

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BORDER: MEDITERRANEAN ITALIAN SERIES AS GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how recent Italian television series set in the Mediterranean function as geopolitical narratives, contributing to the cultural and political redefinition of the region as a contested border-space. Drawing on frameworks from critical geopolitics, border studies, and television studies — in particular the concepts of geopolitical television, border series, and borderscapes — the study analyses three Italian productions: *Lampedusa*

— *Dall'orizzonte in poi* (2016), the *Inspector Montalbano* episode “The Other End of the Thread” (2019), and *Unwanted* (2023). Through close attention to their narrative structures, aesthetic strategies, and localisation choices, the paper argues that serial storytelling affords a distinctive capacity to dramatise the shifting imaginaries of mobility, identity, and territorial governance that define the contemporary Mediterranean. Each work stages the Mediterranean Sea simultaneously as a humanitarian space, a militarised frontier, and a borderscape in which the meanings of belonging and exclusion are continuously negotiated. The analysis foregrounds how Italian public and premium television engages with migration not only as a social issue but as a geopolitical condition, producing affective encounters with the border that shape — and are shaped by — broader public debates.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In global public discourse, the Mediterranean has shifted from an emblem of cultural encounter to one of the most symbolically charged frontiers of the twenty-first century, marked by shipwrecks, rescue operations, and expanding security infrastructures. These images have played a decisive role in reframing the region as a militarised and hyper-visible border-space, shaping political debates while permeating contemporary media production.

This paper investigates how recent television series set in the Mediterranean engage with migration, spatial politics, and the reconfiguration of territorial boundaries, arguing that they operate as geopolitical narratives that contribute to the cultural redefinition of the region. Within this framework, Mediterranean dramas centred on migration can be understood as *geopolitical television* (Saunders 2021) and *border narratives* (Gott 2023). Through localisation strategies, these series portray the Mediterranean Sea as a dynamic border – simultaneously connective and divisive – and foreground its coastline as a *borderscape* (Brambilla 2015), a lived space in which the meanings of the border are continuously negotiated.

The analysis focuses on three Italian productions – *Lampedusa – Dall’orizzonte in poi* (2016), *Inspector Montalbano* (“The Other End of the Line”, 2019), and *Unwanted* (2023) – each of which employs serial storytelling to explore tensions around mobility, identity, and territoriality. By integrating aesthetic, narrative, and geopolitical perspectives, the essay contributes to debates on Mediterranean spatial imaginaries and outlines a framework for understanding how television participates in shaping public perceptions of one of the most contested regions of the contemporary world.

2. THE GEOPOLITICAL WILL BE TELEVISED

Analysing Mediterranean television through a geopolitical lens requires clarifying what “geopolitics” means in contemporary scholarship and how television contributes to the production of geopolitical knowledge. Critical geopolitics begins from the premise that geography is not a neutral description of spatial reality but a form of knowledge that constructs, legitimises, and reveals relations of domination. It conceives geopolitics as a mode of spatial imagination – a constellation of discourses, images, and interpretative frameworks through

which global space is organised and rendered meaningful. As Ó Tuathail argues, “the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space” (1996: 1). If “geography is about power,” then space is not an inert container but is actively produced through material practices, institutional infrastructures, and cultural representations.

Television, as a widely consumed medium, plays a central role in shaping what McFarlane and Hay call “dominant geopolitical understandings” (2003: 211). Moisi adds an affective dimension to this framework, arguing that television drama is a privileged medium through which the “emotions of the world” are articulated (2010; 2017). Whether through fiction, fantasy, or historical reconstruction, serial narratives mobilise affect as they oscillate between reimagined pasts and speculative futures – giving form to the anxieties of the present. Moisi also underscores the geopolitical force of U.S. television hegemony: as the world’s largest content exporter, the United States disseminates ideological and emotional regimes that shape global perceptions of space, conflict, and identity.

Over the past decade, the global television landscape has undergone profound transformation. Streaming platforms have redrawn the geography of audiovisual circulation and multiplied the geopolitical imaginaries available to viewers. As Saunders notes, “English-language series do not possess a monopoly on screening popular geopolitics via serial television” (2021: 1). Digital platforms have produced what Saunders and Strukov describe as “increasing porousness” (2018: 4) – a heightened flow and blending of national, regional, and geolinguistic cultures across media boundaries (Lobato 2020).

