Dancing with the (un)seen: problematizing the viewer's gaze through *Mediterraneo*'s visual aesthetics[*]

Silvia Vari[**]
University of Warwick

Since the 1990s, international migration has become one of the most pressing socio-political issues in Italy. Subsequently, the topic of undocumented immigration has gained increased visibility in Italian society, making the infamous images of incoming masses of migrants ever more frequent in the mainstream media. At the same time, since the turn of the new millennium and thanks to the enhanced diffusion of the graphic novel format, significant changes also occurred in the Italian comics scene at the start of the 21st century. The *fumetto di realtà* [non-fiction comics] saw a consistent rise in popularity, exemplified by the proliferation of autobiographical comics and graphic reportages focusing attention on both personal experiences and socio-political events. Comics and graphic novels have started addressing the topical events of the present, including the phenomenon of immigration towards Italy from the Mediterranean basin. This study aims at exploring the peculiarities of graphic narratives in portraying experiences of forced migration, by paying particular attention to the specific framing strategies of the medium and the political affordances therein. Through the close reading of the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018), the present contribution analyzes how the inherent problematization of notions of presence and absence in comics' spatial and visual grammar can constitute a call for the active participation of viewers in the narrative, potentially mobilizing the Rancièrian formulation of spectators' emancipation that eschews the long-standing association of viewing with inertia.

Keywords: Migration, *Mediterraneo*, Viewing, Gaze, Aesthetics

---

Introduction

Since its formation in October 2022, the Italian government headed by far-right leader Giorgia Meloni has made (undocumented) immigration to Italy one of its major focuses of interest, displaying "restrictive if not hostile positions on migration" (Ceccorulli, 2023). The decision to block two NGO boats carrying shipwrecked migrants to Italian shores in October 2022 triggered the indignation of many European heads of State (Tondo, 2022). A year later, in November 2023, Meloni's government again sparked debate by announcing a pact with Albania to create Italian asylum-seeker centers in the neighboring country (Gozzi, 2023; Tiberio, 2023). These events have contributed to re-centering the public discourse on the topic of undocumented immigration, which, after years of instrumentalization that saw it at the core of heated debates, had slowly subsided to the margins (Diamanti, 2023).

In Italy the topic of undocumented immigration began to receive significant attention in the 1990s, a pivotal decade in which Italy shifted from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Colucci 2018; Comberiati 2010). On the one hand, the phenomenon generated a surge of socio-political reactions, with responses to the changes taking place in the country often characterized by violence and racism (Parati, 1997, p. 169). On the other hand, it led to the first wave of artistic representations of migrant experiences in different media, including film, the performing arts, and literary texts.[1]

The early 2000s have represented a crucial time for the affirmation of non-fictional graphic narratives addressing migration in the Italian scene (Spadaro, 2022; 2023; Tanca, 2022).[2] Conseuqently, the rise of immigration has become a catalyst influencing the narrative and aesthetic evolution of Italian comics authors and practitioners, especially following in the wake of what has been labelled in European discourses as the "migration crisis" of 2015 (Spadaro, 2022; Comberiati & Spadaro, 2023). Interest in migrant experiences appeared, initially, in festivals focusing on the *fumetto di realtà* [non-fictional comics] often moved by ethical and socio-political stances (Spadaro 2022, p. 219). Among the first comics addressing migration there are short stories such as *Muttererde* (2003) by comic author Gipi, the anthology *Fortezza Europa* (2006), a collection of comics by authors of the underground Sherwood Festival, and, five years later, the first biographical account *Etenesh* (2011).[3]

This study aims to explore the narration of migrant experiences in Italian comics through the lens of the wordless graphic novel *Mediterraneo* (2018),[4] a collaboration between journalist Sergio Nazzaro and cartoonist Luca Ferrara. This graphic novel has been purposely selected for the peculiarity of its narrative and visual strategies in depicting the fictional voyage across the Mediterranean Sea of a migrant girl, Amalia. More specifically, I aim to analyze how the formal and aesthetic properties of comics are strategically employed by *Mediterraneo*'s authors to problematize the positionality of the gaze of the viewer-reader when addressing the harsh experience of a migrants.[5]

My analysis will be filtered through the theoretical lens of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose work directs attention toward the intersection of politics and artistic practices. I maintain that Rancière's ideas on the role of spectators in engaging with visual art can be valuable in exploring how the formal and aesthetic features of the comic may

have the potential to arrange, frame, and problematize the viewer's experience. The following questions are addressed: to what extent does *Mediterraneo*'s form and aesthetics, the interplay between seen and unseen, have a role in situating the viewer's gaze? How does the graphic novel use the comic form to raise awareness of the viewer-reader positionality toward the events being portrayed? And how might these formal and aesthetic strategies contribute to raising political awareness?

