



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Against and Beyond Mimeticism

A Cinematic Ethics of Migration Journeys in Documentary Auto-Ethnography

Denić, N.

DOI

[10.5117/9789463725774](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463725774)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Doing Digital Migration Studies

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Denić, N. (2024). Against and Beyond Mimeticism: A Cinematic Ethics of Migration Journeys in Documentary Auto-Ethnography. In K. Leurs, & S. Ponzanesi (Eds.), *Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday* (Vol. Amsterdam, pp. 49-65). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463725774>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

1. **Against and Beyond Mimeticism: A Cinematic Ethics of Migration Journeys in Documentary Auto- Ethnography**

Nadica Denić

Abstract

This chapter traces a cinematic ethics of migration expressed in two digital auto-ethnographies of migration journeys, *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili, 2019) and *Purple Sea* (Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed, 2020). The two documentaries utilize digital filmmaking tools to create cinematic aesthetic spaces in which the practice of mediating migration is critically interrogated, including the experience of coercive mimeticism as a process of self-objectification and compliance with the European imaginary of the migrant subject. By providing an analysis of the relation between aesthetics, affect and ethics in *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea*, this chapter proposes an understanding of the two documentaries as affording engagement with autonomy of migration and the process of queering “Europeanness.”

Keywords: Ethics; documentary; migration; mimeticism; autonomy.

1.1 Introduction

Migration is at the centre of European news media attention. By following the logic of the European border regime, which is based on categorization, classification and management of migration, digital journalism has commonly focused on relaying information about the journeys and routes that migrants take in order to reach Europe, as well as on migrants’ arrival at the borders of European nation states (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014; New

Keywords Collective, 2016). Victimization and criminalization remain the most prevalent techniques utilized in migrant representation, alongside performative engagement with migration by European publics (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). Such modes of representation mobilize pity, fear and irony to invite humanitarian, securitarian and post-humanitarian ethics in relation to migration. While making migrants hypervisible, these discourses commonly exclude the perspectives of migrants themselves. In response, I turn to how migrants utilize digital filmmaking tools to represent their own migration experiences in the form of documentary auto-ethnographies, and in this way invite alternative aesthetic, affective and ethical engagements with migration journeys to Europe.¹ The question guiding this chapter is: How can documentary auto-ethnographies of migration journeys challenge the mainstream discourses of migration and their respective ethics? By examining the relation between aesthetics, affect and ethics in two such auto-ethnographies, I attend to how migrant self-representation via documentary creates an alternative visual register of migration journeys that interrupts the affective economy of news media, as well as invites ethical engagement with the practice of mediating migration and with perspectives pertaining to migrants' position in Europe. This chapter thereby contributes to the research area of digital migration studies by considering bottom-up digital connectivity and meaning-making processes afforded by migrants' digital practices (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018; Leurs & Witteborn, 2021).

The case studies central to this chapter are *Midnight Traveler* (2019), directed by Hassan Fazili, and *Purple Sea* (2020), directed by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed. In *Midnight Traveler*, a family documents its three-year journey from Afghanistan to Germany, while in *Purple Sea*, a woman migrating from Syria to Germany records her five-hour crossing of the Mediterranean Sea from Istanbul to Lesbos. The footage of the first documentary was filmed on three digital mobile devices, the latter on a digital camera small enough to be wrapped around a wrist. In both cases, the digital devices utilized enable practices of self-inscription in the recorded footage, which was later used for the expression of their own perspectives via the documentary form. The two documentaries have recently been praised for advancing a *poetics of refraction* by prioritizing opaqueness over transparency, and indeterminacy over representative order (Rossipal, 2021). In addition to such pertinent aesthetic concerns, my analysis expands

1 Documentaries that reflect on the filmmaker's socio-political position and critically engage with the context in which they are made exceed auto-biography and take the form of auto-ethnography (Russell, 1999).

towards affective and ethical engagement afforded by the documentaries' cinematic choices.

Midnight Traveler and *Purple Sea* have achieved significant successes in the international film festival circuit and have been taken up by a number of national and transnational streaming platforms, which grants them notable positions in the global dynamics of cinema (Iordanova, 2010). This circulation, alongside their focus on both territorial as well as maritime migration journeys, turns the documentaries into critical cases for examining how migrant voices intervene in practices of digital coverage of migration to Europe. It is important to note that minority self-representation usually carries the *burden of representation*, in that they can be perceived as representative of the minority group at stake (Shohat & Stam, 1994). While I discuss how the perspectives of the two proposed case studies challenge hegemonic discourses of migration, I primarily address them as examples in which filmmakers can take control of their own representation, without these depictions necessarily carrying the burden of being representative of migration journeys of others.

