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## La identidad europea en las artes audiovisuales (2021)

Javier Figuro Espadas, Roberto Gelado Marcos (editores)

### Separata

### Capítulo 7

#### Título del Capítulo

«Pillorying the Pillars: the EU identity crisis through the lens of Italian contemporary film and TV drama»

#### Autoría

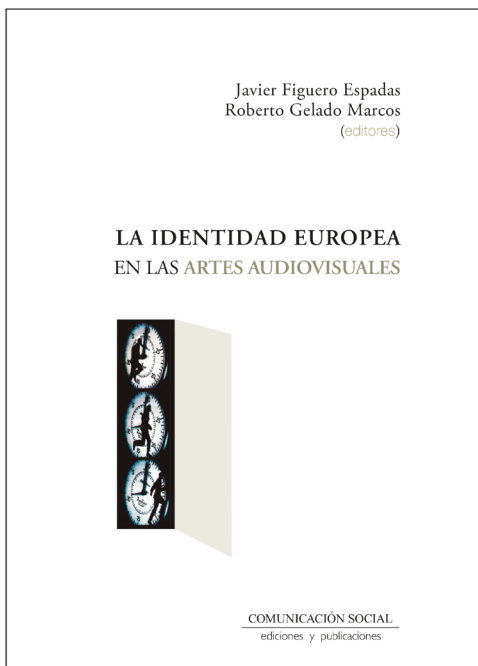
Paolo Russo

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El libro *La identidad europea en las artes audiovisuales* está integrado en la colección «Contextos» de Comunicación Social Ediciones y Publicaciones.

¿Existe una identidad europea?

¿Qué es lo que caracteriza a esa noción de identidad, si es que la hay? Conscientes de que el audiovisual es un potente constructor de significados, los autores que firman estos ocho ensayos abordan dichas construcciones para acercarnos a esa idea identitaria.

Afirmaba Wendy Everett que «la identidad europea y sus cines es múltiple, inestable, y en constante cambio; hecho que, de por sí, explica la fascinación que provoca y constituye, quizás, su fortaleza final».

Es dicha naturaleza cambiante y fascinadora de la identidad europea la que justifica el regreso a su estudio sin pretender encontrar respuestas definitivas.

Los ensayos que conforman *La identidad europea en las artes audiovisuales* buscan ofrecer una radiografía poliédrica de la identidad europea, profundizando en la creación de los imaginarios colectivos de dicha identidad en manifestaciones artísticas como la fotografía, el cine o las series de televisión. Así, sus autores abordan este empeño desde perspectivas variadas que, en su conjunto, ahondan con eficacia en el núcleo constitutivo de la identidad europea actual.

Consulte el lector el sumario de esta obra y sumérgase en la prosa limpia de unos textos que le abrirán la puerta de un viaje cautivador por las artes del audiovisual europeo.

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## Pillorying the Pillars: the EU identity crisis through the lens of Italian contemporary film and TV drama

*Paolo Russo*

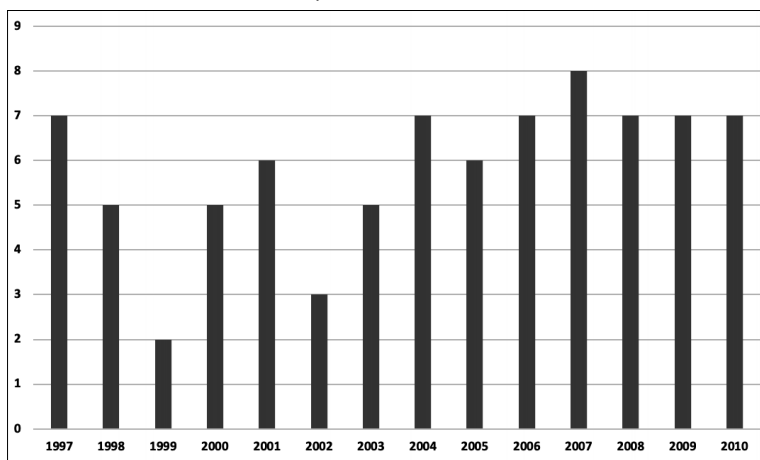
Oxford Brookes University

This chapter investigates Italian contemporary screen narratives of migration/migrants firstly by framing the parameters of the inquiry —namely, critical mass, a focus on current events, the frequency of the victim paradigm and agency as opposed to narratives of clash and/or encounter between cultures; secondly, by analysing select data with regard to domestic and foreign markets in Europe that allow an assessment of the outreach and impact of such narratives. Furthermore, it argues that the paradigm shift from feature to serial television and global platforms (and its reliance on specific formats and genres) draws from and influences public discourses around the representation of migrants on screen while, at the same time, shifting the focus of their narratives from a migrant crisis to a crisis of the institutions, Italian and European alike, and therefore, ultimately, of a struggling European identity.

