

Title	The vulnerable gaze of the migrant: Eye-witnessing and drifting subjectivity in documentary web series
Authors	Cati, Alice
Publication date	2019
Original Citation	Cati, A. (2019) 'The vulnerable gaze of the migrant: Eye-witnessing and drifting subjectivity in documentary web series', <i>Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media</i> , 18, pp. 54-69. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.05
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue18/ArticleCati.pdf - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.05
Rights	© 2019, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2024-06-30 15:25:47
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9410

The Vulnerable Gaze of the Migrant: Eye-Witnessing and Drifting Subjectivity in Documentary Web Series

Alice Cati

Abstract: *In the current media system, we are observing the increasing sedimentation of symbolic forms, discourses and imagery regarding contemporary migrations. With the reuse of videos filmed by migrants, the documentary form represents the best “yielding field” where intercultural modes of representation and visual self-inscriptions can be constantly reinvented. In particular, videos made with nonprofessional devices have drawn viewers’ attention to the capacity of moving images to bear witness to reality “from below” and, in some respects, to reproduce aesthetically the opacity and the contingency of events, even the most tragic ones. This paper examines how such a gaze, when it is embodied by the migrant subject, raises questions about the representation of a first-person experience, an experience which paradoxically constitutes a denial of all identity and subjectivity in a deeper sense. To do this, two interesting experiments recently hosted by the website of the Italian newspaper La Repubblica will be analysed: the web series Com’è profondo il mare and Un unico destino—Tre padri e il naufragio che ha cambiato la nostra storia. These web series not only represent traumatic events, but the images show clashes within the depictions themselves and a collision or negotiation between conflicting points of view.*

In recent years, the proliferation of images recording the migrant crisis has not only fixed the representational boundaries of conflicts and traumatic experiences, it has also produced a conflict of representations—that is, a real clash between gaze regimes (Demos), the hegemonic gaze on the one hand and a first-person regime on the other, as I will explain shortly. It is undeniable that these points of view, while displaying an intrinsic difference, participate in turning migrants into a spectacle, in which the serial status of the image makes the migrant subject infinitely repeatable (Sossi 160). Though each image of a migrant subject should be approached as a single fragment within a wider representational network, it is impossible to avoid comparisons with other representations. In this sense, it is justifiable to state that “[t]he refugee crisis is a representational crisis” (Bennett 15).

Disruptions to the iconic flow are generated by two highly recognisable approaches, which are complementary in the way that they orient the production and dissemination of such images. The first, linked to the hegemonic gaze, is defined by starting from the use of images produced by the biopolitical apparatus, whose objective of controlling and monitoring national borders is carried out mainly using audiovisual technologies. The representations processed by mainstream media are examples of this first approach. In television and newspaper reports, migrants frequently appear as stereotypical figures of otherness or as a “sea of humanity” (Malkki 235). In other words, they are often represented as a sheer mass of bodies, which reflects the continuous processes of subjectification and subjection carried out by the institutional devices of surveillance. The second approach relies on first-person narratives and testimonies, which give migrants the space to make

their voices heard and to represent themselves, thereby enabling them to express and exercise their agency in the construction of their own images. Current representations sit between excessive visibility and attempts to avoid idealised or fictional forms that construct the migrant in stereotypical terms as a victim or invader. It is clear that the imaginary and symbolic representations of this phenomenon are progressively nullifying any ability to understand the reality to which they owe their referential debt (Montani).

Activist media professionals initially reacted to the process of essentialising migrants by elaborating a discourse that took into account the individuality, identity, history and agency that each subject possesses. Many media projects have focused on collecting testimonies concerning the traumas experienced by migrants, recycling personal memories and oral accounts, as well as photographs and videos that do not disturb the seemingly perfect continuity between lived experience and representation. Within this framework, questions arise as to which signs and configurations can act as a means to problematise a subjectivity that is often viewed not only as subaltern, but also as nonexistent. Moreover, any media coverage of the recent “migration crisis” cannot avoid the problematic media exposure to which the body of the migrant subject is subordinated. Such representations are traversed by vulnerability and understand the migrant through the values of suffering and subalternity: “refugees’ bodies must visually be marked as ‘wounded’ in order to legitimize their refugee status” (Mannik 263). It is therefore necessary to understand how the migrant’s subjectivity emerges and finds space in the current order of the visible. Considering that stateless people are not even granted the right to exist politically (and therefore be capable of language), what cultural models and formal patterns are used to convey the speech and image of the other today?

