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A camera in the water: reframing the migrant image in documentary film

MARIANA DUARTE 

- 1 *The Purple Sea: an essay by Merle Kröger with Amel Alzakout*, *Pong-film*, <<https://purplesea.pong-berlin.de/en/5/purple-sea-essay>> accessed 27 March 2024.
- 2 Clarifying terminology is crucial to address the potential misuse and exploitation of terms like 'economic migrant', 'refugee', and 'asylum seeker' in discriminatory political discussions. For the official terminology adopted by the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees, see 'UNHCR viewpoint: refugee or migrant – which is right?', *UNHCR*, <<https://www.unhcr.org/in/news/stories/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-or-migrant-which-right>> accessed 27 March 2024. T. J. Demos suggests that 'while the term "migration" [and "migrant" I would say] may not accurately encompass the diverse forms of movement and displacement in contemporary society, it offers the advantage of conceptualizing a politically and aesthetically committed form of life characterised by mobility'. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

You remember wanting to let go and swim ashore. You remember wanting only to let go. To sink. Into nothingness. I have had enough. Boats. A helicopter. The water swirls. That makes you furious. And your senses are activated again. Why is it taking so long? Why are you leaving us here to die?'¹

The transition from one country to another can be a daunting experience for vulnerable migrants, especially those seeking asylum in Europe.² Ironically, while border enforcement policies targeting unauthorized arrivals severely restrict their freedom of movement, images of migrants circulate freely and globally in the mainstream media. These depictions often focus on groups of people crammed into lorries, or tightly packed on board small boats crossing the Mediterranean or, more recently, the English Channel.³ Arjun Appadurai has drawn attention to the inherent tension between diasporic pluralism and the territorial integrity of modern nation-states, which rely on a number of mechanisms to maintain their sovereignty, including the drawing of frontiers, the collection of census data, taxation, and the issuance of official documentation. As such, unrestricted movement across borders is often seen as a potential threat to the integrity of the nation-state as a political construct.⁴ In the same vein, the mainstream media has a significant impact on the proliferation of violent crisis imagery that portrays people who cross borders as undocumented visitors, victims or even criminals. Such framing of the migrant image reinforces negative stereotypes and perpetuates misconceptions about forced displacement.

- 3 See Melanie Gower, C. J. McKinney, Joanna Dawson and David Foster, 'Research briefing: Illegal Migration Bill 2022–23', *House of Commons Library*, 10 March 2023, <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9747/>> accessed 27 March 2024.
- 4 Arjun Appadurai, 'Traumatic exit, identity narratives, and the ethics of hospitality', *Television and New Media*, vol. 20, no. 6 (2019), pp. 558–65.
- 5 For example, *Human Flow* (Ai Weiwei, Germany, USA, 2017) and *The Rest* (Ai Weiwei, China, Germany, 2019) depict massive human displacements around the globe; the docufiction hybrid *Stranger in Paradise* (Guido Hendriks, Netherlands, 2017) stages conversations between an actor playing the role of a teacher and newcomers at a reception centre in southern Italy to investigate power relations; *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (Gabrielle Brady, Germany, UK, 2018) centres attention upon the ennu of a therapist working for Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre; the animated film *Flugt/Flee* (Jonas Poher Rasmussen, Denmark, 2021) tells the story of a man who struggles with disclosing his past as a child refugee.
- 6 *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (BBC2, UK, 2016–17), <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07ky6ft>> accessed 27 March 2024.
- 7 Peter Bradshaw, 'Fire at Sea review – masterly and moving look at the migrant crisis', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2016, <www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/09/fire-at-sea-review-masterly-and-moving-look-at-the-migrant-crisis> accessed 27 March 2024.
- 8 Faye Ginsburg, 'Decolonizing documentary on-screen and off: sensory ethnography and the aesthetics of accountability', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2018), pp. 38–48.
- 9 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 17.
- 10 Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Over the past decade, several non-fiction films have addressed unauthorized border crossings in the Mediterranean and beyond in an attempt to critically reframe the ways in which human displacement is represented and understood. Many have been produced in North America and Europe, directed by non-refugees, and released internationally at film festivals and on streaming platforms.⁵ Examples of high-profile productions include *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (BBC2, UK, 2016–17), a factual documentary series based on the premise of giving cameras to 'some of the people who smuggled themselves into Europe' to create an 'epic portrait of the migration crisis',⁶ and Gianfranco Rossi's *Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* (Italy, France, 2016), set on the Italian island of Lampedusa, a film in which 'the migrants themselves pass through almost too quickly for individual lives to be registered'.⁷ In this respect, the social and aesthetic engagement through which a filmmaker relates to film participants is also an ethical-political engagement when they frame an individual or a community on screen. The commitment to advancing the cinematic ethics of migration sits alongside discussions of the 'decolonisation of documentary films on and off screen' and a deliberate effort to address issues of cultural and economic power imbalances within dominant systems of film production.⁸

In *The Migrant Image*, a book published years before the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015, T. J. Demos discusses how artists from the USA, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East have sought to reshape documentary representations of the mobile lives of migrants, stateless people and the politically dispossessed. Focusing on diasporic art from the 1980s to the early 2000s, Demos looks into how documentary practices have evolved beyond conventional modes of representation, incorporating elements of fiction, experimentation and collaboration to reflect on a world of militarized borders, xenophobia, and uneven geographies within and between North and South.⁹ Demos's reflections on the portrayal of humanitarian emergencies in documentaries underline the importance of not reinforcing the inequalities they otherwise seek to challenge, and of refraining from the common tendency to sensationalize migrant crises as 'spectacles of misery'.¹⁰ A shift in perspective away from the 'exhausted image' of border violence in which people seeking safety are often made to 'embody the crisis itself'¹¹ has the potential to disrupt the cycle of heightened security policies that emerge alongside fear-based media coverage.

The discourse surrounding mainstream media depictions of border violence is intricately tied to the social and governmental power structures present in these visual representations. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler examines how suffering is presented to viewers and how its representation affects our ability to respond empathetically; in other words, 'frames' that assign recognition to the human are intertwined with more significant 'norms' that dictate which lives are 'grievable'.¹²

- 11 See Christian Rossipal, 'Poetics of refraction: Mediterranean migration and new documentary forms', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 3 (2021), p. 39.
- 12 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), pp.72–77.
- 13 Susan Sontag writes that 'the imaginary proximity to the suffering of others granted by images suggests a connection between the faraway sufferers – seen up close on the television screen – and the privileged viewer, which is implicitly untrue, which is once again a mystification of our real power relations'. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 102.
- 14 See Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 63–64.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 The term *borderscape* refers to physical and imagined spaces connecting diverse aspects of the bordering process. See Chiara Brambilla, 'Exploring the critical potential of the borderscapes concept', *Geopolitics*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2015), pp. 14–34.
- 17 See Martina Tazzioli and Nicholas De Genova (eds), *Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of 'the Crisis' in and of 'Europe'* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2016); Gianluca Gatta, 'Half devil and half child: an ethnographic perspective on the treatment of migrants on their arrival in Lampedusa', in Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (eds), *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 33–51.

