JESSICA SCARLATA

Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame by Áine O’Healy

With Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame, Áine O’Healy adds Italy to the growing body of scholarship on the topic of migration and European cinema. Through the figure of the migrant, O’Healy addresses the cinematic articulation of Italian fears “induced by globalization—particularly by the sharp increase in the flow of immigration from the east and the global South, the uncertainties of the neoliberal economic order, and the necessity to conform to European mandates” (1).

While the films she addresses are all post-1990, O’Healy’s readings put contemporary migration into a longer context of Italy’s history of wide-scale poverty and mass emigration on the one hand, and colonial conquest and fascism on the other. For the most part, the migrant figure in the films she examines is an immigrant to Italy, but she also includes films in which Italian characters emigrate from Italy and immigrate back, either by choice or by circumstance.

Over the course of six chapters and an afterword, multiple meanings emerge for the “anxieties” in the book’s title. While the films may initially address the struggles that migrant characters face on-screen—and things that might cause them anxiety—they ultimately change focus from the anxieties of migrants to the anxieties that migration triggers in Italian conceptions of the nation. Furthermore, O’Healy demonstrates that such concerns have moved across Italian history and throughout “fortress Europe,” giving the sense that the anxieties themselves are migrant.

Though this volume may share some concerns and overlap of time period and film choice with Vetri Nathan’s recent monograph, Marvelous Bodies, O’Healy opts to focus on “films that address or symptomatize clusters of specific anxieties—regarding race, gender, nativity, border construction, and multiethnic cohabitation” (11). To do so, she privileges a transnational lens, foregrounding questions of border crossing and linguistic/ethnic/national plurality and their narrative representation rather than addressing the extent to which the films themselves are transnational productions. The films are transnational, she suggests, precisely because they place national identities into dialogue with one another, via the bodies that circulate through various Italian spaces and the narratives represented on-screen.

O’Healy argues that it is not just a narrative focus on migrant characters that mobilizes Italian national anxieties, but also the ways that such characters are visualized. Appearing in domestic, clandestine, marginal, and public spaces, migrant characters alter these cinematic spaces in literal and symbolic ways that resonate with concerns about the physical presence of actual migrants in Italy. In doing so, she notes, the films destabilize questions of national belonging often taken for granted as common sense.

In order to illustrate the manner in which identity and belonging are challenged, O’Healy begins with Italian outsiders, focusing on films about Italian characters living or traveling in Albania and the former Yugoslavia, or trying to get there, or get back home. This first chapter, “After 1989: Projecting the Balkans,” addresses fears about differentiating Italian citizens from southeastern European immigrants when they share “a common claim to whiteness” (19). O’Healy contextualizes the question of whiteness and citizenship by locating it within a history of the construction of Italian whiteness in relation to the nation’s “internal others (specifically southerners), its emigrants, and its neighboring populations all of whom—at least to outsiders—may appear to resemble each other to a striking degree” (17).

O’Healy’s exploration of European migration continues in the second chapter, “Traffic from the East: Gender, Labor, and Biopolitics,” where she addresses questions of public and private space within the context of films about women who perform “affective labor,” including care work and sex work. Central to the films she addresses is the abject body of the Eastern European migrant woman. In chapter 3 (“African Immigration in the 1990s”), O’Healy returns to questions of race and racism in an analysis of masculinity, femininity, and the subaltern. Considering the colonial legacy at the root of representations of African and Arab migrant women, O’Healy addresses more recent cinema and the ways that it amplifies, challenges, or transforms racist stereotypes. Her fourth chapter extends this focus on gender into questions of migration and masculinity within cinematic urban spaces, wherein Italian characters mature into masculinity through “transnational encounters” facilitated by the marginal and clandestine urban spaces that characterize the on-screen migratory experience. The following chapter moves the site of encounter from the city to the Mediterranean, which O’Healy positions as a borderscape that acknowledges the border as “both a symbolic and material construction” (138). This chapter considers the legacy of both neorealism and Italian cinema d’impegno, particularly for Terraferma (Emmanuele Crialese, 2011) and Fuocoammare (Fire at Sea, Gianfranco Rosi, 2016). In the final chapter, O’Healy turns to theorizations of film noir and global melodrama to argue that the mode in which and the degree to which the films facilitate spectatorial identification are structured through their genres.
Migrant Anxieties puts more than thirty films and their narratives front and center, making the book an excellent text for students new to the subject as well as for any readers seeking to understand how recent Italian cinema has imagined, shaped, and responded to the framing of migration as a crisis to be managed through condescending tolerance at best and criminalization and death at worst. O’Healy rightly characterizes her own approach as eclectic, but the relationship between the book’s different theorizations of marginalization, precarity, and exclusion are not always as clearly delineated as they could be. The book keeps theory at the margins in favor of accessibility, which means that the connection drawn between a given film and the matching theoretical paradigm is not always readily apparent. In addition, the impressive number and array of films discussed at times overwhelms a more detailed consideration of the political and historical contexts in which the films were made and distributed. Still, Migrant Anxieties circulates an impressive archive of films and provides a firm foundation and map for future researchers to expand upon.

