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Spaces of visibility for the migrants of Lampedusa: The counter narrative of the aesthetic discourse

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Political, legal and media discourse around ‘boat migrants’ arriving in Lampedusa share a tendency to focus on an un-named and anonymous ‘mass’ of people in order to build and sustain a Border Spectacle revolving around immigration in Italy. In this context, where very little space is usually left to individual migrant voices, this article challenges this common understanding of immigration to Lampedusa by showing a different side of the story, a story told by the real actors of the Mediterranean passage, the migrants themselves, who, by relying on the realm of aesthetics, have managed to gain visibility and to become ‘subjects of power’

KEYWORDS: Lampedusa, boat migrants, visibility/invisibility, Border Spectacle, aesthetics, subjects of power.

The role of art or the practice of art is a transformation of a certain state of relations between words and things, between words and the visible, a certain organization of the senses and the sensory configuration of what is given to us and how we can make sense of it.¹

Introduction

From the perspective of cultural studies, this article will analyse the impact of immigration to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa at the level of artistic and cultural production, where the representation of migration has targeted, I claim, the ‘visibility’ of migrant subjects.

An important premise that will also work as a methodological framework of this article is offered by W.J.T. Mitchell, who has recently observed how the issue of migration necessarily engages both the fields of the Image and the Law. Mitchell talks more precisely of a convergence of three fields: ‘1) law, with its entire edifice of judicial practice and political philosophy; 2) migration, as the movement and settlement of living beings, especially humans, across the boundaries between distinct habitats; 3) iconology, that is the theory of images across the media, including verbal and visual images, metaphors and figures of speech as well as visual representations’.² This convergence is the central concern here, where I shall seek more specifically to advance a public understanding of the pressing European and global humanitarian crisis of migration by investigating the aesthetic, ethic and critical potential of visual art as a response to mass-mediated images and legal and political discourses.

The article begins with a description of the spatial dimension of Lampedusa and its situation on the margin and border of Europe and proceeds by observing how legal and political accounts, with their related construction of normative practices, often reflect an ‘institutional racism’³ or promote ‘states of exception’⁴ during which the individual rights of migrants are suspended. With Mitchell’s insistence on the central role afforded to ‘images’, the article

¹ Jacques Rancière, ‘Aesthetics Against Incarnation: An Interview by Ann Marie Oliver’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.1 (2008), 172-190 (p. 174).

² Mitchell, W.J.T., ‘Migration, Law and the Image. The Veil of Ignorance’, in *Images of Illegalized Immigration. Towards a Critical Iconology of Politics*, ed. by Christine Bischoff, Francesca Falk and Sylvia Kafehsy (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010), pp. 13-30 (p. 13).

³ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V Hamilton, *Black Power. The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

continues with a discussion of how media representations (such as in print and TV news) perpetuate an institutional discourse on immigration to Italy and Europe, particularly through strategies of stereotyping, which entrench public perceptions of the boat migrants as alien 'bodies'. Finally, by focusing precisely on the representation of boat migrants as subjects and individuals in contemporary visual art, this article will propose that aesthetic accounts in dialogue with cultural, geographical and legalistic discourses offer privileged and pressing opportunities for these 'bodies without words'⁵ to claim spaces of visibility. The space of visibility analysed in this article is represented by the documentary *Soltanto il mare* by directors Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco.

In this article the migrant will often be referred to as a 'body', here intended as an unidentified figure around which circulate various legal, political and public discourses on migration. This 'body' is further characterised by Iain Chambers as an object of economic, legal and political authority, marked, catalogued and defined by a racialising biopolitics.⁶ In the processes of marking, cataloguing and defining these bodies through representational acts of power, migrant bodies also become 'racial' – bodies which, as Xavier Inda observes, 'are constituted performatively as an effect of discourse'.⁷ The performative aspect of these discourses, I claim, relies on the repetition of certain normative and conventional formulae that allow a recognition and a passive acceptance of certain patterns, considered trustworthy because of their institutionalised status.

The intent of this article is, on one hand, to reveal how the reiteration of these patterns of political and juridical discourse and representation participate in the eye-catching fabrication, the 'Border Spectacle' as defined by De Genova,⁸ of undesirable migrant subjects – a strategic de-humanisation; on the other hand, the article suggests how these practices can be subverted by working on the gaps and fissures that are opened up as instabilities in such constructions. This instability is what Xavier Inda defines as 'the deconstituting potentiality' in discourse structures that concurs in making the migrants 'the site for the perpetual possibility of a certain resignifying process'.⁹ I shall suggest that this resignifying process must be found in the realm of aesthetics.

Spaces of invisibility and visibility in Lampedusa

The focal point of my analysis is Lampedusa. When searching for images of Lampedusa on the web, one is struck by the contradictory pictures that appear: on the one hand, images of the island as a resort, of beaches and of an impeccable sea bed; on the other hand, images of overcrowded boats approaching the coasts of Lampedusa and of congested centres where, in 2011, some of the immigrants started a fire and attempted to escape as a protest against the desperate conditions in which they were kept. These 'violently disjunctive experiences and accounts of (the same) space'¹⁰ clearly attest to the fact that the island is witnessing a crucial tension between two spatial dimensions: a desirable and idealised Mediterranean destination for leisure,

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, 'Bodies Without Words: Against the Biopolitical Tattoo', *German Law Journal* 5/2 (2004), 168-169: <http://www.germanlawjournal.de/print.php?id=371> [accessed April 5 2015].

