

## Mediterranean Aesthetics and the Visual Culture of African Migration in Contemporary Italy

Diego Alejandro Atehortúa

“We have been sailing for years  
We’ve been traveling for years  
We’ve been drowning for years.”  
-Dagmawi Yimer, *Asmat*, 2015

Coinciding with the Information Age and post-Cold War globalization, a proliferation of images showing Africans emigrating and embarking on turbulent and often deadly maritime crossings through the Mediterranean Sea, have transformed this liquid geography into a necropolitical borderland imbued with competing symbols and sensibilities about who and what constitute Italy’s Mediterranean imaginary.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, digital photographs and videos showing the illegal auctioning of humans from Sub-Sahara in North Africa, a vital intermediary frontier for migrants and refugees attempting to enter the European Union via the Italian peninsula and its claimed islands like Lampedusa, provoke considering a contemporary and historical Mediterranean dimension to Saidiya Hartman’s theorization of the “afterlife of slavery.”<sup>2</sup> How then, is a hegemonic image and idea of a romanticized Mediterranean—informed by a prevailing discourse of modern/colonial aesthetics, and perpetuated by mass media and an increasingly nationalist rhetoric in Italy—challenged and thus broadened when probing into questions of

---

<sup>1</sup>Imaginary follows Benedict Anderson’s understanding of nationalism as an “imagined political community,” in order to consider the Mediterranean Sea’s geopolitical and symbolic importance for the making of Italy’s own construction of a nation. See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1983), 6. The relationship between the making of an Italian state and the question of race and racism has been traced since the Unification period during the late nineteenth century and the first World War in the early twentieth century by Rhiannon Welch in *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016). The concept of liquidity is theorized by Iain Chambers to rethink the Mediterranean as a heterogeneous area with overlapping and contradictory discourses. See *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>“IOM Learns of ‘Slave Market’ Conditions Endangering Migrants in North Africa,” *International Organization for Migration*, last modified April 11, 2017, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-learns-slave-market-conditions-endangering-migrants-north-africa>; Nima Elbagir, Raja Razek, Alex Platt and Bryony Jones, “People for sale Where lives are auctioned for \$400,” *CNN online*, accessed February 1, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html>; Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

blackness and the country's geopolitical centrality in Mediterranean migration?<sup>3</sup> The ever-present yet growing population of Afro-Italians and people of African descent and origin living in Italy today, and the subsequent racialized discrimination they face, as demonstrated by the recent election of the country's first black minister, Congolese-Italian Cécile Kyenge, and the denial of entry of African migrants and refugees, make a compelling case for exploring the conceptual model of a "Black Mediterranean" through and within contemporary visual culture.<sup>4</sup> As depicted in the promotional poster for Italian director Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 Oscar-nominated film *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea), although the spec of blue water illuminated by a rescue ship's spotlight recalls conventional associations of an idealized Mediterranean and its overwhelming azure façade, the enveloping blackness evokes the need to shed light on what Janet Roitman and Cristiana Giordano might opt to call the *condition* of contemporary Mediterranean migration through critical perspectives about a so-called migration crisis, and artistic practices that consider the potential of decolonizing such imagery of the Mediterranean (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Through a reading of Rosi's documentary film, in conversation with Italian photographer Giulio Piscitelli's 2011-2016 series of digital photographs, *Migrant Offshore Aid Station's Operation in the Mediterranean*, this essay will first examine the historical and cultural

---

<sup>3</sup>I build on Walter Mignolo's distinction between the hegemony of "modern/colonial aesthetics" and his proposal of "decolonialaesthetics." See for example Rolando Vazquez and Walter Mignolo, "DecolonialAesthetics: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," in *Social Text*, July 15, 2013, website, [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/).

<sup>4</sup>Following Paul Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic, Gabrielle Proglia introduces the concept of the Black Mediterranean as one that is neither engendered out of Africa or Europe, but rather from the Mediterranean Sea itself. See "Introduction" in Gabriele Proglia, ed., *Decolonising the Mediterranean: European Colonial Heritages in North Africa and the Middle East* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). Tom Kington, "Italy's first black minister: I had bananas thrown at me but I'm here to stay," *The Guardian*, last modified September 8, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/08/cecile-kyenge-quest-for-tolerance>.

<sup>5</sup>Christiana Giordano, "Catastrophes" in *HotSpots. Cultural Anthropology* website, June 28, 2016, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/906-catastrophes>; Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Gabriele Proglia, ed. *Decolonising the Mediterranean*. Specially "Introduction" by Proglia, Nancy Porsia's chapter, "The Imazighen in Lybia: From Key Ally for the Italian Colonisers to Inconvenient Interlocutor for the Italian Government," and Gaia Giuliani's Afterword, "The Mediterranean as a Stage: Borders, Memories, Bodies."

tensions between modern/colonial aesthetics and the discourse of blackness regarding Africans, their migration, and present-day Italy's Mediterranean imaginary. Providing analyses of the 2015 multimedia short-film, *ASMAT-Names in memory of all victims of the sea* by Ethiopian director and migrant Dagmawi Yimer, and two performances, *Punto di Fuga*, 2013 and *Mediterráneo*, 2017 by Carlos Martiel, a Cuban artist and migrant, I then hope to expand on the concept and framework of decolonial aesthesis as an alternative to modern/colonial aesthetics, and as a crucial option that broadens Italy's symbolic relationship to the Mediterranean and its ontological understanding of blackness.

Conceptualized out of overlapping concerns with notions of taste and sensibility during the early modern period, modern/colonial aesthetics—derived from the Greek *aísthēsis*—was developed by figures of the European Enlightenment in conjunction with debates about the philosophy of art and epistemologies concerned with the discernibility of beauty and the sublime.<sup>6</sup> Relating to a process of perceiving and rationalizing one's senses, modern/colonial aesthetics was shaped by an esteemed regard for Greco-Roman antiquity as an influential model to follow, and concerned itself primarily with the *visual* detection and distinction between “fine art” and other creative practices. An idealized construction that emerged partly through a rhetorical transformation of Renaissance humanism, classical antiquity deriving from these Mediterranean regions became a measuring stick for declaring what would eventually become Western Europe's supposed intellectual and even biological superiority by the eighteenth

---

<sup>6</sup>In the Western European Enlightenment, German, British, and French intellectuals are mainly attributed with the earliest theorizations of aesthetics. Although Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff for example, are credited for conceiving of a methodical approach to understanding and organizing our senses—especially in relation to objects—both acknowledged that the pleasure we sense is also relative and could not be adequately categorized in the same manner, and thus, that such pleasure was indicative of an object's perfection. See Leibniz, “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas,” in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed., Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel/Springer, 1976). Simon Gikandi's analysis of aesthetics within a wider discussion about taste and its connection to the transatlantic slave trade, unearths extensive connections. See *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

century.<sup>7</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a foundational figure in the discipline of art history who developed a career in Rome, argued for the supremacy and imitation of classical Greek objects and style through an assumption of what Martin Bernal calls “the Aryan model,” that is, the notion of ancient Greek civilizations, their histories, and cultural productions as essentially or eventually Western European and white.<sup>8</sup> This claimed cultural patrimony of an idealized Mediterranean past however, was not only manifested through the authoritative Enlightenment writings by Winckelmann and other figures, but through contemporaneous visual representations as well.

