Intra-Active Documentary

Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* and New-Materialist Perspectives on Migrant Cinema

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Introduction: "Establish Visual Contact"[1]

The Mediterranean Sea, September 2012: The Royal Caribbean cruise liner *Adventure of the Seas* encountered people floating in a small rubber boat close to the Spanish coast. Passenger Terry Diamond filmed it with his cell phone camera and posted the 3:36 minute long video on YouTube[2]. Berlin, February 2016: Philip Scheffner's film *Havarie* (2016) premiers at the International Berlin Film Festival.[3] Based on Terry Diamond's 3:36 minute long YouTube video, the camera zooms 93 minutes in and out of the image, which is the span of time between the cruise liners and the boat's encounter. The film extends the YouTube video by 1 picture per second throughout the duration of the movie, totalling 5.400 single pictures. In contrast to the YouTube video, in the film we hear the radio communication between the cruise liner and the *Cartagena Maritime Rescue Center* saying: "Establish visual contact." Through a close reading of the film, this article discusses the cinematic forms used to establish this visual contact and explores the continuities and ruptures of these forms in close relation to Karen Barad's diffractive methodology. This combination of the film analysis with theories from New Materialism aims at an interdisciplinary approach to offer new perspectives in the field of Migrant Cinema.

Beginning in 2015, when rising numbers of people arrived in the European Union travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through Southeast Europe, politics and media alike used to call this migration movement *European Migrant Crisis* or *European Refugee Crisis*. As Jan Kühnemund poignantly sums up, the "crisis" it is referring to happened on four levels. On a political level, "crisis" meant a Europeanisation process that contrasted internal freedom of movement with tight external borders. On a social level, "crisis" meant a perception of immigration as a threat to European societies, culminating in integration discourses. On a spatial level, "crisis" meant a dialectical relationship of mobility and immobility, and adhered to the logic of control and surveillance. On a visual level, "crisis" meant specific iconographies, stereotypes and figures of migrants and migration that in return were a crucial element of image politics justifying policy measures, societal exclusion and spatial structures at the same time. The latter points, he argues, to a "majority of images illustrat[ing] migration and flight as dramas that draw on

well-known figures, icons and metaphors: the victim, the threat, the refugee, the waves, floods and swarms of people, illegal acts of border crossing and of smuggling, the fence, the boat, or the sea" (Kühnemund 2018, 8). If one indeed might talk about a "crisis," it is first and foremost a crisis that is made visual. The set of iconographies representing migration, illegality and the crisis were and are extremely widespread, be it on social media, television or in newspapers. The iconic image of the rubber boat described above does not fundamentally put this representational regime in question; rather, it fuels the visual stereotypes linked with undocumented migration from (North) African countries. Philip Scheffner's internationally acclaimed film *Havarie* (2016) uses this iconic image, but turns the meaning of it against the ruling representational regime, by decelerating the image to a pace that literally accentuates a perpetuating crisis in slow motion.

Our main argument in this article is that Migrant Cinema is not a mere representation *by* or *of* migrants; rather cinema and migration are mutually intertwined and codependent. Our interest in Philip Scheffner's *Havarie* (2016) lies therefore in the question of how the film alternates between stereotyped images prescribed by mass media on one hand, and the subjectivity of artistic and cinematic agency on the other hand.

Harragas and *Havarie*: Methodological Framework of the "Error"

"Intra-actions to begin with are never determining" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 54). Coined by Karen Barad, the notion of *intra-action* designates not only a shift from the related term "interaction," where separate entities work together, to the new term "intra-action," where subject and object emerge as one. Rather, it questions binary suppositions, which, as she argues, "do not exist outside of specific intra-actions that enact cuts that make separations" but "*within* phenomena" (Barad 2014, 175, author's emphasis). For her, thinking in terms of cause-and-effect might not encompass all possibilities that are imaginable to understand the world's natural, cultural or political issues. Thus, matter and meaning are not originally separated. In this context, based on phenomenology's valorisation of the senses as antennae of perception and their agentic structuring of a corporally significant world, *intra-action* emphasizes bodies in their capacity to respond to corporeally significant events before cognition begins. In film studies, such phenomenological approaches lead to concepts like Laura U. Marks' *haptic cinema* or Vivian Sobchack's *cinesthetic subject*. They also emphasize this aspect of *intra-action*, meeting at the site of a multisensorial spectator. Film scholar Wibke Straube proposes in this context the alternative term of "the entrant" (Straube 2015). The idea of "entering" a film, becoming entangled with it rather than "watching" it, appeals to the whole-body experience of cinema, the spectator taking shape as an active part of the image.

