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Detached retinas: empathy and the transmedial interstices of RAI fiction

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we analyse two mainstream Italian TV dramas about the Mediterranean crossing produced by the Italian national public broadcasting company RAI. *Lampedusa dall'orizzonte in poi* (2016, Marco Pontecorvo) and *I fantasmi di Portopalo* (2017a,b Alessandro Angelini) were both two-part mini-series broadcast in prime-time slots on consecutive nights on RAI 1. Inspired by real events which took place in 2008 and 1996, respectively, the first features the well-known actor Claudio Amendola, while the second stars Giuseppe Fiorello, perhaps the most popular face on Italian state television. The essay examines the ways in which these two specifically national productions both reproduce conventional media representations of migration and offer the viewer new ways to approach the topic through their transmedial presence on multiple platforms. We analyse the narratives and cinematography of the films themselves and explore how the star personae of the main actors and their appearances across different platforms affect audience reception. Our argument is indebted on work done in the field of critical race theory to illuminate the representational logics of agency in the Mediterranean and the definitions of the human which they produce.



KEYWORDS

RAI fiction; Giuseppe fiorello; Claudio amendola; Lampedusa; blackness; affect

Affect does not necessarily draw the viewer *in*; it has the potential instead to leave a scar, to make the event or situation of the past meaningful, to touch the viewer in a lasting way (Alison Landsberg)

Introduction

In the substantial corpus of Italian films that deal with the topic of migration, relatively few have focused on the hazardous journey across the Mediterranean which has attracted so much media attention and political commentary.¹ Gianfranco Rosi's acclaimed but also criticized documentary *Fuocoammare* [Fire at Sea] (2016) is a quite rare exception. Yet Rosi's film focuses less on people crossing the Mediterranean than on the residents of the small island of Lampedusa that became the centre of international attention as the landing station for many of the people and boats undertaking the crossing. *Fire at Sea* is not a sociological investigation into migration to Italy nor even a direct inquiry into responses to it. Arguably, its most insistent concern dwells on the vicissitudes of looking

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as the audience is consistently invited by the camera to examine the ways in which looking is made possible. One of its main characters, for example, is the adolescent Samuele whose 'lazy eye' functions as a metaphor for distortions of vision through which the world is framed. The film's humanitarian perspective is conveyed as much by technologies of vision as well as its narrative. Pietro Bartolo, a doctor on Lampedusa who became widely known and admired after his appearance in the film guides the audience in how to see as well as understand what is happening in the Mediterranean.² At one point, he explains to the camera the awful risks of crossing the Mediterranean confined in a ship's hold. The passage is cheaper, and the dangers of suffocation and serious fuel burns as well as drowning are higher. The determining logic of the hold frames the doctor's computer screen as he contemplates and reflects with compassion on the damage wrought on the body of a young boy. The spectator's attention is drawn to the technology of how this damaged migrant body is made visible as Rosi's camera invites the audience to reflect critically on media practices of dehumanisation. Slightly later, in what Áine O'Healy calls the film's 'most provocative scene' (2019, 163), no voice nor sound accompanies three still images of bodies entangled in a ship's hold: 'Despite the presumed pedagogical function of these images and their implicit plea for compassion, they raise ethical questions regarding the symbolic violation of the dignity of the dead for the purpose of provoking spectatorial involvement' (2019, 163).

Rosi's film attempts to change the optics through which contemporary, large-scale demographic movement towards Europe is commonly figured, mostly notably through discourses of emergency and crisis. A by now standard, and much critiqued, repertoire of still and moving imagery shared across the political spectrum, the mainstream media, and non-profit groups confirms its core vocabulary and grammar (Friese 2018; Pogliano 2018). Federica Mazzara refers to this familiar catalogue as a 'liquid scopic regime' comprising 'images of water, drowning corpses, floated and washed ashore, and of course crowded and unseaworthy wooden and inflatable boats, [which] have saturated the minds of audiences exposed to the border spectacle perpetuated by the media' (2019, 16). Sandro Mezzadra sets out a similar list: 'Shipwrecks at sea and corpses on a beach, ungovernable bodies in motion and scenes of destitution in informal camps: a whole humanitarian visual culture has developed around such images of crisis, with the aim to nurture compassion and engagement from afar' (2020, 11).³ O'Healy picks up on the idea of malgovernance referencing specifically the place now synonymous with this rack of association: '[i]mages of mass arrivals, maritime rescues and inadequately administered reception facilities thus come together in forming contemporary perceptions of Lampedusa' (2016, 153). Such imagery inheres to what Christina Sharpe calls the 'orthography of the wake' (2016), the system of the tropes and signifying practices through which Black life is formulated and lived as a site of violent erasure; a figuration of the Black Mediterranean through the island of Lampedusa centres her book.⁴ For the 'scopic regime' of the Mediterranean is saturated with anti-black intent in its reiterated production of recognisable abjection. Yet, as Smythe (2018) intimates, the articulation of Black life also holds the promise of resistance to hegemonic practices of expression and the creative production of an alternative lexis and visual idiom. This promise can also be read as a call to personal investment. Sharpe turns a critical eye towards the metaphor of 'retinal detachment' through which the American artist Kara Walker figures a space of creativity at some distance ('detached') from her own blackness

