

### 3 Frontiers of the political 'Closed Sea' and the cinema of discontent

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This chapter explores some of the ways in which cinema as a medium can offer possibilities for civic action and political transformation. It proposes in particular an analysis that foregrounds the relationship between postcolonial cinema and citizen media as a way of articulating active participation that manages not only to transform public space but also to propose alternative visual registers. Postcolonial cinema, I argue, contests mainstream and dominant visual registers that propose stereotypical or biased representations of the Other, undoing tropes of mastery and control by offering, or opening up, the space for different voices and viewpoints. The argument is developed through an analysis of *Mare Chiuso* (*Closed Sea*, Italy, 2012), a documentary film by Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, focusing in particular on the video footage produced by the refugees themselves during the Italian push-back operations in the Mediterranean, which features in the film. Interpreted as an example of citizen media, the miraculously saved video footage becomes a symbol for self-representation as well as political self-determination.

Cinema is a transnational medium that is particularly suited to conveying messages of dissent and social critique that extend beyond the boundaries of the nation. It can do so by setting in motion an engagement with multiple audiences, by connecting different worlds and realities, from the local to the global. In what follows I focus in particular on postcolonial cinema and some of the ways in which it engages with citizen media, specifically in terms of unearthing the complex legacies of the colonial past which continue to haunt the present, before turning to the analysis of the documentary film *Mare Chiuso* and the video footage produced by some of the migrants featured in it.

#### **Postcolonial cinema and citizen media**

The specificity of postcolonial cinema is that it proposes alternative visions and aesthetic forms that challenge societal inequalities and bring to light hidden histories and perspectives. In this sense, the term 'postcolonial cinema' has little to do with the origin of the film-makers, nor is its

use specifically related to the content of a film. Instead, it references a particular form of engagement with the way in which representation is organized and formalized to fix otherness or deviancy (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). As Stuart Hall explains, '[w]ithout relations of difference no representation could occur. But what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, serialized' (1996:215). The main task of postcolonial cinema is to contest mainstream or dominant visual registers that produce stereotypical or biased representations of the Other, and to expose tropes of mastery and control, thus offering or opening up the space for different voices and viewpoints to be expressed. This means accounting for the perspectives and voices of the oppressed both in ideological and in visual terms, looking for different registers of film making, distribution and reception. In this respect migrant cinema can be seen as a subcategory of postcolonial cinema, as it specifically focuses on issues of mobility and integration. Postcolonial cinema has a broader scope as a framework of analysis, whereas migrant cinema reflects one of the many strands that exemplify a postcolonial way of reading the world.

Postcolonial cinema therefore provides a platform for subaltern marginalities, making the 'others' protagonists and part of the mainstream narrative. This enables marginalized communities to find ways to articulate their presence and participate in different conceptions of social and political life. They become active participants in constructing their media image and media representations. What they produce and how they produce it also falls within the remit of 'citizen media' as conceptualized in this volume, because they make use of media to critique and contest social structures and shape political realities. They become not just the objects of representations, but also shapers and makers of dislocated visions.

Postcolonial cinema then engages in making the invisible visible<sup>1</sup> (Young 2012:21), in developing a visual repertoire that can create a dialogue between aesthetic representations and political intervention. This agenda, which is pursued through film making and its distribution and reception, is intended to allow invisible citizens, unpeople (Curtis 2004) or alien subjects (Marciniak 2006), to find alternative locations for conveying forms of participation and mediation that would otherwise remain unrecorded or ignored. Though we are talking at times of small-scale productions, with limited circulation and *cachet* for international festivals, the films are still likely to reach an informed or interested audience. Audiences can access new stories and memories via the normal distribution channels, but also through the widespread circulation of digital media productions via social network sites such as YouTube, Twitter and Vimeo.

Postcolonial cinema aims to make an impact on public life, to alter the way the notions of public space and political participation are perceived. Yet it deals not just with the present and the public realm, but also with the past and the private, be it individual or collective. It engages many genres (from melodrama

to documentary), historical periods (from the Ottoman Empire to Soviet rule), and different geopolitical contexts (the West as well as the postcolonies; Mbembe 2001) by way of unframing the dichotomy of oppression and resistance, visual mastery and blind spots.