Since Scott McCloud's seminal work, which famously labelled comics "the invisible art" (1994), comics scholarship has been interested in the interaction between what is graphically presented, the visible, and what remains hidden outside the panel or within the gutter, the invisible (Groensteen, 1999; Chute, 2016). In addressing the questions stated above, I will particularly consider the alternation of presence and absence within the medium not only because it calls upon the active engagement of the creative imagination of readers-viewers, but also as it casts light on the ways in which *Mediterraneo*'s framing strategies situate the reader's gaze in specific ways.[6]

Framing narratives of migration through comics

Following the popularity gained by non-fictional narratives in comic art since the turn of the millennium, genres such as graphic journalism and autobiography have often been employed to address Italy's socio-political issues, making comics an attractive medium for narrating contemporary events. Barbara Spadaro (2022, p. 219) draws attention to how activism for social justice and human rights has become a prevailing feature in the *fumetto di realtà*, particularly in light of the multiple migratory "crises" that have dominated media and political debates in recent years. This has prompted many cartoonists and publishing houses to address migration and migrant experiences to denounce the social injustices suffered by migrants.

Indeed, media regimes bear a crucial role in the hyper-visibility of migrant bodies and in inscribing them within patterns of (in)visibility.[7] Migrant journeys are increasingly mediatized, becoming a spectacle for Italian audiences through television screens and newspapers (De Genova, 2002). Alongside the proliferation of images depicting rammed migrant vessels and the drastic discourses framing the narrative of migrant arrivals as "crisis" (Boletsi, Houwen, & Minnaard, 2020), numbers and statistics have been strategically employed to generate anonymous representations that are "decisive for erasing the individuality and political subjectivity of people on the move as well as effacing their collective struggles and hardships" (New Keywords Collective, 2016, p. 22). Furthermore, the reduction of migrant subjects into the dichotomy of either powerless victims or dangerous invaders, undermining their political agency (Sigona, 2014; Szczepanik, 2016), calls attention to the inherent violence in the asymmetry between

> those with the right to see and represent and those who are excluded from it. We are the ones who monitor the migrants' routes, take the photographs, make the films and documentaries […]. We ceaselessly frame

them, forcefully positioning their lives, displacements, and desires within our dehumanizing portrayals (Giubilaro, 2018, p. 107).

To counterbalance the portrayal of migrants in mainstream media which depicts them as powerless victims often lacking political agency (Malkki, 1996), graphic narratives have mostly focused on the individual stories of such perilous journeys, highlighting how migrants are conscious architects of their migration journeys, acting as intentional and rational subjects in the process. In promoting more personalized narratives, comics focusing on individual migrant (hi)stories become a "space of visibility" that encourages "a process that aims to put a face on the real actors of the Mediterranean passage" (Mazzara, 2015, p. 452).

Comics scholarship focusing on migration analyzed how the medium has been often employed to portray the singularity of migrant experiences, bringing to the fore migrant subjects as political and agential characters (Rifkind, 2020; McKinney, 2020). Other studies have stressed the formal affordances of the medium to address traumatic (hi)stories (Davies & Rifkind, 2020; Chute 2016), especially forced displacement (Naghibi, Rifkind & Ty, 2020; MacLeod, 2021), yet underscoring the possible ethical issues of appropriation and effacement of migrant voices (Smith, 2011; Mickwitz, 2020). Thus, the formal and aesthetic features of comics may offer an alternative approach to the remediation, and subsequent understanding, of migrant experiences. In particular, the "plenitude, fragmentation, and unruliness" of a comic page can be employed as a site of interruption from the proliferation static and photographic images perpetrated by hegemonic media narratives (Rifkind, 2017, p. 649).

Dominic Davies addresses how comics interrupt a visual culture that feeds on the ubiquitous dissemination of decontextualized images of violence and suffering, challenging through their subjective form a photographic reality to which viewers have become accustomed (2020, p. 182). Stressing the contrast between the proliferation of "objective" photographic images and the more subjective form of the comics' drawn image has been at the core of scholarly attention (Chute, 2016; Mickwitz, 2016; Schmid, 2021), especially when looking at refugee comics (Rifkind, 2017). More recently, Markus Arnold (2023) has pinpointed the tension between the textual and the visual in comics as having an "aesthetic dimension", that when intertwined with politically relevant themes "cannot be dissociated from ethics" (p. 20). Arnold maintains that discussing sensitive topics in writing does not elicit the same sensitive and critical response as drawing them (p. 4). One might question, then, how wordless graphic narratives that do not rely on discursive material exist at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.

It is precisely the intersection of the ethic and the aesthetic dimension that interests the present analysis. Following Hillary Chute's claim that comic art "literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes" (2016, p. 17), I draw attention to the specific formal and aesthetic strategies of *Mediterraneo*. In what ways does the graphic novel situate the viewer-reader, most likely from Europe or the Global North,[8] within what Kate Polak calls "a space of self-reflexive ethical and affective negotiation" (2017, p. 29)? May the graphic novel's framing strategies, on the one hand, participate in destabilizing the viewer-reader's gaze and positionality, and, on the other hand, challenge the

dehumanizing tropes that often characterize hegemonic discourses on (or viewings of) experiences of migration (Sigona, 2014; Spadaro, 2022)?

The politics of comics' aesthetics

In what follows, I draw from Jacques Rancière's theories on the intersection between politics, which he defines as the act through which "the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (p. 11), and what the philosopher understands as "aesthetics", namely "a delimitation of space and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (2000, p. 13). For Rancière, the aesthetic dimension entails a particular rearrangement of the perceptible aspects of experience, what he calls a novel "*partage du sensible*" [distribution of the sensible], that makes it possible for those under a pre-existing socio-political order to "be seen and heard as political subjects voicing meaningful grievances when they seek to contest that order of domination" (Davis, 2013, p. 157).

