

Immigration, “Literary Value”, and the Logic of Late Capitalism in Piersandro Pallavicini’s *Il mostro di Vigevano* (1999)

Simone Brioni

Stony Brook University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1973-5317>

Abstract: According to Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), postmodern culture functions as an expression of the logic of late capitalism, manifesting in stylistic *pastiche*, the dominance of spectacle, a waning of historical consciousness, and a corresponding erosion of affect. Central to Jameson’s critique is the contention that postmodernism forecloses the possibility of imagining alternatives to capitalism. This article argues that Piersandro Pallavicini’s *Il mostro di Vigevano* (1999) exemplifies some of these features, and it shows how its description of immigrants to Italy as ingenuous, innocent, and simple-minded insinuates that they come from backward places that are not troubled with modernity. *Il mostro di Vigevano* seems to reiterate one of the most powerful Eurocentric narratives, namely that different places in the world belong to different temporalities and follow a linear development towards progress. The analysis concludes by questioning the reliance on violent or provocative imagery in *Il mostro di Vigevano* to shock white middle-class sensibilities—a hallmark of mainstream Italian literature in the late 1990s—to criticize the logic of late capitalism. It also examines the concept of ‘literary value’ and its close entanglement with the logic of late capitalism.

Keywords: Bret Easton Ellis; Consumerism; Immigration; Non-Places; Vigevano; Transgression; Postmodernism; *Cannibali*, 1990s Fiction; Cultural Capital

* **Contact:** simone.brioni@stonybrook.edu

Introduction

According to Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), postmodern culture functions as an expression of the logic of late capitalism, manifesting in stylistic *pastiche*, the dominance of spectacle, a waning of historical consciousness, and a corresponding erosion of affect. Central to Jameson's critique is the contention that postmodernism forecloses the possibility of imagining alternatives to capitalism.¹

Drawing on Jameson's work, this article analyzes Piersandro Pallavicini's *Il mostro di Vigevano* (1999) and it interrogates its critique of consumer society. It argues that the novel's description of immigrants to Italy as ingenuous, innocent, and simple-minded insinuates that they come from backward places that are not troubled with modernity. Moreover, the article develops a comparative reading of Pallavicini's novel in relation to its explicit literary models,² which include Lucio Mastronardi's *Il maestro di Vigevano* (1962) and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). It maintains that the reference to Ellis' novel contributes to the creation of an allochronic time in relation to Italy, the United States, and Northern Africa, thus reiterating one of the most powerful Eurocentric narratives, namely that different places in the world belong to different temporalities and follow a linear development towards progress.

Vigevano: Prosperity, Immigration, and the Rise of the Northern League

According to Giorgio Bocca, the town of Vigevano—found in the Lomellina area, south of Milan—looks in 1962 like ‘una delle città più ricche d'Italia, quanto a denaro, è fra le più povere quanto a vita intellettuale e sociale’.³ Bocca argues that this town is exemplary of how much consumerist mentality has permeated Italy during the economic boom: ‘Fare soldi, per fare soldi, per fare soldi: se esistono altre prospettive, chiedo scusa, non le ho viste. Di abitanti cinquantasettemila, di operai venticinquemila, di milionari battaglioni affiancati, di librerie neanche una. Non volevo crederci’.⁴ This representation of Vigevano has an illustrious literary counterpart: Lucio Mastronardi's 1960s trilogy of novels—*Il calzolaio di Vigevano* (1962), *Il maestro di Vigevano* (1962), and *Il meridionale di Vigevano* (1964)—which criticizes the effects of Italy's capitalist growth and ironizes upon the Italian parvenu middle class.⁵ According to Alberto Asor Rosa, Mastronardi's trilogy pays ‘attenzione a personaggi e situazioni in-

¹ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1991.

² P. Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, Milan, Laurana, 2013, p. 5. Kindle Edition.

³ G. Bocca, ‘Vigevano’, in: A. Berardinelli (ed.), *Autoritratto italiano: un dossier letterario, 1945-1998*, Rome, Donzelli, 1998, pp. 89-96: p. 95.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 89.

⁵ L. Mastronardi, *Il maestro di Vigevano. Il calzolaio di Vigevano. Il meridionale di Vigevano*, Turin, Einaudi, 1994.

termedi, che costituiscono quasi il magma informe, il coacervo non ancora organizzato di forze, dal quale e nel quale il sistema nasce e prospera',⁶ and it provides a grotesque representation of 'l'anarchia del sistema, la sua perpetua disorganicità, la sua effettiva incongruenza, nascosta dietro le apparenze della razionalità'.⁷

Il Maestro di Vigevano is perhaps the best-known novel of the trilogy, as Elio Petri adapted it into a popular movie featuring Alberto Sordi in 1963. This book features a poor schoolmaster, Antonio Mombelli, who changes his job and becomes the owner of a shoe factory in order to satisfy his wife's lust for money. However, the shoe business collapses when it is charged with tax evasion, after Mombelli naively boasts about his anti-social behavior in public. This failure causes his wife, Ada, to confess that she had often betrayed him with a richer businessman and that they had a son that Mombelli believes to be his. Finally, Mombelli returns to his old school and fantasizes about marrying a colleague and benefiting from a shared income with his future wife: 'Coefficiente 202. Due stipendi del coefficiente 202 fanno uno stipendio del gruppo A. Con uno stipendio una persona vive male; con due stipendi due persone vivono bene'.⁸

Almost thirty years after Mastronardi's trilogy, the town of Vigevano appears at the center of Piersandro Pallavicini's first literary work, *Il mostro di Vigevano* (1999), a novel that engages in criticism of the effects of economic neo-liberalism in the area. Pallavicini was born in Vigevano, and while he was writing the novel, he also co-wrote a volume on Mastronardi⁹ and edited a collection of short stories inspired by his work.¹⁰ According to Pallavicini, Mastronardi's Vigevano is a

'mondo in piccolo' [...] palcoscenico delle ossessioni di una certa Italia, come microcosmo in cui si replicano in spazi controllati passioni e urgenze universali. Dunque un concetto di provincia come di piccola comunità laboratorio, di esperimento su scala ridotta – con poche 'variabili' da 'controllare' – ove l'autore può scrivere costruendo un modello valido per il mondo intero.¹¹

As the title of the novel suggests, Pallavicini aims to continue Mastronardi's social criticism in the present. For example, Mastronardi's final book of the Vigevano trilogy, *Il meridionale di Vigevano*, features a post office clerk who moves from Southern Italy to Vigevano to work and lives in poor conditions despite the economic boom. Similarly, *Il mostro di Vigevano* accounts for the global economic migration caused by neoliberal policies by featuring migrants who came to Vigevano to become street vendors. Moreover, the protagonist of Pallavicini's novel seems to be perfectly integrated

⁶ A. Asor Rosa, 'Il maestro di Vigevano', in: *Quaderni Piacentini*, 1 (1964), pp. 36–39: p. 36.

