

## Film Reviews

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### *In altro mare.*

By Franco La Cecla.

A.S.I.A. Production/Cineteca Bologna, 2010.

56 minutes. DVD format, color.

### *Il mare di Joe.*

By Enzo Incontro and Marco Mensa.

Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Emigrati, Delegazione Regionale Sicilia;

Scuba Film Production; Ethnos, 2009.

60 minutes. DVD format, color.

The fluctuating fortunes of the U.S. commercial fisheries have been a consistent topic of observation, commentary, and documentation, be it from government, the media, artists, writers, or the academic community. While motivations for these efforts vary – it is indeed a significant preoccupation – there is no denying that those who work the water provide all of us with connections to the sea that are seemingly timeless and deeply revealing of the human condition. Certain groups of European immigrants galvanized this sentiment, arriving in the United States to participate in the country's burgeoning commercial fisheries and hoping to reverse the economic privations that affected them in their home countries. Starting in the late nineteenth century, an ethnic mosaic began taking shape in American fishing communities, spanning from the Atlantic coast, to the Gulf of Mexico, to the Great Lakes, to the Pacific coast. Not surprisingly, Italians took their place in this unfolding occupational drama. They brought not only the skills, energy, and environmental insight required for commercial fishing but also the family life, religiosity, foodways, and language that accompanied this occupational tradition. Along the way, Italian immigrant fishermen needed to reconcile numerous cultural and economic quandaries. Given these circumstances, it is understandable that such communities appeal to the documentarian's imagination.

Two recent films, *In altro mare* (In other sea) and *Il mare di Joe* (Joe's sea),<sup>1</sup> fit squarely in this documentary tradition, chronicling the connections that link Sicilian and other Italian fishermen to the places they create for themselves in the United States. But these films are structured differently. In *Il mare di Joe*, filmmaker and naturalist Enzo Incontro prominently inserts himself into the film – both in his voiceover and on camera – and takes us on his odyssey to trace the life of Joe Bonanno, whose legendary fishing experience took him from the island of Marettimo, Sicily, to Monterey, California, and north to Alaska. Unlike *Il mare di Joe*, which often takes the form of travelog, *In altro mare* is a more robust social critique, examining the formation of the Italian fishing community of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the challenges it has faced in the wake of collapsing fish stocks in the Northwest Atlantic. Notwithstanding these differences and the narratives they frame, each film firmly establishes the sea's powerful, indeed pervasive, influence in Italian coastal communities and the ways in which this cultural template goes unabated when one is transplanted. As Joe Bonanno says in *Il mare di Joe*, "Salt flows in our veins, we can't do anything about it." Although these films emerge from the social/cultural

documentary tradition and its ever-increasing merger with environmental documentaries, it is equally important that viewers recognize how these films overlap with the content and cinematographic pedigree established by Luchino Visconti's powerful handling of Sicilian fishing in his neorealist film *La terra trema* (*The Earth Trembles*) (1948).

Each film emphasizes how the fishing experience at certain Italian locations—Terrasini, Lampedusa, Marettimo—shaped some immigrants' expectations in coming to the United States, as well as in handling inevitable struggles—both economic and physical (commercial fishing being consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States). Italian traditions were, and continue to be, instrumental in ameliorating these stresses. *In altro mare* opens and closes with scenes from Gloucester's well-known St. Peter's Fiesta, and ample footage in both films depicts deeply valued family events and devotional exercises, underscoring the vital importance of faith and kinship networks in sustaining this way of life. Neither film shies away from burdens placed on women, whether it is the loneliness of separation during fishing voyages, working in Monterey's canneries, managing a fishing family's financial affairs, or being a spiritual bedrock. Italian values and affiliations reinforce occupational resiliency, sometimes in such subtle utterances as Joe Bonanno's tender, grateful devotion to his wife and tacit acknowledgment of her role in his fishing success, and, at other times, in the distinctly modern guise of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association (GFWA), whose efforts, under the leadership of Angela Sanfilippo, have been a potent lobbying force.

To their credit, these films are not formulaic accounts of Italian immigrants simply achieving economic success in the U.S. commercial fishing industry. Although the financial rewards and possibilities of moving to the United States are duly noted, so are the problems. This comes through in particularly compelling terms when footage from *In altro mare* shows ex-Gloucester fishermen—who have returned to Italy—reflecting on their experience. They readily admit that opportunities in their homeland were limited ("Terrasini was beautiful, but gave me nothing," says one returned immigrant) but add that the unrelenting work schedule, different weather conditions, and competitive economic climate in the United States were nothing to envy. Vexed by the compromises they face in transitioning from Italy to the United States—particularly when reflecting on the more humane pace of commercial fishing in Mediterranean waters—one fisherman declares how the United States requires one to have a "business mind . . . [you] remain poor if you work for others." These qualitative distinctions are addressed in footage that rotates between the industrial pace of Gloucester's fisheries and its impersonal, computerized fish auction and the less aggressive, more sensitively wrought artisanal fisheries of Terrasini, where carefully arranged fish await their place in a traditional auction setting, a scene suggesting a less commercially frayed connection to the sea.

