Chapter 7

Migrant Cine-Eye: Storytelling in Documentary and Participatory Filmmaking

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7.1 Introduction

The so-called European “refugee crisis” has bred a profusion of audiovisual accounts throughout the region, many of which aimed to give voice to hitherto voiceless, uprooted people. But as many of these “untold stories” gain material expression as storylines, we are urged to consider the implications of yet another form of displacement: from the historical person to the film character, from personal stories to media representations. The growing interest into the migrant issue and visual representations of refugees have played an important role in the public construction of the “crisis” but have also, paradoxically, obscured or silenced migrant voices. The authors of this paper, a documentary filmmaker (Trencsényi) and a social anthropologist (Naumescu) seek to explore narrative strategies and ethics of representation in European documentaries made after 2010 as well as a participatory filmmaking project developed in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis in Hungary. Having collaborated on several documentary films and filmmaking workshops, we approach this issue from the perspective of practitioners, offering a critical reflection as well as possible strategies for those aiming to produce audiovisual works in this field. The inclusion of refugees’ insight and their ways of constructing their own stories as well as their own observations on the receiving societies can open

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The original version of this chapter was revised: It has now been updated with correct images that were taken from public domain. The correction to this chapter is available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67608-7_19

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new possibilities for collaboration and creative engagement for social scientists and filmmakers preparing visual fieldnotes, ethnographic and documentary films as well as participatory projects.

We find this conversation meaningful because cinema and anthropology share the “problem of the person”, of having to represent an absent body that must be reconstructed through visual and textual strategies (David MacDougall, 1998, p. 95). This issue of “a body too few” has now turned into the problem of “too many bodies” exposed by the overly mediated “refugee crisis” and anti-migration propaganda across Europe. The excess and immediacy of such representations urges us to consider alternative narrative forms that encourage collaboration and self-representation, aiming to recreate a subjectivity that reflects the historical person rather than the objectified “migrant” of mainstream discourses. Once specialized in the “savage slot” (Trouillot, 2003), anthropology has developed the critical understanding and narrative strategies to move beyond the exotic Other or, in this case, the migrant image that haunts Europe today. Inspired by experiments with participatory and collaborative filmmaking we set out to explore the possibilities and limitations of the camera to give voice to migrants in the current context and produce a shared story.

The chapter starts with a critical reflection of the humanitarian impulse in recently acclaimed European documentaries engaging with the issue of migration. It zooms afterwards into Hungary, a prominent case at the time, to show how structural conditions including European integration funds, state propaganda and practices of othering have shaped narrative strategies in Hungarian documentary before and after the “refugee crisis” in 2015. Finally, it describes a participatory filmmaking project developed within the frames of CEU’s Open Learning Initiative (OLive) which aimed to respond to this situation by creating a safe space for refugees and asylum seekers in Hungary to develop their own visual stories. Forced to stop before completion because of tightening government regulations, this project represents an invitation to the reader to pursue further our search for a “subjective voice” through collaborative filmmaking.

7.2 The Migrant Image as Constructed in Recent European Documentaries

Documentary filmmakers have long been aware of the rising number of refugees arriving to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through South-East Europe, via the so-called “Balkan route”. But it was not until the 2015 “refugee crisis” and the shocking images circulating in the media that documentary films started to get public attention (see Augustová, Chap. 11, in this volume). The film industry decided to prioritize the topic of migration so films already in development were rushed through post-production to enter distribution and many new projects kicked off. The competition between films and filmmakers to cover the topic became so intense that even festival hits, like the Locarno winner *Lampedusa* in Winter (2015) with over 60 festival selections were soon taken off the screen to give place to new films; in this particular case to *Fire at Sea* (2016), a film shot on the same island, about the same topic but in an escalating political and dramatic climate.

Jakob Brossman, the director of *Lampedusa in Winter*, had been working on his documentary for several years focusing on the superhuman efforts and the humanitarian approach of the mayor of this small Italian island to keep things running despite rough winters, economic difficulties and the influx of refugees arriving by boat. As time went by, the refugee issue became the most prominent, becoming a key stage for the mayor to act and reveal her human side and an opportunity for the filmmaker to address Italy's (and Europe's) political inertia. In this process, Brossman shifted focus from the kind of mosaic film he was doing - depicting the everyday life of touristic Lampedusa - towards the dramatic events unfolding in front of his eyes. This move turned the film into one of the most celebrated European documentaries portraying the migrant crisis exactly at the time when it became a hot political issue that made media headlines. The film trailer underlines that "Lampedusa is a symbol that is known all over the world, but as an island it is unknown". So even if the influx of refugees dominates the scene, Brossman chooses to direct his gaze towards us, Europeans, to see what effect this phenomenon has on the local society. The film follows the local mayor, the football team, the island's radio commentator, the coastal guards and eventually the refugees too, but only as they pass by or interact with the locals, depicting them as a collectivity rather than individualized characters. Their stories are approached from the sidelines, through the portrait of an Italian lady for example, who visits the anonymous refugee graves in the cemetery to keep their memory alive, or the perspective of other locals who gather refugees' lost objects (diaries, clothes etc.) and try to re-create their lost lives this way. With this, Brossman underscores the human solidarity emerging in these circumstances rather than giving migrants a voice in his film. He uses the refugee crisis and its impact on the local community to uncover social exclusion and marginality and show how marginalized people, whether refugees or Italian citizens at the periphery of the state stand together in such circumstances - "because the inhabitants of the island regard themselves as victims of the same cynical politics as the refugees"¹.

Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare), the documentary that replaced Brossmann's film in the festival circuit, was greeted by critics as the "cinematic Pietà"² of the European refugee crisis. Like its predecessor, the film observes Lampedusa's inhabitants, but goes even more microscopic: we spend time with an Italian boy, Samuele, who apparently lives the life of an average kid on the island but shares the collective anxiety with the others, especially the doctor who is in direct contact with the arriving immigrants. In this story, refugees are depicted as a faceless crowd, an influx of people who have lost their sense of self and identity on the way to Europe. In front of the camera as well as in the eyes of the European host societies they appear as scared, vulnerable people in search of shelter. Composed of several lengthy vignettes, the film gives equal attention to the everyday chores of the Italian

¹ Interview with the Director Jakob Brossmann by Karin Schiefer, AFC, July 2015.

² The European migrant crisis found its pieta in *Fire at Sea*. Powerful, at times shocking, but also intensely human'. *Berlin Review*: <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/fire-at-sea-berlin-review/5100339.article> accessed 25.10.2019.

boy or to an old lady who regularly calls the local radio to dedicate songs to her husband, and to the rundown boats approaching Lampedusa and the dead bodies unloaded from them. The gaze of the refugees who remained alive is frightened and mute throughout the film and their portrayal in semi-darkness or as a “herd” contrasts the more intimate portraits of the locals. The doctor’s gentle examination of Samuele’s eyes becomes a counterpoint to images of mistreated migrant bodies or close-ups of refugees on the boat in shock and despair. (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2).

Despite the different perspectives, Brossmann and Rosi maintain the authorial voice in their films deciding whose story matters, what elicits our emotions, and to what ends.

Figs. 7.1 and 7.2 Stills from *Fire at Sea* (directed by Gianfranco Rosi, 2016)

The perspective changes in 69 minutes of *86 days* (2017), a documentary by Norwegian director Egil Haskjold Larsen, which shifts the focus to refugees completely. Sketching a minimalist portrait of a Syrian family on their journey to Sweden, the story focuses explicitly on individual characters, but still does not aim to give them a voice. As opposed to the usual media images portraying compact masses of refugees marching away with their backs towards us, here we see faces in different framings, total and medium shots, even close-ups of each family member, but most frequently of Lean Kanjo's face, their three-year-old daughter. The camera is at the eye level of little Lean, gliding smoothly along with the moving crowd, through long takes and minimal editing intervention. Throughout the film, the family members do not acknowledge the film crew, carrying on their journey as if they were asked not to take note of the camera. Its approach, echoing the observational style of mainstream documentary (Nichols, 2001, p. 109–115) raises important ethical questions about the vulnerability of the protagonists and refugees more broadly. Could they have said “no” to the camera in this situation? Did they feel obliged to accept it to send a message out there? What would they say if given the chance to talk?

If we consider the mode of perspective, an indicator of the primary locus of expression in film (MacDougall, 1998, p. 102), 69 minutes does not provide a first-person testimony despite its attempt to recreate the subjective experience of the little girl. Instead, it involves the viewers in the lived experience of migration and invites them to identify with the protagonists' disorientation and helplessness. It is almost as immersive as a virtual reality (VR) project where the viewer is placed in the middle of the action, however it treats the protagonists as if we would not need to hear them, substituting their “voice” with music which comes in to raise the tension and enhance viewers' empathy. Next to the Norwegian director we find the film's editor, Victor Kossakovsky, a renowned Russian documentary filmmaker who is responsible for the homogeneity of the style and concept. The film is as strict as a board game with its rules: no words, no direct contact or relationship with the protagonists, no intertitles about the countries and places that the family passes through except for small clues that evoke well-known images of the refugee crisis. The privileged camera and the non-diegetic elements that break the continuity of the real fit the authorial vision and its assumed “observational” style.

In contrast, the observational cinema championed by anthropologist-filmmakers (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009; MacDougall, 2020) starts from very different epistemic and ethical premises (see Verstappen, Chap. 6, in this volume). Their observational approach is based on an intimate, trusting relationship between the filmmaker and the subject where the embodied camera is partial, grounded, situated “close to or nearby” their interlocutors and representing the perspective of individual observers rather than remaining neutral. This intensity of observation is barely simulated in 69 minutes where the camera skims over people and places and dares to look at the protagonists closely only in their sleep. These lengthy shots withhold the protagonists' chance to look back into the camera or to exchange glances or words that would signal mutual recognition and the shared experience of the moment.

This type of humanitarian, art-house documentary that won festivals and audiences in recent years seemed like a promising counterpoint to the ever-disturbing, alienating media images. Such documentaries managed to shift the focus from refugees as a collective actor to individual characters whose subjectivity is recreated through artistic means. Yet, refugees remained voiceless, inscribed into a story not of their making. Attempts to create a space for their own storytelling were slower to emerge and didn't gain as much traction in documentary production as they did in anthropological filmmaking. Take for example the recent issue of NAFA's *Journal of Anthropological Films* (Varvantakis et al. 2019) which shows a lot of creativity and commitment to collaborative modes of storytelling. Alexandra Maria D'Onofrio's *It was tomorrow* is the result of a collaborative process between her and three Egyptian refugees reflecting on their journey, while *Unimaginable Dreams* by Marzia Jamili with Brittany Nugent and Dove Barbanel is a collective auto-ethnography of Marzia, an Afghan refugee in Sweden. Another illustration of collaborative first-person filmmaking is Arjang Omrani and Asef Rezaei's film *Passager* (2020) based on the video diaries of Asef, an Afghan refugee on route to Europe.

