Standing-up vineyards.
The political relevance of Tuscan wine production

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Draft version

Abstract

The article investigates the philosophical and political assumptions supporting the popular concept of ‘place identity’, exemplarily represented by Tuscany and its wine. It focuses on the production process of one of the most expensive and high-rated Italian wine, the Brunello di Montalcino, produced in the south-east of Tuscany. The Brunello di Montalcino wine area in Tuscany has a leading role in Italian wine production, and it is regarded as a successful example of place authenticity protection, economic well-being promotion and high-quality welfare fulfilling.

The paper proposes a deeper deconstructionist analysis of the romantic and fascinating image of Tuscany, by offering an alternative portrait of the material-semiotic networks actually constituting the specificity of this land. The case for the deconstructionist analysis is provided by the diplomatic impasse between Italy and US in 2008, when, in Montalcino vineyards, some vines were illegally introduced. The anomalies in the production process were detected by a massive use of technological control devices. This put in ‘danger’ the reputation, overturned the tradition, the local authenticity and the identity of Tuscan wines – and eventually of Tuscany itself.

In reconstructing the way in which Brunello di Montalcino wine materially shapes politics, economic relations, social behaviours, landscape, cultural production and international narratives, the article analyses the related ‘material-semiotic’ networks. It shows that local identity does not naturally grown out of the soil but it is generated and preserved by a long retinue of global-based practices and connections. Brunello, a symbol of authentic Tuscany, only exists as Brunello and can be enjoyed as such, through the mediation of a large apparatus of very specific scientific knowledge, laboratories practices and protocols, administrative procedures at different geographical scales, certificates and licences. Paradoxically we need the global to protect the local and any further attempt at separatedeness requires interrelatedness.
Introduction

Is there anybody who never fancied to spend some time in the Tuscany rolling hills to personally admire the enchanting landscape Kennet Branagh chose for his *Much ado about nothing* (Branagh 1993)? Or, while visiting churches, squares, museums of Tuscany, who never dreamed to fall in love as in Edward Forrester’s *A room with a view* (Forrester, 2007)? Or, again, never imagined to restore her own ‘grey’ life in the sunny light of the ancient stonewalled villa as Frances Mayes did in *Under the Tuscan sun* (Mayes, 1996)?

Tuscany is worldwide known for its ‘strong identity’ and it perfectly seems to materialise some of the most influential geographical theories about the emergence and the preservation of authentic places. These theories provide a description of place identity as resulting from boundaries closure and allow the identification of peculiar characteristics (nature, religion, culture, crops and food, geological features, historical monuments…) that support a sense of spatial belongingness and historical continuity. Nonetheless, with the emerging of globalisation, local places are increasingly endangered by the progressive erasure of physical and symbolic identity, the ‘despatialisation’ of life-processes and the ‘disembedding’ of daily experience. It appears to be necessary the building up of a bulwark to preserve local identity, tradition and territorial integrity.

But, is this the true story?

The purpose of this article is to propose an alternative consideration of place identity and the global/local relations. It moves from a highly representative case, the so-called ‘affaire Brunello’ that in 2008 perturbed the *Brunello di Montalcino* wine production area in Tuscany.

A deconstructionist analysis of Montalcino identity will be provided and the entire *Brunello* production process will be re-interpreted by adopting the material-semiotic approach. Material semiotic considers everything in the social and natural worlds as an effect of the web of relations within which they are located; explores the interaction of people, things, living beings and technologies on different geographical scales; and produces unexpected descriptions of the building up of place identity. On the base of *Brunello di Montalcino* example, it will be argued that the popular view of place identity is closer to literary imagination than to reality; this requires a consideration of the different political implications of the traditional and the innovative view of place identity here proposed.

1. What place identity?
It is a big issue why some places seem to have a strong identity, while others seem to be completely anonymous and not deserving any attempt at their protection. Identity-provided places are generally represented as static, bounded sections of space, internally coherent and originating a sense of belongingness. The definition of spatial enclosures permits a concentration of interests around nodal centres of interest and requires the building up of solid boundaries; so that those places are seen as different and identifiably areas within a wider ‘space’ that “historically developed in some important degree separately from each other” (Massey, 1995a, p.54). A considerable amount of history, cultural tradition, and social values are registered on their account, and they present a certain degree of pureness, i.e. of proximity to wild nature and to ‘traditional’ way of life.

The quintessence of the locale is generally said to have been produced by the interplay of human cultures and natural environment. This description is immediately resonant with the daily experience, but, at the same time, it deeps its roots in a large part of contemporary cultural geography and philosophy. The idea that local communities’ character is linked with the geographical features of the place they inhabit has the specific function to reinforce the link between people and place. The suggestion dates back to Romantic authors who envisaged the existence of a peculiar nature-society isomorphism in the concept itself of place identity. This is the case of Alexander von Humboldt who associates people, territories and climatic conditions by arguing for an intrinsic affinity amongst them; and argued for the existence of a holistic correspondence between nature and culture (von Humboldt, 1849). Again, it is also the case of Johann Herder who stressed the blood-based relations of people and land, and affirmed cultures are diverse because closely linked with the different places they ‘emerge’ from (Herder, 1880).

Romantic legacy at the beginning of the 20th century extended its influence on the French Geographie Culturelle. Its inspirer, Paul Vidal de la Blanche, investigated how specific milieux shape human life-style, but he also stressed the society’s role in the modification of nature, and considered regional frames as the outcome of human-land relationships (a sort of ‘socialised nature’) (de la Blanche, 1926). French geographers introduced culture as an explanatory factor in place definition, and enable the identification of different genres de vie as quintessential mixes of natural and human elements. They operated in the general continental renovation of the ‘blood and soil’ catchwords: “the external was thought to be only a reflection of deeper spiritual forces. The

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1 The classic C. Levy-Strauss’ The savage Mind, 1966 (University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL); or.ed. La pensée sauvage, 1962), or the more contemporary C.Geertz’s The interpretation of cultures, 2000 (Basik Books New York; ed.or 1973) provide clear examples of this representation.
body mirrored the soul. Landscape and geography were considered indispensable to the soul of the Volk” (Livingstone, 1953, p. 265).

