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## **Witnessing the experience of European bordering: watching the documentary**

### ***Under den samme himmel* in an immigration detention center**

#### Abstract

This paper draws on theories of bordering and mediated witnessing to examine a documentary film that mediates migrants' experiences of bordering in Europe. My analysis of *Under den samme himmel* (Haarløv Johnsen, 2013) shows how the film captures the multiplicity of bordering practices, from geographical to socio-cultural borderings. The analysis is informed by watching and discussing the film in an immigrant detention facility in Finland with people who experienced and eye-witnessed experiences similar to those depicted in the film. This creates a sense of co-presence of the experiential landscapes in the border zones, and the film invites viewers to consider borders not as lines in the landscape, but as zones and as a form of practice that has consequences.

#### Keywords

Border, Europe, immigration, detention, documentary film, media, witnessing

Film critics and film studies scholars rarely discuss the settings in which they watch a film and usually do not mention audience members other than themselves. In this paper, I consider the context of watching a film and the conversations I had with my co-viewers, making this ethnographic encounter visible to the reader as I proceed with the film analysis. This experiment suggests that the practice of *seeing with* is important in the practice of listening to “unimaginable” experiences, including the silences that are part of the telling.

One of the settings where I saw the 2013 Danish documentary *Under den samme himmel* (Haarløv Johnsen, 2013) was a lounge in the Joutseno detention facility in Konnunsuo, Finland.<sup>1</sup> I had brought five documentary films about migration with me and asked some of the detainees if they would watch them with me. Among those watching the films was JB, a 31-year-old Gambian man. At the time, he had been in immigrant detention for nine months. One of the colorful fishing boats (*pateras*) depicted in the film reminded him of the *patera* on which he had been confined for twelve days while traveling from the West African coast to Tenerife: “Every time I see a boat, any boat, that memory returns”.

### **Bordering and silences in *Under den samme himmel***

*Under den samme himmel/Days of Hope* is a film about the experiences of different kinds of European borders. The film moves back and forth between migrant experiences in three locations – Nouadhibou (Mauretania), Syracuse (Sicily, Italy), and Copenhagen (Denmark) – to allow the viewer to examine them simultaneously and comparatively. The film does not present these different border zones in a sequence or follow the journey of one protagonist across borders. Instead, the story moves from Mauretania to Sicily, then back to Mauretania, then to Denmark, and so

on. This creates a sense of co-presence of the events and experiential landscapes in the border zones. By connecting these three locations as sites where the bordering practices of the European Union manifest in different ways and by focusing on the experiences of migrants, the film invites viewers to consider borders not as lines in the landscape, but as zones and as a practice that has consequences. EU bordering practices are felt and experienced from Mauretania to Denmark. This focus on the experience of bordering is underlined because the film does not explicitly depict an actual border crossing. The crossing is either an anticipated future challenge or a memory of the past.

The first border depicted in the film is the sea. In one scene, the protagonist in Mauretania, Harouna from Mali, sits at the shore and gazes towards the horizon, perhaps wondering if he should risk his life and cross the sea, a thought that we have seen him discussing on several occasions: with friends in Mauretania, his family in Mali (during phone calls) and a Father Jerome from the Catholic Mission in Nouadhibou. None of these people encouraged him to go. Father Jerome says, "Have you seen anyone come back with money? Someone who made it?" When Harouna seeks advice from his brother and tells him over the phone that he is thinking of risking his life, he is told, "You shouldn't say things like that to me. I get scared." The brother doesn't want to get involved and take any responsibility for a possible death. Harouna's girlfriend, however, who gave birth to their child, looks forward to regular financial support, and Harouna's mother, too, wants her son to realise the dream of Europe that she once had.

