

When Historical Untruths Enhance Popularity of a Tourist Destination: Fake, Real and Everything in between About the UNESCO Site ‘Trulli of Alberobello’

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ABSTRACT: *Separating fact-based history from its fake version is an ongoing challenge. Hunting down false facts about the past is a matter of anthropology of heritage: false information and mythicised imagery about the past strongly affect the authenticity of the artefact and are meant to be the harbinger of the deliberate creation of fakes ex novo. This happened in the modern history of Alberobello, a town in the Puglia region – Southern Italy – renowned for its typical buildings known as ‘Trulli’. Foundational stories often resort to incorrect or exaggerated narratives and outright lies to compensate for gaps in recorded history. This paper opines two historical untruths that significantly impacted the popularity of ‘Trulli of Alberobello’, an Italian tourist destination among the best known in the world, as a consequence of its recognition as a World Heritage Site in 1996. While the UNESCO badge is an important marketing tool in global tourism, its presence does not bind those responsible for the site’s management to guarantee faithful historical exposure. This has fuelled the increase of inaccurate guided tours and non-authentic merchandising. Consequently, the attempt to restore history faithful to the sources is not a fact that involves only the community of residents. Still, it concerns the entire tourist sector made up of the sale of souvenirs, guidebooks, organised tours, TV shows and even cartoons.*

KEYWORDS – *Authenticity, Cultural significance, Heritage Storytelling, Values Conservation, UNESCO*

I. TELLING THE STORY OF A PLACE

Suppose geography is the ‘description’ of a land. In that case, storytelling represents the ‘story’ of that environment, drawing on forms of narration imbued with cultural phenomena specific to the community that originates that story (Abruzzese, 2001). Through this discourse, one understands what is happening, what has happened and what might happen there (Fontana, 2003, p. 13).

Handed-down facts about a place can influence how people think about that tangible space and even how residents settle and inhabit that physical space (Ragone, 2015). In the context of research on the storytelling of places, the philosopher Walter Benjamin(1968) already demonstrated the relationship between a place and its narration, identifying two complementary characters and their relationship with the place. On the one hand, the individual who brings with them stories of road trips to distant places, and on the other hand, the people who stay at home, in touch with layers of history and memory layered in one place.

More recently, Robert T. Tally Jr. (2019)focused on the relationship between spatial representation and narration. And this particular mode of communication (the association of a place to its story) finds a privileged field of application in the context of geography (Ryan, Foote &Azaryahu 2016).

Storytelling has entered the scientific debate in recent decades (Salmon, 2007), and the repercussions of this form of narration on tourism marketing are now evident, where an economy based on experience (re-enactments, immersion in the habits of the local population, etc.) is gradually replacing the product economy

(stay and visit). In the words of Pine and Gilmore(1999), tourist companies become real “experience stagers” who no longer sell only goods or services but the resulting experience, which turns into a memory, extending through those who have experienced it within their network of contacts. In this increasingly experience-driven landscape, consumers crave what Pine and Gilmore (2007)refer to as “authenticity”. According to the authors, when customers do not perceive a product or an experience close to their imagination, they tend to label it as “inauthentic” or “false”, automatically excluding it from the list of things they consider important.

The story, in its various forms of narration (oral, written, portrayed, filmed, depending on the era) is the tool through which each society constructs the history of its land. It is the same way with which the memory is handed down, favouring the process of “patrimonialisation” of what the territory itself expresses (Bellacchino, 2014).

II. WHAT DEFINES AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a fundamental concept in contemporary Western society, which permeates both the “real” and the imaginary world. People are constantly encouraged to be “themselves”, and the serial imitation of certain cultural products connotes such reproductions of inauthenticity. As far as European regions are concerned, even in museum and tourist contexts, visitors generally expect to see works unanimously considered authentic, and rarely are exhibitions of replicas and reproductions or forgeries organised.

Taken literally, a work of art can be authentic or not on a scale that ranges from real to fake. However, complexity emerges when the subject of discussion is not tangible but concerns a form of a handed-down story, such as foundational stories. Authenticity can be inscribed within an indefinite spectrum rather than correspond to an intrinsic quality of an object or a story. A similar problem is encountered in ethnographic museums, where it is often difficult to determine whether an object is actually what it is said to be: objects can be composite, i.e. made up of both authentic and decontextualised material, generating hybrid works that are neither fake nor real.

