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Artistic methodology of encountering the "other"

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# Radical Softness

## Artistic Methodology of Encountering the "Other"

Peter Kærgaard Andersen, Madeleine Kate McGowan, Lasse Mouritzen & Kristine Samson

Today's media landscape is a constant stream of images—of people represented by images, symbols and signs. This article takes its point of departure in proposing that film activism and activism render another picture. We introduce visibility through Emmanuel Lévinas's understanding of the "Other", discussing it in terms of how faciality operates both within the media machines of the nation-state and current affective politics, and as an ethico-aesthetic alternative in film activism. Through a reading of two recent films from the art collectives Other Story and Jamboy, we suggest another vision in terms of how (film) images are produced and by whom, and terms of an aesthetic that does not delimit and categorise the face, but opens it up for an encounter. In a world where migration is a norm rather than an exception, this article explores how artistic practices enable a human encounter with the Other. Hence, this article suggests how film and art activism have the ability to transgress the borderline mentalities and conflictual distancing practice in the current media and politics through a collective practice, and the aesthetics of indeterminacy and polyvocality.

## Media, Art and Activism

“Artivism never simply reports event, it actively participates in and evolves itself in events in order to sculpt the social.”<sup>1</sup> In the words of media scholar Camilla Møhring Reestorff, artivism is in many regards a prolongation of cultural activism as it seeks to change a socio-political status quo through aesthetisation. Hence, what she defines as *artivism* (artistic activism) partakes in affective cultural politics as a counter-image to the present political order. A counter-image that does not necessarily take up harsh rhetorics and identity politics as its weapons, but works with actualising the virtual with other means. In the article, we draw on Reestorff’s understanding of artivism to define how the approach to film production by the two film collectives Other Story and Jamboy propose aesthetic alternatives to the current media machine and its capture of the “Other”. Media activism is in this context not understood as activism aimed at directly changing the social and political context, rather, the presented film activism works with another, subtler and gentler encounter with otherness. It is our belief—as film-makers, researchers and fellow citizens—that a softening of symbolic imagery is not necessarily only aimed at changing how the media capture otherness, but how to change our own inherent conception of otherness. Therefore, the films and their modes of production are not so much about a critique of the current political situation (which evidently needs a critique!), rather they offer a softening of the visual discourses and refrains that are constantly imposed upon us. In our understanding of activism, we analytically work with the three following acts: *first*, the acts of the people portrayed—the migrant, the revolutionary, the young residents; *second*, the acts of producing the film and the decisions made in regards to aesthetics, editing, camerawork and collaboration; *third*, the acts of the viewers in how they receive and face the people portrayed in the film. The face of the Other, and *how* it is actualised in and for a public is a recurrent question. To engage with the questions of the face and how to meet otherness not as an identical and identifiable character, we initially turn towards Lévinas.

## Masking of the Face

We take our departure in the thoughts of ethical metaphysician Emmanuel Lévinas,

who defines a Western line of philosophy as the power of subsuming the Other under its own categories and thus continuously transforming the Other into the image of the self:

Violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action.<sup>2</sup>

Lévinas argues that the meaning of the Other remains invisible of the “totality”, abandoning uniqueness and singularity in the establishment of a future objective meaning. Otherness in the Western line of thought appears “in the already plastic forms of the epic”.<sup>3</sup> In extension of this we argue that a masking of the face is continuously enforced upon us, something which blurs the encounter with the Other and its infinity through diverse forms of expressions and mediations.

Through mainstream media we are confronted with an endless stream of information about the Other, which sparks a border mentality dividing people into an “us” and a “them”. In 2015, Danish media repeatedly submitted the metaphor of the “refugee stream”, framing a “faceless” stream of otherness moving through European territories as nameless masses. In 2017, the Minister of Foreigners and Integration, Inger Støjberg, celebrated the 50th law tightening on immigration by proudly presenting a cake decorated with a Danish flag and imported non-seasonal fruits. An image that went viral on social media platforms. Whereas recent law tightenings include the shaking of hands as a condition (sic!) of Danish citizenship, the prohibition of burkas and the suggestion of establishing an isolated deportation centre on the island of Lindholm. The so-called “ghetto plan”, which includes the demolition of chosen areas earmarked as ghettos, was presented in March 2018 through a media spectacle in the area of Mjølnerparken, where the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, exclaimed: “We have to be able to recognize our country. I have said, that I see holes in the Danish map, and I submit to that image, because there are places where I can’t recognize what I see.”<sup>4</sup>