The domain of 'citizen media', as defined in this volume, encompasses not only the form and content produced by non-affiliated citizens but also the role citizens and their practices play in public space and their ability to transform that space. Citizen media is therefore envisaged as operating through a different *palette* of art forms, creating diversified political interventions in a bid to pursue an inclusive agenda. In this sense, postcolonial cinema will often fall within the domain of citizen media, not only because it incorporates alternative forms of participation but also because of its emphasis on inclusion and contestation, an emphasis which has historical roots as well as methodological implications.

In the 1960s, Third Cinema, for example, attempted to challenge the economic dominance of First Cinema (i.e. Hollywood) and to differentiate itself from counter-hegemonic, but still European and nation-based Second Cinema (art houses), by proposing a revolutionary alternative that would focus on the masses and express their political goals through innovative cinematic forms (Gabriel 1982; Wayne 2001). Its strategies included not only promoting a poverty of financial means, as it wanted to put forward an 'aesthetic of hunger', but also the use of non-professional actors (as in Italian neo-realism) and most of all the pursuit of embattled and subversive goals. Often influenced by the revolutionary thinking of Frantz Fanon,<sup>2</sup> this was a cinema that magnified not individual and oedipal stories, but the revolt of nations that wanted to liberate themselves from the clutches of imperialism, injustice and oppression. Initially established in Latin America by leading figures such as Ottavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (who wrote the script for Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, 1966), Third Cinema spread across the world, not only reflecting the Third World's need to reclaim its authority and place in the transnational order, but as a style of denunciation and dissent that could involve the First World as well as the Third World, as long as it staged a way of transforming the political order and the role and visibility of its neglected citizens.

I therefore propose to explore the relationship between postcolonial cinema and citizen media as a way of articulating a notion of active participation that manages not only to transform public space, but also to articulate alternative visual registers. I will do so by explaining the origin of postcolonial cinema and its connections to its closest predecessor, Third Cinema, and engaging with the ways in which cinema as a medium can offer possibilities for civic action and political transformations. The discussion will prepare the ground for an analysis of *Mare Chiuso*, a documentary film by Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, and in particular the video footage produced by the refugees themselves during the Italian push-back operations in the Mediterranean. Interpreted as an example of

citizen media, the miraculously saved video footage becomes a symbol for self-representation as well as self-preservation.

### **Cinema as social commentary**

Third Cinema has exerted a strong influence on postcolonial cinema and may be considered its predecessor, although postcolonial cinema does not claim to be a movement or a genre, but rather a form of engagement with the visual narrative of empire and its deconstruction. The concept is thus not intended as a new label for cinematic production, but rather offered here as a framework of analysis – an epistemological standpoint or optic through which films emerge in their engagement with and contestation of power dynamics. It is a navigational tool that allows us to unearth the complex legacies of the colonial past that inevitably haunt the present. However, as a tool of analysis and a mode of reading that address power relationships in visual terms, the concept of postcolonial cinema can also be applied to film productions that are not explicitly postcolonial, such as orientalist movies and ethnographic documentaries, Hollywood classics and recent productions, migrant and world cinema, and recent global productions such as Nollywood and Bollywood films.

As such, then, postcolonial cinema is less explicitly polemical than Third Cinema, but it is still strongly engaged with the political and concerned with authoritarian oppression. It does not deal directly with freedom fighters, liberation heroes or decolonization movements, but has a more oblique relationship to protest and the politics of dissent, and problematizes the cinematic tools, media technologies and distribution networks through which we receive information and images (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012:7).

While sensitive to collective issues, postcolonial cinema often focuses on individual causes and quests, without losing sight of the multidimensionality of characters. These characters are often, but not necessarily, marginalized, displaced or disenfranchised by more subtle and diffused forms of oppression than the colonial/colonizer binary, such as labour migration and the global redistribution of capital. The colonial/postcolonial focus becomes actualized in a new realm of sensory and political experiences, where power relationships are relocated, shifted and rearranged. As neo-colonial configurations of power emerge in the contemporary world, we are reminded that the colonial hangover is far from over. Film and media in general can deal with the imaginary and the real, offering new opportunities for resistance and subversion through the frame of aesthetics and micropolitics. The master narratives break down into kaleidoscopic visions that refract larger, often repressed, miswritten and unofficial histories of the nation, magnifying the role of identity in its intersection with issues of class, gender, ethnicity and race.