The approach that I adopt in trying to answer this question is to analyse a particular communication strategy based on the remediation of audiovisual recordings in journalistic projects that have revisited their practices of composition and writing through the interaction between different textual formats (from interviews to video testimonies, photographs and amateur videos made by the migrants themselves with their smartphones). As it is impossible to include all the media products that in recent years have made use of this strategy, I shall limit myself to reflecting in more detail on a complex Italian media operation, which is the result of a crossmedia plan. I will analyse two web series: *Com'è profondo il mare* (*How Deep Is the Sea*) and *Un unico destino—Tre padri e il naufragio che ha cambiato la nostra storia* (*One Destiny—Three Fathers and a Shipwreck that Changed Our History*), both produced by 42° Parallelo. The former was published as a vertical web series—a web series composed of videos captured on smartphones and shot vertically—on the website of the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* and is taken from a documentary of the same name by Emiliano Bechi Gabrielli and Alessandro D’Elia, which was broadcast on Sky Atlantic on 27 November 2016. The latter is a web adaptation of a feature film directed by Fabrizio Gatti and written by Diana Ligorio, co-produced by *Espresso*, *La Repubblica* and Sky for Gruppo Gedi–Digital Division, which aired on 15 October 2017. The transition to a shorter format brings out the intimate nature of these documentaries, which, according to Massimo Russo, director of Gruppo Gedi’s Digital Division, have to invest in audiovisual and digital language “to enable [their] way of producing journalism and [their] investigations to reach a new, young and international audience” (quoted in Gatti), thus making them suitable for flexible, discontinuous and interstitial viewing, in keeping with the typical methods of smartphones users. Hence, while audiovisual language appears today as one of the principal modelling systems

operating at a transcultural level, such products necessarily have to deal with the system of hierarchies developed on a symbolic and political level by the Western media. In this case, we see the reuse of texts created “from below” (i.e. by smartphone users), which are then edited and adapted to an “institutional” project, whose aim is to give space to eyewitness accounts and direct testimonies by migrants. The possibility of making linguistic acts coincide with video products has enabled many subjects to document their tragic experiences when crossing the Mediterranean through both visual and sound recordings. Regardless of the ways in which these videos arrive in the hands of the production companies and newspapers, they are all subjected to a hierarchical process of reorganisation. As Lilie Chouliaraki says, “our news simultaneously turns mobile witnessing into metawitnessing” (86). That is to say the recontextualisation of migrants’ videos offers the possibility of giving a new meaning to the images and of opening them up to public commentary and assessment.

Contemporary journalistic practice can thus be seen to operate at two levels. The first considers private images taken by migrants not simply as documents to be recovered, but rather as veritable gestures and testimonial acts attesting to their presence in the world through the creation of images and their dissemination in the mediasphere. The second level insists on authenticating the original images that have been remediated in the documentary projects, while also criticising the traditional communicative strategies adopted in Western spaces of publicity. It is thus necessary to trace the thresholds within this specific field of discourse, on the basis of which the other’s horizon of action and gaze are delimited. To express this idea more precisely, it is possible to identify a symbolic bordering mechanism that regulates how and when a person is given access to visual citizenship (Chouliaraki; Colombo; De Franceschi). And yet, it remains difficult to define the status of these images, which originate from a personal and private domain, but become part of a public domain, and which are no longer directly controlled by the people who produced them once they have been published on social media sharing sites.

The images recycled within the web series are essentially forms of self-representation that are not intended to describe life experiences alone, but are rather attempts to affirm an inalienable mode of existence. Once absorbed into the hegemonic discourse—as we shall see below—the images reveal contradictions within the depictions themselves and a collision or negotiation between conflicting points of view.

Com’è profondo il mare: The Migrant Gaze and the Subjective Camera

The vertical web series *Com’è profondo il mare* adopts an interesting approach by recovering audiovisual recordings, which are marked by both the gaze of those who made them and the gaze of those who have reused them. Crucially, 42° Parallelo selected thousands of moving images filmed by migrants with their mobile phones during their journeys across the Mediterranean Sea. The project presents a raw image, without mixed audio, except for the environmental sounds, which are interspersed with voices, such as assistance calls to the Coast Guard, television commentaries or radio listeners’ testimonies expressing contempt for foreigners and scepticism about the extent of the tragedy. Despite this assemblage of raw materials, and because of the hand-held devices, most of the footage confers a bodily and material existence onto the migrants by testifying to the camera user’s active presence within the world framed. In this

