

## Masking, blurring, replacing: can the undocumented migrant have a face in film?

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# Masking, Blurring, Replacing: Can the Undocumented Migrant Have a Face in Film?

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# Masking, Blurring, Replacing: Can the Undocumented Migrant Have a Face in Film?

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OLAF BERG AND HELEN SCHWENKEN

The question whether undocumented migrants can have a face in film points first of all to the ethical responsibility that is implicit in every documentary film, because the filmmakers have to consider the possible harmful effects their film can have for those being represented in it. “Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the relationship between filmmakers and subject has consequences for subjects and viewers alike”, states film scholar Bill Nichols.<sup>1</sup> This general consideration gains special importance when the film’s subjects are as vulnerable as undocumented migrants. Their legal status generates more often than not a need to be “invisible” to the police and therefore to control their visible exposure. Showing the migrant’s face, flat or work place can help government authorities to trace them and lead to their detention and expulsion.

Thus the visual appearance of undocumented migrants becomes a critical point for every documentary on the issue of irregular migration. On the one hand the visual presence of a person is vital for the viewer’s positive relation to the subject. On the other hand it exposes the undocumented migrant to a considerable danger. Caught between those two conflicting interests, many filmmakers opt for techniques of showing and hiding a migrant’s face at the same time by masking or blurring the face, filming the migrant from behind, back-lighted, or as a shadow in the dark. The problematic side of these strategies is the fact that these techniques are culturally associated not only with witnesses of crimes that need to be protected, but also with the representation of criminals and persons who shamefully hide themselves. It is a representational strategy that concedes the undocumented migrants’ visibility only for the price of waiving their

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1 | Nichols 2001, p. 9.

recognizability as normal individuals. Thus, even though not necessarily intended, these remedies to protect the migrants at the same time produce an ambivalent aesthetics. Such ambivalent representations also have ambivalent political impacts. While minorities tend to equal more media presence with more political power, Johanna Schaffer argues that this is not necessarily the case as it can also result in tighter surveillance and discipline. Therefore the modes of visibility are key issues.<sup>2</sup>

In this space of aesthetical and ethical forces, politics of representation take place. The migrant's face becomes a contested space of conflicting representations. The very intention to represent undocumented migrants forces the filmmaker to participate in the construction of what an undocumented illegal migrant might be. One should not forget that to be or not to be "illegal" is not part of a human's nature but a social attribution that state authorities ascribe to certain persons. Hence every documentary film on undocumented migration has to face the fact that "[a]n illegal alien looks exactly like a legal alien or, for that matter, a citizen"<sup>3</sup>, as Mireille Rosello states. Therefore it is impossible to visualize an undocumented immigrant as such through exclusively visual means. In her analysis of French television coverage of migration issues, Rosello noticed that all strategies which filmmakers use to represent undocumented migration "have one feature in common: each time, illegal immigration is not defined, but it is *associated* with other concepts or elements, for example clandestinity *and* invisibility, clandestinity *and* papers, or clandestinity *and* the police, and clandestinity *and* race"<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore documentaries about migration can be considered a constitutive part of the migration and border regime as Brigitta Kuster states.<sup>5</sup> No filmmaker can escape from being part of these politics. Within these politics there is no simple answer to the question how undocumented migrants might best be portrayed. And, wondering "about the cultural consequences of the association between illegal immigration and invisibility," Rosello states that "the paradigm cannot be appropriated as positive or negative. Therefore, this is not a type of representation that dispenses the viewer from a reflection about what should be done"<sup>6</sup>.

In the following we identify different strategies of visual representation of undocumented migrants in (independent) documentary films that go beyond the black-barred face that makes them appear as criminals. We consider these alternative aesthetic strategies an important contribution to antiracist and pro-immigrant struggles. Nevertheless, even in these documentaries, as Brigitta Kuster puts it, the visibility of migrants is always in danger of being quite close to the "visual economy of its criminalization,

2 | Schaffer 2008.

3 | Rosello 1998, p.139.

4 | Rosello 1998, p. 139, emphasis in original.

5 | Kuster 2006, p. 187.

6 | Rosello 1998, p. 146.

regulation and control” and to “reproduce the depictions of the police, of ruling law, of accepted truths”<sup>7</sup>. The line between policing and criminalizing modes of representation and more empowering and appreciating ways can be a thin one.

