Narratives of change, images for change: Contemporary social documentaries in Italy

ABSTRACT
This article focuses on contemporary documentaries about social change in Italy. In particular, I examine the Rome-based ZaLab initiative, an association of media professionals and activists whose video work aims at narrating the stories of marginal social actors. This analysis reflects on the role of ZaLab in current visions of migration in/to Italy, focusing specifically on three documentaries produced by ZaLab: Come un uomo sulla terra/Like a Man on Earth (Segre and Yimer, 2008), Il sangue verde/Green Blood (Segre, 2010) and Mare chiuso/Closed Sea (Liberti and Segre, 2012). Based on a careful film analysis and a series of conversations with the directors, Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, I discuss the composition and film-making strategies in these documentaries and assess the significance of such choices in the context of Italian documentary production. The analysis of the documentaries is followed by an investigation of the horizontal practices of communication (both in the production and distribution stages) embraced by ZaLab and their innovative approach to the changes in Italian contemporary communities. Clearly, the notion of citizenship presented in these videos defies the flattening, pejorative images found in mainstream programming and acknowledges the central role played by those social actors who are often silenced or marginalized in the audience-seeking productions of television channels.

KEYWORDS
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If there is a consensus emerging from the newest generation of documentary scholars, it may just be that representations of the real have more rather than less power to shape our world than heretofore, that the production and control of the flow of historically based images is increasingly the arena of social power that matters most.

(Renov 1999: 324)

Shortly after the release of ZaLab’s most recent documentary *Mare chiuso/Closed Sea* (Liberti and Segre, 2012) in 2012, Mogos Berhane, one of the assistant producers in Tunisia, contacted the directors, Liberti and Segre, to share his view on the impact of *Closed Sea*:

I am deeply convinced that this documentary will contribute to changing people’s attitude towards refugees on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean. And the world will not repeat the same mistakes against refugees. The moral value to warrant decent living conditions to all human beings should never be sacrificed in the face of greedy political and economic interests.

(Liberti 2013: 21–22)

In the past few years, Italian documentary film has engaged in a renewed interest in socio-political issues and has, as noted by Berhane, facilitated public debates on timely and controversial themes, such as immigration, sexual identity, religion and political activism.²

Taking advantage of more flexible production and distribution methods, Italian documentary film-makers, especially among younger generations, have approached this genre as a tool that could open up the spectrum of contemporary representations of identity and citizenship in an ever-changing Italy. In the new millennium, the Italian documentary scene demonstrates that the production of images of social change can effectively contribute to broaden an often-stifling public sphere and include in the debate groups that have notoriously been marginalized by mainstream media. As such, contemporary documentaries represent a successful form of counter-discourse in Italian media and society that targets trite notions of political engagement (understood as *impegno*) by centring on disenfranchised subjects in participatory and productive ways.

The goal of this article is to examine how ZaLab’s productions succeed in presenting the experiences of migrants in undramatized and non-spectacularized ways and how the directors strive for an aesthetics that transforms the subjects of the documentaries into valuable members of the production team. This particular shift in the approach to documentary film-making, along with the innovative distribution practices adopted by the ZaLab collective, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Italian society and civic participation. Clearly, the notion of citizenship presented in these videos defies the flattening, pejorative images found in mainstream programming and acknowledges the central role played by those social actors who are often silenced or marginalized in the audience-seeking productions of television channels. ZaLab provides an innovative and much-needed approach to a different idea of citizenship, one that sees the active engagement of communities and individuals as the pre-eminent benchmark for a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the sociocultural changes taking place in Italian society in the twenty-first century.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are mine.
2. For more details on the history of Italian documentary film, see M. Bertozzi (2008).
As Anita Angelone and Clarissa Clò state in their introduction to a special issue of *Studies in Documentary Film*, ‘… documentary film has resurfaced as one of the most innovative and creative artistic sites in Italy, challenging established forms and subject matters and proposing new and unprecedented visions of both Italy and Italians, often extending beyond geographic borders’ (2011: 84). This approach has proven to be particularly necessary in a context as heavily politicized and economically monopolized as Italy. The affiliation of most news sources with specific political parties and the duopolistic stranglehold of Italian television between RAI and Mediaset have, for many years, created an ideological environment where dissent and diversity are rarely welcomed. As a result, activist media producers have been pressured to design new means of production and distribution of their politically engaged materials. This was the case, for instance, of the creators behind the street-television project Insu^Tv, whose media strategies relied on crowdfunding and DIY broadcasting to overturn the dominant use of media technologies in the Italian neo-liberal system and to draw public attention on controversial issues like the eco-mafia in Naples or the migrants’ protests against racism in the Calabrian town of Rosarno (Ardizzoni 2013a; Ardizzoni, 2013b).

