

# Flows of People

## Comments through Migration Discourse in the Video *Bibby Challenge*

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Designed as floating housing for people working in coastal regions or at sea, the Bibby Challenge<sup>1</sup> is an accommodation barge that can house up to 670 people. From February 1995 to February 2003, the city of Hamburg hired the Bibby Challenge, among others, to provide accommodation for refugees, particularly from Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Adnan Softić's video includes archival photographs and footage by artist Marilyn Stroux, who filmed life around and on the Bibby Challenge.<sup>3</sup>

*Figure 1: Bibby Challenge*



Screenshot Bibby Challenge (TC 08:04)

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- 1 The idea for this contribution was developed in a panel discussion on the metaphoricity of water with Adnan Softić at "Hallo-Festspiele" 2018 in Hamburg.
  - 2 For the client list, see <https://www.bibbymaritime.com/why-choose-bibby>; last access 05.20.2021.
  - 3 In addition to "high quality en suite" housing, the company Bibby Maritime Limited promotes the comfort of the Bibby Challenge with the ship's large restaurant, bar, fitness room, and "games room". See <http://www.bibbymaritime.com/bibby-challenge/>; and <https://www.bibbymaritime.com/our-fleet>, last access 05.20.2021.

The video was part of an installation shown in the exhibition “Mobile Worlds” (2018) at the Hamburg *Kunst- und Gewerbemuseum*.<sup>4</sup> It provides the foundation for a critical reading of the recent European migration discourse in this chapter. Of decided interest is the way in which the video produces the connection between water and migration on the basis of the filmic fabrication of the *Bibby Challenge*. Here, the “audiovisual production has to be taken seriously as the ‘fabrication’ of a specific knowledge space within and through which something that is supposed to be represented first comes into being.” (Bippus/Ochsner/Otto 2016: 264-265; emphasis in original) This filmic fabrication is not to be confused with “depiction.” (Ibid.: 266) Where the video visually focuses on images of people on boats in a global-historical context, the spoken commentary deals with metaphors associated with water. Functioning as a commentary on migration, this can especially be noted in the production level of the sound. Close analysis of the video’s complex audiovisual commentary highlights issues in the discourse on migration. In particular, the relationship between the terms ‘refugee flows’ or ‘waves’ and associations with water can be critically addressed. On the one hand, these metaphorical associations are not apolitical as they are part of discursive power structures (Foucault 1982). On the other hand, this reference, i.e. the invocation of the reference to water, is itself subject to certain politics. In concrete terms the latter refers to the motivation to describe power relations that remain largely unheard through the seemingly self-evident talk of the refugee flow. Yet the images, the voice-over, and the found-footage material from the 1990’s, as well as its actualization today, explicitly point towards the historicity of migration. Therefore, I will include the metaphorical history of the “liquid crowd” (Gleich 2017) in order to contrast it with contemporary talk about refugee flow. Going beyond the ‘image’ of water, to take the question of control into account, elucidates a certain political agenda where migrants are discursively produced as *not yet* controlled.

Within the filmic layers as *sides* of audiovisual production, the discourse on refugee flow presents various points of view, or *sites*. Following the concept of “‘medial participation’” (Bippus/Ochsner/Otto 2016: 261),<sup>5</sup> in these sites “the conditions for in- or exclusion can change and [...] the specific challenges for participants and

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4 The video *SCHIFFE MIT WAREN UND STOFFEN STOßEN MIT IHREN WELLEN DIE BIBBY CHALLENGE AN* (in short: *Bibby Challenge*) was shown as a multi-channel installation (10 min, 11 sec.). In addition to two video projections, a model of the Bibby Challenge was illuminated in a display case. Several soundtracks were included, which were only audible at certain points in the room due to their ceiling placement and focused output.

