

## Island Hopping, Liquid Materiality, and the Mediterranean Cinema of Emanuele Crialese<sup>1</sup>

Elena Margarita Past  
Wayne State University

### Abstract

The history of the “mare nostrum” is a long history of the entanglement of human and more-than-human actors. Three films directed by the Italian Emanuele Crialese, *Respiro: Grazia’s Island* (2002), *Golden Door* (2006), and *Terraferma* (2011), recount stories of encounters and collisions on Mediterranean islands, where the challenges of political, cultural, and ecological cohabitation are intensified. Drawing on theories of material ecocriticism, this article argues that in this trio of films, the Mediterranean sea is not simply a picturesque liquid border. It is instead a generative space that participates in the very process of constituting the narratives, even while the films add another layer to the rich geo-archaeological palimpsest of the region.

*Keywords:* Emanuele Crialese, *Respiro*, Nuovomondo, *Terraferma*, Italian cinema, Mediterranean cinema, Material ecocriticism, Lampedusa e Linosa.

### Resumen

La historia del “mare nostrum” es una larga historia la implicación de actores humanos y más-que-humanos. Tres películas dirigidas por el italiano Emanuele Crialese, *Respiro* (2002), *Nuovomondo* (2006, *Nuevo mundo*), y *Terraferma* (2011), cuentan historias de encuentros y colisiones en islas mediterráneas, donde las dificultades de la convivencia política, cultural, y ecológica se intensifican. Apelando las teorías de la ecocrítica material, este artículo sostiene que en estas tres películas el mar Mediterráneo no es solamente una frontera líquida pintoresca, sino un espacio generativo que participa en el proceso de constituir las narrativas. Por su parte, las películas añaden una capa al palimpsesto geo-arqueológico de la región.

*Palabras clave:* Emanuele Crialese, *Respiro*, Nuevo Mundo, *Terraferma*, cine italiano, cine mediterráneo, ecocrítica material, Lampedusa e Linosa.

---

<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks to Deborah Amberson, Mariana Past, Thibaut Schilt, and the anonymous reviewer for *Ecozon@* for offering important feedback on this article.

“The Mediterranean, the blue sea par excellence, ‘the great sea’ of the Hebrews, ‘the sea’ of the Greeks, the ‘mare nostrum’ of the Romans, bordered by orange-trees, aloes, cacti, and sea-pines; embalmed with the perfume of the myrtle, surrounded by rude mountains, saturated with pure and transparent air, but incessantly worked by underground fires; a perfect battlefield in which Neptune and Pluto still dispute the empire of the world! It is upon these banks, and on these waters, says Michelet, that man is renewed in one of the most powerful climates of the globe.”

Jules Verne  
(*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, 202)

In Jules Verne’s classic adventure tale, the enigmatic Captain Nemo lauds the sea, “the vast reservoir of Nature” (57), and decrees: “The globe began with sea, so to speak; and who knows if it will not end with it? [...] Ah! Sir, live—live in the bosom of the waters!” (57-8). Yet on the sea’s surface, and in particular in the Mediterranean, the haunted Captain feels confined, “cramped between the close shores of Africa and Europe” (203). To live in the bosom of the waters of the Mediterranean means to live the tension of a long, complex, cohabitation between human and nonhuman inhabitants, to experience a form of hybridity apparently disconcerting to the dominating Captain. Such a relationship points towards Roberto Marchesini’s definition of posthumanist thought, which:

inaugurates a different interpretation of knowledge, no longer as domination of the world but rather as conjugation with the world, which means that every process of knowledge increases our level of contamination, dissolves us further into the nonhuman, increases our degree of anthropo-decentrism, unites us ever more with the destinies of other entities. (24-25, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

In the Mediterranean, with particular force, conjunction and contamination have linked the destinies of human and “more-than-human” inhabitants for tens of thousands of years.<sup>3</sup> This contamination intensifies in the region’s liquid-bounded littoral zones,

---

<sup>2</sup> The Italian original reads: “inaugura una diversa interpretazione del sapere, non più come dominio sul mondo bensì come coniugazione al mondo, il che equivale a dire che ogni processo di conoscenza aumenta il nostro livello di contaminazione, ci stempera maggiormente nel non umano, accresce il nostro grado di antropocentrismo, ci rende sempre più solidali con i destini delle altre entità.”

<sup>3</sup> “What characterizes ecosystems and habitats much more in the Mediterranean region than in any other region in the world is their long-lasting common history with humans as they have been designed and redesigned by them for almost 10,000 years in the eastern part of the basin and around 8,000 years in its western part” (Blondel and Médail 616).

where the human population “is growing at an unprecedented rate” (Blondel and Médail 616).

The present article posits the significance of a Mediterranean ecology of connectedness as a means for understanding the posthumanist qualities of this intricately structured basin. My work attempts to think through, as Stacy Alaimo proposes, “the ways in which nature, the environment, and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices” (7-8). Three films directed by Emanuele Crialese and filmed on three southern Italian islands allow me to explore this notion: *Respiro: Grazia’s Island* (2002), *Golden Door* (2006), and *Terraferma* (2011). The films’ moves to the surface of the sea and towards its shores create a space characterized by encounters and collisions, a space marked by the “heterogeneous relationship” of naturecultures (as Donna Haraway formulates it), or the “polyform relating of people, animals, soil, water, and rocks” (Haraway 24). The tensions that result from these encounters stem from the political, cultural, and ecological realities of the hybrid Mediterranean, making the sea itself a text, what philosopher Serenella Iovino calls “a site of narrativity, a storied matter” (“Stories” 451). The sea is also, however, a generative space that participates in the very process of constituting the films: the liquid material agency of the sea flows through and shapes the narratives, even while the films add another layer to the rich geo-archaeological palimpsest of the region.<sup>4</sup>

