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Refugees on Film: Assessing the Political Strengths and Weaknesses of the Documentary Style

P. Stuart Robinson

Abstract: *The article considers one dominant tendency of independent filmmaking, and its impact on the treatment of the refugee (broadly conceived): the application of contemporary documentary methods to both fiction and nonfiction works. The goal is a preliminary exploration of the complex, context-sensitive political effects of the approach, sometimes dubbed the “documentary style”, as resistance of (and/or submission to) the hegemonic global-nationalist order. To this end, the paper investigates specifically how such filmmaking efforts may—or may not—redirect the phenomenological vehicle of imagination away from narrow nationalist imaginaries towards a broader humanist identification and emotional (and normative) investment in the stranger or “the other” per se. The focus is on two works in particular, Another News Story (Orban Wallace, 2017) and Before Summer Ends (Avant la fin de l’été, Maryam Goormaghtigh, 2017), identifying how the filmmakers’ broadly pluralistic techniques help avoid the potentially dehumanising pitfalls of more didactic approaches, but also generate their own potential limitations. While the slackening of the subject’s categorical—and the plot’s narrative—shape may be liberating, it also risks a phenomenological disconnection on the part of the potentially interested spectator. The cognitive effects—including impediments to memory and recall—may thus weaken the work’s potential as a vehicle of cultural awareness and social identification.*

Daily news reports attest to a widespread xenophobic turn, routinely expressed in negative images of and attitudes towards migrants, whether blessed with the legitimacy of refugee status or otherwise. Though not itself the focus of analysis, such a political landscape forms the context and point of departure of what follows. The “hostile environment”—a stipulated objective of British immigration policy since 2010—normalises discourse and imagery indifferent and/or hostile to perceived interlopers. What follows is a consideration of efforts to use the vehicle of moving images against the grain of this environment, in order to depict the migrant in a way that promotes greater understanding and sympathy. Its motivation is an explicitly political interest in the conditions of a more positive and mutually rewarding encounter between host and refugee. Social-scientific—or humanistic—inquiry is, as Robert Cox maintains, “always *for* someone and *for* some purpose” (128; emphasis in the original). Its rigour depends not on the dubious exercise of assuming a position of impartiality but on making one’s normative presuppositions as transparent as possible. With this in mind, the work at hand reflects an interest in how beliefs, values and norms might be affected (if not reconstituted) in a way that enhances receptiveness to both the needs of those who relocate across national boundaries, and to their potential value as new impulses or contributors. This is an empirical question in itself, but one directed by solidarist normative considerations, specifically to serve a globally egalitarian social agenda, assuming that insight into how such an agenda is served might be of use, at least in principle, to its embodied servants: those who pursue such broadly progressive goals through their artistic or political practice.

The question of how films might affect audiences’ empathetic identification with the migrant subject is empirical but not easily susceptible to investigation, let alone the yielding of

proof. Its consideration entails a focus less on the formal properties of film—the poetician’s primary concern (O’Rawe)—and more on their phenomenological effects, that is, their reception in the apprehension of spectators (Sobchack; Ji and Raney). It relates a consideration of the filmic mechanisms at work to preliminary, political-philosophical speculation about, first, aspects of their likely reception and, second, the likely socio-political implications of such reception. In this sense, what follows is an exploratory, process-tracing and hypothesis-generating exercise, which might suggest avenues of potential future comparative research to address the knotty empirical relationship between filmic mechanisms, audience reception and politics.

This broad agenda clarified, the article’s specific focus becomes more intelligible. It will attend less to the postcolonial demonisation of the other and more to the counter-forces embodied in more sympathetic readings and responses, and especially the voices of the potentially demonised others themselves. The dominant discursive mode is the constitution of crisis posed for a community, which, as Benedict Anderson argues persuasively, modern Western culture has paradoxically sacralised through its very secularisation of an older, Judeo-Christian tradition (9–36), but which remains inherently vulnerable as a large and ultimately “imagined” association of strangers. There are necessarily other, more humanist, less nation-centric alternatives, however. Indeed, the latter build on the sort of humanist impulses, which made possible the constitution of national identity itself. I will therefore concentrate on efforts to portray and communicate the experiences and circumstances of refugees in a way that builds greater understanding and thus, ideally, a stronger bond between refugee and non-refugee. More specifically, the focus will be on those efforts employing moving images, and a strategy of representation more or less directly associated with ideas and practices of documentation. It is beyond the scope of this article to make an explicit argument for the importance and power of moving images in global culture. We might only note in passing the latter’s evident Western domination and conspicuous visual orientation. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the long-established disdain for more “traditional” forms of idolatry masks that image obsession entailed in the idea of the clear-sighted mastery of nature (90–1). Moreover, the very internationalisation of Western culture, as a trans-linguistic process, arguably strengthens the role of visual expression at the expense of the textual (Barber). As Mieke Bal notes, moving images seem, in any case, peculiarly well suited to the task of depicting human movement (132).

