
The Passage from 'Person' to 'Character' - A Film Editor's Study of 'Personhood' in Audiovisual Accounts of the "European Migrant Crisis"

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Abstract

The so-called "European migrant crisis" has bred a profusion of audiovisual accounts - films, news reports, photographs -, many of which fueled by an alleged intention of giving voice to hitherto voiceless, uprooted people. But as many of these "untold stories" gain material expression as 'storylines', we are urged to consider the implications of yet another form of displacement: that from 'person' to 'character'. How does the border-crossing into pictorial territory transform the represented? What does it mean for audiences to 'empathise' with characters - and is that even possible? Are these images of people truly capable of affecting change, and, if so, at what cost to their dignity and humanity?

This paper seeks to explore what goes into the construction of the migrant character, how different editing styles privilege certain discursive priorities, and to what extent - if at all - 'personhood' can be reassembled from pictorial presence. Beyond the classic analysis of a corpus of existing material, this paper frames the matter from the perspective of the editing room: as a film editor currently working on a character-centred project that examines the forces driving massive sub-saharan migration to Europe and the torments facing their journeys, I interrogate examples stemming from various media, as well as my own material, against a theoretical background drawn from anthropology and media studies with the forthright purpose of shedding light onto some of the intricate dilemmas inherent to the endeavour of portraying people, especially those enduring an almost complete destitution of dignity and humanity due to systematic denials of political agency.

The paper is accompanied by the audiovisual essay *The Crossing* (currently under production). Composed of a mesh of photographs, film and video snippets, music, voice-over narration, and on-screen text, this essay is conceived to enrich the proposed reflection with a poetic-sensorial experience.

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