

## **TREMOR, UNCERTAINTY, INVENTION**

### **Europe and the sea**

**Daniela Angelucci**

Università Roma Tre - Dipartimento di Architettura e Filosofia / Roma Tre University -  
Department of Philosophy, communication and media studies, Rome, Italy

#### **Abstract**

*In recent years the migrations that cross the sea around Europe call into question the philosophy, which is urged to think about this Outside. How can we avoid an objective discourse, but also the offence of being too familiar with situations so different from our own, as European citizens? By calling into question the category of "intercessor" proposed by Deleuze, perhaps the artistic narrative can help us in this approach. The sea as a mobile territory can then be described in the tremor that animates it (Glissant), in the uncertainty that it implies (Melville), in the invention of a new space and of a new people that it could bring with it (Deleuze and Guattari). These three characteristics emerge in the work of video artist Laura Waddington, Border, as an example of invention and intercession that makes tremor and uncertainty visible.*

The situation of Europe and its borders is an urgent theme of our present, which calls philosophy into question. The most urgent event today concerns the migrations that cross the sea around Europe, and it should force philosophy to think. In 2016 more than 5000 migrants died in the Mediterranean; in 2017 more than 100,000 people landed in Italy, including about 15,000 unaccompanied minors; 3 October 2016, near the island of Lampedusa, in Sicily, 366 persons died just half a mile from the coast and the salvation.

In front of the European sea, crossed by migrations, the first step of philosophy should be to think about the kind of narrative that we aim to legitimize in this respect. The question is: How can we avoid an objective discourse (what Lacan called the discourse of university), but also the offense of an excessive familiarity with situations so different from our situation, so harder than our situation, as European citizens? To borrow a concept from Deleuze and Guattari,

we can call into question the category of "intercessor": becoming someone's intercessor means trying a continuous exchange of points of view, in an affective, political and stylistic adhesion, instead of speaking in his/her place. The theoretical and political sense of this concept – intercession – is that one of refuting the claim of the intellectual, of the philosopher, to speak for others, attributing to himself the right or the duty to be their spokesperson. I quote Deleuze who asks: "Who speaks and who acts? It is always a multiplicity, even in the unique person who speaks or acts". This multiplicity is what produces a stammering, an uncertainty, for Deleuze and Guattari, a becoming-minor of the language.

In the notable book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Iain Chambers talks about thinking *with* migration, and emphasizes how thinking *with* migration and not *about* migration means questioning our position with respect to language, to our history and culture. Thinking with migrations promotes a different relationship, more disturbing, with our own philosophical background. So it needs to give up a more consequential, more structured argumentation, to adhere precisely to the uncertainty of the title, to be captured and modified from the outside and to escape the pleasure of objectification. Not to speak for anyone, nor to be someone's representative, but neither to remain at a distance: the concepts produced in the encounter between the event of the sea crossings and the philosophical practice to produce a rapprochement, an area of indiscernibility, an intercession. And maybe the artistic narration can help us in this approach, maybe it can help us speak about the sea and its contemporary situation without taking a distance and at the same time without showing an excessive familiarity.

Starting from various readings, philosophical in the broad sense, but above all literary, and also visual, I propose then three characters of the sea, which speak to us of the contemporary situation and at the same time of the philosophical practice and a new way (different, disturbing, Chambers would say) of relating to it.

Thinking of the sea as a territory, analogous but very different from the land, the tremor is the characteristic that we could use to express in the first place its

mobility, its fluidity. Borrowing a concept by the book of Edouard Glissant, *Pensée du tremblement*, we can talk about a "trembling thinking" (*tremblement* in French is also *tremblement de terre*, earthquake, something that not by chance has to do with the territory). Against every dogmatism Glissant opposes the archipelagic thinking, which is declined as a *tremblement*, tremor: in fact, such thinking does not aim at the constitution of preconceived grids of interpretation of reality, but adapts to an unstable perception of the world in its own changes. In the ethical field, the trembling preserves the desire and uncertainty of the discovery of the Other. It is a thinking that resists the stiffening of systemic thoughts and the impetus of systems of thought; it opens the identity to the relationship with the Other, it is "the seismic thinking of the world" that trembles inside and outside of us. Glissant affirms that we are "noble" enough, "magnificent" and "wild", and also "miserable" when necessary, to consider our relationship to the Other and to the World as a tremor.