Along with these intersectional issues, one of the most frequently recurring features of postcolonial cinema, especially of the postcolonial migrant cinema which is at the heart of the analysis in this chapter, is that of

non-places. Postcolonial subjects, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are often depicted in non-places such as city outskirts, hotels, detention centres, refugee camps, on the open sea or in airports (Augé 1995). This is an important trope of postcolonial cinema which underlies its political as well as aesthetic component. In the European contexts of migrant cinema, the reference to liminality, or spatial location at the periphery, operates as figuration as well as material place, to convey the borderline identity of subjects who are still perceived as guests in Europe.

In many European migrant films, the postcolonial subjects, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers become marked as ‘other’, and therefore socially ordered elsewhere, through their physical displacement to the outskirts of society, into liminal spaces that function as waiting rooms or holding areas designed to control access to ‘legal’ Europe, for example. However, these zones of marginalization and exclusion, heterotopias or non-places, can actually become places of semi-belonging and transformation (Ponzanesi 2012). One example is the role of the Mediterranean as a non-place that, through the many passages by migrants trying to reach Europe, becomes a location for alternative forms of claimed citizenship, expanding the borders of Europe towards a new liquid frontier. One of the aims of this chapter is to analyse how forms of citizen media reappraise the Mediterranean and turn it from a non-place to a space that is inhabited not by ghosts or invaders but by subjects entitled to human rights and European citizenship.

### **The Mediterranean as a non-place**

In analysing *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, Italy, 2012), a recent film by documentary film-makers Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, I will aim to highlight the connection between citizen media and the debates on postcolonial cinema, migration and non-places. The film is particularly relevant at the time of writing – in 2015 – for its engagement with the current and ongoing immigration emergency in Europe and in particular Southern Europe, Italy and Greece, where thousands of immigrants are landing illegally after a perilous crossing of the Mediterranean in trawlers or rubber boats, risking their lives and turning the Mediterranean into an open cemetery. Immigration to Southern Europe is a recent and rather sudden phenomenon that has been addressed by passing and applying unclear and inappropriate immigration laws. Desperate migrants attempting to reach the Italian and Greek shores (from Albania, North Africa and the Middle East, especially Syria at the time of writing)<sup>3</sup> to secure a future in Europe have been confronted with push-back operations by the Italian military marines. The territorial proximity of the Southern European shores and North Africa should make the Mediterranean an interesting crossroads space, fluid and in continuous evolution, but instead it has become a heavily politicized and patrolled non-place.

In this ongoing series of crossings by migrants, the Mediterranean acquires a new role and valence – which has been extensively studied in history,

anthropology and political theory – as a location that connects as well as separates; at times it is also a location of mediation and a contact zone, where different cultures have criss-crossed and co-existed for centuries, superseding the notion of land as important for territorial contiguity and unity (Boria and dell’Agnese 2012). The Mediterranean is seen as the border of Europe, offshore, and therefore as a political frontier where the new issues of citizenship are debated and guarded. But it is also a liquid continent or an open cemetery, due to the many unsuccessful crossings of migrants whose destination – ‘Europe’ – is never reached. While the media emphasize the ‘illegal’ landings as invasions, the reality of these modern odysseys is that of illegal refoulements, i.e. the expulsion of persons who have the right to be recognized as refugees. The principle of non-refoulement was first laid out in 1951 in the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, in which Article 33(1) states that

No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding this provision, the reality since 2008 has been that of migrants coercively rejected in push-back operations that brought them outside the common gaze, a strategy that reflects the political inadequacies of the Italian government and the European Union.<sup>5</sup> In the widespread metaphor of ‘waves’ of migrants, where cargoes of distraught people on *gommoni* (rubber boats) or *carrette di mare* (dilapidated trawlers) face the Italian navy securing the Italian coastline, the Mediterranean emerges, as Russell King writes, as ‘a liquid frontier separating the rich north (Europe) from the poor south (North Africa, the ‘third world’) and temptingly open to migrant crossing’ (2001:8). Although cultural theorist Iain Chambers has located the Mediterranean as a postcolonial hybrid where multiple histories, languages and cultures intersect and flow into each other, he too is aware of the ambivalence and the ambiguity that the Mediterranean has acquired in recent decades, as an open graveyard filled with unclaimed bodies (2008:33):

Here the concept of the Mediterranean is set adrift to float towards a vulnerability attendant on encounters with other voices, bodies, histories. This is to slow down and deviate the tempo of modernity, its neurotic anxiety for linearity, causality, and ‘progress,’ by folding it into other times, other textures, other ways of being in a multiple modernity.

