Becoming refugees: *Exodus* and contemporary mediations of the refugee crisis

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'Anyone can become a refugee. Anyone. It's not something that you choose; it's something that happens to you. And just like it happened to me, it could happen to you.'

Hassan in *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (Bluemel, 2016)

Migrant mediation

Cinema is the ideal medium with which to represent migration, flight and exile. Perfectly attuned to the depiction of landscape, physical environments, and the movement of bodies through space, it can shift dynamically from microscopic detail to macroscopic overview, from the particularity of the local to the generality of the global, from the individual to the mass. The history of film-making has also been structured around the continual transnational movement of capital technologies, labourers and business-people, as well as films themselves; it is a medium constituted by perpetual motion. As film-maker Patrick Keiller observes, therefore, 'It's not surprising that so much of cinema was created by, and to some extent for, people with first-hand experience of emigration' (2013, 75). Consequently, the international history of migrant cinema is a long one. Mariaguilia Grassilli observes that:

> Waves of films in the mid-1980s in the UK (Black British cinema) and in France (*beur* cinema) attracted the attention of critics who started to recognize this cinema as a new genre: a cinema of migration or, as Hamid Naficy prefers to call it, a sort of 'accented cinema' (Grassilli 2008, 1239).

In so far as migrant cinema is often the expression of an activist politics, Grassilli suggests there is a close relationship to the 'Third Cinema' conceptualized by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the 1960s: 'set against social injustice and global exploitation, for cultural and political activism, towards contemporary struggles and displacement'

(Grassilli 2008, 1239). However, cinema's preoccupation with migration is much older, stretching back at least as far as the 1925 ethnographic documentary *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*, the first feature film by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, the team who went on to make *King Kong* (1933), 'the ultimate carnivalesque version of early ethnographic cinema', which offered the lurid spectacle of exotic bodies, cultures and landscapes, and thrilling, fearful encounters with a racialized Other (Rony 1996, 160).[1] *Grass* documents the migration of 50,000 members of the Iranian Baktiari tribe who travelled long distances twice yearly to find fresh grazing pasture for their 500,000 animals. The self-reflexive film opens with shots of the two film-makers and their companion, American journalist Marguerite Harrison, setting out across Turkey to 'Arabistan' to intercept this 'Forgotten people.' After making contact with the Baktiari, they follow them on a 48-day journey, crossing fast-flowing rivers and mountain ranges until they arrive at 'the Promised Land -- the Land of "Milk and Honey" – the Land of Grass.'

Ostensibly unconcerned with politics in its cheerful preoccupation with the exciting expedition, nevertheless, *Grass* is an early example of ecocinema, depicting a culture shaped by economic considerations and the scarcity of environmental resources. It is notable too that the film targets a location that remains a faultline in global power relations almost a century later, and, consequently, a crucial setting for contemporary political thrillers. Moreover, although only a minor figure in the film as an avatar for the Western viewer, Harrison's presence in the landscape, travelling on horseback and sleeping in a covered wagon, foreshadows the geopolitical significance of this region; although Cooper and Schoedsack were apparently unaware, Harrison spied for the US in Europe, the USSR, China and Japan.

The familiarity of the narrative frame of *Grass* demonstrates that migration has been a preoccupation for documentary film-makers. The film is a prototype of what Yosefa

Loshitsky describes as 'journeys of hope,' a principal narrative genre of recent films about immigration in migrant and diasporic cinema: 'portraying the hardships endured by refugees and migrants on their way to the Promised Land' (2010, 15). As well as comprising an ethnographic record of costumes and habitats, dances and parties, *Grass* also details the hazards and physical discomfort of traversing fast-flowing rivers with precarious makeshift rafts as animals are drowned and washed away, and summiting the snow-covered Zardeh Kuh mountain in bare feet, tracing the route taken by the film-makers and the migrating people with shots of simple maps. The foregrounding of the family of the tribal leader Haidar Khan provides the spectator with a recognisable point of identification (along with the accompanying Americans), and invites viewers to recognize the protagonists of the film as 'our brothers.' Indeed, the opening intertitles emphasise this affinity:

> The way of the world is west. Long the sages have told us how our forefathers, the Aryans of old, rose remote in Asia and began conquest of earth, moving ever in the path of the sun. We are part of that great migration. We are the travelers who still face to the westward.

Grass thus has parallels with the earnest ethnographic project of Robert Flaherty, whose romantic documentaries strove:

> to engage his audience *empathetically*, enabling it to find its own place within the world of the film and experience the sense of "being there". In surrendering him or herself to this experience, the viewer moves beyond the barriers of language or culture to grasp a new universal humanism (Grimshaw 2001, 51).

While this humanist impulse is evident in *Grass* - despite jokey intertitles betraying a condescension towards the on-screen hardships - it is undermined by a racialized, eugenicist worldview since the film stresses the cultural and evolutionary distance between the viewer and the nomads on-screen, who represent an earlier stage of human development: 'the secrets of our own past.' Indeed, Fatimah Tobing Rony proposes that *Grass* is an archetype of the 'racial films' of the 1920s and '30s that allowed Western viewers to travel back in time to view the primitive, simple and uncivilized origins of the white 'Aryan race' (Rony 1996, 133). Like much ethnographic cinema, it offers an awkward combination of education and entertainment in the account of an intrepid expedition into relatively uncharted territory, its authenticity confirmed by a concluding shot of a testimonial letter signed by Haidar Khan, Amir Jang, Prince of the Baktiari, and a US Vice-Consul, confirming that the film-makers were the first foreigners to witness the migratory journey.