Rancière further explores the political affordances of aesthetics in visual art in the *Emancipated Spectator* (2008), where he reflects on the role of the viewer, what he calls the "spectator",[9] of a work of art. Rancière aims to problematize the notion of the spectator as a passive viewer and consumer of art and develops a concept where the spectator becomes an active and autonomous participant in the artwork (Davis, 2010). The spectator's freedom to understand the work of art and reinterpret it according to his or her personal experience is what ultimately "emancipates" him or her both from the work of art *per se* and from the artist's intention. Aesthetic experience thus has a political effect when the creative act of interpretation of spectators opens up to a "multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible" (Rancière, 2008, p. 72).

Comics scholarship has also underlined the autonomy of readers-viewers in interpreting fragments of verbo-visual information in graphic narratives, and the multiple paths for interpretation opened up by the medium (Ahmed, 2016; Byrn-Køhlert, 2017; Groensteen, 1999; McCloud, 1994; Sousanis, 2015). The peculiar distribution of panels and images in a comic page can be analyzed as a useful example of Rancière's theory. The page a comic therefore allows for a complex network of possibilities for reception (Sousanis, 2015), wherein the panel, carrying a fragment of information, becomes part of a larger 'system of proliferation'" (Groensteen, 1999, p. 5).

Although panels are certainly organized by authors following a logical arrangement, the medium's formal multiplicity and fragmentation, its reliance on gaps and interruptions, opens to a "networked mode that allows each panel to hold privileged relations with any others at any distance" (p. 107), ultimately triggering the viewer's agency in creating an organic narrative in relation to the page's visual presences and absences. In involving the reader in the active effort of deciphering the network of verbo-visual codes, comics expose alternative

interpretative paths and allow for a potential break with the preset configuration of the reading experience. By "becoming unfixed from authoritative models of interpretation" (Byrn-Køhlert, 2017, p. 14), a comics page is thus continually shaped by the participatory collaboration of the reader, creating a dynamic environment.

When thinking with Rancière, this process participates in the act of emancipation of the viewer-reader, wherein viewing is not merely a passive act but can be a transformative action. Therefore, I see the tension between the author's organizing logic of the page and the undoing of that same logic by the viewer as an example of the political potential of comics. In this sense, the medium's form and aesthetics challenges the notion of the viewer as a passive figure:

> The spectator also acts […] She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kind of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her (Rancière, 2008, p. 13).

As Oliver Davis (2010) notes, for Rancière visual art has the aesthetic potential to offer individuals an altered perspective on the world and their role within it, turning them into political actors. However, Rancière underlines how visual art can only accomplish this by respecting the autonomy of the spectators' interpretative act. For this reason, the artist (or the comics' author) must try to avoid taking on a didactic or pedagogic role. Thus, on the one hand there is the essential task of the author in framing, and therefore establishing, an interpretative pattern for the viewer, and on the other hand there is the agential freedom of the viewer-reader in filling in the gaps of information on the page. Graphic narratives "cannot conceal [their] reliance on readers to extrapolate from the limited narrative discourse, making [their] mediatedness especially noticeable" (Schmid, 2021, p. 14). Comic art can be employed to raise viewers' awareness of meaning-making processes, wherein the constructedness of the page cues them to reflect on their own positionality. In comics addressing migration, viewers are invited to question how they are situated with respect to the characters and stories being portrayed, and to negotiate the complexity of their ethical position as (often) privileged subjects witnessing the events from a distance (Polak, 2017; Smith, 2011).

Particularly after the widespread accessibility and distribution of audio-visual media, masses have been confronted with the ubiquitous presence of "intolerable images" (2008, p. 83), whose sight triggers a strong emotional impact on viewers. According to Rancière, the visualization of images about traumatic depictions of past or current atrocities mobilizes the spectator's gaze in specific ways. Nevertheless, Rancière maintains that the spectacularization of atrocities and the discourse on the intolerable image have led to an overall suspicion about the political potential of any image, generated by the disappointed belief in a straight line between artistic production, affective engagement, and the subjective will to act politically.

To restore faith in the political effect of images, namely their ability to build new configurations of thinking and of looking at the world, what needs to be challenged is the presupposition that there is an immediate link between representation, awareness, and call

to action. In fact, artistic images do not supply direct weapons for battle, but, rather, help in sketching "new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible" (p. 103). If, thus, aesthetic experience bears political potential, it seems worth questioning how comics' form and aesthetics may participate in the Rancierian "aesthetic regime".

Rather than seeing the tension between viewer and author in purely oppositional terms, I would stress that this tension can be read as a collaborative relationship between the author's narrative cue and the viewer-reader's autonomous interpretative capabilities. Through the close reading of *Mediterraneo,* I want to consider this collaborative relationship and investigate how, in this qualified and context-specific instance, a wordless graphic novel may be employed to problematize the viewers' way of seeing migrant experiences, especially by encouraging them to question their own positionality towards the events being portrayed.

