

Conclusions

This work of media excavation has now come to an end. For me this is not the first time, but it marks a process of learning from the past. When I was studying medieval archaeology and preparing my final bachelor's thesis, I became fed up with my object of study. I was analyzing, studying and drawing models of pottery fragments I found during excavations. I sarcastically nicknamed my thesis a “shovelful of sherd” (sherd is a technical name given to the fragments of pottery usually found in archaeological sites), to ironize my growing disinterest in pottery. These “sherds” were originally a regional product that was widespread during the late medieval period. Their design and structure suggested that an anterior production style and material had come back in fashion: namely a raw, ubiquitous and cheap ceramic mixture. It had done so because the pottery was produced within a local context of circulation. My thoughts during those long hours of measuring and recomposing sherds of pottery into single products, however, went to imagining a future archaeologist analyzing today's IKEA glasses. They might be found, I conjectured, in a north-Italian site and would be consistent with the European period of Late Capitalism. It sounded discouraging. Of course, I was aware that the medieval sherd's production process was different to that found today, or in Late Antiquity and the Classic roman period, where a standardized and centralized production process means materials and forms have global reach. Ultimately, I realized that the IKEA glass—as well medieval earthenware—may be artistically uninteresting, but it is valuable in another way. All was not lost. My archeological experience had helped

me to consider a contemporary artifact and its production process, and this would go on to inform, ironically, how I approached interactive practices. Like other scholars before me, I agonized over how to study them properly in the face of their constantly changing natures, and diversity in form and appearance. To overcome these difficulties, I realized I had to think like an archaeologist when analyzing material findings: that is, I viewed them as “cultural artifacts” or media objects within a media ecology, or fragments within a record that might assist us in the study of the broader and dynamic configuration of the site.

In March 2021, I conducted a brief check on the Internet through Chrome to trace the availability of some case studies I had the opportunity to analyze in this work. They were all released no earlier than 15 years ago. The newsgame *Refugees*, for instance, is no longer available. There is now a page on the website which lets us know that there was once a game there, but it is currently offline. The serious game *Last Exit Flucht*, which is the German version of *Against All Odds*, is also not accessible. The Austrian website hosting it still owns the page domain where it now says: “after longer than a decade and the end of Adobe Flash Player, the game goes to its well deserved retirement” (Last Exit Flucht, n.d.). The English version of *Against All Odds* redirects us to another page, whose domain has now been bought by a non-profit organisation. The game *The Migrant Trail* can be found on the website of the transmedia project *The Undocumented*. Yet, my request to download the latest version of Adobe Player was refused. Instead, the documentary film, part of the same project and released one year before, is available on Vimeo on demand for \$1.99.

In the meantime, some users have uploaded gameplay videos on YouTube, while others have written about it on blogs and journals—a quick Google image search retrieves plenty of screenshots. This book is a documentation of these media as well. These interactives are no longer accessible in their entirety, but some pieces have been left. These fragments tell us a story of media that is rapidly fading away. These remains bring me back to the words that archeologists Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn use to define the scope of their discipline, thus indicating

the study of a process that determines over time “what is left and what is gone forever.” (2004, 53)

In this work, I identified interactive practices as “cultural artifacts” and approached them through a heuristic methodology, which performed a sort of “archeological excavation.” I started from the object itself and looked “around, above and in front of it,” as the Italian archeologist Andrea Carandini encourages us to do (2017, *Premessa*). To frame interactive practices about migration as “cultural artifacts” allowed me to explore both their digital materiality as objects of material production, and the broader conditions of their circulation. I unearthed the ways in which these same objects frame social, cultural and economic practices and form a complex media ecology.

