

## **‘The refugee is ... FOOD FOR BIOPOLITICS’: Critical knowledgescapes in Ursula Biemann’s ‘Contained Mobility’ and ‘X-Mission’**

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### **A modern political coda [refugees, constructed]**

A full-screen, single drone shot of an airport. Accurate black markings on the runway and taxiways suggest calculated bombardments. The phrase ‘Afghanistan 1987’ rapidly moves from right to left in the middle of the frame while ‘Afghanistan 1989’ appears in larger font underneath. The following subtitles are then visually superimposed onto a multiple-layer video montage:

In 1989, the Mujahedin forced the Soviet troops to leave Afghanistan. By then, Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan had grown to 5 million. It marks the beginning of a whole new era in which the West shifts focus from the image of the Cold War enemy to what it calls militant Islam.

The subsequent full-screen sequence ‘Afghanistan 2001’ alternates images of mountains, groups of civilian children, their mothers, as well as male figures holding various weapons. The video cuts to a panning shot of a mountainous countryside filled with several identical UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) tents:

The post 9/11 paradigm had a strong impact on old and new refugees in the Muslim world. Since 1950, the UN High Commissioner for refugees has the international protection mandate for all refugees except for the Palestinians.

Two minutes later, a handheld camera shows a narrow alleyway as children are heard playing in the background. Electronic music accompanies the following text as it is superimposed again onto a multiple-layer video montage while a female voice narrates:

To become a refugee is a fundamental change in status as a human being, in who you are, what other people think you are, where you can live, how you can move, where you can work, if it counts what you say.

The same voice continues reading each subsequent phrase as it is typed out on the screen and immediately erased before the next term takes its place:

THE VICTIM  
THE STATELESS PERSON  
THE NON-CITIZEN  
THE OUTLAW  
THE POST-POLITICAL SUBJECT  
THE CONVERTIBLE FIGURE  
THE PARADIGM SHIFTER  
THE BORDER CONCEPT  
THE AGENT PROVOCATEUR  
THE GUERRILLA FIGHTER  
FOOD FOR BIOPOLITICS

This compound, dynamic sequence is part of Ursula Biemann's 2008 essay film *X-Mission*. Biemann's initial motivation in creating the work was to find a way to speak of refugees, and in this case, of Palestinians, without falling into the 'inevitability of positioning them in relation to Israel or to the conflict'.<sup>[1]</sup> Instead, Biemann sought to rethink the theoretical concept and lived experience of the refugee in conjunction with discourses focusing on global networks of contemporary migrant communities.

In this article I offer a contextualised glimpse into the continuously unfolding narrative of the refugee experience through two essay films by Ursula Biemann, *Contained Mobility* (2004) and *X-Mission* (2008). The ideas I put forth are part of a developing monograph in which I historicise new media works that engage with what I call 'modern rapid migration'. I hope to prompt further discussion as to why migration, an essential characteristic of

human existence, is an issue in the twenty-first century – and how cultural production, especially the moving image, may shed light onto the matter.

First, I present an overview of historical and sociopolitical circumstances which led to the standardisation of cross-border movement in the second half of the twentieth century. Bilateral agreements seeking to regulate migration and the first machine-readable passport, for example, decidedly influenced the ways in which we signify and legitimise movement across nationally defined borders. Second, I highlight key strategies of the essay film, the concept of knowledgespaces, and elements of critical geographies to offer the comprehensive approach of ‘critical knowledgespaces’. I demonstrate that new media works such as *Contained Mobility* and *X-Mission* challenge the highly simplified and constructed notions of the ‘refugee’, the ‘asylum seeker’, and the ‘illegal’. They offer a perspective in which individuals caught in rapid migration successfully and productively negotiate their space, ultimately compelling us to move past viewing rapid migration as an exceptional reality and begin accepting it as one of the constant ways of life.

### **Statist normativity [migration, standardised]**

Both *Contained Mobility* and *X-Mission* are part of a larger international collection of new media works which engage with modern rapid migration. These projects raise significant questions, including which political, economic, and/or environmental catalysts repeatedly cause large population movements, the variety of consequences following the decision to leave one’s country of origin, and ultimately, notions of responsibility towards and representation of migrants. How and why have sudden population movements been (mis)handled throughout history? What happens to an individual who must quickly cross a nationally defined border in order to survive? And, most decisively, perhaps, who decides how a migrant (whether identified as a ‘refugee’, an ‘asylum seeker’, an ‘illegal’, and so on) is to be represented?

