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Citation	Davis, Alexandria Marie. "La dolce vita: Was it Ever Roman, or Did it Always Belong to the Americans?". BA Thesis, John Cabot University, Rome, Italy. 2025.
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Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14490/1035">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14490/1035</a>



**John Cabot University**

Department of Modern Languages and Literature

Bachelor of Arts in Italian Studies

Minor in Political Science

Minor in History

***La dolce vita: Was it Ever Roman, or Did it  
Always Belong to the Americans?***

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Spring 2025

## Abstract

This thesis examines the origins, cultural meaning, and evolution of the concept of *la dolce vita*, questioning whether it was and still is an intrinsically Roman idea, or an American construction shaped by foreign perceptions. Analyzing the historical, economical, and social context of post-war Rome, this study explores the transformation of the city after the Second World War from a period of economic hardship to the glamor of the 1950s. It investigates the influence of American culture in Rome during this period, particularly through the lens of cinema and celebrity culture on Via Veneto. Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) is, therefore, central to this discussion, as it both defined and reinterpreted the phenomenon, ingraining it in the collective imagination.


This thesis also considers the legacy of *la dolce vita* as a phenomenon today, exploring its commodification in tourism, fashion, and the media. Through historical events, film analysis, and contemporary cultural studies, this research illustrates how *la dolce vita* has gone from being a lived experience to a globalized myth, perpetuated in different ways both by Italians and Americans. Ultimately, this thesis highlights how the Roman *dolce vita* is less of a historical reality and more of a constructed dream by foreigners and a profit opportunity for hospitality and tourism businesses in Rome that continues to shape the perception of the Eternal City.

## Methodology

La metodologia impiegata comprende diverse tecniche di ricerca. Ho rovistato tre le pile di libri nella biblioteca della JCU come: *Mezzo Secolo di Dolce Vita* di Boarini Vittorio (2009), *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* di Paul Ginsborg (2003), *The Oxford Handbook of the Italian Economy since Unification* di Gianni Toniolo (2013), *La solitudine del satiro* di Ennio Flaiano (1996), utilizzato principalmente per il primo capitolo. Per il secondo capitolo, sono state utilizzate fonti sia online che cartacee della Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma Per l'analisi dei comportamenti e dello stile di vita *della dolce vita* durante gli anni '50, nonché libri italiani come: *Dolce Vita gossip: star, amori, mondanità e kolossal negli anni d'oro di Cinecittà* di Aruelio Magistà et al. (2007), E "*un mito e il suo futuro: progetto di riqualificazione dell'immagine di Via Veneto, profilo storico, documenti di vita e cultura*" di Giulianelli, Sandro, and Antonio Simbolotti (1985) e archivi di riviste online. Per il terzo capitolo, altre fonti non accademiche hanno fornito il materiale principale per mostrare gli usi odierni *della dolce vita*. Ho utilizzato la mia esperienza personale di americana che vive a Roma da oltre due anni e studia la cultura italiana, così come la mia esperienza lavorativa in un albergo di lusso a cinque stelle a Roma per guidare la ricerca sugli alberghi, i film e i tour in cui si fa riferimento alla dolce vita. Utilizzando i siti web dei tour, sono stata in grado di mostrare l'abbondanza di tour collegati al fenomeno e, quindi, la grande richiesta che ne consegue. Ho messo a confronto riferimenti fotografici presi dai social media e dai siti web degli hotel di lusso a cinque stelle per mostrare come abbiano sfruttato il termine per attrarre turisti e offrire i propri tour. infine, ho adoperato film e serie TV americane per mostrare come il riferimento al concetto di *la dolce vita* continui ancora oggi, nonostante tutti gli stereotipi che porta con sé.

## Acknowledgments

I first want to say thank you to my family, who unquestionably supported my decision to move to Italy on my own at the age of 19, and study Italian. As for my process for this thesis and the way it turned out, that is thanks to three amazing women. My second reader, Valentina Dorato, helped me discover my passion for the Italian language and culture, and, additionally, has always supported me through the learning process, especially when I felt like I couldn't be any worse at Italian. Nicoletta Romano, for sitting there with me and listening to my wholly unorganized thought process and helping me untangle it, which goes beyond her job description, and for the hours that we spent trying to figure out how to cite sources that seemed to hide themselves in the abyss of academia, and lastly, Federica Capoferri, I met a little over a year ago, but has forever changed my life. I have never had someone advocate for my success as hard as she does, and for that, I will forever be grateful. She continuously helps me see my potential, and her faith in me has helped shape who I am today.



The cherry red vintage Vespa races around the Colosseum, driven by Marcello, and behind him, the foreign woman with her colorful neck scarf and perfectly tailored dress blowing in the wind with her sunglasses just a bit too big for her face. She turns to look at you and says: “this is *la dolce vita*.” Then, they drive off into the sunset.

This is the typical American image of Rome’s *la dolce vita*, or at least the first thing that comes to mind when they ponder about their upcoming Roman vacation.

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# 1. Rome Before the Social Action of *la dolce vita*<sup>1</sup>

## An Introduction to the Effects of World War Two in Rome

Rome, being 1,287 square kilometers, is an extensive city in Europe with one of the most significant religious capitals in the world: the Vatican (Smith 31). Having been heavily convoluted and entangled in WWII, Rome was left vulnerable to many questions about the reconstruction of the city and the country of Italy as a whole. From the question of what to do with the government after the 20-year-long Fascist regime, and how to rehabilitate the intangible aspects, such as the suffering economy, and the daily culture, to the physical reconstruction of bombed buildings of the city. While Northern Italy rebounded from the war relatively quickly, the South remained one step behind, which is why each city and region has its own story of reconstruction. It was a “land that emerged from the Second World War on the edge of starvation, surviving only by generous injections of foreign aid” (Hilderbrand 4).

In 1943, the Allied Forces arrived in Sicily, a tactical move that would quickly end the reign of fascist Rome (Ginsborg 11). Rome had been bombed for the first time by the American Allied Forces mainly in a neighborhood that at the time was referred to as *Città Universitaria*, today known as the La Sapienza campus, “killing about 3000 and wounding more than 13,00 people,” leaving the district barren and shattered (Rabun M Taylor et al. 336). The 19th of July 1943, was the first day Rome received a bombing by the Allied Powers (the Americans) with more than

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<sup>1</sup> *La dolce vita*, with the article lowercase, is referring to the social phenomenon, whereas if the article (La) is uppercase, it is then referring to the film *La dolce vita* (1960) by Federico Fellini.

four thousand bombs dropped hitting the neighborhood of San Lorenzo, *Città Universitaria*, with around seven hundred and seventeen victims, as well as the quarters of Prenestino, Tiburtino, and Tuscolano which amounted to around three thousand victims with an additional forty thousand without housing because of the ten thousand houses that were destroyed (“Il bombardamento del quartiere San Lorenzo”). Shortly after, Benito Mussolini’s political demise was marked on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1943, when his own grand council and King Vittorio Emanuele voted him out of office, but this process lasted 45 days. It wasn’t until September 3<sup>rd</sup>, “by the signing of the secret armistice between Italy and the Allies,” that he officially removed his claws from the city of Rome (Ginsborg 13). Though Mussolini was mostly out of the picture, The Nazis, who had already sunken their roots in Rome, attempted to take advantage of the power vacuum and leverage their power in Rome but were only able to for about nine months, after which the Allies liberated Rome on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1944, and remained until the end of the war (Rabun M Taylor et al. 339). The Romans were the only ones who did not “attempt an insurrection” before the arrival of the Allies, due to the massacre of 335 prisoners which the Germans carried out at the Ardeatine caves months before in response to the Roman partisans blowing up “32 German military police” (Ginsborg 53). Therefore, the political turnover was made by the end of the war, the referendum on the Republic, and the then first free elections. There were parts of Rome that were not as afflicted by the war as those in San Lorenzo like the center of the city and Parioli, notably two of the more affluent places in Rome. Rome’s “Luxury’ Parioli district” was one area that was still quite desirable by those who sought “gardens, exclusive residences and villas, quiet streets” and comfort before the 50s (Bozzola et al. 208).

## **Marshall Aid**

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1947, George Marshall (the American Secretary of State at the time) publicly declared the plan for the reconstruction of Europe (Zamagni 324). The reasoning behind this was that the U.S. was in need of trading partners because “at the end of the war three-quarters of the world’s invested capital and two-thirds of its industry capacity were concentrated in the United States” (Ginsborg 78). The problem arose when it was “dogged by policy disagreements and rivalries between different departments and organizations” (79). Therefore, aid reached the top of Italian society the “capitalists”, but the working class remained in the same condition as before (*ibidem*). The plan did, however, achieve both an important helping hand in the reconstruction of Italy and “guaranteed American cultural hegemony and economic expansion in Europe and especially in Italy” (Paulicelli 163).

## **The Unemployment Crisis & Housing Crisis Post-WWII**

Rome had experienced brutalities on all fronts and putting the city back together was going to be a hard feat for just the Italian government and its citizens to do on their own. Rome suffered after the war and recovery from Fascist occupation was slow and incomplete leaving Rome culturally, if not dead” “certainly crippled” (Hughes 440). The population of the city reached 1,550,815 million at the end of 1946 and by the start of the *dolce vita* Phenomenon at the end of 1950, the population was 1,678,664 (Comune di Roma 16).

The cost of living had skyrocketed twenty-three times what it was before the war during the years of 1938 to 1945 (*ibidem*). “Jobs and money were still scarce, the housing crisis reached emergency levels, and thousands of families were homeless.” (Rabun M Taylor et al. 339). In 1947 1.6 million Italians were without jobs (Ginsborg 79). An all-party parliament inquest was

carried out which found that in Rome, in the year 1952, “93,054 people were still living in shacks, caves, cellars, etc.” while another “9,701 lived in former barracks, schools, and camps” (188-89). From the years 1948 to 1952, the Institute for Popular Housing in Rome received “29,00 applications for dwellings and had been able to satisfy only 1,511 of them” (188). While 34% of the rooms constructed in Bologna were part of the statewide “Plans for Economic and Popular Housing” only 7.4% of the rooms built in Rome were allotted to this plan, showing a great disparity between Rome and the North of Italy yet again (296).

