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## Diasporic proximities: spaces of 'home' in European documentary

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### ABSTRACT

This essay explores the relation between the genre of experimental observational documentary and transnational European spaces. It engages with documentaries that focus on the everyday and the uneventful, and that present alternative representations of liminal places and subjects. The three films analysed are: *El Cielo Gira* (The Sky Turns) by Mercedes Álvarez (2004, Spain), *Lift* by Marc Isaacs (2001, UK) and *Sacro GRA* by Gianfranco Rosi (2013, Italy). These documentaries are situated in the debate on observational cinema. The article argues that these films enable the recognition of a collective European temporality and spatiality, where migrants and diasporic subjects are not alien or 'strangers', but are part of the fabric of Europe; they are always already here. Through a study of the films, in their specific framing and editing strategies, the article argues that they open alternative spaces of encounter with other subjectivities. The original notion of affective proximities is presented to account for the political dimension of the films. The focus is on what these films can do: their political potential to affecting alternative imaginaries of the everyday lived space of European diasporic subjects, and performing and making sense of the affective reality of transnational movements and encounters.

### KEYWORDS

Documentary film; everyday; affective proximity; European space; observational cinema

## Introduction

Every voyage can be said to involve a re-sitting of boundaries. The travelling self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following 'public routes and beaten tracks' within a mapped movement; and, the self that embarks on an undetermined journey practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between here, and there, *and* elsewhere. (Trinh 2011, 27)

This article explores how contemporary documentary film performs and represents European spaces, the migrant and liminal subjectivities that animate and inhabit them, and experiences of belonging and displacement. It focuses on three documentaries, set and produced in Europe, that engage with postcolonial frameworks, and that predominantly utilise an observational mode of film-making. The specific strategies of observational documentary are therefore discussed here to examine what these films can do. What is their potential to mobilise alternative understandings of spatialities and temporalities of

belonging in Europe? How do they create new imaginaries of the everyday lived spaces and experiences of diasporic subjects? I argue that these films are not just engaging their audiences aesthetically through the filmic medium, but use a political register that facilitates the recognition of a collective European spatiality and identity. I show how they do this by enabling encounters with an otherness that is not alien or 'stranger', but that is in the fabric of shared everyday experiences, always already here: an 'elsewhere within here' rather than a here versus there (Trinh 2011, 2).

Recent scholarship has discussed how cinema engages with Europe as being constructed by migratory flows, diasporic communities, and migrant subjectivities. This is a Europe of geo-political negotiations, porous and policed borders, colonial legacies, political transitions and contested cultural identity (see, e.g. Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Loshitzky 2010; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012; Kazecki, Ritzenhoff, and Miller 2013 on this topic). In these discussions, documentary film is largely absent from research on European migrant cinema.<sup>1</sup> Documentary is often discussed as either a mode of film-making related realism or objectivity; or as a style that is taken at face value when in its hybrid forms such as docu-fiction, drama-documentary, semi-documentary. Alternatively, the genre of documentary film is discussed in terms of funding accessibility; i.e. how migrant film-makers often struggle to have access to funds to make fictions or feature films, where instead making documentary remains more accessible and affordable (see, e.g. Jäckel 2010 on this topic).

This research is intended not in opposition to these accounts of the documentary 'genre', but aims at a better understanding of the relation between diasporic cinema and documentary in particular. It also discusses documentary film as a genre that entails more than just one approach or set of techniques.<sup>2</sup> The key concept activated here to enter this debate on documentary genres is observational cinema. As will become clear, observational cinema is understood as a mode of engagement with the world, the everyday, and that enables intersubjective encounters. It is not a defined canon of cinematographic techniques or disciplinary norms, nor a genre or style circumscribed only to anthropological film-making. Moreover, the films that I discuss in this article are not explicitly or easily labelled as films *about* migration or diaspora, and are not films made by migrant-identified directors. Rather, these are films that speak about the daily experience of European cities and countryside, where migratory passages are intertwined in the very fabric of daily lives, and appear as one of Europe's many voices and presences. There are many terms that have been used to talk about films that deal with issues of migration, hybridity, intercultural or non-Western cinema.<sup>3</sup> It has been successfully argued that the contemporary reality of European spaces, experiences and politics cannot but be understood through a lens that considers colonial and postcolonial histories and power dynamics (see, e.g. Ponzanesi and Colpani 2016 on this topic). In this sense, these documentaries can be labelled as postcolonial films. Accordingly, I argue that these films perform national belongings. Here, local spaces are constructed through migratory flows, across complex temporalities and encounters. Therefore, these films do not easily lend themselves to being read in terms of strangers/outsideers who enter a space already coded as white or European.

Films such as *El Cielo Gira* (The Sky Turns) by Mercedes Álvarez (2004, Spain), *Lift* by Marc Isaacs (2001, UK) and *Sacro GRA* by Gianfranco Rosi (2013, Italy) are examples of an experimental, observational documentary cinema that enables an encounter with various subjectivities and experiences across ethnicities, religions, classes, sexualities, political views, or professions. These people are already 'here' and construct the space of Europe as

we know it. They are not ‘strangers’<sup>4</sup> or ‘others’ entering, changing or being excluded by what is known or usually coded as ‘Europe.’

