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O’Healy, Áine. *Migrant Anxieties. Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. Pp. 255. ISBN 78-0-253-03721-3 (hardback 80.00\$/paperback 32.00\$/eBook 12.99\$).

*Migrant Anxieties* is a study of more than 30 Italian movies produced between 1990 and 2016, whose common focus is the representation of the migrant figure. Áine O’Healy engages with a huge corpus of material and, within the vast and interconnected book’s framework, her voice performs an important cohesive role. O’Healy offers a high angle critical gaze that aims to go beyond the immediate and visible unfolding of the films’ narratives of migration and displacement, in order to explore “the elisions and the inconsistencies that point to some of the unspoken fears and dilemmas underpinning Italian attitudes toward transnational mobility” (p. 3). Since the plot and circumstances of each movie’s production are summarized first, this strategy is effective in enabling readers to follow the author’s reasoning, and it fosters their questioning disposition too.

The time span considered (1990-2016) is particularly relevant. During the 90s, Italians had an opportunity to reconsider mainstream and conservative ideas about Italianness, and to confront a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. Indeed, Italy became member of the supranational body of EU, and also a venue for noteworthy immigration instead of emigration, which had characterized the country for more than a century. As instance, the Martelli’s Law –the first attempt to regulate immigration–became operational in 1990, and the new law on citizenship was approved in 1992. The flux of migration increased in the following decades: if in the 90s the Balkans were the main area of departure for the Italian peninsula, then the number of people coming from the global South and the Middle East increased. From their very beginnings these transnational movements roused ambivalent reactions, ranging from an awareness of their potential economic and social force, to anxiety over the threat they could pose for the stability of Italian cultural traditions. Paralleling the increase in migration to Italy, the number of movies involving migrant characters also rose significantly: from just a trickle in the total number of features released each year in the early 1990s to a peak rate of output in 2010.

As O’Healy clearly indicates throughout her study, just like every kind of artistic genre, films play a role in shaping social identities and in building nations. O’Healy presents Italian movies dealing with perceptions of migrants, and she emphasizes their attempts to posit more nuanced perspectives, particularly as compared to the rhetoric of much of mainstream media’s reporting. At the same time, though, the author underlines the limits of these same narratives. Indeed, these productions largely focus on the *Italian* experience of encountering an alterity, she argues, thus marginalizing and shadowing the immigrants’ perspective. Quite often the figures of the migrants are reduced to their immigrant status, thus becoming sites of abjections, attracting a range of feeling limited to pity, resentment, or distrust.

For instance, in chapter 1, “After 1989: Projecting the Balkans,” the author makes evident how these movies foreground Italian citizens and build frameworks that cast the white alterity of immigrants as less than fully white. From *Lamerica* (Gianni Amelio, 1994) to *Venuto al mondo (Twice Born)*, Sergio Castellitto, 2012), the author detects in each narrative the “construction of the asylum seeker as an abject threat that serves to shore up for the citizen a more secure sense of national belonging” (p. 29).

In chapter 3, “African Immigration in the 1990s,” O’Healy explores how tensions activated by migration from Africa resonate in Italian cinema in the 1990s, being the link among the movies of this chapter the heritage of Italian colonial history. Italy’s colonial past, rarely properly addressed by scholars and often dismissed as a topic by general culture, is shaped in three different ways in the films here analyzed: the exoticization and eroticization of African characters, Africans’ denied inclusion in Italian society, and in the foreclosure of interracial relationships and reproduction. O’Healy firstly

focuses on *Pummarò* (Tomato, Michele Placido, 1990) and *L'articolo 2* (Article 2, Maurizio Zaccaro, 1994), highlighting how both of them, despite the greater subtlety of the latter, “fail to make plain the blind spots in the liberal ideology that underpins the narrative’s inspiration” (p. 89). An important part of the chapter is also dedicated to the black female body, and the never-ending history of its eroticization. The productions taken into exam here are *Teste rasate* (Skinheads, Claudio Fragasso, 1993), *L'assedio* (Besieged, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1997), and *Sud side stori* (South Side Story, Roberta Torre, 2000). “Though they place themselves in opposition to the patently xenophobic responses to immigration,” declares the author, “they deploy, problematize, or ambivalently engage the stereotype of the Black Venus, upon which colonial configurations of the desire of a white male for a black African woman most often hinged” (p. 90).

Representations of migrants from Africa also comprise the core of chapter 5, “Imagining an Expanded Mediterranean Borderscape,” one feels the intense seaborne mobility in the Mediterranean since 2001. The films discussed in this section are *Tornando a casa* (Going Home, Vincenzo Marra, 2011), *Io, l'altro* (I, the Other, Mohsen Melliti, 2006), *Lettere dal Sahara* (Letters from the Sahara, Vittorio De Seta, 2006), *Billo il Gran Dakbaar* (Billo the Big Guy, Laura Muscardin, 2006), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialese, 2011), *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea, Gianfranco Rosi, 2016), *L'ordine delle cose* (The Order of Things, Andrea Segre, 2017). If compared to the ones in chapter 3, they concentrate more extensively on the border zone itself as well as its porosity and related challenges. They invite the audience to discuss and negotiate borders in their political, religious, racial and social senses, further than their geographical dimension. Despite a higher degree of complexity, maybe with the exception of *L'ordine delle cose*, these movies also portray migrant characters as catalysts in the transformation of Italian characters, reinforcing mainstream gendered, racialized, and exoticized representation, and making generic calls for compassion, which represents a potential consolatory force for Italian audiences.

Finally, chapters 4 and 6, despite the difference in their topics, are joined by a common thread: they both bring attention to some degrees of novelty in Italian cinema. Chapter 4, titled “Migration, Masculinity, and New Urban Geographies,” introduces viewers to situations, institutions and settings rarely seen in previous Italian production, such as urban and peripheral locations and interethnic habitation. Chapter 6, “Living with Difference. From Noir to Melodrama,” deals instead with genres such as comedy, noir and melodrama, that did not engage in migrants’ representations—at least until the first years of 21st century. In this final chapter, as the author concludes, even if the examined films did not “contribute in a substantial way to the overcoming of embedded racist discourse, they nonetheless participate in the reformulation of the cinematic imaginary” (p. 208), developing narratives in which the ongoing effects of the colonial legacy might, at least, be questioned and reshaped.

This very need to reconsider and rework the themes of an Italian colonial and xenophobic past, and its marks on current discourses, imaginaries, and narratives, resounds in each chapter of *Migrant Anxieties*. Most of the Italian films presented in this research are, in fact, poorly known in Italy and they did not circulate in the peninsula. This fact is telling of the Italians’ resistance to facing their country’s migratory realities. Undoubtedly O’Healy urges us—and I found here the more portable insight of her book—to discuss what Italian cinema means as a category. In fact, this discussion could lead to acknowledging that national cinema—and consequently nation states—cannot be confined in a geographical frame, since their understanding and their identities imply multiplicity, hybridity, fluidity and versatility.

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