The role of these instances of counter-culture and alternative discourse seem particularly crucial in light of the representation of migrants and new Italians in today’s media, which privilege a Manichean logic of us versus them, based on obsolete and intransigent orientalist views (Ardizzoni 2013a). Hence, migrants are often depicted as passive objects of Italians’ pity or condescension in daily newscasts and articles, which persist in framing migration flows as emergencies and threats to the public well-being. Migrants, refugees and second generations are seldom addressed in egalitarian terms, and their position in mainstream media is often inflected by the widely accepted view of their irreconcilable difference from the Italian culture. As Schmidt di Friedberg noted apropos Muslims in Italy:

> After September 11, graffiti against Islam and Muslims in Italian cities have replaced those on politics or soccer. In bookshops the translation of Huntington’s work on the clash of civilisations is sold out, while studies on the Arab world are selling well. Classics on Islam are dug out and transferred from the highest bookshelves to the window displays, while studies quickly thrown together are popping out everywhere. In bars and on TV exotic words like ‘jihad’ and ‘mullah’ have become common language. (2009)

The mediated discourse on Otherness has certainly contributed to a flattened perception of migrants that is mistakenly removed from the complex nature of the migratory flows to the country. The lack of depth in most mainstream media analyses creates an alarming gap between the discourse about migration and the reality experienced by migrants and refugees in the different Italian cities as well as during their arduous journey to the country. Such lacuna (and the tangible consequences of political decisions on migrants’ lives) are the focus of ZaLab’s documentaries examined in this article.

In the section that follows, I will introduce ZaLab in the context of a contemporary resurgence of documentaries as a timely medium to deconstruct the complex realities of Italy, fraught with political tensions, economic worries and quandaries of identity. This section will be followed by a close analysis of three films: *Come un uomo sulla terra*/*Like a Man on Earth* (Segre and...
These conversations took place in Boulder, CO, 12–16 February 2013.

While Liberti is not one of the founders of ZaLab, he has nonetheless been actively involved with ZaLab since 2005, when he collaborated with Segre on the short documentary *A sud di Lampedusa/South of Lampedusa.*

Based on a careful film analysis and a series of conversations with the directors, Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti, I will discuss the composition and film-making strategies in these documentaries and assess the significance of such choices in the context of Italian documentary production. In the last section of the article, I will investigate the horizontal practices of communication (both in the production and distribution stages) embraced by ZaLab and their innovative approach to change in Italian contemporary communities.

**CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY FILM AND SOCIAL IMPEGNO**

In a recent article on the status of Italian documentary, film-maker Stefano Missio declared:

> [...] If a few years ago shorts were popular, today it is the turn of documentaries. This is, in fact, the most relevant news of the last few years: the rehabilitation of the term documentary, no longer seen as something negative or limiting, but a re-appropriation of its primary meaning as Cinema, the other cinema, capable of imposing itself with its experimentation of innovative languages and techniques. (2010: 98, original emphasis)

Following and renewing a long tradition of *cinema d’impegno* (politically and civically engaged cinema), which saw its early beginnings in neo-realism and reached its apogee in the 1960s and 1970s with directors such as Francesco Rosi, Gillo Pontecorvo and the Taviani brothers, to name a few, today’s documentaries have succeeded in turning the lens towards pressing social issues and have done so with creativity and aesthetic innovations.

While an overview of contemporary documentary film-making in Italy goes beyond the scope of this article, it is nonetheless important here to mention a few productions whose focus is the nature of change (social as well as political) and its bearing on citizens’ lives. The use of thematic categories to define complex and heterogeneous productions is certainly reductive; yet, in the context of the present analysis, it serves the purpose of delineating two general threads in today’s documentary film-making. Hence, in the next paragraphs, I will briefly discuss films that focus on changing notions of identity and belonging: *Improvisamente l’inverno scorso/Suddenly, Last Winter* (Hofer and Ragazzi, 2008); *L’orchestra di Piazza Vittorio/The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio* (Ferrente, 2006); and films whose focal point are the socio-political struggles that affect Italian society in the new millennium: *Thyssenkrupp Blues* (Balla and Repetto, 2008); *Una montagna di balle/Wasting Naples* (Angrisano, 2009).

