

## PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

## Religion, Film and Migration

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

## Contested images addressing migration policies

In August 2018 an Italian sculptor placed a full-scale reproduction of the Vatican *Pietà* on a fishing boat off the coast of the small island of Lampedusa, an immigration entrance point for thousands of people in search of shelter and a better future in Europe. Fabio Viale's *Pietà senza Cristo* is not an exact copy of the iconic work by Michelangelo since, as the name indicates, the body of Christ is missing. Viale has used the absent Christ as an opportunity to reconceive the great sculpture by placing it in different settings. Viale's marble sculpture was first exhibited in 2017 in an art gallery in Milan.<sup>1</sup> Later, it was set up and photographed as part of a poster installation titled *Lucky Ehi*, in which the marble *Pietà senza Cristo* is presented with a naked man lying on Mary's lap in the place of the dead Jesus. Ehi, the man at the center of the photograph, is a refugee from Nigeria who crossed the Mediterranean Sea like many others to reach the land of his dreams, Italy. Conceived as an art installation, the poster was accompanied by an audio file narrating Ehi's risky journey.<sup>2</sup> Viale's *Pietà* was then used off the coast of Lampedusa, in a further artistic action known as *In mare la Pietà* (*The Pietà at Sea*).

In both works, *Lucky Ehi* and *In mare la Pietà*, the marble sculpture *Pietà senza Cristo* was put in conversation with migration in the Mediterranean; the iconic representation of the desperate mother holding the corpse of her son in her arms depicts, in the words of the artist, "rather

a synthesis of a dramatic historic moment.”<sup>3</sup> For Viale, a floating, “empty” *Pietà* on the Mediterranean transforms a sculpture into a symbolic act of participation and empathy towards people crossing the sea. At the same time, this work can be understood as a message to the inhabitants of Europe, as a plea to question their attitudes towards refugees.<sup>4</sup>

A few months later, at the 58th International Art Exhibition at *La Biennale di Venezia* 2019, the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel presented the work *Barca nostra* (*Our Boat*) in an open air zone of the Arsenale, the location where the city of Venice used to produce its famous naval fleet and where today the Biennale takes place. The art work consists of the original wreck of a Lybian ship that sank on April 18, 2015, in the Sicilian Channel with at least 700 people on board. Pulling the ship—in fact, the grave of so many people—out of the sea and transporting it to the Venetian lagoon was received as a strong, controversial action. The shipwreck simultaneously depicted the fragility of the boat and human life, as well



Figure 1. Christoph Büchel, *Barca nostra*, La Biennale di Venezia, Arsenale, Venezia 2019. (Photograph by the author). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

as the fragility of the hope of its passengers. Presenting an empty tomb as a work of art, the piece challenged indifference (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

These artistic elaborations on migration question both European policies regulating migration and individual attitudes towards an ongoing tragedy. Viale's and Büchel's sculptures evoke at once death and murder as well as grief and compassion; they denounce injustice and encourage participation; they provoke and comfort. They also blur places in a disturbing way: Michelangelo's sculpture par excellence leaves the sacred walls of St. Peter's and floats adrift in the Mediterranean Sea; the remains of a coffin-ship are fished out from the dark sea floor and displayed in a famous art exhibition. Controversial, the art works contest our imaginations by means of visual representation. By reframing our values and attitudes towards people on the move, they pose questions by making visible, from a new angle, what we witness every day.

Both works of art refer to religious aspects: by looking at them audiences may recall the passion of Christ or (missed) funerary rituals. In this article, we focus on the interaction of film, migration, and religion by considering the impact of religious symbols, practices, and traditions as part of cultural settings where meaning-making processes take place.

