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Book Review: The Mirage of Italy in Contemporary Italian Fiction and Film by Barbara Alfano

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The mirage of America in contemporary Italian literature and film

Mary Ann McDonald Carolan

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The mirage of America in contemporary Italian literature and film, by Barbara Alfano Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, 190 pp., \$37.29 (hard cover), ISBN-10: 1442644052/ISBN-13: 978-1442644052

As Barbara Alfano cogently points out in *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film*, America continues to hold a privileged place in the Italian cultural imagination. Italy has discovered and imagined America, both as a place and as an idea, again and again throughout the centuries. Alfano examines a narrow but critical period of the cross-cultural exchange between Italy and America from 1981 to 2006 through a representative sample of Italian literary and cinematic works. In her analysis of the writings of Francesca Duranti, Gina Lagorio, Alessandro Baricco, Andrea DeCarlo, Melania Mazzucco, and Ben Morreale as well as of films directed by Nanni Moretti, Gianni Amelio, Emanuele Crialesi, Roberto Benigni, and Massimo Troisi, she argues for an interpretation of the ethical impact of America on the protagonists – and by extension their authors – in these selections. According to Alfano, the experience of American culture, whether real or imagined, allows Italian intellectuals to critique and valorize aspects of their own country and people. She describes encounters with America that vary from the highly autobiographical (Lagorio's novel *Sogni mancini*) to the impossible (Benigni and Troisi's film *Non ci resta che piangere*). Her study engages with cultural theory, and with Baudrillard in particular, while acknowledging similar work by scholars such as Donald Heiney, Theodore Cachey, and David Ward.

The author situates her twenty-five-year period of investigation within the larger historical context of Italians writing about America. As Alfano indicates, the earliest Italian Americanists were Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci since they reified the New World with their travel narratives. Her brief but thorough review of the history of Italians contemplating America, which includes a compelling analysis of the importance of America for antifascist writers such as Vittorini, Pintor, and Pavese, prepares the reader for the author's examination of more recent works of fiction and film. Alfano's introduction persuasively outlines the necessity of the myth of America for the creation of Italian identity that she defines as essentially weak due to diverse political and historical factors.

Alfano deftly employs the metaphor of mirage to describe journeys of discovery that reveal America to be everywhere and nowhere. A mirage, an optical illusion created by the refraction of light rays, depends upon the human mind to determine its meaning. Borrowed from the French, the word mirage derives from the Latin *mirari*, which means to look at or wonder at; the same root gives us mirror. In Alfano's reading, in recent years, invented notions of America also serve as a reflection of the intellectuals who created them. Yet the mirage – a visual phenomenon that results in a false image – underscores the paradox that subtends Italian writers' and directors' projection of their anxieties and limitations onto America, a construct that the author reminds us represents more than the mere geographical or national entity of the United States. The metaphor is also a subtle critique of America itself, as a failed experiment, an illusion of the values it purveys.

For the most part, Alfano's discussion of texts and films is nuanced and engaging; she builds a credible argument for her thesis throughout *The Mirage of America*

in *Contemporary Italian Literature and Film*. Her close readings of DeCarlo's *Treno di panna* (1981), Duranti's *Sogni mancini* (1996), and Lagorio's *L'arcadia americana* (1999) are particularly insightful. The author's ambitious decision to analyze selected literary and cinematic works expands the argument but the choice to encompass two genres reduces its forcefulness since film and text are not necessarily in dialogue with one another. Additionally, this careful investigation would be more helpful to scholars if the index were expanded to include reference to individual works and critical themes. Still, Alfano convincingly portrays the pervasive presence of America as mirror, often dark, with which Italian creators of film and written narrative critique themselves and their Italy.

There are instances when a little more excavation could reveal even deeper connections between Italy and America than appear on the surface of these works. For example, in Moretti's *Caro diario* (1993), the underlying symbolism of Stromboli is far more complex than its mayor's attempt to Disneyfy it (Alfano's term) or the Italian fascination with American television dramas. This island represents a cinematic palimpsest in that it is at once a moment of self-definition and a cultural critique. Moretti's questioning of tourists from the United States near the crater of the volcano about the popular TV program *The Bold and the Beautiful* points directly to the metamorphosis of Italian intellectuals while alluding to Roberto Rossellini's encounter with Hollywood. Nanni's travel companion, the Joyce scholar Gerardo, abandons Hans Magnus Enzensberger's teachings about the evils of television to embrace television dramas. The plot of *Beautiful* resonates with Rossellini's personal soap opera while filming *Stromboli, terra di Dio* (1950); his love affair with Hollywood star Ingrid Bergman, who left her husband and child in California, engendered condemnation by the American public and legislators. Despite the mayor's interventions, island residents treat Nanni and Gerardo with the same disdain with which inhabitants greeted Karin (played by Bergman) when she arrived as a newlywed in this foreign place. Stromboli resonates as well with Moretti's investigation of television and film as Rossellini, in search of a larger audience for his work, famously left cinema to make documentaries and historical dramas in the 1960s.

The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film represents an important addition to the field of contemporary Italian literature and culture, and to the area of transatlantic studies in particular. Alfano persuasively describes how the Italian Left projects its views onto America, which has become an essentially negative space in the imagination of writers and directors. The author describes Italian intellectuals as people who 'constantly focus on themselves and the work they do on themselves for the sake of civil society' (p. 10). Yet, in the end, her study seems to suggest that this intense self-examination and reflection leads only to disillusionment. In many of the works examined in *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film*, America is merely a false oasis. This leaves the reader to question what happens to the ethically engaged subject, identified by Alfano in this study as the left-leaning Italian intellectual, who must confront Italian reality when s/he realizes that America is merely a collection of stereotypes and a repository of false virtues. The reader notes that there is very little engagement on the part of these subjects with the literature of America that was essential for Vittorini and others during the 1930s and 1940s even though several texts deal directly with university life.

Alfano concludes her examination with a discussion of two films and a novel (Moretti's *The Last Customer*, 2002 and Crialesse's *Nuovomondo*, 2006; Mazzucco's *Vita*, 2003) that appeared after the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001. These three selections deal with different aspects of the immigrant experience, yet none of them addresses or confronts the literal assault on the values that America represents. *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film* leaves us with some trenchant questions about possible future conceptions of America by Italian writers and filmmakers. Will Italy, which has become its own sort of America, a mythic land of opportunity for the downtrodden, like the Albanians in Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994), continue to look to America in order to establish its identity, or has it too become a mirage of false hope?

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