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The Quest for Representation

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DONYA ALINEJAD

THE QUEST FOR REPRESENTATION

Jafari's film begins on the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos, with images that have become iconic for Europe's borders today. At Greece's closest point to Turkey across the Mediterranean, volunteers on the shoreline and local fishermen in their boats welcome and help the passengers of a black rubber dinghy, filled to capacity, as they disembark. As quietly compelling as they start out, these scenes of first encounter soon become dramatic as a thrilling soundtrack accompanies a fisherman's pursuit of a trafficker in coastal waters. I was immediately gripped by these events, and while the film introduced me to these scenes for the first time, the images also seemed strangely familiar. The way we know that since 2015, similar boats have been inundating these very shores is a result of European audiences having been flooded with similar news media images. But even before that, the internationally-used term, "boat people", had become a way to refer to a group of migrants who are the most vulnerable to becoming the object of visual media sensationalism. Given this opening, I immediately wondered whether the film would manage to move beyond the usual representations that saturate the discussion, framing refugees as symbols of either extreme suffering or threat.

From these opening scenes of arrival on that rocky beach, the film takes us along a journey that includes stops at a series of refugee camps and the passages between them. Ultimately, the route leads to a camp on the Greek-Macedonian border at Idomeni, Europe's largest informal refugee camp, whose very presence is a form of resistance to the EU border regime. This is also where the film suddenly ends, leaving us at the frontline of an unresolved standoff between police in full riot gear and a group of asylum seekers. We are left with scenes of riot police standing steadfastly in lines that absurdly guard a small portion of the invisible frontier in an open field, and the protesters' enduring resistance. Jafari's film makes no pretense of showing us anything beyond this

segment of an unfinished journey. And I think this is precisely why it succeeds. By focusing on the spaces *inside* Europe's formal borders as the open-ended continuation of a punishing passage, it lays bare the reality of the harsh habitability of contemporary Europe, itself.

A COMPASSIONATE BUT IMPERSONAL GAZE

A Greek narrator tells us that this is the work of an Iranian filmmaker, himself a refugee in Greece. This information stayed with me as a viewer, affecting, for instance, how I saw Jafari's decision to pass his camera over such a great number of people so briefly. This came across not as detachment from their personal pain, but as a reflection of Jafari's invested desire to make us bear witness to as much of it as possible, all at once. With no particular case being explored in any depth, hardly any face appearing twice, and no names, the film refuses to make the narrative choices typically used by character-driven reportage to draw viewers in, emotionally. And yet the anonymity of the people captured affords a certain respect. That is, the film does not pry into anyone's story or push to tag along in order to represent a sympathetic but depoliticized experience of trauma. Instead it offers us fragment after fragment of life lived under these particular conditions, showing us that a compassionate gaze does not need to be a profoundly personal one. And it is in this sense that the film does something interesting with its goal of sharing a particular truth with the audience.

The reality depicted is not moving because of the spectacle of its intensity or intimacy, but first and foremost because it reveals the characters' own awareness of, and insights about their predicament, told in their own words, in their languages. This depiction of refugee crossings goes beyond giving a voice and face to a flow of bodies that have been made to endure extreme hardship. It portrays its characters as acutely aware of their political position with relation to the wider world, a portrayal that rarely enters current debates in Europe. We see this keen self-awareness nowhere more clearly in the film than in its abovementioned scenes from Idomeni, where protest erupts after the border is selectively opened to Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghani refugees. Bangladeshis, Iranians, and many others are left in limbo at the border, save for their ability to express their opposition to this exclusion through further protest.

THE LIVED BORDER

In the scenes of protest that follow, the specific forms of resistance people choose emerge from the traditions of protest that are particular to the contexts from which they have migrated, from the sewing of lips, to rhythmic group chants, to the silent brandishing of self-made signboards and banners. An Iranian man explains that some refugees have begun a hunger strike as a last resort, a form of protest strongly associated with political prisoners in Iran and other authoritarian contexts. These are protest forms familiar to those who have faced violent repression, cultivated as a necessity under conditions of persecution, and now used to address the governments of the very nations that might offer sanctuary from such attacks. Across the groups, their message is a clear and shared one, directed to European leaders and their governments: open the borders and let people pass.

These scenes show the struggle from the vantage point of the protesters, as a moment in their continued fight for living a dignified life against all odds. And in showing them up close, the film traces the bizarre continuities between the mode of life inside and outside Europe for this group of people. This culminates in chaos, with the police raid of the camp. In a poignant scene from this intense moment, a shirtless teenager's initial macho posturing for the police, transforms into the frustrated tears of a boy as he sobs into a children's blanket and is comforted by the embrace of another young male protester. A powerful image that seems to glaringly ask whether the force of the EU's border policing is proportionate – even according to its own logic – to the task of containing the actions of an adolescent boy. And in a way this contradiction strangely exposes the border police's use of excessive force as the border's weakness.

