

# MIGRANT CINEMA Scenes of Displacement

by Catherine Russell

The U.S.–Canadian border has lately become a spectacle on the nightly news as migrants from Trump's America challenge blizzard conditions and drag suitcases down dirt roads. We rarely see our border on TV, and the scenes of open fields, empty roads, and harsh weather conditions is a new kind of landscape. No longer romantic or mythic, this is a geopolitical gateway through which people from southern climates are willing to risk their lives. The question of borders, migration, and refugees is not only an urgent topic of contemporary geopolitics, it also represents particular challenges to filmmakers. In their attempts to find appropriate ways of representing the experience of migration, of people fleeing from war, famine, or political oppression, it has pushed many filmmakers into creative experiments with geography and empathetic humanism. The current cycle of migrant films, including small-budget personal works as well as more expensive spectacles such as Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* and Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow*, provide important alternatives to the barrage of images in the mainstream media.

Films about people fleeing intolerable conditions, heading for promised lands of opportunity, have been flooding festival screens for at least the last ten years. As documentary subjects, displaced people crossing deserts and seas, waiting in nowhere zones for asylum, are significant subjects for filmmakers committed to social justice. Documentarians can put names and faces to migrants, hear their stories, and witness

their humiliations; they can recognize the humanitarian helpers along the way, as well as the brutality of those who hold them back. The best of migrant cinema, though, dignifies the migrant through aesthetic techniques of framing, lighting, and portraiture, and is best described as experimental non-fiction. Given their homelessness, their fugitive status, and their open-ended journeys, the migrants' plight lends itself to experimental treatments that challenge the clichés of conventional TV journalism.

**Surveying new films that break away from journalistic clichés and experiment with the documentary format in order to find deeper truths in the refugee experience and to dignify the plight of the displaced.**

In fact, the drama of displaced people, immigrants, and migration has many precedents in international cinema. Jonas Mekas was perhaps the first displaced person to make that identity the centerpiece of his film practice in the 1960s. Films such as *Flotel Europa* (Vladimir Tomic, 2015) and *A World Not Ours* (Mahdi Fleifel, 2012) are recent examples of filmmakers using diary footage shot on video over many years to depict their experiences in a floating hotel in Copenhagen in the first instance and Ein El-Helweh refugee camp in southern Lebanon in the second. As early as the 1970s, Chantal Akerman assumed a variety of vantage points on the experience of migration. Her use of the fixed frame, like James Benning's many films of the American landscape, is taken up by many of the migrant films discussed below.

*From the Other Side* (Akerman, 1977) employs many of the parallel tracking shots and landscape compositions that Akerman uses in films such as *News from Home* (1977) and *D'Est (From the East)* (1993) but with the added feature of interviews. Dangerous tales told by Mexicans trying and failing to cross the border are matched with xenophobic, paranoid Americans trying to keep them from "invading." Akerman's inclusion of these portraits and testimonies alongside the images of walls and fences

dividing up the landscape is an early instance of the migrant cinema that has lately become a dominant strain of experimental documentary. Fixed-frame cinematography is also deployed with remarkable effect by Kelly

Reichardt in *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), a fiction film about migrants traveling through the nineteenth-century American West, whose journey is not unlike those of twenty-first-century migrants searching for a better homeland. The structural technique is a valuable means for filmmakers to observe their subjects as figures in space, people situated in urban and rural landscapes. It adds a photographic quality to the subjects that lifts them out of their mundane realities into the formalism of artmaking. It can also be equated with and compared to the fixed gaze of surveillance cameras and drones that is frequently integrated into migrant films.

