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Choucha camp: The production of a space of remnants

by **Federica Sossi**

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The wonderful film ‘Babylon’^[1] made by Ismael, Youssef Chebbi and Ala Eddine Slim, which has received many awards since its launch at the Festival of Marseille in 2012, finishes with a long shot on a stretch of waste. ‘Babylon’ is the name of the film both in Latin and in Arabic alphabets, almost in order to remark, beyond evoking the city of Babylon, that not only spoken languages but also alphabets and their signs have blurred in that border zone, between the void of the desert and the sudden crowding of that area with almost one million escapees, some distance from Ras-Ajdir, at the border between Tunisia and Libya.

In 2011, the three Tunisian filmmakers went on site to film the beginning and the end of a world in a desert landscape accustomed only to the sound of the wind and to the passage of ants, bugs, of some stray dogs and nothing more. A 10 minute shot lingers over plastic bags, abandoned clothes, bottles, tin cans, packages of cigarettes, tanks and a refuse lorry picking up all the garbage. *Babylon*, the construction and the dismantlement of a world-camp, an infinite stretch of tents and an accumulation of people that ‘improvise’ their suspended lives, with the few things they recovered before their flight from the war in Libya and waiting for being repatriated in their countries of origin. In the middle, in between the opening images of the desert’s void and the final shots of the void left by a quick human passage, the film explores the construction of the camp: the fleeing migrants at their arrival at the border, and many other figures such as journalists, camera operators photographers, IOM officers, Tunisian workers, policemen, soldiers, UNICEF officers, UNHCR officers, doctors of Médecins sans frontières, animators and merchants. And together with them, there are objects: cameras, a mosque-tent, a market-tent, a canteen-tent, satellite phones, chemical toilets, showers, car-cisterns, barbed wired, an improvised stage with wooden boards placed on some tin barrels, microphones, amplifiers and lanterns. Towards the end, before seeing the trash remnants, there is the image of a boat in the port of Zarzis, revealing one of the largest repatriation operations organized internationally.

A repatriation from Tunisia, or more accurately, a repatriation of those fleeing persons from the desert of Choucha camp to the many countries of origin. The majority of them were migrant workers in the Libya of Gaddafi and their countries did not arrange their evacuation during the first stages of the civil war that erupted soon after the revolution, and the following stages of the war made by the ‘volunteers’ coalition’ against the regime. These were people resident in Libya but coming from Egypt, Pakistan, Somalia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Niger, Morocco and who poured out there, between the toll-booths of that border that ‘revolution’s Tunisia’ had decided to leave open in order not to hamper their crossing. It was 2011, the year of the Arab revolutions; some of these were ‘successful’, as the Tunisian one, and others were about to slip into permanent conflicts, as in the case of the Libyan revolution. And between two zones in revolution, the camera lingers on the space, showing its construction of a ‘humanitarian’ zone in which human beings are incorporated among objects and operators, operators of images, of daily needs and of categories, leaving only a trace of garbage at the end of their passage. The construction and the dismantling of a city-camp, an “imperfect” and transitory city, as contended by the filmmakers in one of their interviews^[2], also if that space-garbage they decided to put as the last image of their film then has become the space of life of the human “remnants” that any installation of humanitarian zones envisages as part of that construction.

