

Citizen Media and Public Spaces

Diverse Expressions of Citizenship and Dissent

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Frontiers of the Political: ‘Closed Sea’ and the Cinema of Discontent

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Abstract

In many European migrant films, the bodily inscription of postcolonial subjects, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is marked as other, and therefore socially ordered elsewhere. This is achieved through physical displacement to the outskirts of society, into liminal spaces that function as waiting rooms or holding areas preventing entry into Europe. These zones of marginalisation and exclusion, heterotopias or non-places, can nevertheless become places of semi-belonging and transformation. This chapter focuses on *Mare Chiuso* (*Closed Sea*, Italy, 60 min.) by filmmaker Andrea Segre, a documentary comprising interviews, archival footage and original film captured with mobile cameras by migrants at the moment of interception by Italian patrol guards. Here the issue of legality and citizenship is addressed from subaltern positions, giving voice and space to African migrants trying to reach the shores of Southern Italy, only to be deported by Italian patrols to Libyan detention camps, in violation of the principles of Human Rights.

The aim of the documentary is to relate what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these ‘push-back operations’, and in Libyan prisons after deportation. The filmmakers met their witnesses at the Shousha refugee camp, at the border between Libya and Tunisia, and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (C.A.R.A.) in southern Italy. The interviews they conducted with the refugees and footage from the refugees’ own films taken with a smartphone constitute the main part of the documentary, along with a session of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where one of the witnesses sued Italy. Hence it was through their own filming on a smartphone that these citizen media activists and

refugees managed to challenge the illegality of Italy's 'push-back operations'. This chapter argues that recounting one's own history by recording it, is a way of taking charge of one's own representation and reversing the gaze, making the inhospitable 'mare chiuso' a site of protest, but also a site of denouncing injustice and renegotiating citizenship.

Keywords cinema, migration, refugee, refoulement, citizenship, Mediterranean.

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Intro Postcolonial Cinema

Cinema as a transnational medium is particularly suited to conveying issues of dissent and social critique that extend beyond the boundaries of the nation. It sets in motion an engagement with multiple audiences that goes beyond the aesthetic and connects different worlds and realities from local to global. It is the scope of Postcolonial Cinema in particular to propose alternative visions and forms of articulation that challenge the status quo and bring to light hidden histories and perspectives. By the notion of postcolonial cinema I mean therefore not the indication of a new genre or label for cinematic production, but rather a framework of analysis – an epistemological standpoint, or optic - through which films emerge in their engagement and contestations of power dynamics. These contestations, contemporary and non-contemporary, often stem from dissymmetric colonial relations, and are now further complicated by global relocations of people, resources and connections (see Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012).

Postcolonial cinema is not just a cinema of denunciation, but it also provides a platform for subaltern marginalities, making the ‘others’ protagonists and part of the mainstream narrative. This also enables marginalized communities to find ways to emerge and participate in different conceptions of social and political life. They become in a way ‘mediated’ citizens through the representations provided, but also ‘citizen media’ through the interpellation they make by using the media to emerge and account for their dislocated visions.

Postcolonial cinema is therefore called to make the invisible visible¹ (Young, 2012, p. 21) and to find a visual repertoire that can create a dialogue between aesthetic representations and political intervention. This allows invisible citizens, unpeople (Curtis),² or alien subjects (Marciniak, 2006) to find alternative locations for conveying forms of participation and mediation which would otherwise remain unrecorded, or ignored. Though we are talking of at times minor productions, with limited circulation and *cachet* for international festivals, it is still likely to reach an informed or interested audience. These audiences can access new stories and memories via normal distribution channels, but also through the widespread circulation of digital media production via social network sites, such as You Tube, Twitter and Vimeo.

Postcolonial cinema claims therefore to make an impact on public life, altering the way the notion of public space and political participation is perceived. Yet postcolonial cinema does not only deal with the present and with the public realm, but by being an optic, it can also be applied to the private as well as to the collective, to many genres (from melodrama to documentary), historical periods (from the Ottoman Empire to Soviet rule) and

¹ As Robert Young writes: ‘the issue is rather to locate the hidden rhizomes of colonialism’s historical reach, of what remains invisible, unseen, silent, or unspoken. In a sense, postcolonialism has always been about the ongoing life of residues, living remains, lingering legacies.’ (Young, 2012, p. 21)

² Mark Curtis, *Unpeople: Britain’s Secret Human Rights Abuses*. London, Vintage, 2004.

different geopolitical contexts (the West as well as postcolonies³) by way of unframing the dichotomy of oppression and resistance, visual mastery and blind spots.