### Aliens of the deep

In order to contemplate a contrasting range of cinematic relationships to the world’s oceans and seas, this line of inquiry momentarily follows James Cameron in his historic dive on March 25, 2012, into the depths of the Mariana Trench.<sup>5</sup> Cramped into a tiny space in a radically-conceived vertical submersible built in secret in Australia, Cameron spent approximately three hours at the bottom of the trench shooting 3-D footage of a landscape he described, in an interview with Renee Montagne, as “sterile” and “barren” (NPR). Cameron explained that the Challenger Deep, the part of the trench into which he dove, is part of the “last unexplored frontier on our planet” (NPR), and a National Geographic News article hails Cameron as the “first human to reach the 6.8-

---

<sup>4</sup> In an essay meditating on whether the idea of Mediterranean cinema offers a useful space of analysis, Brian Bergen-Aurand suggests shifting focus from consideration of national space to analyses of “production, distribution, exhibition, consumption and reception,” rightly noting that films can “inhabit multiple locations” (273). My focus on the material entanglements of the narratives and the locations of filming constitutes one angle on this question.

<sup>5</sup> James Cameron’s career as director, which spans more than three decades, has long been focused on the frontiers of space and the ocean’s depths, and on blurred boundaries at the border of science and fiction. From *The Abyss* (1989) to *Titanic* (1997), many films have focused specifically on the sea. His filmography also includes a number of deep-sea documentaries, including *Aliens of the Deep* (2005) and *Ghosts of the Abyss* (2003). Cubitt notes that a deep sea creature inspired Cameron’s *Alien* movies (54) and discusses the dives for *Titanic*, suggesting that the director worked to “humanise a deep sea phenomenon” (56-57).

mile-deep (11-kilometer-deep) undersea valley solo” (Than).<sup>6</sup> The expedition’s physician claimed admiringly that, “He’s down there on behalf of everybody else on this planet [...]. There are seven billion people who can’t go, and he can. And he’s aware of that” (qtd. in Than).

In order to fulfill his role as documentarian of the deep, Cameron outfitted his expedition with an 8-foot tower of LED lights and 3-D video cameras, and upon re-emerging from the depths, he was compared to legendary explorer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau *and* to the avatars of his own fictional film production. Proliferating reports of the dive thus focused on two major points—the uniqueness of the journey and its cinematic qualities—insisting that exploring and documenting on film are complementary tasks of the contemporary frontiersman. Cameron underlined his double sense of responsibility while diving: “I think it’s an explorer’s job to go and be at the remote edge of human experience, and then come back and tell that story” (NPR).

Yet telling the story of the sea is not, of course, an innocent enterprise. Casting Cameron as humanity’s documentarian means that there are technical concerns to be considered, concerns not new for the filmmaker. For the fiction film *The Abyss* (1989), Cameron chose to film in an abandoned nuclear power station in central South Carolina, where a containment tank was filled with 7.5 million gallons of water. Filming in the open sea, explained Cameron to an interviewer, “would have posed too many problems’: the anchoring of boats, potential hurricanes, poor visibility, sharks, and ‘teaching fish to act” (qtd. in Maurer 14). Initial reports from the Mariana Trench feature photos of Cameron and his vertical submarine, but very few of his “findings,” suggesting that the documentary images are either proprietary or require further mediation before being released.

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi has emphasized the veiled complexities inherent in films purporting to present a view of “pristine nature” (13), citing ecocritical studies that think through the material relationship between nature and technology when “frontiers” are documented:

Cubitt focuses much attention on the dual function of technology, arguing on the one hand that technologies can permit communication between human and natural worlds and thus should not be seen as mere instruments of domination over nature or other humans. On the other hand, he points to the paradox of using sophisticated technologies to define a ‘pristine nature,’ citing as examples the highly complex and sophisticated lighting techniques and digital grading processes used by David Attenborough in his eight-part natural history of the ocean, *The Blue Planet*. What enables audiences to see the darkness of the ocean at eight hundred meters deep, or the bioluminescence of certain species, also reveals how ‘scientific realism is often a matter of readjusting the unobservable so that it can be observed’ (54), a comment that echoes Bousé’s contention [...] that, in film, nature is often molded ‘to fit the medium.’ (12-13)

---

<sup>6</sup> Although technically true, these assertions somewhat diminish the significance of a manned voyage to Challenger Deep completed in 1960s by a pair of divers, Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard, and further emphasize the celebration of the solitary frontiersman in Cameron’s case.

Cameron's dive thus brings into fascinating relief a number of critical points related to the material and environmental implications of filmmaking and the sea. The filmmaker's emphasis on seeing the "last unexplored frontier," of course, implies as a proprietary corollary that the frontier ends with him: being the *first* to explore a place means that he will be the *last* to have this privilege. Although his voyage promises to provide, as Cubitt recognizes in the *Blue Planet*, an educational, entertaining, informative mediation between viewers and the deep sea, the unique technologies and the narratives that describe them all point to ideals of progress, triumph, and human exceptionalism. Further, the language of the frontier, like the language of early nature writing, creates a "chasm between 'wild' and 'cultivated' and as a result between nature and the human" (Iovino, "Material" 57). Contemporary visions of ecology find that these kinds of narratives risk leaving us isolated in the intellectual shallows of a humanist model.<sup>7</sup> Alaimo explains that:

A posthuman environmental ethic denies the human the sense of separation from the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality, thrusting us into an evolutionary narrative which, in Elisabeth Grosz's terms, 'pushes toward a future with no real direction, no promise of any particular result, no guarantee of progress or improvement, but with every indication of proliferation and transformation.' (157)

In contrast to Cameron's deep sea cinema, and with what can be seen as a polemical position regarding "frontiers," Crialese's filmmaking returns us to the surface and the shores of the Mediterranean sea, where millennia of layers entangling the human and the "more-than-human" underscore the importance of retelling stories, revisiting familiar locations, and re-positing the connectedness of being.

### **Mediterranean entanglement**

"It was plain to me that this Mediterranean, enclosed in the midst of these countries which he wished to avoid, was distasteful to Captain Nemo. [...] Here he had no longer that independence and that liberty of gait which he had when in the open seas, and his Nautilus felt itself cramped between the close shores of Africa and Europe."

