

Imag(in)ing Sardinia

Review of: Maria Bonaria Urban, *Sardinia on Screen. The Construction of the Sardinian Character in Italian Cinema*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 579 p., 2013, ISBN: 9789042037502, € 120 / US\$ 168; eBook: 9789401210010, € 108 / US\$ 151.

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Sardinia on Screen aims to examine how Sardinia, its people and culture, have been represented in cinema starting from a systematic analysis of the repertoire of images canonized in European literature.

The author admirably analyses a considerable corpus of literary texts and then proceeds to cinematographic images in order to assess elements of continuity, as well as discontinuity, between one medium and the other.

Part of the Rodopi series *Studia Imagologica*, the book is situated within interdisciplinary imagological studies. As Urban clarifies, the concept of image needs to be perceived in terms of mental images of a national character determined, among others, by characteristics of groups, family and race and which are a 'synthesis of what we observe and our approach to reality' (pp. 12-13). The author believes that all written sources, irrespective of their genre and immediate objectives, have interacted and contributed to the dissemination of national tropes, in turn generating synergies and correspondences with other artistic forms. In particular, since the very beginnings of cinema, film-makers have drawn fully from an ample repertoire of themes, characters and situations provided by literature, adapting and reworking them in line with their own potential, requirements and objectives (p. 28).

The research follows the creation of a specific repertoire of images from the Sardinian world in films, starting from the forms of portrayal canonized in literary discourse and then identifying the standardized solutions adopted in cinematic narrative, in terms of the representation of characters, landscapes and locations. All the sources analyzed in this study have in common the purpose of making Sardinia known to an audience different from the Sardinian public, or to Sardinians who do not identify with the pastoral world of the island's interior which, as the author demonstrates, appears to be the main protagonist of every traditional portrayal of Sardinian identity.

The first two chapters of the book present a rich tapestry of pre- and post-1900 literary texts. Throughout time, European travelers, Sardinian and Italian writers, essayists and scholars, all have contributed to the construction and circulation of images of Sardinia. The strength of this tradition is demonstrated by the fact that it continues to flourish even when attempts have been made to stimulate changes in the image of the island and its people. The reader is, therefore, presented with literary, journalistic and travel texts where the Sardinian culture is identified with

the pastoral mountain landscapes of the Barbagia and of its people recurrently depicted as shepherds and bandits. Sardinia repeatedly encapsulates the positive and negative characteristics generally attributed to the cultural concept of the South, from Sigismondo Arquer's historical-geographical-anthropological study of the island in the 16th-century, to the 18th- and 19th-century travel journals by European travelers, and the reports by Italian politicians and intellectuals interested in what made Sardinia different from the mainland (one infamous example being Alfredo Niceforo's obsession with criminality and morality in Southern Italy).

The author then moves to a variety of 20th-century texts selected on the basis of their direct influence on the debate on Sardinian identity, and on their adoption as primary source for films. Works cited include Franco Cagnetta's *Inchiesta su Orgosolo* (1954), *Squarcio* (1956) by Franco Solinas, Antonio Pigliaru's *La vendetta barbaricina come ordinamento giuridico* (1959), Carlo Levi's *Tutto il miele è finito* (1964), *Padre Padrone* (1975) by Gavino Ledda, up to Maria Giacobbe's *Gli arcipelaghi* (1995). One of the significant facts emerging from Chapter 2 is the predominant role of Sardinian narrators in the creation and dissemination of the 20th-century image of Sardinia. Urban argues that, after a century in which it was prevalently the subject of the outsiders' narrative, the island has finally become able to tell its own story. Dissonant voices have attempted to alter depictions of the wild island, rooted in the literary tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries, to offer a more positive depiction of the native culture in general. At the beginning of the 20th century, in particular, the trope of the primitive, acquires in Grazia Deledda's work (to which Urban devotes numerous pages of her book), the status of an innate and essential element of Sardinian identity (p. 162). The author also dwells on the Sardinian writers Salvatore Manuzzu and Sergio Atzeni who, in the 1980s, attempted to redefine the island space in the narrative imagination, and to reassess the whole tradition going beyond an absolute, unchanging vision of Sardinian identity. The Barbagia, for instance, is no more the centre of Sardinian character, and the depiction of Sardinia as a closed isolated entity has been replaced by the image of a land immersed in the flow of history and as crossroads of different peoples and cultures (p. 206). In this same chapter, the author also brings the reader's attention to the fascinating historical female figure of Eleonora d'Arborea (1340-1404), regent of the Sardinian Kingdom of the Giudicato d'Arborea, consistently presented in literature as a powerful symbol of national identity (pp. 262-268).