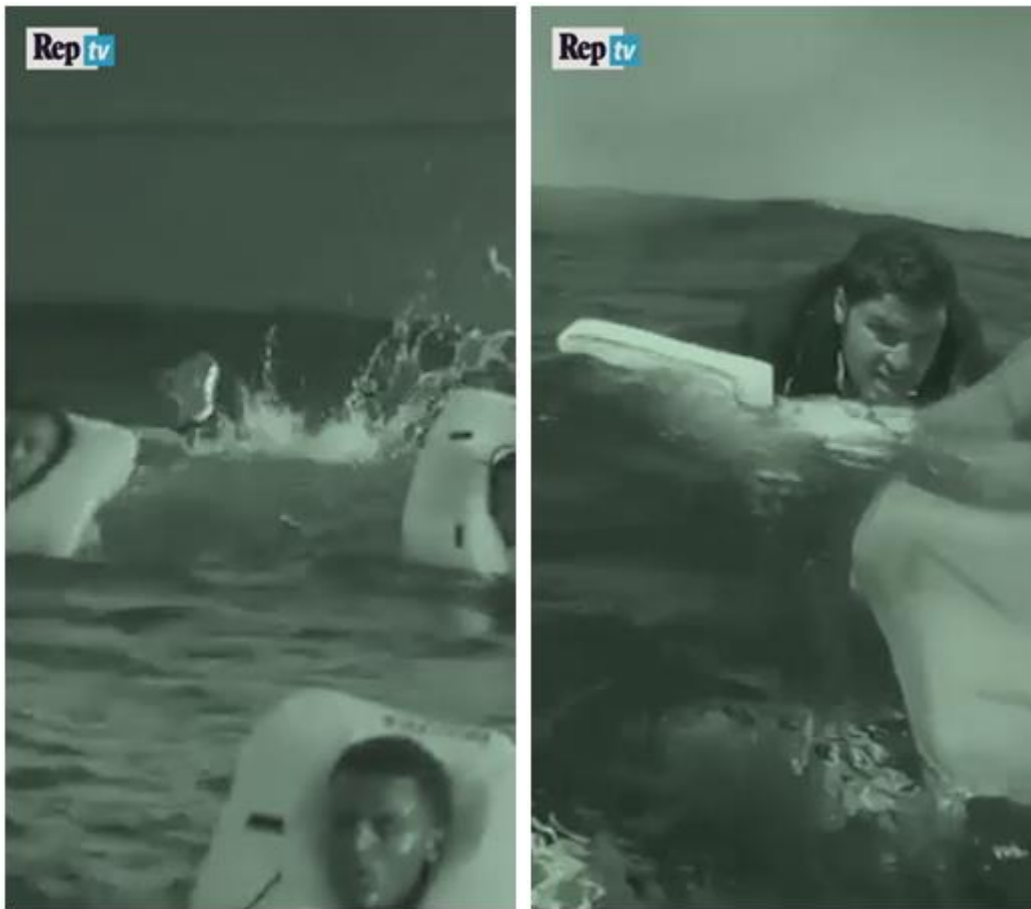
respect, the proximity between the bodily subject's eye and the mechanical camera eye affects the construction of the first-person point of view.

Com'è profondo il mare, which was promoted as a vertical web series, tells the story of a shipwreck in the Strait of Sicily in 2015. It consists of five episodes lasting three–four minutes each. The first episode, *Il dramma (Mayday)*, is devoted to the events on 18 April 2015, when some nine hundred people died. The video opens on the efforts to save a two-year-old child who had drowned at sea. Then, the nature of the gaze changes sharply, shifting from the anonymous migrant's subjective point of view to some frames shot during the underwater rescue operations. Once again, the documentation unfolds through the migrant's (technological) eyes. Sometimes, the people crowded on board are being addressed—some of them look directly at the camera's eye—and, at other times, the camera turns to the menacing waves that threaten to swallow the ship. In the audiotrack, the original Mayday calls are edited with emotional music. The second episode, *Il naufragio (The Shipwreck)*, provides a more detailed account of the tragedy. Subtitles explain that the shipwreck occurred sixty miles off the Libyan coast, and the first images that the viewer sees are clearly taken by the techno-political organisation responsible for border control. As a result of the low resolution and poor light, the texture of the image appears grainy, and the colour has a greenish-blue tone. We see the viewfinder framing a boat. On the audiotrack, the viewer overhears the shocking conversations that took place between people smugglers after the shipwreck was intercepted by the Italian police during Operation Glauco: “Our shipwreck is famous all over the world / Parents are asking for news about their loved ones / I answer that they have not left yet / those missing are so numerous” (my trans.). Meanwhile, a montage of various images taken both by migrants and official cameras—most probably by cameras belonging to the coastguards, the Navy and the reporters who were following the rescue operations—is presented in black and white to underscore the political and human failure we are witnessing. In the third episode, *Cibo per pesci (Food for Fish)*, the filmmakers work on the terrible images of the wreckage lying on the bed of the Mediterranean. First, the opening titles remind us that over the past three years the Mediterranean has become a cemetery for the victims of drowning without proper burial. In most cases, the people who die on the crossings are forgotten in the abyss both of the sea and our conscience. The titles ask: “What is the destiny of the migrants' corpses at the bottom of the sea?” (my trans.) This question acts as a sort of conceptual pointer that leads our gaze from the reality above the sea, or actually on its surface, where a floating corpse has been recovered, to the reality below the sea. The camera physically dives in order to reach the boat wreck: the shots might have been taken either by a probe or a professional camera that approaches the remains of the bodies. The fourth episode, *Rifiuti umani (Human Refuse)*, is structured around the opposition between the numerous corpses strewn on the seashore and the audio of Italian citizens protesting against the arrival of the migrants and questioning the real number of deaths. Finally, the fifth episode, *Il recupero (The Recovery)*, is devoted to the Italian Navy operation to recover the wreck, which began on 13 June 2016. The institutional intervention is highlighted in the audio commentary by a well-known Italian journalist, Corrado Augias, who explains the moral and political duty to give the victims a place to be remembered. The act of burial has the symbolic meaning of commemorating and reassessing a person's place in history.