5 “By using ‘medial participation’ as a key concept, the research group proceeds on the supposition that participation is located in media-cultural exchange processes. This reconceptualization is founded on a process-related understanding of media, which allows the description of the relations between demand and entitlement in the assemblages of subjects, technological objects, practices and communities.” (Bippus/Ochsner/Otto 2016: 261)

non-(or not yet)-participants are posed. These configurations are regarded as socio-technical power structures.” (Ibid.: 262) The analysis of these sites addresses the way the talk about flows “mobilizes (discourses of) interactions between humans, practices, and technical objects.” (Ibid.: 264) As Bippus, Ochsner and Otto point out, “participation essentially focuses on the addressability of future participants (and non-participants alike!) in complex socio-technical arrangements.” (Ibid.: 267)

## Audio-Visual Production of the Relationship Between Migration and Water

Arrangements of stills separated by black screen define the first half of the video. These single images and subsequently shown film sequences focus on crossings of people over water and their temporary accommodation on boats. Archival footage of the Bibby Challenge is shown in split screen as well as in montage with depictions of overcrowded ships and inflatable boats. Historical pictures, like the raft of the grounded Medusa by Géricault<sup>6</sup> and a section-view of a slave ship, are put in relation to the Bibby Challenge. The slave ship is directly followed by Massimo Sestini’s 2015 award-winning press photography of a boat with migrating persons.<sup>7</sup> Through this interplay of footage from the residential containers and the other images, the video marks a semantically loaded connection between water and migration. Especially the images invoke a historical and global context. Hereby, the montage puts *Bibby Challenge* into an ambivalent context of globalization and the history of people moving and being moved. Underlining this visual montage, the voice-over accompanies these pictures and claims: “This is not a boat.” Commentaries, spoken by a female and a male voice, expressly take up a figurative sense of the Bibby Challenge anchored on the city docks: “We also do swim. Here, too, one has no firm ground under one’s feet.” (TC: 00:06:35-00:06:45) What initially refers to the prevailing living conditions in the containers can easily be understood as a reflection of an imagined observer ‘on land’: “Even here in this country one has neither a job nor an apartment forever. No furniture anyway. Also, very often no friends and family.” Ideas of work, family or home are dynamized in connection to the figurative talk of water: “The constant of the home, the firmness of it, the habits, are not to be held tight.” (TC: 00:06:48-00:07:20) Permanent floating of the housing unit sets allegedly fixed concepts in motion by transferring them metaphorically into the liquid and volatile state of water. “The fortress and everything that was fixed to it has long collapsed. The home is in crisis. Seen in this light, we are all displaced, aren’t we?” (TC: 00:07:21-00:07:39). Applying non-metaphorically to the persons on

6 Théodore Géricault, “The Raft of the Medusa”, oil on canvas, 1819, Louvre.

7 Massimo Sestini, “Rescue Operation”, photography, 2015.

board the floating containers, this also indicates an imagined observer, who overlooks a larger history in terms of a global history of migration. What can be interpreted as an argument on permanent movement of people within the larger scope of civilization history has distinctly negative connotations: “Ships with goods and materials from all over the world bump into the Bibby Challenge with their waves.” (TC: 00:09:05-00:09:13) Here, the former layers of observation merge. Migrating people are paralleled with the idea of a global circulation of “goods and materials,” whose proximity to an economic logic dehumanizes them to mere items.<sup>8</sup>

Revolving around the anchored residential containers as a fixed point, the video further hones in on the relationship of water and migration. Considering the figurative sense of water and indicating its ambivalent meanings is not just an accessory to the video, but forms its core. Pointedly, the spoken comment both refers to the fact that the conveyed meanings of water render migration describable and highlights the problems that arise when notions of water are equated with migrating humans. Before discussing this equation in detail, this position is strengthened by the sound production.

