Speaking Back to the Hostile Environment:

Exploring Refugee Voice and Developing Representational Agency through a Refugee-Centred Documentary Practice

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This practice-led PhD responds to what it perceives as the problematic silencing or ventriloquising of refugees' voices across visual discourses, including within the 'mainstream media' and various modes of documentary cinema. Considering my positionality as a filmmaker, as a refugee, and as a scholar, I reflect on my own filmmaking as a vehicle to consider how refugee voices and images might be documented differently. I set out to create an alternative creative mode of documentary-making best described as 'refugee-centred' in nature, in which refugees are not only placed in positions of directorial control, but in which our agency, wellbeing and input is placed centre-stage, offering us various forms of literal and symbolic 'voice'. This is achieved primarily through the creation of a 40-minute documentary film entitled *Voices*, in which I investigate the nature of refugee voicelessness through interviews with variously positioned subjects and explore how creative self-representation can be used to empower and platform the voices of people with lived refugee experience.

The 40-minute documentary film is accompanied by a 40000-word thesis, which explores the issue of refugee voice and visual representation from a number of important angles. It begins by establishing the necessity of the project due to the current status of 'refugee voice' within both the mainstream media, and the 'humanitarian imagination'. Over the two subsequent chapters, it then shifts to exploring the politics of voice in various modes of documentary cinema and considers how the issues of directorial position and aesthetic prove pivotal to the construction of 'voice' within the documentary genre. Throughout, the thesis shows how these observations have informed the development of my own filmmaking practice. The overall objective has been to establish a mode of filmmaking that enables refugee voices to take the lead in shaping narratives about our own lives, providing an

alternative narrative in which we are not depicted as victims nor as ‘voiceless’ agents. During the course of this PhD, I have ultimately therefore developed by own creative voice as a refugee filmmaker – and have also, I hope, enabled other refugees to have their creative voices heard.

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List of Practical Outputs

Shorthand.com link to all Practical Components (including draft iterations)**:**

https://ntu.shorthandstories.com/voices/index.html

Documentary Film – *Voices* (Final practical component)

https://youtu.be/RzN4QImMTA8

Revealing the Untold: A Talking Point Podcast Episode 1 (Developmental work)

http://bitly.ws/Af6X

Revealing the Untold: A Talking Point Podcast Episode 2 (Developmental work)

https://bit.ly/3NnAzbd

Revealing the Untold: A Talking Point Podcast Episode 3 (Developmental work)

https://bit.ly/3H1mETR

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Introduction

What does it mean for a refugee to have a voice on screen? As a student of TV, film production and documentary journalism, and as a person of lived refugee experience (who gained Leave to Remain in 2013 due to my political activism since 2008), I have been asking myself this question in various ways over the past fourteen years. During this time, I have both witnessed refugees populating the screens of numerous films and television programmes and have found myself drawn to the task of representing refugee lives and experiences through my own documentary-making.[1] This has led me to the creative practice presented as the main element of this PhD, which takes the form of a 3-part podcast and short film entitled *Voices*. While focussed and brief in length, these items are the product of an extensive period of research, thinking and creative self-development, enacted through the critical explorations and reflections contained within this thesis.

The critical and practical aspects in this study build upon one another in a formative manner in order to develop what I ultimately understand as a 'refugee-centred' documentary-making practice: one in which refugees are not only placed in positions of directorial control, but in which our agency, wellbeing and input is placed centre-stage, casting us as subjects and authors rather than as objects of the documentary film.[2] As I hope to show over the course of this thesis, this work is vital and necessary due to the current prevalence of the figure of the refugee in the mainstream media, and the disenfranchising position that refugees are often forced to occupy within acts of visual representation. Within this thesis and in my work, then, I have sought to contest how refugees have mainly been represented by others,

[1] In this thesis I use the term 'refugees' to denote a category of individuals and their families who have sought sanctuary in UK, whether there has been a determination on their applications or not. Removing the term asylum seeker also removes the stigma attached to it and legitimates the claim to refuge. However, within mass media in the UK, the terms refugee and asylum seekers are often used interchangeably.

[2] I use the terms 'our' and 'us' throughout this thesis to show that I am in the same category as my refugee subjects.

and our images and voices generally documented to shape narratives other than our own. My objective has been to platform and enable refugee voices to take a lead in shaping narratives about our own lives and to provide an alternative narrative that does not depict us as victims or 'voiceless' agents. In the process, I have explored my own creative voice – and have, I hope, enabled other refugees to also have their creative voices heard.

What does it mean to develop a refugee-centred documentary practice, and how might voice be pivotal to this task? Refugee-centred documentary practice is the method of engaging refugees intellectually and practically, such that we are at the forefront of any initiative to communicate our lives and experiences within documentaries. In this case, we are not just engaged in the transmission of information as interviewees but are involved in the design of the lines of enquiry. I develop this analysis further in the first chapter of my thesis in which I think extensively about the question of voice across varied cultural discourses. Most refugee participants saw this as an opportunity to make a contribution to how the film or podcast would take form, with some giving suggestions on framing, what to record within their homes, and the types of questions they thought would make for interesting conversations. When I first approached other people of lived refugee experience to ask them to participate in the project's podcast and film, I had to build trust and empathy with every one of them. Understanding our commonality based not just on legal status but also on our social circumstance was vital to determining how best we could work together on these projects. In group discussion such as when I was producing the podcast, such a system encouraged the refugees to build on each other's knowledge, skills, and abilities, and this promoted meaningful participation. Our voices are accentuated when platformed in this manner. When one comes from experiences of migration which wholly restructure a person's concept of home and habitation, having an opportunity to reclaim one's voice is vital. A refugee-centred approach therefore incorporates collaborative, participatory, and critical

elements that encourage refugee agency whereby our thoughts and opinions are listened to, so that all individuals are involved in meaningful conversations and discussions. Through this collaboration, we have been able to foreground our own voices through both the content and presentation of the documentary film.

This practice is vitally necessary not only because of the current climate in documentary-making (which I explore through critical consideration of selected works in each of the chapters) but because of the broader 'hostile environment' in which refugees live in the UK. Other than being seen as helpless victims fleeing violence and persecution, refugees are also seen as a threat to the 'ordinary' citizens of the country in which they end up seeking sanctuary. Both these categorisations (as victim or threat) are not mutually exclusive and may coexist or vary depending on the context, media representation, or personal experiences of the people involved. To move beyond this restrictive dichotomy, I adopt an autoethnographic approach within the film whereby I use self-reflection to explore anecdotal and personal experience,[3] connecting my story and those of my fellow refugee contributors to wider cultural, political, and social contexts.[4] I was a political activist, and then became an asylum seeker, and was later granted refugee status. During the phase of political asylum, I experienced effective voicelessness in cases where my input was never considered, even in issues relating to my asylum case or my livelihood. The tendency was that others felt able to speak for me because they felt I was not able to speak for myself, due to my legal status. Paradoxically, this continued even after I had been granted refugee status. Some people who had known me as an asylum seeker continued treating me as one, with one

[3] Autoethnographic approach was first used by Karl Heider to characterise the practice of cultural participants describing and reflecting on their own culture. Karl G Heider, 'What do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31:1 (1975), pp. 3-17 (p3).
[4] Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner, P. (2010). 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12:1 (2010), http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108.

even referring to me as ‘an asylum seeker with papers’ after I was granted refugee status. It is this position of enforced voicelessness that this PhD pushes back against.

As a practice-led project, this PhD is comprised of a creative and a critical component, with the progression of each component influencing and being influenced by the other. The creative components of the thesis consist of a 3-part podcast series, which I created during Pandemic-restricted conditions as part of developmental work for the film; and different developmental iterations of a documentary film *Voices*, which resulted in a 40-minute feature. I produced the podcast from November 2020 to January 2021, and the principal filming of the documentary film was from May 2021 to September 2022, with editing and post-production going on until November 2022. These creative components draw on my experience of TV and film production. However, they have also evolved significantly beyond my earlier practice through the critical reflections that have accompanied and shaped my practical work. Within the critical work, I sought to build a wider contextual understanding of the politics of refugee representation across a range of visual media – including within mainstream media coverage, and within wider documentary practice. In order to engage with this material, I have explored an interdisciplinary range of relevant criticism, including Documentary Film Theory; Postcolonial and Cultural Studies; and International Relations-based Refugee Studies. The dialogue between critical and creative work frequently challenged me to shift my focus from one to the other during the 3-year period. An example is that in October 2019 I engaged in critical analysis of how refugees are represented in the media, and I concluded that our authentic voices were missing from the reportage. I then sought to have my creative element – the first episode of the podcast - platform real refugee voices talking about issues that affected them. In this way, the critical piece influenced how I would produce the practical component, steering away from the refugee representation identified in the media articles. In developing this creative component,

I wanted to understand the scholarly complexities of and rationale for directorial power dynamics in refugee documentary films, so I embarked on the critical element analysing the power dynamics in refugee documentary making. Thus, this dialogic interaction between the creative and the critical components enabled the systematic progression of the project during the three years.

The major component of the practical element consists of the 40-minute feature film *Voices*, but it is important to note that this work is prefaced by a 3-part podcast, *Revealing the Untold: Journeys*. This was important developmental work towards the film. The decision to have a podcast in the first instance was motivated by the power that the audio dimension has to enable listeners to engage with voice. I wanted to explore this with a multiplicity of voices from young people – pupils at a Nottingham academy who came into the UK as unaccompanied minors. The podcast series employed a simple set of prompt questions that enabled refugees to open up and use their voices: I asked them to talk about the things that they missed from their countries of origin. However, this methodology enabled me to establish many interesting insights about refugee voice, agency and documentary practice. This provided the beginning of intimate conversations without a camera in front of the group discussions. Having just a microphone in the centre of the round table provided me with an opportunity to tune in to what is rarely heard about young refugees and showed me the direction that I needed to take when it came to engaging ethically with refugee subjects within a refugee-centred practice. I had to consider aspects such as the comfort of the interviewee within a space that is familiar to them; the development of close connection prior to interview; the use of open-ended questions so that the interviewee does not feel confined in their responses; and engagement even after the interview. The podcast series, while experimental, therefore became a vital learning tool that enabled me to understand the strong relationship between host and listener in the creation of a documentary narrative. As I explore

further in Chapters 1 and 2, this influenced many of the directorial decisions that I made in the film *Voices.*

The creation of a 40-minute feature film entitled *Voices* presents the culmination of my fundamental motivation for this project: to build a better understanding of the complexities that surround any refugee's attempt to have voice, as well as to battle through those complexities in order to enable refugees, including myself, to be heard. The film's approach is relatively linear in its narrative and guides the viewer through landscapes of hostility that serve to limit voice, before introducing them to alternative spaces in which refugees are able to use their voices in different, increasingly empowered ways. This serves to highlight my main aim of enabling and platforming refugees to take responsibility for our own agency and of learning to be proud of who we are, reclaiming and celebrating our diversity as a people. Critically, this documentary film shows that refugee voices and refugee perspectives have much to contribute: a narrative that is largely absent from any form of media discourse. Thus, the unique thing about my project is what happens to the refugee voice when it is allowed to enter the conversation, becoming the central element of the narrative rather than simply a supporting feature. Through the varied voices it platforms, the film element also serves to represent the livelihoods of the refugee subject, and highlights the entrepreneurial skills of some refugees: positive attributes that are hardly documented in mainstream media reportage and traditional documentary films.

I decided to also introduce my own voice as the one that creates and holds together the narrative thread to the film. Some of the decisions I made around how to present my voice and the different processes that I went through are highlighted in my Shorthand online profile account accessible from the links on the 'List of Practical Outputs' page of this thesis. I went through several different iterations of thinking how my voice appears, and I tried various location set-ups for my narration which included Heathrow Airport, home settings, and studio

constructs at Nottingham Trent University's City and Clifton campuses. I experimented with different piece-to-camera narrations to add impact and bring immediacy and authority to my presentations. As can be seen on the Shorthand profile (Film narration set-up 2), I finally made the decision to have the majority of narrations at NTU's Bonington's Gallery Studio as it presented the best auditory space and aesthetic features for the commentary. This enabled my own voice as both a filmmaker and academic to be conveyed as clearly as possible, resonating professionally across the footage filmed in different locations. However, as you will see, I also included a range of different filming styles in which my voice is represented - including narration to camera, as I moved spontaneously through spaces relevant to my own journey. In this way, my own self-representational strategies have come to mirror the variety of different platforms through which my voice has come to be heard - as an academic, as a filmmaker, and as a refugee.

The documentary film *Voices* thus serves dual audiences. First are the refugees who need to know that there are people like them out there who are prepared to raise their voices, both to celebrate their presence and to speak up for their concerns. For this reason, *Voices* assumes a tone that is direct, accessible and personal, making reference to my own story and thus appealing to other refugees at the level of commonality. Secondly, it is aimed at people who are not aware of any 'real' refugee voices but who are willing to listen to an alternative refugee narrative that is not churned out by the mass media. Providing narratives that are from refugees themselves helps to remove stereotypes that are usually attached to refugees within dominant political and media discourse, and thus present a new outlook based on stories told by those who live them.

This project represents the culmination of many years of learning, but it is important to note that it took place within an exceptionally difficult period. The COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in lockdown conditions just five months into my PhD studies, presented me

with some challenges, especially regarding the recruitment of refugees who were prepared to feature in front of the camera. Having recruited participants early in the project through my own networks, many of those within Nottingham where I am based ended up pulling out of the project because of fear of infection from the virus. For refugee community members in the black and Asian ethnic minority demographic, we faced heightened exposure and mortality rates compared to the average Briton. According to a report by the National Institute of Health and Research, and the University of Bristol, there was a higher risk of dying from Covid-19 amongst community members belonging to the Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic communities than that of white British people.

Then some of those who wanted to continue became reluctant to show their faces and opted to make contributions to the podcast instead. I had to go on social media to find new contributors who were willing to participate in the film. I managed to find a variety of refugees to interview in this manner, but I struggled to find any politician who had a refugee background to come onboard. I wanted a political voice to shed light especially on the hostile environment that refugees find ourselves in the UK. Whether the MP would have supported or opposed the current policy regime would not have mattered. I also struggled to find a broadcast news editor, or an editor of a newspaper that reports on refugee issues. Editors have a greater control on how reportage is presented than a journalist, and I would have wanted to interview one to understand the politics behind media framing of refugee issues. It was only in the last few months of film editing that I managed to get in touch with the editors of *The Other Side of Hope* magazine, and I hope that this goes some way towards addressing this issue. This magazine is edited by refugees and other immigrants, and proactively seeks to have refugee voices heard. However, it is important to note that my ability to access interviewees and produce content was more practically challenging than it would usually be mainly due to Covid-19 lockdowns. This also led to some enforced aesthetic decisions, such

as the inclusion of Zoom calls. However, adaptability is an important part of documentary practice, and the adaptations I explored here also revealed important insights about the relationship between director and interviewee, as I explore in Chapter 2 in particular.

The three chapters of this thesis each explore a core aspect of the quest to develop refugee agency through documentary-making. In each case, I engage in critical analysis of existing representations of refugee voice and representational agency as they appear in different discourses, before going on to offer some of my own reflections on how I embarked on my own practice to enhance representational agency for refugees through a refugee-centred documentary practice. The literature review is embedded in each chapter. Chapter 1, 'Representing the 'Voiceless' Refugee: Exploring the Politics of Refugee Voice and Image', proposes that while refugees are represented extensively in various media and humanitarian platforms, our voices and images are generally made to fit narratives that do not serve us well. I therefore ask the question of how refugees' voices and images might be documented differently – in ways that offer them not just representation, but also agency. I begin by exploring some critical drawbacks that have been linked to the representation of refugee voice and image. These emanate from the social landscape of the UK's 'hostile environment' in which refugees are vilified; then the humanitarian discourse which seems to condense the figure of the refugee into one singularity; then the representational landscape of what I describe as the 'mass media', in which I argue that the figure of the refugee is produced as one who is 'voiceless', even when our voice is physically heard. Ultimately, through developing different approaches to documenting refugee voices and images, I consider how it might be possible to speak back to the dominant discourses of the mainstream media and humanitarian imagination.

Chapter 2, 'Placing the Director in Refugee Documentary Film: The Politics of Agency and Voice', explores the dynamics between film director and the filmed refugee

subject in relation to the question of representational agency for refugees. I consider the varying models of collaboration that exist between these two (director and subject) and explore how these relate to the repudiation of unstated power and the granting of agency to the refugee subject, whilst assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each model. This is done via critical analysis of three contrasting documentary films: *Another News Story, Midnight Traveller,* and *400 Miles to Freedom.* Through these films I examine the political strengths and weaknesses of documentary film styles when it comes to directing and representing refugees on film. I also reflect on how refugee stories are obtained by various directors. This analysis enabled me to gain a greater understanding of my own directorial position, and of the dynamic that I wished to forge with my film participants. I consider that stories need to be obtained from a place where the refugee is not vulnerable, so that they are not made to fit narratives which satisfy the stereotypes.

Chapter 3, 'Aesthetics as Power: Framing refugee bodies, material objects, and landscapes in *Human Flow*,[5] and *For Sama*',[6] develops a critical framework through which I explore the interlinkage of cinematography, mise-en-scène and camera framing in producing aesthetic effects that either 'speak for' the refugee subject or enable the refugee subject to 'speak' visually. I focus particularly on two films, *Human Flow* and *For Sama*. The exploratory questions that I pose include how the style in which a documentary film is shot – from the production values to the specific camera angles employed – influence the way in which refugees are portrayed on screen; how aesthetic choices prove empowering or disempowering for refugee subjects; what might constitute an aesthetic register that avoids dehumanising objectification, and even works towards the provision of agency. This type of in-depth enquiry guides me in deciphering the visual aesthetics employed in these two films

[5] Ai Weiwei, dir., *Human Flow*, (London: Altitude Film Distribution, 2017).
[6] Waad Al-Kateab, dir., *For Sama*, (UK: Channel 4, 2019).

and encourages me to craft my own documentary film in a manner that provides visual agency. As visual framing of the refugee bodies affects how they are perceived, I endeavour to portray the refugee subjects in my film as people with our own individuality, and not visualised as humanitarian symbols - vulnerable and destitute.

Overall, these critical reflections and experiments in documentary filmmaking have enabled me to understand much more about my aims and goals as a filmmaker, and I reflect further on this not only within the three chapters but in the conclusion to the thesis. Through this work, I hope to build the basis of a documentary-making practice that will achieve my strategic goals: to transform the visual terrain on which refugee narratives are mobilised for other agendas, and, through my filmmaking, to empower refugees to be able to claim our voices and speak out.

Chapter 1

Representing the 'Voiceless' Refugee:

Exploring the Politics of Refugee Voice and Image

The figure of the refugee has become a defining one in the twenty-first century landscape. The scale of displacement has meant that refugees have been highly visible, and the subject of much interest and concern not just among humanitarian agencies but for governments, societies, and in associated media discourses, all of which have sought to understand 'the refugee' as a figure through extensive documentation of refugee stories, lives, and voices. Yet as numerous critics have now pointed out, while refugees are represented extensively by others, their voices and images are generally documented to fit narratives other than their own. As a documentary maker of lived refugee experience, this leads me to ask how refugees' voices and images might be documented – in ways that offer them not just representation, but also agency in the way that their voices and images feed into narratives of their, not others' making. In this chapter, I will begin by exploring some of the critical problems that have been attached to the representation of refugee voice and image, tracing them firstly across the social backdrops of the UK 'hostile environment' and of humanitarian discourse; and secondly, across the representational landscape of the mass media. Through these explorations, I will argue that the figure of the refugee is produced as one who is 'voiceless', even when their voice is physically heard**.** Finally, I will consider how it might be possible to 'speak back to' the dominant discourses of both mainstream media and the humanitarian imagination, through alternative strategies of documenting refugee voices and images, which I have sought to develop through my own documentary-making practices.

Writing in her seminal essay, 'Speechless Emissaries', Liisa Malkki notes that 'the figure of the refugee is one who is thought to speak to us in a certain way: wordlessly'.[7] What might Malkki mean here, and how is it possible to speak without words? For Malkki, the figure of 'the refugee' is treated primarily as an object of concern in cultural discourse; the term 'refugee' connotes a victim who is mute and whose judgement and reason have been impaired by their experiences. Malkki argues that 'this figuration of the refugee abstracts individual experiences of displacement from the political, social and historical context while putting in their stead a depoliticised, dehistoricised and universalised frame'.[8] In this regard, refugee and asylum stories are shaped within already established discourses and power relations that have a tendency to treat them as basic objects, and not the architects or proponents.[9] This sense of voicelessness – of standing as a 'refugee' rather than as an individual – is something that pervades multiple avenues of representation, and as such, is a major barrier for refugees who want to be seen and heard beyond their casting in this role. Indeed, in research conducted for *Forced Migration Review*, refugee respondents all commented on the subjugation that they felt when it came to participation in discourse about their lives. Simon Harris states:

> …people living through the cyclical deprivations of displacement in an environment of complex and protracted violent conflict seldom have the opportunity of a meaningful say in shaping the decisions and factors affecting their lives.[10]

[7] Liisa H. Malkki. 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11:3 (1996), pp. 377-404 (p390).
[8] Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries', p.378.
[9] Engin F. Isin, *Being Political: Geneologies of Citizenship.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)
[10] Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 15:3 (2002), pp. 247-264.

Roger Bromley also develops the concept of voicelessness of refugees in several ways.[11] Firstly, he shows how they are silenced or ignored by the dominant media and political discourses that construct them as a threat, a burden, or a humanitarian problem. Secondly, he demonstrates how they are subjected to various forms of violence, devaluation and dehumanisation that deprive them of their dignity and agency. Thirdly, he analyses how refugees struggle to express their stories and perspectives in the face of trauma and marginalisation. Bromley argues that refugees can resist this voicelessness and reclaim their humanity through different narratives that challenge the stereotypes and power structures that oppress them. By using cinematic, photographic, and literary forms to create alternative representations of themselves that reflect their diversity and creativity, he suggests that refugees can use their voices to advocate for their rights and belonging in the societies where they seek refuge or resettlement.

Malkki and Bromley help us understand that having a say is about more than just participating through speech, but about refugees having an effective voice that influences decisions affecting their lives, and that allows them to fulfil their civil and political rights and enjoy equal status with others. Thus, we see that 'voice' does not simply refer to the act of speaking, but to the ability to be heard, witnessed, and perceived as an advocate for oneself. It is influenced not simply by one's ability to exercise vocal chords, but by the conditions in which a person is presented and platformed. Being visible and audible within mainstream media or humanitarian discourses does not necessarily offer refugees a 'voice' of their own, then. But what is the backdrop to this voicelessness, and what factors produce it? And indeed, how might it be counteracted through alternative forms of representation? In order to understand this better, we must first turn to the socio-political environment in which UK-

[11] Roger Bromley, *Narratives of Forced Mobility and Displacement in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 59-99

based refugees must live – an environment that responds to and indeed represents refugees in limiting and damaging ways, and which is, as openly stated, 'hostile' to refugees.

Speaking in 2012, then-Home Secretary Theresa May made the announcement that the government planned to create what she described as 'a really hostile environment'.[12] This hostile environment has made life difficult for almost all those seeking sanctuary in the UK. According to Francis Webber's commentary, the indictment presented to the Permanent People's Tribunal (an international human rights organization) London Hearing in 2018 concentrated on the ways in which 'the hostile environment in the UK has removed fundamental rights, enshrined in EU and international laws and conventions, to housing, health, livelihood, liberty, freedom of assembly, family and private life, and freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment'.[13] Those critiquing the policy argue that those without leave to remain in the country have no rights but only privileges that are subject to removal whenever the authorities see it fit. Examples of the hostile environment include disbelief levelled at one's story, as depicted in the short social advocacy documentary film *Guardians,*[14] produced by the Children's Society charity. In this film, the young people who have come to the UK unaccompanied face significant challenges when trying to navigate the UK asylum system. They narrate how, when they tell their stories to the UK Home Office, they are looked upon with disbelief. The purpose of them being part of the production of the documentary film *Guardians* is that they want to use their voice to highlight the difference that having a guardian makes when unaccompanied children apply for asylum cases. Scotland

[12] James Kirkup and Robert Winnett, 'We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception', *The Telegraph.* [online] (25 May 2012). Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/ (Accessed 28 July 2022).
[13] Frances Webber, 'On the creation of the UK's 'hostile environment', *Race & Class*, 60:4 (2019), pp. 76-87 (p.84).
[14] *Guardians* [film], dir. by The Children's Society (UK, 2020) https://youtu.be/MiYTtjdmlAA [accessed 22 July 2022].

provides guardians to unaccompanied children applying for asylum, but England and Wales do not.