⁷ Ivi, p. 37.

⁸ Mastronardi, *Il maestro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 206.

⁹ P. Pallavicini & A. Ramazzina, *Mastronardi e il suo mondo*, Milan, Otto/Novecento, 1999.

¹⁰ P. Pallavicini, 'Scrittori a Vigevano: narrativa della provincia o narrativa provinciale?', in: P. Pallavicini (ed.), *Cinque scrittori nella città di Lucio Mastronardi: raccontare Vigevano*, Milan, La vita felice, 1999, pp. 103–108.

¹¹ Pallavicini & Ramazzina, *Mastronardi e il suo mondo*, cit., p. 105.

within the middle-class, provincial society in which he lives, just like the teacher at the center of Mastronardi's *Il maestro di Vigevano*. Significantly, as soon as Mombelli becomes rich by opening a private company he feels self-accomplished and starts hanging out with 'industrialotti [...] queglii stessi che mi davano ai nervi quando ero maestro che li vedevo soddisfatti di sé'.¹² Drawing on Mastronardi's work, *Il mostro di Vigevano* represents a provincial area of the north of Italy in which the xenophobic party Northern League 'conquered the state'.¹³

Cannibalizing *American Psycho*

Although Pallavicini's introduction to the new edition of the novel argues that *Il mostro di Vigevano* is not a pulp novel,¹⁴ this text might be seen as a *cannibali* novel or as a text that was deeply influenced by this literary movement, which was mainstream in Italy in the 1990s.¹⁵ As Marino Sinibaldi argues, the term *cannibalismo* should be interpreted in relation to one of the main features of this group of writers: the intention to 'assorbire e incorporare il nemico, la sua storia e il suo valore, divorandolo. Ingoiando frammenti provenienti dall'alta tradizione letteraria o dalle varianti più junk della cultura di massa', and the 'pura e spesso vana esibizione di sanguinaria ferocia e una più interessante voracità che mira a inghiottire tutti i linguaggi letterari'.¹⁶ *Cannibali* novels aim to bridge the gap between the rather outdated distinction between mass or popular literature, as opposed to the one that Italian literary critics would consider as 'serious' or 'high' literature: 'their writing goes *beyond* literature. In the challenge of traditional disciplinary borders, their writing appears, in fact, to be naturally shaped by *contaminatio* from media, cartoons, film, music, television, video and computer games, even commercial ads'.¹⁷ Stefania Lucamante also argues that these novels are usually 'situated in disturbing post-industrial urban and suburban landscapes' in order to provide a representation of places that are usually excluded from literary works.¹⁸

It should be noted that *cannibalismo* emerged in the historical aftermath of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, at a moment marked by the geopolitical confirmation of the disappearance of any credible systemic alternative to capitalism. This conjuncture, famously theorized by Francis Fukuyama as the 'end of history',¹⁹ parallels what

¹² Mastronardi, *Il maestro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 82.

¹³ I. Diamanti, 'The Party of the North in the Conquest of the State. 1992–95', in: S. Gundle & S. Parker (eds.), *The New Italian Republic: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to Berlusconi*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 113–129; p. 113.

¹⁴ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 10.

¹⁵ A. Brondino, 'Italian Postmodernism', in: J. A. Cavallo (ed.), *The Literary Encyclopedia*, <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=19542> (May 19, 2026).

¹⁶ M. Sinibaldi, *Pulp: la letteratura nell'era della simultaneità*, Rome, Donzelli, 1997, p. 70.

¹⁷ S. Lucamante, 'Introduction: "Pulp", Splatter and More: The New Italian Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers', in: S. Lucamante (ed. & trans.), *Italian Pulp Fiction. The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers*, London, Associated University Press, 2001, pp. 13–37; p. 22.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 18.

¹⁹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

Jameson diagnoses as a condition of ideological closure, in which capitalism presents itself as inevitable. Within this post-1989 context, the novel can be read as a cultural product of a world in which political imagination has been foreclosed, and where critique is increasingly absorbed into the very logic it seeks to contest.

Another key feature of Italian literature in the 1990s is its engagement with, and influence from, American cultural products. For instance, in his foreword to *Il mostro di Vigevano*, Pallavicini refers to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*,²⁰ which is also a clear cultural reference to *Cannibali*,²¹ and to Transeuropa, a publishing house that published Pier Vittorio Tondelli's Under 25 project—*Giovani Blues* (1986), *Belli & Perversi* (1987), and *Papergang* (1990)²²—and paved the way for the young *débutant* writers of the 1990s.²³ *Cannibali* novels are also characterized by the influence of coeval American literature, in particular Bret Easton Ellis's work.²⁴ Ellis's most famous novel, *American Psycho* (1991), is the terrifying and methodical report of a successful Wall Street yuppie educated at Harvard, Patrick Bateman, who spends his time dining at fine restaurants, snorting cocaine, talking about exclusive clothes, renting videotapes, watching pornography and vacuous television program, and brutally massacring people. Behind a young, rich, handsome stockbroker, the reader discovers a despicable character—thoroughly arrogant, insincere, sexist, racist, vain, and shallow. Bateman displays the same affective filter to meticulously talk about music albums, waking up, exercise routines, clothing, and restaurant scenes, as well as his barbarous acts of mutilation and murder. The description of these crimes is characterized by splatter aesthetics, which is often combined with macabre pornography. Near the end of the novel, Ellis teases the reader into believing that Bateman may finally be brought to justice, but he remains unpunished. At the book's close no solutions, no alternatives, no guidelines, no way out are offered. The novel offers no explicit moral judgment about Bateman so that the reader can judge his vile acts. *American Psycho* neither glorifies nor condones his reprehensible characters: the killer is writing the story of his life and, by viewing the world through his own lens, the reader can notice that he feels no repentance for his acts but rather a sense of normality. The yuppie's self-obsessed depiction monologue offers a criticism of the consumerist system. His crimes

²⁰ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 6.