and its pressures. When the retina becomes detached, the tissue separates from the blood vessels which nourish it causing disturbances of vision. The thing about a detached retina is that it does not hurt. Untreated, it can cause blindness. Scarred tissue may result from both the condition and its treatment. The painful weave between retinal detachment and attachment, and affective distance and proximity requires pause. Sharpe proposes a counter-aesthetics of ‘attachment’, an ethical imperative to ‘behold’ and be ‘beholden’ (and she draws on all variants of the verb) ‘in our Black bodies, to try to look, try to see’ (101). What is seen, Sharpe reflects: ‘depends on what is on one’s retina’ (99).

TV drama and affect

In this essay, we attempt to decipher the scarring ‘on the retina’ of two mainstream Italian TV dramas about the Mediterranean crossing produced by the Italian national public broadcasting company RAI. *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi* (2016, Marco Pontecorvo) and *I fantasmi di Portopalo* (2017a, Alessandro Angelini) were both two-part mini-series broadcast in prime-time slots on consecutive nights on RAI 1.⁵ Inspired by events which took place in 2008 and 1996, respectively, they draw liberally, and arguably anachronistically, on the kind of aquatic imagery mentioned above.⁶ Our starting point is that the ‘liquid scopic regime’ of the Mediterranean is patterned on racialised, but not always explicitly articulated, schemas of beleaguerment and salvation. For instance, Martina Tazzioli points out that Mare Nostrum, the Italian navy’s programme to rescue migrants in distress in the Mediterranean begun in the wake of the catastrophic shipwreck of 3 October 2013, initiated a new modality of seeing.⁷ With what she calls ‘the scene of rescue’, ‘media attention shifted to the humanitarian tasks performed by military actors in charge of saving migrant lives’ (2015, 2).⁸ Tazzioli comments that the persistent visualization of ‘the scene of rescue’ even after the EU’s Triton initiative (2014) shifted the emphasis from rescue to border control continued to pit the vulnerability of black migrants as ‘shipwrecked lives’ against the heroism of white Italian rescuers. This way of seeing obscured the intimate link between rescue and broader structures of ‘migration governmentality’ (Tazzioli 2015, 6)⁹ validating what Danewid calls an ‘abstract – as opposed to historical – humanity’ (2017, 1684). While this kind of racialised image field may well reproduce the kind of viewer ‘detachment’ suggested by Mazzara and Mezzadra above, we are interested in investigating if the popular TV dramas in question offer a more complex array of positions from which to see. While we recognise that they adhere to the conventions of media representation of migration in many respects, we argue that they also express (perhaps counterintuitively) a hybrid aesthetic of spectatorial affect which may counter dominant logics of racialised representation and allow spectators to engage in more visually and politically ‘attached’ ways. Such ‘attachment’, we contend, is not the prerogative of art-house cinema and fine art practice. Our argument is responsive to Alison Landsberg’s position that the formal properties of popular historical representation may engender empathy (attachment) as a cognitive form of critical response to representations of trauma. This critical response in turn prompts what Dominic LaCapra has called ‘empathetic unsettlement’ in the viewer (Landsberg 2015, 66).

In her wide-ranging study, Landsberg approaches anti-black racism thematically through re-enactment in a reality history series *Frontier House*. She suggests that

instances of anachronistic slippage in how it is played out through benign human interaction (also seen in the two fictions we study) allow the audience to conclude that, conversely, twenty-first century racism is ‘more subtle and indirect and it tends to be structural and systemic as opposed to interpersonal’ (129). While her example appears trivial, her assessment of its effects leans towards what Saucier and Woods refer to as ‘the problem with empathy’ which is to elide the ‘structural antagonism’ (2014, 67) of racial erasure. Their analysis of what they call ‘The Lampedusa Affair,’ the loss of Black life in the Mediterranean, indicts its ongoing repetition as an instance of ‘the accumulated violence against black people globally’ (55). Landsberg’s approach to the political potential of viewer empathy created by some elements of mass culture must be kept in check by what Saucier and Woods identify as ‘the violence of empathetic identification’ (66). This violence results from the hasty appropriation of the trauma of others through an assumed understanding of pain and its effects which the emotionally sentient white self might claim to justify and attenuate privilege.

Working with Landsberg’s sense of empathy as a potential critical resource, but tempered by Saucier and Wood’s necessary admonishment, we explore how *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi*¹⁰ and *I fantasmi di Portopalo* generate a transmedial ‘aesthetic of subversion’ (Mazzara 2019) creating a complex and unresolved set of viewing positions through which to be touched by (in Landsberg’s affective and cognitive sense) traumatic experiences of migration. We engage throughout with Mazzara’s attempt uncover new and contestatory ways of visualizing migration although we depart from her preferred emphasis on artists and individual creative practice to look at mainstream TV dramas which we suggest also offer alternative perspectives. The ‘scenes of rescue’ and ‘shipwrecked lives’ which instantiate and delimit the boundaries of migration’s cultural intelligibility figure large in these dramas, but this familiar visual and narrative grammar is disrupted by an alternative aesthetics of empathy. While asserting the critical potentiality of popular cultural forms, we do not take for granted that their empathetic effect necessarily and inevitably realises this potentiality.

