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Voicing the Border: On Some Spectral Essay Films

Giving prominence to the auditory nature of the border, this article argues for the importance of voice to the epistemological practices of border essay films. By engaging with three relevant case studies—*Appunti del passaggio* by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo (2014–2016), *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* by Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari (*Fantasmata planiountai pano apo tin Evropi*, 2016), and *An Asian Ghost Story* by Bo Wang (*九龍東往事*, 2022)—it carries out an acoustemology of spectral border essay films that, to cite Jacques Derrida, speak of the ghost to speak of justice. In so doing, it shows that, through an experimental use of voice, these films perform the border by making it audible. Their experimental approach to make the border "heard" subverts the standard relationship between sound and image in documentary cinema. Simultaneously, it de-forms and re-forms the essay film via postcolonial and feminist appropriations and spectral modifications of the essayist's translocal, border-crossing voiceover.

Keywords
VOICEOVER
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APPUNTI DEL PASSAGGIO
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Essay, voice, border

In her assessment of her video essay film *Performing the Border* (1999), about the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Ursula Biemann (2003) has highlighted important points of contact between essay, border, and voice. In her article, Biemann reflects on the places (and non-places) created by the essay film through its piecing together of different geographical areas, as in an imagined topography, and proposes that they are akin to a transnational zone—much like the one that develops along the US–Mexico border (2003, 83). Biemann notes that the essay film is transnational in that "it practices dislocation; it sets across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic" (83). It is voice, in the shape of voiceover narration, that for Biemann connects the different places in the transnational zone of the essay film's montage through a subjective reasoning. Voice in the essay film is subjective, but while it is clearly situated, "in that it acknowledges a very personal view, a female migrant position, a white workers' position, a gay black position, etc." (83), it is not geographically located. Biemann describes it as "the translocal voice of a mobile, traveling subject that doesn't belong to the place it describes but knows enough about it to unravel its layers of meaning" (83). This translocality coincides with its border-crossing quality.

Biemann's film is set in a border zone which she invites us to understand in terms of performativity, for it is the bodies that cross the border that give meaning to it. Performativity has, in fact, become central to the understanding of borders in human geography and cognate disciplines, where "bordering practices," whether intentional or unintentional, carried out by private citizens or state actors, are seen to contribute to "constituting, sustaining, or modifying borders" (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012, 776), showing in the process that borders are not static entities nor abstract, razor-sharp lines on maps. Among these practices are "rituals such as the showing of passports, the confessionary matrix at the airport, and the removal of clothing" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 72), but also forms of contestation, artistic performances, everyday practices and activities that bring borders into focus and, more literally, into being. Films too contribute to this performance of the border. Some border essay films, in particular, can be seen to not only participate in bordering practices or "borderwork" (Rumford 2008), but to constitute a theorizing activity. Elsewhere, I described the self-reflexivity of the borderwork of certain essay films as a form of theory of the border, and proposed a semiotic classification of film-essayistic border-images (Rascaroli 2022). I proposed that some border essay films deform the image in ways that include "extension, deceleration, and anamorphosis [to] bend and stretch the border ad infinitum, both spatially and temporally," while parallax and parataxis are used to "confound distinctions and defeat the typical binaries of border discourse: in/out, here/there, them/us" (46). These strategies operationalize borders and amount to a temporalizing that "lengthens our spectatorial activity of cognizance and apprehension of the limit" (48). Voice too, however, is crucial to the critical bordering practices of essay films, both qua voiceover, as claimed by Biemann with reference to the border-crossing, situated-yet-translocal voice of the essayist, and in other senses too; as such,

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it deserves specific attention, which this article shall give to it, in so doing extending my previous argument on filmic border-images.

As Irina Leimbacher has remarked, "voice" in the context of documentary film is a shifting signifier that can alternatively mean "an utterance of speech, empowered subjectivity, cinematic authorship, or political agency" (2017, 292). All these meanings are in evidence in the essay film, a form to which issues of subjectivity, authorship, and enunciative authority (and its subversion) are paramount. The question of voice as political agency, then, is crucial to border discourse and to films that engage with it. In an article on images of border-crossing, Nadica Denić discusses voice in the context of the production of knowledge of migration, and notices that "the inclusion of migrant voices in the European mediascape" has been seen more in terms of "migrants' right to speak instead of enabling them 'to set the parameters of the conversation'" (2023, 96). In institutional initiatives in particular (as opposite to grassroot initiatives) migrant voices tend to be bent to the aims of those institutions and "fit the interests and imaginaries of European audiences, whereby migrants are represented as non-political subjects worthy of humanitarian help" (98). These remarks about border discourses echo by-now classical critiques of the inclusion of the voices of subjects in documentary film, for instance Trinh T. Minh-ha's denunciation of some documentarians' claim to "give voice" to their subjects, which is problematic in so far as it "conceals the hierarchy between the filmmaker and the subject, the former selecting and controlling the voice(s) that she or he deigns to include" (Leimbacher 2017, 295).

The essay film, to the extent that it overlaps with the realm of documentary, participates in the representation of the subjects which are part of its discourse, but also exceeds it in how it promotes a particularly complex arrangement and stratification of subjectivities and voices. The translocal voice(over) of the essay is, taking our cue from Biemann, inclined to cross borders. My hypothesis in this article is that voice, on account of this ability, can be an important field of the negotiation of tensions in border essay films, crucial to their participation not only in critical borderwork—i.e., work that brings borders into sight (and auditory prominence)—but also in an epistemology of the border.

