introduced the social constructionism perspective on the notion of stereotypes, allowing us to understand how the discursive intellectual 'spotlight' can focus on certain images of Italian culture at the expense of others that remain in the 'shadow'. It is scarcely surprising to see how some representations and constructs are taken as *passé-partouts* effortlessly to disclose the cultural 'Other'.

We are aware that communicative overstatements and exaggerations are part of the academic game. But, as we have seen, linguistically we do not have the expression 'cultural super-shock'. What happens when we clamber intellectually higher than a hyperbolic statement? Can we reach the giddy heights of a hyper-hyperbole? Or is it too much, a vertigo of meaning? James Carey, in his groundbreaking book *Communication as Culture*, defines communication as a "process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed." (1992, p. 23). Thus, once we have constructed a version of social reality, it doesn't end there. The constructed reality must be maintained and, from time to time, repaired. Sometimes our models 'of and for' reality need intense repair work. And, to end with Carey's words: "Finally, we must, often with fear and regret, toss away our authoritative representations of reality and begin to build the world anew." (1992, p. 30).

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10. Italy ranks 51/180 and scores 53 in the 2019 world corruption perception index (transparency.org, retrieved on 06 April 2020). The index (which is made by experts and businesspeople) ranks 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, more than two-thirds of the countries score below 50. The average score is 43.

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