

Book Reviews

Objects in Italian Life and Culture: Fiction, Migration, and Artificiality.

By Paolo Bartoloni.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

203 pages.

Our engagement with objects, things, and the nature of things is at the core of human relations and expression, enriching our sense of identity and belonging, creating a sense of cobelonging, and facilitating the making of meaning in our everyday lives. Scholars such as Remo Bodei, David Forgacs, and Robert Lumley have tackled the nature of things in an Italian context and provided researchers with valuable theoretical underpinnings. However, according to Paolo Bartoloni, their analyses fall short of probing the coexperiential and metamorphic processes that can more deeply inform our relations with things. Moreover, he argues that, in a number of studies on objects and things emerging from Italian thought, “things and objects are treated more as symbols and vehicles of humans’ meanings than as active partners of meaningful engagements” (2).

By contrast, Bartoloni’s *Objects in Italian Life and Culture* brings an original and interdisciplinary perspective to this issue, drawing on philosophical orientations such as object-oriented ontology and phenomenology, together with cultural studies and psychoanalysis. The author states that the book’s ambition is to “revaluate the significance of meaning and meaningfulness” and that this is arrived at by “stressing the central role that the exchange between objects and individuals plays in giving meanings to the world” (178–179). Bartoloni’s enterprise, therefore, is to engage readers in a mutual understanding of the significance of objects and things as partners in the cocreation of meaning in our lived experience, framing his methodology in “phenomenology’s assessment of things as primarily material instances of world experience” (4). With acute insight and sensibility, Bartoloni articulates his unique and multiform theoretical understanding of the significance and life of objects. While this book makes a valuable contribution to an ample body of work on material culture, Bartoloni also offers new understandings of the connectivity and inclusivity generated by material engagements together with an approach that is both object focused and anchored in an Italian cultural landscape at home and abroad in its transnational manifestations.

Casting his net widely but judiciously, Bartoloni’s five-part analysis discusses meaningful places, fictional objects, objects in a migration context, multicultural and transnational objects, and, finally, objects functioning as

props that may exist in artificial settings. He utilizes, in an informed and thoughtful manner, an array of objects and things situated in particular contexts both material and fictional and in selected locales. In the first half of the book, the author interweaves theoretical discourse with cultural understandings and personal narratives with critical readings and includes a focus on creative endeavors. In order to arrive at a shared understanding of meaningful places and things and our empathetic connection to them, as opposed to a perception of dislocation or disengagement, the author interrogates writings by Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger. The latter's notions of the connections between dwelling, home, and belonging are discussed alongside Freud's definition of the feeling of happiness experienced from a sense of "oceanic" oneness with the cosmos. Selected examples from Italo Svevo's and Michelangelo Antonioni's creative output in textual and visual forms are later introduced as insights into the possibilities of narrative language and cinematic imagery that blur distinctions, casting the relations between humans and materiality into a state of flux and ambiguity where there is no single identifiable reality but multiplicity, approximation, and liminality. In the case of Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*, Bartoloni examines materiality through language and the objectivization of the female body linked to fetishism, while Antonioni's films *L'éclisse* and *Blow-Up* offer perspectives on defamiliarization and "modern disconnection" (78). Bartoloni's foregrounding of the complex process of mediation between characters and objects in these narrative and cinematic representations makes evident modern frames of reference on relational roles and disjunctures in specific fictional encounters between individuals and materiality.

A comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of migration in its dynamic and multifarious enactments serves as the introduction to chapter 4 on migrant objects. In this chapter, the author situates his analysis of objects in the context of the large-scale arrival of Italians to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Bartoloni shares moments of his personal journey as a migrant from Italy who settled in Australia in the 1990s and whose personal belongings, such as his collection of books, proved to be a solace to him "to remind myself who I was" (115). Employing mostly oral testimonies from the online exhibition *Belongings*, created by the New South Wales Migration Heritage Centre, his contextualization reveals how domestic objects from the homeland brought by Italian migrants to the place of settlement helped to ground their sense of identity. The experience of these objects provided a much-needed sense of solidity and security during a time of cultural dislocation and, for many women migrants, linguistic isolation. Bartoloni's is an incisive and thought-provoking analysis of the value of objects as accompanying "presences" that assist migrants and provide a measure of both security and individuality as they renegotiate their transnational identities.

From considerations of the quotidian elements of home, place, and belonging, the analysis broadens to the macrolevel of *polis* (city) and *civitas* (citizens), encompassing historical and contemporary exemplars and culminating, in the final section, in a frank exploration of notions of authenticity, artificiality, and the effects of nonplaces. The author undertakes a perceptive analysis of the Italian Forum in Sydney, a combination cultural space, shopping center, and dining mall built in 1999 that seeks to replicate the experience of a traditional Italian *piazza* but that fails to incorporate the migrant process of translation. This is a subject that Bartoloni has previously examined, and here in hindsight he offers a revised view on the inadequacy of an urban replica in capturing the experience of migration and identities that become hyphenated. The author's reflections on the negative impact of such projects on community building and identity probe at a deeper level the consumerist manipulation of materiality. By contrast, he also scrutinizes and affirms the authenticity of urban constructs such as the Sicilia Outlet Village, a large shopping mall built in the small central Sicilian town of Agira. He considers the economic, social, and cultural impact of such commercial projects on ordinary citizens as a simulacrum of village life and authentic identity that manages to combine the economic effects of large-scale consumerism with an experience of cultural inclusivity and valorization.

Throughout the book, Bartolini demonstrates a keen grasp of his subject, not only when he is exploring the scholarly landscape but also when considering broader themes and modalities, thus offering a balanced and discriminating analysis of the cultural life and value of objects in an Italian context. His typologies engage the reader and provide valuable theoretical and cultural insights for a more profound understanding of the life of objects and things.

—DIANA GLENN
Flinders University

Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies.

By Teresa Fiore.

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250 pages.

In *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies*, Teresa Fiore offers a unique contribution to a (relatively) new and compelling trend in migration studies related to Italy, one grounded in the