



Migration Narratives through Visual and Linguistic Signs

Amer Fathi **AL-gharaibeh**¹, *Mowafaq **Alsaggar**², & Monther **Al-Atoum**³

¹Drama Department. Faculty of Fine Arts, Yarmouk University. Irbid, Jordan.

²Department of Visual Art. Faculty of Fine Arts, Yarmouk University.
Irbid, Jordan.

³Department of Visual Art. Faculty of Fine Arts, Yarmouk University.
Irbid, Jordan.

*Corresponding author: Email. alsagar@yu.edu.jo

Abstract

The research examines a documentary film that follows Nigerian migrants traveling to Europe through Morocco to understand how visual and linguistic semiotics create meaning during this complex migration process. The research applies theoretical models from Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Pierre Guiraud, and Michel Foucault's power concepts, as well as existential philosophy from Heidegger and Sartre, to analyze how visual and linguistic signs come together to tell a cohesive story in the film. The narrative illustrates the mental, social, and political obstacles that migrants face, either reinforcing or challenging existing perspectives on identity and migration. The research showcases how visual and linguistic elements converge to depict various migration realities, as well as the avoidance of common stereotypes to provide profound insights into the human and political aspects of contemporary migration. This research establishes an analytical framework that can be applied to analyze other documentary films, contributing to academic discussions on semiotics, migration studies, and visual and linguistic text analysis.

Keywords: cultural identity, discourse analysis, documentary film, linguistic semiotics, migration, visual semiotics

Introduction

Different psychological elements, alongside social factors and political dynamics, produce major difficulties that affect individuals and their communities during the process of migration.

Documentary art, through its detailed visual-linguistic structure, demonstrates complex migration experiences by showcasing the suffering and hopes of migrants. This research analyzes a 2023 documentary that follows Nigerian migrants who traveled through Morocco to Europe to understand how visual and linguistic semiotics display this human experience, including its multiple and conflicting aspects.

The Nigerian filmmaker Ike Enyeama, from Nollywood, decided to flee to Europe when he was eighteen but abandoned his plans due to threats in Mauritania. His travels took him to various locations until he chose the typical route that migrants take to enter European territories. Ike left Nigeria in 1998 because he believed that young people, including himself, faced limited opportunities for better prospects, such

as financial gain and dignity. His failed escape attempt led him to spend time in The Gambia before returning to share his migration plans with his family.

Motivated by migrant suffering images on social media, Ike started his migration journey while documenting his experiences to understand why African youth risk their lives to reach Europe.

This research is based on a triangulation of Saussure's foundational semiotic theories with advancements by Barthes and Fairclough, alongside Foucault's studies of power and knowledge, and existential concepts from Heidegger and Sartre. The analysis utilizes these theoretical triangulation to examine through visual and linguistic signs the discursive strategies of the migrants' narrative of their experiences, which incorporate psychological, social, and political elements. The research also examines linguistic diversity, silence, repetition, and security discourse through an extensive analysis of visual elements, which includes lighting, colour effects, composition, and camera movement. The film uses structural and

semantic visual and linguistic semiotic elements to create an existential and social critique of migration that goes beyond basic representations. The academic field has shown a growing interest in migration visual and cinematic representations, and this research contributes to this expanding body of work. The research aims to improve theoretical discussions about documentary cinematic text analysis through semiotic theories combined with critical philosophy, to establish a comprehensive analytical framework that addresses modern migration complexities.

This article contributes three interrelated aspects to the scholarship of migration documentaries and the visual cultures of borders. First, it focuses on "From Nigeria to Morocco: A Journey in Search of a Better Life in Europe", a documentary that, despite its distinctive perspective as a Nigerian-directed, trans-African account of mobility, has received little sustained academic attention. Second, the article presents an integrated framework that treats visual and linguistic semiotic elements as mutually constitutive modalities for constructing affect, moral evaluation, and identity in films, rather than as separate domains. Third, the analysis

combines classical semiotic theory, existential philosophy, and contemporary debates on border visibility to show how Nigerian migration narratives complicate and sometimes invert dominant European portrayals of migrants as either victims or invaders. Thus, the article demonstrates how a single, carefully analyzed documentary can generate broader insights into the emotional and political grammars of African–European migration.

Statement of the Problem

Migration remains one of the most complex social phenomena in our contemporary global environment because it combines psychological and cultural phenomena with economic and political elements, generating survival-level difficulties for migrants. The representation of migration in documentary films usually foregrounds direct humanitarian elements while neglecting the visual and linguistic signs that shape narrative experiences. Although there is a growing body of work exploring the visualization of migration and documentary representations of refugees and border regimes, only few studies offer detailed, integrated analyses of visual and linguistic semiotic elements in documentaries about African migration.

Closing this gap requires analytical methods that can simultaneously attend to images, sounds, and verbal discourse in cinematic texts. Extant research on documentary cinematic texts that utilize visual and linguistic semiotics requires an analytical framework that combines these elements for a comprehensive evaluation.

