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ANJA SUNHYUN MICHAELSEN

## ‘Locked out in nature’

**Films on the European Asylum System, Latent Violence, and Ghosts**

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**ABSTRACT:** Following Hannah Arendt’s remarks on refugee camps as spaces of ‘worldlessness’, I examine how, in films on European asylum facilities, systemic violence ‘makes itself known’ in images of nature. Nature separates and isolates (*La Forteresse, Forst*), it constitutes a sphere of domination and control (*View from Above*), and it functions directly as a murder weapon (*Purple Sea*). Nature, in these films, indicates the Outside within, haunted by the latent and ghostly presence of systemic violence.

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## ‘Locked out in nature’

### Films on the European Asylum System, Latent Violence, and Ghosts

ANJA SUNHYUN MICHAELSEN

It is not a case of dead or missing persons sui generis, but of the ghost as a social figure.

Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

While watching documentaries about asylum facilities in Europe, I notice that they are often filmed in the most scenic surroundings. For example, in Fernand Melgar’s *La Forteresse*, the ‘Reception and Processing Centre’ (*Empfangs- und Verfahrenszentrum*) for asylum seekers is located in Vallorbe, Switzerland, at the North-Eastern tip of the Jura National Park, close to the French border, within a landscape of mountains and forests.<sup>1</sup> *Zentralflughafen THF* documents the temporary accommodations set up for asylum seekers in the former Tempelhof Airport in Berlin from 2015 to 2018.<sup>2</sup> The building faces Tempelhofer Feld, a former airfield, which now serves Berliners and tourists as a unique space for leisure activities, including beekeeping and every type

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1 *La Forteresse*, dir. by Fernand Melgar (2008).

2 *Zentralflughafen THF*, dir. by Karim Ainouz (2018) <<https://www.zentralflughafen-thf.de/>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

of recreational sport. The Tempelhofer Feld includes partly wild, growing nature in the middle of the city, and it offers a rare open sky. In *Forst*, the accommodation for asylum seekers is cut off from public transportation and surrounded by a thick forest near the East German city of Jena.<sup>3</sup> In these documentaries, asylum facilities are located in or close to landscapes that are often associated with tourism, leisure, and retreat.<sup>4</sup> This proximity to nature could be understood as exterior or removed from ordinary life — spatially and, as in the case of *Zentralflughafen THF*, conceptually — as far away from ‘civilization’. The scenic location of the asylum facilities troubles the notion of nature as an escape resort — to go ‘off the grid’, free for at least a limited amount of time from state surveillance.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of ‘weathering’ implies a relation between interior and exterior, and a state of exposure to the forces of nature. In *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe conceptualizes ‘the weather’ as all-encompassing antiblackness, as ‘the totality of our environments’, ‘the total climate’. This understanding of weathering highlights how systemic racism permeates all boundaries. In Sharpe’s case (she reads Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*), it collapses the borders between ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ states.<sup>6</sup> Clear distinctions between inside and outside, exposure and protection are deeply unsettled in Sharpe’s account. In the following, I ask to what extent systemic racism collapses the relation between inside and outside of the European asylum system. In the films that I will discuss, images of nature exemplify different kinds of exposure, literal and conceptual. Nature, in various ways, becomes apparent as an instrument of violence, even if one is provided with food and shelter. We can assume that the locations of the asylum facilities have been chosen because of state efforts to separate and isolate the world of

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3 *Forst*, dir. by Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer, Wolfgang Konrad, in cooperation with The Voice Refugee Forum and others (2005) <<http://www.forstfilm.com/>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

4 Another recent example outside of Europe shows a refugee camp in the jungle on beautiful Easter Island in Australia. See *Island of Hungry Ghosts*, dir. by Gabrielle Brady (2018) <<http://www.christmasislandfilm.com/>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

5 I want to thank Alison Sperling, Amelia Groom, and M. Ty for drawing my attention to this aspect and for generally and substantially furthering the text with their careful commenting.