In contrast, mainstream documentaries that work around the refugees' perspective, like Deutsche Welle (DW) documentary *My Escape* (2016), fail to relinquish authority to them. Directed by Elke Sasse, this film is also constructed from refugees' own footage shot along their journeys. But in the film these images are intercut with sitting interviews shot by a "professional film crew" which followed the protagonists' arrival to Germany. In this way, their personal stories become a mere illustration of the broader migration story. Instead of a true first-person camera as in Omrani's *Passager*, we see the subjective camera of the refugees taken over by the scripted narrative of the filmmaker which places these dramatic experiences in the past, already turned into memories. *My Escape* also strives to give an overview of the situation lining up several parallel stories that end up objectifying the migrant journey rather than letting the stories speak for themselves. The effect undermines the initial intention since this structure deprives refugees from their subjectivity, creating instead a typology of migrant experiences. Their footage documents the dire circumstances of their journeys, but unlike journalistic accounts, it is not made with a calculated effect: refugees are shy of horrible scenes, trying to keep up the spirits and not scare the women and children traveling with them. Noticing how those waiting to travel from Ajdabiya get beaten by smugglers one of the refugees remarks on camera: "Hey, we are laughing out of fear. Don't think for a moment that we are doing fine".³

In Regarding the pain of others Susan Sontag (2003) claims that by taking the camera in our hand we create a distance from the horror of reality, even if this horror is just happening to us. One of the protagonists in Sasse's film sums up this experience perfectly while filming his journey: "My shadow is crossing the border between

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³*My Escape* (2016) Min. 20.20.

Macedonia and Serbia but I am really still in Syria”.⁴ However, it’s not only the protagonists who are split in two; the viewers and the protagonists are also separated from each other in this film. By dubbing the refugees and rendering their stories into something more coherent and intelligible for Western audiences, the director creates even more distance between them and the viewers. We watch the spectacle of migration made of a careful selection of first-hand experiences and painful memories recruited to create an aura of authenticity around them.

Such projects take for granted the authority of the filmmaker to speak for vulnerable people and rewrite their stories into the grand narrative of the refugee crisis. While some of these documentaries use the opportunity to reflect on the crisis of European values and society, this strategy stops short of becoming a self-reflection about the scope and method of the authors-filmmakers and their positionality. One exception is Orban Wallace’s *Another News Story* (2017) which turns the camera towards the invisible protagonists of the refugee crisis: the cameramen and producers covering the events at key nodes of this journey, like the Greek seaside, the Hungarian-Serbian border and Vienna train station. It feels as if the filmmakers have finally realized that they cannot bridge the gap between the film character and the historical person without speaking about their own position and role in creating these visual stories. In this feature documentary we follow several news producers, cinematographers, and anchors, as well as two refugees through their common journey from Greece to Germany, marked by life-threatening challenges, hostility and displacement. As viewers we empathize with the crews covering the “migration story” for the media and tend to accept their coming to terms with the fact that the migrant perspective cannot be truthfully represented or transmitted no matter how many films are made about it. (Figs. 7.3 and 7.4)

Another News Story seeks to critically assess the exploitative news genre, yet the “refugee crisis” remains the main character while migrant subjectivities become secondary to it. We face the skepticism of the film directors and cameramen regarding their own practice and the industry specialized in world misery. Protagonists on both sides concur: Italian news producer Lorenzo remarks that “we are making noise, but no help” while Ali, one of the refugees who becomes a character in the movie lucidly observes the media spectacle: “as long as the number of the filmmakers increase, kind of a humiliated feeling starts within our souls. We are just toys, and they are playing with us. These guys are making a film about me, and Europeans at home are having their French fries or beers watching us, and pity “those Afghans”.⁵ This is how refugees become the characters of the European refugee crisis, schematic figures placed in stereotypical sceneries in a foretold story with scripted plot and roles. Such limited visual discourse contributes to rather than countering the spectacle of migration produced by mainstream media and the anti-migration campaigns across Europe.

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⁴*My Escape* (2016) Min. 19.30.

⁵Wallace: *Another News Story*, min. 17.20, Ali, Afghanistan.

Figs. 7.3 and 7.4 Stills from *Another News Story* (directed by Orban Wallace, 2017)

7.3 Politics of (In)Visibility in Hungarian Documentary

In *MyEscape*, the DW documentary mentioned above, refugees start singing a song when they are about to reach Germany:

‘We are going to Germany, illegally,

If not through Turkey, through Spain

or through Ukraine’.

They also mention Sweden and Austria in their song but not Hungary. Yet everyone, including the refugees in these films, were talking about Hungary at the time as a

place to be avoided.⁶ The news about Hungarian anti-migration policies and the borders sealed by Victor Orban's regime frightened people taking the Balkan route. Even more terrifying for them was the highly mediatized tragedy of seventy-one migrants who died suffocated in August 2015 in a locked truck abandoned by smugglers on the Austrian highway after leaving Hungary. While it has never been a desired "final destination" for asylum seekers, Hungary became during those days the center of global attention for migrants and audiences alike. Turning our attention to the Hungarian case, we use it here to show how visual representations of "the migrant" were fostered by the EU's integration policies prior to the 2015 refugee crisis, and framed afterwards by long standing practices of Othering and the aggressive politics of exclusion that European states pursued in its wake. In Hungary, this combination has shaped the field of cultural production and narrative strategies employed by documentary filmmakers and triggered a shift from integration to securitization discourses on migration once the refugee crisis hit the headlines. It also provided the counterpart to our own participatory video project that is discussed in the last section.