The ‘soil and soul’ narrative still significantly inspires contemporary social thought. It claims that a place comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of a larger, undifferentiated geographical space, because a place is “an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals” (Brey, 1998, p. 240). Humanistic Geography is probably the most representative of these culture-oriented geographical theories. One of its pioneering figures, Yi Fu-Tuan, describes a place as “an organised world of meaning” (Tuan, 2003, p. 176) emerging from human interpretation of the surrounding space. The environment has a social existence only through the perception; the analysis and the modification operated by human groups who claim it as their own, and place are regarded as human ‘artefacts’ that clearly express the underlying culture. Their identity is the effect of a long-lasting permanence of human groups on a physical territory. Memories, feeling, social connections, cultural rules and conventions turn space into place (Jiven and Larkham, 2003).

Places are regarded as static fragments of space that can be grasped and interiorised by human society in symbolic terms. Their static nature enables the emergence of a ‘sense of place’, namely a sense of belonging to a particular geographical area, whose characteristics mix those of local cultures. The characteristics of every authentic place give rise to a strong individual and collective empathy: inner space is externalised in places and outer space is internalised in identities (Bachelard, 1954). This implies that “there are qualities of certain places which certain persons respond to with love” (Howard, 1998, p. 150-151) when an intimate relation emerges between a place and ‘its’ people. As a consequence places are provided with emotional and affective traits: “the subjectivity of place means that our ideas of places arise in an active relationship with the physical environment in which we live” (Katz, 2002, p. 198-199).

The spatial structure of places is represented in several narratives of belongingness as deriving from people’s emotional investment in a place. Indeed, relationship toward place mainly relies on a ‘mythical distortion’ of historical and geographical details so to accommodate them to preferred narrative of origins. According to Marc Augè, this process gives raise to specific ‘mythologies of

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2 In 1978 a collective work edited by David Ley and Marwyn Samuels under the title Humanistic Geography connected the French geographical tradition with the new aspiration for a re-humanisation of cultural geography. Some of the so-called ‘humanistic geographers’ claimed to be inspired by Edmund Husserl’s work in which the world is disclosed to the subject prior to any scientific enquiry. Others turned toward Maurice Merleau-Ponty philosophy and existentialism, claiming the sense of loss and alienation to be the core experience of humans’ being-in-the-world; or toward Clifford Geertz’s interpretative anthropology and semiotic decoding of verbal and non-verbal texts.
foundation’, which connect the spirit of a place with the people’s character (Augè, 1995). The main effect of every mythology of foundation is to originate a sense of belongingness, to legitimise the appropriation, definition and modification of the space, through a narrative that (supposedly) provides an exhaustive interpretation of the cosmic order.

According to the culture-oriented geographical interpretation, place identity is determined by history and symbols, by its capacity of resisting the contamination of global influences and of inspiring a sense of belongingness and property.

2. Tuscany under the Globalisation threat

Tuscany is a very well-known Italian region, famous for its outstanding landscape, tasty food, historical and artistic heritage and folklore. A region provided with a ‘strong and authentic identity’. Since the time of the *Gran Tour*, Tuscany attracted travellers especially from the North of Europe, who declared themselves enchanted by its picturesque countryside and the feeling of being part of a rich historical fresco. This is resonant with modern travel guides descriptions and websites that reminds tourists how easy is to experience authenticity in Tuscany: “a land where history, art and nature collide in the most magnificent ways – light and dark, sweet and savoury, gently sandy coasts and rolling inlands hills, ancient walled cities and soaring cypress trees – this is Tuscany. [...]”

As the fast pace of modern life threatens to erase all that we hold sacred, the enduring charm and wonder of Tuscany remains a constraint, an oasis of tradition that helps us experience and savour the good life as it was and as it shall be for centuries to come – preserved in the churches, palaces, museums’ masterpieces, and forever in the hearts of the Tuscan people” (Touring Club, 2005).

Because of this innate vocation, large part of the Tuscany economy is based on tourism, (Regione Toscana, 2008) a business sector highly regulated and controlled by the Regional Administrative Bodies, whose efforts are directed toward the protection of what is commonly regarded as the quintessence of Tuscany and the opposition toward globalisation effects. Thus, in accordance with the European Union’s suggestions, Tuscany generally adopts a strategy of local identity strengthening and preservation.³

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³ A large multimedia campaign to promote the image of Tuscany has been launched under the title “Voglio vivere così” (“This is the way I want to live”), available on one of the Tuscany Regional Administration’s web-sites: http://www.turismo.intoscana.it/intoscana2/export/TurismoRTen/
The underlying assumption of this strategy is that some geographical areas, as Tuscany, are characterised by an identity that is highly appreciated worldwide and worthwhile of being preserved for the sake of their intrinsic value and the benefits they produce. The management of the land is directly related to the identity constitution; landscape and agriculture policies are connected with tourism and services organisation; and, at the same time, food, trade and art policies cannot be addressed without taking into consideration the environmental implications. People and places are seen as highly ‘sympathetic’, and the interpretation of geographical features as endlessly stable metaphorically reinforces and legitimises specific political tenets. The major gain of assuming as a touchstone for place definition the model of coherent, pre-given, bounded entities, is the sense of foundation and stable ‘locatedness’ it provides. Geographical territories are represented as the terroirs for the growing of people’s identity and the creation of the social structure.

The romantic image of Tuscany is so powerful that the Wall Street Journal Europe, decided to defend it even in adverse time, by describing the vintage strategy to face modernity the Tuscan Antinori family, a well-reputed noble family, pushed forward in its activity of wine producers (Kahn, 2008). The description recalls several stereotypes. Antinori is a noble family which never left Florence for 26 generations and only recently acquired some vineyard abroad (in Hungary and America) and that resisted all the arrows of time (from the “outbreaks of Bubonic plague, the invasion of Napoleon, two world wars, the arrival of globalisation” (Kahn, 2008, p.14)). Antinoris succeeded by keeping strong the relation of the family members with their land and by instilling the same values and virtues for generations. The Marquis Antinori explains: “Instead of creating clear lines that separate the family’s interests from the company’s, the Antinoris blur the two beyond recognition” (Kahn, 2008, p.14); and again the Marquis’ daughter affirms: “It’s all pretty fluid, but we have the link with the land, the traditions, so we’ve go tour feet on the ground” (Kahn, 2008, p.14). They are said to have a long-term capital appreciation, typical of old, rather than new economy. With the coming of the international business, new worries are popping up, such as the possibility of experimenting new ways of reaching the international and young taste, but the family resists thanks to its loyalty to the land and the tradition. A merry blood and soil tale.

