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Shelter – a Portrait in Transit(ion): Gender and Migration ¹

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Abstract

The documentary *Shelter - A Farewell to Eden* (Italy, 2019, directed by Enrico Masi) presents a poetic portrait of Pepsi, a Philippine transexual refugee who lives between France and Italy. The portrait of Pepsi is set over the background of a wider landscape, as the film retraces the migratory routes she has taken, and that many other migrants had followed.

Pepsi is in a position of double transition: a geographical and a social one. The first one is defined by her story of migration and seeking asylum. The second one concerns gender, given that she has started sex reassignment therapy, but, at the moment of filming, she had interrupted it, due to circumstances that the film doesn't disclose. **This chapter** analyses how this particular story provides a narrative to think about the intersection of class, gender and nationality in the definition of one's own identity.

By undertaking an intersectional critique, **this chapter** aims at discussing how the film's aesthetics incorporate the transit(ion) of Pepsi, giving depth to the narrative and representations of Pepsi and other migrants. Three artistic choices will be analysed in detail: the composition of the portrait of Pepsi, always preserving her anonymity; the way landscapes are filmed with the camera going through the territory; and the organic construction of the film around a hybridization of formats (16mm, 2K, DV, and archival footage of different natures).

The chapter further demonstrates how the director bypasses the problems of representation of queer migrant narratives in documentary filmmaking, by involving Pepsi in the definition of the narrative and in the creation of the film. Enrico Masi creates a platform for Pepsi to act on the performativity of her identity, a form of agency that creates its own condition of reality independent of hegemonic structures of power (Butler, 1990/2017).

Keywords: Refugees; intersectionality; Hybridization of formats; Politics of representation; Performativity

¹ This chapter is based on a communication presented on April 25th, 2021 at the *Shifting Tides, Anxious Borders* conference, organized by Binghamton University (virtual).

Introduction

The screen is dark. We hear a vague phone conversation. Inside a metro station, we see a person dressed in a very large coat running over a fare gate and crossing this liminal access point. For a short instant, we are left wondering: is this a remake, or a scene of *Barres* (1984) by Luc Moullet, where he comically explores a few strategies to subvert the system of bars that controls the access to the subway? What does this transgressive gesture promise for the rest of the film? How does this movement of overcoming a clear obstacle qualify the main character of the **film that** we are yet to meet?

The transgressiveness of this movement – literally, as transgressing a concrete barrier – reveals itself as an allegory, as soon as we meet the protagonist. “I’ve created 7 names”, she says, as we see only her back. In *Shelter – Farewell to Eden*² (Masi, 2019), we will only get to know one of those names, we will only meet one of those identities that she uses to juggle through invisibility and visibility, across borders and social spheres. Pepsi, a single word that reminds us of the soda drink created to alleviate indigestion (*dyspepsia*), is the main character of the film. We learn very little about her. She’s from the Philippines, Mindanao, where she was part of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. In this particular context, her homosexuality and gender identity were not accepted, and she had to escape. She worked in Lebanon as a nurse for about 10 years. From there, she migrated to Europe, arriving first in Italy, and then crossing the border on foot to France. During the film, she lives in this indefinite state: she has an asylum seeker visa in Italy, yet she lives in France, which forces her to be in constant transition between the two countries. In terms of sex and gender she is also transitioning. She identifies as a woman, she took self-prescribed hormonal treatments, but at the moment of filming she hadn’t still undergone sex reassignment surgery (and it is not clear if she intended to do it). Pepsi is in a double transition: she’s a migrant/refugee in Europe, and she is transgender, in a state of gender and geographic fluidity that eludes **normative social** definitions and bureaucratic categories of identity.

Shelter provides an interesting platform to reflect about matters of the representation of gender and migration. Taking into account the concerns raised by Walter Benjamin in *The Author as Producer*, later reworked by Hal Foster in *The Artist as Ethnographer?*, one recognizes that for the “advanced” artist it is not enough to portray “[a] correct “tendency”, [or] to assume a place “beside the proletariat.” For the “advanced” artist it was necessary “to intervene, like the revolutionary worker, in the means of artistic production to change the ‘techniques’ of traditional media, to transform the ‘apparatus’ of bourgeois culture.” (Foster, 1996, p. 171) For Foster, the affinity between the “advanced” artist and proletariat proposed by Benjamin, gave way to a new paradigm – emerging with the anthropological turn of the sixties – where “[a] shift from a subject [of association] defined in terms of economic relation to one defined in terms of cultural identity” occurs. (p. 173) The analysis of *Shelter* will, first of all, focus on “the solidarity that counted for Benjamin,” namely, a “solidarity in material practice, not in artistic theme or political attitude alone.” (p. 172) *Shelter* not only tells the story of a transgender migrant (*artistic theme*) in an activist way (*political attitude*), but it does so by engaging at the level of the means of artistic production. It proposes a liminal aesthetic approach, that shares a *solidarity in material practice* with the subject it depicts, it reimagines formal and aesthetic possibilities. I will focus on the specific aspects of the film

