



THE
MIRAGE
OF AMERICA
IN CONTEMPORARY
ITALIAN LITERATURE
AND FILM

BARBARA ALFANO

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2013
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4426-4405-2



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer, recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.

Toronto Italian Studies

Publication cataloguing information is available from Library and Archives Canada.

This book has been published with the assistance of a grant from Bennington College.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council
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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
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University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support of the government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for its publishing activities.

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Acknowledgments

In July 1999, I crossed the sky between Europe and America. The history of this book begins then. I took my first ten-hour flight to the United States. It was a rocky flight. I knew nothing of the world I was about to enter, except for what I had seen in films and read in books; and I had just discovered that I knew very little of the world I was leaving behind. However, I was not afraid of the unknown. I was afraid of flying. The book I took with me on this trip was Alessandro Baricco's *City*, which I did not read on the plane. Instead, I spent that time pondering the many aspects of fear. I could not imagine that *City* would become material for a chapter of *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film*. I had no idea the book would ever exist, let alone fathom its content. I carried *City* with me because it was my best friends' gift for my departure. The playful dedication reads, "We will miss you ... but maybe not too much?" My first thankful thoughts go to those in Italy who let me go.

I have stated the following many times, in different ways. I'll say it again. Juana Djelal, my friend, inviting me to cross the pond was a great idea. Thank you. Here is the end result.

I did eventually read *City* a couple of years later, when I began connecting the dots between the two shores. I, the writer of this book, am fully part of its content. My life is the unwritten chapter between its lines. I cannot possibly acknowledge here everyone who helped me arrive at the typing of this last page. However, if you were on my path, I see you from here.

I am immensely grateful to Bennington College for supporting entirely the publication of the book. They lifted a weight that made my

life and the writing process much easier. I felt honoured by this early acknowledgment of my work.

At the University of Toronto Press, I found in Ron Schoeffel and Judith Williams professional wisdom, sagacity, and exemplary skills. Thank you for rescuing *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Literature and Film* from what I did not see, understand, realize, or imagine. To the unknown colleagues who have read the manuscript for UTP goes my immense gratitude for the careful responses and intellectual stimulus they provided.

This book has gone through many changes, but it owes its core and original form to the guidance, wisdom, advice, and patience of Djelal Kadir, a wonderful mentor and a true friend.

My heartfelt thanks to my friends and colleagues Roberta Tabanelli, Steven Thomas, and Quentin Youngberg for reading parts of the manuscript, and for giving me advice that has shaped it up. I am also indebted to the jolly members of a too short lived support reading group, born at Bennington in a small apartment administered by a big grey cat: Karen Gover, Valerie Imbruce, and Carol Pal, thank you so much for your caring, reading, suggesting, and correcting! Thanks are in order also for Jason Laine, Ron Montesi, and my dear friend Judy Matz, who, at different stages, took on the difficult task of taming my wayward English. You gave me a chance to admire your patience and kindness.

Many of the stories I like have fairy godmothers disguised as great women and wonderful friends. I have two, in my life – Juana Djelal and Sherry Roush. *The Mirage of America* would not exist without their loving friendship, unyielding support, smart advice, and magic wisdom. This book and I owe you a lot.

Friendship has nourished me in the Berkshires and at Bennington, while I was going through the last stages of my writing. Asma Abbas, Carol Pal, and Valerie Imbruce: with you I found a home away from home.

To my parents and sister goes my gratitude for letting me camp in their sitting room for many summers, two months at a time, and for giving up their music and television hours to respect the religious silence I imposed on them during those times. Yet, my gratitude will never be an appropriate measure for the extent of their love. To them I dedicate this work.

THE MIRAGE OF AMERICA IN CONTEMPORARY
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Introduction

“Ma tu, cosa ci sei venuto a fare?”

[“What did you come here for, then?”]¹

Gina Lagorio, *L'arcadia americana*

A mirage is an optical illusion; by analogy, it is “something that appears real or possible but is not in fact so.”² The works of the contemporary Italian intellectuals considered in this study (writers, filmmakers) reflect a specific image of America – never simply the United States of America, but that cultural construct that Italy has called America since the New World entered its collective imaginary. In the novels and films under examination here, while America may sometimes correspond to the United States, overlapping with the geopolitical space, more often it may be only a metaphor, an idea, a dream, or a myth. The reader will know the difference, since I refer to the nation as the United States and to the cultural construct as America.

