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FEAR DEATH BY WATER: REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRATORY SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CINEMA*

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Abstract: The migratory crisis that Italy and Europe are facing today is globally well-known. The continuous arrivals of migrants from the southern part of the Mediterranean has stressed the deficiencies of international migratory policies and, from a political point of view, is contributing to reinforce a xenophobic attitude in the population. This essay starts with the concept that images play a fundamental role in the visual economy of this mass migration. I intend to analyse the ways in which spaces of migrations are represented, and at the same time, shaped by contemporary Italian cinema. Analysing these images also offers an interrogation of the mechanisms of power that produce a certain narrative of these events. This essay proposes to do that by analysing three texts produced in different circumstances and by different powers: *La scelta di Catia* (a web series produced and sponsored by the Italian navy in order to promote a certain image of the operation *Mare Nostrum*); *Fuocoammare* (documentary by Gianfranco Rosi that received the Golden Bear); *Io sto con la sposa* (International production in which the directors and members of the cast are personally and directly involved with the migrant crisis). Each of these films shapes migratory space in a different way and helps to define the image of the migrant and the spectator.

The migratory “crisis” in Europe is the outcome of a wider process that has, over the last few decades, contributed to redrawing the geography of mass movements. In fact, since the late 90s, Italy has seen a constant increase of migratory flows to its coasts. There is a commotion of space whose dimensions are unpredictable and whose traces are very hard to follow because of the heterogeneity of the data provided by institutional sources and the tragic ending of most of those travels.¹ The

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phenomenon of contemporary migrations, key point of the Italian and European political agenda, is a laboratory of great interest to those who deal with images and, most of all, with the political construction those images engender. In particular, if it is true that our vision of an image is always culturally and historically set, it is more necessary than ever to deconstruct the icons of contemporaneity in order to bring under their spotlight the constitutive exclusions, and highlight their implicit strategies (Rancière 2009: 84).² Given that, in continuity with the methodology of visual culture studies, this essay will deal with contemporary migrations, analyzing its constitutive images, by showing how they always assume a precise politic of space and subjectivity. It is therefore preferable to concentrate our attention on some still images that are essential to comprehend the narration of the migratory crisis, before investigating some filmic texts recently produced by Italy.

I

It was the 3rd of October 2013, when a boat full of migrants from Eritrea sets out from the Libyan harbor of Misurata, capsizes and sinks barely half a mile from the coasts of Lampedusa. The toll was catastrophic: there were 155 survivors, and the official death tolls was 366, to which we must add at least twenty missing people. It was the most tragic shipwreck that had occurred off the Italian coasts, and as a result, many political declarations came after the tragedy.³ In the days following the event, criticism of Italian immigration policies rose significantly⁴, leading to an expectation of change by the government. However, as operations Mare Nostrum and then Triton (originally Frontex Plus) implied, status quo would remain for the time being.

¹ Also see the useful notes by Sossi (2012). The author reports data regarding the arrivals and shipwrecks in the year 2011, mentioning some passages officially presented in Parliament by the then Interior Minister Roberto Maroni. In the specific case of the shipwrecks, the situation is complicated by the fact that many corpses are not immediately washed up by the sea. Moreover, migrants' corpses are normally buried in suburban cemeteries in Sicily, while gravestones and crosses that identify the burial places are signed with progressive numbers. A useful tool to get a complete vision of the verified shipwreck deaths in the Mediterranean Sea between 1990 and 2013, has been developed by researchers of Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit (<http://www.borderdeaths.org/>) and gives useful data about the causes of death, age and origin of victims. Considering only the Strait of Sicily, the history published on the website of the *Repubblica* newspaper in the days that followed the great shipwreck on 3rd October 2013, appears to be particularly complete: (http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/10/03/news/le_tragedie_nel_canale_di_sicilia_6_200_vittime_dal_1994-67790198/)

² According to Rancière, the act of looking is always active: to see something that is not subject to a "construction of the space in which visible, speakable and practicable are connected" is definitely not possible. Moreover, the dominant power hides its politically and culturally determined nature to present itself as the only possible way to look. In this sense, as Rancière did, and as I will try to do in this essay, it is essential to search for a critical and deconstructive space in order to overturn the dominant narrations.

³ Among many others, it is worth remembering at least the 3rd October committee (<http://www.comitatotreottobre.it/>), that intended to establish as its main mission a Memory Day, for the victims of the Mediterranean. With a deliberation on the 21st March, the Senate of the Italian Republic legally recognized that day. (<http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2016-03-21;45!vig>).

⁴ I am referring here in particular to the Bossi-Fini law of 2002 regarding the regulation of immigration (<http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2002-07-30;189!vig>) and to the so-called Maroni Decree of 2009 in the field of criminal law (<http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/09038l.htm>).



Figs. 1-2: corpses in the hangar of Lampedusa, immediately after the shipwreck (3rd October 2013).

