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Challenges of Separation for Refugee Filmmaking

Introduction

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Lucia Sorbera

This dossier on *Challenges of Separation for Refugee Filmmaking* includes a number of short pieces and visual material from those who have either made films themselves (Su Goldfish; Rana Kazkaz) or who have used film as scholars and activists working in collaboration with people of lived experience (Isobel Blomstein and Caroline Lenette; Mandy Hughes). These writers discuss the questions of ethical and personal narratives and the ways in which certain story arcs present themselves as indicative of a time, a place or a kind of experience. They consider ideas of visibility and invisibility, and of short-term memory and long-term impact. The "separation" in the title for this dossier refers to separation by reason of war, by time and generation, or by experience.

In 2017, Lucia Sorbera and Stephanie Hemelryk Donald collaborated in debates on intellectual arts and activism, and feminism in North Africa, during a visit by distinguished visitor Dr Fadma Aït Mous to Sydney and the University of New South Wales. Aït Mous had herself been part of an EU/Morocco film project (*Khamsa*, Marc Almodóvar, 2016) exploring the reasons why young people sought to migrate away from North African nations in the twenty-first century. Her talk in Sydney on feminism(s) in North Africa, and the complex relationship between the secular and the religious in the experiences of feminist Muslim women attracted almost a hundred young women, showing us so clearly that there is a continuum in debates on youth, mobility, ideas and ideology that stretches beyond and across the discrete definitions of settler/migrant and refugee.

Sorbera and Donald, along with Omid Tofighian, found a mutual interest in the film work of Sydney-based Syrian (refugee) filmmaker Maher Jamous. Jamous, like filmmaker and detainee Behrouz Boochani (see Tofighian in this volume and Dossier Two, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*), has always worked in the creative industries. It is only since the Syrian revolution and the war that he has found himself redefined as a refugee filmmaker. His testimony at the Refugee Alternatives conference, to the audience for his film *Faraway...So Close to the Homeland* (2013), and to the public forum on *Syrian Voices—The Revolution Lives On!*, held at the University of Sydney in 2017, was a moving call to action and a remembrance of a disappearing set of dreams for the Free Syria Alliance. We have not been able to include a full essay on the film, despite Jamous's willingness to write one in principle, simply because the calls on his time have been so extraordinary given the unfolding tragedies in Syria. We offer here a little context in order to register his involvement and to acknowledge the contributions that are not present as articles, but are certainly influences on our development

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in this field. Jamous's film follows the lives of creative practitioners in exile, whilst also describing the total physical destruction wreaked by war, and the exigencies that drive men and women to find shelter wherever they can and whatever their profession. It was Jamous's identity as an established creative worker, but now in exile, that led us to consider the labour of refugee filmmakers, and the ways in which their postexilic productions intensify that aspect of their practice.

The story of the brutal repression by the Assad regime of the Syrian uprisings—which has led to more than 400,000 deaths and forced millions of people to flee their homes in Syria and travel to neighbouring Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, to Europe, and beyond, including Australia—is well known. What is less known is that many of them are intellectuals and artists, who are enriching their host countries with their cultural production, and whose experience can offer a strong contribution towards a nuanced understanding not only of the Syrian crisis, but also of the societies in which they resettled. One of the questions that this dossier raises (in the context of this special issue of *Alphaville* as a whole) is whether their artistic and cultural production can offer a counterpoint to mainstream narratives, which present these years as a binary conflict between the Assad dictatorship, generally labelled as "secular and anti-imperialist", and reactionary Islamist groups like ISIS and Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra). These narratives neglect the long history of Syrian oppositions to the regime, deny their agency, and silence the countless number of Syrian people who continue to sacrifice everything for the original aims of the revolution: for the ousting of the regime, for democracy, and for social justice.

The contemporary Syrian experience invites us all to reconceptualise the same notion of exiles and refugees in the twenty-first century. Exile and displacement—two categories that are not overlapped but strictly related to each other—have not just been narrated by cinema, they have been a constitutive part of it. From Ernst Lubitsch, Charlie Chaplin and Roman Polanski, to Vanessa Redgrave's *Sea Sorrow* (2017), and Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope* (2017), the experience of being a refugee is still shaping the history of cinema. Given the central position of Syria and Syrians in exile in the world today, we are delighted that Rana Kazkaz, codirector of prize-winning short *Mare Nostrum* (with Anas Khalaf, 2016) and the upcoming *The Translator* (with Anas Khalaf, 2020), has contributed a memoir of the making of *Mare Nostrum* to this dossier. She explores the process of casting, financing and production, and in so doing reiterates the continuation of war in domestic conflicts, and clashing, exilic loyalties. Her paper and images explore the challenges of separation and contested loyalties to place, home and family.