This acknowledgement of authorial presence and mediating technology is common in ethnographic film as a guarantee of the veracity of the images, reinforcing their status as visible evidence while also acknowledging the restricted position of the film-makers as outsiders with privileged access, positioned ambivalently between observer and participant. Thus, insofar as *Grass* anticipates contemporary cinema's treatment of migration and flight, it invites us to reflect upon the extent to which the film's Western, colonialist 'gaze' is reproduced in accounts of refugee experience in film and television. With this history in mind, this article discusses the TV series *Exodus*, which depicts the contemporary refugee crisis, and considers the representational strategies, such as multiple, transnational authorship and the use of camera-phones, by which the series attempts to avoid the 'othering' gaze of ethnographic cinema or sensational news coverage and humanize the figure of the refugee

seeking safe passage to Europe. *Exodus* shows us the process by which individuals find themselves recast as foreign bodies.

Mediating the refugee crisis

One of the distinguishing features of the current 'refugee crisis' is the degree to which it is being recorded visually not only by professional film-makers, but by journalists, artists, activists and charity workers, politicians, police, troops, border officials and vigilantes, and by migrants themselves.[2] What is also remarkable about the resulting audio-visual documents is the speed and mobility with which they circulate around the globe. The 'refugee crisis' has coincided with a rapid democratization of media production, but, despite the fact that over 65 million people are either on the move or stalled, stranded in refugee camps around the world, and well over 1000 people died by drowning in the Mediterranean in 2017, it seems that it remains only intermittently visible in mainstream Northern European news media; in this respect, the 'refugee crisis' is a representational crisis.

Among the issues that arise for activists, film-makers and refugees is the question of what political potential film and photography retain in a networked era, when the authenticity of the photographic image is questionable, when the production of audio-visual material has become democratized, and when the quantity of audio-visual content in circulation is so vast. More broadly, the democratization of image production represented by digital culture raises questions about the status and social function of professional media institutions when they are no longer a principal source of images of the world for many audiences. If an overabundance of audiovisual material threatens to overwhelm our individual capacity to distinguish between more or less significant, and more or less reliable images, the curatorial role of news and

entertainment media becomes increasingly important. The ethical responsibility of reportage and film and TV drama lies not so much in the generation or relay of powerful images, but in the curatorial organization of material – its renarration or insertion into narrative frames that allow viewers to understand its meaningful relation to a variety of historical or generic contexts. Mediating the refugee crisis is a matter of animation or mobilization, placing images in sequences that make them comprehensible rather than transiently sensational.

One significant response to the representational problem posed by the Syrian refugee crisis is demonstrated by the series, *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe*, three one-hour films broadcast by the BBC in 2016 (and followed in 2017 by a further three episodes). It is a good example of contemporary, socially-committed transnational documentary that ranges across two continents in its account of the international, transcontinental movements of huge numbers of people. The title's biblical allusion alerts us to the historic scale of this migration and intimates that, as with *Grass*, this is an account of a hopeful journey towards a mythical 'promised land.' This series of films was made in 2015, a period in which over a million people found their way into Europe, by KEO films, a British production company specializing in TV documentaries which describes itself as having a 'strong ethical brand reputation'.[3] The films follow the journeys of a number of migrants attempting to travel into Europe by different routes – and for various reasons - from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and West Africa. They include a teacher of English, a university student of English, a family from Aleppo, a group of siblings travelling from Afghanistan, and a young man from a Gambian village; they are fleeing political persecution, civil war and the encroachment of ISIS, the oppression of the Taliban, and the crushing poverty of postcolonial West Africa, respectively.

Exodus is a stylistically conventional documentary that has minimal voice-over commentary and uses music unobtrusively to emphasize the drama of certain moments in the

narrative. Historical context to these refugee stories is provided by montage sequences combining images from TV news reports, with snatches of reporters' voices in English. Subtitles provide English translations for various spoken languages, and captions identify locations, dates and names, providing statistical information, and also recording the distance from their destination of the various protagonists as they travel along different trajectories. Digitally animated maps visualize the transnational routes followed by refugees as a network of branching capillaries or bundled fibre-optic cables extending across the globe with streams of black dots (like blood cells or data packets) moving along them. These recall the opening of perhaps the most famous film about forced migration, *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1940) (as well as *Grass*), which uses an animated map to depict the flow of migrants following the 'tortuous, roundabout refugee trail' across the Mediterranean and along 'the rim of Africa' to Morocco in search of exit visas to escape to 'the New World' (See figs. 1,2,3). Although the refugees in *Casablanca* travel in the opposite direction, escaping *from* 'imprisoned Europe' to safe havens in Portugal and North Africa, the parallel with this classical Hollywood film is a dis-spiriting reminder that the current crisis is the latest phase in a continual movement of people as they are driven back and forth across mobile national and regional boundaries. More than simple visual aids, the maps also constitute a record of shifting borders and the terms of anti-colonial struggle and nationalism within the region, with 'Constantinople' having since been renamed 'Istanbul' in response to the Turkification movement, and 'Spanish Morocco' reunited with Morocco in 1956, shortly after Morocco gained independence from France.