The brother's unwillingness to talk about Harouna risking his life is one example of an unspeakable topic depicted in the film. There are several moments of silence

around the risk of death in the border zone and about witnessing others dying in the film. One of the silences appears when we see Harouna and his friend walk on the sea shore, pulling clothes and other objects from abandoned wooden fishing boats covered by sand. The friend says that he once found a dead body floating in the sea and that he took the money that was wrapped in plastic around its waist and thigh. “I don’t like euros, do you know why? Because I’m ashamed of taking the money from that corpse,” the friend says. After this episode, Harouna stops for a silent prayer as he stands facing the sea. In a research interview in Copenhagen the filmmaker, Ditte Haarløv Johnsen (2015), tells me that the prayer was a spontaneous act and that they didn’t discuss its meaning while they were filming. Nevertheless, in the film, the prayer scene appears after the images of abandoned objects originating from migrant boats that have washed back onto the shore and the friend’s regret that he took the money. Since the prayer is linked to the death of migrants, it can be interpreted as Harouna’s commemoration of the people who died in their attempt to cross the external European Union border. In this way, the film visualizes border violence by showing an emotional and spiritual response that does not originate from the European rescuers or humanitarian agents, as is typical in media representations (Horsti, 2017), but from a person who is about to cross the sea. Representations of humanity and dignified encounters with death such as these are rare in media representations of migration.

The second type of silence in the film relates to the protagonists’ precarious lives and work: prostitution and not meeting the expectations of family members. In Mauretania, the film introduces a young female protagonist whom we do not get to know as intimately as Harouna. The film is ambiguous about her situation. To me, it

seems that she supports herself by sex work in Mauretania and that she is being seduced into prostitution in Europe. Father Jerome in Nouadhibou is the only one in the film who speaks about prostitution directly. He challenges the young woman: “So you think you’re going to Europe to just plait hair? - They [traffickers] are taking you to Europe free of charge? - How are you going to pay them? - Aah. Like prostitution? - You can’t say you don’t know?”

On the phone, the woman’s mother tries to persuade her to go to Libya with a smuggler and continue to Europe by boat, but she resists, saying, “I’m not going through the desert.”

Mother: “Are you working?”

Daughter: “I’m ok.”

Mother: “Are you working somewhere good?”

Daughter: “Yes.”

Mother: “I hope you have a good life there. So when you get home it will show that you’ve been to Europe. I don’t know if you understand.”

Daughter: “I understand.”

Prostitution is absent from this conversation. The daughter doesn’t say what kind of work she does and the mother doesn’t say what kind of work the traffickers she has been negotiating with would expect her daughter to do in Europe.

“Do you think she’s forced into prostitution?” I ask JB, and by doing so, I suggest that the woman is framed as a victim without much agency. “The role of the woman is changing also in Africa, you know. Women are more independent and want to make

their own choices”, he says. JB does not accept my interpretation that the young woman is a victim of trafficking, and for him, the representation of the woman carries agency. He sees her as someone who departs from the traditional female role. She might have an opportunity to live independently after all, and in any case, she resists her mother. She’s not going through the desert. The director explains that by representing prostitution only indirectly, the dignity of the protagonists could be maintained: “They are not only, completely, victims.”

JB recognizes the music, the landscapes, the city architecture, and the boats in Mauretania. Other detainees also recognize the music played in the film, and there is laughter and dance in the smoking room. Before making his journey, JB knew very well how deadly the route was. Everyone had seen images of dead bodies on the shores, as they had been widely circulated digitally among the young in Mali and Mauretania. “We still do it, knowing the risks, because we don’t have an option”, JB says. The conversation about the deadliness of the route stops there and turns to Konnunsuo. JB points out that what he now experiences in Konnunsuo is in many ways worse than crossing the sea border. Others in the room join him: “This is a Guantanamo with colorful doors. It’s a Guantanamo, although it looks like a kindergarten and they call us ‘customers’.” One young musician points to the doors of single-occupancy cells that have been designed and painted by art school students. And there is sarcasm around the term “customers”, which the detention regime, including guards, uses when referring to the detainees.

The section of the documentary filmed in Syracuse is different from those featuring Nouadhibou and Copenhagen. In Syracuse, the filming centers on an asylum seeker

reception center, and we are introduced to multiple characters, whereas in Nouadhibou and in Copenhagen, the film follows two protagonists. The facility in Syracuse seems to be a closed detention center: confinement is visualized through images of fences and gates. This was Haarløv Johnsen's aesthetic decision: the center was actually open, and at least during the day, the residents were able to come and go. The filmmaker was also free to enter the center and film there. The reception system in Italy has been privatized, and the organization that ran the center did not care who went in and out.