Source: La Repubblica Palermo

Analyzing the pictures that appeared in Italian newspapers on the 3rd of October and in the following days, the iconographic pattern is instantly recognizable since almost every newspaper proposed the same pictures with minimal variations. Two are particularly relevant: the one with corpses placed in plastic bags [Fig. 1] and the one with the coffins [Fig. 2]: in their ceaseless appearance in nearly every news media, these pictures became symbols of the migratory tragedy in the Mediterranean.⁵ The dead bodies may seem apparent in these pictures, but it can be argued that they are missing, because the actual bodies are covered and therefore hidden from our view. There are no pictures of migrants' dead bodies floating in the sea or washed up on shore; the obscenity of death is immediately hidden from view. It is precisely in this non-exhibition of the corpse that some strategies constructing the migrant subject as an object of governmental power become evident (Sossi 2017). The covered corpses are taken "out of the scene" (Kristeva 1982), and in the process, are reduced to a pile of identical entities. The aligned coffins, signed with a progressive number, are the most evident representation of the de-individualizing and medicalizing procedures of border-spaces, developed by migration politics, contributing to the production of nameless subjectivities in death as in life (William 2010; Tazzoli 2012). These paradoxical subjectivities with no face, whose death does not really count (Butler 2000; 200)⁶ and whose stories are impossible to retrace (Sossi 2005) reflect the precariousness of the lives of migrants.

⁵ As Ch  roux (2009) rightly pointed out in his study on 9/11, it is possible to identify a constant trend in the repletion of images that, at a global level, press users to describe the great crises of contemporaneity.

⁶ For an update of this thesis, see also: Butler (2010).



Figs. 3-4: Screenshots of Alan Kurdi's Body. Source: YouTube

Another shipwreck, other pictures. The ones of Alan Kurdi's body, who was three years old, quickly spread around the mediasphere. The boat on which he was travelling with his family capsized soon after leaving the Turkish coasts, and on the 3rd of September 2015, Alan's dead body was washed up on shore by the sea, together with his mother and brother. Why did the picture of Alan go viral, moving internet users and giving people hope, one more time, that the migratory laws might change? Why this picture, and not ones of other shipwrecked children that we could easily find on-line? Analyzing photographs from Abu Ghraib, Stephen Eisenman (2007) has efficaciously shown how the visual composition of a picture can impact its permanence in media circulation. In the case of Alan's image, there are many elements that make it somehow different from the numerous icons of grief that fill the screens every day.

We must not underestimate that, contrary to the norm, Alan's actual dead body is framed in this picture. In his analysis of the mechanism of sensationalizing others' sorrow, Luc Boltanski dwelled on the necessity to focus on a single person rather than on a mass. Sorrow devoted to a collectivity is too big to bear; and focusing on a single subjectivity can engender a relationship with an individual, rather than an unnamed, unrecognizable mass. In this, the viewer is brought closer to the event itself. Boltansky further says that the subjects must be "super-personalized through the accumulation of details of pain" but also "under-qualified: they are them, but they could be anyone else" (Boltanski 1999: 18). Alan's picture compels the viewer to engage with his body and his tragedy, directly questioning our ethical position as spectators. How does this picture hit us? Which details wound us; what justifies our obsessive attention to this specific icon? Sergio Benvenuto (2015) compares this picture with the many other pictures of children that come to us from different regions of Africa, and points out a possible solution:

Those images we see on television of African children, all skin and bones because of diseases or hunger, who drool and shiver announcing their death, let's speak frankly, do

not shock us that much. They are now just part of a routine of cosmic horror to which we got used as we did to earthquakes and victims of car accidents. The point is that those skin and bones children usually are not represented alone, we see someone taking care of them, even if in vain [...]. Nudity, shreds and exotic appearances denounce a distance from our existence that can bring some to emotion, yes, but filled with the sugary becoming estranged of the exotic. On the other hand, Alan, even if neglectfully dressed, could be any Italian or German child. Other pictures, before his deadly journey, show us a child that plays with his teddy-bear and laughs as many other kids [...]. In addition, the decision of his father Abdullah to call him Alan – typical Anglo-American name – facilitates this domestication of the young victim.

Alan, who was Syrian, occupied our awareness because he could have seemed like a Western kid. He was not carrying the signs of sorrow on his body, he did not seem to come from those regions in the world in which tragedies inevitably happen and are part of the natural course of the events.⁷ However, Alan's picture and its immediate ability to capture our visual panorama makes evident the mechanisms of de-humanization that are part of the current dynamics of control with regard to migrations.⁸ If there was a word of sorrow and indignation for Alan, it was only because his picture was acceptable, easy to internalize and to label in our visual paradigms that have built him a surrogate identity, capable of re-writing his subjectivity.

Which space then is available for those who, unlike Alan, show the visible signs of their own alterity? Where is the space for members of that uncontrollable mass that the European Union constantly tries to re-locate, push away and relegate to an "elsewhere" through the adoption of always more pressing measures of recording, identification and estrangement? While migrants experience the borders of Schengen as a place of detention, restricted movement and clandestine identity, for members of the European Union, it's a space of suspension to relegate those undesired lives. *The Space Migrant*⁹ campaign by Save the Children has provocatively proposed sending migrants into orbit, making them non-planetary even before declaring them non-European.¹⁰ The campaign has the

⁷ "These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place. The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world" (Sontag 2003: 53).

