

Pierluigi Musarò, “Cosmopolitan Solidarity vs. National Belonging: How Many More Deaths Can We Tolerate?”, in «Africa e Mediterraneo», vol. 24, n. 82, 2015, pp. 11-17

DOI: 10.53249/aem.2015.82.03

<http://www.africaemediterraneo.it/en/journal/>



Africa e Mediterraneo

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I social media: strumenti di inclusione sociale?

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Pubbl. Semestrale n. 1/15 (82) luglio 2015 - Edizioni L'Asinomo, Bologna - Poste in L. 353/2003 (conv. in L. 27/02/2004 n. 46) art. 1, c. 1 DCB-BO



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Cosmopolitan Solidarity vs. National Belonging: How Many More Deaths Can We Tolerate?

by Pierluigi Musarò

With more than 20.000 people dying during their high-risk journeys through the Mediterranean Sea in the last two decades, Europe has become the deadliest migration destination in the world, before the US with 6.000 fatalities on the border with Mexico for the same period (Brian, Laczko 2014). In 2013, the Maltese president described the Mediterranean Sea as a “cemetery” due to the large number of migrants who drowned there. The same year, European Parliament president Martin Schulz said that Europe’s migration policy had “turned the Mediterranean into a graveyard”, referring to the number of drowned refugees in the region as a direct result of the policies. During his visit in Lampedusa after the tragic shipwreck off Lampedusa on 3 October 2013, where 366 migrants died, European Commission President Jose Manuel Bar-

roso said he was “profoundly shocked” by scenes of coffins of victims. In the same occasion, the Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta described it as “a European tragedy”.

On 11 October 2013 another big shipwreck occurred between Malta and Lampedusa: 268 people died. In those days, the world watched in horror the images of the migrants who lost their lives in the attempt to swim to the shores of the Italian island. Just one week after the second shipwreck, on the wave of the diffused shock, the Italian authorities declared a day of national mourning for the tragedies at sea, gave honorary Italian citizenship to the dead, and launched Mare Nostrum, “a military-humanitarian operation” in the Mediterranean, targeted to rescue the migrants and arrest the traffickers/smugglers.

In so doing, the Italian government did neither mention that the survivors were automatically charged with the



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Duemigranti camminano di fianco al Centro de Estancia Temporalde Inmigrantes (CETI) a Melilla, Spagna. Foto di Sara Prestianni





criminal offence of illegal entry, despite their eligibility to apply for asylum, nor they were detained in the island's holding centre. At the same time, the Italian media did not mention that the Sicilian captains and crews of ships were prosecuted on charges of assisting illegal immigration or even human trafficking, nor the mobility restrictions of the visa regime that forced people to take a boat and risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean.

How do we explain the contradiction between the expressions of anger and grief of the European leaders and the immigration policies pursued by European nations? What is the role of media in framing these events as "tragedies" and, in so doing, legitimizing the gap between the rhetoric and practices of European leaders? How do media produce and disseminate images of migrants, and to what ends? How is the viewer's experience shaped and aestheticized?

The spectacle of the border

In order to answer these questions, we need to explore how the «spectacle of the border» (Cuttitta 2014; De Genova 2013) – performed in Lampedusa by a wide range of state and non-state actors, and characterized by constant negotiations and power dynamics – is intimately intertwined with the ways contemporary mediated representations construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the nation as a symbolic category of belonging as well as ourselves as cosmopolitan citizens. From this perspective, the border and its spectacularization become a sort of meta-issue, capable of condensing a whole complex of political fears and concerns, regarding globalization, the loss of sovereignty or the welfare state, terrorism, but also benevolence, compassion and solidarity.

If Simmel (1908, p. 467) – over a century ago – affirmed that the border «is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that takes a spatial form», and Debord (1995, p. 19) focuses on the spectacle as «a social relationship between people that is mediated by images», we can imagine the border not just as mirror-like reflections of the divisions existing in the physical-cultural landscape, but as symbolic and political barriers enacted and performed as «discursive or emotional landscapes of social power» as well as «technical landscapes of control and surveillance» (Paasi 2011, p. 63).

