

TOWARDS A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH: REVERSING THE GAZE WHEN (RE) PRESENTING REFUGEES IN NONFICTION FILM

RAND BEIRUTY*

* Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF (Germany)

Rand Beiruty is currently pursuing a practice-based Ph.D. at Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF. She is alumna of Berlinale Talents, Beirut Talents, Film Leader Incubator Asia, Documentary Campus, Locarno Documentary School and Ji.hlava Academy.

Corresponding author

Rand Beiruty

randbeiruty@gmail.com

Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF

Marlene-Dietrich-Allee 11, 14482 Potsdam

Germany

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Abstract

Living in Germany during the peak of the “refugee crisis”, I was bombarded with constant reporting on the topic that clearly put forth a problematic representation of refugees, contributing to rendering them a ‘problem’ and the situation a ‘crisis’. This reflects in my own film practice in which I am frequently engaging with Syrian refugees as protagonists. Our shared language and culture made it easier for us to form a connection. However, as a young filmmaker, I felt challenged and conflicted by the complexities of the ethics of representation, especially when making a film with someone who’s going through a complex institutionalized process.

In this paper I explore how reflecting on my position within the filmmaking process affected my relationship with my film participants and how this reflection influenced my choice of documentary film form. In order to do that, I use what Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) refer to as “Research-from-Creation” where research data is generated through the production of, in this case, a short documentary titled *Nudar*.

Keywords: Representation; Refugees; Ethics; Collaborative; Documentary.

Introduction

"The 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, 'enunciated'. We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*."¹

Cultural Identity And Cinematic Representation, Stuart Hall.

In the line of Hall's argument, I begin with positioning myself within the context of this paper. 'I' who writes is a descendant of refugees who fled the occupation in Palestine to Jordan in 1948, grew up in Jordan, Oman and Egypt and in late 2014 moved to Germany to pursue graduate studies. Living in Germany during the peak of the 'refugee crisis' is reflected in my own documentary film practice in which I am frequently engaging with Syrian refugees as film participants. For instance, as part of my master's thesis, I made a short animated documentary portraying a Syrian family's journey of fleeing their war-torn country to a safe haven, i.e.: Europe. The filmmaking process, which took over two years, was one of the first encounters during which I was personally confronted with ethical obligations towards the film participants I was trying to represent. This confrontation affected my artistic choice of film form - in this case, rather than using conventional observation and/or interviews, I chose to use animation as a clear indicator for the subjectivity of the perspective as well as a way to protect their identities.

Growing up in former British colonies, my self-identity is greatly influenced by what Frantz Fanon refers to as internalization of colonial prejudice. Our colonial past is racist and Eurocentric² and unfortunately, that is still ongoing to our present day. Being able to understand the consequences of our stories that still, for the great part, are being written and told by the West is an essential step to self-knowledge as well as political empowerment. Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discusses the danger of a single story in her 2009 TED Talk. After sharing a glimpse of her personal experience upon arriving in the United States at the age of 19, she concludes: "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." She adds that focusing on terrible stories from a specific place results in flattening one's rich experiences and "robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."³

In this paper, I set out to address the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers when framing refugees and asylum seekers, focusing on the relationship between filmmaker and film participant while excluding the responsibilities the filmmaker has towards the audience. The following questions guide this research: In what ways does considering my position as a filmmaker affect my relationship with my film participants? And how does this consideration influence my choice of documentary film form? In order to explore these questions, I use what Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) refer to as "Research-from-Creation" where research data is generated through the production of, in this case, a short documentary titled *Nudar* (2018). The film is 21-minutes long and portrays a

1 Hall, S. (1989). CULTURAL IDENTITY AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION. *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, [online] 36, pp.61-81. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666> [Accessed 22 May 2018].

2 Eurocentrism is defined as the "superstructure that seeks to impose European consciousness onto other people's consciousness" (Asante 2012: 38).

3 TED. "The Danger of a Single Story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." YouTube, YouTube, 7 Oct. 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9l-hs241zeg>.

young Syrian woman who applied for asylum in Weimar with the goal of pursuing a career as a doctor. During the filmmaking process, I took on a participatory approach after I started negotiating my position and ethical responsibility with my film participant. The paper starts with a brief overview on the issue of (re)presenting refugees. It then moves to a description of *Nudar* before reflecting on the filmmaking process through examining the directing, cinematography, and editing. Later, it discusses the importance of a participatory documentary approach, both in general and in the context of refugee documentaries. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on my experience and the lessons I've learnt as a first-time documentary filmmaker.

(Re)presentation of Refugees

"Ethics are principles reflecting the values of a society—guidelines for its members to treat each other fairly according to accepted ideals. Needless to say, reality often differs markedly from the ideals, but civilizations, organizations and informal groups of all kinds have understandings of ethical conduct. Within a group, ethics may be broadly accepted in general terms, but issues arise in their interpretation and application. Ethics can be especially contentious with

changing times and diversities of culture and technology."⁴

Ethical Issues In Photography, Bill Katzenstein.

