

Article

Ten Years of Participatory Cinema as a Form of Political Solidarity with Refugees in Italy. From ZaLab and Archivio Memorie Migranti to 4CaniperStrada

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Abstract: This paper introduces the context of European mobilizations for and against refugees and how participatory cinema has become a way of expressing political solidarity with refugees in Italy. We present and discuss ten years of the artistic work of ZaLab and Archivio Memorie Migranti and focus on two film projects of 4CaniperStrada. Central to the production of participatory cinema in Italy is challenging the mainstream narrative of migration through the proactive involvement of asylum seekers, with their political subjectivity, by using a self-narrative method.

Keywords: documentary films; participatory video; refugees; political solidarity; Italy

1. Introduction

As Della Porta underlines in her book on European mobilizations for and against refugees' rights (2018), in the last decade securitization of migration has led to a reduction in the legal channels of migration and a proliferation of legislation to limit and hierarchize citizenship, with the criminalization of undesirable migrants and the normalization of detention and deportation as instruments of governance. Repression has expanded from the targeting of migrants to the legal persecution of activists from grassroots groups and NGOs. Radical right-wing groups have worked as entrepreneurs of fear and hate against "others".

In Italy, which is at the frontline of the long "refugee crisis", solidarity activists have enacted a variety of direct social actions (i.e., emergency provision of food and clothes; help with communication; managing of informal refugee camps; hosting of migrants within and outside the governmental reception system¹) and different forms of protest (local protests to denounce the conditions of migrants and demand changes in the reception system; symbolic actions at the border with other European countries to denounce the obstacles to the freedom of movement of asylum seekers; opinion campaigns to demand changes in the management of the governmental reception system; solidarity marches as a response to anti-migrant actions). Activists have shown a pragmatic attitude and different levels of contentiousness (Zamponi 2018). They have converged on the idea of solidarity, though the

¹ The reception of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy is handled by three different systems: CARA (Centres of Reception for Asylum Seekers), CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception), and SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which answer to the Ministry of the Interior. The local representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, the prefects, are in charge of the structures and camps in which asylum seekers are hosted. These structures are often owned by NGOs or private citizens, who receive government funds (Zamponi 2018, p. 103).

understanding of the concept varies according to different groups and with the passing of time (Della Porta 2018, pp. 340–42): from compassionate help to the right to hospitality; from the right to move to the right to stay in dignified conditions.

A tension has emerged between the “humanitarian narrative”² (considering refugees as victims) and a more political vision of solidarity (recognizing migrants’ agency, establishing more symmetrical relationships, searching for partnerships and coalitions).

Social movement scholars have paid attention to the *framing* process (what issues are at stake?)³ and the need to convince different players (insiders and outsiders), also through the mobilization of emotions. In the last decade, a growing number of social documentaries have challenged dominant frames on contemporary migrations in Europe⁴. To quote Vittorio Iervese (sociologist and current director of the Festival dei Popoli, International Documentary Film Festival-based in Florence), “brave and uncomfortable documentary” has challenged what mass (and social) media do not show about migrants and refugees in Italy⁵: above all the agency and the active participation of migrants in their representations (Iervese 2016, p. 133).

Migrant cinema⁶ has played an important cultural role in the conflictual transformations of European society⁷ and today it looks at wider socio-political processes related to colonial legacies and new forms of colonialism by showing how those who have been kept invisible continue challenging material and symbolic borders (Ponzanesi 2011). Migrant cinema has become a form of activism, i.e., fighting racism against migrants. Suffice to think of the pioneering experience of the migrant-cineaste Alvaro Bizzarri, who emigrated from Italy to Switzerland in the seventies (La Barba 2018). Like other citizens of foreign origin, Bizzarri suffered widespread racism and it was his indignation at the expulsion of the children⁸ of seasonal workers which turned him to film. His cinematographic accounts aimed to make migrants take consciousness of their condition⁹ and to trigger self-organization and solidarity (above all class solidarity). Bizzarri’s cinematographic gaze took an antiracist stance, it was a rejection of the then-dominant imaginary which dehumanized Italian workers in Switzerland and

² For a critique of humanitarianism, see (Fassin 2010).

³ The concept of framing derives from Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (1974) and it is widely used in all social sciences (for an introduction in the field of communication, Barisione 2009). Applied to social . . . movements (Snow 2004), the idea of *framing* suggests that meanings are constructed through interpretative processes and they are contestable. Social movement leaders and participants (as well as their opponents) regularly engage in this conflictive signifying work.

⁴ See for example the works of Fernand Melgar (http://www.swissfilms.ch/de/film_search/filmdetails/-/id_person/3059), in particular “Vol special” (free available at <https://vimeo.com/111191661>, last accessed on 9 October 2018), distributed in Italy by ZaLab.

⁵ Vittorio Iervese was the curator of two cycles of films selected “to rebel against standardizing words and pictures” full of pietism, hate and fear of migrants. See “Ali in the City. Contemporary migration patterns: drifts and destinations” (Festival dei Popoli 2015) and “Looking for Neverland” (Festival dei Popoli 2016), www.festivaldeipopoli.org/en (last accessed 13 November 2018).

