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The Sea as a Border, the Sea as an Experience: Artistic Engagements with the European Migration Crisis in Three Films

In recent years, migration has become one of the most important issues in the political and cultural discourse across Europe. Inflows through the Mediterranean Sea, in particular, have reminded the European public of the ambivalent effects of globalization, and of the fragility and the ethical questionableness of how political borders are drawn and geographical boundaries perceived. Artistic engagements with the topic shed light on both collective fears and political responses to global challenges, allowing to deconstruct human institutions, such as borders, that have at present acquired the status of a second nature. The article explores three relevant case studies, and attempts to clarify how artistic forms of communication vehiculate ethical insights by aesthetic means, allowing the European audience to gain an outer perspective on ingrained cultural and political practices.

Keywords: borders; cinema; Mediterranean; migration; refugees.

Introduction

In recent years, migration has become one of the most important issues in the political, media and cultural discourse across European countries. Contemporary European media and political discourses are often dominated by migration (Demos, 2013; Bauman, 2016: 88-97; Chouliaraki *et al.*, 2017). Increasing numbers of migrants are risking their lives – and often losing them – in their attempt to reach Europe from the Mediterranean’s southern shores, as they flee violence, poverty and discrimination in their homelands (Andersson, 2014; European Parliament, 2017; and Basaran, 2015 for an analysis of how European legal frameworks foster indifference towards migrant deaths at sea).

This article looks at selected examples of how artists have approached and interpreted the so-called European migration crisis, one of the most

controversial and crucial contemporary political and social debates, and focuses on three films. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- How have the selected artists represented the migration crisis?
- How do their works help us to better understand this phenomenon?
- And what role does the representation and the symbolism of the sea play in it?

In order to answer these questions, this article uses a conceptualisation of the idea of borders which embraces a multidisciplinary approach through the concept of “borderscapes” – the idea that borders are the product of a constant construction and reconstruction of institutional, political, cultural and social practices and discourses that shape the border as a physical and conceptual space (Dell’Agnese and Szary, 2015). Migration – and in particular, “irregular migration” – pushes against the borders that are the apparent physical manifestation of state authority over a defined territory and at the same time of the collective identity of the inhabitants of such territory vis-à-vis others. Rights, duties, ideas of belonging and exclusion are given their delimitation by these dividing lines; these borders, along with other intangible ones that determine different dynamics of inclusion or exclusion, give order to our lives (Newman, 2006).

In their more traditional connotation, borders can be understood as static, physical lines, the product of political processes, territorial markings that could be redrawn through negotiation or war (*ibidem*). In fact, they are complex, negotiated processes of political, social and cultural construction, subject to constant reinforcement, re-inaction and negotiation – it is the act of bordering, rather than the border itself, that is at the heart of these dynamics (Brambilla, 2015). Borders can therefore be regarded as “highly mobile, diffuse, proliferating”, a “process rather than product” (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014). Rather than static, borders are mobile, and their mobility is tied to human mobility (*ibidem*).

The political act of bordering requires policies, practices and discourses to be constantly performed – even more so in a globalised age when these boundaries are constantly tested and stretched into new shapes. The spaces near and around the border – commonly known as borderlands – are spaces of negotiation whose representation, construction and interpretation vary depending on the individuals and groups involved.¹ Fundamental to these processes are cultural and artistic elements, which have led to the emergence of the idea of “borderscapes” to signify how “cultures of all kinds”

¹ For first usage of the term “borderscape”, see Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) and Dell’Agnese and Szary (2015: 4); for a further conceptualisation, see Flint and Mamadouh (2015).

have gone beyond a representational relationship to borders and bordering (Dell'Agnese and Szary, 2015: 4). This concept has led scholars to apply a new, multidisciplinary approach to the study of the cultural, political and social construction of the border as an idea and as practice.

In today's "migrant crisis", in particular in the Mediterranean, specific sites have undergone a process of bordering as small southern islands such as Lampedusa and Lesbos have become the destination of hundreds of thousands of migrants attempting to reach Europe, the result of which being that Italy, Greece and the European Union (EU) have moved their border operations to the islands (Collyer and King, 2016: 6-7; Tazzioli, 2016; Tsoni, 2016; Dimitriadi, 2017). The sea itself is both a physical barrier to human mobility and an element that connects lands and continents. As will be clear from the subsequent analysis, the sea also represents a symbolic interface between the natural and the cultural dimension of the human being, and thus marks a difference, a "border" inside the human being itself, one that unites and separates its natural and cultural ways of being. Such a duplicity is inherent in the concept of the border, which is both a physical and a symbolic place.