Chambers’ poetic invocation embodies the ambiguity of the Mediterranean, not as a space where power imbalances cease but where they are articulated ‘otherwise’, allowing for reciprocal patterns of cross-cultural call and response. If revisiting the Mediterranean in this way means attending to

repressed histories of contact and communication between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, it also means recasting maritime history in terms of securitization and inhospitality, with the sea extending the law of the land into a space marked less by freedom and openness than by anxiety and fear. The Mediterranean, as a Sea of Death, is indelibly marked by the crimes perpetrated by generations of human traffickers, but also by the violent rejections and expulsions enacted by those forces – military and otherwise – that currently patrol its shores. It has become not just the liquid frontier of Europe, but also a repository for the continent's unwanted (Laviosa 2010). It is a place of transit where the abject bodies of migrants, undocumented people and refugees intensify, literally and figuratively, the asymmetries produced by globalization.<sup>6</sup>

### *Mare Chiuso*, push-back operations and the colonial legacy

In *Mare Chiuso*, Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre use the documentary genre as a way of engaging with reality, or better, with a denunciation of reality, siding with marginalized people who suffer injustices despite their entitlement to human rights and European citizenship. This is a cinema *engagé* that contests the status quo and denounces abuses of power. It can be read as a postcolonial film since it engages with the visualizing of subalterns by giving them a podium and a voice through a cinematic language that contests romanticized and stereotypical representations of the immigrant subjects in favour of real-life testimonials and subjective viewpoints. The film features interviews, archival footage and original footage captured on mobile phones by migrants themselves at the very moment that patrolling Italian guards appear on the scene. The film-makers met the victims of the push-back operations in the UNHCR Shousha refugee camp, on the border between Libya and Tunisia, and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (C.A.R.A.) in southern Italy: Sant'Anna in Crotona, Campania and San Giorgio Lucano in Basilicata. Their interviews with the victims form the main part of the documentary, along with footage from a session of the European Court of Human Rights held in Strasbourg in May 2009. The footage shows us that the refugees, who had been sent back to Libya, used Article 34 of the European Convention on Human Rights to sue Italy – in what became known as the *Case of Hirsi Jamaa and others* (2012)<sup>7</sup> – for indiscriminate push-back operations in high seas (Palladino and Gjergji 2015). The Court subsequently obliged Italy to pay a fine of 15,000 euros to the complainants – 11 Somalis and 13 Eritreans. During the public hearings of the Strasbourg trial held on 22 June 2012, footage of which was also shown in the documentary, one of the three solicitors representing the migrants stated that the European Union should prevent this 'Guantanamo on the high seas' from ever happening again.

*Mare Chiuso's* impact on the viewer has to be understood not only within the context that inspired it (the 2009 agreement between Berlusconi and

Gaddafi to control migration flows between Italy and Libya), but also against the backdrop of the specific events that have been unfolding since the film was released in 2012. It strikes the viewer as a stunning documentary that is particularly touching because of its portrayal of the reality experienced by many refugees who continue to attempt to cross the Mediterranean to reach Lampedusa, or other southern coastal posts in Europe. Lampedusa, a small island to the south of Sicily, close to Tunisia in North Africa and separated only by the strait of Sicily, has become a metaphor for Europe's unwanted. A tiny island of fishermen transformed by modern mass tourism, Lampedusa has been continuously in the news for the repeated dramas of refugees stranded on its shores, transferred into cramped CPTs (*centri di permanenza temporanei*, or temporary detention centres) or drowned on the high seas even before reaching the coastline.