In contrast to those more opulent areas of Rome like the center and Parioli, the recovery from the war in the peripheries of Rome took a while longer, which could partly be blamed on its “perpetually weak immune system” that the government’s city plans had always “offered too little, too late” (Rabun M Taylor et al. 338). The corrupt housing system was due to the infrastructure having only been built in favor of how, when, and where private interests such as *Società Generale Immobiliari* (the main developers in Rome at the time) dictated, “without regard for building norms or safety regulations” (Ginsborg 246-7).

To make things worse, the “1966 rent control law was lifted, driving up rents and propelling Romans into wholly new urban quarters, legal or not, outside the city walls.” In 1957, an optimistic and incomplete census recorded that there were 54,000 citizens living in the *Borghetti* outside the city, including around 13,703 families in caves (Bozzola et al. 212-123). Meanwhile, the city center was “treated like a museum: “*Per favore, non toccare*” (Rabun M Taylor et al. 341). As a whole, “Housing policy was a disgrace” and made the grave situation worse for those who were struggling financially (340).

## The Protagonist of the Italian Lifestyle in the 50s: FIAT

FIAT (*Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino*) has always been a symbol of the “Italian lifestyle,” but today the FIAT has been added to the *la dolce vita* vocabulary and is being used to sell tours of Rome marketed as a way to experience or relive *la dolce vita* bourgeoisie lifestyle. However, during the height of the 50s and 60s, the FIAT was more a car of the common Italian than of the more affluent inhabitants of Rome. While the FIAT was featured a few times in *La dolce vita*, it was not fantasized about as it is today, and in fact, there were many other cars in the film, such as the various models of Alfa Romeo. The FIAT, on the other hand, was reserved “alle ‘comparse’ della dolcevita romana, come i papparazzi” (Mariani). The reason FIAT became so widespread in Italy was thanks to a financial plan made by the Italian government to obtain American funds to support mass production. The plan was missing one element: a way to entice the Americans, an incentive per se (Zamagni 329). FIAT offered to be a part of the plan proposing to produce steel with the newfound funds, which was put into practice somewhat later than estimated, but “they nevertheless guaranteed the plan total success,” evidently shown in 1952, when the country had already superseded the production of 3 million tons of Italian steel that were planned for by another half ton extra (*ibidem*). For the first time, the Italian citizens and the world saw “more than one hundred thousand vehicles...produced in a year” (Toniolo 429). Due to its low running cost and push to focus on internal production by the Italian government, FIAT became the car that everyone used (*ibidem*). It was in 1955 that FIAT introduced “the first authentic Italian people’s car,” the FIAT 600, which was shortly followed by the one we all know too well: the FIAT 500. Ten years later, FIAT production reached over 500k units and then exponentially increased in 1966 when “it exceeded the 1.5 million mark” (*ibidem*). In 1959 FIAT was one of three Italian-owned corporations that made the edition of

*Fortune*'s list of the 100 largest non-American industrial firms (Hilderbrand 377). Today, the FIAT company is owned by the Stellantis company from the Netherlands ("FIAT").

So, while the FIAT today is considered part of *la dolce vita* trope by international tourists (mainly Americans), historically, it was never seen that way because those who frequented Via Veneto didn't drive the "people's car," but instead more classy cars of the time such as Cadillacs and Alfa Romeo's.

### **The Italian Economic Miracle**

The Italian Economic Miracle took place in what is called the Golden Age which was a period of rapid European industrialization and economic growth where Italy became the leading Western European country in the modernization and improvement of the economy after WW2 (Di Martino and Vasta 285). It was the "key period in an extraordinary process of transformation that was taking place in the everyday life of Italians" (Ginsborg 239). However, the changes were not uniform as the North and South divide was always present, nor were they instantaneous, but it was a "miracle" (*ibidem*).

During the Economic Miracle, Italy increased its per capita income, which rose from 100 in 1950 to 243.1 in 1970, in comparison to France's increase in the same years which showed only a 36% difference, and the UK's which increased by 32% (*ibidem*). Italy's GDP between 1950 and 1973 was at "5.0 percent versus the 3.8 percent average of the twelve Western European countries" (Di Martino and Vasta 285). When the 1951 census was conducted, 44 percent of Italy's workers were still in the agricultural sector, which could have allowed Italy to move the "unskilled workers to more productive sectors," but politicians at the time decided to put their focus on the importation and exportation of goods instead of implementing an import-

substitution policy which was shown in the doubling of their exportation between the years of 1950 and 1973 (*ibidem*). Import substitution policy is the act of creating a more domestic-dependent production for goods instead of outsourcing to foreign resources (*ibidem*). At the same time, the exportation of “popular products,” such as “Vespa motor scooters, Fiat automobiles” and other industrial goods, was on the rise (Bondanella and Pacchioni 251). At the turn of the decade, Italian family households were starting to modernize with a larger presence of households owning a TV (a symbol of modernity at the time) that by 1965 reached 49%, paradoxically to the 12% in 1958 (Ginsborg 239). Italy was able to combat inflation by implementing a strict monetary policy, and a large investment into infrastructure and physical capital which can be attested to the influx of American financial support, “the low cost in energy (vital in a country without coal or oil), and the relatively low exchange rate of the Lira (Di Martino and Vasta 286). During this time, Italy saw a “successful period for [the] Italian productive system” but this could differ considerably based on the type of business and, who owned it and what their business practices were (*ibidem*). It was additionally suggested that it was the state-owned businesses that saw the most success, such as *l’Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* (IRI) and *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* (ENI), between the years of 1952 and 1962, where their fixed investment doubled the figure held by private firms held (*ibidem*). However, not all private firms were suffering, namely the ones that made financial deals with the government such as FIAT (287).

Just because it was an Economic Miracle, doesn't mean Italy was without its faults or the famous grey zone. The article “Reassessing the Italian Economic Miracle: Law, Firms Governance and Management, 1950-1973” by Paolo Di Martino and Michelangelo Vasta, highlights the scholarly discussion on the lack of competition and poor enforcement of firm

governance (285). They cite that Fabrizio Barca emphasizes the state's failure to reform which left companies unsupported by the government and prone to the temptation of tax evasion. In contrast, Ginsborg argues that the "comprise without reform" was done intentionally to protect interests such as small business owners, offering a conclusion that it might not have been the lack of competition that caused inefficiency in companies but that it could have been "rooted in inefficient rules of the game, which provided distorting incentives to business owners." (*ibidem*).

### **The Roman Olympics**

As the Romans were rebuilding their lives, the bid for the 1960s Olympics was accepted and programmed to be held in Rome (Rabun M Taylor et al. 337). Originally, the dream of Mussolini to hold the Olympics in EUR had been cancelled because of the war, but the "dream came to oblique fruition when the venue, renamed Foro Italico, hosted the 1960 Olympics" (*ibidem*). In preparation for the Olympics, the new metro line B that connects Rome Termini to EUR was opened, new roads were built, and the bus system was expanded in 1955 ("Our History"). At the same time, the Fiumicino Airport was opened, though it was not entirely finished in time for the games (*ibidem*). In 1960, Italy did indeed host the Summer Olympics in Rome, which would "restore Italy's international prominence after the disgraces of the war and boosts its stagnant economy" (342). It was also the first Olympics to be televised (343). The 1960s "indeed marked a turning point" both because of what the Olympics brought and the push towards a healthier economy (344). Tourists "rediscovered Rome... arriving by the tens of thousands for the Olympics, some stayed on, captivated by *la dolce vita*" (*ibidem*). As a result, many residences became hotels or pensions to accommodate the influx of tourists. One of the most notable was the American-owned Hilton hotel, built on Montemario behind the Vatican to (the Rome

Cavalieri, A Waldorf Astoria Hotel) (*ibidem*). It was built on public parkland and “that decision... still rankles with Romans more than 60 years later” (*ibidem*).

Even though “Recovery from fascist occupation was slow and incomplete” Rome and Italy were able to recover at a somewhat fast rate (Hughes 440). Between the years of 1947 and 1961, the economy “attained a steady 5.9 percent annual growth rate” rebuilding its industries and becoming an international trading powerhouse, which added quite a bit to its capital (Hilderbrand 381). The unemployment problem was mostly overcome, inflation was maintained, and in the end, “ordinary standards of life” were improved (*ibidem*). What makes this a miracle is that this was all done after the city had been demolished by a world war, thousands of bombs, poor legislation (even after the war ended), and a quite bankrupt economy (*ibidem*).

## **2. The Formation of The Social Action of *la dolce vita* and the Effect of the Film on the World.**

The *dolce vita* social phenomenon was only defined/named after Federico Fellini’s eponymous (1960) film came out. The arrival of the stars in Rome during the so-called Hollywood on the Tiber, “had the greatest impact on the imagination, customs, and perceptions of glamour” (Gundle 100). Meaning that their arrival created a whole new way of life, or a social phenomenon sequestered only to those who fit the profile. International celebrities (mainly Americans) lived a lavish lifestyle in Rome while filming and played into what one could almost compare to the American phenomenon of the 1920s called the “roaring twenties”. There was a new, somewhat rebellious feeling in the air filled with sex, scandal, fashion, food, and of course, luxury; but the difference between *la dolce vita* and the Roaring Twenties is that *la dolce vita*

was a phenomenon enclosed in the singular road of Via Veneto, even though it lived in the minds of many around the world.

Fellini's film contributed to and created a large conception of the idea of *la dolce vita* in the 50s, but it was, in fact, the film that chronologically came after the social life on Via Veneto as was in part, inspired by the social phenomenon consequently, forging a perception of Rome as the city where one would experience *la dolce vita* as it is intended in today's language. So, in this case, *la dolce vita* has a timeline that goes backward, forwards, and side to side because of all of its different meanings, history, and concepts that it has picked up over its lifetime.

