

THE FAULTS OF DOCUMENTATION. MIGRATION THROUGH AN EXPERIMENT IN FILM PEDAGOGY

EDWIN CULP

Universidad Iberoamericana

DAVID GRIMALDO

Universidad Iberoamericana

Edwin Culp is Professor of Film and Critical Theory at Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México. His research focuses on critical image theory and aesthetics and politics, with a particular interest in the relationships between exclusion and representation in cinema and the arts. He is currently principal investigator of "Interfaces of Images: Mediation, Plasticity, and Political Imagination" (2024–2026).

David Grimaldo is a professional actor. He studied at (BADA) British American Drama Academy (Oxford, England), La Casa del Teatro A.C.(Mexico) and North Lake College (U.S.A.). His work has been presented in Mexico, South America, Asia and Europe. He is currently presenting his one man show, Pocho Sonnet, written and acted by himself. He was awarded with an artistic residency in La Mamma Experimental Theatre in New York. Currently, he is completing his Masters in Film and is a researcher of the "Interfaces of Images" project at Universidad Iberoamericana.

Corresponding author

Edwin Culp
edwin.culp@ibero.mx

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Abstract

This article reflects on the paradoxes of representing exclusion through a pedagogical encounter that investigates the faults of documentation in migration. Dominant representation manages exclusion through figures, where a life's contingencies are condensed into transferable forms — the victim, the dreamer, the resilient subject — in a manner that is compact enough to circulate at the cost of what they leave behind. Through theoretical inquiry and dialogue, we explore how images can resist the circulation of exclusionary figures without abandoning the terrain of representation.

Rather than critiquing the act of looking alone, the article focuses on how the image's materiality resists complete figuration. Drawing on surfaces as sites where this friction operates, we work with figuration's faults — darkness, silence, or blur — as openings where a shared capacity of imagination can emerge.

The dialogue is offered here as an experiment in film pedagogy. David speaks from the experience of being a returning migrant and artist, interviewed by journalists and scholars seeking predetermined narratives; Edwin, a film scholar, questions whether a documentary can avoid reproducing the exclusion it sets out to document. This exchange does not come to a conclusion. The friction between the two positions — and the documentary that remains unfinished — is the method and the finding.

The article suggests that when film pedagogy is faced with exclusion, it can embrace material limitations as invitations for imagination: a shared capacity emerges precisely where mediation is made visible and representation cannot come to a closure.

Keywords: exclusion, documentary, figuration, materiality, imagination, migration, film pedagogy

Introduction: Faults in the Document¹

Representing exclusion risks reproducing it through the very same mechanisms of visibility that promised inclusion. Critiques of exclusion tend to turn against a dominant gaze, proposing new ways of looking, new points of view, less oppressive ways of seeing. Inclusion then becomes a matter of being seen, of gaining rights through visibility. Yet even the fiercest of critiques do not dismantle a visual apparatus that relies on a hierarchical relationship of one subject over others. Who looks and who is looked at may shift, the positions may complicate or be multiplied, but the fundamental structure persists. It should come as no surprise that when those who are subjected to exclusion are given the means to represent their own stories, they often end up reproducing the same power structure they set out to resist.

This visual apparatus goes beyond the physical act of seeing and its errancies: it locates the point of view in a site external to the image, a transcendental and disembodied gaze that presupposes an ideal spectator for whom the image is constructed.² As previously argued: "Critiques of the power of the gaze constantly risk reinforcing it if they do not make a dent in the visual infrastructure of the individual and possessive subject that constitutes it" (Culp, 2024, p. 97). The visibility of exclusion needs to be addressed beyond the question of who is looking and how towards the matter of the images themselves: the surfaces where figuration is produced, and what happens when it fails. The iconoclastic gesture understood this: for the iconoclast, it was not enough to morally condemn those who look at an image. It was necessary to physically destroy it — though not fully, as evidence of the destruction was necessary. As Groys argues, "The destruction of old images embodying

a particular message is not meant to generate new images embodying a new message but rather to highlight the materiality of the medium concealed behind any 'spiritual' message" (Groys, 2008, p. 70). The iconoclast does not destroy the image by condemning who sees it; in fact, iconoclastic gestures make the material medium of the image come to the fore. Images cannot be reduced to objects, but neither can they be separated from their material substrate. Iconoclasts destroy its surface and in doing so, expose what the figure was trying to enclose. Imagination seeps within the cracks, the gaps, the interstices, the faults. It is unfinished and incomplete: the potentiality of an image to come.