In light of the publication of graphic photographs of the torture at Abu Ghraib prison in the early stages of the Iraq war, and in direct dialogue with Susan Sontag's work on the ethics of photography,¹³ Butler argues that there are ways of framing images that 'bring into view the human in its frailty and precariousness' and allow us to stand up for the dignity of human life whilst others might cause the opposite effect.¹⁴ In this sense, the political underpinnings embedded in these images strongly influence our perception, or lack thereof, of the intrinsic value of human life.¹⁵

Given the proliferation of violent crisis imagery, particularly in the wake of the so-called European Refugee Crisis of 2015, we should question if it is still plausible to make documentaries that depict the real-life struggles of forcibly displaced people without addressing the complexities of representation. What is the purpose of such images and for whom are they created? How do the perspectives of those with lived experience advance the cinematic ethics of migration? And how have filmmakers re-imagined and transformed the cinematic borderscape¹⁶ through their aesthetic and directorial choices? With these questions in mind, and reflecting on the intersection of political circumstances and aesthetic negotiations of geographical mobility, this essay proposes a case-study approach that considers the contrasting positionalities and perspectives enacted in three contemporary documentary films depicting Mediterranean crossings. I undertake a close reading of Rosi's observational documentary *Fire at Sea*, shot on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa at the height of the European migrant crisis; the participatory film *Les Sauteurs/Those who Jump* (Denmark, 2016), co-directed by Moritz Siebert, Estephan Wagner and Abou Bakar Sidibé; and the first-person experimental documentary *Das Purpurmeer/Purple Sea* (Germany, 2020) co-directed by Syrian filmmakers Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed.

Fire at Sea adopts a deliberate detachment from the lived experience of the newcomers, its perspective remaining safely on the shores of Lampedusa. In *Those Who Jump*, European-based filmmakers Siebert and Wagner provide Sidibé, an asylum seeker originally from Mali, with a hand-held camera to record his attempts to jump the border fence that separates Africa and Europe, located in Melilla, an autonomous city of Spain in North Africa. In *Purple Sea*, Alzakout survives a tragic shipwreck off the Greek coast of Lesbos with a waterproof camera strapped to her wrist, capturing striking images that later became a film. Informed by *Purple Sea's* approach to documentary filmmaking, I propose the notion of a 'camera in the water' as a provocation to reflect upon the epistemological framing of the migrant image, particularly in light of the influential role that media coverage plays in shaping public perceptions. This conceptualization highlights the lived experience of people seeking safety as a central modality of representation in contemporary border films, a point of view embodied in *Purple Sea* through unexpected underwater footage, orchestrated in a stream of images, sounds, words and memories.¹⁷

In pondering the concept of a ‘camera in the water’, I am inspired by the work of Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay, who has advocated for Indigenous peoples to pursue a cinema of direct self-representation. In his essay ‘Celebrating Fourth Cinema’, Barclay invokes shot/reverse-shot techniques to illustrate the differences between settler and Indigenous filmmaking, imagining a staged encounter between opposing perspectives that foreground the politics of conquest. In a critique of the North American historical drama *The Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lewis Milestone, 1962), which tells the tale of an English ship sailing to Tahiti, Barclay refers to a scene in which Captain Bligh (Trevor Howard) orders Fletcher Christian (Marlon Brando) to have an affair with a woman of high status among ‘the natives’ in order to gain power and influence in their territory. In this context, Barclay argues that the ‘camera on the deck of the ship’ represents the settlers’ point of view embodied in Hollywood’s First Cinema, whilst the Indigenous standpoint is conveyed by the ‘camera ashore’ (Fourth Cinema) held by the people for whom ‘ashore’ is their ancestral land.¹⁸ While Indigenous communities around the world face the challenge of preserving their ancestral lands and traditions within modern nation-state structures, forcibly displaced people travel across the peripheries of sovereign states and national ideologies.

The notion of a camera in the water is therefore highly proximate to that of a Fifth Cinema, theorized by Raminder Kaur and Mariagiulia Grassilli to identify a diverse range of films made by or with the active participation of people who have a liminal or transitory status concerning their region of residence. Such films highlight the ethics, politics and symbolic significance of their making, recognizing that displaced people may not even identify with the term ‘refugee’, hence their use of this terminology rather than ‘refugee cinema’.¹⁹ Kaur and Grassilli’s conceptualization is a late addition to the First-Second-Third-Fourth Cinema framework²⁰ and complements the genre of ‘accented cinema’, theorized by Hamid Naficy, which comprises aesthetic responses to the experience of displacement through exile, migration or diaspora.²¹ In this vein, I argue that Barclay’s notion of the ‘camera ashore’ is as central to Fourth Cinema as the notion of the camera in the water is to specific instances of Fifth Cinema.

The works I discuss respond to the challenge of ‘interrogating the complex causes behind the effects of migration hysteria and the politics of border wars’, as Demos proposed a decade ago.²² Firstly I explore the ways in which *Fire at Sea*’s land-bound camera reinforces the dominant crisis imagery and, consequently, the ‘exhausted’ migrant image. I then consider *Those Who Jump*’s participatory documentary mode of ‘sharing the camera’ with film participants as a means of addressing issues of authorship and unequal power relations in the production process. Finally I argue that the notion of a camera in the water, closely related to *Purple Sea*’s experimental approach, demonstrates the affordances and limitations of observational and participatory documentary in depicting

18 See Barry Barclay, ‘Celebrating Fourth Cinema’, *Illusions*, no. 35 (2003), p. 8, and *Our Own Image: a Story of a Maori Filmmaker* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

19 Raminder Kaur and Mariagiulia Grassilli, ‘Towards a Fifth Cinema’, *Third Text*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2019), p. 4.

20 The ‘Third Cinema’ from Latin America – described in Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas’s ‘Toward a Third Cinema’, *Cineaste*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1969), pp. 1–10 – was criticized for remaining mainly in the hands of male authors, thus the term has also been used to describe a ‘woman’s cinema of decolonisation’. See Ranjana Khanna, ‘The Battle of Algiers and the Nouba of the women of Mont Chenoua: from Third to Fourth Cinema’, *Third Text*, vol. 12, no. 43 (1988), pp. 13–32.

21 See Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

22 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 249.

the lived experiences of forcibly displaced people. In doing so, I highlight one example of a broader film practice that departs from the dominant and frequently disengaged gaze on migration and refugeeism, foregrounding the impact of camerawork – and, by extension, the matter of who controls framing and narrative – as a potent device for reframing the migrant image in contemporary cinema.

The observational documentary *Fire at Sea* depicts the arrival of displaced groups from North Africa in Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost island and a long-standing arrival point for migration towards the European Union. Over the past decade, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has conducted numerous maritime operations to secure the borders and target people-smugglers that operate in the area.²³ *Fire at Sea* takes place between 2014 and 2016, when the highest number of Mediterranean crossings to Europe were observed, and the route was considered the deadliest in the world.²⁴ The documentary focuses on the community of Lampedusa, and in particular on the coming-of-age story of Samuele Pucillo, the son of a fisherman who, ironically, suffers from seasickness.

