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ON THE WATERFRONT

Truth and Fiction in Postcolonial Cinema from the South of Europe

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**documentary
genre**

Mediterranean

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**postcolonial
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truth and fiction

This essay deals with the role of postcolonial cinema in articulating and visualizing issues of migration, uprooting and alienation, with specific relation to Europe and the Southern Mediterranean shore. Cinema as a transnational medium is particularly suitable for conveying denunciation and social critique. Yet this must be combined with an understanding of how the different cinematic traditions and genres contribute, in specific aesthetic and ethical ways, towards conveying the message and impact on the audiences. The scope of this essay is to theorize migration in the context of postcolonial cinema and to discuss the space occupied by the documentary (genre/form) within the framework of postcolonial cinema that deals with migration. This will be done through the close reading of two migrant films produced in Spain and Italy, respectively: *14 Kilómetros* (2007) and *A Sud di Lampedusa* (2006), both of which are concerned with the question of border crossing and African migrants' attempts to reach the southern shore of Europe, following very different visual registers. This raises questions about the political and cultural contextualization of migration to Europe from Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, in which the Mediterranean assumes a new protagonist role that reconfigures our ideas about the porosity of Europe and the liquidity of cinema.

The most beautiful sea
Hasn't been crossed yet
(24 September 1945, Nazim Hikmet)

Postcolonial Cinema in Europe

As a visual language, cinema is a transnational medium *par excellence* and offers new visions of Europe in motion (Marciniak, Imre and O’Healy 2007; Loshitzky 2010; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). Cinema is in fact the ideal arena to illustrate how new forms of representation and sociopolitical contestations are articulated in what we now refer to as the New Europe.

Postcolonial cinema in Europe explores in particular how identity, space and language are represented, articulated and visualized. It often focuses, though not exclusively, on migration as a material and existential journey. This happens through specific visual registers and genres, following, for example, a documentary style as opposed to a fictionalized one, or individual narratives as opposed to collective ones. They are usually films that address the everyday realities of people moving across frontiers in Europe, transmigrations, relocations, and the social and cultural challenges they bring forth. These are films produced in recent decades in several European countries by filmmakers who open up new perspectives on the changing topographies of the European continent (e.g. Michael Haneke, Rachid Bouchareb, Gurinder Chadha, Ken Loach, Michael Winterbottom, Fatih Akin, Stephen Frears, Giuseppe Tornatore, Andrea Segre, Mohsen Melliti, Lukas Moodysson, Imanol Uribe and Montxo Armendáriz Guión, among others). We see a mix of European filmmakers dealing with migrant issues and ‘migrant’ filmmakers dealing with similar issues from a different viewpoint. The common ground to this definition of post-colonial cinema is not just the subject matter addressed; it is also the aesthetic language that foregrounds notions of multilingualism, non-placeness and hapticness, which best make it possible to rethink Europe from migrant subject positions.

The approach proposed here consists of breaking down the dominant oppositional stance that places Europe merely in opposition to its ‘others’ (either internal or external) and providing a contrapuntal understanding of postcolonial Europe inspired by Said’s musical concept of the ‘counterpoint’. This refers to two or more voices autonomous in rhythm and interrelated in harmony. Said refused to privilege either side of the encounter that comprises contrapuntal reading. As he writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, ‘various themes play off one another, with only provisional privilege being given to any particular one’ (1993, 51) at any given time. Contrapuntal reading, Said writes, opens up all texts for the way in which their premises, themes

and even styles ‘brush up unstintingly against historical constraints’ (2003, 27), making alternative or new narratives emerge.

The notion of the counterpoint works not only for a deeper understanding of the working of texts and their contexts, but also for decoding the visual and addressing and deconstructing hegemonic and imperialist visions generated by a western mode of literally ‘shooting’ the other. The search for such a visual counterpoint is the particular challenge of the project of postcolonial cinema studies, the aim of which is to deconstruct the colonial gaze as a form of spectacle and domination. Deconstructing the imperial gaze and its bearing on cinematic spectatorship is essential to the project of ‘unthinking’ Europe, in which the unframing of histories is a political commitment to visualizing what has been invisible, untold or discarded, opening the frame or crafting new frames that are not occlusive or hegemonic. As Robert Young so poignantly writes in his influential article on ‘Postcolonial Remains’, the postcolonial must develop new theoretical paradigms

to locate the hidden rhizomes of colonialism’s historical reach, of what remains invisible, unseen, silent, or unspoken. In a sense postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies. (Young 2012, 21)

This resonates with the task that cinema can fulfil in lifting and revealing what lies beneath, as well as providing extra means to convey the unsayable and the inexpressible:

Cinema with its visual specificity, its freedom to sculpt time and to shape space, its synesthetic appeal to multiple senses, and its privileging of movement over stasis, is particularly well suited to subverting colonial frames and choreographing new histories. (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 61)

Postcolonial cinema, which combines in critical ways the role of cinema with that of postcolonial enquiry, accordingly makes an invaluable contribution towards creating alternative representations and visions while also acknowledging the different filmic traditions and genres that have left an imprint on the styles of narration, modes of visualization and techniques used.