The bordering and securitisation with their practices and narratives have given rise to artistic and cultural works that also shape yet at the same time challenge the wider discourse on borders and migration (Mazzara, 2016a; Ramsay, 2016). Giudice and Giubilaro (2015), for instance, contend that artworks can also be considered as "landscape interventions with a strong capacity for political influence". This raises questions about the relationship between art and politics, which is one of the themes explored in the analysis of the case studies below. These are:

- *4.1 Miles* (2016), 21'20", directed by Daphne Matziaraki, US: The New York Times Company (a short film);
- *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea), (2016) 109', directed by Gianfranco Rosi, Italy: 01 Distribution (a feature-length film);
- *Incoming* (2017), 52', directed by Richard Mosse, first shown as part of a wider installation including photographs from Mosse's series *Heat Maps* (2017).

The three films were shot at the height of the European migration crisis. The analysis aims at understanding what kind of "borderscape" is painted by each work. Borders, however, must be related to the socio-political context of globalization. Indeed, the "migration crisis" is the most striking aspect of contemporary globalization as a wider phenomenon that sees a mass movement of people migrating to study, work, and live in other countries – often but not always from more economically disadvantaged countries (Bauman, 1998: 77-79; Demos, 2013: xiii-xiv).

Yet, as Bauman explains, this new openness also led to accelerated encounters between different cultures, belief systems, and ways of life, as well as creating an ever-widening awareness of the difference between those relative few who were the clear beneficiaries of globalisation and the many who suffered mainly its negative consequences (Bauman, 1998). This in turn brought about a backlash of tension, mistrust, and retrenchment, not just between countries but also within them. What Bauman has identified as the reality of “liquid modernity” is one in which people identify such openness with uncertainty and fear linked to exposure to forces that they cannot fully understand or control; the open society is one that is exposed to “the blows of fate” (Bauman, 2007). The figure of the “illegal immigrant” has become one of the greatest embodiments of this fear.

We therefore expect borderscapes to be built around this tension between openness and closure, cultural encounters and separation. On this basis, the article next attempts to understand how the three case studies represent the European migration crisis, and whether and to what extent they contribute to the creation of a Mediterranean borderscape.

We opted to focus on three film-based case studies for two reasons. The first is given the dynamic nature of video, it is more able to immediately capture the idea of movement that is inherent in the journey of the migrants. Second, the case studies are also a more immediate counterpoint to the way in which the wider public accesses information about the migration crisis, which is via the footage broadcast by news outlets.

Our analysis highlights how an aesthetic treatment and re-creation of “borderscapes” offers innovative insights into the relation between those who are on different sides of state borders, and into the multifaceted gaps that borders create between an “us” and a “them”. In the films under analysis, this comes to the fore through the dialectics of loneliness and separation. As we highlight in our analysis, the films in question introduce the viewer to the “borderscapes” through complex techniques of estrangement, and connect aesthetics and politics in quite an innovative way.

This allows the viewer to focus on a paradoxical result of contemporary “borderscapes”, onto which the “migration crisis” brings our attention: the reduction of humanity to a form of nature, of “bare life”, despite and amidst its very political and institutional form of life.

1. Case Studies: Representations of the Migration Crisis on Film

4.1 Miles

A short journey of 4.1 miles, the distance which inspired the title for the film, is all that separates the Greek island of Lesbos from the Turkish coast.

This apparently small distance is the final border facing those migrants who have reached Turkey across land routes from the Middle East and beyond (often, but not only, refugees from the Syrian civil war). They must cross here in order to reach EU territory, and they do so hoping to be able to move to the Greek mainland and, from there, to other EU countries. The film shows several rescue missions carried out by a Greek Coast Guard patrol boat in this stretch of water, led by Captain Kyriakos Papadopoulos.

At one point in the first scene, the captain turns to the filmmaker to tell her to put down her camera and help – a moment that sets the tone for the rest of the film: acutely tragic scenes of humanity on the cusp of life and death.

