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*Lettere dal Sahara 1*

## **Mediterranean Passages: Abjection and Belonging in Contemporary Italian Cinema**

**Áine O’Healy**

In response to Italy’s dramatic transformation from an emigrant nation into the desired destination for millions of immigrants from around the world, images of displacement and migration have become increasingly prominent in Italian cinema over the past eighteen years. At this juncture over eighty films – including full-length features and short subjects in a variety of formats from 35mm to high-resolution digital – present characters from the former Communist bloc or the global south who aspire to make a new life in Italy.<sup>1</sup> In several though not all of these films, the narrative of migration involves a perilous sea voyage. Repeatedly disseminated in newspapers, television reports, and feature films, images of the illicit arrival of migrant vessels – ranging from inflatable rafts and speedboats to rusty cargo ships and the dilapidated trawlers dubbed “*carrette del mare*” – have by now attained iconic status in the national imaginary, drawing attention to the porousness of Italy’s maritime boundary. Although the majority of irregular migrants no longer enter the country by sea (Pastore et al. 2006), these images continue to appear in Italian cinema with surprising regularity.

Examining several films made in Italy since the early 1990s, I propose to unravel some of the issues imbricated in the recursive trope of the Mediterranean crossing, which gestures symbolically to diverse though interrelated forms of mobility, affinities, and encounters, both past and present. I will argue, in effect, that narratives involving maritime crossings and clandestine arrivals signal a collective anxiety about the shifting identifications and oppositions that mark Italian society in the post-Cold War era. Rather than focusing exclusively on the

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<sup>1</sup> I derive this numerical estimate from Bonsaver 2009.

manifest content of the films in question, however, I am interested in the symptomaticity of cinematic representation.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in my brief review of this body of work I will explore the elisions and inconsistencies in the cinematic narration which point to some of the unspoken tensions and broader political dilemmas underpinning Italian attitudes toward Mediterranean mobility.<sup>3</sup> First, I shall frame my discussion against a backdrop of the social, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances in which these narratives are implicated.

Along with the stretch of sea separating Spain from North Africa, Italy's southern and southeastern coastal waters have become known as "Europe's Rio Grande." Like the river that serves as a natural boundary along the border between the State of Texas and Mexico, these maritime passages are conceived as "a liquid frontier separating the rich north . . . from the poor south . . . [which is] temptingly open to migrant crossings" (King 2001, 8). Over the past eighteen years, untold numbers of migrants have perished in their attempt to reach Italian shores, some of them deliberately pushed overboard or abandoned mid-voyage by their traffickers.<sup>4</sup> Of those who succeed in coming safely to shore, many are apprehended upon arrival, detained in so-called reception centers, and ultimately deported. Those who successfully evade apprehension head toward the larger urban areas and, having found a way to survive in the interstices of Italian society, face the ongoing possibility of discovery and expulsion. Given the striking visual drama of the "illegal" maritime arrivals, Italy's Mediterranean migrants have appeared repeatedly in national television reports over the years and are often sensationalized. As Martin Baldwin Edwards (2004) has observed:

The so-called "Boat people" are the most vulnerable to media visibility, to spectacularization. Many of them die of starvation, overcrowded conditions, deliberate drowning by their traffickers, dehydration or hypothermia while on the boat, and their bodies are washed up on the shores of Italy.

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<sup>2</sup> Extrapolating from the writings of Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson introduced the interpretive model of the symptomatic reading in his influential work *The Political Unconscious* (1981). According to this model, by paying close attention to the silences, ruptures and exclusions within a literary text, the reader may uncover important clues about its determining structures and latent ideological investments. Although postcolonial critics have by now demonstrated the presumptuousness of applying western psychoanalytic formulations to the interpretation of films and literary texts from around the world, the value of determining the disavowed, elided or occluded elements in narrative representation has been retained.

<sup>3</sup> Films that introduce images of "illegal" Mediterranean crossings or clandestine arrivals on Italian shores include: *Pummarò* (dir. Michele Placido, 1990, Numero Uno International and CineEuropa 92); *Lamerica* (dir. Gianni Amelio, 1994, Mario e Vittorio Cecchi Gori, Tiger Cinematografica); *L'Articolo 2* (dir. Maurizio Zaccaro, 1994, Maurizio Nichetti and Ernesto Di Sarro, Bambú Cinema e TV Produzioni with Rete Italia); *Aprile* (dir. Nanni Moretti, 1997, Sacher Film); *I figli di Annibale* (dir. Davide Ferrario, 1998, Medusa); *Tornando a casa* (dir. Vincenzo Marra, 2001, Sacher Film); *L'Italiano* (dir. Ennio De Dominicis, 2002, Andrea de Liberato and Antonio Fusco for Poetiche Cinematografiche); *Lettere al vento* (dir. Edmond Budina, 2002, Donatella Palermo for A.S.P., Dodici Dicembre, and Erafilm, Tirana); *Saimir* (dir. Francesco Munzi, 2004, Orisa); *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (dir. Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005, Cattleya and RAI Cinema); *L'ospite segreto* (dir. Paolo Modugno, 2003, Esse & Bi Cinematografica); *Io l'altro* (dir. Mohsen Melliti, 2006, Trees Productions); *Lettere dal Sahara* (dir. Vittorio De Seta, 2006, A.S.P./Metafilm, Donatella Palermo); *Riparo* (dir. Marco Simon Puccioni, 2006, Intelfilm, Adésif); and *Billo il Grand Dakhaar* (dir. Laura Muscardin, 2008, The Coproducers). In some of these films the representation of the sea crossing or clandestine landing is extremely brief, whereas in others the voyage becomes a major part of the narrative.

<sup>4</sup> A number of migrants have also died as the result of intervention by Italian government patrols. The Albanian vessel *Kater I Rades*, bearing over a hundred Albanian migrants, sank off the coast of Puglia in March 1997 after being struck by an Italian patrol boat, resulting in a death toll of about 85 Albanians. The exact figure is disputed.

Images of human tragedy have in fact been served up, consumed, and forgotten by Italian television audiences so often that they may well have lost their incisive power. Certainly, the dramatic potential of these televised reports has done little to stir compassion or to stem the surge of anti-immigrant sentiment that has swept through Italy in recent years, fanned by the political ideology of the radical right.

