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Beyond

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Studies in International Education

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Beyond the Pit and the Pendulum
An introduction to the third issue of Beyond

When abroad, especially at a young age and for the first time, people can feel trapped, as if they had fallen into a pit and were subject to a constant, unpleasant swing between states of mind that are only apparently distant from one another: anxiety and depression, excitement and frustration. To break this sort of spell and (to borrow from Edgar Allan Poe's imagery once again) climb out of this "cave" of emotional as well as social exclusion, trustworthy adults can serve as a great resort — a lifeline, if you will.

This is particularly true in the case of the student-teacher relationship, especially if the professors also have been international students at some point early on in their lives and for a significant span of time. Besides, this relationship can prove beneficial to both parties, as teaching, too, can prove — strangely enough — a lonely and isolating experience at times, even inside the classroom. Teachers (like students) can feel isolated and bored; these feelings (loneliness and boredom) can become eye-opening opportunities, not to be wasted by either teachers or students.

In this regard, I'd like to turn to another nineteenth-century piece of literature, which may help me describe a feeling common to most teachers at some stages in their careers. I'm alluding to what one may call "the Canterville ghost syndrome." It affects teachers when the more they try to impress and involve their students in the subjects they love, the less those very students seem to be responsive. Just like the poor ghost in that Oscar Wilde story: no matter how hard he tried, he always ended up being mocked by the practical-minded family of US tourists who found his gruesome performances far from scary (in fact, quite ridiculous instead). In the end, as you know, the Canterville ghost and the disenchanted guests who had rented the haunted castle became friends and their relationship turned out to be good for all the characters in the story. Among other

things, they learned that their similarities (what they had in common) were more numerous and more important than their differences.

Come to think of it, most literature (both East and West) is about finding ourselves in the supposed "other." Such is the case, for instance, with the myriad chivalric romances dating from more or less the time when Wilde's ghost was alive in flesh and bones. I mean those medieval tales where knights inevitably realize (sooner or later) that they have a good deal in common with the "other" (whatever that may be) which they encounter on their journeys. This even applies to the so-called "monsters." Having at least reading knowledge of Latin, the authors of those texts knew that the word "monster" (from Latin "monstrum") is a sign to show us (Latin "monstrare"/"to show") something important. As such, a "monster" per se is neither positive nor negative; it's just a sign, a chance (like luck, which can be good or bad), an opportunity (to understand and, maybe, help us grow) that we should not waste.

Going further back in time, think of the first work of literature we know of, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, with the eponymous hero (who is actually considerably flawed at the beginning of the story) meeting the "savage" Enkidu, learning from him, teaching him in turn, and eventually becoming best friends. Another moving example (and another ancient masterpiece) on this same topic is the dialogue between Shiva and Arjuna before the final battle in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Those who reach "serene wisdom" (Krishna tells Arjuna) see all facets of life (starting with themselves and the other human beings) as many pearls on one and the same string.

Sometimes this feeling extends to literary characters. To lovers of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Pierre Bezukhov and Aleksej Karamazov have "substance" as if they were acquaintances (or even friends) of theirs, real people whose desires, hopes, and disappointments they know from personal, direct experience. In a letter to one of his friends, Petrarch once wrote: "Books speak with us, advise us and join us together with a certain living and penetrating intimacy." Whether we like him or not, one must admit that Petrarch (who scholars universally acknowledge as "the Father of Humanism") practiced what he preached. He took literature

so seriously and experienced it so intimately that he wrote letters to the ancient authors he was most fond of (among them, Cicero and Seneca) as if they had been his own living friends – in some cases even suggesting that they mend their ways!

As I'm sure you have understood by now, I've taught literature for some time, mostly focusing on medieval texts. Don't get me wrong, though: I'm glad to be living in this time period – despite Covid-19 – and I would never want to go back to previous times (let alone the Middle Ages). Yet, there is one teaching from medieval culture that – I think – we should not forget: the worst sin (that is, the worst trap of all) is desperation. When we lose hope, we stop trusting anything and anyone, starting with ourselves.

We know all too well how common this feeling has become today, even among our "privileged" students. Teachers (the "other", in their eyes, both as foreigners and because of their institutional role) can be a great resource to them. For starters, teaching students that the "other" (no matter how different at first sight) is part of their own personalities can be a first, crucial step to keep them from falling into that "pit" or (if this incident has happened already) climb out of it. This will stop the uncanny pendulum between those "emotional poles" that I alluded to in the beginning of this short preface, a swing that most people regard (mistakenly, I'm afraid) as mutually exclusive.

Obviously, it takes some remarkable qualities to accomplish this. In sum, it takes good teachers: generous people who love their job, who are already very knowledgeable but never grow tired of learning more and – therefore – listening. Professionals who have enough grit and stamina to keep their enthusiasm alive for decades and share it. Scholars who never take anything for granted (that would be the first sign that it's time for them to quit), who do research in their fields and possess that great amount of both passion and energy that one must have to be a teacher and, therefore, never stop being a student too.

To discuss this ideal profile and probe its authenticity vis-à-vis the many changes that affect our ways of teaching and learning (often chal-

lenging the very idea of education today), professors Federico Damonte and Francesca Passeri have gathered some colleagues at Palazzo Bargagli (one of the two ISI Florence facilities) in March 2019 and organized a one-day conference. International education provides a vantage point to observe the dynamics that determine the teacher-student role nowadays. Several factors contribute to this. Among them are the very intensity of this learning experience abroad, the different backgrounds of all the parties involved, and the awareness of being offered (students and teachers alike) a unique opportunity to grow.

And so, it is now time for me to turn the floor over to the teachers who participated in the conference organized by professors Damonte and Passeri. Practicing this privileged profession with humility, knowledge and enthusiasm, they all share one hope. They all hope that they may be both remembered and superseded by their "others", that is, those very students who travelled far to continue (and, sometimes, even start) the longest trip: the search for themselves.

Stefano U. Baldassarri, Ph.D., *Director, ISI Florence*

academics

Between stereotypes and experience:
teaching study abroad students in Florence
Federico Damonte

Introduction: the "Bubble"[1]

It should be clear from the other contributions to this issue, and especially Pisani's, that study abroad students in Florence know *Florence*, but do not know *Firenze*. By this I mean that the context of their study abroad experience clearly corresponds to that in which many students from the same country live and socialize together, with very limited direct contact with local inhabitants of the city. At study abroad schools, students and teachers are both aware of this basic problem, so much so that it has a name: in class, we sometimes refer to it as "the bubble". By this, we mean the fact that – as several students have described to us in detail – it is possible to avoid all contact with locals and – thanks to social media – maintain intense interactions with friends and relatives back home, so much so that it is not an exaggeration to summarize the experience of some of these students as "living at home while staying abroad". From the point of view of international education, this fact has several consequences, which study abroad programs address in different ways.

In this paper, I try to identify and describe these effects. It is important to underline that the resulting picture is necessarily incomplete, being based on my own point of view and experience as a teacher of specific disciplines at specific institutions. My aim here is to prepare the ground for a more extensive and in-depth research: I want to identify underlying, permanent issues.

On the empirical side, much work remains to be done on teaching practices and assumptions in our programs in Florence, and all findings in this area will have to be complemented by similar studies of the indis-

pensable work of administrative staff, directors, as well as figures usually left at the margins of the study abroad experience, such as tourist guides, counsellors, or the staff of some study programs that live with the students on the same premises[2]. I therefore invite the reader to consider the generalizations I make here as hypotheses to be tested on the ground.

On the theoretical side, I will focus on the role of stereotypes on shaping students' perception and understanding of the Italian context, and the extent to which direct experience and classroom teaching can change them. Again, I do not consider this the only, or even the most important factor at work in forming the students' perception, but it has certainly proved to be a powerful tool for teachers to guide students' awareness towards areas of Italian culture not present in their representations of the country. Even more importantly, in our experience, an explicit discussion of stereotypes in class has allowed students to question their own biases and expectations and to reflect critically on their own reactions to life in Florence.

The problem: the "Romantic Myth" of Italy

For many Italian teachers at study abroad programs, their first experience teaching American students in Florence implies becoming aware of the largely stereotyped views that dominate representations of Italy and Florence in the United States. These contemporary views are based on a tradition that by now is two centuries old, and even if it is has evolved in important respects, it is still possible to detect elements in it that go back to late Renaissance depictions of Italy in Protestant England. For instance, prejudices that paint Italians as intelligent but cunning, or as experts in enjoying life to the full but not in a moral way, have a very old history behind them. That tradition, in brief, depicts Italy as a "romantic" country, a

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2.   For example, a common scenario which is usually not recognised is the case in which some of these figures play also another, sometimes crucial, role besides their official one. For instance, as Stefano Baldassarri pointed out to us, often students turn to their Italian language teachers to share problems or difficulties they would not tell other teachers or members of the staff. This fact can be explained by the observation that students see their language teachers more frequently than others, and go out with them for organised activities, such as dinners together with Italian students their age.

Mediterranean land full of beautiful landscapes and historic buildings; a place where the weather is always sunny, people are always friendly and where it is easy to find "romance" and overcome a personal crisis. In this image the country is just slightly pre-modern, less developed than the US, its countryside roads routinely blocked by herds of sheep, and its technology – if it exists at all – is not reliable. Italians are not entirely trustworthy either, even if they are welcoming, as they behave according to a different set of rules, and moral rules are not very prominent among them. Most importantly, this picture does not leave room for any difficulties or challenges: there is no part of the country and its culture that is not already familiar, and easily accessible.

The nature of the problem: stereotypes, biases and popular culture

It is by now standard for overviews of international education to discuss the role of these romanticized representations in the early history of international travel. Many handbooks, for instance, contain detailed discussions of the Grand Tour and its relationship to modern study abroad in Europe (Lewin 2009). Contrary to this awareness of the role of stereotypes and prejudices in the earlier history of international education, the contemporary counterparts of those views and attitudes, have not received the same degree of attention.

A systematic survey is beyond the scope of this article; so, here I only note that this state of affairs has also been pointed out for other countries hosting study abroad schools for American students. Dominic Janes's description of teaching American students in the UK about British culture is worth quoting in full:

> "Many of my students are highly experienced in a range of academic fields, but know very little of the British culture, art and literature which it is my role to help them learn during their stay in this country. The reason why I want to talk about their 'ignorance' rather than ignorance is that the latter suggests that the students know nothing. In fact, they know a

great deal about their own culture and, moreover, have a distinctive set of stereotypes about Britain and the British. These attitudes are often hard-wired from long exposure to American popular culture [...]" (Janes 2011, 62).

Compare this description with the "blank slate" analysis explicitly or implicitly assumed by many studies, in which students arrive with no preconceived notions or even no expectations, ready for their experience abroad to determine their view of the place and its people. In particular, many authors who support "experiential learning" – as opposed to classroom learning – do not mention stereotypes at all. Even if stereotypes and cultural biases are mentioned (as in Montrose 2002), they are viewed as separate identifiable beliefs that students can become aware of and describe though introspection and analysis. This is clearly visible in Montrose's proposed learning objectives and evaluation methods concerning stereotypes and biases (based on the case of a program in Ireland):

Learning Objective:
• To understand the nature of cultural stereotyping and to address these issues more productively in my own life.

Evaluation:
• Describe in a short reflection paper the various cultural stereotypes that you have heard about people in your host country.
• Did you find yourself judging people against those stereotypes?
• Did you hear stereotypes about Americans while you were abroad?
• What are the reasons that stereotypes are used to define people?
• How did you combat your inclination to judge people by these cultural stereotypes?

- Were any of these values confirmed or denied during your study abroad experience?

Learning Objective:
- To keep a log of incidences of cultural biases that I identify in myself as an American in an international setting.

