Havarie by Philip Scheffner: an Experiment in Erratic Empathy[1]

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In recent decades, many studies have been published on the topic of empathy across a range of disciplines. Being empathic is today almost a social duty, amplified by the possibilities enabled by new media in terms of getting directly in contact with stories and experiences of distant people simultaneously. The general trend is arguably that of focusing on the fusional relation between subject and object, without taking into account the distance and conflict implicit in sensing the other. The latest film of the Berliner visual artist Philip Scheffner, *Havarie* (2016), offers some compelling and fresh cinematic devices to challenge other kinds of empathic relation with the spectator, focusing on an erratic temporality that avoids striking actions and takes position against the idea of one, unique, right image to represent reality.

> La cosa più odiosa e intollerabile, anche nel più innocente dei borghesi, è quella di non saper riconoscere altre esperienze vitali che la propria: e di ricondurre tutte le altre esperienze vitali a una sostanziale analogia con la propria. È una vera offesa che egli compie verso gli altri uomini in condizioni sociali e storiche diverse.
> (P. Pasolini, *Intervento sul discorso libero indiretto* in Empirismo eretico).

The meaning of empathy is often taken for granted and merely overlapped with the capacity for recognizing, feeling, and understanding someone else's emotional state. «Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an

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appropriate emotion» states Simon Baron-Cohen in *Zero Degrees of Empathy*[2]. What does the adjective "appropriate" mean though, and according to which conventional parameters should we define it? Looking to the compelling text "Einfühlung" by Harun Farocki for inspiration, where the German filmmaker questions the simplistic idea that empathy is entirely a fusional process, my aim here is to explore other possible ways to encounter the other, by taking into account the distance and conflict implicit in encountering her/him/it. This means overcoming the presumption that one is able to sense the other through a projection mechanism, supposedly canceling out the complexity and diversity of lived experiences, which reduces people, animals and objects to the fulfillment of a temporary desire here and now. As a case in point of what I attempt to define as "erratic empathy", I have chosen the latest film of the Berliner artist and filmmaker Philipp Scheffner, *Havarie,* which was screened for the first time at the 68th edition of the Internationale Filmfestspiele in 2016. This peculiar documentary offers some compelling and fresh cinematic devices that challenge standard notions of empathic relation with the spectator, focusing on an erratic temporality that avoids striking actions and takes position against the idea of one, unique, right image to represent reality. Analysing Scheffner's cinematic approach, which questions the polarity emotions/distance, is a way to point out the risky yet vital practice of dismantling and redefining the borders between subject and object.

1. The side effects of "fusional" empathy

In the last decades empathy has been the key concept in a lively philosophical debate around which interdisciplinary studies and publications proliferate. The question of "how" one may access the other has always interested humankind, from the ancient Greek culture of Plato and Gorgias, the sophist, through to the introduction of the term «Einfühlung»[3] by German Romanticism, and up to the English psychological enquiries of the early 20th

[2] S. Baron-Cohen, *Zero Degrees of Empathy. A New Theory of Human Cruelty and Kindness,* Penguin, London 2011, p. 12.

[3] H. Farocki, "Einfühlung"*,* in Hebbel am Ufer (ed. by), *100 Jahre Hebbel Theater. Angewandtes Theaterlexikon nach Gustav Freytag*, 2008, pp. 21-22.

century[4]. From that time onwards, the investigations on the topic of empathy have intensified, especially following the widespread circulation in the '50s of the *Empathy Test* to measure the correlation between someone's level of empathy and his leadership skills or ability to do business. Since the discovery in the '90s of mirror neurons, the scientific community has felt compelled to take into account this piece of knowledge whenever dealing with intersubjectivity.

When considering, indeed, the contemporary, transdisciplinary, debate on empathy in the academic world, it becomes clear that a range of different definitions and approaches to the topic are available and that there is no consensus regarding its meaning. Frequently conflated with sympathy or compassion, empathy usually signifies a process of emotional and psychological projection, understood as a shorthand for affective ability to "put oneself in the other´s shoes". However, following the compelling proposition of the postcolonial scholar Carolyn Pedwell[5] – who is interested in conceptualizing empathy as a social and political relation involving the imbrications of cognitive, perceptual, and affective processes – the limits and the risks of framing empathy as an affective «solution to a wide range of social ills and as a central component of building crosscultural and transnational social justice»[6] become immediately apparent. One of those risks stems precisely from the fact that, as Pedwell points out, empathy is widely and unquestioningly viewed as "good".

