



Cristina Della Coletta. *World's Fairs Italian Style: The Great Exhibitions in Turin and Their Narratives, 1860-1915.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. x + 351 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-9115-4.



Reviewed by Jonathan Morris (University of Hertfordshire)

Published on H-Urban (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

World's Fairs Mis-sold

From the 1851 Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace onward, the World's Fairs international trade expositions fulfilled dual roles as displays of the latest products of the modern industrial world and depictions of "national narratives" that underlined the host nation's claim for consideration as part of the avant-garde of international capitalism. The huge number of visitors that such fairs attracted made them as much instruments of consumer education and political communication as of commercial exchange. As Cristina Della Coletta rightly recognizes, analyzing the staging of such World's Fairs in Italy, at a time when the country was still situated on the edge of the global economic core, ought to provide a wealth of opportunities for rereading the ways in which Italy's initial transition toward a consumer society was experienced.

Disappointingly, despite acknowledging the role of World's Fairs as "catalysts of popular taste and promoters of mass culture [that] ... gathered all social classes around bourgeois values and drew the lower social strata into modern market economies and consumption sys-

tems," Della Coletta does not discuss the role of Italian World's Fairs in promoting consumer values or disseminating new products and practices into Italian society (p. 4). Rather, her focus throughout the work is on the second role of the World's Fairs as propagators of national narratives, so that "by examining how Italian expositions masterminded Italy's process of nation formation from the margins of industrialised Europe yet within the ideological context of modern nationalism and imperialism [it] offer[s] ways to individualise and diversify what has often been constructed as the West's monolithic and univocal 'discourse of Empire'" (p. 3).

Although this aim is somewhat more limited, it should at least have had the effect of focusing the analysis. Readers may not be as surprised as Della Coletta appears to be by her finding that such expositions also "inspired the development of subordinate discourses that challenged the absolute ideological unity and cultural hegemony that fairs presented" to the point that "hybrid scripts criss-crossed the imperial divide, undermined the binary logic governing its ethos and shattered the

topographical duality implied in the notion of a fixed metropolitan centre governing a silent and subordinated periphery” (p. 5). They will, however, I suspect, be taken aback by the fact that it turns out that over half the book consists of two chapters deconstructing the colonially inspired outputs of two authors, Emilio Salgari and Guido Gozzano, whose work has no more than a highly tangential link with Italian World’s Fairs.

The publishers should have known better than to have allowed (persuaded?) Della Coletta into using a title that is, at best, an inaccurate description of the book’s full content from both a descriptive and disciplinary perspective. This is not so much cultural history as literary criticism informed by a historical perspective. These two approaches are not (whatever their detractors might think) the same. Furthermore, the format for the scholarly apparatus that the publishers have adopted renders the work close to unreadable. The many quotations within the text are given in the original Italian with an English translation inserted immediately afterward in parenthesis, followed by a Harvard style short citation that then needs to be located in the bibliography. Of course textual analysis of translated material needs to be verifiable against the original, but using this format means that any sense of flow on the page is lost, as the reader is constantly skipping over one or other version of the quotations and has frequently forgotten the beginning of the sentence by the time s/he reaches the end. Meanwhile, all those references that do not include direct quotations take the form of endnotes, which are located at the end of the volume. Surely it would have made sense to have placed the original quotations here too.

The first of the two chapters that do deal with the World’s Fairs is an analysis of expositions in Italy prior to 1911, interspersed with an account of the evolution of the formats of World’s Fairs in general, notably the national and imperial narrative themes that were developed within them. The Turin national exhibition of 1884 forms the centerpiece of this analysis, interpreted as an attempt by the city to “reconfirm [its] status as the cradle of the Risorgimento and initiator of the process of nation formation” in the wake of having lost its status as capital city to Rome, spectacularly embodied in the funicular rising from the city to the royal mausoleum at Superga (p. 46). At the same time, however, “by portraying itself as the Italian capital of labour, Turin aspired to share Manchester’s industrial might and Paris’s cultural charisma, and as such expected recognition in Europe,” thus attempting “to correct the idea of Italy as the country of ‘dolce far niente’ by adopting what had become the

standard World’s Fair tropes of the display of work, productivity and competitive achievement as visible signs of a nation’s standing on civilisation’s ladder, alongside a celebration of leisure, pleasure and cultural diversion as marks of civilized well-being” (p. 23).