⁶ Iain Chambers, 'The Museum of Migrating Modernities', in *Cultural Memories, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices* ed. by Beatrice Ferrara (Milan: Politecnico di Milano DPA, 2012), pp. 3-32 (p. 17).

⁷ Xavier Jonathan Inda, 'Performativity, Materiality and the Racial Body', *Latino Studies Journal* 11.3 (2000), 74-99.

⁸ Nicholas De Genova, 'Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31 (2002) pp. 419-47; Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁹ Inda, p. 90.

¹⁰ Joseph Pugliese, 'Crisis Heterotopias and Border Zones of the Dead', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23.5 (2009), 663-679 (p. 664).

tourism and pleasure; and the landfall of a global passage of people who are bravely escaping dangerous countries in order to reach what they consider a 'safer' place in Europe.

Calling on Foucault's concept of heterotopias, Joseph Pugliese defines Lampedusa as a holiday isle/penal colony, configuring complex and contradictory dimensions of space-time, where the 'subaltern' subjects (the refugee, the undocumented, the *clandestino*) live their clandestine status 'remaining invisible to First-World subjects *despite being directly in their line of sight*'.¹¹ Pugliese provides an historical account of Lampedusa by reference to the period when insurgent Southerners from the Nation were dispatched and exiled to the island during the process of northern-controlled Italian nation building in the nineteenth century. For Pugliese, Lampedusa has now 'morphed into another form of island gulag with a contemporary immigration detention prison'.¹²

The friction between resort and 'penal colony' is currently reflected in a tension within the island itself: between those who reject the idea that the image of Lampedusa and its imagined community can be diminished and undermined by what they perceive as a 'barbarous invasion'¹³ of undesired others, and those who play a crucial role in welcoming and restoring the dignity of the migrants, a rather challenging task considering the political and legal restrictions imposed.

In an attempt to keep the two spatial dimensions separate yet coexistent, Lampedusa has gradually transformed itself into a 'third space'¹⁴, a combination of real and imagined space, where the migrants alternatively occupy spaces of 'invisibility' and 'visibility', depending on who is looking and from which perspective. The 'spaces of invisibility', I claim, are those where the migrants are (de-)identified as mere bodies, masses, numbers. They include: the unseaworthy boats approaching the island; the police boats onto which some are rescued; the harbour where the refugees disembark and where they are put in rows and wrapped in golden plastic blankets to be counted, identified and given first aid; the centre where they are detained for an uncertain period of time and where they finally disappear from the public view. To these spaces we should also add the Mediterranean Sea's surface scattered with floating corpses. Within these spaces of varying grades of 'invisibility', migrants, both as living bodies and as corpses, are perceived, despite their 'invisibility', as a potential disruptive force on the idealised and polished touristic space of Lampedusa, to which migrants have absolutely no access. Contamination between these spaces is ideally forbidden. The spaces of invisibility, where migrants are mainly represented as unlawful or as victims – as 'wasted lives'¹⁵ – are the ones sustained by the institutionalised and public discourse on migration in Italy that I shall analyse later.

In contrast, the spaces of 'visibility' are those where the migrants, and those who support them, are promoting a process that aims to put a face on the real actors of the Mediterranean passage: individuals with names, features and stories. Some of these spaces are located inside

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 674. Italics in the original.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 667.

¹³ Terms such as 'invasion' and 'emergency' are erroneously associated with the arrival of 'boat-people', since the number of migrants arriving by sea is much lower than those arriving to Italy in different ways and becoming 'illegal' only after their permit of residence has expired. The majority of irregular migrants have entered Italy with a valid visa and become undocumented after their visas expired or after they overstayed their permit of residence. Only 10% of undocumented migrants currently residing in Italy have entered the country "illegally" via sea' (Rutvica Andrijasevic, 'From Exception to Excess: Detention and Deportations across the Mediterranean Space,' in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. by Nicholas De Genova and Natalie Peutz (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 147-165 (p. 153).

¹⁴ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁵ Zygmund Bauman, *Wasted Lives, Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

the island and are mostly sustained by a local collective called *Askavusa*,¹⁶ constituted by migrants, locals, activists, artists and cultural mediators who have made an extraordinary effort to extrapolate from the drama of migration a potential rebirth, through cultural initiatives that aim at valorising the presence of migrants within the Italian and European territory. *Askavusa* represents a humble attempt to rewrite the history of global migration, defending human rights and projecting a different image of migrants who become visible in an undisturbed fashion, as dignified individuals. Other spaces of visibility are those encouraged by representational acts in art practice, where migrants find their own subjective way of expressing their traumatic experience, becoming the political actors of their own counter-discourse. Thanks to this positive turn in the Mediterranean passage, Lampedusa has the potential to become a space of 'extraordinary openness, and critical exchange'¹⁷, as auspicated by the theorist of the Third Space, Edward Soja, according to whom Third Spaces not only unite the real and the imagined but are also 'radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge'¹⁸, readied to possibilities of social change and renegotiations of power, boundaries and identity.