The xenophobia cultivated by extreme right-wing political groups that gained prominence in several European countries following the end of the Cold War also found fertile soil in Italy with the rise of the populist party Lega Nord in the regions of the north. The racism expressed by Umberto Bossi, the party leader, and his colleagues has resonated far beyond the confines of the party itself and has, in fact, influenced the shaping of immigration policies. What is remarkable about the xenophobic sentiment characteristic of the *Leghisti* is that it feeds off and amplifies the preexisting racialization of southern Italians by those Italians born further to the north. According to Michela Adrizzoni:

What seems to lie at the heart of the Lega's success with diverse portions of the population is precisely their ability to frame the country's problems and ensuing identity along territorial axes of exclusion/inclusion. In this logic, the true Italian is a Northerner; Southerners are the poor result of a failure to embrace Northern ideals and, consequently, Italianness. (Adrizzoni 2005, 515)

Following the national elections in 1992, Bossi made the rhetorically provocative claim that “[the] North has chosen federalism and Europe, the South has chosen Africa and Fascism” (Dickie, 1996, 28), thus invoking longstanding tensions between North and South and pointedly recasting old attitudes of Northern superiority in a contemporary, “European” context.<sup>5</sup> In Bossi's appropriation of popular, if pejorative association between Southern Italy and Africa, Southerners are symbolically abjected from the European social body. Italy's new migrants from Africa and other parts of the global south are destined, by implication, to share a similar abjection.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, the Lega Nord and other sectors of the right have contributed to the spread of anti-immigrant sentiment by appealing to citizens' fears regarding the impact of immigration on their safety, economic wellbeing, and cultural traditions. In addition, the role of Italian news reports in raising anxieties about immigration from the former Communist bloc and the so-called Third World can scarcely be overstated (Buonfino 2004, Campani 2001). Emphasizing a concern for the safety and security of citizens, newspaper and television reporters have engaged in the criminalization of immigrants, singling out specific groups in an explicitly prejudicial fashion (Dal Lago 2006, Mai 2002, Vehbiu and Devole 1996). With the repeated use of terms such as “hordes,” “floods,” or “invasion,” the media has helped to consolidate the view that the nation is being overrun by an unending tide of untrustworthy foreigners (Triandafyllidou 1999).

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent, comprehensive analysis of the historical shaping of meridionalist discourse and its implications in the contemporary context, see Wong 2006.

<sup>6</sup> In 1992 Bossi denounced “Fascism” in the same breath as he abjected “the South.” Yet, in subsequent years the Lega Nord managed to form a close working relationship with the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale, which was reconstituted by Gianfranco Fini from the membership of the dissolved neo-Fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano, in 1995. The names of the leaders of these two very different right-wing formations are now wedded together in the label *Legge Bossi-Fini*, as Law 189 of July 30, 2002, is commonly known. This legislation reflected a draconian revision of existing immigration requirements.

Acting to some extent as a corrective to the anti-immigrant rhetoric emanating from various political parties and popular media sources, the Italian films discussed in this article construct a largely (though not exclusively) sympathetic portrayal of Italy's new migrants, while visualizing the kinds of marginalization, exploitation, and disorientation often associated with the experience of cultural and geographical displacement. Unlike the burgeoning corpus of literary work produced by Italian immigrants,<sup>7</sup> Italy's emerging cinema of migration is overwhelmingly the creation of Italian writers and directors rather than that of immigrant artists.<sup>8</sup> Hence a decidedly Italian perspective marks the overall vision of the nation's changing demographic landscape that emerges in these films. Nonetheless, several of the filmmakers in question have made a perceptible effort to construct their stories through the subjectivity of the beleaguered migrant,<sup>9</sup> and some of their films explicitly incorporate a critique of contemporary immigration policies and xenophobic attitudes. My concern here, however, is not with authorial intention but with the broader cultural implications of the films' modes of signification and address.

Clearly implicated in the construction of identity and difference, cinema has played a significant role in nation building, particularly in Italy. This, however, does not mean that cinematic fictions reflect social conditions, create "imagined communities," or influence social behavior in a simple or straightforward way. Poststructuralist theorists have insisted on the instability and fluidity of the signifying process and have argued that representations generally offer a space for resistance at the point of their reception (Dyer 1993, 2). It is important to take into account, however, that despite the openness of the reception process, cinematic fictions often reproduce hegemonic assumptions about social hierarchies, with the potential for far-reaching reverberations. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have critiqued the illusory authority of Western cinematic realism in the construction of ethnic and racial others. While acknowledging the view that we live within language and that our access to the "real world" is mediated by discourse, they argue that "films which represent marginalized cultures in a realistic mode . . . still implicitly make factual claims" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 179). In other words, since the codes of realist cinema mask the illusionist strategies of the filmic enunciation, "realistic" fictions may be understood by audiences to reflect actual conditions of existence, thus giving rise to prejudicial effects.

In most of the Italian films featuring Mediterranean migration, the South of Italy – once the source of vast waves of emigration – is imagined as "fortress Europe's" initial point of contact with clandestine migrants arriving from other parts of the Mediterranean basin and from more distant locations in the global south. The construction of Southern Italy as the portal to a land of plenty contains an irony that cannot be ignored. Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century, unspoken anxieties about Italy's status as a modern nation on the international stage, its perceived distance from some of the principal centers of European life, its closeness to

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<sup>7</sup> For a recent anthology of the multicultural literature produced by immigrant writers currently living in Italy, see Parati and Orton 2007. The volume includes a useful introduction written by the editors/translators.

<sup>8</sup> Only one immigrant director, Ferzan Özpetek, has achieved widespread recognition in the Italian film industry. His films, however, have never focused specifically on the theme of immigration. Other immigrants to Italy who have succeeded in directing at least one film within the Italian system are Edmond Budina, Rachid Benhadj, and Mohsen Melliti.

<sup>9</sup> In a pioneering analysis of literary and cinematic works by or about Italian immigrants Graziella Parati theorizes the trope of "talking back" to the host culture by the migrant. Although immigrant filmmakers have produced only a small body of work at this juncture, Parati claims that several films made by Italian directors deploy specific enunciative strategies that result in a sensitive construction of the subjective experience of migrant characters (Parati 2006, 104-141).

North Africa, and the occasionally disputed “whiteness” of Italians themselves were projected onto Southerners by those Italians born further to the north. In the juxtaposition of a modern, civilized North with an impoverished South, Southern Italians were often referred to pejoratively as “Marocchini” or “Africani.” The racialization of southerners in the popular imagination, which emerged with particular force in the 1950s and 1960s with the huge wave of migration from the South to the industrial cities of the North, has been complicated by the recent influx of foreigners from distant points of origin. In a changing global system where the West and the “rest” are mutually imbricated, fixed notions of identity have yielded to a more complex flow of identifications and exclusions. Clearly, for the migrants arriving on the shores of Southern Italy at the end of an arduous voyage, the Italians they are likely to encounter in these locations will certainly not be construed as Moroccan or African, but more probably as “white” and European.