## Sound Production

In addition to the spoken commentary, background sounds from the found footage organize the auditory level. Yet they do not correspond to ambient sound recorded on site, but are produced retrospectively. Although corresponding to a common practice in documentary filmmaking, it proves interesting here precisely because of its particular mode of production. In his performances including the Bibby Challenge Adnan Softić discloses what can be recognized by paying close attention: the sounds are all produced with cleaning utensils. A cleaning rag, wrung out into a bucket of water corresponds to light waves hitting the ship, while a window scraper imitates the screeching of seagulls. In addition, and more obviously, there are dripping tap and teeth brushing sounds (from TC: 00:03:02), as well as a slowly swelling vacuum cleaner noise (from TC: 00:06:28). Softić’s video plays with negatively occupied conceptions of water conjured by the figurative sense of ‘cleaning’, referring to conservative ideals of ‘purity’, ‘homogeneity’ and ultimately to ‘purge’.<sup>9</sup> Marking the difference between atmospheric sounds as taken for granted and the negative connotations created through produced ‘cleaning’ sounds, the video addresses the seemingly self-evident meaning of the figurative sense of water. By playing with the difference between the sounds heard initially and upon closer listening, the specific production of atmospheric sounds confronts the relation of migration and

8 See also Mbembe’s (2017) argument.

9 See also the texts read by Adnan Softić during performances.

the self-evident talk about flows. Considering the sound production using cleaning utensils alongside the off-commentary's problematizing of the ambivalent notions of water metaphors leads to the question: what remains unheard when we speak of the refugee flow as a matter of course? And this question can be translated into the recent discourse of migration.

Criticizing the talk of refugee flows has a broad bandwidth, ranging from on-line and blog entries, magazines, and newspaper articles to political speeches and scholarly debates. In turn, the criticism refers to the talk of refugee flows both in news coverage about migration and in public statements by politicians. Critical positions note that the talk of flows, waves, and tsunamis is about water metaphors that determine our perception of the so-called refugee crisis. In general, they aim for a picture-like quality: "It's the image of refugees or migrants as water, as in 'waves of refugees' or 'the flow of migrants'. It can also become a 'flood' or a place can be 'swamped' by recent arrivals." (Goyette 2016; cf. Packer 2016) It is already indicated here that water metaphors often refer to catastrophes (Albisser 2016), with which their use proves to be political (Parker 2015: 8; cf. Agnetta 2018: 19) or ideologically motivated in the discourse on migration (Mujagić 2018: 108-109; 123). "The metaphor of refugees as water tells a shrill story. Fugitives are not victims, but a threat." (Wehling 2016; cf. Parker 2015: 7) According to Eisenberg, terms such as 'stream of refugees' also imply "that we must protect ourselves against it, defend ourselves, build dams, otherwise we will sink, we will be flooded." (Eisenberg 2015: 2) Agnetta notes that the metaphor of the stream of refugees "subtly favors the description of the fugitive as a reified threat." (2018: 20) Thus, in language terms, migrating people are tailored as part of an indistinguishable, threatening mass. Kainz and Petersson argue that "the attribution to people of qualities ascribed to water runs the risk of metaphorically dehumanizing them due to the substance's lack of shape and colour and the impossibility of distinguishing one drop from another." (2017: 54) Albisser emphasizes this finding and states that "a collective reification and dehumanization takes place." (2016) According to Shariatmadari's conclusions, migrating people are 'dehumanized' by being compared with the forces of nature (2015). To the same extent, this logic fuels fears of the unfamiliar as a danger, which is why the inclusion of water metaphors in the talk of migration proves to be racist overall (Lee 2007: 3).<sup>10</sup> "A flood is submerging and destructive, a tsunami is even deadly and destroys everything", Biermann writes. "Whoever says something like this in connection with refugees wants to stir up fear of them, wants to intensify racism and xenophobia" (2015).

According to these passages, the politics of the talk about refugee flows as the interplay of creating an 'us' and a (threatening) 'them' is unheard. What seems to be

10 Cf. Goyette 2016. For a detailed description of the interweaving of language and violence, see Krämer 2010; Hornscheidt in this collection.

taken for granted in the speech about the stream of refugees aims at catastrophic connotations of water and its consequences in connection with migration. Its use has become so engrained in the news coverage that possible negative connotations cannot be described directly and therefore are no longer the subject of discussion. Corresponding with the video, the critical positions stress the ambivalence of the figurative speech of water and its self-evident meaning. However, contrary to the video, historical references only play a minor role in the discourse criticism. Similar to the historically charged pictures in the video, the found-footage material relates to a certain history of people moving and water. Recordings of the Bibby Challenge take a material and thematic detour through their actualization in the video and therefore relate to a past tense. In the following, I connect a possible history of the relationship between people and their metaphoric description with notions of water.