Current widespread philosophical positions assume that place identity is under threat because of effects of globalisation. Nowadays places disappear, homogenize, reshape, expand, and dissolve; they are (seen as) the first victims of globalisation:

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4 See, for example, the Regulation (EC) 479/2008 that thoroughly reorganises the EU wine market in accordance with Lisbon strategy to reinforce competitiveness, environmental protection and local economy.
Places are not what they used to be. Rapid transportation systems have shrunk the distance between places, transforming them from isolated spots to junctions in the global village. Electric media [...] allow places to blend into each other, making it possible to be closer to someone thousand of miles away that to a person in the next room. [...] All this has dramatically altered the nature of places, as well as our sense of places (Brey, 1998, p.239).

Progressively places lose their boundaries and mix together in an indefinite ‘nowhere-everywhere’. Distinguished social thinkers,⁵ argue that the globalising modernity induces a dematerialisation of experience; it introduces the distant and the absent in relations previously distinctive of a single place; it pierces boundaries and pollutes familiar landscapes with alien influences. Temporally and spatially dissociated relations take over from local face-to-face interactions and produce a worrisome ‘geographical disembedding’ process (Giddens, 1990). Thus places are at risk of becoming inauthentic; unrecognisable in their physical features, ‘uninterpretable’ in their symbolic meaning.

Spatial metaphors (deterritorialization, displacement, diasporas, nomadology, migration, travel-crossing…) permeate discourses on globalisation by opposing the global space to the local places. Amongst these local places, Tuscany still retains its authentic flavour, particularly in its quietist countryside; the small village of Montalcino with its surroundings is one of the emblematic stone–made symbols of the resisting past in the Tuscan countryside.

Or it is not?

3. The Brunello di Montalcino

In the southeast of Tuscany, near Siena, part of the most authentic heart of Tuscany can be found. The case of a small but economically and symbolically influent village in this area, Montalcino,⁶ is representative of the widespread conception of what a place provided with a strong and long-lasting

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⁶ Montalcino is 40 km far from Siena and 113 kilometres southwest of Florence, it is inhabited by 5.000 people.
identity is; and how spatial politics may protect it from the assaults of globalisation and the spreading of non-places.

Fig. 1: Position of Montalcino in Tuscany (http://www.brunello-montalcino.com/)

Montalcino and its surroundings are generally considered a successful case of place identity protection, economic well-being promotion and high-quality welfare fulfilling. This happy circumstance is said to derive from appropriate politics aimed at preserving local traditions, productions, and traditional ways of managing the land. Montalcino is a place apparently untouched by modernity, in which it is still possible to taste traditional food, to experience healthy way of life and to discover the historical cultural heritage. It is one of the principal wine-production areas in Italy, and the Brunello di Montalcino is one of the most expensive and high-rated Italian wines.

7 For a presentation of the Brunello di Montalcino, the Producers Consortium’s web-page could be a good starting point (Consorzio del Brunello di Montalcino, http://www.consorziodelBrunello dimontalcino.it/Brunello/). Comments on Montalcino’s wine by a large number of Italian writers can be found at http://www.montalcinoieri.com/montalcino/vino.htm.

8 In Tuscany there are more than 63.000 hectares of vineyards. They produce 30 variety are DOC wines (Denomination of Controlled Origin) and 6 varieties are DOCG wines (Denomination of Controlled and Guaranteed Origin), the highest recognition for wine in Italy.
The web overflows of enthusiastic description of Brunello as one of the most reputable wines of the world,\(^9\) and of Montalcino as a must-see locale.

The birth of Brunello is due to the Biondi Santi family, who claims an original local wine can be probably dated back to the 1500s, while the first example of Brunello was created by Ferruccio Biondi Santi and his fellows in 1880s. It is a dry and intense red wine with flavours of bitter cherry and smoke, that improves for decades, produced by only using a local vine, the Sangiovese (in Italian “Jove’s blood”).\(^{10}\) Because of its colour Sangiovese is called Brunello (‘darkish’) in the area of Siena; so, the name of the wine.

\(^9\) In 2006 Wine Spectator, the international ‘bible’ of wine lovers, accorded to Brunello di Montalcino the title of the ‘best wine of the world’. The awarded bottle was a Tenuta Nuova Brunello di Montalcino 2001 by Casanova di Neri farm.

\(^{10}\) Sangiovese is a dark red juicy grape which likes non fertile terrain, warm and dry weather and delivers a limited quantity of grapes per hectare; if properly pruned it can concentrate its sweetness in single grapes and thus produce a bold and aromatic strong wine. Sangiovese vine also grow up in other regions in the centre of Italy but, because of the different soil conditions, weather and selection process, it produces radically different wines, sweeter and not adequate for aging. The Sangiovese variety currently covering Montalcino hills is a local strain (Sangiovese grosso) isolated in mid-19th century by Biondi Santi family after a devastating vine-pest, by grafting old variety of Sangiovese on the American vine. The vines could produce much than actually picked (8 tons of grapes per hectare, i.e. 5,54 hl of wine/hectare), but because of the limits imposed by the Disciplinary of Production, only the perfect grapes are harvested.
Brunello usually improves in time, so it can rest until 30 years in bottles without losing its purple colour, intense aroma, warm and robust taste; however, generally, a bottle of Brunello requires 4 years before entering the market.  

