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Documentaries of absence in the films Purple sea and Asmat – names

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Documentary film and essay film have historically been a potent ground for researching the relation between subjectivity and representation, or production and reception of images, and what happens in between, the forming, transforming and deforming subjectivities in the process. This paper aims to explore the practice of visualising memories and subjectivities in the form of fragmented or personal videos, focusing on two case studies – documentary films Asmat – names *(2015) by Dagmawi Yimer and* Purple sea *(2020) by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed. The paper argues for the affective power of documentary image which is not used as a visual synecdoche of migrant issues, nor to idolise the omnipotence of visual representation. On the contrary, the films in question open a space to draw us near and distance us from the suffering at the same time. But. in the refusal to show migrants 'literally', they refuse to see them in the way long- distance surveillance cameras and biometric passports see them when crossing the borders. Both films, I argue, show that the 'right to look' at the image can be accompanied by the 'right to act' (through the image). This perspective stands at the heart of a visual culture that places 'visuality' not as a self-explanatory notion, but at the centre of analytic investigation..*

Key words: documentary films, absence, 'right to look', 'right to act'

Introduction

This paper is based on research into the wave of inter-continental migrations which have become prominent in media reporting since 2015. This followed a major increase of Syrians entering Europe fleeing that country's civil war and continues to this day with refugees from many other countries. My position in this research is as both a visual and film studies scholar, but also as a person who lives in close proximity to the so-called eastern Mediterranean migrant route and western Balkan route, as determined by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, also known as Frontex, which monitors as well as mitigates contemporary migratory flows (using various strategies that will be discussed later). My previous research dealt with the challenges as well as humanitarian crises that marked the last decade of policing the borders of Schengen Europe, either by investigating the discrepancies between generalised media reporting on migration and the actual migrant experiences that were mostly absent from the public discourse, or by conducting ethnographic research on the way local populations in Croatia see migration as a 'threat from the unknown' fuelled by local populist policies and biased media reporting (Ružić and Puljar D'Alessio 2023). In this paper, my focus is on the analysis of two films: *Asmat – names* and *Purple sea* which highlight the practice of visualising memories and subjectivities in the form of fragmented or personal videos. Documentary films and more specifically essay films have historically been a potent ground for researching the relation between subjectivity and representation, or production and reception of images, and what happens in-between: the forming, transforming and deforming subjectivities. By investigating the form that 'disassociates' the spectator through specific filmic techniques, I will advocate for the political importance of understanding that the power asymmetry between the surveillance mechanisms (police) and the surveilled (migrants) is established in the films, as the relation between the distant

gaze of generalised suffering and the subjective shots of the precarious and vulnerable migrant. Nevertheless, in order to understand the socio- political importance of films in question, let me first turn to the context that informs their structure and content – that of the 'migrant crisis' in Europe in the last decade.

Migration as the politicisation of suffering

Living near the sea, the same sea that delineates migrant hopes and struggles, possible salvations or deaths, my attention is also directed at strategies of policing the 'blue border' between north Africa or Turkey and southern Europe. With the influx of migrants after 2015, strategies of policing the borders intensified even further (Van Houtum and Lacy 2020), transforming the EU policies of controlling migrant bodies towards managing their deaths and advancing the biopolitical regime of the EU into its necropolitical form. This is echoed by various reports. For example, Frontex's *Annual brief* (of 2023) claims that every year, between 1.3 and 2.3 per cent of border crossings result in death or disappearance, and official reports estimate that 2023 saw at least 440,000 border crossings. The rise in migrant crossings was accompanied by the substantial budget increase of Frontex generally, and of countries most exposed to the routes particularly. For example, the general budget rose from 6.2 million euro in 2004 to more than 800 million euros in 2023, while the most affected countries such as Greece saw a doubling in budget allocation for the 2021-2027 period (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2023). Current scholarship identifies at least two main issues.