As mentioned above, the notion of cultural diversity has rarely been included in mass-mediated discussions on Italian society and, in the few instances in which it was addressed, it was relegated to the quick format of daily newscasts that relied on anecdotal evidence, well suited for short, three-minute broadcast stories. With this backdrop, the 2008 release of *Suddenly, Last Winter,* directed by Luca Ragazzi and Gustav Hofer, represented an important contribution to the debate of gay rights in Italy and offered a composite analysis of the socio-political tensions that foment people’s discriminating attitudes. This film documents the strenuous and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to pass a law on domestic partners’ rights, which was introduced in 2007 by Prodi’s left-wing government. Foregrounding their long-term relationship,
Ragazzi and Hofer follow the debate about the DiCo (Diritti e doveri dei conviventi – Rights and responsibilities of domestic partners) proposal in the Italian Parliament, in the media and in the streets, thereby exposing the homophobic and narrow-minded public opinion that grants the title of legitimate citizens only to the heteronormative self celebrated by conservative politicians and a muted public sphere.

Ragazzi and Hofer reclaim their visibility and their re-presentation as active social actors through a juxtaposition of interviews, voice-overs, scenes of domestic life, intimacy and reflections on the process of film-making. As C. Clò argues in her analysis of the film, ‘Improvisamente l’inverno scorso denounces the shortcomings of the current Italian political class through a clever use of montage, voice-over and sound effects that make it also a stylistic experiment beyond its subject-matter, in opposition to the flatness and narcotisation of television production’ (2011: 256). In this sense, this documentary is emblematic of a recent trend that sees the use of a creative cinematic style and meta-cinematic references as effective strategies to expand the borders of current notions of citizenship in Italy in the hope that they will some day become more nuanced and inclusive.

The centrality of the artists and the film-maker in the narrative characterizes another documentary released in the new millennium, *The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio* (2006). The piazza is at the heart of the Esquilino neighbourhood in Rome, an area of the city that features a very high concentration of citizens of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions, and the documentary recounts the process that resulted in the creation of the first multicultural band in the country. The catalyst for the formation of the orchestra is the impending privatization of the Apollo 11 theatre in the heart of the Esquilino, the only public building in the area, which would soon be turned into a lucrative bingo hall. Director Agostino Ferrente, one of the founders of the Apollo 11, along with other local activists sets out on a musical urban journey to prevent the neo-liberal logic of the Rome municipality at the time from closing down one of the few public sites, which could have instead become effective loci of civic engagement and inclusion.

The chronologically linear narrative of *The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio*, punctuated by a simple voice-over, takes the viewer through the streets of Rome on the protagonist’s vespa (a clear reference to Moretti’s 1993 film *Caro Diario/ Dear Diary*), thus revealing the multifaceted nature of the new Roman population and the cultural richness that will eventually be at the heart of the newly formed band. The exceptionality of this achievement has to be understood in the context of a public sphere dominated by a rhetoric of fear towards foreigners from the South and the East of the world. As P. Favero observed in his review of the documentary, much discourse about immigration in these years was framed by the Bossi-Fini law of 2001, which discriminated heavily against migrants and refugees and whose goal was to drastically seal the Italian borders (2009).

A few sections of the film focus on the public protests to the legislation through the streets of Rome; these scenes and the overall scope of the documentary give visibility to contemporary instances of activist participation in the country and attest to the possibilities of a renewed sense of citizenship through music. Some critics have pointed to the inability of *The Orchestra of Piazza Vittorio* to delve deeper into the political vicissitudes of the migrant artists featured in the documentary, while putting their lives ‘to the service of our entertainment’ (Favero 2009: 349).
Ferrente’s reliance on fairly traditional film-making strategies and a Euro-centric narrative viewpoint clearly limits the political potential of the film; yet, the film’s goal – to apprise the viewer of the social changes transforming the Italian cultural scene – is well achieved and the documentary has contributed to a more progressive view of Italian music and society.

In the 2000s the social crises in Italian society have been at the centre of a mediated public sphere and documentary film has proven to be a successful tool of reflection, engagement and debate on controversial themes, such as the so-called white deaths\(^7\) and the garbage emergency in the South. Pietro Balla and Monica Repetto’s *ThyssenKrupp Blues* (2008) is one in a series of documentaries and films that focused on the accident that took place in December 2007 inside the ThyssenKrupp factory in Turin, which caused the death of seven workers.

