6

RE-ORIENTING THE GAZE

Visualizing Refugees in Recent Film

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Richard Mosse's 2017 video installation *Incoming* uses a military-grade thermal imaging camera to document the journeys of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Mali, and Senegal. Presented on three multi-channel screens, scenes of boat arrivals, crowded camps, and border sites are rendered through striking infrared imagery that defamiliarizes what has recently become commonplace on news media covering the so-called refugee crisis. Despite his stated goal to use this military technology "against its intended purpose," Mosse's long-range camera nonetheless documents refugees without their awareness or consent. The unwitting participation of the subjects rendered through this technology of surveillance underscores the uneven power dynamics between viewers and those depicted on screen.[1] In its deployment of cutting-edge digital cameras, which can detect humans from a distance of 33.3 kilometers, *Incoming* lays bare both the dehumanizing and humanizing aspects of such weaponized technologies. In the context of an art gallery, the viewing subject is confronted with bodies that, while remaining anonymized, depersonalized, and alien, are made visible through their warm bodily tissue—a reminder that these are living, breathing human beings.

Mosse's project encapsulates the complex issue of visibility as it relates to refugees. Subject to the authoritarian gaze of state control which aims to inhibit movement, refugees at times need to disappear to evade capture and cross borders. Yet they also need to make public their claims to asylum, to testify to abuse and persecution as a means of securing their rights. As Debarati Sanyal points out, "The rhetoric of human rights and humanitarianism operate according to the representational mandates of visibility and recognition."[2] Refugees need to be seen in order to be recognized as rights bearing individuals. This chapter centralizes questions of visibility regarding contemporary refugee movement by focusing on recent filmmaking by and about refugees. In particular, it negotiates between regimes of visual representation within state and humanitarian management of refugees and filmic responses to it. When brought together, the films discussed below suggest the emergence of a new visual grammar of refugeehood, one that attempts to resist the camera's potential role as a "technology of capture" while also harnessing its representational promise.[3]

Concerns about documentary authenticity and moral empathy are especially pressing for those working with visual representations of refugees, who must contend with an archive of imagery that has ossified over time into a set of familiar visual tropes. For example, in what Benjamin Thomas White describes as the "overland trudge" trope, groups of people burdened by luggage are captured trudging through a non-descript landscape.[4] Drawing on the metanarrative of the Biblical exodus, these images tend to be decontextualized such that both the refugees and the landscapes they traverse become interchangeable. In her much-cited study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki shows

how refugee women and children are similarly universalized. Usually depicted in domestic settings, in camps or preparing food, the refugee woman is "madonnalike," while infants come to signify a kind of "elementary humanity."[5] In more recent living memory, scenes of crowded trains, refugee faces pressed up against windows unmistakably evoke the Holocaust. While such images have the potential to act as productive scenes of "multidirectional memory," more often than not they work to both overdetermine and depoliticize refugee narratives in the public sphere.[6] Increasingly exposed to the eye of the camera for the purposes of both humanitarian advocacy and state control, refugees are vulnerable to surveillance, stereotype, and fetishization, all of which occlude the diversity and complexity of individuals captured on screen while coding refugees along a binary axis of either extreme vulnerability or severe threat.

As the numbers of people on the move have increased over the last two decades, so too has the amount of moving image work depicting the experience of forced migration. Not only has the relative ubiquity of digital technology increased the availability of first-hand footage of forced migration but there has also been a growing appetite among filmmakers and moving image artists to explore this ever-growing phenomenon. The visual works explored in this chapter suggest a shifting refugee imaginary which tackles head-on the complex representational politics of the human rights regime and positions refugees as active agents rather than passive objects of pity. I chart the ways in which recent fiction and non-fiction film re-frame the often-objectifying humanitarian gaze of news media and subvert the politics of affect that works on feelings of both fear and compassion among settled or citizen audiences. My analysis of this visual landscape considers how effective these varied strategies are for moving beyond a representational politics perpetually caught between visibility and occlusion, between the demand for rights framed by humanitarian regimes and the right to evade interpolation as figures of either vulnerability or threat.