Both migration studies and media studies are centrally to critically examining, both theoretically and empirically, the diverse roles played by global and local actors in what Castles and Miller (2009) have defined as an «age of migration». Although - in many ways - these two fields of study are implicitly interlinked and mutually constitutive (ex. dialectical dimension of journalistic practices of presenting opposing viewpoints, the risk that media may reproduce and cultivate stereotypes, the interdependence between national and immigrant identities), rarely have scholars from both fields explored the overlaps between them with the aim to critically bridge some of the gaps between media and migration research.

More specifically, while scholars and activists have widely denounced the securitization and militarization of borders today, there is far less consideration of the spectacularization of borders. The fallacy is to perceive only the political, juridical, and military enactments of state projects upon sovereign territory, which so commonly



manifest themselves as the patrol and enforcement of relatively exclusionary borders. In order to go beyond this fallacy, we need to explore the mediated performances that contribute to create the spectacle of the border, and specifically what Walter has recently called «the humanitarian border»: a physical-cultural landscape where life and death are daily performed as «a way of governing this novel and disturbing situation, and compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control.» (Walter 2011, p. 137).

The humanitarian border is physically and symbolically enacted by the different actors involved in the contemporary management of migration: media, institutions, activists, military-security and aid agencies. They perform different dramas in making a vigorous display of their technologies and techniques of exclusion against the most humble of human border crossers, as well as of their humanitarian benevolence of rescuing lives and taking care of human bodies. In so doing, they are able to legitimize the narrative of cosmopolitan solidarity and respect of human rights, and to manage the moral panic related to the warfare against migration.

The idea of a humanitarian border might sound at first counterintuitive or even oxymoronic, but not if we engage the humanitarian not as a set of ideas and ideologies, nor simply as the activity of NGOs, but as a complex domain



possessing specific forms of governmental reason. According to Fassin (2007, p. 151), «humanitarian government can be defined as the administration of human collectivities in the name of a higher moral principle which sees the preservation of life and the alleviation of suffering as the highest value of action». If we consider the “military-humanitarian operation” Mare Nostrum, it is clear how at a certain point one sees war and humanitarian action, typically presumed to be forces opposed to one another, enter into a tense but mutually supportive relationship.

Although it is too simple to affirm that media representations cause particular policy responses, analysing how the discursive field (media images and rhetoric, public speeches of political authorities and ministerial-level dialogues) produce truths about the phenomenon of clandestine migration in the Mediterranean, we can see how humanitarian discourses have become integral parts of border and migration governance.

Watching the images of the two shipwrecks off of Lampedusa on October 2013, we understand how some borders are definitely more “border” than others and how the functions they fulfil are always to a great extent symbolic. As illustrated by Cuttitta (2014), Lampedusa is an island that has been indicated by the authorities to be “the” border of migration controls, and performed by media, state and non-governmental actors as the official theatrical EU border.

Unveiling the intimate link between the “borderization” and the “spectacularization” process we see how the mediated performances contribute to shape the border as a humanitarian space of government: an emotional and physical setting in which fears and insecurities can be used for both progressive and regressive purposes.

Migration crisis...

Migration constitutes a policy domain that frequently stirs strong emotions and controversies. It is a policy area where economic, political, humanitarian, cultural and legal points of view often clash with particular force. In recent years, irregular migration coming from Africa to Europe has increasingly been defined as a security problem associated with international crime and, particularly since the attacks of 11 March 2004 in Madrid, 7 July 2005 in London and 7 January 2015 in Paris, terrorism. Sensational media reportage and popular discourses give rise to an apocalyptic image of a wave or “exodus” of “desperate” Africans fleeing poverty at home in search of the European “el Dorado”, crammed into long-worn ships barely staying afloat (Pastore et al. 2006). Hence the perceived “solutions” to what has been defined as a «migration crisis» (Moore et al. 2012) focus on “fighting” and “combating” illegal migration through a crackdown on trafficking and smuggling networks in combination with the intensification of border controls.

These migration “crisis narratives” are deeply related to the national interests of states and the powers they are able to exercise in controlling undesirable immigration. At a policy level, for example, crisis-mode responses may reflect, or break with predominant modes of governing migration; and the narratives adopted by the government of nation states in order to legitimize the orientation of their policy strategies are fundamental. Especially since the “war on terror”, state powers have reformulated their priorities away from the protection of citizens and towards integration within a global economy and source of global capital, opening a defensive modality of politics that Hage (2003) identifies as the expression of “paranoid” forms of nationalism.

