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WHEN THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCENES COME TO THE FORE

Touristic Venues as Zones of Visual Clash

Elsa Gomis^a and Ana Cristina Mendes ^b

^aMaison Française d'Oxford, UK; ^bSchool of Arts and Humanities,
University of Lisbon, Portugal

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**Mediterranean
refugee "crisis"**
migration studies
**tourism in the
Mediterranean**
**"the people
behind the
scenes"**
"visual clash"
visuality
.....

In this essay, the notion of "the people behind the scenes" is used to build a bridge between the cognitive framework of film studies and migration research to describe those who are discursively categorized as "illegal" or "irregular" migrants and whose lives are exploited in the workforce and at risk in "Fortress Europe". As a natural southern border of the Schengen area, the Mediterranean region sometimes offers fleeting encounters between "illegal" migrants excluded by this border regime and foreign travellers courted by the tourism industry. These ephemeral juxtapositions of people with contrasting political and economic stakes create what we call "visual clashes", gathering in one frame antithetical human lived experiences of this maritime area. Drawing on Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the "right to look", which the visual culture theorist and activist uses as a bulwark against a dominant Western regime of visuality, this essay analyses a series of visual texts that bear witness to unwanted encounters by this dominant regime's visual system of classification and separation. The essay examines two press photographs and television images alongside Elleke Boehmer's short story "Synthetic Orange", and analyses a

cartographic experiment and a film; each case opposes the authority of Western visuality and makes a claim for the autonomy of the right to look.

Introduction

For W. J. T. Mitchell, the movement of images should be thought of in terms of the movement of humans; when considering the idea of the circulation of images, he favours one of “migrating images” to suggest “something much more fraught with contradiction, difficulty, friction, and opposition” (2004, 14). Mitchell’s stance reflects more precisely the lived experience of many migrants. He wonders: “How seriously are we to take the notion that images are like persons or that they are more generally like living things, organisms that move, circulate, proliferate, reproduce, settle and move on?” (2004, 15). Building on the resemblance relationship that Mitchell creates in his metapicture of images as migrants, if mainstream media images of migrants were humans, they would be considered as “second-class individuals” and, conversely, if migrants were images, they would be second-class images, as stereotyped images are viewed. This is the case in the Mediterranean region, where the discursive framework of mainstream images of refugees portrays them at a distance, grouped in human masses, especially when framing dark-skinned people (Maneri 2021, 15). Yet it is the presence of migrants, of these “second-class individuals” who are exploited mainly in the agricultural sector and under constant surveillance, that currently supports our economies and allows official national narratives to exist.

Drawing on the idea of migrants as “the people behind the scenes” of European democratic staging and on Nicholas Mirzoeff’s (2011) notion of the “right to look”, this essay scrutinizes Mediterranean touristic venues as the places where the people behind the scenes can no longer be confined to the background and are pushed to the forefront of the stage. As Mirzoeff frames it, the “right to look” “is not a right for declarations of human rights, or for advocacy, but a claim of the right to the real as the key to a democratic politics” (2011, 4). In the Mediterranean area, in the *Mare Nostrum* of tourist cruises catering to the rise in the disposable income of consumers from the Global North, visuality “sutures authority to power and renders this association ‘natural’” (Mirzoeff 2011, 6). Visuality works spatially and aesthetically to naturalize authority, its divisions and classifications; press photos and video footage capturing migrants’ arrivals in resort locations reflect “visual clashes” within the dominant visual scheme when capturing unexpected encounters between the “poor sedentary” and the “poor nomads” (Balibar 2015, 141).¹ Countervisuality means, for Mirzoeff, “requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right” (2011, 1). How

1 Our translation from the French original “pauvres

sédentaires” and “pauvres nomades”.

could these harrowing situations be reported visually without perpetuating the asymmetric relationships of power that visuality sustains? The present essay analyses those visual clashes via two press photographs, an amateur video broadcast by Euronews international news television channel and “Synthetic Orange”, a short story by Elleke Boehmer (2019). Then, it continues to explore visual ways of thinking about this phenomenon and to ponder alternatives for countervisuality through a cartographic experiment by Philippe Rekacewicz titled “Comparison of the costs of migration in regular and irregular conditions” (2020) and *Sudeuropa*, a film by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo (2005–2007).