What concurs in the vulnerability of the spaces of Lampedusa is that the island is first and foremost a border. It incarnates several liminal forms, often subject to shifting and reconfiguration. Lampedusa is first of all a border in itself, being the furthest Southern shore of Italy and Europe. This geographical frontier locates the island within the First World participating in the policies that patrol and 'protect' the European territory from the arrival of what are commonly perceived as 'irregular hordes'. As such, Lampedusa plays a main role in the regulation and securitization of the border. In this case Paolo Cuttitta's concept of 'borderization'¹⁹ is particularly useful. Cuttitta suggests that Lampedusa has become the stage for a 'border play' – echoing De Genova's 'Border Spectacle' – built by words and images perpetuated by political statements and mass-media coverage, represented by Italian migration control policies.²⁰ In this context, a key actor is the idea of a never-ending 'state of emergency' within a strategy of securitization, in whose wake, Cuttitta argues, comes the staging of humanitarian intervention. Within the strategy of this 'border play', the migrant simultaneously acquires a dual status of both potential criminal and victim.

As part of the on-going border regime in Lampedusa, we are in fact witnessing the emergence of what William Walters has defined as the 'humanitarian border', which would seek to compensate for 'the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control'²¹. This further border level is still part of the process of spectacularization that in this case takes the

¹⁶ *Askavusa* (which means bare feet in Sicilian dialect) is a cultural association based in Lampedusa founded in 2009 following demonstrations against the creation of a new Centre for Identification and Expulsion (CIE) on the island. The purpose of the Association is to promote anti-racism and multiculturalism especially in relation to the arrival of boat migrants in the island. Among the several activities promoted *Askavusa* we should mention the *LampedusaInFestival* (<http://www.lampedusainfestival.com>, accessed 10 October 2014), a yearly cinematic festival that promotes a counter-hegemonic discourse around the regimes of patrolling and securitisation promoted by EU policies. Another interesting initiative of *Askavusa* still working as a form of resistance to the 'anonymisation' of boat migrants is *Porto M*, a space where objects recovered by the activists of *Askavusa* from the boats of migrants are collected and displayed. The intent is to protect the memory which those objects represent and especially to reinstate a new life in them. More information about the *Porto M* project can be found at: www.askavusa.wordpress.com/con-gli-oggetti [accessed 5 April 2015].

¹⁷ Soja, p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁹ Paolo Cuttitta, 'Borderizing the Island Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa 'Border Play'', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 13.2 (2014), 196-219 (p. 196).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²¹ William Walters, 'Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border' in *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges*, ed. by Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann and Thomas Lemke (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 138-164 (pp. 137-38).

perspective of migrants as victims; displaced individuals to be rescued. Walters talks in this context of a ‘neo-pastoral power’, which is not exercised by the state but rather by NGOs and individuals who act in the name of human rights and international law. The potential danger of this further border has been recently highlighted by Mezzadra, De Genova and Pickles who state that:

The effectiveness of the humanitarian border and its form of spectacularization in gaining the consent of the public contrasts with the tensions surrounding the state’s management and securitization apparatuses, and it is not surprising that the two forms have increasingly been linked together in recent years with military practices of humanitarian aid and state building, and humanitarian agency engagements with securitization logics and practices.²²

Within this process of borderization and in a counter-attempt to reconfigure its spatial dimension, Lampedusa locates itself on the margin, which is here intended not merely as a geographical location imposed by oppressive structures, but in bell hook’s sense, ‘as a marginality that one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility’.²³ From this perspective, the space of the margin may become a position from which a critical response to dominion may be possible. Lampedusa is in fact enacting its political and social struggle, through local and migrants voices that are promoting a counter-positioning of migrants in the above-mentioned spaces of visibility, through the claim of human dignity and the right to exist, as I shall later show in the analysis of the documentary *Soltanto il mare*.

I shall argue that this multiplicity of spaces and the ‘high degree of borderness’²⁴ of Lampedusa reflect two modes by which migrants locate themselves, or are located, within the island: as invisible and visible subjects, outside and, at the same time, inside the law.

(II-) legalized migrants in the public discourse: the spaces of invisibility

The first important observation on immigration to Lampedusa is that the presence of immigrants on the island – and their transit prior to arrival – is considered ‘illegal’ under the political and juridical strategies concerning the arrival of immigrants in Italy. This process of ‘illegalization’ begins in the characterisation of the ‘boat-people’ crossing the Sicilian channel as ‘*clandestini*’, therefore unlawful, even before they have been appropriately identified as such. Most of the boat-people trying to reach the shores of Lampedusa are actually asylum seekers who have the right to claim and receive international protection.²⁵ The act of formal identification that only takes place after they are safely on the mainland pertains only to those who survive the passage, while those who die, die as illegal. After being identified, those who opt to seek asylum might be granted the status of refugee; a recognition that brings with it a series of rights according to the Geneva Convention. This predetermined and unchallenged identification of all ‘boat-people’ as illegal by default contributes to their labelling as unruly, and therefore potentially criminal and threatening, individuals. This identification represents the first step towards the negation of their human rights. As Peuts and De Genova suggest, all these practices ‘produce and maintain “illegality” as not merely an anomalous juridical status but also a practical, materially

²² Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles (eds.), ‘New Keywords: Migration and Borders’, *Cultural Studies*, 29.1 (2015), 55-87 (p. 68).