Two oil paintings by French artist Claude-Joseph Vernet for example, titled *A Storm on a Mediterranean Coast*, 1767 (Fig. 2) depicting an image of clashing waves and ominous grey clouds hovering over dynamic bodies in the foreground to evoke the wrath of the sea, and *A Calm at a Mediterranean Port*, 1770 (Fig. 3) representing a hazy scene of fishermen and women working and kissed by warm rays of a golden sun shimmering over tepid waters, offer distinctly similar visions of the Mediterranean. Retaining a proclivity for ideation and a penchant for Winckelmann’s classical “aesthetic” through the depiction of white Western European bodies, the former vignette invokes the sublime potential of the Mediterranean, while the latter’s genre-like scene, recalls its romanticist tropes. Vernet’s following of a Neo-Classical-Romanticist style in his paintings Mediterranean, demonstrates the critical role of visual sources, in this case “fine art,” for engendering such semiotics of the Mediterranean, and its broader significance in the

---

<sup>7</sup>David Bindman has argued for the use of classical forms, or rather, a classicized style, during Enlightenment theorizations by figures like Pieter Camper about human difference. The use of Apollo Belvedere’s physiognomy to create a “visual rhetoric” that in equating the European human as a representative of these features also implied their superiority over other humans of the world. See *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks: with Instructions for the Connoisseur and an Essay on Grace in Works of Art*, trans. Henry Fuseli (London: Andrew Millar, 1765). Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 2-3. Anne Lafont, “How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51, no. 1, Fall 2017, 89-113.

making of modern aesthetic theory and a so-called ideal.<sup>9</sup> This modern/colonial understanding of aesthetics however, is part of a larger epistemological and ontological shift that must be contextualized. As David Bindman has aptly shown, European discourse about aesthetics emerged alongside other Enlightenment texts including “scientific” theories of human difference during the continent’s hold of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>10</sup> European-produced knowledge about African ontology and the supposed degenerative state of other humans located outside of Europe were not only part and parcel of modern/colonial aesthetics, but would pave the way for hierarchal racial thought and coincide with the colonization and division of the African continent by European powers in the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Images of vulnerable black bodies migrating across the Mediterranean Sea as shown in Giulio Piscitelli’s photograph of seven Sub-Saharan African men seated outside on the deck of a rescue ship, do not align with Enlightenment notions of modern/colonial aesthetics (Fig. 4). Both Immanuel Kant and David Hume, credited for laying the foundations of Western aesthetics and art theory, agreed on an inferior status of Africans *vis-à-vis* the negative associations ascribed to blackness. In asserting his theories of aesthetic judgment in his 1764 publication, *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and the Sublime*, Kant made a clear distinction:

“The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that arises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a negro has shown talents and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or anything, or any other

---

<sup>9</sup>According to Walter D. Mignolo, under the modern/colonial order, vision and the realm of the visual have been given special epistemological and ontological authority over other senses in theorizing about aesthetics. He calls this “world-vision”, and opts for “world-sensing,” as a decolonial option that reconsiders the heterogeneous potential of the other senses—as originally posited by aesthesis. See “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (de)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience,” in *Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics* 1.1 (2013): 136.

<sup>10</sup>Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*.

<sup>11</sup>In the case of the Italian Empire, present-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Lybia among other islands like Lampedusa would be claimed or colonized. C.J. Lowe and F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870-1940* (London and New York: Routledge, 1975, Reprinted in 2002).

praiseworthy quality, even though some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through special gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.”<sup>12</sup>

This Enlightenment-driven and ontological irreconcilability between racialized blackness and the making of modern/colonial aesthetics however, shares more local and earlier points of origin in present-day Italy. Although Renaissance humanism continues to influence a modern national imaginary for Italy that sees itself as a successor and improver of these very Greco-Roman ideals, as Nishitani Osamu reminds us, at the same time that the *humanitas* Renaissance human subject was conceived in Europe, so was the *anthropos* human object outside of Europe. Concurrently, the so-called discovery of the Americas by conquistadores like Genoese Christopher Columbus in the late fifteenth century, the *anthropos* came to signify the object/abject ‘other’ living as close as Africa and as far as the Americas, and as posited by the Italian Renaissance’s understanding of difference, incapable of achieving such ideals of versatile intellectualism or of being aesthetic-minded individuals.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, in the early modern period, powerful African kingdoms and polities such as the elites of the Kingdom of Kongo were considered equal diplomatic partners who exercised incredible agency and negotiated with secular and religious figures in Europe, and on their own terms.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, centuries of war over territories and trade, and the subsequent selling and buying of West and West-Central Africans into captives to be sold as slaves and forcefully moved across the Atlantic, partly explain Kant’s pejorative tone and his amnesia regarding the intellectual competence and achievements of Africans by the eighteenth century.

---

<sup>12</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldwithe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 110-11.

<sup>13</sup>Osamu Nishitani “Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of Human Being,” in Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon, ed., *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Traces: A Multicultural Series of Cultural Theory and Translation, 2006), 264-265.

<sup>14</sup>Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

In Italy, as nationalism was imagined and performed during the Unification period by claiming a direct nexus with the accomplishments and legacy of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean Sea was also claimed through the Roman idea of *Mare Nostrum* or Our Sea.<sup>15</sup> More recently, this Latin term has been given new meaning following the Lampedusa migrant shipwreck of October 3, 2013 that took the lives of over 350 people mainly descending from Ghana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Resurfaced by the Italian government's Ministry of Defense under the "Operation Mare Nostrum," this initiative was aimed at regulating migration and saving lives at sea, although it was discontinued only a year later. Despite present-day Italy's extensive imperialist relation with Africa via the Mediterranean—one that dates back farther than the Kingdom of Italy's nineteenth century colonization of Eritrea and Ethiopia or even the Roman Empire's absorption of North Africa—the contemporary narrative of migration and the accompanying discourse of blackness in the Italian imaginary have been rendered as unprecedented under the rhetoric of a crisis.

