

Mary Ann McDonald Carolan (2014) *The Transatlantic Gaze. Italian Cinema, American Film* (Albany: SUNY Press), 172 pp., ISBN 978-1-4384-5025-4, \$ 23.95, hard cover

The Transatlantic Gaze. Italian Cinema, American Film is a meticulous work of love that juxtaposes some of the best Italian and American films produced since the end World War II until this second decade of the new millennium, in order to unveil the influence of Italian cinema on American film.

The book articulates its rigorous analyses of Italian and American films side by side, in “deliberate pairings” (131), paying attention not only to cinematic styles and narratives, but also to the cultural, historical, and political contexts in and around the films.

“*The Transatlantic Gaze*,” Mary Ann McDonald Carolan explains, “highlights specific instances of dialogue between Italian and American directors in a series of close readings of Italian and American films of various genres to investigate how filmmaking techniques and narratives have been translated across the Atlantic” (3). The transatlantic frame within which the author contextualizes her work supports the recognition of influence between cinematic styles, narratives, and genres in a thoroughly comparative manner that highlights the “ongoing conversation between particular directors” (3). One must stress “particular directors” because the book does not propose an overarching theory of the effects of Italian cinematic tradition on American film; rather, the author chooses the films she discusses based of what the works of art themselves tell about the influence they have exerted, or received from across the ocean.

The book focuses on the imprint of great directors such as, but not only Michelangelo Antonioni, Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, and Sergio Leone on the works of Woody Allen, Lee Daniels, Brian De Palma, Neil LaBute, Spike Lee, and Quentin Tarantino among others. The

work is constituted of five independent essays with an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter focuses on a specific genre. Chapter II (chapter I is the introduction), “Screen Idols and Female Admirers,” brings together Fellini’s *The White Sheik* (1952), Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), and LaBute’s *Nurse Betty* (2000) in a parallel between the three mesmerized female admirers of uncertain idols.

The analysis of the dialogue between Italian film and American cinema becomes more compelling in chapter III, in which the art film is at the center of a comparison between Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) and De Palma’s *Blow Out* (1981). The author focuses on “De Palma’s adaptation of Antonioni’s contemplation of his own craft” (46), showing how art film is not foreign to the American cinematic tradition.

Chapter IV traces the influence of the American Western on the spaghetti Western and back on to Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* two volumes; this topic is then reprised in the conclusion, with a closer parallel between the underlying political discourses in *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012).

Neorealism comes to the forefront in chapter V, in the films of African American directors Lee Daniels (*Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire*, 2009) and Spike Lee (*Miracle at St. Anna*, 2008). Here the author demonstrates how Daniels and Lee deploy the style of a foreign genre—neorealist aesthetic—to expose racism and poverty in an American social context. She writes, “Lee Daniels and Spike Lee’s adaptations of neorealist techniques and themes underscore the need for contextualizing film criticism in a larger, transatlantic framework instead of considering Italian and American cinematic works only in relation to their respective national film cultures” (107). With a transatlantic perspective, the importance of Italian film for American cinema becomes more apparent, in this case in the works of Daniels and Lee who

“effectively project social and political critiques” (107) in the same way Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica were able to do before them.

Chapter VI, on the genre of the remake, seems to be the weaker part of this otherwise compelling book. Conscious that remakes constitute a big part of the dialogues between national cinemas (“critical junctures” 109), the author presents a rich overview of American adaptations of Italian films. This long curriculum of adapted films and their originals unravels at the expenses of a closer reading of the material. Unlike the other essays in the book, this one does not delve into deep and fascinating comparative analyses; it seems to touch only the surface of the connections among the films it discusses. For example, Nanni Moretti’s take on American film culture in *Dear Diary* might have benefited from a keener attention to the moral discourse behind it. The author’s signaling of the abundant references and connections does not amount to a solid critical reading of things American in *Dear Diary*. However, the discourse about the Italian reception of the musical film genre is here very interesting. For those interested in a history of adaptations of Italian films in the U.S.A., this detailed essay is a very good place to start from and go back to.

In concluding her work, the author writes: “*The Transatlantic Gaze* has demonstrated the enduring impact of a variety of genres of Italian film on American directors.” The absence of an over-imposed theory is one of the highly positive and refreshing notes of this book that brings together studies and observations done through the years by a scholar who has researched, lived, and mediated between two specific cultures. To this regard, the author states: “As cinema becomes more global, the notion of national cinemas becomes more complicated and ambiguous. In the future, “national” categories of cinema may disappear, as Elsaesser and others suggest. Yet, I contend that we will continue to discern the influence of directors from a particular

country, who represent developed aesthetics such as those found in Italian cinema” (138). It is the “enduring impact” (138) of Italian cinema on American film that the book points to.

The detailed analyses of this scrupulous work are of interest not only to scholars of cinema and Italian studies, but also to those engaged in comparative, cultural, American, and Italian-American studies.

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