Mediterraneo: framing and problematizing the viewer's gaze

Mediterraneo was published in 2018, in the aftermath of the so-called "migration crisis" period. The authors' decision not to employ textual dialogue is one of the most striking aspects of this work. *Mediterraneo*, in fact, lacks the juxtaposition of word and image, considered one of the foundational traits of comics. For author Sergio Nazzaro, the lack of the written word enables the graphic novel to cross borders: "può viaggiare al contrario, può migrare al contrario, […] e puoi regalarlo a chiunque non parli la tua lingua" (Nazzaro in Raudino, 2019).[10] Nazzaro's claim on the transnational power of *Mediterraneo* is context-dependent and should be read in light of the fact that the wordless graphic novel mobilizes an imaginary mostly familiar to audiences from the Global North (Groß, 2014).

In another interview, Nazzaro further explains the decision behind the almost total absence of words in the text:

> Del Mediterraneo è rimasto solo un fondale deserto e arido che mostra la realtà. Ci siamo chiesti: 'Dobbiamo spiegarlo o dobbiamo mostrarlo?' C'era la volontà di un testo che attraversasse i confini proprio perché senza parole, solo con la forza delle immagini, perché ormai si è detto tutto e il contrario di tutto (Nazzaro in Cecchini, 2018).[11]

The debate around immigration in the Italian public arena, for Nazzaro, has been overloaded with words. Recalling Arnold (2023), for the author this verbal abundancy should therefore be counterbalanced with ethically nuanced visual elements. Nevertheless, the lack of the written word does not constitute the only noteworthy absence in this graphic novel. The need for a humble silence when faced with the tragedy of many migrant journeys through one of the deadliest sea crossing routes ("Migration within the Mediterranean", 2023) is further enhanced by the lack of the very foundational element of the sea: its waters. The graphic novel narrates the voyage of Amalia, a girl who flees her war-torn country crossing a desertic Mediterranean Sea that "per vergogna ha ritirato le sue stesse acque" and where "le parole

non hanno più forma, ciò che resta è solo dolore" (Nazzaro, 2018).[12] This remark by Nazzaro encapsulates two crucial elements: the transformation of the sea into a desert, showing in full light the horrors that water naturally conceals, and the difficulty for words to convey the tragedy of such dramatic journeys.

Distancing itself from the more common media trope that sees incoming migrants reduced into nameless individuals, *Mediterraneo*, in line with other graphic narratives, pays attention to the individual experience of migration: in following Amalia through her difficult journey, the graphic novel employs its foundational visual element by offering to the reader multiple close-ups of the young girl, underscoring her determination and strength. In the splash-panel below (image 1), for example, Amalia is portrayed immediately after the destruction of her city as she stares into the distant horizon with determination, observing the vastness of the desertic landscape she will have to cross. Here Ferrara skillfully experiments with the form of comics: in the upper part of the page a cloud of pitch-black smoke rises behind the protagonist, suggesting that her city is being crushed by war. The cloud of smoke then ominously expands beyond the frames of the panel, contributing to an overall sense of doomful asphyxiation.

Figure 1 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia flees her city and exchanges a direct look with the viewer.

In the splash panel, the protagonist's gaze is placed in direct confrontation with that of the viewer-reader. If the upper part of the frame is disrupted by the menacing black smoke, the lower part of the image neatly delimits the young girl, drawing the viewer's focus to her pale face and intense look. Through this direct visual confrontation, the authors are challenging the boundaries between seer and seen, creating a compelling visual strategy that draws attention to the viewer's gaze. The graphic novel attempts to avoid the proliferation of stereotypically dehumanizing images of migration, offering instead a more

complex narrative that plays an important function in problematizing the situatedness of a viewer from the Global North. As Ferrara himself asserts, this work is meant to thoroughly engage the reader: the aim is not to show an exact chronicle of something that happened but to propose suggestions and a moment of reflection in which the reader is an active participant. The overall goal is to make a drawing that would prompt the viewer to fill in the spaces, without imposing the authors' vision but suggesting something that readers complete themselves (Ferrara in Billau, 2018). Recalling Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator as an active participant in the work of art, the play between seen and seer engages viewers as active participants of *Mediterraneo*'s visual narration rather than passive bystanders. The crucial collaboration between the imagination of the author(s) and that of the viewer-reader who must complete the narrative is once more at the forefront of the medium's formal affordances (McCloud, 1994).

Having the protagonist's gaze directly challenging that of the viewer becomes a recurring visual trope in *Mediterraneo*. The determination and power of Amalia's gaze is shown in other close-up scenes, such as the two double-page spread situated at opposite moments of the day: one depicts a new dawn in the protagonist's journey (image 2), and the other shows Amalia contemplating the desertic Mediterranean horizon at dusk (image 3). In both instances, in the lower part of the page, viewers are faced with a close-up of the protagonist's intense look. These pages constitute both a break from the voyage, and a pause for reflection for the viewer-reader. Amalia's gaze appears to be questioning the position of Global North viewers in following her difficult journey through a deathly space, ultimately destabilizing both their role as privileged viewers (Smith 2011), and that of Amalia as mere object of the viewers' gaze: through the close-up of the protagonist's eyes, the authors ultimately make *us*, as viewers-readers, the object of the migrant's gaze.