## THE AMBIGUITY OF SHOWING AND VEILING

One answer to the problem involved in filming undocumented migrants who do not want to show their face to the camera is simply to avoid filming them and looking out for other migrants who do accept being filmed. One example for this strategy is the documentary *Próxima Estación (Next Station)* by Estela Ilárraz. The filmmaker tells the story of Ecuadorian women and couples and their challenges of transnational family-lives. The women work in Madrid as domestic workers, often taking care of other children, while their own children are left in Ecuador under the supervision of mostly female family members. The faces of the protagonists are shown like the ones of any other person. The viewer learns their names and the places where they live are displayed openly. In one case the film even visits an undocumented migrant at his easy identifiable working place, a radio station where he has his own radio show for migrants. There is no visual sign that labels the migrants as “undocumented” and the viewer learns about the migrants’ status only when they talk about specific experiences such as being caught without papers by the police. The filmmaker’s decision to work with undocumented migrants who show their face without fear to the camera normalizes the visual representation of undocumented migration and allows for focusing on the complex transnational family relations.

The film’s conception is based on the specific Spanish situation that differs significantly from the one in countries such as Austria or Germany. In Spain, undocumented migration from Latin America is in many aspects less stigmatized and criminalized in every-day practices. Undocumented migrants can even register as inhabitants with the local administration. Therefore, undocumented migrants can move more freely in Spain as compared to other countries—this does, however, not mean that the life is an easy one, as is also shown in the film when for example one couple gets caught by the police, but manage to talk their way out of it.

The decision to film only persons that show their face works fine as long as there is always an alternative person to portray. To generalize this decision in the case of undocumented migrants carries the risk of excluding by default a group of persons that are systematically deprived from the possibility to show their face and identity without an essential risk. In fact, the films we know that show undocumented migrants’ faces mainly cover three groups of migrants: Firstly, migrants on the move, that do not

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7 | Kuster 2006, p. 188, translation ob/hs.

care much about the traces they leave behind, secondly, migrants in countries where the risk to be detected through the film's images is less acute and finally migrants that already got caught by the police or immigration authorities. As a consequence, the generalized decision to only film those undocumented migrants who agree to being shown would inhibit access to life realities of undocumented migrants beyond these groups for documentary film. So, this strategy could lead to the result of banning most groups of undocumented migrants from documentary film.