This evolving media ecology produces new tensions between the local and the global that are not only industrial but also aesthetic. The intensified attention to space in contemporary serial television may indeed signal a broader technological and aesthetic maturation, comparable to the emergence of landscape in painting (Waade 2017; Lefebvre 2007). Yet the shift cannot be attributed exclusively to streaming platforms; rather, the platforms have accelerated tendencies already present in earlier television cultures.

It is important to emphasise, however, that within this reterritorialized media framework geopolitical narratives no longer originate from a single centre but emerge through the interaction of regional and transnational dynamics. It is precisely this expanded field of production and circulation

that leads Saunders to analyse the geopolitics of television drama, and although his primary focus is Nordic noir, his framework is equally instructive for Mediterranean production. Like Nordic noir, Mediterranean serial drama acquires international visibility through on-demand platforms that allow hyper-local stories to circulate globally; and similarly, it increasingly engages with geopolitical themes that intersect with television's world-building capacities (Tischleder 2017). Through their extended temporalities and immersive geographies, such serial dramas generate what Saunders calls "a feedback loop of worldviews," (2021: 7) shaping everyday understandings of how world politics works.

A key contribution of Saunders' approach lies in his claim that "*television matters more than film* when it comes to 'common-sense' understandings of and expositions on geopolitics." This assertion stems from the medium's long-form narrative structures and its emphasis on "localism, landscapes, the lived city, and flawed, complex characters" (2021: 9). Serial formats thus enable a depth and continuity of geopolitical representation that cinema – typically confined to shorter timeframes – rarely achieves.

The centrality of long-form storytelling also underpins Michael Gott's notion of the border series. Gott argues that "television series are arguably the most prominent – and surely the most popular – form of European screen production that engage extensively with the topic of borders". With seasons spanning six to twelve episodes, and often multiple years, series possess the "depth and breadth to recount the evolving story of Europe" (Gott 2023: 164). In this sense, border series activate a "mapping impulse" in viewers (Cfr. Conley 2003; Castro 2009), reorienting them in relation to the spaces represented onscreen. Gott even suggests that border series function as a "form of map," recalling the mass-produced cartographies that shaped popular imaginaries in the nineteenth century (2023: 166).

The geopolitical function of serial storytelling therefore resides in its capacity to define soft borders, reflect anxieties surrounding hard borders, and dramatize shifting imaginaries of identity and belonging. Designed for mass audiences, series "reflect and reproduce common narratives of identity," reinforcing or challenging widely held spatial imaginaries (Gott 2023: 165).

In this sense, Mediterranean serial television has become a critical site for examining how contemporary audiovisual culture shapes the geopolitics of a region increasingly defined by conflictual and contested borders.

3. MEDITERRANEAN BORDERSCAPES IN SERIAL TELEVISION

Geopolitical narratives profoundly shape contemporary understandings of the Mediterranean and, by extension, its spatial representation in serial drama. Since the early 2000s, the region has been recast as a lethal border-zone, where thousands have died under Europe's migration regime. Highly mediated shipwrecks have exposed what is now widely described as a *liquid border*: a militarised, securitised, and racialised frontier in which mobility is differentially governed and migrant lives rendered expendable (Law 2014; Tazzioli 2015).

The so-called "migrant crisis" is itself a media construction. Initially framed through metaphors of "invasion," it later shifted toward humanitarian narratives centred on saving lives at sea (Chouliaraki and Musarò 2017). Governmental rescue practices operate in highly performative ways: the "scene of rescue" becomes a choreographed moment that feeds into a wider "border spectacle," a public staging in which "migrant 'illegality' is rendered spectacularly visible" (De Genova 2013: 1181).

