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Corpses and numbers: the portrayal of black African refugees in It Will Be Chaos *by Lorena Luciano and Filippo Piscopo*

In this article, I provide a literary analysis of the award-winning 2018 documentary, *It Will Be Chaos*, to highlight the discursive significance of its portrayal of the black African refugees who survived the 2013 Lampedusa migrant shipwreck. The documentary by Italian filmmakers Lorena Luciano and Filippo Piscopo focuses on the turbulent journeys of African and Middle Eastern asylum-seekers through the Mediterranean Sea at a time that marks the beginning of the so-called European refugee crisis. Though I focus especially on one of the main protagonists, Aregai Mehari, who survived the shipwreck, I also consider a significant difference in the portrayal of Aregai and that of a Syrian refugee family who are the film's other main protagonists. These representations, I argue, offer important clues for understanding the often problematic and unique ways in which the African refugee in particular, and Africa in general, figures in contemporary European imaginaries.

Keywords: European refugee crisis, asylum seeker, migrant, refugee, Africa, representation

Introduction

One of the most memorable and important events in the chain of tragic events that describe the so-called European refugee/migrant crisis is the death of around 368[1] asylum seekers on 3 October 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa, an Italian island lying approximately midway between Italy and the north of Africa. The boat was carrying an estimated 518 desperate people mostly from the East African countries of Eritrea and Somalia who were heading for Europe. *It Will Be Chaos* (henceforth, *Chaos*), a 2018 HBO documentary film by US-based Italian filmmakers Lorena Luciano and Filippo Piscopo, is based partly on the shipwreck. It follows one of the survivors, the Eritrean Aregai Mehari whose attempt to secure asylum status takes him from Lampedusa to Stockholm in Sweden. In addition to Aregai,[2] the documentary follows the Syrian family of Wael Orfahli from Turkey to Germany where they finally find refuge. The movie's official blurb describes it aptly as "[a]n epic yet intimate portrait of lives in transit focussing on two refugee stories of human strength and resilience. These tales shed light on the refugee crisis and its muddied relationship with government."

The movie provides brief but compassionate backgrounds to the lives of its protagonists, highlighting the circumstances that pressure them to embark on the precarious transcontinental journeys that take them through the deadly Mediterranean in which an estimated 21 770 people have drowned since 2014 (IOM 2022). While Wael's family is fleeing the disruption to his apparently comfortable middle class life caused by the Syrian civil war which began in 2011, Aregai, a former member of the Eritrean Army, decides to leave his country – along with three cousins – due to political repression and a lack of economic opportunities. After the sad opening scenes showing the retrieval of the caskets of shipwreck victims, wailing distraught survivors and news clips announcing the tragedy, the movie cuts to Aregai displaying cell phone pictures of his three cousins – Biniam, Afwrki and Zenawi – who had perished in the shipwreck. Similarly, when Wael and his family are introduced about 13 minutes later, they are all named and photographs of members of his extended family are shown. This, in addition to background personal stories, are some of the ways in which the movie provides details and textures by which the asylum seekers are humanised.

Critical works on the documentary remains rare and commentary is still limited to reviews which attended its release in 2018. Mark Justin Rainey (2019) notes that 'bring[ing] personal stories to the fore' makes the documentary 'engaging', a point echoed in Lorraine Ali's (2018) review of the film for the US's

1 While most news sources report between 366 and 368 victims, a 2020 forensic states that 'the final genetic database included 363 victims . . .' (Bertoglio et al. 2020, 102156).