Questions of voice, sound, and the auditory nature of the border are understudied. According to Michelle Weitzel (2018), this is due to the prominence of sight, surveillance, and visual epistemologies in border discourse and border scholarship. Weitzel makes a compelling case for taking sound and the "sonic body" fully into account, given the importance of biopolitics and corporeality to the securitization of migration, but also cautions that "[w]e have yet to develop a clear understanding of the ways in which our sonic footprint and practices interact with the complex, networked security mechanisms and data repositories that enframe material sound" (2018, 422). As well as the confessionary regime of migrants' "oral declarations of intent upon entering a country" (423), Weitzel points to the need of audializing the body at the border more broadly, and of studying the soundscape of migration within the context of an understanding of sound as "situated contemporaneously in individuated bodies, in capitalist technologies, in global communication networks, and in security

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paradigms" (423). The border itself can be a sensory margin, where "infrasonic listening devices pick up movement and sound alarms to alert guards" (425). Among all sounds, voice is a special case on account of its suggestion of an embodied presence. Voice at the border may be used or withheld by migrants, for instance to evade categorization by their interrogators, so that muteness becomes sometimes a strategy for crossing the border where a vocalized self would be denied entry. Muteness can also be demonstrative, as when, in 2016, migrants sewed their lips in protest against the demolition of their camp known as the Calais Jungle in France.

Voice, on the other hand, is always mediated, and Weitzel rightly attracts our attention to the Deleuzian man–machine assemblage of voice and sound reproduction, transmission, broadcasting, and amplification in relation to securitization and the border (426). The mediated dimension of voice is of course central to film as medium, and accordingly it will be attended to in the analyses that follow. These will focus on three case studies, the border essay films *Appunti del passaggio* by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo (2014–2016), *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* by Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari (*Fantasmata planiountai pano apo tin Evropi*, 2016), and *An Asian Ghost Story* by Bo Wang (九龍東往事, 2022). In these films, border-crossing voiceovers originate as if from both a body and a beyond, as a haunting that is also the site of a film-theorization of the border.

A spectral acoustemology

> [O]ne cannot speak of generations of skulls or spirits [...] except on the condition of language—and the voice. (Derrida 1994, 9)

The paradox at the core of essay films that do not wish to "give voice" to border-crossing subjects, but that aim to do justice to them by giving visibility to the border, is that they must rely on voice. Although it is the material body that crosses the border (sometimes dying in the attempt), or is rejected by it, the body as summoned by these films has a spectral quality to it—and voice and language are the conditions on which we can speak of spirits, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida. By writing this, I by no means wish to de-humanize or de-subjectivize migrants, or to downplay the importance of documentaries that place individual migrants at their center. I rather wish to attend to an essay-film theory of the performance of the border on screen. To do so, I turn to films that re-present the border-crossing body hauntologically. I use this term in the sense of Derrida's work on specters of Marxism, for whom to speak of the ghost is to speak of justice—a justice concerning those who *are not there* (1994, xviii)—and of Avery Gordon, who thinks of haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" ([1997] 2008, xvi). For Derrida, the hegemony of neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, which has not "managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts [...], still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting" (1994, 46). For Gordon, haunting is the condition of the emergence of a social violence inflicted on subjects in the past or the present that emerges "when the people who are

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meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving" ([1997] 2008, xvi). Gordon's statement is relevant in more than one way to migrants. A condition of invisibility is often associated with undocumented migrants, refugees, and stateless persons, who are stopped, interned, or rejected at the border, or who, after crossing the border, are discriminated, racialized, and segregated by the host societies. The invisibility of the migrant is frequently described as a ghostly condition in both common speech and critical discourse. For Chiara Brambilla and Holger Potzsch, the condition of the migrant is best described as one of "in/visibility," for while publicly invisible they are also being firmly maintained in the public eye by political/securitarian discourses (2019, 72). This in/visibility may be said to parallel that of the ghost—which is at once spirit (that which is invisible) and a "becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (Derrida 1994, 5). Robbie Peters, in an article on the working and living conditions of young migrant women in Ho Chi Minh City, describes the latter as a "city of ghosts," where fourteen percent of the population is made up of in-migrants, often living unregistered in temporary accommodation. For Peters, in-migrants in Ho Chi Minh City are similar to, and even describe themselves as, "the wandering ghosts (*co hon*) that are believed to roam Vietnam's streets and public spaces" (2012, 551). The term "ghost worker" is often used in relation to immigration and the exploited undocumented migrant workforce. Ghosts are also evoked by the tragic loss of life associated with border crossing. Data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggests that, by August 2024, nearly 68,000 people worldwide lost their lives on migratory journeys since 2014 (Missing Migrants Project 2024). Over 30,000 of those died on the Central Mediterranean route alone, a sea which was referred to by Peter Koenig as "the largest graveyard in modern history" (2018). The names and identities of the dead, then, often remain unknown, not to mention the countless bodies that were never recovered.

The ghostly nature of the migrants has been captured by fictional and nonfictional works such as, for instance, the shadow play *Ghosts of the River*, written by Octavio Solís and performed by the ShadowLight Company (2009), which represents "fictionalised accounts of real life stories depicting both the hardships of border crossers in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and the fragile status of the Latino community living in the Valley area" (Pérez Valverde and Perez-Martin 2020, 48), and where "the river itself appears as a liminal space inhabited by the ghosts of dead crossers, suitably represented by shadows" (50). Similarly, Mati Diop's fiction feature *Atlantics* (*Atlantique*, 2019) merges African spirituality and zombie movie. In it, the ghosts of a group of young male Senegalese come back after dying in the attempt to reach Spain by sea and possess the bodies of their female friends in order to torment their former boss, who had failed to pay several months of wages to them, pushing them to emigrate. A further example is the essay film *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* (Morgan Knibbe, 2014), in which a migrant who dies in the attempt to cross the sea with his family turns into a ghost. He lifts above water (thanks to a camera mounted on a drone) and his disembodied voice(over) begins to talk, as a specter that is at once present and absent. In their in/visibility, migrants may be said to haunt, with the social violence inflicted on them, the people, institutions, and societies that are responsible for ejecting, repelling, torturing, or segregating them, or for more

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or less deliberately leaving them to die. But this haunting is also always transhistorical. For Derrida, specters are never single; they are multiple, they are generations of ghosts—"those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism" (1994, xviii). The specter is a revenant, it always comes back; a spectral moment, when it arises, no longer belongs to time—it "de-synchronizes, it recalls us to anachrony" (6) and shows the "*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*" (xviii). Contemporary migrations, then, haunt us with the spectral traces of prior migrations, of forced displacements, of the concentrationary, and of our colonial past.