⁶ Migrant cinema remains a rather controversial notion. It has two major definitions: (1) films made by non-European filmmakers; and (2) European films dealing with migrant themes, characters and issues. In this essay we focus on Italian documentary films made (also) by migrants through a participatory process. For a critical discussion on European and Italian cinema of migrations, “Welcome to Schengenland. Tre cinestorie di ospitalità e colpevolezza” by (De Franceschi 2017, pp. 181–97).

⁷ See Gianturco and Peruzzi 2015 for a study on Italian cinema and migrations. For an interview with Dagmawi Yimer on how to “unlearn racism” through cinema of migrations, (Frisina 2018).

⁸ Seasonal workers did not have a right to family reunification. Their status prevented them from renting homes, changing employer and reuniting with their families. In the film *Lo stagionale*, Giuseppe, the protagonist, an Italian migrant, his “clandestine” son and the comrades of the Colonie Libere choose to protest for their rights in Switzerland, against the status of seasonal workers. In 1970, outside the Italian embassy and the federal Swiss Parliament, the fiction of the film met the reality of the documentary and the political actors met the actors of the film.

⁹ “I thought that this film could give us Italians the chance to clearly see our condition: a mirror in which we could observe our reflected image and take consciousness of how unjust the conditions we lived in were, exploited day and night, separated from our families” (www.swissinfo.ch/ita/con-gli-occhi-di-alvaro-bizzarri--il-regista-operaio/410812).

their children. Bizzarri's militant cinema was possible thanks to the antifascist political socialization in the film clubs of the *Colonie Libere*¹⁰.

This article explores how participatory documentary cinema has become a way of reacting to racism against migrants and of expressing political solidarity with refugees in Italy. According to Andrea Segre (founder of ZaLab) participatory documentary cinema refers to first person accounts, with the protagonists' close involvement in the construction of the story, no external narrating voice and cinematographic detail to aesthetics and photography.

The militancy of participatory documentarists is first moral, then political, and expresses itself in the constant search for more respectful representations of the subjects of the events that are narrated. Unlike Italian directors of previous generations, Segre and other participatory documentarists working on migrations in Italy are more aware of the limits that their gaze may have on the vicissitudes of others. They seek a more symmetrical relationship with migrants/refugees and they are probably also facilitated by their greater familiarity and daily acquaintances with people of foreign backgrounds (Vanoli 2018, pp. 191–92).

Our paper will introduce the roots of participatory documentary cinema in participatory video (White 2003) and it will argue that the documentary work of ZaLab, Archive of Migrant Memories and 4CaniperStrada is unique in the Italian context, by presenting their most important films. Finally, we will discuss the importance of the process of film-making and the politics of "civil distribution" in this particular way of enacting political solidarity with refugees in Italy.

2. Ten Years of Participatory Cinema with ZaLab and Archive of Migrant Memories

The origin of participatory cinema is linked to the activity of the "Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle" (CFC/SN) of the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC), which was born from the 1960s civil rights movement, to denounce and address the roots of poverty and social exclusion, to give voice to those who were marginalized by society and to prevent minorities from becoming victims of government and media stereotypes (Frisina 2013).

The main aim of this program was to promote social change by training community action workers to use video, networking and activating citizens, facilitating communication between the government and local communities of citizens.

The CFC/SN's pioneering role in granting citizens access to media production¹¹ must be recognized, as it gave different groups of citizens a forum through which they could communicate, organize themselves politically and, if necessary, have their complaints reach public officials. In participatory cinema three "circuits of feedback" (Collizzoli 2010) are sought: first of all, an *internal feedback loop*, whereby the film is projected in the local communities and the protagonists can have some control over the montage (indicating what should be kept/changed); secondly, a *horizontal feedback loop*, whereby the film is shown to audiences that are considered "*similar*", that is as having some affinity with the protagonists, in order to create alliances between citizens; finally, an *external and vertical feedback loop*, by projecting to other audiences and looking for dialogue with "experts" and decision-makers. This way of making cinema allows for the creation of a collective subject and gives social actors a sense that change is possible.

In the last decade, participatory cinema has spread in Italy because it can give back the "*dignità del racconto*", the dignity of the story and control over their self-representation to those who are normally only portrayed, and whose suffering is denied or vice versa made spectacular, as in the case of asylum

¹⁰ At the end of the seventies the Colonie Libere organized several courses for "animatori cinematografici" all over Switzerland. The aims were teaching those who would direct the film clubs to analyze the films (deconstruct the mechanisms which could capture the "spettatori-consumatori" "spectator-consumers").

¹¹ From the mid-1990s the "ethics of access" has made headway, an approach to documentaries which aims to both increase the reflexivity/responsibility of the filmmakers with respect to citizen audiences, and also make audiovisual technology more accessible in order to give back to social actors control of how they are represented.

seekers and refugees (Segre and Collizzolli 2016). Participatory cinema with refugees in Italy has produced not only works that are “cinematic in all respects, but above all ethical (. . .). Just as Primo Levi asked himself if a man could be treated like that, so the directors of Like a man on earth ask themselves the same” (Cincinelli 2009, p. 278).