After discussing the key issues regarding migrant visibility and migration discourses in European news media in light of aesthetics, affect and ethics, I will turn to the analysis of *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea*. My aesthetic analysis of the films will focus on how they utilize cinematic means to critically interrogate the process of migrant interpellation in Europe, in turn interrupting the *affective economy* of migration, which entails the circulation of affects through objects (including bodies) and their transformation into emotional attachments of their own (Ahmed, 2004). Moreover, I attend to how such aesthetic and affective engagements advances a *cinematic ethics* of migration by expressing and evoking ethical ideas that pertain to migration and migrants' position to Europe (Sinnerbrink, 2016).

1.2 Migrant Visibility and Migration Discourse in European News Media

On the basis of a recent study by Lillie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic (2017) that examined the representation of the 2015 migration "crisis" in Europe, the following section outlines three common approaches to mediating migration: the humanitarian, the securitarian and the post-humanitarian approach. The discourse of "crisis" in relation to migration moreover reiterates the understanding of large-scale illegalized migration as a disturbance to an otherwise stable state of events, which conceals the

state of permanent crisis of the European border regime (New Keywords Collective, 2016). First, humanitarian representation relies on victimization of migrants through their massification and infantilization. Massification entails a visually distant depiction of a mass of people, for example in refugee camps or dinghies in the sea, while infantilization predominantly utilizes images of mothers and children in the effort to highlight the innocent vulnerability of migrant bodies. Previous research has pointed out how the discourse of “crisis” in connection with victimization of migrants has been framed as concerning “refugees,” whereby the term is applied to subjects deserving of European benevolence (Goodman et al., 2017). Humanitarian representation techniques offer minimal contextualization of migrants’ historicity and deprive migrants of their political agency by depicting them as passive, distressed and powerless bodies in need. Victimization of migrants creates a narrative of suffering that, due to being stripped of its political context, aims to mobilize pity and to evoke a humanitarian ethics which would further humanitarian and charitable agendas.

Second, the securitarian approach concerns criminalization of migrants, which is commonly enacted through images of young men, both massified and individualized. The construal of a migrant subject as a threat depicts migrants as active and political subjects, albeit so at the expense of Europe’s thriving (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). In this case, the discourse of “crisis” is framed as concerning “mere migrants,” which creates narrative subjects who are a threat to European security, economy and values (Goodman et al., 2017). Such representation of agentive malevolence aims to mobilize vigilance, apprehension and fear towards migrants, and to evoke a securitarian ethics that would lead to stricter migration management practices.

Unlike the previous two approaches, which are concerned with the categorization and classification of migrants, the third approach largely concerns the performance of engagement by the European subject (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). It manifests itself through aesthetic playfulness in migrant representation, commonly shared on social media, and through visualities of celebrity philanthropy. In not relying on victimization of migrants, it aims to achieve humanitarian goals through self-reflexive engagement, making its ethical position best conceptualized as one of post-humanitarianism. Nevertheless, its apolitical stance is commonly evocative of irony, which leads to a confirmation of a self-doubt that an alternative state of affairs, in this case concerning the European border regime, is not possible (Chouliaraki, 2013). Another form of performance of solidarity towards migrants is through activism that offers political critique. However, if performed on behalf of,

rather than together with migrants, it can reinforce the marginalization of their voices.

I have so far identified pity, fear and irony as main affects mobilized to evoke humanitarian, securitarian and post-humanitarian ethics of migration. To refer to Sara Ahmed's (2004) example, such an affective economy of migration accounts for how the fear of "migrants" can become an anxiety about the supposed "crisis" and concern, out of love, for the safety of "Europe." This dominant affective economy of migration is further reflected in the manner in which narratives of victimization and criminalization, including their respective humanitarian and securitarian agendas, co-exist and reinforce each other (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014). The narrative of a suffering "refugee" co-exists with a "could-be-a-threat" fear, which reinforces the binary perspective that the inclusion of certain bodies in Europe is justified while others must be excluded. The previously discussed difference in the use of terminology, which differentiates between "refugees," who should be welcomed, and "migrants," who should be excluded, is based on a binary logic of the European border regime that categorizes migration as either forced or voluntary (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018). However, such a clear-cut dichotomy is not empirically tenable, as person's motivations for movement are always mixed and transcend such a binary logic.