This calls for an identifiable imagery, for the Danish nation, even though the

population has never called such an identity into question, at least not in the image of current politics! As noted by Reestorff, this form of affective politics uses imagery that serve to make individuals become attached to the national symbolism.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the political has become affective, since politics strategically works with the creation of intense felt sensations in close relation to policy making. Thus, it can be argued that affective politics is closely related to the event rather than action and political mobilisation. According to Massumi, “the event includes dimensions that aren’t completely actualized.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, affective politics explain why the Danish government in combination with the Danish media to a large extent use imagery and symbols as a strategy for establishing tepid nationalism.

Exemplifying this, in recent years, Danish citizens have been exposed to stagings of otherness as an intrusion that needs to be subjected to law, and kept out of sight, if not at least being enforced to adjust to Danish culture. Imagery, in other words, help the national politics take place and to be actualised within Danish society. These examples are connected to (in)visibility and recognition, to seeing and appearing, they illustrate how contemporary Danish politics are staging visions of otherness. Lévinas notes that “the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power of them”.<sup>7</sup> Likewise we can see that the stagings of otherness bear an expressive force by connecting vision to things, ideas, places, bodies and faces of a territory and its opposite strangeness. Thus, the hand, the cake, the island, the burka, the stream, all become stagings that supersede the complexity, multiplicity and movement of alterity in-between places, culture and belonging. They become orchestrations that not only speak in place of the Other, but shape the appearance of the Other, defining the possible scope of encountering and acting between differences.

According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s reading of Lévinas, what they term *faciality*, understood as the face of identity, is constantly imposed upon us. In the chapter “Year Zero: Faciality”, they associate faciality with power structures, and what they call “the abstract machine of faciality”.<sup>8</sup> Here, “it is not the individuality of the face that counts but the efficacy of the ciphering it makes possible, and in what cases it makes it possible.” Therefore, we argue that in the imagery and faciality imposed upon otherness in current Danish politics and media, we can identify not only symbols but also an eventful engineering in public that allows certain

(inhuman) regulations to be implemented.

The prohibition of the burka is an example of how a certain mask or face is imposed upon people with the intention of problematising cultural and religious diversity. The Burka Law has been presented by the government as an attempt to enhance public encounters with each other through the visibility of the face. However, we argue that the Burka Law can be seen as a reduction of the Other to the same—and a reproduction of sameness in the image of the European White Man's face. Hence, integration equates the ability to conforming to a pre-established faciality, a face that according to Deleuze and Guattari points back to the face of Christ and Western modes of representation. In this understanding, the face of the Other is not acknowledged in its own physicality, but is judged according to how it resembles pre-existing modes of representation, through the binary *yes* or *no*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is in the irreducibility to appearance that infinite existence reveals itself as a face.<sup>10</sup> The face only becomes present in “its refusal to be contained”, and therefore in its ability to extend, surpass and multiply the descriptions given.<sup>11</sup> As noted by political theorist Engin Isin, the making of a people consists of historically invented descriptions through which people constitute themselves as acting beings.<sup>12</sup> These descriptions provide the ways of acting and being in the world; they are not only descriptions in which people will act, but also how people will be acted upon. Thus “if new descriptions come into being, new possibilities for action come into being as a consequence.”<sup>13</sup> With this in mind we turn towards media responses that escape description and categorisation of otherness, to instead offer an opportunity to encounter otherness through a change in perspective. As Isin notes, we need to regard “mobile peoples as a norm rather than an exception and as political subjects rather than subject peoples.”<sup>14</sup> This is a call for practices that reinvent how we see, represent and discuss otherness: not as defined subjects or discursive identities, but as infinite subject lives. We will situate the analysis in the art and media practice of Other Story and Jamboy to discuss film-making as a *radical softness*. Through our different practices, we seek to explore the vulnerability of the face by blurring the sharp traits of representational imagery, and enabling a nuanced and soft approach to the migrants as Other.

