

# Meriel Tulante. Italian Chimeras: Narrating Italy through the Writing of Sebastiano Vassalli

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Ciò è senza dubbio possibile anche grazie agli innumerevoli approcci utilizzati dagli autori dei saggi contenuti nel volume. L'opera infatti ha il merito di fornire un'ampia panoramica di strumenti e prospettive che, ognuna a suo modo, contribuisce a mettere in luce diversi aspetti del mondo della frontiera. Si passa dalla tradizionale filologia all'analisi del multilinguismo letterario, dalla letteratura comparata ad esami narratologici per giungere infine alla dimensione eterotopica da applicare al materiale filmico. Ad arricchire il tutto si deve aggiungere il prezioso materiale inedito offerto da alcuni contributi (estratti da racconti inediti di Bartol, da due scritti di Stjepko Ilić, trovati nell'Archivio di Stato di Trieste in merito ai rapporti tra la letteratura croata e quella italiana e dal materiale preparatorio del romanzo *Cavallo di cartapesta* di Ramous).

*Confini, identità, appartenenze. Scenari letterari e filmici dell'Alpe Adria* si presenta pertanto come una rilevante aggiunta agli studi dell'area trattata, che a questo punto non andrebbe più pensata secondo le tradizionali divisioni bensì seguendo nuove possibili rotte basate sulla consapevolezza che identità e appartenenze, soprattutto in aree di frontiera, sono per forza di cose molteplici e plurali. In quest'ottica il volume oltre a interessare gli studiosi del settore può rivolgersi anche a tutti coloro che si occupano di letteratura comparata, multiculturalismo, multilinguismo letterario in senso più ampio. Ci si augura pertanto che questo modo di affrontare la frontiera venga utilizzato anche in futuro dagli studi che seguiranno.

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**Meriel Tulante. *Italian Chimeras: Narrating Italy through the Writing of Sebastiano Vassalli*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020. Pp. 328. ISBN 9781789977042.**

*Italian Chimeras* argues for the value of examining Sebastiano Vassalli, his works, and his position as a witness and interpreter of some of the most significant cultural, social, and political moments in postwar Italy. At the time of his death, Vassalli was shortlisted for the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature and would have received the 2015 Campiello prize for his career. Meriel Tulante addresses the dissonance between these successes and his lack of a critical profile, which meant that despite Vassalli's wide readership, his reclusive, often combative, attitude to the literary establishment, the media, and the outside world in general resulted

in his work being ignored in critical and scholarly discussions. *Italian Chimeras* highlights the importance of his writing in the field of Italian cultural, historical, and literary studies, and it represents the first full-length study in English of Vassalli and his works.

*Italian Chimeras* serves both as an introduction to Vassalli and as an investigation into modern Italy seen through the particular lens of his writing. Vassalli was incredibly prolific, writing a novel every two years on average, and Tulante chooses from a large corpus of his work to create an overview of his principal interests. In addition to his novels and collections of short stories, he contributed regularly to the *Corriere della sera* and to other newspapers and magazines, establishing a role as a social commentator and public intellectual. These forms of writing are woven into the book to add context to literary analysis and to anchor Vassalli in contemporary public debates and events.

Tulante suggests that Vassalli viewed himself as an iconoclast who was determined to confront a range of problems in Italian society, with the intention of exposing hypocrisy, corruption, and deceit. He tackled controversial or sensitive issues to provoke strong reactions: national identity and the national character, mafia, fascism, the role of the intellectual, mental illness, religion, and political dysfunction. These key topics form the central focus of *Italian Chimeras* and constitute a means through which Italian society and the contradictions and complexities of the time are foregrounded through his writings. In the postwar period, as Italy emerged from fascist rule and the trauma of World War II, literature became a means to process — or to avoid processing — these realities. Sebastiano Vassalli maintained that his contemporaries did not adequately reflect on the fascist period or other violent episodes, such as the political terrorism of the 1970s and the legacy of the anni di piombo. Tulante explores his belief that this cultural amnesia, or unwillingness to confront difficult truths, whether in literature or in society more generally, hindered a frank discussion and true understanding of national identity.

Chapter One, “A Laughing Matter: The Neoavanguardia, the commedia all’italiana, and a Political Trilogy,” considers Vassalli’s association with the neo-avanguardia, and in particular the trilogy of political novels that he published from 1976 to 1982. His experimental period, which began in 1967 (when he made his literary debut at the Gruppo 63 meeting), was ending as he wrote *L’arrivo della lozione* (1976), *Abitare il vento* (1980), and *Mareblù* (1982). These three texts provided the foundation for his later writing and produced works that stand out for their political themes, sarcasm, and humor. Chapter Two, “Impegno Revisited:

The Public Intellectual and the Futurists,” asks how Vassalli presented himself as an intellectual with a public identity in the larger context of discussions by writers and critical commentators about the role of the intellectual in post-war Italian society. Chapter Three, “History as Meaning: The Past in Narrative,” examines the prevalence of historical material in Vassalli’s writing, asks why he adopted such topics and questions the function of history in his writing. Chapter Four, “The Monster, the Nation, the Self: Marginality and Belonging,” considers Vassalli’s focus on marginal or marginalized individuals in society. This narrative and ideological emphasis encompasses his discussion of the monster (“il mostro”) or monstrous figure as well as madness and the relationship between insanity and truth. Chapter Five, “Place and Nation: Regional Identities and an Ethics of Place,” considers the narration of regional and national identities, as well as descriptions of the physical environment, which are core features of Vassalli’s works. In his writing, place and identity are contested yet highly evocative referents, expressing the author’s enduring fascination with the ways in which human beings interact with their environment. For Vassalli, the idea of place is fundamentally revealing of the characteristics both of a particular society and of human nature in general.

Tulante concludes this study by proposing that Vassalli, the author and his work, might be considered as a literary “caso” (189). Throughout his career, Vassalli was rarely in sync with the contemporary moment, either in the topics he prioritized or in the form of his writing. Tulante suggests that this disconnect allowed him to anticipate many of the literary and cinematic tendencies that subsequently came to the surface. In this way, his examination of the anni di piombo and the 1970s, the enduring presence of the mafia, and the representation of the real in literature preceded later investigations of these subjects. *Italian Chimeras* represents a thorough and overdue examination of one of the more significant, yet understudied, postwar Italian authors. Through an approach that connects Vassalli to his literary and social environment, *Italian Chimeras* provides a close consideration of the author’s work at the intersection of recent Italian history, society, and culture. The resulting account is a complex and multifaceted inquiry into the nation’s ambiguities — or chimeras — as they were narrated by a complicated protagonist of the Italian literary world.

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