

## Holiday in Italy! (without Leaving the U.S.)

Laura E. Ruberto (May 20, 2008)



The cult of Italy repackaged for US consumer culture.

Most folks have heard of Venice Beach near Los Angeles and the canals built by Abbot Kinney in the early twentieth century to attract tourists to what was to be “the Coney Island of the West” and the “Venice of America.” Although today Venice Beach is better known for the eccentrics on its boardwalk than the few remaining canals, its mark as a U.S. cultural manifestation of what we might call the “cult of Italy” is pretty deeply set.





In a similar vein, but of more recent development, is the Venetian Resort Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, sitting on the grounds of the former Sands Hotel (of Rat Pack fame). I'm not a big fan of Vegas, but everyone should see Las Vegas at least once. [Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal](#) [2]—the lack of distinction between reality and fantasy—vividly plays itself out in Sin City. And the Venetian is a particularly great example of how Italian romantic identity gets reconfigured outside of Italy for moneymaking purposes.



(Can I seriously mention Las Vegas and not jot down, however travelogue-sounding, some of the town's less-visible Old School Italian American establishments? The [Liberace Museum](#) [3] and the Italian-Polish-American entertainer's favorite restaurant, just steps away, Carluccio's? The singing, roving accordion player who accompanies your meal at [Battista's Hole in the Wall](#) [4], just off the strip? Or Capozzoli's, where I once shared a midnight meal with some [AIHA conference-goers](#) [5] while listening to a Louis Prima cover band—check out Capozzoli's [abrupt end](#) [6]. But I digress.)

What my point is in bringing up LA and Vegas is that there are plenty of examples of how U.S. culture has been taken in by Venice, and Italy more broadly, and repackaged for U.S. consumption. Venice, itself an Italian city that has in great part survived because of tourist money, is particularly susceptible to such treatment—in other words, I don't think anyone has made a passionate-getaway theme park out of a lesser-known city, say, the town of [Pavia](#) [7].

Simply put, Venice Beach and the Venetian seem to be related to a long tradition of non-Italians artists and writers incorporating their tourist perspective of the boot into their creative productions—from Shakespeare, Milton, Gibbon, Byron, Keats, Goethe, Stendahl, Dickens, Shelly, Hawthorne, James, Radcliffe, Tennyson, Lessing, Bulwer-Lyton, Thackeray, Benjamin, etc. Again and again we find exoticized depictions of Italy, its landscape, its people, its history.

My interest at the moment lies in the connection these images have to consumer culture.

- How is the “cult of Italy” used to make big bucks?
- What type of Italy gets refashioned in the U.S. for entertainment and profit?
- What happens to the image of Italy when this branding happens?
- How are these romanticized images a form of nostalgia, of an Italy that has never existed, devoid of references to poverty or emigration, emphasizing only the tourist potential of the boot?

Think for a moment about the post-WWII “Hollywood on the Tiber,” or HOT, films, that capitalized on cheap Italian labor, Marshall Plan economic subsidies, and exotic Mediterranean settings. The result was dozens of “sword and sandal” epics (e.g., Ben Hur, Spartacus, and Quo Vadis) and romantic travel films (e.g., Roman Holiday, It Started in Naples, and Summertime, the latter set in Venice).

Keenly aware of this deep-rooted American fascination with (and profiting from) Venice, I recently took a ride on Oakland's own hyperreal Venetian moment when my children were invited to ride on an “authentic” gondola in Lake Merritt in downtown Oakland.

[Oakland is renowned for many things](#) [8], but generally none of them coincide with the kind of escapist consumer culture I've been talking about. With its gang violence, stark class differences, and earthquakes, Oakland indeed resembles parts of Italy, but few would associate it with the romantic myth of Venice.

And yet although the city's older Italian American history is very much under the radar (as I've noted [in previous posts](#) [9]), Gondola Servizio—owned and operated by an Italian American woman and her recent-émigré Venetian husband—suggests an intriguing moment of the hyperreal: Italian American identity reconfigured by the cult of Italy. It suggests something interesting for a new generation of Italian Americans that may in fact have broader repercussions for how ethnic identity gets created and sustained by work, consumer culture, and just everyday life.





Regardless of the academic attention I give such a scene and whatever Baudrillard (who passed away just last year) might have said about Oakland's Venetian flare, I have to end by noting that it was fascinating to take in the city from that angle—I had a great time riding around Lake Merritt in a gondola!



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[2] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>

[3] <http://www.liberace.org/>

[4] <http://blogsearch.google.com/blogsearch?hl=en&um=1&ie=UTF-8&q=%22battista%27s+hole+in+the+wall%22+%22las+vegas%22&btnG=Search+Blogs>

[5] <http://www.aihaweb.org/pastconferences.htm>

[6] <http://www.klas-tv.com/global/story.asp?s=7098134&ClientType=Printable>

[7] <http://www.comune.pv.it/on/Home.html>

[8] <http://www.oaklandhistory.com/>

[9] <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/1761/californian-goes-east>

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[14] <http://books.google.com/books?id=s0uG9Gw6LT0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=The+Myth+of+Venice+in+British+Culture,+1660-1797&sig=96-U4qN5cHQi71w4H869yr2U1K0>

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