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Title	Seascapes of solidarity: Refugee cinema and the representation of the Mediterranean
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Publication date	2019-12-10
Original Citation	Van De Peer, S. (2019) 'Seascapes of solidarity: Refugee cinema and the representation of the Mediterranean', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 18, pp. 38-53. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.04
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.18.04
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Download date	2026-11-03 16:15:36
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/9411



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 18, 2019, pp. 38–53
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.04

Seascapes of Solidarity: Refugee Cinema and the Representation of the Mediterranean

Stefanie Van de Peer

Abstract: *Films about refugees have been embraced by accented cinema. Indeed, exilic filmmakers continue to test the boundaries of cinema, and specifically its strong bonds with nation and land. But not all exiles are refugees. This article offers that for Arab refugees the journeys across the sea define their filmmaking and thus also the refugee film. If we acknowledge the sea as a central theme, motif and stylistic element in (some) refugee cinema, spectators may be able to experience refugee cinema more ethically. Using the concept of "Mediterranean thinking" as a central analytical tool, this article focuses on the visual representations of refugees in films made on and in the Mediterranean Sea, problematising the injustices in the representation of refugees since the so-called "refugee crisis". With a film-philosophical approach to four films from North Africa and Syria, I emphasise how filmmakers directly or indirectly address the senses of their spectators with a cinema that highlights the instability of knowledge and power through movement and fluidity. An in-depth analysis of the visual qualities of water places fluid space and time at the centre of these refugee films. In Mediterranean refugee filmmaking, water enables an embodied experience that leads to allegiance and sympathy, in order to achieve solidarity. This approach is based on a desire to contribute to a new historiography in the service of a more just world. Transnational journeys shape the representations of refugees travelling, transforming and transcending the Mediterranean. Ultimately, this article examines how the migrant and the sea itself develop with the "refugee crisis", visualised in a cinema adrift on the Mediterranean Sea.*

Films about refugees are nothing new. From as early on as Robert Flaherty, film, and specifically documentary, has been preoccupied with migration and especially with westward journeys of hope. Indeed, it is movement that defines film as a medium and journeys as well as political change represent the ultimate human movement (Eleftheriotis). What changes over time is the perception and representation of moving people, specifically refugees, both on international screens and in their host countries. As refugees turn their gaze away from the country they are leaving, filmmakers and spectators are turning their gaze towards the act of leaving, journeying and arriving. In the broad context of the on-screen movement and journeys of "illegal" migration by refugees, ethical considerations of how refugees are represented and perceived become increasingly central to the conceptualisation of self and other, the hospitality of the host country and the integration of the newly arrived. If someone's life depends on making a journey across the sea, then the space occupied by and the time spent on the water impact people, their journeys and the audiovisual narrative of their experience.

In this article, I look at four films from North Africa and the Middle East, in which the Mediterranean Sea provides the setting for stories about refugees and their search for asylum, and in which the transnational journeys of refugees across the sea shape, transform and transcend the edges of the Mediterranean. Both released in 2009, Leila Kilani's Moroccan documentary *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* and Merzak Allouache's Algerian feature film *Harragas* provide some historical contextualisation for representations of today's so-called "refugee crisis" in two transnational productions from Syria: the collaboratively made

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documentary series *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (James Bluemel and Jack MacInnes, 2016) and Soudade Kaadan's documentary *Obscure* (2017). Through the earlier films, the article searches for a contextualisation of current visualisations of Syrian refugees. Whereas the 2009 Maghrebi films show the long-term postcolonial history of refugeeship, the Syrian films hit home the devastating acuteness of the Syrian crisis, forming a timeline that emphasises the urgency to address refugee cinema from the Middle East. The refugees' envisaged itinerary of leaving home, journeying and arriving in a host country does not necessarily translate into a narrative but rather into a recognition of the impossibility of narrativising space and time spent on the sea. I will show how "Mediterranean thinking"—a concept formulated by Miriam Cooke and developed by Ian Chambers ("Mediterranean"; *Crossings*)—can help us to perceive these non-narratives through an ethical, spectatorial solidarity informed by flexibility and openness of mind. Taken together, the films address issues about experiences and perceptions of nomadism and hybridity, while raising questions about the purpose and rhetoric of political cinema. Using the tools of cultural theories on Mediterranean thinking and film-philosophy's turn towards the ethical exhibition and spectatorship of film (Chamarette), I advocate for a spectatorship rooted in solidarity, moving towards an ethical transnational cinema. Through an in-depth analysis of the visual qualities of water, I place Mediterranean thinking at the centre of my reading of refugee films. This approach is based on a desire to contribute to a new historiography of refugeeship in the service of a more open world. In discussing four films from Morocco, Algeria and Syria, I trace some historical and contemporary conceptualisations of the refugee film and discuss how solidarity is achieved through visualising experiences of the Mediterranean Sea.