Taking a selective approach to the wealth of material emerging on the topic, I have grouped the films into three distinct modes. The first and perhaps the most common form for refugee narrative is documentary, which tends toward the testimonial and can unwittingly collude with an unforgiving legal framework that demands an authentic and verifiable account of persecution.[7] The danger is the emergence of a narrative context that holds refugees to the same standard of truth as a court of law. While some of the documentary material I look at below are clearly intended to expose abuse and ill-treatment, its visual grammar insists on a metaphoricity which installs a critical distance between audiences and the experiences unfolding on screen. My main focus, Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016), rejects the empathetic affect in its depiction of refugees arriving on Lampedusa and instead uses visual forms to draw out metaphorical and aesthetic connections that highlight the structural systems implicating us all in the phenomenon of precarious migration. Further nuancing the documentary mode, the second part of the chapter looks at the rise of refugee-led filmmaking and considers how the subjective "first-person" camera used in these films intersects with and challenges the established visual grammar of refugeehood. Through a close reading of *Midnight Traveler* (2019), which was filmed by a refugee family on route from Afghanistan to Hungary, I explore how refugee-led films re-orient the hierarchical dynamics of pity implicit in the conventional humanitarian gaze. Finally, I explore how genre film—in particular, horror—opens up an unexpected and productive visual language for exploring refugee narratives beyond the social-realist style within which such stories tend to be told. Remi Weekes' asylum horror *His House* (2020) uses the generic conventions of the haunted house sub-genre to defamiliarize the refugee experience for audiences accustomed to the kinds of visual tropes outlined above. All of the films I look at here engage in more or less oblique ways with the politics of humanitarian spectatorship and the visual surveillance of border crossers by states. In doing so, they deploy their visual forms to create subversive refugee narratives through strategies of implication, juxtaposition, and metaphor. Importantly, these films share an interest in mapping connections between refugees and sedentary audiences not through empathy or identification but through structural, historical, and political entanglements.

Documentary and the Implicated Subject

The experimental filmmaker Hito Steyerl diagnoses the present as a condition of "documentary uncertainty," writing that "[t]he closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes."[8] Steyerl urges us to consider this uncertainty not so much as a "shameful lack" but rather as "the core quality of documentary modes."[9] We should, according to Steyerl, "accept the intensity of the problem of truth, especially in an era in which doubts have become persuasive."[10] In fact, as Stella Bruzzi notes, "The pact between documentary, reality and the documentary spectator is far more straightforward than many theorists have made out: that a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational."[11] Existing in a liminal space between reality and representation, documentary foregrounds "the problem of truth" in its very constitution. This is important for refugees, whose claims for asylum are measured against a narrowly interpreted burden of proof. A number of recent documentaries about refugees adopt a self-reflexive and aestheticized approach, storytelling as much through mood, sound, and visual imagery as through testimonial and truth-telling modes.[12] As we shall see, Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016) shifts focus away from refugee testimony to the structural complicity of individuals, states, and humanitarian regimes in the reproduction of punitive conditions for border crossers.

Hito Steyerl's films are one object of analysis in Michael Rothberg's recent intervention into the discourse of the beneficiary in his book *The Implicated Subject*.[13] Rothberg's "implicated subject" is a shifting subject position which figures the intangible connections between actors across time and space in contexts of injustice. So, in relation to forced migration, the question might be how (predominantly white) citizen subjects are implicated in producing the conditions of possibility for ruthless asylum systems and border regimes in the Global North while also being historically implicated in the conditions that create refugees in the first place: histories of colonization, neo-imperialist intervention, and withholding the spoils of empire.[14] The conceptual category of "the implicated subject," Rothberg argues, allows us both to work through legacies of violence and to address "suffering and inequality in the present."[15] Moving beyond the perpetrator/victim binary, Rothberg's concept "shifts questions of accountability from a discourse of guilt to a less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility."[16] Rothberg's aim is a "long-distance solidarity"—that is, "solidarity premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification."[17] "Implication," then, suggests a way of understanding the kinds of structural relationships that are notoriously hard to grasp, especially in dramatic narrative in which, more often than not, we are invested in the story arc of individuals and so come to understand the notion of refugeeism, say, as a singular as opposed to a structural condition. Rothberg's shift to a politics—and a poetics—of difference that at times eschews emotional investment altogether offers an alternative to empathetic identification as a tactic for refugee advocacy.[18]

Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* attempts to visualize Rothberg's structures of implication by figuring the connections between sedentary citizen populations and arriving refugees through abstraction and metaphor. His oblique depiction of life on the Italian island of Lampedusa (a key arrival point for refugees getting to Europe) offers, to quote Rothberg, "allegories of social relations rather than essential or fixed individual identities."[19] Rosi creates figures of implication and a web of symbolic connections between the islanders and the new arrivals in a directorial approach that refuses to distill a social relationship but instead presents viewers with a spectrum of affiliations and responsibilities. The film has two ostensibly unconnected but, in reality, entangled narratives: the first focuses on a young boy, Samuele, who lives with his grandmother and father on Lampedusa and roams the island attacking unsuspecting birds with his catapult. The second narrative, interspersed with the first, is that of a rescue mission that takes place off the coast of the island and provides glimpses into the lives of arriving refugees as they are processed at a holding center prior to relocation to the mainland. Though dominated by Samuele and the domestic life of the island, the film establishes a series of figurative associations that link the Lampedusans with the arriving refugees. Through themes of vision and visuality, order and chaos, Rosi

engages in a process described by Yến Lê Espiritu as "critical juxtaposing": "the bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories and spaces in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire."[20] Rosi's juxtaposition of the island's two constituencies allows audiences to read one through the other, revealing the constitutive and fluid terms of their relationship. Coexisting, but not coinciding, in the space of the film, the viewer holds these two forms of life together and is left to reflect critically on what connections may exist between them.[21]

Consider the constellation of ideas at work in the film's Italian title *Fuocoamare*. In an early scene, Samuele's grandmother is cooking in her kitchen while listening to the radio. As a report comes on describing yet another shipwreck on the island's coast, she mutters, "Poor souls." In this scene, the voice of the DJ intrudes into the domestic space of the kitchen, but later we will see the DJ himself at work as the grandmother calls in to request the World War II song "Fuocoamare." The song refers to a long-shared memory of the bombing of an Italian boat off the island in which many people died. In yet another scene, this war story is recounted to Samuele by his grandmother as she sits sewing by the window: "The ships fired rockets and it was like there was fire at sea. [...] The sea turned red." This link to World War II and its mass displacements presents a pertinent parallel to the refugee migration depicted in the film, but the specificity of fire at sea also has a contemporary resonance. There are many instances of fires on refugee boats, saturated as they are in gasoline. A particularly bad boat fire took place just off the coast of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013, resulting in the deaths of more than 360 people. Days later, on October 11, around 35 people were killed in another shipwreck in the same location. Together they are referred to as the "Lampedusa Disaster" and are memorialized through several artworks. Yet in Rosi's film, the temporal and spatial connections between these two historical circumstances are only obliquely referenced, as if just out of reach. This work of stitching together discrete historical events—figured in the grandmother's sewing—elicits a critical rather than emotional engagement from viewers. The grandmother exemplifies Rothberg's mutable and shifting "implicated subject." She has her own memories of wartime, her own privations and challenges, but she is also implicated in the reception of those who come to the shores of the island seeking sanctuary; she hears of the drowned refugees on the radio and offers them her thoughts from within her clean and ordered domestic space.

