

AMERICANS WHO HAVE MADE TUSCANY THEIR HOME

Federico Siniscalco

What follows is a selection and transcription of three video interviews conducted in Arezzo, Tuscany, at the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017. The objective of the interviewing was to collect personal life stories of Americans who have made Arezzo and its province their new home.¹ The final project will consist in the production of a short documentary intending to highlight aspects of a privileged migration – undertaken by choice rather than by need – to a geographic area, Tuscany, which is witnessing larger and larger numbers of economic immigrants and refugees from deeply troubled parts of the world.

Given the dramatic nature of the latter phenomenon, this theme might appear frivolous and untimely, yet it is my belief that the concepts expressed by the three Americans here interviewed reveal needs that apply to all migrants. Among these is the yearning to define one's new surroundings as "home", a place where one belongs and feels accepted. Perhaps recognizing this yearning among more advantaged immigrants will help us to acknowledge it among the less fortunate.

SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE PRODUCTION OF INTERVIEWS

Transcriptions of video or audio interviews, such as the ones collected here, may seem reductive, as they exclude the visual and audio components of the originals, yet the written form has its advantages, as it remains one of the easiest ways to circulate content and to make

¹ For a short general overview of the presence of foreign travelers to Arezzo, and for some examples of how this city can be experienced by Americans, see Siniscalco (2016). For an in-depth study of foreigners' attraction to Italy from the XVI century onwards, see Attilio Brilli's extensively documented volume (2014), which also sums up this scholar's numerous earlier publications on the topic.

it quickly retrievable. This is particularly true when the text is also made available digitally (through e-books and web pages), which makes it possible to include hyperlinks that can link readers back to the original audio/visual version. In the digital era, the distinction between written and audiovisual texts is finally becoming less significant.²

In my opinion, video-recording interviews has significant advantages over the more traditional audio-recording or the simple pen and paper approach. In the traditional method, the interviewee often becomes a simple conveyer of information about a given topic. Her/his personal identity is essentially effaced by the written text. Conversely, audiovisual interviews enhance the subject's presence by reproducing the spoken word, and add to the verbal message other important components of human communication, such as body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, eye movement, etc. Furthermore, the audiovisual medium also carries important information on the location and context within which the interviews took place. Nonetheless, many interviewers continue to refrain from using video, fearing that it is an excessively invasive approach toward interviewees which violates their privacy, hence running the risk of compromising the outcome of the interview. Finally, there is the technical aspect of filmmaking which is often seen as an unsurmountable obstacle by many researchers and oral historians³.

Surely this would have been the case a few decades ago, when film and audio recording devices were extremely complicated and bulky, and when the low light sensitivity of film stock required lighting equipment and imposing tripods on which to steady a camera and stabilize the image. Setting up for interviews in these conditions required considerable time and a specialized film crew, which, indeed, tended to invade – and even violate – the interviewee's private space. Nowadays, thanks to the digital revolution in cinematography, this is no longer the case. Cameras have become more compact and sensitive to the light, and in many cases no ex-

² Enhanced e-books, and digital media in general are becoming more and more common within academia, as is attested by Hayler and Griffin's important volume (2016).

³ Renowned oral historians such as Donald Ritchie are now including chapters on using video in their how-to textbooks (2015), yet it is my impression that most oral historians are still somewhat shy towards the use of video in their field work.

tra lighting nor tripods are required. Essentially the shooting process (referred to as “production”) and the editing phase (known as “post-production”) have become easily manageable even by those who are completely new to video making⁴.