2 My decision to use his first name is in keeping with the filmmakers' choice.

Los Angeles Times. Ali begins her review with reference to an emotional scene in which three of the four Orfahli children go missing temporarily at one of their many transit points in the Lesbos camp in Greece. Ali returns to this scene at the end of her review. Noting that the children's reunification with their family differs from recent situations in the US where families had faced untold trauma from being forcefully separated by immigration authorities, she emphasises the value of the documentary's exploration of the humanitarian dimensions of the so-called migrant crises in the Western world. But of course, as its official blurb admits, *Chaos* does not focus exclusively on personal stories but also on the highly charged politics associated with migration in the West. This is the emphasis of Amy Glynn's (2018) review which draws parallels with the situation in the US through a conversation about the legality or otherwise of seeking asylum and migration with her conservative neighbour. She describes the movie as 'a rather exhausting documentary about the repatriation of refugees … Everyone's situation, everyone's life, is exhausting. Exhausting' which could serve as 'a wake-up call about the bigger picture of 'the immigration problem'. For this reason, Glynn suggests that 'It has been chaos' would have been a more fitting title.

Nataliia Vdovychenko (2019) provides a more detailed critical response to the documentary in a book chapter that compares it with four other similar documentaries. Although her major focus is on how the problem of human trafficking is framed, perceived and presented, Vdovychenko's interest in "how refugees are portrayed, […] the genderised representation of victims of human trafficking [and] the representation of the trauma suffered by the victims of human trafficking" are important to the mission of the present enquiry (2019: 499). However, the purpose of Vdovychenko's analysis is the search for a generalised or unified understanding of the problem of human trafficking and how such an understanding might contribute to policy responses that may redress it. Her interrogation of the portrayal of the protagonists in *Chaos* is thus significantly limited.

The present enquiry takes the question of the portrayal of the protagonists further and deeper. This analysis of the documentary is aimed at highlighting the discursive significance and implications of its overall depiction of Aregai as representative of the black African refugee in particular. In this regard, I examine two levels of representation – the cinematic choices of the filmmakers on the one hand, and on the other, the words and gestures used by the film's European characters when they address and refer to the asylum seekers and refugees. The questions that the enquiry seeks to answer include, but are not limited to, the following: how are the refugees identified, introduced and described? What attributes are ascribed to, or associated with them? Are these ascriptions and

associations done through insinuations and allusions? And how does the audience or viewer encounter them? I also pay brief attention to what I consider to be a critical absence in the representation of the black African refugees that sets them apart from the Orfahli family. I argue that these similarities and differences provide important discursive clues that illuminate the unique ways in which the African asylum seeker, in particular, and Africa in general are re-imagined in contemporary European narratives and discourses. The article is organised into three parts. The introduction is followed by an extended focus on Aregai and the black African protagonists. In the concluding part, brief attention is given to the Orfahli family to higlight certain absences and a significant difference in the depiction of Aregai.

Before proceeding with close analysis of the film, it is important, for conceptual purposes, to make a brief ground-clearing statement on the terms refugee, asylum seeker and migrant which are often used interchangeably even though they are defined differently. This is important especially because the documentary brings up the question of the terminology by which the people who arrived in Lampedusa ought to be defined as well as the social, legal and political implications of these definitions. The complexity and contestations associated with these definitions however fall outside the immediate scope and interest of this article (see Buff 2020; Chin and Corties 2015; Ruz 2015; Shacknove 1985). While the UNHCR defines an asylum seeker simply as 'someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed', Guy Goodwill-Gill and Jane McAdam (2021, 15) provide the following broad and loose description of a refugee as

> someone in flight, who seeks to escape conditions or personal circumstances found to be intolerable. The destination is not relevant; the fight is to freedom, to safety. Likewise, the reasons for the flight may be many … Implicit in the ordinary meaning of the word 'refugee' lies an assumption that the person concerned is worthy of being, and ought to be assisted, and if necessary, protected from the causes and consequences of flight. (Goodwill-Gill and McAdam 2021, 15)

For the reasons mentioned above and in view of the overlaps between common meanings of 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee', my approach in this article is to use the two terms interchangeably.

