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Editors Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

Aura in the 21st Century

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Texts by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial.....	7
FRANK JACOB AND FRANCESCO MANGIAPANE	
What makes a digital aura? Consequences for the “here and now” of Mixed Reality and Multitasking Interfaces.....	9
FEDERICO BIGGIO	
Falcone and Borsellino. The Aura of Symbols	23
CARLO ANDREA TASSINARI	
Vineyard’s Aura. Touristic discourse in Ridley Scott’s <i>A Good Year</i>	43
FRANCESCO MANGIAPANE	
University of Palermo during and after Covid. Auratic effects in a re-semanticized space	59
MARIA GIULIA FRANCO	
Contributors.....	75



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VINEYARD'S AURA

TOURISTIC DISCOURSE IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S *A GOOD YEAR*

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ABSTRACT. This essay – part of an ongoing project dedicated to highlighting the rhetorical and ideological representations of food and wine in cinema – carries out a semiotic analysis of the film *A good year* (2006) by Ridley Scott, with the aim of identifying the role that wine plays in it and therefore in the represented touristic imaginary. In this film, a spatial dialectic among city and country gets outlined which allows to identify two competing forms of life – one metropolitan, the other related to living in the country. By highlighting the differences among them, the article seeks to define the terms of the auratic proposal which oeno-tourism makes to the urban citizen tempted of visiting wine lands.

KEYWORDS: Wine, Tourism, Cinema, Semiotics, Aura

1. STUDYING THE TOURISTIC CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Touristic discourse is enmeshed in an inextricable web of textualities encompassing as wide a range of materials as promotional brochures, literary narratives, films, television broadcasts, journalistic reports, advertising campaigns, or even blogs and social streams managed by modish influencers. To these we may add gadgets and souvenirs offered as

gifts upon return or even the insufferable videos of one's holidays the viewing of which, up until recently (now everything happens in real time on social networks) was offered to the tourist's circle of closest friends specially invited for the purpose.

It is clear how in such a cauldron, narration (of a lived experience) and experience (to be recounted) end up supporting each other, playing the role of semiotic drivers of travel, acting as virtualizing

agents capable of instilling in others a wanting-to-do or a having-to-do related to tourism and condensing the reasons and passions for setting off towards the next destination. But, just for the fact of working as *senders*, these representations play their function also at the end of the process: it's to them that one must get back in order to assess their own experience towards the social discourse conveyed by the media and public opinion. The ability of the journey to constitute itself as an individual verification of a collective discourse will, hence, seal its success as a touristic experience. This implies that, regardless of the destination, the type of activity carried out, and the style of the settings chosen, the touristic discourse may be recognized by virtue of some characterizing mechanisms that are to be uncovered through critical reflection, as studying their articulation appears as an effective way to study tourism tout court.

Our analysis will proceed on the basis of these assumptions and take into consideration an aspect of touristic cultural imagery – that of wine tourism – by examining its representation in a 2006 romantic comedy, *A Good Year*. Directed by famous British director Ridley Scott and starring international stars Russell Crowe and Marion Cotillard, this rom-com is in turn based on a 'touristic' novel¹ by English writer Peter Mayle bearing the same title and published in 2004 (see Mayle 2004)². Coincidentally, the film's genesis also lies in the acquaintance of the writer with the director, made possible by the fact of being 'neighbours' in Provence, where Mayle lived permanently (after moving there) until his death while Scott usually spent periods of vacation and rest.

This essay is part of a broader and ongoing reconstruction of gastronomic and oenological discourse in cinema (Man-

giapane 2013, 2014, 2021), therefore any given hypothesis and attestation around the film will take into account such an overall articulation.

2. A CONTRAST BETWEEN SENDERS

As I have pointed out in a previous work (Mangiapane 2021), the oenological discourse in cinema can be recognized by difference within a broader corpus of stories around food. In fact, it can be argued that stories about wine overturn the dialectic underpinning stories about cooking, without however changing their form. Whenever 'taste' is the subject of a film narrative, the latter usually involves 'nomadic' heroes, bearers of an intangible cultural heritage – their gastronomic know-how – which travels with them and will be established from time to time in the places where they choose to stay. The way these heroes cook and eat appears different from the way the same actions are performed in the community they enter. As a rule, this is enough to cause scandal, forcing the subjects who host them to take a public position in the face of their difference, either accepting it as a gift, or rejecting it.

As we said, in stories about wine things go the opposite way. These are stories that emphasize the 'return' (*nostos*) and existential repositioning of the protagonists which have been 'recalled' by chance – for example by a fortuitous inheritance – to the vineyard. Such unexpected event will take them back to the physical place from which they came originally and with which they had cut all ties, leading them to consider the possibility of re-focussing their identity in continuity with the symbolic system that they had previously traumatically abandoned. This is what happens in the novel *A Good Year* and in the homonymous film on which it is based. The story

¹ We use this adjective in referring generally to the kind of plot-driven consumer literature, undemanding by definition and conceived as escapist, to be read during or around the holidays. Among the favorite themes of this genre is the dramatization of stories that have to do with the chosen tourist location, often presented as an exotic and intriguing place, whose narrative exploration can ideally take place in parallel with the physical exploration while travelling.