### On the History of the “Liquid Crowd”

Sketching a history of flows, Moritz Gleich (2017) unravels the metaphor of the “liquid crowd”. At the core of his analysis is the “petty door” at the entrance of the Crystal Palace, which was built by Joseph Paxton in 1851 as part of the first World Exhibition in London. This entrance mechanism forms a technical “threshold that could henceforth be crossed in one direction only, at a limited speed, and in an orderly manner.” (Gleich 2017: 56)<sup>11</sup> The flow of the crowd is inextricably intertwined with power relations. Gleich notes that this regulated entrance for large masses of visitors is exemplary in a far-reaching discussion involving “[u]rban planners, architects, and engineers” (ibid.), concerned with “the question [...] of how best to control and organize the movement of large numbers of people.” (Ibid.: 46) Specifically,

“the motif of ‘flow’ came to play a pivotal if not preeminent role in the resolution of the problem. For the numerous techniques and procedures developed for observing, controlling, and steering people in motion drew for their description – to varying degrees but almost without exception – on images and concepts of flux and fluidity.” (Ibid.)

Due to its figurative character, flow is understood as metaphorical speech. Gleich argues that it “draws on the image of flowing or eddying waters to convey the

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11 The “petty door” is part of an ensemble of techniques, including the “ground plan”, which provides different paths. “The primary concern was to keep the crowd moving at all times so as to assure its steady and equal distribution throughout the space.” (Gleich 2017: 55)

potentially *incalculable* features of a moving crowd: its dynamics, volume, and diversity.” (Ibid.: 46; emphasis MD) The linguistic function of flow is not exhausted in its metaphoricality.

Using an early example of urban planning which seeks to direct ‘streams of passers-by’, Gleich illustrates a time-specific (non-)discursive ensemble. First, the “ever-more-regular occurrence of large human crowds in motion” especially in rising metropolises must be taken into account, which in turn is made describable via “the positively connoted image of a stream”. Then, “a specific system of discursive production” is applied in which “the liquid crowds no longer represented an uncontrollable or accidental phenomenon but were raised to the status of an operable entity that could be planned, produced, and controlled by resort to the image of flow.” (Ibid.: 51) Thus viewed, flow provides architects and planners with a means of making the incalculable crowd describable. And this raises the talk of flow into the “status as a regulatory discursive practice, above and beyond any merely contingent metaphorical function.” (Ibid.: 52)

These efforts to perceive people and their movements as flow are united in the fact that they no longer read the stream as a metaphor. Instead the controlled crowd is the liquid flow: “techniques and procedures specifically directed toward the object of the moving crowd [...] were rooted, technologically as well as symbolically, in an understanding of the human crowd as a fluid ‘stream.’” (Ibid.: 57) The disappearance of the metaphorical character of the flow provides a “strategic element”. And therein lies the essence of Gleich’s considerations: “it allowed the physicality and dynamism of the moving crowd to be referenced as a natural and calculable nexus” (ibid.). The transition point is at the moment where the mass becomes controllable, i.e. calculable. Gleich adds: “The formerly chaotic ‘stream of people’ – intimating absolute unpredictability and uncontrollability – could be seen in the motif to have been domesticated by cultural and architectural techniques and converted into a term for an organized and organizable movement.” (Ibid.: 57)<sup>12</sup> Altogether, Gleich illustrates the historical course in which the ‘flowing of the crowd’ becomes “naturalized”. Following the metaphorology of Hans Blumenberg, it becomes “indistinguishable from a physical proposition” (Blumenberg quoted in Gleich 2017: 59). Importantly, the transition from flow as a metaphor to flow as the designation of a crowd moving in a controlled manner cannot be unrelated from questions of power. This is already implicit in the petty doors as they force the body to move in a particular way. Functioning as borders in order to regulate a large mass of