The most hard-hitting scene is perhaps the final, desperate and only partially successful rescue of a group of migrants from a sinking boat, already largely submerged by water. The migrants still on the vessel are standing with water up to their knees, while the shape of the boat itself is hardly discernible. The viewer can hear the crew's frantic calls, and the sound of bodies hitting the side of the patrol boat in the chaos of the moment as the Greek Coast Guard try to help them up with ropes and by hand. The crew can be seen, clearly distraught, in the attempt to revive a child and provide first aid to other survivors, as it becomes clear that the patrol boat does not have enough space to take all the migrants in a single trip (Del Barco, 2017). Throughout the film, Matziaraki's camera lingers on the Greek Coast Guard Captain, Kyriakos Papadopoulos, whose expressive, grim face is emblematic of the daunting task facing him and the isolation in which he carries out this task. It is this final rescue attempt that sheds light on the director's remarks about Papadopoulos's heroism in the face of such a tragedy. Matziaraki has underscored the hardships encountered by the Greek Coast Guard when confronted with the scale of the crisis, one that they were entirely unprepared for, explaining in several interviews how the rescuers were, in fact, insufficiently trained or equipped to intervene in rescue operations of this magnitude.

Although the bulk of *4.1 miles* is dedicated to the rescues, the film also includes a conversation in a restaurant between the Coast Guard Captain and others, presumably locals, and then another between him and a shopkeeper. Far from being staged, these authentic conversations that Matziaraki captured on her camera offer a glimpse into the local context of the island and its inhabitants. Their doubts and concerns are brought up as they briefly discuss what should be done to deal with the crisis, with the editing depicting a quiet moment in-between patrols and rescues. Rather than using interviews or a narrator, *4.1 Miles* uses these voices, captured in

their daily lives, to express the film's viewpoint, and in so doing perhaps is the case study that comes closest to Nichols' definition of the observational mode of the documentary film, "[which] emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera" (Nichols, 2010: 31-32).

Fuocoammare

Rosi's *Fuocoammare* deliberately blurs the line between documentary and feature film, yet there are several reasons why the film cannot quite be defined as a documentary, its use of documentary material notwithstanding. It is neither shot nor edited with documentary techniques. Rather than a handheld camera, for instance, Rosi chose to use a tripod, framing his images to convey an idea of stillness. There are no voiceovers or narrators, and no interviews. The camera choice only changes in part towards the end, showing a long scene aboard an Italian navy ship that has just rescued a vessel – an only partially successful operation, as several migrants were already found dead on the ship. Yet Rosi also refrained from the more typical filming techniques of a feature, eschewing set-up dialogues with reverse shots, or the use of multiple viewpoints. Everything is viewed through the single lens of the filmmakers' camera. The resulting film appears as a curious hybrid, where what is fiction is presented as a document, and what is a document is shot as fiction.

Set in Lampedusa, an Italian island, *Fuocoammare* follows two strands that seem never to intersect: the daily wanderings of a local child, Samuele, and the migrants attempting to make their way from the North African coast across the Mediterranean, attempting to reach the shores of Europe's southernmost island, another gateway to the rest of the EU. Interspersed are other scenes that belong to these two parallel worlds: coast guards attempting to communicate with migrant boats at sea, and later carrying out rescue missions or conducting initial identification procedures on the island, and other local inhabitants going about their daily lives – the DJ for the local radio, some of Samuele's relatives and one of his friends, an elderly couple, and the local doctor.

The film's opening credits present the key facts about how Lampedusa has been impacted by Europe's migrant crisis: Lampedusa has seen 400,000 migrants land on its shores over the past two decades. Yet, immediately after giving the viewers these stark facts, the film opens with an apparently incongruous scene: young Samuele, making a slingshot in the wintry, ragged yet clearly southern island landscape, surrounded by low pine trees and barberry figs, under heavy clouds racing across the sky as night falls.

In immediate juxtaposition to these apparently carefree childish pursuits, Rosi cuts to an enormous radar dish circling on its axis, capturing a stilted conversation between an Italian operator repeatedly asking for coordinates and a man begging for help, clearly broadcasting from a vessel in distress. The following silent shots are of a searchlight on the dark waters. The Italian navy ship continues its search, the radars and searchlight searching for the migrant boat until the pre-dawn light starts to rise on the horizon, and three computer screens in the local radio station replace the radars on the ship's deck, as the DJ chooses the next track and an older lady in her kitchen sets about preparing a meal while listening to news of yet another shipwreck. These are the strands that the film will pursue over the course of its 1'49", as their characters each run their course, migrants and locals never quite converging.

