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Culture & Context: Italy

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In recent years, Italian immigration policies and controversies have drawn significant attention as the country grapples with rising numbers of immigrants arriving on its shores. Legislative frameworks such as the Bossi-Fini law, “Legislators tend to create ad hoc crimes that can only be committed by a foreigner or criminalise the mere assistance to migrants or even self-smuggling... This overcriminalization affects foreigners and those who, for solidarity purposes, provide them with assistance (as in the case of the incrimination of the conduct of NGOs) (Mentasti 503).” In this context, Emanuele Crialesse’s *Terraferma* (2011) tells a powerful story that reflects these struggles. The film explores the challenges of migration, tradition, and the law, and encourages viewers to think about how to balance the conflict between laws and acting on human natural compassion.

The story is set on Lampedusa, a small island where people live off fishing and tourism. Filippo’s mother, Giulietta, rents out their house during tourist season in summer, hoping that Filippo will move to the city for a better life. However, Filippo and his grandfather Ernesto love the quiet island and wish to stay. When three visitors from the city stay at their house, their modern lifestyle fascinates Filippo and makes him think about change. Later, Filippo and Ernesto rescue North African refugees from the sea, including a pregnant woman, Sara. they bring home

to help. This act breaks immigration laws, leading to Ernesto's boat being taken away and a series of chain reactions that break the peaceful, balancing town.

### **Economic Development & Tradition**

First of all, let's start with examining the first major theme of the movie: balancing economic development and tradition, the changing lifestyle of the town. The film illustrates a profound transformation in Italian life through the lens of tradition and modernity. This is evident in the conflicting aspirations of the main characters: Filippo, his mother Giulietta, and his grandfather Ernesto. It's as if two strong currents suddenly collide beneath calm waters—the conflict between city and countryside, locals and outsiders, plays out dramatically within their family. Each family member represents a different mindset among the island's residents during this period of transition. Nino desires change but lacks the opportunities to achieve it, while Ernesto clings tightly to tradition and refuses to let go. Giulietta tries to make the most of limited resources, and Filippo feels stuck and confused, unable to move forward in the midst of these shifts between the old and the new.

Giulietta's decision to convert her home into a summer lodge symbolizes a departure from tradition in favor of economic survival. As Rebecca West notes, Italy's economic shifts have been accompanied by an erosion of traditional lifestyles: "Historically, Italian society and culture have been fragmented, and today there is an increasing, and new, fragmentation under pressure from both internal and external forces. Among these forces are greatly increased immigration, mainly from so-called developing countries, the revival of regionalism, and widespread Americanization (West 337)." Giulietta's family moving into the garage while tourists occupy their home mirrors this broader displacement. This raises the question about the

long-term costs of prioritizing economic growth over cultural preservation, which leads to a broader discussion of the topic “superior and inferior”; is economy the only way to judge which is better?

In contrast, Ernesto represents the stable of ancestral values; he refuses to dismantle his fishing boat for government subsidies. This resonates with Pasolini’s critical metaphor “the disappearance of fireflies” in the 1960s and 1970s: “At the beginning of the sixties, the fireflies began to disappear in our nation, due to pollution of the air, and the azure rivers and limpid canals, above all in the countryside. This was a stunning and searing phenomenon (Pasolini 1).” As Pasolini argues, modernization and economic growth often come at the cost of losing cultural and communal heritage, leading to a homogenization of values, culture, and practices.

The film broadens these personal conflicts within the broader context of Italy’s “economic miracle.” As Paul Ginsborg highlights, this period saw a dramatic shift in population and livelihoods, with a massive exodus from rural areas to urban centers and industrial regions in the North, resulting in the decline of rural traditions and the unique culture of the south. “In the five years of the miracle (1958–63), more than 900,000 southerners changed their places of residence from the South to the other regions of Italy. (Ginsborg 220).”

The situation of Giulietta living in the garage raises an important question about the long-term costs of prioritizing economic growth over cultural preservation, and leads to a even broader debate about whether the economy should be the sole measure of progress or whether preserving cultural values is equally important. The movie encourages us to reflect on whether migration, whether internal or external, truly provides the best path forward. The film subtly critiques this trail, showing how economic development, when left unchecked, can erode

traditions and cultural heritage, and leaves us to question what is truly gained and lost in the process.