Significantly, one of the ways in which the hostile environment has been advanced is via the ways in which voice has been demanded of refugees. Nando Sigona argues that 'a widespread and pervasive culture of disbelief underpins the asylum process, with public attitudes to asylum seekers in many Western countries being overwhelmingly negative, tending to see 'them' as liars or as 'bogus' claimants''.[15] Claimants' personal statements are pivotal in decisions on being granted asylum which rely on how they formulate their journey's stories. The applicant's speech is carefully listened to during the asylum examination in an effort to uncover unvarnished legal truths. In this process, the refugee voice is taken apart and put back together as a legal account during the Refugee Status Determination assessment process. This is how scepticism is rife towards asylum seekers that if their voices are to be heard, they require the endorsement of more credible and reliable voices, such as those of professionals in the medical field or country experts. Didier Fassin and Estelle D'Halluin argue that this has progressed to the level in which 'the medical certificate that confirms torture or sexual violence becomes the tenuous thread on which hangs the entire existence—both physical and political—of the asylum seeker'.[16] The consequences of such a process for many of the asylum seekers after such interviews is that they stop talking to anyone about their stories for fear of not being believed or labelled a liar. Thus, we see the asylum system itself producing 'the refugee' as a figure whose voice is only enabled in limited and victimising ways.

[15] Nando Sigona, *The Politics of Refugee Voices: Representations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014), pp. 369-382.
[16] Didier Fassin and Estelle D'Halluin, 'The truth from the body: medical certificates as ultimate evidence for asylum seekers', *American Anthropologist* 107:4 (2005), pp.597-608.

Articulating the importance of the story in refugee application for asylum, Roger Bromley uses two films, a documentary film called *La Forteresse*,[17] and a drama film called *Escape to Paradise,*[18] to argue that credibility of the story is pivotal in the decision as to whether the claim is successful or not.[19] He asserts that the asylum seeker has to be seen as a 'plausible' client in a culture and an atmosphere that is rife with suspicion, where everything hinges on the asylum interview and the burden of proof lies with the claimant. I would like to take this further and argue that even when the claimant has produced a story that is credible, and provides proof of their well-founded fear of persecution, the system is set up so that refugee applications can still be rejected. This has been proved by the fact that between 2004 to 2021, around 75% of applicants refused asylum at initial decision by the UK Home Office lodged an appeal and almost one third (33%) of those appeals got a positive ruling by the judiciary.[20]

The hostile environment also serves to limit refugee voice through the creation of a climate of fear, which makes it difficult for refugees to speak up and out against this hostility. The UK government has been charged with the imposition of immigration rules and policies that force vulnerable refugees to accept extremely perilous conditions where they are taken advantage of as the price for staying in the country.[21] Such measures embody the EU-wide treatment of migrants and refugees as unqualifying and not good enough for human rights. This has the inevitability of trickling downwards from the government to the ordinary citizen and promotes the escalation of violent anti-refugee racism. Indeed, incidents of hate crime perpetrated against refugees have intensified the fear that members of this community face,

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[17] Fernand Melgar, dir., *La Forteresse* (Switzerland: Climate, 2008)
[18] Nino Jacusso, dir., *Escape to Paradise* (Switzerland: Insert Film, 2001)
[19] Roger Bromley, *Narratives of Forced Mobility and Displacement in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p.43.
[20] Georgina Sturge, *Research Briefing: Asylum Statistics*, UK Parliament: House of Commons Library, 1st March 2023, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/#:~:text=Between%202004%20to%202021%2C%20around,of%20those%20appeals%20were%20allowed. {Accessed 29/05/2023}.
[21] Webber, 'On the creation of the UK's "Hostile Environment"', p.84.

which also leads to a reluctance to report these incidents to the relevant authorities. This produces a vicious circle in which the perpetrators of such crimes continue to attack their victims with impunity in the knowledge that the refugees will be too afraid to report them. In research that I conducted for my film, I was fortunate to interview former Police Commissioner Paddy Tipping, who observed that members of the refugee community needed to report these incidents to the police so that they can be dealt with, whilst acknowledging the fear that the refugees have due to the hostile environment caused by government policies.[22] People of lived refugee experience I interviewed for the film feared being rounded up by the UK Home Office after reporting such cases to the police as they felt that these organisations shared information about refugees, and any attempt to raise a critical voice might be met with hostility.

While the hostile environment in the UK produces a climate of fear that limits refugees' ability or indeed desire to speak for themselves, it must be noted that this silencing also leads to problematic acts of representation within discourses seemingly sympathetic to refugees, too – notably those within the humanitarian imagination. In defining humanitarianism, Antonio De Lauri describes it as follows:

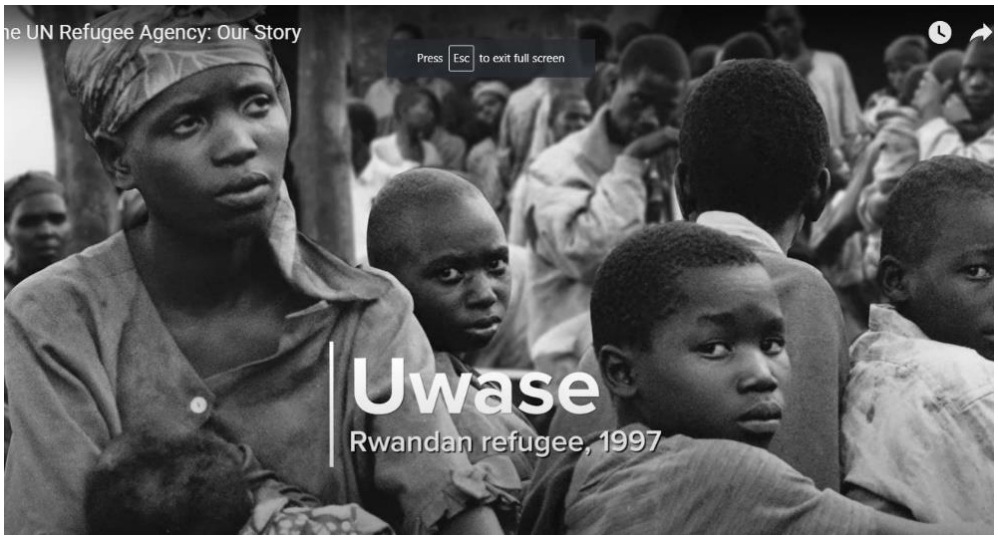
> …a modality of intervention in the world (with the aim of improving it), a global ethos that is driven by a call to address human needs in extraordinary, unbalanced, or unequal circumstances…[23]

Within humanitarian discourse, however, we sometimes see a condensing of the figure of the refugee into one being who represents all and erases the multiplicity of refugee experience, which are influenced by social and cultural differences and make the refugee experiences numerous and varied. Liisa Malkki claims that this then 'tends to privilege a one-

[22] Interview recording with Paddy Tipping, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Police Commissioner from 2012-2021, 11th May 2021.
[23] Antonio De Lauri, ed., *Humanitarianism: Keywords* (London: Brill, 2020).

dimensional representation of the refugee which relies heavily on feminised and infantilised images of "pure" victimhood and vulnerability'.[24] We see this, for instance, in the UN campaign in their documentary film *The UN Refugee Agency: Our Story*, where the refugee subject is presented through the solemn and dejected figures of 'refugee mother and children' in the image below.

Fig. 1.1 - Screenshot of YouTube film: *The UN Refugee Agency: Our Story* – 2016. [25]
(timecode at 00:00:14)



Yet as Nevzat Soguk reminds us, 'there are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences, and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the process of displacement in time and place'.[26] In my film, I endeavoured not to speak 'for' refugees in a generic sense but rather, to create a space for multiple voices to be heard. As a documentary maker, I am interested in how the representation of voice and image might be used to counteract the silencing of refugees. Yet, in order to explore how this might be

[24] Liisa H. Malkki. 'Refugees and Exile: From Refugee Studies to the National Order of Things', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:1 (1995), pp. 495-523 (p.511).
[25] *The UN Refugee Agency: Our Story* [film], Dir. UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OV_Gq8giwtw&t=14s (last accessed 24 July 2022).
[26] Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p.30.

achieved, it is first necessary to turn to a type of platform where voice and image have been used to perpetuate the reduction of the refugee to a 'speechless emissary': the mass media broadcasting.

As Terence Wright points out, refugees have featured extensively within what we might describe as the 'mass media': a term I use to describe the mainstream media outlets that dominate television, newspaper and online media news platforms, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.[27] Refugees are considered highly newsworthy, and while events such as the 'Arab Spring' of 2010-11 and the European 'refugee crisis' of 2015 generated significant attention around refugees, they have been mobilised in the service of many other political agendas within Europe.[28] The tone of coverage of refugee issues in the British national press, particularly among right-leaning newspapers and tabloids such as the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, has become increasingly hostile. Right-wing newspapers amplify stories of refugees and asylum-seekers being given undeserved priority on housing, being lazy, receiving excessive benefit payments, or being guilty of criminality, in order to feed into hostile political agendas. Within left-leaning media, meanwhile, refugee voices proliferate – though they are often mobilised by journalists with no lived experience of seeking refuge themselves, to justify their own political agendas, which may be sympathetic towards refugees but enact some of the same objectifying tendency we see in the humanitarian imagination. [29] By focussing on particular examples of refugees' visual and vocal representation, we therefore start to see the need for refugees to be afforded alternative

[27] Cetina Presuel, R. and Martinez Sierra, J.M., 'Algorithms and the news: social media platforms as news publishers and distributors', *Algorithms and the News: Social Media Platforms as News Publishers and Distributors. Revista De Comunicación,* 18:2 (2019), pp.261-285 (p.266).
[28] Angelika C. Dankert. *Europe under pressure: the development of the European Union under the influence of the Arab Spring, the refugee crisis and the global threat of terrorism*. (Berlin: Tectum Wissenschaftsverlag, 2017), p.103
[29] Roy Greenslade, *Seeking Scapegoats: The Coverage of Asylum in the UK Press*: Working Paper 5 (London: *Institute for Public Policy Research*, 2005), pp.5-42 (p.30).

representational platforms from which different engagements with voice and image become possible.

While the hostile environment creates a negative discourse around refugees, it is clear that the mainstream media also plays a significant role in speaking about refugees – and even sympathetic journalism has the potential to speak reductively about, and for, refugees. I felt this was an issue that demanded careful scrutiny, and as such, conducted research in order to create conversations with two leading journalists who engage in representation of refugees, and who are able to reflect on these issues. While I am not visible on-camera in these interviews, it is interesting to think about the way in which my questions, and thus my voice, drives this self-reflection. Both my interviewees, Jonathan Miller and Katy Fallon, work for media houses that are largely supportive of refugees, and thus their reportage is more sympathetic towards refugee issues. However, they highlighted how some of their compatriots succumb to stereotypes that are framed by the organisations for which they work. They also considered some of the challenges associated with representing refugees, and the ways in which they sought to humanise them when speaking of them – for instance, Miller stresses the importance of citing individual names. However, even in these interviews, it is clear that the journalist still drives the narrative. Thus, we see how refugee voice is limited, even within sympathetic media.

One of the most profound ways in which refugees are produced as 'speechless emissaries' is through the medium of the image itself. This is vital to consider when engaging with the visual medium of documentary. Visual media representation contributes to how asylum seekers and the asylum-seeking process are perceived. These visual representations, together with newspaper articles on asylum seekers and refugees, support assertions to exclude such groups by arguing that they pose a threat to the UK and its citizens. Stronger immigration controls, calls for identity cards and restricted movement have been as a result of

this. It is impossible to overstate how crucial news images are in fostering a misguided and unfavourable perception of refugees. Indeed, James Banks contends that 'the faceless and de-identified stranger enables the construction of a panoply of feared subjects'.[30] The frequency of particular visual situations in newspaper reporting and broadcast bulletins fuels fear in the general public over asylum seekers. Furthermore, such imagery plays a vital role in the conceptualisation of asylum as a matter of security, implying an exclusionary policy pathway. One of the images frequently mobilised in this context is that of big groups of mostly male refugees, often in queues or standing outside. Images of refugees apprehended for criminal offences seem to substantiate this perception of such groups and individuals.

Fig. 1.2 - Asylum seekers 'loitering'. [31]
Photo credit: Begona Blanco Munoz – Enjinsight.com.

In images such as Fig. 1.2 above, we see a focus on the everyday body of the asylum-seeker presented in a manner that can nevertheless be read as threatening. Capturing a normal moment of interaction, the subjects here are presented as 'loitering', with suspicious gazes of passers-by cast upon them. Sara Buchanan, Bethan Grillo and Terry Threadgold contend that

[30] James Banks, 'Unmasking deviance: The Visual Construction of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in English National Newspapers', *Critical Criminology* 20:3 (2012), pp.293-310 (p.293).
[31] Image from article titled 'HK needs to rethink policy on asylum seekers from ENJITSIGHT.COM website', https://images.app.goo.gl/cJhXMjutvcV5aHPZ7 (last accessed 12 November 2022).

'newspaper reporting has typically depicted asylum seekers arriving in the UK as both deviant and threatening'.[32] Indeed, many of the pictures that the mainstream media use show tell-tale signs of the deviance of asylum seekers. Images of asylum seekers wearing designer attire are meant to highlight their unworthiness for protection and, possibly, the 'bogus' character of their claim. The readers could wonder where they got such things, but for some, the clothing might suggest criminal activities and vice. By insinuating that they frequently constitute a threat to the UK and its residents, these photos, along with newspaper articles on asylum seekers, serve to legitimise and support arguments for the exclusion of such groups. Jenny Kitzinger argues that 'this media template is key to the construction of asylum as an issue of security as opposed to an issue of humanity'.[33]

On the other hand, though, even imagery stemming from humanitarian concern can serve to dehumanise in contexts of crisis. Liisa Malkki has identified other stereotypes employed in news photography, such as a picture of a crowd of people walking barefoot leaving Burundi, including women wearing colourful wraps and children wearing tattered shorts and t-shirts.[34] Malkki observes that although the aforementioned image was published in the *New York Times*, there was no accompanying account. This leads her to conclude that 'the visual conventions for representing refugees...have the effect of constructing refugees as a bare humanity—even as a merely biological or demographic presence'.[35] However, the way refugees are treated may be influenced by racial or cultural prejudice. Matthew J Gibney argues that Western audiences are more likely to sympathise with the suffering of the refugees if the situation is centred in Europe.[36] He goes on to state that 'what made the

[32] Sara Buchanan, Bethan Grillo, and Terry Threadgold. 'What's the Story?' *Results from Research into Media Coverage of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK, 10* (London: Refugee Action, 2003).
[33] Jenny Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence Against Children*. (London: Pluto Press, 2004)
[34] Malkki. *Speechless Emissaries.* p389
[35] Malkki. *Speechless Emissaries*, p390
[36] Matthew J Gibney, 'Kosovo and Beyond: Popular and Unpopular Refugees', *Forced Migration Review* 5 (1999), pp.28–9

Kosovans popular refugees was the ability of Westerners to see themselves—and their families, friends and neighbours—in the Kosovans' suffering'; a suggestion that has also been applied to the recent context of Ukrainian refugees. This is evidence of the way in which media representations of refugees do indeed speak to their audience 'wordlessly', as Malkki would have it – not through their actual voices, but rather, through the stereotypes and connotations projected through the image and where and how it is presented. This is a crucial recognition for me as a documentary-maker.

Fig. 1.3 - Refugees walking out of Burundi.[37]

Photo credit: Mary Mndeme – AFP OXFAM 2015.

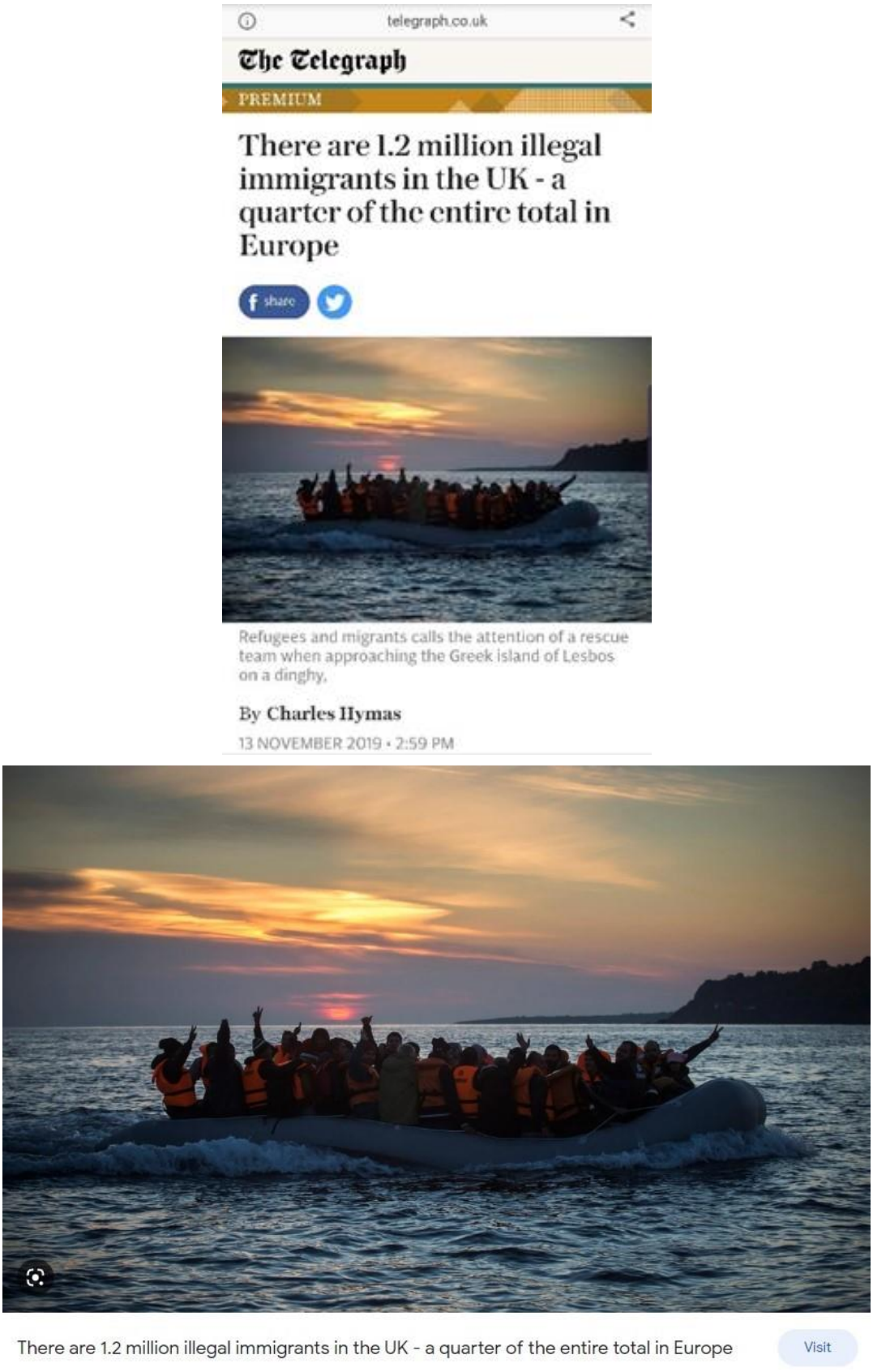
[37] Stock Image of Burundi refugees from The New Humanitarian website at https://deeply-assets.thenewhumanitarian.org/20161208123512/BURUNDI-UNREST-REFUGEES.jpg?w=640&fit=max&q=60 (last accessed 15 November 2022).

Not only does it mean that I must be mindful of the way in which I engage with my interviewees, but that I must also consider carefully how and where they are presented – so as to resist reproducing stereotypes or shoring up political agendas. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, I achieved this through a number of filmmaking choices.

To fully appreciate the potential for images to 'speak' on behalf of refugees in ways that are potentially compromising and even silencing, it is useful to pause for a moment to examine the use of one particular image that featured in a number of media contexts: that of the 'overcrowded dinghy'. One of the places in which it was used was in a newspaper article from *The Telegraph* of 13th November 2019, entitled 'There are 1.2 million illegal immigrants in the UK – a quarter of the entire total in Europe'.[38] The image in the article was taken by Santi Palacios – a Spanish freelance photojournalist - in December 2015, off the Greek islands of Lesbos.[39] This is one of a series of photos that he took highlighting the humanitarian crisis unfolding as refugees crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey. While, in some ways, this image seems to reproduce the reduction of refugees to figures of 'bare life',[40] we find that it also speaks to more complex political agendas when read against the backdrop of the article in which it appears.

[38] Charles Hymas, 'There are 1.2 million illegal immigrants in the UK – a quarter of the entire total in Europe *The Telegraph*, 13th November 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/11/13/12-million-illegal-immigrants-uk-quarter-entire-total-europe/ (last accessed 16 July 2021).
[39] Photo taken by Santi Palacios on 24 December 2015 at Turquía Lesbos. Available at https://twitter.com/SantiPalacios/status/680074006238773248/photo/1 (last accessed 31 July 2022).
[40] The term "bare life" was first coined by Giorgio Agamben who was referring to a concept of life that is exposed to the sovereign power and reduced to its biological dimension. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.127.

Fig. 1.4 - The Telegraph Article on illegal immigrants in the UK.[41]



[41] Hymas, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/11/13/12-million-illegal-immigrants-uk-quarter-entire-total-europe/

This newspaper article appeared both in print and online in *The Telegraph* two and half months before the actual exit of Britain (BREXIT) from the European Union was scheduled to happen, and it speaks to a pro-Brexit agenda. The eye-catching headline highlights an extreme statistic to imply an unfair burden on the UK, while carefully selected stock images provoke strong emotions and the body of text is riddled with quantitative misrepresentation of data sets, while the article also uses a derogatory style of language reaffirming stereotypes congruent with right-leaning nationalists. The title of the article gives a figure of 1.2 million 'illegal immigrants' that the author claims was obtained from a report produced by Pew Research Centre in the USA. I managed to contact this research centre with a view to confirming not only the data sets provided by the author, but more importantly the categorisation of the various groups that seem to have been classed together. I got a response from one of the researchers who directly confirmed that the figure of 1.2 million 'illegal immigrants' included refugee and asylum seeker classes that were not supposed to have been placed within this single category.[42] This is because asylum seekers are classed as legal immigrants by the UK Home Office, as there are numerous avenues open to them whilst they have their asylum applications processed. Even if an asylum seeker's application is rejected by the Home Office, there would still be appeals process they can turn to and through which they can be granted Leave to Remain by tribunal judges. After this stage, asylum cases can even be taken further if either of the two parties, claimant, or Home Office, want to contest the decision of the tribunal judges. This enters the judicial review stage in which a case would be determined by a High Court judge. In all these stages, an asylum seeker would still be regarded as legal in the UK. Thus, the article unfairly categorises and homogenises

[42] This was in response to an email I sent to Pew Research requesting Data sets for The Telegraph article on illegal immigrants in Europe Email to: Cottingham, M, (info@pewresearch.org) on 2 Dec 2019.

refugees, reinforcing this labelling through an image that emphasises scale of arrivals to the UK, and generic rather than individualised identity.

This article is strongly indicative of the way in which refugees are very rarely named, described, and personified in news reports. A huge number of photographs focusing on refugees consistently establish this peculiarity of being the 'stranger' by pejorative depiction. The power of the photograph is found in such unnamed and nondescript representations of refugees.

The Telegraph article is emblematic of broader representational trends of the visual imagery employed within a variety of mass media, bearing the potential to silence refugee voices by appropriating them for other political narratives. It is worth noting, however, that alternative spaces for refugee self-representation have begun to emerge. Looking at media platforms, this includes refugee-led spaces such as Refugees in Effective and Active Partnership (REAP),[43] The Refugee Journalism Project, [44] Our World Too,[45] and The Other Side of Hope magazine,[46] whereby we see refugees constructing their own platforms for self-representation, albeit some with support from humanitarian organisations. What is positive about this is that we get to hear stories from those who have lived through experiences of seeking refuge, told in their own voices and from their perspectives. This form of self-representation carries with it a high degree of authenticity. However, limiting factors include the 'burden of representation' as encapsulated by Kobena Mercer, where he states that access and opportunities for the minority groups are regulated such that for those who do represent, there is an inordinate pressure to be representative of all refugees in a way which erases

[43] REAP website online. Available at: http://reap.org.uk/ [Date accessed 26 April 2023].
[44] The Refugee Journalism Project website online: Available at: https://www.refugeejournalismproject.org/ [Date accessed 26 April 2023].
[45] Our World Too website: Available at https://ourworldtoo.org.uk/ [Date accessed 26 April 2023].
[46] The Other Side of Hope website online. Available at https://othersideofhope.com/index.html [Date accessed 26 April 2023].

individual differences.[47] Also limiting is the fact that there are no huge budgets set for such projects, and this usually affects the outreach for them. Many such projects are being run in collaboration with other already-established organisations not led by refugees, too, and this means that their stories may be used to affirm the pre-established narratives of others. Thus, we see this kind of work teetering precariously on the edge of the prescriptive humanitarian imagination.