⁸ Current migratory politics seem to be oriented toward a conception of the migrant as a non-subject, someone that can disappear, whose corpse can be freely disposed by the state. In this sense, it seems to lose his own corporeity and to be reduced to a sort of ghost or – using the well-known term of Agamben (1998) – a bare life.

⁹ http://www.savethechildren.it/IT/Page/t01/view_html?idp=902

¹⁰ The advertising for the campaign reported above, significantly says: "Hundreds of minors begin a deadly trip to escape from warzones, but European states are not willing to receive them and they create walls to not let them enter. To focalize the attention on this problem, *Save the Children* created *The Space Migrant*, a project developed to send a young migrant in the only place where no one can deny him hospitality: the space."

merit to push to the extreme the mechanism that normally rules the migratory dynamic: the desire to push aside the migratory problem, constructing external detention spaces.¹¹



Fig. 5: Screenshot of *The Space Migrant*. Source: YouTube

II

Immediately after the shipwreck on the 3rd of October, the Italian government made the decision to implement surveillance in the Sicily strait: operation *Mare Nostrum* started with a deployment of navy and aerial forces and Predator B drone units to intercept boats soon after they set out.¹² The campaign, largely criticized in different occasions, was paradoxically introduced as a *military and humanitarian* operation whose main goal was to protect migrants' lives.¹³ My interest here is to evaluate the ways in which this campaign was represented by the national media. In order to do so, it is worth looking directly at the text that seems to be most linked to *Mare Nostrum*'s dynamics. We are talking of *Catia's Choice: 80 Miles South from Lampedusa* (originally: *La Scelta di Catia: 80 Miglia a Sud di Lampedusa*), a web-series sponsored by the Italian Navy and uploaded on their website. The first episodes of this series, on which we will focus our attention, were broadcast on the 6th of October 2014 on Rai 3 TV channel.¹⁴

The series, directed by Roberto Burchielli, follows the last sixty days of Captain Catia Pellegrino on warship *Libra*, one of the ships involved in the *Mare Nostrum* operation. The name of the series directly references the movie *Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982), while also pointing out the deep gap between the main characters of the two texts: Sophie experienced Auschwitz and had to choose which of her children she will save; Catia never deals with such problems: her choice

¹¹ Rebuilding the historic evolution of the law would be inappropriate. I therefore just point out some lectures that are essential: de Genova (2002); Mezzadra, Neilson (2003); Bigo, Guid, (2005); Parsons, Smeeding, (2006); Guiraudon, Gallya, (2007); Geiger, Pécoud, (2010); Squire (2011); Geddes, Boswell, (2011); Balibar, Mezzadra, Samaddar (2012).

¹² About the use of drones in the current political scenario, referring also to migratory dynamics, see Chamayou (2015); Evangelista, Shue, (2014); Coh, (2015); Chomsky, Andre (2016); Gusterson (2016)

¹³For more details about *Mare Nostrum* see: <http://www.marina.difesa.it/cosa-facciamo/operazioni-conclude/Pagine/mare-nostrum.aspx>

¹⁴ Episodes can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wPSALVaD-U>

is different, and alludes to her decision of wearing the uniform to serve the Italian Navy. While Pakula's movie was based on an ethical dilemma, *Catia's Choice* leaves no space for doubts or reconsiderations. The martial tone of the series is confirmed by one of the first phrases in the prologue, repeated at the beginning of every episode: "Long live to Libra. Long live the Italian Navy. Long live Italy."



Fig.6 – Screenshot of *Catia's Choice*

The first picture of the series is already emblematic of the space which *Catia's Choice* (and the Italian Navy as well) occupies: we see an immense sea, compared to which, the Libra warship seems tiny and powerless [Fig. 6]. Captain Catia, meanwhile, warns her men: "Guys! Eyes wide open!". The reference to the ocular dimension of the *Mare Nostrum* operation, significantly presented at the beginning of the series, must not pass unnoticed. Sequences of contact between the Italian crew and the migrants indicate that the dimensions of control and discipline of existence, allowed and put in motion by the mechanisms of power, is always dominant. Even if it is a particular form of docu-fiction that often recalls the visual form of reality television,¹⁵ the series is based on a visual syntax highly reminiscent of Hollywood, as the repeated use of close-ups, clear editing and soundtracks seem to demonstrate. It is a precise choice: the adoption of this visual scheme makes the images of the operations and rescues of *Mare Nostrum* similar to a fiction action movie. Just like in a feature-film, the events are continuously dramatized, and it is only thanks to the decisions of Catia (a protagonist that is easy to empathize with), that the suspense is positively solved.

¹⁵ For an overview on the visual products based on the hybridization between documentary and fiction, see: King (2005); Rhodes, Springer (2006).