Far from the "connective sea" evoked by Horden and Purcell (2000), the Mediterranean's materiality has become an instrument of enforcement, its waters extending the reach of the border regime (Zucconi 2022). This transformation underscores the border's dynamic nature – not a fixed line but a social and cultural process (Paasi 1998; Newman 2006). In this sense, the Mediterranean must be understood not as a singular frontier but as a site where borders multiply, fragment, and assume diverse forms (Cfr. Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

At the same time, the sea as border has mobilised new political subjectivities, positioning the Mediterranean within the Global South and challenging narratives of European modernity from its peripheries (Chambers 2008). This shift has strengthened scholarly calls for a renewed conceptualisation of borders through the notion of *borderscaping* (Brambilla 2015: 28). By merging "border" with the spatial and aesthetic register of "landscape," borderscaping foregrounds the processes through which borders are produced, contested, and reimagined – including the emergence of "counter-hegemonic borderscapes" (Brambilla 2015: 20). Here, the border is reconceived not through a rigid binary of inclusion versus exclusion but as a dynamic process of *becoming* and *belonging* (Brambilla 2015: 30; Deleuze and Guattari 2008).

In the following analysis of Mediterranean-set television series on migration, we therefore treat the border not only as a narrative setting but as an object of inquiry. As the

Mediterranean Sea is increasingly reframed as a border, we adopt the concept of the *borderscape* to analyse how serial narratives configure the relationships between space, storytelling, and subjectivities. While the sea – predominantly depicted in these series – carries the traces of its contemporary transformations, coastal cities emerge as *borderscapes*: human landscapes in which the border is “mobile, perspectival, and relational” (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007: X)

The corpus analysed in this paper comprises episodes and complete miniseries from three Italian television productions released after 2015 – when the so-called migration crisis moved to the centre of international political and media debate. The selected works are: *Lampedusa – Dall’orizzonte in poi* (2016), a two-episode miniseries; “The Other End of the Thread” (2019), the 33rd episode of the long-running *Inspector Montalbano* (1999–2020); and *Unwanted – Ostaggi del mare* (2023), an eight-episode miniseries.

The decision to focus on Italian productions rests on several interrelated considerations. Geopolitically, Italy has become one of the principal landing points along Mediterranean maritime migration routes (Albahari 2015); its coastlines represent key sites where humanitarian rescue efforts intersect with securitarian enforcement. From an industrial standpoint, the corpus spans both public-service and private premium television: *Lampedusa* and *Inspector Montalbano* were produced and broadcast by Rai, in collaboration with companies such as Fabula Pictures and Palomar, while *Unwanted* was developed by Sky Studios – one of the main drivers of the recent renewal of Italian drama – in partnership with Indiana Production. Taken together, these programmes offer a representative cross-section of Italian serial production engaging with Mediterranean migration.

This focus also foregrounds the asymmetries that continue to shape the transnational circulation of Mediterranean media. The Tunisian series *Harga* (2021), which provides a crucial Maghrebi perspective on migration, remains largely inaccessible outside Arabic-speaking markets – particularly due to the absence of English subtitles – highlighting persistent inequalities in the global distribution of Mediterranean screen cultures despite the rhetoric of borderless streaming (Lobato 2020). For this reason, and in order to maintain a cohesive corpus grounded in a single national production context, *Harga* has not been included. A similar rationale informs the exclusion of *Eden* (Arte, 2019), a Franco-German co-production centred on European border politics: while highly relevant, its transnational industrial logic would require a different methodological framework from the one adopted here.

By delimiting the corpus to Italian productions while acknowledging these exclusions, the paper offers a focused analytical terrain for examining how Italian serial television positions itself within broader Mediterranean geopolitics and how it contributes to the shifting imaginaries of migration circulating across contemporary media landscapes.

4. **LAMPEDUSA: A MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE OF VOICES**

As Cuttitta observes, “Lampedusa has almost become a synonym for the border” precisely because its recent history is inseparable from maritime border control operations aimed at curbing unwanted migration (2014: 197). *Lampedusa*, the TV series, underscores this connection through its insistence on location – not only through its title but also through its use of on-screen captions that situate the viewer spatially and temporally¹.

The plot is closely tied to real events: the two-episode miniseries is inspired by a 2008 rescue operation in which local fishermen collaborated with the Coast Guard to save a large group of migrants at sea (Pontecorvo 2016). The series preserves this temporal distance by structuring the narrative as a recollection voiced by its protagonist, Maresciallo Marco Serra. Introduced as a “fish out of water,” Serra arrives on the island following the death of his son and the collapse of his marriage, embodying the perspective of an outsider who slowly becomes embedded within the rhythms and solidarities of the local community.