## The Film Collectives Jamboy and Other

## Story

Jamboy is a Danish research and art collective consisting of Peter Kærgaard Andersen and Lasse Mouritzen. In February 2017 they initiated a film collaboration with a group of eighteen Eritrean refugees living in Hørsholm city after obtaining temporary asylum in Denmark. Together they created a film studio called Selam Selam in one of the empty rooms in their temporary accommodation, an out-of-use retirement home. During a period of seven months, the film studio became a meeting point where Jamboy and the Eritrean community had daily conversations and shared everyday life and culture. The film-making process engaged with daily situations in the home, capturing both collective practices such as cooking, cleaning and festive times, but also more intimate situations. The final film, *When Strangers Move In*, was post-produced in collaboration with the Eritrean residents.<sup>15</sup>

Other Story is a documentary project comprised of short films presenting personal stories of a changing world, told by the people living the change. A media activist and art collective, recording human testimonials based on intimate dialogues, Other Story was founded by Madeleine Kate McGowan in 2015 as the influx of refugees and migrants to Europe reached staggering levels, dominating the news media and provoking international debate. Watching this drama unfold through European news reports, the vision for Other Story came into existence as an alternative. With a desire to get close to the people behind the categorisations in the news, Other Story started recording testimonials. Today Other Story is working on dialogues with climate activists, climate scientists, indigenous communities in the US, workers in rural Palestine and refugees in different areas of the world. Based in Copenhagen, and with active members from Denmark, Syria, the US, Afghanistan and Palestine, the Other Story films are a means to open up the possibility of sensitivity, empathy and awareness, resonating across nationality, values and culture.<sup>16</sup>

## Unfolding Radical Softness

While the practices of the film collectives differ, they share aesthetic approaches to film-making. In the following, we expand on the notion of “radical softness” originally proposed by Other Story as a defining concept for a human film practice seeking

to engage with the face of the Other. Radical softness is an artistic and aesthetic methodology in which vulnerability and presence become the starting point for encountering the Other. A call for a softening of that which is radical today, that a deep encounter with the Other is a revolutionary moment and a crack in a world of hardened borders. Further, we suggest that a radical softness could be found in the anti-spectacular, in the spaces in-between, in that which is not staged with specific intentions, a space for emotions, a softening of roles and stable identities, the imperfect, the risking of oneself, the awkward, the stuttering of the voice, all that which does not seek to categorise. Taking one's time to dwell, to not accept the invitation of drama and conflict, grasping the complexity which rests in the space between people.

According to philosopher Alain Badiou love is under threat, a safety threat, which is something that Badiou identifies in the collective yearning for walls, insurances, military and border control. With a lack of ability to risk oneself, risk identity, risk face, risk perception, and without risk there can be no love, Badiou argues. In this context the notion of love is understood as the world experienced, developed and lived, from the viewpoint of *difference* rather than *identity*. Love as the viewpoint of *two* instead of *one*. An ability to construct a world from a decentred perspective, as contrasted by the mere impulse to re-affirm one's own identity.<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas's humanism presents a challenge to extreme stereotyping that undermines human dignity. According to Lévinas a real violence can come from "ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze".<sup>18</sup> Holding this up beside Badiou's notion of willingness to be risking oneself, risk and the radical soft approach potentially become the ability to meet the gaze of the Other, to see the Other's face. Lévinas articulates that "the absolute nakedness of a face, the absolute defenceless face, without covering, clothing or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way, with an opposition which is opposition itself."<sup>19</sup> But, then, what is the absolute nakedness of a face in a society where we are constantly exposed to faciality? In today's media landscape, we argue that a masking of the face is repeatedly enforced on us. As noted by recent scholars, Lévinas's philosophical framework provides an entrance point for the ethics in documentary film-making.<sup>20</sup> The creation of representation equally runs a risk of placing the Other within a symbolic order, and thus transforming the Other as an



object of knowledge, therefore film-making practices have an ethical responsibility to eschew the totalising urge of objective knowledge of the Other.<sup>21</sup> In this we turn both towards the relationship between film-maker and participant, as well as a form of spectatorship in which “the viewing subject cannot assume a position of mastery and transcendence.”<sup>22</sup>

In the following analysis, we will work with the notion of radical softness to understand how the two films relate to the face of the Other. Radical softness will be explored and proposed as an approach that softens the faciality of power in three regards: 1) in the production of the film; 2) in the cinematic image, and finally; 3) in the reception of the film.