“Mirage” comes from the French *se mirer*, “to be reflected”; it is a deceptive image that contains also a reflection of the self, of one’s own desires and beliefs. The authors discussed in this work are observed subjecting themselves to a process of reflection while subjecting America to a searching examination. *The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film* consists, then, in tracing the record of this spectral process which stands at the intersection of Italian culture, its representations of the American myth, ethics of the individual, and issues of transculturation.

This study offers a new reading of America as imagery in Italian narrative and film created between the 1980s and the first decade of the

4 The Mirage of America in Contemporary Italian Literature and Film

2000s, which chart an ethics of the subject who, although culturally bounded, projects the range of her or his agency beyond national and cultural boundaries. In these works, America represents the topos of a real or metaphorical destination. The individual who sets out on a voyage for America, as geographical place or as ideal concept, also begins a search for the self. America, as a metaphor for a new land, as an icon, or in its reality as a geopolitical space, becomes the inevitable phenomenon with which this individual must come to terms. In *Morals and Stories*, Tobin Siebers writes, "A claim can be theoretically grounded only when it is thematically grounded" (6). Here America is the theme.

Analysing texts narrated from both first-person and non-first-person perspectives, and filmic productions, I consider the ways in which images associated with the United States inflect and shape the ethicality of the individual. The aim is to define what function and significance narrative images of the United States hold in the evolution of the engaged subjects who explore the possibilities of their cultural and historical agency. My chief interest lies in the contemporary Italian intellectual whose ethics encompass the rejection of a certain image of America – America as the land of unlimited possibilities for human social and ethical accomplishment. I choose America because of the ample space it has occupied in the cultural history of Italy as the ultimate utopia of self-realization.

The Mirage of America highlights the importance of Italian literature and film as a locus for the formation of an individual's ethics that encompasses the ability to function on a cross-cultural scale. Historically, due to the vicissitudes of the formation of Italy and a long history of particularism, Italian intellectuals have a weak sense of national identity or boundaries, and, conversely, a strong sense of individual responsibility towards universal, moral values. They are historically in constant displacement – political or metaphorical – and this position of displacement allows them to negotiate issues of identity and alterity that are relevant to the encounter and cohabitation with different cultures. In other words, the Italian intellectual focuses on an ethical self, and I explain here how and why this self needs to confront America, and ultimately does, in the search for a viable transcultural ethics that relies on the individual. In this regard, *The Mirage of America* extends Julia Kristeva's concern with the contemporary "decline of individualities":

The values crisis and the fragmentation of individuals have reached the point where we no longer know what we are and we take shelter, to

preserve a token of personality, under the most massive, regressive common denominators: national origins and the faith of our forebears. (*Nations without Nationalism 2*)

Investigating the possibility of transcultural ethics becomes crucial in a historical moment when Italy has become the America of many migrants who come to her from south and east in search of not simply a better life, but first of all a liveable life. On a larger scale, in a globalized context of cohabitation with very different cultures, it becomes paramount to explore the importance that the individual holds not so much as a representative of a specific cultural identity, but as the singular bearer of ethical values across cultures and nations.

This book examines five novels and five films released during a twenty-five-year period, between 1981 and 2006: Alessandro Baricco's *City*, 1999; Francesca Duranti's *Sogni mancini*, 1996 (*Left-Handed Dreams*, 2000); Gina Lagorio's *L'arcadia americana*, 1999 (*The American Arcadia*); Andrea De Carlo's *Treno di panna*, 1981 (*The Cream Train*, 1987); Melania Mazzucco's *Vita*, 2003 (translation with the same title, 2005); and the films *Non ci resta che piangere*, 1984 (*Nothing Left but to Cry*, directed by Roberto Benigni and Massimo Troisi); *Lamerica*, 1994 (Gianni Amelio); *Caro diario*, 1994 (*Dear Diary*, Nanni Moretti); *The Last Customer*, 2002 (Nanni Moretti); and *Nuovomondo*, 2006 (*Golden Door*, Emanuele Crialese).