The ethics of representing others is a central topic in documentary practice⁵. In documentary film, concerns about potentially exploiting the film subjects⁶ or film participants⁷ often arises and the motive of the documentary filmmaker is questioned: why do they pursue a subject of interest? Is it considered ethical to pay the film participants? Or to record their statements without their knowledge or consent? Would it count as exploitation if the filmmaker earned praise and applause, benefited financially due to the misery of the film participants, who, in contrast, are often left behind? Or is that acceptable as long as the filmmaker's aim is to shed light on a bigger picture and reveal a "higher truth" or "sociological truth"⁸. Indeed, "the difference in power between filmmaker and participant remains the besetting ethical problem of the documentarist/participant relationship even in the most casual, normal, and undeviant of circumstances"⁹.

This is further complicated when it comes to refugee documentaries¹⁰, a topic with current global relevance. Our present-day marks a new record of displaced people around the world. According to the UN Refugee Agency, by the end of

4 Katzenstein, Bill. "ETHICAL ISSUES IN PHOTOGRAPHY." Iconic Photo, Shutter Release, Apr. 2010, www.iconicphoto.com/pdf/ethical_issues_in_photography_0305.pdf.

5 Nash, K. (2011). Documentary-for-the-Other: Relationships, Ethics and (Observational) Documentary. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26(3), pp.224-239.

6 Here 'subjects' refers to the individuals that are being presented and represented on screen. More specifically, the term is used according to Bill Nichols' reference of the subjects in documentary films being "social actors." (Nichols 1991, p. 42).

7 Even though the term 'subjects' is widely used in anthropology and documentary theory, in this dissertation, I opt to use the less objectifying and controversial term 'film participant'.

8 Aufderheide, Patricia, Jaszi, Peter and Chandra, Mridu 2009 'Honest Truths: Documentary filmmakers on ethical challenges in their work', American University Center for Social Media, (accessed 4 October 2017).

9 Winston, Brian. *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries*, London: British Film Institute Publishing. 2000. P. 147.

10 I refer to documentaries that have refugees as film participants regardless whether the filmmaker is herself a refugee or not. I use it instead of the more controversial term "Migrant cinema" which can either mean films made by non-European filmmakers or European films dealing with migrant topics and participants. (Frisina and Muresu, 2018).

2018, the number of displaced people had risen to 70.8 million¹¹. Vicious conflicts in countries like Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, among others, are responsible for this new record¹². The ongoing civil war in Syria alone has produced the largest number of refugees from a single country since its start in 2011, displacing six-in-ten Syrians from their homes¹³. A large number of asylum seekers landed in neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and some ventured to cross the mediterranean to reach Europe. This caused a substantial increase in the numbers of refugees in Europe which led to the so-called 'refugee crisis' with its peak in the summer of 2015.

Germany is the one EU country that took the highest number of refugees pushing the topic of refugees to a perpetual presence in its media and news outlets. In varying degrees across EU countries, this constant news reporting put forth a problematic representation of refugees that arguably actively contributed to rendering them as a 'problem' and the situation as a 'crisis'¹⁴. Parallel to that, films about refugees were commissioned and produced at an increasingly rapid pace and both TV stations and prestigious film festivals offered platforms to show these films. For instance, Festival dei Popoli, an International Documentary Film Festival based in Florence, dedicated its 2015 edition to the theme of immigration describing it in the foreword of their catalogue as "a sensitive theme that can fuel recondite fears and prejudice as well as give vent to rage and primordial instincts. [...] When it's about immigration, it's about us"¹⁵. Likewise, The Berlin International Film Festival 2016 put the theme of immigration

and refugees in focus¹⁶, granting the Golden Bear top prize to Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016).

Fuocoammare was praised by critics for being a multilayered portrayal of the local inhabitants of the island of Lampedusa and how their lives are affected by the thousands of asylum seekers arriving on the island. Rosi writes in his director's note:

"For me, Lampedusa had long been just a snarl of voices and images generated by TV spots and shocking headlines about death, emergencies, invasions and populist uprisings. Once on the island, however, I discovered a reality that was far removed from that found in the media and the political narrative, and I realised that it would be impossible to compress a universe as complex as Lampedusa into just a few minutes. Understanding it would require complete and prolonged immersion. It wouldn't be easy. I knew I would have to find a way in."¹⁷

The film takes an observational approach following Samuele, a nine-year-old boy, who we watch making slingshots from tree branches, eating homemade pasta, hanging out on his father's boat and with his grandmother, etc. With the expectation of the physician, Pietro Bartolo, the local citizens appear to be ambivalent to what is happening a few miles away from them. The film intercuts those sequences of their daily lives with sequences of the newcomer refugees shown in masses, being rescued, inspected, and even as an anonymous group

11 "Refugees." United Nations, United Nations, 5 Dec. 2019, www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/refugees/.

12 Crisis Group. (2016). What's Driving the Global Refugee Crisis?. [online] Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/what-s-driving-global-refugee-crisis> [Accessed 31 Apr. 2018].

13 Connor, P., Krogstad, J. and Krogstad, J. (2016). Key facts about the world's refugees. [online] Pew Research Center. [Accessed 20 Mar. 2018].

14 Berry, Mike, et al. United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2015, Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries, www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.pdf.

15 Nardella, Dario. "Festival Dei Popoli - Catalogo 2015." Issuu, https://issuu.com/aficfestival/docs/festival_dei_popoli_catalogo_2015

16 Kürten, Jochen. "Why the Berlinale Can Claim to Be a Political Festival." Deutsche Welle, 10 Feb. 2016, p.dw.com/p/1HsFh.

