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Journal

California Italian Studies, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2010

DOI

10.5070/C311008877

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45h010h5#supplemental>

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From the Other Side of the Mediterranean: Hospitality in Italian Migration Cinema

Giovanna Faleschini Lerner

In 2002, the Milan-based research laboratory and interdisciplinary group Multiplicity sponsored a project investigating the geopolitical transformations taking place in the Mediterranean. According to the researchers, writers, and artists involved in the project, the liquid space of the Mediterranean has been transformed into a “Solid Sea”:

A territory ploughed by predetermined routes, unsurpassable boundaries and subdivided into strictly regulated bands of water. A solid space, crossed at different depths and with different vectors by clearly distinguished groups of people, goods, information and money. He who enters the Mediterranean today has to acquire an exacerbated identity, a “costume” that will not abandon him until the end of his journey across the water. Clandestine immigrants, cruising tourists, armed forces, fishermen, sailors, submarine and rig engineers, cross the Mediterranean waters every day without communicating and often without even noticing each other, regimented in their own identities and constricted within their predetermined route. When the paths of these travelers accidentally intersect, when a short circuit in the Solid Sea connects different cultures and identities and puts different sea depths in contact with one another . . . paradoxical and dramatic effects are frequently generated.¹

Three recent films, Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005), Vittorio De Seta’s *Lettere dal Sahara* (2004), and Mohsen Melliti’s *Io, l’altro* (2007), explore what it means to cross this solid sea as a “clandestine immigrant,” to force one’s passage through the logic of exclusion that governs its exit and entry points.² At the same time, these films investigate the effects of the unexpected intersections and encounters across the Mediterranean, which can metamorphose the sea into a space of personal transformation, where identities are defined, alliances formed, and conflicts played out. In these encounters, the Mediterranean becomes, once again, a privileged space where a dialogue with the other is still possible, reasserting the relevance of “il suo statuto di confine, di interfaccia, di mediazione tra i popoli.”³

In *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, Giordana expands his repertoire of politically engaged films (*I cento passi*, 2000, *La meglio gioventù*, 2003) to confront the question of migration.⁴ The film has been criticized for its “didacticism” by Manohla Dargis for the *New York Times*, among others, while other reviewers have found its representation of Italian

¹ Multiplicity.lab, Solid Sea, <http://www.multiplicity.it/index2.htm> (accessed January 6, 2009), text modified.

² Ibid.

³ Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 2nd ed. (Roma: Laterza 2005), xxiii.

⁴ In addition to Maria Pace Ottieri’s book *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2003), from which the film takes its title, Giordana mentions Claudio Camarca’s *Migranti. Verso una terra chiamata Italia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2003) and Giuseppe Mantovani’s *Intercultura. È possibile evitare le guerre culturali?* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004) as inspirations for his film.

multicultural society too idealistic and naïve.⁵ At the beginning of the film, indeed, the transition from what Étienne Balibar would call the “imaginary singularity of [. . . Italian] national formation,”⁶— Italy’s imagined cohesiveness— to the actual complexity of Italy today seems to have taken place *too* smoothly and successfully.

The opening frame summarizes visually the diversity of contemporary Italy: the still camera frames Piazza della Vittoria in Brescia with its markedly Fascist Post Office building. A bus crosses the piazza and stops to let out passengers. The first person to descend is an African woman whose multicolored clothes create a sharp contrast with the stark whiteness of the Fascist architectural background. By quickly crossing the frame, her body briefly imposes itself – and provides an ironic commentary – on the historical memories evoked by the civic architecture of the *piazza*: memories of the Italian colonial empire, the racial laws, and the institution of the Republic of Salò only a few miles away. Her physical presence, moreover, exposes the fiction of a homogenous Italian culture, which fascist ideology aimed to construct and the present-day Lega Nord claims to defend. Although she is represented as a stereotypical African immigrant — even wearing the “ethnic costume” of her region of origin — she ultimately escapes the objectifying gaze of the camera. She does not become the object of the filmic narration, but rather signifies what the film is not.

Clip 1 - Opening frame. A black woman, a young boy, and a middle-aged couple get off a bus in Piazza della Vittoria, in Brescia. The camera lets the woman and the couple walk out of the frame and focuses instead on the boy, whose story the film will tell.

Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti is not a documentary-style film about the poor and degrading lives of the *extra-comunitari* (the term for immigrants from countries that do not belong to the European Union and are not American, Australian, or, frankly, rich and white); nor is it a Hollywood-style film about a woman’s dream of shaping a different life for herself and her children in a Western country. While the spectator’s eyes are drawn to the woman, in anticipation of, perhaps, another example of *cinéma vérité*, the camera resists this impulse and chooses instead to tell a different story, the story of another passenger on the same bus: a local, affluent, white boy who dreams of motorcycles and likes to swim. The film is not about *them* but

⁵ In her article for *The New York Times* on May 16, 2005, Dargis writes that “Giordana takes an unfortunately didactic approach to the issue of his film, coming across like a depressed, politically liberal professor who [...] hopes to guilt-trip his pampered students out of solipsism and into the world” (“Anxiety and Turbulence Permeated Three Films at Cannes,” *New York Times*, 16 May 2005). Anna Maria Rivera, writing for *JGCinema*, an online publication of the Centro di Filosofia del diritto internazionale e della politica globale at the University of Florence, finds Giordana’s film a typical example of Italian migration cinema, which has not yet found a way to talk about the issue of migration in Italian society without reverting to an obsolete paternalism (Rivera, “The Triumph of the Commonplace: Images of Migrants in Italian Cinema,” http://www.jgcinema.org/pages/view.php?cat=recensioni&id=232&id_film=80&id_dossier=0, [accessed 12/30/2008]).

Although I do not entirely agree with Rivera’s and Dargis’s un-nuanced objections to the film, in this article I do not intend to dispute its shortcomings, but rather to examine how its limitations can help shape a more adequate critical language, or at least one that is aware of “the limited validity of its representations, acknowledges the margins of repression that permit certain configurations to emerge while others continue to remain outside its reasoning” (Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* [Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008], 17). In this respect, I use the words “multicultural” and “multiculturalism,” for lack of better terms and with an awareness of their opacity when used to mask cultural differentialism and the inferiorization of migrants that this entails (see Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone. L’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*, 3rd ed. [Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008], 170).