Sandra Ponzanesi, in an article on the contemporary "migrant crisis" in Europe and on what she calls Libya's "colonial ghost," reminds us that the task of postcolonialism is to make the invisible visible or, as she adds, audible (2017, 124). The question of the audibility of the invisible may be said to be central to the concept of haunting. The specter, for Derrida, is a someone other who looks at us and by whom we feel looked at "outside of any synchrony" (1994, 6) and, "[s]ince we do not see the one who sees us, [...] we must fall back on its voice" (7). The specter becomes manifest as voice. For Mark Fisher (2014), "hauntology has an intrinsically sonic dimension": in terms of sound, it is a "hearing what is not there." In the analyses that follow, I will aim for a spectral acoustemology of the films I examine. I use the term "acoustemology" here in Steven Feld's (2015) meaning of "acoustic epistemology," a way of knowing with and through the audible. I adopt this expression—rather than terms that are more common in film analysis, such as "soundscape"—not least because of its assonance with "hauntology," to which I link it. My analysis will pay attention to the ways in which the specter as revenant is aroused by certain essay films to do "borderwork," to produce a knowledge of the border through a haunting, border-crossing voice(over). My intention is to contribute at once to our understanding of the essay film as a form of thinking and knowing, and of the function of voice and voiceover in it, while also contributing to the effort of advancing epistemic decolonization.

My ear becomes a passage: *Notes on the Crossing*

> Attending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecuperable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving. (Davis 2005, 373)

Discussing the prevalence of seamless synchronization of image and sound in films, Markos Hadjioannou notes that, in documentary cinema, visual presence tends to take precedence over sound and voice, "with the body's appearance as image acquiring a documentative historical value, becoming the physical trace from within which the voice appears in order to tell us something about the world *being seen*" (2017, 357). While the synchronicity of voice and body "points to the medium's act of narrating reality by way of anchoring the body

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within the world" (365), instances of their disjunction in documentary cinema highlight that voice "can become its own act of narrating, a speech act proper that tends toward a past, present, and future in an act of becoming in time while performing in the present" (365).

A radical disjunction of voice and body characterizes *Appunti del passaggio* (literally *Notes on the Crossing*) by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo. Focusing on the economic migration from Southern Italy to Switzerland in the 1960s, the film is one of a number of works, together with *Sudeuropa* (2005–2007) and *Chronicles of That Time* (2005–2020), devoted by the two artists/filmmakers to histories and logics of migrations from both the past and the present. *Appunti del passaggio* is narrated by two female voices. The first, performed by filmmaker Maria Iorio, reads out in voiceover personal accounts of migrant experiences told in the first person. The embodied sources of these testimonies are not present on screen. The second, performed by sound artist and vocalist Alessandra Eramo, appears to be the voice of Pulcinella, a classical character of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* of the seventeenth century and of Neapolitan puppetry. Pulcinella's voice often comes from the off-screen, and when he appears in the shot, wearing his characteristic black mask with a long nose, his face is framed in extreme close-up and his lips do not move. Therefore, in both cases, the voice and body synchronicity is missing.

Both voices speak Italian; Iorio's does so with an accent. Her voice reads/recites the personal memories of several migrants, both men and women, all in the same tone, characterized by a certain detachment, and even reads out the pauses found in parenthesis in the transcripts (e.g., "Silence," or again, "In a calm, composed voice, he drums his fingers nervously on the table"). In its single-voice polyphonic account, the monotone of Iorio's voice and its reading of the parenthetical descriptions compound the asynchronicity and foreground voice as speech act. Bodies of migrants do appear but only in black-and-white archival photographs from the 1960s. The photographs never fill the frame; rather, they appear as negatives, or as positives that are however framed upside down or only in part. Sometimes, the hands of a person, concievably one of the now-elderly migrants, are shown as they sift through photographs and let them fall one by one on a table; the camera is positioned opposite the (unseen) person, and the images appear in the frame the wrong side up. This de-framing ensures that voice and bodies never come together, while still alluding to each other, for any of the people in the photographs could be the person narrating their memories of border-crossing and migration. The negatives compound the sense of ghostliness triggered by the monotone of the disembodied voice. Besides the archival images, the video track comprises a series of contemporary shots of the places referenced in the migrants' stories: southern Italian villages and rural areas; train tracks and stations; the Alps and the border between Italy and Switzerland; the former *Grenzsanität* in Brig, a building (still in use till the mid-1990s) where migrants were medically examined—a violent and humiliating form of biopolitical control—before being admitted into the country or sent back to Italy. The emptiness of many of these shots, which are mostly devoid of people, the state of abandonment of the buildings and the temporal distance between the places and the stories told about them heighten our impression of being listening to the tales of ghosts.