6 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 200.

asylum. Nature hides the facilities from plain sight and conceals the violence within them from view; it functions as a means of physical separation in *La Forteresse* and *Forst*. It also is used to dominate and control the person in the process of seeking asylum, as exemplified in the aerial images in *View from Above*.<sup>7</sup> And, nature is used directly as murder weapon at the European borders, as can be seen in the underwater shots in *Purple Sea*.<sup>8</sup>

#### A NON-SPACE FOR THE STATELESS

The asylum facilities are not just geographically cut off and remote from urban life but constitute, rather, a ‘non-space’ in the way Hannah Arendt describes refugee internment camps. For Arendt, the problem of the refugee is the problem of statelessness, politically or *de facto*:

Every attempt by international conferences to establish some legal status for stateless people failed because no agreement could possibly replace the territory to which an alien, within the framework of existing law, must be deportable. All discussions about the refugee problems revolved around this one question: How can the refugee be made deportable again? The second World War and the DP camps were not necessary to show that the only practical substitute for a nonexistent homeland was an internment camp. Indeed, as early as the thirties this was the only ‘country’ the world had to offer the stateless.<sup>9</sup>

Handling ‘non-deportable’ subjects required the creation of special places, a foreign ‘country’ of its own kind on the territory of a host nation, a space outside of the trinity of territory — people — state. The treatment of Jews and Armenians exemplify, for Arendt, how falling outside of one distinct state’s responsibility implies the loss of the ‘right to have (civil) rights’. Such a loss of the very pre-condition of claiming rights makes the respective subjects vulnerable to both arbitrary violence and systematic annihilation, in the home country, and on foreign

7 *View from Above*, dir. by Hiwa K (2017).

8 *Purple Sea*, dir. by Amel Alzakout and Khaled Abdulwahed (2020) <<https://purplesea.pong-berlin.de/>>.

9 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 284.

territory. Without a state authority capable and willing to enforce legal protection, refugees are *de facto* ‘outlawed’ — regardless of their actions, simply because of what they ‘are’ — and exposed to arbitrary rule.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Greece recently declared a ‘state of emergency’ that suspends the Geneva Convention of 1949, as well as additional international asylum laws, confirms the continuing relevance of Arendt’s analysis for the contemporary moment.<sup>11</sup> The absence of the right to have rights enables the intentional killing, systematic neglect, and letting die of refugees within and at the European borders. The extreme violence must not be understood as exceptional or excessive, but as a direct consequence of the asylum seekers’ status, fundamentally unprotected by the law.<sup>12</sup> In the German version of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt writes:

The existence of such a category of people poses a twofold danger to the civilized world. Their unrelatedness to the world, their worldlessness, is like an invitation to murder, inasmuch as the death of people who stand outside all worldly references of a legal, social and political nature remains without any consequences for the survivors. When they are murdered, it is as if no one has been wronged or even harmed.<sup>13</sup>

I understand Arendt’s notion of ‘worldlessness’ not in a metaphysical sense but as the name for a situation in which ‘*all worldly references of a legal, social and political nature*’ do not apply to oneself in the same way

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10 Ibid., p. 282.

11 ‘Greece suspends asylum applications as migrants seek to leave Turkey’, *BBC News* (1 March 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51695468>> [accessed 7 June 2020]. Whether the numerous attempts to prove the illegality of the ‘suspension’ of international asylum law have consequences remains to be seen.