These three documentaries not only have in common this mode of engaging with spaces, time and migrant subjects. As I argue, they also enable encounters with ‘other’ subjectivities, by which I mean not only non-(Western)European migrants, but liminal subjects that often fall out of the spotlight of media or mainstream cinema. Moreover, these films engage one other issue at the core of this article: they address the everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion. This experience of feeling ‘at home’ (or not) is not as much about a physical space as it is about a sense of familiarity; a sense of daily belonging.

Before delving into these three films, I will elaborate on the question of observational cinema, also in relation to other genres or modes of documentary making that have emerged in the last 20 years. Next, the article will move to an analysis of the films, driven by the question: How does contemporary European observational documentary attend to these dynamics of belonging, displacement, inclusion and exclusion in urban and rural places?

The three documentaries are not only considered in terms of *what* they represent or *how* they are constructed (i.e. at the level of narrative, framing, sounds, speeds, and other editing strategies). Rather, I engage closely with the films to eventually address what these documentaries can *do*: their political potential to affect alternative imaginaries, provoking new knowledges and perceptions, thus producing effects on our social reality.

Finally, I elaborate on the notion of ‘affective proximity’ as a tool to make sense of the potential of these films to activate and enable an encounter with other subjectivities and (un)familiar social realities. I show how these documentaries enable an engagement with the materiality of the everyday experiences of ‘others’, and provoke an experiential vicinity to the elsewhere within the film. It is because of this specific mode of engagement with the world that these (experimental) observational films have the potential to perform a sense of collective European space. This is a space where ‘strangers’, ‘others’ and their experiences of and from elsewhere are and were, always already here, part of the very fabric of ‘Europe’: an ‘elsewhere within here’ (Trinh 2011, 2).

## Attending to the world: observational cinema revisited

Discussions on the concepts of observation and observational style in ethnographic and documentary film are ongoing since the 1960s. The term is as widely used as contradictorily defined, and it has been identified as ‘perhaps the most contentious areas of documentary filmmaking’ (Grimshaw 2011, 254). Famously, Bill Nichols lists ‘observational’ as one of the six modes of documentary, which he defines as ‘modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative’ (2001, 99).

The debate on what characterises observational cinema in terms of filmic strategies is complex and long-running. Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009b) critically discuss some of these definitions, especially to challenge the accusation of it being a style that feigns objectivity or at least transparency. To summarise, in terms of filming, editing and framing techniques, it can be said that observational documentary – and more broadly this observational mode I am tracing across various kinds of film – is characterised by, for example, long shots and extended sequences, long takes, deep focus photography and synchronous sound. It has been defined as maintaining a respect for the spatial and temporal integrity of events, as being

suggestive rather than declarative, with the emphasis being on shooting rather than editing, and on scenes rather than shots (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009b, 3–18). Moreover, observational cinema, deals with ordinary people, the uneventful and everydayness. Crucially in the context of this article, this ‘sub-genre’ of documentary also engages with issues of alterity, otherness, intercultural encounters, and liminal subjectivities. Finally, a political commitment is underlying and embedded in this observational mode.

In 2009, Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz re-examine observational cinema and argue for it being a ‘distinctive form of anthropology in its own right’ (2009a, 538). They redefine it as a mode of ‘attending to the world’ (540). For the two anthropologists, observation is to be understood not as a mode of scientific knowledge production detached from everyday experiences, but as an embodied enterprise of attending ‘actively, passionately, concretely – while at the same time relinquishing the desire to control, circumscribe, or appropriate it’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009a, 540). Embracing this definition and taking the notion outside of the debate on anthropological methodologies, I argue that this established and yet ever-changing mode or sub-genre of documentary enables a practice of attending to the world observationally (542).

Both inside and outside the disciplinary domain of anthropology, various kinds of documentary (and ethnographic) films have been produced and theorised in the last 20 years, that albeit not always labelled as ‘observational’, share similarities with this mode of cinematic engagement. It seems therefore very timely to explore what the implications of this observational cinema are, and what these films can do for critical, postcolonial approaches to contemporary discourses and society. My research speaks to this debate that has been taking place across documentary studies, visual anthropology, and European art cinema. Two relevant examples of the resurgence of an observational mode in documentary film in the last decades are: films produced in the framework of ‘sensory ethnography,’ and those theorised by Alisa Lebow under the term ‘unwar film’ (2015, 454–474).