Evaluation:
- Remember a particular incident while traveling that made you aware of your own cultural biases. Write a personal essay and address the following questions:
- Describe the incident in detail.
- How was your thinking and reacting particularly "American"?
- Explain the importance of flexibility and refraining from judgment.
- How did you deal with the situation? How did you re-contextualize your values?
- If this situation came up again in the future, would you handle it differently?

(Montrose 2002, 12)

The crucial point that these proposed methods fail to take into account is the "hard-wired" nature of these "beliefs", and the fact that they are systematically supported by the students' own popular culture, as Janes informally – but correctly – points out. Consequently, many "stereotypes" and "biases" are well beyond the students' self-awareness, as they actually refer to deeply internalized aspects of their own culture, aspects that inevitably drive and constrain their ability to self-analyze.

In Janes's discussion, the issue that American students failed to grasp (but was crucial for them to acquire) is "social class", meaning social-economic layers. This is a perfect example of an issue which is highly important and visible in the host country (the UK), but almost taboo to discuss for the type of students that study abroad. Consider the com-

mon incident in which a non-British person makes the wrong assumptions about a British person's level of education, income, and – crucially – self-identification concerning class. I wonder how many American students would be able to answer the second question in the second method above by something like:

> "I failed to take into account the British social and cultural divide and did not recognize I was addressing people who clearly self-identify as working class. I extended my upper-class American bias "we are all middle class" to a different society where that claim is considered wrong and patronizing".

How many *teachers* would be able to do that, for that matter?

The nature of the problem: the function of "romantic Italy"

For Italian teachers in Florence a "blank slate" analysis is surprising, as to them it is evident that their students come indeed loaded with a heavy luggage of preconceptions and expectations. Teachers also quickly discover that these expectations are shaped by stereotypes, the ones codified and transmitted by the traditional romanticized view of the country. Today, a large body of novels, films, TV series as well as memoirs and travel books is based on such a tradition and transmits it in an updated form to younger generations. Teachers involved in study abroad programs are well aware of such works and often discuss them explicitly in class. What is sometimes not clear to both teachers and scholars of international education is how this romanticized view is systematically linked to, and supported by, the culture at home. The crucial observation is that stereotypes and biases are not limited to "popular" culture at all.

In the case of Italy, its romantic myth is often conveyed by "serious" works, such as reports about Italy in respected newspapers or magazines, documentaries about the "Italian lifestyle", or the many books written by journalists that purport to "explain" Italy and Italians. The latter, for example, by now form a well-defined genre in itself, which can be briefly
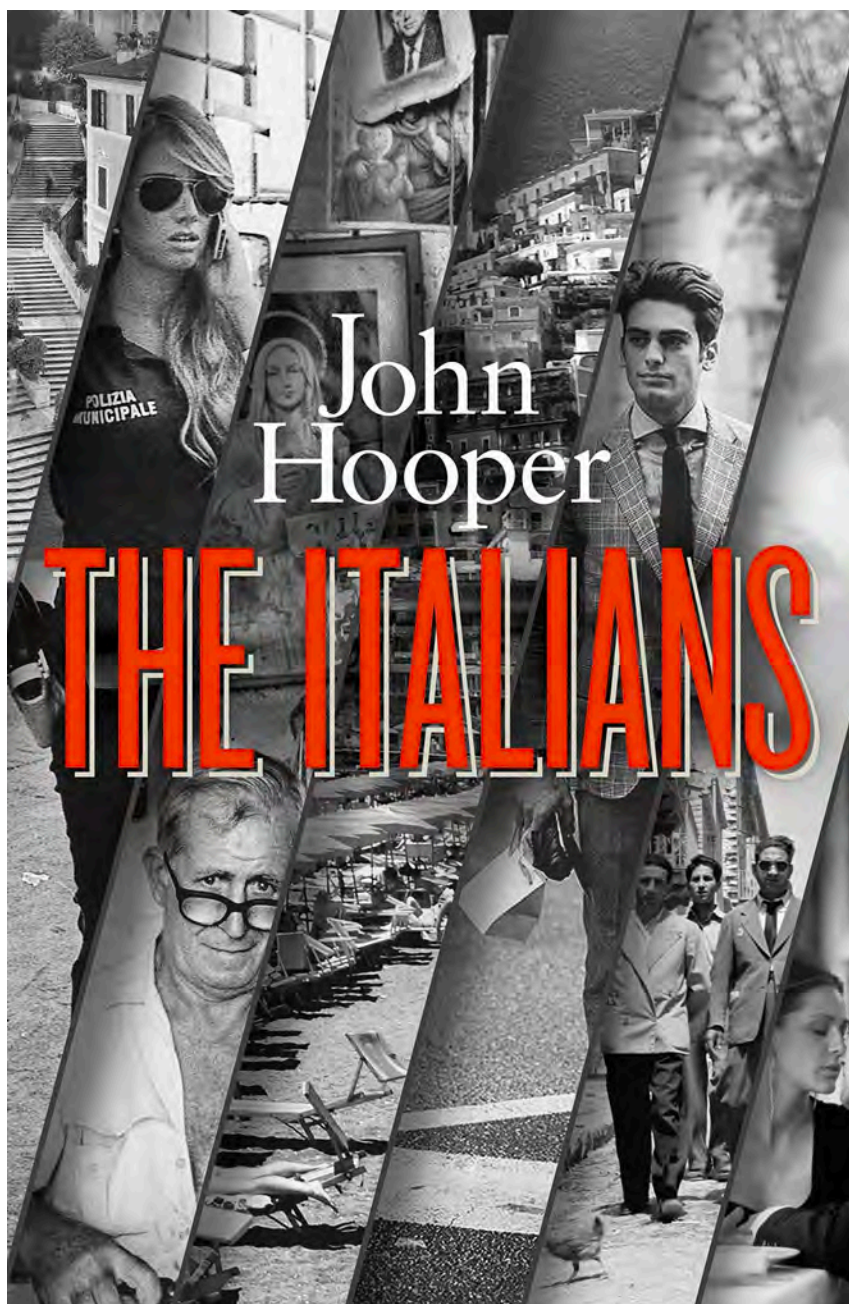
defined as glorified guidebooks, with survey chapters about history, geography, culture, art, food and so on[3]. They differ, of course, from the traditional stereotypical narrative in that they do examine Italy's problems and open issues in politics, the economy and society at large, but they share with it the goal of capturing and evaluating the "national character" of Italians, and compare it with that of Spaniards, Germans and so on. In doing so, of course, they necessarily fall back on generalizations, stereotypes, and the inevitable anecdotal evidence.

Take for instance *The Italians*, by John Hooper (2015): while the book, written a by long-term correspondent from Italy of *The Economist*, is largely based on figures and data about Italy's society and culture, that does not prevent the author from discussing the well-known lack of discipline of Italian children – as proved by one child attempting to play the piano in a restaurant – or Italians' deep-seated mistrust of each other – as clearly shown by the universal use of dark glasses by people walking on the street. The author even devotes a whole chapter to examine how a fundamental aspect of Italian character – self-restraint – is evidenced by Italians' not bursting into dance on the street or other public places. Needless to say, many others such examples could be quoted[4]. It is also significant that while the author does generally try to gather evidence in favor of his views, the cover (quite probably not his responsibility) is a very convenient visual summary of the myth of "romantic Italy" in its most modern incarnation: attractive, well-dressed young people, images of saints and the Virgin Mary, and – naturally – beaches and villages on hills.
The fact that even "serious" works actually accept and spread tra-

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3.   Interestingly, one of the first modern books in the genre is Luigi Barzini's *The Italians: A Full Length Portrait* (1964), a book written by an Italian for an American publisher.

4.   Most of the incorrect generalizations in the book seem to stem from the author's extension to the whole country of features that many Italians would consider exclusively Roman. This is a common error among foreign correspondents, as they are invariably based in Rome. Interestingly, the author does briefly discuss how a northern city like Bologna is "worlds apart" from his Italy, yet this observation is not taken to its logical conclusion: that generalizations over the whole country based on anecdotal evidence are inevitably unfounded.

ditional stereotypes affects teachers in study abroad programs in several ways. At a practical level, since the readings we assign have to be in English, we cannot be completely sure that works by non-Italians, addressed to an international public, do not convey those stereotypes in one form or another: one paper about Italian culture, for instance, quoted the personal memoir *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996, on which the 2003 movie is based), as a realistic representation of the country. The fact that such representation is similar to that of Barzini forty years before is *evidence*, in the authors' analysis, "that cultural change in Italy is occurring slowly"[5]. At a more general level, it deprives teachers of the possibility of criticizing that traditional myth *from within*: there are few American authors we can usefully quote in class to dismantle stereotypes, reveal the power relations behind them, and provide tools to get to know the place at it is – at least in the case of Italy. It seems that for the English-speaking culture at large an Italy made of sunny weather, beaches and villages on hills (not to mention sheep on roads) is realistic enough.

It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate *why* the romantic myth of Italy is so pervasive in the English-speaking world, but it is important to remember that such myths do have a function. In Janes's words:

> "The key point is that deeply held stereotypes and preconceptions of, for instance, 'Brits' or 'Blacks' or 'Jews' are, in a sense, functional. They can be deeply culturally embedded and have meanings and resonances beyond their precise dictionary definitions. For example, a racist stereotype may be a reflection of a whole host of cultural assumptions and deeply rooted cultural practices". (Janes 2011, 62-63).

As a working hypothesis, and purely on the basis of my students'

5. Martin and Rajnandini (2009, ch. 21). The whole analysis is based on a metaphorical interpretation of Italian culture in the light of Italian opera, and forms a veritable primer of stereotypical generalizations about Italy.

own reports, it seems to me that the role of Italy in the Anglo-Saxon world is that of providing a romanticized (and eroticized) setting on which to project narratives of personal (and sexual) transformation and liberation. Naturally, Italy is not alone in playing this function in today's dominant culture (and market), but it has special features in being considered exceptionally beautiful, thoroughly familiar, and just as morally and culturally defective as to put the outsider in a superior position – but not so socially and morally problematic as to be threatening. Add to this the fact that given Italy's long history and importance in the arts, this projection can be easily wrapped inside an educational discourse.

If this analysis is on the right track, the function of the romantic myth of Italy is indeed relevant to international education, as "Italy" would provide a unique combination of advantages in the marketplace of stereotypes about "national characters".

Effects of the problem: stereotypes and experience

In this article, I submit that the existing literature on international education does not fully appreciate the extent to which an ancient and coherent stereotypical tradition such as the one discussed here represents a real obstacle to learning and becoming multi-culturally competent. The crucial mistake is to assume that stereotypes are isolated, random beliefs, which can be easily corrected through direct experience and self-analysis, as discussed above. In this view, an incorrect stereotypical belief like "Italians eat only pasta at lunch" is easily changed, through the experience of living in Florence for a few months, to a correct one like "Italians have a quick snack or a salad at lunch". As teachers at study abroad programs we know that this is definitely *not* the case, and that experience alone cannot correct this belief[6]. We know this, because we have had students that after spending four months in Florence comment on how happy they are to go back to eating a healthier diet than the constant pasta "you Italians" eat at

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6.   Nor is such a belief likely to be reported in the self-analysis assignments proposed by Montrose, quoted above, because a student who entertains this belief would consider it evidently correct.

lunch "every day". We also know that we are going to hear similar comments in the future. More importantly, we know that direct discussion of such an incorrect belief does not necessarily result in any real change. On this, I am again in complete agreement with Janes's opinion:

> "If one simply treats such preconceptions and (mis)understandings as false there is the danger of setting up resistance to the 'corrective' information that one is providing. Students may think that one is being deliberately oppositional, hostile to their notions, or acting as a propagandist for Britain. Or else, the information that one provides, if it goes against received notions, may be absorbed in a surface manner, regurgitated for assessment purposes and then abandoned when back in the comfortable certainties of the home culture." (Janes 2011, 62).