The opening scene introduces the locals' peripheral contact with the migrant experience, as the boy wanders carefree around the island, playing with a slingshot. The film then shifts to a tense radio broadcast from the control room of an Italian naval vessel, in which a distress call from a migrant boat is heard over nocturnal shots of spinning antennas. When the communication is abruptly cut off, searchlights scan the surface of a deep, dark blue sea in search of survivors. Overall, the sequence conveys a detachment from the migrant experience that will persist throughout the film. The first images of migrants appear from a high angle above the water, on the control panel of a military helicopter that is hovering over an overloaded rubber dinghy (figures 1 and 2). These shots frame the distance between two sets of experiences: the mundane aspects of the everyday life of Lampedusans versus the tragedy of Mediterranean crossings.

During the ensuing operation, images of people wrapped in bright yellow emergency thermal blankets are framed through the glass windows of the rescue boat. In contrast, the white overalls and masks worn by the rescuers to prevent contamination evoke the vision of an 'encounter that cannot possibly be on an equal footing'.²⁵ The survivors are unaware of the camera's presence until one man looks directly into the lens, seemingly surrendering to the gravity of his situation.²⁶ After this disturbing moment, the story returns to the communal experience of Lampedusa. Pippo, the town's radio operator, broadcasts traditional Sicilian songs. Samuele's grandmother recalls the story of how 'the sea turned red' during the bombing of an Italian warship in 1943, a direct reference to the wartime song whose lyrics, *Che fuoca a mare che c'e stasera* (What a fire at sea tonight), inspired the film's title.²⁷ This

23 For an overview of the maritime operations in the Mediterranean, see 'Infographic: Lives saved in EU Mediterranean operations (2015–2022)', *European Council of the European Union*, 2022, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/saving-lives-sea/>> accessed 27 March 2024.

24 Philippe Fargues, *Four Decades of Cross-Mediterranean Undocumented Migration to Europe: A Review of the Evidence* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2017), <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/four_decades_of_cross_mediterranean.pdf> accessed 27 March 2024.

25 Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Of shipwrecks and weddings: borders and mobilities in Europe', *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2016), p. 162.

26 *Fire at Sea*, 0:17:33.

27 *Fire at Sea*, 0:39:58.



Figs 1 and 2. A military helicopter hovers over a migrant dinghy. *Fire at Sea* (Gianfranco Rossi, 2016), 0:13:59.

28 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 249.

29 *Fire at Sea*, 0:13:59.

allusion evokes post-war Italy and subtly encourages the viewer's sensitivity to 'how one's own way of life is inevitably linked to others far away and in the past, in both positive and negative ways, with the debts, responsibilities and solidarities that this entails', as Demos suggests.²⁸ In this intimate shared moment between Samuele and his grandmother, the film's deliberate distance from the horrific migrant experience of the present allows the spectator a moment of respite, a chance to catch their breath before more tragedy unfolds.

When the survivors reach Lampedusa, they are thoroughly searched by the border police and taken to a reception centre for immigrants. Surprised by the filmmaker's presence, some lock eyes with the camera for a second time, expressing their discomfort.²⁹ When the film premiered at the New York Film Festival, the director explained why he decided to continue filming while people were directly confronting his gaze:

When they are in front of the camera or when they are being searched and they look at me, at that moment I am somehow part of the system.

30 Yonca Talu, 'Interview: Gianfranco Rosi', *Film Comment*, 24 October 2016, <<https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-gianfranco-rosi-fire-at-sea/>> accessed 27 March 2024.

My camera embodies the system because I never asked them if I could film. I imposed myself.³⁰

While it could be argued that such moments in the documentary are critical to confronting the audience with the harsh reality of Mediterranean crossings, the construction of the migrant image, as Rosi himself is aware, occurs from the filmmaker's privileged position in relation to his film 'subjects'.

The border here is both a place and a metaphor. While geopolitical security regimes are designed to keep unwanted immigrants out of western zones of security and prosperity, the cinematic manifestation of borders is also present in documentaries such as *Fire at Sea*, which disregards migrants' agency over their own image. Such a visual approach exposes vulnerable people without their explicit consent, and without a say in how their lived experience is framed in the narrative. Occasionally, the voices of asylum seekers are featured in observational moments, such as a cathartic scene in which a group gathers at night in the reception centre to pray and sing. In this sequence, one of the men recalls his journey to reach Italian soil:

This is my testimony. We were bombed, and we fled from Nigeria. We ran to the desert [...] fled to Libya, and Libya was a city of ISIS. We cried on our knees. What shall we do? The mountains could not hide us, and we ran to the Sea. A boat was carrying ninety passengers. Only thirty were rescued, and the rest died. Today, we are alive. The Sea is not a place to pass by. The Sea is not a road.³¹

31 *Fire at Sea*, 0:51:17.

32 Talu, 'Interview: Gianfranco Rosi'.

Rosi reflected critically on recording this scene in a press interview: 'In this three-minute song, there is the destiny of the people and the tragedy of their exodus, which most of the times ends in death'.³² Towards the end of the film, the director turns the camera back on the travellers during one of the many maritime operations he filmed on Lampedusa, but this time he focuses on several lifeless bodies piled up on the lower deck of the military vessel.³³ This particular scene invites ethical considerations about filming death, over whether to show the moment and how to represent it. As Christina Sharpe points out, when she considers how visual culture 'evokes and invokes the Middle Passage' and the fact that the Mediterranean has a long history concerning slavery, her 'experience with photographs of disasters that happen in black spaces and to black people is that they usually feature groups of black people, to quote Elizabeth Alexander, in "pain for public consumption" [...] whether in Los Angeles, New Orleans, Sierra Leone, the Dominican Republic, Lampedusa, Liberia or Haiti'.³⁴

33 *Fire at Sea*, 1:41:18.

34 Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 53–58.

Such images of ultimate human tragedy can be read as a form of 'extractive filmmaking', a term coined by Pamela Yates to describe anthropologists, academics, artists, journalists or filmmakers who come from outside a community and take something from it, giving no consideration to working *with* the people depicted or to replenishing

- 35 Lauren Wissot, 'Whose story? Five doc-makers on (avoiding) extractive filmmaking', *Documentary Magazine*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2017), <<https://www.documentary.org/feature/whose-story-five-doc-makers-avoiding-extractive-filmmaking>> accessed 27 March 2024.
- 36 *Fire at Sea*, 01:41:37.
- 37 *Fire at Sea*, 01:45:41.
- 38 *Fire at Sea*, 01:48:16.

- 39 *Fire at Sea*, 0:23:30.

- 40 Pietro Bartolo and Lidia Tilotta, *Lampedusa: Gateway to Europe* (London: Quercus, 2016).
- 41 *Fire at Sea*, 01:00:17.

- 42 Ponzanesi, 'Of shipwrecks and weddings', pp. 151–67.

- 43 *Fire at Sea*, 01:07:37.

what has been taken. Yates compares the practice to extractive industries such as mining, hydroelectric power or industrial agriculture.³⁵ Nevertheless, a respectful sorrow over and mourning for the lives lost at sea is metaphorically symbolized in the final sequence of *Fire at Sea*, a long, wide shot of the surface of the Mediterranean on a clear day. There are no boats to be seen on the horizon.³⁶ Onshore, Samuele's aunt is in her bedroom, surrounded by statues of her patron saints,³⁷ while Pippo broadcasts an emotional song on the radio station.³⁸ Despite the tragedy of the sea crossings, everyday life on Lampedusa remains relatively unaffected. The narrative apparatus of *Fire at Sea* does not create space for migrant agency and subjectivity. Rather, it reasserts a way of seeing displaced communities as an undifferentiated and homogenized category, regardless of the different historical and political conditions of individual experiences.