The film's key metaphor is that of sight. The partially sighted Samuele—who prowls the island wearing an eye patch to correct a lazy eye—suggests that the humanitarian tactic of making visible rights violations is not always as straightforward as it seems. Samuele does not see what goes on elsewhere on the island. His path never crosses that of the refugees despite their geographical proximity, suggesting the challenge of making connections even in circumstances of temporal and spatial simultaneity. What Samuele does not see is captured by Rosi's camera, which documents the arrival of refugees and the ways they are managed on the island. However, the two constituencies of people on Lampedusa are visualized on screen in highly distinct ways. The scenes following Samuele deploy a lingering and often locked-off camera: long, meditative shots of the landscape are replicated inside the domestic spaces where uneventful scenes slowly unfold with Samuele, his grandmother, and his father. Whereas these shots suggest the contemplative luxury of space and time, the scenes involving refugees are tightly packed with people, and a mobile camera moves up and down with the ebb and flow of the sea. Most strikingly, the refugees themselves are aestheticized in a manner reminiscent of science fiction and this technological, other-worldly aesthetic creates a marked contrast to the pastoral landscape traversed by Samuele. For example, we view the arriving boats through grainy surveillance camera footage and see an eerie twilight coastline populated with vast radar trackers. The refugees are wrapped in shiny, metallic blankets rendering them an alien presence, while rescue workers move anonymously across the screen in hazmat suits. The militarized nature of the operation suggests a blurred boundary between humanitarian aid and state control and pre-figures Richard Mosse's surveillance aesthetic in *Incoming*, discussed in the introduction. Unlike Samuele, audiences see both sets of islanders, which, though rendered as visually distinct, are linked by a series of figurative connections

that reveal the challenge of mapping the complex social relations that produce such deathly scenarios as those in and around Lampedusa.

First-Person Filmmaking and Networks of Solidarity

Where Rosi seeks a critical distance between his camera and the refugee subjects it depicts, recent refugee-made documentaries have tended to take a radically first-person approach. *Les Sauteurs* (2016), directed by Abou Bakar Sidibé, Moritz Siebert, and Estephan Wagner; *Revenir* (2018), directed by Kumut Imesh and David Fedele; *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* (2017), directed by Behrouz Boochani and Arash Kamali Sarvestani; and Hassan Fazili's *Midnight Traveler* (2019), which I discuss in detail below, are all instances in which refugees take up a camera to tell their own stories. This authorial control is striking in the context of refugee narratives, which are so often instrumentalized for political purposes. As Laura Rascaroli notes in her discussion of "the personal camera," "to speak 'I' is, after all, firstly a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation."[22] Yet, the films listed above are all collaborative projects. The footage is shot by refugees and then edited into feature films by filmmakers and production outfits working in more stable environments, suggesting a cross-border solidarity between citizens and non-citizens. Indeed, all these films relied on the collaboration of European or American producers, even as the refugees themselves assert directorial control (all are co-credited as directors). While this shows that the authorial 'I' is as much a matter of material circumstance as it is a creative compulsion, the first-person approach in these films provides not only an unprecedented insight into contemporary border crossing but also a highly subjective and intimate portrayal of the individuals who undertake it.

Midnight Traveler stands out among the selection above because Fazili was already a filmmaker when he became a refugee. Indeed, it was his documentaries that brought him to the notice of the Taliban, who put a bounty on his head. After his application for asylum in Australia was denied, Fazili was forced to travel overland to Europe with his wife and two young daughters. *Midnight Traveler* is part video diary and part home movie, documenting his family's journey from Afghanistan to Hungary. Fazili's attention to the minutiae of family life provides a visual counterpoint to the dominant imagery of abject refugees depicted in the news media. He introduces himself in the film by talking over archival footage of his home life and previous documentaries he has made, one of which is about a Taliban leader. In a thoughtful and reflective voice-over, Fazili describes how he was told to flee by a member of the Taliban who was once a family friend, a man bonded to Fazili through an incident in their shared past. That he is both friendly with and an enemy of the Taliban points to the ambivalence that is a hallmark of Fazili's film and which he gives voice to in his extensive narration. Indeed, the film oscillates in formal intention between a desire to document the brutality of Europe's border regime and moments of reflection about the filmmaker's own creative instincts as he documents his family's difficult and often dangerous journey.

