



# *The Legend of 1900: Law, Space, and Immigration*

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## Abstract

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, more than 4 million Italians migrated to the United States of America (U.S.), which they regarded as a utopia. The film *The Legend of 1900*, which was inspired by Alessandro Baricco's monologue *Nocecento* and directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, tells the story about the genius pianist 1900, an orphan, who is fostered by Danny, a black coalman in the boiler room of an ocean liner, and whose parents are presumably Italian immigrants. Due to immigration law, 1900, a man with neither identity, visa, nor legal papers, cannot legally set foot on American soil. As a genius pianist, his existence is nothing more than that of musician—an entertainer to passengers on the gigantic trans-Atlantic liner *Virginian*, the only place he is permitted to live. According to Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia, a ship is “a piece of floating space, a placeless place”—a vessel transporting people to the land of their dreams. However, 1900, who has no legal status, will never arrive in utopia aboard *Virginian*. He can only construct a heterotopia—a mirror of utopia—so that it to him is a utopia. In the eyes of the law, 1900 is a legally non-existent person on *Virginian*, a placeless place. However, it is this lawless heterotopia and isolation that create a genius. In this paper, I illustrate how *Virginian*, as a place outside the law of land, metaphorically gives birth to a pianist, 1900, and why 1900 at the end chooses not to leave the ship, while also discussing the meaning behind the film and the relationship between law and space.

**Keywords** Immigration law · Space · Heterotopia · Utopia · *The Legend of 1900*

## 1 Introduction

Narrated by trumpet player Max Tooney, the film *The Legend of 1900* (*La leggenda del pianista sull'oceano* in Italian) was released in 1998. It tells the story of a pianist who never sets foot on land and who dies in an explosion on the

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ocean liner *Virginian* [1]. Directed by Guiseppe Tornatore, the film is based on the monologue *Novecento*, written by the Italian Alessandro Baricco, that tells the story of an Italian orphan who becomes a genius pianist during the time of mass immigration of Italians between the 1890s and 1920s. Several scenes in which 1900 speaks Italian and plays piano for Italian passengers from the bottom deck of *Virginian* more than suggest that this film depicts the story of Italian immigrants at this time. Therefore, *The Legend of 1900* can be regarded as a fable depicting Italian immigrants. In this paper, I analyse the story of 1900 to explain how this allegorical film illustrates the strange situation experienced by 1900 that is created by the twilight zone of law and the way 1900 deals with it. To explain what makes the situation of 1900 so strange, I begin by describing immigration law and its effect on the lives of immigrants so as to provide a legal background.

Law and space are closely intertwined. As law professor Tayyab Mahmud says: “Law must have a domain over which to exercise dominion. In order to function, law has to be positioned and deployed upon spaces and bodies. Orders and subjectivities created thereby have an unavoidable spatiality” [2]. To regulate people living in specific areas, law inherently possesses a spatial dimension. It delineates legal boundaries between one place and another, between one jurisdiction and another, and between what is controlled by law and what is not. As Mark Blacksell, Charles Watkins, and Kim Economides state:

[w]hen geographers become involved in the legal process this is invariably over litigation concerning boundary disputes at the local, national or international level. Legal concepts and rules have a geographical significance for they often determine the territorial boundaries of homes, courts, electorates and nation states, as well as the states, for example the nationality, of persons [3].

For Italian immigrants, Italy is a place with its own set of laws, and the U.S. is another place with different laws that they will be asked to follow when they move there. But what kind of legal space does the boat *Virginian* fall into is the question? *Virginian* is a space that is defined and regulated by the law of sea but that is outside the law of land: it is thus an ideal place for 1900—who does not readily fit the description of an immigrant—to make use of his talent (in his case music), just as many other immigrants aspire to do in the U.S.