Legal stipulations notwithstanding, the refugee as forced migrant is a problematic and ambiguous category because of the difficulty of distinguishing autonomy and agency in the face of complex social pressures. The degree and character of coercion required to make one migrant a refugee and another an illegitimate interloper are inherently contestable. The term “economic refugee” has been widely used ironically to define and disparage illegitimate migration. Building on Johan Galtung’s argument that victims of poverty are the objects of a sort of “structural violence” (168–74), there is nevertheless a case to be made for their being equally deserving of succour and help, for expanding the scope of the refugee concept to take proper account of the political economy of oppression. Hence, the following analysis employs a liberal interpretation of the concept and some of the “refugees” featured do not meet strict juridical criteria. The kinds of constraints placed on their actions and, not least, their movements, nevertheless betray a similar logic.

The Documentary Style

The next task is to characterise, precisely enough for the purposes of the following analysis, aspects of contemporary filmmaking, which reflect the influence of recent developments and innovations in audiovisual documentation. The goal is to identify emerging features of the practice that have influenced and enabled a widespread convergence of approach among those works—fictional or otherwise—that consider themes of migration from a distinctly sympathetic point of view. As examples of what André Bazin, among others, terms the “plastic arts” (4–6), fiction and nonfiction have more in common than the customary distinction suggests. Both share the artistic tension between considerations of the psychological attraction afforded by the work’s resemblance (even to the point of a power of illusion) to a real-world referent, and the appeal and value of its more aesthetic qualities. The difference thus lies in nonfiction’s customary prioritisation of reproduction over artistic expression, essentially one of degree rather than kind. It should be noted that, in these terms, the work of documentation is not necessarily more realistic than that of fiction, which may depict aspects of human reality, for example, by more expressive and less direct means. The fiction/nonfiction divide reflects historical practices, whose contingency is illustrated by the fluidity of their conventions and the porosity of the border between them. It is especially porous where fiction and the *specific*, albeit dominating, nonfiction form of the documentary are concerned. Unlike a newsreel or other non-narrative forms, the documentary is “structured and motivated” (Bruzzi 22). Crucially, as Stella Bruzzi points out, “[it] does not aspire to convey in as pure a way as possible the real material at its core”. One way or another, documentaries—like fiction—tell a story about, or at least give a meaningful account of, their subject matter. The “documentary style” denotes the application to fictional works of such nonfictional forms and conventions. Filmmakers have increasingly challenged the conventional and hence imagined divide between fiction and nonfiction. It is possible to distil from this tendency a distinctive, recognisable approach.

Few would dispute that changing approaches to documentary filmmaking have entailed the adoption of novel conventions and associated expectations—including what counts as realistic. Hence, Bill Nichols, most influentially, has sought to categorise historically emerging approaches or styles—as “expository, observational, interactive, reflexive” (*Representing* 32) and “performative” (*Boundaries* 95; *Introduction* 132–58). More contentious is the implication of a kind of evolution or learning curve, as Nichols puts it, “a dialectic in which new forms arise from the limitations and constraints of previous forms” (*Representing* 32), especially regarding the credible depiction of reality. Bruzzi questions the presumption that the overriding objective—for filmmaker and analyst alike—is fidelity to reality or facts. This entails a misleading evolutionary and teleological view of documentary history, whereby filmmakers, building on the achievements of their predecessors, progressively master the enduring challenge of representing unvarnished reality as accurately as possible (1–2). Bruzzi counters that many filmmakers are sceptical of the “masquerade of spontaneity” (153) where events appear to unfold independently of any filmmaking process because the latter is made as invisible as possible—hence the growing tendency towards a more self-consciously performative approach. This is realist in a different way, in being more honest about the necessary distancing from real events of any filmic representation. Signal exponents like Nick Broomfield and Nicholas Barker nevertheless acknowledge their own debt to the earlier observational, “fly on the wall” work of, for example, Frederic Wiseman (157). Such influence is apparent in the space Broomfield and Barker allow their human subjects, as observed—in their relative autonomy—granting them license to express themselves but as participants in an explicit dialogue or performative dialectic with the filmmaker as, herself, a subject.