² The film was presented in several film festivals and universities such as CPH:DOX, in Copenhagen, and Cinéma du Réel, in the Pompidou Center, Paris.

regarding the involvement of Pepsi in her own portrayal and the hybridization of formats (16 mm, HD, archival footage, among others) that comprise it. Later, I will return and review some of Foster's predicaments around the challenges artists face when working with otherness, and how such work is manifested in *Shelter*.

Portrait and Landscape of a Territory

“At the beginning of the film, the portrait was not expected. We were aiming at the portrait of a territory. An observational documentary about a very specific place, in which maybe we could catch the essence of a great phenomenon: the migratory phenomenon.” Extract from an interview with Enrico Masi (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)³

Originally *Shelter* was a research project on the theme of migration across Italy and France: the geographical spine of middle Europe. For about a decade, Enrico Masi, the film's director, has developed an artistic and directorial practice centred around the concept of *mega-event*, the main focus of his PhD in Pedagogy by University of Bologna, and *Shelter* is part of a trilogy that engages with that discussion. *The Golden Temple* (2012) was focused on the processes of gentrification caused by the 2012 London Olympics; and *Lepanto – The Last Cangaceiro* (2016) takes the contemporary impact caused by Brazil's 2014 Football World Cup and 2016 Rio Olympics as a motif to dwell on the socio-cultural history of colonialism in the country. In *Shelter*, the mega-event is the set of migratory fluxes that have formed around Europe, with a peak around the mid-2010s.

Slavoj Žižek (2014) defines an *event* as something that happens that “retroactively determines its causes or reasons.” (p. 13) According to this perspective, an event is something that transforms the historical narrative from which it emerges, defining our interpretation of what came before it and what comes afterwards. A mega-event, in its hyperbolic form, suggests the spreading of its effects to impact on a continental or global scale. More often than not, this concept is used to describe transcontinental organizational efforts that culminate in global happenings such as the Olympics. Nevertheless, a broader understanding of “event” as something that doesn't necessarily stem from a wilful organization, allows us to include in this concept global situations like revolutions, global conflicts, pandemics and, in the subject of the present article, the migratory fluxes in Europe.

Before Pepsi, *Shelter* was not planned to be focused on a single character, but rather to represent the “indefinite and international territory, [...] as if this was one single territory” that so many migrants cross pursuing shelter (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020) – a refuge that is political, sociological, but also symbolic. The abundance of landscape in the film reveals the several stages of this filmic research, as well as accentuates the connection between the particular story of Pepsi and her belonging to a wider context. The landscapes that retrace Pepsi's journey are crossed and populated by a few migrant bodies and vestiges of their precarious migration. We understand that there are partially invisible migratory fluxes that can be found in the image, but we cannot grasp its scale. The genre of landscape has become prominent and prestigious in Western tradition, in particular until the 19th century through easel paintings. Following that specific tradition, as Enrico Masi and his team were following the migratory flux, they were filming and depicting a specific territory, the Italo-French axis.

Landscape is often associated with the representation of something natural. However, landscape representation captures the essence of the interconnectedness of nature and culture, as the transformations created by humans are also registered by the brush or camera. More

³ The interview that is mentioned throughout the text was conducted by the author of the chapter..

importantly, the techniques and the visual codes that define how representation translates the visual existence of a landscape are already informed by the cultural and social backgrounds of the artist. A landscape is the projection of the human gaze that creates a certain pictorial composition through the arrangement of signs and expressions that represent natural and human elements.