*Destination Italy: the victim paradigm and the clash/encounter of cultures*

For the good part of a decade (roughly from 2006 to 2014) I was a member of the Destination Italy research network. The core object of the network's inquiries was the representation of migration in contemporary media and narrative in Italy which shares some similarities with the project «La crisis del European Dream en las artes audiovisuales». Amongst other

Figure 1. Number of Italian feature films about migration from 1997 to 2010 (source: Destination Italy database).



tasks, the network compiled a database of the corpus of feature films about migration released in the 1990s and 2000s that is still available online. A key turning point in 1994-95 was the release of *Lamerica* (Gianni Amelio, 1994) in the wake of the first big wave of migration from Albania in the early 1990s. The title itself epitomizes the myth of the American Dream, of America as the Promised Land: although in the hopes of the displaced Albanian people Italy was their America. The title is also a misspelling standing for the migrants' desire to fit in in a new country through the use of language, one of the main tools that are necessary to develop one's own cultural identity and a sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the misspelling gives away the feeling that they are still not ready to really fit in though. The commercial and critical success of *Lamerica* was such that it generated momentum for more such films to follow in its wake. From at least 1997 onwards, the output of

<sup>1</sup> The correct spelling in Italian needs an apostrophe to separate the article from the country name – i.e. *L'America*.



films that tell stories of migrants to Italy bumps up and tends to stabilise at around 5-7 per year, which therefore justifies 1997 as an apt *terminus a quo* for the present analysis (see Fig. 1 below).

While this is not a large number in absolute terms, it is certainly a sizeable sample and a clear sign of new attention to the subject matter. In short, in the time period under scrutiny the «migration film» as a category acquired critical mass just as much as it attracted critical attention.

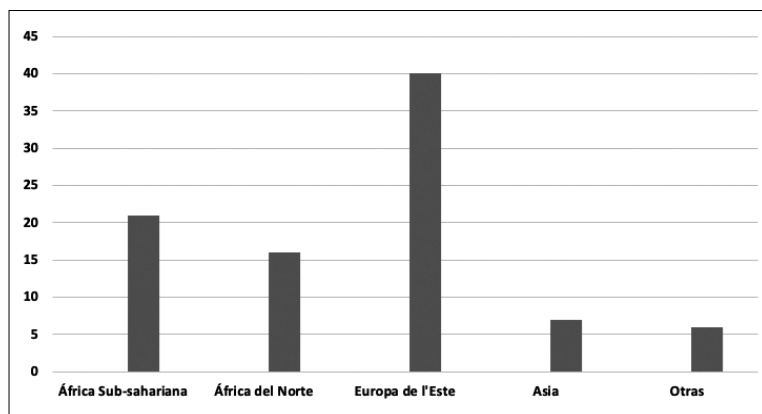
Figure 2. Occurrences of characters of foreign nationalities in Italian feature films about migration from 1997 to 2010 (source: Destination Italy database).

Nacionalidad	No.
Rumana	14
Albanesa	13
Marroquí	7
Africana (no especificada), china, senegalesa, tunecina	4
Angoleña, brasileña, camerunesa, checa, europea de l'Este (no especificada), egipcia, etíope, filipina, india, nigeriana, norteamericana (no especificada), rusa, cingalesa, somalí, ucrania	2
Argelia, bosnia, búlgara, asiática (no especificada), africana de l'Este (no especificada), francesa/occitana, ghanesa, marfileña, libanesa, moldava, polaca, serbio	1

An overview of the nationalities and/or ethnicities that these films portray through their characters and stories reveal statistical relevance and significance. The table in Fig. 2 above shows Romanian, Albanian and Moroccan topping the chart, with several other nationalities counting one or two occurrences each. When clustering these records by region of provenance of the migrant characters, even more telling information emerges. Up to 40 occurrences concerns characters from Eastern Europe and almost as many include characters from African regions (see Fig. 3 below).

This is interesting data because it means that these films reflect the current state of affairs in those years. In the time peri-

Figure 3. Occurrences of characters of foreign nationalities in Italian feature films about migration from 1997 to 2010 by region of provenance (source: Destination Italy database).



od comprised between the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) and the gradual induction of Eastern European countries in the European Union (2004-2013), those were the countries that most migrants to Italy came from.<sup>2</sup> That changes after 2010: numbers from Eastern Europe tend to decrease whereas, conversely, North African characters maintain a very significant presence as a reflection of the frequent tragic accidents involving boats attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Further to that, at least since 2011 the rise of the Islamic State's offensives across North African and Middle Eastern regions as well as the Syrian

<sup>2</sup> Romanian citizens are still the largest immigrant group in Italy (1.1 million) making up more than one fifth of the entire foreign population of the country (5 millions, i.e. about 9.1% of the entire population of Italy), Albanians and Moroccans being distant runners-up with just over 400,000 each. Data on non-Italian population in the country are based on the most recent census (2018) and updated yearly in December, then published by ISTAT online (with the exception of December 2020 due to Covid 19). These figures have been triangulated for accuracy with the Worldometer elaboration of relevant UN data. (source: ISTAT).

crisis, is followed by an increase in the representation of Asian characters previously not as numerically significant.