This paper will present different ways in which authenticity is used as a distinction between true and false in the representation of a tourist destination. At the same time, how this concept has implications for understanding authenticity more broadly will also be depicted. The purpose is not to determine a single authoritative definition of fake history but to raise the question of who – and by what process – has the authority to define authenticity and to what extent the established terminology limits us that we apply to multiple phenomena.

So how does a culture’s tangible or intangible manifestation become a heritage? The phenomenon of “patrimonialisation” explains this, i.e. those processes which lead groups (sometimes several groups of actors within a society) to select, decide and choose what deserves to be valued: what is it that represents culture within that region or community. The process of patrimonialisation has become common knowledge with UNESCO (Advisory Body Evaluation, 1996, p. 57) and occurred within the more general framework of political, social and economic changes at a global level.

III. STORYTELLING AS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN ALBEROBELLO

The protection and enhancement of a land’s natural and cultural heritage are based on its knowledge, and the story of it is what allows this awareness to be transferred to the community, informing it of the importance of passing it on to future generations.

In the context of the field research, this section explores the relationship that binds the Trulli of Alberobello – as a physical instance – to the story that is made of it in the form of media narration. Furthermore, bringing out the identity of a territory through a narrative allows practitioners to enhance the environmental and cultural specificities from the perspective of sustainable tourism. Promoting a place through constructing an image aimed at enhancing the cultural heritage of a territory is relevant in a place like Alberobello, where those assets –Trulli – are already crystallized in the collective imagination.

The story of Alberobello is a tool for signifying places: on the one hand, it helps to strengthen the identity dimension of the place (developing the sense of belonging to the territorial heritage in the local community); on the other, it increases the attractiveness of tourist flows towards that destination. This generates

propulsive effects on the city's development plan, but the progressive media exposure can also amplify a deteriorated narrative of that place. The use of storytelling in the narration of places also serves as a tool to convince and influence specific reference audiences. In the case of territorial communication, the interlocutors are the welcoming residents and visiting tourists.

In collaboration with some local stakeholders, I practised participant observation during 20 guided tours (between 2016 and 2019) conducted in Italian, French and English. I found that on two-thirds of the occasions, the tourist guides exposed a history of Alberobello that did not adhere to what has been handed down by the sources (further on, a historical overview is shown). The legendary and fabled outlines have often been privileged over the documented reality. Furthermore, I found that tourist itineraries were frequently travelled, favouring the routes that lead day-trippers (especially cruise passengers) to streets crowded with souvenir shops, which engulf visitors (See the quote from the newspaper). On the contrary, these routes seldom involved the AiaPiccola district, a residential area cut off from the commercial zone.



Excerpt from an online article in "The Telegraph" of 21 December 2012

This separation represents a sort of threshold between the two historic districts of the town (Rione Monti and AiaPiccola), around which the rest of the urban Trulli are scattered, in a way that is no longer as homogeneous as in the past (Iuso, 2010, p. 142). Following the Second World War, and especially with the increase in tourist numbers, the destinies of the two districts proceeded in different directions. Although both historic districts got the recognition of the monumental heritage and panoramic views, only the district of Rione Monti today is massively affected by tourist attendance. Before many Trulli houses in the AiaPiccola were converted into B&Bs, the area was not even known to tourists, despite being a few hundred meters away from Rione Monti (Iuso, 2010, p. 125).

Historical news is often conveyed in ways that trivialise cultural heritage and reduce authenticity to a mere convention. This finding derives from direct observation of how historical notions about Alberobello circulate. Even the tourist guides that operate in the city usually spread a story of the place that refers to partially unfounded news, and the elements in question (analysed in the following paragraphs) are the same ones at the basis of that kind of popular *reverie* that was already recorded at the dawn of the tourist phenomenon in this place. Cinematography on Alberobello provides evidence: this is the case of a picturesque scene from the comedy film "Roaring Years" (Italian: *Glianniruggenti*) (1962), directed by Luigi Zampa and with the participation of Nino Manfredi.

The screenplay (written by the director together with Ettore Scola and Ruggero Maccari) traces the characteristic features of Italy in the wake of the Fascist period. Alberobello experienced a season of particular renewal in the urban building of those years, in response to the growing presence of travellers to the small town already known throughout the country for its Trulli. At that time, tourism organisation was the responsibility of the Provincial Tourism Authority of the Province of Bari. However, the older residents interviewed told me that – until the 1980s – tourist reception was concretely entrusted to local children, who made some money by telling visitors the local history, memorised just like a poem.