12 Elliot Douglas, ‘Germany: New Accusations of Police Violence in Death of Asylum-Seeker’, *Deutsche Welle* (2 November 2019) <<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-new-accusations-of-police-violence-in-death-of-asylum-seeker/a-51067499>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

13 ‘Die Existenz solch einer Kategorie von Menschen birgt für die zivilisierte Welt eine zweifache Gefahr. Ihre Unbezogenheit zur Welt, ihre Weltlosigkeit ist wie eine Aufforderung zum Mord, insofern der Tod von Menschen, die außerhalb aller weltlichen Bezüge rechtlicher, sozialer und politischer Art stehen, ohne jede Konsequenzen für die Überlebenden bleibt. Wenn man sie mordet, ist es, als sei niemandem ein Unrecht oder auch nur ein Leid geschehen.’ Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), p. 766. This passage is not present in the English version.

as they do to non-refugees, a situation in which these references and the world to which they belong — a world that one is at the mercy of — somehow seem to not concern oneself. To ‘stand outside all worldly references’ in this sense has far-reaching consequences. For Arendt, it makes murder permissible, ‘invites’ murder.

To what extent do contemporary asylum facilities constitute a ‘country’ for those ‘without a country’, and hence a space of comparable existential threat to its inhabitants? How does the lethal undercurrent of statelessness impact the situation in the facilities? And how does the violent structure of the European asylum system ‘make itself known’ in the documentaries? In the films mentioned above, images of ‘nature’, in different ways, indicate a space of being ‘outlawed’, not as freedom from the law (in the sense of escape) but as existing outside of the ‘pale of the law’ (which permits indeterminate confinement and murder). To a certain extent, state territoriality, and thereby protection (at least in theory) from arbitrary violence, are suspended. This does not mean that in asylum facilities unrestricted violence is necessarily enacted but that violence is always latent.

What interests me in these documentaries are the ghostly traces of the latent possibility of violence. The ghosts here are not Freud’s suppressed unfamiliar familiar, a metaphor for psychic processes. Instead, my understanding of the ghostly draws closer to Raymond Williams’s ‘structure of feeling’ — something that is present and potent but not fully ascertainable in conceptual terms.<sup>14</sup> In the documentaries, murderous, systemic violence is present without showing itself openly, in the way Avery Gordon considers haunting as a dimension of violence whose force exerts itself apart from explicit exploitation and oppression:

[H]aunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security). [...] Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced

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14 Raymond Williams, ‘Structure of Feeling’, in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35.

by them. What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.<sup>15</sup>

In the films, systemic violence makes itself known in images of nature. In *La Forteresse* and *Forst*, mountains and forests separate the world of the asylum seekers from Europe, on European territory. In *Zentralflughafen THF*, nature is the space of leisure and recreation from which the asylum seekers are separated. Repeatedly, across several films (*Forst*, *View from Above*, *Purple Sea*), aerial images point to the sky as sphere of surveillance and control in the asylum context. Here, nature, i.e. the sky, is turned into a tool of domination. In *Purple Sea*, the Aegean sea functions directly as murder weapon used by the European asylum system. Nature is not a metaphor in these films. Silently, in the form of trees and air, rocks and water, it is the instrument with which systemic violence is enacted. Without showing violence explicitly, nature in these films, in different ways, indicates its pervasive, latent presence.

#### SEPARATED BY NATURE

In *La Forteresse* — ‘Fortress Europe’ resonates in the title — the asylum facility includes the accommodation as well as the offices where the interviews are conducted, on the basis of which the asylum seekers are transferred to other places or are deported. In the housing units, each room contains four bunk beds. They are cramped, but people help and support each other. There is a large dining room and a program to keep the children occupied. The residents learn German, play football in the courtyard, and pray together. Once, a couple of inhabitants are sent to do some forest work for a change of scenery. They drink tea from thermos flasks and eat a kind of picnic of cheese and kiwis, which the camera captures with a close-up shot (it is puzzling what the camera/I pay attention to). Back at the shelter there is a lot of hoopla as one of the asylum seekers is stuck in his rubber boot. The head of the facility lends a hand to help free him. The staff are obviously trying to

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15 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xvi.

create a humane atmosphere. In a team meeting, the traumatization of asylum seekers is acknowledged and everyone is asked to 'show some humanity' (there seem to be no social workers or psychologists on site). The fact that the security guards take away the asylum seekers' musical instruments, to prevent them being used as weapons, causes laughter all around. The asylum seekers, it seems, are not subject to abusive treatment. In the interviews they are assisted by translators, they are listened to.