Following these perspectives, what does the proposed notion of "intra-active documentary" then mean? On a first, superordinate level, the notion of the *intra-active documentary* means to think of images as both inviting their spectators and implying them. This is to say that film is active and agential in its material semiotic effects, allowing both film and spectator to be not only discursively bound to one another but also materialized through one another. On a second, in-depth level, it also means a critical understanding of moving images, and their capacity to provide a dialogue between new forms of representative politics and new politics of representation. When applying this concept to films about the so-called *European Refugee Crisis*, the main argument is, that *intra-active documentary* is not *about* migration, but conceptualizes migration and film as mutually intertwined and co-dependent, because film is not only a product, a matter, but also producing meaning.

Thus, the close connection between film and migration determines how the iconic image of the rubber boat helps thinking, imagining, seeing, and negotiating the phenomena of migration. Hakim Abderrezak foregrounds the circulation of these images as an essential aspect, as migration is thus concretely bound to cinema, being always something like movements of a technical avant-garde. This means questioning long-established paradigms of national film and of auteur theory, but also of Second

and Third Cinema. In relation to Migrant Cinema about mainly North African refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea, he observes that confinement practices have contributed to the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea into a *sea-cemetery* and African cities into *city-cemeteries* in most narratives of fiction films about undocumented migration (Abderrezak 2018).

Vis-à-vis these fiction films, so-called *harraga videos*, recordings by cell phone cameras by migrants themselves or witnesses like Terry Diamond, have created their own genre on social media, covering the *European Refugee Crisis* beside official surveillance technologies. *Harragas* means "those who burn" and is a word from Algerian Arabic (ةقارح, *ḥarrāga*), designating migrants who burn their IDs and the road, or in this case the sea, or in this case the sea behind them, in order to quest their fortune as asylum seekers in Europe. It refers specifically to North African migrants who attempt to immigrate illegally to Europe or to European-controlled islands in rubber boats. On the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan *harragas* typically hope to cross the Strait of Gibraltar in order to reach Spain. Additionally, *harragas* also sometimes manage to complete the voyage from Africa to the island nation of Malta, or the Italian island of Lampedusa. From there, they often go on to immigrate to other regions of Europe. Taking up the idea of burning, the circulation of images might also happen through the "burning of a CD." This refers to copying and disseminating, sometimes illegally, audiovisual material from one device to another. Therefore, the horizon of meaning of *harragas videos* might be threefold: first, designating those depicted by the videos, the migrants and refugees; second, those producing the videos, the migrants or witnesses of the migration; and third, the appropriation of those images by third parties, like filmmakers making their own film out of it. The entanglement between the illegal, in form of the undocumented migration as well as clandestine filmmaking, with the erroneous images, in form of grainy, shaky and out-of-focus recordings, is even more striking, as the German word *Havarie*, also coming from Arabic (راوع *ʿawār*), is precisely translated by "error" or "damage." It is originally linked to ships, speaking of accidents, emergencies, and shipwrecks, considerably affecting the vehicle and, in most cases, the transported goods. In extreme cases, vehicle and goods are lost. The accident is usually the result of an emergency, such as a crisis that could not, or only partially, be averted. The word exists also in other European languages, like Dutch (*averij, haverij*), Swedish (*haveri*), Italian and Portuguese (*avaria*), and French (*avarie*). As we shall analyze in more detail in the next section of this article, in the film, the "error," happens on four levels: (1) the rubber boat in the state of a literal emergency; (2) migration politics and the lack of help bestowed upon migrants; (3) the erroneous amateur images as a critique of prevalent media images; (4) the deceleration of these images as a deliberate form of refusal to represent what cannot be represented. The use of the word *havarie* as the film's title thus not only resonates with the sea, but also conveys a critique of both media representation and politics about the *European Refugee Crisis*, especially in the prevalent labelling of *harragas'* "illegal" crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.

