

Elisabetta Girelli, 2009.
Beauty and the Beast: Italianness in British Cinema
(Bristol: Intellect)

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Elisabetta Girelli's *Beauty and the Beast* is an investigation of representations of Italy and Italians in British cinema. Girelli explores three specific historical periods: the 1940s, the cinematic era that goes from the beginning of the 1950s until the mid-1960s, and the 1980s. The study sets itself the goal to demonstrate that "typecast, specific notions of Italianness have deep roots in British society, and are related to equally fixed ideas of Britishness" (10).

Girelli frames her argument within the insights and tenets of postcolonial theory. By extending the application of such findings to a context that is not strictly colonial, Girelli demonstrates that "colonial/orientalist discourse," as the "codification of perceived racial, ethnic, and national differences" (11), is very much present in the context of British cinematic encounters with Italy. This occurs because "Italianness," as a British notion that "rests on a complex interplay of high-brow concerns, popular culture, and national attitudes towards immigrant minorities" (19), has been made to encompass, in the course of the modern centuries, all the values, positive and negative, that were perceived as opposite to the British ones. Italy and Italians, therefore, have mostly been depicted as representatives of a unique constellation of counter-values: at times there was something to be learned from them, at times they were seen with condescending eyes.

Girelli observes that "British attitudes [towards Italy] reflect a heritage of centuries of Grand Tour travel and literature, and the internalization of an image of Italy which, through its development from Classical to Gothic, and from Romantic to Victorian, remained based on notions of past glory and present decay" (19). According to this split vision between the land and its inhabitants, typical of orientalist discourse, Italy is the cradle of Western civilization, a land of beauty, art, and ancient traditions; Italians are "a charming but inept, farcical, and a morally suspect people" (16). Such ambivalent

patterns of representation, Girelli maintains, are still detectable today, “modernized by encompassing a desirable, consumable Italianness made up of fashion, design, cuisine, and sex (endlessly exploited in advertising), together with an Italianness of inefficiency, corruption, and organized crime, of moral and political instability” (16).

Moreover, Italy has been constructed, in opposition to Puritanism, as a land of freedom and inhibited passions. Hence the attractive characteristics of Italians are often depicted in British literature and cinema as carefree untroubled, pleasure-loving and life-affirming. As Girelli warns, however, “the step from paganism to savagery is brief, and any representation of the Italian as inhibited, free-living and free-loving, risks becoming a eulogy of the Good Savage” (21). Italians are often shown as untroubled, for instance because they lack depth of thought and/or are incapable of self-reflection.

Few British authors have portrayed the mixture of danger and beauty that Italy stands for as masterfully as E. M. Forster, and Girelli dedicates the fifth chapter of her study to the cinematic versions of those of Forster’s characters such as Gino of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), who is the best example of such conflicting patterns of representation. Gino, after all, is attractive, charming, sensual and strong, but he is also a successful literary instantiation of the modern savage: shady, dishonest, prone to violence and incapable of self-reflection.

Chapter one provides a necessarily concise but ample historical survey of Italian migration to Britain. It begins with the Middle Ages, with the establishment of small commercial colonies in London and Southampton by Venetian and Genovese traders, and with the contemporaneous institution of banking firms. Italian immigration to Britain retains an elitist character throughout the Renaissance. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, it loses its high-profile character to make space to unskilled migration on a larger scale, typically represented by its most visible figures: street vendors, street-musicians, and organ-grinders. Girelli explains that, up until the 1910s, the Italian presence in Britain, in spite of not being numerically predominant in comparison to other foreign communities, was, nevertheless, visually noticeable: “the foreignness of individual Italians could assume highly visible forms, securing them a firm place in nineteenth-century popular imagination: the organ-grinder became inextricably associated with Italianness, as well as the subject of heated debates, and a site for the negotiation of Victorian values” (32).

