

**THE SCREEN AS A HOSPITABLE BORDER.**  
**Analysing the Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics of Documentary Films**  
**about Migration and Border-Crossing Experiences.**

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## ABSTRACT

My project aims to sketch out a theoretical framework to think about documentary films about migration and border-crossings in terms of their political potential. Thus, this work seeks to address the question of whether and how it is possible for these documentaries to give rise to political and ethical relationships that are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state and its sovereign power. In order to do this, I first draw on Jacques Derrida's proposal of an ethics and politics of hospitality as an alternative conceptualization of political relations that, instead of being determined by membership to a nation-state and geo-political borders, are based on relations of responsibility and solidarity amongst individuals regardless of their citizenship status. Secondly, I argue that Ariella Azoulay's triadic model of photography exemplifies Derrida's notion of the ethics and politics of hospitality. For Azoulay, photography can give rise to political relations between the photographed, the photographer and the spectators. Since these relationships are not mediated by the nation-state and are based on partnership, solidarity and equality, I claim that they are relationships of hospitality that are able to disrupt the hierarchies of the social order. Thirdly, I argue that Azoulay's triadic model can be transposed to the form of documentary, but that this transposition needs to acknowledge the fact that photography and documentary are two different visual media. Finally, I expand my analysis of this transposition by examining three contemporary documentaries about migration and drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Hito Steyerl and Trinh T. Minh-Ha. I discuss how the political and ethical bonds between filmmaker, filmed subject and spectators are shaped by the form and stylistic features of each of these documentaries. I conclude that documentaries are like borders, interstitial spaces, where the question of politics converges with questions of ethics and aesthetics.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. The Cut and the Border

In the cinematic lexicon a cut is that which both separates and joins two shots or frames. The cut is a technique by means of which the cinematic time and space is constituted, and hence it is what makes the film what it is both stylistically and narratively. In this sense, the cut determines what is seen from what is not seen on screen. The cut operates thus as a threshold and a boundary of sorts for it demarcates an inside and an outside, what is on screen and what is off screen.

A geo-political border is, to some extent, like the cinematic cut. Borders mark the limits of the territory of a nation-state. Borders determine the interior and exterior of a nation-state; they determine the territorial extension of a state as well the space where the national sovereign is supposed to rule absolutely. Geo-political borders also define the location within which an individual who is member of a nation-state is to be protected by the law and entitled to certain rights and duties. Borders thus function as cuts or interstitial places that both separate and connect different nation-states and also different people by deeming them as the citizens or non-citizens of these states. The boundaries established by nation-states not only bind individuals within these geographical limits to certain obligations and entitlements, but they also govern the social bonds that emerge amongst these persons as well as those between the latter and the sovereign. In setting limits, national borders exclude that which does not belong within them but they also tend to invite the question of what lies beyond the demarcated line. One of the issues that arises in this context is what type of relationships can and might be formed outside of the nation-state regulation and mediation; what kind of bonds can individuals get involved in without the direct sanction of the sovereign power. In other words, is it possible to make sense of political relationships that fall outside the framework of the nation-state and that hence are not restricted by the territorial demarcation of geo-political borders? Can we find alternative spaces where people can bond with one another in ways that not only are not determined by the roles, functions and statuses of the hierarchical order of the nation-state, but also in ways that disrupt these very roles and functions? And more specifically, is it possible to think of documentary films as having the potential

to open up spaces for the formation of political (and ethical) relationships that are not directly governed by the national sovereign power?

These are the key questions that guide this thesis. My main objective is to argue that there are other ways of understanding and practicing politics that do not need to be ultimately restricted to the manner in which we relate to and are regulated by the nation-state power. More particularly, my argument is that there are alternative forms of political relationships that can emerge through documentary films. Here I do not wish to deny or overlook the fact that in today's context of a globalised market economy where goods, information and people move across borders with seemingly little restriction, political relations are increasingly determined by transnational companies or institutions rather than by nation-states. Indeed, global markets have created a transnational form of governance, which is characterised by its attempt to constitute a globally unified geo-political space where nation-states and their borders have a very restricted participation. Nonetheless, geo-political borders still largely operate as institutions of control and international class differentiation that determine who can pass with ease and who cannot. Hence in our transnational world borders have a real and very concrete impact especially on the lives of those who cross them or attempt to cross them as undocumented migrants.

It is in view of this context that my purpose in this work is to suggest a way to understand documentary films about migration and border-crossings as sites that can give rise to political and ethical relationships that escape the direct mediation of the nation-state. Documentaries -- I will argue following documentary theorists such as Michael Renov, Bill Nichols and Trinh T. Minh-Ha,<sup>1</sup> are essentially an in-between form, between artifice and reality, partly constructed and partly factual. This interstitial quality of the documentary form makes it similar to the border in that it divides and excludes but also unites and serves as threshold. It is precisely this feature that gives documentaries the potentiality to serve as spaces for alternative political and ethical bonds beyond the framework of national borders.

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<sup>1</sup> See Renov, 'Toward a Poetics of Documentary,' in Renov (ed), *Theorizing Documentary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp.12-36; Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Trinh, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,' in Renov (ed), *Theorizing Documentary*, pp.90-107.

More particularly, I examine Jacques Derrida's<sup>2</sup> ideas about the contradictory and yet inextricable relation between politics and ethics, as well as his notion of hospitality. Politics, for him, is the domain concerned with making decisions, legislating laws, which are never grounded and hence imply always a risk or a bet that inevitably commits violence against the other (alterity). Whereas ethics is the domain of the unconditional concerned with the responsibility towards the others who have endured the violence of politics. The notion of hospitality is one of many concepts that reflects the constant negotiation between ethics and politics, unconditional and conditional. It is through this negotiation that we can think of an alternative politics that is not structured around concepts like the nation-state and national borders. I then link these ideas of Derrida with Ariella Azoulay's<sup>3</sup> thesis of the political potential of photography in order to argue that documentaries portraying migration and border-crossings have the potential to form political relationships that are deterritorialised for they do not fall under the regulation of nation-states and geo-political borders. Consequently, my claim is that documentaries about border-crossings can constitute 'hospitable' practices insofar as they can actualize the politics of hospitality.

I also argue for a connection between Derrida's conceptualisation of politics, Azoulay's conceptualisation of the political relations of photography and Jacques Rancière's thesis that politics is a collective activity, 'which turns on equality as its principle'<sup>4</sup> and disrupts the existing social order, and thus leads to a re-distribution of the social places and functions imposed by such social order. I make the case that the cinematic cut (the filmmaker's decisions about how one shot is to be linked to another) is akin with both Derrida's notion of politics and the one defended by Rancière. The Derridian politics as ungrounded decision-making that is unable to forecast the effects of these decisions and that cannot but inflict violence on the other is like the cut in that it implies setting a limit, selecting, discriminating. The parallel can be drawn between the cinematic cut and Rancière's view of politics as a process that interrupts the hierarchies of a current social order in that the cut is also an interruption, a border and a limit: it stops one shot to introduce the next one. Drawing

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<sup>2</sup> See Derrida, *Of Hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. by Reli Mezali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008); and Azoulay, *Civil Imagination. A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. by Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.ix.

on Azoulay's model of the political relations created by the photograph, I claim that if the (documentary) filmmaker decides amongst other things on the cuts, montage, camera angles, and hence on the form of the film, she inaugurates thereby certain political relationships with the filmed subjects and the spectators. Even though the filmmaker can never anticipate the response the latter will have towards the film, she can act as a host of sorts through her decisions and leave the door open so that filmed subjects and spectators take active part in determining the sense of the film. The political relationships that could be formed in this way fall beyond the framework of the nation-state and its territorial borders.

A discussion of how alternative conceptions of politics and political relations can take form in the context of today's massive transnational migration is relevant because the struggles that undocumented immigrants, refugees and other displaced persons are forced to endure due to their condition of statelessness demand a transformation of traditional understandings of politics as a domain restricted to and exclusively regulated by the framework of the nation-state. Indeed, a reconsideration of politics as well as a reformulation of citizenship as a practice rather than as a category entitling individuals to a set of rights and duties within a nation-state seems equally necessary. Because citizenship has been territorialised and defined in terms of a status that the national sovereign power grants to some persons, then all those who have not been assigned citizenship are left abandoned without protection and hence vulnerable to all kinds of injustice, violence and suffering. Thus, alternative conceptions of political bonds and citizenship are called for that are neither constituted by nor circumscribed to the boundaries of the nation-state. Following Derrida, Azoulay and Rancière, I will argue that such notions of politics and citizenship entail relations based on ethical responsibility, partnership, solidarity and equality amongst individuals regardless of their actual citizenship status. In this thesis I will show that these relationships can be actualised through documentary films about migration and border-crossings.

## **II. The Politics of the Image**

This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach as it is a discussion within documentary film theory and visual cultures but it also seeks to make an intervention in the areas of political philosophy and political theory. I draw on the work of Hito Steyerl, Trinh and Renov to support my exploration of the political aspects of

documentaries.<sup>5</sup> The core of my argument, however, is crucially informed by Azoulay's theoretical approach to the practice of photography. Her model of photography stands against understanding the photograph as a finalised product of which only the photographer has full and exclusive grasp whereas the spectators can merely passively observe what is represented but not take part in determining the meaning of the image. Instead, Azoulay poses a tripartite theory where photographer, spectators and photographed subjects all play an active role in the event of photography. The relevance of Azoulay's model to the theory of photography is that rather than limiting the bonds between the three parties involved to strict power relationships that cannot be overcome, her model offers a way to think photography beyond these relationships separating those with the power to represent and those who lack this power. Under this theoretical approach, photography becomes a practice and collective endeavour where the portrayed subjects suffering oppressive and violent living conditions are not just simply represented as passive victims, and where the spectators are not just observers that cannot do more than pity the photographed subjects. In this collective endeavour the photograph functions as a space where photographer, portrayed subjects and spectators are all equal partakers determining the meaning of the photograph. She calls this space 'the citizenry of photography'<sup>6</sup> where the three parties relate to one another as equally active members committed to make visible the injuries and suffering of the photographed subjects. Azoulay's triadic model claims that the photographic event constitutes a civil contract of sorts where the photographer takes the picture portraying people living under very deprived and violent conditions or conditions of 'regime-made disaster.'<sup>7</sup> The photographer, however, has no control over the effect the image might have or how it might be interpreted. Spectators, in turn, exercise their civic skill of 'watching'<sup>8</sup> photographs, which for Azoulay is not merely an act of passive and aesthetic contemplation of an event that is now in the past. In watching a photograph rather than looking at it, there is an activation of the spectator's 'civil gaze and intention.'<sup>9</sup> This involves an act of

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<sup>5</sup> See Steyerl, 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth,' in *Transversal-European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, trans. by Aileen Dering (May, 2003), <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>> [accessed 12th November 2013]; Steyerl, 'Documentary Uncertainty,' in *A Prior*, No. 15 (Spring, 2007) <[http://aprior.org/issue/on\\_life](http://aprior.org/issue/on_life)> [accessed 12th November 2013].

<sup>6</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.121.

reconstruction of the photographic event in such a manner that the injuries inflicted on the photographed subjects are rendered inadmissible and seen as calls for the immediate restoration of the damages suffered by these populations. In this way, the photographed subjects also become active participants for they address grievances to both the photographer and the spectator, thus claiming the rehabilitation of their 'impaired citizenship.'<sup>10</sup> Hence, the three participants are bound to one another as equals through civil bonds and thereby they constitute a space of political relations beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

This communal space of equality has, according to Azoulay, two implications. One is that the meaning of a photograph is never closed or ready-determined; instead it remains always open for different readings with every new encounter between these three parties. The second is that the relationships formed within this community of equality are not directly governed by the nation-state for the three partakers relate as equals regardless of what their citizenship status is. Such relationships are hence not restricted by national borders and are based on partnership, solidarity and concern for others rather than on the duties owed to the sovereign power. According to Azoulay this new political space gives rise to an alternative conceptualization of citizenship. This is a notion of citizenship that implies an active commitment of all members of the citizenry of photography to restoring or rehabilitating the citizenship of those who have been deprived of it or who have an impaired one.

I take Azoulay's thesis of the political relationships of photography as an actualization of what Derrida calls the ethics and politics of hospitality. Derrida argues that the most adequate way to approach the questions that are posed today by the phenomena of mass migration, the displacement of people and the waning of the powers of nation-states due to the globalised market is by way of a consideration of the concept of hospitality. For him, the issues raised by undocumented migrants and stateless people are an instantiation of the question of hospitality because they involve looking at the ways in which we legislate the welcoming of others, relate to and receive the absolute other.

Derrida understands hospitality as an aporetic concept, a concept that seems impossible because it implies two figures that are heterogeneous or contradictory and yet necessarily tangled together. On the one hand, unconditional or absolute

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<sup>10</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.15.

hospitality demands that we receive the foreigner without imposing any restrictions or conditions. On the other hand, conditional hospitality establishes certain requirements and limits to the welcoming of the other. Despite this apparent deadlock of hospitality, Derrida thinks that instead of paralysing, the aporia prompts us to think of the possible in a different way.<sup>11</sup> Absolute hospitality is unrealisable, we need to set limits to the arrival of others and, in so doing, we discriminate and commit violence towards them. However, the impossibility of actualising absolute hospitality in laws does not lead to stagnation. Rather, this impossibility remains as a promise that leads us to attempt to make possible the impossible: to attempt to legislate (conditional) laws of hospitality that are less violent towards the other. What this means is that unconditional hospitality requires the conditional laws of hospitality and vice versa.

This aporia of hospitality makes evident the inextricable link and constant tension existing between, the unconditional and the conditional, ethics and politics. Ethics demands that we remain open towards absolute alterity and take responsibility for the decisions and laws we make that impinge violence on the other. While politics requires that we set limits and take decisions that can never be based on a universal decision-making principle. Derrida's main point here is these irreconcilable exigencies of reason are both necessary and need to work in tandem. The recognition of this leads to a politics that admits that every effort needs to be made so that the other is addressed in its singularity, and so this is a politics is on an ongoing process of perfectibility, looking constantly for less bad, less violent, laws.

In view of the conditions endured by the *sans-papiers* or undocumented migrants, who lack the protection of a nation-state due to their status as non-citizens, Derrida proposes adopting a politics of hospitality that truly operates in coordination with an ethics of hospitality, a politics that aims to legislate (conditional) laws for the reception of foreigners in the name of absolute hospitality, the unconditional. This notion of a politics of hospitality entails a politics that is not dependent on citizenship or on the framework established by nation-states and geo-political borders. Rather, the politics and ethics of hospitality involve a particular form of relationship between individuals without respect to what their actual citizenship status might be. Derrida's view of the inseparable link between the ethics and politics of hospitality entails more demanding ways of relating to others, for it is not exclusively the sovereign power

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<sup>11</sup> See Derrida, 'As If It Were Possible, "Within Such Limits,"' in Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp.73-99 (p.91).

that determines how the other is to be received. The ethics and politics of hospitality also compel us to address the other without imposing conditions and thus to take ethical responsibility for the latter whatever her citizenship. In the same fashion, given that the ethics and politics of hospitality call for an ongoing search for less bad laws (even when there is no singular homogenising criteria that helps decide what less bad is), this is necessarily a more demanding form of political relationship.

By using the concept of hospitality as the conceptual tool to discuss the question of the *sans-papiers* and the refugees, Derrida underscores the fact that the policies and laws concerning the welcoming of others entail a politics of fraternity or sameness that excludes and refuses to acknowledge the singularity of the radical other. Derrida also affirms that these laws, in setting conditions for the reception of the other, always fall short of doing justice. In the light of this situation, these laws require transformation. We require a politics that does not close off the arrival of the other and that addresses the latter in its alterity. This politics is not based on the concepts of national citizenship and nation that exclude others on the basis of race, class and gender. This is a politics of the friend as absolute other.<sup>12</sup> What is more, Derrida's remarks about hospitality and about the relation between ethics and politics also seem to suggest an alternative understanding of citizenship: a notion of citizenship that involves first and foremost an active commitment towards the other as radically other, absolutely singular.

By drawing on this idea of hospitality as a necessary and appropriate way to tackle the problem of undocumented migration, I do not mean to neglect the fact that this is a complex issue, which therefore requires a multi-disciplinary approach. In particular, I am aware that an engagement with economic factors is necessary. A focus on the fact that the capitalist system requires cheap labour that is provided by irregular migrants and stateless people is called for if we are to understand the extent to which political relations today are dependent on and shaped by economic relations. However, I use Derrida's ideas -- in tandem with the theses of Azoulay and Rancière around the concepts of politics and the political -- to propose a theoretical and philosophical consideration of the political and ethical implications of documentary films about border-crossings and migration. I argue that the alternative political (and ethical) relationships that can emerge through documentaries are not constrained by

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<sup>12</sup> See Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 2005), pp.viii-ix.

the boundaries of nation-states, and hence constitute a deterritorialized form of politics. My approach might therefore be seen as a small contribution within a broader discussion, which would also include, among other things, a detailed analysis of economic aspects and infrastructures underpinning migration today as well as discussions on border control, citizenship and national and transnational sovereignty.

I believe that Azoulay's thesis of the space of political relationships that emerges through photography can be understood as an actualization of the ethics and politics of hospitality that Derrida poses. Her idea of the civil contract of photography and the concept of citizenship that she derives from it is based on relations of ethical responsibility, partnership and solidarity among individuals. Since such relationships are not directly governed by the nation-state and do not depend on the actual citizenship status of the parties involved, then they seem to embody the Derridian politics and ethics of hospitality. If this proves to be the case and if, as I intend to show, documentaries about migration can also give rise to political relations beyond the direct mediation of the national sovereign, then these will be *relationships of hospitality*.

My analysis of the extrapolation of Azoulay's model to documentary films is especially informed by the work of Rancière. I draw on his understanding of politics as a collective action that challenges the distribution of roles and functions, and hence the hierarchies imposed by the social order. In this sense, politics is not a matter of the judiciary, a political party or any other institution. These latter forms belong to what Rancière calls the order of 'the police,'<sup>13</sup> which not only aims to preserve and foster the current social arrangements, but also determines what can be experienced and apprehended through the senses. The order of the police establishes not just the places and functions of individuals within society, but it even sets the conditions of possibility of perception, action and thought. Thus the order of the police establishes a 'distribution of the sensible.'<sup>14</sup> By contrast, politics for Rancière is a process by which a group of people who have been excluded or presupposed unequal by the order of the police act as if they were equal to all those in higher positions within the hierarchies of this order. Thereby, the excluded show the arbitrariness and contingency of the social arrangement and the conceptual and perceptual framework that underpins it.

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<sup>13</sup> Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics,' in S. Corcoran (ed), *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), p.36.

<sup>14</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. with an introduction by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p.12.

Politics is thus dissensus with the police, leading to a process of reconfiguration of the partition or distribution of the sensible.

I link and compare Rancière's understanding of politics to Azoulay's thesis of the space of political relations created by the photograph because I think his view of politics can enrich and supplement the civil contract of photography that Azoulay poses. Rancière's idea of politics as a collective effort entailing a disruption of social hierarchies and reconfiguration of the sensible can be likened to Azoulay's idea that the under the civil contract photographer, photographed subjects and spectator are related as equals, as active partakers in the articulation of the meaning of the photograph. Azoulay and Rancière thus seem to agree in that politics involves a collective action that implies relations based on equality and hence produces disruption of the social and political hierarchies. They also agree in that politics and aesthetics are not mutually excluding. However, Azoulay distinguishes between the political and the civil in order to argue that all human interactions are political, and that hence the encounters created through a photographic event have to be political too. The civil is a skill and an intention that people exercise when in those human interactions they choose to show concern and partnership and solidarity for others. Therefore, the civil contract of photography and the sphere of relationships not mediated by the nation-state that this contract creates can only emerge when the civil intention is practised. This is where Azoulay and Rancière differ. I will argue that Azoulay's claim that all human encounters are political might make the notion of the political unclear and might leave one wondering how political change or shifts in social hierarchies and power relations can take place if all human interactions are political. Rancière's view, by contrast, avoids this danger since for him politics involves a reconfiguration of the positions and roles assigned to people within the social order. The political should not be different from the civil or an extra dimension within the political as Azoulay thinks. Instead, if politics is a process of actualization of equality and disruption of hierarchies, then politics has to involve relationships based on concern, responsibility, solidarity and partnership towards others. Politics in this sense needs to involve the civic.

Here we can also begin to see the point of convergence between Derrida and Rancière. For both Derrida and Rancière, politics pertains a sort of interruption, a cinematic cut of sorts. As I stated before, politics for Derrida concerns decisions that set limits, calculations and conditions. Politics for Rancière has to do with the

disruption and re-configuration of a current social order. Through Azoulay's work of the political relationships of photography, I am able to make more evident this link between Rancière and Derrida as pertains the political bonds that can be created through documentary films.

### **III. Transpositions**

As I mentioned, it is my purpose in this work to argue that documentary films about migration and border-crossings have the potential to produce political and ethical relationships much in the same way that Azoulay thinks photography can create political bonds between the photographer, the photographed subject and the viewer. Discussing how and to what extent Azoulay's triadic model of photography can be transposed to documentary film is important for two reasons. First, because this allows us to think about the domain of politics and political relations in a way that is not attached to a geographical space or territory and that is not based on the duties that individuals have towards a national sovereign power and vice versa. Instead, we can expand our conception of politics as implying relations amongst individuals that are based on solidarity, partnership and equality. The second reason is that we can understand the documentary form not just in terms of a visual art form and a representational medium, but also as having the potential to constitute an alternative space for political relationships.

Since documentary cinema and photography are two different visual media, I will explore the possibility of extrapolating Azoulay's theory to documentaries taking these differences into consideration. I draw mainly on the work of Renov, Nichols, Steyerl and Trinh to explain that the documentary form is a form of the in-between: between fact and fiction, record of events and artistic creation. This quality of documentaries, I will claim, plays a role in the potential political bonds that can emerge between filmmaker, filmed subject and spectator. I will argue that, in playing with the creative expression and thus the form of a documentary, the filmmaker can act as a host that invites filmed subjects and spectators to play active roles in the determination of the film's sense. In so doing, these three parties can constitute a space of political relations of hospitality, which are not directly regulated by the nation-state.

The virtue of the triadic model of photography of Azoulay, which I use to think about documentary films, is that it presents an approach beyond the dualism of the power relations between the passive viewer with no representational powers and

the artist (the photographer or the filmmaker) bearing the power of representation. The moving images of documentary, nonetheless, do bring in new dimensions for the triadic model. In particular, the elements of temporality, movement, sound and subtitles, which are absent in photography, need to be taken into account in this case, for they necessarily produce a change in the triadic model as applied to documentary. The process of filming is durational, or at least it allows the chance to prolong the relationship between the represented subject and the filmmaker beyond the single snapshot occurring in the photograph. As a consequence, the process of making a documentary differs from the one of taking a photograph, since the durational aspect of film gives way to a more collaborative relationship between the subjects portrayed and the filmmaker. This is not to deny that the process of taking photographs can also be durational and thus collaborative especially when a photograph is made in a studio. But in general, there is more collaboration and therefore a more overt active participation of the filmed subjects in the making of documentaries.

In a similar fashion, the manner and the extent to which the spectator gets actively involved in the determination of the meaning of the documentary is also necessarily shaped by the temporality and sound effects present in documentary images. I draw mostly on the work of Steyerl and Trinh to argue that it is more in the form of the documentary, in its stylistic qualities, rather than in its content, that the potential of the film to produce political relationships resides. Both Steyerl and Trinh affirm that the manner in which the documentary is organised and put together crucially determines the extent to which its meaning can be fixed. The editing, the camera angles and the way images are coupled with sounds decide how stable a meaning can be. When the meaning refuses to become 'easily stabilized and when it does not rely on any single source of authority,'<sup>15</sup> then the documentary can be political in the sense that it offers spectators the space to be actively involved in the articulation of its significance. In other words, if the documentary is organised in a way that lends itself to many readings, then it opens up the possibility of a communal space of equality. This is a space where the filmmaker does not appear as the exclusive owner of the film with privileged access to its meaning, and where the viewers are able to partake as equals. I will claim that this community of equality that can be created through the documentary is similar to the space of political relations

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<sup>15</sup> Trinh, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,' p.100.

created by the photographic event proposed by Azoulay. Through my three case studies, I will suggest that the spectator can engage with the film to a greater or lesser degree that cannot be predetermined. By the same token, I will make the point that the temporality and sound elements in documentary shape spectators' involvement with the film's meaning not only in terms of rational and reflexive experience, but also in terms of affect and embodied responses.

Here I invoke Rancière's work once again for my argument of the possibility of transposing Azoulay's triadic model of photography to the documentary form. I use Rancière's thesis of the 'emancipated spectator' to examine the bonds formed by the filmmaker (the artist) and the spectator. His idea is that an emancipatory practice of art is one that blurs the distinction between the roles of the artist and the spectator, the specialist and the amateur, and thus between doing and looking. The artist in this case has to start with the acknowledgement that spectators are active agents with the capacity to interpret and make sense of the work of art just by themselves; the artist needs to recognise that spectators are not passive ignorant subjects that require to be somehow enlightened through the work of art. Instead, when the artist offers her work from a position of equality, she assumes that she cannot predict or control how the spectator will react to it, and hence she opens up a collaborative space. Such a space is a sphere for the sharing of knowledges amongst equals that therefore blurs functions and roles assigned by the social order. I will argue that, like Steyerl and Trinh say, when the form of the documentary is open, then spectators can become active participants in determining the film's meaning and thus the film can become a space for the exercise of emancipation in the way Rancière explains. In this way, this is a space where the hierarchies of the social order can be challenged and where political relations not governed by the nation-state can emerge.

Finally, another thing I will explore is whether the transposition of the triadic model of photography to documentary can also be extended to different geographical and political contexts. While Azoulay has a particular interest in Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is the context from which she draws the photographic examples to illustrate her thesis of the civil contract of photography, I will examine whether this triadic model can also be expanded to other scenes. Through my case studies, I will show that documentaries about migration and border-crossing experiences, regardless of the geographical situation of the border portrayed, have the potential to give rise to

political bonds, which are based on solidarity, partnership and equality, and which escape the direct regulation of the national sovereign.

I undertake my consideration of the extrapolation of Azoulay's theoretical approach to photography to the documentary form by means of analysing three case studies: Thenjiwe Nkosi's *Border Farm* (2010), Sabine Lubbe Bakker and Ester Gould's *Shout* (2010), and John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010). These are three recent documentaries that portray the experience of migration and border-crossing using diverse approaches, stylistic techniques and narratives. I have chosen these films because I believe their different modalities allow me to focus my discussion of the roles that the filmmakers, the subjects filmed and the spectators might play on each documentary. Thus, through these case studies I test how and to what extent Azoulay's theory of photography can be transposed to the documentary form, how and to what extent documentary films about migration can produce political (and ethical) bonds beyond the framework of the nation-state. Focusing mostly on their stylistic features, I discuss how it is that the filmed subjects and the spectators become actively engaged with (and even how they affectively respond to) each of these films. And I argue how the filmmakers can be seen to act as hosts to both the spectators and filmed subjects in these three cases.

I have limited my analysis to just three rather than a plethora of documentaries because this work aims to be a theoretical exploration of the potential of political relationships that emerge through documentaries and are not limited by geo-political borders. This thesis is not an exhaustive study of documentary films on migration. Furthermore, I do not look at how spectators, filmmakers and represented subjects relate to one another and engage with the film, for that would call for an analysis through audience and reception studies. However, I propose this in my conclusion as an area of further study. My purpose here is to present a theoretical discussion that has implications as to how we can understand and approach documentary films in terms of their political and ethical dimensions.

#### **IV. Outline of the Thesis**

This work is thus divided into six chapters. In Chapter 1, I start by looking more closely at what constitutes a border. I use Étienne Balibar's analysis of this concept to argue that the complex ways in which the institution of the border functions allows us to better understand the problem of undocumented migrants and to signal ways in

which we can tackle this issue.<sup>16</sup> I also draw on the work of Giorgio Agamben further discuss the role of geo-political borders, and to explain the necessary exclusion that the national sovereign power introduces. This theoretical background helps me introduce Derrida's thesis that we need an alternative form of politics, a politics not based on resemblance or identification, but a politics that acknowledges alterity and that is not constructed on the basis of the concepts of nation, national borders or national citizenship. Through the Derridian concept of hospitality we can see how he concludes that ethics and politics are in a relation of contradiction where both remain irreducible to one another and yet indissociable. Politics as the realm of laws and decisions that inevitably are violent towards the absolute other, and ethics as the realm of the unconditional responsibility that we have towards these others who have suffered this violence. The relation of ethics and politics explains why the (conditional) laws of hospitality that govern the reception of foreigners need to be always open to perfectibility in order to do less violence to others, and accommodate the demands of the principle of absolute hospitality. This will serve me as the foundation for claiming, in subsequent chapters, that there can be spaces for political relations beyond geo-political borders, and that these spaces can be found in photography and documentary films.

Chapter 2 focuses on Azoulay's triadic model of photography as one that explains the political potential of photographs in terms of the active and equal participation of the photographer, the photographed subject and the spectator. In this chapter I will consider alternative conceptions of politics and citizenship that arise from her model, and I compare and assess these ideas with Derrida's remarks on the ethics and politics of hospitality and his proposal of the need to think politics independently from nation-states. Here I also introduce Rancière's ideas of the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics in order to show that Azoulay's thesis of the political relations of photography should be understood in terms of the formation of a community of equality that reconfigures the distribution of the sensible and that hence challenges social and political hierarchies.

In Chapter 3 I examine the different ways in which documentary films have been defined. I use Nichols, Renov, Steyerl and Trinh to explain that this is a complex film form that refuses to be explained simply as a non-fictional format and that does

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<sup>16</sup> See Balibar, 'What is a Border?', in É. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans by Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp.75-86.

not easily lend itself to a taxonomy of its different modalities. With this in mind, I analyse in which senses and to what extent Azoulay's triadic model of photography can be extrapolated to documentaries. My argument is that despite being two different visual media, Azoulay's thesis of the political bonds that can emerge through photography can be transposed to documentaries, and thus the latter can be understood as collective practices where participants relate as equals. Here Rancière's notion of politics as a disruption and redistribution of the roles, functions and hierarchies of an existing social order can be linked to Derrida's understanding of politics as ungrounded decision- and law-making through the figure of the cinematic cut. While the cut establishes a limit between one shot another, for Rancière politics entails a cut, and interruption of a social order; and for Derrida politics interrupts, cuts and makes violence when it makes decisions and laws that set limits and conditions.

The last three chapters are devoted to exploring the extrapolation of Azoulay's model to the documentary form by way of an analysis of three documentaries. Chapter 4 looks at *Border Farm* by Nkosi (2010), which is a dramatised documentary set at the border of South Africa and Zimbabwe and that plays freely with elements of fictional and non-fictional films. The way in which this film was made allows me to focus my attention on the role that the filmed subjects had and the effects of their participation. My question here will be whether the filmed subjects can really become so active in the making of a documentary that they can be seen as equal participants with the filmmaker.

In Chapter 5 I analyse *Shout* by Gould and Lubbe Bakker (2010). This documentary is set in the Golan Heights, the Syrian territory under Israeli occupation. I use this film's dramatic narrative style and its stylistic techniques to consider how spectators can become actively involved in the determination of the meaning of the film. More specifically, my analysis aims to explore in which sense we can say that spectators might read the film in terms of claims for rights that the filmed subjects pose.

Lastly, Chapter 6 discusses *The Nine Muses* by Akomfrah (2010), which is a documentary-essay film that presents a lyrical view of the history of migration to post-war Britain. It is composed as a collage of archive footage from newsreels and films with new original footage coupled with music and off-screen readings of classical texts, which I approach to consider the active engagement of spectators in

terms of affective and embodied responses, and the role that the filmmaker has in facilitating this form of involvement on the part of spectators.

Through these cases I hope to show that Azoulay's theory of photography can provide a good basis to think of documentaries also as political practices that can actualise Derrida's hospitality. As I mentioned, the purpose of this thesis is twofold. It aims to lay the groundwork for further enquiry into the potential of documentary films for thinking about questions of undocumented migration, hospitality, citizenship and the border. Likewise, this dissertation also seeks to work alongside other studies which explore different aspects of national sovereignty, migration, citizenship, border control and the economic relations that determine these, as well as alongside studies dealing with other artistic representations and the way the latter are produced, circulated and consumed.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Borders and Hospitality. The Relation Between Ethics and Politics**

#### **I.**

The post-medieval modern political formation known as the nation-state is today's dominant form of state organisation and has as its underlying constitutive principle that of national sovereignty, which is the ideal correspondence between territory and people. To put it differently, the geo-political formations that we now call 'nation-states' are formed of three elements: the (national) sovereign, the territory and the people. A territory is required if the state is to execute its power and enforce its single hegemonic rule over the population within a demarcated space. Whereas a people is needed as one of the constitutive elements of the state and, simultaneously, as the object upon which the state imposes its decree. Thus, insofar as the individuals are members of the state, they have rights; and insofar as they are subordinates to the state power, they have duties. It is the sovereign power that functions here as the unifying element between territory and people. What the sovereign adds to the unity of a people and a territory is the exercise of power condensed into one single dominant executive authority (as opposed to power being spread and exerted amongst many, which was the case in the Middle Ages when the rule and domination were exercised by various landlords and the Church within the pre-national states), and the fact that this exercise is directed towards the attainment of the common good.

Many modern political theorists, such as Carl Schmitt, have attempted to provide a systematic account of how the relation between territory and people can be shaped so as to create the spatio-temporal cohesive and coherent form that is the nation-state. Schmitt proposes that sovereignty is that which rationalises and organises the appropriation of land, and is also the power that determines when a 'state of exception' (a temporary suspension of all legal restrictions to the sovereign's executive powers aimed at restoring or establishing legal order) is to be installed.<sup>1</sup> There is another model that, instead of emphasising the role of territory, underlines the role of people in the determination of sovereignty. According to this approach sovereignty is the result of an agreement or contract between the sovereign power and

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<sup>1</sup> See Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab, foreword by Tracy Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political. Expanded Edition*, trans. by George Schwab, foreword by Tracy Strong and notes by Leo Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the people. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Of the Social Contract*<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*<sup>3</sup> provide examples of this second approach. There is, however, a common idea underlying the various theoretical explanations of sovereignty; and that is the idea that national sovereignty is an attempt to systematise the relation existing between people and territory.

It is not my aim in this chapter (nor in this thesis as a whole) to offer an historical account of the development of the nation-state as a form of state organisation or to engage in a discussion about the different theoretical approaches to the notion of national sovereignty. Thus, I will not delve into these topics in any major depth. Rather, my purpose is to provide a general background to the two main issues I engage with in this first chapter. The first refers to the notion of 'the border' as one that needs to be analysed carefully if one is to understand at least some of the many ethical, political, social, economic and cultural questions that this geo-political institution raises. At the same time, the border as an interstitial space is akin to the cinematic cut, that space that both separates and links two shots within a film. The connection holding between the border, politics, ethics, the cut and documentary films will become clearer in the development of this thesis. This chapter attempts to introduce the political theory that will serve, later on, as foundation to the examination of the ethical and political relationships that can emerge through the documentary film form.

How the institution of the geo-political border works and exerts its control today necessarily brings up the issue of how the foreigner, 'the other,' is received. This involves, as Jacques Derrida claims, the question of hospitality, which is the second notion I will consider in this chapter. I will explain that Derrida understands hospitality as a question that inexorably emerges in today's context of mass migration, and I will assess his thesis of the necessary bond between the sphere of ethics and the sphere of politics. Thus, the argument I advance here is twofold. I claim that Derrida's proposal of a politics and an ethics of hospitality offers a promising way to approach the questions raised by the increasing number of undocumented border-crossers and stateless people both circulating and detained in Europe and

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<sup>2</sup> Rousseau, 'Of the Social Contract,' in *Of the Social Contract and Other Political Writings*, trans. by Quintin Hoare, ed. by Christopher Bertram (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2012), pp.1-134.

<sup>3</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. and intro. by John Charles Addison Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

elsewhere today. In close relation to this, I maintain that Derrida's hospitality allows for an alternative formulation of politics, ethics and citizenship. The conceptualisation of politics that results is one that is indissociable from and yet in tension with ethics because it involves making decisions and setting limits which necessarily commit violence against 'the other,' whereas ethics concerns the responsibility we all bear towards these 'others' who have suffered this violence. This politics, as conditionality, opposes the unconditionality of ethics but it recognises the need to constantly make better decisions, better laws that are more attuned with ethics, and that get closer to the concept of justice. In the case of the notion (and practice) of citizenship, Derrida seems to suggest a citizenship that is neither restricted by the interests of the nation-state nor sanctioned exclusively by the latter. These concepts of hospitality and citizenship are central to this thesis because I will use them in order to argue for and characterise the political and ethical relationships that can emerge through documentaries about migration and border-crossings. Equally, Derrida's idea that politics entails decisions, laws and conditions will serve me to characterize the filmmaker as a host of sorts who establishes limits and makes decisions by selecting what to film and by cutting shots, but who also invites spectators and filmed subjects to take active part in making sense of the film.

In view of the mentioned purpose of this chapter, it seems necessary nonetheless to start with a succinct exposition of what is understood as nation-state and sovereignty, and how these two are related to the notion of citizenship. This will allow me to introduce my discussion of the border as an institution that, as Balibar puts it, operates beyond its mere geographical location and serves as an international apparatus of control and class differentiation and discrimination. In turn, the question of the border will act as a stepping-stone to my analysis of Derrida's hospitality. And also the concepts of the border and the cinematic cut will also return later when I argue that documentary films can act as spaces of hospitality. The next section of this chapter serves to expand upon the discussion about the nation-state and sovereignty.

## **II. National Sovereignty and its Link to Citizenship**

Within the political formation that is the nation-state, the state is largely instrumental in unifying the nation within a framework of a shared economic life, as well as common social and cultural values. In terms of the economy, the nation-state seeks unification by, for instance, eliminating certain internal tolls and taxes whilst imposing others externally. In terms of culture and social values, the nation-state

attempts to homogenise national culture by means of different state policies, such as a common curriculum in primary and secondary education and fostering a uniform language across the nation. In this sense, the nation-state constitutes a form of state organisation characterised by the geographical convergence of two entities. One is the state as a political entity that exerts its power in accordance to a set of laws that directly emanate from the will of the people (the nation's common will) within the limits of a clearly demarcated territorial unit; and the other is the nation as a cultural (and/or linguistic and ethnic) entity.

In *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century*,<sup>4</sup> Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos defend the thesis that there are two consecutive steps that the nation-state takes in order to attain the convergence of territory and people. In a first step, the population is divided and categorised into social classes for the purposes of representation; thus a system of social strata is established. The second and subsequent step sees the nation-state granting rights of participation to each of these represented social groups. It is the balance between granting representation to different social groups within the national territory and granting rights to these groups that ensures the integration of territory and people. Following the work of Nikos Poulantzas,<sup>5</sup> the authors explain this as follows:

National sovereignty is sustained by the existence of a national social compromise -- a stable but changing balance of institutional power between the represented social groups, which is developed as a means of regulating the distribution of rights amongst these groups [...]. Initially, the city-state -- and later the nation state -- consisted of wealthy, property owners only. [...] The majority of the inhabitants of the territory of the state were excluded [from representation and rights]. But [later] what solidifies the centrality of the state in modern sovereignty is a form of differential inclusion of certain social groups through granting rights (social, civil and political). Rights become a means of expanding the category of citizenship.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, the unity created by the people and the territory under the government of a national sovereign necessarily entails a separation, an exclusion and a demarcation between those people who do not belong and those who do, those people who are under the rule of a certain sovereign power (and thus are entitled to certain rights and duties) and those who are not. Simultaneously, a geo-political division is also

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<sup>4</sup> Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, *Escape Routes. Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, trans. by Patrick Camiller, intro. by Stuart Hall (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos, *Escape Routes*, p.5.

established in order to set the limits between the different national sovereignties; to set the territorial boundaries within which a nation-state is to exert its power and rule in an absolute manner, without the intervention of any other power or national sovereign. This is how citizenship and national borders are instituted so as to consolidate the sovereign nation-state.

The modern category of citizenship is thus, from the outset, inextricably linked to the nation-state insofar as it is defined in terms of an individual's relation to the national sovereign. If an individual is deemed a citizen of a nation-state, then she is entitled to certain rights, is bound by the laws and has duties within the borders of such state. By contrast, an individual who is not a citizen does not belong to the nation-state, and hence lacks the rights and duties of the citizen. Citizenship means 'belonging to a nation state, where the belonging is both legitimate through law and codified through culture.'<sup>7</sup> To the extent that citizenship distinguishes between citizens and noncitizens, it necessarily produces exclusions. Citizenship can never be all-inclusive for it would then lose its purpose as a differentiating and status-granting category. However, as I will argue later on following Derrida's and Azoulay's ideas, it is both necessary and possible to conceive of citizenship not merely as a membership entitling a person to certain rights and duties within a nation-state, but also as a practice of political and ethical responsibility and solidarity for others (citizens or noncitizens). Citizenship in this sense would mean a practice that is not directly regulated by the national sovereign power. My claim in this thesis will be that documentary films portraying migration and border-crossings can function as spaces that allow precisely for this conception of citizenship to be actualised, and thus for a way of understanding politics beyond the framework of the nation-state.

As mentioned above, historically the category of citizenship was expanded by the different nation-states to include more social groups, to grant them representation and rights, so as to consolidate the unity of territory and people. But because citizenship is always incomplete and never perfect and all-inclusive, it has been increasingly challenged. Since the 1960s and 1970s many excluded social groups started questioning the supposed inclusiveness of the traditional modes of representation, and demanded further rights. At the same time, the post-war era has been characterised by international trade and political agreements that have produced

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

supra-national blocs that challenge the nation-state's monopoly of power and absolute sovereignty within its borders. The emergence of transnational corporations and non-governmental organisations alongside the consolidation of a virtual order of global markets that fosters the mobility of goods, capital, labour force, people and ideas has gradually put pressure on national borders. Thus today there is a continuing erosion of the hegemonic political and economic powers of the nation-state that puts into question this form of state organisation and the concept of citizenship that it supports. This is why many theorists, amongst them Balibar and Derrida, have engaged in a close examination of the attrition of nation-states, the function of geo-political borders today, and the possibility of an alternative understanding of citizenship and a politics not limited exclusively to the realm of the nation-state.

In order to better understand why and in what sense Derrida proposes a new conceptualisation of politics that is not directly sanctioned by the national sovereign and that is founded on ethics, it is necessary to explore first what is a border and how it functions today. Indeed, Derrida's proposal of an ethics and a politics of hospitality as the most adequate manner to approach the pressing questions that the growing number of undocumented migrants and displaced people pose makes sense when it is presented in the light of today's role of national borders as apparatuses of control operating ubiquitously and well beyond their specific geographical location. Thus, in the following sections, I will examine Balibar's discussion of the institution of the border in the current context of the crisis of the form of organisation that is the nation-state, for this will serve me as groundwork for my analysis of Derrida's hospitality in the second part of this chapter.

### **III. Understanding Borders**

The notion of the 'border' is a complex one. As Balibar has claimed,<sup>8</sup> it is not possible to provide a single and simple definition of the border that would hold valid for all historical, social and political contexts, for all times and places, and for all individuals and communities. It is precisely because there is nothing like a universal essence of the border, that any attempt to define the concept of the 'border' needs to acknowledge its complexity if it is to avoid producing a circular form of reasoning. Indeed, if the border is defined simply as that which delimits a territory and attributes the territory with an identity, then one is inevitably condemned to reason in circles

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<sup>8</sup> See Balibar, 'What is a Border?', pp.75-86.

because to identify or to define is exactly nothing else than demarcating a border. In view of today's so-called context of globalization, which increasingly has blurred national borders and led to a crisis in the definition of the nation-state, a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the 'border' is called for. Thus, my aim in the first part of this chapter is to examine some of the characteristics that borders seem to share in common in order to better comprehend the complexity and the nuances of these apparatuses.

Amongst some of the academics who have attempted to provide a complex notion of the border is Chicano and border theorist Gloria Anzaldúa.<sup>9</sup> For her, the border does not simply refer to a physical boundary between two nation-states, but rather borders are sites where differences or identities like those of gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion converge or else are forced together. Two ideas in Anzaldúa's work emerge as significant. First, that borders and borderlands are 'in a constant state of transition.'<sup>10</sup> Because they are sites for the encounter, entanglement and negotiation of different social, ethnic, religious and cultural identities, borders are fluid, they transform themselves. The second idea is that crossing a border necessarily amounts to an act of transgression against the constraints imposed by the dominant forces that produce and preserve some of those cultural and social identities.

Anzaldúa is right to think that borders are in continuous transformation. Throughout history and depending on the cultural, political and economical contexts within which they are situated, every border has evolved and served different functions, thus acquiring different meanings. The fact that borders undergo constant modifications does not mean that borders cannot be conceptualized. Quite the contrary, it just means that the concept of the border does not admit reductionistic or monolithic definitions. However, Anzaldúa's idea that any border-crossing experience is inherently and automatically a challenge to the social and political order, an act of transgression against the hegemonic forces, needs to be assessed because the crossing of a border entails different meanings depending on who the person or persons which cross the border are. The answers to the questions of who the border-crosser is; in which terms and with which purposes he or she crosses the border; and in which

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<sup>9</sup> See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, intro. by Sonia Saldívar-Hull (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.25.

historical context the border-crossing takes place, all constitute factors that determine how the experience of crossing the border is lived, and thus the significance that this experience has for the person crossing the border. This is once again a confirmation that borders cannot and should not be explained in simplistic terms; they require comprehensive analysis, from a series of perspectives, in order to be fully understood. In what follows, I will use Balibar's analysis of some of the central features and functions of borders in order to explain why border-crossings do not necessarily result in an undermining of the imposed law and order of these apparatuses.

In his article, 'What is a Border?,' Balibar affirms that there are three major qualities of borders that have manifested themselves throughout history. Namely, the *overdetermination* of borders, the *polysemic character* of borders, and the *heterogeneity* and *ubiquity* of borders. Balibar claims that examining these three aspects is useful for comprehending a further, and perhaps more relevant, dimension of borders: the 'spiritual' or symbolic dimension of the border. What Balibar understands by this symbolic dimension is the fact that national (geographical-political-administrative) borders are not merely external realities and that, therefore, they do not simply involve a 'question of external power, [a question] of relations of force and the distribution of populations between states.'<sup>11</sup> For him, borders also become *internalized*<sup>12</sup> and, hence, *idealized* by individuals.

By the *overdetermination* of borders, Balibar refers to the fact that any geo-political border is never purely the dividing line between two nation-states. Instead, borders also serve the function of organizing and configuring the structure of the world. In other words, while borders separate particular territories, they always at the same time provide the world with 'a representable figure in the modality of the partition, distribution and attribution of regions of space.'<sup>13</sup> To illustrate the extent to which borders have a world-configuring function and are thus sanctioned by other geo-political divisions, Balibar invokes the case of the two blocs that emerged after the end of the Second World War and lasted the entire Cold War period, until 1990. In 1945 the world was fractioned into two main blocs. On the one hand, the Eastern bloc, constituted by those countries under Socialist regimes, with the Soviet Union

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<sup>11</sup> Balibar, 'The Borders of Europe,' in Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, pp.87-103, (p.94).

<sup>12</sup> The notion of 'interior' or 'inner borders' was first coined by Fichte, and has been invoked and turned central in Balibar's analysis of the notion of the border. See Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. with and intro. by Gregory Moore (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Balibar, 'The Borders of Europe,' p.93.

leading the bloc. On the other, the Western bloc, constituted by the capitalist and most powerful countries of Western Europe along with the United States as the main heading figure. According to Balibar, the consequence of this division of the world into blocs was twofold. First, the nation-state-form was extended world wide; and second, but equally significant, a hierarchy among the nation-states pertaining to each of the blocs was created, something that allowed these nations to enjoy more or less sovereignty. National borders were thus *overdetermined* by ulterior geo-political interests and allegiances, and this implied that:

National borders of states were [...], depending on the particular case, strengthened or weakened. It also meant that there were [...], in practice, several types of aliens and alienness, and several different modes of border-crossing. When the border, or the sense of crossing a border, coincided with the super-borders of the blocs, it was generally more difficult to pass through, because the alien in this case was also an enemy alien, if not indeed a potential spy.<sup>14</sup>

This *overdetermination* of borders has not been limited exclusively to the post-World War II period. Rather, as Balibar mentions, this is an intrinsic feature of all national borders, and hence it is possible to find examples of it in other historical periods and locations. Thus, even today, after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism as a political hegemonic regime in the Eastern bloc, national borders worldwide are still being *overdetermined* by what appears to be a North/South and West/East world partition along clear lines separating the ‘developed’ from the ‘developing’ or ‘under-developed’ countries. Once again, these supra-national super-borders determine the extent to which national borders may or may not be easily surmounted, and hence these super-borders decide who is considered more or less foreign, as well as who can cross a border more or less effortlessly. The border between India and Pakistan provides a good example of this current geopolitical ‘world order.’ While Western tourists (i.e. Americans, British, German, Australian and other citizens from the so-called ‘First World’) as well as multinational-capital and goods are allowed to cross the Indo-Pak border without much trouble; Indians and Pakistanis, by contrast, find it very complicated to travel across the border. The latter are faced with multiple stringent measures that hinder their journeys, such as the need for visas and the fact that ‘only one crossing at the rail frontier [between these two

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<sup>14</sup> Balibar, ‘What is a Border?’, p.80.

countries] is open'<sup>15</sup> for them to use. In this example, the fact that one is or is not a citizen from a country belonging to the supranational bloc of the developed countries determines whether and in which way one is allowed to cross the Indo-Pak border.

#### **IV. The Multiple Meanings of Borders**

The *overdetermination* of borders is closely linked to the second aspect that Balibar enumerates in his examination of the concept of the border, namely, what he calls the '*polysemic nature*' of borders. Balibar affirms that borders have a *polysemic* character in the sense that they present themselves differently to different people, and therefore they attribute diverse meanings depending on who experiences the crossing of a border and how this crossing is carried out. Indeed, today's borders increasingly provide individuals belonging to different social classes and holding different nationalities with completely different 'experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise.'<sup>16</sup>

Here the case of the Indo-Pak border can help again to illustrate the extent to which differences in social status and nationality among individuals determine the meaning that a particular border has for each person. The tourists from rich countries who attempt to traverse the border between India and Pakistan can do so almost effortlessly. Whereas for both Indian and Pakistani 'coolies' (unskilled and underpaid manual labourers who carry goods from one side of the border and give their cargos to other manual labourers on the other side) the border appears as an insurmountable barrier that they must face everyday as part of their work, and hence is fundamental to their survival. Examples of radically divergent experiences of the same border can be found worldwide. Crossing the US-Mexico border is not experienced in the same manner by US passport holders, who cross the border rather smoothly, as it is by undocumented immigrants who need to pay a smuggler in order to pass through and reach the other side. Likewise, travelling from North African territories (like the Spanish-Moroccan city of Ceuta) to the European Union is an entirely different experience for a Western tourist who is on a holiday, than it is for a *sans-papiers* émigré risking his life on a small boat in order to cross to the other side of the

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<sup>15</sup> Kalra and Purewal, 'The Strut of the Peacocks. Partition, Travel and the Indo-Pak Border,' in Kaur, R., and Hutnyk, J. (eds), *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1999), pp.54-67 (p.58).

<sup>16</sup> Balibar, 'What is a Border?', pp.81-82.

Mediterranean shore. Equally, many other instances of the *polysemic nature* of borders could also be invoked here.

Having the ‘right’ credentials (that is, the ‘right’ class status and the ‘right’ nationality) conditions the ways in which crossing the border is experienced. Class and nationality have increasingly come to signify not just exclusively a certain social status and a national identity (alongside the rights of citizenship that this identity entails), but also the possibility or impossibility to enjoy an additional set of rights -- more specifically, a world right to circulate without deterrents. As Balibar puts it:

For a rich person from a rich country [...] the border has become an embarkation formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgement of his social status [...]. For a poor person from a poor country, however, the border tends to be something quite different: not only is it an obstacle which is very difficult to surmount, but it is a place he runs up against repeatedly [...] when he is expelled or allowed to rejoin his family, so that it becomes, in the end, a place where he *resides*.<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to see here why Anzaldúa is correct in affirming that borders are not merely physical boundaries, but rather, that they are places where different social, ethnic, religious and cultural identities encounter one another and are negotiated. Indeed, borders actively function as instruments of international class differentiation and discrimination.

Nonetheless, in this respect, it can also be noted why Anzaldúa is not entirely right when she claims that any border-crossing experience is essentially a radical act, an act of transgression. To the extent that the crossing of a border has different meanings depending on who the individual crossing is, as well as under which conditions and socio-historical contexts the crossing takes place, it seems that the latter can only be a transgression in those cases where ‘fear of death and prosecution’<sup>18</sup> are involved. For those for whom travelling across the border entails no risk, but rather offers something more like a temporal -- and even perhaps a playful -- stage, crossing a border seems to be simply a transition and not a transgression. The ‘free’ border-crossers of the developed world see their social status recognised and reaffirmed when they travel from one side of a border to another. And so, instead of being supporters of ‘a radical cultural critique, [they] are often carriers of Western

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.83.

<sup>18</sup> Kalra and Purewal, ‘The Strut of the Peacocks,’ p.56.

superiority, tourists for whom international border crossings are not acts of transgression but more akin to transitions.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the reason why Anzaldúa insists on considering any border-crossing as a transgression could be explained as a result of her attempt to find ways in which the arbitrary and violent imposition of divisions that borders necessarily entail can be transcended and resisted. In other words, perhaps because for Anzaldúa all borders involve policing and violence in order to enforce and maintain the divisions that they impose, then any border-crossing appears, for her, as a transgression. In one of her poems Anzaldúa describes the violence at the US-Mexico borderline:

1,950 mile-long open wound  
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,  
running down the length of my  
body,  
staking fence rods in my flesh,  
splits me splits me  
*me raja me raja*  
[...]  
But the skin of the earth is seamless  
The sea cannot be fenced,  
*el mar* does not stop at borders.<sup>20</sup>

But even though Anzaldúa is correct in describing the violent and arbitrary character of borders, her need to find ways to subvert the divisions imposed through borders leads her to overlook the fact that borders present themselves with different degrees of violence depending on the person who experiences the border-crossing and on the circumstances in which this crossing occurs. At this point, I would like to draw attention to Balibar's remark that for those poor individuals from developing countries, the border appears as an obstacle but also, at the same time (through the constant crossing or the attempts to cross it), the border becomes their site of residence, almost their home. The border is here a *quasi*-home in the sense that, as Balibar points out, it becomes a site where it is only possible 'to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life.'<sup>21</sup> Certainly, given that the ease or difficulty with which an individual crosses a border is conditioned by the possession or lack of the right credentials (that is, the right citizenship or social status), then those who do not hold

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, pp.2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Balibar, 'What is a Border?', p.83.

the credentials (the poor from poor countries) not only are deprived from the freedom of circulation, but they are also denied recognition as individuals.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, those who lack the right credentials see their very lives reduced to what Giorgio Agamben has called ‘bare life.’<sup>23</sup> That is, these individuals see their lives reduced to the mere biological survival, cut off from the legal and social order. In other words, the lives of individuals who do not have the ‘right’ social status and nationality are turned into lives that are inhuman, that are non-lives.

Agamben’s distinction between ‘bare life’ (*zoē*) and ‘political life’ (*bios*) between the merely biological life that has no legal or socially recognized status and the properly ‘human life,’ is useful to explain Balibar’s idea that the border almost becomes a home for the poor person from a poor country. Agamben uses the Aristotelian terms *zoē* and *bios* in order to address the question of the relation between human life and sovereign power. While *zoē* is simply the life of biological survival, which we are all born into; *bios* is the (good) life of political participation that we enter into. The transition from bare life to political life entails, for Agamben, a paradoxical movement, an ‘inclusive exclusion.’ To pass from mere life to political life implies that mere life is the necessary precondition to enter into the domain of politics. Conversely, and at the same time, mere life can only be acknowledged as this essential precondition if it is distinguished and excluded from the realm of politics. Consequently, bare life constitutes the threshold of human life: simultaneously interior and exterior; included yet only as that which has to be segregated in order for the ‘qualified life,’ the life that is recognized and protected by the political order, to be able to emerge. In Agamben’s words:

In the ‘politicization’ of bare life [...] the humanity of living man is decided [...]. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.<sup>24</sup>

Agamben finds in the figure of the ‘*homo sacer*’ of the archaic Roman law a concrete example of the process by which biological life is included in political life by way of its very exclusion. The *homo sacer*, the ‘sacred’ man, is the juridical category that

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<sup>22</sup> The fact that paper can embody the force of the law and, thereby, accredit an individual as a legal subject, bound by duties and protected by rights, is a topic that Derrida examines and relates with the topics of the *sans-papiers* and of hospitality.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

designates a criminal whom the state has banned from society, deprived of all his rights of citizenship and deemed worthy of death. Yet the state also prohibits his religious sacrifice as well as his legal execution. A *homo sacer*, however, could be killed by anyone with impunity. Thus, this ‘sacred’ man is simultaneously in and out of the sphere of human and divine law: his ‘life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed).’<sup>25</sup>

According to Agamben, this process of inscription of life into politics, by which the sovereign power actively distinguishes those who are political beings (and hence have the rights of citizenship) from those who are no more than mere bodies, mere biological life, started in antiquity but has continued into our present times. Indeed, for him, the history of Western politics is the history of this distinction, the history of the production of ‘sacred men’ (*homines sacri*). The asylum-seeker or refugee, the death row prisoner, as well as those persecuted in the Holocaust provide examples of modern-day ‘sacred men.’ Their lives are liminal, at the threshold between life and death, between exile and belonging, between human and infra-human. This liminal life of the *homo sacer* is equivalent to the life that Hannah Arendt described in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* as ‘the abstract nakedness of being human.’<sup>26</sup> That is, a life of ‘a man who is nothing but a man, [a life which] has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man.’<sup>27</sup> This life, which lacks ‘the right to have rights,’<sup>28</sup> is clearly exemplified by the so-called ‘*sans-papiers*’ or undocumented persons, the refugees and, in general, by stateless people.