Sensory ethnography has been articulated by Sarah Pink as a rethinking of ethnographic methods that ‘investigates the possibilities afforded by attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representation’ (2009, 7). Audio-visual research in this vein, which connects aesthetics and ethnography, has been developed by the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University. Films made within this project have a style very similar to that of observational cinema, as outlined above. However, not all the film-makers who do sensory ethnography agree with labelling their films as ‘observational’, exactly because of the long-running debate about the objectivity claims that accompanied that kind of ethnographic cinema. Nonetheless, particularly resonating with the body of documentaries I am discussing here are the films by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, founder of the SEL. Films such as *Sweetgrass* (Castaing-Taylor and Barbash 2009, US) and *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel 2012, US) have been studied by anthropologists and film scholars alike. These documentaries are characterised by an intimate camera gaze, a focus on the everyday and the uneventful, and a commitment to long takes and high-quality synchronous sound. His films have been amply analysed in terms of their aesthetic and ethical sensitivity, and have been clearly considered as being examples of a new observational cinema (Grimshaw 2011, 255) while also challenging documentary norms (Thain 2015, 41).

Scholar and film-maker Alisa Lebow, speaking from outside the debate on ethnographic methodologies, studies documentaries about war, and enters the field from an original angle, coining the concept of ‘unwar films’ (2015). These are films that utilise various techniques

and approaches ‘to make the imperceptible perceptible’ (461), but they have in common a use of long takes, a slow pace, a sense of stillness, an attention to the details of the everyday. Unwar films:

look at the quotidian, the uneventful, the ‘something small nearby.’ In these ways, the unwar film makes perceptible that which is otherwise repressed or simply overlooked in the galloping narratives of war, thus helping to create the conditions for an emergent ‘political dissensus.’ (Lebow 2015, 461)

The filming and editing style of these films, their focus on the uneventful, and their political dimension, make ‘unwar films’ strongly resonate with what I identify as the key characteristics of observational cinema.

Alongside these various examples of documentary cinema, fiction or docufiction films such as *Le Quattro Volte* (Michelangelo Frammartino 2010, Italy) have been theorised as having characteristics that resonate with the genres of observational documentary. The observational mode can be detected both at a formal level (editing, speeds, framing, sound) and in terms of the affective experience they enable. Laura Rascaroli observes how Frammartino’s film, among others, speaks of a becoming-minor of European art cinema (2013a). She uses the concept not to describe the cinema of ethnic or national minorities, or one that uses radical, avant-garde-like experimentation. Rather, she describes it as a cinema that ‘embraces oppositional, fringe characters and themes’ (331). She continues stating that ‘the practice of becoming-minor involves a kind of ethics and a political commitment’ (328). Using a deleuzian framework, Rascaroli connects the aesthetic qualities of these films with the geo-political realm in which they are produced and circulated, particularly in relation to contemporary local and global dynamics and a sense of European-ness.

At this point, the common features of these various kinds of films should be apparent. Sensory ethnography films, the ‘unwar film’, and the becoming-minor European art film, all share some key characteristics that resonate with what I have identified as an observational mode. These common traits are: filming techniques such as long shots and extended sequences, the focus on ordinary people and the uneventful, the attention to issues of alterity and intercultural encounters, and a political engagement. Accordingly, revisiting observational cinema once again, I argue for an inclusive understanding of the notion. This approach enables a critical account of these contemporary documentaries in terms of how ‘attending to the world observationally’ can engender alternative modes of imagining spaces, identities and encounters.

It is in this framework that I analyse and put in conversations *El Cielo Gira*, *Sacro GRA* and *Lift*. I will now provide some concrete examples of what these films do, especially in relation to issues of European spaces, the feeling of being at home, and dynamics of belonging.

### Home through temporalities: inside(rs) and outside(rs) in *El Cielo Gira*

*El Cielo Gira* (2004) tells the story of a rural Spanish village, where director Mercedes Álvarez was born and returns to. This is a village isolated from neighbouring towns, and where only a few of the ‘original’ inhabitants are left. In the introduction of the film, we see a painter who, maybe like the film-maker herself, is setting up to paint a (dis)appearing image. After this, we are introduced to some of the ‘protagonists’ of the documentary: a pastoral landscape, an old woman who tells the story of dinosaurs’ traces, the walls of houses, the cracks in the pavement, the hills, the wind, the village, sounds of sheep and dogs, some of the other



inhabitants of the village. Two men, a woman and a dog are sitting on the brick bench in the square of the village. They are the white, elderly, inhabitants who have not left; they are waiting for the bread-man to come; he might come tomorrow or whenever. They talk about some of the other people who live there, those who sometimes appear, more or less regularly: the man who brings the frozen food, the fruit-man, the fishmonger, the postman. The camera keeps a medium shot, focusing on the three people talking; the film-maker remains 'invisible' and we witness these mundane conversations and daily events. The rhythm of this scene, like all others in the film, is slow, infused by a sense of waiting and silence.

One of the relevant temporalities of this film is constituted precisely by its pace, its slowness. Slowness has been theorised not only as the aesthetics of a certain cinema but also as a political move, that contains, among other dimensions, a critique of globalisation and capitalism (see, e.g. Jaffe 2014; De Luca and Jorge 2016 on this topic). In its cinematic time, this 'slow cinema'<sup>5</sup> allows a sensory and sensuous engagement with the film itself, as well as with the filmed reality. This slowness is closely connected to both the emphasis on the everyday to which I will return shortly, and to the affective potential of the film to move the viewer to a sense of proximity to the filmed events, of being pulled closer.

