

## BOOK REVIEW

*Marvelous Bodies: Italy's New Migrant Cinema*, by Vetri Nathan, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 2017, 266 pp., \$45.00/£47.95 (paperback), ISBN-10 1557537739

In the Preface to *Marvelous Bodies*, Vetri Nathan recounts his meeting with an elderly Sicilian woman who mistakes him for an Indian soldier from World War II, revealing the inextricable ties between colonial past and postcolonial present. With the increasing growth of global migrations to Italy in the last three decades, this connection has centrally emerged in the development of Italian postcolonial studies (e.g. Andall and Duncan 2005; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012) and, crucially, in a series of recent publications that interrogate the constructedness of a racially homogeneous Italian identity in cinema (Russo Bullaro 2010; Greene 2012; De Franceschi 2013). One of the still few monographs dedicated to global migrations in Italian cinema, alongside Áine O'Healy's *Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame* (2019), *Marvelous Bodies* focuses on thirteen films made between 1990 and 2010 as examples of 'New Migrant Cinema', exploring the current 'social and cultural phenomenon of immigration into Italy from the global South' (1). The author privileges fictional films with limited global distribution (1; 8), although some of the case studies, such as *La doppia ora/The Double Hour* (Giuseppe Capotondi, 2009) and *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialese, 2011), have arguably attracted international interest thanks to their participation in major film festivals and awards. This representative corpus forms the basis for the symptomatic exploration of tensions that 'haunt seemingly established dichotomies of a stable Italian/European self and the displaced

Immigrant/Oriental Other' (3). Nathan aptly investigates this historical 'chronic ambivalence' in the negotiation of race, gender, and national identity through the filmic representation of what he terms 'marvelous bodies': both 'migrant' and 'Italian' bodies that destabilise fixed categorisations, challenging stereotypes produced by media (6).

Nathan's theoretical framework is firmly grounded in the postcolonial and psychoanalytical fields, with the theories of Homi K. Bhabha lying at the core of the project, as Nathan explains in both the Introduction and Chapter One. In the brief overview of the development of postcolonial studies, Nathan rightly emphasises the necessity of considering the Italian specificity when applying theories and concepts mainly formed in relation to the British and French postcolonial contexts. He thus adopts Bhabha's theory of hybridity as the most suited to examine Italy as an 'unstable *oikos*', as demonstrated through the comprehensive survey of Italy's own Otherness, encompassing the Southern Question, the failed colonial legacy, and its liminal position in the EU (33-37). Nathan then focuses on Bhabha's conceptualisation of the 'stereotype-as-fetish' and 'mimicry' to link this ambivalence to the visual representation of bodies. The examples from Italian media here cited, such as discourses surrounding Cécile Kyenge, Italy's first Black minister, bring effectiveness to the theoretical approach.

The second chapter situates the corpus in relation to the question of realism, a focal point in critical discourses that understand cinema as a means for nation-building. Nathan challenges claims of neo-neorealism associated with New Migrant Cinema solely due to its elements of *impegno sociale* [social commitment], instead highlighting commonalities with post-neorealist *commedia*

*all'italiana* and 1960s auteurs for their Pirandellian humour. The ambivalence that characterises it through the 'split between appearances and the real' (75) allows Nathan to link cinematic forms to Bhabha's theories. Yet, while this contextualisation is useful to frame the corpus, some contradictions emerge. In particular, the containment of neorealism from a social and cultural perspective, as a 'progressive humanism of the *immediate* postwar period' (63), somewhat underplays aesthetic and thematic continuities with preceding and successive popular genres, *commedia all'italiana* included, while going against the attention paid to style and forms in Nathan's analysis.

In the remaining three chapters, Nathan turns to the close textual analysis of the case studies, organised in three main macro-themes: ambivalent geographies, ambivalent desires, and ambivalent moralities. Chapter Three explores the relationship between bodies and the landscape as the nation is re-imagined through filming. The chapter first looks at *Terra di mezzo* (Matteo Garrone, 1996) and *Lamerica* (Gianni Amelio, 1994), wherein the interaction of marvelous bodies with different landscapes temporarily suspends identity, as demonstrated through the careful analysis of the *mise-en-scène* and camerawork. In contrast, *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005) curtails the marvelous through the adoption of a child's perspective that assumes an 'us Vs. them' dialectic. The chapter concludes with *Terraferma*, where the island at the centre of the narrative represents an ideal third space that allows for the suspension of identities.

Chapter four links Laura Mulvey's gaze theory to the Bhabhian ambivalence, finding a connection in the concomitant pleasure and anxiety that the woman-as-object and the stereotype-as-fetish provoke. The centrality of desire, closely

linked to gender and sexuality in colonial biopolitics, is here explored to question the negotiation of the nation in cinematic representations. Nathan examines how gendered hegemonies can be subverted through the gaze, even if only temporarily, as in *Pummarò* (Michele Placido, 1990), or re-established, as in *Bianco and Nero* (Cristina Comencini, 2008). However, the intersectional analysis of bodies on screen would have benefited from a contextualisation within contemporary discourses on gender and race in Italy. The consideration of the historical circulation of an archive of stereotypical images that still persist in the public imaginary would have further concretised the psychoanalytical approach, demonstrating its relevance to the present.

Stereotypes are also explored in the fifth chapter through the figure of the immigrant as criminal, specifically contextualised in relation to the eastward expansion of the European Union. By analysing the figure of the Eastern European immigrant as a marvelous body, constructed in space and through the gaze as in *La sconosciuta* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2006), Nathan shows how these films more or less successfully question the moral stance of the audience through an affect of ambivalence. This is echoed in the last case study, *Io, l'altro* (Mohsen Melliti, 2007), a detour that refers to the post-9/11 'stereotyping of the Arab-as-terrorist' (206).

Nathan's consistent focus on the body emphasises the elements of contact between the chapters, and is further strengthened by the coherent theoretical approach. Their common structural subdivision, starting with opposing case studies and ending with a film that synthesises the issues explored through the chapter, effectively creates resonances between the films and themes, brought together in the Conclusion through the analysis of Paola Randi's *Into Paradiso*

(2010). Arguably, the in-depth textual analysis at the centre of these three chapters represents one of the strengths of this work, as films are examined by paying detailed attention to aesthetics and style, in connection with postcolonial theories, as in *Terra di mezzo* or *La doppia ora*. Yet, in some cases, such as *Il resto della notte* (Francesco Munzi, 2008), the analysis is less persuasive due to the heavy reliance on lengthy plot descriptions, dialogues and interviews from popular press that reveal little about the negotiation of identity.

By systematically organising and analysing representative examples, *Marvelous Bodies* demonstrates the key role that media have in reshaping Italianness. And yet, the book also frustrates expectations in places, due to some of the contradictions highlighted and, in particular, the not always incisive connection between the psychoanalytical approach and current debates. Nevertheless, the book provides a timely overview of New Migrant Cinema and, by extension, of the contemporary Italian industry; it represents an original and important contribution to the growing field of Italian postcolonial and screen studies, which will hopefully pave the path for much needed further research in this direction.

### **Notes on contributor**

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