²¹ M. Arcangeli, *Giovani scrittori, scritture giovani: ribelli, sognatori, cannibali, bad girls*, Rome, Carocci, 2007, p. 213.

²² P. V. Tondelli (ed.), *Giovani Blues*, Ancona, Lavoro Editoriale, 1986; P. V. Tondelli (ed.), *Belli & Perversi*, Ancona, Transeuropa, 1987; P. V. Tondelli (ed.), *Papergang*, Ancona, Transeuropa, 1990.

²³ A. Spadaro, *Laboratorio 'Under 25'. Tondelli e i suoi narratori italiani*, Reggio Emilia, Diabasis, 2000, p. 141. *Giovani Blues* was published by Lavoro editoriale, the previous name of Transeuropa.

²⁴ D. Cannamela, 'The "Pharmakeía" of Blood: Misuse, Abuse, & Reuse in the Young Cannibals' Narrative of Violence', in: *Annali d'Italianistica*, 35 (2017), pp. 421-446: p. 433; F. La Porta, 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show and the Very Real Horrors: About the Italian Pulp', in: S. Lucamante (ed.), *Italian Pulp Fiction. The New Narrative of the Giovani Cannibali Writers*, London, Associated University Press, 2001, pp. 57-75: p. 59; E. Trevi, 'Spazzatura e violenza', in: D. Broli (ed.), *Gioventù Cannibale. Con un nuovo scritto di Emanuele Trevi*, Turin, Einaudi, 2006 [1996], pp. 203-209: p. 205.

in fact seem to graphically literalize the same brutality of a society dominated by corporate interests, which causes economic inequalities and a consequent enormous number of victims, more than any serial killer kills each year.

Given the influence of Ellis's text on Pallavicini's, it might be useful to highlight similarities and equally illuminating differences between the two novels. The main character and narrator of *Il mostro di Vigevano*, Marco Calibani, is a wealthy, powerful, intelligent man, who works as a chemistry researcher at the University of Pavia. Like Patrick Bateman, he abuses his privilege as a white, middle-class man, as he sexually exploits a young immigrant called Tharek. No graphic violence is involved in this act: unlike Ellis, Pallavicini focuses more on how Calibani's symbolic capital is used to approach and rope in Tharek. Calibani's name clearly evokes the monster Caliban in William Shakespeare's 1610 tragedy *The Tempest*,²⁵ a slave who does not have human shape and is a hybrid between a human being and a beast. The "monstrous" nature of this character refers to his obsession with pornography and sex both with men and women. As pornographic representations permeate mass culture, Pallavicini problematizes the insane curiosity for morbid pleasure that is stimulated by the media towards humanity's basest instincts. The monstrosity of Calibani can also be seen in relation to what he is scared of or disgusted by, namely 'l'odore intenso e spiacevole' of a prostitute of African origins.²⁶

In other words, the name Calibani in *Il mostro di Vigevano* is stripped of its historical and political weight and reduced to an abstract monster, turning into what might be described as an empty signifier. The character no longer carries a specific colonial memory or a clearly defined historical conflict but is presented instead as an undifferentiated figure of inhumanity: a "half man, half monster", simultaneously a victim of the system that produces him and a perpetrator who reproduces its logic. In this reduction, Calibani becomes a morally ambiguous figure who addresses the reader not so much by exposing the structural functioning of power, but by provoking an ethical self-interrogation: are we truly "better" than him, or just as hypocritical? Yet this operation entails a profound depoliticization of the name of the character.

In *The Tempest*, Caliban is inseparable from the historical context of European colonization. Prospero conquers an island, imposes his language, knowledge, and authority, and deprives Caliban of the land that Caliban himself claims as his own. For this reason, Shakespeare's play has become a foundational text for postcolonial reinterpretations, which read Caliban as a figure of the colonized native. A seminal example is Aimé Césaire's *Une tempête* (1969), in which Caliban is endowed with an explicitly anticolonial political voice, rejecting Prospero's language and domination while affirming his own historical subjectivity.²⁷ This interpretation is further discussed by Roberto Fernández Retamar, who writes:

²⁵ W. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, London, Penguin, 1998 [1610].

²⁶ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 231.

²⁷ A. Césaire, *A Tempest*, R. Miller (trans.), New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1969, p. 16.

To assume our condition as Caliban implies rethinking our history from the other side, from the viewpoint of the other protagonist. The other protagonist of *The Tempest* ... is not of course Ariel, but, rather, Prospero. There is no real Ariel–Caliban polarity: both are slaves in the hands of Prospero, the foreign magician. But Caliban is rude and unconquerable master of the island, while Ariel, a creature of the air, although also a child of the isle, is the intellectual.²⁸

For Retamar, to assume Caliban as a symbolic figure means rereading history from the perspective of the colonized, foregrounding the structure of domination embodied by Prospero rather than a generic moral opposition between characters. On the other hand, Pallavicini neutralizes the critical potential of Caliban's nominal reference, emptying it of its historical context and rendering it harmless and consumable, fully compatible with a postmodern cultural horizon that privileges symbolic surface over historical memory.

The detachment of this name from its literary genealogy can be further discussed in relation to Jameson's reflections on postmodernism. Jameson argues that postmodern culture is defined by a profoundly distorted relationship to the past and to history, marked by what he calls a 'waning of historicity'.²⁹ Rather than engaging the past as a living process shaped by social conflict, postmodernism treats it as a repository of styles, images, and aesthetic codes available for consumption. This manifests most clearly in *pastiche*, a neutral imitation and assemblage of past forms that lacks the critical distance of parody and transforms history into surface spectacle. As a result, the past appears in decontextualized forms—nostalgic images or simulacra—producing a condition of historical amnesia in which the present seems disconnected from both its origins and possible futures. For Jameson, this loss of historical depth is inseparable from the dominance of late capitalism, whose totalizing logic makes it increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives, reinforcing a cultural presentism that forecloses political possibility. It should also be noted that the intertextuality of *pastiche* enhances a novel's 'cultural capital'—that is, its perceived intellectual prestige and cultural value—because it demonstrates familiarity with prestigious texts and literary traditions.³⁰

To return to the comparative analysis of *American Psycho* and *Il mostro di Vigevano*, Bateman and Calibani are both explicitly alienated characters, and they exemplify the crisis of masculinity that Susan Faludi identified in the 1990s—a crisis driven by the displacement of traditional values such as hard work and responsibility by a cultural obsession with image, consumerism, and fame.³¹ Faludi contends that contemporary

²⁸ R. F. Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, Edward Baker (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 16.