In *El Cielo Gira*, during the entire film, the streets, the cemetery, the buildings, the hills, the whole village and surroundings are mostly quiet and empty. The aural dimension is infused by silence and composed only by diegetic sounds: the animals, footsteps, people working, sitting, or chatting, about everyday activities, small events intertwined with local and national historical events, life and death. In-between scenes, the voiceover of the film-maker tells short stories about her memories of the village. Albeit not exclusively, panoramic shot and long takes are often used, where the camera remains fixed also when people walk away from it, or approach it slowly from a distance. All these techniques – aside from the voice-over – are very recognisable as typical of observational cinema, as previously outlined. Additionally, the working with silences has also an important tradition in postcolonial cinema. Silence is used to make the film breathe; to create moments of interruption in the hegemonic practice of coded signification; to generate suspensions; to create new openings; or to evoke the unrepresentable (see, e.g. Trinh 1992, 1999 on this topic).

*El Cielo Gira* moves from a daily-life moment to another, scene by scene we see the lives of those who belong to the village. Season after season there appear to be nothing really eventful happening, as if these are moments and conversations that have happened many times before, and will happen again, if not tomorrow, the day after, or next week. The first part of the film is infused by a sense of cyclical time. Only in the second half of the film, this regular, ordinary rhythm is interrupted by newcomers; the outsiders are the tourists, the people coming to glue posters for political propaganda, and the new entrepreneurs. With the regular rhythm of life, also the quietness is interrupted: by the guide who leads groups of tourists coming to see the roman ruins, by the loud sound of the machines building the new windmills, by the construction work that has started for a new hotel to be built in town in place of the old palace.

The time of the quotidian is beautifully performed in the film, and so are its ruptures. The everyday, far from being uninteresting or irrelevant, is a field where power relations, and cultural and geo-political dynamics find their most concrete repercussions. Several scholars from disciplines that go from philosophy to media studies, geography to anthropology,<sup>6</sup> have recently studied how everyday practices are negotiated. Also from a feminist and postcolonial studies perspective the quotidian is the ground where complex social and cultural norms

are played out. It is a field of experimentation and possibility (Highmore 2002, 4) that has to be carefully analysed to reveal how self-evident and taken-for-granted assumptions have a great political potential to unsettle common thinking and hegemonic norms, once they are brought into scrutiny, denaturalised, 'made strange' (van den Oever 2010). This endeavour functions to denaturalise 'self-evident assumptions, which far from being natural or neutral are instead informed by gendered power relations and hegemonic discourses' (Olivieri and Leurs 2014, xxviii). That is to say that what is considered to be the norm, or the dominant ideology, is that which remains generally invisible and is taken for granted, because of its pervasiveness. For example, feminist scholars for almost a century now have observed how traditional Western gender roles have been created and reinforced across time and space. They have explained how norms and ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman in society are naturalised by hegemonic discourses, and should rather than be considered as socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, a critical approach to the taken-for-granted means challenging naturalising discourses. A focus on the everyday can shed light on how people negotiate their experiences and identities, thus 'making visible the invisible yet very material and quotidian dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities' (Olivieri and Leurs 2014, xxx). When it comes to the specific potential of documentary film in engaging with the everyday, Elizabeth Cowie makes a strong point in stressing the critical and political implications in such documentary performances. She writes, invoking Jacques Rancière, that '[T]he voicing of the ordinary by documentary disturbs the subjectivizing of objective discourse, introducing a "dissensus"' (Cowie 2011, 59). This dissensus is where non-hegemonic, alternative imaginaries and actions start taking place.

In this light, some of the conversations and scenes in *El Cielo Gira*, about the new hotel that is being built in town, can be interpreted as being exemplary of how a space is negotiated in terms of belonging, and feeling at home. We see shots from the inside and the outside of the palace being renovated; large blades cut into the brick walls opening doors and windows. Three of the old people of the village, sitting in the usual square, talk about the hotel and the visitors who will come: 'Maybe we would be even allowed in!', the woman says. 'Why not? ... it will all depends on the wallets ... It's a 5-star hotel' (1:01:08 to 1:01:34). They speculate about how many rooms it will have, how it will be for the rich and not the locals, how they will only be allowed to look at it from the outside; they argue that an old folk's home would be better: 'We would have more right to live there, we are from the village' (1:02:17). Age, class, right of place, processes of belonging, they all play out in these mundane conversations. In this context, as well as for Europe at large, we can then ask: Who are the insiders and who the outsiders? How are dynamics of belonging unsettled and negotiated? Who is or feels at home, how and when?

