BOOK REVIEWS

Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice. By Jennifer Scappettone. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 440 p.

The idea that Venice and modernism are intimately connected might at first seem paradoxical, given that the city has long been seen as antithetical to any form of modern life, from high-rise buildings to the automobile. It is a commonplace that Venice is the city of fantasy, beauty, and romance, its ancient palaces shrouded in a melancholy mist that both entices and unnerves the visitor. Yet Jennifer Scappettone argues it is precisely this accumulation of aesthetic clichés, mostly dating back to the nineteenth century, that triggered modernist attempts to revitalize and redesign Venice according to newly defined artistic and political agendas. The most outspoken challenge to the popular iconography of Venice comes from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, doyen of the Futurist movement, who in the 1910 pamphlet "Against Passéist Venice" invited the Venetians to "fill the small stinking canals with the rubble of the crumbling and leprous old palaces." Without going as far, Scappettone's thoughtful and provocative study shines a light on the modern afterlives of a Romantic *topos*. The book takes its title from another of Marinetti's bellicose slogans, "let's kill the moonlight!," which, although not specifically referring to Venice, testifies to the avant-garde's programmatic hostility to cultural stereotypes perceived as stale and "passéist." In a similar vein, Scappettone promises a radical departure from the usual survey of literary Venice, focusing instead on multiple media and discourses, and conceiving the project as an exploration of "the aspirations, repressions, critiques, and failures of both modernity as ideology and development and modernism as aesthetic response" (30–31). That a rich multi-layered complex of images, ideas, symbols, and memories coalesces around Venice as a site and as a cultural construct is not a new discovery. The book's originality lies in its recasting of Venice as modernism's irreducible "Other," as well as in its expansive comparative reach.

Scappettone draws our attention to the city's unique geography: an archipelago scattered in shallow waters between the mainland and the Adriatic sea, shaped by the constant struggle to reclaim and protect areas of land from ever rising sea levels and strong tidal waves. The book opens with the chronicle of the 1966 flood, the worst *acqua alta* (high tide) ever recorded, which covered the city in almost two meters of seawater. Often obscured by the even more destructive flood that hit Florence on the same day, the event is nevertheless recognized as a crucial turning point in the history of Venice, exposing the city's vulnerability and the need for an effective strategy for conservation. This dramatic opening allows Scappettone to highlight the tension between the fragile environmental and social equilibrium sustaining the ancient city and the pull of modernization (the creation of the industrial site of Marghera and the unregulated expansion of fish farms in the lagoon were identified as contributing causes of the disaster). This raises the question of Venice's place in the modern world, a question to which the artists and thinkers considered in this book have offered varied and sometimes contrasting responses.

Scappettone's main argument centers on the multiple temporalities at play in the topography of the city: Venice is a "radically anachronistic city . . . in the sense that its urban fabric retains remnants of incommensurable historical epochs," a feature that "aggravates twentieth-century schemes to isolate the present and the future from their precedents" (10). While the same claim can be made about other historic cities such as Rome or Jerusalem, or any site of memory, the way Scappettone yokes together time and space gives it special

resonance in the Venetian context. A keyword she often recurs to is *tempo*, which in Italian means both time and weather, a handy reminder of the reciprocal influence of geo-climatic conditions and the rhythm of everyday life that characterizes the Venetian chronotope. The Introduction sets out to map the ambiguities of Venice as a liminal place between earth and water, Europe and Asia, the familiar and the strange. Moreover, the very fabric of the city, built over disparate islands and lacking an overall plan, is found to be "discontinuous" (a term dear to Calvino) and tantalizingly maze-like. These oft-quoted tropes are made concrete by a wealth of information on the specific historical, economic, and political factors that determined the structure and organization of this extraordinary city. But *Killing the Moonlight* is not a social history. This thick context is brought to bear on an impressive range of literary and artistic artefacts that Scappettone discusses in depth and with brilliant insight. Refreshingly, architectural discourse and practice are mobilized to support her argument that "Venice continues to stand as a contradiction to the rational design of both Rome and the Renaissance" (18), as well as to the Haussmannian ideal of monumental squares and wide boulevards. The resistance of Venice to modernization has resulted in an urban landscape of exceptional richness that enthrals and confuses the viewer, blocking perspectival vision and thwarting attempts to reduce it to a single rational scheme. Any visitor to Venice will recognize the sometimes pleasurable, sometimes frustrating experience of navigating the labyrinth of narrow *calli* and bridges, and Scappettone finds versions of this excited bafflement in the language and style of writers from John Ruskin to Italo Calvino. In parallel to the literary examples, Venice's resistance to abstract geometry is also demonstrated through ample evidence from the visual arts (Turner, Ruskin's own drawings, Whistler, Balla). Scappettone carefully justifies her choice of materials, but a few important counterexamples could have received more attention. I am thinking in particular of the mid-eighteenth-century school of the *vedutisti*, autochthonous to Venice and responsible for the dissemination of perspectivally accurate and spacious city vistas across Europe and North America. Instead, Canaletto is dismissed as an English fad (284), and much emphasis is given to the comparatively minor genre of *capricci* or architectural phantasies. Similarly, Carpaccio's sprawling scenes of Venetian life in the Saint Ursula cycle are admired for their "ephemerality" and the way they "thwart stable identification" (83). A more intuitive though less adventurous interpretation would highlight the realist impulse that governs the inclusive, yet always legible composition of the paintings. There are a few other instances when Scappettone appears to exaggerate her case regarding the nonlinear, anti-Cartesian nature of what she terms the "Venetian complex" (145), and I think she sometimes overstates the centrality of Venice to the writers in question. I say this not to criticize Scappettone's work but rather to emphasize that a book of such intellectual ambition and range inevitably stimulates different responses to the material at hand.

