

Russell J. A. Kilbourn. The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style

Oliver Brett

Volume 42, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088999ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/qi.v42i1.38386>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (imprimé)

2293-7382 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Brett, O. (2021). Compte rendu de [Russell J. A. Kilbourn. The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 42(1), 309–311.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/qi.v42i1.38386>

informed, at least regarding its rhetorical fabric, “by language and imagery from throughout the 1920s and 1930s” (205).

Mussolini's Children is a welcome addition to the existing scholarly production on Fascist elementary education and pedagogical policies. However, whether the idea of *italianità* embraced by the regime in the early 1920s to cement nationalism might be regarded as the germ of discrimination leading to the fully fledged racist norms promoted by Fascism in the second half of the thirties remains an open question. Especially because, as McLean concedes, fascist rhetoric was based on themes that had been a *leitmotif* in Italian culture well before 1922 and were essentially relics of the Risorgimento heroics. Consequently, the assimilation of the rhetoric of *italianità* with a racist spirit lying in wait seems to be the least convincing aspect of this otherwise engaging study of the interrelation of education and racial awareness in Fascist Italy, a topic that would benefit from a renewed and robust critical attention.

MATTEO BRERA

University of Western Ontario

Russell J. A. Kilbourn. *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style.* New York: Wallflower Press, 2020. Pp. 264. ISBN 9780231189934.

Kilbourn's book is part of Wallflower Press's *Directors' Cuts*, a series focusing on key contemporary international filmmakers. Across eight chapters and a coda, aside from the introduction and conclusion, Kilbourn deals mainly with Sorrentino's films (from *L'uomo in più* in 2001 to *Loro* in 2018) and first major television run (*The Young Pope*, 2016). The book is intended for “nonspecialist film lovers” (xxi) to whom Kilbourn aims to introduce Sorrentino and his work.

Counter to accusations of a superficial commitment to style on Sorrentino's part, the overall aim of Kilbourn's research is to highlight the filmmaker's *impegno*. He advances an idea that this can be seen in Sorrentino's “intensified continuity style” (xxvi), which, in his detailed analyses of scenes and/or aspects, identifies the wide-ranging application of codes and genres in a post-classical cinematic sense.

Adopting a “schizoid agenda” (xix), Kilbourn seeks neither to kill off the auteur altogether nor to sidestep the influence of the socio-cultural and/or the historical on the filmmaker. He acknowledges a continuum between artistic

choice and more complex and embodied subject positions, the latter of which he also discusses in relation to the Sorrentinian subject (i.e., protagonist). Kilbourn marshals his analyses through the films as they work with the intertextual and intermedial, avoiding fixed meanings in either the 'original' text or director.

In homing in on Sorrentino's 'commitment to style' as a transnational Italian political cinema (*cinema politico*), Kilbourn extends Millicent Marcus's analysis of postrealism in *Il Divo* (2008) by articulating a "postmodern form of realism" instead (xxvii). More responsive to the ambivalence of contemporary times, Kilbourn feels that this allows him to illuminate a stylistic transparency that plays on the self-reflexive while offering a critique of both the historical and a neo/realist tradition. This emphasises the complexity of realism and postmodernism, delimiting any claims to the real that may come out of the realism lingering in the background of Marcus's position.

Each of the eight chapters, and coda, is dedicated to one text, although central themes re-emerge as part of the intentionally dispersed analyses focusing on the intertextual as intermedial. The texts are temporally sequential in structuring the book, which allows for the mapping out of Sorrentino's style from one of transnational art film to one of a hybrid form reflecting the impact of a masculinity in crisis in a post-secular world (while it also intersects with the sacred). The role of Sorrentino's cinematographer, Luca Bigazzi, and the film *Il Divo* in establishing a particular style and widening exposure to an international audience, respectively, are outlined as important within this stylistic shift (although this shift may be considered arbitrary given the apparent inter- and intra-textual/medial features of Sorrentino's texts). The broader themes foregrounded by Kilbourn, as I see them, are as follows: masculinity and its fragility; representing gender and women; non-normative identities; space and place; memory and nostalgia; postmodernism and existential ennui; irony as political.

Kilbourn's coda, where he focuses on *Loro* (2018), best typifies his argument regarding the political impact of the self-reflexive and the framing of gender (the latter of which is a core element of the whole book). As Kilbourn exemplifies, these can be seen in Sergio's desire to mimic Berlusconi's lifestyle and the tattooed image of Toni Servillo (as Berlusconi) on the woman's sacrum that he (Sergio) visualises while having sex. These examples also demonstrate a notable tension identified by Kilbourn between the ideological (allegiance to an established belief) and the interrogative (active alignment to a particular point of view), and the different ways in which the latter of these two positions in Sorrentino's work challenges normative perspectives on the part of the viewer who may potentially retain ingrained

allegiances. Of note here is how Kilbourn responds to accusations of misogyny in Sorrentino's representation of (often scantily clad and highly sexualised) women by highlighting the ideological framing of gender and its ongoing relevance as a perspective to be explored — as seen particularly well through Berlusconi in *Loro*.

The strength of this book in illuminating Sorrentino's *impegno* on an international level is in the interconnected themes that re-emerge throughout. The stylistic shift that is outlined by way of the temporal sequencing of Sorrentino's work according to chapter and coda therefore feels like a distraction in contrast to the broader and richer thematic analyses that occurs across the entire work as it draws attention to the inter- and intra- textual/medial. These terms needed greater definition and theoretical framing however, as they are used interchangeably and not always necessarily as part of the overall argument but rather as part of what feels like quite personal observations.

Given the intersections that Kilbourn covers within and across the various chapters/coda, I would claim that the book is at least intended for those who are very familiar with Sorrentino's oeuvre — whether or not they are cinema specialists. However, in attempting to elicit the key arguments being asserted, such readers may find that certain sections, in detailing scenes/aspects of Sorrentino's "intensified continuity style" (as evidence of a "postmodern form of realism"), are at times both descriptive and elliptical within the broader analyses. I did not find that this detail necessarily strengthened Kilbourn's argument regarding Sorrentino's *impegno* and contribution to a transnational *cinema politico*. On this point, the value of this book is in the very engaging and overlapping discussions that ultimately function on a thematic level in Kilbourn's analyses of the different texts — many points of which can be re-claimed transnationally as of social and political relevance above and beyond the original text and Sorrentino himself.

OLIVER BRETT

University of Leicester