According to Gatta (forthcoming), adopting a participatory approach means keeping the focus both on the *product* (a counter-narrative on migrations and on Italy as a post-migratory society) and on the relational *process* between migrants as authors and protagonists of the story and audiovisual professionals and cultural facilitators. Each can reflect on their specific point of view, becoming more aware of their social positions.

The independent and non-commercial distribution of participatory documentaries is built on a wide (around 500 partners in Italy and 800,000 public screenings in the last ten years¹²) and, above all, *active* distribution network: each screening has been “co-organized”, which means that someone has asked for it and has involved hundreds people from his/her territory in a public discussion. Small and big associations, schools and universities, congregations, social and cultural centers organized screenings of the films often with the presence of refugees, the protagonists of the stories. In a similar way to how participatory theatre makes things happen (Musalò 2017), participatory cinema has enabled those who are considered inferior (victims to save or suspected criminals to control) to speak up and be heard in the local and wider public sphere.

ZaLab (www.zalab.org) is an association of five film-makers and social workers (M. Aiello, M. Calore, S. Collizzolli, A. Segre, S. Zavarise), who have played a very important role in promoting participatory cinema in Italy. The name of the association is a tribute to Cesare Zavattini (one of the first proponents in the Italian Neorealist movement), because of his democratic ideal of spreading the video camera to any Italian home (“like a sewing machine”, see Collizzolli 2010, p. 353)¹³. ZaLab’s stories stem from participatory video laboratories which aim to have marginalized people express their own reality and then, for those who so desire, to become authors of documentaries. Since 2006 ZaLab has produced¹⁴ and distributed¹⁵ social documentaries on Mediterranean migrations and migrants in Italy/Europe. In ZaLab’s view, even though the number of movies on this issue has continued to grow in Italy in the last decade¹⁶, there is still a strong need to contribute to changing the frame (and policies) on migrations through participatory cinema¹⁷. In particular, two ZaLab documentaries on refugees have become forms of activism and they are made available for free on streaming every time it is necessary to re-open the debate on Italian migration policies.

¹² Stefano Collizzolli, personal communication 9 November 2018.

¹³ Commenting on Stefania Parigi’s text (2014) on neorealism, the renowned film critic Paolo Mereghetti (“the second lives of neorealism” in *La Lettura del Corriere* 18 August 2014) claimed that neorealist film-makers’ deepest aspiration was “to give aesthetic value to the imperatives of ethics”. Ethics is key to the work of participatory video, whilst aesthetics is sometimes sacrificed in order to prioritise social intervention. Nonetheless, Zalab, AMM and 4CaniperStrada share the neorealist project of democratising the image and its social impact (Parigi 2014).

¹⁴ Among award winning documentary films on migrations produced by ZaLab: “South of Lampedusa” “Green Blood” and “Ibi” by Andrea Segre, “Our Best Years” by Stefano Collizzolli and Matteo Calore; and “Limbo” by Matteo Calore and Gustav Hofer. On ZaLab’s “narratives of change”, see (Ardizzoni 2013).

¹⁵ ZaLab distributed films such as “On the bride’s side” by Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman and Antonio Augugliaro; “Les Sauteurs” by Moritz Siebert, Estephan Wagner and Abou Bakar Sidibé; and, most recently, “Juventa” by Michele Cinque.

¹⁶ Stefano Collizzolli (personal communication, Padova, 26 September 2018) quoted the data collected through www.cinemaitaliano.info and elaborated by Zalab (gray paper, 2016): in 2006 87 independent documentaries were produced, 25 of which were about immigration, in 2014 560 documentaries were produced, and about 200 of these on the theme of immigration.

¹⁷ Andrea Segre is also the director of three fiction films on migrations: “Io sono Li”, “La prima neve” and “L’ordine delle cose”. The latter is the most political (<https://lordinedellecose.it/pamphlet/> last accessed 9 October 2018) and it contributed to creating an Italian national forum for migrants’ right to move through legal channels and to stay in Europe in decent conditions (<http://pclodc.blogspot.com> last accessed 9 October 2018). The name of the movement derives from the movie “Per cambiare l’ordine delle cose” (i.e., to change the order of things).

The first film, “Like a man on earth”¹⁸ by Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer¹⁹ and Riccardo Biadene (Italy, 2008, 60’; ZaLab with Asinitas onlus/AMM, Archive of Migrant Memories) enacted political solidarity with refugees, breaking the silence on the tragic consequences of the Italy-Libya agreement which was supposed to contrast irregular migrations. The agreement was centered on the request for “*respingimenti*” (push backs) by the Italian state and included lucrative business contracts between the two countries.