After the hurried transit of one million fleeing people, after their repatriation, there were still 4000 people at the camp of Choucha; even them, as the others, escaping Libya; most of them were migrant workers who had settled in Libya at the time of Gaddafi, or were persons in transit in the Libyan territory in the attempt to reach Europe. These were mainly men, but also were women and children, some of whom are born in the camp. Nevertheless, differently from fleeing people who are only in transit, they are permanent refugees, who had also escaped their countries of origin before escaping Libya. The second life of Choucha camp starts with them; a life that is less transitory than the first one, since it lasted until June 2013 due to the slowness in resettling refugees into the few Western countries available to take them; and their availability was an important one, since to date Tunisia has not an asylum law. Beyond its inhabitants – who are categorized and allocated to tent-spaces that differ according to the places of origin – to remain at the camp were the humanitarian operators, many from the UNHCR, who manage the camp. Together with them, there were Tunisian workers who have been quickly produced as humanitarian operators of bush league, according to a class and racial hierarchy that puts international operators at the leading places; and also the soldiers of the Tunisian army remain to monitor the zone. While people live among the tents, the landscape starts to prevail, with sandstorms, burning sun, ants, bugs, scorpions and snakes; tensions exacerbate between habitants of the camp, between the habitants of the camp and the operators, between Tunisian residents living in the closest towns and the humanitarian operators, between humanitarian operators who are in leading positions and Tunisian operators. Meanwhile, UNHCR goes on in its slow work of producing refugees and rejected refugees: individual interviews, the first rejections, eventual complaints, second interviews, second denials, meetings with the diplomats of the few countries that accepted to resettle the refugees, meetings with the Tunisian government for finalizing an asylum law. Such a law is considered necessary for the transition of the country towards democracy, but most of all a necessary one for the democracies of the European Union: reluctant to host refugees coming from African countries, unless they have arrived in their territories as shipwrecked persons of the Mediterranean, and more steadfast in using other countries - democratic and non-democratic – for processes of externalization. Among the white and azure tents of the camp, upon which the sign of UNHCR marks the reign of the humanitarian, these operators of the ‘first league’ decide to produce the human remnant. Towards the end of the camp’s closure, 400 people remained, between rejected refugees who, as the others, fled Libya at war, and the late refugees, namely those who arrived in Tunisia after December 2011, the date established by UNHCR to claim asylum. In July 2013 the camp was closed.

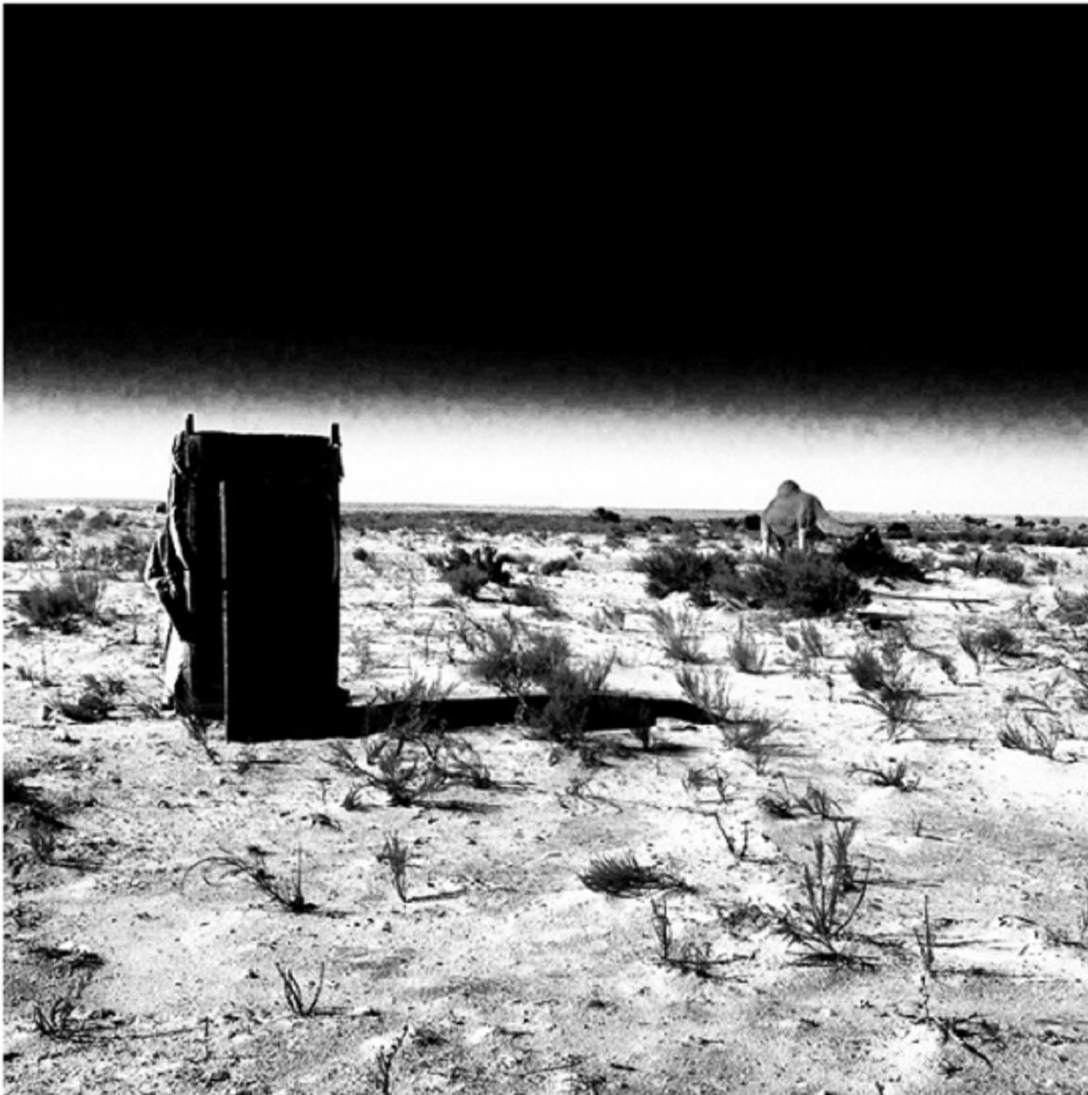
This was the end of the second stage of the humanitarian space, and beginning of the ‘garbage-space’, in which human beings and waste, scraps of tents, packs of cigarettes, plastic bags, tanks and disused clothes remain wrapped into each other and the ‘natural’ environment: the desert again, with sandstorms, the noise of the wind, the burning sun, bugs, scorpions and snakes among the scraps of the tents. This time without water and electricity, without operators of the first league or even the bush league, since these latter have been fired and the former moved to other humanitarian zones; and only a few have remained in Tunisia to continue their meetings with the new Tunisian governments for a necessary asylum law.