When the people behind the scenes interrupt European democratic staging in the Mediterranean

As a popular tourist destination, the Mediterranean region is the setting of journeys whose costs seem to be inversely proportional to the individuals’ financial capacities. On the one hand, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated in a June 2017 survey that the average cost paid by migrants to cross the Mediterranean was as much as 5,000 US dollars. On the other hand, a cursory search of travel websites shows that the price for Mediterranean cruises starts at £359 for five nights during the low season. It could be concluded that it is at least ten times more expensive to cross the Mediterranean for someone considered illegal by European border legislation than to do so on a leisurely cruise. Still, the socioeconomic and political inequalities that exist between the “poor sedentary” and the “poor nomads” (Balibar 2015, 141) are so severe that any kind of cost comparison remains untenable.

Southern European Mediterranean countries are arguably the top holiday and retirement destinations of Northern Europeans (Casado-Díaz, Kaiser, and Warnes 2004). “Illegal” migrants and tourists simultaneously inhabit these touristic venues but fall into two opposite regimes of human circulation. Yet, incidentally, migrants and tourists often share the same picture. In French, a picture is also called a cliché.² As postcards are visual clichés of a place, they are clichés of clichés: the non-literal meaning of cliché becomes an extension of that literal meaning in this setting. Tourists might be afraid of losing their clichés of the Mediterranean, an impression which is supported by the number of comments generally attached to online press articles about the migrant “crisis” – as demonstrated, for example, in the 287 comments for *The Express* article titled “The Popular Holiday Destinations Set to Be Overwhelmed by Migrant Crisis” (Smith 2016) – and the (assumed) verbal abuse that had the live team of moderators of the online

2 Etymologically, in French, the term “cliché” derives from early nineteenth-century printing jargon. An onomatopoeic word, “cliché” is the noun form of the past participle of “clicher” (the verb meaning “to

click”), referring to the clicking sound of the process of printing in “stereotype” (i.e. the printing metal plate).

newspaper delete 38 comments. James Dennison and Teresa Talò (2017) show that human values, constitutive of our perception of the world, are the most relevant components of an individual’s identity for influencing opinions about migrations. For individuals expressing a negative opinion towards migration, the most decisive values for their lives and society are tradition, conformity, and security. Because of their key role in the building of human values (Tappolet 2000, 254), images are key facts in the building of these values upstream of their formation. Downstream, images would be strengthening factors in the persistence of stereotypes. We can choose not to look at images of the real. However, when we choose not to look, when we look away, what is left to be seen in the Mediterranean? From this perspective, the Mediterranean would be seen as the deadliest border in the world because perceptions attached to people on the move in this area are producing the most clashing images, which are also themselves “migrating images” (Mitchell 2004).

Spanish photographers Juan Medina and José Palazón captured this visual clash on Gran Tarajal beach on Fuerteventura, Canary Islands, in 2006, and the North African enclave of Melilla in 2014, respectively. Playing on the contrast between the white and Black subjects placed either in the foreground or the background, their images surprise the viewer and provoke a feeling of unease. In Palazón’s (2014) photograph, Western golfers play in the foreground, one of them hitting a tee shot; at the same time, in the background, a group of migrants is captured sitting on top of a twelve-metre-high border fence between the Moroccan territory and the Spanish territory of Melilla. In Medina’s (2006) photograph, three sunbathing tourists chat in the background, while what we assume to be a newly arrived migrant crawls in the sand in the foreground. As an example of countervisuality, Palazón’s photograph reveals those who, hiding behind the scenes of touristic resorts, are supposed to be invisibilized, for example, through their confinement in isolated detention centres – cast away from sight by the power of authority. Medina’s framing reverses the dominant and subordinate roles in Global North tourism narratives of sunny vacations by putting a surviving unwanted traveller in the centre and simultaneously showing two antithetical experiences of the same Mediterranean sandy beach in the same picture.