Piscitelli's photograph of seven African men set against a blue Mediterranean Sea and sky do not adhere to romanticized representations of white, muscular, and heroic male bodies in the Mediterranean Sea as painted by Vernet. In *A Storm on a Mediterranean Coast* for example, although distraught and distressed subjects, they remain unified within their sublime environment, as aptly demonstrated by the dramatic rescue of scantily clad and naked figures in the foreground. Whether they are considered migrants/refugees or citizens, the wrath of the Mediterranean Sea does not discriminate, and yet in Piscitelli's photograph, it becomes clear in their expression that their relation to this body of water is not of pleasure, but of last resort. Unlike Vernet's human subjects who convey a particular romantic dynamism through the flows of their draped clothing and gesticulating bodies that ecstatically echo the force of the impending

---

<sup>15</sup>Lowe and Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870-1940*, 34.

storm, Piscitelli's image captures a static and seated state of seven Sub-Saharan men that evokes their susceptibility and vulnerability to these conditions. As a Nigerian migrant in Rosi's film exclaims, "the mountains could not hide us, the people could not hide us, and we ran to the sea." Instead, their survival in these waters is contingent on the humanity and help of others, exemplifying Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical idea of bare life, to explain migrants and refugees "who, by being excluded from the sacred realm and the protection of law, could be killed with impunity" because of their status as non-citizens at sea.<sup>16</sup> In Piscitelli's image, between the seven men and the sea, pastel-blue blankets tied to the ship's metal railings (possibly to dry or to serve as shade) formally create a sharper distinction between the dark complexion of the seven men largely wearing earthy tones with the shades of blue that surround them (the blankets, the sea, the sky). Given that no man is looking back at Piscitelli's camera, their sense of otherness is amplified as they do not communicate confidence but concern with their state at sea. Here, Piscitelli plays the role of the *humanitas* subject, armed with the gaze of the camera and the power of representation, whereas the seven African men serve as his *anthropos* objects; recorded and documented for the urgency of circulating information that a supposed migration "crisis" demands. While images like Piscitelli's produce and disseminate information through the frame of photographic journalism, their inverse—mundane images of confident or joyful black bodies sailing the Mediterranean—are not consistent with the Aryan model that has influenced Italy's Mediterranean imaginary. Although the documentary nature of Piscitelli's project may perhaps indicate a lack of concern for creating "artistic" images, the formally striking and arresting qualities of his photographs inevitably suggest a particular intentionality by Piscitelli for capturing images premised on the contrast between black skin and the blue hues of the

---

<sup>16</sup>Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna and Vincenzo Ruggiero, "Thinking Lampedusa: border construction, the spectacle of bare life and the productivity of migrants" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38:3, 434.



Mediterranean. Through the epidermal opposition in Piscitelli's photographs and even the diametrically opposed structure of Rosi's film, as we shall see, a sense of the sublime emerges; demanding a reconciliation between Eurocentric beauty and the sublime as understood by modern/colonial aesthetics, and the racialized and politicized sight of exposed dark-skinned Africans attempting to enter Italy.

The contrast between migrant bodies rendered disposable versus bodies worthy of protection by the Italian government can be observed through the Sicilian citizens living on the island of Lampedusa in *Fuocoammare*. The shifting scenes between migrants and refugees traversing the sea and the everyday life of the island's Lampedusan citizens, particularly through the perspective and subjectivity of a preadolescent boy, Samuele, convey Rosi's interest in portraying two seemingly different worlds occurring in the same Mediterranean location and even at the same time. The audience is introduced to Samuele and his friend as they prepare to build slingshots made out of pine-wood and rubber gloves. Seemingly fascinated with the act of shooting, both boys venture throughout Lampedusa with their slingshots or by simply gesturing with their hands the sign of a gun and aiming towards the Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 5). This act of shooting out to the sea or even by the beach, where land meets sea, communicates a defensive gesture that poetically critiques the European Union's often incompetent and antagonistic attitudes towards migrants attempting to enter. In Italy, as the European Court of Human Rights declared in 2012, the government's refoulement of migrants was a "violation of the prohibition on refoulement because the migrants and asylum seekers were at risk of ill-treatment in Libya and of repatriation to countries where they could face ill-treatment or persecution."<sup>17</sup> In pushing back these migrants, the Italian government demonstrated a clear disinterest in rescuing the

---

<sup>17</sup>Human Rights Watch, "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do," last modified June 19, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do>.

people that were closest to its maritime borders; literally turning their backs on them through inaction, silence, and thus demonstrating a clear distinction between the worthiness of Lampedusans on the island and Africans on the water. Such distinction points to how some white Italians—representing the Aryan model of Mediterraneanism—and despite living on an island that has “played a fundamental role in shaping public discourse about migration” in the last decades, are able to maintain or conserve a limited perspective of the sea, its symbolism, and even a protected understanding of the migration condition.<sup>18</sup> Hence, it is through the conception of a trite Mediterranean imaginary that has not fully absorbed the current conditions of African migration in this region, that such imaginary is retained, upheld, and which further paints Lampedusans as white in Rosi’s documentary film.<sup>19</sup>

Italy’s silencing of migrants’ rescue pleas is symbolically reiterated in the absence of an off-screen narrating voice throughout *Fuocoammare*. Although it is visuals that serve as tacit narrators and which ask the viewer to do the work of reflection, formally, the lack of a voice avoids the potential for explicit bias and adheres to a distinctly Italian precedent in film

---

<sup>18</sup>Italy’s relationship to race and Aryanism is a complex issue that became especially poignant during the Italian Unification processes of the nineteenth century. Finding a homogenous racial identity was difficult given the differences between the histories of conquest and migration in northern Italy and those of southern Italy. In light of this, late-nineteenth century rhetoric on Aryanism eventually led Italian anthropologist, Giuseppe Sergi to coin the term, “Mediterranean Race” to counter the German monopoly on racial supremacy. Additionally, for Sicilians and other Southern Italians migrating to the United States in the early twentieth century, whiteness did not alleviate the discrimination they experienced. In spite of this complex issue, Rosi posits Lampedusans’ whiteness through their identity as *citizens* of the Italian state, a status that is not granted to the African migrants, who are outside of the realm of state protection. See Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna & Vincenzo Ruggiero, “Thinking Lampedusa: border construction, the spectacle of bare life and the productivity of migrants,” 431 and Rhiannon Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860-1920*.

<sup>19</sup>In Rosi’s film and Piscitelli’s photographs, whiteness and blackness are also understood beyond their epidermal/colorist connotations. Following Rhiannon Welch and Derek Duncan, these terms are malleably political identities within a social hierarchy in the history of Italian cinema. On one hand, I would argue that it is Rosi’s positing of Lampedusans as citizens that, beyond their white skin, renders them as politically white. On the other hand, blackness comes to represent not only the sight of dark-skinned Sub-Saharan migrants, but the larger image of migrants crossing the Mediterranean today; an image that is not exclusive to Africa, but to the Middle East and Eastern Europe as well. See Derek Duncan, “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema and Its Histories of Representation,” *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2008):199-202; Rhiannon Welch, “Contact, contagion, immunization: Gianni Amelio’s *Lamerica* (1994),” in *Italian Mobilities*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 72-73.

concerned with so-called objective reality. As André Bazin pointed out in his commentary on a tradition of Italian Neorealist film, “Italian films have an exceptionally documentary quality that could not be removed from the script without thereby eliminating the whole social setting into which its roots are so deeply sunk.”<sup>20</sup> Rosi’s documentary, and its own construction of an objective style for capturing the contemporary sight of Mediterranean migration aligns both with his interest in portraying vulnerable lives and with Italian film conventions, as characterized by Bazin. In spite of this concern for transparency, a sense of disinterest or lack of engagement persists through the muteness of a voice that is essential to the making of modern/colonial aesthetics. As exemplified by the work of Kant, who, in writing about sensing beauty, noted the need for a sense of disinterest, or as Cynthia Freeland summarized it, “a cool and detached way” that was necessary for appreciating and understanding beauty.<sup>21</sup> Kant’s writings have permeated well into twentieth century modernism, including the work of art theorist Edward Bullough, who felt that political or sexual subjects dealing with the overtly physical “lie normally below the Distance-limit” necessary for achieving aesthetic pleasure and appreciating beauty.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, images of a multidimensional conflict such as the contemporary condition of Mediterranean migration, which requires considering the intersection of political, social, economic, and cultural undercurrents—both locally and globally as well as its material and theoretical dimensions—do not align but rather threaten the hegemonic romanticism that such imaginary warrants if it is to survive. Although the omitted contrapuntal sound of a narrator’s voice in *Fuocoammare* may indicate what a journalist praised as “a very, very political film without making a political statement,” in considering the monumental importance of this film for a contemporary reworking