17 Rosi, Gianfranco. "Director's Note, by Gianfranco Rosi, Director of Fire at Sea." SIFA, 4 July 2016, www.sifa.sg/archive-blog/director-s-note-by-gianfranco-rosi-director-of-fire-at-sea.

of corps scattered around the lower hold of a ship. While the film did surpass and challenge the narrower view of newsreel and shed a different light on refugee struggles and hardships without the sensationalism of mainstream media, it did so from the perspective of the Italian locals who are portrayed as identifiable individuals unlike the refugees who are framed as a crowd of victims.

According to Lillie Chouliaraki, this framing of refugees as victims in line with the seemingly well-meaning humanitarian view can be highly damaging and counter-productive.¹⁸ Chouliaraki argues against representations that do not engage in a reflexive grappling with the complexity of displacement but produce an oversimplified narrative of pity. Instead, she encourages that such representations should "situate the refugee as an actor in her/his historical context, treating her/his suffering as a consequence of a complex field of interests and confronting us with the question of why we should act upon it and how."¹⁹ Being aware of the repercussions of an unreflected representation is crucial as one should not underestimate the power of representation to produce a certain narrative that finds itself within or is put into a political discourse. Therefore, the privilege of representing others lie at the very core of ethical considerations in documentary practice, especially since for many filmmakers, documentary is a compelling mode through which they can counter narratives and interrogate history.

Another film that had its world premiere at Berlin International Film Festival the same year as *Fuocoammare* is *Havarie* (2016), an essay film by the German documentarist Philip

Scheffner. Upon finding a 3:36-minute Youtube video of thirteen asylum seekers adrift in dinghy, filmed by an Irish man from on-board of a tourist ship, Scheffner traces the people who were involved in the situation to film them. During the editing, he decided not to use the video footage but instead, to keep the soundtrack over the slowed down approximately three-minute clip, stretching it to a 90 minutes single, unedited sequence - one minute per every second of the original video. In the producers' and director's statement published on the production company's website, they declare that this radical decision was reached as a reaction to the worsening situation in Europe regarding refugee politics. They write: "In this situation, we do not want to make an observational essay that ties together the portraits of five people and gives the viewer the chance to superimpose the image of the individual on to that of the anonymous 'crowd'".²⁰ In a panel discussion during the Berlin International Film Festival, Scheffner said: "it's about us watching... it's not about refugees."²¹ In this film, Scheffner chooses to address the issue in an unorthodox way highlighting the perspective of Europeans looking onto refugees, and thus questioning their own position and complicity in the situation.

It is worth noting that most of the films on the topic were produced, directed and/or funded by Western entities. Here one could ask: how can Westerners²² represent a supposedly powerless refugee who is going through a complex institutionalized process without having a deep understanding of their situation, culture, religion and social background? Being a refugee does not only mean losing a physical home and material possession, but also part of one's identity. Hannah

18 Gross, Bernhard, et al. "Between Pity and Irony - Paradigms of Refugee Representation in Humanitarian Discourse." *Migrations and the Media*, by Lillie Chouliaraki, 2012, pp. 13–31.

19 Ibid.

20 Kröger, M. and Scheffner, P. (2015). Producer's Statement | *Havarie*. [online] Havarie.pong-berlin.de. [Accessed 14 Jan . 2020].

21 Berlinale Talents, "Berlinale Talents 2016 | "No Time to Remember: Films On the Move". YouTube [Accessed 13 Mar. 2020]. www.youtube.com/watch?v=msup-j1uonk

22 I used the term 'Westerners' specifically in reference to socio-economically privileged persons from the Global North

Arendt describes the struggle of refugees' resistance to getting lost in the crowd. "In the first place, we do not like being called, refugees"²³ she states in the first sentence of her essay "We Refugees" of 1943, referring to the fact that even people who have lost their home and all their possessions put a lot of value on their external appearance and the little things as an attempt to preserve their individuality. This leads to the question of what would it mean if refugees had the chance to tell their own stories? We tell stories in order to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world as stories are powerful tools that shape and influence our perception of ourselves and the world around us. "To have an identity, to be a self, requires that one is capable of telling a story about oneself, about who one has been, who one wants to become and who one is now between past and future. To narrate is an ethical practice."²⁴ Indeed, taking hold of one's own narrative is a huge step towards personal, social, and political empowerment.

Nudar: Film summary

The film starts in a small refugee camp located on the outskirts of Weimar where Nudar gives us a tour of the room she shares with another woman. The room is humble and multi-functional, even including a makeshift kitchen where the window ledge substitutes for a fridge. Since they are not allowed to lock the doors in the refugee camp, Nudar came up with a way to lock the door at night so that she can feel safer as a woman living among many young men. In the next scene, Nudar is introduced to two German women, Scarlett and Jasmine, whom she first meets in front of the camera. It's awkward in the beginning, however, over the course of dinner, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and friendly. Scarlett and Jasmine recite the few Arabic words they know and Nudar shows pictures of Arabic food on her phone. Towards the end

of the evening, the women talk about making a trip together to the sea.

Nudar is watching the scene mentioned above on a laptop. She presses the pause button and applauds. She comments that it was difficult for her to speak in German as her level in the language is not yet advanced. When I ask her - from behind the camera - how she feels about being showered with questions she probably gets asked frequently, she says she doesn't mind because she is proud of what she is doing. The film cuts back to Nudar's room in the refugee camp, this time she is working on preparing her papers and certificates that would allow her to get her Syrian medical degree recognized in Germany. While preparing a simple meal for herself in the makeshift kitchen, there is some noise coming from the next room. She points out that there are nine men living next door.