At the heart of the film is the idea of the two worlds that do not meet; the only connection is, in effect, via the island's doctor, who looks after the local population and later talks about the migrants' plight while trying to communicate with a pregnant migrant woman during a scan.

Yet none of these elements is necessarily decisive in determining whether *Fuocoammare* can indeed be considered a documentary – in fact, even the director himself seems torn on whether the film can be classified as one:

Since my first film, I wanted to break this barrier between documentary and fiction. When I start to film, I never think that I'm going to make a documentary or fiction; I want to make a film. I want to use the tool of cinema, the dramatization of cinema into reality. (Rosi, 2016)

This peculiar approach, blending the traditions of documentary and fiction, was recognised by the jury at the Berlin film festival as “a daring hybrid of captured footage and deliberate storytelling that allows us to consider what documentary can do” (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2016). His choice of using a tripod rather than an over-the-shoulder camera is a conscious decision to avoid having the viewer see the film through the filmmaker's eye (Rosi, 2017).

Finally, his editing is also essential not only to the pacing but to the narrative arc of the film, culminating as it does with the tragic scene of death, when the camera silently rests over the corpses of migrants piled one on top of the other on the lower deck of their boat, as it remains adrift in the sea after all the survivors – many so exhausted and dehydrated – are carried as limp as ragdolls onto the Italian ship by men in white hazmat suits.

At its heart, the film is about the loneliness of the human condition: young Samuele is often alone, playing or wandering about, and even his interactions with others are limited in both scope and communication. The DJ is alone in his studio at the radio station, itself a small and limited means of local communication, broadcasting small local news and news of global resonance (the shipwrecks, rescues and deaths at sea) as local chronicle; the woman listening to the broadcast is herself alone in her kitchen; the sense of stillness and wintery landscape add to this sense of loneliness and isolation of the islanders. And the same sense of loneliness and isolation characterises the images of the migrants: boats alone at sea, searchlights in the night, radars turning to capture signals as if they were attempting to detect mysterious signals from the unknown of outer space. Even when in groups on the island, they are waiting to be processed individually, wrapped in thermal foil blankets.

The doctor is the only point of contact between these two worlds; he is also the only one to comment on his own experience of providing medical assistance to the migrants, at times recounting harrowing memories. There are some moments of communality, again, separate for the two worlds of islanders and migrants: Samuele playing with a friend and talking to a handful of adults; two elderly people drink coffee in silence; fisherman set off from the harbour. On the other hand, a group of migrants organises a football match, and in a different scene, one of them intones what sounds like an epic of their journey, as a chorus joins in the chanting.

The encounters between the migrants and their respective rescuers and first aid providers at sea, on the other hand, are quite different: some of the remarks overheard have compassionate undertones, but there is little room for more interaction when the rescuers need to process and triage those who are rescued to determine follow-up treatment. In the last scene at sea, the three officials stand on the deck of the ship, looking out at the sea in silence, as their colleagues make their way off the drifting boat where only corpses are left. The final scene goes back to Samuele, who is again playing alone, as night falls.

Incoming

Incoming is a multi-channel installation, with the film shown on three large 8-metre wide adjacent screens, starting first with a single one, then two, then all three, so that each screen shows scenes running alongside each other simultaneously yet out of synch so that the eye can shift from one to the other, or attempt to follow an order by focusing on one screen only (Barbican, 2016).

Mosse and his cinematographer Trevor Tweeten followed two of the major migration routes of the decade: one where migrants from Syria, the Middle East, and Central Asia make their way across land to Turkey and then across the Aegean Sea (the same crossing at the heart of *4.1 Miles*) to then make their way to the mainland and the rest of Europe, ending at the former Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, which has been turned into a refugee shelter. The second is the African route, where migrants cross the Sahara desert on their way to Libya, where they board boats to make the crossing to Sicily and from there to mainland Italy and other European countries – Mosse and Tweeten ended this journey in Calais, infamous for being the location of the Jungle Camp, which housed migrants hoping to make their way across the English Channel to the United Kingdom.

The monochrome film (everything is a shade of grey with white and black as the two extremes of the light spectrum, rather than a classic black and white) shows striking scenes that go from the everyday moments of people living in the refugee camps – with children playing, improvised football matches, individuals in quiet moments of prayer – to dramatic scenes of rescue and death on the shores of the Mediterranean, pathologists taking samples of DNA from drowned victims in body bags, and military personnel on the deck of an aircraft carrier as fighter jets take off.