Nevertheless, in Syracuse, the migrants are relieved that they have survived to this point. People at the refugee center are hopeful; there is a scene of a birthday party among the asylum seekers. However, this is also part of the border zone, a space of transit, similar to Nouadhibou where migrants from the rest of Africa wait and arrange their travel. The liminality of the reception center is aesthetically represented as waiting: there is a lot of gazing at nothing and sitting around in the film. The migrants are segregated from the rest of society in this artificial waiting space. Social fencing as a form of bordering is also addressed when one migrant who has been in Italy for much longer comes and visits the others. The filmmaker visualizes the (symbolic) confinement and segregation of the center from Italian society by placing a fence between the visitor and one of the inhabitants. While the fence makes this separation visible, the visitor speaks about the invisible bordering that he experiences every day in Italy. "They think all their problems are over because they are here. But it hasn't even begun. Human rights are talked of but not respected. Go to Rome, go to Milan, and they sleep on the streets. They treat you like an animal. They insult you.



Kids call you names. And when it rains and they drive past you, they break so hard that you get all wet. All I can tell you is to be brave. It's not easy, it's not easy."

The reception center in Syracuse is a place where migrants reflect on crossing the Mediterranean—or at least, Ditte Haarløv Johnsen represents the facility as a place of reflection. She constructs a scene in a room with a man and a couple that is expecting a child. They have all just survived a boat journey from Libya to Italy. To prompt conversation about the journey, she uses a mobile phone video that someone else on the same boat had filmed. This video clip, an example of digital eye-witnessing (Mortensen, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2015), functions in *Under den samme himmel* in two ways. For a few minutes, the video footage fills the whole screen, and we see blurry, grainy, shaky visuals that create an aura of dramatic authenticity. According to Ditte Haarløv Johnsen (2015), she included the video footage in this way to create drama, because there was otherwise no drama to be filmed at the reception center. We also see how the three protagonists watch the video from a mobile phone placed in the middle of the floor. No one touches the phone, avoiding it like something toxic on the floor. Nevertheless, the video prompts eyewitness testimonies in the form of a conversation in fits and starts; the pregnant woman does not say anything.

"Many things happened on the boat. Many things happened. We lost hope", the husband begins.

The other man continues: "We lost hope, we thought we were going to die."

Husband: "I wasn't looking for Europe. I was looking for dry land. It's not easy."

Man: "It's not easy. I don't have anything to say. I just thank God for my life."

Husband: "People jumped into the water because they totally lost hope. I also lost

hope but I couldn't kill myself. Instead, I prayed for forgiveness. I said if death was to come, it should meet me here.”

Man: “It's the biggest risk I've taken in my life. The worst risk.”

Husband: “I have vowed to myself never to travel anywhere by sea again.”

Man: “That sea. It's not a small thing. And I'm here now. And if I don't get a good life, what is the essence of risking my life? What is the essence of risking my life for this?”

As spectators, we witness the men's discomfort in telling what happened on the boat and about their roles as survivors while others have died. The narrative is scarce.

Later in the film, another segment of mobile phone footage takes the screen when a young man in Mauretania sits alone in his room, holding a phone in his hand and watching a video clip of corpses lying in the desert. There are no words, and the silence continues for several minutes as we see the young man competing with others to get a job for the day, Harouna watching the sea, and Austin in Copenhagen collecting bottles from the partying locals. According to Haarløv Johnsen (2015), however, while they were filming, the young man was not silent. While they watched the video on his phone he said to her, “Ditte, that's me. I've been in that desert. I've died, too.”

Ditte Haarløv Johnsen (2015) explains that there were various moments of silence, or taboos, that she encountered while making the film. The boat journey was one of them. Many people at the center declined to describe their journey, a phenomenon that she interpreted as shame among the migrants. The shameful of crossing the border illegally and risking one's life also appears in a scene in Mauretania where

Harouna's friend tells him, "I saw my son born. I saw him grow up. I took him to school and all that. So if I leave, I leave with a certain strong faith: to try to get somewhere with my life, to be able to help him. Should I get a chance to get to Europe, it would be all right. But not illegally. It's not because I lack the courage, but I have people relying on me. And if I go to Europe, I'll take a flight. I'll arrive with dignity and my head held high."