The collection of images and videos below speak about this: (i) photographs by Najib Abidi (Dec 2014 – Jan 2015); (ii) photographs by Alessandro Vecchi; (iii) single photograph by Wafema; (iv) video ‘Refugees from Choucha Camp (Tunisia)’ by Zarzis TV (2013) and; (v) video ‘VM14 Coucha Bar’ by Filippo del Bubba (2014).





by Najib Abidi - 1



by Najib Abidi - 2

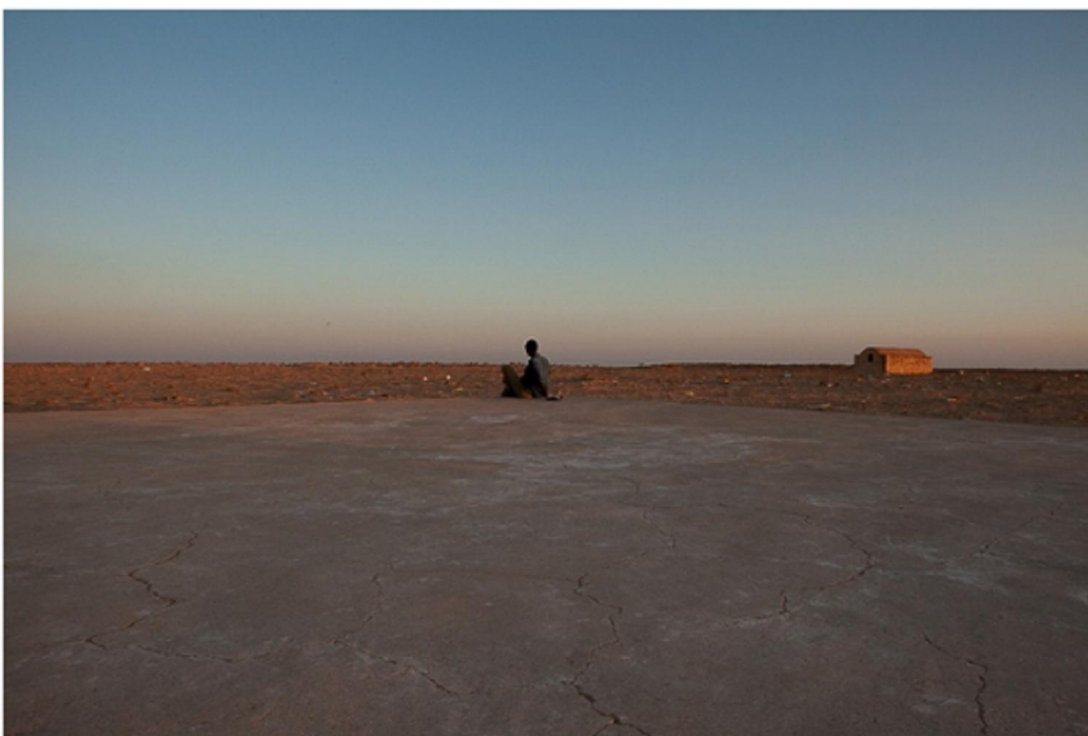




by Najib_Abidi - 3



by Najib Abidi - 4



by Alessandro Vecchi - 1





by Alessandro Vecchi - 2



by Alessandro Vecchi - 3





by Alessandro Vecchi - 4



by Wafema

‘UNHCR finish your job’: is what the placard of a refugee during a protest in Tunis says, at the occasion of the ‘Festival du cinéma des droits de l’Homme’, in December 2014. However, as slow and extenuating as it could be, actually the UNHCR has *finished* its job. And the rejected refugees who are glimpsed in-between the tear of a cloth made from the tents of the camp, in the documentary ‘*The last refugees in Choucha*’, are the result of that job. Men, women and children among scraps of tents and fragments of words written on the sheets: ‘need our right’, and a ‘we’ that can be grasped; ‘demandons’ (‘we demand’) without knowing what they demand because the wind seems to have torn through any possibility of a claim, also that upon which nobody dwell any more, raised between two trees at the entrance of the camp. To remain, to remain as waste, without water, without electricity, ‘without nothing’, demanding without a ‘we’ from which starting...demanding and pretending to be resettled, this is what rejected refugees restate in their interviews. Demanding...it is unknown to whom, since a part from few photographers or filmmakers at the camp there is no longer someone to listen to them. Choucha camp. Between the torn tents and UNHCR’s signs turned upside-down. The reverse side of the construction of the humanitarian. ‘Ugee Agency’, a part of the work of the Refugee Agency: women, men, children left among some waste, a pack of biscuits ‘Amore’ (‘Love’), two Nike shoes, one of which overturned, and in the sand, a pair of underwear upon which appears the brand ‘emporio armani’. The world upside down. Or the reverse side of the world, at