Since 2012 Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán started to build up a massive campaign against migrants as the principal enemy of Hungary and European Christian values. His anti-migration rhetoric became a political tool well before the "herds of migrants" approached the Hungarian border and made the migrant figure not only highly visible in the media and public space but the evil character in his political drama.⁷ The events of summer 2015, when thousands of refugees were stopped by the Hungarian authorities to cross the border to Austria, became a tipping point and the ensuing anti-migration campaigns of the government made sure that "migrants" became a household word in Hungary (Kallius et al., 2016). Blocked for weeks at the Keleti railway station in Budapest the spectacle of their everyday life became visible to all passers-by and media audiences: families, children, old people spending days on the stairs and passageways of the train station, eating, washing and sleeping in the open space. Obscuring the spontaneous solidarities that formed on the ground, the Hungarian media presented this moment as a fulfillment of Orbán's prophecy, a national security threat that justified the construction of the border fence with Serbia. The public broadcasting promoted this discourse, completely colonizing the topic and the public space. By that time, the borders between the public sphere and the state were already blurred and the politics of visibility were almost exclusively in the hands of the government which decided not only what to exclude or include but also how to be portrayed. The portrayal of refugees as an aggressive crowd suggested criminality and violence, what Gabor Bernath and Vera Messing called the "securitization" discourse of the state (Bernáth &

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⁶ e.g. *My Escape*, min. 29; *The Good Postman*, min. 14. *Another News Story*, min. 17.

⁷ This was done systematically through public speeches, national consultations on immigration and terrorism as well as billboard campaigns across the country (Bernath and Messing 2016). It coincided with the tightening of legislation which still didn't deter migrants from crossing through Hungary. Even though Hungary has been a country of transit for many years the number of asylum seekers increased exponentially from 2013 till 2016 (Kallius et al. 2016).

Messing 2016). Even the more balanced media which portrayed the vulnerability and suffering of migrants entrapped their voices in a humanitarian discourse that didn't allow alternative stories to emerge.

This context, in which the government controlled the public discourse on migrants and others' access to it, framed the documentary efforts to talk about migration. Hungarian filmmakers were already sensitive to discourses of othering since the early nineties, a period that witnessed the return of Hungary's repressed Others after a long period of communist homogenizing policies. The awakening of Roma identities and the Jewish renaissance became subjects of documentary production in the post socialist public sphere (Füredi, 2004; Pócsik, 2004). Migrants however remained invisible to the larger public until 2015 despite a significant amount of regular funding made available through the European Integration Fund for filmmakers dealing with migration. Despite Hungary's politics of invisibility towards migrants, European policies fueled local documentary production amidst a general scarcity of funding for independent documentaries. This opportunity gave rise to a number of films about migration that promoted a domesticated migrant image way before the state-sponsored securitization discourse kicked in.⁸ In this process, filmmakers transplanted the narrative patterns of conventional documentaries focused on social topics into their own perspective on migration, approaching it as just another story of yet another marginalized group. Their films depicted the struggles of migrants in a similar manner with those of the Roma, homeless or people with disabilities, framing the migrant experience from the perspective of social integration - exemplary, controversial, human - or dwelling into the moral complexity and vulnerability of their lives.

One of the first projects funded by the European Integration Fund was a compilation of picturesque individual stories of migrants trying to integrate in the Hungarian society (*Three Weddings*, Nagy-Trencsényi-Kis, Campfilm, 2010). This documentary series presents three short stories on mixed marriages contracted in Hungary, focusing on the here and now of their relationship. *Home Paradise* (Anna Kis) tells the story of a Nigerian young man marrying a Hungarian bank employee who often humiliates him and makes racist statements, *Viktor Nagy's Bernadett* and *Sanju* is about the love story of a couple who met on the internet, while Trencsényi's *Elena* and *Leo* portrays the love marriage of a fifty-year-old Hungarian woman with a young Cuban man whose application for residence is rejected by the Immigration Office. These stories offer an insight into the atypical relationships of these couples and the inner processes of immigration and integration. We do not learn much about the background of the protagonists, their motivations and journey to Hungary but observe their everyday interactions with society and state bureaucracy that reveal moments of everyday racism and xenophobia. The films do not pursue this further since their purpose was to help the integration of immigrants by constructing a positive image and bringing "the Other" closer to Hungarian audiences. However, the directors remained committed to the topic, with Trencsényi moving on to a participatory filmmaking project and Nagy directing two feature documentaries and a docu-fiction as a follow-up. (Fig. 7.5)

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⁸*Three Weddings* by Campfilm 2010, *Superior Orders* by Campfilm 2013, *Bureau TV* film with refugees acting by Campfilm 2015. The European Integration Fund also supported a compilation of films on migration for educational purposes, *Strangers in My Garden* (Palantír Foundation 2010).