The analysis of how documentary films construct narrative discourses about migration through visual and linguistic elements to depict the psychological, social, and political aspects of migration underpins the problem of this research.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The documentary film under study showcases Nigerian migrants moving to Europe. The study aims to explore how visual elements and language shape identity dynamics, power structures, and migrant exposure to risk. It focuses on how Nigerian-European migration is portrayed in documentaries using visual and linguistic semiotics. Specifically, the study intends to: (i) explore changes in identity, power relations, and obstacles faced by migrants, and (ii) evaluate storytelling techniques employed in the documentary by studying visual and linguistic components together to build complete migration narratives.

This research is significant to migration scholarship as it reveals migrant experiences through their power conflicts, identity battles, and emotional and existential challenges. The research employs visual and linguistic semiotics to develop complex narrative systems that depict the full migrant experience. Through documentary film, the research demonstrates the external migration process and the internal psychological, social, and political challenges faced by Nigerian migrants moving to Europe. It identifies signs that play a crucial role in shaping migrant power dynamics, identity formation, and existence, while demonstrating their importance in understanding the social impact of documentary cinema.

Scope of the Study

The study examines various signs, including visual elements, linguistic elements, silence, repetition, and security discourse, to understand how documentary cinema depicts migration. Combining images with language produces multiple narratives about migration that examine identity, power dynamics, and existence. The research develops an analytical system that improves the interpretation of cinematic texts by combining philosophical evaluation, semiotic analysis, and social-

political assessment. The study presents innovative methods for studying migration through visual arts and demonstrates that documentary cinema is an effective tool for analyzing modern issues.

Theoretical Framework

The current study adopts a triangulation of Saussure's foundational semiotic theories with advancements by Barthes and Fairclough, alongside Foucault's studies of power and knowledge, and existential concepts from Heidegger and Sartre as theoretical framework. Semiotic analysis offers a particularly productive lens for understanding the social and political dimensions and identity developments in migration documentaries. This approach examines how artistic and media texts create meaning, tracing linguistic signs and their relationship to different interpretations of reality. The current semiotic framework (Saussure's theory of the sign) aligns with the historical progress of cultural and media research approaches, emphasizing the need for theories to explain visual and linguistic signs as vital components in migration studies.

According to Saussure (1916/1983), linguistic signs consist of signifiers

representing sounds or visual elements and signifieds representing mental concepts. Signs function arbitrarily, with meanings established through social agreements and differential structures rather than direct connections to real-world objects. This model explains how documentary films develop identity narratives using various semiotic codes that adapt to social and cultural contexts.

Barthes (1972) distinguishes between denotation and connotation in his theory of the sign, where denotation offers a literal interpretation while connotation carries cultural and ideological significance. Through this distinction, researchers can track how signs evolve within cultural and ideological frameworks. Barthes utilizes "myth" as an analytical tool to unveil the discursive frameworks that uphold dominant ideological narratives. In migration and identity media discourse, "myth" is used to depict migrants as tragic heroes or victims, overlooking the political and social mechanisms that shape these portrayals. The analysis of these ideologies by scholars shows their power to control audience interpretation as well as their ability to either reinforce or break down these myths (Chouliaraki, 2012; Hall, 2022).

Pierre Guiraud (1975) expanded semiotics by demonstrating that visual signs operate as part of a linguistic system through syntactic rules following image grammar at syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. Through these analytical levels, researchers gain the ability to analyze the elements of visual images along with their meanings while understanding how audiences connect with them within social and cultural frameworks. Modern research has advanced this theory to study complex visual film elements, including lighting, colour, movement, and composition, which merge with linguistic texts to form unified meanings (Rose, 2010 ; Manovich, 2001). Research

Migration, Borders and Visuality: Existing Scholarship

A growing body of academic literature on migration cinema and border regimes has drawn attention to the fact that images of migrants are never neutral reflections of reality, but rather are embedded within the broader visual politics that shape how mobility is recognized, experienced, and governed. Researchers have demonstrated how documentaries, news videos, and online videos inform "European border imaginaries," presenting migrants as either humanitarian victims, economic

threats, or anonymous bodies at sea. This body of work suggests that images do more than document suffering; they also shape emotional responses such as empathy, fear, and indifference. Consequently, they influence mass debates about which lives are grievable, governable, or expendable.

In this respect, Sandra Ponzanesi's work is particularly intriguing. Drawing on her analysis of films relevant to contemporary European art, she argues that shipwrecks, camps, and weddings are elements of a visual apparatus that negotiates Europe's borders and identities. Rather than treating celebrations and catastrophes as distinct presentation styles, Ponzanesi shows how they work together to maintain an ambivalent affective economy. In this economy, migrants are simultaneously incorporated into and excluded from social, political, and spatial realms. Her analysis of "shipwrecks and weddings" shows how cinematic images depict Europe as a space of possibility and danger, hospitality and closure in deeply gendered and racialized ways. Building on Ponzanesi's idea that border images operate within complex systems of visibility and emotion, this article shifts the focus from European films to a

Nigerian documentary that explores migration routes across Africa.