Mosse's technique is unique and innovative, and from this point of view at least, his work is revolutionary, far more so than either *4.1 Miles* or *Fuocoammare*. Mosse and Tweeten shot with a custom-built camera which uses thermal recognition technology that can detect a human body from a distance of 30 km. This kind of imaging technology is only available as military grade equipment, and Mosse's camera was made by a defence and security company that manufactures technologies such as drones for surveillance, but that can also be connected to weapons systems to track and target the enemy (see Mosse, 2017b: 36). The Barbican's press release of *Incoming* described this as a camera that "sees as a missile sees" (Barbican, 2016) although it is too heavy for aerial usage and so it is used over land or maritime environments (Mosse, 2017b: 37). The camera is also "colour-blind, registering only the contours of relative heat difference within a given scene" (*ibidem*). The images it produces appear in "a beautiful monochrome tonality; human skin is rendered as a mottled patina disclosing an intimate system of body heat" (*ibidem*); yet, Mosse remarks how the camera also "carries a certain aesthetic violence, stripping the individual from the body and portraying the human as a mere biological trace" (*ibidem*).

This unique technique required innovation just to be installed for exhibition: projectors in the gallery had to be modified to render very high

image quality and high light contrasts to show even the smallest of details (Barbican, 2016).

Incoming has no voiceover and no dialogue – no spoken word as such. Its soundtrack, composed by Ben Frost, uses snippets of “ambient field recordings” that capture human voices, sounds of life in the camps, engine noise (Mosse, 2017b: 42). It is certainly a powerful, somewhat disorienting soundtrack, which adds to the viewers’ sense of discomfort.

The title chosen for the installation reflects an intention to ascribe layers of meaning to the work. Mosse himself points out that “incoming” can be used in reference to incoming enemy fire – immediately referring to the technology employed in warfare and other military uses – as well as the influx of people arriving in a country (*ibidem*: 34). Both are familiar meanings of the word in two different contexts, yet both meanings are clearly imbued the title, signifying the securitisation of migration flows and the idea of borders being contested and crossed – the key concepts of the securised borderscape of Lampedusa as noted by Mazzara (2016a).

Mosse’s camera also performs the interesting conceptual exercise of using a technology traditionally employed to detect bodies across land or maritime borders – and to prevent them from reaching and crossing those borders – to pointedly cross those borders and forge them in a different way. Rather than the physical borders at national frontiers, the border is recreated between the viewer and all of those on screen through the application of the thermal imaging technology. The idea that those on the “right” side have certain political and human rights granted to them by their citizenship status and that those who come across the borders do not have those rights (see Pezzani and Heller, 2013) is challenged by the equal eye of the camera that strips them of their recognisable features and goes to the basic essence of their humanity (and their mortality) – their body temperature.

2. Borderscapes

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Loneliness and Separation

Each one of the three films offers a very different approach to engaging the viewer with what each filmmaker sees as an urgent crisis in present-day society. What is most relevant here is how the aesthetic dimension mediates the film’s political dimension, as opposed to each one’s aesthetic qualities per se.

Fuocoammare has received many accolades, but it has also sparked controversy and sometimes attracted harsh criticisms, from both reviewers and scholars investigating how migration is represented (Mazzara, 2016a; Prospero, 2016; Ramsay, 2016). As previously noted, the film is about the

loneliness of the human condition and shows locals and migrants as living in two separate worlds that almost never intersect or overlap.

It is precisely this separation that attracted criticism. *The Economist's* critic is emblematic of this type of criticism directed at Rosi:

“Fire at Sea” has been praised for offering an oblique, poetic alternative to a more conventional campaigning documentary, but if someone were to watch the Samuele sequences in isolation, they wouldn’t have any inkling of what the rest of the film was about. Don’t the refugees and their rescuers deserve a documentary of their own? (Prospero, 2016)

Yet, as Rosi (2016, 2017) himself has explained, this separation reflects how the everyday lives of Lampedusa’s Italian inhabitants is disassociated from that of the migrants, who only transit through the island and whose time there is spent in the migrant reception centre, with little to no contact with the locals. In addition, Rosi also found it difficult to film inside the refugee centre, even when he was finally able to get access, the permission for which took months. As a filmmaker, it was easier for him to build relationships with the island’s inhabitants over time. The migrants were only there for a few days before moving on to other destinations in Italy. It was his presence during the rescue of the ship, which is the culmination of the film, that allowed him to form a bond with the survivors, who then invited him to talk. The ethical implications of filming such events are striking.