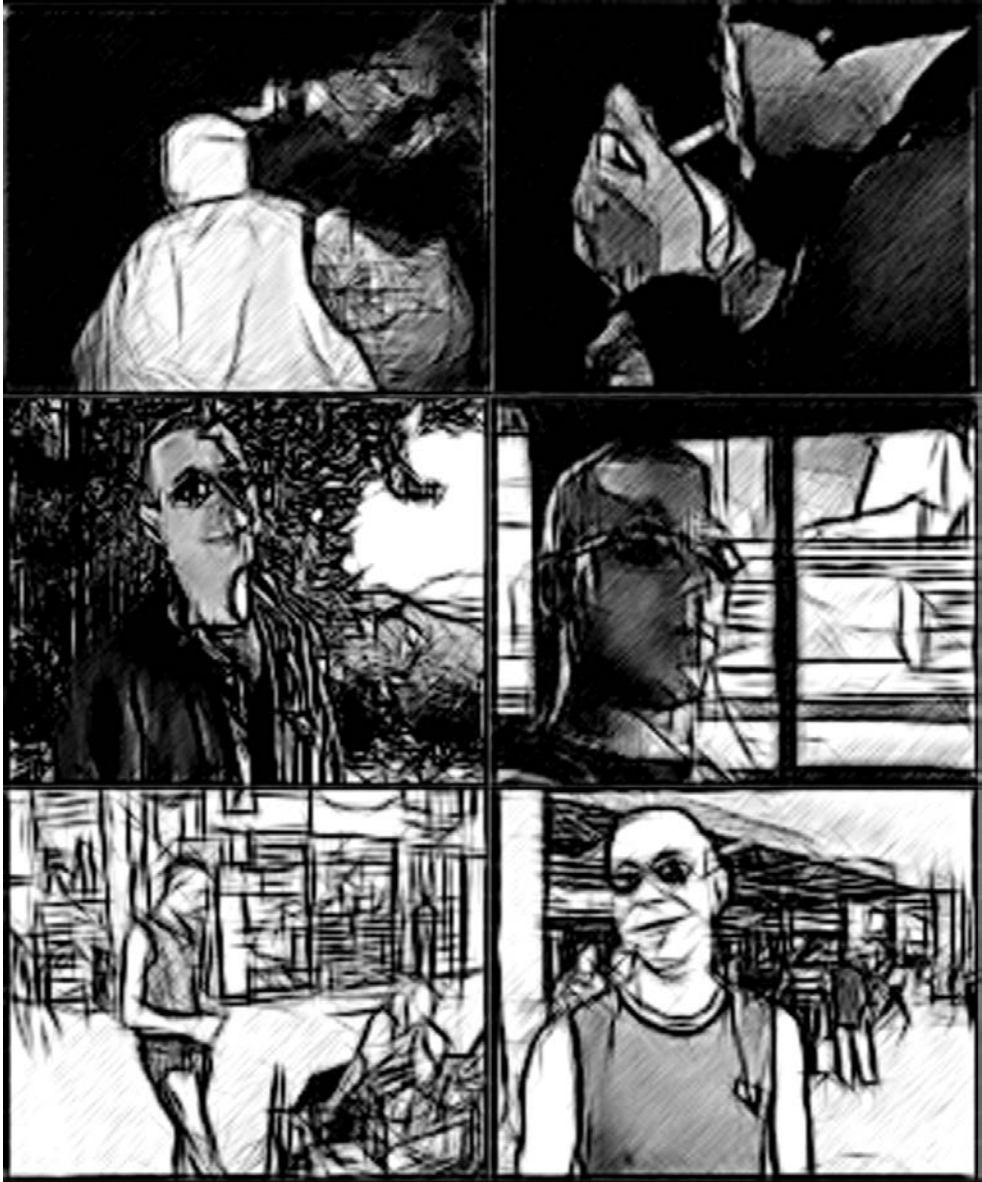
The German TV Production *Schattenmenschen—illegal in Deutschland* (*Shadow People—illegal in Germany*) aims at throwing light on the living condition of people without legal documents. TV has the possibility to reach a general public, at the same time it compels the filmmakers to make concessions to mainstream viewing patterns. The advantage of potentially reaching many people is paired with the amplified risk for the migrants of being apprehended by state officials. By portraying persons who need to protect themselves from being recognized, the film challenges, within the constraints of a TV-production, the aforementioned ambiguity of representing undocumented migrants.

The film follows three lives of undocumented migrants: Nikolai comes from Ukraine and entered the European Union by foot. He travels like a rover from one place to another in search of work—and no border regime will stop him. Valérie came as a young child with her parents from Africa and grew up in Germany. Although she graduated from high school with excellent grades, she cannot register at university to study medicine because she still lives without any legal status. She represents the young generation of migrants that grew up and are culturally rooted in Germany but still have no right to obtain a residence permit let alone citizenship. Elisa came from South America 13 years ago and has been working since then as a domestic worker. She remits as much money as she can afford in order to pay for her daughter's education. Now she is in trouble because she needs a medical treatment and, as undocumented migrant has no insurance. She paradigmatically embodies those hard working migrants who are excluded from social security and lack access to basic services.

Right at the beginning of the film Nikolai's border crossing into Germany is dramatically restaged. A man in the dark runs through the bushes, crossing a river by swimming and warming himself on the other side at a campfire. The camera shows the man's feet, follows him from behind, dives with him into the water, shows his hands lighting a cigarette while the face is a shadow-profile in the flicker of the campfire. The dramatic string music grows louder and louder in this opening scene until the film's title appears flickering like the fire in the background of the image. The undocumented migrant appears as somebody between intruder and Marlboro man. The images function within the parameters of genre knowledge: As in a thriller which at the beginning often shows the criminal at work while the viewer is still left in the dark about his or her identity,

it is in this case Nikolai's identity which is kept undercover. The cigarette smoking man at the campfire foreshadows the coming adventures of a tough guy.