---

<sup>20</sup>André Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation” in *What Is Cinema?: Volume II / Edition 1*, trans. Hugh Grant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup>Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>22</sup>Edward Bullough, “Physical Distance,” in *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics from Plato to Wittgenstein*, ed. Frank A. Tillman and Steven M. Cahn, Editors, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 403.

of Italy's Mediterranean imaginary, Rosi's stylistic decision to *not* provide an unbiased voice actually does a disservice to migrants' plights through the film's strong reliance on a polarized and diametric visual language.<sup>23</sup>

In Rosi's film, the Lampedusan scuba diver who voluntarily and routinely risks his life by submerging into the deep blue Mediterranean to explore its recesses, offers one example of the competing perceptions about the sea and its poetics (Fig. 6). Through silhouettes of his body, the audience follows the diver as he swims towards an increasingly darker profundity to collect sea urchins and place them in a wooden crate. The gracious ease by which scuba diver picks up the sea urchins provides a stark contrast to not only the challenging and thorough process of rescuing human beings from drowning in the surface of the Mediterranean, but the difficulty of recovering their bodies in the depths of that very sea. Like the Italian promotional poster for the film, this rather mundane scene of a scuba diver collecting urchins, may also be another tacit reference by Rosi about the need to shed light on these contrasting visions through a critique of an idealized European imaginary about the Mediterranean unencumbered with the conditions of African migration. Similarly, the nostalgic stories by Samuele's grandma on the shores of Mediterranean Sea waiting for the fishermen to come from their day out at sea to offer them bread, provides another example of rather ubiquitous instances of voluntary mobility that completely oppose the Nigerian migrant's view of the Mediterranean Sea "as a place not to pass by. The sea is not a road." Nevertheless, while Samuele's grandma acknowledges the potential dangers of the sea through her memory of World War II, which prompts her to compare the Mediterranean to a fire at sea, it is another Lampedusan woman of similar age, "Zia Maria," who more clearly demonstrates this limiting and sheltered perception of the Mediterranean. Protected by the

---

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Ed Meza, "Gianfranco Rosi's 'Fire at Sea' Doc Chronicles Refugee Crisis," *Variety*, last modified February 13, 2016. <http://variety.com/2016/film/news/gianfranco-rosi-fuocoammare-fire-at-sea-immigrant-documentary-1201705540/>

structure of her home, she hears about drowning migrant bodies outside the island's shores via the local radio station as she stands in her kitchen preparing dinner. Cooking tomato sauce and thus providing a contemporary cinematic example to what Roland Barthes referred to as "Italianicity" in writing about the communicative potential of images,<sup>24</sup> there is no indication that Zia Maria has *seen* the condition of migration either through television or witnessed it in person. In calling the local radio station to request the song "Fuocoammare," which she relates to the bad weather affecting the work of her fisherman son, this image of a fire at sea is seconded by the radio host himself who subsequently, dedicates the song to all fishermen. Through these two scenes, the viewer is able to notice how harsher and more violent associations with the image of a fire at sea, such as that of war, are later equated with the daily predicaments of citizens who are fishermen. More poignant however, is how the song is not dedicated to the migrants out in the very same sea; surely more vulnerable than fishermen. By connecting this imagery with something as uncontrollable and mundane as bad weather, attention is drawn away from controllable acts such as "minimiz[ing] deaths at seas by ensuring sustained, coordinated search and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean."<sup>25</sup> In turn, by not associating the notion of a fire at sea with the contemporary condition of migration, these Italians are able to retain conventional and more quaint views about the Mediterranean that, while perhaps conscious of a sense of respect for its potential dangers through an Enlightenment-derived sense of the sublime, do not fully consider the migration or movement of dark-skinned Africans as intrinsically Mediterranean. Indeed, Italy's selectivity about who is worthy of rescue and entry into the European Union, and its justifications for obstructing or delaying the entrance of migrants and refugees—whether

---

<sup>24</sup>Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 152-163.

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do."

political or logistical—is ultimately tied to the making of a national imaginary under the purview of modern/colonial aesthetic discourse and its sensibilities about Africans and the Mediterranean.

This sense of selectivity is further envisioned in the careful screening of migrants and scanning of their information by Italian health officials as depicted in another photograph of Piscitelli showing a doctor examining a migrant (Fig. 7). Similar to the silence of Rosi's film in that none of Piscitelli's photographs provide captions for further context, one is able to deduce that, operating from a clinic inside of a rescue ship and surrounded by medical paraphernalia, a doctor slightly lifts a migrant's black shirt to reveal his stomach and where he applies some kind of injection. An objectifying process that decides if one may enter the European Union, as the other photographs that precede and succeed this image (See Figure 8 for example), the privilege of privacy becomes apparent as these migrants clearly lack any. After receiving this kind of medical attention on the ship and arriving on land at the *Posto di Segnalamento* (Signaling Post), migrants are further recorded and as Rosi's film depicts, even photographed. Personal items are also confiscated and placed into plastic sandwich bags which are then numbered (as documented by Piscitelli in another photograph). Although such methodical and systematic ways of organizing migrants may be efficient, such approaches and images of these practices homogenize and desensitize viewers to the harsh realities of contemporary Mediterranean migration, and through a logistical surveillance of migrants, the attentive consideration about *who* is to be granted the privilege of survival and entry into the European Union is brought to the fore. Survival at sea becomes a political act in that, if following non-refoulement conventions, a migrant's survival would include them in the growing population of migrants and refugees from Africa in Europe, and who supposedly pose a threat to the Aryan model of a country like Italy's relationship to the Mediterranean. Despite this seemingly looming threat, "Europe is far from the

top destination for the world's refugees and other migrants" according to a 2016 report by *Médicins Sans Frontières*.<sup>26</sup> Given that most migrants seek refuge in nearby countries in Africa and the Middle East, while "Europe has only received a tiny percentage of the world's refugees," the true fragility of this Aryan model of a Mediterranean imaginary is exposed.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Piscitelli and his camera serve as another layer of surveillance and screening, whose objectivity does not allow these migrants to speak for themselves and instead gives more power to the audience to settle their own expectations about how African migrants' bodies fit in—or not—with their existing assumptions of what defines Mediterraneanism. While the lack of captions in Piscitelli's series of photographs further communicate the sense of a direct and unfiltered approach that more implicitly ask viewer to visually reconcile the sight of Mediterranean migration, it is the diametric structure of Rosi's film that provides a more effective contrast between competing visions of the Mediterranean.