We make the trip to the sea with Scarlett and Jasmine as was planned. There, I hand Nudar a camera so that she can film whatever she wants. Consequently, she first chooses to interview the German women asking them how they perceive her and what their goal in life is. Although Scarlett and Jasmine were being filmed already, they came across more nervous about Nudar directly interviewing them. For instance, when Nudar asks about her goal in life, Jasmine avoids answering by saying it is too personal to answer in front of the camera. Then, Nudar turns the camera on me. She addresses me as "Rand, our director" before asking if the trip is going according to my plan. I admit that it's my first documentary film and that when I had a plan, things didn't go accordingly or that they came across as inauthentic. She further questions why I think it is not working out the way I want it to. I answer saying "The question is, what do I want?". Nudar notes that maybe it's my fault but then laughs it off. The topic is changed and

23 Hannah Arendt(1994). *We Refugees*, in *Altogether Elsewhere*. *Writers on Exile*, hg. von Marc Robinson (Boston; London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p.110f

24 Svendsen, L. (2005). *A philosophy of boredom*. London: Reaktion Books, p.78.

we have an exchange about our lives in Germany in comparison to back in our countries.

In the next scene, it's winter and Nudar is walking around the Christmas Market in Weimar alone. Time passes by. It's spring. Scarlett and Jasmine visit Nudar in her own apartment that she has moved to from the refugee camp. It's been a year since they first met. When Jasmine asks Nudar if she feels like home, she says it's alright but it's difficult when one is alone. We cut to the next scene, Nudar is filming me washing the dishes in her kitchen. She asks what I am doing. I reply that I'm washing the dishes because she said I can only film in the kitchen if I do that. We cut to Nudar making coffee in her kitchen then drinking it while exchanging texts with someone. The next scene, Nudar is posing for pictures with a man standing next to her. We find out that the man is her fiancé. They skype with her mother who was not able to come to Germany to attend her daughter's engagement.

The final scene is Nudar and I sitting in a park, each pointing a camera at the other. In this final exchange we talk about Nudar's journey since she arrived in Germany and since we first met. Nudar mentions that it has been 1 year and 9 months since her arrival. Nudar achieved her preliminary goals; she learned the language and got a work permit. She speaks confidently and says that she does not appreciate it when people pity her when they find out that she's a refugee from Syria. Credits roll. A short epilogue intercuts the end credits where I recount a dream I had of Nudar. She and I were together in a car, she was at the steering wheel. There was a guy in a car in front of us who was reversing onto us. At first I'm afraid he will hit us, but Nudar manages to avoid getting our car hit by reversing as well. And so we drive backwards for a while. End of dream. I don't offer any explanations. Lastly, I ask Nudar if she trusts me, she instantly answers "of course, if I didn't trust you I wouldn't have stood in front of your camera, I wouldn't have given you a chance".

Examining The Filmmaking Process

Directing: Maintaining Relationships

To start with, Nudar and I first met in 2015 in the city of Weimar, where I was doing my graduate studies. The fact that we are both Arab women living on our own in Germany instantly connected us. I was inspired by her determination and strength of character as she was diligently working to learn the German language and to pass the exams that will qualify her to get a medical license. Initially, I planned to follow her until she settles down with a steady job, observing the obstacles that she meets along the way and focusing on the "integration" process that unfolds during that time. During the research phase, however, the film took another direction, in part by exploring the relationship between Nudar and I (the I as a private person as well as a film director) and investigating how as documentary film directors we do not only direct movies but relationships. Along with Nudar and myself, there are two more film participants, Scarlett and Jasmine, young German students. The film scenes can be broken down to the following four categories:

- 1) Observing Nudar / interacting with her from behind the camera;
- 2) Staged scenes with Nudar, Scarlett and Jasmine;
- 3) Unplanned scenes with Nudar and I;
- 4) Staged scene with Nudar and I.

The kitchen scene where Nudar meets Scarlett and Jasmine for the first time in front of the camera belongs to the second category. In the first half of the scene, the women were more or less on their own without getting directions from me. Even though everyone is being friendly, the atmosphere is awkward and rather uncomfortable. Nudar is being showered with questions in a language she barely speaks. Scarlett and Jasmine are nervous and unsure of what to say. However, after a while, they warm up to each other. I then ask them to include "river", "ocean" and "I'm a free woman, I do what I want" into their conversation. Those minimal instructions

were an attempt to 'softly' direct their conversation into a specific direction while leaving space for improvisation. I manufactured that encounter because I was curious to see how young, left-leaning Germans would perceive and interact with Nudar. I was also interested in testing the authenticity of such a contrived setup. It is important to point out that Scarlett and Jasmine are friends of mine. I asked them to participate in this experiment and they agreed as a form of support to my work. I assume that Nudar agreed because she was new in town and happy to meet new people.

