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Title	Refugee filmmaking: Editorial
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Publication date	2019-12-10
Original Citation	Hemelryk Donald, S., Davies Hayon, K. and Sorbera, L. (2019) 'Refugee filmmaking: Editorial', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 18, pp. 3-11. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.01
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.18.01
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Download date	2026-11-07 00:25:55
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9414

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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 18, 2019, pp. 3–11
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.01

Refugee Filmmaking

Editorial

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Kaya Davies Hayon, and Lucia Sorbera



Figure 1: Production still taken for *Mare Nostrum* (Rana Kazkaz and Anas Khalaf, 2016). Georges Films, Synéastes Film. Photo credit: Eric Devin.

The origins of this issue of *Alphaville* lie in collaborations between the Forced Migration Research Network (UNSW – University of New South Wales) and the Refugee Council of Australia, and in the inspiration afforded us by international colleagues and guests to Sydney (Fadma Aït Mous), Liverpool (Dennis Del Favero) and Lincoln (Hoda Afshar) universities. We have benefited from these academic alliances and invitations, but we also embrace the widest notion of hospitality, whereby the moment of arrival, the request for assistance and shelter, and subsequent decisions over citizenship and long-term residency are located in a moral environment of welcome and mutual learning. We trace and acknowledge our intellectual relationships here in so far as they have allowed us to articulate an emerging and shared recognition that refugee lived experience stands as the barometer for political civility and social health in our time.

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The challenge of the global collapse into conflict and authoritarianism is stark, and the work of refugee filmmakers and documentarists—and indeed those who use scholarship to draw attention to their efforts—is serious and important. This curated collection of essays, films, reflections and reviews seeks to understand the nature and extent of refugee filmmaking today, and to determine who counts as a refugee filmmaker and why. Where are the boundaries drawn or understood between witness, the immediate documentation of experience, and visual notetaking on the one hand, and the development of a cinematic poesis or dramatic narrative structure of refugee experience, on the other? How and on what grounds, for example, are we to judge and compare the samizdat filmmaking of an exiled journalist and poet against the storytelling of a director working in an established structure with a production team and distribution system in hand? Or, are such distinctions invidious and irrelevant to the quality of the narration and the image? These questions and more are discussed by the contributors to this special issue, who all seek to understand the structural conditions in which refugees are created, embraced or abandoned, and the politics of representing disenfranchised and dispersed peoples.

In February 2017, the first Refugee Alternatives Conference was hosted at UNSW. A stream of panels and presentations focused on how the creative industries and the creative work of people with lived experience as refugees interconnect. The discussions brought up issues around voice, representation, access to paid employment, and the problem of repeated requests for narratives that leave people of lived experience perpetually framed by their refugee status. While that aspect of people's lives is certainly crucial to acknowledge and understand, it is not a total or sufficient description of their identities, memories, aspirations, and/or individual and collective attributes. It should be possible for such narratives to be allowed to rest and remain private to the bearer. At the same conference, short films were screened to enable and develop conversations around the complex issues outlined above. Whilst not all of those films are discussed in this issue, the generosity of the filmmakers was foundational to our project and we acknowledge those whose work we do not discuss in the collected papers: *Call to Account* (Janet Galbraith, Suvendrini Perera, and Joseph Pugliese, 2015); *Cast from the Storm* (David Mason, 2016); *Constance on the Edge* (Belinda Mason, 2016); *Bon Voyage* (Marc Raymond Wilkins, 2016); *The Staging Post* (Joylon Hoff, 2017), *Faraway...So Close to the Homeland* (Maher Jamous, 2013); and *Khamsa* (Marc Almodóvar, 2016).

In the development of the conference, Omid Tofighian introduced Stephanie Hemelryk Donald to Behrouz Boochani, who at the time of writing is still being detained on Manus Island by Australia. Both men, one a philosopher and the other a journalist, poet and filmmaker, were invited to present and discuss (in person and via WhatsApp Messenger respectively) their approach to telling an occluded story in the context of the censorship regime imposed by the Australian government of the time. An early twenty-minute cut of Boochani's film, *Chauka Please Tell Us the Time* (codirected with Arash Kamali Sarvestani, 2017), was included in the conference film festival. These interactions continued at the international Sydney Film Festival (2017) and at the International Association for Forced Migration meeting in Thessaloniki in 2018, as well as at two intermedial events at Mansions of the Future in Lincoln and Community Links in East London, which brought the issues raised in Boochani's artistic and activist practice to the attention of a UK audience. The second dossier, "Carceral-Border Cinema: The Film from Manus Prison", evolved from these early conversations and from our collective respect for the work achieved by Boochani as an activist and artist in exceptionally challenging circumstances. As translator, philosophical associate and friend to Boochani, Tofighian has exemplified the values of persistence, belief, analysis and advocacy in making art speak for and to freedom. There will be many unnamed others who work alongside refugee filmmakers to help with process, and to afford access to audiences, and they too are acknowledged here.