⁶ Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 87.

about *us*, the spectators. Giordana thus clarifies that the issue of migration in his film is explored in its “mirror function,”⁷ as the opportunity to uncover what is normally hidden in the Italian social unconscious and make its nature manifest.⁸

Sandro is the twelve-year-old only child of a small entrepreneur. Although he lives a sheltered life, he is not completely alien to the multi-ethnic reality of present-day Italian society, epitomized by Brescia as a “provincia laboratorio che più di ogni altra ha inserito il flusso migratorio nel tessuto sociale.”⁹ At school, one of his closest friends is black; his father’s factory seems to be a model of successful integration, as a place where managers, immigrant workers, and owners eat together and engage in (pseudo-)egalitarian conversations at lunchtime. Yet, there are moments in which this idyllic surface is cracked by the emergence of irreducible differences that provoke discomfort in the apparently open-minded characters. Two episodes are particularly significant: the first takes place in the factory owned by Sandro’s father, Bruno. Bruno and his factory manager follow an immigrant worker through a maze of rooms, machinery, and people looking at each other with increasingly puzzled looks. The camerawork reproduces the state of confusion that Bruno and his manager feel, making the spectators participate in the same uncertainty. Finally, the small group stops in an empty, shabby room, and the worker explains that this is the room where he and his Muslim co-workers will be able to fulfill their religious obligation to prayer. Bruno is mystified by the idea that such an unkempt space will be suitable for religious worship and seems about to oppose it.

Clip 2 – Finding a space for prayer in the factory. Muslim workers request that a space be set aside for their daily prayers in the workplace, and Bruno and his manager comply.

Bruno’s apparent uneasiness in this situation is revealing: on the one hand, he embraces the liberal principle of religious tolerance and is willing to provide his workers with a space for prayer; on the other hand, he resists the aspects of their faith that do not conform to his own expectations about religion. In other words, when his cultural framework is seriously challenged by difference, Bruno’s openness is exposed as partial and fragile. Although his behavior is (perhaps unrealistically) exemplary, his perplexity reflects on the individual level some of the political and epistemological issues that multicultural societies face. Meyda Yegenoglu has observed that “the liberal imperative to tolerate and respect cultural difference is far from displacing the sovereignty of the host society in question.”¹⁰ Iain Chambers also discusses the “epistemological violence of liberal thought, deposited in the implicit knot of race and civilization, where it is always the former that ultimately disciplines and defines the latter.”¹¹ Both critics point out how, in adopting the language of multiculturalism, Western societies effectively embrace a form of cultural differentialism that marginalizes the migrant as irreducibly

⁷ Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Migrant*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 282.

⁸ Cfr. Dal Lago, *Non persone*, 13.

⁹ Paolo D’Agostini, “Un bambino alla scoperta del mondo dei clandestini,” review of *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, *La Repubblica*, May 13, 2005. According to data published by the Istituto nazionale di statistica (Istat), Brescia has the fourth largest population of foreign-born migrants in Italy, after Milan, Rome, and Turin. (Cfr. Table 2 on the Istat website, <http://demo.istat.it/altridati/riilbilstra/>, which reports data from December 2007.) It is not by chance that, since February 2009, the Ufficio scolastico of the province of Brescia, has been sponsoring a television series, called “Italiano in famiglia,” aimed at teaching Italian to recent foreign-born immigrants (see www.italianoinfamiglia.it.)

¹⁰ Meyda Yegenoglu, “Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization,” *Postmodern Culture* 13.2 (2003), par. 1, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v013/13.2yegenoglu.html, (accessed 3/13/2007).

¹¹ Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 41.

other and, therefore, incompatible with their own values. The moments in which difference manifests itself rupture the West's self-complacency and reveal its resistance to letting itself be redefined and reshaped by the encounter with the other. Although Bruno does not explicitly question the legitimacy of his worker's request, he clearly does not understand it and considers it an ethnic peculiarity.

In another brief episode, when Sandro's mother's car is waiting at a stop sign, a young prostitute approaches it and stares at Sandro through his lowered window. He is made uncomfortable by her gaze and turns toward his mother to ask: "Mamma, ma cosa vuole questa?" His mother answers, "Niente," and asks him to close his window. At this point, we see how Sandro's and the prostitute's images are superimposed in the reflection of the car window. The two faces coincide, become one, creating an image that indicates the existential equivalence (and equality) between the two young people. The window functions as the conventional cinematic metaphor for the opening of the character's story toward new experiences and possibilities. It is also a clear meta-cinematic symbol (the window/screen as cinematic screen) that uncovers the director's intention of revealing how much the spectator has in common with the marginal experiences of migrants (as the Italian viewer assumes the prostitute to be).¹² But in this scene, the window serves above all as a screen that prevents communication and understanding between the privileged boy and the victimized girl – a screen constituted by laws, social conventions, and language.

Clip 3 –Encounter with a young prostitute. While their car is stopped at an intersection, a young prostitute approaches Bruno and his mother. Bruno is embarrassed and confused by her stare and his mother tells him to close the car window.

This screen is perforated when Sandro accidentally falls into the Mediterranean Sea and is saved by the passengers of a boat of undocumented migrants. His fall into the water – another reflective surface – destroys the narcissistic projection that has been in place so far on both the viewers' and the characters' part and triggers a new kind of identification process. In a way, with Sandro's accident the director brings us back to the scene just discussed and forces us not to close our car window and to sustain the gaze of the young prostitute. If so far we have witnessed migration from the outside perspective of the destination society, now we must look at it from the inside. Sandro's fall and rescue take him – and the viewers who identify with him – into the core of the experience of migration. Once he is lifted on board, he is surrounded by migrants of all ethnic and national origins and is mistaken for one of them by the two criminals who drive the boat.¹³ Forced to silence in order to maintain his real identity concealed from the criminals that

¹² The Italian viewer unconsciously makes the assumption that the street-walker is foreign-born, possibly Eastern-European. As Alessandro Dal Lago writes, in the 1990s, "mentre la prostituzione tradizionale trovava nuove vie più redditizie e discrete ('massaggiatrici' e 'cartomanti'), diveniva vistosa la prostituzione di straniere, viados, donne nigeriane, albanesi" (*Non-persone* 87), and Italian public opinion very quickly began to identify as foreigners those men and women that openly offered sexual services in the streets of Italian urban peripheries (*Non-persone* 90). Here, Giordana cunningly exploits the public's prejudice to make his point about equality and communication, but it is important to recognize that, at the same time, he risks reinforcing the viewer's preconception without really challenging it.

¹³ Rivera takes serious issue with the unrealistic presence of migrants from all ethnic and geographic provenance in the boat: Giordana's buccaneer "seems to transport a flock of foreigners rather than individuals, with their existences and their definite origins: the stereotype of the undifferentiated 'worldly misery' originating from every 'foreign land;' from Africa, Asia, Mid-Orient, Eastern Europe..." ("The Triumph of the Commonplace," par. 2). Yet, Giordana's depiction of the *carretta del mare* constitutes a powerful visual synthesis of the diversity of the contemporary migratory flux toward Italy, which includes refugees and migrants from the northern and central regions of Africa, as well as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and East Asia.

would otherwise try to obtain a ransom from his family, Sandro is thus defined by his gaze, his ability to look at – and thus bear witness to – the degrading reality of clandestine immigration.¹⁴ The act of looking is not an entirely passive one; for instance, when he is discovered witnessing the attempted rape of a young Rumanian girl, he effectively prevents this act of violence from taking place. At the same time, the boat is also a space of ambivalence, a “gray zone” where moral and social codes do not have the same value as in the outside world.¹⁵ Sandro thus learns that a gesture of generosity is evaluated according to a different hierarchy of values in circumstances that are outside any kind of normalcy; although he has saved the young girl from sexual abuse, he has also prevented her from being “paid” in water, a precious possession that can make the difference between life and death on the boat.