The alarming media coverage of the so-called “Arab Spring”, which highlighted large numbers of “boat people” arriving from North African countries on Lampedusa, helped to represent migrants crossing borders as a significant problem to be managed in terms of a wider social, cultural and political “crisis”. On islands, in airports, at sea, and in offshore detention centres where authorities and migrants encounter each other, as Mountz (2010, xvi-xvii) argues, states perform crises and develop proper narratives to manage the geographical margins of their sovereign territory.

Moral panics and anxiety produced by daily news coverage maintain a public perception of perpetual crisis about immigration policies and social problems.¹ This promotes a “commonsense” hostility that has sedimented in dominant media and policy discourses surrounding asylum seekers in the West (Sassen 2009), which is emphasized by some political actors who engage in “business-as-usual” discourse, downplaying extreme migration experiences, especially where acknowledgement of them would undermine their legitimacy and credibility.

This crisis rhetoric is useful to position national security



Pattuglie di Frontex durante l'operazione Poseidon in Grecia.
Foto di Sara Prestianni



Solidarietà cosmopolita vs. appartenenza nazionale: quante morti possiamo ancora accettare?

Le immagini dei migranti in pericolo nel Mediterraneo e di quanti giungono esausti sulle coste del Sud Italia sono diventate pane quotidiano per i media europei, che spesso inquadrano un fenomeno storico e naturale attraverso le lenti dell'emergenza umanitaria. Ma la retorica del discorso umanitario tipica della mediatizzazione contemporanea nasconde ambiguità e paradossi. Quali le cause che spingono i migranti a pagare così caro il rischio della loro vita in alto mare? Come è possibile che le lacrime per le tragedie in mare si traducano spesso in leggi repressive? Quale sfida pongono le migrazioni al concetto di solidarietà, di nazione, di cittadinanza?

L'articolo indaga il ruolo giocato dai media nel legittimare lo scollamento tra retoriche e politiche attuate per gestire un fenomeno che sfida i confini europei e il nostro stesso senso di identità.

Facendo leva sulla "spettacolarizzazione" dei confini (e delle stesse storie di quanti provano ad attraversarli) l'articolo mira a creare un ponte tra gli studi di media e comunicazione e gli studi sulle migrazioni, nella consapevolezza di non poter più distinguere nettamente i diversi campi disciplinari. L'analisi inquadra la cosiddetta tragedia dell'immigrazione irregolare nel più ampio contesto dello "spazio umanitario" – inteso come un imperativo morale universale ad agire direttamente in aiuto dei più vulnerabili, anche se distanti e sconosciuti – e focalizza l'attenzione sulla struttura comunicativa che diffonde questo imperativo a soccorrere gli altri.

Il "confine umanitario" si delinea così come un paesaggio fisico-culturale dove la vita e la morte sono performati quotidianamente come modo di governare questa nuova situazione di disturbo cognitivo e sociale. La strumentalizzazione delle narrazioni umanitarie nella rappresentazione dei migranti, ridotti a figure senza voce e senza umanità, compensa la violenza sociale del regime di controllo dell'immigrazione e rende ancora più stridenti le relazioni di potere esistenti tra la "fortezza Europa" e gli altri, indesiderati e non meritevoli di essere accolti.

Inoltre, nel confermare questa distribuzione asimmetrica di umanità tra "noi" e "loro", la contraddittorietà tra la commozione pubblica e i provvedimenti repressivi adottati, nella generale indifferenza dei cittadini, rivela come l'umanitarismo sia ormai divenuto un dispositivo volto a definire e legittimare una geografia morale del mondo. Nella gestione, anche mediatica, delle migrazioni si riproduce infatti la relazione gerarchica tra l'"Africano" e l'"Europeo", che si rapporta ad esso nella sua duplice veste di donatore e agente di controllo.

and the fear of threatening cultural others as main concerns in the dominant public discourse of wealthy European countries. In this context, anguish born of uncertainty, and more specifically fear – intended as products of globalisation (Bauman 2007) – play an important ideological role, as claims used by the leaders to take political action against "external enemies".