Rosi's camera remains on the shore, witnessing Lampedusa's everyday life that exists alongside the horror of Mediterranean crossings. The deaths at sea are indirectly presented to the viewer through the eyes of Samuele, his family, the Navy ship operators, and Pietro Bartolo, a doctor who runs a clinic on the Island. The scenes in which Bartolo appears move the narrative closer to the individual struggles of people seeking safety, for example, when he performs an ultrasound on a recently arrived pregnant woman.³⁹ For decades the doctor has been at the forefront of sea rescues, 'saving those he can, burying those he cannot, and keeping their stories as if they were his own'.⁴⁰ Direct contact with hundreds of individual tragic accounts has left Bartolo with constant nightmares.⁴¹ The personal cost of seeing, hearing and feeling the traumatic experiences of others and the stabilized distance between two opposing realities are palpable in the film. However, the question remains as to how the lived experiences of people seeking safety can be accessed through cinema, without reducing them to mere visual objects.

This is important given the role of filmmaking, and cinematography in particular, in reconfiguring the viewer's relationship to the image of the migrant on screen. As Sandra Ponzanesi has noted, Rosi's decision to 'mediate the gaze' in *Fire At Sea* through the eyes of Lampedusans functions as a warning against short-sighted policies that attempt to barricade Europe against specific migratory movements, opening the door to brutality at its borders.⁴² Indeed, the juxtaposition of the everyday lives of locals on land with the harrowing experiences of migrants in the water effectively highlights the grim circumstances in which those seeking refuge find themselves, as well as the passivity of the local community. To illustrate how the documentary moves into a metaphorical space to approach the matter, I refer to the scene in which Samuele is diagnosed with 'lazy eye', and during a visit to the local physician, Dr Bartolo, is advised to wear an eye patch over his stronger eye as a treatment. He tries on the patch and has difficulty playing games and hitting the target with his slingshot.⁴³ Later in the film, as the family gathers around the table for dinner, the boy's uncle advises him that

instead of playing he should go sailing to ‘build up his stomach’. Samuele’s coming-of-age and wandering gaze also allude to the distance and indifference to the migrant crisis unfolding around him, and to a broader political context of European border politics. The film thus presents a deliberate detachment from the singularity of the newcomers’ individual stories, reminding the viewer that they are witnessing a tragedy, but from a privileged position of safety.

Fire At Sea provides a social critique of border management in Southern Europe, situating citizens’ lives in relation to refugee crises in order to make visible the policies designed to fortify national borders. The film inhabits a carefully delineated subject position on the shores of Lampedusa – as opposed to deep or open water, where people seeking safety endure life-threatening journeys. Whatever the film’s perspectival honesty in this respect, its depiction of Mediterranean crossings is ultimately complicit with the hegemonic body of migrant imagery that forms a ‘field of perceptible reality’ in which the notion of the ‘recognisable human’ is created, maintained or negatively determined, as Butler describes it.⁴⁴ Such a perspective inadvertently reinforces the practice of observing migrant experience from a distance, a perspective that is left unquestioned in the film.

44 Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 63–64.

Those Who Jump is a participatory documentary co-directed by Germany-based filmmakers Moritz Siebert and Estephan Wagner in collaboration with Abou Bakar Sidibé from Mali, which offers a more nuanced, heterogeneous perspective on migrant communities beyond the ‘indistinguishable chorality’ – the term coined by Raymond Williams⁴⁵ – of groups of migrants observed from a distance. The film depicts crossings into Melilla, an autonomous Spanish city on the African continent, separated from Europe by the Strait of Gibraltar. The land border with Morocco makes Melilla (and Ceuta) the only way to enter the European Union from Africa without crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Several razor-wire fences surround both territories. In spite of the dangers, climbing the fence is the predominant route for people to reach European soil and claim international protection under the Spanish asylum system.⁴⁶

45 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 173.

46 Marion MacGregor, ‘Europe’s razor-wire borders in Africa’, *Infomigrants*, 4 July 2009, <<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/17930/europes-razor-wire-borders-in-africa>> accessed 27 March 2022.

47 *Those Who Jump*, 0:24:00.

The documentary is set on Mount Gurugu, on the northern coast of Morocco, overlooking the Spanish enclave of Melilla. There, a group of people, including Sidibé, live in makeshift camps in the forests of the foothills as they prepare to jump the land border. It is unlikely that they will be able to cross the fence system without being injured, as evidenced by wounded people constantly returning to the camp.⁴⁷ After several unsuccessful attempts to reach Europe, Abou Bakar Sidibé, who grew up in Bamako, where he completed his university studies in English, receives a portable camera and financial assistance from Siebert and Wagner to document his daily life in the Gurugou camp.



Figs 3 and 4. A CCTV camera monitors border crossings in Melilla. *Les Salteurs/Those Who Jump* (Abou Bakar Sidibé, Moritz Siebert, Esthephan Wagner, 2016), 0:57:04.

The film opens with images from the border police surveillance system, over which we hear war-like machinery (figures 3 and 4). Gradually the CCTV camera reveals dozens of human figures grouped along the forest paths, heading towards the fence. By representing the perspective of the border regime, these images serve as a reminder of the complex digital surveillance and control infrastructure for intelligence gathering, monitoring and deterring migrant crossings, that has been deployed and intensified over the years in line with European policies.⁴⁸ In *Fire at Sea*, the camera ‘embodies the system’ by adopting a perspective similar to that of the hegemonic western media (an approach that gives visibility to migrant crossings while leaving no room for subjectivity), whereas in *Those Who Jump*, the surveillance footage appears at various moments in contrast to the eye-level images Sidibé created with his handheld camera.

As Sidibé explains, the money offered by the filmmakers played a crucial role, but there was also a genuine personal motivation to chronicle his border-crossing journey.⁴⁹ In having the freedom to record

⁴⁸ See Mark Latonero and Paula Kift, ‘On digital passages and borders: refugees and the new infrastructure for movement and control’, *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–11.