Ways of seeing

Before looking at the two productions in detail and in particular the interplay of their formal strategies of representation, the star personae of the cast, and multi-platform marketing, it is worth remembering that these contemporary productions belong to the established genre of quality RAI drama. Milly Buonanno argues that from the outset TV drama has constituted a ‘typically national narrative corpus’ (2012, 5)¹¹ with a specifically national compendium of tropes, representational practices, actors, and production values. Stylistically and thematically varied, RAI fiction has often dealt with aspects of Italian history and, particularly from the early 2000s, with contested memories.¹² As historical dramas, both productions are concerned with the difficulties of recalling a painful past, and of managing its effects in the present. In *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi*, these difficulties are figured primarily as personal. Serra (Claudio Amendola) is an officer in the *Guardia costiera* transferred involuntarily to Lampedusa after the accidental death of his son. Photographs of the boy kept in a closed drawer suggest the repression of the memory he struggles to express. Viola (Carolina Crescentini), the compassionate and committed director of the local ‘centro di accoglienza’ for migrants bears the burden of

a failed personal relationship. In *I fantasmi di Portopalo*, the quest to find what happened to a ship which sank off the coast of Sicily in late 1996 carrying migrants mainly from the Indian subcontinent drives the three main characters. Saro Ferro (Giuseppe Fiorello), the fisherman who initiates the inquiry, is later revealed to have been complicit in returning a recovered body to the sea. Giacomo Sanna (Giuseppe Battiston) is the investigative journalist with the means and determination to pursue what was regarded as a cold case. Fortunato/Amaran (Bagya Lankapura) is a young Sri Lankan who had been aboard the boat and subsequently rescued by Saro.¹³ Saro's guilt about his past conduct silently motivates how he behaves in the present. Sanna's father suffers from dementia and can't recognise his son. The trauma of Fortunato's journey makes him unable to recall his past and he experiences distressing and initially unexplained flashbacks or hallucinations.

These different modalities of forgetting and remembering are overtly thematised in both films. However, with respect to the memorial logics of the films, we would draw attention to two images that appear on screen only briefly and that are more compelling and disturbing. In the opening credit sequence of *Lampedusa dall'orizzonte in poi*, stylised figurative images, concealed to some degree behind the credit titles, show fragments from a generic 'scene of rescue' – most are of small boats and submerged bodies, some adorned with Africanate designs. The final image in the sequence is different (Figure 1). Projected onto a front-lit forearm is what looks like a photograph referencing historical Italian emigration: an orderly line of people dressed in clothes from another time caught at, what looks like, the moment of embarkation. The image tattoos the body. Italian emigration is the residual scar of an embodied national trauma/wound which the narrative omits to mention overtly but from which, the tattooed image tells us, it is not detached.

A second embodied historical imprint is glimpsed in *I fantasmi di Portopalo*. As mentioned above Fortunato suffers from amnesia, but also from flashbacks, chaotic sequences of memories of a still to be explicated past. The spectator's first sight of him



Figure 1. The emigration tattoo, *Lampedusa dall'orizzonte in poi*. RAI Fiction DVD

is as a racially marked body pulled from the sea, the very image of a 'ship-wrecked life'. Welcomed into the local fishing community but never fully part of it, Fortunato's identity and origins remain unknown. His flashbacks are visual hallucinations in that their referent is unclear. Before he is fully able to recollect consciously what happened, he touches the past only on his scarred torso. Hodgkin and Thakkar comment on the uncertain status of the scar and scarred tissue as neither skin nor wound. They are also layered across time: 'Scars evoke different temporalities: the past (the wound) and the present (the ever-present scar) but the future only inasmuch as these may indeed be scars for life' (2017, 16). Unlike the widely criticised regime of spectacular migrant corporeal suffering mentioned above, Fortunato's scars are hard to discern. The spectator shares his gaze in a subjective moment of self-seeing as he looks into a dimly-lit mirror (Figure 2). The body's harled surface becomes the historical site of uncertain and encrypted memory.