There is an aggressive dichotomy between what migration is to modern humans and how migration has been (re)presented throughout history. On the one hand, migration is an essential characteristic of humankind. It is a habitual and comprehensive mode of human behavior that permeates multiple aspects of everyday life and helps define social existence. Even the tran-

sition from a mobile hunter-gatherer lifestyle towards predominantly 'stationary farming-based societies' over the last 10,000 years 'should be seen as the exception rather than the rule'.[2]

On the contrary, the historically dominant portrayal of migrants is one of danger, ignorance, and weakness. Prevalent twenty-first century debates on human mobility rely on derogatory language of migration that had begun to develop in classical antiquity. The classical civilisation distinguished itself from its 'barbarian' neighbors as Greeks and Romans identified themselves as 'citizens' belonging to a 'populous', while 'migrants' and 'foreigners' were seen as constituted by their ethnic origin and biological bonds. Throughout the sixteenth century, historians condemned the act of migration as the 'Curse of Cain'.[3] Groups such as 'Vandals, Huns, Goths, Burgundians, and Lombards' all quickly disappeared from the map of post-Roman Europe, but the 'names remained on the agenda, both as resources of identification and as negative stereotypes'.[4]

Today's rapid, unplanned movement across a national border results in a seemingly widespread, collective outpour of disapproval, fear, and judgment. Individuals who flee their first countries due to fear of political and/or religious persecution, natural disasters, and/or live political conflicts carry with them a predetermined burden. (Inter)national news coverage repeatedly shows boats overloaded with people, dead bodies washed up on shores, and/or individuals stranded in refugee camps. Visually, the modern rapid migrant – officially identified as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and/or 'illegal' – is either dead or helpless. Narratively, s/he is part of an alleged 'refugee crisis' and a threat.

The ways in which we currently signify and legitimise rapid cross-border movement is no accident. It is the result of a reactive and concomitant set of events specific to the European continent. In the early twentieth century, empires gave way to nation-states in an exceptional historical moment as the fall of the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires brought a foundational change in the status of the border. A new form of self-governance reflected a turn inward for nation-states as governments sought to clearly identify the territory and the people within constructed borders. A move across national boundaries into newly identified terrain consequently took on new meaning, which relativised the concept of belonging.

I argue that the timeframe after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires, specifically the time after the Second World War, is a period of statist normativity. Statist normativity is the result of both

the geographical and ideological transformation newly formed nation-states undertook (and continue to undertake) in order to assert their existence. Specific to modern rapid migration, statist normativity altered the manner in which nation-states began to qualify and quantify cross-border movement in three distinct ways.

First, bilateral agreements focus(ed) legislatively on simultaneous, multi-national policing of both existence and movement. Supranational directives such as the European Economic Commission (EEC), the European Parliament, and the European Court of Justice as part of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, for example, aimed to standardise unity by way of 'European' decision-making in the economic, financial, and legal sectors. In 1983 the European Association for Population Studies (EAPS) succeeded the 1953 European Centre for Population Studies (ECPS), thereby establishing an academic foundation that would not only observe and record demographic developments but would also retain a specific focus in refugees and international migration. Instituted for the purpose of both 'migration control and combating crime',<sup>[5]</sup> the 1985 Schengen Agreement signaled a transformation from 'intergovernmental to transgovernmental, and ... into supranational law',<sup>[6]</sup> thereby creating a clear distinction between the rights of individuals migrating within the Schengen Area and those outside of it.

Second, statist normativity problematically pursues a hierarchical identity in the commercial, legal, and/or political sectors. As official entities strive to standardise migration, an ever-changing, often unpredictable process, into a set of fixed moments, inexact and volatile approaches to cross-border movement dominate. Undisputed titles such as 'citizen' and 'permanent resident' stand in near opposition to the complicated designations of 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', and 'illegal', all of which took on different valences in the second half of the twentieth century. The 1951/1967 Conventions Relating to the Status of Refugees – the only bilateral documents officially addressing the rights of refugees – request that a person involuntarily displaced from her/his homeland due to imminent threats prove a 'well-founded fear of [religious, racial or political] persecution'. Such 'narrow yet flexible conceptualization of refugee status' which creates 'immense state discretion in accepting individuals as refugees and ensuring their protection'<sup>[7]</sup> spills over into the definition of an 'asylum seeker', who is requesting official permission to remain in the country of arrival, while the designation of 'illegal' appears as a result of 'discrepancies between controls in the country of destination and the needs of the migrant'.<sup>[8]</sup>

Third, statist normativity employs modern technology to reinforce bilateral agreements as well as an official, fixed hierarchy. For example, while one of the earliest surviving references of a safe conduct document dates to the reign of Henry V in England in 1414, today's machine-readable passports (MRPs) have been in place only since 1981.[9] The MRP, in its instantaneous recording and display of personal data, aims to streamline verification processes across nation-states. Ultimately, it collapses personal and legal identities to provide a stable and reliable object for governing.