After becoming seasick in the privacy of his father's fishing boat due to his inexperience at sea, Samuele, encouraged by his father to learn how to adapt to the conditions of being and working above water, goes with his friend out to sea in two paddle boats where he shortly finds himself in trouble, as he gets stuck between two rescue boats. Suddenly, to save himself from being crushed by the anchored boats, he holds on the line around a rescue ship, and with the exception of doctor Pietro Bartolo's central role throughout the film, who attends to both migrants and locals like Samuele, the scene indicates a rare corporeal encounter in the film between a Lampedusan citizen and a fundamental object of the migration condition. Here, the materiality of migration and the ordinary adventures of a young Lampedusan citizen converge (Fig. 9). In this suspenseful and more intimate moment, viewers are drawn to Samuele's singular

---

<sup>26</sup>"10 things you need to know about the Mediterranean crisis," *Médicins Sans Frontières*, last modified December 2, 2016. <http://www.msf.org/en/article/10-things-you-need-know-about-mediterranean-crisis>

<sup>27</sup>"10 things you need to know about the Mediterranean crisis," *Médicins Sans Frontières*.

figure as he hangs on to stay afloat in a manner that starkly differs from Piscitelli's cursory approach and collective recording of migrants trying to do just the same. Indeed, the body of a young boy like Samuele, and his apparent defenselessness amidst the vastness of the sea and the towering rescue ships, provides a scene that emulates the affective and thus effective power of humanitarian photographs of children. As exemplified by the arresting and widely circulated images of Aylan Kurdi, the drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee who washed up on the Mediterranean shores of Turkey in 2015, Rosi demonstrates an understanding of the powerful nature of this kind of subject matter which, in turn, asks for a special attention on behalf of the viewer.<sup>28</sup> Through the diametrical structure of Rosi's film, viewers are asked to settle what elicits more empathy: the image of a singular, white, and young boy caught in the mishaps of his curiosity and voluntary mobility at sea, or the sight of amassed and static dark-skinned African migrants desperately seeking to reach land? As Samuele paddles back to shore with his friend in the privacy of their own boats, and against a picturesque background composed by the blue water and colorful Lampedusan architecture, conventional associations with a romantic Mediterranean imaginary return and are confirmed by his friend who then says, "In Lampedusa, we're all sailors." Through this generalizing statement, Samuele's friend further demonstrates an omission regarding the more disturbing yet equally ubiquitous reality of Lampedusa's centrality to the condition of contemporary Mediterranean migration.

Although both Piscitelli's and Rosi's works distinctly create a visual opposition between a romanticized and passive narrative about a maritime culture embodied by Italian citizens versus the urgent sight of African migrants and refugees, unlike the more direct photographic

---

<sup>28</sup>For more on the affective and effective potential of humanitarian photography, including Nilufer Demir's photographs of Aylan Kurdi, see Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, "A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective" in *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97 (2015).



approach by Piscitelli, Rosi's film provides a more reflective attempt that allows us to consider an alternative to modern/colonial aesthetics: *decolonial aesthetics*. How can a film like Rosi's, whose structure creates a poignant dichotomy between subject/o(a)bject, humanitas/anthropos, or Italian citizen/non-Italian bare life, hint at this alternative? If we, for a moment, look past such formal opposition and return to the scene of Nigerian migrant men confined to a holding center's darkened room after surviving their journey across the Mediterranean Sea, an indication of decolonial aesthetics arises. The scene centers on an English-speaking Nigerian man, who, with his eyes closed, and through gesticulations that reaffirm his passionate tone, exclaims about the arduous experiences of first traversing the Sahara Desert, then escaping Libyan prisons, and finally crossing the Mediterranean Sea, which by the end, left only thirty people alive. Unlike Rosi's—or Piscitelli's—reliance on the camera for the sake of representing their respective narrative, the migrant's closed eyes poetically downplay vision's sensorial centrality in modern/colonial aesthetic discourse and subtly subvert its leading role (Fig. 10). Instead, the tone of the migrant's voice and the accompanying gestures by the rest of the migrants who join him with harmonizing non-English chants, become leading sensorial agents that align with decolonial aesthetics' aim "to recognize and open options for liberating the senses" beyond vision.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the migrant's sonorous story-telling deviates from the tacit narrative of Rosi and Piscitelli, and offers a kind of auditory protest from the film's sound-track, also titled "Fuocoammare." While these migrants denounce the horrific conditions and human rights violations in Libya in their chants, ultimately, they are also celebrating and politicizing life itself at the borderland. Relieved about surviving their long journey to the European Union via Italy,

---

<sup>29</sup>On May 22, 2011, scholars, artists, and activists signed the Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto. "Decolonial Aesthetics (I)," *TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute* (blog), published July 17, 2017, accessed January 2, 2018. <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>

but also “of being together in” and hopefully “beyond the border.”<sup>30</sup> As the Nigerian man recalls, “We said if we cannot die in Libyan prison, we cannot die in the sea. And we went to sea and did not die.” This sense of joy however, is one that is engendered out of trauma and loss and performed under the gazes of both the Italian state’s institution for monitoring and screening migrants and refugees, as well as under Rosi’s camera. Although migrants providing their own testimonies offer an example that disrupts or moves towards decolonizing Italy’s Mediterranean imaginary in making a space for migrants to share their stories and testimonies, certainly, such visibility does not compare to the subjectivity and “state of normalcy” assigned to the citizens of Lampedusa and the memories that they carry throughout Rosi’s film.<sup>31</sup>

A more promising example of decolonial aesthetics can be found through a reading of Ethiopian filmmaker and director Dagmawi Yimer’s multimedia short-film, *Asmat*, which seeks to give subjectivity to migrants who did not survive crossing the Mediterranean Sea—even if such representation means meditating solely on their names. A migrant himself, Yimer has been living in Verona since arriving through Lampedusa in 2006 and making films that address the contemporary condition of African migrants and refugees entering Italy, either as an intermediary place or as one to settle, and the discrimination that they face in the country. *Asmat* however, primarily ponders on questions of memory and memory-making as it concerns those lives unable of being found and recorded by the camera, particularly those that sank at sea during the October 2013 shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa. The film begins with a humming voice by the film’s narrator, Eden Getachew Zerihun of Ethiopia, and watercolors by Luca Serasini of Italy, showing a calm and blue sea and sky and a stretch of land in the distant background reminiscent of the picturesque narrative painted by Vernet (Fig. 11). Without any transition

---

<sup>30</sup>“Decolonial Aesthetics (I),” *TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute*.