Dagmawi Yimer interviewed (in Amharic) eight young Ethiopians who had fled their country, and crossed the desert from Sudan to Libya, in metal containers with no food or liquids. The video camera focuses on their faces, listening to their silences and capturing their emotions through close-ups. In Libya they met brutal officials and prison guards who bought them for 30 dinars and dumped them in overcrowded prison cells without clear indictment for months and years on end. Trucks, prisons, containers, jeeps, and body bags were provided by the Italian government as part of the agreement signed with Libyan authorities in 2008. Yimer’s thoughts are left to the voices off-camera (Figure 1). Migrants’ stories of acts of violence, torture, and systematic rape contrast mainstream political discourse. In the movie Yimer meets Italian (i.e., then foreign minister Franco Frattini) and European politicians and very calmly poses uncomfortable questions which reveal the hypocrisy and inadequacy of his interlocutors. “Do you know anything about the treatment reserved to the detainees in the Kofhra prison?” D. Yimer asked I. Laitinen (director of Frontex, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union). His “diplomatic” answer was: “I do not have the details but I was told that there is much room for improvement”. The inhuman politics of Libyan detention centers was renewed with other agreements “to stop irregular migrations” (and new lucrative business) in 2017²⁰. The film “Like a man on earth” has been screened in 86 Italian public squares since 2008 and has travelled across Italy for ten years thanks to the requests of many associations, cinemas, theatres, schools, universities, parishes, cultural and social centers. Every screening has been an opportunity to “activate” people on the ground and numerous activists have used the film to involve other citizens in direct actions of solidarity with refugees.



Figure 1. Dagmawi Yimer (Ethiopian) watches Italian news where the journalist states that, thanks to the agreement between Berlusconi and Gaddafi, “the colonial contention has been settled” (still frame, used by permission). The documentary seems to show how this story is part of a *neo-colonial* politics of Italy towards Libya (and of Europe towards Africa).

¹⁸ <http://www.zalab.org/en/projects/like-a-man-on-earth/> (last accessed 9 October 2018). It was presented at Milano Film Festival in 2008 and it was the winner of SalinaDocFest in 2009 (Vanoli 2018, p. 190).

¹⁹ Dagmawi Yimer was a Law student from Addis Ababa who left Ethiopia because of the strong political repression. After crossing the desert, surviving the violence in Libya, he arrived by boat in Italy. In Rome he took part in the participatory video laboratory (“The desert and the sea”, 2007) and he started to film.

²⁰ On this issue, see <https://www.msf.org/libya-open-letter-european-governments-are-feeding-business-suffering> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

The second film, “Closed Sea”²¹ is by Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti (Italy, 2012, 60’; ZaLab)—who met their witnesses in Shousha refugee camp (at the border between Libya and Tunisia) and in two reception camps for asylum seekers (C.A.R.A.) in southern Italy. It showed the nexus between “push back operations” and human rights violations against migrants (escaping mainly from Eritrea and Somalia). The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg condemned Italy²² and the documentary contributed to assigning Italian political authorities the responsibility of human rights violations against asylum seekers, providing migrant testimonies in the case of Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy (Palladino and Gjergji 2016).

Italian participatory cinema with refugees is closely linked to another ten-year-long experience, AMM-Archive of Migrant Memories (<http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net>). It was developed in 2007, starting from an organization (Asinitas onlus) engaged in teaching Italian as a second language in creative ways (i.e., involving migrants and asylum seekers in participatory video laboratories, in collaboration with ZaLab). Dagmawi Yimer was one of the founders of AMM. Triulzi (2012) suggested that AMM open a space to share memories of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees with the goal of rethinking Italy with its colonial legacies. AMM’s primary interest is promoting the listening of migrants’ self-narratives through different tools: textual, audiovisual, exhibitions²³ and, above all, by using participatory cinema, as with “C.A.R.A. Italia”²⁴ by Dagmawi Yimer or “Welcome to Italy”²⁵ by Aluk Amiri, Hamed Dera, Hevi Dilara, Zakaria Mohamed Ali and Dagmawi Yimer, who attended a laboratory by Renaud Personnaz (from www.ateliersvaran.com).

Among AMM productions there are “diaries of the return” to Lampedusa. “Nothing but the sea” by Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco (Italy, 2011, 49’) is about the return of D. Yimer to Lampedusa with a video camera and a regular identity card. In 2006 Yimer could only imagine Lampedusa, as he looked through the gratings of the windows of a detention center, but a few years later he met the residents and expressed his gratitude. When undocumented migrants land in Lampedusa they remain confined behind high walls, staying separated from the island and its inhabitants. The film includes moments which have a strong poetic resonance (inspired by the work of the documentarist Vittorio De Seta, according to O’Healy 2012) and reveals how two solitudes, two marginalities can meet. The film gives dignity to its protagonists. Taking up again O’Healy analysis (2012, p. 138), both the *Lampedusani* and the migrants are racialized by the Italian state. In the film a resident of Lampedusa says to Yimer “Before the discrimination against Africans, there was discrimination against Italians from the South”. In addition, he adds that Lampedusa is only ever cited by newspapers to talk about the *sbarchi*, that is the boat arrivals, while the problems of the island itself (i.e., the drastic lack of social services) are systematically ignored.