From the interviews, the preferred way to urge the population towards a renewed awareness of their community's history is to inaugurate a heritage education program in schools, where the first form of knowledge and interpretation of the territory is cultivated (Castagnet-Lars, 2013). Therefore, the fundamental problem lies in school education, where children studying local history and geography are trained on outdated texts (and therefore through obsolete information).

Inventing and telling stories are actions inherent in human beings, thanks to what psychologist Jerome Seymour Bruner called «narrative thinking». According to Bruner (1986), both adults and children have two ways of thinking: narrative and logical. This means that the human species understands and explains the world also through storytelling as a tool. Therefore, children would already be skilled weavers of stories thanks to narrative thinking, which also emerges during symbolic play (Yuksel, 2011). Then, motivating kids to invent stories means corroborating their narrative thinking, helping them to acquire and organise their knowledge (Barret, 2006) about the world and supporting the development of language skills (Maureen, 2018).

IV. FACT-CHECKING IN THE ERA OF FAKE HISTORY

The anthropology of tourism offers both the tools to understand the needs of the different types of tourists and to implement effective and coherent tourist communication. I dealt with the analysis of tourism in Alberobello as a cultural phenomenon: both from the point of view of the procedural dynamics and that of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Bortolotto&Severo, 2011), which are the foundation of tourist attraction. I focused the attention on the tourist movements towards Alberobello and on the individual and collective motivations (social and psychological, historical and universal) which lead to a journey towards Alberobello: a “circular” movement which consists of a departure, a transit and a return.

This argument takes up what Erving Goffman exposed in «The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life» (1959), where individuals act in a real scenic space divided between “front stage” and “back stage”, both concepts that clarify the differences between the idea of private space and that of public space (of a very subtle difference in places like Alberobello, where the proximity between domestic space and public land often coincide). For Goffman, the front stage is where a given performance takes place, and the back stage is where actions pertinent to the performance occur: the latter is inconsistent with the appearance that the footlights try to show.

MacCannell's (1973, 1976) observation also fits into this argument, who argues that considering that tourists are looking for authenticity, this search is multifaceted and complex, and for this reason, it requires the exploration of everything that is around the monument/artefact. He refers to the ability to grasp not only the object as it is presented (the front region, according to Goffman) but also the intimate and reserved world of the host communities that organise the tourist offer (the back region), to which the tourist can have access to different degrees.

In order to document the perception of tourists visiting Alberobello, I submitted a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 327 visitors (192 Italians and 135 foreigners) during the summer of 2019. Previously, a team had already carried out a similar survey (Battilani, Cerabona&Sgobba, 2014), which took place in 2007 and 2012, to analyse the type and quality of the tourism product of Alberobello.

In my investigation in Alberobello, I found a wide range of characteristics attributable to the habits of the tourists who visit this place. People frequently show that they possess a wealth of prior knowledge – sometimes inexact – concerning the contents of the visit. There are also more sophisticated visitors, with high expectations of the tourist offer, and others that are more disorganised (who do not mind improvisation). Almost all of the interviewees stated that they went to Alberobello attracted by the “charm” of the Trulli (or alluding to similar expressions). However, most of them seem content to come into contact with the superficial history of the village, i.e. they do not resort to verification of the truthfulness of the information. In this circumstance, MarxianoMelotti (2013) speaks of the ability to involve the subject in an “other” world without it being even necessary for the experience to be based on the authenticity of the situation or of the finds: it is the feeling of otherness that can be so strong to make any other element irrelevant.

V. A MISUNDERSTANDING BECOMES A LEGEND: THE TRULLI WERE NOT DEMOLISHED

Two examples of full-blown deterioration of tourist storytelling, found in the field study, are reported in the following paragraphs. The first is an example of fake history and is very recurrent on the Internet and in tourist guides and refers to the episode according to which Alberobello is recognizable as one of the first examples of tax evasion. Reference is made to the rumour according to which the feudal lords who ruled the area from the 17th century clearly and resolutely prohibited any construction carried out with the use of mortar. A narrative that, despite deteriorating the tourist image, has found general satisfaction on the part of the local population. It is a form of self-crystallization (Melotti, 2017) and self-typing of (false) history that I have found is also handed down in local schools, which therefore instils inaccurate awareness in the young population.