By examining its format, choice of words and gaze, we can deduce that the enunciative strategy of *Com'è profondo il mare* was based on a production plan that invested in user-generated videos to ensure closer involvement by a public accustomed to the consumption of digital texts.

The aim appears to have been to induce the viewer to identify with the migrant subject through a carefully calibrated linguistic strategy, one that capitalised on the overlap between the experience of smartphone viewing and the experience of producing videos made by the migrants themselves using the same device. Through the rendering of images characterised by low resolution, pixelation, sudden jumps, splattering, and often blurry and abstract patterns, *Com'è profondo il mare* offers an assemblage of sequences made under dangerous conditions that clearly aim to emphasise an apparently unmediated effect, as if to indicate that the migrant self-inscriptions are drawn directly from reality.

It is clear that the camera phone has today become an instrument of survival for migrant subjects as it helps to secure safe conditions during navigation; it is also an instrument of hope as it allows migrants to maintain contact with the loved ones they have left behind in their homelands. At the same time, the relationship between migrants and the technological devices used during the voyage becomes so intimate that it is profoundly integrated into everyday life. The smartphone functions as a channel for self-expression and for conveying nonverbal experiences and perceptual states as they are lived in the immediate present. Thus, in these videos, the performance of subjectivity that is embodied within and through the text itself becomes exemplary (Rascaroli 12).



Figures 1 and 2: *Com'è profondo il mare* (2016), episode 2. 42° Parallelo, 2016. Screenshots.

What kind of gaze has been developed to show us the tragedy of migration? What focus is presented to us? Clearly, the persistent use of nonprofessional digital technologies intercepts the migrant's subjective perspective, which is manifested as a true embodied and situated gaze, capable of aesthetically restoring the density, opacity and contingency of the event itself. In essence, the cameras incorporated in mobile phones endorse the subject's direct and material involvement in the action, while also interacting with the surrounding world, the objects and materials present in the boat, and the other subjects with whom the migrant is sharing the experience of the crossing. In the second episode, for example, we witness moments of panic when the boat full of passengers overturns, throwing everyone into the sea, including the person recording the incident with the video. Here, the migrant's subjective gaze, mediated by the device, and the disorderly movement under and above the water highlight the state of despair experienced by a person who, though wearing a lifejacket, realises the sea is dangerous and the situation life-threatening (Figg. 1 and 2).

Although these videos exhibit subjective perspectives, many of the images are actually shaped by the artificial and technological nature of a gaze that is generated by smartphones, which are expressly designed to free, and therefore misalign, the technological eye of the lens from the physical eye of the operator. As anyone with a smartphone will know, the gaze of the user is detached from the viewfinder, with greater importance being given to the hand-device connection than to the eye-device connection. Corporeal vibrations are transferred from the hand, through the arm and shoulder to the phone. Furthermore, the smartphone is designed so that the camera needs not be held exclusively at eye level. According to Ruggero Eugeni, the principal feature of such a first-person shot is that it "ranges between a 'subjectual' and 'natural' pole characterized by human nature and an 'objectual' and 'artificial' one endowed with the mechanism" (209). And yet, even when the camera phone is pointed at a distance from the operator, the image takes on a distinctly haptic and embodied quality, emphasising a sense of physical presence that generates a tactile proximity between the viewer and the video image (Marks).

Beyond the natural/artificial distinction, we should consider another feature of this renewed symbolic form, one that implies a specific conceptualisation of the subject, and of the mediatisation of migrant subjectivity. I am referring to the idea that, today, as a result of current technological innovations, subjectivity has to be taken as "experienced" or "lived". In other words, self-witnessing is not the direct claim of "my" story or the representation of "my" face, but rather it is the reflexive short circuit by means of which "I" am included in the video taken by "me". In short, it is undeniable that the person in the water was really there and that the medial record of this fact attests to their physical presence both within the real situation and the representation of it. But what elements enable us to attribute an identity to the person filming and to the people filmed? After all, neither the web series, nor the film from which it is derived, tells the viewer anything about the person who made these videos: we do not know whether the migrant was a man or a woman, how old they were, where they came from, and so forth. As in many other media productions and documentaries, the recycling of images shot with smartphones does not incur expensive production costs as the images are often obtained cheaply or even free of charge. In reality, the web series draws inspiration from the numerous smartphone videos shared on YouTube by the migrants themselves (who are often called *harragas*), which confirms a general tendency to use audiovisual language not only as a privileged form of expression, but also as a suitable tool for sharing first-hand accounts rapidly (Figue 26). At any rate, in the case analysed here, the

vertical viewing format places emphasis on the medium in order to simulate the experience of a journey by sea. Viewers not only align their own gaze with that of the operator, but are also encouraged to contrast their experience of viewing (in safe conditions) with the production of the footage (which occurred, by contrast, in extreme circumstances).