Figs. 1,2,3 Mapping migration. Explanatory images in *Grass, Casablanca,* and *Exodus.*

While it is stylistically consonant with contemporary film and TV documentaries, *Exodus* corresponds in several respects to what Hamid Naficy terms 'accented cinema,' a heterogeneous category identifying common features of work produced by film-makers working in exile. Accented films might be characterised formally by 'fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure', while dealing with 'subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement' (Naficy 2001, 4). This is often coupled with 'interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers' (Ibid.). 'Interstitiality' describes well the collective mode of production of *Exodus*, which was multiply authored by professional and amateur film-makers in different locations. The term also expresses the individual experience of the migrant film-makers who have assumed an uncertain, aporetic identity, situated as they are somewhere between home and their ultimate destination; they are physically mobile, crossing various national borders, but have an uncertain citizenship status and have also left behind their familiar roles as students, teachers, restaurateurs, entrepreneurs and employees. This interstitiality is exemplified in *Exodus* by Hassan's purchase of fake passports with assumed names in order to get to the UK[4], but at different points all of the participants find themselves stranded in a protracted state of aporetic foreignness.

With seven main characters accompanied by various family members, the narrative structure of *Exodus* is complex. The protagonists are introduced at successive points across the three programmes with Gambian migrant Alaigie only appearing in the third episode. Some of them, such as Alaigie, Syrian student Ahmad, or four siblings in Kabul, are shown planning their trips, while others, such as Tarek's family, stranded in the port city of Izmir having spent all their money travelling from Syria to Turkey, are already en route when we

first see them. Cutting between the storylines reinforces the sense of perpetual motion

suggested by the animated maps - the sense that, as an intertitle in *Grass* declares, 'all the

world's a-foot'. This narrative structure also enhances drama, as the cross-cutting between

accounts accelerates at moments of danger or risk of discovery, emulating the 'last-minute

rescue' refined by DW Griffith, and suggesting that we are spectators to a transnational race.

Dramatic suspense is enhanced further by the 'cliff-hanger' endings of the first two episodes

that leave the migrants' fate tantalizingly unresolved.

Documentation of the travellers' progress is interlaced with interview footage shot in

the darkened non-place of a studio at an unspecified later date, using a version of

documentarist Errol Morris's 'Interrotron' camera-relay system to ensure that interviewees

address the camera directly, rather than looking off to one side at the director/interviewer[5]

(see fig. 4). In these interviews the migrants reflect upon the trip, offering contextual

biographical information and commenting upon the events shown in the documentary footage

of their journeys. In addition to exposition, as flash-forwards to the conclusion of the journey

these inserts offer reassurance that some of the protagonists, such as Isra'a, a philosophical,

irrepressibly optimistic 12-year-old girl from Aleppo, will survive their trips (even though we

learn that not all of them ended up where they had intended and not all of them were able to

stay).

Fig. 4: Direct address. Ahmad reflects on his journey

Interviewers' questions have been edited out, heightening the impression of direct, intimate address, and this makes it emphatically clear that these individuals have a voice, speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for or over (although the comments of the non-English speakers are mediated through English subtitles). The Interrotron interviews provide moments of emotional intensity - the 'affective charge' that Vivian Sobchack suggests distinguishes documentary from the 'irreal fiction' of narrative cinema - such as when Isra'a and her father Tarek find themselves silenced by tears, recalling the two children who died in the cold while they camped at the closed border-crossing between Serbia and Croatia (Sobchack 2004). In this respect the talking-head interviews fill a lacuna evident in the footage of the journeys since for much of the time the individuals followed by the film-makers are remarkably optimistic and emotionally contained, sometimes even commenting with self-deprecating humour on the absurdity of the circumstances they are in. While we might expect misery and inarticulacy, they are often surprisingly resolute, conscious of the obligation to perform for the ever-present camera. As he is driven out of Aleppo, for example, Ahmad observes sardonically that 'we are famous for sniper fire in Aleppo' shortly

before their car is fired on, while Isra'a declares to her parents, as they tramp through Serbian countryside in the rain, 'This is the best holiday I've ever had'.

In this way, these interviews – especially those moments in which the interviewees are emotionally overcome - provide a guarantee of documentary authenticity, visible evidence of the genuineness of the footage compiled by the film-makers, since these displays of emotion are supposedly difficult to simulate. While such sequences might appear to be exploitative, offering up 'the money shot' of emotional exposure, they have a contrary function.[6] Although Tarek and the other migrants are frequently portrayed in the familiar, undignified role of refugees trying to cope with desperate situations – stranded in camps, in transit on various vehicles – the studio interviews present them in a much less abject light than is typical in, say, TV news reports of the Syrian refugee crisis; composed, calm, suitably dressed, they are presented as reflective individuals rather than reduced to the status of anonymous over-wrought victim or a type.