However, in the context of the confined space in Konnunsuo, there is no shame about the boat crossing in particular. It is just one among other extreme means detainees have employed and experiences they have gone through to get this far. The reason for the scarce conversation on the topic in Konnunsuo may be a certain normalization of the boat journey as one risk, among others, during the detainees' lives and journeys.

Konnunsuo is a place where there is not much hope in the air any longer. JB is hopeful, though, as he has found a way to resist the deportation regime. He knows that Gambia will not admit him if he doesn't return voluntarily, despite the attempts of the Finnish authorities to negotiate. If he resists for a year, Finland has to let him go. However, being in confinement for such a long time and the uncertainty about whether his persistence will pay off frustrates him. His extended family depends on the remittances he sends to Gambia. His little sisters' and teenage daughter's ability to continue their education are jeopardized by the deportation regime. That worries JB.

The hardship in family relations that is experienced in Konnunsuo resonates with the uncertainty and social bordering depicted in the section of the documentary that was filmed in Copenhagen, in particular. There, we follow the experiences of two

protagonists, Thelma and Austin. Thelma is a young woman from Ghana whom we see studying Danish, but who is also in a precarious situation. The film is again not direct about sex work, but it is implied that Thelma's mother has supported her daughter and extended family through prostitution in Denmark. In the film, Thelma and her mother discuss the longing they felt during their separation, when the Thelma was still living with relatives in Ghana. In the story of Thelma, the film illuminates the violence bordering does to family relations: the stress brought on by forced immobility after crossing the border into Europe.

Copenhagen, as a place, is introduced in the film after Nouadhibou and Syracuse. The camera moves through the city streets at night and follows a man, Austin, who collects empty bottles with a bicycle. We see him parking the bike in a park and getting into a sleeping bag. It is already a sign that there is not much left of the hope that we have seen in Nouadhibou and Syracuse. Ditte Haarløv Johnsen (2015) explains that because of the lack of hope, the most difficult part of the casting was to find a protagonist in Copenhagen, the city where she lives.

Austin provides for his extended family through his precarious work of collecting bottles. The relationship with his family is again represented through a phone call. After we have seen him collecting bottles and sleeping outside on the street, we see how his role changes from one who is poor and marginalized to one who has resources.

He calls his brother: "Yes, hello, Michael. There are four pairs of boots, so give one pair to Obenga. There are two smaller-sized ones, try to sell them if you can."

Brother: “Are there four pairs?”

Austin: “Yes, two big and two small sizes.”

Brother: “So two are for me?”

Austin: “No, one size is 45 and the other is 43. And two children’s sizes. Also a small pair, Onome’s size. The old ones from my wife’s daughter. I added six mobile phones.”

Brother: “Mom will want one of those. She doesn’t like used phones.”

Austin: “Had I known, I would have bought some new phones. They are all used.”

Brother: “If you buy something for me, get the size 45.5.”

Austin: “No problem. I’ll buy that size when I go home to Sweden.”

This scene resonates strongly with JB and prompts a conversation. “See, he collects bottles, and still all he thinks about is sending money home.” Referring to the 1000 euros that the International Organization for Migration has offered JB if he signs a voluntary return to Gambia, JB says, “This is what they don’t understand. We cannot go back.”

Austin’s story offers an illustration of JB’s situation and how he is completely misunderstood by the Finnish system—that the system doesn’t recognize his motivation for migration, and that a return to Gambia would influence the lives and future prospects of several family members. JB sees himself and many other migrants in Austin’s character. He uses “we” to speak about people who risk their lives and resist deportation. The protagonists’ lives resonate with his own, and watching their experiences represented in the film shifts his condition to a broader level. The film materializes a situation and misrecognition that JB identifies with. The deportation

system, the authorities, the policemen who tried to deport him to Gambia, IOM, and the state of Finland do not hear his or “their” point of view.