Corpses, numbers and contested terminologies

Almost 30 years before the Lampedusa shipwreck, Andrew Shacknove (1995) had offered the following introduction to his article, 'Who Is a Refugee?': "The term 'refugee' conjures up a melange of bleak images: a teeming boat adrift on the

South China Sea, a bloated child in Bangladesh, a shantytown reduced to rubble in Beirut." A strikingly similar and arguably more dystopian imagery is replicated in the opening episode of *Chaos* where the audience first encounters black African asylum seekers. The camera pans from a crane transferring numbered caskets on to a lorry at a harbour in Lampedusa. Distraught survivors are wailing uncontrollably amid a sombre silent crowd with heavy faces. Masked health officials pinch their noses in apparent response to the stench emanating from rotting corpses. Numbers feature in these opening four or so minutes both in the visuals and audio. The number 28 is on the very first casket we see and another is marked 154. Shortly after we hear that there are '350 corpses' and '518 asylum seekers'. In the audio background, one of the broadcasters reporting the tragedy mentions '368 people' and another (apparently from the BBC World Service)[3] mentions the words "a boat packed with African migrants" and the words of yet another broadcaster is translated into "mostly Eritreans and Somalis" (*Chaos* 04.18).

This means that the first encounter the audience has of the figure of the black African refugee is the corpse in the casket being loaded off a lorry on to a boat; not just one corpse, but *hundreds*. No doubt, this particular sequence and nature of representations is consistent with the filmmakers' avowed noble mission to highlight the chaos that has attended the management of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe since the Lampedusa shipwreck. Yet, it also has apparently unintended effects one of which is the reproduction of a dystopian "melange of bleak images" (Shacknove 1985: 274) of black African refugees. The numbering of the caskets marks them, figuratively, as an anonymous mass and the palpable stench of putrefaction is capable of arousing repulsion and shock in the audience. This recalls Sarah Lincoln's (2008, 99) argument, in regard to images of filth and waste in Africa, that such representations reinforce the idea of "the continent's continued status as a 'remnant' of globalization – a waste product, trash heap, disposable raw material, and degraded offcut of the processes that have so greatly enriched, dignified and beautified their beneficiaries."

Overall, the dominant cinematographic features of the movie foreground the chaotic and grim nature of refugee movements. The many migrant camps that dot the overland route from Greece to Germany are ubiquitous and bring up images of over-crowded people in cramped, often squalid conditions. For example, when Aregai visits his relative in a squatter settlement in an abandoned former government building in Rome, the camera provides a veritable tour of the decrepit building, lingering on dark, shadowy corridors and ceilings that are falling down. The securitised migrant camps with high barbed-wire walls and

3 This is due to the iconic signal tune of the BBC news bulletins.

heavily-armed police officers easily invoke the deadly concentration camps of the Nazi era. The refugees are presented mostly in crowds and in close up shots – anxious, agitated, exhausted, apprehensive, wistful. Images of movement are often dark and moody whether in the views through the windows of moving trains or snapshots of the turbulent Mediterranean Sea. Beyond characterising the overall nature of refugee movements, the only identifiable personal traits of the black refugees portrayed by this dominant cinematography is their inclination towards prayers and religious expression. During his visit to Rome mentioned above, not only is there a deliberate foregrounding of Christian iconography in the apartment, Aregai and his host are shown praying "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (*Chaos* 56.09). Similarly, part of the opening scenes in the Falerna camp episode includes group Muslim prayers (1.03.39).

The movie's opening scene featuring corpses does not define the entire documentary, however. Indeed, the camera immediately cuts to a close up of Aregai, who is introduced by his name and proceeds to name three of the victims – whose cell phone pictures he shows to the camera – as relatives he had been travelling with. This is an important episode in the documentary as it inaugurates an apparently deliberate representational technique by which the earlier impression of the refugees as a sterile statistic is redressed and the overall depiction of the black African refugees is humanised. From here, beginning with his experience in the doomed ship, Aregai's personal back story unfolds in several installments spread throughout the course of the film. The audience sees pictures from his youth and of his family and learns that he spent 15 years as a lowly army guard with limited economic opportunities under a repressive Eritrean government. His Christian faith is revealed when he visits his praying 'auntie' and, through interactions with yet another relative in Italy, his embodiment of the often anonymised refugee becomes gradually realised. In between these narratives, there is an episode worthy of mention. It is a press conference scene where the Lampedusa mayor, Giusi Nicolini, asks for the name of a refugee in what is meant to be a tête-à-tête with an aide. This seemingly minor personal detail is significant for the ways in which it can be understood as a deliberate effort on the part of the filmmakers to enhance the humanisation of the refugees.