A critique of the mechanisms of inclusion does not need to follow the anti-rights movements that have become prevalent in extreme-right politics (Méndez Cota, 2024). The simple inclusion of what has been excluded is always partial — it leaves something behind. It does not necessarily make visible the mechanisms producing exclusion in the first place, and it normalises the demands to incorporate them into the dominant modes of enunciation, generating new and unending series of exclusions. Inclusion is not the opposite of exclusion: it is an integral part of its mechanisms. As Galende writes, "Every exclusion [...] includes the *excluded* or *excludes* including" (Galende, 2011, p. 55). When inclusion becomes the overarching goal in the struggle for rights, it risks enclosing life within the narratives and representations of a system that decides what is to be left out. What is always excluded, finally, is the contingency of life (Galende, 2011).

Undocumented migration to the United States, from and through Mexico, has become one of the most visible effects of life and labour extractivism, as well as the exclusion from political and civil rights. It is a phenomenon that, despite its

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² Critiques of the gaze as a dominant system of visibility have been constant in visual studies from feminist and decolonial perspectives. Seminal texts include: (Mulvey, 1975; Berger, 1978; Silverman, 1996; Bryson, 1983)

constant visibility, remains fundamentally organised clandestinely. Making it visible produces a tension: between denouncing rights violations and exposing the crudest effects of capitalist extractivism and its associated violence on the one hand, while preserving the concealment that border crossing and migrant living requires on the other. The opposition between visibility-as-inclusion and invisibility-as-exclusion is thus questioned: invisibility can become a strategy to avoid exclusion, just as visibility can produce new exclusionary forms.

Migration life experiences, which go beyond and even precede the crossing of a border, are central to extractivist capitalism and have become a crucial subject in contemporary culture. Through forced migration, capital has bodies available for production: a cheap and precarious labour sustained by measures that render migrants' presence illegal, barring them from rights despite their economic contributions. Their exclusion from the legal, social, educational, cultural, and political realms is not merely an identitarian issue; it is a systematic stripping of rights of a decisive sector within the working class, progressively foreclosing the possibility of a demand for dignified living conditions (Rancière, 2006). The figure of the migrant is a body that is constantly traversed by borders and movement.³ These borders cut through bodies, even long after they have been crossed, becoming limits that regulate flows of people in such a way that not everyone can cross them, thus increasing the value of the crossing itself.

Documenting migration means the accumulation of individual stories — the abandonment of precarious or violent contexts, transit routes, border crossings and also, adapting to a new context — through the systemic logic of globalised capitalism and its control of the flow of goods and bodies. It

means avoiding victimisation narratives that reduce the life experiences of migrants to their undocumented status, while not stripping them of the singularity of their experience. It is no accident that the act of documentation is not only associated with film but also with "an administrative procedure for policing boundaries of inclusion within the nation-state" (Schreiber, 2018, p. 4) This does not mean, however, that migratory experiences are themselves disempowering or that they should not be told. In fact, as García Crispín has shown (García Crispín, 2023), migrant narratives — particularly those of women — can open the way to unexpected imaginaries of change. The question becomes how to address these narratives and imaginaries so then inclusion does not reduce their experiences to what the document can enclose.

In terms of representation, inclusion operates through figuration. A figure condenses a life's contingencies into something compact enough to circulate: the victim, the dreamer, the resilient subject. This process of figuration succeeds by detaching life experiences from their context. To include the migrant in representational frameworks, they need to be stripped of other life contingencies. When thinking of migrants, more than likely, we already have a preconceived common image brought forward. Because our imaginations have been hijacked by the dominant figuration, singular and empowering experiences — like learning our first English word or making our first friend in another country — are rarely reproduced. Figuration blocks our imagination from accessing those individual experiences.

