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Experiencing the Presence: Degrees of Closeness in the Digital Biographies of Migration*

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Abstract

Among the many representations of migration, relevant prominence has been acquired by multimedia biographic discourses and digital enriched documentaries that reproduce the direct experience of migrants and their relationship with hosting societies. This paper aims at proposing a scale of the possible degrees of proximity or closeness in the contemporary media discourses about migration. Drawing on the semiotics of media experience, we focus on how biographic theatrical video, digital artistic based VR installation, data visualization platforms and web documentaries contribute to shape the figure of the migrant and of the border, and how they challenge the dialectic opposition between presence and distance in regard of the migration experience. In this direction, contemporary discourses on migration and migrants' digital biographies are not only characterized by recovering the so called "capture of speech" of migrants or what idea of border and Self has been produced. Indeed, they are marked by their capacity to generate effects of presence of and to the direct experience of the migrants' lives.

Keywords: migrants; borders; digital interfaces; storytelling.

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1 Introduction

Among the many representations of migration, relevant prominence has been acquired by multimedia biographic discourses and digital enriched documentaries aiming at reproducing the direct experience of migrants and sharing their relationship with hosting societies. The impact of this emerging media production, composed by multiple modes of communication, such as textual, visual, and spatial, that confirms the link between migration and media (Diminescu 2008), has been highlighted in the special issue of *Television & New Media* on migration and mobility in the digital age, with the aim of “(re)mapping connectivity and belonging” (Ponzanesi 2019: 1).

In this direction, technological developments have significantly contributed to the constitution of new forms of mediation of migration in a changing global mediascape, for example in the field of digital visualization, in the use of datafication, biometric technologies and mapping platforms to combine different sources and media (Madianou 2019; Ponzanesi 2019; Risam 2019). These developments pinpoint one important signpost of the articulation of the relation between migration and media: the role played by semiotic instructions (such as digital affordances) to the “othering” of the migrant and to resignify her experience of displacement. Furthermore, researches have put attention on different types of practices and discourses of media and mobile technologies involving migrants, analyzing their influence on identity and borders. Forms of appropriation and representation of the experience of migration — such as news media coverages, geospatial data visualizations, self-representations on social media, and all the multiple traces that migrants leave online through their activities — have been scrutinized in relation to their capacity of adding a new dimension to the phenomenon of migration (*mediatization*) and of transforming it altogether (Madianou 2014). Since the mediatization of migration affects how people are migrating, how they use media in the migration process and how their experience is represented and socialized online, scholars have started to take into account the process of entanglement of technological devices within the experience of migration. Indeed, these technological devices do not only allow and restrict certain actions with their interface, but also define a new way of negotiating and crossing borders (Ponzanesi and Leurs 2014; Zijlstra and Liempt 2017). Moreover, they contribute to the process of identity construction and to the global representations of migration (Risam 2018, 2019). Therefore, studies on mediatized migration have focused on how technology enables the shaping of different forms of boundaries online, such as social categorized representations, discourses, and practices — based for instance on gender, religion, ethnicity, class — in relation to the experience of migration (Witteborn 2018).

In addition to this perspective, we would like to raise attention on the work of cinema scholars that have analyzed how media discourses engage with affectivity by “screening unlivable lives” (Bennet and Tyler 2007) and how they are concerned with “uninhabitable zones of social life [...] densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (Butler 1993: 3 in Bennet and Tyler 2007: 21). Thus, both the physical space crossed and lived by migrants (for example trails, the Mediterranean sea, urban environments) and the relational space performed and build in the encounter with “diverse” people constitute not only a space of exchange. As the matter of fact, these spaces can be conceived as a sort of liquid and mutable border, with all the implications of meaning and affectivity that are emerging in their dynamics and transformations. In line with these considerations, it is possible to refer to the concept of “cinema of borders,” due to its central preoccupation with border crossing and the mediating role of the border (Bennet and Tyler 2007), as the area where negotiation, connectivity and mobility are enabled. At this regard, it is interesting to mention that the main narratives, scenes, figures, and visual features that characterize a “cinema of borders” — such as fragmentation, multilingualism, and liminal characters — “involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement” (Nacify 2001: 4). Moreover, the “cinema of borders” reflects the main features of the contemporary mediascape of the mediatized migration, where they are mixed in multiple intertwined media resources, diverse and increasing complex technological interfaces (Ponzanesi 2019).

Accordingly, these emerging relevant media configurations define a new way of engaging the spectator beyond “cinema of borders” — in terms of interactivity, *emotional contagion* caused by visual materials, and its propagation on the web (Colombo 2018; Vis and Goriunova 2015).

Beside the experience of displacement and border crossing lived by migrants, the “cinema of borders” and the digital media (with new semiotic instructions such as technological affordances) show us that there is another

experience involved when dealing with the link between media and migration: the media experience of migration as lived by the spectator. This experience can be conceived as a sort of mediated and displaced (both in space and time) “copresence” (Goffman 1963). In this vein, such copresence is distinctive as the spectator’s experience of migration is not implying an instant physical proximity (or “colocation”) in which individuals become “accessible, available, and subject to one another” (Goffman 1963: 22). Indeed, it recalls another form of copresence based on electronic proximity, virtual and digital simulated by instrumental agents that generate a sense of copresence directly influenced by the interface characteristics in order to provide for the spectator the subjective experience of being together with other people (Zhao 2003).

In the case of digital biographies of migration, the spectator or user watches videos or navigates map with multimedia contents (i.e., “cinema of borders” and forms of digital narratives); the media experience of migration enables the spectator to feel closer to the migrant through narratives on digital media without any physical proximity. Thus, the potential disorienting encounter with the unfamiliar (Marciniak and Bennett 2018), where the migrant lives become accessible on a screen as a story, can be conceived in two different and complementary ways: 1) as a diegetic part related to the plot of the story itself, involving different characters; 2) as an implicit component of its discursive structure that enables the story to move on, such as the material and sensorial encounter and mediation of the spectator with what has been screening. In other terms, the intersubjective relation between the spectator and the migrant in the media experience of migration becomes the focus of the representation; such relation is even more relevant in the case of the use of grassroots materials created by the migrants themselves as active prosumers of the web.