This leads to one of the most important aspects of this enquiry, namely the words used by the documentary's European characters to describe and refer to black African refugees. These words provide, arguably, the strongest clues of the ways in which the figure of the black African refugee as well as Africa in general are currently perceived in the European imagination. The many episodes featuring political rallies and press interviews are especially significant given that immigration has dominated public debates across Europe since 2013 more

intensely than at any other time in the continent's recent history. The role of the media in this regard is the subject of thriving scholarship and there seems to be a consensus that media coverage has contributed to adverse perceptions of refugees (Trilling 2019; Berry, Inaki and Moore 2015; Cooper, Blumell and Bunce 2020; Fengler and Kreutler 2020; Vdovychenko 2019). In 'Media coverage of the 'refugee crisis': A cross-European perspective', Myria Georgiou and Rafa Zaborowski (2017, 3) foreground the ways in which the media contributed to public perceptions of refugees "either as outsiders and different to Europeans: either as vulnerable outsiders or as dangerous outsiders."

The accounts above are dramatised most powerfully in the scene where Nicolini remonstrates with a reporter from RAI, Italy's public broadcaster: "Let's make it clear. Those who land in Lampedusa aren't 'illegals'." Apparently disapproving of the reporter's framing, Nicolini emphasises that "words are important". She also insists: "I have to correct you otherwise you'll report that these are 'illegals' … if you don't get it, neither will your audience … ." After the exchange, the camera cuts to a scene where Nicolini is surrounded by a horde of reporters with cameras trained on her while she walks in company with someone else into a meeting with leaders from the EU and the IOM (International Organisation for Migration). The focus of the filmmakers on the reporters and their cameras, even if brief, is unmistakable and significant. The sequence of scenes is an effective way through which the documentary captures a range of crucial themes demonstrated in the literature: the significance of the terminology by which refugees and asylum seekers are defined and described, the diversity of views, perceptions and attitudes among Italians in particular and Europeans more generally as well as the powerful role of the media, government and politics.

Nicolini's comment that the Italian (and perhaps the European) immigration system is "conceived to push" refugees back is reinforced throughout the movie in different ways including the detention of survivors in squalid hyper-securitised holding camps, the denial and deferment of asylum claims and the indictment of Aregai on charges of criminal illegal migration. While Nicolini represents those in politics and government with more positive and accommodating attitudes to refugees, the documentary suggests, through the other main political characters, that those with less accommodating attitudes (far-right demonstrations and rallies) are more numerous. This provides important clues to the dominant ways in which the African refugee figures among European publics. Indeed, the fact that Nicolini woefully lost her re-election bid in 2017 might offer more clues in this regard. As a catchy headline in *The Washington Post* put it, 'An Italian mayor won an international award for helping migrants. Then she lost her job.' Beyond the headline though, Anna Momigliano (2017), author of the report, notes that Nicolini's loss could be the result of several other factors: the former mayor

had been "insulted for the national and international attention she got because of the migrant crisis". Momigliano notes further that Nicolini's successor "had used harsher language about migrants [...] [and] won the election focusing his campaign on the promise of obtaining financial compensation for fishermen whose business is allegedly hurt by the shipwrecks of migrants' boats". Not only that, right-wingers reportedly celebrated Nicolini's loss "as proof that Italians are tired of helping out immigrants and asylum-seekers".