Figures bid for a reduction which makes experiences manageable and transferable at the price of their singularity. Dominant figurations force a collapse of images by inhibiting

3 Thomas Nail speaks in a broader sense of the figure of the migrant: "A figure is a social vector or tendency. Insofar as specific individuals take up a trajectory, they are figured by it. [...] Thus, as a figure, the migrant refers both to empirical migrants in the world and a more abstract social relation. It is irreducible to either." (2015, p. 16) From this definition, Nail characterises different figures of human mobility across political boundaries which, in turn, define such boundaries. His proposal is to rethink political theory from the figure of the migrant rather than from citizenship. Our study critically engages with the figure and figuration themselves, especially when their repetition causes them to stand in for singular experiences, collapsing these into abstract relations.

other possibilities to generate from within our imagination. Inclusion, when it comes, tends to come as a repetitive figure that not only contains but reduces life experiences. This article investigates the faults in that operation, the cracks and fractures where figuration does not quite enclose the experience of migration. It does so through an experiment that began from a fault of its own.

David, a filmmaker and theatre artist, returned to Mexico after living in the U.S. for 18 years. It took thirteen years for him to get a visa through an artistic invitation, which finally gave him a way to reconnect with his former life and the places he was raised in. He has been making a documentary about that experience, but the document and its figuration have failed him. This fault has become part of his artistic research project – not something to abandon, but a fault to insist on. Edwin, a film scholar preoccupied with how images produce and reproduce systems of exclusion, could not accompany the process pedagogically as planned. What this failure produced instead is a conversation, presented here as an output on artistic pedagogy. Not a substitute for the documentary, but rather the remains of what a pedagogical encounter puts together when the objective aimed for fails to be accomplished. The emphasis of the conversation and the reflection is not fluidity but friction: the necessary surface contact to enact movement, in which the parts in contact become embedded within one another, the material resistance of the excluded elements in the production of a stable figure. These frictions impede representational closures and work to spark contingent political imagination.

David: Have you ever read a book and then watched the film? Does it not happen often that as soon as the film ends, we say, “The book was better”? That is because during our reading, our imagination was the one, through our experiences, creating a context, with coordinates and a logic of its own.

Edwin: You make an interesting point, but then the question moves to whether imagination is more active when images are not present in front of our eyes. Are there images not already in the reading (except we don’t see them)? Then, why are films so popular, so powerful at inciting the imagination? Does it mean people don’t want to do the work that imagination involves or is it something else? Do the images in films stay with us, produce a sort of aftertaste or a closure of imagination? Can images in films produce cracks and faults in the dominant figurations and their enclosures? If so, how? Can we imagine with our eyes open?

The remains of an unfinished documentary do not mean a complete renunciation of the image. On the contrary, the dialogue that follows is full of images but they are incomplete and fragmented, their figures constantly exceeded by what they cannot enclose. They are subject to the friction between the image and what it cannot contain. The pedagogical gesture of this encounter does not abandon the image; it opens the enclosure of the figure. It allows imagination to bloom from the faults. It follows what Bermúdez-Dini calls an iconoclastic imagination: the renunciation of a single, stable image gives way to the possibility of many images, the sparking of imagination (Bermúdez-Dini, 2024).

The question is not only who looks and how, but what looking cannot account for: the experience figuration fails to contain, the remainder that no stable figure can absorb, the imagination that enters precisely where representation cannot enclose. The materiality of the image tends to resist figuration by making it incomplete and fragmentary. What if we work with the moments where the material resists our attempts to make it signify cleanly? In line with iconoclastic disruptions on the materiality of images, we propose to resist the figuration of exclusion through material means: not creating better representations to replace inadequate ones, but attending to the fissures and blotches where representation inevitably fails, where figures escape their borders, where materiality

announces itself by refusing transparency in the face of meaning.

The article moves as a conversation. Theoretical reflections become interruptions rather than precepts — provocations, not frameworks. Neither voice claims authority over the other. Following what Rancière, after Jacotot, calls the ignorant schoolmaster, the exchange is premised not on transmitting knowledge from one who knows to one who does not, but on a shared question that neither can answer alone (Rancière, 1991). David's lived experience of being extracted from by journalists, scholars, and artists seeking predetermined narratives, and Edwin's theoretical investment in the materiality of images are not reconciled. The result is friction.

Why Do You Want to Tell My Story?

David. The experience with journalists and academics was unpleasant. I'd present my theatre work followed by interviews, but the artistic work, most of the time, passed to a second tier. This was during Trump's first presidential term.

First, they claimed they wanted to make my case "visible." How? By calling me a *Dreamer*. I said no, I don't consider myself a Dreamer, I don't agree with its context and intention. I don't live in the U.S anymore. I'm here in Mexico. Yet scholars, journalists, and artists

kept insisting on that word. *Dreamer*. "How does it feel to have missed out on DACA while being a Dreamer?" I am not missing out on anything; I was in Mexico when DACA was passed. "But you are, because you lived in the U.S. during the term in which Obama was president... so in theory, you are." They kept pushing me into that category.