Figure 2 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia's gaze at dawn

Figure 3 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Amalia simultaneously staring at both desert and viewer

Furthermore, Rancière interestingly points out that images of atrocity foster in spectators from the Global North a feeling of guilty complicity for benefiting from the system perpetuating such inequalities (Rancière, 2008, p. 85). Rancière, however, is critical of the empathetic effect of images of atrocity based on creating a sense of guilt in the viewer, as it banalizes the reality of these horrors and reinforces the consequential link connecting representation, knowledge, and action (p. 96). Framing the viewer's affective engagement through guilt is made even more explicit in another double-page spread, which functions as an interruption in the main unfolding of the plot (image 4). After witnessing another shipwreck in the Mediterranean desert and the subsequent death of its passengers, the viewer is presented with a depiction of a sequence of panels that, compared to the events witnessed just a page earlier, have the function of making viewers once more aware of their privilege. In fact, the use of tropes familiar especially for Italian readers, is meant to instigate a feeling of estrangement - or "defamiliarization" (Shklovsky, 1925) - towards the well-known scenes of everyday life displayed in front of the viewer. The panels depict scenes from popular Italian reality shows such as *Masterchef* or *C'è posta per te*, pets cuddling each other, a football match, or Leonardo Di Caprio's speech at the Oscars. This powerful interruption from the main narrative participates in the guilt-shaming process outlined by Rancière: after visually taking part in the dramatic voyage of Amalia, through this sequence of images viewers are brazenly put in front of their position as "privileged, safe subjects to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere" (Smith, 2011, p. 64).

Figure 4 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. Scenes from daily media exposure in the Global North

I would then claim that if on the one hand *Mediterraneo*'s authors skillfully use the intricacy of comics' networked form and aesthetics to call on the viewer's agency, on the other the choice of questioning the privileged position of the viewer through guilt may somewhat undermine the graphic novel's political work of "emancipation". In relying mostly on the expedient of guilt, *Mediterraneo* eventually runs the risk of freezing viewers in a position of culpability "in being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it" (Rancière, 2008, p. 85).

In contrast with these representations of daily life in the Global North, I would like to draw attention to one last scene in *Mediterraneo* where the question of migrants' visibility and invisibility is at the forefront. One of the most interesting aspects of the graphic novel is that it casts light on the unseen of the Mediterranean crossing: the thousands of nameless individuals lost at sea who are so often anonymized through countless statistics and numbers. The many migrant subjects who disappear in Mediterranean waters become visible in *Mediterraneo* both literally, through macabre panels depicting piles of corpses, and metonymically, through the orange life jacket, an iconic object of the perilous voyage at sea of migrants that Marie Gillespie interprets as a "unique biography" of their individual stories and personal journeys (2017, p. 150). The proportion of the tragedy of the undocumented crossing of the Mediterranean is visualized through the sequence in which the life jackets come back to life as the protagonist is asleep. It is at night that the ghostly life vests revive, indicating the presence of the innumerable migrants who remain among the uncounted, and therefore the most invisible (image 5).

Figure 5 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. The life jackets come to life.

A sequence of panels shows life vests coming together in a spectral dance. One of the vests notices Amalia and decides to become her companion, her protection, therefore undertaking, in an ironic act of redemption, the life-saving duty that it previously failed to perform. The rubber of the inflatable boat, one of many "*ondate di barconi*" [waves of crammed boats] recurring in European media representations (Binotto and Bruno, 2018, p. 26), envelops Amalia in a dark embrace, while a wide blank space divides the vest's interaction with the girl. This gap works both as a temporal shift and to focus the reader's attention on the life vest itself: here the subject of its protection become ambiguous, as the vest seems no longer directed towards Amalia, but is opening its "arms" towards the viewer, who is once again pulled into the narrative and becomes directly absorbed in the actions taking place therein.

The original use of the gutter space by Ferrara materializes here how visual absences can also become an aesthetic interval for self-reflexion, a "material evidence of how the gaze of the readers is situated in specific ways in relation to what is shown" (Polak, 2017, p. 16). After offering the readers an intimate close-up of the sleeping protagonist, the sequence ends with a double page spread of the procession of orange life vests seen from above (image 6). This scene recalls a satellite picture of the Mediterranean Sea, displayed as an "inconceivable passage marked by slavery, drowning, brutality, and the wrecked lives of ferocious migration today" (Chambers, 2010, p. 681). The usually invisible sea bottom is illuminated by thousands of life vests, almost suggesting an orange-toned torchlight procession to commemorate all the anonymous, invisible individuals who remain unseen.
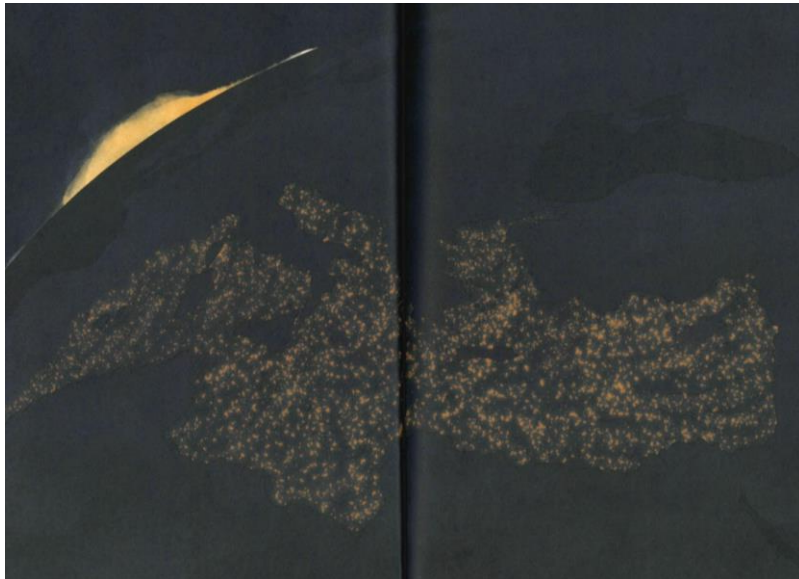
Figure 6 – © Round Robin Editrice, 2018. An aerial view of the illuminated Mediterranean