Generally speaking, the paradigm of representation of migrant characters in films from the 1990s and the 2000s reflects the rhetoric that has taken hold of public discourses over the past two decades, which essentially distinguishes between the refugee—who takes on a pre-determined identity as poor and/or traumatized—and the illegal immigrant. In short, the paradigm is reduced to a binary choice between victim or criminal, or, in some cases, criminalized victim. The migrant is rarely if ever a «normal» character but always a problematic one. One could argue that problematic characters are the core of dramatic conflict: moreover, viewers will tend to align and sympathize with victims who are shown as vulnerable as a consequence of well-recognized social determinants. Surely, many of these films share the sentiment of the so-called «turn to the victim» that has grabbed much deserved attention in cultural and critical discourses in the past twenty years or so. However, one should also consider the risks flagged up by critics of the victim paradigm who warn against narratives that show history as «done to» people because, arguably, those narratives transfer agency from the victims to their mediators (Andreasen and Cecchini, 2017: 102-104).

In point of fact, as concerns the way dramatic narratives work, it is precisely the tension between the migrant being marginalized as victim at one end, and the struggle towards integration and a sense of belonging on the other, that opens up countless possibilities of stories about the search for identity. Italian cinema features good examples of migrants as victim who not necessarily are deprived of narrative agency: such as the teen-age Albanian protagonist of *Saimir* (Francesco Munzi, 2004) who attempts a rebellion against the human trafficking ring he is involved in because of his father; or the young Somali protagonist of *Good Morning Aman* (Claudio Noce, 2009) who not only tries his best to achieve integration in an Italian society that is far from welcoming, but also dreams of another promised land, further North: Britain.

Alongside the victim paradigm, narratives that stage either the clash or the encounter between cultures also stand out. The following examples are representative exchanges between Italy and Romania, which, as mentioned, supplies the largest migrant community.<sup>3</sup> *Cover Boy: L'ultima rivoluzione* (Carmine Amoroso, 2006) follows Ioan's journey from post-Ceausescu Romania to Italy. His arrival in Rome is met with prejudice towards immigrants initially embodied by the Italian co-protagonist Michele. However, Michele being substantially a good man, the two end up building a solid friendship and support each other through ups and, mostly, downs: put another way, the initial clash turns into a narrative of encounter and acceptance of the Other, at least temporarily before the events eventually take a turn for the worse again. Similarly, in *Mar Nero* (Federico Bondi, 2008) a young Romanian *badante* named Angela is hired to look after Gemma, an elderly lady who lives in Tuscany.<sup>4</sup> Set in her ways, Gemma sees Angela as an intruder at first; gradually though, she realizes that the Romanian girl is more loyal to her and cares for her much more than her own family does. Moved to compassion by Angela's personal story, she eventually even takes her back to Romania to help her reunite with her family. In both *Cover Boy* and *Mar Nero*, the stories of two Romanian migrants run in tandem with those of two Italians who—due to either socio-economic conditions or age—feel abandoned, disenfranchised from the society they are supposed to belong to, and which is supposed to support them but no longer does. In other words, they experience a loss of their own identity that paves the way for the encounter with the Other.

It must be pointed out that the almost totality of these films offers a vision *ab intra*, that is from the point of view of Italian characters and/or as told by Italian filmmakers. In

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<sup>3</sup> An in-depth study of this topic can be found in a PhD thesis by Valentina Ippolito (2019).

<sup>4</sup> A *badante* is a caregiver for elderly people, a job that in Italy is normally taken up by Eastern European women.

most cases, they carry out a symbolic function of condemnation of a given social issue (be it racism or injustice) and of promoting integration, most often in the form of compassionate realism.

