

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

The Earth Trembles (La Terra Trema) 1948

Luchino Visconti

OVERVIEW

The Earth Trembles, which tells the tragic story of a poor fishing family in Sicily, is regarded as one of the icons of neo-realist cinema. As the voiceover at the beginning explains, the film was shot entirely in a small village with no professional actors and the language we hear is the dialect of the local people. In fact, the film was dubbed into standard Italian when released in Italy and even in other parts of Sicily. Commissioned by the Communist Party of Italy, it presents a tragic story of exploitation, dashed hopes and grim resignation, but with no final 'victory for the people.' The screenplay also draws heavily on a 19th-century novel by Giovanna Verga. With long shots of the sea and narrow cobblestone streets, the film takes us deep into the life of the village, with its factions, gossip and occasional merry-making. The performances given by the untrained local people are truly remarkable. The film remains today a simple but unforgettable portrait of humanity.

SYNOPSIS

The Valestro family are traditional fishermen in a small village in Sicily. Their father is dead, leaving a grandfather, mother and several children. Antonio, the oldest brother, decides to take a stand against generations of exploitation by the wholesalers. He convinces his family to mortgage their house and buy a boat so that they can become independent of the wholesalers' grip on the local fishing industry. Things go well for a while until a storm renders the boat unseaworthy, forcing the family to sell a valuable store of anchovies at a knockdown price. Unable to pay the bank, they are evicted, and the family starts to fall apart. The grandfather is ill in hospital; Cola, the next oldest brother, emigrates to the mainland for work; and Antonio has no success finding a job in the village. In the end, Antonio has to swallow his pride and sign up to work, once again, on a boat owned by the wholesalers. His one-man revolt against the system has failed.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Grandfather	The oldest member of the family.
Antonio	The oldest brother.
Cola	The second brother.
Mara	The oldest sister.
Lucia	The next oldest sister.
Nedda	Antonio's girlfriend.
Nicola	Mara's boyfriend.
Don Salvatore	A policeman.

STORY

Return of the boats It is not yet dawn in a fishing village on the east coast of Sicily. The fishing boats, lit by lanterns, slowly approach the beach, where the fish wholesalers are waiting. Church bells are ringing, and men are shouting. A woman lights a lamp in the stone cottage where the Valestro family lives, and her two daughters, Lucia and Mara, help tidy up. Lucia is anxious to hear about if her grandfather and brothers are safe. On a similar morning, years back, her father did not return. She looks at a photo of the whole family and sighs, 'How bitter the sea is.'

Wholesalers and fishermen There are dozens of boats and maybe a hundred men, hauling in nets, repairing nets and boats. As they mend the nets, the men complain about the low prices offered by the wholesalers. 'It Catania weren't so far, we'd get a better price there,' one says. Another man says the wholesalers pretend to argue among themselves but are really in league with each other to keep the prices down. We hear the chaotic, loud haggling between fishermen and buyers.

Valestro family After twelve hours at sea, the men of the Valestro family come home, a grandfather and four brothers. Their nets were full, but they got little cash after selling their catch. Antonio, the oldest brother, who served in the military on the mainland, is angry. Because of that experience, he's

different. 'He's not like us anymore,' another brother says. 'He thinks differently.' After Antonio leaves without eating, the grandfather divides the days' profit into fifteen shares, one for each member of the family.

Romance Antonio walks up a hill to visit Nedda, his girlfriend, who teases him about his declarations of love. Her parents are looking for a rich son-in-law, but she says that she must like the boy first. Antonio says a poor man with brains can be rich. At the Valestro house, the money brought in is just enough to buy some oranges, bread and wine, which the family eats, after which the men return 'to the eternal slavery of the sea'. The older Valestro daughter, Mara, flirts with a construction worker, named Nicola.