Aesthetics and Politics: Techniques of Estrangement

The “poetics” of the sea plays an important role in conveying the film’s ethical and political message. In *Fuocoammare* the sea is calm and apparently unthreatening. Its quiet beauty contrasts with the human drama of rescue on the high sea and loss of life. This quietness characterises all natural elements in which human actions are inscribed. The director’s choice favours the sky and the sea. It is exactly this contrast between the human and the natural that causes the viewer to feel more intense uneasiness when witnessing the loneliness and the drama of the human characters in *Fuocoammare*. It is precisely the quiet peace embodied by the natural elements which powerfully conveys the idea that something is deeply wrong with what we are witnessing, and which helps the viewer to overcome the “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999) that befalls contemporary citizens who are spectators of never-ending, identical news reports that systematically fail to trigger any ethical and political response that *Fuocoammare's* aesthetics are attempting to stir up. Its aesthetics represent exactly that

“counter-narrative” that many critics have said they missed in the film, as in *Incoming*, too.

Indeed, a fundamental criticism levelled at both Rosi and Mosse is whether one has the right to make art when its subject is such abject human suffering. “Does an artwork that sets out to challenge documentary tropes end up aestheticising human suffering by rendering it mere spectacle?”, asks Seon O’Hagan in *The Guardian* in response to Mosse’s *Incoming* (O’Hagan, 2017). And, if artists do choose to tackle such topics, then some, like Federica Mazzara, suggest that this should be done within a specific set of parameters – that of “producing a counter-narrative that is otherwise concealed by the hegemonic discourse of the narrative of crisis” (Mazzara, 2016b: 145). Her criticism of Rosi’s *Fuocoammare*, for instance, is that the film treats them not like individuals, but like masses, thus denying them as “subjects of power” (Mazzara, 2016b). The same criticism (already found in the review of the film published by *The Economist*) is picked up by Maya Ramsay (2016). Ramsay’s main criticism is that Rosi portrays the migrants as “voiceless victims”, and that they are “instantly objectified after having literally just beaten death” (*ibidem*: 222). Ramsay and Mazzara are explicit in their contention that art about the migrants should give them a voice, rather than “perpetuate the[ir] objectification and otherization” (*ibidem*). And a similar criticism could be levelled at Mosse’s *Incoming* in which, after all, the camera “dehumanises” everyone but in the process creates captivatingly beautiful images. However, all three of the authors of these works emphasise that their primary goal is to raise awareness; it is not their responsibility to advance a political or even a policy solution. They are attempting to present a phenomenon that has been made so familiar through the daily onslaught of images in the media that viewers have mostly become “desensitised”, and by shining a different light on the plight of migrants, perhaps they can once again appeal to those who have been overexposed and thus made numb to the victims’ suffering by the sheer quantity of images and tales offered up for daily consumption in the mass media. In Mosse’s words, “I wanted to use the technology to create an immersive and humanist art form so as to upend mass media narratives and approach the migrant crisis in a much more emotive and visceral format” (Mosse, 2017a). And, as Pipolo (2016) points out,

Against those who think a serious subject is compromised by a handsome look, Rosi proves that “matching” subject to visual tone is another form of editorializing. If anything, the majestic beauty of the sea and the sky as the backdrop for the human saga unfolding around them, while not played up for facile irony, is a sober reminder

of the blunt juxtaposition that the world itself offers beyond the contrived efforts of any documentarian.

Present in all three works is the desire to transform how the migrant crisis is viewed by depicting a different way of perceiving it.

Humanity as Nature

In *4.1 Miles*, the sea presents itself as an incidental scenario rather than a prominent element, as in *Fuocoammare*. It represents a medium that humans attempt to traverse, and at the same time to technically dominate and control, until they realise that it also represents a limit to their organisational response and control capacity. Through the very fact that it never moves centre stage, it represents the unknown, at times the threatening force that opposes human attempts to control nature through the drawing of geographical boundaries. Loneliness is not least the result of the frustration of human efforts.