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Pulcinella's voice, on the other hand, emerges early on, alongside the voice of the reader of the testimonies, and coexists with it throughout the film. We hear it in the off-screen engaging in nonverbal vocalizations including humming, sighs, mutterings, and monosyllabic sounds. When it verbalizes, it is equally expressive, theatrical. It often changes tone and pitch; sometimes it shouts, sometimes it lowers to a whisper. Apparently drawing on the content of the migrants' memories and their retelling of past episodes of discrimination and exploitation, Pulcinella declares himself to be "hunger, starvation," "a Southern hand," "a flow to be controlled and channeled," "invasion, infiltration."[1] He repeats derogatory names once used for Italian migrants, such as "Brigands!", "Maccheroni!", "Africa!" Following an account by a former housemaid who was told by her Swiss employer that she smelled and should get washed, only to be shouted at for leaving the shower dirty, Pulcinella declares himself to be "illness," "epidemic," "the plague, cholera, tuberculosis, syphilis," and that dirt and smell are found where he is. "I am history, I am history's reject!", he exclaims. Pulcinella speaks from the point of view of the Southern Italian migrants, denouncing their segregation, abuse, and exploitation. It expresses rage, sarcasm, protest. When Pulcinella appears in the frame, and is in focus, his lips are still (Fig. 1); while the (female) voice we hear could be considered his interior monologue, his mask is expressionless, his eyes and lips do not betray any emotion, so creating a strong body/voice disjunction. The effect is uncanny; for Serge Daney, "a voice that originates within the image but does not emanate from the mouth [...] is ambiguous and enigmatic, because its visual stand-in is the body in all its opacity, the expressive body, in whole or in part" (2013, 20).

As Hadjioannou writes, "a corporeal copresence of, *and* a temporal fissure between, body and voice, manifested in the revelation of these elements' incongruity within their enfolding combination," can manifest "the invisible or virtual existential conditions of another temporal reality" (2017, 364). Pulcinella's voice in *Appunti del passaggio* is that of a mask that not only stands in for all the economic migrants from Southern Italy, but that also evokes the meanings associated with the character in the Italian comedy of the seventeenth century and, indeed, before it, given its derivation from stock characters of the ancient Roman Atellan Farce, and long after it, considering its copious afterlife in forms of art and popular culture. One of Pulcinella's characteristics is his ability to put us into contact with the afterlife; his black mask and white dress are symbols of death and mourning, and his name means "little chick"—fowl were considered psychopomps in the classical world. The disjunction of voice and body in *Appunti del passaggio* can first be seen as a result of the violence of the biopolitical processes of dehumanization suffered by the migrants, reduced to constantly threatened "naked life" (Agamben 2000); secondly, it makes an-other temporal reality manifest. Pulcinella here is the becoming-body of the specter; in Derrida's words, "[i]t becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other" (1994, 5). The film is a hauntology of migrants forgotten by history, of stories that were unaccounted for; in the words of the filmmakers, who collected the testimonies that were later used as transcripts for the film, "*Appunti del passaggio* manifests a counter-memory of the period of the 'economic miracle' and exposes the logics of biopolitical control that forced

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Fig. 1: Voice/body disjunction in *Appunti del passaggio* by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo (2014–2016): Pulcinella's close up.

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the bodies of immigrant workers through intrusive health checks at the border, as well as the effects of the current border regime in this frontier zone, where arrests and deportations of migrants back to Italy are a daily occurrence" (Iorio and Cuomo 2020). In this, the Derridean evocation of the "specters of Marx" is fully relevant to the film.

Indeed, towards the end of the film, the camera captures the scene of a group of contemporary migrants being forced by Swiss border guards to board a train directed to Italy, back to where they came from. Meanwhile, some of the stories told in the film are a mourning, and summon the memory of migrants deceased in Switzerland while working on building sites in the absence of all safety measures, like two men who fell to their deaths from an icy roof, or a young man who was buried alive when the ground suddenly gave way while he was laying pipes. A flock of black birds flying against a cloudy sky is suggestive of revenant souls. The migrants from the past haunt us as forgotten and repressed memories, while the present migration from the Global South is falsely presented by European political/securitarian discourse as a new, unprecedented phenomenon.

Drawing on Lisbeth Lipari and her concept of "listening otherwise," a form of ethical listening "that is awakened and attuned to the sounds of *difference* rather than to the sounds of *sameness*" (2009, 45), Irina Leimbacher (2017) notes that some experimental filmmakers use strategies to prompt the spectator to listen to the "saying" and not only to the "said" of speech. This form of "haptic listening" for Leimbacher "fastens on to the affective, expressive, and musical qualities of vocalized speech," so preparing us to receive otherness (2017, 293). The sonorous strategies of the two diverse vocalizations (Iorio's and Eramo's) of migrant voices in *Appunti del passaggio* and the voice/body asynchrony are all at once aesthetic and political, and invite a listening otherwise from the spectator. This form of spectatorial listening is however founded on a prior listening, described in the film by Iorio when she reads the transcript of a conversation ostensibly held between one of the migrant interviewees, who asks, "Why do you say I am telling this story differently?", and the interviewer, who answers: "Because I listen to you, I transcribe, I translate. My ear becomes a place of transition, a passage." The passage in the film's title, therefore, is not only the border-crossing of bodies evoked in the migrants' stories but can appropriately be described as a passage from the "other scene," a liminal space of transition for the return of the specter.