## Critical knowledgescapes [thinking, mapped]

Statist normativity has become an intrinsic part of our modern society. To comprehend and possibly to streamline large-scale migrations, nation-states in the latter part of the twentieth century instituted a standard, bilateral framework for perceiving and recording movement. However, as migration is oftentimes both an uncertain and an active process, it resists a comprehensive grasp. The desire to standardise (the perception of) movement across national borders clashes with migration's inherent elusiveness.

The complexity of global migration and the difficulty in (re)presenting it intricately requires an interdisciplinary approach. Such a framework must be amenable to both changes in the human condition in question and to the creative, technologically advancing modes of (re)presentation. To effectively engage with works such as Biemann's, I propose the initial theoretical approach of 'critical knowledgescapes'. Critical knowledgescapes deploy genre strategies of the essay film, the cultural-anthropologically inspired concept of 'knowledgescapes', and key discursive approaches in critical geography. Connecting these three components provides a dynamic approach when engaging with a complex aesthetic product. As the theoretical tendencies in all three overlap and consistently interact with one another, they retain a flexible analytical framework that still allows for focused moments of analysis.

Around since the dawn of cinema with W.K.L. Dickson's *Record of a Sneeze* (1894) and the Lumière Brothers' *Workers Emerging from a Factory* (1894), the essay film gathered speed through the 1970s (Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* [1972]) before developing as a recognisable phenomenon in the 1980s (Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* [1982]). Since the new millennium the essay film has been particularly insurgent, retelling social tragedies (Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* [2002]), reconstructing security footage of a

public assassination (Chris Marker's *Stopover in Dubai* [2011]), and lecturing on the consequences of global technology (Hito Steyerl's *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* [2013]), for example.

Historically, Sergei Eisenstein first mentioned the term 'essay' in a cinematographic context in his 1927 notes on his own work in which he discusses plans to make a film of *The Capital*. In his 1940 article 'The Film Essay: A New Form of the Documentary Film', Hans Richter claimed that it is time for the documentary film to make visible the imperceptible world of imaginations, thoughts, and ideas.[10] In film criticism, the term stands for a self-reflective and self-referential documentary cinema,[11] a 'meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses'[12] as it consistently strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. As Theodor Adorno explicates in his *Notes to Literature*, 'in the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operation, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet'.[13] A 'postmodern matrix of all generic possibilities',[14] the essay film visually preserves something in the process of thinking. It creatively renders the transfer of knowledge.

Whether one perceives the essay film as a genre or a mode, there are four discernible characteristics that identify it. First, essay films center neither around popular, public personalities nor do they conform to standard histories and strict chronological narratives.[15] Second, the essay film deliberately segues between separate styles, tone, and/or modes of address. It utilises available technological and stylistic resources to render theoretical ideas visible on the screen. A single shot may be a composition consisting of a visual frame, superimposed text and graphs, editorial, voiceover narration, a musical score, and factual intertitles, for example. Third, authorial presence is central in an essay film. The creative representation of (im)perceptible reality through composite audio-visual arrangement of multi-lingual voiceover narration, sound effects, and videographic animation, for example, on the part of the director and/or cinematographer 'hold[s] up for scrutiny those conventions that other documentary genres suppress ... fuel[ing] meta-critical speculation on nonfiction cinema's blind spots'.[16] Last, an essay film challenges enduring perspectives. A converging angle of inquiry disputes that which we initially perceived at truth value, which newly interprets extant images, and ultimately questions cultural contexts.

The essay film debates issues and challenges established perspectives as well as socio-political constructs by using all the means, registers, and expedients that creative representation affords and that the moving image may

synthesise in a single output. The lack of popular figures and standard histories, the deliberate segues between separate styles, tone, and/or modes of address, authorial presence, and defiance of enduring perspectives, converge to form a complex terrain of thought and representation – ‘knowledgescapes’.

The expression ‘knowledgescape’ is an interdisciplinary term that originated in cognitive science by way of social-cultural anthropology.[17] ‘Cognitive knowledgescapes’ are means to survey the processes underlying knowledge transfer between human beings through temporality, absorption, and value.[18] Echoing the essay film’s lack of traditional narratives and usage of technologically advanced styles, temporality underlines that knowledge transfers occur at various speeds and involve unpredictable quantities at any given point in time.

The second element of absorption refers to the internal cognition the recipient in knowledge transfer must possess to interpret the knowledge s/he is receiving.[19] We may connect the element of absorption to the essay film’s recognition of various knowledge registers aside from widely accepted perspectives. We may also think to the experience of an essay film in that absorption of knowledge (transfer) occurs between the material and/or social actors and the filmmaker, as well as between the film and the viewer.