Firstly, increased spending in securitisation of borders is linked to the decrease in humanitarian attitudes and policies in the bordering regions (Hameršak and Pleše 2017). More specifically, some scholarship points out how the actions of the authorities and police in the bordering regions in imposing fines and arresting some on smuggling charges has discouraged individuals and organisations from supporting the refugees (Tazzioli 2018). A report by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate of the European Commission, states that:

> The analysis of EU cooperation with Turkey, Libya, and Niger as case studies has revealed an overwhelming focus on the fight against irregular migration, paying limited attention to the rights of refugees. Furthermore, migration management becoming the ultimate priority of EU funding mechanisms has led to a misuse of development (Article 208 TFEU) and humanitarian aid (Article 214 TFEU), without consideration for the real needs and interests of the parties concerned, even when their detrimental effect on fundamental rights is clear from multiple sources (cited in Moreno- Lax et al. 2012: 15).

Furthermore, in the example of Greece, research suggests that '...only 0.07% of the 819 million euros in the EU's border allocation budget to Greece for 2021-2027 was earmarked for search and rescue' with the much larger proportion of the budget being used for strategies of deterrence and the maintenance of camps located outside the EU with alarming living conditions, serving as a buffer zone towards Europe. The state of migrant camps inside and outside Europe attests to the failure of both the humanitarian principle in dealing with

migration, as well as the strategy of the so-called 'externalisation' of borders through which the European Union financially stimulates countries such as Libya and Turkey in order to keep the camps outside of Schengen borders (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

The second issue that arises from the securitisation of borders is the emergence of so-called 'necropolitics' seen as a process by which a sovereign power extends beyond the question of how one should live towards the articulation of power over how one dies, as theorised by Mbembe (2019). By prioritising border control and national security policies, the EU is seen by some as responsible for the introduction of techniques which not only prevent assistance but can actively contribute towards further migrant suffering (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2020). Research shows that, for example, in Croatia alone, more than 20,000 people are being pushed back every year (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights 2020), and more than 89 per cent of them claim to have negative experiences including humiliation, theft or more extreme forms of violence such as dog bites, incidents of shooting, sexual violence and lack of access to facilities. All this means that many are being pushed back without the appropriate safeguards guaranteed by the European Convention of Human Rights.

Instead of viewing migration as a particular act of moving from one place to another in a geographic sense, this paper leans on the scholarship that sees migration as a factor in the long-term process that constitutes the cultural and political landscapes of societies from the outset of civilisations. This means not only that migrations of people are an historical constant but that the effects of migrations are always intrinsically embedded, economically and culturally, in a society's historical development (Nail 2015; Sassen 1999). Therefore, migration cannot only be regarded as a phenomenon of specific social effects in a given time and space but must also be taken as a contested field of various cultural, economic and political practices. Migration encompasses not only the movement of people geographically but also presupposes the mobilities of local and global elements that affect the idea of migration such as financial and other forms of governance by the state or supranational organisations. As Thomas Nail comments: 'The movement of the migrant is not simply from A to B but is the constitutive condition for the qualitative transformation of the society as a whole. ... In this sense, the figure of the migrant is a socially constitutive power. It is the subjective figure that allows society to move and change' (Nail 2015: 13).

Visuality and the film essay in *Asmat – names*

Precisely because migration cannot be framed by the movement of people but by the movement and change of the social structures and power relations, this paper aims to understand the effects of migration on a specific case study using the approach of visual (culture) studies to understand the relationship between looking and acting generally, and the systemic prohibition of looking and seeing specifically. When thinking visually about recent migration, it is easy to recall the drowning of the Syrian boy Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach in 2015 – a visceral image of human catastrophe that at that time appeared to have influenced a positive policy change concerning the influx of refugees to the EU, especially in Germany (Azevedo et al. 2021). In the months that

followed, the humanitarian principle derived from seeing suffering and people in need on the EU borders, slowly gave way to the securitising principle that closed the borders of Europe, leaving many people stranded in transit zones or camps, rendering them illegal practically overnight. Not only did the EU prevent access in a physical sense, but in visual terms; thus the reporting on migration was largely framed through the lens of generalised masses of people in camps or in the boats heading towards Europe.