In view of all the challenges of refugee voice mentioned above, as a documentary filmmaker and as someone who has been through the asylum journey, voice strikes me as being the most critical issue because it is the key to agency, self-representation and the counteraction of negative stereotypes. My experience of voice – including my own access to voice and the way in which others spoke to and about me as an asylum seeker - were profound. There were occasions on which I felt silenced even when issues being discussed involved me as the subject-matter rather than the subject. Many-a-time I was not consulted in the conversations, and in the few instances that I was asked for my opinion on issues such as the inclusion of refused asylum seeker voices in strategy decisions, my contributions were not considered. This sort of blasé treatment made me feel like I was not an equal human being. I thus made a decision to change this, by developing my filmmaking practice in a way that reflects critically on voice as it relates to positionality, power and representation for refugees.

Incorporating an understanding of voice into my documentary practice

During the developmental research process for my film, which included reflection upon the critical discourses discussed within this chapter as well as extensive engagement with other documentary representations of refugees, I have come to understand voice as the ability of an individual to articulate what they want in life; and as the capacity to be involved

[47] Kobena Mercer, 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation', *Third Text* 4:10 (1990), pp.61-78 (p.61).

in conversation, and to be able to express one's ideas, concepts, beliefs, and values without fear of being judged or reprimanded. Having a voice thus enables one to stand independently and make autonomous decisions regardless of one's position in society, and it is more than just having a say, but rather having agency.

What was planted within me during the years when I was on my journey to gaining refugee status was the need to self-represent. The need to create the documentary film *Voices* arose from personal experiences I had during that period, and the subsequent years when I had gained legal status as a refugee. I felt that not only was my voice being stifled purely because of the identity I had as someone seeking refuge, but that there were also constant attempts to direct what I could say. Only when there were opportunities that required my story to strengthen funding applications for certain organisations, would I be allowed to have my narrative heard. It felt as if my voice was only important when it was satisfying an agenda for someone or for some organisation. In addition to this, the reprehensible treatment that I got from some of my neighbours at the time, when they learnt that the tenants at my home were all applying for refugee status, led me to want to do something that would improve the audibility of refugee voices. All this festered within an environment that has proved hostile to refugees in the UK. I thus decided to provide an alternative refugee-centred narrative through a documentary film and a series of podcast episodes.

Choosing to develop my skills as a filmmaker has thus been about the decision to claim voice, and to explore how it can be nurtured in others. As a filmmaker, I have the power and capacity to form a narrative structure, direct my 'subjects', and drive through my agenda as I wish. I felt that this directorial power gave me an opportunity to address refugee issues from my perspective. Having this position also afforded me the possibility of enabling and platforming fellow refugees to be able to have a voice. I have conducted numerous conversations with refugees who feel as I do, that the question of having a voice is of

paramount importance in a refugee's life. Most peculiar to most of us who have been through this journey is that we are referred to in the third person even when we are around. This makes refugees feel useless and powerless. Within my film, however, I sought to offer a platform for those who are also reflecting on their own voices as refugees – whether those are political, poetic, musical, culinary or otherwise – to speak on their own terms, about what voice means to them – beyond its capacity to simply 'tell their story' as a refugee.

Through filmmaking, I am able to advance what voice means to me, and as alluded to in my documentary film *Voices,* this film both speaks for me, and enables other refugees to speak. It therefore encourages refugees to identify with its voice-taking, including those who might not have had an opportunity to speak up or speak about these issues. The film also aims to be educational in tone. It tries to prompt people who might not have ever reflected critically on mainstream media representation of refugees and challenges them to look at this issue differently. Having this dual purpose is important in that it uses the same voices to address different audiences within the same space. The visual representation of refugees in this film helps to humanise members of this community and gives them a chance to be seen engaging in various aspects of life that they care about. This humanising aspect brings about connection with the audience, so that they are not viewed as 'the other'. Visual representation helps in bringing to the fore things that are hidden, or that people have turned a blind eye towards. This aids in dissipating stereotypes that are usually associated with refugees, as voice and visual representation gives them a platform to show who they are and what they stand for.

Aligning with this aim of humanising the figure of the refugee, I also wanted to show our diversity. In the documentary film *Voices,* the selection of voices effectively tells the story of how refugees are initially silenced – by the hostile environment, governmental policy, and media – before progressing to explore more positive possibilities of self-

representation, through political advocacy, creative self-representation, and self-instigated dialogue. Thus, there is a progression from hostile voices to more complexly positioned journalistic voices and eventually refugee voices which use different media to convey the different messages that they have. My choice in selecting these voices emanated from the need to identify and explore the various settings in which refugee accounts of exile are produced and received., suffering, and celebration to argue and to promote for a more critical analysis of the refugee voices. In this way, I was able to show the range of ways in which refugees are spoken *about,* thus demonstrating the need for us to speak for ourselves. While most traditional documentary films on refugees construct us as 'objects of knowledge', I wanted my documentary film to reveal this process of vocal objectification, and to speak back to it.

By opening the film with the prevalence of hostile voices, I wanted the film to show the current environment that surrounds refugees. These hostile voices speak of refugees as an 'invasion'. We see this, for example, in the archival footage of David Moreland, who speaks at an anti-immigration rally and uses the term 'invaders' to speak about refugees. This helps to explain the animosity that refugees feel when they find themselves in this country. Usually, the hostile voices are associated with right leaning parties and their supporters in the UK. High-profile personalities such as Katie Hopkins and Nigel Farage have used their voices to raise concerns about the number of refugees in the country. The former UK Home Secretary Priti Patel used her office to launch attacks on refugees and people smugglers coming across the English Channel.[48] Such voices are then echoed by those that have agendas directed against refugees as can be seen in my documentary film. For example, in the rally footage, we see David Moreland saying that he represents a large number of people in the country

[48] Rachel Wearmouth and Dan Bloom, 'Priti Patel attacks 'pretending' asylum seekers and claims Rwanda flight WILL go ahead', *The Mirror*, 15 June 2022, https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/breaking-priti-patel-attacks-pretending-27240405 (last accessed 3rd April 2023).

standing up against what he considers to be mass illegal migration into the UK. He goes on to say:

> …the public be [*sic*] treated like idiots…we'll ignore it. Let it carry on…but it's getting worse and worse and worse. I really do fear going forward this is gonna [*sic*] cause some major civil uprising...

Though such a voice might be in the minority, aggressive as it is, I selected it to demonstrate the hostile space we as refugees are in, and to show that such reference to refugees makes us a target as we are seen by some as a form of threat to the ordinary UK citizen.

In this hostile space in which the refugee voice is limited, the ultimate aim of my film was to explore and locate ways in which the refugee voice could be an active participant in discourse. I was interested in exploring the full range of what 'voice' could mean: from speaking up and out against political systems, to self-expression through music or even cooking. When approaching participants, I instigated conversation that helped them to reflect on what voice meant to them. Through the various conversations that I had with the refugee participants from the outset, I was able to engage them during pre-production of the film. They had input into the content of what they needed to talk about and advised me what they felt they would not be prepared to talk about. I drew up standardised questions for each participant, sent them over so that they could see the format as a guide, and informed them that they were free to choose which questions they wanted to answer in the interview, or if they had their own questions that they preferred to respond to instead. The questionnaire asked general questions on what voice meant for them as refugees, if they felt they had it, and what it meant if they did not have it. Having this capacity to determine what one was willing to share, and shape how the conversation went, made the refugee participants feel empowered and their voices enabled. This enabling of voice came way before the interview itself, in the

discussion process of what we would be talking about. It became a way of speaking back to a system that they felt had oppressed them.

For activist voices such as that of Loraine, a person of lived refugee experience, being able to speak back became a way of fighting an unjust system that she felt oppressed refugees. Though the process of securing her voice, the film made sure that she is not silenced even though her legal status in the UK is still precarious as her immigration application has not yet been processed by the UK Home Office. In my numerous conversations with her before the interview, she stated that she did not want to talk about the issues relating to her asylum application. I accepted this, and I wanted her to tell me what she felt comfortable talking about. Having stated that her passion was activism, I sought to engage with her on this topic, and for her to bring out any other issues that she wanted to highlight. Through this, we got to capture the various campaigns that she has organised throughout the UK, and emphasised how she has played a huge role in helping other people on the journey to asylum integrate in Coventry through her charity organisation. She felt empowered through the film as it platformed the agency of a refugee-led organisation, CARAG (Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group) which actively engages community members to fight the hostile infrastructure in UK and helps refugee integration in Coventry.[49] Thus her expression of voice manifested as both direct 'speaking back to' the hostile environment, and as connective communication with other people of lived refugee experience.

I was also interested to explore how creative voice could become a method of advocacy, and a means to speak back to the hostile environment. For this reason, I approached Manjit Sahota, who is a poet. Manjit's voice stems from a creative stance which, in many events where he performs his poetry, serves to highlight the political ramifications of

[49] CARAG website online. Available at: https://www.carag.co.uk/ [Date accessed 22 July 2022].

government policies on refugees, and indeed the necessary decolonisation of the British imperial legacy. During my pre-production, I instigated several meetings with Manjit where we discussed how he would want to contribute to empowering other refugees through poetry. I got to know that he is the founder of an organisation called Poets Against Racism which encourages people to channel their poetry to speak against racism and other social ills. Refugees who are part of this organisation use it as a platform to engage in narratives that highlight the problems they face in the UK. Engaging Manjit in the documentary film meant that I was taking his poetry to a wider audience, and thus increasing the likelihood of other refugees getting to try poetry as a vehicle for voice.

Tone and register of expression are also interesting aspects of voice that enable us to see how refugees might speak up, and back, in ways that resist narratives of victimisation or disempowerment. Here, comedy is an interesting genre to consider. Usman is a stand-up comedian based in London. After several Zoom meetings that I had with him, I realised that not only does he have a passion for making authentic coffee from Pakistan in his shop, but he also uses the day-to-day experience of conversations with his coffee buyers in the comedic routines that he performs. Having spent several months in an immigration detention centre, Usman sought to regain his voice by using stand-up comedy and exploring refugee issues that he had found difficult to talk about. With a ready audience who would come to listen to his stand-up routine, he engages by talking about what he wants, and frames his arguments in ways he feels confident about. My documentary film thus affords him the chance to have a wider audience, while also exploring how the use of humorous tone can be employed as a subversive strategy. Along similar lines, Chrisoula Lionis argues that Palestinian cultural practitioners' comedy has the potential to both relieve social pressure and provide the

oppressed a meaningful moment of power.[50] It thus can be argued that stand-up comedy such as that performed by Usman have the potential to upset the political order and serve as a safeguard against trauma, whilst calling attention to the hostile environment.

The act of speaking of one's own identity and culture takes many forms, and for this reason, I was interested to learn of the ways in which Manal Rawaeh, a refugee from Syria, conducts cooking lessons as a way of teaching people about her culture, and uses food as a shared language. She uses this artistic voice to engage members of her local community and enjoys sharing recipes from her home country with neighbours and those who sign up for her cooking classes. Having conversations with her made me realise how universal the language of food is, and how it provides a solid platform to engage in conversations. My film affords her the ability to speak to a wider audience and engage with communities beyond her local area.

This is also the case for the musician in the film, Blessing Magore, who is from Zimbabwe. Blessing uses music to speak wordlessly, but in a way that still expresses something deeply of himself. When I had conversations with him before the filming of the documentary, he revealed to me that he aspired to be able to fuse authentic Zimbabwean music with a genre called Afrobeat for the UK audience. He wanted to offer something different for this audience, and he was looking forward to the film providing a platform to launch his music. This emergence of a new voice through the development of an original and experimental music genre enables Blessing to utilise his talent and connect to new audiences. The documentary film works as a vehicle in realising this opportunity for him. It also brings us to a point at which we hear a 'refugee subject' speaking 'wordlessly' – but in a way that transcends the refugee narrative altogether, speaking instead of human emotion beyond his

[50] Chrisoula Lionis, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 2016)

refugee journey in a way that is connective, not simply about educating or resisting. He is now using his voice to forge a career for himself, and thus break into new markets.

In order to access different refugee voices such as Blessing's, I went back to the various refugee charities that I volunteer for in Nottingham. These places serve as social hubs for refugees, providing spaces where people gather and engage in conversations over meals and games. Shared beliefs, values and culture help form bonds within these communities, and it was through this that I was able to connect with some of the refugee participants for the film. Through common challenges emanating from the lack of refugee voice, and the recognition that it is up to us to take the initiative of reclaiming our voice, I was able to persuade some members to get onboard with the film project. We saw this as an opportune moment to reflect and explore what our voices could achieve when a platform is provided for engagement with those that are not familiar to us.

As expected from such a diverse community, this approach had its challenges as refugees had a wide range of issues that they wanted to explore. Most of the concerns voiced by participants related to the immigration arena, but I felt that some of those issues were actually symptoms of a lack of voice. Issues such as not being believed by the UK Home Office that one was gay, and needing confirmation from a health worker; political activity within the UK not being considered by the UK Home Office as critical to one's asylum application; belonging to a different religious denomination but not being believed or acknowledged by the UK Home Office; and having to prove to the UK Home Office that one was tortured back home, are all instances where voice plays a vital role. Though the person may testify to these events, their voices may not in themselves be enough to secure their claim, demanding other modes of evidence. Within my documentary, I wanted to explore alternatives to this culture of disbelief, foregrounding the stories that people wished to tell

and giving them space to be heard – such as the stories of hate crime, told in Bridget and Abdesalaam's own words.

I also used online platforms and social media to connect with some of the participants in the project. It was important to me to include the voices of people representing a range of 'refugee identities', and the decision to contact Lord Alf Dubs was based on his lived experience as a child refugee, and also on his advocacy for refugees in parliament and within the charity sector that he worked in. He serves as a model refugee who can take a stand and have his voice heard. His place in the film is meant to showcase what some of the people with refugee backgrounds can achieve. His contributions were more targeted towards the refugees who needed to be empowered and made to realise that they do not have to succumb to stereotypes which limit them. Connection with Manjit Sahota, the poet, was also via social media. I felt that his voice would be enhanced by combining it with other refugees who were making a mark within their own expressive fields, such as comedy and music. I wanted a few select voices that represented an array of creativity to stand for refugee voices more generally. These would serve as a sample of the different voices out there that can be empowered to resurrect a repressed people who can still make their own form of contribution to society.

Important developmental work for my final major piece, *Voices,* took the form of three initial podcasts that I created, on the theme of 'Journeys: A Talking Point'. This focus on voice in its 'purest' and most obvious form – the spoken word, without image – presented a vital opportunity for me to learn more about the politics and practice of eliciting, directing, and facilitating voice. I tried several strategies to determine the most appropriate methods of vocal delivery by my participants. I attempted several conversational approaches where the refugee participants would ask each other questions whilst recording. There was the anticipation that this would bring organic conversations and shed new light in what refugees

want to talk about when the question of voice is presented to them. This approach presented a number of challenges in that the participants strayed away from the question of voice or struggled to come up with a prompting line of enquiry, produced unusable recordings, or failed to record altogether. Trying to correct some of these issues resulted in lengthy delays and alienating some of the initial participants who ended up leaving the project. Indeed, the very act of trying to enable the refugee voice seems to have had a negative effect in some instances.

What I learnt through all this was that even if I share a somewhat similar refugee background with some of the refugee participants, it wasn't enough to just position myself as a director and expect that they would share deeply personal stories with me. I needed to create a rapport with them over time, and they needed to understand my motivation for engaging in this project. In the initial stages when I thought that the film and podcast would be for academic purposes only, I needed more reasoning and persuasion to get the refugee subjects onboard.

The assertion that this would give a voice to refugees was not immediately grasped. Once they were onboard, we then held discussions which resulted in the decision that I could take the film and podcast to much wider audiences. Even though there was an overwhelming acceptance that refugees are in most cases spoken for, and hardly ever given a chance to lead in stories about their lives, there seemed to be a reluctance to take responsibility for self-representation when it came to speaking out as many felt that it was 'too political' and could have personal repercussions.

I thus developed different conversational techniques, such as open-ended interviews that spanned from ten-minute one-on-one discussions to hour-long group discussions including multiple people. These open-ended interviews created space where contributors could provide information that could have been excluded in questionnaires, thus offering new

perspectives and local knowledge vital for insight into their decision-making and drive. In addition to the open-ended format, I also utilised closed questions in one-to-one interviews to maintain uniformity of responses from participants. This was mainly for the participants who I wanted to be the main contributors in each sector. My objective was to gather stories from participants that went into as much visual detail as possible covering the various stages of their journey to safety. For most of the interviewees, I would start by posing a question meant to serve as a conversation starter, like asking about their work or volunteering with an affiliated organisation which they would have told me about during pre-production phase.

Having started with 'Journeys: A Talking Point', I felt that the voice of the refugee would go further if it were then encompassed in a film using moving images. As the figure of the refugee when engaged in direct interview is in most cases obscured in media through pixilation of their images, or represented as a silhouette, or represented by just a black screen, I wanted to move away from this and show that refugees are human beings like everyone else, and that the representation of their bodies also 'speaks' to the audience in important ways. The visual representation that I chose for my film serves to avoid rendering audiences numb to our plight as refugees and to avoid dehumanising us and make us relatable to all the other members of our communities. This approach also serves to raise awareness about our experiences and the difficult circumstances we face. The constant hiding of our identities, though serving some purpose of trying to protect us whilst our applications are being processed, also serves the ironic purpose of 'othering'. Therefore, the decision to have refugee participants unmasked, if they gave their consent for this, was a conscious one that I made to reveal and celebrate our physical presence. However, the visual register I employed was important here, and compared to many other documentary films on refugees, my images seek an unspectacular, down-to-earth but ultimately humanising tone, such as my interview with Loraine which I conducted in her living room. I set out to capture her in a homely

setting just like any other member of a community. I sought to remove any aesthetics that would be associated with someone who has fled their home country and is seeking sanctuary. This is an aspect of my work that I explore further in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Thus, there is nothing about the people that I am interviewing that presents them as refugees until you hear them speak, ensuring that their voices dictate their self-representation.

To ensure that I maintained this aim of humanising the refugee speaker, I focused on fostering trust with all my participants. Other than the COVID-19 challenges already stated, the other challenge that I faced was that the refugee participants had their own issues that they felt they needed to raise in addition to what we had discussed - such as how they felt the immigration system was unfair, the heavy-handedness of the police force, the unresponsiveness of council officers to their requests, the lack of social facilities for their families, the lack of courses for learning English as a second language, caseworkers not being understanding, amongst others. In order to have the content of the film focused on refugee voices, I decided to only edit in the content in which the participants were talking about voice. However, after this PhD course, I intend to produce short documentaries based on the other content which I did not use which I know is equally relevant to the discourse on refugees in the UK.[51] I could see that there was so much more that the refugee community members feel is not being addressed in their lives in this country. This gave me an incentive to move forward with the agenda of refugee self-representation and voice, because I came to feel that by encouraging participants to raise their voices, they would become more capable of making changes and speaking up within their communities.

The other challenge that I faced was that I could not find anyone prepared to have an interview with me who was not supporting refugees. The one person whom I had known for many years who was a member of UKIP advised me that he did not want to comment on the

[51] Ethical approval will be sought for this purpose as originally given for academic purposes only.

issue of refugees. This left me with the only option of having to look for archival footage to use in place of a live interview that I would have wanted. My apprehension was that such footage would also be available for anyone wanting to make a documentary film, and thus it would end up losing its uniqueness and originality within the film. However, because of the narrative that I wished to develop within the film – which traced the different kinds of voices speaking about and for refugees to explain why refugee self-representation is so important – I decided to make use of this footage anyway. As I reflect on the outcome of this choice, I view it as effective since not only does it ground the narrative as I intended, but it also now presents evidence of the kinds of negative voices to which I refer circulating at a wider national level.

The ability to make choices such as selecting archival footage relate to how I wanted to present the refugee subjects in the whole narrative arc. It was of paramount importance to me to present refugees as ordinary human beings equal in status to everyone else, because I did not want to follow media stereotypes that denigrate them. I managed this by engaging in conversations with them well before the recording was done so that they knew what would happen on the day. I knew most of my refugee participants, I let them choose the location where we would conduct the interviews, and most of them chose to do this at home. This was a place in which they felt most comfortable. I also sent most of them the questions I would ask in advance so that they could familiarise themselves with the content to be discussed. I even involved the subjects in deciding the interview camera position setup so that they would feel most at ease. I tried in most locations not to be too intrusive, but to utilise the available resources to conduct the conversations. I utilised the ambient lighting in their homes to avoid intrusive kit. For the audio capture, I endeavoured to have the recorder out of sight of the refugee subject, and at times I just used my mobile phone for the audio.

Having the refugee subject feeling comfortable and at ease produced more relaxed and fuller responses. Whenever they did not understand a question, I repeated it or tried to simplify it for them as English was often not their first language. I also explained to them that in case they felt like they had made mistakes in their responses, I was prepared to cut that section out in the edit and would repeat the same question. At the end of the interviews, I always enquired if they had any further questions or contributions to add to what they had already contributed. This was to give them an opportunity to not only answer interview questions, but to talk about anything they felt was missed in my main line of questioning. Many times, the responses that came out in these tail-end discussions proved more valuable than the responses they would have given me in the main interview.

In the production of the podcast series, my main aim was to explore the nature of voice as it related to testimony for refugee speakers: a thorny area, given the sense in which testimony is a core basis on which one's asylum claim rests. Thus, I was interested in exploring how else testimony might operate for refugees, including when speaking about 'their journeys' on terms that they rather than the Home Office dictated. This material was particularly challenging to produce, however, as the pandemic limited my access to refugee subjects. One of the few contexts still operational in their face-to-face support of refugees at this time was within the world of education. I thus approached an educational facility in Nottingham called NEST – Nottingham Educational Sanctuary Team - and was given access to teenagers on their journey to asylum, who came into the UK as unaccompanied children.[52] Consent was given by their guardians, and supervision during the recordings was done by the academy officials. Given the pressures on education at this time, the project was in fact a welcome addition to the young people's cultural curricula, as it enabled them to practice their English, and to explore new skills related to interviewing and voice recording. To maximise

[52] N.E.S.T. website online, available at. https://www.hhe.nottingham.sch.uk/campuses/nest/provision-at-nest/

the interview time with the pupils, having been given a limited time only since this was during the COVID-19 lockdown phase, I decided to have group sessions that adhered to COVID safety regulations such as distancing and limits on group numbers, instead of one-to-one interviews. The advantage of this set-up was that the pupils would encourage each other to participate during these group sessions. This served the project well in that some of the participants were quite shy at first, but they opened up and were able to make contributions towards the end. They would also nudge each other, reminding them of some piece of information they might have missed, and this proved critical to the discussions.

The challenges connected to this self-led, collaborative interview method, though, were that I felt they only spoke of what could be shared in a group. Had I had time to be able to connect on a one-to-one basis with them, I think some of them would have opened up on the more personal stories than they shared. However, what I wanted was for them to share what they felt open enough to talk about. Enabling their voices in this manner also made them feel at ease.

For all the pupils, English is not their first language, so I sent them the open-ended discussion topics that they would be talking about. This was meant to jog some of their memories, and to give them a chance to rehearse what to say. On the day of the discussions, what was pleasant was that a couple of the pupils came to me whilst I was setting up the audio recording kit to make suggestions of what else they wanted to talk about. This freedom to choose the topics to discuss, and the freedom to share it with fellow pupils made me realise that they felt empowered, and that their voices mattered.

Being able to connect with interview subjects in this way served me well in getting the best out of them as the conversations went wider than I had initially anticipated, giving me a wider choice of recording for the podcasts and the film. As a result of my creative choices in the production of both the podcasts and the film, my voice came out as an enabler

and a catalyst for the refugees who wanted to speak up. These individuals felt they had something to say but had not had an opportunity to say it. As young people, I felt that they did not hold back, which is something that adults sometimes do. Having been given this level of access to these young people, I had a strong duty of care and thus was attentive to anything inappropriate they might have incidentally said. They were eager to share their personal feelings in relatively unfiltered testimonies. By bringing diverse refugee voices together, both the podcast and film have made it possible to present a wide array of under-represented perspectives from communities that are usually treated as 'other'.

Through constructing the questions and posing them to the interviewees, my voice took central stage as it meant that I was directing the conversations. I carefully avoided denigratory language, leading questions, and making assumptions, but instead took a positive viewpoint of the subjects and endeavoured to provide a comfortable space for dialogue during the interviews. This also stretched to my narration in which I was using the term 'we' when I was referring to asylum seekers and refugees. Placing myself in the same position as the asylum seekers and refugees enabled me to build a sense of community and commonality, and also positioned my voice as that of ownership and authority from lived experience. Initially, I had decided to use 'they' or 'them' when referring to refugees and asylum seekers, but I soon realised that this separated me from the subjects whom I was trying to platform, and of whom I am a part. The degree of impact when I owned my status as a refugee and became part of the refugee community that I was engaging with, was greater than when I positioned myself away from them. In taking ownership of our shared refugee status, and when sharing narratives about our lives, we had power and control since we chose what we wanted to share, and in a manner that we dictated.