We recount these details of connection in this our introductory statement as they reveal the global and inescapable intersections of refugee narratives and post-refugee settlement and survival across intellectual, activist and artistic activities. This sense of déjà vu is central to Tofighian's article, "Displacement, Exile and Incarceration Commuted into Cinematic Vision", where he analyses Boochani's critique not just of his own situation, but also of the overarching historical context of Australian neocolonialism in *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. There is nothing dramatically new or exceptional about incarceration, detention and colonial occupation. It has long been a malevolent functioning tool of colonial and neocolonial practices. British camps in South Africa and Kenya are often cited as the origins of modern concentration camp systems (Elkins, *Imperial*; "Looking"). Scholarship differs on the relative violence and destructive intentions of different camp systems, and between the British use of the concentration of imperial subjects to manage imperial power, and other more directly totalitarian and genocidal approaches in the twentieth century (Forth; Hyslop). While the actions of the Italians in Eritrea and in Libya are a case in point here, they were removed from collective memory until relatively recently when the historian Angelo Del Boca wrote them back into Italian colonial history (*Gli italiani*; *Italiani*). Likewise, French brutality in the Algerian War of Independence has largely been confined to historical oblivion, despite attempts by filmmakers like Alain Resnais, Gillo Pontecorvo and, more recently, Michael Haneke to expose France's involvement in systematic torture and violence.

In the British imperial context, Caroline Elkins provides an account of her testimony to the British High Court on the matter of reparations to Mau Mau Kenyan independence fighters, who had been subjected to peculiar and demonstrably British forms of incarceration and torture. Elkins describes the "dilution technique", which permitted "the isolation of small numbers of recalcitrant detainees who were then manhandled, forced to labor, and otherwise 'harangued without respite'" ("Looking" 859). In Tofighian's article (and throughout Dossier Two), we catch a frightening glimpse of the Chauka isolation chamber on Manus Island (a chamber that is cruelly nicknamed after a bird that is sacred to the local Manusians). The technology of "dilution" therefore seems to have a disquieting afterlife in Australian offshore refugee policy for those who arrive by boat.

Indeed, the use of technologising state powers over dehumanised, non-sovereign individuals has become commonplace in contemporary governance practices. Worldwide, we are witnessing a refusal to take responsibility for humane governance in either a hospitable or a cosmopolitan sense of the word. Eileen Baldry and Chris Cuneen have argued that the "carceral state" observed in the United States has also emerged in modern Australia through a persistent "colonial patriarchy", with Indigenous women and vulnerable people the most likely to see increased rates of incarceration (277). Indeed, they point out that, from the very beginning of colonial occupation, "[p]enality, in a variety of institutional forms, has been a central part of the operation of the colonial state in its governance of Indigenous peoples" (283). In the UK, detention as a form of dis-management or non-governance has been used against those who are the unlucky and impoverished children of Empire, or its Indigenous victims (Donald 149; Jalata; Baldry and Cuneen). Colonial patriarchy is arguably even more deeply embedded in the mindset of some politicians and technocrats at the heart of the British Empire in its untidy retreat. Most recently, the treatment of the Windrush generation in the UK is an egregious example, which again links governance by quota in the twenty-first century to actual harm against civilian populations (McKee). In Dossier One, "Challenges of Separation for Refugee Filmmaking", we include an essay on Jewish refugees fleeing Europe through British colonial holdings in the 1930s and 1940s. The filmmaker Su Goldfish's father was one

such refugee and was detained on an island in the West Indies, controlled by Britain, still an Imperial power, although in sharp decline at that time.

Imperial resonances persist through the films addressed in this issue, collapsing hidden histories of the past into visceral stories of an excavated present. But also, and in relation to the role of films that treat such stories of forced migration and detention, we realise that the filmmaker is now an archivist. Elkins's account of British colonial archives is that they are the vault of partial truths and omitted histories, of historical "dilution" ("Looking"). Thus, her task as an archival historian has been to seek deeper and wider evidence, to scrape through the ash of the retreating imperialists' files and challenge the narrative of governance that has supported the imperial myth of the good colonialist. The filmmaker's task, opportunity, and also burden, is to create new archives that forestall the convenient amnesia of the prison keeper, even in the process of bearing witness. These visual archives expose afresh the links between colonial histories, contemporary policies, and migration patterns, which in the Italian literary sphere have already been identified by the late Alessandro Leogrande and, later, by the writer Francesca Melandri.

