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Editorial

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Introduction: Working thematically and collaboratively in an anthropological film festival

The Athens Ethnographic Film Festival-Ethnofest, a festival held annually each November over the last 10 years, is an attempt to present and explore the contemporary status of visual anthropology and relative fields within the framework of a public event. Visual anthropology is a constantly evolving field and the festival is essentially a platform for films to be screened and discussed as well as a meeting place for film-makers, scholars, researchers and students.

Wishing to initiate a dialogue on the value and relevance of visual anthropological perspectives on contemporary social life in different cultural contexts, the festival has introduced a special themed section of screenings relating to socio-cultural issues and (visual-) anthropological viewpoints on these issues. In the context of this initiative we decided to broaden the “traditional” selection process, usually undertaken by our programming team, and to invite guest curators/scholars of the social sciences, with whom the festival has the opportunity to present an ensemble of screenings and discussions.

During the past few years this section has included films, workshops and discussions on racial violence, aggressive expressions of nationalism and xenophobia, social exclusion, labour and precarity, the interrelation between desire and crisis, and the various forms of violence, poverty, displacement and dispossession in the context of shifting gendered, sexualised, racialised, ethnicised and classed dynamics.

For our most recent edition in 2018 the section’s theme was “Critical Encounters: the European Refugee Crisis” and had an aim to problematize the “refugee crisis” by approaching it as a point of encounter and dialogue as well as a condition of violence and division. The guest curators for this most recent themed section were the anthropologists Katerina Rozakou and Ifigeneia Anastasiadi (Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences).

Critical encounters: The “European refugee crisis”

This special issue is based on the rationale behind the themed section that Katerina and Ifigenia co-curated for the 9th Athens Ethnographic Film Festival. In the themed section, entitled “Critical encounters: the ‘European refugee crisis’”, Katerina and Ifigenia intended to contest and problematize dominant representations of the so called “European refugee crisis” and to approach it as a point of encounter and dialogue, but also, as a condition of violence and division. While we were working on the themed section, a series of questions emerged: How can a representational medium like video, disrupt essentialist depictions of “the refugee”, “the journey”, “the camp”, “the horrific living conditions”, “the locals”? Which are the alternatives to sensationalist and voyeuristic visualizations? How can films engage critically with the ethics and politics of the gaze of suffering and displacement? What is the political role of the filmmaker-ethnographer? What are the means, methods and creative processes that contribute to such representations? How can we unsettle on the one hand the assumption that the refugees are voiceless and on the other hand, the conviction that *we* (as ethnographers, film-makers) will give them voice through our projects (ethnographic films, essays, books)?

Although we decided to use the dominant term of the “European refugee crisis” in the current special issue, our primary aim is to challenge it. We are well aware of the Eurocentric and ahistorical character of the notion and the ways in which it informs particular imaginations as well as politics. The catchword “European refugee crisis” has become dominant especially after 2015, when one million refugees and migrants arrived on European land and it constructs the phenomenon as a state of emergency. The refugee/migrant situation is perceived as a problem that poses a specific set of questions and calls for particular remedies. To define a phenomenon as a crisis is not neutral. The “crisis” is a frame through which we imagine the world. Its particular temporality refers to an exceptional condition; a rupture and a disorder that can be treated and managed. Such an approach conceals the fact that the “crisis” is actually directly intertwined with migration policies and practices, which have been formed at least during the past fifteen years.

The “European refugee crisis” has been extensively visualized and mediatized. In fact, the representations of the refugees/migrants’ arrival and reception in Europe have played a crucial role in the construction of the crisis frame itself, in producing an exceptional condition dominated by urgency, in evoking compassion and securitization at the same time, and in imposing the *need* to intervene. Sensationalist and aestheticized depictions of the refugee/migrant's journey and acts of support have prevailed over the past few years. The journalistic, artistic and ethnographic depictions of the “crisis” are in excess. In search of a sensorial account of the “crisis”, vignettes/photos/artwork provide the greedy eyes of the viewer/reader/audience with details, thick descriptions and first-hand experiences of “how it is to live the crisis”. This demand of the “real” is fulfilled through images that objectify suffering.

Considering the above and the abundance of visual representations, the positive reception of our call by filmmakers was not a surprise, given also the fact that the Ethnographic Film Festival took place in Greece, a place that has become the epicentre and the frontline of the “European refugee crisis” and an over-researched and popular field site (among ethnographers, film-makers, artists, humanitarians, volunteers, activists, among others). In this special issue we did not merely select films that correspond directly to our initial perspective in order to create a coherent narrative. In fact, the current special issue is a disparate assemblage of films that do not necessarily embrace our declared rationale but it is precisely their compilation that opens up different possibilities of imagining and narrating the “refugee crisis”. The heterogeneity of the special issue is thus not only inevitable but also creative.