In short, the denial of the right to appear is at the centre of this paper. One of the questions in the field of cultural and visual studies is what do images *do*, as well as what do *we* do with the images. Hence, this research will steer away from the hermeneutics of the image and move towards both the effects of the image and its affects. I argue that images of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean in recent years hide migrants' visibility precisely in plain sight of their generalising media presence. Current scholarship (for example, Martikainen and Sakki 2021) points to the landscapes of dominant media systems as representing migration either in a stereotypical manner, by reducing them to the images of suffering, or by circumventing the migrant presence altogether. In his influential study *The right to look* (2011), Mirzoeff suggests that 'visuality' presupposes not the image, but the articulation of power by internalising a specific (hegemonic) way of looking as a natural perspective. The asymmetry of the gaze in his argument is mostly connected to the development of racist and colonial practices by which the look is equated with the ability to conquer, either the body or the land(scape) itself (Mirzoeff 2023). If Crary (1990) suggests that the perception became an object of scientific study in the late 19th century, in which the spectator became the active producer of optical experience (Crary 1990), Mirzoeff concludes that the visuality formed in that period corresponds to the creation of the seeing subject and the '... specific technique of colonial and imperial practice, operating both "home" and "abroad" by which power visualizes history to itself. In so doing, it claims authority, above and beyond its ability to impose its will' (Mirzoeff 2013: xxx). Hence, the visual landscape of migration, seen either as a threatening force from afar or the weakness of the victim from up close, proves to be the continuation of the politics of visuality that tries to insist on privileging a certain perspective, one which Mirzoeff would claim as dominant or 'white', and which Azoulay regards as 'imperial' (Azoulay 2019: 240). Continuing from the assertion that one task of visual studies is to find 'a different place from which to visualize, challenging not simply whether one can "look" at this or that event, but who may decide where that line falls' (ibid.: xxxiii), I investigate alternative modes of visual representation of migrants in order to argue for (self)representation as a possible sociopolitical and cultural alternative to current dominant practices. By focusing on a specific filmic practice of representing those usually absent from symbolic and mediated landscapes of our everyday lives, I argue for the look that demands to reposition the spectator, as well as the authority of visuality, outside dominant power relations.

With the rise in migration, the production of films touching on the topic increased. *Fire at sea* (Gianfranco Rosi 2016), *The wire* (Tiha Gudac 2021), *Lifeboat* (Skye Fitzgerald 2018), *Havarie* (Philip Scheffner 2016) *Near our border* (Martina Troxler 2021), *Revenir* (Kumut Imesh and David Fedele 2018) and many more offered different perspectives on migration. Two films that I see as particularly important for the discussion on the relation between visibility and invisibility of migration are *Asmat – names* by Dagmawi Yimer (2015) and

Purple sea by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed (2020). Both deal with refugees stranded at sea, as well as the (dis)appearance of subjects from the scenes of the disaster, even if formally they have completely different starting points. *Asmat – names* is a performative or even poetic documentary and a commemoration to the victims of a disaster off the coast of Italian island of Lampedusa killing more than 360 people on 3 October 2013, while *Purple sea* presents a visual account of a person recording their own shipwreck.

Yimer's 17-minute-long film consists primarily of three parts. First, the opening sequence in which the spectator shares the point of view of a potential victim of drowning, employing unsteady first-person shots mostly beneath sea surface that disorient the viewer with the sound of water overflowing our senses. The second section is composed of drawings that reimagine the scenes of travel by those who survived the disaster, while the third features long takes, mostly towards the second half of the film, of dozens of people in the water covered and anonymised by white blankets, so they end resembling ghosts. In more than half the film, the voice-over is used exclusively to utter (and repeat) the names of the victims and the film ends with the reading and visual display of names lasting four minutes. On the film's website, the director states:

> The film's images give space to these names without bodies. They are meaningful names although it might be difficult for us to grasp their meaning. It is necessary for us to count them all, name each and every one, to make us aware of how many names lost their bodies on one single day, in the Mediterranean Sea.