*El mar la mar* (which translates roughly as "The Sea, the Sea") by J. P. Sniadecki and Joshua Bonnetta, was filmed in the Sonoran Desert in the American Southwest where Mexico borders Southern California and



Arizona. The landscape of distant hills and mountains, arid scrub, and rocky gullies with tiny streams, is vaguely familiar from Hollywood Westerns (in fact, the film includes the ghost of *Johnny Guitar* by way of the Peggy Lee theme song). Sniadecki and Bonnetta use a fixed frame with 16mm film to capture the desert's ominous ghost-ridden presence. The film is heavy with darkness, broken only by storms, bats, and a sound mix of radio static, footsteps and wind, overlaid by stories told by unseen men and women who live in this desert or who have passed through it. Migrants speak of their harrowing journeys, of their lost companions, the days and nights of fear and pain; a tracker boasts of his intimate knowledge of the terrain (but is he tracking people or animals?); an aid worker tells of finding a body; a woman talks about giving shelter to a lost man. The stories are moving, even though the speakers' voices are never linked to visible bodies.

In daylight, the camera in *El mar la mar* fixes on details: the objects littering the desert that are so much more than litter: backpacks, cell phones, empty water bottles, broken shoes. Sniadecki and Bonnetta were inspired by Jason de León's book *The Land of Open Graves*, an anthropological study of the Sonoran Desert, which argues that the desert is a violent tool of the American border authorities that forces migrants into hostile, deadly conditions. The film strongly conveys the experience of undocumented workers and the border culture of hiding, hiking, hunting, and helping, while keeping any actual activity, quite literally, at a distance. In one long shot in *El mar*, while an American voice describes the "trippy little world" of the desert, a figure slowly crosses the horizon in the extreme background of the image. The film closes with a poem recited over a landscape fading into dusk, *Primera Sueño* (First Dream), written in the seventeenth century by a Spanish nun in

Mexico. Her words about the light and the landscape—"the sun-worn traveler, dazed and footsore," "the ghosts that fled"—echoes eerily with the elusive imagery of the film. Its timelessness may betray the geopolitics of the twenty-first-century Sonoran experience, but it nevertheless ennobles the migrants, dignifying their experience as at once existential and historical.

Sniadecki's pedigree as a graduate of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) may help to situate this film within an expanded sense of poetic documentary, one that is grounded in anthropological research. The SEL can hardly be said to have a recognizable style, but its graduates share methods of collaboration and approach. The collaboration with gallery artist Bonnetta, and the surprisingly effective use of 16mm, render *El mar la mar* a haunting, almost spiritual work, taking up the task of mourning the lost people of the desert at the same time as telling some of their stories. Sniadecki tends to be drawn to the Benning-inspired fixed frame in films such as *Foreign Parts* (2010), *People's Park* (2012), and *Yumen* (2013). In *El mar la mar* the photographic framing effect endows the project with a kind of solemnity that might otherwise be lacking from the vast, directionless, hostile venue of passage. The filmmakers' own presence is registered in their rigor, which reads as a kind of monumentality in which the blankets of dusk and darkness captured on film pulse with the precarious passage of people in the night.

Another recent migrant film, *Havarie* (which translates as "Accident" or "Shipwreck"), by the German director Philip Scheffner, likewise holds the image of migrants at a distance. Visible throughout the ninety-three minutes of the film, a group of men can be seen perched in a lifeboat on the beautiful blue of the Mediterranean. Captured on cell-phone video, the little black speck moves erratically across the frame, coming in and out of focus. Scheffner

relies entirely on 3:36 minutes of cell-phone video that he and writing partner Merle Kröger found online, slowed down to ninety minutes, for the image track of the film. The camera swings briefly to the left and the right to capture the tourists gathered on the cruise ship's small viewing decks, but never closes in on the migrants or their witnesses.

As in *El mar*, the drama of *Havarie* is all on the soundtrack. Fragments of maritime radio sound detail the slow progress of a rescue operation in progress; we learn a bit about the men in the little boat, but not much. A tourist, maybe the Irish man who shot the original footage, describes the boat ironically as a "wee speedboat type of thing," and the captain describes taking water to refugees and reports thirteen males in good health. Or is he talking about those men in that small boat? *Havarie* is littered with slippages of meaning and referentiality, as the image is gradually implicated into a dense web of layered experiences of migration, witnessing, and helplessness. Voices describe all kinds of activities, including the survival of horrendous Mediterranean crossings, and they recount seeing things, but the voices and images are always out of sync because all we see is one boat. Other voices in Arabic relate the experience of the refugee separated from home; Russian voices characterize the loneliness of the seaman spending months away from home. Some of the stories are banal, and some are terrifying; they circle around the men on the boat, respectful of them and their plight.