In *4.1 Miles*, the sea also represents a different kind of barrier, all inside the world of humans: the barrier between those who are on solid ground and have their own, “natural” place there (like the Greek islanders), and those who first have to reach such a place that others can apparently take for granted. In that sense, the sea — and the corresponding “opposite”, the land — also represent a barrier between human beings: a barrier that, although drawn by humans through their institutions, is to such an extent ingrained in our understanding of our geographical and political “place”, that it now looks like second nature to us.

The alien-like quality of Mosse’s *Incoming* is painted over everyone – all human beings are “others” to his camera, and there is a certain disturbing beauty that permeates every fragment and draws the viewer in to this otherworldly dimension where everyone is made equal in this shared difference.

Mosse very clearly articulates that one of his aims is to make the viewers feel a sense of complicity, responsibility and guilt when viewing *Incoming*. While he is not offering solutions, he is acutely aware of the political nature of the work and has infused his technical and aesthetic choices with political resonance. Mosse’s reference to Giorgio Agamben is crucial to his connection between ethics and aesthetics:

The camera seems to level all, representing each of us in term of “bare life”, as a creature rather than an individual vested with essential rights, both legal and political, which Agamben identifies as the “limit concept” of the nation-state, elicits the crisis that pushes

our liberal democracies over the threshold of totalitarianism. The tendency towards totalitarianism, the imminent and yet spectral crisis at the heart of liberal democracy, threatens to strip each of us of our political life (bios), potentially reducing all of us to “homines sacri”, or, to deploy Agamben’s phrase, “homo sacer” [accursed man], along with the stateless refugee. (Mosse, 2017c)

And thus, the camera used for *Incoming* applies the same process to everyone who is captured by its lens: regardless of role, ethnicity, gender, nationality, the camera strips them all of their humanity to turn them into alien-like creatures – “dehumanising them and then making them human again” (Mosse *apud* Seymour, 2017; see also Viveros-Fauné, 2017). Yet this is, in actuality, precisely the sort of jarring effect that Mosse sought to provoke in the viewer of *Incoming*:

I always say that beauty is the sharpest tool in the box if you want to make people feel something. It raises an ethical problem when you have a beautiful photograph that tries to communicate human suffering, so photojournalists are often scared to go too far into that register, towards the beautiful. Aestheticising human suffering is always perceived as tasteless or crass or morally wrong but my take on it is that the power of aesthetics to communicate should be taken advantage of rather than suppressed. (Mosse, 2017a)

The paradox of finding or even injecting aesthetic beauty in images of human horror and suffering is justified, Mosse contends, because it is precisely this quality that manages to communicate to the viewer in a way that photojournalism is unable to achieve.

The secondariness of the sea in *Incoming* is compensated with a “naturalization” of the human, whose images “flow” over the screens, mingling with the natural elements around them, only separated by degrees of grey, or a basic black and white that represent disquieting “extremes” in which the spectator’s eye struggles to discern what is (culturally) human and what is natural. Again, this aesthetic effect is what actually conveys the key ethical message, representing the consequence of borders, i.e. of what is chiefly supposed to introduce geographical and political distinctions on the earth’s surface, and what ends up, in fact, with blurring the distinction between the cultural and the natural, the “properly” human and the “merely” material. The apparent absence of the sea and of other natural scenarios, such as the desert, which are, in fact, very much present in *Incoming*, is actually an expression of how much the human element has itself become indistinguishable from non-human nature. Thus, the

aesthetic qualities of the film are key in conveying the ethical message of the rediscovery of the “bare life”.

Conclusion

How, then, have the selected artists represented the migration crisis – or, in other words, what kind of borderscape of the migration crisis do they represent, if any? And how do these films contribute to our understanding of the migration crisis?

There are certainly some interesting thematic parallels that emerge from a close reading of the three films. The first is the unsettling sense of isolation, loneliness, and powerlessness, which is present to varying degrees across all three. The second is the problematic relationship between the humans and their natural environment, chiefly but not exclusively represented by the sea.

In the end, however, although the films are about the migration crisis, they say much more about Europe and those privileged enough to be European citizens than about the migrants themselves, focusing as they are on the response to the incoming migrants, and on the significance of drawing borders, in particular. All three filmmakers want these films to raise awareness of the migration crisis by focusing on its human dimension and its implicit relationship to the natural dimension of human life, and in so doing, to spark a debate on our own culpability and complicity, our complex and controversial attempts to control nature, be it land or sea, and use apparently physical barriers to build or strengthen barriers between human beings.