² Peter Mayle's literary production is mostly centered on Provence (see Wikipedia, *Peter Mayle*, ad vocem, https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Mayle, consulted on 1 September 2022).

narrated³ is that of a successful London broker named Max Skinner grappling with the news of having inherited a large Provençal chateau from his late uncle, who has died without a direct successor. Skinner goes back to Provence to stay in his uncle's castle, where he used to spend the summer as a child, with the intention of ridding himself of the substantial inheritance as soon as possible and selling it at the first opportunity to then return to London. It will be during this process, while he is busy gathering the documents needed for the sale, that he will realize the symbolic value of his Provençal and more generally French affiliation, by contrast with his way of life in England.

The gap between the two situations is emphasized in the film through a semi-symbolic system: the London setting from which the protagonist comes is shot in a palette dominated by cold colours (shades of blue) while the Provençal setting is represented in warm colours, mostly brown and yellow (figg. 1–2). What emerges is a dialectic that connects these two chromatic universes to two forms of life: one characterized by the pre-eminence accorded to the 'urban' and abstract values of economic rationality and marked by fast living; the other proceeding slowly, linked as it is to the cyclical time of the seasons, to the primacy of 'community' values and the strong ties underpinning them. This dialectic, which prefigures a contrast between senders – the fascination of the city versus the exoticism of the vineyard – is the backdrop against which the film plays out. Thus Max, the protagonist, will find himself vacillating between the two horizons, and in the end opt for a life as a Provençal heir, not least because in the meantime he has fallen in love with a local innkeeper. It is therefore a story centred on the theme of conversion, which dramatizes the inner torment and the corresponding

hesitations of those who find themselves faced with a radical choice.



FIGG. 1-2. SEMI-SYMBOLISM BETWEEN PROVENCE AND LONDON

Although the theme of conversion may seem distant from that of tourism, the peculiar way in which this film puts into continuity the two thematic universes allows us to deduce an implicit theory of tourism from the events narrated.

3. TOURISTIC DISCOURSE AND THE AURA

A first important remark is how the 'touristicity' of *A Good Year* can only arise from paradox. The film in question appears, in fact, bent on actively denigrating the tourist's viewpoint. Indeed, it is precisely the superficiality of the occasional traveller's gaze that is opposed to the story's underlying invitation: that of delving into the experience, of chasing the ultimate, 'authentic' meaning of the traversed territory. Marco D'Eramo (2017, pp. 43–44) addressed the problem of authenticity in the tourism discourse drawing on Culler, who in his exploration of the possibilities of a Semiotics of Tourism had already noted how the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic could be considered as a 'powerful semiotic operator within tourism' (Culler 1981, pp. 127–140, now in Culler 1988, pp. 153–167).

³ Given its complexity, the plot is briefly reconstructed, for the sake of the analysis that will follow. Such a simplification deliberately leaves out secondary narrative lines, proper subplots, which are not pertinent in the economy of analysis.

Following this suggestion, we can highlight a first characteristic of the touristic discourse: it can only constitute itself as a negation of itself, to the extent that the very fact of bringing to the attention of an audience a specific territory and its imagery emphasizing its presumed authenticity leads to its debasing and trivialization:

The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes. [...] The authentic sight requires markers, but our notion of the authentic is the unmarked. (Culler 1988, p. 164).

Such remark allows us to call into question the notion of aura. By the way, we intend to appeal to it in a restricted, so to speak, operational sense. The semiotic discipline, within a broader philosophical debate relating to the construction of a structural theory of culture, has developed an original reflection on this notion which ranges from Baudrillard ([1972] 1981) to Lotman (1974), from Eco (1985, 1990) to Greimas (1980, 1987) and Prieto ([1988] 1989), from Fabbri (2010) up to the latest contributions by Dondero (2007), Latour ([2008] 2011), Fontanille (2015) and still others. This essay, in continuity with this just drawn family of studies, tends to think of the aura as an effect of meaning constructed by the text, liable to be established under particular enunciative conditions. Starting from the problem posed by Benjamin ([1936] 1968) – that of circumscribing the problem of the authenticity and uniqueness of the work of art, as defined by its presence in time, space and in the relationship with its technical reproducibility

– a semiotic theory of everyday life will want to grasp its role as an asset, susceptible, as will be seen in more detail in the course of the analysis, of being involved in the construction of a sort of “perceptive pact” between enunciator and enunciatee. Such an approach will therefore be interested in revealing the procedural matrix of these aura effects, framing each of their manifestation within a tension between establishment and fall that also includes the problems related to its translation and migration. Seen as an effect and in its procedural matrix, the problem of authenticity induced by the aura will arise in terms of management, of administration. Effects of aura will be pursued by social actors for the valorisation of their discourses and their goods, even more so in a contemporary scenario marked by the artification (Heinich and Shapiro 2012) of everyday life. The case of tourism, among others, is exemplary in this regard, being, as we have seen, the paradox of authenticity consubstantial with its very determination.

Having made these dutiful clarifications, we can return to *A Good Year*. At first, the film’s protagonist considers the period to be spent in Provence as a harmless parenthesis in a life solidly hinged on the urban values of the London financial district. The immersion in the daily life of the Provençal village in which he finds himself and the progressive assimilation into it will in fact allow him to experience a proper identity shift⁴, which, precisely by virtue of its alleged authenticity, will succeed in determining his decision to move to Provence.