Both these photographs create a visual clash capturing in one frame two regimes of images: on the one hand, the postcard aesthetics of Western tourists constituted by paradisiac landscapes and selfies shared on social media; on the other hand, the raw imaginary rendering border enforcement “spectacularly visible” (De Genova 2015, 2017). Although tourists and “irregular” migrants are generally kept in distinct visual regimes of images corresponding to the two opposite regimes of circulation in touristic venues, in the photographs of Medina and Palazón they share, for a fragile and intense instant in our historical moment of “crisis”, the same image, the same photographic

frame. Both these press photographs make visible a humanitarian catastrophe that is usually rendered invisible. They visually construct in the picture the opposition – the visual clash – that conventionally means that the migrant is left outside the frame, or conversely if the migrant is inside, that the cliché of sandy beaches is not possible; in other words, they point to visuality’s regime of exclusion and separation (Mirzoeff 2011).

In August 2017, an amateur video taken up by the 24-hour international news television channel Euronews, founded by the European Broadcasting Union, also gathered antithetical human experiences of a beach resort near the Straits of Gibraltar by capturing within the same frame a group of migrants fleeing for their lives and sunbathing Western tourists. The video is followed by footage of a group of migrants wandering in a Spanish town. Migrants are shown as hordes, first erupting on a sandy beach and later preventing a car from circulating in the street. It ends with images of Spanish police officers binding up the wounds of half-naked men lying on the ground and of a young white woman cleaning a wound on the arm of a smiling dark-skinned man. The migrants are not interviewed and are framed within large groups. The closer shots portray a man coming closer to the camera and making enigmatic gestures: he strikes his torso and waves one hand above the other. The last shots perpetuate the “white saviour complex” by circulating images of whites accomplishing acts of altruism towards nameless Black people.

This visual clash and the idea of the altruistic self are taken up in Elleke Boehmer’s short story “Synthetic Orange”, from her collection *To the Volcano* (2019). The title of the story refers to the material and the colour of a bracelet offered to the main protagonist, LeeAnn, by her former boyfriend, Gregor. The bracelet is made from the jackets worn by migrants. When giving it to her during a trip to a small Spanish beach resort, Gregor gloomily underlines this point:

You know, he said, the jackets those migrants coming over in boats get given when they’re rescued.

I know, I said.

Live migrants, he added. Obviously. They came off live migrants. [...] Seconds later, after a mouthful of linguine, Gregor repeated this fact. I did make sure, he said, live migrants, as if I hadn’t been concentrating the first time. (Boehmer 2019, 111)

Instead of reinforcing her love for Gregor, the gift triggers LeeAnn’s buried memories. Boehmer uses the semantic universe of the sea to depict “a tide memory” that “began to flow”, and crashes over her “like a breaking wave” (112). As soon as she clips it around her wrist, the bracelet brings back to LeeAnn images of drownings and almost drownings she had

witnessed in the past: that of a toddler she had babysat, of a school friend, and the horrific sensation she recently felt when bumping into a floating limb while swimming. Moreover, it reminds her that Gregor had kept his eyes riveted to his smartphone while she was struggling during a night-swim a few days earlier. This stream of images convinces her to end her relationship with Gregor. Nevertheless, she accepts the last parachute ride they had booked for the following day. Onboard the plane, about to jump in the direction of the beach, LeeAnn clips on the bracelet. She suddenly sees dark-skinned people wearing life jackets loaded on a boat, starting to jump out of the vessel and running across the beach while “sunbathers lay on their towels with their eyes closed” (119). Gregor is unable to notice what is unfolding on the beach below. As they are flying in the sky, he asks LeeAnn for a second chance. “A drowning person doesn’t get a second chance”, she answers (119). When landing at Gatwick airport the following day, she nearly throws away the bracelet, changes her mind, and orders ten of them from the Scandinavian designer.

