

Louis Bayman. *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 240.

The reader, who starts Louis Bayman's journey on *Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*, immediately realizes that the book is not simply a representation of one of the most emotional and theatrical genres in Italian cinematographic history, "the drama of the popular masses" (125), but rather a redefinition, through the lens of a passionate writer, of an entire period in Italian history, looking at Italy's cultural identity, visual arts, moral representations, conservative Catholicism, and the musical theatre of the "*sceneggiata*."

In the first part of the book, the author deepens his survey on the technicality and the inner features of the melodramatic genre from 1949 to 1954 by illustrating how in those years the representations of iconic themes and modern dramatic realities portray the evolution of a genre that embodied the transformation of an entire social class. The Italian middle class, battered and weakened by the harshness and destruction of World War II, engaged in a cinematic production and appreciation that gradually helped it to move away from the negativity of the period toward a more acceptable reality where women and men started or gained new cultural identity. Movies such as *Catene*, *Tormento*, *Senso*, *Appassionatamente*, and so many others, together with the familiar faces and voices of Silvana Pampanini, Silvana Mangano, Amedeo Nazzari, Massimo Girotti, came to embody all the emotional and passionate visions of Italian life during that time. Intrigue, love, lust, agony, social recognition, unique cultural and sexual identity, violence, and, to put in Bayman's words "all the conflicts of grand moral absolutes" (74), were the prominent themes of those movies that needed to address the requirements of a changing cinematic audience in constant need of entertainment, distraction, and nurture. These were movies that, in Bayman's eyes, needed to incorporate different points of view—such as the female gaze, for example—while "being made for a universal audience" (59). An audience who, despite modern life, still felt a deeper meaning and a justification as per a still strong Catholic perspective and interpretation.

In the second part of the book, Bayman focuses on the inner nature of melodrama while addressing how the genre, together with "realism and modernism, responds to the specific needs of the modern

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age” (103). While, on one side, the author does indicate a development in the dramatic cinematic style after 1954 into a more “neorealistic symbolism” (108) in emphasizing particular emotions such as hope, despair, pathos, and devastation, Bayman does underline that all these effects are indeed conventionally “melodramatic” in their high degree of “theatricality” that seems to be so essential in Italian culture. Thus, when dealing with movies such as *Roma Città Aperta*, *Paisà*, *Stromboli*, or Matarazzo’s films, Luchino Visconti’s and so forth, we are dealing with new, neorealistic, forms of cinema, in which, however, the melodramatic nature lies in the incorporation of a deeper sense of the emotional landscape. Even if, Bayman argues, the *Neorealismo popolare* seems to be in antithesis with a distant melodramatic representation of reality, it does include a “socially meaningful and eventful” (113) melodramatic essence. Nature, space, rurality versus city sophistication, community versus individuality, are some of the most popular “innovations” of the current cinematic visions, that although seem apparently distant from the melodrama of the previous years, still maintain a very close relationship with it. As to stress this very point, Bayman retrospectively, demonstrates the melodrama’s link with music, in particular the Opera and its “emotional emphasis and elevation” (128). As a matter of fact, opera and all its representation, does incorporate in its “theatrical space and musical structure” (142) the emotional “expressivity of the typical melodrama” (151).

In sum, Bayman’s book represents a profound vision of the inner nature of the melodrama that creates “its own generic terms through which it shapes reality, heightens the gaps between expression, emotion and reality” (182), while manifesting itself in its very emphatical nature. Thus, Bayman’s gaze seems to gather this emotionality and passionate nurturing gaze while giving voice and light to those emotions and feelings that make cinema the most meaningful representation of life and that are found in the “popular” nature of Italian life.

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Gino Tellini. *Alle origini della modernità letteraria*. Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2013, pp. 208.

In his preface, Gino Tellini states the aim of his book: to use the exhibition material from the 2008 Florentine exposition, *Dal vate al saltimbanco. L'avventura della poesia a Firenze tra la belle époque e avanguardie storiche*, to investigate the manifold and antithetical literary movements that developed in Florence between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These movements are critical to the genesis of the future Italian “modernità letteraria” (xi). The book is comprised of eight chapters: *Persone*, *Luoghi*, “*La casa è l'uomo*,” *Intersezioni*, *Fiorentini d'adozione*, *La città riflessa*, *Il signore biancovestito* and *Etica e poesia*, followed by a table of acronyms, the illustration index, the name index. It also includes a DVD.