An artistic representation is always limited. A landscape cannot re-present the territory in its wholeness. The artist and film director Ana Vaz claimed about her films that she tries “to escape from the notion of landscape,” preferring the concept of “territory.” For her, “[u]nlike the landscape, the territory is produced by historical, biological, social, spectral, spiritual relationships, and they are alive.” (Bergamaschi Novaes, 2021, p. 148) This critique of landscape, however, seems to be attached to the most conventional idea of landscape, associated with Renaissance painting, supposing that such representations imply a removal of the body of the artist from the environment to create an ideal representation of nature. As John Berger (1972) has evinced in *Ways of Seeing*, the genre of landscape in European painting, in its most usual expressions – never mind the masterpieces and extraordinary works –, was before anything else a form of representing ownership of land, and therefore power. Hence, any withdrawal of the artist that can be implicit in the genre of landscape – even when talking about Renaissance painting – will evince all the territorial relationships as filtered by the artist’s gaze. That is to say that a landscape – in painting, film or photography – can capture and represent, within its own limits, the complexity of a territory. On the other hand, it’s impossible to think of territory as an artistic genre – it is a set of living and dynamic relations that cannot be reduced to an artistic surface of any kind.

But how could a landscape express, or suggest, the complexity of a territory? In an article that proposes a state of the art around the return to landscape in Geography – as well as in the arts and humanities –, Jorge Gaspar (2001) defends a broader understanding of the concept: “The multiple investigations about landscape have shown the importance of new dimensions, that go beyond the simple visual apprehension resulting from the relations between humans and the environment.”⁴ (pp. 84 – 85) Such an understanding included sensorial landscapes – such as soundscapes – but also the existence of “landscapes of the spirit.” (p. 95) The latter can be visited through “imagination, assisted or not by documents” or through the rediscovery “with a retrospective gaze towards the materialization, possible in the now, of a life.” (p. 94) One can’t fully transcribe a territory onto an artistic representation, and European conceptions of landscape inherit the aforementioned limitations of the easel painting tradition. Still, a multidimensional landscape composed of textual or sensorial elements edited and arranged can reach a representation of a territory.

In *Shelter*, the landscapes presented by Enrico Masi register the aforementioned territory. As the camera traverses the territory, entering and penetrating it alongside the migrants,⁵ it meets several affective narratives (conveyed by the characters and through documentary and archival footage), it crosses the march of migrants, it reveals the traces left behind by them. The embodied camera moves from external point-of-views to tracking shots. It doesn’t imply the removal of the body of the author, it rather expresses its presence. These multidimensional landscapes are dynamic representations that, even though limited to the specific perspective of its filmmaker, point towards the social, the political, the poetic and the spectral, expressed by the materiality of moving bodies.

⁴ The translations of all citations not matching the language of the work cited were made by the author of the chapter.

⁵ Many of these sequences of tracking shots share similarities with the visual grammar of Ana Vaz films (aforementioned). They both share a desire to overcome limited notions of landscape by means of incorporating the understanding they have of the concept of territory.

Figure 1: Still from *Shelter – Farewell to Eden*. Overpass in Ventimiglia. Courtesy of the Director.

Shelter articulates a collection of landscapes of the migration route, tracing the “intersection of moving bodies” that constitutes it as a territory. (Mbembe, 2000, p. 261) Under a viaduct a group of tents are assembled, in a close-shot two pairs of black hands try to get warm by the fire. Construction work being done by the French border. The activity in a refugee centre, with the strong impression of a young man playing soccer alone, powerfully shooting the ball against the fence. We follow Pepsi during the night, but we never see her face. She is walking through a pitch-dark field, carrying a light and some plastic bags. All these scenes characterize a territory of/in transition that seems to be at the margin of urban spaces: fields, forests, but also suburban and low-income areas of the cities. These places, often underprivileged within the industrial society, tend to be less policed and more invisible. Thus, they become points of possible border crossing, but they are also more dangerous. Epistemological and ontological violence forces some forms of existence towards social invisibility. In *Shelter*, Masi tries to give visibility to some of these people, and hence to the political body they form, while preserving the necessary opacity so that they might not be identified by the authorities. For many of these migrants “invisibility can be deadly” – as Hito Steyerl suggested –, but full visibility could mean deportation or worse. The fact is that such conditions have been accepted by the migrants as a dangerous form of resistance against the bureaucratic state and its police. The balance *Shelter* tries to find is that of giving visibility to the political and affective narratives, while keeping the civilian anonymity of all its migrant subjects.