²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, cit., p. 21.

³⁰ P. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in: J. G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood, 1986 [1985], pp. 241–258.

³¹ S. Faludi, *Stiffed: The Roots of Modern Male Rage*, London, HarperCollins, 2019.

masculinity has devolved into a hollow performance in which appearance eclipses substance. Men like Bateman or Calibani are encouraged to stake their worth on looks, economic success, strength, and control—standards that a post-industrial economy has rendered increasingly unattainable or irrelevant—rather than on meaningful actions or social contributions. For example, Bateman's identity is constantly mistaken for someone else's. After killing his "friend" Paul Owen, Bateman records a message in the answering machine because he knows his voice sounds like Owen's.³² Similarly, Calibani states that 'durante le situazioni più spiacevoli, mi estranio'.³³ Moreover, he convinces his girlfriend Marcella to have sex with him in front of a camera, as if the video could provide him with proof of his real existence.³⁴ The verb 'convincere' is used by Calibani to suggest an act of persuasion. Yet this wording may imply a less voluntary, more coercive dimension. Given the narrator's unreliability, readers are encouraged to interrogate the power dynamics at play within a relationship between a thirty-two-year-old male academic and a twenty-one-year-old woman.

Bateman's and Calibani's behavior exemplifies several defining features of what Jameson identifies as the *logic of late capitalism*. In both figures, human relationships—and the people they oppress—are subjected to a process of 'reification', reduced to objects devoid of intrinsic value or moral significance.³⁵ This objectifying logic is accompanied by what Jameson famously describes as the 'waning of affect', evident in their incapacity to experience guilt, empathy, or genuine emotional engagement within the social world of late capitalism.³⁶ Moreover, both characters display traits that resonate with Jameson's notion of the 'schizophrenic' subject: an inability to distinguish coherently between reality, hallucination, and fantasy, resulting in a fragmented experience of time, causality, and selfhood.³⁷ At a more formal level, *American Psycho* and *Il mostro di Vigevano* can be read as allegories of consumerism and neoliberal competition, staging extreme forms of individualism, commodification, and social atomization. As Jameson argues, many postmodern texts operate fundamentally as allegories, translating structural economic and ideological processes into narrative form.³⁸

By watching and making pornographic films or killing people respectively, Bateman and Calibani attempt to break monotony, but instead actually become even more bored, desensitized, and indifferent. They perform interminable monologues of the non-self, which strays into solipsism. Their actions are driven by a consumerist ethos, where the abuse of other people's bodies allows them to define themselves and compensate for their vacuity and superficiality. Bateman and Calibani act by following the selfish principles of pursuing their own goals, which are opposed to the requirements

³² B. E. Ellis, *American Psycho*, London, Picador, 1991, p. 218.

³³ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 250.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 122.

³⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, cit., p. 396.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 16.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 360.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 243.

of society. Their individual and private desires take priority over any communal interest. Significantly, Calibani's sexual immorality mirrors his political disengagement. For instance, when asked about his voting intentions, Calibani replies: 'Le elezioni, se tutto va bene, saranno tra mesi. Preferisco rinviare ad allora ogni considerazione'.³⁹ While Bateman implicitly represents the hegemonic and rabid masculinity that is associated with global capitalism and the domination of the West in economic and political life, Calibani's abuse of Tharek shows that even educated people are not immune from the exploitation of those who are at the margins of Vigevano society in terms of race and class.

Given the close thematic and stylistic connections between *American Psycho* and *Il mostro di Vigevano*, it might be worth discussing some of their key differences. Indeed, every reverberation, rewriting or adaptation of a text implies a critical interpretation of the original.⁴⁰ First, Calibani has the same job and comes from the same town as the author; *Il mostro di Vigevano* therefore includes an autobiographically inspired element to the story. Rather than portraying an impersonal yuppie whose decisions can determine the life or death of countless individuals, *Il mostro di Vigevano* instead casts a university professor as a potential monster. The novel's depiction of a university professor as its central negative figure crystallizes the complicity—conscious or otherwise—of what Musa Al-Gharbi defines as 'symbolic capitalists': academic elites who convert professed antiracism into moral and institutional capital, thereby shoring up prevailing ideologies and reproducing exploitative social relations beneath the veneer of progressive virtue.⁴¹

Unlike *American Psycho*, which presents a character who directly embodies the values of a dominant economic system, *Il mostro di Vigevano* features a more generic figure of privilege, whose complicity—whether intentional or unconscious—sustains a system built on exploitation. Secondly, *Il mostro di Vigevano* invites a reorientation of perspective, suggesting that the true heart of darkness of contemporary civilization is to be found not in Manhattan—a symbolic center of Western cultural and intellectual hegemony—but in a Northern Italian provincial town. Thirdly, Pallavicini refrains from gratuitous depictions of violence, and Calibani is portrayed less as a threatening figure and more as a caricature—marked by absurdity and a certain unctuousness rather than overt aggression. It appears, then, that while Ellis centers his narrative on overt social critique—highlighting systemic inequalities and class tensions—Pallavicini shifts the focus inward, exploring the psychological landscape of a disturbed yet ordinary man. Unlike the archetypal yuppie, who wields economic and social power, this protagonist is marked by his relative powerlessness and emotional instability,

³⁹ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 189.

⁴⁰ A. Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992.

⁴¹ M. Al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke. The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2024, pp. 131-182.

positioning him as a more intimate, if unsettling, reflection of the everyday individual caught within broader societal pressures.