In this direction, we can affirm that there are three levels of the interaction with the “other” in the *media experience* (Eugeni 2010: 1) the object of mediation (the interface) with its semiotic instruction (affordances), 2) the subjective presence of the spectator or user that watches contents and interacts with them, 3) the migrant subjects who are visualized (with details related to their stories, such as contextual information, places and environments, interaction with other subjects, and so on).

Thus, our paper is interested in investigating how digital media contribute to shape the figure of the migrant and of the border, and how they challenge the dialectic opposition between presence and distance in regard of the media experience of migration. More in detail, our interest relies on the *effect of closeness* produced by digital media when screening unlivable lives. In relation to their capacity of representing and challenging the direct experience of migrations in many ways, we take into account different digital media products (such as biographic theatrical video, digital artistic based VR installation, mapped social media tracks and web documentaries) in order to identify how their discourse and semiotic instructions propose different *degrees of closeness*. These objects will be analyzed mixing the textual socio-semiotic perspective (Landovski 1989) with the semiotic perspective of technological media experience (Eugeni 2010; Manovich 2001, 2013), that is referred to the interrelation between direct experiences and mediated ones. According to this approach, a media product can be conceived as a narrative text, structured with an expression plane (*signifier*) and a related content plane (*signified*). In this perspective, a media product is a layered object, with different levels that can be analyzed and connected to each other. The expression plane, with its semiotic instructions, organizes the sensory perception and the apprehension of a media product, while the content plane produces poetic and stylistic meanings: the relation between the two planes is processed as a narrative and complex discursive construction in the act of interpretation by a model spectator or an “implicit model reader” (Eco 1981). In our analyses, therefore, we will pay attention both to the “plastic” configuration and to the “discursive” and “enunciative” configuration of media products. The first one refers to their expressive, perceptual and sensory level. The second one refers to their poetic and narrative forms, the points of view from where the discourse is deployed, the themes and the values proposed, the textual position from where the message is perceived and understood by a model spectator.

Actually, we rely on complex visual resources and their capacity to recall other meanings mixing a semiotics and visual study methodology (Lister and Wells 2000; Pink 2008), such as biographic audiovisuals, virtual reality contents, data visualization platforms and web documentaries. In relation to their capacity to establish, process and challenge real and mediated borders, these objects will be analyzed in the view of the concept of *semiosphere*. Lotman and his school emphasize the importance of space, interconnectivity and the multidimensionality of sign systems, as well as foregrounding the relational and interactional elements of culture

(Lotman 1990, 2005 [1984]). A semiosphere can be conceived as a concrete space with a real geographical topology, such as the uninhabitable zones of social life experienced by migrants or a digitalized material space organized by a software (Manovich 2013), but it can also be an immaterial space, such as a narrative *plot space* related, for example, to the subjective perception of one's migration experience, that consists of different characters, figures, emotions, and so on (Appadurai 2019). In this direction, the media experience textualizes and intertwines the life of migrants and the life of the spectator within a mediated space (Saldre and Torop 2012) composed by different sign systems (intersemiotic), discursive practices (interdiscursive) and media resources (intermedial). In this direction, we are not only dealing with material borders as visualized and narrated on the digital media analyzed, but also semiotic ones, i.e. borders between media, borders of different sign systems, and borders of the communicative relation between spectators and migrant people mediated by the media discourse.

The paper is organized in the following structure: in the next paragraph we analyze the archive of biographic audiovisuals produced by the Italian organization *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring* (Teatro Stabile, Turin); in the third paragraph we delve into the experimental artistic VR installation, *Carne y Arena*, created by director Alejandro G. Iñárritu; then we focus on data visualization platforms and web documentaries representing the lives of people during their migration journeys and their encounters with other people, such as *Migrants: Stories of solidarity and welcoming*, *Stories Behind a Line*, *Migration Trail*, *Refugee Republic*. Lastly, we elaborate on how different degrees of closeness in the media discourses analyzed generate different effects of *presence experience*.

2 Between Theatre and Video: Personal Stories and Narrative Identity

The website of the *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring* (Teatro Stabile, Turin) presents different types of video narrations. According to the playwright Gabriele Vacis,¹ these videos are not simple interviews of migrant people, but “video conversations” among individuals. Vacis insists on the relational aspects of this investigation, where every single migrant is first of all a person who tells a story to somebody else who listens, using all the needed time and the serenity of an encounter. Indeed, in the trailer² which explains this research, we find a voice over defining these videos “conversations in which you give yourself plenty of time to bring out words to answer questions that do require stories to be told rather than opinions.” However, videos are structured – thanks to a strict audio-visual editing – as monologues where the interviewer's voice mostly disappears. As opposed to what the spectator might expect from the trailer, in the Institute's online archive consulted for this research there are only short videos and not many long documentary videos that entirely record every single interview. Actually, the editing reduces the “video conversations” to media products of few minutes, in which migrant's life story is condensed in its most salient passages. Every short video is introduced and closed by the credits of the Institute. Each story is marked by the proper name of the subject interviewed and by a consistent title condensing in some words the most effective sentence told by the migrant. Moreover, each video is summarized in a written form by a long caption (about twenty lines long) in which the key phases of the story are reported. It seems evident in our description – using adjectives such as “salient” and “effective” – that the short videos appear as semiotically manipulated objects. In this direction, they are reworked and reduced to be transformed into a touching and communicative storytelling product. Hence, the discourse strategy of this re-assemblage (semiotically a strategy of enunciation) selects only some passages of the conversation. Thus, it inevitably cuts expansions or other information provided by the migrant while telling details about her life. The discourse strategy eliminates every scenes in which the dialogue is activated by interviewer's questions; finally, this becomes explicit as a stylistic and discursive choice when setting up the online publication of the video which is framed by a title that associates the migrant's name with the main theme of the story, while the written summary emphasizes the narrative turns.