Exodus shares with the films of Robert Flaherty the compassionate intention of humanizing its subjects, challenging the terrorizing stereotype of the refugee as dangerous criminal, religious extremist, or workshy opportunist looking for handouts. Its strategy is to present these characters in their particularity and ordinariness, allowing them, to a degree, to tell their own stories. In so doing, it demonstrates their proximity to the spectator rather than their foreignness, emphasizing the fact that, as Hassan explains, it is circumstances that they have in common, rather than any personal qualities: 'Anyone can become a refugee,' he says. 'Anyone. It's not something that you choose; it's something that happens to you. And just like it happened to me, it could happen to you.' Becoming a refugee – inhabiting a foreign body – is a matter of contingency and the sudden removal of agency. Thus, *Exodus*

effectively proposes that foreignness is not a matter of intrinsic difference or essential

identity, but of dynamic relationality. It shows us that the process of becoming a refugee is

the process of becoming foreign and, in turn, that foreignness is a condition of instability or

aporia – it is a process characterised by physical movement as well as by alienation from

social and cultural context. A foreign body is a body in transit.

Exodus also implies that foreignness is a matter of misplaced expectations: what the

travelers in *Exodus* have in common is a lack of cynicism and an unrealistic hope of

hospitality rather than hostility in the promised land of fortress Europe.[7] In documenting the

experiences of a number of individuals, *Exodus* provides a great deal of detail about the

practicalities of planning, financing and undertaking such a journey, recording the elaborate

transnational infrastructure and shadow economy that sustains the people-smuggling

industry.[8] We see Gambian migrant Alaigie in his family home, negotiating the fee with the

complacent traffickers who are arranging his transport to Tripoli, and Syrian refugee Ahmad

visiting the cafés, parks and town squares in Calais in order to locate the smugglers to arrange

travel to the UK. When Syrian refugee Tarek is introduced, he is selling contraband cigarettes

on the street to fund their sea-crossing, and to buy lifejackets from street traders (most of

which, Hassan later explains, are fake and will pull you under if they get wet). *Exodus* shows

us the hostels, hotels, squats, cramped bedrooms and insubstantial shelters the migrants find

themselves occupying at various points in their odysseys across and around the

Mediterranean. It documents the passage of the protagonists through the range of 'important

transitional and transnational places and spaces' that populate 'accented cinema': 'borders,

tunnels, seaports, airports, and hotels and vehicles of mobility, such as trains, buses and

suitcases' (Naficy 2001, 5). Perhaps the most symbolically important liminal spaces in the

mise-en-scène of *Exodus*, however, are the Mediterranean and the Sahara – deadly, vast, unpredictable interzones.

The film also demonstrates the central importance of social media in establishing communications between traffickers and refugees; 'Whatsapp' and closed 'Facebook' groups are used by people-smugglers to solicit business, offering discounts and promotions. While refugees are typically represented as primitive, impoverished economic migrants by British newspaper columns that regularly ask how it is that asylum-seekers can afford mobile phones, *Exodus* reveals the extent to which these travellers are patched into a sophisticated networked world, components of physical communication systems (roads, railways, sea and airline routes) as well as electrical and digital communications systems. Moreover, in describing the infrastructure of people-smuggling, *Exodus* also records the huge financial costs of navigating these communications networks. Whereas passage on the ferry from Izmir to Athens cost around 22 Euros at the time, for Tarek to take eight adults (including two grandparents) and eight children on the same sea-crossing via dangerous smugglers' dinghies costs him 12,000 Euros. We learn that Tarek owned a restaurant in Syria, while Ali and his sisters sold their family home in Kabul in order to afford their trip to Germany, and so *Exodus* emphasizes the extent to which becoming a refugee involves undergoing a systematic process of impoverishment. The legal obstacles to border-crossing operate to force people such as Tarek into the extractive underground economy, transferring wealth into the accounts of criminal gangs.

Camera-phones, haptic visuality and 'accented media'

One of the key devices deployed by the film-makers to achieve a certain level of detail and authentic texture in documenting this world, and to challenge or counterpoint the condescending touristic or ethnographic perspective of a 'Western' director (however well-intentioned she may be), is the camera-phone. The film-makers gave the subjects camera-phones at the beginning of their trips so that they could film their journeys themselves, and this material is incorporated throughout *Exodus*.[9] The travellers were invited to become guerrilla film-makers, citizen journalists or video autoethnographers, participating in the production of the film and – according to the producers– consulted in the post-production stage.[10]

Films shot with mobile phones are increasingly visible as viewers become accustomed to watching variable-quality video footage on various types of screen, from phones and tablets through computer monitors and TVs to cinema screens. Technical improvements in camera-phone video resolution have made shooting entire films with phones a viable option, with recent examples including short Korean horror film, *Night Fishing* [*Panmanjang*] (Park, Park, 2011), US indie feature, *Tangerine* (Baker, 2015), and Hollywood director Steven Soderbergh's thriller *Unsane* (2018). These high-profile examples mark a significant development in the democratization of film making wherein anybody with a camera-phone is a potential film-maker, and children and teenagers are now some of the most prolific contemporary directors. The camera-phone allows the producers of *Exodus* to share the responsibility for shooting material in a way that was previously impossible[11], and in this respect *Exodus* exemplifies a tendency in migrant cinema to exploit affordable film-making equipment. As Mariagiulia Grassilli observes, cheap digital cameras offer film-makers with limited resources the means 'to participate in the flow of images by recording his or her view on his/her own world, digitally editing it and diffusing it at film festivals or even through

web-networks,' (Grassilli 2008, 1245).[12] As a consequence, low-budget guerrilla film-making is an emerging mode of migrant cinema, and in that context the camera-phone is a perfect tool.

