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Out through the dark night
Darkness and opacity at the borders of Europe

Giulio Gonella

Thermal ghosts

In the last scene of *Waking Hours*[1], the recent documentary about the Serbia–Hungary border by Federico Cammarata and Filippo Foscarini, a horde of white ghosts attempts to cross the wall separating Fortress Europe from its outside. In the inverted colours of the thermal camera, the bodies of the assaulting group are small white flares against an indistinct background. Only some forest topographies can be made out, tentatively, as they are being traversed in the approach to the wall. The whole film is set in different shades of darkness; the last sequence is the only moment within its 78 minutes when a form of forced visibility comes across the screen.

The all-encompassing darkness of the film translates in aesthetic terms the perduring invisibility of people on the move amassing on one of the many strands of the Balkan route. Nighttime in the 'jungle'[2], as elsewhere along the dispersed frontiers of the EU, is not (only) a strategy of concealment, but a material condition that sustains survival and the tentative practices of border crossing. The blurred images of the assault echo the footage featured in another film set in another European liminal zone. In *Les Sauteurs* [*Those Who Jump*] (2016)[3], night vision recordings deployed by Frontex show hundreds of tiny figures walking in line across the steep mediterranean hillsides, as they move to jump the heavily guarded metal fence separating the Spanish enclave of Melilla, north of Morocco. As with the Serbian forest, foothills woods of the nearby Mount Gurugu host encampments where people temporarily dwell before attempting the crossing.

While footage featured in *Les Sauteurs* was obtained from police authorities, figuring as 'operational images' (Farocki, 2004) not made to represent the landscape but to serve the routine practices of pushbacks and border enforcement, Waking Hours' thermal ghosts were instead recorded via the trap camera of a hunter that the authors met in the forest[4]. Although the visual language converges,

Giulio Gonella is a spatial researcher, educator, and PhD candidate in Architecture at Politecnico di Torino. His research explores the materialities of environmental violence, weaponised (post)colonial ecologies, and agro-extractivism. He is completing a dissertation on Dutch ecological imperialism and land struggles in Sumatera Utara, Indonesia. He is a teaching assistant in Critical Urban Design and has published in Volume, Failed Architecture, and L'Internationale Online.

giulio.gonella@polito.it

1 *Waking Hours*, dir. Federico Cammarata and Filippo Foscarini, Italy, 2025, 78 min. Produced by Volos Films in co-production with Italia Pulpa Film, in collaboration with Rai Cinema. It premiered at Venice Critics' Week, where it won the Mario Serandrei & Hotel Saturnia Award for Best Technical Contribution.

2 There are many 'jungles' within EU borders. The most famous was probably the Jungle in Calais, in the north of France. From 2015, tens of thousands of people lived in encampments on an abandoned landfill site adjacent to the port, attempting to cross the English Channel and reach the UK. By the summer of 2016 the camp had reached an estimated 10,000 residents – with shops, restaurants, schools and places of worship. In October 2016, a massive eviction operation dispersed people, while bulldozers and fires razed what remained. Now, only some occasional encampment can be seen.

3 *Les Sauteurs*, dir. Moritz Siebert, Estephan Wagner, and Abou Bakar Sidibé, Denmark, 2016, 80 min. The film combines footage shot by Sidibé – a Malian migrant who spent fourteen months in the encampment on Mount Gurugu – with surveillance camera footage deployed by Frontex along the Melilla fence. It premiered at the Berlinale Forum.

4 Private conversation with the directors, 23rd April 2026.

the images are far apart: technologies of vision employed for surveillance contrast with images born from (unexpected) forest encounters at the Serbian border. As such, the stories behind each piece of footage speak of relations that remain specific to conditions and places. Following Marshall McLuhan (1964), the way an image is made tells us about its maker and the relations that produced it as much as about the subject it appears to show. Blurriness serves here two contrasting agendas; Waking Hours' last scene borrows the language of surveillance without inheriting its intentions.