Considered neither crew nor passenger, who would then be bound by the law on the ship, 1900 demonstrates a disregard for the law when he states: “fuck the regulation”. This highlights how law creates a strange situation for him. However, the ship is not only a place formed by the law that causes 1900’s isolation; rather, it is also a place where he can demonstrate his extraordinary talent as a musician. That is why 1900, at the end of the film, chooses not to leave the ship and ultimately dies on it. As a person with neither identity nor legal papers, 1900 is unlike immigrants who can enter the U.S. to fulfil their dreams. He can only make *Virginian* his utopia, which is a way of turning his disadvantageous and unpleasant situation into something positive.

With the help of Michel Foucault’s idea about heterotopia [4], I analyse the ship *Virginian* not only as a product and symbol created by law to limit 1900’s

life and achievements but also as a place [5] where 1900 can lead his extraordinary life rather than one that is expected and pre-destined by law. I also explore the relationship between place, law, and 1900 with the help of Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, considering them components of the semiosis of law. As well as 1900's psychological transformation, I provide an interpretation as to why 1900 chooses not to leave the ship when he has the chance (presumably for a girl, the daughter of an Italian farmer) and instead chooses to die on the ship, which he knows is going to be blown up, suggestive, then, of his emancipation from and refusal to be controlled by the law. For this paper, I will mainly use the script of *The Legend of 1900* to quote from the film.

## 2 Immigration Law

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries—a time of mass immigration—more than 4 million Italians moved to the U.S., [6] which they regarded as a utopia and a place where they could escape their misery. Excluding those who returned to Italy, the number of Italians who emigrated to the U.S. was 12,354 in 1880 (compared with 5791 in 1879) and 100,135 by 1900. The peak of Italian immigration to the U.S. was in 1914, the year World War One broke out, when the number reached 283,738. [7] There were several reasons for this growing number, two of which were key, that Stephen Puleo addresses in his thesis: “In the 1870s,..., the Italian government forced Southern peasants to pay exorbitant taxes on diseased vineyards. In 1910, the eruption of Mount Etna in Sicily killed 10,000 people”. [8]

The U.S. is considered to be a country that offers countless opportunities to attract and welcome immigrants of all nationalities. However, to control immigration numbers, filter out undesirable groups, find places for immigrants to live, and regulate their behaviour, the U.S. government has historically enacted laws that mean American society can either accept or reject immigrants. Examples of such laws include the Neutralization Act of 1790 [9], the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 [10], and the Immigration Act of 1924 [11]. These laws illustrate that immigration law serves as a legal means not only to regulate the number of immigrants but also to respond to societal sentiments, even when they are biased, on immigration policy and immigrants. As Asian-American historian Erika Lee says about immigration law and history:

Recently, the definition of immigration law has come to encompass several additional aspects of the law in relationship to both the admission of immigrants and the regulation of their lives in the United States. For example, scholars now examine not only the specific legislative acts regarding immigration, but also the judicial cases and administrative decisions affecting the admission and deportation of aliens. Also now considered under the umbrella of immigration law are admission regulations for refugees, naturalization and citizenship policies, laws relating to the control and deportation of illegal immigrants, and local, state, and federal policies that regulate other aspects of

immigrant life, such as occupational and educational opportunities as well as their eligibility for social welfare benefits [12].

In a broad sense, immigration law profoundly impacts every aspect of an immigrant's life, both physically and psychologically. This is mirrored by 1900's strange situation on board *Virginian*. His story serves as a metaphor for the life predicament of immigrants, a stage on which they endeavour to navigate life.

According to the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 [13] and the Supreme Court decision in the 1898 case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* [14], if a child is born in a place in which U.S. jurisdiction applies or if the child's parents are naturalised U.S. citizens, then the child has the right to U.S. citizenship. Presumably, 1900's parents are either Italians or nationals of another European country who cannot afford to care for a baby. Neither born on U.S. soil nor recognised as a child of U.S. citizens, 1900 becomes a victim of immigration law, with no right through birth to American citizenship. As a minor, with no legal papers or statutory guardians, he can neither leave the ship nor enter the U.S. legally. Furthermore, no one he knows, such as his foster father Danny, a black boiler room worker, is wealthy enough to take him to the U.S. and pay for his upbringing. In other words, it is impossible for him, at least as a minor [15], to become a "legal" immigrant.