This mirroring of Fortunato's scar is a site of traumatic memorialisation but not commemoration. The past and present stand in contiguous alignment figuratively in artwork that Fortunato creates. Salvo finds him one day drawing on the broken hull of a grounded vessel. Etched on material wreckage of the Mediterranean passage, his work and practice historicise the traumatic lived experience and unspeakable memory of migration through surface inscription (Figure 3). In the outline of Big Ben, it also expresses future intimations. The work resonates with that of one of the artists who Mazzara sees as 'subverting' dominant visual rhetorics. UK-based artist Lucy Wood's multi-media projects challenge mainstream indifference to the suffering of migration. In particular, Fortunato's etchings in the film recall the paintings in her 'Boat Fragments' series, in which she copies onto pieces of driftwood images of sea rescue culled from the Italian press.¹⁴ If, as Mazzara suggests, Wood contests 'the vacuity of those representations and their non-sensical patterns, establishing instead a link with the tangibility – the



Figure 2. Fortunato's scar, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*. RAI Fiction DVD



Figure 3. Migrant art, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*.RAI Fiction DVD

boat – of the experience of escape’ (2019, 161), through their material translation, what the spectator glimpses in *I fantasmi di Portopalo* is their re-membered re-mediation by a (fictional) migrant artist. A similar scene representing migrant creative practice occurs in Valerio Cataldi’s *La neve la prima volta* 2014, a documentary about the catastrophic 3 October 2013 sinking when the camera focuses on Adal Neguse, the brother of one of the victims, and his drawings of scenes of torture in Eritrea (Orrù 2018, 70–71). Adal subsequently featured in, and was one of the co-directors of, *Remembering Lampedusa*, five short documentary films, made as a critical response to Cataldi’s film.¹⁵ The transmedial tracking of these visual memories or assemblages strikes the retina obliquely and invites the spectator to envisage new patterns of attachment.

Fortunato attempts to foreclose the past’s re-emergence when Saro shows him the identity card recovered from the sea. Refusing to look at the document, later deciphered by Sanna’s Sri Lankan domestic assistant, Fortunato resists its bureaucratic figuration of identity (Figure 4). The card had been issued to Anpalagan Ganeshu whose connection to Fortunato and their shared flight from political violence is gradually disentangled.¹⁶ Anpalagan drowned when the boat sank and his body is identified later by the camera in the ROV (remotely operated underwater vehicle) paid for by Sanna’s newspaper to scour the sea-bed in search of the sunken ship. In scenes reminiscent of Rosi’s *Fire at Sea*, the underwater images lack definition, yet this lack of definition draws attention to the technology of seeing or rather surveillance itself. The spectator and the film’s characters struggle to identify the debris from the wreck on screen, and the sunken ship’s mediated image is a defamiliarising re-representation of a ‘scene of failed rescue’. Staring anxiously into the screen, Fortunato makes out a blue football shirt printed with Roberto Baggio’s name and his number 10 (Figure 5). The shirt had been a consistent, but unexplained, detail of Fortunato’s flashbacks, a present from a relative in his home village which he in turn had gifted to his friend Anpalagan. Baggio’s name is a restless signifier of



Figure 4. The recovered identity card, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*. RAI Fiction DVD

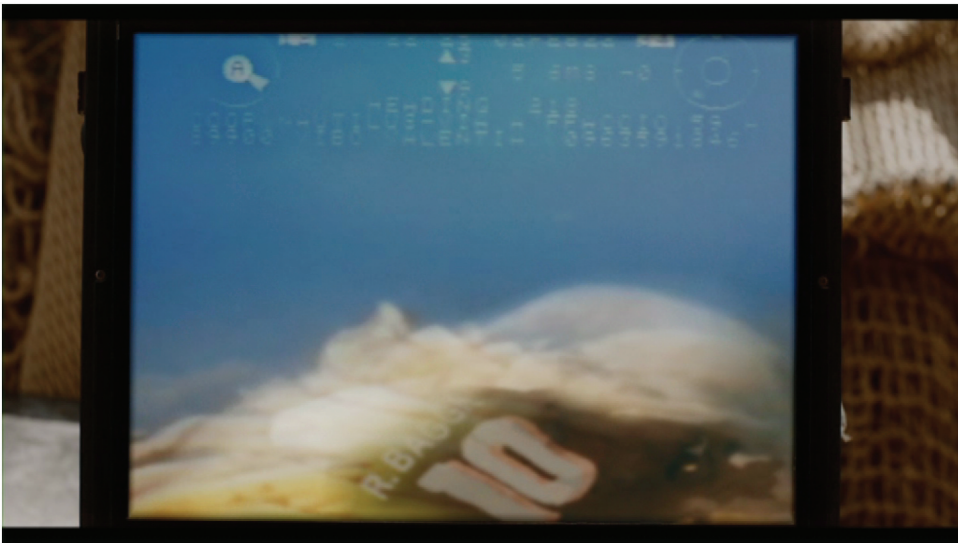


Figure 5. The football shirt on the sea-bed, *I fantasmi di Portopalo*. RAI Fiction DVD

identification beyond national borders. On the ROV's blurred screen, the name and its bright blue frame confirm the seabed as a cemetery.

