

## On the Migrant Image<sup>1</sup> Ana Balona de Oliveira<sup>2</sup>

TJ Demos. 2013. *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 368pp.

In *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, the art historian and critic TJ Demos discusses what he terms *moving images* of globalisation (Demos 2013a, 21-32). This qualification refers to artistic medium, geopolitical context, and spectatorial experience: these images move in film, video, and photography and, in so doing, forge a politics from and of migration which, according to the author, is inextricable from the affective response they prompt in the viewer.<sup>3</sup> They are to be found in the works of such artists as Steve McQueen, the Otolith Group, Hito Steyerl, Yto Barrada, Emily Jacir, Ahlam Shibli, Lamia Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué, the architect Bernard Khoury, Ursula Biemann, and Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri. Deriving from previously published articles and public conversations that took place in the context of exhibitions and symposia either organised by Demos or in which he was invited to participate, the book's structure reveals the manifold points of departure, journeys, and provisional arrivals of Demos' thinking about specific works, in the broader context of these artists' oeuvre.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This review was written in UK English, while the book reviewed was written in US English.

<sup>2</sup> Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Centre for Comparative Studies, University of Lisbon (CEC-FLUL)/Institute for Art History, New University of Lisbon (IHAFCSH-UNL) & Visiting Lecturer, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.

<sup>3</sup> Demos states: "... these interrelated chapters trace the critical engagements ... that reveal the emergency conditions of our current world of militarized borders, xenophobic social relations, and the uneven geographies within and between North and South. In particular, this book grapples with the inspired aesthetic innovations responsive to such developments, according to which artists have invented critical documentary strategies and new modellings of affect, creative modes of mobile images and imaginative videos, with which to negotiate the increased movements of life across the globe" (Demos 2013a, xiv).

<sup>4</sup> An important space of discussion for Demos's *The Migrant Image* was *Zones of Conflict: Rethinking Contemporary Art during Global Crisis*, four research workshops held in London between 2008 and 2009 which I was fortunate to attend. The book is also closely related to the exhibition *Zones of Conflict*, curated by Demos at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery, New York, in 2008-2009.

The titles of the sections and chapters of *The Migrant Image* take migration literally and the overall book structure is that of a journey. Starting with a prelude in the form of a check-in and charting his course in "Charting a Course: Exile, Diaspora, Nomads, Refugees: A Genealogy of Art and Migration", Demos departs

Through the structure of the case study rather than survey, *The Migrant Image* investigates the relationship between aesthetics and politics in artistic practices which seek to attain political significance through a renewed form of documentary. It considers the diverse ways in which contemporary artists from several generations and geographies have been transforming the genre of documentary since the 2000s: by acknowledging how its supposedly transparent truth claims are inescapably mediated and by avoiding its often unintentional traps of authoritative, witness-bearing, or victimizing rhetoric. Demos looks at the concrete formal strategies by means of which these artists have been addressing the emergencies and states of exception of the “lives full of holes” of migrants and refugees — not surprisingly, Agamben’s concepts of bare life and state of exception are major references (Demos 2006; Demos 2013a, 95-102; Agamben 1998). Such strategies involve perceptual disturbance and layered, non-linear “symbolic montages” of heterogeneous visual, auditory, and textual material: either visual erasure or excess to the point of erasing representation; complex auditory effects through a variety of soundtracks and voice-overs; the intermingling of documentary footage, personal archives, and appropriated narratives by either real or fictive authors; the entwinement of real and fictive pasts, presents, and futures — as in the “past-potential futures” of the essay films of the Otolith Group, the *Otolith Trilogy* (2003-2009).<sup>5</sup>

The main theoretical model for Demos’s politics of aesthetics is, of course, Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* but also the theorisations on film, film-essay, and documentary fiction he developed in *Film Fables* (Rancière 2004; Rancière 2006). In the latter, while discussing the documentary fiction of Chris Marker, Rancière expounds what becomes fundamental for Demos: “fiction (as from the Latin,

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three times — “Departure A: Moving Images of Globalization”, “Departure B: Life Full of Holes”, and “Departure C: Zones of Conflict” —, is in transit twice — “*Transit: Politicizing Aesthetics*” and “*Transit: Going Offshore*” — and ends with a “*Destination: The Politics of Aesthetics during Global Crisis*”.