There is yet a further way in which digital technology has come to the aid of researchers involved in the documentation of personal life stories. According to Albert Maysles, one of the founders of the American Direct Cinema movement, interviews tend to be unreliable, as the interviewed subjects usually give answers that they feel comply with the interviewers’ expectations. This is because, according to Maysles, the traditional interviewing process generated a deeply unbalanced relationship between interviewer and interviewee, in which the latter was relegated to a distinctly subaltern role. Analogue filmmaking techniques (camera, recording and lighting equipment, crew, etc.) both generated and reinforced this imbalance. The solution to this problem, according to Maysles and to the other Direct Cinema filmmakers (Albert Maysles’ brother David, Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, and DA Pennebaker), was to avoid interviews altogether in their documentaries by trying to capture spontaneous dialogues and monologues among their subjects⁵. Given this approach, digital filmmaking techniques were welcomed by this group of documentarians as an opportunity to better pursue their goals⁶. Less invasive, more movable and efficient video-recording equipment increased the possibilities of documenting life stories in their natural settings, so that the hegemonic – subaltern relationship described earlier could be substituted by a more empathetic approach that problematized the role of

⁴ The bibliography on video production is extensive, ranging from specialized texts aimed for future media professionals to introductory works for novices. A valid textbook poised on a middle ground is the one by Anthony Artis (2014). For a detailed description of this work see Siniscalco (2014). Lisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor’s volume (1997) is still a valuable classic that deals extensively with issues relating to visual anthropology and interviewing.

⁵ This approach can best be appreciated in *Gray Gardens*, the 1975 documentary by Albert and David Maysles that tells the story of big Edie and little Edie, a mother and daughter who are close relatives of Jackie Kennedy/Onassis and who live in a state of total destitution in a decrepit East Hampton mansion.

⁶ For an analysis of Direct Cinema’s position towards interviews see Siniscalco (2007, 2012). The bibliography on American Direct Cinema is also substantial. The following authors offer significant contributions to the topic: Vogels (2005), O’Connell (1992), Saunders (2007), Geiger (2011).

the observer and redefined the viewer – viewed paradigm in more balanced terms. It seemed a reclaiming of the French origin of the term “interview”: *entrevue*, to see each-other.

Clearly, this way of proceeding requires the making of a full-fledged documentary, and sufficient production time to capture spontaneous situations. Yet, and this is my contention, today’s digital media production tools allow for a reformulation of the more traditional interview method as well. The un-invasiveness and ease of use of the new equipment are conducive to a more relaxed, empathetic, and less invasive interview session in which it is possible to generate an unprompted flow of words that contribute to the representation of individual life stories.

The following are fragments of three such stories.

SCOTT McGEHEE: WHEN YOUR CHILDREN FEEL AT HOME

Scott McGehee, an American man in his early sixties, is the founder and director of the Accademia dell’Arte, a performing arts university located in the outskirts of Arezzo. He first came to Tuscany in 1995 with his wife and children, on a Fulbright fellowship to conduct research on Italian political philosophers. His original idea was to stay 9 months; twenty years later he is still there, and Arezzo has become his hometown, the place where he raised his family, and where he hopes to retire.

We lived in a small village [Loro Ciuffenna, in the province of Arezzo] and it was like the village was the extended family that helped you raise your children. This, I think, has been quite lost in the United States. And this was something extraordinary that made us, unanticipated, want to stay in Italy much longer than we had originally foreseen. That was an incredibly pleasant surprise and we don’t regret it for an instant. We were in a position to have our children raised in Italy, yet not give up their American experience. We sent our children back to summer camp every summer in the United States so that they could also have an “American experience”.

But in terms of my own expectations, I think they were pretty much fulfilled. I was able to do the research I wanted to do and I got incredible help from the Italians when I needed it. They were always there to help. There was always an enthusiastic interaction. I never felt abandoned; I felt very much accepted and I think when you’re in Italy and you have children, you’re accepted even more into the culture.

If I ever needed to have a door open, I made sure to bring one of my children with me and push them through the door first. In which case I was immediately accepted and welcomed. There's kind of this myth that Italians have, sometimes the myth is a negative myth or a positive myth, but nevertheless it's a mythological view of America. They often times felt very proud of the fact that we chose to put our children in an Italian school and felt that that was a great compliment to them in doing so.