The screen frames the captured digital image. These images recall another of the artists whose work is cited by Mazzara. London-based Tamara Kametani used similar footage of the wreck of the 3 October 2013 sinking recorded by the Italian Navy. She took still images from the footage to produce a series of cyanotype prints (blueprints) deliberately blurred and designed to fade with the passing of time.¹⁷ Mazzara contends that unlike similar images in the mainstream media and online which added to 'the usual

uncommitted and voyeuristic affective experience of the violent border, doing nothing to challenge the politics of the border spectacle by furthering the experience of suffering at a distance,' (2019, 130–132) Kametani's translation of raw digital images generate a strong response in the spectator. The blurred images transmitted by the ROV's camera in *I fantasmi di Portopalo*, similarly produce an affective, but transformative response in Saro and Sanna cementing their ties of friendship and solidarity, but also prompting in Fortunato a reckoning with the sinking, a re-memory which allows him to commemorate the 360 people who died.

Star personae and racial asymmetries

Amendola and Fiorello embody a particular version of what it means to be Italian in their portrayal of 'ordinary men who turn their backs on the role of hero' (Grasso 2020).¹⁸ The aesthetics and politics of the films are inseparable from the actors and their personae. Barra (2015) argues that RAI Fiction's consistent use of a well-known team of actors is integral to its dual mission to entertain and to educate. Viewers as well as actors inhabit 'an in-between space of celebrity' in which familiarity blurs the difference between person and character.¹⁹ The recurrent appearance of figures such as Fiorello and Amendola on talk-shows, newscasts, and other infotainment outlets makes them multi-faceted media products in their own right simultaneously occupying the roles of stars, heroes, witnesses, and experts. This transmedial presence invests TV productions with new forms of partial or secondary visibility. For instance, short excerpts become available on YouTube, they are shared on social media, discussed on Twitter threads and/or paired up with interviews released by the stars in other news outlets. New audiences are addressed by the films without necessarily having seen them in their entirety. Advertised and promoted in gossip or TV magazines and commercials, the boundaries between fiction and news are permeable. RAI newscasts such as TG1 or TG2 connect the series' topics with current events by discussing clips of the films or by hosting the main actors. TV drama becomes news.

The actors actively use the apparatus supporting their celebrity to assume on occasions an active role in the public debate of the social and political consequences of migration. Both Fiorello and Amendola as well as other cast members such as Giuseppe Battiston and Carolina Crescentini take pride in their civic role. Fiorello's films in particular sit firmly in the tradition of the 'politically engaged tv drama' (Barra 2015, 35) and in interview, he expresses a strong level of personal determination and emotional commitment to making *I fantasmi di Portopalo* as a civic project (2017b, 2). In an interview with his co-star Carolina Crescentini on TG1, Amendola insists he pushed RAI to make the film as a 'public service', taking the viewer beyond misinformation and political propaganda to grasp the determining role played by Italy's colonial past, economic interests, and diplomatic choices (Anon 2016a). Yet the distance between Amendola and Serra collapses (Figure 6), when the actor claims that 'the women and the men of the [Italian] Coast Guard are the real heroes of the sea, which make it possible for many lives to be rescued' (Anon 2016b).

There is a racial asymmetry between rescuers and rescued in this recursive figuration of humanity. Its privileging of whiteness was most evident on the episode of Bruno Vespa's *Porta a porta* broadcast the day before *Lampedusa* was televised. In a largely



Figure 6. A “scene of rescue”, *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi*. RAI Fiction DVD

sympathetic discussion, Amendola and Crescentini appeared in the studio along with Pontecorvo, the director, and three male representatives of different arms of the Italian rescue mission – Raffaele Faggiano, Gaetano Coronello, and Mirko Valenza. The discussion was preceded by the commentary of previous studio guests including Roberto Maroni, the former Minister of the Interior, member of the anti-immigration Northern League party. It focussed in particular on the statistical computation of migrant lives and deaths, in an instance of what Smythe calls ‘the quantified abstraction of Black and/or migrant lives’ (2018, 5). The emphasis on policing gave way to a humanitarian response with Amendola as the lead voice. Underlining that the forthcoming film tackles widespread ‘disinformation’ about migration in the media, Amendola speaks about the expertise as well as the heroism of the Coast Guard rescue teams, reiterated in the clips from *Lampedusa* shown as tasters to the full drama. The provision of medical assistance to those rescued, especially to mothers and children, invites the audience to respond emotionally. The only African migrants who speak to camera are interviewed in a detention centre. Their dubbed voices relate the harshness of conditions in their home countries which caused them to leave.

In order to challenge, subvert, and re-configure what Sharpe calls the ‘orthography of the wake’ requires the development of strategies of resistance to hegemonic practices of seeing and the re-articulation of a new visual idiom.²⁰ These strategies impact on the retina and risk its scarring. This point returns us to both looking and affect, and to the ‘scarring’ of the audience in Landsberg’s model of empathy.²¹ The afterlife of scarring is evident in what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the ‘precariousness of empathy’ (1997, 4) and the persistence of anti-black modes of representation and thinking across time. The past endures and its’ logics are at hand. Questioning the fine line between practices of witnessing and spectating in which the suffering of the black body is the ‘complicated nexus of terror and enjoyment’ (21), she reveals complicities between the infliction of pain on the black body and the pleasure occasioned by the white spectator’s