A brief description of the Brunello making process can be useful. At the end of August grapes are picked by dedicated machines that gently preserve the integrity of the skin and the grape-stalk (to prevent tannins to release in the must). When the grape-stalks are separated, the grapes are pressed by compressed-air pump so to avoid any unnecessary stress for the grapes. Then, the must starts the fermentation process and the marc is added for the maceration process to take place. In this way the wine produces the tannins, as long as the must remain in contact with the marc, and changes its colour in ruby red. The fermentation process take place in stainless steel containers and it consists in the transformation of sugar into alcohol. The process is constantly checked by the cellarman because the wines cannot suffer higher temperatures than 25-28°C degrees and need to be frequently ‘reassembled’ during the fermentation. After a week of constant and tumultuous activity all the sugar turned into alcohol and the polifenoli emerge (especially the tannins). The tannins give a bitter taste to the wine that can be lost only whit the ageing. When the desiderated alcohol unit is reached, the containers are frozen under 16°C degrees and the fermentation process stops (because the yeasts cannot operate below this temperature). The entire process lasts around 20-30 days. At the end of the fermentation process the must is separated from the marc. Then, it decants in huge Slavonic oak butt containing up to 120 hl (or in French or Californian oak barriques containing up to 228 liters). It rests in the butts or the barriques for two years: the contact with the wood gifts the wine with special aromas and smells. During its permanence in the butts, the wine is decanted three or two times a year and a valve indicate to the cellarman when it is necessary to refill the butts in order
In social imaginary, political planning and market strategies, *Brunello di Montalcino* is closely associated with the traditional image of Tuscan countryside. Buying a bottle of *Brunello* means buying a bit of authentic Tuscany. A bottle of *Brunello* is today sold for up to € 200 a bottle, but it can be bought for a more modest price (around € 25 a bottle). Still in 1960 only 11 producers were bottling *Brunello* on 391 hectares; by the 1990 the produces increased up to 87 producers; and today there are 250 producers on 3,500 hectares of vineyards in the area.\(^\text{12}\) Nowadays vineyards cover hillsides and flatlands all over the Montalcino village.

![Fig. 3: Distribution of Brunello farms in the area of Montalcino (http://www.consorziobrunellodimontalcino.it/)](http://www.consorziobrunellodimontalcino.it/)

The increase is principally due to the expansion of the market for *Brunello* that is now sold worldwide. Surprisingly, *Brunello* the local wine *par excellence*, become a refined symbol of

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\(^\text{12}\) They include 2100 hectares for Brunello di Montalcino; the remaining hectares are devoted to the production of cognate wines (510 hectares for Rosso di Montalcino; 50 hectares for Moscadello di Montalcino; 600 hectares for Sant’Antimo Doc; the remaining part for local certified wine (Igt)). (Consorzio de Brunello di Montalcino, http://www.consorziobrunellodimontalcino.it/it/comunicati-stampa/40-vendemmia-2009-brunello-di-montalcino-raccolto-oggi-il-primo-grappolo-di-sangiovese.html)
Tuscany only in the ‘60s when the Banfi family, an italo-american family started the production of Brunello in the Montalcino family estates and exported the wine outside of Italy. They made Brunello the symbol of Italy and based their market strategy on the preservation of local identity.\textsuperscript{13} Every year, Brunello earns around 120 million euro, from the selling of around 17 millions of bottles, and the 25% of the entire commerce is represented by the 30 millions euro gained from the selling to the U.S.\textsuperscript{14} A big international event, \textit{Welcome Brunello}, takes annually place in February in Montalcino, celebrating Tuscan folklore and tradition, and proposing a fascinating and trendy presentation of the new Brunello. Jointly, the same event takes place in New York; it is an important moment for the evaluation of the future harvesting and the commercialisation of the Brunello ready for the market. The evaluation, expressed in terms of five stars, constitutes the base for the financial investments from all over the world. While Brunello ages in the butts, international investors, from the North Europe to Japan, buy in advance a quantity of the forthcoming production in the form of ‘futures’ that are issues by the producers according to the quotations on international dedicated stock exchange. The financial and economic exchanges on Brunello strongly determines the possibility for the grapes to be cultivated, the introduction of technological devices, and, eventually, the production of wine itself, responsible for the economic solidity and reputation of the Tuscan identity.

4. A thing-based interpretation of places

Indeed, in the last two years a debate emerged between local wine producers about the ‘authenticity’ of the Brunello di Montalcino wine. The debate is about the first article of the Production Disciplinary, a legal document defining the production process and the characteristic of the product, clearly states that Brunello has to be produced, and bottled in the territory of Montalcino, with grapes cultivated in the same territory and from one single vine species: the

\textsuperscript{13}“Banfi is the name of a private holding company, founded in New York in 1919 by John Mariani, Sr. and today owned and operated by his sons and grandchildren.” (Banfi, http://www.banfivintners.com/). Banfi family declare on its website to have made its own duty to colonise and preserve authenticity wherever it goes. Wonderfully naive descriptions are dedicated to Italy: “Italy is the land of Roman Gods and Roman legions, Michelangelo and Marco Polo, Leonardo da Vinci and Lavazza, pasta and polenta, cappuccino and Columbus, Ferrari and fontina, Gucci and gladiators, gorgonzola and Galileo, pesto and Perugina. The country has an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage. Here art, food, drink, music and life cannot be separated from one another. Whereas many people live to work, Italians truly work just to live” (Banfi, http://www.banfivintners.com/index.php/wine_ed/la_dolce_vita).

\textsuperscript{14}In total the 62% of the total production is sold abroad, of which the 25% in the US, the 9% in Germany, the 7% in Switzerland, the 5% in Canada, the 3% in Japan and UK. An increasing demand comes from China, India and Korea (Cazzaniga, 2008)
Sangiovese. It sees sustainers of classic one-grape variety producers opposing the French-influenced two-grape variety producers. It does not only pertain to wine production but it also throws into question environmental, economic and social choices of local administrative bodies. A stylistic dispute opposes the classic “bright cherry-red colour, smoky aromas of rose petals and sour cherries, and an austere, angular, elegant structure” (Asimov, 2008, p.20) wine, to a new “darkner wine, softened and sweetened by new oak, with a dense, velvety texture and concentrated flavours of chocolate and black fruit” (Asimov, 2008, p.20) produced by blending Sangiovese with French vines.\(^\text{15}\) The debate makes evident how place identity is far from being so spontaneous and natural as it may appear at a first glance. Identity is rather the outcome of material practices that have a deep global relevance and connection with late-modernity. The case is an excellent example of how heterogeneous, multilayered and porous a local ‘authentic’ place can be. The interaction of heterogeneous elements (economic, informational, ecological, cultural, technological) in Montalcino area reveals to be a long-lasting process of continuous hybridisation, made up of complex interaction of people, ideas and technologies from different parts of the world, which together contributes to the shaping of its worldly recognised local identity.