Returning to Balibar, given that borders have come to be instruments for international class discrimination and, consequently, have come to signify different things for people from different countries and of different social status, then borders frequently appear as hard to overcome barriers. By the same token, for some people from underdeveloped countries, borders have become their ‘residence.’ The border is a ‘home’ for them in the sense that the very existence of these individuals constitutes a border. Their very lives are a threshold between human and less-than-human. As Balibar would put it: these individuals are themselves borders. The *polysemic nature* of borders is thus manifested through the various meanings that the border and the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1958), p.299.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.300.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.296.

experience of crossing it can have for different persons. For some people, a border means simply a transitory space or a bureaucratic step required to reach some other place; for some others, by contrast, it means an obstacle that has to be overcome, and often it even means their ‘home.’

Geo-political borders belong to a form of politics that is structured around concepts such as national citizenship, nation-state and national territory. This is politics of exclusion and discrimination that requires to be reformulated. As we will see in this chapter, Derrida claims that we need an alternative politics that, instead of excluding, is open to absolute alterity, the absolute other. In this thesis, I draw on Derrida’s ideas of politics and ethics of hospitality to re-conceptualize the border and argue that documentaries can function as borders or interstitial spaces that can give rise to political bonds outside of the direct sanction of the nation-state and geo-political borders.

## **V. Heterogeneous and Ubiquitous Borders**

The idea that an individual can be a border leads to the third aspect of borders that Balibar discusses: the *heterogeneity* and *ubiquity* of borders. Balibar explains that in today’s world borders are *heterogeneous* and *ubiquitous* in the sense that the political, cultural and/or socioeconomic boundaries no longer seem to coincide as they more or less did in the past, specifically, during what Balibar calls ‘the period of the nation-state.’<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, borders have moved, they have been displaced and thus are not localizable immediately and without mistake:

[Borders] are no longer *at the border*, at an institutional site [or a geographical-political-administrative point] that can be materialized on the ground and inscribed on the map, where one sovereignty *ends* and another *begins* [...] This institutional form of the border is [...] today [...] irreversibly coming undone.<sup>30</sup>

There are various reasons why borders are now no longer at the boundaries of a territory concentrating the functions of sovereignty, policy, administration, taxation and cultural control among others. For Balibar, some of these reasons are: the transformation that international communication has undergone with the development of faster modes of transport and new information technologies; the fact that the speed at which economic transactions (purchase and sale) take place is beyond the control of

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<sup>29</sup> Balibar, ‘What is a Border?’, p.84.

For Balibar, the nation-state period is the time in history during which nation-states existed in such a form that they were closest to the nation-state ideal type.

<sup>30</sup> Balibar, ‘The Borders of Europe,’ p.89.

both citizens and administrations; the fact that some natural phenomena cannot be entirely appropriated, contained and controlled by a single state (like the expansion of the so-called 'bird-flu,' the 'swine-flu' or the 'mad-cow' diseases; or like the circulation of gases produced by the explosion in Chernobyl, for instance); the fact that it is no longer possible to find the exercise of political power, economic decision-making and the creation of aesthetic ideals concentrated simultaneously in a single location; and the fact that the phenomena of inequality, poverty and exclusion can no longer be dealt with exclusively within the boundaries of nation-states.

A question arises here as to whether or not all of the above mentioned phenomena, which are part of the contemporary process of globalization, have modified the form of nation-states so radically as to be possible to say, with Balibar, that we have entered into a new era different from that of the nation-state. This is a question worth exploring thoroughly, and which merits more space than can be devoted to it here. However, what I can say briefly in this regard is that within the realms of economy, communication and culture, social relations as well as private practices appear to be increasingly organized and regulated at transnational levels -- multinational corporations and the internet provide good examples of this. It nonetheless also seems true that a large number of public institutions continue to be regulated by the nation-state. In relation to this, it is also worth noting that whereas the circulation of capital, goods and information around the world is virtually unrestricted, the movement of people who lack the economic means to circulate seems, by contrast, to be more and more hindered. It thus seems possible to claim that we are currently witnessing a period where the traditional form of the nation-state (the hegemonic unity constituted by population, territory and sovereignty) has been radically transformed. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to declare that our present period is completely different from the period of the nation-state, especially if one considers the manner in which immigration and asylum are managed today, where many decisions continue to be made at a national level.

All the phenomena associated with the process of globalization that Balibar mentions have, likewise, crucially transformed the institution of the border. Borders are indeed no longer at the boundaries between two nation-states, and their function no longer seems to be merely that of containing and separating one sovereign state from another. However, this is not to say that borders are in the process of disappearing. Rather, they are at once being 'multiplied and reduced in their

localization and their function.<sup>31</sup> Borders today are *heterogeneous* and *ubiquitous*, for they undertake new and diverse functions and hence they are situated in places where they were not before. As Balibar points out:

Borders have stopped marking the limits where politics ends because the community ends [...]. This in fact means that borders are no longer at the shores of the political, but have indeed become -- perhaps by way of the police, given that every border patrol is today an organ of 'internal security' -- *objects* or [...] *things* within the space of the political itself.<sup>32</sup>

This last idea that borders have been assumed into the space of the political, instead of just being situated at its periphery, can be illuminated by invoking Agamben's work once more. He explains the relation between life and politics, or better put, he describes the politicization of life in terms of the 'inclusive exclusion' by means of which 'mere biological' life is both separated from and included in the 'qualified' or 'political' life. This biopolitical division between *zoē* and *bios*, which is basically the mode through which Western politics has operated from the antiquity to our present times, places 'bare life' as an existence in a 'state of exception,' a state of matters where the law has been suspended (yet not eliminated). For Agamben, given that 'bare life' is that life which is deprived from any legal and social status, it is thus a life 'abandoned' from the rule of law, a life with no political significance, a life in a state of exception. This life is clearly instantiated by the case of the *sans-papiers*, the refugees and the stateless people.

According to Agamben, what is crucial in modern times is the fact that the threshold between 'mere biological' life and 'political' life, the threshold of the 'state of exception,' seems to have moved from the periphery of the domain of the political to its very centre in such a way that the state of exception has increasingly become the rule. Indeed, today the rule of law appears to suspend itself more and more overtly and extensively, with the obvious result that anything becomes possible and legitimised. Agamben writes:

What characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoē* in the polis -- which is in itself absolutely ancient [...]. Instead, the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life -- which is originally situated at the margins of the political order -- gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and inclusion and exclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.9.

It is worth noting here that for Agamben it is the law, by way of its suspension, that produces the exception, instead of the exception being that which subtracts itself from the law. In this sense, the exception is not entirely without relation to the law; the exception keeps a relation to the law in the form of the law's suspension. Conversely, by giving rise to the exception through its suspension, and by maintaining itself in relation to the exception, the law constitutes itself as a law. Thus, paradoxically, the exception appears as the primal juridical element, as that which simultaneously produces and is produced by the law. In other words, the idea here is that the state of exception is an organizing element setting a border of sorts between what is inside and outside of the law.

Agamben argues that the state of exception that has become the rule in contemporary political life -- consequently leading to the suspension of the rule of law virtually everywhere -- is clearly exemplified by the concentration camp. Within the space of the concentration camp *zoē* and *bios*, exclusion and inclusion, abandonment and protection, law and violence, enter a zone of indistinction. For Agamben, the concentration camp, far from being a historical anomaly, is the undercover model governing in today's political realm. Insofar as what results from the suspension of the law in the concentration camp is nothing but the indeterminate abstraction of 'bare life,' today's politics is the decision concerning precisely what is excluded from politics, the un-political or 'bare life.' Agamben extends his analysis of camps as the form of the *nomos* in our current world to include and bring to the fore the contemporary and 'less lethal' (yet more familiar) version of the concentration camps. These are the so-called 'centres of temporary permanence' or 'detention centres,' which are normally located at modern airports or other points of entry in order to detain for a indefinite (but limited) period of time undocumented immigrants (that is, displaced 'aliens' whose legal and national status is believed to be unclear). In Agamben's words:

If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there [...]. The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1992 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the German [...], or the *zones d'attentes* in French international

airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained will then all equally be camps.<sup>34</sup>

In the light of Agamben's reading here, it is possible now to try to elucidate Balibar's claim that borders have undertaken new diverse functions, which place them no longer at the margins of politics (separating one nation-state from another) but inside of the political realm, wherever a certain selective control is located. Balibar is correct because the structure of the border is increasingly found reproduced not only at any health or security checkpoint or at the numerous immigration detention centres, but also within the cities where 'safe' neighbourhoods are segregated from 'dangerous' neighbourhoods and/or outsiders by private hired security guards. All these are examples of borders, but they are also instances of what Agamben has diagnosed as the fact that the state of exception has become a rule in contemporary societies. Indeed, the proliferation of the apparatus of the border within the space of the political provides evidence of the degree to which, in today's societies, the threshold between 'bare life' and 'political life' (*zoē* and *bios*), abandonment and protection, violence and law, has been displaced from the periphery to the very inside of politics as much as it has been blurred. What this means thus is that now borders function as instruments for the establishment and maintenance of the state of exception. Since the state of exception appears to be the rule everywhere, borders have, as a consequence, proliferated and become a part within the space of the political.

In view of this situation, it has become a pressing need to think about alternative forms of social and political bonds, bonds that could perhaps function beyond the direct sanction of the national sovereign that necessarily creates the exclusion between the unprotected or naked lives and the protected ones. The second part of this chapter explores this issue. In particular, I will discuss Derrida's proposal of a social and political bond based on the principle of hospitality, and his claim that such a bond is the best way to both understand and tackle the problem of undocumented people and refugees. Derrida defends a politics that is not a politics of fraternity, but a politics that rejects 'the masculine authority of the brother'<sup>35</sup> and that does not privilege 'genealogy, family, birth, autochthony, and the nation.'<sup>36</sup> As we will see, this entails an alternative conception of politics and a new way of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.174.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*, trans by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.58.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

understanding citizenship as a practice that is not exclusively and directly determined by the nation-state. For Derrida, this politics is opposed and yet closely linked to ethics, and the way he explains this link is through the concept of hospitality. My argument in this thesis is that this alternative understanding of politics can be seen at work in documentary films about migration.

## **VI. A Derridian Hospitality**

According to Derrida, the question of hospitality emerges whenever we are faced with the arrival of a newcomer, a foreigner. In other words, the question of hospitality essentially concerns the ways in which we respond to, receive and negotiate the arrival of ‘the other.’ Equally important for Derrida’s understanding of hospitality is the fact that he defines ethics as hospitality and hospitality as ethics. Indeed, his view is that hospitality is not a part or a branch of ethics, but the foundation or the principle upon which ethics itself is based.<sup>37</sup> In this section, I will analyse his notion of hospitality as well his arguments about the relationship between ethics and politics. More particularly, I will consider his view of the way in which these two conflicting areas are nevertheless linked together, and how this bond challenges the traditional notion of citizenship and calls for a radical transformation of the (conditional) laws that govern the reception of foreigners. Derrida’s position is that, in the face of today’s pressing problem of undocumented people and refugees, we all have the moral and political duty to actively pursue the improvement of these conditional laws of hospitality. And this, he says, begins with our duty to translate and improve the languages of law, to make the laws less violent and more just.

Arguably, the work where Derrida overtly addresses the problem of the political *The Politics of Friendship*<sup>38</sup> in which he considers the nature of politics and its relationship to the unconditional (that is, to ethics) by way of an exploration of the figure of the friend. Through an analysis of the concept of friendship, Derrida argues that the experience of absolute alterity reveals that ‘what is unconditional and incalculable is necessarily contaminated by the calculations and negotiations [the decisions] we associate with politics.’<sup>39</sup> I will explain these ideas of Derrida further

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<sup>37</sup> See Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.50.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Cheah and Guerlac, ‘Introduction: Derrida and the Time of the Political,’ in Cheah and Guerlac (eds), *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp.1-37 (p. 7).

on, but first I will present his notion of hospitality, as this will allow me to explain the relationship between politics and ethics, the conditional and the unconditional.

Derrida explicitly raises the topic of hospitality in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, in *Rogues*, as well as in a series of different seminars that Derrida held both in the United States and Paris, and where he directly engaged with the issue of hospitality. *Of Hospitality*,<sup>40</sup> *Paper Machine*<sup>41</sup> and 'Hostipitality'<sup>42</sup> provide examples of this. In all these texts Derrida affirms that hospitality, just like the notions of forgiveness, gift, mourning and justice entails an impossibility, more precisely, an aporia. Derrida argues that for hospitality to be possible, there needs to be a host, someone who holds ownership and control of a 'home' (for instance, a house or nation), and who identifies himself as the owner. Put in other words, in order to be able to welcome the foreign or new arrival, it is essential to have the power to host, which in turn requires one to have a property, and hence also to bear control over the arrival and reception of the other. For, if there is no control over who is to be welcomed or not, guests could potentially take over the house or nation, thus undermining any possible hospitality. On the other hand, for hospitality to be possible, an absolute or unconditional welcoming of the other is also necessary. That is, a reception of everyone and anyone who might arrive regardless of who they are, where they come from, and whether they have been invited or not. Hospitality, therefore, simultaneously calls for the sovereign authority of the host over his house and for the host's renunciation both to impose restrictions upon new arrivals and to claim any ownership. Hospitality in this sense is the 'possibility of impossibility.'<sup>43</sup> It is an aporia. In Derrida's words:

[Hospitality] ordains, even making it desirable, a welcome without reservations or calculation, an unlimited display of hospitality to the new arrival. But a cultural or linguistic community, a family or a nation, cannot fail at the very least to suspend if not to betray this principle of absolute hospitality: so as to protect a "home," presumably, by guaranteeing property and "one's own" against the unrestricted arrival of the other; but also so as to try to make the reception real, determined and concrete -- to put it into practice.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*. *Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, 'Hostipitality,' in Anidjar, G. (ed), *Acts of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.358-420.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.364.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality,' in *Paper Machine*, pp.66-69 (p.66).

In this sense, hospitality appears as the impossible. An antinomy, an aporetic concept, for it entails the inexorable tension between two kinds of hospitality. On the one hand, there is an *unlimited* or *absolute* hospitality, governed by the ‘law of unconditional hospitality,’ which is an absolute ethical requirement, a categorical command that ‘implies that you [as host] don’t ask the other, the newcomer, the guest, to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself.’<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, there is a *conditional* hospitality which, through the laws of hospitality (that is, the legal, and hence political, principles of hospitality), imposes some requisites and restrictions to the welcoming of new arrivals. It is clear then that the unconditional character of absolute hospitality renders hospitality impossible because a limitless reception of newcomers, a reception without any restrictions, implies that the host needs to be ready to renounce the mastery of his home and give up his control over the threshold or border of his space, nation or house. In other words, unconditional hospitality demands that the host no longer be a host, that the host receive the other infinitely, that the host welcome the other beyond his capacity.<sup>46</sup> Yet, there cannot be hospitality without sovereignty of the host over his home nor is hospitality possible without limits or conditions. Absolute hospitality could never be juridically or politically instituted because politics, as I will further explain in the next section, pertains to establishing laws and hence conditions and limitations, whereas absolute hospitality is unconditional. Thus, Derrida concludes, hospitality is impossible. And nevertheless, absolute hospitality is the condition of possibility of a more restricted concept of hospitality such as the right to immigration, the right to asylum or the rights of citizenship. ‘Only an unconditional hospitality can give meaning and practical rationality to a concept of hospitality. Unconditional hospitality exceeds juridical, political or economic calculation. But no thing and no one happens or arrives without it.’<sup>47</sup> Derrida also adds that because of the aporetic character of this notion, hospitality functions *as* a threshold and *at* a threshold. The moment the host affirms his ownership, declares himself ‘at home’ and sets the boundaries and the threshold of his property is also the exact moment when he welcomes the new arrival, and when he relinquishes his claim on property and allows the threshold to be crossed. This play

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<sup>45</sup> Derrida, ‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,’ in Kearney, R. and Dooley, M. (eds), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp.65-83 (pp.70-71).

<sup>46</sup> See Derrida, ‘Hostipitality,’ pp.385-386.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p.149.

between the conditional and the unconditional within hospitality, the contradictory relationship between the two and yet their inseparability, underlines and defines the relationship between ethics and politics, as we will see in the next section. Cheah and Guerlac explain this thus:

[The] urgent propulsion of the impossible into the realm of the possible is precisely the structure in which the unconditional or incalculable other demands that we as rational subjects respond and be responsible by calculating and inscribing the unconditional within present conditions even as this is a violation of the other's alterity. It is a question precisely of an 'impossible transaction between the conditional and the unconditional, the calculable and the incalculable.'<sup>48</sup>

As mentioned before, Derrida links his conception of hospitality with the concepts of gift, mourning and forgiveness by way of the impossibility that he believes is a common feature of the four concepts. For instance, pure gift, like unconditional hospitality, can only be given without the expectation of receiving something in return. For if the receiver needs to reciprocate or if he contracts a debt with the donor, then it is not a gift. For there to be an absolute gift it is necessary that the receiver does not take it as a gift, because if he recognises it as a gift, then the prospect of there being a counter-gift, a possible reciprocation, emerges. And when the chance for reciprocation exists, the gift, rather than being a gift, turns itself into an exchange, a trade. Neither the giver nor the receiver ought to expect something in return, for this expectation annuls the gift. However, it seems that if a gift is not recognised as such, it is meaningless. Derrida thereby affirms that pure gift is impossible, an aporetic concept, for in order to be a gift, it would also have to not be a gift.

In a similar fashion, according to Derrida, mourning is impossible. When we mourn the death of someone we hold dear, we spend a period of time during which we seem to be unable to overcome such a loss; a period during which the other, who no longer exists, lives within us. During mourning, the ones who survive the death of a loved one, feel sad and guilty for having survived, and hence responsible for the death in question.<sup>49</sup> If mourning is to succeed, says Derrida, the survivor who mourns needs to be able to overcome the loss. Nonetheless, if the survivor is able to get over the death of the other, mourning seems to fail in its task. A proper mourning, in this sense, is unattainable for if it is successful, it fails; but it has to fail if it is to succeed.

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<sup>48</sup> Cheah and Guerlac, 'Introduction,' p.24.

<sup>49</sup> Derrida, 'Hostipitality,' p.384.

By the same token, forgiveness entails an impossibility; it is also an aporetic concept. Derrida argues that any kind of forgiveness, be it personal, political or legal has to forgive the unforgivable, for if ‘one had to forgive only what is forgivable, even excusable, *venial*, as one says, or insignificant, then one would not forgive.’<sup>50</sup> A forgiveness which is too readily granted, is meaningless; it is not a real forgiveness. Furthermore, Derrida says, the forgiving subject seems to assume that he has the capacity to grant pardon, that he has the sovereignty needed to forgive. Nonetheless, pure forgiveness requires that I forgive what I am unable to forgive, that I forgive what is beyond my power. A forgiveness that is beyond what is mine to forgive can only be a forgiveness granted in the name of the other, that is, a forgiveness that relinquishes the self-appointed sovereignty required to grant any pardon. Absolute forgiveness is, like unconditional hospitality, mourning and pure gift, impossible. Derrida writes:

Regarding what links the test and the ordeal [l’*épreuve*] of hospitality to that of forgiveness, one should not only say that forgiveness granted to the other is the supreme gift and therefore hospitality par excellence. Forgiving would be opening for and smiling to the other, whatever his fault or his indignity, whatever the offense or even the threat. Whoever asks for hospitality, asks, in a way, for forgiveness and whoever offers hospitality, grants forgiveness –and forgiveness must be infinite or it is nothing: it is excuse or exchange.<sup>51</sup>

In this sense, the negotiations and transactions between the conditional and the unconditional, calculation and the incalculable, are not only at work in the figure of hospitality, but also in other figures of unconditionality like the ones above mentioned. Let us consider now the theoretical implications that Derrida draws from his approach to the concept of hospitality, and how he connects ethics and politics.

## **VII. Politics of Friendship as Other, Undecidability, Responsibility and Ethics**

The two types of hospitality mentioned seem to amount to a distinction between two realms. On the one hand, the realm of ethics; and on the other, the realm of politics or the realm of the juridical. Indeed, for Derrida, unconditional hospitality lies outside right and duty; it lies beyond the juridical. Hence, absolute hospitality is not bound up with the state. Conditional hospitality, by contrast, to the extent that it imposes limits and requirements, is concerned with norms, rights, duties and obligations, and therefore, it is inscribed in the juridical, in the sphere of politics.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.385.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.380.

It is worth stopping here to consider the conceptualisation of politics that Derrida defends especially in *Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues* so that it becomes clearer why he believes that ethics and politics are co-originary and indissociable, and yet also contradictory. Derrida takes issue with traditional political theory through the concept of the friend. He particularly criticises Schmitt's thesis that the essence of politics lies on the distinction between friend and enemy, or better said, the essence of politics lies on the possibility of having enemies for without an enemy, war would not be possible and without the possibility of war the political itself could not be.<sup>52</sup> Such a politics presupposes, for Derrida, an idea of the friend as identical or homogeneous to the self. It is a politics that grants privilege to similarity and identification, rather than to radical alterity and singularity. For this reason, this is a politics based on the figure of the brother and on the concepts of citizenship and nation, which means that it is a politics of exclusion of the other on the basis of gender, race, national citizenship and class. Derrida claims that this politics of fraternity sustains the traditional conception of democracy, and that we need to find another kind of politics, and hence, another conception of democracy, another conception of the rule of people that is disentangled from confraternity, brotherhood and friendship as resemblance. What Derrida proposes thus is a politics based on of the figure of the friend as absolute other. In this sense, the friend cannot be identified with ourselves or reduced to a version of ourselves, hence the politics that results is one of 'heterogeneity, of the singular, of the non-same.'<sup>53</sup> Because this is a politics of the encounter with the radical other, this encounter cannot be calculated or anticipated, it comes from an unknown future. Derrida calls this politics of the friend as other 'democracy to come,' and he says it is the condition of an alternative concept of the political beyond all current understandings of this concept. Derrida writes:

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains a theme of a non-presentable concept. Is it possible to open up to the 'come' of a certain democracy which is no longer an insult to the friendship we have striven to think beyond the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p.84.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p.38.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, p.306.

For Derrida, the experience of absolute alterity is the experience of an unknown, incalculable and undecidable event. We cannot anticipate nor prevent this event. The ‘to-come’ of democracy is this imminent coming of the incalculable or the unconditional. The ‘to-come’ (*à-venir*), always refers to the other, the heteronomous, and thus implies an opening to a future, which is never a future present. Democracy in this sense is promise. Derrida explains:

Future present is not democracy for tomorrow. It is *within* the concept of democracy that the promise is included. The concept of promise, that is the opening that refers to the future, is part of democracy. [...] If one day democracy were perfectly accomplished, that is present, there would be no future, and there would be no promise, and without the promise there would be no democracy. When I say democracy is ‘to come’ first I distinguish between *à-venir* and the future present; and I insist on the *coming* that is the event, *à-venir* meaning the advent of an event. [...] If I knew that tomorrow democracy would be present, that democracy was a necessity of History [...], then in *that* case I would be a fatalist. It is *because* we know that this is not the case that we should struggle for democracy.<sup>55</sup>

How is this politics of the friend as radical other, this democracy to-come, related to ethics? The experience of the undecidable implied by the ‘to-come’ of democracy necessarily entails a demand for responsibility. In the face of the incalculable and undecidable, a decision (or decisions) must be taken. ‘Responsibility for a decision [...] arises from the fact the decision is heterogeneous to knowledge.’<sup>56</sup> Since there is no way to ground this decision on a calculation, since the decision is ungrounded and thus implies a risk, then responsibility must be taken for the decision. This means that the experience of the undecidable demands a response to the call of the other who requires that we inscribe and calculate the unconditional within present conditions, even when this amounts to doing violence to the other’s alterity. Derrida claims that any decision is a bet and an interruption,<sup>57</sup> for there is no way we can anticipate its outcome; and yet a decision must be taken, it cannot be suspended, it is urgent. A ‘decision is the other’s [and] responsibility is for the other, with the other. [...] Responsibility is not my property, I cannot reappropriate it, and *that* is the place of

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<sup>55</sup> Derrida, ‘On Responsibility,’ Interview with Dronsfield, Midgley and Wilding, in Dronsfield, and Midgley (eds), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI. Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.6 (Summer, 1997), pp.19-36 (p.30).

<sup>56</sup> Norval, ‘Hegemony After Deconstruction. The Consequences of Undecidability,’ in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol.9, No.2 (June, 2004), pp.139-157 (p.149).

<sup>57</sup> In later chapters I will link the ideas of the decision as interruption, and politics as decision-making, to the concept of the cinematic cut as the decision taken by the filmmaker but that is always open to the unforeseeable and incalculable response of the spectators and the filmed subjects.

justice: the relation to the other.’<sup>58</sup> Thus, the absolute other demands a negotiation between the unconditional and the conditional, the calculable and the incalculable, the impossible and the possible.

We can now start to see the link between these contradicting realms of politics and ethics. As explained above, politics entails taking decisions, making laws, imposing conditions and thus following a calculation in the light of the experience of the undecidable; and this calculation is necessarily violent, for it attempts to include within a programme of calculation that which is unconditional and incalculable: the radical other. The decisions of politics are ungrounded, they necessarily imply a risk and hence responsibility. It is here where ethics comes into play, as ethics is the realm of the unconditional that demands precisely that responsibility be assumed for the inevitable violence impinged on the absolute other. This explains how ethics and politics are necessarily bound together despite being irreconcilable. These two realms require one another. Calculation and the incalculable are both necessary, and they cannot be reduced to one another nor can politics be deduced from ethics. Ethics as responsibility for and openness to the other implies a constant strive to make the decisions and laws of politics -- that inevitably violate the alterity and singularity of the other -- less violent. In this sense, ethics remains as a promise. As Moore explains it:

[If] the deduction of politics from ethics is necessary, it is because it is impossible; because the condition of the possibility of deducing politics from ethics is also the condition of its impossibility. The deduction is not given, but promised, with the ‘very indestructibility of the “it is necessary [du *il faut*’]” serving as ‘the condition of a re-politicization, perhaps of another concept of the political.’<sup>59</sup>

There is thus a very particular understanding of ethics that results from Derrida’s view of the constant transaction between the political and the ultrapolitical, the decision and the undecidable. This is not a conception of ethics that constitutes a system stipulating what the right and wrong actions are or what our moral duties are. Ethics, in this sense, does not offer a standardized universal procedure or a moral code with which we can test and judge whether the principle or maxim under which an action is (or is to be) performed is a (morally) valid principle. Instead, Derrida links together ethics and politics through the experience of aporia. Ethical responsibility thus

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida, ‘On Responsibility,’ p.27.

<sup>59</sup> Moore, ‘Crises of Derrida: Theodicy, Sacrifice and (Post-)deconstruction,’ in *Derrida Today*, Vol.5, No.2 (2012), pp.264-282 (p.279).

amounts to an active exercise of observation and of maintenance of a critical stance over the laws, decisions, conditions and calculations made by politics. The task of ethics, as this constant critical awareness, is to question and interrupt decision procedures that attempt to reach universal consensus. 'The ethical moment [...] of responsibility, arises out of the restlessness of the experience of aporia, [...] of undecidability. [...] Such an experience of undecidability is at the very antipodes of complacency, it is the perpetual wakefulness of thinking taking place as the interruption of consensus.'<sup>60</sup>

This same structure of transaction and negotiation between the unconditional and the conditional, incalculable and calculable, ethics and politics is also at play in Derrida's account of hospitality. As I said before, the two figures of hospitality, conditional and unconditional contradict each other but cannot be separated. Thus Derrida says, the unconditional law of hospitality needs the conditional laws of hospitality for it to be effectively put into practice, even if those conditional laws 'deny [...] or [...] sometimes corrupt or pervert'<sup>61</sup> the unconditional law of hospitality. Conversely, the pervertibility of the law of unconditional hospitality is a necessary condition for the laws of conditional hospitality to be perfectible and open to improvement there where they commit violence against alterity and pervert the law of absolute hospitality. In Derrida's own words:

It is the pure and hyperbolic hospitality in whose name we should always invent the best dispositions, the least bad conditions, the most just legislation, so as to make it as effective as possible. This is necessary to avoid the perverse effects of an unlimited hospitality [...]. Calculate the risks, yes, but don't shut the door on what cannot be calculated, meaning the future and the foreigner -- that's the double law of hospitality. It defines the unstable place of strategy and decision. Of perfectibility and progress.<sup>62</sup>

Derrida's point is that the realisation that an ideal or absolute hospitality is impossible necessarily requires us to be constantly aware and attentive to the ways in which we react to and legislate the reception of newcomers. For these are always conditional forms of hospitality and, as such, always violent and open to improvement there where they impose conditions and hence fail to meet the demands of an absolute hospitality. Instead of leading to immobility and the self-satisfied acknowledgement

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<sup>60</sup> Critchley, 'The Ethics of Deconstruction: An Attempt at Self-Criticism,' in Dronsfield, and Midgley (eds), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI. Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.6 (Summer, 1997), pp.87-102 (p.97).

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, p.79.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality,' p.67.

of the inexorable failure to attain pure hospitality, Derrida's assertion of the impossibility of unconditional hospitality opens up the possibility and the duty to constantly transform the conditional laws of hospitality in search for the lesser violent and thus less bad law. Indeed, recognising the restrictions and limits set up by conditional hospitality necessarily places us in a certain relation to impossibility: it prompts us to challenge and negotiate those limits and conditions. Thus, Derrida is arguing here for a politics that admits failure and that is always open to negotiation and improvement where it has violated alterity and failed to be just. Derrida explains:

We have to define a policy of absolutely unconditional openness to whoever is coming *and*, because this is absolutely impossible, we have to produce laws and rules in order to select, in the best possible way, the ones we host, we welcome. This is an example of a situation where we must remain absolutely open to who is coming, but nevertheless try to adjust our policy as far as possible, and the conditions as far as possible, to this unconditionality. And this is in every singular instance a political and an ethical challenge.<sup>63</sup>

In this way, for Derrida the two hospitalities (unconditional and conditional), like ethics and politics, are two opposing and incompatible spheres but 'one calls forth, involves, or prescribes the other.'<sup>64</sup> On the one hand, there's the 'hyperbolic' moral duty to welcome the other without restrictions. On the other, there is the juridico-political and conditional hospitality that implies an apparatus of laws, states and borders. What are the implications of the Derridian view about the bond between ethics and politics? In which way can a politics that seeks to make less violent and less bad laws contribute towards transforming what is going on today in our world? In what sense can politics as taking decisions and making laws be related to the work that photographers and filmmakers produce? I will explore the first two questions in the remaining sections of this chapter. And this will provide me the ground to discuss the last question in subsequent chapters, where I will argue that the documentary filmmaker acts as a host to spectators and filmed subjects. The filmmaker takes decisions and sets limits and conditions by cutting, editing and/or deciding on the montage of the film but also, through these decisions regarding especially the form (but also the content) of the film, she welcomes and leaves the door open for spectators and filmed subjects to take active participation in determining the meaning of the documentary.

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida, 'Perhaps or Maybe,' Conversation with and Garcia Düttmann, in Dronsfield, and Midgley (eds), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI. Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.6 (Summer, 1997), pp.1-18 (p.8).

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, p.147.

### VIII. What is a Politics of Hospitality?

The Derridian view of a politics that derives from his analysis of hospitality is a much more demanding politics, for it entails that we must be in constant search for the less bad or less violent hospitality in the light of the impossibility of an absolute or ideal hospitality. The acknowledgement that an ideal hospitality is impossible rather than leading to abasement or to the complacent recognition of inexorable failure, compels us to continuously improve the conditional laws of hospitality where they have violated alterity and perverted or failed to follow the law of unconditional hospitality. This is a politics of negotiation, a politics that acknowledges its flaws and never stops seeking the less bad laws of conditional hospitality.

For Derrida, the immediate consequence of such a politics is that the content of the laws is underdetermined, and thus, it remains always open to being determined. But how is the content of the laws to be determined so that these laws commit less violence or are less bad laws? The determination of the political or juridical content can never be done in advance for it is ‘beyond knowledge, beyond all presentation.’<sup>65</sup> Determining the juridical content cannot -- and should not -- occur through a machine-like, generalized process. This can only take place in the specificity of a one-time event. In Derrida’s words:

The political or the juridical *content* that is [...] assigned remains underdetermined, still to be determined [...] in a singular way, in the speech and the responsibility *taken* by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of an analysis that is each time unique -- unique and infinite, [...] interminable in spite of the urgency of the decision.<sup>66</sup>

It appears that for Derrida the determination of the politico-juridical content has to be carried out in a singular way so that the laws (the conditional laws of hospitality) avoid being anonymously universal and judging automatically without attending to the particularity of each case. The Derridian view of a politics which takes ungrounded decisions and is for this reason prompted to seek for less bad laws and to judge singularly is by far a more demanding politics. It is a politics that, by considering each case individually in order to decide the content of the laws, is in an ongoing process of perfecting these laws. When Derrida proposes a politics of perfectibility, a politics that contradicts ethics but that cannot be separated from it, he is arguing especially against the Kantian view that treats ethical questions as matters

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.115.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

that can be answered or decided by a universal law applicable to all cases under all circumstances.

In *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*,<sup>67</sup> Kant defends a universal right to hospitality as one of three definitive articles that could ensure perpetual peace between states.<sup>68</sup> Just as Kant proposes a universal law against which we can test the moral validity of the maxims or principles guiding our actions (the categorical imperative demands that we act in such a way that we can will that the maxim of our action be turned into a universal law),<sup>69</sup> he also thinks that the world could reach a state of perpetual peace if states were to follow certain principles. In short, Kant believes that there is a universal procedure with which we can decide both how to act morally correctly and how to legislate laws that ensure peace. Reading Kant, Derrida argues that this cosmopolitan right to hospitality establishes restrictions and conditions on the reception of foreign citizens in a nation-state. This move of Kant, claims Derrida, renders hospitality a merely juridico-political matter, a universalized procedure or calculation that closes itself off from the arrival of the absolute other, and that consequently undermines the very principle it is supposed to defend: an unconditional hospitality.

[When Kant concludes that the law of world citizenship shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality], the universal hospitality is here only juridical and political; it grants only the right to temporary sojourn and not the right of residence; it concerns only the citizens of States; and, in spite of its institutional character, it is founded on a natural right, the common possession of the round and finite surface of the earth, across which humans cannot spread ad infinitum. The realization of this natural right, and thus of universal hospitality, is referred to a cosmopolitical constitution that the human species can only approach indefinitely.<sup>70</sup>

Derrida qualifies Kant's idea of a universal right of hospitality as a '*cosmo-political*' hospitality. By setting conditions and turning hospitality into a matter of the State and laws, this allegedly universal right is entirely determined by and dependent on

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<sup>67</sup> See Kant, 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,' in *Kant. Political Writings*, intro. and notes by Hans Reiss, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.93-130.

<sup>68</sup> The three definite articles that guarantee a perpetual peace, according to Kant are: that the civil constitution of every state be republican, that the right of nations be based on a federation of free states, and that cosmopolitan right be limited to conditions of universal hospitality. See Kant, *Ibid*, pp.99-108.

<sup>69</sup> Kant expresses the categorical imperative in this way: 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.' Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. by Gregor with an intro. by Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.31.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p.87.

individuals' citizenship. There are two main things that seem to concern Derrida regarding the Kantian cosmopolitical right to universal hospitality. First, he believes that by inscribing the principle of universal hospitality in juridical discourse -- that is, in a (conditional) law, Kant makes any relationship with the other a public matter, a matter of the State. If all relationships with the other were to fall under the regulation of the law, then there could not be a separation between the private and the public spheres, for even personal relations would be governed by the law. For Derrida, a society where everything is public matter is a society of transparency, a society where everything is policed (including our most intimate relationships), and hence a society where responsibility for the other is fragmented. Thus, Derrida's worry in this regard is that an effacement of the distinction between public and private amounts to the elimination of the space called home, and hence to the elimination of the very possibility of hospitality. Even worse, blurring the distinction between the private and the public can lead to the criminalisation of hospitality. As regards this latter worry, Derrida is particularly concerned with events that were taking place in France at the time when he was developing his ideas on hospitality. Specifically, he was referring to the offence stipulated by the French 'Pasqua law' of 1993 as the 'crime of hospitality,'<sup>71</sup> which punishes (and even imprisons) anyone hosting at home a foreigner in an irregular situation. This criminalisation of private hospitality clearly undermines our ethical responsibility towards the other by subsuming private hospitality into state or public hospitality. As Mireille Rosello puts it:

The implied consequence of the state's right to interfere in the definition of what constitutes an authorized guest is that the host's house is a subset of the national territory and that private gestures of hospitality are always a subcategory of national hospitality.<sup>72</sup>

The only way to avoid turning hospitality into a merely juridico-political matter, into a homogenizing calculation, and to avoid erasing the public and private sphere distinction is by adopting a politics of hospitality that recognises the impossibility of ideal or absolute hospitality and that, nonetheless, is constantly seeking for the less violent or less bad laws of hospitality, even when there is also no universal calculation that can allow to decide what constitutes a 'less' violent law.

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<sup>71</sup> In 1997 the French media focused their attention to the so-called 'l'affaire Deltombe.' A French citizen, Jacqueline Deltombe, had been arrested because she had taken in a Zairian friend who was an undocumented immigrant. After a trial, she was found guilty for having refused to ask the foreigner for his identification papers.

<sup>72</sup> Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality. The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.37.

The second concern that Derrida has with regards to Kant's idea of a right to universal hospitality is that, in reducing hospitality to 'an inter-state conditionality that limits [...] the very hospitality it guarantees,' this cosmopolitical right turns out to be entirely dependent on citizenship. What is at issue for Derrida here is the fact that the right to give and receive hospitality is determined exclusively within the framework of the nation-state and the category of citizenship. Derrida is questioning the extent to which this framework is able to include refugees, the displaced and immigrants with or without citizenship. For him, today's massive transnational migration phenomenon calls into question the use of national citizenship as the determinant condition for the right of hospitality. Indeed, the large numbers of exiled, displaced and stateless people evidence how the traditional concepts of citizenship and of nation-state are no longer pertinent. For him, 'a change in the socio- and geo-political space -- a juridico-political mutation [...], an ethical conversion'<sup>73</sup> is indispensable. Derrida writes:

With regard to this right of refuge [...] millions of "undocumented immigrants" [*sans papiers*], of "homeless" [*sans domicile fixe*], call out for another international law, another border politics, indeed a humanitarian commitment that *effectively* operates beyond the interests of Nation-States.<sup>74</sup>

It is important to underline in this respect that, although Derrida affirms that the question of immigration and undocumented people does 'not strictly coincide with [the question] of hospitality, which [reaches] beyond the civic or political arena,'<sup>75</sup> he does believe that it is not possible to discuss and make sense of the issue of the reception of foreigners without engaging in a discussion of the topic of hospitality. For him, the question of how the stateless, the refugee, the deported, the migrant and, in general, the other are to be welcomed is a question of responsibility. It is a question that calls for a responsible response to a claim made by the foreign arrival. This question is precisely that of hospitality.

Here a question necessarily arises. Is a politics of hospitality that is not restricted to citizenship and the interests of nation-states even plausible? Can there be a politics of hospitality that legislates 'in the name of the unconditional'? Derrida offers some clues as to how these questions could be thought of and responded. In the next section, I will analyse what Derrida seems to suggest as possible answers.

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p.71.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p.101.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality,' p.66.

## **IX. A Politics Beyond the Limits of the Nation-State**

I have explained that Derrida criticises the Kantian view that the right to universal hospitality is to be restricted by conditions agreed between the nation-states because such a view proposes a system that closes off the coming of the absolute other and, consequently, it undermines the universal hospitality it is supposed to defend. Derrida, by contrast, proposes a politics of hospitality that acknowledges the impossibility of unconditional hospitality, and that is constantly looking for less bad laws. A politics that admits the limitations that the conditional laws of hospitality have, and that recognises the impossibility of a decision and consensual procedure to determine what the lesser violence is. This politics of self-critique and perfectibility already hints at the way in which legislating laws of (conditional) hospitality in the name of the unconditional and maintaining the openness to the arrival of the other but setting the necessary limits, could be carried out. It is the very recognition of the impossibility of an absolute hospitality that opens us up to the possibility of changing and intervening in the conditions set by these laws of hospitality. In other words, for Derrida, impossibility itself has a 'poetic' function, for the mere consideration of an impossible unconditional hospitality entails wondering whether the threshold of impossibility could ever be surpassed, hence contesting the inaccessibility of unconditional hospitality.

However, even if one accepts that the impossibility of unconditional hospitality already places us in the position of having the opportunity to modify the restrictions imposed by the laws of conditional hospitality and to try to do the less violence, that does not seem to ensure that such a transformation will actually take place. How then can we legislate in a way that better honours that which the law of absolute hospitality commands? Derrida hints at an answer to this question:

Pure hospitality consists in welcoming the new arrival before imposing conditions on them, before knowing and asking for anything at all, be it a name or an identity "paper." But it also assumes that you address them, *individually*, and thus that you call them something, and grant them a proper name: "What are you called you?" Hospitality consists in doing everything possible to address the other, to grant or ask them their name, while avoiding this question becoming a "condition," a police inquisition, a registration of information, or a straightforward frontier control. A difference both subtle and fundamental, a question that

arises on the threshold of “home,” and on the threshold between two inflections. An art and a poetics, but an entire politics depends on it, an entire ethics is decided by it.<sup>76</sup>

What this means is that in order to intervene effectively in the conditions of hospitality in a way that honours unconditional hospitality -- in order to make possible the impossible, it is necessary to address the other, the foreigner, first and foremost as a unique individual. What is crucial then is that the host addresses the guest in his singularity and heterogeneity, instead of addressing him through a generic calculation process, as a member or not of a nation-state.

Thus, although it is indeed not possible to completely eliminate the exclusion, filtering and violence involved in the exercise of the host’s sovereignty over his home (house or nation), Derrida’s proposal attempts to temper this inevitable violence and to make the asking of the guest’s name not a ‘straightforward’ border checkpoint. His suggestion to legislate and implement laws for the reception of foreigners -- which are necessarily violent for they impose conditions and limitations -- always in the name of unrestricted hospitality does not mean that these conditional laws aim to achieve a teleological horizon where unconditional hospitality is eventually realised. Rather, it means that it is necessary to *make every effort* to create laws that address the new arrivals, the absolute other(s), before and beyond ‘any juridical determination as compeer, compatriot, kin, brother, neighbour, fellow religious follower, or fellow citizen.’<sup>77</sup>

This way of legislating and executing the laws of hospitality entails an overtly different politics and ethics: a politics and an ethics in constant negotiation between calculations and the incalculable; a politics and an ethics aiming to address the other as absolute other and ‘every time in the singular urgency of the *here and now*.’<sup>78</sup> In other words, these would be a politics and an ethics of the friend as other.

In the context of today’s growing numbers of displaced people and migration, these politics and ethics of hospitality seem very much in line with what Arendt calls ‘the right to have rights,’<sup>79</sup> which she affirms are rights that -- in contrast with civil rights and human rights that are valid only for the citizens of nation-states yet never for the stateless people -- belong to each and every human being independently of any natural or political legitimation. According to Arendt, stateless people such as

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p.67. [My emphasis].

<sup>77</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, p.86.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p.105.

<sup>79</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.296.

undocumented migrants, some refugees and exiled people, are neither recognised nor protected by the social and legal orders, hence, they are excluded from both the subjectivity and the domain of citizenship. Insofar as this is so, these people lack what she has dubbed the ‘right to have rights,’ that is, the right to belong to humanity itself. Arendt explains that the *sans-papiers*’ loss of home (their statelessness) and their loss of political status are identical with their being expelled from humanity all together, because human rights have always been (since the very appearance of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789 and 1793) identified with civil rights, with the rights that sovereign national governments grant to their citizens. Indeed, despite the fact that human rights are considered natural to and inalienable for all human beings (and therefore, also independent in their application and execution of any historical or empirical circumstances, independent of any specific people, nation-state or government), these rights have been and are still dependent on the legal sovereignty and executive powers of nation-states. This is the case because it is the nation-state that determines both who is or is not a citizen and what standard of human rights is to apply to those who are citizens within their national borders. In Arendt’s words:

The full implication of this identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people or peoples suddenly appear whose elementary rights were as little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states in the middle of Europe as they would have been in the heart of Africa. The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as “inalienable” because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.<sup>80</sup>

In short, when lacking papers, undocumented immigrants and stateless people in general are not only at loss of citizenship, protection and official recognition of their identity, but also at loss of even their own status as unique individuals, as irreplaceable human beings. And this is precisely the condition that Agamben calls ‘bare-life,’ and which I explained earlier in this chapter.

To the extent that the politics of hospitality that Derrida endorses is a politics that creates laws in the name of unconditional hospitality, he could be proposing in the light of our current context of mass migration a politics of hospitality aimed at respecting and fostering the right to have rights of which Arendt speaks. Since this

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp.291-292.

right to have rights is supposed to be guaranteed to every individual regardless of what his citizenship is and whether or not he is a citizen of any nation-state, then the Derridian politics of hospitality, that attempts to address the other in its singularity, seems to amount to a politics that legislates laws of hospitality that are not determined by citizenship. These are laws that are not strictly constrained by the interests of nation-states, and that give rise to a politics that refuses to be a system of universalization and calculability, a politics that eschews the tendency to eliminate alterity and appropriate the other, and hence a politics that remains open to the promise of the ‘to-come.’

Derrida’s remarks about hospitality and about the contradictory yet necessary relationship between ethics and politics appear to suggest an alternative understanding of citizenship. He seems to be proposing a notion of citizenship that has as its core the duty of forming hospitable relations with other individuals regardless of their status within a nation-state. This is therefore a *hospitable citizenship*. I will further discuss this alternative conception of citizenship in the next chapter, where I will analyse Ariella Azoulay’s proposal of the citizenry of photography,<sup>81</sup> and will claim that the relationships created in this citizenry exemplify Derrida’s concept of hospitality.

One thing worth observing here is that, for Derrida, the task of legislating and constantly transforming the laws of conditional hospitality in order for these laws to commit less violence and address the other in its singularity, is in fact a duty. Indeed, he says, we have a (political and moral) duty to translate the languages of law because it is through them that the first violence is done. Since today’s migrants and refugees are forced to ask for hospitality in a foreign language which they do not speak (that is, the juridical language in which the legal conditions for the right of hospitality and the granting of asylum are specified), they are subjected to a violence that is necessarily implied by the filtering, exclusion and choosing that any exercise of the host’s sovereignty or of conditional hospitality presupposes. Thus Derrida says:

It is almost impossible to suspend this violence [i.e. the violence done to foreigners through the juridical language of the laws of hospitality]; at any rate it is an interminable task. It is another reason to work urgently to transform things. A vast and formidable *duty to translate* is imposed here that is not only pedagogical, “linguistic,” domestic, and national (educating

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<sup>81</sup> See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*.

foreigners in the national language and culture -- in the tradition of state or republican law, for instance). That requires a transformation of law -- of the languages of law.<sup>82</sup>

In view of the pressing question of immigration and *sans-papiers*, it is necessary that the host nations find a way to translate the language in which they formulate the laws that establish the conditions and limits of the duty of hospitality. It is necessary to find a translation that allows (or at least does its best to allow) the gap to be bridged between the language of the foreigner and the language of the host. It is necessary to make these laws more just, even when they can never be just.

The duty to translate the languages of law in which the conditions for the welcoming of foreigners are stated, is not a duty aimed exclusively at 'teaching' foreigners the language and 'instructing' them in the culture of the host nation. Rather, because this translation forms part of the endeavour of legislating the reception of foreigners 'in the name of unconditional hospitality,'<sup>83</sup> then this translation must address the other in her absolute alterity without attempting to appropriate or efface her singularity. Thus this translation cannot have a merely pedagogical purpose. The translation defended by Derrida cannot and should not only serve to educate the foreigner so that he is familiarized with and eventually assimilated into the culture and national language of the host nation, for that would entail an abuse of power on the part of the host over the guests and, therefore, a perversion of the principle of absolute hospitality. If the duty of translation is to remain true to the spirit of unconditional hospitality, and to contribute to the constant perfectibility of the political decisions and legal regulations concerning the reception of foreigners so as to reduce the inevitable violence involved in such reception, it cannot be limited to teaching and/or imposing the host's language to the new arrivals. I will return to the question of the duty of translation and how it could be seen at work within the relationships formed by the documentary filmmaker, the filmed subject and the spectator in Chapter 4.

It is thus clear that underlying Derrida's remarks about hospitality and the duty of translation there is a critique not only of the laws concerning the welcoming of *sans-papiers*, asylum seekers and immigrants in general, but also of some of today's so-called politics and policies of multiculturalism in Western developed nations. His claims about the need for a translation of the languages of law seem to be

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<sup>82</sup> Derrida, 'The Principle of Hospitality,' p.68. [My emphasis].

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.67.

also directed against those policies which are supposedly aimed at integrating, including and giving their due space to the diverse cultures that exist within multicultural societies, but that are in the end restricted to instructing foreigners in the national language in an attempt to assimilate them into the host nation

Derrida's understanding of the relationship between politics and ethics and his notion of hospitality, that I have presented in this chapter, will serve me as the conceptual basis to argue that in cutting and editing and taking decisions regarding the form of the film the filmmaker could be said to do politics and act as a host to the filmed subjects and spectators. The relationships thus formed between filmmaker, spectators and filmed subjects, I will claim following Azoulay's theory of photography, actualize Derrida's notion of hospitality. I will also argue in Chapters 2 and 3 that the analogy between the Derridian notion of politics as ungrounded decision-making and the cinematic cut can also be linked to Rancière's understanding of politics as a change in the social order, or more precisely, as a challenge to and redistribution of the roles and positions within a social order.

## **X. Final Remarks**

In this chapter I have considered two main issues. First, I have examined the functions that national borders have today as ubiquitous apparatuses of international class distinction, control and violence. I have drawn on Balibar's work to claim that borders operate well beyond their mere geographical location, and that they have different meaning for the different people who cross them depending how the crossing is done and who the crosser is. These functions of the border raise questions of how undocumented migrants and stateless people are to be treated. At the same time, such functions also seem to call into question the nation-state as a feasible form of state organisation. My discussion of borders has provided me with a groundwork for the second main issue I have analysed here, which is Derrida's conceptualization of hospitality. This latter concept will be crucial for my discussions later in this thesis, since it implies a way of thinking politics and political relations beyond the framework of nation-states and hence national borders. My argument in this thesis is that such alternative political bonds can emerge in documentaries about borders and migration. Thus, Derrida's hospitality will permeate my work throughout.

I have explained that for Derrida hospitality is essentially a question of the ways we respond to the arrival of the other and, hence, of the ways in which we relate to the absolute other. With this in mind, alongside the fact that crossing borders or

attempting to cross them necessarily implies an encounter between self and other, he concludes that today's debates around the questions and problems raised by undocumented migration and other displaced stateless people should be addressed in terms of hospitality. I have explained Derrida's view that ethics and politics are opposed but inextricably linked, and have analysed the implications that result from this connection. In particular, the implications it seems to have concerning the problem of undocumented immigrants and the ways in which politics is conceived. In this respect, I have sought to show, on the one hand, that these ideas of Derrida offer an alternative to the traditional understanding of citizenship as a status determined and assigned to certain people by a nation-state. On the other hand, I have maintained that his views also call for a drastic transformation of the laws regulating the reception of foreigners so that these laws are in line with the precepts of the principle of absolute hospitality. What results from this is a conceptualisation of politics as a commitment to the active and constant improvement of laws. This is also a politics that addresses the other in its singularity and that does not close off the arrival of the absolute other. Finally, this is a politics that is not exclusively regulated by the structure and interests of the nation-state, for it is a politics that dispenses with the distinction between citizens and noncitizens, and instead favours relations of responsibility towards others regardless of their citizenship status.

In Chapter 2, I will examine Azoulay's work on photography and her view of the political potential of this visual medium. Azoulay maintains that photographs are sites for political relationships between the photographer, the photographed subject and the spectator. This is a space of relations based on solidarity, responsibility and equality functioning beyond the framework and the direct mediation of the nation-state. I will connect and compare Azoulay's model of photography to Derrida's alternative understanding of politics and citizenship. My analysis of Azoulay will allow me to make the point in Chapter 3 that her theory of photography can be transposed to documentary films, and hence that documentaries can also function as spaces for political relationships that are also relationships of hospitality.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Photography as a Political Space. Politics, Aesthetics and the Notion of Citizenship**

#### **I.**

In the last chapter I discussed Derrida's claim that ethics and politics are two opposing realms that, nonetheless, supplement one another. This relationship, I have also said, becomes evident through the concept of hospitality. I used Derrida's position in order to make the case for two ideas, which are key to my own thesis. First, that hospitality is the concept that best allows us to approach questions raised by the increasing number of people (documented and undocumented) mobilizing across geo-political borders today. And secondly, that we need to understand politics in a way that is not exhausted in all the relationships and practices mediated by the nation-state. The issue of how we negotiate between laws that necessarily imply ungrounded decisions, impose limits and discriminate who we are to welcome, and the unconditional and unrealisable promise of the absolute reception of others can be better understood through the perspective of hospitality. Legislating laws in accordance with the unconditional law of hospitality not only allows for the possibility of perfecting and making less violent the conditional laws for the welcoming of newcomers, but it also opens up the possibility of thinking politics and political relationships beyond the confines of national borders and the national sovereign power. It is this alternative form of understanding politics that constitutes my main concern in this second chapter. My discussion here of how we can make sense of different forms of political bonds not inscribed in the framework of the nation-state is crucial, for it will lay the groundwork for my main argument in this thesis that documentary films about migration can give rise to these alternative forms of political relationships.

How can political bonds not directly sanctioned by the sovereign nation-state actually emerge? Is it really possible to form political spaces and relationships that are deterritorialised in the sense that they are not under the direct constraint of geo-political borders? In her provocative book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay argues that photographic images provide a space where new forms of social and political relationships that are not restricted to national boundaries and the mediation of the nation-state are possible. She proposes that photography understood

as an event has the capacity to constitute a civil space of plurality (where a ‘civil space of plurality’ means a community in which all individuals regardless of their citizenship status, their social, political, cultural and or ethnic background can be partakers) that functions independently of the sovereign sanction. Her thesis of the political potential of the relationships emerging through the event of photography constitutes an ontologico-political understanding of photography for it offers an alternative approach to that presented by theories of photography focused on the organisation of power relations. In Azoulay’s model the social and political relations created through the photographic act are based on equality rather than structured hierarchically.

In this chapter I will first analyse Azoulay’s triadic model of photography and consider the specific conceptualizations of politics and citizenship that derive from this model. I will compare Azoulay’s notion of the political with Jacques Rancière’s ideas on politics and its connection with aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Both authors think that politics is a matter of how people relate to one another and what they do collectively, rather than a matter of how people relate to the institutions of government. I will argue that Rancière’s view of politics seems more useful since he does not think that every human encounter is political nor does his concept of politics require separating the latter from the civil. Then I will pursue the idea that there is a link between the political relationships resulting from the event of photography and Derrida’s conception of the ethics and politics of hospitality. All these discussions will allow me to better examine, in subsequent chapters of this thesis, the possibility of developing Azoulay’s understanding of photography as space of political relationships beyond the nation-state to incorporate the specific form of documentary cinema.

## **II. An Alternative Civil Contract**

In *The Civil Contract* Azoulay suggests that there exists a strong link between photography and citizenship. More precisely, she argues that photographs play a crucial role in the formation of citizens. According to Azoulay, there is a ‘civil contract’ emerging through the practice of photography, which operates analogously to the social contract of which Thomas Hobbes or Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*.

<sup>2</sup> Explaining the origin of the sovereign and its power, both Hobbes and Rousseau argue that there is a hypothetical agreement that individuals make so that they each transfer their power defend themselves into a sovereign that would then have the monopoly of violence and the power to defend the common good and collective interests of the community formed by the individuals. As we will see, Azoulay

This is a tacit hypothetical agreement through which individuals acquire a mutual obligation and give up their own powers to defend themselves in favour of the sovereign, who thereby acquires the irrevocable power to govern them and the obligation to protect their lives. Like the social contract, the civil contract of photography yields the foundation of a political community in which its members are mutually obliged to one another and are endowed with the power to act in connection with this obligation. However, unlike the social contracts theorised by Hobbes and Rousseau, the civil contract of photography dispenses with the sovereign as mediator and regulator of the relations between members. As Azoulay puts it: ‘the civil contract of photography organizes political relations in the form of an open and dynamic framework among individuals, without regulation and mediation by a sovereign.’<sup>3</sup>

Azoulay’s proposal of a civil contract of photography that gives rise to a political community in which all members are bound to each other without the intervention of a sovereign power is underpinned by the thesis that doing without the sovereign entails dismantling the mechanism of exclusion that any sovereign power necessarily produces. In other words, she is interested in advancing a conceptualization of citizenship and of politics that are independent of the sovereign power of the nation-state because she thinks that the sovereign necessarily produces statelessness. Drawing on Agamben’s work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, she agrees that the sovereign tie upon which the state is founded does not have the form of a pact or a contract, but rather it has the form of an exception -- an ‘exclusive inclusion’ -- for it produces ‘bare life’ (mere bodies) as opposed to a ‘qualified life,’ the life of ‘political beings’ or citizens. Like Agamben, Azoulay believes it is possible to think a politics that dispenses with the form of the sovereign nation-state and that consequently prevents the emergence of excluded people. However, instead of renouncing the category of citizenship altogether as Agamben proposes, Azoulay attempts to restore this concept by promoting a political sphere where all individuals are equals and related to one another without the direct mediation of a sovereign power. For her, this political sphere is materialised in the act of photography. As she puts it:

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takes inspiration from the idea of this tacit agreement in order to formulate her thesis of the civil contract of photography.

<sup>3</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.110.