indignation.²² The durative nature, albeit mutating forms, of these practices founders on the ‘recognition of humanity’ but more particularly ‘the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved’ (6). As such, the ‘scene of rescue’ as a trope of racialised subjectivity functions as a latter-day ‘scene of subjection’ in which the Black subject is fixed, or framed, subject to the fluctuating responses of the white spectator, but remaining, in essence, the same. While those crossing the Mediterranean exercise a degree of agency denied to the enslaved, they are nevertheless entangled in a racial calculus not of their choosing. Saucier and Woods affirm that ‘those whose lives remain caught in the Lampedusa “hold” are not racialised after the fact of violence, but rather through a prior racist violence that created Africa as the singular place on the planet were you go to turn human beings into objects’ (2014, 61). Hartman looks at the material residues of African cultural traditions in the lives of the enslaved in the US as ‘revenants of a dismembered past’ (1997, 72). In this light, the Africanate imagery of *Lampedusa*’s opening credit sequence are not ornamental effects, but material residues of trauma. Their dislocation from known points of origin renders their affective force akin to that of ‘a phantom limb’, whose truth lies in the memory of its amputation as a ‘pained body’ (73–74). The ‘ghosts of Portopalo’ are also dismembered revenants. What the Sicilian fishermen recovered from the sea were not incorrupt bodies, but severed heads and other dispersed body parts.

Conclusion

The question remains whether the films we discuss in fact interfere enough with the narrative of the Italian hero-rescuer. On a primary level, the narratives follow a trajectory of redemption or innocence that despite offering a positively connoted relationship with the ‘migrant other’ reify the hierarchical distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and protect the façade of a tolerant and multicultural Italy/Europe (Danewid 2017). The sympathetic, human relationships between the Italian protagonists and the films’ migrant characters serve ‘as the conduits through which a new Italy can be created’ with the consequences that the migrant characters function as “surrogate subjects” who “only in death, enable Italians to re-emerge as civilised subjects, to become whole again” (Saucier and Woods 2014, 67). Their hypothesis finds confirmation in an interview accompanying a promotional brochure on *Portopalo*, in which the director Angelini affirms that the character of Fortunato “functions to make the emotional and moral journey of Saro Ferro (played by Giuseppe Fiorello) explicit reinforcing his convictions and exacerbating and amplifying his doubts” (2017, 4). The self-absolutive trajectories offered to the characters in these fictions depend on two premises which, to return to Saucier and Woods, make empathy a problem. Firstly, they express a “selective amnesia” or displacement of Italian colonial history in a move that elides any connection with the current shipwrecks. Simply put, there is no acknowledgment of Italy’s colonial occupation of Libya nor of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia where many of those people trying to cross the Mediterranean come from and who have no legal right of residence in the former coloniser’s national space. Secondly, the representation of the relationship between the inhabitants of Sicily or Lampedusa to the formal apparatus of migration is framed in terms of an ahistorical and cross-cultural ethics of the sea.²³ In accepting the Golden Bear award at the Berlin International Festival in 2016, Rosi warmly cited Pietro Bartolo’s pithy reflection:

'Lampedusa is a place of fishermen, we are fishermen, and fishermen, they all accept always, anything that comes from the sea. So this may be a lesson that (we) should learn to accept anything that comes from the sea' (Roddy 2016). This empathetic dislocation equates the experiences of migrant subalternity with that of Italian South and figures a natural correlation between the endeavours of the rescuers and a putative universal, and not 'historical – humanity' (Danewid 2017; Colombini 2023).²⁴

Crescentini claimed that by experiencing the reality of Lampedusa, she rediscovered 'what it means to be a human being', yet her role in Cataldi's *La neve, la prima volta* tempers this assertion. She was one of several well-known actors used to speak the words of interviewed migrants (Orrù 2018, 68) the silence of whose voices was compounded by the practice of dubbing. 'L'umanità/humanity' is a term which circulates in the discussion of both films. Like the Black Mediterranean, it is a catachresis, a term without a proper object, for it remains unclear if 'human' attaches itself to the redemptive energies of the Italian hero or the beleaguered abjection of the rescued migrant. Yet perhaps what counts is precisely the fact that the discussion remains inconclusive. Perkowski suggests that in order to make the category of the 'human' meaningful it 'is necessary to break the continuum of human rights, humanitarianism, and security' through which it is currently brokered. She turns to the foundational work of Sylvia Winter and the link she posits between *mythoi* and *bios*, stories and bodies, and their activation of 'neurological reward structures in the brain' (2021, 158). Implicitly, this suggestion effects a return to the retina and the practices of vision. In a detailed and largely appreciative analysis of Rosi's complex cinematographic strategies in *Fire at Sea*, Ponzanesi ruefully concludes that 'we stand on the side of Europe throughout the film' (2016, 162) observing the migrants from the perspectives of multiple, but only white Italian, protagonists. Similarly, Johnson notes how the film's presentation by the Berlin Festival sought to manage the audience's gaze in ways likely 'to reproduce a politics of neo-colonial humanitarianism.' Conversely, she contends that her own identification of what she calls 'the objective gaze of the refugee' in *Fire at Sea* indicates that 'the film text itself can offer a site of resistance' (2020, 74). The debates around Rosi's documentary in many respects subtend our own work on *Lampedusa: dall'orizzonte in poi* and *I fantasmi di Portopalo*. Neither of these TV productions offer definitive or radical re-definitions of how humanity survives the Mediterranean. What they do offer are multiple interpretive pathways. Their transmedial affinities and discords perform a praxis of critical affect through which the audience 'beholds' and is 'beholden to' the pragmatics of the Mediterranean's racial calculus, the full accounts of which are yet to be received.