Antonio's plan The fishermen work hard, hauling up nets, emptying the catch, dropping the nets down and hauling them up again. Again and again, all night long. In the middle of the night, Antonio tells his men to stop because they're too many boats and too few fish. Invoking St Thomas as a patron saint of justice, Antonio proposes that, with his grandfather's approval, the young men will take the place of the older man when bargaining with the wholesalers. The others agree to Antonio's plan.

Antonio's protest That morning, during the bargaining on the beach, Antonio throws the scales into the sea as a protest against the wholesalers' price-fixing. A mini riot erupts between the fishermen and the buyers, prompting the police to intervene and arrest the young rebels. But the fishermen's strike has hit the wholesalers hard: they have fewer fish to buy and sell on at a profit because all the young men, who are the best fishermen, are in jail. They decide to ask the police to set Antonio free so that he can work for them again.

Independence After Antonio and his fellow prisoners come home to a heroes' welcome, Antonio realises that something more fundamental is needed to be free of the wholesalers. He also points out that the wholesalers need them; otherwise, they wouldn't have got them released. He then spells out his second plan: they will mortgage the house in order to buy a boat and pay their workers themselves. In other words, they will be independent. Antonio's plan gives the fisherman a new sense of pride, which enables them to make fun of the wholesalers in a tavern. He tries to recruit others to his revolt.

Changes The Valestro family go to Catania to arrange the mortgage, but no one else follows their example because the risk is too high. With the mortgage money, Antonio begins to think of marriage and buys his own boat. But now, the fishermen control everything, mending the nets and salting a large catch of anchovies. Mara is hopeful that they'll earn enough to pay back the bank loan, which irritates 'like a bone in the throat.' Nicola thinks that Mara is now too wealthy for him to be a suitable fiancé, while Antonio is wealthy enough for Nedda, who kisses him.

Disaster Driven to pay back the loan, they work even in bad weather. One afternoon, the church bells ring out the warning signal of high winds and waves. Antonio's mother is frozen with fear, and Mara searches the beaches in vain. The following day, the sun comes out and the sea is calm. A friend has found Antonio's boat and towed him and his brothers back to shore. But the boat has lost nets, oars and sail, and is no longer seaworthy.

Troubles The wholesalers gloat at the family's misfortune, but the women are happy to see the men alive. Grandfather worries about the heavy debt, and Antonio discovers that Nedda's family have moved. Antonio searches for work but finds nothing. The lecherous policeman, Don Salvatore, tempts Lucia with a fine silk scarf. Chaperoned by Mara, Lucia declines the offer, but the policeman says he loves her and will protect the family. When they try to sell their salted anchovies, the wholesalers refuse to pay a reasonable price, knowing that the family is desperate. The family sell for next to nothing and now have no hope.

A stranger A stranger shows up and offers American Lucky Strike cigarettes to everyone. To Cola, the second brother, he also offers a job opportunity on the mainland. Cola is tempted, but Antonio persuades him to stay in the village, where he belongs. Meanwhile, the younger brothers get badly paid work picking oranges.

More troubles One rainy day, a group of suited men from the bank come to the Valestros and estimate the value of their house. Taking up the stranger's offer, Cola leaves the island for work on the mainland. Days later, the grandfather is taken to hospital, and Antonio takes to drink. Lucia has been seeing the policeman at night and received a necklace for her affection. Mara chastises her, and gossip about Lucia spreads, ruining her chances of ever getting married. When one of the

wholesalers offers Antonio work, he turns it down. Rock bottom gets even lower when the eviction order arrives. Mara says goodbye to Nicola, who says he'd still like to marry her, but both of them are too poor.

Return to the sea At a ceremony on the beach, a priest blesses new boats donated to the poor by a member of the aristocracy. Relocated to a hovel, Antonio and his family do not attend and are not allocated a boat. Antonio swallows his pride and accepts work on one of the wholesalers' boats. The next day, Antonio and his brothers go off to sea, saying it looks like good weather for anchovies. But again, we see that it is hard work.