The non-legal status of 1900 on *Virginian* is a form of collateral damage resulting from immigration law, which makes him undefinable and uncategorisable. The ship, a vessel that has more legal rights to exist than he has, becomes an abnormal place that allows a legally unacceptable person to exist on board. What, though, is *Virginian* in the sense of "space" from the perspective of the law?

### 3 Heterotopia and Semiosphere

#### 3.1 Semiosphere

A culture as a semiosphere, which is "the object of semiotics" and "the space of semiosis" [16], is constructed and can be illustrated by its numerous semiotic components, which are not limited to language alone but rather include everything that can be considered significant in the semiotic system. In addition, the semiotic components within the semiosphere can also be considered sub-semiospheres, each having its own languages, signs, and semiotic systems. Although different semiospheres can interact with one another as well as with an integrated semiosphere as a whole, both individual semiospheres and the integrated semiosphere have boundaries that distinguish the internal from the external. Since semiosis cannot exist outside the semiosphere, there is a need for communication and translation between the internal and the external aspects of the semiosphere. As Juri Lotman states:

The border of semiotic space is the important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. Thus, only with the help of the boundary is

the semiosphere able to establish contact with non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces [17].

Accordingly, both Italy and the U.S. can be regarded as two semiospheres, each having its own laws and legal systems within their borders, which are intended to interact due to mass immigration. In this context, immigrants can be seen as the translators who facilitate the exchange of two different cultures and help in the acceptance and adaptation of the laws governing them, while the ship—a vessel, which is also governed by law and which has its own culture as a semiosphere—serves the purpose of transporting immigrants from one place to another, without necessarily engaging with the immigrants' places of origin or their intended destinations. Consequently, to both Italy and the U.S., as well to the passengers who care only about the services on the ship, *Virginian* may simply be an external and non-semiotic space devoid of significant meaning. Nevertheless, this notion of a place-less place can be likened to a utopia where 1900 can fully realise his potential.

### **3.2 A Lawless Place**

The concern with “space”, which usually means “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile” [18], is demographic and is an “emplacement” or a “settlement” of human beings according to law, with a focus on why, where, and how people are emplaced, and on the geographical, political, legal, cultural, and financial relations between people, and also between people and their natural or artificial environment. 1900 is not emplaced on *Virginian* by any legal means for any demographical purpose, and *Virginian* is not a place established by law to accommodate any specific group (as was the case, for example, with the settlement and resettlement of refugees in European countries according to refugee law [19] and the Executive Order 9066 [20] that allowed the U.S. government to emplace/confine Japanese Americans in certain areas after the attack on Pearl Harbor). Since he is not emplaced on *Virginian* by law, 1900 is neither immigrant nor stowaway, and nor can he be considered a member of the crew. He is a person who can be neither defined nor regulated by law, and who has no place to return to or be deported to. In the strict legal sense, he does not even exist. If 1900 is a person without legal status, then, in legal terms, what place is *Virginian*?

*Virginian* is a vessel, according to Admiralty Law [21], that travels back and forth between Europe and the U.S. across the Atlantic Ocean and that is open to everyone regardless of race or nationality, in accordance with the spirit of “The Freedom of the Seas” [22]. Therefore, as long as *Virginian* is on water, at least international water where no jurisdiction can claim 1900 to be an illegal immigrant, there is no law to prevent him staying on board. Besides, in the practical sense, it is hard to believe that the United States Coast Guard (USCG) or any law enforcement in the early 1900s would board a registered ship simply to look for a person who barely holds the status of illegal immigrant. As for the crew, staff, and ship owner, they had no obligation to report the existence of an undocumented child at this time [23]. Furthermore, even if someone had checked for stowaways, *Virginian* was large to

make it easy to hide. This 1900 was aware of, since Danny has warned him that one day, someone may well come to catch him and lock him up in an orphanage.