Notes

1. For an astute and thoroughly contextualised reading of this corpus that includes shorts, documentaries, and feature films see O'Healy (2016) and (2019, 136–77). For a discussion of the Mediterranean crossing in four North African films that offer an alternative optic and axis of contrast to the Italian case see Abderrezak (2016, 145–184).
2. Bartolo, now a member of the European Parliament, has also gone on to become a successful author publishing to date two books about his experiences (Bartolo and Tilotta 2016, Bartolo 2019).

3. Horsti (2019) notes how the constant digital circulation of such imagery facilitates the reproduction of what Susan Sontag had called ‘a memory freeze-frame,’ a commonly recognised visual shorthand believed to encapsulate a time or event.
4. The growing familiarity of the term ‘Black Mediterranean’, a catachresis conflating race and mobility, has been adopted as a geopolitical descriptor invoking the horrors of the Middle Passage to explore questions of race, citizenship, and mobility (The Black Mediterranean Collective 2021).
5. *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi* was broadcast on Tuesday 20 and Wednesday 21 September 2016. *I fantasmi di Portopalo* aired on Monday 20 and Tuesday 21 February 2017. With an estimated 6.613.715 viewers and an audience share of 2499%, the second episode of *I fantasmi di Portopalo* had the fifth highest viewing figures for a RAI Fiction in a year in which the genre stood up well against competition from alternative platforms: <https://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/assets/template/us-articolo.html?ssiPath=/articoli/2017/12/2017-UN-ANNO-RECORD-PER-LA-FICTION-RAI-1fd1cd8e-0812-4d24-83b8-a962d52655d5-ssi.html>.
6. *Lampedusa dall’orizzonte in poi* took its inspiration from a TV report which Claudio Amendola saw about the joint rescue of some 600 migrants by Italian coastguards and local fisherman in 2008. Set approximately in 2010, Pontecorvo acknowledged that changes in the policing of migration in the Mediterranean and the detention of migrants means that the film is not always accurate in terms of detail (Pontecorvo, 2016). The film also references incidents such as the outbreak of serious fires in the Detention Centre in 2009 and 2012 without historical precision (Albahari 2015, 209).
Produced with the support of the UNCHR, *I fantasmi di Portopalo* is an adaptation of a book by investigative journalist Giovanni Maria Bellu (2004) about his attempt to recover a ship carrying migrants mostly from the Indian subcontinent which vanished off the coast of Sicily in 1996 (Albahari 2015; Duncan 2011).
7. This date has become a totemic point of reference for discussion and commemoration of migrant death in the Mediterranean, but as indexed by the films discussed here was not the starting point (Friese 2018).
8. In this vein, the docu-series *La scelta di Catia: 80 miglia a Sud di Lampedusa* (2014, Roberto Burchielli) narrates the heroism and compassion of Mare Nostrum through the actions of Captain Catia Pellegrino and her crew aboard an Italian navy rescue vessel. It first aired as a web-series on the *Corriere della sera* website between 29 September and 10 October 2014. A stand-alone film was broadcast on 6 October 2014 on Rai Tre. The fifth episode containing real footage of the 11 October 2013 shipwreck, the so-called ‘naufragio dei bambini’ was broadcast on the first anniversary of the 3 October 2013 disaster. A book with the same name as the series came out the following year and Pellegrino was also officially recognised by the Italian state for her rescue mission work. She is still under investigation for having repeatedly ignored the boat’s SOS on 11 October. The investigative journalist Fabrizio Gatti made *Un unico destino* (2017), a multimedia project aimed at countering the episode about the 11 October sinking. It appeared as an article in *L’Espresso*, a web-series on the site of *La Repubblica* and as fifty-minute film broadcast on Sky Atlantic. An audiobook version is also available.
9. The films referenced here could be usefully positioned in the category of ‘surveillance cinema’ (Zimmer 2015). Zimmer’s examination of the reciprocal narrative intersections between cinema and technologies of surveillance has obvious relevance to our discussion and in particular illuminates the migrant as “‘global subject’—an individual posited as a functional element of a globalized economy and a strategic figure in a geopolitical landscape” (116).
10. The film has been criticised for perpetuating a shallow and stereotypical understanding of the situation on Lampedusa. See Mazzara (2019, 49) and De Franceschi (2016). We recognise these criticisms but suggest that the film also invites other optics and interpretations.

