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The Mediterranean Sea as a Cultural Object in Migration Films

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Introduction

As years passed and dramas unfolded along the Mediterranean migration routes, the role of images in documenting these dramas and potentially stopping them has become a key issue for artists, documentary directors, and in the media. Some particularly striking images have achieved worldwide attention, as for instance the drowned body of Aylan Kurdi on a Turkish beach, while some have become generic representations of the migration crisis, as is the case for overloaded boats capsizing and people jumping in the water. However, despite the best intentions of militant film directors, activists and humanitarian workers, the dissemination of such images has failed to generate a social movement that would help to end the crisis, and questions the real power of such images, as striking and dramatic as they may be.

The crisis itself has been the subject of numerous scholarly works, with some of them devoted to the part played by images in publicising, representing, or symbolising the migrations. By this I particularly mean Nilgun Bayraktar's work on the images of migrations, *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving Image Art* (2015), which focuses on artistic renditions of migrations, working on the mythology attached to it, as well as on its representations, through the study of films, art installations and video essays. The book develops two main themes, first about the filmic rendition of transnational flux and encounters with the other, then focuses on what she calls "fragmented journeys" (99). This study draws inspiration from her work, as well as from that done in early 2010 when Italy started to face a particularly important influx of migrants (O'Healy 2010; Faleschini 2010), and researchers such as Emma and Gabriele de Angelis (2021), or Michela Franceschelli and Adele Galipò (2021), focused more on the Mediterranean Sea. These authors developed their work around the use of

documentary films, as a tool to raise awareness among the public, on the one hand, on the other hand, as a way for film directors to make a statement about the ongoing migration crisis, while at the same time bearing witness to it. This essay aims to work in their footsteps but with a different film corpus. While documentaries have now been heavily discussed and imposed themselves as a main genre when it comes to migrations, the aim of this paper is to question the part played by the Mediterranean Sea in fiction about the same issue.

Migrations have been quite a common topic for cinema, developing some tropes and representations that took part in the creation of visual imagery of the subject. Such films may come from Western industries, such as famed Elia Kazan's *America, America* (1963), or from the global South, such as Djibril Diop Manbétý's *Touki Bouki* (1973), in which the dream of coming to Europe plays a key part, together with Europe being portrayed as an Eldorado. Portrayals of migrants, legal or illegal, to the US from Europe or Latin America, from the Balkans and Eastern Europe to the West, or from India and the Philippines to the Gulf and the West, among others, added some elements and reinterpreted the representations already ingrained. With these tropes and myths in mind, together with the myths attached to the sea itself, the aim of this essay is to understand how directors have portrayed the ongoing migration crisis in relation to the Mediterranean Sea through the reinterpretation of this cultural background. Through this work, this essay aims to better understand how images are transformed and reinterpreted by film directors for political purposes, in this case, to document the crisis and to question the viewer's identity. In this regard, this chapter aims to contribute to studies about the power of images (Wolff 2012; Azoulay 2001) in a case when images have been recreated, or at least edited, to create a narrative.

The question of fiction here needs to be clarified: the directors of the films studied here almost all had to think of their relation to raw and documentary images, and all films insist that they draw their inspiration from real events or at least from the crisis itself. This question in turn generated a series of binary questions about what to see, show, hear or not, and the big issue of pathos, when it comes to balancing the will to raise awareness about the crisis while avoiding poverty porn. As will be seen, for visual

and ethical reasons, directors have chosen different types of representations, while the one closest to pure documentary, *Fuocoammare* (Rosi 2016), albeit using actual images of Lampedusa and migrants, made careful use of editing in order to build a narrative that precisely questions these binary oppositions and ethical issues. My corpus consists of eleven films, shot between 2005, for example, *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* by Giordana, at the very start of the crisis, and 2017, such as *The Order of Things* by Segre, in which, significantly, European policemen are sent to war-torn Libya to set up refugee camps. The key criterion for the composition of this corpus was that the sea should play a significant part in it, even if its screen time is rather short, so as to include films where the sea appears in its physical dimension and in its various symbolic dimensions. On the European side, the corpus is composed of Italian and French films, while the North African side comprises films from Tunisia and Algeria, as these four countries have produced the bulk of films that focus on the Mediterranean Sea, as a border and as a liminal space, while also exploring its symbolic aspects.

