A Tale of Two Cities: Padre Pio and the Reimagining of Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo

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Abstract
This article presents the concept of an "imaginaire dialectic"– a complex process of imagining and re-imagining places – by analysing how the Italian villages of Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo affect and are affected by tourist imaginaries, both materially and immaterially. The birthplace of the popular 20th century stigmatic saint, Padre Pio, Pietrelcina was "discovered" by tourists amid Pio's canonisation fervor, and has now been rebuilt to conform to imaginaries of a "traditional" 19th century hill-town that served as a formative environment for the saint. But if Pietrelcina embraced some imaginaries, it also reacted against others. Arguing that the iconography promulgated by Pio's shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo marginalises Pietrelcina, locals in the village respond with alternative re-presentations, such as biographies and images of Pio's childhood. Contending that all groups involved produce and consume tourist imaginaries, this article reveals the productivity of examining the imaginaire dialectic when researching meaning-making mechanisms at tourist sites.

1. Introduction

The concept of the "imaginary" (*imaginaire*) has factored into the social scientific study of tourism since its inception, revealing how tourism is both an individual and collective endeavour, how various groups imagine the same sites differently and employ different strategies for defining the place in accordance with their varied ideologies, how such notions are diffused across geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers, and, ultimately, how places are "made" not solely in the physical sense, but in the varied and disparate minds of those who profess membership in the equally diverse social worlds surrounding these sites. Justifiably, most of these studies build on mediation theory, and rigorously a particular form of mediation, or a point within the trajectory of this mediatory experience – a re-presentation's creation, dissemination or

reception. Yet the reality of tourism is that there are many mediators at work simultaneously, and there are just as many tourist imaginaries as there are tourists. Indeed, elsewhere I have argued that tourism is not predicated solely on a host/guest dichotomy, but rather is created through a Bourdieuian field of production (Bourdieu 1993):

> a structured, totalizing set of relationships, often in conflict, that order a diversity of 'epistemic cultures' – systems of groups with their own culturally-specific knowledge, cosmologies, ritualized practices that transcend geographic boundaries – who struggle to stake their claim to, define, and ultimately utilize

the *imaginaire* of the site (cf. Di Giovine 2009: 9, 21-22, 42-48; Di Giovine forthcoming). This is thus a much more complex process, as all parties simultaneously produce, receive, and reproduce these imaginaries – often with much contestation, negotiation, and position-taking.

In this paper, I examine the impact of tourist imaginaries on Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo, the birthplace and burial site (respectively) of 20th century Catholic stigmatic, St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. During Pio's life and ministry, and particularly in the years surrounding Pio's canonisation, both towns have materially and immaterially remade themselves (cf. Di Giovine 2010), both in relation to imaginaries promulgated by various epistemic groups within the cult's field of production – the Capuchin monks at the shrine, the Vatican, the international media, tour operators, service providers, devotees and secular tourists, locals, and a powerful, global network of prayer groups – and also in relation to each other. Such changes are not the product of simple mediation within a linear trajectory of production, dissemination, and consumption, but rather through what I term the *imaginaire dialectic*, a complex process of presenting, imagining, re-presenting, and re-imagining site materiality within the field of touristic production at a site. While this dialectic is a lengthy and on-going process that is obscured through time as imaginaries are modified and re-presented, this contemporary case study helpfully reveals the *imaginaire dialectic* at work.

2. Tourist imaginaries and the *imaginaire* dialectic

The term "imaginary" has sparked several different, and often competing, definitions. For my usage, I do not intend it as an

abstract "ethos" or cultural schema composed of symbolic structures in Castoriadis's terms ([1975] 1987), nor an individuals' psycho-social map as Lacan ([1949] 1977) defined it; I also do not use it as a code word for pure fantasy or illusion, as Marxians like Althusser (1971) have done. Indeed, imaginaries are authentic – they are real in the sense that they serve to frame and provide meaning to a tourist site, sometimes even crystallising in tangible images and written narratives. By *imaginaries*, I mean the constantly deepening, individually instantiated mix of remembered narratives and images that serve to inform an object or place's meaning. This follows from Salazar's definition of an imaginary as the "representational assemblages that mediate the identification with Self and Other [...] schemas of interpretation rather than explicit ideologies" (Salazar 2011: 6-7). The term "representational assemblages" is important in this definition, for it references the fact that imaginaries are a finely woven fabric of re-presentations and mental images which will inevitably modify, deepen, and change over time. And by dialectic, I am referencing the Hegelian process (Hegel 1956) whereby pure being is contradicted or contested, then contradicted and contested again – much like a child's image in a hall of mirrors reflects *ad infinitum* the opposite of its opposite, to use Lacan's example. The *imaginaire* is a thing (or notion); the *imaginaire dialectic* is the ongoing process through which the thing constantly forms and re-forms.