Sharing the challenges that I faced when trying to find my voice as a refugee also had the effect of addressing the problematic issues of 'otherness' that is encountered in mass

media representations on refugees. Being part of the same community as the other refugee contributors worked to represent us as culturally the same, and thus removed the stigma of being different or a threat. This united front thus served to maximise our voices and gave us the confidence to stand independently without fear of being excluded. My speaking out as a form of self-representation thus counters the notion of being spoken for and allowed me to bring other refugee voices to the fore. Making myself part of the subject group that is being empowered gave me a level of authority and authenticity, thereby reclaiming and enabling a voice that genuinely talks of issues that we care about and not just issues that try to identify us as victims.

Whilst producing the podcast series, I asked the participants to talk about their favourite memories from back home in their countries of origin. Placing my voice in the centre of discussions often generated narratives which did more than chronicle journeys that refugees had had. In sharp contrast to refugee stories that we often hear in traditional media broadcasts, the participants talked about emotive memories of joy and happiness conjured through sharing of family histories. One of the participants was eager to share how much he missed the scent of his mother's scarf, and how for him, that is the true meaning of home. I encouraged moments of quiet contemplation during discussions and interviews as I did not want the interviewees to just fill up the time talking but reflecting as well. It was through these strategies that voice became so important and valued, as it meant it came from deep within the participants. Such deep and powerful moments brought out the basic human element that every individual has regardless of their immigration status. It is from within this vital space that voice is enabled and empowered.

It is through the production of the podcast series, the film, and the research that I conducted that I realised the importance of voice, and especially the voice of the refugee. Having communicated with people who speak up against, and for refugees, I have come to

realise how paramount having a voice is, and that it does not mean just opening one's mouth and having words come out. Refugee voices have been heard in many instances, but they have been speaking out within certain frameworks, to other people's agendas. One of the core elements of this project, then, was seeking to arrive at a definition of voice that resonates with refugee subjects such as myself and encapsulates how we feel when rendered voiceless. I now therefore understand voice as the ability of an individual to articulate what one wants in life; the competence and faculty to be involved in conversation, and to be able to express one's ideas, concepts, beliefs, and values without fear of being judged or reprimanded. Since voice is important, as refugees we need to actively empower ourselves with it through self-representation as it is pivotal in gaining agency. Some of the power dynamics that constrain refugee voices in these contexts include the discrimination and hostility that we face from host communities, media and politicians that undermine our dignity, rights and participation. Mass media, whether it is left-leaning or right-leaning, has tended to strip voice from refugees, thereby incapacitating us and only allowing our voices to be heard in situations that fit their agendas. It is up to us as people of lived refugee experience to speak up and speak out so that we can speak for ourselves, in whatever way we choose.

Chapter 2

Placing the Director in Refugee Documentary Film:

The Politics of Agency and Voice

The ethical implications of contemporary documentary-making involving refugees require that we examine the power struggle for agency, voice, and directorship in documentaries. In discussions of refugee documentary filmmaking over the past few decades, the concerns of who is being portrayed, by whom, and for what objective have been particularly apparent, with the significance of refugees' self-representation coming up as a specific concern. Lilie Chouliaraki, for instance, claims that Western journalism serves as a place where moral sensitivities are regulated - a concept she uses to analyse how the media shapes our moral and political connections to distant others who suffer, and how it affects the methods we use observe, to feel, think and acts towards them.[53] According to her, migrant self-representation could make it easier for migrants to be recognised, accepted, and celebrated in a way that challenges this moral standard. In this chapter I therefore explore the dynamics of directorship in relation to the filmed refugee subject, in order to explore how this relationship facilitates, complicates or even refuses agency for refugees. In particular, I consider the varying models of collaboration that exist, while assessing the advantages and disadvantages of each form. I will also look at the different perspectives of refugees in relation to the production of representation and will ultimately come to the conclusion that in order for the documentary to be a meaningful portrayal of them, they need to have a significant influence over how it was shaped. Finally, as a director who also happens to be a

[53] Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Symbolic bordering: The self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news', *Popular Communication*, 15:2 (2017), 78-94 (p.84).

refugee, I'll think about how these challenges can influence and impact how I make documentaries.

This analysis emerges via critical analysis of three films: *Another News Story*,[54] *Midnight Traveller*,[55] and *400 Miles to Freedom*.[56] Through these analyses, I compare and contrast the different forms of directorship, analysing the conclusions drawn from each, and how, through the self-representation of refugees, they contribute to the altering power dynamics. This provides a shift from the dominant practice in documentary film production in which the director and filmed subject are deemed mutually exclusive, and the task of representing the refugee is seen to stem from the assumption of their disenfranchisement or powerlessness. Indeed, this reflects broader trends in the visual documentation of refugees, which, as Stuart Robinson notes, is dominated by television news reportage, in which refugees come to reflect broad trends in social response to immigration and to policy concerns.[57] Thus alternative collaborative modes between director and 'refugee subject' not only bear the potential to disrupt the assumed dynamics of agency and disenfranchisement present in the filmmaking process itself, but also to enable alternative visual narratives of refugee experience and identity to those produced by mainstream media.

To begin, then, it is necessary to establish an understanding of what is meant by the term 'director' – particularly given the extent to which this position is problematised by many of the collaborative models explored within this chapter. The position of the film director in a documentary is central to how it is constructed, and consequently how it is 'consumed' by an audience. According to Larry Gross, both fictional and non-fictional films function as

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[54] Orban Wallace, dir., *Another News Story* (London: Gallivant Film, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=111TOiWnUXk&t=3707s, (last accessed 30th August 2020).
[55] Hassan Fazili, dir., *Midnight Traveller* (Qatar/UK: Old Chilly Pictures, 2019). Available online at *YouTube Movies*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VB9_0hd8EH8&t=1016s (last accessed 30th August 2020).
[56] Mekonen Avishayi, dir., *400 Miles to Freedom* (US/Israel:Pacific Street Films, 2012), https://www.kanopy.com/en/ntuuk/watch/video/121533 (last accessed 14th February 2023).
[57] Stuart P. Robinson, 'Refugees on film: Assessing the political strengths and weaknesses of the documentary style', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 18 (2019), pp.107-122.

formulations or expressions created by someone who wants an audience to infer meaning in a particular way.[58] His argument is based on the premise that the link between the director's (the filmmaker) implication and the audience's inference is what gives a film its meaning. Quoting Sol Worth, he states that:

> … the development of a semiotic of film depends not on answering linguistic questions of grammar, but on a determination of the capabilities of human beings to make inferences from the edemes presented in certain specified ways.[59]

In the context of documentary, 'the meaning' of a film emerges from the narrative and formal choices that are ascribed to it by the director. Indeed, Stella Bruzzi argues that while newsreel simply conveys what is presented as 'real material', documentary is a narrated and motivated non-fiction film.[60] Thus the documentary director's role is not simply to capture footage but to choose from the varying options in an effort to implement strategies and evaluate successes in order to confirm or change those strategies. The only images that are seen by the audience are the final edited batches, and they can only be understood in the context of preconceived notions. This also occurs in evaluations of the director's expertise and skills in selecting, ordering, and implying meanings. As such, conventional understandings of the director's role lie in the assumption that they hold agency over the film's visual and narrative constructions, and the message that is conveyed by its subjects.

The relationship between director and subjects or participants, however, is more complex. According to Bill Nichols, the debate on participant representation has been far-reaching, with some documentarians questioning their ability to 'speak for' anyone, thereby looking for ways to 'speak about' or 'speak with'.[61] This fundamentally challenges the

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[58] Larry Gross, 'Sol Worth and the Study of Visual Communications', *Studies in Visual Communications* 6:3 (1980), pp.2-19 (p.11).
[59]Larry Gross describes an 'edeme' as an editing shot formed from a camera shot (cademe) with sections cut out that one does not intend to use. Gross, 'Sol Worth', p.7.
[60] Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.27
[61] Bill Nichols, 'The Voice of the Documentary', *Film Quarterly*, 36 (1983), 17-29 (p.23).

assumption of the director's authority and leads us to reassess the ethical and intellectual ramifications of producing documentaries.

Documentary authorship is fundamental to enabling us to consider the representation of refugees in film in a more complex manner. Rather than simply equating the director with the role of documentary 'author', the question of documentary authorship encompasses issues of identity, agency, voice and self-representation. Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette assert that, 'whilst progressive documentary filmmakers increasingly question the ethics of representation, there is still the persistent issue of a power imbalance between the director and the participant'.[62] The dynamics of representation are established by the director's vision, making particular victimisation and racialisation structures visible and legible in the public arena. The refugee hardly has any input in the construct of the film except for their 'performance' and has little meaningful power in deciding how they are represented. However, this is called into question in some documentaries in which the subject is willing, even eager to be filmed, and plays an important role in the shaping of the film. Such films include *Bolinao-52*,[63] *Sonita*,[64] and *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars*,[65] in which the subject has almost the same power as the director, and sometimes gives guidance on where and what to shoot. John Grierson defined documentary as - 'the creative treatment of actuality' [66] - thus indicating the creative choices that the director makes: decisions such as what to film, where to film, how to film and for how long all serve to set the tone, pace, aesthetics, and ultimately the narrative of the documentary. A good example of a heavily director-led documentary

[62] Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette, 'Anonymity and Representation: Everyday Practices of Ethical Documentary Filmmaking', *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media,* 18 (2019), pp.175-182.
[63] Duc Nguyen, dir., *Bolinao 52* (USA: KTEH/PBS, 2008). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU5cwuehGoM&t=1895s (last accessed 20th May 2023).
[64] Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, dir., *SONITA* (Germany: TAG/TRAUM Filmproduktion, 2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B47MbpPuz7A (last accessed 20th May 2023).
[65] Zach Niles and Banker White, dir., *Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars* (USA: Cube Vision, 2005). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIj8BkuOhpE (last accessed 20th May 2023).
[66] John Grierson, 'The Documentary Producer,' *Cinema Quarterly,* 2:1 (1933), pp.7–9.

about refugees is *Born in Syria* (2016),[67] in which the director Hernan Zin's decision to use a child for the narration, and to focus on the emotional effects on children when fleeing one's country, constructs a powerfully emotive narrative thread within the film that ultimately proves highly compelling to the audience.

A similar director-led model of documentary film about refugees dominates within the field of material created for educational and awareness-raising purposes. However, the strong agenda of these films is to garner audience sympathy by portraying refugees as subjects in need, typically depicting them as helpless and a burden. Indeed, documentarian Philip Dunne advances the idea that most documentaries are 'conceived as an idea-weapon to strike a blow for whatever cause the originator has in mind'.[68] He suggests that propaganda is generally used in documentary films. Documentaries with a humanitarian agenda thus feed the assumptions shared by both host governments and international humanitarian agencies that outsiders are required to organise and care for refugees, rather than that they possess their own agency. Michael Barnett asserts that whilst humanitarian organisations tackle issues of human rights, post-conflict reconstruction and democracy promotion, they also reframe the figure of the refugee in attitudes of submission or helplessness.[69] This is then used mainly to appeal for sympathy from the public who respond to media portrayals of extreme human suffering and starvation. We see this in films such as *A Day in the Life: Za'atari* (2013),[70] and *It Will be Green Again* (2018),[71] which depict life in refugee camps, and the challenges that the refugees face from lack of food and water to insecurity. Barbara Harrell-Bond

[67] Hernan Zin, dir., *Born in Syria* (Philippines: LA Claqueta, 2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=th_N2j4a8Nw (last accessed 20th May 2023).
[68] Philip Dunne, 'The documentary and Hollywood', *Hollywood Quarterly* 1:2 (1946), pp.166–172.
[69] Michael Barnett, 'Refugee and Humanitarianism', *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (2014), pp. 241-252.
[70] UNHCR, dir., *A Day in the Life:* Za'atari (2013) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4OIVW0waEo&t=4s (last accessed 3rd June 2023).
[71] UNHCR, dir., *It Will be Green Again* (2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT-ZmEs80yc&t=192s (last accessed 3rd June 2023)

remarks on the media portrayal of the extreme human suffering and starvation of refugees, in a way which characterises them as a problem. She asserts that this leads to the public becoming 'rapidly satiated with the starving child appeal'.[72] Within this model of humanitarian filmmaking, the director therefore finds themselves under ever-increasing pressure to construct a narrative that both fits the requirements of the humanitarian imagination and portrays the refugee in increasingly needy terms in order to garner audience sympathy. Thus, the voice of the refugee themselves must only ever be present in order to convey this message – resulting, usually, in their silence.

Ellen Maccarone argues that documentary filmmakers therefore 'have an ethical responsibility to ensure that filming does not cause any or more harm to its participants'.[73] Yet does this style of directorship not inflict harm upon the 'refugee subject' by confining them to such limited and powerless roles within the filmmaking process, and in their eventual narrative function? If this is the case, then it could be argued that Maccarone's terms regarding ethical responsibility can only be fulfilled when directors themselves abrogate some of the directorial control to refugee subjects – so that they might then have power to determine how and by whom they are being filmed.

The following discussion therefore considers how refugees can be granted agency within the documentary-making process. The two measures that are discussed in this chapter in terms of their ability to grant agency are collaborations in film production between refugees and career filmmakers; and refugees becoming sole filmmakers. Hearing personal accounts and witnessing refugee lives in person by career filmmakers gives subjects a greater input in how their image is created. It represents significant shift in perspective regarding where to find authority and authenticity. It acknowledges that the subjects' lived experience

[72] Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance for Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p11.
[73] Ellen Maccarone, 'Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 25 (2010), pp.192-206.

and their perception of themselves must be used to temper the viewpoints of specialists and the filmmakers thus enabling a director to 'speak with' instead of 'speak for'. Without this shift, the empowerment and aid offered to the documentary subject will always be more illusory than actual.

Another News Story (2017)

Another News Story is a documentary film released in 2017, directed by Orban Wallace, a British film director. Winner of the Impact Doc Award and a finalist for the UK's Grierson Award's Best International Documentary,[74] the film averts its gaze from the refugee subjects and instead focusses on the journalists reporting on them. It tackles questions of ethics and consent, who is filming who, and what their agenda is in the whole refugee narrative. Casting a critical eye on the journalistic profession, it garnered international recognition, resulting in more than thirty international festival selections and it remains available worldwide via online streaming services. The documentary goes behind the scenes of the news crews reporting on refugee stories at the height of the 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015. The audience is positioned on the other side of the camera and motivates us to reexamine how we interact with the international press, its pursuit of breaking stories, and how, as an audience, we consume news.

The role of the director and the presence of the refugee subject are different from those within the traditional refugee documentary form in that Wallace, although using the refugee subject as the underlying theme, also exposes the superficiality and duplicitous nature of the reporters and correspondents who are shooting footage for various international news channels. The approach by Wallace, in making the audience witness the unethical practices

[74] Film website, *Another News Story*, https://www.anothernewsstory.com/ (last accessed 30th August 2020).

by journalists, can be read as analogous to the reflexive mode of filmmaking as outlined by Jay Ruby, in which it is argued that:

> to be reflexive is to structure a product in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole. Not only is an audience made aware of these relationships, but they are made to realize the necessity of that knowledge.[75]

In assuming a reflexive stance, Wallace thus reveals the relationship between the production process, filming and the final product in representations of refugees. What comes out is the unorthodox methods that the reporters use in order to obtain footage for their respective organisations. In this reflexive mode, the construction of the film plays out in view of the audience who are made aware of the interview processes employed by journalists. The inhumane actions by some of the reporters while getting film footage or photographs includes approaching and taking photos without consent of a woman who has just gotten off a dinghy and is holding a baby, feet still in the water, and obviously distressed. It borders on dehumanisation of the refugees, who are seen as 'the other', undeserving of the humane treatment afforded to normal citizens. Images 2.1 and 2.2 are screengrabs which highlight the callous nature of some of the news gatherers as refugees disembark from a dinghy on the coast of Lesbos in Greece from Turkey.

[75] Jay Ruby, 'The image mirrored: Reflexivity and the documentary film', in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. by Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp.34-47.

Fig. 2.1 - A photographer positions himself to take a shot as a family tries to wade the waters when they get off a dinghy boat. *Another News Story*, dir. Orban Wallace. (timecode at 00:07:47)

This image shows the inhumanity of the photographer in a situation that the family has found themselves in after having travelled thousands of miles fleeing war in Syria. All he is apparently concerned with is getting the 'perfect shot' for his story. Walking towards a mother and child apparently in distress following their traumatic crossing, a moment surely of terror and shock for the family, he points a camera at their faces at close range, seemingly without any offer of assistance, request to take their image, or personal investment in their suffering. For him, these figures present merely the opportunity to symbolise a wider plight – not to produce empathetic connection with human subjects. This mirrors the wider photographic objectification of refugees within the Western journalistic imagination also outlined by Terence Wright, who argues that 'journalists look for an image to satisfy a preconceived idea of prototype refugees indicating human suffering'.[76] For the photographer to take such a position and photograph the family, he would have had to assess that they would be most vulnerable and would show raw emotion. He has assumed a position of

[76] Terence Wright, *Refugees on Screen* (Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, 2000), pp.1-17

control over the refugee family and has assumed agency as the one to tell their story: a position analogous to that which the director most usually assumes in the humanitarian filmmaking model. Photographs from such encounters depicting grief, deprivation and weariness are then fed into a familiar discourse, which blends attitudes satisfied with the status quo and a lack of critical engagement with the agency of people who are subordinated. In this scenario the photographers can be seen as complacent – satisfaction with the situation as is, in which they do not help the vulnerable families but rather go on to take photographs seemingly unaware or uninformed of the consequences of their decisions. Images of refugees in the contemporary world often include large groups of people, unidentified women and children fleeing war, people living in poverty, injured men oblivious of what is to come, unfortunate victims searching for sanctuary where they can rebuild shattered lives. Along similar lines, Kevin Smets and Cigdem Bozdag argue that 'the representations of immigrants and refugees in social media debates are similar to those of the mainstream mass media',[77] which not only objectify, but collectivise and dehumanise the image of the immigrants and refugees. This is symptomatic of directors who do not give representational agency to their subjects, and they focus on 'speaking for' rather than 'speaking with'. They shape the narrative so that it conforms to the 'cardboard cut-out' formats of refugees, who are reduced to mere statistics instead of humans needing protection.

[77] Kevin Smets and Cigdem Bozdağ, 'Editorial Introduction. Representations of Immigrants and Refugees: News Coverage, Public Opinion and Media Literacy', *Communications* 43:3 (2018), pp.293-299.

Fig. 2.2 - A camerawoman is snubbed by a refugee carrying his child as she requests a response to her question. *Another News Story*, dir Orban Wallace. (Timecode at 00:08:19).

Image 2.2 represents the media gaze that is rebuffed by a refugee who has just disembarked from a dinghy boat, whose actions are a reproach to the intrusion into his life by the camerawoman. From the journalistic perspective, the camerawoman no doubt perceives this moment as her right to film, in the service of public knowledge. By employing the reflexive mode – in which Wallace effectively turns the camera back on those directing the camera towards others, in order to reveal the constructed nature of these images, and the dehumanising processes underpinning their production – he fundamentally calls into question how refugees should be represented on film.

The question of refugee voice also emerges as crucial to Wallace's reflexive filmmaking. By creating a situation of political voicelessness, portraying refugees as simple victims removes political agency from them. According to Liisa Malkki, having a 'voice' is 'being able to build narrative authority over one's own circumstances and destiny while

simultaneously being able to assert one's audience'.[78] Voicelessness in this film can be witnessed in several ways. Firstly, there is the language barrier that exists between the refugees and the reporters – they do not speak the same language. Without this commonality, there is no direct communication between the refugees and the audience served by the reporters' media outlets. Some of the reporters can be seen scrambling to find a refugee with a command of basic English whom they can interview. Secondly, some of the reporters do not even intend to interview any refugees. They just want to use the footage of the refugees as a backdrop to their already preconceived narratives. Even if there is a refugee who can converse in English, they are not prepared to hear their stories. Thirdly, law enforcement denies media access to some of these refugees at different stages of the journeys. When refugees are placed in seclusion zones along the way, there is no access to the refugees by the media, even if both parties would have been willing to communicate. These barriers lead to voicelessness and removal of agency for the refugee.

There are, however, complexities surrounding Wallace's own directorial position. For while he is filming from a distance and thus giving the refugees dignity and space, he arguably mirrors the reductive gaze of the camera people in the way he also casts his gaze upon his own subjects. From their enquiries of him as to why he is filming them, it can be safely assumed that he had not consulted them as to whether he could film them – and they may not know they are being implicated in a negative narrative. By doing so, he also potentially performs a dehumanising move. The question remains: is this a price worth paying in order to reveal the problematic gaze directed towards those who are ultimately more vulnerable and lacking in visual agency – the refugees themselves?

Wallace puts his insights to the test through a major directorial shift that occurs part-way through the documentary. After having established the problematic practices of Western

[78] Liisa Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries', pp.377-404.

journalists, Wallace decides to contest these structures by embarking on a journey across Europe with the refugees themselves, chronicling the physical deprivation and danger that the refugees face along thousands of miles of uncertainty. Even though he is not a refugee, he develops mutual respect and compassion for the refugees whom he films. In his interviews, which take the form of relaxed and personal conversational mode, he takes a reflexive mode. One of his contributors is a woman named Nahasen, a refugee from Syria. Contrary to how the other correspondents approach refugees, Wallace respects his contributors' privacy, gives them space, and puts them in charge of their stories. This is evident in his approach to Nahasen whom he meets during her journey with other refugees in Serbia. His approach to her is that of a new friend, with whom he first makes casual conversations. After these brief encounters with her, the first real conversation we are shown is when he boards a train wagon with her and the other refugees at the Serbia-Croatia border. They make small talk about how hot the wagon was, before disembarking from that train wagon. Nahasen then goes on to ask him if he was coming with them in a manner that showed she was comfortable with him, and indeed seemed to want his company for conversation.[79] This builds on the notion that if someone shares the same journey with you, especially a treacherous one, you get close. They walk along the tracks going to a different train wagon. When they board this new wagon, he complements her for speaking up for the other refugees, and her face glows with warmth and appreciation. From that friendly encounter, their ensuing conversations seem like two friends who have known each other for a long time.

Over the course of the film, Wallace assumes a role far beyond that of the all-controlling director. In fact, he comes to act as a conduit through which the other refugees he meets can express how they feel about the traumas they are facing, and what they expect in

[79] *Another News Story* - timecode at 00:54:17

the countries they hope will provide sanctuary for their families. He manages to let his contributors take control of how they are identified and affords them representation. By humbling himself, and presenting himself as an equal to the refugees, they do not feel as if they are talking to someone who is of a higher status than them. His questions sound empathetic and he shows real concern, taking into consideration the predicament that the refugees are facing. Also, the act of getting on the train with the refugees, when the other journalists have filmed and left in their own cars, shows that he wants to genuinely connect and understand what they are going through.

Certainly, there remain complexities within Wallace's directorial position. While he engages with the refugee subjects as he would with any citizen, in a nonprejudicial manner, he does not afford the same agency to the reporters that he films. Equally, his decision to travel with the refugees as a non-refugee director does not automatically place him on an equal footing with them: he retains control over the camera and can also step away from danger or need at any point should he need to do so. Nevertheless, Wallace's decision to focus on the stories and voices of those seeking refuge, rather than to insert their images into a pre-established narrative, is one that ultimately increases agency for those who are usually marginalised, ignored or totally silenced in the humanitarian discourse. Crucially, his reflexive filmmaking also renders the processes of refugee documentary-making transparent and reveals that the position of filmmaker-as-director is not objective or fixed; rather, one possessing tremendous power, which must be exercised in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

***Midnight Traveller* (2019)**

Midnight Traveller is a collaborative documentary film released in 2019, directed by Hassan Fazili, and produced by Emelie Coleman Mahdavian and Su Kim. The film obtained many international festival selections, including winning the Special Jury Award for No Borders at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019. It also won the Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco Film Festival in the same year and is available worldwide.[80] The collaborative arrangement is integral to the originality and success of this film: Hassan Fazili is a refugee, whilst Emelie C. Mahdavian is an American career film director and producer. Collaborative filmmaking is defined by Sarah Marie Wiebe as 'an artistic practice with the potential to help transform knowledge production and enhance dialogue' by amalgamating the talents and skills of individual members in the co-creation of a film.[81] The end product serves as a catalyst for the development of a sense of community among those participating in the process, ultimately seeking to change dominant patterns of representation. She goes on to affirm that such a collaboration is achieved 'by refusing to gaze at the "Other's" lived reality with curiosity, detachment, professionalism, and neutrality; instead, it aims to interrupt a monolithic gaze with the views of the participants themselves'. The collaborative nature of the partnership producing *Midnight Traveller* is that Fazili would film his family's journeys, recording it onto the phone memory cards, and Mahdavian would arrange for someone to meet them in each country and download the footage off the memory cards onto a hard drive. This was then shipped to her in USA for editing.