Scandals concerning organ-grinders related to the exploitation and abuse of young apprentices and to the living conditions of the over-crowded Italian community in London caused the British public and press to split between supporters and opponents of the trade. The arguments in favour were often based on a romantic and well-meaning (albeit pietistic) vision of Italians: “the Italians were romantic creatures, as cheerful and musical as Italy was always sunny” (35). Between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, therefore, we witness the development of a “split representation of the Italian immigrant, opposing the villain to the likeable but clownish performer, [that] forms the base for contemporary Italian stereotypes, where glamour and style have been injected into a core image which is either corrupted or laughable” (35).

At the end of the nineteenth century, Italian migrants gradually abandoned the occupations of street vendors and performers to enter the industry of food catering, and ice-cream making in particular. Italian ice-cream parlours and café-restaurants will survive World War I and will flourish in the 1920s and 1930s. Once again, Girelli remarks on the visibility of the profession, a factor central to successive constructions of Italians as flamboyant and loud in British literature and cinema: “Ice-cream barrows were often gaudily decorated, announced themselves with catchy organ tunes, and appeared ubiquitous” (40). During the 1950s, espresso and cappuccino were introduced to the British public to become markers of “Italy’s newly fashionable image, conjured up by the clothes, scooters and cinema produced through its relative economic boom” (48).

Chapter two, dedicated to the cinema of the 1940s, explores a diverse cluster of filmic texts, beginning with a discussion of wartime newsreels and continuing with the extended reading of several feature films, focusing, in particular, on British melodrama and its depiction of Italianness. In wartime newsreels, Girelli observes, very much detectable is the stereotype of Italian soldiers as “coward,” a notion derived from memories (related, in particular, to the battle of Caporetto) of the dramatic events and poor performance of the Italian army during WWI. Such filmic texts persistently undermine the Italian army and its soldiers: “unlike Nazi Germany, portrayed as a compact and organic evil, Fascist Italy on the screen was largely synonymous with Mussolini, while his army was seen as a reluctant aggregation of unsoldierly men” (52). After 1943, British newsreels depict a poverty-stricken nation relieved by and thankful for the British and US intervention.

The image of Italy as weak, inefficient, and poverty-stricken was not easily compatible with the traditional figures of villains that had populated British literature, the “dashing dark strangers usually inclined to stabbing, kidnapping or poisoning” (54). It so happened that such figures were consigned to melodrama, where “Italian settings and characters were not a random choice, but part of a stylistic and narrative strategy, aimed at the expression of desires normally unacknowledged or repressed in consensus cinema” (55).

Girelli provides an extended analysis of two feature films representative of the genre: *Madonna of the Seven Moons*, 1945, and *Blanche Fury*, 1948. In the first film, for instance, Italy is depicted as a-temporal and a-historical, a domain whose exoticism is rendered by a series of established stereotypes, partly derived from the tradition of the Gothic novel, partly from images of street vendors and organ grinders that allow for the persistent overlapping, in the film, of Italians with Gypsies: “association of Italians with organ grinders, itineracy, and begging, had created a powerful image which echoed that of the Gypsy” (66). Italians are “primitive and lawless” (61), gesticulating, shouting, indulging in sensual pleasures. Italian men are treacherous Latin-lovers, “passion, charm and good looks combined with Machiavellian scheming, womanizing and violence” (63).

Girelli maintains that, during the 1950s, British cinema underwent a “gender realignment” (93), a shift of interest towards the male sphere, as it produced an increasing number of films focusing on male concerns. In this context, Italian male characters, she argues, often served “a useful function, catalysing or exorcising the crisis of British masculinity” (93).

Girelli chooses *Hell Drivers*, 1957, as a film representative of the period and of the genre, which she interprets as a “man-to-man account of disorientation and crisis” (94). The function of the Italian male character of the film, Gino, is central to the film’s questioning of masculinity: “Gino’s foreignness signifies detachment and alternative, his Italianness provides a specific brand of un-British manhood, typified by a lack of fierceness and competitiveness, and by the presence of gentleness and sensitivity” (99).