⁴⁹ *Those Who Jump*, 0:08:30.

aspects of his life (although his choices were subsequently mediated through the editorial control of Siebert and Wagner in the post-production process), the documentary becomes a partial autobiography constructed from fragments of lived experience. In this respect, the film's point of view allows for a significantly greater degree of individualization of the usually homogenized central figures in films about the refugee crisis in Europe. Wagner notes that the idea to make *Those Who Jump* was born during discussions about how the narratives around the issue seemed to come from a position of power and privilege. Thus the filmmakers decided not to be present during the shoot:

By doing this, he [Sidibé] was more than a character and a cinematographer. He was making aesthetic choices; he was making narration choices, and that, in our eyes, made him really into a co-director. We decided to credit him just like us during the editing [...] and that also has practical repercussions; we, for example, share all the income and all the prizes and any prize money.⁵⁰

In examining participatory approaches to filmmaking, however, it remains essential to consider the overall mediating influence of the co-directors in shaping the final work. Faye Ginsburg argues that questions of epistemology, ethics, and the position of the 'native' interlocutor were raised in the 1950s by ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch,⁵¹ who coined the term 'shared anthropology' to describe a moment when the 'observer finally comes down from his ivory tower' and his work is 'judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people he came to observe'.⁵² Nevertheless, the films Rouch made in West Africa, such as *Les Hommes Qui Font La Pluie/The Men Who Make the Rain* (1951) and *Les Maîtres Fous/Masters of Madness* (1955), have remained controversial for some for their ethnographic gaze on African communities, which reinforced stereotypes and misunderstandings of local rituals and traditions amongst European audiences. In a memorable conversation with the French director, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène argued that 'ethnographic films have often done us [Africans] a disservice' as 'you look at us like insects'.⁵³

Early efforts to put the camera in 'native hands' include works such as Sol Worth's *Navajo Film Themselves* project, which sought to introduce filmmaking to the Indigenous community in the USA to discover whether the resulting films embodied a distinctly 'Navajo perspective'. As has been noted by many commentators, Sam Yazzie, an Elder of the community, pointedly asked, 'Will making movies do the sheep any good?',⁵⁴ and Ginsburg reports that the project was generally seen to be patronising.⁵⁵ Comparable questions – about why and for whom a film is made – could be asked about the value of filming migrants' experiences and the actual impact on the lives of those involved in the film production.

In the mid 1980s, ethnographic filmmaking underwent a significant shift towards a critical examination of power structures in the context of

50 'Filmmaker Spotlight: Estephan Wagner', Salem Film Fest, 6 March 2017. <<https://www.salemfilmfest.com/blog-library/2017/03/06/filmmaker-spotlight-estephan-wagner-les-sauteurs-those-who-jump>> accessed 11 December 2022.

51 Faye Ginsburg, 'Mediating culture: indigenous media, ethnographic film, and the production of identity', in Leslie Deveraux and Roger Hillman (eds), *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 262.

52 Jean Rouch, 'The camera and man', *Studies in Anthropology of Visual Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1974), pp. 37–44.

53 Max Annas and Annet Busch (eds), *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews* (Jackson, MI: Mississippi University Press, 2008).

54 See Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972); Ginsburg, 'Mediating culture', pp. 256–90.

55 Faye Ginsburg, 'Indigenous media: Faustian contract or global village?', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1991), p. 96.

a broader movement of postcolonial revisionism. David MacDougall's writings on the search for a 'subjective voice' in ethnographic film propose a way of looking at the world through 'intersubjective' and 'communal' film practices.⁵⁶ Jay Ruby similarly elaborates on the notion of a 'third voice' and the novel perspectives that emerge from the transformative encounter between the ethnographer and the participants, and the merging of their voices to create a new story.⁵⁷ In this regard – and as in *Those Who Jump* – the filmmakers act as facilitators of the image production of others, thereby extending the range of authorship. To some extent, participatory filmmaking practices have challenged distanced perspectives on migration, as in *Fire at Sea*. However, there are limits to the effectiveness of handing out cameras in an effort to overcome unequal power dynamics, as well as to the capacity of artistic expression to convey the complexities of human movement across borders.

During the making of *Those Who Jump*, Sidibé began to see the camera as a means of asserting his individuality, as he explains in the narration added during post-production in a manner recalling Rouch's practice in *Moi, Un Noir* (1958) and *Jaguar* (1967): 'When you look at the world through a camera lens', Sidibé argues, 'you perceive your surroundings in a different way. I started to express myself with images. I exist when I film.'⁵⁸ It is in this moment that *Those Who Jump* transcends the generic images of dehumanized migrants regularly featured in mainstream media accounts. Sidibé's voiceover evokes a sense of achievement, particularly towards the end of the film when he finally jumps the border fence, and his first-hand perspective sheds light on the struggles of young men in pursuit of an idealized future in Europe. However, the active participation of a person living in precarious conditions in producing footage for *Those Who Jump* raises complex ethical questions. It highlights the challenges of decolonizing documentaries on and off screen, as Rossipal observes.⁵⁹

A pertinent point to consider here is Pooja Rangan's conceptualization of the 'humanitarian impulse' within participatory filmmaking, which aims to humanize the disenfranchised but ends up reinforcing their status as others: 'How does the perception of humanity at risk drive the production of humanist aesthetic forms that produce the humanity they claim to document?'⁶⁰ In posing this question, Rangan suggests that the practice of othering has found new sites, moving from Indigenous cultures to figures such as the refugee. It has also taken on fluid new forms that operate not through segregation but through attempts at inclusion, participation and empowerment.⁶¹ She goes on to argue that the humanitarian demand for immediacy forces destitute individuals to present naked humanity as a mediated spectacle, concluding: 'If we refuse to read images of immediacy as an extension of the discursive conditions under which they were produced, we participate in and exacerbate that very spectacle'.⁶²

⁵⁶ David MacDougall, 'The subjective voice in ethnographic film', in Deveraux and Hillman (eds), *Fields of Vision*, p. 250.

⁵⁷ Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 247.

⁵⁸ *Those Who Jump*, 0:34:54.

⁵⁹ Rossipal, *Poetics of Refraction*, pp. 35–45.

⁶⁰ Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Those Who Jump draws on Sidibé's poignant voice and cinematography to challenge the detached gaze upon forcibly displaced populations that prevails in western media and certain mainstream documentaries such as *Fire at Sea*. However, his subsequent credit as co-director does not do enough to redress the socio-political inequalities and ethical concerns inherent in handing cameras to the most vulnerable – often done to satisfy the editorial demands of European producers and funding agencies – in the assumption that this allows them to tell their own stories and reclaim their humanity. It is, therefore, important to consider the complex motivations behind such collaborations and the ethical codes of production that guide documentary filmmaking.⁶³ As depicted in the film, individuals seeking safety in Europe face severe hardship when crossing borders or navigating the asylum procedures of different European governments. In addition, systemic factors such as class, gender and racial inequalities potentially hinder their pursuit of documentary as a practice and art form. It is worth noting that Sidibé was only able to follow this path with the involvement of the co-directors. Rangan points out that participatory documentaries often use 'the logic of emergency to justify their rhetoric of immediacy', with the aim of realizing the 'radical potential of empowering others with the camera'.⁶⁴ This promise, though, as in the case of *Those Who Jump*, is undermined by the inequalities embedded in the production process. Regardless of its progressive aspects, the resulting film frames the migrant image within the coded conventions of immediacy and, I would argue, perspectival authenticity, thereby running the risk of reducing cinema to a monological art form that reflects the point of view of a single person.

Sidibé's search for empowerment within the dominant discourses on forced migration is further explored in the short documentary sequel *Ma Nouvelle vie Européenne/My New European Life* (Germany, 2019), also co-directed with Moritz Siebert. The film begins with a group of hopeful people arriving in Melilla, which is a continuation of the final sequence of *Those Who Jump*. Sidibé narrates his arrival in Germany after four years spent living outside of any structured system and seven months in Spain.⁶⁵ Despite his high hopes for a fresh start, Sidibé struggles with the intricacies of the asylum process and the challenges of living in a refugee centre, where his freedom of movement is once again restricted. Ironically, as *Those Who Jump* receives acclaim at festivals around the world, Sidibé himself feels trapped and isolated. In this evocative setting, the border transcends physical boundaries and becomes intertwined with the protagonist's perception of his ongoing circumstances.