Third, the value of knowledge as part of cognitive knowledgescapes stresses that knowledge is unique and difficult to commodify, therefore requiring consistent, tacit discussions, such as exchanges involving artists, experts in certain fields, performers, and physicians, for example.[20] We may think of the value of knowledge as an extension (or even as a result) of the essay film’s challenge to enduring perspectives. The characteristics of the film essay, namely the lack of popular figures and standard histories, the deliberate segues between separate styles, tone, and/or modes of address, authorial presence, and defiance of enduring perspectives, are in place to map the interactive and dynamic knowledge transfer process between the artist and the aesthetic product, as well as between the aesthetic product and the observer. Preserving something in the process of thinking, as is the responsibility of the essay film, requires focus on the way this process is executed, as observable through knowledgescapes, which in turn necessitates a range of means, registers, and expedients for the visualisation of an idea.

The final discursive element of critical knowledgescapes includes two central matters borrowed from critical geography: the concept of places as spatio-temporal events and the notion of power geometry. Critical geography brings together scholars working with different approaches (such as



Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and poststructural, for example). Their shared commitment is to expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places. French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre helped lay the groundwork for critical geography in his 1974 work *The Production of Space*. Arguing for space as a dynamic, imbued with action and routine, Lefebvre claimed that ‘absolute, untouched space’ does not exist because it is ‘located nowhere’.[21]

As all space is a product from social activity, it serves not just as a tool of thought and action, but also as a means of control, and hence of domination, of power. Social scientist and critical geographer Doreen Massey pushed Lefebvre’s concepts further by calling all places ‘spatio-temporal events’. According to Massey, places are neither points nor areas on maps – instead, they are an ‘integration of space and time’[22] and a product of interrelations, from the ‘immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’.[23] Out of this notion of ‘spatio-temporal events’ grew Massey’s concept of ‘power geometry’. Power geometry, or ‘differential power migration’,[24] draws attention to how groups and individuals are differently positioned within the porous networks in space. From the control over distribution of goods and services to different circuits enabled by transportation systems, for example, spatiality and mobility are both shaped by and reproduce power differentials in society. Power geometry, therefore, is an instrument of critique that aids in highlighting cultural and sociopolitical inequalities in a given ‘spatio-temporal event’.

The aforementioned genre strategies of the essay film, the cultural-anthropologically inspired concept of ‘knowledgescapes’, and key discursive approaches in critical geography share four main theoretical elements, all of which converge to provide the single comprehensive of ‘critical knowledgescapes’. They are: an understanding of dynamic temporality, a creative representation of knowledge transfer, an understanding of space as a socio-cultural process, and an awareness of power trajectories in all three, that is, in time, space, and the creative representation of knowledge transfer. The following discussions of Biemann’s *Contained Mobility* (2004) and *X-Mission* (2008) will utilise the elements of critical knowledgescapes to offer a nuanced perspective into the lives of individuals caught in modern rapid migration.

***Contained Mobility* [movement, hyper-visualised]**

Commissioned by the Liverpool Biennale,[25] *Contained Mobility* is a 21-minute synchronised double video from 2004 that shares visual and textual information on Anatol Kuis-Zimmerman, whom Biemann identifies as an asylum seeker at the time of filming. According to Biemann, the information in *Contained Mobility* is based on several hours of interviews with Anatol in his 'forever-temporary location' in Liverpool.[26] Biemann writes that she composed his complicated itinerant biography 'with the greatest possible accuracy', defining this information as the 'missing record required for access to the human right of asylum'.

*Contained Mobility* employs a simultaneous split-screen format. The left screen shows images of unidentified bodies of water, digital navigation simulators, and container traffic information systems. The right screen displays the interior of a container inhabited by Anatol Kuis-Zimmerman, complete with a bed, a small table with food items, cutlery, a single-range burner, a writing desk with a lamp, multiple maps hanging on the walls, and several personal items. As the video progresses, we witness Anatol sleep, wake up, do yoga, work at the desk, observe and write on the maps hanging around the container, walk around, eat, as well as talk on what appears to be a personal mobile phone.

Biemann begins *Contained Mobility* with the birth of the individual whom she interviewed. The rolling subtitles on the right screen, which provide the narrative focus for the essay film, describe Anatol as the 'son of an ethnic German father from the Volga River and a Belorussian mother who were both deported to Eastern Siberia during Stalin's decree'. The video also shares Anatol's birthdate as it informs the viewer that on 5 August 1949, Anatol '[was] born in the Matrosova concentration labor camp in Magadan, the capital of Gulag in the Soviet Far East, site of a goldmine'. We also read that the family 'live[d] in a dugout in permafrost soil for two years'. For the remainder of the twenty minutes, the synchronised double video continues to specify Anatol's recurring cross-border movements, life events, personal milestones, and daily routine practices in countries in which he resided without official permission from the government in question. The text also incorporates historical events, such as the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Chernobyl nuclear accident, specific legal implementations in countries Anatol resided in, such as Belarus issuing new passports in 1993, and events spe-

cific to Anatol's own life, such as marriage, children, obtaining a PhD in Biology, and learning Portuguese while illegally residing in Lisbon, for example. *Contained Mobility* ends with the following two statements: 'This is the only existing record of Anatol's itinerary. [...] Everything new is born illegal.'