In this essay the role of cinema and its capacity for denunciation and for offering social critique is combined with an understanding of how the different cinematic traditions and genres contribute in specific aesthetic and ethical ways to convey their message and impact on the audience. The scope is to theorize migration in the context of postcolonial cinema and to discuss the space occupied by the documentary (genre/form) within the framework of postcolonial cinema that deals with migration. This is done through the close reading of two migrant films produced in Spain and Italy, respectively: *14 Kilómetros* (14 Kilometres, Spain, 2007) and *A Sud di Lampedusa* (South of Lampedusa,

Italy, 2006), both of which deal with questions of border crossing and African migrants' attempts to reach the southern shore of Europe, following very different visual registers. This raises questions about the political and cultural contextualization of migration to Europe from Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, in which the Mediterranean assumes a new protagonist role, which reconfigures our ideas about the porosity of Europe and the liquidity of cinema.

Migration and Postcolonial Cinema

The terms 'migrant cinema' and 'postcolonial cinema' are often used interchangeably, yet the latter has a wider theoretical and aesthetic resonance, as argued below. We could say that one category is encompassed in the other, as migration is often one of the offspring of colonial dislocations. Yet the term 'postcolonial cinema' not only addresses the question of mobility and uprooting, but also wider issues of visual hegemony and aesthetic counter-discourses. The 'postcolonial' in postcolonial cinema functions, therefore, not simply as an adjective or declination of the migrant condition, but as a framework of analysis – an epistemological standpoint, or optic, through which films emerge, in their engagement and contestations of colonial dynamics and their legacies in the present, and also as epistemic devices capable of implementing a substantial departure from colonial paradigms of knowledge. As I and Marguerite Waller have pointed out in our introduction to *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, postcolonial cinema is

constituted by and within a *conceptual* space in which making connections and drawing inferences, specifically those that are occluded by national and colonial frames, is encouraged. We discover this conceptual space by breaking with universalism and learning to navigate a fluid, situational, relational mode of knowledge production, one that requires mutual recognition and engagement as well as new methodological and aesthetic strategies. (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 1–2)

So it does not matter what a film is thematically about. What matters is how it engages with history, subjectivity, epistemology and the political ramifications of all of these. Films created and received through this optic – cinema of exile, migration or diaspora, transnational cinema, or world cinema – may also be engaged through the postcolonial lens (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 1).

It is clear in light of this understanding that the postcolonial migrant films analysed in this essay not only concern questions of migration and the occluded history of colonialism, which involves both Europe and its liminalities. It also refers to a specific mode of viewing, filming and interpreting which involves filmmakers, subject matter and audiences in characteristic ways. In

order for the spectators, or audiences, to participate in this understanding, a level of literacy is entailed, i.e. that of political awareness of the issues raised, or a visual literacy to detect in the language of cinema the rhetorical and persuasive strategies involved, as well as how patterns of desire and affect are invoked. Another important discussion on postcolonial cinema concerns the issue of realism and objectivity. This refers, for example, to debates that question whether a documentary style better captures and conveys the hardship of (post)colonization or migration, doing justice to the sociopolitical implications of these conditions. Or how to address and visualize the inner life of uprooted people in order to empower them without reducing them once again to mere visual objects.

The scope is therefore to interrupt the western master narrative of visuality, which centres on the gaze as a way of knowing and controlling, as described by critics such as Berger's ways of seeing (1972), Foucault's panopticon (1975), Mulvey's scopophilia and gaze (1975), and Marks' haptic visuality (2000). Trinh Minh-ha, for example, shows how to interrupt these master narratives in her films, such as *A Tale of Love* (1995), in which voyeurism is contested by invoking other senses, such as the smell of perfume, to convey love and attachment.

