

The use of film documentary in social science research: audio-visual accounts of the ‘migration crisis’ from the Italian island of Lampedusa

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Abstract

The importance of visual evidence -and particularly films and videos- has become more prominent with the fast pace of technological development that has made filming more easily accessible. Since the early 20th century, films have been used as a data collection method in social science research, but less attention has been given to their potential for research dissemination. It is well documented that visual representations are powerful means to broadcast public discourses. The Arab Spring in 2011 and the increasing movement of people across the Mediterranean Sea are a case in point. Images and videos of people trying to reach Europe have contributed to the construction of what is often referred to as the ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’. In this article, we explore the process of making a film documentary about the people in the Italian island of Lampedusa, a key transitory site for migrants, and how they deal with the challenges of this 'crisis' while trying to respond to the local struggles of their isolated community. Drawing on the analysis of ‘audio-visual accounts’ - as the filmed verbal elaborations that broadcast themes emerging from social science research - we reflect on the potential and drawbacks of film documentaries for both knowledge production and research dissemination. **Key words:** community; Mediterranean migration crisis; migration; Lampedusa; social documentary; visual methods

Introduction

In this article, we reflect on the role of visual evidence - and most specifically film documentary - in knowledge production and research dissemination within the context of on-going debates about the so-called ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’. In so doing, we seek to explore the methodological challenges, but also the benefits of using visual evidence to disseminate findings from a research study about the Italian island of Lampedusa, a key transit site for migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to Wright (2008), both still and moving images have the power to communicate messages and influence debates by mediating individuals’ relationship with their own environment, acting like a cognitive framework. Starting from the late 20th century, the role of ‘the visual’ – and so the use of images to communicate messages, the public perception of them and the type of relations and behaviours that they are able to represent – have become a matter of growing interest within social science research. Today, the fast development of visual technologies and the increased accessibility via media and social media has intensified even more the use of images in different aspects of social life with implications for how public debates are framed and how attitudes are shaped (Musarò and Pamiggiani 2017). It is widely acknowledged that the visual in the forms of images, videos and films

has the power to accelerate the emotional response to an event, whilst textual and verbal evidence tends to be processed by people slower, more logically and so less emotively (Iyer and Oldmeadow 2006). The ability of the visual to evoke a range of basic emotions – such as happiness and sadness, but also anger, fear and disgust – has been exploited and used widely in many fields like media, politics but also in advertising (Joffe 2008). The emotive nature of visual material also fosters its other characteristics: its vividness, persuasiveness and memorability - and so the capacity to be remembered, but also its proof of authenticity - as events visually portrayed are more likely to be trusted as being true (Joffe 2008).

Since the outset of the Arab Spring in 2011, images and video reportages have contributed to promote the idea of a migration crisis taking place in the Mediterranean Sea, feeding public concerns about a state of emergency and a boat-migrants' invasion. Central to these discourses and representations is the Italian island of Lampedusa that, because of its geographical location, is the first port of arrival for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the attempt to reach Europe. In the last two decades, but particularly since the Arab spring in 2011, the island has become an 'ideal stage for the spectacle of a crisis' (Mazzara 2016:136) chronicled by images, videos and films constantly shared in media and social media outlets. This article explores the experience of using visual evidence in the form of a film documentary - '*CCÀ SEMU, Here we are, Lives on hold in Lampedusa*'ⁱ - which was directed by a professional filmmakerⁱⁱ and was aimed at reporting findings from social science research conducted on the island. The project aimed to offer a different perspective on the 'migration crisis' shifting attention away from migration as a global issue, to the everyday local concerns of the islanders. Our research suggests that the political and media significance that the island has acquired in the last two decades in the context of the migration debate, does not match with the substantial marginality perceived by locals in relation to public policies and services.

Our analysis and emerging findings are centred around audio-visual accounts consisting of participants' oral elaborations, which were visually reproduced with implications for both knowledge production and dissemination. We will start with a reflection about the role of visual evidence for social science research, followed by an analysis of the ways in which audio-visual accounts have contributed to manufacture the idea of a migration crisis. The paper then details the process of making the film and how the emerging themes were extrapolated from the research data and then broadcasted for dissemination. As we decided to collaborate with an experienced film director, we will also reflect on the possibilities and challenges opened up by collaborative research between the arts and social sciences (Franceschelli and Galipò 2020).