To develop these issues, this work is divided into two main parts questioning the interaction between the characters and the sea. First, this study focuses on the Mediterranean Sea as a transformative space, one which acts as a metaphor for the liquidity of borders that kill characters or have them reborn (Davitti 1175). The second part deals with the sea as a space for encounter, as this transformation is presented as paving the way for questioning the idea of the self and the other, developing the idea of a Babel on the sea, that is, a space in which all origins and language encounter one another, but which lacks order, and where violence is looming. These issues become even more important, as film directors tie them with the body of international developments politics and control.

Migrants and the Sea

Contrary to most European characters, migrants are defined by their interaction with the sea, presented as a hostile, dangerous space that sums up all the borders they have to cross. Simultaneously, this ordeal also acts as some sort of epiphany, with characters being reborn through their relation to the sea.

The Mediterranean as a Watery Grave

The most common way to portray the Mediterranean Sea, given the ongoing crisis and the staggering number of casualties along migration routes, is to focus on it as a dangerous, uncertain space, as the apparently calm surface of the water can become a death trap for migrants. Danger itself is usually underlined by focusing on the poor condition of the boats used by the migrants, be it the common small boats seen in *Terraferma* (Crial-ese 2011), and *Harragas* (Allouache 2009), or the bigger ones (but in an appalling condition) that appears in *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (Giordana 2005). In *Harragas*, the dialogues point to the poor condition of the vessel, with migrants almost revolting before embarking because of their (justified) fear that it might capsize or that the motor might break.

A common trope to underline the danger of the trip is wide, panoramic shots, presenting the overcrowded boat in a completely empty sea. Other ships, merchant or else, are rarely mentioned, even in the dialogues, or as in *Harragas*, just as a last hope in extreme circumstances. Otherwise, the sea appears as a watery desert, where the migrants are left to themselves, in danger of being left alone by human traffickers, which happens in *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide*. The fact that in some films the sea appears as a follow-up to the crossing of the Sahara Desert (most notably in *Mediterranea* (2015) by Carpignano and *Hope* (2014) by Lojkine) reinforces this desertic aspect, as the migrants have to cross seemingly endless spaces devoid of any shelter, with the camera work emphasizing the void immensity with which they are confronted, and their comparative vulnerability. As migrants are commonly portrayed warmly clothed as they cross the sea, the futility of such protection appears all the more starkly on screen.

Beyond the immensity of the sea, the most common ways to underline the danger are images of migrants jumping into the sea, shot from beneath the water: the audience just sees bubbles, limbs and bodies moving and drifting in a disorderly way, with various belongings (usually symbolic ones: passports, photos, items of clothing) falling to the bottom of the sea. Such images, inspired by media images of people jumping into the sea to

reach the coast, avoid arrest, or escape a sinking boat (Amores et al. 2019; Mangone and Pece 2017), appear very often in our corpus and have become so linked to the migration crisis that directors may use this trope beyond its immediate meaning, as a narrative tool: Carpignano, in *Mediterranea*, uses such images to create tension, as he makes a parallel between tourist boats with people diving and migrants struggling for their lives. Raja Amari, on the other hand, in *Foreign Body* (2016) uses the underwater shots as a leitmotiv that she intersperses with the main narrative of her film, about the self-discovery of a young undocumented migrant, which adds a layer of meaning to the main narrative.