Fig. 7.5 Still from *Three Weddings: Home Paradise* (directed by Anna Kis, 2010)

Nagy's first feature-length documentary *Caught Between Two Worlds* (2011) follows four personal stories of refugees who received international protection and are about to leave the refugee camp to find their place in the Hungarian society.⁹ It blends the integration narrative with the humanitarian discourse, framing the protagonists as depoliticized, suffering subjects caught in between the structures of violence at home and the Hungarian bureaucracy. The film is constructed by interviews and situations of refugees' everyday life without assuming an authoritative voice explicitly. The conventional style and the editing frame "the migrant" situationally and aesthetically without going deeper into their past and their insights into their actual situation. The interviews, with many close-up and super close-up shots, have a calculated effect on the viewer to elicit their compassion. Yet, such "confessions" into the camera tend to play an ambiguous role for the audience because of their "mixture of candor and self-justification" as Jean Rouch has observed in his experiments with "cine-truth" (Rouch, 2003).

The integration genre centered on the "domesticated migrant" and individual, character-driven stories subsided after 2014 when Orbán's anti-migration campaign promoted a securitization discourse which directed the disquiet of the Hungarian society against the migrant as an "external enemy".¹⁰ There was, however, one documentary film, *Superior orders* (Campfilm 2013) co-directed by Viktor Nagy and András Petrik, that deviated from the integration discourse. Somehow anticipating what was to come, the film focuses on the social dynamic and institutional

⁹Bicske, the biggest refugee camp in Hungary where Nagy's documentary takes place, was "quietly closed" by the Hungarian government in Winter 2016 (Cantat 2017).

¹⁰It was revived in fiction film however, with two successful productions, *The Bureau* (2015) and *The Citizen* (2016), speaking openly about the hardships of immigration.

Fig. 7.6 Still from *Superior Orders* (directed by András Petrik and Viktor Nagy, 2013)

mechanisms behind the Hungarian border spectacle (Cantat, 2017) juxtaposing the humanitarian and securitization perspectives. Filmed around Christmas 2012 on both sides of the Hungarian-Serbian border, it reveals two different worlds mobilized around European migrants. On the Hungarian side, the border police joined by local vigilantes (“volunteer civil guards”) are constantly on patrol supported by an impressive mechanism of surveillance that turns migrants into “targets”: we only get to see their silhouettes through the thermo-cameras, completely depersonalized figures moving quickly towards the border fence. On the Serbian side, however, we follow a Christian pastor who brings food, warm clothes and comforting words to migrants on the run, prays with them and for them, and spends Christmas with them holding their frozen hands and feet above the fire. The contrast between the zeal of the locals to fulfill their “patriotic mission” hunting migrants and the fragile relationship of trust built between the pastor and passing migrants makes for a stronger statement than any other narrative. Indeed, the film is tightly edited, simple, without music, letting emotions flow and our empathy grow when watching the caring pastor and freezing migrants in the shadow of the border fence. The film remains quite unique among the documentaries made before the Hungarian refugee crisis, giving an insight into what was to turn very soon into a full-blown border spectacle. (Fig. 7.6)

In contrast to the boom of European documentaries on the refugee crisis explored in the first section, very few Hungarian films on migration were produced after 2015. A notable exception, Dorottya Zurbó’s *Easy Lessons* (Eclipse Film, 2018) tries to find a path between the securitization discourse of the state and the humanitarian impulse of European documentary, continuing the integration genre of individual, character-driven stories. Her film follows Kafia, a Somali refugee girl who arrived in Hungary as an unaccompanied minor and was therefore placed in the Fót Children Shelter. Zurbó meticulously follows her integration into the last year

of Hungarian secondary school, her final exam, her dream to become a model and her first relationship with a Hungarian boy. The narrative develops as a coming of age story somewhat oblivious of the atmosphere of public hysteria and anti-migrant propaganda in which the character grows up. The film is mostly based on close, discrete observation by an “invisible” crew. However, at the end of the film, Zurbó introduces a narrative tool that breaks this tacit agreement with the viewer by setting up Kafia’s confession to her mother in a professional sound studio. This way the subtle observational moments of the film are reframed by a post hoc narration which becomes the structuring element of the film. Her artistic decision not to include everyday politics in this intimate portrait made the film very successful, but it also raised criticism for keeping our attention away from the actual context in which her story materialized (Stöhr, 2020). An exception in the Hungarian cultural field where the government controls the “migrant image”, Zurbó’s *Easy Lessons* became a good illustration of how personal stories can still engage audiences even at the price of depoliticizing migrant subjectivities. These challenges were at the back of our minds when proposing a participatory video workshop for refugees and asylum seekers within the frames of the Open Learning Initiative (OLive) program at the Central European University.

