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Eurosur, Humanitarian Visibility, and (Nearly) Real-time Mapping in the Mediterranean

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Abstract

This article analyses the ongoing transformations occurring in the regime of visibility of migration governmentality in the Mediterranean sea, investigating two complementary politics of visibility: on the one hand, humanitarian visibility, that is the threshold of visibility fixed by humanitarian actors, and in this specific case the visibility at stake with the military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, that produced a sort of good border spectacle of the rescue; on the other, the (nearly) real-time visibility envisaged by monitoring systems like Eurosur, that articulates temporality (the real-time one) with a specific look situational awareness. The article interrogates how humanitarian visibility and real-time visualization are articulated in the current Mediterranean context for producing migratory events, tracing maps of future risks and opening new spaces of governmental intervention. I conclude by drawing attention to strategies through which both activists and migrants have appropriated and utilized visibility in their own ways by demanding that people in distress at sea are ¹promptly rescued.

Keywords

Keywords; separated by semicolons; try to limit to one line; six or fewer words

¹Message received on the Watchthemed mailing list from activists who have been called by migrants in distress at sea.



Introduction

We received an SOS call from a boat in the Mediterranean with about 200 people on board. This is a message for the Coast Guard and for the Navy. We have the number of their satellite phones, in order to find where they are. The people who called told us that they have been travelling for 14 hours and that the boat is starting to have technical problems.

This message, sent via email to the Italian coast guard and to the Navy, reports one of the daily SOS message launched in the Mediterranean by migrants at sea escaping wars. In such a context, Libya has become a point of multiple departures: people escaping Syria, Palestine and Iraq, but also third-country nationals working in Libya and now fleeing the country because of the political crisis there. The message was sent by a group of activists based between Germany and Italy that have put into place an alternative alarm network, monitoring the rescue operations of the Italian Navy and facilitating the connections between the persons on the sinking boats and the Italian authorities. The group advises the Italian Navy that there are vessels in distress and verifies that they effectively rescue people. Indeed, since October 2013, the Italian Navy has been in charge of coordinating the “military-humanitarian” operation Mare Nostrum for “saving migrants’ lives” in the Mediterranean. Their bulletin is updated daily with large numbers of people who have either been rescued or those who died before because the Italian Navy arrived too late or nobody detected them. Deaths at sea are certainly not a new event in the Mediterranean. In the early 2000’s the denomination of the Mediterranean as a “maritime cemetery” was introduced by activists to highlight the incredible number of migrants who have died in the attempt to cross the sea: from 1988 to 2013 the estimated number of deaths in the Mediterranean is about 23, 000². Furthermore, this number does not include those who are missing, for example, when no shipwreck has been attested nor the bodies found. Confronting deaths at sea means dealing with an incalculable margin of approximation that ultimately corresponds to the elusiveness of undocumented migrants’ visibility, due to their strategies of concealment but also due to state authorities that many times do not detect them or let them drown.

This article focuses on the current politics of visibility in the Mediterranean Sea from the point of view of the contested task of controlling and rescuing migrants: it investigates the (nearly) real-time mapping performed by monitoring tools and systems such as Eurosur, and simultaneously it brings attention to what I call humanitarian visibility at sea, interrogating how migrants and activists have strategically played with them. By “humanitarian visibility” I mean the regime of visibility shaped by humanitarian actors as one of the pillars of their intervention: that is, the thresholds and the mechanisms defining what must be seen and what

² <http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/pdfs/listofdeaths.pdf>

can pass undetected or unnoticed. If visibility is a salient issue in the field of humanitarian politics, such a regime and its thresholds of visibility and invisibility change over time.

This paper illustrates that since the start of the military-humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum* coordinated by the Italian Navy, the Mediterranean has appeared as a scene of rescue. The article comes to grips with the transformations which have occurred in the politics of visibility in the Mediterranean, highlighting how this latter is related to a politics of life, that is to a specific “hold” exercised both on singular conducts and on migrant flows, and to a way of selecting between subjects of concern and of no concern. The main arguments that sustain the article are the following ones. Firstly, monitoring systems for controlling migration in the Mediterranean do not provide an overwhelming and continuous visibility but, rather, they act selectively and in a desultory way. In this regard, the Eurosur system will be taken here as an example of a mapping rationale that does not aim to detect migrant vessels in real-time but to collect data about migrant border crossing for producing maps of future migration risk scenarios. Secondly, the politics of visibility should be seen as a contested field that is strategically appropriated by migrants themselves: the struggles over visibility carried on by migrants constantly reconfigure not only the thresholds of the visible but also the politics of life that is related to it – defining which subjects are the object of governmental concern. In order to understand the effective functioning and the implications of (nearly) real-time mapping, this article starts by taking into account the European External Border Surveillance System (Eurosur) launched in December 2013. The start of Eurosur has represented an important step in the growing obsession for a real-time situational picture of the external border of Europe. Indeed, conceived as “the system of the systems”³, Eurosur accesses many European monitoring systems, and at the same time generates a real-time map of the illegal crossings and border crimes happening at the external borders of Europe (Borderline, 2012; Jandesbodz, 2011); according to the European Union, this should lead “to strengthen the information exchange and operational cooperation between national authorities of Member States as well as with the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States.”⁴

