

Peter Carravetta, *Del postmoderno*

Milan: Bompiani, 2009. Pp. 630. ISBN: 45255892

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Full text

Peter Carravetta, professor of “Italian and Italian American Studies” at SUNY Stony Brook, with an Italian and American education, has put together in his massive *Del postmoderno* possibly the most complete critical review so far of American academic production from the 1970s to the present. “Postmodern” is the key word of the cultural turn that took place between the 1950s and the 1970s only to meet its death, in Carravetta’s opinion, on September 11, 2001, when the shortlived illusion that history had resulted in the triumph of democracy and capitalism fell to the ground together with the Twin Towers. Postmodern, postmodernism, or postmodernity, are in fact other names for modernity stranded. According to the failed utopia that saw no end to modernity, after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall the whole world was supposed to be going through an unstoppable process of westernization and secularization with no enemy in sight. Throughout the 1990s, the feeling that Western culture had reached its final balance—and therefore could go on forever quoting itself, recycling itself, and parodying itself—had become contagious, but the future did not go as planned, and in our current predicament we still don’t know where the post-postmodern is headed. Carravetta, on his part, has thoroughly done his homework. His book accurately sums up all the classic texts and major topics of postmodern critical theory, covering mostly American authors but with an eye on European production (Lyotard, Derrida) and non-Western theory (Spivak, Appadurai). From the initial analysis of modernity’s crisis he then moves on to the relation between avantgarde and postmodernity and the transition from the analogical to digital. In the fourth chapter (“Cartografie del crepuscolo,” or “Maps of the Twilight”) he offers his synthesis of the academic avalanche of Cultural Studies, Post-Colonial Studies (which he regards as the best product of postmodern theory together with 1970s feminism, and I am inclined to agree), Gender Studies, globalization theories, utopia, anti-utopias, dystopias and a-topias (the Non-Place where we are now), the Marxist-influenced criticism of the New Historicists as well as Paul De Man’s nihilistic deconstruction and his assertion that texts are ultimately undecidable. *Del postmoderno* is a precious “guide for the perplexed,” addressed to anyone who wants to know what these thirty years have been about (1970-2001), with all their new ideas and perspectives endlessly popping out, but also with their countless blind spots and dead-ends.

Alessandro Carrera, « Peter Carravetta, *Del postmoderno*. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2010-2, document 7, Online since 18 August 2010, connection on 18 August 2010. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/8516>

2 His postmodern education notwithstanding, Carravetta is still a “modern humanist.” Obviously aware of the essentialist and Eurocentric limitations of humanism, he also knows that the repudiation of the interpretive wisdom cultivated by humanism may turn us all into mere “functions, means, available tools” (“funzioni, strumenti, mezzi disponibili,” p. 523) of globalized exploitation. In their most arrogant expressions (and they were aplenty), postmodern theories have often given the impression that their wish was to be referential without a referent or, better said, theories of something without something. Not so much theories of nothing (a theory of nothingness would still be something), as attempts to put aside the referent to make room for more and more theory. If I remember well, it was Borges who told the legend of the king who built a memorial to his dead wife so magnificent that when it was completed the tomb of his beloved was no longer up to the building’s aesthetical value and the king proceeded ungracefully to remove it. To use a more down-to-earth example, the literature departments of American universities where, especially in the 1990s, professors were saying proudly that they were no longer teaching literature but only literary theory, in their contempt for the material support of their enterprise (the text to be read) and the actual life beyond the walls of academia, resembled a motorbike champion who would say that he no longer gets on a bike, but he reads all the bikers’ magazines instead.

3 I am reminded here of Aldo Giorgio Gargani’s *Sguardo e destino*, first volume of his trilogy *La seconda nascita*, now reprinted by Bergamo-based publisher Moretti & Vitali (2010, pp. 444) in the first anniversary of the author’s death. *La seconda nascita* is a unique example of Italian prose modeled after the style of Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, a mixture of personal essay and novel of ideas, no less philosophical than a Wittgenstein book (Wittgenstein was the author Gargani loved the most). As Gargani writes, men and women make theories, but what are theories after all? They are suggestions, trying to convince us that if we follow them, then some good will come to us, and if we don’t follow them, then there will be bad news. Theories always come down to *happy end*. If we obey them, then the happy end is in store for us. Even Wittgenstein, when he was close to his death, told his doctor to go and tell his students that he had had a wonderful life. Not even Wittgenstein could resist the urge to universalize his own experience. He too reshaped his life in a happy-end theory, saying what he was supposed to say in that particular circumstance, to the detriment of what he might have said otherwise. A theory that says what really needs to be said (instead of what it is supposed to say) has always been a rare event. However, it looks like postmodernity has missed a great deal of chances to get close to it.

References - Electronic reference

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