If Italian masculinity was constructed in opposition to the British one, it is also because the Italian immigrants who reached Britain in unprecedented numbers after the Fascist decades and the war

were [...] preceded by a long-established catalogue of stereotypes, images of musicians, ice-cream sellers, hairdressers, and bad

soldiers. It is easy to contrast this national Italianness with the aggressively masculine standards embraced, at least theoretically, by many British working-class men, especially those who had physically demanding or dangerous jobs (96).

Throughout the decade, however, British cinema mostly continued to represent Italian men as either “losers or crooks, sometimes as both” (103). Girelli discusses, as instances of this dominating and unflattering pattern of representation, *The Frightened Man*, 1952, *The Flanagan Boy*, 1953, and *Miracle in Soho*, 1957. In the first film, “the familiar paradigm of Italian maleness, a combination of cowardice and social menace is stretched [...] to apply to two generations of Italians, suggesting genetic inevitability” (105); the second film opposes the solid masculinity of the British protagonist to the ridiculous figure of the Italian antagonist; in the third film, “Italian men, in stark contrast to the national subject, are defined by failure, naivety, and general ludicrousness” (109).

In the fourth chapter, Girelli analyses films such as *Summer Madness*, 1955, *The Millionairess*, 1960, and *Woman of Straw*, 1954, in order to discuss post-war Italy as a country that “was making its presence felt in the world stage throughout its design, fashion, and cinema industries” (119). In the scenario of imagined contemporary Italy, a scenario made-up of “sunbathing, Vespa-riding, espresso-drinking population” (120), Italian film-stars occupied a prominent place; they continued to stand for all things un-British, while, at the same time, “legitimizing Britain’s claim to cosmopolitan chic” (120). Girelli explains how these actors (Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Rossano Brazzi) were perceived by the audience:

these new films icons [...] satisfied at once the need for novelty and for tradition; they broke from the familiar star mould in terms of looks, accents, and performance. Their sultry, primal sex appeal thrilled, because it was foreign and threatening, though its threat was tempered by the audience’s in-built perception of Italianness as exotic, rather than alien (123).

A point that is particularly relevant to the films of this period, but which will also be relevant to the filmic renditions of E. M. Forster’s narratives, is that Italianness is an “enticing option” forbidden “outside the parameters

of a holiday, implicitly destined to end" (132). Italy is portrayed, therefore, as an appealing "site of pleasure" (132), but also, by virtue of "a questionable moral system" (132), as a site of a foreign ethos and sensibility; it is a place that, in the end, always serves to reiterate "the preferability of the subject's own, non-Italian reality" (132).

In the fifth and final chapter of the book, Girelli discusses three films from the 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s: *Another Time, Another Place*, 1983, *A Room with a View*, 1985, and *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, 1991. Girelli reads the first film as directly challenging the political and cultural ethos of the era, while she detects, in the latter two films, a fundamental ambiguity: "they ostensibly pay homage to national 'tradition,' while belying a potentially subversive discourse" (161). What all three movies share is a representation of Italy as a destabilizing presence and a "repository of emotions" (156). Girelli's discussion of the latter two films is clearly more relevant to the present context. The filmic interpretations of Forster's narratives are representatives of British 'heritage films,' a filmic genre that should be read, Girelli explains, in the context of Margaret Thatcher's cultural politics: "Labelling her political project as a mission to restore Britain's greatness, the Prime Minister wrapped up her vision in the suggestive guise of Victorianism, mobilizing selective accounts of an extremely complex age; redolent of power, empire and progress" (148).

Often downplaying such complexities, heritage films share "a preoccupation with the conventions of late Victorian or Edwardian Britain [...], lavish mise-en-scène and a middle-class, visually beautiful representation of national society" (162). At the same time, they also display "a nostalgic but troubled framework, articulating an ambiguous, anxious approach to British identity and destiny" (147). This is the reason why such movies have sometimes been read as proposing a conservative and elitist vision of the British past, sometimes as subtly subversive.

