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**New World, Old Hope:  
Utopian Imaginaries in *Golden Door*  
by Emanuele Crialese**

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**Abstract:** *Golden Door* (Nuovomondo), a 2006 film by Emanuele Crialese, tells the story of Europeans immigrating to America at the turn of the twentieth century. Representing various characters travelling there driven by diverse motivations, the film showcases different versions of a utopian imaginary vision of America. The article analyses the various ways in which the American ‘promised land’ is conceptualized in the film and how all of them are contrasted with and checked by the realities of the voyage and the Ellis Island reception centre. Referring to the concept of the imaginary, the analysis discusses mechanisms and functions of their production and their subsequent verification and contrast with the rather dystopian realities of the host country.

**Keywords:** Imaginary; Utopia; Dystopia; Heterotopias; Immigration; Promised Land.

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**G**olden Door (Nuovomondo), a 2006 film by Emanuele Crialese, tells the familiar story of Europeans immigrating to America at the turn of the twentieth century. Representing various characters travelling there driven by diverse motivations, the film also showcases different versions of a utopian imaginary connected with the vision and reality of America. The story of immigration, its subsequent stages and challenges is shown as driven by the mental images either created or adopted by the prospective immigrants; and it is the persuasive power of these images which turns out decisive in their life choices. Mental images they project and share are collected to form an imaginary of hope and promise, a land of plenty and opportunity, and a vision of a better life. Thus, in what follows, the article will analyse the various ways in which the imaginary of the American “promised land” is conceptualized in the film and how all of these images are contrasted with and checked by the realities of the voyage and the Ellis Island reception centre for immigrants. Referring to the concept of the imaginary, the analysis will try to establish mechanisms

and functions of their production and their subsequent verification and maintenance or abandonment.

### Social and Utopian Imaginary

The imaginary as a concept may be related to and simultaneously opposed to the more familiar ones of imagination or fancy. The latter describe the human ability to produce mental images that go beyond the existing experience of the world; these images may be random, fantastic, subjective or chimerical, unbound by reason or knowledge. The Romantic theories of imagination, especially these of Coleridge, distinguish two different levels of imagination: fancy, or the primary imagination, which, as David Daiches observes, “enables us both to discriminate and to order, to separate and to synthesise, and thus makes perception possible”.<sup>1</sup> The primary imagination is innate and automatic; it is the mental operation of processing the reality by human mind in order to make sense of it. The secondary imagination, according to the Romantics, is the conscious human use of this power: a poetic or artistic creation, a modifying and transforming ability that allows one to not only understand and represent reality but also to actively shape it. As Leo Salingar notes, thus conceived imagination is a gesture of “reaching towards the Whole – a worldview, a religious intuition – disguised as a psychological faculty”.<sup>2</sup> Imagination, then, according to its Romantic theorists and practitioners, was primarily a cognitive function of human mind; in special cases it was also a creative function.

In contrast, the former term, the imaginary, while also designating the ability to form new images, goes deeper and

refers not merely to the operational ability of the mind but to the imaging or imagining function of the psyche and the psychological capacity to create new representations. It is the force that stands behind and conditions imagination, allowing it to work.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the imaginary reveals not just the images that human brains project but also, at a deeper level, the needs and desires that motivate such production. It may be described as a map of representations that underlie and precede the production of specific images and fancies. The exploration of imaginaries may therefore help understand the meaning-making mechanisms as the produced images show how humans relate to the world and how they navigate in it. The analysis of imaginaries may be useful in the understanding of the more profound psychological and also social processes that lead to the creation of such projections. Social imaginary, by extension, will refer to the concept of collectively shared desires that produce images of social life; they may take various shapes of narratives or symbols which help make sense of the past, organise the present or dream of the future. According to Charles Taylor, “social imaginary [is] something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. [It is] rather, the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”.<sup>4</sup> Social imaginary, then, is a creative effort to imagine the matrix of the desired social life crucial for its possible transformation.

Taylor's conceptualisation of social imaginary brings the term close to Ruth Levitas's definition of utopia which she describes as a method of an "imaginary reconstitution of society". For Levitas, utopia is predicated on the deeply felt and collectively shared human desire for a better way of being and living. As she defines it, utopia – both socio-political and artistic – is an "identification and expression of the deepest desires of our hearts, and those of others" and "a form of knowledge and truth".<sup>5</sup> Similar to Taylor, Levitas seems to connect utopian thinking to the more fundamental level of human needs and visions of a good social life; just as for Taylor, for her, too, the imaginary is vital in any process of mental or actual change, including social and political change. Consequently, utopian narratives, social, political or artistic, may be treated as expressions of the deep imaginaries concerning the desired model of social life that preoccupy human minds; utopian thinking may be linked to the concept of social imaginary and seen as the more overt and better visible manifestation of the underlying system of imaginaries concerning the social and political aspect of human existence. The imaginaries – utopian, dystopian or other – may be analysed as a convenient signal of the psychological and social needs which are thus expressed; as an indicator of desires of human psyche. Artistic productions which represent such narratives and thus reveal these desires assist in exploring and understanding them; in an approachable form they express the dreams and needs of a given artist, or a given community, concerning various aspects of reality and preceding their actualisation in practice and action.