Through a close analysis of the functioning of Eurosur the article shows that, far from being a system conceived for a real-time intervention, it works as a data-storage for producing particular forms of risk analyses and as a constantly

³ “The European Defence Agency describes a ‘system of systems’ as a set or arrangement of systems that, for reasons of physical distance or of different primary responsibilities, do not lend themselves to fusion into a single system. [...] This pooling of resources can be made in a centrally organised way, or by an association of peers.” (Borderline, 2012, p.18).

⁴ Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), COM/2013/0197 final.

updated map that locates migratory events. Then, the article interrogates how humanitarian visibility and real-time monitoring are articulated in the current Mediterranean context. I conclude by drawing attention to strategies through which both activists and migrants have appropriated and utilized visibility in their own ways by demanding that people in distress at sea are promptly rescued. In the paper I use the term “visualisation” to indicate the visual tools (such as maps) used for reporting the detected migratory events. Instead, “visibility” refers here to the regime of the seen and the unseen, conceiving it as a contested field that is strategically played out by migrants as well as by governmental actors.

Humanitarian and real-time migration mapping

It cannot pass overlooked that the ‘ordinary scene of rescue’ performed by Mare Nostrum military forces reveals, I suggest, a salient slippage in the governmental rationale and, consequently, also in the subjects that are shaped and targeted, that is in the ways in which migrants’ lives are captured, managed and contained. In order to claim asylum and become subject of the humanitarian government, migrants at sea have to expose themselves to the condition of being lives to rescue – like shipwrecked lives. The massive deployment of military navies and other technologies is ultimately presented as the countermeasure of what appears as the unavoidable condition of those who do not have a Visa for entering Europe: that is, it seems that the fact of putting ones’ own life in danger by risking death at sea cannot be prevented other than by not migrating; otherwise, deaths can be eschewed only as far as a military equipped system intervene.

Conceiving humanitarianism in terms of politics as a political technology for governing singular conducts and migration flows (Fassin, 2007; Walters, 2011), and at the same time as a strategy of border enforcement (Williams, 2014) I analyze it by looking at the subjects that it shapes and targets as objects of concern. In this regard, Foucault’s approach to power relations that focuses on the subject that is shaped by them, represents an important analytical tool for tackling borders, monitoring mechanisms and bordering processes by looking at the subjectivities that are produced, targeted and posited by them (Foucault, 1982). To what extent and in which terms are subjects monitored and seen by governmental technologies and monitoring systems, and what do these systems aim to record? These questions are here raised together with a further interrogation about what can be called ‘the production of the event’ that characterizes the (nearly) real time mapping gazes that target undocumented migration and border crossing crime. What is put on the map by monitoring devices as a migration event? What are the thresholds of visibility that define the passage of migrants in a certain place as an “event of concern”?

In this regard, it is worth observing that a specific regime of visibility is at stake in every political technology, since visibility – conceived as the articulation of the seen and the unseen, of what can be seen and of what is left or produced as invisible – is one of the tools through which the field of power relations is structured. Therefore, government is always also a government through visibility,

and this paper deals with the government of migration at sea from such a specific point of view, exploring the specificity of the politics of visibility that is currently at stake in the Mediterranean. Moreover, since visibility is essentially a contested field and is not played in a unidirectional way – e.g. by actors that govern migrations – the point is to grasp how the thresholds of visibility are constantly strategically altered and challenged by subjects. Gregoire Chamayou's reflection on the political implications of the increasingly extensive use of drones provides important analytical tools for interrogating the kind of critical perspective through which addressing the mapping and monitoring systems envisaged from detecting migrants. From a methodological point of view, a critical analysis of technological and monitoring devices should be made not for asking whether or not the goal justifies those mapping technologies but rather to assess the political stakes that the proliferation of visual monitoring systems for governing migration entails (Chamayou, 2013, p.16). To put it differently, the growing centrality gained by mapping devices for controlling, containing and monitoring mobility, should lead us to interrogate the governmental gaze that sustains the current struggle over a real-time visibility. From a methodological point of view this point can be framed also according the Foucaultian notion of problematization (Foucault, 1998): as William Walters stresses, any emergent political or technical object must be treated “not as something self-evident, but as a space of problematization whose unfolding needs to be situated amid technologies of investigation, representation and truth-telling” (Walters, 2014, p. 7). Unpacking the governmental gaze means inquiring into the specific ontology of the visible that qualifies the real-time “cartographic anxiety” (Gregory, 1994): what are the thresholds of political visibility that are traced by these mapping tools, and what is actually searched? My hypothesis is that the regime of visibility at play in the government of migration at sea has not as its primary goal to see – namely to identify people; rather, it aims to detect a presence or a trace in order to determine that there is a migratory event to tackle or that possible future migration risks could occur. In this regard, the image of a “scopic regime” of visibility (Jay, 1999; Gregory, 2011; Somaini, 2005) captures quite nicely the selective and targeted functioning of migration monitoring tools. Nevertheless, I contend, in the context of migration those mechanisms respond more to an even patchy visibility and to a “desultory” rhythm (Tazzioli, 2014) than to a constant and pervasive mode of visual apprehension.