From Burners to Mobile Phones: Mediterranean Thinking in Refugee Films

There are different opinions on the history of refugee cinema. Jonathan Smolin, for instance, states that "cinema has been slow to grapple with the subject of illegal migration" (76). For him, cinema is more conservative than narrative fiction. While it may seem to be the case that refugees, since the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe, are on screen more intensively than ever, refugee films are not at all a new phenomenon. Indeed, in the Middle East and North Africa there is a long history of films about displacement and migration. Even the earliest documentary makers were already searching for points of contact and allegiance, emphasising affinity with their subjects and engaging the spectator in a sympathetic humanist impulse for moving people. Bruce Bennett lays bare how the recent "refugee crisis" coincided with a democratisation of media production but remains only intermittently visible in mainstream Northern European news media; "in this respect, the 'refugee crisis' is a representational crisis" (15). Likewise, film-philosophical research in world cinema shows that sympathy and solidarity are increasingly important values in academic approaches to film, as tools for cross-cultural dialogue (Martin-Jones). But, sympathy and solidarity should not be conflated. In my view, sympathy leads to solidarity: the "feeling-with" inherent in the etymology of sympathy needs to lead to solidarity across cultures, geographies and identities.

Refugees, as Michael J. Fischer theorised in 1995, have become a major sociological category. Three types dominate the discourse: there are those who flee civil war, those who escape natural disasters, and those who try to overcome economic hardships. Sometimes the three overlap and—although the categories remain important in legal terms—the creative sphere shows how the boundaries between the categories are blurred. Although there is of course a difference between migrants and refugees, Miriam Rosen warns that "emigration can become a genre […] fulfilling the stereotypical expectations of Western audiences" (36).

Indeed, by focusing on the Mediterranean journey, many North African refugee films deconstruct the European narrative that claims that "migrants" risk their lives simply to pursue a fantasy of Europe. As the films show, those reports manipulate fantasies of Europe and of the dead bodies that wash ashore after failed crossings. The films under scrutiny here, however, acknowledge agency, both through individualising the voices and looks of those travelling, and by enabling sympathy leading to solidarity for those who "see" the films. North African films dealing with refugees powerfully critique the idea that North African *harragas* (a dialect word meaning "those who burn their past") migrate voluntarily. These films show, through their representation of the dark nightly sea, and close-ups of the inadequate boats bobbing up and down in a Strait crossing that is extremely dangerous, that this journey is not simply a means of getting somewhere. On the one hand, in the Moroccan and Algerian films, North Africa is portrayed as a long-term postcolonial jail from which it is hard to escape. The Syrian films, on the other hand, portray Syria as a space of infernal warfare after the hopes of the revolution were dashed, somewhere that is a beloved home but has become acutely life-threatening. Importantly, it is a place to which the migrants want to return. Films like these have become part of a new kind of committed political cinema that is using migrant narratives to expose the realities of refugeeship and combat social ills. As such, they can help to understand and sympathise with refugees, rather than categorise them, as I will show in the analyses that follow.

By looking at the similarities and differences between four very different refugee films here, we will see that refugee films are not a genre but rather a form of filmmaking that penetrates all genres. In addition, looking at Mediterranean crossings through a philosophical understanding of water and the sea requires a fluid approach to the experiences of refugees on-screen. Theories of water and the seas are rare because water is an unstable element. Nevertheless, those theories that exist are useful in a philosophical approach to reading the sea. Gender studies has illustrated how psychoanalysis (Kristeva), *écriture féminine* (Irigaray) and postmodern notions of fluid versus static binaries have connected the trope of liquidity to notions of the feminine. But we need to go further, and the tool that enables us to do so is Mediterranean thinking. It puts a fluid, flexible and changeable space—the sea—at the centre of our critical vision, so that we are able to think more inclusively about the "other". Rather than starting from a fixed landscape, a fluid seascape will allow us to change and, most importantly, think differently. The space taken up by the Mediterranean as such can become one of open-minded contact and connectivity. I argue that the concept of Mediterranean thinking allows for a fluid, humanistic and sympathetic approach to refugees. While tendencies to exclude "others" increasingly dominate the discourse of political decision-makers, Mediterranean thinking compels us in our human ability to experience solidarity. With a central conceptualisation of the Mediterranean in an approach to the refugees' journey, this article looks beyond genre, gender, national identity or heritage, towards a transnational understanding of how the crisis of (self-)representation of the refugee engages its spectators.

Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs depicts Tangier, the northernmost city of the country, as a transitory place. Patricia Pisters shows that Tangier has always spoken to the imagination of filmmakers. But she also identifies a paradox between the attraction of a fascinating past and the city's identity as a space for those wanting so desperately to leave: "[s]ince the nineteenth century the city has occupied an important place in the imagination of the West and East as an extremely complex, chaotic, dangerous and at the same time alluring and open city" (175). However, Tangier embodies an always changing, shifting dynamic between "a peripheral city and a transnational meeting point", between centre and periphery. Pisters claims that there is no space for nostalgia in an ethical reading of the city, but that there is an urgent need to engage

with its contemporaneous positioning. Its position so close to Europe makes it the first destination of those wishing to make the crossing. But it is a transitory place: the three main characters in *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* testify, in their own words, that they would rather die than stay in Morocco. Their options are to burn and succeed in their crossing or die at sea in the process.

Kilani presents Tangier as a window onto Europe. From the promenade one sees, very clearly and tantalisingly close-by, the hills of southern Spain. The border is in constant flux through the waves, mist, rain, sunshine: the sea envelops the city everywhere, but everyone looking out over the sea is engaging with the other side, not with the sea itself. Leaving Morocco and reaching Spain has become a communal obsession. Becoming European, with the safety and prosperity it implies, is the common goal. Beyond the description of a mass movement, the film follows the troubled journeys of a few "burners". Dependent entirely on the sea and the seasons, Rhima, Denis and Aziz read the sea, devise new plans and discuss their dire circumstances. Like the sea and like the seasons, their decisions constantly change, and rather than act on their plans, they remain static, debilitated. Denis is a young man originally from Ghana, who has attempted the journey several times and has been detained as an illegal migrant. He has years of bad experiences behind him, always failing at the journey across the sea. In spite of these enormous setbacks, he remains optimistic, in part due to his unshaken religion. He prays for the good of all burners, to find a way to cross. Much less optimistic and more painfully desperate in his obsession is Aziz, a young Moroccan man who keeps coming up with new ways to take the ferry to Spain. One way he imagines is the best strategy he has come up with is by hiding himself in a bin for forty-eight hours (the crossing only takes four hours). His quiet nature, his weathered face and his light eyes are observed in extreme close-ups, but he continuously turns his back on the camera, towards the sea. Where Denis is loquacious and desperately optimistic, quiet Aziz seems resigned to the impossibility of the journey. Relentlessly being sent back to Tangier, he acquiesces as he focuses on others' stories of lucky and unlucky fellow-burners. The third closely observed burner is Rhima, a young woman with a baby, who sees no future for her son in Morocco. She counts the seasons and imagines her journey on a zodiac when the sea is calmer and it will be safer to cross. Her illusion of being able to understand the sea is painful to watch, and her husband and other family members warn her that there are many stories of the zodiacs being too full, of people drowning and washing up on the shores.



Figure 1: Men from all over Africa are staring out at see from the Tangier promenade, with a "burning" wish to leave. *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* (Leila Kilani, 2009). Vivement Lundi!, 2009. Screenshot.

It is the peripheral nature of Tangier in Morocco that sets the scene for these outcasts. They represent just three of the thousands of burners, and all the stories have similarly fragmented structures, silent protagonists and repetitive plot lines. But Kilani's film has enabled these three to tell their stories, not only with words, but also with previously unspoken or unheard fears. They may repress the hopelessness of their situations, the danger of the crossing, or the repetitive nature of their failures, but their silences, their longing gazes towards the sea and their dependence on the seasons gives the spectator a glimpse of the constant flux and stasis of their lives. This is reflected in the depiction of the Mediterranean Sea: it is sometimes a calm and distant expanse that reveals the mountains of Spain, and sometimes it is a wild space with high waves and dark waters. People admitting that they cannot swim makes their situation seem even more static. It is, then, the paradox between the attraction of Tangier as being tantalisingly close to Europe on the one hand, and its grey decaying buildings, its rainy atmosphere and depressed people on the other hand, that brings the city's mythological dynamism to a complete stop. If crossing the sea is synonymous with death, and if the *harragas* say they accept that, then all of them will perpetually remain in or return to Tangier. Individual stories, extreme close-ups and unspoken, desperate dreams enable spectators to sympathise, to experience solidarity engendered by the dichotomy between hope and desperation, sea and land, seasons and the passage of time.

Also made in 2009, *Harragas* by Allouache shares the sense that "to stay in Algeria is to die" (as one character states), that the country is like a prison, and that it is better to die at sea than to stay on land. But this film goes further than *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* in that it actually follows the burners onto the boat and partakes in their journey across the Mediterranean Sea towards Spain. Leaving from Mostaghanem on the northern Algerian coast, a dinghy with ten passengers sets off at night for the 200km crossing. As in *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs*, *Harragas* focuses on three friends, Rachid, Nasser and Imène, and is mostly characterised by a constant back and forth between contrasting feelings, wishes and hopes. In contrast to *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs*, it is not nature or another nonhuman force that hinders them. It is the ten people on the boat that make the journey increasingly difficult, even though all of them want the same thing and are pointed in the same direction.