Another politician whose open, extravagant and unconventional support for refugees led to serious negative consequences is Domenica Lucano, who was mayor of Riace, a small hilly town on Italy's eastern Mediterranean shore. Riace and Lucano became world famous for receiving and accommodating hundreds of asylum seekers at the height of the 'crisis' in spite of the town being in economic hardship. In the scene in which Riace is introduced, an elderly female resident tells the audience many residents had emigrated to the US (including her own father, who had gone to Argentina) due to starvation during World War II. The camera then cuts to show a multiracial crowd of children waving flags from different nations with the flags of Nigeria, Somalia, Egypt and Afghanistan among those in the foreground and the Italian anthem playing as a visibly multiracial crowd gathers for the visit of a government minister. Meaningfully, there are close-up shots of one or two black children. Against this background, the camera cuts to an upbeat Lucano, proudly stating that 'the whole world is here' and noting that there were more than 200 refugees among the town's 1 800 residents. The minister praises him for his innovative 'migration model' and "the sense of solidarity that all of Italy should bring out". This model was credited with "revitalising the village, which attracted tourists by renovating houses and installing crafts workshops in structures that had once been abandoned" (Italy ends beacon model for migrant integration 2018). But it was ended by the anti-immigration right-wing Italian government in 2018 when Lucano was placed under house arrest. Among other corruption-linked charges, Lucano was accused of abetting illegal immigration including facilitating marriages of convenience between refugees and citizens to assist refugees to secure residency. His sentence of 13 years, which almost doubled the term requested by prosecutors in 2021, was slammed by some human rights activists as "shameful [and as] the gravest attack on the culture and practice of solidarity in our country" (Migrant-friendly Italian ex-mayor given 13 years in prison 2021). The fates of two of Europe's most celebrated[4] pro-refugee politicians during this period are a clear sign that positive attitudes towards refugees, at least publicly, comes at significant socio-political risk to the individual.

4 Nicolini was awarded the UNESCO Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize in April 2017 (UNESCO 2017) while Lucano won the Dresden Peace Prize in the same year (Dresden Peace Prize, n.d.). He was once named on Fortune magazine's list of the world's top 50 leaders (Poggioli 2016).

The significance of Nicolini's argument about terminology is borne out in the fact that one of the local fishermen who rescued some of the refugees from the shipwreck uses the term 'illegal immigrants' to refer to refugees when narrating the rescue. That an obviously well-intentioned person would use this term not only reinforces Nicolini's concern about the immediate media coverage of what was an ongoing situation at the time, but, more importantly, raises questions about preconceptions and the representational archive that populates the socio-cultural imagination of this fisherman. Furthermore, when he recounts the difficulty in communicating with the refuges at the time of their distress, the fisherman says: "We would communicate with our hands. Who can understand their language?" There is a way in which this innocuous, apparently innocent, question conjures – for Africanist and postcolonial scholars and commentators – problematic histories of colonial literary narratives of the encounter between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas the fisherman's question could simply mean that it was impossible for him to understand the words and shrieks of hundreds of terrified drowning people, the particular phrasing evokes an infamous scene from Josef Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which a crowd of animated local Congolese was portrayed as primitive and unintelligible (see Achebe 1977). Accompanied by a cryptic shrug, the fisherman's rhetorical question has echoes of problematic ideologies which imply hierarchies of high versus low languages along with a set of perception, stereotypes and clichés associated with so-called vernacular languages and their communities of speakers (see Wolf 2017). There is a sense therefore in which the question conjures narratives and assumptions by which the African subject has been constructed over time in the Western colonial imagination as a strange, exotic and unknowable other (see Said 1978; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989).

But these are not the only examples of problematical representations coming from otherwise well-intentioned characters in the documentary. When black African refugees living in what is described as an 'occupied' resort on the outskirts of the small town of Falerna protest against the cutting off of their water supply, the mayor Giovanni Costanzo speaks to them patiently and assures them that 'we've got nothing against you'. He then gets on a call to request a water tank as 'just as a temporary solution' until the refugees are transferred from the camp. While the town has apparently shown some hospitality to the refugees for two years, and although the mayor speaks to them agreeably and makes an effort to meet their demand for water, he is heard motivating for the temporary solution because 'if [the refugees] can't bathe, we might risk an epidemic in the surrounding community'. Here again is a possibly unintended echo of both recent and historical Western stereotypes of Africans and immigrants as people who are prone to, and carriers of, infectious diseases (Moskowitz, Stone and Childs 2012;