### **Rethinking the representation of refugees: Stereotypes in media coverage**

These powerful installations discussed above open up a symbolic space for reflection through material and visual communication. Circulating in the media, in the press, on TV, the Internet, and in social media, the installations challenge and dissent from the way migration is often represented. Usually, those seeking shelter and safety are depicted either as hordes of humans traveling in boats, or as bodies beyond fences, railings, or walls. In fact, media coverage tends to use a very small range of representations to illustrate one of the biggest migratory waves of our time. Stereotypes and *déjà vu* effects instantiate ideas of menacing, dangerous strangers. These stereotypical, widespread images of human masses moving north constructs a vision not only of a homogeneous mass of migrants, but also of a homogeneous Europe. They convey imaginations of European national states as places where common values and norms are shared.<sup>6</sup>

In the mainstream coverage, religion is often exploited to corroborate an alleged ontological distinction between "them" and "us." Specifically,

visual and audiovisual media coverage contributes extensively to framing migration as an unsolvable “crisis,”<sup>7</sup> and as a threat to “European”—often identified with “Christian”—identity. However, these stereotypical images are challenged by works of visual art, sculptures, and installations, and, furthermore, by feature and documentary films and arthouse productions which directly contest such pervading, highly problematic representations of migration. Visual and audiovisual art works have become a public place of information, meaning-making, and debate. Furthermore, by presenting individual and personal biographies, they bridge the distance between people on the move and their audiences by means of emotional identification and empathy.<sup>8</sup> It is in this rich context of representation that films on migration are embedded.

Images and moving images are not to be considered as mere representations of reality. Images interact with viewers, they are active players that shape the way we look at the world. The power of visual communication is rooted in the capacity of the image to act.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, in arthouse productions dealing with migration, the boundaries between different genres tend to blur. Documentary and fiction filmmaking styles are merged, and the relationship between representation and the contemporary phenomena does not follow strict genre conventions. In doing so, the films challenge attitudes towards what have become visual commonplaces, and made these challenges more explicit, since the audience cannot rely on the genre conventions they are used to. Many films about migration invite audience members to assume an active role as viewers, and to develop opinions about and take up positions on what they are watching.<sup>10</sup>

In this context of controversial visualizations and of imaging politics, religion plays an important role. If stereotypical visual representations tend to use religion as a marker of insurmountable difference, many independent productions address religion in a subtler way. In this article, it is not possible to offer an exhaustive overview of the topic. Nevertheless, two influential works are highlighted to illustrate the role religious references may assume in challenging common assumptions about refugees.

To analyze religion in film means to address a very complex relationship that is deeply rooted in the history of cinema. There are various procedures to approach and describe religion in film art.<sup>11</sup> For the sake of

the topic we are exploring here, we will concentrate on symbols, motifs, and narrative patterns explicitly taken from religious traditions emphasizing the meaning and function they assume in the setting of works dealing with displaced people traveling towards Europe.

### Looking back to the 1990's

Our exploration begins with a Swiss film from 1990. The drama *Reise der Hoffnung* (*Journey of Hope*, Xavier Koller, 1990) retraces the traumatic journey of a Kurdish family—father Haydar, mother Meryem, and Mehmed Ali, the youngest and smartest of seven children—from an Anatolian mountain village to Istanbul, Naples, and finally the southern border of Switzerland. The family, trying to cross the Alps by foot, are abandoned by their smugglers, and caught by surprise in bad weather. In the snow storm, Mehmed Ali dies in the arms of his father.

A true story which was mentioned in the margins of newspapers, caught the attention of the director and inspired the film.<sup>12</sup> In the 1990's, identities of refugees were defined by nationality (in this case Turkish) rather than religion. Still, in this film, religion plays a subtle role. In terms of narration, the film depicts a journey born out of hope that ends in despair. The film begins with the joyful celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice at the end of Ramadan in a small rural village in Anatolia. This religious festival becomes a metaphor for the destiny of Haydar's family: the child will be the scapegoat, but unlike the sheep offering at the core of the festival that establishes strong communal ties between the members of the village, Mehmed Ali's death disrupts the cohesion of his family. In this film, the journey goes hand in hand with the loss of religious practice and belief. In the middle of the film, a suitcase full of religious books falls downhill and the sacred scriptures are scattered in ravines. It is a powerful visual metaphor that expresses migration as a loss of cultural, religious, and familiar roots.

While references to Islamic traditions and customs are seen throughout the film, religious imagery from the Judeo-Christian tradition is stylistically evoked and then used as an alienating device. At one point we see a rainbow and olive branch, symbols that recall Noah's new covenant in the book of *Genesis*, while these both work to suggest a less than optimistic outcome. During their difficult journey, the family is represented according to visual conventions typical for the Holy Family fleeing to



Figure 2. Screen capture: The family on the road toward Switzerland is presented with references to iconographic conventions of the motif of the Holy Family (screenshot, *Journey of Hope*, 00:43:43) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Egypt (Fig. 2). Furthermore, at the end, the *Pietà* is recollected to express the desperation of Haydar (Fig. 3): the father holds the dying son in his arms with no hope of resurrection. Alone in the glacial winter landscape, Haydar has been completely abandoned.