While the camera-phone extends the possibility of illicit, participatory, activist film-making, it also has a potentially therapeutic function for the migrant film-makers, who are given a means of self-representation and also, perhaps, a means of establishing a mediated distance from the misery and desperation around them. For example, after the 2017 Grenfell Tower disaster in which a north London tower block caught fire, killing over 70 residents, artist and fashion photographer Juergen Teller distributed camera-phones to 20 young people connected to the disaster, to document their lives for a feature in a fashion magazine. 'If they don't have an outlet,' Teller observed, 'there's just this resentment mouldering inside them,' and taking pictures was a means of articulating these frustrations for these young photographers, a performative means of recovering agency (Nowill 2018).

Embodied perspectives on migration

Fig. 5 The wide-angle, embodied camera-phone image - Hassan films himself in Greece.

Camera-phone video imbues sequences of *Exodus* with greater intimacy or affective charge, as the migrants speak directly to their phones, rather than an off-screen camera crew, but more than this, the restlessly bobbing, low-resolution, wide-angle lens of the phone, situates us in the location in a way that a high-definition film or video camera can't replicate. Because of the way it is manipulated, as well as the optics – the focal length of the lens and sensor capacity – the camera-phone image has a quite distinct, embodied quality (See fig. 5). It moves with the body of the operator, a prosthetic extension of arm and eye, so that the presence of their body is evident in the shaking, jolting movement of the image (even when the camera is pointed away from the operator). Whereas the aesthetic conventions of most fiction and documentary films are concerned with disguising the physical presence of camera and film crew, these sequences insist upon its material presence. The distorting, fish-eye effect of the camera-phone's wide-angle lens, exaggerates depth and makes the holder of the phone seem much closer than objects and people around her, emphasizing a sense of physical presence.

Discussing the film experience in phenomenological terms, Vivian Sobchack insists that the cinema's affective impact rests partly upon the sense that the film image is 'more than a merely visible object' and instead presents the spectator with an embodied point-of-view (Sobchack 1992, 21). 'Vision is an *act* that occurs from somewhere in particular; its requisites are both a *body* and a *world*,' and if this embodied, wordly materiality is implicit in the conventional film image, this is even more emphatic in a hand-held camera-phone video image (Sobchack 1992 , 25). Whereas the digital image has often been treated as ontologically suspect, as a non-indexical image by comparison with analogue film and photographs, the embodied quality of camera-phone video insists upon the presence of the

user and, by extension, the viewer. Since, Sobchack proposes, 'to see and be seen, the viewing subject must be a body and be materially in the world, sharing a similar manner and matter of existence with other viewing subjects,' it follows that the *presence* of the video shot by the migrant film-makers implies a radical similarity or equality between spectator and film-maker, regardless of the actual *content* (1992, 23); a humanist worldview is implicit in the mediated relationship between viewer and refugee director, rather than – or as well as - the dialogue or on-screen events.

Laura Marks has written about the 'haptic character' of certain video art works from the 1980s and '90s that draw the spectator's eye to the surface of the screen and the grain or pixellation of the video image rather than to the objects that are being depicted. In emphasising the textures and surface of the image, rather than the representational illusion of depth, such video works engage a haptic visuality, 'a term contrasted to optical visuality, [which] draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics' (Marks 1998, 332). One effect of this haptic quality is a 'tactile closeness,' since the haptic image 'does not invite identification with a figure so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the video image' (Marks 1998, 332.). Whereas the conventions of composition and staging in film and TV tend to hold the viewer at a voyeuristic distance from the narrative space, by contrast, the fuzzy indistinctness and flattened space of the haptic image give the impression that the viewer is excessively close to the image. Thus, Marks describes the relationship between the haptic image and spectator as eroticized since, in leading the spectator to concentrate on the image surface, 'it enables an embodied perception: the viewer responding to the video as to another body, and the screen as another skin' (Marks 1998, 333).

The resolution of the camera-phone shots in *Exodus* is relatively high compared with most of the videos discussed by Marks, some of which approach abstraction, but the camera-phone sequences are also clearly distinct from the fluid, high-definition professionally shot material with which they are interwoven. In that respect the textural shifts – from haptic to optic image – are visual markers of an aporia; the perceptible transition from one type of camera to another is a sign of the limitations of the documentary image. These textural transitions are indicators of the restricted, situated perspective from which the image has been captured, subverting an impression of unmediated transparency or documentary comprehensiveness by reminding us of the multiplicity of perspectives from which *Exodus* is constructed. Marks suggests that this disruptive effect can be experienced as violent, as the viewer is suddenly confronted 'with an object whole and distant where she had been contemplating it closeup and in part' (1998., 341). This spatial violence is one of the means by which *Exodus* relates the various forms of violence to which the protagonists are subject. It is, thus, an ethical solution to the problem of how to make this violence evident while avoiding desensitizing overexposure or prurient spectacle. The principal exception to this cautious strategy is the inclusion at the end of a montage sequence of TV news footage of the widely reproduced still photograph of a Turkish policeman carrying the body of the Syrian infant, Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in 2015 with a number of other refugees while crossing the Mediterranean.[13] However, the image is placed within a black border, shrinking it so that it is less spectacular, and is followed with Tarek's explanation that seeing this image online made him resolve not to attempt a sea-crossing with his family. The sequence is a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the potential power of news media images and the care with which they should be recirculated.