These narratives ultimately declare that though setting out for America, either as a geographical space or as a concept, can be tantamount to setting out to discover the self, discovering the self does not, or should not necessarily, lead to America. In 1943, in his essay on Elio Vittorini's *Americana*, Giaime Pintor wrote:

In our words dedicated to America much may be ingenuous and inexact, much may refer to arguments extraneous to the historical phenomenon of the United States as it stands today. But this does not matter because if the continent did not exist our words would not lose their significance. This America has no need of Columbus, it is discovered within ourselves; it is the land to which we turn with the same hope and faith of the first immigrants, of whoever has decided to defend at the price of pains and error the dignity of the human condition. (244–5)

Contrary to what America meant for the writers and intellectuals working in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Pintor, Cesare Pavese, and Vittorini, my analysis of contemporary works indicates

that the concept of America does not empower the individuals concerned. This is a concept on which I elaborate fully in my third and fourth chapters, where I pursue an extensive comparison of some of my primary sources with Jean Baudrillard's *Amérique* and Ben Morreale's play "Ava Gardner's Brother-in-Law."

The works under consideration in chapter 5, all produced after 2000, mark a turn in how artists and intellectuals look at America, which now loses much of its ideological component and returns to be the historical dream that moved the poor masses of Southern Italy to cross the ocean during the great migration, between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the restrictive U.S. immigration laws of 1921 (the Quota Act) and 1924 (the National Origins Act).³

The Vantage of the I: Prospecting in Perspective

For those countries whose histories have been marked by the presence and the political and military action of the United States, or whose cultures have been strongly influenced by its political and economic power, or simply by its existence as the destination of their migrations, all of which apply to Italy, America has played a role in the formation of their cultural identities beyond its geography.

I examine this role through the lens of subjectivity as a locus for ethics formation within an Italian cultural and historical context. My ultimate goal is to define what function America, as construct and as imagery, may hold in the formation of subjective ethics. In the texts that I analyse in chapters 1, 3, and 4, the self comes in the form of a first-person narrator, which creates an ideal setting for the exploration of issues of subjectivity related to issues of space in the formation of identity. Looking at creative writing and film through the form of first-person narratives offers the chance to deal with the subject in its problematic singularity, an aspect that much of the academic discourse on identity, culture, and globalization (in several disciplines besides literature, such as geography, history, and sociology) has chosen to leave aside, preferring to deal exclusively with theories of identity that bypass singularity, often in order to smoothly accommodate issues of collective political and sociocultural struggles. In chapter 2, America is the object (indeed, the subject) of observation itself.

First-person narratives explore those zones of the self that save the subject from its historic and materialistic reification as perpetrated by certain academic discourses exclusively on behalf of an identity that

overrides the individual as a *locus* of struggle for, and performativity of, ethical agency and choices. But my subject is not only an “I”-narrator.⁴ It is also the individual(s) of *City*, a third-person narrative, and the intellectual at the centre of this essay. This polymorphic subject has an ethical aspect. The subject of *The Mirage of America* is, then, grounded in an understanding of subjectivity as forms of relation of the self to itself, forms that represent operative ethical choices. I base this usage in the Foucauldian definition of the self, that is,

not a substance, it is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. (Foucault 291)

What I am interested in, and what leads me to the analysis of mainly first-person narratives, is the dimension of the self that Foucault surprisingly brings into his materialistic discourse by simply reconstituting an old, haunting ghost: “Oneself.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, referring to Foucault’s final works on the history of sexuality, explain the presence of this dimension as “humanism after the death of Man”:

The ethical care of the self reemerges as a constituent power of self-creation. How is it possible that the man who worked so hard to convince us of the death of Man [...] would in the end champion these central tenets of the humanist tradition? [...]. Foucault asks in his final work a paradoxical and urgent question: What is humanism after the death of Man? Or rather, what is an antihumanist (or posthuman) humanism? [...]. If we are to conceive Man as separate from nature, then Man does not exist. This recognition is precisely the death of Man [...]. The humanism of Foucault’s final works, then, should not be seen as contradictory [...]. Once we recognize our posthuman bodies and minds, once we see ourselves for the simians and cyborgs we are, we then need to explore the *vis viva*, the creative powers that animate us as they do all of nature and actualize our potentialities. This is humanism after the death of Man: what Foucault calls “le travail du soi sur soi,” the continuous constituent project to create and re-create ourselves and our world. (*Empire* 91–2)

This dimension of self-creation cannot be set apart from a level of subjectivity as individuality, a dimension well represented in first-person fictional works. Hardt and Negri do not directly refer to individuality, but it is undeniable that Foucault, by simply saying “oneself” and stating “le travail du soi sur soi,” recognized this individual dimension as necessary to the understanding and analysis of subjectivity.

Foucault did not exclude the dimension of the individual from the theoretical approach to the understanding and analysis of social forms. In *Labor of Dionysus* Hardt and Negri write:

Subjectivity must be grasped in terms of the social processes that animate the production of subjectivity. The subject, as Foucault clearly understood, is at the same time a product and productive, constituted in and constitutive of the vast networks of the social labor. Labor is both subjection and subjectivation – “Le travail du soi sur soi” – in such a way that all notions of free will or the determinism of the subject must be discarded. Subjectivity is defined simultaneously and equally by its productivity and its producibility, its aptitudes to produce and be produced. (11)

This is a notion that clearly does not leave room for a theoretical consideration of individuality. But “le travail du soi sur soi” implies a site of individuality where this production happens that cannot be discarded and that is represented not only by the relation of the self to the community, but also by – again – a relationship of the self to itself – even if it exclusively, and obviously, happens through the interaction of social forces.

Why is this important? Because globalization issues of displacement and otherness, as can be understood in Kristeva’s *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, carry with them a dimension of individuality as a site of struggle for the formation of social ethics. Taking into consideration this aspect of the self does not mean falling back into transcendence, but simply focusing on a particular aspect of the labour of subjectivity: the self. It is an aspect that looks at the labour of the individual on her/his own self and that does not transcend at all a “Subjectivity [...] defined simultaneously and equally by its productivity and its producibility,” because this labour of the self does not escape the laws of materialism. Unless we want to fall into what Hardt and Negri call the Marxian paradox “of confiding the liberation of the revolutionary subjectivity to a ‘process without subject’” (*Labor of Dionysus* 11), we have not only to recognize Foucault’s humanism, but also to give credit to it by

trying to understand how “le travail du soi sur soi” works. Foucault proposed a question, not merely an affirmative theoretical principle: What work should one do on oneself? Displacement and otherness draw attention to the ethical responsibility of the individual. If fiction still makes sense as representation of social relations in the age of post-nationalisms, that sense is also, and especially, to be found in its capacity to express and represent this “travail du soi sur soi” urged by displacement and otherness.

In *The Mirage of America* the quest resides in this multifold relationship of the self to itself as performed through space and in the encounter with its alterities, since the “I” going towards (to or against) America is the representation of “a relationship of the self to itself.” As if sitting in a hairdresser’s chair, in order to talk about “America” Italian intellectuals hold a mirror of irony to their back, so that reflecting upon America becomes a way to reflect upon themselves and their function in society. In his *America in Modern Italian Literature*, Donald Heiney writes that for Italian intellectuals to discuss America has always meant to discuss themselves.

On the level of representation, as we shall see further in considering *Caro diario*, *L’arcadia americana*, and *Sogni mancini*, images of U.S. culture are significantly woven into narratives of self-description and are used to shape a specific relationship of the narrating “I” to itself. This relationship plays itself out through spatial iconography. The protagonists of my texts all move, in the beginning, from spaces whose barriers have disintegrated, losing in the process their original significance, to zones of uncertainty that reveal themselves to be zones of the self. I will pass from one text to the other to evaluate these movements of the subject and to see where and which America lies in these transitions and passages.