I have demonstrated that when we look at interactive practices’ materiality and frame them as goods in a market, their subjection to economic dynamics becomes clear. Interactive practices do not seek to standardize but instead follow change and aim to innovate. This media production is not purely new: it also invokes the experimentality of early cinema and amateur production, and film formats which rapidly faded away. The use of certain web formats and the choice to let them circulate primarily on the web shows how important it has been for producers to reach an online audience. In the second chapter, I explored their context of circulation, the Web, and digital formats. This revealed that TV broadcasters and legacy media also typically adopt a strategy of innovation, as they are attempting to keep up with technological trends within an environment of new media giants. At the same time, the use of specific formats like Adobe Flash shows that despite its decade-long success, economic and technological factors can accelerate a format’s demise. The format opened the world of animation and interactive media to amateur practitioners. It was disseminated quickly and easily over the Internet, and its obsolescence, therefore, heralds the end of a certain kind of creative production. As a consequence of its deprecation, some interactives developed over the last decade have become what Paul Grainge calls “ephemeral media” (2011). Software or web-encoding (such as API) deprecation is the largest contributing factor to the ephemerality of interactive practices. On the one hand, these techno-

logical features enable a simpler creation and implementation of maps, links to social media, and interactivity; but on the other, they condemn producers to financing the perpetual maintenance of media objects so as to keep them accessible in their entirety.

As I found out during my visits to the Sound and Vision Institute in Hilversum and the National Film Board of Canada in Montréal, national institutions are already trying to preserve some of these interactives. Archiving and preservation solutions for interactives suggest a new form of thinking about the archive as a fluid and shifting entity. Indeed, the preservation of interactives, similar to interactive media art, requires archiving not just the final product, but the preservation of every component of the work in its formative stages. Further, the fact that a work can be migrated to or emulated on different software or operating systems does not always mean that these practices are necessary or (economically) feasible. In the latter case, documentation helps to prevent definitive loss, or disappearance into mere source code. Studying interactive practices' digital materiality demonstrates how important the study of format is to determine which economic and technological forces contribute to digital obsolescence, circulation, and a specific software's success. What this all means is that we must shift our understanding of the archive itself. Archivists, broadcasters, producers and creators need to be more aware of what formats they choose, and they should already be thinking about preservation before they begin to create. If we want to preserve digital media, innovation should not just mean producing something new, but also something durable and sustainable. The archive, in this configuration, would become a repository not just of what is left behind, but what might be reused, recomposed, and reactivated in different forms and formats in the future.

After looking at the digital materiality of interactive practices, I proceeded with what an archaeologist might call a "morphological analysis," or an analysis of the form of an artifact. This meant looking more closely at case studies, and exploring the way the story of migration engages with the specific features of interactivity. In the third and fourth chapter I outlined two scopic regimes (Jay 1988) which often define interactive practices about migration. The chapter "A View

from *Within*” explored serious games, text-adventures, interactive documentaries and newsgames, which place the user in the position of a migrant or a refugee, or ask them to travel to a refugee camp. In adopting this view, the user interacts with the world of refugees and migrants. Some of the case studies reconstruct the experience of crossing the border, and by doing so they also replicate its inevitability. In other words, these media can be understood as “simulations”; we look at them as reproductions of a certain system instead of focusing on their narrative (Frasca 2003).

In asking us to get closer to the condition of migrants and refugees oppressed by border regimes, they also address our deepest emotions. Through what I call an “ethic of empathy” such interactive practices mobilize our compassion towards “vulnerables.” By adopting this empathic view which encourages us to feel compassion for the vulnerables, we maintain a comfortable position as “ironic spectators.” (Chouliaraki 2013) In other words, we do not feel the urge to change a situation, but instead look at and passively accept the causes of the present situation as inevitable. Approaching these interactive practices as simulations helps us to see how creators and practitioners can think about migration in other ways. Instead of reproducing and replicating border regimes, simulations offer an opportunity to propose alternative views: “we are so used to see the world through the narrative lenses that it is hard for us to imagine an alternative” (Frasca 2003, 224). Interactive practices about migration, this work argues, can become a utopian field in which to experiment and reimagine a world without borders, where migrants and refugee are neither oppressed nor a problem to be managed.