7.4 Participatory Storytelling: Strategies of Engaging “Others” Through Film

As the examples offered so far illustrate, European audiences became saturated with the “migrant image” produced and circulated by the media and the documentary industry since 2015. Their narratives revolved around similar stories about accidents at sea, human trafficking, migrant deaths on the journey to Europe and European countries blocking or mistreating migrants at the border. Despite the humanitarian impulse of documentary filmmakers, their films tended to objectify the migrant experience and the “refugee crisis” as much as those emphasizing securitization and the migrant threat. Attempts to develop alternative approaches and narrative strategies to subvert these images and the authorial voice of the filmmaker remained scarce in the documentary field.¹¹ Even participatory documentaries supposed to empower vulnerable people by giving them a voice have been marred by a rhetoric of immediacy which hides the fact that giving them a camera “invents the very disenfranchised humanity that it claims to redeem” (Rangan, 2017, p. 1). As Pooja Rangan argues, the humanitarian impulse to give voice to voiceless people is inscribed into a logic of immediation that justifies the documentary pursuit of dehumanized lives by its urgency. This obscures the constructed quality of

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¹¹ One such project is *Midnight Traveler* (2019) by Afghan filmmaker Hassan Fazili who delivered a personal, first-hand testimony of their long journey to Europe, thoughtfully intertwining private, family footage with the highly politicized video diary genre migrants produced those days.

representations and reinforces their otherness thus reifying the “suffering subject” (Robbins, 2013). However, rather than giving up this pursuit altogether, we should find ways to circumvent the power relation and conventional narrative frames searching for a subjective voice that emerges from the encounter between the medium and the subject facilitated by the filmmaker – what others called a “third voice”.¹²

With such concerns in mind, we looked for inspiration in experiments with participatory, collaborative filmmaking when developing our own pedagogical approach. Given their critical understanding of the long history of objectifying colonized and marginalized people, anthropologists seem more attuned to the subjective voice of others than contemporary documentary filmmakers.¹³ Since ethnographic practice is based on the encounter with an-other who often challenges their own position, anthropologists became highly reflexive of their practice and aimed for developing an ethical relationship and shared knowledge through it. From the early attempts to give a camera to the “Other” (Worth and Adair 1997) through Rouch’s shared anthropology (2003), and MacDougall’s participatory cinema (1998, p. 136), a robust anthropological practice has developed which seeks to generate a space for co-creating new cinematic truths. The ethics, aesthetics and representational practices grounding this approach provide a broad range of possibilities for engaging others in a truly participatory collaboration (see examples above and Piemontese, Chap. 10, in this volume).¹⁴

In May 2016, together with Babak Arzani, an Iranian refugee and activist, we developed a participatory video workshop within the frames of the pioneering Open Learning Initiative (OLive) at CEU. Founded by a group of people which included migrants, activists and CEU members, some of whom had been directly involved in the 2015 events, this educational program for refugees and asylum seekers was the first of its kind in Europe (Cantat, Cook, & Rajaram, 2022). Alongside the academic courses offered by the OLive Program, our practical course aimed to provide new means of self-expression and self-representation for OLive students to create their own visual stories. The course was designed around principles of experiential and participatory learning, employing a wide range of techniques that enhanced creativity, co-authorship, reflection and practical learning. We believed that such a workshop could also help participants to cope with the experience of migration through dramatization, using various tools like storytelling, role-play and photo-voice among others. Lastly, we saw it as an opportunity to engage in collaborative

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¹²The notion of “third voice” articulated by Barbara Myerhoff following Rouch’s cine-trance, attempts to grasp the new perspective that emerges from the transformative encounter between ethnographer and her interlocutor and their blending of voices into a new story (Ruby 2000, p. 247).

¹³Despite a longstanding documentary tradition starting with *Challenge for Change*, a participatory program developed by the National Film Board of Canada in the 1960s.

¹⁴See for example the edited collections *Visual interventions: applied visual anthropology* (Pink 2007) and *Participatory visual and digital research in action* (Gubrium et. al 2015).

filmmaking with the students and explore alternative modes of storytelling and visual expression.

We started by giving cameras to our students from the very first moment and only guided their hands-on training based on their own questions and needs of expression. In this way we hoped to free their eye and imagination from conventions and liberate ourselves from the omnipresent media stereotypes. First, we asked them to prepare a short photo story about their home in Hungary and picture themselves within their new home (we used these photo stories later on to introduce the concept of editing and the different interpretations images can generate by association and sequencing). Most participants didn't have experience in producing visual stories except for the usual "refugee selfies" which constitute an important mode of self-representation in itself (Risam, 2018; Zimanyi, 2017). Yet, each student came back with well-conceived, intriguing stories that represented their homes and everyday life but also revealed their current emotional state. B., a student from the Ivory Coast settled in Budapest, took a picture about the aging socialist panel houses in his neighborhood juxtaposed with his cosy flat arranged according to his taste, and a self-portrait in the mirror, impeccably dressed. When watching the pictures together, he told us how grateful he was for finding a new home, mentioning the difficulties he faced in an almost exclusively white city and the friendly relations he developed with his own neighbors. In contrast, A., an Iranian student, took a picture of his shared room in a homeless center, which revealed his uncertainty about the status of his asylum procedure and his waiting for something better to come. This picture which looks like a split-screen shot, reveals two different universes crammed into a single room, one inhabited by a hopeful young man, the other by a resigned, old person. F., from Nigeria, took a picture of a clock on the empty walls of his rented apartment, symbol of the long wait to settle down and find his place in Hungary. By the end of the term, however, he brought another picture where he substituted the clock with the framed course diploma issued by the OLIVE program, a newly found "home" in the endless waiting for the refugee status. (Figs. 7.7 and 7.8)

In class, the photo stories triggered memories about the homes they left and their journeys to Hungary. We decided not to insist on these memories immediately but noticed how small details triggered important stories and collectively shared experiences – as for example when somebody mentioned "shoes", almost everybody had a story of these "companions" along their long journey across borders. So later, in a follow-up drama workshop, the instructor used this trigger to bring back and reenact these migration stories in class. During the collective discussion that followed this exercise, we also noticed how important it was for participants to reflect on their recent experiences in a safe environment where no one sought to expose their suffering to the camera or forced them to remember the difficult moments of their journey. The subjective voice is always mediated and fragmentary and requires appropriate narrative forms as well as a "landscape of memory" that recognizes people's lived experience, not least in the moment of remembering (Kirmayer, 1996).