The background story to this documentary is one that persists to this day. It is the story of many attempted or failed crossings of the Mediterranean. A record number of 170,000 migrants reached Italian shores in 2014 alone, a figure that continued to rise significantly in 2015, but not all attempts were successful – quite the opposite. The surge in the number of deaths has sparked renewed debate as to whether European search-and-rescue operations are adequate in the face of the humanitarian crisis triggered by the escalation of conflict in the Middle East and Africa (Aljazeera America 2015). Events that have particularly influenced public opinion since the filming of the documentary include shipwrecks that despite wide media attention were forgotten within a week. On 3 October 2013, a year after the release of the film in 2012, an overcrowded boat containing almost 500 migrants capsized less than one kilometre off the coast of Lampedusa, resulting in the death of an estimated 300 refugees, mostly originating from Eritrea. The tragedy shocked Brussels, with the European Commission president José Manuel Barroso travelling to Lampedusa to pay tribute to the line of 300 coffins. The symbolic but empty gesture of the Italian government to grant them citizenship after death speaks of the paradoxes and abuses committed in the name of citizenship and border control. In Milan, a flash mob was organized in support of the migrants of Lampedusa. People lay down in Galleria Vittorio Emanuele as 'dead bodies' covered with white sheets, the hollowed black bodies being replaced by whiteness and invisibility.<sup>8</sup> Such drownings and deaths have been repeated since 2013 without any substantial changes taking place. Another tragedy occurred in February 2015, when more than a dozen overcrowded boats tried to reach Lampedusa, with some 3,800 people attempting to cross the Mediterranean in the course of a few weeks, resulting in the death of more than 300 people.

On 19 April 2015, the greatest tragedy of all took place. A boat off the coast of Libya, south of the Italian island of Lampedusa, capsized, resulting in the dramatic estimate of between 700 and 900 people drowned. This created a new special emergency and led to a summit in Brussels, which responded with inadequate and even more restrictive measures, such as

imposing higher penalties and sanctions on human traffickers and a strategy plan to bomb all suspect vessels and ships on the African coast to prevent them crossing, consequently drowning innocent people. Once again, the problem (what causes unrest in Africa and the Middle East and what the responsibilities of the European Union are) is not addressed; only its consequences. Introducing short-term measures that penalize and criminalize the mediators of these exploitative conditions, with the aim of blocking terrorism through ISIS activities, will not diminish the flow or the problem (*Der Spiegel* 2015).

The filming of *Mare Chiuso* precedes but today continues to evoke these events. It focuses on a previous period when the Gaddafi regime was still in place (from 1969 until 2011). During that period, the Italian government resorted to illegal operations in order to block the stream of migrants across the Mediterranean, using an official push-back operation that violated the Geneva Conventions on the rights of refugees and the duty of providing rescue in case of danger by deporting the migrants to detention camps in Libya, a territory outside the jurisdiction of the Geneva Convention. Of particular concern in this context is the fact that migrants did not have access to asylum procedures, which they could only start once they reach Lampedusa, and that they were expelled to Libya, a country that is not their country of origin but a transit stop and that does not have a functioning asylum system, has not signed the Geneva Convention on Refugees and practices large-scale expulsion of undocumented migrants (Andrijasevic 2006).

The illegal refoulement actions (or push-back operations) were a consequence of the infamous Friendship Treaty, signed in 2008 by Berlusconi and Gaddafi. The agreement was supposed to put an end to a painful chapter in Italian history, relating to Italian colonialism in Libya and the inhuman concentration camps set up between 1929 and 1931,<sup>9</sup> mostly to uproot Bedouin nomads who supported the resistance movement led by Omar Al-Mukhtar. The end of this colonial chapter was linked to an injection of funding of up to 5 billion euros over 20 years for key infrastructure projects, the nature of which remained undefined. Although the treaty had economic benefits for Libya and the parties involved claimed to be motivated by a wish to end past disputes, it simultaneously implicated Libya in the establishment of a violent technology of security. Against the backdrop of Libya's colonial history, it seemed particularly paradoxical for it to apply forms of containment that are similar to those the Italians used against Libyan people during colonial times (Powell 2015).

There is a clear link here between the failure of Libya as a security border and the failure of the Italian government, and with it the European Union, to deal with the flows of globalization and the consequences of decolonization. The treaty constitutes a remapping of the colonial sovereign logic that implicates Libya in the production of sovereign violence against refugees. It re-enacts Italian colonial history by implicating Libyans in Italy's violent sovereign ban on refugees and asylum seekers. Through this remapping,

Libya has been transformed into a border zone of exception that is both outside but also inside the jurisdiction of Italian sovereignty (Palombo 2010:51–2).