Dead bodies are rarely seen, as they fall into what directors choose not to show, judging this would lead to voyeurism and pornography. Marco Tullio Giordana and Andrea Segre do show dead bodies, one that of a dead migrant who is abandoned overboard by smugglers, and one in a makeshift morgue in a so-called hotspot in Libya, but for the most part, film directors prefer to make death a looming presence, a constant threat. Dead bodies on the beach, rather than being shown, are mentioned in the dialogues, such as in *Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese or suggested through linking sound with images of places where the bodies could land (or have come ashore), as Gianfranco Rosi does in *Fuocoammare* (2016). Film directors, in this regard, do not want to repeat media images when it comes to death, but choose to make its presence permanent rather than spectacular. In that aspect, fiction may reach a limit, as recreating images of dead people would hurt decency, and miss the point they are trying to make; hence, their self-censoring of what cannot be represented follows the footsteps of film directors who often have confronted with the question of representing major dramas and mass crimes (Chemelny 275-282). Furthermore, this looming danger enhances one key aspect of the migration crisis, that of the routinisation of death, as dramatic episodes keep happening along the coasts of Europe while the films are being shot.

The void immensity of the sea also plays a part in its symbolization of the liquidity of borders. In a few films, such as Lojkin's *Hope* (2014), borders, in this case, those of the Spanish city of Melilla, are visible and materialised by the fence that surrounds the city. But in most cases, the

border is invisible, being the sea itself, and only materialised by the patrol boats that try to stop the migrants, which may as well come from Europe as they may come from North Africa, particularly Libya, without any precision as to where the intervention zones begin or end. Even so, migrants are subject to being caught on the beaches, or in the countries they transit through, making the border immaterial, being everywhere and nowhere, but most deeply symbolized by the sea, its fluidity, and its dangers, as Daria Davitti demonstrates (1173-1196). Given that the border as a dangerous place has a long history in film representation, through the risk of denunciation or being repelled, these films develop this image as the liquid border can become a death trap, while migrants are trying to evade capture. Furthermore, the dialogues in films such as *Harragas* (2009) insist on the fact that migrants consider being caught as equivalent to death, with the main character considering himself as lost after being caught as his companions who drowned along the way. Through this presentation of the immaterial borders of Europe, film directors question the possibilities of art in representing what was meant to be invisible and take part in the reflection about offering a visual memento to the migrants who lost their lives in the process of crossing these borders (Horsti 83).

In that regard, crossing the Mediterranean and its dangers also lead to our second point, as the sea is presented as not only killing the migrants and creating dead bodies but also as a womb that allows them to be reborn.

The Sea as a Womb

Death and birth are quite commonly associated by film directors, who often make use of the double symbolism attached to water, all the more when it comes to birth, as the Mediterranean Sea is commonly associated with the idea of a civilizational cradle (Roy 1). This idea is also a follow-up to the images of migrants jumping into the sea. If they do not die, they emerge from the water as they would from a womb, being reborn as they reach the shore (Kovačević 428).

Visually, this is enhanced by the use of nudity. While migrants on board are usually portrayed in warm clothes, very often migrants are

shown coming out of the water naked or semi-naked. Costa-Gavras was among the first to use such an image with the arrival on shore of Elias, the main character of *Eden is West* (2009), whose first concern is to find some clothes. Merzak Allouache, in *Harragas* (2009), films the end of his characters' journey by having them shed their clothes to dive into the sea and swim to the shore. The power of this image is enhanced by wide shots portraying the characters' swimming, and the idea of love is even present as two of them are lovers. Then, one of them, when reaching the coastline first leaves what remaining clothes he has and proceeds to wash to get rid of the salt, but also in a symbolic way, as a baby is cleaned right after being born.

But the idea of being reborn does not stop at the symbolism of water. The same character, right after his shower, wears new clothes that he carries in a sealed bag, clothes that would, as he thinks, make him look European, together with the fake ID that he has prepared. Characters go through a process of shedding their old identity and gaining a new one, or in other words, preparing for a transitory identity towards their new life in Europe. In that way, Samia, the main character of *Foreign Body* (2016), abandoned her old identity in Tunisia, then donned heavy clothes and is taught how to look "European", as she gradually fits into French society, to finally make peace with her Tunisian original self. These steps are being rhythmized by the visual leitmotiv of the sea.