With the laws above in mind and for practical reasons, *Virginian* becomes 1900's natural shelter since despite being a vessel defined by law, it operates outside immigration law. That is to say, 1900 and *Virginian* are both defined by law but exist outside of it, with *Virginian* being the only place where 1900 can remain. The interaction between 1900 and *Virginian*—that is to say, human inhabitants and their living environments that form a space—represents the relationship between immigrants and the land they move to.

### 3.3 Heterotopia

1900 on *Virginian* is comparable to immigrants in the U.S. *Virginian* is a space where 1900 remains, like a colony or settlement, even though the ship was not built for immigration purposes. What exactly is a ship in terms of space? Michel Foucault once wrote:

[i]f you consider, for example, that the ship is a piece of floating space, a placeless place, that lives by its own devices, that is self-enclosed and, at the same time, delivered over to the boundless expanse of the ocean, and that goes from port to port, from watch to watch, from brothel to brothel, all the way to the colonies in search of the most precious treasures that lie waiting in their gardens, you see why for our civilization, from the sixteenth century up to our time, the ship has been at the same time not only the greatest instrument of economic development [...], but the greatest reservoir of imagination. The sailing vessel is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without ships the dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police that of the corsairs [24].

A vessel is a placeless place that transports passengers to their destinations. A vessel is not a place where people's dreams can be realised or where cultures can be formed; rather, it is a carrier loaded with people's dreams about the journey and the final destination. Therefore, a vessel is still part of an immigrant's dreams and an essential component to the realisation of those dreams. Without ships (and, indeed, other modes of transport), our dreams will fade because they have nothing to attach to. Without ships, we cannot leave our current place, where opportunities are perhaps scarce, and move to a promised land where dreams can perhaps come true. This is why, Foucault terms "le bateau" a placeless place, a heterotopia.

Michel Foucault talks about *hétérotopie* for the first time in the preface of *Les Mots et Les Choses* [25]. *Hétérotopie* is originally a medical term: heterotopy and heterotopism refer to misplaced body tissues [26]. In 1970, *hétérotopie* was translated into English as heterotopia, which is a non-exact translation of *hétérotopie*. It is a compound noun that combines two Greek words: ἕτερος (*héteros*) and τόπος (*topos*, place) [27]. In the preface of *The Order of Things*, Foucault discusses Borges's essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" [28], which is about an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia of animals entitled "Celestial

Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” [29] found by a fictitious doctor, Franz Kuhn. Foucault used *hétérotopie* as a spatial metaphor [30] through the comparison of utopia and heterotopia to illustrate a (non-)existent “space” within which the commonly accepted “words and orders—a systemised knowledge in general” do not apply. Classification and categorisation, as the Chinese encyclopaedia of animals suggests, imply space: each category is like a box in our mind that contains different things. As Foucault says:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together” [...]. [h]eterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences [31].

In *The Legend of 1900*, *Virginian* is the only place outside the legal semiosphere of the law of both Italy and the U.S. that allows 1900 to exist and live. The ship, in this context, serves as a heterotopia, a space that cannot be easily categorised or identified within the legal framework of our world, as 1900 is the sole person on board who exists outside immigration law. Therefore, a heterotopia, despite having a virtual aspect, is also a tangible place comprising the ship as a physical space and 1900 as an active participant. In other words, 1900 and *Virginian* together constitute a heterotopia. Foucault explains the concept of heterotopia using the metaphor of a mirror:

The mirror is [...] a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space [...] that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality [...]. From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is [...], directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space [...], I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real [...], and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there [32].

According to Foucault, a heterotopia is as real a place as any other we find ourselves in because not only is it a place of virtuality but it is also one in which we can find our realness. We cannot see either ourselves or what is behind us unless we turn our heads. A mirror, however, enables us to see both ourselves and what is behind us simultaneously. In other words, the realness of the world from which we look at the mirror needs to be ascertained by the mirror, and the realness of

the world from which we look at the mirror cannot be ascertained without the mirror. That is to say, the real world that we look at from the mirror becomes unreal because the realness is manifested by the virtual reality of the reflection in the mirror. A virtual place we see in the mirror becomes real because you can only confirm the realness of the world from which we are looking at the mirror.