Jules Verne  
(*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, 202-3)

---

<sup>7</sup> Alaimo elaborates on the borders constructed by the humanist tradition: "Humanism, capitalist individualism, transcendent religions, and utilitarian conceptions of nature have labored to deny the rather biophysical, yet also commonsensical realization that we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous borders" (Alaimo 156).

Like the intrepid Captain Nemo, Cameron might feel uncomfortable in the Mediterranean, where the frontiersman has no place to go. The Mediterranean contains “very deep basins” that are up to four kilometers deep (Rohling et al 33), but these of course would offer little challenge to the pilot of the Deepsea Challenger whose dive took him eleven kilometers below the surface. To speak of the Mediterranean region is to invoke a contested term, which can describe alternately the countries bordering the sea, the Mediterranean watershed, or a zone defined by climate and in particular where the olive is cultivated, among other things (King et al, “Unity” 1-4). Mediterranean tension also exists at a geological level, since the region “occupies the convergence zone between two major tectonic plates, Africa and Europe, with a third, Arabia, pressing from the east” (Stewart and Morhange 385). At the encounter of three continents, the Mediterranean Sea creates assemblages of environmental, geopolitical, and cultural forces, but also collisions between them.

A landlocked, semi-enclosed sea with an estimated 46,000 miles of coastline, the Mediterranean bears everywhere traces of its long cohabitation with humans. According to geographer Jamie Woodward, this entanglement provides opportunities and challenges for those studying the physical geography of the region:

The region is unique because of the very early and widespread impact of humans in landscape and ecosystem change—and the richness of the archaeological and geological archives in which it is chronicled. [...] However, disentangling the human impact from other drivers of change is not straightforward. (167)

When studying the sea in particular, “geoarchaeological proxies” or cultural markers found along shorelines, such as cave paintings, Roman *piscinae* (fish ponds) and ancient harbors help geographers reconstruct sea-level changes over “recent” millennia (Stewart and Morhange 394-5). This interconnectedness of Mediterranean landscape and human past, and its relevance for ecologists and geographers, resonates with Roberto Esposito’s recent work historicizing Italian philosophy as *pensiero vivente*, “living thought.” Arguing that Italian philosophy has in large part avoided both the transcendental and linguistic turns, Esposito claims that, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, life, politics, and history have constituted the principal axes of philosophical inquiry:

Opting—rather than for soul-searching [*l’interrogazione della coscienza*] or for interior dialogue—for entanglement [*coinvolgimento*] with the external world, Italian philosophy seems to always be at the point of exceeding its boundaries, but by way of that excess, it manages to draw on a horizon that otherwise would remain blocked. (13)<sup>8</sup>

Citing Deleuze, Esposito then makes a case for a “geophilosophy,” which is not a “geographically determined space” (and certainly not a fixed national area), but rather a “group of environmental, linguistic, and tonal characteristics” that lead to an

---

<sup>8</sup> All translations of Esposito’s *Pensiero vivente* are my own. The original Italian reads: “optando – anziché per l’interrogazione della coscienza o per il dialogo interiore – per un coinvolgimento col mondo esterno, la filosofia italiana appare sempre sul punto di oltrepassare i propri confini, ma attraverso tale eccedenza riesce ad attingere un orizzonte che altrimenti le resterebbe precluso.”



unmistakable style of thought (14). Serenella Iovino has argued that the “new materialisms” of contemporary ecological thought react against “some radical trends of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking,” which dematerialize our world “into linguistic and social constructions” (Iovino “Stories,” 452). Esposito’s argument suggests that in Italian thought, matter never ceased to play a central role. In other words, thinking was never detached from the material world.

In both Italian philosophy and in the Mediterranean setting—inextricably intertwined, while still permitting Deleuzian lines of flight—there thus lies a challenge, and an interesting possibility for an ecocritical focus on Italy. As Patrick Barron reminds us in the introduction to the anthology *Italian Environmental Literature*, although there is “plenty of beautiful ‘wilderness’” in Italy, “in the Italian language there is no equivalent of the word” (xxv). Italy, Barron states, is “rife with overlaying human and nonhuman signs of residence and alteration, even if at first glance particular landscapes appear to be the clear domain of either nature or culture” (xxiv). It is a place where it is perhaps more difficult to forget than in the Mariana Trench that, as Alaimo argues, “the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world” (11).

In a trio of films, Crialesse has shown himself to be obsessed, like Cameron, with the world of salt water, but a world dramatically different from the one envisioned by the Canadian director in his fiction films and real-life adventures. The films’ constant point of reference is the Mediterranean Sea, where they hop between islands large and small: *Respiro* takes place on the island of Lampedusa, *Golden Door* (in part) in Sicily, *Terraferma* on the island of Linosa. The cultural density of the Mediterranean setting, and Crialesse’s relationship to liquid materiality, allow no room for the kind of explorer experience favored by Cameron; in the Mediterranean, it could be argued, there are no unexplored frontiers.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Mediterranean cohabitation becomes the basis for a form of environmentalism that, like the Italian philosophy described by Esposito, is living, shifting, deterritorializing, and yet (or, actually, as a result) closely tied to place.

All three films recount stories involving the challenges of island life. *Respiro* tells the story of a woman, Grazia, whose atypical behavior leads her fellow islanders to plan to send her to a “mainland” clinic where she can be cured; she rebels against this exile by running away from home and hiding in a cave. *Golden Door*, set at the end of the nineteenth century, follows the Mancuso family from inland Sicily to the island’s shores, where they will depart on the long voyage to America, an Atlantic crossing that constitutes the central part of the film. The film’s final section depicts their arrival on the decidedly un-Mediterranean Ellis Island, where they undergo tests of “intelligence” to determine whether they are fit to be Americans. *Terraferma* traces the lives of a family of fishermen who live on an island where the fishing industry is in crisis. The island has instead become a tourist haven for two months each summer, a reality that conflicts with the arrival of boatloads of immigrants making the relatively short but

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, Blondel and Médail observe that, “of all the mediterranean-type regions in the world, the Mediterranean basin harbours the lowest percentage (c.5%) of natural vegetation considered to be in ‘pristine condition’” (615).

hazardous crossing from northern Africa. The fishermen rescue an Ethiopian woman and her son, becoming perilously enmeshed in the contemporary politics of immigration to southern Italy.