The bewitched bracelet releases memories and visions that impose themselves upon LeeAnn. It seems haunted by those who drowned in the Mediterranean and whose spirits unleash personal memories attached to disappearances at sea. It also stresses the passivity of the tourists whose eyes remain closed, and that of Gregor who stayed in front of his smartphone instead of keeping an eye on his beloved while she was swimming at night. The piece of jewellery appears to provide LeeAnn with the gift of clairvoyance and with the right to the look (Mirzoeff 2011): while bridging her stories of drowning with those of contemporary refugees, the life-jacket bracelet enables her *to see* what she had closed her eyes to until then. Besides, the Spanish beach resort offers a place where those who are confined to the carceral spaces of the cities, crammed in detention camps or airport waiting zones, can suddenly interrupt restful vacations by the sea and disrupt their paradisiac scenery. The eruption at stake here is that of politics: European border regimes spill over into European workers’ place of leisure. At a time when the holidaymakers would have closed their eyes more forcefully on the migrants’ fate, it comes back to them in full force. The moment when they would have escaped from reality the most becomes the moment when reality arises in all its cruelty. On this basis, Mediterranean touristic venues are European landscapes where those restricted to being “the people behind the scenes” can no longer be confined to the background. Born from a doctoral Research in Practice project in Film Studies, the notion of “the people behind the scenes” draws a parallel between the Western economic and migratory systems (Gomis 2022). Following its conclusions, the distribution of roles in European societies would reflect the distribution of roles in European films. From there, the film industry will serve as a cognitive framework for thinking about border regimes. The phenomenon is not new.

The concept behind “The people behind the scenes”

Second World War refugees housed in Cinecittà in the post-war period gradually took the place of extras during the filming that took place there (Bertozzi 2012). The Italian studios suspended their operations at the end of the Second World War to host refugees from the Italian colonies in Libya, survivors of the Battle of Monte Cassino, exiles from Istria and Dalmatia, and Jewish survivors of the camps. When the studios relaunched their activity, refugees were the first to be recruited as extras in the films, as in the 1951 epic *Quo Vadis*, which was nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture and starred Deborah Kerr and Peter Ustinov (Bertozzi 2012). “The figure of the extra”, notes Marie-José Mondzain, “operates as an indicator of credibility that gives the star and the story their place in the real factory of our history. An index of reality, without a name, without glory or history, it alone perhaps gives fiction its support and determines its plan for inscribing itself in a sensitive reality, both historical and filmed” (2011, 289). Based on this intuition, between 200 and 300 asylum seekers tried, in vain, to interrupt a play at Comédie Française on Sunday, 16 December 2018. The exiles intended to call on Éric Ruf, the theatre administrator, to intervene on their behalf with the French Minister of the Interior (Le Figaro 2018). If asylum seekers turn to the administrator of this public theatrical institution it may be because, confusingly, they perceive the spectacular dimension of the migration regime that is staged by a necessarily fictional democracy since it claims to be concerned about human rights and yet defines and sustains their exclusion. To gather in front of an establishment, which for more than 300 years has officially provided a place for the “human comedy”, was therefore logically the place to go to try to interfere in a social game in which they have no place. To “be an extra”, states Didi-Huberman, “is to be there but only so as not to appear in the spotlight. To melt into the mass and to serve no other purpose than to be at the base of the story, the drama and the action” (2009, 20); this much is evidenced by the images of crowded boats and endless queues of individuals who seem to be exposed only as extras. The supporting role of migrants can thus be exposed for strategic purposes and suppressed when deemed not essential by the media scene management.

Lampedusa’s official commemorations of the 3 October 2013 tragedy, in which 358 people lost their lives on the island’s shorelines, have been accurately described by Federica Mazzara as a revealing moment of border spectacle’s deployment (2019, 91–2). In 2014, for the first-year commemoration of the shipwreck, Italian institutions enacted a commiseration show in front of RAI TV cameras. Pope Francis, several celebrities including Hollywood actor Richard Gere, and the Coast Guards team took part in the event. The parade did not mention the authority’s negligence in failing to respond