Yener Bayramoğlu's concept of "border countervisuality" adds another dimension to the discussion. Through migrant-produced mobile phone videos of border crossings, Bayramoğlu argues that these images challenge top-down, state-oriented perspectives on border control and humanitarian surveillance by highlighting disjointed, embodied, and precarious narratives. These low-resolution, improvised recordings offer subliminal visual narratives of waiting, exhaustion, and resistance that transcend traditional notions of rescue and security. Though *From Nigeria to Morocco: A Journey in Search of a Better Life in Europe* is a professionally produced documentary, not a smartphone video diary, it shares with these countervisual practices a concern with the destabilization of dominant ways of seeing migrants. By emphasizing Nigerian voices, existential introspection, and everyday sights of urban misery along the route, the film reimagines familiar visual motifs — forests, fences, boats, and camps — from the perspective of West African experience. Analyzing this documentary alongside Ponzanesi's and Bayramoğlu's work thus clarifies how the film simultaneously participates

in and subtly subverts modern visual regimes of borders and mobility.

Methodological Approach and Case Selection

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology incorporating visual and linguistic semiotic analysis. Instead of making statistical generalizations, the article provides an in-depth analysis of a documentary, mapping how meaning is constructed through repeated images, sounds, and verbal expressions. While semiotic analysis is not the only method for studying migration documentaries—interviews, ethnography, audience research, and production studies can also provide valuable insights—it is particularly well-suited to the present study. Since the article explores how specific visual and linguistic choices shape emotions, moral considerations, and identity positions, a semiotic approach allows for a more thorough investigation of framing, colour, lighting, montage, language choice, silence, and repetition as interconnected systems of signs.

The decision to focus on *From Nigeria to Morocco: A Journey in Search of a Better Life in Europe* is both empirical and conceptual. The documentary offers a

sustained encounter with Nigerian perspectives on migration to Europe, which is important and engaging. It takes place across several African countries, not focusing on the arrival on European shores as the main pivot point of the migration process. Created for DW Documentary, the film visits Nigeria, the Sahel, Morocco, and European destinations. It represents the everyday realities of urban poverty as well as mediated spaces, such as forests, camps, and border fences. Conceptually, the documentary represents a suitable data for semiotic analysis due to the complex interplay of visual and linguistic motifs, such as handheld and static camera angles, dark colours and locations, and multilingual dialogue, silences, and repeated phrases about "paradise," "freedom," and "death." This combination allows us to explore the film's construction of complex emotional atmospheres consisting of hope, fear, waiting, and exhaustion.

This documentary is not chosen randomly. There has been a noticeable scarcity in the literature on migration cinema, which has mainly been dominated by European-directed films and spectacular scenes of sea crossings in the Mediterranean (Ponzanesi, 2016). By centering a Nigerian director who is

aware of his own migration plans and of the "fragile narratives" circulating among youth, the article offers an alternative view of the visual and linguistic politics of mobility. In this respect, the case study is analytically generalizable: while the findings are based on a single film, they respond to larger debates on how African migration is viewed, narrated, and contested in current documentary practices.

Overview of the documentary, *From Nigeria to Morocco*

The documentary "From Nigeria to Morocco: A Journey in Search of a Better Life in Europe (DW Documentary, 2023), traces the journey of a group of Nigerian migrants seeking a better life in Europe as they travel across West and North Africa. Directed and narrated by Ike Enyeama, the film follows their journey through Nigeria, the Sahel, and Morocco before reaching Spanish territory. The film alternates between observational scenes, such as nighttime bus rides, forest scenes, and glimpses of city outskirts, and interviews, narration, and voice-over commentary. It also includes brief encounters with state officials and smugglers. Rather than portraying migration as a linear path from departure to arrival, the film highlights moments of waiting, uncertainty, and

suspended time in forests, informal settlements, and non-places. The production setting is also significant.

As a Nigerian filmmaker who aspired to migrate himself, Enyeama explicitly reflects on the "fragile narratives" that play out in the lives of young Nigerians and diaspora members, and on the social media images of success and shipwrecks shaped by the imaginations of Europe. By incorporating his personal reflections into the cinematic narrative, the documentary blurs the lines between subjective testimony and journalistic storytelling. Its dissemination via DW Documentary places it on transnational media circuits that extend to a broad audience spanning Europe, Africa, and beyond. This makes the film an important case study for understanding how visual and linguistic semiotics co-produce migration as an existential, political, and affective experience of the early 2020s.

A Visual and Philosophical Semiotic Analysis of Migration and Urban Misery Representation in the Documentary Film: A Study of Meaning Construction and Identity

Saussure's theory establishes that signs emerge from signifiers and signified components, deriving their meanings

from interactions with other system elements rather than from inherent connections to reality (Saussure, 2023). The forest and borders function as signs in the visual semiotic system of the film rather than existing as natural places. The forest is portrayed as a marginalized physical space, gaining meaning by standing apart from city centers and detention centers through low camera angles, dark colours, and dim lighting that establish a narrative of marginalization (Ponzanesi, 2019). The forest exists as an unacknowledged legal and human space in the film, standing outside conventional boundaries. The visual presentation of the forest through low camera angles and dark lighting creates an atmosphere of isolation and concealment, symbolizing legal and existential fragility. The forest stands as a transitional area between survival and destruction, self and erasure, as the migrant loses their cultural identity.