In his commentary to the DVD version of the film, Giordana explicitly discusses the baptismal symbolism evoked by Sandro’s fall into the Mediterranean waters. As in Christian initiation the individual is given a unique name as one of God’s children, so Sandro acquires a new identity in his passage through the waters. When Italian police officers board the clandestine boat, he identifies himself as Italian but later insists that he wants to go to the *Centro di prima accoglienza* together with his new Rumanian friends, Alina and Radu, and that he does not want to be separated from them. He thus finds himself in an untenable position as a son of the Italian upper bourgeoisie who feels, at the same time, a sense of belonging to the community of the undocumented migrants who saved his life. Sandro comes to experience the “double absence” that characterizes migrant identity, belonging neither to the country of origin nor the country of destination.¹⁶ Migrants, in fact, are at the same time absent “from their country of origin and a familiar culture and pushed into a position of erasure and expendability at the margins of the country of immigration.”¹⁷ Analogously, Sandro feels estranged from the prejudices of his fellow Italians toward immigrants. The racial intolerance of many Italians emerges explicitly in a scene in which two elderly women recognize Sandro on the bus and ask him if he is the boy who was lost at sea. They commiserate him and end the brief conversation with a pitiful reference to him with all those “*neghers* [blacks]!” At the same time that he rejects these forms of bigotry, though, Sandro remains a member of Italy’s affluent class, the class that needs a migrant labor force in order to perpetuate its privilege.

In response to this new borderline identity, Sandro attempts to embrace—and proposes to his parents as a model of praxis—an ethics of hospitality that, as defined by Jacques Derrida, is potentially infinite, as opposed to the politics of hospitality seen throughout the film. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida deconstructs the metaphor of a destination country as “host” to its immigrants: “To dare say welcome is perhaps to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be at home, and that at home one receives, invites, or offers hospitality, thus appropriating a space for oneself, a space to *welcome* the other, or worse, *welcoming* the

¹⁴ Sandro’s innocent gaze finds its cinematic root in Vittorio De Sica’s *I bambini ci guardano*, which Giordana explicitly mentions in the genealogy of *Quando sei nato*

(http://www.cinemaitaliano.info/dichiarazione_di_marco_tullio_giordana_sul_film_quando_notizia00291.html).

¹⁵ In the second chapter of his book, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), Primo Levi describes the space of the Nazi extermination camps as a “gray zone” where the laws of human solidarity and morality are suspended in the face of the overwhelming need to survive.

¹⁶ On the notion of double absence see Sayad’s *The Suffering of the Migrant*, as well as Dal Lago’s discussion of the migrant as a non-person.

¹⁷ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 25.

other in order to appropriate for oneself a place and then speak the language of hospitality. . . .”¹⁸ Offering hospitality to someone is tantamount to asserting one’s absolute authority over the house and its guests, who are thus placed in a position of dependence and inferiority. If the immigrant is treated as a guest, he is turned into the beneficiary of the host’s *largesse*, rather than a human being with certain inalienable rights.¹⁹ For Dal Lago, this is the first step toward the dehumanization of the migrant, his becoming a non-person.²⁰ As a guest, the foreigner is welcomed under conditions that the host country has established and, as a non-person, is placed in a special space, “devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations are deactivated,” which Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception.”²¹

The hospitality center where Sandro and his companions are taken after being rescued by the maritime police is precisely such a space of exception, where rights are suspended and special laws established. Men and women are separated, regardless of their family ties; minors are lodged with women; undocumented migrants are subjected to medical tests to establish their age. The hospitality center is constructed as an internment camp: women’s and men’s quarters are divided by a metal fence that also surrounds the center, from which the undocumented migrants cannot leave except to go back to their own countries. In the sequence recording the migrants’ arrival at the center, Giordana focuses on the Babel of languages that characterizes the place. Multiple interpreters are necessary to explain the rules of the center. Among these rules, the Catholic priest that directs the center emphasizes the main tenet of societies that define themselves as multicultural: let each person worship his own God, provided he lets all others do the same. Perhaps paradoxically, though, the priest forgets to pray to his own God and is reminded by Sandro, who asks him to recite the Lord’s Prayer with him.

Clip 4 – Centro di prima accoglienza. The director of the center, a Catholic priest, illustrates its rules and regulations, assisted by a series of interpreters.

In a way, the priest’s forgetfulness in relation to his own religious tradition is symbolic of the emptiness of the multicultural position.²² Posing its own cultural stance as a universal and neutral position, the West judges other experiences to be irreducibly alien and, therefore, impossible to integrate in its society.²³ Although it claims to valorize individuality and diversity, it does so from a distance that maintains its ultimate position of sovereignty:

Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn’t oppose to the Other the *particular* values of his own culture) but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged *empty point of universality* from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures – the multiculturalist respect for the Other’s specificity is the very form of asserting one’s own superiority.²⁴

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 15-16.

¹⁹ Dal Lago, *Non-persone*, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 50. In Italy, these spaces, once called *centri di permanenza temporanea*, have recently been renamed *centri di identificazione ed espulsione*, thus unveiling the fictionality of the earlier denomination as *centri di prima accoglienza*.

²² Cfr. Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *The New Left Review* I/225 (1997), 28-51.

²³ Cfr. Cassano, *Pensiero meridiano*, xii.

²⁴ Žižek, “Multiculturalism, Or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” 44.

Thus conceived, multiculturalism as political practice corresponds directly to Derrida's notion of conditional hospitality, for it places the immigrant consistently in the subordinate position of the guest who needs to be instructed in the laws of the house and is subjected to the authoritative judgment of those that inhabit it.²⁵

If conditional hospitality is the operational principle of the *centro d'accoglienza*, it is shown as a function of the private sphere in Sandro's own family. Daily practices of private citizens are, in fact, affected both by their personal histories and social norms.²⁶ When his parents arrive at the center to take him home, Sandro asks them to adopt his friends Alina and Radu, to whom he owes his survival. Although taken by surprise, they agree to meet with the *giudice minorile* and request to adopt the children. Sandro's father seems uncertain about taking Radu and Alina in, whereas his wife is visibly elated at the prospect, happy and gratified to be helping the disadvantaged, orphaned children who have saved her son's life. But when Radu and Alina escape from the center to avoid the deportation of Radu – no longer a minor – to Romania, and arrive at their door in Brescia, Bruno and Lucia are asked to remove the conditions of their hospitality, to extend it, that is, beyond the limits imposed by the law. Once again they do so, but after they welcome Alina and Radu into their home, the two youngsters steal from them and leave during the night. The family's attempt at infinite hospitality ends up only in failure, revealing in almost traumatic ways the aporia implicit in Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality. For Derrida, hospitality becomes unconditional when, by opening one's home to the *other*, one gives up ownership of it.²⁷ Unconditional hospitality is modeled on the biblical example of Lot, who offers his own virgin daughters to the enraged citizens of Sodom, rather than betray the laws of hospitality that oblige him to protect his guests. It is a hospitality of visitation, rather than a hospitality of invitation. Whereas in an invitation, the host remains in control of his threshold, determining who should or should not be invited in and under what conditions, Derrida explains, "the visitor is not an invited guest, the visitor is the unexpected one who arrives and to whom a pure host should open his house without asking questions such as: who are you? what are you coming for? will you work with us? do you have a passport? do you have a visa? and so on and so forth."²⁸ It is the uninquisitive, pure hospitality that Abraham offers to God and his two angels, when they visit him disguised as travelers:

In the hospitality without conditions, the host should, in principle, receive even before knowing anything about the guest. A pure welcome consists not only in not knowing anything or acting as if one knows nothing, but also in avoiding any questions about the Other's identity, their desire, their rules, their language, their capacity for work, for integration, for adaptation . . .²⁹

The guest, continues Derrida, "might be an assassin, might disrupt my home . . . might come to

²⁵ Cfr. Dal Lago, *Non-persone*, 154-55.

²⁶ Cfr. Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality. The Migrant as Guest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 6-7.

²⁷ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 41-2.

²⁸ Derrida, "Discussion with Jacques Derrida," *Theory & Event* 5.1 (2001), par. 28, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.1derrida.html (accessed 4/1/2008).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, par. 17.

make revolution,” but in unconditional hospitality she would still be welcome.³⁰ This pure hospitality implies, then, that the host renounces his sovereignty, submitting instead to the guest’s authority. In this sense, Derrida writes, “the host is a hostage.”³¹ Although Sandro’s parents decide not to press legal charges against Alina and Radu, they react to the theft by withdrawing their welcome, by refusing to be hostages. As adults fully involved in the polity, in other words, they are not willing to subjugate themselves and the social norm to the rule of the other.

Although Sandro, too, feels deeply betrayed by Alina and Radu, he maintains his connection with them. Having shared their journey of immigration, he finds himself changed. He experiences a sense of responsibility for the other that “enables the birth of the subject along with freedom: the coming of the subject to itself as it welcomes the other.”³² Sandro’s fall into the waters of the Mediterranean Sea is thus confirmed as a moment of rebirth in the encounter and unconditional acceptance of the other and his otherness. His new “hospitable” subjectivity pushes him to ask his parents what they would do if Alina and Radu came back. His father’s response manifests the essentially conditional nature of his hospitality; in his incredulous answer to Sandro’s question, he definitively denies them the possibility of a return. His welcome does not extend beyond the borders marked by the rules of social law and domesticity. In this sense, he represents the incarnation of the limited nature of the politics of hospitality pursued by Western society, which does not ultimately let itself be reshaped by its guests, but places them in a position of “inclusive exclusion.”³³ In contrast, Lucia’s position is ambivalent, confirming the notion of the welcome as presupposing “the idea of woman, feminine alterity.”³⁴ The fact that the host of Derrida’s discussions is always the male master of the house authorizes a gendered approach to the question of hospitality in the film.³⁵

Giordana represents Lucia exclusively as a welcoming figure, a nurturing presence, who fully identifies with her maternal role. When Sandro is thought to be dead, she isolates herself in the obsessive replaying of the home video that records his last moments on the sailboat; she rejects Bruno’s timid attempts to share her pain, defining herself not as his life partner, but exclusively as a mother. When she recovers her son, she is willing to include Alina and Radu in her maternal embrace, serving as a mediator between her husband’s reluctance and her son’s insistence. After Alina and Radu have betrayed her family’s trust, she does not condemn them *tout court*, but is open to a possible return. In this respect, Lucia is a problematic character in the film, insofar as woman she is given no actual agency, but functions simply as a conduit that enables Sandro to remain in a position of infinite hospitality. Lucia is thus akin to the women of the Bible, who bring food and water and serve their husbands’ and fathers’ guests (when they are

³⁰ Derrida, *Manifeste pour l’hospitalité* (Paris: Paroles d’aube, 1999), 100, qtd. in “Discussion with Jacques Derrida” par. 18.

³¹ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 20.

³² Yegenoglu, “Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality,” par. 31.

³³ In this sense, the current use of the term “guest workers” itself, as Rosello points out, underlines the precariousness of migrants’ position in—and at the same time outside—the laws regulating labor (*Postcolonial Hospitality*, 9).

³⁴ Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 28.

³⁵ Although my reading of *Quando sei nato* and *Lettere dal Sahara* is sensitive to questions of gender and gender roles, these issues do not constitute the main focus of my analysis, and by no means do I presume to have exhausted their discussion in this essay.

not offered to them as sexual objects),³⁶ or to Antigone, who pleads that the laws of hospitality be respected in regard to her brother's body.³⁷ She occupies, in other words, "a zone of nurturing and regenerative emotional . . . transaction," which makes possible Sandro's hospitable stance.³⁸

When Alina calls Sandro, in fact, he travels to Milan and looks for her. In a sequence that appears loaded with literary and psychoanalytic references, Sandro wanders through an infernal landscape of dilapidated buildings at the periphery of the metropolis, marking his entrance into the labyrinth of adolescence and sexual awakening.³⁹ He finally finds Alina when he hears the notes of her favorite Italian pop song. When he arrives in her apartment, he understands that Radu is not Alina's brother but her boyfriend, who has forced her to prostitute herself. It is at this moment that he discovers, quite literally, what it means to welcome the other without asking questions or expecting answers: his dialogue with Alina is a mute one, where the words of Eros Ramazzotti's international success, "Un'emozione per sempre," are left to describe the empty illusions that moved her to leave her country and follow Radu. For Sandro, the acceptance of Alina's mysterious otherness coincides, at this point, with his definitive loss of innocence. If, in the beginning of the film, he could ask his mother about the young streetwalker, he has now been forced to face the realities of prostitution and sexual exploitation.

Clip 5 – Looking for Alina. Bruno travels to Milan to look for Alina and wanders through a maze of dilapidated buildings and wretched humanity until he finds her.

Despite the accusations of didacticism it has received, *Quando sei nato* does not have a happy ending. In fact, it has no ending at all. In the last scene, Sandro and Alina are sitting on the curb of an anonymous square sharing a sandwich, while the still camera frames their loneliness, slowly dissolving the image into the closing titles.

Clip 6 – Closing scene. Bruno and Alina share a sandwich in the desolate landscape of the periphery of Milan.