While it traces a path from one Greek nation state border to another, the film's journey is not the movement of any protagonist in particular. Instead, the details it offers are the specifics of what the EU border regime looks like on the ground in specific contexts. The many aerial shots show the logistical nature of the operation, what the movement on such a scale entails, and the conditions under which these operations are conducted. It is also in showing these specifics that the film is a compelling portrayal of a situation that calls for visual representation. The drone shots of the boats, roads, coasts, buildings, fences, and tents make up a picture of border infrastructure within and between which human figures move, huddle, rejoice, sleep, and care for their children. We see how the border is lived as it follows these people's movements and activities. The narrator's announcements of specific numbers, events, and distances, as well as hints of the informal economies that

operate along the sidelines, give this movement of people the somewhat chilling character of a mass relocation program. If the building of Europe has engrained certain ideologies into infrastructures,¹ these images illustrate how the idea of Fortress Europe is engrained into border infrastructure.

MIGRANTS AS DOCUMENTERS

Reading the statement that the filmmaker wrote to accompany his film in this publication, I was struck by the importance Jafari placed on documenting “facts of migration”. As a director, he is clearly interested in addressing an audience who might be considering making the trip, which is evident in his repeated question to the subjects of the film about whether their perilous journey was ‘worth it’. This adds an interesting layer to the film, speaking both for and to those who may or may not migrate, rather than strictly being a representation of Europe’s ‘other’ to itself. This is an interesting position, and is a mode of occupying the role of migrant documentary filmmaker that documentary cinema about boat migration to Europe has largely left unexplored.²

But this film is clearly not only intended to reach potential migrants considering the trip. It is also clearly meant for a Greek and broader European viewership. And this is why it is interesting to note that Jafari’s statement places emphasis on the relationship between the migrant and digital technologies. In fact, he goes as far as suggesting that such technologies’ ability to reveal more of reality of the situation consequently could result in fewer deaths in the Mediterranean. This is a remarkable vision, given that the film does not feature any of the characters using digital technologies for accessing news, documenting their experiences, or communicating with one another. The absence of scenes of digital technology use from the film reflects an interesting ambiguity between on the one hand the promise of digital media to allow refugees to represent themselves through their own media production, and on the other hand the relative public absence of such self-representations.

When I conducted ethnographic research on Iranian migrants’ use of digital media for self-representation and expression in a very different context (Los Angeles), I found that many of my respondents wanted to

1 Cp. Dimitris Dalakoglou, “Europe’s last frontier: The spatialities of the refugee crisis”, *City*, 20 (2), 2016, pp. 180–185. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13604813.2016.1170467> [accessed June 11, 2017].

2 Cp. Sandra Ponzanesi, “On the Waterfront”, *Interventions*, 18(2), 2016, pp. 217–233. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369801X.2015.1079501> [accessed June 11, 2017].

use media to counter negative representations of Iranians, Middle Easterners, and immigrants in the US. But not all of them could gain access to the larger audiences that those negative representations reached. There were very few cases of more widely influential media productions. And these relied on modes of transcending ‘migrant media’ production and accessing institutions and knowledge that reflected their proficiencies in the social and political environments of their ‘host’ country, the US.³ This film is similarly a product of the passage of time since the migrant journey, a proficiency with the medium of film, and a collaboration with Greek, non-migrant partners embedded within the political context in Europe.

Simply put, not everyone with access to a digital video device and an internet connection has access to the same audiences. And thinking so fails to acknowledge the complex ways in which online content circulates and produces audiences in the process, often in very different ways that other media forms do. The notion of “networked publics” is just one of the influential ideas scholars have come up with to theorise how emerging technologies shape how messages (are) spread. And despite the many new potentialities this implies, there are also limits to the scope and pace of changes to how institutions value different media forms. In the case of this film, it suffices to ask the question of whether I would have been asked to write about this film for this publication had it been a YouTube clip.

Finally, I wonder whether more reflexive and less realist styles of documentary film made by migrant filmmakers would be welcomed with the same types of European collaborators and audiences as this film project. This raises the issue, once again, of how self-representational (media) style matters, and specifically whether this director’s particular mode of inhabiting the migrant-filmmaker identity portends the film’s politics and its consequent claim to realism. If so, aside from depicting the reality that faces Europe’s refugees, I wonder which media forms and styles might best be used to document the dreams of these new migrants. Dreams to which this film’s title refers but which receive little attention in the midst of penetratingly conveying their reality.

3 Cp. Donya Alinejad, *The Internet Formations of Iranian American-ness. Next Generation Diaspora*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.