At this point I think maybe [I feel] a little bit more as an immigrant, in the sense that by raising my children here it sort of nestled me into the community more than if I had moved here for retirement purposes. I had a more complete life experience by raising children and watching them grow up and figuring out what they're going to do and helping them as they get older. And I think I'll always feel like an immigrant, that is, someone who's in but not of the culture, which I think is a permanent condition for someone like me. I will never be Italian, I will never be Tuscan, I will never be integrated to that level say that my children are, which is ok. I don't mind that. I think Pascal said «all of our problems begin when we leave home»⁷, but I think "home" is increasingly difficult to hold on to. It's not just a question of leaving a place, it's a question of how rapidly your home changes and suddenly you find yourself not recognizing the place you were born in.

My son, who grew up here, when he was a teenager in high school he took a walk around Arezzo, after school, and he came in the house and he said, «you know, I realize Arezzo is the perfect city». I said «What do you mean by that?» and he said «Well, think about it», and he proceeded to describe the architecture, the layout of the streets, the way cafés are positioned. He went on and on and on about how it's the perfect city. «If you were dreaming up a perfect city, it would look like Arezzo. It's the perfect scale...». He went on and on, and I thought: «Oh, he's got it! He's got the bug! It is his identity now».

Italians do not expect me to be Italian. They accept that we do strange things. We eat at different times of the day, we eat different types of food. They accept all of that because we are *stranieri*. And I've only experienced tolerance in that regard. I'm sure that if the immigration problem becomes more difficult, that tolerance might shift, especially if people see their own traditions being diluted. The only integration issues, when the Italians expect you to integrate, were when our kids were in school. There

⁷ The quote, from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670, 1958), actually reads: "the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber" (Thought n. 139).

was an absolute expectation to integrate and conform to the Italian way of doing things. I have to admit, that was one of the bigger conflicts I had with the way schools function here.

People often ask, «Are you going to stay there? Are you ever going to return to the US?» And I'm not sure how to answer that question. I have no intention of returning, I have no plans to return. Could I return? I could, if I had something to do. I do think, though, about what the future will look like in the next 10, 20, or 30 years. I'm 63 years old so, what will it look like when I'll be 73? When I'll be 83 (if I make it)? Where do I want to be? I think there's not a lot of doubt. I would prefer to have my old age here, simply because look at the way old people are treated here versus the way old people are treated in the United States. There they are thrown away, they're isolated, they are not integrated. Here they are completely and 100% integrated.

OONAGH STRANSKY: A HOME THAT FOSTERS CREATIVITY

Oonagh Stransky is an American citizen in her late forties who lives in a restored farm house in the Cortona countryside. She is a freelance, published literary translator and writer who also consults as a cultural mediator, advising firms and establishments on how to promote their images and products to an English-speaking audience.

I first came to Italy in 1986 and it was my winter break from college. I stayed with an elderly lady who was a friend of the family. Lydia was her name. Lydia was sort of an old-world lady of nobility and very set in her ways. She was a great introduction to Italy. While I was staying in her house I explored Florence and I walked around and found that I felt very much at home here. I'm not Italian at all by birth, so this was a new experience for me. I was born in Paris and I grew up speaking French at home and at school, and my stepmother is French, so I already had a bilingual situation at home. I had often been to France, but had never been to Italy before. And something about being here resonated very deeply with me. That was my first experience here in Italy (There is another side of the story, which we can get into maybe later).

I came back to Italy in '87, '88 for a year, to study at the University of Florence. I came with the University of Connecticut program because that was, at the time, one of the only programs where you would study with Italians, at the local university. That was important to me. I didn't want to be segregated with other Americans, like many of the other programs.

I really wanted a full impact or something that would throw me into the mix.

Towards the end of that year, I met a man who was also a fellow student at the University and we fell in love. Over the course of the following year, when I went back to college in the USA, to finish up, I kept in touch with him. After graduating from college, I returned to Italy to be with him and to explore our relationship and to start my working life and figure out what I wanted to do.