Monson 2017; Herrera 2019). Indeed, these views came to the fore in the COVID-19 travel bans against several African countries in the wake of the identification of the omicron variant of the virus by scientists in South Africa and Botswana (see Namubiru, Allison and Kings 2021). Furthermore, Costanzo's concern seems to be the local Italians 'in the surrounding community' rather than the refugees who are desperate to get something as basic as a water supply. Which raises two important questions: to what extent are Costanzo's words a possible Freudian slip? And how much of these humanitarian acts are motivated by genuine interest in the well-being of the refugees and how much might be mere enactments of the 'white saviour' complex (see Cole 2012; Hepzibah 2018)? Needless to say, it is impossible for these questions to be answered with any certainty. What they highlight however are the subtleties, indeterminacies and contradictions that characterise social imagination during complex cross-cultural encounters such as those between migrants and hosts.

These questions also come to mind when we consider a short exchange between an elderly local cobbler and a young female refugee who brings her footwear to be mended. The cobbler is not surprised that she cannot pay for the service but goes ahead to assist her anyway even though he does so without the enthusiasm. As he fixes her footwear, he notes dispassionately: "All these immigrants coming to Italy … someone over there must have told them that this is America. But in Italy, they go hungry now." (*Chaos* 51: 40) These words indicate that he considers the refugees to be misinformed and unaware of the economic realities of their destinations. And indeed, it has been established that some asylum seekers are motivated to undertake their precarious journeys by unrealistic expectations of socio-economic opportunities in Europe plus a serious lack of awareness of the difficulties of access to employment if and when they arrive (see Laine and Rauhut 2018; Sanderton 2019). While not necessarily favourable, the cobbler therefore articulates an impression of refugees that is – in a sense – relatively neutral and unburdened by obvious prejudice.[5] Even so, it might also be an echo of the problematic tendency to reduce migration to the economic motive. This assumption is associated with problematical arguments about so-called 'economic migrants' and whether those so defined deserve the support that most legal conventions provide to refugees fleeing war, famine, environmental disasters and political and religious persecution. The cobbler's comments thus prompt reflection on the vexed question of the drivers of migration and the limitations of the relatively simplistic explanations advanced by the push-

5 This resonates with the personal narratives I heard from 2 participants of focus group discussions I organised on European re-imaginings of Africa in Naples and Copenhagen in 2019. Their contributions came from their own personal interaction with young people in Senegal and Tanzania respectively where they had been on study trips.

pull theory. Noting the complex and multi-faceted combination of factors behind migration, Francesco Castelli (2018, 6) has argued that the 'prevalence of a factor over the other is unpredictable' and that

> the stereotype of the illiterate poor migrant coming from the most remote rural areas and reaching the borders of affluent countries does not stand. The poorest people simply do not have the means to escape war and poverty and remain trapped in his/her country or in the neighbouring one. Some degree of entrepreneurship, educational level, social and financial support is usually requested for international south–north economic migration and personal characteristics and choices also play a role.

The cobbler's statements are the last direct comments on refugees by local Europeans that I discuss in this article. However, there are comments that amount to indirect narratives of local Europeans about black refugees that are worthy of mention here. These are relayed by a group of refugees in Falerna during their remonstration with the mayor over the cutting off of water supply to the refugee camp. When the mayor complains that the problem is the huge cost of water for the small town, the refugees' spokesman responds:

> 'How can we pay for water, for electricity?
> [Impossible]
> When we bike on the road people say
> 'Look at this bastard who lives here for free . . .'
> I have nobody here, no mother, no father
> They rescued me at sea and put me here (1.04.58)[6]

This answer provides a context in which the mayor's complaints about the water supply might be interpreted in a way other than, or in addition to, the understandable issue of the costs of hosting refugees. In this regard, the complaint could well be – in the eyes of the refugees at least – an official and diplomatic version of the crude slurs hurled at refugees at street corners, on social media and during far-right anti-immigrant rallies (see Zucchino 2016; Ekman 2019).