As one of the most horrific and largest workplace accidents in the country, this event angered the public and attracted the attention of journalists, activists and film-makers, who decided to use different kinds of media to uncover what actually happened inside the German steel factory. Balla and Repetto’s documentary follows the vicissitudes of one individual, Carlo Marrapodi, a worker in the factory who was miraculously spared from the deadly fire that caused the death of his close colleagues. Stylistically, the film can be divided into two separate, yet interrelated sections, which comment on the place of Marrapodi in Italian society – a Calabrian who migrated to Turin in 2000 to live the Italian dream and is now forced to return to the South after a series of layoffs at the factory – and in the workers’ community – marked by foreign capitalism and class strife. In *ThyssenKrupp Blues*, the deadly accident serves as a chronological and ideological divider that organizes the sequences into a before/after narrative. Hence, while the first part presents a chronology of Marrapodi’s life in the factory, his protests against ThyssenKrupp’s decision to move the workers to Terni, and his final decision to temporarily move back to Calabria, in the second half of the documentary the viewer is confronted with a rather fragmented and unsettling structure that is deeply reflective of Marrapodi’s position and state of mind after the tragic deaths of his co-workers. As P. Chirumbolo argues in his analysis of the documentary, the linear narration of the first half is totally disrupted. The incoherent editing of the documentary, its loss of narrative unity and the fragmentation of time and space appropriately represent Carlo’s own loss of identity. His journey back to Calabria, a region depicted as a timeless peaceful land far from the commotion of the big industrial city, is a desperate attempt to put the pieces of his life back together, grieve and move on. Marrapodi’s disconnected relationship with reality is aptly represented during his trip back home. The narrative is transposed from one time and space (Marrapodi in the train as he travels to Pazzano) to another (he is already in his hometown) without any explanation. The two diegetic levels are constantly juxtaposed and produce in the audience a sense of disorientation that mirrors Marrapodi’s own loss of self.

(2011: 163)

Because of its tone of *denuncia* and its evocative film-making techniques, *ThyssenKrupp Blues* provides a poignant example of how contemporary Italian documentary has succeeded in giving visibility to what had, for many years, remained invisible (in this case, the plight of the working class). As F. Laviosa
argued in her analysis of the film, *ThyssenKrupp Blues* presents ‘a tragedy of epic tones, staged with the theatricality and the poetry of the real’ (2013: 57).

In a similar light, the 2009 documentary *Wasting Naples* aimed to unveil the many truths behind the dramatic trash crisis that has afflicted Naples and its surroundings since the early 2000s. Framed like a traditional story, with opposing sides and the fictional trope of a radio host who tells the story of Naples’ trash emergency (played by Italian actor Ascanio Celestini), this film is based on more than 500 hours of footage collected over the span of six years (2003–2009) to give voice to the communities and individuals affected by the political and financial garbage emergency around Naples. While this emergency has received, through the years, frequent and superficial coverage in local and national newscasts, *Wasting Naples* is the first in-depth attempt to uncover and untangle the intricate ties between government, eco-mafia, mighty corporations and the effect of these relations on citizens’ health, jobs and the environment. As one of the creators, who wishes to remain anonymous and uses the name of Nicol* Angrisano as a group pseudonym, explained:

> We felt there was a need to provide an informative, educational, communicative tool for those communities involved in the fight against the construction of landfills […]. Our objective was to create a docu-film targeting both the people involved in this issue and people in other parts of Italy who did not know much about the details of this issue […]. We worked on this as a social assignment.

(personal interview, 17 July 2011)

This connective approach to film-making was reinforced in the final phases of post-production, during which the creators returned to the communities and the individuals interviewed to ensure a correct representation of their views in the final editing of the film. Like other productions by Insu^tv, the activist collective at the heart of this production, *Wasting Naples* was funded partially through the site ‘Produzioni dal basso’ (literally bottom-up productions; www.produzionidalbasso.com), an independent, horizontal and free platform where viewers can fund different kinds of video productions (from feature films to shorts, animations and reportages) by purchasing quotas of the project of their choice. The use of crowdfunding to finance films that are considered too alternative or too risky for mainstream media was essential in the production of this popular documentary and it has proven to be a viable approach for engaged film-makers and socially responsible artists.

As these four examples have highlighted, contemporary documentary film in Italy has proactively engaged in a re-evaluation of the forces of change that are shaping Italian society and, in so doing, these films have succeeded in redefining the contours and the uses of *cinema d’impegno*. The next section will address the work of ZaLab, a group of media professionals who work on participatory video workshops and documentaries in/about intercultural contexts and situations of geo-social marginalization.

**NEW VISIONS OF CHANGE AT ZALAB**

In the early 2000s six film-makers, Alberto Bougleux, Matteo Calore, Stefano Collizzolli, Maddalena Grechi, Andrea Segre and Sara Zavarise, collaborated on the creation of an association that would use video workshops and
documentary cinema as a tool to give voice to marginalized groups in contemporary Italian society. The desire behind the creation of ZaLab was in fact twofold: to enable these communities to use the tool of video to speak from a non-subaltern position and to acquaint the general public with groups that are often silenced in mainstream discourse. This approach is clearly articulated in their mission statement on their website: ‘ZaLab documentaries emerge either from these workshops or from one of the participants’ individual experience. These documentaries tell lives largely ignored by mainstream media, marked by today’s conflicts; our desire is to make these stories accessible for everybody’ (www.zalab.org).