A Portrait in Transit(ion)

“At a certain moment, a character was able to represent the whole group. And [the] individual portrait appeared. But we couldn’t film her face, to protect her identity. Hence a missing portrait.” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)

Like landscape, the genre of portrait should also be seen as a surface where the distinction between culture and nature becomes difficult to define. The most evident thing about the portrait of Pepsi is how dangerous visibility can be for her. During the whole film, we never see her full face. Sometimes hidden by a scarf, sometimes seen from perspectives that protect her identity, the portrait of the heroine of this film appears despite the invisibility of her face. a figure that overcomes anonymity through the emotional self-narrative of Pepsi. Such representation, while it cannot be traced back to a specific identity, reveals the specific subjectivity of the character. The *lack* element of this “missing portrait” defines the political subject that presents itself: a subject that has to circulate in between regimes of invisibility, while claiming a right to visibility. The absence of a face is fundamental in the depiction of the portrait of this political subject – it integrates the violence of invisibility Pepsi is subjected too.

Figure 2: Still from *Shelter – Farewell to Eden*. Pepsi by European coaches (Bologna). Courtesy of the Director.

Marnell et al. (2020) state that “[a] border crossing of any kind is dangerous, for it marks one out as an other, a potential threat to social categories that are fragile at best – ‘citizens’, ‘subject’, ‘male’, ‘female’.” (p. 87) As they move through marginal spaces, this threat is double for queer migrants as the mere existence of these subjecthoods represent a disruption of both “hetero-patriarchal norms and claims to nationhood.” (p. 87) The intersectionality of Pepsi’s condition qualified this character to represent the ensemble of migrants that, due to

different identity traits, face multiple challenges to find a shelter in Europe. Not only from their country of departure, but also from the norms and bureaucracy of European societies. In particular, female and queer migrants find an aggravated risk of becoming victims of sexual violence, adding to all the other risks they already face. To understand those dangers, we have to consider the intersectionality of their condition, as “queer migrants do not experience homophobia/transphobia in one place and xenophobia in another, but rather live both concurrently.” (Marnell et al., 2020, p. 90) And yet, “even within this context of violence, queer migrants continue to develop livelihood strategies, forge networks and resist oppression.” (p. 87)

While individual narratives are important, in particular for the art of cinema, Masi looked at those narratives as a form of enhancing the political movement of migrants that have so little visibility in public discourse. As Pepsi was moving across this territory strengthening the collective portrait through her own affective narrative, the “[b]ackgrounds [...] set up and highlight the individual portrait.” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)

Masi was focusing on the collective process of migration, and he admits that the sexual aspect of Pepsi’s story was lost throughout the film. Nevertheless, the gender aspect is fundamental; first, to understand how Pepsi got to this situation in the first place – it was one of the reasons for her migration, as she states in the film, she had to leave Philippines for “being *gay*,” – and second, to understand the specific challenges that threaten her. As Marnell et al. (2020) propose, xenophobia and transphobia are experienced concurrently, an intersectional critique is necessary to fully grasp the ontological violence that she suffers, only by existing.

Usually, a distinction between sex and gender is advanced: sex relates to biology/nature, and gender to culture. However, as proposed by Judith Butler (1990/1999), such would mean “a radical discontinuity” between “sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.” (p. 10) Many feminists, like Butler herself or Donna Haraway, have pointed out that this relates to the binary at the core of the myth of Western rationality: nature vs culture. In this sort of binary, it is implicit that one of the poles of the binary dominates the other: culture dominates nature, just as the mind dominates the body, etc.

Therefore, to take this distinction seriously, and to believe in the “mimetic relation of gender to sex,” means to succumb to the hetero-patriarchal ideological bias that defines society. For Butler (1990/1999) “gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established [...] by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’” rather than simply to be conceived as “the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex.” (p. 11) Therefore, sex is not a “politically neutral surface” that stems exclusively from anatomical configuration “*on which* culture acts,” but it is a cultural and political construction that corresponds to a certain normative **regime**⁶. Moreover, the “presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.” (p. 10)

Transitioning: Movements and Becomings

The heteronormative structure of European societies, even if less evidently violent than those of other societies, will become yet another obstacle for the recognition of asylum or residence

⁶ In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990/1999) follows the likes of Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss to describe the political, social and economic reasonings that might explain the formation of norms and **taboos**, and the regulation of sexuality and gender identity.

of migrants. It is in face of this difficulty that the portrayal of Pepsi, based on the performativity of her agency, becomes expressed only in the *lack*, in the invisibility of her face.