A heterotopia, as a non-semiotic space that is in contrast to a semiosphere, lacks the rules that define non-heterotopia places, and it cannot be comprehended or defined by these rules. The world that we inhabit and the world that exists in the mirror constitute one interconnected reality, like two sides of a coin, bridged by the mirror. A heterotopia created through a mirror serves as a device that represents the complete world from an unusual and unprecedented perspective.

## 4 1900 Space, and Law

### 4.1 1900 and a Place of his Own

A question that goes unanswered in the film is why 1900 does not leave the ship when he can and instead dies in its explosion. Maria Vittoria Costantini and Paola Golinelli argue that “As the expression of an indissoluble bond with the mother’s body, aestheticism can be immobile and immobilizing, thus enhancing grandiosity and omnipotence and distancing the subject from relational life” [33]. Virginian is his protector and represents his lost mother. The ship is a place where he makes music, after his foster father dies, which is his way to cope with loss and anxiety, and where he can establish his identity and existence. It is impossible for 1900 to leave his mother, Virginian, where his music is born, even if it is for a woman with whom he has fallen in love. Yet such analysis is negative and ignores the fact that 1900 is an active agent who creates his own place and rejects the law and life on land. The analysis would differ if it were conducted from the perspective of law and space.

Virginian—a heterotopia—requires 1900, a mobile and active agent, to make it into a place that has its own semiotic significance, distinct from other semiospheres and shaped through their mutual cooperation—that is to say, the cooperation between Virginian and 1900. In other words, a place cannot exist in isolation: it requires human activity that involves interaction between the participants and the space. As Pentti Määttänen comments on Henri Lefebvre’s idea about the production of space: “Social space is the space of social practice, and social practice is always spatial practice. As cultural and social beings we are still embodied beings which move around in space in our social activities, when we produce and reproduce the social space around us” [34]. To Henri Lefebvre, production is materialistic and spatial because all activities occur within a space-time continuum.

From the start of an activity so oriented towards an objective, spatial elements - the body, limbs, eyes - are mobilized, including both materials (stone, wood, bone, leather, etc.) and *matériel* (tools, arms, language, instructions and agendas). Relations based on an order to be followed – that is to say, on simul-



taneity and synchronicity – are thus set up, by means of intellectual activity, between the component elements of the action undertaken on the physical plane. All productive activity is defined less by invariable or constant factors than by the incessant to-and-fro between temporality (succession, concatenation) and spatiality (simultaneity, synchronicity) [35].

The idea in the film is that place [36] is created through the interaction between the participant, the social practices of 1900 (such as piano playing and his interaction with others), and the space itself, including other people and objects, like the piano. The formation of a place requires humans, and a person's talent necessitates spatial elements. Therefore, 1900 and the ship are but one inseparable organism. 1900 cannot live without the ship and the ship cannot live without 1900. 1900's decisions determine the value and destiny of not only himself but also of the ship.

## 4.2 Changing Perspective

As mentioned, the situation of 1900 is an unfortunate result of immigration law. However, the ship *Virginian*, as a heterotopia, offers 1900 a sanctuary where no law can touch him. It is paradoxical that 1900 is both controlled by and free from the law at the same time. *Virginian* is a place to emplace and confine 1900; however, it is also his utopia where he can use his musical talent to perform, much like the Italian immigrants realise their dreams in the U.S. Therefore, the reason he does not leave *Virginian* is not because he is unable to but because he neither wants to nor needs to.

Initially, 1900 tries to avoid the world, such as when he hides from the messengers sent by Jelly Roll Morton, because he has been informed by his foster father that he will end up in an orphanage if he is captured by people who come on board the ship. He may not know that he can actually go to the U.S. without legal papers as an illegal immigrant [37], and never dares or thinks to leave the ship. Even his best friend, Max Tooney, a trumpet player, tells him to leave the ship to lead a life on land. He asks 1900 why he does not leave, and 1900 responds:

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? I think land people waste a lot of time wondering why. Winter comes and you can't wait for summer. Summer comes and you live in dread of winter. That's why you never tire of traveling, always chasing some place far away, where it's always summer. Doesn't sound like a good bet to me [38].