While the dichotomy between a "migrant" and a "refugee" is inherent to Europe's judiciary system and migration law, these concepts should not be approached as mere abstractions but rather as reflective of the active processes of categorization, classification and exclusion (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). One of the key implications of these processes is that a name conferred to someone is not only a designation, but is reflective of a hierarchical power relation that shapes migrants' realities. As Rey Chow (2014, p. 4) has argued, "by naming something, we confer upon it an identity it does not otherwise have," which is why the name becomes "a form of address, a call." Chow is here referring to the process of *interpellation*, in which an individual is constituted as a subject of a certain ideology issuing the call. Participation in the process is not optional, and the individual might even have specific reasons to conform to the ideology. Seen in the light of interpellation, those who migrate to Europe are, among others, in the process of becoming "migrant" and "refugee" subjects of the European border regime. It is important to the process of interpellation that it does not operate as a negation of the individual, but as an ontological subtraction, a reduction of the self. Instead of migrants' subjectivity being annihilated by the ideology, they are "given a place in the community of relations as performed by the name: he is hailed some thing" (Chow, 2014, p. 6). This is

how migrant interpellation reinforces hierarchies of difference: a person is granted a place in society on the condition of being a suffering, passive, distressed and powerless “refugee,” but not otherwise. When such a power relation exists, migrants are expected to objectify themselves to comply to the European imaginary.

1.3 Documentary Auto-Ethnography of Migration Journeys

In this section, I examine how *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* advance counter-narratives that go beyond hegemonic discourses that either victimize, criminalize or altogether exclude migrants, and instead offer intimate access to directors’ critical interrogation of migrant interpellation. The three-year long journey from Afghanistan to Germany that is at the centre of *Midnight Traveler* started after the Taliban put a bounty on Hassan Fazili’s head. The family, consisting of his partner Fatima Hussaini and their two young daughters Nargis and Zahra, first sought asylum in Tajikistan, and after having been rejected, decided to present the same asylum case in Germany. They filmed their journey together with three digital mobile devices. Amel Alzakout, the director of *Purple Sea*, fled the Syrian Civil War and was temporarily based in Turkey. She recorded her journey to Europe for her partner, Khaled Abdulwahed, with whom she wished to reunite in Germany. Her crossing of the Mediterranean Sea by boat from Turkey to Greece is the focus of their film.

As I will argue, these documentaries utilize cinematic tools to create a space of agency in which they interrogate the European gaze, reverse the gaze by looking back, and name what is seen. Such a process has been theorized by bell hooks (2014, p. 117) as one of an *oppositional gaze*, which forms a critical aspect of spectatorship that functions as “a site of resistance for colonized black people globally,” in turn leading to the development of independent black cinema. *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* enact an oppositional gaze in the context of contemporary migrant representation in Europe by developing alternative visual registers of migration experiences. That is to say, they not only oppose hegemonic discourses and aesthetics of migration, but create cinematic aesthetic spaces reflective of their own experiences and issues that pertain to their migration journeys. In light of this, I will turn to two scenes, one from each documentary, which grapple with migrant interpellation and its effect on the process of self-representation. As my aesthetic analysis will show, the cinematic rendering of this process enables heterogenous affective engagement with migration experiences, such as with

shame and anger, but also serenity and resilience, which in turn disrupts the affective economy of migration based on pity, fear and irony.

Moreover, in line with the current scholarship in film ethics that argues for an analysis of aesthetics, affect and ethics in cinema as inherently related, I build on the aesthetic and affective analysis by turning to the ethical engagement afforded by the two case studies. A study of cinematic ethics analyses formal, stylistic and narrative choices alongside the subject matter, content and characters of the film, with the aim of understanding the affective and ethical contours of spectatorship that they evoke (Plantinga, 2018; Sinnerbrink, 2016). The relation between aesthetics, affect and ethics in the two films can best be characterized as one of *cinempathy*, which has been conceptualized by Robert Sinnerbrink (2016) as a cinematic ethical experience characterized by dynamic involvement of central and peripheral imagination in a spectator, which evokes both empathy and sympathy. The two are defined as separate but related states: empathy evokes central imagination, the imagining of an other's emotional state from their point of view, while sympathy enables peripheral imagination, the imagining of an emotional state from a third-person perspective. Their dynamic relation allows the spectator to both inhabit ("feel with") and observe ("feel for") a certain situation, to engage both affectively and in an evaluative manner, one directly with the experience of the protagonist and the other with the context in which that experience occurs. In essence, cinempathy is meant to create a "synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation" (Sinnerbrink, 2016, p. 95).