Going into historical merit, the years of the turning point in the transformation of Alberobello from a reduced community of just forty families to a more substantial urban agglomeration are placed under the regency of Giangirolamo II Acquaviva (in office from 1626 to 1665). In 1635 he established the primitive inhabited nucleus of today's Alberobello, without the character of the declared stability, building a hunting lodge (which still survives) with an annexed oven, mill, shop and tavern for wayfarers (Gioia, 1842, p. 220; Martellotta, 1993, p. 68). Legally, a condition of that kind (i.e. the non-official foundation of a stable village) did not guarantee the population of the early village any form of ownership and succession on the land. We must also consider the free will of the county governors, which clearly forbade any construction carried out with the use of mortar.

At this point, history meets legend: which is why a fact-checking of the sources was used here. This legend is at the centre of a series of historical falsehoods that continue to be handed down by the guides and that are all the rage in the television reports on Alberobello. According to what the nineteenth-century historian Pietro Gioiastated (1842, p. 218)), the precarious condition of the buildings imposed by the County of Conversano gave to the governors the power to expel the settlers quickly at any time «by precipitating the hovel» (Original Italian: *dirupandoiltugurio*), or by making their shelters fall to the ground. I find in this expression the embryonic form of the legend according to which, in anticipation of royal inspections by the crown of Naples, the ordinary people were forced to demolish the Trulli (and therefore their homes) before the arrival of the royal messengers to avoid the tax. Many historians describe the story similarly, even established authors (as Pedio, 2022, p. 47), who fall into a rather obvious trap: the Trulli are rather bulky constructions that cannot be demolished and rebuilt continuously.

A reconstruction of the facts is necessary, starting from a consideration. The Trulli were originally built with the dry-stone construction technique, and the sources agree on the prohibition of the use of the cement binder during the feudal era. So, we need to consider that the Trulli – which at the time did not yet have this terminological definition – as rural buildings, linked to the field, initially served as improvised shelters. Therefore, it was not necessary to make them permanently habitable: a requirement that was only felt gradually the early village of Alberobello was gradually becoming populated. That is to say that the Trulli were not built immediately with the main permanent residential use. It should also be kept in mind that the standards of comfort of that time differed from those of today. Therefore, the contemporary reader must interpret the precariousness of the buildings with a more emotional detachment.

Secondly, in those times, in the Kingdom of Naples, a law was in force – the so-called *Prammatica XXIV (de Baronibus)* – which subjected every new urban settlement to an authorisation from the crown of Naples, and therefore payment of taxes (Gioia, 1842, p. 221). To avoid this tax, the Counts of Conversano imposed on the commoners (at that time permanently residing in this place) to build only precarious buildings (i.e. without any mortar), which did not have the characteristics of the stability of ordinary homes, and which were therefore exempt from this type of tax. There is no trace of an explicit intention by Acquaviva family to evade the tax. Instead, Alberobello, unlike all the other larger neighbouring cities, had no particular reason to be protected and recognised. Actually, defensive walls have never been erected precisely because of this. Moreover, around Alberobello, other towns were also subjected to the same conditions: however, today, we speak of this “fortunate” case because a rare and peculiar form of architecture has survived in Alberobello, unlike other villages.

Ultimately, the Trulli were not demolished: the fact remains that the imposition not to build in a stable manner (and the general provisional condition) aroused resentment on the part of the population, who demanded – but it is unknown how – a more dignified status in terms of property rights. Although this deteriorated form of the story continues to be reported in publications, maps and public signs, almost all of the tourists interviewed (who were unaware of this inaccuracy) declared themselves attracted by the “mythological-fairytale” factor of the town. However, at the same time, some travellers look beyond the folk tales and seek something more in Alberobello than an open-air museum.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS: THE SYMBOLS ON THE TRULLI ARE NOT MAGICAL

Another case that is brought to attention is the presumed metaphysical charge of the Trulli, specifically of the iconographic inventory depicted on the conical roofs. The residents currently adorn the external roofs of the Trulli with a series of lime-based paintings that refer to a vast symbolic heritage. The population hands down that those signs are “magic” and “religious” symbols, in the belief that they ward off negativity. This is the story that has been handed down for decades, however the real implications are much more complex.

