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Author

Fattal, Alexander

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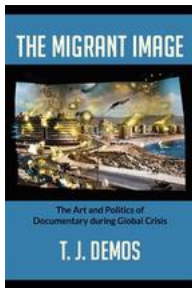
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ALEX FATTAL



THE MIGRANT IMAGE:
THE ART AND POLITICS
OF DOCUMENTARY
DURING GLOBAL CRISIS

T. J. Demos

Duke University
Press, 2013

BUY

August 20, 2013—Forged at the interstice of art history and curatorial practice, T. J. Demos’s *The Migrant Image* is an ambitious sketch of how politically committed documentary artists—working in film, video, and photography—have responded to uneven capitalist expansion and the migrations impelled by abject poverty, authoritarianism, and armed conflict. The art projects Demos features confront this global crisis through interventions that place the artworks in two “post” categories. The first is “postdocumentary,” a concept Demos invokes in a way that seeks to transcend and subvert the photographic image’s claims to truth and objectivity without equating it with fiction. The second is “contemporary art’s post-medium condition,” in which digitization collapses divisions between established genres (for example, film and digital video) and “no single medium, such as painting or sculpture, dominates.” By highlighting works that straddle these two “posts,” Demos argues, contemporary artists are reinventing documentary practices and in the process opening spaces of critical engagement with and resistance to structures of political and economic domination.

The postdocumentary works described by Demos attest to their creators’ acute awareness of the contrast between the infinite reproducibility of images and the political reality of bodies confined by fortified boundaries, or more precisely, “the inequality between those who can and cannot enjoy the rights of the freedom of movement.” The artists traffic in this paradox, focusing on populations who move (or are forced to move) only to find themselves stuck: the migrant, the refugee, the dispossessed, and the stateless. On the other hand, the artists and their works (if not their collaborators) move fluidly across contexts. With their relative freedom they are “mobilizing the image as much as imaging mobility ... to intervene in the cultural politics of globalization in critical and creative ways.”

DEMOS EXTOLS ALL OF THE ARTISTS’ WORKS HE ANALYZES, ARGUING THAT TAKEN TOGETHER THEY REPRESENT HOW DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE PROVIDES “CRITICAL RESOURCES WITH WHICH TO OPPOSE THE GROWING PRESSURE TO DEPOLITICIZE LIFE.”

Demos goes to his most embodied example of mobilizing the image and imaging mobility in Chapter 1, which opens with a population moving not South to North, or East to West, but inward and downward, into one of South Africa’s deepest mines, Western Deep. Steve McQueen’s film of the same name captures the sensorial world of the “earsplitting” descent through a dark shaft. Even as former socialist union leaders

such as Cyril Ramaphosa have assumed chairmanships of mining companies (including those responsible for the Marikana massacre of 2012), the audiovisual landscape of harvesting precious minerals has changed little since the states of emergency in the 1980s. Feted internationally for its less violent than anticipated transition from centuries of white minority rule, and held up as exemplary of a moral victory at the very end of the Cold War, South Africa’s real achievements, viewed through the lens of persistent class immobility, are precarious at best.

McQueen's film is paradigmatic of Demos's project of highlighting works that push back against "a triumphalist globalism." While his enthusiasm for *Western Deep* is particularly great, Demos extols all of the artists' works he analyzes, arguing that taken together they represent how documentary practice provides "critical resources with which to oppose the growing pressure to depoliticize life."

Theoretically, *The Migrant Image* is at once promiscuous yet loyal to Agamben. Of the two attributes, I found the latter more problematic, for reasons related to the boom and bust cycles of academic citation. Published at a moment when "bare life," sovereignty rooted in "states of exception," and "the camp" have become predictable staples of academic production, Demos's book suffers to the extent that the theoretical apparatus Agamben builds, via Schmitt and contra Foucault, looms as a totalizing worldview, all too quickly collapsing the challenges of the contemporary moment into those of Auschwitz. Demos occasionally gestures toward critiques of Agamben, noting, for instance, his radical generalizations of the figure of the refugee, but provides neither a sustained critical engagement with his theories nor a reflection on what is at stake in their repeated invocation to understand the contemporary moment.

