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Of shipwrecks and weddings: borders and mobilities in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a new visual politics of Europe's borders that foregrounds encounters and trespassings. It focuses on the analysis of several films that deal with the migrant drama but in particular on two films that have received wide international acclaim: *Io Sto con la Sposa* [On The Bride's Side] (2014) and *Fuocoammare* [Fire at Sea] (2016). The films deal with migration as a humanitarian crisis but are not simple acts of denunciation. They are also not straightforward documentaries but offer innovative visual registers that defy categorization into fixed genres, such as the road movie or observational documentary. *On the Bride's Side* uses the format of a travelling wedding party that disregards both legislation restricting free mobility in Europe and the cynicism about the hopelessness of the migrant condition. The film was realized through an online crowdfunding campaign unprecedented in Italy. *Fire at Sea* presents the tragedy of Lampedusa outside of the regular schemes and screens, combining the migrant drama with the ordinary lives of people on the island, mostly through the perspective of a 12-year-old boy, Samuele, whose lazy eye becomes a metaphor for the short-sightedness of Europe. Both films propose a new aesthetic of the border, forging new imaginaries for Europe where spaces of solidarity and cosmopolitanism are still possible.

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Introduction

This essay proposes a new visual politics of the borders in Europe that foregrounds encounters and trespassings. It focuses on the analysis of several films that deal with the migrant drama but in particular on two films that have received wide international acclaim: *On the Bride's Side* (2014), which was presented at the 71st Venice Film Festival in 2013, and *Fire at Sea* (2016), which won the 66th Golden Bear at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival. These recognitions and awards at high-standing European film festivals testify to the timeliness of the subject the films deal with – migration as a humanitarian crisis – but also to the originality of the visual registers used. The two films in question are far from being straightforward documentaries, usually perceived as conferring truth and reality, nor are they simple acts of denunciation. On the contrary, the political message is mainly conveyed in an intriguing aesthetic language of high symbolism, whose poetic force presents new imaginaries for

Europe, where spaces of solidarity and cosmopolitanism can be regained from new subject positions.

Io Sto con La Sposa (On The Bride's Side's 2014) is a brave and poignant documentary, a road movie across Europe with a visionary message: 'no one can stop a bride at the border'. The cultural symbolism carried by a bride on her way to her wedding party with guests in tow is a genial idea from journalist and activist Gabriele del Grande, Palestinian-Syrian poet and writer Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry and filmmaker Antonio Augugliaro, who turn themselves for the occasion into benign contrabandists. The idea behind the docu-film, which is connected to a real event, is the staging, performing and filming of a fake wedding to smuggle a group of five Syrian and Palestinian migrants out of Italy in a trip that will take them to Sweden, considered the European mecca for refugees.

The film combines activism and journalism, resorting to an unprecedented online crowd-funding campaign to get it financially off the ground. Focusing on the plight of Syrian and Palestinian migrants fleeing war-torn Syria, the film puts the spotlight on issues of migration but with a positive message. The project, which is an act of protest and civil disobedience against the regulations of Fortress Europe, proposes alternative solutions to the stereotypical representations of migrants and refugees as victims or invaders, by presenting a model of solidarity and optimism. This is done using the format of a travelling wedding procession that defies both legislation restricting free mobility in Europe and cynicism about the hopelessness of the migrant condition.

In *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea 2016), Gianfranco Rosi presents the tragedy of Lampedusa outside of the regular schemes and screens, showing that the islanders have a different sense of solidarity to that of the European Union, by stating that 'fishermen accept everything that comes from the sea'. It is a film that combines art with the politics of the everyday. It is not a film of political denunciation but a perspective from the ordinary lives of people on the island, mostly through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy, Samuele.

Rosi's approach is unobtrusive and observational rather than confrontational, almost in the best neorealist style. There is little intersection between the two worlds portrayed: that of the distraught and traumatized refugees, and that of the timeless locals, shaped by generations of devotion to life on the sea and religious rituals. However, Rosi finds ways to intersect some common threads. The harrowing navy radio that receives the distressed calls for help from sinking migrant vessels finds an echo in the local radio station, where a local DJ plays songs from a bygone era and takes dedications from his most loyal listener, his aunt. The island doctor, Pietro Bartolo, whose task is to save the wretched of the earth, is the important connection between the migrants and Samuele.

The two films combine a fresh idea of how to conceive the borders between Europe and the rest, based not on policing and surveillance but on the principle of a common humanity that counters the bombastic rhetoric of media sensationalism and the inhospitable EU Frontex operations of established in 2004 (see e.g. 'Roles and Responsibilities' 2016), Mare Nostrum, established in 2013 (see e.g. Davis and Neslen 2014; Marina.difesa 2013; Taylor 2015), and Triton, established in 2014 (see the European Commission Press Release Database 2014).

The restriction imposed in the Dublin convention that obliges migrants to request asylum in the first European country they arrive in, constitutes a serious infringement to the right of mobility that is granted to European people by the Schengen Agreement. However, Italy has often disobeyed the EU legislation by letting the thousands of migrants landing

in Lampedusa travel further to Northern Europe, because it is incapable of managing the numbers and the emergency situation. The Italian state claims that Mare Nostrum costs 9.5 million euros a month, and the controversy is that the EU cannot match that price – the European Union's own Frontex Plus operation, renamed Triton, will depend on contributions from other European governments.