The comparison with other cinematographic views on the island is striking, especially with the most famous, the Berlin award-winning “Fire at sea (Fuocoammare)” by Francesco Rosi (2016), which ends up reinforcing the dominant humanitarian and securitarian frame on migrations, making refugees “poor victims” with no possibility to interact with Lampedusani in more symmetrical ways²⁶. The cinematography of “Fire at sea” is very beautiful, but its aesthetics seems detached from politics. To quote Sou (2017, p. 2), “there is a near total erasure of refugees’ voices, personal identities and histories. Scenes which feature refugees (re)produce familiar scenes of distressed and desperate groups of black bodies being rescued, cared for, or processed by Italians (. . .). In contrast, the film

²¹ <http://www.zalab.org/en/projects/closed-sea/> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

²² <http://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/news/The-European-Court-of-Human-Rights-condemns-Italy-for-its-push-back-policy-to-Libya-in-2009/2381> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

²³ For example, AMM organized an exhibition with objects of migrants and, more recently, there has been a project with migrants’ multimedial diaries (project DIMMI).

²⁴ <http://www.asinitas.org/?portfolio=c-a-r-a-italia-3> (last accessed on 9 October 2018). Per un’analisi di “C.A.R.A. Italia”, see O’Healy 2012, pp. 136–7.

²⁵ <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en/films/amm-productions/benvenuti-in-italia-welcome-to-italy/>.

²⁶ See also the criticism from the collective Askavusa: <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/2016/02/24/1428/> (accessed on 9 October 2018).

is dominated by the personal stories and experiences of Lampedusa residents (. . .). The audience ultimately learns more about a romanticized identity of the island and its residents at the expense of the hundreds of refugees who are filmed as mass movements of silent, voiceless, and identity-less bodies”.

After Yimer’s “Nothing but the sea”, Zakaria Mohamed Ali—a young Somali journalist- returns to Lampedusa and recalls his stay in the Centre for Identification and Expulsion, searching for lost memories with his video camera (“To whom it may concern”²⁷, Italy, 2013, 16’).

AMM (co)produced some other films by Yimer: “Va’ Pensiero. Walking stories” (Italy, 2013, 55’)²⁸ on the experiences of three persons who survived racist violence (in Milan Mohamed Ba was knifed in 2009, while in Florence Mor and Cheikh were shot in 2011); “Asmat-Names” (Italy, 2015, 17’ 23’)²⁹ on the disaster that occurred on 3 October 2013, off the coast of Lampedusa (Figure 2).

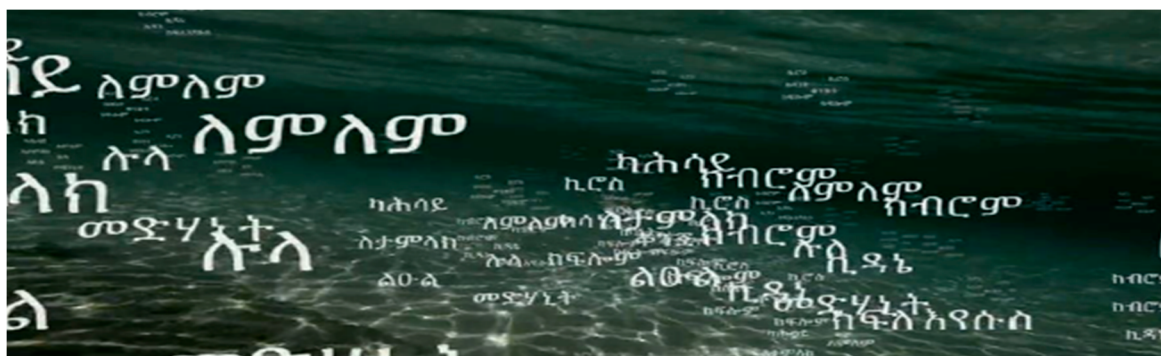


Figure 2. Names of people without bodies, meaningful names (i.e., Selam/Peace or Tesfaye/My Hope) of migrants who lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean (“Asmat” still frame, used by permission).

3. 4Caniperstrada: Participatory Cinema with Refugees in Sardinia

4Caniperstrada is an artistic collective of independent photographers, film-makers and social researchers³⁰ that produces reportages, documentary films and visual research where photography and video-making become tools for social inquiry, observation and representation of contemporary phenomena. The project was born “on the road”—hence the group’s name—through the interaction with territories, people, and their stories, focusing mainly on social issues: migration, human rights, human geography, social change.

In ten years of activity the collective has produced several documentary films of an ethnographic/anthropologic nature, organized thematic festivals, as well as meetings with authors and directors, cinema, and photography workshops. They have created an international network of organizations working in the field of visual culture, human rights and cinema and promoted projects aimed at describing social changes by building close ties with territories and local communities.

For several years they have been conducting projects on the language of participatory cinema, giving workshops and producing films together with refugees and asylum seekers in Sardinia, with the intention of creating new cinematographic narratives on biographies and subjectivities within migratory paths.