In unpacking Ursula Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle*, Demos sees in the desert a state of exception—"a smooth space that geologically defies borders as much as national inscription"—for the Tuareg people, nomads who have historically roamed through the contemporary states of Chad, Niger, Libya, Algeria, and Mali. Their legal indeterminacy in the context of proliferating mining enclaves is refracted through the analytic lens of the state of exception, which upon a quick read can be compelling. However, if the vertigo of passing so quickly from camp, to mining enclave, to desert prompts a closer reading, doubts begin to creep in. What are the consequences of viewing geographies as expansive as the Sahara desert as a state of exception? Would the situation be more productively framed within a conceptual apparatus better equipped to detail empirical complexities, such as legal pluralism? What are the political effects of identifying the denial or withdrawal of political rights as necessarily a state of exception? Anticipating such doubts and explaining *why Agamben?* would strengthen the author's mobilization of states of exception at a time when citing this theorist has become the norm rather than the exception.

THE RESULT IS A KALEIDOSCOPIC EFFECT, JUXTAPOSING ART PROJECTS AND THEORISTS.

Instead, Demos makes passing references to Rancière, Benjamin, Kracauer, Deleuze, Foucault, and others in his discussion of the works he describes and interprets. The result is a kaleidoscopic effect, juxtaposing art projects and theorists. However, the patterns can be difficult to decipher. While this might constitute a knock against the text from an academic standpoint, it also lends it an indeterminacy akin to that of the art projects it profiles, collapsing the space between book and exhibition. Considering that *The Migrant Image* grew out of the "Zones of Conflict" curatorial project and workshops organized by the author, perhaps this resonance should not be surprising.

Finally, *The Migrant Image* could have benefited from a more nuanced framing of the documentary foil it uses to produce a breach between documentary and postdocumentary: between a previous documentary moment, one supposedly uncritical of its representational form and wedded to its truth claims, and its hyper-reflexive successor. The contrast, while convenient for Demos's argument, freezes the documentary tradition in the moment of Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother." This stark form of periodizing documentary practice cannot help but commit injustices. A photographer who is on the receiving end of that injustice is Guy Tillim, whose work exceeds mere reportage and evinces a subtle irony about its genre. However, in *The Migrant Image*, Tillim is reduced to a photojournalist-type, a globe-trotting hunter of images, a counterpoint to the reflexivity embodied by the art projects Demos features.

The reinvention of documentary during the current moment of crisis that Demos takes as his subject does not conform to a linear history. A more thorough acknowledgment of how the documentary tradition has always held within it the specter of its own self-doubt, critique, and subversion would have added a welcome dimension to the text, as would have a case study or two that complicated Demos's typology; these might have included Jean Rouch's film *Jaguar* (1967) or David Goldblatt's photo book *The Transported of KwaNdebele* (1989) (an extraordinary precursor to *Western Deep*).

The Migrant Image is an important reflection on a form of art practice marked by the "posts" of postmodern critique and a political commitment to oppose prepackaged discourses of crisis, austerity, and futile resistance. In a timely way, Demos shows the two are compatible. *The Migrant Image* will stimulate fascinating debates in the academic, artistic, and documentary spheres. In triangulating among these camps Demos brings down the barriers separating them.

Alex Fattal is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at Harvard University. His forthcoming dissertation is titled "Guerrilla Marketing: Information War and the Demobilization of FARC Rebels" and will feature an addendum in the form of a short film about the dreams of ex-combatants filmed in a truck turned camera obscura. As a visual anthropologist he has also produced an experimental documentary, *Trees Tropiques*, and founded participatory photography projects for refugee youth, including *Shooting Cameras for Peace* in Colombia.

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