In 1952, Rome became the set of *Roman Holiday (Vacanze Romane)* filmed by William Wyler. The movie is particularly known for its scene of Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck on a Vespa exploring a part of the historical center, which is now one of the most well-known tropes of what *la dolce vita* currently means in today's context. The famous scene with Audrey Hepburn on the Vespa with Gregory Peck driving around Rome became burned into the brains of Americans as the image that represents Rome. They also wanted to drive around the ancient monuments of the Eternal City in the cute, colored scooters with their neck scarves flowing in the wind.

To give this social phenomenon a single, simple definition would be an insult to the intricacy of what it was and represented, nor can one sentence sum up all that happened. Therefore, the best way to define *la dolce vita* is not as one singular idea or tangible thing, but as a multitude of facts that together by its transformation over time, represent *la dolce vita*.

## American Culture in Rome

Soon after the Second World War, American culture began to spread itself through the country, to the point where only Americans were able to “infiltrate” the dating culture, and the arts culture that Rome held so dear: from Roman New Orleans Jazz Band to the New York Art Foundation that existed on Isola Tiberina, to the 1958 Jackson Pollock exhibition that was in the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna (140-41).

An aspect associated with the American culture in Rome was the term “Hollywood on the Tiber” or, in Italian “*Hollywood sul Tevere*”, which came out of the 50s and was coined by the *Time* magazine during the making of *Quo Vadis* (1951) directed by Mervyn LeRoy (Cinema: Hollywood on the Tiber”). The term referred to the seemingly rapid increase in American celebrities who came to use Cinecittà to film their movies. It wasn’t that Hollywood Studios had physically moved on to the Tiber River itself, but it was another way to reference that a large portion of the Hollywood industry had taken an interest in the city of Rome (Magistà 44).

By the 1950s, in the years after WW2, the demand for domestic film increased, and in order to satisfy this demand, Rome answered the call. Cinecittà was rebranded and marketed both to the Italian film production industry as well as to Hollywood, so as to bring more international attention to the Italian film industry and answer the desires of Italian society. In this same decade, “70% of the revenue from entertainment in Italy [was] spent on filmgoing” thanks to not only the previously stated focus on funding more movie studios but the movie houses that screened the films as well; this entertainment was a push from the top (movie sets/studios), bottom (theaters) and even side (international film production presence in Italy (*ibidem*)). Simultaneously, the box offices from 1946 to 1955 increased four times their original fixture

(*ibidem*). in the 1950s of the films shown in Italian theaters, more than two-thirds were American-produced and the remaining were Italian (*ibidem*).

It can be stated that one of the reasons that Americans came to Rome was to feel the freedom that the city had to offer or, contrarily, to “run away” from the “stricter” America as well as an exemption for taxes if one stayed for at least eighteen months in Italy (Magistà 10). In terms of places to work, it couldn't get much better than Rome: there was good food, more freedom, large and relatively inexpensive studios, the city was an international hub for celebrities, and the choice of living in a villa on Via Appia Antica or on the Via Veneto, a street one could spend the entire day and night on and never get bored.

Cinecittà was originally inaugurated in 1937 by Mussolini. By the Fifties, it became the perfect hotspot for films starring a mix of Italians and Americans. What brought Cinecittà to the attention of the Americans and the Hollywood industry was in the 1950s, “the cheapness of Rome production and the attractions of the city itself- what American actor wasn't going to prefer living in a grand Roman hotel to working in Hollywood” (Hughes 451-452). Before the war, there were very few celebrities who had visited Rome, but as the enticement of the city and the Cinecittà studio became more prominent year after year, the stars would flow in one after another (Gundle 100). Cinecittà had also undergone a major reconstruction and renovation because of the Marshall Plan that had put Cinecittà as the “third highest recipient of funds,” allowing it to emerge as a “nexus of filmmaking” (Ulrich 114). Not only did the funds go toward the renovation, but the money that poured into Cinecittà, on account of the Sottosegretario allo Spettacolo e al Turismo at the time Giulio Andreotti, from that of the Marshall Plan, was allotted to those who chose to film at Cinecittà, including the American's because the “profits from the US-produced films shot in Italy were locked in the country (115). This led to an influx of

American films set in Cinecittà and or the City of Rome, such as the already mentioned *Roman Holiday*, *Three Coins in a Fountain* by Jean Negulesco (1954) and *Cleopatra* Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1963).

## **The Newspapers**

As social life in Rome increased post-war, the “worst kind of celebrity journalists grew into a cottage industry in Rome with its center on the Via Veneto, where the American and European actresses and actors came to see and to be seen” (Bondanella and Pacchioni 252). The increase of Americans in Rome didn’t always receive a warm welcome as an article from October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1954, in the popular magazine *Epoca* stated that “non pagano le tasse e mangiano gli spaghetti... ingrassano nelle trattoria e frequentano i caffè di via Veneto” (40). At the same time, the city appreciated the beauty that came with the influx of international actresses as another article in *Epoca*, published on May 31, 1959, was entitled “Vengono in Italia le bellissime di tutto il mondo” with photos of Liz Taylor, Anita Ekberg, and Kim Novak (45). They caught celebrities like Gianfranco Piacentini and Astrid Johansen (a friend of Anita Ekberg, the icon of Fellini’s movie) having fun at the Trevi Fountain, falling in, and drinking Jonny Walker, the drink of the American celebrities who frequented Via Veneto (48).

The American newspapers, on the other hand, in order to market Fellini’s *La dolce vita* in the United States claimed that the scenes were “ispirate a fatti veri accaduti nella società romana nel decennio precedente” (Harrington 183). This sold *La dolce vita* the Americans because they believed what they were seeing was really how one lived in Rome, a way of fantasizing as one does today. The international gazette gossip about the film only added fuel to the fire of the American fantasy of *la dolce vita* that “[si] rendeva... sempre più appetibile, come l’assaggio di

un frutto proibito” (*ibidem*). Fellini even admitted to having been contacted numerous times by international news outlets “Americans especially,” that would resort to “begging [him] to introduce them to the mysteries, erotic or intellectual, that supposedly have their beginnings and end in Via Veneto” and him having to convince them that the Via Veneto that he created was “fictitious” (195).

### **Via Veneto from the 50s to 60s**

From Fellini’s *La dolce vita* to the luxurious cafes, hotels, and infamous location of Via Veneto in Rome, this street was at the epicenter of the Roman high life and an international celebrity magnet; this single street in Rome is where everyone who was anyone would socialize, gossip, have infamous affairs, and stroll along the couple hundred yard long Via Veneto in the 50s and early 60s. The movie *La dolce vita* would not be filmed until 1960, but the street and those who populated it were already living *la dolce vita*. While it attracted public figures from all over the world, it appealed most to American Hollywood directors, actors, actresses, and enthusiasts alike. The ample increase in American films based in Rome during those years created a world of movie stars and jet setters who would film movies at Cinecittà during the day and at night strolling the streets of Via Veneto. With all of the little tables and umbrellas overflowing with the Romans and Americans of the film world, one could say that it seemed like “una Parigi di mare” (Magistà 2). Via Veneto has also been described as a “beach-like playground for the celebrated and rich” because of all of the colorful umbrellas that the Americans would saunter around with (Ulrich 116).

With the mix of individuals that populated the street, it was seen very much as a “matrice culturale” as were the sets and casting of films in Rome/Cinecittà (3). Those who would frequent

Via Veneto were artists, intellectuals, journalists, and most of all those of the film industry, “sempre più numerosa” that could be seen at the tables (4). Via Veneto, which was later “depicted in *La dolce vita*, became the hub of Roman nightlife” (Paulicelli 171). The celebrities would flock to Via Veneto from the film studios in Cinecittà because the actors and actresses “felt freer in a foreign environment,” creating “conduct and misconduct in the Eternal City” (Ulrich 114). During the day celebrities could be seen on Via Veneto, in fact, “era facile incontrale... all’ora dell’aperitivo” (Gnoli 2023). Via Veneto hosted many eventful nights not only in the street itself but in the exclusive hotels that populated it, such as Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra’s numerous dalliances that, as legend has it, could be seen at the Via Veneto’s Excelsior Hotel (Conway Morris). Ennio Flaiano, one of the main screenwriters of *La dolce vita*, described the late night/early morning as the intellectuals have already gone to bed, “Arrivano col rombo delle automobili da corsa le grandi firme del cinema... c’è la Ferrari di Rossellini, La Jaguar di Raf Vallone etc.” each drinking a whiskey like the American actors, as it was seen as “segno di elezione e di stile” (*L’Europeo* qtd. in Magistà 4). Some hopeful business owners and paparazzi would incite the actors to come as special guests or improvise a dance at the nightclub in order to gain their business or get the perfect photo (4).

Similarly, there were tempestuous spats between Anita Ekberg and her husband, Anthony Steek, appearances from Audrey Hepburn and Tennessee Williams, and of course, the “decadent partying of filmdom’s elite” (Ulrich 114). Extravagance was the fashion of the street with fancy cars, new Roman fashion, and an occasional “Leopard on a leash as a lapdog” (Conway Morris). The fashion that Via Veneto exuded was that of high fashion Roman atelier such as Fernanda Gattinoni, Emilio Schuberth (called the “Tailor of the Stars”), and Sorelle Fontana, who would make tailor-made costumes for the movie sets whose actors would then reach out to wear their

items out in public (Gnoli 2023). Le Sorelle Fontana most notably made dresses for Tyrone Power's wedding in 1949, and the wedding of Audrey Hepburn and James Hanson that was canceled because she met Mel Ferrer as well as for the film *Contessa Scalza*. Rome came in as a close second to the "center for alta moda" which contributed a great deal to the reconstruction of the Eternal City post-war (Paulicelli 163).