But tourists are not all the same and in order to let such a transformation – from tourist to expat – happen, a trip is not as good as any. This is why it is es-

4 In sociological and marketing terms, for some time now, a trend towards “experiential tourism” or even “transformative” tourism (Reisinger, ed., 2013) has been distinguished from the more traditional modes of confirmatory tourism. In the canonical approaches, the journey was mostly understood as a confirmation of the tourist’s departure identity so that upon the return of the journey, his beliefs could be strengthened. Transformative tourism thinks of the moment of travel as an opportunity for the tourist to acquire some know-how, to experiment with some qualifying challenge. Upon return from the trip, these experiences will therefore give the tourist a transformed image and perception of himself and of society. For a semiotic reading of the phenomenon and a case study of experiential tourism see Puca 2021, p. 117–161.

essential to wonder what value Max actually seeks in his explorations, a value that cannot already be traced in his comfortable life of a successful broker as he is. Answering this question will let us draw from Max's concrete experience a general understanding of the "lack" felt by the "urban" spectator postulated by the film as well as of the foundation of his eventual desire to travel.

4. SPATIAL GENRES

Answering the questions outlined above requires first of all a more accurate description of the spatial dialectic between London and Provence the way it is staged by the director through the chromatic semi-symbolism described earlier. For this purpose, reference can be made to a square proposed by Giannitrapani (2013, pp. 137-140) who, with regard to restaurant venues, recognizes four forms of spatiality based on the opposition between restaurants that represent themselves as bearers of a local identity (typical restaurants) and restaurants which, on the contrary, pose as bearers of a cosmopolitan identity (globalized restaurants) in that they use signs and icons of globalisation. From this fundamental opposition, Giannitrapani recognizes two other positions whereby negating the 'globalized' will yield an *exoticized* restaurant – that is, one that will tend to mark its belonging to some cultural otherness – and, on the other hand, negating the *typified*, a *glacialized* space will be obtained, the explicit aim of which is to erase any signs of cultural belonging. It can easily be observed how the dialectic between London and Provence, in the film in question, also takes the form of a dialectic between opposing spatial models. On one side are the city offices where Max Skinner's character moves: they are characterized by minimalist design, in line with a contemporary aesthetic which, by rejecting any decoration (according to the assumption that 'form follows function'), erases all expressions of identity or any setting that may be ascribed to some identifiable cultural affil-

iation. These can therefore be identified as 'glacialized spaces' (fig. 3). Conversely, the spaces in Provence are inserted within (stereo-)typically French landscapes and architectures – the *chateau*, the *dehors* of the Provençal restaurant full of round tables managed by Max's lover, its interiors characterized by saturated colours, and so on – and appear as *typified* spaces (figg. 4-5), in logical contradiction with the *glacialized* ones of the London setting.

In the square:

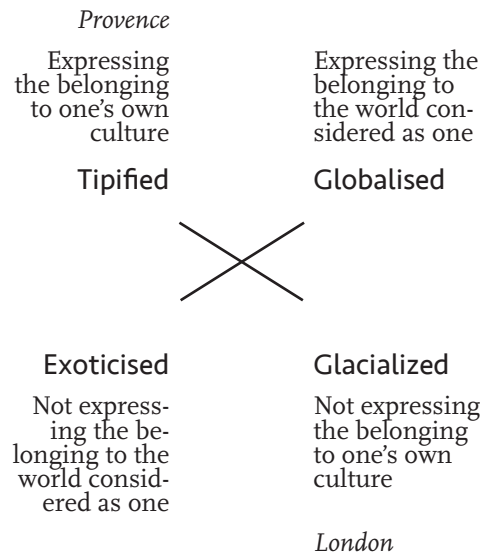


FIG. 3. GLACIALIZED SPACE OF THE LONDON OFFICE



FIGG. 4-5. TYPIFIED SPACE OF THE PROVENÇAL SCENERIES

There is more. The *glacialized* space of the financial offices where the broker Max works is mostly unpartitioned and brightly lit, reproducing the open space model that is typical of the offices of large global corporations. Its internal articulations are organized through clear panels allowing the light to circulate freely (to quote Fontanille 1995, as *glow*) and determining a regime of absolute transparency which, as a result, qualifies the managers as hyper-competent, complacent custodians of the power that comes from visual domination over what is happening. Such condition of hyper-competence also proceeds from the exploitation of the potential offered by the opposite strategy, that of hyper-mediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000, pp. 21–50). The screens that dot the offices here and there (fig. 6), standing out for the vividness of their colours, serve as optical prostheses, control devices oriented towards some elsewhere worthy of attention: in short, they play the semiotic role of informants (Fontanille 1987) at the service of the managers, ‘increasing’ their pre-established knowledgeable position, and consequently their self-perception as eminent subjects, custodian of a more than enhanced capability to do. However, it is the system itself that tells the viewer of the fragility of a structure so conceived, if we consider that, as Bolter and Grusin have pointed out (*ibidem*), transparency is a utopia that the media have always pursued and yet can never be completely achieved. This is why, in the pursuit of such an ideal of total transpar-

ency, the structures that divide the rooms are ultimately confusing and make it impossible to distinguish the organisation of the space into planes⁵. The proliferation of transparent panels, moreover, produces annoying visual glares (fig. 7): by disturbing the vision, they contribute to maintaining the awareness of the artificiality of such articulation. Finally, the multiple screens, each of which beckons the attention of managers, do nothing but increase the general level of confusion; therefore the finely crafted regime ultimately implodes⁶, assuming the appearance of its opposite, that of a noisy and chaotic market square⁷. Understandably, the perception of the vulnerability of such an arrangement also agitates the mind of managers like Max who, although apparently confident, cannot fail to feel, in their hearts, the intrinsic fragility (indeed the primary material quality of glass) that underlies their position of power.