This brings us back to the notion of the *intra-active documentary*. Karen Barad points out, that "the specificity of intra-actions speaks to the particularities of the power imbalances of the complexity of a field of forces" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 55). In that sense, the entanglement of migration and film as conceived in this article is also about the changing power of images. The notion of the "error" is a methodological and conceptual framework allowing a meaningful comparison of different cinematic forms that may describe basic assumptions and implicit beliefs about the nature of things, which govern how humans perceive and interpret the world. A central part of the following section thus is to identify such cinematic forms and how they are (re-)produced and transformed. It seeks to map when and how the "error" appears in the film to trace the ongoing changes. Our consideration of film is to be in a paradoxical state of continuous flux and continuous movement. Thus, Migrant Cinema is no longer a cohesive entity but facing the unforeseeable, like the unexpected encounter between a rubber boat and a cruise liner.

Borders, Boats, Bodies: Analysis of the "No-Picture"

The aesthetic perception of the image involves a simultaneous attention to its depiction as well as its surface qualities. This section analyzes four interrelated aspects of the "error", namely: the shakiness, the graininess, the color use, and the slow motion.

Terry Diamond's YouTube video starts with the image of a boat in the middle of a deep blue sea. The image shakes after a few seconds and the boat almost falls out of the frame. The boat then appears again in the middle of the image, still, giving the spectator a few seconds to view it. The image shakes again and becomes out of focus. The blurry image stays until the camera focuses again, a moment in which one person in the boat is waving a hat. Around a minute into the video, the camera zooms out and in, shaking, and becoming out of focus again, the boat appearing upside down, the sea mixing with the blueness of the sky. This movement is repeated a second time, only this time the camera zooms out completely, leaving the boat as a black spot in the middle of the sea. *Havarie* (2016) on the other hand starts with the insert "37°28.6'N 000°3.8'E". Only after that does the same image of the rubber boat surrounded by the sea as filmed by Terry Diamond appear. While the first image suggests a calculated location, white numbers on black font evoking a sharp and truthful point of reference, the following image of an undetermined spot in an ever-moving and shaded tone of blue seems rather hard to locate. It is arguable that these two images depict a similar sense of imperceptibility (Fig. 1).
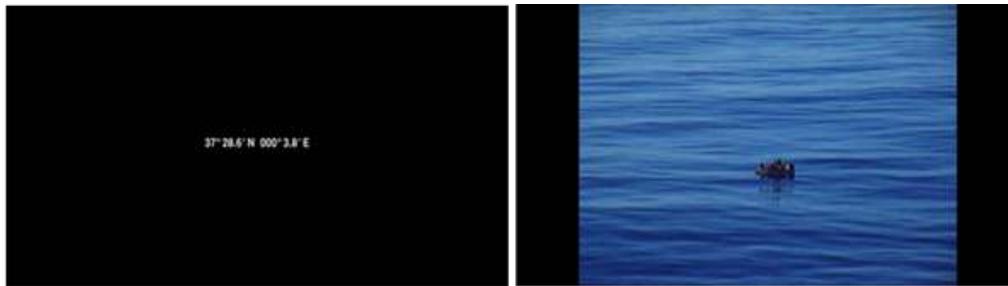