In 2013 Demos also published the briefer *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*. Highly indebted to Derrida’s *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International* and his idea of “spectropoetics”, and to Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* and his concept of “necropolitics”, *Return to the Postcolony* focusses on fewer and more thematically specific case studies which critically investigate the amnesias, repressions and disavowals of the still pervasive, haunting specters of European colonialism(s) and empire(s) in the globalised, neo-liberal present. Demos focuses his discussion on works by Sven Augustijnen, Vincent Meessen, Zarina Bhimji, Renzo Martens, and Pieter Hugo. As his selection of artists reveals, he has not addressed quite a few other specters of European colonialism(s) as they have been investigated by contemporary artists from other locations. But then again, he never aimed, and rightly so, at an all-encompassing survey with all its practical difficulties and problematic totalisations. See Demos (2013b); Derrida (1994); Mbembe (2001).

<sup>5</sup> On Demos’s account of Rancière’s notion of symbolic montage, see Demos (2013a, 72). On Demos’s account of the *Otolith Trilogy*, see Demos (2013a, 54-73).

*fingere*) means to forge, rather than to feign, and therefore what [Rancière] appropriately calls ‘documentary fiction’ reconfigures the real as an effect to be produced, rather than a fact to be understood” (Demos 2013a, 62; Rancière 2006, 158).

It is this “fiction”, which has the power of forging (effects in) the “real”, that permits the opening of Demos’s selected images onto a politics. That is, through their aesthetics, they not only “expose” migration as site of inequality but also, most importantly, put forth migration as a politics, as site of resistance and agency.

The book offers a timely critique of traditional forms of documentary practice, notably in terms of the dangers of collusion with the rhetoric of mainstream media and governmental propaganda.<sup>6</sup> Demos accurately recognises the need for a politics of representation rather than the representation of politics. However, the reader might also be justified in detecting far from satisfactory claims — in Demos’s case, regarding not the possibility of a truthful re-presentation of facts by documentary, but the possibility of the “truly” transformative potential of these new forms of artistic documentary practice, often displayed in the space of the commercial gallery, forming an integral part of the globalised commodity circuit and, in certain instances, fetishising somewhat migration and border-crossing.

In the context of his general argument for art’s critical and transformative capacities instead of the document’s, Demos becomes increasingly concerned with distinguishing art from activism — and understandably so. Although quite a few artists see themselves as activists, and although art and activism often feed into each other and partake of the same critique of economic, political, social, and environmental inequalities, their means of production, circulation, collaboration, participation, reception, and consumption are usually, though not always, different. To be fair, Demos acknowledges this much.

But he goes further and ascribes to his case studies of politically-oriented artistic practices, rather than activist *tout court*, more critical and transformative force. Activism’s tendency, according to Demos, toward the representation of politics rather than politics of representation seems to cause impoverishment and closure of meaning and to place it in the vicinity of media and propaganda.<sup>7</sup> In this

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<sup>6</sup> Other recent contributions to this debate are Stallabrass (2013a) and Stallabrass (2013b).

<sup>7</sup> In his prelude, Demos writes: “... this book not only engages and draws on artistic practices that construct imaginative possibilities that await potential realization, but sees those works as having the power to mobilize the energy that will help bring about reinvented possibilities” (Demos 2013a, xxii). He then adds: “This claim is not meant to privilege artistic practice over other forms of political construction; for today, what is needed more than ever are powerful and creative artistic expressions and interventions that join other social movements for positive change, social justice and equality, working together toward the progressive

context, I find that Demos dismisses activism within art all too quickly, and does not pay the same amount of critical attention to the problems entailed by the art market and the commercial gallery.