As humanitarian, securitarian and post-humanitarian ethics fall short in articulating an ethics of migration that critically incorporates engagement with migrant subjectivities, my aesthetic and affective analysis of the two case studies is primarily invested in discerning how *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* evoke cinempathy to advance a cinematic ethics of migration journeys. First, I propose that the films express an ethical idea of the *autonomy of migration*, which is a perspective on migration that attends to migrant subjectivities and heterogenous ways in which migrants exercise mobility, resist systemic exclusion and partake in social formations that have constitutive power and can be seen as a social movement in itself (De Genova, 2017). Second, by critically interrogating the "European question" (De Genova, 2017), which asks what "Europe" is and who may be counted as "European," I propose that the films offer ethical engagement through the process of queering "Europeanness." By this I understand the directors' intervention in the Eurocentric discursive field as one that

queers “Europeanness” by destabilizing a static, nativist and exclusionary understanding of it (El-Tayeb, 2011).

I begin my analysis with a scene from *Midnight Traveler* that takes the form of a confession, in which Hassan Fazili, after more than a year of filming the family’s migration journey, for the first time expresses confusions about his role as a filmmaker: “I’m happy I’m a filmmaker. I love cinema. But sometimes cinema is so dirty.” His reflection on filmmaking is sparked by the disappearance of his daughter Zahra, which occurs during the family’s stay in a camp in Serbia, as they wait for legal means to continue their journey to Germany via Hungary. After realizing that they have not seen her for more than an hour, they warn others in the camp and start looking for her. In a voice-over, he says:

A week before this, some men in Germany had raped and murdered a girl. All those thoughts rushed into my head at once. We mobilized everyone in the camp. We looked over here, over there. We went room to room. She wasn’t there. We became really worried. I went and looked in the trees. I looked in the bushes. I was upset with myself. Why was I looking in the bushes? For one moment, I thought to myself, “What a scene you’re in! You’re searching in the bushes.” I thought, “This will be the best scene in the film.”

Fazili’s thoughts are narrated over a long take of a moon barely visible through the branches of a tree. In this part of the scene, he initially shares with us his worry that his daughter might have been hurt, associating her disappearance with the rape and murder of a girl in Germany, who was, like Zahra, a migrant in Europe. His worries lead him to the nearby bushes, and in that moment, he envisions that this, too, could be a scene in the film he is making—and it would be the best one in it. Why would a scene in which a father is looking for his missing daughter in the bushes make for the best scene in the film?

Building on Pooja Rangan’s (2017) insights on the documentary aesthetic of immediacy, we can understand Hassan’s directorial response in this scene as one of a *humanitarian impulse* in documentary, which uses images of endangered life as a method to demonstrate the humanity of a group or individual being filmed. In this scene, the humanitarian impulse involves the belief that capturing the manner in which Zahra’s life is endangered would justify the filming by presenting a humanitarian plea for help. A humanitarian ethics that drives this impulse, in news media as well as in documentary, posits humanitarian aid as the necessary immediate

action for saving endangered lives. This institutes *emergency thinking*, a construction of discourses of emergency and crisis, in which immediate humanitarian intervention takes precedence over, for example, political action, but also over aesthetics and politics of representation (Rangan, 2017). When a person's suffering and endangered life are used as means of humanization, this in turn regulates what it means to be human and constructs humanity as "bare life" (Rangan, 2017, p. 4). Therefore, as Rangan has argued, the humanization taking place is only seemingly an inclusive gesture. Rather, it offers a reductionist understanding of migration in terms of suffering and propagates the figure of a "human" migrant as a one of a "genuine" refugee who needs saving through humanitarian intervention.

Hassan continues by confessing that he briefly entertained the humanitarian impulse that suggested he start filming:

"Maybe, maybe you should turn on your camera, and look for Zahra with your camera on." It just popped into my head. I didn't focus on it. For one moment, for one second, I imagined seeing Zahra's body. And from the distance, Fatima is running. I have my camera in hand, and I'm filming that moment.

