How has the concept of Belpaese influenced the construction of Italy as an idealised tourist destination through media like postcards, guidebooks, and photography? Drawing on the concepts of the Tourist Gaze, Travel Glance and Sight Sensing, analyse how visual and multi-sensory elements shape tourists' perceptions of Italy. To what extent do these representations contribute to the commodification or sacralisation of Italy, and how might the experience of Italy differ when viewed through these distinct 'Ways of seeing'?

The concept of Belpaese, meaning "beautiful country," has been a central theme in terms of Italy's image as a premier tourist destination. Belpaese is created through Italy's history, art, and culture which has moulded the country's identity. Italy is a naturally beautiful traditional country, steeped in a rich and classical history and heritage. Italy's reputation as 'Belpaese' is interconnected through its artistic legacy, particularly from the Renaissance, classical antiquity, and the Baroque period. Rome, Florence and Venice especially, are not just seen as urban spaces, but almost living museums where art and the everyday coexist. From the Grand tour of the eighteenth century to contempary mass tourism, Italy has always been a popular destination, even more so due to media and visual art. Postcards, photography, guidebooks, and other visual media have been designed emotively and visually for tourists, making Italy into a universally desirable destination. This essay will examine, to what extent do these representations, alongside ideas of the Tourist Gaze, Travel Glance and Sight Sensing, contribute to the commodification, in how Italy has become an easily consumable package offering economic value through 'La dolce vita.' It is also interesting to explore how these very same visual images have potentially sacralised Italy as a timeless cultural, historic, religious, and artistic shrine which have dominated its national identity.

The idea of Belpaese has its historical roots in the Renaissance, as seen by Dante's description of Italy as a beautiful region in his inferno. Antonio Stoppani's 19th century idea later revived Belpaese, who utilised it to show collective understanding of the countries culture. The touring club Italiano, Italy first and largest tourism organisation, adopted the Il Bel Paese notion later in the 20th century, using it to travel their nation.

Postcards in particular have played a crucial role in forming expectations of Italy as a tourist destination, not only acting as a souvenir, but also a powerful tool in creating the Belpaese image of Italy. Postcards circulate the idealised images of Italy as a country of cultural beauty and tradition, with a spiritual and religious essence central to its world status and gravitas. However, these postcards do not reflect Italy as the country as it is, but they actively portray it as Belpaese. The three different types of postcards are panorama, close up and montage postcards, each showing different aesthetic images of iconic sites, views, art, using visual strategies to create this idealised national image. The panorama postcards show these amazing, sweeping views of cities and landscapes, giving this sense of opulent grandeur to a place, much like the Belvedere or the panoramic postcard of Venice viewed from the Bacino di San Marco. These panoramic postcards use many visual technologies, like using a wide angle, to show off the beauty and scale of a place emphasising this historical continuity. The close up postcards focus on a specific detail, for example the duomo in Florence or Venice gondolas on grand canal, offering a focus on a specific detail in a larger location. They serve

as a visual example for the whole destination, providing tourists with a handheld image of a key attraction, adding to the power and presence of the scene. By isolating these singular sites or artworks, this contributes to the isolation and secularisation of a site, almost defining Italy by this image, reinforcing the idea of the 'Tourist Gaze'. It encourages visitors to seek out these familiar and repeated views rather than seeking out those less known but more picturesque spaces. The montage postcards display multiple images collaged together to almost 'represent' a specific place, for example the 'Greetings from Italy' postcards. They are made up of many close up and wide shot images, surrounded by classic supporting visuals. This postcard reflects the idea of fast paced contemporary tourism, the 'Travel glance' encouraging those to only see the places displayed on the postcard due to the constructed narrative, which shapes their idea on a destination. Alongside this the idea of a guidebook also directs and shapes perception and behaviour when it comes to seeing a location, displaying what is 'worth seeing. Overall, postcards and other visual media have had a considerable influence on how Italy is imagined and experienced in contemporary tourism, shaping those expectations and creating this idea of Italy as a 'Belpaese.' Not only this but plays to the ongoing role of Italy as an aesthetic and cultural destination, presenting Italy as a culturally superior and timeless country.