In Chapter 3 the films considered are based on written texts, and provide depictions of Sardinia corresponding to the literary images discussed in the previous chapters. In examining films set in Sardinia, and produced from the early 1900s up to today, the author explains how what emerges is a homogeneous and consistent stock of elements whose function is essentially symbolic rather than narrative, in that they establish direct contact with the audience and are independent of the development of the plot. Most of the films discussed here have an ethnocentric viewpoint translated into the re-creation of the Sardinian world as an exotic land, inhabited by primitive men with bizarre customs.

In this section the author refers to the concept of spectacle understood as a set of unique elements (from cinematographic special effects to costumes) exhibited on the screen and whose function is to capture the spectator's attention (pp. 304-305). Ethnographic spectacle, in particular, is employed to define representations of the Sardinian world as an anthropological rarity. Urban confirms how images of Sardinia and its people in films – produced by Sardinian and non-Sardinian directors alike – are essentially consistent with those in literary texts. Some Sardinian film-makers have refused the ethnocentric narrative in favour of a representation of Sardinia similar to other places in the contemporary world, and with an urban context closer

to the socio-cultural reality of the modern day, an example being the work of director Enrico Pau. Nevertheless, even where a literary source contains an alternative perspective of the island, cinema often stubbornly returns to trite representations, contributing to the maintenance of a standardisation of images of the island as an archaic, alien world.

Chapters 4 and 5 elaborate on the Sardinian character and identity on screen. Urban explores, in particular, the recurrence of the shepherd-bandit protagonist as expression of a society ruled by the code of honour, and hardly used as vehicles (together with images of women) for any critical reflection on Sardinian identity. The author, then, discusses a set of features of the Sardinian world that captured the attention of writers and were subsequently taken up by the cinema. These are festivities, traditional costume, prehistoric monuments (like the *nuraghi*) and the Sardinian language.

In the last Chapter the reader is offered a detailed analysis of seven case studies. Starting with Aldo De Benedetti's silent film *La grazia* (1929) and ending with the more recent *Bellas mariposas* (2012) by Salvatore Mereu, Urban engages with some of the strategies adopted in cinematic narration to display the Sardinian character and its commonplaces on screen.

The author concludes by stressing how ethnocentrism, primitivism and exoticism constitute the key factors in every literary and cinematographic narrative on Sardinia. The data analyzed demonstrate that whoever observes Sardinia does so from an ethnocentric viewpoint, irrespective of his/her geographical origin and cultural background. There are two essential characteristics present in every narrative: Sardinia as a fascinating world and, thus, interesting because it is different; and Sardinia as Other, culturally inferior, and recurrently configured according to the trope of the South, in order to satisfy the European and Italian insatiable appetite for the fantastic, the mythic and the unreachable.

The book includes an appendix with a brief summary of Sardinian history and a very helpful filmography.

Essentially narrative in its approach, *Sardinia on Screen* is at times repetitive and engages only timidly with canonical cultural studies or critical theory in general. It is, however, admirably researched, clearly written and, I believe, instrumental in providing an overview of regional representations, and of literary and visual texts which have often been marginalized within Italian Studies.

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