

## Realisms in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema

Review of: Loredana Di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio (eds.), *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. ISBN: 9781443811231, £ 57.99.

Paolo Chirumbolo

The debate on 21st century Italian realism that started nearly ten years ago with the publication of the issue of *Allegoria* entitled “‘Ritorno alla realtà’: narrativa e cinema alla fine del postmoderno’ (2008), welcomes the publication of Loredana Di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio’s *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*. The volume is a timely contribution to this lively and engaging discussion, and it is relevant for at least three reasons. Firstly, it offers the readers a theoretical introduction (‘Contemporary Iterations of Realism: Italian Perspectives’) to all the different shades of realism existing in contemporary Italian philosophy, literature, and cinema (from Ferraris’ *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, to Eco’s notion of ‘negative realism’; from Recalcati’s discussion of the Lacanian Real, to Taviani’s concept of ‘allegorical realism’). Secondly, it provides in-depth investigations of some of the most prominent writers and filmmakers whose works have been associated, one way or another, with 21<sup>st</sup> century realism. Finally, it gives non-Italian readers the opportunity to ‘familiarize themselves with recent artistic and critical productions in Italy’ (VIII).

*Encounters with the Real* is divided in two parts. The first part, ‘Literary Encounters with the Real’, opens with Monica Jansen’s essay ‘The Uses of Affective Realism in Asbestos Narratives: Prunetti’s *Amianto* and Valenti’s *La fabbrica del panico*’. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s work on ‘affective realism’ and Marianne Hirsch’s theory of ‘postmemory’, Jansen argues that the hybrid fictional works of Prunetti and Valenti, not only possess inherent, and topical, testimonial and documentarian qualities, but also foster ‘a mediated prospective memory of protest and change’ (23). In this sense, the works of Prunetti and Valenti (as well as other Italian writers who use similar narrative strategies) become exemplary of narratives that transform private events (factory workers’ death) into universal stories of ‘resistance against capitalism’ (22). Monica Seger’s article tackles another vital issue. ‘Toxic Tales: On Representing Environmental Crisis in Puglia’ focuses on the ecological catastrophe that in recent years has plagued the city of Taranto. Seger’s objects of investigation, *Adesso tienimi* by Flavia Piccinni, and *Quindici passi* by Giuliano Foschini, are paradigmatic of ‘the sort of post-millennial realist narrative’ (30) that is not afraid of engaging with controversial questions, and provide readers with a deeper understanding of the complex interaction between human health, industrial development, and the environment. Raffaello Palumbo Mosca’s chapter, ‘New Realism or Return to Ethics? Paths of Italian Narrative from the 1990’s to Today’, tackles the debate on realism

from a different angle. Instead of advocating a return to realism Palumbo prefers to speak of a 'return to ethics'. Focusing on writers such as Veronesi, Affinati, Albinati, Pascale, Franchini, and Tarabbia, the author highlights their tendency to experiment with hybrid forms of fiction, in order to raise, and deal with, ethical concerns. In 'Resisting Inexperience in the Age of Media Hyperreality: The "Ends of Mourning" in Antonio Scurati's *Il sopravvissuto*', Loredana Di Martino convincingly argues that contemporary fiction represents an effective antidote to 'the media's spectacularization of violence'. Literature becomes the tool through which readers can work through their traumas, and reject any simplistic interpretation of reality. The section on literature ends with Clarissa Clo's analysis of the novel *Timira* by Wu Ming 2 and Italian-Somali author Antar Mohamed ('Collective Transmedia: Storytelling from Below: *Timira* and the New Italian Epic'), and an interview with Antonio Franchini ('The Task of Truly Probing Reality').

The second part of the volume ('Cinematic Encounters with the Real') begins with Pasquale Verdicchio's investigation of Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution* and Garrone's *Reality* ('Revelatory Crises of the Real: *Before the Revolution* and *After Reality*'). According to the author, both films engage with moments of political and economic crisis in Italian history, thus reaffirming the role of cinema as a privileged vehicle of social criticism and commentary. Fulvio Orsitto's contribution, 'Emanuele Crialese's Allegorical Realism in *Respiro*', focuses on director Crialese's rendition of realism. Using Massimo Recalcati's reading of Lacan's distinction between 'real' and 'reality', and borrowing Crialese's own definition of 'allegorical/magical realism' (Crialese speaks of 'Reality alternating with a dimension of fantasy'; 150), Orsitto offers the reader an exhaustive analysis of the filmmaker's work. In her piece, Gloria Pastorino discusses the representation of migration in contemporary Italian cinema ('The Quest for Identity and the Real in Crialese's *Terraferma*, Dionisio's *Un consiglio a Dio*, and Martinelli's *Rumore di Acque*'). Drawing on Lacan's notion of the 'encounter with the Other', Pastorino claims that cinema (in all its different facets) helps the audience renegotiate the relationship with the unknown, the migrant 'Other', thus leading 'to growth both as individuals and as a nation' (162). 'A Journey from Death to Life: Spectacular Realism and the "Unamendability" of Reality in Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty*' by Monica Facchini delves into the cinematic universe of one of Italy's most prominent directors. In her analysis, Facchini skillfully combines Debord's theory on the 'Society of the Spectacle', Ferraris' ideas on the 'unamendability of reality', and Pasolini's concept of death as the moment that, like a montage, gives full meaning to one's existence. According to Facchini, Jep Gambardella's spectacular life begins to make sense only when he is forced to confront death and loss. As the author puts it: 'the encounter with death leads Jep to select and order the most important moments of his life' (197). The last essay of this section, Marco Bertozzi's 'Italian Documentary Forms and Cinematographic Archives', discusses the importance of found footage and archival images in Italian documentaries. Covering a period ranging from the 1960s to the 2000s, Bertozzi demonstrates how the 'recuperation of images cuts across the entire body of Italian cinema' (225), and how this cinematic strategy gives reality, and its representations, a new meaning. The section on cinema ends with an interview with filmmaker Giovanna Taviani ('History Has Come Back with a Vengeance').

In conclusion, *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema* is an excellent tool for a thorough analysis of 21<sup>st</sup> century Italian realisms. Due to its interdisciplinary and dialogic nature, clear structure, as well as its comprehensive bibliography, the volume provides professional academics and scholars with an invaluable source for future investigations in this field of study.

**Paolo Chirumbolo**  
Associate Professor of Italian  
328 Hodges Hall  
Louisiana State University  
Department of Foreign Languages  
Baton Rouge, LA (USA)  
chirumbo@lsu.edu