In 2017, Su Goldfish released a film about her father, a refugee from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. *The Last Goldfish* recounts Manfred Goldfish's journey from Germany via the West Indies to Australia, and that of the second generation of refugees—his children by his first wife—to Canada. This family included Goldfish's half-brother (Harry) whose experience of detention under the British in Trinidad and Tobago and the separation from his father due to that detention, produced lifelong anxiety and depression. Harry's story is the focus of Goldfish's contribution to this dossier, which also includes a segment from the film as well as historical and critical reflections on the film and its context by historian Joanna Newman and curator and writer Julie Ewington. For Goldfish herself, the project to discover her family history brought her close to new stories of twenty-first century forced migration and new occupancies of place. The layering of harm, mobility, place and time within Goldfish's personal pilgrimage to her family's past resonates with the piles of rubble and lives lived in transit recorded in Jamous's flyovers of the Syrian war—visible to all who would see the

retrospective trauma of displaced men, women and children across Europe and the Pacific, and on the shores of Libya and Turkey today.



Figure 1: Manfred Goldfisch and daughter Marion Goldfisch (later Marion Wagschal) one to two years after the family was released from internment in Trinidad, 1944. From *The Last Goldfish* (Su Goldfish, 2017). Carolyn Johnson Films, 2017.

The work of Hughes and Blomfield and Lenette is of a different order, although Hughes and Blomfield would both describe themselves as filmmakers as well as academics. Lenette's work on approaches to arts and academic research is premised on collaboration and mutuality, as outlined in her recent book *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research*, which outlines ethical and safe participatory methods for producing meaningful research collaborations with people of refugee experience. For Hughes, Blomfield and Lenette in this dossier, the question of labour is a question of ethical collaboration (also referred to in P. Stuart Robinson's article in the main section of this special issue) and a realistic and pragmatic approach to making experience visible. The realism is not that of representation (although they consider that in their work), but rather a politically savvy understanding of the audience. Films about refugee experience that will be seen by policy makers, the settled community in rural and regional Australia as well as metropolitan districts, have an enormous responsibility to enable goodwill and clarity and to avoid harm.

Altogether, this collection of essays invites us to reflect on the ethical and aesthetic challenges implied by producing art as a testimony. Both the contributions and the film extracts are aligned with social science perspectives and are couched within an active, emplaced engagement with refugee subjects and co-respondents. They are nonetheless working along similar lines of engagement as the other filmmakers discussed in this issue in so far as they question the extent to which a filmmaker may render the subject visible without exploiting vulnerability or fixing them, either in difference or in an accessible but banal universality.



Figure 2: A group of refugee rights activists, NGO workers, service sector workers, academics, artists and cultural leaders discuss art and ethics with a particular focus on refugee experience. Lincoln, April 2019. Copyright Matt Snellin.

In conclusion, we cite the work of collaborators at a recent seminar on the ethical parameters of working alongside people whose lived experience differs from one's own. Participants included activists with lived experience, NGO workers, service sector workers, academics, artists and cultural leaders. The overwhelming outcome was an agreement that stories are personal and precious, but are often manipulated or appropriated. They are not political currency. Sometimes, it may in any case be unsafe for asylum seekers and refugees and those on temporary visas to make themselves "visible", and the hostile environment that is being promoted in many nation states and regions produces that harsh reality. We found that the power relations between us and across our various statuses as settled or displaced, institutional or freelance, minority ethnic or dominant ethnic, cis or queer, all come to bear on how our stories are heard or understood. We were particularly struck by the manifesto of the RISE organisation of refugees and migrants in Melbourne. Their ten-point plan for people wishing to work "with" them (they address artists, but academics and filmmakers can also take this as good advice) ends with:

> 10. Art is not neutral
> Our community has been politicised and any art work done with/by us is inherently political. If you wish to build with our community know that your artistic practice cannot be neutral. (Cañas)

It is our collective responsibility then, especially if we are fortunate enough to feel secure in our citizenship or right to remain, to call out the failings of our societies, our systems and our governments, and to do so from whatever skill-set obtains to us. That is the underlying message from this dossier.

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