As Del Grande points out, looking beyond slogans and organizations, it is important to understand whether Triton is a push-back or a rescue operation. If it is like the original Frontex it is no more than another military operation, which does not help prevent people from dying at sea. It is the restrictions imposed by the legislation that make people take greater risks through smuggling routes. It is unfair that there is free movement for Eastern Europe as far as the Balkans, either because of EU membership or the liberalization of the visa regimes, whereas for people coming from countries considered 'at high risk of immigration' such as Africa, the Middle East and a few Asian countries, the response takes the form of military ships and waging war upon them. The alternative proposed, to create a humanitarian corridor, between Libya and Italy for example, will still not remove the risks of having to get to Libya. The way forward is to develop and enforce a common asylum policy in Europe.

Therefore the two films discussed use cinema as a creative medium to counter the EU politics of borders and patrolling by showing alternative scenarios of solidarity where the 'other' is not depicted as an outcast but as a fellow citizen in search of a hopeful future in Europe.

On the Bride's Side is a collaborative project between a journalist, a poet and a television film director together with the Syrian and Palestinian migrants and accompanied by a large crew that is on the bride's side, literally because they are taking a stand and supporting an operation of legal defiance in the name of friendship. Its aim is to propose a new aesthetic of the frontier, with a language capable of turning numbers into faces, victims into heroes and disasters into adventure.

Fire at Sea is an intense yet poetically slow documentary, which dauntingly focuses on the global phenomena of the migrant crisis through the intimacy of the lives on a small island that counter the dark statistics and show a form of solidarity and compassion that Europe has forgotten about. The perspective through the eyes of a young boy has the purpose of recalibrating the distorted view of political opportunism that uses migration as a scarecrow. It functions also as a warning against the rising indifference, apathy and short-sighted policy of the European Union.

On the Bride's Side came about through a serendipitous encounter. In September 2013 Gabriele del Grande, a freelance reporter and author of the migration-watch blog Fortress Europe (see e.g. Del Grande 2006), had just returned from a period in Syria where he was documenting the war while travelling with civilian activists. Soon after he arrived back home, two vessels coming from Libya sank off the coast of the island of Lampedusa, killing hundreds, mostly from Eritrea and Somalia (3 October 2013, with over 360 deaths reported, and a second shipwreck on 11 October 2013, with over 34 deaths declared and 250 missing bodies) (see e.g. Hooper 2013 on this topic). Suddenly hundreds of migrants started arriving in Milan, coming from Southern Italy and fleeing the Centres for Identification and Expulsion (CIEs) in order to reach destinations in Germany, Sweden, Holland and France. As there were no reception centres in Milan, people were living on the streets and in the central station. Del Grande was at Milan's central station with his Palestinian-Syrian poet friend, Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry, when Abdullah Sallam approached them, overhearing them speaking in Arabic. He asked them where to get the train to Sweden, to which Del

Grande responded, laughing hard, 'My friend, there is no train to Sweden. Sorry, but come with us and we'll drink a coffee' (Del Grande 2015, 4).

The sky's everybody: no borders

On the Bride's Side focuses on people like Abdullah who had just survived the aforementioned shipwreck in Lampedusa (11 October 2013), seeing more than 200 people die at sea. With a passport worthless in the eyes of many European embassies, migrants coming from Africa and the Middle East are left to the whims of smugglers to take them across the Mediterranean in makeshift boats, with results and death tolls that are all too familiar to the general public. Del Grande introduced Al Nassiry to Antonio Augugliaro, a filmmaker, and the trio came up with an unconventional idea in order to help Abdullah to get out of the country and find asylum in Sweden. Khaled Solaiman al-Nassiry said:

But then we think of a wedding party, this idea was good because it made sense. Weddings mean new life, the bride in English is something white, something clean to start a new life. (Kwan 2015)

Abdullah reacted to the proposal jokingly, saying: 'Should I not see the bride first?' The idea was genial because 'the police would never check a bride's documents' (Augugliaro, Del Grande, and Al Nassiry 2013). So the filming is about a real event, though the event itself was very much staged and fictionalized as in a theatrical performance. It is also a satirical tirade against the criminalization of sham marriages, through which people attempt to acquire a European permit by 'faking' marriage to a European citizen to be granted admission to Fortress Europe. In the case of *On the Bride's Side*, the marriage is never going to happen, but it functions as a cover-up for a wedding procession that moves across Europe in a goliardic spirit that defies institutions and treaties.

The problem was to find the bride. They finally found one in Tasnin, a Syrian-Palestinian activist friend who had fled from Yarmouk. She had recently emigrated to Spain but held a German passport and therefore could have left the caravan at any time. On 14 November 2013, a group of 23 people in total started their four-day journey trip towards Stockholm. They included Italians, Palestinians and Syrians, with Abdullah as the groom, Tasnin as the bride, a dissident couple from Syria, Mona and Ahmed Al Ghabra, and Alaa Bjeremi and his 13-year-old rapper son Manar, plus the three filmmakers (Gabriele, Khaled and Antonio), the film crew and an array of friends (sociologists, journalists, social workers and academics) acting as wedding guests.