3. The *imaginaire* dialectic at work in Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo

On 25 May 1887, Padre Pio was born in Pietrelcina, a small, isolated town of 3,000 inhabitants located in one of the poorest regions of Italy, and one that is most resistant to change (Davis 1998). After several illnesses, he was ordained in 1910, and celebrated his first Mass the following Sunday. Later that year, Pio experienced a vision of Jesus and Mary while sitting under an elm tree at his farm in the countryside of Piana Romana immediately outside the town, where he would herd sheep. This vision left red marks and extreme pain in his hands, side and feet – an "invisible stigmata" as hagiographers now call it. They subsided after a year, and in 1918, Pio was sent to a small Capuchin monastery in the remote town of San Giovanni Rotondo 135 km away, never to return again. It was here, in

September, that Pio received the stigmata that catapulted him and San Giovanni Rotondo into the international religious tourism track. Within a year, the town averaged 500 pilgrims a day (Luzzatto 2009: 38, 42); this number grew exponentially as images and stories of Pio and his miraculous abilities to cure the sick spread throughout the international press. Devotees were frenzied (Allegri 1999: 185):

> Locals and outsiders reached the point of penetrating the convent armed with scissors, to furtively steal what was perceived from afar as relics: the crowd […] cut pieces of his vestments, shirts, belts, even the chairs that Padre Pio sat on.

They were drawn by word-of-mouth, aided by the swift distribution of *santini*, wallet-sized prayer cards emblazoned with an image of his bleeding hand on them.

While San Giovanni grew exponentially thanks to imaginaries of a thaumaturgic monk who could heal the sick, knew one's sins before they confessed them, and bore the marks of Christ's crucifixion, Pietrelcina was clearly left behind. Prior to Pio's death in 1968, pilgrims in search of healing had no reason to visit Pio's obscure birthplace when they could commune directly with him; this conceptualisation continues even after his death. As with the tombs of other saints from late antiquity to today (Brown 1981: 1-22), Pio's sepulchre and the body it contains is envisioned as the *axis mundi* of Pio's cult (cf. Eliade 1959). Numerous tour sponsors in Ireland and Italy state that they have little desire to make the detour to Pietrelcina when the object of their devotion is Pio's tomb; of the six million annual pilgrims, only 10% stop in Pietrelcina.

When Pio was still alive, Pietrelcinesi were not only cognizant of their marginalisation, but also felt entitled to the fruits of his growing cult. In several instances, Pietrelcinesi visiting Pio asked him why he allowed San Giovanni to reap the material benefits of pilgrimage (including wealth, infrastructural development, and "traffic") while his hometown stagnated. Pio made reference to both the past and the future in his purported two-part answer. "Jesus was in Pietrelcina, and everything happened there" (Da Prata and Da Ripabottoni 1994: 160). Second, he promised, "I have valorised San Giovanni in life, Pietrelcina I will valorise in death" (Da Prata and Da Ripabottoni 1994: 163). Although this oft-recited quote is believed by Pietrelcinesi to be a prophecy for their town's

regeneration after Pio's death in 1968, they did not immediately see his promise fulfilled. While the sites associated with Pio's birth and invisible stigmata were set aside as shrines – and the local Capuchin order erected interpretative placards in the late 1980s – there is also little indication that locals attempted a concentrated effort to develop tourism in the region; few improvements were made to the town's infrastructure, the main streets were a patchwork of asphalt and stones, and abandoned homes were left to decay.

Yet Pietrelcinesi had begun to contest the predominant imaginaries that envisioned San Giovanni Rotondo as the *axis mundi* of the cult. In particular, they self-published a number of Pietrelcina-centric hagiographies that focused on the first thirty years of Pio's life, linking it with their town's history (cf. Montella 1987; Tretola 1988; Bonavita 1989). These narratives provided the earliest concretised imaginaries of Pio's connection with Pietrelcina for public consumption. This is less a marketing endeavour than the fruit of an acute need to "set the record straight" in the minds of Pietrelcinesi, who viewed Pio not as a patron saint – an "intimate, invisible friend" (Brown 1981: 50) – like the worldwide network of devotees (including Sangiovannesi), but rather through a kinship idiom as a family member (Di Giovine in press): Pietrelcinesi had already been naming their children "Pio", praying to him, decorating their homes with his images, and orally circulating stories about their personal experiences with him.