[Photography can] edify an open political space where no one can decide on the exception, and a final decision cannot be made, a community in which a new beginning is a right preserved for each of its members and solidarity among its members precedes the submission and the identification with power. [This is] a politics founded on the equality of the governed [...].<sup>4</sup>

In the political realm created by the photograph there is no distinction between citizen and non-citizen, a distinction that obscures the fact that all individuals are ‘first and foremost *governed*’<sup>5</sup> independently of their citizenship status. For Azoulay, this division of all the governed between citizens and non-citizens is overcome to the extent that individuals in the citizenry of photography are bound by a civic duty that is neither imposed nor regulated by the nation-state sovereign power. In this sense, what she proposes is to shift the foundation of politics that Agamben has characterised as ‘bare life’ -- which, as explained in chapter one, is the state of exception that the sovereign power inexorably produces -- to that of the political community created through the civil contract of photography. This is a political community composed of all those governed by this contract regardless of whether they are citizens of a particular nation-state or not. Since in the citizenry of photography there is no sovereign power, not only are its members all ‘*equally* not governed’<sup>6</sup> but also their membership is not sanctioned by any national border. As Azoulay writes:

Photography [...] deterritorializes citizenship, reaching beyond its conventional boundaries and plotting out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed.<sup>7</sup>

The conceptualization of citizenship that therefore surfaces is based on the relations of political partnership and solidarity among the participants in the photographic act, instead of being based on the relations that individuals have with the sovereign nation-state. This is a notion of citizenship indifferent to links of ethnic kinship, class or national belonging that are invoked by the sovereign power to connect part of the governed to one another and, simultaneously, to exclude others. Citizenship thus ceases to be a status or a private possession, and becomes a set of civil skills exercised by the governed in order to voice grievances and make claims whenever injuries and violations of rights are inflicted upon the others governed. In this sense, citizenship

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.88.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

becomes a shield of sorts that all the governed have against the sovereign power and the exclusions that national borders necessarily entail. In Azoulay's words:

Whereas the nation-state is based on the principles of sovereignty and territorialisation, the citizenry of photography, of which the civil contract of photography is the constitutional foundation, is based on *ethical duty*, and on patterns of deterritorialization. [...] The citizenry of photography is a simulation of a collective to which all citizens belong. Neither taking precedence over citizenship or making it conditional, the citizenry of photography is fundamentally and solely defined by citizenship: Membership in the citizenry means citizenship, and citizenship means membership in the citizenry. The citizenry of photography has no sovereign and therefore no apparatus of exclusion.<sup>8</sup>

The way in which this civil contract emerges through the photographic event will become clearer further on. But for now it is worth noting that what is central to Azoulay's notions of the civil contract of photography and the political community to which this contract gives shape is that they open up the possibility of new conceptualizations of both citizenship and the political. This alternative notion of citizenship is defined both by the way in which citizens relate to one another and by the absence of the sovereign's mediation. Since in such a political sphere there is no sovereign state deciding on the exception, there are no asymmetries produced among the governed. Citizens here are all governed on an equal standing, which reduces their vulnerability to suffering outrageous forms of harm. By the same token, the principle that governs the relationships among the members of this citizenry is ethical responsibility, expressed in the form of partnership and solidarity that the citizens of photography practice towards each other. The kind of citizenship that surfaces here is thus neither a status assigned nor a good distributed. Rather, citizenship is the practice of effectively exercising one's duty towards all the other members of the citizenry of photography: the duty to defend and to rehabilitate citizenship for all those who have been stripped from it. As such, citizenship as a practice is neither determined nor restricted by the sovereign state, which means that citizenship is deterritorialised, for its exercise is not confined to the geographical boundaries of the nation-state. As a consequence of this, the political becomes a form of relationship amongst individuals instead of a relationship between individuals and the nation-state.

It is important to note at this point that Azoulay states that a politics freed from the sovereign power and founded on the equality of the governed, like the one she is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.128. [My emphasis].

advocating, is not a mere theoretical model. She thinks that this politics is in fact empirically actualised and manifested ‘in the form of nongovernmental political activities of many forms and agendas in [...] the world today.’<sup>9</sup> The practice of photography, as I will explain in the next section, is for Azoulay one of those empirical concretizations of a politics liberated from the conditions and the territorialised form of the nation-state. By making this claim, Azoulay wants to deny the idea that a politics freed from the nation-state is merely possible in a community to come. Rather, she maintains that this is a politics materialised in ‘several communities, both within and without the boundaries of the sovereign state, that already exist, communities that employ a variety of means [...] to edify an open political space’<sup>10</sup> which is founded on the equality of all the members, all the governed, regardless of what their citizenship status is. Thus Azoulay posits photography as one of the practices through which the communities constitute these open political spaces. The collective created through photography is such that it allows the inclusion of a plurality of individuals who are partners sharing equal access within an actual concrete community with diverse interests.

Later in this chapter I will examine the specific implications of the emergence of political relations not sanctioned by the nation-state that Azoulay proposes, and I will link this form of political relationship to Derrida’s theses of hospitality and the necessary though contradictory bond between ethics and politics that I presented in Chapter 1. Is it really possible and, furthermore, useful to conceive of citizenship as a form of relationship between individuals rather than in terms of a status granted by a nation-state? I will engage with this question later on, but for now it is necessary to expand my exposition of Azoulay’s thesis of the civil contract of photography in order to better understand what the implications of her proposal are for the concepts of citizenship and of politics, as well as for understanding the practice of photography.

### **III. The Ontologico-Political Approach to Photography**

In what ways does the practice of photography actually constitute a political sphere where all members are made equal in standing and where the form of the sovereign nation-state is absent? How is the civil contract established through the photographic event? Azoulay articulates the relationship between photographic practices and the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.88.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

formation of such a political community by defining photographs as acts of communication between three parties: the photographer, the subject photographed and the spectator. A photograph, she argues, functions as a statement or *énoncé*<sup>11</sup> that depends on the collective recognition of these three parties in order to attain meaning. The photograph is therefore a statement that is addressed as a civil act. This feature of photographs is one of the two aspects that likens citizenship to photography:

Photographs are constructed like statements (*énoncés*), the photographic image gains its meaning through mutual (mis)recognition, and this meaning cannot be possessed by its addresser and/or addressee. Citizenship likewise is gained through recognition, and like photography is not something that can simply be possessed.<sup>12</sup>

The other aspect that links citizenship and photography is plurality. Without plurality, neither citizenship nor photography is possible. While in the case of citizenship, the condition that guarantees plurality is an effective equality among citizens (which is only possible by eliminating the exclusion and asymmetries that the mediation of any sovereign power produces); in the case of photography, a plurality of political relations can be actualized by the ‘act of transforming and disseminating what is seen into claims that demand action.’<sup>13</sup>

For Azoulay, both photography and citizenship rely heavily on the activity of recognition, which means that the two presuppose a set of relations between individuals, as well as between individuals and the governing authority. Photography and in particular those photographs portraying images of individuals who due to their statelessness or their ‘impaired’ citizenship have (or are susceptible to having) outrageous harms inflicted upon them, sets up a civil contract that binds spectators, photographed subjects and photographers together. The civil contract of photography configures a political space in which anyone (regardless of her status as citizen or as non-citizen) who either uses photographs as a means to address others or adopts the position of a photograph’s addressee becomes a member or a citizen of the citizenry of photography. This civil contract binds all of its contracting parts, making these responsible for the other members of the citizenry and for rehabilitating the

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<sup>11</sup> Azoulay draws here on Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of ‘*énoncés*’ as statements that are structures resulting from the relation between an addresser, an addressee, a referent, and a meaning. An ‘*énoncé*’ can only gain meaning within the context of a conversational exchange where addresser, addressee, and referent are all given their due recognition as constitutional elements of this statement. It is Lyotard’s idea of ‘making justice’ to the elements of the ‘*énoncé*’ that Azoulay takes cue from in order to articulate her thesis of photographs as statements and photography as a triadic event. See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, pp.29, 142-143.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.26.

citizenship of all those who have been deprived of it or who have suffered any damage from it. As Azoulay puts it:

Becoming a citizen in the citizenry of photography entails seeking, by means of photography, to rehabilitate one's citizenship or that of someone else who has been stripped of it. [The citizen of photography] is someone who sees photography and its civil contract as something that can protect her from anyone who would violate another citizen, which amounts to violating her, insofar as citizenship itself is violated.<sup>14</sup>

The civil contract of photography is established above all by means of 'catastrophe photographs.' That is, photographs taken on the 'verge of catastrophe'<sup>15</sup> or 'under conditions of regime-made disaster,'<sup>16</sup> which portray populations that (due to their statelessness or their 'impaired' citizenship) experience a continuous deprivation of their rights and intolerable harms. For Azoulay, 'any photographic image can *in principle* come to constitute an independent political space,'<sup>17</sup> a citizenry of photography.<sup>18</sup> But she also claims that photographing people living 'on the verge of catastrophe' entails a particular act of resistance, for it amounts to making visible the ongoing and unbearable violations these people endure on a regular basis. The civil contract originating from these images compels all participants in the act of photography to actively claim the restoration of citizenship where it has been impaired. Rather than simply showing empathy or pity to those who have suffered harm to their citizenship, the contract demands action from the spectators. In this sense, a photograph exceeds the status of mere testimony, document or evidence by calling for all the signatory parties of the contract to take action. It is the responsibility of all the parties involved in the contract of photography to recognize and construct the meaning of a photograph in terms of a statement (*énoncé*) that shows the injustice of a situation and that urges the rehabilitation of citizenship. This is the reason why none of the parties has unique entitlement to the ownership of the photograph nor a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.117.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>16</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.83. [My emphasis].

<sup>18</sup> As I will explain later on, Azoulay thinks that any photographic image has the potential to constitute a space of political relationships to the extent that these images entail an encounter between human beings. For her, all public human encounters are political. Azoulay unpacks this last idea in her book *Civil Imagination* but she already hints at it in *The Civil Contract*. My argument will be that her understanding of the political is problematic since she thinks each and every human encounter with other humans is political, thus making this latter domain seemingly too broad. I will also contrast her view with Rancière's conceptualization of politics and claim that there is no need to distinguish the civil from the political.

privileged or exclusive access to its meaning for, under this conception, the event of photography becomes a collective endeavour that seeks to make injustices visible.

Azoulay claims that to the extent that those who have been stripped of or denied citizenship are enabled, through the photograph and the civil contract implied by it, to become citizens of the citizenry of photography, then they are in the position to make claims and calls for the restoration of their citizenship. The photographed person relies on the photographer to help her make such a claim and address others through the photograph. It is important to note here, however, that Azoulay does not think photography actually terminates the photographed person's status as a non-citizen. Instead, she thinks that photography empowers non-citizens to make grievances known through the cooperation of others (photographer and spectator) that otherwise they would not be able to pose:

Photography does not put an end to their position as noncitizen, but it does enable them and others to take part in the reconstruction of their civil grievances to exercise the legitimate violence of photography's citizenry, regardless of their [actual] status as noncitizens deprived of rights who cannot use their citizenship to negotiate with the sovereign power.<sup>19</sup>

For Azoulay, an important bond is created in the encounter between photographer and subject photographed, a bond that is inspired by a relation to an external eye which is not present at the moment when the photograph is taken: the eye of the spectator. Emphasizing the role played by the (ideal) spectator, Azoulay affirms that the latter acquires a very specific responsibility through the contract: to make visible the harms to citizenship that the photographed subjects endure. Rather than simply witnessing with a voyeuristic gaze the suffering portrayed in images taken on the verge of catastrophe, the spectator is called to actively participate in the reconstruction of the photographic *énoncé*. Her participation in this reconstruction is crucial for, without it, the harm inflicted upon the rights of the depicted person or persons (and hence upon citizenship as a whole) would not be made visible. This task of the spectator is what Azoulay calls the 'ethics of the spectator,' which is the duty of the spectator to 'watch' the photograph (not just merely look at it) and care for its sense. The spectator must make use of her civil skill of 'watching' photographs; she must be able to recognise 'that not only were the photographed people there, but that, in addition, they are *still* present there at the time [the spectator is] watching them.'<sup>20</sup> Watching a

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<sup>19</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.131.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p.16.

photograph is, in this sense, to acknowledge the temporal co-presence with a photographed body, and hence to acknowledge the urgency to take action against the dispossession and/or impairment of citizenship. To put it differently, the civic skill that the photographs of the verge of catastrophe demand from spectators is precisely that of ‘watching’ because that implies that the violations and injuries depicted are seen as occurring in, so to speak ‘real-time,’ right in front of the spectator’s gaze. And as present events, these images become binding summons to the restoration of the injuries portrayed. Azoulay argues that her proposal of the civil duty of spectators to watch photographs as if these were portraying present events offers a counterpoint to Roland Barthes’s approach to photography. By contrast to Azoulay who claims that the photographic image of catastrophe portrays what is occurring in the present, Barthes thinks that the photograph captures what has been; that the photograph is an index signaling ‘that-has-been.’<sup>21</sup> At the same time, he says, the photographic image is also an indication of what will be. In this way, for Barthes, the photograph always shows an ‘anterior future of which death is the stake.’<sup>22</sup> The photograph shows future death or loss and, for this reason, any encounter with a photograph confronts the viewer with the horror of seeing death. It is this difference in understanding the temporality of the photograph as showing the present that allows Azoulay to explain the binding nature of photography spectatorship.

The civil contract of photography that Azoulay proposes involves a spectatorial recognition of a ‘civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven’t stopped being “there,” toward dispossessed citizens who, in turn, enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship.’<sup>23</sup> In a similar fashion, by allowing themselves to be photographed, the injured subjects demand that their situations be witnessed by both the spectator and the photographer. Thus, insofar as the meanings of photographs of people on the verge of catastrophe are collectively articulated as statements (*énoncés*) that serve as grievances demanding the rehabilitation of their damaged citizenships, then photographer, subjects photographed and viewers become *equal* interlocutors in the citizenry of photography. Azoulay thinks that if the photographer and the spectator become addressees of the claims made by the subjects photographed, then the three parties recognize each other as

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<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p.80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.96.

<sup>23</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, pp.16-17.

equal members -- and therefore as citizens -- in the citizenry of photography. The three parties here share two main civic duties: first, to make visible the intolerable conditions of people living under the conditions of the verge of catastrophe; and second, to demand rehabilitation where citizenship has been harmed, denied or impaired.

As mentioned before, Azoulay believes that given that the meaning of a photograph results from the encounter between the photographer, the photographed and the spectator, then none of these three parties has exclusive entitlement to determine the photograph's sense nor to claim ownership over either the photograph or its meaning. In this sense, the civil contract of photography undermines the possibility of any one party becoming the only and absolute sovereign in the citizenry of photography. Thus constituted, the citizenry of photography is a space for equal and horizontal political relations -- rather than vertical ones, where both the plurality of positions and the equality among its members are guaranteed. Azoulay's idea is that by doing away with the mediation of the sovereign power of the nation-state, the notion of citizenship becomes both de-nationalised and de-territorialised, thereby granting political agency to non-citizens and equality to all participants.

The particular example that Azoulay employs to illustrate a situation that lends itself for the development of the civil contract of photography is the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Photographs taken by Israeli photographers of violent episodes occurring in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza during the years of the second Palestinian intifada provide explanatory instances of her theoretical model of photography as a space for political relations which are not governed by the nation-state. Her examples characterize Palestinians as bearers of impaired citizenship due to the retaliatory and preventive aggressions that the Israeli power continuously exerts upon them. The numerous checkpoints constraining movement in the Occupied Territories; the destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes; the targeted assassinations; the bombing from the sky; as well as the raids and violent arrests keep Palestinians' lives on the verge of catastrophe, a condition that can (and must) be made visible and repaired by means of the binding commitment that the members in the citizenry of photography have towards one another.

Azoulay has a particular interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict because she was born and raised in Israel, and has witnessed live and through photographs the injustices Palestinians suffer on a daily basis due to their forced statelessness under

the Israeli occupation. This led her to look for ways to understand citizenship beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Through the civil contract of photography she proposes that it is the viewers' responsibility to draw emergency claims from the violent images of Palestinians and to become addressees of such claims. Thereby, viewers exceed the understanding of these photographs as mere documentation of events. Thus, images of the excruciating circumstances of Palestinians have the potential to become political spaces for struggle and resistance against the sovereign power that denies and damages these people's citizenship. The next two sections are devoted to exploring the notions of citizenship and of politics that derive from Azoulay's view on the photographic encounter.

#### **IV. Politics and Ethics of Photography**

Before considering the presuppositions and the implications of Azoulay's triadic model of photography and her alternative understanding of citizenship and politics,<sup>24</sup> it is worth summarizing three important points that her thesis of the civil contract of photography makes. First, she claims that because today virtually anyone (regardless of his actual citizenship status within a particular nation-state) can have access to the practices of photography either as a photographed subject, as a photographer or as a viewer, then anyone who takes part in one way or another in an photographic act immediately becomes a member in the citizenry of photography. What this means is that this citizenry is open, borderless and ubiquitous. Second, given that both the photographic act and its meaning result from the encounter between the three active parties and that none of them has the authority and/or exclusivity to determine the photograph's sense, then there is no sovereign power regulating or mediating the relationships among the members of the citizenry. And third, because there is no sovereign power discriminating between citizens and non-citizens, then all the members in the citizenry of photography stand as equal. In this manner, the civil contract of photography establishes a citizenry that 'functions on a horizontal plane.'<sup>25</sup> That is, a plane where power is not centralized, but instead it is spread equally among all the members.

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<sup>24</sup> Here I will be using the terms 'politics' and 'the political' interchangeably. Even though Azoulay prefers the latter, I use both terms because that allows me to better contrast Azoulay's and Rancière's views. Nonetheless, I follow Rancière in his distinction between 'politics' and 'the order of the police,' where the latter refers, as we will see, to the domain of governance, the hierarchical arrangements of the social order and all the institutional forms that maintain this order.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.146.

Azoulay proposes a triadic model of the social relationships that converge in the photographic act in the hope of offering an alternative to the traditional dualistic model implied by most theoretical approaches in the area of image ethics. This is the area that studies the ethical questions that emerge in the process of making, exhibiting and looking at images of others, especially when these others live under conditions of oppression and suffering. Azoulay believes that what she calls ‘dualistic models’ of photography -- like those of Barthes or Susan Sontag -- focus only on the photographer’s and/or on the viewer’s role, and thus fail to acknowledge the agency of the photographed subject in the ‘social bind’ created by the photograph.<sup>26</sup> Azoulay’s triadic model, by contrast, grants visibility to the portrayed subject and denies the supposed passivity of both the latter and the spectator within the relations that emerge through the photographic act. In a strong criticism of theories of photography which consider ‘photographs of horror’ (photographs representing populations in precarious conditions) from the narrow perspective of the aesthetic value of the images or the psychological and emotional responses that these photographs induce, Azoulay claims that a photographic image and its meaning are the result of the collective encounter between the photographer, the photographed and the viewer. According to Azoulay, image ethics theories -- such as that of Sontag -- are inherently flawed because by linking the spectator’s gaze to feelings of compassion, empathy and pity, they turn photographs into objects of property and exchange that bear a meaning that is exclusively determined by the photographer. Under such an understanding, photographs can only be considered in terms of their value as works of art; and neither spectators nor portrayed subjects play a role in the articulation of the photographs’ meanings. In Azoulay’s words:

[Sontag’s theory] turns photographs into works of art that can be judged. Her ethics of seeing, in effect, reifies the new visual field created with the appearance of photography, leaving the photograph in possession of a special ‘grammar’ that allows it to remain independent of its spectator.<sup>27</sup>

Azoulay is not only arguing against traditional dualistic models of image ethics here, she is also posing a thesis that is at odds with what she calls the ‘paradigm or art’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; and Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London and New York: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.130.

<sup>28</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.61.

and/or the 'canon [of the history] of photography.'<sup>29</sup> If rather than considering the photograph as a complete and finished product created by an artist who has exclusive agency and access to the photograph's meaning, the photograph is understood as lacking a fixed and predetermined content, then this image will be always open to the generation of new utterances whenever a new spectator encounters it. The photograph in this latter sense has a meaning that surpasses the artist's intention; and the spectators and the subjects portrayed gain agency insofar as they are included as essential participants in the photograph's meaning. Unlike the photographic canon, in Azoulay's model the photographed subject is no longer rendered invisible; this subject's gaze and her active involvement in the photographic act are acknowledged. In a similar fashion, the photographer has no exclusive claim over the photograph's sense, while the role of the spectator is not simply reduced to the act of judging the aesthetic value of the image or how effectively the photographer achieved his or her intentions. In being directly addressed by the photographed subject's gaze (who is here recognized as a member within the plurality of the photographic citizenry), the spectator acquires responsibility for what is seen in the photograph. In clear contrast with Sontag's image ethics, it is due to the active address toward the viewer on the part of the photographed subject that the photograph does not fix a situation or event nor does it have a single, univocal, already-determined meaning. Rather, the photographic act opens up a space for ongoing past and present encounters between the photographer, the photographed and the spectator. It is therefore possible to affirm that the civil contract of photography entails an ethics of spectatorship, since it commands that the viewer abandon her role as a passive addressee of an image and instead adopt that of the active addresser that articulates photographs of injured populations in terms of emergency statements. Such statements are urgent calls for the immediate reparation of these injuries. As Azoulay puts it:

The spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee's position to the addresser's position to take responsibility for the sense of such photographs by addressing them even further, turning them into signals of emergency, signals of danger or warning -- transforming them into emergency claims.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, Azoulay grounds photographic spectatorship on civic duty (rather than on pity, mercy or plain voyeurism), the civic duty towards the photographed persons.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>30</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.169.

That is, the civic duty to make visible their sufferings and the intolerable violations these people endure, and thus to call for the urgent rehabilitation of their ‘impaired citizenship’<sup>31</sup> and their damaged life conditions. This civic duty is in turn grounded on the assumption that the subjects portrayed in the photograph continue to be there, still present in the moment when the viewer encounters the photograph and makes use of her ‘civic skill’ to ‘watch’ this image, as opposed to merely ‘looking at’ it. Indeed, Azoulay’s idea is that through the cinematic watching of a still photograph, the spectator allows for the image to be endowed with temporality and movement. This consequently sets the conditions for the encounter between the photographer, the photographed subject and the viewer to take place in the present, thus making the articulation of the meaning of the photograph into an active process. In other words, the temporal dimension of the photographic socio-political bind is essential for the mutual recognition of the three parties, and hence for the plurality of the citizenry of photography.

However, this civic duty is not limited to assuming the present time quality of the image, the spectator also needs to have the ‘civil intention’<sup>32</sup> to circumvent the limits set by the photographic canon and the professional discourse of art with regards to photographs. This civil intention means that the spectator suspends the ‘professional gaze’ that, in accordance with the photographic canon, attributes all effects produced by the photograph to the photographer’s intention. And in lieu, the spectator adopts a ‘civil gaze’ that allows her to transgress the boundaries of the visual, the limits of what is visible in the photograph. Through the civil gaze the spectator does not regard the photograph as a finished product where the truth is stored, nor does she regard it as a single source of knowledge and as an end in itself. But what she sees in the photograph instead is a basis for multiple utterances and heterogeneous knowledge beyond the visual and beyond the sanctioned parameters according to which the governing power represents itself. Under the civil gaze and civil intention that the spectator adopts, the photograph becomes the result of the active exchange between those who see the image and those who participated in the making of the image. The photograph in this sense is not a repository of truth but an open and plural arena where participants actively engage in the reconstruction of what

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>32</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.121.

is visible and not visible through the photographic image, an arena where participants are able to actively join in the ‘game of [utterance formation and] truth-claiming.’<sup>33</sup>

This ontological-political understanding of photography that Azoulay proposes also aims to constitute an alternative theoretical approach to the one offered by the social power model of photography. While the latter model reduces the photographic act ultimately to the outcome of the relations of power that emerge between the photographer and the photographed subject, Azoulay’s triadic model is an attempt to overcome the restrictive scope of this notion of power relations. With her model, Azoulay eschews the power relations discourse that qualifies the photographic act as inexorably repressive in nature, for there is always one party holding representational authority (the photographer) over the other party, which is the subject of representation (the photographed subject). Instead, her triadic model underscores the complexity as much as the conflict and the negotiation involved in the photographic encounter. Azoulay does not deny that photography, as a practice of representation, implies construction and prejudice and that it is very often used by governmental and institutional power hierarchies for the control of populations and preservation of the social order. However, her thesis of the civil contract of photography opens up the possibility for the photographic encounter to contest precisely those power relations, and thus for photography to play an emancipatory role.

Azoulay provides many examples both in *The Civil Contract* and in *Civil Imagination* to illustrate and support her arguments. One of the photographs she refers to is by Israeli photographer Micha Kirshner, who uses studio photography to realize his portrayals of Palestinians under the Israeli Occupation. Kirshner sets his photographs on improvised studios on site and employs studio lighting, staging and other studio aesthetic techniques to represent the conditions of ‘regime-made’ disaster, which Palestinians endure on a daily basis. Azoulay refers to Kirshner’s 1988 photograph of Aisha al-Kurd and her young son Yassir, who was born in prison when his mother was serving a jail sentence for resisting the Occupation. Seated on the floor and wearing a black dress, Aisha al-Kurd is presented with her child peacefully sleeping on her lap while she caresses his head having her eyes almost closed, in a gesture that is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s famous sculpture *La Pietà*.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.117.

According to Azoulay, a reading of this photograph following the traditional paradigm or the canon of art would exclusively focus on the aesthetic traits of it, namely on the composition, the lightning, the positioning of Aisha al-Kurd and her child, among others. This approach to the photograph would amount to employing only the ‘professional gaze’ to read this image, and so it would reconstruct the photograph in terms of a complete finished product owned by the artist and in which the spectator has no role except for that of passively confronting the photographed figure. With this professional gaze the spectator would be restricted to assess the photograph according to the judgment of taste as an aestheticized image of the suffering of Palestinians, and thus as *not political enough*. However, if the spectator was also to adopt a ‘civil gaze’ and ‘watch’ the photograph instead of just looking at it, she would have to acknowledge that inscribed in the image there is the presence of all the people involved in the making of it. The spectator would then recognize the photograph as a collective and unfinished product. The spectator would then see the fact that Aisha al-Kurd actively gave her consent to being photographed by an Israeli, that she cooperated with him receiving his directions through an interpreter, and that she actively wanted to have her life and conditions made visible. With this realization, says Azoulay, the spectator becomes an active participant in the event of photography, going well beyond what is visible in the frame and seeing through the personal story of Aisha al-Kurd the effects of an unjust and intolerable regime affecting many people. It is through this civil intention of the spectator that the civil contract of photography emerges. In Azoulay’s words:

Alongside her professional skills in analyzing the photograph, the trained spectator is required to activate her civil intention to assist her in deciphering the defective conditions in which [Aisha al-Kurd] finds herself. The civil contract (of photography), between the spectator and the woman photographed, protects her – even if only partially against the takeover of the civil malfunction that structures the regime that she inhabits and that threatens to impair her ability to determine that what is depicted in the photograph is unbearable.<sup>34</sup>

A question emerges here as to whether it is possible for the spectator to always go beyond the frame and have access to the circumstances of production of the photograph. Does the isolated photograph without any knowledge about the subject portrayed and the context in which the image was made compel the spectator to find

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.124.

out more? Could the photograph without a backstory still have a useful function and how? Azoulay seems to believe that a photograph can oblige spectators to find out more as a result of what it does not show or tell as much as the story that appears to be contained within its frame. To some extent, this is a useful approach since it seems to demand a responsible or conscious form of ‘consumption’ (of images), which could be compared to how we ‘consume’ other products often without being aware of the supply chain and conditions in which things are produced and distributed. On the other hand, however, it is not clear to what extent it is possible to indeed have access to the context of production. Can all spectators have the resources and capacity to undertake the kind of background research that Azoulay seems to assume? What is problematic here is that Azoulay’s proposal seems to presuppose a certain type of ‘academic’ viewer, one that is both compelled and able to pursue the backstory and go beyond what is visible in the frame. If this were so, Azoulay’s model would depend on existing hierarchies rather than contest them.

Moving on from this discussion of the kind of spectator that Azoulay’s thesis appears to assume, there is a particular conceptualization of the political results from Azoulay’s approach to photography that is worth analyzing. What she deems as political is the encounter between people and the special forms of relationships that they create in such an encounter. In this sense, the political exists independently of the sanction of a sovereign power and it entails a collective practice, where all participants act as equals. This idea that the political is essentially a form of being-together or being-with-others and that this relationship is characterised by the plurality and equality of the people involved is similar to what Rancière defines as the domain of politics. I will use Rancière’s ideas of politics here to better analyze and assess Azoulay’s view of the political, and this will also help me later on to establish a connection between Derrida’s view of politics as ungrounded decision-making, the cinematic cut, hospitality, and Rancière’s and Azoulay’s notions of politics.

## **V. Politics and Aesthetics of Photography**

For Rancière, politics emerges in opposition to the order of the police (or, simply, the police), which is the system that distributes and legitimizes the social positions and roles that are assigned to individuals by the ruling power. The order of the police is a form of governance that follows the ‘logic of saturation’ in the sense that it counts and accounts for each and every part of the community and attributes them with a precise place and function. This means that insofar as the order of the police is a process that

decides how and which parts are acknowledged and visible as parts, and also whether the voice or speech of these parts would be heard as intelligible or not within a specific society, it is a process that determines what is perceptible. The police thus sets the boundaries of the field of possible experience, the field of our own sensibility. The police is ‘a distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*).’<sup>35</sup> Politics, for Rancière, emerges in opposition to the order of the police, to this partition of the sensible. Politics, however, is not a matter of the institutional creation of just social arrangements. Instead, politics is a matter of what people do and how they relate to one another, and in particular what they do collectively that contests the hierarchical order of the police. Rancière believes that to challenge and disrupt such a social order and its distribution of social parts and places is to act under the presupposition of one's own equality.

Here we can start to see a connection between Derrida's idea of politics as making ungrounded decisions and taking risks, and Rancière's thesis that politics entails a disruption of the social order. These connections will become more evident in subsequent chapters, but it is worth noting that the common ground for these two philosophers is that politics involves in one way or another an interruption.

Like Azoulay's understanding of the political that stems from her idea of the civil contract of photography, Rancière argues that politics is a process that involves action on the part of a group, rather than on an individual level. Through this process, those who have been made and/or presupposed unequal by a particular social order (as well as those in solidarity with them) act under the presupposition of equality; they enact their equality, and thereby disrupt the hierarchical order itself. In addition to this, both Azoulay and Rancière also agree that the political is not an attribute of the work of art (the photograph, in the specific case of Azoulay), but rather the political is the result of a particular form of social relations that are often enabled and originated by means of the work of art. However, Azoulay and Rancière are not in complete agreement as to what constitutes politics or the political as well as what the relationship between politics and the work of art and/or aesthetics consists of. Because Azoulay is trying to argue that the photographic event is a space of political relations not mediated by the nation-state and that the photographer does not have exclusive ownership over the photograph, she maintains that neither the aesthetic nor

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<sup>35</sup> Rancière, ‘Ten Theses on Politics,’ p. 36.

the political are properties of photographs. Her view is that all images (including photographs) are necessarily aesthetic insofar as the manner in which they are experienced is always by way of the senses. In this way, a photographic image belongs to the domain of the aesthetic not because the author of it so intended or because a critic has judged the photograph as such. Similarly, one photograph cannot be more aesthetic than another nor can it be considered as not aesthetic enough.

Underlying this view is Azoulay's rejection of the use of what she calls the 'third judgment of taste,' by which she means the most prevalent form of the judgment of taste within today's paradigm of art.<sup>36</sup> The third judgment of taste considers works of art such as photographs as either being political (and hence not aesthetic) or as being not political (and hence aesthetic). This judgment implies that the categories of the political and the aesthetic are seen as incompatible qualities of the work of art that can be absent or present in the work, and that it is the sole decision of the artist to make stylistic choices that result in her work becoming either aesthetic or political. Rejecting the use of the third judgment of taste and the dichotomy it entails allows Azoulay to maintain that all photographs -- insofar as they are objects of the senses -- belong to the aesthetic domain, and also that the political is not a trait that photographs have but a 'space of human relations exposed to each other in public.'<sup>37</sup> Here Azoulay draws on Arendt's view of what the political is. Arendt revisited the classical distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*.<sup>38</sup> For her, the political is part of our *vita activa*, involving action; as opposed to our *vita contemplativa*, which is that part of our lives we devote to contemplation, speculation and theorizing. The political for Arendt 'exists only insofar as people exist together in

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<sup>36</sup> Azoulay takes her idea of the judgment of taste from Kant. For him, aesthetic judgments that decide whether a work of art is beautiful or not are judgments of taste. Kant develops his theory of the judgment of taste in *The Critique of Judgment*, where he explains that the two fundamental conditions of the judgment 'this is beautiful' is that it is subjective and universal at the same time. Azoulay explains that the Kantian judgment of taste is the first form of this judgment and that the other two forms emerged during the twentieth century with the different developments in art practice, history and criticism. The second judgment of taste shifted from the question of beauty to the question of art. Thus this second judgment evaluates whether some work is or not art. Finally, Azoulay explains that the third judgment of taste emerged during the inter-war period and that it decides whether a work of art is aesthetic or political. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by Paul Guyer and trans. by P. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, pp.35-38.

<sup>37</sup> Azoulay, 'Getting Rid of the Distinction Between the Aesthetic and the Political,' in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 7-8 (2010), pp.239-262 (p.251).

<sup>38</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, intro. by Margaret Canovan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

public, and it ceases to exist when they part ways.<sup>39</sup> Adopting this notion of the political and denying that the photographer is the unique exclusive author of the photograph, serve as premises for the argument that Azoulay is trying to advance. Her claim is that, since the photograph also involves the subjects photographed and the spectator as active participants and not just the photographer's intervention, then the photograph creates a plural space of human relations. Therefore, the photograph configures a political space. The idea that wherever there is human encounter there is a political space is central because it is on the basis of this that Azoulay can claim that there are some collective practices that create relationships that are not directly mediated by the nation-state, and that photography is one of those practices.

It is precisely here where Azoulay's and Rancière's understandings of politics or the political differ. While for Azoulay every human encounter is political, for Rancière only those collective actions that suppose equality amongst the participants and that hence imply dissent and subversion of social hierarchies and the distribution of the sensible can be deemed as politics. Against this, Azoulay wishes to deny the idea that politics is an infrequent and unique event and that it does not necessarily imply rupture, resistance or contestation with the ruling order. She believes that by making all human interactions expressions of the political, the dichotomy introduced by the third judgment of taste between the aesthetic (the non-political) and the political (the non-aesthetic) will simply not arise; and hence practices like photography can be seen as essentially collective rather than as a product made by an individual (the artist, the photographer). For Azoulay, if all human exchanges are political, and if all photographic images involve interactions amongst humans and are necessarily aesthetic (because they are experienced through the senses), then all photographic images are political and aesthetic at the same time. Here aesthetics and politics are not mutually excluding domains. This last idea is something that Rancière also endorses, albeit for completely different reasons.

Rancière argues that aesthetics and politics are not opposing concepts but that rather they bear an important relationship to one another (while remaining two different domains). This is because he thinks that politics is a process of emancipation whereby a collective of people refuses to identify with the positions and functions that have been assigned to them within the order of the police; and instead this collective

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<sup>39</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.54.

assumes their equality with other groups positioned higher in this order. It is a process of challenging the distribution of the sensible and producing alternative ways of what can be seen, thought, experienced and said. In other words, politics involves a dissensus that not only calls into question the power arrangements and the supposed justice of a social order, but it also unveils the arbitrariness and contingency of the conceptual, epistemological and perceptual axioms that underpin such an order; the arbitrariness of the partition or distribution of the sensible. This is precisely where the aesthetic aspect of politics can be seen, for politics is the disruption of that partition that determines the limits of the sensible, the limits of all experience.

Inversely, aesthetics also has a political aspect for Rancière. Like politics, art can also be a dissensual activity; an activity that subverts forms of domination for it can also lead to a process of enactment of equality or of verification of equality. It is important to note that he distinguishes three different regimes of art or of the artistic practice, only referring to the third of these as aesthetics; the only regime associated with dissensual and subversive activity. The first regime of art is the *ethical* regime, in which a work of art is judged by its truth and by the (ethical) effects upon individuals, their behavior, and upon the community at large. The second is the *representative* or the *mimetic* regime in which works of art are destined to imitation. These are works of art that show an adequacy between expression and subject matter and most importantly between the way the artwork is created, its form and texture (*poiesis*), and the way it is perceived, enjoyed and understood (*aisthesis*). Finally, the *aesthetic* regime is that where the work of art breaks up the correspondence between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, ‘between the texture of the work and its efficacy.’<sup>40</sup> This rupture is the aesthetic break that disrupts the cause-effect link that the representative regime establishes between artistic creation and aesthetic pleasure. According to Rancière, while in the representative regime the adequacy between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* could only be appreciated by a select few with a refined sensibility and never by the unsophisticated masses, the aesthetic regime liberates the work of art from its supposed exclusive circle of addressees. In this regime art is open (in principle) to the gaze of everyone and anyone by way of the gap created between the particular creative artistic practice and the affects that this practice may produce. As Rancière argues, in the aesthetic regime the rules of mimesis are dismissed and the domain of

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<sup>40</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p.62.

affect and/or experience is cut from its conventional reference points. Thus art is freed from strict structures, and ‘what is offered to the free play of art is free appearance.’<sup>41</sup>

Corcoran offers a clarifying explanation of Rancière’s view as follows:

Since no pre-ordered, pre-given structures are available anymore that would define what can be said, in what form, in which language, using which images, and to whom, art in the ‘aesthetic regime’ consists of always limited attempts or propositions for a local restructuring of the field of experience.<sup>42</sup>

This free play of aestheticization unveils the arbitrariness of a particular distribution of the sensible by constructing alternative distributions that are not grounded upon the hierarchies implied in the ethical and the representational regimes of art. Indeed, the primacy of mimesis is replaced with that of expressiveness in the aesthetic regime, which means that instead of employing images and language of the world for merely representational and mimetic purposes, these images and language become ends in themselves, valuable for their own poetic potential. The aesthetic regime thus articulates a new partition of the sensible that rejects the hierarchy of the existing order and rather is founded on certain ‘equalities.’ For example, in this regime there is no particular subject to be represented, nor is there a fixed way of representing a subject. To illustrate this, Rancière recalls Gustave Flaubert who made it clear through his writing that style should not be determined by the represented subject, and that it is form and style that take primacy over mimetic representations and subject matters. Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* shows this insofar as it meticulously describes the life of a bourgeois woman who commits adultery; her affairs are taken here as aesthetically valuable as the life and adventures of any conventional heroic character.

In this manner, art in the aesthetic regime implies a dissensus. Just as politics, so aesthetics contests a particular distribution of the sensible. Nevertheless, the form of dissensus of politics and that of aesthetics differ from one another. The dissensual activity in politics produces a collective subject, a ‘we’ that disrupts the social order -- the distribution of the sensible -- by way of its emergence. This is what Rancière calls the ‘aesthetics of politics.’<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the form of dissensual activity of aesthetics does not create, as politics does, a new form of subjectivation or a collective voice for those who have been excluded from the social order. Rather, it articulates an alternative shared world of experience, and thereby it produces new

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Corcoran, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in Rancière, *Dissensus*, pp.1-24 (pp.17-18).

<sup>43</sup> Rancière, ‘The Paradoxes of Political Art,’ in *Dissensus*, pp.134-151 (p.141).

forms of individuality as well as new ways in which these forms relate to one another, and also new modes of perception. This is the ‘politics of aesthetics,’<sup>44</sup> which Rancière describes as follows:

The ‘politics of aesthetics’ [...] does not give a collective voice to the anonymous [those who have no part]. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of shared impersonal experience. In this way it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed that are characteristic of the ‘aesthetics of politics.’<sup>45</sup>

An important thing to underline here is that any effects that are produced by the politics of aesthetics are conducted ‘on the basis of an original effect that implies the suspension of any direct cause-effect relationship.’<sup>46</sup> What this means is that art in the aesthetic regime cannot foresee nor know what will result from the encounter between the work of art (and the artist’s intention) and the spectator’s reception and response to this. In other words, aestheticized art is unable to predict the outcome that its disruption of the ruling distribution of the sensible and its suspension of the hierarchical order will generate upon the forms of political subjectivation. And it is this unpredictability that makes art in the aesthetic regime an instantiation of politics. ‘Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations.’<sup>47</sup>

This last idea of Rancière that it is not possible to anticipate the meaning of the artwork or the effects that this work has is shared by Azoulay too. Her triadic model sustains the claim that the photograph is never a complete, fixed and finished product for its significance cannot be restricted to the intentions of the photographer. The photograph as such is only one utterance of the many possible utterances produced through the encounter of photographer, subjects photographed and spectators. The three parties play an active role in the constitution of the photograph as a political space, but none of them can act as the final arbitrator of the image. This idea of Azoulay of photography as an always-evolving practice and a continuously open space for dialogue is valuable, and I will explore in the next chapters how it can be transposed to documentaries. Likewise, Derrida’s understanding of politics as the domain of laws and decisions that cannot be grounded, that are always a bet in the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.142.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p.72.

sense that it is impossible to anticipate the outcome of such decisions, could be seen to mirror both Rancière's claim that the effect of an artwork cannot be forecast, and also Azoulay's idea that the artwork is always open to myriad readings and meanings. I will also return to this later on.

Despite the convergence between Azoulay's and Rancière's views with regards to politics and aesthetics, Azoulay also assumes a critical distance from Rancière. She affirms that the processes of subversion and emancipation that Rancière calls 'politics' do occur within the domain she considers as 'the political' but only when certain civil skills are put into action. Azoulay maintains that when the skills of the civil intention and the civil gaze are exercised, then political relations can truly contest a social order and its hierarchies. In the case of the event of photography, it is when the spectator employs her civil gaze to 'watch' the images and go beyond what the photograph frames, that the spectator shows interest, responsibility and partnership with the subjects portrayed and their situations. And it is only then that the social relationships emerging through the photograph can pose a challenge for the ruling social order.

A question surfaces here as to whether Azoulay's notion of the political is more adequate than that presented by Rancière; and if it really helps to understand the realms of the political, the aesthetic and the civil in a more useful way. I believe that Azoulay insists that all human interactions are political because she thinks there is no other way to avoid three theses she believes are mistaken. First, the thesis of the third judgment of taste that distinguishes the aesthetic and the political as mutually excluding attributes of the work of art. Second, the paradigm of art approach that denies all agency to spectators and the subjects photographed, and sees the photograph as a finished product owned by the artist in whose hands resides exclusively any possible political rupture with the hierarchies of the social order. And third, the idea that Azoulay attributes to critical theorists and that affirms that the political is a practice 'reserved for a select few'<sup>48</sup> who are outside politics and who relate to the regime in certain way.

For Rancière, unlike for Azoulay, not every human encounter is political. He claims that the 'essence of politics consists in disturbing the [social] arrangement by

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<sup>48</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.109.

supplementing it with a part of those without part.<sup>49</sup> Politics in this sense is a process and not an attribute or quality of a person, a work of art or an event. While Rancière's notion of politics does imply a unique event, he does not need to make use of the third judgment of taste and distinguish aesthetics and politics as conflicting domains. Contrary to what Azoulay thinks, when Rancière distinguishes politics from its other (the non-politics), he does not mention aesthetics. What opposes politics is the order of the police. Politics takes place when those who are denied a share in the communal distribution of the sensible and who are hence unaccounted for within the order of the police actively verify their equality to those who are above them in the social order. This does not mean that politics is an exclusive process accessible only to certain people (the unaccounted or excluded). On the contrary, for Rancière politics is precisely that collective process that affirms the equality of all individuals and that shows the arbitrariness and contingency of the social hierarchies and the partition of the sensible. In this way, Rancière's views allow for a politics that not only does not oppose aesthetics, but that is also based on the principle of universal equality without having to endorse Azoulay's idea that every human interaction is political.

In trying to avoid making the political an infrequent event, Azoulay proposes that the political is the everyday action of human beings. She is thereby led to affirm that an extra element is needed within all the political interactions for the latter to be able to raise a challenge to the social order and its hierarchies. This extra element or extra dimension of the political is what she calls the 'civil intention,' which is the civil skill that enables individuals to form relationships with others based on partnership, responsibility and solidarity; relationships that are neither sanctioned nor restricted by national borders, social class or professional roles. In the case of the event of photography, the civil skill or intention that spectators put into action is that of 'watching' the photograph and seeing the event portrayed as occurring in the present. Only in this way can the photographic encounter create a space of political relationships that challenge the hierarchies of the social order.

Does Azoulay's claim that only when the civil gaze and civil intention are involved it is possible to bring up a challenge to the social order provide a more useful or a clearer understanding of the political than that of Rancière? It is my view that Azoulay thesis of the political is manifested in every human interaction ends up

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<sup>49</sup> Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics,' p.36.

making this domain too broad. In her attempt to include photography as a space where political relationships emerge and where (against what the canon of art claims) spectators and subjects represented play an active role, she extends the political to such an extent that she needs to add the dimension of the civil so as to explain the possibility of political relationships that disrupt the hierarchies of the ruling social regime. Even though she emphasizes that the civil skills always co-exist with the other two dimensions of the political life or the ‘life of action’ (namely, the dimension of survival, orientation and experience of the world; and the dimension of professional expertise), she needs to underline the civil skills as unique and necessary to ensure forms of human interaction that are subversive of the ruling order. I believe that Azoulay is correct in pointing out the relevance of the civil skills and intention, understood in terms of the dimension through which individuals show concern, responsibility and partnership for one another and for the world they share. But her position seems to imply that the civil is not always guaranteed. This is evidenced when she says that it is the photograph that allows the spectator to realize the civil potential and activate the civil gaze, which refuses to consider the photograph as the finished product of the photographer, and thus ‘resists the attempts of others to erase this space of plurality’<sup>50</sup> created through the event of photography. If the civil intention and gaze are a potential, then the possibility of relationships that challenge the ruling order becomes exceptional in the exact same way that (according to Azoulay) Rancière’s notion of politics is infrequent and unique. In this way, despite what she claims, Azoulay’s understanding of the political does not appear to be radically different from that of Rancière. In fact, his view might be clearer than that of Azoulay for he does not need to single out the civil dimension within politics (for him, these two are completely merged). Furthermore, as I will explain in Chapter 3, he is able to offer an explanation of the active role of spectators and the (political) subversiveness of the work of art without having to extend the political to all type of human exchanges.

I will return to contrast Azoulay’s and Rancière’s views further on in this thesis. In particular, I will draw on Rancière’s ideas of the relationship between spectators and artist in order to argue that Azoulay’s model of photography can be transposed to documentary films about migration. But for now, I will examine the

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<sup>50</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.72.

concept of citizenship that is implied by Azoulay's thesis of the civil contract of photography. This analysis will allow me to bridge Azoulay's ideas of politics and citizenship with Derrida's conception of hospitality.

## **VI. Rehabilitating Citizenship?**

According to Azoulay, what follows from her triadic model of photography is that whenever citizenship has been in one way or another violated or injured, there is the possibility of rectifying such injustices through photography. Photography offers an arena for political (and civil) action, and hence for a new understanding of the concept of citizenship in terms of a practice of solidarity and duty towards others, rather than in terms of a status, a membership or a possession that individuals are endowed with in a certain nation-state. She states that:

The civil contract of photography assumes that, at least in principle, the users of photography possess a certain power to suspend the gesture of the sovereign power which seeks to totally dominate the relations between them as governed -- governed into citizens and noncitizens, thus making disappear the violation of citizenship. This is an attempt to rethink the political space of governed populations and to reformulate the boundaries of citizenship as distinct from the nation and the market whose dual rationale constantly threatens to subjugate it.<sup>51</sup>

The conceptualization of citizenship that therefore emerges from the thesis of the civil contract of photography is one that entails the exercise of certain civil skills that serve to negotiate with the sovereign power. At the same time, the civil contract of photography implies that the citizen has the political obligation to give expression to grievances on behalf of those whose rights have been violated and those whose living conditions are on the verge of catastrophe. Here, citizenship means adopting an active political stance to defend the governed (that is, both the citizens and non-citizens of a nation-state) against the power of the sovereign state. The domain of the political is, in this sense, understood in terms of the relationships between the governed, 'whose political duty is first and foremost or at least also toward one another, rather than toward the ruling power.'<sup>52</sup>

Can a conceptualization of citizenship such as the one Azoulay defends really make sense outside of the boundaries of the nation-state? As she explains, from its

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<sup>51</sup> Azoulay, 'Ariella Azoulay on her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*,' in *Rorotoko* (January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009),

<[http://rorotoko.com/interview/20090123\\_azoulay\\_ariella\\_book\\_civil\\_contract\\_photography/?page=4](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20090123_azoulay_ariella_book_civil_contract_photography/?page=4)> [accessed February 10<sup>th</sup> 2012].

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

very inception the modern notion of citizenship was inextricably linked to the nation-state insofar as it was defined in terms of the ways in which individuals are related to the sovereign power. Thus understood, citizenship necessarily produces exclusions for it implies a distinction between citizens and non-citizens. Dimitris Papadopoulos has put this idea very clearly by way of a thought experiment.<sup>53</sup> He proposes to imagine a nation-state that grants citizenship to everybody without restrictions or conditions. The result is that in such a state citizenship becomes, useless since it no longer distinguishes individuals who belong to the nation as citizens from those who are not. Papadopoulos's point is that citizenship inevitably implies the production of exclusion -- and hence of irregularities; and that the more inclusive citizenship is, the less useful as a distinguishing tool it gets. This means that if citizenship is conceived as legitimately belonging to a nation-state, then from the outset it can never be all-inclusive.

Concerned with the everyday and normalised -- and therefore often invisible -- violence to which Palestinians are subjected, and in the hope of offering an alternative conceptualization of citizenship that does not exclude anyone, Azoulay argues for a notion of citizenship that is not sanctioned by the nation-state but that functions as a tool that citizens employ to negotiate with the sovereign power. Her proposal thus needs to be understood as a de-nationalised and de-territorialised notion of citizenship that is, for this reason, able to include everyone as active members in a political community. Indeed, she asserts that for the conceptualization of citizenship to be restored today it is a necessary condition that it be based on the 'principle that everyone everywhere is entitled to citizenship in the state in which he or she lives.'<sup>54</sup> To the extent that Azoulay's notion of citizenship is not dependent on the way in which individuals relate to a nation-state but rather on the way they relate to one another, then citizenship sheds its appearance as a fixed status bestowed by the state and instead becomes a set of civil duties towards others and civil skills that everyone can exercise. Citizenship thus establishes a plane of horizontal political (and ethical) relations among equals.

One might still object here that by detaching citizenship from the nation-state, Azoulay is presenting a perspective on certain political relations that emerge through

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<sup>53</sup> Papadopoulos, 'The Autonomy of Migration,' Lecture given at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies, Seminar Series (London, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.82.

different practices today, such as photography, but that these are not equivalent to citizenship. The criticism would be that Azoulay is not really providing a notion of citizenship but something altogether different. A possible response to this would be to emphasize that precisely because she is seeking to find an alternative notion of citizenship that does not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, and that grants political agency to those who are either stateless or with an impaired citizenship, she needs to articulate the notion of citizenship outside of the framework of the nation-state. Her proposal does entail a different way of thinking both about politics and citizenship. The virtue of this proposal is twofold for, firstly, it constitutes an inclusive notion of citizenship; and secondly, it allows rethinking politics as a sphere of relations among individuals, rather than between individuals and the sovereign power.

Nonetheless, a further objection would be that Azoulay's idea to make citizenship independent of the nation-state and politics a domain of relations among equals is a romanticised conceptualization of citizenship and politics, a utopian proposal that fails to have any possible application. The response here would be that Azoulay tries to avoid speaking about an ideal political community, a political community to come, by invoking actual practices that allow for the materialization of political relationships -- and hence political communities -- both inside and outside national borders. For her, photography is one of those practices. Equally, her view that any human interaction is political allows her to eschew a distinction between the political and the non-political, and therefore avoiding the distinction between an ideal political community and one that is not ideal.

However, the critic might still insist that insofar as those political relations remain beyond the regulation of the sovereign power, then they can have no bearing on the actual world. If as Azoulay admits, through the civil contract of photography a stateless person or one with an impaired citizenship will not in fact be able to modify his or her conditions, then a citizenship beyond the framework of the nation-state seems to be an abstract and unrealizable ideal. In the hope of addressing this last objection, Azoulay asserts that her proposal does empower non-citizens and people with a damaged citizenship to direct claims to both spectator and photographer, and thereby eventually also to the sovereign power. It is by way of the collective articulation of civil grievances of non-citizens and/or impaired ones, that the latter are actually able to negotiate with the sovereign. Yet, one thing that seems

counterintuitive in Azoulay's conceptualization of citizenship is the fact that she presents it as a notion that is not regulated by the sovereign nation-state, and nonetheless as a notion that simultaneously operates as a protective shield and tool to negotiate with the sovereign power. One thus wonders, why does Azoulay insist on getting rid entirely of the sovereign power (within the citizenry of photography) and yet she still wants to maintain the capacity to negotiate with it?

Another point that is questionable in Azoulay's account of the citizenship of photography is the idea that anyone who comes into contact with the practice of photography is a citizen in the citizenry of photography. Her claim that photography is, in principle, 'accessible to all, [and that therefore it] bestows universal citizenship on a new citizenry whose citizens produce, distribute and look at images'<sup>55</sup> is also problematic because it is not clear that everyone anywhere can enjoy access to photography; which means that becoming a citizen of photography is not really open to everybody. The question of how images are distributed, exhibited, accessed and appropriated today is something that Azoulay does not seem to consider at length. Even though the Internet has opened up the possibility for the immediate worldwide circulation of images and hence for the wide appropriation of them, this does not mean that everyone has equal access to these images. Taking issue with the question of access is something that Azoulay would need to do. For if she wants to establish a borderless citizenry, one that is truly de-territorialised, then the possibility of becoming a citizen of photography would have to really be open to everyone and not restricted only to those who can come into contact with photography.<sup>56</sup>

In view of the mentioned problems, in the following paragraphs I will argue that Azoulay's proposal needs to be refined and supplemented by drawing on Derrida's discussion of hospitality and the relation between this latter concept and the domains of ethics and politics, which I have already presented in Chapter 1. I will claim that Azoulay's understanding of the concept of citizenship -- as defined in terms of a practice of partnership and solidarity among individuals -- is in line with Derrida's idea that ethics and politics are two opposing spheres that are inextricably linked. At the same time however, if Azoulay's notion of citizenship as both a set of skills to negotiate with the sovereign and as a practice based on civil responsibility is

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.134.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the circulation of images today, see Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' in Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, intro. by Franco Berardi (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 31-45.

to be meaningful and effective, it should not do away with the national sovereign altogether. Instead, her notion of citizenship can only be possible if it is based on an idea of politics that is guided by the principle of hospitality.

To recapitulate what I mentioned in the previous chapter, Derrida defines hospitality as an aporetic concept, for it involves an insoluble tension between two opposing yet inseparable and coexistent figures that this concept takes. Absolute or unconditional hospitality demands that we receive the foreigner without imposing any restrictions and conditions. Conditional hospitality, on the other hand, establishes certain requirements and limitations to the welcoming of the other. According to Derrida, absolute hospitality is impossible because it is a formal ‘promise’ that lacks content, and hence it can never be actualized in laws. Thus, the conditional laws of hospitality are called forth in the light of the impossibility of this promise. Because these conditional laws necessarily commit violence by selecting and discriminating who is to be welcome, these laws are in constant need of improvement where they have failed to meet the demands of absolute hospitality.

These two figures of hospitality express the relation existing between ethics and politics, which in turn parallels the relation between justice and law (*droit*). While the law is associated with legitimacy or legality, that which is always ‘calculable, a system of regulated and coded prescriptions; [justice, by contrast is] infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry.’<sup>57</sup> Justice exceeds the law; and the law is ‘haunted’ by the prospect of a justice that it will never entirely accomplish. Yet the impossibility of justice, as much as that of unconditional hospitality, ‘far from paralyzing, sets in motion a new thinking of the possible.’<sup>58</sup> The impossibility of pure unconditional hospitality and of pure justice does not provoke the idealization of the unachievable; rather, it prompts us to attempt to make possible the impossible, and so opens up possibilities of transformation. What this means is that, for Derrida, unconditional and conditional, ethics and politics are in a constant and inevitable play of negotiation. In the absence of ideal hospitality, politics needs to constantly look for less bad laws, laws that commit less violence against the absolute other.

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”,’ in Cornell, D., Rosenfeld, M. and Carlson, D. G. (eds), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, trans. by Mary Quaintance (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.3-67 (p.22).

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, ‘As If It Were Possible, “Within Such Limits”,’ p.91.

Derrida proposes adopting a politics that aims to legislate (conditional laws of hospitality) in the name of the unconditional, a politics that inevitably imposes conditions but that admits these conditions can always be perfected. This implies a notion of politics that strives to remain open to the arrival of the other and that is critic of the laws of hospitality that depend on citizenship or on agreements between nation-states. Derrida's views about hospitality and the relationship between ethics and politics seem also to suggest an alternative approach to citizenship. As he says, today we need to re-think 'what is "political" in citizenship, [...] what it means to belong to a nation or a state.'<sup>59</sup> The form of citizenship that Derrida appears to propose involves, above all, relationships that, instead of being determined solely by the sovereign power, are based on political and ethical responsibility among individuals. In other words, Derrida seems to argue for a notion of citizenship that has as its core the duty of forming 'hospitable' relations with other individuals regardless of their status within a nation-state. This could be called, therefore, a *hospitable citizenship*. And the concrete application of this hospitable citizenship is our moral and civic duty to struggle to transform the conditional laws of hospitality so that they are less violent and avoid closing off the arrival of the absolute other.

Returning now to Azoulay's conceptualization of citizenship derived from her triadic model of photography, we can see that the 'hospitable' citizenship that appears to follow from Derrida's remarks about hospitality is similar to the one that she defends. Like Azoulay, Derrida seems to maintain a notion of citizenship that entails the formation of (hospitable) relationships not directly sanctioned by the nation-state for he proposes a form of political and ethical commitment towards other individuals independently of what their actual citizenship status is within certain nation-state. Also like Azoulay, Derrida affirms that a conceptualization of citizenship that is adequate to today's most pressing matters (for instance, the large number of people suffering inequality, repression and rights deprivation) should necessarily involve an active struggle, an active demand from the state to find 'the best "legislative" transaction, the best "juridical" conditions,'<sup>60</sup> as well as a demand for the actual implementation of such improved laws. All in all, Derrida and Azoulay seem to coincide in their views pertaining to how the task and the domain of politics should be understood today. They both consider that political relationships can be created

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<sup>59</sup> Derrida, 'Not Utopia, the Im-possible,' p.132.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.131.

without the mediation of the state through, for instance, nongovernmental organisations and other practices like that of photography. Crucially, they agree that the sign of today's political relations is (or should be) that of solidarity across national borders and the struggle for equality. This is not a solidarity out of pity, mercy or empathy, but one out of a genuine ethical and political commitment towards others irrespective of their citizenship status. As Azoulay explains, what motivates these ethico-political relations is the double realization of the fact that the violations inflicted on others mean that not all the people governed (citizens and non-citizens) are equally governed, and of the fact that so long as citizens are governed alongside others who are not governed as equals, then citizens themselves can never be governed equally. Striving for the improvement of laws as the way to counter the violence endured by stateless persons and those with a flawed citizenship stems from the conviction that, insofar as nothing is done towards modifying the unequal treatment and government of all individuals, then citizens can never be really equal.

