

Dom Holdaway and Trentin Filippo, eds. *Rome: Postmodern Narratives of a Cityscape*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013.

ISBN: 9781848933491.

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This collection of essays establishes multiple new perspectives for the possible interpretation of Rome and its landscape. Common to all its contributions is an effort to surpass the traditional image of the city as an open-air museum, a symbol of a lost grandeur confined in a nostalgic admiration of past achievement. Rome is investigated here from a postmodern vantage point, which sparks a stimulating debate and affirms Rome's status as a modern and even postmodern city.

The essays focus primarily on Rome's topography, which is explored throughout the collection from different angles and scopes. The authors analyse these perspectives of Rome with reference to twentieth-century Italian cinema and local and international urban planning, with these representations brought together through the metaphor of the "palimpsest," as the editors suggest in the introduction (1). This metaphor encapsulates the problem that every scholar faces when approaching the arduous task of defining the city: its "written and re-written layers" of history that coexist at the topographic level, here brilliantly compared to Freud's layers of consciousness, unconsciousness and memory traces that constitute the human mind (1). By comparing the complexity of the city's structure with the architecture of the human mind, the volume allows a depiction of Rome as a multidi-

mensional labyrinth to emerge and offers the possibility of viewing the city from unprecedented positions.

The postmodern approach becomes then a logical choice, which allows the scholarly discussion to move beyond the more “classical” interpretations of Rome, prevalent since World War II. These readings tend either to define Rome as the eternal-historical city in an attempt to preserve its mythology (2), or conversely, to underline the dichotomy modern-ancient where its peripheral growth and its ugliness, although clashing with the beauty of the historic buildings, are “integrated” into the ancient centre (2). While both of these readings stress the legacy of ancient Rome and the existence of “an archetypal Imperial imaginary” (2), the aim of this postmodern approach is, on the one hand, to emphasise the problematic nature of interpreting the city solely in terms of its modernisation as such an interpretation resists the idea of a postmodern city, and on the other, how all this is situated with respect to the universal image of Rome at a topographic, social and individual level. The unity of the classical interpretations is contrasted here with the fragmentation of the city defined as a “broken” mirror, reflecting a myriad of images in a Cubist deconstruction and reconstruction of a landscape where past and present are no longer a linear sequence but are “axes of intersection in a historical constellation” (9).

This postmodern “re-appropriation of history” and its tribute to fragmentation are particularly expounded upon in the filmographic contributions by Benincasa and Caldwell. Benincasa and Caldwell interpret the films studied as lacking a clear unity due to the coexistence of different forces in the city, which limits the possibility of a single narration of Rome at a superficial level. Fellini’s *Rome*, for instance, is presented by Benincasa as a psychological landscape where the “nomadic gaze of the city” becomes a symbol of the “unstable condition of the modern man” (45) and the fragmentation of the narrative is employed as a postmodern means of developing one’s singularity outside the mass, instead of establishing such singularity *within* the mass and thus in terms of unity, as in the classical approach. In this sense the city becomes a subjective and contemporary theatrical of human experiences that exist beyond the city, intended as an ensemble of famous monuments.

Fragmentation is also the focus of the urban and architectural studies present in the collection, particularly in the chapters by Rhodes, Jewell and Trentin. The “planimetry collage” of the project *Roma Interrotta*, in Szacka’s contribution, expounds even further this concept through the image of the puzzle created by assembling the urban solutions proposed by the participants in this project. The result of the revisitation and re-imagination of a piece of Rome’s historic map by each architect, without the possibility of

consulting or knowing the approach of the others, perfectly summarises the postmodern ideas of “pluralism and tolerance” (162). This spatial intricacy, underlined by the kaleidoscope of the maps’ possibilities, reveals Rome’s postmodern soul. The city is presented as “the antithesis of the modernist Utopia of urban order” (9). Behind the familiar images of the city that may inspire an impression of an easily visualised and therefore modern city, Rome discloses a spatially confusing and unmappable reality due to the synchronicity with which its multiple layers become manifest to the spectator.

Finally, the unimaginability of the city then rests on both its “temporal ambiguity” (Benincasa) and its “horizontal vacuum.” Temporal and spatial superimpositions create a resistance to the definite imaginability of Rome. At the same time, the development of the “borgata” as a peripheral extension of the city, after ingesting the post-war idealisation of a mythological countryside “beyond the walls,” has dissolved the once clearly demarcated borders of the modern city into an endless and imprecise urban sprawl. The essays collected here all contribute to a positive redefinition of Rome: by unanchoring Rome from its past, they pave the way for a wider investigation of the city. Rome has been elevated from a model of “classicality” to a model of postmodernity for postmodern cities.

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