Such heteronormative structures highlight the difficulty of understanding the complexity of transitioning, in particular by the opposition between “trans as condition” (or as a fixed post-transition category) and “trans as movement” (or as a process of becoming without an arrival stage). The first is more easily understood and accounted for in legal systems, inferring “that transitioning is a limited process where people move to(ward) their desired gender, with transition being realised when they have arrived at it.” (Shepherd & Hanckel, 2021, p. 50) That conception excludes the ontological validity of the individual throughout the process – only once it is achieved, is the individual acknowledged – and fails to include the diversity of expressions of gender that might exist, including fluid identities that are not fixed in any of the binaries. For that matter, Shepherd and Hanckel propose “trans as movement:” “[a]s a conceptual tool [that] can be used to create space for more expansive ontologies of gender that confront the harms and restrictions imposed by the gender binary and offer alternative ways of (re)imagining multiplicity in trans(ition) trajectories and futures.” (p. 53)

Likewise, “[m]igration necessarily involves becoming as much as being.” (Collins, 2018, p. 978) A migrant is not a passive and finite political agent. Despite their relative invisibility, “migrants both appropriate and rework the territorialising powers of migration regimes – they become the labouring bodies desired in these regimes as well as active human subjects whose presence can never be completely contained.” (p. 978) They transform themselves as they migrate, and they subtly transform the contexts they cross. Their political agency “alter[s] the politics of migration, or they subvert the workings of the migration regime by becoming undocumented and insisting on their continuing presence and stability.” (p. 978) Migrants also pose a challenge to bureaucratic and legal systems. As pointed out by Collins, migration descends from desire, that cannot be reduced to “the result of calculative thought on the part of migrants or government.” Migration might be about economic issues, about safety or well-being, but there are many other subjective and ineffable aspects that can condition a decision that cannot be located in a single temporal moment. All these factors are operated by “desire”, and it is always about the “transformation of subjecthood, about becoming more than just a migrant.” (p. 978)

Both “movements” and “becomings” highlight the difficulty of fluid identities in the context of centralised and hegemonic forms of social **management that** fail to recognize them. This, of course, clashes with the several states, and in our case with the European Union, where freedom of movement is pretty much limited to goods and commodities, and to those that are recognised as European citizens or as desirable tourists or immigrants. Xenophobia is not an exclusive of the Far-right in Europe but, through inaction and silence, it is well widespread throughout the whole continent. Xenophobia and transphobia don’t have to be openly expressed, but they are unconsciously manifested in the legal structures that fail to include those who don’t fit within its limitations. And “[t]he near impossibility of having one’s sexuality and/or asylum claim recognised by the state has serious consequences for individuals” as they are not able to “participate fully in society.” (Marnel et al., 2020, p. 100) The limitations and this invisibility are not natural, contrary to what one might believe, they have genealogies. Invisibility is socially produced.⁷

In this chapter I focus on the intersectionality of transgender and migrant issues, but it is clear that this form of epistemological violence that devalues certain “possibilities of viable

⁷ Vide Santos, B. S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. London: Routledge.

personhood” can be applied across several categories of identity. Besides gender, race and nationality, it is obvious that class also plays a huge role, and certainly there are several other relevant categories. Ultimately, migration and transgender “phenomena” reveal how “operations of systems and institutions” operate the recognition and elimination of certain forms of “personhood.” (Stryker, 1985, p. 3) Therefore, the representation of Pepsi and the struggles of migrants and transgenders, while being acutely personal, are also a story of universal appeal: they talk, before anything else, of which forms of personhood are accepted and which are not. They talk about our freedom of becoming under the tendency of homogenization in mass societies.

Performativity

“At the moment when the authors told Pepsi: – You are also representing a movement, you could be a revolutionary subject – she understands it and participates in this process.” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)

The most evident narrative and aesthetic choice throughout *Shelter* is the central role and agency that Pepsi assumes. While the visual dimension of the portrayal is oblique, shaded, fragmentary – as I’ve discussed previously – its performative and sound dimensions highlight a deep collaboration between character and director. When we follow her through an empty field, or through her intimate space, she is always aware of the presence of the camera.