The film presents borders as powerful visual systems of surveillance rather than as simple transition points. Borders are depicted as controlled areas where surveillance technology dominates through thermal cameras, drones, barbed wire, and military force. These scenes deliver dual operational value by establishing a visual language of "visible

power" that controls, rejects, and monitors (Mirzoeff, 2023). During nighttime scenes, migrants appear as red dots against the darkness when viewed through thermal imaging technology. Through this vision, migrants lose their human identity, becoming mere targets rather than individuals. According to Roland Barthes, the image serves as both a literal depiction and a cultural narrative that transforms actual events into myths (Barthes, 2020). Security technology creates the "myth of danger," eliminating human aspects through detached thermal vision.

The visual discourse extends throughout all camera movements and framing techniques in the film. Filmmakers employ handheld camera methods, conveying emotional distress and travel anxiety directly to the audience's physical responses. This filmmaking technique removes viewers' ability to control their perspective, allowing them to experience what migrants endure during their journey. The camera's unsteadiness symbolizes internal breakdown and chaos, according to Pierre Guiraud, who studies vision as a symbolic system equivalent to language (Guiraud, 1975). The internal perspective of the camera immerses

viewers in the Melilla fence mass surge, allowing them to join the action rather than observe from the outside. The sequence alternates between physical expressions and vocalizations to produce a multisensory impact that exceeds typical visual experiences, according to Laura Marks, who terms it "tactile visibility" (Marks, 2000).

The semiotic elements extend beyond movement to incorporate colour and light design. The film maintains a colour palette of natural tones, including brown, gray, and dark blue, showcasing the process of deterioration and creating a dim visual environment that reflects the notion of "transit as loss of identity." The lighting throughout the film appears dim, originating from artificial sources such as flashlights, phones, and moonlight, creating an ambiance of confusing ambiguity. A detention center's lighting system creates a beam of light hitting a young female migrant's face as she descends into darkness. This image represents the "power of the overseeing gaze," showing the self being watched and stripped bare without a chance to respond in various scenes throughout the film (Mirzoeff, 2023). (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Interior Bus Scene Showing Migrants Crossing at Night under Dim Light Reflecting Visual Isolation and symbolic Absence of Identity

Note. Culled from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGrIXSyILjU&t=428s>

In Figure 1, the camera captures the inside of a nighttime bus where migrants

establishing a sense of visual control that allows the viewer to observe these



find themselves bathed in a dark blue light that dominates the space above. The facial features of the figures are shrouded in darkness, causing their identities to fade away completely. Augé (2023) refers to the use of colour and light as symbolic visual cues that convey "social non-existence" and "visual erasure," as described by Barthes (2020) in image myth theory. The individuals inside the bus appear silent, facing forward, with their faces obscured and their names and voices unheard. The camera takes a position behind the seats,

suspended lives without the ability to intervene (Mirzoeff, 2023).

The lighting in this scene functions as a complete semiotic system, creating symbolic distinctions between disappearance and integration by placing light between the foreground and background, thus portraying each body as temporarily waiting in an unfinished space. In Pierre Guiraud's terms, the image operates as a "visual phrase" within a symbolic visual system (Guiraud, 1975).

These images engage in a visual dialogue about transportation and vulnerability, showcasing people vanishing in space before emerging as moving shapes within deep shadows. The arrangement of light and colour serves as a tool for conveying meaningful semantic content in this specific context. Similar visual motifs

recur in camps, bus stations, and ports, existing solely as empty transitional zones. These locations are incomplete spaces that Augé (2023) identifies as "non-places." These voids lack names, faces, or details, transforming into symbols of identity loss (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Outskirts of Nigeria – A Passing Car Scene Showing an Industrial Pillar, Shantytowns, and Extended Garbage on the Edges.



Note. Culled from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGrIXsYLjU&t=428s>

The scene in Figure 2 captures a comprehensive view of urban distress, encapsulated within a single frame. It features a large concrete pillar, dilapidated tin houses, and trash, strewn about the road. Captured from the inside of a moving vehicle, the camera creates a feeling of fast movement by capturing this unstable scene. According to

Saussure, the elements work together as a "system of differences" because meaning emerges from comparisons between this scene and European notions of "orderly" cities.