Instances of the opposite perspective —i.e. a vision *ab extra*— remain numerically marginal. If one considers impact, at least in terms of critical acclaim and audience reach, possibly the most significant, if rather isolated example is the Romanian film *Francesca* (Bobby Paunescu, 2009) whose eponymous protagonist is a young teacher who —not dissimilarly to the Albanian migrants of *Lamerica*— dreams of migrating to Italy, her promised land for a better life. But Francesca is confronted by friends and family —especially her father— who present her with a very different view of Italy: one as a racist country who hates and exploits migrants and will surely force her into prostitution or worse. Back to Italian productions or co-productions, throughout the last decades more visions *ab extra* have been promoted by various associations and non-profit organizations —e.g. the Cineteca di Bologna, Archivio delle Memorie Migranti— and the Venice Film Festival has been awarding the Premio Mutti since 2008 to help development of projects by migrant citizens. At least a few titles deserve mention: the short films *I soldi di mia madre* (Suranga Deshapriya Katugampala, 2014) and *La voliera* (Bagya D. Lankapura, 2018); the feature films *Sto per piovere* (Haider Rashid, 2013) and *Pizza e datteri* (Fariborz Kamkari, 2015); the documentaries *18 jus solis* (Fred Kudjo Kuwornu, 2012), *Benvenuti in Italia* (Aluk Amiri, Hamed Dera, Hevi Dilara, Zakaria Mohamed Ali e Dagmawi Yimer, 2012) and *Devil comes to Koko* (Alfie Nze, 2016). While all are certainly representative of alternative visions from Africa and Asia, hardly any of them has found any distribution and therefore a suitable audience.

*In search of an audience*

In the time period between 2000 and 2010, the corpus of Italian films that deal with issues of migration includes 68 titles that attracted a total domestic audience of 13.7 millions—resulting in an average of 1.25 million viewers per year. In the last 25 years cinemagoing in Italy has kept stable at around 100-110 million admissions a year, which means the outreach of the focus films is limited to about 1.1%. The analysis of box office revenues shows that the 68 titles amassed almost 92 million euros for an average of around 1.35 million each. However, closer scrutiny shows that out of those 68, the 5 best-grossing films took 50.6 millions: and the best 15 almost 80 millions (source: Destination Italy database). Granted, this is in line with the overall trend of the whole domestic market in Italy—it does not apply only to migration films. Unfortunately, though, this means that whatever the reasons, the vast majority of these films hardly reach an audience in Italy.

After 2010, the overall production output has kept growing while the presence and impact of migration films has remained fairly stable: that is, critically relevant but with marginal results and impact in the domestic market. If one expands the scope of the analysis to other European countries, Italian cinema exports mostly to Switzerland, France, Spain and the Benelux countries; and, to a lesser extent, to Britain, Scandinavia, Portugal and Germany (source: ANICA-International Box Office). Spain is a representative example because the films exported there are pretty much the same as those exported to other countries and the data found are quite similar in both quantitative and qualitative terms. On average, Spain imports around 10-13 Italian films a year that attract around 190,000 spectators each: again, if one excludes the top 6 films from the tally, the average for all the other remaining films plummets dramatically to 39,000 each.<sup>5</sup> Notably, throughout the

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<sup>5</sup> These figures have been extrapolated from the Film database of ICAA (Instituto de la Cinematografía y las Artes audiovisuales). Cross-referenc-

whole decade only two films were about migrants — *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2011) and *Fuocoammare* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2015)— despite the fact that many more were produced and released in Italy.<sup>6</sup>

*Terraferma* draws inspirations from accounts of controversial convictions from 2007 onwards, due to law provision in Italy that forbids rescuing people at sea, considering it on a par with abetting illegal immigration.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, in August 2007 seven Tunisian fishermen were arrested for rescuing a few dozen migrants, including two children and a pregnant woman, stranded at sea in rough weather conditions, despite following emergency protocols and subsequently mooring at the nearest safe port in Sicily. The fishermen were released after one month, following protest demos and a petition to the European Parliament which was set to debate migration and border control in plenary session. A similar incident involved an Italian fisherman who, fearing similar consequences, refused to rescue a shipwrecked migrant who later died, only to be charged with murder afterwards (Graceffo, 2008). Similarly, the protagonist of *Terraferma* is a Sicilian fisherman who at first complies with the law but when several migrants die because he refuses to take them on his boat, he decides to break it. The clear-cut conflict at the heart of the narrative shows in a disarmingly simple way the gap between entity and identity, between the institutional framework that should safeguard that identity, and the betrayal of that function by that very same institution.

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ing with the database of ANICA (i.e. the equivalent Italian organization) shows that a few titles are missing: however, overall the sample can be considered as strongly representative, yielding sufficiently reliable data.

<sup>6</sup> Two more feature films — *Venuto al mondo* (Sergio Castellitto, 2012) and *Suburra* (Stefano Sollima, 2015)— treat migration only marginally.

<sup>7</sup> The law in question is Legge n. 182/2002 (so-called «Bossi-Fini») but it still includes clauses from the pre-existing Legge n. 286/1998. In actual fact, net of the controversies caused by this particular law over the years, the matter is more complex, and maritime rescues are regulated by SAR and SOLAS Conventions, which supersede national laws.