THEMES

1. *Politics* Unsurprisingly for a film commissioned by the Communist Party of Italy, its dominant theme is the injustice that degrades the fishermen in small town in Sicily. The fishermen of the town are exploited by the wholesalers, who own the boats and control the competition for selling the fish, thereby ensuring that they can buy the catch at a low price and sell it at a higher price. The scene is thus set for a class-struggle, in the classical Marxist sense, but the film does not conclude with a historically-determined triumph of the working-class against the capitalist owners. Instead, drawing on a 19th-century novel, Visconti steers the story toward a reflection on the lack of class solidarity among the oppressed. Antonio, who has probably never read a book, let alone Marxist analysis, leads a revolt against the wholesalers when he convinces his family to mortgage their house, buy their own boat and become independent. However, he failed to foresee that he would not be able to convince other fishermen to do that same: they are too cautious and he is too reckless. In fact, by mortgaging the house, Antonio has simply replaced the wholesalers with the bank manager. And, as before, all the risk is with his family. When disaster strikes, he and they suffer. The political message of the film is that a single, bold act is insufficient to achieve any change in the structure of power. Without class solidarity, built presumably by the communist movement, the people of the village will continue to slave for the owners. Antonio's insurgency is impressive but misjudged. The earth may tremble, but nothing will shift permanently until the working class is fully prepared to shake it more forcefully.

2. *Family: generations* As the film makes clear, the wholesalers are not the only enemy. There is also the older generation of the fishermen community who are opposed to change. This generational conflict is dramatised primarily within the Valestro family, between Antonio and his grandfather. When Antonio first outlines his plan to the family, the 70-year-old grandfather counsels his grandsons to listen to their elders. 'Strength of youth, wisdom of age,' he says, quoting a proverb. Again, after the boat is destroyed, and Antonio proposes to mortgage the house, the old man counsels caution, reminding him that such a debt is dangerous. He proves right in the end, which prompts another old man to say, 'The poor always pay.' The inbred passivity of the older generation is then summed up when the grandfather cites another proverb: 'Change old for new, you will rue.' His conservative outlook is the result of centuries of suffering and adapting to survive against a bitter sea and an unjust economic situation. If you can't win over the older generation, the young rebels will never succeed.

3. *Love* The political and economic forces highlighted in the film also shape the lives of the main characters, especially their love life. There are three distinct pairs of lovers or would-be lovers, whose romantic hopes are affected by the events depicted in the film. First, there is Antonio, who is love with Nedda, who returns his affection. As soon as Antonio gets the mortgage money and buys a boat, he floats in the air with visions of a marriage and happy future. That is all ruined by the tragic loss of boat and house, plus Antonio's decline into drink. Second, Mara and Nicola are also lovers and would have been planning marriage except that Nicola is slightly lower status and little money; any hope of love overcoming adversity is quelled by the complete loss of money in Mara's family. And third, there is the budding romance of Lucia and the policeman, who appears as her prince charming. He sweet talks her, and she blushes; he offers a silk scarf, which she must refuse, but only out of propriety. In a later scene, we watch as Lucia steals a look at a glittering necklace given to her (we assume) by the policeman. We wonder what he asked for in return. Using these three cases to enter into the inner lives of his characters, Visconti raises his story above the level of political propaganda.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Antonio Antonio is the central figure in the story. The initial success and then final defeat are both his. We know little of his background, before the story begins, except that he served in the army on the mainland, which might explain why he is more independent-minded than the other fishermen. Whatever the reason, he is a courageous young man, prepared to fight against the exploitation by the boat-owners and against the passivity in his own family and community. He is certainly an intelligent and proud young man, who shows affection to his younger brothers. Even in defeat, he shows dignity.