The visual in social science research

The recent history of western intellectual thought – particularly from the Enlightenment onwards - has seen a growing dualism between the text and the image as separate 'paradigms of thinking' (Bartmanski 2014, 165), and so different ways to reproduce and communicate social realities. Preference has been historically given to the written element perceived as more rigorous and rational. Hence, the division of scientific labour has been organised so that the visual only acted as cosmetic and a supplementary domain, with the purpose of integrating or complementing the linguistic/textual element rather than an autonomous tool to study social life. Things have taken a different twist with post-modernist thinking, but many still remain reluctant to define the new interest on images as an actual visual turn, because images have not yet reached their full potential but have remained secluded

to a few disciplines and still secondary to other methods (Bartmanski 2014). Regardless of the epistemological debate about whether we are witnessing a real ‘visual turn’ in social science, surely attention on the visual has increased and images – either still or moving – have become objects of more rigorous analysis.

Even though theoretical attention to film-based research has relatively been recent, its history dates back to the end of the 1800 early 1900. During that time, technological innovation led to the development of the 16mm camera, which was easier to carry in fieldwork settings (Erikson 2011). Yet, it was not until the Second War World that these visual approaches acquired more of a status within research methodology. From its origin until now, films have been mostly used in research as resources to record human activities, particularly as part of the process of ethnographic data generation (Heath et al. 2010; Harper 1987). The idea is that films’ main contribution is the recording of naturally occurring activities in their ordinary habitats and so the provision of ‘fine-grained scrutiny of moments of social life’ (Heath et al. 2010, 3) allowing to capture the taken for granted elements of social interactions (Heath 2011). A film provides ‘a version of an event as it happens’ (Heath et al. 2010, 5) and it enacts the consideration of the ecology where the action takes place.

However, the generation of ethnographic data is not the only way to use visual evidence in research. Differently from ethnographic films, social documentaries do not claim to be fully authentic reproductions of occurring activities, but they account more explicitly for the artistic elaboration of the recorded social reality and so, they are reproductions of real-life events, but not the actual real-life event in itself (Aufderheide 2007). Although the boundaries are sometimes blurred, the tradition of ethnographic films tends to distinguish itself from social documentaries. In our case, the film documentary *CCÀ SEMU* was produced for a different reason rather than data gathering and documenting spontaneous social activities. With the film, we mostly aimed to disseminate findings from our research to wider audiences. Indeed, visual evidence has a strong impact both in terms of the content transmitted and the length of retention of this content, but the potential of films as medium for research dissemination is more rarely addressed by methodological literature (Brannen 2002). In producing the film, we also aimed to reinforce the collaboration between social sciences and the arts by illustrating the research’s results in a different way from textual reporting (Brannen 2002). The film’s main purpose was the dissemination of findings, but from the beginning, it was also an important component of the study and complementary to the text analysis for its role in knowledge production.

Visual representations of the ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’

Migration is an area that has been deeply affected by the development and widening use of the visual. The so-called ‘migration crisis’ has been one of the mostly mediated phenomena of recent years, providing reporters and filmmakers with a new pool of news stories (Trilling 2019). In this context, visual evidence has had a big role to play because of its undeniable advantages: it is immediate and able to reach its audiences quickly and stays imprinted in the memory for longer. Yet, the circulation of visual evidence about migration through different media outlets has also led to frame migrants as ‘others’, either when depicted as vulnerable victims or when portrayed as invaders with implications for shaping the general public’s attitudes and perceptions. Even the most well-meaning images, which have carefully represented migrants’ suffering, have been less effective at explaining the complex mechanisms and political failures behind the suffering.

The need to address the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean Sea is widely acknowledged, but its description as ‘migration crisis’ is considered by many a rather problematic label that risks incrementing the fear of an invasion from potentially dangerous masses with destabilizing effects for European countries (Mazzara 2016). Moffitt (2015, 190) argues that crises are never ‘neutral’ but mediated and ‘performed’ by actors leading to the ‘spectacularization of phenomena’, in our case migration. The idea that the ‘migration crisis’ has been ‘manufactured’ with the help of the media to fulfill specific political interests at national and European levels has been addressed by critical literature (see Campesi, 2011). Under this premise, migration has been used as a tool to shift attention away from the effects of austerity policy, including growing structural inequalities, slow growth and lack of public investments (Dines et al. 2015). In fact, while attention has been focused on the ongoing flow of people leaving their countries and coming to Europe, less emphasis has been placed on the geopolitics and complex responsibilities behind the movement of people. The ‘migration crisis’ is first of all a political crisis rooted into the failure of specific bilateral agreements and diplomatic relations and based on a system of securitization supporting ‘a strict policing of the migratory routes in the Mediterranean region’ (Campesi, 2011, 1). This political crisis marks the breakdown of the European migration policy and ‘border regime’ (Dines et al. 2015) made of highly complex institutional arrangements and a legal framework aimed to negotiate humanitarian aid and border control (Friese 2010). The feeling is that real events have produced a crisis of cinematic form (Dines et al. 2018, 440) and that the idea of ‘a Mediterranean migration crisis’ is rather ‘utterly banal’ (Dines et al. 2018, 446) and un-reflexive simplification of a complex process of social change.