According to Roland Barthes, the image functions as a mythological tool because it reduces Africa to the mere display of

misery, backwardness, and helplessness. The vertical pillar in the center of the frame is a visual marker that distinguishes central from peripheral areas and dominant groups from marginalized populations. Due to the absence of human presence, the built environment appears inactive and devoid of energy or opposition. According to Achille Mbembe, Lagos is more than a geographical location; it embodies "fractured modernity" as an architectural expression of political and social disorder (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004). The dual purposes of documentation and condemnation emerge from this context, as the camera serves both functions. The image functions as both signifier and signified, representing a random physical

structure that reflects the fragmented human condition while performing the ideological function of creating a "symbolic justification for escape." The film conveys its message through silent images that begin this narrative from a state of destruction.

The documentary repetition of this pattern of urban misery generates what Nicholas Mirzoeff describes as a "degraded semiotic environment," () transforming unique images into standardized copies that erase human memory and replace it with generic stereotypes. These elements operate as "visible power" in accordance with Nicholas Mirzoeff's definition

Figure 3:
Images of
Sandra and
Laura Gazing
Toward the sea,
Preparing to
Cross to Spain.



This scene

from Figure 3 shows Sandra and Laura looking toward the sea, preparing to cross to Spain. However, it contains

Note. Culled from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGrIXSyILjU&t=428s>

deeper philosophical meanings that connect with visual semiotics to illustrate human transitional experiences during

migration. Viewed through the lens of existential transition and the philosophical concepts of being versus nothingness, the image reflects the ideas of Martin Heidegger in "Being and Time" (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger explains how human beings encounter threatened existence and open themselves to unknown possibilities. The sea, beyond geographical boundaries, represents the unknown and serves as a place where individuals experience the limits of their being through their hopes of arrival and their fears of death or loss. Sandra and Laura's varying facial expressions showcase the psychological struggle between hope and fear, creating a significant philosophical moment regarding crossing.

Drawing on Sartre's concept of self and other, personal identity emerges through relationships with others, as these become active forces in shaping both self-consciousness and personal identity (Sartre, 2018). The characters' physical closeness and embrace demonstrate an existential bond that provides mutual protection during their encounter with the unknown.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the meaning of a sign emerges from its relationships with other signs within the

visual and symbolic system (Saussure, 1983). Through their embrace and intertwined bodies, these individuals create a visual symbol of unity that serves as a sign against nihilism. Their identities and fates merge into a powerful symbol of resistance against the existential void and isolation.

The soft sidelight and earthy colours serve as a symbolic representation of chromatic semiotics. Light signifies hope and opportunity, while earthy tones represent a foundation and real-world connections. By accurately representing the psychological complexities, the image becomes a unified visual text that carries profound meanings about self-discovery and identity development.

This visual-philosophical space combines the act of crossing with existential contemplation and symbolic meaning through visual representation. The image documents human experiences of confronting the unknown and challenges the documentary discourse to transform its meanings and symbols into something deeper regarding human existence in global migration processes.

Linguistic Semiotics and Identity Construction in Contemporary Migration Documentary Film

The film under study uses Nigerian Pidgin English, along with French and Moroccan Arabic as its primary languages to create a complex audio structure that mirrors the migrant experience through fragmented sound. Sound functions beyond its role as a communication tool, signifying lost identity and temporary replacement based on situational context. Homi Bhabha describes "linguistic ambivalence" as the state in which individuals must constantly switch between languages, disrupting their self-identity (Bhabha, 1994). Migrants establish different identities through language, addressing journalists in one tongue, peers in another, and law enforcement in a third; these identities exist only for specific purposes. Through vocal layers, the film demonstrates cultural diversity while showing that identity exists as a fluid construct of language, formed through survival needs and short-term connections.

The main narrator, Ike Nebo, explains the process of choosing fabricated stories and aliases when migrants leave Nigeria. The situation demands that one avoid revealing their European travel plans to every police officer encountered or stranger met. People create fictional accounts to build new identities during this process. Thus, the temporary identity

emerges through linguistic storytelling, changing based on the situation.

The film employs silence as a specific element that functions beyond mere soundlessness because it creates negative linguistic signs with deep symbolic meanings. Roland Barthes explains in his theory that silence functions as an active component within the signification system (Barthes, 1977). During various moments in the film, long camera shots show characters with expressionless faces maintaining their gazes either at distant horizons or directly at the lens while remaining unexplained. The film features a migrant character who observes the sea without a taxi or bus. All plans fail for a major portion of life's duration, signifying the psychological state represented by the expression: "so let's wait." Waiting serves as an essential element in the migration process, according to the director's narrative. Silence functions as an expressive tool to convey the existential experience of the migrants because it creates a semiotic connection with waiting to represent a time that neither progresses nor reaches an end.

Throughout the film, the dialogue includes numerous repeated expressions that carry symbolic and metaphorical

significance because migrants use them as "saturated linguistic signs." The repeated phrases occur with ritual-like frequency because they have evolved into common migration discourse that includes:

- "Europe is paradise"
- "Dying here is better than living there"
- "No one knows you here until you die"
- "In this forest, we have no law, no names"

The director labels these phrases as "fragile narratives" that migrants share in Nigerian restaurants and bars while describing their collective mental state. Norman Fairclough (Fairclough, 1995) defines these phrases as "socially recycled discourse" since communities reuse expressions from shared experiences to create natural facts instead of personal choices. The director clearly deconstructs this myth when he states, "You hear fragile narratives about the geographical, logistical, and temporal details of this adventure." The film texts, along with the director's analysis, reveal that these repeated phrases serve both as expressive language and social narratives that migrants use to defend their

dangerous journey despite its risks and lead them to accept their tragic fate.

