Records in Motion
Migrants and Mobile Spectatorship

Lutz Koepnick

Created by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani in 2014, the digital animation feature *Liquid Traces: The Left-to-Die Boat Case* offers a synthetic reconstruction of the fate of seventy-two passengers drifting aimlessly on a boat between Libya and Lampedusa for fourteen days. Though its course was tracked by NATO surveillance technologies and its location repeatedly approached by military helicopters and warships, no one stepped up to help the migrants' vessel in a timely fashion and prevent sixty-three passengers from dying during the process. *Liquid Traces* maps the ocean as a deeply political and politicized space: a zone in which competing jurisdictions and advanced technologies of power halt certain flows of movement and redefine undocumented migrants and stateless subjects. At first, this work of forensic oceanography simply seems to challenge the cold and compassionless gaze of power, its indifference to the precarious lives of African migrants. A closer engagement with the project, however, will lead to very different conclusions. For the project's point is less to expose the lack of empathy and care that may drive NATO's and the EU's politics of keeping refugees and migrants at bay from a merely humanitarian standpoint. Rather, it reveals the extent to which a wide array of media technologies today produces the migrant as a figure that has no real claim to rights to begin with. The project's point is to beat visual surveillance technologies at their own game and present advanced media technologies as media able to recuperate the voice of those unheard, to challenge the Western cold gaze of power which has stripped the ocean of its former role as a medium of hope, passage, and transformative experimentation. Boats and their passengers here are left to die not because advanced systems tracking movements across the sea lack compassion for the refugees but because political, legal, and technocratic exigencies produce the refugee's body as one that neither owes rights nor should attract compassion.

Heller and Pezzani's eighteen-minute document of obstructed migration is ambitious and brave but it anticipates and relies on spectators who understand physical stillness as a decisive resource of focused attention and critical engagement. The video might spread visible content across the frame, at first emulat-

ing a desktop environment on a PC with multiple program windows open. But to live up to *Liquid Traces*'s forensic ambition, the viewer will need to move beyond a multitasker's divided attention and effectively synthesize the different channels of information into one coherent stream, i. e., approach the film's narrative of migration and death as a story contained within the borders of one coherent frame of representation. Whether seen on a computer screen at home or on a gallery's monitor in public, the success of *Liquid Traces*'s documentary impulse thus rests on normative expectations about spectatorship that this project shares with the templates of classical cinema: the idea of the viewer as a silent, fixated, and immobile subject whose sense of physical detachment sustains the conditions for the viewer's attachment to the dynamic of moving images on screen. Such positions of detachment and immobility, one might want to argue, not only snub the migratory and displaced lives mapped in the film itself. They also represent an ever-less attainable niche amid the attention economy of the present under conditions in which multi-screen interactions and 24/7 mobile media usage have become the order of the day.

Though my aim is not to disparage in any way the value of works such as *Liquid Traces*, the following chapter explores different screen-based installation works that engage with the fate of contemporary migrants and refugees, but do no longer take the normative regime of classical cinema as well as critical art films for granted – the idea of the viewer as a fully concentrated, absorbed, frontal, and stationary observer of framed images on a singular screen. Art critics, film theorists, and well-meaning pedagogues have many good reasons to worry about the hyper- and semi-attentive habits of contemporary screen culture and their roaming spectators. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter is to probe the formal aptness and aesthetic productivity of multi-screen formats to document, and engage mostly mobile viewers in, the precarious fates of migrants and refugees in search for safer havens. I argue that we cannot talk about documenting a world structured by asymmetrical flows of human migration without talking about the media platforms and perceptual arrangements we put to work to screen the lives of the twenty-first century's wretched of the Earth.

In her writing on contemporary multi-screen installation art, Hito Steyerl has provided an intriguing framework to think constructively about contemporary modes of embodied, roaming, and often semi-attentive modes of spectatorship. In stark and polemical contrast to those who compare itinerant viewing practices in contemporary gallery spaces to the habits of channel zappers and mall consumers, Steyerl welcomes the ubiquity of moving images in twenty-first-century museums as an opportunity to overcome long-held investments in sovereign looking and individualized art consumption. Rather than nostalgically mourning the disappearance of former regimes of durational and deeply absorptive looking, Steyerl stresses the culturally productive and politically progressive dimen-

