UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Breath on the windowpane: Precarious aesthetics and diegetic noise in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts*

Martin, N.

DOI

[10.1386/cjmc_00005_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc_00005_1)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Crossings

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Martin, N. (2019). Breath on the windowpane: Precarious aesthetics and diegetic noise in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts*. *Crossings*, 10(2), 243-259. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc_00005_1

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.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture
Volume 10 Number 2

© 2019 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/cjmc_00005_1

NIALL MARTIN
University of Amsterdam

Breath on the windowpane: Precarious aesthetics and diegetic noise in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts*

ABSTRACT

This article explores the various ways in which noise acts as an aesthetic marker of precarity in Nick Broomfield's Ghosts, a documentary account of the death of 23 undocumented Chinese nationals in the United Kingdom in 2004. Taking its cue from recent work on aesthetics and the temporalities of precarity, it considers the ways in which the different forms of noise – medial and informational – index the ways in which the figure of the undocumented migrant labourer disturbs dominant western accounts of the aesthetic predicated on a division between production and consumption. Noise, in the form of Michel Serres' conceptual figure of the parasite, it argues, registers the ways in which precarious labour has revealed the dependence of aesthetic categories on models of production rendered incoherent by the representation of undocumented migrant labour.

KEYWORDS

globalization
noise
precarity
aesthetics
undocumented labour
migrant labour
documentary
Nick Broomfield

In February 2004, 23 undocumented Chinese nationals drowned while picking cockles in conditions of forced labour in Morecambe Bay on the English coast. With the victims' desperation captured in thermal imagery from a police rescue helicopter and recordings of harrowing phone calls to the coastguard, the national news coverage of the tragedy ensured it achieved a visibility and status unusual among the fatalities associated with the precarious labour of 'illegal' migrants within the global workforce (Carter et al. 2006). For British filmmaker Nick Broomfield, seeking a focus for a project 'on modern slavery' (Wood 2007), 'Morecambe' thus presented itself as an obvious choice around which to build his 2007 film *Ghosts* (Broomfield, 2007) whose stated aim was to 'stimulate discussion' about the 'illegal' labour and 'institutionalized slavery' upon which the UK economy remains so heavily reliant (Wood 2007). In addition to a conversation about the economics of precarious labour, however, the Morecambe tragedy's initial mediation through the technologies of rescue and surveillance and its remediation in the language of documentary within Broomfield's film, also provides an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of the relationship between precarity, media and regimes of representation. In this article, consequently, I want to extend Broomfield's discussion about the place of precarious labour within the (global) economy to the relationship between precarious labour, aesthetics and media raised by Broomfield's film itself. Specifically, I want to consider the ways in which two senses of noise – one medial and one informational – work to register the entanglement of precarious labour with mutations in the genre of documentary and its implications for a genre defined by its role as witness.

Some of those implications become painfully apparent at the conclusion of Broomfield's film. Having shown how most of the 23 dead had incurred huge debts to pay people smugglers or snakeheads for passage to the United Kingdom, the film closes with text screens that inform us those debts have now reverted to the victims' families in China and then provide details of a website – www.ghosts.uk.com – where viewers can make a donation to help pay off the money still owed to snakeheads. The remainder amounts to some GBP 500,000, a sum which, we are told pointedly, the UK government has refused to pay.

The appeal expresses Broomfield's 'pragmatic' concern that his movie should do something to help the extended victims of the tragedy (Wood 2007), but it also serves as a reminder of the limitations of that project. Donating to the Morecambe fund, we know, does nothing to address the structural problems identified by the film. As such, the sense of agency with which Broomfield hoped to endow his project is already suffused with a sense of impotence. In giving, I am also giving in: recognizing my inability to do anything about the circumstances that connect my gesture with the precarious conditions of migrant labour. Who, for example, will pay the debts of the 58 Chinese nationals who died four years earlier in the back of a truck between Zeebrugge and Dover because their driver turned off the refrigeration unit (Kelso 2001)? Effectively, the appeal divides the world into two different spaces, each populated by two different types of body: those with pockets and hands to put in them – the film's viewers – and those whose lives are lived in a condition of debt, whose money is already somebody else's. Thus, even as it calls for the audience to support Morecambe's extended victims, Broomfield's appeal reinforces their position on the other side of a chasm which seems more ontological than geographical, and thereby obscures the connection in exposure to precarity of the bodies it divides.

As such, we might recognize in this final appeal an example of that ‘distribution of the sensible’, or *partage du sensible*, that philosopher Jacques Rancière identifies as a limitation of much overtly political art (2009b: 12). Rather than fostering understanding of its subjects, the film here seems to assert their otherness and to affirm the distinction between the different kinds of body that can be counted in the world – the function, in Rancière’s terminology, of the ‘police’ in that it maintains the existing regime of what counts as possible. In this, *Ghosts* seems to substantiate Rancière’s argument that social realism may come to reinforce the structures it seeks to change: it demonstrates that the problem with starting a conversation about the reality of precarious labour in the UK economy is that the precarious labourer is not part of the conversation but its object. However, rather than regarding Broomfield’s project as limited by the constrictions of a mode that reaffirms the existing distribution of the sensible and thus the existing count of bodies that (can) count, I want to consider how the film speaks about the relation between precarity and aesthetics not through its address or message, but through the noise which it cannot help but bring to the discussion by virtue of its (re)mediation of precarity as spectacle.