If ‘crises are performed’ (Moffitt 2015), the arts - and particularly visual arts - have a huge role in documenting, propagating and even creating these crises-performances. Mazzara (2016) reflects upon the possibility opened up by ‘the arts’ to also produce counter-narratives, which challenge the hegemonic discourse about migration as a crisis by presenting examples of migrants and refugee-led artistic activities such as a documentary film and a theatre play. However, the extent to which aesthetic representations - particularly those visual – can provide grounds for resistance depends on the actors involved behind their production. For instance, in 2013, the Italian government launched the military-humanitarian operation ‘Mare Nostrum’ aimed at rescuing migrants, arresting smugglers, preventing the illegal entry of unauthorised migrants (Musarò 2017) which was bringing together a humanitarian and a military logic about European borders protection. To promote the operation, Italian authorities produced videos and photographs, which were widely distributed by Italian media, representing rescues at sea with migrants portrayed as victims in need of help and the military as heroes/rescuers promptly ready to save lives (Musarò 2017).

Critical literature has also pointed to the role of the ‘visual’ – both in the forms of films and photographic images - in the construction of the ‘migration crisis’, thus acknowledging its contribution to the shifting public mood from pity for the victims of the sea to a state of emergency fearing an invasion. In many respects, the popularity of the migration crisis was brought under worldwide attention by numerous images, video and photos. The emotive impact of the visual is maximised when the content is made more personal and focused on individual stories (Joffe 2008). For instance, studies suggest that people tend to give more money to a cause when children have been portrayed (Kogut and Ritov 2005). Media and social media are very well aware of the potential of the visual for engaging their audiences, sensationalizing and globalizing the spread of their news as

the analysis of representations of the Ebola disease suggests: while the text material referred to the risks of spreading, images of men in hermetically sealed outfits, reassured audiences about the West's ability to control it (Joffe 2008). In 2015 the image of a two-year old drowned Syrian boy wearing a red t-shirt in the Turkish beach near Bodrum, started circulating via media and social media giving rise to a global public dissent. The child was later identified as Alan Kurdi and his story was made public: his family was trying to reach Europe via Kos to then fly to Canada and join their relatives who are already settled there (Kingsley and Timur 2015). The image of the body of young Alan went around the world feeding what Giorgio Agamben (1998) has defined as the spectacle of 'migrants' bare lives' stripped of their rights and – in many respects - of their agency. Yet, the same image has also been able to mobilise people's sentiments of pity and concerns about the loss of life. The Dutch documentary 'A Sea of Images' (2016) about Alan Kurdi shows the under the scene decisions taken by NGOs and more influential journalists to create the media case about the young boy. Politics also makes use of visual material as a resource to impress the public and quickly pass on the message and seek support from wide audiences (Joffe 2008). 'Breaking Point', the Nigel Farage's anti-migrants poster in support of the pro-Brexit campaign to leave the EU during 2016, exemplifies another representation of the migration crisis: the myth of the invasion and the need to protect national borders for specific political purposes. Images accompanied by words such as 'hordes, floods or invasion' (Mazzara 2015) have created a deep moral panic about migrants threatening European nations leading to xenophobic behaviours. In this context, Lampedusa is a case in point, as the island has acquired a specific role in manufacturing representations of migrants as 'bare lives' but also as 'illegal and deportable workers (Genova, 2013) and migration as 'invasion and an emergency' and so continuing to contribute to the spectacle of the 'migration crisis'.

Visual representations of Lampedusa

For its geographical position, the history of Lampedusa is linked with that of people who live and trade by the Mediterranean Sea (Taranto 2016). The island is located at 205 km off the coast of Sicily, isolated from the rest of Italy to which it is linked via a ferry service that brings essential goods to the island twice a week. Through history, Lampedusa has been an ancient free zone for Christians and Muslims in their battles in the Mediterranean Sea and it became a colony for dissidents and political prisoners in the late 1870s up to 1940s. Today, the island counts approximately 6,000 people who mostly rely on tourism, the main economic activity since the 1980s, employing almost the entire population in the summer season.

In the last decade, Lampedusa has become known internationally as the site for arriving migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Differently from Greece, which constitutes the route to Europe for many Syrians fleeing war, the majority of those heading to Italy from Africa, particularly Nigeria (21%) and Eritrea (12%) (Interni 2016). In September 2015, the migration centre in the island has been converted into a hotspot, a temporary hub for the sorting and identification of migrants and asylum seekers who are then moved to other support centres in Sicily or Italy's mainland. Around the hotspot, a wide range of national and international actors gravitate: the Italian police, representatives of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), but also NGOs such as Save the Children.