The thought of filming conjured an image of Zahra's body in the bushes. That image presents itself as the best scene in the film because it would not be a scene about any father looking for his daughter, but about a father whose "refugee" daughter went missing; it would be a scene in which their family would have been shown to have suffered pain as immense as that of losing their daughter, thereby revealing the extent to which their lives are endangered. In that scene, no one could question their "refugee" subject position and deservingness of European benevolence.

Building on Chow's (2002) insights on coercive mimeticism as a process in which colonized subjects are encouraged to objectify themselves and behave in accordance with the colonizer's imaginary of the colonized subject, I understand Hassan's confession as reflective of the manner in which those who migrate to Europe are expected to comply with the European imaginary of the migrant subject, to fit the expected subject position of their "refugee," "migrant," or "ethnic" identity. This internalization and incorporation of an imposed identity is part of the interpellation process, "a kind of unconscious automatization, impersonation, or mimicking, in behavior as much as in psychology, of certain beliefs, practices, and rituals," which "give that identity its sense of legitimacy and security" (Chow, 2002, p. 110). It is precisely because an identity is not annihilated but acknowledged, deemed as *some*

thing, even if that *some* thing is subtraction of the self as experienced prior to interpellation, that the person being hailed can still achieve a sense of legitimacy and security by confirming the gaze and being willing to embody the stereotypes expected from them. In the scene at stake, despite the fact that the societal position granted to the migrant as “refugee” is a reduction of the self, it is still a space. Due to the construction of “refugeeness” as deserving of European benevolence (Jovičić, 2021), migrants can feel compelled to perform their “refugee” identity because it could give their reasons for migration a sense of legitimacy. Similar to Rangan’s (2017) critical view of the outcomes of the humanitarian impulse in documentary, different forms of self-representation can become performances of “human” migrants in order to comply with the European imaginary of “refugee” identity.

However, Hassan is not filming, and the spectator is presented with a black screen. As soon as he confessed the intrusive thoughts in his head, the camera pans to darkness, cutting to black. While we are affectively immersed, the scene is aesthetically distancing as it refuses to visualize the suffering experienced by Hassan. In this way, we empathize with Hassan while witnessing a critical interrogation of the framing and visualization of the vulnerability of migrants in the context of the European border regime. In a voice-over, he shares feelings of self-hatred: “I only imagined it for a moment. I hated myself so much. I hated cinema. And I couldn’t do it. Zahra was found.” In the scene at stake, the roles of director, migrant and father blur to the extent that Hassan is unable to enact care for his daughter, which causes him shame. The affective experience of shame occurs after nearly having given in to an impulse that urged him to film a scene that would perpetuate a humanitarian ethics in relation to migration. The personal dimension of that urge, the temptation to perform his family’s “refugeeness,” turns his shame into self-hatred.

In this scene, the film becomes a site and a facilitator for self-examination, allowing for a confession of the hidden parts of oneself in a controlled manner, which is reflective of Michael Renov’s (2004, p. 215) insight that cinematic confessions, “produced and exchanged in nonhegemonic contexts, can be powerful tools for self-understanding as well as for two-way communication, for the forging of human bonds and for the emotional recovery.” While Hassan felt self-hatred at having the above-discussed thoughts, he nevertheless found it important to include the experience of being ashamed of himself in the film in the form of a confession. With that gesture, he shared the intimate workings of coercive mimeticism in the form of “refugee” interpellation. In marking himself as vulnerable, as aware of that thought, struggling with the question whether he should



Figure 1.1. Zahra playing in the camp. Film still from *Midnight Traveler* (2019). Courtesy of Hassan Fazili. Copyright The Party Film Sales, Old Chilly Pictures, ITVS, POV | American Documentary.

act on it or not, and realizing that he cannot do it, I understand Fazili as counter-hailing the calling of himself as a “refugee” subject. Moreover, he refused to indulge us as spectators by performing the humanity of himself and his family in such a reductionist manner. In stark affective contrast to this, the refusal to visualize endangered life is juxtaposed with the bright image of Zahra in the sun, smiling at the camera, laughing and running around the camp. Instead of turning Zahra’s vulnerability into a vehicle for humanitarian intervention, the documentary highlights her serenity and resilience in spite of her vulnerable position.