In accordance with a reading that highlights the phenomenological dimension of these images, we can argue that the subjective filmic language compresses the (migrant) actor's standpoint into a mere act of presence, to which the viewer adheres in a transitory way. As Vivian Sobchack explains in her famous analysis of *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), the subjective camera aims:

to reduce a “person’s” body to nothing but its immanence. [...] That is, when the body is “grounded” in immanence (if not always visibility) by such attention to its materiality, the world visibly shrinks. Correlatively, that body’s subjectivity, too, shrivels to one dimension, its intentional directedness focused only on what is objectively before its eyes. (“Man” 74)

Naturally, in the videos re-edited in *Com'è profondo il mare*, the material presence of the body is related to a real operator, rather than a fictional alter ego. The enunciative configuration, modelled according to the affective modifications of a body in a state of distress and suffering, is determined by the deictic anchorage to the liquid world, namely the true documentary context of the absence of a stable landfall under the state of law. At the same time, this configuration represents the concrete attempt to find a voice, to achieve a discursive field in which the migrant would be permitted to become the political actor of a counter-memory that opposes the flattening of the dominant discourse. Hence, it is an attempt to attain a space of visibility.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that this space of visibility, which is often claimed by productions that recycle videos shot at sea by migrants, immediately slips under a new shadow, a new form of invisibility. These videos recovered after shipwrecks—even if they belonged to survivors—have the same status as flotsam picked up on the sea's edge, destined to remain linked to nameless bodies. While avoiding the danger of falling into the logic of the total subtraction of corporeity, the mediatisation of the subjective gaze functions as a form of identity deprivation. According to Roopika Risam, “[t]he omission of refugees’ names in the captions—a dehumanizing gesture—reinforces the sense of refugee unbelonging” (62). Following the logic of Georges Didi-Huberman, our gazes, as impotent spectators, find themselves drawn to acts of pure enunciation as a fatal result of the impediment to speak and the processes of desubjectivisation to which the defenceless subjects of history have been universally compelled (54). On the one hand, the images preserve their material existence, as distinct from the many others that have disappeared in the abyss; on the other hand, no real identification between the viewer and the filming/filmed witness is possible, because the viewer remains decisively estranged from the migrant subject. Not only are migrants continuously reproduced by the media and cameras, but the remediation of their subjective gazes has become a repeated technical and stylistic solution that deprives them of their human complexity.

The inference is that the web series’ strategy of including private images made directly by migrants repeats the critical deficiencies that are inherent in the Western news media’s tendency

to favour forms of representation that they have produced and that they can therefore control—whether those images are of anonymous masses of people aboard boats, or migrant-related selfies. Although these videos are similar to other forms of self-representation by migrants in which their agency is expressed in some way, their decontextualisation enacts a neocolonialist rupture of the referential bond between the individual and his/her name. However, the ways of recognising the other are ambiguous and other forms of discourse and representation also need to be put to the test.

Un unico destino: Private Images and Life Stories

In restoring the horizontal format, the other project by 42° Parallelo, *Un unico destino—Tre padri e il naufragio che ha cambiato la nostra storia*, seeks to develop a different approach. In order to accord full recognition to the individuality of the migrant protagonists at the centre of the events documented, the process of identification between refugees and viewers is here redirected through their life stories. The web series, as well as the documentary on which it is based, recounts the experiences of three Syrian doctors (Mazen Dahhan, Ayman Mostafa and Mohanad Jammo), who fled from war-torn Aleppo and lost their families after the fishing boat on which they were travelling sank on 11 October 2013. According to the news stories, this was the largest massacre of civilians involving the Italian Navy: 268 people died, including sixty children. The patrol boat *Libra* and the commanders in the operations room that controlled the naval squadron in Rome were accused of instructing the corvette to sail away from the site of the sinking, thereby delaying the rescue efforts.

