Distopie, viaggi spaziali, allucinazioni. Fantascienza italiana contemporanea

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THAT the Italian literary canon has not been kind to science fiction works written by Italians is well known. This volume by Giulia Iannuzzi therefore carries double importance: it not only offers a thorough description of those forces which shaped the development of Italian science fiction between the 1960s and the early 2000s, but it also focuses on the production of four of the most noteworthy authors and defenders of the genre in those years. The work builds on the preceding Fantascienza italiana: Riviste, autori, dibattiti dagli anni cinquanta agli anni Settanta (see SFRA Review 310 (Fall 2014), pp. 42–43).

The volume opens with Pierpaolo Antonello’s Prefazione. Archeologie del futuro (Foreword. Archeologies of the future, pp. 7–16) in which Iannuzzi’s book is contextualized given the ostracism the Italian literary elites and publishers have shown this genre. The thorny and complex relationship between fandom and academia clearly indicates the lines of inquiry followed by Distopie, viaggi spaziali, allucinazioni. Antonello touches upon the Italian readers’ supposed preference for “the marvellous” (fairy tales, fantasy, horror, rather than SF), and the literary critics’ difficulties with critical apparatus with which to measure the dawn of Italian science fiction. To group authors into spurious slots is to do them injustice, and a real critical work relies on foundational works dealing with significant authors, as illustrated by Iannuzzi’s book.

In a Nota introduttiva (Introductory note, pp. 19–20), Iannuzzi states that her purpose in writing the book is to critically reread four authors to lift them from the ghetto and oblivion to which they have been relegated so that SF is finally raised from the marginal status it has been occupying in the Italian literary canon.

Chapter 1 (Fantascienza italiana contemporanea: il quadro storico e critico [Contemporary Italian science fiction: historical and critical perspectives], pp. 21–98) deals with a number of critical issues. Iannuzzi agrees with the approaches to science fiction illustrated by the Cambridge and Routledge encyclopaedias in treating science fiction as a fluid genre, susceptible of withstanding a variety of approaches and multiplicity of descriptions. There are early ancestors of Italian science fiction (e.g., Dante Alighieri, Ariosto, Giacomo Casanova, Giacomo Leopardi) but they do not have droves of disciples who embark on similar literary journeys. Furthermore, after WWII, publication series flooded the Italian market with translations of science fiction works from English, a trend which continues to this day. The reasons for this hegemony include the late and slow industrial development in Italy, the heavy weight of humanistic disciplines, the obstructed publication of books and journals given the post-war economic situation, as well as the cultural, economic, and political domination of the USA. The situation improved in the 1970s when Italian authors were translated abroad, Italian literary journals (e.g. Robot and Nova SF) also became well-known outside of Italy, and the first European SF convention was held in Trieste in 1972. In the 1950s, specialized journals and periodicals (even if short-lived) created the foundations on which Italian science fiction fandom was built. In the 1970s, a trend began of a type of ghettoization of the genre as there was almost no dialogue between those who published in the periodicals and possible external critics: those who were responsible for professional science fiction publications came from the fandom base. The first scholarly account of Italian science fiction was published in 1978 (Vittorio Curtoni’s Le frontiere dell’ignoto [Frontiers of the unknown]). In the third millennium, Internet and digital printing on demand offer a way out to sustain the demand of a limited public. Web initiatives (e.g. Valerio Evangelisti’s Carmilla), literary prizes (Urania), the group Connettivisti (trans-media, authors publishing in anthologies, fanzines, organized events), all point to the fact that the SF world in Italy is in ferment, even if critical studies are not abundant. Still, this lack of proper standing of science fiction literature in the Italian canon has never discouraged the production of varied science fiction works.

The next four chapters are dedicated each to a day-
en of Italian science fiction: Lino Aldani, Gilda Musa, Vittorio Curtoni, Vittorio Catani. A selection of their works undergoes a thematic and content account, rather than a critical literary analysis. Each work examined is connected to possible Anglo-American models, and is placed into a thematic category preferred by the author. Where applicable, narrative techniques, linguistic inventions, and interesting settings receive a thorough description.

Note conclusive (Concluding remarks, pp. 327–330) summarizes the main thrust of the four authors’ works as vehicles of reflection on the ingrained experience of the contemporary Italian industrial and post-industrial world. Aldani’s dystopia, Musa’s and Catani’s gloomy urban scenes, and Curtoni’s media manipulation of reality manifest the hardship and uneasiness brought on by automation and changes of paradigms of reality, supported by techno-science.

The volume closes with an extensive bibliography (pp. 331–354), Acknowledgments, and Index of Names (pp. 357–363).

There is no doubt that Iannuzzi’s book contains a great wealth of information about Italian science fiction works written between the 1960s and the early 2000s. It reflects patient archival work to track down hard-to-find sources, delves at length into the intricate relationships between fans and scholars, connects the developments in Italy to the thematic and formal experiences of English and American writers, and provides information on the editorial decisions which shape the construction of cultural material.

Although “anglomania” and “anglofilia” are constants in Italian cultural history of the last 200 years, the dependence on the Anglo influence in Italian SF literature needs to be explained, especially since the concept of “assimilation” of themes from English science fiction into Italian works is mentioned frequently, and yet does not receive a thorough treatment. This would clarify the challenging notion of national SF literatures.

Nonetheless, the volume has all the prerequisites to become a solid source of information for students and scholars alike, whose interests lie in the development of national literatures as seen through the lens of the editorial history of Italian science fiction as well as the SF production of four major authors.