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12 The discourse finally came to a halt around 1900. Ludwig Boltzmann “transferred the characteristics of atomistic physics to a human crowd. In applying concepts of mathematics and physics to the representation of a human crowd, Boltzmann made of the latter a calculable fluid. Thus, at the close of the nineteenth century, Boltzmann laid the discursive as well as scientific foundations for crowd descriptions through fluid dynamics.” (Ibid.: 58)

persons, they are the materialization of decisions which can be grasped with the concept of “governmentality” (Gleich 2017: 49; Foucault 2005: 247-269). Therefore, the flow became “a vehicle for a system of governance that no longer sought to suppress mass phenomena but to promote, support, and optimize them by regulatory means.” (Gleich 2017: 57)

## Steering the (Migratory) Flow

Considering the so-called refugee flow today from the point of view of a water metaphor, against the backdrop of its ‘naturalization’, the metaphor has reappeared. Analyzing the difference between the historical meaning of the flow of people at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including its conventionalization, and the current *analytical* readings in terms of a natural catastrophic view of refugee flows is fruitful. Once again it is stressed that the relation to water is productive and problematic at the same time. Although the flow metaphor seems to make large movements of people easily graspable, it is inevitably accompanied by negative connotations like the dehumanization of persons. Additionally, it is possible to compare where the respective moment of control sets in. The control of refugee flows starts at a different imagined point than the flow generated by petty doors. While, for Gleich, the flow of people is thus a mechanically induced effect, the refugee flow is connoted as still uncontrolled and uncontrollable. People flows controlled by the door mechanism contradict the assumption invoked by the natural catastrophic imaginary of the flow, according to which this flow must first be contained in a controlling manner (cf. Mujagić 2018: 115-121). Viewing today’s flow of refugees in light of the question of control, a political agenda becomes discernible. To this end, the off-commentary of the *Bibby Challenge* video asks: “If we look at the whole thing as a transport metaphor, then what is the state? Should it be a vehicle, or a road, or a way?” (TC: 00:03:33-00:03:42) Thus, flows are not only portrayed as related to natural catastrophes, but – as Gleich indicates – also refer to a form of “governmentality” (Foucault 2005: 247-269). Contrary to the history of the metaphor, in the contemporary discourse on migration the flow is depicted as still to be steered.

The metaphor allows to describe the work of the state as the “art of steering” although the state less steers ‘the ship’ (Foucault 2005: 249-250; 267, note 7) than aims to control the flows. It refers to a political agenda that goes beyond a suggestive negative politicization of the migration discourse through the metaphor. The gap in between a regulated flow of people produced by petty doors and contemporary’s talk about uncontrolled flows of people hints towards the violence of political measures necessary to produce a *controlled* flow. In the case of flows in the World Exhibition, mechanical doors sufficed to make the mass of people move

in a regulated manner. However, since today's flows are connoted with natural catastrophes, from a governmental perspective this requires more forceful steering. Mechanisms of regulation are applied where refugee flows are perceived as the most threatening: 'Floodgates', 'locks', and 'sluices' then find their administrative pendants expressed in demands for an expansion of border protection. Furthermore, it materializes in the development of identification techniques and the organization of fleeing people according to a *distribution key*, in specific facilities such as – specifically in Germany – *anchor centers*, as well as eventually in the attempt to *contain* so-called causes of refugee flight preventively through economic programs. Petersson and Kainz note that “metaphors depicting natural events and disasters tend to frame restrictive political action as a key element in order to retain state sovereignty and control over national territories.” Seen in this perspective, “the primeval forces of nature alluded to in these metaphors locate political measures concerning immigration on a spectrum ranging from palliative measures at best to utterly futile at worst.” (2017, 54; cf. Mujagić 2018, 115)