*Fuocoammare* is generally described as a documentary whereas, as a matter of fact, it is a hybrid. One narrative thread follows young Samuele listening to the tales of lives spent on a boat at sea by the fishermen that live on the Island of Lampedusa off the coast of Sicily. Parallel to this runs the actual documentary that tells a very different tale of other lives on other boats at sea: yet another group of migrants have been rescued by the coast guard and taken to the island's reception centre. From here on the story is told by Pietro Bartolo, the actual doctor who visited thousands of migrants who landed at Lampedusa over the years and therefore witnessed countless tragic circumstances. Setting aside any aesthetic consideration or value judgment, the box office results shows that in Spain these two films—which also garnered major critical acclaim and prizes at international festivals—<sup>8</sup> managed to attract around 11,000 and 5,000 viewers, respectively, which is to say they hardly reached a substantial audience.

In this respect, the real paradigm shift in the last two decades has been the growing presence of television serial drama alongside the advent of new key industry players that have profoundly altered the way audiences access content on a global scale. To cite a few significant examples, *Gomorra: La serie* (Cattleya-Fandango-Sky-La7-Beta Film, 2014-) has been sold to around 170 countries via Sky; *Il commissario Montalbano* (Palomar-Rai, 1999-) sells to around 65 countries, including Iran; as part of the Netflix catalogue, *Suburra—La serie* (Cattleya-Rai, 2017-20) and *Nero a metà* (Cattleya, 2018) can rely on a pool of potential over 100 million subscribers. The following part of this analysis will therefore assess the impact of these titles in relation to their engagement with public discourses.

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<sup>8</sup> *Terraferma* won the Jury Special Prize at the 2011 Venice Film Festival. *Fuocoammare* too enjoyed vast critical acclaim, won the Golden Bear at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival, and received two nominations at the Oscars.



### *The real paradigm shift: serial drama*

Up until the first decade of the new century, television serial drama in Italy tended to be rather traditional with stories, characters and themes generally informed by political correctness and linear storytelling. Two very successful series bookended the decades before and after the turn of the century combining such an approach to issues of migration: *Felipe ha gli occhi azzurri* (Red Film Group-Beta Film, 1991) and *Butta la luna* (Rai, 2006-09). Felipe is an 8-year-old Filipino who reaches Italy illegally in the hope of being reunited with his older sister. At first exploited as an underage black labourer, he is then helped in his odyssey by Turi, a Sicilian small time crook and orphan himself, and eventually by the police. The protagonist of *Butta la luna* is a Nigerian woman named Alyssa who gets pregnant as a result of an affair with an Italian man. The man's selfish refusal to take responsibility is countered by a competition of sorts between who offers the most support to Alyssa: the mother-in-law, lawyers, tribunals, psychologists. The obvious, underlying message of both series is the solidarity shown by the Italian people at a time when mass migration turned from unexpected occasional events to constant flows: despite the presence of some bad apples the traditional institutions of society—family, justice, support networks—can still be relied upon. Whether such an uplifting message reflects everyday reality in Italy at all is of course a completely different matter.<sup>9</sup>

As the longest running series on Italian television, *Il commissario Montalbano* has been on air since 1999 for a total of 15 seasons that come in the more traditional format of two to four self-contained 100-minute episodes each. Of the 35 episodes to date, at least fourteen include plotlines featuring

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<sup>9</sup> The casting of Fiona May in the role of Alyssa deserves some attention. Fiona May is well known to the Italian public as a former Olympic athlete who represented Italy for several years after having been naturalized Italian. Ironically, while most Italians believe her to be African, she is in fact British of Jamaican descent.

characters of migrants. In *Montalbano* too these alternate between the victim and the criminal paradigms, although the former is much more frequent, often with stories about human trafficking that either forces young female migrants from Africa («La forma dell'acqua», 2.3) or Eastern Europe («Par condicio», 5.12; and «Le ali della sfinge», 7.16) into prostitution; coerces children into sexual exploitation («Il giro di boa», 5.11); or supplies organ trade organizations («La gita a Tindari», 3.5). The criminal paradigm is limited to a case of drug smuggling («Il senso del tatto», 4.7) and to the unjust accusations against a hard-working Tunisian bricklayer («Salvo amato, Livia mia», 14.35). Characterising trait of the protagonist, Salvo, is his compassion in treating all migrants humanely, as individuals rather than as part of an undistinguished mass or social issue category, often praising their command of the Italian language (in contrast with the linguistic shortcomings of *Lamerica*) and apologizing for the flaws and prejudices shown by the institutions he represents. All episodes cited above contain one-off stories but one storyline that originates in the very first episode titled «Il ladro di merendine» (1.1) is developed through several seasons, involving the rescue of a six-year-old Tunisian orphan (François) who Montalbano even contemplates adopting.<sup>10</sup>