The anxieties Fazili expresses in the film about his own acts of representation echo those articulated by Susan Sontag in her 2003 book, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* where she brings in for critique Sebastião Salgado's durational photography project, *Migrations*. It is no coincidence that Sontag's critique of documentary photography is focused on the issue of migration. The bias toward sedentary life in the Global North and the persistence of the nation-state as a unit of political power and ethno-cultural identification frame migration and statelessness as both crisis and threat. Salgado's itinerant, homeless figures, Sontag suggests, are "reduced to their powerlessness."[23] Fixed by a decontextualizing gaze, refugees exist only as indices of their own statelessness, with the specifics of their history, politics and conditions of displacement remaining unknown even as they are transfigured onto a global canvas. Critiqued as "cinematic," Salgado's images are presented on a large scale and, for Sontag, induce a kind of paralysis in the viewer, whose own sense of powerlessness, when confronted with the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon, becomes the dominant affect.[24] By contrast, in *Midnight Traveler*, Fazili deploys his sharp aesthetic sensibility to hone in on intimate family relationships as a way of giving emotional and historical context to the film's characters.

Sontag is also interested in the ways that the camera provokes compassion, pity, and even action on behalf of those depicted. If Salgado's pictures are too beautiful, then photographs of things at their worst, or "uglifying," for Sontag, invite an active response: "For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock."[25] Images of suffering are forever caught in this paradox since the camera cannot help but make a spectacle of the suffering it depicts: "The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!"[26] While a number of refugee films are caught up in such a dynamic, *Midnight Traveler* is most explicit in its articulation of this paradox. For example, in a scene toward the end of the film, as the family waits in Serbia to have their case heard, the pace slows and music plays over a sequence of shots: Fazili's young daughters looking through a window, their reflections in a puddle as they walk, birds flying. Fazili remarks in voice-over: "I love cinema. But sometimes cinema is so dirty." He appears to change the subject, describing how they were packing up their belongings ready to change rooms in the camp when they realized they had not seen their youngest daughter Zahra for over an hour. He describes their frantic search as the image on the screen switches from birds flying across a grey sky to a fuzzy moon glimpsed through twisted tree branches striating the screen. As though a tear has ripped through the reel, the image indicates a break in the film's spell in which Fazili contemplates the ethics of his own act of filmmaking: "For one moment, I thought to myself, 'What a scene you're in!' […] I thought, 'This will be the best scene in the film.' I said, 'Maybe, maybe you should turn on your camera.'" At this point, Fazili's voice begins to crack, his emotion overwhelming him. By this time, the moon has disappeared and the screen is blank, a square of black as he describes imagining seeing Zahra's body, his wife running and "I have my camera in my hand, and I'm filming that moment." The film is effectively paused as Fazili contemplates the extent to which he is as much a product of the film as its creator. Even where the filmmaker is himself in charge of his own narrative as a refugee on the run, the impulse to create a strong story via the spectacularization of refugee precarity is keenly felt.

Fazili's questioning narration and editorial decisions about what to show parallel the anxieties about visual representations of suffering raised by Sontag, and this moment in the film speaks powerfully to a rejection of the norms of humanitarian storytelling. While it appears to conform to the conventions of subjective human rights testimonial, *Midnight Traveler* resists interpellation as such by actively questioning the representation of trauma on screen. It is a documentary technique in which, as Michael Renov describes, "the representation of the historical real is consciously filtered through the flux of subjectivity."[27] Moreover, Fazili narrates his tussle between his identities as documentarian and father, which pull him in different directions as this moment of drama unfolds. Fazili's "self-searching authorial presence" involves the spectator in a more active, critical relationship with what they are seeing on the screen.[28] As refugee solidarity groups search for ways to engage audiences with the catastrophic situation unfolding at border sites, here is a way for refugees to appear as self-reflective agents of their own experience. Moreover, the film's interest in those moments familiar in any family life—children playing, tears of frustration and boredom, relationship tensions—suggests a desire to shift focus from the conventional frames through which we view life as a refugee. Indeed, the film's reflection on refugee experience rests on a visual expression of what it *feels* like to live in circumstances of danger and uncertainty rather than what it *looks* like as represented on screen. The opening sequence of the film shows Fazili's daughters on a fairground ride wheeling around as they are filmed from inside an adjacent seat. The temporality and spatiality of the scene are ambiguous. Is this the projection of some as-yet-unrealized future where the family has secured safe asylum in Europe? Is it a stop along the way, a snatched moment of frivolity? Or is it back in Afghanistan, the home they have now irrevocably lost? The final scenes of the film return to this moment in the fairground and to others from along the journey, stitched together in a montage that, rather than suggesting a chronological journey, evokes circularity and repetition, suggesting the relentlessness of their search for asylum. This kind of first-person filmmaking generates an intimacy that humanizes at the same time as it documents. But it also insistently contemplates the mechanics of the narrative's construction, re-working the testimonial form such that confession becomes a mode of critical reflection.