To start, it is important to take into account two kinds of images and forms of capture that are simultaneously at play in the (nearly) real-time migration cartography: the trace and the event. The trace – the production of the trace of migrants' passage – has important implications for the reconstruction of migrants' shipwrecks. The event consists in the designation of 'migratory events', namely migrants' crossings or presences that are detected and then translated on the map as 'migratory events' of concern. Both of these two visualizing mechanisms of capture contribute to a regime of visibility that is not primarily grounded on an identification strategy.

Eurosur and the production of migratory events

By combining different real-time mapping systems, Eurosur's task is to check when an illegal immigration event or a border crime event takes place at the European borders. Then, after the event is detected and the system has collected enough data to determine its *consistency* and the possibility of managing and tackling it, "the following step consists in establishing its level of impact and the risk factor associated with it". But what does "level of impact" stand for? It designates the level of intervention, technical tools, people and money that are estimated to be necessary for managing a certain migration phenomenon. Moreover, the "level of impact" of a migration phenomenon happening in a specific border region is the yardstick for determining the financial assistance that member states could ask from the Commission. However, the definition of the level of impact case by case is not an undisputed affair⁵; in principle, it should be the outcome of the negotiation between Eurosur and the member state in question. When no agreement is reached between the two, Eurosur has the right to determine the "impact" of the migration phenomenon. The "border impact" basically depends on the mobilization of costs and resources as well as on the technical difficulties in managing a certain migration phenomenon: 30 Egyptians who arrive irregularly in Italy are not estimated to have a real border impact, due to the repatriation agreement granting fast deportations that Italy has with Egypt –, but the same number of Eritreans could have much relevance in terms of border impact, since their management requires a longer procedure. For determining the border impact, both qualitative and quantitative aspects about "illegal" border crossing and events of concern are taken into consideration. Thus, in principle Eurosur is conceived for registering and putting on the map any illegal migration event or cross-border crime; but, actually, the entity of the dots marked on the map depends on the risk factor associated with that migration phenomenon and its manageability – namely, the estimated costs and the feasibility of tackling it. Therefore, the widespread discourse on the real-time situational awareness⁶ that underpins the promotion of Eurosur in many EU documents should not be overstated in its effective functioning. In fact, it is certainly important to investigate the meaning and the political use of the 'situational awareness' rhetoric, as Joseph Pugliese has showed (Pugliese, 2013), but this should not lead us to imagine a sort of digital panopticon.

Far from envisaging a constant overall gaze on the Mediterranean, Eurosur consists in producing events starting from the multifarious partial digital mapping

⁵ Interview with Eurosur's officer at the Home Office in Rome, August 2014.

⁶ This term or military origins is defined by the European Commission as what "measures the capability of the authorities to detect cross-border movements and find reasoned grounds for control measures." The concept is strictly related to the notion of "reaction capability" that "measures the lapse of time required to control any cross-border movement and the time and means necessary to react adequately to unusual circumstances."

<http://eapmigrationpanel.org/page18261.html?template=print>

gathered by the different monitoring systems to which Eurosur has access⁷. The geopolitical landscape of Europe is redrawn by Eurosur's mapping strategy through a cartography of dots-events: the size of a dot on the map is not given by the number of migrants but, as I said above, by their potential impact and the greater or lesser feasibility of their management. Moreover, Eurosur does not record any movement or presence detected at the external borders of Europe: only those border crossing practices that are labeled as "illegal" are translated into events of concern on the map. Nevertheless, it is not a monitoring gaze that takes snapshots of a space and produces a fixed map of that space-time unit: on the contrary, as Eurosur's officers explain⁸, the main goal is not to 'freeze' the event once it is put on the map but, rather, having the possibility to rework it over time. For instance, a few hours after an illegal border crossing is detected and a migrant vessel is intercepted by national authorities or by Frontex, the (nearly) real-time Eurosur's map is updated with this event of concern. However, after this first data input of a new migration event on the map, this can be further updated with additional elements and information about that illegal border crossing. It is important that the mapping system is able to account for a temporal continuity that corresponds to the development of the event itself. Therefore, beyond the object-event in itself, the most salient issue for this real-time mapping rationale consists in the transformability of the description and the narrative of the event, according to new information and data gathered on it. This temporal deployment of the migratory event and its breakdown in different aspects ultimately allow it to be framed in terms of its governability, assessing the risk factors associated with it.