As this volume argues ‘citizen media’ refer not only to the form or content produced by non-affiliated citizens but also to the impact they make in the public sphere and the way in which they propose to transform it. Citizen media are therefore meant to operate through a different *pallet* of art forms creating diversified political interventions pursuing a more inclusive agenda. Postcolonial cinema provides an excellent template for citizen media not only because it makes an intervention into the realm of film studies by incorporating alternative forms of participation but also because it has always been a medium of inclusion and combat.

In the 1960s, Third Cinema, for example, attempted to challenge the economic dominance of First Cinema (read Hollywood) and to differentiate itself from counter-hegemonic, but still European, and nation-based Second Cinema (art house) by proposing a revolutionary cinema that would focus on the masses and express their political goals through innovative cinematic forms (Gabriel, 1982; Wayne, 2001). These included not only the poverty of its financial means as it wanted to put forward an ‘aesthetic of hunger’ but also the use of non-professional actors (as from Italian neo-realism) and most of all the inclusion of embattled and subversive goals. Often influenced by the revolutionary thinking of Franz Fanon⁴ this was a cinema that magnified not individual, and oedipal stories, but the revolt of nations that wanted to liberate themselves from the clutches of imperialism, injustice and oppression. Initially started in Latin American with leading figures such as Ottavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (who will write the script for Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*, 1966), Third Cinema spread across the world not only to indicate the Third World and its need to reclaim its authority and place in the transnational order, but as a style of denunciation and dissent that could involve First and Third worlds irrespectively as long as it staged a way of transforming the political order and the role and visibility of its neglected citizens.

Cinema as social commentary

Third cinema is therefore a strong influence and predecessor to postcolonial cinema, though as explained above, postcolonial cinema does not claim to be a movement, or a genre, but rather an engagement with the visual narrative of empire and its deconstruction. As such, postcolonialism as an optic is less explicitly polemical than Third Cinema, but is still strongly engaged with the political and concerned with authoritarian oppression. Not dealing directly with freedom fighters, liberation heroes or decolonization movements, but with a more

³ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001.

⁴ See Fanon, Frantz, ‘Concerning Violence.’ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Trans. by Constance Farrington, New York, Grove Press, 1993, pp. 35-106.

oblique relation to protest and the politics of dissent, postcolonial cinema also problematizes cinematic tools, media technologies and distribution networks through which we receive information and images (Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012, p. 7). While adhering to the collective, postcolonial cinema often focuses on individual causes and quests, though keeping account of the multidimensionality of figures. These figures are often, but not necessarily, marginalized, displaced or disenfranchised by more subtle and diffused forms of oppression than the colonial/colonizer binary, such as the global redistribution of capital and labour migration. The colonial/postcolonial focus becomes actualized in a new realm of sensory and political experiences, where power relationships are relocated, shifted and rearranged. As neo-colonial configurations of power emerge in the contemporary world, we are reminded that the colonial hangover is far from over. Film and media in general can deal with the imaginary and the real, offering new opportunities for resistance and subversion, through the frame of aesthetics and micropolitics. The master narratives break down into kaleidoscopic visions that refract larger, often repressed, miswritten and un(official) histories of the nation, magnifying the role of identity in its intersection with issues of class, gender, ethnicity and race.

One of the most frequently recurring features of postcolonial cinema, especially of postcolonial migrant cinema which is at the heart of the analysis in this chapter, is that of non-places. This is because postcolonial subjects, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are often depicted in non-places such as city outskirts, hotels, detention centres, refugee camps, on the open sea or in airports (Augé, 1995). This is an important trope of postcolonial cinema, which underlies the political as well as the aesthetic component. In the European contexts of migrant cinema the reference to liminality, or spatial location at the periphery, operates as figurations, as well as material places, to convey the borderline identity of subjects who are still perceived as guests to Europe.