on time to a distress call emanating from a vessel 500 metres from land (Le Monde 2013), nor did the ceremony include any genuine rescuers whose call for an acknowledgement of the Coast Guards' responsibility in the disaster was not answered. Funerals organized the day after the tragedy were also aligned with the authorities' exaggerated pity. Meron Estefanos and Father Mussie Zerai, two Eritreans who assisted families of Eritrean victims after the disaster, described the funeral as a "gimmick arranged for the convenience of politicians" and bore witness to the fact that no survivors, the majority of whom were mourning relatives, were permitted to attend the ceremony (Mazzara 2019, 85–6). Left off-camera when they were being extras in film productions, migrants are maintained off-camera in national narratives even when they are the main protagonists in the action game. For writer Niki Giannari, they are surfaces for projections of what is perceived as Other: "they pass and envisage us", she states (Didi-Huberman and Giannari 2017, 21). When giving his director's camera to Kurdish refugees in Sangatte at the end of his film *No Pasarán, album souvenir*, Henri-François Imbert (2003) also seemed to share this perception. On Calais beach facing the English coast, the exiles turn the lens of Imbert's camera towards nearby shores. Their gesture shows both their willingness to appropriate images of exile, and an intuitive feeling of the institutional *setting* surrounding them.

In this context, what is visible would not be a social interaction mediated by images (Debord [1968] 1995), but the result of a dominant systemic regime of power through which "the 'West' historicizes and distinguishes itself from others" (Mirzoeff 2011, xiv). It is an authority presenting itself as self-evident and imposing its legitimacy by going beyond visual perceptions. Visuality affects the collective imagination by naming, categorizing, and defining the visible and generates "all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order" (Fanon 1963, 38). Mirzoeff (2011) casts modernity within three "complexes of visuality": plantation slavery, imperialism, and the present-day military-industrial complex. As a response to the authority of visuality, Mirzoeff proposes "the right to look", namely a "right to existence" in respect of external constraints designated as "reality" (2011, 10). Acts of countervisuality, attempted by the enslaved, the colonized, and the opponents of war, challenge authority. How can contemporary visual representations propose alternative ways of understanding and exceed the limits of postcolonial contexts such as European border regimes? The following passages explore a cartographic and a filmic proposal creating spaces where the imaginaries of those considered as Others can be articulated.

Attempts to create countervisuality

A cursory search on Google Images with the keywords “Migration” + “Mediterranean” reveals an abundance of maps created by geographers and analysts from data collected and compiled by international organizations and NGOs. These maps are widely disseminated in mainstream media, research papers, and educational resources. An overview of these data visualizations shows that, for a significant number, human displacements are represented through broad arrows, often in warm colours, pointing in the direction of European countries (Gomis 2022). Political geographers Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy coined the term “invasion arrows” (2020) to describe this way of depicting migratory displacements. How can we explain the success and resonance of this aesthetic choice? Film studies scholar Teresa Castro observed that the proliferation of cartographic tools that enable us to geo-locate individuals in real-time are extensions of paper-based cartographies and constitute disciplinary devices (2011, 250). Concerning the scale of the surveillance technologies being deployed at the borders to deter “illegal” movements of individuals, as for example in the Mediterranean Sea, today’s cartographies of migrants’ arrivals in Europe appear as the afterlives of yesterday’s military invasions. Among them, one official piece of cartography drew our attention (Figure 1). Published by Frontex, it was included in a 2015 quarterly report intended to assess the “risks” incurred by the European Union state members with regards to the “illegal” entries of migrants into the continent.

Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020) examined in their analysis of the map’s grid, frame, and arrows how the undertones of neutrality and objectivity that maps seemingly convey are an interpretation and designed to support a particular political position. This Frontex approach to cartography – as well as the mainstream maps of migration we find in a Google search, for example – are constitutive of what Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy designate as “cartopolitics”, namely: “political discourse that relies on cartography to b/order geography and thus to b/order history, culture and people through the geographical imaginations that maps arouse” (2020, 164). A slash separates the spelling of the word “border” between the “b” and the “o” to highlight the power exercised through the making and dissemination of maps. From the point of view of visual anthropology, these cartographies can be seen as reading grids of European migratory policies, as part of what anthropologist Nicholas De Genova calls “border spectacle” (2015, 2017). De Genova’s conceptualization of Western spectacular border management is inspired by Guy Debord’s theorization of “spectacle” not as “a set of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images” ([1968] 1995, 19). In “border spectacle”, this aesthetics would form a scene where border enforcement and the exclusion of illegal migrants become spectacularly visible.