The mode of participatory video production has been employed by ZaLab to focus on the lives of a multitude of individuals, who are able to offer an original view of reality, one that is free from the aesthetic and commercial pressures of traditional broadcasting. Among these productions, here it is critical to mention the seven-year long collaboration (Lapa TV, 2004–2011) with some of the most destitute elementary and middle schools in the Aeolian Islands, which resulted in shorts and animation features about life on the islands. Equally important in the context of this analysis is the 2010 project ‘Percorsi: una nuova generazione’/’Paths: A new generation’, a workshop that took place in the north-eastern city of Padua among high-school students of Italian and other ethnic origins. Contesting the commonly used label of second generation, these youth came together to discuss their own identities in Italian society and agreed on the need to think of a new generation of young people, who are not necessarily defined by the racial and ethnic origins of their parents, but rather by the commonality of experiences, hopes and fears they share. This workshop culminated in a series of shorts and a 30-minute long film on the theme of belonging and identity, Il posto di cui sento far parte/The Place I Feel I Belong to (2010). In this production, the short format of the videos and the collaborative mode of script writing allowed young citizens to define their civic roles and their cultural identities in creative ways that respected their lived experiences.

As mentioned above, one of the most fundamental changes in contemporary Italy is brought by complex and multifarious immigration patterns, which media headlines often link to the themes of criminality and illegality. The appalling images of small, overcrowded boats crossing the Mediterranean in summer months or the patronizing newspapers titles, which identify migrants only by their nationality, have become commonplace in Italian media, and the public has been somewhat desensitized towards the plight and the reality of migration to the country. In these representations, migrants are rarely allowed to speak, and their viewpoint is often filtered by Italian journalists or interlocutors. This approach characterized the coverage of the 2010 Rosarno protests by African migrants.

After years of abuse and discrimination and after the latest violent attack against four migrants, the African agricultural workers in this small Calabrian town reacted with a strong street protest that culminated in acts of vandalism and destruction. Instead of investigating the responsibilities of the ‘ndrangheta in the xenophobic attitudes towards local immigrants, mainstream media preferred to label this riot as the outcome of excessively tolerant and lax laws that favoured clandestine migration. In reality, the interactions between Africans and locals were much more complex, and the lives of immigrants in Rosarno (and in other parts of the country as well) were more arduous than what traditional media chose to highlight.
With the intent to rectify the distorted and partial depiction of most news sources, in 2010 Andrea Segre wrote and directed the documentary *Green Blood* on the Rosarno incidents. Taking its title from a quotation by one migrant interviewee, who asserts that human beings ‘all have red blood, nobody’s blood is green’ (Segre 2010), this 55-minute documentary juxtaposes the personal experiences of seven African migrants in Rosarno before and after the 7 January protest with footage of television news coverage of the events. These two very different versions of the incidents are punctuated with black and white segments of an interview with the town’s former mayor, Giuseppe Lavorato, who uses archival materials to recount the history of agricultural work in Rosarno and the influence of ‘ndrangheta on low labour wages and the lack of prosperity of small land owners.

*Green Blood* opens with images of the destitute living conditions of the film’s subjects with hand-held camera shots of the dirty floors and dump blankets they use as beds and across which legal documents and crumpled clothes are strewn. The first part of the documentary focuses on close-up and extreme close-up shots of the migrants from Ghana, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Congo and Senegal who retell their experiences of migration to Italy, their sojourn in detention camps and the exploitative work circumstances they found in Rosarno. With vivid imagery, agonizing details and the use of native languages (French, English and Wolof), the stories that emerge from these interviews clash with the discourse of criminality used to frame reports about Africans in the region. The footage from RAI newscasts alerts viewers to the widespread problem of immigration and to the danger foreigners inevitably bring. In the second half, Segre films migrants as they offer personal recollections of the January riots (and the tense situation leading up to this) and they describe their individual trajectories through other Italian cities after having been ousted from Rosarno. This section follows the seven interviewees in their new, yet unchanged, lives, as they perform the daily tasks of working, cooking, praying and hope for future personal progress. The latter is highlighted in the concluding scenes of the documentary, which alternate between a hopeful rap song performed by an interviewee and television images of the arrest of small-time ‘ndrangheta bosses from Rosarno.