In other words, *Asmat – names* presents itself visually in the form of the reenactment of tragedy, accompanied by the voice-over leading the spectator not to visualise the deaths (there are no visual traces of suffering) but to imagine the lives by reading their names. The film makes a conscious effort to distance itself from the usual visual depictions of migrations that I elaborated earlier. Taking into account the existing scholarship on the visual representation of migration, we can distil at least three types (with various sub-types) of contemporary visual articulation of migration:

- the images of migration in the mainstream media, which I name the 'capital image';
- the fragmented, decontextualised image from a personal archive (usually shot on a smartphone) serving as a means of communication between the people on the move or as a personal memory (the capillary image),
- and the image as evidence, mostly used by various human rights organisations as proof of mistreatment or pushbacks.

The first theme broadly encompasses representations by authorities or journalists who use generalised images of migrants, which Foucault described as 'seeing without being seen' (Foucault 1975). These are considered by some researchers as being the most frequent ways of portraying migrants (Bleiker et. al. 2013), forming the 'imperial regime' of framing someone as victim (following the tradition of Christian iconography in painting), threat (showing masses of people depicted as an invading force appearing from the distance) or exiled (images of camps). Quantitative as well as qualitative studies underline those tendencies. For example, Azevedo et al.

(2021), using photo-journalistic images that portray refugees, clustered them in eight small groups of people in order to find evidence of differences in the reception and attitudes of the audience. They concluded that de-individualisation of visual representation 'enhances the dehumanization of refugees and the political consequences of specific visualizations' (ibid: 14). Those images highlight Mbembe's claim that 'necropolitics' is exerted over people who hold no political significance, making them not worthy even of the spectator's pity.

I suggest that *Asmat – names* takes an image of a migrant challenging us to 'become active citizens who question and unlearn normative behaviours' (Paramana 2023: 266) by establishing at least two distinct procedures in documentary film: the use of voice-over as counter- narration and the use of memory as a counter-archive.

In an instructive discussion on documentary film in her book *New documentary*, Stella Bruzzi suggests that the use of voice-over as an extra-diegetic soundtrack to the documentary film does not necessarily lead to the 'dogmatic conclusions' (Bruzzi 2006: 48) of Rober Drew who saw narration in documentary film as a 'structuring device and a didactic exercise' (ibid). On the contrary, she contends that this view is restrictive and rests on a highly influential but selective reading of Bill Nichols's research which highlights the role of voice-over as a way of anchoring the film's meaning (Nichols 2017). Bruzzi, in contrast, asserts that non-standard voice-over narration can be a part of documentary aesthetics as well as being essential to the structure and control of the meaning behind the image:

> Many of the unconventional voice-overs signal their doubt that such a neat collusion between voice and the image can ever be sustained, that even narration is not invariably linked to determinism, but has the potential to be a destabilizing component of a dialectical structure that intentionally brings cracks and inconsistencies to the surface (ibid: 59).

When Yimer's film exposes the spectator to the continuing cascade of names without actual faces or bodies, there is a clear and intentional disconnect between the signifier and the signified that produces a dialectical distance 'that both draws the audience into sympathising for the image and sets them critically back from it' (ibid). In the inability, as well as refusal, to represent the suffering visually, Yimer underlines the inadequacy of narration and representation by transposing those filmic procedures from the space of certainty and authority to the domains of subjective affects and personal memories articulated through counter-narration. Yimer's artistic choices are reminiscent of the socio-political effects of migration that Sarah Bishop (2019) illuminates in her book *Undocumented storytellers: Narrating the immigrant rights movement*. She stresses the counter-hegemonic aspects of migrant stories which provide a window into the experiences of undocumented people in the US who have no means of making themselves visible by using their 'complicated and diverse' (ibid: 104) stories for activism. They are 'complicated' on two levels: on the first, viewers are unable to feel pity for the victimised since they are given no opportunity to identify with any specific sufferer. On the second, viewers cannot voyeuristically watch over them as spectacular objects of broader human suffering. Chouliaraki (2006) sees the phenomenon of 'distant suffering' as the logic of appearance that 'occurs outside of meaningful

context for interpretation and evaluation and remains too general to motivate engagement on the part of the spectators' (ibid: 102). In short, Chouliaraki argues that the failure to offer individual sufferers' any agency (narration) and the absence of human appearance (representation) lead to the lack of connection between the spectator and the subjects on screen.