Unlike Azoulay, however, Derrida does not propose a citizenship that entirely dispenses with the sovereign state. Nor does his notion of citizenship imply that everyone can become a citizen, thereby flattening and overlooking power relations that nevertheless still inevitably exist. There is a horizontal non-hierarchical way of relating to others in Derrida's account of hospitality and in the notion of citizenship that stems from this account to the extent that we all have an ethico-political duty towards the other, and especially towards those who are under the constant threat of suffering inequalities and unjust treatment. According to him, the world as it is now *does* require that we re-think politics outside of the restrictive framework of national borders, and that we strive for the creation of laws of conditional hospitality that best respect the principle of absolute hospitality. Yet, Derrida does not think that with this ethico-political duty we can do away entirely with the sovereign power and become equal members of a *citizenry* beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. In fact, he warns us of the danger of a complete effacement of the state or a too straightforward hostility towards sovereignty:

I think on the one hand you have to be active against what you call 'the passing away of the state' (the state can still, sometimes, set limits to private forces of appropriation, concentrations of economic powers, and it can restrain a violent depoliticization occurring in the name of the 'market'). But also, on the other hand, you have to resist the state where it is too often soldered to the nationalism of the nation-state or the representation of socio-economic hegemonies. Every time you must analyse, and invent a new rule: in one case you

should challenge the state, in another consolidate it. *Politics is not coextensive with states* [...]. The necessary repoliticization must not be in the service of a new cult of the state. We have to bring about new dissociations and accept complex and differentiated practices.<sup>61</sup>

Thus it appears that where Azoulay's view of political relations differs from that of Derrida is in her notion that through the photographic act everyone can become a 'citizen' in the citizenry of photography, and that the 'injured citizenship' of those who suffer the deprivation or the violation of their rights can be 'restored' by way of the civil contract of photography. These ideas are problematic because they entail the creation of an abstract, apparently utopian, sphere of political relations that operates independently of the actual sovereign state yet pretends to negotiate with it and produce changes in the political sphere governed by the state. If the political relations emanating from the civil contract of photography are to effectively empower the stateless, the noncitizens and/or those with a 'damaged' citizenship, then Azoulay needs to acknowledge that those relationships cannot entirely disregard the sovereign nation-state. Furthermore, if her argument is that the two spheres of political relations -- the one governed by the sovereign state and the one independent of it -- can coexist, then her model would imply that there are two types of citizenship: the one granted by the nation-state, and the one not sanctioned by it and hence accessible to everyone. Yet again, claiming that there are two sorts of citizenship seems at least awkward, if not flawed.

Additionally, Azoulay's triadic model also appears to assume that just by the act of coming into contact with a photograph of horror, the viewer immediately takes up her civic duty to 'watch' a photograph and to reconstitute it in terms of grievances for those injured. But there is no guarantee that this is the case; nothing ensures that spectators will indeed assume responsibility for the meaning of the photograph and what it depicts. Again, here the problem with Azoulay is that she holds a utopian view of both the citizenry of photography and the spectators. For her, the spectator who 'watches' photographs of the verge of catastrophe and hence takes a responsible stance towards those images and what they portray is an ideal, a universal spectator. That is, the viewer is a 'moral addressee' that is able to overcome 'the narrow considerations of time and place or local interests. [And in this sense her existence] is a necessary logical postulate, [...] a limit concept embodying the ethics of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pp.127-128. [My emphasis].

spectator.<sup>62</sup> Without this concept of an ideal ‘true’ spectator, the consent given by the citizenry of photography cannot be explained.

Ultimately, I believe, it is the terminology she employs that makes her proposal appear difficult to grasp and self-defeating. For instance, using the terms ‘impaired’ or ‘damaged’ citizenship suggests there is one form of citizenship that is pure or complete or undamaged. But it is problematic to affirm that there is a ‘perfect’ citizenship for, what could that be? If the whole, perfect, citizen is the one who has always all his rights respected and one who can always voice grievances when either himself or others have suffered unacceptable injuries, then it would seem that such a citizen is also an ideal construction. This terminology equally suggests that citizenship can be somehow fully repaired. What would it mean to have a ‘repaired’ citizenship? Would a repaired citizenship amount to a whole, untainted or pure citizenship? Do we all not, in one way or another, have a failed or an impaired citizenship? Furthermore, such terminology seems misleading, for it implies a distinction between those with complete or undamaged status and those with an impaired one. This distinction is self-defeating for -- or at least contradictory to -- Azoulay’s argument as she is thereby reinforcing a distinction that she had rejected from the traditional understanding of citizenship. The contradiction seems to stem again from the fact that she wishes to dispense with the sovereign power, yet her model entails addressing claims towards and negotiating with the nation-state.

In order to maintain and refine what is valuable in Azoulay’s insight about citizenship as a set of civic skills and duties towards other individuals, and her idea that political relationships can emerge beyond the framework of the nation-state, it is necessary to turn to Derrida’s thesis about hospitality and the inextricable link between ethics and politics. If the political relationships not mediated by the state, which Azoulay thinks are created through the photographic event, are understood as hospitable relations -- that is, ethico-political relations based on partnership and responsibility -- between individuals rather than between citizens of some idealized state-independent citizenry, then her thesis of the practice of photography as an alternative space for politics becomes more plausible. As Derrida affirms, politics is neither identical with nor restricted to the framework of the state, but there is no need to postulate platonic citizenries. Instead, here and now the concept and practice of

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<sup>62</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.390.

citizenship needs to be broadened, to encompass more than a membership or a status granting rights and duties within a nation-state. Citizenship has to involve a constant exercise of hospitality towards others, and particularly towards the stateless and those with an impaired citizenship. Indeed, the experience of refugees, undocumented persons, deportees, and so on calls today for ‘another kind or practical response,’<sup>63</sup> and thus for wider notions of politics and citizenship. The essential trait of citizenship now has to consist of striving ‘to get the laws of hospitality written into actual law.’<sup>64</sup> Since the principle of absolute hospitality can never be captured entirely by the laws of conditional hospitality, then the trait of citizenship needs to be that of doing the impossible: struggling to ‘enjoin a negotiation with the non-negotiable so as to find the “better” or the least bad [laws].’<sup>65</sup>

An understanding of citizenship as an exercise in hospitality allows for the actualization of a ‘shared’ sovereignty understood as the active participation of citizens who put the state under strict scrutiny in order to ensure that better laws are continuously being legislated and enforced. As Derrida says, there is no hospitality if there is not a sovereign or host of a household; and there cannot be a host if there is no guest. So it is through the guest, the other, the foreigner, that the host can really become a host. In a similar fashion, citizens can only exercise their citizenship completely by fulfilling their duty of hospitality, by demanding better laws for the reception of foreigners and the way these laws are implemented. Only then can citizenship as an exercise of hospitality give rise to a shared sovereignty.

If Azoulay’s conceptualization of citizenship is understood in terms of Derrida’s remarks on ethics and politics of hospitality, then her identification of the photographic act as an alternative space for political relations becomes clearer and plausible since there is no need to get rid of the sovereign altogether. In this way, a shared sovereignty and a hospitable citizenship in the event of photography mean that spectators activate their civil intention and skills, and become active participants in the political space created through the photograph. Spectators thus become responsible for articulating and reconstructing the meaning of images of people deprived of rights in terms of demands for better laws. This active participation of spectators ensures the ethico-political relationships emerging between the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.132.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p.112.

photographer, the spectators and the photographed persons are not only relationships based on equality, partnership and solidarity but also relationships that can therefore ‘suspend disciplinary, sectarian or sovereign interests and [...] oppose the authority of anyone seeking to impose them.’<sup>66</sup> These ethico-political relationships that emerge through the photographic event are thus deterritorialised, they are not directly regulated by the nation-state and have a subversive character.

## **VII. Final Remarks**

I have dedicated this chapter to examining Azoulay’s model of photography, which proposes understanding the latter as a practice that involves the relationship between three parties: photographer, photographed persons and (actual and/or potential) spectators. Through the event of photography these three parties can form political relationships that are not mediated by the nation-state and are independent of the citizenship status of the participants. Instead, these relationships are based on solidarity and partnership, and they exist beyond the territorial demarcations of geopolitical borders. Thus these political relationships question and resist the sovereign powers that oppose them and often threaten to erode them.

As I argued -- following Derrida -- in Chapter 1, today there is a need to understand politics and the political in ways that do not reduce this domain to the nation-state. The large number of displaced and stateless people, as well as those who endure a constant deprivation of their rights attest to the urgency of thinking forms of political relationships that are neither dependent on having a citizenship status nor restricted to the regulations imposed by national borders. Azoulay presents a view of photography that does precisely this. Her triadic model is an alternative theory of photography to the long established models that see photography only in terms of power relations between the represented subjects and those with the power to represent or in terms that restrict the role of spectators to mere passive voyeurism. But perhaps most importantly, Azoulay’s theory of photography makes a contribution to the area of political philosophy by articulating politics as human encounters and relations, and by making the photographic event as a space that gives rise to such interactions without the complete subordination to the sovereign sanction. In other words, Azoulay’s approach to photography is useful because it allows thinking this visual medium beyond the perspective of its aesthetic value, and instead it allows

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<sup>66</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.106.

considering this medium in connection to wider questions, such as what politics is, how political relations can be created and what constitutes (or should constitute) the practice of citizenship today. I believe that Azoulay's model can be transposed to other visual media and, in particular, to documentary films about migration and border-crossings. In the next chapter, I will examine the possibility of this transposition.

I have considered Azoulay's proposal of the civil contract of photography and have assessed the understanding of politics and of citizenship that derive from this contract. I have compared her conceptualization of the political to that of Rancière, and I have concluded that they both see politics as a subversive practice realized only in collectivity, and they also think that aesthetics and politics are not two mutually excluding domains. However, my belief is that Rancière's notion of politics as a collective process of dissent and emancipation that presupposes the equality of all people and therefore challenges the social order (the distribution of the sensible) is clearer than that of Azoulay's. I will return to compare Rancière's and Azoulay's views on politics in the next chapter, and I will draw on his notion of the relation between spectator and artist in my consideration of the transposition of Azoulay's model of photography to documentaries. The consideration of the characteristics of documentary form in the next chapter, and specifically the notion of cinematic cut, will also allow me to establish a link between Rancière's understanding of politics as disruption and redistribution of the places and roles within the social order, and Derrida's view of politics as ungrounded decision-making.

I have claimed that the political relationships that give rise to what Azoulay calls the citizenry of photography should be understood as relationships of hospitality as defined by Derrida. Azoulay thinks that citizenship, rather than a membership or a status granted by the nation-state, is a practice whereby people relate to others in terms of partnership and solidarity regardless of what their actual citizenship status is. This notion of citizenship coincides with Derrida's proposal of a politics (and an ethics) of hospitality, a politics that seeks to legislate less bad laws for the reception of foreigners, each time striving to follow the principle of absolute hospitality, receiving others unconditionally despite their citizenship. That is a politics that fosters forms of political relationships based on responsibility, solidarity and equality beyond the perimeters of geo-political borders.

The next chapter will deal with the consideration of extending Azoulay's triadic model of photography to documentary films as well as to situations different to her specific focus on the Israeli occupation of Palestine, which frames and defines her thesis of citizenship. I will suggest that documentary films have the potential to constitute spaces for ethico-political relationships (relationships of hospitality), and that therefore the form of documentary can be politically subversive and call into question cultural, social and political hierarchies.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Art(ifice) of Documentary as a Hospitable Space

#### I.

In the last chapter I introduced and analysed Azoulay's triadic model of photography. Her thesis of the political relationships that emerge through the photographic event provides a valuable contribution to both the theory of photography and political philosophy. Her theoretical model grants an active role to the spectator as well as to the photographed person. Thus, this model implies that the photograph is not a finished product realised by the photographer, but the product of a collective and upon which no one can claim exclusive ownership. By this, Azoulay means that the photograph never has a fixed meaning; its meaning is open since it is articulated differently each time with each photographic encounter between spectator, photographed subject and photographer. Photography is here understood as a set of practices, always evolving, always changing, and always generating new encounters and meanings.

In this way, the triadic model of photography offers a counter theory to that of the social power relationships model by challenging the supposed sole agency, the hierarchy and the exclusive representational and creative powers of the photographer. At the same time, this model also offers an approach to photography that goes beyond the question of representation. Azoulay's theory of photography yields an alternative understanding of politics and of the practice of citizenship. Here the photographic event gives rise to political relationships between the three parties -- the photographer, the portrayed subject and the spectator -- that are not directly sanctioned by the sovereign power. These political relationships beyond the framework of the nation-state are hence deterritorialised, that is, they are not confined to, nor are they determined by geo-political borders. The concept of citizenship that Azoulay wishes to defend with her thesis of the political space of photography (the civil contract of photography) is that of a practice -- instead of a membership granting rights and duties within a nation-state -- based on solidarity and partnership towards other persons regardless of what their official citizenship status is. I maintained that these political relationships created through photography should be understood as relationships of hospitality, as Derrida conceived of this term. Insofar as these

relationships are based on the principle that we ought to receive and be ethically and politically responsible for others irrespective of what their citizenship might be, these are ethico-political relationships or relationships of hospitality.

In this chapter, I will ask whether it is possible to extrapolate Azoulay's model of photography to documentary cinema. My aim here will be to demonstrate how, once her triadic theory of the event of photography has been appropriately reworked, it might then be transposed to the documentary form. Equally, Azoulay's model has to be adjusted for it to be extrapolated both to documentary films and to historical contexts beyond that of Palestine. This is precisely one of the main points of this chapter. I will argue that this double extrapolation is possible provided that there is an acknowledgement that photography and film are two different forms of visual media. Cinema, and in particular documentary film, can also constitute a space of ethico-political relationships that are not entirely mediated by the nation-state and that are based on responsibility, solidarity and partnership towards others. Nevertheless, the fact that cinema is composed of moving images -- and hence constitutes a temporal visual medium -- and that these images are coupled with sound, necessarily affects the form in which political relationships can emerge through film and how they function.

In order to consider how particular features of documentary films determine the ethical and political relationships that could potentially arise through this medium -- as opposed to those created through photography, I will give an overview of how scholars writing about the documentary form tend to describe this visual medium. Drawing on the work of Trinh, Renov and Steyerl I will argue that the dichotomy between fact-based objectivity and fictive interpretation, between naturalness and artifice, between truth and pleasure (which has been frequently employed to explain the distinction between non-fictional and fictional cinema) is a false dichotomy. The idea that capturing raw facts and ensuring pure objectivity are ever achievable through a representational practice such as filmmaking and/or photography is misguided. The products of these two practices are always constructions and, as such, they cannot ever offer raw facts. What is more, the idea of the possibility of capturing raw facts is also a very limited way of understanding representation that fails to see the ethical and political value of 'constructed' scenes and narratives.

I present and contrast two taxonomies of the documentary form -- one proposed by Nichols, the other by Renov -- because I consider them to be heuristically valuable in understanding why any strict typology of this film form is

deemed to fail; and also in showing the multiple modalities that documentaries can adopt according to the context of their creation and the desire/incentive driving the documentarist. Finally, comparing these two categorisations will allow me to make the point further on in this chapter that photography and documentary show similarities and differences, and that the latter determine the manner in which each of these two visual media can function as spaces for political relationships not mediated by the nation-state.

Another aim of this chapter is to argue that it is by means of the form and the stylistic techniques of the documentary film (that is, the manner in which its content is organised) rather than its discursive and ideological content that spectators are invited to become engaged with the documentary and eventually to read it as a claim for rights for the represented subjects. I side with Steyerl and Trinh to put forward the thesis that it is through the *montage* alongside the sound effects (the form of the film), that the documentary allows the spectator to actively partake in the articulation of the meaning of the film. And therefore documentary can be considered a medium with the potential to create political relations. As Rancière would say, it is when the hierarchical distinction between spectator and filmmaker is blurred; when they both actively create a ‘new fiction’ in conjunction with images of the filmed subjects, that there is a challenge to the current social order or ‘partition of the sensible.’ Their roles as (passive) spectator and (active) filmmaker are thus eroded, and an alternative distribution of the places and roles within the social order surfaces.

Lastly, I will argue that since movement, and hence time, along with the sound effects are the core elements distinguishing cinematic images from photographic ones, then the potential political (and ethical) relationships emerging from documentary films ought to differ from the political relationships that can be formed through photography. Documentary, like photography, can be a space for relationships of hospitality even while these two spaces have their own specific features that need to be acknowledged.

## **II. The Documentary. An Impossible Definition?**

From its very inception the word ‘documentary,’ when employed to refer to a certain kind of films, has always evoked divergent understandings and, very often, contradictory definitions. Indeed several scholars, among them Bill Nichols and

David Saunders,<sup>1</sup> have attempted to find a single all-encompassing characterization for documentary films only to find that it is a form of filmmaking that refuses to be given any clear-cut definition.

Documentary film production has been ‘haunted’ by its etymological shadow. To document is to record or gather evidence or proof; and it comes from the Latin words ‘*documentum*’ and ‘*docere*,’ which mean ‘lesson’ and ‘to teach’ respectively. There is thus a tension at the core of documentary practice. On the one hand, there is an attempt to capture the real, to serve as a register of facts as they occur, without mediation. On the other hand, there is the intention of producing more than a mere mimetic reproduction of an event or situation, the intention of providing an approach to, an angle or a comment on the facts recorded. It is this conflict between authenticity and artifice, fact and fictional construct, that defines the documentary form. As Olivier Lugon claims, the documentary project is ‘beyond art, yet very much a part of it.’<sup>2</sup>

This inexorable paradox cannot be reconciled, and yet it is the determining feature of documentary, and it is what has allowed the continuous development and reinvention of this form of filmmaking. In trying to present things as they are in the actual world and yet claiming a bearing on this creative representation of actuality,<sup>3</sup> documentarists have been involved in a constant exploration of new techniques and codes. Throughout the development of the documentary form, filmmakers have opted to test out different forms of expression by including techniques and stylistic devices from other visual practices such as visual anthropology, newsreels, but also fictional cinema genres like the *avant-garde* as well as ‘fictive’ strategies including dramatized narration, character construction, manipulation and exaggeration of camera angles and distance, and musical scores. Thus, for instance, films produced by artists of the so-called ‘direct cinema’ movement (which rose in America in the 1960s) sought to efface mediation and achieve transparency as much as possible by minimizing the interference of the filmmaker and the camera with the subject filmed. Unobtrusive

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<sup>1</sup> See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*; Saunders, *Documentary* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Lind and Steyerl (eds), *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art #1* (Berlin and Annandale-on-Hudson: Sternberg Press and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2008); and Renov (ed), *Theorizing Documentary*.

<sup>2</sup> Lugon, ‘“Documentary”: Authority and Ambiguities,’ in Lind and Steyerl (eds), *The Greenroom*, pp.28-37 (p.35).

<sup>3</sup> John Grierson, British theoretician and founder of the ‘Documentary Film Movement,’ first coined the term ‘documentary’ and described it as ‘the creative treatment of actuality.’ See Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics,’ p.33.

camera work -- the so-called ‘fly-on-the-wall’ technique, synchronized sound, and a minimal use of narration and explanatory titling are some of the distinctive techniques employed by direct cinema. In opposition to the purely observational mode of direct cinema, the French school known as *cinéma vérité*, attempted to overtly acknowledge the effect that the camera and the filmmaker have upon the situation and subjects filmed by rendering visible and audible their presence in the ‘pro-filmic’ space. In this way, not only etymologically but also historically, the tension between capturing the real and affirming authorship has pervaded and still pervades documentary practice.

In view of this apparently paradoxical nature and the resulting ever-evolving documentary methods, it would seem that only a negative and very broad definition of this form could be possible. Documentary, it is generally agreed,<sup>4</sup> is a non-fictional form of filmmaking. In contrast to fictional cinema, documentaries do not re-present a world entirely imagined by the filmmaker; documentary films do not re-present imaginary places, events or beings. Instead, this form of filmmaking provides representations of certain aspects of the actual world in which we live. Beyond this basic description in terms of what documentaries are not, a myriad of viewpoints have emerged as to how actuality is to be re-presented, how the material is to be collected, assembled and employed, and which facts are worth recording.

If documentary is never entirely subdued to ‘naked’ actuality, if it is never a mere accumulation of ‘raw’ facts but a particular construction or treatment of the real, then it is a form of filmmaking that not only aims to serve recording and preserving purposes, but also strives to provide some sort of persuasive, didactic or pedagogical, and propagandistic effects, and even to produce aesthetic pleasure. In this sense, the documentary is closely linked to the literary essay, insofar as it is a form of cinema that seeks to argue for a view or to make a point, and not merely serve as a descriptive record of facts. And this structuring of the argument, this making-a-point, has necessarily an expressive or creative dimension because it entails a rhetorical, and hence an aesthetic function. As Renov has put it:

Under scrutiny, the Griersonian definition of documentary -- the creative treatment of actuality -- appears to be a kind of oxymoron, the site of an irreconcilable union between invention on the one hand and mechanical reproduction on the other. And, as with the figure of the oxymoron in its literary context, this collision can be the occasion of an explosive, often poetic effect. [...] As a study of [the work of] accomplished documentary

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<sup>4</sup> See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

artists reveals, there need not be exclusionary relations between documentation and artfulness.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to put forward a 'poetics' of the documentary form (that is, a systematic investigation and account of the documentary as an aesthetic form), Renov has explained that the supposed tension between record and truth versus beauty and pleasure at the core of documentary stems less from a limitation of this film form as such than from the long assumed schism between science and art. The clear-cut distinction of science and art, assumes that science is a completely objective description of the world, while art is taken to be a creative expression and hence a product of interpretation and subjectivity that has no relation to facts as they 'truly are.' A poetics of documentary that is able to provide an adequate explanation of this form needs, according to Renov, to reject the idea that science and art, truth and pleasure are mutually excluding. Instead, a poetics of the documentary form requires to start from the idea that there is no such thing as an all-encompassing, all-explanatory, totalitarian theory 'which would filter, hierarchize and order [all local, partial and discontinued knowledges] in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.'<sup>6</sup> For only in this way, the character of documentary as simultaneously a record and a creative or expressive form can be defended without a sense of contradiction. In other words, a poetics of documentary for Renov has to embody the spirit of Foucault's genealogies and thus question at every step the presuppositions, categories of discourse and values that underlie this systematic research of the form of documentary. This poetics will therefore question the possibility of a stark distinction between fact based objectivity and fictive expression; it will accept that all theoretical explanations are partial; and it will take both political and historical contingencies into account in any explanation of the documentary and its development.

Other scholars of documentary theory have shared Renov's view. For instance, Trinh has denied that there is a difference between naturalness and artifice. It is a false dichotomy, she says, one which sets a clear-cut distinction between nonfictional representation, the documentary sign, and fictional representation. Both fictional and nonfictional representations are creations, fabrications for the screen, and thus equally 'artificial' or synthetic. Since both imply a process of producing meaning and images,

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<sup>5</sup> Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' pp.33-34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.17.

their 'nature' is that of creativity. In other words, the 'naturalness' of these two forms of representation lies precisely in their creativity. In Trinh's words:

From its descriptions to its arrangements and rearrangements, reality on the move may be heightened or impoverished but it is never neutral (that is, objectivist). "Documentary at its purest and most poetic is a form in which the elements that you use are the actual elements." Why, for example, use the qualifying term "artificial" at all? In the process of producing a "document," is there such a thing as an artificial aspect that can be securely separated from the true aspect (except for analytical purpose – that is, for another artifice of language)? In other words, is a closer framing of reality more artificial than a wider one?<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, both Renov and Trinh coincide in that a definition of documentary, if one is at all possible, needs to deny the supposed boundary between science and art, truth and pleasure, objectivity and subjectivity. Trinh goes as far as to argue that there is no such thing as documentary, if this term is understood either as 'a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques.'<sup>8</sup> What she means by this is that it is not possible to have a term or label that completely encompasses and homogenises all the practices that have been and could be considered as documentary. In particular, Trinh thinks, those narratives that claim to give a single unified account of the evolution of the documentary form as if there was a continuous historical unfolding of the latter are misled. For her, no periodization of the documentary practice is possible as it is ever-developing and refuses to be fitted into narrow historical explanations. This is why she rejects the label 'documentary' all together.

Even when Renov does not discard this term, he agrees with Trinh: 'it is unwise to generalize any uniform laws of construction for nonfiction film and video.'<sup>9</sup> His view is that both subjectivity and expressivity (that is, interpretive creativity) play a major role in the practice and production of documentary films. Thus, here Renov is opposing Nichols's characterisation of documentaries as an instance of the 'discourses of sobriety.' These discourses include, for Nichols, the domains of economics, politics, science, education, foreign policy, religion and welfare and they all claim a 'direct' relation to the real. Without denying the link that documentaries have to the actual world, Renov wishes to acknowledge their undeniable expressive and subjective dimensions. It is with this in view, that he calls for a poetics of the documentary form, a systematised approach to this film form that denies science and

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<sup>7</sup> Trinh, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,' p.100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.90.

<sup>9</sup> Renov, 'Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction,' in Renov (ed), *Theorizing Documentary*, pp.1-11 (p.6).

art are mutually exclusive, and that avoids the pretence of achieving a universal and unified theory of documentary practices and instead admits that all knowledge is provisional and partial. Such an approach also acknowledges that fictional and nonfictional film forms are intertwined. Finally, this poetics takes into account -- alongside the rhetorical and formal strategies of documentaries -- the local, political, ideological and historical contexts that determine both documentary production and scholarly discourse on this film form. Indeed, this is a poetics that is self-aware and critical of its own presuppositions and theoretical axioms.

I take my cue from Renov and Trinh throughout this thesis and affirm that it is indeed not possible to defend a universal homogenising definition of the documentary form, and that this form is -- without contradiction -- simultaneously an informative record of facts or events in the world and an artistic creation. As it will become clear in subsequent chapters, my three case studies aim to reflect the broad diversity of this film form, and also seek to reflect the extent to which actuality and creative expression intermingle and how much the boundary between fictional and nonfictional cinema is blurred. My view, like that of Trinh and Renov, is that documentary is a film form of the interstice, of the in-betweenness, of the borderline, and that is why it refuses to be perfectly defined and to be constrained by clear-cut parameters. As I will argue further on in this chapter and later through my case studies, it is precisely this interstitial quality of documentaries that makes them fertile spaces for the emergence of political relationships (as Azoulay understands them), and hence relationships exemplifying Derridian hospitality.

### **III. The (Non-Rigid) Modalities of Documentary**

Once established that the documentary form by nature eludes any definitive well-delimited definition as well as any taxonomy and strict rules of classification, it is worth looking at the diverse modalities or functions that this film form might take, so that we can have a better understanding of the wide range that documentaries encompass and also of how much these modalities have been and are combined and emphasized to produce different effects. Discussing these rhetorical and/or aesthetic functions also serves two additional purposes. First, these modalities will provide me with the analytic tools necessary to argue that it is more within the form, rather than the content, that the political (and ethical) potential of documentaries is located. This in turn will allow me to both extrapolate Azoulay's model of photography to documentary film and elaborate on her model as applied to this specific cinematic

form. And second, I will refer back to these modalities to enrich my own analysis of the case studies I present in the following chapters.

Here I draw on Renov's proposal of four discursive or aesthetic functions that he claims have been apparent to a greater or lesser extent since the beginning of documentary film practice, which can be traced back to the Lumière brothers. Indeed, the Lumières's ground-breaking work at the end of the nineteenth century attempted to offer a window onto the actual world and the quotidian life of their time through a creative portrayal of the latter. Now, Renov describes these four rhetorical functions as 'modalities of desire,'<sup>10</sup> that is, as incentives that govern and shape the documentary discourse. As he explains, these four modalities are neither strictly delimited nor a-historical. Rather, they tend to mix, supplement each other and are subject to historical contingencies. In Renov's words:

These categories are not intended to be exclusive or airtight; the friction, overlaps – even mutual determination – discernible among them testify to the richness and historical variability of nonfiction forms in the visual arts. At some moments and in the work of certain practitioners, one or another of these [functions] has frequently been over- or under-favored.<sup>11</sup>

Before looking at the four discursive functions of documentary film identified by Renov, it is important to note that, even though there is no unified agreement amongst film scholars as regards the different types of documentaries, there have been some efforts to offer typologies of this film form. For example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson and also, famously, Nichols have advanced taxonomies to distinguish modes, categories or sub-genres within documentary cinema.<sup>12</sup> I consider it useful to look briefly at Nichols's typology, for it provides insight into the many stylistic techniques and devices that documentarists might choose in creating their films. Simultaneously, his model is also helpful precisely in understanding why it is that taxonomies of the documentary form can only have explanatory and heuristic use, but can never be ontologically rigid or precise. Nichols identifies six types or modes of representations in documentary cinema, which he believes to have emerged progressively throughout the development of this form. These six modes are: the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative.

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<sup>10</sup> Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' p.22.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.21.

<sup>12</sup> See Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art. An Introduction*, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), pp.342-350.

The poetic mode of representation is characterised by the prominence of ‘visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization.’<sup>13</sup> Documentaries in the poetic mode move away from the aims of conveying straightforward objective information about a situation or an aspect of the world and of advancing an argument in order to stress mood and affect. For this reason, in the poetic mode the rhetorical element of a documentary is, for Nichols, underdeveloped and the traditional narrative content is forsaken. This mode has frequently been likened to the *avant-garde* film school.

The expository mode, in contrast to the poetic mode, stresses the rhetorical or argumentative dimension of documentary by employing verbal commentary and by addressing the viewer directly. Documentaries in the expository mode endeavour to gather footage and arrange it so as to strengthen the spoken narrative and the argumentative flow. The use of voice-over commentary, known as ‘voice of God,’ is the main feature of this mode.

The observational mode attempts to present footage that gives the impression that the filmmaker is merely an observer and is not intruding on the behaviour of the subjects filmed. Documentaries in the observational mode emphasize ‘a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera.’<sup>14</sup> The withdrawal of the documentarist to the position of a passive and neutral observer is achieved through a technique known as ‘fly on the wall,’ which supposedly allows the filming of events just as they would occur in the absence of both the camera and the filmmaker. According to Nichols, the rhetorical practice of moving and convincing viewers is here kept to a minimum and avoided as much as possible. As a result of this, observational documentaries do not make use of voice-over commentary, additional sound effects or music; nor do they resort to historical re-enactments.

It is important to note that Nichols seems to think that persuading viewers cannot be done with purely observational techniques, and that the overt intervention of the filmmaker and obvious explanations are required for the documentary to convince of or promote a view. The way Nichols describes the observational mode appears to imply that he does not think observational documentary can in itself be persuasive. This view, I believe, is mistaken. As it will become clear later on, Renov’s

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<sup>13</sup> Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p.33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.34.

proposal of four functions implies that the capturing and observing of facts does not conflict with the promotion of a view. In fact, it emerges from Renov's argumentation that there is no such thing as 'pure' observation since all records, all images, are always mediated. Therefore, the visual record or document, even if attempting to 'merely' observe, is inexorably promoting a view. The more or less overt role of promotion of the film is determined by its stylistic features. Indeed, contrary to what Nichols seems to claim, the rhetorical function of a documentary in the observational mode lies precisely in its supposed 'plain' and non-interventionist observation.

The participatory mode, unlike the observational mode, encourages the interaction between documentary filmmaker and filmed subjects. Here the documentarist becomes part of the events recorded and hence appears as one of the subjects in her own work. This mode is often identified with the so-called '*cinéma vérité*' because what is made visible is the 'truth of an encounter [between documentarist and subject] rather than the absolute or untampered truth.'<sup>15</sup> Interviews are one of the most common forms employed to convey this encounter between subject and filmmaker.

In the reflexive mode crucially there is an open acknowledgement of the constructed nature of documentary cinema because the use of artifice in this cinematic genre is evidenced to the audience, and thereby documentary is de-mystified and its implications are reflected on. The reflexive mode thus entails a shift from the focus on what or who gets represented to a focus on how it is represented. This means that reflexive documentaries pose a challenge to the supposed realism or truthfulness of documentary representations.

Finally, the performative mode of documentary representation is based on the conviction that our knowledge and understanding of the world are never abstract and disembodied but are, rather, concrete and embodied. A documentary in the performative mode stresses the 'subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement.'<sup>16</sup> Instead of addressing viewers via a logic of argumentative persuasion and rhetorical imperatives, performative documentaries engage viewers emotionally and expressively by confronting them with the filmmaker's own vivid responsiveness

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.34.

in the hope of moving the audience to sympathize subjectively with her emotional and affective perspective.

Here I prefer to focus on and to adopt the four aesthetic or rhetorical functions that Renov poses, rather than Nichols's six modes, not so much because the latter presents these six modalities in a way that often suggests them to be pure or mutually exclusive genres (in fact, Nichols does recognise that the six are increasingly being mixed today by documentary filmmakers), but mainly because Nichols based his categorisation of documentaries almost completely on the historical evolution of American independent cinema and thus his proposal fails to be applicable to documentaries made elsewhere, in other social and cultural conditions and markets. Nichols does not seem to be aware of this shortfall in his typology. He does not appear to acknowledge the fact that such categories are political, social, economical, cultural and historically contingent, hence his taxonomy -- even if useful for studying the documentary form -- seems dated and too strict at times. Since Renov's four aesthetic functions are posed in terms of modes of desire, that is, as impulses driving the filmmaker, then his model explains more clearly why and how these modalities may combine, overlap, enhance one another, and be highlighted to a greater or lesser extent within a documentary film according to its discursive and aesthetic purposes. Similarly, because Renov conceives of these modalities of desire as ideologically and historically determined, his proposal is able to explain the different tendencies that have driven and still drive documentarists' works made within different social, political and historical contexts. In other words, as opposed to Nichols's taxonomy, Renov's model not only focuses on the formal and rhetorical strategies of each modality of the documentary form but also is crucially aware that such strategies are ideologically and historically inflected. As Renov puts it:

There are, to be sure, historical contingencies which temper any claims for "modalities of desire" as eternal or innate. The documentative drive may be transhistorical, but it is far from being untouched by history [...] Four decades [after World War II] – in the wake of countless TV ads which trade on their documentary "look" (shaky camera, grainy black-and-white) – the technically flawed depiction of a purported reality no longer suffices as visual guarantee of authenticity. [...] [W]hile the instinct for cultural self preservation remains constant, *the markers of documentary authenticity are historically variable.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' p.23. [My emphasis].

Renov's proposal of the four functions of documentary film thus seems to provide a more adequate explanation of the different tendencies that this film form may adopt according to the socio-historical circumstances and purpose of the filmmaker. These four fundamental modalities of desire guiding documentaries are: to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyse or interrogate; and to express. And the most important thing to bear in mind is that, despite being presented as separate and distinct modalities for the sake of clarity, simplicity and explanatory potential, these four functions are never found as pure types; the four tend to be always present to a greater or lesser degree within all documentaries.

The first of these four tendencies -- that of serving as a record that reveals and preserves -- is the most basic function present in all documentary films. Much in the same way as photography, this function of documentary attempts to reproduce the historical real and, thereby, 'to cheat death, stop time, restore loss.'<sup>18</sup> Through this desire of safeguarding the trace of the event, the camera is here mainly used as a machine with revelatory, indexical and preservation powers. Nonetheless, as mentioned before, Renov is emphatic that even when the motivation here is that of recording and serving as evidence, documentary images are always the result of a selection process (the camera angle, the take, the editing) and hence they are always inexorably mediated images. Invoking the work of art historian John Tagg, Renov affirms that the indexicality and evidential power of documentary representation is just the outcome of particular historical conditions and institutional practices. There is thus nothing ontologically essential that makes the documentary image guaranteed evidence, an infallible record.

To persuade or promote constitutes the second rhetorical function of the documentary, and this modality is intrinsic to this film form and therefore operates in tandem with the other three modalities. The persuasive drive of documentary can be more or less obvious and the manner in which it is presented varies greatly according to the way in which this function intermingles with the other modalities. To be sure, a core parameter for a documentary's persuasive power is its indexical quality, which is one essential element of the record and preserve modality of this film form. Equally, persuasion in documentary cannot be considered in isolation from the ways in which sound and images are coupled to support the argument promoted, and therefore

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.25.

persuasion and the expressive function need to be looked at together. The persuasion or promotional function first emerged as a result of a particular historical context. Crucially, it has been mainly due to governmental urgency to mobilize popular support for different policies that the documentary's persuasive powers were acknowledged and began to be exploited. Grierson's work is emblematic in this respect. He led the film unit of Britain's Empire Marketing Board during the thirties producing documentaries aimed at promoting the consumption and trade of British Empire products. Today this promotional modality is used widely not just for governmental purposes, but also by other groups and/or cultural and commercial institutions -- such as NGOs and charities as well as cultural associations and even businesses -- seeking to advocate certain causes, foster subcultural identities and/or sell products or values. For instance, to promote their work and raise funding, the charity Macmillan Cancer Support uses short videos showing personal testimonies of people who have been diagnosed with cancer and have been helped by Macmillan throughout their medical treatments.<sup>19</sup>

A third modality of documentaries is to analyse or interrogate. This function is concerned with reflecting on and questioning the record, reveal and preserve modality of the documentary. The film here turns to look toward itself critically and interrogates its own presuppositions and production processes. Crucially, documentaries in the analytical mode draw attention to the fact that they themselves are works claiming a direct and essential bond to the real. And thus these films acknowledge that they are mediated works, that the relation between what is seen on screen and the event or thing that existed in the world -- between the documentary sign and its referent -- is the outcome of myriad interventions and choices. This analytical and interrogative function aims to motivate an active response on the part of spectators. Films in this modality seek to 'encourage inquiry, offer space for judgment and provide the tools for evaluation and further action'<sup>20</sup> for viewers. Thus, the 'analytical impulse is not so much enacted by the filmmakers as encouraged for the viewer.'<sup>21</sup> Among the techniques most commonly used to foster analysis and interrogation are breaching the synchronicity between images and audio, repeating

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<sup>19</sup> See Macmillan Cancer Support, <<http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Aboutus/AboutUsHome.aspx>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> December 2013].

<sup>20</sup> Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' p.31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

certain images and sounds, and introducing unrelated, anachronistic or banal sequences into the train of narrative.

The last of the four rhetorical modalities proposed by Renov is to express. According to Renov, this function of the documentary form has often been repressed and neglected within the history and development of this film format. Despite existing since the early days of documentary as embodied by the poetic work of Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, 1922)<sup>22</sup> or Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929)<sup>23</sup> in the 1920s, expressivity has been belittled in the documentary tradition due to the widely spread and institutionalised dichotomy between art and science, subjective expression and factual objectivity. But, as mentioned earlier, this is a false dichotomy; artfulness and documentation need not be mutually exclusive. There is no ontological necessity preventing a documentary with poetic/aesthetic qualities from effectively representing the historical real. As Renov explains well, the expressive character of a documentary is a matter of degree, and some filmmakers choose to underscore this quality to a greater or lesser extent.

[The] realm of filmic nonfiction is a continuum along which can be ranged work of great expressive variability – from that which attends little to the vehicle of expression (the no-so-distant apotheosis of cinema verité [sic] – surveillance technology might serve as the limit case) to that which emphasizes the filtering of the represented object through the eye and mind of the artist.<sup>24</sup>

If we consider, with Renov, that these four functions of the documentary are impulses guiding the film, rather than rigid categorizations that mutually exclude one another, then it is possible to use them for their explanatory and heuristic value towards better understanding the documentary's multiple modalities. As impulses, these functions of the documentary help in explaining why this is a film form of the in-betweenness and the extent to which documentary films are shaped and determined by the historical and social context of production as much as by the documentarist's motivations. With this in mind, in subsequent chapters I will invoke Renov's taxonomy of documentaries and also the one proposed by Nichols for the purposes of the analysis

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<sup>22</sup> Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (USA and France: Les Frères Revillon and Pathé Exchange, 1922).

<sup>23</sup> Dziga Vertov (born Denis Abramovich Kaufman) was a Soviet experimental filmmaker and cinema theorist. Considered a pioneer documentarist with strong political views, both his film style and theoretical work on the moving image medium has been of great influence to many filmmakers to follow. His most widely known film is *Man with a Movie Camera* (Soviet Union: VUFKU, 1929).

<sup>24</sup> Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' pp.34-35.

of my case studies. It will then become clearer that a strict classification of documentaries is not possible.

In the next section I will argue that it is in the form and/or style of the documentary -- the manner in which its content is organised, rather than exclusively in its discursive and ideological content, that the potential for the creation of political and ethical relationships that are not directly governed by the nation-state rests. I will draw on Hito Steyerl's and Joanne Richardson's views about what makes a film politically subversive or have emancipatory potential. According to these theorists, a film made politically has a self-reflexive form, meaning that its arrangement of sounds and images is such that it calls for spectators to question the film's modes of production, its mediating nature, its ways of constructing meaning, as well as the hierarchical relations that govern how the film is owned and distributed. It is the possibility of the active involvement of the spectator that gives the film its political potential. Steyerl's and Richardson's insight will allow me to discuss, later on in this chapter, whether and how it is possible to extrapolate Azoulay's triadic model of photography to documentary films.

#### **IV. Making Films Politically vs. Making Political Films**

In the course of its historical development, the documentary form and its theory have appeared to be more or less concerned with its constructed nature and its potential for indoctrination. As Richardson remarks:

[Historically], the logic of the documentary-form has been partly obscured in the American landscape, where the pretext to truth and immediacy has been foregrounded, and where the reality effects have been more tenaciously defended. The propagandistic effects of the documentary form have been more evident in Eastern European productions, from Soviet agit-prop of the 1930s to the recent pre-89 past.<sup>25</sup>

The very close link between documentary and (political) propaganda, between documentary and politics, has been an issue that theorists of non-fictional cinema have increasingly discussed. Especially after the emergence of Foucault's model of a politics of truth,<sup>26</sup> scholars and filmmakers alike have been careful to signal the instrumental value of the documentary form for the affirmation and maintenance of social power relations. At the same time, however, the documentary's ability to serve

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<sup>25</sup> Richardson, 'Est-ethics of Counter Documentary,' *ARTMargins Online* (16 June 2000), <<http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/archive/421-est-ethics-of-counter-documentary>> [accessed 12th October 2011].

<sup>26</sup> See Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in Gordon (ed). *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings By Michel Foucault 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp.109-133.

militant or activist causes that challenge precisely those power relations has also been considered. For instance, as I said in the previous section, Renov explains how the promotional function of documentary has been employed to advance governmental policies or state's interests, as well as to sell certain products. At the same time, Renov argues that documentaries that emphasize the subjective and creative expression (in particular those films that tend toward the essay form and/or the autobiography, like the so-called film-diaries) bear a personal imprint or a signature of sorts (the trace, the self-imprint of the filmmaker) that gives the film critical and provocative agency against the supposedly objective truths. According to Renov, the personal or subjective elements of the expressive function of documentary paired with its analytical function have the power to interrupt and even subvert institutionalised 'truths' and state official narratives that sustain and reinforce power relations and socio-political and cultural hierarchies. In his words:

During the direct cinema period, self-reference was shunned. But far from a sign of self-effacement, this was the symptomatic silence of the empowered, who sought no forum for self-justification or display. [...] Not so the current generation of performative documentarists. In more ways than one, their self-enactments are transgressive. Through their explorations of the (social) self, they are speaking the lives and desires of the many who have lived outside "the boundaries of cultural knowledge."<sup>27</sup>

In this way, documentaries show, once more, an ambivalent quality: they can be instruments of power and surveillance, as much as a means to undermine the very structures they serve to sustain. Furthermore, these two opposing uses of documentary presuppose that the audience is a political field of sorts; a mobile body that can in one way or another interact with and respond to the constructs created by documentarists. Either the viewer is taken as a subject susceptible to governmental subjectivation, manipulation and unconscious indoctrination through the truths created by documentary (and by other media products and apparatuses that assume the governmental role of truth production), or she is regarded as a subject that is able to engage actively in the articulation of the meaning of documentary representations.

Steyerl -- like Trinh and Renov, among others -- has also taken issue with the question of the political quality of the documentary form. She has noted that in order for this form to effectively deconstruct or challenge power structures, it first needs to be acknowledged that documents themselves are inextricably linked to authority, to

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<sup>27</sup> Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Visible Evidence, Vol. 16 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.181.

procedures of certification, and thus to hierarchical structures of power. According to Steyerl, if one is to undermine power structures, it is not enough to simply denounce them by providing documentary proof or evidence of their existence. For this evidence is thereby erected as truth, as an authoritative power itself, which is what the documentary was supposed to be criticising in the first place. In her own words:

Superficially or on the content level, many documentary articulations seemed to erode or even attack unfair power structures. But on the level of form, by relying on authoritative procedures, conventional documentaries have intensified the aura of the court room, the penitentiary or the laboratory [...] Documentary production has taken on forensic duties for a long time, and has functioned in the service of a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked to the project of Western colonialism. Reporting the so-called truth about remote people and locations has been closely linked to their domination.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, concludes Steyerl, it cannot be at the level of the information or content where the political strength of the documentary form lies, but in the way this content is put together, articulated and presented. In other words, how a documentary organizes its subject matter determines whether it operates as an instrument at the service of domination and power structures or as a means of subversion against those very structures.

Steyerl's point seems to be confirmed by French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, who (although he was speaking about cinema in general, and not just about documentaries) has proposed the distinction between making film politically and making political films. Godard first introduced this contrast during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he was making films as part of the experimental collective Dziga Vertov Group -- which took its name from the Soviet filmmaker. Curiously enough, as Richardson reminds us,<sup>29</sup> Godard went on later to regard the methods, films and manifesto of this collective as 'Marxist-Leninist' rubbish. His criticism being that the Dziga Vertov Group had made mere 'political propaganda,' but never engaged in a conscious self-examination of their own production procedures, their presuppositions or the ways in which their films could articulate political meaning. For him, what was important was not so much the content of a film but its mode of production and reception. Thus, a film engaging in an exercise of self-reflection about its constructed nature and the way it organizes and conveys information is not a political film, but

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<sup>28</sup> Steyerl, 'Documentary Uncertainty.'

<sup>29</sup> Richardson, 'What Does it Mean to Make Film Politically?,' in *Subsol*, <[http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors3/richardsontext4.html#](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/richardsontext4.html#)> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2011].

rather a film made politically. According to Godard then, making films politically meant working beyond the level of content and concentrating instead on the level of form, the level of the articulation of content, expression and the creation of significance.

The work that Godard produced after this collective was dissolved, particularly those films he made in collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville, mirror this concern of his and, thus, are works that utterly avoid militancy or endorsing any particular cause. In this sense, these films can be regarded as Godard's best examples of cinema made politically. *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976), for instance, has often been invoked by scholars<sup>30</sup> as a film made politically because in it Godard and Miéville employ footage from a previous film by the Dziga Vertov Group, the pro-Palestinian film *Jusqu'à la victoire* (1970), not only to reflect about the 1970s French solidarity movement with Palestine, but also to draw attention to and criticize the extent to which any political protest stages, organises and expresses its demands.

The relevance of Godard's distinction between making films politically and making political films, as both Steyerl and Richardson affirm, is that it allows us to move beyond the focus on the ideological content, and instead think about how this content is gathered, produced, structured, presented, and provided with meaning. This shift of focus brings to the fore the extent to which the medium of film (either fictional or non-fictional) is determined by the intertwined and complex relation between its modes of production, its ways of articulating information, and its methods of constructing meaning, as much as by the cultural and other hierarchical structures under which films are made, owned and distributed. As Richardson says, Godard's insight underlines the fact that any radical militant message presented through cinema fails to have any political effect if it is not accompanied by a questioning on 'who speaks for whom, how images and sounds are coded, and what type of social relationships they make possible or deny.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Steyerl, 'The Articulation of Protest,' in *Transversal* (Webjournal of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), <<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en>> [accessed 10th January 2012]; Öhner, 'What Does Political Filmmaking Mean?,' in *Republicart Net* (Webjournal of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies), <[http://republicart.net/disc/representations/oehner01\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/representations/oehner01_en.htm)> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012]; and Richardson, 'At the Crossroads of Art and Activism,' in *Subsol*, <[http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors3/richardsoncontext5.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/richardsoncontext5.html)> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012].

<sup>31</sup> Richardson, 'What Does it Mean?'

Taking cue from Godard, Richardson further expands on the idea of making films politically, and in doing so she proposes five concepts, each corresponding to one of the various relations that make up the intricate medium of film -- the relation between 'the image and its referent, between different subjects, between form and content, between the work and its audience, and between its production and distribution.'<sup>32</sup> These five concepts or trajectories signal the aspects that are to be considered and put into question by any film that intends to go beyond the level of content, that is self-aware of its constructed nature, and that offers a critical view of this medium as a cultural product. The five trajectories are: *mimesis*, *intersubjectivity*, *form*, *reception* and *ownership*.

According to Richardson, films made politically have a self-reflexive quality, which involves putting into question the transparency and *mimesis* that the cinematic image supposedly achieves. For her, however, foregrounding the impossibility of non-mediated (direct) representations of the real in no way amounts to condemning all images for their inadequacy to capture reality. Making film politically thus amounts to 'thinking critically about our relation to images and admitting the subjectivity of perspective [by] asking how our own ideologies and inherited prejudices influence the general frame that creates meaning.'<sup>33</sup>

A film made politically also involves self-interrogating its mode and means of organization. By questioning its hierarchies of knowledge, its division of labour and the relation between the filmmaker and the subjects represented, films made politically transform the process of production into a collaborative, *intersubjective*, one for they open up a dialogue with other subjects, rather than merely speaking for them. A clear example of this intersubjective dialogue is found in Trinh's work. Her first film, *Reassemblage. From the Firelight to the Screen* (1982) was shot in Senegal, and it constitutes a critique of the methods and presuppositions of traditional visual anthropology and ethnographic documentary filmmaking. *Reassemblage* presents images of Senegalese in their daily activities and errands without following any clear narrative line. It also has some voice-over commentary by Trinh interwoven with long silences and/or asynchronous sounds and music, but none of this is meant to assign a fixed meaning to what is seen on screen. The film is thus open for spectators to find the meaning of the images themselves, as there is no attempt or intention to explain

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

the culture and way of living of the Senegalese. As Trinh mentions in the opening sequence of the film: 'I do not intend to speak about, just speak nearby.'<sup>34</sup> I will return to discuss the intersubjective, inter-dialogic, character of documentary films, when I consider the potential political and ethical relationships formed between filmmaker, filmed subjects and spectators through these films -- the potential for these films to act as spaces of hospitality.

Continuing with Richardson, she explains that the *form* in a film -- that is, the manner in which images and sounds are put together and presented -- crucially determines the sense of totality that the film conveys. When the images and sounds are intermingled seamlessly and cohesively, the film appears as a homogeneous totality thus prompting the viewer to immerse themselves in the narrative and identify with it. By contrast, when 'montage is disjunctive, made up of elements that do not seem to fit, the message becomes ambiguous or even contradictory, requiring the audience to take an active part in constructing the meaning.'<sup>35</sup> Films made politically, for Richardson, employ disjunctive montage. A disjunctive montage in a film disrupts its sense of totality and, consequently, invites a viewer that reflects, doubts, asks questions, and that refuses to merely receive the content of the film in a passive fashion. In other words, a film that employs estrangement devices (such as asynchronous sound, distorted images or discontinuous and interrupted flow of natural time sequences) and thereby makes the spectator wonder about its meaning, thus inducing her 'to step back and reflect, is more genuinely activist than a work of agit-prop that plays on the emotions of the audience and gets it to agree and act in accordance with its message.'<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Richardson claims that filmmakers who attempt to make films politically must take issue with the question of the *ownership* of their work and how and by whom it is distributed, for only thus can these films present a real challenge to the existing cultural hierarchies. In Richardson's words:

As long as a film is copyrighted and cannot be disseminated or used freely, as long as it circulates primarily through dominant cultural institutions and is accessible only to an elite

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<sup>34</sup> Trinh, *Reassemblage. From the Firelight to the Screen* (USA: Co-produced by Jean-Paul Bourdier, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Richardson, 'What Does it Mean?'

<sup>36</sup> Richardson, 'At the Crossroads.'

type of audience, it is doomed to remain trapped in a system that constrains it and renders its critique ineffective.<sup>37</sup>

How films are 'framed' by film festivals, art-house and/or independent cinemas, galleries, TV programming schedules and other distribution and exhibition channels crucially determine the spatial, temporal and socio-economic conditions under which films are consumed. These factors need to be taken into account if a film is to disrupt social and cultural hierarchies.

As I will argue later following Steyerl and Richardson, it is indeed more in the form rather than (exclusively) in the content that the possibility for political and ethical relationships emerging between the spectators, the documentary filmmaker and the portrayed subjects resides. These relationships, I will maintain mirroring Azoulay's theory of photography, are not directly mediated by the nation-state and they can transgress the hierarchical power relations imposed by the social order. An open-ended form and a disjunctive montage of a film do invite and allow for the viewer to become an active participant in determining the film's meaning, thereby contesting the stark binary active-filmmaker and passive-viewer.

Before considering the link between the form of a film and its capacity to give rise to political and ethical bonds, there is one very important thing to mention in regard to Richardson's view that overtly militant and propagandistic films cannot be as critical and politically subversive as those films that employ a disjunctive montage and disorienting techniques. Here, Richardson seems to overlook the fact that throughout history there have been activist films that have significantly contributed to liberation processes, struggles and movements, especially those that took place in the late twentieth century. Significantly, what is known as the Latin American 'militant cinema' played an important role in resisting and criticising military dictatorship regimes that emerged in this area. The work by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino is a good example of this. Most famously, Solanas and Getino made *La Hora de los Hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968), which is a four-and-a-half-hour long documentary that was filmed clandestinely. The film not only overtly attacks the military dictatorship but it also critically exposes First World nations that supported and benefited from the dictatorial regime. Screenings of *La Hora de los Hornos* were also surreptitiously organised, and attending them was considered an act of treason. At the screenings the filmmakers would frequently pause

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<sup>37</sup> Richardson, 'What Does it Mean?'

the projection in order to open the floor for discussions and questions as well as to directly ‘provoke’ the viewers into action. In this manner, the radical quality of this film does not reside so much in its documentation of both ‘the “quotidian violence” of social injustice and the repressive violence that enforces it, [but rather it lies more] in its move beyond documentation into the sphere of militant agitation, the challenge it issues to the passive spectator through its conception of the “cine-acto.”’<sup>38</sup> What is more, Solanas and Getino wrote a manifesto, entitled ‘Towards a Third Cinema. Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World,’<sup>39</sup> that was to guide their militant documentary work as well as that of other filmmakers adhered to the Grupo Cine Liberación. This overtly militant cinema greatly influenced film directors throughout Latin America and the world as a model of politically activist filmmaking to counter official discourses and the hierarchies of the social order.

Thus, there are examples of films like the ones made following the Third Cinema manifesto that present their ideological content very openly in order to promote political causes and move viewers into action.<sup>40</sup> And this evident activism does not necessarily mean that these films are mere political propaganda that cannot pose a serious challenge to the political, economical, social and cultural stratified organization imposed by the social order. What I consider valuable from the insight of Godard, Richardson and Steyerl is, as I have said, that they emphasize the need for a film to be self-aware and self-critical of its own artifice, values and presuppositions if it is to really incite (but never impose) viewers into active spectatorship. In inviting the viewer to take part actively by reflecting on, questioning and trying to make sense of the images presented, the film does show a potential to subvert the social order. I agree with the above mentioned three authors in that the key element that gives a film its political subversive potential is its form and not so much (or at least not exclusively) its ideological content, although the latter can also play a role, as was the case with Latin American militant cinema. Drawing on Rancière’s thesis of the

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<sup>38</sup> Losada, ‘Fernando Solanas,’ in *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 55 (July 2010)

<<http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/great-directors/fernando-solanas/>> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013].

<sup>39</sup> Solanas and Getino, ‘Towards a Third Cinema. Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World,’ in Chanan (ed), *Twenty-five Years of the New Latin American Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1983), pp.17-27.

<sup>40</sup> Alongside, Solanas and Getino, other filmmakers that have made openly militant cinema that contributed to advance political causes and supported liberation struggles, include Brazilian Glauber Rocha, Cuban Santiago Alvarez and Polish-French Edouard de Laurot.

emancipated spectator, in the next section I will explain how the self-reflexive form of the documentary film invites spectators to become active participants without assuming that the latter need to be enlightened or emancipated, for that would only reinforce rather than challenge the hierarchical status of the filmmaker over spectators. Likewise, I will consider why the active participation of the spectator can bring about a new (non-hierarchical) relationship between the latter and the filmmaker, and hence even give rise to an alternative social order or distribution of places and functions within society. This in turn will allow me to conclude that documentary films can engender political (and ethical) relationships that are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state. Consequently, I will argue that Azoulay's model of the political relationships created by photography can be transposed to the documentary form --with some modifications due to the different qualities of the moving image of film as opposed the still image of photography.

#### **V. Self-reflexivity as Politics. The (Blurred) Relation Between Spectator and Filmmaker**

As a specific film form, the documentary has the potential to challenge power structures insofar as it can invite and involve a self-exploratory and self-critical reflection on the epistemological, cultural, economical and political hierarchies, and also on the ideologies that necessarily underlie and determine how sounds and images are arranged in order to create meaning. This is largely owing to the documentary's in-between nature -- in-between fact and fiction, plain record of events and artifice, which creatively plays with the style and montage to document facts and present a certain viewpoint.