Conclusion: nothing to miss

To conclude, I point out significant absences in the movie's portrayal of Aregai and the black African refugees compared to that of the Orfahli. Perhaps the most poignant of these is at the closing scenes of the movie after Aregai and the Orfahlis have successfully secured asylum in Sweden and Germany respectively.

6 Though the audience can hear the speaker say 'impossible', the word is not included in the subtitles. This is apparently due to the fact that the rest of the conversation is in Italian.

The postscript on both sides briefly summarises the political situations in their respective countries of origin and includes a close up shot of a contemplative, silent Aregai. But for the Orfahlis, the closing has decidedly far more texture, substance and detail. More importantly, Wael's wife, Doha, is deep in reflection:

> We would've never thought of leaving
> Syria was very beautiful before
> I wanted my kids to go to school there,
> and for us live our lives normally
> [...]
> Wael is worn out psychologically
> He misses Syria. (*Chaos* 1.28.50)

Wael also speaks:

> I don't know what to do
> In Syria, I had my family and friends around
> Now I feel lost and lonely
> We had a good life before ... (1.30.03)

The lack of symmetry in the depiction of the two sets of refugees in this emotional closing – whether intentional or accidental on the part of the filmmakers – deprives the figure of Aregai of a crucial layer of character depth. As a result of this, and in addition to a rather one-dimensional backdrop of limited economic and political opportunities in Eritrea, the audience might reach the conclusion that, unlike the Orfahlis, Aregai does not miss home. Perhaps he has nothing to miss, unlike the obviously middle-class Orfahlis who had lived a comfortable life in Syria before the civil war forced them out. Thus, in spite of the apparent good intentions of the filmmakers, the figure of Aregai and that of the black African refugee which he represents is at risk of embodying the familiar, earlier-mentioned trope of the desperate, penniless migrant who somehow shows up at the borders of an affluent country (Casteli 2018). This contradiction should not be seen as compromising the quality of the filmmakers' mission to provide a humanising account of refugee movement during the early phases of the so-called European refugee crisis. Rather, it highlights the fraught nature of recording, translating and making sense of the slippery, sometimes indeterminate, codes and stimuli which characterise social imaginaries especially during times of transition and upheaval – social, cultural, economic and political. Given the intensification of these upheavals and disjunctures following the Arab Spring and the unprecedented number of asylum applications in Europe in 2015, this exercise is even more fraught and uncertain.

In *Chaos*, the filmmakers provide an impressive humanitarian account of the chaos that described refugee movements across the Mediterranean into Europe since the Lampedusa shipwreck. Their avowed mission is to highlight the role of European governments in exacerbating the suffering of hapless asylum seekers, but the filmmakers also provide a substantial, even if not comprehensive, portrayal of two sets of refugees – black Africans represented by Aregai and Middle Easterners who are represented by the six-member Orfahli family. These portrayals have offered a productive interrogation of the possible ways in which the black African refugee figures in contemporary European imaginaries. The documentary reveals a range of perceptions and imaginings at one end of which is the familiar hostile rejection more openly expressed by far right politicians. At the other end is people like the former mayors of Lampedusa and Riace who bent over backwards, not only to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees but more importantly, to make a strong case against the prejudicial and patently dehumanising construction of refugees as 'illegals' by the media and conservative governmental structures. The ostensible positive intentions of the filmmakers notwithstanding, the movie's dominant opening and closing imageries expose it to the risk of perpetuating some problematical historical colonial stereotypes and clichés that associate black Africans with disease and desperate poverty. Most importantly, however, the documentary's value lies in the light it sheds on the subtleties and contradictions of social imaginaries that characterise cross-cultural encounters that occur in the backdrop of fluid social, economic and political upheavals. The insights it offers in this regard hold important clues that might illuminate unique ways in which the African refugee in particular and Africa in general figures in the contemporary European imagination.

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