Fig. 1 Havarie (2016), timecode: 00:00:00-00:01:00

The chosen format of 4:3 for the digital image refers to the classical aspect ratio of 35-mm-film. This *mise-en-cadrage* is remarkable, firstly because a digital device (cell phone) and not a 35-mm-film camera made the image; and secondly because for landscape-shots like this, one would expect a widescreen format of 16:9, emphasizing the panoramic view rather than mimicking a classical cinema format. The sea surrounding the rubber boat fills the frame completely, leaving no blank space on any side of the frame. Clearly, the 4:3 format throughout the film follows the intention to focus on the boat and its forsakenness/inescapability in the middle of the sea. The frame combines the perceptual space of the images with the current perceptual environment. The format indicates the dual characteristic of images as objects and as representations. Once zooming-out, the camera reveals gradually the horizon as the one border delimiting the human sight, leaving the boat as a small black point, barely recognizable, between the sea and the sky (Fig. 2).
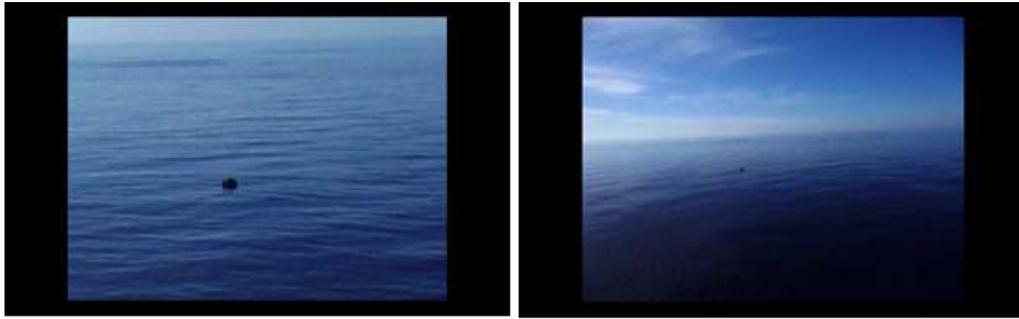
Fig. 2 Havarie (2016), timecode: 00:40:25-00:43:40

The first aspect of the erroneous image is the shakiness. The people in the boat do not perform any particular action visible through the image. They stand in the boat, waiting together with the spectator for something to happen or someone to come rescue them from their immobility. At the same time, the image is far from immobile, moving constantly up and down, zooming in and out, and getting out of focus and back in focus again, showing its very own materiality and temporality frame by frame. In *Havarie* (2016), movement is ever-present since the images show a space associated with journey, travel, departure, arrival and transit: the Mediterranean Sea. The concept of the sea deeply implies the idea of movement insofar as it loses any other connotation apart from being a platform towards somewhere else; in other terms, far from being a habitat it becomes a threshold. Moreover, the sea is the space where imaginary and real borders cross. The sea is the emblem of this, representing the setting in place of a constant and repeated departure and arrival. In this sense, it stands for the place of a passage, a threshold not simply separating two geographical areas, two nation-states, nor one from the Other, but an old existential condition of the Self from a renovated one. However, the boat does not seem to have this transformational potential because instead of leading to a passage towards an opening and an upgrade, the boat seems immobile, not changing its position. The result is an oxymoronic situation, a "temporary permanence" (Kuhn 2005) evoking on the one hand the transitional nature of migration as socio-cultural and personal process, and on the other hand criticizing contemporary European immigration policies, which tend with any means to prevent refugees to enter. The people are alone without the chance to elaborate a differentiation between their previous condition and their future, their inner and outer reality, their present possibilities and their imaginary. The aesthetic therefore expresses the loss rather than the transforming of the Self. The structure of the cinematic image and its capacity to convey the deep sense of estrangement typical of migration processes mirrors through the shakiness a condition of the Self's disorientation in space, although the camera's position suggests a potential harbour.

The second aspect of the erroneous image is the graininess. The image's quality does not only refer to the ways in which digital images are produced and distributed but also to the different regimes elicited by media, and consequently the configuration of space in which media operate. In other words, the graininess of images affects not only our perception of them but also the way in which we locate them. These "poor images", as coined by art critique Hito Steyerl, are far from being mere representations of a given reality as they are "no longer about the real thing – the originary original." (Steyerl 2009, 8). Not by chance, it is an empty space, which provokes the blurring of references. To put it in the words of Hito Steyerl, such images "also express a condition of dematerialization" (Steyerl 2009, 7). For that reason, the film begins explicitly with the geographic coordinates, situating the boat in a reference system that gives the spectator the impression of order and categorization. The resultant aesthetics emphasize the dichotomy mobility vs. immobility, rendering the unexpected encounter of refugees and tourists visible. Accordingly, the question about the acuteness and clarity (supposedly) underlying all images, anticipates in the grain what is not complete. In *Havarie* (2016), they are about the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, perception and imagination, as well as technology and aesthetics, representing ambiguity and potentiality through their indeterminacy. In that sense, the "temporary permanence" does not work then as "aesthetic moment

[able of] defining facets of cultural experience" (Kuhn 2005, 404). Rather the image of a boat filled with people in the vast blue of the Mediterranean Sea depicts, to put it in Barad's words, "what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad 2003, 827) and thus migration as a multidirectional rather than one-directional process.