If 'Haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing,' then the combination of camera-phone footage and professionally shot footage in *Exodus* functions to destabilize this secure sense of mastery and omniscience (Marks 1998, 341). In her theorization of 'video haptics,' Marks is particularly concerned with 'intercultural cinema,' aporetic artworks 'that speak from a place between cultures,' and are directly concerned with a violent ethnographic visuality that is preoccupied with categorizing, fixing, flattening and killing its object of scrutiny in order to know it (Marks 1998, 347). 'The critique of visual mastery in such works speaks from an awareness about the deathful and truly imperialist potential of vision,' and while *Exodus* is formally distinct from the sorts of video art Marks discusses, nevertheless, with its participatory method in which refugee film-makers document their experiences of physical and cultural mobility, violence, abjection, and the forceful removal of agency, it is equally interesting as a critique of imperialist, ethnographic visuality (1998, 347). Citing Marks and Sobchack, Naficy suggests that a 'tactile optics' is a feature of accented films in their use of nonlinear montage structures to evoke memory, longing and the 'multiple losses and wishes' that characterize the experience of displacement (Naficy 2001, 29). While this aesthetic formation is derived partly from experimental cinema, as Naficy observes, many accented films invite the restive, distracted glance of a television viewer rather than the contemplative gaze of a film spectator. Multiple authorship, textural variation, an episodic, segmented televisual structure and a combination of documentary modes are all signs that *Exodus* sits within this category of accented media.

Documentation and surveillance

While the cheapness and portability of camera-phones makes them practically useful for documentarists, they also ensure that *Exodus* includes extraordinary footage that would be virtually impossible for a professional British film crew to capture, and which is generally absent from news reports on the refugee experience that tend to concentrate upon the dead or corralled bodies of migrants arriving at European borders, rather than on their journey up to that point. Examples include footage shot by Alaigie of a four-day crossing of the Sahara in a Mad Max-style convoy of overloaded pick-up trucks organized by people-smugglers,[14] Ahmad hiding for three days in the trailer of an articulated lorry full of potato chips while attempting to travel by ferry from Denmark to the UK, or Hassan filming himself and the other passengers while the crowded inflatable boat on which they are travelling from Turkey to Greece begins to sink (Figures 6,7).

Fig. 6: Alaigie documents the Trans-Saharan convoy.

Fig. 7: Hassan captures the sinking of a dinghy in the Mediterranean.

These sequences demonstrate the value of the camera-phone as a tool that extends the reach of the documentarist. It is a cheap, lightweight, discrete, and user-friendly device for recording, editing, distributing and viewing sound and image, but there is also a thematic aptness to the deployment of this technology in the production of *Exodus*. As a mobile technology it is symbolically appropriate that it is used to document precarious experiences of migration, but it has a particular practical significance for migrants, as is made clear in the film at various points, beyond the fact that in most of Africa and the middle-east the absence of well-established physical communications infrastructures makes the mobile phone an essential device.

At the opening of the first episode, Isra'a leads the film crew on a tour of street stalls in Izmir, cheerfully pointing out where refugees buy phone chargers and waterproof neck pouches to prevent them being stolen, and to protect them should their dinghy sink on the sea crossing. Mobile phones have numerous mobilizing functions for refugees in addition to

allowing them to document their journey with film and video, and to store family photographs and videos; map applications allow them to navigate through unfamiliar locations, while text and social media applications such as WhatsApp, facebook and skype allow them to maintain contact with family and friends. In one scene, we even see Karima using her phone to learn German before embarking on the journey from Afghanistan to Europe. They enable refugees to establish and maintain contact with people smugglers, negotiating deals and planning multi-stage journeys on dedicated websites in the same way that one might plan a holiday itinerary. As we learn from Hassan's first abortive attempt to reach Greece, they also allow refugees on sea crossings to call coastguards to be rescued when their boats begin to sink, or when the GPS app shows that they have crossed a national border – they are visual aids that make invisible political borders perceptible.

While they are an essential tool, the use of phones as recording devices in these films is also emblematic of some of the problems faced by refugees. They can contain endangering or incriminating information both for the owners of the phones and their contacts and more broadly, of course, mobile phones can be used to locate and track people. Refugees use their phones to locate and negotiate borders, attempting to move unobserved through the European surveillance networks that have been strengthened during and since the global war on terror, but at the same time, these communications networks are part of a surveillance infrastructure that has turned doctors' surgeries, hospitals and homeless shelters, schools and university campuses into border checkpoints that are continually gathering information about the civilians who pass through them. This is not a central focus of the film in the way that it is in *Fuocammare* (*Fire at Sea*) (Rosi, 2016), which depicts the horrors of the Mediterranean crossing from the perspective of residents of Lampedusa and the Italian coast guard and navy, or *Incoming* (2017) Richard Mosse's multi-screen audio-visual installation that incorporates

footage from a military thermal imaging camera with which Mosse filmed similar locations
to those documented in *Exodus*: refugee camps, including the Calais Jungle, Syrian
battlefields, the Saharan convoys and landing sites used by smuggler's boats in Europe. As
Mosse observes, while shooting video for the installation it became clear that, 'Along with
other technologies evident on our journeys along migrant routes, the camera belongs to the
biopolitical technologies of discipline and regulation' (Mosse 2017). Although it pays little
direct attention to the securitization of borders across Europe and the procedures through
which asylum-seekers are 'processed,' nevertheless, like *Incoming, Exodus* is a performative
demonstration of the precision and comprehensiveness with which the movements and
identities of refugees and asylum seekers can be monitored.

