

Louis Bayman. *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 240.

The reader, who starts Louis Bayman's journey on *Post-war Italian Film Melodrama*, immediately realizes that the book is not simply a representation of one of the most emotional and theatrical genres in Italian cinematographic history, "the drama of the popular masses" (125), but rather a redefinition, through the lens of a passionate writer, of an entire period in Italian history, looking at Italy's cultural identity, visual arts, moral representations, conservative Catholicism, and the musical theatre of the "*sceneggiata*."

In the first part of the book, the author deepens his survey on the technicality and the inner features of the melodramatic genre from 1949 to 1954 by illustrating how in those years the representations of iconic themes and modern dramatic realities portray the evolution of a genre that embodied the transformation of an entire social class. The Italian middle class, battered and weakened by the harshness and destruction of World War II, engaged in a cinematic production and appreciation that gradually helped it to move away from the negativity of the period toward a more acceptable reality where women and men started or gained new cultural identity. Movies such as *Catene*, *Tormento*, *Senso*, *Appassionatamente*, and so many others, together with the familiar faces and voices of Silvana Pampanini, Silvana Mangano, Amedeo Nazzari, Massimo Girotti, came to embody all the emotional and passionate visions of Italian life during that time. Intrigue, love, lust, agony, social recognition, unique cultural and sexual identity, violence, and, to put in Bayman's words "all the conflicts of grand moral absolutes" (74), were the prominent themes of those movies that needed to address the requirements of a changing cinematic audience in constant need of entertainment, distraction, and nurture. These were movies that, in Bayman's eyes, needed to incorporate different points of view—such as the female gaze, for example—while "being made for a universal audience" (59). An audience who, despite modern life, still felt a deeper meaning and a justification as per a still strong Catholic perspective and interpretation.

In the second part of the book, Bayman focuses on the inner nature of melodrama while addressing how the genre, together with "realism and modernism, responds to the specific needs of the modern

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age” (103). While, on one side, the author does indicate a development in the dramatic cinematic style after 1954 into a more “neorealist symbolism” (108) in emphasizing particular emotions such as hope, despair, pathos, and devastation, Bayman does underline that all these effects are indeed conventionally “melodramatic” in their high degree of “theatricality” that seems to be so essential in Italian culture. Thus, when dealing with movies such as *Roma Città Aperta*, *Paisà*, *Stromboli*, or Matarazzo’s films, Luchino Visconti’s and so forth, we are dealing with new, neorealist, forms of cinema, in which, however, the melodramatic nature lies in the incorporation of a deeper sense of the emotional landscape. Even if, Bayman argues, the *Neorealismo popolare* seems to be in antithesis with a distant melodramatic representation of reality, it does include a “socially meaningful and eventful” (113) melodramatic essence. Nature, space, rurality versus city sophistication, community versus individuality, are some of the most popular “innovations” of the current cinematic visions, that although seem apparently distant from the melodrama of the previous years, still maintain a very close relationship with it. As to stress this very point, Bayman retrospectively, demonstrates the melodrama’s link with music, in particular the Opera and its “emotional emphasis and elevation” (128). As a matter of fact, opera and all its representation, does incorporate in its “theatrical space and musical structure” (142) the emotional “expressivity of the typical melodrama” (151).

In sum, Bayman’s book represents a profound vision of the inner nature of the melodrama that creates “its own generic terms through which it shapes reality, heightens the gaps between expression, emotion and reality” (182), while manifesting itself in its very emphatical nature. Thus, Bayman’s gaze seems to gather this emotionality and passionate nurturing gaze while giving voice and light to those emotions and feelings that make cinema the most meaningful representation of life and that are found in the “popular” nature of Italian life.

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