1. Correspondence with the author.

That noise is already present in the film’s final appeal. Follow the fund’s website link today – clicking is of course impossible – and it leads to a domain name seller. The GBP 500,000 target has been met and the fund wound up according to Broomfield.¹ While dead links are in themselves an unremarkable part of the digital detritus that is integral to a networked information economy, they nevertheless register a more general precarity with respect to the film’s position in a wider media environment. In connecting – or failing to connect – *Ghosts* with that environment, the broken link locates Broomfield’s film at an interface between two regimes of communication, the optical and the networked, which I argue are intricately but separately bound up with the production of precarious bodies. Consequently, it is this broken link that provides my initial example of the noise in *Ghosts* that I will suggest disrupts and complicates the correlations of precarity and the political familiar from the arguments of Rancière mentioned above.

Precarity, whether understood philosophically as a life lived without the possibilities of making, or making good on, a promise, or more socio-economically in terms of work without contracts, denotes a relation towards time as the condition of uncertainty. The relationship may be construed as politically enabling (Butler 2010: xvi) in that, by destroying fantasies of autonomy, it inculcates an awareness of the interdependency of life, or debilitating insofar as it deprives labour of its traditional tools of collective action (Standing 2014) but either way it invokes an idea of a futurity which has profound consequences for ideas of self-determination. As such it exists in a position of tension with ideas of the aesthetic insofar as these might be taken to assume – as above – a possibility of leisure denied the precarious, or, in its Kantian formulation, a freedom and independence of judgement that is possible only in a condition of detachment from the cares of the world and the exigencies of survival (Kant 2000). It is this tension that informs Nicolas Bourriaud’s claim that the increasingly problematic idea of ‘endurance’ in a global space characterized by uncertainty and a ‘generalised disposability’ (2009: 23) is registered in a ‘precarious aesthetics’ in which traditional aesthetic categories have been supplanted by a concern with the transient (2009: 21). For Bourriaud this concern with transience is manifest in a generalized concern with ‘flickering, transcoding and blurring’, which Arild Fetveit has in turn argued can be

used to motivate a more focused ‘media aesthetic perspective’ aimed at investigating ‘deliberate uses of precarious mediation’ (2015) through, for example, attention to the function of blurring photographic material. This move seems productive insofar as in emphasizing the role of imperfection as a marker of the tension between precarity and the aesthetic, it adds a further valence to the questions of temporality that arise in this encounter. For insofar as imperfection is manifest as noise – in flickering and blurring for example – it invites reflection on the relationship between precarity and the peculiar temporalities of noise which, as its theorists have pointed out, can be regarded as the source of new information (Malaspina 2012; Serres 1995), as the manifestation of a system succumbing to entropic decline or obsolescence, and as the signifier of a lost, seemingly more authentic past, the locus of nostalgia (Hainge 2013). More generally it presents us with the paradox of the emergent: noise as the ‘outside’ of signal is a virtual property of all media but ceases to be noise when it is actualized as an aesthetic component within, for example, an image or as a marker of an aesthetic paradigm.

Accordingly, I want here to extend Fetveit’s proposed media aesthetic perspective by attending to the emergent properties of imperfection rather than its function as an already recognizable trace. I am interested, in other words, in the *becoming noisy* of media that occurs in the attempt to negotiate the tensions involved in the encounter of precarity and aesthetics. It is this concern that informs my engagement with Broomfield’s *Ghosts* in what follows. How, I ask, does precarity as a social phenomenon render media noisy; how do different forms of media collude in the production of precarious subjects?

I

Broomfield’s film tells the story of single mother, Ai Qin, who takes the agonizing decision to leave her baby, Bebe, in the care of her parents, and pay snake-heads \$25,000 to make the six-month journey by land from China’s Fujian province to the United Kingdom where she hopes to earn enough money to pay for Bebe’s education. After a succession of jobs in factories and farms she ends up picking cockles in Morecambe Bay on the night of the tragedy, but survives and is eventually reunited with her son. In its attempt to document the UK economy’s reliance on ‘modern slavery’ (Wood 2007), Broomfield’s film aims to reveal ‘a secret world that is all around us’ (Wood 2007). The technical problems involved in filming this world which is simultaneously hidden and in plain view are described by Broomfield in *Shooting Ghosts*, the ‘making of’ film directed by Mark Hoferlin included on the film’s DVD release. After rejecting the idea of using a camera concealed in his spectacles to record secret footage, Broomfield decided on a drama format in which former undocumented workers would perform a script partly based on articles by Taiwanese journalist Hsiao-Hung Pai, who had spent time undercover working as an undocumented migrant, and partly on their own experiences (Hoferlin n.d.). Thus, Ai Qin is played by Ai Qin Lin whose own experience as an undocumented worker forms the basis of Ai Qin’s story: the same six-month journey, the same experience of exploitation and privation, the same agonizing decision to leave her baby in order to secure his future (Marxism 2007 2008). This approach results in what Jason Woods describes as ‘a gripping but low-key realist aesthetic that frequently operates at the intersection between fact and fiction’ (Wood 2007) – an intersection which, in an allusion to the

North American development of *cinema vérité* in the early 1960s, Broomfield terms 'direct cinema'.