This street hasn't always been filled with Americans and international elites but was once a regularly frequented spot by famous Italian writers and critics such as Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Gianfranco Contini, and many Romans and Italian artists (Ulrich 116). However, by the 50s, it became the haunting grounds of American celebrities. (*ibidem*). The transformation of the Via Veneto "da centro intellettuale a grande scenario della dolce vita viene registrata dai giornali con puntuale, fisiologico ritardo" (Magistà 7). With what was the growing success of the Cinecittà studios, the Italian artists who frequented the famous street were rapidly replaced by those who were known in the international world of film (4). This also attracted those who aspired to be one of the stars who lived "la dolce vita" on the streets of Via Veneto, increasing the number of persons on the quarter mile-long street (*ibidem*).

Ennio Flaiano, one of the most noted observers and writers on the Via Veneto as well as Federico Fellini's screenwriter for *La dolce vita* and many other films, made a collection of 'papers' about his observations and experiences on Via Veneto. In May of 1955, he observes the sunny days on the street where the women "entrano e escono dai negozi... I giornalisti s'incontrano e si domandano: "che fai?" (Flaiano 255). He recounted being asked to pose for a French journalist who requested that he pose at a table in a natural way to get that classic shot of the famous people at the tables along the sidewalk of Via Veneto (*ibidem*). Flaiano recorded that those who drink liquor at the bars on Via Veneto, "diventano col tempo oggetto di ammirazione,

perché rivelano un'abitudine ai viaggi, al mondo di vita europeo" (263). He described the chats he would overhear about the cinema of the time, the deserted bars after 7 pm, yet it was still called "via dei Cappucini" which was, as Flaiano explains, "la strada centrale di un quartiere d'abitazione popolare" and filled with characters such as "ricchi borghesi, alte cariche dello Stato" but Via Veneto was not always like this (270). At a certain point the "poveri andarono nelle case dei ricchi e via Veneto divenne la strada elegante, si riempì di alberghi, di caffè..." (*ibidem*).

### **Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita***

Fellini's *La dolce vita* was a powerful piece of art that touched many aspects of Rome, Italy, and the world since it came out in 1960. The film was represented "as a landmark pointing to important changes in Italian and European Society" (Bondanella and Pacchioni 250). It followed the life of Marcello Rubini, played by Marcello Mastroianni, who internally struggles with wanting to be a part of the superficial environment that the *dolce vita* life provided and the life he came to Rome for: the life of a serious writer/intellectual. The reason that this film left a lasting impression on the world was because of how it showed the curious phenomenon of the celebrities on Via Veneto living in their bubble of luxury, which was very sheltered and opposite of what most people experienced in the time after the Second World War. The scenes in *La dolce vita* were meant to critique celebrity culture and materialism.

For Americans, *La dolce vita* is by far one of the most impactful social and artistic additions to Italian society since pasta. As life in Rome is quite complex, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, there is "no other film able to capture better" this complexity during the time of Hollywood on the Tiber (Paulicelli 171). Diego Fabbri, a playwright, once said that he believed that. *La dolce vita* was "il fatto culturalmente più importante di questo dopoguerra nel senso di

più ricco di echi e di conseguenze” (qtd. in Zavoli 23). The film didn’t always receive the most positive responses, and the public went as far as to try to Fellini during the premiere of *La dolce vita* in Milan and follow his mother to and from her church, as many considered it anti-religious for some of its more explicit scenes. Nonetheless, this film did things that even “i grandi film americani a colori non erano assolutamente capaci di fare” (Stone qtd. in Zavoli 23).

Fellini himself when confronted with the outcome of *La dolce vita* in an interview in 1989, almost 30 years after the film, insisted that “sarei tentato di rivelare che *La dolce vita* non l’ho fatta io. Io ho girato un film, 23 dei 24 che ho firmato... No, *La dolce vita* intesa come fenomeno non solo non l’ho fatta io, ma non ho mai saputo spiegarmela” (qtd. in Kezich qtd. in Rondolino 49-50). In a way, the film “escaped its author” by spinning into a whole new meaning and even revolution that was never intended (Rondolino 58). It is important to remember that Italy and Rome, at their very simplistic core, are just physical locations like other cities and countries; it is the press that makes this movie come alive.

*La dolce vita* is one of a kind because of its ability to straddle the imagination of Fellini and what was real in Rome. The film “è entrato nella storia perché fu in corto circuito tra l’immaginazione di Fellini e una Roma vera, viva, esagerata, in un certo senso già felliniana di suo” (Delbecchi).

Not only did it give a name to phenomena such as the “Paparazzi”, indicating gossip photographers, which gets its origins from the character in the film Walter Paparazzo, and the social life on Via Veneto, which had not yet been defined, but it also shaped the image of Italy for the international public for the rest of time (Paulicelli 171). It changed the future of what Italy would be but also changed the past as well. How does something from the future change something from the past? It simply changes the way that collective consciousness defines the

phenomenon that happened on Via Veneto in the 50s through the lens of Fellini and his film *La dolce vita*. In fact, there is no one other film that has embedded “these images in the collective consciousness” (*ibidem*).

The title *La dolce vita* arrived from Fellini desire to demonstrate that “la Roma della dolce vita era una città interiore e che il titolo del film non aveva nessuna intenzione moralistica o denigratoria, voleva soltanto dire che nonostante tutto la vita aveva una sua dolcezza profonda, irrinnequivabile” (qtd. in Magistà 13). For Fellini, balancing the tightrope between the artistic display of his film and the environment that *La dolce vita* was based was a challenge even “l’idea che *La dolce vita* sia una specie di film-verità sulla cronaca di via Veneto e dintorni è talmente radicata” (qtd. in Magistà 14). He never intended that the film to become a documentary of the lifestyle on Via Veneto, but on contrarily, that’s exactly what it did as well as bring those who sought to see or live *La dolce vita* to Rome and Via Veneto.

Flaiano, in *Fogli di via Veneto*, recounted that in June of 1959, Fellini was “girando finalmente *La dolce vita*” at the Cinecittà Studios (279). Even though the film *La dolce vita* was based on a real street in Rome, which would have been relatively facile to film in terms of minimizing the budget and having the scene already set for them, Fellini and his film crew chose to film and almost entirely reconstruct the Via Veneto at Cinecittà. Fellini believed that “il cinema non deve copiare la realtà” but instead built on it, stating that he preferred the reconstructed street to the real one and even considered it the real one (qtd. in Magistà 15). Not only because of this idea but also to remain loyal to artistic expression, he felt it necessary to recreate the famous street (*ibidem*). The set designer Pietro Gherardi additionally mentioned, “ormai via Veneto era diventata un luogo troppo affollato e avremmo dovuto girare a notte fonda” (qtd. in Magistà 14). One of the most noticeable differences between the set versus the

real street is that the one that had been reconstructed was flat whereas the real Via Veneto is angled going up toward the Villa Borghese.

One of the most famous scenes of *La dolce vita* is the scene where Anita Ekberg wades through the water of the Trevi Fountain. Fellini was not the first with this idea but, in fact, took the idea from a photo in a magazine, and recreated it into a fantasy in his movie though immortalizing the image of the Trevi Fountain (Bondanella and Pacchioni 253).

The hotels on Via Veneto (specifically The Westin Excelsior) were frequented by Americans in the 50s before the film, which is why in “*la dolce vita c’è l’Excelsior, in piena scintillante via Veneto*” (83).

A somewhat puzzling phenomenon that was shown was what the journalists and newspapers did with the material of the film. Instead of covering the ins and outs of the film they went in search of “i personaggi riconducibili al film” that formed a linked repetition “un circuito chiuso giornali-film-giornali parallelo alla realtà” (Magistà 16). This further transformed what had been a form of artistic expression on the screen in Italy into a more tangible, real-world event. Fellini’s film gave a sense of inviting those who watch it to come to see the *dolce vita* for themselves and walk the street in a way, feeling like the cast themselves, having been drawn by Fellini (18). The tourists and even Italians wanted to see the blonde woman splashing around in the fountain and Marcello casually walking the street of Via Veneto.

Fellini’s film as much as he tried to make sure it did not run too close along the lines of reality, “impressiona per la rapidità con cui si sovrappone e si confonde con la realtà” (17). By 1959, “*La dolce vita* ha raggiunto lo zenith e sta per declinare sotto il proprio peso” a year before the debute of *La dolce vita* the film (45). He maintained that he invented “una via Veneto inesistente” which mirrored the atmosphere of the film (*L’Europeo* qtd. in Magistà 18). While

this could be true, Fellini got a large part of his inspiration from the real Via Veneto and those who populated it, as previously stated, and this phenomenon that had yet to be dictionized was already happening years before this film finished. What Fellini did do, was give a name to the phenomenon, and from there, thanks to the newspapers, it spiraled into something completely different from what it was intended to represent as it was then televised and fantasized by the public.

If the impression the film made upon the public was not enough to make it a hallmark of the cinema industry, the \$20 million it earned before it reached the shores of the United States would vouch for this statement (Harrington 182).

*La dolce vita's* impression on the American market was monumental at the time being that in the U.S., international films tended to get less coverage because of the productions of Hollywood. This was not only because, after the war, Italy became more of a common topic in America but “anche a causa della stretta relazione fra i produttori americani e lo studio di Cinecittà” which had become famous thanks to the “Hollywood on the Tiber” concept (*ibidem*). Thanks to the film, Rome became the place of freedom, freedom to do what you wanted with the simple explanation of “When in Rome.” The Eternal City was forevermore known as “un avamposto della società internazionale frequentatrice dei caffè, un punto d’incontro per i nobili stranieri in esilio, playboy, viveur e artisti” (*ibidem*). Back in the city of Rome, the actual Romans were experiencing a very different phenomenon from *la dolce vita*, they were seeing the “tourist vita”. The Americans who came to visit never failing to stop at the Trevi Fountain would instead of throwing a coin in the fountain as the legend has it, would throw themselves in, in an attempt to recreate the swimming scene from Fellini’s hit film.

One lasting effect the movie left in the U.S. was a new definition to characterize the aggressive journalists who would harass celebrities, which became commonly referred to as “paparazzi” as I previously stated. Though the film was translated into “The Sweet Life” in the U.S. when it premiered, *La dolce vita* made its way into the English language in 1961 (Harrington 198).