My New European Life is a sensitive look at the difficulties faced by asylum seekers, such as the pressure to return to their home countries and the lack of social interaction outside the refugee shelters. The film highlights that Sidibé's border-crossing experience, depicted in his previous documentary, has been recognized as a form of political activism' leading to opportunities for him to share his journey with German students, participate in public talks, and eventually be awarded

63 An van Dienderen, Natalie Gielen, Éléonore Yaméogo and with a commentary by Rosine Mbakam, 'Through Prisms', *Anthrovision*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2019), pp. 8–9, <<https://www.anvandieren.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/anthrovision-5931.pdf>>, accessed 27 March 2024.

64 Rangan, *Immediations*, p. 194.

65 *My New European Life*, 0:01:36.

66 *My New European Life*, 0:16:55.

67 *My New European Life*, 0:06:04.

68 Rangan, *Immediations*, p. 194.

69 Ginsburg, 'Mediating culture', p. 263.

the prestigious Ecumenical Jury Prize at the Berlin Film Festival. As a co-director of the award-winning documentary, Sidibé engages in direct conversations with people in Europe who are genuinely interested in hearing about his border-crossing experiences, despite the fact that he is, as he puts it, 'a black man in front of a white audience'.⁶⁶ Over time, however, Sidibé finds himself returning to his 'side of the border' – a temporary accommodation located near a busy highway and a gravel factory.⁶⁷ *My New European Life* leads up to the moment when he receives a refusal letter from the German Federal Office for asylum.

On the positive side, participatory filmmaking gives its contributors a certain degree of control over the narrative development. To elaborate on Rangan's remarks, when the camera is given to the Other, there is no assurance that the documentary immediacy's ideological messages, codes and conventions will be conveyed. In exchange for the 'camera gift', participants create images and sounds that carry a hint of their individuality and their way of existing in the world.⁶⁸ *Those Who Jump* and *My New European Life* offer a unique perspective on border crossings, contrasting conventional observational viewpoints. Yet in the case of *Those Who Jump*, the shift in positionality is mediated by the European-based producers and co-directors. Although Sidibé was granted a degree of independence during the filmmaking process, the external filmmakers still played a direct role in editorial decisions. In this respect, Ginsburg brings an insightful perspective:

Much of current postmodern theory, while raising important points about the politics of representation, is so critical of all 'gazes' at the so-called 'other' that, to follow the programme set forth by some, we would all be paralysed into an alienated universe with no engagement across the boundaries of difference that, for better or worse, exist.⁶⁹

Indeed, the co-authorship practices of *Those Who Jump* disrupt established and hierarchical forms of production in non-fiction filmmaking. Cinema, however, remains a privileged medium, even if we might wish it otherwise. In this sense, Navajo Elder Sam Yazzie's words, albeit from a different place and context, are equally relevant here. To what extent has Sidibé's participation in the documentary, intended for international festival audiences, had a long-term impact on his life off-screen? While not invalidating the efforts to critically engage with the gaze inherent in the film, enabling a migrant storyteller to play a part in framing his own image, the ethical implications of involving vulnerable individuals in film projects such as *Those Who Jump* remain a subject for reflection.

Alongside films that engage with migration stories through conventional observational and participatory modes, there are formally imaginative works of experimental film that seek to unravel the hegemonic crisis imagery of the European border regime. One such documentary is *Das Purpurmeer/Purple Sea* (Germany, 2020), which features footage shot by

70 Associated Press in Athens, 'Greek coastguard rescues 242 people after boat capsizes off Lesbos', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/29/greek-coast-guard-rescues-242-people-after-wooden-boat-capsizes> accessed on 28 March 2024.

71 Kaur and Grassilli, 'Towards a Fifth Cinema', p. 24.

72 Mathew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso, 2021).

73 Ibid.

74 'Purple Sea: Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed in conversation with Vanina Vignal', (One World Romania, 2021), 0:33:43, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=tExK7__jevE> accessed 28 March 2024.

Syrian visual artist Amel Alzakout. Based on a personal account of a Mediterranean crossing, the film shows the moment when the boat on which Alzakout was travelling sank off the Greek coast of Lesbos, an event covered widely by international media.⁷⁰ Like *Those Who Jump*, *Purple Sea* presents a powerful first-person narrative of a harrowing experience during the protagonist's journey across borders. While both films align with Kaur and Grassilli's notion of 'Fifth Cinema', which emphasizes the ethical involvement of refugees in the filmmaking process, recognition of their creative input, and ethical consideration of the medium's representational impact and potential,⁷¹ *Purple Sea* goes further by proposing a radically different approach to the migrant image. The film's translation of the perspective of a camera in the water through multiple instances of engagement with Alzakout's lived experience opens up novel possibilities for an aesthetic of accountability in non-fiction films.

The co-directors, Alzakout and Abdulwahed, originally intended to use the footage as evidence in case legal action was taken regarding the incident. However, they later teamed up with Forensic Architecture, an independent agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, specializing in conducting media and spatial research on human rights abuses and state violence. The end result was the creation of the film *Shipwreck at the Threshold of Europe, Lesbos, Aegean Sea* (2020), which meticulously reconstructs the incident, challenging the official narrative presented by the European Union Border Agency's (Frontex) rescue efforts, which were otherwise deemed effective. Using multiple camera angles and sources, the film employs a 'polyperspectival assemblage' technique, a mode of practice referred to as 'investigative aesthetics' by Mathew Fuller and Eyal Weizman.⁷²

Shipwreck cross-references evidence recorded by artists (including Alzakout's footage), activists, the press, the Greek coastguard, weather data and survivors' testimonies, leading the viewer through a detailed timeline of events. There is arguably a paradox between epistemology and aesthetics in reconstructing the tragic event as presented in *Shipwreck*. In this regard, Fuller and Weizman contend that investigative work requires different modes of coexistence between truth and aesthetics.⁷³ The film concluded that the longstanding policy of surveillance and repatriation of migrants from the Global South along its maritime borders has left European authorities and local coastguards unprepared and under-equipped for rescue operations. The resulting inquiry held Greek and European Union authorities responsible, enabling civil society groups to demand accountability for human rights violations during Mediterranean crossings.

Years later, Alzakout and Abdulwahed created *Purple Sea* to shed light on a more personal account of the incident, and to confront border-crossing discourses that rarely consider that 'the person in the water has a past, a life beyond the event'.⁷⁴ In this context, it is insightful to revisit the moment in *Fire at Sea* mentioned at the beginning of this essay, where images of distressed migrants are framed from the perspective of a

Fig. 5. The reverse gaze upon the helicopter in *Purple Sea* (Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, 2020), 0:53:07.



military helicopter hovering over a dinghy. *Purple Sea* depicts a similar situation from the relatively unseen perspective of a camera floating in the water, attached to the body of a person crossing the invisible line that constitutes the Mediterranean Sea border (figure 5). The resulting images convey the sensory register of Alzakout's lived experience and precise location, bearing in mind that the gravity of the circumstances rendered her unable to control or direct what the camera was recording.