Amplifying the noise arising from the hybridity of this intersection is Broomfield's decision to shoot *Ghosts* using a single Sony HD750 hand-held camcorder and a 'guerrilla crew' to maximize mobility and flexibility. New to the market at that time, promotional campaigns for the Sony HD750 heavily emphasized its ability to reproduce 'Film-look' qualities through its '25 Progressive (PsF) mode' technology (Sony n.d.), and as a result the film combines the image quality associated with bigger budget productions with the mobility of documentary. In other words, *Ghosts* is a film made noisy in an informational sense through the intersection of codes and affordances previously associated with different modes and languages of cinematic representation.

A useful guide to the nature of the interference that occurs at this intersection is found in the model of noise developed in the mid-twentieth century by information theorist Claude Shannon (Shannon and Weaver 1969). Central to Shannon's communication theory, we may recall, was the argument that the best way to assess the information content of a message is to view that message as the product of a series of selections. Where the selections are predictable the information content is low, and, correspondingly, the information content increases in relation to the novelty or unpredictability of the selections involved. An immediate corollary of this model is that any message carries with it a penumbra of uncertainty composed of our knowledge – conscious and unconscious – of the selections that were not made in the process of producing the particular message. A message is both what it is and what it could have been and thus exists within a virtual field of the unselected, which always has the power to return as noise. The second corollary of this haunting is that noise, as such, is both a physical property of a medium but also of the changing and dynamic expectations of a medium. In respect to noise, in other words, we cannot separate a particular medium or technology from the wider distributions of the sensible that render its limitations and materiality visible or invisible. In the case of *Ghosts*, media and its expectations become noisy precisely through the affordances of the HD 750 which, in mixing the expectations of documentary with those of film-drama, raises questions about the status of the figures appearing on the screen.

In order to examine the specific forms of noise emergent within the realist aesthetic of *Ghosts*, it is consequently necessary to extend the scope of the 'transcoding, flickering and blurring' around which Bourriaud (2009) builds his account of a precarious aesthetics to incorporate an appreciation of the dynamic nature of the relationship between noise, media and cultural expectations. With its formal commitment to making visible or revealing the hidden, documentary discovers noise most obviously in that which interferes with this imperative. Thus, while noise in the form of strategic interference with the image for aesthetic purposes is more or less excluded by the codes of social realism, noise nevertheless can and does function as a critical element in what documentary as a mode stages as the 'struggle' to make visible. As such, we can differentiate between two different sources or forms of noise in *Ghosts* and examine their separate effects. The first is the noise that *Ghosts* shares with all representative media – the noise that marks the limits of representation by reminding us of the presence of the medium: the second arises from Broomfield's strategy for representing a world that is hidden in plain sight through the creative decision to use non-professional actors.

2. But it is also this source of noise that drives technological innovation and which is identified for the purposes of product promotion. Thus Sony lists the HD750's improved specifications in this respect as one of its most significant features.

Ultimate sensitivity: The HDW-750P has a sensitivity of f10 at 2000 Lux. When fitted with an optional HKDW-705 Slow Shutter board, the camcorder can slow its shutter speed to a 64 frame period. This dramatically increases sensitivity and allows pictures to be shot at a minimum illumination of 0.003 Lux. This allows camera operators to shoot images in extremely dark environments. The Slow Shutter board also allows motion blur to be used as a creative tool during acquisition.

(Sony n.d.)

The first source of noise in *Ghosts* thus resides in the unremarkable: in details which are almost too embarrassing to mention. In the broadest sense, it is noise which registers the limitations of the representative power of the medium, typically as optical or sound technology. Frequently produced by the interference of the environment in the quality of the image, we might somewhat ponderously, call this noise 'diegetic noise'. Thus, for example, when the tension between local cockle pickers and the Chinese workers turns violent and Mr Lin, the gangmaster, wrestles with a local in the muddy waters of Morecambe, water and mud splash the camera lens obscuring our view of the struggle, or, again, as Ai Qin is shut inside a secret compartment in the back of a truck for the final leg of her journey, we lose sight of her save for the part of her body illuminated by a shaft of light from a tiny aperture in the compartment.