While the members of the Italian Navy are positively described and showed under Captain Pellegrino's severe watch, migrants—the main characters of a rescue operation from the very first episode—are depicted as a mass and often framed from helicopters to visually underline their position of dependency and passivity. The image of the migrants as a headless and uncontrollable group is one of the main features of the xenophobic narration that has taken hold for some years in Italy: it is a representation of migratory fluxes that, with the help of a populist rhetoric and media, transform the arrival of non-European citizens into an invasion.¹⁶ It is a narrative that, in some moments of the series, becomes evident in the protocols of preventive control, and in the statements made by the members of the staff.¹⁷

The first contact with migrants takes place under the sign of a disciplinary power that aims to control and medically scrutinize the lives saved from the sea. Bodies of medical staff members are showed shielded by the so called “individual protection systems,”¹⁸ and immediately after the arrival of the migrants on board, the members of the crew make sure to check their health conditions and have them undergo a series of individual controls. It is significant that, along with those protocols, there is also a check with the metal detector [Fig. 7-8]; this once again underlines the link between the migrant and the terrorist – which is never made evident but repeatedly presented in various more or less subtle forms. In the continuous underlining of the Foucauldian connection between knowledge, power and safety,¹⁹ *Catia's Choice* is able to demonstrate—despite its own will—the deep political and ideological involvements of *Mare Nostrum*. An operation that is more a device of control of existences and of migratory fluxes (usually re-sent to native countries) than a rescue operation.

III

In the current international migratory scenario, one of the places most representative of the ongoing social, political and safety dynamics, is undoubtedly represented by the island of Lampedusa. A small island in the Mediterranean, far from the coasts of Sicily, to which it belongs from an administrative point of view, over the years, Lampedusa has become a unique place that is deeply connected with the theme of migration control. Central to the definition of Italian political agenda,

¹⁶ The bibliography on this topic is extremely rich; see: Triandafyllidou, (1999); Dal Lago (2009); Taguieff (2001); Asale (2002); Pagliai, (2011); Parati, Tamburri (2011); Selmini (2016).

¹⁷ The doctor on board, significantly states: “We could come into contact with an infected population.”

¹⁸ This is the description of the equipment offered by one of the medics: “I am the medical lieutenant of the Libra warship. We have just received the order to inspect a boat with migrants on-board. The first thing to do is to wear the individual protection systems that consist of a white single-use suit, a medical mask and obviously the latex gloves. We could make contact with populations infected with endemic diseases, that could spread through saliva, sneezes or direct contact with migrants.”

¹⁹ This is of course central theme in Foucault's thought (1973; 1977; 1978; 2003; 2003).



Figs. 7-8 – Screenshots from *Catia's Choice*

Lampedusa has become, first of all a border, a boundary in the sea and, maybe above all, a place of preventive rejection. In particular, the island and its “reception center” are constituted by a dualistic spatiality. It is as if there were two islands: the touristic one that’s full of vacationers who strengthen the local economy, and the phantom one, invisible but existing, and worn out by migrants. A “neverland” where, as Federica Sossi has noticed, “everything is seen because it happens under the eyes of everybody, and even the sight of the detention center is hidden” (2005:20).

In Lampedusa then, the migratory phenomenon is played in the field of vision, a vision which is both required and denied. Therefore, Lampedusa unwillingly becomes an essential laboratory that considers how migratory fluxes in Italy are perceived, represented and “staged”. This is facilitated, in particular, by the border position of Lampedusa (placed at the very limits of the Schengen space)²⁰ and by its touristic image as a seaside paradise with its white beaches and its sea, almost too blue to be real. As a result, the island has become an extra-juridical laboratory of new security procedures tested on the bodies and existences of incoming immigrants. Traceability, control and power methods that turned out to be useful for the construction of a narration are announced on the news every night. The “human tsunami” that was about to arrive on Lampedusa’s coasts became the icon of a request of European cooperation uselessly demanded by Italy.²¹

The narration of the assault of Lampedusa is relatively unknown to the rest of the world, but it found fertile ground in Italy. We witnessed a spectacle of migration, constantly broadcast on television and represented as an invasion, a siege, a real “clash of civilization” (Huntington 1996). For the incoming migrants, Lampedusa was the space of arrest, detention and deportation;²² a plural space that does not offer the possibility of movement they often desired. As an authentic laboratory of power procedures, Lampedusa became an example for other reception/detention centers in Italy. It also influenced control and surveillance strategies that find their first place of application in the body and the space.²³ Migrants are then bound to cross more and more borders, multiplied by the obsession of demarcation that not only divides spaces, but also makes them impossible to cross.

If Lampedusa is essentially a visual and spectacularized space, it is natural to imagine that is must be represented primarily through visual media. The movie *Fuocoammare* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016)²⁴ is, from this point of view, essential especially for its capacity to summarize the political

²⁰ About Europe and Schengen’s borders see: Dal Lago, Mezzadra (2002); Rigo (2004).

²¹ As Garelli (2012: 118) noted, the narrative of Lampedusa as an “invaded island” was soon enough questioned by international media.