The project rests on the testimony of three men, now based in Sweden, Malta and Germany respectively, where they have attempted to rebuild their lives. The resettled doctors visit patients and joke with their colleagues, all the while continuing to suffer from anguish and a sense of guilt at having caused the deaths of their children by attempting to save them from the war. Like *Com'è profondo il mare*, *Un unico destino* consists of five episodes lasting five to seven minutes each. The first episode, *La guerra (The War)*, opens with the story of the Syrian conflict. It weaves together images from cartoons, family videos of children skipping around in their pyjamas at home, and the video testimony of the first doctor, Mazen, whose voice acts as the link between the various audiovisual materials. His name appears as a caption in a close-up after one and a half minutes, when he appears in his current role as a surgeon, as if to underline the rift between his new life and his loss of those he loved in the past. His words are echoed in the testimony by Ayman and Mohanad. Video interviews showing them against a black backdrop and looking outside the frame alternate with amateur images documenting confused air raids in Aleppo, sequences of devastated areas shot from drones, moments of everyday life in the hospitals where the two men work, and private family images. While the first episode explains that they fled the war in the hope of a better life for themselves and their families, the second episode, entitled *La fuga (The Escape)*, depicts their departure from Libya using tense tones heightened by the rhythmic, urgent soundtrack. The accelerated pace of the editing—which is constructed of blurred, dark images, some taken from fictional reconstructions, others generated by alterations of perspective and colour—seeks to create a sense of suspense and an ominous overtone. Visual continuity is interrupted by pixelated, saturated and euphoric images of family videos. The third episode, *Il naufragio (The Shipwreck)*, reconstructs the tragedy at sea through the points of view of the three different men. On a visual level, the three video testimonies alternate with images of the sea, which

is restless, opaque and dark. The re-enactment of the tragic moment of the protagonists' families' drowning is marked by the shocking cuts between images of tourists relaxing on the beach and the blurred view of a body immersed in murky water. The fourth episode, *Il comandante George Abela* (*Commander George Abela*), marks a sudden change in register. The focus shifts to the account of the tragedy of 11 October 2013 given by a former Major in the Maltese army, George Abela, who was an eyewitness to the event. On a formal level, the gaze in this segment adopts the perspective of the biopolitical apparatus, recycling the traces disseminated by the Italian surveillance systems during the control and rescue operations. The final episode, *Tre uomini soli* (*Three Lonely Men*), dwells on the memory of the victims, showing the difficulty of mourning in the setting of the three men's new lives in their host countries. Unlike the earlier sequences, in which the gaze of the speakers in the video-testimonies is strictly directed outside the frame, here Mazen directly challenges the viewer with a dramatic question: "You could reach us in about 45 minutes, why didn't you make that?" (Fig. 3). There immediately follows another gaze within the frame with a change of texture, as two children are shown at home in an amateur movie (Fig. 4). The obvious intent is to solicit a different emotional response on the part of the viewer, whose function shifts from being coresponsible for a crime to being the victim's kin. A context of public reception is displaced in favour of the simulation of private reception. Finally, it is worth pointing out that each episode ends with elaborate credits, which roll to the melancholic and evocative notes of Aurora's *Murder Song* (5,4,3,2,1), and which combine montage footage of home videos from the three refugees' private archives.



Figure 3: *Un unico destino* (2017), episode 5. 42° Parallelo, 2017. Screenshot.



Figure 4: *Un unico destino* (2017), episode 5. 42° Parallelo, 2017. Screenshot.

Apart from the use of direct interpellation, the web series aims to trigger a process of identification and empathy between viewers and refugees in at least two other ways. The first way again uses the subjective gaze of a body fallen into the sea. However, unlike *Com'è profondo il mare*, this web series plays on the ambiguity between an authentic document and staged scenes. Although this web series abandons the vertical format, it still simulates the first-person shot taken both on the surface of the water and during an immersion in the murky and threatening waters of the Mediterranean. While some fragments suggest that the videos were shot with smartphones, we may question the fictional reworking of the experience of drowning or sinking because the montage clearly attempts to establish a relationship between the panning shots of tourists, who crowd the beaches unaware of the tragedy unfolding, and the recovery of the memory of what might have been avoided. It is in this way that this disembodied gaze connotes the sea as a space of suspension, traversed by different meanings, but also by distinct time frames: the temporary time frame of vacationing and the irreversible temporality of the dead (see Figg. 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6: *Un unico destino*, episode 3. 42° Parallelo. Screenshots.

The second strategy for securing viewers' identification with the refugees involves the reuse of family videos. These sequences, as well as being interspersed throughout the narrative, mark the conclusion of each episode and link to the credits. Through these private images, the true dramatic power of the event unfolds, because it is wedged in-between moments of happiness and

tragedy. Taken in retrospect, such images of innocence are intended to move viewers, working on them emotionally, by depicting the subjects' lack of awareness of the death that awaits them.

Although the "home movies" (shot on amateur devices) convey a situated and embedded look, it is equally true that they trigger specific forms of identification and different degrees of involvement. As Sobchack states, drawing on Jean-Pierre Meunier, the emotional power of such images produces an experience that transcends the fragmented experience of viewing, which is circumscribed in time and space, by creating a mental connection to the person or event in a different place and time ("Phenomenology" 244). The home-made film thus produces a surplus that transcends the specificities of the single image. In other words, an entire life story emanates from each image, and it is in these terms that we must speak of an experience that always implies a "longitudinal consciousness"; that is, a present consciousness that relates to and is informed by the past, and is inevitably marked by the loss of what has been (Sobchack, "Phenomenology" 248).