This source of noise is not so much unremarked as unremarkable: everybody knows the lens must be kept clean, that there must be sufficient light to see what is before the camera, that it must be possible to hear the actors speak. Diegetic noise becomes noise only through the irritation of critical attention: it is registered in the sense of annoyance felt at having something so obvious pointed out so laboriously.²

However, it is diegetic noise that most consistently speaks about the complicated relationship between precarity and environment. As the film shows, the visibility of bodies is frequently related directly to the experience of physical precarity. In an early scene Mr Lin, having concluded that the workers' calls for help will not be heard, instructs them to phone their families on the other side of the world to say a final goodbye. The precarious workers' relationship to their environment, the scene reminds us, is particularly complex and heavily mediated by technologies of communication and circulation. More generally, we note that the interference of environment with image quality and thus the imperative to make visible can itself easily be made into an index of precarity. When the image fades to black because there is no light in the concealed

Figure 1: Mr Lin (Zhan Yu) fights with local cockle pickers, Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Ghosts*, 2007. UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

compartment in the truck, or when water splashes on the camera's lens in the fight between indigenous and migrant workers, or when the cries for help are carried away by the wind, diegetic noise directly signifies the ways in which precarious bodies are caught up in a fraught relationship with visibility. The optics of invisibility become a metaphor of social and cultural invisibility.

In the context of *Ghosts*, consequently, diegetic noise is an important source of information. In reminding us of the placement of the camera – and hence of the filmmaker's presence and involvement with what is being filmed – diegetic noise becomes one of the means through which the drama aligns itself with the documentary tradition. As well as giving the film a frisson of documentary verisimilitude, this form of noise arising from the production of a sense of immersion in the environment is simultaneously, and paradoxically, used as an aesthetic device to expose the limits of representation. Thus, the water on the camera lens repeats the image of the water on the minibus windscreen in the opening sequence during which the gangmaster, after commenting on the appalling weather, remarks that the local cockle pickers – '*Ghosts*' – would not come out in these conditions. It is an image which resonates throughout the film as we see Ai Qin gazing out of the windows of minibuses and the condensation on windows of overcrowded houses.

Water on glass stands as a visual metaphor for the particular nature of the condition of the undocumented worker: not locked away out of sight but, while visibly part of the everyday world, confined within a world whose constraints and limits are invisible – which can be represented only by making visible the limits of technologies of representation.

With Shannon's thesis in mind, we can identify the in/visibility of the undocumented worker as the condition of, and that which disturbs the apparent naturalism of the film world. Rather than the 'hidden army of labour' referred to in Hsiao-Hung's *Chinese Whispers*, the film's naturalist aesthetic shows that these invisible bodies inhabit a world that is conspicuously shared by its presumed audience: that these bodies *produce* that world, and are thus

Figure 2: Ai Qin (Ai Qin Lin) draws in the condensation on a window, Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Ghosts*, 2007. UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

part of the technology of representation. Thus, the film documents an immediately recognizable England of motorways and housing estates, factory floors, muddy fields, gasometers and portaloos: a workaday England shaped by the affective contours of long hours of low-wage labour. This, at least, is what the camera sees, and what the audience is presumed to see. However, the film encourages its interpellated audience to recognize that this is not what the Chinese worker sees and in teaching the viewer to see the world seen by Ai Qin, *Ghosts* also teaches us to see the limits of representation that are the conditions of the film's naturalism. It is the diegetic noise within the film's commitment to naturalism, in other words, the everydayness of the visual world rather than the invisibility of the precarious worker that is the source of the film's power to turn attention from the precarious worker to the precarity of the world.

The tension between the familiar and recognizable staged within the film is made explicit in *Shooting Ghosts* (n.d.) when a postman doing his deliveries on a housing estate in Thetford, Norfolk stops to ask a member of the film crew if he can answer a question:

'You are sort of looking in on a bunch of immigrants right?'

'Yes'.

'Now what do you think of what you find?'

'Personally?'

'Personally, yeah'.

'Um, here, it's quite shocking'.

'It is, isn't it? Because let me tell you when I first started delivering 'round here when they started moving immigrants in, I couldn't believe the state of the houses they were putting the people in'.

'Really?'

'Around here, yeah, because it was all privately owned. That's one thing that really shocked me that these people were stuck in houses with no furniture, no curtains, no nothing, and they were putting blankets up at the window, and I couldn't believe that.

I have always wanted to ask an immigrant, like, "you had a picture of England coming to England, is the picture of England when you get here what you thought it would be?"'

'I'm guessing it probably isn't'.

'I'm guessing it's completely distorted'.

(Hoeflerlin, *Shooting Ghosts*, n.d.)

In fact, the film provides a partial answer to the postman's question as we see the photograph that a snakehead shows his prospective client of one of his 'satisfied customers'. A young man leaning on a car in an unexceptional suburban English street, who, the snakehead says, had paid off his debt within two years and was now reaping all the benefits of working in an economy where the average wage is ten times greater than that in Fujian. The image that the 'immigrant' had of England, in other words, is structured by the economic discrepancy of a global economy, rather than any idealization of England as a location or destination. The distortion, we might conclude, lies less in the Chinese migrant's perception of England, than in the postman's perception of his own country as a place untouched by the inequalities of a global economy predicated on combined and unequal distribution of wealth. Looking out, the illegal worker sees an England structured by knowledge of economic inequality that is available to the postman, looking in, only theoretically, if at all.