### **The “Illegals”**

The arrival of African migrants on the island highlights a second major theme, focusing on the legal and moral dilemmas of migration. Through characters like Sara, the pregnant migrant, *Terraferma* brings the human side of the immigration crisis into sharp discussion, contrasting these personal stories with the strict frameworks of immigration law.

Filippo’s journey symbolizes Italy’s inner struggle with migration issues. Filippo is an “incomplete” boy, still forming his values. His attitude toward illegal immigrants initially seems inconsistent (he doesn’t hate them, nor does he particularly like them). He saves them, cares for them, fears them, and even attacks them with a boat pole. However, when we examine deeper, his actions are shaped by the responses of those around him. His first choice (to save the migrants) comes from instinctive humanitarianism and the respect for his grandfather’s guidance. When he first encounters the migrants, his initial reaction isn’t to leave them alone but to turn to his grandfather, asking him what to do: saving them.

His second response is shaped by the negative feedback he receives. Filippo doesn’t understand why saving lives results in punishment, why their boat is confiscated, which worsens the family’s financial problems. During the fishermen’s meeting, his confusion about being penalized for helping others becomes more obvious. The backlash from government threats to seize their boat to the additional strain on his family shapes his later reaction, where he aggressively attacks and defends himself from another group of migrants arriving in the night.

To be honest, I can understand Filippo's second choice. When those endless waves of people appeared in my line of sight, my most honest reaction was fear. How should he view these people? Are they locusts? Are they pitiable? Are they invaders? When Filippo took Maureen out to sea, and in that moment of darkness when they were illuminated by a white light, he saw a vast crowd surfing toward them, like a raging flood or a wild beast. Maureen was naked on the surface of the sea, and perhaps an overwhelming sense of fear surged in his heart. Even though Maureen later climbed aboard the boat, the others clung desperately to its edges, refusing to let go.

Can this small boat really carry so many people? Can it really not capsize? Where exactly did they come from? As I delved deeper into these questions, a chill ran through me. Have they perhaps been drifting at sea all along, lingering in the boundless darkness of the night, soaking in the icy seawater, so that when they see even the faintest light, they throw themselves forward without hesitation, like a drowning person grabbing hold of their last straw of salvation?

By the third encounter, however, Filippo's choice is unwavering. He helps three migrants escape into the dark night, driven by his growing empathy and moral clarity. His innate kindness, the bonds he's formed with the three, and his knowledge of the woman's tragic circumstances come together, and guided his decision. And what's most important is witnessing the bodies of drowned migrants, the personal belongings of the migrants underwater, and the giant statue of the Virgin Mary all push him to act. In the end, Filippo drove into the unknown with the migrants, choosing justice over legality.

The film presents the issue of illegal immigration in a direct, realistic yet balanced way. The director does not take sides but instead offers a vivid and unfiltered view of the problem. Every perspective found in real life society is represented. There is the fearful, prejudiced old

fisherman whose racism drives him to say migrants should not be saved. There is uncle Nino, who views migrants as a threat to the economy and wants to avoid them. And there Giulietta is torn between her instinctive kindness and her fear of breaking the law. Ernesto treats all people equally, regardless of skin color, and saves lives because, as he says, “it is the rule of the ocean.” Finally, there is Filippo, who evolves through these encounters to find his own path. “Filippo is torn and uncertain until the very end of the movie, when he decides to help Sara (Polizzi 133).” His journey reflects the moral and legal tensions embedded in Italy’s treatment of migrants.

Here, I want to discuss another key point: the law. Specifically, whether the law itself is reasonable and what we should do when it conflicts with humanitarian values and the kindness inherent in human nature. What does the law state? It prohibits illegal immigration. But is this truly the right approach? Take Ernesto and Giulietta, for example. They have always deeply believed in following the law (Ernesto’s initial reaction upon seeing the migrants was to report them to the authorities, and Giulietta did the same. So, what changed their minds? It is because their most genuine and direct emotions made them realize that the law may not be as perfect or reliable as it seems.