The style in which the film was made immediately problematises the traditional function of the 'director' as an outside observer who is in control of the material that is created. The film was shot entirely on three phones, and over the course of several years. The

[80] *Midnight Traveller*, IMBD website https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8923500/ (last accessed 30th August 2020).
[81] Sarah Marie Wiebe, 'Decolonizing Engagement? Creating a Sense of Community Through Collaborative Filmmaking', *Studies in Social Justice* 9:2 (2015), pp.244-257 (p.244).

family members are both the subjects and the camera operators in this documentary. What emerges is an autobiographical film that chronicles Fazili and his family as they flee from Afghanistan where he has been targeted and marked for death by the Taliban. When the family flee to Tajikistan, Fazili meets Emelie who conceives of the idea of a video diary as the family embarks on the treacherous journey headed for Europe via Iran. Fazili captures their uncertain journey and demonstrates the perils that await refugees as well as the affection that a family on the run shares. This is footage that could not have been obtained by a non-refugee director, who would not have been able to access these locations or experiences in an authentic manner. Thus, it provides unparalleled insight into a narrative that could not have emerged except through the first-hand insights of a refugee.

In this documentary, both Fazili and his wife Nargis take turns to direct the videography of their journeys and reveal the goings on in the places where they would find refuge. Such places in this instance include open forests, windowless, abandoned, half-built structures and infested rooms in refugee camps. Having made a documentary film already in his home country of Afghanistan, and thus being an experienced filmmaker, Fazili shares graphic video footage of his family as they trek across countries, scurry through dangerous regions, cram into vehicles, are smuggled by traffickers, apprehended by the police, and caught in fist fights with locals in countries they would be passing through. In these instances, the camera 'witnesses' not only the danger and desperation but also the exuberance and tenderness of the family, and indeed, it seems that the family has not altered their actions because of the presence of a camera: the fact that the director is one of them renders them trusting and indeed nonchalant in the camera's presence. The audience sees the tears of pain from Zahra the daughter, and the joy of laughter from Nargis, the desperation of a parent when a child gets sick from Fazili, as well as the moments of glee when they reach a milestone such as crossing a border towards their destination. Herein, Fazili would just let the

camera roll and let life be, regardless of where they are – forest, refugee camp or running across the borders. Even in foreign countries where they are regarded as stateless and have to hide away from the police and are attacked by hooligans, they refuse construction as victims. Whilst Fazili's daughter cries and says she does not want to go outside anymore because of her fear due to the demonstrations against refugees outside their home by local Bulgarian gangs from the Nationalist Party, Fazili grabs the camera from his wife and heads to where these demonstrations are taking place, putting himself in danger. There are, however, instances in which his wife seems uncomfortable with the presence of a camera in front of her, but Fazili tries to negotiate to continue filming. Here, the position of director-as-family member becomes complex: people have the right to not give consent to being recorded, and the director, had he been an outsider, would have had to stop recording as it is deemed unethical to record individuals who have expressly stated that they do not want to be filmed. Even Fazili has a moment in which he stops filming when the family thinks that they have lost their daughter Zahra. However, Fazili's standpoint as both director and subject means that, within this context, the work can perhaps be better understood through the framework of autoethnography.

Autoethnography, according to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, is an 'autobiographical writing and research genre that reveals several layers of consciousness and connects the individual to the collective',[82] while Katz and Katz describe autoethnographic films as 'the [filming] self and the [filmed] other becoming intertwined'.[83] The definition can be expanded to include personal narratives, self-stories, first person accounts, and collaborative autobiographies amongst others. When we understand Fazili's position as auto-

[82] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams and Arthur P Bochner. 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 36:4 (2011), pp.273-290 (p.273).
[83] John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz, 'Ethics and the Perception of Ethics in Autobiographical Film' in Image Ethics, ed. Larry P Gross, John Stuart Katz and Jay Ruby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.119-134.

ethnographer rather than as objective documentary-maker, we come to appreciate why it is that he may wish to explore and document the complexities and contradictions of his family's journey. Potential power dynamics in his family also come into play, as he takes the role of the head of the family who is assuming a leadership function, whilst at the same time he is often seen being playful with his daughters and his wife. Indeed, in doing so, he resists ascribing the straightforward narrative of victimhood to his family that might be imposed by the humanitarian imagination. Showing his family through their highs and their lows, and in their varied moods, thus serves to humanise them, and to complicate 'the refugee narrative'.

This film cannot, however, be described as straightforward autoethnography, in that the footage obtained by Fazili was then sent to Emilie in the US for editing. Thus, the collaborative dynamics of this film are crucial to consider. It is reported that there were more than three hundred hours of footage over the whole period from the time that the family escaped Afghanistan to the time they were accepted as asylum seekers in Germany. From this much content, it is the responsibility of the editor to create a narrative that is engaging and coherent, based on the assumption that Fazili would only have filmed content that he and his wife felt comfortable with. No matter how it was going to be edited, he knows that the footage in its totality is his. Such is the level of dexterity expected of the editor that she needs to have an understanding of the film's structure, language, pace, emotional drive and narration. David Bordwell et al. argue that narration as a communication pathway provides interaction between narrator, performer, and audience, with an aim to engage and provoke an emotional response from the viewer.[84] Mahdavian's editing of the documentary is expertly done, as the film's assembly delivers well on emotion and takes the audience on a journey with the family. However, her active role in shaping the documentary's narrative is evident in

[84] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction (Vol. 7)*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

the editorial techniques that we can see within the film. Mahdavian uses a wide variety of editing techniques to piece together the whole narrative. In editing the huge volume of raw footage that was downloaded from the mobile phones and sent to her, she expertly adds various segments of Middle Eastern music to the original footage, and thus adds to the tone and pace of the film. This addition of local music is used for narrative effect and to lend authenticity to the film, immersing audience in the film world. Steve Jones, commenting on Jensen's critical analysis of authenticity in US country music, contends that music 'connects an understanding of authenticity as a cultural construct with an understanding of culture and geography'.[85] This, together with the inclusion of archive footage from Fazili's films whilst he was still in Afghanistan alongside home-video content, all adds to the texture of this road movie. The use of subtitles and onscreen text helps the audience to navigate the course of the journey together with the family. Mahdavian's decision to select intimate moments and normal day-to-day mundane acts, including the altercations and the crying, shouting and hurting, all culminate in the production of a film that is highly relatable. She carefully selects content that humanises this family even on their journey in the wilderness. The decision to edit most of the narrative sequentially also helps us follow the journey and the film's narrative, while the use of sound effects such as the hybrid soundscape, and the overall sound design are effective in heightening tension and setting the pace for this film. Thus, despite the use of raw footage, the film gains polish and external directorial vision through Mahdavian's active narrative direction.

[85] Steve Jones, 'Music that moves: Popular Music, Distribution and Network Technologies', *Cultural Studies* 16:2 (2002), pp.213-232.

***400 Miles to Freedom* (2012)**

400 Miles to Freedom is a documentary film released in 2012, directed by the husband-and-wife team Avishai Mekonen and Shari Rothfarb Mekonen. Avishai is a refugee, his family having fled Ethiopia when religious persecution of the Ethiopian Jews (Beta Israel) commenced in the 1980s. The film had limited exposure in film festivals but is available worldwide on Vimeo.[86] The documentary is an autobiographical film, which follows the director Avishai as he traces his route back in order to get closure around the brutal kidnapping that he endured 20 years ago as a child in Sudan during his community's exodus out of Africa. Crucially, as a documentary co-conceived, filmed and edited by refugee subjects, this film invites us to consider whether having refugee individuals holding total directorial vision and control serves to grant agency to the film's refugee subjects.

The film establishes from its outset that Avishai is a refugee and a trained film director, having graduated from university on a film production course in Israel. For the production of this documentary, the husband-and-wife team are sole filmmakers, responsible for the entire process of the filming and editing. The two filmmakers can now address a specific idea through their film without having to seek the advice of any other party, giving them complete authorial authority over the development of the recorded and transmitted material of the film. This viewpoint can be interpreted as an example of 'indigenous media', which Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart define as 'work produced by members of the communities being documented and which frequently directly addresses issues of representation and identity politics by engaging with and challenging the preeminent political forms'.[87] This is very pertinent to Avishai and Shari, who have control over how they represent the figure of the refugee. Malkki argues that 'there is a tendency to universalise "the

[86] *400 Miles to Freedom*, dir. Avishayi Mekonen (Israel: Pacific Street Films, 2012). Available on Kanopy website at https://ntuuk.kanopy.com/video/400-miles-freedom (last accessed 4th April 2023).
[87] Pamela Wilson, Michelle Stewart, Juan Francisco Salazar and Jennifer Gauthier, eds., *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p5.

refugee" as a special kind of person, not only in the textual representation, but also in their photographic representation'.[88] These representations would be founded on assumptions that commonly dehumanised and objectify refugees while neglecting their political, cultural, and historical settings. An indigenous filmmaker has the ability to construct a film which encounters these themes of discrimination, without fear or consideration of decommissioning by those higher up in the corporate hierarchy as he is not employed by anyone. He is responsible for the dissemination of his own work. Jay Ruby, commenting in *Visual Anthropology Review*, argues that 'for some observers, indigenous media is a positive step towards self-determination, as it offers a possible means, social as well as political, for reproducing and re-imagining cultural identity for people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption'.[89] Social actors, who are able to produce media products can play a crucial part in changing the conversation about refugees. When refugees have access to video recording devices, they are not restricted in what kind of content they can produce by anyone or any institution. They can take use of this chance to produce content that reflects on themselves and honours their culture, beliefs, and identity. With this self-representation, Avishai and Shari are granted the freedom to uphold their identity regardless of the country they happen to be living in.. As a refugee, Avishai belongs to a group of marginalised experiences that have taken up residence in autobiographical narratives. With a multitude of platforms to exhibit autobiographical content such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook, many people who feel disenfranchised are now turning to creating self-made content. However, there are also difficulties associated with being an independent filmmaker. One is the fact that the director may need expert training in aspects of filmmaking. Many filmmakers become highly specialised in one area of the craft and

[88] Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries', p.384
[89] Jay Ruby, 'Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma', *Visual Anthropology Review* 7:2 (1991), pp.50-67.

would thus need to form a team or work with other filmmakers to make the film a co-creation. Not having this pool of talent has the direct effect of making the filmmaking process take longer to complete. Avishai and Shari conceded that it took them seven years to complete *400 Miles to Freedom.* Being a family project has the effect of having limited marketing and distribution prowess, and limited access and finance, resulting in the restricted distribution of the film. In order to submit films to most of the internationally recognised film festivals, a filmmaker has to pay, and this could also be a limiting factor if (s)he does not have sufficient funds.

400 Miles to Freedom touches on a number of themes which Avishai and Shari, granted agency through self-representation, explore in-depth. This analysis will focus on two: the celebration of one's own religion, history and peoples; and the nature of Avishai's autobiographical investigation that unearths and tries to resolve a moment of darkness from his past. The fact that Avishai was even able to document all these issues and bring them to the public's attention, without having to conform to some dominant preconceived notion of 'the refugee', should be celebrated. Regarding the dissident voices in our discourse, Colin Harvey makes the case that 'perhaps it is time to consider the advantages of perpetual critical "irritants"'.[90] For this reason, it is important to support, if not encourage, voices like Avishai's so that the underrepresented can continue to be represented.

The second theme, which forms the emotional core of the film, is Avishai's exploration of the kidnapping that happened to him when he was nine years old. This dark moment happened when he was taken from the refugee camp in Sudan by slave traders and disappeared for three weeks. This was after his family had fled Ethiopia and headed for the refugee camp in Sudan. He searches for answers from his parents, and from the individual

[90] Colin J Harvey, 'Dissident Voices: Refugees, Human Rights and Asylum in Europe', *Social & Legal Studies* 9:3 (2000), pp.367-396 (p.377).

who later saved him and brought him home. Avishai has been carrying this emotional burden for 20 years, and only now is he able to face up to it. The painful memories that refugees endure during their journeys affect how they integrate into new communities when they finally find sanctuary. In his interview, Avishai concedes that he always felt lost and not proud of himself even when he was living in the US, which is years after this incident. He goes on to say that he never felt that he belonged. Kazi Farzana contends that refugees hide their painful memories as they go about their daily lives.[91] Such painful memories could arise from the splitting up of families, or from witnessing the murder of parents and siblings. Rik Huizingaa and Bettina van Hoven define belonging as 'a desire for attachment in order to negotiate one's identity and to feel part of a larger group'.[92] Avishai later struggled with this in the US as he was not amongst people with whom he shared a history. This, he recounts, was one of the reasons why he had to embark on the journey to find closure and reconnect with his family. Being able to tell such a personal narrative is an important aspect of being a filmmaker. However, it is also vital that the filmmaker have control over the way in which these issues are explored. In the hands of an external director, exploration of this material could risk re-traumatising the filmic subject, or of misrepresenting or failing to understand the complexity of the psychological narrative. When controlled and indeed instigated by the indigenous filmmaker, however, this process has the potential to not only produce highly authentic material, but to be therapeutic and meaningful to the person making the film.

As a filmic model, *400 Miles to Freedom* suggests that placing the refugee subject in a position of filmic control facilitates the greatest complexity of voice, and of directorial vision. However, each of the documentary modes that have been explored display their own strengths when it comes to granting agency and voice to the refugee subject. In *Another News*

[91] Kazi Fahmida Farzana, *Memories of Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Contested Identity and Belonging*. (New York: Springer, 2017), p.201.
[92] Rik P Huizinga and Bettina van Hoven, 'Everyday geographies of belonging: Syrian refugee experiences in the Northern Netherlands', *Geoforum* 96 (2018), pp.309-317.

Story, we witness Wallace, a trained non-refugee director, building forms of trusting relationship with his filmic subjects in ways that actively promote the refugee voice among those who do not otherwise have access to filmic representation, and who do not in themselves possess the training or means to make a film. In *Midnight Traveller*, we see the fruitful nature of the collaboration between a refugee subject capable of producing amateur footage, who is thus able to control the visual content produced, and a trained expert with editorial and directorial experience who is supportive of the material's narrative complexity. Thus, the strength of the model depends on who it is that the film is engaging with, what technical skills they possess, and what qualities of voice are available to them. These are certainly issues that I have learned to be attentive to in my own filmmaking practice, as I shall now explore.

Between Director and Subject: Reflections on My Own Directorial Position

The three models of directorship presented within these films – those of the non-refugee director, the collaborative director, and the sole indigenous filmmaker – facilitate different forms of representation and agency for the refugee subject being filmed. As a filmmaker, however, these models present complexities for me, given the extent to which my own position falls between these models. As someone who comes from a refugee background and who has been through the asylum journey, I am able to claim the position of indigenous filmmaker – particularly given that my films often reflect on environments and experiences that are local to my own position, as is also the case in my PhD practice. However, my films are not straightforwardly autobiographical and generally engage with others from a refugee background who are going through their own journeys and experiences. This also locates me within the collaborative model. Thus, I do not simply bear an ethical responsibility towards myself but towards those who I am engaging with on film. I am also a trained filmmaker, and

thus have access to the technologies and strategies of professional filmmaking, rather than having to rely on amateur filming techniques. However, my position as 'trained filmmaker' is also nuanced by my refugee background, and by my awareness of the responsibilities I bear towards the subject-matter. How, then, do each of the films I have analysed feed into my own practice? This warrants further discussion.

Avishai's status as an indigenous filmmaker has provided a number of insights that have influenced my own negotiation of this position. Indigenous filmmakers have a tendency to disrupt dominant narratives, and they usually touch on subject content that is shunned by mainstream filmmakers, focussing on social justice issues that are being avoided by authorities. Thus, their intent is often politicised, bearing a desire to give voice to both themselves as marginalised and under-represented individuals, and the communities of which they are a part. My film, *Voices*, seeks to call out the hostile voices that I have faced. It seeks to protect and legitimise my own voicing of personal experience. It achieves this by speaking back to dominant mainstream discourses, as I engage in presentation of a politicised narrative about my filmmaking and its purpose in the world. I hope that it will inspire change.

As an integral part of these communities, I was therefore able to project my voice while also platforming a wider community's concerns. For both the documentary film *Voices* and the podcast *Journeys: A Talking Point*, though, I used my personal story as the backdrop to present the framework for the narrative arcs. From the first shot of *Voices*, I pointed out that I came from a background of activism, having tried to speak out against the ruling regime and government of Zimbabwe as a political activist. It was through this background that I have been a refugee, and I have experienced the silencing of my voice since then. This silencing continued into the years when I sought asylum, and the ensuing years as a recognised refugee.

While the documentary film *Voices* is thus partly autoethnographic, it is also clear that I wish to locate my work in relation to a wider refugee community of which I am a part. The collaborative model displayed in *Midnight Traveller* therefore raises interesting questions for me as someone who works with refugee subjects from the position of both a fellow refugee and director. In *Midnight Traveller*, the shared directorship between Fazili and Emilie proved effective as a vehicle for Fazili's self-representation. Since the whole family was involved in the recording, though at different levels, this granted Fazili access to all the footage for the film. No outsider would have had filmed anything of which he was not aware, meaning that Fazili and his family had total control of everything that would end up on Emilie's editing timeline. Emilie's contribution lies in the structuring of the story from the pieces that she is given. With more than three hundred hours of raw footage, the end product could easily have portrayed Fazili in a different light. Circumstances permitting, it would have been better for Fazili to have been present during the editing stage. This is because for the film to be called his film, he needs to have been responsible for the direction in its crafting, even if it meant just over-seeing the process. However, considering his circumstances which did not permit him to be in the USA where the film was edited, he had to surrender the footage and the whole editing process to Emilie to complete. For someone in his situation, being a refugee and not being able to complete the whole filming process, this collaboration worked well, though other scholars would question how effective his representation was if he could not choose what to include and what to take out.

There are a number of ways in which I sought to negotiate the collaborative working model within both the film and podcast. In both instances, I sought to present myself as a refugee subject first, and then as a director second. Taking this stance enabled me to channel and guide the conversations in both the film and the podcast. My main priority was for my fellow refugee contributors to take me as one of their own, for them to feel comfortable with

me first as someone who has been through what they went through, and one who knows exactly how it feels being in their shoes. Such a position would then bring with it trust, and an understanding that not only are their stories being taken seriously, but that there is genuine interest in engaging with them. This conscious decision to present myself as both a fellow refugee and a director sought to narrow the power imbalance between myself and all the refugee contributors in the film.

This strategy proved effective in a number of contexts within the making of both podcast and film. Having been granted the opportunity to work with a diverse group of people including pupils from NEST, how I related to them was crucial to getting the best out of them. This also included people of lived refugee experience that I had contacted via refugee social hubs and online. I first established cordial relationships with all my contributors, weeks or months before any filming was done. I did not know any of my subject participants prior to this project, and I had to get to know them before engaging with them on the project. I then progressed these cordial relationships with the intention to be accommodated as a friend or acquaintance whom they would trust and believe in.

An example of this was the experience that I had with Loraine, who is a person currently on the journey to asylum who appears in the film. I met her at a virtual conference organised by Counterpoints Arts, a UK organisation that supports and produces art by and about migrants and refugees. After several weeks, during which she invited me to attend some of the conferences at which she presented, we then agreed on when we should film our interview. During this interview, she was even prepared to show me some of her asylum application documentation, and the responses that she had received from the UK Home Office. I would not have had access to such personal and highly confidential information had I not developed and nurtured our relationship to a stage where she felt safe allowing me to see such paperwork. I used footage of this as cut-away in the film *Voices*, making sure that

the contents of these documents are out of focus for the viewer. Even this decision to keep the details out of focus came after discussion with her and we concluded that it was in her best interest. Thus, the trust-building in which I engaged with my 'subjects' was based on our shared experiences, and operated with a view to building rapport, respect, and equality, rather than enabling me to exploit them. I was particularly able to do this given my own experience of the asylum system.

In my filmmaking, then, I sought to draw out the best potential from both the political commitments of the indigenous filmmaker position, and from the collaborative working models displayed in both *Another News Story* and *Midnight Traveller*. An absolutely central question posed by this collaborative model, though, is that of consent when it comes to the act of engaging others in interview. This is an important issue in relation to the politics of the refugee subject's voice and agency, and this was something with which I was particularly concerned, given my desire to arrive at a more ethical mode of directorship in which refugees are able to assume voice and agency for themselves. We see this issue surface particularly in *Another News Story*. The reporters in this film 'dehumanise' the refugees with impunity through their filming and interviewing tactics, all for the sake of getting 'a breaking story' for their TV channels. The need to maintain a popular or dominant narrative was prioritised over the need for simple human decency, and journalistic etiquette. There was a general mistreatment of the refugees by the correspondents as 'the others' through objectification, and no initiative to empower them through genuine representation. When it comes to taking photographs or shooting video footage of refugees, the issue of asking for and being granted consent is a problematic one. The process of negotiating consent needs to be made when there is full disclosure, and by individuals who are well aware of what they are agreeing to. The dynamics of power between a film director and his or her refugee subject presents challenges when it comes to negotiation of consent, as there exists a likelihood that full

disclosure could result in consent not being granted. This gives rise to 'the myth of informed consent'. Carolyn Anderson and Thomas Benson, in their support for informed consent in the production of documentaries, argue that it is a contested issue as, unless the consent was given by someone with mental competence under conditions free from coercion and fully aware of the outcomes, then it is not valid.[93] They contend that documentary filmmakers hardly ever anticipate the potential difficulties their subjects may encounter. A woman coming out of a dinghy holding a child, having travelled two days without food, may appear physically able to give consent but is likely in no mental state to offer this. When addressing the possibility of exploitation, advice, consent, and cooperation are required but they are not enough. It is stated that the moral responsibility for authorship still rests with the director even in collectively created films. Although including several voices in a documentary can give subjects a sense of empowerment, it does not absolve the filmmaker of their moral and ethical duties to the work. When interviewees are prompted to give their consent after watching the recording and are given the opportunity to speak for themselves on camera, there is a noticeable shift in the documentary's tone and authority. People get more power when they are asked to actively participate in the production of a film about their lives. Cooperative projects become collaborations when the subjects and the filmmakers agree on the film's structure and content.

My solution to the complexities surrounding the issue of consent was to involve the 'subjects' of the film as actively as possible in its creation, thus fully embracing the collaborative model. For instance, I involved the participants in the crafting of the interviews, and how they would want to appear in the film. Though I had autonomous control in the construction of the film, I sought the assistance of the refugee subjects in crafting the

[93] Carolyn Anderson and Thomas W Benson, 'Direct cinema and the myth of informed consent: The case of Titicut Follies' in *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television*, ed. Larry P Gross, John Stuart Katz and Jay Ruby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.58-90.

questions. In all my conversations with the refugee subjects, what emerged clearly was that this film needed to be a celebration of the diversity of refugees' backgrounds, journeys to sanctuary and pathways to finding their voice. The refugees and asylum seekers were not shy when talking of some dark periods in their journeys, but we decided that this film should not portray them as helpless victims of some of these atrocities. Such decisions made them feel that they had input in how the film would portray them. I found it important to involve them in these decisions so that they would know I valued both their input in the narratives they shared, and into how they would be seen by an audience. Laura Nyahuye, for instance, chose to be filmed in a space where she creates costumes for the refugees that she works with. It was her decision to have this space be part of the mise-en-scène, and this added value to what we recorded. This idea of involving the interviewees in the process worked well in that the participants not only became subjects in the filming process, but co-creators with me.

Interview strategy was another issue to which I gave tremendous thought in order to consider how best to generate, enable and platform voice for the people in my film and podcast. I employed different approaches to this, depending on the context in which I was working. For instance, when I recorded the series which featured pupils from the Nottingham Education Sanctuary Team (NEST) in Nottingham for the podcast, I chose not to interview each individual pupil on their own. These pupils came into the UK as unaccompanied refugees or asylum seekers, and with English not their first language, most felt more comfortable contributing in the company of their school friends and countryfolk than in a one-to-one conversation. I thus decided that the best mode of engaging with their voices in the podcast would be to employ a group set-up in which I recorded conversations generated between them. My position in this set-up would then be to provide questions or topics which would spark conversations, but I would step back and let the discussions develop organically. I would moderate these conversations and provide some guidance when I felt that they were

going on a tangent, though I tried as much as I could to not influence whatever was being said. However, I did decide to mobilise my position as refugee filmmaker in order to encourage students to use their voices. By first sharing my story with them, I gave them the confidence to share their own stories with the other group members. Through interactions in the group discussions, my voice emboldened the pupils to know that it was alright to be different, and that this was something to be celebrated and not to be a cause for concern. For the pupils who did not speak any English, I encouraged them to speak in their first language, and I had their friends interpret to the group what they had said. No one felt left out, and we overcame language barriers. I gave a chance to everyone who wanted to speak and had something to say. There were two pupils who did not want to say anything, so I respected their decisions and encouraged them to stay within the group if they wanted to hear their friends' stories. By doing so, I removed the element of voicelessness amongst the pupils, as I accepted that at times choosing not to speak was a form of using one's voice. This approach in fact had mixed success, however. Because I stepped away from a position of control within the interviews, it meant that I was reliant on the participants developing the conversation for themselves. However, many were reluctant to do this and engaged in a very straightforward manner with the initial questions, then moving on, as though it was a school exercise. This meant that in fact, although I had intended to create space for voice by stepping away from my authority as director, voice emerged in more limited form within the podcast than I had intended.

