

Saturnia, a film by Ferdinando Dell'Omo and Lilia Topouzova

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Saturnia

A film by Ferdinando Dell'Omo and Lilia Topouzova

A Still Ocean Films Inc. production, 2012. 56 minutes,
plus 15 minutes of bonus features. \$20.00. (www.stilloceanfilms.com)

Ontario History does not usually review films, but staff at the Ontario Historical Society saw this film and asked to have it reviewed, as it deals with post-World War II Canadian history. The *Saturnia* was an elderly ocean liner that brought some 260,000 people to North America, mainly tourists and immigrants. Most of the immigrants were Italian and Portuguese, but his film deals just with Italian tourists and immigrants. Unlike book reviews, which are based on how accurate the book is and how complete an account the book provides, a review of a documentary film is about impressions. How well did it tell the story? As a result, there are two reviews, one by a member of a Portuguese immigrant family (who did not arrive on the *Saturnia*), and one by a specialist in the history of immigration to Canada.

Review 1

This short movie is an attempt to tell the story of Italian immigration to Canada on the *Saturnia* in the 1960s. It is the story of five people who had the courage to leave their homeland hoping for better life in Canada. It was interesting to hear some of the testimony of the immigrants, stories of struggles and triumph. Like all other immigrants, the Italians interviewed all had Italy in their hearts and minds. This was evident by all the pictures of Italian villages hanging on the walls of their homes, by the tears in their eyes when they talked about the family and the country they left behind. These stories mimic many of those of immigrants around the world. However, I was expecting more historical facts about Italy, the *Saturnia*, the voyage, Canada in the 1960s, and why this mass migration took place. What factors swayed these immigrants to choose to come to Canada instead of the USA or South America?

The ship was described as “an old but

grand lady.” These immigrants saw the *Saturnia* as a vessel where dreams started, but also where family ties ended. They were leaving their country behind for an unknown future in an unknown country. This aspect of the experience was explored extensively, through the interviews with the immigrants.

However, I wanted to see more of Italy after the War, more on board the *Saturnia*, or at least more detailed stories of the struggles on the ship for the immigrant class. There was a story about someone being born on the *Saturnia* and her passport listing her as being born at sea, but I wanted to know more about what struggles her parents faced. It seems the tourist class on the *Saturnia* had a very good time on the journey to Canada, but it left me wanting to know more about what the immigrant class endured on their journey across the Atlantic. This aspect was only hinted at throughout the movie.



Aside from leaving me wanting more detail, there are weaknesses to the film. The movie started with people getting together, for what looks like a group picture. However, people walked in front of the camera while others were talking to each other and to the camera, making this look like a very amateur production. I felt there was too

many filming styles, many shots with water being projected on walls, too much focus on photos of people without explanations. Overall, I don't think this movie did the Italian immigrants full justice and did not show the *Saturnia's* glory.

Fatima DaSilva

Review 2

Saturnia is the name of an Italian merchant liner, one of the few to survive the Second World War, which transported as many as a quarter of a million travellers to North America. In this sentimental documentary, a second generation Canadian, Michelle Alfano, attempts to recover her father Francesco's immigrant past through the medium of the memory of fellow *Saturnia* passengers: Rosa (Galenzo), Silvano (Gastaldo) and Antonio (Zenari).

What does Michelle learn—and what can viewers learn—from this trio of late-fifties, early-sixties newcomers to Canada as Michelle tries to imagine what her father might have been like as a young person departing his native Italy for a land that her interviewees describe as a land of hope, a land of independence, a land of opportunity, but also a land of risk—as to emigrate is to gamble with one precarious present for an uncertain future.

Almost certainly, travelling back a half-century via the memories of Rosa, Silvano and Antonio the viewer would find many things different, perhaps most strikingly the very experience of trans-Atlantic travel. There is marvelous opening footage of the *Saturnia* plowing from one Italian city to the next (Genoa, Naples, Messina) collecting its expectant passengers while at each of these embarkation ports the quay

is swelled with friend and family waving goodbye and actually running down the quay to signal their last farewell, for that “last” apparently is what many believed the voyage to America would actually mean. There would be no coming back. This would be the trip of a lifetime, as life as the emigrants understood it would be forever transformed. As pithy comments put it, “to leave is to die a little”, or “to cross the ocean was to leave everything behind,” and to force the question “will I ever come back?”. There is pictured in these quay-side scenes the emotional wrench of separation that emigration entailed that is clearly absent in contemporary airport departure with its homeland security check-in and boarding-area pre-departure confinement.

The reflections of being aboard ship for several weeks are also revealing in their social detail. Unlike the modern airplane with its “business class” separation of passengers, trans-oceanic liners had very old style “steerage” with its historic connotations of first class and third class and not much apparently in between. A very real and keenly felt “discrepancy” as another recollection had it. But life aboard the ship itself was also something of a harbinger of what lay ahead in Halifax, in Edmonton and in Vancouver, a larger social world for those who left behind a village and oppor-

tunity to make new associations and new friendships. Being on the *Saturnia*, says Antonio, was a little like being in the army: a life transforming experience.

Rosa and Antonio and Silvano have no regrets. In post-war Italy, America was seen as paradise and that included Canada. And indeed in the case of Rosa her only regret—and it is a huge one—is the memory of being a fifteen-year-old dispatched to Canada to an arranged marriage to someone she had never met. Married in Canada at seventeen while still a minor, she speaks with sadness of being alone and with her adolescent needs unmet. Hence her desire to help others in need—shipping clothing to Haiti—but particularly orphans, which is how she must have felt aboard the *Saturnia*.

The expressed feelings of her documentary subjects—Rosa, Antonio and Silvano—contrast sharply with those of Michelle. She has regrets; regrets about having to wear black for a year mourning her father's death, for example. As she sees it, barbaric and archaic—and all the worse for having been dictated to her. Some traditional prescriptions clearly survived the

Saturnia voyage. And undoubtedly the persistence of such cultural norms—as experienced by the Canadian-born second generation—explains why Michelle characterizes the College Street Italian community as something of a museum of Italian culture. It preserves nostalgia for “Italianicity” but it is not the real thing, as immigrants themselves discover when returning home to Italy they are told their accents seem outdated and time-bound.

The documentary leaves us with a question (an historical counterfactual of sorts) that all immigrants likely mull over from time to time, and the most likely when they reach old age like Silvano, who made his career in the construction industry (like many of his compatriots). What if he had stayed in Italy where instead he might have become a successful opera singer (he began singing at age two)? We may not be able to answer that question individually for Silvano but we can hazard a good guess for the impact on Canada absent the contribution of these resourceful and adaptive people.

Des Glynn