## Film-making as Radical Softness

In the two films *When Strangers Move In*<sup>23</sup> and *Um Firas—The Mother of the Revolution*<sup>24</sup> a radical soft approach can be seen in terms of the encounter between film-maker and participant, in the way the films approach the face, which is handled differently, but with an equally radical aesthetics seeking to disrupt faciality in the current media discourse. Jamboy discussed how to initiate a film project with the Eritrean community back in 2016. Radical softness can be seen as a methodology of softening the boundaries between the film-maker and the participant. The Jamboy film project intended to engage with the everyday life and culture of the Eritrean community, and share the complexities of moving to a new country in regards to place, culture and the production of subjectivity. The process of participatory film-making became a way to create a platform from where the community could engage local society, and the film could be seen as a contribution to the local conception of “the refugee”.<sup>25</sup> The film touches upon some social processes, and the film-making method was likewise emphasised as a relational and intimate process; as a way of being together. Thus film-making was not generated in the search for a specific story or a certain narrative, but rather expressed through social moments and shared activities. In *When Strangers Move In*, the softening of roles meant investing more time in daily activities than in the actual time spent recording them, and opening up for the participants to use the cameras in their own way. The softening of the roles was not a choice, but a necessity to be able to make the participants more comfortable with the camera and with the Jamboy

members, which helped all involved to get closer to each other and share moments. During the production, the softening of roles meant that participants gained a better practical insight into film-making, while the film-makers were able to get closer to the everyday life they were invited into. As a result, the participants started to engage more with the ideas of the film, which led to a stronger desire to take part in and co-direct their own story. The use of the camera over time would be re-appropriated into a play in daily activities, and the film-making process was given other purposes, such as shooting selfies or the digitalisation of analogue travel photographs. This softening of roles essentially meant that the film motivated a dialogue towards multiple expressions and belonging.

Fig. 1: *Jambo*, filming everyday activities in the home, 2017

The softening in the process is not merely a connective process, but similarly entails social complexities, exposure and transgression of subjective demarcations. The placing of the project directly in a home setting marks this fragile social approach. It contrasts the local socio-spatial practice of the neighbourhood that practises citizenship through privacy and distance.<sup>26</sup> The home in this instance becomes a place of exposure of each other, and a place where you risk yourself in relation to each other. Obviously, by inviting *Jambo* into their place of residence, the Eritrean community lay bare the intimate social sphere as a place for new negotiations and exchange. Film-makers *Jambo*, in turn, are strangers to the language and practices of the place. They had to adapt and change their habits to become part of the place. This display of vulnerability in front of each other became a subject guiding the film-making process.

Fig. 2: *Jambo*, Test screening and discussion about selection of scenes with the community, 2017

In continuation with the collaborative film-making practice of Jamboy, the Other Story film production is not merely a situation of production, but a process of friendship. Of risking oneself into a closeness and intimacy with someone who once was a stranger. In a time of extreme separations, the action of approaching the Other becomes an activist action, where the encounter becomes the radical soft approach, and the film gear the key that allows that situation to occur. As a result, the people portrayed in the Other Story films often become members of the collective. Today, Other Story consists of active members from Afghanistan, Syria, the US, Jordan and Denmark. Members from Syria have travelled with the Other Story films, screening them in several European countries. One member from Syria even screened the Other Story films in Athens, only a few kilometres away from the shop where he had bought the survival gear he needed to walk across Europe by foot one year earlier. In the film *Um Firas*, the roles and duration of the interview were softened as well. Here, the film-makers allowed the interviews to turn into a conversation, opening up to new dimensions of the themes.

When the members of Other Story encounter people to portray, the process is very intuitive. The encounter is central, the exchange of gaze, chemistry and the desire for friendship with the specific person is crucial. In this sense one could say that Other Story members are allowing themselves to be driven by desire. A desire to explore and connect to the Other. Friendship is essential here. To be able to work like this, time is crucial. And in this process of getting close to each other, the film-makers from Other Story typically encounter several hints towards affective conflicts and drama-driven narratives. Other Story members do not take this invitation, as the affective encounter is directed otherwise. Here, the questions stand as a sort of skeleton for the ongoing work. Questions such as *Describe your mother?*, *What is your favourite book?*, *What is home?* *Do you have a hero or heroine?*, are seemingly naïve and resonate as a pulse through the whole project, and are meant to dismantle stereotypes. This way of working lets the person portrayed unfold through a richer complexity, and not merely be a character cast for another heroic story. Thus film-making becomes a space of a genuine encounter that takes time, but opens up towards other stories that do not reproduce existing identities and meanings.