*Montalbano*'s peculiar preoccupation with public discourses and policies around migration culminates in «L'altro capo del filo» (13.34), broadcast in Italy in February of 2019. The episode opens with Montalbano coordinating his men in preparation for the arrival of a ship who has rescued dozens of fleeing migrants from the sea. When an officer from another division approaches him worried about a missing migrant, Montalbano retorts: «Enough with this tale of ISIS terrorists travelling on migrant boats!» This line sounds like a direct scathing rebuff of the hysteria peddled over the years by newspapers and

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<sup>10</sup> Other episodes that follow François's storyline are: «La voce del violino» (1.2), «L'odore della notte» (4.9), «Il sorriso di Angelica» (9.23), and «Una lama di luce» (9.26).

media outlets (*cf.* Anon, 2015; Di Giuseppe, 2015; Scalea, 2016), especially following unproven allegations by members of the Libian government, and by politicians of all parties, as in the case of the Home Secretary of the left-wing government coalition Marco Minniti (Anon, 2018). Montalbano is then taken aboard the ship off the coast of Sicily where he can see with his own eyes the suffering that those people carry with them —throughout the scene Montalbano does not utter a single word. The style is almost documentary not dissimilar to that of *Fuocoammare* and clearly unusual, if not altogether extraneous to the tongue-in-cheek tone and the detection plotlines that are typical of the series. This was enough for the then incumbent Home Secretary —the anti-migrant Lega party's Matteo Salvini who, in the meantime, had succeeded Minniti in office— to unleash a nasty social media campaign against the alleged «pro-migrant propaganda» of the show (Tondo, 2019; Legnani, 2019; Anon, 2019), which implies that the official political discourse and policies themselves have become anti-migrant and that the new cultural discourse and dominant social perception is a reactionary one that opposes any notion of «hybridity» as a threat to a supposedly original, purer identity.

On approaching the last decade Italy too started to participate in the global paradigm shift that has invested what is now called, after Jason Mittell, complex television (2015). The game changer was the advent of Sky Italia and the production of *Romanzo criminale-La serie* (Cattleya-Sky Italia, 2007-10), which has become the founding branding model —*viz.* successful novel (or book), followed by feature film adaptation first, and drama series development next— and marked the widespread adoption of the multi-strand one-hour format combining vertical and horizontal storylines as the benchmark for later series such as *Gomorra: La serie* (2014-), *Suburra-La serie* (2017-20), *L'amica geniale* (2018-) and many more, *pace* political correctness.

Storylines in both *Gomorra* and *Suburra* are based on or (loosely) inspired by true events and their screen adaptations

(both feature films and drama series) tend to depart even significantly from the original books. Three of the five stories—all set in Naples—that *Gomorra* the feature film (Matteo Garrone, 2008) consists of feature immigrants. One includes a mutiny of illegal African workers and an accident involving Albanian truck drivers transporting toxic waste. Another follows a Neapolitan dressmaker who «betrays» the cottage factory he works for to secretly teach his craft to the local Chinese community of black labourers on the side. The third storyline shows a group of African drug dealers being assaulted by two local young gangsters. Only the latter finds its way into *Gomorra: La serie* (2014-) as a similar set of characters and events is much expanded to the extent that most of the plotline of an entire episode aptly titled «Sangue africano» (1.4) —i.e. African blood— revolves around it. The main characters of the series are either members of or linked to the Camorra clan led by the fictitious Savastano family, who controls, among other things, the drug trade in several areas of Naples through an army of local gangs affiliated to them.<sup>11</sup> These include a gang of Nigerian dealers in one of the more peripheral districts of the city where a large community of Nigerian migrants live. The ringleader of the Nigerian gang orders one of his men to get himself arrested so he can meet the head of the Savastano family, Don Pietro, who has recently been jailed, and negotiate a higher profit margin from the drugs they push on behalf of the Savastanos in their territory. Don Pietro agrees in return for the Nigerians to help him stir a riot amongst the inmates so he can blackmail the prison warden to lift some of the restrictions. The Nigerians comply and the deal seems sealed. However, soon after the riot, Don Pietro sends orders to his men on the outside to kill all the Nigerians. Overnight, the Nigerian community is ambushed: nobody is spared.