In order to find a way to permanently change attitudes, we have to look closer at the content and structure of the romantic myth that constrains our students' vision. The starting point is that this tradition does not consist of random beliefs that can change from student to student, but forms a coherent whole, which is much harder to analyze and describe, let alone modify. From our specific point of view of teachers trying to dismantle this image, the main features of this romantic myth are the following:

The "Romantic Myth of Italy"
– contains a detailed and coherent stereotypical *description* of the country and its culture, including "invisible" parts like its values, norms, acceptable behavior and so on.
– That description is not static, but is embedded within *narratives* that reinforce its stereotypical content through familiar plots and characters.
– Those narratives have a precise *moral message* that often underlies attachment to the values and viewpoints of the student's native culture.

– The myth offers a specific *role* to foreigners that come into prolonged contact with Italian culture: "living in Italy" entails a precise set of experiences and achievements.

Thus, an example of this tradition would not be a simple statement like "Italians eat only pasta at lunch", but a whole narrative like the one in the film *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), well known to many of our students. More precisely, it would be the basic plot of the American coming to "romantic Tuscany" to overcome a personal crisis, deciding to stay on the basis of impulse, getting to know the place in all the stereotypical clichés (from live geese at the market to the roads blocked by sheep), to *thinking* of finding romance in a love story with an Italian (which is bound to end in disappointment), to *really* finding it with a fellow American. As an exercise in class, we ask students to come up with other movies that follow this basic pattern, and we usually get several interesting answers, ranging from similar works like *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* or *Letters to Juliet* to more distant ones like *Spiderman; far from home*. This basic plot has indeed been exploited – with variations – across many types of genres, aimed at very different audiences.

Described in this way, the romantic myth is pervasive and hard to avoid, as it offers students the main part in a story that is much more vivid and exciting than the daily routine of getting to understand an unfamiliar culture.

As expected, this highly coherent and often repeated stereotypical narrative is not easily contradicted by daily experience or self-analysis: for most American students, one salad lunch is not going to change their idea of Italian food, which is itself one of the main features of "living in Italy". That narrative – as we all know – shows gatherings of "typical" large Italian families spending hours – even at lunch – over pasta and wine, and is not going to be modified by anecdotal evidence[7]. On the contrary,

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7. Notice that under this definition, a stereotypical narrative consists of both stereotypes and factually correct statements, which therefore cannot be corrected: Italians do eat a lot of pasta, after all.

I claim that this narrative can significantly shape and direct the students' experience of living in Florence, all the way down to what they see and how they evaluate it. Let us therefore examine its consequences in each phase of the students' experience.

Expectations

To begin with, the narrative influences students' *plans* on what to do in Florence even *before* their arrival. With their luggage, students pack a precise and long list of "things to do" and experiences to live. Most students share the same list, and their high concentration in the city means that deviations and original decisions are rare. As far as we can infer as teachers, there is significant social pressure on *current* students to have exactly the same experiences *previous* students have had before them. Indeed, sharing the *same* experience seems to carry positive value. Since much of their free time is taken up by travelling over the weekend, students do not have much time to do things outside their to-do list. This attitude surely contributes to the American students' reputation, among locals, of being gregarious and unadventurous, to the point of being incurious. Teachers at study abroad programs often tell each other stories of carefully crafted visits or tours that were met by the students' complete indifference. This can be understood in a non-judgmental way by remembering that "living in Italy" entails a precise set of experiences, and what the teachers offer may not be included in the list or even contradict it, thus triggering a defensive reaction, as reported by Janes above.

Students, for instance, have not shown much enthusiasm in meeting refugees from Africa, who did the dangerous crossing over sea to Italy and are waiting for an answer to their asylum application. This kind of migration is an important feature of modern Italy, and its practical consequences are clearly visible in the many African migrants walking the streets of Florence as street vendors. The migrants' point of view is also important to teachers, as it shows the city in a completely different light. Students invariably understand the importance of the issue, but they simply have no space for it in the type of narrative they subscribed to before

arriving[8]. As a result, they often have a hard time remembering and reporting contacts with street vendors (unless students feel threatened by them). On the contrary, casual but repeated talks with waiters and other personnel working in bars and restaurants are often reported and fondly remembered. The difference seems to be that the "Florence experience" involves becoming "friends" with locals, and small talk with the bartender under your apartment seems to fulfil that role. Interestingly, while the content of those conversations may sometimes be useful and significant (as noticed by the students themselves), almost always students fail to notice that most of those waiters and bartenders are also migrants (although not from Africa).

Reflections

The narrative also affects students' experience *after* their stay. Students are often asked by teachers and staff, both in Florence and the US, to summarize their study abroad experience. Crucially, these narrative accounts often form the "evidence" on which programs are evaluated by Departments and Study Abroad Offices. As Doerr (2019) points out, these narratives follow a pre-arranged script, that only partially reflects the students' own experiences abroad. Important contributors to these narratives, according to Doerr, are study abroad providers in the US and the evaluators of those providers. As expected, these actors have little incentive to challenge or complete the romanticized view of Italy. For this reason, they offer a pre-packaged experience that is then reflected in the students' own narratives. Doerr points out that these often involve a moment of personal crisis or a significant challenge, and then the overcoming of such an obstacle, resulting in a stronger, more self-confident individual. We have seen this basic plot many times in our own students' final essays,

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8.   As evidence of the teachers' attempt to show the city in all its aspects, many of our colleagues have enthusiastycally joined tours organised by *MigranTour*, a Europe-wide project, sponsored by Oxfam. The project offers tours of many European cities, including Florence, led by migrants themselves. The Florence tours focus on food, shops by and for migrants, non-Catholic religions, and aspects of the city that are usually invisible to the average tourist.

and we think that the evident similarity with movies like *Under the Tuscan Sun* is not a coincidence.

This is also very important for the assessment of students' progress during their stay abroad, as it casts a doubt about the relevance – and even authenticity – of any answer to questionnaires such as the ones proposed by Montrose, and quoted above. We can confirm from experience that students by now have a very clear idea of what kind of answer is expected from them if the teacher asks them to "explain the importance of flexibility and refraining from judgment". They also have very little incentive to provide any other type of answer, since it would upset the narrative to which they themselves have subscribed, and could be evaluated negatively by the teacher. It could even be claimed that assignments containing these types of questions *reinforce* the stereotypical study abroad narrative, as far as they subscribe to the challenge-crisis-growth paradigm. What if students never felt challenged or in crisis? Or if they never felt the need to be flexible and adapt to the new circumstances? Or if they found no problem at all in the judgement they passed on the local culture? In my experience, teachers in Florence are keenly aware of how difficult it is to extract feelings and opinions from students that would put them in any other position than that of young champions accepting a challenge enthusiastically.

The limits of experience

Between their arrival and departure, teachers and staff have a chance of influencing students' appreciation of their Italian experience. Many methods and approaches are used to make students more aware of their current surroundings, but all these endeavors face a similar set of limits: there are areas of the local culture that seem to remain systematically outside the students' "lived experience". I refer to Birindelli's article in this issue for further comment and analysis. Here, I just want to summarize the main points. In order of increasing generality, these areas are:

1. The city of Florence

2. Everyday life and activities
3. The invisible parts of local culture

Each of these points is in need of further study. For the time being, I just want to discuss how they refer to the stereotypical narrative of "Romantic Italy". Before proceeding, it is worth noting that a 4th point can be added to the list: the current relevance of past history and culture[9].

The first point is not a provocation; rather, it reflects the limits and the very nature of the students' perception of the city. As discussed in depth by Pisani's article in this issue, there is by now a stereotypical *Florence*, which is quite different and separate from the Italian *Firenze*. For a start, the former is much smaller than the latter: the stereotypical view narrows down the concept of *Florence* so much that it basically excludes most of the historic center itself. Even inside this area, some parts and elements of the city are not included: in congruence with the sunny image of the romantic narrative, narrow, shadowy alleys are out, as well as all the parts of the city that do not immediately show themselves to be "historic". Points that are difficult to reach – such as some paths on the hills in the Oltrarno district – also seem to be disfavored, in line with the expectations that the city is, literally, easily accessible. Of course, signs of the globalized world we live in are also left out: *Florence* does not have electric trams, security cameras, and people do not have computers or smartphones. Even more systematically deleted are all clues pointing to the heavily commoditized nature of the foreign presence in the city, which is one of the main touristic destinations in the world. In *Florence*, though, there is no mass tourism, and every visitor and American student has the squares and alleys all to themselves.
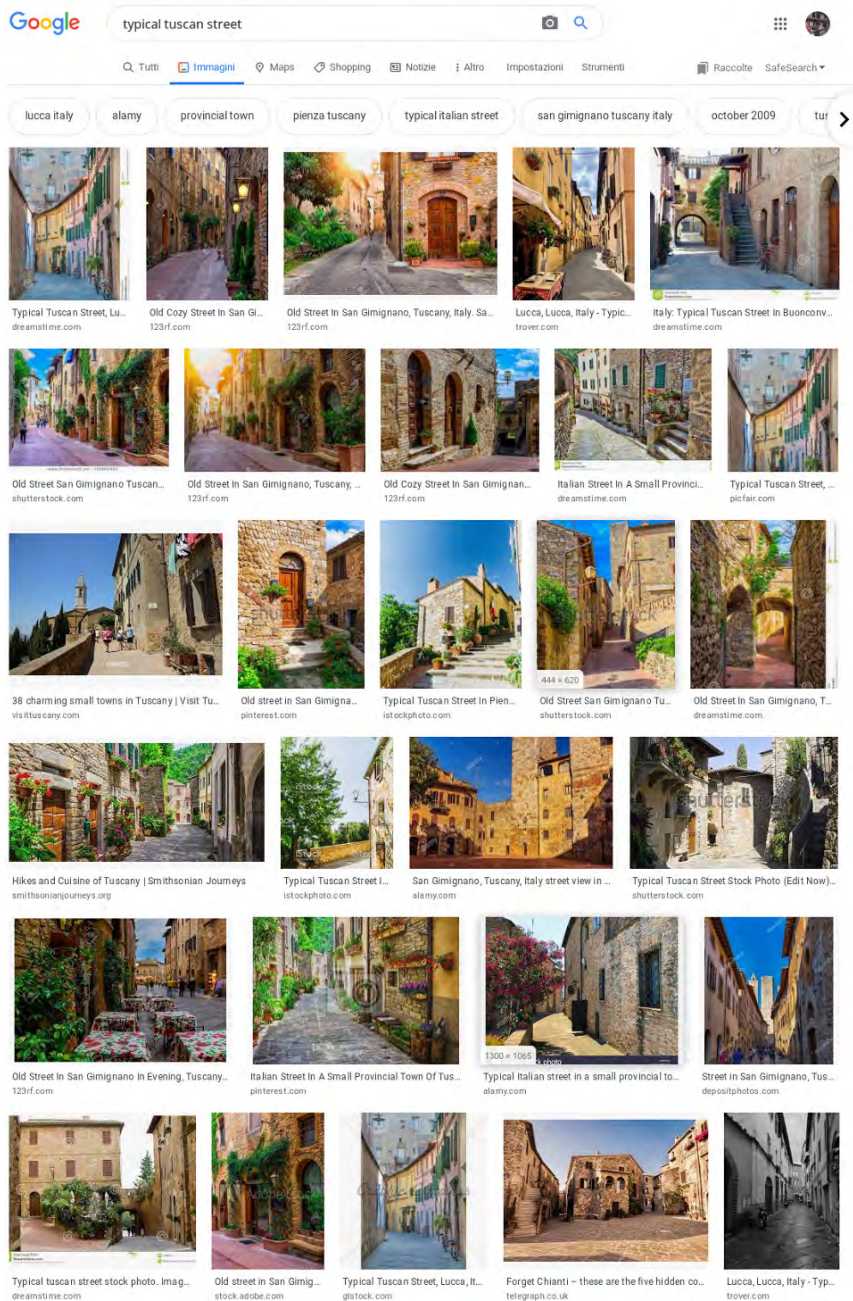
Each point of this summary is reflected in the observations and reports provided by our students. They are indeed so numerous and coherent that some generalizations seem already well founded: students

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9.   On this point, Matteo Duni provided many insightful observations in his presentation at our conference, which we would have liked to publish in written form here.

will be very surprised and unsettled by the amount of people on the (too narrow!) sidewalks, traffic in the streets, and the crowds at the main railway station. They will also be extremely surprised by any building that looks "modern" (to them), and will feel very disappointed if they have to live in one of them. All "modern" buildings are invariably judged to be "run down", and teachers would be asked why they are not renovated. Invariably, the city feels very large, and students will only move in it by walking – tours organized by teachers are often the only time they take a bus or a tram. When moving out of the city by train, all students wonder how such extensive suburbs "were allowed" to be built around a historic city. When asked, all students report imagining the city, before leaving, as a historic core surrounded by green hills. Most of our students report being surprised to land in an airport when they arrived.