These formal operations are directed to transform the video in a media product – using the short format of web videos – that engages the spectator through the rhythm based on the editing choices, the narrative coherence,

1. We mention Gabriele Vacis just as a known Italian intellectual around whom many authors of the Migrants Project of the Teatro Stabile of Turin are grouped.
2. It is possible to watch the video trailer at <https://www.listituto.it/progetti/pensieri-migranti> (Last accessed 03/09/2019).

and the “enunciative” construction such as the point of view of the subject, based on her way of speaking, her glances and what she says. Also, they become a way to add an ideological perspective to the migrant’s stories. As a matter of fact, only the points considered important by the editor stand out; also, an implicit judgment on the migrant’s story emerges through these operations of “enunciative manipulation” (Greimas and Courtés 1979). It would be different, for example, if the interviewer’s and the bystanders’ questions and gestures were presented during the interviews, in order to make visible the communicative situation in the video conversations.

Beside this critical premise, we should add that the cut of the interviewer’s voice is not radical and sometime is maintained, for example when the voice is that of the playwright Gabriele Vacis. Thus, the communicative pact with the spectator is not totally “objectifying” the discourse (“*mode objectivante*” in French socio-semiotic terms, Landowski 1989), as to say linked to a story told as a matter of fact in which the spectator faces events and biographical information that can be judged independently from the mediations of the interviewer’s point of view. When Vacis talks to a migrant person and listen to her answers, the communicative pact enters in a “subjectivating” mode (“*mode subjectivante*” in French socio-semiotic terms). This means that the relationships between the subject on the stage and the people offstage lead to a presence and a real dialogue that encourage the spectator to a more “empathic” apprehension (Eugeni 2010), as to say to a more emotional and affective way to watch and listen the biographic story.

The subjective and emotional mode is used in the trailer of the “Migrant Project” of the *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring*. The video trailer is introduced by a voice over explaining the reasons of the choice to work both inside and outside the theatre, as to say in the social context of Turin, collecting stories but also organizing workshops with high school students or with citizens. As an open and free way to create shared participatory experiences within a community of people. The trailer shows some theatrical performances and some public meeting set to promote the project of the Institution and share its outcomes; it also presents some short scenes of “conversations” from each interviews, highlighting the moments that identify each single migrant as a meaningful bearer of a particular story. According to Vacis, the choice of archiving online the video conversations responds to the need of creating “a place online with an archive of witnesses where those who want to listen to migrants speaking about their lives can hear them directly, without other people talking beside themselves.”³ Although this “direct take” on the migrant biographic stories is mediated by a screen and by discursive and enunciative choices that can be more “objective” or more “subjective,” we have to admit that the videos collected in the website of the Institute contribute to activate empathy in the spectator (Eugeni 2010). In this direction, videos touch the spectator in a way that is quite different from a simple “secondary identification” with the main character of the story as discussed by Metz (1977). The choice of using only the proper name to identify the person who tells her life is certainly a simplification but it obtains the semiotic effect of a confidential and friendly personalization, framing a conversation oriented by the direct relationship between “me” and “you.”

The biographic stories of some migrants who now live in Italy, where they have become educators in centres for migrants or of social solidarity, are first of all appreciable for the intelligence and the courage that the speakers demonstrate in their stories; secondly they are oriented to provide the spectator for some “key words” in order to shape the transformation of her point of view. Considering the way the message is organized and conveyed, the implicit or “model reader” of these videos (Eco 1981), is supposed to have a biased perspective on cultural diversity, linked to cultural values of closure towards migrants and of a defence of her perceived own territory. The videos of migrants who instead experienced different life paths, inside and outside the centres of reception, focus on the description of their own transition from the former life and culture of their country to the Italian culture, often compared with their own past and current aspirations. As the voice over of the trailer explains: “We started to learn about a phenomenon, and we ended up getting to know people.”

As a matter of fact, in the video titled “Marcia” the story of a middle-aged lady now being a cultural mediator arrived from Brazil in 1992 is told. Marcia tells in her own words the importance of considering “what you have lived before, what you have been,” that is the “cultural baggage” that identifies every person. She explains that the process of intercultural mediation works when the life contexts of people is taken into account; otherwise,

3. Vacis’ words are in the video trailer.

the judgment is limited to superficial considerations such as “she does not understand, she cannot do it,” that is not helpful in order to understand someone’s life and way of being.

In another video, Misbao’s story is told. He tells that he studied and graduated in journalism but fled Guinea for political problems: “When I was in my country I lived better: it wasn’t like as I were sick or as I were living in bad condition. You are wrong about people coming from Africa saying that they go away because they are dying of hunger.” Misbao talks about the ambitions and dreams he had before coming to Italy; he feels very disappointed by his current condition.