Second, they always wanted me to criticise Trump. All I wanted was to present my play, but I soon realised their intentions were other. This play didn't come to be because of Trump. It just so happened he was in power, but regardless of who would have been in power, my play would have come out anyway. It is a play that I needed to create. A story I wanted to share. To speak about the moments and words that have not been associated with the immigrant experience, whatever that means.

The first time I noticed these actions, my thoughts were "Maybe they made a mistake." But by the fifth time it happened, I said, "This is what they want to say." It probably gets them more clicks. The word "deported" and/or saying something against Trump, in their narratives, in their minds, made it seem like they were giving this poor young artist — who missed out on DACA because of Trump — a voice. But all of that was



Fig. 1 "Irving". Source: Centro Dramático de Michoacán, 2018



Fig.2 Interview Telesur. Source: TeleSur Noticias (2018). Interview with David Grimaldo [News]. Caracas: TeleSur. Retrieved 2026-05-08 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkXVToXFRv4&t=53s>

miles away from the truth. They were speaking about migration to include some emotional, sad immigrant story that included my name. They wanted a face and a name, but they never really wanted my experience. I've had approximately fifteen interviews with journalists and scholars from many backgrounds during the time I was presenting my play, asking me to share my story. All of them promised to share the final article, the final visual product, and even an artistic piece. So far, I've only gotten word back from one of them with their final project.

In one of those interviews, I directly asked: "Why do you want to tell my story?"

This journalist responded: "Because it's important and I think people need to hear and read it."

I agree. But I can tell my own story. I am an artist, an actor. I can tell my own story the way I want to.

The journalist stayed silent for a long time. After a few seconds, I asked once again: Why do you want to tell my story?

"I won't if you don't want me to."

It's not that I don't want you to. I just would like to know your reasons and what makes my story appealing to you.

Most scholars and journalists don't expect confrontation. They are not willing to elaborate on their

reason or need to tell migrant stories. Most of them believe we'll say yes right away. They are so easily demotivated when confronted. But why? They ask several questions but the person being interviewed can't ask one?

Edwin. We are walking on a blade here. On the one hand, you have the dominant media narratives that want to make you into a figure, almost a victim of the system, sensationalised, framed in whatever way will get more clicks or readers. Academics work the same way: it makes a text more interesting if it says, "I spoke directly with someone who suffered the consequences and so I am putting their voice here." That is also using that voice.

On the other hand, the other risk is more complicated. If we decide that the problem is that migrants are not the ones speaking, then the solution is to give them their voice "back," to hand them a camera, or to run a workshop so they learn how to use it. The gesture is condescending in each case. I open the space for *you*. The camera changes hands, but the

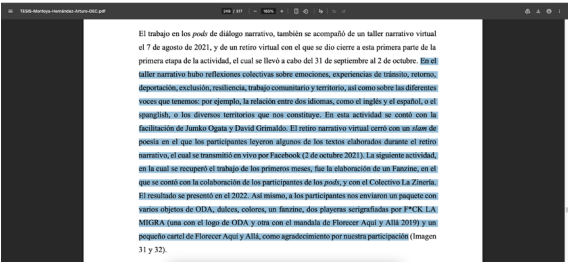


Fig. 3 Thesis. Source: Hernández, A. M. (2022). *De aquí y de allá: identidades colectivas y performance cultural en el activismo de migrantes de retorno de la generación 1.5 en México*. Colegio de la Frontera Norte. <https://posgrado.colef.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/TESIS-Montoya-Hern%C3%A1ndez-Arturo-DEC.pdf>



Fig. 4 Univision. Source: N+ Univision 34 Los Angeles. (2018). 'Irving', la obra de teatro de un dreamer para invitar a los migrantes a convertirse en dueños de su propio destino [News]. Los Angeles: Univision. Retrieved 8 May, 2026 from <https://www.univision.com/local/los-angeles-kmex/irving-la-obra-teatral-de-un-dreamer-que-alienta-a-los-migrantes-a-salir-de-las-sombras>



Fig. 5 Theatre Festival. Source: 27º Festival Internacional de Teatro Universitario. (2019). Teatro para Aliens. <https://www.facebook.com/share/1BLVcFCycz/?mibextid=wwXlfr>

frame does not. It ends up being the same way to represent migration, except now you hold the camera. The uneven relation of power appears when someone with broader capital knowledge hands the camera to someone who feels disenfranchised by the experience. The person receiving the camera will only try to emulate or seek approval from the person with the “greater” knowledge. The how remains and it’s even stronger now.