The last fascinating temporal dimension of Álvarez's documentary is in how it relates to the past, the future and the present through the stories told in and by the film. The inhabitants of the village talk, for example, about the many people who used to live there, the old elm tree that was uprooted 30 years ago, the dinosaurs that roamed the area, the old roman road and Marco Flavio's house discovered nearby. Moreover, global historical events find their way in these remote spaces: the war in Iraq and George W. Bush's ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, the Second World War, the start of the Spanish Civil War of the related local events. Traces of these pasts are present, visible and audible in the documentary, and part of the very fabric of this Spanish village, and of Europe.<sup>7</sup>



A crucial scene, where space, time and the politics of belonging unfold is the one where we see two people whom we would read as ‘foreigners’, or migrants, meet in the countryside. It is one of the final moments of the film: a man jogs through the countryside, he is an Olympic athlete; he meets a shepherd looking after his sheep, he and his family are the only Moroccans in their village, we learn. They greet, speak Moroccan and tell their stories of where they are from and what brought them here ‘so far from their homes’. They talk about how the Arabs were here already 800 years ago, how they were in the castle of the village, the one where the hotel is being built; and about how even those sheep are of Arab origin. They meet across and along these temporalities. Again, the past is made present in the film, and it inscribes these non-white Muslim Europeans as part of the very history of the place, not outsiders, not newcomers. What Europe is evoked in this documentary then? Who feels at home and how is displaced, included and excluded in this rural (trans)national space?

*El Cielo Gira* presents a complex European space where transnational flows and temporalities intertwine; past and present events inform each other; where everyone seems to belong across ethnicities and religions, but where some feel more at home than others. It is a (trans)national space where ‘feeling at home’ appears mobile and relational; precarious and not always comfortable, but not conflictual; dependent on personal memories, interpersonal relations, and a commitment to the local life, rather than on race, nationality or some ‘jus soli’.

In the next two documentaries, the city rather than the countryside is the space where movements of inclusions and exclusions, belongings and encounters are explored: Rome, and London – two of the most renowned and highly populated European capitals.

### **Homes at the borders: belonging around the city – *Sacro GRA***

When Gianfranco Rosi set up to shoot the documentary *Sacro GRA* (2013, Italy), he involved Renato Nicolini, architect, politician, dramaturge, and famous Roman personality. This makes the film deeply entangled not only with the human geography of the city, but with the recent history of Rome. The documentary follows the almost perfect circular movement of the giant highway ring that surrounds the city of Rome and Vatican City, 68 kilometres long, and with an average diameter of 21 kilometres. Outside of it are the suburbs, the historical ones and the overgrown peripheries. Along the various stops on the way, the film presents, in separate scenes, the coexisting realities of the people living there. Symbolically, the ring separates Rome from the rest. Like the modern walls of a city, it constitutes the invisible boundaries of who belongs and who does not. The Grande Raccordo Anulare (GRA) has a prominent role in the imaginary of Romans, its routes are well known to the inhabitants of the city, and it even has its place in pop songs and current anecdotes. What happens on or outside of it belongs to an almost no-man’s-land: illegal car-depots, trash-pits, unauthorised hotels and human settlements at the border of legality. Recent politicians have, for example, banned or tried to move foreigners, especially Roma people, outside of the ring, as if that would be enough to expel those unwanted ‘aliens’ from the space of those how have the right to belong ‘there’.<sup>8</sup>

The documentary tells the stories of those people who live, literally, in the liminal space of the city: the subjectivities usually invisible in the hegemonic narratives of contemporary European urban spaces. The film won the Golden Lion at the 70th Venice International Film Festival, and became an important, poetic document of Italian contemporary social reality,

telling the tales of Rome specifically, but plausibly of many large metropolises. Among the various characters and spaces narrated in the film, the viewers sit inside of an ambulance, observe the fields along the sides of the road where sheep graze, follow a gardener cataloguing and maintaining the local flora in a somewhat surreal fashion, peeks in an aristocratic mansion that now remains as a fotonovela setting or as a Bed&Breakfast, look around the run-down courtyard of popular houses covered in graffiti. Some of the people are white Italians, speaking with a thick Roman accent; others speak a proficient Italian yet with a foreign accent. Other scenes include, for example, two migrant sex-worker women telling hilarious and mundane stories about their lives and work vicissitudes, singing and eating in their van on the side of the road. In a beautiful, almost neo-realist film scene, the camera enters the home of an eel fisherman and his wife; a migrant worker helps them in their daily labour, he does not speak but is there, in the frame, fixing the nets. With an almost CCTV-like angle the camera records, from outside their windows, the people living in a tall building: white and non-white migrant families, a guy playing music on his DJ console, mother and daughter painting the walls of the room, a family chatting and reading, a woman talking about how the economy is stale. One of the ambulance nurses irons his clothes at home while talking via webcam with two women on what looks like a sex-chat. They talk about what happened in their lives, what they are eating, their jobs. All these people appear connected to each other by the visible highway ring, or by the phone or the internet. Most importantly, they are connected by their shared belonging to an in-between zone, ordinary and unspectacular, mostly invisible in the celebratory master narratives of European-ness in mainstream media.