In the first chapter, the author points out the central role of Florence as the recipient of the three major conflicting literary movements at the beginning of the twentieth century: the avant-gardists from the 1880s that promoted a cultural renewal through their works and new founded journals paving the way to the future modern Italian literature; the professors from the *Istituto di Studi Superiori*—representative of the traditional academic school—that fostered literary research in a rationalistic style; and the celebrity Gabriele D'Annunzio along with a handful of contributors to the literary magazine, *Il Marzocco*. Through numerous photographic portraits as well as reproductions of theatre posters, first-edition books, and periodicals, Tellini offers an account of the diverse personalities that populated Florence at that time.

In the second chapter Tellini demonstrates the coexistence of “energie contrastanti” (26) within the walls of the same city. Indeed, Florence was unique in witnessing the confrontation among four poetic trends: D'Annunzio's aestheticism; the classical and humanistic poetry of the academic professors; the expressionism and autobiographism of the contributors to *La Voce*, and the scornful and ironic poetry of the “*Lacerbiani*.” The Florentine city space therefore hosted four different types of poets: *Il Vate*, *il Professore*, *l'Uomo Comune* and *il Saltimbanco* (26), respectively. Also, by providing a thorough description of D'Annunzio's villa, of the *Istituto di Studi Superiori*'s location and of the apartment where Giuseppe Prezzolini founded and ran *La Voce*, Tellini shows how the different places are actually emblematic of their inhabitants' poetic styles.

In the following chapter, the author dwells on the identification between an inhabited place and the individual that lives there. Through a number of quotations, Tellini offers an example of three different interiors that identify D'Annunzio's luxurious lifestyle, the Professors' lack of aesthetic appreciation and Prezzolini's sober life code. This corroborates Tellini's thesis that only in the city of Florence opposing protagonists coexist. In fact, the new anti-sublime poetry was generated from these antithetical cultural perspectives, to develop, later, into twentieth century modern Italian literature.

In chapter four, Tellini emphasizes two major phenomena that took place in Florence between the two centuries. If, on the one hand, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anti-positivistic culture established connections with academic research, as demonstrated by the contributions in *Il Marzocco*, on the other hand, a violent breakup came about between the literary academic tradition and the avant-gardists through the new magazines. Particularly, the conflict focused on the philological studies on Dante and the historical research method adopted by the *Istituto di Studi Superiori*. This rift's effects would then reverberate along the twentieth-century literary culture.

In the next chapter, Tellini draws attention to the multiple young Italian poets that were mainly attracted by *La Voce* and *Lacerba*'s activities and, therefore, chose Florence as their second home. Among these was Umberto Saba who, after publishing his first book, *Poesie*, under his new and final pseudonym, wrote an article, *Quello che resta da fare ai poeti* (94), in which he defined a new poetics distancing himself from D'Annunzio's poetry.

In the sixth chapter, Tellini illustrates how the literary production of the time mirrors the Florentine urban space. Indeed, the discordant artistic trends were reflected in the layouts of the literary magazines as well as in literary productions (both poetry and prose). Through a wide range of examples, the author shows the many dissimilar manners in which Florence was represented by intellectuals: aesthetically, realistically, mysteriously, or humanistically. Furthermore, a new poetic language was created opposing D'Annunzio's: The major representative of anti-sublime poetry was the *Saltimbanco* created by Palazzeschi.

In the next to last chapter, Tellini puts emphasis on Saba, Prezzolini, and Palazzeschi's aversion to D'Annunzio's aesthetic poetry and his followers.

The author concludes his book highlighting the cultural, social and political conflicts between the avant-gardists and the academic

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tradition. Moreover, Tellini demonstrates that the poetic style of the young poets who also served in The Great War expressed their feelings of anguish and disenchantment opposing D'Annunzio's rhetoric of the celebration of war.

Tellini's book represents a precious contribution to the history of nineteenth century Italian literature, in that it illustrates the genesis of modern literary culture from a geographical and biographical perspective with an emphasis on the daily experience of each individual artist. As in other works, Tellini does not separate the artist's life from the human being behind the writer. In fact, as he states in his premise, the quotidian details can contribute to the interpretation of the authors' literary production (x).

Also, by providing a great many literary excerpts by a number of the poets covered, he offers critical information that supports his thesis and meets the scope of his book, which is to diffuse the knowledge of the exhibited materials. These, in turn, add value to the book since they are comprised of numerous manuscripts, portraits of the artists, images of the places where the intellectuals lived, worked, and trod. Tellini excels at giving an iconographic representation of the conflicting literary tendencies leading the reader across the Florentine urban spaces and into the most private corners of the artists' homes. Furthermore, his unique style, resulting from erudition, synthesis, concision, and a wide range of accurate and learned vocabulary, makes the book a supplemental tool for knowledgeable scholars as well as interesting material for curious readers.

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