Mainstream theories of empathy are based on the assumption that we tend to empathize more with those whose needs are salient, who are similar to ourselves, and who are close by in space and time. And furthermore, that empathizing with a person in pain or distress is to feel what the other person is feeling. As Paul Bloom wrote in his article from 2014, "Against Empathy"[7], this attitude can lead to an egoistic drift where the empathizer becomes more

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[4] A. Pinotti, *Empatia: Storia di un'idea da Platone al post-umano*, Bari, Laterza 2011.
[5] C. Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy,* Plagrave, Basingstoke 2014.
[6] Ivi, p. X.
[7] P. Bloom, "Against Empathy", *Boston Review*, 39/5, 2014, pp. 14-19.

concerned with alleviating her own distress than with caring about the other person's feelings or wellbeing.

There is, however, another intertwined reason why empathy is one of the key concepts of our society, one that is linked to the idea that the contemporary world has fallen into a merely present dimension to the detriment of the other dimensions of time. It is widely acknowledged that new media allow us the possibility to be simultaneously connected to what happens in the world. The web provides 24hour access to the news, and social networks enable stories and experiences to be shared with geographically distant people in real time. The advantage of being more informed and "closer" to friends and acquaintances is coupled with a compulsion to meet the constant requests for emotional feedback, to be empathic *on demand*, here and now. Whenever the sensing of the other is filtered through the reduction of the complexity of his/her lived experience to one's own background, a form of understanding based on analogy is invoked. This instinctive form of orienting also implies an idea of unidirectional evolution without conflict, according to which the other is a predictable being, who sooner or later will reach my own conclusions.

What are the effects on our emotional life of the radicalisation of such a mechanism? Is there a link between the presumptions of simultaneous interaction and the dominion of the fusional type of empathy, in which one's own lived experience is projected onto the other, thus cancelling out all differences? Is the tendency to empathically swallow the other the symptom of a consumerist attitude towards people, animals and things, as subjugated to the fulfilment of a temporary desire?

2. Looking, speaking, and listening "nearby"

I want to try to analyse these controversial questions through the work of Philipp Scheffner, whose cinema seeks to build a space of contact with the spectator, yet not through a mechanism of either emotional or intellectual identification. Scheffner is a Berlin based visual artist, who in 2001 founded the collective Pong (German acronym for production for creative documentaries on the border of the arts) together with the scriptwriter and

novelist Merle Kröger. In 2014, the filmmakers and producers Alex Gerbaulet and Caroline Kirberg joined the board. Subverting the established stance on historical (*The Halfmoon Files,* 2006) and more recent events (*Revision,* 2012; *Der Tag des Spatzen,* 2010) emerges as the most crucial – both political and artistic – concern of the Berliner Filmmaker.

My main question here, considering Harun Farocki's notion of "Einfühlung"[8], which I will come back to, is how to rethink the aged conception of a critical spectator and, at the same time, how to go beyond the cliché of a contemplative spectator, who often is called upon to accomplish a mere process of aestheticization. In this respect, *Havarie* represents an emblematic case study for at least two main reasons. In the first place, because it is a film that specifically addresses the issue of finding "a shared space at eye level" through an open and prismatic dialogue between the spectators, the authors and all the characters involved in the story. Second, although *Havarie* speaks about the journey refugees take across the Mediterranean, it avoids the label of a film about refugees. The filmmaker consciously refrained from drawing attention to the issues highlighted everyday by the media, in an effort to change the mediatic rules of the perfect, striking timing, which usually sheds light only and always upon the emergency. *Havarie* is, in fact, an accomplished experience of *erratic empathy* for the spectator who is called upon to practice a 90-minute long waiting in the middle of the sea, without the possibility of finding a comfortable position from which to identify herself with the observer, since till the very end, we don't know who, why and from where he is filming. A "static" yet disorienting adventure, sometimes interesting and exciting, other times maybe just boring and frustrating. But let's go back to the beginning of the story, namely the pivotal backstage of the film. In 2014, browsing on *Youtube*, Scheffner found a 3-minute video that grabbed his attention. The short amateur film, posted with the clear-cut title "refugees", showed at a very long distance and from a strangely high perspective a small boat carrying about ten people. The sea is