Across the narrative, a succession of rescue operations carried out by institutional actors builds toward the final – and most spectacular – intervention, anticipated as the pivotal event that will ultimately redefine Serra’s life. Running parallel to his trajectory is Viola, the resolute director of the migrant reception centre, through whom the series articulates the ongoing “borderisation” of the island, produced through political choices like “policies, practices and discourses” (Cuttitta 2014). Through her perspective, the series maps the network of local infrastructures involved in migrant reception – including the detention centre, the church, a tourist hotel, and the city hall – revealing how the island’s everyday spaces are reshaped by the demands of migration governance.

1 The opening sequence, for instance, begins with the caption “Libyan coast, 2010” (Costa libica, 2010) and depicts a group of migrants attempting to board a boat while being violently forced aboard by smugglers.

Significantly, the series aligns institutional stances with individual characters to render them more sympathetic and morally legible. The detention centre becomes the primary site where these tensions crystallise: migrants protest the poor living conditions yet also recognise Viola's efforts on their behalf. When unrest escalates and the centre is set on fire, the church provides temporary shelter, extending the network of local solidarities activated in response to the crisis.

Divergences among locals regarding the "migrant question" are also staged publicly. For instance, when a hotel owner interrupts the priest's sermon calling for greater solidarity with migrants, his abrupt exit, met with visible disapproval from the congregation, reinforces the series' broader ethic alignment with hospitality and humanitarian concern.

In a similar way, much of the island's transformation is articulated through dialogue. The same hotel owner – who functions as an antagonist to the community's ethos – voices stereotypical anti-migrant sentiments, sarcastically praising the sailors "for bringing us our daily ration of illegals" before linking migrant arrivals to the decline in tourism: "Sooner or later you'll be ruined as well, because if the tourists don't come, who are you going to sell your fish to?" ("Hai visto che bravi i nostri marinai che ci portano la razione quotidiana di clandestini... Peccato però che quest'anno abbiamo la metà delle prenotazioni in albergo. Prima o poi finite in miseria pure voi, perché se non ci sono i turisti, a chi glielo vendi il pesce?").

By voicing these concerns, the character explicitly frames Lampedusa's shift from tourist destination to border-zone. In this respect, the series often constructs the borderscape through discourse rather than spectacle – what Higson terms a "discursive space," produced "through people talking, either in voice-over or as figures in the landscape" (1987).

This dynamic resurfaces in a later scene, after Serra is shaken by a deadly shipwreck. Seeking to console him, Viola takes him to a high vantage point overlooking the sea – the same waters from which he has recently retrieved the bodies of the drowned. "When I can't take it anymore, I come here," she says, "all this beauty is a kind of medicine" ("Quando non ce la faccio più vengo sempre qui; tutta questa bellezza è una specie di medicina"). Yet the camera remains fixed on the characters rather than revealing the vista she describes. The borderscape is thus conjured verbally rather than visually, underscoring the series' reliance on dialogue to frame the island's evolving geopolitical significance.

The sea does not present itself as a "spatial spectacle" to viewers (Toft Hansen and Waade 2017: 89). Instead, it appears primarily as a site of intervention and action. Multiple

rescues punctuate the narrative, culminating in the final operation – nearly twenty minutes long – which stands as the most elaborate sequence in the miniseries. Here, the migrant vessel carries the largest group of passengers encountered so far, and the Coast Guard, lacking adequate equipment, enlists the assistance of a local fishing boat. The rescue unfolds under torrential rain, heightening its dramatic urgency.

Director Marco Pontecorvo emphasises the logistical and aesthetic complexity of the sequence:

Perhaps the most difficult sequence was the final nighttime rescue in the pouring rain. Water cranes, extras, stunt performers, and underwater operators were in the sea until five in the morning [...] Numerous cameras had to be coordinated, along with a fishing boat, a Coast Guard vessel, and a dilapidated migrant boat, all moving during the scene (2016).