Hostile Environments: Refugee Horror and the Politics of Hospitality

Outside the social realism of testimonial representation, in the realm of genres such as thriller, horror, road movies, and even comedy, lies an alternative refugee imaginary that finds refugee characters able to inhabit a diverse range of roles. As protagonists of thrillers like Stephen Frears' *Dirty, Pretty, Things* (2002) and Alfonso Cuarón's 2012 dystopian *Children of Men*, refugees take charge of the narrative within identifiably generic terms. Kornél Mundruczó's *Jupiter's Moon* (2017) features a Syrian refugee who develops the ability to fly after being shot by border police, and Neill Blomkamp has twice explored the dramatic conflicts thrown up by migration through a heavily allegorical science fiction mode: the eerily affecting *District 9* (2009), which finds alien refugees confined to an internment camp, and the bigger budget follow up, *Elysium* (2013), which takes place on a space colony. In Aki Kaurismäki's deadpan comedies *Le Havre* (2011) and *The Other Side of Hope* (2017), refugees belong to a cast of stylized characters echoed in Ben Sharrock's 2021 film *Limbo*, a dark comedy about asylum seekers set on a Hebridean island.

Though arguably jumping from one set of representational constraints to another, as character archetypes in mainstream genre films, refugees are, paradoxically, free to become unlikable anti-heroes, superhuman action heroes, and, perhaps most importantly, agents of change within the narrative. This "narrative plenitude" within genre representations of forced migration has the potential to free refugees from the "enclave" of abjection, passivity, and dependency to which they are often confined and allow them to emerge as nuanced characters.[29] Most recently, horror, with its moral ambiguities and oblique social commentary, has proven to be a particularly fertile genre for exploring the often traumatic experience of seeking asylum. Romola Garai's *Amulet* (2020) and Remi Weekes's *His House* (2020), which I discuss in depth below, both deploy the horror sub-genre of the haunted house, which comes with a readymade set of themes linked to refuge regarding ideas of hospitality, hostility, and visitation. Crossing literal and figurative thresholds into an uncertain future, the protagonists of haunted house films are invariably met by a hostile reception in the form of a malign presence lingering within the walls, the memory of a horrific event, or a human host with murderous intent.

His House contains multiple permutations of the idea of host and guest, which neatly satirize the politics of asylum by allegorizing the idea of hospitality in the figure of the haunted house. An asylum-seeking couple from South Sudan are both guests in the UK and hosts to a series of malign entities they unwittingly bring with them after they kidnap a young girl to help secure their escape. Transferred from a detention center to an all but derelict housing estate on the outskirts of London, Rial and Bol are allocated a run-down house in which they must remain until the outcome of their asylum claim is determined. Traumatized by their perilous journey to the UK, the couple find that the ghosts of those they have lost along the way live inside the walls of the ramshackle house, and the haunting drives both characters to destructive extremes. As morally complex horror protagonists, Bol and Rial do not conform to the prevailing image of the forced migrant in human rights discourses, which often colludes with the idea of the "good" or "deserving" refugee.[30] Their haunting is, in part, retribution for their kidnap of the young girl they had passed off as their daughter.

In addition to experiencing a supernatural haunting, Bol and Rial are subjected to the routine horrors of the UK asylum system. These are hinted at in an early scene in which the couple glimpse a blood-soaked man being restrained by security guards in one of the detention cells. The discriminations, petty abuses, and racism of the asylum system suggest that the UK is at best unwelcoming and at worst actively hostile, an environment successfully living up to the policy ambitions of former Home Secretary Teresa May, who in 2012 described her intention to "create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants."[31] As Jacques Derrida theorizes, hostility and hospitality are close etymological companions and derive from the same root: "hostis," which means both host and guest and gives us both *hos*pitality and *hos*tile.[32] That the two are so closely linked suggests the always already present nature of otherness. The word gives us the idea of the stranger or the foreigner and highlights the ease with which nation-states oscillate between positions of hospitality and hostility in public discourse or,

sometimes, occupy both positions simultaneously. Many nations, the UK included, are signatories to the internationally agreed standard on hospitality to refugees: the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. Yet this same legal hospitality gives rise to a bureaucratic and ideological hostility which sees states attempting to evade international responsibilities.