The disruption within this familiar landscape is primarily temporal. The world inhabited by Ai Qin may resemble that inhabited by the viewer interpellated by the film's naturalist aesthetic, but Ai Qin's tale unfolds in a wholly unfamiliar temporality. Of precarity, Bourriaud notes '[a]n object is said to be precarious if it has no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny: it is held in abeyance, waiting, surrounded by irresolution. It occupies a transitory territory' (Bourriaud 2009: 24). In *Ghosts* this irresolution manifests itself in the coexistence of two distinct but mutually constitutive temporalities, which for convenience sake might be called diasporic time and the time of labour. From Ai Qin's perspective England is a place which makes it possible to realize the dream of transforming her own life at home. England is a space of sacrifice and transformation: a place which is to be endured in anticipation of its power to transfigure an otherwise inescapable future. The United Kingdom is, in Bourriaud's words, a place of 'abeyance [...] a transitory territory' (Bourriaud 2009: 24). It is Ai Qin's experience of this distinctively diasporic temporality that provides the affective force of Broomfield's film. For Ai Qin, the sense of global temporality is informed by an anguished realization that the time she is away from Bebe can never be replaced; that her son is growing up without her and that consequently the time of exile is of a fundamentally different order than the time that is traded in the market place – a market place where, lacking name or identity, she is constantly exploited and short-changed.

The oneiric quality of this temporality that structures the existence of the diasporic worker is conveyed through images of Ai Qin watching landscapes glide by outside minibus windows or gazing out of windows on anonymous streets where other people's children play – images which echo the diegetic noise of the medium. Diasporic time, it suggests, is a time of suspension characterized by an intense and anguished desire to return home. For Ai Qin it comprises a sense that she has sold her life along with her labour to transform a future which otherwise seems inescapable.

Figure 3: Ai Qin (Ai Qin Lin) gazes through a minibus window, Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Ghosts*, 2007. UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

This diasporic temporality of agonized suspension marked by an acute sense of time's non-fungibility should be distinguished from and contrasted with the time of labour carried out in the factories and fields of the United Kingdom. In contrast to the diasporic time of exile, this time of labour is depicted as mechanical, exhausting and ultimately fatal. However, here too we can recognize that the migrant worker's performance of one of the constitutive temporalities of global space is doubled and contradictory. As the avatar of neo-liberal globalization, the migrant worker produces and reproduces an ideal of labour that is detached from locale. As Esther Peeren (2014) points out: '[t]he Chinese workers in *Ghosts* lack even a tangential connection [with their produce] as the products they process will be labelled local' (2014: 42), and we should add that in thus cancelling any significant distinction between the local and the global they throw into focus an otherwise obscured connection between work and place, again emblemized in the fogged windows of the minibuses that take them to yet another anonymous work-floor. Revealing a globalized space which is structured around a deterritorialized production of value, Ai Qin embodies a labour whose value is not returned to a locale in the form of localized knowledge, skills and capital, but is instead governed by an extractivist logic which aims to maximize the circulation of value as finance.

But even as the migrant worker embodies an emergent global space and globalized production of value that blurs the link between labour and locality, there is also a powerful sense that she also foretells her own obsolescence. Her precarity is also the precarity of her form of labour: she is, in effect, already the noise that signals obsolescence within an emerging form of social production whose logic is to dispense with human labour altogether. The factories in which Ai Qin works are strikingly empty and her work consists almost exclusively of attending machines. As such they are haunted by the memories of the factories in Liverpool filmed 30 years earlier in Broomfield's *Behind the Rent Strike* (1979) whose shop floors are places both of labour and of community where the deafening noise of women in conversation drowns out that of the machines. In contrast to these scenes, the silence of the factories where Ai Qin makes her money reminds us that precarious labourers perform tasks whose automatization is not yet quite profitable. They work in the shadow of machines to come.

Thus, even as the migrant worker signals the triumph of an emergent deterritorialized scene of labour, she also signals her own future obsolescence within that sphere of production. As she performs the space of a global present, she is pointing to the obsolescence of that space in that her very ability to perform these tasks marks those tasks as ripe for automatization. In speaking of a precarious temporality, consequently, we should distinguish between a number of inflections within that general sense of 'irresolution'. We should note that *Ghosts* shows us a diasporic time which is both distinct from and subsumed within the time of labour, and which is itself internally divided between sacrifice and transformation, while the time of labour announces the emergence of a global space severed from the location in which labour will become obsolete.

In recognizing the noise that marks the limits of documentary's claim upon naturalism, in other words, we are also registering the peculiar nature of the confinements that circumscribe the lives of precarious workers. In *Ghosts* the noise of naturalistic media produces a hesitation in the ideal of transparency which in itself performs a subtle redistribution of the sensible. Rather than showing us the migrant as Other, it shifts our perspective to the world

(a)

(b)

Figure 4a: Factory scene from Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Behind the Rent Strike*, 1979. UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

Figure 4b: Factory scene from Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Ghosts*, 2007, UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

as seen by the Other, and presents us with the possibility of an estrangement which is dependent on the familiarity of the world it presents. Diegetic noise, in marking the unremarkable limits of the medium simultaneously works to suggest the nature of the undocumented worker's confinement (part of the workforce but separate) and to destabilize the vision of the world it seems to present the viewer. Diegetic noise becomes in effect the shadow of a futurity that throws the present into an unexpected relief.