Gianni Amelio’s *Lamerica* (1994), the first Italian film to allude to the mass migrations of the post-Communist era, skillfully contextualizes contemporary immigration in light of Italy’s former status as both an impoverished emigrant nation and a colonial power. It is significant that the initial inspiration for *Lamerica* was prompted by a series of images broadcast on television. While watching live news reports showing the arrival in Bari of about 20,000 destitute Albanians aboard dilapidated ships in early August 1991, Amelio was reminded of the desperation that had driven his own forebears to emigrate to the Americas many years earlier. Realizing that Italy had become for Albanians what America had once been for Italians, he set out on a journey to Albania to find “the Italy of the past” (Amelio and Fofi 1994, 7) and, in the process, to consolidate his ideas for a new film. This project came to fruition with *Lamerica*. Invoking the shifting play of identifications inherent in Italy’s rapid transformation from emigrant nation into the destination of large numbers of immigrants, Amelio’s film builds an implicit comparison between the historic emigration of millions of Italians to the New World and the contemporary surge of impoverished Albanians seeking to migrate to Italy. Through the use of Fascist-era news footage, the film also alludes to Italy’s occupation of Albania under Fascism, astutely juxtaposing this historical event with the exploitation of Albanians by Italian business interests in the post-Cold War era as well as the contemporary “colonization” of Albania through the intrusive power of Italian commercial television.

These themes are played out in the story of Gino, a young Sicilian entrepreneur who travels to Albania with an older colleague in the immediate post-Communist era in the hope of turning a quick profit on a bogus business deal. While the protagonist remains ignorant of the wretched poverty that characterized the lives of most Sicilians just two generations earlier, *Lamerica* builds a symbolic association between the abjection of the Italian South in the 1930s – evoked through Gino’s encounter with a senile army veteran from Sicily trapped in Albania since the Italian occupation – and the destitute circumstances of contemporary Albanians who wish to seek a better life in Italy. While the film focuses mainly on the Italian protagonist as he undergoes a process of involuntary “Albanianization” through the loss of the external signifiers of privilege, it also alludes to the self-fashioning of contemporary Albanians as “Italians,” thanks to the pervasive influence of Italian television broadcasting on Albanian audiences.

*Lamerica* pointedly contrasts the arrogance of the young Italian businessman with the desperation of the Albanian crowds and with the spontaneous generosity of the elderly Sicilian veteran who, despite his derangement, maintains the values of a lost peasant culture. Ultimately, however, the film is less concerned with Albania than with Italy. Emphasizing the contrast between the Italian businessman and the senile Sicilian peasant, the narrative juxtaposes the wealthy, corrupt nation of the Tangentopoli years with the purported honesty and simplicity of

Italian rural life in the past.<sup>10</sup> In this symbolic opposition, Albania's poverty functions mainly as a reminder of a forgotten Italy, and its landscape is deployed as a terrain of self-discovery for the young Italian protagonist. The drama of the Albanian people thus becomes subordinate to his story, to the lesson he must learn by becoming helpless in their midst. In this way, the filmmaker unwittingly "colonizes" Albania for the purpose of his own narrative about Italy, an irony that has not been lost on some of the film's critics.

Shot on board a crowded ship, *Lamerica*'s concluding sequence offers one of the most compelling visualizations of Mediterranean migration found in Italian cinema. Moving away from the Albanian shore toward the still invisible coast of Italy, a rusty vessel crammed with thousands of men, women, and children appears suspended in time and space. Without money or passport, Gino is compelled to travel alongside the Albanian migrants, from whom he can no longer be readily distinguished. As he surveys the passengers huddled on the deck, their faces are shown in close-up, steadily returning his gaze. Looking in the direction of the camera, these Albanian travelers are also returning the gaze of Italian audiences, already aware that the migrants who traveled on the ships bound for Italy in August 1991 would not achieve their goal, but would soon be repatriated by the Italian authorities to the desperation from which they came.

The scene on the crowded ship heading for Italy that brings *Lamerica* to a close consolidates the symbolic dimension of Amelio's narrative and its complex evocation of transnational affinities and generational contrasts. On the literal level, the image clearly alludes to the Albanian ships that arrived in the harbors of Puglia in 1991 – a vision that signaled the onset of an era of mass migration, witnessed live by millions of Italian television viewers (and by Albanians as well). At another level, the image of the crowded vessel simultaneously functions as the spectral double of the emigrant ships that carried millions of impoverished Italians to American shores generations earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Though Amelio's film was widely acclaimed by Italian and international critics and audiences, its reception by Albanians was much less enthusiastic. Among the most noteworthy criticisms was that of the novelist Ismail Kadaré, an Albanian émigré living in France, who objected to what he perceived as Amelio's insufficient attention to historical details pertaining to the film's backstory.<sup>12</sup> Many Albanian viewers also objected to the film's portrayal of their compatriots as gullible consumers of Italian television, easily duped by false impressions of Italy as a land of unparalleled wealth and opportunity. Several images from *Lamerica*, and particularly the iconic representation of the battered ship packed with desperate migrants, fed into a growing repertoire of representational tropes repeatedly featured in the Italian news, which Albanians

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<sup>10</sup> *Lamerica* was made just after the revelations of the corruption scandals popularly known as Tangentopoli exploded on the Italian scene, a process that led to the collapse of the Italian government and the demise of two of Italy's largest political parties.

<sup>11</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis of *Lamerica* see O'Healy 2004. See also Duncan 2006 and Landy 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See Giovanna Grassi, "Kadaré attacca Amelio: 'Che razzismo in *Lamerica*.'" *Corriere della sera*, December 13, 1994, 35. For further analysis of the novelist's reaction, see Tommaso Di Francesco, "Ieri/oggi: Le due sponde dell'Adriatico," *Il manifesto*. April 25, 2003. [http://www.ilmanifesto.it/25aprile/03\\_25Aprile/9503rs26.01.htm](http://www.ilmanifesto.it/25aprile/03_25Aprile/9503rs26.01.htm) (Accessed June 1, 2003). Kadaré and others have objected to the suggestion made by the film that Italian soldiers and deserters from the Fascist era were imprisoned or executed by Albanian forces. Yet most international commentators on *Lamerica* seem to accept as historically plausible the statement offered to Gino by an Albanian physician as an explanation for Michele's long imprisonment.

found distasteful.<sup>13</sup> In effect, despite the considerable aesthetic qualities of *Lamerica* and the undeniable power of its humanitarian subtext, it could be argued that the film's representation of Albanian poverty and desperation unwittingly participated in a broader discursive process that served to freeze the image of the Albanian migrant into an iconic figure of abjection.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the unthreatening tone of the exchanges between Gino and Albanian youths he encounters in the course of his journey, the vision of hundreds of ragged young men weaving their way to the harbor in the reckless hope of finding passage to Italy evokes the figure of the nameless, lawless *extracomunitario* constructed by the Italian media from the early 1990s onward. This shadowy figure gradually became a scapegoat upon which all blame could be projected for the rise in crime in Italian cities. Indeed, the depiction of *extracomunitari* as an unstoppable tide threatening to breach Italy's borders and to wreak havoc on the social landscape played an important role in restructuring the national imaginary before and after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement by the Italian government in 1997.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (Kristeva 1982), Imogen Tyler has described how a rhetoric of abjection is deployed to construct the image of the asylum seeker in contemporary Britain. This rhetoric fulfills a precise function in the consolidation and definition of citizenship:

While we have become accustomed to thinking about the abject as that thing that disrupts or transgresses cultural values, abjection is primarily the means through which "reality" ("way of life") is safeguarded (against the real) and reproduced. In other words, abjection describes the psychosocial processes through which hegemonic cultural values are reaffirmed. (Tyler 2006, 192)

Citing Kristeva's axiom, "the abject and abjection are my safeguards . . . primers of my culture," Tyler suggests how the discursive construction of the asylum seeker as an abject threat serves to shore up for the citizen a more secure sense of national belonging. In short, "as the abject thing, the asylum-seeker operates as something akin to a 'security blanket' for the citizen" (ibid.).

The figure of the unwanted immigrant or asylum seeker is deployed in similarly oppositional terms in several other countries of "Fortress Europe" at present, often prompting a rallying cry to protect a traditional way of life and thus reaffirming a sense of national belonging. In Italy, however, the national subject or imagined "way of life" is *already* shot through with the tensions of an internal, Southern "otherness." For generations, the cultural construction of Southern Italy as the "territorial watershed between Italy as Europeanized (or Americanized) and Italy as African" (Pandolfi 1998, 287) undermined any attempt to imagine Italy as a unified political

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<sup>13</sup> A compelling critique of the representations of Albanian migration in Italian media was published by the Albanian writers Vehbiu and Devole in 1996. Subsequent analyses of the phenomenon include Mai 2002, King and Mai 2008, 101-126, and Duncan 2007, 2008a. The more recent publications relate the contemporary representation of Albanians in Italian media to traditional representations of Italian southerners.

<sup>14</sup> Writing about the symbolic force and widespread diffusion of images of the Albanian "boat people," Russell King and Nicola Mai have observed: "The boat is highly symbolic of the 'migrating crowd,' since it gathers together the greatest mass of migrants in a single confined space, berthing on the shore of 'fortress Europe.' The images filled the Italian TV screens and the pages of the print media, not to mention a controversial Benetton poster and Gianni Amelio's celebrated film *Lamerica* (Mai and King 2009, 120).

<sup>15</sup> The Schengen Convention, signed by all members of the European Economic Community, with the exception of Ireland and the United Kingdom, was finally put into effect by the Italian government in 1997. The agreement involved abolishing checks at the internal borders of the signatory States and creating a single external frontier.



subject. Following the onset of mass migration in the 1990s, which coincided with Italy's ambition to forge a strong image as a modern, efficient, and progressive European nation, the Albanian immigrant became an exemplary figure of abjection and was constructed in the national imaginary in terms similar to those historically attributed to the Southerner. According to Russell King and Nicola Mai:

In the 1990s, Albanians, because of both their common somatic traits and their common denied colonial status, were both identified with and substituted for the Italian southerner as the main constitutive other against which to articulate a civilized and democratic Italian identity in relation to Italy's aspirational belonging to Europe and the West. Because of their physical and cultural similarity to Italians, and their foreign status, they were perceived as the simultaneous living embodiment of the new constitutive other, the foreign immigrant of the 1990s. Hence, they were criminalized and stigmatized twice; both as disavowed and projected selves and as rejected others. (King and Mai 2008, 123).

Several recent films self-consciously strive to humanize the anonymous, demonized figure of the migrant by briefly mobilizing a positive discourse of fraternity or spiritual affinity with those arriving from nearby shores, either in terms of specific postcolonial ties or by gesturing to a broader, transhistorical vision of Mediterranean belonging. In this way, Italian filmmakers attempt to counterbalance the widespread tendency in the national media to perpetuate "a process of projective dis-identification with a part of Italian history, society and culture that had been strategically separated and rejected" (ibid). Using LUCE newsreel footage similar to the montage deployed in Amelio's film, Ennio De Dominicis' *L'Italiano* (2003), for example, introduces the memory of the Italian occupation of Albania as the back-story for a narrative focusing on a contemporary Albanian immigrant who claims to be the grandson of one of the Italian soldiers of the Fascist occupation. Like *Lamerica*, to which it alludes intertextually, *L'Italiano* weaves parallels between past and present, Italy and Albania, but its focus on the experience of an Albanian protagonist (the "Italian" of the title) and his doomed involvement in a romantic relationship with an Italian woman brings a very different perspective to this story of trans-Adriatic mobility and displacement. The film conjures up a rather familiar plot in which the largely sympathetic migrant emerges as both victim and criminal, suggesting that his descent into crime is prompted by the desperation of his pariah status as an illegal immigrant. Yet a crucial scene in the film, which shows a (fictional) family in Tirana watching and commenting on an (authentic) Italian news report on the arrival of the crowded Albanian ships in Bari in 1991, adds a fascinating dimension to the configuration of Albanian migration, briefly drawing attention to the Albanian reception of Italian reports on this phenomenon which are broadcast by Italian television and readily available to audiences across the Adriatic Sea.<sup>16</sup>

Elements from Amelio's powerful evocation of the migrant voyage in *Lamerica* are transposed and reworked in a handful of additional Italian films featuring Mediterranean sea crossings, such as Vincenzo Marra's *Tornando a casa* (2001), Marco Tullio Giordana's *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005), and Mohsen Melliti's *Io, l'altro* (2006). In each of these films the identity of the Italian passenger is provisionally merged with that of the migrant

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<sup>16</sup> I wish to thank Derek Duncan for directing my attention to this film and enabling me to view it. For a detailed analysis of *L'Italiano*, see Duncan 2007.

(or migrants) with whom he undertakes a maritime journey. Though each narrative ends differently, all suggest the possibility of existential transformation in the fluid, transitional space of the Mediterranean Sea. While the stability of national identities and ethnic affiliations is cast into doubt in these films, a provisional fraternity becomes available to the Italian character through his encounter with other Mediterranean travelers embarked on a similar voyage.

Marra's *Tornando a casa* takes the idea of Mediterranean affinities in a different direction from most Italian films about migration by foregrounding the chronotope of the sea itself, both as *nostos* and as locus of contemporary mobility.<sup>17</sup> The film depicts in a realistic, quasi-documentary fashion the difficult day-to-day routine of four fishermen who, though based near Naples, are forced to sail far from home to cast their nets, ultimately venturing into Tunisian waters. Played by an ensemble of non-professional actors, three of the men are Neapolitan and the fourth is an Algerian immigrant. All of them, including the Algerian, communicate in Neapolitan dialect rather than standard Italian. The linguistic dimension infuses the narrative with a heightened realism, with effects similar to those sought by Luchino Visconti in his neorealist epic *La terra trema* (1948), while at the same time complicating the film's appeal to mainstream audiences.