Figure 2: The tiny boat runs out of gas and is adrift on the quiet and endless Mediterranean Sea. *Harragas* (Merzak Allouache, 2009). Librisfilms, 2009. Screenshot.

The water of the Mediterranean in *Harragas* is tranquil. There are almost no waves, and for most of the film, the sea is a flat, reflective surface where the only danger is that of being discovered by authorities. The reflective surface of the sea is perhaps a symbolic precursor of the "mirage" that is the Europe of their dreams. The burners sleep on the boat and hardly speak to one another. The droning sound of the motor adds to the monotony of the journey. But this monotony is a prelude to internal chaos. The lack of community and solidarity within the boat is tragic. Not only are the passengers literally close to one another on the small vessel, but quite a few of them also come from the same district and know each other. The divisions between those who speak French and those who do not, between those who have money and those who do not, those who can swim and those who cannot result in arguments about who has more reason or right to reach the desired destination. These arguments lead to two deaths, and eventually result in the motor being damaged, so that the three protagonists, the only ones who can swim, have to go on without the boat.

The fact that there is a total lack of solidarity on the boat in *Harragas* actually encourages viewers of the film to attain a sense of sympathy with the migrants, especially as this lack comes from desperation, stasis and fear. The lack of solidarity on the boat also reflects the divisions within the Algerian society, divisions that run along class, religious, political and gender lines. The boat becomes a microcosm of the fragmented society that the *harragas* are desperate to escape. Allouache himself has pointed out the nonfictional aspects of the film (Staali), which are, on the one hand, based on research into the motive and experience of the *harragas* and, on the other hand, expressed in the nonfiction style aesthetics of the film. The film manages to engage with the lived reality of the burners, without resorting to any melodramatic or romantic notions of what Europe can offer. It is the fact that Algerian life equals death for the characters in the film that gives them no choice in the matter. Allouache highlights this with facts and figures at the end of the film. Before the credits run, a statement shows that "from 1988 to 2009 no fewer than 13,444 refugees were found dead at the borders with Europe, of whom 5,182 were lost at sea". It is notable that Allouache does not do this at the start of the film, which would serve as a context: bringing in this information at the end of the film brings home to the viewer the reality of what they have just seen. The film highlights the emotion-filled crossing of the Mediterranean Sea with "mind-boggling scenes of a sea crossing" (Fofana and Madigan 782). Approaching the lived experience of crossing two hundred kilometres of Mediterranean Sea on a small dinghy with people you do not know or do not like, through slow development, boredom and stillness on the one hand, and internal chaos on the other hand, evokes a sense of immediacy. At the same time, close-ups, facial expressions and body language, or the dramatic irony of subtitled languages and flashbacks, expose viewers to the raw emotions of a sea-crossing. The combination of documentary and fictional tools in *Harragas* enables director and subjects to implicate the spectators to emotionally invest in the journey. The characters make up a "cross-section of social types" (Fofana and Madigan 791) rather than the mediatised depersonalised numbers and images presented by news reports. This also ensures that the spectator manages to develop sympathy, and it even latterly elicits a sobering solidarity among the refugees, when towards the end of the film, after the threat of internal fighting is gone, the sub-Saharan Africans persuade the others to swim to shore, suggesting the shared hope that some of them will make it. The combination of fact and fiction reveals the ambiguity of feelings and experiences in the Mediterranean Sea, and lends the film an urgency that enables spectators to develop their understanding and solidarity. It also offers a perspective on a "crisis" that is humanitarian and elicits feelings of sympathy through a focus on the common emotional perceptions of the sea.

What is particularly useful is the understanding that seeing beyond the surface, and understanding one another, requires not only flexibility, but also ethical efforts to approach the protagonist as subject. This approach demands that the viewer/reader thinks more radically. The fact that most of the films I discuss here are nonfictions, or draw on non-fictional elements, also points to how a specific form of film enables a viewer to go beyond identification and instead sympathise with the on-screen subject. Having a fluid approach towards those journeying across the sea aids sympathy, as it requires an awareness of one's own senses, experiences and emotions in the plight of the on-screen refugee. If we understand sympathy as a "feeling-with", it actually leads to solidarity with the other. Mediterranean thinking enables this sympathetic and ethical approach to sea-crossing refugees, just as a Deleuzian becoming-refugee offers a valuable alternative to static borders and national thinking. Summarising Deleuzian becomings for the purposes of this article, I use Anna Hickey-Moody and Peta Malins's understanding of becoming: for them, "[b]ecomings take place when a body connects to another body and in doing so, begins to perceive, move, think and feel in new ways" (6). Becoming is a human transformation that implies pushing perception into an experienced change of the self, and films can achieve this by underscoring the sensorial, emphasising the audiovisual and making real the capacity to feel-with the subject on screen through an increasingly conscious seeing and listening. By becoming-refugee on screen, the spectator is engaging in solidarity on a humanistic level rather than identifying as a refugee. This distinction is crucial.