II

I have dwelt on the importance of attending to noise as the unremarkable within *Ghosts* in order to underscore its contribution to the effect of the film because there is a danger that its effects – the effects of media noise – will

be drowned out by a much more obvious source of ‘imperfection’ in the film, namely Broomfield’s experiment with ‘direct cinema’. The use of non-professional actors working from a collective script has a number of effects which complicate the reception of the film by forcing the viewer to question what it is that they are watching. While the visual codes of the film world point us towards documentary realism, this strategy of using non-professional actors to re-enact their own experiences as undocumented workers inevitably works against any easy identification of the film with the codes of either documentary or drama. That this strategy becomes an important source of aesthetic noise is evident, for example in the dialogue in *Ghosts*, which – as relayed through the English subtitles – can seem stilted and marked by over-explication, as information about the conditions of migrant labour is worked into the ostensibly naturalistic format. We hear this form of noise in the supermarket, for example, when Ai Qin and a friend comment on the difference between the price of onions and what they are paid for picking them.

Superficially at least this form of noisiness resembles Brecht’s alienation effect (Brecht 1961), and as such might encourage us to align Broomfield’s direct cinema with Western theatre’s long tradition of disrupting the fourth wall of naturalistic illusion in order to ‘reach out’ to the spectator. Rancière, however, has alerted us to a danger in this strategy for reading of the noise in *Ghosts* when he points out that the idea of the need to disrupt the fourth wall is modelled on an idea of the spectator as a passive consumer of a spectacle produced on his or her behalf (Rancière 2009a). Rather than reaching out to the spectator, we should, Rancière suggests, challenge the habit of thought that identifies the spectator as a passive consumer of action produced elsewhere. Emancipation begins, he argues, when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. Far from being passive, Rancière’s spectator ‘observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what

Figure 5: Ai Qin (Ai Qin Lin) remarks on the retail price of onions packed by migrant workers, Nick Broomfield (dir.), *Ghosts*, 2007, UK. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her' (Rancière 2009a: 13).

This line of argument is attractive, for isn't this exactly what is signalled in the 'noise' of *Ghosts*? Its refusal to fit into either of the available categories for a film of this nature should jolt us out of any easy understanding of its 'nature'. However, we soon encounter a problem if we follow Rancière in this direction, for his model of emancipation is built upon an idea of labour as the creative freedom to produce, through association, a text of your own, and it is precisely this understanding of labour that is problematized within the film itself which, even as it destabilizes the perception of a 'familiar' landscape – a workaday world – also encourages us to reflect on the implications of precarity for the division between labour and consumption, and by extension the tension between precarity and aesthetics noted above.

Ghosts disrupts Rancière's lesson in emancipation in that Broomfield's direct cinema problematizes the idea of the actor's labour. Neither 'actors' nor 'themselves', the figures that appear on the screen in *Ghosts* perturb the categories of drama and documentary. For, while nominally 'former' undocumented workers, the film itself teaches us to recognize the true nature of the bureaucratic fiction that distinguishes between documented and undocumented workers or legal and illegal migrants and they thus throw the premise of direct cinema into question. The 'before' and 'after' of these administrative categories that deem that some bodies can be visible while others must be invisible ignore the experiential reality of diasporic temporality in which, unable to return home, the former undocumented labourer remains trapped.

Watching former undocumented labourers re-enacting scenes from their undocumented lives for the benefit of the camera is, in other words, once again an experience which confronts the viewer with the tension between two contradictory temporalities of precarity. This tension is most painfully manifest in the concluding scene of the film when Ai Qin is reunited with the now 5-year-old Bebe. As the mother reaches out to the impassive child, we see that – as she has feared – Bebe no longer recognizes Ai Qin as his mother. What the camera records, and what we are watching, however, is Ai Qin Lin's reunion with her son, Sean and the pain of her realization that she is no longer recognizable to her child. In this heart-rending moment where Ai Qin's worst fears become reality, a tension that has been evident throughout the film is made palpable. We are confronted with the fact that we have no words to describe the figures on the screen. They are neither actors nor 'themselves' – that is the selves we could recognize as the traditional subjects of documentary. As precarious subjects they are, in effect, categorically undocumentable, and are rendered so by the correlation of cinematic optics with the optics of the state.

In this case Broomfield's form of direct cinema, it becomes apparent, relies on an administrative fiction whose 'before' and 'after' is incommensurable with the temporality experienced by the diasporic worker. In this incorporation of the optics of the state into its own logic of visibility we might be tempted to simply register the limitations of the documentary mode. However, at the same time we can also recognize that in the position of the former undocumented worker who becomes a player in a film without actors, direct cinema also presents us with an image of a schism that is central to the idea of precarious labour itself. As labourers who simultaneously disguise and perform their labour, the players in *Ghosts* effectively mirror the entanglement of two ideas

of labour historically signified by the idea of precarity: between, on the one hand, the *precario bello* who, turning her life into a performance of the self, emancipates herself from the tedium of mechanical reproduction and, on the other, the structural inequality that exposes those most disadvantaged by the global divisions of labour to conditions of mortal hazard (De Bloois 2011).