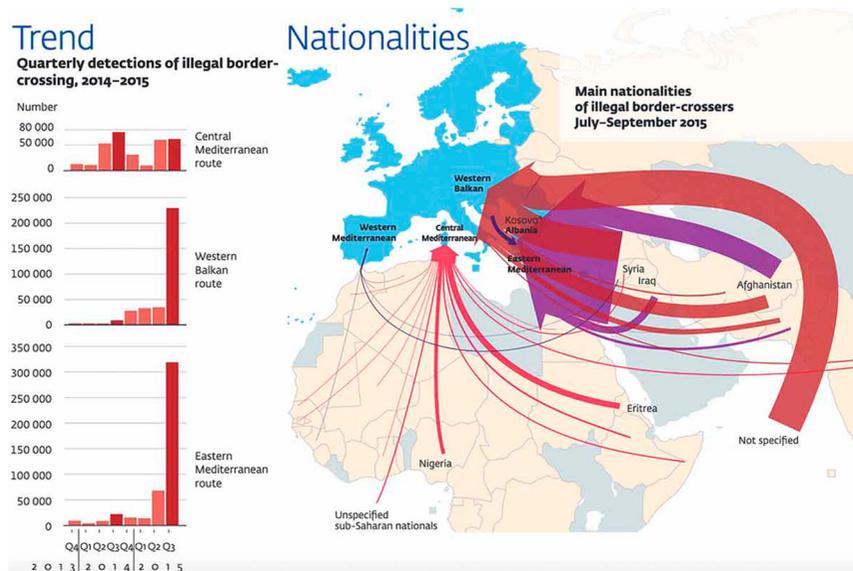


Figure 1 FRAN Quarterly: Quarter 2, April–June 2015 (Frontex 2015, 9).

Rekacewicz’s map (2020; see also Zwer and Rekacewicz 2021) denounces the political dysfunction which leads to the emergence of clandestine networks exploiting migrants’ vulnerability for profit. His map outlines the main migratory routes from Southern to Northern countries and compares travelling expenses in regular and irregular conditions (Figure 2). To put visual emphasis on the cost gap, the same curved lines retrace the displacements from Southern to Northern countries – more accurately, from Libya to Italy and Turkey to Greece. In doing so, Rekacewicz shows that “the differences in costs between regular and irregular modes are considerable, whereas it is precisely the migrants [...] [who] could use these sums for their settlement and integration in the host countries” (Zwer and Rekacewicz 2021, 80, our translation). The travel cost is also psychological. As director Olivia Dehez notices in the voiceover of her documentary *Tunisia: Bodies on the Beaches* (2019), near the resort island of Djerba: “In Tunisia today, authorized travellers enjoy the luxury of unplugging from their worldly consciousness, while others have to overcome its contradictions, at the risk of getting lost, somewhere in the Mediterranean” (our translation). The city of Zarzis, close to Djerba, is described as “a territory of contradictory migrations” – in other words, of antipodal regimes of circulation. In Zarzis, a new cemetery was built as a matter of urgency “because we wanted to prevent the bodies of drowned migrants from floating and going to places where there are tourists”, explains Mongi Slim, head of the Red Crescent NGO in Zarzis. With the new cemetery, it was possible to invisibilize migrants’ deaths, as he