I therefore trialled different interview forms for the film *Voices*. Here, I made the decision to be onscreen during the commentary sections and not the interviews. This was so that I would not take away the focus from the participants during the interviews. Having only the interviewee in the frame of the shot meant that I would be removing the visual power imbalance between myself as the director and refugee as the subject. In instances where both

the director and the subject are in the frame, there is an expectation from an audience to see the power differentials. This director off-camera position meant that I avoided a face-to-face 'interrogation style' interview set-up, which is less intimidating for the interviewee. It was easier for the subjects to ask me to repeat a question which they had not heard properly, whilst I was off camera than if I was in frame. However, I did decide to employ a more interventionist style of interview within the film, in order to encourage stronger and fuller vocal performance from the film's subjects, and in the process minimise the format of 'voice of God' narration where I would be regarded as an authoritative expert. As I learned from *Another News Story* in particular, the interview style is critical when it comes to building trust and facilitating rather than simply demanding voice from the interviewee. Thus, it is important to consider what voice I employ as director and interviewer, even when my words are not heard in the final film. Analysing Wallace's interaction with Nahasen in *Another News Story* proved very useful here. In the interaction between director and interviewer in *Another News Story*, we see how, over the course of several days, including embarking on train journeys together, Wallace developed a cordial relationship with Nahasen in which it becomes clear that he wanted her to feel in control, and to trust him. The questions that he asked her were more open-ended, so that she could express herself in a way with which she felt comfortable. He allowed her to lead conversations when he was filming her, and thus in turn she controlled the narrative. He was conscious of when and where to interview her, and almost all the time it was when she was seated comfortably. In as much as he had the ultimate decision as to what to film, in instances where he wanted to engage with the other refugees, he granted them agency so as to empower them to represent themselves well. This was also the case in my own filmmaking practice, in terms of how I guided my interviewees through respectful questioning that enabled them to lead the discussion. Indeed, there were instances when my interviewees pointed out that they didn't want to answer specific questions which I

intended to pose. This also included instances when the subjects wanted time to think of their responses. I did not want to rush them in any way, but to give them as much space to think of ways of expressing themselves with which they felt comfortable. Such breaks in conversations during filming would have made the footage look awkward had both of us been in that frame. Just editing my question out of such footage when I was out of the frame was easier than if we had been in the middle of a flowing conversation, with both of us in the frame.

Before I could make these technical decisions, however, I had to grapple with the more pertinent question of whether to include my own voice within the film or not. I could have settled for projecting another refugee or other contributor's voice in the project, but I chose to use my voice as that of the overarching narrator, in order to lend a sense of coherence and of personal investment to the film. Considering my positionality as both a refugee and a filmmaker, I decided that my voice would be legitimate and indeed appropriate in bringing out the issues of refugee voice, agency, and representation. From a lived experience position, and given my advocacy for refugee self-representation, I am using the medium of film and audio to aggregate and platform different refugee voices. My voice thus comes to curate and unify these different voices through a narrative that creates space in which refugees can speak of their diverse experiences, concerns and feelings about voice, and challenge stereotypes of the 'speechless emissary'. Because of my own lived experience and investment in the subject, I did not feel any pressure to frame the refugees and asylum seekers as helpless or as victims. Instead, I endeavoured to show that we are independent and in charge of our lives. For the asylum-seeker contributors who stated in the film that they had faced xenophobic and racist abuses, I made it a point to give them the platform to raise these issues as they wished, 'calling out' instances of wrongdoing. These were not necessarily the issues that I had expected them to raise. However, by allowing their voices and the stories

they wished to share to guide the film, I feel I arrived at a model that allowed me to let the film 'speak with' refugees instead of just 'speaking for' them.

Clearly, then, the extent to which voice and agency are granted to refugees proves pivotal to the ethical nature of documentary practice. However, these are difficult issues to address, and there is no straightforward solution as to how best to grant agency and voice to the film's subjects. Instead, the director must assess the context in which they are working, the refugee subject's abilities and the extent to which they possess the desire to tell their own story when considering how best to grant voice and consequent agency to the film's subjects. Within my own work, I came to understand that it is important for me to employ my dual roles as both refugee director and subject in a manner that is flexible and that above all is guided by integrity and respect for those with whom I am collaborating. My empathy for their experiences, alongside my ability to perceive the value of their voices to the wider narrative, allowed me, I hope, to produce a film in which I reveal the variety of ways in which refugees have found voice – while unifying these into a narrative that enables them to move the audience more powerfully and coherently than they would without my overarching directorial vision and voice.

Through this process of filming fellow refugees, I have endeavoured to deconstruct the representation of 'othering' by presenting multifaceted and empowering narratives. Cognisant of my positionality, I managed to capture more holistic constructions of refugees and asylum seekers' individual circumstances whilst avoiding over-simplification of their depiction, and with artists such as Blessing and Manjit, I managed to bring out the essence of their political and creative prowess. For Bridget and Abdesalaam who spoke about the hate crimes they experienced, they commented that recording them had provided an avenue in which they felt they could vent emotions that they have long held inside. They felt that this was the beginning of a new chapter in their lives where they were less burdened by past

events. In doing so, my refugee contributors acknowledged that the film challenged limited understandings of the complexities of individual refugees as it shifted from stories of trauma to narratives of memory, strengths and hopes for the future.

Chapter 3

Aesthetics as Power:

Framing refugee bodies and material objects in *Human Flow* and *For Sama*.

In the production of documentary films about refugees and asylum seekers, aesthetics has a direct impact on the visual agency granted to refugees, serving as a means either to imbue them with the authority of self-representation or indeed to reduce them to stereotypes. Indeed, Roland Bleiker argues that 'how the refugee subject appears on screen informs and reinforces public opinion and hence political and social policy'.[94] Michael Fischer confirms the power of film as ''cultural critique' but also as a tool to 'reshape debate', especially for people from refugee backgrounds who, if supported, can use their agency to intervene in public debate to tell their own stories'.[95] In this chapter I explore these claims by investigating how the dynamics of mise-en-scène, cinematography and camera framing and editing produce aesthetic effects that impact upon refugees' visual agency. In particular, I focus on the framing of refugee bodies and also explore how the aesthetic importance attached to material objects plays a role in building a narrative around refugee experience. I also examine the ramifications of such issues in my own documentary filmmaking practices, especially considering my positionality as a refugee and as an advocate for refugee agency, considering how that affects my aesthetic choices in arranging the subjects and objects in my own documentary film. Ultimately, I conclude that aesthetics plays a vital role in providing visual agency for the figure of the refugee.

[94] Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson, 'The visual dehumanisation of refugees', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48: 4 (2013), pp.398-416 (p.400).
[95] Michael MJ Fischer, 'Starting Over: How, What, and for Whom Does One', in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp.126-150 (p.126).

Documentary aesthetics are comprised of a number of different features, which I explore within this chapter. Mise-en-scène proves central to the construction of cinematographic power relations. It refers to the visual arrangement of participants and objects in the camera frame and includes attention to aspects such as gesture, costume and make-up, and lighting.[96] This guides the audience's attention towards different sections of the frame. Cinematography, meanwhile, refers to the use of cameras and lighting equipment to record all the various aspects of the mise-en-scène, thus contributing to the viewers' emotional response and aesthetic experience.[97] In documentary films, these elements are under the director's control, providing creative choices which shape viewers' experience of the film. Thus, within the context of documentary work portraying refugees, they prove critical to the way in which refugee identities and experiences are constructed. Of particular interest to this study, though, is the way in which power comes to function through aesthetics. How does the aesthetic style in which a documentary is shot – from the production values to the specific camera angles employed – influence the way in which refugees are portrayed on screen? Indeed, how do aesthetic choices prove empowering or disempowering for refugee subjects? What, then, might constitute an aesthetic register that avoids dehumanising objectification, and even works towards the provision of agency? By comparing and contrasting two refugee-directed documentaries, *Human Flow* (2017) directed by Ai Weiwei, and *For Sama* (2019) directed by Waad Al-Kateab, this chapter will begin to answer some of these questions.

Production values play a significant role in the creation of a documentary aesthetic, and it is important to acknowledge from the outset that *Human Flow* and *For Sama* are at different ends of the scale here. *Human Flow* was produced by more than two hundred and

[96] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. Vol. 9. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), p.10.
[97] Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction*. 3rd Edition. (London: Lawrence King, 2011)

fifty crew members and filmed in twenty-three countries with extensive use of drones and expensive professional Arri Alexa camera equipment that was visible in some of the interviews that Weiwei had with Princess Dana Firas of Jordan (Fig.3.1), or the students in Palestine.[98] The camera details are also available on the *Human Flow* IMDB webpage.[99]

Fig 3.1. Camera set-up - Screenshot from *Human Flow* (timecode at 00:37:12)

[98] Ai Weiwei, dir, *Human Flow* (London: Altitude Film Distribution, 2017) (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6573444/trivia/?ref_=tt_trv_trv) [Last accessed 23/10/21]
[99] Ai Weiwei, dir, *Human Flow*.

Fig. 3.2 – Camera set-up - Screenshot from *For Sama* (timecode at 00:32:45).

In comparison, *For Sama* was filmed on a mobile phone and a handheld camcorder which is visible in some of the shots (Fig 3.2), and mainly within the confines of Aleppo, Syria when it was under intense bombardment. Both films garnered international recognition with *For Sama* winning seventy-one awards including BAFTA Best Documentary Cannes Film Festival, European Film Festival, and the Amsterdam International DocFest amongst others.[100] *Human Flow* won seven awards including at the Venice Film Festival and the ZagrebDox, and received nominations in the Hamburg Film Festival and the Adelaide Film Festival.[101] Both these films remain available worldwide via online streaming services, and *For Sama* is available via Channel 4 public service television in the UK. In spite of their differing production values, though, it is clear that both are effective at engaging the

[100] Waad Al-Kateab, dir, *For Sama* (A list of the awards and nominations that *For Sama* has won so far). (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9617456/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.) [Last accessed 12/10/2021].
[101] Ai Weiwei, dir, Human Flow (A list of the awards and nominations that *Human Flow* has won so far). (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6573444/awards/?ref_=tt_awd). [Last accessed 12/10/2021].

audience, and this makes it interesting to consider how they approach their subject-matter aesthetically.

Human Flow traces the migration of vast numbers of displaced people forced from their homes to escape war, violence, persecution and famine at the height of Europe's 'refugee crisis'.[102] It was filmed in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon and Turkey as people made their way to more stable countries in search of places of sanctuary. The film focuses on the precarity of their situations, after they were forced to leave their homes and embark on treacherous journeys with minimal provisions, moving towards uncertain destinations to countries which not only might not allow them in, but might be inhospitable when they are allowed in, out of the host communities' fear of disruption of cultural identity, language and values.[103]

Weiwei's status as a high-profile artist of substantial cultural capital has a direct bearing on his aesthetic approach to humanitarian issues. Indeed, as we shall see, it results in a particular register of aesthetic choices that – while impressive for their technical prowess – arguably romanticise the figure of the refugee through their high-scale production values, turning them into 'works of art' rather than enabling them to be seen as subjects capable of agency. Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei creates contemporary art in the fields of sculpture, installation, architecture, curating, photography, and cinema. He is also a human rights activist whose work often engages in social, political, and cultural criticism. On his website, he is described as:

> …renowned for making strong aesthetic statements that resonate with timely phenomena across today's geopolitical world. From architecture to installations,

[102] Esther Greussing and Hajo G. Boomgaarden, 'Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe's 2015 refugee crisis', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43: 11(2017), pp. 1749-1774.
[103] Liette Gilbert, 'The Discursive Production of a Mexican Refugee Crisis in Canadian Media and Policy', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39:5 (2013), pp.827–843.

social media to documentaries, Ai uses a wide range of mediums as expressions of new ways for his audiences to examine society and its values…[104]

This focus on making an aesthetic statement, I would argue, leads Weiwei to not shoot in an observational cinéma vérité style, but rather a more choreographed manner in which he orchestrates how he wants the set-up and movement in the frame to be. Weiwei emphasises the creation of his photos as well, as he is often shown working with his camera crew to set up interviews and coordinate B-roll footage. Thus, Weiwei's aesthetic can be viewed as prioritising scale and choreographed impression in order to be as immediately striking as possible to the audience. Consequently, through this choreography some of his art has at times been described as too staged or artificial, instead of being left to exude its naturalness without too much prearrangement: not everything needs to be aesthetically pleasing.

In stark contrast with the emphasis on scale of global mass displacement evidenced in *Human Flow*, *For Sama* chooses instead an intimate and domestic vision that focuses primarily on a woman and child as autobiographical subjects. This film is set in Aleppo, Syria, which is a live war zone, and shows the Syrian government forces attacking their own citizens. The director, Waad Al-Kataeb, is a student who then becomes a mother and a wife during the course of the film. The film depicts the fighting spirit of the average citizen against their own government that wants to silence and thwart any opposition voices. These humble settings make for an intimate journey through the rubble of bombed hospitals and homes. However, smaller in scale as this focus may be compared to *Human Flow*, it perhaps proves all the more effective at conveying the human impact of forced migration, through the relatability of its unshowy cinematography. It achieves this by showcasing greater proximity

[104] Content on Ai Weiwei's website describing his work: (https://www.aiweiwei. com/about) [Last accessed 27.08.2021].

to the human figure, and the internal struggles that individuals and families go through. This depicts relatability in the everyday and highlights the fragility of the human spirit in everyday decisions we take.

Aesthetic register is determined partly by necessity in *For Sama*. Al-Ketaeb's fight against her government is on show in her mobile phone footage from her early days whilst still at Aleppo University in 2012. The repressive regime that they lived under with her family finally led them to flee their country. She states in the film that, as students, filming on mobiles was their only way of showing the world that they were fighting for their freedom after having felt betrayed by the Syrian army and government. It was during these 'militant days' that she commenced the video diary format of reporting the events that were happening in her life. Footage from those protests show that they were involved in running battles with the army and government security services. Her cinematography thus morphed into a live action cinéma vérité style, more akin to militant filming with the purpose of documenting and creating political ideas as a form of activism.[105] The aesthetic attributes of this form include shaky camera work due to hand-held camera movement, grainy and sometimes out-of-focus footage, use of natural light, zooming in or out, and continuous action including following subjects on foot even when they walk out of frame.[106] Film theorist Stephen Mamber argues that 'cinéma vérité is an attempt to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of filmmaking'.[107] Thus Al-Kateab's adopted film form has the tendency of bringing out realism in the shot, thus presenting her subjects through an uncompromising lens. This is witnessed in the footage that she shoots even after she had left university and was living with her husband in the hospitals,

[105] Davide Panagia, 'Cinéma Vérité and the Ontology of Cinema: A Response to Roy Germano', *Perspectives on Politics* 12:3 (2014), p.688–90.
[106] Jeanne Hall, 'Realism as a Style in Cinéma Vérité: A Critical Analysis of 'Primary.' *Cinema Journal* 30:4 (1991), pp.24–50.
[107] Stephen Mamber, 'Cinema Verite in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary', *Film Quarterly* 28:2 (1974), pp.13-21.

which then constitute the main location for the documentary. The film chronicles Al-Kateab's life story over the course of the five-year Syrian city of Aleppo's revolt, and provides a non-linear narrative of her falling in love, getting married and giving birth to Sama, all while conflict is escalating around her. The film presents the unrelenting spectacle of death in its raw, live action format. The encounters during events in the film lend it credibility as the director adopts an observational mode.[108] In this convention, the camera is silent and unobtrusive, becoming the audience's eyes and ears. Application of this documentary mode in significant sections of the documentary film by Al-Kateab would have been influenced by her journalistic background. While low budget, then, there is a sense of personal and political necessity that underpins her aesthetic choices in this film, and which makes it highly engaging to the viewer.

The framing of refugee bodies

As we have established, it is not so much personal necessity as political motivation that drives Weiwei's own aesthetic practice. This leads to a very different mode of engagement with refugee lives and people, though, and we see it most strikingly in the way in which he frames refugee bodies in his film. This is a loaded subject: the framing of bodies in cinematography affects how they are perceived, and in turn determines their agency within the narrative. Weiwei is very careful in his choreography of bodies in the frame and draws on his experience of installations to place the subject of the refugee within the frame of the camera, as is symptomatic in his many artistic installations and art creations.[109] He produces works full of metaphor and symbolism that highlight societal injustice, and that at times prove controversial. Such controversy was generated by his art piece in which he recreated

[108] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), p.132.
[109] Ai Weiwei's art creations on the Royal Academy website. (https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/ai-weiwei-13-works-to-know) [Last accessed 23/09/2022]

the scene in the photo taken by Niluer Demir of the Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi,[110] who had drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and was washed-ashore. Weiwei lay face down on a Lesbos beach in the same posture in which Aylan was discovered.

Fig. 3.3 - Artist Ai Weiwei poses in Lesbos, Greece

https://edition.cnn.com/style/gallery/ai-weiwei-aylan-kurdi-syria/index.html

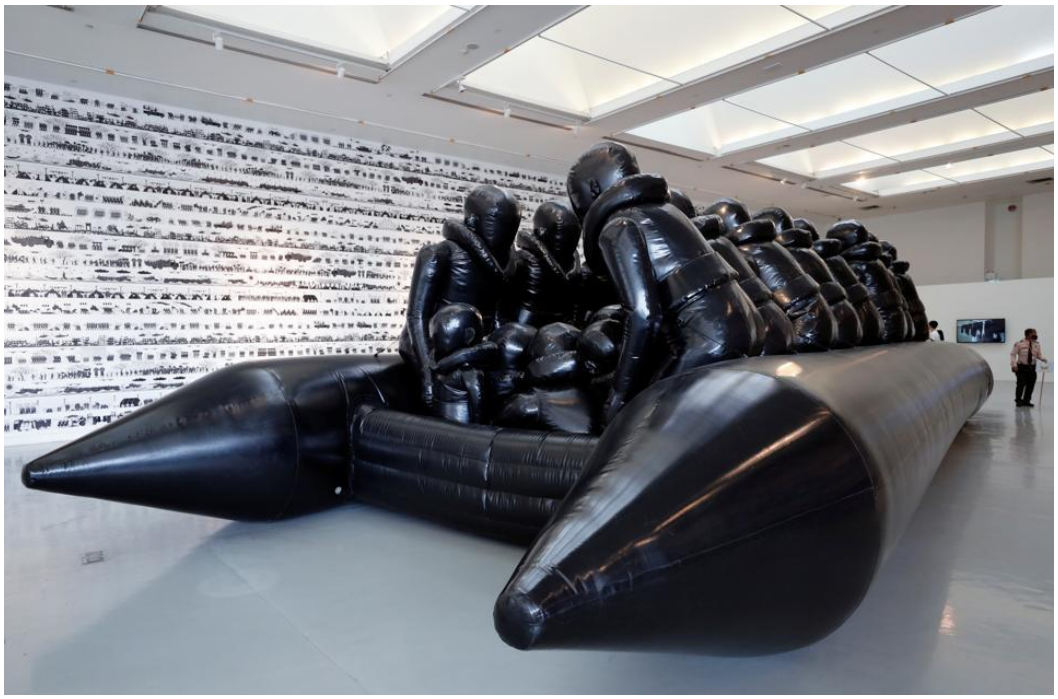
As he places himself in the centre of this image, he focuses the attention of the viewer on his figure that appears "washed up on the beach".[111] By assuming the identity of the victim, he may be attempting to draw attention to the suffering of refugees. However, it is also a direct form of appropriation. According to Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites, 'appropriations are crucial to the creation and reception of icons'.[112] In this case, the body of Aylan has served as an icon reminiscent of the European 'refugee crisis'. His image stirred

[110] I have chosen not to reproduce Aylan Kurdi's photo in which his body is washed ashore. This is out of respect of the young boy, and also to avoid creating a little boy's death into a meme.
[111] Mette Mortensen, 'Constructing, confirming, and contesting icons: The Alan Kurdi imagery appropriated by humanitywashedashore, Ai Weiwei, and Charlie Hebdo', *Media, Culture & Society* 39:8 (2017), pp.1142-1161 (p.1143).
[112] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

public outrage, which drove European leaders to take action and open up their borders to displaced refugees.[113] Appropriations play a crucial role in the iconisation process since they reinforce and validate the image's iconic status by reusing it. However, critical voices such as Dabashi point to 'the differences in hierarchy in depictions of refugees: between Aylan Kurdi, a regular Syrian-Kurdish refugee family member, and Weiwei, a significant artist; between the fortunate and safe, and the suffering or dead'.[114] Thus, Weiwei's focus on the 'refugee body' as a symbol and aesthetic object that comes to stand as a metaphor for the broader pathos of a global condition is problematic when it is viewed from the perspective of the refugee subject that he will be 'using' or working with at that particular time.

Fig. 3.4 - The Law of the Journey art installation by Ai Weiwei[115]

Photo credit: Jorge Silva/REUTERS



[113] Seth M Holmes and Castaneda Heide, 'Representing the "European refugee crisis" in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death', *Journal Ethnologist* 43:1 (2016), pp.12-24.
[114] Hamid Dabashi, 'A portrait of the artist as a dead boy: is Ai Weiwei's portrayal of Aylan Kurdi's death his greatest work of suicidal art', *Al Jazeera English* 4 (2016), https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2016/2/4/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-dead-boy (last accessed 10th April 2023).
[115] Anon, 'PHOTOS | Art installation by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei 'Law of the Journey (Prototype B)'', *Hindustan Times*, 1st December 2020 https://www.hindustantimes.com/photos/art-and-culture/photos-art-installation-by-chinese-artist-ai-weiwei-law-of-the-journey-prototype-b/photo-j8wklTfQMBCzrU0kohhasO.html, (last accessed 30th May 2023).

Weiwei's artwork displays a tendency to compose the refugee body as carefully constructed aesthetic subject who conveys symbolic pathos. Fig. 3.4 shows an art installation by Weiwei that is titled *Law of the Journey* that features a 60-meter-long boat filled with more that three hundred faceless refugee men, women, and children. This piece serves as a reminder of the global refugee crisis and is meant to draw attention to the plight of refugee around the world.

Fig. 3.5 - Screenshot from *Human Flow* of Ai Weiwei comforting a woman in grief.

Image from *Human Flow*, 2017, dir. Ai Weiwei, 24 Media Production Company.

In Fig. 3.5 above from *Human Flow*, a refugee woman (name not provided in the film) is being interviewed by Weiwei at a refugee camp that has been set up temporarily. Earlier, this camp had been raided by the police and border officials who informed the refugees that they would not be getting documentation to allow them to proceed with their journeys but would be facing deportation or arrest. In the narration that the woman is giving, she is lamenting her ordeal of walking for sixty days with her son without any idea of where

she is going, and no one having shown her how to claim asylum, or where to re-start her life. At this stage she then gesticulates with her hands, having been gripped with emotion.

Weiwei chooses to set up this interview so that he and the woman are in the centre of the frame. She has her head bowed and her back to the camera to conceal her identity. She has a hunched over position revealing vulnerability and fragility, and her hijab and dark clothing are symbols of modesty and devotion to religion. The background is constructed from basic temporary material which can be disassembled at any time, showing the liminality of her situation. The space is composed of a low wooden table that looks fixed to the dusty floor, and with nothing on top of it, a collapsible chair, an empty bucket in the corner for collecting dripping water, and an empty tumbler on a shelf that is by a water tap. All this points to a very basic and temporary setting. Weiwei positions himself so that his face is illuminated by the light and is identifiable. He features in this frame like a saviour, holding the woman's hands to comfort her, and then offers a bottle of water and tissue paper for the woman to wipe away her tears. He is portrayed as the stable force with power and agency in this scenario. A single-source soft lighting technique that creates diffused illumination, weaker contrasts and light shadows is used here, and it accentuates Weiwei because the viewer's eyes are directed to his face which is warmer in colour than anything else in the frame.[116] The position that he has maintained in which he is looking down on the woman also gives him dominance. Instead of stopping the camera from recording this grief-stricken woman, Weiwei shapes this sequence by intentionally getting involved in the frame and dominating the shot, thereby rendering the refugee as a helpless subject without agency.

This kind of visualisation of the refugee subject as humanitarian symbol has further been explored by Heather Johnson where she contends that 'asylum policies and

[116] David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction* (12th Edition). (New York: McGraw-Hill. 2010), p.125

humanitarian activities within the refugee regime rely upon discourses of victimisation that dehumanise the refugee'.[117] She argues that present day refugees are seen as vulnerable and destitute, with humanitarian organisations capitalising on the images of refugee women and children to depict mass mobilisation. In humanitarian discourse, the representation of refugees is problematic, as there is still the depiction of the figure of the refugee as a vulnerable entity requiring rescuing. The following images are from a United Nations documentary on refugees.

Fig. 3.6. Screenshot from *The UN Refugee Agency: Our Story* (timecode 00:00:12) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ymxq7D2DfA&t=18s (last accessed 10th April 2023).

