

Theoreme reagiert und diese vertieft. Herausgekommen ist ein Band, der der Exotismusforschung durch die Erkundung frankofoner, japanischer und deutscher Vernetzungen neue und wichtige Impulse liefert, die über die oftmals enggeführte angelsächsische Debatte hinaus erfrischend neue Perspektiven anbietet.

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Teltscher Taylor, Francesca. *A Topos Subverted. Italy in the 20th and 21st Century German Literary Imagination*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2024 (= Transpositionen 15), 182 pp. ISBN 9783503238057 (Hardcover), ISBN 9783503238064 (Open Access E-Book).

Literary writing in German engaging with Italy, Germany's longstanding southern neighbour, was not merely a fascination for German writers of past centuries. Rather it has continued, as Francesca Teltscher Taylor's 2024 study shows, to capture the imagination of twentieth- and twenty-first century German authors. Through this continuing strand of literary production, contends the study, Italy serves as a locus and trope to be revisited and reimagined, helping Germany's »understanding of itself within Europe« (9).

This is a study of the, at times quite radical, literary subversion of the topos ›Italy‹, both in form and function, across literary writing of the modern period. Italy is taken as a topos throughout, i.e. as a dynamically shifting set of knowledges, associations and functions, rather than as a more narrowly defined ›motif‹ or ›locus‹ of travel or action. The literary Italian encounters considered, while often involving travel, are thus not reducible to transitions through physical space, or indeed to instances of travel literature, but trace rather ›epistemic shifts‹ (13–14) in the German experience and knowledge of Italy, which both inform and question narrative traditions exploring identity, selfhood, and self-realization in German culture from classical models of *Bildung* to the novels and novellas of the present.

The examination of Italy-as-topos begins by citing historical, paradigmatic examples in modern German culture. These include writings of J. J. Winkelmann, which appear devoted to the accurate, modern representation of Italy's classical past, followed by Goethe, whose Weimar Classicism constituted more of a self-reflexive use of classical and modern Italian topoi in a quest to understand German and European identity in modernity, and Thomas Mann, whose protagonist Aschenbach in *Der Tod in Venedig* holds onto the value of topos Italy by clin-

ging to the values of Weimar Classicism, even though Aschenbach's Romantic tendencies and erotic proclivities highlight the limitations of classicism and foreshadow his own demise. The cross-epochal framework marks a real strength of the study and, as historical texts and contexts are revisited throughout, adds richness to discussions of more recent texts and their subversive strategies.

The study treats six literary texts and organises them around several themes. One section focuses on texts which are »particularly self-conscious« about their mutual »intertextuality« (20) and groups together an inter-referential triad of Thomas Mann's *Mario und der Zauberer* (1930), Wolfgang Koeppen's *Der Tod in Rom* (1954) and Gert Hoffman's *Auf dem Turm* (1982). In differing ways and to differing degrees, the works all challenge older narrative norms of a rational, objective, and stable German traveller or observer, captivated, seduced even, by an Italy that transforms (usually) him. Thus, while Mann evokes and undermines classical discourses and tropes of the German subject clinging to *Bildung*, Koeppen refers back to Mann's texts, using a narrative set in Fascist Italy of the Second World War to quash any lingering hope of a transformative cultural encounter with Italy and its classical heritage. Hoffmann, in turn, evokes

the same texts by Mann, achieving not only a shift in the tone – from one of doubt or despair to ironic enjoyment – but also establishes a »metafictional« voice. This allows the text to reflect upon literary production and the paradoxical situation of using literature to narrate the »chaos of modernity« while also undermining literature's value in this endeavour and showing its descent into increasingly parodic narratives of Italy (95).

The third section is devoted to the interweaving themes of *memoria*, gender, and imagination. Friedrich Christian Delius's novella *Bildnis der Mutter als junge Frau* (2006) is shown to undermine further normative topoi of Italy, though it does so by drawing not on intertexts, but on a wider range of material culture and expressions of memorial culture which mediate between the Rome of the present day and the Rome lived in by the narrator's mother. In so doing, he critiques the notion of Rome as the »eternal city« – here Rome's permanence consists not in an ongoing prevailing role as centre of classical cultural norms, but in the ever-shifting nature and value of the encounters which the city offers travellers (115–16). Bodo Kirchoff's *Widerfahrnis* (2016) elicits a more critical reading by resurrecting a more traditionally patriarchal, cosmopolitan subject, who gazes upon refugee women in southern Italy as myste-

rious others, while Bettina Blumenberg's novella *Vor Spiegeln* (1983) precisely undermines the tradition of male subjects ›finding themselves‹ through Italian encounters, experimenting instead with a new kind of de-centred *Bildung* which allows the female protagonist Barbara to perform a purely imaginary journey to Italy and view herself from different perspectives through various ›specular‹ moments experienced before the mirrors of the title.

Teltscher Taylor has by no means written a long book. By examining the topos of Italy between historical epochs, as well as across the contemporary period broadly defined, the study also navigates a wide terrain. Thus, not every German novel to engage topos Italy gets to feature here in depth – Hanns-Josef Ortheil's *Die große Liebe* (2003) and Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Mein Sardinien* (2012) being notable omissions. This makes the study more

illustrative than it is exhaustive. Yet that in itself is of value. The book surveys wide-ranging cultural production reflecting Germany's Italian entanglements, reflects critically on the reasons for its chosen corpus, and thus shows itself as strategically selective, rather than as lacking. In covering a broad sweep of history, often tracing patterns of development between texts, the study does not suggest a single, simple chronological development and thus retains an eye for politically retrogressive trends in literature. Lucid, readable, as well as refreshingly concise, the convincing and multi-contextual analysis offered here re-diverts our attention to a topos that has continued to evolve over time and offers a strong critical framework for scholars and students to continue work in this area in the future.

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