My descriptions of these three films take a typically anthropocentric approach that implies the centrality of the story about human protagonists. Yet a closer look at the films reveals that, although humans occupy central positions in the narrative, they are not the exclusive protagonists. Acknowledging that human and nonhuman nature “share certain qualities and interests,” this trio of films demonstrates, as ecocinema can according to Willoquet-Maricondi, that “our survival interests are not in opposition to those of nonhuman nature, but are interconnected and interdependent with it” (47). Cinema, it might be argued, is a site where an anthropocentric view is in any case limited by the material realities of the medium. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell asserts that, “Whether individual or social, being doesn’t stop at the border of the skin” (23). Buell explains that the term “ecology” “derives etymologically from the Greek *oikos*, household, and in modern usage refers both to ‘the study of biological interrelationships and the flow of energy through organisms and inorganic matter’” (13). Cinema is an undeniably hybrid form: the energy flows that pulse through a cinematic production physically encompass human, animal, vegetable, mineral, and technological subjects and substances. Films foreground real, material places not only in their narratives, but also prior to their narratives, in choices made regarding production. From a film’s conception significant choices are made about how a film crew will interact with the world, as for example whether to film on location or in a studio, whether to film where the narrative takes place or in an analogous environment, or whether to use ambient or artificially-enhanced lighting. A film thus shows us, as Adrian Ivakhiv has argued, “real objects, artifacts from the material world: landscapes and places, mortal bodies and organisms, caught in the grip of the cycle of living, dying, and decomposition” (132). The collective of humans, nonhuman animals, places, and technologies that result in a film are evidence of our posthumanist existence, or as Cary Wolfe suggests, of “the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world” (xv).

Crialesse’s films, the result of long months spent on the three islands on the part of cast and crew, are in fact deeply entangled with the material reality of the Mediterranean, a reality that could be considered in specifically mediatic terms, thinking through the environmental impact and ethics of media technology.<sup>10</sup> My ecocritical approach in this study, however, considers the relationship that the discursive cinematic worlds have with material space.<sup>11</sup> Iovino argues that “ecocriticism seeks to propose a reading of literary texts as a vehicle for ‘educating people to see’ contemporary ecological tension” (Iovino, *Ecologia* 14, my translation and emphasis). Her focus on

---

<sup>10</sup> See Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, “Ecological Ethics and Media Technology.”

<sup>11</sup> Scenes in inland Sicily were in fact shot on location, but scenes on the Atlantic and Ellis Island were filmed on a sound stage in Buenos Aires, Argentina. See Oppenheimer, “Chasing the American Dream,” for more on the filming of *Golden Door*.



vision in this description of ecocriticism evokes the power of cinema, and Crialesse's cinema is in fact particularly adept at envisioning the ecological tension of the Mediterranean. Yet as the products of a period of intense cohabitation, their creation exceeds the realm of vision. From windy coastlines to undulating seas, the mobile land- and seascapes of the islands are filmed—inevitably but also evidently—even while their shifting forms generate the films' narratives, embodying the fact that, as Iovino argues, "the true dimension of matter is not that of a static being, but of a generative becoming" ("Stories" 453).

*Respiro* begins with a white title sequence that fades into an overexposed shot of sun-drenched rocks, glaring in their brightness. A boy appears in close-up on the left side of the frame, shoots a slingshot, and then fades, with the landscape, back into the blinding white. The first image in *Golden Door* depicts a massive, lichen-covered rock, over the top of which two members of the Mancuso family climb. A subsequent long shot from above pans away from the climbers, who eventually disappear in the distance, part of the rock-covered slope. In both cases, human protagonists emerge only after the landscape is framed, and then disappear into it. The film thus shows the human co-protagonists in the process of being constituted by the landscape. As part of the frame but neither consistently at its center nor easily discernable, these human actors become "ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (Alaimo 2).

The third of the films, *Terraferma*, ironically (given the title), begins underwater, and immerses viewers in the strong liquid presence that flows across Crialesse's cinema. An underwater shot looks up toward the surface of the sea, and gradually a boat moves into the frame. A series of distinctive thumps accompanies the dropping of a net into the water, and the net slowly opens to occupy the entire left-hand side of the screen, dividing the frame almost exactly in two (although the liquid boundary is an undulating one). The net that opens *Terraferma* recalls a dramatic scene with a net in the earlier *Respiro*, when Grazia, frustrated with her husband, walks off with a fishing net draped over her head and twirls to wrap herself in it. The image of the net becomes a poetic im-sign for Crialesse, a visually overdetermined symbol that evokes human dependence on the sea, human entanglement with marine life, and the intensity of relationship for any life—human or nonhuman—so closely bound to another.<sup>12</sup> Both porous and perilous, livelihood and instrument of death, the net encompasses the paradoxes of island existence.