Despite Sandro's "unconditional yes" to his other, Alina, we do not know what will happen to her or Radu. On some level, then, we could conclude that critics are correct in deploring the symbolism of the film. The ethics of hospitality that Sandro's figure incarnates does not translate into a viable social practice that will solve the issue of immigration and of migrants' integration in Italian society. On the contrary, infinite hospitality seems to fail as an operating principle, remaining an impossible ideal. Indeed, Derrida admits,

We are not dreamers, from that point of view, we know that today no government, no nation state, will simply open the borders, and in good faith we know that we don't do that ourselves. We would not simply leave the house with no doors, no keys and so on and so forth. We protect ourselves, okay? Who could deny this in

³⁶ Penelope Deutscher, "Derrida's Impossible Genealogies," *Theory and Event* 8:1 (2005), par. 5, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v008/8.1deutscher.html (accessed 1/15/2009).

³⁷ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 85.

³⁸ Deutscher, "Derrida's Impossible Genealogies," par. 23.

³⁹ Sandro's walk echoes Edmund's similar walk in Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* (http://www.cinemaitaliano.info/dichiarazione_di_marco_tullio_giordana_sul_film_quando_notizia00291.html), but it also gives a glimpse of the living conditions of foreign immigrants in Italian cities. See Carlo Lovati's 2003 article, "La favela di via Cornalia," in *Il Corriere della Sera* for a particularly alarming representation of the impact of immigration on urban areas, as well as Franco Morganti's response, which brings into the discussion the memory of Italian emigration to the New World at the beginning of the twentieth century.

good faith? *But we have the desire for this perfectibility, and this desire is regulated by the infinite pole of pure hospitality.*⁴⁰

Thus, what makes any form of hospitality possible, and perfectible, is the governing ideal of unconditional, pure hospitality. As Mireille Rosello puts it, the ethics and the politics of hospitality “are doomed to cohabit, unhappily, chaotically, because that tension is what hospitality is precisely all about.”⁴¹ Giordana’s film, despite its faults, has the merit of showing the tension between the ideal and the political, thus deconstructing the political discourse of hospitality in order to generate discussion about immigration laws and public attitudes toward migrants.

The tension between pure and conditional hospitality and the question of hybrid identity is also central to *Lettere dal Sahara*, directed by Vittorio De Seta. A master of *docu-fiction*, beginning with *Diario di un maestro di scuola* in 1972, De Seta follows the odyssey of a Senegalese migrant, Assane, who, after traumatic crossings of desert and sea, arrives in Italy only to be taken to the *centro di prima accoglienza* in Lampedusa. Escaping from the police, Assane travels from Sicily to Turin, where he finally settles, thanks to the support of a volunteer association that provides language instruction and legal assistance to new migrants. He also makes friends with Caterina, one of the volunteers for the organization. With his good Italian, remarkable social skills, and a *permesso di soggiorno*, Assane seems, for a short while, to have easily fulfilled the migrant’s aspiration to successful integration in Italian society.

In the opening sequences of the film, De Seta depicts Assane’s journey from Senegal to Italy through a series of still photographs, apparently borrowed from Italian television newscasts.

Clip 7 – Opening sequence. De Seta shows a series of still photographs of refugees, displaced persons, and migrants, as they regularly appear in the Italian media.

Assane does not appear in these images, and the director’s objective in avoiding an immediate identification of his protagonist becomes clear when an explanatory note appears on screen: “Per fuggire carestie, calamità, guerre, fame, milioni di uomini di lingua, religioni, culture diverse emigrano dai paesi poveri ai paesi ricchi. Tutto ciò provoca disagio, sradicamento, discriminazione, ma talvolta anche dialogo, speranza.” Assane’s story, then, does not only belong to him, but is universalized to stand for all the men and women we briefly encounter in the opening scenes of the film.⁴² His journey across the desert, the sea, and the Italian Peninsula is an exemplary tale that aims to explore the possibility of solidarity and multiculturalism in Italian society, according to De Seta’s opening statement. It is soon clear, however, that this possibility is based on a notion of hospitality that reasserts the hegemony of the host over the guest, as we have seen in *Quando sei nato*, and is inevitably doomed to failure.

Assane’s status as the newest arrival in the community of Senegalese migrants renders him a guest, not only of Italy and Italians, but of his fellow migrants as well. He is a guest in the decrepit house where his cousin and his companions squat outside of Naples, until a drug-dealing

⁴⁰ Derrida, “Discussion,” 30, my italics.

⁴¹ Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality*, 11.

⁴² Perhaps because of De Seta’s broader objectives in the film, he never explores the very concrete causes of Assane’s migration from Senegal to Italy. Senegal’s economy relies heavily on fishing and agriculture, but as industrial fleets from the European Union (but also China and Russia), having exhausted the resources of their own fishing grounds, make commercial pacts with West African nations for fishing rights, overfishing has made it increasingly difficult for local fishermen to make a living and has forced them to seek work in Europe. For an informative account of the reasons of the Senegalese diaspora, see Sharon Lafraniere, “Europe Takes Africa’s Fish, and Boatloads of Migrants Follow,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2008, A1.

neighbor is involved in a violent confrontation and the police step in. He is also briefly a guest in another cousin's comfortable apartment near Florence. In each case, though, Assane chooses to leave. He leaves his first dwelling because he does not want to be involved with people whose conduct he considers immoral and irresponsible, and he rejects his cousin's hospitality when he realizes that she shares the apartment with her non-Muslim Italian boyfriend. In both cases, De Seta suggests that his motivation is moral and deeply grounded in his self-identification as an African Muslim, an identity that he feels is constantly threatened by the society in which he finds himself. The houses in which Assane is hosted, although they belong to his own people – his cousins, other fellow Senegalese – are ultimately inhospitable because their rule is imposed from the outside. By inhabiting them, their occupants either place themselves at the margins of law and society – as undocumented workers and squatters – or renounce their ethnic, cultural, and religious identity by adopting the mores of their host country. For Assane, the effort his cousin makes to prepare a Senegalese feast for him and wear traditional clothes is nothing but a masquerade that badly disguises her complete assimilation. In a way, Assane chooses homelessness as a gesture of recognition of the inauthenticity of each of these alternatives, which can be dwelling places but not home. Homelessness, as a choice in the face of the “created aura” of the homes of the destination country, is indeed a recurrent topos of migrant narratives, together with the image of luggage.⁴³ Both light and laden travel are important in migrant narratives because they signify the protagonist's need to come to terms with the spiritual, material, and even linguistic baggage he carries or inherits.⁴⁴ Assane never abandons the luggage he has brought from Senegal. Unlike his cousin, he does not want to forget who he is and where he comes from. In a way, his predicament derives precisely from this tension between his desire to become an integrated part of Italian society and his fear of losing his identity in the process.