Thinking further through water, then, seas are changeable and therefore powerful: rather than weak in its flux, water is strong in its ability to adapt to contours and depths. The sea cannot be contained, but is also steadfast as its rhythm can be counted on in high and low tides. In that sense, human beings have the illusion of possessing knowledge of and power over the sea, which is perhaps embodied by our understanding of the Mediterranean as a contained sea, referred to as a basin. As such, this sea is of interest to politics, geographies and cultures, while it is also of economic interest to trade and especially tourism. Politically, it is governed by the Union for the Mediterranean, which decreed that individual states have jurisdiction over their territorial waters. The rest of the basin is subject to the so-called "freedom of the seas", which stresses the freedom to navigate and disapproves of war fought on water. The ethical nature of governing the open sea recognises its interstitial nature and superordinate identity. However, political considerations ignore human presence around and on the Mediterranean: even the Barcelona Convention focuses on the sustainable development of the sea's environment, not on the people dependent on it (European Commission).

An ethical approach must consider human presences: the Mediterranean is a meeting space where cultures clash and coalesce with one another, resulting in a complex, superordinate and constantly changing identity. Clashes have historically shaped significant mental barriers. As a physical/geographical entity and as a psychological environment, the Mediterranean can be understood as a "sort of Berlin Wall" politically (Sassen). But artists advocate a revision of the notion of a cohesive Mediterranean. Being located on the hinges of three world cultures, this body of water needs to be seen as hybrid, unfixed and changeable: it is not linked inherently to soil or nation. Historically, a superordinate, fluid Mediterranean identity has brought different cultures closer together in respect to their cultural identity.

To understand the Mediterranean Sea, humanity has decided to "explain" it by assigning it specific (restorative) characteristics, but we also need to consider its unknowability. Ultimately, the sea is subject to natural powers, and that is where I believe our moral consideration for those who do not have a choice but to cross it, can come into focus.

The sea (and nature at large), insofar as it is observed from the safety of the fixed land, offers a vista of possibilities, escape and becoming. But it also carries a sense of finality, of death. Its water can seem black, impenetrable, terrifying. The sea offers both an opportunity for crossing and the mortal ending of a perilous journey. It is, then, important to prioritise sociological and cultural considerations of human interaction with the sea, rather than only politics or the economy. Being between countries and continents, and being uncontainable, the Mediterranean is the ultimate cultural Third Space (Bhabha). Being physically mobile and crossing various borders across the Mediterranean, refugees are equally always between places and in fluid states of transition.

As film-philosophy's turn towards ethically reading affect and solidarity in cinema and New Cinema History's emphasis on sociologically understanding the effect of film on spectators (Maltby et al.) have both indicated, films more than commercial media enable us to ethically "see" and "listen" to stories. When I put seeing and listening in quotation marks, I do so to draw attention to their deeper meaning, especially in the reception of nonfiction. As mentioned before, identification is not always desired in nonfiction. Rather, the act of sympathising or aligning one's spectatorial position with the subject on screen can be encouraged. The concept of "seeing" (rather than just the word) implies understanding and acceptance, and an ethical rapprochement between two subject-positions. The conscious act of seeing is transnationally significant: if one "sees" the other, one acknowledges the other's subjectivity, therefore establishing a reciprocal relationship based on proximity, allegiance, understanding and sympathy. The same goes for "listening": in an audiovisual medium, as spectators we need to deploy our senses, our powers of perception, in order to do more than observe or hear. If we really "see" and "listen" in order to understand, to understand the act of becoming-refugee, then the audiovisual arts enable us to establish an intersubjective ethical kinship with the subjects of film. The Deleuzian concept of becoming encourages us to recognise films' power to enable solidarity or sympathy beyond artistic or aesthetic pleasure (Pisters; Marks; Martin-Jones). The audiovisual medium, with its tools to "listen" to and "see" the other in their process of becoming-refugee, enables spectators to move beyond observation and registration in order to start to feel-with and assist in the process of becoming.

Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs and *Harragas*, both made before the current "refugee crisis" in the Mediterranean Sea, show how this "crisis" has a significant history, how it has been depicted in the past, and how it is not just a crisis of refugees, but of European humanity. In fact, it shows that—even as more films are being made about refugees, and are becoming effective in eliciting humane reactions of solidarity in their spectators—seeing and "seeing" are still two different things, and spectators need to learn to "see" the human suffering and "listen" to voices that have been marginalised. Mediterranean thinking needs to continue to expand towards an increasingly idealist philosophy.