<sup>31</sup>In *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman reminds us that while the idea of a crisis or multiple crises today operates as politicized rhetoric and epistemological discourse, its inverse—normalcy—is capable of achieving similar goals.

however, both the scene and medium abruptly change to a digital camera being submerged underwater in a frenzied manner that evokes the unpredictable condition of crossing through and possibly drowning in tempestuous Mediterranean waters. Delicate hums are soon replaced by the sharp sound of gushing water and the agitated movement of the camera then suddenly comes to a still; as if a drowning body has lost its battle to the sea. By acknowledging the life-threatening experience of crossing the Mediterranean as a migrant/refugee, the sea as well as the passive and romanticizing tropes of its larger imaginary, are given new and nuanced meaning in *Asmat*. Unlike Piscitelli's or Rosi's use of the camera as an instrument that documents both photographically and cinematically, in this opening scene, Yimer's use of the camera takes on a more corporeal quality; becoming an extension of the subjective experience of migrating and even dying in the Mediterranean. In an attempt to give materiality and subjectivity to lives deemed unworthy of protection, the camera comes to personify, even embody Agamben's concept of bare life. Spoken in Amharic with captions in Italian and English provided, the narrator's reciting of the poem immediately communicates an explicit political stance: "You who are alive...are condemned to listen to these screams...you will not cover your ears." This line not only demonstrates a rethinking of necropolitics and a politicization of memory and who has access to preserving it, but it counters the supposed disinterest and detachment that lies at the core of modern/colonial aesthetics by demanding an engagement between future audiences and the video itself. Yimer's "disrupt[ion] of stability" goes beyond a "restless camera that consciously interferes with our desire to find equilibrium, stillness, and respite," as Simona Wright has reflected, but I would add, an attempt to decenter universalist and pleasure-ridden connotations of the Mediterranean alongside politicized imagery of African death at sea.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup>Simona Wright, "A Politics of the Body as Body Politics: Rethinking Europe's Worksites of Democracy" in *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, ed., Gabriele Proglia and Laura

Through intermediality and interculturality, *Asmat* further complicates the condition of migration across the Mediterranean by following decolonial aesthetics' proposal for pluriversality as a substitute for modern/colonial aesthetics' universalist assumptions. Continuing with Serasini's watercolors and Zerihun's poetic narration accompanied by a soft stringing sound of a guitar, watercolors of dark-skinned bodies underwater provide alternative and perhaps more haunting representations of migrants and refugees than in Rosi's film or Piscitelli's photographs taken above the surface of the water. Illustrations of legs and feet walking on sand and covered with a white cloth over their upper-half bodies are replicated in a recorded performance of people's lower-half bodies submerged underwater with similar cloths over their heads and torsos while the narrator denounces African politicians for "mak[ing] people flee," convey the unfortunately elusive nature of representing lives no longer tangible; no longer visible to their loved ones or the camera (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13). Zerihun goes on to say, "With each dying victim in the sea, you are more naked and exposed," providing a play on words to Agamben's biopolitical idea of bare life in that, it is no longer the dead migrants who exemplified this concept, but rather the living African political elites whose corrupt governance has led to great numbers of Africans migrating and dying at sea, is now being brought to light and exposed for the world to judge. European politicians, too, are included as culprits by the narrator who says that as refugees and migrants, they are "observ[ing] [their] actions and the civilization that [European politicians] boast of." While Yimer's denunciation of both African and European politicians demonstrates that migration across the Mediterranean is not merely a condition of binaries that is to be superficially understood between Europe versus Africa, nevertheless, his broader goal is not about placing blame, but to memorialize. Indeed, more than half of the short-film is dedicated to the utterance of the names of victims from the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck;

first in Amharic and then in Italian or English to explain their meaning. Composed of watercolors, a performance, and a narrating voice accompanied by interludes of hymns and instruments throughout film, Yimer's amalgamation of media created by various actors from both Italy and Ethiopia, not only align with decolonial aesthesis' call for interculturality instead of multiculturalism (following decolonial thought, the latter is controlled and promoted by the State), but by giving auditory primacy to the Amharic language—with Italian and English operating as subtitles or as secondary—Yimer confronts a linguistic hierarchy imposed alongside modern/colonial aesthetics by suggesting a perspective that comes from the colonized world; the Global South.<sup>33</sup> In changing the setting of Mediterranean migration from rescue ships hovering above water or migrant screenings in centers to the naturally uneasy and unsustainable state of being underwater, Yimer's composition and direction immediately asks of viewers to reconsider and expand their sensorial relationship to the Mediterranean beyond the vision-centric imaginary created at the surface of its waters. *Asmat* also demonstrates a sophisticated critique of the implications behind the spectacle of a "migration crisis," in saying that as Africans, they "have been sailing for years ... [they've] been traveling for years ... [they've] been drowning for years." For Yimer, both the common occurrence and disturbing ratio of Africans emigrating to Africans dying in the Mediterranean further proves the need to interpret migration across this sea not as a crisis, but as an unfortunate condition.

Conscious about the importance of setting and the materiality of his own body, Afro-Cuban artist Carlos Martiel's site-specific and real-time performances, *Punto di Fuga*, performed at the Nitsch Museum in Naples in 2013 and *Mediterráneo*, which took place at the 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2017, seek to broaden the condition of migration in and beyond Italy's Mediterranean imaginary through contemporary art practices that uphold and affirm

---

<sup>33</sup>"Decolonial Aesthetics (I)"

transnational identities. Commissioned by the Fondazione Morra and curated by Eugenio Viola, *Punto di Fuga* (Vanishing Point) was a performance whose title makes reference to the influential optical, spatial, and perspectival theorizations that came out of the Italian Renaissance and laid the groundwork for modern/colonial aesthetics, as well as equally influential treatises of drawing and architecture. The recorded performance began with Italian doctor, Alberto del Genio piercing Martiel's skin by sewing black wool yarn into his body (Fig. 14). While the graphic sight of a glove-covered hand pinching and then puncturing Martiel skin is reminiscent of the medical screening and other objectifying practices that migrants and refugees have to endure upon being rescued at sea, Martiel's voluntary subjection to this kind of painful process reclaims and complicates this perspective by using his own body as medium, and thus challenging the supposed necessity of bodily inspection as established by the Italian government. After five hours of having pierced both the front and back sides of his body, Martiel stood nude for two hours with his arms on his sides and his hands opened while the dozens of black threads were attached to a single point on two opposite walls, creating the illusion of a single point perspective converging *through* and *in* him (Fig. 15). In subjecting himself to these monitored levels of stress and pain through tempered threads that pulled on his skin, Martiel created a visceral tension via the intrinsic physicality of his own body that could not be ignored by the audience, asking them to confront conflicting feelings of anxiety and desire about the human body; particularly the black and nude male body.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, in making an explicit reference to Leonardo da Vinci's renowned Renaissance drawing of *L'Uomo Vitruviano* (the Vitruvian Man), Martiel's appropriation of this early modern model into real time and space also demystified the idealization of the human male body, conceived at the same time of the New

---

<sup>34</sup>As Martiel said, "human anxiety [about the body] is as perpetual as desire." See, Rafael DiazCasas, "The Performance Art of Carlos Martiel: Blood, Epiphany, Revelation," *Cuban Art News*, last modified April 18, 2013, <http://www.cubanartnews.org/news/105-the-performance-art-of-carlos-martiel-blood-epiphany-revelation-105>.

