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EDGES OF EUROPE

Visuality, ethics and witnessing
in social research

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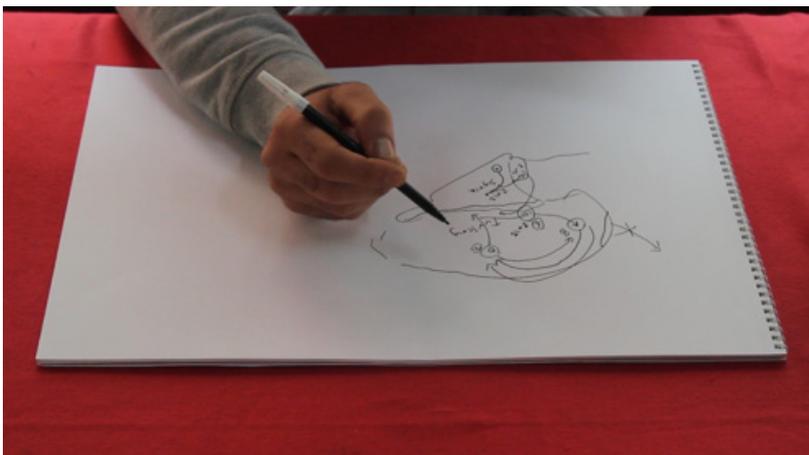University of Sheffield

In thinking about the edges of Europe I was interested in that which Europe excludes or that from which it is marginalised. The edge could also be referred to as the border, perhaps a more resonant term in the current context of mobility across Europe of those who are variously termed as migrants, asylum seekers and for the lucky few, refugees. As Europe's borders become increasingly militarised and solidified, a journey along the Black Sea's western edge reveals the deeply problematic contradictions at the core of the very idea of Europe. The line I traced in a two-month journey started in Turkey, a Muslim country whose EU membership until recently seemed to be eternally deferred, and which is now in the paradoxical position of being allowed in if it can keep other Others out. Then come Bulgaria and Romania, the two newest members of the EU whose entrance into the union brought its own toxic debate centred around migrant labour that is both desired and denied. The journey ended in Ukraine, a country, the fraught positioning of which between Russia and Europe has led to war and the annexation of territory. On the one hand, such an account of the edge of Europe tells us what we already know - that borders are not fixed or static things; but in journeying through these countries, that in the standard idiom of the social sciences would be considered quite disparate, my aim was to look for continuities, relationalities and disjunctures across these spaces through the migrant experience.

My own interest in migration and borders comes from having migrated myself, from Pakistan to the U.K., and many of those I met

on this journey and with whom I had the most rapport were also from Pakistan. I think that tells its own story about how research is always already implicated in us as we are in it. As someone who has always attempted to remain aware of a feminist politics of location, my aim was to carry out situated work, that is slow, that gives something of itself and that is ready not to reveal it all. I travelled with artist and filmmaker, Cressida Kocienski, and we returned with many stories and a large amount of visual material, all of which was gathered following the relevant ethical procedures of anonymity and informed consent. Yet, I do not feel comfortable sharing many of them. Here the role of representation and what it means to reveal and to make visible is key. As the filmmaker, Trinh T Minh-ha writes, "invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle."[1] This fraught relationship between the visible and invisible is the subject of a recent exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London by the artist Martine Syms, titled *Fact & Trouble*, after a phrase by William James, the American philosopher and psychologist. For Syms this phrase embodies the relationship between the truth and its construction and between the document and its reception in film-making and artistic practice. Many of these same issues are also present in social and cultural research, but particularly so in visual research. Facts *are* trouble and representing them can lead to trouble. As someone interested in forms of visual experimentation the idea of 'troubling' mainstream representations seemed to me to be an apt metaphor for the type of work I was attempting to carry out. I was interested in how such representations can challenge mainstream narratives without, for example, turning each and every person on the move into abject victim or demonised other. What forms of representation allow for the agency of the migrant subject, for the fluid and flexible geographies of the border to be made visible and for the traumas associated with border crossing to be expressed in ways that are based around evocation rather than explication?

If we think about the politics of visualisation in relation to the so-called refugee crisis, one very strong strand of the way in which the visual is being used is in support of, or to elicit, a humanitarian response. It is a response based in sometimes sensational images, like the photograph of the Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, who

1. Minh-ha, T. T. (2016). The Image and the Void. Journal of Visual Culture, 15(1), 131-140

Drawing difficult journeys across Syria, Lebanon and Turkey - an interview with a Syrian in Istanbul. Image: Cressida Kocienski

drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. That image did lead to a change in the way the issue was being discussed, at least in UK, but I think it would be fair to say that this renewed compassion did not last long. In order to think about the role of images and the humanitarian impulse, it is perhaps useful to turn to an older image. I am referring to Michael Buerk's seminal report on the famine in Ethiopia, which was broadcast by the BBC in 1984. In many ways it has been instrumental in shaping the politics of compassion upon which humanitarian responses in the West rely.[2] That report was followed by the rather problematic Live Aid concerts and inaugurated the now regular celebrity forays into humanitarianism. One could trace a genealogy of image-making from that single broadcast to the situation as it is today, where techniques of digital story-telling and virtual reality are being used by aid agencies as a way of communicating with potential donors. One such attempt is the film, *Clouds over Sidra*, made in collaboration with the UN, which follows a young Syrian girl around the Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan.[3] The award winning virtual reality film was premièred at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and was credited with increasing the amount