In *Under den samme himmel*, the mobile phone is a symbol of connection and of transnational relationships between people. In each location, we see and hear the migrants connecting with the people they love and for whom they say they’ve migrated. In the film, we become intimately familiar with the hardships they face in the border zone, making the contrast to whom they become during the phone conversations striking. The migrants carry not only their own hopes, but also the hopes of others. Similarly, in *Konnunsuo*, “their lives are on the phone”, as one of the guards puts it. On the one hand, the phone transmits hopes that are not easy to live up to. But on the other hand, these hopes are what makes the hardships worthwhile. As one character in *Mauretania* says, “You must help your family all you can. So you can go back one day and repay them for all the tears that are falling now.”

### **Participatory research and the context of watching *Under den samme himmel***

I brought along five DVDs when visiting the detention centre. JB made the decision for everyone present that we would first watch *Under den samme himmel*, which depicts border crossings similar to those he made on his journey from Gambia to the Canary Islands of Spain ten years earlier and again later on his way further north after the economic troubles in Spain left him jobless. The only way to extend his stay in Finland was to apply for asylum. His asylum application had been denied, but efforts to deport him had repeatedly failed because Gambia does not accept involuntary repatriations. The motivations for mobility discussed in the film are similar to JB’s: namely, his role as a provider for his extended family in Gambia. For most detainees in *Konnunsuo*, this is the last border zone in Europe before they are deported—and

often not to “home”, like the guards claim, because their home is in Finland. In the common TV room, JB and I begin our impromptu documentary film festival. Two other detainees join us for most of the films, and some others stop, watch, and comment as they pass by the room. One person recognizes *Under den samme himmel*: he has seen it on Al Jazeera, the most watched television channel in Konunsuo.

The detainees in Konunsuo speak about the injustice of borders in different ways during the viewing and in between the films, but other times we remain silent, and a small gesture or a look is enough to create an understanding or a space of dignity where there is no need to say anything. Or *is* there a common understanding? While we watch the same images and hear the same stories, is there really a “we” gathered in the TV room that sees the films in the same way?

Susan Sontag (2003: 7), in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, says, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.” It was uncertainty related to the idea of mediated witness that brought me to Konunsuo in the first place. I wanted to watch the films with people who had experienced something similar, who might have a different understanding of the pain depicted in the films. The pain we see is an indication of the violence of the bordering that affects the lives of those whose mobility is restricted. Before going to Konunsuo, I had analyzed *Under den samme himmel* and had conversations with the director, but I remained unsure of what the potential significance of the film could be and of the profundity of its representation of the pain produced by border-related violence.

The experimental screening in Konunsuo was a pilot run for a research method that I am developing in different research and artistic contexts. The method is predicated on *thinking with* and *seeing with* research participants. Participation is a key practice in

what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) term ‘radical democracy’: democracy that is never finished or secured and that depends on difference and dissent rather than striving towards consensus. It is based on an awareness and constant re-negotiation of the power relations that are always present in society, including in scientific and artistic processes. My methodological interest within the study of media representations has been to explore how analysis itself can be participatory. Combining the study of representation with ethnography widens the analytical horizon (see also Nikunen, 2011; Khan, 2013). Sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) offers relevant insights in acknowledging that research is a reflexive and experiential process through which understanding of and knowledge about a phenomenon is produced. Sensory ethnography also allows the scholar to be open to more profound knowledge that may be difficult to put into words or grasped in interviews or through textual analysis methods.

In this project, the participatory approach adds to the analysis of the film and the study of the representation of European borders. My methodological experiment in the detention center allowed me to extend the study beyond representation to what could be termed “more-than-representational theory” (Lorimer, 2005; 2008; Pyyry, 2015). More-than-representational theory offers a critical discussion of “non-representational theories” that direct attention to embodied experiences and multisensorial knowing in research. Non-representational theorists claim that their research orientation takes a turn away from the analysis of text and representation towards the analysis of practice and doing. However, a methodological juxtaposition of the analysis of representation and the analysis of experience is not fruitful for the purposes of studying mediated witnessing, i.e. the act of seeing something through the



media (in contrast to eye-witnessing) and engaging responsibly with the suffering caused by the injustice that is seen. The experience in Konnunsuo, however, underlines that mediated witness is not only about the relation between the spectator and the media (and between the spectator and the protagonists through the media). Rather, the viewing context and the conversations among viewers—the *seeing with*—shape the practice of witnessing through media.

