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Bodies on Hold

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract
Bodies on Hold explores the phenomenology of watching people at risk and its ethical implications. It includes both a visual analysis of two experimental documentaries about migration and an original sensorial investigation in the city of Philadelphia of how temporal precarity is created on screen with no human subject.

Keywords: migration, ethics, spectatorship, waiting, abstraction

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Bodies on Hold is a situated investigation into the spectatorial experience of watching people at risk on screen. Inspired by critical discussions about the mobilization of compassion in liberal cultures, this video attempts to reconfigure the relationship between viewers and on-screen subjects. Mass media representations of endangered human lives perpetuate unequal relation between viewers and on-screen subjects by emphasize emergency and sentimentality. Lauren Berlant clarifies how this mechanism works: "Compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is over there. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering."[1] This disposition, she argues, suspends a critical consideration of the ways by which regimes of violence enable the reproduction of political and global capital today. Following Berlant and other critics of humanitarian imagery, I am searching after an alternative spectatorship experience, one which may point at the direction of politics of equality.

Developed as a complementary part of my dissertation writing process, the video's point of departure is the analysis of two experimental documentaries dealing with migrants awaiting rescue at sea. Philip Schefner's *Havarie* (2016) and Amel Alzakout's *Purple Sea* (2020) were made against the backdrop of the Mediterranean crossing in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria. *Havarie* reworks a short YouTube video recorded from a cruise liner that features blurry images of a dinghy adrift with thirteen people onboard. Three minutes' worth of footage is slowed down so that it unfolds at one frame per second. It is accompanied by the marine radio traffic recorded during the rescue operation and a mosaic of voiced testimonies, in which anonymous men and women recall their experience of historical conflicts. *Purple Sea* (2020) also examines an unfolding event of endangered migrants waiting to be saved. Here the perspective is that of a GoPro camera mounted on the wrist of a Syrian artist and filmmaker who took the smugglers' route to Europe. Just before reaching the coast of Lesbos, her vessel capsized, and she fell overboard along with more than 300 other passengers. They waited almost three hours in the water for help, and forty-three people died in the incident. The film is comprised of dizzying footage of fluorescent orange life jackets, dangling legs, tiny feet in white sneakers, a bobbing packet of cigarettes, life preservers. These nearly abstract close-ups are accompanied by tactile soundscapes above and below water.

1 Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)," in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (London: Routledge, 2004), 4.

Whereas the first film observes the unfolding event from a perspective that is too distant and the second offers a view that is too close, both abstract the human figure. *Bodies on Hold* study the films' techniques of abstraction by means of split screen, graphic animation, separating video from audio, and producing original video material. However, while these two films serve as guiding examples for counter-hegemonic, interruptive nonfiction media practices, the video focuses on my viewing experience and is constructed around it. My voice-over reflects on the experience of watching people who I cannot discern waiting for a rescue team. Other abstraction techniques such as slow motion, minimalism, and decentralized narrative structure bring to my attention the ways by which the films allude to different kinds of waiting—some are more precarious than others—yet there is no hierarchy implied. Watching waiting and watching as waiting (for something to happen) open two questions that I pursue in the second half of the video: What are the conditions of possibility for seeing "waiting" on screen without a human subject? When does "waiting" become precarity?

The filming process was led by the idea that one way of confronting the question of how to ethically account for the inherent power relations between documentary subjects and viewers is to construct a scene in which the viewer could watch precarity with no subject (this does not mean though that there are no people in the frame). I borrow the term "temporal precarity" from migration scholar Nicholas De Genova, who highlights how capitalism manipulates time to produce global inequalities. In the context of irregular migration, De Genova argues that, in addition to the legal and administrative production of waiting by the border regime, the threat of detention or deportation can itself intensify migrants' precarity by rendering their lives unstable and unpredictable, making them more vulnerable to exploitation as a source of labor force.[2] I began filming in designated waiting areas around Philadelphia but early in the process I turned the camera to other corners in the city as well. My aim was to point to the fact that temporal precarity characterizes the lives of many people across the globe; and that because it is mundane and structural, it is imperceptible to the humanitarian eye.

Bodies on Hold's prologue is composed by a slowed-down scene taken from Pierre Braubenger's documentary *The Bullfight* (La Course de Taureaux, 1949). This documentary is at the center of André Bazin discussion about what he perceived as a radical rupture between the transience of life and the repeatability of death on-screen.[3] Unlike watching "the tragic ballet of the bullfight" on-site, wherein the moment of death is unique by definition, in cinema, death is subjected to endless repetitions. Thus, for Bazin, death on-screen is intrinsically obscene. I follow Bazin's appreciation of cinema's unique linkage with contingency, yet, when it comes to temporal precarity on-screen, I depart from his account by considering it from the vantage point of life rather than death. *Bodies on Hold*, thereby, shifts the focal point from the imminent death of subjects (such as the toreador and the bull) to the physical relations between the body of the viewer and the missing body on the screen.

2 Nicholas De Genova, "'Doin' Hard Time on Planet Earth:' Migrant Detainability, Disciplinary Power and the Disposability of Life," in *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, ed. Christine M. Jacobsen, Marry-Anne Karlsen, and Shahram Khosravi (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 193.

3 André Bazin, "Death Every Afternoon," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 27–31.

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