Tourist guides, travel blogs and merchandising extensively reference these symbols as emblems with magical and propitiatory meanings. In concrete terms, these are paintings painted with white lime on the conical roof of the Trulli. In fact, this ornament is a phenomenon that does not only affect the Trulli of the Alberobello area but also those scattered in the surrounding areas (mainly in association with agricultural land): this is the case of the countryside of Putignano, Noci, Locorotondo, Martina Franca, Fasano, Cisternino and Carovigno.

Being a characteristic trait of these buildings, and particularly evident, I found that the paintings on the roofs of the Trulli are the object of curiosity of almost all the visitors. At the point that one of the most common questions the Google search engine recorded in association with the word ‘Alberobello’ is “What do the symbols on the roofs of the Trulli mean?”. The question has interested scholars and mystery enthusiasts, whose discussions have converged both on websites (and, more recently, social networks), in audio-visuals focused on Alberobello, and in the literature of the sector.

The considerable presence of online entries on the subject demonstrates both the interest in the eschatological side of this place and the preparation that many tourists show upon arrival at this location. Some of them have been attracted precisely by the aura of mystery and, once on the spot, they start looking for what they have learned on the web. This was also confirmed by the visitor interviews conducted during the field research. At the time of writing this article – in September 2022 – Google records about 31,800 results corresponding to the expression “Trulli symbols” (Italian: *simbolitrulli*) and over 5,400 results in response to the question “What do the symbols on the trulli roofs mean?” (Italian: *Cosa significano i simboli sui tetti dei trulli?*).

Both nationally and internationally, cinema and television have helped to develop the fascination for the trulli. By virtue of the visual medium, the surveyed audio-visual productions on Alberobello usually refer to the symbols as something magical and esoteric. This is the case, for example, of the TV show “Voyager”, aired at the beginning of the summer of 2015 on national channel Rai 2,¹ in which the TV host Roberto Giacobbo said that «The origins of the symbols found on the Trulli resemble in a surprising way some symbols found in some Egyptian tombs».² What I have focused my attention on is not so much the vague allusion to an aesthetic similarity but rather the growing presence of Alberobello in television schedules from that year onwards: the

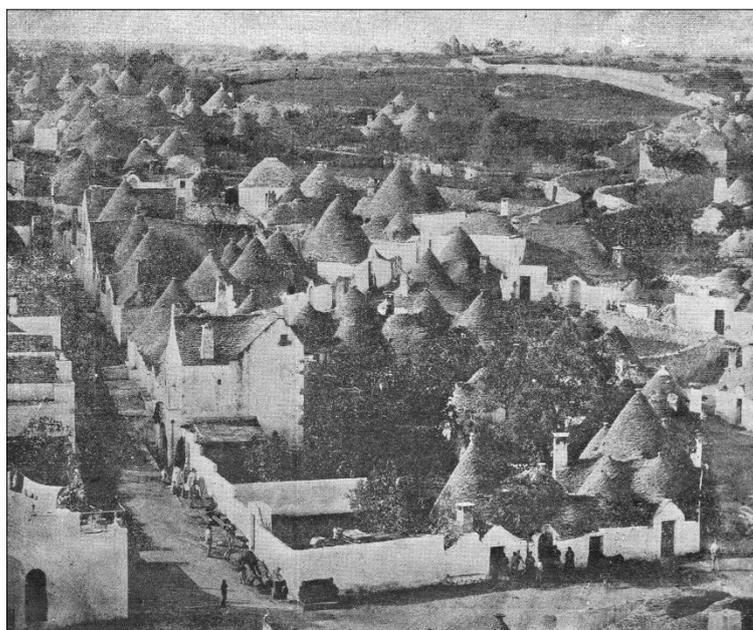
¹At the time of airing on June 22, 2015, the Voyager TV series had reached its twenty-seventh season. It represented one of the most popular evening television appointments: the episode in question reached 1,783,000 viewers.