In many European migrant films the bodily inscription of the postcolonial subjects, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers becomes marked as other, and therefore socially ordered elsewhere, through their physical displacement at the outskirts of society, into liminal spaces that function as waiting rooms or holding areas to the 'legal' Europe for example. However, these zones of marginalisation and exclusion, heterotopias or non-places, can actually become places of semi-belonging and transformation (Ponzanesi, 2012)⁵. As I have argued elsewhere, non-places can be inhabited and appropriated and can be regarded as alternative venues for hospitality, where the 'host', who is usually in a position of domination and control, becomes dependent on the 'guests'.

The Mediterranean as Non-Place

⁵ Sandra Ponzanesi, 'The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe.' *Third Text*, 26(6), pp. 675-690.

I will analyse a recent film by documentary filmmaker Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, Italy, 2012) to highlight a case of citizen media that connects to the debates on postcolonial cinema, migration and non-places. The film is important in relation to the emergency in Southern Italy where thousands of immigrants land illegally after the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean on trawlers or rubber boats, risking their lives and creating an open cemetery of the Mediterranean. Immigration to Southern Europe is a recent and rather sudden phenomenon which has been tackled with unclear and inappropriate immigration laws. Desperate migrants attempting to reach Italian shores (from Albania, North Africa and the Middle East)⁶ to secure a future in Europe have been confronted with push-back operations by the Italian military marine. The territorial proximity of the Southern European shores and North Africa should make of the Mediterranean an interesting crossroads space, fluid and in continuous evolution, which instead becomes a non-place due to its politicised and patrolling effect.

In this crossing the Mediterranean acquires a new role and valence which has been intensively studied in history, anthropology and political theory, as a location that connects as well as separates, but it is at times a location of mediation and a contact zone, where different cultures have criss-crossed and coexisted for centuries above the notion of the soil as important for territorial contiguity and unity (Boria and Dell’Agnese 2012).⁷ The Mediterranean is seen as the border of Europe, offshore, and therefore as a political frontier where the new issues of citizenship are argued and guarded. But it is also a liquid continent or an open cemetery, due to the many unsuccessful crossings of migrants whose destination ‘Europe’ is never reached. While the media emphasise the ‘illegal’ landings as invasions, the reality of these modern odysseys is that of illegal refoulements, i.e. the expulsion of persons who have the right to be recognised as refugees. The principle of non-refoulement was first laid out in 1954 in the UN Convention on the status of refugees, which in article 33(1) provides that:

No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.⁸

⁶ Since the 1980s the rapidly increasing number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees coming not only from the former Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia) but also from the Maghreb and other African countries, and from Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the war in Yugoslavia), drastically changed the face of Italian demography.

⁷ Boria, Edoardo and Elena dell’Agnese. 2012. ‘Frontier.’ In *Mediterranean Lexicon*, edited by Paolo Giaccaria and Maria Paradiso, 87-102. Roma: Società Geografica Italiana.

⁸ UNESCO: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/refoulement/>

Instead, the reality after 2008 has been that of migrants coercively rejected, in push-back operations which brought them outside the common gaze that reflects the political inadequacies of the Italian government and the European union.⁹ In this metaphor of ‘waves’ of migrants, where cargoes of distraught people on ‘gommoni’ (rubber boats) or ‘carrette di mare’ (dilapidated trawlers) face the Italian Navy securing the Italian coastline, the Mediterranean emerges, as Russell King writes, as ‘a liquid frontier separating the rich north (Europe) from the poor south (North Africa, the ‘third world’) and temptingly open to migrant crossing’ (King 2001, 8)¹⁰.

Cultural theorist Iain Chambers has poignantly located the Mediterranean as a postcolonial hybrid where multiple histories, languages, and cultures intersect and flow into each other. Yet he is also aware of the ambivalence and the ambiguity that the Mediterranean has acquired in recent decades, as an open graveyard filled with unclaimed bodies. As Chambers writes:

Here the concept of the Mediterranean is set adrift to float towards a vulnerability attendant on encounters with other voices, bodies, histories. This is to slow down and deviate the tempo of modernity, its neurotic anxiety for linearity, causality, and ‘progress,’ by folding it into other times, other textures, other ways of being in a multiple modernity. (Chambers, 2008, 33)¹¹