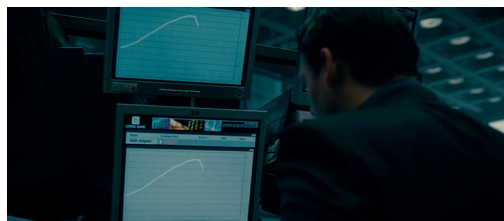


FIG. 6. INFORMANT SCREENS.



FIG. 7. FLATTENED PLANES AND MULTIPLE VISUAL GLARES

⁵ According to Wölfflin [1984] 2015, the articulation of space as a sequence of planes is one of the qualities of classic art in opposition to that of Baroque which, in this regard, prefers to create effects of depth, confusing the planes of representation. Following Wölfflin's observations (imported into Semiotics by Floch cf. [1995] 2005, pp. 85–115, and further discussed by Marrone 2007, pp. 276–285), the office space of the film could be comprised and understood within a baroque vision (within a general disposition of the contemporary oriented, to quote Calabrese, 1987, towards the neo-baroque). Baroque aesthetics, in its reinterpretation by semiotic theory, is associated with a form of life oriented towards non-continuity, characterized, among other things, by the ‘loss of cognitive mastery by a subject faced with a world apprehended as an event’ (cf. Floch [1995] 2005, p. 100).

⁶ In this regard, Marrone (2007a) in his work dedicated to the analysis of Steven Spielberg's film *The Terminal* (2007), points out how the airport – a space of modernity comparable to the London offices where Max works – founded as it is on transparency as an architectural code and on the *panopticon* as a control device for its passengers made possible by this quality, ends up obstructing the vision of the surveillance cameras: the diffused glares that spread uncontrollably in space in fact determine the implosion of the panoptic regime (see especially pp. 145–149) and the ‘failure’ of its control mission.

⁷ This is what the viewer of the film can appreciate during the stock market trading sessions in which Max exercises his savoir-faire as a broker: they always degenerate into bedlam.

The *typified* space of Provençal environments is also peculiar. According to Fontanille (1995), it always appears as ‘matter-light’ (fig. 8), a stratified space, an extension to be traversed in depth: the opposite of the flattening of the planes achieved for the city offices. Precisely for this reason it is full of pitfalls: there either are no screens or they do not work, just as the GPS in charge of guiding Max through the narrow streets does not work: navigating this space without a map is an incredibly difficult as well as dangerous undertaking, it only takes a trifle to fall into a disused swimming pool and get trapped there, as happens at one point in a famous scene of the film. In Provence, every perception is situated in such a way that seeing becomes one with feeling, that is, with the conjuring up of an overall and all-encompassing perceptive universe in which distinguishing between the five canonical senses is nearly impossible.



FIG. 8. LIGHT ‘MATTER’ IN THE PROVENÇAL INTERIORS

As we will see, it is precisely the perceptive gap between the two environments that takes on increasing significance for the protagonist.

5. DISCOURSE ON THE AURA⁸

At a certain point in the film – precisely at the beginning of Max’s exploration of Provence – the camera lingers on a

detail of the hall of the restaurant where Fanny, the woman Max will fall madly in love with, works. None of the characters is involved in this fleeting vision which, therefore, is constituted as a “description”, an extradiegetic relationship that the text establishes between enunciator and enunciatee. In this passage, apparently secondary, we see Fanny quickly passing in front of the wall where the till is located, painted in a very intense yellow, on which hangs a tourist poster reproducing a famous work by Van Gogh, painted during his stay on site in 1890, *Country Road in Provence by Night* (fig. 9). It is precisely the tourist discourse that marks the base of the painting with the wording “Provence” that informs the viewer that the picture hanged on the wall is a copy. Interestingly, next to the poster we can glimpse a vase full of sunflowers (fig. 10). Both details, the tourism poster and the flower vase, pass, as we said, literally unnoticed, in the sense that they are not ‘looked at’ by any of the characters. The fact remains that Van Gogh’s work is doubly invoked, as an explicit quotation framed by the touristic discourse of the poster and, more subtly, in the figure of the vase of sunflowers, which evokes the famous series of paintings the artist dedicated to that subject around the same period. What effect is produced by juxtaposing these images? Although they are interchangeable from the point of view of the themes and figures represented, which refer to the special geo-anthropological makeup of the Provençal territory (with its starry nights, its paths, and its peculiar vegetation as well as with its artists), they differ from the point of view of their putting into discourse. On the

⁸ The discourse on the film’s aura is more articulated than that which we will outline below, bringing into play at least two other narrative strands identifiable in the plot. The first has to do with a photograph of Max’s uncle, which Max is shown by an American girl who, at one point, knocks on the door of the castle. She will tell Max that she is looking for her father, the man portrayed in that very photo alongside her mother. The fortuitous discovery of another print of the same photo among the uncle’s papers will provide the proof of his lineage. The second concerns the forged autograph letter that Max decides to produce in order to remedy the lack of supporting documents proving the girl’s status as his late uncle’s closest relative and consequently as the legitimate recipient of the inheritance. This letter, precisely by virtue of being ‘by the author’ (written by the nephew with a calligraphy he had learned directly from his uncle, and with his ink and paper) is believed to be true. For our purposes, it is important to remember how these narrative strands allow us to place the discourse on the film’s aura not on the veridictory level (the aura that tells the ‘truth’ of the work) but, as we will see, on the level of its perceptual and therefore existential value.

one hand, the poster's discourse is the result of a *debrayage* that literally frames Van Gogh's artistic discourse, roughly quoting it through a reproduction where the space of representation has been flagrantly defaced (by the superimposed touristic slogan) and the textural qualities of the paint have been flattened in a two-dimensional photographic reproduction⁹. On the other hand, the vase of sunflowers is presented in the first instance as part of the environment, so that the viewer can picture it more vividly filling the restaurant with its perfume and impacting with its strong scent the perception of its patrons.