Through the film, Yimer articulates the form of storytelling that does not succumb to the necropolitical representation as victimisation. Rather, he uses the names of migrants as a counter-archive, not as a repository of imperial knowledge but as a space for personal and vulnerable histories to be expressed. *Asmat – names* does not aim to represent the phenomenon of migration as in, for example, Ai Wei Wei's *Human flow* which uses wide lenses, tracking shots and drones to shock the viewer by providing the sheer scale of the *human flow* on a planetary level. On the contrary, Yimer uses subjective focalisation and narration, as well as personal archival material, to highlight the persistence of subjectivity and the productive void between memory and the possibility of the image to represent it. It can be said that Yimer delineates the geopolitical complexities of contemporary migrations by choosing to visualise those who suffer in such a way as to point to their usual anonymity and at the same time provide them with a name and a body which are usually absent from the mediated imaginary of migrant suffering.

Purple sea and the division of the sensible

If visual culture is 'a practice: a way of doing, making, and seeing. In short, ... a verb, not a noun' (Mirzoeff 2023a), then the films in question activate the visible without succumbing to the regime of 'migrant representation' as a way to define people in those images. Visuality is seen here as part of 'imperial power' that relies on the asymmetry of the look that not only makes a spectacle of the suffering, but also uses that inequality of the gaze to qualify migrants only through their non-agency of suffering. To be a migrant in this discourse means to be devoid of the power of self-representation, to live (or die) in a policed space of appearance that defines 'who can appear as part of the *demos*, the people, and who is excluded' (ibid: 90).

Purple sea provides us with a similar outlook on representation, trying to disassociate image from words, and spectators from the process of viewing. It opens with a black screen and a woman's voice out of shot saying: 'It's a beautiful day. The sun is bright. The sea is sharp blue.' Soon afterwards we see the sharpness of the blue sea and the brightness of the sun just as in *Asmat – names*. There is shaking camera, first-person shot, a mix of subdued sounds under the sea and the loud screaming of people when the camera surfaces. The opening shot lasts for almost 15 minutes and seems to comprise footage of a person recording with a phone while floating in the sea among other people in a similar condition. As the 67-min film progresses, we find out that we are looking at the footage made by Amel Alzakout, one of the survivors of the boat that sank off the coast of Greece, recorded on 28 October 2015. 'We' are in the Mediterranean: the sun is bright, and the sea is beautifully blue. The *only* problem of the landscape is its dweller, not a tourist but a person trying to survive the catastrophe, having only her camera to testify to the necropolitical 'beauty' of border fortification. Hence, the opening of the film introduces the 'unstable narrator' as well as the betrayal of expectations. The camera is

emancipated from the person holding it: we do not share the literal point of view but are given the opportunity to see glimpses of landscape while trying to stay afloat. The narrator's voice points out that the camera is not representative of her specifically, but of a person in her situation. She is the embodiment of the event, a historic trauma shared among so many people caught in the same situation.

Alzakout and Abdulwahed use the power of documentary film, or more specifically the essay film, to explore the relationship between subjectivity and representation, the production and reception of images. They see documentary film as a means of articulating subjective viewpoints and critical engagements, implementing monologues, dialogues with the absent others, as well as reflexive voice-overs. That view is akin to the seminal discussion on documentary film by Michael Renov in which he states that the 'repression of subjectivity has been a persistent, ideologically driven fact of documentary history; yet subjectivity has never been banished from the documentary ranks' (Renov 2004: xviii).