In one of the rare moments when the camera emerges and registers a helicopter filming the disaster, Alzakout's voice-over raises poignant questions: 'Where will the images end up? YouTube? Television? Regular news or breaking news? What do you call us? Refugees, criminals, victims or just numbers? Fuck you all. Stop filming!'⁷⁵ This particular moment holds great significance in the narrative and political stance of *Purple Sea*, and speaks to the key issues surrounding the reframing of the migrant image explored in this essay. Indeed, the camera has traditionally played a role in creating a one-sided perspective of border crossers in the water (from the safety of a BBC news helicopter or similar). However, *Purple Sea* stands out as a rare case of reversing this stance. The film embraces both political and aesthetic strategies that directly confront the perpetuation of crisis imagery, while also offering a reverse view of the helicopter.

To return to Butler's insightful perspective, how we respond to the suffering of others, and how we construct moral judgements and articulate political analyses, depends on a pre-determined field of perceptible reality. Such a field serves as the foundation for our ethical and political frameworks.⁷⁶ In the midst of a world inundated with news of crises, the repetitive portrayal of migrants in the mainstream media perpetuates the notion of a 'discursive unconscious', where the tones, rhetorical tropes and ideological tendencies present in such depictions often fall short in conveying the humanity and individual experiences of people in transit across borders.⁷⁷ In this light, how might the choice of aesthetic strategies in *Purple Sea* potentially transform the cinematic borderscape?

75 *Purple Sea*, 0:53:07.

76 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 63.

77 Colin McArthur coined the term 'discursive unconscious' to explain the limited, repetitive repertoire of images relating to Scotland in the creation of identity narratives of transatlantic Scots. See McArthur, 'Transatlantic Scots, their interlocutors, and the Scottish discursive unconscious', in Celeste Ray (ed.), *Transatlantic Scots* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. 339–56.

- 78 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger* (London: BBC, 1972).
- 79 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, NY: Random House, 1977).
- 80 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.
- 81 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).
- 82 Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 13.
- 83 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 22.
- 84 'Purple Sea: Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed in conversation with Vanina Vignal', 0:53:07.
- 85 'Synopsis', *Purple Sea* (Pong-film website) <<https://purplesea.pong-berlin.de/en/16/synopsis>> accessed 28 March 2024.
- 86 Ponzanesi, 'Of shipwrecks and weddings', p.163.

Several well-known studies have explored the dominance of vision in traditional western narratives combined with means of imposing control, discussed in works such as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*,⁷⁸ Michel Foucault's Panopticon theory,⁷⁹ and Laura Mulvey's study of scopophilia and the gaze.⁸⁰ Additionally, the critical method established in the 1970s with Edward Said's *Orientalism* sought to address the hegemonic influence of the West on the lands and peoples of the East, and his thesis was subsequently applied in academic work on various regions and subjects.⁸¹ Said's theories of Orientalism also informed the incorporation of self-reflexive techniques into ethnographic and documentary films. However, as Laura Marks points out, this 'sincere and rigorous self-questioning on the part of Westerners has often devolved into the lazy assumption that since one cannot possibly understand the experience of the other, one should not even try'.⁸² For Marks, synaesthesia and haptic visuality (a form of perception closer to the body) enable the viewer to experience cinema in a multi-sensorial way, emphasizing the tactile quality of seeing as if you were 'touching a film with your eyes'.⁸³ In this sense, *Purple Sea* is concerned with pushing the boundaries of optical visuality, incorporating other forms of seeing and encoding tactile memory.

Firstly, the decision to exclude footage showing faces, explicit death, violence or suffering in the making of *Purple Sea* was both an ethical-political and aesthetic choice. Alzakout reflected upon the death of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, whose image made global headlines in 2015 after he drowned in the Mediterranean; in her view, graphic images would have dominated the film narrative.⁸⁴ The final cut of *Purple Sea* deliberately omitted footage of Alzakout's departure from Istanbul, where the journey began, and her arrival in Berlin, focusing exclusively on the hours during which the shipwreck occurred. As the film's synopsis states, 'even the flow of time comes to a halt, contracting into the brutal present'.⁸⁵ The depiction of Alzakout's lived experience openly defies the straightforward objectification of migrants present in third-person observational films about the so-called refugee crisis, such as *Fire at Sea*. As Ponzanesi writes, 'in many films about the "migrant drama" by filmmakers based in Italy, the refugees are silent, portrayed *en masse*, indistinguishable except for the occasional heavily accented Italian'.⁸⁶ In contrast, *Purple Sea*'s directorial choices resulted in a more abstract and multifaceted depiction of the lived experiences of forced displacement at Europe's southern borders.

The footage has been edited to give the impression of continuous time, as the cuts are not readily apparent. For much of the film, the camera is pressed close to the hands, arms, legs, clothes and shoes of people floating in the water, creating a disorienting atmosphere for the viewer. A sense of suspension of linear temporality accompanies the images, while at times, it is difficult to tell whether the camera is pointing at the sky or the deep sea. The imagery appeals to the senses to depict Alzakout's near drowning, and the repetition of similar shots throughout

the film offers a glimpse into the overwhelming experience. This sense could not be achieved by simply watching graphic footage or listening to on-camera testimonies of traumatic events. Marks's definition of haptic visuality is consistent with the experimental aesthetic of *Purple Sea*, which includes formal qualities such as images that evoke sensory memories, blurred imagery, close-ups across the surface of objects, and the depiction of characters in heightened states of sensory activity.⁸⁷ Rather than being drawn into a predetermined narrative, *Purple Sea* challenges the viewer to contemplate the material presence of the image and to cultivate what Toni Cade Bambara has termed an 'empowered eye'.⁸⁸ This approach encourages a more active and engaged form of spectatorship, less bound by conventional storytelling conventions and more attuned to the complex meanings that emerge from the interplay of image and sound.

The mix of underwater and surface images inevitably suggests a state of being between life and death. Alzakout notes that seeing herself in the footage made her relive the trauma repeatedly, which influenced her decision to keep most of the film underwater.⁸⁹ *Purple Sea* opens with distorted images of people on the sinking boat just before the filmmaker (and the camera attached to her body) falls into the water. The sound of Alzakout's arm rubbing against her lifejacket, emergency whistles, and the screams of the other travellers become an indistinct collection of muffled tones played over a close-up of her hands below the surface of the water. At this point, her voiceover recalls a childhood memory of near drowning: 'I let go of my sister's hand and jump into the pond. It is dark – it smells of mud. There is a strange sound [...] A hand pulls me out. I take a deep breath. I cough. Where am I?'⁹⁰ The narration employs the present tense and travels to moments of her former life in Syria: 'I hate the sea. The mountains, that is where I belong. I smell the fresh bread on the bonfires in the summer. I have a clear view. I can see for miles.'⁹¹

The imagery of bodies struggling to stay afloat is accompanied by a recitation of memories, thoughts and reflections that address both the viewer and Abdulwahed, who was already in Berlin. In stark contrast with the horror of the images, Alzakout's voice is emotionally subdued, often optimistic, as in the passage where she speaks of a future in Germany: 'Think with me, you are in Berlin. You are walking in the park, holding your daughter's hand.'⁹² The personal narrative, which goes beyond the event itself, highlights the frailty and precariousness of the human condition and confronts the viewer with the depths of the protagonist's subjectivity. Alzakout's words combine fact and fiction to describe the shipwreck and are intertwined with universal human thoughts about the past (hometown, childhood and family) and the future (dreams and aspirations), which take on heightened meaning in the context of migration.