FIG. 9-10. THE YELLOW WALL WITH THE TOURISM POSTER

Thus, the director has developed a veritable theory of perception by silently juxtaposing the two objects – the vase of sunflowers and the tourism poster – in order to show their irreducibility. If it is

intuitive to assume the coarse tourism poster of Van Gogh's painting as a decline of the aura resulting from its technical reproduction, the presence of the vase of sunflowers plays a more subtle role of re-activator of the same touristic discourse by staging a return to the semiotic source of the poster, thanks to that which in Semiotics is known as an *embrayage*. Through this expedient, the objects of Van Gogh's artistic representation faintly echoed by the tourism poster can be regained without mediation, in their primordial guise, so to speak, that is before being 'selected' by the artist's gaze and through it by the institutional tourism discourse on the territory. Unlike *Country Road in Provence by Night*¹⁰, the sunflowers are not explicitly referred to as works within the narration: their eventual recognition – clearly 'facilitated' by the fact that sunflowers are among the Dutch painter's most famous subjects¹¹ – is ultimately left to the interpretative activity of the spectators who will thus be able to indulge in the illusion of having come to that revelation by themselves. In line with Culler's observations I have cited at the beginning of this essay, it is only in this way that the flowers can in fact appear to them inviolate, auratic sources in a relationship of non-discontinuity with the instances of the *I* that perceives, the *here* that emanates, and the *now* that flees. The juxtaposition of the tourism poster and the vase of flowers therefore demands acknowledging their

⁹ Bruno Latour (with Adam Lowe, 2011) dwells at length on the effects of the decline of the aura in the photographic reproductions of art masterpieces. He observes that it can be attributed to the lack of accuracy with which they are usually made. Taking for example the case of the *Wedding at Cana* by Veronese, a work kept in the Louvre in an unsuitable space whose conditions are far removed from the intended location, Latour notes how the copy of this masterpiece made for the refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice substantiates the possibility of a 'migration of the aura' from the original to its copy.

¹⁰ In the film we are also shown *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (1893) by Paul Gauguin, the famous artist who lived for a time in Provence with his friend and rival, Vincent Van Gogh.

¹¹ Jack Goody, in his famous book devoted to the *Culture of Flowers* (Goody 1963, p. 207) refers to Van Gogh's sunflowers as a subject whose printed reproduction was highly popular for decorating dining rooms in private houses in the early XX century, a sign (and an effect) of a peculiar process of "democratisation" of floral culture in Europe, what he later (*ibidem*, p. 404) defines as the "sunflower effect". As claimed, however, the reference to Van Gogh's sunflowers does not even require to be underscored, to exert its semiotic power. Any effort of a pedagogical order, aimed at facilitating the recognition of their iconic value, being obvious to most, would have probably determined the decline of their aura.

difference¹². The coarseness of the reproduction¹³ determines the collapse of the perceptive depth of the work, deleting all multisensory aspects – for instance, tactile or olfactory – in the name of the primacy of the visual and cognitive spheres. The result is, therefore, impoverished to the point of making the painting appear as a faded image of itself. Whereas the reproduction anesthetizes, the vase of flowers empowers – in other words, it *hyperesthetizes*¹⁴. Illich (1987) offers a cogent account of the role that the olfactory dimension plays in such a juxtaposition:

Both living and dead bodies have an aura. This aura takes up space and gives the body a presence beyond the confines of its skin [...] it blends into the atmosphere of a particular space. Odor is a trace that dwelling leaves on the environment. As fleeting as each person's aura might be, the atmosphere of a given space has its own kind of permanence, comparable to the building style characteristic of a neighborhood. This aura, when sensed by the nose, reveals the non-dimensional properties of a given space; just as the eyes perceive height and depth and the feet measure distance, the nose perceives the quality of an interior (Illich 1985, pp. 51–52).

The olfactory imprint of the flowers is invoked in its quality of primordial inspiring force capable of exerting a deep influence, freeing the subject from the slavery of the visual. The film audience is thus given an enunciative position that constructs them as perceptive subjects, enabled to glimpse the possibility of experiencing the depth of those same impressions that must have pushed Van Gogh's genius towards the pictorial representation: in a certain sense, offering them the possibility of putting them-

selves in his shoes. But all of this, as has been said, lasts for the time of a fleeting shot at the beginning of the film.

6. FIGURE AND BACKGROUND

Meanwhile Max Skinner, stuck in the village preparing the papers for the sale of the newly inherited chateau, has the opportunity to experience himself in such an immersion. The space of the castle where, as a child, he used to spend time with his now deceased uncle becomes a veritable mine of impressions. In it everything resonates, triggering, through its materiality, a true aesthetic grasp in the form of vivid memories or imaginative projections: in these poetic moments it is the space that speaks through the simulacrum of the uncle, manipulating Max. For the rest it is an evolution without real twists that revolves around the funny aspects of the protagonist's 'adjustment' to the new context. Thus, we witness a progressive shift of the values at stake: what should be considered as a figure and what as a background of the action? What should be considered pertinent to give meaning to one's life? The question – always deferred – will become pressing once Max's London boss Sir Nigel backs him into a corner, criticizing his excesses as an Englishman seduced by the oddities of the 'frog-eating' French, and, on the other hand, offering him a life-changing opportunity, that of becoming a partner of the studio with a view to definitively assuming its values. It is at this point that Max is forced to take stock of his life: the dispute between the two is revealed as a discourse on perception whose terms are realized by Max again through an aesthetic grasp¹⁵, the results

12 Yuri Lotman (1986) has devoted an essay to the problem of the relationship between words (signs) and things in painting, claiming that still life may be recognized as a style which problematizes such a relationship, in two opposite directions, from *signs to things* (promoting a "total reification of the thing" represented) and from *things to signs* (as in allegorical still lifes such as *Vanitas*).