The film is comprised of shots made mostly underwater and does not offer much information: it is made in epistolary form similar to Chris Marker's film, *Sans soleil* (1983), in which the protagonist engages in long and personal exposés, sharing past, current and future events, fears and dreams in the form of a diary. Only in the end credits are we given the abbreviated context of what we have just witnessed: a film made while waiting for a rescue at sea, between 1:30 pm and 5:30 pm, between the Turkish coast and the Greek island of Lesbos. The boat that featured in the film and sank had 316 people on board, of whom 46 died. We are watching the life of one of those who survived in a form not described in routine media reporting, but with the 'witness' being able to testify to migration as a biopolitical and 'necropolitical' event under state control. One could say what we see is literally what happens when you lose the right to be seen as a subject, providing us with at least a two-fold perspective. Firstly, the film employs an aesthetics akin to the archival and found-footage which Catherine Russell, in her work, *Experimental ethnography: The work of film in the age of video* (1999), calls the aesthetic of ruins: 'Its intertextuality is always also an allegory of history, a montage of memory traces, by which the filmmaker engages with the past through recall, retrieval and recycling' (ibid: 238). Both of the films discussed not only show us what is usually missing but also speak to us directly and by sharing their intimacies and vulnerabilities, as well as their perseverance, they are inviting us to recognise the central actors as subjects *in* the text and not subjects *of* the text.

Second, on the formal level, the shots in *Purple sea* have a double use: they firmly structure the viewpoint in a limited frame of the focaliser, but on the other level also, in the scenes of surfacing, the narrator points to another set of eyes hovering over them, helicopters and possible rescue teams, reminding us again of the asymmetry of the gaze between the imperial look and the objects of that look. Alzakout has said that in her film, she did not want to individualise the story but present it as a synecdoche of similar disasters happening every day. Moreover, the images of the landscape were intended as a means of relating to people in the detailed shots of chaos. In short, *Purple sea* fills the void which Renov describes as the one between the internal experience (or memory) and the external representation (or visible screen) in using the film essay format to

propose that 'historical meanings are never simply legible or immanent. Understanding arises from the thoughtful interrogation of documents (the real in representation) and the contradictions they engender' (Renov 2004: 114). Alzakout and Abdulwahed recognise the absence of self-representational power in the suffering between borders but choose not to redeem that crisis by succumbing to the proliferation of 'pity images'. Instead, they turn to the role of the spectator and provoke our passive gaze by inviting us to unsee the spectacle that informs their normalised suffering.

In contrast to the dehumanisation principle, I want to argue that both films do not show images of migrants in distress but, on the contrary, the images themselves, as Georges Didi Huberman claims, take a position in relation to their own invisibility:

> Showing that we are showing means not lying about the epistemic status of representation: it is to make the image a question of knowledge rather than of illusion. ... Thus, to distance means to show by showing that we are showing and by thus dissociating – in order to show better the complex and dialectical nature – what we show (Didi-Huberman 2048: 58).

In implementing counter-narration as a way of not creating discursive knowledge on migration but as a way of underlining the forsaken histories of those caught under the necropolitical umbrella of migrant policing, and employing the essayistic approach to filmmaking by trying to disassociate the images we see from what we are expected to know in the context of the generalisation of suffering, both directors precisely deconstruct the form of the film to show us the process of creating it. By doing so, they deconstruct the very figure of the migrant from the last decade, one which is expected to be either the non-existent other or merely to suffer.

