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

***Paolo Bartoloni. 2016. Objects in Italian Life and Culture: Fiction, Migration, and Artificiality. Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 203 pp., US\$ 99.99. ISBN 978-1-349-94874-1***



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Bartoloni's *Objects in Italian Life and Culture* retraces landscapes in which individuals and objects are joined by relations of co-belonging, contending that people's relations with objects make places meaningful. The author combines Cultural Studies and psychoanalytical theories with a variety of philosophical perspectives, including Phenomenology and Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). The book comprises six chapters and explores four typologies of relations: the fictional, migrant, multicultural/transnational, and the artificial.

Chapter two, which follows chapter one, the introduction, provides a theoretical overview of the notion of meaningful places. Bartoloni discusses Freud's definition of 'oceanic feeling' – a sense of oneness that ties a person to a place – and Heidegger's image of the house as the privileged locus of the relation between individuals and language. Bartoloni then refers to anthropologist Ferdinando Fava's study on the 'poetic of inhabiting'. This research highlights how private narratives of homing can reveal microcosms of identities, feelings, and interactions that controvert the public image of a place. Bartoloni also discuss-

es how the framework of modernity shifted people's view of material objects. He engages with intellectuals like Simmel, Marx, Debord, and Pasolini to discuss that the devaluation of the sense of things is directly related to the modern desacralization of places. Yet, borrowing from philosopher Tonino Griffero, Bartoloni suggests that the current challenge is to re-evaluate our empathic experience with things and restore a caring atmosphere of reciprocity.

In the third chapter, dedicated to fictional objects, Bartoloni borrows from Object-Oriented Ontology that the meaning of objects resides in their materiality. However, unlike OOO, he affirms that materiality does not withdraw itself from relations. The material significance of objects depends on processes of mediations. In contending this point, he draws from Michel Serres' and Bjorn Schiermer's view that the bonding experience between people and material things turns objects into markers of collective meanings. Bartoloni then analyzes the relational role of fictional objects, examining Italo Svevo's novel *La coscienza di Zeno* and Michelangelo Antonioni's films. In Svevo's book, the coming together of bodies and / or objects is essential to the protagonist's journey toward consciousness. Bartoloni focuses on Zeno's fetishism of the female body, the character's sick body as a form of knowledge-making experience, and the complex 'materiality' of the novel's language. Moving to two films by Antonioni, *L'eclisse* and *Blow up*, Bartoloni contends that the Italian director creates a 'phenomenology of vision' that stems from the mediation of actors and objects. Antonioni turns materiality into a tangible sense of restlessness and incommunicability. These cinematic images, like Svevo's language, are objects that simultaneously ground the characters to the world and suspend them among the countless options of modernity.

Drawing from the online exhibition *Belongings*, in chapter four Bartoloni contextualizes 'migrant objects' in the socio-historical setting of the Italian migration to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. The author examines the interviews with immigrants collected in this exhibition. He refers to the testimonies of southern-Italian women who brought kitchen tools to Australia and explains that these domestic objects served the purpose to recreate a sense of place overseas. These everyday tools can also tell of women's struggle with education: many female immigrants lived marginalized in the domestic space and secluded from the community for their inability to speak English. Often the language barrier became the 'object' that identified Italians as foreign people and made them feel out of place. Immigrants then used objects to create a 'solid' surrogate for their precarious identities.

In the fifth chapter, Bartoloni analyzes multicultural and transcultural objects that represent the development of the new identity of Italians in Australia. The chapter features the case of the Italian Forum, a replica of a typical Italian square, inaugurated in Leichhardt, Sydney's Little Italy, in 1999. The Forum intended to celebrate Italian integration; yet, according to Bartoloni, this space does not creatively elaborate on the range of contrasting experiences and emotions that informs multiculturalism. In attaining a 'musealization' of an idealized 'authentic' Italy, the Forum does not express the struggles that immigrants underwent in the gradual development of Italian-Australian hyphenated identities. Bartoloni argues that an urban design that aims to express transculturalism must engage with a complex process of translation that finds new shared values and symbols in the cultural 'in-betweenness' of migration.

In the last chapter, the author refers to Ludovico Zorzi's *La città e il teatro*, a book that illustrates the connection between urban design and political power, highlighting how the Medici family shaped and staged Florence into a showroom of power. The author then focuses on the theatrical environment of shopping malls and analyzes how new commercial developments are trying to charge non-places with symbolic values that convey a sense of place to their shoppers. Bartoloni examines the case of the Sicilia Outlet Village in Agira (near Catania). The outlet re-creates a traditional Sicilian village by featuring a quasi-cinematic set with native trees, local materials, and the typical Baroque style. The idea that inspired this site was to revitalize a depressed area and conjugate economic growth with cultural valorization. Bartoloni applies translation theories to the Sicilia Outlet Village, contending that in translating the 'authenticity' of a Sicilian village into a concrete place, the outlet has become a successful business model that combines a safe shopping environment with a dramatization of traditional Sicilian culture.

*Objects in Italian Life and Culture* compellingly intertwines theoretical discourses about material life with an interdisciplinary variety of case studies, including literature, cinema, immigration history, and everyday lifestyle.

Through its focus on Italian culture, Bartoloni's work partakes of the current scholarly debate about the nonhuman, proposing intriguing reflections on the translation process that underlies different 'poetics of inhabiting' and on the connection between objects and our ability to give meaningful sense to a place. Although I would have liked to see more about Italian-Australian literature and how it elaborates on the immigrants' need to 'translate' meanings through objects, I appreciate Bartoloni's focus on the experience of immigration and the 'material translation' of values that this process entails.

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