### **Borders, crisis, and cohabitation in *Respiro* and *Terraferma***

*Terraferma's* underwater beginning draws immediate attention to liquid materiality, and to the Mediterranean ecological, social, and political tensions that drive

---

<sup>12</sup> The concept of the "im-sign" or image sign stems from Pier Paolo Pasolini's theory of "The Cinema of Poetry," and is, according to Pasolini, an image taken from the infinite, chaotic grammar of visual images. These images include "gestures, environment, dream, memory" (170, my emphasis), and like the Mediterranean space Crialesse's cinema describes, "belong to a common patrimony" (171).

all three films. The liquid borders on the edges of the island spaces are particularly porous, particularly shifting, and thus particularly interesting ways to challenge fixed notions of nation, selfhood, and ecological identity. Lampedusa and Linosa, the two islands on which *Respiro* and *Terraferma* are set, respectively, belong to the region of Sicily and the province of Agrigento. Geographically, Lampedusa is part of the African continent, and closer to Tunisia than to Italy; Linosa is volcanic, but Lampedusa is not (King and Kolodny 241). Together, Lampedusa and Linosa form one township, Italy's southernmost, which has become one of the "principal gateways for immigrants attempting to enter 'EU'rope" (Kitagawa 201). Migrant arrivals in 2008 reached 30,657, although the two islands have only about 6,160 inhabitants (Kitagawa 201). A town that spans two islands; an Italian existence nearer to Africa; a Sicilian province more than 200 kilometers from Sicily; a population outnumbered by migrants. Lampedusa and neighboring Linosa and their relationship to the surrounding sea complicate notions of national, regional, and personal space.<sup>13</sup>

The films spend significant time physically on the shores of the sea, on the edges of these borderlands that link Italy geologically to the rest of the Mediterranean. Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," or the "literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature" (2), is vividly enacted in the transitional spaces between land and sea. Beaches, docks, and shorelines are liminal spaces that become important points of focus for the camera. From the very opening frames, and in significant moments throughout *Respiro* and *Terraferma*, long shots and extreme long shots frame land and sea together, capturing the mobile border between the two ecosystems where erosion, evaporation and tides create a constantly changing landscape, and where the encounter of two ecosystems also forms a space of both heightened biodiversity and fragility. Coastal zones, precious ecological spaces, are in the Mediterranean intensely used by human inhabitants. From 213 million people in 1950, the population of the Mediterranean region is expected to reach 600 million in 2050, with most of these human inhabitants located along the coasts. Geographers Blondel and Médail warn that:

coastal habitats and ecosystems are [...] increasingly under threat. Rapid changes in land use practices in the twentieth century, especially over the last four decades, have had disastrous consequences for coastal ecosystems where more than 60 per cent of people live [...]. In Italy, 70 percent of the coast is already urbanized. (621-22)

As a consequence of global warming, sea level change, changes in precipitation, increased frequency and intensity of storms, soil erosion, and diminished soil fertility are expected to affect coastal zones and their inhabitants with particular force (Georgas). There is "often a correlation between the biodiversity of natural systems and

---

<sup>13</sup> Kitagawa invokes a liquid metaphor to describe the political role of Lampedusa, from which immigrants have been deported to Africa: "The camp at Lampedusa appeared to play the role of border at the outer-edge of the cartographically imagined Italian territory; as it were, of a 'breakwater' aimed at stemming the immigrant flood" (210).

the abundance of people” (Blondel and Médail 615), which means that coastal lands are of critical importance for reasons human and more-than-human.

The effects of the urbanization of the coasts are prominent in the films. In *Respiro*, Grazia and her family work and play along the shores of the sea, and in *Terraferma*, the beachfront is the domain of the tourists who flock to the island in the summer; it is populated by colorfully-dressed, dancing, drinking revelers. Concerns regarding a changing ecology of the sea are also part of everyday discussions on the islands. Shrinking catches threaten the livelihood of the fishermen and lead residents to consider moving to the mainland or even to nearby Sicily (*Terraferma*), where an economy less driven by the rhythms of tourism and fishing might offer greater opportunity.

And in all three films, beaches and shores are also represented as spaces of human conflict, where family quarrels and political discord are quite directly brought in on the waves. In *Respiro*, Grazia is chastised by her children for swimming topless and reprimanded by her husband for wanting to go for a sail with two Frenchmen. More urgently, in *Terraferma*, the crisis is entangled in contemporary clashes over immigration from northern Africa. Early in the film, the fishermen-protagonists encounter an overcrowded boat of migrants and rescue a group who jumped overboard, citing the “law of the sea” that requires such philanthropic behavior. Later Filippo, the youngest of the family, will beat imploring migrants away from his boat in a dramatic nighttime scene, when a group of swimmers, presumably capsized offshore, seems to materialize from the dark water with arms flailing wildly. Later still, a morning tide washes up the limp though living bodies of shipwrecked migrants.

## Diving in

In both *Respiro* and *Terraferma*, one or more human protagonists are strongly pressured to leave the island: to go to a clinic in Milan (*Respiro*), to a hospital on the “mainland” (*Terraferma*), to a better job in Trapani (*Terraferma*), to a detention center or deported back to Africa (*Terraferma*). It is intriguing that these narratives of shores, beaches, and liquid borders intensify when the films’ stories take the plunge and jump, fall in, or emerge from the water. Immersion in the water becomes a form of resistance, a move that forces protagonists to acknowledge human limitation, and human entanglement, in the physical world—and the protagonists move waterward in order to avoid the fixity that would come with capitulating to the status quo that wants them, ironically, to move. The protagonists “go,” they dive in, sail off, wade in, not specifically in order to stay, but rather in order to *not* leave, *not* allow a linear trajectory to be imposed on their life. They thus acknowledge, by their immersion, that being is always in flux, never fixed. Their aquatic suspension embodies the fact that matter is “*in fieri*, it is *physis*, nature; and its all-encompassing generativity justifies the etymological bond between the Latin words *mater* (‘mother’) and *materia* (‘matter’) (Iovino, “Stories” 453).

These moves force cinema, too, to cohabitate with a marine environment. Cinematic form reveals its material weight, intertwining bodies of film actors, political

actors, technological bodies, political bodies, bodies of water. Cinema must contend not just with narrative tension, but also with surface tension, different viscosity, different reflectivity, waves, ripples, and all of the other particular qualities of water (Cubitt 67). Crialesse's underwater scenes feature underwater sound, with literally dampened sound waves traveling with different intensity through the liquid medium; we hear air bubbles released as human protagonists release air from their lungs. Things become buoyant, and suddenly relationships between up and down change, as humans and nonhumans alike can travel horizontally, vertically, diagonally through space.