sions of what she calls the multiple gaze of contemporary screen culture – a gaze »which is no longer collective, but common, which is incomplete, but in process, which is distracted and singular, but can be edited into various sequences and combinations. This gaze is no longer the gaze of the individual sovereign master, nor, more precisely, of the self-deluded sovereign […]. It isn't even a product of common labor, but focuses its point of rupture on the paradigm of productivity.«[1] As screen-based installation art today often appeals to viewers on the go and invites spectators to navigate different screens at once, it moves moving images from the presentational and representational to the post-representational in Steyerl's view. The affordances of post-cinematic viewing document and transform the real not simply by offering images and sounds on screen, but by constructing vibrant infrastructures of motion and mobility off-screen. Rather than educate or please a crowd of singular spectators arrested in the darkness of the auditorium, they articulate a crowd that is dispersed and mobile in space and time. Instead of catering to monadic spectators trying to master a work in its entirety, they endorse nomadic viewers able to recognize their limitations and fragmentations as spectating subjects, their vulnerability, the relational character of all subjectivity, their unavoidable failure as subjects to synthesize the real freely and sovereignly into unified representations.

In the following, I discuss three different artistic interventions whose choreographies of screens and moving images seek to avoid imposing fixed perspectives, disembodied stillness, and unified durations onto the viewer. In their engagement with the global issue of migration and the precarious figure of the contemporary refugee, all three works, in different ways, reckon with what Steyerl understands as the fractured gazes of contemporary screen culture. They anticipate viewers who no longer enter or exit installation spaces and screen environments as sovereign subjects and singular masters over the visible. To document the figure of the migrant, for all three, means to explore and stress the itinerancy and incompleteness of viewing as well, to expose the spectator to fundamentally contingent, fragmented, and unpredictable viewing arrangements. In this, all three projects of course challenge naïve concepts of documentary realism, as much as they place tremendous pressure on what may count as fact and truth, veracity and sincerity, make-believe and fake. Each of them asks tough questions about what it means to stretch one's perception to the paths of contemporary migrants; and each of them proposes different and differently compelling strategies undercutting possible efforts to associate Steyerl's multiplied gaze with the workings of post-truth societies – societies in which media overload and fragmented attentiveness seems to undermine the possibility of shared understandings of the real. After examining these three works first, in my conclusion, I will briefly address in more theoretical

1 Steyerl, Hito: The Wretched of the Screen, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2012, p. 73.

terms the extent to which mobile, embodied, distracted, and fragmented looking, rather than upending a documentarian's truth claim, may open new paths for what moving images can do to move their viewers and how they can cope with the pressing matters of the world.

Mario Pfeifer: *Noch einmal/Again* (2018)

A two-channel, forty-two minutes video installation first screened at the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2018, Pfeifer's *Again* (2018) projects found and carefully staged footage on two sizable screens, adjoining each other at an obtuse angle and positioned in front of a seated audience. What unfolds on screen references and reenacts a widely reported event in May 2016, when four male citizens of Arnsdorf, Saxony, in what they believed to be an act of civil courage and self-justice, pulled an Iraqi refugee violently out of a discount supermarket and tied him with cable ties to a nearby tree. While the refugee was found dead shortly after this event, the court proceedings against the four attackers were closed without judgment in 2017 due to the death of the victim. In a setting clearly marked as a film studio, two moderators or hosts, played by well-known German crime-show actors Dennenesch Zoude and Mark Waschke, recall the events with the help of photographs and YouTube videos and provide background information about the various people involved. Constantly crossing the lines between different diegetic spaces, they oversee a meticulous reconstruction and highly self-reflexive reenactment of the incident in the supermarket. On another diegetic level, we also observe ten German citizens – like witnesses or jurors in an American courtroom drama – observing the reenactment from a position similar to the one of the audience in front of the two screens. In the video's final minutes, each of them comment on what they saw and leave little doubt that neither truth was established nor justice was served during the original legal proceedings. In the words of the exhibition statement itself: »The citizens are interviewed after the last scene is played. They explain how they judge the action's reenactment considering their own biographical, social, cultural and political experiences.«