In the fourth chapter “A View from Above,” I explored interactive maps and data visualizations. These media objects offer an empowered view. This standpoint suggests the need to scale migration and by doing so it reframes it as a global problem. These interactives often represent migrants and refugees as dots or arrows, simplifying the complexity of human trajectories. By following design rules and their objective to produce beautiful and harmonic visualizations, interactive maps often risk producing an image of migration—especially of trajectories over

time—which emphasizes the steady flow of peoples, or an incoming invasion. This reinforces an understanding of migration as an emergency which requires a prompt and coordinated response. On the other hand, this image represents the process of governmentalizing migration for humanitarian reasons (Fassin 2013). In other words, these interactive practices represent a (humanitarian) need to make refugees and migrants legible, scalable and manageable. Their perspective on migration is one of statecraft (Scott 1998). This way of looking involves the use of certain data collections by humanitarian and governmental agencies, and a complex infrastructure of vision, which employs satellite, drones and other technologies of non-human vision to create “operational images.” (Farocki 2003) This complex apparatus suggests a new “invisual” form of looking, or “platform seeing.” (Mckenzie and Munster 2019)

In the last chapter, “The Promise of Humanitarianism,” I explored humanitarianism as a discursive formation in order to understand how it shapes the way stories of migration are narrated on the web (Foucault [1978] 2008). It made clear how specific technological features influence how stories of migration are told. This “View from Within” conveys an “ethic of empathy,” where our moral compulsions are supported by a technology which aims to bring the user virtually closer to migrants and refugees and understand their suffering. In so doing, it offers a humanitarian solution. At the same time, this use of interactivity and simulations risks reproducing a self-directed morality, which seeks to bring relief to the user rather than to the migrant subject(s) of interactives. In other words, virtual interaction replaces real action. This model is a marketing strategy: a way to disburden oneself of moral concerns.

Moreover, interactive practices show how humanitarianism is enacted by the display of its material infrastructures. In refugee camps, the actual material infrastructures and the supply chain is rendered visible. Humanitarian infrastructures, which form part of a broader infrastructure of migration, not only carry a message of progress and development, but, as Brian Larkin argues, they have a certain poetic value (2013). Following Larkin, infrastructures also work at the level of “fantasy and desire” by “encoding dreams.” They might also function as “embodiments of objective historical forces.” (Ibid., 333) This view of

humanitarian aid offers a cosmopolitan perspective: on the one hand it wants to bring relief and alleviate suffering, while on the other, it makes the whole world more “human.”

I agree with Didier Fassin in his contention that humanitarianism has become a force and a secular religion which helps overcome the fear of a crumbling world lacking solidarity and order. That is, humanitarianism bespeaks a belief in a fundamentally ordered world which is placed in danger by constant emergencies. This empowered and omniscient position suggests that migration is, as Martina Tazzioli contends, “a problem to be governed.” (2020). I argue that these heuristic operations of collecting in *A View from Within* and *A View from Above*, clarify the way in which contemporary humanitarian discourse constructs a specific political rationality. This “is not pure, neutral knowledge”—as Thomas Lemke argues—which simply represents the governed reality. It is an element of government itself, which helps to create “a discursive field in which exercising power is rational.” (2002, 8) Both scopopic regimes generate a “humanitarian affect” (Ross 2020): on the one hand as a form of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2011) that feeds our moral sentiments, and on the other by describing migration as an urgent problem. The close reading of these two perspectives shows how broadcasters produce these media objects in order to obtain an online audience. It also shows how creators and other institutions develop interactives as “useful” media, which leverage and support solidarity and hopefully gain donors for humanitarian agencies. It demonstrates how important humanitarianism has become in this present historical moment. The timeframe in which they were produced—the beginning of the conflict in Syria and the subsequent peak in international migration towards Europe—suggests a time in which producers felt the need to emphasize emotion, and to use data as a way of combatting the over-saturated media environment concerning migration. Still, the fact that they continue to be produced and were made before the time in question, also shows that the topic of migration is not exclusively historical, but also part a broader humanitarian discourse.