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[8] See A. Ehmann, C. Guerra (ed. by), *Harun Farocki. Another Kind of Empathy,* Fundación Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona 2016 and C. Nicastro, "Identità, identificazione e riconoscimento a partire dall'idea di Einfühlung in Harun Farocki", in Luisella Farinotti, Barbara Grespi, Federica Villa (ed. by), *Harun Farocki. Pensare con gli occhi*, Mimesis, Milano forthcoming.

calm and deeply blue, the people on the boat don't look scared or in immediate danger. They sometimes wave towards a mysterious observer. The film viewer's knowledge of the persons in danger clashes, thus, with the serenity of the sky, the sea, and the lack of movement in the frame. After a long research process, Scheffner and his team contacted the author of the footage, Terry Diamond, a man from Belfast, whose wife had given him the gift of a Mediterranean cruise for his 50th birthday. They were out on the deck when the passengers were warned about the little boat adrift, and he filmed it. After the filmmaker contacted the Maritime Rescue Center for further information and interviewed the cruise ship crew, he found out that the people on the boat were Algerian, but also that they were not traceable. The process of research was at that point already so thrilling and rich in suggestions, that they nevertheless decided to go ahead and interview a different person who had made that voyage from Algeria to Spain several times. Of course, one can legitimately wonder why the people on the boat are replaceable and the video's author, for instance, is not. Is there a hidden hierarchy behind this choice, in which the experience of Algerians traveling to Spain become interchangeable and substitutable, whereas that of the man behind the camera is implicitly codes as unique? I should have asked Scheffner when I met him for an interview in his studio in Berlin[9] a few months after the 68th Berlinale. I must admit I was probably a victim of the same prejudice myself.

Scheffner's troupe spent 30 days filming and sound recording in Belfast, in Spain, in France, in Algeria, on the cruise ship, twice on a container ship, collecting enough beautiful footage to set up a well-founded documentary. But this is not the film they made in the end, or better, this is not what we are able to see in the final work. During the film editing Scheffner made a radical decision, which the production had to explain in a press release for the Berlinale 2016, when the work was displayed for the first time. The only part of that 30-day footage Scheffner kept in the final version was the soundtrack

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[9] C. Nicastro, "Storia di un'ordinaria avventura" [online], in *Film idee #17, Lo stato delle cose,* published on May 5th 2016. Available at the following address: http://www.filmidee.it/2016/05/havarie-storia-di-unordinaria-avventura/.

of the characters' conversations, played over Terry Diamond's 3-minute *Youtube* clip. Scheffner stretched out the 3-min original footage to 90 minutes.

> At a visual level, the cinematic space is compressed into one single, unedited sequence that extends across the entire length of the film. It is the footage by Terry Diamond, the short YouTube clip that formed the origin of the Havarie project, that seems to us today like the essence of the situation in the Mediterranean in concentrated form. In individual images, the inflatable dinghy with thirteen people on board has become an icon for the pictures that appear daily on the news. We are forced to look, to grapple with the perspective (from above), with the impossibility of proper recognition, with the silent waving of those on board. The reflections in the water and the slowing down of the material produce "ghost images": the dinghy seems to multiply, to elude our grasp, and even disappears from our field of vision in the end. And ultimately, the film doesn't spare us from the tracking shot that leads us to our own position: the huge ship of glass and steel and the tourists staring off into the distance.[10]

Scheffner's decision, both an aesthetic and a political one, has to do with "time", specifically with the time of a "multiple encounter". 90 minutes is most obviously the conventional length of a feature film, but there is another, more important, conceptual reason behind this particular length. 90 minutes is the actual amount of time that the small boat and the cruise liner spent next to each other, namely the span of time during which the passengers of the two vessels looked at each other. Maintaining the original duration of the scene is then a way to let the spectator step into this fragile encounter zone in the middle of the sea, while the different protagonists of the story speak about their own experience of that day – or days like that one – intertwining those memories with their own biography. This audio-overlapping produces a constellation of temporal digressions, which the spectator accesses whilst he is looking at the hypnotic blue image. At the same time, we constantly hear the recording of the broadcast of the Maritime Rescue Center in the background, which serves as a sort of metronome set to the pace of the frame changes.