11. Barra comments on the ‘closed universe of national tv drama’ (2015, 34). This limitation is increasingly challenged by global streaming platforms such as Netflix even as they expand their non-English language programming.
12. Eleonora Andreatta, former director of RAI fiction, affirmed that as a public service broadcaster RAI needed to fulfil multiple functions with respect to the nation: ‘focus more on new stories, address contemporary issues and express the principles and human values that keep a country united’ (2015, 202). She mentions specifically *Lampedusa*, then in production, underlining that the series is ‘based on real facts about the arrival of immigrants in Italy’ (Laviosa 2015, 207). In 2020, Andreatta left RAI for Netflix to head up their Italian Originals series expressing a clear commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in broadcasting.
13. While the characters of Saro and Sanna are adaptations of the actual protagonists, that of Fortunato is entirely invented. He effectively stands in for Anpalagan Ganeshu the book’s main character, who drowned in the shipwreck and whose recovered identity card drove Bellu’s search. Bagya Lankapura who plays Fortunato also directed the short *La voliera*, winner of the Premio Mutti in 2018. The prize supports the work of film-makers resident in Italy ‘of migrant origin’. Born in Naples to Sri Lankan parents, he discusses his career and experience as a member of the Italian Sinhalese community in interview with Antonio Augugliaro at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2GyKm-djpl>. Accessed 22 January 2023.
14. Wood’s work can be seen on her website: http://www.lucywood.net/ongoing/part2/boat_fragments.html.
15. For details of the films and the film-making process and ethics see <https://rememberinglampedusa.com>. Adal also appeared on TG3 in an interview with Cataldi in October 2019 to raise funds for a memorial to those who died <https://en-gb.facebook.com/tg3rai/videos/961588407508927/>. Colombini (forthcoming 2023) gives a critical account of cultural projects using Lampedusa as a symbol and site to represent migration from the perspective of migrants.
16. The book’s original cover was a mosaic of unidentified ID images whereas its more recent version has a medium close-up shot of Fiorello taken from the film. The cover of the DVD shows Fiorello embracing Bagya Lankapura.
17. The images can be seen on Kametani’s website: <https://www.tamarakametani.com/#/half-a-mile-from-lampedusa/>. Accessed 22 January 2023.
18. This humane, redemptive, albeit fallible ‘ordinariness’ is a recurrent trope of Italian historical or political TV drama (Buonanno 2012; Jansen and Lanslot 2014; Perra 2014).
19. Claudio Amendola has alternated between dramatic and comic roles, and between television and cinema. While the range of his work does not fit the parameters of ‘engaged cinema’, as a public figure he enjoys the reputation of being a left-leaning politically committed actor. Since the early 2000s, Giuseppe Fiorello has been a very popular staple of RAI fiction. He has starred in a RAI drama about Mimmo Lucano, the mayor of Riace, famous for opening the town to migrants, made in 2018, and still not broadcast after numerous scheduling delays. He is currently directing his first film, *Stranizza d’amuri*, about the murder of two young gay men in Sicily in 1980, responses to which led to the setting up of gay activist organisation ARCI Gay.
20. In her discussion of *Fuocoammare*, Breger shifts attention from a generic ‘asymmetrical sympathy’ for beleaguered migrants to the film’s more expansively articulated ‘affective vulnerability’ expressed through its ‘objectfull assembly – of historical memories, spatial practices, and nonhuman agency’ (2020, 176–177). Breger’s highly sophisticated dissection of ‘affective realism’ in European transnational cinema productively illuminates our own concerns with national TV drama.
21. Both films were viewed by large national audiences and are still available on RaiPlay and on DVD. While De Franceschi (2016) is critical of what he sees as their low audience share, their mode of distribution ensures a far larger audience than that available to other cultural products on this theme. RAI’s own digital platform has proved very successful not least thanks to Viva RaiPlay, a variety show broadcast solely digitally and hosted by Rosario

- Fiorello, Giuseppe's older brother. On the afternoon of 20 June 2021 *I fantasmi di Portopalo* was broadcast on RAI Premium to commemorate World Refugee Day.
22. This nexus structures the experience of viewing these RAI dramas. Horsti (2017) identifies a similar dynamic in user-generated YouTube videos on migration which reiterate both hegemonic and alternative viewing perspectives. She argues strongly in favour of the value of the 'performative citizenship' grounded in the empathetic response to migrants they allow despite their location on an entertainment channel.
 23. For a discussion of this notion and its imprint on Emanuele Crialesè's *Terraferma* which deals with the varying responses of islanders to hospitality and the rescue of migrants see O'Healy (2019, 155–162).
 24. Although some of the Italian characters in both films show sign of cynicism towards migrants, the people-smuggler is the anti-hero to which the main Italian protagonist is opposed. The pervasiveness of the narrative of the unscrupulous smuggler is not confined to television drama. Frontex, the European border control agency, has progressively adopted this trope to legitimise and expand his patrolling missions in the Mediterranean (Perkowski 2021, 71). The figure of the smuggler/criminal (object of prosecution), and the rescued migrant (object of rescue) are subordinate to both the white, European humanitarian or securitarian gaze.

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