In order to appreciate this non-discursive sense of the world, it is necessary to deconstruct the identity of Montalcino as a medieval town rather untouched by globalisation and witnessing the existence of a harmonic relation between locals and their locale. Despite the conventional image of place identity Montalcino suggests at the first glance, a material semiotic approach may be useful to understand its identity in terms of ‘heterogeneity’, rather than ‘authenticity’, and taking form in the interplay of different kind of entities: human, non-human and more-than-human.\(^\text{16}\)

The material semiotic approach suggests reality is in the making in the very sense that people, things, theories, forces, and various kinds of entities interact in form of network and provoke the material existence of the world. Even if the daily experience reveals humans and non-/more-than-humans do not actually dwell different worlds, it should be noted that a theoretical overcoming of their ontological separation is far from being easily grasped. In the material semiotic view, the distinction between different ontological domains is of little consequence because it attributes agency to heterogeneous networks (composed of humans, non-humans and more-than-humans).

\(^\text{15}\) Actually the possibility to produce a wine in which Sangiovese is blended with French vines already exists; the result is the high-status wine Super Tuscan. Traditionalist criticise the differentiation of producing techniques and propose to make stricter the Disciplinary rules: no more vineyards in clay soil, return to slavonian oak and abandons the barriques, returns to minimum three years in wood (Higgins, 2006).

\(^\text{16}\) ‘Non-humans’ are all those composing the so-called ‘natural world’; ‘more-than-humans’ are those partly human but having something added (such as a production chain, an aircraft…).
provided with causal potentiality, rather than to humans only on the base of their ontological status. Networks’ features signal them as endowed with political relevance: “realities are enacted, rather than pregiven, and are therefore not fixed or singular […]. It follows that there can be debates and struggles over which realities to enact and that these struggles will involve assemblages of human and nonhumans. Politics, in this sense, becomes a more-than-human affaire” (Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006, p. 124). This means that the ‘being’ itself (being a place, being an animal, being a machine…) is ‘politically relevant’: “The politics here is as much an ontological struggle, subject to various modes and forms of power, as it is an argument over how best to see matters.” (Bingham and Hinchliffe, 2008, p. 85-86).

This view signals the material traces of politics, emerging from the heterogeneous networks of people, things, procedures of standardisation, normalisation processes, rules, financial flows, living beings, chemical reactions…. It challenges the general consideration of what politics is and who is entitled to enter the political arena, by lengthening the list of beings whose acting must be considered as ‘politically relevant’. Humans and non-/more-than-humans can be equally thought as actors. Indeed,

\[\text{[a]s soon as we stop taking nonhumans as objects, as soon as we allow them to enter the network in the form of new entities with uncertain boundaries, entities that hesitate, quake, and induce perplexity, it is not hard to see that we can grant them the designation of actors. And if we take the term ‘association’ literally, there is no reason, either, not to grant them the designation of social actors (Latour, 1994).}\]

Networks assemble around a matter of concern, around ‘the stuff’ of politics (Latour, 2005). They are not bounded and clearly definable entities; they are not political subjects characterised by permanent and clearly evident features, rights, duties; they are not once-for-all given entities. They are in becoming configurations, fuzzy confluences that cannot be mapped through the simple definition of what is in and what is out. Nonetheless they can be mapped by the identification of the issues they are ‘involved’ in - the politically relevant ‘things’ they are about. By opposing a strong object-avoiding tendency in political theories, this view designs political space as the physical space in which networks are bound together around an object, a matter of concern. They are ‘directed toward’, ‘interested in’, ‘concerned with’ a public issue, and this directionality concretely shapes

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17} The term is proposed by Bruno Latour in the frame of the Action-Network-Theory. By following Greimas, he defines ‘actor’ an integral structural element upon which the narrative resolves (Latour, 2005).}\]
the world they happen to dwell: “In this frame, non-humans are not only in the backstage of political life, but they are active part of it; it is necessary to avoid any ‘discoursification’ or ‘dematerialisation’ of politics” (Marres, 2006).

5. The “Brunello affaire”: a material semiotic story

May 2008: the story starts from a quite large number of containers waiting for days and days in Livorno harbour, one of the biggest commercial harbours in the centre of Italy. In the containers a huge quantity of Brunello di Montalcino is improving its organoleptic properties and patiently waiting. The wine is always vibrant, as living beings are, but it is entrapped in the Bordeaux-type dark green bottle, stored in wooden boxes and it is standing on the bay, ready to leave Europe and to reach the US shore. Unfortunately it has no VISA to enter the New World.

This is, however, not the only ‘waiting’ wine. Not too far from Livorno harbour, in Montalcino, wine cellars 67.000 hectolitres of Brunello di Montalcino ready to leave Tuscan hills are impounded by the Italian Customs Officers.