Moreover, the concept of hospitality anchors the public world of war, exile, and nations to the domestic, private boundaries of the home, and in *His House,* the house itself becomes the boundary line between these spheres. As asylum seekers with temporary leave to remain, Bol and Rial are subject to what Derrida describes as "conditional hospitality."[33] The conditions of their hospitality are that they must not work, and they must stay in the accommodation that has been provided. That the couple are compelled to stay in the haunted house by immigration law rather than by some supernatural force not only resolves a common plotting problem in horrors—"Why don't they just get out of there?!"—but also gives the narrative a real-world twist that brings the everyday horror of asylum seeking into focus. The couple can neither live in nor vacate the house, an aporetic situation that characterizes the position of many refugees caught in camps along national borders: unable to cross, unable to return.

The thin border between hospitality and hostility creates a narrative tension in *His House* that works both as effective horror and as critique of a punitive asylum system. This operates most success-fully at the level of the production design, which draws on both a localized British tradition of social realism and the symbolic schema of the classic haunted house genre. The council estate, as depicted by canonical British realist filmmakers like Andrea Arnold, Ken Loach, and Mike Leigh in *His House* becomes imbued with a sinister and supernatural force. The house itself appears to sigh, creak, and even scream, electrical glitches conjure images of decomposed bodies, and the streets around the house seem populated with dead-eyed automatons who embody May's "hostile environment." These distinct generic approaches exist in productive tension with one another in Weekes's film such that the refugee figure is neither subsumed into fantasy by the horror elements nor is their victimhood fetishized as it might be in a social realist depiction.

The film was shot in Tilbury, Essex, just outside London. An iconic location of departures and arrivals, Tilbury Docks was where the *SS Windrush* arrived in 1948, and its liminal status between town and country is an ambiguity played on by Weekes in the film. In one memorable scene, Rial sets out from the house to find the GP Surgery, a journey that finds her continually thwarted by the maze-like streets of the housing estate. Turning corners repeatedly in an evident nod to Stanley Kubrick's 1980 iconic horror film *The Shining*, Rial is confronted with the same blind alleys, brick walls, and, at one point, the same child kicking a ball. The circuitous dead ends of the bureaucratic asylum system are here spatialized in the tortuous housing estate, which keeps replicating itself, blocking Rial's escape. The scene builds a sense of danger and foreboding that culminates in an encounter between Rial and a group of Black British schoolkids who mock her accent and tell her to "Get back to Africa." As the echo of *The Shining* attests, the scene draws on classic genre techniques to build tension, but both the setting and the scene's final encounter temporarily transport audiences from the supernatural realm to the com-plex racial and xenophobic politics that underlie Rial's confrontation with the school boys. Refracted through a horror lens, the routine "othering" of refugees depicted in the scene is amplified, endowed with the shock value inherent in the structure of suspenseful narrative plotting.

In fusing horror and social realist aesthetics, Weekes grants viewers all the anticipated pleasures of the horror genre while at the same time keeping them alert to the material realities of seeking asylum. The sequence of shots that ends the film captures this duality and suggests an ambivalence common to horror endings by invoking the ongoing uncertainty faced by refugees: as Bol states, your ghosts "live with you." Posed in front of the camera as if for a family portrait, Bol and Rial appear inside their freshly painted sitting room cleansed of the presence of the "night witch" that has been haunting them. They affirm their readiness to move on and build a new life, yet in the next shot, the couple appears surrounded by other refugees: the ghosts of those who have drowned now restored to full bodily humanity. Far from the gruesome figures we have glimpsed through the plasterwork, here are human beings looking straight back at us, the audience. Bol and Rial will remain both guests and hosts,

treading the boundary between life and death and marking the ruptures caused by forced migration. As Heidrun Friese observes, negotiations over hospitality "question social, cultural or national boundaries, and undermine the general congruence of citizenship, territory and nation."[34] The profoundly unsettling experience of watching *His House* arises not just from its horror elements but from the very real unsettlements of seeking refuge.