Migrant children, who rarely appear in these movies, play a similar part, as they are portrayed to signify this transformation through the crossing. In that way, the lovers of *Harragas* (2009) plan to have children once they reach Europe, while *Terraferma* (2011) and *Hope* (2014) portray mothers who intend to give birth once they reach Europe. For Emanuele Crialese, this is a follow-up to the love and hopes that he portrayed among Italian migrants to the US in *Golden Door* (2007). In this film, the eldest member of the family is barred from entering America, while the main characters decide to give birth in their new home, as they are themselves reborn (Faleschini 211). In the same way, in *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (2005), Marco Tullio Giordana portrays an attempt to adoption of two young migrants into an Italian family, that would give them new names and identities. This move is also deeply linked to the

Mediterranean, as these migrants saved the family's son from drowning by jumping themselves into the sea. The failure of this adoption process takes them back to migrant, shelterless, and endangered identities that seemingly they are unable to escape.

Some films like *The Order of Things* (2017) have migrants talk about the new lives they imagine they will have once they have crossed the sea; however, the idea of being reborn and getting a new identity is vividly used, in a poetic way, by Ala Eddine Slim in *The Last of Us* (2016). As such, the film starts in a rather classical way, following the endeavours and hardships encountered by a migrant as he reaches the North African coast. Once he manages to steal a fishing boat and reach the other side of the sea, he arrives in a completely unexpected world, devoid of any human presence and technology; he is saved by an old man, whose appearance is that of a mix between an ogre and caveman. Despite this frightening look, the old man appears to be friendly, and he gradually teaches the African migrant how to live in this strange environment, before he dies. The last sequence of the film, significantly, portrays the migrant bathing naked in a river, in the midst of nature. The film itself has been compared by Clarisse Fabre, in her article "The Last of Us": 'Dead Man' au temps des migrants" published in *Le Monde*, to tales of living in the wilderness such as Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) and offers multiple layers of symbolism. Being almost a silent film (no dialogues), it made a choice about what is to be seen and heard by focusing on nature and its sounds. If the migrant's voice is symbolically unheard, here, the relation to the visual and audio environment (wolves howling in the distance) is underlined. The film can be interpreted as a reflection on the possible disappearance of Europe, or of the Europe the migrant dreamt about. It can also be about the transformation of the African migrant, who finds an entirely new self, possibly in harmony with nature once the obstacles have been overcome. And it can also be seen as a reflection on migrations in the very long run, the migrant re-enacting the arrival of modern men from Africa to Europe, while the elder that welcomes him, with his huge forehead, could be symbolic of the Neandertal population. All interpretations are left open by the film director, who avoids any didacticism, but what remains is this transformation of the main character, who becomes another self by crossing the sea.

The title of the film, *The Last of Us* (2016), itself leaves the audience with open interpretations, as there is no mention of who is this “last”, nor who are “us”, and “last” also be interpreted as a new beginning. What is more, the Arabic part of the titles adds another layer of meaning as *Akher wahed fina* translates as *The Last of Us*, but “akher” means at the same time “last” and “other”. This leads us to our second part, about the sea as a space of encounters, and its use by film directors to question identities.

The Sea as a Space of Encounters

Among the representations associated with the Mediterranean is also the idea that this sea, locked between Europe and Africa, contrary to the border aspect now associated with it, has long been a space that allowed encounters (Roy 2). Film directors have made use of this by portraying the migration process as a Babel on the sea, where people and languages come across each other, and as a way to set up encounters between characters that question the issue of power and control.

A Babel on the Sea

The crowded boats on which the migrants set sail are often presented as welcoming people from all over the world, speaking all kinds of languages that seemingly form a buzz of indistinguishable words. The one boarded by Elias in *Eden is West* (2009) is in that situation, as well as the one in *Once You're Born, You Can No Longer Hide* (2005), is full of different nationalities and ethnicities such as Syrians, Kurds, Romanian, various African nationalities, and so on, with the smugglers having difficulties communicating with them. The same can be said about *Hope* (2014), *Mediterranea* (2015), and *Terraferma* (2011). The main protagonists in these films have travelled with people seemingly coming from everywhere in the Global South, gathering together to come to Europe, giving the impression that a modern Babel has been recreated on the sea. The image itself is not new, as it is commonly used when speaking about migrations (Agier 24), and it can be traced back to former global migrations, particularly in the case of migrations to the US, with Ellis Island already being considered that way (Vidal 98). Such a link is easy, particularly for Italian directors such as Emanuele Crialese, who is familiar with the emigration