²Although the television program does not elaborate on the similarities announced by this statement, a similar trace can be found in a documentary entitled “L’Enigmadei Trulli” (WarmPieStudio, 2010), where it is reported that «The eye of Ra is depicted on the buildings Trullo in the Itria Valley. However, how can it be found on trulli, side by side – sometimes – with Christian symbols? And why do Hebrew letters such as the Tau, the Heth or the Nun appear on the trulli, announcing a new life in the afterlife? What knowledge do the signs painted with white or the pinnacles carved at the apex of the cones communicate?». The video can be reached here: <https://youtu.be/IL13A93ObZE> [Viewed December 8, 2022]. In correspondence with these statements, the footage did not show the symbols with the abovementioned appearance. I never found the presence of symbols attributable to the Egyptian repertoire or the Hebrew alphabet during the years of direct observation in Alberobello.

television programs “Ulisse” (2015) and “Meraviglie” (2018) hosted by Alberto Angela,³ the reality show “4 Ristoranti” (2017), the arrival of the stage in Alberobello of the “Giro d’Italia” (2017). In those same years, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase in attendance recorded in Alberobello also coincided.

Finally, even written sources (studies of local history, travel guides, magazines) hand down the explanation of the presence of symbols as the result of a mystical expression (especially as a result of the religious sentiment of the population), recognising particular effectiveness of these signs on the protection of housing and their residents. Any tourist guide consulted enunciates the allegories of the Trulli symbols, and they all refer to transcendental factors or propitiatory invocations, which deliver to the local population a sort of mystical legacy or manifest devotion. A last rare explanation is given as the “random” result of cleaning the brushes dipped in lime.⁴

A decisive key to understanding this story can be found in the photographic collections between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In reality, before the arrival of tourists at the beginning of the twentieth century, none of the Trulli of Alberobello bore any decorative painting, as shown by the photos dating back to the years just before 1900 (See the photo below).



Panoramic view of the Monti district at the end of the 19th century (Nencha, 1894)

These photos prove that system of symbols was not present – at least in Alberobello – before the years of the fascist regime. In fact, the political event that explains the circumstance dates back to that period, as evidenced by a photograph (See the photo below) which portrays the Rione Monti in 1934. In the forest of symbols depicted on the conical roofs, an apparent reference to Benito Mussolini can be recognised: the “duce”, as it was written there.

³Speaking of the symbols, the host Alberto Angela reported in “Ulisse”: «You can also see signs, symbols traced with lime – therefore very white – which take up religious themes or popular culture and tradition». On the same subject, in “Meraviglie” he explained that «Symbols linked to religion or history, to popular tradition, were painted on the roof».

⁴Although I found only one occurrence of this justification, I considered this hypothesis unique both for the daring analysis and for the dissemination it had. Indeed, this statement is found in a video uploaded to YouTube in 2011 and refers to a public conference: see <https://youtu.be/s5Xm-aNB37g> [Viewed December 8, 2022].



Panoramic view of the Monti district in 1934 (Notarnicola, 1940)

In 1934, Mussolini was expected to visit Alberobello for an official inspection (De Felice, 2009): it was an operation that would have been inserted into Mussolini's more general programmatic line to support rurality. In anticipation of this event, the Provincial Tourist Board decided to embellish an area of the town, specifically the Rione Monti, adorning the cone-shaped roof with a series of symbols, which have been modified and replicated over the years. The iconographic repertoire painted on that occasion not only recalled esoteric elements known to the fascist entourage but configured that panoramic view as a tourist attraction. The symbols fuelled a further reason for interest in the already singular vernacular buildings. Consequently, the self-representation of the ancient local identity should not be sought in that complex system of symbols, as is still being claimed.

Also, note that the symbols are all oriented in the direction of the observation point of the photo and not in the vicinity of the access to the houses. The place from which the photo was taken, i.e. the balcony (adjacent to the church of Santa Lucia), is the place that would have welcomed the Duce during his visit and which still today continues to be the privileged place for taking photos. Secondly, the other monumental district – AiaPiccola – like most other Trulli scattered throughout the village does not bear any symbol since, unlike the Rione Monti district, they have not been massively affected by the tourist influx.

Therefore, both the choice of signs and their survival and transmission are correlated to factors external to the symbolic reference of cultured derivation, as the supporters of the “mystery” of symbols would like. At the point that the inhabitants of the Trulli themselves almost always ignore the complete theological reference of the signs adopted, because the signs-symbols themselves are perceived and transmitted essentially due to their formal characteristics.

