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Book Review: Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces: Comedy, Italian Style by Natalie Fullwood

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Fullwood, Natalie. *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces: Comedy, Italian Style*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp 260. ISBN 9781137403568. \$ 95.00 (hardcover).

In *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Space* Natalie Fullwood explores the relationship between everyday spaces and gender in the genre “commedia all’italiana” by examining films produced between 1958 and 1970. Fullwood’s principal interest in this book is to examine the ways in which cinema articulates discourses of gender and fictional spaces in the films’ narrative vis-à-vis the cultural demands of the emerging Italian economic development commonly referred to as the *boom*. With its emphasis on the quotidian spaces and practices of the Italian society of the economic boom, *Cinema, Gender and Everyday Space* offers what can be defined as a transmedial contribution to both Italian studies and film studies in general. Fullwood’s analysis, in fact, relies not only on close readings of an extended corpus of films, but also draws from other media’s configuration of the new places of everyday life. Comedies, advertising, television, and magazines, she argues, played a prominent role in the construction of a new imagery of a modernized Italy. This innovative approach to Italian film studies makes *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces* a useful resource for students and scholars examining the use of space in cinema, as well as for those interested in Italian cultural studies.

The first part of the book, “Contexts,” contains two chapters. In the first chapter, Fullwood offers a brief survey on the extant scholarship addressing issues of space in cinema. While recognizing David Bordwell and Stephen Heath’s works as significant in their analysis of the cinematic space in narrative cinema, Fullwood identifies their suggestion that the interiority of the viewer is the sole conceivable space outside of the frame as a principal shortcoming of their theory. In her perspective, they have failed to recognize what she defines the “material realities” of the cinematic space. Fullwood proceeds to position *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces* in dialog with Henry Lefebvre’s *La production de l’espace* (published in English in 1991), his theory of space as the social product of a set of relations between things, as well as with Judith Butler’s notion of gender as the result of a performative process. Fullwood’s understanding of space and gender as social constructions provokes her to investigate the terms upon which their meaning is negotiated in the light of the new economic development brought by the Italian economic *boom*. Furthermore, departing from the work of feminist geographers like Martina Löw, with her book Fullwood proposes a relationship of mutual interdependence between space and gender.

In chapter two of the section “Contexts,” Fullwood presents the criteria she adopts in selecting her corpus of comedies, Italian style. She delimits the genre principally on industrial and chronological grounds and then secondarily on formal grounds. Insisting on the porosity and flexibility of the genre boundaries, Fullwood problematizes its definition in the context of the production-distribution-consumption process, identifying low-budget comedies as distinct. She defines comedies, Italian style as a genre composed of “mid-level categories that had higher production values than other popular Italian comedies produced at that time, especially in their frequent use of expensive star actors” (45). Along with the use of star personae, the Comedies’ chronology is a decisive factor in their being included in the genre. Fullwood cleverly highlights the importance of the films’ contribution to the establishment of a consumer culture language, in conjunction with weekly entertainment magazines, television broadcasting (and in particular *Carosello*) during and after the economic boom. In the conclusive remarks of chapter two, Fullwood engages with extant scholarship on Comedies, Italian style, pointing to a substantial lacuna in Italian film studies with regard to gender readings of Comedies, Italian style (with the only exception being Maggie Gunsberg’s work, along with Sergio Rigoletto and Mauro Giori).

The second part of *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces* is structured around four main spatial tropes: the beach and the nightclub, the office, the car, and the kitchen. Fullwood’s underpinning argument is that spatial representations in comedies, Italian style are never gender neutral, rather they

play active parts of change in the negotiation and establishment of societal norms. In chapter three, “Bodies, Bikinis, and Bras: Beaches and Nightclubs in comedy, Italian Style,” Fullwood addresses gender imbalances in those films in which beach and nightclub scenes are prevalent. The goal of this section is to study the role of space, *mise-en-scène*, and framing in the establishment of a “politics of looking” (66) and of the sexual objectification of the female body. This chapter proposes *Racconti d'estate/Girls for the Summer*, Gianni Franciolini (1958), *Tipi da spiaggia/Beachcombers*, Mario Mattoli (1959), *Diciottenni al sole/Eighteen in the Sun*, Camillo Mastrocinque (1962), and *Frenesia dell'estate/Summer Frenzy*, Luigi Zampa (1964), among the others, as examples of films displaying male-oriented, heteronormative sexual discourses through the use of the spatial tropes of beach and of nightclub, two locations whose degree of female nudity is notoriously higher. Fullwood's contribution is her grounding of this analysis in a transmedial perspective. In particular, the author examines ways in which comedies, along with magazines and television advertising, were part of a much wider process of the creation of a language of leisure culture.

In chapter four of her book, Fullwood explores Sandro Bellassai's notion of “reformed masculinity” and the ways in which the genre of the comedies, Italian style articulates it in the representation of new, efficiency-oriented office spaces. Fullwood contends that comedies such as *L'impiegato/The Employee*, Gianni Puccini (1959), *La vita agra/It's a Hard Life*, Carlo Lizzani (1964), and *Il profeta/The Prophet*, Dino Risi (1968) all engage with “the comic gap between the masculine ideal of ‘uomo di successo’ and the vast spectrum of masculinities which fail to live up to this ideal” (107). The second part of the chapter is devoted to a close reading of Gianni Puccini's *The Employee*, presented as exceptional in its featuring a female office clerk in a prominent, managerial position. Fullwood's brief survey of the impact of American ideals of work organization on Italian public and private service sectors, as well as the role of media and advertising, offers valuable insights into the comedies' attempt at establishing a model of leisure and consumption.

In chapter five and six, the last two of *Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces*, the author examines the use of the profilmic spaces of the car and of the kitchen in their role within discourses of gender. The car, studied in its “dual status in the genre as both object that moves through space, and space in its own right” (130), represents the new Italian society in movement, “in a state of flux” (133), as well of sexually empowered masculinity. Kitchen space in comedies, Italian style, or rather the lack thereof, is instead as Fullwood argues, the bearer of the old-fashioned image of the woman as an *angelo del focolare*, angel of the hearth. Housewives, the privileged target of kitchen-related product advertisements, in fact gradually become synonyms for consumer culture, as Fullwood clearly shows by her discussion of *The Prophet* by Dino Risi. The two chapters draw similar conclusions by outlining how the genre broadly upholds traditional gender roles. Gender-role reversals in the kitchen, as well as on the road, produce problematic consequences. Sexually empowered women at the wheel “often represent a threat to the established social order” (159), in the same way feminized househusbands stand as a prelude to male failure, and ultimately troubled masculinity.

Cinema, Gender, and Everyday Spaces' most valuable contribution stands in its promoting a farsighted transmedial analysis to a traditional Italian genre such as comedy, Italian style. While presenting close readings of entire films or scenes, Fullwood's approach is not merely formal, but contextualizes the films in the new social imagery of advertising prompted by the Italian economic boom. However original its analysis, the book comes with a spoiler alert in its very introduction: what are being negotiated are not new gender values, but old ones in new spaces. As the author warns in the incipit of her book, “the genre's supposed ‘critique’ of Italian society usually operates within a wider framework where certain norms regarding, for example, gender, class and sexuality, often remain unchallenged” (59).

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