



<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

**g/s/i** is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

**Title:**

Book Review: Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema by Catherine O'Rawe

**Journal Issue:**

[gender/sexuality/italy, 2 \(2015\)](#)

**Author:**

Elena Dalla Torre, Saint Louis University

**Publication date:**

July 2015

**Publication info:**

gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

**Permalink:**

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/book-review-stars-and-masculinities/>

**Copyright information**

**g/s/i** is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)

O'Rawe, Catherine. *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Pp. 230. ISBN 9781137381460. \$71.05 (Paperback); \$ 83.75 (Kindle).

The crisis of masculinity has become a trope both within masculinity studies and Italian cultural discourse. In her brilliant and engaging book Catherine O'Rawe problematizes this trope by warning us against its major risks: first, the lack of adequate historicizing on the subject of masculinity; second, the fact that the idea of crisis implies a previous sense of stability against which the presumed masculine crisis is constituted; third the problematic link between masculine crisis and the feminization of men, connected with Berlusconi. O'Rawe addresses these issues by looking simultaneously at three cinematic dimensions of masculinity: male performances, the production and reception of male star personae, and the constructions of masculinity that dominate very recent Italian cinema. Through the analysis of these intersecting dimensions O'Rawe articulates a two-fold argument. On the one hand, films and stars make apparent specific cultural issues concerning masculinity; on the other hand, the redeployment of the rhetoric of the masculine crisis plays as a strategy to re-center white Italian masculinity in response to real social changes.

The book is the first in the field of Italian cinema studies to integrate film criticism with star studies and the reading of fandom in order to interrogate a specific cultural production of gender. It also builds on and complements existing work on Italian masculinities and stardom by Jacqueline Reich, Alan O'Leary, and Maggie Günsberg. The author grounds her work into a variety of Anglo-American and Italian sources on gender and masculinity, including seminal studies produced in Italy since the late 1970s such as *L'antimaschio* (1982) edited by Stefano Segre, *L'ultimo uomo: quattro confessioni-riflessioni sulla crisi del ruolo maschile* (1977) by Marco Lombardo Radice and the more recent monograph by Sandro Bellassai *L'invenzione della virilità* (2011). O'Rawe's monograph is divided in two parts, which mark a temporal and thematic division. The first part examines post-2000 comedies, melodramas and dramas about the average Italian man—white and heterosexual—and a general redefinition of male roles within family and society. The second part explores the cinematic nostalgia for the 1970s as a melancholic return to a stable ideal of masculinity and a comforting space of male bonding.

Chapter one titled “Mad About the Boy: Teen Stars and Serious Actors” examines Riccardo Scamarcio's acting trajectory from teen idol to serious actor in movies such as *Tre metri sopra il cielo/Three Steps Above Heaven* (Luca Lucini, 2004) *Ho voglia di te/I want you* (Luis Prieto, 2007), *L'uomo perfetto/The Perfect Man* (Luca Lucini, 2005) and *Mine Vaganti/Loose Canons* (Ferza Ozpetek, 2009). O'Rawe convincingly argues that Scamarcio's legitimization as an actor involved a balanced management of his own image as beautiful icon —produced by teen movies and the response of female fans—and the re-appropriation of agency in performance.

A few thematic and critical aspects of this chapter set the tone for the entire book: the skillful blend of popular culture and theoretical sources to engage the question of the neo-liberal objectification of the male body; the devaluation of the teen icon in concomitance with a general devaluation of the teen movie genre; the uneasy association between the male heartthrob and the derogatory depictions of Scamarcio's female fandom as hysterical and out of control. The latter speak, according to O'Rawe, to a generalized social anxiety about looking at male bodies, and to a

still pervasive debasement of the feminine, especially when used to describe masculinity and male bodies.