In 2011, following the events of the Arab Spring, approximately 11,000 Tunisians who had crossed the Mediterranean by boat arrived in the island and were left sleeping in the open, without any

assistance from either the Italian state or Europe. The situation escalated to violence when hundreds of Tunisians organized a rally to protest against the threat of being forcibly taken back to Tunisia (Orsini 2015). A couple of years later, on October 3rd 2013 more than 360 migrants died in a shipwreck off the shore of Lampedusa, which was followed by other similar cases quite soon after (Musarò 2017). At the time, video footage documented drowned bodies floating in the sea (Dines et al. 2015) while videos of rescues in the sea multiplied. Since then, despite being located at the geographical margins of Italy and the EU, Lampedusa has become the new symbolic core of the ‘migration crisis’ (Orsini 2015, 521-22). This condition of being both at the periphery and the centre of events has been important to understand how the local community feels about migration and the idea of ‘crisis’.

As the attention to the ‘migration crisis’ has grown, so it did the video footage about Lampedusa. Images have been focusing prevalently on rescues at sea, invigorating the myth of invasion and portraying migrants’ bare lives. Yet, the need to document the responses of the local community has also emerged both within the social sciences and the arts. The most famous film about the community, and often mentioned during our interviews, was the Oscar nominated and critically acclaimed ‘Fuocoammare’ (Fire at Sea) (see Bradshaw 2016) by the well-known Italian director Gianfranco Rosi. Rosi takes distance from the sensationalism of video footage about migrants and focuses on the slow pace lives of the islanders. His film portrays the life of a Lampedusan family and particularly of a young boy called Samuele and his everyday routines: from doing schoolwork and slurping his pasta at dinner to his spare time spent cutting branches and playing with slingshots. In his interview for our film documentary, Pietro Bartolo, the doctor of Lampedusa who also featured in Rosi’s film, told us about how he supported the director to find the right angle to tell the story of the community. Bartolo explained that he saw Rosi’s film as an unmissable opportunity to tell the world the story of how the islanders lived with and faced the ongoing arrival of people via sea. Fuocoammare was finally nominated for an Oscar, and although it did not win, it was still – according to the doctor - effective in making a remote and isolated island visible around the world. Yet, the film was badly received by Lampedusans who felt they were mistakenly reproduced as backward through the simple story of the 12 years old Samuele, feeling that their voices were neglected once again.

The award-winning documentary ‘*Lampedusa in winter*’ by the director Jakob Brossmann (2015) also focuses on the local community of residents highlighting the importance of seasonality to the life in the island, with winters increasing the isolation of the community. This sense of isolation was reiterated by the words of our participants who explained how the community depends on a ferry service which, like an ‘umbilical cord’, links Lampedusa to the mainland and provides essential goods. Usually, the ferry runs twice a week, but with bad weather conditions the island might experience shortage of essential goods for days. This geographical isolation only adds to the perceived social marginality exemplified – in our film - by pregnant mothers having to fly to the mainland to deliver because there is no adequate maternity care in the island. Yet, in all the above-mentioned films, including our ‘CCÀ SEMU’, migrants are portrayed and represented by the narratives of western directors. Mazzara (2015) instead writes of films made by migrants as aesthetic expressions of resistance. She refers to a film ‘*Soltanto il Mare*’ (2011) by the director Dagmawi Yimer, who arrived in Lampedusa from Ethiopia in 2006. Yimer returned to the island in 2010 to ‘tell the story of this space’ from his point of view (Mazzara 2015, 461). Differently from the aesthetic representations of the island produced by Rosi, Brossmann and Yimer, our film documentary - CCÀ

SEMU - has a strong connection with social science research and its content was derived from thematic analysis of audio-visual accounts about the identity of the island and the life of the community.