If these films significantly tone down the complex social satire and irony that characterize the Forsterian narratives (with their pungent critique of British class dynamics, gender roles, and modern tourism), they effectively reflect the "primary division" (164) upon which Forster's narratives are based: the opposition between Italianness and Britishness. Girelli explains that *A Room with a View* and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* "are essentially journeys of self-discovery for the British protagonists, characterized by a flight from an oppressive, hypocritical, and soul-numbing culture, to arrive at a new level

of consciousness, 'revealed' to them through their Italian experience" (164). Ultimately, therefore, what the narratives and the movies share, Girelli argues, is the "exposure of a short-sighted and patronizing reading of Italy" (166):

While denouncing traditional British notions of Italy as a fabrication, the narrative relies on an essential Italianness to provide a mirror for the problems of Britishness, effectively giving the films, like the novels, a double-shell structure: an unacknowledged construction within the construction. Moreover, one version is not so dissimilar from the other: what is really being discussed is not Italy, but rather the British approach to it (166).

In both films, Girelli further claims, "British eyes are looking at the same object, an Italy which needs to be grasped in absolute terms for the process of British self-definition to take place. [...] In *A Room with a View*, for instance, the early sequence entitled 'In Santa Croce Without Baedeker' establishes one of the film's major assumptions, the association of Italianness with art, sensuality, and danger" (166).

In conclusion, Girelli remarks on the relative consistency of British discourses of self-definition and definition of Italianness throughout the examined period in the history of cinema, where Italians are expected to "excel at un-British behaviour" (174). Italianness signifies:

excess versus restraint, fantasy versus pragmatism, and sexiness versus inhibition. It equally represents deviousness, chaos, and immorality against British fair play, decency, and order [...]. [It comprises] ideas of beauty, decay, menace, and cowardice; these traits are themselves subject to a dominant representation, the combination of fashion and farce which is peculiarly Italian (174).

Beauty and the Beast is a fascinating and pioneering study, one of the first to isolate the notion of "Italianness" as a possible object of study in British cinema. By articulating her arguments within a frame of postcolonial theory, Girelli demonstrates the applicability of Said's insights to a context which is not colonial, but is nevertheless dominated by power relations that must be recognized and understood. Beside this aspect, the most persuasive feature

of Girelli's book lies in its ability to explain trite images of Italian otherness in reference to the history of Italian immigration to Britain, and of the ideas and patterns it has produced, in time, in the British collective imagination. The study calls for more up-dated work on the subject, for the extension of this exploration to the most recent decades of British cinema, and to the contemporary production of both cinematic and television texts.

Michelle Fillion, 2010.
Difficult Rhythm: Music and the Word in E. M. Forster
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University of Illinois Press)

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In the seven years since *Difficult Rhythm's* publication, initially reviewed by music and literary scholars alike, the work has become a model for interdisciplinary scholarship. Michelle Fillion's writing balances literary and musical language, combined with clear explanations, so that readers lacking in knowledge of musical or literary criticism will find her writing enlightening and enjoyable. Earlier scholarship had, of course, mentioned E. M. Forster's frequent inclusion of musical works, but failed to address the musical references as more than passing notes or demonstrations of Forster's musical knowledge. However, Fillion regards the prominence of music throughout Forster's life as a companion and integral part of research into Forster's literary world.

Fillion begins by outlining Forster's intimate knowledge of music as a performer, listener, and critic, which positioned him to examine music in his own way as an expression of modernism. Among these experiences, Fillion recounts Forster's early exposure to music: childhood music lessons, ensembles and prominent composers at Cambridge, and an humorous account of a performance he organized in Alexandria during WWI, reminding the audience not to "clap