Considering the emotional reactions of the European leaders after the Lampedusa "tragedies" and their silence on the EU immigration policies, we should ask: what do we know about this "crisis" in terms of its seriousness and the allocation of responsibility for it? What types of solutions do we consider possible: fighting smugglers, rescuing people, or changing EU policies?

Once a problem is framed and adopted in terms of security crisis or humanitarian emergency, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means. Assuming, with Edelmans (1977), that «any regime that prides itself on its capacity to manage crises will find crises to manage», it is clear that for the several crisis response agencies involved in the management of migration (State, Army, UNHCR, IOM, NGOs, etc.) a crisis is both a challenge and a blessing. It is a challenge in the sense that of all the actors in the crisis network they are held to the highest standards of preparedness, speed of mobilization, smooth communication and coordination, and effective service delivery. On the other hand, a crisis also presents a welcome opportunity to demonstrate relevance and confirm performance capacity. Moreover, a crisis is an effective way of de-politicizing a phenomenon: the military-humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum, for example, as well as migration at large.

...and humanitarian emergency

In order to unveil the gap between the rhetoric and practices of the humanitarian discourse, we should explore how the dynamics between humanitarian protection and border control are central to legitimizing EU policies. If we intend humanitarianism as «a historically specific articulation of cosmopolitan solidarity, which acts directly on the global South through specialized institutions, yet seeks legitimacy in the West through a communicative structure that disseminates moral discourses of care and responsibility» (Chouliaraki 2013, p. 27), how is our moral attitude to helping vulnerable strangers affected when the spectacle of suffering is performed at home? How can we understand the recent strengthening of humanitarian rhetoric in migration governance, and how is it related to humanitarian practices? Whose humanity is included in recent invocations of humanitarian discourses of care and responsibility, and whose is not?

While we usually define humanitarianism as a moral force that transcends the walled space of the international system, operating in response to fundamental values and urgent needs (Calhoun 2008; Moyn 2010), recent events and media attention to the migrant tragedies at sea has intensified humanitarian discourses in the context of borders and migration. Subjects, policies and mechanisms related to mobility have played a crucial role in the spatial and symbolic reshaping of Europe that has characterized the last two decades. Since the restrictive policy change of the asylum regime in the early 1990s, migration and asylum have been high on Europe's agenda and a main cause of



Rifugiati e migranti attendono di scendere dalla barca "Spica" della Marina italiana per esser imbarcati su un rimorchiatore che li condurrà nel porto di Pozzallo, all'interno dell'operazione Triton. Foto di © UNHCR/ Francesco Malavolta

concern for European citizens, alarmed by the levels of "illegal" migration as well as by the humanitarian duty of safeguarding the rights of people who are attempting to cross the borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

As a consequence, in recent years national politicians and media have shaped the public debate on immigration in Europe, framing it alternatively as a "problem of national security", associated with international crime and terrorism, or as a "humanitarian catastrophe" for the migrants, who often suffer the dangers of the travel. At the same time, migration has been defined in humanitarian terms also in the public communication of European policy makers and security-military agents, such as the European border control agency FRONTEX, as well as in the official declaration of a "humanitarian emergency" by the Italian government in February 2011 after more than 5.000 migrants arrived on boats at Lampedusa (Horsti 2012).²

It is important to consider what kind of humanitarian imaginary we are referring to. Despite the original aim of modern humanitarianism to operate as a force of moral education for western publics by relying on the theatre of pity, the minimalist version of obligation as the saving of human life – what Chouliaraki (2013) defines as "solidarity as salvation" – shaped, in the last fifty years, a neo-colonial vocabulary that has currently hegemonized the public domain. The discourse of global compassion historically emphasized by media and aid agencies has been discursively dislocated from the context of humanitarian action and philanthropy onto the context of border control (Musarò 2011, 2013). Today, dominant media and political discourses tend to identify extreme poverty, war and environmental degradation amalgamated into a stereotypical image of "African misery" as the root causes of this migration. This typically accompanies the portrayal of African migrants as passive victims of poverty and war, as desperate hopeless people (de Haas 2007; Musarò, Parmiggiani 2014). Even in the case of death, as in the October ship-

wrecks, the primary definition that frames public and political narratives of the migratory experience tends to cancel out the autonomous decisions taken by people when embarking on a migration project and their calculation of potential perils. In order to legitimate the governmentality of borders, media, institutions, and military-security organizations have contributed to feeding the process of labeling and dehumanizing migrants. Their agency has been denied: they are human beings reduced to numbers, bodies, "non-persons" (Dal Lago 1999). As an essential element of governmentality humanitarian concerns are used to support restrictive policies, which are often presented as necessary to guarantee adherence to humanitarian obligations according to international refugee law, or protect the migrants' human rights from abuses committed by smugglers and traffickers (Bigo 2002).