This required a frantic preparation, which is shown at the opening of the film with Tasnin trying on a wedding dress in a Chinese shop in Milan, bought for 200 euros and worn throughout the trip. The groom and the other guests also start shopping in order to get proper wedding clothes. A shop assistant asks them whether they are refugees, to which they happily reply: 'No, we are actors'. A trip to the hairdresser cut even further into the pockets of the filmmakers, who had to advance all the money for the operation, including car hire for four cars, a little van and the fuel. Expenses had already risen to 5000 euros before the trip itself had even started. All participants were asked to contribute financially to the project as this was a collective action with consequences for everyone.

The journey consisted of covering a 3000-km-long journey in four days, traversing France, Luxembourg, Germany, Denmark and Sweden (Marseille, Bochum, Copenhagen and Malmö). It started on foot as they crossed the border into France, following a mountain path into France that was once used by Italians escaping Fascism.

During the trip itself the risk of being stopped and arrested was real, for aiding and abetting illegal immigration can result in a prison sentence of up to 15 years. This risk levelled the position between the migrants and the crew. They were in the same boat metaphorically speaking, at risk of being caught by the police and sentenced or sent back. The risk of being arrested expired after the journey but someone could still press charges, as the film is the proof that the crew did actually make the trip, aiding illegal immigrants to cross Europe. The decision to take only five migrants and no more was to avoid the higher risks of being charged for trafficking and not just aiding illegal migrants. If charges had been pressed, Del Grande commented that they would turn it into a trial about 'Fortress Europe' itself, and use the media to their avail to raise further awareness in Italy.

As Chiara Bonfiglioli writes, *On the Bride's Side* is a response to the catastrophes in the Mediterranean; it proposes a renegotiation of the idea of borders, challenging restricted movement, but also seeking to launch a model of humanity that has been crippled by exclusionary policies and the growing indifference towards the plight of migrants:

As the journey begins, a brilliant script allows the refugees the space to revisit the tragedy of the Syrian war, and the calamities encountered in the boats of death. As such, *On the Bride's Side* refuses to limit itself to the unfolding of the journey to Sweden, but rather provides the audience a genealogy of each refugee's story. In one bitter scene, Abdallah proceeds to write the names of some of the 250 refugees who died in the shipwreck he survived, and whose names he had written on a piece of paper. (Bonfiglioli 2015)

The film was shot without a clear script, except for the 4 days, which would refer to the four countries to be traversed: Day 1 for France (Marseille); Day 2 for Germany (Bochum); Day 3 for Denmark (Copenhagen); Day 4 for Sweden (Malmö). However, this free approach was balanced with astonishing and unexpected contributions by the migrants themselves, who offered key performances in the film. Before crossing the Grimaldi Superiore death path into France, they rest in a cave where many other migrants before them have left their names carved into the wall. Abdallah proceeds to recite all the names of the victims on a piece of paper. Tasnin writes on the wall: 'The Sky's everybody. No Border'. The music has a nice beat created by Dissei Logoi with a mix of different instruments from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. But the most captivating moment is when the boy, Manar, breaks out in a contagious rap and offers a spontaneous concert in a café in Bochum. He is turned into MC Manar, showing a great musical talent through his rapper poems that offer a commentary on the migrant condition. Another unforgettable moment is when Tasnin, beautifully attired in her white wedding dress, stands on the seashore in Copenhagen and starts a lament song, which is inspired by the famous Lebanese singer Fayrouz. Shot from behind, with the white dress forming a silhouette against the blue sea, the chant is utterly mesmerizing in its melancholy and poetic evocation (Figures 1 and 2).

After the tense and nerve-wrecking train journey from Copenhagen to Malmö the group finally reach their destination, where they are welcomed by friends and family, an encounter which turns into a euphoric dance of joy in the main square. Mission accomplished.¹

Lampedusa burning

Abdallah's commemorative gesture of writing all the victims' names on a piece of paper is a strategy also adopted in Ethiopian filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer's documentary *Asmat. Nomi per tutte le vittime in mare* (Names in Memory of all Victims of the Sea 2015). The short



Figure 1. Tasnin on the seashore in Copenhagen.



Figure 2. Tasnin on the seashore in Copenhagen.

documentary, which does not follow any filming rules and refuses to adapt to a traditional narrative style, was shot in Lampedusa on the day of the commemoration for the victims of 3 October 2013 to offer a tribute to those young people, mostly originating from Eritrea and escaping their dictatorial and militarized country. The result is a filmic production that is not easily identifiable, neither as a film genre nor as a literary poem. It is deliberately filmed in a provocative and unsettling way, offering a long laic and digital litany: a female voice-over recalls in a mantra style each one of victims by name, Selam ‘peace’, or Tesfaye ‘my hope’, through a beautiful visualization of the names in Tigrinya characters projected on the

waves of the sea, restoring the victims' dignity from namelessness and group anonymity. The film images give space to these names without bodies. The director commented by saying:

The Lampedusa tragedy has confronted all of us with a new element: for the first time the authorities have been able to reconstruct all, or almost all, the names of the victims. This has never happened before. In *Asmat* I wanted to force my spectators to listen to all of them, from first to last. I did not limit myself to making a consolatory spot, to be quickly consumed between one film and the other. I wanted to defy the attention and patience of the public in order to bring back the numbers of the tragedy to the reality of names. It takes ten minutes to read the 368 names of the victims of Lampedusa. Imagine how long it would take to read all 900 names of the last tragedy. Unfortunately this time no one can tell with precision who they are. (Yimer as quoted in Archivio Memorie Migranti, my translation, <http://archiviomemoriemigranti.net/evidenza/show/1499?shareLang=it-IT>)

The documentary makes us count them, one by one, so that we realize that these names have been separated from their bodies, in only one day, in the Mediterranean (see e.g. AMM (2014) for the documentary, <https://vimeo.com/114343040>). *Asmat* beautifully captures the issue of representation, embodiment and memory. How to keep the memory alive and restore the dignity of migrants made nameless by their dying. And there is also the question of how to represent the unrepresentable, the phantomatic traces that need to be recovered.

In his much lauded film debut *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning*, Dutch film director Morgan Knibbe avoids representing the refugee by giving only a voice, a disembodied voice, a voice which is a shadow, to narrate the events of other migrants in Europe. It is the voice of a migrant who drowned in the Mediterranean, who did not manage the crossing. *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* conveys in an effective way how refugees are actually ghosts, spectres to their own existence, invisible and unnamed. The film, released in 2014, received considerable acclaim at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam (IDFA) in 2014, and won the prize for best documentary at the Netherlands Film Festival in September 2015. It was subsequently selected as the Dutch submission for the Oscar nomination. The psychedelic music that accompanies the film, based on Brian Eno and other techno sounds, combined with many scenes shot upside down to convey the perspective of a ghost from above, with streets flashing as in electronic highways, creates a mesmerizing, immersive, gripping effect.

The director Knibbe, who was also the screenwriter, cinematographer and cameraman, opted for a free-flowing, pseudo-subjective approach with his Steadicam. He is literally eavesdropping on the lives of various illegal immigrants, scrabbling for their lives in countries such as Greece, Italy and the Netherlands. The narration of the film is left to Ali Borzouee, who gives voice to the unseen ghost protagonist and asks himself 'Where am I? Is this paradise?' While the ghost can float through space, his fellow voyagers who are still alive are trapped in space: 'Existence and non-existence are both alien to me', the narrator says, a statement that resonates with the migrants stuck in limbo, made stateless and devoid of rights (Ross 2014).

Limbo and hell are indeed background metaphors for the film: limbo is the waiting room for Europe, but hell is where you feel the fire burning. The title is not only an ode to Dante's *Inferno* and a reference to Europe as Hell, but also an indirect reference to the Arabic notion of 'harraga', which means 'those who burn', referring to migrants from North Africa illegally attempting to enter Europe firstly by burning their bridges and secondly by literally burning their papers in order to gain a new identity in the new country (see e.g. 'Harraga' 2008 on the meaning of the word, and the film *Harraga* on the subject 2009 by Algerian director Merzak Allouache).

The voice-over comes and goes, becoming at times inaudible, or just a whisper. Despite the director's humanistic and consciousness-raising intentions, the film remains a bit stilted and is not devoid of gimmicky effects. Because of its editing style and chosen format, with scenes tilted upward to the sky, accelerated images and the style of narration, the film can at times become a barrier to empathy and understanding. As the film critic Ken Kenigsberg writes, 'The immersive style is always fascinating. But it also seems uneasily suited to the material. With its gravity-defying camera, *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* sometimes seems less interested in observation or empathy than in calling attention to the virtuoso behind the lens' (Kenigsberg 2015).

However Knibbe's documentary is a brave attempt to search for a new visual language that is not just dry reporting and traditional documentary style. By offering snippets of intimate access to migrants who are often not even seen as human beings, but indeed as ghosts beyond humanity, he creates an extremely atmospheric and gripping insight into what usually remains ignored and literally unseen.

This is quite an achievement for a debut film. Morgan Knibbe had previously made a 15 min video *Shipwreck* (2014). It was named best short at Locarno ('Shipwreck Wins...' 2014) and was therefore nominated in the same category at the European Film Awards. The subject of this miniature is also the 3 October 2013 disaster, recalled in the previous films mentioned, the tragedy in which a boat carrying 500 Eritrean refugees sank off the coast of Lampedusa, resulting in the loss of 360 lives, commemorated in the *Asmat* film. In this short documentary we hear the testimony of one of the survivors, while hundreds of coffins await transportation back home. These were also the 300 coffins to which Barroso had belatedly paid homage on behalf of the EU. Reproduced in its entirety, *Shipwreck* forms one of the more effective segments of *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning*, an episodic reverie told from the perspective of one of the shipwreck's victims, Abraham from Eritrea, who tells his story in a whisper amid the background wreckages. The film poster for *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* is indeed taken from that fragment, showing the survivor wearing a T-shirt with the text 'I'm famous' on it, which is an ironic statement on the ways of achieving fame, but also on the hopeful prospects for the future lying ahead (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Film poster of *Those of Feel the Fire Burning*.