In problematising and revising Nichols's taxonomy-in-motion Bruzzi importantly reframes filmic realism more as a norm to be continually negotiated (and renegotiated) than as a problem to be solved. What distinguishes recent "performative" work, like Barker's *Signs of the Times* (1992), is its own expression and application of just such a view. It reflects a new reflexivity, expressed in efforts to employ film's powers of evocation, not only to engage the imagination with whatever the condition or experiences of its subjects may (or may not) have been, but also with the very operation of those powers. By emphasising rather than concealing the artificiality of a *mise en scène*, the powers of evocation are themselves evoked. This may even cast greater light on the events forming their referent, as experiences whose qualities may be interrogated but never fully captured or comprehended. Arguably, the notion of the real preoccupies filmmakers and spectators alike primarily as a shared if elusive value, as something worthy of consideration by virtue of its resonance with and deep rooting in the world as it is more or less widely experienced. The comment "it was real" typically attributes some substance to an experience, sufficient to afford it a secure place in memory. What lends it substance is a kind of objectivity, not in empiricist terms of direct access to the real world "out there" but in intersubjective terms of meaningful dialogue and shared experiences—however imaginary.

Contemporary filmmakers, especially relative independents, clearly give short shrift to the idea, which haunted direct cinema, that moving images have the capacity to show what is "real" as a simple, passive, reflective—or transparent—process.¹ The influence of direct cinema's observational emphasis nevertheless persists in scepticism to the kind of "old-fashioned" didactic exposition immortalised by the pioneering work of John Grierson (Renov 6–7; Nichols, *Speaking* 24–31). Recent practice has certainly brought the filmmaker back to the fore, but rarely as an authoritative, "voice of God" narrator. Rather, she returns to prominence as a kind of further application of direct cinema's sensitivity to subjectivity, having taken more account of the representational process and the associated drawbacks of denying and minimising her central role within it. The work of Mieke Bal is a good example pertaining to the depiction of the migrant (134). It is suspicion of authority, broadly conceived, including one's own, that provides the more or less explicit empirical and normative premises of such reflexivity. It can be, and has been, argued that this is the hallmark of an epochal shift in the cultural landscape as a whole, the beginnings of a new episteme, suitably labelled postmodern (Ruggie; Harvey). Such an irreverent reflexivity is exemplified by the challenge to authoritative categories. Hence, hybrid forms reappropriate elements across the documentary/fiction border, like television's "docusop", which refits soap-opera editing and narrative conventions to create a novel kind of entertainment-orientated documentary (Bruzzi 75–98).

Renegotiations of the categorical boundary have some paradoxical consequences, as fiction returns to documentary "roots" by resorting to the observational "realness" of "hand-held camera work, scratchy synch sound recording and ad-libbed dialogue", just as documentary effects its own performative liberation (Bruzzi 153). The contrast is qualified by the logic of reappropriation and reception, however. The application of documentary's observational elements, such as the technical limitations imposed by mobile equipment, draws attention to the filmmaker in another way. The move mimics early avant-garde experimentation intended to disrupt expectations and render the familiar unfamiliar (Nichols, *Speaking* 14–16). Those features taken for granted in a documentary become more conspicuous, and thus draw attention to the filmmaking process—and performance—upon their recontextualisation as fiction. Such effects must nevertheless be considered in their historical context. Ken Loach's innovations in television's *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 would have had a quite different effect from something formally similar today, rehearsing familiar conventions within the "genre" of festival-circuit fiction. The auteur's partial emergence from the literal and figurative shadows

notwithstanding, the legacy of direct cinema still looms large, especially in light of the influence of documentary beyond its indistinct and shifting boundaries. In the *longue durée*, documentary-style fiction reflects documentary's own overall trajectory towards more exploratory and pluralistic, and less didactic methods, though this broad generalisation should not obscure the complex and discontinuous history of documentary filmmaking, apparent upon closer examination (*Speaking* 13–33; Bruzzi). It remains to consider how the identified approach handles the depiction of the refugee.

Documentary-Style Refugees

The dominant mode of the refugee's portrayal is television news reportage, which emphasises broad trends and policy concerns. This tends to shape the depiction of refugees themselves (Rodan and Lange 157–8). Reports indicate the volume of people—illustrated by long or panning shots of camps or detention centres—and the policy framework—illustrated by shots of borders and their fortifications, marine patrols and the politicians providing commentary. Insofar as mainstream media engage with the plight of migrants at all, they tend to do so on the level of undifferentiated masses and archetypal victims, most typically expressed in the figure of the child as symbol of innocence and powerlessness (Malkki 101–3; Gupta and Miller 17). Conspicuous by their absence are encounters with individual refugees and engagement with their experiences and stories. In their analysis of responses to the 2015 Syrian “refugee crisis”, Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic find that news media's visual representations, whether through “massification, vilification, infantilisation, marginalisation or aestheticisation”, amount to “symbolic strategies of dehumanisation” (1173). The preceding brief sketch of an overall tendency should not obscure the significant variation between media outlets, documented by Attila Zoltán Kenyeres and Jozsef Szabó in their comparative analysis of accounts and depictions of the Hungarian–Serbian border clashes in 2016, for example. Shades of relative “humanity” aside, it remains to be seen what kind of visual strategies of humanisation and mutual identification that are—or could be—employed to directly oppose and counteract the basic news-media model. Taking media to be an expression of a broader political landscape, how does one engage with and seek to undermine the power dynamics of the audiovisual constitution of the refugee?