To sum up, we see a radical softness as an activist approach in how images come

into being, by whom and with what intentions. As an artistic and activist mode of film-making, both practices insist on slowness, in the everyday but passionate encounter, and in shared human values. From this perspective, we argue that this way of producing film differs from the fast and sensational image production in the current media landscape.

## Radical Softness in *When Strangers Move In* and *Um Firas—The Mother of The Revolution*

*When Strangers Move In* insists on a focus on the everyday life of the migrant as ordinary unfolding events, without an obvious suspense or articulation. But despite the ordinariness of the scenes, they hide an underlying layer of conflict and desire in relation to being foreign or “Other” in Denmark. In one scene we see a young man with his smartphone watching videos from Danish television. The videos are interviews with Danes sharing thoughts on proper integration. Simultaneously you see a close-up shot of the young man. He is wearing contact lenses and his eyes are sparkling blue. When the video ends he shakes his head lightly with an almost imperceptible despondent sigh.

Fig. 3: *When Strangers Move In*, still 8 min 22 sec

This scene describes an example of faciality, and how the other confronts the face granted by Danish media. His reaction is not definable, or rather it is refusing to be contained. Does he assimilate by literally becoming blue-eyed, a body-aesthetic transition of becoming Danish? Is it a camouflage? A satirical provocative act, does he really say—“I have become blue-eyed but you cannot change me on the inside”? We do not know. The indeterminacy of the face is a dismantling of the faciality of power given by the political discourse and media as it simultaneously embodies an adaptation to, and a re-appropriation of, existing mediated faciality.

Another scene follows a young man in his attempt to take up activities he used to do, before he arrived to Denmark. The scene is initiated with the Tigrinya voice-over: "Sometimes the present stumbles upon the past." The young man is practising tricks on his bike on a pedestrian path behind his home as he gets distracted. He leaves his bike on the ground as he gazes into the nearby bushes. The voice-over narrates how he, back in his hometown, used to catch wild doves with a slingshot. Speechless, we follow the young man as he investigates the nearby bushes and trees, in search for a perfect branch, that could be used for a slingshot. He does not succeed in finding a good branch and leaves the area with the final sentence of the voice-over; "He hopes one day to catch wild doves again." This scene can be seen to demonstrate how foreignness and processes of othering or masking are also taking place in the intimate and personal aspects of everyday life.

Fig. 4: *Jamboj, When Strangers Move In*, still 18 min 04 sec

In another scene, we follow two workers measuring the plot in orange high-visibility suits. The voice-over comments: "Two men in orange suits wander about, like strangers moving in from another planet. An unknown language is spoken by their tools." The contrast between the orange high-visibility suits and the winter landscape around the retirement home is in focus, while the soundscape amplifies the electronic measurement tools and the stamping of heavy boots. This scene marks an ongoing shifting in the perspective of who are truly the strangers. It acts as a decoding of the film title, the orange aliens with their measurement tools attuned to how strangeness is made up by various elements depending on the point of view. Here a masking is suddenly enforced on the worker, who, seen from the normalised national perspective would simply be efficiently performing his job obligations in society.

Fig. 5: *Jambo*, *When Strangers Move In*, still 18 min 13sec

However, the drama and the causal links between all these everyday incidents are never made, they are presented as open-ended observations without obvious conclusions, facts or conflicts. Hence, the indeterminacy of the scenes and the images are not only kept open for interpretation, they also confuse and blur what we might expect from the more dramatic title *When Strangers Move In*. In this sense, the film operates with indeterminacy and shifting perspectives, mixed feelings and sensations throughout the film.

To sum up, an essential feature of the film is the intimate description of how foreignness or otherness looks from the various perspectives. It captures the in-betweenness of the Other as a becoming that is “neither a one-way process nor a movement from one place to another. Rather, it is related to the process of stretching in-between, continuously connecting to and disconnecting from former and new environments, cultures, gestures, images and expressions.”<sup>27</sup>

In the Other Story film, *Um Firas—The Mother Of The Revolution*, the viewer is introduced to Um Firas, a woman from Damascus, Syria. Other Story met Um Firas in a centre called Souriyat Across Borders in Amman, a place that treats Syrian children and young people who are wounded by the war. In the first part of the film, Um Firas reflects on notions of love, war, childhood, storytelling, home. In the second part of the film, she engages in dialogue with old friends who were all part of the peaceful uprising against the Assad regime in Damascus. In the following we will explore the elements of radical softness in the cinematic aesthetics of the film.