Silence now, they pass: *Spectres Are Haunting Europe*

> Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day, Europe, as if the latter, at a certain moment of its history, had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest. (Derrida 1994, 3)

The specter's passage from the other scene in *Appunti del passaggio* takes place thanks to the ear of the filmmakers, who have collected the testimonies of a forgotten migration, and have channeled them via an experimental work on the sound and image tracks of their

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film that invites a listening otherwise. Multiple voices appear also in Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari's *Spectres Are Haunting Europe*, including those speaking in Arabic, Greek, and English of migrants from several countries and of Europeans, as well as a voice reciting a poetic text in Greek. The film was shot in a temporary refugee camp in Idomeni, a Greek village near the Macedonian border, when, in March 2016, the European Commission closed the "Balkan route" of immigration from the Greek coast via Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. 15,000 people, mostly Syrian, Kurdish, Pakistani, and Afghani, remained trapped at the border, till the camp was dismantled in May and the refugees were taken to facilities in and around Thessaloniki. This crisis followed the decision of Chancellor Angela Merkel to open the German border in September 2015 that resulted in the arrival of about 900,000 asylum seekers mainly from Syria, which was then at a peak of the war started in 2011. Responding to the increasing political pressure generated by Germany's decision, the EU and Turkey reached an agreement, according to which migrants and asylum seekers who arrived mostly via Greek islands would be sent back to Turkey. In exchange, the EU would pay 6 billion euros to Turkey.

The film was co-directed by filmmaker Maria Kourkouta and writer Niki Giannari. Giannari also wrote a poem, "Spectres Are Haunting Europe (Letter from Idomeni)" ("Φαντάσματα π λανιούνται π άνω απ ' την Ευρώπ η (Γράμμα απ ό την Ειδομένη)"), which is recited in voiceover in the last section of the film by Greek musician and singer Lena Platonos. The poem was published both in the original Greek and in French translation in the volume *Passer, quoi qu'il en coûte* (*Pass, Whatever It Takes*), together with an essay by Georges Didi-Huberman (Didi-Huberman and Giannari 2017).

Engaging with the "haunting" in the title of the poem and the film, Didi-Huberman (2017) states in his essay that contemporary migrants and refugees do not show up from nowhere but return. We Europeans, writes Didi-Huberman, repress that knowledge to safeguard our sense of our "identity" (when not of the "purity" of the race), even if we are all children of migrations, and migrants are nothing other than our returning relatives. For Didi-Huberman, the refugees from Idomeni are like specters in the sense of our "family stranger," whose appearance is always a re-appearance; when a specter appears to us, it is our own genealogy that is brought to light and called into question. The poem and film, he remarks, also raise other specters, particularly those of the Shoah, via the repeated images of trains, tracks, and displaced people, as well as the camp itself, which are all redolent of another history. Other imperialist histories too return with the migrants, and Didi-Huberman reminds us of how Europe has reversed its own memory of colonization into fantasies of persecution and fear of finding itself colonized by foreigners.

The framing of the figure of the migrant as a "symptom," a reminder of Europe's obliterated past, and embodiment of its contemporary fears, seems to be common to a certain type of European cinema sympathetic to the plight of refugees. Commenting on filmic re-presentations of the colonial past, Nataša Kovačević discusses European docudramas that represent migrants in the middle of the sea, among which Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), focusing on their portrayal of the Mediterranean "as a gothic space

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where the perished yet ghostly migrant is not powerless but rather carries the potential to haunt Europe like a revenant of its colonial past—in the words of Hanif Kureishi, 'an example of the undead, who will invade, colonise and contaminate, a figure we can never quite digest or vomit'" (2019, 429). In some of these films, for Kovačević, the figure of the ghostly migrant remains "visually frozen in temporal and geographic limbo" (429), ultimately resulting in a state of in/visibility not dissimilar to that of mainstream media representations.

Spectres Are Haunting Europe can similarly be described as a European film sympathetic to refugees that reflects on the continent's past. Migrants in it are largely represented from the perspective of Europeans, as revenants haunting Europe with a question all at once genealogical, colonial, and concentrationary, and while the film does not show them in the middle of the "gothic Mediterranean," they also are apparently trapped in the temporal and geographic limbo of the border—we are not shown how they got there, or what will happen to them later. Yet, Kourkouta and Giannari's film avoids "freezing" their image. It does so not only by showing them leaving the camp, an action we see both at the start and at the end of the film, but also, as I will argue, through its political use of voice.

The film starts with a series of long fixed shots of migrants. In the first, the camera is centrally positioned and for five minutes observes the migrants as they cross the screen, purposefully walking past the camera along a country path. This shot captures their decision to leave the camp and cross the border illegally on the afternoon of 14 March 2016 (Lanšperková 2017), and is mirrored, albeit in a different style, by the closing shots of the film. The subsequent series of shots, in which the camera often concentrates on the migrants' legs, shows them as they walk around the Idomeni camp, wait by train tracks, slowly advance in long queues, or stand in the mud under the rain, covered in the raincoats handed to them by refugee agencies, which, for Didi-Huberman, resemble uniforms for ghosts and turn them into translucent specters (2017). We listen to voices of migrants, mostly untranslated; people chat, laugh, cough; occasionally, we hear a child crying. Another voice, that of the European administrator, is clearly conveyed by a loudspeaker and translated into English in the subtitles. Speaking alternatively in Afghan Persian or Syrian Arabic, it repeatedly announces that the border is closed, that food, medicine, and accommodation are provided by the Greek police, and that migrants should collaborate with the Greek authorities. This perfectly intelligible Deleuzian "man–machine assemblage of voice and sound reproduction, transmission, broadcasting, and amplification" brings the Idomeni border into being, together with the endless to-and-fro movements of the migrants and their slowly advancing queues, a vivid performance of the border. Migrant voices eventually begin to be translated in the subtitles. A young man explains that "This is a hunger strike." Some people chant, demanding that the border be opened, or calling for "Germany! Germany!" Some announce, "We are not going anywhere." Some sing an improvised song against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

In the next set of shots, the camera is still observational but closer to the migrants. Many of them are sitting or standing on train tracks; some carry handwritten signs. The camera is among them, motionless. A freight