Visually, the sequence resists the "liquid scopic regime" described by Mazzara (2019: 6), in which circulating images of bodies at sea and overcrowded boats have become so ubiquitous that they risk inducing spectator detachment (Colombini and Duncan 2023). While *Lampedusa* reproduces many of these familiar visual elements, the final rescue scene distinguishes itself by emphasising prolonged duration, the materiality of water (rain and sea), and limited visibility. The narration builds tension toward a moment that requires bodily immersion and affective engagement rather than the detached observation of familiar topoi.

In the aftermath, the sea horizon once again appears perfectly calm: beach umbrellas reopen, the sun shines again, and locals gather to welcome the arriving migrants. What Serra had initially presented as a traumatic turning point is reframed as an affirmation of collective purpose. The emotional weight of the event is crystallised in the closing voice-over, which encapsulates the series' spatial poetics. Beyond the boundaries of fiction, the island persists, and to grasp its reality, Serra insists, one must: "Come to Lampedusa, see with your own eyes" ("Vieni a Lampedusa, vieni a vedere con i tuoi occhi").

5. INSPECTOR MONTALBANO'S "THE OTHER END OF THE THREAD": STAGING THE MIGRANT EVENT

The television adaptation of Camilleri's noir novels, *Inspector Montalbano*, has achieved enduring success both nationally

and internationally. Beyond the strength of Camilleri's literary material, much of the series' appeal has been attributed to the attractiveness of its setting in the fictional town of Vigàta. International audiences often engage with the series in what Forshaw (2014) describes as a "hedonistic" mode:

They savoured the warm glow imparted by the Mediterranean setting – the blue skies, a personable Latin hero tackling none-too-gritty crimes – all of which were provided by this glossily made series, in which the town of Vigàta, with its unspoilt, antique beauty (unmarred by even a scribble of graffiti), provided a sumptuous wish-we-were-there backdrop.

Compared to its Scandinavian noir counterparts, one critic describes *Montalbano* as "a breath of warm air... He taught me I could laugh at murder again, and we part on good terms" (Donaghy 2012).

These accounts raise an important question: can a series defined by humour, sunlit landscapes, and an overall comforting aesthetic meaningfully engage with political issues? Pezzotti (2023) argues that, despite its reputation as primarily escapist, *Inspector Montalbano* should also be understood as geopolitical.

Crucially, the critical force of Camilleri's crime fiction derives in part from the serial form itself (Pezzotti 2015), a structural principle already embedded in his novels. As Rushing observes, "the cognitive pleasure produced by the unfolding of a Camilleri mystery is slight; what is significant is the reader's initiation into a series of social problems ranging from the minor [...] to the major" (2007, 33–34). Through serial accumulation and repetition, the *Montalbano* universe becomes a space in which everyday injustices, political dysfunctions, and social tensions are continually revisited and reassessed. Within this framework, migration emerges as a recurrent thematic thread. The television series foregrounds questions of immigration to Italy, extending and updating the social critiques present in Camilleri's writing (Mazzucchelli 2018).

The Other End of the Thread (2019) takes up this issue explicitly. Its opening sequence immediately signals a tonal rupture. Instead of the luminous aerial shots that usually introduce Vigàta, the episode begins at night, lingering on dark waves breaking against the shore. The camera then pans from the sea to Montalbano's balcony, where the inspector receives a phone call announcing the imminent arrival of a

migrant boat. This is a marked departure from Camilleri's novel *L'altro capo del filo* (2016), which opens with a domestic exchange between Montalbano and Livia about an upcoming wedding, foregrounding the crime plot rather than the migrant story.

This shift not only reflects the political urgency of the topic; it also produces an atmospheric rupture. The gloomy landscape, the threatening soundscape of the waves, and Montalbano's unusually sombre clothing collectively break with the series' established aesthetic register (Fahlenbrach 2021). The altered opening prepares viewers for the episode's exceptional thematic focus, signalling that something out of the ordinary is unfolding – both within the diegetic world and within the conventions of the series itself.