The research project and the making of the film

As there is already visual evidence reporting about the lives and experiences of migrants in the island (e.g. Mazzara 2016), we felt we had to take a different angle. Our overarching research aim was to explore how Lampedusans responded to the increased arrival of migrants and whether and how their lives were affected by it. We were interested to know how it is to live in the island today and what the 'crisis' meant to Lampedusans. The methodology involved 65 in-depth interviews with islanders which were taped recorded, and ethnographic fieldwork to contextualise the interviews. We asked a sub-sample of participants the permission to film their contributions which provided the main material for the filmmaking. The overall sample includes permanent residents of Lampedusa aged between 20 to over 70 years old, and similar numbers of men and women (Franceschelli and Galipò 2020). Some participants were born in the island, but the youngest were not because, since the 1980s, there is no longer access to a maternity care and women have to go to give birth in Sicily or elsewhere in the Italian mainland. In the selection, we accounted for participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds as reflected by their occupational status, and so both seasonal workers and employers in the tourist sector. Participants were identified by both the researchers and the film director mostly starting from their initial contacts developed during the ethnographic fieldwork, and then proceeding through snowballing. The interviews began with some contextual questions about participants' background and then focused on life on the island, everyday activities and social relationships. We specifically asked participants to describe the island, to tell us about the local community, whether they felt things have changed and how they viewed the future. We also followed and observed Lampedusans in key spaces of congregation: the main square where events are hosted in the summer evenings, the Church and the mass, the port, the different cafés where they have breakfast and the high street which gets busy in the evening. In restaurants, we got to know some locals more closely and they acted as gatekeepers. In one of our first field trips, we arrived at the start of the local election campaign, so we attended political rallies and spoke to the main candidates. We also spent time volunteering at the Archivio Storico, which organises Italian lessons for migrants and helped the Lampedusa Centro Solidale to welcome migrants at their arrival at the port (Franceschelli and Galipò 2020).

The 30 minutes film aimed at portraying and disseminating the results of the research project and it was not embedded in the methodology as a tool for data collection as an ethnographic film. As detailed in Franceschelli and Galipò (2020), we initially aimed to conduct qualitative video interviews together with the film director and the cameraman. This approach changed throughout the length of the project to better meet both research and filmmaking needs. The video interviews took a long time to prepare: they were arranged and meticulously planned with participants. Their presentation of themselves was also mediated by their positions in front of the camera and the adjustments required for maximising the performance of the audio, achieve the right focus of the image and account for the right amount of light. We were aware that filming involved losing out on some of the spontaneity of interviewing. Yet, this approach remains in line with our research aims and motivation to make the film, which was not to record spontaneous human interactions, but to support public engagement and represent the themes identified in the research through 'audio-visual accounts'. As researchers,

we felt that the camera became an intrusive tool emphasising the performative aspect of the interview but affecting the participants' answers. Some participants did not feel comfortable to open up in the same way as they did off camera, and we were missing out on important and more personal elements of their stories (Franceschelli and Galipò 2020). In many instances, the structured format involved by the use of the video affected the length of the interview by shortening it to fewer and more focused points, as we could not afford editing so many hours of footage. Hence, we were under pressure to cut the interviews and afraid of losing the spontaneity and the unexpected that might have emerged without the camera, while the director was experiencing technical difficulties. Details that were very important to us, such as those emerging from numerous follow-up questions that extended the length of the interviews, were instead hindering the work of the director. Moreover, for us it was important to maintain a one-to-one approach with participants to make them feel comfortable to open up, rather than conducting interviews as a team, which inevitably affected the interactions. These practical issues had also wider implications for the relation between social science and the arts and 'the related question of representation and authority in this type of collaborative work' (Franceschelli and Galipò 2020). To address these problems, we finally decided to conduct separate interviews with and without the camera and so we selected a sub-sample of participants who were comfortable with been video-recorded. In this way, the director was able to carry out shorter video interviews about a smaller number of key questions chosen in advance after preliminary analysis of some of the collected material. Though in the off-camera interviews, we were able to adopt a narrative approach (Clandinin 2006) and also gather more detailed biographical accounts. Through this two steps-approach, we managed to address both academic and filmmaking needs and were even able to explore how people behaved differently in front of a camera compared to 'backstage' settings.

Image [1] below is taken from the animation¹ at the start of the film, which provides background information about the island while also introducing the viewer to a number of key themes: the sea; the geography of Lampedusa; its centrality/marginality and migration.



[Image 1: animation, the sea]

¹ The animation is by the graphic designer Voilà Silvia - <https://vimeo.com/user41012718>

Although the filmed interviews were the main component of the footage, the film also involves a number of ‘cutaways’. A ‘cutaway shot’ is used to interrupt a continuously filmed scene that otherwise will become visually monotonous. Image [2] captures the key features of the cutaways, such as the contrast between the colours of the island’s dry soil and the sea. In our case, cutaways were made of aerial shots of Lampedusa taken by a drone and were selected and edited by the director and cameraman to break down the flow of the filmed interviews. They were mostly aesthetic components about how the story was told. However, these cutaways revealed also useful to refine the message conveyed by many participants for whom the landscape was a crucial aspect of Lampedusa.



[Image 2: Lampedusa’s landscape]

The visualisation of the island’s landscape was also the dominant theme of the initials of the film, but not the only one. In the rather emotionally intense start enhanced by the music (composed specifically for the film), the stillness and beauty of aerial landscaping is contrasted with scenes of rescue at sea from the Italian Coastal Guard’s archive exemplified by image [3].