Shortly after this shoot, Nudar asks to stop the filming altogether. She reasons that she doesn't feel comfortable walking around the refugee camp with a film crew following her, because she does not want others from the community to gossip about her. At first, I did not insist or try to change her mind. But a few months passed and I still had a strong feeling about pursuing the project. I contacted her again and shared my motivation with her honestly and directly. I explained that I relate to her urge of wanting to make something out of herself and be independent, no matter what the challenges are, to her strong will to pursue her goals, and that, given that Arab women are often portrayed in the mainstream media as victims, I aim to tell a story of an Arab woman who is not. This resonates with me personally, especially since moving to Europe for studying and being often confronted by a general sentiment of people assuming that I, as an Arab woman, am oppressed or in need of saving. I added that in fact, her story is compelling not just because of her as a woman, but also as a refugee, at a time when many narratives of refugees portrayed them as powerless victims in urgent need of Western pity and therefore, generosity. I also promised that we will not film anything that she does not wish to be filmed and that I will not release the film before she approves the final cut. She agreed on the spot, which made it clear to me that the actual reason why she wished to stop the filming was because she was unsure what I wanted to do with the film. Conveying my intentions

transparently in addition to reassuring her that she will have the final say on how she is being represented convinced her to carry on with the project.

After Nudar agreed to resume filming, our relationship as director and film participant had different dynamics. Behind the scenes, it was clear that Nudar can stop filming whenever she's not in the mood for it. It also seemed to me that I was expected to do favors for Nudar, for example, co-organizing her engagement party and filming it for personal use only while not being allowed to use it in the documentary. In normal situations, when friends ask for such favors, one might feel free to accept or decline according to one's capacity. In this case, I felt the pressure of her expecting me to oblige in order to continue filming. This change of the power dynamic was also noticeable in front of the camera as I will expand on in the next section.

Camera: Reversing The Gaze

As many first time filmmakers, I started filming on impulse and without any financing in place. That meant, in terms of crew and equipment, I had to improvise and work with what's available. Initially, I wanted to have an all female crew to create a more intimate setting for Nudar as well as portray her from a female perspective. Eventually, the film was shot by four cinematographers, among which are two camerawomen and two cameramen, in addition to Nudar and myself, with 5 different cameras including mobile cameras and a GoPro. Admittedly, other than Nudar and myself filming each other, cinematographers and the cameras used were not a conscious choice but rather a practical one as I had to take whatever camera was available and a camera person that had the time. When I couldn't find anyone, I filmed myself. I was not comfortable with that because I could not deliver good camera work and sound quality while also being there as a director and producer. However, as challenging as it was, those scenes where I operated the camera myself have a feeling of intimacy which I believe is created by Nudar talking to me - in

the direction of the camera and, metaphorically, directly to the audience.

One of the conscious choices made was handing Nudar a camera to film. The change of our relationship dynamics mentioned above is noticeably felt in front of the camera during the scene on the beach, when Nudar turns the camera on me. Even though I anticipated this, it still puts me on the spot. My heart skips a beat. I feel nervous and uncomfortable. Nudar senses that and asks if she should switch the camera off. This act marked a turning point in the research as well as Nudar and I's relationship, affecting the form of the film and creating a dialogue between the two of us, in which we reflect on the new society we now live in. Moreover, in a way, turning the camera on me is a token of Nudar gaining some power, which seemed only fair. I believe that having the gaze returned has taught me a lesson in practising empathy for my film participants' position when facing the camera. Of course, I previously was theoretically aware of that, but again, experiencing it, even for a moment, created a deeper level of awareness. That being said, perhaps the extent of this power change is reflected in the size of the cameras we both hold - Nudar with a small Gopro and I with a professional camcorder.

By the time I had won a completion grant from Tribeca Film Institute, it was over a year into the filmmaking process. We planned a few more days of shooting where I could hire a professional crew resulting in footage that looked 'too good' in comparison to what we filmed earlier. During the editing, it became clear that the use of different footage shot by different camera persons had the sense of an incoherent look and feel as well as muddled change of perspective. Eventually, since content-wise, the earlier material was more relevant, we ended up excluding most of the 'good looking' footage.

Editing: Collaborating With Companions

It was essential for me to find an Arabic speaking editor for practical reasons but more importantly, to find an editor who understands the cultural background and could help me make sense of the footage. I was directed to Meys Al-Jezairi, a German-Iraqi editor based in Berlin. A big part of our editing process was exchanging our experiences of living in Germany and in a way, my work relationship with Al-Jezairi mirrored my relationship with Nudar. Al-Jezairi could relate to Nudar as she herself applied for asylum in Germany with her mother when she was 10-years-old. Looking back at her childhood, she explained how it was very important for them to be "good foreigners" and integrate by learning the language, working hard, getting the best education possible and having German friends. In 2014 she befriended Syrians who were in the process of adjusting to their new life in Germany, struggling with past trauma while having to learn the language, pursue education, etc. After years of seemingly perfect assimilation into German society she found herself watching them go through this difficult and painful process. Al-Jezairi told me "The struggles and confusions of living in a country that is not yours, the feelings of shame and exposure, the loss of dignity and identity all flooded back to me like a delayed pain reaction."²⁵

At the same time, the wave of documentaries on the topic of refugees put her in demand as an arabic speaking editor to work with European filmmakers acting as a kind of link between the Arab culture and the European perception. For her, working with Europeans on these topics was at times extremely sensitive and frustrating. She was put in a position where she had to constantly explain to them "how we feel" which reminded her of how she constantly had to explain her background to Germans as she was growing up. Besides that Al-Jezairi also felt that they were "taking away our stories and profiting from our pain" and in this constellation, she felt almost like a traitor. In hindsight, she realises that these strong emotions partly come from past unresolved issues of coming