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train approaches, but they refuse to move and let it through. A lengthy, animated discussion unfolds between the migrants and a negotiator. This exchange occupies a large part of this second section of the film. The negotiator complains that, by stopping the train, the migrants are damaging the Greeks, who have welcomed and helped them. Some of the migrants remind him that they have been there for months, that they are imprisoned, and that they do not want to stay but cross the border and reach Germany. Some feel the Greeks have not truly helped them: "The state hasn't come once to see us here!" Others recognize they have been generous with them, but they should now "help our voice reach other countries." Some know that, after the recent terrorist attacks in France, Europe is afraid of them because they are Muslim, but, they explain, they are not terrorists, they have escaped Daesh. A young man says he was a law student, a musician, and a photographer at home—he has lost everything to get there and will not move an inch. The negotiator tries to appeal to their gratitude, explains the Greeks too are struggling and have nothing to eat, and pleads with them, promising that Europe will make a decision on opening the border soon. The migrants respond that it is an empty promise, as the decision keeps being postponed, and are aware of the imminent cash deal between the EU and Turkey.

In the last section of the film, the static, lengthy digital shots are suddenly replaced by a hand-held camera and black-and-white 16mm film. The images are mobile, fluid, and warmer; they follow the migrants' everyday life in the camp, as they cook, eat, wash, chat, play. Adults and children look into the camera, smiling at us. The diegetic sound is replaced by the lyrical voiceover recitation of Giannari's poem. The voice of the poet addresses the migrants, who are stuck on the border, unable to either advance or go back, and recognizes they are "persistent figures of some genealogy of our own, forgotten, relinquished." It speaks of Europeans too: "some of us illuminate their passages through the night, some shout at them to leave, and spit on them and kick them." It evokes the trains of the Shoah, and Walter Benjamin's suicide in Portbou on 26 September 1940, after he crossed the French–Spanish border to avoid arrest by the Nazis, only to be told that the border had been closed that day, and that he would be sent back to France the day after. The mention of Benjamin is particularly meaningful, as it helps frame the haunting in the film with reference to his ideas on the true image of the past erupting in the present in moments of crisis ([1940] 2003).

In his essay on the film, Didi-Huberman (2017) suggests that Giannari composed her text to "give voice" to the gestures and faces of the migrants in the film's images. In truth, the poet's voice here is the voice of Europe itself or, more precisely, of all sympathetic European citizens who are perturbed by the condition of the migrants and the questions this raises for Europe. My argument is that the film does not "give voice" to the migrants; rather, it gives ears first, and then voice, to the European/Western spectator. The five-minute-long, fixed opening shot places us standing amid a field, close to the "passing" migrants, some of whom turn to stare into the lens, into our eyes. We, the spectators (from the Latin "spectare," meaning "to view, to watch"), are confronted by the specters (from the Latin "spectrum," "appearance, vision, apparition"). Positioned below head height, the camera foregrounds us as European/Western viewers; its unflinching gaze makes it impossible for us not to consider our positioning, as we ponder the flux of migrants walking

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right past us. We then find ourselves inside the camp, under the rain, and are invited not only to spectate but to listen. By not translating the migrants' voices at first, and by focusing less on their faces than on their legs and feet in the mud, the film encourages us to "listen otherwise," to pay attention to how things are said, to receive otherness. Then, it places us right in the midst of the refugees' debate with the European negotiator. The migrants do not talk to the camera, to the filmmakers, and the filmmakers do not "give voice" to them. Rather, the migrants set the parameters of their discussion with the negotiator, to which we are present. We are an ear (Fig. 2). We recognize all the familiar arguments of the European political/securitarian discourse on the refugee crisis being rehearsed by the negotiator, and we listen to the punctual replies of the refugees. We cannot not identify with the European voice, and we question our identification with its apparently reasonable yet faulty arguments in the face of the ethically superior, absolute reasons of the migrants. Finally, the voice of the poet emerges over the last sequences to "give voice" to the thoughts and feelings our spectating has elicited in us. The poet's voice is our voice. It asks our own questions as Western spectators of the migrants' passing: "Who are they? What do they want? Where are they going?", and "How does one leave? Why does one leave? Where to?" It acknowledges that seeing them brings back all that we have forgotten: "the dead [...] the oath we've taken and the promises we've given, the ideas we've loved, the revolutions we've done, the sacraments we've renounced." It voices our shame. Meanwhile, the migrants fall silent; all sounds are erased, except for the poet's/our voiceover. The gaze also is reversed. The emphasis on our spectating recedes, and we become visible, an object in the migrants' eyes, who look into the lens, smiling at us: "They are there and they welcome us generously, in their fleeting gaze, us, the forgetful, the blind." We are, after all, those who "watch the spectacle, from cafés or museums, universities or parliaments." In the end, the voice falls quiet: "Silence now. Let it all stop. They pass." It is a silence of respect before this "sacred procession that looks at us and through us." By switching the (Western) spectator's position from haunted observer to welcomed observed, the spectrality of the film dissipates, and is replaced, as the poet recognizes, by a "desire that survives every shipwreck, a desire we've long lost: politics."

Sounds never die: *An Asian Ghost Story*

> The post-modern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did. Indeed, the concentration on haunting and ghosts is a way of maintaining the salience of social analysis as bounded by its social context, as in history, which is anything but dead and over, while avoiding simple reflectionism.
> (Gordon [1997] 2008, 12–13)

Both *Appunti del passaggio* and *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* fall into the category that Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln have called "secondary haunting," which "recognizes its 'entities' in the sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events" (2015, 200). Lincoln and Lincoln draw on their discussion of "unsettled, intrusive,

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Fig. 2: Listening to the refugees debating with the European negotiator in *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* by Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari (2016).