In this regard, interactives address our deepest feelings, our wish to overthrow a general crisis of pity (Boltanski 1999), and compassion

fatigue (Moeller 2002). We see grief, pain, injustice everywhere and we ask ourselves what we can do about it. However, we do not ask how to stop systematic suffering, for the world is too complex to find root causes. Humanitarianism never views economic globalization as a cause; nevertheless, its global, empowered perspective is precisely a product of such a historic transformation. For Zygmunt Bauman, however, globalization is at the root of “liquid modernity,” a system which is divided into those who rule and “move and act faster,” and the rest (2000, 119). Bauman famously argues that “refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers, migrants, the sans papiers...are the waste of globalization.” (2013, 58) The effort of humanitarianism and its renewed “platform seeing” tells us that it follows a capitalistic imperative of efficiency (McKenzie and Munster 2019). It has created a global, complex, and coordinated infrastructure that aims not only to provide immediate help, but also to prevent vulnerability. By presenting migrants and refugees as “vulnerables” we not only increase our understanding of them, but we come to view ourselves as the *non-vulnerables*. This is similar to what Edward Said termed “Orientalism:” the idea that the West, during the previous centuries, had actively built the Orient (1979). In so doing, Europeans’ perception of themselves also changed; the West became what the Orient was not. Following the same line of thinking, in this work, interactive practices about migration create an image of our humanitarian and global institutions as compassionate saviors. If Orientalism has contributed to the acceptance of European ruling and its management and administering of the Orient, then humanitarianism is not only a force that elicits compassion, but also acts as a form of power-knowledge that forces the acceptance of certain social practices (Foucault 1980). In short, the humanitarian vision justifies how we manage, administer and rule the lives of migrants and refugees.

This work has not offered a general definition of humanitarianism, but instead provides a contemporary analysis of it through the study of interactive practices of the last 15 years. Although media outlets continue to discuss a migrant or refugee “crisis,” some scholars have suggested that this may in fact point to a “crisis of humanitarianism” itself. Adopting this view, my analysis asks if migrants and refugees are re-

ally the source of the crisis. We might instead turn to the narratives of interactive practices, and wonder if a story about migration “flows” reaching Europe instead indicates an inner crisis of Europe (Nail 2020). In the same fashion, we might ask if the story of migrants crossing the border from Mexico to US represents a crisis of democratic institutions in the United States. Further, we may wonder if our interest in learning through innovative technological means about the vulnerables instead discloses a *non*-vulnerable, humanitarian will to dominate. To be clear, I am not claiming that people working for humanitarian aid organization are doing wrong—this is not the point. Humanitarian workers alleviate suffering. It suffices to reflect on how exactly, during this timeframe, European migration policies (for instance the agreement with Turkey in March 2016) have been implemented in order to control migration at “external” borders. Matthias Thiele demonstrated a similar outcome in his analysis of German television productions about migration during the nineties, and how negative images of migrant “flow” supported a sharpening of immigrations laws in Germany (2005).

I hope this work makes us reflect on how humanitarianism as a “discursive formation” reflects the imperatives of a globalized world separated into those who have and those who have not. This ambiguity explains what Kaarina Nikunen calls the “the paradox of media solidarity.” (2019, 4) She argues that some “representations and expressions of solidarities that seems inspiring, may be part of oppressive practices: there is no absolute, inherent purity or goodness in media solidarities.” (Ibid., 4) The case studies I have explored in this work present this same ambiguity. Studying these media within their context, thus within their respective infrastructures, reveals these paradoxes.

I hope this work is just the beginning of a sustained practice of media digging. Studying interactive practices about migration as “cultural artifacts” can broaden our understanding of contemporary media production on the web. I explored how interactive practices engage with the topic of migration. But as the media landscape becomes ever more complex, this methodology can be applied to other media ecologies, topics, and discursive formations. This work is a singular excavation—the report from my fieldwork. It demonstrates how the media landscape has

transformed—and continues to transform—while “migrating” through the Web. And in that sense it reminds us that our film and media history is not only made up of “progressive”, standardized, and long-lasting artistic productions. Indeed, our film and media history does not have to respond to or correspond to a certain canon, or to binaries such a “fiction” and “nonfiction”. Interactive practices about migration show us that there is also an in-between. As media archaeologists and scholars of utility cinema have demonstrated before, film can be made in ephemeral, useful and non-mainstream formats. Such media objects deserve to be uncovered and studied, in order to understand a media culture which is in continuous transformation.