These have been instances of critique of visuality, as a way of imposing control and definition in traditional western master narratives. Yet it is with postcolonial cinema that a critique of different modes and traditions of visuality is more systematically theorized and integrated into an account of how to make alternative visions possible in order to register untold stories and viewpoints. There is obviously a long tradition in neorealism and Third Cinema that accounts for the dispossessed and the articulation of marginal subject positions, also in contestation with the power of the film industry (of Hollywood in particular) and its ideological apparatus. Nevertheless, it is with postcolonial cinema that a more strategic view is reached on how a postcolonial approach can also be applied to non-strictly postcolonial films and how the entanglements of power and resistance also need to be situated within the circuit of reception and evaluation. The post-colonial is therefore not an intrinsic characteristic of cinema in itself, but rather a *modus operandi* which accounts for the continuing legacies of colonialism and its imprint on the representations of self and other, culture and identity, and patterns of globalization. This also includes the way Europe imagines itself and has provided an imaginary of itself through national and international cinema.

Therefore, in its emphasis on how to access and convey a globalized and politically saturated reality through visuality, postcolonial cinema proves crucial to exploring how Europe is being redefined and reconfigured from positions previously (and still) deemed to be marginal, such as migrants and refugees chancing their luck on escape boats in the Mediterranean, as well as

through new visual registers that enter into dialogue with dominant western paradigms of representations and filmmaking.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, for example, have criticized the illusory authority of western cinematic realism in the construction of ethnic and racial others. While acknowledging the view that we live within language and that our access to the ‘real world’ is mediated by discourse, they argue ‘films which represent marginalized cultures in a realistic mode ... still implicitly make factual claims’ (Shohat and Stam 1994, 179). In other words, since the codes of realist cinema mask the illusionist strategies of the filmic enunciation, ‘realistic’ fictions may be understood by audiences to reflect actual conditions of existence, hence giving rise to prejudiced effects.

So it is interesting to analyse the cinematic representations of ethnic and racial others in two very different films that deal with Mediterranean crossings: one is a fiction in the form of a travel narrative (*14 Kilómetros*), and the other is a documentary in the form of denunciation (*A Sud di Lampedusa*). Both films, *14 Kilómetros* by Spanish filmmaker Gerardo Olivares (Spain, 2007) and *A Sud di Lampedusa* by established Italian filmmaker Andrea Segre (Italy, 2006), concur on the idea of crossing, trespassing and entrapment for African people attempting to reach the supposed ‘golden’ shores of Southern Europe. How this myth of Eldorado is constructed is interesting from several points of view, as the reality, or the material encounter between Africans and Europe, is often disappointing and troubling, if not one of open rejection and repulsion. The many operations of *refoulement* (rejection at sea) enforced by Italian coastguards in 2009 were against the principles of the Geneva conventions that impose a duty to provide help and rescue for migrants in danger on the high sea. These two films give visual representations of the Mediterranean as a location of trespass and death for migrants, but also contest the role of European legislation that barricades Europe against migrant flows, augmenting the risks and fatalities of their perilous journeys.

Segre’s film follows the documentary style, in a way to counter the romanticized fable narratives of migrants trying to reach Europe. Adopting a more realistic, sparse narrative style but coupled with visually elaborate images and camera shots, it suggests a way of giving migrants their voice back. The migrants are extensively on screen, speaking for themselves, in their numerous mother tongues (Italian, French, Djola, English). They are also cast as the protagonists of the film (with Abdul Nasir Ibrahim, Issiaka Yonussa, Abdou Walikou, Ali Lazane, Yussuf Baba Ibrahim, Ibrahim Manzo Diallo and Ralliu Hamed Assaleh).

The question is whether the documentary genre, expressed in films such *A Sud di Lampedusa*, conveys the lives and crises around the Mediterranean in a way that is different from a film such as *14 Kilómetros*, which is a more

fictionalized account of how to overcome the paltry 14 kilometres separating Morocco from Spain.

14 Kilómetros: An African Odyssey

14 Kilómetros is based on the story of Violeta Sunny, Buba Kanou and Mukela Kanou, who represent an entire generation of young African people whose main desire is to migrate to Europe. Violeta escapes from a forced marriage with a much older man from her village, which also follows his repeated sexual abuse of her during her childhood; Buba wants to be a football star for one of the leading European teams and he undertakes the entire migration journey wearing a Real Madrid t-shirt and carrying a soccer ball; and the third traveller is Mukela, Buba's brother, who is unemployed and who inculcates in Buba the idea of escape. Mukela has attempted the journey before and failed, but he is ready to try again as there are no realistic alternatives in their own country, Niger.

The film's title, *14 Kilómetros*, refers to the geographical distance between the African continent and Southern Europe, between Morocco and the Spanish coast, usually defined as the Straits of Gibraltar. However, the distance is far more insurmountable than initially appears. The journey of hope becomes one of despair as this short distance turns out to be a huge obstacle for the protagonists of the film, and as reference, for millions of young African people in search of a better future (Goméz Isa 2008).