Sex and the Exploitation of Migrants in *Il mostro di Vigevano*

Calibani's lack of restrictions concerning his sexual behavior is an allegory of the unbound power of mass consumerism and neo-liberal capitalism, which is also one of the main topics in *cannibali* novels of the 1990s.⁴² Calibani's obsession with pornography is well exemplified by the end pages of the book that list his collection of porn movies. His fixation is a symptom of a more radical alienation, which might be commented in relation with Herbert Marcuse's assumption that 'advanced industrial civilization operates with a greater degree of sexual freedom—"operates" in the sense that the latter becomes a market value'.⁴³ In other words, Calibani's enjoyment of pornography might be seen as representative of the alienated relationships in consumerist society: as his pornographic gaze erases individual subjectivity to satisfy his desires without the slightest hesitation, mass consumerism and liberal capitalism pay scant regard to human life and social relationships in order to fulfil economic goals. *Il mostro di Vigevano* reinterprets pornography as a trope for a wider social condition and purpose. To put it in Jean Baudrillard's terms: 'sex as it exists in pornography [...] is the enterprise of our entire culture, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity'.⁴⁴ *Il maestro di Vigevano* also presents sex as a commodity to exchange. For example, Mombelli's wife betrays and leaves him to gain a better social position. However, *Il mostro di Vigevano* depicts sex as a commodity that fulfils a mere personal and hedonistic pleasure.

Calibani's perennial necessity to "consume" bodies through sex reflects the consumption of material goods that characterizes the society in which he lives. His sexual exploitation of the body of Tharek—perhaps the most evident commodity he may offer—certainly provides a fictional representation of the mechanisms of domination found in the capitalist system in the 1990s, which is based on the economic exploitation of migrants. As Abdelmalek Sayad argues, this representation is frequently present in the narration of immigration, where the corporeity of immigrants is set against the loquacity (and higher rationality) of the natives, implying that their bodies speak instead of them.⁴⁵ The dichotomic representation of Calibani's alienation and Tharek's exploitation shows that, to put it in Slavoj Žižek's terms, in 'the much-celebrated free circulation opened up by global capitalism, it is "things" (commodi-

⁴² E. Mondello, *In principio fu Tondelli. Letteratura, merci, televisione nella narrativa degli anni novanta*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2007, p. 11.

⁴³ H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, London, Routledge, 2002 [1964], p. 70.

⁴⁴ J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, B. Singer (trans.), London, Macmillan, 1990 [1979], p. 35.

⁴⁵ A. Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, D. Macey (trans.), Cambridge, Polity, 2004 [1999], pp. 207-215.

ties) which freely circulate, while the circulation of "persons" is more and more controlled'.⁴⁶ The social class that Calibani represents allows him to get away with his immoral conduct: at the end of the novel, when he discovers that his girlfriend Marcella, who works as a volunteer at a center for immigrants, is having an affair with a Senegalese immigrant called Mbei, he wishes to have a *ménage à trois*.

Il mostro di Vigevano also features Marcella as a secondary narrator, by presenting her letters to a friend named Rita, where she describes her unsatisfactory relationship with Calibani and narrates her affair with Mbei. The choice of placing these letters in the novel is effective: readers can either imagine that Calibani has found her letters and is reading them, or feel "monstrous" like him, as they are reading the private correspondence of a person without her permission. Moreover, Marcella's last letter suggests that Calibani will know about her affair at the end of the day, when the couple will return home, insinuating that perhaps the most interesting epilogue to the novel has not yet been narrated.

The representation of Marcella is rather shallow: she is a victim of her boyfriend's behavior, and she is as obsessed with the beautiful body of Mbei, whom she often calls 'il Senegal', as Calibani is with Tharik's.⁴⁷ For instance, she describes her immigrant lover as a 'viso perfetto, corpo perfetto... un figo da delirio' and 'quello davvero carino-carino, anzi, totalmente figo'.⁴⁸ Marcella simply acts as a weak counterpart for and victim of the main character, whom she calls 'il malefico'.⁴⁹ She is not represented as women are in *American Psycho*, namely as beings who, in Bateman's words, 'have nothing to say and one can only fuck them'.⁵⁰ However, Calibani certainly seems to be more intelligent than her, and his rational superiority and the growing boredom of their relationship may, for some readers, render his vexation toward Marcella more understandable. Marcella's profile shows that Calibani is surrounded by a loss of humanity: the whole of Vigevano society seems to be as alienated and self-absorbed as he is. The responsibility for Calibani's behavior is certainly individual; however, his moral vacuity lies in the barren values of the selfish society that has shaped him. In fact, alienation seems to be a diffusive trait of Vigevano society, where no possibility of an actual intimate relationship between characters exists. For example, every Wednesday Calibani and some friends reunite at a friend's house—Migliavacche, whose name sounds like Tettavacche, one of the friends of Mastronardi's *Il calzolaio di Vigevano*—, to watch porn movies together.

The representation of migrant characters in *Il mostro di Vigevano* also raises concerns as African immigrants in the novel are represented with overemphasized physical traits. To refer to Cristina Mauceri's criticism of Pallavicini's later novels and short stories, it might be said that *Il mostro di Vigevano*:

⁴⁶ S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, London, Profile Books, 2009, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 172.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 58.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 54.

⁵⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, cit., p. 200.

[mette] in evidenza solo stereotipi, soprattutto quelli del nero iperdotato sessualmente, attraente perché esotico, a volte bugiardo e furbacchione, mentre gli italiani sono razzisti senza neanche rendersene conto, oppure si comportano da buoni samaritani, anche questo un modo per far risaltare la loro superiorità e il loro buonismo verso gli africani visti solo come vittime bisognose di aiuto.⁵¹

For instance, Calibani affirms feeling 'vagamente eccitato da gambe e seni strepitosi' of an African prostitute,⁵² he gets distracted by the 'seni che giudico sensazionali' of an African woman,⁵³ and he fantasizes about the 'dimensioni del pene di lui (nerissimo e ben piantato)'.⁵⁴ These passages show that Calibani's pornographic gaze not only considers women or men as sexual objects, but also sees the female or male body as a fragmented set of detachable pieces of anatomy as if each could easily be severed from the unified entity of the body in its entirety. Unlike Bateman, Calibani does not kill his victims, but the way he looks at them turns them into sexual objects by effacing their subjectivity. It should also be noted that Calibani associates Africa with extreme sexual practice, as he ties the ankle of his girlfriend to the bed with an African bracelet.⁵⁵ Moreover, the physicality of African characters is further emphasized by the fact that Calibani's loquacity covers and annihilates their voices.