So there are two problems at once. The first is the dominant system extracting from those it has already oppressed. The second is that speaking for oneself doesn’t necessarily interrupt the system of oppression.

David. Anyone can tell these stories. I believe that. *Línea de sombra*, my short film about a fifteen-year-old girl who has to choose between her quinceañera

(Sweet 15) or her father’s return. Can I not speak on this because I’m not a woman or because I’m not fifteen? That doesn’t seem right. It’s like saying: “How can you be against capitalism and have an iPhone?” Reality pushes us into that.

So I don’t rule out the possibility of someone speaking on certain topics only because they haven’t lived the experience of being returned or deported, in this case. Go ahead, do it.

Something I will say is that we need to accept the reactions it can produce. We cannot talk about a topic and then walk away from the reaction or opinions. We need to own our share of responsibility. We need to have it in mind that even though we see the final credits of the documentary, the person whose story is being shared is still going on. The Pandora’s box we opened is still open and it doesn’t necessarily close with the final credits.

Edwin. The question is how.

David. The *how* is knowing there will be backlash. What bothers me when I have been interviewed is that they come at me with metaphors, with pretty words. The minimum we can do when we approach a topic is hope that a person close to these experiences says: "At least they didn't turn me into a metaphor." I'll finish with three final thoughts. First, a journalist, scholar, or artist should not be thin skinned when being confronted. Second, they should not approach topics (in this case, migration) ignoring that they have the high ground, and third, they should have it in mind that no one is being saved or discovered. I call this last one the Anthony Bourdain and the National Geographic syndrome. Nowadays, everyone can erroneously believe they are filming the trending global news or discovering THE taco shop.

Edwin. After all, metaphors are rhetorical figures. It is the same concern: how do we keep those figures from capturing us, from enclosing us, from telling us who we are? Inclusion always comes at a price. You are included, but under certain conditions, through certain ways of telling. Not as an artist. Not as an actor. Your only possibility is to become an author of books on migration.

David. Easier said than done. But something worth pursuing.

Against the Figure

David: Something I see often is that whoever talks about us never seems to think outside the same handful of symbols. When you picture an undocumented migrant, you picture a desert, housekeeping, ICE, mean gringos. Now Trump again. The vocabulary

is closed. The images kill any other possibilities, they annihilate imagination.

For scholars, an undocumented person can only dream when there is an obstacle in the way. What about the goals we did achieve? Pursuing a career in acting, for example. Where was that in the interviews? We get associated with hardship, with distance, with constant pain. Yes, there is much of that in the experience, and I am not denying it. But what I am saying is that those adjectives can put a distance between us and our reality.

And then there is the word *resilient*. I hate it. Nobody asked if we wanted to be resilient. We have no option. We have to eat, go to the store and buy groceries, buy clothes, and do daily errands. We have to go out, regardless of whether we fear immigration or not. As an undocumented immigrant, I did not even know what *resilient* meant. But since you have been the ones writing our stories for the most part, and you want to write in a clever manner, you have to use clever adjectives such as *resilient*.

Stop with the emotional music and the magical allegories. There is nothing colourful about forced separation. It is not metaphorical. It hurts, burns, tears you apart, fills you with resentment. It is raw. I am so fed up with our stories ending in hope. Hope for what? Citizenship? An amnesty? I have been hearing about hope since I was four years old, as a baby undocumented human. A year after arriving in the U.S. Imagine that.

Edwin: But "raw" is itself an aesthetic category, a framing choice. Documentaries never show things "as they are"—framing and editing always construct. Rejecting metaphor proposes a different aesthetic. A visual figure is what stands out and becomes recognisable, a character that detaches from the ground. When inclusion works figuratively, it relies on



Fig. 6 Machine. Source: Grimaldo, D. (2024)

finding resemblances for different experiences. Life's contingencies then become enclosed in the norms of resemblance. The multiplication of testimonies in the media does not fracture the figure: each new instance confirms a form that audiences and institutions already recognise. The figure is not undone by being repeated, but by material intervention.