Sardinia, an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, has seen the number of asylum seekers grow since 2013, and is now hosting over seven thousand migrants. The phenomenon of the reception and flow of forced migrants has opened a great debate on social change on the island.

²⁷ <https://vimeo.com/77179552> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

²⁸ <http://va-pensiero.org> See also its anti-racist educational kit edited by AMM, <https://www.giuntiscuola.it/lavitascolastica/magazine/news/eventi/percorsi-di-antirazzismo-in-classe-ecco-il-kit-va-pensiero/> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

²⁹ <https://vimeo.com/114849871> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

³⁰ S. Muresu joined the artistic collective since 2007 collaborating as director and visual researcher in workshop of participatory cinema and social documentaries. <http://www.4caniperstrada.org/en/productions/> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

Farms in inland areas or ex-hotels on the coasts are some of the places where the first reception centers were born, thus triggering, often in small communities isolated from the presence of foreigners, a mix of generations, religions, languages, and customs.

The time required for processing asylum requests in Italy (often around 1–2 years) and the continuous denials of the Territorial Commissions to grant refugee status, have prolonged the time spent by migrants in reception centers. All this has led to unprecedented cultural exchanges that Sardinia, in its condition of insularity, had never known before.

Between 2014 and 2017 4CaniperStrada carried out research on the use of participatory methods to produce films (short films and feature films), thus experimenting, together with refugees and asylum seekers, original languages, and horizontal creative processes. This methodology entailed opening the direction to a multi-voiced dialogue and recognizing empathy and subjectivity as distinctive elements of a process where there was no written plot, but only the stories encountered at different stages of a shared emotional, existential, and normative journey. In 2016 they created the first web platform entirely dedicated to participatory cinema in Sardinia, which collects all the workshops and experiences from the field³¹.

The two films produced through workshop activities and using the participatory method are:

- *Nako—The Land*³² (ITA, 2016, 30'), direction of K. H. Beyla, L. Manka, Ali A. Hashi, within the project Video Partecipativo Sardegna³³,
- *On the Same Boat*³⁴ (ITA, 2017, 71') direction of Stefania Muresu, T. Khalifa, U. Aziz, S. Suwareh, produced by Roda Film e 4CaniperStrada.

The approach used in the creative process of both films focused on long periods of production and research (on average between one and three years), the centrality of the relationship with the people involved, the spontaneity of contents and narrative choices, searching for co-authorship.

They attempted to break the classic documentary cinema tradition, born together with anthropology and visual ethnology, where filming was seen as a tool for objective documentation of reality. In this way, they experienced the limits of this traditional approach and at the same time they also differentiate themselves from the specific current called “Accented Cinema”³⁵ made exclusively by migrant directors.

In the following case studies, we explain how the filming practice with refugees was used as a research tool to experience visual forms of dramaturgy of reality: by learning and questioning the way to manage the cinematographic narration during the creative process. The main feature of this experience was the creation of a mixed gaze between refugees and film-makers. This approach also asserts the importance of a “temporary present” (for example the limbo of reception centers) that produced the different forms of re-writing and representation of the other in the two case studies.

Participatory cinema of 4CaniperStrada has been based on low production costs, flexibility, use of non-invasive cameras and handy cams to practice cinema without technical limits, a small crew of 3–4 people, within the idea of a “stylo camera” (Astruc 1948, p. 33), free and able to portray with images and do so with many hands, in a constant dialectics and practice of reflection.

The experience of the two participatory films opens up to the idea of a trans-cultural cinema (McDougall 2015, p. 340), made up of interactional dynamics of observation, of mixed directions and the search for an aesthetic performativity, halfway between the dimension of the process and the

³¹ <http://www.videopartecipativosardegna.net> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

³² <http://www.4caniperstrada.org/en/portfolio/nako-la-terra-nako-the-land/> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

³³ <http://www.videopartecipativosardegna.net> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

³⁴ <http://www.4caniperstrada.org/en/portfolio/on-the-same-boat/> (last accessed on 9 October 2018).

³⁵ “Accented cinema” comprises different types of cinema made by exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers who live and work in countries other than their country of origin. The distinction between the sub-categories of exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic films is based chiefly on the varied relationship of the films and their makers to existing or imagined homeplaces (Naficy 2001).

cinematographic product. These are works capable of providing a contemporary representation of stories of migrations through new narrative languages, where “the cinema that belongs to the real, is made in reality and with the real, a large open laboratory, within which critical sense, ethical discourse and the search for truthfulness of the representation converge” (Dottorini 2013, pp. 16–18).

Nako—The Earth was shot at a reception center in the province of Nuoro, a former agri-tourism business in the agro-pastoral context of Sardinia, geographically isolated from urban settlements.