Although delivered through Calibani's perverted gaze, the description of immigrants with excessive physical traits is antithetical to the representation of Calibani, who is a symbol for the crisis of masculinity and the anxiety over the "black peril" in Italy. For instance, Calibani notices that 'il mio pene è totalmente rattrappito',⁵⁶ while Tharek has a 'membro [che] punta verso l'alto, gonfio e rigido'.⁵⁷ On the other hand, he hires a prostitute who asks him 'Non ti viene mai duro?' and 'Sei un impotente?'.⁵⁸ Calibani also argues that a physical relationship with an African prostitute would make him feel better: 'Penso che questa sia la serata adatta per una prostituta africana. Non avere mai avuto rapporti con ragazze nere mi fa sentire incompleto'.⁵⁹ The idea that sexual intercourse with African women might "complete" or make the Western man feel better is a frequent theme in Italian colonial literature. According to Giulietta Stefani:

⁵¹ M. C. Mauceri, 'Scrivere lo straniero: autori, editori e tipologie della letteratura italiana contemporanea', in: M.C. Mauceri & M.G. Negro (eds.), *Nuovo immaginario italiano. Italiani e stranieri a confronto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*, Roma, Sinnos, 2009, pp. 21-39: p. 31. It should be noted that this homoerotic element is constitutive of orientalist literature. For instance, see J. A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, p. xxi.

⁵² Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 18.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 16.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 98.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 163.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 232.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 228.

la letteratura popolare italiana presentò la colonia come luogo di soluzione della crisi d'identità sull'uomo moderno, diviso tra nostalgia per un passato rurale, tradizionale e rassicurante, e l'anelito verso una modernità urbana, eccitante ma intrisa di incertezze. In Africa era possibile infatti coniugare le due esigenze: recuperare uno stile di vita genuino, e in particolare gli istinti virili primordiali, senza per questo dover rinunciare alle conquiste razionali e culturali acquisite con la modernità e la civilizzazione.⁶⁰

This passage clearly offers an insight into understanding the colonial attitude of Calibani towards African immigrants. In Pallavicini's work, readers can clearly understand that, as Étienne Balibar⁶¹ and Sandro Mezzadra⁶² have argued in another context, immigration may thus be understood as both reshaping and reiterating dynamics of exploitation and racial discrimination, while also carrying forward narrative conventions established in colonial contexts. While Calibani is represented as an intelligent devil, African and Arab characters are extremely ingenuous. Significantly, Tharek has never seen a porn movie,⁶³ but he seems to consent willingly and ingeniously to having sexual intercourse with Calibani: 'Tharek, senza che io gli dica una parola, abbassa la cerniera e cala i jeans alle caviglie'.⁶⁴ This representation is further emphasized by the fact that Calibani talks to him 'paternamente',⁶⁵ and his girlfriend Marcella takes a patronizing approach to Mbei when she finally rejects him: 'Mi sa che stava per mettersi a piangere, povero Senegal mio'.⁶⁶

Representing Spatiality and Temporality in *Il mostro di Vigevano*

The representation of space in *Il mostro di Vigevano* clearly shows Calibani's class privilege with respect to immigrants. Although Calibani and his wife live in a 'condominio periferico',⁶⁷ they can access central cultural places such as, respectively, the university, and 'Teatro Cagnoni'.⁶⁸ Calibani also navigates a series of peripheral spaces inhabited by migrants, including 'la strada lungo il naviglio' between Rozzano and Binasco,⁶⁹ 'i viali della circonvallazione interna di Milano',⁷⁰ the 'statale' between Vigevano e Novara, the 'sexyshop di Vigevano',⁷¹ and the supermarket 'Esselunga'.⁷²

⁶⁰ G. Stefani, *Colonia per maschi. Italiani in Africa Orientale: una storia di genere*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2007, p. 96.

⁶¹ É. Balibar, *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, J. Swenson (trans.), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004 [2001].

⁶² S. Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel presente globale*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2008.

⁶³ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 193.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 162.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 106.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 173.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 175.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 12.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 13.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 72.

⁷² Ivi, p. 47.

These sites, situated on the margins of Italian society, include 'il piazzale-parcheggio davanti al supermercato'⁷³ and 'le aree d'ombra nei pressi del Salone della Calzatura'.⁷⁴ *Il mostro di Vigevano* shows that these locations emerge as new centers of encounter and sociability for immigrants. This representation of places clearly challenges Marc Augé's idea of non-space, which he defines

in opposition to the sociological notion of place, [...] with the idea of a culture localized in time and space. The installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centers, or the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked.⁷⁵

Il mostro di Vigevano shows that the presence of migrants transforms non-identitarian spaces into places where migrants live and have social encounters as well as in places of interest for those who want to exploit them. Calibani's excursions to the non-identitarian places in which immigrants live might be seen as a colonial activity, which appropriates and controls the frontier of otherness thanks to its privilege.

The representation of depraved European characters who manipulate and corrupt simple-minded Arab and African victims is a frequent literary *topos* in Western literature, which *Il mostro di Vigevano* enforces with an ambiguous representation of homosexuality. On the one hand, Calibani's sexual intercourse with Tharek suggests that he might be homosexual and confers a negative connotation to homosexuality. In fact, the brutality of fictional male serial killers (such as Bateman and Calibani) can be understood as a compensatory performance of fragile heterosexual masculinity, rooted in repressed homosexuality and an inability to form meaningful relationships with women.⁷⁶ On the other hand, a significant passage of the novel ridicules a homophobic professor, thus representing the discrimination of homosexuals:

'Non mi dica che siamo arrivati al punto che essere omosessuale, come dice lei, o essere normale sia poi la stessa cosa!' [...] 'Quale società civile? Non mi venga a raccontare che l'omosessualità va di pari passo con la civiltà! Questa non è altro che la grande fandonia inventata dalla lobby degli omosessuali per autoaccreditarci.' [...] 'Tutta questa panzana degli artisti omosessuali' [...] 'degli scrittori, degli scienziati, dei poeti... Tutta questa idiozia della presunta finezza ed intellettualità degli omosessuali...'⁷⁷

Although giving a different connotation to homosexuality, both passages seem to suggest that civility goes hand in hand with homosexuality by creating an allochronic

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 114.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 154.