When Demos qualifies Hito Steyerl's as a "false choice", one wonders how his non-choice can become "true" (Demos 2013a, 248). To Steyerl's view, "the blind spot' of contemporary political art dedicated to global crises is to overlook the often compromised local conditions of its own production and display — a situation often reeking of the exploitation of interns and funded by politically unsavoury benefactors, such as multinational banks, hedge-fund operators, and arm dealers ... 'we could try to understand [art's] space as a political one instead of trying to represent a politics that is always happening elsewhere'" (Demos 2013a, 248). For Demos, "there is nothing preventing us from operating on multiple fronts", globally and locally, "both committing to an active global citizenship involving the participation in a movement of movements pledged to the anticorporate globalization struggle, and embracing the fight for equality and social justice in relation to local institutions" (Demos 2013a, 248). In other words, Demos seems to be forced to recover activism within art, if not globally at least locally, in order to sustain his view that contemporary political art may adequately address global crises.

To the artist and theorist Andrea Fraser, he responds that "while Fraser's analysis of the commercial logic of the exhibition site is crucial to consider, her conclusion that art's meaning is totally determined by its context is, in [his] view, unacceptable as a credible methodology of interpretation and reception" (Demos 2013a, 248). Even if Demos does have a point in highlighting the narrowness of Fraser's institutional critique pushed to the limit, he then presents us with his somewhat unsatisfactory alternative.<sup>8</sup> For it is here that his

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re-creation of our common world" (Demos 2013a, xxii-xxiii). But in the beginning of his third departure Demos is already stating the following: "It is in this light that we might also relinquish the question of 'effectiveness', when it comes to cultural practices deemed political in their oppositional, anti-war stances. Let us favor a more complex and aesthetically considered relation to artistic imagery and practice, even where it has been deployed to problematize and dissolve the very line of separation between art and activism. More often than not, the motivation behind such political stances originates in a perpetually negotiated politics of truth that is capable of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves" (Demos 2013a, 174-5). And finally, in his last chapter where he analyses Anastas and Gabri's *Camp Campaign*, among other works, he is already explicitly joining "mass media, governmental publicity and protesters' rhetoric" under the same banner of "the reductive tendencies of political discourse", to which one must resist in one's response to "the crises and emergencies of present-day reality" with the alternative of "a creative subtlety and analytic power" (Demos 2013a, 230-1).

<sup>8</sup> It is a fact that the commercial space of the gallery might do more than simply to turn works of art into commodities. At times, it offers the sole space where some works can actually be viewed and can become the only supporting institution for artists whose work is excluded from major public collections and exhibiting spaces.

politics of aesthetics is shown to be sustained solely by his claim that political art is a “site of potential subjective transformation”:

While the politics of aesthetics offers no punctual revolutionary event, or immediate political effects, it does, I would argue, constitute a site of potential subjective transformation with ultimately immeasurable political implications. And while its audiences may often be relatively small, art’s potential for meaningful political, social, and cultural experience is enormous and its temporal range of reception unlimited (Demos 2013a, 248).

One cannot disagree. It is indisputable that subjective transformation can possess “ultimately immeasurable political implications” — but where and for whom? If Demos adequately demonstrates his case studies to exemplify a Rancièrian politics of aesthetics (which is neither specifically nor exclusively artistic), the problem with his argument is how it favours generalisation from spectatorial experience when it comes to describing the political effectiveness of these works’ aesthetics as response to global crises. More often than not, such a response has mainly to do with subjective transformation on the part of the viewer, who always seems to be able to establish an empathic connection with subjects from “elsewhere” living in the harshest situations, no matter how opaquely depicted — for example, the miners of McQueen’s *Western Deep* (2002). Does the politics of aesthetics, migration, and equality that Demos propounds allow us to easily move from the first to the second of these two sets of statements?

The ambition of *Western Deep* is to create the aesthetic possibilities for release from the condition of documentation within its very system of representation. Rather than reifying identity, the film renders depiction inextricable from the endless process of its imaginary description (Demos 2013a, 52).

*Western Deep* ... allows audience and image to touch, engendering an empathic connection that builds a phenomenology of political alliance. We, the viewers, are placed in a relationship with an outside world, but not from the safety of an objective position; rather, we approach the other by becoming other. It is precisely through this complex negotiation of self and other, this staging of a perceptual and affective encounter with difference, that McQueen’s *Western Deep* models new forms of being and belonging in the world (Demos 2013a, 52).