My contention is that *Havarie* goes beyond the simplistic idea that slowing down the rhythm of a film gives the spectator more "critical space" to digest the visual content and to reflect upon the stories. Scheffner is aware of the

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[10] P. Scheffner, "Statement of the film project *Havarie*" [online], published on September 30th 2015. Available at the following address: http://havarie.pongberlin.de/sites/default/files/downloads/HAVARIE_Press_Kit_en_0.pdf.

fact that "multivocality" as such, as astutely pointed out Trinh T. Minh-ha[11], doesn't avoid the trap of reproducing hierarchical knowledge, since the solely juxtaposition of different voices could take place within the same identified, political boundaries. Trinh T. Minh-ha compares this practice to the concept of "multiculturalism", where the "multi" can easily be conflated with "no-"(voice), namely with the lack of a space to produce a shared meaning in. One should instead be able, continues the Vietnamese artist and filmmaker, to "speak nearby" subjects and objects rather than speak about them. This is a cinematic method that can't be isolated from «an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world»[12].

Farocki's main struggle in the work of filmmaking was precisely how to seize a distance from reality, maintaining his responsibility as non-neutral observer, and to involve the audience in this ongoing process. Already at an early stage of his carrier, in his second film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), Farocki was working in this direction when he decided not to show the images of the US napalm attack in Vietnam. We see a TV announcer – Farocki himself – who explains how extreme images function and why they are to be rejected in this case. Then he puts a cigarette out on his arm and, while keeping a calm voice and a neutral gaze, he states that the Napalm burns at 3000 degrees Celsius, while the cigarette merely at 400. From the very beginning of his career Farocki always challenged the risk of offending or shocking the viewer. According to him, an affective reaction would foreclose the possibility of acceding to the different levels of the film's effect, namely the images themselves, the memory of these images, the facts to which the images refer and the contexts in which these facts are based. Avoiding shocking images provides an experimental solution to this problem, and calls upon the process behind the event to guide the spectator towards a broader comprehension of the facts. In the short yet valuable text "Einfühlung" – written in 2008 for a special publication on the occasion of the Berliner Hebbel Theatre centenary – Farocki describes his idea of empathy. Instead of merely

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[11] N.N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha", in *Visual Anthropology Review,* vol. 8, n. 1, Spring 1992, p. 85. Available at the following address : https://docfilmhist.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/chen.pdf.
[12] Ivi, p. 87.

rejecting the term, the German filmmaker stresses the need to redefine a word which, in his view, has been "handed over to the enemy". Farocki's approach is particularly appealing for at least two intertwined reasons; first, because it challenges the simplistic opposition between the idea that empathy is entirely a fusional process and, on the contrary, that the alternative could only be an aseptic, neutral distance towards the other subject/object. Second, because Farocki takes into account the conflict implicit in sensing the other, and argues for the possibility "to empathize in such a way that it produces the effect of alienation". Empathy constitutes, thus, a double-edged sword to make visible how society at the same time creates and marginalises its "other" whose emotions and personality are negated or manipulated. As a visual artist and as film theorist, Farocki is chiefly concerned with avoiding a narrative pattern in which either the victim becomes the "other" or the "other" becomes the victim.

When Scheffner claims that *Havarie* doesn't seek to trigger a general feeling of "emergency", he aims to add a different political level to storytelling, another aspect of the refugees' travel across the Mediterranean. Of course, it is still an emergency, but the scene is also normal in a peculiar way. It doesn't have the ingredients that usually make a story appealing to the media: small children, heroic rescues and death. This image of a sort of daily routine in the Mediterranean Sea, instead, dismantles the temporal structure of the process of empathic identification as such. The end of the film mismatches the spectator's expectations, by not showing the rescue. This absence suggests a temporal enigma; the boat was always there, maybe it is still there. It also allows the spectator to challenge her/his clichés and prejudices about, for instance, what mark a refugees' boat as such, if there is an adventurous aspect to the journey; how to de-colonize our idea of the victim instead of fulfilling the need to help as a form of reiterated subordination; how, instead, to establish an effective contact with the one we simply call the "other"; how storytelling affects these beliefs. Suddenly the boat becomes at the same time familiar but unknowable. This "ungraspable" image of the boat is not an opaque and romantic allusion to the impossibility of doing something to

change the political situation; on the contrary, it underlines how images can't wholly replace and fulfil action and solidarity.