What makes the film *La dolce vita* so important is that it shaped how Italy, specifically Rome, is and was seen forevermore. This film gave a name to the phenomenon happening at the Via Veneto, which then the newspapers and magazines used to spin their own story, consequently leading to what *la dolce vita* stands for today.

Between the war, *la dolce vita*, and Fellini himself, the U.S. has always been connected to Italy and vice versa. Fellini, in an interview later in life, stated that America represented a new way of life for the Italians, and continued the interview by explaining that “cosicché, se ho scelto di fare film, è stato proprio grazie all’America. C’è un cordone ombelicale che mi lega a questo paese al quale sarò grato per sempre” (Harrington 190).

### **3. The Term *la dolce vita* Today, and How it is Used**

#### **Via Veneto Today**

By the 1970s, only 10 years after the release of Fellini’s film and 20 years after the start of the social phenomenon, Via Veneto had become a zoo of tourists who wanted to see and live *la dolce vita*, but what it was in the 50s and 60s is no longer. It had become a “caricature of a caricature” per se, a shell of what it once was (Hofmann 1970). The people who then populated it

were “denizens” who were just as local to the area as the “habitues of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel are of New York” (*ibidem*). Now, the historical street serves as a reminder of what once was through the words of tour guides or those who stay in the hotels that line the street in search of *la dolce vita* sensation.

## **Fashion**

Though Fellini may not have intended it, the name *La dolce vita* “has become a powerful trope, signifying in Italy, but even more so abroad” the stereotypes of Rome (Paulicelli 171). Because of the film’s popular costume design, the styles became immortalized so much so that Italian fashion designers such as Dolce & Gabbana, Valentino, and Prada have pulled some of their inspiration from the film often finding “catalogs of high-end American department stores Featuring Italian style under the Fellinian trope of La Dolce Vita” (*ibidem*).

Gianfranco Battistini conducted an interview about Via Veneto, proposing questions to fashion moguls such as Fendi, Valentino, and Renato Balestra. He proposed the following questions: “What did and does Via Veneto mean for the city of Rome?” (qtd. in Giulianelli and Simbolotti). Valentino responded by saying that the street “was a parade, a movable feast of the culture, the cinema, and the jet set, the very starting point for a generation of great actors, artists, and cinema directors... it was the best place for public relations in Rome.” Fendi took a more fashion-aimed response saying that it used to be a “‘shop window’ of the Italian style” but now is not anymore. Balestra, on the other hand, looked at what came after the 60s by stating that “for a long time it was the symbol of Rome and maybe of Italy in the whole world... all this is now is completely lost and I think it is highly desirable to carry out a plan to recreate this international image of the street” meaning that it is now used as a fantasy and nothing more. Another proposed

question was: “why didn’t you open a shop in Via Veneto?” Both Fendi and Balestra replied saying that it would not have been of benefit to their respective companies because there is no longer that “Italian style” or “high-class customer” that it used to have. The next question was “what kind of relationship was there and can there be between Via Veneto and the world of fashion?” Valentino reflected on the past stating that “in the past, it was a great one” which is what Fendi concluded as well: “there was in the past and there is no more in the present day.” Lastly, the response of Balestra expressed: “it was great in the past thanks to the famous movie stars that used to live in Via Veneto.” The responses to the question posed in this interview further show the harsh change from the epicenter of fashion and movie stars to a somewhat desolate street only filled with the memories of what it was.

### **The Vespa Craze**

In the year 1946, not long after the end of the war, Vespa (currently under the Piaggio Group) was founded (“From the Origins to Myth”). The Vespa, meaning wasp in Italian, got its name from when Enrico Piaggio (one of the founders of the company) first heard the engine exclaiming that it sounded like a “*vespa!*” (*ibidem*) At first, the Vespa was used as an affordable and convenient way to get around Rome after the war, but thanks to *Roman Holiday*, it became glamorized. Before the film, the Vespa stood as a “symbol of reconstruction after the war and an icon of the working class,” but again, quickly gained status (*Forbes*).

*Roman Holiday* is credited with launching the sale of one hundred thousand Vespa scooters (Glancey 2013). It was particularly loved by women not only because of the scene from the film but because they could wear dresses and skirts while riding it, and the engine was hidden, so no engine grease would get on their clothes (*ibidem*).

In 1953, Audrey Hepburn won her first and only Oscar for the film, but the “award might just as well have gone to the sleek little scooter” as the world seemed to have fallen in love with the scooter’s short debut in the movie more than the movie itself (*Forbes*). After the film came out, Vespas became an item of interest to the American market. A year later, the Vespa was offered in the U.S. The New York Times published a column on December 25th, 1955, with a picture similar to that of the scene of Audrey Hepburn. They were not only marketing the “Italian lifestyle” but also the convenience of what the Vespa could bring to a daily commute. It could be parked almost anywhere because of its small size, which was something Vespa knew New Yorkers would take to.

To sell it to the Americans, they used words such as “spry”, “little”, “swift darting”, “revived energy”, and “postwar symbols” that “swarmed over Italy” to show how they were a true icon of the Italians and the *dolce vita* lifestyle (see fig. 1 below). Therefore, if an American bought one, they would embody this “Italianess” on their own streets of New York. Apart from New York, another target audience was California, which experienced its first taste of Vespa in 1951, though the sale was suspended in the state shortly after, thanks to the new emission requirements California passed in 1984, which Vespa’s engine didn’t pass (*Forbes*).



**Finished Vespa—the name means “wasp”—is given try-out on Park Avenue. Six can park in space needed for one car.**

## **MOTOR SCOOTERS SEEK U. S. MARKET**

**Italian Vespa Will Be Offered  
for Cheap Transportation  
Through Dealers Here**

**By BRENDAN M. JONES**

Those spry little motor scooters that swarmed over Italy and other parts of Europe to become postwar symbols of revived energy and prosperity are looking for new roads to travel.

Now it is the United States that will be the target for a national sales drive in the spring on Europe's original “scoot-bug,” the Italian Vespa. The name means “wasp,” an apt description for the swift darting vehicle whose production since 1946 exceeds 1,000,000.

It is made by Piaggio & Co., of Genoa, which before it was leveled by war was one of Italy's major rail-transportation and aircraft manufacturers. Its re-establishment with an entirely new industry is credited chiefly to the determination of the brothers Enrico and Armando Piaggio.

### **Copied Military Scooter**

War-damaged roads and lack of vehicles made it plain that some low-cost means of transportation was needed swiftly and

*Figure 1 Jones, Brendan M. “Motor Scooters Seek U.S. Market.”*

It was not only marketed by *Roman Holiday* but other American celebrities like Angie Dickinson to Gwen Stefani's scene in her music video “Now That You Got It” racing the Vespa. While women seemed to be the main focus of the Vespa campaign, men also modeled the spiffy icon, such as Matt Damon in Anthony Minghella's *Talented Mr. Ripley* in 1999. It is even so idolized by Americans that the 1955 Vespa GS150 model has a spot in the permanent Collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (D'Ascanio).



*Figure 2 Roman Holiday (1953)*

In the past few years, it has been used as a way to promote tours in Rome and experience *la dolce vita*.

### **Tours in Rome Connected to the phenomenon *la dolce vita***

Today, Vespas are still just as popular modes of transportation, but additionally, they serve another purpose, which is to tour around Rome. As tour companies are always geared towards the foreigner's desire, they noticed that Vespas were being fetishized by the international community, therefore, they put two and two together and made tours of Rome on the Vespa. It adds that bit of extra "Italianess" that foreigners want to experience when they

travel to Rome. They have even gone as far as to categorize and tailor them even further to specific interests, like a film tour on a Vespa.

The museum/tour company *Spazio Museo Vespa* offers said tours to tourists “garantiti in lingua inglese” with the option to request another language if necessary, showing that these tours are not intended for Italians but for non-nationals. The first sentence in their description of the tour states they will start with an homage to the two films that “hanno maggiormente contribuito a far conoscere le bellezze Roma in tutto il mondo: *La dolce vita* e *Vacanze Romane*. They also pass by Via Veneto to see where Federico Fellini “ha ambientato alcune indimenticabili scene” from *La dolce vita*. The inaccuracy of this comes with the knowledge that the real location of the film *La dolce vita* was actually filmed on a reconstructed street in Cinecittà, but using “ambientato” doesn’t mean it was physically filmed on Via Veneto but that it is “set” on that street; all of which is a smart way to use the language to avoid lying but still attract tourists who, when reading the summary of the tour don’t think that deeply on the meaning of every word. This way, the company is not liable for spreading misinformation, and the tourists are none the wiser.

International knowledge of the Vespa doesn’t just mean the main players of Italian tourism, like the Americans and Europeans, but now also the Middle East and Asia. So much so that small group tours are now pre-offered (without request) in Chinese and Arabic by companies such as Vespa Sidecar Tour, as well as private tours (which require a request) in Italian, French, Portuguese, German, English, Russian, Chinese, Hungarian, and Arabic (“Chinese - Arabic Private Vespa Sidecar Tour in Rome”). In their advertising photos, they put the Colosseum as the first photo, which is concurrent with other tours.