²² Lampedusa has become a space of deportation at least since 2004, when in October, the first deportation of handcuffed migrants to Libya started.

²³ On the pervasiveness of those strategies also outside the security policies related to migrations, see: Lyon (2001; 2003); Mirzoeff, (2004); Doyle, Lippert, Lyon, (2011).

²⁴ The movie was awarded with the Golden Bear at Berlin Film Festival in 2016 and nominated by Italy as the official entry for the Academy Awards. It is a documentary on the migratory problem of Lampedusa that tries to narrate both the

representation of Lampedusa. After investigating the relationship between space, narration and identity in the Golden Lion movie *Sacro GRA* (2013), Rosi presents a detailed report of the island of Lampedusa that has been central to the imaginary of migrations in Europe.

The movie starts with text on a black screen that introduces and sums the proportions of the migratory phenomena in Lampedusa: “The island of Lampedusa has a surface of 20km,² is 70 miles far from the African coast, 120 miles from Sicily. In the last 20 years, about 400,000 migrants have arrived at Lampedusa. We estimate that 15,000 people died trying to reach Europe through the Strait of Sicily.” This paratextual information already gives an idea of Lampedusa’s paradox: an island that is Italian but is isolated from the rest of the country; therefore, it gets established as a piece of land culled from the sea, a space where movement and rights are suspended. One of the first sequences of the movie, the first one in which a human voice is heard, is even more problematic: while the reception center of Lampedusa along with its survey devices is filmed in long-shot [Fig. 9], we hear the registration of a radio communication between a migrants’ boat in trouble and presumably, the staff of the Port Authority. It is an impossible confrontation of voices: while the migrant uses prayer (“In the name of God, please!”), the coast guard tries in vain to be heard (“Your position! Your position”). Thus, a dialogic exchange is consciously presented by the filmmaker as impossible; it is as if the two voices belong to different spaces or times and are therefore unable to communicate.

Starting with this premise, the movie follows two different documentarian lines that are paratactically pulled together, but rarely related. The movie is interesting because of its ability to show, almost beyond the author’s intentions, an image of Lampedusa that needs at least two voices to emerge: first, there is the real Lampedusa, of the inhabitants (not the tourists), and then, the “phantom Lampedusa”,²⁵ which belongs to the reception center, where the migrants live. The spokesperson of the first space is Samuele, a kid whose daily routine consists of school and slingshot

migratory experience and the way of life of the permanent residents of the island. In so doing, the film indirectly stresses the spectacular nature (and construction) of contemporary migrations, constantly reminding us that Lampedusa is first of all a (political) stage. From the point of view of critical reception, the film was presented as a work of art that could counter-narrate the migratory phenomenon, focusing on aspects that are consciously unexpressed in the narration given by journalists and television channels.

²⁵ I took this expression from the works of Sossi (2007: 55). The author, talking about the process of visual construction of Lampedusa as a stage for the spectacle of migrations, suggests that the part of the island devoted to people’s detention somehow disappeared from the public gaze. In this sense, the lack of images creates a suspended space of non-seeing, that is the “phantom Lampedusa” quoted above.



Fig. 9 – *Fuocoammare*

strikes with a friend. It is specifically in these circumstances that Rosi's style gets close to "Neo-Verism", which for Ivelise Perniola (2014) is one of the key-feature of Italian contemporary documentary.²⁶ *Fuocoammare* shows Samuele moving freely in empty spaces, between the harbor of Lampedusa and the house where he lives with his dad and his grandmother. In this, according to a tradition that we can date back at least to the Italian Neorealism, Rosi describes scenes of daily life in detail through particular attention addressed to objects, gestures, attitudes and situations [Fig. 10-11].²⁷ Keeping a distance from the main theme of the movie, Rosi takes us into characters' lives that unfold before us, inviting us to identify with them. These are methodical lives that have little to do with the migratory emergency experienced by others in Lampedusa: they almost seem to happen in a different place. Samuele's family receives information about the shipwrecks through the radio; therefore, even if they are physically very close to the tragedy, it still seems to come from a space that seems unreal, completely alien.

On the opposite side of this intimate, familiar, and at the same time, boundless space (where Samuele can wander freely), there is the migratory space. A space that, as previously highlighted, is the sum of different spaces that share an identical logic: of confinement and of the coercive power that is performed/practiced on bodies that don't have the right of mobility. The structures of this spatiality are unwaveringly hidden from Lampedusa's people's (and tourists') sight: the phantom part of the island is blocked out, impossible to see, pushed outside the field of vision. There is no kind of

²⁶ The author compares Rosi's works with the style of Giovanni Verga, the main author of Italian Verism. Both are said to be able to represent "a world left [...] for a long time outside history", in which "life [...] shows itself through its rhythms which are always the same [...]. Under a dazzling and threatening cheerfulness, the universe seems to be translated into the repetition of eternal gestures". (Perniola 2014: 199). On contemporary Italian documentary see: Spagnoletti, (2012); Dottorini, (2013).