A Mediterranean understanding of the sea and those crossing it as refugees results in a more inclusive and less possessive seascape. As I have briefly mentioned, a concrete engagement with the interstitial and fluid nature of the Mediterranean in cultural studies came from Miriam Cooke in 1999 in *The Geographical Review*. In the same journal, Kären Wigen and Jessica Jacobs explore the "value of a Mediterranean perspective" and ask: "What if seas were shifted from the margins to the centre of academic vision?" (ii). The Mediterranean allows us to focus on "crossovers, contaminations, creolisations, and historical memories" that impact on the contemporary world and the (European) ways of talking about, reflecting on and living in it. Cooke develops Wigen and Jacobs's "basin perspectives" (ii) into Mediterranean thinking, going beyond geographical and historical traditions. This mindset offers

opportunities to see the sea as a transnational site that connects widely separated peoples and cultures. The sea's fluid connections problematise temporal fixity, and rather work on the principle of an erasure of barriers. According to Cooke, Mediterranean thinking embraces a Third Space, a space where civilisations touch, dialogue and interfere. Putting the Mediterranean at the centre of our thinking offers the opportunity to develop a new way to think of place, beyond its geographically and historically determined limits (Cooke 291). I want to take these topoi further into an intersectional reading and show how the conceptualisation of the Mediterranean and its seascapes in refugee filmmaking can enable and encourage sympathy across genders, ethnicities and generations.

Iain Chambers elaborates that the sea, with its waves, currents and tides, is a better metaphor and a "more suitable frame for recognising the unstable location of historical knowledge" than concepts such as nation or land and their fixity ("Mediterranean" 425). This is especially the case for the postcolonial world and the uncertain futures of those who constantly cross it. He shows how Mediterranean thinking entails a critical humility and a tolerance towards others, an openness that leaves space for different types of thinking. The Mediterranean is imaginatively constructed. On it, or in it, reality and rationality are consistently confounded by the deviant creativity of becoming, and through it emerges a space for representation dependent on subjectivity: a new perception in which things that were previously shown can finally also really be "seen". The sea's multiplicity undermines the idea of objectivity. So rather than trying to contain the Mediterranean, he encourages us to think in an "unstable set of relations […] an uprooted geography is necessary to reveal a discriminatory mapping" ("Mediterranean" 423). Most importantly, Chambers shows how porous borders are, particularly in the liquid materiality of the Mediterranean (*Mediterranean* 7). The modern, mobile and connected refugee is suspended in the intersections of economic, political and cultural dispossession. Arab refugees coming from over the sea doubly challenge spatial borders and limits: they journey through a liminal space and challenge borders, puncturing national configurations of identity, culture, modernity and progress.

Even if spectators manage to think in a Mediterranean way about the sea, the next level would be to think ethically about the Arab or African subject coming from its southern shores. In European mainstream media, Arab and African refugees continue to be represented as a threat to European "integrity". In *Orientalism*, an extended critique of mainstream discourse on the Middle East, Edward Said showed how terms like "terrorism", "fundamentalism", "Islam" and "Arabs" are conflated. In 1981 he drove his argument home in *Covering Islam* by showing how easily the Western media continues to spread certain "universal truths" about the Arab world. His historical work has become increasingly relevant: in 1991, coverage of the US-led military aggression of Iraq directed the global media gaze onto the Arab world with suspicion and prejudice. Since 11 September 2001, this global gaze has been shamelessly fixed on the Middle East and events are often represented ambiguously, driven by fear and anger, resulting in an increasingly stark division of the world into at least two diametrically opposed sensibilities. The way in which African and Arab refugees risk their lives by crossing the Mediterranean is, again, nothing new but the increased dialectic nature of the representation of these journeys since 2001 defines refugee filmmaking now. Kilani's *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* and Allouache's *Harragas* both engage specifically with the increasing desperation of those refugees and with post-9/11 Western prejudice and discourse on refugees from North Africa. A decade after 2001, since 2011 and the wave of revolutions and wars across North Africa and the Middle East, the Western media's gaze is once again fixed suspiciously on the region and specifically on westward movement from the Middle East by Syrian refugees. Deceitfully powerful media images of refugees on overcrowded vessels, seen from a great

height and a huge distance, have, in effect, turned the average Western viewer into an irrational being who accepts mediatised perceptions of the "waves" and "influxes" of Arab refugees. In my view, Arab and African (documentary) film encourages more informed and humane visions of refugees' journeys across the sea, which is exactly what *Exodus* and *Obscure* do: by using modern technology—mobile phone footage of the journeys and engagement with the water of the Mediterranean—the filmmakers emphasise the human aspect of the perilous journey. If spectators think in a fluid, Mediterranean way, we can move away from dichotomous into sympathetic thinking, and by enabling ourselves to understand fully the act of becoming-refugee, we can start to see the refugee as a fellow human being. Rather than sticking to a Western-centric appropriation of the Mediterranean, a fluidity in thinking about waves of journeys and refugeeship will allow the viewer to embody a sympathetic position.