In Fig. 3.6 above, the figure of the individual refugee in the frame is solemn, dejected, and in need of saving. There is no happiness on his face, and it is this kind of sadness that humanitarian organisations capitalise on for their funding drives. The construction of Weiwei's interaction with refugees in *Human Flow* can be seen as his refusal to permit the

[117] Heather L Johnson, 'Click to donate: Visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee', *Third World Quarterly* 32:6 (2011), pp.1015-1037.

interpretation of his own status as a political refugee in Europe as being distinct from the requests for asylum made by the thousands of refugees coming on Europe's beaches. In a documentary film produced for DW Documentary as they accompanied him whilst he was filming *Human Flow*, he comments on a group of refugees who had just disembarked from a dinghy, saying:

> …you cannot use words to describe. They are so innocent, vulnerable and they risk their lives. This is just so surreal. I'm speechless, I don't know what to say…[118]

It is therefore arguable from such interviews that when Weiwei is interacting with refugee subjects, though his words might lean towards showing solidarity with them, his views of 'them' as innocent, vulnerable and beyond words affirms the humanitarian reduction of refugees to 'icons of suffering'.

Fig. 3.7 – Screenshot from *Human Flow*: Ai Weiwei with recently arrived refugee in Lesbos, Greece (timecode at 00:04:38)

[118]Ai Weiwei, dir., *Ai Weiwei Drifting - Art, Awareness and the Refugee Crisis* (DW Documentary, 2017). Available online at YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MkcTI00_uw&t=54s (last accessed 25th October 2022).

Fig. 3.8 – Screenshot from *Human Flow*: Ai Weiwei on ship with recently arrived refugees in Lesbos, Greece (timecode at 00:16:23).

This humanitarian power dynamic is also evident in Fig. 3.7 and 3.8, which are screenshots taken from *Human Flow*, in which we see Weiwei assuming the figure of a 'saviour' of the recently arrived refugees in Lesbos, Greece. In Fig. 3.7 he is seen hugging a refugee who has just disembarked, cold, wet and hungry, from a dinghy. He then assumes a position of power by leading this refugee to where the hot tea is being served, all the while serving as his protector by putting his hand over him. He is modelling interpersonal compassion and care but, perhaps unintentionally, underscoring power differentials. The visual effect is that the refugee is powerless and has relinquished his agency into the hands of the one who is 'taking care' of him, in this case Weiwei. Fig. 3.8 shows Weiwei on board a vessel with refugees who are now being transported from Lesbos for immigration processing. He finds another refugee who is still in this state of precarity and goes on to take a selfie of the two of them from his mobile phone. The film footage does not show how they had negotiated the eventual agreement to have a photo taken. In this photo, Weiwei chooses to

position himself in front of the refugee and appears bigger and in control. The aesthetic power dynamics here are slanted in Weiwei's favour, as he is seen taking charge and controlling the selfie-stick. The refugee appears to be just following what Weiwei is saying, having again relinquished his power and agency. The effect is that these images create an aesthetic power imbalance for the viewer, but more importantly, for the refugee with whom he will be in the camera frame, who does not experience any control over how they are represented. These images thus point to a representation of refugee bodies that Malkki refers to as the 'objectification of refugee experiences'.[119] She expands on this by describing the identification of refugees as a group, rather than in terms of their individual humanity, whose borders and members removed from past events and are therefore reduced to helpless victims, obscuring the specificity of different types of refugee experiences and leaving them voiceless and without agency. Weiwei's presentation of refugees in these images aligns with this trope of refugee helplessness and their need for someone to offer support for their wellbeing. The refugee's body is reduced to a mute image, which promotes the idea that they are less human than everyone else, thus becoming a 'thing' to be utilised, resulting in refugee identities being easily ignored, simplified or conflated. Such dehumanisation occurs even when one has the best of intentions to show support and offer help. What some of those in positions to offer support fail to consider is the refugee's sense of independence and the need to be recognised as an individual even in their state of misfortune. Within the camera frame, this independence refers to the capability of the refugee to adopt responses which rely on technical skills, or coping mechanisms. A simple way would have been for Weiwei to give the phone to the refugee to take the selfie instead of Weiwei to take the photo himself. The footage shows other refugees taking their own photos with their families and friends, and Weiwei could

[119] Malkki, 'Speeches Emissaries', p.377.

easily have done the same, allowing the refugee to take the photo instead, thus altering his framing within the image and also, therefore, the representation of him as being empowered.

In contrast, film director Al-Kateab seems to have minimal to no control over the bodies that become part of the mise-en-scène in the frame of the camera as she shoots *For Sama*. Though this could be seen as the same for Weiwei in some of the images with the dinghy footage, Al-Kateab does not try to dominate her subjects. The events that unfold in the hospital settings in *For Sama* are not planned but are spontaneous and unpredictable as they dynamically enter the narrative action. With minimal voice-over narration during the bombardment of Aleppo by the Syrian government, the footage brings the viewer as close to the live action and emotion as possible. Bill Nichols claims that this style of filming 'captures people in action and let[s] the viewer come to conclusions about them unaided by any implicit or explicit commentary'.[120] Cinéma vérité provides a platform from which the subjects and filmmakers can mediate their own representation. Sarah Pink and Leder Mackley put forward the idea that 'supporting participants to tell their own stories can facilitate a deep understanding of how people experience their daily lives and process understandings of self-identity'.[121] Al-Kateab deliberately surrenders her privileged and powerful role as a director by adopting a position of advocacy and enabler of the refugees she is filming, and this affects the aesthetics in her footage. In significant parts of the film, she is more of a cinematographer than a director where her focus is just capturing the footage of the film rather than directing or guiding the subjects' interactions within the frame. This is another area where she is different to Weiwei, thus her footage is more observational and more organic.

[120] Bill Nichols, 'The Voice of Documentary', reprinted in Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods,* Vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press,1985), p.261.
[121] Sarah Pink and Kerstin Leder Mackley, 'Video and a Sense of the Invisible: Approaching Domestic Energy Consumption through the Sensory Home', *Sociological Research Online* 17:1 (2012), pp.87-105.

Fig. 3.9 – Hospital Scene 1 -Screenshot from *For Sama* (timecode at 00:25:53)

Fig. 3.10 – Hospital Scene 2 - Screenshot from *For Sama* (timecode at 00:26:10)

Fig. 3.9 and 3.10 are screenshots from *For Sama* which highlight the cinéma vérité style that Al-Kateab uses in filming. In Fig. 3.9, the young boy is narrating what happened when their neighbour's house was bombed, and his brother was hit by the shrapnel as he was on the balcony facing the bombed house. Al-Kateab is using a handheld camcorder, and there is lots of camera movement in this sequence as she tries to get the young boy into frame. The image is out of focus as the boy keeps moving around due to the shock that he has had after

witnessing his brother hit by the shrapnel. His face and body are still covered in dust, probably from the rubble of the damaged house where he retrieved his brother. Using the available light in this hospital corridor the camera has been able to capture the details of his face and eyes, revealing the emotional pain and the tears streaming down his cheeks.

The bright reflection on the right side of the frame draws the viewer's attention to that side of the frame instead of the left side which is darker. This, compounded with the way the boy has been centred in the frame, then forces the eyes of the viewer to concentrate on his face. This frame composition has been rather spontaneous and intuitive, and not set up. Due to the confined space limiting movement in that part of the hospital, and the activity due to the injured being brought to seek medical attention, Al-Kateab would not have had time to frame the boy according to the 'rule of thirds' compositional rule which usually leads to more appealing visuals.[122] However, for aesthetic purposes, there are other elements that can be considered as well such as content, symmetry, depth of field, motion blur, balancing elements, 'the golden ratio',[123] colour harmony, amongst others.[124] How Al-Kateab would have approached this shot is by focusing on the eyes of the boy in the frame, and making sure that there was sufficient light to bring out the features on his face, including the stream of tears. By lowering the camera to the boy's eye-level, she affords him an equal platform on which he is not looked down upon by the viewer. Also making sure that there is no other person in the frame serves to remove competition for frame presence. This in turn puts the boy in a position of narrative authority as the attention remains on him. Though she has not

[122] Rule of Thirds: 'A type of composition in which an image is divided evenly into thirds, both horizontally and vertically, and the subject of the image is placed at the intersection of those dividing lines, or along one of the lines itself to create a strong balanced image'. David Präkel, *Basics Photography 01: Composition* (London: A&C Black, 2012), p.36

[123] Golden Ratio: 'appears when you divide a line into two parts and the longer part (a) divided by the smaller part (b) is equal to the sum of (a) + (b) divided by (a), which both equal 1.618. This formula can help you when creating shapes, logos, layouts, and more'. Präkel, *Basics Photography 01: Composition*, p36

[124] Tom Riedel, 'Review of Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics 4 vols. Michael Kelly', *Art Documentation: J. Art Library* 18:2 (1999), p.48.

asked for his permission to film, her approach is different in that her filming has minimal effect on what is taking place; she does not manipulate what is going on in the scene.

Fig. 3.10 shows the second brother also covered in dust and dirt, crouching in the hospital corridor as he waits for his brother to receive treatment. Just as in Fig. 3.9, Al-Kateab makes use of natural daylight that is coming from the corridor entrance to light up this shot. She chooses to place the boy in the centre of the frame so that he becomes the focus of the shot. The low-camera angle puts the boy in a prominent position and helps to direct the focus onto him even though there are other people in the frame, and we can only see their hands, feet or torsos, but not their faces. The boy is then sandwiched between the arm of a man on the left of the frame, and a pillar on the right. This puts him dead centre of the frame. Al-Kateab chooses not to interview him in the moment but instead films from a distance, thus respecting his personal space though she still films. The image is out of focus due to camera movement, but the boy's pensive mood still manages to keep the viewer engaged. Giving the boy this space and time, even in the most difficult of situations, shows that she respects his humanity and his experience. It is in such situations in *Human Flow* that we would find Weiwei getting into the frame and interacting with the refugee subject, something that shifts the power balance altogether. In instances where Al-Kateab places herself within the camera frame, though, she creates different power dynamics because she is living in the same context and thus films from within rather than looking in from outside, knowing when to keep her distance rather than step in to 'save' her subjects.

Fig. 3.11. Screenshot from *For Sama* - of Al-Kateab on hospital bed (timecode at 00:33:03).

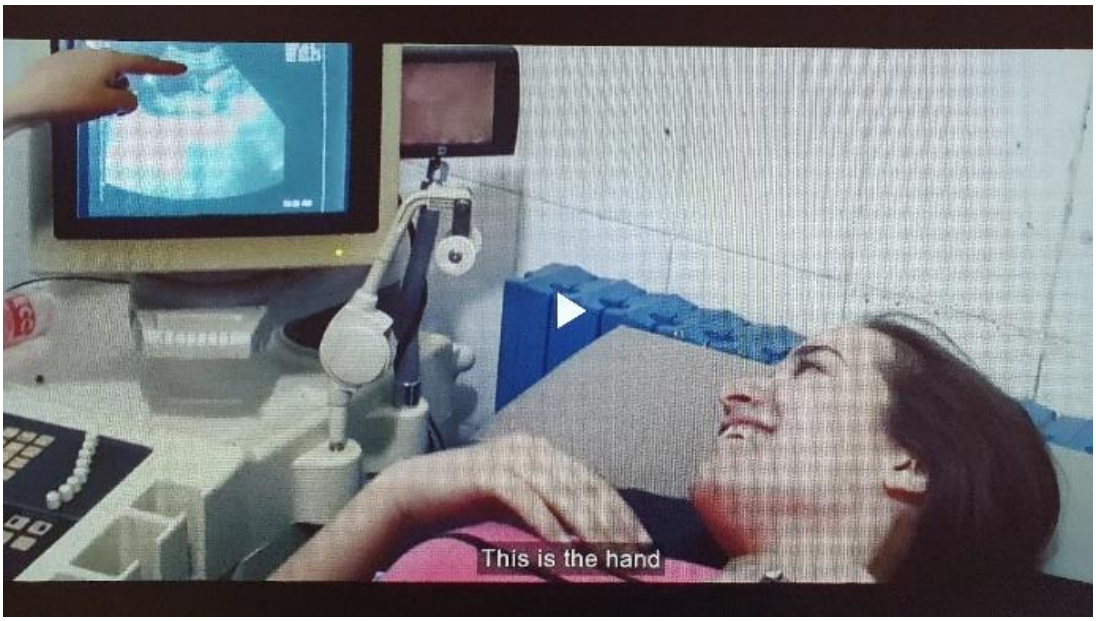


Figure 3.11 shows Al-Kateab in the hospital when she was having her antenatal tests at the hospital. In this shot it is her husband Hamza who is filming this scene. He frames her in a manner whereby she is not too dominant but shares the frame with the antenatal screen monitor showing her developing baby in the womb. She is looking at the image of her unborn baby, Sama, and she is smiling gleefully. Hamza managed to position the antenatal screen monitor in the top left-hand corner, and Al-Kateab in the bottom right-hand corner to make it look like a reflection. In this frame there is an equal power balance between the monitor image and Al-Kateab. The hand that is in the top left-hand corner pointing at the body in the screen monitor brings the image to significance, and makes the whole frame have more meaning than if it was just Al-Kateab looking at the monitor. This makes the shot about engagement between her and the monitor. This is important because in instances where she is in the frame, she does not 'overpower' anyone or anything that she shares the frame with – in stark contrast with Weiwei.

Fig. 3.12 - Screenshot from *For Sama* – Al Kateab cowering as the hospital she lives in is bombed (timecode at 00:24:44)

Fig. 3.12 shows Al-Kateab and her daughter Sama in their bedroom moments after there has been a bomb blast in the hospital where they are living. Al-Kateab has just put the camera down on a chest of drawers and left it recording while going about her daily life. In that moment a missile strikes the hospital causing a loud bang and Al-Kateab crouches to try to avoid any debris. With the live action nature of cinéma vérité that she is using, she is aware that anything could happen at any time, hence why she has left the camera recording. Using the ordinary home environment that she is in, the bottles of water, blank walls, a telephone charger and a mobile phone on the unmade bed, and a small plate of food on a chest of drawers, she shows her own personal and quotidian existence. In this shot, and in this instance, she has highlighted the ordinary life that every Syrian goes through when faced with bombardment. She has managed to turn the camera on herself and provides genuine humane insight into a situation that is often portrayed in reductive and symbolic terms. This is portrayed, then, not through an aesthetics that is consciously politicised but through the

conscious *refusal* to aestheticise her setting. She presents 'the everyday' as being worthy of representation, and in doing so, creates a sense that the audience is being invited into a world of her own – not presented as an object of scrutiny or curiosity. It is also significant that this image captures her genuine fright during the bombing of the hospital. This is very different from Weiwei, who appears relaxed and in control in almost all his on-screen appearances. Within her film, then, Al-Kateab refuses the objectifying aesthetic that Weiwei perhaps inadvertently employs.

The framing of material objects

It is not only the framing of the refugee subject's body that serves to offer or deny representational agency. The visual framing of material objects also plays an important role in refugee and migration experiences and is closely connected to the representation of the refugee through a process of substitution. During these phases of liminality, material precarity amongst the refugees is rife. Images of material possessions are frequently employed as a symbolic depiction of freedom of movement, method or transportation, and refugee status.[125] The material possessions such as clothing, baggage, passports, and other tangible belongings that refugees bring with them as they flee their homes into other nations have a crucial influence in how they are seen during transit and in where and how they are allowed to go. Passes to cross the physical borders, identification documents, types of clothing for the treacherous journeys in all types of weather, and the bags of luggage of different sizes all play a part in the representation of agency. Materials also play a socio-cultural representational role with objects restoring or reinstating lost spaces, people and time. However, Ruben Anderson notes that materials such as personal possessions - clothing,

[125] Kaya Barry, 'Art and materiality in the global refugee crisis: Ai Weiwei's artworks and the emerging aesthetics of mobilities', *Mobilities* 14:2 (2019), pp.204-217 (p207).

luggage, passports, documents, smart phones, luggage – 'contribute to refugee profiling, sorting and level of scrutiny at border points and within transit places'.[126] These objects nonetheless remind us that refugees rely on materials for food, shelter and transportation. Sometimes materials restrict or enable refugee passage or options for movement. John Urry argues that 'the social and material relationships that underlie life on the move have been a prominent theme in mobilities scholarship'.[127] This has led to an understanding that items such as luggage often become representative of one's means of transportation, intended destination, and also represent the travelling subject's rights of movement. When we look at the use of material objects within the frame in documentaries about refugees, it becomes apparent that they bear the potential either to enhance the refugee subject's agency, or to enforce their objectification.

For families left behind who choose not to embark on journeys, they connect with materials that then remind them of and represent family members or friends who would have fled their homes. Objects may have sentimental value, and serve as a link to distant locations, or carry socio-political tensions and forces. Julie Mertus, Jasmina Tesanovic, Habiba Metikos and Rada Boric contend that 'for those who decide to flee, material belongings are often one of the few physical ties to family, identity, and culture'.[128] Materials such as photographs, pieces of clothing, books, letters or even small notes serve to connect a refugee to the people they have been separated from, or the place that they have lost. Monetary value cannot be placed on such items as they are irreplaceable.

[126] Ruben Andersson, 'Hunter and Prey: Patrolling Clandestine Migration in the Euro-African Borderlands', *Anthropological Quarterly* 87:1 (2014), pp.119–149 (p.143).
[127] John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p.92.
[128] Julie Mertus, Jasmina Tesanovic, Habiba Metikos, and Rada Boric, eds., *The Suitcase: Refugee Voices from Bosnia and Croatia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.3.

What role, then, do objects play in the aesthetic presentation of refugee experience? While personal belongings testify to the deeply human narrative that underpins each refugee's journey, we have also, in recent years, seen the emergence of a material aesthetics that foregrounds altogether more depersonalised experiences of travel. We see this in the visual emphasis on abandoned dinghies, dolls and toys dropped and forgotten at the border posts, and other material objects in news footage and in documentary representation. Indeed, this is an aesthetic in which Weiwei is heavily invested, and it appears in many shots within *Human Flow* as a means to emphasise scale of movement.

Figure 3.13. Screenshot from *Human Flow* – an over-loaded dinghy (timecode at 2:04:05)

Fig. 3.13 from *Human Flow*, for instance, captures a dinghy overcrowded with refugees in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea at night. The image is a screenshot of footage taken from the rescue ship the Aquarius which is a joint operation between Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and SOS Méditerranée. This operation goes out, meets distressed

refugees at sea, provides medical care and brings the refugees onboard the ship. The image has been framed in such a way that there is the striking juxtaposition of the fluorescent orange colour of the lifejackets worn by the refugees with the bright blue colour of the boat. This boat is surrounded by total darkness, depicting isolation and loneliness. None of the refugee faces are identifiable nor distinguishable. This image is thus meant to depict mass exodus of refugees, and is emblematic of the images that are used by many media outlets to depict refugee inflows via the Mediterranean Sea into Europe.[129] The orange lifejackets became synonymous with refugees from 2015 when more than five hundred thousand refugees reached the shores of Lesbos, Greece during the start of the 'refugee crisis' during which they sought a safe passage to Europe. They wore the orange lifejackets that were discarded upon arrival on shore, as in Figure 3.14.[130]

Figure 3.14 Screenshot from *Human Flow* – discarded lifejackets (timecode at 02:16:00)

[129] For instance see the image published in *Time* online's web article depicting refugees in an overcrowded boat: https://time.com/4063972/refugee-crisis-massimo-sestini/ (last accessed 10th April 2023). Photo credit: Massimo Sestini—Polaris.
[130] George Tyrikos-Ergas, 'Orange life jackets: Materiality and narration in Lesvos, one year after the eruption of the "refugee crisis"', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 3:2 (2017), pp.227-232.

While it is in some ways interesting to consider how refugee subjects can be evoked in their absence through their substitution by objects, it nevertheless seems degrading to reduce an individual to the type and colour of apparel that they wear. Indeed, Weiwei also created an art installation called the Berlin Life Jacket Installation in which he used fourteen thousand life jackets that he had collected from Lesbos, Greece.[131] Prem Kumar Rajaram interprets the aesthetics of refugee representation as 'reproducing the disenfranchisement of the process by speaking for refugees in a way that silences their individual voices'.[132] Making art using waste from refugee journeys raises concerns about the significance of creative and cultural representations of lives and experiences involving forced displacement. Faulconbridge and Hui state that 'the entanglement of human and non-human mobilities forges material-social relationships that are significant in shaping personal and collective journeys'.[133] These material-social relationships perpetuate the collectivisation of the figure of the refugee and propagate their reduction from persons into numbers as highlighted in media articles when incidents of drowning occur, or when reporting on those who have crossed. They are seldom referred to by their names. This in turn continues to enclose refugees within their refugee status and renders them anonymous.

The substitution of objects for actual people seeking refuge also occurs in *For Sama*. Here, though, we see the director engaging in consciously stylised visual substitution in a way that is poignant and encourages rather than discourages emotive, humanised connection. In one scene, the director interviews a child and shows us cut-out pieces of paper that are shaped in the form of human bodies. As far as the child who has created this is concerned, each cut-out piece represents one of his friends who has left or has died.

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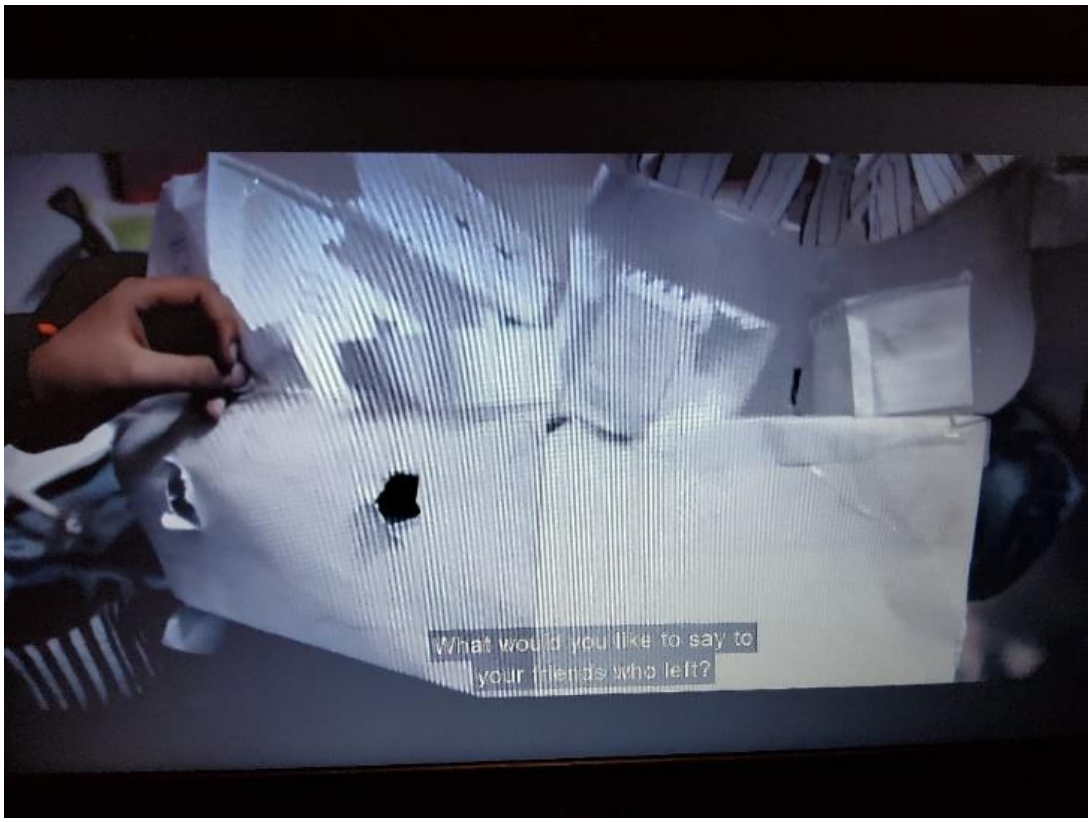
[131] Ai Weiwei, dir., 'Berlin Life Jacket Installation', *Artnet*, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ai-weiwei-life-jackets-installation-berlin-427247 (last accessed 20th October 2021).
[132] Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15:3 (2002), pp.247-264 (p.247).
[133] James Faulconbridge and Alison Hui, 'Traces of a Mobile Field: Ten Years of Mobilities Research', *Mobilities* 11:1 (2016), p.p1–14.

Fig. 3.15 (Screenshot from *For Sama* - paper figures (timecode at 1:01:30).

Al-Kateab asks the child what the paper figures are, and he responds saying that they are ‘my friends who have left’. In such a sombre context, what the boy conveys is the representational power of the paper figures to stand in for humans, and the deep emotional attachment that endures for him, projected here in touchingly childish objects. The focus on the objects here is close up and intimate, recognising smallness rather than seeking scale.

Fig. 3.16. Screenshot from *For Sama* – paper ship (timecode at 1:02:04).