Though *14 Kilómetros* was not widely distributed, it did win the Best Film award at the Seminci Festival (Valladolid, Spain, 2007). The film is a road movie, offering a combination of fiction and documentary style, though it relies heavily on the exoticization of the images of the desert, where the latter becomes one of the main protagonists of the film, depicted with its alluring colours but also unforgiving and deadly in nature. The odyssey, even before reaching the Moroccan coast and boarding a possibly illegal boat, is a nomadic journey of biblical proportions from Niger to Morocco.

Though the sense of time is unclear – the journey may take months or years – the geographical itinerary is well depicted throughout the film, with visual and cartographic renditions of progress from south to north through the different countries and through the desert. The three characters start their odyssey in Niger, crossing the Teneré and the Saharan deserts, passing from Niger to Mali, then through Algeria and Morocco, and finally to Spain. Graphic animation allows us to follow the itinerary, a didascalic and didactic attempt to understand the immensity of the task, where the border controls seem to be Beckettian in their attempt to patrol and mark the boundaries of the vast and never-ending Sahara. In the midst of all this, the exploitation

of the *passeurs* by traffickers, corrupt policemen and thieves is framed in stark contrast to the solidarity among the fellow travellers. Buba does not want to abandon Violeta, but he loses her at several crossing points, only to find her again. He succeeds in convincing her to continue and have faith in her mission. The Tuaregs, familiar with the secrets of the desert, are also a great source of solidarity and support. Through their care and directions they take care of the burial of Mukela, save Buba and Violeta from death, look after them at their oasis and accompany them towards their future destination. One of the crucial moments in the film is when a Tuareg leader addresses Violeta and Buba, telling them that ‘the future is here, in Africa’, hence providing a countertext to the exodus from Africa towards Europe.

However, as the critic Leonardo De Franceschi observes in his review of the film published in 2008 on the *Cinemafrica* website, though the film makes an interesting contribution to the reality of thousands of migrants in their pilgrimage from destitution towards hope, the gaze of the filmmaker is complacent and his use of the camera, with its highly aestheticized images of the desert resembling a natural world documentary *à la* National Geographic, is strident *vis-à-vis* its treatment of hardship and constant exploitation. In a way, Olivares cannot escape the fascination for the desert as a beautiful setting, a tableau of colours, an archetypical fascination that has caught the imaginaries of many western travellers. *14 Kilómetros* also resorts to filmic references, calling to mind *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Sheltering Sky* or *The English Patient*, all instances of the desert and the nomads remaining muted subjects, speaking incomprehensible languages, and providing only a backdrop to the films that invariably revolve around the destiny of western travellers in search of adventure, enhancement of their existential quests, or escape from the malaise of the western world. Though the engagement of *14 Kilómetros*, with the African desert and taking Africans as central characters, is unlike the films mentioned above, the question is whether the use of such a fictionalized travel narrative bordering on exotic documentary filmmaking is more effective in captivating western audiences. It provides them with an easy way of experiencing distanced empathy towards the wretched of the earth rather than account more directly for migrants’ speaking and subject positions, in documentary form.

A Sud di Lampedusa

A Sud di Lampedusa (South of Lampedusa) is also about crossing the Sahara. The documentary is part of a trilogy that deals with migration to Italy. *A Sud di Lampedusa* is the first film in the trilogy (2006), followed by *Come un uomo sulla Terra* (Like a Man on Earth, 2008) and *Sangue Verde* (Green Blood, 2010). The trilogy was recently followed up by a very successful film, *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, 2012), dealing with rejection at sea and deportation to Libyan

detention camps in contravention of the Geneva Convention. This last film gives direct insight into the brutal ways in which Libya, aided by Italian and European funds, was operating to control the movements of immigrants from Africa.

A Sud di Lampedusa is a thirty minute documentary comprising interviews in which voice and perspective are given to those migrants who are rarely heard, whose individual, personal histories as migrants are often amalgamated into a common group of threatening black immigrants. At stake is not just an attempt to give migration a face, but also to critique the Italian government and its hidden political agenda, played out around the metaphor of an island, Lampedusa. The film focuses, therefore, not on the ultimate destination of the journey (Lampedusa), but on the hidden face of migration, the trajectories of many Africans fleeing their countries. It is an exploration of the geography of transit between Sahel and Maghreb, focusing on a multitude of reasons and modes of migration that renders the notion of the ‘migration emergency’ better documented and visualized.