The film presents language through the interactions of police forces, border control personnel, and human trafficking agents. Language functions as a disciplinary tool for control, according to Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977). Through short commands and loud orders, a migrant transforms into a "body to be controlled" instead of a person. When a Moroccan soldier orders, "Go back! Go back!" and a trafficker demands, "Pay now or no passage," these statements use language to enforce both authority and discipline over physical bodies and personal identities. The discourse finds support in Ike's statement, which asserts, "This journey seems more about an identity crisis than anything else because we are searching for our true selves. Maybe."

Sandra and Laura maintain an exchange that displays profound philosophical and semiotic elements. The expression, "We plan to purchase a boat for sailing because the boat owner who operates ferry services deceived me, yet I remain undocumented, and my status as an illegal immigrant prevents me from making a report," reveals how language

functions as a social indicator of legal exclusion, resulting in the loss of protection and rights for those who exist outside the law. According to Foucault (1977), this situation exemplifies disciplinary discourse because language maintains power relations, creating threats to existence and restricting freedom.

Laura's statement, "I fear the boat will drift into the open sea... we continue swimming... we have life jackets... we have oars and phones... we check the weather," shows how language acts as a resistance mechanism to construct optimism while transforming dangerous circumstances through personal empowerment in a challenging environment. Barthes (1977) would agree with this approach because he viewed language and symbols as forms of resistant discourse.

Through his statement, "All those migrants don't know when they will be reunited again," the director illustrates Sartre's (2018) concept of existence as waiting in a state of temporary nothingness while searching for meaning. Work alongside begging, functions as survival mechanisms within an existential linguistic framework that generates and constructs the experience of

marginalization through linguistic and identity-related aspects. Through her words, Laura illustrates how her homeland denies opportunities for dreaming, thus forcing people to migrate in pursuit of personal transformation, according to Bhabha (1994). Sandra's recurring use of the term "freedom" demonstrates how language functions as an ideological sign to maintain hope for liberation in the face of challenging migration circumstances, according to Fairclough (1995).

The Integration of Visual and Linguistic Semiotics in the Documentary Film

The production of meaning in documentary films depends heavily on both visual semiotics and linguistic semiotics. Visual elements, together with linguistic components, form an integrated system that creates a harmonious interaction, displaying the complete spectrum of human migration effects across psychological, social, and political domains.

First: Visual Semiotics as a Multilayered Production of Meaning. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory (1983), the sign consists of two components: the signifier represents the image, colour, lighting, or movement, while the signified represents their contextual meaning.

Throughout the film, the director uses visual signs to establish an elaborate visual story. For example, the forest functions beyond its natural state to represent both legal and existential vulnerability through persistent dim lighting and low camera angles (Ponzanesi, 2019). The physical borders appear as monitoring zones that utilize drones and thermal cameras to dehumanize migrants, as explained by Mirzoeff (2023).

The handheld, shaky camera movement generates psychological distress and chaotic sensations, enabling the audience to experience the migrants' physical bodies while intensifying their sensory perception (Guiraud, 1975). The dominant natural colours in the scenes indicate identity deterioration, and the dim lighting represents uncertainty and loss.

Second: Linguistic Semiotics as the Production of Identity and Power. Language functions as a method of communication while simultaneously generating identity constructs and maintaining power structures through its complex sign systems. Language diversity, including Nigerian English, French, and Moroccan Arabic, creates "linguistic ambivalence," according to Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994), as it serves

as a site of identity creation and survival. The migrants' identities remain fragmented and adaptable because language identity transforms according to specific situations.

Silence in the film functions as a negative sign that transcends linguistic absence to express deep emotions of fear, brokenness, and waiting (Barthes, 1977). Through this silent sign, an existential effect emerges, converting silence into a language that operates as part of signification systems. The repeated statements "Europe is paradise" and "No one knows you here until you die" illustrate how migration discourse evolves through social mechanisms to support risk-taking behavior and escape reality, as Norman Fairclough described under "socially recycled discourse" (Fairclough, 1995). These phrases function as linguistic indicators embodying ideological messages related to migration and tragedy. Through language as a disciplinary tool, Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977) demonstrates how orders and commands control migrant bodies, transforming them into monitored entities.