The episode is formally divided into two parts: the first centred on the migrant storyline, and the second on the investigation into a local dressmaker's murder. The migration plot is reframed through a set of aesthetic and narrative strategies. Situations initially shaped by assumptions or clichés are subsequently recontextualised – typically through dialogue – so that their actual meaning emerges. In this way, the episode actively stages and dismantles common stereotypes surrounding the "migration crisis." The first instance appears in the second scene, when a police officer insists that a migrant who fell from the boat must be affiliated with ISIS. Montalbano promptly exposes the implausibility of the claim, countering the prejudice that underpins it. A similar dynamic unfolds when another migrant attempts to flee police checks: officers, convinced he is armed, restrain him violently, only to discover he is carrying a flute. With Montalbano's intervention, the man is revealed to be a musician attempting to return home via a clandestine route. A final case concerns the alleged sexual assault of a young girl. Here too, Montalbano challenges the assumption that migrants are responsible, arguing that their precarious condition makes such an act unlikely. The investigation ultimately reveals that the perpetrators were the smugglers themselves.

The migrant presence also reconfigures the spatial and affective geography of Vigàta. The series foregrounds the transformation of the Mediterranean into a border-space by mobilising one of its most recognisable visual markers: the postcard-like seascape framed from Montalbano's balcony. This touristic imaginary is abruptly disrupted by the realities of migration. As the inspector prepares for his habitual morning swim, the familiar, placid horizon is suddenly broken by the sight of a body drifting ashore. He then carries the young

man's corpse to the beach, where he and Livia cover it with a towel in a gesture of solemn respect.

This scene acquires additional resonance through the temporal depth afforded by the serial form (García and Nannicelli 2021). The retrieval of the body evokes François – the Tunisian orphan introduced in the inaugural episode *The Snack Thief* (1999) – whom Montalbano and Livia once considered adopting. Italian viewers are likewise invited to recall this earlier storyline: despite the passage of time, *Inspector Montalbano* remains continuously present on national television through reruns, sustaining a collective familiarity with its narrative past (Weispfenning 2003; Kompare 2006). By integrating the arrival of the migrant boat into the long arc of the series, the episode presents the event as both extraordinary and structurally familiar (Hernández García 2024).

Upon its Italian broadcast, the episode attracted over eleven million viewers and generated considerable controversy, particularly on social media (Tondo 2019). This reaction must be understood within the political climate surrounding its broadcast, which occurred shortly after the 2018 *Diciotti* incident: the Coast Guard vessel *Diciotti* rescued 190 people near Lampedusa but was prevented from docking for five days under the newly implemented “closed ports” policy. The migrants were allowed to disembark only once Interior Minister Matteo Salvini secured commitments from other European countries to take them in. In this context, the episode's timing was widely interpreted as a critique of Salvini's anti-immigration stance (Tondo 2018). As a prime-time programme on the national public broadcaster, the episode thus became a televisual event, capable of intervening in contemporary political debates and generating widespread public discussion.

6. UNWANTED: CONTESTING CONTROL OF A HETEROTOPIC SPACE AT SEA

The miniseries *Unwanted* builds on a striking premise: what happens when a luxury cruise ship rescues a migrant vessel? This tension is succinctly captured in the series' promotional poster, which reworks Massimo Sestini's celebrated photograph *Mediterranean* – winner of a World Press Photo award and included in *TIME*'s Top 10 Photos of 2014. In the poster, the overcrowded migrant boat from Sestini's original image appears even smaller when juxtaposed with the looming prow of the cruise ship.

Reconfiguring Sestini's composition in this way foregrounds the collision of two radically different forms of mobility – touristic and migratory (Nail 2015: 2; Gott 2023: 140–163). The image crystallises the series' geopolitical project into a single visual metaphor, exposing the inequalities that surface when these asymmetrical movements converge within the same maritime space.

Foucault describes the ship as “the heterotopia *par excellence*: a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time given over to the infinity of the sea” (2008: 9). The cruise ship thus operates as a heterotopic microcosm: it reproduces a miniature version of society while simultaneously suspending or transforming its norms. Life on board follows its own logic – passengers cannot leave, temporal rhythms shift, and new spatial and social boundaries take shape. *Unwanted* mobilises this heterotopic “property” to both reproduce and trouble, within the enclosed space of the cruise ship, the dynamics of the Mediterranean border.

The series opens on the Libyan coast at night, as migrants prepare to cross the sea. This is immediately juxtaposed with shots of the illuminated cruise ship, its lights and music emphasising its monumental scale against the night sky. The contrast borders on emblematic: luxury and leisure are placed in direct visual opposition to precarious mobility. The captain, introduced as a grieving widower, is first shown lost in contemplation over photographs of his late wife; he is abruptly drawn out of his private sorrow by the distant sight of the migrant vessel.