While around 1 millions bottles quietly stay in the harbour or in the darkness of the cellars, everything around is in movement: satellites carefully inspect 400 hectares of Montalcino’s vineyards; wine receipts from Montalcino’s canteens travel to Siena, the nearest town; international newspapers and journals turn up and down the still not-official news; cameras and TVs from all over Europe reach Montalcino and start private investigations; websites flourishes of comments, posts, impressions; 1,3 millions of litres of Brunello ‘by law’ become common Red Tuscan wine; inspecting devices arrive in Montalcino, while samples of Brunello leaves the canteens to be analysed in chemical laboratories in the North of Italy; and, eventually, the Italian Minister of Agriculture prepares his speech for the meeting with the US Ambassador. Tuscany is in

18 The information about the Brunello affaire presented in this and the following section have been summarised from the press review provided by the Minister of Agriculture “Il Caso Brunello. Rassegna Stampa” (“The Brunello case. Press review”), 2008 (http://www.politicheagricole.it/default.html). The press review includes articles from some of the principal Italian and international newspaper, (La Repubbica, La Stampa, Il Corriere della Sera, Il Sole 24 ore, The Wall Street Journal, Le Figaro, Suddeutsche Zeitung, El Pais, Il Messaggero, Herald Tribune); italian reviews (L’Espresso, Panorama) and specialised websites (Wine Spector, Decanter...). Articles have been collected from the 4th of April to the 8th of July 2008.

19 This is the case of Antinori’s Brunello: 83.000 bottles of ‘fake’ Brunello have been downgraded to common Tuscan red wine by the Siena Attorney Office.
commotion: several hectolitres of wine are sequestered and ‘keep prisoners’ in the cellars or in the containers.\textsuperscript{20}

What was this commotion for? How the order of things was disturbed?

It has something to do with the \textit{Brunello di Montalcino} identity, the Montalcino and Tuscany reputation and their role of local symbols resisting globalisation. By definition, Brunello is made of 100\% Sangiovese grapes: it means that \textit{Brunello} is a mono-variety wine. The so-called ‘\textit{Brunello affaire}’ originated exactly when a large number of heterogeneous actors gathered around this ‘issue’.

In the entire process of wine-making, a strong communication process between the cellarman and the wine takes place; the grapes turned into wine and the cellarman are required to constantly cooperate by providing a constant assistance, through advanced technologies, in order to control the internal temperature, the alcoholic rate and to make the wine ‘able to speak’. Cellarmen establish a special relation with the grapes, the most, the wine through the mediation of all the technical apparatuses that allow the wine to affirm its stances in the production process, to express its relation with the global warming and the weather conditions, to affirm its preference in terms of legal norms, its connection with the norms on agricultural practices, chemical substances, biological control, commercialisation and production quotas.... As a consequence, cellarman know their wine, thanks to an intense material-communicative process. This is the reason why, they can forecast, given the quantity and the quality of grapes harvested, how much wine will be produced in the next years. In 2007, some weird cellarman’s receipts were found in the archive of the \textit{Brunello di Montalcino} Producers Consortium, the local organism representing the totality of the \textit{Brunello di Montalcino} producers. And here is the rub of the \textit{Brunello affaire}; in the betrayal of this intimate relation is the reason for bottles and vineyard to have been kept under special surveillance. It is a matter of non-correspondence between the forecast and the reality that such a strong relation is unlikely to generate.

In Montalcino’s hills, vineyards are constantly controlled, and they are mapped in special registers (when they have been planted, where they come from, how do they grow and how much they produce) in the Consortium’s archives. The 2003-2007 receipts concerning the planted vines of Sangiovese and the forecasted production presented some anomalies. The prospected production of wine was superior to the reasonably quantity that could be obtained by the declared quantities of

\textsuperscript{20} Specifically, 7.400 hectolitres of \textit{Rosso di Montalcino}, 3.300 hectolitres of \textit{Chianti} DOCG, 6.200 hectoliters of IGT \textit{Tuscan Red}. 
vineyards. The Consortium underestimated this irregular condition and granted the authorisation to commercialise *Brunello di Montalcino*.

But the ‘anomalous’ cellarman’s receipts didn’t remain silent, their voice was heard loud and the Customs Officers started a large inspecting operation on behalf of the Siena’s Public Prosecutor.

Few weeks later, the anomaly was clarified: in the hills of Montalcino there was something that was not supposed to be there, i.e. clandestines. Clandestine vines, clandestine grapes, clandestine procedures, eventually, clandestine wine. These clandestines had foreign names (as usual they have), ironically, French names: *Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Shyraz*. Their grapes fraudulently interfered with the Sangiovese in the production of *Brunello*. They have been fraudulently hidden by deceitful legal certificates, and they have been sequestered with a formal act are impeded to cooperate with human agents. The atmosphere in Montalcino became thigh. Quite outrageously, illegally introduced vines offended the name, the reputation, overturned the tradition, the local authenticity and the identity of Tuscan wine and of Italy itself. Underestimated receipts generated a huge legal and diplomatic accident; *Brunello* was charged of high betrayal. Clandestine vines infiltrated the production process of *Brunello* with the complicity of some of the largest producers: 5 of the biggest farms and 20 people were inquired for food fraud under the suspect that large quantities of fake *Brunello*, around the 30-40% have been produced from 2003 to – probably - 2007. Thanks to sophisticated chemical tests in specialised laboratories, *Brunello* started ‘to speak’; while in the Costumers officers’ bureau the producers remained silent. A great ingenuity to attribute speaking ability to humans only!

The ‘inauthentic’ *Brunello* is surprisingly sweet, ‘Frenchish’, and gentle to be only made with Sangiovese; the French vine species illegally cultivated in some areas of Montalcino hills produced grapes that have been kept in separate steel containers and, with the help of the cellarmen, they completed their fermentation process far from Sangiovese. It was only before the bottling that the content of different container was blended; and the cellarmen ‘made’ the wine. This explains how was possible to declare a certain quantity of Sangiovese grapes and an estimated quantity of *Brunello* superior to the limit of Sangiovese potential productivity. A large network assembled

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21 The cultivation of a small quantity of these vines is allowed in the area for the production of other than Brunello di Montalcino wines. In this case their presence in the vineyards exceed the allowed quantity.

22 Particularly the families under investigation were: Antinori, Banfi, Frescobaldi, Agiano, Casanova de Neri. Not all of them have been declared guilty.

23 Italians use to say that French wines are actually *made* in the cellars because they are composed of different vine varieties, not the Italians. Actually, all over the world the ‘creation’ of a wine is largely due to the work of the oenologists that are called to interpret the market and the taste trend.
around the purple, fruity and tasty red wine: its composition, its intimate relation with the land, the norms it materialises, and the identity it represents.