The imaginaries valorising Pietrelcina as the foundation of Pio's ministry originally complemented the particular hagiographic understanding of Pio that was solidifying around San Giovanni, thanks to a particularly effective marketing machine run by the Capuchin friars, who founded no less than five magazines, a publishing house, a radio station, a satellite TV station and an internet site, which together net over EUR 120 million per year ("Padre Pio tomb 'desecrated'" 2008). It also both reflected and set the stage for increased interest in Pietrelcina by Vatican experts and devotees after Pope John Paul II formally opened Pio's canonisation process in 1982. As the media would report on the process, interest grew; international visitors whose imaginaries were less connected to his shrine – and who were thus more receptive to alternative narratives – began to come in the 1980s, while Italian pilgrims and seasoned devotees – whose imaginaries of Pio were strongly tied to their remembrances of interactions with the friar or visits to his

tomb – only arose a decade later. But by the mid-1990s, visitation to Pietrelcina reached a fever pitch; "At that time it was so packed you couldn't breathe," said one Irish guide who had been leading tours since the 1970s.

In response to the increased interest in Padre Pio's bucolic origins, Pietrelcina's mayor at the time, Pio Iadanza, engaged a group of architects from the University of Naples to suggest a restoration plan for the city. The team not only studied the layout of the town, but also conducted survey and interview research with locals and those catering to the nascent tourism industry in Pietrelcina. The idea was not merely to conserve the existing structures, but rather to re-imagine the city to better coincide with both the imaginaries of locals and that of outsider devotees who came to the town looking to better understand Pio's bucolic and reverential upbringing, which had been portrayed in the hagiographies. What they suggested was a project of "urban transformation" – a synergy of conservation and transformation, "guaranteeing each other's existence" and "restoring life and utility" to the town (De Feo 1995).

This radical plan was not without opposition; a certain faction of Pietrelcinesi, originally led by Domenico Masone, petitioned to block the work. He would later succeed Iadenza as mayor, and would change his tune, carrying out the former mayor's plan. In classic Italian style, Masone's critics suggest that economics played a central part; indeed, aided by the touristic 'discovery' of Pietrelcina, the Iadenza-Masone project began a practice of linking the economic potential of tourism to successful grant applications for infrastructural development, restoration, and the 'recovery' of traditional practices – despite the fact that tourists continue to visit for an average of two hours and generate little revenue. Importantly, though, these initiatives re-created, and revitalised, the urban space. Masone himself commented: "We don't have any ancient things, just old things… In nine years, we took an old town and made it completely new" (interview, 31/07/2010).

This comment, however, suggests not merely economic motivations, but a deeper cognizance of how Pietrelcina would be imagined by millions of tourists and devotees around the world who consumed images of the town. Indeed, in 1999, when tourism to Pietrelcina reached its height – and when De Feo's urban transformation project was still being debated – a television

crew came to Pietrelcina to film a documentary entitled *Padre Pio: Sanctus* for the Italian national television station, Rai1. Dedicating a full 16 minutes to Pio's early life and upbringing, this documentary is groundbreaking because it represents the first to use footage from Pietrelcina itself. Marked by slow pans across an intensely verdant countryside surrounding Pietrelcina, the documentary both responded to, and certainly deepened, imaginaries of an idyllic Italian hill town, not unlike those of the cobblestoned and wine-soaked Tuscany. It also included footage of Pietrelcina's streets and edifices. While Padre Pio's homes and churches were already restored – thanks in part to Italian-Americans and the NY-based Padre Pio Foundation – footage shows a hodgepodge of rickety buildings, gap-toothed stones peeking from patches of crumbling asphalt, and a central piazza used as a parking lot for old cars. Masone's words seem to have also been referencing this sight, which not only disturbed these idealised images of a traditional town, but no doubt were embarrassing to portray to those whose impressions of Pietrelcina had not yet been formed.