As far as the politics of the subject in its relationship to space is concerned, this study explores ideas of space and place as framed by the cultural references of the beholder. The analysis relies on Djelal Kadir’s definition of place and space:

The mathemata and metaphors of space, whether global, local, virtual, real, or hyperreal, are ultimately ideologically bounded and defined within the circumscriptive parameters of cultural habitus. In this sense space and place function as concomitants, and landscape, whether geometrically naturalized or aesthetically skewed, frames the cultural habitat of the inhabitants, who see themselves as its human agencies and who frame the space of that landscape in turn. (24–5)

The ethical subject of my inquiry, in its relationship with space, is just such a human agency.

The Ethics of the Subject

Let us begin with a dictionary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ethics as “The moral principles by which a person is guided. The rules of conduct recognized in certain associations or departments of human life.” Gina Lagorio, when questioned about ethics, provided the link between the moral principles by which that person is guided and the association of human life around her/him. She said, “Credo che nessun essere umano sufficientemente dotato di ragione possa vivere senza seguire una linea di condotta di solito ereditata dall’ambiente in cui è nato (è quel che chiamiamo etica) [...]” (Oberti 5; “I believe that no human being sufficiently endowed with reason can live without following a line of conduct usually inherited from the environment where he or she was born. This is what we call ethics [...]).”

I quote Gina Lagorio to give a working definition of ethics in this book because, having established the theoretical frame that defines the subject as singular – the individual – I am now framing this individual within her historical and cultural aspects: in this book, s/he is the Italian leftist intellectual. Gina Lagorio, herself, is exemplary of such subjectivity.

Historically, as we shall see in the next two sections, the Italian intellectual feels the moral duty to participate in the development of civil society and regards her/his role as fundamental in that development. It is in this light that one has to understand Lagorio’s definition of ethics as a local, cultural construct. For Italian intellectuals, to be ethically engaged in their social milieu has always entailed the consideration of human relationships on a larger scale than just the local (I shall be dealing with this further in the next section of this chapter). When Gina Lagorio refers to “a line of conduct usually inherited from the environment where he or she was born,” she does not confine the works of ethics geographically, she talks about inheritance. Lagorio shares with her reader the understanding that the inheritance of that line of conduct which relies on the individual bears universal values. Italian intellectuals are those individuals who constantly focus on themselves and on the work they do on themselves for the sake of civil society. Each of them is the subject as defined previously with the help of Foucault. In his preface to the American edition of *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco writes,

An American interviewer once asked me how I manage to reconcile my work as a scholar and university professor, author of books published by university presses, with my other work as what would be called in the United States a “columnist” [...]. My answer was that this habit is common to all European intellectuals, in Germany, France, Spain, and naturally, Italy: all countries where a scholar or scientist often feels required to speak out in papers, to comment, if only from the point of view of his own interests and special field, on events that concern all citizens [...]. But many Italian scholars and literary critics also write columns where they take a stand on political questions, and they do this not only as a natural part of their work, but also as a duty. (ix–x)

The same attitude pertains to writers and filmmakers. I explain in the next pages how and why this position of the Italian intellectual came into being historically.

What Italian intellectuals do, then, once they have established their position as an influential factor in civil society, is to criticize that society for the sake of its betterment and moral change. With this we move to the level of representation, because the intellectuals do so through their work.

Tobin Siebers explains the place of ethics in literature, and I would extend his definition to representation as far as my work is concerned:

My theme and theory privilege place, as craftsmen privilege the hammer, as a way of talking about literature and ethics. We have an attraction to where we are not only because it is the site of work and living but because we make our tools and ideas work there [...]. More specifically, I will focus on the idea of character as that “place” – for the Greek *ēthos*, in addition to suggesting “character” and “ethics,” originally meant “to be found somewhere” – in which ethical ideas and literary ones gather together to help us work out the best way to live with other people in the places where people live. There literature and ethics join forces in the search for the good life for a human being. (5)

A literal and literary example of such characters as sites are *City’s* subjects, who, rather than travelling somewhere like the protagonists of the other works discussed here, are themselves “places,” as one of the protagonists of the novel defines individuals (see chapter 2).

We will ultimately discover that for the contemporary Italian intellectual to reject the myth of America as the land of salvation, whether real or metaphorical, means to be striving for an ethical