Yet Chambers’ poetic invocation also embodies the ambiguity of the Mediterranean, not as a space where power imbalances cease but where they are articulated ‘otherwise,’ allowing for reciprocal patterns of cross-cultural call and response. If revisiting the Mediterranean in this way means attending to repressed histories of contact and communication between Europe and the Arab world, it also means recasting maritime history in terms of securitization and inhospitality, with the sea extending the law of the land into a space marked less by freedom and openness than by anxiety and fear. The Mediterranean, as a ‘Sea of Death,’ is indelibly marked by the crimes perpetrated by generations of human traffickers, but also by the violent rejections and expulsions enacted by those forces – military and otherwise – that currently patrol its shores. Accordingly, the Mediterranean becomes not just the liquid frontier of Europe, but also a repository for the continent’s

⁹ The various improvised laws that attempted to regulate and legislate the presence, residence and right to citizenship of the newcomers were the one more inadequate and disastrous than the other (Legge Martelli, 1990, Turco-Napolitano, 1998; Bossi-Fini, 2002; Legge Pacchetto Sicurezza, 2009). The sudden influx of immigration to Italy (chaotically hosted in detention centres, refugee camps and improvised ‘centri di accoglienza’ [hosting centres]) was not a temporary emergency stopgap but was destined to continue.

¹⁰ King, Russell, ed. 2001. *The Mediterranean Passage: Migration and New Cultural Encounters in Southern Europe*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

¹¹ Chambers, Iain. 2008. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

unwanted (see also [Laviosa 2010])¹². It is a place of transit where the asymmetries produced by globalization intensify, literally and figuratively carried by the abject bodies of migrants, undocumented people, and refugees.¹³

Mare Aperto (Closed Sea)

This connects to the recent documentary film made by Stefano Liberti and Andrea Segre *Mare Chiuso* (2012). Liberti and Segre use the documentary genre as a way of engaging with reality, or better, with a denunciation of reality, siding with marginalized people who suffer injustices despite their entitlement to human rights and European citizenship. This is a cinema *engagé* that contests the status quo and denounces abuses of power, and it could be read as postcolonial film as it engages with the visualising of the subalterns by giving them a podium and a voice through a cinematic language that contests romanticised or stereotypical representations of the immigrant subjects in favour of accurate testimonials and subjective viewpoints.

Mare Chiuso is in this sense a stunning documentary that is particularly touching because of its contribution to the ‘real’ experience of refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Lampedusa, or other southern coastal posts in Europe. Lampedusa, a little island to the south of Sicily, close to Tunisia in North Africa, and separated only by the strait of Sicily, has become a metaphor for Europe’s unwanted. A tiny island of fishermen transformed by modern mass tourism, Lampedusa has been continuously in the news for the repeated dramas of refugees stranded on its shores, transferred into cramped CPT, centri di permanenza temporanei (temporary detention centres)¹⁴ or drowned on the high seas even before reaching the coastline.

On 3 October, 2013 an estimated 300 refugees mostly originating from Eritrea¹⁵, died at high sea after a shipwreck. An overcrowded boat contained almost 500 migrants capsized

¹² Laviosa, Flavia (2010), *Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan.

¹³ See the blog by Gabriele del Grande, ‘Fortress Europe’ in which he reports 6 years of travelling around the Mediterranean along the borders of Europe. Link: <http://fortresseurope.blogspot.nl/>

¹⁴ Of particular concern is the fact that migrants do not have access to asylum procedures in Lampedusa and that they are expelled to Libya, a country that is not their country of origin but of transit and that does not have a functioning asylum system, has not signed the Geneva Convention on Refugees and practices large-scale expulsion of undocumented migrants. See Andrijasevic (2006).

¹⁵ Human Right Watch has described Eritrea as a ‘giant prison’. The high state of militarization of the country has led to a dictatorial regime where there is not freedom of press, religion or movement. There indefinite conscription in the military service, with

less than one kilometre off the coast of Lampedusa. A week later another boat capsized some 60 kilometres from the island killing yet another 60 people. The tragedy shocked Brussels, with the European commission president José Manuel Barroso coming to Lampedusa to pay tribute to the 300 lined up coffins. The symbolic but empty gesture of the Italian government to grant them citizenship after death speaks of the paradoxes and abuses committed in the name of citizenship and border control. This drowning and death have been repeated since 2013 without any substantial changes taking place, the last tragedy having taken place in February 2015, where more than a dozen overcrowded boats tried to reach Lampedusa, with an estimated 3800 people attempting to cross the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe in the course of a few weeks. At least 330 people are thought to have perished while crossing from Libya to Italy, 29 who died on Italian coastguard boats. A record number of 170,000 migrants reached Italian shores last year. The surge in the number of deaths has sparked renewed debate as to whether European search-and-rescue operations are adequate in the face of the humanitarian crisis triggered by the escalation of conflict in the Middle East and Africa.¹⁶