After sharing their own stories, we asked participants to direct their cameras towards their new home country and make a short video etude about Budapest.

Fig. 7.7 B's new home in a socialist panel house

Fig. 7.8 A's room in the shelter

Inspired by experiments in reverse anthropological filmmaking developed around Jean Rouch's work (Jules-Rosette, 2015), we thought the reversed gaze exercise could unsettle privileged perspectives and unequal power relations while enabling alternative modes of seeing and relationality. Our students took their cameras out in downtown Budapest, walking through a familiar environment this time as observers. The task, to take several shots with different framings, was open and so was their position. Some remained silent observers, others engaged with passers-by, acted in their own improvised scenes or developed their own mini-stories. They also took up new roles, becoming impromptu tourists or guides in this city they were yet to call home. They took pictures of passers-by, tourists and locals alike, but their gaze shifted quickly from the touristic highlights to nearby people. By focusing on different aspects of reality they discovered the power of the camera to craft its own reality, singling out and redefining a particular aspect (as homelessness or tourism) and turning ordinary people into "characters". This has further encouraged them to collect images and stories they might have ignored or hesitated to engage with and learn to see more deeply into reality as it reveals itself to the camera.

The sequence of exercises built up their practice towards creating their own film projects. For this, we formed small teams of 2–3 students who had to take turns in being the director, cinematographer, and interviewer during the shooting. Four short films were born from this exercise – two of them from the same rushes, because one of the filmmakers decided to assemble their footage in a different way. In line with our pedagogical approach students were in control of the filmmaking process, including the editing which filmmakers tend to reserve to themselves even in collaborative, participatory projects. After a brief hands-on training, the groups edited their own films, combining intuitively different visual techniques and styles: attraction montage, voice-over narration, or videoclip. The short films they produced revealed a diversity of audiovisual narratives and perspectives – self-reflective, playful-ironic, but also closely attuned to the social problems the government itself tried to cover with its securitization discourse such as homelessness, xenophobia and poverty. Free from specific filmic conventions, they brought a fresh eye to their filmmaking practice, finding unconventional angles, provocative framing and brave editing solutions. During the editing process, for example, one of the students, M. from Afghanistan who recorded a long introduction about homelessness as a news anchor, decided to delete his well-rehearsed speech and let the images speak for themselves, a big step away from the authorial voice.

The initial success convinced us to continue with another workshop in 2017 and bring on board a drama education expert and theatre director, Adam Bethlenfalvy to facilitate the group dynamics and creative process by introducing new modes of storytelling and improvisation. This time we asked applicants to shoot some stills and submit a self-portrait prior to the course. This minor assignment brought some powerful images and evocative portrayals. By way of introduction, the youngest participant, seventeen-year-old S. from Baluchistan, sent us a miniseries of photographs which show him painting the flag of his country in the children shelter he was placed in when arriving in Hungary as an unaccompanied minor. Yemeni participant Al. took shots of the newly built metro line 4 of Budapest which evoke the

waiting of Yemeni refugees to return to their country while J.'s photo evokes a similar expectation this time from the refugee camp. (Figs. 7.9 and 7.10)

In our first session we used some of these pictures for an exercise asking participants to treat them as “found photos”. Each student had to choose one photo and imagine a story behind it, giving names and a history to the people and places that appear on them. By inventing a new story for each photo, participants saw how

Fig. 7.9 Budapest metro's modernist aesthetic

Fig. 7.10 Kiskunhalas camp

images work once removed from their original context, and how they can be resignified again and again by different viewers.

During the second session we moved from still photography to the moving image, using Lev Kuleshov's editing experiment to illustrate the effect of montage. After this, participants took their cameras to the street to reenact the experiment. This gave them the chance to share some of their desires and longing for home with each other through images rather than through verbal recollections. Given that play and improvisation are rarely part of a migrant's experience we tried to use the liberating and equalizing effects of drama and filmmaking exercises towards a more participatory, reflective experience. Throughout the course, participants were encouraged to bring their personal experience into the process of filmmaking from scripting to shooting and montage.

As in the previous course, we gave them cameras from the first moment before showing any film clips or explaining the basics of framing, composition, or camera features. This time, however, we asked one or two participants to record all activities during each class, thus giving them the chance for additional practice but also documenting their input and the emotional journeys they took during the drama-based exercises. The resulting video material gave them a different perspective, finding themselves on both sides of the camera, author and character at the same time. This encouraged them to communicate their own stories more freely. The insight into the nature of their stories, their will to share them and the respect and trust developed in this process created new possibilities to engage with and evoke the migration experience, their present condition and future dreams.

