

# La Passerella: Ways of Accessing the Sea

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The sand on the shores of the Adriatic sea is usually soft and extremely warm to your feet. Sometimes, it can be unpleasantly hot, especially during the sticky days of an Italian summer. Crowds of holiday makers have been depositing themselves on the beaches of Riviera Romagnola, 100 km of coast in the north of the peninsula, since the early fifties. To avoid mobs of tourists hopping on one foot and swearing in a variety of languages, local resorts introduced a practical solution: *la passerella*, a quintessentially Italian invention which can be translated into the shape of a colourful footbridge. *La passerella* allows bathers to navigate the myriad of flaming sunbeds under umbrellas, and, finally, to access the sea – feet unharmed.

Despite its true utility, this name doesn't reveal a mere platform to walk across. Having being a zealous frequenter of the Romagnola coast, I dare to say that *la passerella* is not just functional; it is a metonym for an attitude towards the shore.

Just as the whitish foam on the beach embodies both the manifestation and the absence of the sea, the demise of a wave and the wait for the next one, this striped footbridge evokes clashing ways of seeing and living in the maritime landscape. Around *la passerella* chatters expand, on it unctuous bikinis perform while the perfume of suntan creams permeates its surroundings. Yet sometimes the whistling wind of the sea floods in, bringing with it desires for knowledge and calm meditation. *La passerella* still shows the way to the void, to the nothingness of a large expanse of erratic water and uncoloured thought; in other words, it stands for a slightly theatrical but pensive approach to the shore, definitely Italian and perhaps international.

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- *"I saw your kid running up and down with a bucket of sand, he's so grown up, I barely recognized him!"*

- *"Where did she get that bluish, pompous hat? I must have it, now!"*

- *"Are you going for drinks tonight? There is a brand new disco pub, we shall test it. Oh by the way, over there is where Matteo threw up last night"*

My mind goes back to some fragments of conversations I accidentally overheard as I have walked along *la passerella* over the summers. After years of such observations, I realise how the human experience of the sea rotates around this narrow strip, which rises above the overcrowded horizon. When you are a child, you start to respect *la passerella* because it represents the highway to the salt water, its games and mystery; parents

can easily push their strollers and babies along it, reaching the section of umbrellas preferred by families. During the day, a constant succession of wheeled carriages move past, between the procession of veteran tourists dragging their tanned feet. People in their sixties and seventies faithfully live by *la passerella*. They place their chairs next to it and have loud conversations with their neighbours on the other side. Their moves are either towards the sea for a quick bathe or towards the café for a much more meditative cards contest.

However, teenagers and young bathers slathered in oil are the main tenants of the Riviera Romagnola. The beach is their realm, the sublime landscape in which they can finally show the outcome of a winter's work out. Troops of would-be perfectly shaped bodies exhibit themselves on *la passerella*, following the repetitive rhythm of the pop music that spills out from some concealed speakers. The walk on the footbridge is something that all the beach goers are aware of. It is the climax of a year of diets and expectations, the kind of test that determines who will be enviable and who will be scoffed at for the whole summer season. In this way, *la passerella* evolves into a fashion swimwear catwalk, whose items follow a certain order of importance: increasingly tiny bikinis, then see-through sarongs, thick sunglasses with dark lenses and lastly, expensive squeaky flip flops. The shore has become the stage for the performance of lust merged with shallowness and *la passerella* is the front part of it, the space where the relieved actors walk and bow for the audience at the end of the play.

The theatrical connotation of this playful object reverberates in one of the meanings of this Italian entity. *La passerella* can refer to a march of artists, a walk in sequence to greet and thank the spectators. The Romagnola coast has totally soaked up and broadened this atmosphere of a parade of people; as the beach has been turned into a show of bodies and accessories, the institution of a linear display has been adopted at large. An infinite series of suntan creams appear under the multitude of umbrellas of the thousands of resorts that line up in front of the sea. Its water sees another side of *la passerella* at night, when it mirrors a trail of glittering lights coming from roaring cafés and clubs on shore. Quite a magical image, except for the lines of hammered people that consecutively lay down in front of it as they wait to recover their senses.

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*"Forgive me, sweet creatures. I hadn't understood, I didn't know. It's so natural accepting you, loving you. And it's so simple. Luisa, I feel I've been freed. (...) How I wish I could explain, but I don't know how to. Everything is confused again, as it was before. But this confusion is me, not as I would like to be, but as I am. I'm not afraid anymore of telling the truth, of the things I don't know, what I'm looking for and haven't found. This is the only*

*way I can feel alive, and I can look into your faithful eyes without shame.  
Life is a celebration, let's live it together!"*

The song *La passerella* by Nino Rota accompanies the final monologue of Federico Fellini's film *8 ½*. Guido, the protagonist and film maker, has failed in his creational intent and goes to a beach on the Romagnola coast to take down the film set. When the story of his collapsed career seems to an end, the beach is inundated by Guido's imaginary characters; trying to evoke through words the brilliance of these vital images, I confront myself with the angst of diminishing Fellini's work.

With his feet sinking in the nocturnal and thus fresh sand, the protagonist whispers the words above to his wife Luisa and his actors. He is reconciled, a new ecstatic rapture blows in from the sea and whistles in his ears. Guido's real and fictional life now crumbles, it is openly displayed on the beach and asks to be enjoyed. The curtain falls and discloses a parade of people walking through the yellowish landscape, towards *la passerella*. On the elevated footbridge, actual friendships and cinematic roles hold hands. They march together and whirl around Guido, their generator.

On screen there is a circus director, a couple of clowns, some old ladies wearing amusingly sumptuous outfits, and a feeling too, of cheerfulness; a sheer human comedy supported by the brisk Fellinian soundtrack. Although the costumes and the theatrical setting, with its playful mood, hint at the triviality of the creamy summery catwalks, in *8 ½ la passerella* freezes a moment of achievement. It is one of the most envied finales of cinematic history: the sublime synopsis of a whole film, of its protagonist's past and hopes for the future.

Among this tide of thoughts, the image of *la passerella* that I keep returning to resembles the one in a photograph by Luigi Ghirri. It lies bare and silent on the shore; faint footprints suggest fleeting presences and dreamy moods in a landscape that could still be moving. Unaware of being watched, *la passerella* gracefully indicates the way to the sea, and to the numerous associations it triggers, yet I suppose I have already gone too far.