This perspective is exemplarily underscored by William Walter's analysis of the British government's document *Secure Borders, Safe Haven* released in 2002. Also, pertaining to the logic of (forceful) exclusion in order to produce and maintain an inclusive us, Walter strikingly notes that “[t]he pre-eminent task of government is to attract and channel flows of resources, whether investment, goods, services, and now flows of (the right kind of) people into one's territory.” (2004: 244) In the document Walter registers the government's “political ambition [...] to combine two forms of security – the imperative of economic security which now entails attracting mobile human capital, and personal and internal security.” Hence, there is “the quest to make the border into a membrane, a tissue which can filter movements across its threshold.” (Ibid.: 255)<sup>13</sup> This illustrates the mechanism by which the deliberate inclusion of a specific group of people inevitably leads to signification of ‘others’ who are not welcome and therefore are excluded. Within this framework, the flow of refugees is degraded to a control variable that still needs to be regulated. Consequently, it makes no difference whether “goods and materials from all over the world” (TC: 00:09:05-00:09:13) or fleeing persons arrive. The orchestrated control of refugee flows appears in the residential containers anchored off Hamburg. They are the product of a political agenda according to which refugees may stay on a ship on the shore but not enter the country as a politically sovereign territory.<sup>14</sup>

13 Thanks to Milan Stürmer for mentioning this paper.

14 The image of a boat with fleeing people being anchored outside national borders is updated in the summer 2019 in view of lifeboats being refused entry into northern Mediterranean ports. In this regard, Mujagić concludes “that metaphor use is not just a matter of rhetorics, but that this particular word choice actually depicts a reality where migrants are prevented from entering countries they come to by physical obstacles.” (2018: 121)

What remains widely unheard in the talk of ‘refugee flows’ is the historically conditioned, negative semantic charge. Making it recognizable thus requires a semantic shift of the metaphor. Instead of a detour via associations to water, the flow of refugees must instead directly carry its political semantics with it; it demands a reconnotation. Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (2014) underscores this necessity and problematizes the metaphor of flow in the sense of a ‘self-evident image’ borrowed from nature. She asks: “But are streams and rivers truly the root image of ‘flow’ talk?” (2014: 98) In view of “globalization” and specifically the talk of migration “by now the root metaphor may have shifted”, which in turn results in “a new dynamic of word associations”. She concretizes that “flow would come to have [...] a far more political taste.” (Ibid.) It is not a matter of finding another idiom for the flow of refugees, but of challenging both the seeming self-evidence of its meaning as well as the reference to natural catastrophes.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the negative, dehumanizing control logic must be a reflexive part of the talk about migratory flows. Including the regulatory aspect of the metaphor through its history, the talk of refugee flows is describable in the logic of governmentality that perceives fleeing persons as a variable which is controllable by the state. However, this resemantization does not simply mean assigning a different meaning to flow, but rather to capture precisely this control function in its historicity.

Inscribed into the multiple layers of the video, this “political taste” (ibid.) is contained in the very sentence: “this is not a boat”. Referring to such ships that cannot be considered adequate vehicles, the same holds for the Bibby Challenge. Anchoring before the city of Hamburg, it does not fulfil a conventional boat’s function to transport people from one place to the other. And this insufficiency pertains to the metaphor of refugee flow, too. Concerning its linguistic function, it does not *transfer* from one meaning to another. The docked Bibby Challenge itself is a metaphor for the metaphor. With respect to the Greek *metapherein*, i.e. to “carry over”,<sup>16</sup> the transfer itself is suspended. Hence, the metaphor proves to be deficient of its “political taste”, as it isn’t ‘carried over’ with it. As a result, the metaphor ‘flows of people’ refers to more than notions of water, and it has to become self-explanatory that talk about ‘migrant flows’ is part of a dehumanizing control logic that depicts migration as a regulable variable.

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15 However, Walters provides a good example for another metaphor, i.e. “antivirus software”: “The image is of the state/home as a computer terminal located in a proliferating network which is both a space of resources and risks. The asylum system is a core element of this scanning infrastructure regulating the passage of flows which traverse the state/home. Properly organized it is to work in the background, effectively and silently. It blocks malicious incoming traffic, while the non-malicious can smoothly cross its threshold.” (2004: 255)

16 <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=metaphor>, last access 05.20.2021.

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