The lived experience of refugees and the politics of representing refugees and migrants are issues at the heart of cultural production in Europe today (as evidenced in the articles in this issue by Emma Wilson, Alice Cati, and Emilija Talijan). Across the continent, we are witnessing a rise in extreme-right politics and a hardening of public sentiment towards migrants and refugees who attempt to penetrate the borders of Fortress Europe. It took the horrific image of Alan Kurdi's lifeless three-year-old body to soften public opinion and moderate irresponsible media reporting during the humanitarian crisis in response to forced migration of 2015. Since then, refugees and migrants have continued to make perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea (as represented in the films discussed by Wilson, Cati, and Stefanie Van De Peer in this issue). Those that land safely on the shores of Europe often find themselves living in huge camps like the one that was recently closed in Calais, or in prison-like detention centres like Yarls Wood and Morton Hall in the UK. The pressure on European lawmakers to resist or comply with anti-migrant legislation has had a particularly damaging effect on the Mediterranean coast (an issue which is addressed by Van De Peer in this issue, but also elsewhere by filmmakers like Andrea Segre, and by writers like Evelina Santangelo and Roberto Saviano, among others). Writers, artists and intellectuals are today engaged in a relentless effort to contradict xenophobic narratives and to expose and unpick their manipulation by right-wing politicians. As we are finalising this editorial note, the curtains lower on the 76th edition of the International Film Festival in Venice, where the actor Luca Marinelli has dedicated his Coppa Volpi award for Best Actor to "those who save lives in the Mediterranean Sea, saving us from the shame of letting people sink" ("Venezia"), and where the actress Ariane Ascaride has acknowledged her own Italian migrant background and dedicated her award for Best Actress "to those who are sleeping for eternity in the Mediterranean" ("Ariane").[1] Marinelli and Ascaride are not the first stars of the silver screen to take a stand for refugees: Vanessa Redgrave did so in her acceptance speech for the Career Award at Venice in 2018, as did Meryl Streep at the Golden Globes in 2017. On 2 September 2019, Italian press agencies reported that, after twelve days of uncertainty and fear, a number of shipwrecked people who had been saved by the NGO, Mediterranean Saving Humans, were allowed to enter Lampedusa's harbour and disembark. That same day, the *Superpremio Sciascia*, one of Italy's most prestigious literary awards, was also announced. One of the two winners, Evelina Santangelo, dedicated her award to her fellow writer Caterina Bonvicini, who volunteered and reported from one of Mediterranean Saving Humans' boats, tweeting:

"Sciascia has left us a warning: we must know how to be inconvenient interpreters of our times" (@lonelyip).

The duty to bear witness to the brutality of our era is urgent, particularly for countries like Italy, whose geographical position exposes them to migratory flows and whose politicians manipulate fears about migrants. Roberto Saviano writes about the Italian context that:

> Migrations and migrants are the big lie used in the past ten years by politicians to be able to stop talking about politics. Every failed path about work, business, health, treasury, recycling of dirty money and mafia has been covered, substituted, sometimes even motivated, using discourses about migration. The immigrant is the useful enemy. (7)

Alessandro Leogrande was perhaps the first Italian intellectual to launch a call to collective responsibility. He documented the war against migrants in the Mediterranean Sea by collecting survivor testimonies and life-stories, and by linking the history of contemporary migrations to European colonial legacy. His narrative report, *La frontiera*, stands as an epic testimony to the unreported war that is currently being fought every day in the Mediterranean Sea without any real awareness that it is taking place.

It is against this background of ethical failure by politicians and strenuous resistance by those in the art world that we examine fiction and documentary films treating refugee subjects and/or by refugee filmmakers on a continuum of practice and representational constraints and innovations. Wilson's delicate essay "Telephone Calls in Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016)" considers how the director produces an ethics of listening and response that links not only the refugee with previous spatial realities and people they have known or loved, but also connects those who might listen with their responsibility to hear and understand what has been lost through displacement. Talijan also pays attention to the ethics of listening in "Sonic Sociabilities and Stranger Relations in Arnaud des Pallières' *Adieu* (2004)". Her assessment of the French filmmaker builds a portrait of moral commitment, but also maps out an ethics of humility for a director who is not himself a refugee with lived experience, and who uses his outsider status to show all of us how to listen out for the sounds of mobility in our midst. Between these two papers, we consider the use of sound and the importance of the sonic in the expression of belonging and presence, and in establishing a place of safety or a premonition of danger. Sound is a crucial component of embodied spatiality, but is also a signal of the temporal realities that impinge on places of transitory safety, overleaping visual territories and boundaries of custom.

