Celli, Carlo. *The Divine Comic. The Cinema of Roberto Benigni*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2001. 175 pp.

To North American audiences, Roberto Benigni is most certainly best known for his film *La vita è bella* which earned him three Oscars in 1999, including Best Foreign Film and Best Actor. Celli's recent monographic study of the multifaceted actor/director's career provides the English-speaking cinéophile with a comprehensive look at Benigni's origins, family background and previous experience in theatre and film.

The preface pays homage to Benigni's international acclaim and success after the awarding of the three Academy Awards to *Life is Beautiful* but stresses Benigni as a steady presence in Italian popular culture since the mid-seventies. The aim of this book is clearly to introduce English-speaking audiences to Benigni's earlier film, stage and tv performances with an emphasis on the cultural and intellectual backdrops that characterize his films. This study offers an introduction to Benigni's readings of Dante and the Old Testament and traces the progression in Benigni's art and particularly his cinematic style as he "attempts a more ambitious use of the camera to filter reality into his own artistic vision" (p.x).

Celli provides an extensive, detailed biographical summary which explores the ancient Tuscan origins, the relationship Benigni-Dante and the influence on Benigni of Italian cinematic masters such as Cesare Zavattini and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Subsequent chapters deal with the genesis and development of the *Cioni* persona, the main character in Benigni's monologue *Cioni Mario di Gaspare fu Giulia* (1975), as Celli traces the evolution of this character from theatre to film justly noting the significance of the appearance of this 'decidedly leftist, obscene, country bumpkin' on the RAI state television as a "complete subversion of RAI's conservative policies" (p.33). With the *Cioni* persona, Benigni continued his challenge to intellectual hegemonies in Italy, "in this case the linguistic and cultural commonplaces of Italian state television" and "with his parody of RAI programming methods, Benigni continues the challenges to cultural elites that were first expressed in the Roman avant-garde theater" (p. 37).

A fifth chapter, 'Film Apprenticeships and Cameos, 1979-89', traces Benigni's collaboration and cinematic apprenticeship with Renzo Arbore, Marco Ferreri, Cesare Zavattini, Sergio Citti (and the Pasolinian school of filmmaking), Federico Fellini as well as U.S. independent film director Jim Jarmusch. This discussion effectively illustrates the attraction and influence of strategies of filmmaking that sought to 'counter the dominant cinematic culture with an alternative based in artistic forms that have at their heart a Gramscian search for nonbourgeois sources (Zavattini, Pasolini)' (p. 48) or 'lead the audience to question the commonplaces of commercial cinema (Jarmusch)' (p. 51) or yet 'criticize the dehumanizing confusion of the modern lifestyle (Fellini)' (p. 51).

A chapter entitled 'Benigni's Religious Parody on Stage' demonstrates how, in comic vein, Benigni incorporates into his parodies the influence of Schopenhauer: the theory of the world as an expression of the will, the inconsistencies in the biblical representation and expectations of God, the inconsistency in the Christian

dogma with regard to man's supremacy over animals and the incongruous concept of the Last Judgment and Celli attributes to Benigni's treatment of religion 'the carnival physicality of Rabelais, the scepticism of Schopenhauer and the cynicism of Pascal' (p. 60).

Benigni's growth as a director is mapped out in chapters VII through X: from the novice director of a first feature length film *Tu mi turbi* (1983) who 'uses the camera to emphasize his comic presence rather than as an instrument to alter or filter reality' (p. 67) to the more mature director of *Il mostro* (1994) 'where the camera becomes an interpreter of a social reality that complements his comedic body rather than merely records it' (p. 86), Celli traces the evolution to a higher level of cinematic sophistication which will appear in *La vita è bella*. These chapters examine also the various incarnations of Cioni-like characters in *Il piccolo diavolo* (1988), *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), *Il mostro* (1994) and even *La vita è bella* (1997).

A lengthy final chapter is dedicated, most fittingly, to *La vita è bella*, one of the most internationally successful non-English language films in cinema history, as Celli rightly notes—a triumph at Cannes and at the Academy Awards, but also object of much controversy 'over the delicate question of the suitability of using comedy to depict the Holocaust' (p. 97). In his discussion of this film, Celli highlights the fable-like construction of the film, the suspension of normality, the introduction of fantasy elements as well as the homage to Chaplin and the reliance on cinematic techniques reminiscent of the silent era and rightly places Benigni's film in a tradition of Italian cinema which re-examined Italy's Fascist past. To counter the prevalent criticism on the film's lack of historical realism and the viewers' inability to achieve a suspension of disbelief, Celli defends Benigni's conscious choice of an understated approach where 'horror is evoked rather than depicted' (p. 115).

Celli's monograph concludes with an Appendix consisting of two interviews with Benigni: the first, conducted by Celli, offers the reader Benigni's insight on questions regarding his improvisations, monologues and religious satires as well as Dante and 'high and low culture'; the second, conducted by Vanina Pezzetti, treats the question of Jewish identity, verisimilitude and the combination of tragedy and humour in *La vita è bella*.

This volume features also an extensive bibliography, complete filmography and list of Benigni's theatrical work which will render it an indispensable tool for any student or scholar of Benigni in particular or of contemporary Italian cinema in general. Its general readability and engaging style will fare well with proponents of 'high' and 'low' culture alike ...

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