### *Mare Chiuso*

Andrea Segre has tried through his film making to bring the plight of migrants caught in this postcolonial remapping to international attention. His films focus not so much on the migrants' arrival in Europe as on the causes that lead them to make their perilous journey, and provide a platform for their voices and stories to be heard. He has produced a consistent *oeuvre* that tries to address these issues in a consistent and politically sophisticated manner by focusing on the origins and developments of migrations from Africa, long before the migrants even reach Europe, in order to reveal migrants' motivations and depict life stories that are hidden behind the mediatised renditions of Italian and European reports. These themes are reflected in the trilogy of films he directed prior to *Mare Chiuso: A Sud di Lampedusa* (South of Lampedusa, 2006), *Come un uomo sulla Terra* (Like a Man on Earth, 2008) and *Sangue Verde* (Green Blood, 2010).

In *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, 2012), Segre, together with co-director Stefano Liberti, brings the story of *A Sud di Lampedusa* to a further climax by telling, in documentary form, what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these push-back operations and in the Libyan prisons after their deportation. On 6 May 2009, an overloaded boat with Somali and Eritrean men, women and children was intercepted in international waters. The boat was not fit for sailing and failed to continue its trip towards Lampedusa. Under the 2008 Friendship Treaty between Italy and Libya, these people could be and were returned to Libya even though they were in international waters and subject to international legislation.

One of the central elements of *Mare Chiuso* is a few minutes of video footage recorded on smartphones by the refugees themselves during their encounter at sea with the patrolling Italian police. The footage is a rare cameo that provides evidence to incriminate Italy in unlawful practices. According to Elisabetta Povoledo of the *New York Times* (Povoledo 2012), the video footage is particularly touching 'because it is real': She goes on to explain:

Because it was taken from a mobile phone, the images are jumpy and all-over-the-place, but it's unlikely that a professionally shot movie would have captured the spontaneity of the joy – and relief – of the boatload of mostly Eritrean migrants rescued by the Italian navy in the Mediterranean after a harrowing four-day crossing from Libya . . . The excitement of the migrants is palpable at the prospect that they would soon be taken to Italy.<sup>10</sup>

But this story has no happy ending. Initially friendly, the Italian navy receives a phone call and they change their behaviour and approach. Instead of taking the migrants on the rubber boats to safety as required by international law, they transfer them onto Italian military ships and return them to Tripoli, where many were subsequently mistreated for refusing to leave the Italian ship.

The story is told through interviews in addition to the video footage. Semere Kahsay is one of the main characters interviewed for the film. He tells us that he had to send his pregnant wife ahead of him because he did not have enough money to pay for both of them. His wife arrived safely and waited with their baby daughter for him to make the crossing, but as the victim of the push-back operation described in the film he could not join his family. Semere has a particularly powerful presence in the film, and provides cinematic force through his simple life story: he tells of his own odyssey, evoking a recurring theme that features in the different narratives, with his trip across the sea, his imprisonment in Libya, his long stay in the refugee camps and his great disappointment in the Italian dream. 'Thank you, Italians', he says, and then breaks down – 'We love Italy and all Italians. But thank you'. As it happens, there is a happy ending to his story. In the summer of 2011 Semere acquired the right to political asylum, 2 years and 5 months after his departure from Eritrea.

Notwithstanding the powerful impact of interviewees such as Semere, the most dramatic part of the film remains the video footage, which the migrants themselves miraculously managed to preserve and pass on to the two film-makers. The short 5.49-minute stretch – which was filmed by Semere, using a smartphone – has the familiarity of a home-made video.<sup>11</sup> It shows a boat, although it is hard to see whether it is a rubber boat or larger carrier, overloaded with Eritreans, mostly men and probably one woman in the frame, in the middle of the sea and under a blue sky. People smile directly and greet the camera, as if they are on holiday and enjoying a trip with friends. Some, of different ages, wear orange–blue safety vests, several wear caps and we hear them talking in their native language, Tigrinya. At 38 seconds into the video the camera focuses on a big white ship approaching the boat. The images become jumpy, moving between body parts and unfocused details, while we clearly see the big ship quickly approaching. People continue to speak to the camera, telling stories and embracing each other convivially, evidently excited by the arrival of the ship. The film-maker asks questions and various people respond and interact as if in an extemporaneous video clip. At 3.30 minutes into the video the camera focuses again on the huge white ship, which seems to be carrying Italian marines, now still at a safe distance. Migrants turn towards the ship in anticipation and joy because they assume they will be rescued. The last minute of the footage records the confusion and some discussion about what is going to happen. At 4.35 minutes we see a smaller boat leaving the white ship and approaching the migrants. We see later on that it is a yellow rubber boat. Slowly we

start noticing a couple of military men and a couple of men who are shirtless. They seem to address each other in English. In the last 10 seconds it is hard to anticipate what will happen. Ropes seem to be offered to attach their boat to the migrants'. Suddenly the video is interrupted and there is no more footage.