1900 considers himself a sea person in contrast to land people, such as Max Tooney, who do not cherish the present and who always yearn for the future. His words indicate his profound understanding of the nature of land people, and his accomplishment on *Virginian* proves he can still be brilliant even if he is not allowed into the U.S. But despite not needing the world, 1900 still tries to make contact with it: for example, he uses the radio to talk to strangers and imagines the landscapes of places he has never been to based on the information he receives from others. *Virginian* is a paradoxical place where he is confined by and also free from the law. 1900's transformation begins with a conversation he has with an old Italian farmer.

When 1900 plays the piano, the farmer, who wants to move to the U.S., joins him on the accordion. They then have a conversation:

1900: You don't look too happy to be going to America.

Italian farmer: It's not America. It's everything I leave behind [...]. Maybe you can't understand that.

1900: I understand perfectly. I know someone who went through something very very similar.

Italian farmer: [...]. And did the fever take his five children?

1900: No, but he ended up alone, too [...].

Italian farmer: I still have a daughter, the young one. She survived. It's for her that I decide one day to fight against my bad luck [...]. And then one day [...], I come to a hill, and then, I see the most beautiful thing in my life. The sea!

1900: The sea?

Italian farmer: I'd never seen it before. It was like lightning hit me, because I hear the voice.

1900: The voice of the sea?

Italian farmer: Yes. The voice of the sea. I never heard it. The voice of the sea, it is like a shout [...]. And the thing it would scream was: [...]. "Life is immense! Can you understand that?" "Immense." [...]. A revolution was in my head. That's how I suddenly decided to change my life, to start afresh. Change life, start afresh. Tell that to your friend [38].

Changing one's perspective is the key point of this conversation. To this old Italian farmer, his old land and home country, even though he feels sad about leaving it, was a prison. One day, after hearing the scream of the sea, he examines his life from a different perspective and realises that life is immense and has numerous possibilities. This conversation triggers 1900's transformation. He realises that Virginian is in fact a place of incarceration and that he is imprisoned on it by immigration law. In addition, he coincidentally meets the farmer's only daughter on the ship on her way to New York to meet her father. This incident leads to 1900 deciding to leave the ship and venture on land even if that means his status will be that of illegal immigrant and he may be caught by the authorities. His decision is not solely a result of love but also of his changing view of his life on the sea. Yet while walking down the gangway, he stops to look at the city, New York, and he decides to walk back onto Virginian, where he remains until his death.

### 4.3 A Meaningful Place and Personal Integrity

1900's decision to remain on Virginian is baffling since his existence on the ship is much like the confinement in a prison since it deprives him of his freedom. To pursue a life on land and therefore the challenge law, he needs to leave his life on the ship. The fact is, however, that 1900 realises something while on the gangway looking at New York and this is that the city is not a utopia where he will fulfil his dreams but rather a place that will put an end to his musical talent, such as is symbolised by Max selling his trumpet for money. In the final

scene, Max finds 1900 in the belly of *Virginian*, and 1900 explains to him why he wants to die in the explosion.

All that city [...] You just couldn't see an end to it [...]. It wasn't what I saw that stopped me, Max. It was what I didn't see [...]. What I did not see was where the whole thing came to an end. The end of the world.

Take the piano. Keys begin, keys end [...]. They are not infinite. You're infinite [...] And on those keys, the music that you can make [...] is infinite [...]. You rolled out in front of me a keyboard of millions of keys, [...] that never end [...]. That keyboard is infinite [...] and if that keyboard is infinite, then on that keyboard there is no music you can play [...] [38].