Even today, there are still films being produced in homage to Federico Fellini's film *La dolce vita* one of them being *La grande bellezza* by Paolo Sorrentino, filmed more recently in 2013. When Sorrentino won the 2014 Oscar, he made a speech thanking none other than Federico Fellini (Paulicelli 185). Sorrentino is considered by critics as a film director who most embodies the Fellini legacy, and much like *La dolce vita*, *La grande bellezza* has also been transformed into a tourist attraction. The official tourism website of Rome, under the themed itineraries tab, has both a "Discovering 'The Great Beauty'" itinerary and a "Fellini locations" itinerary, which is mostly dedicated to his arguably most famous film *La dolce vita*, that both include interactive maps of the locations filmed in Rome ("Fellini's Locations"). So, the Vespa tours are advertising the Via Veneto as a place of inspiration for the film, but the *Tourismoroma* website is a self-guided tour. Therefore, this means that they are pushing *la dolce vita* stereotype just as much as private tour companies, as they do not state anything to the contrary, but only "I luoghi" or "the locations" the same thing in both languages, that means the place where it was filmed. To go even further, the *Turismoroma* website has a page dedicated to the film that further pushes the *dolce vita* trope along. The first half of the page is dedicated to the phenomenon, and the last half to the film. The first half declares that Italians used private transportation modes such as Vespas and FIAT 500s that became the "status symbol of an era" ("The Dolce Vita"). As stated previously, the FIAT was initially marketed as an affordable, small family car, not a symbol of status or luxury (*ibidem*). If one wanted luxury, they would not buy a small family car marketed to the masses. Where the site also distorts is its blanket statement that "Luxury and Glamour are the distinctive features of this golden age," as if they were referring to those who live in their era, therefore the general public, but again, this was not the case as the "Luxury" that the site is referring to could only really be seen on the Via Veneto while the rest of the city was

working on rebuilding their lives from the ground up (*ibidem*). The subsequent paragraph perpetuates further the focus of the international microscope that only paid attention to the Via Veneto during its peak as the peripheries of Rome and the less desirable places were ignored, as the *Tourismoroma* website state that “Via Vittorio Veneto, with its cafes and luxury hotels, becomes the “living room” of the world and the place where celebrities meet.” (*ibidem*). They concluded their statement by confirming that *la dolce vita* stands for “a light-hearted lifestyle consecrated to worldly pleasure” that became a part of the international vocabulary (*ibidem*). Numerous tours on the website are offered by private individuals or companies such as *GetYourGuide* and *Viatour* that are used by many Western tourists, as per my personal experience and that of others, as well as English being the main language of the tours. As not to be redundant, I will look at the tours on *GetYourGuide* because many tour companies tend to advertise their tours on both websites. On the website of *GetyourGuide*, you can find *la dolce vita*-themed tours. One tour titled “*La Dolce Vita: Cruising Rome in a Classic Fiat 500.*” uses the Fiat in the title with *la dolce vita* as well as a profile photo of tourists in a Fiat in front of the Colosseum to promote their tour (“*La Dolce Vita: Cruising Rome in a Classic Fiat 500*”). Almost all three components have nothing to do with each other, but because of the fascination of Americans with Fiats, the Colosseum, and *la dolce vita*, they are put together as if they were all a part of *la dolce vita* phenomenon. Nowhere in the description does it state anything about the film *la dolce vita* or the typical link with Via Veneto. Another tour on the *GetYourGuide* website entices tourists to “Discover the magic of Rome’s ‘*La Dolce Vita*’ on a night tour” again with a photo of the Colosseum, and additionally a photo of the Trevi Fountain. (“*Rome: Small-Group Night Tour with Pizza and Gelato*”). To promote the food and wine culture of Rome, a tour called “*La dolce vita in Rome: Wine& Gastronomy tour*” which is a different facet of the “*dolce*

*vita*” tours. Instead of encoring the stereotypical site visits to the Colosseum and Trevi Fountain, they emphasize gelato, pasta, wine, suppli and more to attract tourists and let them feel like they are going to “navigate Rome like a true Roman,” but once more there is no real connection to Federico Fellini’s film *La dolce vita*, which is the overarching theme of the tours operated for profit (“La dolce vita in Rome: wine& Gastronomy tour”). Two tours that do attempt to link their tour with the film are the “Rome: Private La Dolce Vita Tour with Cake Tasting”, which mentions the Trevi Fountain as “the home of the iconic fountain scene in the classic film *La dolce vita*” and another tour called “Rome: La Dolce Vita Tour with Luxury Chauffeur & Guide” that brings the tourist to Via Veneto stating that declares it was “made famous by the film *La dolce vita*” (“Rome: Private La Dolce Vita Tour with Cake Tasting,” “Rome: La Dolce Vita Tour with Luxury Chauffeur & Guide”). Lastly, knowing that *la dolce vita* is a worldwide known term, there is a tour on the website that offers tours in Italian, English, and Spanish called “Dolce Vita en Fiat 500: Roma y Aperitivo al Coliseo”, of course with the Colosseum picture and Trevi Fountain included (“Dolce Vita en Fiat 500: Roma y Aperitivo al Coliseo”).

### **Can you buy *la dolce vita*? How Five-star Hotels Use the Term**

Apart from tour websites and private tours utilizing a mass tour website, some hotels advertise *la dolce vita* tours, especially those of four and five-stars. This is because the *dolce vita* phenomenon has been associated with luxury, and therefore, the hotels intend to take profitable advantage of this. On that account, this section will be about my personal experience, with knowledge from my previous internship, my over two-year history of living in Rome, being a previous tourist, and my bilateral viewpoint having, studied the Italian language, culture, and history as my undergraduate degree. For examination of how hotels use the term *la dolce vita*,

the lifestyle associated with it, and luxury to promote tours, I will only focus on the five-star hotels located on the Via Veneto and in the general center of Rome, their websites, and Instagram pages as this is where most people ages 18 to 50 look at when considering a hotel.

A hotel that I worked for in the summer of 2023, called Hotel de la Ville on Via Sistina, which sits on top of the Spanish Steps and operates as a five-star hotel, offers a similar experience, which was promoted on their Instagram page multiple times. They offer an experience through the city in a vintage car, usually the Fiat 500. They advertised this using captions such as “Embark on a nostalgic ride with ‘hurry up Marcello!’” (see fig. 3) referencing the protagonist of Fellini’s *la dolce vita* as well as “Ride through Rome in style, embracing every moment of *la dolce vita*” (see fig. 4) but are not clear on whether they are referring to the film or the phenomenon. With both captions, it is important to note that they are written in English, meaning they are geared towards the Western/English-speaking world.



Figure 3 Hotel de la Ville “Nostalgic ride with ‘Hurry up Marcello!’”

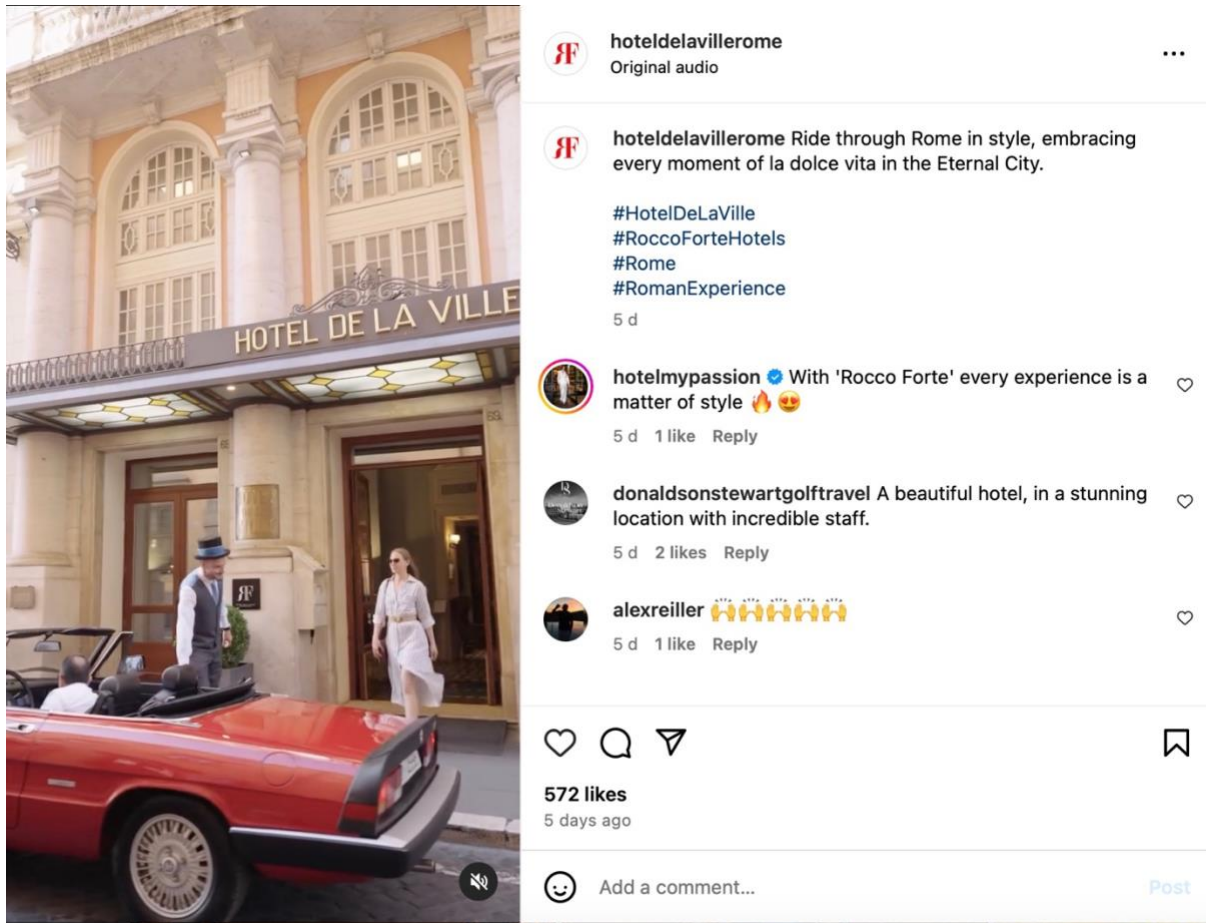


Figure 4 Hotel de la Ville “Embrace every moment of la dolce vita”

Another well-known five-star hotel at the beginning of Via Veneto, Grand Hotel Palace Rome, uses *la dolce vita* to promote the city where they are located by equating the street musicians to the city ambiance, which is encompassed by *la dolce vita*, but their website lacks any connection to *la dolce vita*. One photo is taken at Ponte Sisto, which is nowhere near Via Veneto and is not linked to *la dolce vita*, but because of my knowledge of American tropes of *la dolce vita* I clicked on this photo hoping it would give me a caption that I could use to show this American viewpoint of Rome and *la dolce vita* and, low and behold... here it is, a picture of a

street musician with the caption “Living la dolce vita with the sweet serenade of Rome’s street musicians” (fig. 5).