Steyerl argues, in agreement with Richardson, that it is only by means of a 'radical montage,' by means of editing and stylistic techniques that disrupt the traditionally homogeneous entwinement of sounds and images, that a documentary can offer a critical stance capable of undermining the status quo. According to Steyerl, every political protest is the result of an articulation -- much in the way of a film montage -- of various elements including its programme, its demands, the actions proposed for the attainment of such demands, but also the allegiances and feuds, alliances and differences with other protest movements and interest groups. Thus understood, a protest is articulated at two levels. One is the level of the 'organization

of its expression,<sup>41</sup> that is, the language, signs and symbols used to manifest and voice their demands. The other level of articulation is the ‘expression of its organization,’<sup>42</sup> which refers to the structural or internal arrangement of the protest itself, the rules under which the protest is organized. Steyerl extends the analogy between film editing or montage and the articulation of a political protest, and she claims that a documentary film can constitute a successful oppositional movement when it makes transparent its own form of organization. By making evident the principles guiding its particular concatenation of images and sounds, a film invites the viewer to reflect about the way in which this concatenation is made. This self-reflexive form of organization is what Steyerl calls a political or ‘radical montage’:

Which movement of political montage then results in an oppositional articulation – instead of a mere addition of elements for the sake of reproducing the status quo? Or to phrase the question differently: Which montage between two images/elements could be imagined, that could result in something different between and outside these two, which would not represent a compromise, but would instead belong to a different order – roughly the way someone might tenaciously pound two dull stones together to create a spark in the darkness? Whether this spark, which one could also call the spark of the political, can be created at all is a question of this articulation.<sup>43</sup>

Radical montage thus entails a particular organization of content, one that draws attention to its own presuppositions guiding the juxtaposition of images. The more self-reflexive a documentary is; the more visible a documentary renders its mediating activity and its constructed nature, then the more critical it seems to be of itself. And this critical stance necessarily calls for the spectator to be active; it calls for her to reflect on the articulation of the film and thus to take part in the construction of its meaning. If rather than being offered a supposedly mimetic depiction of an event or situation -- an already digested and non-negotiable re-presentation of the real through juxtaposed images, the viewer is instead given the chance to reach her own conclusions by being confronted with the artifice of documentary representation, then a political critique can be articulated. In other words, if instead of assuming the spectator is merely passively receiving information, she is encouraged to ask questions and become part of the cinematic artifice in the creation of meaning, then a documentary can offer a strong critique that can undermine the social order that

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<sup>41</sup> Steyerl, ‘The Articulation of Protest.’

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

imposes who has and who does not have representational powers. That is, a critique that can undermine the hierarchical structures and values sustained by this order.

This view of Steyerl is also shared by Trinh, who affirms that self-reflexivity is significant and transgressive only if it is employed to avoid the closure and absolutizing of the meaning of a documentary film. Whenever reflexivity is reduced to a mere stylistic technique or method -- as commonly occurred with visual anthropology which uses self-reflexivity as a default style to guarantee its scientific status, this only reinforces scientific and cultural hierarchies. For self-reflexivity to be subversive and constitute a political cause in itself, it has to crucially preclude a single and totalizing meaning. This means that a documentary that is self-aware of its own constructed nature and does not attempt to hide its artifice, is one that lets fact and fiction, realism and artificiality, freely move without having to solve contradictions or commit to a sole and definitive meaning. In Trinh's words:

To compose is not always synonymous with ordering-so-as-to-persuade, and to give the filmed document another sense, another meaning, is not necessarily to distort it. [...] Therefore, meaning can be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties it, or decentralizes it. Thus, even when this source is referred to, it stands as one among many others, at once plural and utterly singular. In its demand to mean at any rate, the "documentary" often forgets how it comes about and how aesthetics and politics remain inseparable in its constitution; for, when not equated with mere techniques of beautifying, aesthetics allows one to experience life differently.<sup>44</sup>

I agree with Steyerl and Trinh that it is this particular feature of the documentary form, the manner in which it can lend itself to multiple readings, to be attributed myriad senses (some of them contradictory, others not) by making evident and questioning its very own artifice, that gives this film form its potential for calling into question the power structures and hierarchies imposed by the social order, and for suggesting that there might be alternative orders.

Now, how exactly is it that the self-awareness of a documentary and its refusal to have one single meaning and a single authority determining this meaning can configure a strong political criticism? Both Steyerl and Trinh point to an answer. When, through an open-ended and self-reflexive form, the spectator is invited to take active part in the articulation of the meaning of the film, then the schism between a passive spectator and an active filmmaker is challenged. What is relevant here is the

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<sup>44</sup> Trinh, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,' pp.99-100.

implication that the viewer plays a role not only in configuring the sense of the images and sounds with which she is presented, but also in articulating the critical stance that the documentary aims to put forward. The viewer is here not passively subjected to a pedagogic lecture, and instead her active involvement entails that the power relations establishing the distinction between someone with representational powers (the documentarist) and someone who lacks them (the spectator and the film subject) is merely contingent. Thus a political relationship between the filmmaker and the spectator is created, a relationship of equality that subverts the hierarchies of the social order. This idea will become clearer if we turn, once more, to Rancière's ideas on the relation between aesthetics and politics.

As explained in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Rancière believes that aesthetics and politics are not two mutually exclusive domains, but that rather the two are closely intertwined. He explains this by arguing that the social order or order of the police assigns shares, functions and places to all members of society but it also sets up the conditions of possibility of (or the *a priori* laws that determine) what can be thought, seen, heard, said, made, done, and everything that can be apprehended through the senses. Rancière calls these epistemological and perceptual underpinnings of the order of the police, the 'distribution of the sensible.'<sup>45</sup> This means that the sensible is partitioned in such a way that it demarcates the forms of inclusion and exclusion within a community. It is the role of the order of the police to maintain a particular distribution of the sensible and thus a hierarchy of places and roles. Rancière's understanding of politics bears a close link to the notion of the partition of the sensible. For him, politics is the process of the collective enactment of equality. Politics is 'a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition.'<sup>46</sup> Those who are involved in the verification of the axiom of equality are those who are unaccounted for within the social arrangement. By acting under the presupposition of equality, these people disrupt the hierarchies of the order of the police. In this sense, politics is a process that aims to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible, and thus it is a process of emancipation

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<sup>45</sup> Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics,' p.36.

<sup>46</sup> Rancière, 'Politics, Identification and Subjectivization,' in *October*, Vol. 61 (Summer, 1992), pp.58-64 (p.58), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778785>> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> March 2013].

and a form of dissensus with the current social order. This, Rancière says, is the ‘aesthetics of politics.’<sup>47</sup>

Aesthetics is, as I also explained in Chapter 2, a form of dissensus, a challenge to a certain partition of the sensible. Thus, both aesthetics and politics involve a process of rupture with a hierarchical order and its re-organization. Similarly, both aesthetics and politics are based upon the principle of equality. The difference here lies in that the re-configuration of the partition of the sensible performed by politics is the result of forms of subjectivation, that is, the result of the constitution of ‘a subject of collective demonstration [of those who have no part; the anonymous] whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts.’<sup>48</sup> The re-distribution of the sensible effected by aesthetics, by contrast, does not frame a collective ‘we’ for the unaccounted and anonymous. Rather, the rupture of aesthetics ‘re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience.’<sup>49</sup> This rupture reconfigures the ‘forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practice and reception’<sup>50</sup> in such a way that the parameters of aesthetic worthiness are revealed as contingent. Rancière calls this the ‘politics of aesthetics.’<sup>51</sup>

It is important to recall that for Rancière aesthetics is not a term that refers to art in general, but rather this term names a particular regime of artistic practice. For him, there are three regimes of art, the ethical, the representative and the aesthetic regimes. But only the last one is to be identified with the rupture just mentioned. The aesthetic regime emerges against the representative regime that establishes a hierarchy of artistic disciplines and stipulates that every artwork needs to have a narrative with a moral, social and political significance. By contrast, the aesthetic regime of art affirms the singularity of art and liberates it from the structures that determine what can be said and the language and form that are to be used. The aesthetic regime disrupts the hierarchy of disciplines, subject matter and genres of the representative regime. Instead of giving primacy to the mimetic function, in the aesthetic regime language and images of the world are employed as expressive powers and ends in themselves. Most importantly, the aesthetic regime induces a

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<sup>47</sup> Rancière, ‘The Paradoxes,’ p.140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp.141-142.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.142.

<sup>50</sup> Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge,’ in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Autumn, 2009), pp.1-19 (p.5), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/606120>> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> March 2013].

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, ‘The Paradoxes,’ p.142.

break between the intention of the artist and the effect it may have upon the spectator's behaviour; a break between a way of doing (*poiesis*) and a way of being affected by it (*aisthesis*), between cause and effect.<sup>52</sup>

The key idea that Rancière is defending here is that art cannot anticipate the outcome that its subversive strategies might or might not have upon the forms of political subjectivation. Rancière is arguing here against the widely held presupposition in critical thought and political art that there is a straightforward causal relationship between artistic means and political aims or ends, as well as a straight line from raising political awareness of an apparently passive spectator to her political mobilisation. As Rancière says:

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated.<sup>53</sup>

Rancière is critical of an art that aspires to emancipate the spectator that is passive and ignorant. He is sceptical of the art that seeks to reveal market relations, commodity consumerism and to make the viewer understand the nature of exploitation, inequality and class domination. Nothing guarantees the political efficacy of an artwork for there is no easy and direct transit between certain modalities and strategies of artistic production and the subjective determination to mobilise politically. Since there is no way to forecast the effects and affects that art may produce, the work of art that can challenge the distribution of the sensible and give rise to alternative forms of subjective enunciation does not assume that the artist has a superior knowledge and that the spectator needs to be enlightened. Under this understanding, the spectator is creative and has the capacity to interpret and translate what she is presented with. The role of the artist is not to teach spectators what she knows, but rather to encourage them to make new associations and dissociations from the images and representations they see. In this way, instead of serving as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, the work of art emerges as an unknown entity that the artist and the spectator are to verify together. This is what Rancière calls an 'emancipatory practice' of art. This is a practice that blurs the roles of specialist and amateur, active artist and passive spectator; the boundaries between looking and doing, viewing and knowing.

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<sup>52</sup> See Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p.64

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p.103.

Artist and spectator thus emerge as equals. Equally active and equal participants in reshaping and creating new possibilities of what can be thought, seen, experienced and said. As Rancière explains, the point of the emancipatory practice of art is not to confront reality with mimetic representations of it and/or to reveal the reality of inequality and domination behind these images. The point is to produce works of ‘fiction,’ to create ‘different realities, different forms of common sense -- that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings.’<sup>54</sup> In other words, these works of fiction allow for the emergence of new partitions of the sensible insofar as it is not possible to anticipate the effects on the spectator, hence the latter and the artist no longer fit the functions and destinations assigned to them in the social order.

What is valuable in Rancière’s theses about the relations between politics and aesthetics is the idea that the political entails a collective and plural practice, which is also -- as I will explain further on -- the view that Azoulay maintains with her model of photography. Politics is a matter of what people do collectively that calls into question and disrupts the hierarchical order of a social arrangement. And the political dimension of a work of art lies in its potential to involve the spectator as an active participant alongside the artist; a spectator who questions what is visible and not visible in the images and who invents new links between things and meanings. Rancière’s views coincide with and help clarify the ideas of Trinh and Steyerl that the spectator’s active partaking in the articulation of a documentary’s meaning precludes the existence of a single authority determining its meaning, and therefore subverts the hierarchies of the social order and configures a political critique. When filmmaker and spectator relate as equal participants in creating alternative meanings and novel ‘fictions’ they make evident the arbitrariness of the social arrangement and open the door for new possibilities of what can be experienced, thought and said. The connection with Derrida’s idea that politics pertains decisions and setting limits and conditions can be seen here more clearly. The filmmaker selects and makes choices as to how to present a story and join one shot to the next one, but she cannot foresee or control the spectator’s response, for her decisions are always ungrounded and imply risks. The filmmaker thus can only act as a host allowing spectators to create their

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.102.

own fictions. Leaving the door open for the arrival of the other (the spectator in this case), opens up multiple avenues that the meaning of the film can take.

The fact that the filmmaker cannot foresee and does not have control over what the viewer would see, experience or think of the documentary does not mean that the documentarist withdraws himself completely from the film. This cannot be done as the film always bears the presence of the filmmaker; the film always bears her voice. But the documentary that has the possibility to transgress the cultural, social and political hierarchies of the social arrangement has to allow spectator and artist to work collectively in determining the meaning of the images. As Trinh puts it:

A film is like a page of paper that I [the filmmaker] offer the viewer. I am responsible for what is within the boundary of the paper, but I do not control and do not wish to control its folding. The viewer can fold it horizontally, obliquely, vertically. They can weave the elements to their liking and background.<sup>55</sup>

The degree to which the spectator becomes involved is decided by her alone. But there is a special bond created between the filmmaker and the spectator, a political relationship to the extent that its emergence questions the distribution of functions and places of the social arrangement, and blurs the hierarchical distinction of filmmaker and viewer. This is also a relationship of hospitality in a Derridian sense, since the filmmaker offers his film for the spectator to freely engage with, without imposing a meaning onto the images that the viewer must admit. In this way, and as it will become clearer through my case studies, the filmmaker can be said to act as a ‘host’ to both the filmed subject and (especially) the spectator.

This is how I believe political relationships can be created through documentary films. By means of its form, the documentary brings filmmaker and spectator together as equal collaborators in the articulation of the film’s sense. This community of equality between documentarist and spectators already suggests the possibility of extrapolating Azoulay’s model of political relations of photography to the form of documentary. In the following section I will consider this extrapolation.

## **VI. A Triadic Model of Documentary Film?**

In the previous chapter I introduced Azoulay’s theoretical approach to photography. Her model puts forth an understanding of photography in terms of an aggregate of social practices; a set of socio-political relationships created through the interplay

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<sup>55</sup> Trinh, “‘Why a Fish Pond?’ Fiction at the Heart of Documentation,” interview by Laleen Jayamane and Anne Rutherford, in Trinh, *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.161-179 (p.173).

between three parties: the photographer, the photographed subject and the spectator. Azoulay argues that photographs of ‘the verge of catastrophe’ -- which portray populations whose lives are deprived of resources and subjected to such a constant violation of their rights that their living conditions are ‘normalised’ despite being utterly unacceptable -- can engender political relationships between the three parties involved in the photographic act.

Azoulay’s triadic model offers an alternative to traditional dualistic approaches that focus only on the photographer’s role and/or on the viewer’s experience, and that thus fail to acknowledge the agency of the photographed subject (or subjects) within the ‘social bind’ created by the photograph. Instead, her model grants visibility to the portrayed subject and denies the passivity of both the latter and the spectator in the relationships that surface through the event of photography. Azoulay aims to open up new theoretical perspectives about photography (and especially about photographs representing populations in precarious conditions) that go beyond the narrow view that considers photographs only in terms of their aesthetic value or the psychological and emotional impact that these images might induce. She proposes that a photograph and its meaning are the result of a social encounter between the photographed, the photographer and the viewer, and that none of these parties has exclusive claim over the ownership of the photograph, nor do they have it over its significance. Because there are many participants in the making of a photographic event, the meaning and intention of a photograph are always beyond the control of the photographer and exceed her purpose. This idea of Azoulay mirrors to a certain extent that of Rancière in that the artist has no way to forecast the effect that her artwork might have over the spectator, and in that this uncertainty is what prevents the photograph from having one single and fixed meaning. Consequently, because the photograph’s meaning is open, the spectator is free to participate in the determination of the artwork’s sense. The photographic act, for Azoulay, opens up a space for ongoing past and present encounters between the three parties.

In Azoulay’s model of photography, the photographed person is never rendered invisible; her gaze and her active involvement in the photographic act are affirmed as crucial elements in the constitution of the social and plural space created by the photograph. This is so because both the photographer and the spectator become addressees of the claims made by the portrayed subject, and they also acquire thereby (civic) responsibility for what is seen in the photograph. In this manner, a sphere of

political relationships is created among the photographer, the photographed subject and the viewer bound together by their mutual recognition and the civic duty to make visible the intolerable violations that people living on the ‘verge of catastrophe’ endure on a regular basis. Azoulay calls this socio-political bind the ‘civil contract of photography,’ and she claims that this ‘might be actualized by the act of watching, transforming, and disseminating what is seen [in the images of violence and suffering] into claims that demand action [and reparation].’<sup>56</sup>

There are some points implied by Azoulay’s model that are worth considering when thinking about its applicability to documentary film. The civil contract of photography entails an ‘ethics of spectatorship,’ since it commands that the viewer abandon its role as a passive addressee of an image and instead adopt that of the active addresser that articulates photographs of injured populations in terms of emergency statements. In this way, Azoulay grounds photographic spectatorship on civic duty, the civic duty towards the photographed persons. That is, the civic duty to make visible their sufferings and the intolerable deprivations these people undergo, and thus to call for the urgent rehabilitation of their ‘injured citizenship’ and their damaged life conditions. According to Azoulay, what follows from her model is that whenever citizenship has been in one way or another violated or injured, there is the possibility of rectifying such injustices through photography. Photography for her offers an arena for political relationships that are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state. Her proposal also implies a new understanding of the concept of citizenship in terms of a practice of solidarity and duty towards others, rather than in terms of a status that individuals are endowed with in a certain nation-state. This citizenship of photography entails the exercise of a particular set of civil skills that are employed to negotiate with the sovereign power and demand reparation for those whose rights have been violated.

As explained in Chapter 2, Azoulay ontologico-political model of photography works as an alternative to social power approaches that define the photographic act as inexorably repressive in character, for there is one party holding representational authority and power (the photographer) over the other party, which is subject of this representation (the photographed subject). While Azoulay does not deny that photography implies social hierarchies, her thesis of the civil contract of photography

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<sup>56</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.26.

allows for the photographic encounter to (potentially) challenge those very power relations to the extent that every such encounter exceeds the photographer's intention and opens up the possibility of myriad readings of what the photograph might mean. Since there is not a single authority to determine the meaning of the image, then the hierarchies of representation are eroded, and thus photography can be a space for politics and an emancipatory practice.

Returning to the discussion of documentary cinema, it is possible to draw some parallels between Azoulay's thesis of the political relationships engendered through the practice of photography; Derrida's hospitality; Rancière's views on politics and aesthetics; and Trinh's and Steyerl's ideas about documentary filmmaking and its potential to question and disrupt social, cultural and political hierarchies. I am interested in these parallels because I believe that documentary films can (also) provide a space for political (and ethical) relationships that escape the traditional conception that locates politics exclusively within the boundaries of the nation-state. And I think Azoulay's understanding of photography can be used as a groundwork to develop an approach to documentary that explains the political potential of this film form in these terms.

Both Steyerl and Trinh affirm that for a documentary to have the capacity to subvert the hierarchies of the social order, the film needs to question its own construction and presuppositions so as to destabilise its meaning and leave open the possibility of many interpretations. This opening invites (but does not force) the spectator to become an active observer of the moving images presented to her and so to question and contribute to the articulation of the sense of the images. It is mainly through the stylistic features of the film, its modes of organization, that this open space becomes possible. When the documentary refuses to allow a single authority to specify its meaning, then the spectator can, alongside the filmmaker, partake in the construction of the film's sense. Thus, in the same way Azoulay considers photographs, Steyerl and Trinh think that there is nothing like a fixed, ready-determined, meaning of (cinematic) documentary images. The meaning of these images is the result of the joint participation of those involved (one way or another) in the making and the watching of them. If a documentary film produces a dialogue of sorts between the filmmaker, the filmed subjects and the viewer; if it seeks to 'speak nearby' rather than to speak about the represented subjects; and if instead of attempting to lecture passive viewers incites them to examine the message conveyed

through the purposely concatenated images and sounds, then the documentary's meaning can be political.

The sense of collective creation of meaning, the sense of shared responsibilities and consequent blurring of roles and functions that Rancière explains with his understanding of the aesthetics of politics is implied in Azoulay's understanding of photography, and it is also present in Steyerl's and Trinh's views about what it is that makes documentary cinema into an art form with the capacity to have political effects. Indeed, the importance here lies in the idea that for a documentary to function as a politically emancipatory practice, it needs to eschew the pretension that the images it presents have a definitive, stable meaning, and the pretension that this meaning is not contingent. For only in this way can a documentary undermine hierarchies of knowledge and of the production of representation. As Guerra has put it, the documentary practice that aims to have a (collective) pedagogic role but that avoids imposing any teachings, is that which implies 'a social reorganization of labour [in the creation of documentary] representations, [and thus] the redistribution of responsibilities, often segmented between the authors, those represented in the work, the critics and the public.'<sup>57</sup>

This parallel between Azoulay's ideas on the political relationships of photography and those of Rancière, Steyerl and Trinh suggests how and to what extent the triadic model of photography can be extrapolated to explain documentary film and its potential to form political relationships that are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state. Even though Azoulay does not distinguish *made politically* from political photographs -- because for her all human interactions are political and hence all photographs are political, the distinction that Steyerl and Trinh make does help to elucidate the way in which spectators can become active participants in the documentary made politically and hence create a relationship with the filmmaker that is based on equality and that challenges hierarchies -- as Rancière explains. However, one point that is central to Azoulay's theory that is not fully developed by these other three authors is the thesis that the portrayed subject has agency within the sphere of socio-political relationships originated through the photograph. The represented subject is recognised as an active (and equal) participant in the photographic event, and so her grievances are heard. This is how Azoulay explains the moral and civic

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<sup>57</sup> Guerra, 'Negatives of Europe: Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies,' in Lind and Steyerl (eds), *The Greenroom*, pp.144-164 (p.154).

duty that both the photographer and the viewer have towards the photographed subject who is addressing them. Photographer and viewers must make visible and demand restoration for the violations suffered by the portrayed subjects.

This three-party model of photographic relations can still be reconciled with Steyerl's and Trinh's ideas on documentary. Since these two scholars propose that the articulation of the meaning of documentaries be done collectively, with the active participation of the spectator, this means that the latter is confronted with facts that are always negotiable. At the same time, the spectator's involvement in the determination of the sense of the film necessarily implies an opening towards the other. This other is here embodied by the filmmaker but also, very especially, by the represented subject. The presence of the latter prompts the viewer to consider who this filmed subject is and why she might be represented in this way. There is thus a negotiation between self and other, which means that not only is the bond created between filmmaker, filmed subject and viewer political but also ethical. The bond is political insofar as the hierarchical status of the documentarist -- who has the power and ownership of the means of representation -- is challenged by the fact that the meaning of the documentary cannot be anticipated and can only be articulated collectively, and thus there is a re-distribution of roles and responsibilities within the hierarchies of representation. The bond is ethical to the extent that there is an overt recognition of the other as an indispensable partaker in the process of negotiating facts and determining the sense of the film. Since the relationships thus created through the film are simultaneously ethical and political in character, then these are relationships of hospitality in the sense that Derrida understands this concept -- and which I discussed at length in chapter one.

In this way, Azoulay's triadic model of photography and the idea that photography can be a space for political relationships not directly mediated by the nation-state can be transposed to the field of documentary film. This is important because an approach to the documentary form following the guidelines of Azoulay's theory of photography opens up the possibility of understanding documentary in terms of its potential to originate political and ethical relationships, and thus to think of this film form beyond its representational qualities, and instead consider documentary in terms of its capacity to question and undermine cultural, social and political hierarchies. Similarly, understanding documentary film on the basis of a triadic model like the one Azoulay proposes allows considering the domain of politics

or the political outside of the framework of the nation-state and geo-political borders; a deterritorialised form of politics. Finally, as I argued in Chapter 2, the political bonds formed through the photographic event are relationships of hospitality, relationships based on the ethical and political responsibility we have towards other people regardless of their actual citizenship status. And if the documentary film can create, like photography, a field of political bonds not sanctioned by the nation-state, then documentaries can operate as vessels of hospitality.

Can this transposition be done seamlessly given that there are significant differences between the medium of photography and the medium of film that would arguably challenge a straightforward extrapolation of Azoulay's model to the documentary form? I will take issue with this question in the next section by looking at the differences and similarities of these two visual media. This discussion will continue in subsequent chapters where I will explore in greater depth the possibility and the extent of this transposition through my case studies.

### **VII. An Expanded Transposition. Movement, Time and Sound**

Because movement is one of the most obvious differences between photography and cinema, a first thing to consider when trying to extrapolate Azoulay's triadic model of photography to documentary film is whether a theory conceived to apply to still images could be transposed to a medium of moving images (and hence a temporal medium) coupled with sounds. I will argue that these factors absent from the medium of photography bear an impact on the ways the filmmaker, filmed subjects and (especially) the spectator engage with the film and with one another. In particular, I will argue that temporality and sound produce reflexive as much as affective responses from the spectator.

Movement necessarily implies change; and change in turn implies temporality. This means that movement, change and time are key elements distinguishing photography from film. While both photography and film are representational practices, photographic images capture and freeze a single moment in time (they embalm a moment in the past) but cinematic images, by contrast, capture equally consecutive and non-consecutive moments that are juxtaposed creating a sense of continuity. This means that the moving images are experienced by the viewer as if they were unfolding in the present even when they portray an event in the past. As Malin Wahlberg explains:

The analogy between photography and film has been justified either by the photographic base of filmic representation or by the experiential difference between the moving image and the photograph. The latter claim refers to the cinematic experience of continuous change, denoting the present tense of involvement and identification. The difference between a single still image and the filmic flow of sound-images in constant change has motivated the present tense of film.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that moving images are usually identified with the temporality of the present does not prevent them from also offering traces of the past -- just like the photographic image does. To be sure, cinematic images (fictional and non-fictional alike) constitute cultural representations marked by the date on which they were recorded, and therefore, they are also imprints of the past. This foremost trait of cinema as an imprint of past events provides the documentary form in particular with a close and inextricable relationship to the passing of time, the development of history, and consequently to the past, present and even the future. Documentary films in this sense belong to what Gilles Deleuze has characterised as 'time-images'<sup>59</sup> since they render visible the actual movement of time. For this reason, documentary images contain, display, intertwine and imply simultaneously several layers of time. The time of filming; the time being represented and/or referred to (often through the use of personal testimonies, interviews or found footage); the time of viewing (which can be discontinuous and dislocated since today's home film-watching allows spectators to stop the film and resume their viewing when they want); and finally the time that is evoked in the spectator's mind through her viewing. Thus film, and therefore documentary, is a time-based medium whose images are able to 'perform simultaneously as [images] of the present and [as traces] of the past [that is, as mementos of events occurred in the past]'.<sup>60</sup> This temporal quality, as I will explain further on, necessarily shapes the experience and response that viewers might have when seeing a film.

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<sup>58</sup> Wahlberg, *Documentary Time. Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.6.

<sup>59</sup> Deleuze distinguishes between movement-images and time-images, dedicating one volume of his work on cinema to each of these two types of images. By 'movement-image' Deleuze refers to those films that create a linear narrative by focusing on the movement and actions of the protagonist, like classical Hollywood films do. By contrast, the cinema of the 'time-image' is for Deleuze that cinema which represents the movement of time itself, and which offers a narrative structure and a layering of sound and image that are never linear. See Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London and New York: Continuum Impacts, 2005); and Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London and New York: Continuum Impacts, 2005).

<sup>60</sup> Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p.6.

Returning to Azoulay's model of photography, she proposes that spectators exercise their civic duty of 'watching' photographs of horror so as to adopt the perspective of actual witness of the unacceptable living conditions of populations on the verge of catastrophe. In watching photographs, instead of merely looking at them, viewers act as if the event or situation portrayed was happening in the present, in front of them. This presupposition is not necessary in the case of documentaries for, given that film is by nature a time-based medium, spectators watch the images and are thereby necessarily immersed in the flow of time presented through the documentary. The sense of duration and simultaneity of the present moment (obtained by way of the flux of images in a continuous sequence) and the trace of the past embedded in documentaries, directly provide the spectator with a sense of being present, of witnessing. This suggests that the spectator becomes involved in and with the documentary in a way that is different from the responses she would have towards a photograph.

Indeed, the way in which the spectator is affected by and engages with the documentary differs significantly from her encounter with photographs. This difference can be better understood if we draw on Wahlberg's conception of the trace in documentary film. Following André Bazin and Paul Ricoeur, Wahlberg defines the trace or image-memory in documentary filmmaking as that which "signifies without making anything appear," and yet [as that which] bears witness to something that happened and even to the passing of time itself.<sup>61</sup> Thus defined, the trace is characterized by its contingency and deferral. That is, the trace functions less as an imprint of an event that took place in the past, and more as a constituent sign within the narrative that seeks to re-construct a historical event. In this way, the viewer engages with the film not exclusively in terms of a mnemonic activity, but most importantly in terms of both an *affective* and *reflexive* process that consists in the organizing and combining of the (documentary) images so that they acquire sense. Wahlberg further claims that what prompts viewers to get involved in such articulation of the meaning of a documentary is precisely the dimension of duration and the temporal quality of this film form. For her, temporality and duration produce in the spectator the experience of a 'frame-breaking' event. This means that the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.41.

viewer has an aesthetic experience through which she ‘becomes disturbingly aware’<sup>62</sup> of the socially and culturally constructed preconceptions that frame and determine both her understanding and her affective responses to a given situation. Here ‘affective’ refers to the quality that produces ‘affects’ as Deleuze understands the term, that is, as experiences with no concrete form in themselves but with certain intensity, experiences that are non-conscious or pre-conscious but that are neither feelings nor emotions.<sup>63</sup> The frame-breaking event that according to Wahlberg is produced by a documentary creates an affective response in the viewer. This affective quality of frame-breaking is ‘propelled by a combination of manipulated space-time (duration, tempo, rhythm and repetition) and the enactment of the sound-image record as a trace of a historical and social realm.’<sup>64</sup> At the same time, this frame-breaking also entails a reflexive and critical response in the viewer insofar as it draws attention to and hence calls into question her own cultural and social preconceptions when she actively engages in making sense of the documentary. In this sense, this affective frame-breaking also has the potential to disrupt cultural, social and political hierarchies. Wahlberg’s theses on temporality and trace in the documentary form coincides with and confirms what Steyerl and Trinh say about how the form and stylistic features of documentaries determine the involvement of the viewers with the film, and hence also the political potential of the latter. At the same time, Wahlberg’s ideas make evident how these features of documentary make the viewer’s experience differ from the one she would have with a photograph. Hence, a transposition of Azoulay’s model of photography to documentary would have to take into account such differences.

Another temporal aspect that differentiates photography from documentary films lies in the process of making the film itself. As Kate Nash has explained, documentaries, particularly those that aim to be purely observational, imply ‘a long-term and intimate relationship between the participant [the filmed subject] and the filmmaker.’<sup>65</sup> Such a relationship is possible precisely because filming a

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.50.

<sup>63</sup> I will return to the question of affects and affection later on in Chapter 6 of this thesis. But it is worth recalling Deleuze’s own words on affect and affection in his book *Cinema 1*: ‘[affect] is not a sensation, a feeling, an idea, but the quality of a possible sensation feeling or idea.’ This means that affects precede feelings and emotions. See Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, p.100.

<sup>64</sup> Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p.53.

<sup>65</sup> Nash, ‘Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary,’ in *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2011), pp.224-239 (p.225), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08900523.2011.581971>> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> November 2012].

documentary, as opposed to taking a photograph, is a durational practice, it requires time and thus it provides the opportunity for the emergence of a different bond between the person having the means and power of representation and the represented subject. Nash argues that documentaries in the observational mode often do raise ethical questions related to the way in which the filmmaker might be invading the filmed subject's privacy or whether the former needs some sort of informed consent from the subject in order to avoid merely exploiting her image. However, precisely due to the fact that observational documentary requires the filmmaker to spend long periods of time with the subjects, this documentary mode 'also admits a degree of collaboration, thereby preserving the alterity of the other.'<sup>66</sup> The potential for a collaborative relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject is thus determined and enhanced by the temporality of the medium of film that is absent in photography. This collaboration would imply that filmmaker and portrayed subject can relate more as equals and not so much in hierarchical terms. I will explore this collaborative bond in more detail through my case studies, and particularly in chapter four.

Movement and temporality are not the only aspects that differentiate film and photography. Sound and the way it is married with the moving images add another dimension that also complicates a straightforward transposition of the triadic model of photography and the documentary film. Sound effects and music definitively play a significant role in the affective response that spectators have towards a film. Likewise, as Trinh has remarked,<sup>67</sup> asynchronicity between documentary images and sound openly signals the constructive nature of the film and destabilizes meaning, and this prompts spectators to actively engage with it, ask questions, and take part in the articulation of the sense of the film. Since sound is absent in photography, the spectator's affective and reflexive response to a photograph is again (just as it occurs with the temporal dimension of film) necessarily different from her response to a (documentary) film. This means that any attempt to transpose Azoulay's theoretical approach to photography to the form of documentary will require modification and expansion so as to accommodate the fact that these two media differ from each other and hence engage viewers in different ways.

As I have said, through my case studies I will explore more thoroughly the question of the forms of engagement that spectators can have with documentaries and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See Trinh, 'Why a Fish Pond?', pp.168-169.

also test and explore the extent to which Azoulay's theory of photography can be extrapolated to the domain of documentary. I will pay particular attention to the possible response that viewers might have to sound effects in chapter six of this thesis. My main argument will be that Azoulay's model can be transposed to documentary and that her views provide a way to approach this film form beyond representation and, instead, in terms of its potential to produce political and ethical relationships that escape the direct sanction of the nation-state. But this transposition, I will claim, cannot be seamless; it would also need to acknowledge the differences between the medium of photography and that of film.

Alongside movement, temporality and sound as key elements preventing a straightforward transposition of Azoulay's model of photography into documentary film, there is the question of whether her model, which aims to offer a new understanding of the political and civic life having the specific context of the Palestinian population, can indeed be extrapolated to other socio-political and geographical contexts. Azoulay has a particular interest in finding a theoretical approach that serves to subvert or counter the condition of 'regime-made disaster' under which Palestinians are forced to live by the Israeli government. This is why she proposes photography as a deterritorialised space of political relations that are not entirely subordinated to the rule of the nation-state. Her proposal of a citizenry of photography seeks to open up a space that restores citizenship and the possibility of civic and political action for those populations who suffer constant violation of their rights and denial of citizenship status. Hence she defends an idea of citizenship that, rather than being a status granting rights and duties to a person within a certain nation-state, is a practice of forming relationships of partnership and solidarity towards others who have been unjustly injured, regardless of what their actual citizenship status is.

It is worth noting here that Azoulay also focuses on photographs of women in *The Civil Contract* because she believes that women, like Palestinians, have an 'impaired' citizenship and are thus susceptible to a very specific type of harm and disaster -- namely, rape -- that is never examined in terms of their civic status. This suggests that she thinks that her model can apply to other populations and not just the Palestinians. It is my aim in this thesis to argue that her triadic model can be extrapolated not only to documentary films as yet another space for political relations beyond the exclusive mediation of the power of the nation-state, but also that the

extrapolation can be done to encompass other geographical and political contexts (not just Palestine) where populations have their rights systematically violated due to their citizenship status (or their lack of it). In particular, I want to argue that Azoulay's theory can be transposed to include those populations that have to migrate or cross borders irregularly or without documents because they then become stateless and are thus susceptible to excruciating rights violations, living under unacceptable conditions. What I propose therefore is a double transposition of her triadic model of photography: first, a transposition to the field of documentary, and second, a transposition to other contexts beyond Palestine where individuals find themselves without the protection of any nation-state. This double transposition (from photography to documentary cinema and from the specific case of the Palestinian population to people who experience border-crossings) will allow me to show not only that documentaries can be alternative spaces for political relationships that are not under the direct mediation of the nation-state power but also, consequently, that the documentary about border-crossings as an interstitial film form between fiction and fact, reality and artifice, has the potential to function as a site hospitality relationships, a vessel for hospitality encounters in a Derridian sense. This is what I aim to do in the next chapters by taking particular documentaries as my case studies and analysing them in terms of their stylistic traits, their modalities and the way they were produced in order to test the possibility of this double transposition.

### **VIII. Final Remarks**

My aim in this chapter has been to argue that Azoulay's theses that photography is a practice that gives rise to political relations that are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state and that these relationships constitute a novel form of understanding citizenship can be extrapolated to the field of documentary cinema. I have claimed that documentaries, like photography, can also produce relationships of ethical and political responsibility and solidarity between documentarist, spectator and filmed subjects. I am interested in Azoulay's approach because I think it serves as a groundwork to explain alternative forms of politics not constrained by territorial boundaries. However, I have explained that the way in which these relationships that escape the direct sanction of the state emerge through documentary films necessarily differs from the way photography produces this type of bond, for cinema and photography are two distinct visual media that hence produce different responses in the viewer.

I have linked Rancière's ideas on aesthetics and politics with Steyerl's and Trinh's views that documentaries can be politically critical when their form is self-reflexive and open to different readings and meanings. Through this link I have explained how the spectator can become actively engaged with the film and thereby form ethico-political relationships with the filmmaker and the filmed subjects in a way that resembles the political relationships of the civil contract of photography proposed by Azoulay. These relationships of documentary, just like the ones Azoulay says are formed through the photographic event, also escape the direct regulation of the nation-state and are based on equality rather on a duty imposed by the sovereign state. Similarly, like Derrida's view of politics as decisions that cannot calculate the arrival of the other, filmmakers make choices as regards the form, style and content of the film but they cannot anticipate the spectators' response. The filmmaker's decisions thus remain open to the spectator's arrival that will necessarily challenge and transform such decisions.

I have proposed that because movement adds a temporality dimension to film that is absent in the still image of photography, then the involvement that the filmmaker, filmed subjects and (very particularly) the spectator might have with the film and with one another has to be different from the way they might engage with and through a photograph. I drew on Wahlberg's work to explain that through documentary there is an experience of a sense of duration or of an ongoing real-time experience of the present moment, but also of a sense of a trace of an actual past event. This dual experience results in affective and reflexive responses on the part of the spectator who is thereby prompted to adopt an active part in the determination of the meaning of the documentary and to question her own social and cultural predispositions, and hence to disrupt the hierarchies imposed by the social arrangement. Wahlberg's ideas on the temporality of documentaries show how Azoulay's model can be transposed to the documentary while acknowledging the temporal quality of this form. Through my case studies, I will further explore this transposition and question how sound effects and music (and silence) produce a similar affective and reflexive response in the viewer to that produced by time.

This transposition that I am proposing is double. I want to argue for the possibility of extending Azoulay's view of the political relationships of photography not just to the field of documentary but also to other contexts beyond Palestine and the conditions under which Palestinians live. In particular, I will claim that just like

there might be political relations created through the photographic event that are not sanctioned by the nation-state and can make visible and protest against the injustices suffered by populations without a citizenship status (like the Palestinians), documentaries that portray border-crossings and migration also have the potential to form such political relationships.

Thus the purpose of the following chapters is to examine the feasibility of this double transposition by means of three case studies. These cases are documentaries that take issue with border-crossings and migration occurring in different geographical and political contexts, and they approach the topic by employing different stylistic and narrative strategies and thus adopting one or more of the modalities of documentary that Renov proposes (and that I introduced in this chapter). Each of these cases is aimed at exploring the role of one of the three parties (the filmed subject, the spectator and the filmmaker) in the hope to shed light on how and to what extent the triadic model of photography can be extrapolated to documentary films about border-crossings.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Crossing Borders and Re-enacting Stories. The Case of *Border Farm***

#### **I.**

In the previous three chapters I have argued for the need for alternative ways to understand politics and the political beyond the confines marked by geo-political borders and beyond the direct sanction of the nation-state. The phenomenon of undocumented migration and displaced populations that are vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation and violations due to their lack of citizenship status call for other forms of political relationships and for changes in the conceptualization and practice of citizenship. Following Derrida,<sup>1</sup> I explained that a politics and an ethics of hospitality open up the door to ways of relating to others that are not reduced to the framework of the nation-state, ways of relating that are based on our (ethical and political) responsibility towards others without regard of where they come from and what their actual citizenship might be. I then presented Azoulay's theory of photography and conceptualization of citizenship that derives from it.<sup>2</sup> This is a concept of citizenship that, rather than determining a status or a membership of an individual in a nation-state that entitles her to certain rights and duties, is defined in terms of relationships of partnership and solidarity amongst individuals. My claim was that Azoulay's proposal of photography as a practice that gives rise to a space of political bonds between photographer, portrayed subjects and spectators actualizes the practice of hospitality as understood by Derrida. The final point that I have made is that Azoulay's triadic model of photography can be transposed to the domain of documentary cinema. The documentary form -- and in particular documentaries about border-crossings and the experience of migration -- can also operate as spatio-temporal sites for the emergence of relationships based on solidarity, responsibility and partnership not regulated directly by the nation-state, and hence as relationships that actualize the ethics and politics of hospitality.

The transposition I am proposing cannot be done simply and straightforwardly for it has to accommodate the fact that documentary cinema and photography are two different visual media. It has to accommodate the fact that the moving images of

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<sup>1</sup> See Derrida, *Of Hospitality*.

<sup>2</sup> See Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*.

documentary add the temporal dimension of duration as well as the element of sound effects, which are both absent from photography. Similarly, I also intend to extrapolate Azoulay's thesis to other populations and other geographical contexts. As I explained in Chapters 2 and 3, Azoulay is concerned with finding ways to 'rehabilitate' populations who live under conditions of 'disaster' and are therefore vulnerable to constant violations. She is especially concerned with the case of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, and she thus proposes an alternative conception of citizenship that can be applied to this deprived population and rehabilitate it. The extrapolation that I argue for seeks to extend to other populations that, similar to the Palestinians, are stateless and/or suffer the lack of protection that the nation-state is supposed to guarantee. This is why I propose to transpose Azoulay's model to documentaries that are about border-crossings and the experience of migration. For as I maintained in chapter one, geo-political borders install a regime of exclusion, and populations that are displaced and forced to cross borders irregularly are exposed to intolerable sufferings and exploitation precisely because they are excluded from and/or abandoned by the protection of the nation-state. In this way, the transposition that I here pose has a double character. It aims to take Azoulay's theoretical approach to photography as a place for political relations to the field of documentary film and to extend it to the context of borders and migration.

It is my aim in this chapter and the following two to test out this transposition and further discuss documentaries and their potential to provide alternative understandings of politics that are deterritorialised and unhinged from the direct sanction of the nation-state. Following the scheme of Azoulay's triadic model, each of my case studies will be mainly focused on the role of one of the three parties involved in the political and ethical relationships emerging through documentary, either the filmed subjects, the filmmaker or the spectators. Thus, in this specific chapter I will consider the way and extent to which the represented subjects actively participate within the documentary and thus in their own representation, and how this participation shapes the (political and ethical) relationships established between the filmmaker and the spectator. Azoulay believes that the way in which the portrayed subjects living in conditions of disaster take active part in the photographic event and thus enter into a relationship with the photographer and the viewers is by addressing the latter, by demanding that their injuries and deprived lives be made visible and repaired. How can this idea of the active participation of the represented subjects be

transposed to documentaries about border-crossings and migration? How can the filmed subjects form bonds with the filmmaker and the viewers so that they become equally active in the articulation of the meaning of the documentary? To what extent can these bonds call into question the hierarchies of the social order and hence be considered politically subversive? These are the main questions that I seek to address in this chapter by using as my case study the documentary *Border Farm* by Thenjiwe Nkosi (2010), a dramatised documentary about Zimbabwean border-crossers who work in a farm in the northern part of South Africa. I will engage in a textual and stylistic analysis of this film, but will also discuss the way it was produced by drawing on interviews and email exchanges with the filmmaker. This analysis will help me consider the above mentioned questions as they arise for this specific documentary, and ultimately examine whether documentary films can function as spaces for the emergence of relations of ethical and political responsibility amongst individuals without the direct mediation of the nation-state.

## II. A Dramatised Documentary

Nkosi's work has been strongly influenced by her own migration background. Her father was a member of the Pan Africanist Congress in South Africa that during the late 1950s and early 1960s actively opposed the apartheid regime. Due to her father's political views, Nkosi's family spent over 31 years in exile in the United States. In addition, Nkosi's maternal grandparents were Greek refugees from Turkey in the 1920s. This family background and the consequent experiences derived from her own immigration from and to South Africa have determined the interests and work of Nkosi. For this reason she has produced various artworks where she explores the ideas of migration and the sense of belonging to a community and/or to a country. In her documentary *Elephant King* (2008),<sup>3</sup> for instance, she interviews members of her family and of the South African community in order to discover the origins of her family's surname and thus to reflect on her own identity. *Darfurian Voices* (2008) was a human rights advocacy project commissioned to Nkosi by the not-for-profit organisation 24 Hours for Darfur.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this organisation is to document and broadcast what Darfurian refugees think about the issues of peace, justice and reconciliation by conducting public opinion research and recording video testimonies.

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<sup>3</sup> See Anon, 'Thenjiwe Nkosi,' in *Bag Factory Art Studios Website*, <<http://www.bagfactoryart.org.za/?p=50>> [accessed 6 January 2011].

<sup>4</sup> See *Darfurian Voices Website*, <<http://www.darfurianvoices.org/index-new.php>> [accessed January 20<sup>th</sup> 2011].

In this film Nkosi presents, through a series of interviews, the testimonials and viewpoints of several displaced Darfurians in the refugee camps of eastern Chad. The commission for this film, she explains in an interview, came to her while she was shooting and working on her own art project in those very refugee camps. The aim of her video project was to create a critical artwork about the ‘Disney Land-like’<sup>5</sup> infrastructure created by the non-governmental organizations working in these camps.

The dramatised documentary *Border Farm* is one of the products that emerged from a larger art project conceived and led by Nkosi and, at the same time, it also constitutes the documentation of the developing process of this art project. The motivation behind *Border Farm* was Nkosi’s interest in the fact that immigrant workers in fruit farms of the Limpopo province, in northern South Africa, largely lack collective forms of organisation and are not able to unionize due to the exploitative conditions under which they work. Nkosi has said that even though there are some churches and football teams in this area of South Africa in which these migrant workers are able to participate, they are unable to organise collectively and thus to have a greater sense of community because most of their time has to be spent in the fields picking fruits and they have very few opportunities to share non-work related activities with other migrants. As Azoulay might say, the life conditions of these migrant farm workers are conditions of disaster since they are easily exploited by the farm owners and suffer countless injuries and injustice at the hand of either the smugglers that transport them into South Africa or other people that take advantage of their vulnerable conditions.

With this in mind, and after visiting several of these farms in the border area between South Africa and Zimbabwe, Nkosi started an art project on one of the farms in the city of Musina, South Africa. This project consisted in creating a drama group in which the voluntary members could take part and collaborate in different art workshops and thereby build a sense of community among the participants. Nkosi’s idea was to provide the group with a space where they could speak out about common experiences as immigrants and farm workers, as well as to document and explore these life experiences using drama, photography, video and creative writing. The art workshops functioned both as skills-transfer programmes and as a way to create art works about an experience. Nkosi ran these workshops in cooperation mainly with

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<sup>5</sup> Nkosi, Interview via email exchange by Pantoja-Peschard, unpublished manuscript (12th August, 2011), Windows Word file, p.1.

South African photographer, Raymond Marlowe, and the Zimbabwean drama workshop facilitator, Tapiwa Marovatsanga. But there were also four other South African facilitators involved in the project and the different workshops.

In a telephone interview with Polly Savage on January 23 2011,<sup>6</sup> Nkosi explains that the collective was formed by approximately 25 people (which later took the name of the Dulibadzimu Theatre Group), most of them from Zimbabwe and all of whom had crossed the border into South Africa as undocumented immigrants. A Zimbabwean man, Meza, had already started writing a drama script, and it was through him that the rest of the members of the group were recruited. Meza's script was enriched and modified by the group of migrant farm workers and this became the core around which the art workshops were planned.

The photographs, the written texts and the video recorded dramatizations that resulted from the different workshops with the group of migrants were exhibited. The exhibition was called 'Border Farm,' and it allowed the Zimbabwean immigrants to tell their stories while, at the same time, providing a platform for displaying these real-life narratives in South Africa, the country to where they had migrated. 'Border Farm' was exhibited both at the Bag Factory<sup>7</sup> and in the Musina Municipal Buildings in 2010. The defining theme, around which the exhibition was organised, as Nkosi puts it, was 'life in-between.' The idea was to show 'the pressures, challenges, absurdities and opportunities'<sup>8</sup> which migrant farm workers experience by living in liminal zones, neither here nor there, and by having precarious lives. The Limpopo river -- separating Zimbabwe and South Africa -- alongside the video footage and photographic images portraying the migrant's lives around its waters functioned as a symbol of this condition of 'in-betweenness.' Similarly, crossing the river became a powerful 'metaphor of passage and catharsis'<sup>9</sup> for the group members. Thus, as curator of the exhibition, Nkosi decided that the river would be the core concept around which the show was to be organised. And as will become clear further on in this chapter, the qualities of liminality and in-betweenness are also defining aspects of

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<sup>6</sup> Nkosi, Telephonic interview by Savage (23rd January, 2011), Windows Media Audio file.

<sup>7</sup> The Bag Factory, officially named the Fordsburg Artists' Studios, is a collective art studio space in Johannesburg, South Africa, which also offers a residency programme for artists from the African continent and the world. Thenjiwe Nkosi is currently one of the studio artists at the Bag Factory. See, *Bag Factory Artists Studios Website*, <<http://www.bagfactoryart.org.za/?cat=3>> [accessed 17th January 2011].

<sup>8</sup> Nkosi, 'Sheet B: Project Description and Motivation,' unpublished manuscript (12th February, 2010), Microsoft Word file.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the documentary *Border Farm* insofar as it combines fictionalized scenes with documenting footage and blurs the lines between filmmaker (and also artists and workshop facilitators) and subjects filmed.

The dramatised documentary also entitled *Border Farm* was, along with the exhibition, another one of the outcomes of the workshops with the group of farm workers. The film makes use of conventional documentary aesthetics and methods. For instance, it employs extreme close-up shots to present the interviews and personal testimonies of some of the group members who speak about their experience of crossing the border. It also adopts the so-called ‘voice of God’<sup>10</sup> commentary in order to explain the process of the workshops and of the filmmaking itself. The off-screen voice used here and throughout the film belongs to one of the group’s members, Norman Masawi. While the ‘talking heads’ of the migrants function as record of their experiences, the explanatory ‘voice of God’ adds to the persuasive or promotional modality of this documentary, which, as I said in chapter three following Renov, is the intrinsic function of all documentaries.<sup>11</sup> Thus, *Border Farm* provides viewers with a sense of evidence of the real conditions of these migrants. But it also guides spectators through the sequence of images and suggests what these mean with the specific purpose of stressing the collaborative nature of the project, and the active involvement of the farmers.

However, at the same time, the film draws on techniques and narrative styles that have usually been attributed to fictional cinema. For example, there are several scenes where the migrants re-enact crossing the river and the border fence clandestinely, mimicking the way in which they had in fact crossed. There are also various scripted sequences that recreate and show the abuses to which border crossers are subjected by smugglers and the precarious work conditions they need to endure. These fictionalized scenes help construct the dramatic narrative of *Border Farm* and therefore they also constitute the expressive modality of this documentary or, to use Renov’s terms,<sup>12</sup> these fictional and dramatic elements are part of the creative and subjective aspects of the film.

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<sup>10</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 3, the ‘voice of God’ commentary is that where the speaker is heard but not seen, it has been usually employed in documentaries that aim to be more openly rhetorical or argumentative. See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, pp.105-109.

<sup>11</sup> See Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics of Documentary.’

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

The way in which *Border Farm* intertwines elements of non-fiction filmmaking with those more typical of fictional cinema gives the film a rich texture and many layers that can lend themselves to myriad readings, depending on which elements and/or functions one chooses to focus on. To what extent can we read *Border Farm* as a space where certain political and ethical relationships between individuals are formed independently of the mediation of national-state? To what extent is it possible to claim that the subjects filmed in this documentary actively take part in these political and ethical relations? The rest of this chapter will explore these questions by looking at how Azoulay's triadic model of photography can be extrapolated to documentary film, and in particular to *Border Farm*. Equally, this chapter will discuss in which sense and to what degree the political and ethical relationships that can emerge through this documentary have the potential to subvert social, cultural and political hierarchies. Finally, the chapter will also think through how these relationships can be said to be relationships of hospitality in a Derridian sense as well as how they allow for the emergence of an alternative conceptualization of citizenship, a notion of citizenship that is not a status a person has but a practice through which individuals relate such that their political duty is toward one another instead of toward the governing power.

### **III. The Triadic Model in *Border Farm*: The Relationship Between The Filmmaker and the Filmed Subjects**

In the last chapter I argued that Azoulay's triadic model of photography can be extrapolated to documentary provided some adjustments are made to this theoretical approach so that the differences between the medium of photography and that of cinema are taken into account in the explanation of the potential relationships emerging between filmmaker, filmed subjects and viewers. In this section I will explore how this three-party relationship emerges in the particular case of the documentary *Border Farm*.

Azoulay proposes that photographs of people who either have suffered the violation of their rights or who have been deprived of their rights altogether create a space of political relations between the photographer, the photographed subjects and the viewer. These relationships are not directly governed by the nation-state, and so the political space they constitute is deterritorialised for it functions beyond the framework of geo-political borders. Azoulay's argument is that photographs depicting

populations on the ‘verge of catastrophe’<sup>13</sup> have the potential to make claims on viewers so that the situation of the photographed subjects becomes visible, and thereby gets considered intolerable and in urgent need of reparation. According to her, it is through their gaze that spectators of photographs of populations on the verge of catastrophe become addressees of the claims made by the photographed subjects, and hence acquire a duty both to resist injury inflicted on others (i.e. the photographed subjects) and to demand the restoration of the latter’s impaired citizenship. In this sense, photography for Azoulay has the potential to restore citizenship where it has been damaged. What is more, the photograph in this way stops being regarded as a product owned by the photographer, who has exclusive access to its meaning. Instead, the sense of the photograph is always open and it is collectively constructed with each and every different encounter between the photographer, the portrayed subjects and the spectators. Photography for Azoulay is therefore a social practice always evolving and remaining open-ended.

According to Azoulay, the way in which the photographed subjects become *equal* partakers within the citizenry of photography is, first, through letting themselves be seen by the photographer and the (potential or actual) spectator, and second, by directing emergency claims to the latter. These portrayed subjects are active citizens just as much as the photographer and the viewers are, and it is the civil contract that binds all three parties to one another in the rehabilitation of citizenship. The partnership and solidarity these parties have to each other is not motivated by compassion, empathy, shame or pity, but by the contract. In Azoulay’s words:

I employ the term “contract” in order to shed terms such as “empathy,” “shame,” “pity,” or “compassion” as organizers of the spectator’s gaze in photographs. Within this political space, the point of departure for the mutual relations between the various “users” of photography cannot be empathy or mercy. It must be a covenant for the rehabilitation of their citizenship in the political sphere within which we, spectators and photographed persons, are all ruled. When the photographed persons address the spectator, claiming their citizenship in [...] the “citizenry of photography,” they cease to appear as stateless or as enemies – they cease to appear how the sovereign regime strives to construct them.<sup>14</sup>

How is it then that these political relationships of photographs can be mirrored in documentary films about border-crossings and migration? More specifically, how can these political and ethical relationships not sanctioned by the nation-state emerge in

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<sup>13</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.291.

<sup>14</sup> Azoulay, “Ariella Azoulay on her Book *The Civil Contract of Photography*,” p.2.

*Border Farm*? In which sense is Nkosi, as the filmmaker, not the owner of the documentary and who has exclusive access to the meaning of the film? To what extent are the migrant farmers active partakers in *Border Farm*?

The first, and perhaps most striking, set of relations to be noted in *Border Farm* is that between Nkosi and the members of the Dulibadzimu Theatre Group. The very purpose of the South African filmmaker's art project establishes, from the outset, both an ethical and political commitment of the filmmaker to each of the members of the drama group. The fact that Nkosi set herself to organize art workshops through which migrant farm workers could learn some skills that would allow them to express their experiences as border crossers and thereby also gain a certain sense of community, means that the filmmaker adopts certain (political and ethical) commitment to the farm workers. This already raises the issue of what kind of intervention Nkosi produced with her project. It also raises the question of whether the relationships that were created with Nkosi's project are not straightforwardly hierarchical insofar as it was ultimately the filmmaker who determined that a particular group of people needed to document their experiences and acquire some skills. Equally, the idea that these farm workers were lacking a sense of community suggests that it was Nkosi's own understanding of 'community' that was being promoted with her project. However, could it have been otherwise? Would these migrant workers have had the chance to film their testimonies, learn how to use video and photo cameras and get to know better other farm workers without the intervention of Nkosi and the other facilitators? I will delve into these questions later on, but I will first consider the manner in which *Border Farm* was made and also the footage and dialogues, as well as the montage and its stylistic features. For it is through its formal qualities that this documentary makes evident the relations created between Nkosi, the migrants of the drama group, and also the potential or actual spectators.

Like any documentary in its most basic modality -- that of being a record,<sup>15</sup> *Border Farm* documents, preserves and reveals real events. Thus the film includes interviews and personal testimony footage throughout in order for the filmed subjects (the members of the drama group) to give accounts of their own experiences as border-crossers and low-wage farm workers in the Limpopo province. The film opens with a hand-held camera shot of hand-written sheets of paper and zooms in to a pair

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<sup>15</sup> See Renov, 'Toward a Poetics,' pp.25-28.

of hands moving these sheets. Simultaneously, a diegetic yet off-screen voice explains that these papers contain the script the Dulibadzimu group wrote collectively for the film. A cut is then followed by an extreme close-up shot of a Zimbabwean farm worker explaining that he migrated to South Africa in the hope of finding a job and improving his living conditions. He continues, adding that it had not been his purpose to cross the border and live away from his family, but that the economic situation in Zimbabwe had forced him to risk crossing the Limpopo River as an undocumented migrant. Similar testimonies of the farm workers telling their own migration stories are skilfully interwoven with hand-held camera footage shot both during a working day at the crop fields, and also during the course of the art workshops as well as the rehearsals of the scripted scenes in the compound and the river bank. Thus we see alternating images of the migrants selecting fruits, of them singing and clapping at one of the workshop sessions, and of them re-enacting how they crossed the border.

In this sense, *Border Farm* not only documents the migrants' experiences and everyday lives in the fruit farm, but it also offers a record of the process of the art project itself. Thus, for instance, immediately after a shot in which a woman explains that she decided to join the drama group and the workshops in order to learn more about her life and other people's lives, a shot frames the members of the group when they are giving instructions to one another about how they are supposed to act in front of the camera when they re-enact crossing the border fence. Throughout the film, almost all the sequences that present the rehearsals and the workshops are accompanied by voice-over commentaries of one of the participants that serve to explain to viewers how the project -- and the film -- evolved and the motivations that guided the group during the process. Thus, for instance, we hear: 'we wanted to capture our stories on film; we wanted to go back to the places we crossed and show the world what we did.'<sup>16</sup> It is important to note here that this voice-of-God commentary was always made by the participants in the group, and never by Nkosi or another one of the workshop facilitators. The voice-of-God is usually thought of as the embedded yet strong presence of either the filmmaker or the enunciator, which as Laura Rascaroli explains, does not always coincide with the subjective expression of the filmmaker and instead it 'often represents a broad, institutional authority.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nkosi, *Border Farm* (South Africa: Thenjiwe Nkosi with the Dulibadzimu Theatre Group, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera. Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), p.13.