Iconoclastic gestures have long produced a destruction of the image that goes beyond any critique from within the gaze. The iconoclast does not condemn who looks at an image; they obliterate, mutilate, or vandalise its surface and in doing so, expose what the figure had been working to enclose. The destruction of an image exposes the materiality the figure was concealing. Often, adding paint or mutilating it does not mean to completely annul the image, but to physically alter its surface, to display the damage done to the figure. Feminist or anti-racist interventions of monuments in public space by painting them until the figure dissolves into colour, into its surfaces, or by bringing a statue down and leaving its empty stand, become constant reminders that the figures need to be resisted.

Iconoclasm has not always come from resistance. Throughout history, it has served structures of power and domination: regimes obliterating prior beliefs, consolidating their own images over those they replaced. As Freedberg

has argued (2021), the gesture speaks to the power we give to images and the force required to destroy them. What interests us here is the other direction: iconoclastic gestures that arise from a confrontation with domination and its representations, stressing the points of friction with the images disseminated to consolidate hegemony. Tsing defines friction as: "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing, 2005, p. 4). Friction is not only synonymous with resistance; it is the sticky materiality through which power moves, like the grip of a wheel on a road, at once, the condition of the capital's movement and the condition of its potential interruption. It is the encounter between surfaces that leaves neither of them intact. From that irreversible and asymmetric graze, energy is produced, and a spark can be ignited. Where figures are produced to minimise friction and circulate without consequence, repeating and imposing the inclusion mould, iconoclastic interventions reintroduce it: the crossing-out, the obliteration, the colour stain, the cut. These do not replace one stable image with another. They make the surface resist, and in that resistance, open the image to its own material conditions.

David. I realised my documentary is fictional based on non-fictional events. I want the audience to identify new axes in the immigrant experience, and I want someone who went through similar experiences to be spoken to, starting in the imagination. I have stopped, but I know I will still be filming *Return-no*. The premise is simple. After more than a 10-year immigration bar, I will present my play in Texas, where I used to live. But what really happened was that I went to New York first. No one I knew growing up was there. The montage and editing rearrange all of that and I will make that evident. The document is [a worn and eroded] fiction.

A teacher of mine once said I am more what I didn't film than the images I did film. That sentence has stayed with me. The footage is partly a personal



Fig. 7 Fields and Rest. Source: Grimaldo, D. (2024)

archive. Going back to my high school, having my first pig in the blanket after 13 years, even walking the streets, which is not very common in Texas. All that actually happened when I had no camera with me, no music, and no other person. Just me. How can I present those moments? The nerves I had at the immigration checkpoint. I keep looking for images in my personal archive but they don't quite seem to present what I experienced. At times, I feel the best way to do this documentary is leaving a black screen for an hour with no sound and no images.

Edwin. What you are describing is not a defeat. It is the beginning of the work. A documentary that leaves distance as perceptible, where the viewer can notice someone has been there. Contrary to what the press and academics do, your documentary does not need to announce itself loudly. It is enough that the effort stays visible: the music that sits awkwardly under the clip, the cut that does not pretend to be a continuity, the location that takes the audience to a different non-Texas location and does not bother to disguise its flaws.

In film and documentary, this gesture takes on a different weight. A film that hides its arrangement, that places music under a clip where music was not playing, that passes one

location for another, produces smooth figuration. The iconoclastic move is to leave the arrangement as visible, working with its layers, making its interfaces apparent: the cut that does not pretend continuity, the editing that does not cover its tracks, the image that admits it is a reconstruction. This is a friction interfering with the figures of the migrant that film and other media would otherwise reproduce. Wearing at their contours and eroding the resemblances that allow them to circulate, until something other than the recognised form remains.

David: When we see a U.S. ID, what do you see? A document. For an undocumented immigrant, it is not a document — it is an impossible line to cross. A rejection. Something that can be the difference between staying and being deported, and that is practically impossible to obtain without legal status. The same object, the same figure, enclosing entirely different lives.

This matters when thinking of exclusion. Stable figures of the excluded circulate too smoothly precisely because they require no imaginative work from the viewer. The risk of inclusion is not that it remains insufficient, but that it absorbs life into forms the system already recognises. To work against it does not mean producing better figures to replace the bad ones. It means interrupting the figure but also attending to what escapes the figure: the ground, the blotch, the remainder, and the contingencies the figure had to leave out in order to circulate.