from Italy to the US, and with its mark on Italian history and memory (Capussotti 55). In that case, it serves the purpose of comparing the early twentieth-century situation, when Italy was a country of emigration, to the present situation when it itself is faced with an influx of migrants.

Seemingly, this idea of a Babel on the sea could appear as relatively positive, and even engaging, as people from all horizons mingle together. However, there are darker layers of interpretation to this image, that question the possibility of an encounter, and the violence that is rooted in the Babel trope. If directors choose to focus on the seemingly choral aspect of voices, echoing each other in different languages, these languages remain indiscernible and are quite often not translated, mimicking the mingling of languages of the Biblical story. There are voices, indeed, as in Tullio Giordana's film, but voices that fail to be heard, by the smugglers, or by the migrants themselves. Even in *Harragas* (2009) the focus on migrants all coming from the same country (Algeria), Merzak Allouache stresses the dialectal difference between migrants coming from the coast and the ones from the Sahara, with characters aggressively mocking each other on this issue, stressing the fact that, far from a common endeavour, crossing the sea is, for each of them, an individual experience marked by loneliness, only partially shared with the few very close companions with whom they travel. Crossing the national and language barrier, as done in *Hope* (2014), leads to hardships and even more loneliness.

Contrasting with this, the common language of this Babel also bears the mark of symbolic violence, being that of the former colonisers and of the ones who are in power during the journey. Be it English, French, Italian or Arabic, in all cases, language is a mark of power. *Mediterranea* (2015) stresses this by having one Italian character being asked not to speak in the Sicilian dialect (the language of power, that of the entrepreneurs and landlords who the migrants face) to the migrants who painfully managed to master some level of standard Italian through the classes that are specifically addressed to them to help them integrate. The same use of power can be seen in another scene in which a patronizing humanitarian worker has the migrants answer to her in the most childish way possible in Italian before allowing them to eat supper at the end of a long workday. It is significant that Gianfranco Rosi, who particularly focused

his movie on sounds only allows the audience to hear the migrants as they call for help on the radio in broken English, as any other language would be useless (De Angelis and De Angelis 147). *The Order of Things* (2017), for its part, establishes even a hierarchy among power languages, as each character is forced to learn the language of the other: Somali migrants have to turn to Italian, and Italian police officers have to use Arabic and English to communicate with Libyan militias and European officials.

Silence is used as a symbol of power more than the language in many of these films. As sound plays such an important part in these movies, its absence is all the more noticeable, and some directors have even chosen to portray the migrants as almost mute. As said, *The Last of Us* (2016) is almost a silent movie; Costa-Gavras' character Elias goes all through the Mediterranean and half of Europe almost without uttering a word. Other than the distress calls, *Fuocoammare* (2016) has no migrants speaking directly to the camera, and *Terraferma* (2011) follows almost the same path. In that way, directors have put to the screen the question of subalternity that Gayatri Spivak talked about in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Morris 100; 117). This aspect becomes all the more apparent as some migrants yield what power they can get from working as translators and middlemen, as seen in *Mediterranea* (2015) and in *Hope* (2014). Film directors put to the screen the question of power by demonstrating that who is in control of the words, also controls and frames the narrative about migrations. Given their own position, this move appears as self-reflexive. These silent migrants also hint at another issue, that of control in the most basic sense, particularly when it comes to body politics.