In a context where global inequalities widen, potential global mobilities develop, and states are pouring more money into the control over borders than ever before, it is clear that the humanitarian terminology is often used to describe migration in contexts of crisis and to obscure questions of political responsibility. Gaps between rhetoric and reality abound, evident both in instances where restrictive, crisis rhetoric is belied by the permeability of borders on the ground, as well as in instances where much-vaunted liberal values are belied by deaths at the border and denials of protection.

From this point of view, the humanitarian performances and the securitarian ones represent two faces of the same coin. While reaffirming our cosmopolitan solidarity through the rescue of lives and the language of compassion towards those people who are part of our common humanity, the spectacle of increasingly militarized and securitized borders created around Europe filters human mobility, dividing people into sufficiently docile and tractable categories of desirable or undesirable, deserving or undeserving, welcome or unwanted human mobility (Mezzadra, Nielson 2013).



The main effect of this spectacle is the dehumanization of the migrants, reducing them to their bare life (Agamben 1998) and the consequent depoliticization of the “migration problem”, as well as a naturalization of the borders that serves to produce the difference between a state’s putative inside and outside, between the presumably proper subjects of a state’s authority and those mobile human beings branded as different, foreigners, migrants.

Contending civilizations

Although we are the children of yesterday’s e-migrants and in-migrants, what would we learn, in Sayad’s (1999) terms, about ourselves by looking in the mirror held for us by migrants who die trying to reach our shores?

The spectacle of the border, performed by the new iconography of “military-humanitarian intervention” and the explicitness of death in contemporary mediascapes, perpetuates existing hierarchies of place and human life, as well as the European ambivalent dialectic between cosmopolitan solidarity and national fear.

Far from being simple tragedies, the events of Lampedusa and the following discourses of media and political authorities, invite us to reflect on the clash between our cosmopolitan solidarity and our sense of national belonging and identity. A matter of life and death for thousands of humble and innocent people, the clash between cosmopolitanism and nationalism may be perceived as a disturbing situation that needs to be managed. If we usually take for granted that our cosmopolitan solidarity can be expressed properly when we decide to donate money to support victims in the refugee camps or to adopt a child at distance, this moral attitude is challenged by the category of migrants. As soon as these mediatized “poor victims” decide to move and to try to reach our countries, making their way across borders into our cities, they become the concern of the national or international community precisely because of the risks they potentially pose. The fear of migration, commonly associated with crime and terrorism, is conceived of as being in inverse relation to the wellbeing of Western populations. As a consequence, the poor victims we were supposed to help through our compassionate solidarity change their status, becoming dangerous, unwanted and criminalized.

Nevertheless, the shipwreck tragedies on October 2013 constituted a productive-transformative moment in the collective perception of the management of migration. Launching the Italian operation Mare Nostrum as an exceptional measure, the EU (at least, part of it) tried to rebrand itself as a compassionate and benevolent institution while perpetuating its cosmopolitan-national ambivalent dialectic.

Even though lauded by many organizations as a “life-saving” solution to a dramatic problem, Mare Nostrum has come under heavy criticism from other European countries as encouraging clandestine crossings³. Britain’s Foreign Officer spelled out the “unintended pull factor” of Mare Nostrum to the House of Lords in 2014 before announcing that the UK would pull its diplomatic and financial support for any future rescue missions in the Mediterranean, preferring instead operations aimed at “border management” and surveillance. Since November 2014, Mare Nostrum has been abandoned in favor of Triton, a program operated by FRONTEX, whose mandate

is largely one of border control, and not humanitarian intervention. Nevertheless, boats overwhelmingly populated by people fleeing conflict in Libya, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia and Syria continue to arrive on southern European shores in even greater numbers. The inevitable result is that 500 people have already died this year – more than 30 times higher than during the same period of 2014. How many more deaths can we tolerate?⁴

Especially in time of crises, media representations play a key role in reassuring communities and societies, providing ontological security and helping consolidate a sense of coherence, control and belonging (Silverstone 1999). Images and rhetoric on clandestine boat migration contribute to the formation of national identity in relation to an external threat and continue to reinforce the security-oriented response, which does not curtail boat migration to southern Europe but rather prolongs and intensifies already dangerous journeys.

