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## Italo Calvino's Sensory Universe

Review of: Ulla Musarra-Schrøder, *Italo Calvino tra i cinque sensi*, Florence, Franco Cesati Editore, 2010, 246 p., ISBN: 9788876673948, € 26,00.

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Ulla Musarra-Schrøder's second book on the work of Italo Calvino offers a comprehensively researched and rich examination of the author's approach to the senses. Acknowledging that to date critics have responded mainly to the visual element in Calvino's work, this book seeks to expand the discussion and describe Calvino's overall treatment of all five senses, including the less addressed '*sensi intimi*' of touch, smell and taste. While the book draws upon Calvino's entire literary corpus, its specific lens – a view into the senses – focuses half the work on the visual, leaving a discussion of Calvino's treatment of the other four senses to share the remaining half.

The first chapter sets off on an innovative foot, describing architecture – both real and imagined – as theme and metaphor, drawing from instances in a range of Calvino's essays and fiction such as the urban landscapes of *Le città invisibili*, culminating in a discussion of *Palomar*. The second chapter concerns itself with the *fumetto* as inspiration for Calvinian texts, both in terms of narrative form as well as graphic convention, relying upon it as a model for rapidity, exactitude and structural inventiveness (*rapidità, esattezza, and inventività strutturale*), and delves with an eye to this into texts such as *Marcovaldo* and *Le cosmicomiche*. The third chapter continues its consideration of the visual by devoting itself to the photographic image, discussing this vis à vis Barthes, Sontag and Baudrillard, as well as authors predating Calvino: Pirandello and Benjamin.

It is only after this, in the second half of the book, that the critical eye turns toward the relatively uncharted territory of the other senses. The fourth chapter explores the sonorous – the musicality – of the Calvinian universe, referring to operatic libretti and one section of *Palomar*. The fifth chapter covers the libretto *Un re in ascolto*, Calvino's collaborative work with Luciano Berio (based upon Calvino's 1977 short story of the same title), which was staged in 1984, analyzing Calvino and Berio's texts as intertextual mosaics (*mosaici intertestuali*). Arguably the most interesting and innovative topic – a discussion of the *sensi intimi* and a certain Calvinian synesthetic, symphonic, application of the various senses – appears in the sixth and final chapter, drawing upon texts such as *Cosmicomiche* and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore...*

That it is only the last, sixth, chapter that concerns itself with the *olfatto, gusto* and *tatto*, reflects both a movement toward the other senses in the latter part of

Calvino's career as well as the relative lack of attention to such in the majority of his work. In itself, this is an area that would benefit from even greater future exploration, as initiated by Musarra. For now, this work on the full sensory experience in Calvino's work pointedly affirms an authorial scope: like a massive (radio) telescope, Calvino probed his universe for the bulk of his career mainly attuned to applications of sight and sound.

Musarra's concluding statement is perhaps both key, and most mysterious: the literary endeavor of the later Calvino was not only to process his sensory universe in an almost cannibalistic *processo d'ingestione e digestione* but to also reach and potentially surpass the limits of both language and the sensory experience. For Calvino, ultimately, literature was not only a syntactical semiotic experiment; it was a product yielded from the 'process of ingesting and digesting' the universe. That that product itself might be surpassed – that the universe might be indescribable in words, its dimensions unmappable by the senses – leaves us together with Calvino at the edge of the known universe.

And so, this work by Musarra offers a dense, richly written and researched look into Calvino's lifelong endeavor to chart the course of his cognitive processes to the end, where the senses themselves are exposed to be both fully dimensional and at the same time markers for the underlying inexpressible truths – that which cannot be expressed in words or text. For those interested in pursuing this line, and charting the course of Calvino's attempts to map the universe via the senses, particularly Musarra's focus on the *sensi intimi* and Calvino's later work will be fertile ground for further discussion. In the meantime, this book is a sensory experience in itself and one worthy of addition to the Calvinian critical library.

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