[Image 3 from Italian Coastal Guard Archive as in the film: rescue at sea]

These scenes were obtained after a long negotiation with the Italian authorities and were object of discussion within the project team. Whether all agreed in the team that the focus of the research was not going to be on the migrants and rescues at sea, but on the experiences of the islanders, we also felt that a reference to the ‘migration crisis’ needed to be made in order to remind the audience why we went to Lampedusa in the first place. Indeed, Lampedusa is not like any other island in the Mediterranean and we wanted to report a short reference to the media coverage of the place often phrased as ‘the migrants’ island’.

Film editing as ‘visual-thematic analysis’: audio-visual accounts of the migration crisis from the perspective of Lampedusans

Similarly to text analysis, the choice of what approach to use for the analysis of visual data depends on the research aims, epistemological and ontological nature of the study, and it may range from analysing social interactions (Knoblauch et al 2012; Knoblauch 2008) to a focus on content and so on the application of categories and codes to the visual evidence (Silver and Patashnick 2011). In our case, the analytic status of visual data was contingent (although not secondary) to the text (transcripts) and the focus was on content and more specifically on the identification and the reproduction of themes. The thematic analysis of transcripts took place simultaneously to the editing of the film footage, which aimed to illustrate the emerging messages from the research.

How did Lampedusans articulate the ‘migration crisis’? The film elaborates on this by presenting a number of audio-visual accounts organised thematically. Audio-visual accounts consist of participants’ verbal articulations filmed during the interview context. The filming reproduces visually research participants’ oral accounts, while also contributing to knowledge and meaning production by for instance, making a link between the geography of Lampedusa and the sense of isolation expressed by the interviews. Hence, our final themes result from the analysis of text as well as from the way this text material is represented visually. In sum, we can consider audio-visual accounts as the audio-visual representations of a theme. The film shows that the closed knitted community of the island was subject to internal divisions and competition, but it was united about a general sense of dissatisfaction with the Italian state accused of delivering poor quality public services, from transport to healthcare (Franceschelli 2019). The crisis for Lampedusa was not just about migrants, but also about the institutional failure of the Italian government on many different fronts, including but not only, the management of migration.

The final edited film documentary broadcasts these findings through four themes described below, each of which draws on a number of audio-visual accounts. Themes were identified by simultaneously analysing non-filmed and filmed interviews and by employing a mixture of inductive and deductive coding which then were put together in wider themes. The final selection of footage for the film was the result of thematically assembling together fractions of audio-video interviews which document the emerging themes. Thematic analysis of the non-filmed interviews was conducted with NVivo, while different software were used for the video interviews. The director and editor used Adobe Premiere for the post-production of the film, but we used the more flexible iMovie (Silver and Patashnick 2011) to watch the footage, select and cut - as we were coding - audio-visual accounts. Finally, the director, in conversation with the researchers, selected the footage that more effectively reproduced each code/theme.

Migration



[Image 4: migrants on the beach]

This first theme revolves around three main codes documented by audio-visual accounts: discussion about the sea; blame of the government, and tourism. Although we did not always ask directly, migration was inevitably a subject of discussion with participants. In speaking about everyday life in the island, many referred to the changing conditions and renewed attention to the place deriving from migration. The film documents an important emerging theme about how the Mediterranean Sea being subject to a symbolic transformation. Many of the migrants' complex and dangerous journeys to reach Europe have ended tragically with their death. The priest of Lampedusa, Don Carmelo, acknowledged that the Mediterranean Sea - historically a place of life, trade, cultural exchanges and opportunities - has become a rather exclusionary border and a place of death and loss:

The sea has been and still is today a sea of death, and while the different nations decide which walls to raise and how tall they should be, here people continue to die. (...) For Lampedusans and seafarers, the sea represents life, affluence, work, generosity and exchanges, but when it becomes a frontier, it gets filled with blood (Don Carmelo).

As shown by the film, migration was not perceived as new in Lampedusa, but part of its long-lasting history. Audio-visual accounts describe migration in Lampedusa as 'normal' rather than an emergency, talking of hospitality as part of the 'DNA of the island'. Yet, the current scenario has changed, the numbers of arriving migrants have increased, stretching the already precarious resources of the isolated community to the maximum. One central issue broadcasted by the film is the sense of lacking support and being abandoned by the national government. The feeling of malaise was strong in the community, but while migrants were not directly blamed for the situation, Lampedusans addressed their resentment toward the government (Franceschelli 2019). As visually illustrated by image [4], migrants and tourists' spaces tended to converge at times with worrying implications for Lampedusans, mostly concerned about the negative impact of migration on the economy of the island, which mostly relies on tourism. Indeed, revenues from tourism went down sharply during the peak of the crisis between 2011-2013 causing the islanders' grievances toward the authorities (Franceschelli 2019).