This is how we all became part of J.'s story, who instructed another four participants to act as family members in a reenactment of his departure from home. Evoking a war scene happening right before this moment J. placed the two Yemeni girls and a boy on his left and right side and started to tell his story. Once he reached a critical moment in which, as he says, "he started weeping like a baby", the girl on his right started to cry. Role play allowed him to create a distance from his own experience from which a new storyline emerged through a process of spontaneous improvisation, identification and recollection. Furthermore, his personal memory became a shared experience performed collectively as a group - as J. later remarked "we learned to work as a group, like real filmmakers". Participants contributed to each other's stories, shared emotions and re-lived their own feelings through their storytelling. (Fig. 7.11)

These moments of cinema vérité came closest to the idea of a "third voice" and resonated strongly with viewers during follow-up screenings. By the end of the course we started planning a feature documentary together with the workshop participants, built from the footage they shot. Inspired by Rouch's "cinema of collective improvisation" (Rouch, 2003) an attempt to produce a shared anthropology which delves into issues of difference, cultural contact, (mis)translation and the space between two worlds, this approach turns the camera into a catalyst of social processes and provokes a transformation in participants and viewers. The closing session of our course turned into a discussion about what this film should look like. M. from Nigeria presented the idea that "the true story should be told", and that it

Fig. 7.11 Stills from the role play of J's story (participants' footage)

“should be a film about how racism feels”. But J. reminded him “that such a film could be dangerous, since the (Hungarian) government is against even the head of the Central European University”. So, they agreed that we should make a “funny film”, possibly a comedy instead.

And J. was right about the threat. Towards the end of the workshop, the Hungarian government decided to curtail migrants’ freedom of movement and move all registered asylum seekers to closed camps at the border. This was brought up in one of our last sessions and the discussion filmed by participants. Shortly after, several of our filmmakers-participants learned that the courts refused their asylum requests and forced them to move back to closed camps, without any support or possibility to continue the OLive program. Under this threat, several participants left Hungary while others were taken to camps. Editing, a crucial step in the creation of a collective story, remained in our hands this time since everyone was gone. Still, some participants continued to send video letters after their departure and we decided to go on with the project despite the legal measures that criminalized any organization or individuals helping migrants. We prepared a short video compilation of the photo stories, role-play sessions and the last discussion and approached funding institutions in Hungary and abroad to ask for their support.¹⁵ Not surprisingly given the political context, all funders withdrew or refused to finance this story even when recognizing its value and innovative character. Furthermore, threatened by another law, CEU decided to suspend the OLive program in August 2018 for fear of legal repercussions.¹⁶ This put an unexpected end to our plans and the project was forced to come to a halt.

7.5 Conclusion

Our project, a collective experiment in storytelling, was made possible in the first place by the OLive program, which created a safe space for refugees where such collaborations could emerge. It also provided a safe space for us, as filmmakers, to escape institutional pressure and dominant narratives, and launch an open-ended project of participatory filmmaking together with the refugees. Through the participatory exercises and the experience of becoming filmmakers and protagonists at the same time, our participants started to talk about themselves in a different way, breaking free from the testimonial genre of migration narratives and the objectifying frame of humanitarian, securitization and integration discourses. This allowed them to step back and reflect for a moment on the actual framing mechanisms and gain a new perspective on issues affecting them and the society at large. A simple shift of role and context, from the typical “migrant backgrounds” to becoming observers of Budapest’s public spaces, made them reconsider their self-presentation and create alternative representations to the “migrant image”. Role

¹⁵The OLive participatory workshop teaser is accessible here: <https://vimeo.com/222890780>.

¹⁶OLive restarted in Budapest in 2019 under a different legal entity and its university preparatory programme has moved to Bard College Berlin.

playing during the workshop helped them shift perspective from passive migrants to involved participants and storytellers. Exploring various visual and narrative tools they learned to portray themselves in the present and to recreate the historical persons behind migrant images by means of a medium that has denied their “voices” until now.

When working on their video essays about Budapest, however, participants moved beyond self-representation starting to reflect on the broader context and their position as refugees in Hungary. This experience revealed their openness and capability to exercise an ethnographic gaze on the receiving society, exposing social problems yet maintaining a sympathetic view of their new home country. Shooting scenes of homelessness, intolerance and poverty in the streets of Budapest, they discovered the critical function of film. They used intuitively the camera not only to create their own personal stories but to exercise a new mode of observing the immediate reality. This revealed the potential for our participants-filmmakers to become a sort of twenty-first century “cine-eyes” just like the impersonated kino-glaz of Dziga Vertov (Vertov, 1985). Excited by the newly gained ability to express themselves in a new medium, they rushed to observe life as it happens in front of their eyes. This shows how one can turn the overpoliticized visibility of migrants into a reversed gaze on a society marred by its own problems and anxieties. They could thus become informed reporters of their own and other people’s struggles and shift from being passive subjects of mainstream media discourse to active explorers of their condition and society’s ills. The abrupt end of our participatory project, however, did not allow us to explore this mode of politicization any further and the way it weaves into the search for a subjective (third) voice.

Films about refugees and marginalized people are still to be made so the question how to use the power of images remains relevant for filmmakers and social researchers alike. Navigating through institutional structures and prevalent discourses that shape audiences’ expectations while remaining critical of our own position, we can engage our interlocutors more truthfully in crafting powerful stories together. We’ll be surprised to discover how much there is still to be told and find ways to retell stories that have already been told from a reinstated “subjective voice”. The participatory experiments we see emerging in anthropological filmmaking provide inspiration for us to develop new approaches unhindered by conventional narrative and aesthetic frames. It is high time that we create possibilities for “others” to become the tellers of their own stories and find new cinematic means to engage different publics in a more radical way.

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