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Book Review: Italian Women Filmmakers and the Gendered Screen by Maristella Cantini

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Author:

Stefania Lucamante, The Catholic University of America

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Cantini, Maristella, ed. *Italian Women Filmmakers and the Gendered Screen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 312. ISBN: 9781137336507. \$95.00 (hardcover).

When it comes to the work of women, the void in Italian studies needs mending for—regardless of the medium, the period, or the area of Italy one chooses to focus on—the gaps to fill are many. It is appropriate then to start somewhere. *Italian Women Filmmakers and the Gendered Screen* intercepts this *somewhere*: its focus is justified by the fact that many look at Italian film production, both in academia and in the public. Italian cinema—Paolo Sorrentino’s *La grande bellezza* is a fit example—still sets trends and launches new *vagues*. This book deserves to be read for its originality and out of an absolute necessity: works by women filmmakers still need to be analyzed in Italian and in film studies overall. Italian women filmmakers are clearly not interested in directing and producing only mainstream feature films (the topics themselves are quite telling of their choice) but, rather, want to promote an innovative discourse in cinema today and bring in their own issues or social issues overlooked by mainstream cinema. Cantini’s claim that, “[...] for over one century, [mainstream cinema] has hidden, underestimated, and failed to produce and support movies directed by women” rings true, even with notable exceptions like actress Eleonora Duse directing the cinematic adaptation of Grazia Deledda’s novel *Genere*.

In the foreword, Patrizia Carrano makes a provoking statement, “Italian cinema doesn’t exist anymore” (xiii). This sounds almost like Quentin Tarantino’s derogatory comments at Venice a few years ago. While Tarantino’s statements do not hold much truth, for even his own work is overwhelmingly mindful not only of classic Neorealist works, but also of Comedy Italian-style and many Italian genre movies, Carrano really meant what she wrote. From her point of view, she might be right. Italian women directors’ cinema, which existed in the 70s and 80s—particularly thanks to the merits of Lina Wertmüller and Liliana Cavani—has long been long a species in danger of extinction. What Carrano does not explore on a deeper level is that women’s studies in general, and women’s rights in particular, are under fire in a country that has recently seen an intense backlash in cultural production due to abysmal political and social problems. I cannot answer Carrano’s question whether “[...] these women filmmakers agree with being grouped together by definition of gender” (xiv) if not in a conventional way: no artist likes to be grouped along with others unless he/she has released a specific manifesto (i.e. Futurists, Dogma) that binds them in a group out of their own will. And so, rather than thinking of (only) gender as their common trait, why can’t we think of them as a postcolonial (gendered) answer to the general lack of innovation in Italian cinema? I do not think, not even for a minute, that “the higher the quality of the work, the less possible it is to discern the author’s gender” as Vittorio Spinazzola claims in Carrano’s preface (xiv). Every universal work also breathes the particularity and the corporeality of the human being behind such words, such images, such architecture and so on. Any true work of art is gendered, for the humus of art is the body. Of this I am firmly convinced. What we need to remember, however, is that any work that wants to be programmatically ‘something’ is bound not to be universal.

Unlike Carrano, I feel that the issue lies more in the fact that the themes and the techniques that each of these women artists chose add a tassel to the representation of Western society in the new millennium—with an Italian, gendered, and aesthetically driven perspective.

The sequence of articles follows a loose chronological line. It emphasizes the individual auteurs and/or specific films. Doing so, however, runs the risk of weakening the epistemological force of the book. For a book like this, it would have been more interesting to identify cinematic trends such as themes, visual elements, and technical features; but this work does pave the way for more books on Italian women’s film studies to come. The list of articles is not presented under the umbrella of a specific thesis other than presenting works by women filmmakers. With the notable exception of Spada and Marazzi, chapters in Part 1 on works by Archibugi, Borrelli, and Maiorca do not find their counterpart director interviews in the second half. Part 2, instead,

has interviews of Rohrwacher, Randi, and Quattriglio. I am not sure why some filmmakers are interviewed without their works being analyzed in the rest of the book.

Aside from all the merits I mention above, I feel the book possesses a gap: between Cavani and Wertmüller and the rest of the women directors' works treated in the book (second-generation filmmakers), we have a generation missing. If there is a specific cause for such gap, editor Maristella Cantini should have dealt with the issue and explained it in her introduction. Also, on page 5 of her otherwise brilliant introduction, Cantini raises some questions that deserve some exploration: "how many women filmmakers are working in the industry? How many movies are produced every year by female filmmakers? How are those films produced and distributed? How do they receive funding? Who is eligible for funding? Why are many of the female directors recognized and awarded by the most ambitious festival, only then to disappear in a cloud of oblivion? Who does evaluate the artistic content of movies authored by women and how many of those 'experts' are women? In other words, who is dictating and imposing a canonical traditional criticism that established who can enter a *History of Italian Cinema* and who can be grouped in a general footnote (and be lucky to be there)?" I believe that this book should have attempted to answer at least a few questions. If it is true that the directors themselves address some of them in the interviews, their speculations remain on the personal, subjective level. A chapter on issues of funding, production, and distribution would have been appropriate to address problems directly connected to film production and reception. My only criticism is perhaps the failure to clarify the 'birth' of a hybrid docu-film most evident in the works of Marazzi. Distant, and yet resonant with Rossellini's docu-fiction and Rosi's docu-drama, it originates in Cavani's own filmography, thus asserting a genealogy of women's work that marks women filmmakers as important predecessors and innovators of Italian cinema. Even though the styles and genres set by contemporary filmmakers are very different (and, yes, they may also have "fathers"), I think that historicizing the "gendered screen" would have sense.

Precisely because of its language, the book's market will be much larger. Many film studies departments (also in the USA) could really benefit from comparative readings and courses. The editor mentions many countries with reason, for there is currently an increase in courses taught in English also in non-Anglophone countries (Italy included) due to university exchange programs. This book's importance lies in the fact that the many Italian film studies courses taught by academic departments in English-speaking countries will make good use of this text, for they now have a textbook of several interesting essays from which they can benefit. One can only hope that, with the publication of this book, more Italian and non-Italian scholars will investigate the merits of Italian women filmmakers' productions.

STEFANIA LUCAMANTE
The Catholic University of America