In this documentary the question is not so much that of who belongs and who does not, who are the insiders and outsiders, rather, everyone already belongs here, in this liminal space already separated from the 'centre'. Liminality, as an anthropological concept (see, e.g. Douglas 1966 on this topic), can also be connected to what Trinh T. Minh-ha has called, in different contexts, the gap, the interval, the intra or 'the space in-between' (Trinh 1992, 1999, 2005) as 'a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it' (Trinh 1990, 96).<sup>9</sup> In the film, this space is a threshold between worlds, an urban peripheral modernity, invisible yet real. It can be understood as an 'interstitial space' (Trinh 1992, 173), that is at once theoretical, symbolic, and as an actual space, which has an aesthetic value as well as an epistemological and political dimension. I argue that this liminal space, as Trinh's 'space in-between', is a space between visible and invisible, presence and absence, present and past/future, known and unknown. This in-between space also resonates strongly with what Homi Bhabha calls 'third space' (1994, 37–38) as a hybrid space of identification, but not of fixed identity: 'a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha as quoted in Rutherford 1990, 211). This interstitial space allows the unsettling of dominant conceptions, and creates the space for new subject positions to become visible and to be encountered.<sup>10</sup> *Sacro GRA* opens this space, thus enabling this encounter, which I consider to be not just representational but also affective.

The style of the film is observational, although not as slow as the previously discussed *El Cielo Gira*. Rosi's film displays many of the techniques characteristic of observational film, such as synchronous sounds, often hand-held camera, minimal editing during each scene, and a focus on ordinary lives and people. The scenes are like short snapshots of the contemporary everyday, of the lives of unnamed people, buildings, bars, cars and airplanes, and their voices and sounds compose the rhythm of the film. The viewers drive with and

in the ambulance and the cars along the ring, stop with the camera in bars with girls dancing on the tables, observes a crowd praying in a Catholic ceremony, and peek inside people's houses, their workplaces, through their windows, destitute aristocratic villas and poor popular houses.

The camera, and with it the viewers, literally enters these private spaces; and then is on the road again. We do not 'see for ourselves', but in documentary it is 'ourselves seeing through another's eye, for we adopt as our own the look of the camera that has gone before us and that has selected and organized the space and the seen' (Cowie 2007, 90). The documentary enables what Elizabeth Cowie has referred to as a relation between 'here' and 'there'. The feminist scholar, elaborating on the ability of documentary indexicality of 'making present' (Doane 2007, 136–140) writes:

We want this reality to be present to the other, who is our interlocutor, and we want to make present to ourselves *here* the other's gaze *elsewhere* that we imagine as we listen to her or his reactions to our visible missive. Our 'here' both actual, as geographical and spatial, and also virtual, as thought – in Charles Sanders Peirce's terms, as the 'here' of me, myself, as desiring subject. (...) The observer-spectator could now see and hear for her- or himself, as if she or he were there. (Cowie 2007, 88–90)

In this sense, *Sacro GRA* is an example of how documentary film has the potential of bringing the elsewhere here, of enabling an encounter between self and others, spectators and filmed subjects, connecting realities and everyday lives, in an affective network of filmic, representational, material and political relations. In the film, the eternal city is suspended, circularly, neither in the past nor in the future: 'and the cycle begins again' – as we hear from one of the protagonists of the film. It shows a present of multiple employments, class, gender, races, nationalities and living conditions. The documentary reaffirms Rome as an imaginary present and maybe presents its possible futures. It shows another side of European spaces, the boundary space of the margins, spatially, socially and economically.

### **Who lives here? Proximate encounters – *Lift***

Marc Isaacs's documentary *Lift* (2001, UK) is entirely shot in the lift of a high-rise building of flats in London. The space engaged here is therefore small and limited, yet the film addresses many different subjectivities, experiences and locations. The camera follows the various residents of the flats in their daily lives. The passages and conversations in the lift are fleeting; the shots present very short but repeated encounters. This time, differently from the other two documentaries here analysed, the film-maker's presence and voice are directly part of the film. The opening of the film features the inside of the lift tunnel accompanied by noise of the mechanics of the ropes and levers of the lift, edited with voices and sounds into a somewhat scary and sci-fi soundtrack. While a background mechanical noise stays throughout most of the film, the remaining 22 min continue with shorter or longer shots of the people who enter and exit the lift, talking to each other or talking to the film-maker, interspersed by shots of the digital dial or the ropes of the lift going up and down. The inhabitants of the building appear to be of all different ages, genders, national origins, religions ... and moods. It is unclear for how long the camera is filming, could be the same day, and at times it is, or multiple days. The film-maker asks questions directly to the people once they enter the lift: about their day, their dreams, their experiences in the building, their childhood, how satisfied they are with their lives, their religion. Some of

the people are friendly, other hostile or suspicious, or curious. Sometimes the ‘lifters’ talk to each other as strangers and they find some apparently unexpected common grounds, other times they ignore or even avoid each other. Religion and faith at large emerges as one of the key topics that most people want to discuss.

All in all this film is more ‘experimental’ than the others I have analysed above. Most of the shots are close ups or medium shots, as to be expected given the material spatial limitations; thus, panoramic long shots and long takes are not present. However, hand-held camera, the consistency of time within a scene, synchronous sound and the emphasis on daily activities are clear similarities to the other films I have analysed so far. In this sense, *Lift* can be considered an observational film, although it sits at the border of what Bruzzi (2000), revisiting Bill Nichols’ famous categorisation, would call performative documentary. There are various elements that make a documentary performative. One of the main definitions Bruzzi provides is that the performative mode entails the ‘intrusive presence of the filmmaker’ in the film (2000, 155). That is to say, the film comes into being because of the explicit encounter of the film-maker with the filmed subjects, for the benefit of the camera (126).