Who are the actual viewers that can benefit from the potential of subjective transformation? Where have these works been shown? Have those real subjects who at times inhabit the screen, no matter how non-documentary-like, been able to become viewers of their own real-reconfiguring opacity? How do these works make effective, as Demos argues, the reclaiming, if not of complete citizenship, then at least of a certain degree of agency by some of the migrants and refugees opaquely depicted and fragmentally heard?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> By now the reader already knows, indeed is not allowed to forget and rightly so, that any story, experience and memory is simultaneously a real and precarious construct. But, at the same time, one cannot do away with the impression that

I am addressing not so much the achievements and failures of some of these works as Demos's own failure in recognising their shortcomings (which some of their makers would perhaps be the first to acknowledge, as Steyerl's assertions seem to point out), alongside their undeniable achievements. This recognition, to my view, is as unavoidable, if for different reasons, as the one of which Demos keeps reminding us — the necessary acknowledgement of the failures of traditional documentary.

Finally, how do these works actually contribute to the realisation of the Agambenian project of “universaliz[ing] the exception in the practice of a politics of equality” by turning the refugee into the paradigmatic form — the norm — of the citizen, thus giving rise to a “citizenship of aliens”, a “commonality on the basis of exclusion”, to which “none fully belong”, in which “all are displaced” and “share in this condition of immeasurability and opacity” (Demos 2013a, 249-50)?

Despite the impression one retains of a certain fetishisation of unbelonging and displacement, it is clear that what is at stake for Demos and most of the *moving* images he writes about is an ethico-political project. But this comes in the form of “a new politics that has yet to be realized” (Demos 2013a, 250). He does ask the question of effectiveness in his last paragraph: “How to advance beyond the schematic aspect of this theoretical conclusion and realise positive transformation?” (Demos 2013a, 250). Unable to give an answer, he hopefully hands over to another and another future that which, very much in line with his own reasoning, can be neither known nor seen (Caruth 1996, 111). At the core of this gesture of handing over noth-

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Demos compulsively repeats, perhaps symptomatically, Rancière's dictum according to which “fiction” means to forge, not to feign. This is productively elaborated further in chapter 7 where Demos proposes a threefold politics of fiction: “fiction does not obscure reality; rather, as a hybrid formation of documents and imaginary scenarios, it elicits its deepest truths” (Demos 2013a, 191); “fiction facilitates memory by linking representation with affect” (Demos 2013a, 194); “fiction does not immobilize politics; rather it is politics' condition of possibility” (Demos 2013a, 197). For the discussion of this politics, see Demos (2013a, 191-200).

On a different note, Rancière's theorisation of the aesthetic regime of the arts — a non-representational regime of which modern art is an integral part — sets itself against Aristotelian aesthetics founded on art as mimesis — the representative regime of the arts — which still pervaded nineteenth-century literary and painterly realism. Nonetheless, the dictum according to which fiction forges rather than feigns might actually be considered first and foremost anti-Platonic — Plato derided art as “mere”, “bad”, “second-hand” imitation of the real, a real which was already in itself a “bad” imitation of the “real-ideal” — and therefore, paradoxically, somewhat Aristotelian before becoming Rancièrian. Demos seems to hint at this when he writes about Rancière's notion of documentary-fiction in terms of “a radical transformation of the old Platonic opposition between real and representation, between original model and second-order copy. No longer opposed to each other, the real surrenders to representational uncertainties and the image takes on material properties; combined, the sensible and the intelligible remain creatively indistinguishable” (Demos 2013a, 62).

ing (everything?) but the act of transmission is the realisation that positive transformation by politically-oriented artistic practice engaged with global crises might only be possible and even desirable as that very blindness and opacity that keeps being sent to the future (Agamben 1999, 114). There is no decoded message but only a sending, a transmission, a contact. It may be in the form, if not of an entirely activist, then at least of an active sending — and receiving — rather than viewing or knowing that some sort of communal agency is to be found.

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