Figure 1: *Schattenmenschen*, Germany, 2007<sup>8</sup>



After this opening scene the film switches to Valérie. To gain more dynamism the film switches between the three stories of Nikolai, Valérie and Elisa which are developing in parallel. When the film returns to Nikolai we can see him in a light-flooded forest answering questions of the film team. The potentially dangerous intruder from the first scene transforms into a smart guy looking for some adventure and work to make a living. Like a modern rover he wanders through Europe and the film team follows him on his way from the Polish-German border to Italy where a friend

**8** | Unfortunately the filmmaker refused permission to publish photo-stills of the film. To avoid legal trouble we only publish sketches of the film shots.

promised to help him getting a job. In contrast to his first border crossing through the river, the camera films him sitting in the back of a car and smiling into the camera while passing a control post. The commentary, “Nikolai is at the destination of his desires, in Italy” (translation ob/hs), suggests it is the border control station into Italy. A close look at the image shows it more likely to be a toll-station on the motorway. As there are no regular passport controls anymore between the countries of the Schengen zone, the control post, as the place where the decision whether you can enter a country or not takes place, dissolves into a border zone of controls upon suspicion. Thus the border becomes less visible while maintaining its function as a barrier for people’s free circulation. In public imaginaries the control post still represents the border and thus the toll station functions as a symbol for entering Italy.

Obviously in the case of Nikolai there was no need to hide the face in the first scene. It was an aesthetic decision to dramatize his border crossing. One reason was most definitely to catch the viewer’s attention before he/she switches to another TV channel. It also marks Nikolai as an irregular border crosser.<sup>9</sup> At the same time he appears as someone engaged in a criminal activity, if not a threat to the viewer. It can be argued that the filmmakers counter this concession to the TV format in the remaining parts of the documentary. They contrast the first image of a potentially criminal undocumented migrant with the image of smiling Nikolai as an ordinary adventure seeking young guy in the subsequent scenes. Nikolai is the embodiment of what critical migration studies call the “autonomy of migration”<sup>10</sup>. The subject of autonomy of migration is clearly a male one. This is true for most critical migration studies<sup>11</sup> as well as in this film. While the two women are much more portrayed as victims of migration policies and societal circumstances, the only male protagonist embodies the independent rover. This difference is underscored in the film by the fact that the migrant women’s faces are blurred while Nikolai’s is shown openly.

The film’s visual strategy illustrates the ambivalent potential effects of the decision to show undocumented migrants while avoiding to film their faces. As Nikolai in the opening scene, undocumented migrants find themselves in such images most of the time placed somewhere in the dark and bound to stereotypes known from genre cinema. The power of images attaches this position to the migrants as a kind of ontological feature, not as a temporary and involuntary situation. This effect has rightly led to the criticism that such representations willingly or unwillingly contribute to the criminalization of undocumented migrants. Public discourses on

**9** | Cf. the paradigmatic figure of the border crosser Horn/Kaufmann/Bröckling 2002.

**10** | Cf. Moulier Boutang 1993; Karakayali/Tsianos 2005.

**11** | Cf. Benz/Schwenken 2005.



migration are in many contexts characterized by “threat narratives”<sup>12</sup>. Threats are socially re-/produced, and visual media are one important way how that is achieved. This danger of the potential negative effect of hiding faces is countered in the film by the open appearance of Nikolai later in the film. By deconstructing the threatening intruder image of the opening scene, the film invites the viewer to critically reflect upon the viewer’s own pre-perception of undocumented migrants with which the dramatic opening scene operates.