Only through the film shot by Segre and Liberti and their interviews with the people on the boat, who were deported to Libya, do we come to know what happened afterwards. At first friendly and helpful, the military receive a phone call that makes them change their attitude and approach – possibly a call from the authorities telling them not to rescue the refugees but to send them back to Libya. On the big ship, the migrants start to understand that something is wrong and that the ship is not travelling in the direction of Italy, as they can detect from the position of the sun. Once they realize that they are being sent back to Libya, they begin to resist and the Italian marines respond with violence; one migrant is even beaten on the head by a club so badly that he bleeds. Though the migrants' footage constitutes the core of the film, it is through the framing of the entire documentary by the directors that migrants' stories acquire a logic and coherence that turn them into an instrument of protest and vindication. The video was later used as evidence against the Italian state in the European Court of Human Rights, and this is the scene that we see at the opening of the film and at the end.

Hence it was through their own filming on a smartphone that these witnesses of their own suffering managed to challenge the legality of Italy's push-back operations, in a powerful example of how citizen media practices can bring about change in social and political life.

## Conclusions

*Mare Chiuso* provides a rare example of migrants documenting their own suffering and of engaged postcolonial cinema adopting the cause of refugees and asylum seekers as a central focus, not only in elaborating a film's narrative but also in delivering its visual content through the migrants themselves and their footage. By weaving together the aesthetic and the political, the film managed to achieve a subtle balance between artistic testimonial and social denunciation, and to succeed in bringing about concrete political change. Not only was Italy sued on the basis of the facts portrayed in the film, and obliged to offer compensation, but the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg also issued a ruling in favour of the refugees and their version of the truth. The film's success in reversing the mainstream narrative and giving credence to the migrants' perspective, and the migrants' own skill at preserving the short clip they recorded, testify to the empowering potential of digital tools, now widely available and highly adaptable. Without suggesting that they are simply a democratizing tool, it is fair to say that digital media have enlarged the space of participation and protest, for migrants and other constituencies. Yet it is within the medium of cinema

that the video footage provided by migrants could be framed in such a way as to facilitate a deeper understanding of the texture of representation, interpretation and dissent that goes beyond the digital revolution and straightforward accounts of the past as well as the present.

This documentary film, which started with the modest ambition of showing footage and interviews to record the story of one group of migrants, has now travelled to many international festivals and has been received very positively by critics and activists. On the evening of the Lampedusa drama on 3 October 2013, mentioned above, the film-makers decided to make the film freely available for streaming ‘as an exception’ – as a form of protest and denunciation, and an expression of solidarity with all migrants and with the dead.<sup>12</sup>

*Mare Chiuso* thus contributes to the tradition of postcolonial cinema by demonstrating how power relationships are historically constructed and constitute part of the colonial legacy, but also by showcasing moments of resistance that foreground the voices and histories of otherwise marginalized subjects, who are spoken of in the media in sensationalist terms but are hardly ever allowed to present their own perspective on events. The video is an example of what new digital media can do for citizen participation and of the power of witnessing it enables. Negative tropes, such as the Mediterranean as a non-place and references to the European inability to face ‘the immigrant invasion’, are contrasted with beautiful visual images of refugees calmly telling their stories of hope and despair. Unlike Third Cinema, the film depicts not a mass movement of protest but individual stories and testimonies that can raise public awareness and evoke empathy. The elaborate camera work and the warm colours produced by the images of the desert and the interiors of the refugee tents not only confer dignity and respect on those silenced subjects but aesthetically help to create a productive fissure between the harshness of the content and the opulence of the images. The film-makers’ skilful camera work could be said to be out of tune with the content; they may be accused of orientalizing or glamorizing the migrants. I would argue, however, that it succeeds in aligning the quality of the medium with the importance of the message, without falling into the trite understanding of documentary film as a poor genre or a record of unmediated reality. In *Mare Chiuso*, documentary film becomes an interpretative genre that draws on the postcolonial to achieve its powerful political sensitivity and visual cogency.