The illegal refoulement actions were a consequence of the infamous Friendship Treaty, signed in 2008 by Berlusconi and Gaddafi. The agreement was supposed to put an end to a ‘painful chapter in Italian history’ relating to Italian colonialism in Libya and the inhuman concentration camps set up between 1929-1931¹⁷, mostly to uproot Bedouin nomads who supported the resistance mobilised by Omar Al-Mukhtar.¹⁸ The end of this colonial

families being torn apart for some members to become part of the army. Link: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/05/06/eritrea-slender-land-giant-prison>

¹⁶ ‘Record number of migrants strain Lampedusa facilities’. *Aljazeera America*. February 17, 2015. Link: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/17/lampedusa-migrant-centers-flooded-with-thousands-of-migrants.html>

¹⁷ The ferocious reaction of the fascists to the Bedouin uprising brought them to create new systems of ordering and disciplining. Nomads were considered more than barbaric, whose way of life was seen by the fascists as deviant and dangerous to the Italian empire. In the eye of Generale Rodolfo Graziani, nomadism was a real danger and required special attention. To this end General Graziani took measures officially ordered by General Badoglio, Governor of Cyrenaica, to spatially exclude the local populations (Labanca, 2005, p. 31). Between 1930 and 1933, the Cyrenaica *sottomessi* communities were forced into what Badoglio called ‘a restricted space, so that they can be surveilled adequately, and isolated from the rebels.’ The exact total number of deaths is unknown and not documented. It is estimated that throughout these years between 40,000 and 70,000 were killed or died of starvation. As David Atkinson wrote: ‘The camps and its barbed wired fences materialised European notions of a bounded territoriality; they finally forced the Bedouin to live within a disciplined, controlled, fixed space – in contrast to their traditional conceptions of group encampments and unfettered movement across territory’ (David Atkinson, 2000, pp. 113-114). These camps were organised into re-education camps, which were meant to educate and train Libyan people for the military colonial apparatus, but they were also punitive camps, where torture and human rights abuses occurred (De Carlo, 2013).

¹⁸ This was also as a response to the successful campaigns by Sheikh Omar Al-Mukhtar, renamed as the lion of the desert. Italians thought that Libyans would be happy to be liberated

chapter is linked to an injection of funding of up to 5 billion in the next 20 years for key infrastructure projects, the nature of which remains undefined. Although the treaty had economic benefits for Libya, and claimed to want to end past disputes, it simultaneously implicated Libya in the establishment of a violent technology of security. It is only more paradoxical to see that Libya applies similar forms of containment and violation as the Italians during colonial times against Libyan people.

There is here an attempt between the failure of Libya as a security border and the failure of the Italian government, and with it of the European Union, to deal with the flows of globalization, and the consequences of decolonization. The treaty is a remapping of the colonial sovereign logic that implicates Libya in the production of sovereign violence against refugees. The treaty responds to Italian violent colonial history by implicating Libyans in its violent sovereign ban on refugees and asylum seekers. Libya through this remapping has been transformed into a border zone of exception that is both outside but also inside the jurisdiction of Italian sovereignty.¹⁹

Segre has produced a consistent *oeuvre* which tries to address these issues in a consistent and political way. He has already produced a trilogy that focuses on the origins and developments of these migrations from Africa, far before even reaching Europe in order to show the reasons, motivations and life stories behind the mediated renditions of Italian and European reports. *A Sud di Lampedusa* is the first film in the trilogy (2006), followed by *Come un uomo sulla Terra* (Like a Man on Earth, 2008) and *Sangue Verde* (Green Blood, 2010).