²³ bell hooks. ‘Marginality as a Site of Resistance’, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), pp. 341-344 (p. 341)

²⁴ Cuttitta, p. 198.

²⁵ The EU member states, in particular, have obligations towards refugees under international law, including the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 and the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

consequential, and deeply interiorized mode of being – and of being put in place’.²⁶ This contributes to the public abjection of migrants and to their invisibility within the conversely visible and recognized space occupied by the natural ‘citizens’, humans with rights. After all, as rightly observed by Dines, Montagna and Ruggiero, ‘Lampedusa operates as the ideal stage to naturalize the distinction between the taken-for-granted, politically qualified life of the citizen and the debased and desperate existence of the migrant’.²⁷

The act of illegalization of immigrants is the result of a wide phenomenon that we could define as ‘institutional racism’, a term I borrow from the Black Power activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, who used it in the context of the American civil-rights movement in the 1960s. Institutional racism refers, in their view, to the operation of established and respected forces within a given society, and thus receives very little public condemnation.

Within Europe, Italy is one of the countries where institutional racism has possibly reached a peak. Clelia Bartoli identifies a series of institutionally racist acts – from simple, daily racist declarations by political figures, to the production and actualization of national and local measures that limit the rights of migrants and spread an unreasoned alarmism. The so-called Bossi-Fini law, for instance, an Italian norm that came into force in 2002 and is currently regulating the phenomenon in Italy, states that:

- Non-EU immigrants will be allowed entry into Italy only if they have a 'residence contract' (contratto di soggiorno) – ie. a contract of dependent employment signed by an employer (a firm or a family) and the immigrant worker. [...]. When the contract expires, the immigrant worker must return to the country of origin.
- When their residence permit is issued, immigrant workers must provide their fingerprints;
- Irregular immigrants will be issued an expulsion order and accompanied to Italy’s borders. Expulsion will be immediate and will not be suspended even if the immigrant appeals to the courts;
- Suspected illegal immigrants stopped by the police will be taken to specific centres controlled by the police. If they are found to be illegal immigrants, they will be ordered to leave the country within five days (a period they must spend in the centre). If they fail to do so, the illegal immigrants will put under administrative detention for between six months and a year or issued an expulsion order and accompanied to the borders. If illegal immigrants return to Italy, they will be arrested and tried by the courts.²⁸

Given that this controversial norm establishes a surreal procedure – it is indeed almost impossible that an Italian employer would provide potential migrants with a work contract before they actually reach the country, while migrants who lose their employment in Italy are at risk of losing the possibility of renewing the stay permit.

Another example of institutional racism employed by the Italian government is the 2008 Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation, signed by the ex-Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi and the former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi.²⁹ The consequences of the agreement were macabre, it allowed for a policy to push-back the boat-people who tried to approach the shores of Lampedusa before they could reach the Italian mainland and be properly

²⁶ De Genova, Peutz, p. 1.

²⁷ Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna, Vincenzo Ruggiero, ‘Thinking Lampedusa: Border Construction, the Spectacle of Bare Life and the Productivity of Migrants’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38.3 (2014), pp. 430-445 (pp. 437-438).

²⁸ Law 30 July 2002, n. 189: <http://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/021891.htm>

²⁹ The Treaty was meant to put an end to the dispute between the two countries particularly Libya’s claims relating to Italian colonialism. On this occasion, Berlusconi expressed his public regret for the colonial period and committed to make \$5 billion available over the next twenty years in order to compensate Libya for the harm caused by colonialism. Italy of course benefited too, especially in relation to irregular immigration, since the treaty increased the patrolling of Libyan shores.

identified. In this specific circumstance, Italy violated the principle of ‘non-refoulement’ recognized by the European Convention on Human Rights,³⁰ and has for this been condemned by the European Court. The documentary *Soltanto il mare* refers to this specific political moment.

The Italian judicial and political system perceives immigration as one of the most threatening phenomena in the nation’s short history. The total set of regulations related to immigration, that exhibit numerous contradictions and paradoxes, contribute to contain immigrants in a limbo, an Agamben ‘state of exception’, during which ‘individual rights can be diminished, superseded or rejected’.³¹ A state of exception is fabricated by the sovereign state through the exceptional suspension of a norm. Being kept in a state of exception does not place the subject – in this case the migrant subject – within a lawless state. On the contrary:

The most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to rule. On the contrary, what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule’s suspension. [...] The state of exception is thus not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension.³²

The state of exception can relate to specific spaces that migrants, as ‘illegalized’ subjects, are forced to inhabit and experience for an undetermined period of time as ‘bare lives’, invisible subjects beyond politics.³³ In this state of exception and juridical suspension the migrants’ political agency is temporarily deferred and therefore repressed. Dines, Montagna and Ruggiero suggest that ‘the transformation of Lampedusa into a spectacle of bare life is not only instrumental to the functioning of migration management at Europe’s southern border; it is also constitutive of the subordinate position of migrants in Italian society and its labour market’.³⁴ As we shall see, this subordination is perpetuated by the attempts of the mass media to document the ‘disturbing’ presence of migrant bodies in Italian and European territory.