One interesting aspect of *Lift* is how it transgresses the boundaries between the private space of home, and the public or shared space. Only one lady directly complains about how she is being filmed during one of her private activities, smoking. A man of Pakistani or Indian origin mostly interacts with the film-maker offering him food. Slowly the film-maker in the lift seems to become more familiar, more intimate, less alien and less threatening.

The same question that guided the analysis of the previous two documentaries can be asked here: How does the film present European spaces, and attend to dynamics of belonging, displacement, inclusion and exclusion? If we focus on the enclosed space of the lift itself, in the film it seems that the only real outsider is the film-maker. He is the one who ‘should not’ be in the lift, the one who is intruding in the home space of someone else. However, the lift itself is a transitional space; none really belongs *in* the lift. When we considered that the film is set in London, the multicultural composition of the people using the lift acquires a broader dimension. London is considered the quintessential cosmopolitan European capital. So, the question is not anymore who is welcome into the lift; rather, it becomes: who belongs to the apartment, i.e. London, i.e. contemporary multicultural and postcolonial Europe? The lift becomes an exemplary microcosm of the European space.

Once again, although in a very different way than the previous one, this film could be read as inhabiting a liminal space. The lift is literally a space between home and the outside, between private and public. Moreover, the viewers are catapulted in an elsewhere that becomes very proximate: the space of the film is small, the protagonists of the film really close to the camera. The very narrow space of the lift makes very poignant Michael Taussig’s statement when, talking about a different set of films, he declares: ‘spaces press up against the film-maker, shaping the contours of work and affecting the viewer’s capacity to imagine or to be lifted into other worlds’ (Taussig 1993, 8). Viewers are affectively lifted elsewhere.

The film has been brilliantly analysed by Laura Rascaroli as speaking to a postcolonial critique of the common European home (2013b). Rather than seeing it as utopian however, as Rascaroli does, I argue that the film, especially when read together with the other two documentaries, speak to a European space that is already here. The utopian element could possibly be in the lack of explicit conflict recorded in the film. This is certainly not representative of the many actual violent events happening in Europe and sadly present

in newspapers daily (from aggressions to racial minorities, to terrorist attacks; from the frequent episodes of gendered violence, to the killings of activists and politicians). However, the film is not free of tensions and conflict, thus making it quite a compelling performance of the postcolonial European space that this article has discussed so far. As I have discussed, this is a space always already traversed and inhabited by people of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds, and cultural and religious traditions; a space which very texture is composed by migratory flows and intercultural, transnational encounters. Importantly, I do not argue for a reading of the film in terms of some ideal multiculturalism, but I want to advocate for the film's ability to engage with an intimacy of relations that works at the level of the everyday of experiences rather than the idealised notions of multicultural politics.

In line with Rascaroli's study of another of Isaacs's film, *Calais: The Last Border* (2003, UK), I would argue also this film 'questions the contemporary form of European "community," and produces forms of visibility that interrupt the falsely unified and simplified figure of otherness that shores it up' (Dasgupta in Rascaroli 2013b, 5). In other words, 'Isaacs's films produce spatial reconfigurations of the relationships between subjects' (5). Relations between subjects are therefore the key element here. Moreover, and quite literally, *Lift* mobilises a relation of proximity: between the camera and the subjects filmed, the viewers and the diegetic space, and the various subjects with each other. I propose to understand this proximity, therefore, not only as the necessary contingency of events occurring in the few square meters of a lift, but as a metaphor of what documentary film, and particularly this kind of contemporary European documentary, can do. Similarly, the proximity enabled by the lift and in the film can work:

as a metaphor of the city and, indeed, of spaces of increasingly larger scale: East London, London, postcolonial Europe, the urban West. At the same time as being metaphorical, however, this lift also offers itself as an actual place, where specific people are met and, as such, it is irreducible and, of course, non-fictional. (Rascaroli 2013b, 7)

Importantly, the lift as a metaphor also carries another meaning: it can be read as a 'non-place' (Augé 1995). Sandra Ponzanesi, elaborating on Marc Augé's notion of non-places, connects it with the specific experiences of migrants in European cinema (Ponzanesi 2012). Non-place are spaces of transit and waiting, of otherness, neither here nor there (677); they are also spaces of suffering, exclusion and enclosure. Ponzanesi discusses the role of such places in migrant cinema: refugee camps, detention centres, airports, boats. The lift fits extremely well in this list. It can be argued that, in Isaacs's film, the lift becomes a space, inscribed in a postcolonial Europe, which transforms 'the outsider/insider relations' making it a location 'for alternative belonging and trespassing' (690). In this sense, the political potential of this documentary becomes explicit: *Lift* does not merely repeat and reconfirm ideas about London (or Europe) 'it somewhat subverts them, leading to a counter-reading' (Rascaroli 2013b, 11). It opens to a counter-imaginary of the postcolonial European present that is already here, and to its possible futures, not utopian, but actual, conflictual and contradictory.