²⁷ This interpretation of Neorealism (and of filmmaking in its entirety), as it is known, was firstly proposed by Kracauer (1960).



Fig. 10: Screenshot from *Fuocoammare*



Fig. 11 – Screenshot from *Fuocoammare*

communication between the two spaces defined until now: inhabitants and migrants never come into contact. It is the main theme of the movie, which is figuratively represented through a particular visual choice: in fact, on many occasions, migrants are seen from a long distance, behind a screen, a monitor



Figs. 12-13 – Screenshots from *Fuocoammare*

or a glass [Fig.12]. It is a way of keeping distance that translates, with the elements of filmic grammar, the difficulties of relationships with alterity, an attempt of “frame” it, of give it a shape, of enclose it within comprehensible boundaries.

The same desire of distance and control seems to justify, for almost the entire movie, the representation of migrants as incarcerated individuals, confined in detention spaces. *Fuocoammare* shows migrants in different phases of their entry in Lampedusa: once they get to the harbor they are counted, controlled, squeezed into buses and taken to the reception center. Here, again, we see the instruments of disciplinary power in action: migrants, always seen as a group (the movie does not show individual existences), undergo medical exams, and are then photographed and numbered [Fig. 13]. They are deprived of their name and therefore also of the possibility of telling their own experience. The only exception is a single sequence, meaningfully showed at the half-point of the movie. In a semi-dark room, at the background of a collective song, a single migrant speaks and tells

the story of the journey he and his companions took.²⁸ It is a unique moment in the movie, it gives voice to a coral narration, to the story of a collective exodus, whose experience involves every single individual. It serves to counter the dynamics of de-individualization carried out by the protocols of immobilization of space.

IV

Images of migratory space that emerge from these two films are visually similar to each other, even though they work with different productive dynamics and purposes. Both in *Catia's Choice* and in *Fuocoammare*, migrants are subject to a controlling gaze that aims to dominate them and prevents them from moving freely. It is also an isolating gaze that keeps individuals at the borders of Europe and, most of all, outside legality, bounding them to live improvised existences and rely on different expedients. The case of the movie *I Stay with the Bride* (originally: *Io sto con la sposa*) is somehow different, starting from its mechanism of production. In fact, the movie was directly financed by three directors (Gabriele Del Grande, Khalid Soliman Al Nassiry and Antonio Augugliaro) and its production was possible thanks to a crowdfunding campaign which involved more than two thousand directors “from below”. The movie starts with a black signal and a real declaration of intent and cinematographic poetry:

Their passport has no value in the European embassy. Every month, thousands of Syrians and Palestinians rely on Libyan and Egyptian smugglers to cross the Mediterranean on makeshift boats. They run away from the war in Syria and come to Europe to ask for political asylum. Italy is just an area of transit. Their real purpose is Sweden. After disembarking in Sicily, the journey starts again from Milan, in a car, again in smugglers' hands. With current migratory laws, there is no other solution. Unless one decides to disobey those laws. That is what we did. And in his movie, we tell you what happened to us on our way from Milan to Stockholm between the 14th and the 18th of November 2013.

I Stay with the Bride is firstly a political rather than filmic act. As they often say during the movie, directors were personally involved in illegal conduct, risking a serious criminal conviction for aiding illegal immigration. Deconstructing the dualistic opposition of “us/them” that we saw in the movies I previously analyzed, this film proposes “a radical revolution [...] of the dominant narration while dramatically rewriting the image of the migrant as an active individual, who does not beg for his own rights, but fights for their affirmation” (Guerini Rocco 2014:24). The film tried to implement a

²⁸ “This is my testimony. We could not stay in Nigeria. Many were dying, there were bombings. We were bombed and we fled from Nigeria. We ran into the desert; and many died. They were killed, raped. We could not stay. We fled to Libya. And in Libya was ISIS and we couldn't stay there. We cried on our knees: “What shall we do?”. The mountains could not hide us, the people could not hide us, and so we ran to the sea. On the journey to the sea, many passengers died [...]. The boat was carrying ninety passengers. Only thirty were rescued and the rest died [...] The sea is not a place to pass by. The sea is not a road”.

different subdivision of space, to challenge its borders to create a different geography, which, going along with the structures of segmentation of the space, calls its power into discussion. Risking the suspension of their own rights, the directors of *I Stay with the Bride* challenged the laws, promoting (and testing) a process of political dissent whose value is exemplar.²⁹

Therefore, the directors' decision to go to Sweden with a group of migrants they met in Milan, becomes first of all an act of resisting Schengen's policies and the so-called "fortress Europe". They decide then to put on a wedding party and to take the side of the bride at any cost. The title itself, with the highlighting of the personal pronoun *I*, is an invitation to singularly make, as individuals (and not as citizens of a sovereign nation), a decisive choice (Guerini Rocco 2014:26). The first minutes of the movie are committed to the introduction of the characters and to the explanation of the plan developed to cross Europe bypassing border controls. The sequence in which director Gabriele Del Grande takes the floor to explain to the rest of the group the strategy is extremely meaningful [Fig. 14]. The journey the migrants went on until that point and the route they planned to reach Sweden, are both illustrated starting from the image of a map (significantly, of a planisphere and not a map of Europe, for example). Del Grande uses the map in a peculiar way, indicating the places where the migrants come from and tracing the paths that they are going to follow. Deconstructing the image of the map as a power device (Wood 1992; Klinghoffer 2006) and of creations of borders, *I Stay with the Bride* immediately suggests a subversion of established margins, privileging the image of space as free to cross.