Third: Semantic Interaction and Structural Integration. The film shows how visual elements and linguistic

components create a complex semantic integration, preventing their independent analysis. Visual elements in the film perform dual roles, as they both represent and symbolize; they interact with language to build an integrated text that generates multiple layers of meaning. The visual exchange between Sandra and Laura viewing the ocean (Figure 3) demonstrates this relationship perfectly, as their embrace and body contact in the image represent both physical connection and emotional solidarity as they confront the unknown together. Their facial expressions, which move from hope to anxiety, strengthen the emotional depth of the scene, creating multiple interpretations. Visual meanings from these images combine with spoken dialogue addressing the potential risks of the boat's drift, life jacket usage, oar operations, and phone checks for weather conditions. The linguistic discourse functions as more than mere description; it generates an opposing interpretation of danger, providing short-term command of the situation while exhibiting resistance against uncertainty. Guiraud (1975) explains that sight and language operate as two parallel symbolic systems that create complex meanings exceeding their individual components. Through this

interaction, the film establishes a unified harmony between visual elements (movement, composition, colour, and light) and sound elements (dialogue, silence, and natural sounds) to produce a deeply integrated cognitive experience for viewers. Viewers experience a unified "text" because visual signs and linguistic signs enhance each other, creating a powerful visual-linguistic narrative.

Fourth: The Existential Dimension and Philosophy of Identity. The semiotic analysis progresses to the existential dimension, as the human encounter with uncertainty and nothingness is illustrated through Martin Heidegger's "Being and Time" (Heidegger, 1962). The ocean in the movie represents both a geographical obstacle and an existential representation of unexplored possibilities, potential non-existence, and the critical point at which a person encounters their destiny. At this existential moment, Sandra and Laura look at the sea with combined hope and fear, blending their anticipation of the future with their dread of the unknown. They reflect on existence as they experience both presence and absence while living between life and death, safety and danger. Sartre (2018) further asserts that identity is not fixed or independent but is formed in a reciprocal relationship

between self and other. The physical contact between Sandra and Laura holds philosophical value as it showcases human unity in times of uncertainty. Interacting with others enables Sandra and Laura to develop their personal identities, safeguarding them from social isolation and emptiness.

Fifth: The film *Power and Discourse* illustrates how, according to Michel Foucault's discipline and knowledge theory (Foucault, 1977), language and image function as instruments of sustaining power and domination. This theory shows how discourse operates within power systems to produce knowledge while enforcing physical control simultaneously. Security and military personnel use verbal commands to transform migrants into disciplined bodies, monitoring them through constant surveillance under harsh instructions. Monitored zones maintain power through a combination of surveillance cameras, barbed wire, and intense lighting, which enable visibility of the population. This dual control system becomes more solidified through linguistic control.

Visual and linguistic elements depict migrants as controlled entities with restricted movement and permanent

surveillance, showing dominant ideological power. The film uses language and imagery to depict the emotions, hopes, fears, and human connections of migrants as they resist power structures and join resistance movements. Through visual and linguistic semiotics, the film presents migration as an intense existential crisis and builds a sophisticated discourse about it. It uses two symbolic systems to tell a cinematic story about identity changes, existential mental pressure, power relations, and social control. Visual and linguistic elements unite to generate multiple cognitive, emotional, and philosophical layers, deepening our comprehension of migration and its human and political dimensions.

Results of the Study's Analysis

Through visual components and linguistic expressions, the current study examines human migration in documentary film by studying its psychological aspects alongside social elements, as well as existential and political dimensions. These visual components and linguistic expressions interact to reveal multiple meanings that expose deep suffering and hope. Saussure (1983) explains that meaning emerges from sign relationships within the semiotic system, which unites

visual and linguistic elements to express complex meanings.

The film uses dark forest scenes, monitored borders, and dim lighting to create signifiers that express social and legal marginalization. Through the forest imagery, the film represents the legal and existential exposure of migrants in a lawless area that denies them access to any legal system. Visual signs derive their meaning from dark lighting effects and low camera angles, which generate scenes that depict marginalization and exclusion. Ponzanesi (2019) uses Saussurean semiotics for visual texts, similar to Guiraud (1975), which explains how images function as symbolic systems capable of using syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules to create meanings that exceed simple representation through their use of colour, lighting, and compositional elements.

The film demonstrates visible multilingualism as a semiotic instrument to display the fragmented nature of identity, functioning as more than cultural representation. When migrants navigate between languages according to situations they must survive, they establish a temporary fluid state of identity. Homi Bhabha's "linguistic ambivalence" (Bhabha, 1994) validates

that identity within migration processes remains unstable because it evolves through changing circumstances, generating multiple languages and survival-based linguistic expressions. The language dynamics support post-structuralist semiotic theory by demonstrating that identity exists as a dynamic negotiated construct.

Through silence, the film creates powerful linguistic elements that carry deep existential meaning, as silence functions as a negative sign representing migrants' fear, brokenness, and their state of suspended waiting. The strategic use of silence in the film aligns with Barthes' (1977) view of silence as a semiotic system equal in significance to spoken language, which enhances existential and psychological elements while deepening audience engagement. The extended periods of silence in the film serve as indicators, expressing psychological states and social political conditions that transcend spoken words, portraying the migrant experience of uncertainty and waiting (Barthes, 2020).