By then that was 1989. We ended up getting married and living in the Casentino Valley for four years. We had two children. Then we moved back to the United States in 1994, shortly after my youngest daughter, Geraldine, was born. We lived in New York City for 15 years, during which a lot of things changed, and of course we got divorced and started growing up (...). I moved back here in 2009. I moved back as an adult, with experience, ready to live here and to make my life here.

I wanted to get away from New York, which sounds crazy, because who wouldn't want to be in New York? After living and working and raising your kids in NY, I really longed for a place that was a healthier environment for me to explore both my work, in terms of translating and writing, and just to live a daily life that was quieter and calmer, more manageable, more refined. By living here and living frugally and making time for myself and having very minimal needs, I can bring myself to the table [to write]. I can force myself to sit down and be creative and it's something that I'm striving to do every day. Sometimes I run away from creative work because it's hard, my work in particular is hard. The kinds of things I want to talk about have nothing to do with Tuscany or the beauty of Tuscany whatsoever.

Creativity, in a way, is important, it's a complex subject. It's hard just to say Tuscany is important to me. What's important to me is the essence of time; how do I use my time? I am the master of my time because I live alone, because I live in a foreign country, because there's a healthy sense of time and I like that. I didn't have that in New York.

When Geraldine, my youngest daughter, moved back here in 2009 with me and started attending the Italian high school here – keep in mind she was born in Italy, in NY she went from Pre-K through 9th grade to the only bilingual, Italian school in North America credited by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri – they said to her, «Oh, but you're a foreigner, you need to be taking a class for foreigners in Italian language». She didn't know what to say, she was like «Oh, ok». Then I went to talk to her teacher and asked why this was happening. Not that there was anything

wrong with it, if it was a brush up course on Italian that would be fine, that would be helpful. But the way that they treated her was very unfair because they came down very heavily on her. The first couple of months that she arrived at the school, the first couple of months that she was in Italy, made her feel very out of sorts, like she didn't belong here. They made a case of her writing, they said, «this isn't how you write, this is not how you think, this is not how you should describe a book or a feeling; you clearly are an immigrant, you need a specific course of writing».

So, as I was saying, I went in to talk to the teacher and she was a very aggressive sort of woman. She said, «Geraldine absolutely needs more work and you don't need to come in here and be a lawyer for her». I said, «Well, actually Professoressa, I do need to be here for my daughter and I will continue to be here for my daughter and I will come in here and talk to you and check in on her. So, whenever you have that course ready to help her with her Italian, fine». They never organized the course. By the end of the year the teacher had sort of gotten used to us perhaps or maybe she started to realize that underneath Geraldine was quite Italian. Or that her Italian wasn't quite so bad or maybe she had a different way of approaching an Italian description, ideas, or books, or whatever it was that she had to write about. At the end she would come to me and say, «Oh, Geraldine has made enormous progress. She's doing so much better now than she did at the very beginning». And I always thought that that was very unfair of her at the beginning just to label her as an immigrant, to treat her like that.

I want to tell you a story about why I actually moved here. It is not something that has to do with nation or culture, but it's a deeply personal story and you can choose to include it or you can choose to leave it out, as you wish.

When I was staying with my friend Lydia, in the house in Florence, I was sleeping in an upstairs room at the top of a beautiful Renaissance palace, in the attic. One night, after a long day of walking around the city, exploring and looking at people and flirting with men, and doing various other things, I went to bed. I climbed into this big old bed that was made with this horse-hair mattress kind of thing and a big, old wool blanket, the kind they used to use, and these heavy linen sheets, the big, old kind. And there was a window not too far away from the bed. I felt the window open. I remember perfectly well the sensation, the fatigue that I had. It was just the sense of having a very full and rich and textured day. So, I looked over at the window, it was directly across from the bed, and it was open and I felt a very cool sort of breeze come in and I felt my mother's

spirit come towards the bed. I felt her hand caress my forehead, and I felt her hand smooth the sheet over my body and tuck me into bed. And then she left. At that moment, I knew she was happy that I was there.