More overtly critical portrayals of refugees commonly adopt the kind of filmmaking approach discussed above, which draws heavily on more documentary practices (MacLeod; Byrnes 30–2; Schaefer 4–9; Granatowska 61). The filmmaker and theorist Mieke Bal goes so far as to suggest that such an open-ended technique and ethic, whereby “collaboration replaces objectification”, represents a distinctive “migratory aesthetic” (130–1). To at least a degree, the choice of approach is a pragmatic one. It may even entail a series of proverbial “Hobson's choices”, as the filmmaker selects only those means actually at her disposal, and crafts a work with the kind of production values she can at any rate afford. It is nevertheless doubtful whether such a choice is ever entirely pragmatic. The practitioners of the documentary style have commonly understood and justified it as a coherent strategy of visual storytelling, which imbues their work with realism and thus a sort of authenticity. In these terms, it offers the promise of more effectively representing the humanity of the refugee, and thereby improving the prospects of audiences identifying and sympathising with her plight. Arguably, it may even enable a literal connection—at a distance—with the politically displaced, to the degree to which filmmaking entails “material-semiotic processes which can neither be reduced to the material nor the semiotic” (Schaefer 12). The spectator may have a powerful apprehension, at least, of such an embodied connection with the migrant subject. We might at any rate attempt to evaluate how

and to what degree the documentary style delivers on the promise of creating the conditions for a more sophisticated and sympathetic apprehension of the refugee. Such promise is perhaps most conspicuous in what we could with more than a touch of irony call its classic form, a documentary-style documentary like *Another News Story* (Orban Wallace, 2017).

In contrast to the news clip, the feature format gives space and time to the visualisation and presentation of individual refugees, and some individuals and their situations emerge quite clearly and compellingly. The combination of a substantive focus on news reporting of the Syrian refugee “crisis” of 2015 and an exploratory approach generates something in addition: an impression of a meeting, of the encounter between “us” and “them”. The filmmaker has struck a delicate balance between responding to events and shaping a story. The refugees are on a journey, a “found event”, which functions as a loose, readymade and cinematically familiar narrative structure—the road movie. Indeed, according to Hamid Naficy, the strong presence of the journey in movie culture attests to the longstanding creative influence of the displaced and interstitial, their contribution of a literally and/or metaphorically “accented” cinema (222–36). Here the narrative proper begins with the powerful impression of collective joy, as dozens paddle to shore from their death-trap life-raft, as we witness their realisation—and relief—that one deadly hurdle, at least, has been overcome. Wallace’s principal intervention into his material is determinedly to follow that journey wherever it should lead. The result is a stark portrayal of the refugees’ difficulties and their struggle to make it to their destination, wherever that may be, whatever sanctuary might be found, one that can, at least, offer the prospect of allowing normal life to be resumed.



Figure 1: Journalists and refugees in *Another News Story* (Orban Wallace, 2017). Gallivant Film, 2017. Screenshot.

At the risk of trivialising the extraordinary hardships of the refugees depicted in the film, there is an emergent echo of their plight in the portrayal of the reporters. Wallace’s goal (as personally recounted to me in Karlovy Vary in July 2017) had clearly been a kind of exposé of reporting practices, to reveal their superficiality and duplicity. However, the draw of documentary conventions would seem to have taken the filmmaker’s debut feature in a rather

different direction, shaped by exploratory practice and more organically determined conditions. We rather bear witness to the plight of the journalist herself, her participation in the journey, her own displacement and pressures, professional and financial, and, last but not least, her sympathy for the refugee. This strikes a note of shared experience and thereby highlights conditions of solidarity. Thus invoked is Walter Benjamin's influential notion of the common exile of modernity, dictated by the continual flux and upheaval of capitalist society (qtd. in Demos 1–2), and Giorgio Agamben's more active notion of exodus, explored as an agenda for artistic expression by T. J. Demos:

Agamben has suggested that only when “the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is—only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable.” The emancipatory nature of this proposal is that the recognition of one's fundamentally dislocated self dissolves the division between citizen and refugee [...] where one is placed in “a relation of reciprocal extraterritoriality” to the other. (19)

The key in this regard would be a greater popular recognition of how the emergence of the capitalist organisation of production entailed a radical commodification and mobilisation of labour, meticulously documented in Karl Polanyi's classic historical–theoretical study, *The Great Transformation*, from 1944. Such are the roots of the widespread and profound conditions of precariousness and displacement, which go far beyond the specific plight of the refugee—even in its broadest conception. Indeed, one way of looking at the rise of the more or less conscious project of Anderson's imagined national community is its role in assuaging or consoling widespread feelings of displacement and alienation experienced by some combination of removal from—or removal of—more face-to-face communities.

The work of Naomi Millner on the resistance efforts of “non-migrants” to work in solidarity with the migrants trapped in the notorious informal “jungle” camp at Calais is interesting in this regard. Millner points to the importance of enacting—and subverting—the unequal and yet shared terms of mobility in order to create a kind of revelatory spectacle, which might shock and unsettle those habituated attitudes that cement the divide between “us” and “them”. Though Millner's focus is not on film specifically, her work has clear implications for a potential film-activist practice committed to pursuing Agamben's ideal of—as it were—the self-conscious citizen-refugee.

What Wallace's documentary interrogation of its topic has achieved is to shine a light on something beneath and beyond the equally veracious news-clip impression of reporters gliding superficially over their topic, recording its contours in accordance with a familiar discourse, which blends postcolonial complacency with proprietorial anxiety. News reports show directly the performative effects of commercial and national structures, while a documentary film like Wallace's shows their more ambiguous and somatic effects—how that process is imprinted on the bodies and minds of the journalists themselves. The comparability (within limits) revealed offers the hope of a kind of liberating egalitarian universal, and grounds, at least to some degree, for solidarity and, paradoxically, emancipatory collective agency. The source of such potential agency is to be found—and here lies the paradox—in the recognition of its extinction through the revelation of the conditions of mutual disempowerment. Perhaps this dimension of cross-referentiality evident in *Another News Story* is the key to overcoming the central problematic of representation Demos identifies: “The challenge of [...] documentary treatments is [...] to avoid reaffirming the excluded as victimized objects of representation, which ironically tend to reiterate the relations of inequality they are otherwise trying to contest” (17).

Such a line of analysis might be pursued further with the help of another example, *Before Summer Ends* (*Avant la fin de l'été*, Maryam Goormaghtigh, 2017). This study of three Iranian immigrants in France takes the documentary style deep into the world of fiction, with all the dynamic tensions that entails. It shares with *Another News Story* a road-based narrative structure, and even the presentation of the journey as a kind of limbo, but otherwise *Before Summer Ends* is an altogether different kind of road trip, and a different kind of movie. According to Naficy's tripartite categorisation of journey-based films into home-seeking, homelessness and homecoming varieties (222–36), *Another News Story* clearly fits the first, while *Before Summer Ends* is closer to the second. Though not strictly speaking a refugee film, it speaks to the theme through its portrayal of displacement and the social dynamics entailed. It is less readily categorised than *Another News Story*, evidenced in some critical scepticism of its documentary credentials. Jamie Lang, in *Variety*, describes the film as “technically a documentary” yet “edited to look and feel like a fictional feature”, while Jordan Mintzer, in *The Hollywood Reporter*, characterises it as “somewhat of a fiction-documentary hybrid”. Whatever its uncertain categorisation, it clearly draws from documentary practice, clearly enough to secure its admission to the documentary programme at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2017 at any rate.

Some featured events, like the unanticipated phone call bringing bad news from the “home country”, were rather passively documented by the ever-ready camera, but these were the exceptions. Otherwise, the filmmaker heavily manipulated events to give them narrative shape, short of actually feeding the “actors” scripted dialogue (Lang). Apparently chance encounters, with two female musicians, for example, were carefully engineered, blurring the boundary between the actual and the fictional. Whatever the methods employed, and the ambiguous illusion entailed, an appearance of realism is successfully maintained. Whether fictional or actual, the protagonists come across as ordinary men, engaged in their day-to-day activities, where the narrative structure is loose enough to evoke the arbitrariness of the everyday, the pacing slack enough to evoke its natural rhythms. They also come across as sympathetic if imperfect characters. They betray understandable, even likeable imperfections, the kind that may even raise a smile. One has put on tremendous weight, deliberately, in order to escape military service, and he lies over the phone to his father in Iran, telling him he is at the library rather than sitting on the beach.