This fluid status is part of the legacy of Lampedusa and Linosa, islands located between Italy and Africa, in the channel between Sicily and Tunisia that "divides the Mediterranean Sea into two basins" (King *et al.* 9) but in a sense are properly of neither.<sup>14</sup> Lampedusa, Linosa, and Sicily are part of an assemblage that, as indicated before, can be constituted in different ways—as a region, a township, a geological space, etc. They are most importantly linked, however, by their common aquatic context—a context perhaps more critical than the terrestrial one in constituting the assemblage. In an article calling for a rethinking of the term "archipelago," Philip Hayward worries that the term is "now too heavily associated with concepts of islands as land masses to be useful as a designation for regions in which aquatic spaces play a vital constitutive role" (5). In fact a current trend in the field of island studies seeks to understand "disjuncture, connection and entanglement *between and among* islands" (Stratford *et al.* 114, emphasis in original), a push that leads islanders, and insular films, to think seaward. Crialesse's films in fact stretch towards the creation of trans-corporeal subjects, subjects who, Alaimo has argued, "must also relinquish mastery as they find themselves inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world that others would presume to master" (17).

Humans dive below the water's surface a number of times. In *Respiro*, one brother collects sea urchins; Grazia goes for several swims; Pietro searches the sea for Grazia; the entire village swims from the shore in the conciliatory final scene.<sup>15</sup> But *Terraferma* most specifically dramatizes the shift in emphasis from the human to the more-than-human in an important scene, the film's last foray below the waves, when the camera moves along the dark volcanic sand of the beach floor, caressing the intermingled forms of a school of fish, some sea grass, a toothbrush, a passport, a shoe, a book, toothpaste, a plastic bag, a lichen-covered statue of a saint holding rosary beads. Although Filippo's uncle, a tour guide, insists that the island offers only "fish and amazing sea beds," invoking an ideal of the island experience as pristine nature, his affirmation is belied by the presence of the human immigrants on the beach, by the human effect on the sea, and by the sea's effect on these lost objects, now transformed

---

<sup>14</sup> In a more nuanced understanding of the island spaces than their characterization as "gateway" implies, Kitagawa argues that, "We shouldn't [...] see the island of Lampedusa as a border at the edge of a territory cartographically imagined as a singular block. It is not a 'gateway into Europe', for Lampedusa (and countless other centres like it, in Italy and elsewhere) is never the arrival point or final destination for migrants. Lampedusa is just one of the points through which they pass in a continuing migratory process along the borders" (218).

<sup>15</sup> I discuss this final underwater scene at length in Past, "Lives Aquatic."

by their immersion: no Mediterranean space, human or non, can wholly separate itself from these cohabitations.

In its political and narrative orientation, *Terraferma* thus probes the border spaces of the Mediterranean, questioning, as Iain Chambers does, “the simultaneous sense of *division*—in particular, the sea as a seemingly divisive barrier between, on the one hand, Europe and the modern ‘north’ of the world, and, on the [other] hand, Africa, Asia and the south of the planet—and *connection*; after all, so much of the formation of Europe was, and is, intrinsically dependent upon this negated elsewhere” (313). In a dramatically lit scene, Filippo holds up a lighted globe in a darkened room and Sara traces her long voyage through Addis Ababa, capital of would-be Italian empire, through Libya and finally into the Mediterranean sea. In response, Filippo’s mother shows her that she has landed in a place too small to appear on the globe, “Off The Map,” as Chambers’ article is titled.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Chambers points towards a more eloquent Mediterranean quality, “a silence that draws us beyond the conclusion of our words” (314), which he finds in the “poetics of maritime life” (315). In art, which works through “language and silence” (314), he proposes that a “‘Mediterranean musicality’ (Paolo Scarnecchia) suggestively directs us towards shifting, more elusive tonalities, the incomplete body of performance and the subsequent weakening of the conclusive orchestration of time and being unilaterally proposed by official modernity” (315). In his formulation, music “proposes a ‘home’ that fluctuates, travels and is perpetually uprooted,” a poetics that “runs along the shoreline between land and sea” (315). In Crialesse’s films, this Mediterranean musicality materializes in scenes shot in the water.

### **Golden door, liquid borders, and the dance of relating**

Given the seminal visual and narrative importance of the sea, it is intriguing, then, that a kind of liquid manifesto for Crialesse’s cinema can be found in the one film that tells the story of the Mediterranean by means of its absence. In *Golden Door*, a story of emigration from Italy, the Mediterranean never comes into view. The one scene that theoretically depicts the *mare nostrum* is a stylized shot, filmed from above, of a steam ship leaving the harbor. A gradual movement on the left of the frame reveals that half of a crowd of dark heads are standing on the deck of the ship, and as the crowd parts, we realize that the other half are standing on the shore. The gray-green water that slowly emerges between the ship and dock bears no comparison with the intense blues around Lampedusa and Linosa. The Atlantic crossing, at times smooth, is also characterized by violent storms and seasickness. Eventually, fog in the harbor of New York completely

---

<sup>16</sup> Sara points at Addis Ababa, although some materials about the film claim that she comes from Eritrea, like Timnit T, the woman who played the role. An article in *Conbonifem* magazine explains that Timnit arrived on a raft from Tripoli in 2009 (Cugini), thus suggesting that her role in the film is in part a material reenactment of her own voyage.



blocks the view of the port of arrival. In fact the story of *Golden Door*, as it hops from island to island, is figured as an ecological rift, as the farmers are plucked from their native soil and transplanted to the harsh eugenics experiments of Ellis Island. Protagonists and film alike thus seem to mourn the loss of this critical part of their Mediterranean constitution.