Strikingly, immigrants in *Gomorra* (both the film and the series) can only be recognized as generic groups rather than indi-

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<sup>11</sup> One of the largest crime syndicates in Italy, the Camorra is the criminal organization historically associated with the Campania region.

viduals and are never given a chance to play a more active role or even just try and bend the rules to their advantage without having to face terrible consequences. Their integration is defined by the space they occupy and is granted only inasmuch as they remain part of the landscape, a cog of the system, in the background.<sup>12</sup>

*Suburra* draws inspiration from journalistic inquiries and criminal prosecutions that unveiled an elaborate web of corruption and intrigues involving Rome's municipal administrations, organized crime and Catholic organizations.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, criminal organizations secured contracts via corrupt politicians who grafted vast sums of public funds originally allocated to manage public services and, crucially, EU funds destined to manage the emergency caused by the influx of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Interceptions were published of the leader of one such criminal organization gloating over the phone with accomplices at the prospect that the income from the funds syphoned off the migration crisis would exceed even the profits made by drug dealing (Abbate, 2016).<sup>14</sup> This fact inspires the core premise of Season 2 of the TV series —namely, a strip of land along the coast is turned into a temporary reception camp for migrants triggering all sorts of complications:

—Local criminal organizations want that same piece of land for two reasons:

1. They have made a deal with the Mafia to build a new port that would flood Rome with drugs; and

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<sup>12</sup> In an interesting role reversal, one of the main protagonists (Ciro Di Marzio) is forced to emigrate to Bulgaria in the opening episode of Season 3 and, following his apparent demise by the end of the season, again to Latvia in the feature film *L'immortale* (Marco D'Amore, 2019), which follows a separate storyline parallel to that Season 4 in the series, centred around a small Italian community residing in Riga.

<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed account of how facts and real events have been fictionalized in *Suburra* see Russo (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Those profits would be in the order of billions of euros. Excerpts of said interceptions are also available on various YouTube news channel.

2. They are planning a huge speculative project to build a sort of Italian Las Vegas.
  - Catholic and other (in theory) non-profit organizations try to secure funding and contracts to manage the accommodation of migrants.
  - Politicians exploit the situation for propaganda purposes as local elections are looming and right-wing parties are set to win.

These storylines are woven throughout the whole second season until, in «La culla» (2.5), they all converge in one exemplary plot point. Two of the criminal characters hijack a coach that is transporting a newly arrived group of migrants to the reception camp and force the driver to lie to the police and the press by claiming he was attacked by the immigrants, who then allegedly escaped of their own volition. In the following days, the local population stage a vigorous protest against the immigrants and the camp is cleared by the local authorities—this too being a nod to the rather recurrent similar episodes throughout Italy.

As a final case study, the significance of *Nero a metà* should be given due consideration. What is denied to *Montalbano's* François—who expressed his desire to become a policeman just like his uncle Salvo only to be murdered as a teenager—is granted to the protagonist of *Nero a metà*. Not only for the first time on Italian television series features a black character who shares the role of active protagonist with his white counterpart; but he is an up-and-coming Deputy Inspector in the police force. Malik Soprani's is also the story of a double search for identity. On a personal level this is shaped by a painful reconciliation with a now distant past gradually revealed throughout Season 1 by a traumatic origin backstory: sure enough, 5-year-old Malik was rescued at sea after a boat overcrowded with migrants capsized in the Mediterranean causing the death of dozens, including his mother. The accident marked the end of his African life and of any early memories of his culture of origin; Malik

cannot remember anything about native Ivory Coast, was later adopted by an Italian woman who runs a charity that takes care of displaced migrants, was raised an Italian, speaks Italian, and considers himself Italian. Such is Malik's desire to feel fully integrated that in an episode niftily titled «L'ev-idenza inganna» (i.e. appearances are deceiving) it soon attracts the scorn and criticism of a Nigerian girl who accuses Malik of trying to be «whiter than white people» (1.2). On another level, through his public role Malik is also in search of an institutional identity of sorts: not just because he is a black young man who represents a traditionally all-white institution such as the Italian police force; but also because, through his active presence, the identity of that same institution itself is poised to become less white and, hopefully, more open to change.

None of this comes without a price though: throughout Season 1, and especially in the first six episodes, Malik is subject to repeated instances of racism, most often in the form of derogatory comments or outright offensive epithets regarding the colour of his skin by characters representing all social groups —*viz.* victims of crimes he investigates, citizens in public spaces and colleagues alike. This rhetorical device was a systematic choice at development and storylining stage by the creators and writers of the series, as well as a clear editorial line pursued by the broadcaster (i.e. Rai, the public television network)<sup>15</sup> to the extent that the opening of the first episode was written with the intent of misleading the audience into believing Malik is a criminal (a drug dealer) whereas he is in fact working undercover: the clear purpose being to encourage viewers to question their own assumptions and misconceptions based on racial stereotyping. This makes him an unusual screen character because even though he still retains some aspects of the victim paradigm (i.e. the

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<sup>15</sup> First-hand information about the decision-making process in the writers' room of *Nero a metà* was collected in an interview with the series story editor Laura Cotta Ramosino (Russo, 2021).

past trauma associated to his migration from Africa combined with the racism he experiences on a daily basis in the present), and although he is not literally a second-generation migrant per se, Malik shares the main trait of the latter as defined by Marianne Hirsch as the «postmemory generation» whose members «present themselves as active citizens rather than victim, and engage in activities that reach the public sphere» (Hirsch, 2008, as quoted by Andreassen and Cecchini).