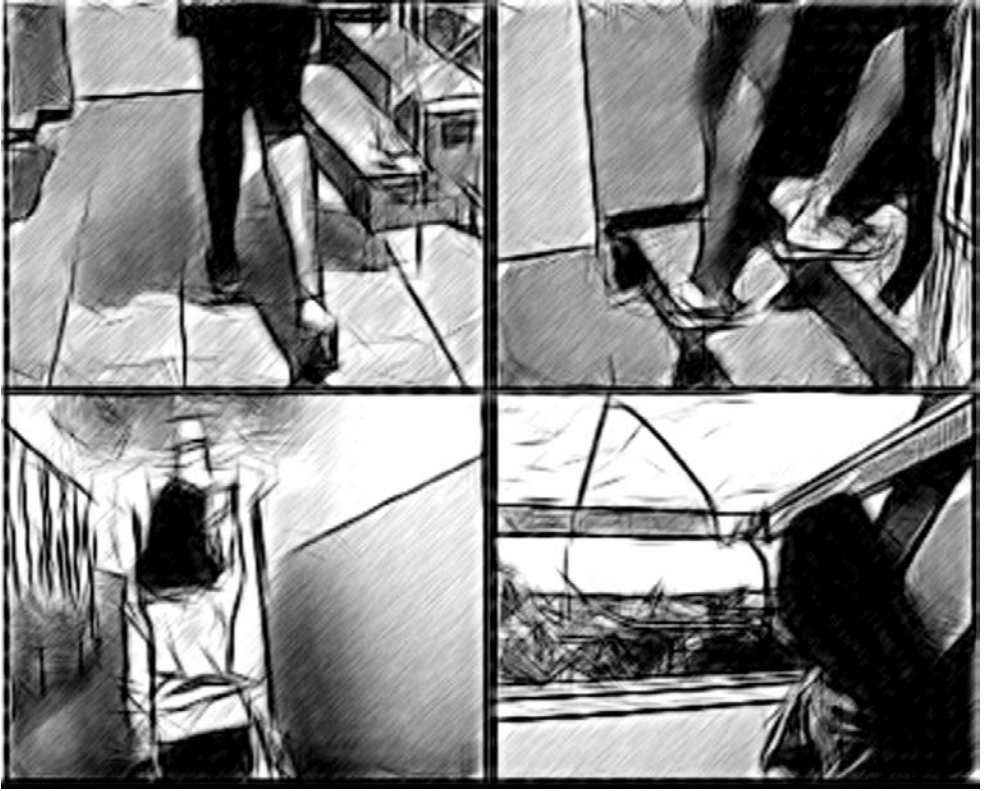
## VIEWS FROM THE BACK

A common strategy to make undocumented migrants visible while at the same time ensuring their anonymity is to film them from the back or from a perspective where their face is not recognizable. This strategy is a less obvious intervention to the image than blurring and therefore intercepts less the viewers’ perception of the image. While blurring is symbolically charged and reminds the viewer of the potential manipulation that can happen to every image, filming from the back works more subtle. The following examples show, however, how different the effect of this strategy can be.

In the already mentioned film *Schattenmenschen*, the first appearance of Valérie is like the one with Nikolai characterized by images that build on the viewers’ genre knowledge. 19-year-old Valérie is going up a stairway in short jeans and with red flip-flops. The camera shows her legs from below following her going upstairs. She walks along a corridor with a range of doors on each side, still being followed by the camera, playing with a key in her hand. The subjective camera positions the viewer in a voyeuristic perspective that sexualizes the image and alludes to a sex-worker going up to her room followed by the gaze of her client. However, Valérie is not working as a sex worker. Nonetheless, she appears like an object of the camera’s voyeurism, which is enhanced by the voice-of-god commentary that talks about her. The view of the camera invokes a common and highly gendered visual repertoire of the undocumented migrant woman as a sex worker, or even a victim of trafficking.

The sequence ends with the back-profile of Valérie looking out of the window. An empty metal coat-hanger is swinging in the foreground, like a loop hanging from a gallows. It may be read as a symbol for the threat of being captured and deported. Unlike the presentation of Nikolai, the first stereotyped portrait of Valérie is not countered by an image of her face. To protect her from being recognized, her face is blurred out throughout the film. The filmmakers told us that they were aware of the problematics of blurring. In the first version they felt that the migrants appeared unsympathetic or like “monsters”. They experimented with different types of blurring until they found a less distorting type of blurring.

Figure 2: *Schattenmenschen*, Germany, 2007



The stereotype reproduced in Valérie's entry scene is challenged by her later appearance in the film. The camera follows her while cooking, doing her laundry or shopping and the spoken words alternate between commentaries and her own voice. Valerie is shown as an active person who leaves her parents' home to live with her boy-friend and finds a way to study psychology in spite of all difficulties. When trying to counter the image of the migrant woman as a victim, the filmmakers told us, they were confronted with Valerie's self-staging, actively using victim narratives as well as playing with her sexuality. In the tension between the motives offered by Valerie and the images taken by the camera in the editing process, the filmmakers tried to construct an image that caters to both, Valerie's personality and the paradigmatic figure she stands for in the film.