Degrees of opacity

Writer and poet Eduard Glissant's concept of opacity, as elaborated in his *Poetics of Relation* (2009 [1990]), is all-too-often referred to as either predicating caution about or outright refusing to be available to the ever-expanding eye of the state. His 'right to opacity' has been invoked as a strategy of resistance to the surveillance apparati employed against people on the move and, more broadly, against the state- and capitalist-inflected control and sanctioning of social and political bodies – one that demands hypervisibility obtained through constant visual monitoring, in any environmental or weather condition. "Alongside the need for representation", Irene de Craen writes, "exists a prerequisite to remain opaque in the eyes of hegemonic powers as a strategy of resistance". It is from and through the dark that resistance becomes thinkable and possible as a form of counter-insurgency, or as an atmospheric condition that can host and foster clandestinity, sabotage, and guerrilla (Djerbal, 2024).

But the same apparatus also produces and maintains the dark. On one hand, the purposeful concealment of documents and 'confidential' records remains an urgent problem for activist networks that attempt to fight systematic border violence and tackle the inhumane practices of police patrolling and recurrent deaths. The disobedient gaze of researchers investigating violence at the border attempts in some cases to flip the perspective and arguably employs 'the master's tools to dismantle the master's house', tentatively making visible what authorities sought not to be (Stavinoha, n.d.; Pezzani and Heller, 2013). As such, while opacity names a strategy of counter-power employed by people on the move or activists to resist the oppression of the border regime, it also emerges as a practice deployed by governmental bodies and police forces to purposely conceal their vicious operations. On the other hand, more frequently than not, police operations hide in the shadows, further "obscur[ing] or blur[ring] legible information" in order to evade institutional accountability (Tagle, 2020). Likewise, darkness is forcibly imposed when countries are at war, as a form of negation of their citizens' political agency; during raids in the West Bank, for instance, Israeli forces regularly shot out streetlights and cut off electricity to Palestinian neighbourhoods so that, when the night fell, they could operate under the cover of darkness (Cuyler, 2025). To be kept in the dark is the incapacitating condition par excellence, under the bombs, among improvised shelters, or in the belly of the ship, across the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean sea alike.[5]

As much as Western thought has historically predicated transparency in order to build the nation-state and its mandated subjects, the opposite is also more and more emerging as true: opacity has always been produced to conceal what is not needed, and what interferes with institutional power. "Opposite of opacity is not visibility, it is transparency" (de Craen, 2025): both directions (re)produce a spectrum of visibility: transparency and opacity build the visible subject along the invisible one.

A night that never ends

Nights in the Serbian forest are not opaque; they are utterly dark. In one of the sequences of Waking Hours, the edges of some trees' branches in the foreground, cut against the night sky, dissolve from indeterminate contours into an uncertain vision of their jagged limits. It takes some time for

5 Teenagers arriving in the Italian port of Lampedusa told workers from Save the Children how migrants from sub-Saharan African countries were often kept below the deck, deprived of water and sunlight". Dearden (2015), quoted in Sharpe (2016).

the viewer to grasp the silhouettes she is looking at. Throughout the film, this discomfort of vision constantly surfaces in the forms of overlapping shadows and blurry lights, as well as field sounds that never fully come into a spectre of familiarity. Technically speaking, images and sounds of Waking Hours are not in low res; and yet, much like Hito Steyerl's *Poor images* (2009), they "operate against the fetish value of high resolution".