In “Afterword: Accented and Transnational Filmmaking in Italy,” O’Healy also addresses films made by migrant, diasporic, and first-generation Italian filmmakers. Working with Hamid Naficy’s concept of exilic cinema, O’Healy contrasts the Italian context with Western European and U.S. exilic and diasporic cinema, noting that Italy has neither the “institutional support for minority filmmaking” found in other European nations nor “the type of large, long-established ethnic communities that have given rise to the production of distinctive clusters of diasporic films” elsewhere (213). Despite these adverse conditions, she explains, Italy does have a small number of exilic filmmakers producing shorts, documentaries, and feature-length films.

After an overview of exilic filmmaking, O’Healy turns to an in-depth analysis of Jonas Carpignano’s Mediterranea (2015), a film that, she argues, reveals the limits of the concepts of national cinema and accented cinema and is instead better understood as a transnational film, due to Carpignano’s biography as well as its conditions of production. Given the multilingual, multicultural history that contributes to what O’Healy calls Italy’s “historically fragile sense of nationhood,” a consideration of exilic filmmaking alongside other forms of transnational Italian cinema might well provoke a rethinking of Naficy’s model of accented and interstitial cinemas. How can Europe’s “internal others” be represented without feeding the resentments of xenophobic nationalism at a time of the global rise of right-wing populisms? By opening the discussion of Italian cinema to questions such as these, O’Healy’s book productively destabilizes the categories of both “Italian” and “migrant.”

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NATTIE GOLUBOV

Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution by Ramon Lobato

Two ideas condense much of Ramon Lobato’s discussion of Internet-distributed television in this study: one concerns his central subject, Netflix; the other, his method of analysis, which disrupts expectation.

Netflix has “become a verb (‘let’s Netflix it,’ ‘Netflix and chill’)” (13), which Lobato points to as a small yet significant linguistic innovation indicating the transformation of conventional televisial viewing practices, locations, and possibilities enabled by the platform’s features: a searchable library of on-demand, professionally made nonlinear content as well as an entertainment experience that can be shared on the move, anywhere. Although Netflix is not alone in distributing content worldwide through the Internet, it is sufficiently distinct from other platforms—webistes, portals, apps, subscription and cable/satellite services—in the contemporary media ecology to become a case study. As such, it provides Lobato with a way to analyze how streaming services are changing the digital-media landscape.

Distribution networks are much more than a means (however complex or intricately layered) to facilitate transnational circulation. After reading Lobato’s book, it becomes clear that they also shape policy, gatekeeping tactics, content production, programming and circulation, audience expectations and viewing habits, technological adjustments and innovations, infrastructural investment, and legal and financial decisions, as well as activities seeking to circumvent geoblocking, censorship, and unaffordable pricing. In other words, everything.

The multidimensionality of Internet-distributed television prompts Lobato’s second idea. In a conceptual and methodological provocation, Lobato advances his arguments in every chapter by posing a central critical question that he follows with a call for “both/and rather than