The site of the fair in the Valentino Park will be well known to visitors to the city today as the location of the faux medieval castle and village built for the exhibition by the architect Alfredo D’Andrade. As Della Coletta presents it, this was an attempt to rewrite the city’s local medieval history into a “national past” as an alternative to that of Rome, focusing on “reproductions of a canonized and concluded world, rather than a colonial reality that was still somewhat fluid” (p. 39). In fact, as her citation from a description of the time makes clear, rather more was going on at the castle. She writes: “Workers of the Issel factory from Genoa and the Farina factory from Faenza, dressed in rough cloth, make terracotta pitchers with a primitive wheel they turn with their foot. At the same time other workers paint vases with rough figures and a blonde heavy-set female villager takes care of sales. This is the modern world that enters the Middle Ages. This is the nineteenth century that fantastically returns to the 15th” (p. 39). One would have liked, and the author could have done, so much more with this: more information about the respective factories and their products, the workers, the role of contemporary commerce and consumption within this historical display, and, indeed, the exposition as a whole. Above all, one would have liked to know more about the people who bought these items. According to Della Coletta, there were over three million visitors to the exhibition, an extraordinary number equivalent to the entire population of Piedmont. Who were these people? Why did they come? How did they consume the exhibits, or read the narratives laid out in front of them? On all of these issues, the book is virtually silent, making one wonder if the author is not guilty of casting these visitors as mere “passive readers” of the narratives she wishes to lay out before us.

Similar questions, nearly all to do with issues of context, are raised by consideration of other fairs in Italy during the period and the themes that emerge from these. An analysis of Edmondo De Amicis’s 1880 guide to Turin reads more like a formulaic exercise in the application of the theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on the use of description to sort, categorize, and classify the urban landscape into “harmonious hierarchies,” rather than investigating the degree of correlation or contradiction between De Amicis’s presentation of the city and the concrete realities of Turin at the time. Although

drawing on many spectacular examples of the celebration of Italy's scientific and industrial progress, such as Luigi Manzotti's 1881 "propaganda ballet" *Excelsior* with its scenes of drilling the Mount Cenis tunnel in the Alps, the mixing of diverse exhibitions along with many other sources serves to highlight omissions and dissipate analysis rather than focus it. For example, one theme running through this and subsequent chapter is the rivalry between Milan and Turin for the role of leading industrial city in Italy (exemplified in their stagings of *Excelsior* in conjunctions with exhibitions in 1881 and 1882 respectively), yet there is no mention, let alone any analysis, of Milan's hosting of the World's Fair in 1906: an inexplicable omission given the objectives of the book.

Chapter 2 is primarily concerned with the staging of the World's Fair in Turin five years later in 1911. The Italian organizers recognized an opportunity for "creating that sense of collective national identity that would overcome (the country's) endemic regional, historical and cultural fragmentation," while "proposing itself as a viable member of a larger 'civilisation' of which Great Britain and France constituted the models" (p. 103). This civilization was exemplified in imperialism as much as industrialism, leaving Italy again anxious to utilize an opportunity to advance its own claims to already be a colonial power, even as the military convoys were leaving Turin to secure Italy's "Fourth Shore" in Libya. This was underlined in three exhibits, each emphasizing the degree of authority and structure within the existing Italian enclaves in Eritrea and Somalia—a notable departure from previous displays that tended to contrast chaotic native villages with the order of the West. A war exhibit, situated close to the Somalian village, featured "indigenous policemen, all cleaned up European style," embodying the success of Italy's colonial mission (p. 100). These representations of Italy's imperial ambitions are well deconstructed by Della Coletta, while there is also a fascinating section on the stage managed return of Luigi Amedeo, Duke of Abruzzi's return from his 1898 expedition to the North Pole, essentially orchestrated into a progression through the Italian peninsula designed to restore the royalty's reputation in the wake of the social unrest that had swept through the kingdom during that year.

However, this chapter again suffers from an attempt to capture a collection of diverse "narratives" through reference to a multiplicity of expositions, which results in a diffusion, rather than a deepening, of the analysis. The use of evidence and implied causalities are often questionable, while a lot of the contextualization does little

more than reiterate what we might expect. The World's Fair was actually divided between Turin, Rome, and Florence with the other two cities mounting exhibits representing the historical and artistic patrimony of Italy's past, while Turin concentrated on contemporary commerce and industry. It is not clear how that division was arrived at, or how we should "read" it, because Della Coletta does not give us any details on the administrative entities that directed the fairs and the balance of power within them. Instead, she attempts to decode power relations based on the cultural manifestations of the exhibitions themselves.

For example, the fair organizers in Turin chose to adopt an overarching architectural style based on the Turin baroque while those in Rome unsurprisingly turned to a Roman one. According to Della Coletta, the choice in Turin was made "arguably with the intent to propose the Turin baroque as the model for a national architectural style," though she presents no evidence to justify this assertion (p. 82). Nonetheless, when, well over a decade later, the Fascists also adopted a Romanized architectural style, this was proof that "the Turin baroque (had) failed to reactivate its symbolic values in the present and thrust them forward into the future, and thus could not respond to the collective needs and appease the all-too-modern anxieties of united Italy" (p. 86).