Again, teachers are aware of the importance of not being judgmental when faced with the limits of students' perception of our city. Indeed, one of the ways we make it easier for students to share their surprise or disappointment at the sight of *Firenze*, is by pointing out how the idea of *Florence* is systematically supported by the prevailing portrayal of the city on television and online media. One activity I often use in class is to use Google to look for images of Florentine streets. The results are amazingly uniform and consistently compatible with the international image of *Florence.* In class, I have sometimes looked up several pages of results without finding a single picture containing a tourist bus, for example. This makes it clear to students that it is not their fault if they only had *Florence* in mind before leaving.

Similarly, the social life that goes on every day in the city remains outside the students' grasp, and in most cases remains so until the end of their stay. Indeed, the first critical remarks that teachers hear from students always involve daily activities. Among the most common are the narrow and crowded sidewalks, which force you to walk in the streets, near the cars; the lines at the local supermarket, which is also incredibly small and crowded; and the absence of dryers in their apartments. The way locals do things is largely mysterious for students, and teachers are

often asked things like the proper way to order a coffee at the bar: do you pay before or after asking for it? More importantly, they do not seem to be able to generalize from observation, so that, for instance, more than one student completed a semester without learning that you have to ask for the bill yourself at the restaurant.

This is related to the stereotypical narrative in that the "Italy" students get to know is one of culture, history and traditions, but without the social and economic structure that sustains them, at both the micro and macro levels. Films like *Under the Tuscan Sun* never show Italians talking about finding a job or making ends meet; on the contrary, everybody seems to have a kind of traditional occupation. For that matter, nobody is ever shown paying for anything. Daily life is included as far as it is colorful and "picturesque": buying groceries at a market is in, but going through all the paperwork needed to buy a house is obviously out. Again, this is reflected in students' reported experiences: the pace of the city invariably feels slow to them and they are surprised to learn in class that *Firenze* is at the center of a small industrial area. Similarly, all shops feel small and homely, and what many locals would deem "fake" tourist spots feel "authentic" to them. Their *Florence* is an atemporal place, where traditions live on indefinitely, without any economic or social cause: any text that claims that there are no class distinctions in Italy is eagerly quoted by students. Correspondingly, they systematically misjudge the social status of locals: it is common for them to infer that any well-dressed Italian is well off, for instance.

Finally, the limited ability to infer customs and habits from observed behavior translates at a more general level into the inability of imagining those "invisible" parts of Italian culture (values, norms, rules of politeness etc.) that are not explicitly taught in class. This, in a sense, is the least important of the limitations mentioned here, as it is most easily noticed by teachers and corrected in class. Indeed, many students would associate learning about these aspects of Italian culture with the lectures and readings for their courses.

Still, it is interesting to point out here that this constrained imagination may produce results that Italian teachers find surprising: for instance, students understand and remember the fact that different wines in Italy are strongly associated with regional cultures and identities, but they may not extend this fact to food, and try to order *pici alla senese* (a pasta dish from Siena) in a restaurant in Bologna. At a more general level, they may be baffled by a class on European identity, and its importance for younger generations, despite the fact that they spend a considerable amount of their time abroad travelling in a united Europe without borders. In another case, some of my students are surprised to learn that there is only one Lutheran church in Florence, despite being repeatedly taught about the dominant role of the Catholic faith and religion in Italy.

Maybe the distinction between a historical *Firenze* and a stereotypical *Florence* can be extended to the state as a whole: there is an *Italia* and a separate *Italy* that only partially overlap. Students may learn and remember without any problem facts about *Italia*, but may find it difficult to relate them to their *Florence* and their *Italy*[10].

Conclusions: solutions to the problem

In conclusion, our experience as Italian teachers at study abroad programs in Florence has shown us repeatedly that American students in Italy do indeed come with a vast and detailed amount of knowledge about the country. I hope I also made a persuasive argument that if this knowledge is largely stereotypical, it is so because of an ancient, coherent and constantly updated romanticized view of the country in the English-speaking world, a view that is shared by both popular and "serious" culture. The main point of my argument here is that the influence of this tradition on the students' perception and evaluation of their own experience in our country is vast and profound, and is not correctly described as a list of separate stereotypes and biases. In my view, the "romantic myth

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10. Notice that by Italy I refer here to a steretypical but plausibly realistic country, complete with borders, passports, a national government and so on. Strictly speaking, this *Italy* is different from the completely idealised romantic notion of "Italy" in the traditional myth.

of Italy" is a living, engrossing narrative which offers young students a much more exciting role than the "real-life" alternative of getting to understand how a foreign culture works.

If all this is correct, then it has serious consequences for the way Italian teachers and staff approach the education of American students abroad. As a teacher of courses based on sociology, my greatest worry is that we are offering an interesting but escapist introduction to Italian culture, where by "escapist" I mean "completely detached from the social and economic interests that shape and sustain that culture". Naturally, it is possible and legitimate to teach art, cinema, literature without reference to society at large, and there are valuable lessons to be gained for studying and enjoying art for the pleasure of art. But if it is correct that the romantic representation of Italy plays an escapist function within the English-speaking world, then it is only logical to ask ourselves how much our own work sustains that function.

Here I only want to report that most of my colleagues are keenly aware of this issue and try hard to counterbalance the "picturesque" image of the country with some relevant facts: from tours guided by migrants, visits to women's centers, workshops hiring developmentally disabled youths, to carefully organized meetings with fellow Italian students, we take every opportunity to put our students in contact with those parts of Italy not shown in the standard Hollywood movie. Similarly, it is by now standard for courses about fashion or wine-making to include in their syllabi, lectures on the economy behind the products, and at ISI Florence, a course about representations of the mafia in movies includes a visit to the anti-organized-crime police headquarters in the city. We definitely cannot be blamed for spreading the myth, but of course the question is whether we succeed in providing a different, alternative view.

A detailed answer requires much more empirical investigation, but my teaching experience definitely shows that it is possible to make a difference. The key point is to remember that students do have their own views about the country and us, and it is counter-productive to correct them directly. Instead, we have to engage them, and make them engage

with the culture and the place they are living in. We also have to be aware that a seemingly innocent stereotype about Italian food may have many ramifications into the students' American culture, and involve deeply held beliefs, as discussed above. If we really strive for an intercultural learning experience with our students, it is only natural that teachers be familiar with the students' culture, and be able to draw comparisons and underline differences. Indeed, most of the faculty and staff at study abroad programs in Florence have experience studying and teaching in the US. Yet, what I am talking about is not knowledge of American culture itself, but rather those "invisible parts" (values, norms, symbols of identity and so on) which our own students find it difficult to discover in Italy. This is much more difficult than learning lacrosse rules, or the process to get accepted into a sorority or fraternity.

My own personal solution to the problem has been a very rewarding one: every time I feel I do not know what my students are talking about, I ask them to explain it to me. Over the years, I learned a huge amount about things like cheer-leading, playing in a brass band, playing competitive hockey at college level, mock United Nations, countless TV shows, and a myriad of other issues I would have never learned about had they not been mentioned by my students. But most importantly, I learned from them what all of these things *mean* for them and what their *value* is. This they can do, clearly and sometimes even eloquently, if you give them your attention and make sure you understand it is something important to them. It may be time-consuming and not fit exactly into the syllabus, but I claim it is fundamental. After all, the greatest compliment we can receive from our students is that our courses are "eye opening", but we get this result only if we keep our own eyes open as well.

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Study Abroad: the "discomfort zone"

Francesca Passeri

This section aims to highlight the problem of the real perception of the study abroad experience in Florence and how the role of the teacher becomes fundamental, contributing significantly to debunk the image of the cultural context in which students will be immersed, or not, during the study abroad experience.

The "contact" with the Florentine reality, or rather with Florence (as Pisani says in his article in this same issue), actually takes place long before the arrival of the students, when, with the mediation of ambassadors' students and dedicated offices, study abroad education is encouraged.

Study abroad is promoted precisely because it should allow students to acquire intercultural communication skills in order to make them more flexible and increase cultural empathy; this also means a path of discovery and rediscovery of the self, and an acceptance of the challenges that the impact with a new culture imposes.

Eric J. Leed points out in his *The Mind of the Traveler* (1991), that, in all cultures, "travel is the most common resource of metaphors to explain transformations and transitions of all kinds, the journey allows a rediscovery of our more ancestral impulses, often taking on the meaning of a sacred moment for its potential for transformation, rediscovery and motivation for the individual".

This travel metaphor explains the central role of the teacher, capable through the various methodologies adopted, to accompany the students towards a conscious immersion in a new cultural context, overcoming stereotypes and offering the tools for a correct interpretation of reality.

From a psychological point of view, the journey continues to represent a search for "authenticity", a laceration of one's living space and affects, an act of destruction followed by a reconstruction that will require determination, empathy, and spirit of adaptation (MacCannell).

This means opening ourselves to the unknown, to novelty, to the discovery of a new symbolic and communicative system. The meeting with the other is a way of acquiring knowledge and at the same time an awareness of ourselves in the world.

In this perspective, study programs abroad can represent a valid tool, responding not only to requests for professional training and enriching students' curricula, but also (and above all) for the "global" development of the individual, educating students in cultural dialogue and in the recognition of the needs and structures of sense of the other.

The use of categories such as "we", "me" and "you" often represents a lifeline for students who find themselves handling an unfamiliar and environment which is often perceived through a stereotyped narrative. The latter is aimed, on the one hand, to protect from any dangers that the authentic encounter with another culture entails, and, on the other hand, to convey what MacCannell defines as "staged authenticity".

The stereotyped narrative of the cultural context becomes reassuring, with the consequence that there is really nothing left to discover, or what is discovered is perceived as a cultural accident or an occasion for cultural shock, a vision often relegated to the discovery of a different ritual for breakfast, or for the shopping experience in a supermarket or surprise where the English language is neither spoken nor understood. Systematically, when asked to report a cultural incident, the students simply identify the wait for the bill at the restaurant, the espresso at the bar, the narrow sidewalks.

This discomfort space often leads American students to search for places that are most familiar to them, for example places frequented only by their compatriots, experiencing the encounter with "the other" as potentially dangerous and non-productive.

One gets the impression that students are looking for a copy of a typical day on the main campus, disguised as aspects of inter-culturalism or alleged challenges which are nothing more than everyday situations; this reinforces stages of ethnocentrism in the students and a tendency to continue living in one's "bubble" or "comfort zone". Actually, the acqui-

sition of a higher level of awareness of inter-culturalism means pushing towards discomfort, abandoning the protection of stereotypes and the image of "staged" Florence, to begin a process of understanding of what an intercultural skill really represents.

In this context, the teacher becomes a fundamental actor in the students' journey, who will experience the authenticity of their academic term abroad not as a limit, but as a resource for personal growth. The methodologies adopted by the teacher become fundamental tools of this process; methodologies not only based on a theoretical system, but also knowledge mediated by direct contact with the cultural context in which the students will be immersed for four months and developed in multiple forms – for instance, the several outdoor activities organized within each course.