Nonetheless, the fact that it is the migrants' voice that is used seems to suggest that Nkosi is at least willing to share her representational powers and hierarchy as filmmaker. I will discuss this in more detail below.

*Border Farm* can be deemed a dramatized documentary -- and in fact this is how Nkosi herself describes it -- because it mixes techniques from non-fictional filmmaking with scripted scenes and re-enactments. As mentioned before, it is this collage of techniques that gives the film its particular expressive modality and thus adds to its other functions as a record and a promotional or persuasive documentary. There is a sequence, for example, in which the drama group re-enacts a scene where they cross the Limpopo River led by a smuggler who, once they reach the other side, asks the migrants for more money and deprives them of the very last few possessions they have. Later on in the film, we see yet another participant -- a Zimbabwean widow -- who narrates on screen how hard it had been for her to find a job once she crossed the border, and also the blackmail from potential employers she had to endure. This testimony is then illustrated by a sequence where a young participant impersonates a migrant in a scene where she goes around the compound asking for a job and the only offer she gets is as an underpaid childminder.

In addition to these staged scenes, *Border Farm* also includes extra-diegetic music, a feature supposedly more commonly used in fictional cinema than in traditional documentaries, especially those following a 'purely' observational form like the documentaries of the direct cinema movement.<sup>18</sup> This off-screen and non-diegetic instrumental music accompanies some of the scenes shot while the members of the group were in fact working in the fields picking fruit or preparing it for its transportation. This is yet another element that enriches the narrative and adds to the expressive function of the film. And hence -- as Renov would say -- this shows the subjective and/or creative contribution of Nkosi as filmmaker. By contrast, there are other scenes that have diegetic music. The farm workers chose a traditional Zimbabwean song about migration that they performed live with some clapping and drumming during the workshops. Nkosi explains that the group were all happy to sing and experiment with it, and that the lyrics of this song say: 'Those hills, those far off hills, they make me think of Zimbabwe.'<sup>19</sup> As I explained in Chapter 3, music and sound effects are one of the elements that crucially distinguish the medium of film

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<sup>18</sup> See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*.

<sup>19</sup> Nkosi, Interview via email by Pantoja-Peschard, p.1.

from that of photography. For this reason, an attempt to extrapolate Azoulay's triadic model of photography to the documentary has to include a consideration as to how sound might bear consequences on the political relationships that could potentially emerge through this film form. In the case of *Border Farm*, the choice of the traditional song and its performance on screen is arguably a sign of the active participation of the migrants in the film, and hence of the way in which they related to the filmmaker as collaborators, but also to the potential viewers insofar as the group wanted to be filmed performing a song that is presumably significant for them. In chapter six, by means of another case study, I will further examine the potential effects that sound can have on spectators in terms of affect and in terms of the way they engage with documentaries.

The fact that the film is narrated entirely by one of the participants (and never by the filmmaker) and that the scripted scenes were all written collectively by the drama group seems to confirm a sort of political and ethical commitment from Nkosi to the group members. At the same time, this fact also gives evidence of the reciprocal relationship that the farm workers have with Nkosi. *Border Farm* in this sense could constitute a space for horizontal and non-hierarchical ethical and political relationships between the filmed subjects (i.e. the participants) and the filmmaker. Indeed, the film allows for the emergence of a type of mutual hospitality. While the group members welcome the filmmaker into their lives by letting her film their everyday errands on the farm and their personal migration experiences; the filmmaker, in turn, welcomes them into her art project and the film, and thereby acquires a commitment to disseminate the voice and claims of these migrant farm workers. The collective quality that this documentary has suggests at least certain willingness of the filmmaker to let go her position of power or, as Rancière would say, a willingness to 'dis-identify' with her role as artist and person with representational powers. Equally, since the migrants partake in the production of their own representation, they seem to counter their role as the passive represented subjects. This blurring of roles seems to suggest the possibility of a new 'distribution of the sensible,'<sup>20</sup> a re-ordering of the functions and positions established by the social arrangement.

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<sup>20</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, p.12

It nonetheless could be argued here that because the editing and hence the final cut of the film was done entirely by Nkosi (with the help of a film editor), then *Border Farm* is not a truly collective product between her and the farm workers. And in this sense, what could seem like the formation of a space for horizontal ethical and political relations among equals beyond the framework of the nation-state is simply another vertical power relation of filmmaker and filmed subjects. The argument would be that if Nkosi is the one who ultimately decided how the shots would be linked to one another and what the film would look like in the end, then the filmmaker is in a position of superiority over the drama group members since she still has control over the representational powers that the migrants do not have.

Trinh has been particularly critical of projects and documentaries that like *Border Farm* seek to either ‘give voice’ to those who have no chance to express themselves or to ‘make visible’ their deprived living conditions. Trinh claims that these aims are problematic because the mere idea of ‘giving voice’ to someone or that of ‘making visible’ what is not visible, already entail a distinction between those who can give voice to others and those who do not have a voice and need to be given one. ‘Giving voice’ and ‘making visible’ in this sense necessarily involve power relations. What is more, the filmmaker is always implicated in the film, and therefore her voice can never be erased. As Trinh puts it:

The notion of giving voice is so charged because you have to be in such a position that you can “give voice” to other people. And also the illusion that you “give voice,” whereas the film is very much the voice of the filmmaker -- the term “voice” meaning here the place from which meaning is produced, through both coherence and discontinuity. No matter how plural and diverse the voices featured, one always has to point back to the apparatus and the site from which these voices are brought out and constructed, and so the notion of giving voice remains extremely paternalistic.<sup>21</sup>

According to Trinh those documentaries that attempt to ‘give a voice’ to certain people or ‘make visible’ their suffering not only implicate power relations, but also by having these aims they are films that are unaware of their own ideological presuppositions and the hierarchical powers that shape and support them. If a documentary is to remain open to multiple meanings, to avoid having a single source of authority and hence to be critical of political and social hierarchies, then it must be able to self-direct questions about its own form of representation and the ideology underpinning it.

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<sup>21</sup> Trinh, ““Why a Fish Pond?” Fiction at the Heart of Documentation,” p.169.

There is undoubtedly a relationship of power between Nkosi and the participants in the *Border Farm* project, and this needs to be acknowledged if we are to understand to what extent there is also a bind between filmmaker and filmed subjects that could erode or at least interrupt their initial unequal relationship. Here some things could be said in response to the objection that *Border Farm* maintains rather than disrupts the power relations between the documentarist and the portrayed migrants. First, while it is true that Nkosi is better off than any of the group members and that she had the technical skills and knowledge to make a film and the economic resources to run the workshops, it needs to be acknowledged that she would not have been able to make *Border Farm* or even implement the workshops without the active participation and collaboration of the drama group. Indeed, all the members agreed to take part in the workshops and, more importantly, they gave their consent to be filmed while they were working in the fields, rehearsing a scene or telling their personal stories. As one of the farm workers puts it on screen: 'I am telling this story, so that people know that we are suffering in this world.'<sup>22</sup> Could the hierarchical relation between Nkosi and the migrants have been otherwise? Could the group members ever find a way to represent themselves and have their artwork exhibited without any external help? Are not the multiple hierarchical relations here at work precisely what authenticate the project as a collective production? It is my belief that despite the fact that Nkosi's voice is ever present and her representational power could not be eroded, this power need not be entirely negative. Insofar as the hierarchical differences are acknowledged openly, the role of Nkosi can be likened to that of an enabler of sorts that facilitates the filmed subjects with a way of representing themselves, rather than simply use or exploit the migrants for the purposes of her art project. The important thing here is that Nkosi recognises her own status as filmmaker, and that she made every effort to make the aim and process of her project overt both to the migrants and within the film. This acknowledgment indicates that she was aware of the questions that a project like *Border Farm* could bring up. In Nkosi's words:

Every documentary is skewed to some extent by the perspectives of its makers. But what makes *Border Farm* interesting to me is that the 'making' and 'perspective' of the film was owned jointly by me (the 'filmmaker'/editor) and the group (who were the 'writers'). It was

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<sup>22</sup> Nkosi, *Border Farm*.

important to me that I was implicated in the film, and that the process that we went through in making the film was portrayed/made 'transparent.'<sup>23</sup>

A second thing to note in this respect, is that the filmmaker also appears in the film in the course of the workshops and at the end of the film in the credits sequence when each of the participants and the facilitators introduce themselves and say where they come from. The closing credits sequence crucially allows for everyone in the film to be accredited as equal partakers both in the film and in the art project as a whole. Here Nkosi allowed the camera to be directly pointed at her up-close, thus she appears as yet another talking head on the film. Without a doubt there are many examples of documentarists that openly make their presence on screen. For instance, filmmaker Michael Moore in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002)<sup>24</sup> is followed by the camera while he travels in the United States interviewing several people with the aim of determining the reasons why the massacre at the Columbine High School might have happened. British filmmaker Nick Broomfield has used a very similar strategy, appearing on screen in many of his documentaries and trying to make transparent the process of making these films, most recently in *Sarah Palin: You Betcha!* (2011).<sup>25</sup> However, Nkosi's appearance (and that of the other workshop facilitators) in *Border Farm* as another participant, and not as a filmmaker, attests to the way in which she really tried to give due credit to the migrants and to present the project as a collaboration rather than as a product of her exclusive ownership.

Thirdly, as the narrator of the film asserts, all decisions concerning the workshops, the script and the film were taken collectively, so that the roles that each of the participants and the facilitators took were elected and agreed on in advance. The name of the drama group, Dulibadzimu -- which means sacred place or place of the ancestors in Shona language -- was equally proposed and chosen by the group members. There were also frequent discussions about how each of the members felt in relation to the project and what their expectations were. Nkosi explains that it was very important for her to make sure everyone was aware of the project's purposes from the beginning and that no one held unrealistic prospects about it, so that all the decisions taken by the group were well informed. In this sense, *Border Farm* is more

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<sup>23</sup> Nkosi, Interview via email by Pantoja-Peschard, p.1.

<sup>24</sup> Moore, *Bowling for Columbine* (USA, Canada and Germany: Iconolatry Productions Inc., Alliance Atlantis Communications, Dog Eat Dog Films, and Vif Babelsberger Filmproduktion GmbH & Co. Zweite KG, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Broomfield, *Sarah Palin: You Betcha!* (USA: Gravity Films and Lafayette Films, 2011).

the product of a communal effort than something for which a single individual can take exclusive credit. Thus, in an interview, the filmmaker recalls that when Meza (the main scriptwriter) first introduced the project to the farm workers he said that it would be 'our' project, by which he meant the project of the people in the farm, and that Nkosi would only be the facilitator. But then, she continues, 'I think "our" became "all of our" as well. Ray [the photography facilitator] and I definitely became part of the group and the other facilitators too.'<sup>26</sup> This sense of community and cooperation that allegedly the participants, the workshop leaders and the filmmaker were able to build suggests that the film disrupts notions of authorship as it prevents the filmmaker from being the single authority and stable source of meaning. In other words, the collective character of *Border Farm* does seem to reverse hierarchies and create a space of equal and horizontal relations between the migrants, the facilitators and Nkosi.

Lastly, Nkosi has acknowledged the fact that she made an intervention, that her presence in the farm and the project had an impact, at least, in the lives of the migrant farm workers who were involved in it. She believes that this impact has been positive and that she managed to build a trusting strong relationship with the group. She aimed to be careful at every step of the project by being honest and realistic about the purposes of the project as a whole, and also by ensuring that privacy of the participants was respected so that only those personal testimonies that they were willing to share were documented. What is more, Nkosi and the other workshop facilitators planned and implemented an 'exit' strategy with the purpose of encouraging and ensuring that the theatre group continued working together self-directed after the *Border Farm* project was finished. In a last exchange with Nkosi in late August 2011, she said that the Dulibadzimu group had remained active albeit with a significantly reduced number of committed members (only five out of the original twenty-three participants). The group had been working with local non-governmental organisations and with Médecins sans frontières, 'creating short drama pieces for HIV/AIDS peer education and awareness purposes.'<sup>27</sup> They also had been writing new material and had made contact with the Made in Musina Arts Network, which is a networking project aiming to link the arts community in this town.

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<sup>26</sup> Nkosi, Telephonic interview by Savage.

<sup>27</sup> Nkosi, Interview via email by Pantoja-Peschard, p.2.

Thus, *Border Farm* shows that the filmmaker and the facilitators adopted a relationship of partnership and solidarity towards the filmed subjects. In spite of their obvious position of power, Nkosi and her team were able to constitute a space of political and ethical bonds with the members of the drama group beyond the direct sanction of the nation-state. The documentarist and the facilitators seem committed to fostering the filmed subjects to become their own storytellers, and as Azoulay would say, to address claims to potential and actual spectators. Correspondingly, by agreeing to take part in the project, to be storytellers, to act and to be filmed, the portrayed subjects adopt an active role and are thereby able to disrupt the power relations and the distribution of roles and functions imposed by the social order. In other words, the migrant farm workers share a space and an experience with Nkosi, the facilitators and eventually with spectators in such a way that they can take part where they have no part. The migrants' partaking thus makes possible a 're-configuration of the sensible.'<sup>28</sup> And the space that these three partakers constitute can, therefore, be considered as a space of hospitality in the Derridian sense.

A thing worth noticing at this point is that in extrapolating Azoulay's triadic model of photography to the form of documentary film not only are movement, time and sound to be taken into account as central elements distinguishing the still image of photography from the moving image of cinema, but there is also the fact that film tends to involve many more parties than the three proposed in Azoulay's theory. And even though Azoulay gives examples of how a civil contract of photography emerges where the photographer had assistance with the lighting and staging in the creation of the photograph, the three-party model focuses on the bonds created between the photographer, the photograph subjects and the spectators. A transposition of Azoulay's model to documentary thus need to acknowledge that the medium of film almost always involves more than three parties since directors more often than not draw on the support of a film crew in the process of making a film. *Border Farm* offers a good example of this since Nkosi worked with the workshop facilitators, a sound designer, a director of photography, and two editors in order to put the film together into its final cut.

Once the differences between the medium of photography and the medium of cinema have been considered, then -- as will become clearer through the next two

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<sup>28</sup> Rancière, 'The Paradoxes,' p.141.

case studies -- it is possible to use Azoulay's insight on the political relationships of photography and transpose it to the medium of documentary film. My argument will be that documentaries about migration and border-crossing experiences have the potential to create political and ethical bonds that are not under the direct regulation of the nation-state, and therefore these films can constitute spaces or vessels of hospitality. I have analysed thus far the bonds made between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects by using *Border Farm*. However, if we are going to explain how spectators take active part in the space of political and ethical relationships of documentary films, then we need to examine how spectators relate to filmmakers, how they become engaged with a film, and how they are addressed by the filmed subjects. The next part of this chapter will explore these questions.

#### **IV. The Triadic Model in *Border Farm*: The Relationship Between The Filmmaker and the Spectators**

One of the defining features of *Border Farm* is that it has a form that crucially challenges the long assumed opposition between documentary and fictional cinemas, between reality and artifice. Nkosi's film shows that these are false dichotomies, and that the documentary and the fictional forms can enhance rather than simply exclude each other. Thus, attending to the form and the stylistic qualities of documentary opens up the door to discuss this film format beyond the questions of whether and to what extent documentary representations are accurate, whether they correspond to reality or not. So far, I have been trying to make the point that Azoulay's theory of photography can be transposed to the field of documentary cinema precisely as a way to think documentary beyond the question of representation, and instead to shift the focus to the political and ethical relationships that can arise through this form of cinema without the direct sanction of the nation-state. In transposing Azoulay's insight to the domain of the documentary, I have drawn in previous chapters on the work of both Steyerl and Trinh to explain how viewers get actively engaged in the determination of the documentary's meaning, and thereby form political and ethical relationships with the filmmaker and the subjects filmed. Here I will return to Steyerl's and Trinh's work to examine the bond that can emerge between the documentarist and the spectators.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I explained that the theoretical approach to photography that Azoulay poses constitutes an alternative to the canonical views that either focus on the aesthetic value of a photograph and see the latter as a completed product

created by an artist, or on the role of spectators as merely passive subjects satisfying voyeuristic desires when presented with photographs of horror. Azoulay proposes understanding photography from the perspective of the 'paradigm of visual culture' rather than the 'paradigm of art,'<sup>29</sup> which means seeing photographs not exclusively in terms of what is represented by the image and the intentions of the photographer. The visual culture paradigm approach relinquishes the scholarly gaze that sees the photographic image as having a fixed content that is the only source of utterance. Instead, the visual culture paradigm that Azoulay defends adopts a 'practical gaze' that approaches the photograph considering all the information regarding the circumstances (the historical and political conditions) under which the image was produced as well as the subjects portrayed in it. As opposed to a theory of photography like that of Roland Barthes, who thinks the photographic image is an index signalling 'that-has-been'<sup>30</sup> and hence restricted to that which it represents, Azoulay's thesis of the practical gaze eschews seeing the photographic image as a finished work of art for which there is a single and final arbitrator. Rather this practical gaze sees the image as continuously open and constantly generating new utterances and new meanings with every new encounter between photographer, photographed subjects and spectators. This approach allows Azoulay to present a theory of photography that grants an active role to both the portrayed subjects and the viewers, and hence a theory of the potential social and political relationships of photography. While Barthes speaks about the photograph as portraying future death as certainty, Azoulay's approach also opens up through the possibility of the multiple utterances of photographs the potential of the latter to prevent and repair catastrophes. How does the space of political relationships arise in the particular case of Nkosi's *Border Farm*? How can potential and actual spectators become active participants in articulating the sense of the film?

Here it is worth recalling some of the ideas of Steyerl pertaining to the need to examine documentaries from a perspective beyond that of representation, for this perspective tends to restrict its analysis of representational media like film to a discussion of the power relations between those who represent and those represented. An exclusive focus on representation thus reduces its account of documentary film as a practice of artifice and construction of truths made and regulated by the governing

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<sup>29</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.96.

power, which seeks to manage populations by imposing such constructed truths. Steyerl further explains that representation limits the scope of documentary theory because it does not allow space to think about documentary practices in terms of what it is that these practices express in relation to the process of film production, the social relations implied by it and the institutional powers underlying such production. Considering documentary films not merely as mimetic representations of events or situations in the actual world but also as expressions of social reality, that is, as expressions of their entire mode of organization (including their conditions of production, of representation, their funding and modes of distribution), opens up the possibility of discussing other (non-representational) aspects of this form of filmmaking. Thus, as shown in last section of this chapter, by attending to the process of production of *Border Farm* and the bonds that seem to be created between the filmmaker and the migrants (rather than to whether this film accurately represents the latter or not), it becomes possible to consider questions concerning the emancipatory and political potential of documentary. This is what Steyerl means by an approach to documentary from the perspective of expression as opposed to an approach in terms of representation.<sup>31</sup>

I believe it is possible to trace a parallel between, on the one hand, Azoulay's idea of adopting the visual culture paradigm to examine photography and the social bonds the latter can produce, and on the other hand, Steyerl's views on expression as a manner to approach documentary film outside the boundary of representation. Both Steyerl and Azoulay propose to move beyond the limiting question of whether a documentary or a photograph represent accurately what they portray, or whether such representations are mere constructions at the service of the structures maintaining the social order. But without denying the mediating gaze, artifice and/or the prejudice necessarily involved in documentary and photography representations, Steyerl's and Azoulay's proposals open up the scope of perspectives and issues that can be raised through the two visual media. They both suggest attending to the circumstances of production of the documentary or the photograph, and to the people who are portrayed (filmed or photographed) in these. Most importantly, Steyerl and Azoulay coincide in that the artist (filmmaker or photographer) does not have exclusive access to the meaning of the work of art, but rather this meaning is articulated collectively

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<sup>31</sup> Steyerl, 'Making Films Politically: Interview with Hito Steyerl.' Interview by Zanny Begg, in *Zanny Begg Website*, <<http://www.zannybegg.com/hito.htm>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2012].

through the encounter of the represented subjects, the spectators and the filmmaker or photographer. In this way, Azoulay and Steyerl offer a way to think of photography and documentary as social practices, practices that give rise to social and political relationships not mediated by the nation-state.

Following Steyerl and Trinh, I explained in Chapter 3 that the way in which the spectators become actively engaged in the construction of the meaning of the film is mainly through the form and stylistic strategies rather than exclusively through its content. Indeed, the documentarist motivates viewers to think about what the moving images might mean by playing with montage, sound effects, camera angles and other techniques, and also by using self-reflexivity to make evident and call into question the constructed quality of the documentary. The documentarist employs the form and style of the film to destabilize the meaning of the latter and hence preclude the existence of a single and final arbitrator of the film. In this sense, the filmmaker acts as a host of sorts, for she incites and invites (without imposing on) spectators to actively partake in determining the sense of the moving images even when she cannot anticipate nor control the spectators' engagement. A space of hospitality is thus created, where spectators are given the choice to engage with the film in such a way that they can be collaborators with the filmmaker, equal partners in the articulation of the meaning of the documentary. Through this partnership, the social and political roles distinguishing spectators from the filmmaker are blurred, and the hierarchies of the social arrangement are thereby disrupted. As Rancière might put it, the possibility of eroding the socially assigned roles allows for the emergence of new alternatives to what can be experienced, seen and said; and hence a new distribution of the sensible. Without a doubt, the open form and self-reflexive style of a documentary does not guarantee the active engagement of the spectators. However, the potentiality for this engagement is established. The next two chapters will examine in greater detail the degree and forms of involvement of the spectator. My claim will be that spectators can become active partakers in the determination of the film's meaning to different extents and not only in an intellectual and reflexive manner but also affectively, at the sensorial level.

Returning to Nkosi's *Border Farm*, the way in which the spectator becomes actively engaged, participating as an equal with the filmmaker is by means of the editing and other stylistic features of the film. The manner in which the documentary presents the migrant farm workers' personal testimonies interwoven with the re-

enacted scenes and the footage of the workshops, creates a rich and multi-layered narrative that flows between fiction and non-fiction. By having the farm workers speak about their border-crossings experiences directly to the camera; by using the migrants' own voices to narrate the process of the workshops and of the documentary-making itself; and finally by getting them to write and perform a script about their experiences as migrants and farm workers, Nkosi draws attention to the fictional and constructed quality of non-fictional narratives. In other words, the documentarist presents the staged and the real intermingled not in an attempt to erode the line between fact and fiction so that the artifice of re-enactments cannot be seen, but in a bid to invite a contemplation on the fictions caught in what we call the real. In addition to this, the close collaboration of the farm workers and Nkosi brings out the question of what the role of a documentary filmmaker really is. Is it ever possible for a documentarist to withdraw entirely from her position of the person with representational powers? Is Nkosi really willing to share her role as storyteller with the filmed subjects when a sub-title granting her credit as director is first to appear in the opening sequence? Furthermore, am I not reiterating Nkosi's position of power by drawing on interviews with her to analyse *Border Farm*? Is not the fact that I was able to track Nkosi down to discuss *Border Farm* a confirmation that her authority extends beyond the project, whereas the authority of those in the film only lasts during the film itself (whether considered in terms of the making or the viewing of it)?

These questions are suggested to the spectator through the form and the way in which the film was produced. And this opens up a critically creative space in which the viewers can participate to consider these questions and to give meaning to the images, sounds and the way these are put together. *Border Farm* offers in this way a hospitable space where filmmaker and spectators can relate as equal and active partners. The exercise of hospitality that Nkosi carries out through this documentary necessarily inaugurates a relationship between the spectators and the filmed subjects since the film draws attention to its own internal organisation and therefore problematizes the representational privilege of the filmmaker supposedly has over the farm workers. At the same time, since *Border Farm* seems to refuse having a fixed and ready-determined meaning, since it switches back and forth from fiction to non-fiction, then the articulation of its meaning calls for a collective collaboration between filmmaker, viewers and filmed subjects. This means that viewers acquire certain responsibility for what is seen in the documentary images and hence they form a

political bond with the represented subjects. In the next section I will discuss this relationship of viewers and portrayed subjects.

### **V. The Triadic Model in *Border Farm*: The Relationship Between Spectators and Filmed Subjects**

I have shown that in *Border Farm* there is a potential political bond emerging between the filmed subjects and the documentarist and between the latter and the viewers. The sort of community that is constituted through this bond is one based on relationships of partnership, solidarity and equality. Thus this community can unsettle hierarchical structures imposed by the social order and it also escapes the direct sanction of the nation-state. In this section I will argue that when the viewers of *Border Farm* engage in the articulation of meaning of the film they also exercise what Derrida called the 'duty of translation,' which -- as I explained in chapter one -- is the duty that we have to translate the languages of law by looking constantly to legislate better laws for the reception of foreigners, trying to counter the violence that the latter suffer whenever they cross a border and arrive into a host country.

In *The Civil Contract* Azoulay argues that photographs of subjects living on the 'verge of catastrophe' can only make the photographed subjects' struggles evident, and thus become emergency claims to restore the impaired citizenship of these subjects, when the photographer ceases to be considered the owner of the photographs' meanings. Instead, continues Azoulay, when those meanings are collectively constructed through the relationship that emerges between the photographer, the photographed subjects and the spectator; then photographs become effective claims to the urgency of repairing the injury, the damaged citizenship. For Azoulay, the spectator in particular has the duty to 'watch' photographs of subjects on the verge of catastrophe, rather than merely passively looking at them. In watching photographs, the spectator is actively involved in reconstructing the act of photography as if it was taking place in the present; that is, in reconstructing it as a visible phenomenon that the spectator is witnessing and that has a particular meaning. Watching photographs also implies a 'watching out for,' that is paying attention to the 'catastrophe' that is about to happen. It is only when photographs are watched that they can become claims that demand action to repair injuries impinged on individuals with impaired citizenships. As Azoulay writes:

The duty to watch as spectators is at the same time the duty to resist injury to others who are governed and the duty to restore the civilian skill of spectatorship: to be an addressee of this injury, to produce its meaning as injury, and to continue to address it.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar fashion, using *Border Farm* I will contend that documentaries about borders and border-crossings that depict the suffering and deprivation that migrants, refugees or stateless people face can only emerge and operate as emergency calls for the reparation of the injuries impinged on the filmed subjects when the viewers become actively involved in determining the meaning of the film and also in ‘translating’ the images into claims that the film subjects address to both the photographer and the spectators.

As I explained in Chapter 1, Derrida argues that the controversial problem of the undocumented persons and refugees constitutes an instantiation of the question of hospitality because it is a problem that crucially involves the forms in which we relate with the other, and that in this respect it is a problem that concerns the realm of ethics as much as that of politics. Derrida’s understanding of hospitality as an aporetic concept, allows him to affirm that there is a necessary and urgent bond of the sphere of politics and the sphere of ethics (the unconditional). For him, politics and ethics oppose one another but cannot be disentangled from each other in the sense that politics is unable to achieve absolute justice through laws and unable to avoid doing violence, since any legislation is always imperfect and falls short of justice, but it needs to try to commit less violence towards the other and be more just. This is a politics that recognizes its limitations and, Derrida would say, a politics that is constantly seeking the least bad laws.

In discussing the concept of hospitality, Derrida also affirms that the first violence which foreigners must endure is that they have to ask to be hosted and assert their rights in a language that is not their own. This violence, he believes, cannot be avoided for any politics of hospitality and hence any (conditional) laws for the reception of foreigners exercise an action of filtering, selecting and discriminating, which is by nature violent. Nonetheless, precisely because it is impossible to suspend such violence, we must engage in a constant task of translation and transformation of the languages of international law. We have thus ‘a vast and formidable duty to translate’<sup>33</sup> the laws that govern the welcoming of others.

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<sup>32</sup> Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*, p.343.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Hospitality,’ p.68.

In which sense does the spectator of documentaries about border-crossings and migration exercise this Derridian duty of translation? I have argued that viewers are incited (without imposition) to become active partakers in articulating the meaning of the documentary when its form is open and its stylistic strategies preclude it from having a single and fixed sense. But when the viewer is presented with images that portray people that have crossed borders and that -- due to their statelessness and displacement -- are exposed to excruciating suffering and precarious living conditions, she is called to 'translate' the moving images and sounds in such a way that they acquire meaning as injuries that need to be repaired. Only then does the spectator actively take the role of an addressee of the claim. This is the responsibility that the viewer is invited (but never pressed) to take for the filmed subject: a commitment to acknowledge the hardships and injustices faced by undocumented and stateless migrants and to strive against the situation of the latter. Consequently, the spectator is thus committed to improving the (always conditional and hence always failing to be just) laws for the reception of foreigners. In this way, the viewer's gaze cannot be considered here as a passive, merely voyeuristic, gaze 'enjoying' a 'spectacle of suffering.' If the relationships that are created between the documentary filmmaker, the filmed subject and the viewer are understood in terms of a reciprocated political and ethical responsibility that compels these three parties to acknowledge the injuries impinged on the filmed subjects and to struggle for the restoration of such injuries, then the claim that the spectator's gaze is a passive, desensitized gaze that disavows the images of suffering does not stand. Indeed, spectatorship in this sense entails an ethics, insofar as the viewer is involved in the process of negotiating, constructing and hence translating the meaning of the documentary images in terms of demands that call for resisting against and rectifying the injustices that the filmed subjects endure.

Without a doubt, the question surfaces here regarding the sort of spectator that is being interpellated. Is it possible to make the assumption that the spectator will actually engage in this way with the documentary, adopt the civil gaze and form a relationship of responsibility and partnership towards the filmed subjects and the filmmaker? As I said before, the spectator is given the opportunity to become involved in making sense of the film, and it is her choice to do so or not, as well as to which degree she gets engaged. Indeed, I agree with Rancière that the spectator does not need to be enlightened or emancipated through the film for she already is. All she

needs is to be offered the space where she can decide whether and how she becomes involved with the images and the people portrayed through them. However, I believe that there is implicitly a particular kind of spectator that a documentary like *Border Farm* addresses. It is possible to assume that this is a spectator that arguably is already actively engaged and concerned with the world she shares with others and makes manifest her concern. Presumably, this the sort of spectator that has a particular interest either in the type of collaborative-community art project that *Border Farm* is or in the topic of migration or in documentary filmmaking in general. And if the spectator is invested in this way, then she is likely to become involved also in the articulation of the film's meaning and in actively struggling against injustices that the filmed subjects endure. The assumption is possible given the circuit within which Nkosi's film has been distributed and exhibited. The documentary was first screened in its final cut at the South London Gallery in January 2011, and Nkosi was at the time looking to have it exhibited through 'community TV channels, universities, organisations for migration and other educational outlets.'<sup>34</sup> This means that the viewers of *Border Farm* are prone to be students, academics, people who attend art galleries and/or those who work for other non-profit organisations. Someone might object at this point that if only certain educated or privileged individuals can become active spectators in the sense explained, then a triadic model of the political and ethical relationships of documentary films is elitist and only reinforces the social and cultural hierarchical disparities already existing in society. Nonetheless, as Trinh has very well argued with respect to her films, the idea that a film can be directed to the 'general public' is misleading and even irresponsible, because mainstream directors openly direct their films to particular audiences and target their marketing strategies to them. Therefore, it is not possible to assume that a film is directed to any spectator in the abstract. In Trinh's words:

I think it is very important to have my films circulate in educational networks, because the classroom is a workplace. And if it is a privileged workplace, it's because changes in the production of knowledge can be effected, where film consumption can be challenged, and where different sensitivities and new forms of subjectivities and resistance are possible.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, even though the spectators that are likely to become involved in making sense of the film are privileged to some extent, it is again a matter of their own choice rather

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<sup>34</sup> Nkosi, Telephonic interview by Savage.

<sup>35</sup> Trinh, 'Why a Fish Pond?', p.75.

than an imposition whether they actually enter in a relationship of responsibility and solidarity towards the filmed subjects. The filmed subjects, in turn, address claims to both the documentarist and the viewers when they actively allow themselves to be portrayed. Their ability to make claims on the filmmaker and spectators enables them to show their suffering and make clear that ‘they have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not.’<sup>36</sup> Indeed, if through the collective construction of the documentary’s meaning, those excluded from the political order or included in it in a subordinate way (the filmed subjects) are able to some extent to speak for themselves, then -- as Rancière has argued -- their claims can become political criticisms, insofar as they manage to question the hierarchies of the socio-political order and thus have the potential to bring about a change in the distribution of the social arrangement.

Thus understood, documentaries portraying the border-crossing experiences of migrants, refugees and stateless people can articulate political spaces beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. *Border Farm* provides a good example of this not only because the migrant farm workers speak directly to the camera (and hence to the viewers, potential or actual) about their struggles, but also because they worked closely with the filmmaker in the creative process of the documentary. By writing the film script, by helping out in the filming process, by re-enacting their border-crossing experiences and by narrating the scenes, the migrant farmers they are able to take a position of power in relation to the filmmaker as much as she is to them as the person holding the means and power of representation. These multiple hierarchies at work in this documentary cannot disappear altogether, but they seem to give authenticity and authority to the collective project insofar as they allow the creation of a community where everyone participates and the social order can be put into question (if not entirely eroded). It remains our responsibility as spectators of this film to not remain passive and to engage with the documentary in such a way that we construct its meaning as a claim the filmed subjects make both on us and the filmmaker. *Border Farm* can articulate a political space where all the parties involved are responsible for one another without the mediation of the national sovereign power. Accordingly, the scene where the main scriptwriter, Meza Weza, addresses the camera to explain that he wrote the script in the hope that his story would help others wishing to migrate

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<sup>36</sup> Rancière, ‘Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man,’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer, 2004), pp.297-310 (p.302).

shows the extent to which he is calling for the spectators' attention and claiming the rights he has been deprived of. Meza says: '[Border Farm] is the story of a million people; it is my story and it is *your* story.'<sup>37</sup>

## **VI. Final Remarks**

Using *Border Farm* as a case study, in this chapter I have explored extrapolating Azoulay's triadic model of photography to the form of documentary film. My argument is that documentaries concerning borders and border-crossing experiences of migrants, refugees and stateless people have the potential to articulate political relations beyond the framework of the nation-state. The relationship of reciprocal political and ethical responsibility between documentarist, filmed subjects and spectators that can emerge through such documentary films suggests an alternative way of exercising politics based on hospitality. This is a form of political obligation towards other individuals instead of towards a sovereign power, and it is a form of political obligation that is not constrained by geo-political borders. Within this political space that documentaries can constitute, all the parties involved can hold equal shares for they are all simultaneously guests and hosts. Thereby, they allow the possibility of an unconditional hospitality. It is in this sense that documentaries can become hospitable spaces or vessels of hospitality. The next chapters are devoted to further exploring the transposition of Azoulay's theses on photography to documentaries about border-crossings and migration. In particular, I will discuss in more detail, by looking at other case studies, the roles of the spectators and the filmmaker within the triadic scheme.

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<sup>37</sup> Nkosi, *Border Farm*. [My emphasis].

## CHAPTER 5

### Moments of Truth and the Engaged Spectator in *Shout*

#### I.

In the last chapter I used Nkosi's film *Border Farm* to explore the possibility of extending Azoulay's theory of photography to documentary films about migration and border-crossings. I also considered the possibility for the emergence of ethical and political relationships through these films, and the role that the filmed subjects play within those relationships. The aim of the present chapter is twofold. First, by using the documentary *Shout* (Lubbe Bakker and Gould, 2010) as a case study, I will argue that documentaries have the potential to be more than representations of reality and mere 'constructions of truth' at the service of power, surveillance and domination of people in a society. To this end, I will employ Steyerl's thesis that documentaries can actually articulate 'moments of truth' that offer critical perspectives that call into question and destabilize the hierarchical structures that create and maintain the dominant forms of truth.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Steyerl's and Azoulay's ideas, I will claim that these films can not only disrupt the hierarchies of the social order, but also even constitute claims for rights that have been violated. In parallel to this purpose I will continue to discuss the question of whether documentary films about migration and border-crossing experiences can give rise to ethical and political relationships of equality and solidarity between the filmmaker, the spectator and the filmed subjects. In this respect, I will pay particular attention to the issue of how and to what extent spectators can become engaged with a documentary film by invoking Rancière's work.

It is worth noting, however, that I will not approach this last question as an empirical enquiry. Even though such an approach is possible and in fact often relevant for some discussions within certain areas of film studies (the areas of reception and/or audience studies), my interest in the topic of the involvement of the spectator is more philosophical or theoretical, rather than empirical. One can indeed ask how it is in fact that spectators become involved or engaged with a film, and the answer would very likely require questioning a significant number of viewers. However, this is not the approach I would like to pursue in

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<sup>1</sup> Steyerl is inspired by Foucault's idea that image production and representational practices are part of what the latter calls 'governmentality,' which is the exercise of political power through the collective operation of institutions (such as hospitals, schools, universities and psychiatric institutions) practices and agents that produce certain truths in order to manage populations and goods. See Foucault, 'Governmentality,' in Burchell, Gordon, and Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality. With Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp.87-104.

this chapter (or in this thesis at large). I am not concerned here with the question of the actual engagement of the spectator with the documentary film, for I believe this involvement of the viewer takes place in a variety of manners depending on the type of audience, what their cultural background, gender, age, nationality are, as well as what the time and circumstances of the screening and the watching of the film are. Hence, a discussion of all these aspects requires a specific focus on reception. By contrast, I am interested in the political, ethical and aesthetic implications of the role of the spectator of documentaries about borders; and it is through this philosophical-theoretical perspective that I will take issue with these questions. In order to do this, I will draw again on Rancière's ideas about the relation between aesthetics and politics, and what he calls the 'emancipated spectator.'<sup>2</sup>

## II. Historical and Political Background of *Shout*

The documentary *Shout* was filmed in the Syrian territories known as the Golan Heights, which have been under Israeli occupation since 1967. In order to better analyse this documentary, it is necessary to provide some historical and political background relating to the place where it was made. This historical detour will allow me to discuss how exactly *Shout* can offer a critical stance against some forms of truth construction, as well as how this film can articulate claims for the rights of which the Golani population has been deprived during the 46 years of Israeli occupation.

The territory of the Golan Heights sits in the southwestern corner of Syria, and it has borders with Lebanon to the north, Israel to the west and Jordan to the south. This territory has always been a matter of contest between Israel and Syria mainly due to its water resources. In 1967, after the Six-Day War, the Golan was occupied by Israeli military forces and remained under their administrative control until December 1981, when the Israeli Knesset approved the Golan Heights Law,<sup>3</sup> a legislation that made effective the annexation of the territory to Israel.<sup>4</sup> This unilateral action by the Israeli government was not recognised by the international community and this remains the case today. Furthermore, both the United States and the United Nations Security Council have condemned the action, with the latter issuing the Resolution 242 against the annexation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*.

<sup>3</sup> The Knesset is the unicameral parliament of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> This legislation was passed by a majority of 63 votes against 21. See Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Golan Heights Law. December 14, 1981,' in *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Golan+Heights+Law.htm>> [accessed 29th April 2011].

<sup>5</sup> The UN Security Council Resolution 242 was issued in November 1967 after the Six-Day War. See UNSC, 'Resolution 242,' in *United Nations Security Council Resolutions-1967*, <<http://www.un.org/documents/sc/res/1967/scres67.htm>> [accessed 29th April 2011].

In an effort to make the annexation appear legitimate, the Israeli army attempted to distribute blue Israeli identity cards among the (Syrian) Golan population in 1981. But the soldiers were received with contempt and the Syrian residents utterly refused to accept and carry the ID cards since that would also mean accepting that they and their territory belonged to Israel. As a result, Israelis gave up their effort to make the occupied Golan and the people inhabiting there an official part of Israel. Thus, the Syrians ‘were somewhat victorious: while the Israeli attempt to impose citizenship failed and [Syrian] residents were classified as permanent residents, their land remains occupied.’<sup>6</sup> After the annexation, the border with Syria was closed while the Israeli side of the border was opened up, again in an effort to make Golanis feel part of Israel. This meant that many of the households and families were split in two not only because of the imposition of a border that did not exist before, but also because many Golanis in resistance were taken away by Israel as political prisoners and later returned to Syria (in exchange for Israeli soldiers captured by Syrian forces). By the time these prisoners were returned, they found it impossible to go back to their homes in the Golan.

The village of Majdal Shams -- where a large part of *Shout* was filmed -- is considered the most important and most populated Druze village in the occupied Golan.<sup>7</sup> Majdal Shams is only about an hour’s drive from Syria’s capital city, Damascus. The village is separated from Syria by a narrow strip of no-man’s land that marks the cease-fire line, which since 1967 has been under control and surveillance by UN peacekeeping forces. Arbitrarily torn from their relatives and placed under imposed movement restrictions, people in Majdal Shams first started communicating with family and friends on the Syrian side by shouting to each other from a nearby hill, since all other forms of contact and communication were forbidden. The so-called ‘Shouting Hill’ thus became a meeting point for many of the Druze on both sides of the line. To this day, it remains a tradition for families to ‘meet’ and ‘talk’ at the Shouting Hill using loudspeakers, especially on Mother’s day. However, younger generations of Druze now prefer using mobile phones and the internet to communicate with

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<sup>6</sup> Guarnieri, ‘Golan Residents Recall Their Tahrir,’ in *Al Jazeera in English* (25th February, 2011), <<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/201122093915567148.html>> [accessed 18th December 2013].

<sup>7</sup> Druze is the religion most widely practiced by the population in the occupied Golan Heights. Political activists and Golanis who actively resist and criticize the 46-year-old Israeli occupation emphatically express the fact that Druze is a religion, and that practising it does not make them any less Arab. This is a crucial point they are eager to make in opposition to Israel’s attempts to convince the younger generations of Golanis that they are different from Syrian Arabs. See *Ibid*.

their relatives. Therefore, meeting and shouting at this hill has become a symbolic ritual of sorts rather than a practical way of communication.

Since the occupation, the only people allowed to cross the cease-fire line are the UN peacekeepers, some members of the clergy and, once per year, a very small, carefully selected group of students aged between 18 and 20 years. Under this agreement, Syria and Israel grant some students entrance into Syrian territory, but they are not allowed to return back into the occupied Golan until the summer holidays. Shot between the village of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied territories of the Golan Heights, and Damascus, *Shout* follows the lives of two young Golani Druze, Ezat and Bayan, during the year they spend studying in the capital of Syria. The two main figures of the documentary are among the few Druze residents in the Golan that have had the chance to go to Syria. *Shout* offers a view of the experience of these young men in Damascus and a reflection about how being away from their close relatives and friends in Majdal Shams affects their lives in different ways. The two Dutch film directors, Lubbe Bakker and Gould, decided to call their documentary '*Shout*' mainly in reference to the Shouting Hill, which symbolizes the families torn apart by the imposed border. But this title was also chosen because, while the filmmakers were conducting research in the Golan and Damascus previous to filming, they met Golani students eager to tell their stories. The documentary thus attempts to gather some of the voices of this younger generation of Golanis, who are undoubtedly still affected by the occupation, but who also have a different take on the conflict since they were born into an already occupied Golan.

Keeping this historical framework in mind, in the next sections I will engage in a textual and stylistic analysis of this documentary. That is, I will analyse *Shout*'s narrative content but also the specific techniques employed in the construction and presentation of such narrative -- that is, the specific form of the film. I will do so with the aim of making the case for three interrelated theses. First, I will argue that the construction of truths that documentaries realise -- like those of any other representational practice -- can be more than just instruments at the service of the hegemonic power regulating populations, since they can also articulate a critical stance against the hierarchies of the social order, and can even function as claims for certain rights. In particular, I will contend that *Shout* presents a critique of the regime of national borders and of the Israeli occupation in the Golan, and also that this critique demands the viewer engage in the construction of the meaning of the images -- instead of just passively gazing at the latter, and that she engage in a way that these images can become claims for the restoration of those subjects whose rights have been violated. As I

did in the previous chapter devoted to discussing *Border Farm*, I will extrapolate Azoulay's work on the political potential of photography to documentaries portraying migration and border-crossings in order to make the point that these films have the ability to invite spectators to actively take part in the articulation of their meaning, and that these documentaries can be constituted as urgent calls for the restoration of rights that have been disrespected or violated.

Secondly, I will draw again on Azoulay's triadic model of photography as well as on Rancière's conceptualization of 'politics' and his idea of the 'emancipated spectator' in order to maintain that documentaries about borders have the capacity to give rise to relationships of ethical and political responsibility and solidarity between the filmed subjects, the filmmaker and the spectator. These relationships emerge beyond the direct mediation or sanction of the national sovereign, and the individuals involved thereby adopt a position of equality instead of preserving and reinforcing the place and function that they have been assigned in the social order. Therefore, I will conclude, such relationships have the potential to question and thus subvert political, social and cultural hierarchies.

Thirdly, I will make the point that the viewer of these documentaries can be incited and invited to actively engage with the film in such a way that she becomes an active spectator that stands on a par with the filmmaker in the determination of the meaning of the documentary. In other words, the viewer of these films can be said to embody or exemplify the figure of the 'emancipated spectator' of which Rancière speaks.

### **III. A Documentary Between Fact and Fiction**

*Shout* is a coming-of-age documentary that shows how two teenagers, Ezat and Bayan, prepare for their departure, bid farewell to their families and friends in Majdal Shams, cross the border into Syrian territory and experience life in Damascus without the chance to go back to their homes in the Golan Heights until their school year is over. From a very early age, the two best friends have dreamt of visiting what they and their families consider to be their homeland. Alongside a reduced number of Golani students aged 18 years old, Ezat and Bayan are granted the once-in-a-life-time chance to go to Damascus to pursue an undergraduate degree.

*Shout* opens with a panoramic birds-eye-view shot of a village surrounded by mountains. Then a cut frames two young men sitting on the top of a water tank overlooking this landscape. The two are smoking whilst they admire the view. The frame shows their backs but not their faces. One of them shouts out loud and his voice resonates with an echo. The village, we will later on be informed, is Majdal Shams. This opening sequence

constitutes both a motif in the documentary and a metaphor. It is a motif since in this scene with the two young men looking down over a landscape is repeated also towards the end of the film, except that the shot is set in a different location: a hill overlooking the Syrian capital, Damascus. The mentioned sequence, but especially the scene where one of the youths shouts out loud with his voice is echoing throughout the landscape, also functions as a double metaphor. On the one hand, his shout is a metaphor for the arbitrariness implied by the forced separation that all geopolitical borders inflict equally on landscapes and on people's lives. Simultaneously, this is also a metaphor for the specific urgency to voice the grievances of the people in the occupied Golan.

Immediately after the young man's shout, the title of the film appears on screen. A cut returns to frame the landscape view accompanied by an off-screen diegetic dialogue of two people greeting each other. The next sequence shows that this dialogue is held between two old men who are separated by a strip of land (of approximately one kilometre wide) and thus have to use megaphones to talk. Then a new sequence shows a barbwire fence under military observation, an army vehicle patrolling the fence, and a checkpoint surveillance tower. These last shots are accompanied by a sequence of titles explaining the Israeli occupation in the Golan Heights and the consequences this has had for the residents in this area. Thus this is the first time that the film overtly positions itself as a non-fictional film. As one of the directors, Gould, mentions in an interview, 'the kind of film we wanted to make [was] not an informational film, but one with a dramatic narrative.'<sup>8</sup> Indeed, *Shout* is a documentary that constructs a dramatic narrative by employing both 'conventional' documentary techniques, such as interviews conducted with close-up shots and factual information titles. But the film also uses other technical features that are more traditionally identified with fictional cinema's stylistic characteristics, such as the use of non-diegetic and asynchronous sound effects and music, continuity principles of montage, and titling.

Reflecting on the combination that *Shout* produces with these once supposedly opposing techniques, Gould and Lubbe Bakker agree on the idea that distinguishing fictional and non-fictional forms of filmmaking is not really relevant. Rather, the directors believe that both forms inform and learn from one another, and that this mixture is the most effective and enriching way 'to show realities, tell stories, and also bring across ideas or thoughts.'<sup>9</sup> Gould is eager to emphasise that she and Lubbe Bakker organised and decided in advance which

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<sup>8</sup> Gould, Interview via email exchange by Pantoja-Peschard (21<sup>st</sup> December, 2010). Unpublished transcript.

<sup>9</sup> Lubbe Bakker, Interview via email exchange by Pantoja-Peschard (28<sup>th</sup> November, 2010). Unpublished transcript.

scenes they wanted to film always based on reality, on how events took place, as much as on what the people being filmed told them. But, she adds, ‘the fact that [one] selects and to some extent directs the scenes, does not mean that the reality of what [one is] filming disappears.’<sup>10</sup> Lubbe Bakker further expands on this idea when she claims that documentary is ‘directing in an indirect way’ insofar as one can give certain guidelines to the filmed subjects and ‘prepare’ some of the scenes to be shot, but never more than that. In her own words:

Reality does not always work the way you [as a documentary filmmaker] want at the time you need it. For example, the army jeep in the beginning of the film drives on the border. According to most people, it passes every hour. We needed this jeep to show this road is a border and under surveillance. But when we were standing there to film the patrolling jeep we waited and waited [for several hours]. Then we decided to throw rocks at the electrical fence. This sets off an alarm at the basecamp and five minutes later the jeep arrives. And so we got our shot.<sup>11</sup>

It seems thus that *Shout*, like any other documentary, finds its inspiration in reality; but it also constructs and shapes a narrative thread by means of the variety of techniques and stylistic resources that it draws on: sound effects, camera work and montage, among others. Thus, *Shout* provides a good example of how documentaries mix the four functions or tendencies that Renov<sup>12</sup> has attributed to these films. This documentary is a record of one year in the lives of the two young Golanis studying in Damascus, but it also seeks to make the point or to persuade the viewer of the hardships that the Golani population has had to endure due to the Israeli occupation. Similarly, the way in which *Shout* presents the story and builds the characters of Ezat and Bayan in a melodramatic tone (aiming to appeal to the spectator’s emotions) constitutes the expressive dimension of this film.

In this sense, the remarks of the Dutch directors concerning documentary filmmaking in general and the particular way in which they made *Shout* coincide with what I have said in chapter three about the documentary as a film form of the interstice, a form in-between fact and fiction. But these remarks also concur with what Steyerl has said about documentaries as a practice of truth construction. Steyerl invokes Foucault’s notion of a ‘politics of truth,’ according to which the production of knowledge and hence the distinction between true and false is a necessary practice for the government and ordering of both individuals and populations as a whole. Truth, in this sense, necessarily implies power to the extent that it establishes and maintains the social, political, economic and cultural forms of hegemony within societies. A politics of truth is thus determined, standardised and regulated by political

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<sup>10</sup> Gould, Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Lubbe Bakker, Interview.

<sup>12</sup> See Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics.’

hierarchies or, in other words, by social power relations. Specifically, Foucault defines a politics of truth as follows:

Truth [...] is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth -- that is the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.<sup>13</sup>

Steyerl pursues Foucault’s line of thought and argues that documentary practices constitute examples of truth-producing procedures that are politically regulated. To the extent that documentaries construct truths that generate, maintain, but sometimes also challenge social relations of domination, they are a form of government since ‘governmentality’ is, for Foucault, a way of exerting power and regulating the conduct of populations through the production of truths. Steyerl calls this feature of documentary practices ‘documentality.’<sup>14</sup> As she explains:

I call this interface between governmentality and documentary truth production ‘documentality.’ Documentality describes the permeation of a specific documentary politics of truth with superordinated political, social and epistemological formations. Documentality is the pivotal point where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa. It describes the complicity with dominant forms of a politics of truth, *just as it can describe a critical stance with regard to these forms.*<sup>15</sup>

The key point in Steyerl’s account of documentality is the fact that documentary forms -- which include documentary filmmaking as well as other documenting and recording practices such as journalistic photography and/or video -- not only serve as instruments for the execution of administrative, governmental and regulating functions of power, but that they can also articulate critical perspectives that attempt to question and thwart dominant forms of truth production as well as forms of government. However, if all truths are the product of a construction within a particular system of truth production or ‘regime of truth,’ and if all documentary forms are subdued and shaped by hierarchical social power relations, how exactly can a documentary like *Shout* actually challenge and undermine those very power

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault, ‘Truth and Power,’ p.131.

<sup>14</sup> Other documentary theorists, like Renov, have made similar arguments to the one Steyerl poses about documentaries as constituting forms of truth production that serve political aims. As I explained in chapter three, Renov describes the persuasive and promotional function of documentaries as that which aims to convince viewers about certain viewpoint, which very often concerns a policy or a reform that a government seeks to foster. However Steyerl might be more specific in making the connection between governmentality and documentality. See Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics.’

<sup>15</sup> Steyerl, ‘Documentarism as Politics of Truth.’ [My emphasis].

relations? Steyerl has written about this at length, and she has advanced an answer to this question. In the next section, I will unpack Steyerl's proposal about the possibility of resistance and subversion that documentaries can have by way of analysing *Shout*. This will allow me to argue that this particular documentary can articulate 'moments of truth' that have the potential to disrupt -- even if just subtly -- certain power relations and social hierarchies.

#### **IV. Moments of Truth in *Shout***

Steyerl notes that Foucault's concepts of 'governmentality' and the 'politics of truth' seem to suggest that all documentary forms, insofar as they are truth-producing practices within a regime of truth, first 'create' the reality that they claim to be recording. In this sense, truth is created from politics and not the other way around, which would mean that *all* systems of truth and falsity are contingent and relative to the social power framework in which they have been forged. However, Steyerl claims that even if the articulation, production and reception of a document is shaped and constricted by social power relations, what gives the document its legitimacy and authority lies in the fact that the document 'is also intended to be able to prove what is unpredictable within these power relations -- it should be able to express what is unimaginable, unspoken, unknown, redeeming or even monstrous -- and thus create a possibility for change.'<sup>16</sup>

In order to argue for the idea that all truths are constructed and contingent but some of them can become points of resistance that expose and disrupt power relations, Steyerl recalls Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'dialectical image.'<sup>17</sup> Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image is based on a materialist understanding of truth, which permeates all representations and hence explains their constructed nature. And at the same time, this concept of the dialectical image affirms the 'impossibility of relativizing truth that continues to persist despite'<sup>18</sup> the constructedness of representations. Following Benjamin, Steyerl claims that all documentary forms (including documentary films) are like the dialectical image in that they re-present a specific historical moment under specific materialist and historical conditions, but the truth of this representation is not entirely contingent. Documents, for Steyerl, have the ability to articulate 'moments of truth' even if they can never capture the 'whole' truth. In her own words:

The 'urgency' of the documentary is grounded in the ethical dilemma of having to give testimony to an event that cannot be conveyed as such, but instead contains necessary elements of truth [that is,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Steyerl, 'Documentarism as Politics of Truth.'

moments of truth] as well as of ‘darkness.’ [...] We must insist in reading and rescuing ‘the moments of truth’ preserved in [documentaries], otherwise it no longer makes sense to speak of truth at all.<sup>19</sup>

Steyerl observes two things in relation to these ‘moments of truth.’ One is that it is necessary that there be truths whose power and effectiveness as truths can be separated from the economic, political, social and cultural forms of hegemony within which these truths have been produced and operate. In other words, it is necessary that there be at least certain moments of truth that are captured in documents and that can resist being put at the service of the vilest ends -- such as, for instance, when the Nazis denied the truth of the photographic evidence of their crimes. The second remark that Steyerl makes is that those moments of truth should not be invoked to support a ‘humanitarian’ or ‘charitable’ politics of truth that employs documents in purely voyeuristic and victimising terms in order to justify military and economic invasions. Avoiding the use of narratives and images of suffering and human rights violations as mere performances of victimhood and/or spectacles of traumatic situations is essential to ensure that the moments of truth captured through these narratives and images are not perverted and turned into means at the service of political, economical and cultural interventionism. This is crucial, for all (potential) moments of truth recorded or documented run the risk of becoming instruments at the service of domination and power disguised as a humanitarian cause; and hence they run the risk of not functioning as moments of truth at all. Indeed, the notion of charity often reaffirms (rather than questions) social hierarchies, which is why it is necessary to attend to the ways in which a documentary has been funded and how it is circulated and exhibited in order to know if and how it is used for purposes beyond its supposedly charitable aim.

Thus, for Steyerl, documentary forms always confront us with a challenge: becoming aware of the social power relations that determine the production, use and reception of these forms. Such awareness opens up the possibility of circumventing and questioning the very power relations at play in documentary forms. As Steyerl puts it:

There is hardly a visibility that is not steeped in power relations -- so that we can almost say that what we see has always been provided by power relations. On the other hand, the doubt in these visibilities insists with a vehemence that is capable of constituting its own form of power.<sup>20</sup>

As a documentary, *Shout* offers an alternative representation of the conflict in the Middle East, and thereby calls into question the ways in which this conflict is usually presented in the media. Lubbe Bakker and Gould affirm in an interview that it was their intention to ‘tell a different story about the Middle East conflict [since] most people only think about

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Palestine,<sup>21</sup> so it was important for them to draw attention to another aspect of the problem. The directors do recognise that Palestinians are much worse off than Golanis, because the latter do not have to endure the constant raids, bombings, roadblocks and overall violence that Palestinians suffer under the Israeli occupation. However, they are convinced that precisely because of this fact, the Palestine-Israel problem has received widespread coverage whereas the situation in the occupied Golan Heights has very often been overlooked and forsaken.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Azoulay has explained, representations and narratives of conflict (in particular for Azoulay, the conflict between Palestine and Israel) often flatten, homogenise and even trivialise violent events or situations of injustice and suffering to the point that these catastrophic events appear as ‘normal,’ as if they were everyday life events rather than as exceptional and intolerable circumstances. It is by way of the constant circulation of such images and narratives of suffering in the media, that these representations become ‘naturalised’ and the injustices and struggles that they are supposed to make visible remain invisible.

Without claiming to present a full account or the ‘whole’ truth about the Israeli occupation in the Golan, *Shout* focuses on exploring how the situation and the imposition of a border with Syria has affected and still affects the younger generations of Golanis, and in particular the impact that it has had on the lives of Ezat and Bayan. Thus, rather than giving a grandiose all-encompassing depiction of the Syria-Israel problem or offering an overtly militant narrative against the occupation, the film constructs an emotive narrative to tell the story about two best friends and what their experience of crossing the border to study in Damascus means for each of them.

There are various scenes in the film that foreground the effects that the arbitrarily imposed border has had on the lives of Golanis and on those of the two friends. For instance, in the sequence where Ezat and his family are interviewed by director Lubbe Bakker days

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Makhadhi, ‘Shouting for Freedom,’ in *Al Jazeera in English* (11th March, 2011), <<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/03/20113871812819484.html>> [accessed 10th April 2011].