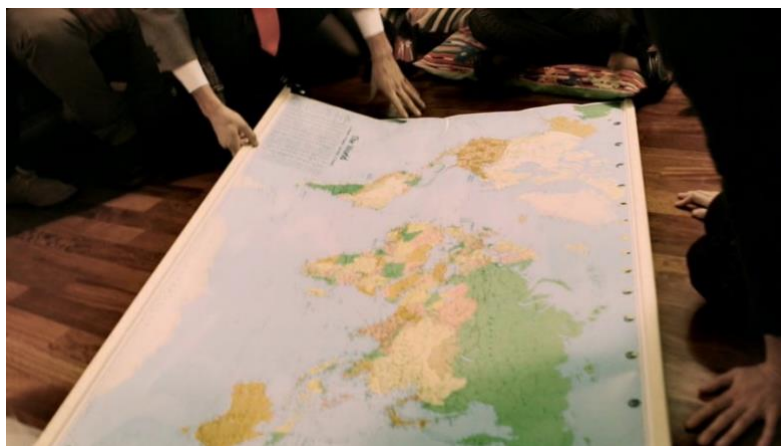


Fig. 14– Screenshot from *I Stay with the Bride*

²⁹ A disagreement that is set in the space that Rànciere defined as *politique* and the laws of the *police*. On this topic, see: Rànciere (2007; 2015).



Fig. 15 – Screenshot from *I Stay with the Bride*

They decide then to cross the first border, the one between Italy and France, on foot. Taking advantage of an old passage not far from Ventimiglia, the protagonists travel on the same route used by Italian migrants headed to France some decades ago. The sequence in which they get closer to the border visually compares the two different ways of going through the space. In fact, in the same frame [Fig. 15] we see the conventional route, which goes straight from one country to the other, and the rough, curvy and difficult route that the protagonists are bound to take on foot. It is the inaugural moment of a trip that transforms an unused space of separation (the old border) into a new space of crosswalk.

The film reaches one of its most important sequences right before the crosswalk scene. In an old, wrecked house, the protagonists have a rest before restarting their journey to the border. Here, the “groom” Abdallah tells the story of his own experience as a migrant and refugee through a long first-person narrative in which he recalls the dangers of the sea and the lost companions.³⁰ This verbal act makes us aware of their names and relationship to him. While the narration goes on, Abdallah writes their Arabic names on the wall.³¹ It is a sequence significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it highlights writing as a memorial vehicle: reactivating a metaphor of memory that goes back to

³⁰ “We called the Italians and they said we were in Maltese waters. We called the Maltese and they said we were nearer Italy, and we should call them. They just shifted the responsibility. We were in the water for an hour and a half amidst the dead bodies. Dead bodies were floating in the sea. The first to arrive was a Maltese warship and it took the living and the dead on-board. They put me with the dead bodies. And for an hour they were heaping dead bodies around me. As soon as I could, I moved my hand to show them I was still alive because I was frightened they were going to pile bodies on top of me. I couldn’t move; I hadn’t drowned but I was about to be suffocated by corpses. Ibrahim Al Ghazzi is my cousin, he died in the sea in the journey to Italy. Sara Mohammad was the sweetest little girl I ever knew, I loved her like a daughter. Ahmed Dahshe. Ghada was Ahmed’s sister, the most beautiful child I’d ever met. Hossam Kalash, I stayed awake until late, talking to him, the day before the ship sank; he was like a brother to me, even though we just met”.

³¹ The fact that Abdallah writes the names of the companions in Arabic also assumes a sort of identitarian value, as if the calligraphic difference also stresses a sort of cultural difference. It is of course a difference that the film underlines in a positive way, as a vehicle of important traditions and memories. The sequence, in its capacity to dialectically put in communication different identities (and stories, and memories) in a same place, seems to propose itself as a visual representation of the concept of “unchosen cohabitation” elaborated by Butler (2012).

the ancient Greeks and travels through to the Western mindset;³² he transforms the space of the house into a tribute to the memory of the dead [Fig. 16]. It is, of course, a counter-monumental space that avoids the dominant narration of the victim (Arendt 2006) which characterizes our age. This also seems oppositional to the canonical ritual of memory that the 3rd of October has come to symbolize. It is a form of memorial writing that has an evident palimpsestic value,³³ as the Arabic calligraphy is superimposed to the inscription that Italian migrants left when they were forced to emigrate to France in order to work [Fig. 17]. It is certainly not a casual overlapping that invites the European audience (and most of all the Italians) to reconsider their position on migration.

