

The making of “Where is Europe?”
directed by Valentina Signorelli (2018, ITA, 15’): A Reflective Film Review¹

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In June 2018, Mustafa Dawood tragically died in Britain while fleeing from immigration enforcement officers. According to the BBC, he fell through a factory roof while running away from British immigration enforcement officers. “It was a brutal end to a short life - one that had already seen him flee war in Sudan and make a perilous journey across Europe eventually settling in south Wales” (BBC, 2018). He is one of many migrants that have made the difficult journey that includes crossing the perilous Mediterranean Sea to European countries such as Italy, France, Spain and the UK. According to UNHCR data, in 2017 alone, over 170.000 people have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, with more than 3,000 reported to have drowned. Their countries of origin include - but are not limited to - Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Guinea, Côte D’Ivoire, Mali, Nigeria and Bangladesh. Around 70%, roughly 119.000 people, opted for the Central Mediterranean Route, which meant, in simpler terms, that after months of enduring travelling and exploitation, Italy was the first European country they reached.² In parallel to the national coastguard, several NGOs have been working on supporting their rescue operations.

Italy is the country in which I was born and raised, before moving to London in 2013. Here in the UK, I often experience the feeling of uncertainty surrounding the ongoing Brexit negotiations. After the referendum, I started to question the impact of politics on matters of identity and migration. Why had I not questioned that before? The reason is simple: I was born in 1989. I have never experienced war. I do not remember the Berlin wall. I have not been hungry a single day in my life. As a *millennial*, I have often benefited from my EU status to work, study, travel and live in any European country without being afraid of any illegal consequences. It has all been - for me and for an entire generation - easy, natural and taken from granted. Then, a few weeks after the Brexit vote, I took a trip to Sicily, a beautiful island in my country of origin, and I randomly witnessed a disembarkment at the port of Palermo.

As a filmmaker and researcher, experiencing something that I could not understand entirely, incited me to take action and tell a story. In September 2017, I was lucky enough to be hosted with a camera operator on board the rescue ship “Aquarius”, coordinated by the Italian-French-Swiss-German NGO SOS Méditerranée for three days.³ Since that encounter, with the support of my colleagues from Daitona production, I have written and directed the short documentary *Where is Europe?*; a story of migration, yet without any migrants shown on-screen. It is a story on European politics and its limits, yet without any institution directly involved. At the same time, *Where is Europe?* is a story of European identity and the future

¹ I was able to carry and complete this project only thanks to the pivotal support of SOS MEDITERRANEE and their MSF team onboard. Above all, a special thanks goes to my colleagues at Daitona’s which produced and contributed to the making of this film.

² For further reference see the UNHCR operational portal available at: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (Date accessed: 15/07/2018)

³ For further information visit <https://sosmediterrance.com/> (Date accessed: 15/07/2018)

of the EU, but for the first time experienced through the eyes and voices of one the most underrepresented and unheard parts of Europe: its citizens.

Several filmmakers have, in fact, recently addressed the phenomenon of boat migration in their works; among others: Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare - Fire At Sea*, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2016, Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea*, presented at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival Critics Week and Roberto Burchielli's 2014 film *La Scelta di Catia - Catia's Choice*. The main visual thread of these and other related works, is the body of the migrant put at the centre of action, showing the rescues with great pathos and detail and indeed exposing them to potential identification and danger, not to mention the ethical implications deriving from insisting on the corpses of women, men and children who have drown in the crossing.

Beside Andre Bazin's ontological paradox of showing death on-screen (1951) and Bill Nichols' memento to 'do the right thing' (2016), this concern was central to my work. Having an extended background in fiction, I often need to make sure that actors, extras and interviewees sign their consent form before starting any filming. On the other hand, not filming the rescues would lead to another impasse: how to prove a tragedy without filming it, and especially in this post-truth era in which videos would represent over 80% of the online content by 2021?⁴ The first answer to this question comes from the fact that *Where is Europe?* is not a newspaper investigation. We did not need to prove anything to anyone, we were not working for any news agency or TV network. Being an independent film company sometimes has its advantages in terms of creative freedom. Rather, this film is a spiritual research caught on camera about the complexity of boat migration from the perspective of the European citizens. In fact, while the rescues have been widely, yet insufficiently documented, very little has been explored of the other side of these operations: what happens before and after each emergency call, what kind of support NGOs provide in the Mediterranean and most of all why their European crew decided to volunteer on board. Equally, in the film we hear the voices of the locals debating skeptical about migration, mirroring to a great extent the mosaicoon of contrasting views that are familiar all around Europe. The second reason why we did not film the people rescued comes from a contextual factor, a practical issue that we had to face in the production phase. We were in fact allowed to film only when the "Aquarius" was docked at the port of Catania, where the ship returns every three weeks to restock and crew-change.

Several months later, in June 2018, the Aquarius was refused to dock by the Italian government and kept stuck at sea for over a week with 629 rescued people onboard. By coincidence, in the same days *Where is Europe?* won its first festival awards in Rome and London. In that moment, we easily realised that we had produced something unique. Far before the media started questioning the nature of the rescues at an international level, we could in fact document the thoughts and the vocation of the volunteers. Now that the Dublin Regulation was collapsing, we have their different hopes and fears towards the Union

⁴ For extended readings on the relationship between video contents and the internet see *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Methodology 2016-2021*. Available at: https://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/service-provider/visual-networking-index-vni/complete-white-paper-c11-481360.html#_Toc484813989 (Date accessed: 15/07/2018)

available. Under these circumstances, seeing the volunteers doing their laundry and filling the fridge gains a truly extraordinary outlook on screen.⁵

In these key weeks, during which the European Parliament needs to recompose the fracture created by the ineffective management of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, I hope that watching the human side of the volunteers would help spread awareness and promote international dialogue that can present the untimely death of migrants such as Mustafa. For the moment, the film has been screened in three international film festivals around the world and is expected to take part in several others in the near future. More information can be found at <http://daitona.it/en/where-is-europe/>

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- UNHCR operational portal available at: <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean> (Last Access: 15/07/2018)

⁵ For further reference on this incident and the following European response see e.g. the following articles: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/11/italy-migrant-rescue-ship-standoff-aquarius>
<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/06/28/europe/italy-eu-summit-migrant-crisis/index.html>
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/italy-france-trade-insults-migration-row-boils-over> (Date accessed: 15/07/2018)

Filmography:

- *Fuocoammare - Fire At Sea*, directed by G. Rosi, ITA, 2016, 108 min
- *La Scelta di Catia - Catia's Choice*, directed by R. Burchielli, ITA, 2014, 93 min
- *Mediterranea*, directed by J. Carpignano, ITA, 2015, 107 min
- *Where is Europe?*, directed by V. Signorelli, ITA, 2018, 15 min

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Valentina Signorelli is a professional producer, screenwriter and documentary director. She holds a PhD Film from the University of Westminster in London where she works as a Visiting Lecturer. She is also one of the co-founders of Daitona production. Her research interests include film adaptation, screenwriting techniques in the age of celebrity politics and the issue of the European identity in the Brexit era.

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