### **Bordering and witnessing**

As we watched three films over the two days I spent in Konnunsuo, the issue of borders emerged as the central focus of our discussions<sup>2</sup>. We talked about the injustice of borders in a broad sense: Europe's internal and external border-crossings, the various methods of bordering in different European countries, and the ways in which borders stick to or follow those who appear to be 'migrants' in their everyday lives. We also discussed how bordering shapes social relations not only among people in Finland, but also among family members and friends dispersed across the globe.

Bordering practices have effects on people, and in this paper, it has been my aim to show the ways in which border related pain—that is, painful memories and painful experiences in European border zones—are depicted in the film and witnessed through watching the film. In my understanding of borders, I follow Etienne Balibar (2002) and other critical border studies scholars (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Brambilla, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Mountz, 2015; Albahari 2015) and treat borders as practice rather than as marked or stable materiality. The walls, fences, and other architectures of confinement in Konnunsuo are materializations of the practices of bordering. Critical border scholars also direct attention to what borders do: how they

shape identities and relationships and how they differentiate people, mobilities, territories, wealth, and opportunities. According to Balibar, bordering practices are “instruments of differentiation” in “the service of an international class differentiation” (Balibar, 2002: 82). Thus, they not only prevent people from entering, but they also accept them by subjugation, creating an underclass that is vulnerable for exploitation (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

Konnunsuo is a technology of bordering, and our impromptu film festival was defined by the space. Although some detainees were immediately curious to know who I was and what I was doing, the majority of them didn't care. They went about their routines, going to the gym or the showers and lining up for meals in the cafeteria. I was completely invisible to them, part of the confinement technology. But for some, I was perhaps the only available entertainment for the day. Some of the detainees had been in Konnunsuo for quite a long time already and they had seen all kinds of volunteers, journalists and artists pass through<sup>3</sup>. Documentary film watching wasn't odd at all.

Those people who did want to talk with me made the point that I was from the outside and that I had the ability to speak to those outside, “to the Finnish people”. During conversations, someone might say, “remember to tell this”. After we had been talking about Konnunsuo for a while, JB said to me, “There is nothing happening here, tell us something what happens in the outside.” Konnunsuo is a space between, one border zone among many others in which the detainees had been before. While it is likely that this is the most transparent and the most “humanitarian” of the European border zones, it is violent nevertheless. JB says that survival in Konnunsuo is more difficult than crossing the sea from Morocco to Tenerife in a *patera* (a small fishing boat) or

the journey in a truck across Europe to Finland. The punishment for being without papers and the terror of not knowing are mental, JB says and taps his finger on his head. “You don’t know what happens next. The police can come and ask you to pack your things. You are going to be deported now. You don’t know when this happens. And the brain is the most important part of your body.” He continues to explain the mental stress of living in the detention center by telling me how terrible he feels every day when he sees the children from the center’s family unit play outside in a small, walled yard. “You have to write about the children. What kind of nation detains children, puts children into prison? This is not fair. No country should do this. And this is Finland. I don’t care about myself. I am an adult man and I can take this. It is depressing, but I am a grown man. I survive. But what about these children?”

By drawing attention to the children, JB appeals to me and to the Finnish audience he thinks I can reach in terms he believes we will be sympathetic to. In addition, JB positions himself as a citizen who is shocked at the behavior of the country where he feels he belongs (despite not having a formal right to residence). No country should detain children, he says, but crucially, he underlines that particularly Finland should not act this way. He marks his belonging and his right to point out the deficiencies of the country. He also makes his daily eyewitness of detained children in the barbed wired playground understandable to me and to the others in the smoking room:

belonging (or desiring to belong) to Finland is the context we all share. When I say that most people in Finland don’t know that children are detained and would think of that as a violation of children’s rights<sup>4</sup>, JB says that this is the reason he always approaches journalists and other visitors to Konnunsuo and asks them to write about it. Making an injustice visible and audible in an understandable form is the first mode

of the practice of witnessing (Kurasawa, 2009: 95). JB bears witness by taking every opportunity to articulate the injustice towards the children he sees in the confined playground through the window. In the theory of witnessing, the testimony of an eyewitness is understood as a means to cultivate empathy and to remember, so that the injustice will not be repeated. However, the practice of witnessing needs mediation in some way through various kinds of intermediaries, such as the documentary filmmakers.