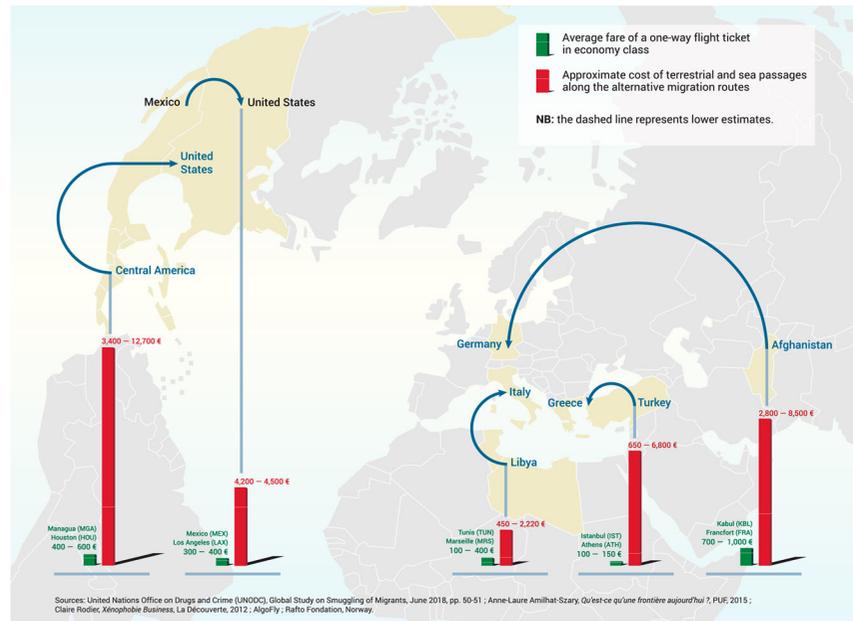


Figure 2 Comparison of the costs of migration in regular and irregular conditions (Rekacewicz 2020). Map extracted from the travelling exhibition *Frontières*, Musée de l'Immigration, Paris.

explains in Dehez's documentary, “[s]o that it doesn’t shock the tourists and doesn’t affect the economic activity of this region which lives essentially on tourism”.

Sudeuropa

Despite travellers’ concerns expressed on TripAdvisor (2015), the presence of migrants in tourist spots remains fugitive. “We don’t see them. We see them on TV. We see them on the news”, observes a local in *Sudeuropa* (2005–2007), a film shot on the Italian island of Lampedusa by Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo. The relationships between migrants and the local population seem to be intermediated by mainstream media screens. *Sudeuropa* starts with the words of a tourist guide embarking on a boat called *The New Future*. Eager to provide the visitors with an image of Lampedusa different from the one provided by the mainstream media, the guide questions the mayor of Lampedusa: “Everyone has heard about Lampedusa arrivals, disembarkments of clandestine migrants”. He asks: “I’ve never seen anything. Why?” The mayor of Lampedusa answers: “Thanks to the support and the sensitivity of all national institutions both regional and local, and thanks to all the law enforcement officers who tackle this phenomenon, we

3 With reference to Lampedusa and border spectacle, and for a new perspective on art-activism and the securitarian-humanitarian approach, see Mazzara (2019).

succeed in keeping separate – clearly separate – the reality of clandestine immigration from social life”. The message is clear: the border regime fosters the border spectacle of separateness and exclusion, but not potential meetings in the public space.³ Migrants must be kept out of “social life” and remain “the people behind the scenes”, namely those that one can hear about in the mass media, but that the tourists must not be confronted with for the sake of preserving the tourism industry. From there, the film seems to be an investigation of one main question: where are those irregular migrants we hear so much about in the media?

The voiceover reports the words of a journalist explaining that migrants can only be seen from helicopters or through the lens of thermal video cameras. The two directors reverse these two visual regimes of images: throughout the film, blurry silver images taken by helicopter relate to the words of Westerners, while close-ups and medium shots in HD show the migrants. Almost no narrative is spoken by the people seen in the images; all that is said passes through the voiceover, which is spoken in a slow pace, and which is sometimes read by locals. The distance created between the narrative and the image, between the images seen and their description in the voiceover, fosters reflexivity about the realm of visibility. The sometimes slightly hesitant voice of the locals when reading the voiceover reminds the viewer of amateur actors and the staged context in which those illegal migrations take place. The directors dedicate several sequences to descriptions of the border regime’s staging. The latter relates to the organization of the bodies in the space (“in vans”, “groups of men on the quay”, “in rows of two”, “one behind the other”), to the outfits and accessories (“blue shirt black cap dark blue uniforms white hygiene masks guns”, “latex gloves”, “a plastic bag in hand”), and to the facial expressions (“hard stares”).