The film itself is divided into three parts: *Partenza* (departure), *Ritorno* (return) and *Espulsioni* (deportations). This narrative structure differs from the traditional stages of the narrative of migration which, according to Yosefa Loshitzky (2010), we can find in European migrant cinema – this familiar narrative usually follows three guiding threads: the ‘Journey’, the ‘Arrival’ in the Promised Land, and problems of ‘integration’ of second generations. In Segre’s film, however, things clearly go differently.

Partenza (departure) documents the initial steps towards crossing the Sahara, when Africans from the Sub-Saharan region meet up in Agadez, the biggest city in Niger, to begin their journey. Since the mid-1990s, Agadez has become something of a cosmopolitan city because of its role as a departure point for crossing the desert, where different people meet and gather for the first time: Congolese, Cameroonian, Nigerians, Malinese. They embark on their shared journey on overloaded trucks, but as one interviewee says in the film: ‘un camion serve a trasportare merci, non esseri umani’ (a truck is meant to transport goods, not human beings).

Ritorno (return) opens with an interview, but the camera soon refocuses on a truck crossing the desert, the truck overflowing with men, women and children of different nationalities, no different from the images shown in the other film, *14 Kilómetros*. Through gazing at the sea of sand, the image envisages the journey ahead on the dilapidated trawlers that have by now attained iconic status in the imaginary of migration, drawing attention to the porosity of the Mediterranean Sea and of Italy’s maritime borders. Repeatedly disseminated in newspapers, television reports and feature films are the images of the illicit arrival of migrant vessels, ranging from inflatable rafts and speedboats to rusty cargo ships and dilapidated trawlers – dubbed, indeed, ‘carrette di mare’ (O’Healy 2010).

Espulsioni (deportations) replaces, here, the most expected title – arrival or destination. This is because the film refuses to give us a happy tale of

1 The European Court of Human Rights ordered Italy to pay thousands of euros to the two dozen immigrants the country deported to Libya in 2009, stating that deportation exposed them to the risk of ill-treatment, including torture. The deportations – part of a bilateral agreement between the Berlusconi government and the regime of Muammar Gaddafi – aimed to stop illegal immigration. Italy maintained that it was safe for those migrants to return to Libya, but the court found unanimously that the deportations violated Article 3 of the Geneva Convention, for irregular migrants and asylum seekers were systematically arrested and detained in abusive conditions in Libya.

redemption after the immense struggle for survival in the Sahara, but confronts us, instead, with the dynamics of deportation to Libya.¹ The detainees interviewed simply comment: ‘we have committed no crime, we just want a better life.’

In *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, 2012), Segre, together with co-director Stefano Liberti, brings the story of *A Sud di Lampedusa* to a further climax by telling, in documentary form, what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these ‘push-back operations’ and deportations to Libyan prisons. *Mare Chiuso* is a documentary with interviews, archival footage and original films captured on mobile phone by migrants themselves at the very moment the patrolling Italian guards appear on the scene. The filmmakers met the victims of these push-back operations in the Shousha refugee camp on the border between Libya and Tunisia, and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (CARA) in southern Italy. Their interviews form the main part of the documentary, along with a session of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where one of the refugees sent back to Libya sued Italy. The court recently condemned Italy for violating the European Convention on Human Rights.

Mare Chiuso and *A Sud di Lampedusa* are both documentaries that claim to account for the position of the subalterns, emphasizing the voices and experiences of the migrants themselves, letting them speak in their own language or in translation, at times in Italian – migrants who never reached Italy, and were met on the high seas, only to be deported to Libyan detention camps. Their story is not even about the Mediterranean and Italy, but rather about the desert and the passage: an endless journey through transnational non-places that are literally outlaw locations, beyond the law of the soil and of the European Court of Human Rights.

Documentary versus Fiction

Both *A Sud di Lampedusa* and *14 Kilómetros* deal with similar questions, though the genre – documentary and fiction, respectively – varies considerably, conveying the experience of migration and its impact on the audience in very different ways. Both films can be studied under the gaze of postcolonial critique, particularly if we intend postcolonial cinema neither as a rigid category nor as a new genre, but rather as a powerful optic through which to address questions of postcolonial historiography, geography, subjectivity and epistemology.

What is the relevance of documentary filmmaking for the postcolonial perspective?

As Shohat and Stam (1994) have discussed, the documentary film has often been used in ethnographic filmmaking to fix the otherness of cultures and identities into an objectifying gaze, which established not the nature of the culture

² Documentary is considered to be one type of non-fiction cinema, which also includes, among others, propaganda films, journalistic enquiries, historical films, reality series, naturalistic film and travelogues (Olivieri 2012, 27).