The validation of the migrants’ illegality finds a perfect stage in the mass-media account of immigration in Lampedusa that has a strong impact on the Italian collective imagination. The image of migrants as a problem and a threat is built up by the mass media through the constant use of catchy headlines, decontextualized statistics that suggest huge masses of run-down migrants and similar stylistic effects that aim to provoke a sense of *disgusto oggettivo* (objective disgust) in the readers and viewers, as suggested by Alessandro Del Lago.³⁵ Some examples include titles such as ‘Invasione di Lampedusa. Mille immigrati in 24 ore’ (*Il Giornale* 06/05/2011); ‘Immigrazione: nel 2013 sbarchi triplicati e costi record’ (*Panorama* 03/01/2014); ‘Lampedusa l’arrivo di 352 migranti: lo sbarco sfuggito ai controlli’ (*La Repubblica*

³⁰ On the 23rd of February 2012, Italy was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for violating the principle of non-refoulement. The case is known as *Hirsi Saama and Others vs Italy*. The principle of non-refoulement was officially enshrined in article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that establishes that ‘no Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’. In the acts of push-backs and expulsions promoted by Italy, migrants were usually sent back to the presumed country of origin, Libya, a country that most of the time is only of transit for the migrants and a very dangerous place as well. Migrants sent back to Libya are usually detained in prisons where violence and abuses are a matter of fact, plus Libya does not have a functioning asylum system, neither has it signed the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

³¹ Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 87.

³² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 34.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Dines et. al., p. 3.

³⁵ Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non Persone. L’esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Roma: Feltrinelli, 2004), p. 74.

18/07/2014).

It is undeniable that the mechanisms contributing to acts of racism and xenophobia, and consequently to the public dehumanization and humiliation of migrants, are more specifically related to prevalent discourses in the public sphere propagated by the mass media. The Italian media tend generally to operate in support of political and legal discourses by providing superficial information with alarmist tones, accompanied by a visual strategy that naturalizes and validates the illegalization of migration. Mass media images of ‘boat-people’ have by now become iconic, with cramped boats approaching the shores of Lampedusa being documented on a daily basis in the press (Fig. 1). As Francesca Falk observes, such pictures are often polyvalent; their sense changes according to the context. As they contain a multiplicity of possible meanings, ‘the viewer can feel pity or fear – or both. Nevertheless, generally, packed ships have the potential to evoke a feeling of threat’.³⁶ These are exactly the images and discourses that, according to De Genova, supply the rationale for the Border Spectacle, ‘a spectacle of enforcement at “the” border, whereby migrant “illegality” is rendered spectacularly visible’³⁷ putting an emphasis on the exclusion of undesirable migrants.

Pamela Scorzin argues that such images demonstrate an extreme paradox in the visual documentary, by producing at the same time the migrants’ visibility and invisibility:

On one side they are made highly visible in the sense and form of actually being stamped and stereotyped, as strange and exotic foreigners, into certain widespread and long-standing clichés, such as the well-known image of waves and floods of poor, hungry, strange and unskilled dangerous aliens; and on the other side, they are virtually made invisible as individuals and human beings, each with their own dreams and wishes, their hopes and desires.³⁸

[Figure 1:]

In either case they are abject subjects, indistinguishable from the mass that inhabits the boats, a space that, as King and Mai argue, is highly symbolic of the ‘migrating crowd,’ since it gathers together the greatest mass of migrants in a single confined space and therefore emphasizes the spectacularization perpetuated by the TV and the press.³⁹ Also the language employed in the mass media contributes to the dramatization of migration. With the repeated use of terms such as ‘hordes’, ‘floods’, or ‘invasion’, the media has helped to consolidate the view that the nation is under constant threat, but in reality, we are here dealing with ‘a paradigm of factually ill-informed nomenclature and politically charged rhetoric [that] has fashioned an increasingly xenophobic ethos, [and] inflated the threat of an invasion’.⁴⁰

It is evident therefore that the act of dehumanization of migrant bodies initiated by legal and political discourse is reinforced in their public representation, where these mass-mediated bodies become momentarily ‘perceptible’, yet only as a mass; a process which becomes even

³⁶ Francesca Falk, ‘Invasion, Infection, Invisibility. An Iconology of Illegalized Immigration’, in *Images of Illegalized Immigration. Towards a Critical Iconology of Politics*, ed. by Christine Bischoff, Francesca Falk, Sylvia Kafehsy (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010), pp. 83-100 (p. 85).

³⁷ Nicholas De Genova, ‘Spectacles of Migrant “Illegality”: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36.7 (2013), 1180-1198 (p. 1182).

³⁸ Pamela Scorzin, ‘Voice-over Image’, in *Images of Illegalized Immigration. Towards a Critical Iconology of Politics*, ed. by Christine Bischoff, Francesca Falk, Sylvia Kafehsy (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2010), pp. 101-110 (p. 102).

³⁹ Russell King and Nicola Mai, ‘Italophilia Meets Albanophobia: Paradoxes of Asymmetric Assimilation and Identity Processes among Albanian Immigrants in Italy’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32.1 (2009), 17-38 (p. 20).