In addition, *Purple Sea*'s intricate sound design enhances the visceral and tactile qualities of the footage, inviting the audience to engage with

⁸⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 163.

⁸⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, 'Reading the signs, empowering the eye: Daughters of the Oust and the Black independent cinema movement', in Manthia Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 132–33.

⁸⁹ 'Purple Sea: Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed in conversation with Vanina Vignal', 0:21:00.

⁹⁰ *Purple Sea*, 0:22:12.

⁹¹ *Purple Sea*, 0:02:39.

⁹² *Purple Sea*, 0:41:31.

the far-reaching human consequences of displacement. The soundscape, an evocative layer in itself, captures the emotional and sensory intensity of the events, transporting the viewer into the disorienting and terrifying experience of being adrift at sea. Marks draws our attention to the role of the senses in the embodied experience of cinema and how sound operates along a dialectic of haptic and optical visibility. Hearing can thus be used in different instrumental registers to activate cultural memories.⁹³ In this sense, Alzakout's voice-over becomes a powerful tool for storytelling and for resisting the erasure of individual narratives within the broader discourses on the refugee crisis. At the same time, her narration grounds the viewer in the absence of an informative image or linear narrative, appearing especially when the camera is submerged to create a space of consciousness within the abstraction of the footage.

Even though the documentary was shot and co-directed by someone with lived experience, the collaborative nature of cinema as an art form again directly mediates the creation of the final work. Similarly, Alzakout's close co-operation with German writer Merle Kröger resulted in the 2017 *Purple Sea* essay, a written piece based on conversations recorded in Istanbul and Berlin during long walks they took together through both cities.⁹⁴ Images and memories of the event were then carefully elaborated and shaped in dialogue, initially through the work of Forensic Architecture, which advocates accountability for human rights violations, and then with collaborators such as Khaled Abdulwahed (co-director) and Philip Scheffner (editor), until the footage was shaped into a final cut. In this respect, *Purple Sea* retains a powerful sense of traumatic, individual experience while drawing on a certain collective multivocality in articulating this experience as a film. A poignant instance of refugee-led filmmaking and a result of cross-border creative collaboration, *Purple Sea* orchestrates the viewpoint of a camera in the water with a collective effort, revealing an expanded border aesthetics that encompasses artistic imagination and lived experience.

Scholars have explored the concept of the borderscape to signify both physical and imagined spaces that connect different aspects of the bordering process, such as political rhetoric, news media spectacle, popular culture, literature, art and everyday experience.⁹⁵ In this sense, Nick Vaughan-Williams has suggested that in order to broaden, diversify and radicalize our understanding of contemporary border studies, it is essential to transcend the modern geopolitical imagination and to conceive of frontiers as intimately linked to the bodies of those in transit, as mobile as the subjects they seek to control.⁹⁶ Released five years after the shipwreck, *Purple Sea* departs from detached observational perspectives and participatory documentary interventions that aim to empower dehumanized 'subjects' with a degree of temporal immediacy, following the humanitarian impulse in documentary film theorized by Rangan.⁹⁷ The juxtaposition of immersive imagery with a first-person narrative reframes the migrant image and the very notion of borders through a unique, embodied perspective, an unsettling lens through

93 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 183

94 'The Purple Sea: an essay by Merle Kröger with Amel Alzakout'.

95 *Border aesthetics* was established in the 2010s as a cross-disciplinary academic field, addressing cultural production related to geopolitical boundaries and their aesthetic or sensual dimensions. See Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe (eds), *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections, Volume III* (Brooklyn, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019); Jopi Nyman, 'Borderscapes of Calais: images of the "jungle" in Breach by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes', in Jopi Nyman and Johan Schimanski (eds), *Border Images, Border Narratives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021) pp. 18–205; Benjamin Tallis, 'Operationalising the borderscape: making sense of proliferating (in)securities and (im) mobilities', *International Politics*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2022), pp. 410–27.

96 Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 165.

97 Rangan, *Immediations*, p. 11.

which we can gaze at geopolitical divides and their aesthetic or sensual dimensions.

In the wake of the highly mediatized arrival of displaced populations in Europe over the past decade, filmmakers of different origins and backgrounds have continued to depict migrant crossings at Europe's southern borders and beyond. In this essay, the camera has moved from a land-bound perspective, to shared authorship that mediates between land and sea, and finally to the cinematic depiction of a lived experience of near-drowning. I have sought to explore the impact of shifting positionalities and perspectives orchestrated in the cases of three documentaries exploring Mediterranean crossings, discussing the ongoing, intertwined aesthetic and ethical-political implications of contemporary migrant cinema. In doing so I have argued that the narrative of *Fire at Sea* oscillates between two worlds that barely touch: the inhabitants of Lampedusa, rooted in their everyday lives, history and traditions, and the newcomers, who – at least from the film's perspective – are secondary characters in the drama of their own lives.

Whilst *Fire at Sea* presents a carefully delineated subject position situated on the shores of Lampedusa, its depiction of a homogenized migrant body remains problematic in relation to the political instrumentalization of western media representations of border crossings. This is a question that Rosi's film does not attempt to address. *Those Who Jump* offers a more inflected perspective upon displaced communities, but the film's participatory approach was initiated by privileged outsiders, handing the camera to vulnerable migrants in a manner that retains complex ethical difficulties.

In *Purple Sea*, the focus shifts to self-originating and self-directed stories, a more experimental approach in which traumatic experiences are presented without the more familiar, objectifying tropes of the observational or participatory documentary. Here documentary practices embody the inherently collective process of cinema through an element of cross-border collaboration between artists with lived experience and contributors from countries with more stable political environments and established documentary industries, such as Germany. Withdrawing from the explicit and dehumanizing image-making of migrants (complicit with mainstream political discourses used to deter migratory movements), *Purple Sea* deconstructs the collective imagination of forced migration by offering a dissident perspective to that of the media, which is the vantage point of a camera floating in the water and the sensory image-memory it creates. In this critical respect, the film advances a cinematic aesthetic and ethical code of production that openly contests asymmetrical power structures elsewhere in political non-fiction films.

As Ginsburg notes, filming others and filming one's own community are related but distinct parts of a larger project of reflecting upon the

human condition. Each approach raises specific questions about ethics, social relations, power, and the right to represent.⁹⁸ I argue for understanding borders beyond the confines of the modern geopolitical imaginary, where the division between states and populations is violently reinforced at the cost of human lives, and for documentary filmmaking practices that openly engage with the representation of multifaceted migrant images. In such an environment, emerging discourses on migration and refugeeism led by people with lived experience and cross-border creative collaborations would be able to contribute to a politics and praxis of equality, social justice, and historical consciousness within the aesthetic realm. Only then will we move beyond mainstream portrayals of border crossings and shed light on the grievable lives of those seeking international protection, whose voices are often silenced in mainstream narratives.

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