Life in Lampedusa and local issues



[Image 5: local leader of Lega]

A second range of audio-visual accounts fed into another (audio-visual) theme of the film, which opposed the local priorities of Lampedusans to the global interest in the island because of migration. The film depicts the frustration of the islanders for the failing local public services, including poor education and healthcare provision and the lack of social and cultural activities for young people. These issues were exploited politically by parties such as ‘*Lega Nord*’ (Northern League), which was only a minority party at the time of the fieldwork in 2017, but that has since then acquired a much wider consent in the island and Italy more generally. In the film, Angela in image [5], the representative of Lega Nord in Lampedusa, articulates her political agenda in line with narratives promoting stereotypes about migrants. In fact, she claims that migrants enjoy their stay in Lampedusa at the expenses of taxpayers and also argues that humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) conducting search and rescue operations off the coast of Libya are in league with smugglers to pick up migrants left stranded at sea.

The community

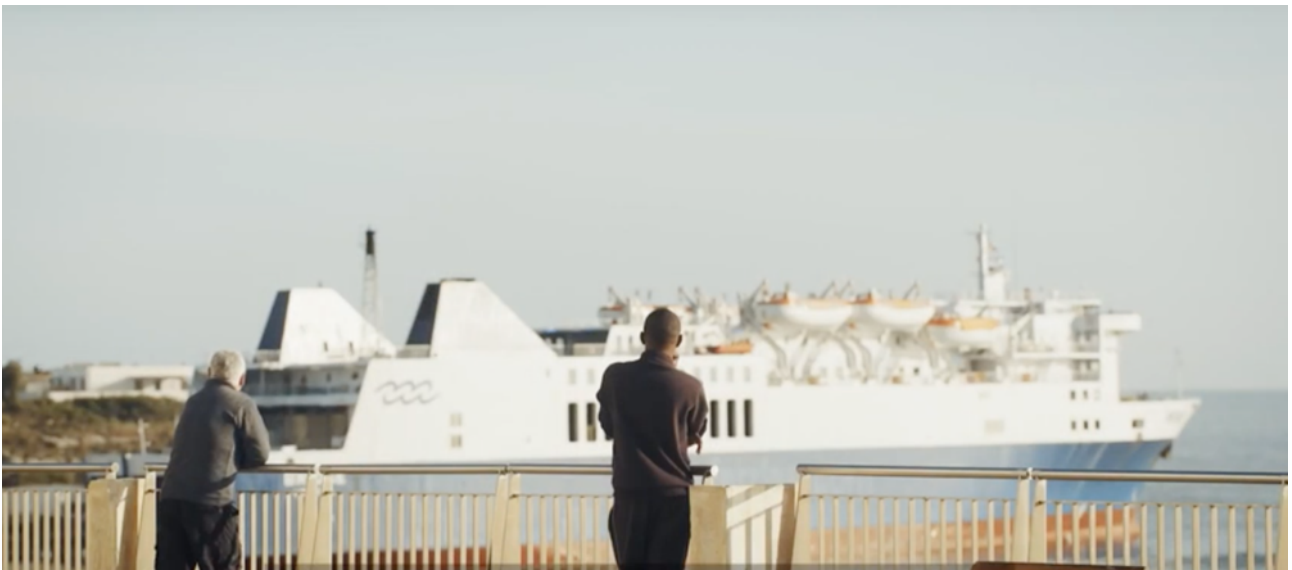


[Image 6: Lampedusa landscape]

This audio-visual theme illustrates the challenges and contradictions of the small community split between migration and tourism. Most islanders showed attachment to Lampedusa and a strong appreciation for its natural beauty, which was widely shared and unified the community. However, there was also an evident sense of antagonism among them, mostly consequence of the highly competitive tourism business. The film documents how Lampedusans are open to outsiders but remain suspicious of members of their own community. They describe themselves as ‘bipolar’ and easy to change their minds but also resilient.

Image [6] exemplifies the film’s cutaways portraying Lampedusa’s dry soil with only little vegetation, which acquire a symbolic meaning in the words of Giusi Nicolini, the former mayor of the island. Giusi compares the resilience of the community to small juniper trees which, in order to grow, have to adapt to the island’s rough soil. Similarly, Pietro, another respondent, refers to Lampedusans as ‘the rock on which the island stands: hard and sturdy but also friable’. The seasonality of Lampedusa, which brings more challenge to the community, is also discussed in the film. Regardless of the difficulties presented, the islanders ultimately suggest a strong sense of attachment to their land depicted as a place difficult to leave behind, as Miriam expresses: ‘Sometimes I want to leave, but here we say, "Our rock is our rock." (...) It’s a bond that we can’t explain, that you can only understand if you are from here’.