In his study, *The eye of history*, Didi-Huberman (2018) looks at early gestures of refusing to be subjected to the gaze, finding people who instead of 'taking a pose' for a photograph, were actually taking a position against the regime of visuality. That provides an interesting entry into the final investigation of the process of repositioning of the subjectivity. Visual culture rests on the idea that politics are inseparable from the image which, in this research, is transposed into the inability to separate migrant representation from the politics of migration. For Mirzoeff, politics can be seen 'as the construction of a political subject in a different relation of the visible and the sayable. In short, the visual image seems less important in its particular instances and more important in its proposing of a certain epistemology ...' (Mirzoeff 2023a: 14). His claim of the *right to see* is inseparable from the *right to be seen*, which is closely connected to Rancière's concept of the 'division of the sensible' (*partage du sensible*) (Rancière 2010) by which he poses a question of what can an individual or a group see or speak, in which social position is he or she allowed to talk and to take space? The division of the sensible means that certain positions afford, as much as restrict, the ability of representing in a given dominant social structure. For Rancière, photographs such as the seminal image of Rosa Parks sitting in a bus 'in place' of a white person is a testament to the strong bond between aesthetics and politics. The image is not only a representation, but a literal process of the redistribution of the sensible, an articulation of *dissensus*, a refusal to partake in the dominant visuality and hence, the hegemonic politics of positioning and seeing. The refusal of

the directors to represent suffering through generalisation or victimisation is not only a political comment on the current reach of media systems and their use of visuality to empower the imperial look and disempower the migrant, but is also an invitation towards the spectator to understand the importance of repositioning in the space from which we look and, hence, name that which we see.

Besides the need to reposition ourselves, one more process is worth mentioning and that is distantiation and disassociation in documentary film as an epistemic condition. It could be said that both films simultaneously recognise the affective and humane imperative to be seen in the contemporary regime of the absence of migrant presence (especially their necropolitical status at the bordering spaces), but at the same time refuse to produce photographic 'regimes of pity' that fetishise migrant suffering. Dissociation in the films is produced by the openness of the directors to question the process of representing that which is unrepresentable – memories of trauma and even death.

Hence, the two documentaries are only partly about the events of migrant suffering, they are also about the role of the films themselves in providing the space for a counter-visual gesture of the anti-imperial gaze that refuses to succumb to the embedded asymmetry of power between the supposed all-seeing spectators and the victims. As Didi- Huberman (2018: 58, italics in the original) argues, distance can be productive as it circumvents the question of dishonesty in documentary film by producing the epistemic gesture of making 'the image a question of *knowledge* rather than of *illusion*'.

Conclusion

For Guattari, politics encompasses not only the ideas and actions articulated in the public sphere as well as the private sphere but is concerned precisely with the zone between those two spheres, and with the questions of 'productive leakages' between those spheres (Guattari 2009: 138):

> I believe that there is a collective, unformed search, from above and below, for another kind of politics. This is what I call 'micropolitics,' and 'molecular revolution.' It begins with very immediate, daily, individual preoccupations, yet remains connected to what happens at the social level (ibid: 138).

The politics which Guattari describes is concerned with the interweaving between the dynamics of large groups, their socio-economic context and attitudes and positions of individuals in their specific contexts. I see the films discussed here as positioned at the intersection between the individual and the public and at the same time, articulating an individual event and the subsequent trauma (floating at sea in distress waiting for help), and a very broad *dispositif* (the global migration *crisis* in the Mediterranean). The micropolitics in question is one in which, through the insertion of individual struggle and first-person point of view, the migrant is not the object of this study, but becomes the subject within it.

By investigating the form that 'disassociates' the spectator through specific filmic techniques, I advocate for the political importance of understanding the power asymmetry between the surveillance mechanisms (police)

and the surveilled (migrants). I propose an alternative to that visuality, seen as a 'capilliary' image that the two films articulate in diegetic and extradiegetic sense, by establishing the difference between the distant gaze of generalised suffering (the dominant scopic regime), and the shots of the subjects and by the subjects on-screen. Furthermore, I emphasise the ways in which that suffering is not necessarily articulated as victimisation, but how, in using radically subjective narrative and framing techniques, as spectators we are both drawn in and distanced from that suffering at the same time. By doing so, I suggest that one of the purposes of the documentary film format is to remind us of our spectatorial position as voyeur and to invite us to take up a radical repositioning in relation not only to the images of suffering, but also to the lives suffered.

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