In this sense, the methodologies developed by the teachers are strongly and positively influenced by the intercultural context in which not only students, but also teachers are immersed.

As Bracci says in this same issue of Beyond, it is a question of teaching *with* students rather than teaching *to* students, a terminological change that implies a profound meaning in the understanding of a different cultural context.

> *A flipped classroom, as its name suggests, is a class where the lecture and homework have been reversed. In other words, the practice problems normally completed at home are worked on in the classroom, and the direct instruction normally given during class time is given as homework through video lectures, reading assignments, or some other direct instruction delivery method.* (Szparagowski, p. 2).

> *This new teaching mindset brought practical changes - less lecturing, more in-class activities and more class discussions - but the most significant was the cultural change which I was metaphorically going to embrace: I began to see the classroom as an environment*

in which 'learning' was the most relevant part, not 'teaching'; I rap-
idly convinced myself that what students were and are learning is
fundamental, and I began to realize that the teaching process was
part of the learning, of my learning process as well (Bracci, p. 2).

The aim is to stimulate the students' curiosity by involving them in
the teaching process, disentangling away from the "students-consumers"
logic, and transforming them into active subjects of the learning process,
inviting them to think critically and to accept the numerous challenges to
which they will be subjected as resources rather than limits.

This assumes the need to replace the memorization of notions with
a process of reflective, critical, and authentic involvement, in which, as
stated by Pisani in his essay, students discover *Firenze* instead of Florence.

The teacher provides the students with the tools that can allow an
authentic and real intercultural navigation; the aim will be to appre-
ciate the differences and confront the concept of diversity, starting
that path of cultural sensitivity that will take them from an ethno-
centric world view to an ethno-relativist vision (Bennett).

In this sense, the teacher can promote the process of awareness of
a different cultural context that allows the students to know not only the
"front regions", but especially all the "back regions" (Goffman), develop-
ing new and unexplored dimensions of reality, which help them under-
stand that their own "culture" is one of the many possible, especially in
the contemporary context, which is increasingly globalized and intercon-
nected (and, for this reason, more and more complex).

With regard to methodologies used in the classroom, an introduc-
tion to the historical context is an effective tool. In each course a brief, but
exhaustive explanation of the history of the city in which the students
live, but "do not live" at the same time, is particularly valuable. Every
weekend is an opportunity to visit a European capital, with the conse-
quence that (in most cases) Florence will be seen but not experienced ex-

cept during the last week, before returning to the United States).

Not secondary is the perception by the students of where their apartment in Florence is located; if not exactly situated within the landmarks of the city, it is considered part of the sub-urban area. This makes it more difficult to explore the cultural context in depth, thus favoring ethnocentrism.

Walking tours become unique opportunities to let the students discover the co-existence of the two dichotomous aspects of the city, the tourist Florence (super crowded, global) and the *Firenze* of small artisans, shops, parks, local markets (all unknown and often not sought, but equally relevant in the process of developing intercultural sensitivity).

The narrative of the study abroad experience collected over the years of teaching, usually reports the pre-packaged script before departure. This approach is also strengthened by media narratives, such as *Under The Tuscan Sun* or *Lizzie Maguire*, which are often used as a methodological tool precisely to induce students to a deeper reflection of the experience which will then report to other students on their return to the United States, in turn becoming interpreters of the narrative.

Despite being art, food, fashion, family, and the sense of beauty elements that distinguish Italian identity, that make Italy one of the most popular destinations in the world, it is also necessary to keep in mind the contemporaneity of what today characterizes Italian culture. As Birindelli states in his article, "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".

The narrative script that students bring with them in a different and complex cultural context can end up strengthening the students' ethnocentrism, which, in turn, imposes American culture as a reference model and makes the shift to the phases that Bennett identifies as ethno-relativist complex, based on a model of development of intercultural sensitivity.

In conclusion, the methodologies adopted by the teacher, thanks

to an appropriate balance between traditional teaching and experiential learning, can increase the students' emotional and cognitive impact, thus favoring and encouraging greater active participation in "real" life. Differently, the risk is that students are not actors, but mere spectators, without developing the ability to master intercultural contexts, thus experiencing every difference with their own culture as a source of stress and – sometimes – culture shock.

In defending their own comfort zone, students would risk to adopt reference and behavioral models that only imitate the exposure to a different set of rules and behaviors.

Our aim as teachers is to guide students in their mediated experience, with the general purpose of providing them with the tools to bypass stereotypes on their own.

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The Cultural Experience Abroad:
Spotlight, Shadow and Illusion
Pierluca Birindelli

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.[1] 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 aesthetic 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.[2] 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 –

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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.

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."

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 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[3] 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 anxiety' 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

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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).

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?"[4] (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

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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).

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 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[5] 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.

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

"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 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, incompletion 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 determinate 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 con-

trive 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 repre-

sentation 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 archetypical 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 allogenous (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,[6] 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.

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

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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)

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[7] 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, nevertheless, 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.

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7   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).

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.[8]

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 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

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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*.

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. [9]

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, corruption,[10] 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

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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).

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.

discursive intellectual 'spotlight' can focus on certain images of Italian culture at the expense of others that remain in the 'shadow'. It is thus scarcely surprising that some representations and constructs are taken as passe-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 realty, 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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Flip the classroom?
Challenges in teaching sociology courses *with* American students
Marco Bracci

Introduction. Flipping the classroom

In this essay I will not provide answers or certainties. Instead, to use a basketball metaphor, I will "shoot" questions and doubts in an attempt to share some ideas on what teaching means according to my professional experience.

In the title I wrote *with* rather than *to* (American students). I strongly believe that any teaching activity is a teaching process, made by steps and by problems to face, a journey characterized by trials and errors, but – above all – a learning process. This preliminary reflection leads to another level and to another (key)word: to *flip*. During my first semester with a small group of abroad students from the University of Minnesota, who were taking my *History and Sociology of Modern Consumerism* course, I had to change my approach to teaching. Halfway through the semester I had to understand that I should have 'flipped the classroom':

> A flipped classroom, as its name suggests, is a class where the lecture and homework have been reversed. In other words, the practice problems normally completed at home are worked on in the classroom, and the direct instruction normally given during class time is given as homework through video lectures, reading assignments, or some other direct instruction delivery method. (Szparagowski, p. 2)

This new teaching mindset brought practical changes – less lecturing, more in-class activities and more class discussions – but the most significant among them was the cultural change, which I was metaphorically going to embrace: I began to see the classroom as an environment

in which 'learning' was the most relevant part, not 'teaching'. I rapidly convinced myself that what students were and are learning is fundamental, and I began to realize that the teaching process was part of the learning, including my own learning process.

Teaching "with"

I had to 'simply' apply what, as a sociologist of culture and communication, I had learned in my previous years of teaching and researching at the University of Florence,[1] namely that a classroom is a small and, at the same time, complex social and cultural context, imagined and constructed by specific individuals – in which students and the professor – for a limited amount of hours per week and through on line relations – interact and communicate.

Communication, *action-in-common*, is a process through which individuals and groups belonging to and expressing particular cultures (which vary depending on specific values and norms) should find a way to understand each other and achieve their personal goals. Thus, a classroom is a communicative context; yet, the problem is that communicating is very hard (Bechelloni, 2007).

In my case, an Italian professor immersed in a group of American *abroad* students, my only chance to achieve any educational goal is to teach "with" them, being actively present, let them exercise their intellect, help them to develop their critical reflection through in-class activities and out-of-class activities. My strategy to create a teaching connection with these young adults who decide to spend four months in Italy and Europe during their college years is to let them understand that, during our course, we will create something; in this way I always try to challenge their intellect and to stimulate their curiosity.

While I was immersed in this problematic and fascinating learning process, I also began to ask myself: 'Am I expected to serve them or help

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1. I worked at the University of Florence for ten years (2002-2012): I taught Sociology courses, researched on popular culture and the media, and on the sociology of personal and collective identities.

them acquire something?' In other terms: are they clients that I have to please and satisfy or are they *students-students* that should learn and appreciate the importance to be intellectually challenged and to be exposed to another culture? To be honest, sometimes I meet students (from diverse American programs in Florence) who consider themselves consumers, which are only ready to be satisfied: consumers of education and consumers of knowledge. I refuse to consider my profession in these terms.

Questions, cultures and (teaching) goals

As regards the cultural and methodological side of this profession, two questions are usually 'on the court':[2] How is it possible to teach sociology to and with heterogeneous groups of students? How is it possible to interact and to create a learning environment with students from different areas of the US? Each semester, when I first meet new students, I immediately need to gather relevant information on their educational, socio-cultural and geographical backgrounds.

I always try to let students understand that sociological theories are not important if they are not utilized as instruments to understand reality: for this reason, I use many cases from real-life situations, and I ask them to find and critically share their own examples, individually, but more often through group discussions and class discussions.

The first day of class, I immediately tell students that the verb 'to memorize' is banned from my courses and that it must be replaced with "to think". A cultural change to which I try to expose them is that of thinking that critical reflection is not a philosophical method but rather a sociological – and for this reason tangible – way to better understand reality: first of all, their reality, their world.

American culture is usually driven by "goals" or results that must be achieved; for this reason, I advice my students to consider the knowl-

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2. I like sport terminology applied to teaching. I believe that teaching can be compared to sport. However, this particular process, as opposed a game, should not be based on competition but rather on a 'quest for excitement' (Elias & Dunning, 1986).

edge they will acquire in my classes as a tool *ready-to-be-used* in the next future, including (of course) their future job career. The aim is trying to help them recognize the usefulness of what they are learning and its practical application to the real world.

In doing so, I focus on the importance to build a metaphorical bridge between theories and reality. This generation (so-called *Generation Z*) is really complicated and controversial: it is at once attracted to the intangible (on-line world) and very concentrated on the tangible (school grades). Answering a question by author Colin Beavan in an interview, Juliet Schor (Professor of Sociology at Boston College) said:

In some ways, we're not material *enough*. We are too materialistic in the everyday sense of the word, and we are not at all materialistic enough in the true sense of the word. We need to be true materialists, like really care about the *materiality* of goods. (Schor, in *Minimalism*, 2015)

American culture has become more materialistic but less materialistic at the same time: material things and goods are important (as a source of self-fulfillment and as a sign to display status and rank in society) but less and less attention is paid to the material world, which is made by objects, consumption goods, but especially by humans (people and individuals).

I believe that the students I work with are caught up in this controversial process; for this reason I always try to maintain a balance between the intangible (theoretical notions they should understand and assimilate) and the tangible (examples from real life situations).

Ask 'How?' not 'Why?'

During my classes, I adopt the following strategy: I ask 'How?' rather than 'Why?'. It's stressing and tiring, but more beneficial for me as a teacher and for students as well. I've learned this lesson from Howard Becker, one of the most prominent contemporary sociologists who studied the labeling process and the construction of criminal careers. Becker explains that this is a useful methodological trick:

I first understood that "How?" was better than "Why?" as a result of doing field research. When I interviewed people, asking them why they did

something inevitably provoked a defensive response. If I asked someone why he or she had done some particular thing I was interested in — "Why did you become a doctor?" "Why did you choose that school to teach at?" — the poor defenseless interviewee understood my question as a request for a justification, for a good and sufficient reason for the action I was inquiring about. They answered my "Why?" questions briefly, guardedly, pugnaciously, as if to say, "OK, buddy, that good enough for you?"

When, on the other hand, I asked how something had happened—"How did you happen to go into that line of work?" "How did you end up teaching at that school?" — my questions "worked" well. People answered at length, told me stories filled with informative detail, gave accounts that included not only their reasons for whatever they had done, but also the actions of others that had contributed to the outcome I was inquiring about. (Becker, 1998, p. 58)

Since I consider the teaching process as a researching process or activity, I always try to apply some of Becker's tricks to teaching: don't ask 'Why' a student shows a specific attitude and behavior in class, or don't ask 'Why' a student finds a topic or something dealt with in class particularly difficult, but rather try to understand the process that led that student to come to Florence, her/his cultural background, the factors that prevent her/him from fully accepting a cultural change during the abroad experience.