Conclusion

To conclude, I maintain that the graphic novel is a welcome attempt to problematize the common, mass-media viewing practices which spectacularize undocumented migration in the Mediterranean. The graphic novel is original in materializing a powerful space of visibility for the otherwise invisible individuals lost at sea. Furthermore, in troubling questions of (in)visibility and the boundaries between viewer (the reader of the comic) and viewed (the migrant subject), *Mediterraneo* creatively employs the formal complexity of the comic to invite viewers to reflect on their role as distant "spectators" of migrant voyages across the Mediterranean Sea. The graphic novel ultimately calls for an act of "critical witnessing" (Whitlock, 2020, p. 499) that ultimately questions who has the right to look and who is responsible for what is being seen.

Biographical note

Silvia Vari is a PhD student in Italian at the University of Warwick. Her previous work focused on narrations of youth precarity in Italian comics and appeared in peer-reviewed journals *Studi Culturali* and *Ticontre*. Her current research explores the experiences of (forced) migration in the Mediterranean area narrated in Italian comics from the past two decades, where she specifically investigates how the medium's formal hybridity and fragmentary aesthetics may embody and convey the transitional experience of migrant subjects. Aiming attention at different forms of migrant storytelling in comics (i.e. autobiography, reportage, and fiction) and their narrative framing strategies, her research analyzes through a Rancièrian lens the potential of comics to challenge mainstream discourses about (forced) migration and displacement.

Bibliography

Ahmed, M. (2016). *Openness in Comics Generating Meaning within Flexible Structures.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Arnold, M. (2023). The Pleasure of Drawing while People are Drowning. Graphic Literature and the Critical Engagement with Death in Migratory Spaces. *Interventions*, 25, 1 – 22. doi: 10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190909

Billau, A. (2018, May 8). *Intervista a Sergio Nazzaro e Luca Ferrara sulla loro graphic novel "Mediterraneo" (Round Robin Editrice)* [Radio Broadcast]. Radio Radicale. https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/540760/intervista-a-sergio-nazzaro-e-luca-ferrara-sulla-loro-graphic-novel-mediterraneo-round

Binotto, M. and Bruno, M. (2018). Spazi mediali delle migrazioni. Framing e rappresentazioni del confine nell'informazione italiana. *Lingue e Linguaggi,* 25, 17 - 44. doi: 10.1285/i22390359v25p17

Boletsi, M., Houwen, J. & Minnaard, L. (eds.). (2020). *Languages of Resistance, Transformation, and Futurity in Mediterranean Crisis-Scapes.* Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

Byrn-Køhlert, F. (2017). Comics, Form, and Anarchy. *Substance*, 46, 11-32.

Calia, C. & Rabuiti, E. (2006). *Fortezza Europa.* Roma: Coniglio.

Castaldi, P. (2011). *Etenesh. L'odissea di una migrante.* Roma: BeccoGiallo.

Cecchini, C. (2018). Da culla della civiltà a cimitero: in un fumetto senza parole le stragi del Mediterraneo. *Today*. Taken from https://www.today.it/attualita/mediterraneo-sergio-nazzaro-luca-ferrara-round-robin.html

Ceccorulli, M. (2023). From Ukraine to the Mediterranean: Italy and the governance of migration. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 15, 269-282.

Chambers, I. (2010). *Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks,* PMLA, 125, 678-684. doi 10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.678

Chambers, I. (2012). The Museum of Migrating Modernities. In E. Ferrara (ed.), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices* (pp. 13 – 32). Milan: Mela Books

Colucci, M. (2018). Per una storia del governo dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia: dagli anni sessanta alla crisi delle politiche. *Meridiana,* 91, 9 -36.

Comberiati, D. (2010). *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro.* Bruxelles: Peter Lang.