Whoever these real and/or fictional characters are, they have veracity, and they operate through the powerful medium of desire, that mainstay of narrative form, something the more purely documentary form is less able to arouse. It is the power to invest in the characters' situation, to share in their fears and aspirations, which operates through the emotional register of desire. This is what allows identification with the young Middle Eastern men, otherwise so readily and regularly constituted as unwanted aliens, criminals, retrograde traditionalists and/or potential terrorists. The strategic and finely observed detail of their depiction persuasively invites the spectator to like them and to care about their fate. Such is the realism that fiction at its best is able to attain, not through its fidelity in reference to a direct object, but through its evocation of an imaginary world (Conant), in Robert Hopkins's terms, at the level of illusion (79) or, in Jiri Benovsky's, the “story told” (135). Its verisimilitude is the product of a more intersubjective referentiality whose mechanisms are less susceptible to direct scrutiny (Sobchack xviii), though Qihao Ji and Arthur Raney, for example, have attempted to access them indirectly through spectators' accounts of their own viewing experience. What makes the depiction realistic for the spectator is its evocation—and her active recognition—of aspects of her own experience, in all their categorical, phenomenological reality. The world becomes imaginable—and worth imagining—partly through its consistency in key respects with the

spectator's own experience. The desire to identify with the characters and their stories is partly fuelled by the pleasure or satisfaction of such a recognition. This is the key to the kind of "sensate binding" Bal attributes to effective migratory aesthetics (132).

What can we say about the mechanisms of power, which the film employs to reconstitute the figure of the refugee in the discursive landscape? What are their strengths and weaknesses in this regard? In Agamben's terms (who, in turn, draws on the work of Émile Benveniste and Michel Foucault), how do they work discursively and semiologically, as enunciations or statements (137–41) or what others have commonly referred to as speech acts? The refugee is certainly given space to breathe as a living human being because the "authorship" and "authority" of the filmmaker are less stridently—and less openly—asserted. However, the refugee's looser (though never entirely absent) narrative frame also threatens to loosen our connection with her, to weaken the ties that bond: that is, the ties of desire and memory. That explains, I believe, the stronger audience sympathies with and understanding of the protagonists of *Before Summer Ends* compared to *Another News Story*. We (in the West) live in a culture with an exaggerated sense of individual autonomy and agency. Indeed, to some extent that exaggeration may be a feature of the human condition per se. The dictates of cognition and memory storage exaggerate order such that events and details we can meaningfully arrange within categorical and narrative forms are favoured at the expense of random events and details, first, in our perceptions and, second, our recollections (Jervis 117–202; Lebow 101–15; Neumann). The process of cognition tends to be as categorical as it is sweeping, vague and inaccurate, whereby people are readily interpreted as either nice—or not—as deciding for themselves, and embarking on adventures—at least those who are best liked and/or remembered.

The principal danger of the documentary form, then, is to weaken the categorical shape of the human subject and the narrative context, which lends her meaning. Some of the relevant methods can be a mixed blessing in this regard. An amateur subject may have all the well-rounded humanity of anyone faithfully playing herself, but if the camera shakes her face will blur, and her on-screen verbal stumbles are less likely to be overlooked than in a "real life" encounter (as Erving Goffman's study of broadcasting would suggest 197–327). Moreover, insofar as the subject is acting, in the sense of contributing to the construction of a fictional world, the process may unravel badly. It is clear that Goormaghtigh expertly brought out the "actor within" in the case of Hossein, Arash and Ashkan, probably aided and abetted by more than a little innate talent, but this is perhaps the exception rather than the rule. We might contrast *Before Summer Ends* with another migration story, *Before Snowfall* (*Før snøen faller*, Hisham Zaman, 2013), in this regard. The central character's wooden performance and impassive expression continually undermine the verisimilitude of the work's narrative world, as Benovsky puts it, fastening the spectator's attention on the actual events (à la filmmaking process) and preventing a shift onto the "story told" (134–5). Its paradoxical realism—as illusion—thus unravels (Ji and Raney 127).

It should be noted that the effectiveness of the depiction must also be related to the substantive choices—the qualities highlighted—regarding the depicted subject, for the purposes of evaluating its potential political effects. Herein lies a problem. The characterisations and narrative form combine to emphasise the three protagonists' similarities to average European males at the expense of their differences. Central themes featured revolve around human affection or love in its various guises: the brotherly bonds between the three, romantic love or at least attraction to the opposite sex, and family affections (and the well-meaning deceptions they may provoke). As Liisa Malkki points out, this kind of appeal to

common denominators is a recurring feature of the portrayal of the displaced, and invokes a dangerously “dehistoricizing universalism” (101). Common points of reference represent valuable points of connection, but they risk downplaying real differences, glossing over the rich variety of life experiences, and thus precluding their better understanding, as well as any possibility of attaching them value. The political danger, identified by Rodan and Lange, is that such portrayals can fuel already powerful expectations that newcomers should assimilate, and their differences be eradicated rather than recognised, respected and integrated. The positive image of refugees who are “just like us” thus becomes a powerful and oppressive norm to be applied to those unable or unwilling to live up to the ideal (165).