Through language-image integration, the film achieves its narrative depth as visual signs merge with linguistic signs to create a unified visual-linguistic text. Sandra and Laura's psychological

difficulties become visible through their fearful expressions when they gaze at the sea, which match their descriptions of survival techniques and danger assessment. The combination of visual and verbal elements forms an extensive semantic unit that generates strong sensory and emotional responses. Guiraud's (1975) research shows how visual and verbal signs function as interdependent elements to generate complex meanings, and Machin, Kress and van Leeuwen (2014; 2021) examine visual media discourse through a multimodal integration analysis.

Further, the film illustrates how visual elements are united with linguistic components to create systems of dominance and restriction. Official military language functions as a tool of control, and security cameras and barbed wires establish systems that limit physical movement and personal freedom. Through its verbal and pictorial elements, the film shows how, according to Foucault (1977), discourse produces physical power, which transforms personal identities and actions.

Finally, this research shows how film concepts align with Heidegger's and Sartre's philosophical ideas about human interactions with ambiguous and vacant

spaces. According to Heidegger (1962), the ocean transcends geographical boundaries to serve as a philosophical metaphor linking existence to non-existence and hope to dread. The film illustrates how "the Other" influences self-identity, as Sartre (2018) investigated self-other relationships. Sandra and Laura display emotional bonds during existential threats. Together, visual and linguistic semiotics establish an advanced system that produces modern discourse representing psychological, social, and existential aspects of migration experiences. Complex sign networks produce social critique and awareness through narrative art, thus supporting multidisciplinary semiotic analysis of documentary films (Machin, 2014).

Conclusion

The research shows how documentary filmmakers use visual elements together with language to present migration narratives. This combination produces intricate discourses that expose the social environment and personal experiences of migrants. Visual components and spoken dialogue operate as an integrated system that generates complex meanings, depicting migrant psychological challenges, identity

transformations, and social and political barriers.

The film uses environmental elements, colour, lighting, and camera angles to establish a unified semiotic landscape that shows migrants' nonexistence and their social and legal exclusion. The forest symbolizes dangerous legal conditions, and borders serve as permanent observation zones for security personnel. These visual elements enable viewers to experience the extreme hardships of unprotected people as security forces track them through advanced surveillance systems, creating an intense sensory experience that transports viewers into the emotional state of migrant struggles.

Bhabha's "linguistic ambivalence" theory demonstrates how language functions as an independent semiotic instrument that presents migrant identities through their movement between Nigerian English, French, and Moroccan Arabic. Security institutions exert total control over physical bodies and personal identities through strict commands and security language. The narrative structure develops through migrant dialogue, presenting their survival objectives and resistance against the existing system.

This research reveals a powerful philosophical connection between pictures and words, which lead characters in the film to transit between positive and negative emotions, presence and absence, and life and death states. The sea observed by Sandra and Laura serves as an existential enigma representing migration-related fears and the desire for freedom from that particular area. According to Sartre's philosophical works, social encounters and visual displays, along with facial expressions, enable characters to form their identities. The film builds essential human connections that lead to a deep examination of human nature beyond documentation, raising essential questions about existence and identity.

The film also demonstrates how migrants experience their environment based on intricate power dynamics. Foucault avers that language and images carry non-neutral elements that both distribute discriminatory beliefs and validate surveillance activities. The dual sign system in the film demonstrates how bodies experience limitations because migration functions under multiple systems of economic, political, and social control.

Through the combination of visual elements with language, the film constitutes an artistic and critical discourse that reveals migration complexities through deep philosophical and emotional evaluation. Through its integrated modes, the film serves as an effective instrument for tackling social crises, migrant self-identification, and survival issues as well as an independent visual, linguistic, and philosophical migration study of modern society.

This article supplements scholarship on European migration cinema and border visibility by foregrounding a Nigerian-directed documentary and examining the interaction of visual and linguistic signs in it through semiotic and existential lenses. Rather than using broad descriptive terms that frame migration as merely an economic or humanitarian "crisis," the article explores how emotions, moral evaluations, and forms of subjectivity are arranged within specific scenes, images, and utterances in the documentary, "From Nigeria to Morocco: A Journey in Search of a Better Life in Europe". Furthermore, by situating

this analysis within the context of visual cultures of borders and border countervisuality scholarship, the article demonstrates how African perspectives can challenge and reshape the dominant visual narratives of mobility, which have largely been theorized through Eurocentric perspectives. With the current case study, the findings of this research would enhance further examination of other African-directed migration documentaries, and how different audiences perceive and negotiate the visual and linguistic resources of migration documentaries.

The current research reveals how visual and linguistic semiotics in the analyzed film present migrants beyond victimhood by showing their complete human experience, including resistance, hopes, fears, and survival abilities under oppressive conditions.

Through its artistic, philosophical, and political elements, the film presents new perspectives on how documentary cinema produces vital knowledge to enhance public discussions regarding refugees and migrants.

ORCID

Amer Fathi AL- gharaibeh: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0399-3485>

Mowafaq Alsaggar: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7795-7829>

Monther Al-Atoum: Orcid no: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1093-7345>

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