⁴⁰ Alessandro Triulzi, Robert L. McKenzie, eds. *Long Journeys. African Migrants on the Road*. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), p. 5.

more evident when migrant bodies become corpses, ‘bodies of water’.⁴¹ As such, these bodies are ‘stripped of their human status and thus become utterly coextensive with their marine environment. [...] [They are] mere phantoms that could neither represent themselves nor be represented’.⁴²

In this (un-)representational process mass-mediated bodies become purely symbolic, dead metaphors, endlessly reproducing the same image of bodies with no name, no identities, exceptionally outside of the law and therefore bare lives.

From bare lives to political resistance: the aesthetics of subversion and the spaces of visibility

After analysing the practice of representation of migrants as bare lives and imperceptible bodies around a space of invisibility, I aim to facilitate an understanding of migration from the perspective of the ‘subjectivity’ of migrants and of the ‘autonomy of migration’. According to Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, ‘the autonomy of migration’ approach does not, of course, consider migration in isolation from social, cultural and economic structures. The opposite is true: ‘migration is understood as a creative force within these structures’.⁴³

What is, in fact, at stake in this new approach is a different sensibility and ‘gaze’:

It means looking at migratory movements and conflicts in terms that prioritize the subjective practices, the desires, the expectations, and the behaviours of migrants themselves. This does not imply a romanticization of migration, [...] it allows for an analysis of the production of irregularity not as a unilateral process of exclusion and domination managed by State and law, but as a tense and conflict-driven process, in which subjective movements and struggles of migration are an active and fundamental factor.⁴⁴

The analysis has so far concentrated on the spaces of sovereignty and on the regimes of life control, which are mobilised by the institutional bodies of state and mass media. This article argues that there are possibilities of subverting these regimes through processes where migration is first and foremost ‘a creative force which fuels social, cultural and economic transformations’.⁴⁵ According to this perspective migrants are not to be considered as ‘bare lives’ as political, legal and public discourses profess, but as ‘subjects of power’⁴⁶, imbued with the power of resisting, escaping and subverting the regimes of control.

This act of re-signification of migrants – from ‘imperceptible bodies’⁴⁷ to ‘subjects of power’ – is reflected in the two different representational practices analysed in this article, on the one hand the one sustained by policy and public information makers already analysed, and on the other the counter-discourse promoted by the real actors of the migratory passage, the migrants themselves, and by other subjects who support the migrants’ struggle to ‘become’ subjects of

⁴¹ Joseph Pugliese, ‘Bodies of Water’. *HEAT* 12 (2006), 13–20 (p. 16).

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 676.

⁴³ Dimitris Papadopoulos, Dimitris Stephenson, Vassilis Tsianos, eds. *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the XXI Century* (London, Pluto Press, 2008), p. 202.

⁴⁴ Sandro Mezzadra, ‘The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles’, in *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity*, ed. by Vicki Squire (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) pp. 121-142 (p. 121).

⁴⁵ Papadopoulos et. al., p. xviii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

power.⁴⁸ The act of becoming is understood as ‘a political practice through which social actors escape normalising representations and reconstitute themselves in the course of participating and changing the condition of their material corporeal existence’.⁴⁹

On several occasions ‘boat migrants’ have claimed the right to exercise this autonomy by performing acts of resistance and subversion: intentionally disseminating uncertainty around their identity by destroying their documents upon departure or even by burning their own fingertips to avoid being identified by immigration officers at the border. In the Lampedusa centre, a group of refugees on two occasions set fire to their mattresses provoking a massive destruction of a portion of the camp. The fire was deliberately started by a group of migrants protesting against their imminent return home and the inhumane conditions in which they were kept for an unpredictable period of time. In this act of claiming a political presence within Europe, migrants have become subverting forces against the hopeless oblivion enforced by state powers. An interesting initiative of dissensus promoted by immigrants in Europe are the two collectives called ‘Lampedusa in Hamburg’ and ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’, made of immigrants living in Germany, who had arrived in Lampedusa by boat, and are now protesting against the lack of rights and the asylum and immigration policies that force them to live in camps or in occupied buildings. The two movements are an example of self-organization and social struggle engaged in by refugees and asylum seekers that testify to the recent process of self-empowerment among migrants in Italy and Europe.

In providing the stage for these processes of acting as ‘subjects of power’, Lampedusa has become a space of visibility for the migrants and for their right to claim a voice as individuals. By expressing their subjectivity, migrants have distanced themselves from the representation of their own stories and experiences through a deviated and mediated system that aims at relegating them to the role of either criminal or victim; in any case, to bodies without agency and will.

One way the ‘boat people’ of Lampedusa have used to promote a process of subjectification of their experience of migration, and to offer a form of emancipatory counter-representation of this very experience, is to rely on the realm of aesthetics, a realm where ‘action is possible and can have effects’.⁵⁰ The idea here is that art has a potential that governmental discourses do not have, which is ‘to open up the possible *visibility* of situations, issues, events and people and [to] leave it to its viewers or readers to enact that visibility; to answer that call by seeing’.⁵¹ In this attempt to express dissensus, aesthetics becomes political, contributing to what Rancière calls ‘the distribution of the sensible’, where those who are commonly invisible take the time to reconfigure spaces and times, places and identities:

Politics occurs when those who “have no” time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncement on the common, which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible. Politics

⁴⁸ An Association playing a crucial role in supporting immigrants in Italy in the process of becoming subjects of power through cultural initiatives is the *Archivio delle Memorie Migranti*. The Archive, a repository of migrant testimonies, ‘brings together a group of migrant and non-migrant volunteers, researchers, and media operators committed to a participatory method in recording current migratory processes and registering their traces in the collective heritage of national and transnational memory’ (<http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/presentazione>, accessed 5 April 2015). The director of the Archive is the Italian historian Alessandro Triulzi.