The night, Leopold Lambert (2024) writes, is not only a time but also a place – while half of the Earth is in daylight, the other half dives into darkness. While minimal variations occur at the Equator, far south and far northern places can experience very different conditions of luminance across the seasons. At the latitude of the Serbia–Hungary border, the night never ends; much of people's life takes place in the dark forest: the clan organises passages, manages contacts between migrants so that tentative crossings can be attempted. A broader ecology of relations is set in motion through the dark: food delivery, negotiations with taxi drivers and passeurs, clandestine arms exchanges. A community precariously thrives within the woods. As such, the dark shapes the conditions of political agency within the liminal space crafted by the border regime. Night in the forest is also the tranquil spacetime for one's own story, and for recursive storytelling. The film, as the authors reveal, was born from a nocturnal encounter: some people invited them to join their group in the forest. Occasionally, drones were sent out by the police at night to map the place where people hid, so that eviction operations could then be carried out in daylight – included the one that cleared out the forest at last, severing the contacts between the directors and the people on the move.

Darkness fosters protection. As much as the dark of the night allows one not to be seen, its opaqueness turns it into an intimate atmosphere, a protective barrier[6]. Rethinking the forest as a safe space contrasts with its representations as a space of fear. The forest is frightening within cultural imaginaries of films and fairytales; instead, in the Serbian forest, nighttime was the moment of gathering, intimacy and sharing – and the privileged time for filming.

Entre chien et loup

Who inhabits the forest? Half-way through the documentary, the only spoken sequence in the film takes the form of a long monologue delivered by a young man to someone off-scene. He tells stories of encounters, movements and returns, from Afghanistan through the Balkans and then into Europe, and back into the woods. Moving counter-way to the flow, he troubled the linearity of crossing as a one-way trip. His face is softly lit and shadowed by the unruly flames of a bonfire; at some point, he confesses that he came back to this liminal space to help others attempting to cross. Bits of the monologue stop at such a candid disclosure of his role as a *passeur*, or a smuggler, at the border. In the attempt to singularise responsibility for the structural violence of border regimes, securitarian discourses highlight smuggling as the practice that produces death at the border. Deflecting accountability away from institutional grounds and police operations, the smuggler becomes the perfect figure to persecute (Zampano, 2023).

Within the Serbian forest, as Foscarini reminds us, passeurs are not quite fully in focus; they act as helpers, at times as exploiters, while remaining on the move themselves. Without smugglers, he says, some of the routes to Europe could not exist[7]. Contrary to other bordering zones where tragic dynamics are clearer, such as Libya, the forest forecloses easy distinctions. Foscarini further refers to the French expression 'entre le chien et le loup' [between the dog and the wolf], as apt for describing the blurring figure of the migrant / passeur. The expression names the moment where light is so low that the domesticated ground cannot be told apart from the threat. To tell the migrant from the smuggler would arguably determine who must be persecuted, and who instead might be considered apt for a

6 Conversation with the directors, 23rd April 2026.
7 Filippo Foscarini, private conversation with the directors. 23rd April 2026.

form of increasingly weak humanitarian protection.

Will the day come?

To be opaque is to helplessly and yet stubbornly be out of focus, whereas 'focus' is the rationale of a state of constant presentness, ruthlessly determined in bringing into focus a clear distinction between who is to be granted care, agency, rights, and who is not. Being out of focus, Hito Steyerl (2009) reminds referring to Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), is a metonym for outcastness. In Waking Hours, the night that never ends constantly blurs the borders, unfolding as a sustained, inescapable condition.

The Afghan man, far from an either/or figure, inhabits a form of purposed indistinction within darkness. So do the bodies in the film's last sequence. Through the clear visibility promised by the thermal camera, or the proxy of its operational language, the contours of some hundred bodies can be grasped against the forested background – but these figures, as Foscarini remarks, can hardly be read as humans. The spectrality of the thermal ghosts enacts this purposed form of enforced invisibility in aesthetic terms. Forced vision dehumanises them as much as it tries to bring across their sharp contours; through the attempt at individualisation, it blurs their boundaries. "Regardless of its scale, the border takes the self as its subject, defining it in relation to an other" (Axel et al., 2020). Both senses of self and otherness are indistinct within the blurred reality of life at the border; the dark of the forest contains the violence of merging and the tentative promise of potentiality.

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