### **Documentary encounters: European spaces in affective proximities**

As previously discussed, documentary film has the ability of 'making present', of bringing here (close to the viewers), an elsewhere (the everyday reality of the people filmed). Additionally, I argue that the potential of all three of these documentaries lies not just in

this making present of another reality. Rather, the potential is in provoking an affective encounter with the realities and experiences of diasporic and liminal subjects. These people are usually either absent from mainstream representations of Europe, or become visible as a humanitarian crisis or a criminal problem. Instead, these documentaries show that these 'other' subjectivities and everyday realities are already here, and are part of the fabric of the European space. This is what I call affective proximity: a mode of embodied and political encounter that these observational documentaries enable.

It is in the way the films are constructed that this affective mode is elicited. But what kind of affective and political experience arises from such a documentary? First of all, it should be stressed that the distinctive techniques of observational cinema 'open up a space between the concrete details of lived experience and broader historical and political abstractions' (Grimshaw 2011, 255). This space is political in as much as it allows to engage with reality otherwise, and to envision alternative modes to imagine the European space and to interact with 'alien' others. When considering observational documentary as a mode of attending to the world, its epistemological as well as political implications become apparent. I maintain that these three documentaries 'engage[s] the viewer in an experience of the political, that is, of historical reality and the social as a public sphere that can be *contended*, *remade*, and *reimagined*' (Cowie 2007, 99). Documentary – and I argue, specifically observational documentary – is to be understood not as a genre that engages with a 'mere recording of actuality as spectacle or beauty; instead, the documentary is presented as an epistemological discourse that requires that we not only *see* but are also brought to *know*' (Cowie 2007, 95). How do these films 'bring us to know'? I propose that it is also through their 'affective texture' that they 'elicit an empathy in the viewer' (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009b, 114). I identify this affective texture in the sense of proximity, of closeness, that the films engender between viewers and filmed subjects, between filmic materiality and filmed reality. The way these documentaries enter into the everyday spaces of other people's lives activates a sense of vicinity and recognition. It is as if we, viewers, are there: in a Spanish village, sitting on a broken chair; in the ambulance rushing at night around Rome; in the lift of an apartment building in London.

I argue that it is in the affective proximity that these films activate, that empathetic encounters become possible. In other words, these documentaries activate an aesthetic, symbolic, material and affective proximity to other people's everyday lives. This proximity allows for an 'expansion of perception [that] brings us into "affective co-motion": by opening us to more possibilities for being affected, we increase our own power to affect in return' (Thain 2008, 3). It is here I propose to find the answer to what these documentaries can *do*: in creating a sense of affective proximity, they unfold their political potential of reimagining contemporary reality. More specifically, each of these three documentaries has presented a different space: a metropolis or a village, outsides and inside places, in the North or in the South of Europe. Although the diversity of social context and national specificities is crucial when looking closely at these documentaries, I focus here and what all three films have in common. They portray and perform the lived reality of European cities and countryside, and they enable an affective experience that has the potential of re-imagining those very spaces.

In other words, such films contribute to creating alternative imaginaries of the everyday lives of the inhabitants of contemporary European spaces. They intimately address the temporal and spatial realities of transnational subjects; they make visible how migratory



movements and temporalities are part of European histories and spaces; and eventually they contribute to redefining the contours and identities of contemporary postcolonial Europe.

## Notes

1. There are, however, noteworthy exceptions to this general tendency. These include works that have engaged with the genre of documentary film from a postcolonial perspective, such as: Trinh (1990) and Ponzanesi (2016).
2. For an elaborate discussion on the 'classic' norms and the new techniques of documentary and ethnographic film, see for example Renov 1993; Gaines and Renov 1999; Nichols 2001; Ellis and McLane 2005.
3. See for example works on so-called transnational, postcolonial, intercultural or accented cinema, such as Pines and Willemen 1989; Marks 2000; Naficy 2001; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012.
4. For a discussion of the figure of the 'stranger' in Europe and European Cinema, see Loshitzky (2010).
5. Slow Cinema has been identified as a genre in itself, of a specific kind of art cinema (see, e.g. Røssaak 2011, 116–117).
6. Among others, see de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Highmore 2002; Moran 2005; Silverstone 2005.
7. It shall be noted that the concept of trace in relation to both history and the medium specificity of documentary film has a long tradition. I have elaborated on this concept and its implications elsewhere (Olivieri 2012).
8. An oral narrative by Renato Nicolini, in Italian, retraces some of those politics and movements: <http://www.rai.tv/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-1fbfd63a-a47f-473f-8be6-4756e68ff1d0.html>.
9. See for example, Trinh 1992, 1999, 2005.
10. Elsewhere, I have articulated some of the implications of the concept of the 'interval' as referring simultaneously, to the content matter of a film, to its techniques and to a certain understanding of experimental and political documentary-making itself (Olivieri 2014).

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