³ It is important to note that the claim to objectivity actually started with Direct Cinema, a style first developed in the early 1960s. However, in the 1920s and 1930s, documentary was seen as a propaganda tool – propaganda in a positive sense (as in Grierson [1926] and Rother [1935]), but also appropriated for ideological reasons. See, for example, the use of documentary by Mussolini to construct the ‘consensus factory’ or under Hitler for the articulation of his ideology through the films of Leni Riefenstahl.

Therefore, objectivity must be read more as a polysemic term which ranges from ‘impartial’ to ‘scientifically precise’, but which is not necessarily seen by documentary filmmakers as their task.

⁴ Nichols (1991) gives one of the most exhaustive and influential

observed but the stereotypes and assumptions about that culture that western culture, filmmakers and anthropologists not only relied on, but also actively reproduced through the lens of ‘objective’ filmmaking. It is therefore interesting to analyse how documentary filmmaking in our time does either a service or a disservice to the issues emerging from the confrontations among cultures, identities and ethnic perspectives. While Segre shows a compassionate and participatory gaze to the question of migration and to the perspective of migrants themselves, without resorting to narrative twists and fictionalized storytelling, his film does rely on excellent camerawork and beautiful photography, which are associated with certain filmic traditions. This aesthetic achievement does not necessarily diminish the impact of the coarseness and hardship of migrants’ and refugees’ lives, as documentary filmmaking is not intended to be a technically poor genre, but it reaches audiences in specific ways. On the other hand, *14 Kilómetros* provides spectacular views of the desert and magnifies the adventures of the main protagonists as heroes of a sort, and representative of many others. Yet the overpowering visuality of the desert is strident compared with the unrefined acting. This makes *14 Kilómetros* and its realistic but exoticizing portrayal of the desert totally out of balance with the development of the characters, who remain romanticized and clichéd.

It is important, therefore, to identify the various theories around documentary filmmaking which stem from the beginning of cinema as an art form² and the discussion on the role of postcolonial cinema and its engagement with the deconstruction of visual paradigms.

The definition of documentary is problematic. It has undergone extensive discussion and shifts in understanding in the course of theorizing film. A striving for objectivity is often something expected of this genre, but this is neither the aim nor the ambition of documentary *per se*.³ What is more interesting is the way documentary filmmaking has, through time, engaged in different ways with the representation of reality, through which the relation between facts or fiction becomes more nuanced and challenging. The question remains whether fiction or documentary can give an adequate representation of reality at all. As Stuart Hall (1989) asserts, all identities are constituted within discourse, not outside representation.

According to most theories on documentary filmmaking (Renov 1993a; Nichols 1991,⁴ 2001; Kessler 1998; Bruzzi 2000), documentary can never live up to its traditional claim to represent reality objectively. As Renov (1993b, 2) has argued, ‘non-fiction contains any number of “fictive” elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention.’ Documentary filmmaking obviously constructs its own discursive world. The presence of the camera framing the filmed object already offers a selective, interpretative and mediated language, which is further creatively transformed through framing, editing, narration, musical score, and additional diegetic elements

categorizations of documentary, identifying five modes of documentary filmmaking: the *expository*, the *observational*, the *interactive*, the *reflective* and the *performative*. His premise is that documentary has progressed from simplistic and primitive, both in form and argument, to increasingly sophisticated, complex and elusive.

⁵ John Grierson used the word ‘documentary’ for the first time in an anonymous review of Flaherty’s film *Moana* (1926).

such as voiceover, characters, and their style of acting. As a result, documentaries construct their own ‘truth’ as they *constitute* the object that they pretend to describe realistically (Renov 1993b, 7). The claim is often that documentary filmmaking is more informative and historically accurate than other genres and that it occupies a different relationship to fact and fiction than other filmic genres. Yet fiction films can have a more realistic and documentary approach than certain so-called documentaries.

In ‘Ontology of the Photographic Image’ André Bazin (1967, 14) wrote: ‘The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.’ This claim, based on the privileged relationship between the photographic image and the real, has undergone significant shifts with technological innovations such as digitization. Furthermore, documentary filmmaking has never been about one-to-one reproduction of reality in a transparent and unmediated way. It has always been about ‘the creative treatment of actuality’, as John Grierson wrote in 1926 about Robert Flaherty’s work,⁵ giving one of the first definitions of documentary (Rotha 1952, 70). Though the definition of actuality is vague and contradictory, we can say that documentary comprises ‘the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world’ (Renov 1993b, 11). Again borrowing Renov’s words:

It is important to recall that the documentary is the cinematic idiom that most actively promotes the illusion of immediacy insofar as it forswears ‘realism’ in favour of a direct, ontological claim to the ‘real’. Every documentary issues a ‘truth claim’ of a sort, positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart. (Quoted in Bruzzi 2000, 3)

Of course, this statement about the essence and role of documentary is naïve, as Stella Bruzzi writes, and will be subject to further revisions in the course of time:

Continuously invoked by documentary theory is the idealized notion, on the one hand, of pure documentary, in which the relation between the image and the real is straightforward, and on the other hand, the impossibility of this aspiration. (Bruzzi 2000, 3)

The documentary as a theoretical field of study has therefore undergone a shift in focus, so that analyses of the documentary no longer emphasized the characteristics of the documentary image and its indexical status, but started to refer to its cinematographic apparatus – not only to the implications of its modes of production, but also to the ways in which spectators come to form part of

⁶ The discussion has also been about the so-called cinéma vérité which sees documentary as a sub-species of journalism, and which has limited the potential and the frame of reference of documentary filmmaking, setting back the development of documentary filmmaking as a theoretical field because it believed that through technological development and the increased sophistication of audio-visual equipment it was possible to diminish the distance between reality and representation, because the camera would become: 'just a window someone peeps through' (Donn Pennebaker quoted in Brian Winston 1993: 43).

the structure of meaning of films they recognize/regard as documentaries. According to French semio-pragmatist Roger Odin (1995b, 234) individual spectators are able to produce a 'documentarizing lecture' of each film – even a fictional film. This is because films that we usually call documentary can contain textual but also contextual information, indicating that we must switch to a documentarizing mode of viewing. According to Odin, 'any reading of an image consists of applying to it processes that are essentially external to it. This reading does not result from an internal constraint but from a cultural constraint' (1995a, 213). Therefore, the realization of a documentarizing mode is not just about detecting 'what really happened'⁶ but more about understanding how historical truth is subject to representation through cinema as language and as apparatus. The documentary film, therefore, mainly problematizes the relationship between authority and objectivity rather than merely reproducing reality. As Stella Bruzzi succinctly puts it:

The documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim. (Bruzzi 2000, 4)

For this reason we can conclude that the non-fictional image can never simply be a truthful rendition of reality, but can only be seen as part of many discourses on reality (Kessler 2009).

To return to our initial question, what is the relevance of these debates on documentary filmmaking for postcolonial cinema about migration? No wonder that the representation of the other, which is central to both questions of migration and postcoloniality, has been recurrent in ethnographic filmmaking. There exists a long tradition of 'ethnographic films' pretending to approach the representation of the other in an allegedly truthful and objective manner. Here the issues are obviously more sensitive and politically charged than just a focus on the question of indexicality and on the creative treatment of actuality. At stake is the very reproduction of the optical apparatuses of empire and Eurocentrism.

To raise the question of representing the Other is to reopen endlessly the fundamental issue of science and art; documentary and fiction; universal and personal; objectivity and subjectivity; masculine and feminine; outsider and insider. (Trinh 1991, 65)

As Domitilla Olivieri (2012) observes in her work on feminist documentary filmmaking, documentaries are not just about the 'politics of truth' (Foucault 1997) and engagement with the 'realist debate', but very much more about the cinematic apparatus, the bodily implication in the act of filming, and the ideological

7 Uncovering this process of mediation and the artifice of the documentary does not mean that they are less effective or valuable. As Trinh (1988) asserts, it means paying attention to the ‘cultural, sexual, political interreality of the filmmaker as subject, the reality of the subject film and the reality of the cinematic apparatus.’

construction of self and other. No one has reflected on this better than Trinh, who studies the implications of the documentary genre and the need to untangle the binary of fact–fiction, and to deconstruct the ‘aesthetic of objectivity’ (Trinh 1993, 94). In her groundbreaking 1982 film *Reassemblage*, Trinh reflects on documentary filmmaking and the ethnographic representation of cultures, revealing the artifice of the distinction between fact and fiction:

There is not such a thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach or a set of techniques. This assertion – as old and fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition. (Trinh 1990, 76)⁷

Mediterranean Passages

The critical appraisal of the documentary form and its historical transitions is of particular relevance for understanding its functions within the debate on post-colonial cinema. It facilitates a better understanding of how representations of migration are conveyed by filmmakers in order to solicit certain responses and not others from audiences and policymakers. The relationship between documentary filmmaking and the postcolonial quest is therefore important to untangle different visual styles as well as political implications. Though in appearance natural allies, both documentary filmmaking and postcolonial cinema studies are categories under erasure that need to be qualified and contextualized in order to acquire significance and validity for each other.