Media are involved in the process of witnessing in several ways: there is witnessing *in, with, and through* the media (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009). The protagonists in the films are eyewitnesses of events that have happened to them and to others, and *in the film*, they express what they have seen. The documentary filmmakers witness the protagonists' lives at border zones *with their camera* and mediate it to the viewers. The genre of documentary has its affordances for witnessing *through the media*. Documentary filmmaking allows the storyteller to introduce protagonists in an intimate way, prompting the audience to enact responsibility for the suffering that is seen through the film. As viewers, we are able to get closer to the emotions of the protagonists and not only hear, but also see the consequences of bordering in their bodily expressions. By watching the film in Konnunsuo, the detainees and I looked at the lives of the protagonists at different European border zones. However, through the act of watching *with* the detainees in Konnunsuo, I became more aware that witnessing through media is also shaped by the context of where and with whom it happens. There is no "we" that witnesses through media, but instead various individuals who respond differently and who have different resources to act upon the

suffering that is being witnessed together. By engaging with the film together, with our different ways of seeing, we broaden our understanding of European bordering.

In mediated witnessing, the notion of voice is crucial; the act of bearing witness aims to counter silence and invisibility, which in the witnessing context are considered unjust. In the theory of mediated witness, silence signifies injustice—marginalized and hidden wrongdoing that the hegemonic groups wish not to speak or hear about. However, the notion of voice and mediation through artistic work, such as documentary film, has ethical complications (Horsti, 2017; Hui Kyong Chun, 2002). The issue of ownership and the transparency of the story are never completely settled, but are rather subject to constant negotiation between the filmmaker and the protagonists.

A witness speaks, and in doing so, she makes some experiences audible. However, as many theorists argue (Triulzi, 2013; 2015; Tait, 2011; Hartman, 2000), there needs to be a willingness to listen, because a testimony also needs to be heard. What can be said is contextual, and therefore, testimonies of difficult experiences often include ruptures and silences. In my discussions with detainees in the TV room and in the smoking room, moments of silence emerged. We also saw moments in the films when the protagonists were unwilling to speak about some experiences. Speaking is performative, and things are said in relation to socially available discourses (Sigona, 2014; Triulzi 2013). Therefore, there should not be a default understanding of silence. It is not, for example, a necessarily submissive non-action. Rather, silence can be a deliberate action that is performed in a certain social context or to communicate a specific position or emotion. For example, it can be spiritual or a protest. As

communication, silence can sometimes be more powerful than speech. By declining my invitation to watch the films and by ignoring my presence in the detention center, some detainees actively chose to be silent (to me). Some of them were tired of speaking with Finnish journalists, scholars, and volunteers and of participating in their projects, as the guards had already warned me. One of those who declined to watch the films said that such encounters had little benefit for him and furthered only the careers of those who carried out the projects. In their eyes, a Finnish scholar was not too different from the regime that was deporting them.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis of media representation has been shaped by my conversations with the film director Ditte Haarløv Johnsen (2015) and by my experiences watching documentary films with and speaking with JB and the other detainees in Konnunsuo. In doing so, I have moved beyond traditional film analysis, which tends to focus on authorship or representation and does not pay much attention to the viewing context. I broadened the analytical approach with ethnographical methods and tools from cultural sociology, which allowed me to examine the film's production and viewing in its ethical and political contexts (Nikunen, 2011; Rovisco, 2012). The experiment of *seeing with* the detainees in Konnunsuo created sensitivity to listen to the protagonists and the detainees—to listen to what they said, and what they didn't say.