In *Mare Chiuso* (Closed Sea, 2012), Segre, together with codirector Stefano Liberti, brings the story of *A Sud di Lampedusa* to a further climax by telling, in documentary form, what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these ‘push-back operations’ and deportations to Libyan prisons. On 6 May 2009 an overloaded boat with Somali and Eritrean men, women and children, was intercepted in international waters. The boat was defective and unable to continue towards Lampedusa. Under the friendship treaty these people can be returned to Libya even though they are in international waters and subject to international legislation.

Mare Chiuso is a documentary with interviews, archival footage, and original film captured on mobile phone by migrants themselves at the very moment the patrolling Italian guards appear on the scene. The filmmakers met the victims of the push-back operations in the Shousha refugee camp, on the border between Libya and Tunisia, and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (C.A.R.A.) in southern Italy, Sant’Anna in Crotona, Campania and San Giorgio Lucano, in Basilicata. Their interviews form the main part of the documentary,

from the clutches of the Ottoman Empire and did not expect such fierce resistance which was often articulated along guerrilla lines to which the Italians had not been prepared. The Fascists embarked on a gruesome and brutal tactic in their war of annihilation against the Libyan population: the use of concentration camps.

¹⁹ Lara Palombo, ‘The Drawing of the Sovereign Line.’ In Joseph Pugliese (ed.), *Transmediterranean: Diasporas, Histories, Geopolitical Spaces*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2010, p. 51-52)

along with a session of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where one of the refugees, Ernias Berhane who had been sent back to Libya, sued Italy. The Court recently condemned Italy for violating Article 34 of the European Convention on Human Rights, obliging Italy to pay a fine of 15,000 euros to the complainants - 11 Somalis and 13 refugees. During his speech, the defendant stated that the European Union should prevent this 'Guantanamo on the high seas' from ever happening again.

As Elisabetta Povoledo writes in the New York Times (April 2, 2012), what is central to *Mare Chiuso* is the few minutes video recorded by the refugees themselves during their encounter at sea with the patrolling Italian police. As sanctioned by internal law for human rights - which requires the duty to provide help where there is danger - the Italian patrol should have taken the migrants requesting asylum to safety. Instead, the migrants were taken back to Libya, after receiving a phone call from the Italian authorities, allowing them to be imprisoned in refugee camps, where violations to human rights through torture and psychological abuse had already been denounced (Povoledo 2012, NB).

The documentary aims to tell what actually happened to African refugees on the Italian ships during these 'push-back operations' and in the Libyan prisons after their deportation. The video is therefore a rare cameo that functions as evidence to incriminate the unlawful Italian operations. The filmmakers met their witnesses at the Shousha refugee camp, on the border between Libya and Tunisia, and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (C.A.R.A.) in southern Italy. The interviews they conducted with the refugees and footage from the refugees' own films shot on a smartphone constitute the main part of the documentary, along with a session of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, where one of the witnesses sued Italy. Hence it was through their own filming on a smartphone that these citizen media activists and refugees managed to challenge the illegality of Italy's 'push-back operations'.

The centrality of the video is, according to Elisabetta Povoledo, particularly touching because 'it is real'... 'Because it was taken from a mobile phone, the images are jumpy and all-over-the-place, but it's unlikely that a professionally shot movie would have captured the spontaneity of the joy – and relief- of the boatland of mostly Eritrean migrants rescued by the Italian navy in the Mediterranean after a harrowing four-day crossing from Libya (the video can be found on You Tube ([video](#))). The excitement of the migrants is palpable at the prospect that they would soon be taken to Italy.'

But this story has no happy ending. Initially friendly, the Italian navy receives a phone call and change their behaviour and approach. Instead of taking the migrants on the rubber dinghies to safety as required by international law, they return the boats to Libya where many migrants were mistreated.

Semere Kahsay was one of the main characters among the people interviewed. Semere had to send his pregnant wife ahead because he did not have enough money to pay for two. His wife arrived safely and waited with their baby daughter for him to make the crossing as well. But he was the victim of the push-back operation described in the film. Semere has wonderful presence in the film, and great cinematic force through his simple life story: he tells his own odyssey creating a recurring theme between the different narratives: his trip over the sea, his imprisonment in Libya, his long imprisonment in the refugee camps

and his great disappointment in the Italian dream. In the film he says ‘thank you, Italians’, breaking down with bitterness, ‘we love Italy and all Italians. But thank you.’ But there is a happy ending to his story. In the summer of 2011 Semere acquires the right to political asylum, two years and five months after his departure from Eritrea.