### **Utopian Imaginary in *Golden Door***

Crialese's film tells a story of immigration to the "golden doors" of a "Promised Land" – of a voyage to the United States in the hope of finding a better life there. The picture focuses on the fate of a fictional character, Salvatore Mancuso, a poor Sicilian farmer and shepherd, a single father of two with an elderly mother and a mute son, struggling with hardships of life, poverty and lack of perspectives. Set in the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>6</sup>, the film presents its audiences with a familiar and convincing motivation for moving away: dire economic problems verging on the possibility of survival.

The harshness of existence and the incessant economic struggle are expressed both by scenes and dialogues but also emphasised very strongly visually: the frames of Crialese's film show Mancuso's native Sicily as a land of stones and barren ground, misty, cold and grey; there are no shots that would present lush vegetation, sunshine, beaches or attractive tourist-guide photographs of beautiful vistas. The camera constructs the space focusing on deprivation and lack rather than on a more expected stereotypical Mediterranean abundance; the landscape is stripped of colour and greenery, characters' lives have no basic comforts: they lack goods, food or clothes (the latter are "recycled" from the dead). The early twentieth-century Sicily, then, is shown as a land of scarcity and austerity, suggesting little or none possibility of improvement. Thus, the main character's decision to leave and join the flow of immigrants to America seems hardly surprising.<sup>7</sup> Reached after a complicated ritual involving climbing a mountain and consulting the figure of crucified Christ there, it seems

understandable; it feels even more natural given that Salvatore's twin brother already set the path and emigrated to the U. S. fifteen years before. The decision to emigrate may be, however, determined also by his relatively young age and good health condition. Salvatore's mother, Fortunata, seems less eager to leave and she agrees to do so only for her son's sake; she seems less hopeful to find a better life in the New Land. As Marie-Christine Michaud observes,

the movie alludes to the generational differences in attitudes regarding emigration. For the old generation, going to the New World does not inspire hope for the future, as their lives remain in their village; however, the younger adults comprising the vast majority of immigrants (some 70 percent before the First World War, according to the Census Bureau), and embodied here in the character of Salvatore contemplate starting a new existence in a land where they can work and raise a family.<sup>8</sup>

The decision to emigrate, then, although historically common and frequent, is shown in the film as a more complicated one, fuelled by poverty and hopelessness, yet also checked by doubt, anxiety and fear.

The film, however, shows vividly one more powerful factor that stands behind the protagonist's decision to emigrate and which constitutes a driving force of many such men. This is the utopian imaginary connected with the New World that represents it as a Land of Plenty: the stories about its abundance passed among the peasants and the postcards and photographs circulated by them. Salvatore is also given some of such

pictures: they represent overgrown vegetables and animals, e.g. a carrot that has to be carried by two people, monstrous olives, an onion that cannot fit a wheelbarrow, or a hen the size of a pony; they include also pictures of gigantic coins hanging from tree branches. Using the persuasive power of photography which suggests that thus constructed images are indeed true representations of reality, the postcards suggest to Salvatore that America is the land of not just comfort and safety but sheer overabundance and perpetual satiety. The film further reinforces these images with shots visualising Salvatore's own dreams and hallucinatory visions in which he sees himself and his family floating in the river of milk. This image clearly alludes to the Biblical presentation of the Promised Land which construes it in terms of abundance; the Book of Exodus quotes God saying "and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey".<sup>9</sup> Showing these visions along the realistic shots representing the hardships of the protagonist's life the film, on the one hand, breaks the realistic frame of the whole work and introduces elements of the fantastic and imaginary. Yet, on the other hand, these shots are clearly symbolic of the hopes and dreams of immigrants who desire a better future in which they will never lack for food and drink, and in which they will be free from problems connected with survival.

Viewed in the light of the concept of the imaginary, the fantastic and symbolic frames of the film signal the existence of precisely this repository of images which reveal the concepts of a better life and desires for a specific shape of a better future.

They prove the existence of a common imaginary which expresses the dreams and desires of the migrants and which predicate their further actions. Making these shots of the film fantastic and inflated, Crialese's work shows vividly that these images are clearly utopian, following the well-known tradition of the stories about the land of Cockaigne.<sup>10</sup> Thus constructed frames further characterise the protagonists of the film as poor and miserable, yet dreaming of a better life. The first act of the film, then, is based on the clear contrast between the realities of life and the hopes for a better future, between the real and the utopian, between the actual and the imaginary. This contrast activates the plot of the film and galvanises its protagonists into action: driven by the utopian imaginary they decide to change their lives, travel to the nearest port (most probably Palermo), board the ship and go to America.