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and angry ghosts" (197) in post-war, post-market reform Vietnam to define "primary haunting," in which the haunted recognizes "the reality and autonomy of metaphysical entities [...] in relatively uncritical and unselfconscious fashion" (200). *An Asian Ghost Story* by Bo Wang, mostly set in Hong Kong but also including archival footage from various countries and eras, is an essay film on migration and multiple border-crossings that belongs to the "primary haunting" category.[2] In it, we encounter a ghost in a story told by a wig factory worker about her friend, who once met and hosted a spirit in her home. We also hear other stories relayed by other sources of authority, including a TV news item about a man who met the ghost of a woman with long hair and no face in the street the night before, an archival news report about an exorcism rite aimed at appeasing ghosts practiced by Buddhist monks in the Transportation Department, and a scientist who claims to have developed a machine able to listen to the voices of spirits. All these sources, some fictional, some documentary, acknowledge and accept the reality of ghosts as autonomous entities. Most notably, in the second part of the film we encounter the ghost of the wig factory: she was a Japanese woman who was abducted when she was fifteen and sold in Singapore; from there, she was smuggled to Hong Kong and then to Manchuria (Northeast China), where she died of an infection. Her hair was cut before she was buried and was sold to a dealer. Her spirit resided in her hair ever since, and travelled between Asia and Europe, back and forth from China to Alsace, from Tsingtao (the German port attacked during World War I by Japan and the United Kingdom), where it was made into a wig, to Germany, where the wig was sold to a Jewish woman. When the Second World War broke out, the wig returned to Asia, was sold in Shanghai, and then to a Chinese family, whose house was raided in the 1950s, with the wig (and ghost) finally arriving in Hong Kong. Eventually, in 1990, the ghost ended up in Los Angeles, in a Korean wig shop. Here, during the riots of 1992 against Korean American business owners and residents in the aftermath of the beating of Rodney King, of which we see some archival footage, she caught sight again of the woman who had originally hosted her in her house in Hong Kong. As can be seen, the protagonist witnessed some of the biggest historical and socio-political upheavals of the past century, and was forced to cross borders many times, travelling between Asia and Europe, both when alive and after her death.

Following Lincoln and Lincoln, unlike in secondary haunting, which is mediated by an author or researcher who conveys a story of past suffering and speaks on behalf of the dead, seeking to arouse the consciousness of a group or a society, in primary haunting the encounter with the ghost is direct, and intense (2015, 201). Ghosts in primary haunting are terrifying presences that threaten those who they hail with psychic and physical harm, not unlike in *An Asian Ghost Story*, where the ghost warns the wig factory worker that she will kill her, should she tell others about her. Yet, Lincoln and Lincoln acknowledge that primary and secondary haunting can merge, as I would argue they do in this film. The ghost here is not seeking to set right the crime that brought her to her original displacement and untimely death by pursuing those directly responsible for it (something that happens, for instance, in the already mentioned *Atlantics* by Mati Diop); rather, with her story of abduction, forced

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border-crossing and exploitation she evokes the broader crimes of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and racial discrimination, as well as gender violence against women. It does so by evoking not the traces of the past, but a specific spirit and the terrifying (but beloved) figure of the pontianak, the female vampire-like ghost from folkloric Malay cultures, a woman who died as a result of male violence or childbirth, who, as Rosalind Galt has shown, invites feminist readings for how she troubles gender norms and "disrupts the smooth operation of power" (2021, 18). Simultaneously, she invites colonialist interpretation: "What the pontianak makes apparent to us is a space of lively contestation in postcolonial culture, in which injustices both past and present are animated in horrifying form" (1).

Like Galt writes, "[v]ampire time is out of joint, and the pontianak's juxtaposition of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial temporalities prompts exactly such a disturbance" (9). The pontianak in *An Asian Ghost Story*, in whose life and afterlife a series of historical disasters are compressed in a way remindful of Walter Benjamin's angel of history ([1940] 2003), however, also directly raises the specter of Marx, so to speak. By mixing fact and fiction, *An Asian Ghost Story* brings to light the history of the commodification of Asian women's hair. As the director notes:

> Wigs were vital for the rise of the Asian economy in the post-war era. In the heyday of the 1960s, it was the number four export in Hong Kong's export-orientated industrialization. Between Mao's China—the largest source of hair supplies, and the insatiable Western market, Hong Kong functioned as the gateway. In 1965, U.S. Treasury Department imposed an embargo on "Asiatic hair", to cut off foreign currency to Communist China in the hair trade. The highly racialized category of "Asiatic hair" was later revised as "communist hair", to enable the wig industry to develop in U.S. allies including mainly South Korea and Japan, which led to a significant reconfiguration of light industry in East Asia. (Wang n.d.)

Through the pontianak, who was abducted and sold at fifteen, and whose hair was removed from her head after her death, the film highlights the history of extraction of hair from Asian women and the commodification of their bodies. Equally, it looks at the exploitative working conditions of female factory workers through the stories narrated in the film. As Lincoln and Lincoln remind us, in Marx's theory of alienation human labor reappears in commodities and surplus value in a phantasmatic way (2015, 192). Here, the phantasm is literal, and embodied. At one point in the story, a pontianak appears before the camera for an interview which could be with immigration (Fig. 3).[3] Her long hair entirely covers her face, which remains uncannily invisible, and an off-screen male voice asks where she is from, how she ended up in Hong Kong, and whether she knows that she needs papers to stay there, given the tensions with mainland China and the risk of communist infiltration. However, the paperless pontianak, a sort of illegal migrant, has no desire to remain in the country, and only craves returning home. The questions are conveyed via a translator who speaks Indonesian, while the pontianak answers through nonverbal vocalizations. The scene is humorous but also disquieting, as is the closing sequence, in which the pontianak reappears,

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Fig. 3: Immigration interview of the pontianak in *An Asian Ghost Story* by Bo Wang (2022).