The protagonists were asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 25, coming from Sub-Saharan African countries (Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Ghana) and Somalia. Circular meetings were organized to provide an introduction to the camera, mutual interviews, activities on geographic maps, and the creation of story-boards. The contents gathered consist of personal stories, discursive interviews, transpositions of cultural concepts in fictional scenes, self-representations, stories related to agricultural work and the land. The geographic isolation and the daily life around the rural environment (the forest) influenced the production of contents in *Nako* (from the mandinke “garden, field”), which is structured in three micro-stories (*Laboureur et ses enfants*, *Nabiaulu*, *Dhulka—The Land*). The film introduces new codes and stratified meanings (in terms of editing choices and poetry of cinematography) to the social truthfulness that the film intends to tell (Figure 3).

By participating in the video-editing, the protagonists reorganized the images shot in narrative terms, thus constructing a dramaturgy of reality and conveying the contents with ethnographic elements typical of their culture of origin and visual perception³⁶.

The film was disseminated in the local public sphere, in meetings with the participation of the inhabitants, institutions and refugees, now invested with a new role and an artistic experience that allowed them to escape from forced isolation to the edge of the inhabited area. The internal feedback loop started with a first projection in the reception center and then in the small city of Sarule (NU), co-organized with the Municipality and the local school. The aim was to strengthen the relations between the refugees and the local community.

After that, the film went through the horizontal, external, and vertical feedback loops. *Nako-The Land* has also been screened in academic contexts, schools, and thematic meetings as an educational and informative tool. At the cinematographic festival Tertio Millennium, in 2017 the film received an award from Il Cinematografo³⁷, in the film contest “A Corto d’Identità”.



Figure 3. Ali (Somalia) observes the Sardinian landscape, remembering his faraway land. A frame of *On The Same Boat*, a hut in the woods is built, an emotional representation of a journey.

³⁶ Reclaiming or Constructing? Real or Un-Real? How do objective and subjective visions coexist in the places of the image? Definition of “Un-Real” by Giovanni Festa (Dottorini 2013, pp. 51–61): “a sore wound inflicted in the real, embedded in its surface. A reality that raves, disintegrates, imagines”.

³⁷ “A corto di identità” First film prize promoted by Fondazione Ente dello Spettacolo, during Tertio Millennio Film Fest 2017.

On The Same Boat was born as a project for the production of a documentary film. It collects the subjective stories of the life and travel of refugees who arrived from the sea and find themselves in a reception center (CAS) on the beach, in a former tourist resort in northern Sardinia.

The film combines different narrative levels: documentary of reality, interviews, participatory video, and fiction. Filmed between 2014 and 2016 and produced at the end of 2017, it has been presented—as a collaborative film—in several international film festivals, screenings in cultural circuits and in the autumn of 2018, it will travel to other countries (including Africa) thanks to its selection at a festival promoted by the International Organization for Migration.

The protagonists are a young Syrian, two Gambians and a Pakistani co-director, who recounts life in the reception center and the wait for asylum with a sort of candid-camera technique. The center housed over 300 male migrants from various geographical areas (Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh).

The film observes the daily routine between the center, the beach, and the bar of the small coastal town, until the protagonist meets a boat, metaphor and real *matter* of the film, which reveals the memory of the trip. The narrative form tries to minimize distances and, with poetical empathy (acquired through the long research process) and the use of black and white photography (color is used only for mobile phone images documenting the travels of the migrants), it tries to create a connecting thread between the spectator and the voice of the protagonists.

The video camera is visible, participating, the intent to tell one's story evident and conscious. The gaze is directed to the viewer the images create an emotional relationship between place—memory—character, in a construction of the scenes that is always linked to the complex subjectivity of the protagonist and which interrogates the spectator without granting presumed truths.

The documentary is characterized by a fictional part³⁸, the construction of a hut in a wood made of reeds and plastic, which from the very beginning is called “home”, a transposition into images of Sulayman Suwareh's personal biography, co-author of the film. This inner story of the film was directed and interpreted by Sulayman, starting from his own three-year experience in the Gourougou mountain (on the border between Morocco and Spain, Melilla). The place where he lived and slept—his home—was a hut of plastic in the wood together with hundreds of migrants, which in the film was re-constructed. As an example of the above-mentioned “accented cinema”—the story of the hut has a narrative structure designed by Sulayman, that identifies topic, language (mandinka), a visual style and plot with a personal sensibility (such as the scene where they prepare a tea on the fire “*as we make in Gambia, our country*”).

On The Same Boat, which has been projected mostly through an *external feedback loop* at a cinematographic festival (focused in documentaries and human rights) and a national screening, is today an instrument with which the protagonists become bearers of their artistic project and their migratory experience in Italy. For some of them, participation in the film, presentations during public screenings and collaboration with 4CaniperStrada has facilitated obtaining a residence permit and provided the opportunity to demonstrate their social integration in the host country.

In 4CaniperStrada's experience of participatory cinema, they sought to make a representation based on refugees' visual self-narration, by exercising what Glissant (2005) defines as the “right to opacity” or “that right not to be totally understood and not to totally understand the other” (Massari 2017), a complexity that resists the demand for transparency and exhibition, and which produces critical knowledge and a shared collective heritage created together with migrants, detached from the logic of institutionalized recognition³⁹.