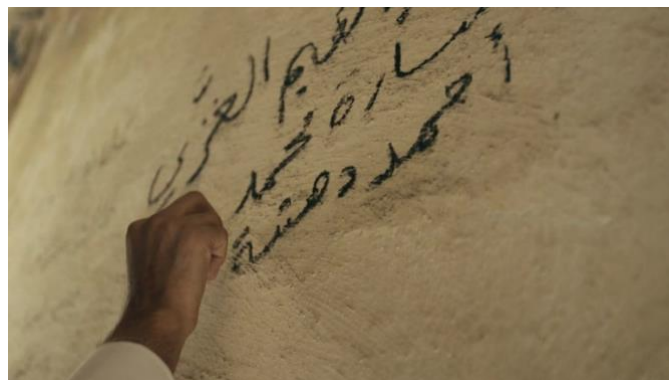


Fig. 16 – Screenshot *I Stay with the Bride*



Fig. 17 – Screenshot *I Stay with the Bride*

The same urgency moves Manar, the youngest member of the group. He expresses his experience through a different and freer form of expression: aspiring to be a rapper, Manar shows his abilities in

³² Plato, in the *Theatetus* (191 c-d), compares the memory to a board made of wax and in the *Philebus* (40 a-d) to a book. To Aristotle, as he states in the *De anima* (424 a) memory has the shape of a footprint, a seal made by the mind of the individual. About the metaphors of memory in Occidental culture, see the very last work of Assmann (2011).

³³ As Assman recalls, the palimpsest is a lucky metaphor of memory. See the well-known: De Quincey (1845).

front of the camera and makes a strong declaration of political subjectivity despite his young age. As demonstrated on different occasions,³⁴ the youngest members of the Arabic-Islamic world have often taken the floor in recent times to elaborate different narrations of themselves that are capable of questioning the dominant narratives. It is a strongly personal language that is critical of the reality that it describes; Manar's rap is no exception, as it combines a strong desire of self-affirmation and self-representation with the social-political dynamics.³⁵ This demonstrates how *I Stay with the Bride* prefers to highlight the life experiences of singular individuals, as it emerges during a journey motivated by the desire to question the logic of borders and of introducing different ways of living the space.³⁶

As I have tried to demonstrate in this essay, Italian filmmaking in recent years has directly addressed the current international migratory crisis. It did that though in different ways, depending on the production context and the politics of space linked to it. This necessarily leads to different narrations of migrant subjectivities and of the spaces that they occupy. At least in *Catia's Choice* and *Fuocoammare*, it seems that the main tendency is to represent the migratory space as absolutely different from ours. A space where rights are suspended, where singular subjectivities have no occasion to narrate themselves. The case of *I Stay with the Bride* is different and emblematic; in its will of narrating the migratory process in a different way, it represents a challenge to Italian filmmaking. It is an urgent movie, in which the experience of individuals as rights-holders is highlighted and models an alternative narration of the dynamics of constructing migrant identity, not only in Italy. What is common to all the three works considered here is the tendency to dramatize the spatial component of the relationship with migrants, in order to counter the narrative and images

³⁴ See for example Gandolfi (2010) and Levine's (2008, referring in particular to the musical dimension) studies in the Moroccan context.

³⁵ "Times are hard. Where do I begin? Nothing works in this life. Got a plan? It either fails or disappears. I'm tired of acting. Don't ask me why I bother! Me, when I took the microphone and started doing rap, people and my friends were against me. But I said: I don't care what people said! Get out of my head and shut the door properly. Let me sing. My heart's bursting. The words will come, one microphone won't be enough. No, no, I'm not stopping. I won't leave a single word behind. I'm not turning back! I want to go ahead. Fuck society! Are you against me or with me? And with the people that listen to me [...]. We built this refugee camp and built again. Until we made a myth of the revolution. Our cause is forged in fire. I'm Palestinian and I shall return to our homeland and our homes. My story's the same, a routine that repeats itself. I was already a refugee from Palestine. And now we're fleeing again from the refugee camp. [...] We suffered the cold and God help us. We were starving, we even shared our names. We'll suffer like in Sabra for the blood of Shatila. We've lost our most precious asset, which is safety. I'm living through what my grandfather once lived through. Why has your Palestinian people been deprived of everything? Stop the humiliation! We'll go back to the refugee camp and stay united even with death inside. I am Manar, a boy from Palestine. I have nurtured the Arab cause and freedom in my heart. To the people I'm a partisan. To rap I'm a rapper. Hear this song. We still got the keys of the houses we left. Our grandparents left when they were still children [...]. I said it with a wound in my heart. How much has this people suffered. How many eyes have wept, while the world stood by and watched? And from behind the microphone I want to be heard by a thousand people, or rather a million!".

³⁶ About the lack of written scenography and about the making of the movie see Gabriele Del Grande, *Storia di un matrimonio*, booklet DVD Italian language edition by Feltrinelli.

presented everyday by other media forms. While mainstream journalistic narrative tends to underline the danger of proximity, these films foreground the distance and differences from those who are considered outsiders.

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