The third aspect of the erroneous image is the use of color. Halfway through the film, the camera suddenly gives up its frontal position and turns towards the right, offering the view on the side front of the cruise liner and the passengers standing on a balcony watching in the direction of the boat. This comes as a surprise for the spectator who only now realizes the position of the filmmaker on the unstable ground of a bigger boat, the cruise liner, itself moving on the sea. The camera then turns left, gliding over the sea and the rubber boat in the far distance, showing the second balcony with onlookers. On this side, the sunlight refraction dives the image first into magenta, then into green, and finally into both magenta and green. This side also reveals numerous yellow rescue boats that the cruise liner carries in case of a "havarie", an emergency evacuation (Fig. 3). Blue, magenta and green are fundamental colors of color motion picture films. However, the color play in this scene is remarkable in the way that, besides the shakiness and graininess of the image, it reveals a third layer of disturbance of the act of filming as the lighting produces an image, which appears somehow artificial and factitious. This use of color here is involuntary, as it is the position of the sun, which interferes with the position of the cell phone camera. This highlights the working of materiality as potential and actual agent of differentiation and thus open-endedly producing states of a transforming reality. In other words, the materiality of the images in their surreal coloring shifts the perception into a 'highlighted' state while also marking divisions, as through the light rays or borders of the ship the images appear mostly as split-screens. The light's borderline may evoke the image of a straight and fixed borderline, but as the images simultaneously change, the borderline too is moving.
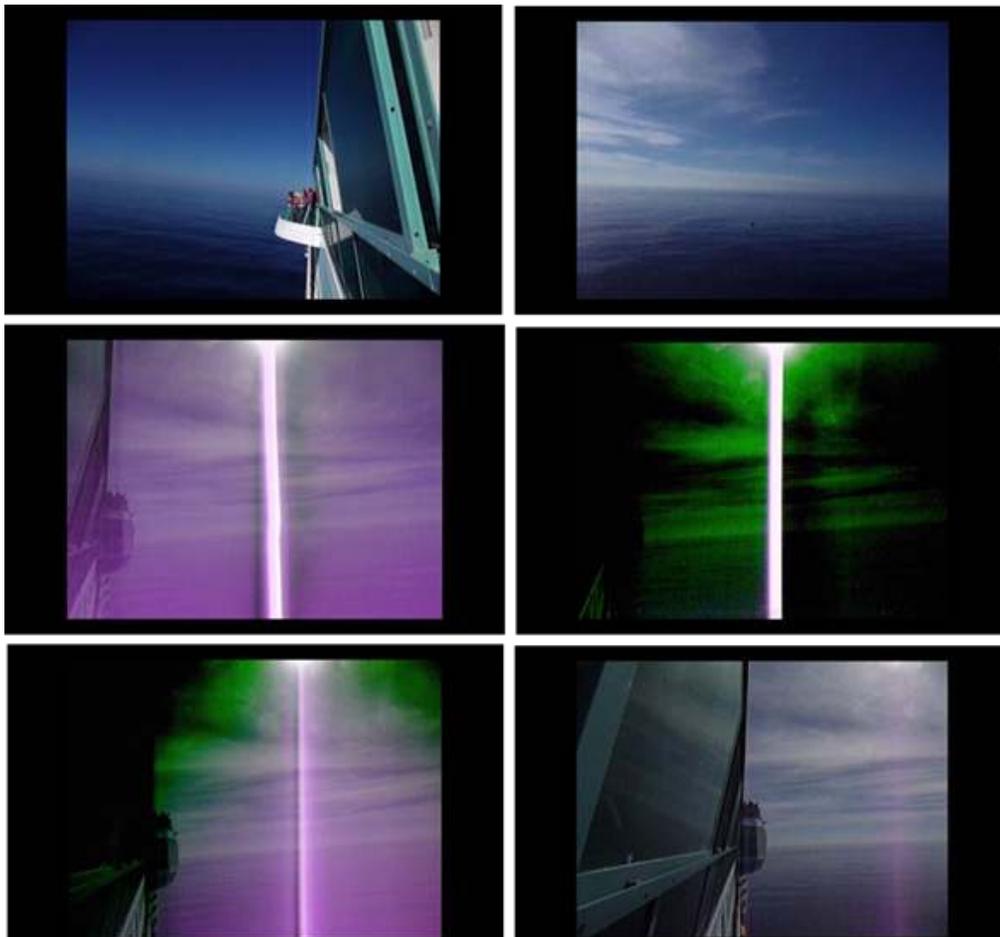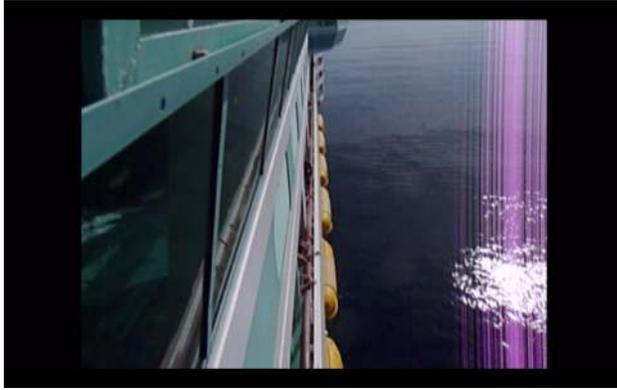
Fig. 3 Havarie (2016), timecode: 00:47:00-00:53:00