As indicated earlier, a great portion of Anatol's life is available as a list that appears on the right side of the screen in chronological order. It includes dates and statements written in English in the present tense, continuously relieving Anatol's 'illegal' life every time the video plays and thereby holding his experiences as a 'refugee' and as an 'illegal migrant' in a permanent loop. This dynamic temporality ensures that Anatol is no longer invisible and unknown. What was once only discernible and memorable to him is now available on video for repeated viewing. Nevertheless, our gaze into the container, an immobile box symbolising the gap between protective rights regimes and a long migratory existence, is made possible through a surveillance camera. This collapse between public and private life reminds us of the power dynamics necessary in order to create the very video that also records – that is, legitimises Anatol's existence.

*Contained Mobility* therefore reveals the container as a symbol of contradiction. On the one hand, its quality of confinement and enclosure represents official spatial practices of control from the receiving country. On the other, that same space mirrors the immobile box to which a citizen or a recognised immigrant returns at the end of the day. The camera Biemann placed to record Anatol during his daily routines does not follow him, resulting in the viewer being left to stare at an empty space for several moments at a time. Furthermore, we do not hear Anatol speak. We are not privy to any confidential or personal conversations that may help us engage with Anatol further, but these possible pieces of information also do not reveal anything that may be used against him. In other words, an officially unrecognised migratory existence does not inevitably imply a binary opposition between the oppressive interests of the state and the migrant's individual resistance. The capability of both life and survival necessitates a far greater complexity in aesthetic representation, which opens up the space for nuanced perspectives on different forms of existence.

In her own analysis of *Contained Mobility*, Biemann cites the 'European space' in a time after Schengen in which only the 'resourceful and inventive stand a chance of overcoming the imposed barriers'. [27] Biemann argues that although measures such as the Geneva Convention and Conventions Relating to the Status of Refugees are in place, their reactive and general wording

make it impossible to access this right. What happens then is that we keep migrants in ‘extraterritorial transit zones’, where national constitutions do not apply and can therefore not be violated. Consequently, individuals who are not entitled to settle down anywhere are caught in a prolonged state of legal suspension, which then becomes the ‘primary mode of migratory subsistence’. Biemann terms this provisional state that is embodied by the reception camps, the refugee camps, and asylum procedures, as a ‘permanent post-human and post-humanist condition’.

*Contained Mobility* is a ‘highly stylized ... multi-channel visual format using simultaneous projections, audio tracks, and running texts, couched in theoretical discourse that facilitated its dissemination in networks, conferences, and exhibition centers’.[28] The essay film cites and invokes visual conventions from cartography and documentaries to databases and CCTV streams to ‘inscribe trajectories and motion, surveillance and capture in the viewer’s visual field’.[29] It reminds us of the concept of the ‘citizenship gap’, the legal disparity between citizenship rights and human rights that is especially present at borders, as they mark geographically and politically the limit of national entities: ‘Nowhere are the tensions between the demands of postnational universalistic solidarity and the practices of exclusive membership more apparent than at the site of territorial borders and boundaries’.[30]

Biemann pushes the essay film’s purpose of challenging enduring perspectives even further. Her desire to gather the information on Anatol’s life as accurately and as meticulously as possible serves not only to prove his existence, but to absolutely outline every step he took since he began his life as a migrant. *Contained Mobility* includes the exact days, months, years, and in some cases, specific timeframes, alongside exhaustive descriptions on every movement and event in Anatol’s life. *Contained Mobility* is therefore an aesthetic product that exposes Anatol’s existence beyond the point of anyone who may hold an official permit to reside in a country.

However, it is important to note that several other issues arise in this case. On one hand, this may be the missing, ‘fair’ record of Anatol’s life required to finally grant him asylum. On the other hand, how far may authorial presence reach when it comes to documenting the officially undocumented? The act of dislocation results in an immediate rupture from the grasp of the state. A split from an officially recognised – and, recognisable – sociopolitical status troubles representation. Furthermore, the power trajectory in Biemann’s creative representation of knowledge transfer in *Contained Mobility* comes to a head the moment she supposedly stopped filming and offered Anatol help

in the form of buying him a Polish passport.[31] Anatol declined the offer, and Biemann's reaction included the following evaluation: 'Salvation would have meant the death of his problem, which by now was obviously not only a burden but also the condition with which he has come to identify: to march in the cracks between nations as the post-migratory subject into which he has mutated.'[32]

Both Biemann's offer and her subsequent evaluation of Anatol's answer are problematic. Although Biemann's decision to help Anatol originated positively, the very fact that he needed help, or that Biemann presumed that he may need help, is prescriptive. By describing her offer of a forged Polish passport as 'salvation', Anatol's way of life as both a 'burden' and as a 'condition with which he has come to identify', Anatol himself as a 'post-migratory subject into which he has mutated', and by recognising national borders as such with everything else being 'the cracks between', Biemann feeds into the established binary of national authority vs. migrant. Her evaluation suggests that the migrant still must source official help from the very source that produced the normative environment and standardised regulation in which s/he exists.