If Assane's identity conflict is at the core of De Seta's exploration of the experience of migration, it also constitutes his film's theoretical weakness. De Seta establishes Assane's identity as profoundly rooted in ethnicity, in turn conceived as “una realtà culturale fondamentale, invariante e rigidamente deterministica.”⁴⁵ In the unwaveringly Muslim and Senegalese Assane, the representation of difference does not seem to leave space for the hybridity of postcolonial identity formations, constantly negotiating and redefining itself in dialogue with the migrant's destination society, other migrant experiences, and the cultures of provenance.⁴⁶ On the contrary, De Seta risks fetishizing the notion of a traditional, original identity, construing Assane's character as the type of the African immigrant. It is precisely this ethnicization or orientalizing of the migrant, Dal Lago warns, that leads to his subordination as the representative of a traditional culture that resists integration in the fictional universalism of Western multiculturalism.⁴⁷ Perhaps paradoxically, though, it is precisely the desire to return concrete substance to the protagonists of African migration that has moved De Seta to get behind the camera again after twenty years of inactivity. The elderly director laments that African migrants “sono oggi come delle ombre. Essendo stato io stesso prigioniero di guerra, so che

⁴³ Rose Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 175.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 173

⁴⁵ Dal Lago, *Non-persone*, 166.

⁴⁶ Cfr. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-9.

⁴⁷ Dal Lago, *Non-persone*, 167-170.

cos'è questa impossibile presenza.”⁴⁸ *Lettere dal Sahara* thus aims to explore the condition of the African immigrant as a non-person.

Assane's recurring nightmare of the death by drowning of a traveling companion during his journey across the sea makes visible his fear of becoming simply a shadow in the Italian public imaginary. The image also constitutes a powerful challenge to the notion of the *viaggio della speranza*, the voyage of hope, as Italian journalists like to call the migrants' crossings of the Mediterranean. If for Assane the waters of the Mediterranean mark the borders of a new, more hopeful existence, crossing these borders also implies the risk of losing his sense of an individual, dynamic self, replaced by a rhetorical, imagined identity imposed on him by Italian society. His companion's death at the hands of the smugglers, who throw their human load into the sea when sighted by the Maritime Police, acquires an existential layer of meaning, signifying the possibility of dying to oneself, of renouncing the possibility of negotiating one's own identity. Whereas in *Quando sei nato* Sandro's fall into the waters signals a baptismal moment of personal rebirth, as an opening of the character's consciousness to the existence of the other, in *Lettere dal Sahara* Assane's fall marks his first realization of the depersonalization of the migrant that systematically takes place in his country of destination.

The nightmare that obsesses Assane in his sleep becomes real when he, Caterina, and another young Senegalese are assaulted by a gang of Italian youth outside a club in Turin, at the end of a multi-ethnic musical celebration that would normally represent the culmination of his story of success. In trying to save the Italian woman from the racist violence of their assailants, Assane and his compatriot make the thugs chase them. Pursued by motorcycle, the two men are finally caught and savagely beaten, before being thrown into the Po river. The incident causes him to recall memories of the other traumatic fall into the water, in a vivid flash back that, in the film, superimposes images of the two events without distinguishing between them. As crossing the Mediterranean meant for Assane the opportunity to look for a better existence in Italy, now crossing this other stream of water coincides with a new resolution: returning to Senegal, in an act of resistance against the prejudices latent in Italian society. He can no longer accept Italian hospitality, with its conditionality and restrictions.

Clip 8 – The racist attack. As Assane and his friends are leaving a party, they are attacked by a gang of Turinese youth shouting racial slurs. After being savagely beaten, he saves himself when he falls into the nearby river Po.

Indeed, concrete examples of hospitality in the film reveal the inherent limits of Italian multiculturalism. Earlier in the narration, Caterina, the social worker who becomes Assane's friend after sponsoring his application for legal residency and offering him a job as a caretaker for her brother, invites him to her apartment to meet her brother and have dinner. Sharing a meal is, of course, a highly charged gesture of hospitality in many cultures. Attentive to religious difference, she is careful not to prepare pork for Assane, but she forgets that he does not drink alcohol. Assane graciously and simply refuses her offer of a glass of wine, but Caterina's gaffe shows how even the most sincere liberal effort to recognize and respect the difference of the

⁴⁸ Olivier Barlet, “*Lettre du Sahara* (Lettere dal Sahara) de Vittorio de Seta,” <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=5773> (accessed 1/5/2009).

other can never entirely account for it, especially when it challenges the most ingrained aspects of one's own cultural practices of hospitality, such as the offer of wine.⁴⁹

Clip 9 – Dinner at Caterina's. Caterina invites Assane over to meet her brother and have dinner. Although she is careful to make Assane feel at home, she forgets that, as a Muslim, he does not drink alcohol, and offers him some wine.

Caterina, like Lucia in *Quando sei nato*, is characterized as a nurturing, motherly figure. Despite the fact that the audience expects a romance to begin between her and Assane, the plot never takes that turn, and the two remain involved in a platonic relationship, which guarantees her hospitable, asexual role. Caterina's hospitality seems to offer a model, on the private level, of political practices; in the context of the Italian body politics, she represents the ideal Italian *madre patria* as it opens its doors and welcomes the stranger into her home. This model remains, however, based on a hospitality of invitation, as discussed above, rather than a hospitality of visitation. And in fact, although Assane finds refuge in Caterina's home when he needs medical care to recover from the injuries suffered during the xenophobic attack, as soon as he is able to walk on his own, he decides to leave, recognizing the conditional nature of the hospitality Italy is ready to extend to him. When Caterina optimistically talks about future opportunities (his wounds will heal, the scars will fade, he will be able to take a computer literacy course and find a better job), Assane replies simply, "I am tired, Caterina." With these words and his decision to leave, he unveils the inadequacies and limitations of Western multiculturalism, and of Italian practices of hospitality in particular.

Whereas De Seta does not actually visualize Assane's journey to Italy, he chronicles in detail his return to Senegal. And, for Assane, returning is indeed a more deeply life-changing experience. Initially, he chooses to tell his family that he is enjoying a period of rest after a workplace accident. The marks his attackers have left on his face mean nothing, he claims, but the angst he is ostensibly feeling makes his sister say she can no longer recognize him. De Seta clearly uses the scars on Assane's face as a metaphor for the inner trauma that he has suffered and that has changed him as a person. He will find a measure of peace only when he reconnects with his university mentor, Thierno. The former university professor (played by actor Thierno Ndiaye, who worked with famed Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène) has retired and returned to his native village to help his people organize artisanal and agricultural cooperatives, because, he declares, "se aspettiamo sempre l'aiuto dei bianchi, non ce la faremo mai." Indeed, the African sequences of the film show a very different Africa from the one that the European viewer is used to seeing in newscasts and documentary films. In these scenes, we do not see a land torn apart by ethnic conflicts, destroyed by famine, and riddled by poverty and disease. On the contrary, De Seta focuses his camera on farmers, fishermen, artisans, men and women engaged in productive activities that do not require "help from the whites." While the spectacle of violence and death to which the Western public is accustomed reinforces the racist notion of qualitatively different human groups,⁵⁰ De Seta's visual choices cause his audience to question those representations of the African continent. These sequences, thus, represent a challenge to Pierre-André Taguieff's "differential racism,"⁵¹ the dominant racism in the decolonized world, which highlights "the insurmountability of cultural differences . . . , the

⁴⁹ I must thank one of the anonymous reviewers of my article for suggesting a more nuanced reading of this scene, one that takes a less radical, but more accurate position vis-à-vis Assane's reaction to Italian hospitality.