Not all migrant films are so cautious with issues of representation. *Fire at Sea* by Gianfranco Rosi is more of a crowd-pleaser, having won the Golden Bear at Berlin in 2016 (*El mar la mar* won the Caligari Film Award and an Ecumenical Jury Prize the same year), and it certainly has its own poetry. The island of Lampedusa, a critical site of the migrant journey in the Twenteens, is the scene of Rosi's film, featuring the Italian



A pair of sandals on the Sonoran Desert offers visual evidence of the dangerous journey of migrants trying to reach America in J. P. Sniadecki and Joshua Bonnetta's *El mar la mar*. (photo courtesy of The Cinema Guild)



A lifeboat loaded with desperate migrants bobs helplessly on the Mediterranean Sea in the extended cell-phone video that constitutes Philip Scheffner's documentary *Havarie*.





In Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea*, an Italian Coast Guard boat employs a video monitor to aid in its search-and-rescue missions. (photo courtesy of Kino Lorber)

islanders who have lived there for generations, fifty miles closer to Libya than to Sicily. Rosi's style combines observational documentary with something closer to the neorealist techniques of Visconti and De Sica. He uses the latter for the Italians, and the former for scenes involving migrants rescued at sea. The charm of the film rests entirely on a charismatic young boy named Samuele who leads the camera onto beautiful barren cliffs, the decks of fishing boats, and the various domestic and public spaces of the village, where he never actually passes or sees an undocumented person.

Meanwhile, African men and women are rescued by the hazmat-clad Italian Coast Guard, "processed," medically examined, and herded into holding patterns. They look miserable, weak, and destitute. Cutting back and forth between the mundane, everyday activities of the residents of Lampedusa and the migrants being rescued, *Fire at Sea* is an exercise in contrasts, coincidence, and proximity, with little encounter or engagement. The radio announcer dedicates the traditional Sicilian song "Fuccoammare" ("Fire at Sea") to all the fishermen waiting for good weather. Meanwhile, the greatest Lampedusean disaster of a fire on a migrant boat in 2013, in which more than 360 people died, is an event that lurks in the background of the film.

Only the benevolent doctor Pietro Bartolo links the two worlds. We see him treating a pregnant woman who speaks only Arabic; he is among the staff examining migrant arrivals, and he also treats Samuele's anxiety. Bartolo offers a moving testimony to the terrible things he has seen, but it pales beside the incredible testimony that Rosi records among a group of Nigerians in the displaced persons camp. An uncredited poet chants his story like a rapper while a chorus sings behind him, slightly out of focus. He says, "We ran to the desert and many died...raping and killing in the desert...We fled to Libya...they would not help us because we are Africans...The sea is not a place to pass by. The sea is not a road...If we

did not die in the Libyan prison, we will not die at sea. God rescued us." The singer is elated with religious fervor, and his dreadful tale is strangely uplifting.

*Fire at Sea* lists seven government agencies plus the Ministry of the Interior in the credits, and the film arguably celebrates the mechanics of the Italian state. The routine rescue of such desperate people will inevitably put pressure on a small population of six thousand, and Rosi's film certainly alludes to it in Samuele's anxiety and the doctor's painful testimony. Rossini's opera *Moses in Egypt* playing over the radio, while a housewife makes a bed and kisses the saints, suggests that the film, in the end, is more like a tribute to the Lampedusean islanders than a documentary about migrants who are last seen in the horrific form of corpses in the hold of a shipwrecked boat.