*Pillorying the Pillars: what serial dramas tell us about the crisis of the EU identity*

The Call for Papers for a panel to be submitted at the 2020 Conference of the American Association for Italian Studies was themed: «Exploring identity/identities: Naples beyond *Gomorra* & Elena Ferrante». As per the Call:

This panel intends to investigate the complexity of Neapolitan identity beyond the stereotypes that are perpetuated by contemporary media representations, such as the legacy of criminality on one hand [Ndr. a clear reference to *Gomorra*], and the image of degradation and moral and material violence associated to the *rione* on the other [Ndr. as portrayed by Elena Ferrante].<sup>16</sup>

The *a priori* assumption here is that these representations are stereotypical. Or, put in lay terms, these stereotypes would be a glorification of the criminal on one hand, and the victimization of the migrant on the other, resulting in a negative portrayal of Italy and Italians. But as with Bhabha (1994), a stereotype creates identity through fixity, that is through an unchanging order where the dominant prevails and the threat of the different is recognized and then disavowed, which is

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<sup>16</sup> Author's translation. The *rione* is Naples' equivalent of a Spanish *barrio* in the oldest areas of the city.



precisely the point that similar arguments miss about the potential of these serial narratives.<sup>17</sup>

Far from simply staging a reiteration of stereotypes, series like *Gomorra* (2014-), *Suburra* (2017-20), *Il Commissario Montalbano* (1999-) and *Nero a metà* (2018) are exemplary of the crisis of the European Identity as a result of the failure to keep true to the so-called Pillars that the European entity had set to itself. Crucially, the First pillar—which includes EU citizenship, social policy, asylum policy, and immigration policy—is supposed to be about «community integration». The EU as a supranational entity has abdicated part or all of the community integration values and the heart and soul of its foreign policy—which includes human rights and foreign aid as part of the Second pillar—to what is formally defined as intergovernmental cooperation, which in practice translates into the EU allocating money to individual countries to deal with the issues themselves. Furthermore, the above-mentioned elements of the First pillar have *de facto* been shifted to issues of security policy with the evident militarization of border control. Likewise, the EU depends on the individual states to action the elements of the Third pillar with regard to criminal matters. However, when the individual state fails—as it often does—to tackle human trafficking and organized crime; and when EU funding to deal with emergencies are turned into a source of income through a political system fraught with corruption (as shown in *Suburra*), the resulting short circuit becomes the locus of tension that these serial narratives stage.

The focus of their narratives is *not* the migrant crisis, which is a given: the focus is the crisis of the institutions, Italian and European alike. And this crisis is staged by the representation of the failure at an institutional level in the control of space or by the outright absence of said institutions in that space. In *Borders, Bodies and Narratives of Crisis in Europe* (Lagios,

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<sup>17</sup> Bhabha's well-known notions of mimicry and ambivalence would prove much more useful in investigating the representations of migrants in a context of crisis, be it of identity or entity, of the European Dream.

Lekka and Panoutsopoulos, 2018) the authors convincingly unpick the shortcomings of what the volume calls the military/humanitarian nexus, that is the discourse with which the EU has framed the migrant crisis. The miscarriage of this nexus has had two nefarious consequences:

1. It failed to achieve its own problem-solving objective (one only has to mention Frontex as a most glaring example of such a failure).
2. It ended up colonizing political and public discourses and more or less guided (mis)perceptions around this dichotomy, as staged, for example, in *Il commissario Montalbano* and *Suburra*.

Within this scenario, the paradigm shift to serial television highlighted here has achieved a double objective. Firstly, it potentially solves the problem of lacking an audience: not only that, but it also automatically makes these narratives available to millions of potential viewers in dozens of countries. Secondly, these series tackle storytelling via specific devices—that is, format and genre (and more precisely, crime and melodrama)—that return a different portrayal of migrant characters. Even when they still rely on the victim paradigm, victimhood is no longer the issue at hand. If anything, migrant characters have become victims of two sides of another problem. On one hand, the lack or failure or absence of institutions in implementing a proper process that achieves or at least facilitates real integration and social justice; on the other hand, and because of this absence, organized crime steps in to fill this void by putting its own system of integrating masses of migrants into a social and economic landscape that works according to its own logic, and that although illegal is not even concerned with remaining underground anymore. It has become «normal»: because there is no virtuous system on the other end, it is «the» system.

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