Material Absences

David. Honestly, I think the real stories happen when nobody is around. When there's no camera. The sound of many of our stories is silence.



Fig.8 Start. Source: Grimaldo, D. (2025)

Edwin. There is no such thing as pure silence. If the sound of your stories is silence, then silence is doing something. It is not nothing.

David. When I say silence, I do not mean no sound. I mean the experience of being unperceived. Silence is patched with images that are produced in our imaginations. The absence of being recognised. I remember calling my mom from a payphone. This was around 2010, when you still fed coins into a machine on the street. I had four coins left, my last four. I put them in. The machine took them and the call did not go through. I did not get to speak with my mom. Around me, the city was at full volume. Cars, music, people, at three in the afternoon on a street in the middle of everything. All I could hear was the silence in that phone speaker.

Edwin. Silence does not become a figure. It stays on the ground. It is present and it appears as an absence.

What we call silence is part of the material ground of an image: what we do not normally pay attention to, noticed only when a specific sound is not there. Silence is the material presence of an absence. The figure separates from the ground in order to be recognised. Silence comes from the ground and refuses that separation.

Working on the figures in Fra Angelico's *Noli me tangere*, Georges Didi-Huberman (1995) notices a series of stains in the grass, blotches that seemed to imitate nothing in particular and were strangely "nonfigurative." These blotches could resemble blood or crosses, but were not exactly anything recognisable; they are thus regarded as dissemblant. They stand "between the form and the formless, what we could call the

figurative figure and the virtual figure" (Didi-Huberman, 1995, p. 59). Dissemblance is a paradoxical process of the figure: one where figuration touches disfiguration, where the formation of a figure simultaneously abandons it. The blotches do not refuse the image; they are the sites where the image does not close. There, the figure can also open beyond the present towards a continuous prefiguration: not a determinate future, but the contingent opening of possible images, which we associate with imagination.

It is in this sense of prefiguration that Nail brings the figure of the migrant to bear on political theory: "The migrant is not only empirical but also prefigures a new model of political membership and subjectivity still in its early stages" (Nail, 2015, p. 17). Once freed from the closures of its figure, the migrant does not settle into a defined political horizon but holds it open as contingent. Our concern is adjacent but distinct. Where Nail's prefiguration operates at the level of political membership, what interests us is what happens at the level

of the image: the material conditions of the migratory experience generate friction that resists any stable figuration, and it is in that resistance — in the silence, the blotch, the dissemblant remainder — that imagination enters not as a political program but as a contingent opening.

What we call silence is actually the audible form of this relation: not the lack of sound but the presence of an absence in the materiality of the auditory image. Interviewers listen for a voice that can be lifted out and placed in their text. The silence the voice was sitting in does not travel with it. They take the transferable figure, and the ground stays where it was. To work with silence as matter is to work with that dissemblant residue, the experience the figure had to leave behind in order to circulate, and to let it disfigure rather than resolve into the next recognisable form. For Mondzain, this iconoclastic gesture makes it such that "seeing the image is equivalent to detecting, in the visible, the presence of an absence" (Mondzain, 2010, p. 310). To detect an absence in the visible is not to fill



Fig. 9 Home? Source: Grimaldo, D. (2024)