13 We agree with Latour (see footnote no. 9) in stating that the decline of the aura does not depend on its technical reproducibility, as Benjamin claimed, but by the poor quality of the reproductions.

14 Following Hetzel (2002), Boutaud (2005, 2007, 2016) proposes a model of sensory regimes derived from the dialectic between *emphatic*, *empathic*, *pathic* and *phatic*.

15 Semiotic theory, following Greimas (1987), refers to the 'aesthetic grasp' (*saisie esthétique*) as a moment of non-narrative transformation of the subject induced by the perception that combines with the trial schema represented by the canonical narrative schema. Marrone writes ([1995] 2013, p. 393): 'The aesthetic grasp would then be

of which he will promptly accept and defend in front of his interlocutor.

7. FIRST AESTHETIC GRASP

What happens is impassively recorded by the sidereal gaze of the camera which shoots the conversation between the two, held behind closed doors. However, the detached viewpoint aimed at reporting the diegetic relationships between the characters is preceded by a scene which calls into question the enunciative relationship with the spectator's instance. Once again, it is an apparently unimportant, passing sequence. Max is summoned by his boss and, while he is standing on the threshold waiting for the latter to finish talking on the phone, his eyes are drawn to the works of art displayed in the studio. His gaze rests on a black sculpture depicting two lovers wrapped in a passionate kiss. As soon as it enters the frame, the director turns to the viewers, proposing a visual exploration for their exclusive consumption. It is a true change of perspective: the referential representation gives way to a close gaze that seeks to bring out its material, haptic, erotic aspects in the literal sense¹⁶. This exploration anticipates Max's gesture: once he gets close to the sculpture, he can only double the course of his action by effecting a further exploration of it, this time tactile (fig. 11): his hand covers the surface of the sculpture in the same way as the camera, in a point of view shot¹⁷. This exploration is the moment in which something changes.

Max can now turn his attention to another work of art: it is the same *Country Road in Provence by Night* (fig. 12) whose reproduction hangs on a wall in Fanny's restaurant.



FIG. 11. THE TACTILE EXPLORATION OF THE SCULPTURE



FIG. 12. COUNTRY ROAD IN PROVENCE BY NIGHT IN SIR NIGEL'S OFFICE

He recognizes Van Gogh's painting and challenges his interlocutor: how can a man whose life pivots on the abstraction of money choose to display such valuable work in his office without fearing it will be stolen? Sir Nigel rejects this charge of naivety by informing him that the picture hanging on the wall in plain sight is only a very expensive copy of the original painting, which is securely stored in a safe. He motivates his vocation for art collecting as another 'passions' of his, alongside that for women, horses, and so on; whims that he indulges in his busy life. Max quickly retorts: 'are they passions or vices, sir?'. The question remains unanswered as Sir Nigel goes on to illustrate the terms of his offer of making Max a partner of the firm: taking it up will mean accepting the life choice founded on the primacy of economic rationality. Sir Nigel gives Max an hour to think about it, which the latter spends pensively in front of the office window, closed against the lashing

that astounding, dazzling, pungent, elusive moment about which it is not possible to express judgments or knowledge except when it is no longer there, it has vanished to make way to a cognitive representation of it and a consequent sense of nostalgia and imperfection'.

¹⁶ From an enunciative point of view, there is a change from a referential communication style to a substantial one (see the articulation of a square of advertising styles proposed by Floch 1997, pp. 231–276 and the progressive generalization of the model within an overall brand discourse in Marrone 2007b, pp. 197–206, and finally converging into a general semiotic theory, see Marrone 2022, pp. 216–234).

¹⁷ In cinematographic language, the POV shot is a filming technique "that shows what the character is looking at" cf. Wikipedia, Subjective, ad vocem, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point-of-view_shot, accessed September 1, 2022.

rain (fig. 13). Again, an aesthetic grasp will guide him in his choice.

8. SECOND AESTHETIC GRASP

Max's gaze is drawn to the rain drops running down the window pane. This image gives way to a flashback of his childhood in Provence, in which he is alone by the swimming pool with an equally very young Fanny – who therefore turns out to be an old acquaintance of his – by the opposite side. As they are lying in the sun waiting for their guardians to return, Fanny does not hesitate to dive into the pool to swim to him and kiss him (figg. 14–15).



FIG. 13. MAX GAZES PENSIVELY AT THE WINDOW WHILE THE RAIN TAPS ON THE GLASS PANES



FIG. 14–15. AFTER DIVING IN THE POOL, FANNY RE-EMERGES AND KISSES MAX

It is the nostalgia¹⁸ of the moist little kiss that the girl had given him that

strikes him, establishing itself by contrast with respect to his own condition of blasé city dweller¹⁹, forced to pay with his perceptive split for the protection guaranteed by the screens. After all, the window that shelters him from the rain can only appear to him as yet another interface that separates him from a situated perception of his own existence. The search for himself as a single unified perceptive unit negated in *glacialized* environments dominated by sight will push him towards the ultimate choice of giving up his job and with it his former existence as an urban man. Max has understood: he is now ready to challenge his boss in terms of the valency²⁰ of values at stake: what is more worth, the ‘abstract’ life guided by money or that situated and ‘concrete’ foreshadowed by Provence?