The 'Tourist gaze' is an idea developed by John Urry, where he examines how different visual elements shape tourists perceptions of Italy. This concept suggests that tourists experience, as well as Belpaese is socially and visually constructed through media, as well as arriving with preformed expectations (guidebooks, social media, films, and postcards), in particularly the close up postcard. In particular, the postcards of the Florence duomo or the colosseum in Rome. Tourism has now become a socially constructed gaze, rather than a spontaneous journey through a city. In terms of Italy, the iconic and popular landmarks and landscapes are always repeated, again reinforcing the idea of Italy as 'Belpaese,' therefore encouraging tourists to seek out these recognisable sights, such as the Venetian Gondolas on the canal. This perception prioritises aesthetics over engaging with the everyday culture itself, narrowing further what is worth seeing. As a result of this, Italy becomes a spectacle of pre existing expectations, rather than a culturally rich lived in society. Landscapes and cities are packaged as products for consumption, where they are organised visually to meet past visual expectations, "What people gaze upon is socially organised and systematised" (Urry, 2002). The tourist gaze transforms these places in objects for consumption "Italy's past becomes its most marketable resource" (Stephanie Malia Hom, 2015), encouraging surface level engagement with Italy as a place, therefore adding to the commodification and sacralisation of Italy.

Jonas Larsen's idea of the 'Travel glance' follows along the idea of how tourists' perceptions of Italy are shaped by this fast moving mode of seeing, which so many of us experience today particularly through photography and social media. The glance describes this mode of seeing these culturally beautiful, not in an experienced depth but a quick glimpse. Since cameras and mobile phones have become so popular, this has encouraged tourists to record images rather than first hand prolonged engagement, promoting again this surface level encounter with Italy, rather than a slow reflective interaction which we used to have as humans. Due to this

fleeting vision and seeing landmarks without engaging, it turns Italy into this commodified spectacle, filled with these aesthetically pleasing landmarks, not as a culturally rich and historic place.

In contrast to these modes of perception, sight sensing emphasises the importance of a multi sensory experience in shaping tourists' perceptions of Italy. Rather than basing perceptions on vision alone, the combination of senses (sound, smell, touch, and taste), all contribute to the atmosphere and experience of the place. In terms of Italy, the sensory elements include the damp foggy like aroma of the canal in Venice, or the cobbled streets, all contribute to the experience of the place, making tourists be engaged and immersed in the culture. However, these sensory experiences are mimicked and created alongside tourism, for example the fake Venice's in Las Vegas and China, or films such as 'Talented Mr Ripley' (1999) or 'Call me by your name' (2018), using techniques such a sounds, silence and cinematography to mimic the atmosphere of a destination. Therefore, even theses sensory ideas could become commodified and does not fully escape the tourist consumption, but does provide a more meaningful engagement with Italy, "Tourism transforms Italy into an object of contemplation rather than a space of political or social action" (Stephanie Malia Hom, 2015).

The ideas of the tourist gaze, travel glance, and sight sensing, all offer contrasting ways of understanding how tourists perceive and experience Italy. Urry's ideas on the tourist gaze emphasise tourism as a socially and visually constructed journey, where tourists come with a preempted idea and expectation, shaped through visual media. This contrasts to Larsen's ideas on the travel glance, which reflects the fast moving nature of modern mass tourism, which is created through mobile image driven media. This mode of seeing priorities quick encounters rather than in depth experience a, reinforcing Italy as a commodified destination including recognisable sights. Sight sensing challenges this idea of visual dominance, by creating a multi sensory engagement with Italy. However, it does not entirely escape the idea of commodification, as this sensory experience is able to be staged and performed to tourists before. All together, these concepts all show how different ways of seeing can shape tourist's perceptions, leaving them with pre constructed ideas.

In conclusion, Belpaese does play a key role in shaping Italy's identity as a idealised and romanticised tourist destination. Through visual media representation, it engages tourists through creating this commodified version of Italy. The ways of seeing limit the tourists experience, making them see Italy as a place filled with just these aesthetically pleasing beautiful areas, but not as a culturally rich and historic place, "What is consumed is not Italy as it is lived, but Italy as it is imagined" (Stephanie Malia Hom, 2015). When it comes to understanding Belpaese, it makes one recognise the gap between this idealised image of Italy and the actual reality.

Bibliography

Urry, J., 2002. The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies. 2nd edition ed. London: Sage Publications.

Stephanie Malia Hom (2015). The beautiful country : tourism and the impossible state of destination Italy. Toronto: University Of Toronto Press.