Stylistically, *Green Blood* can be located within what Bill Nichols termed the ‘performative’ mode of documentary making (2001). Characteristic of performative documentaries is the adoption of a highly subjective lens of analysis, which emphasizes personal experience and favours a specific worldview. The performative mode is often used by marginalized groups to ‘speak about themselves’ in a filmic language that intimately reflects their social positioning. While Segre does not necessarily speak from a position of marginality in Italian society, his choice to edit the interviews without a voice-over narration results in a more empathic rapprochement on the part of the viewer. At the same time, though, we are always reminded of the constructedness of the documentary through a dramatic soundtrack (alternating Pergolesi’s classical music with contemporary rap by Somali-Canadian singer K’naan) and the switch from colour to black and white in the sequences on the history of Rosarno.

A slightly different aesthetics is adopted in the first of ZaLab’s two documentaries, *Like a Man on Earth*, on the plight of sub-Saharan African refugees who were pushed back by Italian authorities and ended up in Libyan prisons. As a result of the 2008 agreements between Gaddafi and Berlusconi, intended to halt illegal immigration from the southern shores of the Mediterranean,
thousands of African migrants, whose precarious boats were intercepted by
the Italian coast guard, were sent back to Libyan authorities and imprisoned
for long periods in inhumane conditions. In Like a Man on Earth this experience
is narrated by Segre’s co-director Dagmawi Yimer, a law student from Addis
Ababa (Ethiopia), who fled his country in 2005. This film presents Dagmawi’s
viewpoint and that of his eight interviewees, who shared with Dagmawi simi-
lar experiences of detention and migration.

Like a Man on Earth opens with Dagmawi’s voice-over about his back-
ground and the Italian colonial relationships with Libya and Ethiopia. After a
few minutes of voice-over, the camera turns to Dagmawi as the interviewee,
as he remembers the day he left his Ethiopian family behind. In the scenes
that follow Dagmawi takes on yet a different role – that of the film-maker
and the interviewer – and he is filmed as he moves with his camera around
the Italian language school in Rome, where he met some of his interviewees,
and in the kitchens of his subjects. Hence, unlike Green Blood where the film-
maker remained invisible, this documentary engages with a participatory
mode (using Nichols’ model) that derives its uniqueness from the encounter
between the film-maker and his subject/s. Nichols define participatory docu-
mentary as follows:

When we see participatory documentaries we expect to witness the
historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with,
rather than unobtrusively observes, poetically reconfigures, or argumen-
tatively assembles that world. The film-maker steps out from behind
the cloak of voice-over commentary, steps away from poetic meditation,
steps down from a fly-on-the-wall perch, and becomes a social actor
(almost) like any other. (Almost like any other because the film-maker
retains the camera, and with it, a certain degree of potential power and
control over events).

(2001: 116)

This stylistic approach, while emphasizing the constructed nature of the
images on-screen, does also succeed in narrowing the cultural gap between
the subject and Italian audiences. The intimate close-up shots of the refugees
as they retell their stories of suffering and captivity are alternated with medium
shots that include Dagmawi and his interlocutors around a kitchen table,
often pointing to a spread-out map of Libya to reminisce about their migra-
tory routes. Faced with the impossibility to visit the actual locations of the
events, the film-makers included footage of the Sahara desert that had been
previously filmed for ZaLab’s 2006 short documentary A sud di Lampedusa/
South of Lampedusa (Segre, 2006). Furthermore, Dagmawi reconstructs the
cruelty of cargo transportation of migrants by filming inside an empty cargo
truck while narrating his own experience inside a similar vehicle. These strat-
egies are used effectively by Segre and Dagmawi to emphasize a participa-
tory mode which seems necessary to convey the complexity of this process of
migration, while also avoiding the trap of turning the refugees’ stories into a
spectacle for western audiences.

In 2012 ZaLab addressed once more the repeated push-back operations of
migrants with a second documentary on the issue, Closed Sea, and a national
advocacy campaign on migrants’ rights. Filmed mostly in the refugee camp
in Shousha (Tunisia), Closed Sea centres on a group of migrants who were
able to flee Libya during the recent civil war and found temporary asylum
in the UNHCR camps on the border with Libya. This award-winning documentary opens with images of an Eritrean refugee who survived the perilous journey across the Mediterranean and is now an asylum seeker in the province of Crotone, Southern Italy. The long shots of the immigrant as he swims in calm Italian waters are accompanied by the voice-over from the European Court of Human Rights as the trial against the Italian government begins. Actual footage from the court in Strasbourg follows, as the legal ramifications of the push-back policies become the main frame for the events presented in this documentary. Indeed, two dozens migrants from Eritrea and Somalia succeeded in bringing the Italian government to court with the accusation of human rights abuses, thus establishing a historical precedent in the European context. As the final sequences of *Closed Sea* document, in 2012 the ECHR ruled that the Italian government should pay 15,000 Euros to each plaintiff in the push-back case. In this sense, the legal framework functions as the container for individual stories narrated from the refugee tents in Tunisia and from two small towns in the South of Italy.