## Notes

- 1 As Robert Young puts it, ‘the issue is rather to locate the hidden rhizomes of colonialism’s historical reach, of what remains invisible, unseen, silent, or unspoken. In a sense, postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies’ (2012:21).
- 2 See, for example, Fanon (1993:35–106).
- 3 Since the 1980s, the rapidly increasing number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees coming not only from the former Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa

- (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia) but also from the Maghreb and other African countries, and from Latin America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the war in Yugoslavia), has drastically changed the face of Italian demography.
- 4 Available at [www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.pdf) (accessed 31 August 2015).
  - 5 The various improvised laws that attempted to regulate and legislate the presence, residence and right to citizenship of the newcomers have been increasingly inadequate and disastrous (Legge Martelli 1990; Turco-Napolitano 1998; Bossi-Fini 2002; Legge Pacchetto Sicurezza 2009; <https://strugglesinitaly.wordpress.com/equality/en-immigration-policies-in-italy/>). The sudden influx of immigrants to Italy (chaotically hosted in detention centres, refugee camps and improvised *centri di accoglienza*/hosting centres) is not a temporary emergency, but one that is destined to continue well into the future.
  - 6 See the blog by Gabriele del Grande, 'Fortress Europe', in which he reports on 6 years of travelling around the Mediterranean along the borders of Europe. Available at <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.nl/> (accessed 31 August 2015).
  - 7 [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-109231#{"itemid":\["001-109231"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-109231#{) (accessed 9 September 2015).
  - 8 See *Milano 14/2/2015 Flashmob Per i migranti di Lampedusa* (Milan 14/2/2015 Flashmob for the Migrants of Lampedusa); available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0uerxqggQ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0uerxqggQ8) (accessed 31 August 2015).
  - 9 The ferocious response of the Fascists to the Bedouin uprising in Libya involved creating new systems of ordering and disciplining. Nomads were considered worse than barbaric, and as deviant and dangerous to the Italian empire. For Generale Rodolfo Graziani, nomadism was a real danger and required special attention. To this end General Graziani took measures officially sanctioned by General Badoglio, Governor of Cyrenaica, to physically exclude the local populations and locate them in specific spaces. Between 1930 and 1933, the Cyrenaica *sottomessi* communities were forced into what Badoglio called 'a restricted space, so that they can be surveilled adequately, and isolated from the rebels' (Labanca 2005:31). The exact number of deaths is unknown and not documented, but it is estimated that during this period between 40,000 and 70,000 were killed or died of starvation. As David Atkinson argues, '[t]he camp and its barbed wired fences materialised European notions of a bounded territoriality; they finally forced the Bedouin to live within a disciplined, controlled, fixed space – in contrast to their traditional conceptions of group encampments and unfettered movement across territory' (2000:113–14). The camp was organized into re-education areas, which were meant to educate and train Libyan people for the military colonial apparatus, but they were also punitive spaces, where torture and human rights abuses occurred (De Carlo 2013).
  - 10 A video of the footage is available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgQB1b-3br94&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgQB1b-3br94&feature=youtu.be) (accessed 31 August 2015).
  - 11 A computer expert by training, Semere was on the boat because he was attempting to flee his country where military reserve duties can last indefinitely. The opportunity for the film-makers (Segre and Liberati) to meet with migrants presented itself after the outbreak of the Libyan war in March 2011, when many African migrants escaped the Libyan detention camps where they had been forcibly held. Some crossed the border with Tunisia, and in June Segre and Liberati travelled to the Shousha refugee camp to hear their stories. Segre explains how they were allowed by the migrants to use the footage, but also how they helped the migrants take steps against Italy in the European Court of Human Rights, in an interview available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kan6QyuRXvs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kan6QyuRXvs) (accessed 9 September 2015).
  - 12 [www.cinespresso.com/2013/10/04/mare-chiuso-in-streaming-gratuito-per-fermare-il-massacro-dei-migranti/](http://www.cinespresso.com/2013/10/04/mare-chiuso-in-streaming-gratuito-per-fermare-il-massacro-dei-migranti/). The film is now freely available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=goUBCs-SkAY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goUBCs-SkAY) (accessed 31 August 2015).

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