The facility appears as a mix of a youth hostel, welfare institution, and prison. The employees serve as social workers, administrators, judges, police and prison guards at the same time. The facility follows the rule of 'carceral humanitarianism':

Under carceral humanitarianism, detention is shelter and materializes the double meaning of security, as securing against a threat through violence and offering security from the threat of violence. Humanitarian governmentality produces irregularized bodies as simultaneously a threat to security and a life to be secured: a life to be saved *and* made secure, seized, possessed, fastened to an apparatus of care that is also an apparatus of capture, control, and ruination.<sup>16</sup>

In the uncomfortable laughter at the idea of music instruments being used as weapons, the double meaning of security Debarati Sanyal points to resonates. The security measure prevents obvious abuse of the refugees but renders them as a potential threat, suspicious, nonetheless.

In this observant, rather quiet representation of the Swiss asylum system, which includes no spoken commentary, it is above all nature that suggests that something is wrong. The facility is surrounded by snow-covered mountains; it is cold, and it rains. Instead of prison walls, there is thick forest. Nature blocks the view. It separates this world from the world outside which is Europe. The images of isolating and confining nature frame the social interactions within the facility. They remind the viewer of the precarious grounds on which daily life in

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<sup>16</sup> Debarati Sanyal, 'Humanitarian Detention and Figures of Persistence at the Border', *Critical Times*, 2.3 (December 2019), pp. 435–65 (pp. 438–39) (emphases in original).





Figure 1. *La Forteresse*, film still. Image © 2008 Fernand Melgar.

detention takes place.<sup>17</sup> Those asked to behave humanely hold, in their hands, the power over the asylum seekers' lives.

#### THE INTERVIEW

Indirect reminders of these precarious grounds permeate the film. Repeatedly, *La Forteresse* shows excerpts of asylum interviews, during which officers ask refugees to describe their journey to Switzerland. They inquire about entry routes and state persecution. They compare earlier versions to the accounts of family members, they point to gaps and contradictions and register the emotional state of the applicant. In her book on the European asylum practices, the author Dina Nayeri develops a polemical narrative theory in which she compares the storytelling of asylum seekers to literary writing:

[T]o pass an asylum interview, you don't just need a true story. [...] To satisfy an asylum officer takes the same narrative sophistication it takes to please book critics. At once

17 There is a spatial inversion happening, built into the hillside, the accommodation appears as a fortress within the 'Fortress Europe'. Geography and nature separate the accommodation — i.e. the socio-political Outside of Europe — and the outside, i.e. the Inside of Europe.

logical and judgmental of demeanor, both are on guard for manipulation and emotional trickery. Stick to the concrete, the five senses, they say. Sound natural, human, but also dazzle with your prose. Make me cry, but a whiff of sentimentality and you're done.<sup>18</sup>

At one point in *La Forteresse*, the decision-maker decides that the story did not convince her, that it seemed 'too stereotypical'. It seems implausible to her that the asylum seeker made the journey he recounts. He talked about it, she explains to her colleague, as if he was telling another person's story. She rejects his application on the grounds of incredibility.<sup>19</sup> The problem, however, might not be the story's validity but that 'credibility' is structurally impossible:

[T]he asylum officer, who appropriates the rules of good storytelling, fails to realise, when sitting across a petitioning refugee, that you are speaking to a *character* in the story, not the *author*. [...] In practice, much still depends on what each asylum officer finds credible. For that, the refugee must take control of the story and behave as the storyteller, not just a character.<sup>20</sup>

In the end, the asylum seeker must embody both the position of the storyteller *and* of the story's subject. They must give an objective account without appearing detached, 'as if telling someone else's story'. Based on Nayeri's book, we can assume that asylum seekers are well aware of this impossible narrative requirement. In *La Forteresse*, suspicion takes hold of the entire film. The employees are alert to lies, contradictions, missing memories, too much emotion, or too little.