The focus of this article has been on filmic mechanisms of mutual identification associated with the documentary style. There is another mechanism, relevant and important to the cinematic configuration of refugees in film, that we might at least note in passing. Documentary-style films may be especially effective at engaging in the critique of relevant attitudes and policies because manipulative disruptions of the border between fact and fiction can provide a powerful satirical weapon. There are many recent examples, dealing in one way or another with literal or figurative borders and their associated “us and them” relationships, such as *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer and Anonymous, 2012), *Narco Cultura* (Shaul Schwarz, 2013), *The White World According to Daliborek* (*Svět podle Daliborka*, Vít Klusák, 2017) and *Golden Dawn Girls* (*Hatets vugge*, Håvard Bustnes, 2017), to name a few. The manipulation of the fact/fiction border typically also entails a degree of ethically questionable human manipulation, however. Lewis MacLeod’s analysis suggests that the nub of the ethical problem comes especially clearly to light in the extraordinarily prominent and—not least—manipulative example of the so-called mockumentary, *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006). The danger is that, used freely, such an ironical assault becomes a blunt instrument and a problematic assertion of disproportionate power. This explains the uncomfortable feeling MacLeod for one experienced at the sight of Sasha Baron Cohen, who is Jewish but, equally importantly, a relatively privileged Cambridge graduate, leading the denizens of a rural drinking den in the American South in a rendition of “Throw the Jew Down the Well”. Such a process of ironical recontextualisation is clearly in evidence in a more purely mockumentary (and less manipulative) form in *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) as a categorically fictional account of otherworldly visitors unluckily stranded in, of all places, Johannesburg.

Internationalism and the Refugee

The contemporary epidemic of hostility towards outsiders has deep geopolitical roots—but not as deep as they appear (Anderson 1–7). It is rooted in the institutions of nation-states and especially the culture of nationalism, which provides their *modus vivendi*. Nationalism as a political-cultural phenomenon gives the impression of enduring ancient attachments to place—the more ancient the better—but these are the ideological constructions or guiding myths of modern states. One of the most compelling theorists of nationhood and nationalism, Benedict Anderson, draws attention to the roots of European mass society’s national identifications in a kind of hermeneutical gap created by the fragmentation of Christendom (12–19) coinciding with the new possibilities afforded by that veritable pilot-project of mass production, the massive expansion of printed media in the seventeenth century (37–46). The declining sway of religious identification, and the sacred, universal language and texts upon which it was built, allowed a burgeoning national-territorial consciousness to fill the void it left behind, especially with regard to making sense of human mortality (9–12). As territorial-administrative states became more politically dominant, a practical, territorially delimited,

written medium of governance was refined—but much more than this. A new kind of mass-cultural space emerged, which might be filled with national ideas, not least by the assiduous efforts of the state’s own institutions. Prussian educational initiatives in the nineteenth century, for example, endeavoured to build a serviceable, literate nation but also one energised by nationalist history and identification (Posen). The long-term strategic benefits of functionally literate and nationalistically socialised “cannon fodder” appear to have provided the motivation for such initiatives. Importantly, Anderson brings into focus the role of the human imagination, channelled through a proliferation of new printed media, in the modern nation- and state-building project. Through the distinctively modern vehicles of novels and newspapers especially, it becomes possible to imagine a contemporaneous national space and thus to take a share in it, day-to-day, on that imaginary level (25–36).

Anderson offers insight into the power of nationalism, illuminating its continuing ideological sway in the face of perceived challenges to national integrity. However, the mechanisms of political association are revealed not only in their extraordinary ideological power but also their inherent limitations. For the rise of printed media coincided not only with the rise of the nation-state and its associated national imaginaries, but also with the rise of a kind of humanist imaginary, exemplified by that outpouring of epistemological zeal we have come to know as The Enlightenment. The material explosion of print-media harnessed and channelled the human imagination in new ways and on a new scale. It provided unprecedented opportunities for any individual anywhere, in principle at least, to attempt to communicate and share her experiences, reflections and stories. These were new modes of mutual identification, of which nationalism was only one—albeit historically decisive—example. Modern media facilitated a heightened sense of abstract, collective identity but one whose boundaries were never firm. Indeed, they have invariably been honoured in the breach. As Andrew Linklater suggests, “[t]he conflict between men [*sic*] and citizens is fundamental to the experience of the modern states-system” (23). Modern states simultaneously invoke axiomatic values of national citizenship and common humanity. American constitutional principles protecting individual rights, for example, gain their moral authority partly by their representing a kind of citizens’ compact or social contract, partly by their grounding in fundamental, rationally intelligible principles of natural law—the basis of the internationalist human rights agenda.