In popular culture, a symbol is not magical or invested with spirituality by itself but is endowed with this significance through gestural characteristics that connect the external objective world to the internal and spiritual one, modelled on the organisation of external reality. The value of the “mysterious” symbols of the Trulli is not attributable only to their meaning but also to their survival. Currently, it is the stereotyped continuation of an original magical “gesture” which has crystallised in the relationship of subjection to a religious culture.

Nowadays, the Apulian tourist ecosystem is called to face the constant growth of incoming flows and the notoriety of the Puglia destination. A contemporary celebrity consecrated by a collective imagination ranging from design to branded content⁵ and children's animated television series.

The latter is the case of the children's TV series "Trulli Tales", whose name highlights how the character of the "tale" connotes knowledge of the place and the possibility of passing on its stories. It is a work of fiction and a tremendous worldwide success: distributed in 177 countries, Maria Elena Congedo and Fiorella Congedo created the series. The population of Alberobello reacted positively to the broadcast. However, it should not be underestimated how this work of fiction contributes to the progressive trivialisation of Trulli since it dreams of a fairytale idea that never belonged to the history of the place.

VI. CONCLUSION

In heritage conservation, the increasingly frantic search for authenticity can produce a standardised idea of historical truth, to the point of not being able to distance oneself from erroneous statements that have been consolidated for too long in the collective memory. For this reason, the process of building a place's identity requires a participatory process by the population: a form of collective narration based on two components, the product (the thing, the communicative act) and the process (the "how" with which multiple results can be obtained and with different efficacy). The narration of places interacts with the senses of every human subject and, according to different times, as everyone has their memory, the archive in which the reference elements for the narration reside.

A range of factors substantiates the authenticity of the features of a place. It was what takes the name of Outstanding Universal Value that guaranteed the inclusion of the Trulli of Alberobello site in the World Heritage List. Nowadays, the potential threats to the site's authenticity are not only those recommended by UNESCO,⁶ such as the abandonment of the Trulli, the non-compliance with building regulations and the impacts of tourism. Actually, there is a recognisable low widespread awareness of the World Heritage narrative among visitors, in the local community and among businesses operating in the tourism sector. Regular meetings with schools to spread awareness of being endowed with a World Heritage site were already among the recommendations of the UNESCO evaluators (World Heritage Centre, 2014).

As regards the historical inaccuracies handed down, these not only negatively affect the authentic experience of visitors but also undermine the integrity of the identity of the local population, who will progressively feel disaffection for their history if they ignore it.

Rumours are capable of compromising the solidity of the imaginary about places. In Alberobello, two fake histories are still stranded in the common dissemination of the territory: the alleged tax evasion of the citizens of the first settlement (and the further forced demolition of the houses) and the supposed magical influence of the signs painted on the roofs of the Trulli. Those who have more extensively attempted to trace the origins of this latter phenomenon (La Sorsa, 1996; Troccoli Verardi, 1972) refer to a comparativist approach of a historical-religious type, neglecting that such instances should be related to the influences of the dominant culture. In fact, even the signs that can be traced back to pagan and Jewish repertoires are interpreted according to a clearly Christian matrix, never explaining the steps of these possible adoptions. Not even those who hand down the story of the demolition of the Trulli as a result of the royal visits ever mention precise and datable occasions; and even ignoring the laws of statics – simplifying each treatment – seems to serve to legitimise a presumed story of overcoming, of redemption from atavistic traumas.

Every attempt at explanation (from printed paper to television statements) seems conditioned (and pleased) by a desire for magic, by a constant need for enigmas capable of building interest in a very localised cultural fact (Spera, 1975). This yearning for myths is often genuinely lavished. It is justifiable with the desire to

⁵This is the case of the well-known Coca-Cola brand, which paid homage to six Italian cities through the "Face of the City" campaign: a limited edition dedicated to Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome, Naples and Bari. This last city is featured with the Trulli of Alberobello, stylized in the face of the human silhouette.

⁶A 2007 report on the state of conservation of the Trulli of Alberobello noted that the authenticity is compromised with regard to the function of the buildings: cf. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/787/> [Viewed 8 December 2022].

give visibility to societies located on the margins of the dominant culture (such as the peasant one), following the erudite approach typical of nineteenth-century scholars.

This ethnographic argument aims to represent an exhortation for the population of Alberobello and its institutions to privilege and seek the historical truth in favour of the exceptional character, promoting the dissemination of the reality of the facts through a compelling and equally coherent way.

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