Visually, the film dwells on the hard physical work carried out by the fishermen aboard the trawler, the dangers they must endure at sea, and the kinds of surveillance to which they are subjected – by maritime patrols on the one hand and by the Camorra on the other. The narrative also sketches out an evolving friendship between the two younger members of the crew, Franco, who is considering emigrating to America, and Samir, the Algerian immigrant to Italy. It thus establishes a kind of parity in poverty between the two men, each from a different Mediterranean shore, yet each prompted by similar pressures to confront the possibility of emigration. When, at the film's conclusion, Franco is apprehended by the border patrol as he travels aboard a vessel full of clandestine migrants (where he has taken refuge after attempting to save a drowning man), the Italians assume that he, like his fellow-travelers, is of Maghrebi origin. Deliberately destroying his identity card, Franco allows himself to be deported to the coast of Africa along with his newfound companions, to whom he offers the only Arabic phrase in his possession: "Salaam aleichum." Abandoning his familiar home near Naples, Franco is apparently "returning home" (as the film's title implies) to a different Mediterranean harbor, while traveling in the opposite direction to the one pursued by countless immigrants to Italy today.

On a symbolic level, the film problematizes the image of contemporary Italy as a uniformly progressive, affluent nation, with a standard language spoken by all and the shared aspiration of "European" belonging. It builds a counter-narrative focusing on economically marginalized, Southern characters who speak a local dialect not readily comprehensible to a wider audience and who inhabit a location where the rule of the Camorra rivals the power of the state. *Tornando a casa* gestures toward a broadly conceived Mediterranean *communitas* as a different locus of identification for those disenfranchised Italians who are disillusioned with the hollow promises of neoliberal capitalism. The film's conclusion must be read metaphorically, however, as the narrative does not indicate what kind of future Franco envisions for himself as he travels toward the shore of North Africa, bereft of material resources, identification papers, or the ability to speak more than two words of Arabic.

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<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Teresa Fiore's nuanced discussion of Marra's *Tornando a casa* for bringing this film to my attention (Fiore 2006).

A more recent film espousing the concept of trans-Mediterranean affinities in the era of mass migrations is *Io, l'altro*, the first dramatic feature directed by Mohsen Melliti, a Tunisian writer and longtime resident in Italy. Dedicated to “the victims of the war on terrorism,” the film explicitly alludes to the racial stereotyping and paranoia that have gained ground in the West since 9/11 and the potentially damaging effects of these phenomena on the lives of innocent Arab or Maghrebi migrants. The two principal characters are a Sicilian fisherman and his long-time friend and business partner, an immigrant from Tunisia. The fact that the men are named Giuseppe and Yousef – the Italian and Arabic versions of the same name – foregrounds the issues of identity and alterity already suggested in the title. Though the friends bicker with each other even at the outset, it seems that they have built up a close, almost fraternal relationship that transcends their religious and cultural differences. In fact, they even entertain the fantasy – proposed by Yousef – of escaping the tyranny of the Mafioso wholesaler who makes their lives miserable by moving to Tunisia, where, surrounded by their families, they would jointly operate a hotel and restaurant.

*Io l'altro* unfolds over a span of about twenty-four hours, and almost all of the action, takes place aboard a fishing trawler as the two men sail south to cast their nets in the Strait of Sicily. A crisis occurs when Giuseppe hears on the ship’s radio that, following the explosion of a bomb in Spain, the police are searching for a Tunisian terrorist with the same name as Yousef. Although he initially dismisses the possibility that his friend is the wanted terrorist, Giuseppe’s anxiety soon escalates to full-blown paranoia. The tension that develops between the men, clearly instigated by the media, thus quickly undermines their long-term trust and friendship. Each of them feels betrayed by the other, and each retaliates with panic and hostility. Realizing that Giuseppe has telephoned the authorities to appeal for help, Yousef severs the phone line and turns the boat in a different direction, accelerating so rapidly that the engine dies. The men are thus cast adrift without the possibility of further contact with dry land. The discovery of the dead body of a migrant Somali woman entangled in their fishing net further exacerbates the tensions between the pair, and their disagreement regarding how to dispose of the corpse ultimately leads to the film’s tragic denouement.

Marred to some degree by excessive use of symbolism and the intrusion of didactic overtones, *Io, l'altro* draws attention to the potential affinities between populations of different Mediterranean shores, and suggests that these affinities are being thwarted or negated by ideological forces originating elsewhere. It also implies that anti-Arab political discourses in the West are amplified and “naturalized” by the power and reach of contemporary media. Thus, from the film’s perspective, far from a matter of insurmountable cultural differences, the tensions and disagreements that arise between “brothers” from different Mediterranean lands are brought into being by the politically charged sensationalism favored by popular media sources.

Maurizio Zaccaro’s *L’Articolo 2* (1994), one of the first Italian feature films to focus entirely on an immigrant character, also sets up a self-conscious juxtaposition between the Maghreb and Italy. Rather than suggesting a possible fraternity among the subaltern populations of the Mediterranean as occurs in *Tornando a casa* and *Io, l'altro*, both of which were made about a decade later, Zaccaro’s film ultimately elicits a sense of cultural incommensurability. *L’Articolo 2* was in fact inspired by the situation of a Maghrebi immigrant who ran afoul of the Italian authorities when he attempted to settle in Italy with his two wives. Anticipating some of the debates that gained widespread currency at the end of the 1990s, the film implicitly asks: How can the cultural practices and expectations of Muslim immigrants be accommodated in Italy, a modern, secular society with a strong Christian heritage?

Unfolding for the most part in Arabic dialogue, the story begins in a remote village in Algeria, where a young woman is caring for a dying man. For the first twenty minutes of the film, there is frequent crosscutting between this isolated setting and the crowded, noisy Milanese neighborhood where the woman's husband lives with his older wife and children. The binary opposition of urban and pastoral, European and North African, Western and "Oriental" thus prepares the audience for the cultural conflict at the heart of the narrative. At one level the film seems to valorize the stern family values of the protagonist in opposition to the vulgar attitudes and behavior of some of his Italian coworkers. At another level, however, it articulates an unsympathetic view of the man's imperious behavior toward his wives and daughter, from whom he demands unquestioning obedience and respect.