Pilgrims who visit Pietrelcina are receptive to Pietrelcina's new look, which prompts them to recall stories of Pio and to exchange accounts of miracles and other supernatural phenomena that the saint has performed in their lives. The stones seem to act as mediators between the past inhabitant of Pietrelcina and the present pilgrim: "Just think, he sat right here outside the church waiting for it to open. My kids, I couldn't get them to go to church; I had to bribe them…" (Irish pilgrim, 8/08/2009). These elements also seem to be effective in fulfilling their expectations of a 'classic Southern Italian village' that has been developed in the media. Numerous pilgrims echo the sentiments of one who said: "It was just as I imagined, only maybe a little cleaner" (Italian pilgrim, 27/06/2009). Other comments reveal the importance of the imagination in co-creating the touristic experience: "With a little imagination, you can know how it was back then. The structures are all the same" (Italian pilgrim, 27/06/2009). Although the management of these sites makes no comparisons to San Giovanni Rotondo, many tourists have been overheard favourably comparing Pietrelcina's aesthetics to that of modern San Giovanni. "I like Pietrelcina better than San Giovanni Rotondo", one Italian declared as he rested with two women of the same age; they agreed that it was "enchanting" (fieldnotes 24/07/2009). Even

pilgrims who correctly figured that "it was more rustic back then", nevertheless positively recognised the restoration's value: Pietrelcina "needs to be cleaned and organized. To maintain it, to let the future see how it was, for the people who will come – you have to maintain it like that" (Italian pilgrim, 27/06/2009).

But the completion of Pietrelcina's restoration effort in 2006 was met with greater iconographic contestation, as San Giovanni Rotondo had just inaugurated a new mega-church designed by internationally renowned architect Renzo Piano, and decorated by world-class sculptors such as Mimmo Paladino and Arnaldo Pomodoro. The crowning achievement – other than the 8300-person basilica and the beautifully landscaped piazza, envisioned as a "church without walls" that can accommodate 35,000 devotees – is Pio's new crypt, adorned with scintillating vermillion and golden mosaics by noted Slovenian mosaicist Marko Ivan Rupnik. By constructing this, the Capuchins in San Giovanni fulfilled a longstanding desire to become "the next Assisi" – that is, a sustainable destination not only for future devotees of the saint, but also for future secular tourists who wish to see the most representative art and architecture of our era. At nearly 800 years after St. Francis' death, Assisi ranks as one of the top tourist attractions of Italy. In addition, "of the visitors who go to Assisi, 10% go for the saint. The rest go for Giotto", one site manager told me (31/07/2010).

This ambition has thus necessarily caused a reimagining of Padre Pio, in both narrative and image. On the one hand, many devotees are shocked by what they perceive as a modern, richly adorned, self-celebratory edifice that is incongruous with a traditional, humble, quietly suffering priest. Pilgrims from Italy, Ireland and the U.S. echo the sentiment of one Italian who said, "It's not that it's ugly or a monstrosity, it's just that it's very, very modern with respect to who Padre Pio was" (interview, 27/06/2009). Many also point out that while Pio used the donations he was given by the faithful to charitably construct an immense research hospital, the Home for the Relief of Suffering, the Capuchins melted down the thousands of gold bracelets, necklaces and wedding bands given as *ex votos* to create Pio's new crypt, and they believe that he would not be happy in his new "pharaonic" (Colafemmina 2010b) or "Masonic" resting place (Villa and Adessa 2006; Colafemmina 2010a). Some of Pio's family members even sued to stop his body from being translated into the new crypt in 2010, to no avail. These grumblings

and contestations have forced the Capuchins to go on the offensive; they published books, gave television interviews, and disseminated images of Pio and quotations from Pio's writings that would suggest the saint's long-standing desire for just this very construction.

Such conflicting views of Pio have sometimes even forced pilgrims to stop and assess their culturally situated imaginaries of Padre Pio and his relationship to the institution of the Church. For example, most Italians I have talked to are against what they view as a commodification of his body, and criticise the "business" of the Capuchins and the Vatican at San Giovanni; this is in line with "popular anti-clericalism" in the Northern Mediterranean since the Counter-Reformation (see Riegelhaupt 1984; Behar 1990). As Badone asserts, these cultures continue to privilege direct and reciprocal relations over rational, economic and legalistic ones instituted by the Council of Trent – and thus criticise attempts of the Vatican to co-opt the charisma of saints as a commercialisation the cult (Badone 1990: 13-15). On the other hand, Irish Catholics – minorities in an Anglo-British milieu – are generally more receptive to forms exuding the wealth and strength of the Church in general. On one bus ride to the Rome airport after visiting both Pietrelcina and San Giovanni Rotondo, over 40 pilgrims held an engaging debate on the merits and drawbacks of the new, modern basilica. "Somebody might disagree with the amount of money that was spent on Renzo Piano's basilica because there's so much poverty in the world", one man said, "but in Ireland, in times past, there was poverty and famine. The only thing that stood out and remained past those generations are the churches. Hopefully it'll outlive our generation, too" (24/09/2010).