Similarly, in a later scene, a woman contemplating suicide on the deck is halted by the unfolding rescue. These scenes underline – at times insistently – the disparity between the trivial concerns of some passengers and the life-and-death stakes of the migrants' crossing. Editing further amplifies this contrast: a shot of a tourist diving into a pool is intercut with a stylised image of migrants drowning, producing a jarring visual collision between diversion and peril. The rescue scene itself is rendered through spectacle (De Genova 2015). The immense size of the cruise ship creates a safe distance from which passengers watch the operation, turning them into spectators of the border regime.

The series maintains a dual perspective on migrants and tourists. Passengers – cosmopolitan travellers from across Europe, largely Italy and Germany – are characterised primarily through dialogue, especially their comments and reactions to the rescue, which echo public debates on migration. Migrants, by contrast, receive formal and narrative privilege.

Throughout the episodes, flashbacks recount the individual routes that have led them to the vessel², fostering an affective alignment with their pasts.

Within the confined space of the ship, the serial narrative unfolds through the gradual disclosure of the characters' pasts, generating a temporal structure that stretches beyond the immediate present and could, in principle, expand indefinitely³. Flashbacks deepen the moral complexity of the migrant characters – most notably Tareq, who, while concealing his identity, is revealed to have been a smuggler involved in the torture of several passengers.

The cruise ship initially provides shelter to the rescued migrants, yet simultaneously establishes a clear line of exclusion: they are confined to a restricted area and must avoid contact with the other passengers. The border regime is thus reproduced on board as a spatial and social separation. A crucial exception is Elvis, the young albino boy who speaks Italian and bears an “occidental” name; his ability to slip past security underscores the racialised dimension of border exclusion (Law 2014). Meanwhile, several European passengers express curiosity about the migrants, seeking encounters that generate new forms of relation – some solidaristic, others voyeuristic.

Most relevant to this analysis is how the border dynamic reproduced inside the ship is rendered *polydiegetic* through the series' narrative architecture. Through flashbacks, a multiplot structure, and rhythmic editing, the series constructs itself as an assemblage of intersecting storylines, so that “the viewer is witnessing a frontier that is a ‘multipolar axiological space’” (Shapiro 2015): a space in which the cultural and institutional production of the border becomes contested and negotiable.

Migrant agency becomes central when the characters discover that the ship is not heading toward Italy but back to North Africa. Led by the antiheroic figure of Tareq, the migrants seize control of the vessel and force its redirection toward Italy. The final arrival occurs during the night, and the Italian coast does not appear in its familiar balneary imaginary (Hom 2015). From the migrants' perspective, entry into Italy is reduced to a quiet bus journey⁴.

Throughout the series, the sea functions primarily as a setting: the site of encounter between the two vessels and the two modes of mobility (tourism and migration); the backdrop of the border spectacle; a recurring visual motif glimpsed through the ship's windows or in aerial establishing shots. As the border is displaced from the sea onto the ship's interior, spatial dynamics become central to the enclosed environment of the cruise and to the strongly marked mobility displayed in the migrants' flashbacks. Because the series anchors its spatial exploration in the ship's heterotopic environment and in the routes preceding it, the arrival in Italy is not elaborated through further spatial exploration.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Identifying a unified spatial sensibility in Mediterranean serial narratives – one expressed through recurring tones, moods, or atmospheres – remains a challenge. In literature, Mediterranean noir authors such as Andrea Camilleri and Jean-Claude Izzo anchor their stories in dense portrayals of real or imagined cities like Marseille, Barcelona, or the fictional Vigàta. In these works, place is not a mere backdrop but an affective and sociocultural fabric, articulated through references to cuisine, dialects, and shared cultural values that generate what Gabellieri (2022) defines as a distinctly Mediterranean locality. Television seriality, however, has struggled to transpose this literary regionalism into the audiovisual domain.