But is it effectively a question of a real-time event that is put on the map? Actually the delay that always occurs between the moment of data capture and the update of the map is not an exception: on the contrary, the lag in putting data on the map is somehow constitutive of Eurosur's mechanisms for producing the event, since it could also take more than 24 hours for the "border crime" to be "translated" on the Eurosur's map. "The qualifier 'near' succinctly names the latency effect that haunts the micro-rift between 'live' and 'real time' because of the ineluctable logics of tele-techno mediation that effectively transmute 'live' images into retrospectively constructed spatiotemporal visual artefacts" (Pugliese, 2013). In fact, more than taking this *mapping-lag*, that is the latency that occurs between the detection of movements and their translation on the map, as the sign of a failure of the system, it is worth interrogating what such a lag reveals in terms of governmental approach and politics over life (Kurgan, 2013). Actually, this unavoidable lag helps to disentangle Eurosur's ambiguous formulation about the twofold task of securing borders and saving people's lives: "the aim of saving of life has nothing to do with an on-time rescue strategy and prompt interventions. Rather, we save lives as far as we hamper would-be migrants from leaving by

⁷ Jora, AIS, European satellite system, national coordination centres and Marsur

⁸ Interview with Eurosur's officers in Rome, at the Italian Home Office (July, 2014).

boats, undertaking risky journeys, and in this sense we contribute to prevent migrants' deaths"⁹. At the same time, this structural mapping-delay gives us a clue about the temporality of the governmental hold, suggesting repositioning and downplaying the effectiveness of a real-time map. This does not mean disregarding that the (unachieved) goal of a real-time situational awareness represents an important turning point in the discursive regime and in the technological developments of the migration regime: as William Walters argues, "situational awareness is a particular form of temporal engineering. It privileges the acquisition and communication of 'near real time' information about events and processes as they unfold" (Walters, 2014, p.2). However, we need to bring attention to the effective temporal acting of bordering mechanisms that stretch beyond (nearly) real-time snapshots and project them into possible future scenarios starting from a present migratory event – namely, the future risks that a certain migratory pressure could engender. Grounding on a series of data gathered over time, this virtual future temporality establishes the possible risky outcomes of the event to manage. Indeed, it involves a sort of archiving gesture: more than for a prompt use, migrants' movements and the position of their vessels captured through images are stored, disassembled into multiple data and added to the national databases and then transferred into Eurosur's data-platform. Hence, by exceeding the single event that is detected and put on the map, the different elements that form it (number and nationality of people on the boat, vessel's location, time for finding it etc.) are the basis for tracing future cartographies of governmentality¹⁰.

After this excursus on the temporal stretch of nearly-real time monitoring systems we should scrutinize what is seen and what is searched for by this migration mapping gaze, in order to understand the objects of this regime of visibility. As explained above, the visibility that emerges from these combined multiple monitoring mechanisms does not focus primarily on singularities: despite the potentiality of some advanced dispositives of surveillance to discern even individual bodies, the politics of visibility at the external borders of Europe aims rather to detect unauthorized practices of movements for recording and translating them on a map as events of concern. *Track and record* – more than monitoring and control – could be the formula for describing the *reactive cartography*¹¹ traced by these technologies for mapping migration and that gestures towards an anticipatory space of governmentality (Tazzioli, 2014). Indeed, the real-time mapping-anxiety,

⁹ Interview with the head officer of the Italian national coordination center, based at the department of Public Security of the Home Office (Rome, 12 august, 2014).

¹⁰ William Walters observes that in the context of European border management "situational awareness is both a matter of combating adversaries –who now become the smugglers, traffickers and perhaps terrorists. But it is simultaneously a struggle with an information system and its imperfections" (Walters, 2014, p6).

¹¹ This expression refers to the fact that migration governmental maps "are actually the result of frantic practices that pursue migrants, trying to hijack, deviate and when possible anticipate their moves" (Tazzioli, 2014, p.144).

that characterizes the current politics of migration control at a distance is eminently grounded on a strategy of what Andrew Herscher calls “surveillant witnessing” (Herscher, 2014, p. 473), aimed at tracking migrants’ movements. It is in fact on the basis of an *undercovering monitoring strategy*¹² that mapping systems try to trace a real-time situational awareness picture of unauthorized movements in the Mediterranean: by detecting and archiving migrant crossing, an anticipatory map of possible future risks then is produced. For instance, Frontex risk-analysis¹³ is definitively one of the most well-known anticipatory maps, which are actually one of the primary sources for Eurosur’s analyses.

The identification, mapping and archiving of migratory events does not work through individualization, as other categorization practices do. On the contrary, especially in the context of migration governmentality at sea, what is searched for and seen by the technological devices that send the information to Eurosur is the presence or the trace of a migrant group – namely, a more or less indistinct number of people whose practice of movement constitutes an “illegal crossing”. Indeed, it is not at the level of mapping but through the encounter between the migrant and the (digital or physical) border-line that the border working operates through the production and the banning of migration profiles via the generation of data double (Amoore, 2013; Bigo, 2011, 2014; Scheel, 2013). However, these two quite different mechanisms of crafting borders detach spatially and temporally from the bodily presence are both characterized by a fundamental disregard for individual identity (Bigo, 2014).