*Lampedusa in Winter* by Austrian filmmaker Jakob Brossman has also won awards, among them an Ethnographic Film Award from the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Brossman takes us much deeper into the island's difficult accommodation of so many thousands -

of displaced people. One person bemoans the fact that Lampedusa has essentially become one big immigration office, and we get a much better impression of the pressures on the islanders and the challenges they face. In the winter, while the tourists stay away, the infrastructure of Lampedusa, on the fringes of a continent more than 120 miles away, is in constant peril. Mayor Giusi Nicolini—who has been widely recognized for her efforts since 2012, winning a UNESCO Peace Prize in 2017—is seen in action, negotiating with several different constituencies. Speaking by Skype to someone in mainland Italy, she defends the migrants' rights to asylum and notes that "Lampedusa is bearing the burden of resources and grief." She also holds her own among vocal fishermen striking because the ferry service has become too limited for them to get their fish to market. She also manages to placate a group of migrants who have camped out at the church, complaining of mistreatment and poor conditions at the camp.

*Lampedusa in Winter* stands out among migrant films because it explores the complicated interrelations between the European residents and the people from Africa and the Middle East who land on their shores. Brossman observes but he also interviews people on both sides of the encounter. A local archivist has collected artifacts washed up on shore and scavenged from a boat graveyard—details that speak volumes about lives lost at sea. Brossman also interviews a local activist, Annalisa D'Ancona, who helps the migrants make their case with the mayor, and who tends the graves of unidentified casualties. She speaks of the many corpses of women that have been found but not reported. In many of these migrant films, the fates of women are made invisible, and this is one of the only references that even hint at the gendering of migrants. Brossman's camera remains on the outer margins of the media circus of Lampedusa, watching the TV crews from the sidelines. His film may lack the cinematic effects of some of the others discussed



African migrants, kept warm with aluminum-coated plastic blankets, are taken aboard a rescue ship in Jakob Brossman's *Winter in Lampedusa*.





African refugees gather on a hillside above barbed-wire fences that separate them from asylum in Morocco in *Those Who Jump*, a film by Moritz Siebert, Estephan Wagner, and Abou Bakar Sidibé.

here, but he makes up for it by capturing the passion of those who have struggled to welcome the migrants and help them on their journeys.

Many of the migrants in these documentaries are no longer moving, but are awaiting an opportunity to become refugees, to ask for asylum, and to end their journey in a better place than where they started. The waiting game is a kind of purgatory, and two films do an excellent job of documenting that wretched experience in makeshift camps. *Those Who Jump* is set on Mount Gourougou just outside the town of Melilla, a Spanish enclave on the African continent. Three rows of huge barbed-wire fences separate the town from Morocco, and above the fences, on a steep hillside, hundreds of men from sub-Saharan Africa have congregated. They periodically charge the barriers en masse in the hopes that a few lucky souls will survive the "jump" and the inevitable aggressive police assault on the other side. German filmmakers Moritz Siebert and Estephan Wagner enlisted Abou Bakar Sidibé from Mali to shoot the film from inside the Mount Gourougou camp where he, too, awaited his leap to freedom.

Part of the story of *Those Who Jump* involves Abou learning to use his camera, and he ends up capturing great footage of the camaraderie among the men, including the rituals of their everyday lives—scavenging for food, cooking, playing football, singing, praying, getting busted and ransacked by the Moroccan police, and planning their escape to Spain and "El Dorado." Although the men come from many different countries, they have a shared mission, and similar stories of crossing the deadly Sahara Desert to get to this hillside where they can watch cruise ships and freighters pulling out of the harbor, and airplanes arriving and leaving for Europe. Siebert and Wagner have incorporated CCTV footage into their edit, providing the view from Spanish surveillance cameras when the men

make their way down through the hillside to the intimidating barriers. The contrast with Abou's intimate footage and lively commentary makes a powerful statement.