## On Sound

In one of the opening scenes of *Um Firas—The Mother Of The Revolution* the viewer is placed inside a home setting looking out of a window, while the sounds of dishes being washed and singing from a radio is presented in the background. As a general aesthetic choice, there is no sound or music added to the films; all sounds in the film must be present in the specific situation or situations surrounding the encounter. Because of this, the non-spectacular sounds of an everyday life are exaggerated. This contrasts with the often over-dramatised music sequences in

mainstream media productions, where a hint of Hollywood is added to everyday-life situations. The sound of dishes invites the viewer into an intimate space, and simultaneously leaves them with the experience of a decentralised point of view, where the storyline is hinted at, but not clearly articulated.

Fig 6: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 1 min 34 sec

## On Voice

In one sequence the interviewer has initiated a longer process of asking the question. His voice is somewhat insecure, stuttering and aimless. The expression in Um Firas's face becomes intensified, motherly, until she cuts him off and states that which is obvious to her, yet nerve-wracking to others. This moment of an insecure voice is a returning element to the *Other Story* films, something which naturally occurs when people speak, but is rarely presented to viewers. We argue that this opens a softening, an awkwardness which opens the possibility of identification.

## On Framing

In this frame the viewer is presented with an extreme close-up of a living room curtain being tossed by the wind from an open balcony door. When presented through extreme close-ups, specific situations and settings shatter the sensation of an overview, bringing the viewer into the textures of the everyday setting of the person in the film. When the camera moves so close to a detail, this image becomes a new whole, and a container for new details. The viewer is not allowed a secure and controlled point of view. Instead the viewer is taken on a visually disorienting journey into the matter of the film.

Fig 7: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 2 min 47 sec

## On Questions

The viewer encounters Um Firas, who is the person portrayed in this film. Um Firas is asked to reflect on different questions, such as “the stories she tells her children or grandchildren”. As a general element to the *Other Story* films, the viewer is presented with a series of reflections on questions which are common to all human beings, such as “what is home?”, “describe when you were in love”, “what is your favourite object?”, hereby placing the portrayed person in a position of nuance and complexity, granting the space to unfold personal considerations on aspects to life which are common to all humans. The specific scene cultivates an air of the unspectacular and not-politicised intention. Instead the scene lets a series of personal reflections unfold, which independently can stimulate and open up to the complexities of life, without placing the person in any dramaturgy or specific category of experiences. Hence it leaves the series of events open for interpretation, and gives the story of Um Firas time to actualise in the viewer.

Fig 8: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 4 min 6 min

## On Settings

The viewer is presented with several image-collage sequences, which illustrate details and sensations from the landscape surrounding the person portrayed in the film. This is done without providing the viewer with an overview. Instead the viewer is taken on a random journey through different impressions, which do not promise to grant a coherent and complete narrative, but instead hint towards the sensuous and textural aspects to the lifeworld of the person portrayed. Thus, not telling a single, specific story, but hinting at a myriad of stories, hereby decentralising the point of view.



Fig. 9: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 8 min 50 sec

## On Silence

In a sequence, which starts with Um Firas ending a sentence and holding her eyes locked with Saif, who is the person activating her responses, a silence is initiated. The viewer is taken through a room and introduced to several young men and children with handicaps inflicted on their bodies by the war in Syria. The several-minute sequence is held in silence, or the natural air residue which any space carries. By not adding music, and letting a silence have its place, we propose that the resonant world is poetic and musical in its essence, and that the musicality of the setting can unfold without it being spoon-fed to the viewer. In these young men's life, there are no emotional synth chords in the background. When a rubber boat sinks in the Aegean Sea, there are no violins. When a young woman in France is refused asylum, there may be only the sound of the street. Leaving out any music, and holding a space for silence or actual, diegetic sounds, disturbs the general conception viewers might have: that such situations only happen with a soundtrack. Ultimately, it points to the bare fact that this would never happen in the comfortable moment in which the viewer is experiencing the imagery. In this regard, the film suggests that the sounds of the world are strong enough and do not need dramatical extradiegetic sounds to provoke sensations.