Comberiati D. & Spadaro, B. (2023). Introduction: transnational Italian comics: memory, migration, transformation. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 14, 489-501. DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2023.2239334

Davis, O. (2010). *Jacques Rancière.* Cambridge: Polity Press

Davis, O. (2013). The Politics of Art: Aesthetic Contingency and the Aesthetic Affect. In O. Davis (ed.). *Rancière Now* (155-168). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Davies, D. (2020). Crossing Borders, Bridging Boundaries: Reconstructing the Rights of the Refugee in Comics". In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (ed.), *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing Refugee and Migrant Journeys across Disciplines* (pp. 177-192). London: UCL Press. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xprtw.20

Davies, D. & Rifkind, C. (2020). *Documenting Trauma in Comics. Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage.* Cham: Palgrave MacMillan.

De Genova, N. (2002). Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life. Annual Review of Anthropology, 31, 419-47. doi: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432

Diamanti, I. (2023). Dopo il Covid torna la paura dello straniero. Due terzi degli italiani per le frontiere chiuse. *La Repubblica.* Taken from https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/09/28/news/

Gillespie, M. (2017). Refugee Waste. Death, survival and solidarity in Lesvos. In F. Dodsworth & A. Walford (eds.), *A World Laid Waste?: Responding to the Social, Cultural and Political Consequences of Globalisation* (pp. 147-170). Oxon: Routledge.

Giubilaro, C. (2018) (Un)framing Lampedusa: Regimes of Visibility and the Politics of Affect in Italian Media Representations. In G. Proglio & L. Odasso (eds.), *Border Lampedusa Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land* (pp. 103-117). Cham: Palgrave McMillan. doi 10.1007/978-3-319-59330-2

Gozzi, L. (2023). Europe migrant crisis: Italy to build migrant centres in Albania. *BBC News.* Taken from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/

Groensteen, T. (1999). *Système de la bande dessinée.* Paris: Press Universitaires de France; eng. trans. (2007). *The System of Comics.* Jackson (MS): University of Mississippi Press.

Groß, F. (2014). In D. Stein, S. Denson, & Meyer, C. (eds.), *Transnational perspectives on graphic narratives: Comics at the crossroads.* London: Bloomsbury.

Jameel, A. (2022). Wordless Comics. in E. La Cour, S. Grennan & R. Spanjers (eds.). *Key terms in Comics Studies* (353). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

MacLeod, C. (2021). Tracing Trauma: Questioning Understanding of Clandestine Migration in *Amazigh: itinéraire d'hommes libres*. In N.L. Serrano (ed.), *Immigrants and Comics. Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis* (pp. 189-203). New York (NY): Routledge.

Malkki, L. H. (1996). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11, 377-404.

Mazzara, F. (2015) Spaces of Visibility for the Migrants of Lampedusa: The Counter Narrative of the Aesthetic Discourse. *Italian Studies*, 22, 449-464. doi: 10.1080/00751634.2015.1120944

McKinney, M. (2020) *Postcolonialism and Migration in French Comics.* Leuven: Leuven University Press.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art.* New York: HarperPerennial.

Mickwitz, N. (2020) Introduction: Discursive Contexts, "Voice," and Empathy in Graphic Life Narratives of Migration and Exile, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35, 459-465. doi: 10.1080/08989575.2020.1738079

Mickwitz, N. (2016). *Documentary Comics. Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Mikkonen, K. (2012). Focalisation in comics. From the specificities of the medium to conceptual reformulations. *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art*, 1, 71- 95.

Mikkonen, K. (2017). *The Narratology of Comic Art*. New York: Routledge.

Missing Migrants Project (2023). *Migration within the Mediterranean*. Taken from: https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean

Naghibi N, Rifkind C. & Ty E. (2020) Migration, Exile, and Diaspora in Graphic Life Narratives. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35, 295-304. doi: 10.1080/08989575.2020.1738081

Nazzaro, S. & Ferrara, L. (2018). *Mediterraneo*. Roma: Round Robin.

New Keywords Collective (2016). Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of 'the Crisis' in and of 'Europe'. *Near Futures Online*, 1. Taken from https://nearfuturesonline.org/europecrisis-new-keywords-of-crisis-in-and-of-europe/

Pacinotti, G. A. (2014). Muttererde. In *Esterno notte*. Roma: Coconino Press.

Parati, G. (1997). Strangers in paradise: Foreigners and Shadows in Italian Literature. In B. Allen & M. Russo (eds.), *Revisioning Italy: National identity and global culture* (pp. 169-190). Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota press.

Polak, K. (2017). *Ethics in the Gutter. Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics*. Columbus (OJH: The Ohio State University Press

Postema, B. (2022). Silent Comics. in E. La Cour, S. Grennan & R. Spanjers (eds.). *Key terms in Comics Studies* (p. 296). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rancière, J. (1995). *La Mésentente: Politique et philosophie*. Paris: Éditions Galilée; eng. trans. (1999). *Dis-agreement. Politics and Philosophy,* London: Continuum.

Rancière, J. (2000). *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*. Paris: Éditions La Fabrique; Eng. trans. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible,* Continuum: London.

Rancière, J. (2008). *Le Spectateur Émancipé*. Paris: Éditions La Fabrique; Eng. trans. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator.* London: Verso.