As Toft Hansen and Re observe, “the Mediterranean Noir label has not been able to extend its pragmatic effectiveness from its literary origin to the audiovisual sphere” (2023: 81). On screen, the Mediterranean is frequently rendered through an overdetermined touristic imaginary – crystalline waters, sun-saturated coastlines, picturesque towns – popularised by *Inspector Montalbano* and widely commodified in international markets. In response, showrunners increasingly turn to peripheral or visually less recognisable locations in an ef-

and across the Mediterranean – and ends precisely at the moment of arrival on the Italian shore. This conclusion has been widely criticised for its simplicity. As Chambers notes: “Seydou, induced by his Libyan captors to navigate a boat of migrants to Europe, experiences all the moral qualms of his responsibility. Despite everything, he succeeds. He is a hero, and there is a (temporary) happy ending. But we know that this is not the case. In addition to the torture in Libya, these migrants will also face near-slavery conditions in Italy. Without documents and protection, they are without rights. The European reality is invariably also a nightmare. Trapped in such mechanisms, further codified and reinforced by racism, this is certainly not a narrative that makes for easy conclusions.” (2024)

2 The flashbacks draw on the journalistic investigations of Fabrizio Gatti, whose book *Bilal* (2007) – based on his undercover journey along the migration route – provides the narrative foundation for several of these scenes.

3 This manipulation of space and time recalls narrative strategies characteristic of complex serial dramas such as *Prison Break*, *Lost*, and *Money Heist* (Mittell 2015; Maiello 2023).

4 Similarly, Matteo Garrone's *Io Capitano* (2023) concentrates on the crossing itself – following the protagonists from Senegal, through the desert, into Libya,

fort to resist cliché and reclaim a degree of authenticity. This aesthetic hesitation reflects a deeper conceptual instability: the enduring difficulty of defining the Mediterranean as a coherent region (Moulakis 2005). At the same time, the idyllic, tourist-oriented vision of the Mediterranean Sea has been progressively unsettled by the widespread circulation of images of migrant rescues in television news programmes. Over recent years, these images have flooded broadcast media, contributing to the formation of a more realistic—and politically charged—Mediterranean imaginary in the minds of viewers.

Within this framework, the Mediterranean emerges less as a cultural unity than as a geopolitical space, particularly in relation to migration. By focusing on television series that foreground the Mediterranean Sea as a border, a border-space, and a relational space, this study approaches seriality as both an aesthetic form and a geopolitical device. A notable commonality across these works is their self-contained structure: narratives unfold within a single episode or within the limited arc of a miniseries. While multi-season serials might offer a longitudinal perspective on evolving border imaginaries – as suggested by Saunders (2020) and Gott (2023) – this analysis instead approaches temporal depth comparatively. Examining works produced between 2016 and 2023 makes it possible to trace shifting televisual constructions of the Mediterranean border and to identify recurring patterns, continuities, and transformations in the representation of migration, coastal environments, and borderscapes.

These series, addressed to broad publics, contribute to the cultural shaping of the border. They dramatise encounters that take form at the threshold between characters and simultaneously construct an encounter with the viewer. Through combinations of dramatic and comic registers, they cultivate affective engagement with geopolitical subjects, prompting audiences to inhabit and emotionally register the complexities of the Mediterranean border regime.

Across its two episodes, *Lampedusa* humanises institutions and foregrounds the caregiving practices of the lampedusani. Though the series depicts tensions between xenophobic reactions and solidaristic forms of hospitality, these are ultimately mediated through a shared recognition of the human tragedy unfolding on the island.

Inspector Montalbano's “The Other End of the Thread” addresses migration even more explicitly while remaining stylistically and narratively coherent with the broader *Montalbano* universe. Here, the affordances of the serial form – the repetition of settings, motifs, and narrative rhythms – frame the arrival of migrants and its repercussions as an “event” in the

life of the coastal community. Its broadcast on Italian public television became an event in itself, enabling the series to intervene in debates on migration governance and catalyse national discussion.

Finally, *Unwanted* synthesises a tension that runs through all the works analysed: the contrast between the touristic imaginary and the border imaginary of the Mediterranean. By situating the narrative within an enclosed space rather than a recognisable Mediterranean landscape, the series abandons strategies of localisation altogether. Border dynamics become a synecdoche for the Mediterranean as a whole, foregrounding the region not through iconic geographies but through the intensities of detention, negotiation, and conflict that define its contemporary geopolitical condition.

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