Fig. 10: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 10 min 54 sec

## On Language

At one moment in the film, the style and voice are broken and shift into another

kind of language. Um Firas and Saif, the interviewer, realise that they know each other from the early days of the revolution in Damascus, and a different kind of conversation unfolds. Whereas the first part of the film is edited to a certain degree, this second part is almost a full one-take. A shift in style which visualises the construction that inevitably takes place when producing a documentary film. The language and the tonality of Um Firas's voice changes, and the viewer is invited into a personal and intimate conversation between two people who have experienced extreme situations together. The language of war turns into an everyday kind of jargon of catching up on old days. When the film reaches its conclusion, an unknown person enters the room and the three people keep having a relaxed conversation. The film ends in the middle of a sentence, not presenting a classic outro, but instead shows the viewer that this was just one moment of many moments in these lives. The viewer is not given a grand narrative to place the portrait in, but instead has to stay with the resonance of non-closure.

Fig. 11: *Other Story, Um Firas*, still 16 min 10 sec

To conclude, the aesthetics—of, for instance, sound, editing and camera work—of the films, point to a non-dramatic and non-totalising approach to the Other in which the face—in its multiplicity and its plethora of expressivity—has time and space to unfold. Both films operate within *the ordinary*, for instance in the scene when Um Firas encounters an old friend, or when a young resident in *When Strangers Move In* cooks alone in the kitchen. The lack of music or diegetic soundscape marks a different approach to the face. As film-makers, we believe that the perverse amount of added sounds resonating through mainstream media today work as a masking and ultimately, it desensitises the viewer and persuades its receivers of a world with a Hollywood ending. Hence, telling a story of a world *without* such an ending is a way of softening and humanising the face. In the aesthetics of the films, radical softness means making the choice of not casting the face as a certain character or identity. Rather, the face offers an open encounter for engagement—an encounter that is not staged in advance. In this sense, both films

offer a non-totalising relation to the Other, something which is possible in situations where the viewing subject cannot assume a position of mastery and transcendence.

## Radical Softness and the Reception of the Films

The premiere screening of *When Strangers Move In* was followed by a Q&A in which the audience shared their impressions and critique. For many, a critical reception was enforced by the unsensational or even lacking narrative of the film. In addition, the uncertain and dynamic moods seemed difficult to grasp or clarify. One audience member argued that nothing was happening and would like to know why Jamboy chose not to show all the conflicts and problems that the refugees naturally must go through. He also argued that he had initially expected to learn some facts about the refugees in the film. Another commented: "I don't know how to feel about this film, some scenes are very sad while other scenes made me laugh and feel hope." This surrounding discussion gave us an interesting insight into some apparent general and fixed perceptions of both the role or the character of the refugee and what was expected of the film. First, the reception of the film was obviously guided by a pre-supposed imagery of the refugee as a sensational, miserable and dramatic character, not necessarily a person who cooks while dancing alone. The attempt to show other sceneries and imageries of the refugee, by focusing on the non-sensational and trivial everyday life, apparently became a provocative act of misguidance, resulting in an inability to frame stories. Other audiences have expressed that the film is propagandistic in the portrayal of Danish welfare decay.

When the Eritrean community was invited to deliver their feedback on the final film, a central person advised to use more background music to create an atmosphere. Furthermore, a more conclusive or happy ending was called for. While this example shows that despite Jamboy's intentions and participatory process, the film is not a one-to-one translation, but rather a subtraction of multiple interpretations that is never-ending. When speaking to a Danish woman in her 60s about the *When Strangers Move In* film, she pointed out that no female figures were portrayed in

any central scenes, arguing that this illustrated a different and more male-dominated culture. While this reading cannot be deduced from the scenes in the film, it is an example of how infinite readings and subjective desires can be projected onto the screen. When the image does not contain a clear or easily perceived idea, but rather opens up through fragmented and diverse imaginary, the readings become equally multiple.