### **Heterotopia of Voyage, Dystopia of Landing**

The second and third parts of the film show the subsequent stages of this voyage: the rite of passage of third-class immigrant passengers on a transatlantic ship and the rite of admission at Ellis Island. As immigrants, before boarding the ship, the passengers have to undergo a preliminary medical and administrative check according to the U. S. regulations. As Marie-Christine Michaud describes, "since the 1880s, some laws had been adopted to bar the entrance of some applicants: contract labourers, prostitutes, paupers, convicts, people infected by contagious diseases, and mentally ill people were rejected".<sup>11</sup> Thus, the passengers are checked twice: first

before leaving their country and then upon arrival in the United States. The voyage of lower class passengers is shown as equally squalid as their previous lives. Crowded under the deck, kept in darkness, sleeping on makeshift berths and poorly protected against storms, they barely survive the passage; this part of the story shows both the determination of immigrants and their lack of choices. Yet, the space they temporarily inhabit becomes a special area, separate and unique, a chronotope of the voyage with its own private configurations. The ship, suspended between Europe and America, the past life and the future one, between despair and hope, constitutes a space of its own, out of the world, yet also a part of it. As such, it may be described as a space close to Michel Foucault's heterotopia, which similarly describes spaces located outside of the existing power structures, yet not in the distant future or alternative reality but in the existing world. Foucault points out that while utopia is literally a no-place, that is a place which physically does not exist, a site without a place, in contrast heterotopia is a place which does exist in reality and "in which the real sites ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".<sup>12</sup> Hence the name 'hetero-topia': another place, a different place, a counter-site reflecting upon the existing ones. It may seem that indeed the ship, on the one hand, becomes the Other of the previous spaces inhabited by the immigrants: forced into intimacy, creating a makeshift community, sharing food and medicines, striking unlikely friendships or even falling in love with one another, they behave differently, in a less formal and restricted manner than they would in their native spaces and start forming a sort of an alternative community of mutual support,

collaboration and care. The scenes depicting women bathing and combing one another's hair poetically and delicately show their intimacy and care for each other. The ship's heterotopia, however, simultaneously reflects the painfully realistic low status of the characters as third-class passengers and merely tolerated immigrants – and in this sense the ship firmly belongs to the actual world of the historical reality. Despite its utopian potential of creating an alternative to the existing hierarchies of power and status, the ship also confirms their existence and influence; it is then a site which both represents and contests the principles of the represented world of the film, without, however, creating a viable alternative to the miserable existence of its passengers.

This alternative is imaginatively located in America but in order to get there the characters have to pass through the meticulously and historically accurately represented reception centre on Ellis Island. While the ship, though not without reservation, could be interpreted as a heterotopias of sorts, the Ellis Island centre shown in the film is clearly construed in dystopian terms. Again, this representation agrees with the historical accounts; as Brownstone notices, the process of reception was characterised by contempt, harassment and abuse, and immigrants were treated like cattle.<sup>13</sup> *Golden Door* again depicts this aspect of the immigrant experience with great visual force. Filmed with the help of high-angle shots, the characters of the film are shown as mere numbers in the crowd, as anonymous cogs in the modern efficient machine processing immigrants through subsequent stages of the production of American citizens. Deprived of individuality, intimacy and dignity, stripped naked, checked by doctors and

psychologists, kept behind bars and moved in lines, they seem bewildered and alienated, heading into a selection procedure which is to determine their usefulness for the new country. The selection and admission principles, based on a mix of eugenics, the theory of the heredity of psychological disorders and the prevention of contagion, suggested the rejection and deportation of immigrants who could become a potential burden to the society: not only the ill or the mentally disabled, but also for instance single women who, for lack of resources, may resort to prostitution or transmit venereal diseases. The principles, ironically described by one of the characters, Lucy, as “a modern vision” of the society, project the latter as an assemblage of fit individuals responsible only for themselves and clash violently with the ones worked out and lived by the immigrants during the voyage and back in their native villages: those of community, network and support. Thus, representing in its third part the reception procedures of Ellis Island the film introduces and visualises one more contrast: that between the modern and the pre-modern vision of the social organisation; of the society organised by the ethics of care versus that organised by the ethics of efficiency.