On 9th of May 2008 a letter from the US Alcool and Tobacco Trade Bureau (Attb), the Federal Organism on Trade of Tobacco and Alcohol, reached the Italian Minister of Agriculture. It reported a most alarming warning: from 9th of June onward, Brunello di Montalcino will be impeded to enter US borders, if the bottles will not be certified, one by one, to only contain Sangiovese. An identity certificate was required in change of a VISA. From being a legal fraud, the Brunello affaire, with the US embargo turned to be a diplomatic impasse. Because the entire food and agricultural export from Italy toward the US every year produces 1 billion euros, the case of Brunello could have been dangerous for the entire exporting sector. The news appeared in newspapers the opening day of Vinitaly – the most reputed exposition of wines in Italy, and, as if the entire castle was attached from inside, all the other Italian wines felt themselves in danger.

The Italian minister of agriculture, Luca Zaia, member of a radical right populist party, the Lega Nord, could not bear Italian (food) identity to be questioned and the proud of Italy to be under attack, so he personally decided to manage the embarrassing situation. His main concern was to reaffirm that wine is strictly linked to the territory of production and fully represents the local culture. Zaia negotiated a stand-by with the US Secretary of Treasury, Henry Paulson and the US Secretary of Agriculture Ed Shaffer. A delegation of wine-experts from the US reached Rome meet the Minister of Agriculture and another delegation of the Attb was expected in the Regional Administration Offices in Florence. In June an informative note appeared on the Attb on its web site; it stated that it requires

beginning on June 23, 2008, to withhold the release of all shipments of Brunello di Montalcino wine from CBP [Customs and Border Protection] custody unless the importer submits to CBP a statement from the Italian Government attesting that the Brunello di Montalcino meets the requirements of the Brunello di Montalcino DOCG and is acceptable for sale as such in Italy. This statement must be in English or, if in Italian, accompanied by an English translation.26

24 The block was then negotiated to be effective from the 23th of June.

25 The Minister declared that from the solution of the Brunello ‘s affaire depends the entire italian food export sector (Ferrara, 2008)

26 Attb, http://www.ttb.gov/industry_circulars/archives/2008/08-01.html. The statement was lately established to be owned by the farms and exhibited in case of request.
The Producers Consortium and the Minister of Agriculture proposed the institution of a new Guarantee Committee, including national experts and up-to-dated technologies for detaching any anomaly in the cultivation and production techniques. Thus, a reputed board is called to re-build the authenticity of Brunello and the identity of the places it represents. The fate of Montalcino moved from the local Consortium hands, to the national control where the provenience of the grapes, and the respect for the Disciplinary are certified. As a consequence, the wine was re-etiquetted for the US market and a bi-lateral commission between Rome and Washington rescued Brunello from painful identity crisis. After the institution of a guarantee commission, Brunello was free again to enter the US border.

Biopolitics (Foucault, 2003) is clearly brought about in the vineyards of Tuscany populated of chemical reagents, yeasts, computer-based bottling mechanisms, smelling stones.... The biological becomes political under special surveillance: regulated, controlled, evaluated, and continuously checked. When an error occurs is a not just a matter of counting, it rather is a matter of the highest political relevance. With general satisfaction, Brunello is now under control, its traditional production methods are now guaranteed by the use of highly technological and scientific laboratory methods. Brunello turned to be the most inspected wine of the world and the entire territory of Montalcino is nowadays constantly under control. Local identity is safe: frozen.

6. Politics in a bottle of wine

The identity of Brunello is generally regarded as a bulwark against direct competition with less expensive New World wines, so that Brunello identity is immediately political because with its own presence it represents something and imposes something else in the public arena. The effect of Brunello ‘pollution’ with clandestine grapes is not only a matter of wine contamination or Sangiovese biological pureness in the vineyards; rather, it prefigures (or, simply, makes evident?) the unavoidable ‘contamination’ of local identity, culture, food tradition, local trust and rules. In the Brunello affaire, wine and land identity revealed to be a matter of things (glass, wood, wine, workers, rules, money...) flowing from one to the other side of the world.

Despite its apparent simplicity and the claim to be an ambassador of the tradition and the local identity, Brunello revealed to be a rather complex product whose production entails a number of

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27 The efficacy of scientific analyses is however controversial because the tests involve the gas chromatography which measures volatile compound in order to identify the specific vine variety used. The margin of error is of 10% and the lack of in-depth data and experiences with these new methods implies that they can hardly be considered infallible.
advanced techniques; a large number of normative sources defining its identity, creation, existence and diffusions; massive economic and financial movements and an impressive use of marketing strategies. The evolution of technical devices such as filters able to keep up to 0,1 millimetres of particles of impurity in the wine, or to stick the bottle etiquettes faster (but needing particular kind of glue affecting the smell of wine), or the building of the cellars in concrete or crushed rock having diverse influences on the wine taste, etc..., require a broadening of the borders of what pertains to wine production. Humans and non-/more-than-humans are actively assembled in a network originated by the vital processes of the vineyards. This network includes the wine, the yeasts, the rocks, the cellarman, the oak barrels, the treatments, the Disciplinary... it constantly becomes more and more global, more and more hybrid.

If we define as ‘political’ the process of making decisions and acting in the public space, then, it inevitably will results in a much more protracted and complex affaire than suggested by the discursive political tradition. Brunello made clear the material character of politics and the necessity to enlarge the parliamentary arena outside of the Parliament. It entered the conventional political assemblies (Ministers and Chamber of Deputies, Chambers of Commerce, EU Commission, FAO Summit, US Embassy) (Melilli, 2008) and requires them to abandon the language of theory, and to speak the language of facts (chemical reagent, yeasts, etiquettes, ships...). The point is not to introduce things in Parliamentary discussions, they are obviously referred to, but to properly estimate their political relevance. Things are political because they actually have a causal power on the arrangement of the world, that is, the other way round, what political theories are intended to have.