⁷⁵ M. Augé, *Non-places. An Introduction to Supermodernity*, London, Verso, 1995 [1992], p. 34.

⁷⁶ See D. Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2013. For an example of a graphic depiction of this brutality against women in *American Psycho*, see Ellis, *American Psycho*, cit., p. 82.

⁷⁷ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 62.

world geography: people from most 'advanced' countries, where sexual liberation goes together with economic wealth, are set in a different temporal dimension with respect to people coming from less 'civilized' countries.⁷⁸

This construction of time in the novel is further problematized by the fact that the social environment in Vigevano is ironically represented as similar to that of New York in *American Psycho*, by suggesting that Italy in the 1990s is becoming as the United States was in the 1980s. This representation aims to show that American culture has permeated many aspects of social life in Italy, but at the same time it further complicates the allochronic description of the geopolitical position of Italy.

Above all, Pallavicini's reworking of *American Psycho* can be productively read through Fredric Jameson's reflections on postmodern 'revival', which he defines as symptomatic of a systemic incapacity to produce new critiques of capitalism.⁷⁹ Trapped in an eternal present, postmodern culture consumes artistic works as an archive of ready-made styles, endlessly recycled. In this sense, Pallavicini's novel mimes *American Psycho*, reproducing its mechanisms of excess, violence, and commodification until they become visible precisely through repetition. The reliance on pastiche ultimately reinforces the logic of late capitalism by implicitly suggesting that no alternative to the present is imaginable: redemption and transformation are absent, and cynicism becomes the dominant affect. What emerges is a condition of cultural stagnation, marked by derivativeness and ideological exhaustion.

While *Il mostro di Vigevano* seeks proximity to mainstream middle-class white readership by emulating dominant American cultural models, it simultaneously fails to give voice to the new working class—African migrants—who remain socially and culturally segregated within the narrative. The migrant figures in *Il mostro di Vigevano* are present largely as objects of representation rather than as subjects of history or political agency. Because the novel shows little interest in foregrounding the lived experience, language, or interests of its migrant characters, it becomes difficult to determine a clear ideological distance between the narrator's position and that of the text as a whole. As a result, the work risks reproducing the very ideological closure it depicts, offering neither a critique that emerges from the margins nor an alternative narrative imagination capable of breaking with the self-referential logic of late capitalist culture.

A Contradictory Criticism of Late Capitalism

The literature characterized by its reliance on spectacularized imaginaries became mainstream in the 1990s. Drawing on Fredric Jameson, this trend can be seen as symptomatic of a broader postmodern condition—one in which depth was replaced by surface, and cultural production became increasingly commodified. Within this

⁷⁸ For further information about the construction of allochrony in the homonationalist discourse and about how the discourses of sexuality and race link up with discourses of nation, see J. A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; J. K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC, Duke, 2007, pp. 160-190.

⁷⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, cit., p. 280.

framework, literature that privileged spectacle over substance was seen not merely as aesthetically shallow, but as ideologically complicit in the logic of late capitalism. *Il mostro di Vigevano* can clearly be inscribed within the narratives that, as Frank Kermode argues in the epilogue to the republished version of his 1967 seminal *The Sense of an Ending*, have depicted the end of the millennium as a sense of decay and cultural decline, showing the insecurity of a world spiraling out of control in economic and social terms.⁸⁰

Within this debate, *Il mostro di Vigevano* inevitably raises some questions about its depiction of migrants and society within a neo-liberal economic system. Does the sense of moral superiority that readers experience in relation to the protagonist serve to absolve them of any complicity in the narrative's ethical ambiguities, or even prevent identification with the character's troubling traits? To what extent does the novel aestheticize the excessive behavior of a white male figure, rather than offering a meaningful alternative through nuanced, non-stereotypical representations of minor characters? Does the text merely depict, or does it actively construct, the fear of immigrants as sexual threats? Furthermore, is the reader's enjoyment derived primarily from the novel's intertextual play and literary allusions, or from its satirical portrayal of a broad spectrum of human types, irrespective of their social positioning?

There are of course many possible answers to these questions. For example, in one of the few reviews of the novel, Tiziano Scarpa, one of the most successful *cannibali* writers, argues that we should not see Calibani as a monster:

altro che mostro! Certo, è un egoista. Un fissato. Un antipatico. Gli altri lo disgustano. Più che schizzinoso, è un vero misantropo. Ma in fin dei conti è uno che cerca di essere sincero con i propri desideri: magari non ce la fa, ma intanto non idealizza nulla. Il romanzo potrebbe sembrare l'ennesima riflessione su come far quadrare felicità sessuale e paradossi coniugali [...] Ma c'è dell'altro. Marco si porta a letto un venditore ambulante arabo sedicenne (la lunga serie di appostamenti, le cautele, le blandizie per sedurre il ragazzo sono la cosa più bella del libro). Marcella fa volontariato e va a letto con un africano. Sarà il sesso a favorire l'integrazione multietnica, dove solidarietà e buoni propositi hanno fallito?⁸¹

Scarpa's review proposes a reading of the book that is antithetical to mine, as it seems to suggest that Calibani's sexual abuse and the enticement of an adolescent immigrant might represent the possible solution to the integration of migrants in Italy. Moreover, Scarpa sees Calibani's sexual behavior as a representation of the impossibility of regulating desires—perhaps suggesting that *Il mostro di Vigevano* echoes Pier Vittorio Tondelli's reflections about his 'libertine' sexual encounters—,⁸² thus endorsing the narrator's candid portrayal of sexuality as a marker of authenticity. This

⁸⁰ F. Kermode, *The Sense of Ending*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000 [1967], pp. 181-197.

⁸¹ T. Scarpa, *Cos'è questo fracasso? Alfabeto e intemperanze*, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, p. 137.