The book deserves a chapter-by-chapter survey to give a sense of its exceptional comparative reach. In outlining "The Entanglement of Memory" (the first chapter), Scappettone draws on Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* to chart the origins of modern engagement with the city, which is marked by the lasting influence of Romantic representations (Byron's above all) as well as by "scorn for the superficial model of sympathy and attendant pathetic fallacies characteristic of 'romance'" (58). Ruskin's conflicting relationship to his Romantic antecedents and their reverberations in popular culture, as Scappettone argues, is characteristic of modern attitudes tout court. The digressive, unsystematic style of Ruskin's Venetian writings is seen to reflect his struggle to make epistemological sense of the city's history and its fragmented topography. Henry James, who is the fulcrum of the second chapter, appears to embrace, rather than resist, the disorientation produced by the potently evocative surroundings that threaten to engulf characters and actions in his Venetian narratives (*The Aspern Papers* and *The Wings of the Dove*). For James too, Venice is overwritten with traces of the past (historical, literary, personal), thus offering the ideal setting to explore the mysterious ways in which experience and consciousness move across overlapping temporal dimensions.

The appropriation of Venice by Anglophone culture is contrasted in chapter 3 with more or less critical reworkings of the Romantic myth by Italian writers Gabriele D'Annunzio and Marinetti. Significantly, politics and the contemporary debate over the future of Venice, which were but a distant echo in the previous chapters, come back into focus here. Against the background of rapid industrialization and growing imperial ambitions, D'Annunzio uses Venice both as a ready-made literary construct guaranteed to appeal to an international readership and as a springboard for nationalist dreams of resurrecting Italy's dominance over the Adriatic. Scappettone carefully teases out the complex relationship of rivalry and emulation that links the *poeta vate* to the younger generation of the Futurists. She shows how Marinetti's iconoclastic tirade against "passéist Venice," a publicity stunt intended to shock the bourgeois audience of the International Exposition of Art, in fact captured the Zeitgeist of the new Fascist regime, which promoted the expansion of the industrial port at Marghera and the creation of a railway line (later followed by a motorway) connecting Venice to the mainland. Scappettone gives a balanced and illuminating account of the disturbing political uses of the "Venice complex" in the Fascist period, while maintaining optimistically that "this environment turns from a manipulable metaphor into a medium with the capacity to condition, or even implode, ideological projections" (145).

The problem of time and history returns to the fore in the substantial chapter dedicated to Ezra Pound, which tracks his shifting perspectives on Venice from the first collection, *A Lume Spento*, printed in "the city of Aldus" (Manutius) in 1908 to his later *Cantos*. The chapter cites Pound's practice of linguistic and poetic salvage to make a compelling case that "Venice is one site where a central problematic of Pound's poetic—the continuity between past and present—becomes concretized, located in space and in the present moment" (204). Although Scappettone does not gloss over Pound's celebration of Fascism and his anti-Semitism, she insists that Venice is the originator of ideas of fragmentariness, circulation, and hybridity, which subtly undermine Pound's allegiance to regressive totalitarian discourse.

The last two chapters consider the requalification of Venice as a postmodern utopia. The fantastic cities described by Marco Polo in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* are read in parallel to contemporary reflections on the future of cities by urban planners such as Lewis Mumford and Vittorio Gregotti. The anachronistic, irregular morphology of Venice becomes the paradigm for a new urban modernity based on a fluid, modular structure and human scale with potentially universal applications. Scappettone establishes Venice as the inspiration for Eco's theory of the "open work," Calvino's experiments with non-linear narratives and combinatory patterns, and, later, Jeanette Winterson's queer Venetian narrative in *The Passion* and Robert Coover's deconstruction of the canonical children's tale in *Pinocchio in Venice*. Once again as in the Romantic period, Venice's decline and apparent backwardness is discovered instead to be forward-looking, in a temporal inversion that fascinates Scappettone and the writers she examines.

Although it may from time to time overplay its larger claims, *Killing the Moonlight* is a brilliant fusion of literature, art, architecture, politics, and history that challenges and rewards the reader with its voracious and wide-ranging scope. Scappettone's re-positioning of modernism in Venice enriches our understanding of individual authors, revealing unexpected connections and re-contextualizing more familiar ones, and provides a fascinating multidisciplinary approach to Venice and its myth. This book makes an important contribution not only to modernist studies but also to wider theoretical debates about the relationship between real and imagined places, the temporal dislocation that characterizes sites of historical memory and how they can be reclaimed for the present.

Rosa Mucignat
King's College London

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