Choucha camp, after the long job that has been done by hundreds of humanitarian actors. While today, 15th February 2015, in the Mediterranean a military navy leaves, supervised by another military navy and by a predator, in order to evacuate 150 Italian citizens from Libya; and at the same time there are 12 makeshift vessels at sea with thousands of human beings fleeing storms of war that are devastating Libya. Two parallel worlds, one the reverse mirror of the other.

Refugees from Choucha Camp (Tunisia)



Choucha Camp (Tunisia)' by Zarzis TV (2013).

'Refugees from



**VM14 CHOUCHA BAR by Jacqueline Farda
(Tunisia 2014)**

from **VIDEOMINUTO**



01:07



**'VM14 CHOUCHA BAR' by Filippo del Bubba (aka Jacqueline Farda) (Tunisia 2014) from
VIDEOMINUTO**

Filippo del Bubba (Livorno, 1978) is a videomaker and has filmed the G8 in Genova and the rom camps in Pisa. He is currently working at MTV news, Rai, sky and FattoQuotidiano on postrevolutionary Tunisia.

Najib Abidi is a Tunisian filmmaker and activist in the field of migration. He is currently working on a film about Choucha camp and his project can be found here:

<http://www.gawaattheendoftheday.wordpress.com>.

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Alessandro Vecchi is a freelance photographer based between Milan and New York. Born (1981) and raised in Alba, Italy, he studied architecture in Florence and Paris and then photography in New York. He travels to work on projects and assignments, often focusing his interest and his work on migration and minority dynamics.

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Notes

1. For a short excerpt of 'Babylon', see: <https://vimeo.com/44331700> [↑]
2. Cfr. <http://www.fidmarseille.org/pdf/080712.pdf> [↑]

Tags: Europe, migration

Federica Sossi teaches Aesthetics at the University of Bergamo. She coordinates the website storiemigranti.org. She co-edited the volume *Spaces in Migration. Postcard of a revolution* (2013) and she is the author of *Autobiografie negate. Immigrati nei Lager del presente* (2002), *Storie migranti. Viaggio tra i nuovi confini* (2005), *Migrare. Spazi di confinamento e strategie di esistenza* (2007).

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