This paper intends to analyze the role played by two of the main American advertising agencies - J. Walter Thompson (JWT) and McCann Erickson - in transforming the organizational and discursive practices of Italian advertising between the 1950s and the early 1970s. With few exceptions, so far this role has been given short shrift in the literature on the history of advertising in Italy. Long the precinct of former Italian practitioners rather than social scientists or historians, such a literature usually confined itself to cursory references to the “American invasion.” Only in the last few years a couple of contributions have tackled the issue in a more thorough way. In a pioneering work sociologist Adam Arvidsson chronicled the “American influence” between the interwar period and the 1980s, tracing the early incursions of JWT into Europe and Italy and the seminal role played in Italy by JWT, which, in the author’s words, “was to dominate the Italian advertising scene during the 1950s” (Arvidsson, 2003). More recently, historian of design Carlo Vinti and mass media scholar Simona De Iulio have redefined the nature of the relations between Italian and American advertising and suggested a different chronology. They have emphasized how up to the early 1960s advertising in Italy was dominated by advertisers’ in-house departments rather than advertising agencies. In their view, the relationship between Italian and American advertising is one of complex “hybridisation” and “mediation,” rather than direct influence (De Iulio-Vinti, 2007).

Building upon such works, this paper aims at expanding knowledge on the topic through a combination of new sources and insights coming from the most recent international literature. The paper is based on primary research in the archives of JWT, the Exxon Mobil Historical Collection, the Hagley Library and the Archives Center of the National Museum of American History. Furthermore, it will examine articles and advertisements published in the main U.S. and Italian journals and magazines, and will incorporate interviews to some of the main protagonists of the Italian advertising world.

Our research is informed by the burgeoning literature on the internationalization of American advertising in the twentieth century, by the newly emerging research on a global history of the industry, and by the increasing attention paid by scholars to the competing “philosophies” of business embodied by the different agencies in relation to the ever changing markets, as well as to the dynamics internal to the agencies, their diverse functions, the changing weight of such functions relative to the evolution of the larger economic system. The literature on the internationalization of American advertising alerts us to the successes, but also the difficulties and problems, of an economic, organizational, and cultural nature, that the U.S. agencies faced while trying to go international (Merron, 1991; Scanlon, 2003). Moving beyond the traditional U.S.-centred perspective, the newly emerging global history of advertising reinforces this attention toward the concrete, multifarious economic and cultural exchanges going on within the business at an international level, and the processes of mediation, adaptation, and reformulation that the advertising operational practices were subjected to while travelling across nations (Schwarzkopf, 2011). Last, but hardly the least, the increasing attention toward the economic and cultural competition among agencies and to their internal dimension allows for a less one-dimensional view of the American advertising industry, and of the sector more generally, than traditionally provided by the literature (Fasce 2012). This perspective suggests the need to look more in depth inside the business, zooming on its various actors and their common challenges, but also on the different, and at times diverging, paths they followed in their efforts at expansion, both domestically and abroad.
Both JWT and H.K. McCann (which in 1930 became McCann Erickson) set up shops on a limited scale in Italy in the interwar period, thus exposing the country to new advertising techniques. The former, vying for the primacy in the U.S. domestic business with Ayer & Co., opened up a small office in Milan working for U.S. and British companies like General Motors (GM) and Lever Brothers. Under pressures from the Fascist regime, with the worsening of the economic international situation and the abandoning of Europe by GM in the early 1930s, it upped sticks. A minor, distant competitor to market leader JWT, McCann tried the European venture in the 1920s, following the expansion of U.S. companies abroad. Without establishing an Italian office, it sold such leading American products as Goodyear, Ford and Esso on the Italian market from its offices in Paris. As many other U.S. businesses, with the outbreak of the Second World War it was forced to abandon the Italian market for good.

After this first stint in the interwar period, the two agencies returned to Europe in earnest in the aftermath of World War II. Italy reappeared on the JWT’s radar in the early 1950s, on the heels of the agency’s involvement with the Marshall Plan. The London branch, which had long been the linchpin of the agency’s initiatives in Europe, guided and inspected closely the reopening and the gradual evolution of the Italian business, with some help and additional supervision from the Paris office. The foreign, and especially British, imprinting on the Milan branch was to endure well into the 1970s. Indeed, the imperative not to look “foreign,” looming large in the branch’s internal papers since the beginning of the Italian operations, translated into the hiring and training of a large number of natives. By the early 1960s these made up the bulk of creative, productive, and secretarial jobs. But accounting, research, and especially higher managerial positions remained a preserve of British officers, trained both in Britain and the U.S.

The paper will analyze this process showing how JWT managed to carve out an increasing space for itself within the Italian market and adapted its so called “descriptive” style, based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative research ever evolving since the interwar period, to the peculiarities of the country. We will show how it navigated amidst a clientele originally made up mostly of such American companies as Pan Am, Ford, Unilever, and Kraft, but eventually comprising Italian advertisers Gancia, Burgo, and Max Meyer.

We will then contrast the JWT’s experience with that of McCann Erickson. This returned to Italy only in 1959, when it opened an office in Milan and, later, Rome. Its first clients were the largest American, increasingly multinational, firms selling their products on the European market, namely Nestlé, Colgate-Palmolive, Coca Cola, General Motors, Unilever, and Esso. Emerged in the postwar period as an increasingly serious competitor to JWT, thanks to its pioneering experiences in the new and growing field of consumer psychology and motivational research, McCann Erickson brought such experiences to Italy. Particularly important was the Esso campaign carried out in the 1960s, “Put a Tiger in Your Tank!,” that introduced “revolutionary” elements, linked to the combination of an inventive discursive strategy with motivational research. These campaigns drew on the expertise of one of the main protagonists of postwar international advertising, Ernest Dichter, an Austrian emigré who in the early 1960s opened an office in Milan and founded the Institute for Motivation Research in Rome.

At a corporate level McCann Erickson incarnated a more systemic approach to international business than that of JWT. In the early 1960s it created Interpublic, the world’s first marketing services management holding company, of which the agency became a subsidiary. This helped develop a precociously more global and somehow less “American” oriented strategy that translated into a stronger commitment to opening up the ranks to foreign and, in our case, Italian employees at any level of the structure. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s advertisers had been required to adopt American marketing techniques with a concern for the specificity of local and national contexts, by the early 1970s McCann Erickson assumed that most consumers had become homogenized, and advertisers should, “first and foremost, speak the language of soft-drinks, or gasoline or automobiles or beer” (Alter, 1994). The agency internationalized its advertisers, by adopting the idea of “transferable power.” In this context, one of the first Presidents of McCann Erickson Italiana, Giancarlo Livraghi, became one of the protagonists of the agency’s renewed and expanded global activities in the 1970s and 1980s.

Thus a closer inspection of JWT’s and McCann Erickson’s activities between the 1950s and early 1970s suggests a more nuanced and complicated picture than the ones provided so far on a crucial topic such as the American influences on the Italian advertising industry. First, our research shows the cultural and business achievements of the two agencies, as well as the myriad concrete problems they
faced in entering the Italian market. Second, it suggests the need to further qualify and deconstruct the notion of “Americanization” by integrating the now well established and thoroughly plausible notions of “hybridization” and “mediation” with a more specific attention to the different and competing “hearts and souls” that different admen tried to instil into goods and consumers.

References