We should note that, linguistically, the first interviewee (Marcia) puts the accent on herself and her own story; she talks about migrants as human subjects (in the third person singular) which are part of a story to be discovered. Instead, the second interviewee (Misbao) tells his story establishing the couple “me/you,” in which he introduces the listener (“you”) as a collective subject, a distant “other” (Misbao uses the third person plural) with prejudicial thoughts towards migrants like him, framed as one of the group of “people coming from Africa”). Landowski (1997: 10-11) would speak semiotically of a “*présentification*” (an “effect of presence”) in which the other is found inside oneself in the case of the story of Marcia. In the case of Misbao’s story, Landowski would speak of a process of “*identification*” being at play, as to say of an identity that clashes with another one and defines the other as “someone different from me.” According to Ricoeur (1990), there is a living duality in the identity of each individual, which is both “idem” identity and “ipse” identity; this duality shapes every “narrative identity.” Ricoeur does not consider identity as something closed and fixed but as the temporary result of a continuous process of becoming. The first formula, “idem” identity (or *sameness*), indicates the condition of invariance over time, as to say the static side of a personal identity. According to Ricoeur, this side of the identity is shaped by the individual “character” and the “acquired experiences” of a person. The second formula, “ipse” identity (or *selfhood*), indicates instead the construction of the identity as a dynamic process, through the experience of the comparisons with the other. Ricoeur defines this identity as linked to the ability of “maintaining a promise” to oneself, despite the temporal and contextual changes that occur between the moment in which someone promises and the time when someone realizes what she has promised. *Sameness* and *selfhood* are complementary and reciprocally necessary. According to Ricoeur, the first type of identity restores the “ego” in a more stable and coherent way, while the second type opens it to new experiences and transformations. Actually, for Ricoeur we build our “narrative identity” by telling our transformations.

In the archive of the Migrants Project of the *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring*, another video conversation is dedicated to Gerald, a man who has become a collaborator of the project. Gerald tells about the journey from his small town in Cameroon to Libya, and then about the trip to Italy through the sea. He always remarks his own emotions and feelings during and after the different trips. The comment of the written caption posted under the video claims:

He looks angry at the beginning of the interview. He now feels safe; sadness and fatigue disappear at the pleasure of being here today. He tells us about his migration from Cameroon to Lampedusa [...] He describes precise elements and detailed memories of drugs and weapons, of a closed van, of a boat with one hundred and twenty people with women and children [...] After the precise words of Gerald we have to remain silent for a while and thank him for this prayer [...] He has an incredible and rare narrative talent.

According to Ricoeur’s theory (1990: 203), in this commentary the narration becomes a “description” that marks the emotional transformation of the narrator. This description emphasizes the testimonial values of the autobiographical story (“precise elements, detailed memories”), but the summary goes further and opens up to what Ricoeur calls a “prescription” (1990: 203). A *prescription* points out an ethical problem indicating how the spectator should react to the biographic story (“we have to remain silent [...] and thank him”). Finally, we should notice that all video conversations of the Migrants Project of the *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring* present individual stories of great efficacy and intensity that fit into a documentary discursive frame. Hence, the audiovisual discourse is received within a semantic and pragmatic frame that orients the vision and the experience of the spectator and that denies any “fictional reading” (Odin 2011) because it seems to come directly from the phenomenological “real world.” Actually, the “documentary mode” does not reflect neutrally the “reality” but implies a “communicative pact” about the truthfulness and the realism of the story that has

been told (*Ib.*). The stories are told in Italian (or sometimes in an Italian and French mix) and the glance of the migrant toward the spectator (and the video camera) is never forced: actually, it is often lateral, discreet or even modest; she is an *intermediary* that is mediating between the interviewer and the spectator, including them in their discourse made of words, gestures and glances. The videocamera is recording the scene without camera movements and without changing the points of view; the interface is neutral and foresee only an emotional and visual interactivity: videos are presented as part of a coherent set where there is no need for clicking to continue the story and its development. At the same time, the migrant storyteller uses a friendly tone of voice and a relaxed body presence always credible and direct, resulting from the respectful and participatory receptive mode of the interviewers. All these features (gaze, voices, bodies) convey an overall warm affective tone, which build an immediate empathy and a sort of complicity in the spectator. Finally, these audiovisual witnesses activate more than an effective “documentary pact” (Odin 2011) between narrator and spectator, providing a media experience that goes beyond the cognitive communicative pact and opens to a perceptive and affective agreement. Actually, in the case of this analysis, digital biographies constitute a discursive strategy that produces a media experience challenging the way the spectator may question and relate affectively to her own identity. The relationship between the spectator and the migrant storyteller results equal and the “other” who is talking becomes just a person who tells her own life experience.

3 Embodied Digital Experiences: Virtual Reality between Presence and Absence

Carne y Arena, the experimental installation created by director Alejandro G. Iñárritu in collaboration with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki (an installation premiered in 2017 at the 70th Festival de Cannes), provides a different form of the spectator’s *presence experience*: the experience of an active spectator immersed virtually in the story. The caption of the presentation website claims that Iñárritu’s project is based on real events⁴:

Based on true accounts, the superficial lines between subject and bystander are blurred and bound together, allowing individuals to walk in a vast space and thoroughly live a fragment of the refugees’ personal journeys. *Carne y Arena* uses the latest and most innovative virtual reality technologies to create a large multi-narrative space that includes real characters.

According to Manovich (2001), when we enter into an immersive story of virtual reality, the screen disappears and the images fill completely the visual field of the spectator, who is inside the narrative space. It is a space of simulation in which the scale of representation is that of the human environment mixing physical space and virtual space. In the VR Cinema the spectator sits on a swivel chair wearing VR viewer and headphones and turns on herself, even if she is virtually placed in large open spaces and dynamics situations. Conversely, stand up experiences like the Iñárritu’s project allow the spectator to move in the physical space since she wears a backpack containing a computer that manages the virtual environment in which she moves, in addition to the helmet with the VR viewer and the headphones. An important part of *Carne y Arena* installation is a specific immersive experience of six minutes. The user body disappears becoming an absolute subjective gaze that allows the spectator to meet some virtual characters, shot with Motion Capture techniques, that are “virtually present but physically invisible” (as the payoff of the project says). Moreover, the actors are Mexican migrants hired by the director. In this immersive experience the environment is no longer just “visible” as in the VR Cinema, becoming instead somehow “walkable,”⁵ plunging the spectator into the life of a migrant.