25 Beiruty, Rand. "Interview Meys Al-Jezairi." 18 July 2020.

to Germany as a refugee. Al-Jezairi maintained that whenever she worked with filmmakers with a similar background as hers, things would fall into place. She told me that working together on this project was fulfilling because she felt we were companions in finding a voice and a nuanced and authentic representation of refugees.²⁶

When we sent the rough cut to Tribeca Film Institute, the feedback was asking to show more of Nudar's struggles to integrate into German society. I explained while of course she does, that it isn't the point of the film. Nudar herself recounts multiple encounters with Western journalists that automatically assumed that she came to Germany to study medicine. As she said in the last scene of the film: "We do have universities in Syria, I'm already a doctor". There was a consensus between Nudar, Al-Jezairi and I that a narrative of victimization should not be at the center of the film. And as per our agreement, the final cut had to be approved by Nudar, which she did approve saying she's happy with the result and that she's proud of what she has achieved so far.

The fact that Nudar had to approve the cut made me nervous during the editing. I thought, what if she changed her mind, what if she decides to cancel the film? I was relieved when Nudar approved the cut and it felt that a participatory approach was the right thing to do. But, since she wasn't present in the editing room, does it really count as participatory? In the next section, I will explore what participatory filmmaking is before considering it in the case of *Nudar*.

Participatory Filmmaking Approach

In his 1974 paper "Beyond Observational Cinema", David Macdougall contrasts participatory approach to an observational one which, he argues, borrows from the fiction film conventions, having the camera taking an invisible stance. This invisibility may be a self-authorization by the filmmaker, with the complicity of the viewer, to bland voyeurism. The filmmaker is elevated to a position of omniscience and omnipotence by holding on to the ultimate control of the knowledgeable eye of the camera. With such an approach, the ambiguous stance of the filmmaker remains ethically questionable²⁷. The filmmaker can simply become 'invisible' along with their camera without having to clearly interact with their film participants or the audience. Hence, they can more easily evade responsibility for what is presented on-screen with the pretence of alleged neutral, even passive, albeit privileged, observer position. Macdougall states: "In his refusal to give his subjects access to the film, the filmmaker refuses them access to himself, [...] In denying a part of his own humanity, he denies a part of theirs."²⁸ This imbalanced exchange can be directly traced to anthropology's colonial roots with the European individual authoritatively dictating what is worth knowing about the "primitive" others. Macdougall writes: "The shadow of that attitude falls across the observational film, giving it a distinctively Western parochialism." This attitude of Western insularity gives way to dehumanizing others by placing a barrier between the observer and the observed. Macdougall maintains that this leads to the production of monologues and one-sided narratives²⁹.

26 Ibid.

27 MacDougall, David.(1995) Beyond Observational Cinema. Principles of Visual Anthropology. 2nd ed. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter. P.119.

28 Ibid. P.124.

29 Ibid.

In contrast, he defines Participatory Cinema as a cinema that does not conceal the filmmakers nor the participants from the world of the film so that "a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world."³⁰ Likewise, Bill Nichols defines participatory documentary by its emphasis on the presence of the filmmaker, their engagement in the world of the film and them not attempting to obscure the consequences of this engagement. The filmmaker could take the role of the investigator or deepen their involvement by getting more personal and having their presence central to the unfolding of the narrative.³¹ And so, the strength of the participatory approach lies within embracing the fact that the filmmaker along with their camera are indeed there. However, for such a film to fundamentally and meaningfully gain from the deconstruction of former narrative traditions, it should not only translate to a simple acknowledgment of the presence of the filmmaker but rather engage the filmmaker along with the subject in a palpable conversation within the world of the film³².

This approach has a long history, beginning with classic and seminal documentary films such as *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922), in which Nanook made substantial artistic contributions to the film, and *Chronicle of a Summer* (Rouch/Morin, 1961), in which participants and filmmakers reflect on the filmmaking process in front of the camera. *Chronicle of a Summer* begins with a scene where Rouch and Morin, the filmmakers, sit in front of the camera discussing the nature of the film they're trying to make with Marceline Loridan-Lyons, one of the main film participants who went on to direct

her first documentary the following year³³. The discussion revolves around whether one can record truth on camera or not. They decide to try. Throughout the film it is clear that the filmmakers are orchestrating the scenes and provoking responses, both from behind and in front of the camera. Thus the filmmaker "becomes a social actor (almost) like any other."³⁴ Only "almost" because the filmmaker eventually holds onto the control over the camera and cinematic decisions, and so the potential power lies within their hands. Nichols reflects on the ethics and politics of such encounters by posing the following questions: "How do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other? How do they negotiate control and share responsibility? How much can the filmmaker insist on testimony when it is painful to provide it? What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of appearing on camera? What ties join filmmaker and subject and what needs to divide them?"³⁵.

One can infer from these questions that simply placing themselves in the film, does not absolve the filmmaker from their ethical responsibilities. Indeed, many contemporary documentary filmmakers use both terms participatory and collaborative arbitrarily as a way to obfuscate the power imbalance or completely disregard it. In her discussion of collaborative filmmaking within an ethnographic context, Sarah Elder comments: "In documentary the term [collaborative filmmaking] is tossed around to mean anything from the subject as an informant to the sharing of differing skills to the subject introducing the crew into a community, to the subject as co-producer."³⁶ It is the latter that Elder is interested in and has

30 Ibid.

31 Nichols, B. (2001). Introduction to documentary. Bloomington,: Indiana University Press, P.119.

32 MacDougall, David.(1995) Beyond Observational Cinema. Principles of Visual Anthropology. 2nd ed. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter. P.127.