The film *Haus-Halt-Hilfe* (*Domestic Helper*) portrays a range of women—migrants and non-migrants—who work in private households in Germany. In addition to the extended 92 minutes version, different shorter versions exist for educational use; an important distribution channel of the film are trade unions, educational institutions and social movement groups. The central intention of the film is to show the dignity and strength of women who work in other people's households and to promote the recognition of their work as regular work that should be honored and paid as such. Having such an intention, it is important to refrain from the possible impression that domestic workers shamefully hide from the camera. Yet a significant part of workers in this sector is undocumented, therefore it is important to include a woman with this background among the portrayed. Thus the filmmaker had to face the fact that while the women with a legal

status show their faces to the camera, Maria G. from the Philippines needs to protect herself from being identified.

Like in the introduction of Valérie in *Schattenmenschen*, the camera follows Maria, but this time while she is working in a household cleaning a room. Instead of the commentary voice from a speaker, it is her own voice that comments on her daily-life and working conditions. She appears as an active person. The subjective camera positions the viewer as a person that accompanies the migrant, listens to her and steps back to not disturb her while performing her work duties. Even though in other interview sequences Maria is filmed against back-light, so that her face is not recognizable, the images taken at her workplace prevent her from appearing out of line in comparison to the other women who do show their faces in the same documentary. Embedded in the stories of these women that demonstrate proud and dignity for their work, Maria G.'s own dignity and power is transmitted, even without openly seeing her face.

Figure 3: *Haus-Halt-Hilfe*, Germany 2006



*Otras Vías (Other ways)* by FrauenLesben-FilmCollectiv and the Latina group MuCoLaDe is a documentary about Latin American women sex workers and transsexual migrant sex workers in Hamburg. They talk about their lives, their motivations to come to Germany, the problems they have with the police and clients, their dreams etc. Some of the protagonists are shown openly, they either have a secured legal status through marriage or were in a women's prison at that time. Others objected to being identified. Together with the protagonists, the filmmakers developed different ways of showing them in the documentary: The whole film's concept is charac-

terized by the intention to position the migrants as being an active part in the process of producing the film. Like the documentary *Haus-Halt-Hilfe* the film works mostly with the original voice of the protagonists, there is almost no voice-of-god commentary.

Instead of interviews with the individual migrants the film draws on many occasions on conversations between migrants and a group of feminist supporters. These scenes are recorded at a kitchen table, in a cozy atmosphere with coffee and cookies or at a picnic in a park. For filming these conversations, the camera is positioned in relation to the migrants who do not want to show their face in a way that they are shown from the back. In these group situations with people sitting in a circle it appears most likely that not everybody's face can be seen, although it still irritates when the face of the person speaking is not shown. Instead, the camera shows the persons who listen to the migrant. This allows the viewer on the one hand to identify with the role of the listener and on the other hand it shows the migrants being integrated into the group and interacting quite naturally with the others. Thus mediated through the group, the undocumented migrants appear in an ordinary, non discriminating manner.

Figure 4: *Otras vías*, Germany 2003



In another scene, one of the migrant sex workers is shown in front of a mirror while dressing up as a transvestite. It appears probable—as in the case of the domestic worker who cleans the flat in *Haus-Halt-Hilfe*—that the viewer is standing behind the person who is dressing himself up. The camera position has definitely something voyeuristic, but the migrant, while shown from the back, clearly communicates through his movements towards the

camera and thus plays an active part, self-confident of his control over the voyeuristic constellation. The backstage situation of the professional dressing and masking procedure reminds of as well the staging and masking as the voyeurism inherent in general to producing and viewing a film.

These examples from *Schattenmenschen*, *Haus-Halt-Hilfe* and *Otrás vias* indicate to which extend the formally identical strategy—to show undocumented migrants from their back—can have very different effects in the overall context of the film.

## **MASKING, SUBSTITUTING OR EVACUATING THE MIGRANT BODY FROM THE IMAGE**

*Passagères clandestines. Mothers crossing* by Lodet Desmet and Nawzad Tofec is a documentary film about the people smuggler “Djouma the Arab” and the Iranian mother Sima with her two daughters clandestinely crossing the land border between Turkey and Greece. This documentary represents the “passage” genre, in which film-makers follow migrants’ journeys across borders. A characteristic of this genre is the “embeddedness” of the filmmakers.<sup>13</sup> In this case authenticity is given by the fact that the filmmakers provided the smugglers with (infrared) cameras and had them film the dangerous smuggling themselves.<sup>14</sup> Mireille Rosello coins this kind of representational strategy “clandestine filming of clandestinity” in which “[o]ften the quality of the images is (artificially?) poor as if to confirm that the filming itself was contaminated by stealth and danger.<sup>15</sup>