Tremor can be used to indicate the fluidity of water and the rippling of waves, but also the movement of lives, both human and animal, that populate and cross the sea. Tremor describes the vitality of the sea, its mobility but also the fact that it is full of living beings, animals and humans. The tremor here is closely linked to a poetics of the relationship: the trembling thinking also means living the openness to the whole world, at risk of trembling, at risk of uncertainty.

There are many literary texts about the sea that describe its uncertainty, the impossibility of seeing what is hidden under the surface, the possibility of shipwreck, of dying while crossing. Carl Schmitt, in his book *Land and Sea*, writes that Melville, with his *Moby Dick*, represents for the oceans what Homer and *Odyssey* represented for the Mediterranean. Well, in both cases the element that characterizes the sea is that of uncertainty. In the *Odyssey*, the sea has the color of wine, it is infinite, dark, full of fish, but above all, with its waves and storms, it destroys any attempt by humans to follow a route.

So, uncertainty is first of all the uncertainty of the sea's conditions, given that the movement of the sea changes continuously and suddenly. But uncertainty is also the uncertainty of recognition: on the surface of the sea it is difficult to

distinguish who or what may arise out of it: the white whale? the sirens? an overturned dinghy? or a boat full of human beings? dead or alive? The Italian writer Elena Stancanelli, in the book *Venne alla spiaggia un assassino*, describes her experience in the autumn of 2018 aboard the ship Mare Jonio of the Mediterranean fleet, prepared to intervene in the sighting and rescue of migrants. Stancanelli describes very well the uncertainty of the sighting, but also the uncertainty about the nature and intentions of the Other coming from the sea (are these people in need of rescue or dangerous people?), as well as the uncertainty of the survival. At the beginning of the book she writes that the Mediterranean Sea is filling up with deaths, which is a sort of quotation that refers to Melville, that defined the sea floor – Ocean in this case – as “a great cemetery”. But above all the sea’s uncertainty is that of survival: in the *Odyssey* Ulysses, during the storms unleashed by Poseidon, often complains about the fear of not returning home. In the fifth book, which tells the departure from the island of Calypso and the path into the sea before arriving from the Phaeacians, at the court of Alcinous, Ulysses is desperate during the storm, and regrets not to have died in war, because dying at sea means not having a burial, not having marked graves.

Precisely the recognition of this uncertainty, however, dictates appropriate rules of conduct, the law of hospitality towards castaways or those who come from the sea: the stories of hospitality towards shipwrecked people are many in the *Odyssey*, but perhaps the most beautiful verses are present in the *Telemachy*, at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus goes in search of Odysseus until Sparta at the palace of Menelaus: the squire asks Menelaus if he should accommodate the two foreigners or not, and Menelaus responds disdainfully to the idea that there may even be a doubt. Telemachus and Nestor's son are washed, wrapped in beautiful robes and seated on two thrones, then fed and quenched with water. Only then are questions asked about their identity.

The third character that I propose, referring to Deleuze and Guattari, is that of the invention of a new space and a new people. Meanwhile, the idea of the invention of a new space must be taken seriously: the experience of those bodies that come from Africa literally creates a territory, a path that was not

there before. Uncertainty in fact leads to the search for an escape route, which, as Henri Laborit writes in *L'éloge de la fuite* (1976), is not only sometimes the only salvation, but also the possibility of gaining "unknown shores". The invention of a new, minor, nomadic people, which is missing, is a political, artistic and philosophical task for Deleuze and Guattari. Using Glissant's reading of Deleuze and Guattari, we could say it is a matter of inventing and not creating, if by creating we mean a future already included in the present. Instead, this invented people is always a "becoming people", it is in continuous change. In art, but also in philosophy and politics, the invention of a people can only take place by taking a minor position, rejecting the greater canon. From the point of view of the two French authors, minority and majority do not constitute themselves as such on a quantitative level, but on the basis of an opposition of the former to the majority character of the management and organization of society. Majority is defined through constancy, homogeneity, centrality and unification, minority is instead the disorienting, plastic and deterritorializing element of the system.