From Body Politics to Individual Encounters

The fact that migrants are portrayed as silent characters is only one aspect of a larger question that film directors have intended to put to the screen, that of control, namely control in the sense of body politics, as developed by Daria Davitti's work, inspired by Foucault and Agamben's development of the notion. However, the migrants' bodies have a long media history, particularly in the sense of a symbolic infestation (Inda 46). In the case of the films studied here, it takes, above all, the form of control as migrants are portrayed stacked, transported, and jailed, all in the name of

control. As *Fuocoammare* (2016) insists, there is no encounter when there is physical control over one of the participants, something Emanuele Crialese underlines by filming the gloves and hazmat suits donned by the Italian coast guards. On the other hand, one of his main characters, a young boy from Lampedusa, has vision issues in one of his eyes, symbolizing the imbalance in any kind of encounter, as it would be one-sided, and only half of it would be seen, linking it to the whole showing and seeing aspect directors have to tackle.

This control exerted over migrant bodies is that of the smugglers, the police, and the authorities in the so-called Libyan hotspot portrayed in *The Order of Things* (2017), as can be expected. Migrants go from boat to hotspot to the retention camp that appears in *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (2005), all marked by symbols of violence and control (barbed wire, fences, weapons, gates, and locks). But it is also the control exerted by some migrants over others, precisely that of those who act as middlemen with local authorities, smugglers, and entrepreneurs. They appear in *Hope* (2014), where along the migration route, each stop has some chairmen who take charge of organizing the migrants and controlling them. It is also the potential control over the migrants' bodies that can, even unwillingly, be that of Europeans: the entrepreneurs in *Mediterranea* (2015) who employ the migrants, among whom a change in status is marked by the mere possession of gloves to pick up oranges. The same can be said of the people who help Elias to make it across Europe, the first being a tourist woman who has sex with him before letting him go, pointing at the ambivalence of the help he receives, and undermining a too-simplistic view of the Mediterranean as a place of encounters.

Control over the migrants also means control over their bodies, which makes this aspect of body politics even more blatant. Filming them as groups can, depending on the movie, be either a way to emphasize that they are treated as an influx of a flock (*The Order of Things*, *Hope*) or a choice to focus on the magnitude of the drama at stake, at the expense of individualisation, migrants being identified as a group per se (*Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide*). This politicisation of the body is especially apparent when migrants are put face-to-face with Europeans, the latter themselves often treated as groups of tourists at the beach. The nakedness

of both groups is put into contrast by their relation to the sea, adding to the awkwardness of the encounter, or lack of it (*Fuocoammare*). This way of opposing relations to the sea comes as a leitmotiv in the corpus, starting with *Eden is West* (2009), and reappearing in *Terraferma* (2011) and in *Riparo* (2007), among others, even *Terraferma* puts some emphasis on the hospitality of Italian islanders, as a reminder of the part played by the people of Lampedusa early in the crisis (Melotti et al. 215). *Riparo*, as well as *Foreign Body* (2016), make a link between sexuality, wealth, status, and power, linking these to the idea of control, in a way that is metaphorical of Europe's relation to the migrants. It mimics Europe's goal of controlling the migration influx through administrative and financial means (*The Order of Things*), following Daria Davitti's analysis of her own corpus.

This situation acts as a follow-up to the Babel image previously seen in all its violence. As the tower of Babel was built through violence in the Bible, so is the Babel of migrants left to the discretionary power of whoever has authority where they are. Their representation as a Babel is a way for directors to make the audience adopt an outside point of view, that of someone who sees migrants from a distance and who has at least potential power over them. This is underlined on screen through all the scenes which are shot from a distance, or through a fence (*Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide*, *Fuocoammare*). The artificiality of the Babel image is furthermore developed in films that have been shot in a more intimate way, sometimes with migrants playing their own part (*Hope*), stressing all the differences that separate migrants from one another, allowing the audience to individualise characters by no longer seeing them through the dehumanising lens of a flock or a crowd. In the film, migrants are not 'Africans', but from Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Gabon etc and identify as such among others.