At the same time, digital mapping practices displace and unsettle also the very notion of borders and force us to move beyond a linear image of them. Indeed, the border coincide with what is looked at by the monitoring eyes: on the one hand the borders of Europe mapped by Eurosur – are detached from the EU territory and start before – since for instance the Mediterranean itself is considered an external frontier of Europe, becoming a *sea border zone*. On the other hand, the border that must be monitored and controlled as such is, at least in part, the result of the migratory events that are detected signaling a new risk in a certain area. Indeed, once a suspect object is detected, “a rectangle area can be drawn which marks an area that the decision maker wants to have surveyed completely” (Bauer, Fischer, 2010).

Mapping beyond representation?

In order to better understand the current struggles over visibility at stake in the current politics of rescue in the Mediterranean I introduce a point on the

¹² This is the expression used by Italian authorities in charge of patrolling the sea, for designating the ordinary procedure through which they follow “suspect” vessels.

¹³ Frontex Situation Centre was established in 2008, with the aim of producing a multi-layered European situational picture and responsible for maintaining the Common Frontier Intelligence Picture.

relationship between mapping and representation in this real-time mapping gaze. Indeed, monitoring mechanisms based on a real-time logic aim less to represent migration movements on the map than to craft and locate migratory events of concern, tracking migrant vessels and grounding on the (human and digital) traces gathered by different systems. On this point, it is worth recalling that what is at stake in migration monitoring systems is the fact that starting from detected presence of migrants at sea an evaluation can be done about whether or not they form a migratory event of concern. Beyond this point, it could be argued that the visualizing effect— what is put on the map as a result of a monitoring action — actually is not a mere translation of what has been detected/seen — representing the phenomenon in cartographic and visual terms. Rather, it is in itself an event producer — crafting migratory events of concerns. Indeed, Eurosur’s system traces zones of interventions and select movements of concern, producing a map by starting from practice of mobility that must be governed. In a nutshell, what matters is the governability of the migratory event (Tazzioli, Walters, 2016). In other words, these maps, insofar as they visualize an object of concern, open or change a space of governmentality, that is a space defined and bordered by the very techniques deployed for governing and containing a migratory event. Thus, this reveals that through the gesture of map updating, a certain space of intervention is opened on the basis of the ‘impact’ of the mapped events and on the measures necessary for tackling it. More than in terms of tracing and mapping, it would be perhaps more appropriate to talk about a *spatial crafting*, meaning by that the transformations that real-time monitoring systems produce in the way in which a specific area becomes a border-zone of intervention.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress again that it is not necessarily the immediateness of the response that qualifies the functioning of Eurosur; rather, the data gathered are most of the time used for producing risk-analysis maps for future interventions. Accordingly, the transformative action staged by the visualizing mechanism itself, concerns less a temporal dimension — namely, a prompt reaction — than a spatial one — how a given space is reshaped as an area of intervention. That said, the production of spaces of governmentality through mapping techniques highlights the partial discrepancy between mapping and representation (Daston, Galison, 2010, pp. 382-385)¹⁴.

¹⁴ It is important to stress that this is far from being an exclusive characteristic of migration monitoring systems. In fact, As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison explain, “towards the end of the twentieth century [...] the aim was not simply to get the images right but also to manipulate the images. The shift from image-as-representation to image-as-process [...] images began to function at least as much as a tweezer, hammer or anvil of nature: a tool to make and change things”. (Daston, Galison, 2010, p. 383). However, in the context of migration, what Daston and Galison call the “image as a tool” should be placed within a broader strategy of surveillance, in which the aim is at the same time to produce the event and to visualize what happens at sea. Secondly, “image as a tool” works in the field of migration monitoring according to a twofold task: on the one hand, it

The politics of trace

Referring to the production of the data double, Didier Bigo suggestively points out that “borders are constructed through the traces left along the passages” (Bigo, 2014, p.218). And the assemblage of digital traces – like radar or satellite images – is in fact one of the main procedures used in national coordination centres for locating a migratory event. Indeed, on Eurosur’s interactive map the European space is spotted with red dots signifying the size of the event; and clicking on those dots the characteristics of any single ‘migratory event’ or border-crime are disclosed to all the people allowed to access the map¹⁵. The model of the vessel, the number of people on board, the eventual smugglers arrested and the kind of illegal action in which they were apprehended are the main sets of information reported for any illegal border crossing event. The crafting of the migratory event starting from the data capture that is then put on the map and subjected to further integrations. As Elisabeth Povinelli puts it, “by design, statistics [...] transform the borders, qualities, scale, and agency of quasi-events into self-evident eventfulness” (Povinelli, 2011: 35). In this way, data are selected and put together to designate a migratory event that contributes in tracing the map of ‘risk factors’ at the external borders of the EU.