While the previous films that we discussed avoid showing the protagonists’ faces, this film uses a different strategy: In the first sequence of the film the camera shows a make-up artist working on the smuggler’s face applying a false beard and altering his nose. Throughout the film the smuggler appears as a normal person directly looking and talking into the camera. In a self-reflexive manner masking is here put into the context of the everyday business of make-up in the film-industry. It reminds us of the fact that every film alters reality and the simple act of installing a camera changes people’s behavior. The documentary film too inevitably creates its own filmic reality that only relates in a mediated way to the reality outside of the film.

**13** | Kuster 2006, p. 191.

**14** | Transit Migration 2010.

**15** | Rosello 1998, p. 145.

Figure 5: *Passagères clandestines*, Belgium/France, 2004



The documentary *Mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen* (*With a smile on her lips*) by Anne Frisius, in cooperation with Nadja Damm and Mónica Orjeda tells the story of the Latin American undocumented migrant domestic worker Ana S. in Hamburg who successfully claimed compensation for her withheld wages. The filmmakers accompany the domestic worker through the long process from the moment on where she contacted a street worker for undocumented women up to the court case two years later. During the production of the film it was uncertain how the court case would end. The documentary reproduces this tension by revealing step by step the development of the domestic worker's struggle to the audience. *Mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen* circulates among activists and trade unionists to give an example of how to attain the difficult to achieve compensation for unpaid wages of an undocumented worker.

In the introductory scene of the film, a female dancer expresses in a pantomimic way and with a white, long shawl in her hands Ana's daily work such as caring for a baby or cleaning. During the dance the film's commentary adumbrates the working and living conditions of the film's main protagonist. After several years she has finally decided to claim her right for a decent payment which has been withheld from her by her employers. The dance not simply substitutes what cannot be shown, because Ana's former employers would have hardly allowed her or the film-team to shoot for the documentary film in their house. It is a representation that is conscious about the difference and the power relationship between the representation and the represented. The dancer transforms the typical movements domestic workers constantly repeat

in the private zone of their bosses' household into an aesthetic form exposed to the public view. At the same time the expression through body language keeps the represented work bound to the intimate realm of the body. Thus, even though Ana is physically evacuated from the images, her bodily experiences of performing physical and emotional labors are still perceptible.

Figure 6: *Mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen*, Germany, 2008



The emphasis the film puts in its beginning on the expressiveness of body language is relevant for the following scenes with Ana: She explicitly tells her story as a story of gaining confidence, losing fear and becoming less nervous about claiming her rights. Her body language shows a woman who went through a very difficult time, but who is learning to know what her rights are and that she has to fight for them. However, in an irritating contrast to her statements, Ana's face appears blurred throughout the film. The missing face clearly obstructs the relation the viewer can build to the protagonist. One of the filmmakers explained to us that when the film project started Ana originally planned to return to Latin America and agreed to be shown without blurring. Only briefly before finishing the film, she decided to extend her stay in Germany. Therefore the filmmakers had no alternative but to ex-post manipulate the already recorded pictures in order to hide her identity or to completely do without the scenes with Ana. The filmmakers took a twofold decision. They reduced the use of footage showing Ana's face and tried to find substitute images like the dance that do not objectify or criminalize the main protagonist.

Maybe the most radical answer to the question of visual representation of the invisible undocumented migrant is exhibited by Anja Salomonowitz in *Kurz davor ist es passiert* (*It happened just before*) by visualizing the invisibility instead of the invisible persons. While the migrants are completely absent from the images shown, the film documents the daily lives of those who play important roles in the migrants' lives: a border-police official, a bartender, a diplomat, etc. Those persons had to memorize excerpts from interview protocols with trafficked women and they interrupt their own activities in a Brecht'ian manner in order to recite the excerpts for the camera. An eccentric female Cameroonian consul of Austrian decent, for example, recites the story of an abused domestic worker working for a diplomat's household. The worker has to work long-hours, is not allowed to wear her hair as she wishes, has to cater for large parties and in the end faints from exhaustion and loses her job which makes her liable to deportation. While the consul is reciting the fate of the worker, she herself lives a daily-life which would qualify her as the employer of the domestic worker whose story she is telling. She gives orders to her domestic worker and professionally negotiates the status of diplomatic housekeeping personnel with other diplomats. These interwoven, yet clearly separated stories correspond in an uncomfortable manner.