Nonetheless, this exact opposition is highly productive. The fact that *Contained Mobility* simultaneously provides a multimedia record of an 'unofficial' existence and reminds us of the inevitability of the construct of statist normativity produces another perspective on an extant issue while preserving something in the process of thinking. Biemann pushes these capacities of the essay film in another aesthetic product she completed four years after meeting Anatol, titled *X-Mission*.

### ***X-Mission* [exception, realised]**

The final essay film in Biemann's collection of works that engage with the concept of the border, *X-Mission* (2008) forms a critical knowledgescape that directly addresses refugee-dom in one of the most complex territorial configurations, namely in Palestinian refugee camps. The 40-minute essay film explores how Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank have negotiated their space over the course of 60 years. *X-Mission* ultimately shows how Palestinians built a civil life in the camps by adopting an intense microcosm with complex relations to their respective homelands and to related communities abroad.

Biemann partitioned *X-Mission* into six segments which include 'Juridical Space', 'Symbolic Space', 'Zone of Exception', 'Mythological Time', and 'Post-National Space'. She interspersed documentary footage with manipulated sound bites, interviews, and multiple-layer video montage deriving from both downloaded and Biemann's self-recorded sources. The narrative relies on a series of interviews made with both refugees and scholarly experts in their respective fields. Throughout *X-Mission*, they include, among others: 'The Lawyer' Susan Akram (Boston School of Law), 'The Historian' Beshara Doumani (University of California, Berkeley), 'The Architect' Ismaël Sheikh Hassan (Reconstruction Committee, Tripoli), and 'The Refugee' Shaadi Abu Zarqa (Deheishe, West Bank).

*X-Mission*, therefore, is not only the product of Western-sourced collaborations as it strives to engage with those who are close to the issues in question. Biemann critically describes this arrangement of discursive interrelations as reflecting on an 'extreme form of extraterritoriality' in which populations of Palestinians are 'to be defined and regulated according to the humanitarian conventions of the United Nations and the volatile domain of international politics'.[33]

During the first segment, titled 'Juridical Space', 'The Lawyer' Susan Akram provides the historical precedent for *X-Mission* from her legal perspective. Akram states that the United Nations first created 'the problem' of the Palestinian refugees. Beginning in 1948, Akram declares that the Palestinians were to have two agencies devoted exclusively to them: the UNCCP (United Nations Conciliation Commission on Palestine), entrusted with complete international protection and a resolution mandate, and the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency), whose job was to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Because the Palestinians were then seen to be taken care of (theoretically and diplomatically) under the UNCCP and the UNRWA, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees instituted a special clause excluding the Palestinians from its mandate. When it became clear that the UNCCP was unable to resolve the Palestinian conflict, its funding was substantially reduced, which incapacitated it in its role as protector. Within four years, the Palestinians lost this international protection or that provided by the UNHCR to other refugee groups. Consequently, Palestinian refugees have no official agency for interventions on an international level and no access to the International Court of Justice. This protection gap has never been closed, 'not least because the absence of any legal framework has been very convenient to the

power politics behind negotiations'.[34] Ultimately, a major refugee case was pushed outside international law, where it has remained for decades since.

Both the UNCC and the UNRWA are further examples of the standardised, normative approach to international legislation regarding cross-border movement after the Second World War. Although this approach, in addition to the Conventions Regarding the Status of Refugees, diplomatically recognises the status of being a refugee, it does not offer a productive resolution for the individual in question. *X-Mission* categorically relates this issue by taking as its focus a group of people who twice lost juridical and to some extent, political protection, from both the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and from the UNCCP. A state of exemption within the exemption therefore reflects a twice-formed power geometry, which continues to remain unaltered as international authorities overlap in their deficiency. The resulting absence of an accountable legal and sociopolitical structure in the Palestinian refugee camps leaves two disparate possibilities: the risk of (para)military invasion and/or a complete structural takeover by the refugees who inhabit these spaces.

The segment 'Zone of Exception' engages with these two probabilities. It recounts the life-cycle of Nahr el Bared, a refugee camp in northern Lebanon that was destroyed in the summer of 2007. 'The Sociologist' Sari Hanafi explains how prior to 2007, Lebanese authorities allowed no infrastructure to connect Nahr el Bared to Tripoli, a city right outside of the camp in Lebanon. Such marginalisation and governing by emergency law resulted in a condition in which the refugee camp became vulnerable to other 'extraterritorial elements ... [such as] al Qaeda'.[35] In the summer of 2007, the Lebanese Army breached international conventions and entered Nahr el Bared to 'eradicate a small number of foreign Islamists who had settled in the isolated camp'. The operation grew out of proportion, and instead of securing the refugees' space, the army razed the entire camp to the ground and declared it a zone of exception. The 40,000 refugees became refugees once more as they lost all of their belongings and were forced to flee to another overpopulated camp in the region.