In creating a visual register representative of a multiplicity of affective states in relation to migration, *Midnight Traveler* offers engagement with the process of exercising a person’s mobility and autonomy against and beyond the European border regime’s practices of categorization, classification and exclusion, with the documentary thereby enacting a reflection on the practice that has been conceptualized by Nicholas De Genova (2017) as one of *autonomy of migration*. I understand *Midnight Traveler*’s enactment of autonomy of migration as twofold. The documentary first reflects the family’s migration journey, which is driven by the desire for mobility in spite of the border regime that aims to foreclose it, and by the perseverance to claim autonomy of asylum, namely the seeking of asylum in the country of one’s choice (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2018). Second, in resisting coercive mimeticism that would entail a performance of his position as a subject deserving of European benevolence, Fazili demands recognition on his own terms, and not on the terms of the border regime that has led to the

illegalization of the family's mobility in the first place, which leads him to develop an alternative visual, affective and ethical register of migration.

While *Midnight Traveler* mobilizes shame alongside serenity and resilience to reveal the affective experience of interpellation and coercive mimeticism, *Purple Sea* first and foremost expresses anger towards the European imaginary of the migrant subject. The documentary is almost entirely shot from beneath the water surface, as the boat Amel Alzakout boarded capsized soon after departing from the Turkish coast, leaving the passengers floating in the Mediterranean Sea. After noticing a helicopter hovering above the capsized boat and filming the tragedy unfolding at Europe's maritime border, Amel offers overt criticism of the European mediation of migration journeys and its participation in the entanglement of humanitarian and securitarian ethics:

I hear a helicopter. What is it doing here? It whirls up the waves. I see a red light inside a helicopter. Are they filming us? Where will the images end up? On YouTube? On TV? Regular news or breakings news? What do you call us? Refugees? Criminals? Victims? Or just numbers? Fuck you all! Stop filming!

Amel's direct confrontation with those she can feel interpellating her as a "refugee," "criminal," "victim" or merely a "number," is one of anger. Her visual register of this moment includes the helicopter filming the tragedy while in a voice-over she critically interrogates the complicity of digital journalism in the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea into a dangerous maritime border for migrants. While the underwater footage from Amel's point of view evokes empathy, her criticism of the helicopter's distant mediation of the deadly event turns the spectator into a witness of European border regime's oppression of migrants. Over the course of the film, *Purple Sea* continues to utilize voice-over narration to create a space of agency that transgresses the trauma that the director lived through during her journey to Europe. An important scene in the film recounts a dream Alzakout had. In the dream, her back is submerged below the surface of a "purple sea," while she floats and feels the warmth of the sun on her skin. Juxtaposed with the footage of a capsized boat, the image she represented with her words reveals a process of overcoming the fear impressed by the journey to reach a state of calmness.

In *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea*, ethical engagement is afforded by the creation of cinematic aesthetic spaces that evoke both central and peripheral imagination. That is to say, both documentaries offer the spectator a third-person perspective into the socio-political context of the filmmakers'

migration journey, thereby eliciting sympathy for the suffering endured by migrants under the European border regime's violent and deadly policies. Engagement of peripheral imagination is entangled with the first-person points of view of the directors, both visually and through the use of voice-over narration, which elicits empathy with the issues directors identify as pertinent to their journeys. While empathy enables central imagining of the directors' perspectives, it should not be thought to involve an assimilation of directors' experiences. Rather, as Sinnerbrink (2020, p. 286) has argued, "one can share a character's perspective, imagining centrally from their point of view, feeling *with* them as to what their experience involves, while nonetheless distinguishing oneself from that character." By way of cinempathy, the two case studies evoke empathy with the directors' experiences as well as encourage ethical evaluation of the context in which those experiences take place, thereby offering a complex understanding of how migration journeys, as well as the process of their mediation, have shaped directors' perspectives.