An aspect that has not yet been explored is the possibility of extending this longitudinal consciousness to the experience of viewing family films that are remote from the viewer's private universe. The viewing of "home movies" stimulates a particular affective response, wherein other people's memories are recognised in their existential intensity precisely because they are represented using the same visual language that we use to tell our stories. This viewing process gives rise to that inescapable inclination to transform private images, both our own and those of others, into icons or fetishes that are powerful enough to invoke fascination and identification, not least by virtue of their being rough, disjointed and fragmented (Hirsch). From this perspective, it can be argued that the private videos of the families featured in *Un unico destino* offer a normalised and naturalised representation of the migrant. That is not only because the witnesses who speak belong to a specific social class and ethnic group (now understood by the public within the framework of victimisation, charity and piety), but also because they speak our own language, or, rather, use our own visual languages, especially those we practice to represent ourselves and our private world such as video-souvenirs.

Conclusion

What conceptualisations of subjectivity and eye-witnessing do the images in *Com'è profondo il mare* and *Un unico destino* convey? According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the iconology of contemporary "illegal immigration" moves between two opposite poles: concrete and faithful representations of reality, and an imaginary built on idealised and fictionalised visions of migrants as pioneers or hordes preparing for invasion (13). From this perspective, the imaginary universe seems to have acquired a power sufficient enough to prevent containment and control over the circulation of images concerning the phenomenon of migration. In this respect, the idea that "images 'go before' the immigrant" should be interpreted as a reifying action that constructs the migrant through stereotypes, tables of classification, identificatory schemes, and so forth, as well as by admitting the difficulties of the image in establishing a different understanding of migrant subjectivity (Mitchell 14).

The reuse of camera-phone footage today seems to reveal two trends: on the one hand, it creates a distance from the so-called border spectacle, while, on the other, it is in harmony with

the common tendency to intensify the effect of reality precisely because of the imperfections of the amateur image. Furthermore, the power of authentication of the real is generated by the awareness to which the video attests, by stating “this is what I am doing right now”, rather than simply “I am here”. Nevertheless, bearing witness to the immediacy of existence, or its readiness for the world, does not yet fully render the complexity of the individual’s identity.

The videos reproduced within the web series that I have examined here lead us to a different order of recognition, and to a different understanding of the subject and subjectivity, particularly as it is constituted and witnessed, not only in its corporeal immanence, but also as a relational identity. This different version of subjectivity emerges not only in videos shot during the sea crossings and in family videos (where we see a camera user whose gaze is turned on other people, whose faces are also visible to us), but also in all the videos that record encounters within reality. The configuration of the first-person shot provides a new conception of the subject, who is constituted by living, filming and leaving audiovisual traces. At the same time, in keeping with Graziella Parati’s idea of relational identity, this attestation of the self must open itself up to relationships by passing through recognition of the migrant subject as a subject embodied in historical, sexual and social terms. It is important for the media to try not to portray migrants as objectified and depersonalised subjects, nor reduce them to their existential singularities. There is an urgent need to give migrants a discursive space in which to speak and interact creatively, thereby giving a meaning to their unique experiences through narrative and representative devices.

In the light of the above arguments, I feel that greater attention needs to be drawn to understanding the vulnerability of the contemporary gaze as it is focused on migrant subjects. On the one hand, these fragments of reality focus on the representation of an obviously vulnerable subject, as evidenced by the numerous shaky and grainy images whose closeness to lived experience gives value to the migrant subject’s experiences. On the other hand, this vulnerability might correspond to a crisis in the image’s capacity to incite transformative action, and not function merely as a reproductive act. The use of subjective camerawork is disjunctive for the spectator, mainly because the person whose vision we are asked to assume resides in a “blind spot” that is not our own.

We could venture to say that (as has happened in the past with the institutionalisation of multiculturalism) we are witnessing a new attempt to make the categories of subjectivity, difference and cultural identity marketable. It seems to me that we are too ready to claim that oral memories and recovered media traces of subjective camerawork are valuable instruments for the self-empowerment of stateless persons. As Steffen Köhn claims, without a thorough examination of the ways in which specific cultural settings affect testimonies, we risk assuming that we can equate lived experience and mediated experience, “life as lived” and “life as talked about” or—as I would add—“life as represented” (67). These equations favour the perception that trauma is a homogeneous and transculturally identical experience. Although media productions repeatedly solicit reactions of empathy in the public who view these images goodness knows where on their smartphones, the distance between the viewer and the migrant subject’s points of views is not only incommensurable, but also unerasable, as only the migrant subject is confined in a space without true prospects.

Acknowledgment

This article emerges from a funded project: *Migrations | Mediations. Arts and Communication as Resources for Intercultural Dialogue* (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2017–2019).