The dramatic centre part of the film is this video which they miraculously managed to preserve and pass to the two filmmakers. The video will be used to denounce the Italian state to the European Court of Human Rights, and this is the scene that we see at the opening of the film and at the end.

The documentary which opens with modest ambitions showing footage, interviews for the most part and this embedded ‘real’ video, has travelled to many international festivals and has been received very positively by critics and activists. On the evening of the Lampedusa drama of 3 October, 2013 mentioned above, the film was made ‘extraordinarily’ freely available for streaming as a form of protest and denunciation, and solidarity with all migrants and the dead.²⁰

What is shocking and even more confronting is that the images of the Eritreans in the Libyan concentration camps so much recall and look like the Italian detention camps from colonial times set up for the Libyans during the Italian repression of Sheikh Omar Al-Mukhtar, renamed as the lion of the desert, and his supporters.

It is stunning how the display of the camps for refugees now looks so much like the concentration camps that Italians had organized in the 1930s. As Ruth Ben Ghiat has stated, histories of captivity and torture often remained unchanged through history, or uncannily similar in their forms and psychological effect.²¹

The film has excellently managed to intersperse interviews of the survivors with the original video recording on the boatland. Just as beautiful are also the shots of the desert and

²⁰ <http://www.cinespresso.com/2013/10/04/mare-chiuso-in-streaming-gratuito-per-fermare-il-massacro-dei-migranti/>. The film is now freely available on You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goUBCs-SkAY>

²¹ ‘And despite the availability of 21st-century technology, those torturing prisoners are often unwittingly repeating the exact actions of captors in centuries past. The ISIS beheadings put on public display were an ancient execution method used by governments throughout Europe and Asia through the early 20th century. Most of the torture methods used by the CIA have their own long past: waterboarding, singled out by Senator John McCain as a method used by the Japanese on American POWs in World War II, and before that by many other powers, is merely one example. Governments invest much time and money in setting up the infrastructures of imprisonment: for example, the labour involved in building camps and prisons, transporting the living and the dead, formulating policies, and educating chains of command. Yet all of this bureaucratic planning fades away at the moment of the fateful face-off between two human beings: prisoner and captor.’ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, ‘The Captive. A Measure of our Humanity.’ *The Huffington Post*, 12/29/2014: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ruth-benghiat/the-captive-a-measure-of-_b_6372984.html

the sunset on the HNHCR tents, and the precious video documents from Strasbourg. The photography work which, despite the poverty of the locations: the inside of a tent, shots of refugee camps, the faces and expressions of the interviewed migrants, the desolation of small villages in southern Italy, is stunningly beautiful and moving. While on the one hand the strong focus on Semere's personal drama helps to keep the many narrative lines together, it is also a slight concession to sentimentalism. The directors closely follow Semere's desperation and happiness to be reunited with his family, recording his phone calls and tears. It clearly makes the drama more individualised which obviously appeals to the affect and reaction of international audiences but also weakens the film's strong journalist sensitivity.

Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated how a rare example of citizen media has been recorded and commented upon through engaged postcolonial cinema, such as Segre's films, who takes the migrants and refugees and their causes as central point not only for his narrative but also for his visual choices. By keeping the aesthetic intertwined with the political the film acquires a subtle balance between artistic testimonial and social denunciation. The result of the short video was not only that Italy was sued, and the country was obliged to confess and offer retribution, but it also resulted in the European Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg ruling in favour of the refugees and their truths. The reverse perspective of the filming, from the migrants' own perspective, through their own devices and filming, and thanks to their skilled preservation of the short clip, is testimony to the eruptive contribution to citizenship media that digital tools can achieve, being easily purchasable, available and manoeuvrable. Though not simply a democratising tool, digital media have enlarged the space for participation and protest. Yet it is within the medium of cinema that the video is framed into a larger documentarising form which facilitates a deeper understanding of the texture of representation, interpretation and dissent which goes beyond the digital revolution and accounts for the past as well as the present.

This chapter has argued that *Mare Chiuso* contributes to the tradition of postcolonial cinema as it provides a recording of one's own history by taking charge of one's own representation and reversing the gaze, making the inhospitable 'mare chiuso' a non-place but also a site of protest which can lead to a renegotiated citizenship and alternative visions.

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