Indeed, *Carne y Arena* can be experienced if the spectator enters barefoot in a space set up with sand on the ground. Thus, we face a “naturalization” of the media experience (Eugeni 2015) because the markers of the media frames and the signs of the technology disappear in this homogeneous immersive space. In this direction, the experience in *Carne y Arena* is designed in order to produce a direct feeling that to some extent is connecting us to the “real” world of our phenomenological experience (D’Aloia 2018). The spectator becomes a performer that moves in a precise environment: the desert border between Mexico and the United

4. See the Italian web site at <http://www.fondazioneprada.org/project/carne-y-arena/> (Last accessed 05/22/2019).

5. See Acquarelli 2018.

States, where she walks alongside a group of Mexican migrants (including women and children) running, lying on the ground, standing immobilized for the fear. Actually, the group of migrants who is passing by the border illegally at night is suddenly chased and captured by the American police supported by a helicopter that flies very low spreading a huge dazzling headlight. As a matter of fact, even if the installation's payoff claims that it is "Virtually Present, Physically Invisible," the relationship between "presence" and "absence" concerns not only the body of the spectator, but the assembly and editing strategy of the media device (D'Aloia 2018). Iñárritu's *Carne y Arena*, as every VR experience, allows a very peculiar embodied vision: the spectator enters in the virtual world without really being able to interact with it, nor intervene with its characters and objects. She can only silently observe a virtual environment, like a ghost without any grip on it, exploring and living the strange experience of a dematerialized and disembodied tactile sensation, because she can pass through any body and any object.

However, the virtual experience becomes more and more meaningful while entering the installation and exploring its world: the group of virtual migrants is brutally captured (and their guide is killed), while the spectator lives in a vortex of deafening noises, frightening visions and a cold wind beats her (thanks to a special wind machine). Nevertheless, despite entering directly into the world of the story, the spectator can only have an "indirect" medial experience, which simulates the "real" and the direct one. The absence of interactivity of this simulation of presence tresses her subjective gaze as pure digital and virtual, along with the spectator's passivity and ghostly "disembodied" gaze. Even if a policeman comes towards the spectator shouting and (apparently) looking at her in the eyes in the virtual performative situation, this does not constitute for her any danger. Whereas this walkable experience allows an active involvement of the spectator, who must perform her movement in the virtual space, the spectator remains a sort of ghostly body.

Finally, the virtual experience of the VR Cinema seems more "participatory" (Jenkins 2006; Eugeni 2010), but it is an individual experience without any possibility of contact, negotiation and comparison with the other spectators during the process of vision.⁶ According to Montani, even if the performative experience of *Carne y Arena* apparently allows to participate emotionally, sharing the fear and the horror of the situation with other participants, virtual reality plunges us into a story that unfolds in front of us without giving any opportunity to do anything about it (Montani 2017). According to D'Aloia, the spectator's interactive experience is considered too much limited to be really engaging, failing to create empathy in relation to the conflict between embodiment and disembodiment; even if the spectator feels vertigo or curiosity, her perception is limited because of the immediate perceptive and sensorial disconfirmation of the tactile sense (D'Aloia 2018). Moreover, the avatars or characters of the virtual scene have a visual style that recalls the fake aesthetic of *Second Life*. Therefore, the experience of presence given by *Carne y Arena* seems to be a paradoxical one; the complex design of the installation "certainly offers an immersive experience" (D'Aloia 2018: 9), also because it provides more environments than the one with the virtual reality experience. Nevertheless, considering the experience phenomenologically, it

extends corporeality, alterity, and the borders of spatial perception, but at the same time it remains without Body, without Other, and without Screen. It is an immersive experience, but also constitutionally *immersiv*e, one of proximity and distance, of appropriation and loss, of presence and absence: an illusion that is insurmountably partial — at least until the technologies of imagination are completely grafted onto the mind and the human senses are numbed to the point of no longer being able to distinguish, as cinema has already imagined, between reality and its virtual *mise-en-abyme* (D'Aloia 2018: 9).

4 Interacting with Storytelling Interfaces: Maps and Web Documentaries

Mapping and data visualization can be considered a narrative genre within the widespread appearance of new digital tools and platforms that facilitate the mapping of data online (Risam 2019: 3) with peculiar features, such as storytelling affordances (i.e. semiotic instructions) that guide the user through the platforms and the story. These features range from data sets to multimodal communication objects, such as texts, videos, maps,

6. See Dusi 2019.

pictures, drawings, sounds, offered to the user through a map, that constitutes an environment she is enabled to interact with. Accordingly, a map can be considered a bidimensional representative device that proposes both the representation of an object — i.e., the position of a migrant within a geographical context where actions can be deployed — and the representation of the production of a discourse on a subject — i.e., mapping as a discursive approach to the journey of a migrant (Marin 2001).

In this direction, the term *user* is preferable rather than the term *spectator* in consideration of the fact that the narration of data implies the active intervention of the subject that is interacting with the graphic interface which contents are presented by. The figures of migrants are constituted by the data information and the intertwine of multiple modes of communication. In this section, we will focus on four projects of data visualization: *Migrants: Stories of solidarity and welcoming*,⁷ *Stories Behind a Line*,⁸ *Migration Trail*,⁹ *Refugee Republic*.¹⁰ Although, they have different focus and different issues, all of them share the characteristics of data visualization as digital narrative genre outlined by Risam (2019: 6): “the framing of the stakes and politics of migration through text (the written-linguistic mode), the use of maps based on Cartesian coordinates (the visual mode), and the deployment of moving dots or lines (the spatial mode) to represent movement.” In these digital storytelling platforms, words, dots and lines activated by the movements of the *user* constitute the simulacrum of the migrants and of the situation where they are involved in. The life of the migrants is spatialized within an interface that enables interactive practices based on a locative logic: there is the material location (i.e. the trail, the border) of the environments where migrants are placed, mapped on the visual space (the *interface*) which the user is living its media experience through.