Visually, 'Zone of Exception' begins with the image of a helicopter hovering over a series of destroyed concrete buildings on a bright sunny day. Subsequent shots show women and children walking over uneven, muddy ground that alternates between multiple bodies of water, which are covered with improvised bridges made of shaved tree logs. At sunset, a blue 'UNICEF' tarp hanging on the side of a makeshift house before the subsequent shot

shows the hand of ‘The Architect’ Ismaël Sheikh Hassan, who is part of the camp Reconstruction Committee in Tripoli. Hassan slowly draws out a map of the location of the old refugee camp, the surrounding bodies of water, and certain territorial details relevant to understanding the distribution of space in this particular area: ‘Nahr el Bared means Cold River ... This is the river ... And this is the sea ... This is the old camp, right here ... and this is the main road, the economic heart of the camp ... the extension is an area around the old camp here ... The government has allowed people to return only to certain areas’.

The establishing shots in ‘Zone of Exception’ serve both to remember and redraw the historicised space of Nahr el Bared. Although we hear Hassan explain the distribution of the land as he is drawing, the immediate focus is on what is being rendered, and not on any possible discursive approach we may draw from ‘The Architect’s’ statements. As Nahr el Bared no longer exists and a new refugee camp is still in the process of becoming, the filmic shot of the drawing bridges the once-present and the yet-to-be spatiality in a direct rendering of what Massey identified as a spatio-temporal event. A product of the interrelations of past and present, and between various levels and registers of interactions, including the Nahr el Bared refugees, the Lebanese Army, and the newly introduced Reconstruction Committee, Biemann’s shot of Hassan’s drawing documents that which official entities have avoided to recognise.

To conclude the discussion of *X-Mission*, I will briefly engage with the final segment, titled ‘Post-National Space’. Here we hear from ‘The Historian’ Beshara Doumani (University of California, Berkeley) and from one of the refugees featured in the work, Shaadi Abu Zaqra, at the time living in camp Deheishe on the West Bank. The camera first cuts to Doumani, who advocates for a change in the way one thinks of Palestinian refugees and of Palestinian refugee camps:

How the Palestinians negotiate this space now and build a nation outside of the territory should not be perceived only as negative, as a trap ... [it] can be seen as a laboratory for other groups of people, whether they are refugees or migrant laborers or people who simply find themselves outside certain spaces that they have long known.

Doumani clearly subverts majoritarian analyses in which West European establishments serve as [failed] protectors of the perceived East European and/or Middle Eastern perceived ‘Other’. Neither weak nor incompetent, [Palestinian] refugees maintain a productive, adaptable stability within the



realm of unpredictable change and constant movement. It is precisely what Doumani describes as a 'laboratory', a potential, uncharted enterprise in which 'refugees' design a space and command the power geometries within that directly challenges the historically predominant construct of the nation-state. Biemann's decision to include Doumani's analyses and impromptu reflections is as significant as it is risky, for it attributes to [Palestinian] refugees the power only official sociopolitical entities have utilized; for to inscribe meaning in both the physical surroundings and routine decisions constitutes an immediate negotiation of parameters and familiarisation of new space through methods of the refugees' own choosing.

In subsequent shots we first hear Abu Zaqra's voice. He is speaking in English in a voiceover that accompanies a composite image including four different elements: one, a backdrop of satellite images of the West Bank at night that fills up the entire frame; two, on the left side of the frame, a transparent image of a computer screen depicting a website superimposed onto the night backdrop; three, on the right-hand side, a transparent profile of Abu Zaqra; and four, a graphic superimposed over the entire frame consisting of dots bearing names of different refugee camps. The dots connect in 'real-time' as the video advances while pulsating sound bites accompany the visuals. Zaqra's profile emerges and a faint outline of his hand moves over the computer monitor. With informality and ease Zaqra tells us how the website is called 'Across Borders' and how it serves as a connection between eleven refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. He tells the camera how one can see daily news about what is going on in the camps, particularly since one 'cannot move between Palestinian cities'.

The inability to move freely between separate locations opens up a porous space of online networks which redefines the traditional perception of refugee reality. Biemann renders this complexity through several aesthetic and technological registers, including the website 'Across Borders', the satellite image of the West Bank, the superimposed image connecting the refugee camps graphically, and Abu Zaqra's voice, among others. Abu Zaqra's experience in Deheishe is connected to his family members' elsewhere, as it is the product of interrelations established through various levels and registers of interactions (as represented in Biemann's composite images).

