

## BOOK REVIEW

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As Giampaolo Renello points out in his contribution to this volume, from its birth in 1996 until the present day, Italian Pulp literature has attracted countless reviews and journalistic reports. „This excessive attention of the critics has also turned into a paroxysmic attempt to label this group of writers with all kind of names, ranging from „pulp to cattivi , „splatter , „trash , „freak , „cattivisti , „maledettisti , and „tremendisti . However, the discrepancy between what Renello calls such neologising fervour and the „actual depth of textual analysis is rather disconcerting (p. 139). As Lucamante stresses in her introductory essay, this is also due to the fact that, unlike in „English-speaking countries, in Italy the labeling of a genre [...] immediately marginalizes that work as something of inferior aesthetic value (p. 18) that is not worthy of serious attention.

*Italian Pulp Fiction*, instead, finally breaks this trend and offers a perspective and objective study of the *Cannibali* phenomenon. By putting together the critical work of scholars based in both America and Italy, Lucamante is also able to guarantee a comparative cross-cultural approach and a variety of intellectual perspectives that illustrate how the ever-changing social, political, and cultural landscapes of the country affect Italian literature and uncover interesting relations between canonical and non-canonical writing, between „highbrow and „lowbrow literature, and between tradition and avant-garde. Although, as La Porta maintains, the *Cannibali* belong entirely to the establishment and „do not scandalize really the bourgeois as they themselves are bourgeois, and they cannot be an avant-garde in the true sense of the word (Filippo La Porta, „Altro che raccontare la contemporaneità , *Il Secolo XIX*, 12 November 1996), they offer a picture of Italy that is much more „frank, stark and realistic than some might like to think (p. 30) and far from that which the stereotypes present (p. 32). What is shocking, instead, is the lack of answers to some of the most impelling issues they raise. In Lucamante's view, this reflects the „sudden lack of ideological polarisation to which people became accustomed in a country that is still trying to recover from the *anni di piombo*, which means dealing with the difficult problem of whether or not to approve „the social re-integration of the *terroristi* whilst, at the same time, promoting stereotypical images in order to increase Italy's economic power around the world (p. 33).

Apart from the very informative and stimulating introduction, the volume consists of five contributions looking at the *Cannibali* from different angles. Although the individual essays vary in quality, when considered as a whole, they offer an exhaustive study of the phenomenon that takes into account the linguistic levels and stylistic solutions of the „new Italian narrative, the recurrent themes, the use of violence and pornography in this group of authors, and their relationship to the Italian avant-garde. Another common feature is the constant reference to the world of cinema and television, so much so that in a writer like Nove, at times, as Renello maintains, „television becomes the world (p. 157) and the boundaries between fiction and reality appear to be totally blurred. As the mind becomes televisual, Renello explains, literature reacts by exteriorizing the body. Nove's characters, in fact, try to come out of their bodies and die while pursuing a modification of their bodies in line with some television scheme. In such a context, death is no more than a change in condition, which explains why the *Cannibali*'s production seems to be characterized by a progressive annihilation of the body. According to Renello this is the result of that process of exteriorization of the imaginary that De Kerckhove had identified as the main impact that television would have on its viewers as early as 1994. Renello, however, pushes his investigation a step further and looks at the process of artificialization of the body that is encouraged by the new technologies. Thanks to virtual reality, the computer becomes a metaphor both of the self and of the body. In this respect, though, Renello concludes, Italian literature lags behind compared to what is happening in other countries.

Particularly interesting for the thoroughness of the analysis is Lucamante's contribution to the volume. Although the main purpose of this essay is, in Lucamante's own words, „to situate Isabella Santacroce's trilogy – *Fluo*, *Destroy*, and her more recent *Luminal* in a map of postmodern cultural and gender studies ,

the author looks at the way in which pornography is used by both male and female *Cannibali* writers. Whereas for female authors of the *Cannibali* group the use of pornography represents a way of appropriating a form of discourse previously dominated by men, thus „unleashing the feminine imaginary and constructing „a new image of Italian Culture and Italian women, both of which are a far cry from those presented by programmatic feminists of the 1970s like Dacia Maraini (p. 100), for the male writers women remain „cheap merchandise and they never play a relevant role in the development of the plot (p. 103). Women are portrayed as two-dimensional and their existence is narratively defined „in a physically determined matter (p. 104) because „Italian males are practically unaware of the theoretical debates of the last ten years regarding the revision of the gender “woman” also as a social construct and perceive themselves to be threatened (p. 105).

Finally, what makes this volume particularly worthy of attention is the inclusion of three stories (also translated into English) that had originally been included in the anthology *Gioventù Cannibale (Prima antologia del terrore estremo*, ed. By Daniele Brolli, Turin: Einaudi, 1996). These are „Evening Jaunt („Seratina ) by Niccolò Ammaniti and Luisa Brancaccio, „The World of Love („Il mondo dell amore ) by Aldo Nove, and „Little Red Ridinghood („Cappuccetto Splatter ) by Daniele Luttazzi.

-Laura Rorato, *Italian Studies*, LVIII, 2003