Thus, the user and the migrant are co-localized on a digital space that mediates their relationship. In this sense, the interface occupies the interstitial discursive zone between the *direct world* lived by the migrants and the *indirect world* built within the media, enabling a distinctive media experience. Data visualization products are structured following a mix of “objective” and “subjective” mode allowing a sort of navigation through the data and the interface: even if data are presented as neutral, they are mediated forms of data created by authors and by the interactive role of users. In this direction, even if each project here analyzed relies on different repositories of data, it represents a meta-pragmatic of digital media, by which it is possible to medially experience the life of others without living it and without being co-present with them, neither physically nor electronically.

The first project is relevant as it represents an example of a data visualization mainly structured around the written-linguistic mode. *Migrants: Stories of Solidarity and Welcoming* is a collaborative project that aims at gathering together social media tracks of storytelling created by Italian people sharing news link covering the encounter with others (refugees and migrants). The project challenges the idea that the migrant could be conceived as the target of anxiety, fears and racism of a dominant culture threatened by the “other.” It consists basically of a website based on the opensource platform *StoryMap JS* where journalists and volunteers of the news organizations *Valigia Blu* (the one which organizes in Italy the *International Journalism Festival*) collect and map news that are shared by people on social media (Facebook and Twitter) about positive stories of encounters between migrants, refugees and Italian citizens. Furthermore, the platform hosts stories shared by Italian people that directly lived the experience which the stories are referred to. Thus, it remediates different objects available online with the ethical activation of users that collaboratively interact on social media to counteract the widespread hostility, hate and disdain against migrants echoed by news media. However, in the case of the platform *Migrants: Stories of Solidarity and Welcoming*, migrants are framed as background characters. In this context, the “model reader” (Eco 1981) of the platform is the user, who is the one experiencing the encounter with a migrant, sharing the story and linking news, website or social media posts. One of the most relevant narrative features is the way affective relation towards the issue of migration is treated. In the section of the website that describes the reason for the project, it is possible to read that the platform collects stories that work as “antibodies against a poisoning hate,” showing the position of people who love migrants

7. See the website at <http://migranti.valigiablu.it> (last accessed 06/10/2019).

8. See the website at <http://www.storiesbehindaline.com/> (last accessed 06/22/2019).

9. See the website at <http://www.migrationtrail.com/> (last accessed 06/22/2019).

10. See the website at <https://refugeerepublic.submarinechannel.com/> (last accessed 07/01/2019).

in opposition to people who hate them. For example, there are a Mayor and many families hosting refugees in their house, monasteries that are open for migrants, Muslims helping Italian that are living in poor conditions, volunteers that are supporting associations that are welcoming migrants, and much more. The subjects of these stories are always two figures that are living an encounter despite their cultural diversity. The platform visualizes the locations where the stories happened on an interactive map; the user can jump click by click in different sites of the country, marked with a pin on the map. The effect is a plentiful view of reports that form the repository of data which this project is based on. Accordingly, it is not a mapping project focused on migrant, but on news about people encountering migrants with a positive approach. The project tries to avoid the trope of “migrant-as-problem” while reinforcing the tropes “love-vs-hate,” “good-vs-evil” embedded in the news coverage of migration (King and Wood, 2001; Moore et al. 2012; Philo et al. 2013). *Migrants: Stories of Solidarity and Welcoming* chooses a perspective often peripheral in mainstream news media, that is the intimate relationship between the “us” and the “others” of globalization; however, the voices are not the ones of migrants, but the ones of Italian people that select these stories, thus constituting a selection that provides just a specific type of cultural values and a specific ideological perspective.

In this sense, the project is shaped around the discursive structure of the chorus of many voices that collaborate together to share common views and feelings by mean of hyperlinks within a digital environment. In so doing, the project bridges the gap between news media, mapping platform and social media in order to represent a consistent digital community of people that are sharing the same attitudes towards migration. It is useful to note that the project does not focus on Italians migration and on Italy as a place of departure (despite the great migration of Italians abroad during the ‘900). Indeed, it considers Italy as the territory of arrival of foreign migrants and it addresses its attention towards the point of view of the Italians on migration. The project is designed on the base of a participatory method that draws attention on the social impact of migration reaffirming the humanity of host societies and migrants. As the people engaged are mainly Italians who are sharing stories of solidarity and welcoming, the specificity and materiality of migrants’ lived experiences of borders and encounters remain on the background. In doing so, the migrant remains a figure portrayed as in need of support, entrapped within the narrative struggle between “lovers” and “haters,” rather than a figure with her own resources and memories. *Migrants: Stories of Solidarity and Welcoming* sets a meta-discursive space based on intermediality (social media, mapping, news coverage) that deals more with the Italian outlooks towards migration rather than migrants’ biographic stories and feelings. It connects the experience of the direct world (stories of encounters between Italians and migrants) with the media experience (the way these stories are narrated, presented and shared online) – as to say a phenomenological experience and a discursive and mediated one – involving people who share the same view on migration in a digital collaborative activity that can be conceived as a political statement. The project does not include directly the participation of migrants in the creation of the maps, using their information and their voices, but a different type of data (reports of social media users).

The second and the third project that we are analyzing in this section, *Stories Behind a Line* and *Migration Trail*, have been designed starting from the data provided by the migrants: characters’ names are fictional or not clearly explicit, but their stories are based on true events. These projects represent a useful example of how digital storytelling platforms focus on the relevance of visual and spatial mode while organizing archives of information with a temporal perspective. *Stories Behind a Line* pictures six stories of migrants from Western Africa and Pakistan, mainly focusing on the direction of their trail. Stage after stage, the user can visualize with dots and lines information about their trip: why they moved away from their country, how long they travelled by walking or by truck, which cities they reach. Migrants as real people are here encoded in digital fragments; their complex story is summarized by a line, that is basically a digital drawing that reproduces the course of their journey and summarizes objective and personal data, collected with interviews in which migrants shared also painful memories. One of the character of *Stories Behind a Line*, M.B. (from Ivory Coast; his real name remains unknown to the *user*) says that he lost his parents and so “I had no one else, and I decided to leave.” All the biographic complexity of this sentence is represented with a line, data and numbers – distance covered in kilometers, time spent travelling, means of transportation. In the view of the author (Federica Fragapane, visual and information designer), such strategy is justified because “this information in its simplicity can really depict the exhausting and dangerous experiences lived by persons who are looking for a better life.” Only some stories are enriched with personal quotations, that are added to the drawing of the

trails as captions. The availability of this content is related to the willingness of interviewees to share “what they wanted to,” such as objective information or fragments of their stories. Furthermore, not all the stories offer complete information. This kind of incompleteness is visualized with empty spaces and broken line, where no information appears on the screen.