The references to religious motifs in *Journey of Hope* can be interpreted in different ways. The references to the Islamic tradition emphasize the loss of orientation that accompanies the characters during their journey. There are only fragments of a religious practice remaining, wrested out from the context of a community. In this sense, they highlight the process of isolation that goes hand in hand with the development of relocation. The Islamic tradition, a crucial part of the cultural and emotional context the protagonists have left behind, disappears slowly along the course of their dramatic adventure. Meanwhile, the allusion to biblical motifs seems to offer a clue to the audience for the film's interpretation: the motifs suggest a narrative that runs parallel to a Christian vision of sacrifice—the



Figure 3. Screen capture: The father with his dying son mirrors the iconography of the *Pietà* (screenshot, *Journey of Hope* 01:31:41). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

*Pietà* constellation is a very strong image here—but, at the same time, they create a sense of alienation, since any hint of redemption is denied.

The internationally well-received and Oscar-winning *Journey of Hope* has been digitally restored and was presented at the 2016 Locarno Film Festival, where it was first launched in 1990 and awarded the Bronze Leopard. Through the 1990's, *Journey of Hope* shocked Swiss audiences by denouncing illegal practices and dramatic destinies with which most people were not familiar. Sadly, after 26 years, the film has not lost any relevance. Still, considered in the contemporary socio-political and artistic context, Xavier Koller's film assumes a new significance. It has become a part of a whole film production that challenges not only the political responses to displaced people but also the way European audiences still look at it.

### **Religious symbols, motifs, and narratives as a common ground**

In the 2016 *Berlinale*, the Italian documentary filmmaker Gianfranco Rosi presented his last work: *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*, IT/FR 2016). The

documentary stages strong and explicit images which center the so-called “migrant crisis” in the capital of Germany, a country where the welcoming attitude toward refugees was becoming controversial and social tensions were increasing.<sup>13</sup>

In *Journey of Hope*, Koller carefully reconstructed the details of the events with archival work and research on the various sites the Turkish family had passed, and he choose to tell a fiction story by maintaining a documentary character. Gianfranco Rosi’s approach is the opposite of this. His film is based on documentary footage, but is composed of sophisticated editing and sound style which purposely blurs distinctions between documentary footage and fictional narration. The film implements a cross-cutting style, telling two stories that never converge although they both unfold in Lampedusa. On the one hand, the film portrays inhabitants of the island who make a modest living. The daily routine on the island unfolds with the portrait of a child, Samuele (the protagonist), a fisherman, a radio-broadcaster, elderly women, and a few other figures. Daily life on the island is depicted in a cold, sunless, and windy atmosphere. The interactions between the figures, whose relationships remain vague, are modulated by a slow, repetitive rhythm. There are no idyllic sceneries. Everyday survival on the island is a struggle. On the other hand, the film focuses on the situation of refugees who reach the island shore after terrifying journeys.

The documentary footage leads straight into the tragedy. The camera—and the audience with it—explores holds of ships where the bodies of the deceased mix with the living. There are shocking scenes of medical resuscitation attempts on the decks of boats—death, despair, and suffering are depicted straightforwardly. The precarious, though quiet world of the island’s inhabitants and the dramatic scenes of the refugees occur at the same time but never in the same filmic space: they remain dimensions of Lampedusa that do not interact with each other.<sup>14</sup>

In this film, only a few connections link the gap between the two narratives. First, the character of the physician, Pietro Bartolo, who cares for everybody, links the two worlds. When Samuele needs a medical examination because he does not see properly, Bartolo takes care of him, an everyday case for a general practitioner. But Bartolo also takes responsibility for the refugees and performs emergency care in extreme



conditions. His relationship to the patients is respectful and human, regardless of the places from which they have come.