In disrupting the categories of performance that help distinguish drama from documentary, the figures in *Ghosts* provide an image of labour in a realm of social production where distinctions between reproduction and creation have lost their explanative force. Thus, where Rancière's (2009a) lesson in emancipation preserves the idea of labour as *production* as the privileged term in a binary whose opposite is consumption, *Ghosts* suggests that this idea of labour as the production of social value and of socially recognizable bodies is regulated by the operations of a system of value production (neo-liberalism) that becomes legible only when we introduce a third figure concealed within the moral economy of the production/consumption binary. The players in *Ghosts* are neither virtuosos, setting out on careers as performers, nor workers, for they are not producers. Rather, as workers who stand in for themselves, they become parasites on their own experience: doing over rather than producing or performing. *Ghosts*, in other words, presents an image of precarious labour whose central figure is the parasite.

As Michel Serres has pointed out, there is a striking homology between the function of the parasite as a designation that serves to stabilize the system of relations that underpins social identities and the function of noise within systems generally (Serres 2007). What gets called noise and who is described as a parasite, serves to fix and regulate the relations and identities within a system of values. In the context of 'irregular' labour, the rhetorical use of the parasite as a device to mask political and structural culpability is particularly striking. As Hsiao-Hung (2008) writes, after the 'Dover tragedy',

[T]he British government cleverly diverted attention away from themselves, and their own immigration policy of entry refusal, by blaming the snakeheads. Jack Straw, the then Home Secretary, said, 'The death by suffocation of fifty-eight suspected illegal immigrants whose bodies were found at Dover must serve as a stark warning to others who might be tempted to place themselves in the hands of organized traffickers.' Since then, the standard response from government to such tragedies has been 'blame the snakeheads and forget about it'.

(2008: xiv–xv)

The rhetoric of the parasite, in other words, enables culpability for tragedies such as Dover and Morecambe to be attributed to those who seek to exploit the vulnerability of others, rather than those who produce that vulnerability. *Ghosts* reinforces this message, leaving us in no doubt that the production of precarious bodies is a vital function of the neo-liberal marketplace. It shows that, in effect, the undocumented worker performs two forms of labour: she produces economic value as 'cheap' labour, but she also reproduces the relational distribution of identities. If she stays at home, Ai Qin only performs the first function: it is only as a migrant that she produces the other identities – the parasite, the citizen, the non-exploitative employer, the protective state. She is, in other words, the worker who shores up the global distribution of identities, or the relational apparatus necessary for the functioning of an economy predicated on inequality.

Broomfield's film suggests the complexity of the parasite as a figure within the 'irregular' economy in its portrayal of Lin, the gangmaster who, although he exploits the vulnerability of the undocumented workers, is also shown to be powerless in relation to the 'ghosts' or white citizens that surround him. His power in one respect accentuates his own sense of powerlessness when confronted with figures whose authority is based solely on their nationality and possession of a passport. After being spat at by a neighbour he remarks, '[i]f we were in China, I'd beat him to death, but he's the type to call the police' (47.11), and Broomfield's camera pays close attention to Lin's reactions and commentary as his girlfriend flirts with their British landlord. We can also note how the act of representation is itself caught up in this dynamic. As *Shooting Ghosts* makes clear, there is a strong sense of rivalry between Lin as the gangmaster and Broomfield as the film's director, and the parallels between the two roles can seem troubling. This is particularly evident in the case of the actor originally cast as the film's protagonist, who is dismissed by Broomfield when he discovers that she has lied about her working experience and sees his film as an opportunity to launch her own career as an actor (Hoeferlin).

But in identifying the parasite with noise, Serres also provides a productive figure for thinking the nature of documentary as an aesthetic mode at a juncture where the advent of the digital has instituted a more general uncertainty about the status of what appears on the screen, and the connection of that uncertainty with the material properties of glass as a medium simultaneously of focalization and condensation. Hito Steyerl has celebrated the advent of CGI as an emancipation from 'the prescribed focal dimensions that have normalized and limited the realm of [cinematic] vision' (2012: 27). The shift from a focal to a computational technology celebrated here seemingly points to the end of the optical paradigm – and with it, its prescribed subject/object relations. *Ghosts'* broken link thus becomes a moment of imperfection that registers the wider disruption of the distribution of the sensible performed in Broomfield's direct cinema. However, as I have argued above, *Ghosts'* power as a reflection on precarity and aesthetics is due in large part to the diegetic noise generated by optical technology, and thus from the material qualities of glass itself. I want to close, consequently by reflecting on how those qualities are themselves bound up with, and instrumental in, the production of precarity.