When the technological eyes ‘fail’¹⁶ to detect a migrant vessel in distress at sea, the dynamic of the event can be at least in part reconstructed through the combination of disparate elements: weather conditions, eventual emergency calls, traces in the radar images etc. This mechanism of reconstructing the event after the event has recently been used in the context of the many shipwrecks that have happened in the central Mediterranean between 2011 and 2014. In those cases, the traces’ assemblage has actually been one of the main strategies mobilized by humanitarian international organizations for demonstrating states’ responsibility in the failure or in the delay in rescuing migrants at sea. “Liquid traces” is the title of the video in which Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani illustrate the stages of the *Left-to-die boat* case, one of the most conspicuous examples of activist counter-mapping practices: using the images and the traces left by those same technical tools used for monitoring and intercepting migrants’ movements, they were able to reconstruct what happened during the shipwreck of a migrant vessel departed from

opens spaces of intervention; on the other the images produced starting from multiple data become in turn data themselves, stored for producing future risk analyses.

¹⁵ National authorities in charge of managing the national coordination centres and Frontex personnel.

¹⁶ The failure of monitoring system in detecting people in distress at sea should be object of an attentive theoretical reflection that takes together the politics over (migrants) lives that is at stake in migration governmentality at sea, and the technical limits of visibility. Indeed, the non-detectability of certain vessels in distress on the one hand shows well that the Mediterranean sea is far from being a transparent space to the technological eyes; on the other, it is the mark of the politics of letting people drown and die that in part characterize the government of mobility at sea.

the Libyan coasts, proving the responsibility of states and international actors for the failure to rescue people in distress at sea (Heller, Pezzani, 2014).

The forensic approach (Weizman, 2007, 2014)– in this context a *forensic oceanography* (Pezzani, 2014) – is at the basis of this *data hunt* (*traces hunt*). Especially as far as deaths or disappearances are concerned, as it is in the case of tragedies at sea, the attention is drawn to objects and tools, instead of people's testimonies in order to reconstruct an event that is the object of political claims for knowing the truth and for compensation. Since traces are left in water, "by reading them carefully the sea itself can be turned into a witness for interrogation", grounding on "the different electromagnetic waves send and received by multiple sensing devices that create a new sea altogether" (Heller, Pezzani, 2014, p. 658). However, in the case of unauthorized migrations, the elusiveness of traces is something that must be taken into account and that defines the specificity and the deadlocks of a 'politics of traces' in that field. Indeed, far from always leaving a trace or a sign, deaths and disappearances at sea are simply undetected by the technological eyes; and thus, even counter-mapping practices that try to take and elaborate archives of digital images often have no concrete foothold for reconstructing the event. Since counter-mapping is a practice that rests on the same tools and images managed, crafted and oriented by governmental instances, they cannot see anything other than what power sees. In fact, counter-mapping techniques could reveal something that is left overshadowed in official maps and reports, as well as in the archives of the monitoring devices. But what occurs without leaving any trace in the capturing monitoring systems, simply remains ungraspable. The claim for checking what happened during the shipwrecks and which digital information was taken and stored, finally could not have a response also because of the total absence of traces in the digital archives of the technological eyes that watch the Mediterranean. Therefore, due to the unresponsiveness of monitoring systems in tracing an *a posteriori* cartography of the events, the phantom shipwrecks of migrant vessels that happened in 2011 and 2012 could not have even been known by European authorities if those absences had not become a political urgency in the countries of the missing migrants (Sossi, 2013)¹⁷.

Coming back to the question about the rationale of visibility that is at stake a (nearly) real-time situational awareness picture of the Mediterranean, the goal of the mapping systems analyzed here is neither to identify the singular people on the boat, nor to make visible what tends to remain in the shadows. Rather, what is of relevance is that a migratory event can be detected, recorded and managed, opening new spaces of intervention. This requires highlighting the nuanced working of the visibility regime in the government of migration, shifting the attention from the

¹⁷ The understanding of those (tragic) events that were actually unascertained on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, became known because of the denunciation and the struggle of the families of the Tunisian missing migrants that marked the disappearance of their sons.

binary opposition invisible/visible to the thresholds of political detection that are constantly rearranged by migration maps. “The maritime picture is not only a visualization of a map and ship detections. The maritime picture can be viewed as a means of collecting all information about the current situation at sea, which also includes [...] the projection of the current situation in the future” (Bauer, Fischer, 2010). Secondly, more than seeing everything, the mapping eyes act through a sort of partitioning gaze that distinguishes between relevant and irrelevant activities: “the challenge in supporting maritime situation awareness [...] is therefore not only to know about every kind of activity that is going on in the whole area, but also to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant activities” (Bauer, Fischer, 2010).