When Other Story films are screened at public spaces, it has been a recurrent practice that the people portrayed are invited to join via a live Skype call. When initiating the Skype call, guests at the screening are invited to ask questions. The guest asking the specific question is instructed to walk up to the computer screen and face the person on Skype when posing the question. This live encounter occasionally turns into a dialogue between the two. When doing so, Other Story invites publics to step out of the traditional safe cinema chair and instead actively facially engage with the Other. However, on several occasions audiences have left the space or reacted somewhat insulted on behalf of the portrayed person who is presenting themselves—not as an image but as an invitation for dialogue. On the one occasion when two guests left the screening, without articulating any verbal remarks in the situation, we later received an email stating, that Other Story were jeopardising already vulnerable people's (refugees) emotional safety and that our live Q&A via Skype was "bad practice". After this episode, the members of Other Story developed a verbal contract when initiating the Skype call, which clearly illustrated that the invited person had chosen to do this and could be asked any question.

Therefore, we see a radical softness in how the audience reception is constructed in terms of the uncertainty and indeterminacy that emerges while watching: doubt and even the potential refusal of the encounter. This is also the case for the Q&A after the screenings. While news media are often edited as dialectical imagery in which two radical sides or discourses are staged through confrontation—for instance human rights activists contra new nationalists—the Jamboy and Other Story films propose a different ambiguity and a plethora of open questions and sentiments. This might explain why some audiences decided to leave after the Other Story screenings, refusing to accept the encounter with the portrayed people in real time.

Finally, this raises the question of how we can generally understand the face when encountering the Other, and the impact who is invited has, when and with what purpose. We will try to conclude by returning to Lévinas and Deleuze and Guattari's re-reading of him, approaching the affective ethico-aesthetics of the face.

## Perspectives on Faciality of Power and the Aesthetic Faciality of the Films

As mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari, we cannot fight the faciality of power by returning to some pre-signifying and pre-subjective semiotics. As they suggest, "We will never succeed in making ourselves a new primitive head and body, human, spiritual, and faceless."<sup>28</sup> In other words, we cannot escape the signifying image. But aesthetically, we can work with how to change those signifying and symbolic processes—what we initially referred to as the event in the current affective politics. Aesthetics, and in particular ethico-aesthetics as proposed by Guattari elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> we understand might offer a line of flight in dismantling affective faciality and its political and symbolic determinacy. As Deleuze and Guattari note, "if the face is a politics, dismantling face is also politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming clandestine."<sup>30</sup> Such real becomings and events are what the two films above are working with. How *Other Story* and *Jambo* demand time to situate themselves together with people in the film production process; in how the film dismantles fixed identities and the sensational conflict-driven capturing of the other; in how the films allow for the stuttering, indeterminacy and the *and, and, and* of the often fragmented narrative. Further, how the situations of the film screenings allow space for mixed feelings and uncertainty in the viewers—even as a reaction of dissent among audience members choosing to leave the auditorium. The viewer might be left in a crisis without a recognisable framework for interpretation (no dramaturgy, no music or soundscape). However, as mentioned by film scholar Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen in relation to Lars von Trier's cinematic faciality, this lack of framework also allows "the viewer to see himself seeing".<sup>31</sup> Here, viewers and publics potentially realise what kind of embodied, cultural gaze is normally imposed upon the Other. "Only in the black hole of subjective consciousness and passion do you discover the transformed, heated, captured particles you must relaunch for a nonsubjective, living love in which each party connects with unknown tracts in

the other without entering or conquering them”, state Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>32</sup> This is what we draw from the aesthetic faciality in the films: a radical softness that is non-subjective in the sense that it does not attempt a conquering of the Other, but softly through an ethico-aesthetics works indeterminacy, doubt and the in-between. Or articulated otherwise: witnessing our own subjective becoming-Other in the encounter with the face.

## Films:

Other Story, *Um Firas—The Mother of The Revolution*, 2018

<https://vimeo.com/282471174>

password: 14OS

Jamboy Art Collective, *When Strangers Move In*, 2018

<https://vimeo.com/265703912>

Password: selam

## Footnotes

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16. Since 2016 Other Story's films have been screened in The Royal Danish Theatre, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, The Danish House in Palestine, The National Museum of Denmark, Souriyat Across Borders in Amman, Cinemateket, Hal Atelier House Leipzig and several other venues around the world. See more on <http://>

[www.other-story.org/](http://www.other-story.org/) (accessed 2019-01-07.) ↑

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