In another scene, meanwhile – Figure 3.16 - we see a paper ship made by a child who is in conversation with Al-Kateab about the friends who have deserted him and fled their homes with their families. This paper ship resembles the boats that the friends would have taken, going to far-away countries to seek sanctuary and escape the bombing by the Syrian forces. The holes on the sides resemble how some of these dinghies end up with holes and people drowning in the sea. Even the material that has been used to create this paper ship suggests the flimsy nature of the boats that are being used to ferry people, and thus the precarious nature of the journeys. The whole frame of the shot of the paper ship is unsteady, again signifying how unsafe and unbalanced the boats that are ferrying refugees across the seas are. Here, then, the representation of an object becomes a way to bear witness to those who cannot be represented on screen – and to demonstrate the enduring trauma of those who remain. The simple physicality of the image is tactile, connective and poignant. This

highlights the potency that some material possessions can hold in building understanding of refugee experiences, and the way in which they can be used to build humanising rather than dehumanising connection.

Reflections on aesthetics in *Voices*

In the film *Voices*, I sought to create an aesthetic that afforded visual agency to refugees, by presenting us as subjects, and not objects or as victims. Through the mise-en-scène that I constructed, the cinematography employed, the interview styles and positions maintained, and the overall look of my interactions with refugee subjects within the camera frame that we produced collectively as refugee subjects, we endeavoured to imbue the figure of the refuge with the authority of self-representation. Having analysed different models of documentary films on refugees, I set to interact with my refugee contributors in ways that did not dehumanise or objectify them as victims or vulnerable, but instead presented them in ways that showed that they were active agents who are capable of making decisions and taking actions that affect their lives and the lives of others. *Voices* thus shows them as people with diverse experiences, skills and interests who are not defined solely by their status as refugees, and through their stories, allow viewers to see them through unfiltered lens.

In *Voices*, each element of the mise-en-scène influences the audience's experience of the story and characters within the film. The opening scene is a good example here. I sought to create a reflective tone through which the audience is invited to consider the key question underpinning the film. I thus edited the opening scene of the film with a blank screen that gradually fades into a long shot of silhouetted figures who are dancing and singing in Chewa, a Malawian language. The backdrop is a deep red horizon against their black figures that are not identifiable. Their singing is set as a juxtaposition against the rhetorical question in my commentary: What does it mean when one does not have a voice? This motif serves as a

precursor to the theme of refugee voicelessness even when one is still able to speak or sing. It is important in this scene that the figures, while indistinct, still possess audible voice and a striking visual presence. Thus, their dramatic agency is centre stage, presenting them as subjects and not objects of the film about to unfold.

Agency was also central to the way in which I wanted to represent myself as a figure within the film. Following this introductory scene is a montage of images meant to cause the viewer to perceive an idea or emotion that is not presented in the individual images themselves. The purpose was to set up the framework for my political activism, thus presenting my positionality as a refugee and an advocate in this narrative. The montage sequence links the different periods in which these images were taken (2009-2022) and emphasizes the actual process of passing time between the different rallies and demonstrations that I attended when I was an activist in Movement for Democratic Change (M.D.C.), an opposition Zimbabwean political party. The footage in these scenes is largely spontaneous and taken on-site during protests. Thus, the sequence captures something of the spontaneity and reality of the fly-on-the-wall style of *For Sama*, while also framing my own visual presence as allied to that of other refugee activists.

During the filmmaking process, I discovered that different refugee subjects required different modes of framing. For symbolic reasons, I felt that the interviews that I conducted with Loraine, Bridget, and Abdesalaam needed to be done in their respective homes. The function of filming the interviews in the homes of the individuals was that it served to present a shift away from the traditional notion of those seeking asylum in a foreign county as liminal or placeless. I wanted to show that all those seeking or granted asylum in the film have settled in a place that they can call home, even if it is temporary.

Fig. 3.17 - Bridget seated comfortably and smiling when we were in her home whilst I was interviewing her for the *Voice* documentary film.

These homely settings present visual characteristics evoking a sense of safety for the asylum seekers. I felt that these three individuals, who are still waiting on the determination of their asylum claims, needed to be interviewed in a space where they would be most comfortable to share their experiences, but which also evoked a sense of place and belonging in aesthetic terms. While I did not consciously focus on objects as symbolic here, I did consider how the domestic setting would frame each shot. When Loraine speaks, for example, I ensured that the soft, muted fabric of the curtain complements the light entering from the window, which also falls upon her face. Here, domestic furnishing conjures an aesthetic of everyday comfort and belonging.

Fig. 3.18 - Loraine sitting by the window during our interview for *Voices* – (timecode at 00:19:18).

I also considered the framing of my interview subjects very carefully when setting up the interviews. My interview with Abdesalaam was done in the living room in his home (Fig. 3.19). I set up this interview so that it would be a one-shot scene in which only he is present. Bringing the camera lens to his eye-level and setting myself next to the camera meant that he did not have to look up or down at me, in a way which implied equal power dynamics between him and myself. In filmmaking, this interview setup puts us on a par as far as authority and control is concerned. Compositionally, I used the rule of thirds, to create a strong, balanced image. I positioned him along the first-third vertical line on the left, thus presenting him as looking to his left where I was positioned.

Figure 3.19. Screenshot from *Voices* (timecode at 00:11:00).

In this image, his eyes, which are the focal point in the frame, are looking directly at me along the upper horizontal line. This is further accentuated by the brightness of the natural light that is reflecting on the right side of his face. I framed this shot so that he would have ample head room, and any gestures he makes would be visible to the viewer.

To compliment the aesthetics of the individuals I filmed, I decided to film within the space and environment that the refugee subjects were in. I chose to employ footage of selected objects in order to convey a wider context for their stories. During the filming at Loraine's house, she allowed me to record footage of some of the letters and documents that she had received pertaining to her asylum application with the UK Home Office. These documents, though personal and highly confidential, highlight the asylum process that she is going through with the Home Office and the Tribunal Courts. Since I went through the same process, I understood the significance of having to share these on camera. These objects highlight the stages that those who flee their homes must go through in a UK before they are

recognised as ‘genuine’ refugees. Such letters present the barriers that one must clear before the credibility of one’s story is tested, and one’s claim for sanctuary is granted.

Fig. 3.20 - Screenshots from *Voices* - Letters from Tribunal Courts 1 (timecode 00:19:32)

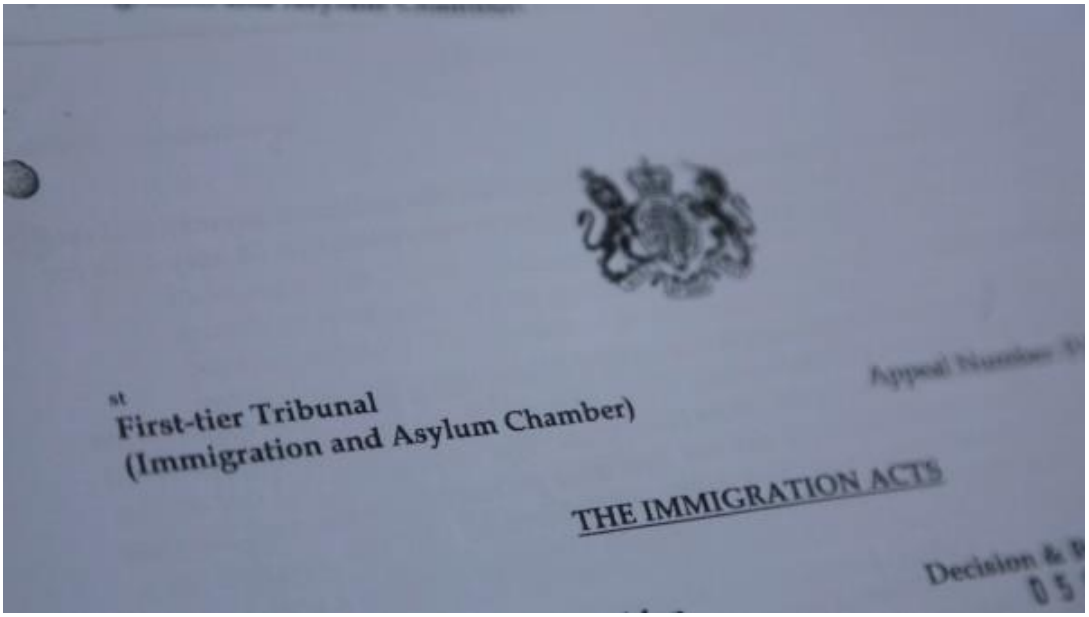
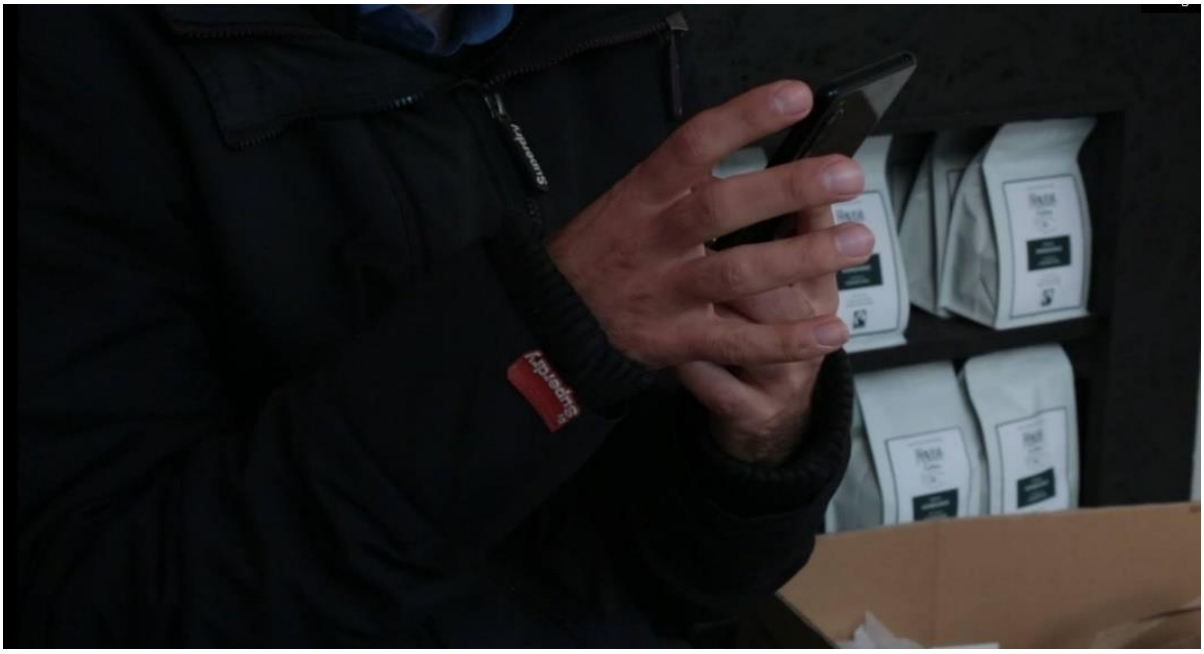


Fig 3.21 - Screenshot from *Voices* – letters from Tribunal Courts 2 (timecode at 00:19:27)

These documents present a picture of the months or years of struggle that the refugee goes through even when they have arrived here in the UK. The Tribunal Courts are involved when an individual's claim would have been rejected by the Home Office, and one then decides to appeal the Home Office decision. When a positive decision is granted by the judges in these Tribunal Courts the applicant is then granted refugee status. It felt important to me to portray paperwork as an object of tremendous significance within Loraine's narrative. In an aesthetic sense, the official headers immediately suggest a sense of authority that Loraine has had to stand up to or navigate. Here, then, the letters suggest both her struggle and her agency.

I also used setting and objects to construct a portrait of an individual with agency when interviewing Usman Khalid. I recorded the interview with Khalid in his coffee shop in London. I chose to film within this space because of the significance it had in his life, and I wanted the viewers to be able to experience how his story has manifested itself. Any setting's significance is derived not just from its aesthetic and physical aspects but also from how it interacts with its surroundings in the film and the story it depicts. After being granted his refugee status, Usman embarked on setting up his retail business in London. He bemoans 'not having a voice' during the time when he was still an asylum seeker and feels empowered now by his refugee status. He comments on the clothes that he now wears and compares them to how he was when he was in detention. The image shows the label on his clothes with a Superdry tag, which indicates high quality clothes not normally worn by refugees. This is taken to visually symbolise that he has now progressed in life and has passed the barrier that is set for those still seeking sanctuary.

Figure 3.22 – Packets of Stock - Screenshot from *Voices* (timecode at 00:25:55).



In this image, packets of stock for his shop are also visible together with a carton that is on the ground full of more of the stock. This portrays a thriving business and someone who is doing well regardless of his refugee status. Such enterprise by refugees is showcased in a documentary film called Soufra,[134] but hardly shown in traditional documentary films about refugees.

I made different aesthetic choices when it came to framing refugee subjects engaged in conscious performances, however. This emerged via my interaction with Laura Nyahuye, who set up Maokwo, a social enterprise that works with refugees and asylum seekers by using art as a vehicle for engagement. I was able to film *Invisible Threads*, a show that was performed at University of Warwick's Arts Centre, and which had been developed by her company. Rather than employing close-up as I had for the interviews, I chose to film this show from an elevated position within the auditorium.

[134] Thomas A. Morgan, dir., *Soufra* (Pilgrim Media, 2017). Available online at YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKOJN67WXzc, (last accessed 26th May 2023).

Fig. 3.23 – Loraine on Stage - Screenshot from *Voices* (timecode at 00:33:06)

From this vantage position, I was able to frame most of the stage and could zoom in on the individual performers' faces and actions. Figure 3.23 shows Loraine giving an account of her journey from Malawi to the UK. She is well-lit and the focus is on her, emphasising her bodily gestures and movement. The dark costumes that the performers are wearing makes them all equal in value and worth, and no one is seen as better than anyone else. In this instance, there is no differentiation between who is a refugee and who is not. In my filming of the play, then, I chose to ensure that Loraine was represented alongside other figures, giving a sense of her both leading the action and operating as part of a wider community. Much of the aesthetic work was already done for me when filming this play, due to the presence of stage lighting. However, my position above the action nevertheless maintains and emphasises both individuality and commonality in a way that is very different from Weiwei's dehumanising aerial shots.

Reflections on Aesthetics

Throughout the whole filming and documentation of refugees and asylum seekers in *Voices,* I have come to appreciate the power embedded in the aesthetics of the visual representation of refugees and asylum seekers. I approached the aesthetic element cognisant of the challenges refugees face when it came to our objectifying representation as 'the other' and had sought to develop practices that would humanise us. In this process, I have learnt how to develop visual characteristics of settings that elicit reactions from the audience, as this plays the primary functions of establishing time and place and introducing themes and mood. Having experimented with various elements of mise-en-scène such as cinematography, frame composition and lighting during the filming of various scenes of the documentary, I have seen how they bring out a visual system which externalises characters' perception of the world, illuminating the possibilities and limitations within their social circumstances.

The relationship developed with the refugee subjects off-screen had the effect of making them relax and be comfortable on-screen. This gave them the freedom to be expressive and move around as we all do in normal conversations, and not be rigid and awkward. The relaxed atmosphere affected their freedom of expression and allowed them to be honest to themselves without feeling that they had to give some sort of prescribed response or risked being relegated into stereotypes that portray them as vulnerable and helpless. This was a surprising lesson that I learnt whereby building relationships affected the aesthetics of a film. I tried as much as possible to let organically occurring conversations be the driving force behind how the refugee subjects would present themselves on camera.

The biggest challenge that I faced was that of revealing the faces and identity of some of the subjects in the film. Originally, I had agreed with Abdesalaam and Bridget that I would blur their faces in their interview scenes as they are still waiting on the outcome of their asylum applications with the UK Home Office. In earlier iterations of *Voices,* I blurred their

faces, but felt that this aesthetic did not work well with the rest of the film. Applying a blur was akin to using a veil to cover the faces of people who want the world to know their stories, and it felt counterproductive. Within my documentary film it risked resembling the stereotyping of refugees as 'unidentified strangers' and seemed like a dark representation of the 'faceless other'. I went back to them and explained how blurring their faces could depersonalise and disconnect them from the audience, and that the aesthetic effect produced was not congruent with the whole film, and they gave me permission to remove the blur.

Through this experience, I have come to understand that visual elements in a film will only go some way towards enabling visual agency, but that true agency lies within an individual, cognisant of, and able to respond to power dynamics in any situation or environment. Agency can thus be defined as the contextual capacity of an individual to act independently and make their own choices which influence their own situation and the world around them; being able to construct progression that one desires and putting in place measure to accomplish it. During the period that I applied for refugee status I realised that I did not have agency, having been housed in an asylum accommodation centre (Stone Road Asylum Centre in Birmingham, UK) where we were subjected to curfews and containment which was part of the process that stripped us of our humanity. We were forced to register with the security guards each morning before breakfast, register each evening, and were not allowed to have friends or relatives visit us. In this state one does not have agency, and crucially, one cannot speak up or out against the limitations imposed upon us due to the system on which we are reliant. When faced with limiting circumstances, then, creating space for individuals to speak and be heard beyond the asylum system proves an empowering move.

Conclusions

Over the course of this PhD programme, I have experimented with various documentary strategies; challenged filming formats and tested critical theories; and arrived at an informed understanding of the sociocultural terrain in which refugee representation operates. I have done so against the difficult backdrop of a UK that has been hostile in many senses: both in its governmental policy towards refugees, but also during a period of severe restriction during the pandemic. Working against these restraints, though, has resulted in a dynamic reshaping and refocusing of my position regarding refugee self-representation. What the multiple elements of the PhD have demonstrated to me above all is the necessity of humanising the figure of the refugee, challenging the labels associated with 'otherness' that plague our community, and thus providing a starting point for engagement in dialogue as equal citizens. There is a critical need to provide alternative narratives to the mainstream media's position. As a result, my film *Voices* took the film essay form and proved quite didactic in its nature. This is borne from my desire to raise awareness and share insights with the target audiences that I have in mind – those that mainly rely on mainstream media for any stories about refugees, and the refugees themselves who do not feel able to speak up within the hostile environment. Since I was in a similar position of not being able to speak out when I was an asylum seeker, my approach has been autoethnographic in nature, a strategy that thrives in collaborative modes of practise because refugee filmmaking's realism and accessibility to telling stories about refugees, by refugees, are important components. Over these past three years, I have realised that I am a proud refugee, and I want to use my developing documentary film practices to enhance the chances of other refugees by platforming their voices. Ultimately, then, I have developed a commitment to refugee-centred documentary practice that will endure throughout my creative career.

I have also realised, though, that with this commitment come larger responsibilities. These include taking part in conversations surrounding documentary practice, and the wellbeing of refugee participants. This community is very vulnerable, and the filmmaker must exercise their duty of care to the highest level. There is also a responsibility towards those viewers who trust that what they are watching is produced ethically and transparently. These were all questions that my research has enabled me to navigate. Key insights that I obtained during this process were that as a refugee, a scholar, and a filmmaker, my practice had to be founded in establishing trusting connections with the refugee subjects who contribute to the film in the preproduction phase, creating collaborations with them so that they are involved in the design of the project, and approaching it with a mind that is not constrained with pre-set formats or stereotypes. My style therefore became refugee-centred, whereby refugees are not only in positions of shared directorial control, but in which their agency, wellbeing and input is placed centre-stage, casting them as subjects and authors. In completing this work, I have also come to realise that I hold significant responsibility as a documentary filmmaker. When working with refugees, who must be respected and integrated into the filmmaking process while having their opinions heard, my creative work must strike a delicate balance between artistic ambition and creative responsibility. My perspective and how I view teamwork, documentary practice, and filmmaking have altered as a result of this encounter.

Another key insight that I developed, though, was that 'refugee voice' cannot be reduced to a single entity and indeed, that diversity is its defining feature. The decision to have creative people, activists and campaigners from the refugee communities emanated from my desire to capture the breadth of what refugee voices can do and that is hardly shown in mainstream media. This was in response to another question that I had at the start of the project: Can an audience look at refugees and asylum seekers without seeing them only as

victims? This inevitably led me to avoiding a focus on narrative backstory, so that 'voice' is not simply reduced to the ability of refugees to speak of the experiences that brought them to the UK. Overall, in the film, I set out to have refugees look at an audience and talk directly of what they love, what they are good at, and how they think they can make the world a better place. It is this stance that has a tendency to interrupt the traditional control over their perception. It also meant that my style of film naturally shied away from the recurring images in traditional documentaries of 'flows' of people crossing seas in precarious overloaded dinghies or disembarking on the shores of islands – frightening to Western viewers because it echoes the danger of an invasion. In stark contrast, my film appeals to its viewers on the grounds of recognition - whether of shared refugee status, or of human empathy towards those with relatable interests, talents and commitments, such as music, drama or comedy.

Certainly, there have been challenges associated with this process. Working during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself particularly restricted when it came to getting enough participants. Ideally, I would have liked to have contributors for the documentary film from all around the UK, rather than just from England as was the case. While I was able to reach out to some participants online, the documentary became more local than I had intended due to the ready accessibility of participants in the local area. In spite of this limitation, though, I was able to leverage a strong narrative relating to voice through the post-production phase, in which I employed my directorial and editorial position to shape the material to the narrative that I had wished to explore.

There have also been technical challenges that I have had to overcome. I had to undergo a rapid upskilling in new technical knowledge to complete the process. For the podcast series, for instance, I had to learn how to conduct audio recording of interviews in group sessions and over Zoom. In order to obtain the sound-effects I wanted to sustain tension and interest, I also taught myself how to use the audio production app GarageBand

and BandLab. Within the process of creating the film itself, I explored a variety of methodologies relating to presenting myself on-camera and used a narrative voiceover for the first time in this film. All these techniques helped me to reflect further on the place and presentation of my own voice within the filmic medium.

I view this documentary film *Voices* as my voice and feel that my actual voice in the film has served as a tool to bridge narratives together. This dual position has been developed through my longing to have self-representation in discourse pertaining to my life as a refugee. Having realised that being able to speak was not enough, I saw that positive change and impact was only possible through garnering the support of other refugees willing to make a difference; that we had the autonomy to make our own choices which influence our situations; and that the change we seek can come from ourselves. Being a filmmaker, I decided to make a film as a vehicle that I can use to drive my agenda of refugees fighting back against mainstream media discourse on refugees. In this way the film *Voices* became an act of speaking back. My actual voice was to engage with fellow refugees and other constituents in enabling self-representation from the figure of the refugee. This included conversations - bridging ideas and experiences - with the aim of establishing a vehicle that epitomise what we stand for and what we believe. I take the stance that my film is equivalent to what a song means to Blessing who is a musician, or what a poem is to Manjit who is a poet: that is, a deep expression of self that also resonates with the audience in powerful ways.

In developing the film as a vehicle, I experimented with different film narration set-ups through various iterations as indicated on my Shorthand online profile. For my commentary I had tried filming from different locations, but ended up choosing the Bonington Gallery Studio at NTU as it provided the best aural spaces, and I was able to set up a number of props for the mise-en-scène. This decision was also so that this space would be congruent with a TV studio - having studio lights in the background, multi-camera set up

for the recording, editing computer in view, and studio backdrops that can be altered depending on the production in question.

Looking back at the whole pre-production and production phase of the film, there are a number of things that I learnt and now realise I could have done differently. Instead of incorporating other refugee ideas at the filming recording stage, I learnt that I could have had more in-depth participants involvement early on in the film concept and design stage. This would have given the contributors a greater say in the development of the film and would have meant that I cede a significant part of the directorial control of the film, making it a more collaborative project. Co-creation would have meant that there would have been shared ownership of the project, something that I see as lacking as it stands.

Moving forward, this project has made me reflect on the changing landscape of documentary film. While I initially thought of documentary journalism as a primary journalistic form of expression that could operate in opposition to mainstream media, I have since come to see it as much more democratic and fluid as the growing popularity of online media is enabling filmmakers to have a greater social impact – whether on a small or large scale. As a result, films can now be released directly on websites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Shorthand rather than through traditional distribution channels. This change enables viewers to consume information whenever, wherever, and however they choose, and this adaptability may provide filmmakers more creative freedom to explore and share tales without being constrained by conventional industry norms. The present environment in which documentaries are produced and promptly shared with audiences is the result of technology and access to online audiences. For this reason, I have uploaded both the documentary film *Voices* and the podcast series on the Shorthand.com website. While I initially envisaged seeking traditional screenings of the film in cinemas or

galleries, I am now interested in the greater reach and visibility that the online landscape offers.

Three years of practice-led research have provided me the chance to start discovering my artistic voice as a filmmaker, podcast producer, and editor more than any other aspect of my study. I have learned that my effectiveness is greatest when I am free to voice my astonishment and joy at other people's tales and my scepticism towards how refugees are portrayed in the media. The generation of new knowledge through the act of creation is what a practice-led methodology aims for, and via my work, I hope to have expressed what refugee-centred film and podcast features could be if given creative room. It is my wish that academics, refugee policy makers, and filmmakers might use my work as an influential starting point when building effective relationships with refugee communities. These relationships, my work proposes, must be founded not in speaking for refugees, but in listening to what we have to say, on our own terms and in our own voices.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this thesis as no datasets were generated or analysed during this project.

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