A Danish production, with Abou Bakar Sidibé credited with co-direction, *Those Who Jump* is a highly successful collaboration between migrants and filmmakers. Among other attributes, it counters the stereotype of African migrants as merely bodies looking for shelter, and dignifies their journeys and their plights. The landscape of Mount Gourougou is not your typical displaced persons camp. It's a kind of no man's land in which the men are trapped for months on end. Some give up and return to their wartorn countries, some die in the camp or in the "jump," and some, including

the filmmaker, make it to the other side to begin new lives.

Sylvain George's *May They Rest in Revolt* (*Figures of War*) is set in the border region of Calais in northern France where more migrants have gathered en route to England—another perceived land of plenty. Many of the men in this film are from Afghanistan, as well as Africa. This is in many ways an artisanal film, as George is credited with camera, editing, and direction. He shoots in high-contrast black and white, often at night, finding the men camping in parks and under bridges, in the back alleys and abandoned buildings of Calais. They cook together, wash at a hydrant, and wander through the industrial landscape of the port city, trying to snag lifts under transport trucks, hop trains, and board ships. George's cinematography lends their situation a certain majesty, even in scenes such as burning their fingertips so as to evade identification. They are undocumented, homeless, and, in this film, angry.

Several men in *May They Rest in Revolt* tell their tales of woe to the camera, describing their travels through dozens of different countries, across deserts and seas where they have lost countless comrades. Calais is depicted as inhospitable, with only gendarmes representing the local population. George's camera follows the would-be refugees everywhere during the night and the day, interrupting the action with shots of the beach, the parked cruise boats, the cage-like fencing, and the debris amidst which they live on the edge of the continent. One man bemoans his fate: "I have crossed a desert and a sea, only to lose my life here. For what?"



In Sylvain George's *May They Rest in Revolt* (*Figures of War*), African refugees in the Calais migrant camp burn their fingertips so as to evade identification. (photo courtesy of Noir Production)





Syrian families escaping war arrive at a Jordanian refugee camp in Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow*.

In the second part of *May They Rest*, George turns his attention to "The Jungle," a refugee camp just outside Calais. Human rights activists visit the residents, warning them of an impending raid by French authorities. Sure enough, police, protesters, journalists, and finally, politicians, soon descend upon the encampment of undocumented people. George shoots from within the center of the chaos, capturing the screaming and the chanting, bodies falling and loudspeakers blaring. Lines of men are finally led into buses where they are relocated to other parts of France. Bulldozers take down the makeshift campsites, scattering the advertising posters from which they were built.

*May They Rest in Revolt* succeeds because of the richly evocative cinematography that does not aestheticize so much as exaggerate the extremes of the migrant experience. George's use of darkness is like that of *El mar la mar*, and of *Havarie's* limited visual field: it highlights the challenge of knowing these people, or of really understanding their experiences. These films refuse the conceit of character-based documentary, plunging the viewer instead into the landscape of transit and the multiple stories that cross there. Working from the physical sites of desert, sea, and border town, and allowing those spaces to determine the shapes of their films, these filmmakers have produced remarkable documents of an ongoing geopolitical humanitarian crisis.

*Human Flow*, directed by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, and produced by Participant Media (a socially engaged production house funded by philanthropists such as eBay entrepreneur Jeff Skoll), stands in stark contrast to the cautious treatment of the representation of migrants by many independent filmmakers. This monumental work has extraordinarily high production values and a global scope for its treatment of displaced people. The exquisite

cinematography includes sweeping aerial drone shots, as well as low-level flights through refugee camps and crowds of people. Christopher Doyle is one of twelve credited cinematographers, including Ai himself, who frequently appears among groups of migrants, interacting with them and filming from the sidelines with his iPhone. While the 140-minute film provides plenty of context and interviews, it nevertheless evokes the grandiose scale of Godfrey Reggio's transcendent global gaze in films such as *Koyaanisqatsi* and its sequels. Edited by Nils Pagh Andersen—who also edited *The Act of Killing* (2012) among other films—*Human Flow* moves quickly from one country to the next, transcending borders and gravity, making everything and everyone appear incredibly beautiful.