References to religion function as a second bridge between the tragic world of the refugees and the grey-scale world of the locals. The documentary depicts religious practices of both groups, even though the rituals they perform are quite different from each other. However, the rituals of the different groups also evidence strong parallels. For example, the film presents religious practices from the perspective of individuals, never from the perspective of institutionalized religion. These are rituals in which personal origins, biographies, and experiences are remembered.

For the refugees, religion is a space of personal expression. Singing, they recapitulate the journey from Nigeria to Lampedusa, describing dehumanizing situations and their experiences of disconcerting injustice, violence, humiliation, and distress. Praying, offered through rhythm and song, the refugees are represented as individuals with personal stories and agency, sharply contrasting with the images of dismembered bodies in the ship holds. Through prayer, the refugees express their traumas but also their dreams.

Individual rituals are also brought into focus in the depiction of the island inhabitants: an elderly woman makes her bed carefully; statues of saints and of Mary decorate her tidy bedroom; a photo of her deceased husband sits on the night table (Fig. 4). The woman says some prayers, kisses the images, and leaves the room. The scene offers an insight into a personal Catholic practice that the woman carries with her throughout the day. Even though the situation of the refugees is not comparable to the life of the praying island woman, religious practice is, for both groups, an intimate moment.

A further, fragile bridge between the separated worlds of refugees and islanders is built by the radio sound bites that punctuate the film. Information about the stranded boats and the rescued migrants is transmitted into the homes of the islanders. Along with the news, the local radio station transmits pieces of music the inhabitants dedicate to friends and relatives. The film concludes with the aria *Dal tuo stellato soglio* from Rossini's Opera *Mosé in Egitto* (*Moses in Egypt*). The aria tells the story of the Jews standing in front of the Red Sea as the Egyptians encroach on them. Moses and his followers address God, asking him to save them. Will the water separate? Will God help them cross the sea?



Figure 4. While cleaning her bedroom, an older inhabitant of the isle of Lampedusa prays (screenshot, *Fire at Sea*, 00:44:01). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Neither Mediterranean nor European politics show mercy toward the refugees. Even still, the refugees who we see praying in the camp have made it, at least to Lampedusa. *Fire at Sea* avoids suggesting happy endings or easy solutions. Instead, it emphasizes the humanity of all of the protagonists, which strongly contrasts with the horrifying images of illegal trafficking and febrile politics.<sup>15</sup>

#### Looking differently at moving images

I have highlighted only two productions among a long series of outstanding films such as Fatih Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite* (*The Edge of Heaven*, 2007), Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011) and *The Other Side of Hope* (2017), Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* (2017), or Markus Imhof's *Eldorado* (2018). These works challenge the ways the media reports on migration. Not only do they provide alternative images of this phenomenon, they also encourage new ways of seeing it. In this cinematic context, religion plays a striking role in staging and representing migration, often helping to bring to life individuals and their personal identities. These arthouse productions draw portraits of distinct, autonomous individuals, particularly while they attend their religious practice in a challenging displaced situation.

Awarded with the Golden Bear, which is unusual for a documentary, *Fire at Sea* has been controversially received and broadly discussed. The Ecumenical Jury at the *Berlinale* joined the main jury in praising the film not only for its “poetically meaningful images,” and its insights into the ambiguity of the sea that sustains life for some and destroys the life of others. It awarded the film for the ways in which it represents refugees, “a film that crafts a new perspective of the catastrophe, a film that refuses to allow the status quo to go unquestioned.”<sup>16</sup>

In the case of films about migration, the public function of cinema is crucial. The cinematic depiction of migration is not only about social or political critique, but also about different ways of representing this contemporary phenomenon. These films give a public space to people who might not otherwise have a voice. They bring individuals with personal stories into view and allow for an encounter with people on the move in a way that clearly departs from the widespread representation of amorphous, anonymous, and dangerous masses.

Staging personal histories, traumas, and dreams, these films deal with religion in a similar way. In both movies, I discussed above, but also in other productions, the depiction of religion is mainly developed in two directions. First, beliefs and rituals are tied to personal practices which function as a symbolic space of resilience and of hope. Second, staging references to well-known religious narratives, motifs, symbols, and rituals creates a common ground between the filmic figures and the audience. Religion is presented as a part of a cultural imaginary, not as a marker of affiliation to an institution.<sup>17</sup> The religious references open up a common ground of debate; audiences are invited to enter into it and to assume independent roles as active interpreters.