⁴⁹ Papadopoulos et. al., p. xviii.

⁵⁰ Mieke Bal, Miguel Á Hernández-Navarro (eds.), *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture Conflict, Resistance and Agency*, (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2011), p. 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible [...], to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. This work involved in creating dissensus informs an aesthetics of politics that operates at a complete remove from the forms of staging power and mass mobilization.⁵²

The role of aesthetics is therefore to reorganize the realm of the visible, diverting the position and the roles of observers and observees, in order to gain different perspectives.

These aesthetic acts of diversion are political statements that migrants and refugees perform in the name of rights they have been denied, and with the aim of dislocating the Western and First World beliefs and certainties around immigration and ‘migrant bodies’.

I argue, therefore, that aesthetics has a reinvigorating potential of disrupting and challenging any representational system that aims at reducing migrant subjectivities to mere bodies without words and yet threatening in their presence as a mass, a multitude, an hemorrhagic stream of anonymous and unfamiliar others.

What we witness in the aesthetic discourse is an ‘affective turn’ where the direct testimony and subjective construction of the migratory experience allows the sharing of an emotional flux, which is far from the pity and compassion that sometimes characterise the institutional discourse. The affective process instigated by the aesthetic representation is informed by the desire to give voice and visibility to a feeling of frustration, anger and aversion of traumatised subjects that the viewer will eventually share.

The turning point in aesthetic discourse consists therefore in giving space to dissensus through the voices and the narratives of the invisible.

An example of aesthetic and political self-reflective expression promoted by a migrant where Lampedusa plays a central role is the film-documentary *Soltanto il mare (Nothing But The Sea, 2011)* by the Ethiopian-Italian film-maker Dagmawi Yimer and the Italian Fabrizio Barraco and Giulio Caderna.

The documentary was shot in 2010, which was a year of ‘apparent’ calm’ in terms of migrants’ arrivals on the island; owing to the ‘push-back’ practice enacted by the Italian government in 2009. The documentary revolves around the character of one of the film-makers, Dagmawi Yimer, who arrived on Lampedusa from Ethiopia as a ‘boat migrant’ himself on the 30th of July 2006.

The story of Yimer is emblematic of a process of redemption that has allowed him to emerge from the anonymous, un-named and faceless mass of ‘migrant bodies’ arriving in Lampedusa over the last decades. Yimer wanted to be a lawyer in his own country, but as a young man in Ethiopia he was also making films as a hobby. This allowed him to continue pursuing his interest once in Italy, thanks to the help of people who recognized the potential of his artistic skills and his power of building up and passing on a different narrative around immigration to Europe.⁵³

In *Soltanto il mare*, Dagmawi pays tribute to the island of Lampedusa, the place that received him back in 2006 and where he arrived safely, after months of turmoil spent either travelling in miserable conditions or detained in prisons in Africa. Lampedusa represents for Dagmawi a place of solace, where life is still a possibility.

In the documentary, Dagmawi returns to the island with a new role and a new duty, which is to tell a story of this space that is usually unrepresented in other media discourses. In *Soltanto il mare*, Lampedusa appears as a beautiful yet tormented island, not simply because it has become the preferred destination of desperate refugees, but because the island has been abandoned to its

⁵² Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontent* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 24-25.

⁵³ Marco Carsetti and Alessandro Triulzi offered Yimer the possibility to attend a course on video-narration at a Roman school directed by the Italian film-maker Andrea Segre, with whom Dagmawi collaborated on his first documentary in 2008 called *Come un uomo sulla terra*. Yimer is also the author of *C.A.R.A. Italia* (2010); *Una relazione* (2012) and *Va pensiero, storie ambulanti* (2013).

fate with its 'petty' and unheard problems. The documentary shows how the locals are mainly concerned about the lack of health and educational support and of resources to implement its touristic potential, in other words its socio-economic marginality within the nation. However, *Soltanto il mare* is more than a tribute to the island, it is first and foremost an attempt to reconstitute the original link between the different people of the Mediterranean, as it was in the past between for instance the fishermen of Lampedusa and the fishermen on the other side of the Mare Nostrum, addressed by the locals with the general term of *li turchi* (the Turks), symbolically represented by Yimer himself. As observed by Simona Wright: 'What Yimer is attempting with this journey is thus more than a simple return, it is a revolutionary act aimed at reclaiming what risked to be lost amidst the liquidity of political narratives and media oversimplifications: the network of human relations which constitutes a collective's dignity, historicity, and solidity'.⁵⁴

Yimer shows this 'nostalgic' feeling through a series of interviews with the inhabitants of the island he did not have the chance to meet the first time he arrived in Lampedusa as an 'illegal' traveller. The people interviewed seem grateful to Yimer for being allowed to tell their stories and to talk about the island beyond the common portrayal perpetuated by the media, which only relate it to the global passage of desperate migrants, as if the island is nothing else. The interviews are intimate, simple and show, through the technique of close-up, a very humble aspect of the locals and their attachment to the sea, which seems to be the only thing that really matters to them: 'we have nothing but the sea', a fisherman tells Yimer. The sea is the most romanticised 'character' in the documentary. Several scenes take place in fishing boats or nearby the sea that Yimer often contemplates with a nostalgic yet traumatised gaze of someone who only a few years earlier took the risk of crossing it, full of hope and faith (Figure 2). The insistence, in the documentary, on the Mediterranean Sea as a space that connects rather than divides, suggests how it is still an active crossroad of inter-cultural transmission and one of the most promising cultural platforms within a gradually more self-absorbed Europe.⁵⁵

[Figure 2.]