The point of departure for this essay was whether documentary filmmaking is a more suitable genre to reflect the experience of migration, or whether – as for any genre – its use is dependent on the intentions of the filmmaker and the apparatuses through which the film will be received. It obviously makes a difference whether or not these films are meant for the western circuit and produced with western funding, or travel through European film festivals and engage in a dialogue with western-based activists, intellectuals and spectators in general. The operations of production and reception are certainly complex and multi-layered, and mostly transnational and globalized in nature. Hence they cannot be reduced to specific countries, and audiences are difficult to profile as univocally ‘western’ (Ponzanesi 2014). Yet this discussion is relevant for assessing the value and impact of Andrea Segre’s *A Sud di Lampedusa*, for example, and his attempt to mobilize documentary in order to give back to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers their voice – those who are often talked about and hyper-visibility in ways that structurally alienate such accounts from the point of view of the subjects in question. Though literary accounts of migrant writers have been successful and much more visible

⁸ See, for example, *Io, L'Altro*, directed by Mohsen Melliti (Italy, 2006).

among a western readership, in the case of film production its expensive infrastructure and apparatus have limited access to the camera to only a few migrant authors.⁸

What is interesting here is Segre's use of the documentary genre as a way of engaging with reality, with a denunciation of the reality of marginalized people who suffer injustices within a realm of human rights and entitlement to European citizenship. This is a cinema *engagé* that contests the status quo and denounces abuses of power. Yet the question remains as to whether it is more effective for audience reception than the fiction film *14 Kilómetros*, which might be more entertaining and follows regular patterns of filmic identification. This is despite the fact that the latter film has passages of reverie and idealized representation that are orientalizing and border on the exotic, fetishizing the Sahara as an atemporal landscape that swallows up indistinct groups from different countries and ethnic groups. The route in *14 Kilómetros* is the same as in *A Sud di Lampedusa* – from Agadez in Niger through the Teneré desert, to the North African coast and the 'forbidden passage' that leads to the dream of Europe (*14 Kilómetros*) or the beginning of disenchantment: rejection at sea, detention in Libya, death at sea (*A Sud di Lampedusa*). Yet the way these films mobilize their audiences and provide a platform for migrants is very different.

The two films provide complementary interpretations of the crossing of the Sahara, and also of the ways in which the Mediterranean is imagined and visualized as a location of connection and trespass (Chambers 2008; Laviosa 2010).

Conclusion

'On the Waterfront' signals this embattled relationship with the conflicted shores of the Mediterranean, Southern Europe and North Africa, East and West, Levanto and the Middle East. The facts about these crossings, their dangers and their deadly results, are known, though not widely or publicly acknowledged. Cinematic language offers a forceful and effective medium to convey these facts and realities to wider audiences and create awareness. However, in this evaluation, the relationship between fact and fiction needs to be kept under erasure, and the dynamics between filmmaker, subject matter and audience questioned.

Documentary filmmaking, as envisioned and realized by Segre, therefore offers a platform for migrants to become actors and principal protagonists in their own stories – stories which would otherwise remain unheard or (due to high production costs and the complexity of global distribution) unavailable and of little impact. Thus do questions of reality and objectivity become entangled with questions of access and means. The documentary

style makes room for different imaginaries, based on supposedly true accounts. At the same time, films such as *14 Kilómetros*, which is more explicitly a fictional account of migration, continually take the viewer out of a fictional reading by referring to historical events and political facts, thereby at times eliciting a documentarizing reading of the film.

Both films are clearly meant to sensitize and inform audiences at home, i.e. Italian and Spanish spectators, respectively, and European audiences more broadly. However, Europe does not begin and end at its own territorial boundaries. It needs to be reimagined via different accounts and visions.

The contribution of these two films to the debate on postcolonial cinema is not primarily their attendability and faithfulness to the experience of migration and the subjectivity of migrants, but their engagement with reality – an engagement that through the chosen genre provokes a specific reaction in spectators, making them more equipped or able to empathize with the experiences of subjects who are part of Europe but continue to be perceived as external or as trespassers. The question of accountability moves away from the epistemological towards the ethical. It is not whether these accounts, fictional or documentary, are ‘more true’ or ‘more objective’ in representing the migrant condition, but about how these cinematic representations put in motion spectator and migrant subjectivities. This ethical turn in the discussion of documentary better addresses these films’ contribution to postcolonial cinema and clarifies the intervention of *14 Kilómetros* and *A Sud di Lampedusa* in the postcolonial debate.

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