<sup>22</sup> Recently, this situation appears to be changing due to the ongoing civil conflict that has sprung in Syria in March 2011. The uprising against the regime of president Bashar al-Assad started in the city of Derra, in the south of the country, but it quickly expanded towards other areas of the country. Today, almost two years since the conflict between the forces loyal to al-Assad’s government and the rebels who seek to overthrow his oppressive regime started, there is no apparent sign of the fighting coming to an end as neither party seems to be willing to negotiate. This has taken a large toll on the civilian population; the UN estimates that more than 60,000 people have died and that more than half a million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries. The Druze population in the occupied Golan Heights have always identified themselves as Syrians, even after over forty years of Israeli occupation. For this reason, the Druze have continuously supported the Syrian government over the years. However, today’s civil war in Syria has meant that divisions are emerging amongst them. See, Anon, ‘Golan’s Druze Divided over Syrian Unrest,’ in *Al Jazeera in English* (28th September, 2012), <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/09/20129287535962927.html>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> February 2013].

prior to Ezat's departure to Damascus, he explains how the Golanis' rejection of Israeli citizenship has entailed that they have an 'undefined' status within the Israeli state (signalled by the asterisks printed in Ezat's official identity card). Such undefined status signifies that Golanis are deterred from travelling to Syria to meet their relatives. Going to Damascus to study, Ezat says directly addressing the camera, means that he will finally meet his grandfather and his homeland but also that he will not be able to return to his home in the Golan for an entire year. In another scene, Ezat is shown packing his suitcases in his room. He explains to the director -- who remains off-screen throughout the duration of the film -- that he needs to make sure everything that he takes with him does not have any labels in Hebrew, because Syrian authorities do not allow Israeli products into their territory, even if those products come from the visiting students from the Golan.<sup>23</sup> On the day of their departure, Bayan, Ezat and the rest of the students who have been granted the opportunity to study in the Syrian capital are carefully scrutinized by the UN forces and under the strict vigilance of the Israeli army at the border. The UN forces need to ensure that everything in the students' luggage is safe and approved by the Syrian government before the youngsters are allowed to board the bus that will take them to Damascus. This last scene underscores how Syrian Golanis have an 'undefined' status, since Israel treats them as non-Israeli citizens in accordance with international law, and thus restricts their mobility across borders. At the same time, the scene also shows how this forces Golanis to be a captive market for Israeli products. On the other hand, in Syria Golanis are referred to as 'brothers sharing the same blood,'<sup>24</sup> as a man selling coffee in Damascus tells Bayan and Ezat. Yet the Syrian government imposes strict controls as to who is allowed to study in Damascus and what they can bring with them.

One of the crucial moments in *Shout* is the scene where Ezat and Bayan go to the Shouting Hill on the Syrian side to greet their families and friends on Mother's Day. Here once more the documentary makes visible how a narrow territorial demarcation can unjustly keep families apart, and how this situation can prove emotionally excruciating for some. While Ezat seems happy and having fun with his Syrian girlfriend on the Shouting Hill, a close-up shows Bayan in tears as he hears his mother's voice on the loudspeakers. Film director Gould describes this scene as follows:

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<sup>23</sup> Due to the occupation, Syrian residents in the Golan are forced to consume Israeli products because only these are available in the area. Likewise, since the beginning of the occupation, Golanis have seen their lands confiscated and instead used for Israeli settlements and industries. Consequently, produce that Golanis used to grow or make has now to be bought from Israeli producers.

<sup>24</sup> Lubbe Bakker and Gould, *Shout* (Netherlands: Pieter Van Huystee Film/IKON, 2010), DVD.

This scene [on the shouting hill] is very moving but also very surreal [...]. When you are standing there, you do not see all the landmines scattered near the fence and you do not even really see the border. From a distance it looks like just a modest fence with a dirt road alongside it, and you really feel like walking up to it and getting close to the people on the other side. But of course it is impossible to do this. It is also surreal because this hill has already become something Syrian propaganda is using in a systematic and persistent way. On Mother's Day, for example, there are always reporters there from Syrian television and they always film the tears of the mothers and students, and use this to show what the Zionists are doing to their people. It is a situation planned in advance, but also authentic in a certain sense. For most of the students, like Ezat, it was not very emotional but for others, like Bayan, it is really heartbreaking.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, *Shout* avoids adopting an overtly militant or activist discourse, and instead it centres its narrative on the particular experiences of Bayan and Ezat as Golanis visiting Damascus for the first time. In this sense, the film appears closer to a drama than to an advocacy documentary or to a 'purely' observational one. The interviewer never figures on screen, and a significant number of sequences are coupled with Ezat's and Bayan's asynchronous off-screen voices, which suggest their internal dialogues. Such stylistic features provide this documentary with a dramatic twist. As I mentioned before, this film deploys to varying degrees the functions that Renov attributes to documentaries. It functions as a record of the lives of two young Golanis, but it also aims to persuade the viewer of the unjust conditions that the Golanis live under the occupation. The expressive function of this documentary resides in the fact that it constructs the narrative by drawing on some stylistic features of melodrama. Thus this film is a good example of the extent to which documentaries are a form of the in-betweenness. Further on in this chapter, I will discuss how these features and functions in *Shout* might invite the spectator to engage with the documentary.

Even if subtly, *Shout* does articulate critical commentary on two issues. One is how the border politics imposed by Israel within the occupied Golan Heights forces Golanis studying in Damascus to make a very difficult choice at the end of their courses. If they decide to stay in Damascus, then the Israelis will never let them return to their families and friends in the Golan; but if they decide to go back to their homes in the occupied territories, then 'the border will be shut behind them forever and their new lives, loves and homeland will remain out of reach.'<sup>26</sup> As their first year of their courses draws to a close, Bayan and Ezat are already torn apart by the prospect of this choice after graduation. This is made explicit in the scene where the two young Golanis are sitting together once again overlooking

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<sup>25</sup> Anderman, 'A Different Occupation,' in *Haaretz Daily Newspaper* (28th September, 2010), <<http://www.haaretz.com/culture/arts-leisure/a-different-occupation-1.316061>> [accessed 20th March 2011].

<sup>26</sup> Al-Makhadhi, 'Shouting for Freedom.'

a panoramic view (but this time it is the view of the urbanised Syrian capital). Ezat says to Bayan: 'It has only been a short while, but I got attached to it [Damascus]. I want to be here, not there [Majdal Shams].'<sup>27</sup> To which Bayan replies: 'Of course we have changed. You liked it here; but I am sure you will like our hometown again.'<sup>28</sup> Thus the border seems to have grown between these two friends. As the closing titles explain, after the summer break, Bayan decided to stay in Majdal Shams whereas Ezat went back to Damascus to continue his studies in Dramatic Art.

The second critical point that *Shout* makes is that the way in which the younger generation of Golanis and the older ones understand and approach the conflict between Syria and Israel is increasingly different. Young Golanis, born after the occupation, do not seem to feel connected to the struggle against Israel in the same manner as their parents and grandparents do; and also they are in general less politicized. This is not to say that the Syrian youths in the Golan Heights consider themselves Israeli. On the contrary, they see Israel as the occupier and the Golan as Syrian territory. But they are also significantly less invested in the old resistance discourse against the 'Zionist enemy.'<sup>29</sup> The most revealing sequence that manifests this is when Ezat, visiting his family in Damascus for the first time in his life, is asked to show to the interviewer (and to the camera) a book about his grandfather's achievements as a 'freedom fighter.' When the grandfather (in a close-up shot) is questioned what he would like for his grandson's future, he replies: 'I want the Israelis out of this country; then the enemy out of Iraq; and I salute the Palestinians in solidarity with their cause.'<sup>30</sup> Ezat, in despair after hearing these words, repeats the question. And thus the grandfather finally replies: 'I would like to see Ezat succeed in his studies. With education, he can fight better the occupation in the Golan.'<sup>31</sup> As years go by, the generational gap, just like the border, grows deeper between old and young Golanis. The younger generations are becoming more and more sceptic of the possibility of ever defeating and expelling the Israeli settlers and army. They do not seem to believe active resistance actually stands a chance of

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<sup>27</sup> Lubbe Bakker and Gould, *Shout*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> It is likely that this situation of the young Golanis as being less overtly politicized has changed over the last two years in the light of the current civil conflict in Syria between supporters of Bashar al-Assad's oppressive regime and the rebels fighting against the latter. As mentioned in a previous footnote, the Syrian civil war has started to create divisions within the Golan population who are torn between endorsing al-Assad (who has always been critical of the Israeli occupation of the Golan, and has allowed the Golan's produce to be exported and sold in Syria) and backing the rebels in the opposition. Since both the so-called 'Arab Spring' and the Syrian rebel movement have been characterised by the active participation of younger sections of the population, then it is possible that the youth in the Golan are being influenced and inspired to get active and more politically involved. See, Anon, 'Golan's Druze Divided over Syrian Unrest.'

<sup>30</sup> Lubbe Bakker and Gould, *Shout*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

changing their situation. As Ezat puts it in a tracking shot that follows him walking along the streets of Damascus: ‘I hope I can do something for the Golan. All Golanis share the same goal. But in the end the question remains: what can we do?’<sup>32</sup>

Needless to say, the fact that younger Golanis are gradually becoming distanced from the old rhetoric of resistance that their parents and grandparents endorsed only favours the Israeli aspiration that one day Syrian Golanis will ‘forget’ the occupation altogether and fully embrace Israeli citizenship. Furthermore, Israel’s strategy of imposing so many restrictions on Syrian Golanis wishing to travel to Damascus while encouraging them to study in Haifa and other Israeli cities only helps to deepen the generational gap. This is a danger that the film seems to be pointing at.

Thus far I have argued that *Shout* presents an alternative perspective of the Middle East conflict, and that in this sense it simultaneously calls into question the common representations of this conflict and makes visible the consequences that the Israeli occupation has over the Syrian inhabitants in the Golan Heights. Indeed, *Shout* eschews a polarized political discourse that is frequently employed in advocacy documentaries that tend to exploit images of suffering and pain in order to make a point by way of producing a sense of guilt in the viewers. By contrast, *Shout* constructs a dramatic narrative to tell the story of two best friends who have completely different experiences of life in Damascus; a life on the other side of the border and away from their homes in the Golan. Paradoxical as it may sound, it is precisely due to the mixture of dramatic and non-fictional techniques that this documentary is effective at articulating the ‘moments of truth’ that Steyerl speaks about. And thereby the film problematizes the representations of this conflict that pervade the dominant media. In Gould’s words:

In the Middle East, people are used to the fact that everything is political and polarized [...] I was touched by the fact that an Israeli army officer came up to us after the screening, and wanted a copy to show to his whole unit [...] Another film with Arabs speaking harsh words about Israel would not touch them (they have heard that story so often and immediately defend themselves, this defensive discourse is like second nature to Israelis). But *Shout* is a soft film without militant words or actions. And I really believe that can touch a lot of Israelis [...] I think that the softness of the film can work to give [Golanis] a voice [without falling in] the same old political rhetoric [used by the Syrian state], but [offering] instead a small, human, story.<sup>33</sup>

It could be argued that this strategy of trying to portray a ‘small, human, story’ can lead to a depoliticising effect. For this tendency is often used in TV documentaries to focus on

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Gould, Interview.

personal human stories that avoid addressing the political conditions and structures that provoked these very stories. Nonetheless, this is not the case of *Shout*. In this film, the fact that the two students actually have opportunities (even if these are restricted) and the possibility of making decisions, refuses a narrative of victimhood. And this seems to enable viewers to identify more strongly with the story than if the two Golanis were portrayed simply as oppressed, suffering victims. Thus, the alternative depiction of the Middle East conflict alongside the absence of an overtly activist view on the topic can open up the possibility of new approaches through an engaged viewing on the part of the spectator. Indeed, new perspectives and angles can be suggested by documentary forms. However, for this to happen, an active spectator is necessary if the dominant representations are really to be challenged and if moments of resistance that avoid ‘humanitarian’ discourses based on mercy or pity are to emerge.

In the next section, I will once more contrast Azoulay’s understanding of the role of spectators in the civil contract of photography with Rancière’s conceptualization of the emancipated spectator. I will do this with the aim of arguing that spectators can become engaged with the documentary in a way that blurs the hierarchical distinction between the filmmaker with the power and means of representation, and the supposedly passive spectator that lacks this power. Contrasting Azoulay’s and Rancière’s views will also allow me to explain how documentaries about migration and border-crossings -- like *Shout* -- have the potential to invite an active spectator, and thus to articulate a critical stance against dominant forms of truth production and hierarchical power relations.

## **V. The Engaged Spectator**

In Chapters 2 and 3 I explained that Azoulay believes that the viewer, rather than passively being presented with representations at the service of social power relations, is called to actively participate in the construction of the meaning of these representations. It is the civil duty of the spectator to respond to the represented subject’s counter-gaze by articulating the meaning of these representations in terms of claims for rights of those represented. It is worth noting here, however, that the notion of spectator proposed by Azoulay is an ideal concept, insofar as it not only implies the active participation of the viewer in articulating the meaning of the photograph, but it also requires that her involvement constitute claims for the restoration of rights. This seems to be slightly over-demanding on the viewer, since it is one thing to say that she is moved by the photo, engaged and invited to reflect on its meaning (as opposed to simply being provided a close-ended story of the photo), and another to affirm that the involvement of the viewer with an image portraying subjects enduring ‘regime-made

disasters'<sup>34</sup> is such that she articulates a 'statement of emergency,' a call for the restitution of rights.

Azoulay has acknowledged that her triadic model of photography does presuppose an ideal spectator; one that subscribes to the civil contract of photography and acts as a citizen in the citizenry created through the photograph. It is possible, she believes, that a photograph portraying 'disaster' fails to motivate the form of political relationships that she claims photography is able to produce. It is possible that the photograph is unsuccessful in calling the spectator to adopt a civil gaze and commit to making emergency claims when the rights of others have been violated. Is there a way in which Azoulay's insight could be preserved without the over-idealization of the role played by the spectator of both photographs and films? I believe that an understanding of the engagement of the spectator that eschews an overly utopian view of the potential that visual representations have to form political and ethical relationships that can subvert hierarchical relations of power is possible if we turn again to Rancière's thesis of the emancipated spectator, and to his ideas about the necessary bond between aesthetics and politics. It is my view that a notion of the engaged spectator can be defended without invoking a romanticised idea of citizenship in the way that Azoulay's model of photography does. It is possible to speak of a spectator who is motivated to take active part in the articulation of the meaning of a film and to become involved in relationships of ethical responsibility and political solidarity with the filmmaker and (especially) with the represented subjects through the form of the film, and through its aesthetic elements. I will argue that a documentary film can have the potential to invite spectators not as citizens in a utopian citizenry of documentary film (as in Azoulay's thesis of the citizenry of photography), but as active viewers able to partake in the ethical and political relationships that the film can produce mainly through its form and stylistic aspects.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière critically argues against the view that assumes that what the spectator understands, or how she feels when presented with a work of art, is exactly what the artist intended. According to him, there is no such thing as a straight, uniform and smooth transmission occurring between the artist's mind and that of the spectator. Through her viewing of a work of art, a spectator necessarily interprets and transforms what she experiences. In other words, whatever the spectator feels, sees and comprehends from her encounter with a work of art does not necessarily correspond to what the artist planned to convey. For Rancière, the spectator is first and foremost creative; she is

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<sup>34</sup> Azoulay, 'Getting Rid of the Distinction Between the Aesthetic and the Political,' p.242.

not an inactive or passive viewer that needs to be enlightened or instructed by the artist. For this reason, if art is to be a truly ‘emancipatory practice,’ then the artist needs to eschew adopting the position of the specialist transferring his wealth of expertise. Instead, the artist -- just like the figure of the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’<sup>35</sup> -- needs to foster the spectator’s capacity to interpret and translate a work of art. Without imposing or assuming any superiority, what the artist needs to do is to encourage the spectator to make new associations and disassociations from the artwork. It follows that, for Rancière, emancipation (of the spectator and of all other individuals in subordinate positions within the hegemonic power relations) entails the eradication of clear-cut boundaries between the amateur and the expert, the pupil and the teacher; between (passively) looking and doing. In this sense, the emancipated spectator becomes her own storyteller, for there is no longer a dominant authoritative figure that determines the story or has some sort of privileged access to it. Rancière describes the role of the emancipated spectator as follows:

Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires [emancipated] *spectators who play the role of active interpreters*, who develop their own translation [of the work of art they are presented with] in order to *appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story*.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, rather than adopting a paternalistic and/or elitist approach by assuming the passivity of the spectator, the role of the artist is that of creating, through the work of art, the conditions that allow the spectator to ‘dis-identify’ herself from the functions and roles that have been prescribed to her through the socio-political relations of production, and thus from the power relations within which she is immersed. It is only in this way that the distinction between an ignorant and passive spectator, and the knowledgeable, expert, artist is dissolved, thus allowing for the true emancipation of the spectator. Rancière believes in the creative and transformative potentiality of spectatorship. He affirms that looking is as active as doing, and that hence there is no gap between artist and spectator. In Rancière’s own words:

These oppositions -- viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity -- are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly defined terms. They specifically define a distribution of the sensible, an *a priori* distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. They are embodied allegories of inequality. [...] Emancipation [by contrast] starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations

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<sup>35</sup> Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. with an intro. by Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p.22. [My emphasis].

between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions, and that “interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, Rancière’s understanding of emancipation entails a radical shift in the distribution of the sensible, rather than a mere redistribution of places and capacities. Emancipation entails a change of meaning, a blurring of oppositions, rather than simply a shift in perspective or vantage-point that fails to dissolve inequalities. It is not enough to simply produce a work of art aimed at instructing and enlightening the supposedly ignorant or dormant spectator, for this only amounts to maintaining the unequal social relations derived from the dominant distribution of places and functions within society. The process of emancipation disrupts the symbolic order that distributes and assigns the names and positions that attach people to their work and roles within the social order. Emancipation for Rancière is the verification or demonstration of equality, which is attained through the enactment of equality.<sup>38</sup> This enactment is always done in the name of those identities, those categories that have been denied equality in some way. But precisely because it is the enactment of equality, it cannot be identified with the self of the community that has been somehow injured. The enactment of equality cannot be identified with a particular group or population. For the enactment to effectively prove equality, it has to be beyond any social identification. In other words, Rancière maintains that the construction of a demonstration of equality is neither the affirmation of an identity nor the demonstration of the values of a specific group. The process of emancipation or of the enactment of equality is a process of subjectivization, that is, a process of the constitution of (political) subjectivity.

Rancière avoids aligning political subjectivization with identification because, for him, identification belongs to the order of the police, which is the process distribution of names or identities that attach people to their work, function and place within society. Insofar as the order of the police is first and foremost that which regulates what parts of the society or the community are visible and identifiable as parts, then the police is the delimitation of the field of all possible experience, the partition of the perceptible or, in Rancière’s words, the ‘distribution of the sensible.’

Rancière emphasises that the order of the police is never a complete, all-encompassing, unchangeable process. The supposition that the distribution of roles and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp.12-13.

<sup>38</sup> See Rancière, ‘Politics, Identification and Subjectivization.’

functions to all parts of the society are underpinned by a strong ontological reality of sorts is misleading. Put differently, there is no ‘objective’ order of reasons upon which the social order of domination is supported. The distribution done by the order of the police is contingent, and as such it can be subverted and contested. This is what emancipation, as a process of enactment of equality, consists in. Emancipation or politics produces a ‘break with the sensory “natural” order that destines specific groups and individuals to rule, to public or private life, [...] by pinning bodies down to a certain time and space.’<sup>39</sup> Politics introduces a dissensus into the social order of the police. Thus, politics is a process of dis-identification, a dissociation of parts of the society from the names and positions they occupy in the social order. In this sense, politics has egalitarian effects, for it undermines the idea that those who rule are entitled to do so; and it functions as a demonstration that those either excluded from the social order or included in it but in a subordinate manner can also partake in this order. The capacity for politics is never exclusive to anyone; it belongs to everyone but, at the same time, to no one in particular. The equality enacted by politics therefore brings about a different distribution of the sensible, a change in the system that assigns and ties individuals to their functions in society. Like the cinematic cut, marking simultaneously the end of one shot and the beginning of the other, politics for Rancière interrupts an existing social order and inaugurates a new partition of the sensible.

Rancière considers that what is central to aesthetics is that it bears a strong correlation to politics. For him, aesthetics is not a set of artistic practices, nor is it the general theory that attempts to explain such practices or a theory concerned with sense experience at large. Instead, he argues that what is at stake in aesthetics is exactly what is at stake in politics too, namely, the partition or distribution of the sensible. Aesthetics is constituted by various structural systems that, on the one hand, determine the shared world of our everyday experiences; and on the other, divide, distribute and delimit the positions and roles that a person occupies within this world. While politics is not to be identified with or reduced to this partitioning of the sensible conditioned by the aesthetic systems, politics is however determined by these aesthetics. As Rancière puts it:

[Aesthetics] can be understood [...] as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of

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<sup>39</sup> Corcoran, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ p.7.

experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of times.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, aesthetics entails a mode of appearance that does not restrict itself to a purely artistic practice, but it also constitutes the force of the political inside art itself, which can suggest an alternative politics to the institutionalised and ruling structures of power relations from outside those very structures. If politics implies a break, a dis-identification with the dominant symbolic order, then aesthetics is political to the extent that it allows persons to disentangle themselves from the roles that have been prescribed to them within the social order. This dis-identification entails a challenge to -- and hence a change in -- the distribution of the sensible. This change is precisely what Rancière calls emancipation, a process of the enactment of equality. And this dis-identification is precisely the process that undergoes the emancipated spectator.

I argued in Chapter 3 that Rancière and Azoulay coincide in the view that aesthetic experiences (photography in the specific case of Azoulay) have the potential to be politically subversive. The two theorists also share the idea that the viewer or spectator can play a role as an active participant, rather than merely as a passive observer. Azoulay proposes that there is no real opposition between the aesthetic and the political, for neither the former nor the latter are attributes of works of art. Insofar as a work of art is an object given to the senses, experienced by the senses, then it cannot exist outside the aesthetic plane. Photographic images are thus aesthetic in this sense. The political, according to Azoulay, is not a trait, 'but a space of human relations exposed to each other in public, and [...] photography is one of the realizations of this space.'<sup>41</sup> The space of the political is thus realized whenever people assemble together and, as a collective, have the capacity to actualize (at any given moment) their civil duties towards one another and their inner potential for equal participation. Rancière, in turn, proposes that there is a crucial aesthetic dimension of politics, as much as a political dimension of aesthetics. For him, the aesthetics of politics means the split of the social order from itself; that is, the disruption of the existing distribution of social functions and places as much as the rearrangement of the sensible world upon which such a distribution rests.

Despite the similarities between their views about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, the role of the spectator, and the political potential of art, Rancière's understanding of the emancipated spectator avoids the romanticised and utopian idea of

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<sup>40</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.13.

<sup>41</sup> Azoulay, 'Getting Rid of the Distinction,' p.251.

citizenship that Azoulay's triadic model of photography seems to imply. As Rancière claims, it is possible to conceive of a spectator who can become an active participant in the articulation of the meaning of a work of art such as a documentary film. This spectator is hence involved in certain types of relationships with the filmmaker and especially with the represented subjects simply through the form of the film, through its aesthetic and stylistic elements. There is no need to evoke citizenship or a civil duty (like Azoulay does with her ideal citizenship of photography) in order to explain the possibility of the spectator's active engagement with the documentary film and the potential it offers for political emancipation. The moving images of a documentary and the manner in which they are put together have the capacity to invite the viewer to become responsible for and to act in both political and ethical solidarity towards the other, the filmed subject. And thus these films have the capacity to form a space of relationships that are not directly mediated by the nation-state.

As I have argued in Chapter 3 and will further claim in Chapter 6, it is the open form of a documentary film that allows for the active involvement of the spectator. For an open form prevents the film from having a fixed meaning and single source of authority, therefore the spectator is invited to take part in determining the documentary's meaning. Here, the spectator is not considered to be an ignorant passive viewer that needs to be somehow relieved from her ignorance. Instead, the open form of a documentary blurs the hierarchical distinction that exists between the filmmaker as the one with the representational power, and the portrayed subjects and the viewer as the ones lacking such power. The hierarchical distinction is disrupted to the extent that the stylistic aspects and the form of the film are 'loose' or 'open' in a way that calls for the spectator to act as a translator of sorts; an interpreter of the images that she is presented with, and of the manner in which they are linked together. The spectator thus appropriates the narrative and emerges as an active and equal partaker in the articulation of the meaning of these moving images. Because the spectator has the choice to engage or not, then spectatorship can never be fully determined or fixed. As a result, instead of acting merely as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge (as a 'pedagogical tool' that reinforces the distinction between a knowledgeable filmmaker and an ignorant spectator), the documentary film has the capacity to function as a product that the filmmaker, the represented subject and the spectator can collectively verify and provide with meaning, without any of them having any ownership and/or privileged claim over the significance of the documentary. And it is in this sense that the documentary can pose a challenge to the ruling forms of truth production and governmentality, subvert social and political hierarchies, and hence assume an emancipatory function. In other words, the

documentary can function, in Rancière's terms, as an enactment of equality by reorganising the dominant distribution of the sensible.

In this section I have discussed how the spectator of documentaries can become actively engaged in the articulation of the meaning of the film without having to invoke utopian citizenries in the way that Azoulay does. Following Rancière, I explained that the spectator is free to decide her involvement with the documentary. In the next section, I will make the point that spectators not only have the capacity and choice to be active partakers determining the sense of the film, but they also can decide the degree to which they become involved. And I will examine how this could happen in the particular case of *Shout*.

## **VI. The Spectator's Degree of Engagement**

Even though spectators are always free to find their own narrative and interpretation of any documentary, there are some documentaries that allow the relationships between filmmaker, filmed subject and spectator to become an encounter based on the equality of intelligences. Indeed, some documentaries have a form (and a content) that does not invite too much interpretation on the part of the viewer. These films seem to refuse to let go of their intention to teach and make a point, and they also seem to prevent their meaning from being completely open to the spectator's interpretation. In other words, these documentaries seem to 'spoon-feed' the information that they attempt to convey to spectators, and so their images and narratives are presented using a sort of strategy that does not give space for the spectator to be in conversation with the film's meaning. For example, Michael Moore's documentaries -- such as *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) -- tend to employ this overtly persuasive strategy. Other documentary films, however, are multi-layered (and often ambiguous) in the way they employ images and intertwine them in order to promote a view. These documentaries use an aesthetic style that prompts the spectator to actively interpret and to partake in the articulation of its meaning, and hence to appropriate the latter. At the same time, a spectator might be more or less motivated to become engaged with the documentary, to participate in articulating the significance of it, and to enter into ethical and political relationships with the filmed subjects. It is the spectator's choice to be a more or less active partaker in the social bonds that can be created between filmmaker, filmed subjects and viewers through the film. The degree to which the spectator is responsible for the other, the portrayed subject, is her own decision, as is the degree to which she reads the images as binding urgent claims for the restoration of rights.

Thus, for example, the series of four short films directed by Marc Silver and Gael García Bernal in co-production with Amnesty International entitled *Los Invisibles* (*The*

*Invisibles*, 2010) depicts the difficult and dangerous journeys that thousands of migrants from Central America take when they travel between Mexico's southern border with Guatemala and the northern Mexico-United States border. All four films show interviews with migrants, volunteers and activists, where García Bernal, a world-known Mexican actor, often appears in frame. These interviews are coupled (often off-screen and asynchronously) with images that directly present migrants travelling on top of freight trains, staying in shelters, and suffering serious injuries caused by falling from the trains or by being abused, raped and/or robbed during their journeys. As a large number of activist films do, the four-part series *Los Invisibles* seeks to draw the attention of the viewer by employing an aesthetic style where images and narrative leave little space for interpretation on the part of the spectator.

Many activist documentaries about migration overtly endorse a cause by exploiting images of suffering and adopting a victimising narrative style with the aim of making a deep impression on the viewer so that she too subscribes to the cause. *Los Invisibles* uses this narrative strategy and style throughout. For instance, in the fourth part entitled 'Goal' a shot depicts in close-up a deeply open wound that a migrant child has on the back of his leg. The boy is shown lying on his stomach in a bed provided by a shelter for passing migrants, and he is having his wound cleaned by one of the volunteers working at the shelter. In a similar fashion, the second part called 'Six out of Ten' shows García Bernal speaking to three migrant women from Honduras about why they left their country and families in order to reach the US and find work to support their children and other relatives back home. In this section, images alternate between the conversation with the three women seated on the rail line track, still close ups of other migrants' faces and shots of the landscape that migrants have to travel through in southern Mexico. Meanwhile, in voice-over to these images, García Bernal explains the struggles and sufferings of these people: 'according to estimates, six out of ten women are sexually abused on their journey to the United States.'<sup>42</sup> These overtly shocking images alongside the interviews and narration by García Bernal can indeed produce reactions in viewers -- in fact, Amnesty International has affirmed that '*The Invisibles* [was made] to shine a light on the abuses migrants suffer in Mexico'<sup>43</sup> -- but they do not seem to leave spectators free to decide their own interpretation of the film. Rather, the meaning of

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<sup>42</sup> García Bernal and Silver, *Los Invisibles* (Mexico: Amnesty International, 2010). See Amnesty International Website, 'Los Invisibles,' <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/watch-invisibles-2010-11-02>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

<sup>43</sup> Anon, 'Amnesty International and Gael García Bernal Launch Films on Migrants in Mexico,' in Amnesty International Website (8<sup>th</sup> November 2010), <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/amnesty-international-and-gael-garc%C3%AD-bernal-launch-films-migrants-mexico-2010-11-08>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013].

these images seems closed and predetermined, and aimed directly at fostering a cause and getting viewers to support it. That this is the case is confirmed by García Bernal's off-screen closing statement at the end of the fourth part. He says:

The Mexican authorities must protect migrants in our country. The law must protect us all whether nationals or foreigners. It is essential Mexico sets a good example in the way it treats migrants in order to be consistent with the valid demands we make for the fair treatment of migrants in the United States. We cannot continue to be invisible.<sup>44</sup>

By contrast with *Los Invisibles*, the video installation *The Mapping Journey Project* (2008-2011) by Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili presents,<sup>45</sup> through eight screens, different documentations of migrants' journeys from Northern Africa and Afghanistan into Europe. Each of the eight screens frames an identical shot of a coloured atlas made of paper and showing the Mediterranean Sea and southern and central Europe. On each map a hand draws with a marker the route that the voice-over of the migrant describing his or her journey into Europe. Each hand thus follows a different itinerary drawn over an identical background map. Khalili has described her video as an attempt to distort normative and official cartographies and geographies by way of mapping clandestine journeys.<sup>46</sup> The lines traced over the maps not only indicate the illegal trajectories, but they also subvert the geopolitical borders as the latter are crossed, drawn over, and broken with the marker. At the same time, the off-screen voices of each migrant explaining the specific itinerary they decided to follow serve as documentations of minor histories that otherwise would not be recorded. Similarly, another way in which this video artwork is subversive is through the strongly accented languages and dialects of the migrants describing their journeys. As Khalili has explained,<sup>47</sup> the dialects used in combination with French, Arabic and Spanish make for an eclectic mix that make evident the colonial history and the postcolonial situation of the migrants and their countries of origin. Thus, these documentations stress the inherent forms of inequality existing in our current societies and contest dominant histories and accounts of undocumented migration.

Khalili's video installation presents a much more open form than that of *Los Invisibles*. Instead of pursuing the conversion of viewers into a cause, her video encourages the latter to actively reflect on the meaning of the images and audio. Indeed, the eight-screen

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<sup>44</sup> García Bernal and Silver, *Los Invisibles*.

<sup>45</sup> Khalili, *The Mapping Journey Project* (France: 2008-2011).

<sup>46</sup> See Khalili, 'Bouchra Khalili in Conversation at Rivington Place,' in *Rivington Place Youtube Channel* (26<sup>th</sup> October 2010), <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=EKuiQmCp8rA>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013].

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

video installation invites a discussion about the arbitrariness of geopolitical borders and the extent to which official cartographies are constantly challenged through the journeys that undocumented immigrants undertake. Spectators in this case are presumably considered to be active individuals with the capacity to interpret the moving images and sounds with which they are presented. Rather than assuming that spectators are passive and/or ignorant subjects that need somehow to be informed about a certain actual event or situation, the video-art work ‘opens the door’ for them to decide the degree to which they want to become engaged with the film. Spectators in this way are provided with a sense of freedom to interpret and translate the moving images and sounds. In this way, the overt attempt to ‘educate’ the viewer that a documentary like *Los Invisibles* realises is actively avoided in *The Mapping Journey Project*.

What these examples show is that all documentary films depicting migration and border-crossing experiences – such as *Shout*, *Los Invisibles* or *The Mapping Journey Project* -- have the potential to be more or less politically subversive, more or less challenging towards social and political hierarchies. By the same token, to the extent that spectators are offered a more or less conclusive film, they are more or less free to create their own ‘fictions’ and draw their own interpretations. Thus, spectators have the capacity to adopt a more or less active role in the articulation of the meaning of the documentary. They have the capacity and opportunity to become equal with the filmmaker.

Returning now to the particular case of *Shout*, it seems that the approach to the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights from the point of view of two young Syrian Golanis invites the viewer to question not only dominant media depictions of this particular conflict (and of the Middle-East conflict as a whole), but also the Israeli border regime imposed on the Syrian Golani people. And this is indeed the hope that Lubbe Bakker and Gould had when they made this documentary:

When we made [*Shout*], the goal was to get into the minds of people, to make them wonder and think about certain regions and the people in there with another perspective. This eventually might lead to changing political ways of thinking or even laws.<sup>48</sup>

It is precisely through engaging with these questions that the spectator of *Shout* opens up the possibility of forming relationships of solidarity and responsibility with the filmed subjects (with Ezat and Bayan, but also with the Syrian Golanis in general). These relationships are not mediated by the nation-state. And since they are based on an active concern for the other

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<sup>48</sup> Lubbe Bakker, Interview.

regardless of her actual citizenship status, they are ethical and political relationships guided by the principle of unconditional hospitality.

Throughout *Shout* there is an emotional use of camera angles -- such as close-ups, and the filmed subjects openly acknowledge the camera. As I mentioned before, this documentary constructs the film characters as if they were dramatic characters -- as opposed to subjects of 'pure' observation. In this sense, the documentary refuses offering mimetic representations and thus allows viewers to become interpreters. It is precisely the melodramatic narrative that provides spectators the space to engage with the film by identifying and sympathising with the two main figures, but also by making visible the effects that the Israeli occupation and the border have upon the lives of the two friends and their families. At the same time, a moment of truth is present in this documentary since it shows an alternative angle on the broad conflict in the Middle East. The way the film does this is by avoiding a straightforward narrative of victimhood. For, even though the film underscores the restrictions imposed on Golanis, it also shows the opportunities that the two students have: the possibility of deciding between family obligations and the desire to define their own identity. This new perspective allows the spectator to reflect upon the dominant approaches to this conflict, and thus to freely consider the suggested new perspective. The spectator is here free to understand this film as a demand for the restoration of the rights of Golanis. In this way, the spectator actively appropriates the narrative and partakes in the meaning of the film. Conversely, the filmmakers make decisions on the form and content of the film, but they cannot calculate the responses of spectators. Hence, filmmakers act as hosts leaving open the possibility for spectators to take active part and thus give rise to a new distribution of the sensible. And in consequence, the hierarchical distinction between filmmaker and viewer is thereby blurred.

## **VII. Final Remarks**

In this chapter I have continued exploring the possibility of transposing Azoulay's triadic model of photography to documentary films about migration and border-crossing experiences. I have used here the case of *Shout* as an example of a documentary that constructs a dramatic narrative in order to convey the difficulties that the Golani population suffers under the Israeli occupation. While in the last chapter I centred my analysis on the role of the filmed subjects within a documentary, my focus in this chapter has been on discussing the role that spectators might adopt towards *Shout*, and the way in which they might become actively involved with it. I claimed that spectators can engage with documentaries as much or as little as they decide, and that the filmmaker need not attempt to enlighten viewers but only to invite them to question the images they see by offering

representations that avoid mimesis and instead encourage interpretation from the viewer. In the case of *Shout* it is the melodramatic style that opens up the space for spectators to become actively engaged in determining the meaning of the film, and to relate to the filmed subjects in terms of solidarity and partnership. In this sense, it is the form and style of the film and not so much its content that determines the degree of involvement of the spectator. In the next chapter I will further argue for this point, and will conclude that it is more in the form than in the documentary's content that the political potential of the film resides. Finally, I have also argued here that despite its constructed nature *Shout* creates moments of truth that can challenge the hierarchies of the social order.

In the next chapter, I will continue my exploration of the transposition of Azoulay's model to documentaries by examining Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010). My focus will be mainly on the role of the filmmaker. However, I will also claim that spectators cannot only engage with the film to different degrees and at a rational level, but that they can also become involved in a sensorial and embodied way, at the level of affect. Indeed spectators can be engaged cognitively as much as affectively with the film.

## CHAPTER 6

### Traces of Memory and Time. Affect and Politics in *The Nine Muses*

#### I.

By transposing Azoulay's triadic model of photography to documentaries, and by drawing on Derrida's notion of hospitality and his claim of the necessary link between ethics and politics, I have argued that documentary films which focus on migration and the experience of crossing the border can give rise to ethical and political relationships between the filmmaker, the viewers and the filmed subjects. These relationships are relationships based on responsibility and solidarity, and hence they are relationships of hospitality with the potential to subvert cultural, political, and social hierarchies. Documentaries that explore the issue of migration can articulate a space (and a time) where those represented, those with the power to represent and those who are viewers no longer relate exclusively in terms of vertical or hierarchical power relations operating unilaterally. Rather, the way these three subjects relate becomes more horizontal, and thus a more equal way of relating. The reason for this is that these documentaries allow for spectators to become involved in the articulation of the meaning of the film, and for the filmed subjects to make visible their grievances. In this manner, filmmaker, spectators and represented subjects all play an active role within the social relationships that emerge through the film.

But, how exactly is this achieved? What features does a documentary film about migration need to have for it to enable the formation of such ethical and political relationships and thus to pose a challenge to established social hierarchies? What is it that gives a documentary film its political potential? In this chapter, I would like to consider these questions. I will take my cue once more from Rancière's ideas around the political potential of the work of art in order to discuss what it means for a documentary film to have political potentiality. Drawing also on the ideas of Hito Steyerl, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Laura U. Marks, I will claim that it is more through affect rather than through the ideological content of a documentary that spectators become active participants in the determination of the meaning of the film. I will particularly deal with the question of how the elements of time and sound in documentaries might affect and thereby invite spectators to actively engage with the film, and I will use John Akomfrah's documentary essay *The Nine Muses* (2010)<sup>1</sup> as my

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<sup>1</sup> Akomfrah, *The Nine Muses* (UK: Smoking Dogs Films, 2010).

case study. Finally, I will also consider what the role of the filmmaker needs to be in order for spectators to become such active participants.

## **II. Affect and the Expressive Dimension of Documentaries**

In discussing documentary filmmaking and its potential for articulating political criticism, Steyerl has argued that documentaries should neither be regarded as mimetic reproductions of reality (and hence as representations that are able to capture the essence of facts, and convey true reality), nor should these films be understood as mere constructions of a reality that does not exist as such. In her own words:

Both positions are problematic. While realists believe in an objectivity that, more often than not, turns out to be extremely subjective and which has nonchalantly passed off hideous propaganda as truth, constructivists end up not being able to distinguish the difference between facts and blatant misinformation or [...] between truth and plain lies. While the position of realists could be called naïve, the position of constructivists runs the danger of sliding into opportunistic and cynical relativism.<sup>2</sup>

Other documentary theorists, such as Trinh and Renov, have maintained similar views to that of Steyerl. Trinh has argued that there is no real opposition between the natural and the synthetic or the artificial in (documentary) films. According to her, because cinematic images are representations, because they mediate or frame reality, they necessarily involve staging and artifice. And since this is the very nature of film, then a film that ‘call[s] attention to the subjectivity at work and [that] show[s] the activity of production in the production [is a film that functions] in its most natural, realistic and truthful [way].’<sup>3</sup> What is seen as the natural and the staged are not separated for Trinh; they are part of the same process, of the same whole production. In chapter three I said that Renov has characterised this opposition as being based upon the mistaken dichotomy between science and art, between objectivity and subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> This dichotomy has led to the belief that if documentaries are to represent reality ‘objectively,’ then they cannot be artistic expressions, and vice versa. In view of this, Steyerl has explained that the opposition between realist and constructivist approaches has led to an impasse of sorts within documentary theory, and that a good way to overcome this stalemate is to understand the documentary form also in terms of expression rather than exclusively in terms of representation. This, she says, in no way means denying that documentaries are representational practices. Instead, documentaries are representations that necessarily bear an expressive dimension.

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<sup>2</sup> Steyerl, ‘Documentary Uncertainty.’

<sup>3</sup> Trinh, ‘When the Eye Frames Red,’ interview by Akira Mizuta Lippit, in *Trinh T. Minh-ha Website*, <<http://www.trinhminh-ha.com/>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> May 2012].

<sup>4</sup> Renov, ‘Toward a Poetics.’

If we here turn briefly to Stefan Nowotny's discussion of what 'expression' means, it will be easier to grasp what this expressive aspect of documentary is. Concerned with the question of the possibility of cultural translation, Nowotny argues that it is necessary to understand the way in which 'the reference to any extra-linguistic social reality [such as culture] is manifest [or expressed] within linguistic enunciations.'<sup>5</sup> Following the linguist Emile Benveniste, Nowotny explains that any expression bears a relationship to the world in the sense that whatever is expressed by means of a linguistic enunciation is not itself the world (or more precisely, a thing in the world), but a relation that holds between the world and language. Now, this relation constitutes the reference of the linguistic utterance, and what determines such relation is what Benveniste deems a 'centre of expression' or 'centre of reference.' The centre of expression of an enunciation is the presence that the speaker has upon her utterance. This presence leaves a trace that operates as an inherent reference that is non-linguistic and that binds the enunciation to a specific point in time and space. In other words, at the core of all enunciations there is a relation between 'the linguistic given' and that aspect which cannot be reduced to the linguistic given but still *expresses* itself through the utterance. This non-linguistic centre of reference of the enunciation is thus 'dialogical and situated in a world,'<sup>6</sup> an expression which is embodied and temporalised.

Let us return now to documentaries and Steyerl's claim that what these films *express* through their form constitutes their potential for political criticism, subversion and emancipation. This means that the political critique that documentaries may articulate does not reside so much in what they *represent* through their ideological content, but rather this potential lies more in the *expressive* aspect of the film that is necessarily included within its form. The form of a documentary constitutes an *expression* of social reality, that is, an expression of 'the conditions of production and representation [as much as] the material and aesthetic choices.'<sup>7</sup> All of these social relations determine the manner in which the film is put together. And so these relations are *expressed* through the documentary, but they are not necessarily *represented* within the film's content and narrative. In this way, by attending to a documentary's form and not restricting oneself exclusively to its content, it is possible to find out whether it has potential for articulating a political criticism, and also the manner in which it articulates such critique.

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<sup>5</sup> Nowotny, 'The Stakes of Translation,' in *Transversal Webjournal*, trans. by Gerrit Jackson (June, 2006), <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/nowotny/en>> [accessed 21<sup>st</sup> May 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Steyerl, 'Making Films Politically: Interview with Hito Steyerl.'

As I explained in Chapter 3, Trinh and Steyerl have made the point that the documentaries that are able to articulate a political criticism that calls into question social, economical, political and/or cultural hierarchies have as one of their core traits that of being self-reflexive. By self-reflexivity, they mean the recognition within the film that the images produced are made from a certain perspective, always through a certain lens. However, it is important to note here that a documentary that turns to reflect on itself, on its own production, is not to be equated simply with a film that adopts a certain method or technique. Indeed, as Trinh emphasises, self-reflexivity should not be reduced to a mere aesthetics, to a purely formalistic and 'beautifying' device. In particular, Trinh claims that the broadly extended tendency in the area of Visual Anthropology to 'self-expose' the methodology adopted and the conditions of production of the filmed ethnographic material supposedly in order to guarantee the scientific rigour of the film has undermined and trivialised the importance of self-reflexivity. A self-reflexive documentary -- despite being determined by and imbued with the social, political and cultural conditions under which it is produced -- has an open-ended form, a form that challenges its own closure and thus suggests other possible closures, inviting other possible meanings. And it is here where the value of self-reflexivity lies. In Trinh's words:

[Self-reflexivity aims] to prevent meaning from ending with what is said and what is shown and -- through enquiries into production relation -- thereby to challenge representation itself even while emphasizing the reality of the experience of film as well as the important role that reality plays in the lives of the spectators.<sup>8</sup>

The aperture to other possible meanings is, according to both Steyerl and Trinh, what makes a documentary film truly critical. That is, a documentary that challenges rooted ideologies and destabilizes the status-quo is that which puts under scrutiny the representational and referential function of cinematic images and sounds, and thus not only questions the authority of documentary representations as depictions of reality, but also refuses to have a single and fixed meaning. This is the sense in which the meaning of a documentary can be said to be politically critical, 'when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority but, rather, empties or decentralizes it.'<sup>9</sup> Even though every film is in itself whole or complete in that it has its particular order and closure, when the film calls into question its own wholeness, it opens a door of possibilities onto other closures and significations. It is by defying the single and totalizing subject of meaning and of knowledge

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<sup>8</sup> Trinh, 'Documentary Is/Not a Name,' in *October*, Vol. 52 (Spring, 1990), pp.76-98 (pp.94-95), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/778886>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012].

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.89.

(that is, a subject that assumes herself as the only and ultimate reserve of reference) that the power relations that this subject fosters and helps to maintain are undermined. Steyerl argues that it is by means of its self-reflexive form that a documentary can prompt the viewer to become aware of the mediating nature of the cinematic representations she is being presented with. In other words, it is by means of what the images in tandem with sounds express -- rather than what they represent, that documentaries can affect viewers and even invite and mobilise them to critically question the hierarchies of the social order.

More specifically, Steyerl draws on Brian Massumi's<sup>10</sup> work on fear to argue that documentary practices mobilise spectators by way of affect much in the same manner that power today 'addresses us [by triggering and] modulating the intensity of collective feelings [and emotional responses].'<sup>11</sup> To be sure, fear is and has always been a political tool employed by governments to justify the incrementation and expansion of the police state and wars elsewhere. Thus, for example, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by a coalition of troops from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Spain and Poland was justified on the dubious claim that the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein had refused to disarm and eliminate the nuclear and biological weapons programmes in his country, and that his government had ties with terrorist group al-Qaeda. There was never actually sufficient evidence for this rationale to support the war against Iraq, and that was one of the reasons why many countries -- including France, China and Russia -- would not support the invasion. However, by invoking weapons of mass destruction and by making the military intervention in Iraq an essential part of the so-called 'war on terror,' the governments of the invading countries, especially the US, resorted to instilling fear of a potential threat to the world's security in order to justify the attack on Iraq.

Massumi further explains that the images that circulate in today's global media about events of horror range between the two poles: the pole of natural disasters, on the one hand; and that of terrorist attacks, on the other. Such images of disaster play a central role in the affective reception of the frightful events they portray. As a result of the emphasis on the horrors of the event and the renunciation to make sense of it, global media produce an affective impact by instilling a strike of insurmountable horror, which eventually mutates into a continuum of 'low-level' fear that becomes the underlying permanent feature of everyday

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<sup>10</sup> See Massumi, 'Fear (The Spectrum Said),' in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 2005), pp.31-48, <[http://www.brianmassumi.com/textes/Fear \(the Spectrum Said\) - Positions.pdf](http://www.brianmassumi.com/textes/Fear%20(the%20Spectrum%20Said)%20-%20Positions.pdf)> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2012]; and Massumi, 'Everywhere You Want to Be. Introduction to Fear,' in Massumi (ed), *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp.3-38, <[http://www.brianmassumi.com/textes/EVERYWHERE YOU WANT TO BE.pdf](http://www.brianmassumi.com/textes/EVERYWHERE%20YOU%20WANT%20TO%20BE.pdf)> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2012].

<sup>11</sup> Steyerl, 'Documentary Uncertainty.'

life. This low-level fear, in turn, undermines the potential for collective response and creates a tight link between a natural disaster and what is deemed a national security threat. As Massumi puts it:

Fear defies a collective response. When response is re-enabled, it is on the individual scale of the personal actions of ‘everyday heroes’ carrying out small deeds of voluntaristic support. At this becalming pole of the affective conversion circuit, human agency is reasserted, but in the exemplary figure of individual actors exercising personal choice. By contrast, the out-of-scale strike of the unforeseen event seems utterly inhuman, an ‘act of God’ – by which is meant ‘nature.’ [...] This applies even to wholly human-caused events, such as terrorist attacks. An association is established between ‘natural disaster’ and ‘national security threat,’ which discourages any response other than the cyclic, media-driven return to the voluntaristic, individual human scale. That affective pattern becomes second nature.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, fear is frequently employed by state apparatuses, such as the media, for the affective modulation and management of populations. It is worth noting at this point that the term ‘affect’ has a particular meaning for Massumi, who took the term from Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*,<sup>13</sup> who in turn took it from the work of philosopher Baruch Spinoza. For Deleuze and Guattari, affect and affection should not be confused with feelings or with emotions. In the introductory notes to his translation of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Massumi further explains that while feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social. By contrast, affect ‘is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.’<sup>14</sup> Affects are non-conscious experiences of certain intensity. Affects are always prior to and/or outside of consciousness, and for this reason they are abstract, unstructured and cannot be fully captured through language. On the other hand, feelings are sensations that are confronted and labelled and interpreted against previous experiences. As opposed to affects thus, feelings depend on the distinctive set of previous sensations that each person has, which is why feelings are both biographical and personal. Emotions are projections and/or displays of a feeling, and in this sense they differ from feelings because emotions can be either genuine or feigned. What gives content to a feeling, and therefore to an emotion, is affect, the intensity that results from the stimuli that impinge upon our bodies via our senses. Affect thus determines the intensity of a feeling.

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<sup>12</sup> Massumi, ‘The Half-Life of Disaster,’ in *The Guardian* (Friday, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2011), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/15/half-life-of-disaster>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> October 2012].

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.xvii.

Understanding the cinematic image in terms of affect or of its affective modulation, entails affirming that the image operates upon us on a bodily or sensorial level, which in turn entails that meaning does not reside (exclusively) at the level of text or of language but also at the level of an embodied sensorial response. Steyerl's idea that documentaries that have the potential to articulate a political criticism are able to engage spectators not exclusively by means of their representational content, but also (and perhaps more importantly) via what they express through their form is relevant because it allows thinking and explaining the political and ethical potential of documentary filmmaking beyond the framework of representation. In what follows, I will argue that approaching documentaries in terms of expression and affect allows us to consider other aspects and social relationships that can emerge through this form of filmmaking. These alternative aspects differ from the questions that usually arise from an exclusive focus on representation, and hence on the power relations necessarily existing between those represented and those with the power to represent and to speak on behalf of others. More specifically, since what a documentary expresses can invite the spectator to have a bodily-sensorial response that can open up the door to other meanings and other forms of engagement with the film, then the hierarchical relationship between those who represent, those who are represented, and those who are limited to observe such representations can be challenged. And consequently, such representational hierarchies can instead be substituted with a more horizontal set of social and ethical and political relationships among the spectators, the filmmaker and the filmed subjects. In the following sections of this chapter, I will discuss *The Nine Muses* because it is a documentary about migration, and its stylistic and formal features provide a good example of the extent to which temporal and acoustic elements of documentaries can produce affective and embodied responses in spectators.

### **III. *The Nine Muses* and the Experience of Migration**

Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* could be described simultaneously as a documentary and a poetic essay film that offers a meditation on the experience of migration, on travel and epic journeys, as well as on the ideas of being and becoming. In line with his previous work as a solo video-artist and as part of the Black Audio Film Collective,<sup>15</sup> *The Nine Muses* crucially

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<sup>15</sup> The Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) was a group founded in 1982 by Akomfrah alongside six other British students. Working mainly with moving and still images, they produced a diverse body of work ranging from essay films and experimental documentaries, videos, installations, and photographs to essays, posters, film programs, seminars and an art manifesto. Highly influenced by the work of French avant-garde and other non-Western filmmakers, BAFC was concerned with the politics of representation (specifically with media representations of race) and dedicated their experimental work to explore issues of diaspora, memory and the political struggle of marginalized groups. See Eshun and Sagar (eds), *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the*

revolves around the question as to what extent it is possible to extract an image from the narrative and the chronology in which it has been presented, and then re-insert it within another set of images, another con-text. In other words, the question underlying the film is what sort of narrative (and subsequent mythology) would result from withdrawing some archival images and media representations of the African, Caribbean and Asian diasporas in Britain during the 1960s and through to the 1980s, and instead relocating these images into another context of expression, another framework. Would this new context allow the images of migrants to shed the original mythologies they have been imbued with and instead re-articulate them in terms of new narratives?

Indeed, the purpose of *The Nine Muses* is to suggest a counter-history, a counter-mythology and a counter-memory of the experience of migration by re-working and re-contextualising archival footage taken from films and newsreels portraying black and Asian migrants in post-war Britain. As Akomfrah puts it in an interview:

In some sense [...] the archive does exist as a kind of official memory of place, a moment and so on. But the archive survives in a very complicated way for diasporic subjectivities. Someone made the point that diasporic lives are characterized by the absence of monuments that attest to your existence, so in a way the archival inventory *is* that monument. But it's contradictory because the archive is also the space of a certain fabulations and fictions. So there needs to be a critical interrogation of the archive. One of the important ways of doing this is to remove the narrative voice [...]. If you remove one of the key structuring devices from archival images, they suddenly allow themselves to be reinserted into other narratives with which you can ask new questions.<sup>16</sup>

Ever since the start of his career, Akomfrah has been interested in finding alternative ways of portraying and narrating the migrant experience and the lives of diasporas in Britain. One of the main concerns throughout the body of Akomfrah's work has been drawing attention to and questioning mainstream media representations and public discourse about migration. In particular, he has been critical of the strong tendency within British media to depict migrants through negative, stereotyped and racist lenses. Migrants have frequently been scapegoated especially during times of economic crisis. Today, they are often blamed for the high levels of unemployment and for stealing jobs from the British working class, for driving down

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*Black Audio Film Collective* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); and Romphf, "Invention in the Name of Community": Workshops, the Avant-Garde and The Black Audio Film Collective,' in *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), pp.1-8, <<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol1/iss1/2>> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012].

<sup>16</sup> Power, 'Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry: Interview with John Akomfrah,' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Winter 2011), pp.59-63 (p.62), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/FQ.2011.65.2.59>> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012].

wages, and also for ‘abusing’ the welfare system of the host nation.<sup>17</sup> This portrayal of immigration has become so common in the media and within politicians’ rhetoric (the latter often done with electoral aims) that it has been ‘naturalised’ to the extent that this view is now taken as common sense, as something which is no longer called into question. It is precisely this prejudiced anti-immigration thinking that Akomfrah has sought to resist through his video-art installations and films.

With the aim of challenging and trying to overcome the common depiction of migrants in relation to discussions about crime and other social problems, in *The Nine Muses* Akomfrah draws on epic literature as well as on English and non-Western poetry such as Homer’s *Odyssey*; Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Beckett’s *The Unnamable* and *Molloy*; Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *Richard II*; Sophocles’s *Oedipus*; Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*; *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; *The Old Testament*, among others. Akomfrah uses these works throughout *The Nine Muses* in the form of voice-over readings and captioned quotations that serve both as a framework and background against which the phenomenology of the experience of migration is explored. Thus, the film provides a different approach to today’s much discussed question of mass migration, and it questions the representation of the latter within mainstream media. One could argue here that the choice of a largely Western literary canon only reinforces -- rather than questions -- the powers of colonial and post-colonial regimes that have imposed these texts as cannon. However, as I will argue below, Akomfrah’s film proposes a positive reclaiming and re-appropriating of these texts by way of mixing them and putting them in dialogue with images and other sounds effects. It is through this re-appropriation that this documentary is able to challenge mainstream representations of migrants and migration.

Akomfrah has affirmed that two of the concepts and tropes guiding *The Nine Muses* are those of being and becoming. In particular, while making the film he was trying to understand the process of ‘becoming’ a migrant and the sense in which migrant subjectivities seem to be always in a state of in-betweenness. That is, as if migrant subjectivities were always constantly arriving but never quite getting there, never quite completing the journey; and so in an endless state of transience and flux. As I said in chapter one following Balibar, because of their in-betweenness, migrants’ lives are borders themselves. Given that what characterizes migrant subjectivities is precisely this ontological transience, the endless

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<sup>17</sup> See Forkert, ‘Cash Cows and Job Poachers? Non-EU Students and Austerity Politics,’ in *Mute Magazine* (11<sup>th</sup> October 2012), <<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/cash-cows-and-job-poachers-non-eu-students-and-austerity-politics>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012].

displacement, and the rootlessness, then these lives can be seen on a par with epic journeys narratives. Indeed, migrants have endured long and very often difficult journeys, and in this process they have tried to find ways to avoid or overcome obstacles as well as to adapt to new environments by drawing on their own resources. And these experiences, says Akomfrah, bear striking similarities to the narratives of epic literature, and in particular to the outline of Homer's *Odyssey*, which explains why the filmmaker decided to make use of this classic text. Thus, connecting archival images of migrants arriving, living and working in post-war Britain to the Homeric myth and the figure of the epic hero, frees these images from their context of expression and the narrative chains and stories to which they were first linked. These alternative narratives allow the images to say something different, to create new stories.

The director has further claimed as regards the use of recorded poetry in his film that what he sought to convey is that there is a deeper underlying connection between all the apparently disparate texts and migrant subjectivities. The ontological mark of migrant lives, which is the constant state of becoming, the never-ending sense of in-betweenness, is a quality that is shared by all human beings and not just by migrants. According to Akomfrah, Beckett's work and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are two examples that clearly attest to this fact; the fact that human life is an interminable process. As he explains it:

*Paradise Lost* is a monumental exposition of precisely that [...] ontological transience [...]. *Paradise Lost* is about man's first disobedience -- we are born in that moment of flux and we never really move out of it. And this isn't a migrant speaking; this is the major poet of the English language, who understood this. And everybody else in [*The Nine Muses*] is trying to understand this same problem. Beckett is all about flickering sparks in that transience; no one ever 'is' in Beckett. I think I am, I may be, I could be tomorrow. Endless questions.<sup>18</sup>

This existentialist rumination is presented in *The Nine Muses* by way of the interweaving of the archival footage and newly shot material with the voice-over readings as well as the asynchronous and the dissonant and non-dissonant sound effects and music. In this way, the film simultaneously offers an investigation on the experience of migration to Britain during the twentieth century, and a philosophical contemplation of the journey as a metaphor of human life. Thus in the film a caption quoting Japanese poet Matsuo Basho reads: 'Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.'