One aspect that fascinates me is the discussion about rules during the fishermen’s meeting preparing for a protest. While some debated the legality of their actions, Ernesto emphasized the “law of the ocean.” For generations, this unwritten rule has dictated that if they see someone struggling in the sea, they must rescue them. As Polizzi notes, “He is the epitome of the positive values of tradition and morality; he never doubts his decision to help Sara and such self-assured determination is presented as springing from his respect and knowledge of what the movie calls the ‘law of the sea’ . This law prescribes that one never abandons a man at sea, but it

is also charged with general values of reciprocity, altruism and fraternity in the film, which opposes it with the migration law of the state (Polizzi 135).”

Even the law enforcement officers in the film are not portrayed as cruel or evil. Instead, they are shown as individuals who genuinely consider the well-being of the people. For instance, when confiscating Ernesto’s boat, they face Filippo’s anger and even physical resistance but choose not to arrest or warn him. Instead, they try to calm him down, not wanting a young boy to carry a criminal record into adulthood.

Thus, my focus here is not on the laws themselves or whether these policies are right or wrong, but rather on the issues these laws aim to address. In today’s globalized world, migration from underdeveloped areas to more developed regions in search of better opportunities is incredibly common and understandable. Just as Filippo and Giulietta dream of moving north, so do the migrants want to reach Europe and Italy. To borrow an imperfect metaphor: it’s impossible to spend eternity catching thieves; at some point, you must reconsider the system.

### **“Terraferma”**

The title *Terraferma*, meaning "solid ground," carries metaphorical weight. For the migrants in the film, terraferma represents a safe haven, a land of opportunity, much like the US or Europe for those in the Global South. For Sara this concept becomes even more personal. Her goal is not just to reach solid ground but to reunite with her husband in Turin, Italy’s third-largest city. Her journey reflects the longing for stability and belonging shared by countless migrants. Sara is deeply grateful to Giulietta, who helped deliver her baby, and calls her “sister,” and named her daughter after Giulietta.

Giulietta cradles the baby twice: once during delivery and once to calm her cries. Sara says, “The first person to hold her was you; she remembers your scent.” In this moment, Sara’s daughter becomes a symbol of a new generation: one born on foreign soil with the possibility of long-term integration and expectation of true belonging. Yet, this possibility is filled with challenges. As Levy explains, “Migrants, illegal or legal, were wanted but not welcome in much of Italy: the blast furnaces of the ‘Deep North’...would fall silent without their labour, and the Italian welfare state would have had to spend far more if migrant nannies tending to young children and carers helping the elderly were not present in the bosom of many Italian families (Levy 55).” The pain inherent in this process is beyond what most can bear. Their bodies may one day become the black soil of foreign lands, but this land rejects the souls within their bodies. Foreign blood remains taboo.

The cycle of migration and integration depicted in the film carries an inherent pain. If this process is being repeated over generations, migrants may erase their pasts and roots, and blend into foreign societies out of necessity and reality. Levy captures this idea when he says: “By 2013 both the Albanians and non-Roma Romanians were being integrated into Italian society...Their scapegoat replacements, the Roma from the Balkans, did not even possess those rather dubious mitigating stereotypical features that acceptable migrants are sometimes given to ease their acceptance into the host nation (Levy 55).”

The film highlights this pain, portraying how the proof of survival left by previous generations (cultural identity and traditions) becomes diluted over time. When migrants arrive, they embody their homeland in its entirety. But with each subsequent generation, these distinctive markers will eventually fade. In the end, only stories remain, and fragments of an

origin will be increasingly out of reach. This is the emotional weight of *Terraferma*, it is not just the struggle for a step or palce on solid ground but the cost of leaving behind everything else.

To be honest, the director doesn't provide a clear-cut answer about what's right or wrong. Because he understands that these issues (illegal immigration, cultural displacement, and the tension between law and morality) are too complex for definitive answers. What Crialesi does is exporting a kind of attitude and peeling off the mask of the problems for us, showing us what the reality is like, in both sides, both perspectives. He also conveys a hidden attitude in the end, a wish, a wish of believing in the good side of human nature through Filippo's choice. The future is like the final scene of the movie, with endless darkness and waves of the sea. Yet Filippo's ship is the only light, driving, going fiercely and relentlessly into the unknown.

Does that ship have enough fuel? Is it realistic for him to reach Turin? No, none of these questions are answered, because the director chooses a romantic, open-ended way of storytelling. It's clear that he himself doesn't have an answer. For this complex reality and its challenges, he merely offers a vision, a glimpse of hope.

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