⁸² P. V. Tondelli, *Altri Libertini*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1980. This book sparked considerable controversy at the time for its unflinching portrayal of gay love and its challenge to prevailing social norms.

review shows how ambiguous *Il mostro di Vigevano* is towards issues such as violence, sexuality, and the integration of migrants in Italian society.

The ambiguity of *Il mostro di Vigevano* can also be seen in relation to the way in which Pallavicini has referred to his work ten years later. In a new preface to the book, Pallavicini argues that *Il mostro di Vigevano* is 'figlio del suo tempo. Si scriveva così allora. Era nell'aria',⁸³ and even distances himself from his work: 'oggi non è più il tempo di scrivere quelle cose... *Il mostro di Vigevano*, allora, rimane una schietta testimonianza di un tempo che – nella narrativa italiana – fu'.⁸⁴ Pallavicini does not provide an explanation for why this shock-driven style of writing ceased to be used in the following decade; rather, he frames the new edition of the book as an act of historical preservation.

However, in his short nonfiction story *London Angel* (2012), which describes his encounter and friendship with Italian writer Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo, Pallavicini commends the Italian literary scene during this period but questions migrant writers' ability to represent themselves effectively within literary discourse:

Gangbo [...] era il vento nuovo che arrivava, o così sembrava allora: era nato in Congo nel 1976 ma stava in Italia dal 1980, e faceva parte degli 'scrittori migranti' di cui tanto si parlava una decina d'anni fa. Una curiosità editoriale e culturale, di cui si diceva:

'Sangue fresco per il nostro morente panorama letterario!'

'Portatori di rinnovamento nel vocabolario italiano!'

'Laboratori viventi dell'ibridazione e della contaminazione!'

Io ci credevo e li leggevo, li recensivo, li intervistavo. Ci ho messo dieci anni a capire che il panorama letterario italiano era in perfetta salute, che il rinnovamento portato dalla scrittura migrante era significativo quanto un calzino spaiato, e che la stragrande maggioranza di quel che usciva da quel giro nei primi anni zero era interessante solo perché l'autore aveva una biografia esotica e costituiva una curiosità sociale e antropologica. Al fronte di un valore letterario nullo. Ma ho scritto la stragrande maggioranza, no? Perché poi c'era una minoranza di talenti. Uno di questi, il più brillante, era Jadelin.⁸⁵

Unlike most *cannibali* writers, Pallavicini demonstrated a genuine interest in representing migrants and understanding immigration. This concern is evident in his involvement with a charitable initiative, which allowed Senegalese street vendors to keep half of the profits made from the selling of two collections of short stories edited by him, *Afro-Beats* (2006) and *L'Africa nel piatto* (2008; this collection also includes African recipes).⁸⁶ Yet, Pallavicini's description of Gangbo's work as an example of migration literature might be seen as misleading, because Gangbo came to Italy when he was four years old, and he is an Italian native speaker.

⁸³ Pallavicini, *Il mostro di Vigevano*, cit., p. 10.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 11.

⁸⁵ P. Pallavicini, *London Angel*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2012, pp. 4-5. Kindle Edition.

⁸⁶ P. Pallavicini, *Afro Beats*, Milan, Edizioni dell'Arco, 2006; P. Pallavicini (ed.), *L'Africa nel piatto*, Milano, Edizioni dell'Arco, 2008.

Although Pallavicini is certainly right to affirm that some of the texts written by migrants are more interesting than others, this representation of migration literature as an uninfluential cultural phenomenon located only in the past simply lacks any critical evidence. As Jennifer Burns demonstrated, migration literature ‘marks a shift in literary imaginaries as well as in broader cultural positions’ in Italy.⁸⁷ Since the 2000s, a more reflective and less sensationalistic strand has arguably emerged in the literary narration of migration. This shift is partly due to migrants themselves beginning to recount their own experiences, foregrounding everyday life rather than spectacle and demonstrating a more intimate affective investment in the stories they tell. In turn, this development has had a significant impact on the Italian literary landscape.⁸⁸

Moreover, Pallavicini affirms that many of these texts have no ‘literary value’, thereby reproducing a rather outdated distinction between high and low cultural productions in relation to the categories of migrant/native writer. One could argue that literary value itself is determined by what Jameson terms the logic of late capitalism: the degree to which a work adheres to dominant, commodifiable stylistic and thematic features. From this perspective, Pallavicini’s alignment with these mainstream conventions invites reflection on how value is produced less through originality than through a work’s market compatibility.

In short, it appears that the passage of time has not prompted a critical reassessment by Pallavicini of the cultural and aesthetic shifts that led a new generation of writers to abandon cynically provocative and sensationalized forms of art—often under the influence of migrant authors whose narratives introduced alternative ethical and aesthetic paradigms.⁸⁹ Rather than subverting dominant cultural paradigms, this aesthetic—characterized by pastiche and a reliance on stylized violence, which was a defining feature of the *cannibali* novels—now seems to mirror the mainstream entertainment it once purported to critique, thereby diminishing its critical efficacy and contributing to its diminished resonance in the present.

While addressing important social issues, *Il mostro di Vigevano* seems to end up reproducing the same logics it attempts to challenge. To paraphrase Jameson, ‘it seems easier for [Pallavicini] to imagine the thoroughgoing of the earth and nature than the breakdown of late capitalism’.⁹⁰ The representation of the ambivalent attitude of the Vigevano middle class towards immigration—which involves anxiety as well as fascination with the body of the migrants—seems to be the only politics with a tangible referent or emotional charge in the novel. By privileging the hegemonic perspective while neglecting the voices and experiences of immigrants, *Il mostro di*

⁸⁷ J. Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries. Figures in Italian Migration Literature*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2013, p. 206.

⁸⁸ D. Comberiati & C. Mengozzi, *Storie condivise nell’Italia contemporanea: narrazioni e performance transculturali*, Roma, Carocci, 2022.

⁸⁹ Wu Ming 1, ‘200NEW ITALIAN EPIC versione 2.0. Memorandum 1993-2008: narrativa, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro’, *wumingfoundation.com* http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/WM1_saggio_sul_new_italian_epic.pdf (May 19, 2026).

⁹⁰ F. Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994, p. xii.

Vigevano seems unable to unthink the existing relationships of power and therefore reproduces and reinforces the same hierarchy and dominance that are present in the consumer society it aims to criticize.