⁵⁰ See Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 126, for a discussion of this differential racism.

⁵¹ Cfr. Pierre-André Taguieff's discussion in his *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and Its Doubles*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of MN P, 2001).

incompatibility of life-styles and traditions”⁵² over biological heredity.⁵³

In the same attempt to displace received ideas about life in Europe, Thierno invites Assane to share his personal tale of emigration with the village assembly. He wants the young people of the village to be aware of the realities of migration, of the painful challenges that it entails beyond the flashy images of success and affluence with which they are familiar. By sharing with his village his personal tale of humiliation and victimization, Assane provokes in his former professor an outburst of racial and cultural pride that serves as an indictment of Italian (and white) colonial mentality toward Africa and its people. His speech affirms Senegalese culture as opposed to European values, without falling into the trap of “reducing African discourse to a simple polemical affirmation of black humanity.”⁵⁴ Rather, he proposes a third way, an alternative to both alienation and integration in a foreign society, which echoes Homi Bhaba’s notion of the margin as a privileged position: “those at the margins may read their marginality as a positive, even superior stance from which to experience the modern nation.”⁵⁵ They may not *want* to be inscribed in the discourse of the nation except as aliens. By returning to Senegal, Assane asserts his right to remain alien to a society that has dramatically shown its inability to embrace cultural, religious, and racial diversity. Leaving Caterina’s home, like leaving his cousins’ homes earlier in the film, is Assane’s final affirmation of the right to refuse being a shadow, a nonperson. As his professor warns Assane and his fellow-villagers in his climactic speech, however, Senegalese emigrants should remember who they are, without ever feeling superior to whites, because this would mean that they have become like them, that they have assimilated their colonial mentality.

Clip 10 – The professor’s speech. Assane’s former mentor gives an impassioned speech against white colonization of Africa and racialization of its people, which concludes with an invitation to his community to resist white objectification.

The teacher’s address, as well as the comments pronounced by the leader of the Muslim community in Turin who visits Assane after he is injured, constitute De Seta’s response to neo-racism, a response based on the subaltern other’s self-awareness and affirmation of his difference as value. De Seta effectively gives the last word to Assane’s professor, thus empowering the other with speech. This is the case not only in the narrative, but also in the actual production of the film. As De Seta explains in the extras to the DVD version, his screenplay evolved during the shooting of the film; the main actors contributed greatly to the creation of dialogues that reflected what persons emigrating from Senegal would actually say and do in the particular situations portrayed. De Seta thus shared authorship of the film with his actors, who would also point out cultural inaccuracies in the way certain scenes were imagined.

The most substantial aspect of the power of speech that De Seta attributes to his characters is language itself. Most of the dialogue in the film is in Wolof, the language most widely spoken in Senegal, and in particular its Dakar version, a hybrid idiom that also incorporates some French, Arabic, and even English vocabulary. The adoption of Wolof as the main language of the film serves, first of all, to establish Assane as the film’s focalizer. De Seta’s realist aesthetics lead him

⁵² Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 21.

⁵³ The contradiction between De Seta’s non-idealized visualization of Senegal and his characterization of Assane is apparent, and explains a tendency by reviewers to describe *Lettere dal Sahara* as uneven in its effectiveness. Barlet addresses this point in his review, “*Lettre du Sahara* (Lettere dal Sahara) de Vittorio de Seta,” as does Deborah Young (“*Letters from the Sahara* (Lettere dal Sahara),” *Variety*, 16 October 2006.

<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117931452.html?categoryid=31&cs=1> (accessed 1/15/2009).

⁵⁴ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 12.

⁵⁵ George, *The Politics of Home*, 189.

to use the subjective and semi-subjective camera with great discretion, in order to avoid drawing attention to its mediating presence between viewer and the story on screen. De Seta, thus, uses language to empower Assane as “narrator.” Through the adoption of his native language, he allows Assane to tell his story quite literally in his own voice. De Seta does not dub the extended dialogues in Wolof – as is common practice in Italy when a film is shot in another language. Rather, in accordance with the aesthetics of *docu-fiction* that he has pursued in his socially-oriented films, beginning with *Diario di un maestro di scuola* (1970), he uses subtitles, which add a documentary dimension to the fictional film and make it more verisimilar. Subtitles also function as visual markers of linguistic difference, highlighting the gap of incomprehension that separates the Italian public and African immigrants, both on screen and in their daily encounters. In addition, because subtitles are uncomfortable to read for an Italian audience accustomed to dubbed dialogues, they create a visual experience of defamiliarization, which makes it impossible to erase racial, cultural, and religious difference. Graziella Parati makes a similar point in her analysis of *Walo Fendo*, an internationally produced film by the Senegalese director Saidou Moussa Ba, which is also shot mainly in Wolof and Pulaar. She argues that Ba’s choice “radically changes the terms of the cultural relationship between North and South and shifts the attention from the linguistic hybridizations brought by colonial languages to a reversal of roles.”⁵⁶ In both Ba’s and De Seta’s films, this reversal is visualized in the confinement of the translation into a European language to a marginal position on the cinematic screen.⁵⁷ Thus, language is revealed to be “a place of struggle.”⁵⁸ An important difference between the two projects is, however, that Ba works within a linguistic framework that is familiar to him as a Senegalese (although his native language is Pulaar), whereas De Seta’s choice to shoot in Wolof effectively pushes him, as a European, to the margins of the narrative. He is no longer the author, but rather the facilitator, of Assane’s narration. De Seta thus gives up ownership of the film and shares its authorship with the actors, as the most faithful *raconteurs* of their own stories; to return to the image of hospitality, he renounces his authority over his cinematic territory and accepts the rule and the language of his guests. That this position of infinite welcome is concretely untenable is proven in the reemergence of the director’s voice in the professor’s speech as well as in the shorter diatribes by the imam and the priest.⁵⁹

Silence, rather than speech, dominates the film with which I would like briefly to conclude this discussion of Mediterranean crossings in Italian migration cinema: *Io, l’altro*, by the Tunisian writer and first-time director Mohsen Melliti. More than in the other films I have discussed, in *Io, l’altro* the Mediterranean figures explicitly as a privileged space of encounter,

⁵⁶ Parati, *Migration Italy*, 123.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 146.