As a paradigm, the opening scene, with Pepsi jumping over the metro fare gate, is shown not as a scene taken from Pepsi’s life but as a performance directed towards it. By accepting the importance of narrative and taking a part in its construction in dialogue with the director, she actively participates in its writing. We hear Pepsi’s story through her own words. We hear a monologue throughout the film, not an interview. This is quite significant. While an edited interview supposes the ability to catch an impression of the character’s discourse, a monologue is always a construction. It implies thought and analysis, it implies repetition and intentionality.

The director is not a neutral agent that tries to document objective reality, as some schools of documentary would desire, but he is rather a listener and, with all due reservations, an ally. The alliance comes from this filmic platform that Masi proposes to Pepsi and that she takes. She fictionalises and dramatises her own life. Performance towards the camera is a constant in filmmaking. In *Cronicle of a Summer* (1961), Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin interview a series of subjects in Paris. In this particular scene, one woman walks desperately through the streets of Paris as she tells the story of her father – a Jewish man sent to a concentration camp by the nazis. At the end of the film, Rouch and Morin show the film to all the subjects that participated. The woman comments that, even if at the time she was not aware, she now notices that she had been acting in that scene. This supported the authors’ theory that everything that happens in front of a camera is a performance, even if one is talking of a documentary. Some interpretations of this scene will question the authenticity of the woman’s story and performance. However, while Rouch and Morin walk back and forth outside the screening room in their cigarette break, Morin states that “if she was acting, she was acting the most authentic part of herself.” It is not reality or authenticity that is difficult to reach through cinema, but objectivity. The setting of a camera immediately sets the stage for a realistic performance.

As they continue their discussion about how *Cronicle* relates to “usual” cinema or to reality itself, it is necessary to recognise the big role *performativity* plays in our everyday life. Before anything else, performativity is directed towards oneself:

“The so-called inner image of oneself that we all possess is a set of pure improvisations from one minute to the next. It is determined, so to speak, entirely by the masks that are made available to it. The world is an arsenal of such masks. But the impoverished and desolate human being seeks out the image as a disguise within himself.” (Benjamin, 1929/2005, p. 271)

The “inner image of oneself” appears in the split between selfhood and otherness, from the recognition of the *self* that emerges from the contrast with the *other*. Performativity plays a great role in the construction of the identity and relationships of affinity. According to psychoanalysis the construction of the self is done in relation to the *Other*, through acts of speech or performativity that consist of intentional and contingent construction of meaning. Both *self* and *other* are not stable entities but are in constant construction through the self-affirmation of the identity of the subject.

Along these lines, Judith Butler (1990/1999) has proposed that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (p. 33) As such, gender is not so much a condition, but more of a movement, or a becoming, that results from the repetition and reiteration of certain acts of speech. The performative production of gender is “compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” (p. 33) Transitioning is a movement from certain expressions of gender, in a fluid process that might or might not stabilize a certain set of physical and cultural expressions that can be identified within the traditional genders. This is a challenge to the legal and bureaucratic system that is driven by clear and sharp categorization of humans under specific labels and social roles. This form of transphobic violence, that might not be conscious, means that “people living with diverse genders and sexualities largely remain invisible across all levels” of society. (Shepherd & Hanckel, 2021, p. 43)

Butler claims that performative expressions of gender shouldn’t be taken as propositions that should demonstrate, or that are subjected to, a judgement of their truth-value. Such expressions are affirmative, they are statements that create their own truth-value. That means that gender identity is not dependent on external approval, and that external criticism cannot deny the meaning created by those expressions. Some critics of this theory suggest it is problematic as it might be interpreted as intentional, not authentic, as acting – which might fall within some homophobic tropes. However, this critique is based in a misunderstanding. Susan Stryker (1985) explains that declaring “gender as a performative act is to say that it does not need material referent to be meaningful, is directed at others in an attempt to communicate, is not subject to falsification or verification, and is accomplished by ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ something.” (p. 11)

Returning to the discussion of Morin and Rouch, performativity implies that a certain expression is produced towards an *other* (or the self, or the *big Other*), but it doesn’t mean that what is expressed is fictional or untrue: it is the subject recognizing in the gaze of the *other* an opportunity to communicate, to self-affirm its identity. This means that performativity is a “theory of agency, [...] one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility.” (Butler, 1990/1999, p. xxiv) According to this understanding, gender becomes released from a material, natural, biological referent that serves the structure of hetero-patriarchy. Gender becomes independent from the category of sex (that under hetero-

patriarchy is socially perceived as natural) and, therefore, it is individually constructed through performativity.