The other part of the story is that my mother lived in Italy, she was not Italian, but she died in Italy. She was a painter and she lived in Italy the last few years of her life. She lived in Rome and she died in Rome. She died alone even though she had a very large family, a very wealthy family. She died very poor and she died alone. This is something I have never forgiven my family for, whether it was my immediate father, who by then was already divorced from her – he maybe had less of an obligation I guess you could say – and I never forgave my mother's family for that.

I've always felt that any kind of work that I do here in Italy, any creative work that I do here in Italy, will always have to come back to that wound and to heal. So, I want to be able to tell her story and finish her story. Finish it well and give her back the space, the kindness and respect. I think that that probably became clear to me at that time when I was first in Florence; that there was that possibility of being and doing, and being close to her. That is an element that I carry with me in my daily life in Italy and one of the main reasons I'm here.

I have a lot of ideas about how I want to tell that story and periodically I start it, but it's very painful. But here we are, at the very beginning of 2017, and I hope that this year I might be able to make some headway on it. It requires a lot of delving into things that are painful. My hope is that I will be able to—in my safe space, my home with my lifestyle I have created for myself, in my frugal living, and surrounding myself with the people that I want to be surrounded by—that I'll be able to make headway into that search, and to restore some sort of element of peace to her life and to my life.

WILL DAMERON: HOME IS WHERE YOUR FRIENDS ARE

Will Dameron is an American in his mid-twenties who has been living in Arezzo for the last couple of years. He works as a technical director for the Accademia dell'Arte Master of Fine Arts program in physical theater and coordinates the school's studios, the set design, lighting and sound. Will originally came to Arezzo as an undergraduate student of the Accademia dell'Arte and then returned after about a year when he was offered his current position. His training and interests range from scenography to photography, painting and music.

Tuscany, in terms of the collective imagination and also my personal imagination, always sat as the pinnacle of art history, of the base of Western art. For me, being here is a daily source of inspiration. I can walk into the church that's down the street from my house and see frescos [Piero Della Francesca's Story of the True Cross, in the Church of San Francesco] that I could barely even imagine seeing in an art history textbook in the States. Walking around this city and all the cities nearby as well as the rest of Italy is inspirational on a daily basis. One of the biggest sources, for me, of inspiration growing up and getting into art and things like that, was the work of the Renaissance greats. Also, being an opera fan, I really took a liking to composers like Donizetti, Puccini, and such. So, being able to travel here and see where they worked and see what inspired them was definitely something that called me pretty intensely to Tuscany, and to Arezzo specifically.

Moving to Italy was the first time I had ever been abroad, the first time I had ever been outside of the U.S. For me it was a big change. I had ideas of what to expect, but I didn't know what I was getting myself into, really at the end of the day. It was what I expected and so much more. Learning about a new culture and finding new people. What surprised me, really, was how similar I found myself to the people here. It's not just me. It's not just because I was listening to opera or looking at Italian paintings or knew what the culture was. It was nothing like that. It was more that people are people anywhere you go, and I think that was the biggest thing that I learned moving here.

I refer to Arezzo as home now. For me, home has always been where your roots are, where you set yourself, and where you are with the people that you surround yourself with. Like the saying goes: «Home is where the heart is». For me, if I plant myself somewhere and have friends that I trust and know and love, that place becomes home. Also, language is absolutely essential to integration within a community. If you can't communicate with someone on the level in which they communicate the most naturally, you really can't arrive at a certain level of depth, or it's much more difficult. When I got here, it was imperative that I learn Italian and so I really put myself behind that and learned it as quickly and intently as I could.