2. Gilbert, P., & Berlant, L. (Eds.). (2014). Compassion: The culture and politics of an emotion. Routledge; Nussbaum, M. C. (2003). Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions. Cambridge University Press
3. Arora, G., & Milk, C. (Directors). (2015). *Clouds Over Sidra* [Video file]. Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://with.in/watch/clouds-over-sidra/

of aid pledged to the cause by world leaders.[4] The film is a good successor to Buerk's BBC report since both rely on the notion of witnessing to mobilise passions. We are shown the emaciated child crying at the pain of hunger, or the harsh realities of life in a desert refugee camp, in order to provoke a response from us at an emotional level. Whilst there is this similarity between the two images, there is also a significant shift in the way that these images operate as modes of witnessing that has much to say about our contemporary reality. In the BBC report the familiar and trusted face of the presenter gave an authenticity not only to the images but also to the accompanying analysis, however simplified and unreliable it may have been.[5] Again like the image of the Syrian toddler one cannot deny that there was an immediate efficacy to the image but its longer term legacy is more problematic. In *Clouds over Sidra*, a different dynamic is at play. We are now in the era of the ubiquity of the image, of the hyper-complexity of politics, where black and white understandings of right and wrong are simply not possible. It is an era that the artist-philosopher Hito Steyerl has called the time of November, referring to the Sergei Eisenstein film, *October*.[6] She writes, "November is the time after October, a time when revolution seems to be over and peripheral struggles have become particular, localist, and almost impossible to communicate."[7] In such a time, whose witnessing could be trustworthy enough? The simple and rather cynical answer that *Clouds over Sidra* provides us with, is yourself and yourself alone. Virtual reality transports us to the refugee camp, where we can see 'first-hand' the traumatic conditions and hear the personal stories of refugees who seem to be addressing us alone. As one of

4. Anderson, M. (2015). Can tearjerker virtual reality movies tempt donors to give more aid? Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/dec/31/virtual-reality-movies-aid-humanitarian-assistance-united-nations; Feltham, Jamie. "Clouds Over Sidra Wins Sheffield Doc/Fest Award." Vrseworks. Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://vrse.works/826/clouds-over-sidra-wins-sheffield-docfest-award/

5. Much has been written about the report's failure to show the complex reasons behind the famine, which was almost entirely man-made. Instead the report settled for the rather sensational image of a 'biblical famine'. See, Franks, S. (2014). *Reporting disasters: Famine, aid, politics and the media*. Hurst; Franks, S. (2014). Ethiopian famine: How landmark BBC report influenced modern coverage. Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/oct/22/ethiopian-famine-report-influence-modern-coverage;

6. Aleksandrov, G., & Eisenstein, S. (Directors). (1928). *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* [Documentary]. Soviet Union: Sovkino (USSR).

7. Steyerl, H. (2004). November: A Film Treatment. *Transit, 1(1).* Chicago

the film makers Chris Milk claims; "Virtual reality, fundamentally, is a technology that removes borders... Anything can be local to you."[8] The primacy of vision embedded within such statements is only one in a line of problematic assumptions. This work places the burden of proof on the refugee, in this case a twelve year old girl, who has to show us her destitution and her will in the face of it; she has to perform it. There is also the unerring faith in the technological, which in this particular configuration has rather aptly been named the 'digital saviour complex', by the critic Bhakti Shringarpure.[9]

In an age of new media and the almost instant sharing of images via social media, a different set of politics and ethics are at play. No longer reliant on the mediation of newsroom editors and professional journalists in the field, today the images we consume of various crises are often sent by members of the public, people who happen to be there at the time, people who might even be involved in the events. There is an authenticity and immediacy associated with such images, but at the same time they are easily exploited, misinterpreted and hijacked by powerful actors. How to make sense of the sheer amount and often shocking nature of these images is difficult. In the case of migrant journeys the ubiquity of the image has led many to speak of the possibility of self-narration, meaning that through the use of mobile phone cameras people are able to record, and therefore to represent their own experiences. I was offered such images by some of the people I spoke to and many of these were disturbing. Just as photographs are often taken to record moments of joy, so they were taken on these journeys to record moments of trauma or points in the journey that were especially difficult. I did not take any of these images but following the new impulse of social science as surveillance, it is really not that hard to find these images on Facebook, Twitter etc., something that fits into a dangerous and extremely unethical trend of scrapping information from the web. This issue of the ubiquity of the image came up again when we were being shown around the Kapikule border crossing, between

8. Harris, B. J. (2015). How The United Nations Is Using Virtual Reality To Tackle Real-World Problems. Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://www.fastcompany.com/3051672/tech-forecast/how-the-united-nations-is-using-virtual-reality-to-tack-le-real-world-problems
9. Shringarpure, B. (2015). The Digital Savior Complex. Retrieved June 21, 2016, from http://www.warscapes.com/opinion/digital-savior-complex

Turkey and Bulgaria, which is the second busiest land border crossing in the world. We were shown around the border by a customs official who pointed out a low-slung building at the edge of a large concrete expanse. It was the building that housed the x-ray, and we were told of the time when it revealed the bodies of several people in a lorry, mostly Syrians who were attempting to cross the border into Europe. We were first offered the x-rays but then having reconsidered they offered us images that the customs officials themselves had taken on their mobile phones, since these were not seen to be subject to the same rules as the official images. Needless to say we did not take them but again the issue of the ethics of image production, of what can be revealed, what can be shown and what indeed is ethically and politically possible to see, comes up.

The Kapikule crossing between Turkey and Bulgaria with Greece in the distance. Image: Cressida Kocienski

This issue features:
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