Likewise, migrants perform their identity by physically transposing borders. It is the desire to exist in a different set of economic and social conditions, often along situations of extreme need or danger, that prompts them. But the physical and cultural expressions of nationality are sometimes difficult to hide, particularly when they migrate to places with different languages. In the 20th century, the first generations of migrants were compelled to hide their differences, to try to blend in and become invisible. The following generations and more recent migratory movements have some more possibilities to show their cultural expressions, but it still is socially complex to do it – and in many cases, dangerous.

Pepsi takes the platform of *Shelter* to self-affirm her identity. Simply by existing, and by performing her gender and her “astronautic abilities”⁸ to exist beyond borders, Pepsi is threatening the hetero-patriarchal and nationalistic structures of society. If nothing else, this expression in film makes it thinkable and gives visibility to certain modes of existence that usually are invisible. And what is thinkable becomes possible.

Hybridization of formats

A second aspect that stands out in the narrative and aesthetic construction of the film is how it seems to be in transit through different times and spaces. The film combines different regimes and formats of images: high-definition digital images, analogic film, personal and institutional archives, etc. Masi calls this aesthetic choice the “hybridization of formats”, and claims that intends to “give back a living body to the images”, in the most “organic” and “alive” way possible. (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)

The ambiguity around *format*, across a variety of fields of study, opens the concept to multiple different contexts and for different purposes. Hybridization of formats emerges in the conceptual framework of postmodern aesthetics, alongside *pastiche*⁹, (Penas, 2013, p. 134) to describe the *melange* of genres, of documentary and fiction or of television and cinema visual grammar. In the context of *Shelter*, however, while some of these hybridizations are also useful, it is the diversity of formats onto which the images are recorded, and the different aesthetic regimes that each image brings.

The documentary is not filmed recurring to a single format, or to a few formats that appear and are contextualized through a voice-over – which is relatively common in films that recur to archival footage. *Shelter* combines all the aforementioned formats, without contextualization or a strict narrative purpose. While we can understand different intentions behind each format – the high-resolution image stands for the most observational documentary, the analogue film for more allegorical or poetic moments, the archival footage to provide a historical context to this narrative –, those are not stable. E.g., the archival footage of a woman dancing on the beach, whose context we cannot grasp, but that comes as an expressive element of emotional immersion into the narrative. Or the image of a white cow

⁸ “A person who travels inside a cosmos. For someone coming from Mindanao and arriving in Calais, the border doesn’t exist, the border is the planet.” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020)

⁹ Postmodern aesthetics might have different interpretations and refer to different aspects, in particular when applied to different disciplines or arts. Here, I’m referring to the quality of combining in a single work elements coming from different styles, disciplines, regimes or times. Parallel to *hybridization of formats*, that points towards such an arrangement of media elements and fragments, *pastiche* describes a work (of art, literary, etc) composed by a combination of elements coming from very different origins, while those elements conserve an evidence of their origin.

that appears a few times, filmed in digital high-resolution, but that appears as an allegory for the myth of Europe. (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2020) Like the different tissues that compose a body, the different formats become intertwined as different types of pigment in a mixed media painting, while the montage and the ambience created through sound harmonises their differences. Digital and analogue, new and archival, documentary, experimental and fiction, all these regimes of images and sounds blend in a discursive composition.

Figure 3: *Souvenir de l'enfance perdue (Liguria als Mindanao)*. Still from *Shelter – Farewell to Eden*. Example of the archival footage used in the film. Courtesy of the Director.

Shelter refuses the “wholeness”¹⁰ that characterizes Western thought, the myth of the Eden, of an original state of “purity.” This film portrays a *Farewell to Eden*, a farewell to these wholesome and coherent filmic objects that portray ideal representations of the world. Instead, *Shelter* crosses format boundaries and categorizations. Like Pepsi, the film itself is in constant transition between different regimes of image, refusing to ever portray an ideal unity.

Traditional Western art – until the aesthetic revolution in mid. 19th century – was defined by the binary content/form. In that paradigm, form was dominated by content – form was there to ideally represent a certain theme (many of which religious or heroic), and its quality was measured by the ability to reach perfection. The aesthetic revolution, as described by Jacques Rancière (2019), meant that form was released from this form of domination. More importantly, the divide between content and form became more porous, and form (or the aesthetic) raised to equality with content.