The interviews with the locals are interspersed with Yimer's narration about his own arrival to Lampedusa as an irregular migrant. Incidentally, the rescue of Yimer's boat was documented in one TV news segment's attempt to report on the arrival of yet another boat full of desperate people from Africa. In these scenes from the Italian news, included in the montage as a flashback in the last part of the documentary, Yimer appears as an anonymous and 'unsuspected' migrant who passively allows the rescue operations. His expression is vacant and absent while Yimer, as the narrator of the documentary, recalls that the first thing he saw at his arrival in Lampedusa as a boat migrant were the aeroplanes full of tourists arriving or departing from the island and the tourists themselves whose gazes on the migrants made him feel ashamed.

This intimate memory that Yimer shares with the audience of his documentary reflects the violent disjunctive and yet simultaneous experience of the space of Lampedusa as analysed previously in this article. In this piece of memory work, the spaces of visibility and invisibility conflate through the eyes of the real 'actor' of the migratory passage who is now in the position

⁵⁴ Simona Wright, 'Lampedusa's Gaze: Messages from the Outpost of Europe', in *Archivio Memorie Migranti*: <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/Home/PostExtended/6c26d1bc-3812-4381-b29c-1da1be356a70> [accessed 5 April 2015].

⁵⁵ Federica Mazzara, 'Beyond Italian Borders. Amara Lakhous and the Mediterranean Alternative'. *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 3.1 (2012), 71-87 (p. 73, 72).

of reversing the order of these locations and talking back from a space of visibility, Lampedusa. The return to the island is here an act of subversion and resistance; the once anonymous and invisible boat migrant is now moving freely around a space that only a few years earlier was denied to him. Yimer is now a potential tourist and yet he still personified all the images projected on him by the institutionalised and public discourse on immigration in Lampedusa: the illegal body without a name, the survivor, the victim and the potential criminal, who now, by holding the camera, has become a subject of power ‘changing the condition of [his] material corporeal existence’.⁵⁶

The most interesting tour Yimer takes on the island is the one that brings him to the *munizzaru* (Figure 3), a municipal refuse dump where ‘clandestine’ boats are also brought after the rescue. The camera moves slowly between the remains of boats that testify to the perils of the Mediterranean passage. Yimer returns to the boat not as a traveller but as a critical observer, who wants to document the memory, through debris, of a global tragedy. The cemetery of boats reproduces symbolically the idea of ‘human waste’ as theorised by Zygmund Bauman:

The production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted human (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization [...]. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’)⁵⁷.

[Figure 3.]

The camera lingers on shoes lying next to the boats in the ‘*munizzaru*’ that presumably belonged to boat migrants and that synecdochically engage the human waste constituted, according to the most common public understanding, by individuals like Yimer. The process of subjectification enacted by Yimer in his personal video-recording of this place reinforces his position as subject of power, one who is not scared of going back to the most symbolic space of invisibility – the boat, or what remains of it – in order to give tangibility to a usually vague and abstract representation of that space. The tangibility of the boat, its details (the numbers and Arabic writings on its sides) is part of the process of reconfiguration supported by the aesthetic discourse where, as mentioned before, art ‘opens up the possible *visibility* of situations, issues, events and people and leaves it to its viewers or readers to enact that visibility; to answer that call by seeing’.⁵⁸

The viewer is hence asked to participate in this process of resistance and in this act of dissensus expressed at its best in the final scenes shot months later when the practice of push-back for migrants adopted by the Italian government was interrupted after being judged illegal by the European Court of Human Rights. As a result, the rescues at sea started again and Lampedusa was used once more as a receptive place for ‘boat migrants’. Yimer, the director, is on the island when some new boats arrive, but what he decides to focus on is not the boats crowded with ‘migrant bodies’. Instead, he focuses on the mass of journalists documenting this endlessly recurring ‘threatening’ and ‘tragic’ event. Yimer turns his camera on the news cameras and the viewer is allowed to see for the first time the ‘backstage’ of the Border Spectacle: hordes of cameras and video-cameras pointing at the small boats of migrants, journalists with their little notebooks ready to report live the breaking news and to foster anxiety, fear and frustration.

⁵⁶ Papadopoulos et. al., p. 81.

⁵⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Bal, Hernandez-Navarro, p. 14.

Soltanto il mare has nothing more to add; these are the very final scenes. No further comment is needed. The audience is invited to reflect critically on these images, reorganizing what is given to them and how they can make sense of it.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Rancière, 'Aesthetics Against Incarnation', p. 174.