Interestingly, the film does not show any frames of America that would visualise and materialise it for the viewers: the plot of the film never goes beyond the reception centre on Ellis Island, the protagonists – and hence the audience – do not yet have a chance to set their eyes on the land of the United States. When they arrive at the port, the weather is misty and America cannot be seen; while in the reception centre, all they see are translucent window panes which effectively obstruct any views. When



some of the protagonists climb the window to have a look through the only clear glass panel near the ceiling, all they describe is a glimpse of a skyscraper, which is never shown on screen. The plot of the story ends with the decisions of the U.S. authorities to admit or deport some of them; their further fate is never told. Thus, throughout the film America remains constantly ahead, in the future – still a vision and a dream of the protagonists rather than reality, an imaginary and imagined space rather than a realistically photographed place. This withdrawal of representation creates the open ending of the film: like characters, the audience faces the great unknown, the infinite potential that America stands for; like them, it is left with expectations, hope and anxiety. The lack of the visual representation of the “promised land”, however, once again emphasises the role of the imaginary as a force pushing to action, a stage prior to and perhaps even more important than the actual reality. Privileging the imaginary visions of America over the visual representation of its reality and focusing on desires rather than their (un)fulfilment, Crialese’s movie showcases the pivotal role the imaginary – private, social and utopian – plays in human decision-making processes and the influence it has on human actions.

### Conclusions

The open ending of *Golden Door* may be seen as a lack of the resolution of the conflicts that structure the ideology of the film. The contrast between the actual barren land and the imaginary Promised Land, important in the first part of the story, cannot be resolved as the latter is never shown. Likewise, the contrast between the

pre-modern concept of the society, represented by the Sicilian village life and the provisional community created on the ship, and the modern concept of Ellis Island is similarly unresolved, as none of them is shown as better or more fair. The village life is perhaps kinder but it is poor, primitive and limiting; the modern society offers possibilities but withdraws care and support. The emotional sympathy of the audience lies with the immigrants who are represented as intelligent, resilient and responsible community members rather than with the staff and organisational system of the reception centre who do not care for the newcomers and treat them with indifference and distance. Yet, the open ending of the film does not resolve the conflict and hence does not show any of these propositions as more desirable.

Finally, the open ending and the lack of resolutions reflect also on the concepts of utopia, dystopia and heterotopia. Far from criticising the utopian imaginaries – though sometimes they are shown in a humorous manner – the film emphasises their essential role of inspirations and motivations standing behind the effort of changing both private and social life. Though the third part of the film, with its almost dystopian representation of a modern society of the United States may warn against the naivety of such utopian or clearly unrealistic visions, the fact that the last scene of the film shows yet again the protagonists floating in the river of milk suggests that the utopian thinking, predicated on hope and desire, is a necessary factor of change. Thus, it points out that the oldest dreams of human beings – to change their lives for better – perhaps always start with and involve utopian imaginary which makes their realisation possible.

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## NOTES

1. David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1983, p. 900.
2. Leo Salingar, "Colerige: Poet and Philosopher", in Boris Ford (ed.), *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, London, Penguin, 1982, p. 289.
3. Cf. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003.
4. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 23.
5. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method. The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, London, Palgrave, 2013, p. 3.
6. Marie-Christine Michaud claims that the plot of the film "takes place between 1901 (as the first building [of Ellis Island] which opened in 1892, was damaged in a fire in 1897 and re-opened in 1901) and 1917, when the Literacy Act stipulated that, in order to be entitled to enter the United States, one had to be able to read and write in any language. Salvatore Mancuso, the main character of the film, revealed that he could neither read nor write. He is nevertheless accepted to immigrate to the United States". Cf. Marie-Christine Michaud, "Nuovomondo, Ellis Island, and the Italian Immigrants: a New Appraisal by Emanuele Crialesse", in *Quaderni d'italianistica*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2017, p. 38.
7. The Italian immigration to the United States was indeed considerable; as Lorena Carbonara claims, "between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, 11.1 million Italians migrated *en masse* to the US, contributing greatly to the expansion of American population." The fictional Salvatore Mancuso is thus one of many Italians undertaking such challenge. Cf. Lorena Carbonara, "Language, Silence and Translation in Emanuele Crialesse' Polyglot Migration Film *Nuovomondo – Golden Door* (2006)", in *Cadernos de Tradução*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2017, p. 120.
8. Marie-Christine Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
9. *The Holy Bible, King James Version, Exodus 3:8*, Weston, Paradise Press, 2003.
10. Cf. Lyman Tower Sargent's taxonomy of historical forms of utopian literature in his article "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", in *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 11, in which Cockaigne features as one of the representative forms of utopian writing.
11. Marie-Christine Michaud, *op. cit.*, p.40.
12. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", Translated by Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, p. 24.
13. Cf. Brownstone, David M., Irene M. Franck, and Douglass Brownstone, *Island of Hope, Island of Tears*, New York, Metro Books, 2002, p. 15.