I believe that asking 'How' will put me – as a teacher – in a better position to understand my students' academic background, learning needs and goals. As a consequence, this should make it easier for me to play my professional role of instructor and sociologist at once.

When I teach, I do research; I investigate (sociologically speaking) my audience (i.e., the students). Usually, after a rather long and challenging time, I end up with more questions and doubts. They are necessary for my profession, as they serve the following functional role: to create learning paths aimed at finding answers, possibly together with my students.

Comparing, going beyond stereotypes and accepting the risk of changing, I apply a comparative approach: while I am trying to let the

students go and delve into Italian culture through the use of elements of Italian popular culture – TV, social media, sports, music, among others – I also try to critically examine the main features of youth culture in contemporary American society. In doing so, I try to apply knowledge and teaching to the students' own lives. This way they can better understand how (culturally speaking) their perspective on Italy is influenced by their own cultural background and biases. Likewise, I can better understand them and their own culture, too.

Yet, I also invite them to go beyond easy stereotypes on Italian culture and Italian society and dive – instead – into the waves of Italian and European culture, so as to appreciate differences and the concept of diversity[3]. As Pickering writes:

> Stereotypes are usually considered inaccurate because of the way they portray a social group or category as homogeneous. Certain forms of behavior, disposition or propensity are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category. The imprecise representations involved in this process of social dissemination create the illusion of precision, of order, of the ways things should be. This is convenient for existing relations of power because it lends to them a sense of certainty, regularity and continuity. (Pickering, 2001, p. 2)

Certainty, regularity and continuity: these are typical feelings that foreigners (while living in another country and another culture, surrounded by a different language) try to experience. But, for students who have decided to spend four months of their life in Italy, the three above-mentioned terms should be rejected because they are the opposite of the learning goals to be achieved during an abroad

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3.   The notion of *diversity* is culturally situated and it may differ from society to society; in this essay, I won't expand my analysis on this concept.

program. Students should learn to experience and appreciate discomfort, uncertainty and – above all – dis-continuity. They should take any opportunity to be detached from their native national culture and work to create immersive (even potentially disruptive) intellectual experiences, which will be beneficial to their personal growth. In order to hold this mentality, they need to learn new tools to observe 'the world', starting from the 'new' world (Florence and Italy) where they will be living for a few months. Based on my professional experience, for most of them this is usually 'the' challenge, since they are used to living without taking any particular risk, or minimizing any risk. As Anthony Giddens states:

> The difficulties of living in a secular risk culture are compounded by the importance of lifestyle choices. A person may take refuge in a traditional or pre-established style of life as a means of cutting back on the anxieties that might otherwise beset her. (Giddens, 1991, p. 182)

A person (a student, in this case) has to acquire 'tools' to accept that risk is part of our contemporary lives. Based on that, I work to develop and provide my students with specific tools and strategies, which may help them to accept the existence of the most important risk today: to change our perspective on reality or (to put it differently) to accept 'change' as a viable option to take into consideration.

The following are two practical examples of this teaching/learning approach:

The journal of consumer habits

Students keep track of their most relevant purchases for the entire duration of the semester. The final version of their journal will be a hybrid paper, based on a descriptive section (list of purchases on a weekly basis) and an analytical section – where they are required to critically assess the relevance of their purchases and to apply sociological notions learned

and discussed in class, such as Pierre Bourdieu's theory on taste, Colin Campbell's theory on the advent of modern consumerist society, Georg Simmel's theory on fashion and Thorstein Veblen's theory on leisure class (and conspicuous consumption).

Through this assignment, students can step outside their 'comfort zone' and confront themselves with an unknown and different consuming context; they can accept uncertainty in their lives, and understand how the sense of wonder (by discovering new aspects of their cultural approach to consumption) is one of the pillars of "risk society." Along with these cultural outcomes, they can learn if they are active consumers or passive consumers; how – on the one hand – the culture associated with the Italian and Tuscan (Florentine) way of life have been changing their daily consumption habits (food, clothes, music, travels, sport25); how – on the other hand – their own (American) culture has kept ?hem from changing their consumption culture. Finally, a major questimjm,on must be asked: what did they learn from the comparison between Italian and US consumption cultures?

My advice to them is that they use their Florentine/Italian/European experience also as an empirical test or as a 'field research activity' on consumption. They can construct a critical narration of their weekly consumptions and see if and how their consumer habits have been changing here in Italy.

Students are always invited to consider *the context* in which they play the role of consumer as a relevant variable: that is, the social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts.

Media narratives to understand the complexity of Italian culture and to avoid oversimplifying reality. Focus on the Sicilian Mafia and Anti-mafia culture.

I use TV shows and movies to let students understand particular cultural and social traits of the Sicilian Mafia, especially what mafia culture means in everyday life. This helps to detach them from the stereotypical – although somewhat fascinating – depiction of the mafia provided by iconic films (*The Godfather* trilogy by Francis Ford Coppola being the

most popular among my students).

A 'special' movie I watch in class with my students, *I Cento Passi* (*One Hundred Steps*), discloses particular features of mafia culture in Sicily, in particular the anti-mafia fight. The story of Peppino Impastato[4] allows students to empathize with the protagonist, his mother and his friends. As such, this movie stimulates a different perspective on both the mafia and the Anti-mafia movement. Students can discuss their positions and problematize the notion of Mafia in order to comprehend the intangible wires existing among Mafia, corruption, black economy and Italian history. They thus realize that the Mafia is a multilayered phenomenon that deserves to be studied in order to grasp a deeper understanding of Italian culture.

Conclusions: political correctness and the updated version of the American Dream

Sociology usually deals with what is wrong, deviant, problematic, dysfunctional and characterized by the notion of evil. For this reason, when dealing with sociological problems I often experience a cultural issue, which is related to my perception of one of the most evident features defining American culture: political correctness.

How can I deal with sensitive issues without offending any student? And, do we (teachers) really need to be politically correct? Or is this only a cultural defeat for us? I refer to the quasi-mandatory use of formal correctness instead of focusing on substantial issues. Am I able (Are we able) to teach problematic issues and to be politically correct (i.e. "neutral")? To this day, I have not been able to find a reasonable answer. At the end of this reflection, I still have more doubts and questions than answers.

I thus want to share the following final observation, which is proba-

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4.   Giuseppe 'Peppino' Impastato (1948-1978) was a journalist and political activist brutally assassinated by the Sicilian Mafia. Boss Gaetano 'Tano' Badalamenti was the instigator of the murder. *I Cento Passi* is a movie by Marco Tullio Giordana on Impastato's fight against the Mafia. The title of the movie (which came out in 2000) refers to the distance between Impastato's house and that of Badalamenti in the small Sicilian village of Cinisi.

bly the 'problem of problems': what I call the *updated version* of the American Dream. Robert Merton has used his own *Strain Theory* to develop an interesting analysis relating the American Dream's problematic disjunction between socially imposed cultural goals and institutionalized means, which results in producing a state of anomie both at a societal and an individual level. More recently, Noam Chomsky went back to this subject in his book *Requiem for the American Dream*, offering a harsh critique of the dysfunctions produced by neoliberalism and capitalism in America.

The problem is when the goals are meant as the title you earn (say, a BA degree) rather than the knowledge you would need to understand and to live the world. Most students I work with are goal-oriented, but they have no clear or solid means to reach the socially accepted and acceptable goals. This mentality could become a serious problem for them, because it will be more likely able to produce high levels of anomie, long-term anxiety and a profound feeling of both psychic and social inadequacy. I believe this set of consequences may dramatically contribute to lower and worsen our current and future students' life chances not only as today's learners but – above all – as tomorrow's adults and responsible citizens.

As a teacher, I only know one strategy to help them: encouraging them to express their positions, to accept the category of risk and to actively embrace the possibility of failing as a necessary step along their learning and growing process.

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Firenze and Florence:
two faces of a diversified (not disorderly) whole
Franco Pisani

I've been – in a certain way – a student abroad. Throughout high school, I lived and studied in Sanremo. After that, I went "rinsing my clothes on the banks of the Arno river," as Alessandro Manzoni once said.[1] Sure enough, from a Florentine perspective, Sanremo and the Riviera dei Fiori (as its coast is known) are not so "far west" as the United States. Also, first Dante in the Late Middle Ages, then the Italian public educational system from the 1860s onwards, and finally RAI (Italy's state television network) starting in the 1950s gave our country a national, unified language. Nevertheless, I can say that people in Liguria and Tuscany speak idioms that are remarkably different from one another. More precisely, the Florentines' approach to language (its rhythm and musicality, the related social etiquette, including physical distance between speakers and the "rules of engagement") was mostly unusual to me, enough to trigger a sometime unbridgeable sense of being out of place – what Italians would call "*spaesamento*."

I started teaching in "Firenze" right after earning my degree at the local university's School of Architecture. At first, I taught in several Italian universities, working – at once – as a freelance architect and a professor. In 2003, while doing research on self-construction in public housing for the Giovanni Michelucci Foundation at Fiesole, I was invited to give a lecture on this famous "maestro", who was born in nearby Pistoia. Because of that invitation, I started teaching in English to students from various American architecture schools, mainly at ISI Florence, but also in other

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1.   One can say that the famous Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni somewhat "studied abroad" in Firenze in the summer of 1827. Manzoni looked at the Florentine language as the model to follow for his Italian prose. Lacking a Florentine vocabulary, he thought that the best option for him would be to learn the language directly on site.

schools in the USA and the UK as a visiting professor. It's been exactly fifteen years this last Fall Semester.

Over the years, I have grown so used to speaking about architecture in English that sometimes, when I give lectures or tutorials to Italian students, I cannot find the right words in my native language. From the start, I considered having to teach in a different language as an opportunity to develop the level of appropriateness and the exactitude that Italo Calvino recommends as a key attitude to survive in this third millennium.[2] The sense of comfort given by the use of metaphors, circumlocutions, informal verbal expressions and "disciplinary jargon" would never have let me achieve such precision in Italian. To be fully comprehensible and accessible is a necessary condition to obtain attention and respect from the students, especially if you are not teaching in your native language and your accent sounds a bit odd. To be precise and accessible you must continuously double check the exactitude of both form and content. As you can imagine, speaking of architecture is not always an easy task, because space is "*indicible*"[3]. Communication is not exclusively verbal – we all know this. But when you don't share the same context (either because of cultural, personal or social issues), dialectic skills become crucial to break down cultural barriers and gain credibility. In other words, teaching in another language proves to be a very precious methodological exercise for me, giving continuous feedback to my role as both an architect and an educator.

People are strange when you're a stranger… .[4] So runs a song by Jim Morrison, written more or less when I was born, that is, some fifty years ago. Despite the space-time distance of the two contexts, the words of this famous song by the Doors echo in my head at the beginning of each semester, when I first meet a new group of students. Their out-of-place

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2. I. Calvino *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Engl. trans. by P. Creagh, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988.

3. Le Corbusier: "*L'espace indicible" in L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, special issue, January, 1946.

4. The Doors, *People are Strange*, from the album *Strange Days* (1967).

faces (that I can't pair with a name yet, but that I'll learn soon, having to spend plenty of time with them in the following four months) trigger this song in my mind. Sometimes the students look scared, sometimes curious, sometimes arrogant, but they are always "strangers" at first.

What are they thinking of me? What do they know about me? What do they expect from this experience? A teacher is not a tour guide; a teacher is an educator. A good educator (as the etymology of this word suggests) has the duty of taking students away from ignorance by instilling curiosity, knowledge, and good manners (what Italians would call "*buona creanza*"). A student abroad is not a tourist; this holds true in particular if he or she comes here to study architecture.