Two recent Syrian refugee films dealing with the Mediterranean Sea and challenging spectators to think in a Mediterranean way are *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* and *Obscure*. These documentaries carry the experience of the Syrian Revolution and Civil War in them, while they explicitly engage with the consequences of the digital revolution, in their use of mobile phone footage and the Internet. Bennett argues that "[t]he mobile phone has acquired a crucial symbolic significance with regard to the plight of refugees, offering a means of both documenting their experience and distributing these audio-visual records" (13). The refugees of the Syrian war have become pawns not only of the Assad regime but also of the European media and its homogenising gaze, while *Exodus*—with a particularly multiple and multimedia approach, a transnational production, and the use of multiple camera-phones—avoids an "othering" gaze in its representation strategies. Instead of a single director, this three-part documentary was made by a production team that consists of Syrian, British and other citizens, focusing on seven main characters accompanied by family members, and a fluid, fragmented narrative structure.



Figure 3: Hassan Akkad and other Syrian refugees holding on to the overcrowded dinghy.
***Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (James Bluemel and Jack MacInnes, 2016). KEO Films, 2016. Screenshot.**

The structure is in perpetual motion, combining mobile phone footage shot by refugees travelling from Syria to Europe with archival footage and interviews with direct address, where the same travellers reflect on their journey and provide biographical information, clarifying what the footage cannot. This biographical detail shows the refugees as being ordinary and similar to the spectator, emphasising their sameness and humanity rather than their otherness. The structure of combining fragments of the extraordinary journey with the refugees' ordinariness and humanity illustrates the makers' "compassionate intention" of humanising the subjects (Bennett 20). This emphasis on having in common the specific circumstances of becoming-refugee echoes what we saw in the 2009 films, where the success or failure of solidarity is subject to the agency of the subjects who elicit sympathy on an individual level. The spectator is given the tools to realise that the "mass" of refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea consists of individuals with subjective, personal stories as highlighted in the films. If, in these films, we see repetition—for example in stories and people in *Exodus*, and in showing the similarities between hostels, hotels, squats and insubstantial shelters across and around the Mediterranean; or in *Tanger, le rêve des brûleurs* and *Harragas* the repetition of peering out over the sea, waiting for the boat to arrive and the ensuing discussions on the dinghy—these repetitions confront spectators with fragmented non-adventures: the lived experience of a reality perpetually repeated. Likewise, the repetition of places (accommodation) and spaces (the wide, open uncontrollable sea) documents the passage of the protagonists through a range of transitional, transformative and transnational places and spaces. The most important liminal spaces in *Exodus* are the Mediterranean and the Sahara, not places that provide (temporary) shelter, but deadly, vast, unpredictable interstitial spaces whose unknowable fluidity and incomprehensible vastness demand a flexibility of spirit and a perseverance that elicits respect from the viewer. Visual media increasingly have the ability to include these spaces in the image and have a responsibility to do so, in order to enable the viewer to accept their inability to identify and instead manage to sympathise.

If nonfiction is where refugees claim agency, individuality, subjectivity, it is also where their non-narrativised stories become reimagined. Border stories, dreamscapes of being saved from death, poverty and a life of indignity are stories of hope and individual aspiration. A nation is constructed on narration, which leads to specific types of stories (Shohat and Stam 2003). So, if we move away from the so-called stability of the land and move towards Mediterranean thinking through a focus on the sea, the trauma of refugeeship and the resultant lack of narrativisation are visualised in a cinema adrift on the Mediterranean Sea. Rather than seeing refugees as a mass of people "invading" Europe by means of a porous watery border, the representations of their journeys on and in the water of the Mediterranean give us tools to query our own and our nation-states' political and legal discourses on human beings that come from the south. The sea is a physical and a temporal space, a space where a process happens, a traumatic space that forces us to consider the darkness out of which the image appears. A sea space is never empty or geometrical. Instead, it is full of detailed, unfolding configurations (Marks). Broken narratives are "denied the coherence that comes with recognition" (Chambers, *Crossings* 20). The inability to narrativise and a lack of linearity in narrative cause the invisibility of the refugee. So, if spectators manage to think openly, modestly and subjectively, enabling themselves to really "see" and "listen" to the stories, however fragmented they are, they enable themselves to experience the refugees' words and images, making the stories their own and being affected by the human endeavour to survive.