The dramatic focus of *L'Articolo 2* is the disruption that comes into play when the husband reveals to the immigration authorities that the woman who has just arrived in Italy aboard a passenger ship from Tunisia is his second wife. Since the woman's marital status cannot be recognized in Italy, she is not eligible for a residence permit and cannot legally remain in the country. Although a positive court ruling eventually offers the protagonist a compromise solution that would allow the younger woman to stay in Italy, it is an economically impracticable one. Then, at the very moment that the film brings to the fore the full force of cultural incommensurability, the narrative produces a *deus ex machina* resolution that brings the man's story abruptly to a close. His sudden death as the result of an industrial accident, which occurs immediately after the unsatisfactory court ruling, enables the film to conclude without having to engage further with the perplexing social, cultural questions, and ideological dilemmas it has begun to explore.

While *L'Articolo 2* foregrounds some of the problems implicit in Italy's shift from a relatively homogeneous society to a multi-ethnic one, it subverts the urgency of these issues in its unexpected, melodramatic conclusion. Although explicitly acknowledging that the country's transformation into a pluralistic nation must involve taking the needs of a growing Islamic population into account, the film seems unable to envision a resolution for the kinds of cultural conflict that may ensue in the process. Rather than grappling with these questions, Zaccaro chooses the device of the industrial accident to facilitate the ejection of the protagonist from the Italian scene.

Made much more recently than Zaccaro's film, Vittorio De Seta's *Lettere dal Sahara* raises similar questions about the integration of immigrants with different faith traditions into the fabric of a predominantly secular society. This low-budget feature film, which was shot in Italy and Senegal using high-resolution digital format, self-consciously positions itself in the representational economy of Italy's emerging cinema of migration. In the film's opening moments, the director presents a series of thirteen iconic images of migrant journeys and clandestine arrivals – images which by now have a generic recognizability for Italian film and television audiences. This montage of still shots, which evokes an epic vision of countless migrants making their arduous journey to Italy by land and sea, has a calculated affective charge. Some of the images it presents, such as that of an overcrowded Albanian ship, hark back to the large-scale clandestine migrations of the 1990s. Others show the smaller, flimsier vessels associated with clandestine migration from Africa at present. One aerial image suggests the accidental sinking of a boat, from which passengers are thrown into the churning waves. Another image, in medium shot, depicts exhausted African migrants being escorted to dry land by Italian military personnel. The overall vision offered by De Seta's montage is one of excruciating hardship and life-threatening danger. The sequence concludes, however, with images in medium

range or close up, evoking private moments of weariness or bewilderment, before giving way to the fictional story that constitutes the central focus of the film.

*Lettere dal Sahara*'s striking introductory montage gives prominence to the Mediterranean and clandestine aspect of immigration to Italy, although these elements were, in reality, much less dominant in the overall scheme of Italian immigration patterns at the time the film was made than had been the case some years earlier. Yet De Seta's deployment of archival news photographs suggests the kind of truth claims associated with the tradition of neorealist cinema and recalls the director's own earlier work in documentary film. Similarly, the casting of non-professional Senegalese actors who speak in Wolof throughout most of the film, the use of authentic locations and techniques reminiscent of television reporting (such as the digital "scrambling" of the faces of African prostitutes appearing in street scenes), and the deployment of a quasi-ethnographic style of filmmaking in the concluding sequence, set in Senegal, seem to aim at a heightened sense of realism. Rather than eliciting an up-to-date, realistic account of the conditions of contemporary migration to Italy, however, the film functions as generic call for humanitarian compassion in the face of the massive uprootings and displacements of late modernity.



*Lettere dal Sahara 2*

Assane, protagonist of *Lettere dal Sahara*, is a young Senegalese migrant who, just before reaching the coast of Lampedusa, is thrown into the sea by his smugglers. After witnessing the drowning of a friend and fellow traveler, he is rescued by Italian border guards and submitted to biometric processing in a reception center for clandestine migrants, presumably in preparation for his deportation. Escaping police custody, he embarks on a difficult journey up through the boot of Italy. His experience of racially motivated violence in Turin, however, ultimately prompts him to return to Africa. In the film's final section he is back in Senegal, where he tells his former teacher of his daunting experiences in Italy, and passes along a word of caution to his younger compatriots who might contemplate undertaking a similarly challenging voyage.

The journey through the boot of Italy is, of course, a classical trope in Italy's national cinema and serves to link *Lettere dal Sahara* to a specific, socially committed tradition of filmmaking that has its roots in neorealism. It also replicates the trajectory of the African protagonist of *Pummarò* (Michele Placido 1990), one of the earliest films on Italian immigration, and suggests similar patterns of discrimination, abuse, and hospitality on the part of Italians encountered along the way. Assane's Italian journey begins, however, with a Muslim prayer on a windswept shore – an image that has become a recurrent trope in contemporary films about

migration. As he travels through Italy, he remains loyal to his Islamic faith, which is observed most forcefully in the scene where he repudiates his female cousin, living in Florence with an Italian man, for her abandonment of Muslim tradition. Though he finds refuge at the home of an Italian teacher in Turin, where he develops a nurturing relationship with a disturbed teenage boy, he eventually becomes the victim of racist thugs in the city streets, and relinquishes all ambition to remain in Italy. Unlike Zaccaro's *L'Articolo 2*, which eliminates the problem of cultural incommensurability by killing off the protagonist in an industrial accident, *Lettere al Sahara* suggests that Assane voluntarily renounces his migratory project to return to Senegal, removing himself from the Italian scene in order to retain a sense of human dignity. The concluding sequence, focusing on his journey to a remote Sengalese hamlet to visit his former mentor, conjures up a devout, tranquil, pre-modern community in a lush tropical landscape, a setting that stands in sharp contrast with the film's Italian locations.

De Seta's image of the aspiring immigrant as a saintly, idealized figure at odds with the corruption and violence of Western modernity is nonetheless an anomaly. For the most part, the representation of migrants in Italian cinema has given way to more complicated articulations of alterity, even envisioning, in one recent film, the possibility of miscegenation within the context of transnational, polygamous relationships.<sup>18</sup> The xenophobic anxieties that have characterized much of the Italian media discourse on immigration, however, continue to resonate in a handful of films that feature Albanian or other Eastern European characters rather than Africans. In these films, the stretch of sea separating southeastern Italy from the Balkan peninsula is configured as a particularly vulnerable boundary zone, perpetually traversed by unscrupulous traffickers who transport not only impoverished migrants, refugees, and trafficked women, but also criminals and delinquents likely to exploit and contaminate the Italian social body.