Migration Trail pictures the stories of two migrants, related to two different journeys: one from Syria to Europe, the other from Nigeria to Europe. It is possible to follow their movements day by day, using a timeline and reading the text messages that they are exchanging with relatives. The interplay between direct text messaging and the visualization of the different stages of the displacements of the migrants on a map is even more interactive as the platform allows the user to receive the same text messages received by the migrants on their own Facebook Messenger. Also, the user can access material details of migrants’ travel conditions: personal information, battery level and range of the mobile phone, current status (for example, in a smuggler’s house in Tripoli, waiting for the departure which time is unknown), strengths of passport by nationalities, and other contextualized explanations about routes before reaching boats, shipping, borders and risk of death. For each stage, the information about the situation of the two characters are updated, with new messages, different temporal and locational details. In order to live the experience of migrants’ journey, the user is required to keep the computer connected for ten days. In this way, different alerts of departure announcement or change in locational positions aim at creating an effect of impending anxiety, increased by the fact that the user receives chat notifications and text messages by the migrants whose stories is told on the platform. Digital affordances support the user who is experiencing migrants’ journey side by side. Moreover, the platform offers multiple layers of data that are significant for the characters and their journey; podcasts are also available to “delve deeper into real life stories and explore the wider issues”, as we can read on the website. The digital platform functions as an *energetic shifter* (de Certeau 1997) that modulates the possibility of interaction determined by the platform itself, providing fragmented information translated and rendered into a specific visual and digital format.

In these two digital projects of data visualization there are no picture, or video, or other journalistic contents. Data are basically related to means of transportation, distances covered, mobile phone usability and some biographic notes when available and shared by the migrants interviewed. Information has been collected directly by authors and designers of the platforms. As it is explained in *Stories Behind a Line* footer by its author, Federica Fragapane, “there are some missing data and there are two main reasons for that: either they [the migrants] weren’t able to recall the information, or I was so moved that I simply forgot to ask it.” What it is shared and visualized for the user is a set of visual devices (screened, organized and accessible through an interface) that works as a simulacrum of the experience. The bodies of migrants are not there, they are simply represented by bits on a screen. The narrative of the specificity and materiality of migrant condition is limited to digitalized visual inputs; their stories basically rely on their position, signaled by dots and lines which the user can click on to view additional contents if available. Migrants become narrative actants of a trajectory, as to say the subject of a movement in a precise space, where the complexity of their life stories is condensed in a line.

The fourth project mixes all together the characteristics of data visualization as a digital genre. *Refugee Republic* is defined on its website as an “interactive transmedia documentary,” where transmedia — despite the richness of meanings of the term well explained by Jenkins in relation to the concept of *transmedia storytelling* (Jenkins 2006) — here is referred to the fact that multiple formats are coalesced to tell the story of a refugee camp and the everyday life that many people live in it. The web documentary is composed by sets of drawings, short movies, photographs, sounds and texts based on data collected on the ground by the authors, who met people and discovered the various environments of a Syrian refugee camp situated in Domiz, in northern Iraq. These sets of audio, textual and visual features have been edited and combined to create an audiovisual sensory experience within an interactive interface that the user can navigate choosing four different narrative routes signaled with different colors (camp construction, camp life, camp smart, camp money). Once one route is selected, a drawing that sketches the build environment of the camp can be accessed; then, the user can scroll up and down or click the arrows at the right or left sides of the screen to slide the drawings, which are enriched with sounds, to unveil the following drawn environments and to discover other multimedia visual contents, like a film, a photo slideshow, a podcast and much more. The story of the camp becomes a narrative experience about “the existence of an emerging city” that strives to move from an unlivable zone to a livable

organized one. In this direction, *Refugee Republic* condenses the inherent narrative and discursive structure of the cinema of borders, made of “incoherent, heterogeneous graphic style that lurches discontinuously from scene to scene or shot to shot,” and of “fragmentary, elliptical editing strategy that gives the impression that we are viewing snatches of the real events” (Bennet and Tyler 2007: 34). Also, it includes a pact of truthfulness about the documentary discursive organization, that is structured around a visual interface with precise digital affordances and graphic style. People and places represented within the web documentary – such as the poet or the circumciser, the bakery or the restaurant – recall those real-life situations that people long for and seek every day even if they are in a border zone (camp) with an uncertain status (refugee) – such as love affairs and weddings, business, entertainment and much more. The contents are embedded within a map, on which the user can activate the routes available, disclosing multiple formats while sliding back and forth the drawings of environment. The formats (film, audio, text, photo) have been produced from raw materials collected by the authors while visiting the camp through in-depth interviews, listening and observation techniques. Both the editing of these raw materials, from the audio recording to the shooting of audio-visual scenes and photographs, and the way they are screened online all contribute to generate a “documentary mode” (Odin 2011) that creates a meaningful reality effect of the story conveyed by the web documentary. At the same time, the interface which the user interacts with, that represents the closest object to her media experience, reveals explicitly how the documentary communicative pact is always something built culturally: from a semiotic perspective what is narrated and represented in a web documentary is just a “possible world” (Eco 1981) or an “indirect world” (Eugeni 2010) mediated by an interface and a software that allow certain actions and offer selected modes of visualization. Hence, what the user experiences is the result of a semiotic discursive strategy that selects, organizes, and shares only some information to create a biographical story of migration.