Tuscan vineyards show how to ‘make’ politics through the arrangement of things, through the structuration of places. This originates the assembling of humans and non-humans (producers, tannins, vines, Ministers, Prosecutors Offices...), the gathering of more-than-humans agents (the Consortium’s disciplinary, futures, the Attb notes, guarantee certificates...), and the physical concentration of things (such as surveillance, production, and inspection devices...) all around the wine fluid substance. All these actors relate to each other in peculiar way: they communicate through a broad range of communication procedures and tools, and circulate in various forms. Obviously Sangiovese vineyards do not ‘stand up’ in classic political sense: their agency in the public space is mediated by devices, scientific analyses, and data humans can decode. Nonetheless, vineyards actually resist: they are resilient, opaque to the understanding; they constantly interact and produce social effect. Indeed, everybody/thing in the network act according to its own nature

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28 For instance, the Italian Parliament debated the Brunello affaire as a point of order on the 28th of May 2008.
(law regulates, vineyards grows or not, grapes interact with the iron and the calcium in the soil, filters analyse the fluids...) and they oppose resistance in terms of frictions and reactions.

Furthermore, the material-semiotic description shows that local identity does not naturally grown out of the soil but it is generated and preserved by a long retinue of global-based practices and connections. Brunello reveals not to be a symbolic projection of the ancestral narratives of local identity; rather it is an actor of global politics. It makes present distant things, people and events, it makes evident in a tiny spot of land huge global mechanisms: international trade rules and large distribution chains, the European business of vines and grapes, financial interventions in the material economy, WTO liberalisations, grape harvesters coming from East Europe and working with monthly contracts together with young volunteer from the Western World, cellarmen and production technologies from all over the world, international jet-set and taste-inspired emotions....

Brunello is at the same time a product of globalisation and a bulwark against it. It creates a politically relevant local identity supported by global mechanisms; because without these mechanisms it would not be able to present itself as the champion of the true local. Indeed, Brunello may exists as such only if produced according to determined techniques: allowed to ferment and rest in specific physical conditions, in contact with some specific material (such as wood and rocks), analysed in specialised laboratories, inspected by the experts and certified by authorised bodies. From the level of the Consortium rules to WTO decisions, a wine as Brunello is part of a large number of scales of governance. An impressive number of actors are involved in producing a single bottle of Brunello, so that is almost ridiculous to call it a ‘local’ product. The introduction of further norms, controls and certificates issued by ad-hoc committees or laboratories, paradoxically, while confirms that the investigated wine is an ‘authentic Brunello di Montalcino’, at the same time makes it less authentic. Indeed, it dissociates nature and traditional knowledge from the wine by the institution a highly technological, mediated, controlled production process. What Brunello represents – unchanged traditions, local folklore, natural food, harmonious way of live, artistic inspiration, cultural landscape... - is preserved (and, eventually, it is made possible to exist) by the use of massive modern hybrids devices, procedures, and technologies.

The story of Montalcino’s wine contests a concept of local identity as closure and demonstrate that, paradoxically, we need the global to protect the local and any further attempt at separateness

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29 WTO required European Union to modify its law on etiquettes (seen as a protectionist act) so to allow common wine names (such as Brunello, Est!Est!Est!, Morellino...) without reference to a geographical territory (Brunello di Montalcino, Morellino di Scansano, Est!Est!Est! di Montefiascone...) to be used even in other than the ‘original’ region of production.
requires interrelatedness. Local identity is, for a large part, a political invention - a desirable one, still an invention.

Nonetheless, power of imagination is strong; but power of materiality is even stronger. The skyline of the Tuscany rolling hills is the product of the woods falling from the Roman Age onward, and of the demolition of dry walls to facilitate tractors in agricultural practice. The maintenance of stone-built houses is due to the lack of industrial investments in the area, that was considered, considered in the ‘50s an underdeveloped area, so that lots of inhabitants left. House prices lowered and people from other Countries, mainly British, North Americans, Germans, and French, bought them to recreate the Tuscany described by their romantic literature.

Contrary to the interpretation of humanistic geography, in order to understand the identity of a place, it is not sufficient to dig its terroir but it is necessary to investigate the surface where networks cross. The view of small and bounded locales as alternatives to globalisation, endangered by the standardising global economics is only partially justified. Places are neither the victims of the globalisation, nor the redoubts against the global. A unidirectional influence from global to local is rather unlikely because when global meets local the effects are quite unpredictable. As geographer Doreen Massey affirms, this view shows that conflict over local and global is not an issue of “just abstract geography (local/global) but of the relationship between that geography and the already existing, and unequal, distribution of power and resources” (Massey, 1995b, p.18).

Space and politics concern the production of inequality, division, exclusion, contestation, resistance and inclusion: “[w]hat are at the issue are the constantly-being-produced new geometries of power, the shifting geographies of power-relations” (Massey, 2005, p.85). Places are fluid ‘tissues’ made of complex power-geometries, which connect people, places, objects, information, and processes around the globe by giving a different weight to every relation; they can be variously structured according to the position, the history, the aspirations and the physical bounds. As a consequence, any fundamentalist sense of place is difficult to support, because “place are criss-crossing in the wider power-geometries that constitute both themselves and the global” (Massey, 2005, p.101).

Across permeable boundaries things move constantly and identities blend, so that the identity of places which people campaign to defend is the product, in large measure, of a long history of connections with other places and other stories. This challenges the idea that, in order to preserve a place’s identity, it is necessary to freeze it, to make it static, to close it up. On the contrary it requires a much more complex continuous negotiation between plural and hybrid actors.

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30 D. Massey, ‘The conceptualisation of place’ in D. Massey and P. Jess (eds), A Place in the World?
As a result, the specific feature of every place is provided by a sort of ‘negotiation’ of ‘here and now’ which must take place between both human and nonhumans (Massey, 2005). Indeed, places revealed to be spaces of embodiment and mutability, space of motion traced by different paths, dislocations, migrations through the time, space of complicated and unexpected relations; every place is the outcome of temporary meeting up of cultures, history, political designs, geological events, economic strategies, nonhuman animals, environmental feedbacks, technological products, information and so on. Place identity is exactly given by the uniqueness of a place’s constituting relations.

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