Hence, the imaginary quality of communal identification draws attention to the ambivalence of its constitutive mechanisms. The phenomenological purchase mutual-identity construction exerts upon the empathetic imagination is historically contingent and inherently mutable. Current preoccupations with the “irregular” breach of national boundaries are thus equally ambivalent and charged with mutually contradictory potentialities. The focus of popular and academic media alike has, understandably, been on one important and especially conspicuous aspect: the energising of national sympathies and their “natural limitations”, expressed in the rise of more or less xenophobic populism across a wide range of countries. They thus neglect a rather obvious feature of the phenomenon of migration. It represents (as xenophobes especially fear) a genuine threat or—in preferable, that is, less pejorative terms—a challenge to nation and nationalism. Predictable negative reactions to such a challenge should not obscure the characteristics of the challenge itself and the more progressive potential it nonetheless entails. The stranger’s distinctively alien qualities may shock or unsettle, but she will also exhibit—above all—that strangeness even such “outliers” share with established citizens. The encounter with the unmediated stranger can of course stimulate recourse to the contrasting reassurance offered by the familiar tropes of community, but it can also act as a reminder of its limits. The creatures of modernity—and its mass society—continually apprehend the seemingly limitless corpus of strangers who surround them. Paradoxically, the

apprehension can be experienced as both threatening and liberating—even simultaneously. The archetypal forms of the golden age of printing—the novel and the newspaper—produced complex cultural and political effects, for better and for worse, of which the powerful consolidation of modern nationalism was only one. We may just be entering the golden age of audiovisual reproduction with its own paradoxical possibilities, be it the reduction to pure, stereotypical surface, or the opening up of a new depth of visual-imaginative field. It is vital in this regard, to consider not only the social and political damage film can do, but also the mechanisms by which it might, in the right hands, build bridges across apparently insurmountable modern political divides, and potentially make the world a slightly more just and egalitarian place.

Conclusion

The goal has been to investigate audiovisual depictions of the refugee—broadly conceived—which employ a kind of documentary style, understood to be an historically specific approach to making documentaries, which has clearly also been much adapted to more—or less—fictional works. Broadly speaking, it constructs an essentially narrative form from an organic or observational treatment of its human subjects, combined with a performative reflexivity regarding the filmmaker’s own intersubjective role. The focus of the analysis was on how such filmmaking efforts may—or may not—redirect the phenomenological vehicle of imagination away from narrow nationalist imaginaries towards a broader humanist identification and emotional (and normative) investment in the stranger or “the other” per se. Attention was directed to two films in particular, *Another News Story* and *Before Summer Ends*. The filmmakers’ broadly pluralistic techniques help avoid the potentially dehumanising pitfalls of more didactic approaches, but also generate their own potential difficulties. While the slackening of the subject’s categorical—and the plot’s narrative—shape may be liberating, it also risks a phenomenological disconnection on the part of the potentially interested spectator. The cognitive effects—including impediments to memory and recall—may thus weaken the work’s potential as a vehicle of cultural awareness and social identification. The very process of identification is not without its own pitfalls either. Goormaghtigh’s depictions of “the others” comes close to portraying them as “just like us”, with potentially cultural-imperialistic and assimilationist consequences.

The preceding analysis casts doubt on the ready assumption that an observational approach to filmmaking is predisposed to deliver a finer appreciation of the refugee. The complex phenomenological effects of such methods make them a mixed blessing. They are not predisposed to create a strong impression of either individual agency or character, for example, both of which are important factors in capturing and holding audience attention. Yet the creation of their mirror images of individual impotency and existential crisis are, paradoxically enough, critical sources of twenty-first-century mutual understanding and common interests. Being lost and disempowered is the existential reality most of us share. The capacity of such shared experiences to unite us in our misery is the paradoxical source of their own potential eclipse.

Note

¹ Kendall Walton makes a remarkably influential case for the camera operating less as means of representation and more as visual aid (akin to a periscope), allowing observations at a

distance—in time and space. His perspective has influenced the reflection on realism in film of, for example, Hopkins and Benovsky.

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