Figure 7: *Kurz davor ist es passiert*, Austria, 2006



Every event that documentary film pretends to represent always happened “just before” we can see its image on a screen. Instead of the illusion of sharing the migrant's perspective for a moment in film, Salomonowitz disturbs the spectator and forces her or him to double-read the film. The images represent their protagonists' daily life and they sharpen the viewer's sense for what is invisible in this representation and in all our ordinary daily life as well. Film becomes no longer a medium of recognition but of cognition. The evacuation of the migrants' bodies from the images is the price Salomonowitz has to pay for showing the invisibility. However, it is not only a price to pay, but opens up new perspectives beyond the un-



derstanding of documentary as pure replication of reality.

The three films discussed in this section have in common that they build on the fact that film inevitably creates its own reality. Mediated through the film's own reality they facilitate a different perception and knowledge of the world we and the undocumented migrants live in, without pretending to offer a plain view through the window into someone else's life.

## CONCLUSION

The question whether the undocumented migrant can have a face in film is at first glance *not* a question of aesthetics. It is their social and legal condition, not aesthetics, which prevent undocumented migrants from showing their face. But the question becomes more complex if we take into account, that films are a part of the migration regime. It works like a vicious circle: The migration regime forces undocumented migrants to conceal their face. But the image of a face not only helps to identify and trace a specific person, it also helps the spectator to identify with the person's needs and feelings, to recognize a person's condition as a human being. Therefore to protect the migrant's identity at the same time can easily produce a de-humanizing discriminatory effect on the migrant that strengthens the hostile perception of and policies against undocumented migrants. From this point of view, the aesthetic question *how* a film shows or does not show the faces of undocumented migrants is a highly political issue and the filmmakers' ethical responsibility.

Nonetheless, it is possible to counter the discriminatory effects of concealing the migrants' faces. It does matter how a face is disguised and in what context it is put. It is possible to shoot and integrate images from the back of a migrant in a nearly natural and unspectacular way while another camera position reinforces sexualized and/or criminalizing pre-perceptions of the audience. It is possible to localize the disguised faces in a genre of playful masking and travesty in order to allow for a positive relation between viewer and undocumented migrants. It is possible to find visual expressions to fill the gap left by an unseen face. It is possible to turn the missing image of a face into a reflection on the invisibility as a socially produced condition.

It seems to make also a difference whether the documentaries are made in close cooperation with the undocumented migrants themselves or whether they are passive objects of documentation. The latter one is what Nichols identifies as the most classic interaction between the filmmakers, the subjects or social actors and the audience: "*I speak about them to you.*"<sup>16</sup> This has been the case in some of the analyzed documentaries in which for example the voice-of-god commentary dominates. Whereas the docu-

mentaries *Otras vías* and *Mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen* were both produced together with the migrants portrayed in the film. The spectator can see them develop over time, gaining confidence, fighting for justice and their rights and consciously using the medium of the film. Participating in the documentary may be a means of individual empowerment as well as a means of political mobilization and collective empowerment, including questioning the political and economic conditions leading to their undocumented status—all three dimensions are central for a change-oriented notion of empowerment.<sup>17</sup>

For the migrants, appropriating visual presence on the screen, however, has no legal power to also regain a legal status. Nevertheless, at least on a symbolic level it counters the legal status of being ‘undocumented’ by documenting one’s status as a human being. If the film also manages to critically bring up the negative effects of the migration regimes and border regimes, it has even more the capacity to contribute to a critical discourse on migration. In fact, Rosello demonstrates that gaining visibility and challenging the representation of undocumented migrants by proposing new visual narratives was an important factor for the political impact of the *sans papiers* movement.<sup>18</sup> Visual techniques allowing for this kind of presence of undocumented migrants and their conditions thus contribute to the legitimate presence of migrant subjectivities that usually are portrayed as deviant and criminal.

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Figure 5: *Passagères clandestines. Mothers crossing*, Belgium/France, 2004.

Figure 6: *Mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen*, Germany, 2008.

Figure 7: *Kurz davor ist es passiert*, Austria, 2006.

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