Referring to the words of Iain Chambers, that I quoted before, who invites us to think *with* the event of migrations, we can highlight what the sea as a territory and as a border can teach to philosophy. These three concepts – tremor, uncertainty, invention – that describe the sea as a boundary can also be proposed as characteristics of philosophical work, which should expose itself to risk, accept the possibilities offered by uncertainty, give space to invention.

An example of artistic invention, a filmic one, in which these three characteristics emerge clearly is the film of English video-artist Laura Waddington, *Border*, a great success at the Locarno Film Festival in 2004. The film seems to be a perfect example of an invention and an intercession that makes visible tremor and uncertainty. It seems to me to be particularly suitable for this occasion precisely because of the characteristics of the sea as a boundary, of which I have spoken so far. Waddington has a literary background – and maybe this is significant in respect of the kind of narrative that she chose. She travelled to Kurdistan, The Middle East, and the Balkans, researching refugee routes into Europe, and in 2002 she lived for a few months in the countryside around the

Red Cross camp in Sangatte, a small French town in the Nord-Pas de Calais region, refusing to join the government-authorised news media linked to the Red Cross. There she closely followed Afghan and Iraqi refugees who were trying to pass through the underwater tunnel linking France to the United Kingdom. Joining the migrants with a small DV camera, Waddington filmed their nightly routines, escape attempts, runs through the camps, waits, police repression and clashes over the closure of the camp. The sea here is really a border, or rather a wall to be crossed, an object of desire that is never seen, however. As for the way of narration, Waddington proposes a non-objective narration, she participates and puts herself at risk, not interviewing, but running, running away with the refugees. It is not, therefore, a face-to-face confrontation with reality, but rather an intercession, an affective adhesion, as if the artist is looking for a deletion of her subjective gaze, in order to become part of those situations.

The tremor: The images, always shot in the dark and in slow motion, are grainy, confused, flickering. The tremor of life that swarms and moves in the dark, highlighted by the tremor and flashes of the same images is also noticed by Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *Survivance des lucioles* (2009), which cites Waddington, along with Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Lanzmann, tracing the lines for a survival policy: "Waddington's images like fireflies pierce slightly the darkness of the ethical void into which contemporary society seems to be plunged". The uncertainty: the film recounts the uncertainty of these lives, it is about trying a chance that is often a failure; losing the people who travel with you; risking their lives. This uncertainty of the sea, or the experience of the border in this case, is shown in all its scope in this powerful and disorienting video. Finally, the invention: different from conventional narrative cinema, but far beyond the formalism of some experimental cinema, Waddington shoots and edits these images inventing a new, different way to tell the experience of the borders.

## Author identification

**Daniela Angelucci.** *Is associate professor of Aesthetics at Roma Tre University. She is co-director of the Post-graduate course Environmental Humanities at Roma Tre (Departments of Philosophy and Architecture). She has been in the Presidency Board of Società Italiana di Estetica. She is Advisor for Philosophy and Cinema for Enciclopedia Italiana (Treccani). She is co-director of the series Sguardi fuori campo (Mimesis edizioni); member of the scientific board of the series Estetica e critica (Quodlibet); member of Scientific Committee of the journal La Deleuziana; managing editor of Lebenswelt and Colloquia philosophica. In 2016 she organized the 9<sup>th</sup> Deleuze Studies Conference. Last books: Deleuze e i concetti del cinema, 2012 (Engl. transl. Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Filosofia del cinema, 2013; Philosophical Essays on Nespolo's Art and Cinema, co-ed. D. Dal Sasso, 2018*