The liquidity of *Golden Door*, rather than limpid and Mediterranean, is stylized and magical, and finds the protagonists, dressed in dark nineteenth-century clothes, swimming in a murky white liquid and grabbing onto a giant floating carrot. In what seem to be dream sequences appearing twice in the film—once during the Atlantic crossing, and again at the very end, with closing titles rolling over the images—the film depicts its actors paddling along in a river of milk, underlining the potentially empty promise of migration away from their Mediterranean home. As liquid drips from their hats and long sleeves wave in the water, a critical element of emigration, here and in *Terraferma*, is figured as immersion—not cultural and social, but quite explicitly material—in a new substance. In the background of the final moments of *Golden Door*, Nina Simone’s voice resonates in the gospel song “Sinnerman,” whose lyrics underline an alienating, animate nature that refuses to help the sinner.<sup>17</sup> The contrast between the images of utopia and the apocalyptic lyrics underlines the fact that nature resides in neither extreme.

Recalling again James Cameron and his dive to the Challenger Deep helps to mark the distance between the filmmaker’s search for the final frontier, for a last space of “pristine nature,” and the Mediterranean reality of these films. Although, as I have argued, the material and geophysical presence of the setting echoes strongly with the human narratives, one of the strengths of Crialesse’s cinema is its willingness to renounce a realist model in favor of a carefully choreographed dance that links the protagonists to one another but also, irretrievably, to their “situated histories.” In “situated histories” or “situated naturecultures,” argues Donna Haraway, “all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*, not from scratch, not *ex nihilo*, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter. All the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact” (25, emphasis in text).

Both in *Golden Door* and in *Terraferma*, careful attention to the choreography of scenes involving crowds—and in particular, crowds in the water—becomes evident. *Terraferma* plays with this dance as tourists and islanders frolic on the deck of a boat, diving off artistically as the sounds of “Maracaibo” fill the soundscape. The dance becomes a tragic one as those same tourists move off their beach blankets in horror as the bodies of immigrants wash up onto the shore. In an explicitly non-realist sequence in slow motion, we hear dramatic soundtrack music and the sound of waves lapping on the shore, as the beachgoers pour water from their bottles into parched mouths and over the heads of the migrants. Salt water waves, sweat, and aid in the form of fresh water

---

<sup>17</sup> The sinner cries out to a rock, who “cried out/ ‘I can’t hide you,’” and then runs to a boiling river and a boiling sea.



evoke the liquid connectedness between all human constitutions and the sea, even as police wearing surgical masks and tourists snapping photos on cell phones reinforce the notion that humans place great stock in the reinforcement of “species boundaries and sterilization of category deviants” (Haraway 4). In the final frames of *Golden Door*, carefully spaced bodies in the river of milk form a pleasingly geometric pattern, hypnotic as they extend darkly-clad arms in the murky white waters. The choreography of these moments, heightened by the intensity of soundtrack music, slow-motion camerawork, and distances of framing that are alternately very close up and very long, emphasizes the relational dance between cinematic image, physical environment, and narrative. In both cases, the films show, rather than tell of, “embodied communication,” which Haraway once again likens to a dance rather than a word. “The flow of entangled meaningful bodies in time—whether jerky and nervous or flaming and flowing, whether both partners move in harmony or painfully out of synch or something else altogether—is communication about relationship, the relationship itself, and the means of reshaping relationship and so its enactors” (26).

### Water dancing

The critical liquid spaces of the Mediterranean, Italy’s mobile borders, reveal themselves as spaces not of apocalypse or utopia, but rather of conflict and of cohabitation. This is the ecological and also the cultural legacy of the Mediterranean Sea. In making an appeal for the environmental future of the Mediterranean, Blondel and Médail insist that:

After 10,000 years or more of cohabitation between humans and nature, most Mediterranean ecosystems are so inextricably linked to human interventions that the future of biological diversity cannot be disconnected from that of human affairs, which have too often been characterized by bitter conflicts. Whatever the future of people and their environment, landscape conditions will continue to be shaped and driven by the long common history they share. (Blondel and Médail 646)

More optimistically, they conclude that, “Because it is, in a sense, a microcosm that is representative of many worldwide problems, it is an exceptional laboratory and pilot region for launching a strategy for sustainable development on a regional scale” (646).

In the closing frames of *Respiro*, an underwater shot depicts the legs of a crowd of villagers treading water, as Grazia is surrounded, not exiled, by her community. The closing titles of *Golden Door* roll over a shot of crowds of emigrants swimming, delicately spaced and gracefully paddling in the milk white sea. *Terraferma* closes with a shot from above of Filippo’s boat, carrying Sara and her children away from Linosa on the mobile sea; the rhythmic waves fill the screen and gradually erase all signs of forward progress of the craft. Each film, then, ends with a camera pulling away and leaving tiny humans adrift, immersed, and in movement.

These final scenes thus depict protagonists as part of liquid networks of relationality that respond to Alaimo’s call for more complex understandings of

nature/culture 'hybrids': "Networks, then, require analyses that can grapple with their reality, narrativity, and collectivity" (9). As the camera gradually allows the films' human protagonists to move away from center screen and recede into a more complex assemblage, it creates patterns of collective activity that suddenly become more significant than the enterprise of any one individual. No more individual agency, no more dialogue, no more protagonists, no more islands; only collective, liquid movement, open-ended and bounded by a frame that itself moves gently. In their hypnotic regularity, the scenes are almost, like Haraway's relational dances, "extremely prosaic, relentlessly mundane, and exactly how worlds come into being" (26). As the camera draws away from human actors, the films' true protagonists are revealed to be both liquid landscapes and their inhabitants, whose forms run together as "matter and meaning, as correlated 'entangled agencies,' emerge together in the world's process of becoming" (Iovino "Stories," 453). The stylized choreography of the scenes calls attention to cinema's own participation in the dance, its creation of "geocinematic proxies" that document a relationship both discursive and material. In the shallows, on the beaches, and in between, Crialesse's Mediterranean cinema thus calls into being a world, imperfect, endangered, and complex, in the bosom of the waters.

