

Mapping Lampedusa: cinema and "emotional geography".

Legend has it that a hermit lived on the island of Lampedusa during the Middle Ages. Due to its strategic location, the island was at the time a favourite object of conquest for Christian and Muslim caravels sailing across the Mediterranean Sea. Determined to avoid trouble and violence at the hands of the sly and ruthless sailors, the hermit would routinely disguise his identity, switching between Arab and Latin prayers as called for by the circumstances. This legend can be seen as a metaphor for the island itself: Lampedusa is not only a white, Italian-European territory, with beautiful beaches and breathtaking landscapes; nor is it only the first/last border between the EU and North Africa and a connection/separation space between cultures in the Southern Mediterranean. Lampedusa is also a place of arrival for people coming from every corner of Africa, and a metaphor for other places in Europe and North Africa where black African people were and still are detained before expulsion; finally, Lampedusa epitomises the two sides of this ongoing migration—public spectacularisation and private silence. This 'private silence' is the outcome of a complex system of narration on migration through the Mediterranean. In consequence of this, only white-European-people are allowed to feel emotions about what happens across the Mediterranean and through the national/European borders (i.e. the fear about the theft of the job/land by migrant people). Black/African people are not allowed to speak on it: their voices and subjectivities are silenced, their collective and private emotions are unheeded and unheard. The coexistence of these multiple aspects needs to be interpreted and regarded as part of a device for the production of space in Europe and Africa. In keeping with this perspective, I intend Lampedusa as the space where different human geographies collide with one another. Through this gaze, and especially if we take into consideration the theoretical reflections upon the notions of isolation and insularity, on the one hand we can view Lampedusa as the expression of social, economic, cultural and spatial segregation between European citizens and other subjects (such as illegal immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons); on the other hand, we can view the island as part of a diasporic transnational and transcontinental migration path that starts thousands of miles away from Europe. In this post, I would like to focus my attention on some narrations in the field of cinema about Lampedusa. My intention is to bring light on this visual archive and its different gazes on the same piece of the Mediterranean Sea. These gazes and narrations are at the core of the invention of a public "emotional geography". For "emotional geography" I mean the way through which Lampedusa has been narrated to the ideas of an ongoing migrant emergency and state of exception. Cinema was and is one of the fields of the "emotional geography": filmmakers have connected specific visual narrations of Lampedusa to feelings which have been elaborated in connection with other people. They are not only representation of an individual condition: they are counter-narrations elaborated in the intersubjective sphere. For an "emotional geography" of Lampedusa, several films have offered a glimpse into the diaspora from the Horn of Africa in Europe and the events unfolding in the stretch of sea that divides North Africa from Lampedusa. One of the first, and most successful, Italian documentaries is *Come un uomo sulla Terra* (2008), by Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer and Riccardo Biadene. It opens

with the protagonist, Dagmawi Yimer, telling his story and pointing out that “this story should have started about 100 years ago, when our great-grandparents met.” Yimer is referring to Italian colonialism, the Italo-Ethiopian war, and the conflict between Italians and Ethiopians. His first-hand account of migration harks back to the tension between the colonial past and the postcolonial condition. His sorrow at leaving without saying goodbye to his father and the rest of his family merges with the pain felt by those he interviews, who made the same journey. Yimer met these people in Italy, at the Scuola di Marco (Marco’s school), an immigrant learning centre where Italian classes are taught. All throughout the documentary a map gathers the migrants’ memories and their emotions, as the editing alternates between shots of the paper map and real locations such as the desert and the Mediterranean. [Asmat](#) (2015), also by Yimer, was made to commemorate the victims of the October 3, 2013 shipwreck. The short film is set at sea, a space of amnesia where all places and human beings seem to lose importance to the vast desert of water. One by one, the names of the victims are read by Yimer, so that their memory is not lost amid the silence of the waves. Thus, the Mediterranean becomes a place of anguish and anxiety, poised between the memories of a lifetime and a present where there is no place to mourn the dead. “Mare Chiuso” (2012), by Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre, chronicles the exodus of over two thousand people stranded in the Mediterranean and pushed back to Libya by the Italian police. The consequences will be devastating, as violence escalates against those who ran away from war and poverty. Likewise, Jonas Carpignano’s documentary, “Mediterranean” (2015), portrays the geography of migration across the in-between sea, first from the Horn of Africa and then from Burkina Faso and Algeria. The visual narrative turns the landscape into a sort of vast map of emotions felt by the migrants during the journey. The same is true for other films such as “Il Volo” by Wim Wenders, and “La nave dolce”, by Daniele Vicari— which portrays the Albanian immigration, in particular. “Terraferma”, by Stefano Criaiese, adopts the same perspective, although this director’s lens captures the migrants at the midpoint of their journey: Sarah, a beautiful woman reminiscent of the Hottentot Venus, and her children arrive in Linosa after fleeing Eritrea. Sarah has mixed feelings, as her sadness at leaving Asmara is coupled with her preoccupation with reaching her husband in Turin. In [“To Whom it may Concern”](#) (2013), Zakaria Mohamed Ali recounts his own journey to Libya. He first heard about Lampedusa when he was about to leave Libya. He had never been there and in the film he recalls his sense of disorientation while at sea: “Lampedusa is down there, no, that’s not Lampedusa, it’s elsewhere: there was a heated exchange. But I didn’t even know where I was going.” Then he wonders: what is memory for? “It’s the only bridge that connects all human beings with the possibility to remember their past”: memory, that is, is never individual but comes from sharing and serves the need to find oneself in the past and recognise oneself in the present. Once again, it is the sadness at the abandoned home, the fear and the hope during the journey, the sorrow felt for those who did not make it that narrate what we may call a shared geography—“shared” because the goal of the documentary is to reach a wide audience and because you are never alone when you remember. Problematizing territories with the “emotional geography” it is important “to put aside” a catastrophic vision of what is going on in the Mediterranean Sea. Deaths in Mediterranean waters are not accidental but due to specific geopolitical situations and European policies. At the same time, it ought to reinvent the European society from the

border, reconsidering the ways of access and to stay inner to the national and communitarian frontiers for non-European people. The "emotional geography" could be helpful in reconsidering territories and the role of borders in the production of social space. In fact, it is a strategy that can expose mystifying narrations by racist groups and parties in Italy-Europe and detrimental discourses on a sort of white-European multiculturalism. Furthermore, "emotional geography" is a sign of territories' resignification. The ambivalence of Lampedusa is the challenge for the Italian-European future. Will we be able to apply the polysemy of meanings of the visual archive to the ways into which we can invent and produce public spaces?