³⁸ Or ethno-fiction? An example of the use of a language located between cinematographic fiction and a reality developed through the practice of visual ethnography. A definition of ethno-fiction comes from visual anthropology and is provided by the ethnologist and anthropologist Marc Augé: “a narration that evokes a social reality, observed through the subjectivity of an individual”, (Augé 2011, p. 8).

³⁹ Maria Lugones writes: “through traveling to other people's worlds” we discover that there are “worlds” in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions, even though

4. Conclusions

As the sociologist Emmanuel Ethis (2018) stated, *cinema* not only reveals fragments of the real that the public can accept and recognize, but—to cite Pierre Sorlin—it enlarges the domain of the visible and offers new interpretive frames on a reality. Cinema can have a social impact in different ways: offering alternative values to the mainstream; allowing spectators to identify with people and situations that they are not familiar with; and finally enthusing and drawing on people's emotions to motivate them to take action. Called on by the film, the spectators may feel compelled to “respond” (Sorlin 1977).

Italian participatory documentary cinema with refugees has been our privileged point of departure from which to explore how it is possible to challenge the mainstream narrative of migrations in Europe and to promote new forms of everyday interactions between locals and refugees in Italy.

The Italian documentary cinema presented in this article has been made with refugees through a participatory process of film-making and by adopting a politics of “civil distribution”.

The participatory process has allowed the viewers to appreciate the positive force of migrants' active testimony (O'Healy 2012, p. 139) which warns the audience of how framing refugees as victims entails downplaying their dignity and the ability to take charge of one's own life. Moreover, changing point of view thanks to refugees' memories has helped to rethink Italian history. For instance, Dagmawi Yimer refers to Italian colonialism in Ethiopia at the beginning of “Like a man of Earth” as “the first time our great grandparents (Italian and Ethiopian) met”; Aboubakar (in “C.A.R.A. Italia”) tells Dagmawi: “Our grandparents told us that Italians were good people, that they knew them; our ears heard this and we came to Italy. When we arrived we found something else”.

ZaLab, AMM and 4CaniperStrada have given Italian audiences the opportunity to reconnect with their past and to learn how to feel “responsible” (etymologically, “able to give a response”) in the present. For instance, AMM has committed to working above all in schools and universities within reflective, antiracist programs in which young people are encouraged to write a “collective diary” where they weave the direct testimonials of refugees through the audiovisual and their own stereotypes which they collectively discuss. Several times the discussions after the films quoted in this article have ended with a “call for action” at a local level. For instance, the activists of Baobab Experience (<https://baobabexperience.org>) have organized screenings with ZaLab films and every time they have found new volunteers to support refugees in Rome.

Italian participatory documentary cinema has thus become a form of enacting political solidarity with refugees, involving citizens in local direct social actions and in different forms of protest (i.e., symbolic actions to denounce social injustice in the governmental reception system). DVDs with ZaLab's documentaries—such as “Like a man of earth” and “Closed sea”—were sent to many Italian politicians as a “Christmas gift” by citizens in campaigns dedicated to assigning political authorities⁴⁰ the responsibility to open legal channels of migration and to change the negative social conditions of asylum seekers and refugees in Italy. The text of the campaign⁴¹ was sarcastic, calling for helping politicians who live in “a dramatic condition of ignorance” to know the consequences of their decisions.

In recent years, film-makers from ZaLab, AMM and 4CaniperStrada have paid increased attention to the product, to reach a wider audience and to promote advocacy campaigns for migrants and refugees' rights. This shift seems to be even more necessary today, when symbolic and physical violence against migrants and refugees appears legitimated by the political discourse of the new Italian government and, especially, by the Home Office Minister Matteo Salvini (from the xenophobic

in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable”, (Lugones 1987, pp. 3–19).

⁴⁰ Here there are the first 50 Italian politicians who received this gift: <http://comeunuomosullaterra.blogspot.com/2008/12/politici-natale-come-un-uomo.html>.

⁴¹ About 45,000 people joined the campaign and more than 150 dvds were sent as gift to politicians from Italian citizens (Stefano Collizzolli's personal communication, 26 November 2018).

party “Lega Nord”). Participatory cinema keeps on playing an important role to enact a political solidarity with refugees⁴² in difficult times not only for the System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR)⁴³, but also in a more general crisis of Italian democracy, by inviting citizens to challenge the new faces of fascism (Traverso 2017) through the arts of de-bordering.

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⁴² In 2018 ZaLab organized a one-year project in collaboration with SPRAR, using participatory video laboratory to engage both refugees and social workers involved in the reception system, from North, Centre and South Italy.

⁴³ Minister Salvini's recent “decreto immigrazione” has dramatic effects on migrants' rights and on the system of reception of asylum seekers and refugees. See <https://www.meltingpot.org/Il-CdM-ha-approvato-il-decreto-immigrazione-ma-la-battaglia.html#.W6-TwmW3m0g> (last accessed 9 October 2018)

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