World's so-called discovery by Europeans. A migrant currently based in New York City, Martiel's gestures adhere to the "reversal rhetoric of modernity" as posited by decolonial aesthetics: "We are here because you were there," and thus, empowering the transnational identities of migrants and refugees like Yimer and himself.<sup>35</sup>

In his 2017 performance, *Mediterráneo* (Mediterranean) at the Venice Biennale's Cuban Pavilion at the Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti, Martiel literally brought a piece of the Mediterranean Sea by encasing its water and then slowly pouring it onto his nude body until fully submerged. Curated by José Manuel Noceda, the performance consisted of a glass structure "inspired by the design of the ancient hourglass" and filled with brackish water at the top that then slowly trickled down to the bottom, where Martiel, with his kneeling body, awaited with his eyes closed (Fig. 16).<sup>36</sup> In containing water from the Mediterranean, Martiel's performance expands on the affective yet paradoxical encounter between himself and the audience. On one hand, the sight of his singular body, centrally positioned and encaged by a metal frame and glass screens, ask for a special kind of attention on behalf of the audience that counters the homogenizing discourse about migrants and refugees and the collective actions taken by the Italian government that in turn, compromise individuals' subjectivity and access to representation. As Martiel himself commented after overhearing xenophobic remarks at an Italian airport, "*Mediterráneo* is a work that perfectly illustrates the current situation of African immigration to Europe, so many deaths, so much indifference..."<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the encasement of his body and the rising Mediterranean water, downplays not only the vastness and overwhelming connotations of a large Sea—which have been used as justifications by Europe for its inability to rescue and save lives

---

<sup>35</sup>"Decolonial Aesthetics (I)"

<sup>36</sup>Carlos Martiel, "Mediterráneo" <http://carlosmartiel.net>.

<sup>37</sup>My translation. Fernando Pichardo, "Carlos Martiel hacesacrificios con su cuerpo para criticar el mundo," *Creators*, last modified May 29, 2017, [https://creators.vice.com/es\\_mx/article/paejwy/carlos-martiel-hace-sacrificios-con-su-cuerpo-para-criticar-el-mundo](https://creators.vice.com/es_mx/article/paejwy/carlos-martiel-hace-sacrificios-con-su-cuerpo-para-criticar-el-mundo).

in a timely and adequate manner—but the greenish and opaque color of the water provides a different image to the hues of blue that form part of the Mediterranean’s romanticized imagery.

Italy’s maritime borders on the Mediterranean Sea have functioned beyond a theatre for cross-cultural encounters and colonization, but as an exclusivist frontier or “a gate” that is not only politicized and militarized, but aestheticized as well.<sup>38</sup> Images of Africans migrating across the Mediterranean Sea to reach the European Union through Italy, form part of larger historical and cultural tension between Italian nationalism and a racialized discourse about blackness that persists through an analysis of contemporary visual culture. Thus, to speak about Italy and a particular Italian Mediterranean aesthetic, requires an engagement with Enlightenment rhetoric about the discernibility of beauty and pleasure, alongside the making of a hierarchized racial system, which partly came to justify the exclusion and colonization of the African continent by European powers such as Italy. If an object’s beauty, as understood by modern/colonial aesthetics, requires a certain sense of detachment from the social and political realms, then the immediate and urgent action and engagement that migration at sea requires does not support this perspective. In other words, for the Mediterranean imaginary to retain its visual sensibilities as an idyllic maritime region, then it must enact and enforce actions that will allow sovereign nations like Italy find a “moral alibi” for *not* engaging through proactive care and measures, but rather rejecting through reactive refolement, at the expense of ignoring.<sup>39</sup> Gianfranco Rosi’s film, *Fuocoammare* and Giulio Piscitelli’s series of photographs, *MOAS Operation in the Mediterranean*, provide examples of modern/colonial aesthetics through their positionality as well-intentioned Italian citizens with the power of representation, and their choice of subject matter and medium. Both works are premised on the “objective” visual documentation of

---

<sup>38</sup>Giuliani, “The Mediterranean as a Stage: Borders, Memories, Bodies,” 92.

<sup>39</sup>Roxanne Lynn Doty, “Bare Life: Border-crossing Deaths and Spaces of Moral Alibi,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 4 (2011): 606.



migration and appear more concerned with giving visibility rather than subjectivity to the plight of migrants; a subtle yet critical difference. Thus, formal analysis of both works demonstrates an attempt to communicate various oppositions between blue romanticized images of the Mediterranean and the sight of dark-skinned Africans entering and possibly settling in Italy. Dagmawi Yimer's *Asmat* and Carlos Martiel's *Punto di Fuga* and *Mediterráneo* however, provide an alternative to modern/colonial aesthetics through works that align with decolonial aesthesis. In seeking to materialize and memorialize migration, and thus give subjectivity to its victims through intercultural artistic practices, Yimer and Martiel push Italians and other audiences to broaden their sensorial and symbolic relationship to the Mediterranean and the sight of black bodies in Italy today. Sensitive to the contemporary implications of these historical and cultural tensions, all three works reaffirm the framework of a Black Mediterranean, and arouse an expansion to Mediterranean poetics that is cognizant of the discourse of blackness by incorporating the condition of African migration as not merely additive or recent, but as intrinsic. Given the growing anti-black and anti-immigration rhetoric, as well as the recent June 1, 2018 election of Italy's populist far-right Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, who promises to increase the regulation and management of migration to/in Italy, the perceptions and livelihoods of these African subjects, as represented in contemporary visual culture, becomes all the more vital. Decolonial aesthesis provides an empowering theoretical framework for reflecting on the ethics of visual representation, for critiquing the dogma of modern/colonial aesthetics, and for expanding Italy's connections and connotations to both blackness and the Mediterranean Sea.

## Figures

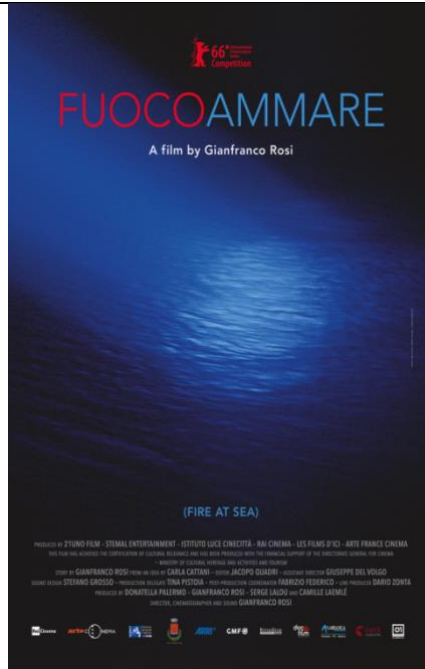


Figure 1.  
Italian Film Poster for  
Gianfranco Rosi's  
*Fuocoammare*, 2016.



Figure 2.  
Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Storm  
on a Mediterranean Coast*, 1767,  
oil on canvas. Accessed through  
The Getty's Open Content Image  
Database.



Figure 3.  
Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Calm at a Mediterranean Port*, 1770, oil on canvas. Accessed through The Getty's Open Content Image Database.



Figure 4.  
Giulio Piscitelli, *MOAS Operation in the Mediterranean*, 2011-2016.  
<https://giulio Piscitelli.viewbook.com/album/moas-operations-in-the-mediterranean.html?p=1>



Figure 5.  
Gianfranco Rosi, Still from  
*Fuocoammare*, 2016.