Conclusion

Released in 2020, *His House* is the logical product of two decades in which filmmakers have experimented with new ways of representing refugees on screen. Not only have genre films responded to the growing phenomenon of forced migration, but widespread access to basic digital filmmaking technology has opened up multiple narrative avenues for refugees to tell their stories through film. Both these developments in moving image work have influenced documentary filmmaking to the extent that bearing witness to refugee testimony is beginning to take innovative and hybrid forms, as seen in the examples explored above. It is, in part, a negotiation with the power of images in relation to constituencies for whom *being seen* is a complex proposition. As we have seen, this negotiation takes various forms: strategies of constellation, metaphor, implication, and genre counteract both the arresting gaze of nation–state surveillance and the pitying eye of the humanitarian imaginary. Above all, these films suggest the emergence of a new set of optics for the visualization of refugee experiences, one that resists the commodification of suffering and seeks to harness the power of the visual in liberatory rather than restrictive ways.

Notes

1 Quote taken from Mosse's website: www.richardmosse.com/projects/incoming.
2 Sanyal, "Humanitarian Detention and Figures of Persistence at the Border," 457.
3 Sanyal, "Calais's 'Jungle,'" 9.
4 Benjamin Thomas White coins the phrase "overland trudge" in his series of blog articles on images of refugees: https://singularthings.wordpress.com/2015/10/07/images-of-refugees-part-2-refugees-on-land.
5 Malkki, *Purity and Exile,* 11.
6 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory.*
7 The Refugee Convention requires that asylum seekers demonstrate a "well–founded" fear of persecution in order to be granted refugee status. See United Nations High Commission for Refugees (1951, 1967) "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees."
8 Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty."
9 Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty."
10 Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty."
11 Bruzzi, *New Documentary,* 6.
12 A good example of this is Ai Weiwei's 2017 documentary *Human Flow*, which deploys an almost hyperbolically epic aesthetic achieved through the use of high–definition drone cameras, capturing a vast canvas of moving bodies abstracted to the point of total obscurity. This tactic offers a set of unconscious and metaphorical connections, which contrast to the intimate one–to–one interviews the filmmaker conducts with refugees at other moments in the film. In this vein, see *Blue Sky from Pain* (2016) directed by Stephanos Mangriotis and Hyacinthe Pavlides. Documentary animation has also proved to be a form elastic enough to accommodate the hardships faced by refugees without fetishizing their victimhood. See, for example, *Flee* (2021, Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen).
13 See also Robbins, *The Beneficiary.*
14 See El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain* on this last point.
15 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 11.
16 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 20.
17 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 12.
18 This tactic has been used extensively in humanitarian campaigning on refugee issues. For example, the UNHCR Virtual Reality film *Clouds Over Sidra* was taken to Davos World Economic Forum in 2015. VR producer Chris Milk describes VR as "ultimate empathy machine" in his 2015 Ted Talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=en.

19 Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject,* 200.
20 Espiritu, *Body Counts,* 34.
21 The only point of human connection in the film is provided by a doctor who treats both Samuele and a number of refugee patients.
22 Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera,* 2.
23 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 78.
24 Consciously "cinematic" imagery has been used to differing effect in recent refugee documentaries such as Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* (2017) and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016), discussed above.
25 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 81.
26 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 77.
27 Renov, *The Subject of Documentary,* 70.
28 Paul Arthur quoted in Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera.*
29 Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies,* 203.
30 See Sales, "The Deserving and the Undeserving?"; and Shukla, *The Good Immigrant.*
31 Kirkup and Winnett, "Theresa May Interview."
32 Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality.*
33 Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality,* 25.
34 Freise, "The Limits of Hospitality," 53.

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