Brave Above all else, Antonio is a courageous man, who takes on the power and wealth of the wholesalers. We watch his dissatisfaction with the fishermen's situation grow in the early part of the film, until it matures into a plan to change their centuries-old dependence on the men who own the boats. One scene begins with him running across the beach, leading a group of other fishermen, who then join him on a boat and listen to his plan. 'Listen,' he says, 'for years, maybe for centuries, we've lived with our eyes closed...like fish trying to find our way out of a net...we need to be independent...they'll threaten us, of course, but what do they take us for?' As Antonio speaks, his whole face blazes with passion. He knows that he has a tough fight ahead, not only with the wholesalers but with his own community, too. Everything is stacked against him—tradition, money, inertia, passivity—but he has the strength of his conviction to face it.

Happy When Antonio has put his plan into action and secured new money to buy a boat, his familiar scowl turns to a lover's smile. In one of the few happy scenes in this long film, he takes his girlfriend, Nedda, on a walk. He is dressed in his best clothes, coat and tie, and she wears a bright floral dress. They romp through the countryside above the village, kissing, laughing and running after each other. Finally, they lay down on flat rocks and embrace. As the narrator tells us, 'Antonio, you have everything. All you ever dreamed of.' All through this scene, when he smiles at Nedda with his handsome face, Antonio looks more like a matinee idol than an oppressed fisherman. His is optimistic about fishing, about his family and about being able to marry Nedda.

Proud After his boat is half-destroyed in the storm, and he has lost everything, Antonio is at the mercy of his old enemies, the wholesalers. The family are forced to sell their remaining thirty barrels of high-quality anchovies, which was to function like a savings account for them. The wholesalers come to the house and offer a very low price because they know how desperate Antonio is. Antonio knows they are cheating him and says, 'Don't do me down. Don't throttle me.' When the wholesalers say he can sell it to them or throw it all back into the sea, Antonio cries, 'Get out! You thieves!' His is too proud to be humbled by those who have enslaved him and his family.

Humiliated And yet, in the very next scene, he is humiliated because, as the narrator says, 'When you're hungry, you can't argue.' Now Antonio wears a face of grim resignation as the wholesalers come into the courtyard and carry away those same thirty barrels of quality anchovies. Again, the narrator comments: 'You give in, as surely as water wears away a stone.' Leaning against a wall, watching his enemies practically steal the only assets his family has, Antonio is completely humiliated.

Dignified Toward the end of the story, Antonio has no boat, no money and no house because the bank repossesses their house and they shelter in a hovel. He begins a fruitless search for work, while his family has barely enough to eat. In the final scene, he decides he must swallow his pride and sign up to work on one the wholesalers' boat, just as he had done before his 'bright' idea. He puts on a working-sailor's jersey and, with defeat in his eyes, goes to the wholesalers' office, where he is mocked and insulted. But he stands in front of his tormentors, his arms around his two brothers, who will work with him as assistants. 'Didn't you say you'd never work for us again, even if you starved?' teases one of the wholesalers. Slowly, Antonio turns his head and stares at the man, who realises he has gone too far. Throughout this deeply affecting scene, Antonio maintains his self-respect. He does not grovel. He does apologise. He requests work and signs on. Despite all his suffering, he remains dignified.

Cola The next brother, in terms of age, is Cola. Although he hangs back a little, letting Antonio lead the family, he is loyal to his brother and affectionate toward everyone. He is a little less cautious than Antonio, and, when provoked, he lashes out in anger. Precisely because he is not the oldest brother, he has the freedom to leave the family and seek his fortune abroad.

Angry Although Cola at first appears somewhat more passive than his older brother, Antonio, he is prone to outbursts of anger. A good example is the scene when the wholesalers come to buy the family's barrels of anchovies. While Antonio and the buyers haggle over the price, Cola stands in the background, leaning against a wall and listening. Then, at the end of the scene, when the wholesalers won't offer a decent price, Cola steps forward and says, 'It's only because you know we lost everything at sea. And now you want to rob us!' The wholesalers shrug and start to leave. Then, in a full-face close-up, Cola screams at them, 'I'd rather throw them [fish] back into the sea.' His eyes are cold as ice, but inside he burns with anger.