Figure 6.  
Gianfranco Rosi, Still from  
*Fuocoammare*, 2016.



Figure 7.  
Giulio Piscitelli, *MOAS  
Operations in the  
Mediterranean*, 2011-2016.  
<https://giulio Piscitelli.viewbook.com/album/moas-operations-in-the-mediterranean.html?p=1>





Figure 8.  
Giulio Piscitelli, *MOAS Operations in the Mediterranean*, 2011-2016.  
<https://giuliopiscitelli.viewbook.com/album/moas-operations-in-the-mediterranean.html?p=1>



Figure 9.  
Gianfranco Rosi, Still from *Fuocoammare*, 2016.



Figure 10.  
Gianfranco Rosi, Still from *Fuocoammare*, 2016.



Figure 11.  
Dagmawi Yimer, Still from  
*Asmat-Names in memory of all  
victims of the sea*, 2015.  
<https://vimeo.com/114343040>



Figure 12.  
Dagmawi Yimer. Still from  
*Asmat-Names in memory of all  
victims of the sea*, 2015.  
<https://vimeo.com/114343040>



Figure 13.  
Dagmawi Yimer. Still from  
*Asmat-Names in memory of all  
victims of sea*, 2015.  
<https://vimeo.com/114343040>

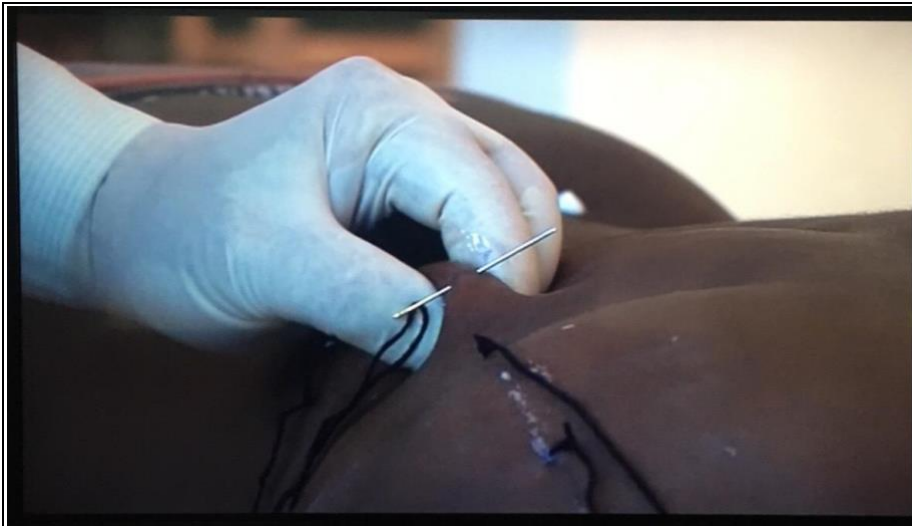


Figure 14.  
Carlos Martiel, *Punto di Fuga*, 2013. My photo taken on June 1, 2018 from Carlos Martiel's group exhibition, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery in New York City, NY.



Figure 15.  
Carlos Martiel, *Punto di Fuga*, 2013. Photograph taken from Amedeo Benestante.  
<http://www.carlosmartiel.net/232-2/>



Figure 16.  
Carlos Martiel, *Mediterráneo*, 2017. Photograph taken by Annamaria La Mastra.  
<http://www.carlosmartiel.net/mediterraneo/>



## Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York City: Verso Books, 1983.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bazin, Andre. *What Is Cinema? Volume II / Edition 1*. Translated by Hugh Grant. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Bindman, David. *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and The Idea of Race in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
- Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987.
- Bullough, Edward. "Physical Distance." *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics from Plato to Wittgenstein*, Frank A. Tillman and Steven M. Cahn, Editors. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Chambers, Iain. *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Davies, T., Isakjee, A., Dhesi, S. "Violent Inaction: The Necropolitical Experience of Refugees in Europe." *Antipode* 49 no. 5 (November 2017): 1263-1284.
- DiazCasas, Rafael. "The Performance Art of Carlos Martiel: Blood, Epiphany, Revelation." *Cuban Art News*, last modified April 18, 2013, <http://www.cubanartnews.org/news/105-the-performance-art-of-carlos-martiel-blood-epiphany-revelation-105>.
- Dines N., Montagna N., Ruggiero V. "Thinking Lampedusa: Border Construction, The Spectacle of Bare Life, and the Productivity of Migrants." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 no. 3 (2014).
- Doty, Roxanne Lynn. "Bare Life: Border-crossing Deaths and Spaces of Moral Alibi," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 4 (2011): 599-612.
- Duncan, Derek, "Italy's Postcolonial Cinema and Its Histories of Representation." *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2008): 195-211.



- Fehrenbach, Heidi and Rodogno, Davide. "A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child": Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective" in *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97 (2015).
- Freeland, Cynthia A. *Art Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Fromont, Cécile. *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Giordano, Cristiana. "Catastrophes." Hot Spots, *Cultural Anthropology* website, June 28, 2016. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/906-catastrophes>.
- Giuliani, Gaia. "The Mediterranean as a Stage: Borders, Memories, Bodies." Afterword in *Decolonising the Mediterranean: European Colonial Heritages in North Africa and the Middle East*, Edited by Gabriele Proglia. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.
- Human Rights Watch. "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis: Why People Flee, What the EU Should do" June 19, 2015.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. Translated by John T. Goldthwaite. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- Lafont, Anne. "How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 89-113.
- Lowe, C.J., and Marzari F. *Italian Foreign Policy*. London and New York: Routledge: 1975.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture* 15 no. 1 (2003): 11-40.
- Médecins Sans Frontières. "10 Things You Need to Know about the Mediterranean Migration Crisis." 2016.
- Meza, Ed. "Gianfranco Rosi's 'Fire at Sea' Doc Chronicles Refugee Crisis," *Variety*, last modified February 13, 2016. <http://variety.com/2016/film/news/gianfranco-rosi-fuocoammare-fire-at-sea-immigrant-documentary-1201705540/>.

- Mignolo, Walter. "Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (de)coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience." *Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics* 1.1 (2013): 129-150.
- Osamu, Nashitani. "Anthropos and Humanitas: Two Western Concepts of Human Being." *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference*. Eds. Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon. Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Traces: A Multicultural Series of Cultural Theory and Translation, 2006.
- Roitman, Janet. *Anti-Crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Vazquez, Rolando and Mignolo, Walter. "DecolonialAestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text*, last modified July 15, 2013. [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/).
- Welch, Rhiannon. "Contact, contagion, immunization: Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994)." *Italian Mobilities*, Edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Welch, Rhiannon. *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.
- Winckelmann, Johann Joachim. *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks: with Instructions for the Connoisseur and an Essay on Grace in Works of Art*. Translated by Henry Fuseli. London: Andrew Millar, 1765.
- Wright, Simona. "A Politics of the Body as Body Politics: Rethinking Europe's Worksites of Democracy. *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, Edited by Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2018, 87-101.