References

- Bechi Gabrielli, Emiliano, and Alessandro D'Elia, directors. *Com'è profondo il mare*. 42° Parallelo, Gedi–Digital Division, L'Espresso, La Repubblica, 2016.
- Bennett, Bruce. “Becoming Refugees: *Exodus* and Contemporary Mediations of the Refugee Crisis.” *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 13–30, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2018.1471181>.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. “Symbolic Bordering: The Self-Representation of Migrants and Refugees in Digital News.” *Popular Communication*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2017, pp. 78–94, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1281415>.
- Colombo, Fausto. *Imago Pietatis. Indagine su fotografia e compassione*. Vita e Pensiero, 2018.
- Com'è profondo il mare*. 42° Parallelo, Gedi–Digital Division, L'Espresso, La Repubblica, 2016. 19 Feb. 2019, video.repubblica.it/le-webseries-verticali/come-e-profondo-il-mare-il-dramma-dei-migranti-la-webserie-in-verticale-per-smartphone/259651/259958?video=&ref=HRESS-1.
- Daves, Delmer, director. *Dark Passage*. Warner Brothers, 1947.
- De Franceschi, Leonardo. *La cittadinanza come luogo di lotta. Le seconde generazioni in Italia fra cinema e serialità*. Aracne, 2018.
- Demos, T. J. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis*. Duke UP, 2013, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395751>.
- Didi-Huberman, George. *Images Malgré Tout*. Minuit, 2003.
- Eugeni, Ruggero “Remediating the Presence. First-Person Shot and Post Cinema Subjectivity.” *Rimediazioni. Immagini Interattive*, edited by Tiziana Migliore, Aracne, 2016, pp. 201–14.
- Figge, Maja. “‘Actions of the Eyes of the Fleeing’? Reflections on the In/Visibility of *Harraga* Videos”. *Scattered Subalternities: Transnationalism, Globalization, and Power*, edited by Ilaria Antonella De Pascalis, Judith Keilbach, Mariafrancesca Piredda, special issue of *Cinéma et Cie.*, vol. 17, no. 28, 2017, pp. 21–30.

- Gatti, Fabrizio. "Il grande massacro: il film evento." *L'Espresso*. 6 Sep. 2018, espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2017/10/06/news/il-grande-massacro-il-film-evento-1.311667.
- . director. *Un unico destino—Tre padri e il naufragio che ha cambiato la nostra storia*, 42° Parallelo, Gedi-Digital Division, L'Espresso, La Repubblica, 2017.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia UP, 2012.
- Köhn, Steffen. *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration*. Columbia UP, 2016, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/kohn17888>.
- Malkki, Liisa H. "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricizing." *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object*, edited by Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup, Routledge, 1997, pp. 227–59.
- Mannik, Lynda. "Public and Private Photographs of Refugees: The Problem of Representation." *Visual Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2012, pp. 262–76, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2012.717747>.
- Marks, Laura. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Duke UP, 2000, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381372>.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. "Migration, Law and the Image: Beyond the Veil of Ignorance." *Images of the Illegalized Immigration: Towards a Critical Iconology of Politics*, edited by Christine Bischoff et al., Verlag, 2010, pp. 13–30.
- Montani, Pietro. *L'immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile*. Laterza, 2010.
- Parati, Graziella. *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. U of Toronto P, 2005, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442677265>.
- Rascaroli, Laura. *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*. Wallflower Press, 2009.
- Risam, Roopika. "Now You See Them: Self-Representation and the Refugee Selfie." *Popular Communication*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2018, pp. 58–71, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1413191>.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience." *Collecting Visible Evidence*, edited by Michael Renov and Jane Gaines, U of Minnesota P, 1999, pp. 241–54.

---. “The Man Who Wasn’t There: The Production of Subjectivity in Delmer Daves’ *Dark Passage*.” *Subjectivity: Filmic Representation and The Spectator’s Experience*, edited by Dominique Chateau, Amsterdam UP, 2011, pp 69–83.

Sossi, Federica. “Struggles in Migration: The Phantom of Truth.” *Spaces in Migration: Postcards of a Revolution*, edited by Glenda Garelli et al., Pavement Books, 2013, pp. 149–63.

Un unico destino—Tre padri e il naufragio che ha cambiato la nostra storia, 42° Parallelo, Gedi-Digital Division, L’Espresso, La Repubblica, 2017, 19 Feb. 2019, video.repubblica.it/webseries/un-unico-destino/un-unico-destino-episodio-1-la-guerra/287096/287708.

Suggested Citation

Cati, Alice. “The Vulnerable Gaze of the Migrant: Eye-Witnessing and Drifting Subjectivity in Documentary Web Series.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 18, 2019, pp. 54–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.05>.

Alice Cati is an Assistant Professor at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. Her research areas include film theory, memory studies, visual culture and migrant cinema with a particular focus on home movies, self-representation, documentary, media and transcultural trauma. She is a member of the Steering Committee of the project “Mediations/Migrations” (2017–19), which focuses on the role of the media in the process of inclusion policies.