Aspirational After the family has lost everything, Cola is approached by a stranger who offers him a job opportunity on the mainland. In the next scene, we see Cola alone inside the house and looking at the packet of Lucky Strikes the man has given him. He opens a trunk and glances at a string of postcards showing foreign places. When he pulls out a rucksack, Antonio enters and asks what he's doing. 'I'm fed up with living here, the injustice,' Cola says. 'But there's so much out there.' Folding up the string of postcards, he adds: 'You could make your fortune.' The next morning, he is gone. Cola has aspirations that take him beyond the confines of Sicily.

Lucia Dark-haired and slim, Lucia is perhaps in her mid-teens. She is a hard worker, helping her mother and older sister with domestic chores. As a young girl, though, she has dreams that momentarily set her free from the misery all around her.

Unhappy Lucia has one scene all to herself. The men have gone out fishing and she is making the beds, while also looking after the small children. After bending down to tuck in a sheet, he straightens up with a big smile and says, 'He's the king's son, as beautiful as the son.' She's speaking to her little sister, perched on a wooden chair. Still making up bed, she continues telling the story to the little child: 'He travels a year, a month and a day on a lovely white horse until he reaches a magic fountain flowing with milk and honey.' At the end of her folktale, the handsome prince marries the poor girl and takes her 'far, far away with him.' As she speaks these final words, Lucia lays her head on the curved back of the bed frame and dreams of flying away with a handsome husband. The power of that folktale, the depth of her dream, is the measure of her unhappiness.

Happy Lucia's dream comes closer to reality when the policeman, Don Salvatore, pays special attention to her. He looks in through the window of the family home, resplendent in his uniform and cap, and says she is beautiful. Lucia beams like a lighthouse, looking just as lovely as the policeman has said. Again, the man in the window praises her beauty and then offers her a silk scarf. Lucia can't accept it—it wouldn't look right—but she is shining with joy. When the man mentions marriage, Lucia tilts her head to one side and says that she hasn't thought about it, 'until now.' The man in the window is not riding the white horse in her fairy tale, but he looks like her prince and she is very happy.

Mara Although only a few years older than Lucia, Mara is more like a junior mother in the family. She is not as pretty as her younger sister, but she is also more cautious and pragmatic by nature. She has imbibed the values of her community, primarily those of personal modesty and resignation to one's fate.

Protective Mara often acts as a mother toward Lucia, her younger sister, as illustrated in a scene midway through the story. One morning, after the boat has been destroyed and the family await eviction, the amorous policeman leans in through the window and greets Lucia with a big smile. Mara, though, cautions him, saying, 'There are wicked tongues in this town. If you were seen at our window...not for myself, but for Lucia. She's so young.' As she speaks, Mara goes to Lucia and puts a hand on her shoulder. While that is a hand of support, it is also a gesture of restraint, gently pulling her back away from the window and into the protection of the family. When the policeman offers Lucia a fine silk scarf, Mara looks up from her sewing and says, 'Now that we're poor, we don't deserve such pretty things.' She is not trying to deny her sister, only trying to protect her against wagging tongues and a romance that could only end in tragedy.

Stoic At the end, after everything has been lost, Mara goes out to find her boyfriend, Nicola. With her usual sad face, she tells him that she has come to say goodbye because they have been evicted. They both know that any marriage is not possible. 'It's God's will,' she says, almost in tears. Nicola says he still loves her, but she replies that things have changed and that she can't marry. Earlier, before the disaster, when Mara's fortunes had risen, it seemed that he was too poor to marry her and they had waited. Now, when Mara is as poor as he, she must shut down her heart and accept her

fate.



(Antonio accepts defeat when selling the anchovies)



(Mara and Nicola say goodbye)



(The family and friends salt the anchovies)