Il volo. Wim Wenders' short documentary on hybrid space in Calabrian shrinking cities

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The present paper proposes an analysis of Wim Wenders' Il volo *(2010), which could be translated as* Flight. *This short documentary film shows how 300 immigrants, who had debarked on the Ionic side of Italy, were welcomed by the local Calabrian communities of the so-called ghost towns or shrinking cities in the Locride. Contrary to what the topic of Wenders' short documentary might surmise,* Il volo *is not an expository nor an observational narration on the integration of (il)legal immigrants in Italy, with long (panoramic) shots and extended sequences, but it combines cinematic resources and techniques that belong to the poetic and the reflexive mode of documentary filmmaking. As I will demonstrate, Wenders' documentary clearly 'emphasises visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organisation', while it also 'calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking' (Nichols 2012, p. 31).*

As film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols points out in his ground-breaking *Introduction to documentary*, a precise definition of documentaries has never been formulated. However, critics still rely on John Grierson's founding description of 'creative treatment of actuality', first articulated in the 1930s, but are unable to resolve 'the obvious tension between 'creative treatment' and 'actuality'' (2012, p. 2). They do agree upon the fact that documentary filmmaking 'draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective' (2012, p. 3) and that '[d]ocumentary is often discussed as either a mode of film-making related realism or objectivity' (Olivieri 2016, p. 136). In previous research, Nichols had already concluded that contemporary productions question more overtly documentary truth and their relationship to reality (1993, p. 174). Therefore, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between films and

documentaries are often blurred, in a far more explicit way. In the second edition to *Introduction to documentary*, Nichols argues that

> Because documentaries address *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker, they differ from the various genres of fiction (science fiction, horror, adventure, melodrama, and so on) in significant ways. They are made with different assumptions about purpose, they involve a different quality of relationship between filmmaker and subject, and they prompt different sorts of expectations from audiences.
>
> These differences, as we shall see, guarantee no absolute separation between fiction and documentary. Some documentaries make strong use of practices such as scripting, staging, reenactment, rehearsal, and performance that we associate with fiction. Some adopt familiar conventions such as the individual hero who undergoes a challenge or embarks on a quest, building suspense, emotional crescendos, and climactic resolutions. Some fictions make strong use of conventions that we typically associate with nonfiction or documentary such as location shooting, nonfactors, hand-held cameras, improvisation, found footage (footage not shot by the filmmaker), voice-over commentary, and natural lighting. The boundary between the two realms is highly fluid but, in most cases, still perceptible. (Nichols 2012, p. xi)

That type of fluctuating separation between contemporary fiction film and documentary filmmaking is epitomised by Wim Wenders' *Il volo* (2010), the short documentary film on the integration of (il)legal immigrants in Italian society. Contrary to what the topic of Wenders' short documentary might surmise, *Il volo* (which could be translated as *Flight*) is not an expository nor an observational narration, with long (panoramic) shots and extended sequences, but it combines cinematic resources and techniques that belong to the poetic and the reflexive mode of documentary filmmaking (2010, pp. 31, 149-153). As I will demonstrate, Wenders' documentary clearly 'emphasises visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organisation', while it also 'calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking' (Nichols 2012, p. 31).

Blurring boundaries

Originally, *Il volo* was conceived as a short film, based on a script by Eugenio Melloni, with a pre-established length of, first 7 to 9, later 15 minutes. This work of fiction, that should have been filmed at the coastal town of Scilla, was then turned into a film which included its making-of. Based on a script by Melloni and the documentary filmmaker, *Il volo* became Wenders' second 3D project (TAV 2010), after a documentary on dance performer-choreographer Pina Bausch (*Pina*, released in 2011), and the first of its kind in Italy, with an estimated working budget of € 440 000. Revolving around the topic of immigration, *Il volo* shows the difficulties and obstacles immigrants have to face upon their arrival in Southern Italy, but also brings the story of their successful integration

into Italian society. It focuses on the inventive and courageous solutions that some small municipalities resorted to in Calabria, a Southern region characterised by serious racial tensions, and from which young Italians had fled because of organised crime and unemployment. About 300 immigrants had debarked on the Ionic side of Italy and were welcomed by the local Calabrian communities of the so-called ghost towns or shrinking cities in the Locride (Haase et alii 2016), such as the hilltop medieval village of Riace. Its mayor Mimmo Lucano was the first to come 'up with the brainwave of repopulating the town with irregular migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, the Lebanon and Somalia' (Fossi 2010). Soon, other municipalities followed the example of Riace and, despite the threats of the 'Ndrangheta', the Calabrian 'mafia', the immigrants actually revived economic, educational and cultural activities (Sasso 2009). When Wenders took interest in this integration model, he got particularly touched by the account of the young Roma orphan Ramadullah and his three brothers, upon which he decided to turn it into a documentary film project, with, as mentioned above, a rather complex genesis.