The physical boundary of a piano keyboard or of a ship cannot truly limit a person's accomplishment when that person is infinite. On the contrary, an infinite place such as New York both distracts and exhausts. Here, talent and life goals are lost, and everyone becomes average. The ship is in fact a heterotopia. It is a place that cannot be understood in the normal sense and that cannot be controlled by the law. *Virginian* is not only a real physical space where 1900 can remain and thus escape the law; rather, it is also a place where he acquired his musical ability and fulfilled his destiny through the interaction between him and place, which is a semiosphere with semiotic signification created by him and the ship. Therefore, instead of losing himself in the infinite options and opportunities of a huge city, 1900 chooses to stay and die where he has but one choice. It is the only way he can assure his identity, retain his integrity, and perform on and, in the end, exit the stage as a pianist.

Christ! Did you see the streets? There were thousands of them! How do you do it down there? How do you choose just one? One woman, one house, one piece of land to call your own, one landscape to look at, one way to die [...]. I was born on this ship [...]. And there were wishes here, but never more than could fit between the prow and the stern. And you played out your happiness, but on a piano that was not infinite! I learned to live that way [...]. Land is a ship too big for me. It's a woman too beautiful. It's a voyage too long. Perfume too strong. It's music I don't know how to make. I can never get off this ship. At best, I can step off my life [38].

The ending is ambiguous and open for interpretation. One interpretation, such as that by Costantini and Golinelli, is that 1900 accepts his fate and dies a person without legal status. It seems he gives up his fight against the law that determined his fate on *Virginian*. However, 1900 has in fact fulfilled his destiny as a pianist on *Virginian*. His achievement is great and not what is supposed to be had, or is at least not easy to be had, by an immigrant on land, whose potential is limited by the law and confined within a place. Therefore, 1900's achievement on board *Virginian* and his decision to stay and die when it explodes is how he retains his integrity and is also his ultimate rebuttal of the law that tries to limit not only his life on board the ship but also all the possible lives of immigrants on land.

## 5 Conclusion

*The Legend of 1900* is a story about immigrants. The lives of immigrants are determined by the law in terms of where they should be emplaced—for example, colonies—their occupation, their right to social benefits, and their social status, as well as the way they are viewed and treated by non-immigrants. People become immigrants because they choose to or are forced to move to a new place that has yet to become their promised land but that is the chance at a new life. However, 1900 is an exception: he is not an immigrant—not even an illegal immigrant—since he has no means of attaining the legal identity as an immigrant on land, and his decision not to go to New York means he does not become an immigrant either on land or on sea. He can only be himself, which is a legally uncategorisable new species in a legally undefinable space—a heterotopia—that differs from other places created for immigrants, illegal immigrants, and non-immigrants.

Therefore, the ship and 1900 form a heterotopia, which is not only a mirror through which we can see our world but also a real physical place where we live, and where our dreams may come true. The musical accomplishments of 1900 on the ship come without his needing to be an immigrant on land and without his having to renounce the law. His final decision to stay on the ship and consequently die in the explosion represents his denial of success on land, his fight against the law, and his ability to view Virginian as his own promised land, indicated by the words “fuck the regulation” that 1900 repeats in the film to demonstrate his despisal of things that people like and follow. *The Legend of 1900* is then not a pessimistic story about a man accepting his fate but instead a positive story about how the genius pianist 1900 conquers the difficulties that immigrants encounter and successfully challenges a law that was put in place to control the lives of immigrants and their dreams. 1900 and the ship Virginian together created a place more promising than New York, a places so full of opportunity yet also very much controlled by the law.

Some people might argue that the destiny of 1900 and the ship does not make for a positive ending, regardless of how successful 1900 is on the ship. However, I would contend that the gramophone recording of 1900’s music made on the ship is evidence of his legacy that goes on to influences people in another semiosphere. The owner of the music shop returns the trumpet after hears 1900’s story. Max is thus able to revive his musical career, and the priceless story of 1900 is told and will now live forever.

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directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

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4. In this paper, the *heterotopia*, which is composed of the space and people within it, refers to an existing physical place that cannot be understood, defined, or categorised by common sense or by any current systems of knowledge.
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