Chapter 2 and 3 analyze comedies and melodramas (*Posti in piedi in paradiso/A Flat for Three*, Carlo Verdone, 2012, *Baciarmi ancora/Kiss me Again*, Gabriele Muccino, 2010, *Scusa ma ti voglio sposare/Sorry if I want to Marry You*, Federico Moccia, 2010, *Femmine contro maschi/Men Vs. Women*, Fausto Brizzi 2011, *Lezioni di cioccolato/Lessons in Chocolate*, Claudio Cupellini, 2007) whose male protagonists deal with anxieties related to monogamy, paternity, ageing, and maturity at times brought about by the absence or disappearance of a wife. Issues of economic precarity complicate the situation by creating transitory scenarios of male cohabitation or male forced inhabiting of female roles. These, along with the marginal presence of non-white men consolidate, according to O'Rawe, an image of fragile masculinity as white and heterosexual. With chapter 4, "The Last Real Men: *Romanzo criminale*," the readers plunge back into the projected homosocial paradise of the post-1968 film and television adaptation of *Romanzo criminale/Criminal Novel* (Stefano Sollima, 2008-2010). As emphasis is given to the male homosocial bond, the fear of effeminacy is accompanied by a dismissal of the social impact of feminism. The authenticity of the male bond in the TV series is also interestingly legitimated by an increase of violence and sexual explicitness that are predicated on an abjection of the "Other" (whether feminine or non-white), which threatens the contours of masculinity, exposing it as queer.

Brotherhood, in turn, is the central trope of films of middlebrow *impegno* and the *anni di piombo*. Framing the representation of brotherhood through Sedgwick's theory of male homosociality, desire, and patriarchal power, chapter 5 analyzes the affective and political component of fraternal bonds in *La meglio gioventù/The Best of Youth* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003), *Mio fratello è figlio unico/My Brother is an Only Child* (Daniele Lucchetti, 2007) and *Il grande sogno/The Big Dream* (Michele Placido, 2009). For O'Rawe, the emphasis on brotherhood constitutes a problematic return to the family narrative, which reveals deep anxiety regarding its unstable structure. The most compelling point of this chapter is that fraternal attachments are portrayed as unhealthy and unproductive, which results in the expulsion of the "queer" brother (queer as politically wrong or excessive). In "Impersonating Men: History, Biopics, and Performance," O'Rawe examines the recent obsession with politically committed cinema about the 1970s, and the challenges, in term of reception, that actors face in impersonating real figures of terrorism and politics such as Sergio Segio (*La prima linea/The Front Line*, Renato De Maria, 2009) Renato Vallanzasca (*Vallanzasca: gli angeli del male/Angel of Evil*, Michele Placido, 2011), Giulio Andreotti (*Il divo*, Paolo Sorrentino, 2008) and Silvio Berlusconi (*Il caimano/The Caiman*, Nanni Moretti, 2006). Building on Barry King's analysis of impersonation, O'Rawe argues in favor of a mode of performance that makes invisible the actor's personality in favor of the part. While Luigi Lo Cascio was praised for the verisimilitude of his impersonation of Peppino Impastato, Kim Rossi Stuart and Riccardo Scamarcio were criticized for trivializing the real figures because of their association with popular and teen cinema. Ultimately, what is at stake is the fragile charisma of impersonators like Rossi Stuart and Scamarcio whose constant search for artistic confirmation speaks of the uneasy relationship between male beauty, the gaze, and artistic authority.

O'Rawe's monograph is a compelling piece of scholarly work that makes for an enjoyable and accessible read both for specialists and for students of cinema, cultural studies, and gender studies. The book's unique focus on male performance, stardom, and fandom calls for a more subtle analysis of Italian masculinities at the intersection of gender, queer, and race studies. However, if the author is convincing in arguing that representations of Italian masculinity are mostly circumscribed to white masculinity, she fails in mentioning how class and geography affect masculine narratives. Class and geography, which remain mostly implicit throughout the chapters, would help further problematize the trope of crisis. Historicizing masculinity also means reconstructing a possible link between the dismissal of non-white men and of non-bourgeois men. Certainly O'Rawe is successful in showing us that the crisis of masculinity and its consequent feminization are essentializing tropes and it is time to start reading masculinity with a language of its own.

ELENA DALLA TORRE  
Saint Louis University