Within the final version of *Il volo*, the work of fiction narrows the story of that Calabrian integration model down to the city of Badolato narrating how an eight-year-old boy called Peppino, performed by the young actor Salvatore Flore, becomes the messenger boy between the city council and the immigrant officer, in their renegotiation of the European immigration policy. In between his errands which take Peppino from the city centre to the seaside, the young boy plays football with all other children, whether they are Italian or not. Watching these scenes, the audience immediately realises that it does not witness the actual immigration but a parodic re-enactment of the various processes, a type of 'docudrama', by means of a strong stereotypisation of people and cultural practices, mainly performed by two professional actors, who, along with the rest of the crew worked free or for scale (Vivarelli 2010). The immigration officer, for instance, played by the Roman actor Luca Zingaretti, puts all kinds of prejudices on immigrants into words personifying simultaneously the impatient Italian, who is unwilling to understand the other and who is too strongly attached to his mobile phone. The city mayor, interpreted by the late American actor with Sicilian roots, Ben Gazzara, whom Wenders deliberately cast because of his migrant past, embodies the astute politician and negotiator.[i] The portrayal of these two characters, based on imagologist interpretations (Beller & Leersen 2007), for that matter, contrasts highly with the depiction of the extras, whose behavior is far less stereotypical and parodic—the crew members and immigrants indistinctly play the part of the immigrants and of the original citizens.

That type of acting is totally lacking in *Il volo*'s other component, the making-of, also called *Backstage*, which has not been edited as an addendum to the fiction film. Both components have been intertwined, or better still, the making-of functions as a frame to the fiction part: *Backstage* opens and closes Wenders' documentary exemplifying other circular movements of the narration and thus withdrawing it from

any linear temporality. As could be expected, the making-of visualises several stages of the production process and the major obstacles, ranging from the storyboard (preproduction), over the rehearsals of the scenes and the actual shootings (production), to the (sound) editing (postproduction). Moreover, *Backstage* addresses the possibilities offered by 3D filming, in Italy, and it discusses the future of filmmaking, in general, illustrating Wenders' point of view by filming himself within the film and showing that recording to the audience. In doing so, the documentary filmmaker becomes an actor and a character within his own meta-filmic discourse to the extent that the characters he created start to observe him. In the opening sequence, for instance, which frames Wenders in the recording studio while he is watching a scene on a big screen, Ben Gazzara's character looks back at him through binoculars. This first video overlay also typifies the technique of the mise-en-abyme in Wenders' short documentary.

By contrast, the documentary filmmaker does not really explain why he wanted to film in 3D for this particular project—journalists, such as Panella, and media releases[ii] do state that the production company had promotional purposes—nor does he address the impact on the audience, but one might suggest that the illusion of depth perception does not offer the expected escape from reality, as in animation film, but it enhances a more direct confrontation with today's reality realising agency through connection (Kress 2010, p. 21). Regardless of the exact meaning of the 3D, *Il volo*'s *Backstage* does highlight the successful integration of the immigrants into the village of Badolato, a model from which the newly arrived immigrants as well as the Calabrians benefited.[iii] Compared to the fiction film, which focuses majorly on the obstacles of the migration process, the making-of dwells on the economic-cultural activities and expressions, such as the finely-woven fabrics by migrant women who adopted traditional Calabrian techniques. To that goal, Wenders shows and comments on the city's murals. *Dove vanno le nuvole?*, for instance, recur on several occasions representing the various countries of origin: each country is a cloud drifting in the air, in which is planted a road sign that carries the name of the country.