*Human Flow* begins and ends in the Mediterranean, and many of its images are familiar from other migrant films, but many more are new, as the film moves through Iraq, Greece, Bangladesh, Hungary, Jordan, Italy, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, France, Kenya, Lebanon, Macedonia, Thailand, Gaza, Pakistan, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, and the Mexican–American border. Ai Weiwei's comprehensive view of the migrant crisis includes refugee camps and people displaced within their own countries. We watch long streams of men and women trekking through the verdant landscapes of Europe and crossing a dangerously fast-flowing river; the film then cuts to Jordanian Princess Dana Firas discussing her country's humanitarian mission, followed by a cut to Ai Weiwei pretending in a shared joke to trade passports with a Syrian refugee in Greece. Meanwhile, the film is littered with textual tidbits such as newspaper headlines, poetic epigraphs, and overwhelming statistics (e.g., in 2016 twenty-two million people worldwide were registered as refugees).

Ai Weiwei's portraits and interviews with individual men and women provide a unique intimacy. Their tales of woe are deeply moving and yet Ai, while empathetic, often provides an almost clownish counterbalance to their desperate plights. His own experience as a former political prisoner is not mentioned in the film, and yet he establishes a meaningful rapport with those who are homeless or trapped in camps. Despite his humble persona, the conceit is less convincing as a form of empathetic identity than it is a useful continuity device. The strength of the film lies in the elegant push-pull relationship between the individual testimonies and the vast landscapes, some of which are crowded with rows and rows of standardized refugee housing.

The interviews with human rights workers in *Human Flow*, along with the many tidbits of information provided by titles, provide a lucid context for the challenges faced by migrant populations and those committed to helping them. Despite the global scope of *Human Flow*, Ai Weiwei repeatedly returns to Europe, and the film underlines the recent European Union policies that have affected refugee movement since 2016 and fly in the face of United Nations mandates of humanitarian cooperation. At the same time, we are reminded that populations have traveled across continents for thousands of years. *Human Flow* exemplifies the aesthetic technique of offering respect and dignity to displaced people. It lacks the anthropological specificity of many of the other films, and for that reason projects a nascent helplessness in the face of such a huge humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, these documentaries, which all lean to the experimental end of the spectrum, suggest that filmmakers who may not be "activists" can nevertheless engage constructively with the challenges confronting displaced people precisely by seeing and hearing them within the sensual, geographic, and architectural spaces in which they move. ■

#### Distribution Sources:

*El mar la mar*: J. P. Sniadecki and Joshua Bonnetta, 94 min., 2017. Distributed by The Cinema Guild, <http://www.cinemaguild.com>.

*Havarie*: Philip Scheffner, 93 min., 2016. No U.S. distributor at the time of writing. For further information, contact [www.realfictionfilme.de](http://www.realfictionfilme.de).

*Fire at Sea*: Gianfranco Rosi, 108 min., 2016. Distributed by Kino Lorber, [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com). *Fire at Sea* is available on a Blu-ray edition with several other Rosi documentaries.

*Lampedusa in Winter*: Jakob Brossman, 103 min., 2015. No U.S. distributor at the time of writing. For further information, visit [www.taskovskifilms.com](http://www.taskovskifilms.com).

*Those Who Jump*: Mortiz Siebert, Estephan Wagner, and Abou Bakar Sidibé, 80 min., 2017. No U.S. distributor at the time of writing. For further information, visit <http://widehouse.org>.

*May They Rest in Revolt (Figures of War)*: Sylvain George, 153 mins., 2010. No U.S. distributor at the time of writing. For further information, visit [www.noirproduction.net/sylvain-george](http://www.noirproduction.net/sylvain-george). DVDs are available for purchase at the Noir Production site.

*Human Flow*: Ai Weiwei, 240 mins., 2017. Distributed by Magnolia Pictures, [www.magnoliapictures.com](http://www.magnoliapictures.com).