Created as a spectacle on behalf of missing politics, the humanitarian border becomes a powerful dispositive to displace citizens’ attention from the internal problems. Assuming that «the identity a person lays claim to is often based, in reverse, on that of his enemy» (Maalouf 2000, p. 14), the nationalism embedded in the humanitarian narratives of border control coincides with a process of rendering inferior other societies. Even though mainstream politicians continue to claim a proud history of cosmopolitanism and human rights for European identity, publicly describing Western countries as welcoming societies by tradition and conviction and the immigrants as decent human beings, the idea of human rights has been re-politicised and rearticulated as a “failed”, or “naïve” liberal policy responsible for social and national vulnerabilities, insecurities and potential conflicts over sovereignty.

As Bauman (2007, p. 85) suggests: «the latent function of the barriers at the borders, ostensibly erected against “false asylum seekers” and “merely economic” migrants, is to fortify the shaky, erratic and unpredictable existence of the insiders».⁵ We can grasp this ambivalent attitude in the specific regime of representation that frames the management of migration both as a securitarian problem and as a humanitarian emergency. It is clear that while through humanitarian discourse Europe fulfils its role as caretaker and civilizer of the African victims, the securitarian frame is used to criticize cosmopolitan solidarity and multiculturalism as weak legislative adjustments towards the inclusion of difference.

Once the public debate shapes the old ideas of mobility and multiculturalism as part of a conflict between “contending civilizations”, the possibility of any loyalty more cosmopolitan than national deference is thrown into ferment. Following the naturalization of notions of identity and belonging fixed as exclusively national phenomena, we see a restriction of the idea of solidarity and a political environment where cosmopolitan affiliations became suspect to the point that they are now virtually unthinkable outside of the limited codes of humanitarianism (Calhoun 2008).

Despite much celebratory rhetoric, however, the link between humanitarianism and migration management regime reveals the asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the screen. Mirroring the articulation of European migration policies, this “dark side” of humanitari-



anism reflects the tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of “domination” and a relation of “assistance”. Rather than positively promoting solidarity in the name of human dignity, these military-humanitarian narratives certify the complex ontology of inequality that gives specific hierarchical value and meaning to human life. From this perspective, the contradictory link between humanitarianism and securitization looks like a “compassionate repression” that fails to bridge the gap between “us” and “them”. On the contrary, it risks to provide support to the neo-liberal global governance in establishing a moral geography of the world: an asymmetry of power (in terms of both agency and dignity) that portrays the North as a wealthy, ordered and compassionate entity, a natural performer of a civilizing mission in/towards the underdeveloped, dangerous, and voiceless South.

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NOTES

1 - There is a big gap between the reality and the perception of irregular migrants entered Italy via its maritime borders: although who arrive by sea receive the most political and public attention, analyzing the data by the Italian Ministry of the Interior we can see that between 2000 and 2013, an average of 12% of irregular migrants entered Italy via its maritime borders, while between 50% and 75% were overstayers.

2 - The Berlusconi government used the state of emergency as an ad hoc measure to bypass ordinary political procedures and release public money. During the North Africa Emergency, which delegated extraordinary powers to the Civil Protection to manage the situation, over €1.5 billion were allocated to fund makeshift reception centres and hotel accommodation distributed across Italy for 21,000 asylum seekers: <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/cronaca/2012/10/15/news/chi-specula-sui-profughi-1.47304>

3 - According to the UNHCR, 165,000 boat migrants arrived on Italian territory in 2014, more than double the number in 2013

4 - <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11548995/Mediterranean-migrant-crisis-hits-Italy-as-EU-ministers-meet-live.html>

5 - From this point of view, the spectacle of the border it is also aimed at a migrant audience. While the securitarian messages function as a reassurance for the European citizens, the dramatic images of the dead constitute a permanent threat for the “saved” and as warnings about what could happen for those who are waiting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