A "third space"

These types of signs regularly occur within the two parts of *Il volo*, whether as real road marks or in the shape of murals or other artistic expressions. The street name sign, 'Via Speranza' (Hope Street), and the artistic map *Tutte le direzioni, tutte le popolazioni*, in which people and nations meet via metro lines, are highly illustrative, as well as other murals which offer an apt answer to the regional organised crime which in their turn tried to intimidate Wender and his film crew. These signs do not only mark space, but also the spatiality of migration.[iv]

While the physical setting engaged within the documentary is limited to the cities of Badolato (fiction and making-of) and Riace (making-of), *Il volo* does cross borders, but only in a virtual way, through the use of

'maps', the artistic references and the presence of people from different origins. By doing so, Wenders demonstrates that the issue of migration can be addressed from a limited setting, without addressing actual traveling nor visualising climactic images of loaded boats with refugees rescued by the coast guard. Instead, Wenders refers to the treacherous journey of the immigrants by quoting Homer's *Odyssey*. So, whereas conventional discursive strategies in documentaries on (im)migration, as in, for instance, Gianfranco Rosi's acclaimed *Fuocammare* (2016), include the insertion of archival footage, of photographs and other documents, Wenders opts for a more literary approach—*Il volo*'s material hybridity consists in its two-fold nature. This might lead to the conclusion that Wenders' poetic approach is in line with Nichols' vision on original documentary filmmaking: 'Documentary flourishes when it gains a voice of its own. Producing accurate documents or visual evidence does not, on its own, grant it such a voice' (2012, p. 125).

On a visual level, the 'static' character is even more present in the fiction film, only set in Badolato. Wenders does alternate sequences or scenes shot in closed and open spaces, opposing the city centre to its more liminal spaces, the hilltops to the shore, the land to the sea, which is always filmed from the shore, while he also plays with different types of lightning, whether they are determined by meteorological conditions or not. The various shots might have different angles, with numerous non-frontal shots, but Wenders consistently films from the land or the air. In the latter case, the cameras are attached to a small deltaplane with wheels. Strikingly, the physical object that ties those opposite poles together is Peppino's football. When the young boy plays with it running up and down the small stairs which connect Badolato to the seaside (within the fiction film), he also counters the static dimension of the short documentary. That same football reappears as a visual association in the documentary part, more precisely in the filming of the shooting of related scenes or of the filming of the free moments in between shooting. The constant use of the football contributes to turning a fragmented narrative into one fluid narration.

However, the Manichean structures of the visual level dissolve on the acoustic one. Despite the fact that the use of English and Italian prevails (with subtitles in the other language), the audience will hear utterances in different languages, which, contrary to the two dominant ones, are neither subtitled nor dubbed, but they do add to the multicultural dimension of the setting. Moreover, the soundscape comprises traditional music, which, as Wenders points out, renders a strong local color—he uses the synaesthetic imagery 'flavor'—but simultaneously refers to African and Arabic influences so that that music clearly transcends its local dimension. The documentary filmmaker also stresses that the southern part of Italy, and Calabria in particular, has been invaded by several civilisations, but no trace of it can be found on the visual level. Despite that absence, the local Calabrian setting becomes a hybrid space, an in-between where different actors, relations and institutional structures co-exist (Nederveen-Pieterse 2003). This interstitiality concerns settling patterns, the relationship between mono- and pluri-ethnic geographies and their respective

identity construction (Soja 2000). A key moment in that respect is one of the last scenes of the making-of, an establishing shot, in which the square of Riace slowly fills with people: at first the old and new inhabitants seem to have a spectral appearance covering slowly the *Dove vanno le nuvole?* murals, but, as soon as they turn to their human shape, they visualise the reversal of the ghost town phenomenon.

Relying on Homi Bhabha's and John Comaroff's interpretation (2002), *Il volo*'s spatial hybridity can also be defined as a liminal or 'third space marked by a simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous that allows […] to be constantly reinterpreted, overwritten and cross-appropriated' (Bachmann-Medick 2016, p. 146). This definition could also be extended to the filmic interpretation of that spatiality, as rendered in Wenders' short multimodal narrative, which comprises the visual, the acoustic and the verbal. The local Calabrian municipalities and its representation are both discursive practices and these

> '[t]ransmission processes [such as documentaries] are not channels that relay words, sound, or images *about* [a regional setting] but rather they are the means through which [that setting] achieves actualisation'. (Brasell 2015, p. 8)

Travelers as actors of encounters

That actualisation not only gives the audience an insight in how Calabrian create a new local identity combining the old and the new, but transcends that local character via an exceptional use of the actors who contributed to that identity creation. Wenders mixes professionals and amateurs, local Calabrians and immigrants, public figures (such as Riace's mayor) and randomly chosen passers-by, filmmakers and other artists, but without always giving them the part they had in real life. As Peppino in the fiction film, the actors are go-betweens or mediators between the audience and the real protagonists in migration, whose stories are being remixed and given a more universal character.