## Future articulations [the refugee, autonomised]

My research into the continuously unfolding narrative of the refugee experience began with a single question: why is migration, an essential characteristic that helps define human existence, an issue in the twenty-first century? It soon became evident that it is not just any type of migration that elicits social critique and political aggression. It is the rapid, unplanned movement across a national border – today's 'modern rapid migration' – that results in a seemingly widespread, collective outpour of disapproval, fear, and judgment. What was once an accepted status of 'national' or 'citizen' transforms into a vague and insufficient labeling with the unplanned, or rather, officially unauthorised crossing of a nationally defined border. At the moment of this type of border crossing, the path to an officially defined identity and routine life becomes unclear for individuals (now newly and vaguely) defined as 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', and 'illegals'. The lack of clear and proactive identity positioning within the structure of a nation-state consequently highlights its deficiencies, ultimately leading to destructive generalisations of individuals who are caught in modern rapid migration.

As those officially identified as 'refugees', 'asylum seekers', and 'illegals' are characterised as an ideological threat to the concept of the nation-state, key nuances connected to this type of existence disappear. For example, even taking into consideration the waves of migrants following an international conflict, for the past 50 years global migration rates have remained relatively stable while the political salience of the topic significantly increased.[36] Furthermore, today's crisis narratives as they pertain to persons involved in modern rapid migration do not account for the extensive sociopolitical standardisation of cross-border movement in the second half of the twentieth century. Bilateral agreements, the pursuit of a hierarchical identity, and the supporting technological advancements signify not only a new form and frequency, but also the legitimacy of movement across officially defined borders.

The ensuing collapse of personal and legal identities compel the 'refugee', the 'asylum seeker', and the 'illegal' to re-inscribe themselves into their own spatial fabric. This 're-inscription', an evolving and unpredictable process, becomes visible through essay films such as Ursula Biemann's *Contained Mobility* and *X-Mission*. Biemann's own aesthetic approach, developed in the 1980s during a time when visual arts positioned itself to other terrains of knowledge production, reflects a discursivity whose simultaneous variety of

styles, tones, and modes of address maps the critical knowledgescapes, that is, terrains of thought, on the subject in question. Artists such as Biemann radicalise the process of arranging, editing, and cataloguing material and human data to render visible an imperceptible reality. In this case, the progression between standardised perception of cross-border movement and the complexity that actually results out of such an approach reveals a significantly more intricate network of exchanges between individual adaptability and national authority, between the restrictions of federally issued parameters and the way human agency transforms these limits into effective habitation practices.

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] Biemann 2008, p. 94.
- [2] de Knijff 2010, p. 39.
- [3] Donecker 2012, p. 235.
- [4] Pohl & Wodak 2012, p. 207.
- [5] Fischer 2012, p. 13.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Islam 2013, p. 24.
- [8] Bracalenti 2003, 'Illegal Alien'.
- [9] Abeyratne 2014, p. 192.
- [10] Richter 1940 (2017), p. 91.
- [11] Alter 1996, p. 171; Rascaroli 2008, p. 39.
- [12] Arthur 2003, p. 62.

- [13] Adorno 1958 (1991), p. 160.
- [14] Bensmaïa 1987, p. 92.
- [15] Corrigan 1999, p. 58.
- [16] Arthur 2003, p. 60.
- [17] See also A. Appadurai's 1996 work *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* for the framework of '-scapes' (such as 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes', and 'ideascapes', for example) through which to explore how relationships between migration and modern mass media affect our perception and definition of nation and nationhood.
- [18] Shariq 1999, p. 249.
- [19] Ibid., pp. 249-250.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Lefebvre 1974 (1991), p. 236.
- [22] Massey 2005, p. 130.
- [23] Ibid., pp. 130-131.
- [24] Ibid., p. 84.
- [25] Biemann, 'Contained Mobility' 2008, p. 57; Staiger 2008, p. 145.
- [26] Biemann, 'Contained Mobility' 2008, p. 59.
- [27] Ibid., p. 57.
- [28] Staiger 2008, p. 144.
- [29] Ibid., p. 145.
- [30] Benhabib 2004, p. 17.
- [31] Biemann, 'Contained Mobility' 2008, p. 59.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Biemann, 'X-Mission' 2008, p. 95.
- [34] Ibid., p. 97.
- [35] Ibid., pp. 97-99.
- [36] See also S. Castles, H. de Haas, and M.J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, (5<sup>th</sup> edition; New York: Guilford Press, 2014: 1-24) as well as J. Azose and A.E. Raftery, 'Estimation of Emigration, Return Migration, and Transit Migration between All Pairs of Countries' in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 116, no. 1 (2019): 116-122 for detailed discussions.