While the directors describe these elements of *mise en scène*, a team of TV journalists is at work, shooting camera footage. A German journalist, coming to the island for four years, is finally extremely happy as he manages to capture “magnificent” images of a migrants’ boat by helicopter; at the same time, the tourism industry imperturbably carries on its work. As the verbal descriptions of migrants’ arrests depict the physical positions for migrants to adopt (“sit down”, “legs apart”), leisure activities continue on the island. While another journalist proposes to pay for “emotional” and “beautiful” stories, workers cook, clean, install deck chairs and parasols, and prepare coffee for the tourists. The members of staff are often of foreign origin: even when sometimes becoming “legal”, the people behind the scenes are kept behind the scenes. The migrants’ “centre” is not central but inaccessible, close to the airport, where many of them are forced to board planes to Libya on flights which are not announced. What is left of their passage are the boats, brought to a hidden pit at the other end of the island, where their wood is made into dust and later carried to the north of Italy to be

transformed into furniture. Nothing of their passage is left to see. The touristic show can go on so that “everything seems absolutely normal”, as a visitor observed when interviewed by journalists. When the sun sets, the music of the nightclub is layered over the images and the sounds of aircrafts leaving the island.

Conclusion

Today, the attractiveness of Mediterranean holiday resorts for the “poor sedentary” continues to be mediated by images posted on social media and online travel companies. Among the messages related to the Mediterranean island of Sicily which were not removed by the TripAdvisor moderator team due to abusive content, someone asked if the migrant situation would be “noticeable” (TripAdvisor 2015). The word choice reveals how this concern relates to visibility. It is also telling about the perceptions held by the “poor sedentary” of the migrants that the sole presence of the latter could undermine the trip and potentially “spoil” the photographs to be posted on social media. Berndt Korner, deputy executive director of Frontex, also addresses this concern when discussing changes in migrant routes: “Whether the new route goes up to Croatia, it remains to be seen” (Cook 2016). The political leader is implying that, despite the likely presence of migrants who *should* not be seen, this tourist location is still worth visiting. More precisely, as one of the lead representatives of Frontex, Korner means that the exiles’ presence does not fit with the Croatian holiday scenery since their presence could threaten the feeling of security or spoil a highly appreciated tourist landscape. While some may argue this comes very close to hate speech, this official statement certainly hides the failure of the European Union member states to rescue migrants threatened by death at sea and helps explain European inaction in the face of the refugee “crisis” denounced by NGOs.⁴

4 In the Mediterranean, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has stated that when a vessel is intercepted, even on the high seas, effective control over the boat and all persons on board means that public officials have the duty to respect and protect the rights of migrants

The press photographs by Medina and Palazón analysed in this essay are echo chambers of European migratory policies and make history. In Jacques Rancière’s words: “History is the time when those who do not have the right to share the same place can occupy the same image” (2014, 13). If Mediterranean touristic venues seem to offer ephemeral clashes of representation, briefly spotlighting the antithetical visual and political regimes in which Westerners and “illegal” migrants are kept aside, these situations remain exceptional. The visibility imposed by European authorities on migrants does not tolerate interruptions: the people behind the scenes must remain backstage to allow the tourism industry to fit with the postcard aesthetic sold by travel agencies. Reporting migrants’ presence in Mediterranean

on the vessel. The “return of the boats at sea” policy is also a violation of the ECHR.

touristic venues and resisting this visuality thus implies the need to call upon the afterlives of the deceased migrants (Boehmer 2019), to compare the dominant logic of capital with migrants’ situations (Rekacewicz 2020), and to make the inhabitants of these places read the script imposed by the border regime (Iorio and Cuomo 2005–2007).

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ORCID

Ana Cristina Mendes  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3596-0701>

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