There is no mistaking the pivotal role that Italian tradition—indeed, more typically, Sicilian tradition—plays in consummating the U.S. fishing experience of those portrayed in these films. But viewers will be struck by how these fishing people are caught in the crosscurrents of ecological changes and environmental politics that afflict fisheries throughout the world. *Incontro* depicts how sardine fishing brought Marettimans to Monterey as early as 1917; however, declines in this fishery led Joe Bonanno to seek salmon in Alaska during the later twentieth century. Bonanno's maritime roots reach all the way back to Sicily, but the tenuous environmental circumstances

that engulfed his working life are evident as he tours the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary or meets with an Alaska fisheries official before the start of the salmon season. Likewise, in *In altro mare*—which is less focused on a single figure than *Il mare di Joe*—we gain similar insight when Gloucester fishing-boat captain Baldassare Noto remarks on the challenges of making a living amidst declining stocks and more stringent catch regulations—“Now it is over in Gloucester.” His affable personality stands in stark contrast to the GFWA’s Angela Sanfilippo and her frustration with the federal government and the circumstances that threaten her beloved fishing community. These vignettes are starkly illuminated by footage of Gloucester fishermen returning dead bycatch to the sea in compliance with federal regulations. In a not too subtle critique, *In altro mare* ends with ex-Gloucester fishermen in Terrasini contentedly greeting the camera, perhaps with less money than they had in the United States, but possibly with a more measured, sustained relationship to the sea and with a renewed perspective on how their Mediterranean inheritance sustains what they valued most in their human relationships.

Broadly speaking, these films remind us that the sea is central—indeed, highly defining—to Italian transnational identity. Although this legacy is typically touted from the perspective of Italy’s well-known actors in global history, the figures in these films show how such dynamics ripple deep into the ranks of ordinary Italians and Italian Americans. In fostering movement around the globe, the seas and their resources have endowed Italians with environmental and culturally syncretistic perspectives that not all groups can claim. But as much as the oceans call, Italy also beckons its people to return. Throughout U.S. history, Italian immigrants have had some of the highest rates of return migration back to their European home, and each of the two films underscores this enduring practice. Indeed, Italian women who migrated to the United States were particularly noted for maintaining these ties, a tradition exemplified not only by Angela Sanfilippo and her Gloucester Fishermen’s Wives Association but across the United States, as evidenced by Carol McKibben’s work (2006) on Sicilian women in the Monterey fishing community.

Both of these films are rich in ethnographic detail and historical documentation. The mix of contemporary and historical footage, still shots, and oral testimony will prove useful in any number of educational settings and can be effectively integrated in these venues with a range of historical, anthropological, fiction, and nonfiction writing.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, both films add to a pattern of public history and public humanities projects in Monterey and Gloucester that have focused on the Italian-American fishing experience—projects that have taken form as permanent and temporary museum exhibits and oral history collections.

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## Notes

1. Incontro and Mensa’s film is variously identified as *Il mare di Joe* and *Joe’s sea* on the DVD label and *The sea of Joe* in the film’s title sequence. To minimize confusion, this review uses the film’s Italian title.

2. For historical, anthropological, fiction, and nonfiction writing on the subject, see Kurlansky (2008), McKibben (2006), Norkunas (1993), Orlando (2004), St. Peter's Fiesta Committee (2001), Swiderski (1987), and Testaverde (2004).

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### *Columbus Day Legacy.*

By Bennie Klain (Navajo).

A TricksterFilms, LLC Production, 2011.

27 minutes. DVD format, color.

*Columbus Day Legacy*, by Navajo director Bennie Klain, offers insight into this federal holiday as it is observed in Denver, Colorado—Colorado being the state where it was first proclaimed an official celebration. The documentary opens with a series of remarks by Native-American activists, scholars, artists, and Italian-American cultural activists about the meaning of the holiday. The common denominator for both groups is the idea that Columbus Day—and, for that matter, its street parades—bears a highly symbolic and ideological value, yet it also contributes to furthering the historical oppositional narrative of oppressed versus oppressor. The documentary draws a definite line between Native-American and Italian-American perspectives on the issue: First, we are presented with a radio interview of American Indian Movement leader Russell Means and political science professor Glenn Morris. Then we are introduced to the testimonials of Italian-American activist Micki Lava Clayton and to the archival reconstruction of Italian immigration and mining history in Colorado. The documentary culminates in the 2007 parade (also marking the 100th anniversary of the Colorado holiday), which in some sense is a metaphor for indigenous peoples' history on this continent: Resistance to and peaceful demonstration against the celebration by the Transform Columbus Day Alliance are met with utmost contempt and violence by the local law enforcement. Once the protesters are out of the way (quite predictably, the movement leaders undergo temporary detention), the parade continues unhindered. The photographic images, the soundtrack, and the editing of these last sequences in