Once again this opposition can be expressed as a discourse around the work of art and its aura: ‘When do you look at it? Do you make late-night pilgrimages down to the vault just to see it or?’

It is at this point that the story can return to Provence.



FIG. 16. COUNTRY ROAD IN PROVENCE BY NIGHT IN THE PROVENÇAL RESTAURANT

The scene cuts to the floor of Fanny's restaurant, on the wall of which we find *Country Road in Provence by Night* again, however without the touristic indication ‘Provence’ this time (fig. 16). What has changed? It won't take long for the view-

¹⁸ The role of nostalgia in gastronomy and its connection to perception has been discussed by Marrone (2014 pp. 43–66, 2016b) with reference to the famous movie *Ratatouille* (dir. Brad Bird, 2007). Marrone notes that this passion, as activated by gustatory perception in the *saisie estétique*, actually liberates the surly food critic Anton Ego from misery, letting him glimpse unexpected options for a re-assessment of his life in the future. The bond which connects nostalgia and future has also been investigated in the psychoanalytic work of Recalcati (2022).

¹⁹ Simmel and his works, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) and *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) spring to mind as a reference.

²⁰ In Semiotics, valency is understood as *the value of values* (see Greimas e Fontanille ([1991] 1992), pp. 18–19, Fabbri 1991, and the systematization carried out by Fontanille and Zilberberg 1998, pp. 11–27).

er to surmise what has happened: Max must have used his severance pay to buy the original painting by Van Gogh and reinsert it in its context of use, a miracle that only the viewer is privy to²¹.

9. CONCLUSION: A THEORY OF THE REST

At this point we could ask ourselves how to clarify the overall proposal of this film by reconstructing its touristic rhetoric.

9.1. WINE AS PERCEPTIVE PROMISE

A first consideration regards the role played by wine in the latter. As we have seen, although our analysis is devoted to one of the most viewed and appreciated 'wine' films set in one of the most visited wine areas in the world, it does not dwell particularly on the specificities of this drink. On closer inspection, there are few scenes in which wine is identified as a value in itself. It is true that the film opens precisely with the memory of a drink, a flashback in which Max's late uncle tries to explain to his nephew as a child the value of wine²² and makes him try some, not before having prudently watered it down; however, there is no narrative development that allows us to assign to it a precise actantial role.

As a matter of fact, expensive bottles of wine and sophisticated tastings already have a place in the story before the trip to Provence: they serve to characterize Max's city life, the 'abstract' life that sees him as

a successful broker in the city of London. What is wrong with this way of drinking and therefore with this life? Remaining anchored to the notion of *tasty* (see Marrone 2022) linked to cognitive recognition, these drinking sessions do not reach the deep level of perception but remain on the surface as status symbols, trophies of a successful life to be exhibited.

Wine, in Provence, is, on the contrary, everywhere and nowhere. In order for its perceptual value (what Marrone 2022 calls *flavourful*) to emerge, it must be decentralized as an object. This is how Ridley Scott's comedy proceeds, following Max in the re-exploration of his space and his lost time. In this context, wine is there naturally, it has a place, it is part of the scene without its presence taking over the rest. And it is 'the rest' that, therefore, becomes the merit of the proposed meaning, so that only in retrospect can wine become the emblem of everything that is impossible to reduce in travel. In the film, 'the rest' takes centre stage, manifesting itself through the thousands of substances that find themselves making the 'circle of muses'²³ around Max, spontaneously harmonizing their voices to build a single voice. The muses circle around Max in a continuous play of correspondences that brings together different sensorialities – the rustle of the wind sweeping the fields of Provence, Fanny's moist lips, the dust that covers the abandoned castle, the scents that spread from

21 To all effects the film erases the tourist marker from the poster, asking the most attentive spectators to solve the enigma by themselves. It is a choice that goes in the direction pointed by Culler (see above) of preserving the effect of authenticity of the touristic discourse through a wise use of a marked (I point where to look) unmarked (I will not explain what could have happened and ask viewers to infer it by themselves, without the mediation of a narrator).

22 In this initial sequence, wine is defined as a drink that is "simply incapable of lying", a statement that cannot fail to resonate in the semiotician's ear with reference to the well-known definition of Semiotics led by Eco as a "theory of lie" (cf. Eco [1975] 1976, p. 6–7). As we have seen, the whole film is oriented towards shifting this assumption from the regime of the cognitive (the problem of objective truth) to that of perception (the problem of the truth of perception).

23 With this metaphor, Jurij Lotman (1974, It. transl. 1998, pp. 23–37) designates the pertinence of a unitary 'perceptive grammar' underlying the material specificity of the arts. Sculpture, poetry, painting, music, and so on, make up 'the circle of the muses', translating into each other thanks to this shared foundation that establishes comparability between them, leaving room for a transversal identification of a 'spirit of the age' or a 'style of the time'. Lotman's essay was included in a posthumous collection edited by Cesare Segre, entitled *Il girotondo delle muse* (Lotman 1998) and its approach was revived in Italian Semiotics. The latter has built upon the findings of Greimas' work on visual arts ([1984] 1989) to further explore the shared foundation posited by Lotman. This research perspective, currently in a theoretical definition phase (see Marrone's latest output, 2022), the recent republication of the collection of essays for the Campo Aperto series of Bompiani, founded by Umberto Eco and now directed by Stefano Barthezzaghi.

the kitchen – reactivating the atrophied sensitivity of the blasé city man.