Yet all three directors refrain from taking an overtly “political” stance and, indeed, ideas of guilt and complicity belong to the realm of the moral, not the realm of the political. Matziaraki, Rosi and Mosse all seek to provoke an emotive response, perhaps that same emotive response that is forfeit when compassion fatigue sets in in the face of relentless media coverage (Moeller, 1999; Wright, 2000; Sinclair, 2016; *The Economist*, 2017). While the subject is certainly political, the films in themselves are not; they do not explore the causes of the migration phenomenon, nor do they offer a solution, or a path towards reaching a solution. Matziaraki very simply phrases the question that, in the end, is at the heart of each of these films: what kind of response are we prepared to give when witnessing the suffering of other human beings? They all assume that the viewer will already be aware that there is such a thing as migration and such a thing as a migration crisis: they are interested in showing explicitly what this actually looks like at the human level.

In that sense, the three directors send a message to the viewer, encouraging each one to engage in the first person with what is depicted in the films. Thinking about the European viewer as the addressee of the films, the borderscape they paint is one where the border is in our thinking and our clinging to the idea that there is such a thing as a border that can differentiate between “us” and “them”, and in not realising or not drawing the consequences from the fact that we are responsible for the response to the migration crisis. They film the borders, and in all three films the natural border, represented by the sea, is actually a border we draw inside our sense of humanity: in *4.1 Miles*, the border lies tragically in the space between the Coast Guard vessel and those who can be pulled from the sea on board and those who will ultimately drown. In *Fuocoammare*, the border is in the space between Lampedusa’s inhabitants and the migrants transiting through, but also, more importantly, in the solitude and silences experienced by both sides alike. In *Incoming*, it is in the alien-ness of all those on screen vis-à-vis the viewers. Yet, in all three cases, the border can be crossed, challenged, and, perhaps, erased by the emotive response that they wish to draw out of the viewer and that underscores our shared humanity.

Ultimately, these films about migration are films about the human condition. This is how, fundamentally, *4.1 Miles*, *Fuocoammare* and *Incoming* contribute to our understanding of the migration crisis: by painting a borderscape that ultimately shows us the contemporary migration crisis as a manifestation of the tragedies and paradoxes of the human condition.

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O mar como uma fronteira, o mar como uma experiência: três filmes comprometidos artisticamente com a crise europeia das migrações

Nos últimos anos, a migração tornou-se uma das mais importantes questões no discurso político e cultural em toda a Europa. As entradas através do mar Mediterrâneo, em particular, lembraram o público europeu dos efeitos ambivalentes da globalização assim como da fragilidade e da questionabilidade ética de como as fronteiras políticas são traçadas e as fronteiras geográficas percebidas. Os comprometimentos artísticos com este tópico ajudam a compreender os medos coletivos e as respostas políticas aos desafios globais, permitindo desconstruir as instituições humanas, como as fronteiras, que atualmente adquiriram o estatuto de uma segunda natureza. No artigo, exploram-se três estudos de caso relevantes e as tentativas de esclarecer o modo como as formas artísticas de comunicação veiculam percepções éticas através de meios estéticos, permitindo que o público europeu ganhe uma perspectiva externa sobre as práticas culturais e políticas arraigadas.

Palavras-chave: cinema; crise política; fronteiras; Mediterrâneo; refugiados.

La mer comme une frontière, la mer comme une expérience : trois films engagés artistiquement avec la crise européenne des migrations

Ces dernières années, la migration est devenue l'une des plus importantes questions dans le discours politique et culturel à travers l'Europe. L'afflux de migrants à travers la mer Méditerranée, en particulier, ont rappelé au public européen les effets ambivalents de la mondialisation ainsi comme la fragilité et l'éthique discutable de la façon dont les frontières politiques sont tracées et les limites géographiques perçues. Les engagements artistiques sur ce sujet éclairent les peurs collectives et les réponses politiques aux défis mondiaux, ce qui permet de déconstruire les institutions humaines, telles que les frontières, qui ont actuellement acquis le statut d'une deuxième nature. On explore trois études de cas importants et essaye de clarifier comment les formes de communication artistiques véhiculent des aperçus éthiques à travers l'esthétique, permettant au public européen d'avoir une perspective extérieure sur des pratiques culturelles et politiques bien ancrées.

Mots-clés: cinéma; crise politique; frontières; Méditerranée; réfugiés.