33 The documentary is titled "Algérie, année zéro" (1962) and is co-directed with Jean-Pierre Sergent.

34 Nichols, B. (2001). Introduction to documentary. Bloomington,: Indiana University Press, P.116.

35 Ibid.

36 Elder, Sarah. (1995) Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, a Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film. Visual Anthropology Review 11(1): 94-101.

worked on developing a method for collaboration based on twenty-three years of practical experience. Her method calls for active engagement of film participants, opening a genuine dialogue between the participant and the filmmaker in a way that creates: "a space for filmmakers to learn to pose the questions they do not originally know to ask, a place where film subjects select the fragments of their reality they deem significant to document, and a moral place where subjects and image-makers can mediate their own representation."³⁷ She concludes that even though the process might not be fast or efficient, the creative exchange and accountability help produce a complex work that is ethically responsible and rich in its content³⁸. This echoes Macdougall's call for turning the filming process into an experiment where the filmmaker make their cinematic knowledge accessible to the film participants so that they can invent the film together and have it reach its rich potential of possibilities³⁹.

As often is the case, there are no easy answers to complex ethical dilemmas like the ones filmmakers might run into while making a documentary. Participatory documentary is not a go to solution for a colonial, Western, classist or any other problematic gaze. As mentioned above, once one chooses a participatory approach, another set of ethical questions arise. However, participatory documentaries can be considered a crucial approach in some situations. For instance, in visual anthropology where the researcher takes on the endeavour to interpret the daily life and rituals in a cultural context that is foreign from their own; to researching violence

in a way that creates a safe environment to openly talk about traumatic and painful experiences⁴⁰; or when attempting to represent a vulnerable population like refugees and asylum seekers.

In Italy, there are different filmmaking initiatives working along with the refugees to protest and combat hardline anti-immigrant policies. Film initiatives, such as Zalab, Archivio Memorie and 4Canuperstrada have adopted a participatory approach as a form of political solidarity with refugees. Contemporary Italian filmmakers from these initiatives, who concede the colonial past of their country and the limits of their European perspective, recognize the urgency of this approach⁴¹. One example of Zalab productions is "Like A Man On Earth" (2008) where Italian Andrea Segre and Riccardo Biadene co-directed the film with Dagmawi Yimer, a former law student who fled Ethiopia in 2005 due to political repression. The film provides an insider perspective to the miserable conditions Libya, aided with European funds, inflicts on refugees and immigrants in order to control and hinder migratory movements. Besides being screened at international film festivals including Rotterdam, receiving several awards and pushing Dagmawi Yimer's career as a filmmaker, clips from the film were used in court as evidence proving that Italy had violated the European Convention on Human Rights by sending refugees back to face horrific conditions.⁴² In this case, not only did the collaboration benefit both the filmmakers in creating an insightful film that depicts a first hand experience with the credits and recognition shared fairly, the film

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid. (P.8)

39 MacDougall, David.(1995) *Beyond Observational Cinema. Principles of Visual Anthropology*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter. P.128.

40 Wheeler, J. (2009), 'The Life That We Don't Want': Using Participatory Video in Researching Violence. *IDS Bulletin*, 40: 10-18. doi:[10.1111/j.1759-5436.2009.00033.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2009.00033.x)

41 Frisina, Annalisa, and Stefania Muresu. "Ten Years of Participatory Cinema as a Form of Political Solidarity with Refugees in Italy. From ZaLab and Archivio Memorie Migranti to 4CaniperStrada." *Arts*, vol. 7, no. 4, 6 Dec. 2018, p. 101., doi:10.3390/arts7040101.

42 Povoledo, Elisabetta. "Filmmakers Look to Change Italy's Treatment of Migrants." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 Apr. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/arts/03iht-docu03.html.

impacted the lives of refugees directly by winning the lawsuit and being compensated.⁴³

Reflections on Nudar

As the film took on a participatory approach, Nudar and I started a more genuine negotiation of power that is integral between the filmmaker and film participant. The mere act of Nudar filming me, however, does not necessarily mean that she has gained as much power over the filming process as I do, because after all, I'm the filmmaker, armed with the cinematic knowledge. Furthermore, even though Nudar herself approved the final cut of the film, she wasn't present in the editing room where important dramaturgical decisions were made. This leads me to another question, are power hierarchies in documentary film intrinsically bad? At the end of the day, filmmakers spend years studying the craft and art of film with the aim of telling stories while potential film participants have the freedom to either accept being filmed or not for any number of reasons. Contrarily, there are many factors that contribute to whether someone is giving enthusiastic consent for participation or if the systemic power that the director has informs this consent i.e: if the director brings an aura of authority by belonging to an institution or a higher social class. Or does that all correlate with the intentions of the filmmaker at the end of the day? What I can conclude from my experience thus far is that it is a process of negotiation that is only possible when both the filmmaker and film participant are honest, transparent and on an equal footing.