5 Conclusions. Closeness, Interaction and Archives of Memories

In a semiotic perspective, a media experience is a type of experience characterized by the mediation of a device, which catalyses, activates and regulates the experience through the dispensing of sensory materials. Every media experience is pre-established (designed and produced) from the outside with respect to the situation in which it is experienced (Eugeni 2010). This means that every media experience is guided by a discursive and narrative strategy in the interpretation of a relationship with the “direct world” of our daily phenomenological experience. In this perspective, there is not a direct and immediate relationship between any media content and the world, but an intermediation that implies a polysemic, multimodal and synesthetic relationship.

Accordingly, the media discourses analyzed in this paper present distinctive features that generate different “degrees of closeness” in order to feel the presence of the migrants in the spectator media experience. The spectator is placed in the zone (the border) where migrants are living their unlivable lives, and her experience is that of a “touching” closeness or that of a “safe” distant closeness from migrant lives. More specifically, the analysis of three type of media discourse (edited audiovisual tracks of theatrical experiences, VR artistic installation, data visualization platforms and web documentary) show us that it is possible to propose a scale of degrees of closeness in the contemporary media discourses about migration.

In doing so, we have challenged the concept of the border, being not only the material one crossed by people in their displacement and screened in multiple ways on the media, but the semiotic one that enables the media experience of migration, such as the interface. Moreover, it is useful to recall that the digital projects analysed in this paper deal with real migrant experiences. In this direction, it is useful to highlight that a “documentary mode” does not reflect neutrally the “reality” and it is not a discourse based on a pure “truth” which has no “narration” because it relies on direct testimonies (Odin 2011). On the contrary, the documentary mode is always a narrative product with a discursive perspective and an enunciative strategy that can even falsify its sources. Therefore, the accessible contents of these digital media projects have a discursive, narrative, stylistic configuration, ideologically and culturally oriented, based on a negotiation of their frames of interpretation that guides both the production and the reception. This means that there is always an agreement at play between the textual strategy of the media product and the user, which implies a communicative pact about the truthfulness and the realism of the story. In other terms, media experiences are designed on the base of a trust pact between the author and the user. This pact shapes also the intersubjective and cultural construction

of a sense of authenticity. We call this discursive frame “documentary.” Therefore, each one of the digital media projects analyzed here is considered not only as a moment of representation and narration of lived situations, but as a mediated semiotic space that allows a certain media experience of migration that generates an “effect of closeness,” aiming at involving and engaging the user.

More in detail, the videos of the archive of biographic audiovisuals produced by the Italian organization *Institution of Theatrical Practices for Self-Caring* (Teatro Stabile, Turin) offer an effect of the *presence experience* based on the “*présentification*” and “*identification*” of the “other.” The user lives an *emphatic media experience* in which she can find the other in herself or in which she recognizes and legitimizes being the identity of the “other,” thanks to a documentary discursive mode that presents people and their voices as real. In this case, migrants have a face, a voice, and an ethical standing that is characterized by a *prescription* that indicates how the user should react to the biographic stories.

Comparing the *presence experience* of the theatrical video conversations with the one of the VR installation *Carne y Arena* by Iñárritu, it is notable to remind that every media experience is an “indirect” one, as to say something very different from the “direct” experience of our living in the real world. Moreover, the forms of technological mediation change our perception while experiencing it (Eugeni 2010). In the case of *Carne y Arena*, the effect of the *presence experience* is based on the naturalisation of the “other.” The user can choose to be a visitor or a participant; then, she is placed within a virtual scene of migration, becoming a close and proximate sufferer (Raessens 2019) although safe and not bodily experiencing the direct suffering of migrants. In this sense, the user is living an aesthetic media experience characterized by the interplay between embodiment and disembodiment. In this direction, the conception of *Carne y Arena* as a political intervention that proposes “to challenge the limits of mediation” and promotes “social justice through feeling, acting, and knowing otherwise” (Raessens 2019: 1) is limited by the affective proximity of the user to the migrants, that are “virtually present and physically invisible.”

In relation to data visualization platforms and web documentaries which represent the lives of people during their migration journeys and their encounters with other people, the media projects *Migrants: Stories of Solidarity and Welcoming*, *Stories Behind a Line*, *Migration Trail*, *Refugee Republic* offer an effect of *presence experience* related to the peculiar format of the data visualization. They rely on the narrative fragmented structure of a database that constitutes the core of these four projects. Thus, we can propose that digital interactive platforms of data visualization are providing a *stylization* of the *presence experience* of migrants. The user is living a *functional media experience* characterized by the usability of the interface, guided by digital affordances (or semiotic instructions) through which they navigate the multimedia contents, placing the contact between the “us” and the “others” in a distant digital mediated proximity.

Lastly, contemporary migrant discourses and digital biographies are not only characterized by what it means recovering the so called “capture of speech” (De Certeau 1997) with new platform or recovering what idea of border and Self has been produced if any (Chambers 1994). Also, the projects analyzed in this paper show that digital biographies of migrants are defined by their capacity to modulate multiple degrees of closeness of and to the direct experience of the lives of migrants.

Furthermore, the attention to the *presence experience* can be conceived as a useful add-on to a renewed perspective on the relationship between migrants and mediation that Appadurai calls for. If the contemporary migrant discourses are developed in the view of their degree of closeness of and to the direct experience of the lives of migrants, they should rely on the archives of migrants’ memories in order to make them work not only as repositories of the past, but also as “maps for the future” (Appadurai 2019). In this sense, they should have not only a plot, a story, a narrative – that is a common attitude for digital based data visualization or VR project that are not exhibiting faces and voices of migrants –, but rather a name, a character, an identity that release their figures from the trope of the migration journey to the trope of citizenship, with their own memories, resources, desires, and expectations.

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