Raudino, C. (2019). Il silenzio assordante del Mediterraneo di Sergio Nazzaro. *Lettera 7C.* Taken from https://lettera7c.com/2019/03/22/il-silenzio-del-mediterraneo/

Rifkind, C. (2017) Refugee Comics and Migrant Topographies. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32, 648-654, https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1339468

Rifkind, C. (2020). Migrant Detention Comics and the Aesthetic Technologies of Compassion. In D. Davies & C. Rifkind (eds.), *Documenting Trauma in Comics. Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage* (pp. 297-316). Cham: Palgrave MacMillan

Schmid, J. C. P. (2021). *Frames and Framing in Documentary Comics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shklovsky, V. (1925). *O teorii prozy*. Moscow-Leningrad: Krug; Eng. trans. (1992). *Theory of Prose.* Duke University Press

Sigona, N. (2014). The Politics of Refugee Voices: Representations, Narratives, and Memories. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long & N. Sigona (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (pp. 369-382). Oxford: Oxford UP.

Smith, S. (2011). Human Rights and Comics. Autobiographical Avatars, Crisis Witnessing, and Transnational Rescue Networks. In M. Chaney (ed.), *Graphic Subjects. Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (pp. 61 – 72). Madison (WI): The University of Wisconsin Press.

Sousanis, N. (2015) *Unflattening*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Spadaro, B. (2023). Fumetto, transnationalism and migration: an annotated and multilingual bibliography. *H-TransItalianStudies*.

Spadaro, B. (2023). Migrazioni memoria e transnazionalità nel fumetto italiano. In D. Comberiati & C. Mengozzi (eds), *Storie condivise nell'Italia contemporanea Narrazioni e performance transculturali* (pp. 217 – 240). Roma: Carocci.

Szczepanik, M. (2016). The 'Good' and 'Bad' Refugees? Imagined Refugeehood(s) in the Media Coverage of the Migration Crisis. *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies*, 10, 23-33.

Tiberio, L. (2023). L'accordo italiano con l'Albania e la disumanizzazione dei migranti in Europa. *Valigia Blu.* Taken from https://www.valigiablu.it/italia-albania-accordo-migranti-europa/

Tondo, L. (2022). Giorgia Meloni faces first migration test from two NGO rescue boats. *The Guardian.* Taken from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/26/georgia-meloni-faces-first-migration-test-from-two-ngo-rescue-boats.

Whitlock, G. (2020). Implicated Subjects. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35, 495-501. doi 10.1080/08989575.2020.1738085

Notes

[1] The emergence of migrant literature in Italy dates back to 1990 with the publication of two pivotal co-authored novels *Immigrato* (1990) by Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani. One of the earliest films addressing undocumented immigration in Italy is Michele Placido's *Pummaro'* (1990), while international acclaim was received by the Berlinale award winner *Fuocoammare* (2016) by Gianfranco Rosi.

[2] Given the heterogenous nature of comics, I employ "graphic narrative" as an inclusive term that encompasses the medium's different formats (i.e. the comic strip, the comic book, the graphic novel, wordless comics, among others). I use the term "graphic novel" specifically when relating to *Mediterraneo* because it is how the authors and the publishing house refer to the work.

[3] For an encompassing overview on Italian transnational comics and graphic narratives on migration please see Barbara Spadaro's '*Fumetto*, transnationalism and migration: an annotated and multilingual bibliography' (2023).

[4] "Wordless" (Jameel, 2023) or "Silent" comics (Postema, 2023) are a specific sub-genre of sequential graphic narratives that almost entirely eschew the use of textual discourse to convey meaning.

[5] Given the particular verbo-visual nature of comics, both the terms "viewer" and "reader" have been consistently used in comics scholarship (see Groensteen, 1999; McCloud, 1994; Mikkonen, 2012; 2017). This distinction results particularly blurred in the case of a predominantly visual comic such as *Mediterraneo*. For terminological clarity, I will employ both terms and the combined term viewer-reader when referring to comics readers.

[6] Following Schmid (2021), the terms "frame" and "framing strategies" refer here to the multiple ways in which different visual, textual, and cognitive phenomena are employed by comics authors to influence the meaning-making processes of readers.

[7] The 'bodily' materiality of migrants is highlighted here to stress how migrant subjects – and subjectivities - are de-humanized and made into an unidentifiable, anonymous figure around which various legal, political, and public discourses are inscribed. The bodies of migrants therefore become mere objects of a racialized biopolitical rationality that invests them with economic, legal, and political authority (Chambers, 2012).

[8] By using the term 'Global North' I do not refer to a geographical region in the conventional sense. The term rather signifies the relative economic power and wealth of countries across distinct parts of the world such as North America, Europe, and Australia.

[9] In Rancièrian terms the spectator is not necessarily limited to someone viewing a live performance, but the term more broadly refers to whoever is exposed to the aesthetic experience provided by forms of (visual) art.

[10] "It can travel backwards, it can migrate backwards, […] and you can give it to anyone who doesn't speak your language". This and the following translations of the two authors' words are mine.

[11] "All that is left of the Mediterranean is a barren, deserted backdrop showing reality. We asked ourselves, 'Do we have to explain it or do we have to show it?' There was a desire for a text that would cross borders precisely because without words, only with the power of images, because by now everything and the opposite of everything has already been said."

[12] "Out of shame has withdrawn its own waters, words no longer have form, what remains is only pain."