The “humanitarian visibility” at sea after Mare Nostrum

Accounting for visibility as a contested field and as a regime – constituted by mobile and nuanced threshold of visible and invisible – enables to grasp the uneven distribution of the seen and the unseen and what in a given context appears as an object of concern. As far as migration at sea is concerned, the issue of visibility is related on the one hand to the distribution of political vulnerability (Butler, 2006; Povinelli, 2011), that is to the power of rescuing or letting people die at sea; on the other, it refers to the battlefield of detectability that is strategically played both by migrants and by governmental actors. To be detected at sea for migrants may mean being intercepted and pushed back, but it may also mean rescue and safe travel to Italy in case of a shipwreck. For state and non-state actors involved in monitoring the Mediterranean, a migratory event that passes undetected simply does not exist: when the mapping devices do not observe any presence, and when no trace is left in the mechanisms of control-through-monitoring, migrants’ deaths become disappearances that cannot even be known by the mapping actors. Thus, for the technological governmental eyes expecting to detect migrants at sea and record a migratory event, the fact that a migrant vessel passes undetected entails that it remains a non-event that no authority can account for.

The working of a political technology cannot be done in the void, by simply describing its technical operation as if there were a smooth and neutral space in which it operates. On the contrary, mechanisms of control and monitoring must be situated in the contested field of governmentality in which they function. Eurosur started in December 2013, but actually the first regulation for establishing the European Border Surveillance System dates back to 2008¹⁸ and before the official launch many other legislative steps had been made¹⁹ (Jandesbodsz, 2011). More broadly, the first EU proposal for “a surveillance system covering the whole southern border of the EU and the Mediterranean Sea” was drafted in 2005²⁰.

¹⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/pdf/eurosur_final.pdf

¹⁹ See for instance <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2013-0232+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

²⁰ EU Presidency conclusions of 15-16 December 2005.

However, precisely because governmental technologies must be analysed in the context of the struggle in which they effectively operate, it cannot pass unnoticed that in December 2013 Eurosur started to operate after some important changes happened. Indeed, on the 3rd and on the 11th of October 2013 two migrant vessels drowned near the island of Lampedusa and more than 600 people died at sea. Mare Nostrum is the military-humanitarian response, technically put into place in few days by Italy: the peculiarity of this rescue mission does not consist only in the decision to go and rescue the migrants on the high sea and near Libyan waters but also in the humanitarian task that the Navy is charged to perform. In fact, the Italian Navy was at the head of the ‘military-humanitarian mission to save migrants’ lives at sea’, coordinating the other Italian police authorities (Guardia di Finanza and Guardia Costiera). Quite suddenly, the scene of the ‘good border spectacle’ of the rescue called the attention of media, researchers and activists; and the central Mediterranean became the object of a constant ‘humanitarian visibility’, characterized by the daily bulletin of deaths and rescues released by the Italian Navy. The *rescue politics* that gained ground after this military-humanitarian shift in the government of migration at sea, paved the way for two *border looks* based on two different exercises of visibility: an aesthetic of the rescue, based on the *making-visible* humanitarian strategy, and a (supposed) real-time monitoring gaze, grounded on *visualizing* the events on the map.

Indeed, the implementation of a military-humanitarian border-zone in the Mediterranean due to the massive migrant departures from Libya generated a hyper-visibility of migrants arriving at Italian harbours on the military boats of the Navy. Every stage of the military-rescue was put under the spotlight as if the reiterated gesture of making the humanitarian-military border visible were constitutive of the humanitarian itself, in this case performed by the military. Indeed, as Thomas Keenan remarks, “humanitarian action seems not simply to take advantage of the media, but indeed to depend on them”, (Keenan, 2011, p.3). Everybody started to look at the sea: different eyes, and not only the media, mobilized a scopic gaze towards the military-ferries of the Navy, which rescued migrants at sea taking them to Italy. Simultaneously, the visualizing capture of the events taking place at sea was the other “visual register” (Belcher, 2015, p.2) very close to the situational awareness and real-time mapping rationale I talked about above. Or to put it better, the already existing mapping and monitoring systems appeared as the actual and ideal technological eyes to visualize on time migratory events at sea on the map. However, as the militaries of the Navy explain, the rescue system is not mostly based on that kind of visualization – the real-time cartography – but rather depends on the monitoring radar systems placed on the Navy’s boats and on those parts of the coastal radar network²¹. However, as I will show in the next section, we should not overlook the topicality of real-time monitoring rationale in human rights discourses and strategies. In the context of migration

²¹ Interview with the Italian Navy, Rome, March 2014.

governmentality at sea, the *humanitarian visibility* that traditionally sustains human rights actions (Azoulay, 2008; Weizman, 2014) is now focused on real-time mapping, appropriating such a monitoring gaze.