In *Shelter*, form and content are intertwined, releasing the aesthetic object – the film – from the constraints of traditional Western thought. Therefore, purely aesthetic choices have a very strong impact in the political potency of an artistic object – as it is not enough to free the content (narrative, story) from hegemonic structures; form should be released as well, to create a possibility of understanding the real.

Conclusion

Hal Foster (1996) has warned artists working with otherness. In between a “reductive over-identification with the other” and a “murderous disidentification from the other” there is a thin line of balance where one should “negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and phantasmatic.” (p. 203) Foster suggests that artists will engage in a reflexivity about their own position, to “frame the framer.” The complicated status of otherness is the focal point of Masi’s film: to work with and represent a queer migrant narrative. As Marnell et al. (2020) suggest, there is a risk of “reinforcing hegemonic narratives” and “reducing individuals with complex lives.” (p. 93) In the context of a documentary film, another issue should be taken into account: the fact that queer migrants, due to their history of facing dangers and difficulties, become “adept at crafting their story to align with the expectations” of those “who may be able to provide assistance.”

Masi had to develop strategies of how to offer a political representation that can make justice to the phenomenon and to all the subjects he has met. Those strategies were the implicit

¹⁰ See Haraway, D. (2016). Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene. *e-flux* #75. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>; Attia, K. (2018). Open Your Eyes: 'La Réparation' in Africa and in the Occident. *Third Text* 32 No.1, 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1459102> and Amorim, J. P. & Crespo, N. (2021). Art as Expanded Rationality. *OnCurating.org* 50, 11–29. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-50-reader/art-as-expanded-rationality>.

contract with the main character and how the film could provide a platform for her performativity and self-affirmation, and the hybridization of formats: that is the construction of a filmic object that includes many different regimes of images, without aiming at a visual wholeness or coherence. While *Shelter* doesn't engage in reflexivity – the film's director is hidden from the film, he appears as an invisible listener whose place will be assumed by the audience —, it takes very evidently the side of Pepsi. The film becomes a platform for Pepsi to craft her story, one of her seven names, that – according to her most emotional, and perhaps best, judgement – might provide assistance for her and the queer migrant cause. The film builds an immersive composition of images and sounds, of different sources and natures, around the subjectivity of Pepsi. Like Nani Moretti's claim in *Santiago, Italia* (2018), Masi is not impartial, and its stance is implicitly evident in the aesthetic of the film.

Art forms can provide platforms for political change, but not by privileging politics against aesthetics. **As Benjamin (1939/2000) told us “the aestheticization of politics” tends to serve conservative, or neoliberal and far-right interests.** (p. 314) On the other hand, the “politicization of aesthetics” takes the progressive perspective (p. 316) – but by aesthetically engaging with politic or collective issues. In our case-study, this aesthetic engagement happened through performativity and hybridization of formats.

An intersectional perspective should walk the fine line between identity and affinity. To quote Donna Haraway (1985/2016):

“[...] Sandoval [...] has theorized a hopeful model of political identity called ‘oppositional consciousness,’ born of the skills for reading webs of power by those refused stable membership in the social categories of race, sex, or class. [...] This identity marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.” (pp. 17–18)

A coalition is only possible if the different characteristics of identity are acknowledged and recognized, because oppression is not universally expressed — different groups and different individuals are subjected to and experience it in different ways and intensities. But at the same time, to varying degrees, oppression affects most people on this planet. While expressed in concrete ways against migrants and transgender, hegemonic violence extends to other forms of minority, of not belonging to the majority. It is, in itself, a form of homogenization. Therefore, affinity, kinship and coalition of different forms of dissent can resist hegemonic violence, by embracing difference and challenging such homogenization at different levels. By articulating various forms of dissent, coalition might gather synergies otherwise spent in facing multiple political fights.¹¹ I believe this film constitutes an example of coalition, between a filmmaker and a filmic subject in a marginalized condition. By creating the film around Pepsi's performativity, Masi shares his platform (*Shelter*) to empower those that would otherwise

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¹¹ A classic example of coalition is that of the London-based Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners movement with the United Kingdom Miners' Strike in 1984-85. See Gaynor, C. E. (2017). *Affect, Coalitional Politics, and Pride: Imagining Activism through Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners and the United Kingdom Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners and the United Kingdom Miners' Strike of 1984-5 Miners' Strike of 1984-5* [Master thesis]. Syracuse University.

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