Figure 5 Grand Hotel Palace Rome “Living la dolce vita”

Although the Westin Excelsior found on the Via Veneto was at the epicenter of *la dolce vita* phenomenon, they don’t advertise their famous history as much as one would think, nor do they heavily advertise *la dolce vita* trope, but there is a photo where they do post about their link to the phenomenon captioned “From la Dolce Vita memories. Café Doney in 1960” (see fig.6 below). Café Doney is the restaurant of the hotel that has the famous chairs sprawled out on the sidewalk of Via Veneto.



Figure 6 Grand Hotel Palace Rome “From la Dolce Vita memories”

A hotel known for appealing to a more ‘Italian’ crowd is the Baglioni Hotel collection, which has various locations around Italy, but the one that I will focus on is the Baglioni Hotel Regina Rome, located on the Via Veneto. The first thing to note about this hotel is that the two words in the title are in English: Hotel and Rome, and the other two are in Italian: Baglioni and Regina; This is the first indication that the Baglioni Hotel Regina Rome is trying to appeal to both Italian and English-speaking/international tourists. On their home page, the first panel displays two different slides, one of which is a picture of a woman in a sundress and a vespa next to her looking out onto Rome with the caption: “Experience the magic of La dolce vita” (fig. 8) and the second panel captioned “La dolce vita” (fig. 7) with a picture of Rome and a link to their recommendations of things to do in Rome.



Figure 7 Baglioni home page 1

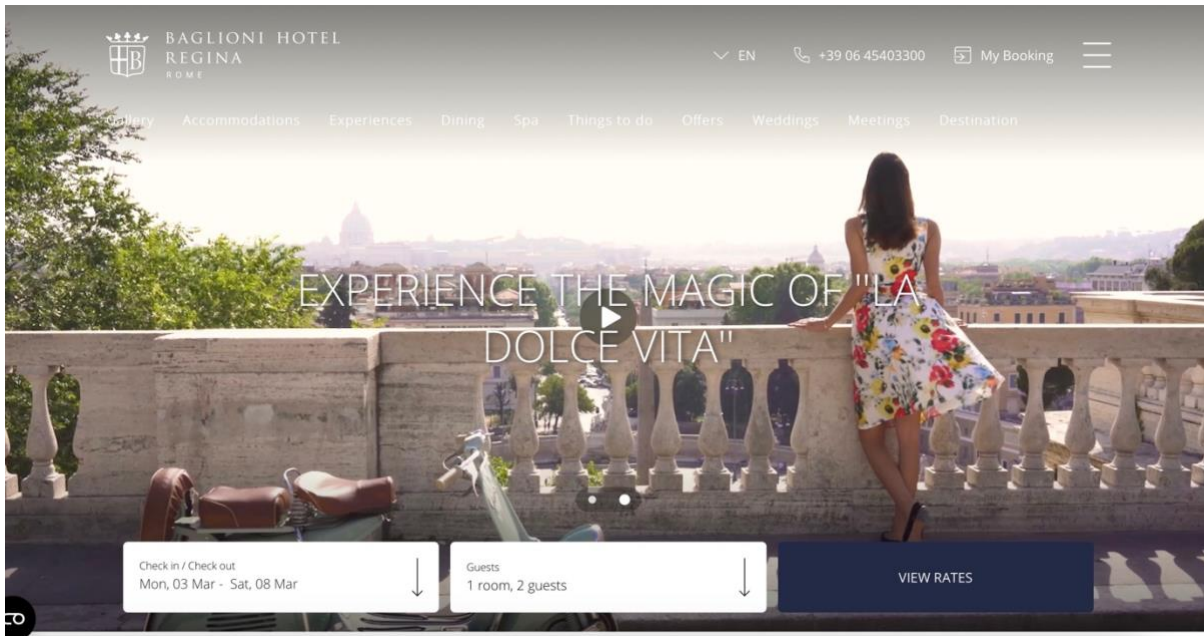


Figure 8 Baglioni home page 2



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## LA DOLCE VITA PHOTO TOUR

Recapture the atmosphere of '60s Rome, treating yourself to a photoshoot in the Eternal City. Tour of the places from the classic Fellini film, La Dolce Vita & be photographed by real paparazzo at some of Rome's famous sites.

*Figure 9 Baglioni Hotel Regina "La dolce vita tour"*

Above is the most prominent example of a five-star hotel in Rome using the *dolce vita* term to promote their hotel to guests, but the utilization of the term doesn't stop here; they also employ it in their privately-run tours (see figure 9 above). They have created an experience dedicated to *La dolce vita* phenomenon called "La Dolce Vita Photo Tour", naturally the profile photo is of the Trevi Fountain, the monument most associated with the term. In the tour Baglioni Rome offers, they use terminology such as "Recapture the atmosphere of the '60s Rome" "Eternal city", and "tour of the places from the classic Fellini film, La Dolce Vita & be photographed by real paparazzo". By offering this tour they are trying to capitalize from the tourist who wants to feel like the international movie star in the 60's by recreating the lifestyle the movie stars lived, and to make it even more 'authentic' the hotel includes an aperitivo at Harry's Bar, a local that was frequented by the celebrities at the time.

In addition to this tour, Baglioni also offers a “Vintage FIAT 500 Tour” that includes a tour of Rome in a vintage FIAT 500 and a small replica toy of the FIAT as a gift. Though they do not explicitly use *La dolce vita* terminology in these tours so as not to overlap the two tours, they do use a similar lexicon to the tours on the *GetYourGuide* website, that is: “One-of-a-kind, classic gem”, “unique experience” “car that made Italian history.”

Both their use of *La dolce vita* twice on the home page and their tours geared toward the desires and stereotypes of *La dolce vita* in Rome show not only how it can aid as a selling point for things to do in Rome, but *La dolce vita* can also be used to sell a room in a five-star hotel.

### **Films Inspired by *La dolce vita***

Many films have been inspired by or paid tribute to Fellini’s film *La dolce vita*, but the majority of films that are associated with *La dolce vita* are actually contributions to the stereotypes that belong to the phenomenon, especially American films. I am specifically going to focus on American films from the 21st century to show the current adaptations of the *dolce vita* phenomenon.

#### ***Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003) by Audrey Wells**

*Under the Tuscan Sun* (which came to my attention thanks to my father, funny enough) follows a divorced woman’s journey (Frances) to finding herself by spontaneously buying a villa in Tuscany. Through her journey, she meets an ethereal blonde woman (Kathrine), whom she comes to befriend. In a certain scene, the blonde woman wades through the fountain in the city near Frances’s house, clearly paying homage to Fellini’s Fountain scene from which it pulled its

inspiration. The parallels don't stop here, as there is also a character called Marcello, a tall, dark-haired Italian man like the Marcello in Fellini's movie, whom the main character falls in love with. Additionally, Frances is seen riding the back of a Vespa with a police officer in Positano on her way to meet Marcello, which resembles the Vespa scene of *Roman Holiday* (see fig. 10 and 11 below). In both films, they are wearing a similar outfit, with the man driving the Vespa.

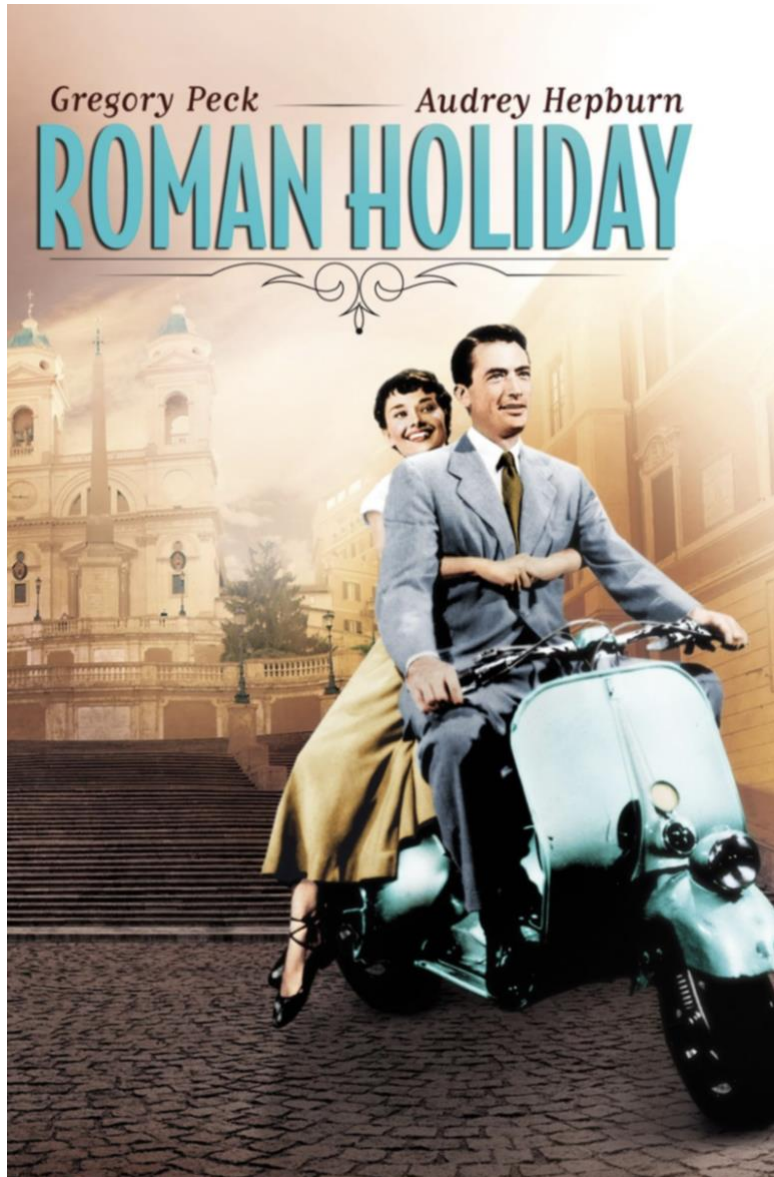


Figure 10 Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday* (1953)

## ***Eat Pray, Love* (2010) by Ryan Murphy**

*Eat, Pray, Love*, a film adaptation of the book of the same name, follows the main character Elizabeth's journey (played by Julia Roberts) to find herself after she realizes she is unhappy with her life and her partner. The film has many connections with Fellini's *La dolce vita*, being that they were both based in Rome and portray the city as a place of transformation, indulgence, and self-discovery. The concept is that *Eat, Pray, Love* is about a healing journey, and *La dolce vita* is more about the pursuit of pleasure.