There is Florence and there is "Firenze" – this is a typical "motto" in my studio during the first week of the semester. I find it is necessary to underline, as soon as possible, the historical duplicity deeply rooted in this city: two faces, two personalities, independent, contradictory and in continuous competition with one another. This is also suggested by the many rivalries that have marked the history of this city since its very beginning: Etruscans vs. Romans first, then Guelphs vs. Ghibellines, the Medici family vs. the Republic, and – finally, in the XX century – the *Oratorio* vs. the *Casa del Popolo*.[5] Likewise, we have Firenze vs. Florence.

In the intro to his book on the 1966 Florence flood,[6] Robert Clark clearly points out these two souls:

> Firenze, dignified and incomprehensible, and the Florentines: "*bottegai*"[7] and naively proud. Florence with its hordes of all-inclusive tourists, all looking for memorabilia and stereo-

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5.   These two Italian expressions can be translated into English as "Parish Church" and "People's House" (or, better, "Community Center"), respectively. Especially throughout the XX century, the former was a meeting place for Catholics and their families, while the latter served the same purpose for the working class (which was often associated with labor unions and left-wing parties).

6.   R. Clark, *Dark Water. Flood and Redemption in the City of Masterpieces*, Doubleday, New York City 2009.

7.   Literally "Shopkeepers." In Italian, this word may have a pejorative connotation, denoting a shallow, greedy, and selfish person.

typed pictures to be posted on Instagram.
"We are here for the view", claims Clark.[8]

The history of study abroad programs as well as the centuries-old history of foreigners in Firenze is deeply connected with this complex personality. At first, one might think that students should be addressed to Firenze. By definition, Florence is already accessible and available without much effort. The city of cheap entertainment, the pearl of the Renaissance in ten slides, the city of "all you can drink" bars, of mountains of "gelato" that never melt, of one's own "secret bakery", of "Bus-to-Alps" weekends in Switzerland. All those experiences that a student must mandatorily flag on his/her academic curriculum under the section Study Abroad. A funny city, where apparently everyone speaks English, or better, "internet English", i.e., that kit of a hundred words without connections and without *"consecutio temporum"*[9] yet good enough to make every stranger comfortable in an undefined everlasting present. A city whose name is translated into English even on the local Hard Rock Café t-shirts. A city – significantly enough – that seems immense and cosmopolitan to the eyes of my students; but if one tries to measure it, he or she will find out that it is no bigger than a medium-sized campus. In their four-month stay, our students stroll around on a surface of a couple square kilometers in the historic center around the borough of Santa Croce. It is not unusual to discover that at the end of their Florentine semester, they hardly went as far as the Cascine Park, Porta Romana, the Sant'Ambrogio Food Market or to see the stunning frescoes by Beato Angelico in the San Marco convent.

At first, it might seem natural to repudiate Florence in favor of Firenze for the sake of an assumed genuineness. I'm completely aware of the potential contradiction of such an assumption, especially from someone teaching at a study abroad program (ISI Florence) in this city. But it is

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8. Clark, *Dark Water*, cit., p. 3.

9. Classical Latin formula meaning "Sequence of tenses," that is, the rules governing the agreement between the tenses of verbs in related clauses or sentences.

not so. It is simplistic and reductive to split reality in two and ask people to support one over the other. Firenze is a city, and as such, it is filled with complexity and contradictions. Florence, on the other hand, is its complementary, inseparable part. To deny this would be a mistake.

One of the best definitions of "city" I can remember describes it as the place where we encounter the unexpected. And by "unexpected" we should think of both unfortunate encounters (for instance, a stolen wallet) and fortunate ones, like an infatuation while waiting in line at a supermarket cash register. In 2009, for the first time in history, the percentage of urbanized humans overtook those not living in cities. By 2050 this percentage is expected to be close to 75%[10]. For an architecture student used to the comfort of a campus (which is nothing but a simplified model of a city, without surprises and without canine manure on the sidewalks), both cities – Firenze and Florence – have a lot to teach. Anywhere in the world, cities – with their complex maze of stories and layers – will be the context of their professional lives and the backdrop to their jobs.

The city, in my own opinion, is the highest expression of humankind, and will be the main "client" of future architects. As such, we must know it well, in all its folds, including those hard to understand and uncomfortable. Firenze and its "alter ego" Florence (filled as they are with contradictions and the complexity of this duality) stand out as a very interesting – and topical – case study. Both owing to its dimension and rich historic background, this city is perfect for the fifteen weeks of a regular semester. Exotic, but apparently understandable, within a short span of time it can give visitors that superficial sense of ease which is necessary to make them feel at home, although they are strangers.

For an architecture student, things should be different. In fact, that sense of comfort should be avoided as a terrible trap. In Firenze, more than 70% of the city's surface inside the last circuit of walls (dating from the Late Middle Ages) is under the aegis of UNESCO (whose decisions, I must say, are not always beneficial to urban landscape). Since 2009, build-

10. 2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects.

ing regulations only allow new constructions on condition that they preserve the original volumes. A city whose image is deliberately blocked and protected as a precious painting by laws and codes will end up having the effect of Botox on the face of an aged diva. Despite this, around 12,000 building interventions are legitimized every year, inexorably renewing the urban space.

Also, Florence is a city where capital-B Beauty becomes an overwhelming physical rather than intellectual experience. Not by chance, this is the city where Graziella Magherini coined the expression the "Stendhal syndrome".[11]

It's a city where on a daily basis, even without reaching the impossible numbers of Venezia, tourists (whose average permanence in town is less than two days) outnumber residents.

It's a city that hosts seventy-four museums and where in the past few years the number of restaurants and bars has grown at an incredible pace.

It's a city where the "Antico Vinaio" sandwich shop has the same appeal (at least according to Trip Advisor) as the Galleria degli Uffizi.

It's a city – I must add – where architects are more numerous than in the entire state of Pennsylvania. As of today, there are about five thousand licensed architects in Florence. Despite this, the percentage of projects signed by architects is still one of the lowest in Europe.

Does it make any sense for an architecture student to study and practice design in such a city, where – at first sight – there is no physical or conceptual space for design? My answer to this question is a clear and resounding "yes". The best athletes train themselves by searching for the most demanding conditions. During training routines, the worst-case scenario is reproduced to acquire the ease and the authority necessary to be successful on the competition field. When I got my driving license, I start-

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11. Graziella Magherini is an Italian psychiatrist who worked for many years at the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital in Florence. She is best known for her 1989 book *The Stendhal Syndrome*, which popularized this expression (that she had coined some ten years earlier) to indicate a psychosomatic illness affecting some individuals when exposed to art.

ed practicing in an old Italian car (Fiat 131 Supermirafiori) without power steering. When you get used to that, everything else is a joke. Architecture students in Firenze are forced to find the best response to a very difficult (yet extremely rewarding) context. To live and think as an architect in Firenze means to ponder the meaning of gestures and the intrinsic value of things. Architects must face the built environment, understand it, and free it from stereotypes and prejudices. This leads to reading context as a text, learning to respect and love it. It also leads to discovering that the value of the city is not so much in its monuments as in the fabric that holds them together harmoniously.

As Louis Kahn (an important American architect particularly fond of ancient Roman architecture) once said, to be able to contribute – even with a small verse – to this ever-evolving choral poem that is known as the built environment, one must fight the idea of perfection and finality, one must stop looking for the masterpiece and resize the ego. *Beauty will evolve*,[12] to borrow Kahn's words. This is why reading and listening to context are skills that will prove extremely useful and qualifying in the daily practice of future architects.

Firenze can play a crucial role in developing these skills only if it is considered in its complex duality: Firenze and Florence, together. The mission that must be clear to those who teach students out of context, especially those coming from US campuses, is to be an interpreter of the city, bridging the multiple realities that coexist in it and feed them. We should avoid the "Truman Show" of study abroad by providing the right lenses to recognize the city and instilling the antibodies that are necessary to inhabit it. Also, we must be equidistant from Firenze and Florence and share awareness. We must be able to find the right words to give new life to the city and the Culture (with a capital C) of which the city is a built image and a symbol.

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12. L. I. Kahn *Order is*, first published in *Zodiac*, 1961, p. 20, then reprinted in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. by U. Conrads, Engl. trans. by M. Bullock, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1970, pp. 16-170.

In closing, I'd like to quote a passage from *The story of the warrior and the captive* by Jorge Luis Borges.[13] It is pinned on the billboard at the entrance to the Marystudio,[14] on the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli (one of the two ISI Florence premises, the other being the famous fifteenth-century Palazzo Rucellai, which Leon Battista Alberti designed in the 1450s). It has been hanging there for many years now, both as a warning and an encouragement to the students. In my own opinion, it contains everything I try to support while tutoring a student abroad in Florence. I never made it mandatory to read, but sometimes someone lingers in front of it. Sometimes, someone tries to understand why that quote is hanging there. Sometimes it works. This is how it reads:

> *He came from the inextricable forests of the boar and the bison; he was light-skinned, spirited, innocent, cruel, loyal to his captain and his tribe, but not to the universe. The wars bring him to Ravenna and there he sees something he has never seen before, or has not seen fully. He sees the day and the cypresses and the marble. He sees a whole whose multiplicity is not that of disorder; he sees a city, an organism composed of statues, temples, gardens, rooms, amphitheaters, vases, columns, regular and open spaces. None of these fabrications (I know) impresses him as beautiful; he is touched by them as we now would be by a complex mechanism whose purpose we could not fathom but in whose design an immortal intelligence might be divined. Perhaps it is enough for him to see a single arch with an incomprehensible inscription in eternal Roman letters. Suddenly he is blinded and renewed by this revelation, the City. He knows that in it he will be a dog, or a child, and that he will not even begin to understand it, but he also knows that it is worth more than his gods and his sworn faith and all the marshes of Germany. Droctulft aban-*

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13. J. L. Borges, *The story of the warrior and the captive*, in *The Aleph and other stories*, Engl. trans. by A. Hurley, Penguin, London 2000.

14. Marystudio is the nickname of the studio that I teach at ISI Florence. The reason for this name is that the students enrolled in it come from Marywood University and University of Maryland.

dons his own and fights for Ravenna. He dies and on his grave they inscribe these words, which he would not have understood:

Contempsit caros, dum nos amat ille, parentes,

Hanc patriam reputans esse, Ravenna, suam.

He wasn't a traitor (traitors don't usually inspire pious epitaphs), he was illuminated, a convert.

alumni

Life after MARYStudio
Marywood University Architecture

Spring 2017

The 2017 Spring Semester marked the beginning of the partnership between the ISI Florence Architecture Program and the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland (aka UMD).

In January that year, a first group of six shy undergraduate students made themselves comfortable at the desks of the architecture studio that I usually teach. Broadly speaking, the main objective of that course is the 'discovery' of both context and all the tools that allow designers to navigate unknown environments. More specifically, that Spring Semester the design goal was a housing program in the south district of "Firenze," just outside the medieval city walls.

The small group of undergraduate students from University of Maryland was joined with their peers from Marywood University. This first 'mixed team' laid the foundations for the MARYStudio (also nicknamed Merrystudio by the same group). From then on, the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli came to be known as MARYStudio. At the end of that semester, I found this moving thank-you note attached to the door of my office.

Spring 2018

In Spring 2018 a cohort of 11 students from the UMD School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, left College Park to join ISI Florence. More precisely, they were headed for the so-called MARYStudio on the second floor of Palazzo Bargagli in "Firenze."

That semester the Studio worked on two different assignments: first, the extension of the local Museo Bardini as part of a design 'charrette' organized in collaboration with Dutch students from TU Delft; second,

Franco,

To our architectural father! Thank you for an amazing and fun semester. You taught us so much about the true Firenze and architecture. You made our stay here fun, interesting, and educational. This experience has shaped us all as architects and people, and you played an important role in that. Most importantly, you taught us to resist the urge to be cool and to love architecture, design, and that being happy is most important. We will try our best to make you proud in the future!