Van De Peer also addresses the responsibility to govern ourselves as listeners and those-who-see in an article that analyses North African films facing across the Mediterranean. In "Seascapes of Solidarity: Refugee Cinema and the Representation of the Mediterranean", she seeks a position of ethical spectatorial solidarity that does not replicate, replace, or elide the refugee subject, but rather moves the spectator towards the fluidity required for walking alongside the "other", and for looking with and listening to those whose lives we do not inhabit. She uses the concept of "Mediterranean thinking" to understand how films that engage with the vast and changeable space of the Mediterranean Sea encourage us to think more flexibly about the refugee "other". The question of audiovisual identity and agency is further addressed by Cati in "The Vulnerable Gaze of the Migrant: Eye-Witnessing and Drifting Subjectivity in Documentary Web Series", her account of mobile and meta-filmmaking practices in Italy. Cati, whose work is centred on the ways in which an ethical response to narratives in situ may

proceed, provides an acute summation of what is at stake, noting that the value of self-created visual data serves "as veritable gestures and testimonial acts attesting to [the migrants'] presence in the world through the creation of images and their dissemination in the mediasphere".

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald also analyses the indexical choices of documentarists and visual artists. Her article "Shaming Australia: Cinematic Responses to the 'Pacific Solution'" is concerned with two questions. The first is the relationship between representational strategies and the reality of the traumatic events befalling refugees. The second concerns the ways in which spectators and audiences are invited to respond to images and sounds that attempt to communicate complex and traumatic refugee stories of dispossession or disappearance. Through a nuanced analysis of two major documentaries dedicated to refugees and asylum seekers, namely *Chasing Asylum* (2016) by Eve Orner and *Tampa 2001* (2015) by Dennis Del Favero, Donald writes a history of the Australian policy towards migration, from the so-called Pacific Solution (2011), later renamed "Operation Sovereign Borders" (2013), through to today. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's distinction between the spheres of ethics and law, she situates these two works in the field of ethics, and argues that, through their images and sounds, they aim at inspiring in the viewers emotions of shame. Her reading questions contemporary narratives about Australian history, demonstrating that Australia has been a home for refugees throughout the twentieth century, but is currently losing its way.

Finally, in "Refugees on Film: Assessing the Political Strengths and Weaknesses of the Documentary Style", P. Stuart Robinson brings the sensibility of a political scientist to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of documentary in countering the so-called "hostile environment" of our era (a term developed with shameful approval by Theresa May in her capacity as British Home Secretary). Robinson carefully delineates the characteristics of the documentary style across a number of mainly European films and filmmakers. His motivation is pragmatic. He seeks to understand how a film might create bridges between the settled and those who arrive, between an "us" and a "them". His conclusions note the liberating value in removing the didactic impulse in documentary, and in loosening narrative structure to allow a more flexible entry for the spectator to—as we saw in Van De Peer's argument—walk alongside the refugee subject in a pluralistic embrace of lostness. Yet, he also warns against pandering to a desire to see everyone as the same and to thereby occlude difference. The trick, for Robinson, is to acknowledge our mutual twenty-first century ennui, to look firmly at our differences, wherever and however they reside, and only then to take back the possibility of mutual existence.

Altogether, the six articles invite us to think of the function of the arts in front of a tragedy of such enormous dimensions. Art can restore the sense of history in times of collective emotion; it can restore visible and aural status and humanity to people who have been reduced to numbers by dry chronicles and evasive political rhetoric; it can indeed stand as a testimony, an active narration that contributes to collective awareness and that positions the subjects of the narrations in the flow of history.

Note

1 All translations from Italian are by Lucia Sorbera.

Acknowledgment

All editors gave their intellectual input in a productive collaboration. Whilst Donald, Davies Hayon and Sorbera focused on the articles and the first dossier, Tofighian (see Foreword) worked on the second dossier. We thank Davies Hayon for her keen eye and tireless editorial work on all sections of this special issue. All four editors were greatly assisted by our peer reviewers, some of whom read pieces on multiple occasions across the editorial process. We acknowledge the work of all refugee filmmakers, those who work alongside them, and colleagues working in our ever more precarious but also fractal economies of knowledge. Finally, we are so grateful to all the contributors for their immediate and willing responses to editorial requests for reshaping and rewriting. We all know how painful this process can be and the trust that underlies it.

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@lonelyip. "#premiorecalmaresciascia Vinto ex aequo con @CriCassar Io lo dedico alla scrittrice @CaterinaBon sulla #MareJonio al largo di #Lampedusa con @RescueMed #sciascia ci ha lasciato un monito: bisogna saper essere interpreti scomodi del proprio tempo. #FATELISCENDERE." *Twitter*, 2 Sept. 2019, 1:20 a.m., twitter.com/lonelyip/status/1168317858050465792.

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Suggested Citation

Hemelryk Donald, Stephanie, Kaya Davies Hayon, and Lucia Sorbera. "Refugee Filmmaking." Editorial. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 18, 2019, pp. 3–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.01.

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