These actors represent the sociopolitical, the institutional and the creative or artistic sphere, of which the latter gets the most speech time focusing on film-related topics, whereas migration would have seemed to be a more logical choice. Furthermore, the documentary filmmaker takes a limited number of the so-called social actors, who are usually involved in migration and who have a standard appearance in documentaries on the topic. In *Il volo* Wenders does not give voice to witnesses, activists or social workers who strive for the integration of immigrants, he refers only vaguely to policy makers and to the Calabrian crime syndicate. Experts, such as journalists and academics, or representatives of the legal sphere (militaries) are totally lacking, but the audience does not question this absence while watching, only with hindsight, when it starts comparing *Il volo* to other documentaries and narratives on a similar or the same topic, such as Chiara Sasso's testimonial narrative, *Trasite, favorite. Grandi storie di piccoli paesi. Riace e gli altri* (2009).

In Wenders' documentary film there are deliberately no dissenting voices, no hostile or racist remarks opposing the Italians to the others, it is completely in line with the topic of successful integration and contrary to the more current reactions, fed by more populist views on Italy's migration crisis. Within Wenders' representational strategies, the dominating voice is the one of the documentary filmmaker himself, who often uses the narratological device of the voice-over connecting the various sequences of the fiction film and the documentary. Wenders speaks mainly in English, with a few passages in Italian, probably due to the dynamics of localisation (Gottlieb 2005, Matamala 2010). The low voice of the extradiegetic narrator adds to *Il volo's* rhythmic and tonal qualities, as well as to the 'overall form of the film' (Nichols 2012, p. 130).

Although *Il volo* might be highly reflexive, bringing to the fore the conventions of documentary filmmaking, its main feature is the poetic mode, with Wenders' unusual rhythms, patterns and form. The combination of these two modes discloses a third one, the performative mode, which 'emphasises the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject […] address[ing] the audience in a vivid way' (2012, p. 151). In that light, Wenders' short documentary illustrates how '[d]ocumentary has become the flagship for a cinema of social engagement and distinctive vision' (Nichols 2012, p. 2). His particular way of documentary filmmaking

> moves forward in relation to all the work that has gone before, addressing issues, exploring situations, engaging viewers in ways that will continue to instruct and please, move and compel. Its history belongs to the future and those efforts to come. [—According to Wenders, who has always wanted to address the wider audience; 3D and its specificity will be a part of that future.] It is these future works that will enlarge an existing tradition and contribute to shaping a world we have yet to create. (2012, p. 252)

Documentary filmmaking should enable 'alternative imaginaries, provoking new knowledges and perceptions, thus producing effects on our social reality' (Olivieri 2016, p. 137) and on the audience-citizens who should actively engage in the debate on immigrants and their identity (Harindranath in Ardizzoni 2013, p. 323). Wenders' *Il volo* mediates between the audience and the immigrants with their liminality or hybridity. Viewers and immigrants both become a part of 'the fabric of the European space' creating a performative encounter by 'affective proximity' (Olivieri 2016, p. 147).

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Notes

[i] Gazzara speaks with the voice of the Italian actor and voice-over artist Giancarlo Giannini.

[ii] See, for instance, the press release on the website of Trans Audio Video Group, entitled *Il 'Volo' di Wim Wenders in 3D* (2010).

So far, the documentary has not released on dvd, probably because of this extra dimension.

[iii] Francesca Esposito (2013, p. 92) describes briefly Wenders' initial ideas and the genesis of the film. A full account can be found in *In difesa dei luoghi. Mimmo Lucano e Wim Wenders.* Il volo *di Riace* (2015), by sociologist Vito Teti. [The 2010 book *Il Volo di Wim Wenders. Un film sulla Calabria dell'accoglienza*, in which Teti's contribution was originally, published could not be retrieved.]

[iv] A more iconic mark of that spatiality is Mimmo Paladino's *Gateway to Lampedusa—Gateway to Europe*, the widely known a memorial which is also a plea for humaneness (Horsti 2016, pp. 93-96).

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