The special issue includes eight films from different European countries. The films are put in direct or indirect dialogue with one another, suggesting alternative representational methods like animation (*It was tomorrow*), the combination of different modes -such as archive and surveillance footage (*Document: Hoyerswerda| Frontex*)-, or even the deliberate absence of the refugees (*Underground* and *A camp is a wall in the forest*). Some of the films take place in emblematic borderlands, such as Lesbos (*When you are in the sea where can you hide?*) while others remind us that the “European refugee crisis” is not a recent and/or temporary phenomenon (*Document: Hoyerswerda| Frontex*). Other films focus on the everyday lives of refugees and migrants in European destination countries (*It was tomorrow*, *Shukry: a new life*, *Underground*), as well as in sites of temporary residence (*A Camp is a Wall in the Forest*, *Unimaginable dreams*, *Quiet life*). The presumed linearity of the refugee journey is also questioned: is the arrival to an imaginary desired destination the end of the journey or connotes another prolonged condition of precarity? (*A Camp is a Wall in the Forest*, *Unimaginable dreams*, *Underground*).

In some of the films, the refugees/migrants remain unseen (*A camp is a wall in the forest*, *Underground*), leading us to reflect on how one can ethically and visually engage with the condition of illegality and deportability. How can an illegalized person be filmed? Can the imposed invisibility of illegality be transformed through the film and the filming process? How does this evoke the demand for political existence? In other films refugees are placed in isolated reception centers, far away from the host societies (*A Camp is a Wall in the Forest*). In these films, the visual absence of the refugees not only challenges the excessive visualization of the refugee/migrant, but it also highlights the unseen violence of these “critical encounters”.

The special issue also includes two films created through collaborative and participatory processes (*Unimaginable Dreams*, *It was tomorrow*). These alternative creative processes address critical questions regarding the ethics and politics of representation. Yet, although generally these practices aspire to transcend the aspiration that “we give voice to the voiceless other”, can they actually subvert established hierarchies of power? Can such filming practices embrace and engage creatively with other culturally informed forms of storytelling? How does this incorporation (of other forms of storytelling) transform the aesthetics, the narrative and the temporality of the film?

Finally, one of the intriguing suggestions in this special issue is the use of animation and stop-motion animation (*It was Tomorrow*) and the use of archive and surveillance footage (*Document: Hoyerswerda| Frontex*) as a way to critically and creatively stand against a pornographic and voyeuristic gaze that craves for “real suffering”. Contrary to the abundance of accounts of “true refugee stories” and “scenes of actual suffering”, can these methods suggest an alternative and still emphatic way of narrating violence, pain, hope and struggle? What kind of possibilities do they open for non-linear narrations? How can these methods depict what remains unseen; make fantasy tangible and account for the potential that has not yet come?

‘Critical encounters’ are the point where mundane life and sociality carry the weight of state politics of exclusion; this politics of exclusion is ever-present in the ways people carry their bodies in space, in the ways they relate with others, in becoming and wishing to become invisible, and in turning into absences. Reclaiming their identity as human beings signifies reclaiming their political existence and presence not as distant sufferers subjected to the greedy gaze of the viewer-bystander, but as (co)producers/(co)creators of their own narrative. This narrative may disrupt the expectations of the viewer to consume a “refugee story” of particular aesthetics by addressing the themes of desire and belonging, of dreaming and its denial.

From the screening room to the journal pages: Challenges and implications

Summing up this editorial introduction and the very creative experience of collaborating with JAF to edit a special issue based on our festival's themed section, we would like to take a minute to reflect on the process of selecting the films for this issue, and to share our thoughts on the implications of publishing films in an open access journal. The films selected for this issue have undergone two stages of rigorous peer review. In selecting the films for the festival all submissions for the themed section (60) have been reviewed both by the two curators, who are specialist anthropologists on the subject of refugees and migration, as well as by the festival's programme team regarding their filmic visual anthropological qualities. Following the festival screenings, the selection and the initial list of submissions was revisited and reviewed again by all five editors of this special issue, this time with an additional outlook with regards to the films' resonance with the scopes and aims of the journal.

Following the review and selection of the films we invited filmmakers of the selected films to submit their films to the journal. This process turned out to be not an uncomplicated one, rather one which led to several extended, interesting and creative exchanges with filmmakers and distributors, and which got us thinking that we are probably finding ourselves in a complex epistemological transitional period of *in-between*, both with regards to the publication of *films* as anthropological research and analysis, as well as the prospect of open access distribution of films. Understandably, both those issues are contested and were problematized in some occasions by filmmakers and film distributors. Questions were posed and were consequently extensively discussed: Would the publication of the film mean the 'end' of its festival 'life'? But, what would it mean for the film to have instead the possibility of another permanent online 'life' as published work in a discoverable and accredited scientific context? How does the film's online open accessibility influences the film's commercial potential? Additionally, and especially with regards to more junior scholars and filmmakers concerns: even if the online and open-access publication of the film in a scientific journal would subsequently hinder its festival or commercial potential, does it still worth it as an accreditation and recognition of their scientific work? Bearing in mind that ethnographic and anthropological documentaries are often produced on very low budget and involve a lot of unpaid work and effort from their makers, these are pertinent and important questions which we need to address.

We found all these discussions to be really important and ones that we were glad to engage with and are looking forward to continue having through various platforms in the future. Such discussions, we maintain, can be really constructive in the process of negotiating spaces and places for the anthropological and ethnographic film within more traditional disciplinary publishing and evaluation practices. Especially so within the contemporary moment of the neoliberal academia, which is largely characterised by precarious work, pernicious bureaucracies, competition and audit cultures. We maintain that this journal is making an immense contribution in bringing the field forward by providing scholars/filmmakers, who often find themselves being *in-between*, both a home and a recognition for their work. And we are really glad that we have been able to contribute to this effort.

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