-The Merry Studio

the project of an art gallery to be located in Piazza Tasso, a very peculiar neighborhood in the city's historic district.

That Spring Semester, UMD student Alicia Moreira won the ISI Florence best student award for architecture.

After their semester abroad, UMD undergraduate architecture students attend the Fall Semester studio with their peers back in the States; that academic term usually ends with the Senior Intra-Studio Design Competition. On average, more than 50 students participate in it with their fourth-year studio projects. That Fall Semester, three out of eleven students who studied in "Firenze" were shortlisted; one of the two prize winners was among them.

That was definitely a rewarding moment for the ISI Florence architecture program; even more remarkably, the same thing happened the following year, when many of the awarded students spent a semester abroad at the MARYStudio. Sure enough, such results are not necessarily achieved thanks to particularly gifted tutors. More likely, they have to do with the daily stimuli to intellectual curiosity and cultural engagement that students can (and should) receive during their semester abroad. Usually, questions are more important than answers. I don't know if students are intellectually curious before going abroad (and if that is the reason why they make such a decision) or if they become so once here, because of a remarkably challenging and demanding environment. Whatever the case, I'm convinced that as students ponder the importance of studying abroad during their semester at ISI Florence they see their own intellectual curiosity increase.

The first three years of partnership with the UMD School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation have been fruitful and successful above expectations. Below is a series of thank-you notes that I received from UMD students who studied with me in the last years.

Franco Pisani, *MARYStudio Coordinator*

On my last day in Firenze, somehow now two years ago, I visited La Specola for the first time. The museum was filled with anatomic human models and rooms with walls covered in taxidermized birds, insects and reptiles. It was a fascinatingly uncomfortable experience, which I now see as fitting to have ended my semester abroad.

I was privileged to have experienced discomfort on so many occasions that semester, pulling myself whenever possible from routines and the culture I knew well. During a trip through Verona, Vicenza and the Veneto region to visit works of architecture by Carlo Scarpa, I was struck by compositions Scarpa created through many small elements — my professor commented that "sometimes arbitrariness becomes rationality." I think this is true not only for architecture, but also for the places, cities and cultures that they divulge. In order to get a glimpse of the rational, you need to be willing to step into the arbitrary.

Learning to look for uncomfortable experiences has made me a more aware, curious and confident person. As I now get some sense of comfort from traveling in Europe, having lived there for four months and understanding pieces of its cultures, I have been able to push myself to travel to places that make me more nervous. Between the time I returned from Florence and the end of this year, I will have traveled to one Central and three South American countries. I will have placed myself in four countries that I know little about, with cultures that feel even farther from my own despite geographic proximity. My willingness to step outside of what I know can be attributed so much to what I learned and whom I learned from when I was most uncomfortable in Firenze.
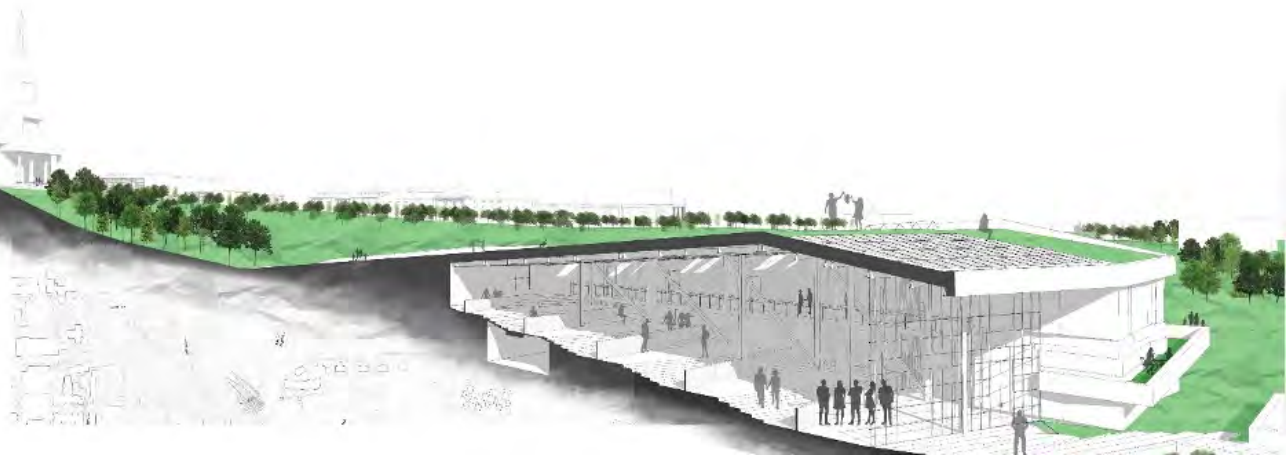
Alicia Moreira, *Spring 18*

Spring 2019

If you compiled a 'supercut' of our trip to Italy it would go something like this…

Stomach lurches at touchdown… Immediate wonder… Sea of languages… Cupola, Ponte, Piazzale… Uneven cobblestone… Ruins and Towers… Prosecco atop the Bastillion…Unimaginable places… Extraordinary people.

Our opportunity was staggeringly extraordinary. Roughly one third of our Junior class (19 students) packed up our studio desks in December. We made preparations to spend the next four months studying architecture in the Renaissance City. Then, suddenly, we were surrounded by terracotta and travertine, living it.

As a testament to everything we absorbed while abroad, ⅕ of our Florentine cohort became award recipients upon our return to Maryland. As competitors in the Senior Intra-Studio Design Competition, we have all agreed that subconsciously or not, we each drew upon our experiences abroad. Earning second prize, Mafe Farieta created Greenscape, taking third place was Node by Ben Ripley, and honorable mention was awarded to Ryan Muir's for creating a sanctuary-like space that he called Ripple. Rounding out the Florentine contestants was Alex Hall who won first prize for her project, re-CAPTURE. Five out of the six award recipients of the competition had participated in the study abroad experience in Florence, a clear depiction of the program's influence. However, the program's renowned Renaissance gravitas was overlaid with thousands of ordinary discoveries.

The Spring'19 crew

The ISI Florence study abroad experience allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. Living in Florence as an international student and experiencing the city for the first time, taught me the value of the historical layers that make up its essence. It developed a curiosity in me to look beyond the surface and question why things are the way they are and where they came from. My project while abroad took place in the Baluardo della Ginevra, where the characteristic color, texture, and pattern of the remains of the Roman walls played a major role on the uniqueness of the site and the project as a whole. With the guidance of professor Franco Pisani, Stefano Corazzini and Simone Barbi, our team designed a three-artist residence focused on enhancing the artists' experience in relation to the importance of the context where each "villa" was oriented and designed to frame a specific landmark visible from the site to inspire the artists.

As an architecture major, the opportunity to take a studio abroad has had a tremendous impact on my design sensitivity to truly understand, value, and experience the context of a project with attention to the smallest details. Coming back to the University of Maryland, the fourth-year studio competition culminated with the highest recognitions for stu-

dents that participated in the Florence studio. Personally, I have been able to approach my studio projects with a different perspective that takes special consideration of the context of a site. Not to mention, practicing the use of the metric system and getting accustomed to Italian proportions pushed me to explore new possibilities. My most recent studio project at UMD was a sustainable building that imposes a minimal impact on the characteristics and importance of the context as a green field.

Overall, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to study in Florence and even more so to see the positive impact it continues to have on my academic career and beyond.

Maria Fernanda Farieta, *Spring 19*

My rain jacket flapped in the wind as I carefully stepped around the coastal brush; with each step, orange clay clung to my sneakers. The teal waves of the Mediterranean Sea swayed in my eyes as the tower came into view. As I approached the Torre di Cala Domestica, a sense of surrealism ensued. The mystique of the stone structure captivated my imagination. I could imagine Spanish soldiers guarding the island from pirates, the nearby port teeming with mineral exports, and World War II soldiers climbing up the wrought iron ladder dangling from the facade. The tower's grandeur is in part due to its being atop a hill, surrounded by low-lying ground cover. This absence of built context allows the tower to rise up from the crashing waves below, its edifice distinctly outlined. In this way, the tower has a powerful approach, while remaining sympathetic to the natural material palette of the coastline.

To define this structure only as a stone fortress would be dishonest to the emotional impact of the Torre di Cala Domestica. As one of hundreds of homogeneous war forts dotting the coast of Sardinia, this particular tower inhales its significance from its settings. To ignore this sensory quality would steal the unique convergence of time, place, and material from the tower, and this particular Sardinian 'Torre' would cease to stand out.

That is the type of experience that inspires one to become an architect; it is a balance between the discovery of history, the inspiration of nature and a passion to shape the future. One of the most enthralling architectural illusions to me is the suspension of time and place when experiencing a space. The emotional conditions at the Torre were irrefutably significant, even though the structure itself was of systematic form. Design allows an architect to place its occupants into any given moment in history. This is a poetic power, one that is not easily attainable.

The simple, yet extraordinary perception of that coastal tower was a unique byproduct of studying in Florence for four months. The educational collaboration with the University of Maryland and the faculty at ISI allowed my peers and me to experience European architecture in a raw way. It was untainted by textbook jargon and allowed each one of us to place our own judgments upon every space we stumbled across. The tower upon the sea wasn't something I had ever learned about in class, nor was it even detailed on the internet without sufficient digging; that experience was completely our own. We were the only ones climbing the orange tinged cliffs that dreary morning, but somehow it felt like my mind had been flooded by the history it represented. By participating in the Florence study abroad experience, ordinary moments became surreal,

and that type of exhilaration is what compels me to pursue architecture.

Alex Hall, *Spring 19*

Studying architecture and theory in Florence definitely influenced my perception of architecture, but more so living in Florence for four months, partaking in the culture, influenced my perception of life and how to best live it. There are many things that I appreciate about how Americans live life, but it required me to live in another country to realize my appreciation for things that had never occurred to me at home. You will learn to love your lack of dependency on a vehicle. You will learn to love 'piazze' and the effect they have on the urban fabric. You will learn to love the night life, which is not just bars and clubs, but secret bakeries and 'focaccia.' You will learn to love stopping at the market, right down the street from your apartment to pick up fresh food for dinner that night.... And, of course, you will learn to love the architecture.

Since coming back home, I have tried to hold on to some of these things. The way the US is built makes it difficult, but the best way to bring a part of Italy home is in theory and practice. As architects, try to focus on the intentionality of Italian life and architectural design and implement that in your own practice.

Ryan Muir, *Spring 19*

It's hard to express just how much studying abroad in Florence impacted my growth as a person and a designer. Living in the city, and being able to fully immerse myself into the culture, has impacted me in so many unexpected ways. In fact, it's so challenging to hone in and define specific ways in which this experience helped me, because it didn't have just a small change or impact, but rather completely altered who I am as a person.

I learned so much about myself and my friends, and was able to forge strong, lasting relationships throughout my time in Florence. Also, through this experience, I gained a wonderful new lens with which to view and envision architecture.

The design studio was an especially unique and valuable experience for me, as we worked in pairs for the entirety of the semester on our design projects. This forced both me and my partner to work on our ability to communicate design ideas to each other at every stage of the project, which I've found to be an incredibly valuable skill to have. This studio experience, combined with the opportunity to visit and study numerous significant historical landmarks, provided an opportunity and experience that I fully recommend for every student.

Ben Ripley, *Spring 19*

Beyond

The ISI Florence & Umbra Institute
Studies in International Education

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Contributors
Pierluca Birindelli
Federico Damonte
Marco Bracci
Francesca Passeri
Franco Pisani

The students of MARYStudio:
Maria Fernanda Farieta
Alex Hall
Alicia Moreira
Ryan Muir
Ben Ripley

ISI FLORENCE
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES INSTITUTE

UMBRA INSTITUTE
PERUGIA, ITALY