The connection that Akomfrah wishes to establish between migrants' experiences and traditional epic narratives, on the one hand; and between migrant subjectivities and the

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<sup>18</sup> Power, 'Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry,' p.62.

ontological mark of human beings, on the other, invites the question as to what extent these two analogies are possible. In other words, a question emerges as to whether these two metaphors are appropriate considering that what the film director aims to do is to offer a different depiction of migrants and diasporas, a different way of narrating the experience of migration. Can we really say that human life is just like the life of a migrant? What would this mean? What understanding of migration does this analogy imply?

An epic is a long narrative poem employing a grandiose or elevated style to recount the deeds and adventures of a heroic figure, who is usually protected by gods (and sometimes even procreated by gods) and is engaged in a mission or a serious enterprise upon which the fate of a nation or a race depends. This quest frequently involves a battle or a long and arduous journey (or both) during which the hero has to defeat adversaries that attempt to thwart his endeavour. This journey is transformational. Thus upon his intrepid accomplishment, the hero returns home significantly shaped by this experience. According to *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, epic narratives have some formal features that are prominent, amongst them for instance, ‘the narrator vouches for the truth of his story; there are invocations [to the muses], elaborate greetings, long speeches, [...] and the frequent repetition of “typical” elements [such as the scene where the hero arms] for battle.’<sup>19</sup> Comparing migrants’ lives with epic narratives, as Akomfrah does, might seem farfetched, especially as regards the god-like nature of the hero and his always triumphant venture, since migrants’ journeys across borders do not always end successfully nor are migrants always able to return home. However, if one takes the metaphor to loosely mean that a migrant -- like the epic figure -- embarks on a perilous journey that requires courage to leave his homeland and loved ones behind, and that this experience deeply transforms him, then the analogy between epic narratives and migration seems reasonable. What is more, given that Akomfrah intends to challenge the traditionally negative representations of migrants in Britain, this analogy provides an opportunity to present an alternative portrayal of migration and diasporas in the UK, and also to question the ubiquitous prejudiced depictions found in mainstream media and in public political discourse.

One might still wonder, nonetheless, whether Akomfrah’s attempt to offer a new portrayal and narrative of mass migration to 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain does not risk generalising the experience of migrants by presenting a single and overarching account of migrants’ subjectivities and the phenomenology of the experience of crossing borders. Would the

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<sup>19</sup> Howatson and Chilvers (eds), *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.203.

attempt to establish this all-encompassing account not entail closing the door to other possible narratives? Would *The Nine Muses* not be falling prey of the very same problem it aims to criticise? Are the archival images, the newly shot footage and the classic western texts employed in this film not suggesting a univocal representation, a closed and reductive story of migrants' lives? Furthermore, is the use of classic literature not another westernised and romanticised depiction of migrant subjectivities? Is the ontological characterization of human lives as resembling the life and journeys of the epic figure not a somewhat clichéd analogy? And if so, does this analogy not simplify, and moreover, homogenize the experience of migration and hence legitimize the hardships that migrants endure?

In response to this criticism, one might argue, firstly, that employing classic Western literature such as Shakespeare, Beckett and/or Milton as a metaphor of migration does not necessarily amount to trivialising migrants' difficult journeys or idealising their 'adventurous' lives. Equally, the use of these authors does not entail adopting the frequently negative representations of migrant subjectivities and the experience of migration. Indeed, resorting to English speaking writers and to other texts considered canonical in the Western world (such as the *Odyssey*) does not by itself entail remaining uncritical of the official narratives and prejudiced portrayals of migrants. On the contrary, Akomfrah has made the point in a conversation that,<sup>20</sup> as a migrant who grew up in Britain (he was born in Ghana, and arrived in Britain when he was six years old), he actually had to read these canonical works and had been shaped by them. Thus by quoting these classical texts in his film, he wanted to present a narrative of the phenomenology of the experience of migration that -- rather than telling a story about how much the arrival of African, Asian and Caribbean immigrants affected British society and culture -- would invert the logic of official narratives in order to explore the extent to which the British host culture affected migrants. More specifically, he was interested in asking what and how these texts of classic literature could say about diasporic identities and migration, in general; and in particular, what these texts could also say about his own life as an immigrant growing up in the UK from an early age. In this sense, what Akomfrah is doing by invoking the Western canon is claiming ownership of these texts in order to explore the issue of migration from his own personal experience. It is this personal aspect that gives this documentary its essay-film aspect. As Rascaroli has

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<sup>20</sup> See Akomfrah, 'The Nine Muses. Q and A Session with Helen Dewitt,' *British Film Institute Live Website*, <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/470>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2012].

pointed out, what makes the foremost feature of essay-films is that the filmmaker expresses her own personal view, that she has a strong presence within the film as an authorial voice.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to this, Akomfrah has insisted that the use of works by Dylan Thomas, Milton, Emily Dickinson and/or Beckett in no way amounts to ‘throwing away the revolutionary towel.’<sup>22</sup> It is possible to create a documentary-essay film that is critical and poetic simultaneously. The most radical film essays to have been made in Britain were, according to Akomfrah, those that took distance from fabulist tales and epistolary forms, and in lieu of this adopted a more poetic form. For instance, Humphrey Jennings and other members of the GPO Film Unit,<sup>23</sup> who saw in the use of poetry an essential part of their film works. It is by invoking the work of these canonical English authors in order to find a different voice and a different way of narrating migration, that a political criticism can be articulated. In other words, a subversive narrative that challenges the widely spread negative representations of migrants can be proposed precisely by extracting and transposing classic Western literature to produce new stories, stories that offer alternatives to the official ones. To be sure, there is something significantly subversive in taking a structure from its original form and applying it in another medium.

Against the criticism that rather than opening up the possibility of new narratives Akomfrah’s film presents a closed and reductionist account of migrants’ experience in Britain, I would like to counter-argue throughout the remaining sections of this chapter that what this documentary-essay expresses by means of its form is a different way of narrating the experience of migration. I will claim that this new narrative about migration and migrant subjectivities is neither reductive nor does it deter the possibility of other accounts, other stories and other mythologies. Thus in what follows, I will analyse the form of *The Nine Muses* more closely, and will affirm that the manner in which time and memory are expressed, and also the way sound functions within the film are affective. In other words, I will make the point that this documentary-essay produces certain affects, embodied responses in spectators in a way that allows the latter to become actively engaged in the articulation of the meaning of the film. In this way, the film opens up the prospect of various alternative

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<sup>21</sup> See Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera. Subjective Cinema and The Essay Film*.

<sup>22</sup> Power, ‘Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry,’ p.63.

<sup>23</sup> The GPO Film Unit was established by Sir Stephen Tallents in 1933 as part of the UK General Post Office’s new public relations department. The Film Unit was directed by British documentary filmmaker, John Grierson, and it was in charge of creating sponsored documentary films in order to promote the activities of the GPO. Under Grierson’s guidance, the Film Unit emerged as a film school concerned with producing work with a socially useful purpose. See Anthony, ‘GPO Film Unit (1933-1940),’ in *Screen Online* <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/464254/index.html>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> October 2012].

narratives, and meanings. And this, I will argue following Steyerl, is what makes this film critical and where its potential for political subversion resides.

#### **IV. Form and Narrative in *The Nine Muses***

A striking feature of *The Nine Muses* lies precisely in its form. To begin with, the way this film is organised closely resembles the structure of epic narratives not merely in terms of the montage interweaving archival and new footage accompanied by voice-over readings, but also in terms of its narrative elements and form. *The Nine Muses* is divided into nine sections or chapters, one standing for each of the Nine Muses of Greek mythology who -- as the film informs in a series of captions -- were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. In an oblique yet lyrical manner, the muses of Epic Poetry (Calliope), History (Clio), Sacred Song or Choral Poetry (Polyhymnia), Tragedy (Melpomene), Music (Euterpe), Astronomy (Urania), Comedy (Thalia), Erotic or Lyric Poetry (Erato), and Dance (Terpsichore) are evoked through sequences of intertwined images. Thus, like in any classic epic narrative, a muse or muses are invoked by the narrator so that he is divinely inspired and able to tell the story about the journey and events that the epic hero is faced with.

The images in each of the nine chapters shift -- at times smoothly and at other times more dramatically -- between archival footage of migrants in post-war Britain realizing their everyday activities, and Akomfrah's original filmed material depicting a snowed and icy Alaskan landscape and an unsettled Artic Sea. While the archive images appear to deal with constant movement, travel and the hectic urban life, the scenes of frozen and desolate landscapes, by contrast, seem static and meditative. In the latter, an anonymous solitary figure wearing a bright coloured winter coat stands still against the snowy monochromatic background with his back to the camera, thus suggesting the sense of alienation, isolation and the cold experienced by immigrants when they first arrived in Great Britain.

Also in line with one of the traits of epic narratives, which is the use of repetitions and recurrent phrases, the film reiterates the trope of the unidentifiable dark figure in a bright coat against a snowy, grey and vast landscape. In yet another conversation about his work,<sup>24</sup> Akomfrah has explained that this motif of a single human silhouette in an open landscape represents questions of self and place. Specifically, a very important issue pervasive in all his films and video-installations is that of the place that diasporic subjectivities have within the larger imagery of the host nation or site of destination. The lone dark figure located outdoors stands for the idea that displaced subjects are largely marginal to the narratives of the place

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<sup>24</sup> Akomfrah, 'Conversation Between John Akomfrah and Mike Sperlinger,' Carroll/Fletcher Gallery, London, 24<sup>th</sup> October, 2012.

where they relocate. Again, it is this sense of isolation and estrangement of diasporic subjects that gets stressed time and time again throughout *The Nine Muses*, just like one of the recurrent lines that figure in epic poems.

Another parallel that can be drawn between this documentary-essay and the characteristics of classic epic narratives is the core role played by the narrator's voice. In its origins, epic poetry was primarily an oral form; fundamentally transmitted by oral means. This explains why these poems tended to be constituted by a series of short episodes that could be remembered both by narrators and audience more easily, thus ensuring the epic story would be preserved throughout its successive transmissions. The voice-over readings of classic texts in the film work as a trope that simultaneously highlights the importance of the narrator and reinforces the analogy between the epic hero figure and the figure of the migrant, between the epic journey and the migrant's journey. The myriad works and the diverse voices employed to do the readings (performed by some renowned period and contemporary actors and actresses, such as Richard Burton, John Barrymore and Teresa Gallagher) appears to emulate the manner in which epic poetry is passed on: orally done by means of a consecutive chain of storytellers. But perhaps most importantly and because these voice-over readings are extra-diegetic and asynchronous with the images, *The Nine Muses* suggests that there are many ways to tell the story (and the history) of migration to post-war Britain, not just the official (and largely prejudiced and racist) way. This can be observed, for instance, in the chapter dedicated to Euterpe, the muse of music. In it shots of an open landscape showing snowy mountains, a frozen forest and a dark sea are paired with a reading of *The Odyssey*. At first, this seems to suggest that it is the anonymous figure in the bright coat walking in the snow the one who is acting as the narrator; telling about Odysseus encounter with the sirens and how he was able to avoid being enchanted by their song by tying himself to a mast. However, this same voice keeps narrating while traditional vocal Indian music simultaneously starts playing and gradually increases its volume. At the same time, the images shift from the Alaskan landscape to archival footage in black and white depicting, first, an industrial landscape and factory chimneys expelling smoke, and then, black immigrants on board of a big ship. The narrator's voice overlapped with the Indian music but also with the diegetic sounds produced by factories and ship engines appear to subvert the idea that there is one single voice, one narrative. Instead, this mix of sounds and images emphasise that there are many voices, and myriad ways and perspectives to tell the story of migrants and diasporas in Britain.

The complex tapestry that Akomfrah's film achieves through the assemblage of archive and newly shot scenes together with the voice-over readings, the poetry quotations as well as the contemporary atmospheric music by Arvo Pärt in tandem with Schubert, Wagner, Handel and the traditional vocal Indian music, results in an emotional recreation of the migrant experience. The film offers an emotional map of sorts tracing the journey towards and the encounter with the new land, and also migrants' lives in this new territory. For instance, the section that is entitled '*Polyhymnia*' begins with archive black and white footage of black singer Leontyne Price<sup>25</sup> performing a song whose lyrics claim 'sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home.' The song plays throughout this section -- which is devoted to the muse of choral songs and hymns -- while archival images of trains in motion and British industrial urban landscapes are followed by newly filmed images of snowy forests and the Artic Sea. Thus, sounds and images are coupled in this section and throughout the film in order to suggest the sense of uprootedness and alienation migrants felt. The nostalgic and homesick tone of the song and its lyrics appear as the perfect hymn to evoke and illustrate the experience of migration.

#### **V. Time, Memory and Sound**

I would like now to explore two central elements belonging to the form of *The Nine Muses*, and that play a role in the expressive and thus also in the affective dimension of this film. These two elements are time and memory, on the one hand; and sound (voice, noise and music), on the other. Analysing these two elements and the affective resonance they produce, will allow me to further discuss -- following Steyerl -- the potential that this documentary-essay has for engaging the spectator affectively and actively, and hence also its potential for challenging cultural, political and social hierarchies.

There is a fundamental exploration of the concept of memory in *The Nine Muses*. The fact that this film is the result of the development and expansion of a previous video installation by Akomfrah, entitled '*Mnemosyne*,' confirms this. Mnemosyne is the Greek goddess of memory. And the words 'mnemonics' and 'mnemotechnics,' which refer to techniques for remembering things with ease, are etymologically related for they share the Greek roots '*mnēmē*' and '*mnēmonikos*,' which respectively mean 'memory' and 'of

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<sup>25</sup> Leontyne Price is an American soprano who reached the peak of her career between the 1950's and 1960's performing in world known opera houses. She became the first black singer to have sung a leading role at Milan's opera house, La Scala. See Oron, 'Leontyne Price,' in *Bach Cantatas Website* (January 2002), <<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Price-Leontyn.htm>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2012].

memory.<sup>26</sup> In ancient Greece, the art of memory or mnemotechnics emerged as a group of techniques or principles that were employed for the purposes of aiding recollection and organising memories usually in the practice of rhetoric and other oratorical exercises that demanded the memorization of large amounts of information, concepts or ideas. For instance, a common mnemotechnics consists in associating the idea or concept that is to be recalled with a striking visual image or some other salient sensorial impression.

*The Nine Muses* itself can be considered as a mnemonic exercise or, perhaps better said, as a film deploying a mnemonic structure. The chapters or episodes named after each of the Nine Muses that repeatedly shift between new and archival footage function as a reminder of the need to question the evidence found in archives as well as the ‘official’ narratives based on such evidence. It is through the repetition of this collage of past and recent images that viewers are constantly reminded that there are other ways to portray the experience of migration and diasporic subjectivities. However, this is not the only sense in which Akomfrah’s film could be said to operate mnemonically. It is also worth noting that the multi-layered quality of *The Nine Muses* effectively captures the way in which memory actually operates in us, that is, the process through which we freely associate and dissociate past experiences. The fact that archival and new images, monochromatic black and white and colour footage, succeed one another seems to emulate the manner our memories shift from the most remote ones to more recent ones and vice versa without following an obvious logic.

Additionally, each of the episodes seems to leave a ‘trace,’ a remnant of a past event, either in the form of archival material (images or sounds) or in the form of a voice-over fragment or a quotation taken from a classic text. Here it’s worth remembering briefly that the notion of ‘trace’ has been largely explored and given different definitions by philosophers and other theorists of film and photography. Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, among others, have discussed this concept in terms of the semiotic hybridity between materiality and experience that the notion of the trace has. For instance, Merleau-Ponty has described the trace as something that does not refer to the past, but rather the trace is present; and if we find in the trace signs of a previous event, that is because we derive our sense of the past from another experience but not from the trace itself.<sup>27</sup> The material trace of the past in documentaries like *The Nine Muses* stands not as an imprint or an index of an event but as a souvenir, for it draws

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<sup>26</sup> See Anon, ‘Mnemosyne,’ in *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Mnemosyne?q=mnemosyne>> [accessed 30<sup>th</sup> October 2012].

<sup>27</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

attention to the fact that all cinematic images are a record of a past time, of a 'death time' (even when the phenomenology of watching moving images, as opposed to photographs, normally appears for the viewer to unfold in the present). The lingering presence of the past, nonetheless, functions as a trigger for memories in the spectator in the sense that it brings her to an awareness of time, a sense of the passing of time. As Wahlberg has explained it, the trace, instead of being a mark of a past event, is a constitutive sign within the re-construction and re-invention of the narrative of a historical event. In Wahlberg's words:

The trace of the trace is the label I choose for techniques in film and video to stage traces of the past through, for example, photographs, archival footage, recorded speech, text and verbal discourses of testimony. In this realm of re-invented memory, the trace is often evoked in collected fragments from different media contexts. This material aspect of image compilation questions the idea of the image-memory as directly correspondent to historical time. Instead, a sequence may perform as a documentary ready-made [...] which [...] results in a thought-provoking re-contextualising of the object or image.<sup>28</sup>

In the case of *The Nine Muses*, because the spectator is constantly confronted with overlapping traces present in newly shot material and images extracted from television and film archives, the sense of what belongs in the distant past, what belongs in the more recent past, and what belongs in the present becomes blurry. *The Nine Muses* thus constitutes a multi-layered and complex collage of time and memory. Time unfolds in this film in many ways and directions. There is the time of watching, a 'now' time that presents to the spectator as developing in the present moment, occurring right in front of her. But there is also the time of recording of the recently filmed images, and the times of recording of the various archival images, which occurred in the past and so they function as repositories and mementos of past events. And there is also a time that unfolds at the juncture of all these times. It is precisely this disorienting (or at least ambiguous) experience of temporality that allows the spectator to acquire a sense of the passing of time as much as a sense of the many ways in which the experience of migration to Britain can be remembered, re-interpreted and re-narrated.

The centrality that memory acquires in this documentary-essay is marked by the fact that the 'official' history of migration to post-war Britain gets revisited and subverted through the continuous transposition, interpolation, deconstruction and re-framing of archival material, and hence of temporality. Akomfrah stresses thereby the importance that memory and the archive have for the diasporic subject. For the film director, memory is an 'essential

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<sup>28</sup> Wahlberg, 'Inscription and Re-framing: At the Editing Table of Harun Farocki,' in *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/ Journal of Art History*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (February, 2004), pp.15-26 (pp.17-18), <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00233600410027273>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2012].

prerequisite to being' in general, for it is what allows people to have a sense of identity and belonging, and to acquire a sense of value. In the particular case of the migrant and/or the diasporic subject, memory is ever more relevant because through their displacement and travels the sense of belonging gets disrupted, dislocated, since there are almost no spaces that serve as memorials to attest and thus anchor or give grounding to migrants' identity. As Akomfrah claims, the archive provides the only space of the 'memorial for diasporic subjects.'<sup>29</sup> But the archive is at the same time a site of struggle between the official and the unofficial; between that which is deemed a historical fact and that which is not recognised as such and has been suppressed or overlooked. Hence the importance for Akomfrah to delve into various film and television archives, to exhume them, and to de-construct and re-construct them.

The other remarkable trait of *The Nine Muses* is the way it plays with sound, be this in the form of voice-over readings, music, machine and engine noises or as rain, snow, wind and wave-crashing sounds. In a similar fashion to the way Akomfrah interpolates archival and new footage, the sound effects and music accompanying the images flow continuously sometimes succeeding one another, sometimes overlapping and then dissolving into each other. From contemporary instrumental music (purposely composed for the film by Akomfrah's long term collaborator, Trevor Mathison) to classical music to distorted diegetic and non-diegetic machine-like sounds, and to the voice-over readings of classic texts, this documentary-essay creates an elaborate sonic collage. In this way, the sound effects and score in *The Nine Muses* also shift freely from past to more recent sounds, much in the same way that our memory functions. And once again, all this is done with the purpose of deconstructing the narrative and original context within which images and sounds were originally used in order to reconstruct a new alternative narrative. This is clear, for instance, towards the end of the section devoted to Polyhymnia, where the voice of singer Price dissolves into echoes and machine-like noises. In this respect, Akomfrah affirms:

I'm fond of trying to force apparently dissonant sounds to cohabit the same narrative space as non-dissonant sounds. Leontyne Price is singing about being motherless, but marrying her with post-Eno, post-Stockhausen type sounds that suggest another universe of openness and open possibilities, suddenly something really strange starts to happen which can't be anticipated in advance of trying it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Akomfrah, 'Chiasmus. An Interview with John Akomfrah,' *The Nine Muses DVD* (London: New Wave Films, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Trilling, 'Sound on Film. Interview: John Akomfrah,' in *Sound and Music Website*, <<http://soundandmusic.org/features/sound-film/interview-john-akomfrah>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012].

Sound acquires a particular relevance within this film because Akomfrah employs it as another element within the form and narrative, of equal importance to the images. Instead of simply subordinating sound and using it as a mere accompaniment to the footage, he interweaves the two in such a manner that the film serves as a reminder that cinema is both an audio and a visual medium, and that sound can actually undermine the narratives and the logic that images follow. Akomfrah thus lets sound follow and produce its own logic, one that is different from and even sometimes contradictory to the order produced by the images. As he explains: 'I am very interested in the sense of cacophony -- in the metaphoric sense -- that sound brings [for] it has a kind of subversive presence, [...] a sort of disruptive value vis-à-vis the logic of images.'<sup>31</sup> This cacophony between sound and image is emphasised throughout the length of *The Nine Muses*. For instance, in the episode entitled 'Clio' a sequence from a black and white British TV film -- *A Man from the Sun* (1956)<sup>32</sup> -- frames a white man in a raincoat walking along the pavement on a busy commercial street. The man stops to look to the other side of the street. A shot-reverse-shot shows a black man and a white woman holding a conversation on the street. The woman turns her head away from the black man and then the camera returns to frame the white man disapprovingly staring in the direction of the couple. Then the black man asks the woman why she had turned away, and she explains that her father was standing across the street and would not have liked seeing her speaking to a man. The black man responds that what she really had meant to say was that her father would not have liked to see her speaking to a black man. While the dialogue between the black man and the white woman continues to be heard, the frame changes to show a colour low-angle shot (clearly not taken from the TV film) of another black man walking towards a building that looks like a warehouse or an old factory. As the conversation between the couple slowly fades, it is substituted gradually by non-diegetic guitar music. Finally, another cut introduces one more black and white archival shot depicting a close-up of a pair of hands playing a guitar. Only the upper part of the torso of the guitar player is shown as his face and the rest of his body remain outside the frame, unseen.

The fact that Akomfrah allows the dialogue extracted from *A Man from the Sun* to extend into and then become part of the newly shot sequence of a black man wandering in an

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<sup>31</sup> Akomfrah, 'Chiasmus.'

<sup>32</sup> *A Man from the Sun* is a TV film written by John Elliot, produced by the BBC in 1956. This film is an example of the attempts that British TV drama undertook in the mid-1950s to portray the lives of West Indian immigrants in Britain. The film follows a group of individuals who arrive in London from the West Indies, and they are faced with the racist and stereotyped views of the white population. See Daniels, 'A Man from the Sun (1956),' in *Screen Online* <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/475546/index.html>> [accessed 5th November 2012].

urban landscape is one of the many moments in *The Nine Muses* that uses asynchronous sound in order to produce the cacophony between images and sound. The tension thus created underlines the different logic governing these two elements, and hence the different contributions that sound and image bring to films in general, and to this documentary-essay in particular. In the scene described above, sound disrupts the narrative flow of the archival images and the original footage by way of dissonance and syncopation. And this in turn can challenge the viewer's expectations as regards the story and the history that Akomfrah's documentary is trying to articulate, for it is a self-reflexive practice that draws attention to the constructed nature of cinematic representations. In this sense, sound operates as a trace insofar as it provides a reminder of the fact that both the newly shot images and the ones taken from archives -- and even sound itself -- are records of a past time even when, at the time of watching, the events portrayed appear to be live. Sound thus lays bare the artifice of cinema. But, perhaps most importantly, sound in this documentary-essay also acts as a thought-provoking and affective element within the film's form, since it highlights the possibility and the need of revisiting, dislocating and reconstructing the 'official' history and narratives of immigrants and their experiences of moving to, settling and living in post-war Britain.

In the next section, I will examine how the way sound and images are articulated in *The Nine Muses* can produce affective responses in the spectators, and how these responses invite spectators to be active participants in the determination of the meaning of the film. Exploring again the transposition of Azoulay's model of photography, and drawing on Steyerl and Rancière, I will argue that this active engagement of the spectator is facilitated by the filmmaker. The latter, instead of adopting a position of superiority and attempting to teach spectators, acts as a host inviting them to take part. This is how spectators and filmmaker form a political and ethical bond based on equality.

## **VI. Affect and the Potential for Political Relationships**

In her influential book *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Laura U. Marks argues that one of the traits of what she deems 'intercultural cinema' is that it inscribes the history and the memory of diasporic subjects with what Deleuze called the 'powers of the false.' This means that intercultural films act as falsifiers that 'undermine the hegemonic character of official images, clichés, and other totalizing regimes of

knowledge.’<sup>33</sup> As falsifying powers, these films refuse to call upon univocal voices, all-encompassing narratives and/or pre-existing truths of community and culture. Marks also claims that films that can be qualified as intercultural are experimental in style and form; and that they constitute attempts to portray and reflect on the experience of living between two or more cultural frameworks and regimes of knowledge. These cinematographic works suggest that there are countless ways of knowing and representing the world; and they suspend or at least are sceptic of the ideological presumption that films can actually represent reality as it is. Another central feature of intercultural cinema according to Marks is that these films try to express the inexpressible and call to the fore that which is hard to represent. The way intercultural cinema does this is by summoning those senses that cannot be easily invoked through the medium of film except in a way that challenges traditional understandings of the manner in which sound and vision work together. In so doing, intercultural films experiment with and push the interplay between images and sound to new thresholds of perception. And the way these films open up new limits of perception is by offering ‘haptic images’<sup>34</sup> or tactile images, which are images that invite a look that moves along the surface of an object or objects portrayed in such a way that the viewing subject cannot perceive the objects as separate and distinct forms in deep space. Haptic images allow for a gaze that discerns texture much more than it distinguishes form; thus giving prominence to the material (hence sensorial) aspect of the image, rather than to its representational potential as optical images do. Haptic images call for a haptic visuality, where the sense of touch is evoked through vision, and the eyes hence operate as organs of touch. Marks thus explains:

Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step towards considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole. The difference between haptic and optical visuality is a matter of degree. [...] Haptic images are [...] so ‘thin’ and uncliché that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them. The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.<sup>35</sup>

Marks sees in the falsifying powers that she ascribes to intercultural cinema the potential for creating ‘political transformations.’<sup>36</sup> Because these films refuse to accept a hegemonic, homogenising, reductionist and all-encompassing account of the experience of migration and

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<sup>33</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p.66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p.67.

of cultural displacement, they become open spaces that allow multiple perspectives and alternative regimes of knowledge as regards the condition of in-betweenness that migrants and diasporic subjects have. It is in this sense that intercultural films are subversive, endowed with political potentiality, for they inaugurate a deterritorialised place, a place beyond geopolitical borders that acknowledges the lives of people in-between cultures. This space serves as a vessel for their histories and memories without pretending to be an objective record of the past (since such a record is impossible) or to stand as the only authentic voice of these displaced people.

Bearing in mind Marks's understanding of intercultural cinema, it is possible to characterize *The Nine Muses* as an intercultural documentary-essay, because it is an experimental film made by a diasporic filmmaker that explores the possibility of creating new narratives about the experience of migration and refuses to adopt a single definite account of migrants' subjectivities. Akomfrah de-constructs and re-constructs film and TV archives mixing them with original footage in order to question the political and cultural limitations of what can be represented through a supposedly univocal history of migrant subjectivities in post-war Britain. The audiovisual collage that *The Nine Muses* achieves produces a narrative that is often disorienting, for it employs asynchronous sounds and voice-overs, and it splits time by moving back and forth -- from past to present and vice versa -- with the new and the archival images. All this results in a revision of official versions of history which foregrounds the necessarily fictional character of such dominant narratives that pretend to stand as discourses of truth. At the same time, Akomfrah's film suggests an alternative story (equally fictional) that offers a sensorial and embodied approach to the experience of migration, and thus opens up a new space for diasporic memorials. As I will claim further on, the role that Akomfrah here adopts is one of a narrator that presents a personal view on migration, but that invites and fosters (but never forces) spectators to create their own story. In this way, the film undermines dominant discourses, and hence sets the conditions for political transformation.

Let us return now to Steyerl's thesis that documentaries that can articulate a political criticism manage to move a step beyond the level of text and representation, and instead engage spectators by means of expression. This means, as Massumi would say, that these films mobilise viewers at the level of affect, by prompting in them sensorial embodied responses. Steyerl largely coincides with Marks here. But perhaps the difference between the two is that Steyerl focuses on discussing how the formal elements and the expressive dimension of a documentary can constitute a political critique, whereas Marks is interested in defining intercultural cinema and discussing the embodied and sensorial experience that

necessarily results from watching intercultural films. While Steyerl puts her emphasis in the subversive potential of documentary films and the articulation of political critiques, Marks argues for the possibility of intercultural cinema (regardless of whether it is fictional or non-fictional) to offer an alternative way of preserving cultural memory there where official histories are incomplete or misled, and where images, sounds and words seem simply inadequate. Ultimately, Marks's focus is on the haptic or tactile possibilities of intercultural cinema, the feasibility of non-audiovisual sense experiences through this kind of cinema.<sup>37</sup> I believe that Marks's and Steyerl's views are not mutually exclusive, and that the two positions can in fact supplement each other to provide a richer perspective on how documentaries about migration and border-crossing experiences can articulate a political criticism, subvert cultural and political hierarchies and establish alternative political and ethical relationships amongst viewers, filmed subjects and filmmakers. Turning again to *The Nine Muses*, I will suggest how these two views can work together.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, *The Nine Muses* evokes the sensorial and emotional impact upon Asian, African and Caribbean migrants leaving their countries of origin and arriving in Britain. The film recreates and heightens the sense of strangeness and dislocation and the cold that immigrants felt; and it does so through coupling and organising apparently disparate images and sounds in such a way that there does not seem to be a definitive meaning or a final or complete closure to the film. Rather, new alternative closures and meanings emerge as possible to the extent that the recent footage, the archival images and the various sound effects are shown to be independent or, better said, detachable from the narrative chains in which they had been inserted in the first place. What *The Nine Muses* thus suggests is that there is no such thing as a single narrative, nor is there an exclusive authority to tell the story of migration to post-war Britain. The migrant experience can be re-presented in many ways and from many angles. In Akomfrah's words:

What seemed to me to be absolutely crucial when we started this film was to first banish that voice that you're talking about -- what people call the 'voice of God' -- and then bring it back again. Every single bit of archive used in the film would have [originally been narrated in] that voice, but the voice would have said something very different. It would have said: I know everything and everything I'm going to tell you is the absolute truth [...]. But if you could get that voice to recite poetry, for instance, which is a highly subjective reading of a situation, then that voice starts to

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<sup>37</sup> In her book Marks devotes her analysis almost entirely to the sense of touch as evoked by intercultural cinema. She engages also with the senses of smell and taste. But she tends to leave out the consideration of sound. Even though she acknowledges the important role that sound plays in intercultural films, for sound can also be haptic and thus contribute to the embodied experience that these films produce, she leaves its discussion to one side. See Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.xvi.

resonate differently. It also seems to me that once you let the voice back in, be it male or female, then weirdly you start to see the range of it. Because as they [the various narrators] come in to speak partial truths you suddenly start to see the texture of each voice and what each voice does.<sup>38</sup>

It's worth pondering here whether Akomfrah's documentary-essay really displays an open form. Does its narrative have no closure at all? This film does have a closure insofar as it builds up a narrative chain. It is divided into nine sections and each of them is in turn self-contained; each offering a lyrical reflection or an existential allegory of sorts around the topic that gives name to the section. For example, the chapter entitled 'Thalia,' the muse of comedy, begins with a panning single close-up shot of children laughing and playing in front of the camera. Their voices and laughter can be heard simultaneously until they slowly fade away and a cut introduces a black screen with white titles quoting a fragment of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 50*: 'How heavy do I journey on the way, When what I seek, my weary travels end.'<sup>39</sup> Later on, black and white footage shows a medium shot of a white man delivering a racist discourse about the urgency of stopping immigration to Britain. Unless the spectator is well versed in British political history, it is hard to know who he is, since the film does not say. However, the film makes explicit that this speaker is strongly against immigration. The man in question is British conservative politician Enoch Powell, who in 1968 gave a controversial speech, known as 'Rivers of Blood Speech,' where he stated that the increasing number of migrants in Britain needed to be cut if the British culture and society were to survive and be saved from imminent violence. Still, the identity of this man is not relevant. What matters is that, through the footage of his discourse, the film suggests that migrating and settling in the UK was not easy, and that the experience did not always mean for the new arrivals to be in contentment in the new land, happily laughing like the children in the opening sequence of this section. There appears thus to be a wholeness or a completeness to this chapter devoted to the muse of comedy, and a similar logic is present in the other eight sections of the film.

Despite this closure, however, *The Nine Muses* is structured in a way that does not close down form. Rather, this film's closure works simultaneously as an opening in the sense that it allows for alternative interpretations and meanings, for it denies the possibility of both reaching one single univocal account of the experience of migration and offering an objective record of reality. Thus the film leaves the door open for the spectator to ponder in what other

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<sup>38</sup> Trilling, 'Interview: John Akomfrah.'

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 50: How Heavy Do I Journey on the Way,' in Alchin, *William Shakespeare Info. The Complete Works Online*, <<http://www.william-shakespeare.info/william-shakespeare-sonnet-50.htm>> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> November 2012].

ways the migrant experience can be depicted; and what other stories, histories and memories can be constructed about diasporic subjectivities. The active questioning on the part of the viewer entails her appropriation of the story, and hence a potential challenge to traditional representational practices, which normally endow those with representational powers (the filmmaker) with a position of knowledge -- and hence of cultural and political superiority -- over the represented subjects and even over the viewers. The spectator's active involvement with the film can undermine social, political and cultural hierarchies necessarily presupposed by representational practices like documentaries. Insofar as *The Nine Muses* invites the spectator to engage in such a questioning, then the film has the potential to articulate a political critique in the way that Steyerl proposes. The fact that through its form the film allows others to take part in the construction of meaning opens the possibility of the emergence of alternative political relationships beyond the framework of the nation-state. Indeed, in the absence of one single subject of knowledge and of meaning, the bonds created by the film do not fall under the direct regulation of the national sovereign, much in the way that Azoulay says that photography can create political relationships. These political bonds formed through the documentary between spectators, the filmmaker and the filmed subjects challenge hierarchies of representation, and thus seem to be more horizontal rather than vertical, and more equal rather than stratified. Hence, these are political but also ethical relationships, relationships based on equality, solidarity and partnership. In other words, these are of hospitality in a Derridian sense. As Akomfrah has put it:

[The idea behind *The Nine Muses* is an] idea of a kind of recycling aesthetic; an idea of sort of post-scarcity aesthetic, which allows the possibility of re-use [of images] but for an ethical reason. There is a reason to revisit memory; there is a reason to revisit our past [and our official narratives]. And then to see whether stuff that you used in films previously can say something else later.<sup>40</sup>

It is significant that Akomfrah invokes here an ethical rationale for revisiting archival images, relocating and reordering them in order to produce alternative narratives about migration and diasporic subjectivities. The film director seems to confirm thereby that he is committed to making artworks that are politically and ethically engaged. Politically engaged insofar as these works seek to resist hegemonic discourses and propose new stories of migrants' experiences without imposing them as univocal and exhaustive. And ethically engaged insofar as Akomfrah sees this political motivation as a moral responsibility of sorts towards diasporic subjects.

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<sup>40</sup> Akomfrah, 'The Nine Muses. Q & A Session with Helen Dewitt.'

However, a critic could still insist on asking whether Akomfrah's film really invites viewers to become actively engaged with it. Does the thorough use of classic texts and the constant shift between new and archival images not produce too great a form of alienation for the spectator or, indeed, certain spectators? Does Akomfrah's attempt to subvert hegemonic regimes of truth and official discourses not end up being overly intellectualized and thus impenetrable? What is more, does his film not require a particular kind of viewer who is at least familiar with the quoted texts? And if this were the case, would this not mean that this documentary-essay is actually deterring the possibility of the active participation of the spectator in the articulation of the film's meaning?

One could agree that a documentary-essay like *The Nine Muses* is most likely to be appealing to certain viewers; perhaps those who have already an interest in documentary and experimental cinema or those who prefer watching so-called art-house films rather than blockbusters screened at cinema multiplexes. Akomfrah's film is also arguably not very likely to attract large numbers of viewers, for its distribution and exhibition cannot match those of large budget commercial films. However, this does not mean that the film can only engage highly educated viewers. As Rancière explains, there is no way to predict how a spectator will react to a work of art (in this case, to a documentary), and it is not the role of the artist or filmmaker to enlighten or emancipate spectators.<sup>41</sup> Instead, as I said in previous chapters, spectators are free to determine whether and to what degree they become involved in articulating the meaning of the film. The filmmaker should only open the possibility, the space, for spectators to become active participants. Akomfrah's documentary-essay has the potential to engage spectators (both highly educated and not) since his voice and presence as enunciator and author is present, but in a way that is hospitable and that invites spectators to act as equal partakers.

Let us draw again on Steyerl's argument that the potential that a documentary has to articulate a political criticism and thus subvert social and cultural hierarchies resides in the film's form and what is expressed through the latter, rather than in what the film represents and the ideological content that the documentary may have. If we accept Steyerl's position, then the spectators become involved in the determination of the film's signification at the linguistic and cognitive level of text, but also at the sensorial, bodily level of affect. And if this is the case, then there is no need for the viewer of *The Nine Muses* to be versed in the classic authors and the canonical literature cited or read as voice-overs in order for her to be

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<sup>41</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p.22.

able to actively take part in establishing the meaning of this documentary. As I have explained, it is by means of its stylistic features, the rich collage of past and present images intertwined with sounds and music, and its epic narrative and self-reflexive structure, that the film and the filmmaker invite the viewer to be an active participant questioning and contributing to the meaning of the film -- rather than merely being a passive observer. The cold, nostalgia, estrangement and general disorientation experienced by migrants in the new land is conveyed effectively and affectively to the spectator. As Marks would claim, *The Nine Muses* is an intercultural film presenting haptic images that prompt the spectator's sensorial apparatus (in this particular case specially the senses of hearing and touch) so as to 'complete' the images she is presented with and to actively provide them with meaning. In this sense, it becomes possible to understand Akomfrah's film as bearing a skin of sorts that is not simply the screen or surface where it is (or can be) projected, but rather a skin that functions like 'a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material [and sensorial] forms of memory.'<sup>42</sup> Thus this documentary-essay operates as a site for remembrance insofar as it evokes and invokes the sensorial memories of the experience of migration that have no other space to be preserved and made visible within the official histories, records and institutional discourses of the dominant host society and culture.

This potential active and embodied engagement of the spectator in the interpretation and determination of the meaning of the film entails that she becomes also a storyteller within the narrative of this documentary. As Rancière has argued, this is the political potential or the politicizing effect that 'documentary fiction' has upon viewers. When the spectator actively adopts the role both as an interpreter and narrator, appropriates the story and thereby becomes an 'emancipated spectator,' then the documentary is necessarily critical and subverts social, cultural and political hierarchies. And it is in this sense that the relationships emerging between filmmaker, spectator and filmed subjects become less stratified and more equal. In Rancière's words:

Like researchers, artists [filmmakers included] construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.243.

<sup>43</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p.22.

Insofar as Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* has an open form and a narrative that can invite the spectator to be an interpreter or translator and thus a narrator, this documentary-essay has the potential to form social relationships amongst equals. Thus the film gives rise to a space for hospitality relations, and hence to a community of equality. And even though such relationships amongst equal subjects might not be considered as constituting the utopian civil contract of photography of which Azoulay speaks, they can be said to be political and ethical relationships of mutual responsibility and solidarity that can pose a challenge to the dominant social, cultural and political hierarchies.

## **VII. Final Remarks**

In this chapter, I have argued that documentaries can be affective and politically subversive practices by analysing Akomfrah's documentary-essay, *The Nine Muses*. I have based my discussion of this film mainly on Steyerl's and Marks's ideas about the expressive and the affective dimensions of documentaries. Through a close reading of various sequences, and focusing mainly on the form and stylistic features of Akomfrah's film, my aim has been to make the point that documentary films about migration have the potential to articulate a political critique and thus undermine social, cultural and political hierarchies. I have claimed that these films can articulate such a criticism by means of what they express with their form. This means that the political potentiality of a film resides not so much in its ideological content, at the level of text and representation, but more in the manner in which it is put together. Documentaries about migration that, like *The Nine Muses*, show a narrative that does not have an overt closure and a form that is open, are able to invite the viewer to become an active participant in determining the meaning of the film. Such films have political potential for they can engage the viewers also affectively. This in turn means that rather than indoctrinating spectators with a certain ready-made point of view, these films can produce embodied sensorial responses incentivising them to interpret and appropriate the narrative. In so doing, these documentaries are able to put into question the power relations that inevitably emerge between those represented and those with the power to represent. And instead, new political relationships based on equality are thus created between the filmed subjects, the filmmakers and the spectators. Here two questions surface. One is the question of whether spectators really become involved with the film, and second is to what extent they need to participate so that the documentary actualises its political potential and disrupts hierarchies. However, I believe it suffices to conclude that even though there is the chance for viewers to not be engaged and actively participate in determining the meaning of a film, the fact that a documentary film offers viewers with the option of being active participants,

already leaves the door open for the formation of alternative political (and ethical) relationships that can subvert current hierarchies. These ethical and political relationships are not directly sanctioned by the nation-state, and thus they are not governed by geo-political borders.

## CONCLUSION

### I.

Documentary films about border-crossings and migration *can* function as alternative spaces for politics and political relations. In drawing on Azoulay's theoretical approach to photography, my undertaking here has been to show that it is possible to transpose her triadic model of the photographic event to the documentary form, and thus understand this form as having the potential to create a domain of political and ethical relationships that escape the direct sanction of the nation-state and its sovereign power. I have also argued that since these alternative relationships are based on solidarity and partnership and since they assume the equality of the individuals involved, these are relationships that actualize the ethics and politics of hospitality in the sense that Derrida understands the latter. In this way, this work maps out a theoretical framework or a toolkit for thinking documentary films in terms of their political dimension, as well as for thinking politics, citizenship and migration in ways that are not limited to the parameters of the nation-state.

### II. A Politics of No-Borders?

Chapter 1 dealt with the question of how the border operates as an institution of class differentiation and violence that exercises its power beyond its mere geographical location. I then presented Derrida's proposal of the ethics and politics of hospitality as an alternative and productive approach to the questions posed by undocumented migration and stateless people. I argued with Derrida that the concept of hospitality provides a perspective that allows us to see that politics and ethics, calculation and the incalculable, the conditional and the unconditional are two opposing but inseparable domains that need to work together, supplementing each other. This perspective of hospitality offers the chance to conceive of politics and political relationships in a way that is independent from the direct mediation and regulation of the nation-state, and hence in a way that is *deterritorialised*. We need to find ways to relate to other individuals neither on the basis of resemblance and identification nor on the basis of the places and functions that we have been assigned by the social order, but on the basis of alterity and also solidarity, partnership, responsibility and equality towards others. If we do this, then the emergence of forms of political bonds not directly sanctioned by an ongoing form of national sovereignty seems possible. Here Derrida is not referring to relationships that can emerge between people in different nations,

for surely friendships and work collaborations take place across borders. The kinds of relationships that he is endorsing are relationships founded on political and ethical responsibility for other individuals not because that is what the national-state demands as one of our duties as members or citizens of such state, but because we as individuals can show concern for others and take action accordingly regardless of the citizenship status that the latter might have.

Derrida proposes these political and ethical relationships falling outside the framework of the nation-state as an alternative way to approach both the problems posed by undocumented migrants, refugees and stateless people and national borders, as well as the concept of politics. However, his thesis of hospitality could seem problematic if it was taken to mean as a proposal that all national borders be eliminated. Would it be realistic to defend a world without geo-political borders? I believe that Derrida would not endorse such a proposal, for he has said that absolute hospitality is impossible and also not desirable. Likewise, Derrida has acknowledged the fact that a complete disappearance of nation-states and their borders would mean allowing capital and global markets to rule freely without any restrictions. Today we witness alongside the ‘homogenization, market unification, the permeability of frontiers [and] the speed and power of transnational communication, [an unprecedented number of] victims of inequality and repression.’<sup>1</sup> A total erosion of national boundaries would most likely make inequality gaps larger still. Indeed, it seems that at least some form of national sovereign power is required to avoid the absolute rule of capital over all human activities and exchanges. The question of a world with no borders has no simple answers, and thus calls for a multi-disciplinary and comprehensive enquiry. As outlined in the introduction, this dissertation is a contribution to a much broader discussion that would necessarily include, amongst others, a detailed engagement with the economic features and infrastructures of today’s globalised markets that shape and underpin migration as well as many other human interactions.

In considering Derrida’s thesis of the necessity to find forms of political relationships that do not exclude alterity and that are not determined by the framework of the nation-state, I suggested that Azoulay’s theory of the political relations that emerge through photography can be understood as exemplifying

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, ‘What Does it Mean to be a French Philosopher Today?’, in *Paper Machine*, pp.112-120 (p.117).

Derrida's ideas. In Chapter 2 I explained that the significance of Azoulay's triadic model of photography to the field is that it presents an understanding of the practice of photography that differs from the common approach that reduces it to an interaction of power relations between an active person as owner of the means and powers of representation, and a passive viewer who lacks the latter. Instead, Azoulay proposes we look at the photographic encounter between photographer, photographed subjects and spectators (actual or potential) as inaugurating a space of political relations founded on solidarity and partnership. These three parties take part as equals in the determination of the meaning of the photograph, which means that the photographer does not have exclusive control over the image and that the latter is never a finished and fixed product. Because every photographic encounter can produce a different meaning that bypasses the photographer's original intention, photography for Azoulay constitutes an open and always evolving set of practices where there is no single or ultimate authority. What is unique in Azoulay's theory of photography is that it grants both the photographed subject and the spectator an active role. The person portrayed in a situation of 'regime-made disaster'<sup>2</sup> or 'on the verge of catastrophe'<sup>3</sup> appeals to a potential viewer to air her grievances. The viewer, in turn, as an addressee of these grievances reads the photograph as an emergency statement that calls for the urgent reparation of the harm and suffering of the photographed subject. In this way, the photographic encounter creates a citizenry of sorts, a community of equality and plurality established by a hypothetical civil contract that binds individuals primarily through a duty toward one another, rather than a duty toward the national sovereign.

I have linked Azoulay's thesis of the political relationships of photography to Derrida's ideas on hospitality. My argument has been that her proposal can be seen as exemplifying Derrida's ethics and politics of hospitality insofar as the political bonds created through the photographic encounter are neither directly mediated by the nation-state nor restricted to national borders and citizenship status. Since such political bonds are based on solidarity, partnership and equality then they can be seen as relationships of hospitality. Nonetheless, I have also shown that the conceptualization of citizenship that Azoulay derives from her triadic model of photography is problematic, for it seems to imply a utopian, idealised, notion of

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<sup>2</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, pp.290-291.

citizenship that is granted to anyone and everyone and that eliminates the sovereign power altogether. Undoubtedly, Derrida's thesis of unconditional hospitality and the total unrestricted reception of the other might seem romantic. But, as I have explained, even though absolute hospitality is unrealisable and cannot be actualised in laws, he proposes that the politics of hospitality is a constant exercise of improving the laws, an ongoing effort to make less bad laws, laws that do less violence to the other, laws that are more in accordance to absolute hospitality. The case I have made here is that Azoulay's conception of citizenship provides a solid starting point to rethink this concept not merely as a membership that grants duties and rights within a territory, but as a form of relating to other individuals. But if this alternative form of relationship is seen as an example of hospitality, then there is no need to postulate imaginary citizenries as Azoulay does. Further discussion on alternative ways of understanding citizenship is another area toward which this critical project could be expanded.

In my analysis of Azoulay's triadic model of photography I have shown that her understanding of the political as the result of human interactions, and hence as a collective practice that does not exclude or oppose the aesthetic shares similarities with Rancière's ideas on the relation between politics and aesthetics. Contrasting the positions of these two scholars has allowed me to deepen my discussion of Azoulay's notion of politics. They both defend a conceptualization of the political as a communal exercise. Azoulay's proposal that photography can produce political bonds based on solidarity and equality seems to be in line with Rancière's claim that politics is a collective action that consists on an assumption and enactment of equality. Indeed, the thesis that the photographer, the spectator and the photographed subject are equally active participants in the photographic event mirrors Rancière's view that politics is a process through which spectators and the artist dis-identify from their roles and functions assigned by the social order, and thereby artist and spectators emerge as equals. However, Azoulay argues against Rancière that the political does not produce a change within the hierarchies of the social order. For her, it is only through the engagement of the civil skill and intention that a political relationship can really disrupt social and political hierarchies. By comparing Rancière's views with Azoulay's thesis that all human interactions are political, I have shown that her position seems to dilute the sense of what political action is. For, if all interactions are political, it seems hard to distinguish human interactions with the potential to disrupt

power relations and social hierarchies from those that lack this potential. What is more, Azoulay's distinction between the civil and the political only appears to complicate both concepts. By contrast, Rancière's view clearly delimits what politics is by specifying under what circumstances a human encounter is political. There is no need for Rancière to add the dimension of the civil (as separate from the political) in order to explain how political relationships make evident the contingent character of social hierarchies and are based on the principle of equality. The discussion about the link between politics and the civil is an extensive one, and it thus requires further analysis beyond the ideas proposed by Azoulay and Rancière.

I have placed these two authors in conversation here because they both underscore the connection between art and politics, and because I believe Rancière's ideas clarify and often improve those of Azoulay. My aim in this thesis has been to demonstrate that Azoulay's thesis that photographic encounters have the potential to create a space of political bonds can be transposed to documentary films about migration and border-crossings. For this reason, the work of Rancière seems relevant to the analysis of the political potential of the documentary, for he thinks there is a political dimension in art as well as an aesthetic dimension in politics. The way in which aesthetics is related to politics is yet another vast area of study that exceeds the limits of this thesis and that requires extensive discussion, especially in the light of the constant changes that artistic forms adopt due to the innovations in technology and the emergence of new media.

### **III. Transpositions and Interactions.**

The medium of film and the medium of photography share similarities but they are also significantly different. To be sure, the moving images, temporality and sound effects present in (documentary) film but not in the medium of photography affect the way in which the filmmaker, the subjects filmed and the spectators might relate to one another as well as the way in which they each take part in the articulation of the meaning of the film. I have explored these distinct aspects of the documentary and discussed to what extent Azoulay's proposal can be extended to this film form by examining three recent documentaries dealing with migration. In this sense, this thesis does not present an exhaustive history of documentaries about borders and migration, but it provides a foundation for studying these films under the perspective of their potential for creating political relations that are not directly sanctioned and mediated by the national sovereign.

Drawing on the work of Trinh and Steyerl, in Chapter 3 I have claimed that the form or the stylistic features of the documentary crucially determine the way in which spectators might become involved with the film. These two documentary theorists agree in that for the meaning of a documentary to have political effects it needs to avoid being immediately fixed or stabilized. When the documentary's meaning remains open and refuses to have a single final source of authority, it gives space for the viewer to participate in making sense of the film. Both Trinh and Steyerl argue that when the documentary has a self-reflexive form in the sense that it does not aim to conceal or deny its own artifice or constructed quality, it invites spectators to question and actively engage with the film. This can only be so, as Trinh well observes, when self-reflexivity is not used exclusively as an aesthetic technique, when self-reflexivity is used to question the film's assumptions and to prevent its meaning from reaching a final closure. I have taken cue from this idea of the open form of documentary in order to suggest how spectators might adopt an active role and thus become equal participants with the filmmaker. Even though Azoulay does not speak of a particular form or a quality that photographs need to present in order to produce political relationships based on partnership and solidarity, I believe that Trinh's and Steyerl's remarks help make clear the way in which spectators might become involved with the particular medium of documentary.

I have also drawn on Rancière's idea of the emancipated spectator to explain how the blurring of functions between the filmmaker and the spectators can take place through documentaries, and hence how the disruption of hierarchies of the social order can occur. My claim has been that, as Rancière explains, the artist (the filmmaker in this case) needs to renounce her attempt to enlighten or emancipate spectators and instead assume a position of equality with the latter by offering the film as an open sphere for collective intervention and the sharing of knowledges. And even though it is not possible to anticipate or predict the degree of involvement that a spectator might adopt -- for this is always a matter of her own choice, the documentary needs to invite and open up a space for the spectator to have the option to partake in the determination of the meaning of the film. Here, a connection between the cinematic cut, Derrida's understanding of politics and Rancière's notion of politics emerges. The filmmaker makes choices, sets limits to the form and content of the film. Like in Derridian politics, the filmmaker takes decisions that are ungrounded; her decisions cannot predict the spectator's response. The filmmaker

thus can only act as a host; through her decisions she invites spectators and filmed subjects to become actively engaged in determining the meaning of the film. Remaining open to the arrival of the absolute other, the filmmaker also opens up the possibility of multiple meanings of the film and hence of a new social order, a redistribution of the sensible, as Rancière would say. Following Trinh and Steyerl, I have explained that it is the self-reflexive form of the documentary, and not so much its content, that provides this open space for the reception of the radical other. The documentary, in this sense, has the potentiality to become a space for political relationships that are based on equality and that escape the regulation of the national sovereign. The documentary can, in other words, function as a space for relationships of hospitality.

I have used three different documentaries as my case studies in order to explore the transposition of Azoulay's model of photography to documentary films about migration and border-crossings. The form, the stylistic qualities and the way in which these films have been made has allowed me to focus my analysis on the roles that filmmakers, filmed subjects and spectators have in each film. Through these case studies I have also analysed the possibility of extrapolating Azoulay's theses to other geographical political contexts beyond Palestine, which is the one upon which Azoulay centres her discussion on photography. By looking at documentaries portraying the experience of migration through different approaches, I have argued that her theory can also be used to think about today's phenomenon of migration in terms of political and ethical relationships not restricted to the framework of national borders.

My analysis of Nkosi's documentary, *Border Farm*, has allowed me to take issue with the question of the way and extent to which the filmed subjects can be considered as playing an active part within a documentary. I have discussed whether the involvement of these subjects in the making of a documentary can be so that they become equals with the filmmaker and thus subvert the hierarchical distinction between those with the power and means of representation and those who lack this power. My claim here has been that even when these hierarchies cannot be completely dismantled, documentaries like *Border Farm* do have the capacity to subtly challenge the functions and places assigned by the social order.

Through *Shout* and *The Nine Muses* I have explored in greater depth the ways in which spectators might engage with the films and thus adopt a position of equality

with both the filmmaker and the filmed subjects. When spectators become thus involved, they appropriate the narrative and create their own fictions. And this is possible only when the documentarist acts as a host and, instead of attempting to educate spectators, opens the space for the latter to participate actively. The degree of involvement a spectator can take is never fixed and, as Rancière observes, it cannot be predicted. It is always open to the spectator to decide whether and to what extent she takes responsibility for the images she is presented with and if she reads them as calls to take action to modify the situation of the subjects portrayed.

In close relation to the issue of the engagement of spectators is the question of the ethics of spectatorship. I have claimed that the political and ethical relationships that can be created by documentaries about migration are not based on charity, but on hospitality, an unconditional commitment towards the other as an equal. The notion of charity tends to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing social hierarchies and boundaries whilst claiming to mediate between these. Thus, a notion of the ethics of spectatorship needs to acknowledge this. More specifically, as I indicated in the introduction, further analysis might be carried out on the economic structures and national discourses underpinning the funding of filmmaking projects by charitable organisations and NGOs in order to understand the relationships between spectators and filmed subjects.

Through *The Nine Muses* I have discussed how temporality and sound -- elements that are not present in the medium of photography -- intervene in the responses of spectators. I have argued that these two dimensions shape the engagement of the spectator at the level of affect, the level of embodied sensorial responses. This, I have said, further complicates the forms and degrees in which spectators engage with documentaries, and this also suggests the need of more empirical exploration as regards the ways in which spectators respond to films as well as the ways they relate to the filmmaker and the subjects filmed. In this sense, the question of the relation between affect and politics is not just about the ways in which power uses affects or affective modulation to govern and control populations, but also about the way in which affects can give rise to political relationships that can challenge the social order. This is yet another topic that calls for more research.

A study into the forms of interaction between filmmakers, subjects filmed and spectators that are allowed by new technologies today is, likewise, an issue for further study. The emergence of web-documentaries, for instance, has given viewers the

opportunity to have more control over and a greater contribution to the narrative of the film, and hence a different form of engagement with it. To be sure, this opens the door to new and perhaps more equal forms of relationship between the filmmaker, the filmed subjects and the viewers. Can this interactive technology produce a complete disruption of the hierarchies of documentary representation?<sup>4</sup> Even though the scholarship on webdocumentary is still in its early days, this question points to a further area of study towards which my study of the possible political relations created through documentaries can be directed.

This thesis provides a starting point and a groundwork to think about the documentary film form under the light of its political potential and also, necessarily, under the light of its ethical dimension. In other words, this work shows how and to which degree political and ethical relationships, and hence political theory, are not outside or beyond the visual medium of documentary, but inherent to it. This approach to documentary has implications to many other areas of study such as citizenship and border studies, migration studies, aesthetics and politics, participatory and interactive art, among others. These links to further areas of scholarship remain to be explored particularly in the light of new technologies that have changed, and are still changing, the ways in which documentaries are made, watched, consumed and circulated. Documentaries in this sense are like borders. They are spaces of in-betweenness and mediation, in-between fact and fiction; but also spaces for the confluence of many questions and areas of study.

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<sup>4</sup> See Nash, 'Modes of Interactivity: Analyzing the Webdoc,' in *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2012), pp.195-210, <<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/34/2/195>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> November 2013].

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