The rhetorical form of documentary as an act of display in which the world is laid out for the inspection of a viewer sits squarely within that 'exhibitionary complex' that Tony Bennet (1988) discusses in relation to the 'great' exhibitions and museums of nineteenth-century Europe. In the documentary, as in the museum, an 'I' addresses a 'you' about an 'it', and in the documentary, as in the museum, glass – whether in the form of a lens or a display case – plays a critical role within this dynamic insofar as it simultaneously grants and withholds access to the object its intercession produces. Glass is, in other words, the material par excellence of *partage*: it produces the sensation of connection and separation that I have identified with Broomfield's concluding appeal. It is also in the becoming noisy of glass that *Ghosts* speaks most directly about the nature of a precarious aesthetic where the freedom to behold is compromised by the irresolution of the object. If the broken link as emblem of the dis/connected within a networked economy gestures towards the awareness of a common vulnerability that Butler identifies as the politically enabling dimension of precarity, the doubled nature of glass as a medium of connection

and separation rendered visible by diegetic noise gestures to an environment rendered precarious by its absence from the digital media ecology signified in the broken link, and a digital imaginary that in diminishing the importance of glass as a medium of focalization reminds us of its properties as a material of condensation. It is for this reason that in *Ghosts* the mediation of the precarious finds some of its most resonant expressions in the conjunction of water and glass: in raindrops on windscreens and condensation on a windowpane.

REFERENCES

- Bennet, T. (1988), 'The exhibitionary complex', *New Formations*, 4:1, pp. 73–102.
- Bloois, J. De (2011), 'Making ends meet: Precarity, art and political activism', *Volume*, 30:1, pp. 5–8.
- Bourriaud, N. (2009), 'Precarious constructions: Answer to Jacques Rancière on art and politics', *Open*, series 17, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, pp. 20–37.
- Brecht, B. (1961), 'On Chinese acting', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6:1, pp. 130–36.
- Broomfield, Nick (2007), *Ghosts*, UK: World Cinema.
- (1979), *Behind the Rent Strike*, UK: National Film School.
- Butler, J. (2010), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Carter, H., Hsiao-Hung, P. and Butt, R. (2006), 'Tell the family to pray for me ... I am dying', *The Guardian*, 25 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/mar/25/immigration.ukcrime1>. Accessed 31 July 2018.
- Fetveit, A. (2015), 'Death, beauty, and iconoclastic nostalgia: Precarious aesthetics and Lana Del Rey', *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*, 6 December, <https://necsus-ejms.org/death-beauty-and-iconoclastic-nostalgia-precarious-aesthetics-and-lana-del-rey/>. Accessed 28 August 2018.
- Hainge, G. (2013), *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hoeflerlin, M. (n.d.), *Shooting Ghosts: The Making of Ghosts*, UK: World Cinema.
- Hsiao-Hung, P. (2008), *Chinese Whispers: The True Story Behind Britain's Hidden Army of Labour*, London: Penguin.
- Kant, I. (2000), *Critique of Judgment* (trans. J. Bernard), London: Penguin.
- Kelso, P. (2001), 'Chronicle of the Dover tragedy', *The Guardian*, 5 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/apr/05/immigration.immigrationandpublicservices>. Accessed 31 August 2018.
- Malaspina, C. (2012), 'The noise paradigm', in M. N. Goddard, B. Halligan and P. Hegarty (eds), *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, New York: Continuum, pp. 58–72.
- Marxism 2007 (2008), 'Nick Broomfield Q&A', YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IIPUj0Yfbo>. Accessed 27 August 2018.
- Peeren, E. (2014), *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rancière, J. (2009a), *The Emancipated Spectator* (trans. G. Elliot), London: Verso.
- (2009b), *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (trans. G. Rockhill), London: Continuum.
- Serres, M. (1995), *Genesis* (trans. G. James and J. Nielson), Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- (2007), *The Parasite* (ed. C. Wolfe, trans. L. R. Schehr), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shannon, C. E. and Weaver, W. (1969), *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press.

- Sony (n.d.), 'Sony United Kingdom', Sony, <https://www.sony.co.uk/pro/product/broadcast-products-camcorders-hdcam/hdw-750p/features/>. Accessed 31 July 2018.
- Standing, G. (2014), *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Steyerl, H. and Beradi, F. (2012), *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Wood, J. (2007), Booklet accompanying DVD release of *Ghosts*, UK: World Cinema.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Martin, N. (2019), 'Breath on the windowpane: Precarious aesthetics and diegetic noise in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts*', *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 10:2, pp. 243–259, doi: 10.1386/cjmc_00005_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Niall Martin is an assistant professor in the Department of Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam and is affiliated to the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). His research project, 'Reading Globalization through Noise', examines the different ways in which concepts of noise interact with and produce our ideas of globalization and is associated with the Amsterdam Centre for Globalization Studies (ACGS).

Contact: Department of Literary and Cultural Analysis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Kamer 7.18, P.C. Hoofthuis, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

E-mail: n.martin@uva.nl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2847-4147>

Niall Martin has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.