The first of these films, *Lettere al vento* (2003), an Italian-Albanian co-production, was written and directed by Edmond Budina, an Albanian immigrant living in Italy, and addresses the experience of transnational dislocation from a perspective that is different from most Italian films on migration. Highlighting the routine corruption and commonplace tragedies that accompany the perpetual flow of human traffic in the southern Adriatic, the film recounts the story of a morally upstanding Albanian intellectual (played by Budina himself) who travels to Italy in the post-Communist period to search for his missing son, whom he suspects of having joined a criminal organization. Constructed in a visual style that alternates straightforward realism with carnivalesque elements reminiscent of the work of Federico Fellini and Emir Kusturica, *Lettere al vento* points to the emergence of a new, transnational criminal class of profiteers eager to exploit the desperation of the most vulnerable members of society. Alluding

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<sup>18</sup> I refer here to Laura Muscardin's comedy *Billo il Grand Dakhaar*. Though this film, like *Lettere dal Sahara*, opens with a Muslim prayer performed by a migrant on a desolate shore, its construction of the Senegalese protagonist provides an interesting counterpoint to the almost hagiographic portrait of Assane in De Seta's film. Muscardin's protagonist Billo impregnates his Italian girlfriend, then marries and impregnates his childhood sweetheart in Senegal, and finally marries the pregnant Italian girlfriend as well. The film does not indicate how the ensuing conflict will play out. In fact, Billo's former teacher tells him that no conflict exists, since Islam allows for four wives. Although the Italian woman is at first devastated to learn of Billo's marriage in Senegal, she eventually goes through with the wedding. Present at the ceremony are two gay men who express the hope that they too will be able to formalize their relationship, an exchange that seems to point forward to an understanding of marriage as a less narrowly conceived union than that which is constituted by the traditional Western heterosexual couple. It is also worth noting that this is the first film that activates the promise of biological reproduction in a romantic relationship between an immigrant character and an Italian. The heterosexual relationships between Italians and foreigners portrayed in contemporary Italian cinema are generally doomed to end without reproduction, as Derek Duncan has discussed in a recent insightful article (Duncan 2008b).

to routine kidnappings, people smuggling, the sexual enslavement of women and girls, identity theft, and the drowning of helpless migrants, the narrative condenses some of the most dramatic elements associated with illegal migration in the Mediterranean. The film traces the distraught journey of the sympathetic protagonist and conjures up the devastation of ordinary Albanians whose lives are touched by increasingly sophisticated systems of exploitation. *Lettere al vento* is flawed by an almost Manichean opposition between the morally upstanding protagonist, willing to sacrifice his material interests in order to maintain his integrity, and the unscrupulous greed of his Albanian antagonists. Yet the pathos generated by the film's final sequence, where the traveler returns to a bleak Albanian shore to mourn the death of his son, whose innocence has now been ascertained, possesses both a haunting lyrical power and a precise historical specificity.

Francesco Munzi's low-budget debut feature film *Saimir* (2004) also focuses on Albanian characters, though the narrative unfolds exclusively within Italian borders. The peripheral locations in which the action is set, the outsider status of its principal characters, and the lawlessness of the adolescent boys frequented by the protagonist are all clearly reminiscent of the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Yet, there is a different sensitivity at work here, a more ambivalent response to issues of exclusion and belonging. *Saimir* charts the coming of age of the eponymous protagonist who lives on the edges of Italian society, his short-lived romance with an Italian girl, and his growing discomfort with the illegal activities in which he is complicit as his father's assistant. The action is focalized by the young protagonist, and for this reason, most of the dialogue is in Albanian. There is some additional dialogue in Italian, Rom, and, more briefly, Russian. The dramatic crux of the film occurs when Saimir discovers that a Russian-speaking teenage girl, whom he has helped to smuggle from the Adriatic coast to the coastal suburbs of Rome, has been kidnapped, brutalized, and raped by his father's employers. He then takes decisive action by reporting her whereabouts to the police, provoking the arrest of his own father in the process.

Despite Munzi's sympathetic construction of the young protagonist, the film implicitly reinforces the prejudicial equation of "Albanian" with "criminal" which has been perpetrated by the Italian media since the early 1990s. As Derek Duncan has noted in his astute reading of *Saimir* as an example of Italy's "postcolonial" cinema, the opposition that the narrative establishes between Albanian criminality and Italian "normality" seems, at least on the surface, to evoke familiar, racializing stereotypes (Duncan 2008a). While the film's attentiveness to the protagonist's alienation from his compatriots and from mainstream Italian society evokes a compelling impression of the experience of liminality and abjection familiar to many migrants living in Italy today, this attentiveness also serves to highlight the boy's status as an exception. In other words, the narrative asks us to care about Saimir precisely by virtue of those characteristics that make him *unlike* the other Albanian characters encountered in the course of the film's unfolding.

There is no happy ending for Munzi's protagonist, for he is scarcely rewarded for his conscientious action, which was motivated at least in part by a desire to attain a distance from what he perceives as his problematical Albanian identity. Despite his courageous denunciation of his corrupt compatriots, the narrative offers no sign of his eventual ability to transcend his status as an outsider in Italian society, nor is there any hint of a compensatory symbolic inclusion in a transnational Mediterranean fraternity (as occurs, for example, with the protagonist of *Tornando a casa*). Having betrayed his father, automatically alienating himself from his close-knit expatriate community in the process, the boy seems more isolated than ever. In the final shot, he

is silently escorted from his father's home by a uniformed *carabiniere*, presumably to become a ward of the state until his eighteenth birthday.<sup>19</sup>

In Marco Tullio Giordana's feature film *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* tropes of identification and disidentification also emerge, though articulated in different terms. The central section of the film unfolds entirely against a backdrop of the Mediterranean seascape, which is featured on the one hand as a playground for privileged Italian vacationers and, on the other, as a dangerous maritime passage for destitute migrants. Sandro, the protagonist, is the adolescent son of a well-to-do Northern Italian family who narrowly escapes drowning when he falls overboard during a yachting trip, unnoticed by his father. He owes his survival to the intervention of a Romanian youth, who dives into the water and pulls him aboard a fishing trawler filled with migrants heading for Italy. This dramatic rescue at sea serves as the Italian boy's initiation into the shocking realities of clandestine migration, and he is obliged to travel with his newfound companions aboard the filthy, overcrowded boat toward the distant Italian shore.

*Quando sei nato* was the first Italian feature film to visualize the dehumanizing conditions experienced by clandestine migrants who are ferried across the Mediterranean in barely seaworthy vessels, apprehended at sea by border patrols, subjected to strict processing protocols upon disembarkation, and confined to detention centers, euphemistically known as Centri di Permanenza Temporanea, which were first set up by the center-left government in 1998. Giordana's representation of the detention camp – focalized by the Italian boy who is briefly accommodated within its boundaries along with the migrants – proved highly controversial, provoking polarized reactions that reflected already existing tensions vis-à-vis the existence of these institutions on Italian soil.<sup>20</sup>

For the most part, *Quando sei nato* provides a nuanced construction of the traumatic journey of clandestine Mediterranean migrants. Though striving to evoke the suffering and helplessness of the disenfranchised travelers, the film contains one of the most unsettling representations of Southern Italian masculinity in recent cinema. In fact, the two Italian *scafisti* who steer the battered boat toward Italy constitute a jarring instance of caricature in a narrative where other minor characters are constructed with greater subtlety. Though the film is apparently attempting to suggest a symbolic similarity between the impoverished *scafisti*, who are coded by their speech as southerners, and the destitute passengers, all of whom are driven by economic desperation, the characterization of these men as heartless and abusive thugs precludes any sympathy for their circumstances.