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this time to sing, karaoke-style, an old Chinese song previously mentioned in the film, meaningfully titled "When Will You Return."

Galt has noted the pontianak's "ability to emerge within apparently nonhorror texts" (2021, 12) and, in so doing, to de-form genre. Her emergence in an essay film on histories of exploitation and forced displacement in pre-colonial and post-colonial times de-forms the essay in more than one way. The acceptance of ghosts as autonomous entities in the film challenges the rationalism of the Western essay form. I want to focus in particular on the de-forming effects of voice and sound in the film. At the start of the narrative, we are addressed in a direct, almost confessional mode by a female voiceover (by Jia Zhao). We tend to attune to this voiceover as the border-crossing voice of the essayist who, in Biemann's words quoted at the start of this article, is a translocal, mobile, travelling subject able to unravel the layers of meaning of the place about which it talks to us, and, I add, guide our engagement with the essayistic argument. However, with an uncanny effect, mid-way through the film it is revealed that the "essayist's voice" to which we have been listening is in fact the voice of a pontianak. The rationalism of the essay's narration is undermined here and several more times in the film on the basis of voice and sound. Other typical voices of authority, such as those of the news, or of scientists, are equally subverted. We see and listen to an interview with a scientist in a white coat, for instance, who begins by describing hair as the only corporeal substance that survives the body's demise, and remains practically intact in time, so defying the separation between life and death. Later, showing slides, he discusses the work of scientists, both professional and amateur, who believed that "sound never dies," like Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the radio, who thought that with a sufficiently sensitive microphone one could record the voice of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount; or again like painter Friedrich Jürgenson who in the 1960s, alongside Latvian psychologist Konstantin Raudive, experimented with electronic voice phenomena (EVP), i.e. audio found on electronic recordings that is interpreted as ghostly voices. The scientist in the film (played by Michael de Roos) claims to have developed an EVPL machine that records the voices of ghosts "trapped" in the hair of deceased people and identifies the language they speak ("L" stands for "linguistic detection").

This playful approach undermines the authority of voiceover, which is of course a long-standing tradition within the Western essay film too, as for instance the work of Chris Marker testifies. However, the somewhat horrific, powerful presence of the faceless pontianak and her undead hair forced to migrate repeatedly between Asia and Europe amounts to a feminist postcolonial rewriting of the essay form that reveals the violence of rationalistic discourses of modernity, colonialism, and capitalism.

Conclusion: A spectral politics

As forms of "secondary haunting," sometimes including the "primary haunting" of ghostly entities, each of the three essay films analyzed in this article evokes spirits to reveal in/visible border histories of violent displacement and economic exploitation, so also raising the specter of Marx, which for Derrida still haunts

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neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism. Each film, indeed, is political through and through, and exposes forms of violent biopolitical control at the border, the reappearance of the concentrationary in contemporary refugee camps, the erasure of histories of gender violence and colonial extraction, the global logic of imperialism and capitalism. Formally, the films do so through an experimental use of voice that consciously moves away from and even subverts customary "documentary discourse" with its sound/image synchrony, in so doing paralleling the experimental use of image I investigated in my previously cited article on border essay films as a form of theory of the border (2022). The films I analyzed in that article—Armin Linke's *Alpi* (2011), Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016), and Tadhg O'Sullivan's *The Great Wall* (2015)—use strategies that deform images to "perform" the border, making it visible. The films I analyzed here perform the border by making it audible, through strategies that "deform" the standard relationship between sound and image track in documentary cinema.

Voice in these films is always multiple. In them, we hear the voices of many displaced people, past and present, and of uncanny figures from popular culture, Pulcinella and the pontianak, alongside the voices of the authority, mediated by the news report, the scientific lecture, the loudspeaker at the border, the immigration interview. None of the three films "gives voice" to the border-crossing subjects, in the problematic sense of conceding them a controlled space in their representation of them. None represents them as "non-political subjects worthy of humanitarian help," to use again the words of Denić. Rather, this acoustemological study has revealed how, through different strategies—by disjointing body and voice, by presenting untranslated or nonverbal utterances, by reading out multiple testimonies in a monotonic voice performance, by removing or subverting the essayist's voiceover, by summoning a lyrical voice—they attune the spectator to a "listening otherwise." This listening opens our ear to "another scene," which reveals the "non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present," to cite Derrida one more time, and facilitates the passing of the revenants. The revenants are summoned; they look at us "outside of any synchrony," through the welcoming fleeting gaze of contemporary refugees in Idomeni, the black mask of Pulcinella, or the blind stare of the pontianak. Their gazes are a call to action, as is consistent with the politics of haunting, which "implies futurity and 'something to be done'" (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015, 202). Their voices, however, already are action—a speech act. They set the parameters of the conversation. They bring audibility to the border, and in so doing they participate in an epistemology of it. What is more, they contribute to a de-forming and re-forming of the essay film via postcolonial and feminist appropriations and spectral modifications of the essayist's translocal, border-crossing voiceover.

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1/ I refer to Pulcinella using the masculine as in the Italian tradition, even if he is here voiced by a woman and speaks on behalf of migrants of all genders.

2/ I would argue that the figure of Pulcinella in *Appunti del passaggio* is akin to a ghost, but, unlike in this film, is not part of the diegesis and does not interact with others in the film.

3/ The interview is somewhat informal, and the setup invites more than one interpretation. Bo Wang confirmed that, in his original concept, the interviewer was supposed to be the voice of an institution, whether border control, immigration or similar, but it was left purposefully ambiguous, and could also be a local TV report (Bo Wang, email to author, February 1, 2024).

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