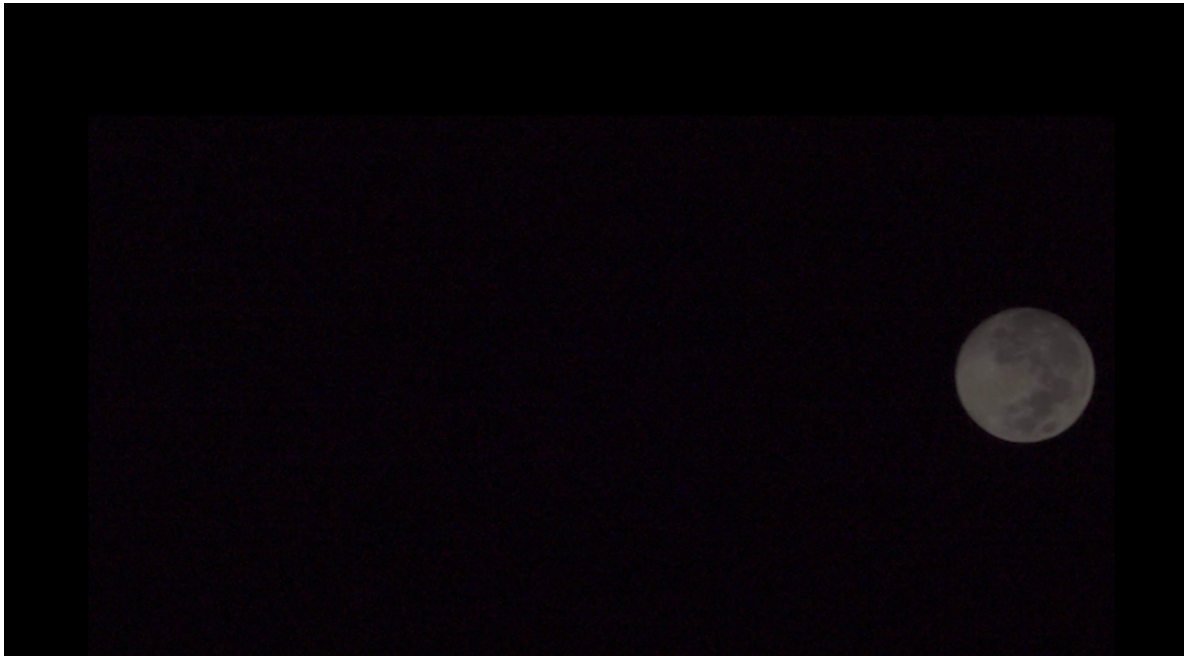


Fig. 10 End. Source: Grimaldo, D. (2025)

it back in. It is to register that the visible is held open by what does not appear in it.

Perhaps to loosen the figurations that make exclusion possible, we need to move from figuration to material disfiguration, and, finally, to prefiguration, which is a process that starts as dissemblance in relation to the imagination. Imagination is a faculty we all share, our commonality, as it is “a way to reorganize the world in a different, more just, way.” (Didi-Huberman, 2020, p. 9). It is on the surface where images can exert friction and resist, where they reveal their porosity and their fissures, where their seeming and appearing take us by surprise, and where the imagination is activated. This imagination slips through the cracks of the matter of images, in the places where the image represents nothing: a stain on the canvas, pixels in the image, the grain in a photograph, and the material silence that is heard when one has become speechless.

Towards a Pedagogy of Imagination

The faults in the document began from what the figure could not enclose, in the interstices already present in the material productions of inclusion: the places where figuration thins out, where the matter of images resists being pure representation. This paper is not a substitute for a documentary in the making, but it raises the question of what a pedagogical encounter can produce when the figure it aimed for refuses to close. It is not a call to abandon images of migration, nor to destroy their figures iconoclastically and start from nothing. It is a call to insist on them: to intervene in existing figures, to attend to their material resistances, to let the tensions within the figuration lead the way. How can one set up existing figures of inclusion for disfiguration and prefiguration? How can one incite dissemblance and spark a shared imagination?

At some point in our early lives, some of us stopped drawing. Or at least, we stopped thinking our drawings were good. Not because we lost the ability, but because the norms of figuration were introduced: a drawing that does not resemble what it set out to show is wrong, and the resistance of pencil and paper to our intentions becomes error. The errors became failures. What was lost was not skill but the willingness to stay with what the material produced when it resisted the intention, to remain with the dissemblant image rather than to discard it for falling short of resemblance.

A pedagogy of imagination would need to move past the norms of figuration. Its goal is not to produce artists or finished works, but to embrace accidents and errors, the line that went where it was not intended, the shape that emerged from the friction between the hand and the page, as the sites where imagination is activated rather than foreclosed. It is grounded in an art education that centres on the processes rather than the results, that “asks us to observe, to try, to make mistakes, and to return to what has been done” (García Crispín, 2026, p. 49).

The fault is not the end of the work but where it begins. Where figuration fails and imagination enters — through the crack, the blotch, or the silence that stays in the ground — is where the experiences that no figure can enclose find a way to appear. Documentaries still hold on to possibilities in this direction: not when it sets out to document the undocumented, to capture and circulate the migrant experience as a recognisable figure, but when it turns toward the faults of figuration itself — the friction, the material resistance, the silence the receiver does not transmit — and lets those be what the camera attends to.

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