The two documentaries' cinematic engagement with migration resonates with Sandra Ponzanesi's and Marguerite Waller's (2012, p. 7) conceptualization of postcolonial cinema, which, "while maintaining engagement with collectives, refocuses on the specificity of the individuals." As they elaborate, "protagonists are not represented as ego ideals or everypersons, though, but as multi-dimensional figures—often marginalized, subordinated, displaced or deterritorialized" (pp. 7-8). In their own respective manners, *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* challenged the humanitarian, securitarian and post-humanitarian manners of representing migration, as well as the identities that these modes of representation imposed on the directors. The directors' respective expressions of shame and anger as co-existing with resilience and calmness interrupt the affective economy of migration characterized by pity, fear and irony by revealing a multiplicity of affective experiences that reflect the process of establishing one's autonomy of migration. Their shame and anger could, if reduced to passive suffering or agentive malevolence, be used as vehicles for promoting humanitarian or securitarian ethics. However, when contextualized, these affective experiences are disclosed as disagreements with the oppression of the European border regime that can be characterized in terms of suffering: not of suffering as a passive state but as an activity in response to their encounter with humanitarian and securitarian migration agendas. That is to say, Ahmed's (2010, p. 210) reflection on the experience of suffering proposes that to suffer "can mean to feel your disagreement with what has been judged as good," which makes suffering "a receptivity that can heighten the capacity to act." Suffering, as

we witness in the two documentaries, is active and generative, and leads to the development of the filmmakers' own documentary perspectives. In the above-discussed scenes, Fazili's and Alzakout's oppositional gazes are at work by not only resisting dominant forms of representation but opposing them by creating a cinematic aesthetic space for their own experiences that includes the affective complexity of their gazes. In engaging both central and peripheral imagination of the issues pertinent to their own migration journeys, their visual registers separate from hegemonic ones by inviting recognition of their autonomy of migration, both in terms of migration journeys and in terms of their mediation.

This leads me to how *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* queer a static and exclusionary understanding of "Europeanness."² Autonomy of migration and the process of queering of "Europeanness" are two separate but interrelated manners of ethical engagement with migration experiences. By claiming their space autonomously, both as migrants to Europe and as directors of documentaries on migration, the directors, in my understanding, queer a nativist understanding of "Europeanness" that has interpellated them in oppressive manners. Their disillusionment and critical interrogation of the European border regime's management of differently categorized and classified migrant subjects moreover provide a possibility to recalibrate it. In bringing to the fore the relationship between their personal experiences and the politics in which they occur, and, in doing so, challenging the political myths in relation to migration, the documentaries emphasize the relationship between personal and political (Plantinga, 2018). They engage the "European question" by revealing the oppressive dimension of the European border regime and its mediated counterpart in the form of humanitarian, securitarian and post-humanitarian representation of migration. By holding "Europe" accountable for that oppression, and by persevering in their efforts to reground their homes in Germany, the directors invite reflection on how "Europe" can rid itself of its immigration complex. Moreover, in refusing to perform the roles assigned to them, the directors challenge normative, nativist and purist conceptions of "Europeanness" as an identity space defined in opposition to "migrantness," "refugeeness" and "ethnicity." For Fatima El-Tayeb (2011, p. 174), the queering of "Europeanness" has "the dual function of inserting European minorities into the ongoing debate around the continent's identity and of reclaiming their place in its history." Therefore, by exercising their autonomy of migration and by advancing

2 Rather than reinstating "queerness" as a norm, queering of "Europe" is an ongoing and permanent process that challenges normativity (Rosello & Dasgupta, 2014).

their own cinematic gazes in opposition to the European imaginary of the migrant subject, the directors set in motion an imagination of “Europe” and “Europeanness” as inclusive of migrants and of the plurality of their voices.

1.4 Shifting the Frames of Migration

I have shown how *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* interrupt the dominant affective economy of migration characterized by pity, fear and irony, by engaging the spectators with the generative potential of shame and anger, as well as their co-existence with a multiplicity of other affective states. Rather than positioning their directorial focus outside of the process of coercive mimeticism, the directors reflect on their experience of and struggle with internalized oppression. Imposed identities are not absent from these auto-ethnographies but included in the gaze that aims for resistance to them. In this process, digital cameras become tools of self-care in the development of their own visual registers of migration journeys. The films thereby reflect how digital mobile media can be utilized by migrants as agentic European citizens to bring visualities to the fore that challenge hegemonic discourse (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016).