This article examined the ways in which *Under den samme himmel* depicts various border zones and the multiple bordering practices that produce the “undocumented migrant” who can be exploited and deported. The externalization of bordering beyond the physical border in the form of visas and family reunification policies; the

militarization of the geographical border; and finally, social fencing through othering practices inside Europe in the everyday lives of migrants produce this figure of the “undocumented”. The film depicts the loss of hope as the migrants’ journey goes on. Similarly, the detainees identified Konnunsuo as a place where there is not much hope and where a certain mental violence prevails, a place that is wrapped up in decent but contradictory circumstances: a playground surrounded by walls and barbed wire, locked doors embellished with art, and guards who call the detainees “customers”. Nevertheless, the film and the way it is seen in Konnunsuo do not produce victims. The protagonists are represented as making choices, as in control of their own lives, and in terms of the lives of those who depend on them. But neither are they heroic characters. Instead, we are able to see their vulnerability and the contradictions in their choices.

JB paused the film after Austin, the protagonist in Copenhagen, makes the phone call to his family about the different kinds of shoes he has sent. JB said, “*See*, that is how it is.” The verb *seeing* is crucial here. By watching familiar experiences on film, the detainees in Konnunsuo were looking at something that reminded them of their own lives from a distance. By discussing some scenes in the film (like Austin’s conversation about the shoes and mobile phones), they also encouraged me to see their condition from their point of view. The film prompted conversations about the pain of bordering but also offered a distance that allowed us to think about pain beyond individual experience. The silences we witnessed in the film and those that emerged while watching it were part of the act of mediated witnessing. Silence became a form of speech, for example, in Harouna’s prayer, which in the film became a dignified commemoration of those who died at sea. Silences about prostitution and precariousness allowed viewers to form their own interpretations and to see other

sides of the protagonists' lives. They were not only victims, but more complex characters with agency (albeit in a limited space).

In this article, I have analyzed instances of mediated witnessing (Durham Peters, 2001; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2008; Zelizer, 2007; Tait 2011): the ways in which the documentary witnesses the border zone, mediates eyewitness testimonies, and turns the spectators into (media) witnesses. Watching the documentary films with those who had themselves eye-witnessed similar practices of bordering revealed that the theory of mediated witnessing needs to pay more attention to the context: to the *where* and *with whom* seeing and knowing happens. This practice can create more sensitivity to listening to and seeing others.

Finally, watching the films in Konunsuo shaped my research practice. I analyzed *Under den samme himmel* and witnessed through media with people who had experienced the violence of bordering. We watched the films in a space that was a border zone. This produced a number of complexities around the practice of seeing. I was not only there to watch the film, but I was also watching the detainees watching the film. Considering that the detainees in the unit were all men, I was also being watched while I was watching the film. The encounter with JB through watching the film together created space for me and him to be attentive towards one another.

Walking into Konunsuo, being granted access by and being there under the protection of the deportation system, and seeing how some of the detainees marked the boundary between me and them with their silence revealed how reflexive research on media representations needs to be. Combining an analysis of media representations of bordering with the ethnographic practice of *seeing with* people who have



experienced something similar to what is depicted in the media proved to be one step further on the path of reflexive research.

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<sup>1</sup> The Joutseno detention unit is located in a former prison in Konnunsuo, 11 km from the Russian border. It was opened in 2014 and is attached to an asylum seeker reception center. The detention unit has two sections: one for 30 people who are detained because they are to be deported or because their identity is not known, and one for ten people where women, families with children, and unaccompanied minors between 15 and 18 years old are held.

<sup>2</sup> The other two films we watched were *Special Flight/Vol special* (2012) and *The World is Like That/Le monde est comme ça* (2013) by Swiss-Spanish filmmaker Fernand Melgar.

<sup>3</sup> In Finland, detention center directors decide whether to grant access to the centers and whether to grant permits to do research or journalistic, artistic or humanitarian work. The detainees decide if they want to participate or not. I went to the smoking room and started chatting. JB was the one who became interested in the films.

<sup>4</sup> I visited Konnunsuo for two days in the autumn of 2015, a year when Finland registered a record number of asylum seekers (32 477 people). Awareness and discussion about deportations, including the detention of children emerged in the public sphere at the beginning of 2017. Asylum seekers' public protests at the center of Helsinki between February and July 2017 were crucial in raising public debate.