9.3. FROM WINE TO AURA

This is how wine – and the touristic discourse about it that the film focusses on – can speak through the discourse on the aura which involves Van Gogh's artistic work, in a sort of double enunciative leap, who, through Max, addresses the viewer: the characters in the film live immersed in a context that cannot be reduced by the mediated touristic discourse. In the difference between the primitive force of the scent of the sunflowers and the two-dimensional 'reduction' exemplified by tourism posters, one can, therefore, grasp the perceptive gap that anyone wishing to go in the direction of the vineyard is invited to bridge. It is in these terms that *A Good Year* establishes a 'disunited' enunciator, one initially convinced that he is happy in his own perceptive divergence but then urged to acknowledge 'lack'. It will take time to realize how misleading such a belief can be, one will have to fall into the pool and find oneself soaked and without control²⁴. It will be necessary to rediscover the anthropological condition of a fully perceiving subject, after being atrophied by the hypertrophy of the visual. It is precisely the rediscovery of that condition which represents the value of *the return* – a common theme in many films dedicated to wine – to allow the viewer to recognize Max's existential path (being heir to a castle in Provence) within a broader, more general and relatable condition: that of being split subjects capable of returning to an atavistic condition of perception. In this context²⁵, wine is posited as a substitute for the territory from which it emanates; only thus can we acknowledge that its material and sensory

aspects correspond²⁶ to the habitat they come from and call us to: wine circulates in the city but in order for us to penetrate its meaning we must set off on a journey to reach it in its context of production and first consumption, and live with it. It is at this point, that is, once it has accomplished its task of 'attraction', that it can disappear, taking a more discreet place on the table as the local product of a general, pervasive perceptive configuration widespread in the territory, in which one can immerse oneself. *In loco*, it will not have a value in itself, or as an object, but as an experiential substitute, the sign of a future perceptive unity in the environment of which it is at the same time an emanation and a substitute. The implication is that if wine keeps its promise, when we reach our destination we will recognize its proposed meaning in everything: in the wind that blows through the fields, in the colours of its villages, in the smells and scents that emanate from its environments, in the rites and ceremonies that mark the community life in which it finds its place. This is how the discourse on the anthropological and existential value of wine can be carried forward through a disquisition around the aura in painting, with reference to Van Gogh's work.

9.4. TOURISM RETHORIC OF THE EXPATRIATION

The question remains of how to relate to this heritage. *A Good Year* offers its solution which is configured, oxymoronically, as 'anti-tourist' tourism rhetoric. Max's life path traced by the film stages precisely the transformation of his travelling identity from that of a tourist to that of an expat²⁷. This has a lot to do with the 'authenticity dilemma' evoked by Culler (see above) whereby the touristic markers of authenticity end up causing the aura of

²⁴ Exactly as it happens to Max (cf. § 4).

²⁵ The relationship between wine and territory has been extensively examined by Æsthetic and Semiotic theory, cf. at least Mangano 2014; Mangiapane 2021, Marrone 2014 e 2016a; Perullo 2012 e 2016; Puca 2021, Sangiorgi 2011.

²⁶ On this particular aspect I am in agreement with Nicola Perullo's valuable work (see among others 2012, 2020a, 2020b).

²⁷ 'While you've been on your little holiday, I've been in a shitstorm!' Sir Nigel holds against Max during the fight that would lead to his choice of resigning from his job and moving to Provence.

the marked experience to decline. From this point of view, it can be seen how the touristic experience is identified in a process of gradual assumption of a system of values: it is valid as an intermediate step, a transitory phase of exploration of a proposed meaning which, to the extent that it will be considered pregnant, can only be taken seriously and assumed as a way of life in what appears to be a true conversion. This certainly depends on an attitude (let us say a willingness to let oneself be affected, overwhelmed), derived from postulating travel as a moment of necessary loosening of identity, an opportunity for a vacation from oneself, the possibility of letting oneself be manipulated and changed by it. This is how the experience of travel is transformed into a discourse on value, that is to say, into a contrast between senders, between the affiliation at the start (represented in the film by the 'disunited' corporate horizon) and that at the end (represented by community life) of the journey. Framing the question of tourism in these terms allows us to free ourselves from an 'ontological' definition of the tourist. Max Skinner, while entangled in the concerns of his journey, does not know if he wants to be a tourist or not. On the other hand, it allows us to look at the issue of *touristification* and gentrification of cities from a perhaps less apocalyptic perspective than the dominant one, postulating a *non-discontinuity* between the world of an 'authentic' sociality and its touristic representation: only *a posteriori* will we be able to determine whether the travel experience prefigured by touristic discourses about it can be considered as a holiday or, on the contrary, assumed as the trigger of a life change.

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88 years have passed since the first publication of Walter Benjamin's essay where he firstly proposed the notion of aura. Following the ongoing process of artification of daily life, the problem of the uniqueness of the work of art, as identified by aura, continues to be inspiring for understanding and criticizing the social world.

This issue of Global Humanities proposes the idea that the concept of aura may be considered as an effect of meaning which demands to be managed by social actors in the mediasphere. Such a move enlightens the relevance of a proper struggle for "authenticity" to be pursued as an added value of daily life: How do social forces construct such an effect? How do they capitalize on it, in their activity? How does it get recognized and valued?

€ 16

