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New Ecocritical Perspectives in Italian Studies

Landscapes in Between: Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film by MONICA SEGER

University of Toronto Press, 2015 \$41.25

Reviewed by ILARIA TABUSSO MARCYAN

Through the lens of ecocriticism, in her first book, *Landscapes in Between*, Monica Seger contributes to the growing interest in ecocriticism within Italian studies by analyzing a selection of literary and cinematic productions by Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gianni Celati, Simona Vinci, and the film directors Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco. The author is not interested in the conventional representation of the Italian landscape as “gently rolling hills with poppies and poplars swaying” (3). Her attention goes to a modified nature and altered ecosystem which, in Italy more than in many other countries, has suffered, and continues to suffer, due to industrial development and constant construction. In covering the time period from the 50s through today, Seger focuses on “interstitial landscapes” (4), be it “the gap between two objects . . . the space between tissues in the body . . . the pause in time” (4) to think about the Italian natural environment in its entirety. The Italian peninsula, on the other hand, becomes a fruitful terrain for the ancient and ongoing nature/culture debate, and Seger, in her landscape-focused approach, reminds the reader of the importance of the nature/culture relationship throughout the book.

The introduction is a chapter in itself. Along with offering an overview of the following chapters and defining the

terms she utilizes throughout the book, such as nature, culture, and interstice, Seger also includes historical, social, political, economic, and environmental details of the last sixty years in Italy and refers directly to the environmental concerns of Italian intellectuals such as Elio Vittorini and Antonio Cederna. The second chapter analyzes the early works of Italo Calvino's *La speculazione edilizia* and *La nuvola di smog*. Seger engages the texts using a bioregional and eco-cosmopolitan approach while examining Calvino's stories and the author's concern with landscape and environmental changes caused by post-war industrialization. In doing so, she calls into conversation the theoretical texts conceived in the 70s by Peter Berg, with the more recent ecocritical interpretations of eco-cosmopolitanism by Ursula Heise, and broadens the environmental discourse using a transnational approach. Yet, Seger is careful not to negate one discourse in favor of the other, and by stressing how eco-cosmopolitanism shares concerns with bioregionalism (26), she brilliantly puts them in conversation while returning to Calvino texts as the space where this meeting takes place.

Pasolini's work reveals itself to be particularly interesting when read through the lenses of interstitial landscape and the binary nature/culture proposed by Seger. In the third chapter, the scholar reads some of Pasolini's filmic production to consider the interstitial landscape as the space between the rural and the urban, between built and unbuilt environments (50). In doing so, she cannot but acknowledge that, as Martin Lefebvre points out, landscape is a cultural construct (51) and, although Pasolini advocates for a separation between nature and culture, his work ends up overlapping the two. Seger uses Agamben's idea of “the

porous quality of defined realms” (52) expressed in *Homo Sacer* to explain the role of landscape in Pasolini’s films as a “boundary in the process of being crossed” (53). That is why, Seger continues, the idea of interstice is interchangeable with the concept of borderlands, as explained by Gloria Anzaldúa, as the space where two cultures edge each other, as well as when thinking of Pasolini’s work, where the archaic and rural space meets the one imposed by the urban landscape (53).

Chapter four focuses on the less analyzed Gianni Celati’s *Verso la foce*. Seger continues her exploration of the relationship of nature and culture by looking, among other directions, at Celati’s attitude of observation of the natural environment. She sees Celati’s act of observation as “the interchange of landscape, communication, and community to which it speaks” (73) and puts the author in conversation with the concept of ecological citizenship introduced by Serenella Iovino. As Iovino talks of “sharing common space and . . . reciprocal responsibilities . . . recovering the shared environment, it’s as though society preserves and recovers itself as a democratic structure” (160). As Seger highlights, in a similar way Celati recognizes the “bioregional bond that co-inhabitants of an area may have in their shared place” (90) suggesting that “the care for the land lead into one another” (90).

In chapter five, Seger considers the contemporary work of Simona Vinci to be a step further on the topic of natural environment, in terms of social alienation as analyzed previously in Calvino and Pasolini works. When writing about landscape, Vinci in fact puts the reader in an uncomfortable situation by incorporating issues of gender, sexuality, and ethnic and

national identity (95). Vinci’s language in the novel *Strada Provinciale Tre* is read through Kristeva’s work on semiotic as Seger analyzes the stories of the more recent novels of the writer and further engages with Alaimo’s eco-feminism. The last chapter returns to the cinematic interpretation of landscape through the even more controversial works of Cipri and Maresco, while complicating the discourse of interstitial landscape. Seger refers to the “blurred or darkened” (128) landscape in their three films as a metaphor for issues regarding history and temporality (128) since their places are often lacking any historical reference or human presence.

Seger’s special attention to the nature/culture binary and the idea of interstitial landscape grows and develops through the chapters, focusing her ecocritical approach while adding new lenses to the reading of the authors examined. Constantly in conversation with scholars such as Rob Nixon, Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, Stacy Alaimo, and Serenella Iovino, among others, *Landscapes in Between* contributes to the transnational expansion of ecocriticism, both within Italian studies and environmental humanities.

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