During the first half of the film, Pfeifer uses the dual-screen set-up as an effective medium to reconstruct the supermarket incidence from multiple perspectives, highlight the extent to which our knowledge about real events rely on mediated images, and remind extradiegetic viewers of the different diegetic levels that permeate each other in the video. We watch our hosts introduce, direct, and review the performance on one screen while the action they help to choreograph unfolds on the other; we watch the same sequence of events from two different angles; we observe our witnesses witnessing while we are also able to see, from some other point of view, what may unfold in front of our eyes; we see found footage or news-

paper reports about the 2016 happening and its legal aftermath. As the viewer will be asked, less to behold of two images at once, but rather to toggle between different ontological levels of representation and continually to probe competing and not necessarily compatible views on the past, *Again* communicates the instability and multiplicity of truth, the need to reread and restage the past because whatever we call document always already entails acts of interpretation. Filmmaking, in its efforts to reveal the injustice done to a refugee in East Germany, takes on what characterizes the life of the migrant and exile on a structural level: a logic of an irreconcilable multiplication of temporalities and spatial orientations. With its two screens, *Again* performs the very rift between here and there experienced by migrants and the painful but at times also potentially productive pluralization of narratives, trajectories, truths, and stories-to-be-told that marks the existence of those dispelled from their homes.

Remarkably, however, *Again* somewhat mistrusts its own mistrust in the efficacy of documentary realism. In its final minutes, when capturing the testimonies of the ten justifiably troubled, at times even traumatized witnesses, the camera work for both screens tends to focus on each speaker's face, eyes, and mouth, whereby Pfeifer's prolonged extreme close-ups here are designed to endow their words, their indictments, with unquestionable authenticity and truthfulness. As if in need to bring its political intervention safely home, the film's initial rhetoric of fragmentation and incompleteness in the very end thus yields to a stylized language of synthetic amplification and integration. In their understandable effort to right the wrongs of history, Pfeifer's final images of eyes and mouths seek to document the trustworthiness of how his juror's words process their observations as deeply affected individuals. In thus recentering the viewer's perception, however, Pfeifer's installation – some might want to argue – collapses Steyerl's multiple gaze in front of our very eyes and potentially revokes the mobile process of reframing and reenactment that helped question existing documentations of xenophobic violence in the first place.

Angela Melitopoulos: *Crossings* (2017)

Crossings, a four-channel video installation by German artist Angela Melitopoulos, was first staged in Kassel's Gießhaus in 2017 as part of *documenta 14*. It converted the former site of industrial labor into a space to document the interrelations of three contemporary ›crises‹ and their impact on present-day Greece: (1) the so-called ›refugee crisis‹ that has brought hundreds of thousands of migrants to the shores of Europe over the last years; (2) the so-called ›European debt crisis‹, understood as an asymmetrical process in which ideas of common markets, currencies, labor, and productivity within the Eurozone help to widen the economic

gap between North and South; and (3) the crisis of how humans relate to their natural environments, effected by the destruction of habitats for sustainable living caused by multinational corporations. In Melitopoulos's vision, all three crises are products of neoliberal finance capitalism, i. e., the way in which Western capitalism over the last decades has exploited postcolonial imbalances of power and wealth, and in prioritizing money and debt over labor, social justice, and democratic deliberation, generates a constant need to displace existing social tensions, be it by erecting walls and fences at the periphery or by exporting conflict abroad. *Crossings* displays moving images on four screens and broadcasts sounds with unpredictable durations and patterns. Viewers are confronted with piles of life vests from refugees stranded on Greek islands; the devastating sight of refugee camps such as Idomeni or Moira, but also migrants actively protesting the closing down of Europe; environmental activists challenging how multinational corporations ravage the Earth in Northern Greece; Middle Eastern refugees visiting Greek archeological sites only to realize that they now serve as the modern age's slaves, slaves that the Greek polis needed, and needed to repress, to develop and celebrate its ideals of freedom, pluralism, and non-violent democratic interaction.

Crossings's images are as disturbing as they are engaging, but the piece's most potent intervention in documenting the crises of migration does not merely inhabit the level of representation. It plays out in how the installation elevates the state of contemporary walling and migration policy to a question of spectatorship itself. Because the location of sights and sounds are constantly changing during the screening, there is no privileged view or position from which to attend the entirety of *Crossings*. Viewing the piece involves a continual repositioning of one's perspective as much as it will often cause viewers to find themselves unable to view all footage at once. No viewer, in other words, is ever fully in control over their act of viewing. Moreover, the audience experiences a profound need, in its frequent repositioning, to reckon with and respond to the viewing of other onlookers to create an operative equilibrium, a resonant network, of collective perception because viewers, due to the demand to resituate themselves, tend to block each other's view. Bodies shift to improve sightlines, but also may forgo perfect viewing angles to allow adjacent spectators to see something, too.