On the other hand, the construction of Renzo Piano's new church, and Pio's subsequent translation to the crypt below it, has also created an avenue to iconographically solidify and consolidate imaginaries of San Giovanni Rotondo as the centre of Pio's cult. This is achieved primarily through Rupnik's mosaic cycle leading down to the crypt, which juxtaposes scenes from the life of St. Francis – the first stigmatic and the "grandfather" of Pio's Capuchin order – with similar scenes from Padre Pio's life on the other. They not only create new imaginaries linking Francis with Pio, but Assisi with San Giovanni Rotondo. One particular scene is telling; it is a frieze of Pio convalescing in his parents' house in Pietrelcina; the rendering

of the one-room home matches that of the actual house as it appears today: small, sparse and with a solitary square window directly across from the entrance where a viewer could survey the scene. For pilgrims in Pietrelcina, it is a picturesque sight conforming to their romanticised expectations of Pio's rustic youth, with the window opening up to the verdant Pietrelcinese hillside. Yet Rupnik does not depict the hillside, but, anachronistically, the façade of Pio's monastery in San Giovanni Rotondo – a symbolic conflation of the towns that might suggest, against what Pietrelcinesi feel, that everything really happened in San Giovanni Rotondo.

Pietrelcinesi had been progressively contesting such representations by responding with their own imaginaries of the saint that underscore those aspects of Pio's life that he spent tangibly enmeshed in Pietrelcina's social networks, the supernatural events that are imagined to have occurred there, and Pio's devotion to their patroness, the Madonna della Libera. Around Pietrelcina, one can find numerous images of Pio as a young child, such as the stained-glass windows and the bronze doors in Pietrelcina's cathedral, which depict primarily scenes from Pio's youth – from his birth and baptism to early ecstatic visions and the aforementioned convalescence at his parents' home. And in the reconstructed central piazza a giant mural, complete with a map of the town, couples imagined images from Pio's childhood with famous images of Pio (one when he was young, and one when he was older in San Giovanni). This mural not only provides information to visitors, but also localises common imaginaries of Pio with the geography and topography of the town itself. The city also launched a branding campaign built around museologically inspired billboards that feature an image and relevant biographical details of a locality associated with the saint under the tagline, *Pietrelcina: City of Padre Pio*.

And responding to imaginaries of Pio's bucolic childhood, a via del Rosario was constructed in the woods connecting his home in Pietrelcina with his farmhouse in the countryside of Piana Romana. The pathway literally cuts through a dark forest, over a bubbling stream, up hills and around large stones, and past farmhouses, granaries, fields and barns before emerging at his family's *masseria*, or farmhouse. Placards along the way urge the participant to put themselves in Pio's shoes: "who knows how many graces he obtained for our souls through the many rosaries he recited along this very

path". Such an embodied experience will create new imaginaries – focused squarely on this small town and its narrative "Jesus was in Pietrelcina, and everything happened there".

4. Conclusion

This paper illustrated the *imaginaire dialectic* by examining the changing narratives, images and touristic practices that affected both the construction of Pio's basilica in San Giovanni Rotondo and the restoration of Pietrelcina. These efforts cannot simply be viewed as commercial endeavours to attract more visitors, nor are they solely crystallisations of locals' understandings about the place. Rather, they represent steps in a broader, more historically situated process of producing, consuming, reacting to, and re-producing conflicting imaginaries of these towns, and their connection to Pio espoused by a diversity of social actors within the cult's broader field of production.

As the focal point of the cult, San Giovanni developed alongside Pio's hagiographies, simultaneously conforming to, and shaping, pilgrims' imaginaries. During Pio's canonisation process, Pietrelcina was originally perceived within San Giovanni-centric imaginaries of a marginal, if bucolic, village. In its reconstruction, Pietrelcina referenced this notion but refracted it; Pietrelcina was imbued in sanctity, and Pio's ministry began here. To re-centre the cult's focus on San Giovanni, however, the shrine responded by producing monumental iconographic images such as Rupnik's mosaic cycle that appropriated these stories, yet conflated them with San Giovanni. And in recent years, Pietrelcina has begun to re-position itself not at the centre of Pio's cult, but rather within a broader national and international context: the present mayor and tourism board have been active in bringing international 'culture' to Pietrelcina in the form of opera performances, jazz concerts, and Eastern European folk dance in the town's square, though most inhabitants do not particularly profess an interest in these art forms. These transformations are clearly not marked by an inevitable, linear progression or development – but rather of an imaginaire dialectic: Competing imaginaries refract off each other, like images in a hall of mirrors; they respond to each other, meld together, and create new competing imaginaries that will deepen, complexify, and modify themselves.

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