Film art shapes the public disposition to migration by offering a public space where a critical *way of seeing* can be practiced in a literal sense. Recognizing religious motifs, audiences are invited to engage with the film and what it represents as autonomous and participative subjects, and to rethink mainstream media coverage.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access funding enabled and organized by ProjektDEAL.

## Notes

1. On the work and biography of the Italian sculptor s. [www.fabioviale.it](http://www.fabioviale.it) (accessed on 31th August 2020).
2. <https://www.galleriapoggiali.com/it/mostra-milano/fabio-viale-lucky-ehi> (accessed on 31th August 2020).
3. “Credo che sia un’immagine rappresentativa—afferma Viale, anzi una sintesi di un momento storico drammatico”, <https://www.malgradotuttoweb.it/lampedusa-in-mare-la-pieta/> (accessed on 31th August 2020).
4. Ibid.
5. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/partecipants/christoph-büchel> (accessed on 31th August 2020).
6. See Dennerlein, Bettina, and Elke Frietsch, eds., *Identitäten in Bewegung, Migration im Film*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011; Bleuler, Marcel, and Anita Moser, eds., *Ent/Grenzen. Künstlerische und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf Grenzräume, Migration und Ungleichheit*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018.
7. On the ambiguity of this term see Zaroulia, Mariella, “Performing that which Exceeds Us – Aesthetics of Sincerity and Obscenity During ‘the Refugees Crisis,’” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 23 (2), 2018, pp. 179-92.
8. Bayraktar, Nilgün, *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving-Image Art*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015; Fritz, Natalie, and Marie-Therese Mäder, eds., *Uncertain Destinies and Destinations. Audiovisual Perspectives on Migration*, Marburg: Schüren Verlag forthcoming, 2021. This forthcoming volume is dedicated not only to art house production, as a section explores audio-visual footage by refugee.
9. Boehm, Gottfried, “Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkung zur Logik der Bilder,” in Christa Maar and Hubert Burda, eds., *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder*, Köln: DuMont pp. 28–43; Bredekamp, Horst, *Theorie des Bildakts, Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013, pp. 48–56.
10. Chow, Rey, “Film und kulturelle Identität,” in Bettina Dennerlein and Elke Frietsch, eds., *Identitäten in Bewegung, Migration im Film*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011, pp. 19–32 (21); Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria, “Moving Images. Representation of Religion in Migration Films,” in Natalie Fritz and Marie-Therese Mäder, eds., *Uncertain Destinies and Destinations. Audiovisual Perspectives on Migration*, Marburg: Schüren Verlag (forthcoming), 2021.
11. For an initial introduction see Wright, Melanie, *Religion and Film. An Introduction*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2007; Blizek, William L., ed., *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, London and New York: Continuum, 2009.
12. See Sieg, Christina, ed., *Reise der Hoffnung. Flucht, Schleppertum und schweizerische Asylpolitik. Ein Dokumentarband zum Thema des Films von Xavier Koller*, Zürich: Werdverlag, 1990; Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria, “Moving Images.”
13. The famous sentence “Wir schaffen das” (“We will manage this”) that synthesized Germany’s migration politics was uttered by Chancellor Angela Merkel exactly five years ago. A retrospective on German migration policies can be found in Oltermann, Philip, “How Angela Merkel’s Great Migrant Gamble Paid off”, *The Guardian*, 30.08.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/angela-merkel-great-migrant-gamble-paid-off> (accessed on 31th August 2020).

14. Sou, Gemma, 2018, "Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare)", *Nationalities Papers*, 46 (2), pp. 335–6; Díez Valle, Álvaro, "Fuego en el mar. Fuocoammare", *Filmhistoria online*, 26 (2), 2016, pp. 101–3, <http://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/filmhistoria/article/view/17158/19957> (accessed on 31th August 2020).
15. Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria, "Moving Images."
16. <https://www.inter-film.org/auszeichnungen/16161616/prize-ecumenical-jury-berlin-2016-international-competition> (accessed on 5th November 2020).
17. Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria, "Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Setting the Scene", in Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, ed., *Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Explorations in Visual und Material Practices*, ed. Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (Zürich: Pano, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015), pp. 9–38.