In Melitopoulos's installation, the walls of Kassel's Gießhaus serve as aesthetic training grounds to liquefy the stalwart selves and communities of our age of enclosures, of neoliberal self-management and increasing nativist xenophobia. *Crossings* asks its viewers to perform bodily and cognitive work that not only recalibrates the fickle attention economies of our present, but models attitudes and forms attachments that sharpen, rather than reduce, resilience. Though the majority of spectators have little reason to fear a fate similar to those of the migrants and refugees presented on screen, Melitopoulos's choreography of sights and sounds thus asks the viewer to navigate our precarious present from the pre-

carious position of a migrant, of a commons in which post-sovereign viewers face the contingencies of contemporary existence without being able to engage various kinds of physical, perceptual, and psychic defensive shields. To forfeit sovereign looking and attach oneself to the unpredictable movements of images and other spectating bodies, to resonate with images, sounds, and other viewers rather than to pursue strategies of defensive self-optimization here means to recognize contingency in all its ambivalence: as both the cause and the source that fuels the strategies of resistance, of cruel optimism, of speaking up and acting against the politics of walling depicted on screen. It is to explore the contingencies of resonance, the resonance of the contingent, as antidotes to the loss of the ordinary, the sustainable and durational we associate with the precarization of life and the fear of the migrant in our dismal twenty-first century.

John Akomfrah: *Auto Da Fé* (2016)

Perhaps no moving-image-maker of our present has done more to understand and document stories of migrancy and dislocation as both political and formal challenges than British filmmaker, writer, and theorist John Akomfrah. One of Akomfrah's most recent works, the dual-screen installation *Auto Da Fé* of 2016, focuses on various transatlantic voyages between Africa and Europe on the one hand, and Barbados in the West Indies on the other, starting with the fleeing of Sephardic Jews to the Caribbean in 1654 and ending with images of present days migrants from Hombori, Mali, and Mosul, Iraq. Whether he recalls little known pasts or pressing presents, Akomfrah's ocean is not only a medium carrying migrant passengers towards the promise of better and brighter futures. The film's pace and movements are slow, its images of migrants, refugees, and exiles express a pervasive sense of alienation and diasporic disorientation, of standstill and temporal displacement. Figures do not interact with each other; protagonists follow separate paths and often appear frozen in theatrical tableaux set against the background or staring at the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Repeatedly we see various objects floating in the waves, recalling the sight of drifting life vests so ubiquitous in recent news imagery – floating devices referencing the absence, the loss of human life during failed efforts of passage. At various junctures, we also see black-and-white photographs drifting in the waves, metaphors, and metonymies of memories no longer lodged in human bodies, of forgotten pasts that have lost their bearing upon present and future. Akomfrah's shores are populated by specter-like figures, maritime voyagers who – in spite of their physical arrival on safe land – have not succeeded to make a new home in a new world, who remain stuck somewhere between here and there, yesterday and today, self and community.

Though Akomfrah's travelers have reached another shore, their hope in the transformative powers of migrancy has been deeply shattered and betrayed. As they line up at the shore to look back at what they have left behind, Akomfrah's passengers recognize that they are as stateless and rightless, as disenfranchised and haunted, as they were before their voyage. They are neither here nor there, have neither fully departed nor ever entirely arrived. For them, the promise of a safe haven turns out to be a mere chimera, based on nothing more than a long history of deceptive dualisms and unyielding juxtapositions of past and present, this shore and that shore, old and new. Akomfrah's choreography of images across two adjacent screens imprints this sense of agitated stasis onto the viewer's senses. In contrast to Melitopoulos's piece, Akomfrah invites viewers to sit still and peruse both screens at their own will and inclination, while, unlike Pfeifer's dual-channel setting, one image here does not serve to prop up the other image, infuse it with added meaning and weight. The final images of *Auto Da Fé*, shot in black and white on both screens, display bags, live vests, toys, and dolls – the detritus of failed passages and sunken hopes, ominous markers of loss and death – as breaking waves sweep them onto a sandy beach. The footage is mostly shot in slow motion with alternating shot lengths and from different angles. Akomfrah's editing choices within one and across both screens systematically thwart any sense of unified motion or direction; each cut creates new kinetic patterns, rubs against or redirects the momentum of the previous or adjacent image. Confronted with this at once poetic and deeply unsettling crosscurrent of routes and movements, the viewer's eye will find nothing to hold on and attach to, no foot hole to rest upon. Instead of establishing lyrical and meditative distance, *Auto Da Fé*'s stylized images expose their viewers to discontinuous unrest of the visible, to a fragmented and fragmenting sense of agitation at a standstill. The installation's choreography splinters the idea of a unified, stable viewing subject as it points and pulls spectators into incompatible directions at once and, in the end, leaves us – like the doll in the final shot – with nowhere to go, marooned in times and spaces that no longer know of any difference between past and future, transformation and repetition.