‘Ccà semu’



[Image 7: people looking at the sea]

The film suggests that the geographical isolation was also associated with a more complex range of contradictory feelings and emotions. Islanders described themselves as proactive and self-reliant, used to get together and mobilise in times of need and in face of emergencies. However, they also felt deeply subjected to waiting for what is decided elsewhere, beyond their own reach. In Lampedusa, hope and resilience came together with a sense of resignation which prompted islanders to a continuous state of waitness (see image 7), summarised by the phrase *Ccà semu*, a Sicilian fisherman saying which literally means ‘here we are’.

Conclusion

The role and contribution of visual evidence to shape and inform public debate is now the current object of critical and scientific investigation. Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, from communication and media studies to social psychology, anthropology and sociology, have already acknowledged how visual evidence may impact on how social issues are presented and perceived, at times with profound political implications. In this article, we have discussed our experience of making a film documentary to disseminate findings from research about the community of Lampedusa.

Our aim has been to explore the local responses of a community subject to global attention and scrutiny because of its relevance to the debate about migration. This is particularly important in the context of raising anti-migrant feelings used by right-wing populist parties to strengthen their support in Italy, as in many other countries. Therefore, in developing the film and reporting the findings, we have taken into consideration the general media context where representations of the ‘global migration crisis’ tend to create a state of emergency with implications for either how migrants or locals are portrayed and perceived. In documenting this experience, we have accounted for the opportunities provided by visual representations for findings dissemination, but also the risks that they may bring when used to construct a worrying spectacle of migration nurturing fears and moral panic.

How does the ‘migration crisis’ look like for the people of Lampedusa? While reflecting on the methodological aspects of making a film in a social science research context, this article shows how for the community at the core of the European migration debate, migration was only part of a wider list of concerns that have to do with social isolation and poor public services. Through the audio-visual accounts of Lampedusans, our film captures the specific local aspects of a ‘global crisis’ (Franceschelli 2019) while showing the contradictions in which Lampedusans often find themselves in. By documenting their narratives, the film offers a holistic sensory representation of their lives and circumstances in the island. Our idea was not to produce a film with a single narrator voice, but rather to let different people explain meanings that are attached to their place and to enhance their own representations of the crisis. Against this backdrop, we believe the film made a real contribution to knowledge production, informing intellectual debates about ongoing dynamics in the island.

To meet our goal of telling the research story through a different tool and engage audiences outside academia, the film was initially launched in a theatre in London and then screened in different film festivals in Italy, the UK and all-around Europeⁱⁱⁱ. In July 2018, the film was awarded a prize at the Taormina Film Festival^{iv} and in 2019 at the Italian Festival of San Diego. The film was screened several times in the main square of Lampedusa arousing a mixture of different feelings: anger for the island’s unresolved problems portrayed quite vividly by the documentary, but also approval for how the film was able to represent the community, including its landscape and natural resources. Some Lampedusans felt that we left out important problems such as the increasing militarisation of the island, which is also a NATO base. Yet, in the film we could only report on what Lampedusans told us on camera. Despite so, we succeeded in our aim to let Lampedusans becoming an active audience and to speak for themselves. As researchers and academics, we also use the film for seminars and teaching, from research methods courses on visual tools to lecturers in social theory and migration studies. So far, our experience has shown the benefits of using visual evidence for knowledge dissemination, while also highlighting the challenges of making a social science informed film. This

being said, we are aware that like any other written text, the film is not neutral knowledge but inescapably constructed (Parr 2007, 116), as it has to produce something "that you can look at and think about and change ..." (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006, 85). The film is now a stand-alone product, with its own life far beyond academic circles, attracting attention from policymakers and activists and creating opportunities for discussion and further collaboration beyond research.

The final scene of 'Ccà semu', illustrated by image [8], depicts Lampedusa as a site of transit where endangered animal species, like the sea turtles, find refuge. Indeed, this holds true for human beings too, as many people find in Lampedusa a safe port where to rest and stop before continuing with their journeys.



[Image 8: the rescue of a sea turtle]

The film is available here: <https://youtu.be/yWwklC6yorc>

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Notes

ⁱ Link to the film: <https://youtu.be/yWwklC6yorc>

ⁱⁱ Luca Vullo is a Sicilian director. His work has focused on Sicily, Italy and migration. See filmography at <https://www.lucavullo.com/biographyita?lang=en>

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, the 8th Social World Film Festival (Vico Equense) or Cinemambiente (Torino)

^{iv} Prize as the Sebastiano Gesù (film critic) Award at the 64th Taormina Film Festival 14th-20th July 2018