Lampedusa burning part II

Fuocoammare (Fire at Sea), brings us back directly to the events taking place in Lampedusa. It is shot with astounding photography, strongly intensifying the landscape and beauty of the island. Although it is a documentary, it manages to heighten the symbolic and delicate subject of the immigration drama in a touching but non-sensationalist way.

Gianfranco Rosi has previously won the Golden Lion in Venice, in 2013 with his film *Sacro Gra*, a fascinating, almost experimentally unclassifiable film, that could also be described as a prose-poem on the unlikely subject of Rome's ring-road motorway (see e.g. Olivieri in this special issue). Two prizes of this calibre are not only an ode to Italian cinema and to a new home-grown talent, but also to a renewed take on documentary filmmaking, which combines the poetics of everydayness with harsh social realities portrayed in a slow and intimate rhythm of great visual beauty. The chaos of the ring motorway becomes spaced out and time almost stands still, while zooming in on the banal but very intense rituals of the ring-road inhabitants, in theory leading a marginal existence expressed by the urban peripherality.

A similar take appears in *Fire at Sea*, an unconventional documentary that joins the tragedy of migration and huge death tolls in the Mediterranean with the minutiae of the lives of the Lampedusa residents, fishermen, doctors and Italian navy operators. The account is mostly filtered through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy, Samuele, whose solitary meandering through the island, hunting and playing among cacti and birds, creates a strong contrast between his carefree childhood and the harsh realities of the refugees. The latter are often heard via the radio news, or just overheard and viewed from the navy patrolling cabin and screens. It is through Samuele's tangential contact with the wider world that we begin to see the colossal tragedy of migration.

The film opens with text providing factual information about the island of Lampedusa. The island is closer to Africa than Europe – around 113 km from the Tunisian coast and further south than Malta, in the Strait of Sicily, 205 km from Sicily, making it geographically more part of Africa than Italy (Davis 2013). Over the last 20 years, 400,000 migrants have tried to land on its beaches and 15,000 have died trying the crossing, as the film informs us. As we know, the death toll has risen to 20,000 since the release of the film and it is increasing by the day. Indeed Lampedusa often falls off the map of Europe, this being a symbol of the current crisis perceived as external to the borders of Europe, liminal and removed. With an area of only 20 km² and a population of approximately 6000 people, the impact of the thousands of migrants landing on its shores is of course huge and hard to contain. The island's sparkling water and beautiful beaches, strongly recommended by TripAdvisor, offer a jarring backdrop for the migrant destiny.

In the first scene we encounter Samuele, the son of fisherman, as he is making a slingshot from the twigs of a pine tree, amidst a setting of spectacular natural beauty on the dry and rugged island, with its rough waves and its rocky cliffs. After this idyllic opening shot, Rosi switches to the other aspect of the film, giving us the first blow of harsh reality. He does not do so by using images but by resorting to a radio broadcast from an Italian navy ship. We hear a man shout: 'Please please help us, we are sinking'. And the navy operator contritely keeps asking 'What is your position, please? What is your position?' over and over again in a robotic voice, while the screams became slowly less audible and we keep seeing the gigantic radar antennas rotating in the sky to no avail.

The filmmaker, who operated alone on the island for over a year and a half, is the epitome of the auteur documentary maker, doing the filming, camerawork and sound all by himself, and therefore not operating with a crew at his disposal. This artisanal aspect testifies to his observational documentary style, through which he follows, observes and gains the trust of the local inhabitants, the young boy and the patrolling navy operators, by sharing day-to-day events and humdrum moments. Due to operations such as Mare Nostrum, Frontex and Triton (see e.g. ‘Frontex Joint Operation...’ 2014 on this topic), the border had been moved offshore with boats usually intercepted on the open sea. In this way, a new phase has started for Lampedusa, creating a certain distance between the islanders and the migrants. Everything arriving on Lampedusa is now monitored by the state. Navy ships dock on the quay, migrants go through the reception procedure, with buses taking them to the centres, from where they are moved further to other centres around Italy.

The life on the island unfolds in parallel to the migrant drama; scenes are interspersed in a balanced alternation, swinging from harshness to lightness, desperation to optimism, cold surveillance to solidarity. The music in the film plays an essential role in calibrating the emotions and softening the tone. Within the secluded space of a radio station, a delightful local DJ, bent over his monitors and microphone in a darkened studio – at first he could be mistaken for navy personnel scouting the rough waters of the Mediterranean – takes dedications from his listeners who call on the phone. Through entertaining excerpts of Sicilian songs with titles like ‘The Little Donkey’ and ‘The Cart Driver’s Love’, the melancholic Sicilian music offers humour and consolation, lifting the heavy spirits of the fishermen who are often out of work because of the bad weather. The title of the film refers to a wartime Sicilian song that the DJ plays. It is about the bombing of an Italian warship in 1943 in port at Lampedusa, prior to the island’s surrender to the Allies. It retells how the flames lit up the night: *Che fuoco a mare che c’è stasera* (‘What fire at sea there is tonight’). In this way Rosi captures the old-world atmosphere and history of Lampedusa, adding melody to the images of the barren and scrubby island.