The twisting of visibility: migrants' appropriation of humanitarian and real-time mapping

The Safe Alarm Network was launched on the 10th October 2014, by a group of German, Italian and Tunisian activists with the aim of supporting the migrants who cross the Mediterranean with unsafe vessels. The transnational Network aims to provide a 24/7 hotline for people in distress at sea and, when migrants call, to immediately phone the Coast Guard and the Navy, monitoring that they effectively go and rescue. In fact, they could not actually set up an alternative system of rescue, and consequently decided to work to assure and speed the connections between migrants and the authorities in charge of rescuing people; at the same time, their counter-visibility action was supposed to control that, once the alarm call was received, national authorities would immediately intervene. "If coast guards do not act promptly, it will be sought, on the one hand, to enforce rescue operations through public pressure. On the other hand, attempts will be made to alert cargo ships and tankers in vicinity of the vessel in distress"²². In terms of real-time devices, the possibility of finding and locating in time migrants in distress at sea depends first of all on the technical equipment that migrants who leave Libya now have on the boats: indeed, Turaya satellite phones enable the person who calls to see the exact location of the boat, and this is automatically read also by the authorities that receive the SOS call. Then, activists find the correspondent location on the map searching for the latitude and longitude received on the interactive Watch the Med platform (<http://watchthemed.net/>). Through this finding method, they should be able to verify the Search and Rescue zone (SAR) zone which the vessel is in, and consequently the state that has the duty to go and perform the rescue.

However, this possibility to locate migrants in distress at sea without drawing upon radar or other monitoring tools managed by states, depends also on the strategies of visibility adopted by migrants with the starting of Mare Nostrum's politics of rescue. Indeed, as I explained above, the media attention on the 'good border spectacle' of rescue on the one hand, and the goal of a real-time situational awareness of the Mediterranean, craft the scene of governvisibility at sea. The rescue operations of the Italian Navy should be situated in a broader technological frame of a politics of visibility and visualization (*real-time visibility*) and, at once, within the humanitarian-military EU's approach to migrants' deaths at sea after the two big shipwrecks in October 2013 (*humanitarian visibility*). Thus, looked for, targeted and tracked down by an assemblage of humanitarian and policing technical gazes, migrants tried to appropriate and twist this striving for

²² <http://www.watchthemed.net/media/uploads/page/12/Alarmphone-FAQ-english.pdf>

visibility. First of all, aware of Mare Nostrum operation, migrants started to equip themselves with the Turaya satellite phones (at least one per vessel) making sure in this way of being traceable and seen. Secondly, instead of concealing themselves as undocumented migrants used to do, the increased number of deaths at sea on the one side and the shift in the EU's approach towards a politics of rescue on the other, led migrants to ride on the humanitarian and real-time visibility, as a way to reach Europe. In fact, migrants from Libya facilitated their traceability by national authorities and monitoring systems, anticipating in space and time border patrols by sending an SOS as soon as they entered the international waters. Since for people in distress at sea being visualized on the map by real-time monitoring tools means opening and highlighting a space of rescue intervention, migrants staged their own capture by the mapping gaze and demanded to be rescued. In this way, the "humanitarian visibility" has been in part yielded by migrants' exposure and traceability that demanded to be seen and saved. At the same time, riding on the humanitarian visibility that governs their movements, and becoming traceable to the monitoring eyes, they promptly visibilized themselves as objects of the humanitarian and of the 'good border spectacle': the capacity to detect was turned into an inescapable duty of rescue.

Conclusions: a protean visibility?

The politics of visibility at stake in the Mediterranean has been approached here by taking into account the Mediterranean Sea as a space of contested mobility, analysing monitoring systems and mapping devices by placing them in a struggle over visibility. In this way, the 'mapping anxiety' that percolates the governmentality of migration at sea, appears as an attempt for detecting, containing and managing migrants' movements. "Actually, migration maps are part of a reactive and responsive cartography "based on a logic of spying and hijacking migrants' routes" (Tazzioli, 2014, p.144). In this regard, what can be called a *protean visibility* concerns the simultaneously reactive and anticipatory mechanism at the core of the (nearly) real-time mapping rationale – reacting to migrants' movements by tracing spaces of governmentality, and anticipating future migratory events through risk analyses. Moreover, if on the one hand this article has stressed how the supposed two-sided function (control and rescue) of monitoring systems like Eurosur is actually a misleading definition, on the other it has shown how migrants have tried to twist humanitarian visibility and visualizing tools, strategically playing within a versatile battlefield of visibility. Starting from this analytical framework, Eurosur has been scrutinized here in its effective functioning, from the point of view of the kind of visibility that it enacts and from the standpoint of what is visualized on the map – the migratory event. However, this inroad in the struggle over migration visibility in the Mediterranean has been made by situating the analysis in a time when the government of migration at sea is led by a humanitarian-military logic; this has been well actualized in the Italian operation Mare Nostrum, in charge of rescuing migrants at sea by entrusting military forces to operate as humanitarian actors. What I called 'humanitarian

visibility' is certainly not specific of the current Mediterranean context, since rather it underpins the humanitarian politics as such (McKee, 2007; McLagan, McKee, 2012). Nevertheless, in this article I have showed how the articulation between the frantic attempt to provide real-time situational awareness of the Mediterranean and the refreshed military-humanitarian assemblage has been twisted by activists and migrants mobilizing strategies of 'visibility appropriation'.

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