As I have argued, by evoking cinempathy, the films advance a cinematic ethics of migration that is expressive of autonomy of migration and the queering of “Europeanness.” These ethical positions and processes can be understood as *frame shifters*—they form stories that encourage perspective-taking, which is “the ability to consider an issue, event, problem, or person from varied or alternative perspectives or frameworks” (Plantinga, 2018, p. 225). *Midnight Traveler* and *Purple Sea* destabilize the hegemonic discourse on migration by presenting alternative encounters with the migrating subject and the “European question” and encourage the shifting of the Eurocentric frame that victimizes, criminalizes or excludes migrants, towards solidarity in the form of recognition of migrants as autonomous citizens claiming their space in Europe.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117–139. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jkj2>

- Baker, M., & Blaagaard, B. (Eds.). (2016). *Citizen media and public spaces: Diverse expressions of citizenship and dissent*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315726632>
- Casas-Cortes, M., Cobarrubias, S., De Genova, N., Garelli, G., Grappi, G., Heller, C., Hess, S., Kasperek, B., Mezzadra, S., Neilson, B., Peano, I., Pezzani, L., Pickles, J., Rahola, F., Riedner, L., Scheel, S., & Tazzioli, M. (2014). New keywords: Migration and borders. *Cultural Studies*, 29(1), 55–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.891630>
- Chouliaraki, L. (2013). *The ironic spectator: Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*. Polity Press.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Stolic, T. (2017). Rethinking media responsibility in the refugee “crisis”: A visual typology of European news. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(8), 1162–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717726163>
- Chow, R. (2002). *The Protestant ethnic and the spirit of capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chow, R. (2014). *Not like a native speaker: On languaging as a postcolonial experience*. Columbia University Press.
- De Genova, N. (2017). Introduction: The borders of “Europe” and the European question. In N. De Genova (Ed.), *The borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of migration, tactics of bordering* (pp. 1–36). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822372660-002>
- De Genova, N., & Tazzioli, M. (2018). Autonomy of asylum? The autonomy of migration undoing the refugee crisis script. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(2), 239–265. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-4374823>
- El-Tayeb, F. (2011). *European others: Queering ethnicity in postnational Europe*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816670154.001.0001>
- Goodman, S., Sirriyeh, A., & McMahon, S. (2017). The evolving (re)categorisations of refugees throughout the “refugee/migrant crisis.” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 27(2), 105–114. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2302>
- Gutiérrez Rodríguez, E. (2018). The coloniality of migration and the “refugee crisis”: On the asylum-migration nexus, the transatlantic white European settler colonialism-migration and racial capitalism. *Refuge*, 34(1), 16–28. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050851ar>
- hooks, b. (2014). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743226>
- Iordanova, D. (2010). Rise of the fringe: Global cinema’s long tail. In D. Iordanova, D. Martin-Jones, & B. Vidal (Eds.), *Cinema at the periphery* (pp. 23–45). Wayne State University Press.
- Jovičić, J. (2021). *On the visual (re)production of “Refugeeness”: Images, production sites and oppositional gazes* [Stockholm University]. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-192348>

- Leurs, K., & Ponzanesi, S. (2018). Connected migrants: Encapsulation and cosmopolitanization. *Popular Communication*, 16(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1418359>
- Leurs, K., & Witteborn, S. (2021). Digital migration studies. In M. McAuliffe (Ed.), *Research handbook on international migration and digital technology* (pp. 15–28). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839100611.00010>
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Border as method, or, the multiplication of labor*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822377542>
- New Keywords Collective. (2016). Europe/crisis: New keywords of “The Crisis” in and of “Europe.” *Near Futures Online*, 1. <http://nearfuturesonline.org/europecrisis-new-keywords-of-crisis-in-and-of-europe/>
- Plantinga, C. (2018). *Screen stories: Emotion and the ethics of engagement*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/os0/9780190867133.001.0001>
- Ponzanesi, S., & Waller, M. (2012). Introduction. In S. Ponzanesi & M. Waller (Eds.), *Postcolonial cinema studies* (pp. 1–16). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203181478-7>
- Rangan, P. (2017). *Immediations: The humanitarian impulse in documentary*. Duke University Press.
- Renov, M. (2004). *The subject of documentary*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rossipal, C. (2021). Poetics of refraction. *Film Quarterly*, 74(3), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.74.3.35>
- Russell, C. (1999). *Experimental ethnography: The work of film in the age of video*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822396680>
- Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media (sightlines)*. Routledge.
- Sinnerbrink, R. (2016). *Cinematic ethics: Exploring ethical experience through film*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315660127>
- Sinnerbrink, R. (2020). Imagining cinema: “Cinempathy” and the embodied imagination. *Paragraph*, 43(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2020.0341>