Life continues carefree for Samuele, but he suffers from sea-sickness, a bad omen for an island boy whose destiny will probably be that of a fisherman. He also suffers from hyperventilation and anxiety, which makes his breathing difficult. This leads to a very endearing and exhilarating scene with the very same depressed doctor, Pietro Bartolo, who treats the wretched of the earth and who in this encounter with Samuele very patiently and reassuringly talks to the boy, taking his symptoms seriously. The doctor is the one explicit point of contact between the migrants’ story and Samuele, one hint of a symptom of a much larger malaise.

The doctor has been treating migrants’ chemical burns from fuel for 20 years, he has delivered the babies of pregnant African women who have just arrived on the island, and he has often been forced to bury children, some of them babies still attached to the umbilical cord of their equally dead mothers. ‘I hate doing autopsies. I’ve done so many. I have nightmares’, he confesses, ‘but it’s every man’s duty, if he really is a man, to help these people’. This is probably the most human and humanitarian character of the film, who has lived through the history of Lampedusa, helping thousands of migrants. He has been on board the Italian navy boats to do the first screening, detecting contagious diseases as well as quickly intervening to treat cases of severe dehydration, showing compassion and unrelenting commitment.

The encounter with doctor Bartolo on the island was a turning point for Rosi, who just went to him for treatment for his bronchitis. In an interview he confessed that he had almost given up and wanted to stop filming and leave the island. However, after his encounter with doctor Bartolo, with whom he had a conversation lasting over 3h, he received a USB stick with the message: 'Watch this and I am sure you will come back'. The USB stick contained information and images gathered by the doctor over 20 years in his profession, with detailed recording of all the migrants whom he had received and treated. It was a priceless first-hand account of what has often been removed, deleted or denied by mainstream media and politicians. Rosi watched the USB content from his home in Rome and indeed returned to the island to continue and complete his film (Rosi 2016).

The choice of Samuele as the perspective in the film was important in offering more freedom and also lightness. There is an astonishing scene when Samuele goes to the optician to have his eyesight tested. The verdict is that he has a 'lazy' eye. The doctor's treatment is the old-fashioned method of blanking out one lens for the good eye. This becomes an excellent metaphor for the lazy eye of Europe. The documentary maker has the enhanced function through his camerawork, focalization and intervention of activating the lazy eye of Europe by bringing into sharp focus the neglected reality of suffering and inhumanity that happens at Europe's border.

Throughout the film, Rosi often opts to mediate his gaze, letting us observe, or peep through, the right eye of Samuele hitting a target with his slingshot, through military monitors, mirrors, wet portholes encrusted with dried salt, through scuba-diving glasses searching the marvellous beauty of the island's abyss at night, through the torchlight of the navy boats piercing the Mediterranean in search of survivors to be rescued. This 'looking with' and 'looking through' conveys the indirect gaze, albeit non-intervening, of the filmmaker. However, his observations are not devoid of moral and ethical choices. Indeed, how can the images of the sufferers be portrayed without making a spectacle of them or glorifying them as aesthetic images? Rosi faced this dilemma when a navy officer asked him to film the dead corpses scattered below deck like human litter:

When I arrived with the boat on what seemed like one of the many transshipments – I followed so many; I was at sea for more than 40 days – the thing that really struck me was seeing those bodies so close to death there in front of me, the sound of their breathing. When the tragedy was revealed to me in the cargo hold, I felt a duty to go in and record it, but it wasn't an easy decision. After that moment, I decided that the film had to be wrapped and edited with whatever I had by that point. I didn't have the strength to go on filming. (Rosi as quoted in Scarpa 2016)

In the film, the doctor explains that the boat has three levels: the upper front is the first class area where migrants pay up to 1500 dollars to the smuggler for their passage, the upper intermediate level is where they pay about 1000 dollars and the cargo hold, the bottom part of the boat is where they pay 800 dollars. Here there is no air and it is extremely hot, and migrants often die during their passage from suffocation rather than from drowning, frequently suffering from fuel burns created by the combustion of fuel mixed with salty water, which produces severe if not lethal burns (see e.g. Del Grande 2006; Vanni 2014 on this topic).

The scene became the closing moment of filming for Rosi but also the close of the film. Its intensity is gripping and painful to witness and yet the unfailing beauty of the camera angle and particular aesthetic way of filming reminds us that we are just observing, gazing, looking

at, shocked but also at a safe distance, in our film theatre chair, coming out of the screening to a reality that will look quite different to that we have just been asked to be part of.

The migration industry: production and reception

In 'The Spectacle of the Other', Stuart Hall explores the creation of discourse and how otherness came to become a 'spectacle'. He asks: 'Why is "difference" so compelling a theme, so contested an area of representation? What is the secret fascination of "otherness", and why is popular representation so frequently drawn to it?' (Hall 1997, 225). He goes on to explain that we need to offer different strategies to intervene in the field of representation, to contest 'negative' images and transform representational practices around 'race' in a more 'positive' direction and he puts the visual field of representation central stage.

Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with 'difference', it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way. This is why we need theories - to deepen our analysis. (Hall 1997, 225, 226)

The task of the films addressed here is indeed to contest the mainstream politics of representation of migrants, often portrayed as victims or space invaders (Puwar 2004), by offering a new aesthetics of the border.

In this essay, the role of cinema and its capacity for denunciation and for offering social critique is combined with a renewed visual language that resorts to alternative genres and mode of production. All the films that have been highlighted deal with questions of border crossings, though they are neither road movies in any simple way nor traditional documentaries. The representation of migrants is often challenged, renounced or conveyed through new participatory techniques, which engage the audience in more critical ways. Migrants are left in limbo, in the waiting chamber of Europe, but are also shown as in charge of their destiny, generating alternative forms of solidarity between fishermen and newcomers, Italian journalists and refugees, activists and artists.

Both *Fire at Sea* and *On The Bride's Side* were received with an avalanche of reviews, awards and praise. Both films were screened at the European Parliament. Both films are acts of testimony and denunciation, but often also an easy way to acquit bad consciences by taking part in a drama that is safely portrayed at a distance through the art of filming.

Fire at Sea received wide acclaim for being so perceptive and aesthetically as well as politically accomplished. Yet we stand on the side of Europe throughout the film, we observe through Samuele, his grandmother Maria, his uncle, doctor Bartolo, the operators in the navy, but we have little contact with the migrants themselves. They do not speak in the film, we only hear their laments, chants, screams for help via the radar radio, their cries, their excitement during their self-organized football tournaments: Syria versus Eritrea, because Somalia and Libya have already been knocked out. So if Samuele is the keyhole through which we see the island, there is no equivalent character on the migrant side. Except for a few moments they are shot mostly as an unknown mass, often at night, and divided only by country: Mali, Syria, Eritrea.

The rescue scenes also have science-fiction, alienating undertones. The shiny laminate thermal blankets give a group of immigrants a surreal look, especially in contrast to the white overalls and masks worn by the rescue team to protect themselves from possible contagion, creating an encounter that cannot possibly be on an equal footing. We never hear any of

the migrants directly, or their personal story. They offer a face, correcting therefore our perception of just numbers, but their subjective position never comes to the fore.

This is the choice of the filmmaker: not to make an auto-ethnographic account of those stories in order to offer more consistency in the language he uses, which is mostly the Sicilian dialect mixed up with Italian, a question of coherence with regard to the subject that he would be able to follow, observe and use as filters for his mediated gaze.

But it is obvious that this is a very different take to *On The Bride's Side*, where the five migrant characters have leading roles in the story, and where their journey is embraced by the filmmakers as well as the crew acting as wedding guests, fully participating not only in the risk of being arrested and charged but also in the exhilaration of its success. Many individual narratives emerge and intersect in *On the Bride's Side*. The film is mostly in Arabic, making it relatively difficult to distribute and market.

Of course this should not be a judgmental evaluation, but in the many portrayals of the drama of migrants by 'Italian' filmmakers, such as in *Terraferma* by mainstream Italian film director Crialesi, the refugees are often silent, portrayed en masse, undistinguishable apart from the occasional heavily accented Italian, as in the case of the pregnant Ethiopian (Timnit T., a real-life refugee) who is secretly harboured by Filippo in his mother's garage, defying the authorities who incriminate anyone who helps refugees (Rapold 2013; see e.g. Oboe 2016 on this topic).

Furthermore, the strategies for production and distribution are as relevant as the visual choices made for artistic representation. For example, an unprecedented online crowdfunding 2.0 operation took place between the filming and the screening of *On the Bride's Side* in order to achieve the second goal of the wedding trip, that of reaching the cinema theatres and sensitizing public opinion on the issue of migration.

The journey produced more than 60 h of film but the challenge was how to go about covering the production and post-production costs. The directors decided to submit the film for the Venice Film Festival in September 2014 and therefore a hectic campaign started in order to raise funding. A Facebook page was created with the name 'On the Bride's Side', which gathered more than 10,000 fans in no time. On 19 May 2014 the film trailer was published with the page information about the crowdfunding campaign. The story went viral, reaching all Italian media outlets,² but also quickly reaching the international press.³ The headlines emphasized various attributes of the campaign: 'A wedding party has defied Fortress Europe', 'Cinema and Civil Disobedience', 'A film and a political manifesto'.

The original idea was to raise 75,000 euros to pay for the production and post-production costs and raise another 75,000 hopefully through the distribution of the film by selling the copyrights. Instead within 60 days, 2617 donators, coming from 30 different countries around the world, had given a total amount of 101,000 euros, an absolute record in the crowdfunding history of Italy.

All of the 2617 co-producers are mentioned in the final credits, in rows of three, taking several minutes for their names to scroll down and creating a quite impressive effect. The fact of having so many people co-producing the film also meant that it would become impossible to press charges as all the names behind the production process are responsible for the final product.