⁵⁹ In this third, but centrally positioned, speech, a Catholic priest chastises his parishioners for their racial and ethnic prejudice toward the migrants living in their neighborhood. The priest, who emphasizes the commonalities between Islam’s and Christianity’s forms of monotheism in his address, remains somewhat marginal in the film. On the one hand, he represents the important role played by Catholic organizations, such as Caritas, in offering services to migrants; on the other, he gives voice to De Seta’s own Catholic humanism, which informs the film. Reviewers have observed how the use of these explicit, didactic speeches weakens the effectiveness of De Seta’s documentary approach. Barlet in particular, considers the film “a bit too spoken, made to say something” (my translation). I believe that the main limitation of De Seta’s film (and of most Italian migration cinema) lies in his use of speeches. The long addresses by figures of (male) authority, as well as the representation of Assane as the “perfect” migrant, undermine the director’s adhesion to documentary realism and make him occasionally assume a tone of pedantic didacticism.

conflict, and discovery of both self and other. Except for the opening sequence, in fact, the film is entirely shot on a fishing boat that, due to a mechanical breakdown, is drifting while waiting for assistance. Stranded on the boat are two old friends, the Tunisian Youssef and the Sicilian Giuseppe, who have been working together for ten years and are “like brothers.”⁶⁰ In a reversal of the usual representations of Italian and migrant identities, Giuseppe is a simple man, while Youssef’s character is more worldly, educated, and well traveled. The fact that Giuseppe helped Youssef upon his arrival in Italy and their many years at sea together have created a familiar bond between them. This bond is severed when the radio announces an international manhunt to catch an Islamic terrorist who is considered the mastermind behind the 2004 Madrid train bombings. That the alleged terrorist is also named Youssef, along with some racist remarks made by a fellow fisherman on the radio, and finally the discovery of a suspicious newspaper clipping in Youssef’s pocket, make Giuseppe fear that his old friend may, in fact, be this same dangerous terrorist. The confrontation that follows is destined to end tragically, with the death of Youssef and the realization that ancient prejudices and irrational fears have moved Giuseppe to kill his brother and thus, in a way, himself.

A third character of this “metaphysical drama,” as it has been called by reviewers, is the Mediterranean Sea, which does not simply offer a beautiful backdrop to the tragedy unfolding on board, but participates in the development of the narrative. In search of more bountiful fishing grounds, the two men constantly cross the maritime border between Italian and Tunisian territorial waters, literally placing themselves in a borderline position that enables and provokes the confrontation between them. As Cassano writes, “la parola *frontiera* viene dal latino *frons, frontis*, ‘fronte.’ Le frontiere sono i luoghi in cui i paesi e gli uomini che li abitano si incontrano e stanno di fronte.”⁶¹ The movement of the waves forces the two characters constantly to shift positions – between fear and trust, vindictive thoughts and a desire to reconcile, anger and laughter – as they try to decipher the meanings of events and words broadcast on the radio and tossed between them. The Mediterranean is no longer the tourist attraction we recognize in Gabriele Salvatores’ *Mediterraneo* or Michael Radford’s *Il postino*, where the beauty of the seascape suggested the need for a more authentic and harmonious Italian-Mediterranean identity. On the contrary, for Melliti the natural dimension of the Mediterranean coincides with the possibility of confronting one’s unconscious fear of the other, grounded precisely in the other’s utter otherness. The Mediterranean is thus also an existential space, which acquires a metaphysical dimension in its transcendence of geographic and national confines. It is in this space that Giuseppe realizes how ultimately irreducible is his difference with Youssef. As many joking exchanges show, despite their long friendship, Giuseppe does not entirely understand Youssef or his mentality. Although in the past he was able to accept difference as an essential part of their relationship, now this experience only generates the suspicion and distrust that haunt him in their last fishing expedition together.

Melliti complicates his uncovering of the layers of fear and doubt that separate Giuseppe from Youssef by introducing another character in the story: the radio. The voice of the radio provides the fishing outing with its soundtrack. Switching from Arabic pop music to Italian melodic songs, to RAI newscasts, the radio incarnates the intersection of languages and cultural

⁶⁰ Another film that chooses the relationship between two fishermen, one from North Africa and the other from Southern Italy, to discuss issues of difference and identity is Vincenzo Marra’s *Tornando a casa* (2001). I thank Anna Botta of Smith College for introducing this film to me in a presentation given on April 12, 2008 at Franklin & Marshall College.

⁶¹ Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, 51.

perspectives that the liquid surface of the Mediterranean makes possible. It also problematizes the view of the Mediterranean as a utopian space of multiculturalism and peaceful diversity. The newscasts, in particular, precipitate the tragic plot, since it is by listening to a journalist's description of the presumed terrorist's whereabouts and way of life that Giuseppe becomes afraid of his friend. Through Youssef, who scolds Giuseppe for having failed to see that what was relevant about the newspaper clipping in his pocket was not the article profiling some terrorist organizer, but the article on the reverse, about a Tunisian soccer player in Italy, Melliti reminds us of our responsibilities in receiving and decoding news and information from the media.

Clip 11 – Distrust on board. Youssef confronts Giuseppe's sudden distrust of him and reveals that the newspaper clipping in his pocket is not about the Al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri, but rather about a soccer player in the Italian C-league, who comes from Youssef's town in Tunisia. Youssef warns Giuseppe of the danger of misinterpretation in communication.

We should deconstruct and interpret the language of the media of global communication, rather than being passive recipients of distorted information. Melliti also offers a critique of the sensationalist approach of Italian media, in particular, with its unethical appeal to the irrational side, which suffocates any attempt at critical analysis. Whereas in *Mediterraneo* and *Il postino* the Mediterranean appears to be a locus of innocence and peace (with certain exceptions, for history forces itself upon these Edenic landscapes, too), Melliti shows us how neat distinctions between nature and culture are no longer possible in an era of globalization, where the manipulating power of mass media can reach people in the most remote places. In the case of Youssef and Giuseppe, the media effectively prevent Giuseppe and Youssef from recognizing, in each other, the mirror image of their own individual selves, by introducing between them a gap of incomprehension and fear that is bridged only by Giuseppe's tragic gesture. Only in contemplating his own gaze reflected in Youssef's dead eyes does Giuseppe realize that his friend was for him "I, the Other."

Clip 12 – The murder. When Giuseppe, still in the daze of a drug-induced heavy sleep, sees Youssef throwing overboard the body of a dead woman they had rescued from the sea, he attacks him and wounds him with a knife. Youssef dies in his arms, leaving him utterly alone.

Among the films I have examined, Melliti's is the only one directed by a foreign-born filmmaker. His perspective, in many ways, is an essential one, getting to the core of the question of multiculturalism in a global society and representing it as an existential struggle to accept the other. In this sense, Melliti's film constitutes a synthesis of the issues raised in the other films, from the discovery of a borderline identity for Sandro in *Quando sei nato*, to the right of the other to remain such in *Lettere dal Sahara*. In all these films, the Mediterranean Sea plays a central function, placing at the center "il confine, la linea di divisione e di contatto tra gli uomini e le civiltà."⁶² Contemplating this *limen* of Europe and the West, the Mediterranean, may not coincide with a search for the fullness of an origin, but with the experience of one's own contingency.⁶³ I would like to suggest that in viewing these films one should not seek definitive solutions to the problems of immigration, but rather experience the limits of one's own – and one's country's – hospitality. It is precisely this tension that, according to Derrida, makes the perfectibility of laws and social practices, if not a political reality, at least a possibility.

⁶² Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*, xxiv.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

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