Received 10 February 2013

Revised version accepted 15 April 2013

## Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010. Print.
- Barron, Patrick. "Introduction." *Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology*. New York: Italica Press, 2003. xxi-xxxiii. Print.
- Bergen-Aurand, Brian. "Charting the Constellation of Mediterranean Cinema." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31.3 (2010): 271-83. Print.
- Bertellini, Giorgio. "The Earth Still Trembles: On Landscape Views in Contemporary Italian Cinema" *Italian Culture* 30.1 (2012): 38-50. Print.
- Blondel, Jacques and Frédéric Médail. "Biodiversity and Conservation." *Physical Geography of the Mediterranean*. Ed. Jamie Woodward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 615-50. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. Print.
- Chambers, Iain. "Off the Map: A Mediterranean Journey." *Comparative Literature Studies* 42.4 (2005): 312-327. Print.
- Cubitt, Sean. *Eco Media*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005. Print.
- Cugini, Jessica. "La Terraferma di Timnit." *Conbonifem Magazine*. Web. <<http://www.combonifem.it/articolo.aspx?t=M&a=4166>>. 12 June 2012.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Pensiero vivente: Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*. Turin: Einaudi, 2010. Print.

- Georgas, Dimitris G. "Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change in the Mediterranean Coastal Zones." *Climate Change in the Mediterranean: Socio-economic Perspectives of Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation*. Eds. Carlo Giupponi and Mordechai Shechter. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2003. 225-244. Print.
- Giupponi, Carlo and Mordechai Shechter. *Climate Change in the Mediterranean: Socio-economic Perspectives of Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2003. Print.
- Golden Door*. Dir. Emanuele Crialesse. Perf. Charlotte Gainsbourg, Vincenzo Amato, Francesco Casisa, Filippo Pucillo. Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006. DVD.
- Goldman, Andrew. "There's No Scaring James Cameron." Web. *New York Times Magazine*. 8 April 2012. 14.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm P, 1993. Print.
- Hayward, Philip. "Aquapelagos and Aquapelagic Assemblages: Towards an Integrated Study of Island Societies and Marine Environments." *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 6.1 (2012): 1-11. Print.
- Iovino, Serenella. *Ecologia letteraria: Una strategia di sopravvivenza*. Milan: Edizioni Ambiente, 2006. Print.
- . "Material Ecocriticism. Matter, Text, and Posthuman Ethics." *Literature, Ecology, Ethics*. Eds. Timo Müller and Michael Sauter. Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2012. 51-68. Print.
- . "Stories from the Thick of Things: Introducing Material Ecocriticism." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19.3 (2012): 449-460. Print.
- Ivakhin, Adrian J. "The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema." *Film-Philosophy* 15.1 (2011): 118-139. Print.
- King, Russell, Berardo Cori and Adalberto Vallega. "Unity, Diversity and the Challenge of Sustainable Development: An Introduction to the Mediterranean." *Geography, Environment and Development in the Mediterranean*. Eds. Russell King, Paolo De Mas, and Jan Mansvelt Beck. Brighton: Sussex, 2001. 1-17. Print.
- King, Russell and Emile Kolodny. "Marginal or Nodal? Towards a Geography of Mediterranean Islands." *Geography, Environment and Development in the Mediterranean*. Eds. Russell King, Paolo De Mas, and Jan Mansvelt Beck. Brighton: Sussex, 2001. 237-260. Print.
- Kitagawa, Shinya. "Geographies of Migration Across and Beyond Europe: The Camp and the Road of Movements." *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics and the Making of European Space*. Ed. Luiza Bialasiewicz. Ashgate, 2011. Print.
- Marchesini, Roberto. *Il tramonto dell'uomo: La prospettiva post-umanista*. Bari: Dedalo, 2009. Print.
- Maurer, Alan. "Deep-Sea Cinema." *Omni* (1989): 14, 96. Print.
- Maxwell, Richard, and Toby Miller. "Ecological Ethics and Media Technology." *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2008): 331-53. Print.

- NPR Staff. "Diving Deep, Dredging Up Titanic." 30 March 2012. Web. <<http://m.npr.org/news/front/149635287?page=0>>. 30 May 2012.
- Oppenheimer, Jean. "Chasing the American Dream." *American Cinematographer* 88.6 (2007): 24-31. Print.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Heretical Empiricism*. Trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988. Print.
- Past, Elena. "Lives Aquatic: Mediterranean Cinema and an Ethics of Underwater Existence." *Cinema Journal* 48.3 (2009): 52-65. Print.
- Respiro*. Dir. Emanuele Crialesse. Perf. Valeria Golino, Vincenzo Amato, Filippo Pucillo, Francesco Casisa. Sony Pictures Classics, 2002. DVD.
- Rohling, Eelco, Ramadan Abu-Zied, James Casford, Angela Hayes, and Babette Hoogakker. "The Marine Environment: Present and Past." *Physical Geography of the Mediterranean*. Ed. Jamie Woodward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 33-68. Print.
- Stewart, Iain and Christophe Morhange. "Coastal Geomorphology and Sea-Level Change." *The Physical Geography of the Mediterranean*. Ed. Jamie Woodward. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 385-413. Print.
- Stratford, Elaine, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, and Andrew Harwood. "Envisioning the Archipelago." *Island Studies Journal* 6.2 (2011): 113-30. Print.
- Terraferma*. Dir. Emanuele Crialesse. Perf. Filippo Pucillo, Dontaella Finocchiaro, Mimmo Cuticchio, Giuseppe Fiorello, Timnit T. Rai Cinema, 2011. DVD.
- Than, Ker. "James Cameron Completes Record-Breaking Mariana Trench Dive." *National Geographic Daily News*. Web. <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/03/120325-james-cameron-mariana-trench-challenger-deepest-returns-science-sub/>>. 6 April 2012.
- Verne, Jules. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Trans. Mercier Lewis. New York: Heritage, 1957. Print.
- Willoquent-Maricondi, Paula. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2010. Print.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Woodward, Jamie, ed. *The Physical Geography of the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.