Migrant stories and impact-images

In its integration of phone footage, *Exodus* exemplifies an emerging, collaboratively
produced, post-cinematic documentary aesthetic in which directing is partly a matter of
bricolage or curatorship. The 'crowdsourced' documentary *Life in a Day* (2011) is probably
the best-known example, produced as it was by Ridley Scott. Compiling material uploaded
by contributors around the world onto Youtube and documenting a single day in 2010*, Life in
a Day* is a sentimental celebration of a unified, technologically linked global village that
could pass as an advert for a multinational tech company. More recently the activist/artist Ai
Weiwei, who is producing an expanding, heterogeneous body of work on the refugee crisis,
has begun to incorporate camera-phone photography and video into his work. The exhibition
Law of the Journey (2017-18) in Prague's National Gallery includes an installation with
thousands of camera-phone photographs of refugee camps, boats, landing sites and selfies

taken by Ai, while the epic documentary *Human Flow* (Ai, 2017) contains camera-phone footage produced by himself and refugees to whom he distributed phones, as well as striking drone footage.

This new democratic documentary aesthetic is exemplified in the most striking way by the film *Silvered Water, Syria: Self-portrait* (Mohammed, Bedirxan, 2014) which is assembled from video footage shot in Syria by hundreds of people, some of which is technically crude and indistinct. It offers an account of events from within the country, constituting a counter-perspective to professional news media coverage of the civil war from outside, although this counter-perspective comprises a bewildering constellation of viewpoints rather than a single rhetorical position. With much of the material harvested from video file-sharing sites like YouTube, the film displays the shattered, non-narrative self-reflexive visual poetics of an art film. Some of the material seems to have been shot by Syrian soldiers bombarding cities like Homs, while other material has been captured by people caught up in the siege. With little narration or exposition and an unrelenting depiction of violence and destruction, the overall effect of the film is thoroughly disorienting.

Exodus is no less sophisticated in its fusion of a conventional documentary aesthetic with amateur phone footage, but a key difference lies in its self-reflexive concern with narration. Indeed, one of the aspects of the series that gives it a cinematic quality is its careful narrative organization, shifting rhythmically between moments of suspense and relief, and tantalizing the spectator by with-holding information about the success of the migrants in reaching their destinations. In part this cinematic character is a consequence of the generically familiar circumstances encountered by the participants; as one passer-by observes ironically to Hassan after they have survived the capsizing of their boat to arrive safely in

Greece, 'It was just like in the movies,' and for the spectator the complex, multi-character account of migrant experience has the rich narrative texture of film drama, recalling such precedents as Michael Winterbottom's 2002 guerrilla-style docudrama, *In This World*, which follows two young Afghan men attempting to travel to London from the massive Peshawar refugee camp on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border.

However, the concern with storytelling reveals a fundamental concern with representation and advocacy, as the individualized story offers up a stubbornly irreducible particularity as a strategic response to the dehumanizing stereotypes of bogus asylum-seekers and pathetic refugees. In the first episode, as his family prepares to board a boat for a night-crossing from Istanbul to Athens, Tarek tells the film-makers, 'If anything bad happens to us you will have to tell our story. Deliver our voice to everyone.' This instruction is effectively a statement of purpose for the series, and its significance is emphasised later on in the same episode. As we see scattered groups of people trudging miles along a road, making their way from a Greek beach to a refugee centre in the nearest town, a man smoking by the side of the road observes to the film crew that, 'Everyone has a story. A long story.' For *Exodus,* story-telling is a matter of testimony and bearing witness, although the series refrains from the blithely humanist cliché that everybody's story is equally fascinating and unique. In fact, it is Tarek himself who expresses reservations about the self-evident value of personal stories. After arriving in Greece with his family, he is shown sitting on the docks with his daughter looking at the sea. 'All these people,' he observes, 'have the same story.'