A migrant's story of passage defies the arc of well-defined beginnings, linear vectors, and clear endings. In Akomfrah's *Auto Da Fé*, the migrant's taxing ambivalence of movement and stasis, of ongoing displacement and being stuck in place and time, informs the formal organization of images across both screens of the installation as well. Akomfrah's images move spectators as much as they arrest them. They immerse them with quasi-oceanic affects of mobility as much as they strike the viewer's multiple gaze with feelings of powerlessness and surrender.

Itinerant Viewing

Multi-screen formats, which become ever-more frequent in contemporary video and installation art, ask important questions about attentive spectatorship in media-saturated environments. In their pluralization of possible perspectives and probing of incoherent points of view, they put pressure on naïve notions of documentary realism, of film's indexical ability to capture and display truthful images of profilmic events. As I have sought to indicate in the previous pages, multi-screen environments show unique affinities to documenting the precarious narratives of contemporary migrants and refugees: the affordances of multi-screen platforms allow artists to explore the fractured contingencies of post-classical spectatorship as a unique medium to engage the ruptured lives of those in search for livable conditions.

In her seminal book on the essay film, Nora Alter argues that multi-channel installations and their often looped images, which have come to permeate gallery spaces since the 1990s, have not only modified the role of montage in film art but added to the richness of what she traces as the history of the essay film since the 1920s: »The possibility of using multiple screens had significant implications for montage. The practice of synchronized and looping projections challenged the concept of linear film and called into question any notion of beginning or ending. This looping of images is one aspect of installation film that corresponds to the meandering, nonteleological structure of the essay.«[2] In this sense, we may understand the nonlinear, open, and often unpredictable structures of viewing installations such as Pfeifer's *Again*, Melitopoulos's *Crossings*, and Akomfrah's *Auto Da Fé*, as a variation of how essay films typically produce multiple vantage points, question the possibility of single narrative logics, situate the viewer beyond fact and fiction, and – unlike typical documentaries – refuse to carry out a relatively clear line of argumentation. However, to think of the way these works multiply the viewer's gaze and appeal to what Steyerl would understand as mobile, non-sovereign forms of looking as a mere extension of classical montage techniques misses the mark. The point here is not simply to situate the viewer as an active and highly attentive producer of meaning, one who is eager to fill, imagine, or conceptually flesh out what a film's disruptive cuts leave unsaid. Instead, what the works and viewing arrangements discussed in this chapter do is shifting the question of documentation and participation, of truth and engagement, of screening the other and othering existing modes of representation to a different terrain altogether.

No serious attempt to track the itinerant position of contemporary migrants and refugees can do without probing the dynamics of attention itself, of how

2 Alter, Nora M.: The Essay Film after Fact and Fiction, New York: Columbia University Press 2018, p. 292.

viewers relate and attach themselves to moving images today. Any effort to challenge dominant representations of the figure of the refugee needs to ask how we live with and navigate our daily trajectories through the omnipresence of our contemporary screenscapes. All three works pose the question of the migrant as a question of what it means and takes to attend to their image, as a question of how images of suffering and loss can still move us when we, in our media-saturated times, never cease to move images ourselves and move with them at all times. What these works bring to the fore is that no ambition to document the precarious lives of others can succeed today without recognizing that nothing concerning the durational commitments and attentional resources of today's spectators can be taken for granted anymore.

References

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Installations

Akomfrah, John: Auto Da Fé (2016). Two-channel HD color video installation, 5.1 sound, 40 minutes 30 seconds.

Melitopoulos, Angela: Crossings (2017). Four-channel video and sixteen-channel sound installation, color, 109 minutes.

Pfeifer, Mario: Noch einmal/Again (2018). 4K video transferred to HD, 2-channel installation, color, 5.1 surround sound, 23 minutes.