Using the same filmic composition found in the previous documentaries – use of close-ups and television news footage – Liberti and Segre focus on a handful of protagonists, whose narratives expose the complexity of Mediterranean migration, especially after the outbreak of the Libyan civil war. Unlike previous productions, though, *Closed Sea* is enriched by the insertion of cell phone footage shot by the migrants themselves as they attempted the clandestine crossing to Italy. The rough and raw nature of these images, along with the original commentary by the refugees, provides a stark contrast to the polished and dramatized coverage by television news and the out-of-touch analysis of government officials. While long shots of the overflowing clandestine boats approaching Italian coasts are common television images, seldom has the audience been able to view the actual circumstances of navigation inside these boats. It is precisely this desire to bare the details often obscured by a biased coverage that motivated some migrants to send their cell phone videos to Liberti and Segre as a further evidence of the abuses (personal communication, see note 5).

While different from the participatory mode of *Like a Man on Earth*, one can argue that the subjects of *Closed Sea* were directly involved in the production of the film both through their cell phone videos and by choosing some filming strategies. In the case of the latter, Semere, one of the protagonists, stands out for his willingness to be on camera and to share with the camera even the most intimate recollections. Indeed, as Liberti and Segre explained, the extreme close-up sequences that see Semere talk on the phone with his wife and his young daughter, whom he has never seen, were requested by the interviewee who insisted on having even the most private moments on record (personal communication). As Áine O’Healy argued in her presentation at the 2013 symposium on contemporary Italian cinema, held at Indiana University, while this choice could be easily criticized as cinematic spectacle, it is however important to contextualize its analysis within the marginal positions of migrants and their wish to speak and be heard.

As mentioned earlier, the participatory mode of *Closed Sea* progressed into an advocacy campaign called ‘Mai più respinti’/’No more pushed back’. On 3 April 2012, the agreement between Italy and Libya on migration patterns was ratified once again by the then Minister of Internal Affairs, Anna Maria Cancellieri. This event, along with the national and international popularity of *Closed Sea*, moved ZaLab to organize a concerted campaign whose goal was the government’s promise to reject all push-back policies in the future. Hence,
in collaboration with other human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International Italy), ZaLab chose 20 June, World Refugee Day, to coordinate a series of concurrent screenings of the documentary throughout the country. The call to host a screening was sent out via their website at the end of May and within few weeks hundreds of small and large organizations, schools, bookstores and centri sociali had agreed to show the film. The success of the ‘Mai più respinti’ campaign culminated in a statement by Minister Cancellieri on 21 June, promising that Italy will abide by the European Court sentence and that the government will no longer pursue the push-back policies at sea.

This example clearly illustrates the possible outcomes of a horizontal mode of communication, which relies on high-quality narrative practices to inform and engage civic society with the aim to move beyond the non-political. As the next section delineates, the participatory mode of production as well as the participatory aesthetics appropriately classify ZaLab’s documentaries as a new kind of cinema d’impegno.

**PARTICIPATORY FILM AS NEW CINEMA D’IMPEGNO**

As mentioned in the first section of this article, the Italian film distribution market and its funding practices are dominated by commercial interests that inevitably privilege prestige and profits over the aesthetic and thematic quality of productions. The existence of special committees (commissioni governative) appointed by the government to evaluate feature and documentary films and to distribute state funds accordingly has not precluded the use of partial parameters of judgement, thus reinforcing the presence (and the production) of those media professionals who already play prominent roles in mainstream Italian cinema. As Giacomo Manzoli argued in a keynote presentation on the subject, the apparently objective evaluation system based on points does actually work to benefit well-known film-makers, award-winning actors and acclaimed producers (2013). As a consequence, funding requests by new directors and productions on sensitive topics are often ignored, thus leaving them only with marginal spaces of distribution.

The stagnant context of film production and distribution in Italy is crucial to understand the choice by ZaLab to adopt horizontal distribution modes and participatory creative practices. At the time of this writing, ZaLab belongs to a network of more than 300 associations, institutes, schools, universities and centri sociali that collaborate in grassroots activities to promote independent documentary films in Italy and abroad. The distribuzione civile/civic distribution adopted by these film-makers focuses on the need to inform various communities about realities they might ignore, in the attempt that viewers will also become social actors and will engage in essential advocacy campaigns. As such, ZaLab proposes another mode of distribution, a mode whose goal is

[… to produce and distribute long and short documentaries – stories of reality – together with those who live such realities, in order to find collective solutions to collective problems… From the distribution of [ZaLab’s] video productions new energies and opportunities for change emerge, which ZaLab attempts to support and develop.