There are two problems here: firstly, there is no evidence that such a contest was intended by the exposition organizers; and secondly, why are the Fascists given the power of decision as to who is the winner? At the very least, this sounds like Whig history. There is also an implicit contradiction in the analysis; here Rome is presented as being capable of representing Italian modernity in a way that Turin cannot, while literally, on the next page, Della Coletta argues that the superior strength of the northern marketplace explained why the bourgeoisie had only belatedly invested Rome with "a purely ceremonial and representative function" within the 1911 World's Fair, one that pointed to a "meaningful silence" over the "repressed story of the division between the northern and southern parts of the Italian peninsula" (pp. 87, 86).

One cannot help feeling that an alternative and simpler reading would be to refer to the most common model for representing Italy after unification—that is to say, the celebration of locality and region within a national framework (a common trope in other Italian exhibitions as the book recognizes). A World's Fair divided between three Italian cities, each utilizing different reference points situated in a local context, can be interpreted,

and, much more important, was surely intended to be interpreted, not as a competition between them, or as an indicator of their individual deficiencies, but of the greater collective unity that could be constructed on top of them. The texts that Della Coletta deconstructs to demonstrate the existence of silent divisions within the country (such as a joint declaration by the mayors of Turin and Rome) were, of course, constructs that were put together to do precisely the reverse. In this instance, the act of construction and the power negotiations that lay behind it are of more interest than deconstructing a document by elaborating contexts of which the reader will be well aware (though it is remarkable the voice that she chooses to use to illustrate those southerners excluded from the prevailing narrative within the World's Fair is that of Don Fabrizio di Salina, protagonist of Di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*—that is to say, a fictional Sicilian prince from a novel published in the 1950s).

The unanswered question remains that of how the Worlds' Fair narrative was received. The Turin exhibits may have “provided fairgoers with well-engineered and sanitized adventures and safe returns home,” but again we learn nothing about who these visitors actually were (p. 119).

Sadly we learn very little more about the World's Fairs, or Turin, over the course of the second half of the volume. The chapter on Salgari is by far the best in the book, arguing that the story of Sandokan, the deposed prince-cum-pirate from Borneo who is the hero of the popular “Jungle” cycle of novels chronicling his conflict with the British antihero James Brooke, is modelled on Alexandre Dumas's account of Giuseppe Garibaldi's early life as a rebel in Latin America. The following chapter, of almost one hundred pages, on Gozzano, focuses on the 1917 posthumous publication of sketches from his journey through India, entitled *Verso la cuna del mondo* (Toward the cradle of the world), which argued that: “The Westerner who returns to India does not recognize his cradle any longer... I am well aware that these Hindus are Aryans like us, our brothers, but brothers who refuse to hold out their hand to us. We are too different. Too

many millennia separate us. We said farewell to one another too long ago” (p. 201).

What Della Coletta wants us to appreciate about both Salgari and Gozzano is that despite their apparent deviations from convention—Salgari making his leading protagonist a nonwhite Muslim with an Anglo-Italian bride, Gozzano seeking the cradle of the world not in Greece but in Asia—both share many instinctive prejudices of the time. Sandokan's anti-British perspective appealed to Italian readers during the 1880s when their country's own imperial ambitions were held in check by the same rival, but Salgari's “formulaic narrative world thrives on a notion of racial difference based on a crude moral binarism (just) like Ian Fleming” (p. 145). Gozzano “engaged in a symbolic practice that World's Fairs repeatedly employed when putting together their ephemeral shows ... making his narrative the quintessential case study of all the best, and all the worst, that the relationship between East and West had to offer ... confirming ... the binary and oppositional hermeneutics that expressed itself visually in many World's Fairs layouts with their displays of Western industrial might on one side and their colonial exhibits on the other” (p. 225).

This comparison of the narrative styles within Gozzano, Salgari, and the World's Fairs expositions, is, of course, the peg on which Della Coletta hangs her overarching analysis. Yet given that, as she identifies, World's Fairs contained multiple, conflicting, simultaneous narratives, even within each individual edition, this hardly brings the work together, as it is simply too diffuse an argument to carry any weight. The reader becomes more and more conscious that the only real link between Salgari and the World's Fair is that he may have based a description of a giant telescope in his futuristic novel *Le meraviglie del Duemila* (The wonders of the twenty-first century [1907]) on one he saw at the 1884 exhibition, and that Gozzano wrote about the 1911 fair as part of his journalistic duties—albeit this piece is not much cited in the text. This is not nearly sufficient a connection to justify the title and the implied unity of the work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Jonathan Morris. Review of Coletta, Cristina Della, *World's Fairs Italian Style: The Great Exhibitions in Turin and Their Narratives, 1860-1915*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23510>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.