*Figure 11 Julia Roberts in Eat Pray Love (2010)*

For the protagonist Liz, Rome represents a necessary escape from her life back in the States. She arrives seeking pleasure and self-care mostly through the means of typical Roman dishes. She indulges in pasta and gelato, the staple foods that Americans commonly link with the Roman experience. In the film, there is a scene where Liz is in an Italian barber shop, and one of

the clients talks about how Americans don't know how to enjoy life unless they are told that they earned it, whereas Italians decide when they want a break, and they take it. Another client joined in, giving a definition to the phenomenon, calling it *il dolce far niente*. This scene confirms that just like Liz, there are many Americans that come to Rome to seek out *il dolce far niente* both in the hopes of taking part in it themselves and to see how Italians live in such a contrasting way, which is then supported in the current life in Rome by the tours and hotels that market to this exact fascination.

(Below is a link to the video of the scene: from 0.00' to 0.58')

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gg3n9z5zuJg&t=58ssc>.

#### ***Emily in Paris* Season 4 (since 2020) by Darren Star**

*Emily in Paris*, an American TV series that follows the life of an American girl who lives and works in Paris, but suddenly, at the end of season 4, moves to Rome. The protagonist, Emily, played by Lily Collins, meets an Italian character called Marcello, who invites her to Rome, and soon after, she arrives in Rome to meet him as a way to escape her dramatic life in Paris, much like Liz in *Eat, Pray, Love* and consequently experiences the typical American, romanticized view of what Rome is, *la dolce vita* being shown by the famous landmarks such as the Spanish Steps, the Trevi Fountain, and the Colosseum. While they do differ as Fellini's film offers a darker and more mysterious take on Rome, and *Emily in Paris* portrays a bright, tourist postcard version of Rome *Emily in Paris* provides many scenes that take after both *La dolce vita* and

The first thing to note is the name of the Italian character, Marcello, which is the same name as the protagonist in Fellini's film *La dolce vita* (see fig15 and 17). Both Marcellos have

dark hair and a certain masculine stature. This consistent Italian male stereotyping has become so widespread that this is the image Americans think of when they think of Italian men. To support this male stereotyping, a film that came out in February of 2025 called *La Dolce Villa* by Mark Waters, follows an American girl finding herself buying and renovating a one-euro house in Tuscany. Among other characters is the love interest not named Marcello but Giuseppe (see fig.14). Regardless of the fact that this is based in Tuscany, there are still key similarities to the perpetuating American stereotypes of Rome/*la dolce vita*/Italy: its title puts a spin on *la dolce vita* by simply changing the last word to *Villa*, they attempt to build a new less stressful life away from the States which is a similar objective of both Liz, Emily, and Frances, and the protagonist's love interest is again of the similar stature as the Marcello of *Emily in Paris*.



Figure 12 Giuseppe Futia and Maia Reficco in *La Dolce Villa* (2025)



*Figure 13 Emily in Paris (2020)*



*Figure 14 Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg in La dolce vita (1960)*

There are also akin scenes in *Emily in Paris* of the Trevi Fountain that are indisputably inspired by Fellini's *La dolce vita*.



Figure 15 *Emily in Paris* Trevi Fountain



Figure 16 Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) [Trevi Fountain]

Darren Star, the creator and showrunner of *Emily in Paris*, even admitted that the series “channels classic iconography through homages such as *Roman Holiday*,” which can be clearly seen with the infamous ride on a Vespa with a similar but modern twist on the fashion of the 50s (Marsh).



*Figure 17 Lily Collins and Eugenio Franceschini in All Roads Lead to Rome (2024)*

*Emily in Paris* season 4 in Rome is a mishmash of almost all of the components that make up today’s modern *dolce vita* in the eyes of Americans. The pasta and gelato Emily enjoys is another ode to *Roman Holiday*, along with a Vespa ride with an Italian named Marcello, the “food-loving nonnas and men who exclaim ‘Bellissima!’” and of course, the visit to the famous

Trevi Fountain with her love interest just such as Marcello and Sylvia in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (Marsh).

### ***La dolce vita*<sup>2</sup> as a term today**

As shown in this chapter, *la dolce vita* has taken on many different forms and meanings, but what do the American encyclopedia and dictionaries say?

According to the Merriam-Webster encyclopedia, "America's leading provider of language information for more than 180 years", the *dolce vita* can be defined as "a life of indolence and self-indulgence" ("Dolce vita"). They note that the first known use of the word in American English was in 1961 (*ibidem*). Along with the definition are examples of the word being used in sentences in the media. In *Variety* magazine, Elenora Andreatta the VP of Italian content for Netflix, was quoted in the magazine from a speech she made at the MIA (Mercato Internazionale Audiovisivo) Market stating that "We want to create stories that are really rooted in our country's culture and tradition" supporting the idea that "Italian cinema's glorious *dolce vita* boom had also left a bitter aftertaste by way of cultural stereotypes that lingered for years," and want to create more cinematic content that reflects the modern society that Rome is today (Croll). This shows that even Italians know that the use of these stereotypes has gone too far, as far as to leak into Italian cinema that is geared toward Italians and not Americans, demonstrating how far the American influence has penetrated the true Italian culture.

Another quote used to show how *dolce vita* is used in American lingo was quoted in *Town & Country* magazine by the writer Lesley M.M. Blume that said: "After the war, Aarons would set up a Rome bureau for *Life* (the magazine) and document the post-conflict *dolce vita* in

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the social phenomenon

that city and beyond” (Blume). What makes this particular quote interesting is that right above this quote is a photo of a contact sheet by Slim Aarons that shows Louis Armstrong's and Lucille Brown's trip to Rome in 1949, almost 10 years before Fellini's film would have come out. Depicted in the contact sheet are many pictures at the Colosseum where Louis Armstrong can be seen playing the trumpet, a picture of Louis Armstrong stuffing spaghetti in his mouth, and a picture of the couple on a Vespa with the Colosseum in the background while he is playing the trumpet. This contact sheet shows almost all of the typical stereotypes of Rome that Americans think about when they travel, but these stereotypes of Rome have never been Roman. These experiences that Americans have from the tours in Vespas: “the Italian dolce vita mode of transportation,” eating only pasta and wine because it is “Italian,” and thinking that the Colosseum encompasses all of what there is to do in Rome proves that *la dolce vita* was in fact, entirely fabricated by the Americans and enabled by the Italians as a way to increase the tourism economy in Rome.



*Figure 18 The Secret History of Slim Aaron's Life as a U.S. Army war Photographer*

## 4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of *la dolce vita* has undergone a profound transformation from its origins in postwar Rome to its modern-day global interpretation. Initially, it was a fleeting social reality, confined to a select group of celebrities, intellectuals, and socialites who congregated on Via Veneto during the 1950s. The term itself, however, only gained widespread recognition after Federico Fellini's 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, which both later defined and satirized the extravagant lifestyle of Rome's elite. While Fellini intended his film as a critique of consumerism, moral decay, and media sensationalism, it inadvertently contributed to the mythologization of Rome as a city of glamor, romance, and effortless pleasure.

In the decades that followed, the term *la dolce vita* became gradually detached from its historical and cultural significance, mainly due to American fascination with the term and its aesthetic. Hollywood's influence on Rome, beginning with the era of "Hollywood on the Tiber," played a crucial role in this shift. It blended the American ideals of luxury with the Italian backdrop. The international media then took it a step further, adding fuel to the fire so to speak, reinforcing the stereotypes of carefree indulgences, wealth, and beauty. Over time, the meaning of *la dolce vita* became less and less about its original socio-cultural symbolism and became more about an aspirational fantasy of Italian life, one that was increasingly shaped by the influx of tourism, marketing, and pop culture.

Today, *la dolce vita* functions as a commercialized brand, used to market everything from high-end fashion, five-star hotels, Vespa tours, and culinary experiences to Roman tourism as a whole. The contemporary use of the term suggests a nostalgic yet idealized version of Rome, often catering to an American and global audience seeking to live the *dolce vita*, even if only

temporarily, which is usually the case as most Americans that come are escaping their day-to-day work life in the U.S for *il dolce far niente*. This can be seen in luxury tourism packages offered by hotels in Rome not only on the Via Veneto but in other areas of Rome as well, film and television portrayals such as *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Emily in Paris*, and even dictionaries that present *la dolce vita* as synonymous with a life of indulgence and pleasure. However, this version of *la dolce vita* often ignores the social and economic realities of post-war Italy and the stark contrast between the glamorous bubble of Via Veneto and the struggles of ordinary Romans during that time.

Ultimately, this thesis has examined whether *la dolce vita* was ever truly Roman or if it was a concept shaped and repackaged by American imagination and commercialization. While its roots lie in the social landscape of 1950s Rome, its lasting legacy has largely been crafted through international reinterpretation. What began as an exclusive reality has been immortalized, redefined, and warped in the interest of profits, proving that cultural phenomena do not remain static but evolve through media, collective consciousness, and the interests of their investors. *La dolce vita* of the past is no longer. What it is now is a global fantasy that will continue to shape the world's perception of Rome, and the internal interpretations of the Italians who use it as a tool to profit from, for better or worse.

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