In the case of Nudar and I, albeit having a different legal status from Nudar's - she has a refugee status while I am on a student visa - our shared language and cultural background made it easy for us to communicate in an honest manner. Nudar first gave her consent to being filmed when she was still new in Germany, specifically, two months. When I proposed the idea of the film to her, she agreed saying that she

is proud of what she is doing and would love to explore something new and meet friends. A few months passed and the challenges of creating her place in Germany (both within the Arab community in the refugee camp as well as within the society as a whole) was taking its toll on her. She felt the need to protect herself and so she decided to stop the filming. This might be understandable to someone who left everything behind to a new country where they had high hopes and dreams for what they can and will achieve but were soon confronted with a challenging bureaucratic process and the reality of the situation. This moment of disillusionment might force one to see things from a different angle.

And so the only way she would agree to go on filming was claiming more agency in how she was being represented. Simultaneously, laying my cards on the table and making the deal with Nudar that gave her more control over the process of filming made it more challenging for me. Towards the end of shooting, I was getting more and more nervous about finishing the film. For instance, there's a moment in the film where I ask Nudar if we can film her in the kitchen, she says yes, on condition that I wash the dishes. At the time, that was frustrating. I said to Nudar, fine, I will wash the dishes but you have to film me doing it. Situations like these, made me want the filming to end so that we can maybe have a normal friendship with no artistic goals and strings attached, and so that we didn't owe each other anything. This feeling of unease accompanied me in the editing room where I had concerns that Nudar might ask to cut important scenes out. It was only after the final cut that I was aware how important this feeling of uneasiness to keep me alert of my responsibilities towards my film participant.

My personal critique of the finished film is that it was an experiment which was started but not pursued to the end, hence, it did not reach its full potential. To elaborate: when the film turned into a dialogue between Nudar and I during

43 Ibid.

the scene on the beach, the dynamics of our relationship on screen didn't develop much further. That resulted in the film holding a vague message in both its content and form. The parts that come across the most authentic are the one where Nudar and I are interacting. This contrasts with the other scenes about the integration process and her interaction with the German girls which did not amount to much more than scratching the surface. The problem was that Nudar, at one point refused to be open or vulnerable in front of the camera. But what does the filmmaker do when the film participants lose interest or for some reason or another refuse to actively participate? I've been told that I casted wrongly, that I should have chosen someone else to portray. However, since I myself was an active participant in the film, like Nudar, I didn't make myself vulnerable. Film participants have the right to privacy and while I might not have control over how much Nudar decides to share or reveal about herself, I have control over myself. In actuality, I believe the mistake that I made was not being unable to make myself vulnerable or not succeeding in persuading Nudar to do so, but a simpler mistake that many first time documentary filmmakers fall into: It is that the central question of why I am making the film and what I want to find out through it, was not clear for me when starting the filming process.

Regarding the reception of the film within a German audience, the one scene that induced strong feelings were Nudar's interaction with Scarlett and Jasmine, specifically in the kitchen scene. The feedback was that it made them uncomfortable, as if they're in a zoo. When the film was screened at the Malmö Arab Film Festival in Sweden, a few Syrians - who are themselves refugees in Sweden - came up to me after the screening to thank me for making a film about a Syrian doctor - away from the miserable conditions or the usual portrayal of struggling refugees. That they were delighted to see a Syrian represented on the screen not as a pitiful person. One man excitedly offered to introduce me to other Syrians in Sweden who are also successful in their pursuits. This showed me

that the results of a participatory documentary approach were reflected in the film's reception by some audiences as they felt Nudar's and by extension, theirs.

The fact that Nudar and I share a similar cultural background, language and a common personal interest in pursuing a narrative of empowerment rather than victimization made it easier for us to collaborate. This proved also true in collaborating with an editor who shared those strong views. At the same time, keeping ethical concerns in the foreground pushed me to be honest with myself about my intentions; to communicate truthfully with my film participant; and to being open to a more collaborative endeavour. When I set out to make the film, I never intended to appear in it, and definitely not as a first-time filmmaker who was not even sure where she wanted to go with the film. However, I believe that having an honest conversation with Nudar, on an eye level, resulted in the film's current form.

Conclusion

Applying theory into practice can often prove a challenging endeavor. Ideally, I would have started filming Nudar with a clear participatory approach from the get go in order to achieve a unified form with a clear message and for the film to benefit from the rich possibilities and outcomes of this approach. In reality, it is difficult to give up complete control as a film director and trust that a pure participatory approach will result in a meaningful filmic experiment. Furthermore, the reality of the funding systems incentivize the filmmakers to predict where the documentary story could develop in order to set the dramatic arch. This prompts another crucial point of the filmmaking process being a complex one that goes beyond the obligations the filmmaker has towards the film participant. The documentary filmmaking process is:

“the aggregate of a set of relationships between filmmaker and self, filmmaker and technology, filmmaker

and source of financial support, filmmaker and 'subjects', filmmaker and audience, and filmmaker and the larger community."⁴⁴

Those obligations can often find themselves in conflict leading the filmmaker to compromise one of the expenses of the other.

Making this film encouraged me to explore some territories of participatory documentary by including myself in the film and creating a conversation between Nudar and I. It turned my attention to exploring the relations that evolve between the filmmaker and participant when they are collaborating on making a film and basing it on relationships and dialogue as opposed to observer/observed distinctions. To answer the questions I posed at the beginning of this paper, being aware of my position and ethical responsibility did affect my relationship with my film participants and consequently, influence my choice of documentary film form. It became clear to me that this awareness and openness can lead to an enriching experience and can unfold new ways to tell stories with the film participants, rather than about them.

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