There is a schism between these two boats expressed as a visual motif of the divided lives, replicated and reinforced by the colors. Film scholar Joshua Yumibe noted, "through its sensual appeal, color can move the mind and emotions of a spectator. This understanding of the interconnection of the senses, intellect, and emotions is also, broadly construed, synesthetic in nature" (Yumibe 2012, 32). The intervening layers of technology, however, deceive the spectator's desire for an immersive emotional experience or a meaningful connection with the rubber boat. Both the graininess and the color play (re-)establish a perceptual distance for the spectator. In this scene only both boats appear, Throughout the film, no shot shows them together in the same image.[4] The difference between the cruise liner and the rubber boat is apparent on several levels: (1) on the level of scale (small vs. big boat); (2) on the level of social attributes (refugees vs. tourists); and (3) on the level of cinematic strategies (close-up vs. panorama shot and cruise liner in magenta/green vs. rubber boat in blue).

The fourth aspect of the erroneous image, the slow motion, is a cinematic effect strongly suggesting the entrapment of the rubber boat as an object of the gaze continuously monitored. However, the meditative aspect of the deceleration also reflects back on the spectator, who cannot escape the technological interface and system either. Even though documentary productions in general claim the moral seriousness of depicting the existing world, they also register on an emotional level, a level that is often absent in other discourses of migration. The rhythm of changing images stays the same over the whole course of the film, so that the expectation of a changing scene becomes less and less pronounced; rather, the slow motion necessitates a sense of surrender, both for the spectator as well as for the people in the rubber boat. In this sense, the slow motion may evoke personal responses and senses of moral responsibility from the spectator, providing the temporal space needed to solicit it.

The only layer of the film, which does not appear erroneous, is the use of sound. The images of *Havarie* (2016) are fed with fragments of professionally recorded spoken dialogue and narratives in which very different subject positions come to speak. Throughout the film, we hear the story of a woman (Rhim Ibrir) phoning from France to her husband in Algeria (Abdallah Benhamou); testimonials from refugees (Houcin Ouahiani, Houria Kourad); cargo workers and crew from the container vessel *Smaragd* (Leonid Savin, Dmitriy Simonov, Oleg Vashchenko, Artem Zaporozhets, Oleksiy Shelyakin, Sergiy Isayev, Vincente Bautista, Osmundo Fuertes, Mardion Arong, Johnrey Alvarado, Ryan Magdua, Clark Jhun Cantoria, Ron Toledo, Danilo De Leon); passengers from the cruise liner (Guillaume Coutu-Lemaire, Emma Gillings); and Terry Diamond himself together with his wife Jackie Kelly back in their home in Belfast. These stories are told in an interview-based manner, not after each other but bit by bit, mixed amongst each other. Material manifestations like sound, which do signify their own weave and texture at the expense of a film's content, are likewise important as their materiality exceeds their semiotic function for an abstract signified. The use of the voice engenders a network of metaphors whose nodal point appears to be the body.