In a short online essay published a couple of days after a suicide-bombing that killed 22 people as they left a pop concert in Manchester on 22nd May 2017, visual culture theorist

Nicholas Mirzoeff proposed that, among the various conclusions we might draw about the historical meaning of the violence, one is that the atrocity marked a shift in the political significance of the image. A spectacular attack of this sort constitutes an 'image-event' that is designed to cut through an already crowded visual field, and Mirzoeff suggests that the impact image works by stopping time, effectively tearing images out of a historical continuum. As an attention-grabbing spectacle, it is an anti-narrative device that over-writes and erases other images and narratives, rather than establishing interconnections with them. Mirzoeff proposes that one of the consequences of an emergent politics conducted through the spectacular, terrorizing impact-image (whether it is a politics of resistance or reaction) is that a conventional political strategy of careful deployment of photographs and moving images to make a persuasive argument is less and less effective, especially so when the immateriality of the digital image invites scepticism about its authenticity. Indeed, Mirzoeff proposes, 'That has been tried and it has failed and continues to fail' (year). However, in its concern with story-telling, *Exodus* offers a way of thinking about the problem of how to circulate politically effective images. *Exodus* is concerned with reanimation or mobilization, restarting time through the organisation of images of migrants within a temporal, historical and critical frame. Story-telling here is not so much a matter of producing more intensely impactful, weaponized, cinematic images as it is a matter of shaping their meaning through providing curatorial context. The mundane aesthetic of the camera-phone footage constitutes a refusal of the awesome visual spectacle of the photojournalism of Sergei Ponomarev whose award-winning aestheticizing images of refugee camps, overloaded boats and bombed cities deploy the lighting, colour schemes and composition of 18th and 19th-century history paintings. Camera-phone footage is also a refusal of what Nicholas de Genova has termed 'border spectacle,' the aggregation of racialized and racializing images of migrants, border patrols, fences and checkpoints that reinforces the idea of migrant illegality (De Genova

2015). In telling migrants' stories from a mosaic of perspectives, the films give a clear account of the diversity of people who have been forced into migration emphasizing their proximity to us (as students, teachers, business people, or family members), challenging the stereotype of the refugee as passive victim or sinister jihadist.

Story-telling is also an essential means through which the series can convey a sense of the sheer difficulty, the depressing duration, and growing horror of the journey as the protagonists doggedly make their way into and across Europe. The continual cross-cutting between different stories emphasises the temporality of migrant experience, which is structured around interruption, delay and immobility, as much as it is by the movement that seems deceptively straightforward on the animated maps.[15] Journeys that could be completed in a few hours by plane take the participants in the film months, and often involve long, frustrating periods of stasis (and this immobility is highlighted indirectly by the mobility of the film crew who are able to travel to intercept them at various stages of their journeys). For example, Alaigie was kidnapped and held hostage after travelling from Gambia to Lebanon, while Hassan, the Syrian teacher who was initially mildly bemused by the experience of homelessness, never having even been camping before, found himself stranded for 60 days in the 'Jungle' refugee camp in Calais. Driven to dangerous nightly attempts to board trucks being loaded onto the ferries, one night-vision sequence even showing him swimming across a harbour to reach a parking area, he tells the film-makers these were the worst days of his life. This, despite the fact that we learn later his reason for leaving Aleppo was that after participating in the Arab Spring protests, he had been arrested by the police and beaten with iron bars, breaking his ribs and shattering his wrists and arms.

If the impact image obliterates meaningful context, the value of story-telling in film and television is that it can relocate disconnected images within extended narrative sequences that allow us to make sense of them, establishing a set of intertextual relays. If the political problem posed by images of refugees is one of managing impact, in its multiperspectival, longform narrative approach, *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* offers one productive and provocative solution.

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[1]Placed in an expanded media history, the history of migrant cinema extends back through *Broken Blossoms* (Griffith, 1919) and *The Immigrant* (Chaplin, 1917) to pre-cinematic narrative media such as lantern slide shows.

[2] See Tyler and Loyd 2015 for a discussion of the misleading language with which this crisis is reported:

[3] http://www.keofilms.com/about-us/

[4] And for all we know, the names they are given in *Exodus* may be prudently false.

[5] With the 'Interrotron' the interviewee faces the camera, which is placed behind a two-way mirror. The mirror is angled so that it reflects a video monitor, which shows a live image of the face of the director/interviewer who sits in front of a second camera. The interviewee therefore appears to make direct eye contact with the viewer, enhancing the drama and sense of intimacy of the interview (http://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html).

[6] See Kesting 2017: 65

[7] Indeed, UK government policy since 2010 has been to deter immigration by presenting the UK as a 'hostile environment'. See https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/sites/default/files/HE%20web.pdf.

[8] (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/01/migrants-more-profitable-than-drugs-how-mafia-infiltrated-italy-asylum-system)

[9] Cameraphones were distributed to around 60 migrant but the series focuses on seven main figures (Harrison 2016).

[10] http://www.keofilms.com/projects/our-journey-to-europe/

[11] As director James Bluemel explains, 'I sat down with each person and said: "This is a very quick lesson in how to film usefully for us: Please remember to film in landscape rather than portrait, these are the shots that make up a sequence, and good luck, off you go."' (Harrison 2016)

[12] As Grassilli notes, the interstitial status of the refugee film-maker typically means the film-maker cannot access funding in her/his home country or from film foundations that support world cinema since these typically require film-makers to have residency.

[14] As with boats, the smugglers packed their trucks, refusing to carry sufficient water in order to reduce weight, so that Alaigie and fellow passengers collapsed from dehydration, one of them dying on the trip. The desert is harder than the sea, he suggests, since the heat means 'you suffer before you die'.

[15] Indeed, the desperate immobility of the refugee is the principal theme of *Casablanca,* captured memorably in the opening voiceover which relates that, 'the fortunate ones, through influence, or money, or luck might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the New World, but the others wait in Casablanca, and wait and wait and wait...'