This idea of repetition hitting home the solidarity with refugees is symbolically and physically represented in the idea of the sea, its waves and its perpetual motion. Indeed, by using mobile phones to record the journey of the refugees, the swaying of the waves being

recorded with a small device shows more directly the sea's motion. This movement becomes a tool that embodies fluid perspectives on refugeeship across the sea:

> the restlessly bobbing, low-resolution, wide-angle lens of the phone situates us in the location. […] The camera-phone image has an embodied quality. It moves with the body of the operator, a prosthetic extension of arm and eye, so that the presence of their body is evident in the shaking, jolting movement of the image. (Bennett 22)

This mobile phone footage filmed by refugees offers the spectator a raw insight into the otherwise unseen refugees' perspective on the crossing, as opposed to the TV footage, coastguard video or "citizen journalist" footage shot on mobile phones that show the refugees arriving on beaches or boarding rescue boats—always confronting and qualifying them and their journey as Other. This perspective on the sea through the mobile phone camera is not only personal and subjective, but also distorting and fluid, exaggerating the depth and breadth of vision and emphasising a sense of physical presence, enabling the spectator to become-refugee in that instant. This "implies a radical similarity or equality between spectator and filmmaker" (Bennett 23). The technology-enhanced embodied experience also influences the storytelling in *Exodus*. There is a clear concern with ownership of the story, placing it squarely in the hands of the refugee-filmmakers. The role of the producers is "limited" to editing, curation and exhibition. *Exodus* as such offers a way of thinking about the circulation of political images. The constant repetition of tropes and topoi foregrounds the need to create impact, and to establish a relationship of solidarity between the refugee-filmmaker and the spectator.



Figure 4: Omar (front) and his little brother in the Lebaese refugee camp.
***Obscure* (Soudade Kaadan, 2017). KAF Production, 2017. Screenshot.**

Obscure likewise uses the various digital tools available to the documentary maker. Kadaan's central preoccupation with a child in this film enables her to subtly manipulate the spectator's ability for sympathy. The story is that of Omar, a young boy in Beirut who fled the violence in Syria with his family. He is so deeply traumatised that at times he is unable to move

or speak. Once again it is repetition and distanced observation that enable the filmmaker to eventually create a link directly from the subject to the film's spectator, using silence and stillness with an unobtrusive camera to break the fourth wall. Repeated questions and the revelation of the everyday stasis of the boy assist with the spectator's sympathy for him. Through these digital tools, the spectator is encouraged to "see" Omar as the child-refugee that he is. Together with the camera-woman and the therapist we listen to the silence and to Omar's short, whispered words. In this film, the Mediterranean Sea serves as a bookend to a story of stasis, and as such brings us to the final idea of the symbolic and realistic nature of the representation of the sea. If we ignited our Mediterranean thinking by describing how the sea is a sort of Berlin Wall, here Omar shows how the sea also offers an openness or a horizon. Omar takes a long time to heal, and perhaps does not heal completely from his traumatic experiences. But he does break out of his stasis, and is seen, at the end of *Obscure*, on mobile phone footage shot by his uncle, swimming and laughing in the Mediterranean Sea in Beirut. The fact that this is shot on a mobile phone and is seen in the film on a mobile phone—the mobile phone screen filmed by a professional camera—emphasises once again, as in *Exodus*, the mobile phone as a tool for subjective self-curation and even defiance of the image global spectators have of refugees. Kadaan shows that the sea offers a way of dealing with being lost within national borders that are under strain. If the sea is not territorialised the way land is, then ultimately it is the water that sets us free.

Conclusions: Seeing and Listening in Solidarity

As I worked on this article, I spent a lot of time by the sea to develop my perspective. I questioned its shores and movements, and my thinking in terms of transnational ideals and approaches to cinema. The ability of Mediterranean thinking to challenge our stability and place in the world is, in my view, more urgent than ever. Political and digital revolutions, the refugee "crisis", mobile phone technology and the availability of screens must be taken seriously in our quest to make the world a better (visual) place. Mediterranean thinking encourages a thinking through and with the sea, a visual experience that film can help us to feel. In collaboration, an ethical film philosophy and a visualisation of the changing sea can help us to feel sympathy, achieve solidarity and become-refugee as well. As such, Mediterranean "seeing" and "listening" can prompt a borderless and generous access to the refugee experience.

With this article I have shown that there is a counter-narrative to mainstream mediatisation of the "refugee crisis". Un-curated, "objective", bites (or bytes) of single-perspective land-focused thinking need to be redirected into a period of Mediterranean thinking permeated with modesty, idealism and humanity. Refugee films made in and about the Arab Mediterranean place a fluid space and time at the centre of lived experience, a centre that changes and develops, and that is being written into a desire to contribute to a new kind of non-narrative historiography in the service of a more open world, a more flexible understanding and a point of view fed by "seeing" and "listening" that enable solidarity with the refugee through a multicultural becoming and a tolerance of transnational identities. Sympathy, solidarity and feeling-with are increasingly important values as tools for cross-cultural dialogue. It is within the framework of ethical kinship through images, which work across space and time, that these films and their analyses function most effectively.

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Suggested Citation

Van de Peer, Stefanie. "Seascapes of Solidarity: Refugee Cinema and the Representation of the Mediterranean." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 18, 2019, pp. 38–53. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.18.04.

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