However, the body reconstituted by the technology and practices of the cinema is, as Mary Ann Doane foregrounds, "a *fantasmatic* body" (Doane 1980, 34; emphasis in original), which offers a support as well as a point of identification for the subject addressed by the film. Disassociating the image from the sound is one of Philip Scheffner's main cinematic strategies, also used in his other works like *The Halfmoon Files* (2007) and *Revision* (2012). His statement about the use of sound in *Havarie* (2016) however, emphasizes the entanglement, rather than the dissociation between sound and image:

> Sound is not decoupled from image in the film. In terms of their content, the stories approach the image, which seems to wander again and again through the various perspectives, with the viewer's distance from events perceived differently depending on whoever is speaking at the moment. From the middle of the film onwards, there are surprising moments of synchronicity, which open up a space for associations, connections, and conjecture once again (Scheffner 2016).[5]

Thus, the film allows for the apperception of intrinsically interwoven forms of "no-pictures". Its crossing into different layers of material, like the cell phone images with their shakiness and graininess or the off-screen voices, intersects with discursive contents, like geopolitical, economic, social and cultural landscapes, which are intra-actively produced through cinematic forms in diverse and contrasting ways. The *intra-active documentary*, as we argue, broadens then the conception of (1) migration as practice of crossing borders; (2) borders themselves as onto-epistemological phenomena; and (3) cinema as producing spaces of multisensory perception.

Conclusion: Do Not Disturb

Havarie (2016) establishes the "visual contact" for the spectator from the beginning. However, it would be too easy to place it in the category of Migrant Cinema for its depiction of a rubber boat with refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, the figure of thought of the "error" helps understand the different cinematic forms the film uses in borrowing a *harragas video* from YouTube, decelerating the images and putting a soundscape on it that reflects a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. The *European Refugee Crisis* on its official side, with restrictive European border controls and asylum laws, not wanting refugees and migrants "to disturb", clashes with the erroneous images of it. These images speak of clandestine and amateur filmmaking, about technological hierarchies at the same time as they speak of social inequalities. The reconfiguration of Europe in a state of "crisis" is then reflected through what we called the *intra-active documentary*, as it is much more about the matters involved, like the graininess and shakiness, than the representations of iconic images conveyed. However, even though *Havarie* is an arthouse movie, it not only challenges the more prevalent mass media representations of *harragas* in the Mediterranean Sea, but also its stereotypical representations and iconographies, like the rubber boat, without neglecting the politics at work that dialogue with and shape the discourses around and about undocumented migration. Image and perception fade into each other, and this blurring presents a different testimonial form that operates in dialogue with another perspective, outside of the classical migratory perspective. The *error* persists at the same time as a key objective pursued by the film through various cinematic means. More specifically, the film addresses the relationship between movement, sound and body in ways that bring about alternative testimonial forms of cinematic experiences. If we think of cinema as not having any outside boundaries but always already being an intra-active reconfiguring of the world, then *Havarie* (2016) can be constituted as an open-ended cultural practice.

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Endnotes

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2   "refugees": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRAmCO2ilrg Accessed September 9, 2018.

3   Other films dealing with the so-called "fortress Europe" are Andre Segre's *A sud di Lampedusa* (2006), Anja Salomonowitz's *Kurz davor ist es passiert* (2006), Frederico Lobo and Pedro Pinho's *Bab Sebta* (2008), Andrea Segre and Dagmawi Yimer's *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008), Fernand Malgar's *La Forteresse* (2009), Nina Kustorica's *Little Alien* (2009), Sylvain L'Espérance's *Sur le rivage du monde* (2012), *Styx* by Wolfgang Fischer (2017), *Transit* by Christian Petzold (2017), *Eldorado* by Markus Imhoof (2017), and *THF* by Karim Aïnouz (2017).

4   In contrast to a film like *Styx* (2017), in which the encounter of a sailing yacht and a refugee boat is made visible on different levels, i.e. as spots on the radar's screen, from a birds-eye-perspective or from a symmetry with a vertical axis of reflection.

5   Producers Statement: http://havarie.pong-berlin.de/en/9/producers-statement Accessed September 9, 2018.