This process of individual humanisation is precisely the core narrative in *The Order of Things* (2016), with its title directly inspired by Foucault's work¹. Sent to Libya to organise a hotspot, an Italian police officer,

¹ *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* is the English title for the translation of Foucault's book *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* published

originally cold and efficient, is forced to meet a Somali migrant whose brother died while being detained by a Libyan militia. As awkward and short-lived as the relation between them is, and laden with issues of power (language, among others, and a strong visual opposition between the boats that migrants board and the plane used by the policeman), it forces the officer to rehumanise the migrant, as he comes to see her as a person, and not only as part of a migrant influx. The few conversations between them have nothing special about them: just a few words about personal hopes, family, and tastes. These ordinary conversations matter because these are the words that would be exchanged between people who meet; hence, they humanise both characters and form what can be considered a social relationship between them. This relation as shown in *The Order of Things* (2016), as well as the ones built in the same way by Aviya, the main character in *Mediterranea* (2015), leads to nothing much, as this would probably be considered a simplistic painting of a rosy picture of a terrible situation. *The Order of Things* (2016), as the title of the film points out, is the one where encounter remains the exception and where social and political roles weigh heavily on characters such as this policeman. The same can be said about the doctor in Lampedusa who appears in *Fuocoammare* (2016). It is possible, but it is not the norm, and it is not really accepted, as other officers appear particularly reluctant when they hear of it. A few encounters cannot solve a whole continental crisis, as well-meaning as they may be (such as in *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide*). The director of *Hope* (2014) states in interviews²: that as much as he wanted to help them, he was well aware that he could not give false hopes to the migrants he met and who played in his film, but only, through his work he could rehumanise and individualise this so-called Babel.

Conclusion

In the Polish film about European identity *Dolce fine giornata* (Borcuch 2019), an award-winning activist and poet is trapped in an art installation

in 1966. In this book, Foucault explores the epistemic assumption of each historical period, what is considered to be true and acceptable at a given time.

² Bonus interview, Pyramide Video DVD edition 2015.

designed to raise attention to the plight of the migrants by making a link to more ancient European tragedies. As the migration crisis unfolded in the Mediterranean, beyond poignant documentaries that aimed at raising attention to a sense of emergency (*Sea Sorrow* (2017)) through the use of historical links and strong images, film directors have developed a reflection about how to portray the ongoing crisis in its uniqueness. All the while they indeed used references to some former migrations (particularly to the US) and tragedies, and to the Mediterranean identity itself, but at the same time they thrived to avoid becoming, trapped in such references, as the poet in *Dolce fine giornata*.

The aim of portraying the crisis' routinised violence without falling into easy pathos led film directors to question their own power as cultural entrepreneurs. As such, they frame issues for the audience and develop a representation of the crisis. Indeed, an evolution can be traced between the first film studied here (released in the mid-2000s) and the more recent ones (late 2010), as the tropes and references used, about Babel, about former migrations, and about identities gradually grow more complex. As important as each may be in their own right, the characters in *Eden is West* (2009), with its Chaplinesque undertone, and *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (2005) appear as forerunners when it comes to describing the migration crisis, paving the way for the characters in *Hope* (2014) and in *The Last of Us* (2016) to evolve with their more complex background and symbolism. However, between the release of these films, the crisis had deepened and routinised, and humanitarian and bureaucratic concerns became more important and visible, all of which were gradually included in the directors' reflections too.

Film directors have based their films around a few core themes that have allowed them to deepen the reflection about the issues of representation of an ongoing tragedy as well as avoiding voyeurism or too far-fetched references. These themes, which revolve around the ambivalence of the sea, as a space where people both die and are reborn, and as a place for encounters, particularly through the various symbolisms attached to the story of Babel, have allowed them to raise complex political issues, such as body politics and control, the shortcomings of humanitarian help, or rendering invisible violence. Even if rehumanising the issue appears as

a core concern, it is in no way presented as a solution to the crisis, even if it is crucial. At a deeper level, what these directors have been trying to do is, through the relationship to the sea, to question European and migrant identities. Characters in these movies play parts which question the notion of identity, as does the “us” in Slim Ala Eddine’s film, *The Last of Us* (2016). In this regard, beyond its role as a liminal and transformative space, the sea is not only a metaphor for liquid borders but also a revealing space that questions the limits of identity.

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