(Liberti 2013: 71–72)

Hence, through the use of traditional media (film) as well as new technologies (web and social media sites) ZaLab engages the democratic potential of
participatory communication to re-centre the place of citizens in Italian society today. Recent socio-economic changes and the increase in multicultural communities have brought the contended issue of citizenship to the forefront of public debates. The relationship between media and cultural citizenship has been widely addressed in scholarship from different disciplinary viewpoints; in the context of this analysis, I find G. Murdock’s discussion on rights and representation in public discourse particularly useful (1999). The central idea of citizenship is defined by Murdock as ‘the right to participate fully in social life with dignity and without fear, and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future’ (1999: 8). In this sense, the participatory potential of the media is cardinal to the formation of democratic societies, whose politics are increasingly based on ‘the politics of identity – the struggle over forms of belonging, loyalty, solidarity’ (Murdock 1999).

In order for audience-citizens (using Harindranath’s terminology) to become actively engaged in the debate and the re-framing of identity politics, ‘access to material and symbolic resources, and public knowledge’ are necessary requirements (Harindranath 2009: 9–10). Hence, ZaLab’s work in providing access to video productions along with the competences to use video cameras and other representational tools effectively reveals a belief in the empowering potential of such symbolic resources: while the power of media corporations and state apparatus remains undisputable, the horizontal distribution practices of ZaLab bespeak a need to conceive of access to symbolic capital as an urgent step for equal enunciation rights of diverse groups. As mentioned earlier, these rights are particularly wanting in contemporary Italian society, where mainstream cultural representations reflect the majority’s outlook.

As the example of the ‘Mai più respinti’ campaign clearly highlights, Italian civic culture is a core component and major interlocutor in ZaLab’s communication practices. In his work on political communication and mediated democracies, P. Dahlgren defines civic culture as

... an analytic construct that seeks to identify the possibilities of people acting in the role of citizens. This is a role which can have non- or pre-political aspects (as often is the case in civil society), but which may open up toward ‘the political’, and indeed evolve into formalized politics.

(2003: 155)

This shift from the non- or pre-political sphere into political action was indeed set in motion by the horizontal and heterogeneous distribution practices of Closed Sea that combined the direct involvement of different sections of the population with the more traditional coverage in mainstream media (newspapers and satellite television).

As highlighted above, the convergence of various spheres of civic society culminated in tangible political changes on the complex issue of migration. As N. Couldry argues in his analysis of the ‘culture of citizenship’ in a mediated world, ‘[w]hether citizens feel they have a voice, or the space in which effectively to exercise a voice, is crucial to their possibilities of acting as citizens’ (2006: 326, emphasis added). By collaborating with both audiences and documentary subjects, as in the case of Like a Man on Earth, ZaLab has produced a form of participatory civic culture that has enabled a public space where citizens could partially enact the social changes they deemed imperative in Italy. Instead of operating on well-tread media routes, where documentary films are generally used to make the public aware about sensitive topics, ZaLab’s
approach transforms the traditional concept of media advocacy campaigns by focusing on the artistic and aesthetic quality of the videos as a catalyst to engage the public and provoke a response. The goal of this approach is to produce high-quality films and media materials, which succeed in drawing the public’s attention thanks to their artistic qualities. These films provide the opportunity for those members of civic society who deal with these advocacy issues to meet. ZaLab does not and will not provide public service communication for civic society; instead, it provides independent communication that fosters and effectively supports the dynamics of civic society.

(Liberti 2013: 72)

In this sense, ZaLab’s documentaries and videos are conceived to promote a culture of citizenship by reflecting on the social changes taking place in Italy and encouraging an inclusive debate that uses various media to express heterogeneous voices. As such, ZaLab has located a narrative discourse and a film language that articulate the ethnic transformations at the heart of Italian society today, while also advocating for the engagement of various social groups in the civic dialogue on human rights, citizenship and belonging. As T. J. Demos argues in his analysis of artistic documentary practices in the age of globalisation, ‘[…] today, what is needed more than ever are powerful and creative artistic expressions and interventions that join other social movements for positive change, social justice and equality, working together towards the progressive re-creation of our common world’ (2013: xxiii). ZaLab’s social documentaries have indeed engaged this creative, yet socially conscious, path.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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