Thanks to the newly available budget the directors were able to conclude the editing on time and to submit the film to the 71st Venice Film Festival. The film was selected for the 'Orizzonti' section, outside competition. It sounded like the perfect fairy tale with a happy

ending. Yet there was more to organize around the screening of the film planned for 2 September 2014 in Venice. Augugliaro came with the idea of the #whitecarpet, instead of the red carpet, by having many brides dressed in white on the Venice Lido. The #whitecarpet action, which had been promoted via Facebook, generated a deluge of brides dressed in white, travelling by train, by bus, by motorboat and on foot, to reach the festival. After the screening, an applause lasting seventeen minutes, a complete standing ovation, broke out among the 1200 people in the room, testifying to the great success of this bottom-up initiative that defied many rules and protocols.

Therefore behind an alternative mode of production there was also a shrewd marketing campaign that, by relying on social media and bottom-up initiatives and participation, clearly touched upon the new forms of production and communication strategies of our times.

Hamid Naficy has written for example that diasporic cinema is realized through interstitial funding relating to artisanal and collective modes of production. This refers to complex forms of international co-productions that involve not only different national states and production agencies but also alternative types of distribution (through independent film distributors), via online platforms and digital channels:

The accented cinema's mode of production is divided into the interstitial and the collective modes... These modes are undergirded by rhizomatically interlinked independent, non-profit, political, and ethnoreligious organizations and by a variety of mediating cultural institutions. (Naficy 2001, 43)

One of the characteristics of the interstitial production mode is the financial conditions under which it operates. Filmmakers often have to either invest in their own films, act in them, or work in technical or routine capacities in the entertainment industry and ethnic media to raise funds (47).⁴

Therefore there are two important aspects of the interstitial mode of production: multi-source funding (funding agencies, ethnic communities, filmmaking institutions and television networks in several countries) and academic distribution (including universities, colleges, cultural centres and art museums).

This holds true for both *On The Bride's Side*, which was the work of three people with no production organization behind them, and for *Fire at Sea*, which was produced by Gianfranco Rosi himself together with Donatella Palermo with the participation of many international partners for its creation and distribution (Stemal Entertainment, 21uno Film, Cinecittà Luce S.P.A., Les Films d'Ici, ARTE France Cinéma). Both films were realized with financial investments from their directors and shot in languages of limited appeal – in Arabic for *On The Bride's Side* and Sicilian for *Fire at Sea*. Obviously both films also had a non-professional cast and deal with a topic that despite its social relevance does not necessarily draw crowds to the theatres. *On the Bride's Side* was initially only available through downloading, once you had contributed to the production costs through the crowdfunding campaign, and became available for distribution only via alternative channels.

Conclusions

On the Bride's Side and *Fire at Sea* are unconventional documentaries that defy traditional visual registers and modes of production. *On the Bride's Side* is based on an act of civil disobedience and collective mode of production. It uses the genial idea of a wedding procession

through Europe to turn a road movie into an adventure and act of solidarity, offering a new cosmopolitan outlook on Europe.

Fire at Sea is more of an arthouse film, allowed to experiment with an observational documentary style of great beauty and impact. By alternating the migrant tragedies with the everydayness of life on the island of Lampedusa, a balance is reached between showing the border of Europe and proposing its unravelment. The island becomes a microcosm for Europe where the liminal and precarious existences, of both fishermen and refugees, convey an idea of Europe from the South where different marginalities coexist and interweave, avoiding celebratory discourses on Europe as the ideal haven.

Both films propose a new aesthetic of the border, achieved by employing innovative visual registers that do not stay within the confines of any traditional genres, neither the road movie nor the observational documentary. They contribute to new forms of engagement with the 'other' and participatory politics. By proposing a new vision of migration, identity and mobility, the films analysed here subvert conventional representations of the 'other' by offering new possible cosmopolitan outlooks that resignify Europe from a location of marginality and hope.

Notes

1. The groom Abdallah and the couple Mona and Ahmed, two veterans of the Syrian opposition, received asylum in Sweden, while the child rapper and his father Alaa were sent back to Italy under the Dublin regulation and were granted asylum.
2. From the Ansa (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata), one of the leading world news agencies, to the weekly magazine *Internazionale*, to the Italian television company Rai, to the main newspaper *Repubblica* and Radio 3.
3. The news quickly spread abroad reaching *El País*, *Vice America*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the BBC, Al Jazeera and France 24.
4. According to Naficy the main characteristics of the interstitial mode of production are:
 - (a) Filmmakers have to invest in their own film
 - (b) Multiplication of accumulation of labour, particularly on behalf of the director. 'Directors often act in principal roles in their film to control the project, keep down the cost, or make up for the lack of appropriate bilingual actors' (Naficy 2001, 48)
 - (c) Multilinguality entailed by the many languages of the filmmakers and their crew. Multilinguality makes intelligibility more complex. In these films language is never taken for granted (see essay by Derek Duncan in this special issue)
 - (d) The production process of the accented films is convoluted: funding sources, languages used on the set and on screen, nationality of crew and cast, and the functions that the filmmaker performs are all multiple. This complexity includes the artisanal conditions and the political constraints under which the films are shot (51)
 - (e) Length of time it takes to produce and distribute the film. In general, interstitial filmmakers are satisfied with a limited distribution and exhibition of their films.

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