There is the kind of joke of the brash American, this prejudice of the loud American who spends three months in Florence and never learns a word of Italian. Like any prejudice, it's maybe based on someone's experience at some point, but it's not an issue. I've noticed that there is a trend when Americans travel abroad: just like with many other cultures, which

I've seen also traveling abroad, there's a tendency to seek out familiarity. Culturally speaking, there's a difference in terms of the way that people interact with each other; in terms of the way that people behave in public; the way that people dress themselves. These are largely superficial differences, but differences that distinguish. The prejudices that I've seen, that have been directed towards me, have been things like: «Oh, you're being too loud in restaurants»; or «why are you wearing sweatpants in public?» (I don't, but you know...); «why do you guys always wear socks with sandals» and things like that. The things that I see are largely good natured jokes and things that people don't seem to hold any specific disdain for. I guess the answer to the question is yes, I do experience some of that prejudgment, prejudice, but remain largely unaffected by it because of its lack of malice.

The word "expat" is something that I just don't like. When someone moves from one place to another I really think that "expat" is a way that immigrants divide themselves from other immigrants. ... The word "expat" really, in a way, rubs me the wrong way; because if I immigrated to a place, I'm an immigrant. "Expat" just seems like a way to make someone feel better than someone else. Here in Italy, for my friends from Italy, I'm "the American friend". I'm the guy that moved here. At home, now, having just been home for Christmas, I am "the guy that moved away". So, there's this sense of being between two spaces, in a way. Yes, I have moved away from the States, but I am still American by birth, I do still dress like an American, look like an American. It's an interesting balance.

The things that I miss from back home in the States are first and foremost my friends and family. Growing up somewhere you get an attachment to people and those people I miss. And it's nice living in the age that we do because I am still able to communicate with them and I'm still able to see them, even if they're on a screen. But, that's the biggest thing that I miss and then I do also miss my grandma's cooking. I don't know if you've noticed, but food is very important to me. Another thing I miss in America is the open roads. When I lived there, I drove a lot. I drove cross country three times, so I miss the sense of having these huge, unwieldy distances to cross with just an ever-changing landscape. But living in Europe is cool too, because if you drive the same distance as I would drive to get to my grandma's house, I'm in a different country!

VARIATIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF "HOME"

Against the backdrop of the current Italian immigration phenomenon, the life stories collected help us go beyond mere statistical data and see how each individual reacts to the challenges that come

from relocating to a foreign country. The reader will have discerned a common theme that unites these stories: the need to feel at home in new surroundings. Each experience is different, yet this longing is ever-present.

Scott's sense of belonging is the product of the integration of his own children within the local community. According to him this is the result of the Italians' benevolence towards children and towards people from the United States. In his experience the inhabitants of Loro Ciuffenna, and later of Arezzo, felt honored by the fact that he enrolled his children in the local schools. Scott is confident that the school was the means through which the integration of his children took place, as attested by the story of his son walking through Arezzo and feeling at home in what he considers the perfect city. For Scott, however, who came as an adult, *home* is a more complex issue: to this day, after twenty years of living in Tuscany, he feels like someone who is *in* the culture rather than *of* the culture. Yet, he strongly rejects the label of the American *expat* (living "under the Tuscany sun"), and subscribes to that of the *immigrant*, someone who is engaged as an active citizen.

Oonagh's experience with the Italian school system seems less positive. Her daughter Geraldine, she tells us, was treated as a *straniera* by the teachers; someone who does things differently and does not conform. In Oonagh's case feeling at home in Tuscany is the result of a more introspective process: finding an equilibrium among chores and obligations which will enable her to cultivate her creative impulse, something which was not possible when she lived in New York City.

Will, the youngest of the three by far, pursues his urge to belong and to feel at home in Arezzo in a more active manner – as would be expected in a newcomer. The key element for him is the ability to communicate in the native language, a crucial aspect in making new friends and assimilating the culture. His determination to quickly master Italian (I can attest to his fluency in both speaking and writing it) and his friendly and outgoing disposition have enabled him to feel a commonality with the Aretines, who ultimately, he tells us, share his same values, even though he may still be considered *l'amico americano*, who eats strange things and wears socks with sandals.

In his youthful candor, Will seems a true believer in the universality of the human condition ("*people are people anywhere you go*").

Being accepted and feeling at home in the place where one settles are surely among the universal needs shared by our species. We have heard three testimonies to this effect, but I am confident that endless more would be available if we only listened.

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