The short scene that depicts the sexual harassment of Alina, a young migrant girl, by one of the *scafisti* on board the trawler is one of the most disturbing episodes in the film, where violence is otherwise enacted off screen. Shot in lighting conditions suggestive of the horror genre, the scene unfolds at night, as the Italian skipper obliges the girl (who, unknown to the protagonist, is being transported to Italy for prostitution) to submit to sexual intimacy in exchange for water. Their interaction is mediated through the perplexed gaze of Sandro, who accidentally comes upon the encounter, framed as a kind of primal scene. As contemporary spectators aware of the ideological force of stereotypes, we might well question the process through which a Southern Italian is explicitly indicated as the perpetrator of sexual aggression against the most vulnerable member of a defenseless migrant community. It could be argued, however, that the visual codes

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<sup>19</sup> Unlike irregular adult migrants, unaccompanied minors found to be without the required residence permit are not subject to immediate deportation by Italian authorities. Instead, they are allowed to remain in Italy under supervision of the social services until they come of age.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of this issue see O'Healy 2006.



of the sequence leave open the interpretation that Sandro, the Northern, bourgeois adolescent, may be projecting his own internalized prejudices and unconscious anxieties onto that age-old, racialized scapegoat, the Southern male – volatile, untrustworthy, and hypersexualized.

Although *Quando sei nato* initially elicits an attitude of compassion toward clandestine immigration, its concluding scenario appears to confirm Italian citizens' worst fears about this issue.<sup>21</sup> The Romanian youth who heroically saved Sandro from drowning turns out to be a liar, a thief, and a pimp who transported the adolescent Alina to Italy for the purpose of prostitution. The young Italian protagonist's final challenge in the narrative is not to enable his young friends to avoid deportation by the Italian authorities, but rather to rescue the girl from the clutches of her imputed brother. Ultimately, in the scheme of the film's overarching narrative trajectory, the Romanian teenagers, like the two Southern *scafisti*, function mainly as a foil for the Northern Italian boy's maturation as an appropriate citizen of the contemporary Euro-Italian polis. In this way, *Quando sei nato* offers a particularly compelling example of the contradictory mechanisms through which Italian cinema attempts to conjure up a sympathetic response to the needs of Italy's new migrants while at the same time falling prey to the discursive mechanisms of abjection that separate the nationally desirable subject – white, middle-class and “European” – from the outsiders, those “not quite white” Southerners or foreigners who threaten to sully the purity of an idealized, Europeanized social body.<sup>22</sup>

Exploring the shifting understandings of place, culture, and identity implicit in the nation's experience of the dislocations of globalization, the films I have discussed highlight in a critical way some of the hardships, abuses, and exclusions experienced by immigrants to Italy in recent years. Some of the films configuring Mediterranean crossings (*L'America* and *L'Italiano*) allude to Italy's occluded colonial history, while others (*Tornando a casa* and *Io l'altro*) gesture abstractly toward a transhistorical understanding of the region as a fluid, borderless space, vaguely signaling the possibility of a renewed brotherhood between the populations of different shores. In this body of work as a whole, the cumulative emphasis on Italy's Mediterranean location – at a time when discourses of Europe often imply a “white,” “continental” identity rooted firmly in the West or global north – thus contributes a complex, disruptive element to the ongoing process of the nation's self-imagining.<sup>23</sup> As Iain Chambers has observed: “If the

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<sup>21</sup> The screenwriters originally envisioned the two fugitive teenagers as Moldovan. Because of casting issues, their identity was later changed to Romanian. By the time the film was seen by Italians, however, Romania was on the threshold of being admitted to full membership of the European Union (January 1, 2007), making the youngsters' clandestine status seem unrealistic to several viewers. It is worth noting that in the past two years (2007-2009), in response to the mounting influx of Romanians into Italy (including Romanian-born Roma), Romanian migrants have become increasingly demonized by the Italian media. Although they are now full members of the European Union, they appear to have replaced Albanians as the most despised immigrant community (Mai 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Martorana, the Sicilian actor who plays one of the loathsome *scafisti* in *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, is cast as a Maghrebi migrant in two recent films; in Giordana's *La meglio gioventù* he plays a Moroccan, and in Melliti's *Io l'altro*, he plays a major role as Yousef, the Tunisian fisherman. The somatic adaptability of the actor to both Italian and Arab roles raises interesting questions about the visual inscription and readability of national identities, particularly among Mediterranean populations. As one of the characters in Gabriele Salvatores's *Mediterraneo* (1990) puts it rather baldly: “Stessa faccia, stessa razza.” Nonetheless, the credibility of Martorana's onscreen performances in these ethnically marked roles remains debatable.

<sup>23</sup> Although I have focused in this article on the Mediterranean dimension of Italy's cinema of migration, I wish to note here that many recent Italian films featuring female immigrants from Eastern Europe construct narratives where the Mediterranean element of contemporary mobility is not foregrounded. In these films, the gendered dimension of migration and the sexualized otherness of the female immigrant contribute to a very different representational economy and a contrasting articulation of alterity. For a discussion of this body of work, see O'Healy 2007.

Mediterranean can propose a common measure, it is surely that of cultural and historical diversity washed up by a shared marine medium” (Chambers 2008, 141).

The many recent Italian films that highlight trans-Mediterranean crossings and displacements generally avoid taking a clear position on the political implications of unregulated migration; rather, they gesture in various implicit or explicit ways to a conflict between the need to safeguard the wellbeing of citizens and the prospect of welcoming foreigners indiscriminately within the nation’s borders. Despite the willingness of some filmmakers to envision Italy as a Mediterranean entity, mobile, open, and diverse rather than static and impervious, this corpus of films is not entirely devoid of the exclusionary discourses that it self-consciously attempts to subvert. It is difficult, for example, to ignore the predominantly male, patriarchal, and homosocial thrust of these narratives of migration. While many of the films foreground the humanity of the foreigner/immigrant and allow their protagonists to be heard in “foreign” tongues of European, North African, and sub-Saharan provenance, they simultaneously reveal unresolved anxieties about the boundaries of the Italy body politic in relation to its internal and external others. In Italy’s cinema of Mediterranean migration, these others – in contradistinction to the aspiration of contemporary Italians to a fully modern, European identity – are mainly configured through recurring images of the “not quite white” Southeastern European (mirroring the older discursive figure of the Italian Southerner) or of the exotic and—at least from the films’ perspective—potentially unassimilable African.



*Lettere dal Sahara 3*

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