The camera participates in the credibility test, as it focuses on the asylum seekers' faces and bodies and records their movements, ges-

18 Dina Nayeri, *The Ungrateful Refugee* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), pp. 242–43.

19 The process might be this trivial and arbitrary. In *Die Entscheider* (dir. by Susanne Offeringer, 1992) the filmmaker asks her interview partners, two 'decision-makers' at the Central Admission Point for asylum seekers in Cologne, what enables them to assess the credibility of asylum seekers. Expert knowledge, professional experience and knowledge of human nature, they answer. Other disclosures from the film: the interviews take place in a friendly atmosphere. They are not interrogations. The decisions are mostly correct. The decision makers do not consider themselves as in a specifically powerful position. *Die Entscheider* exposes their alarming lack of awareness for their role within the asylum system.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

tures, and voices as they tell their story. The film's audience is put into the position of the judge as well. Is the story true? Are the tears real? What is revealed by the posture, the facial expressions, the look into the camera? The asylum seekers tell their story to a triple audience: the interviewer, the camera, and the film's audience. But in this paranoid situation, everyone is tested — the asylum seekers, the staff members as well as the film *and* its audience. Everyone turns into subject and object of suspicion. Is the interviewer 'humane enough', 'unbiased', racist? Do I agree with her decision? Is the film 'biased', manipulative, is it critical enough? Am I 'biased', manipulated, critical enough? The testing continues outside of the interview scenes, it makes no difference which situation is shown. The asylum seekers' interactions with one another and with the staff are equally subject to it. Suspicion is the undercurrent of the entire film despite its humane impression. The film does not produce a voyeuristic gaze in the proper sense, the fact of observation is in no way hidden. The story is told *for* the interviewer, the camera, and the audience. And still the film creates the most paranoid viewing situation in which everyone is suspected to deceive and misjudge.

#### LOCKED OUT IN NATURE

In *La Forteresse*, the asylum facility is hidden by Swiss mountains. The asylum seekers are under constant surveillance and the film unintentionally participates in it. Despite the overtly sympathetic depiction, the film creates the feeling of being locked in, in this remote space, in the logic of impossible authentication. The more experimental film, *Forst*, helps to understand how nature in the asylum context *is* the space of claustrophobia, a space in which one is locked in and out at the same time. The film, which was made in cooperation with refugee organizations in Germany such as The Voice Refugee Forum, Women in Exile, and Caravan for the Rights of Migrants and Refugees, depicts an accommodation for asylum seekers in the city of Forst. Forst is the small town's name, but it is also a German term for 'forest'. The accommodation is located in an actual forest. The film gives only a blurred impression of the building and its surroundings, the images

of the accommodation and the forest merge into an undistinguishable entity. The latter extends the former, just like the mountains in *La Forteresse* constitute an external part of the facility. In *Forst*, the forest is the prison.

*Forst* is not a typical documentary film. The filmmakers call it an ‘un-documentary’, which could refer to its experimental aesthetics, as well as to the status of those who are invisible in ordinary life:

*Forst* is a portrayal. The documentary tells about a forest in the middle of Europe far from the urban world and from civilisation which is home to a peculiar community of the banished — it is a world for the stranded. A diffuse system that still has total control makes sure that this world doesn’t show itself, that it doesn’t pop up in our reality and become a disturbance.<sup>21</sup>

The film conveys the reality of this ‘community of the banished’, but its aesthetics — abstract black and white images, with asynchronic sound and voice-overs — maintains opacity of the scene and its subjects and prevents objectification by the viewer and exposure to state control. Unlike *La Forteresse* the human faces and figures are kept out of the frame, shown only as silhouettes. By not assigning bodies to stories the film resists to individualize and authenticate the question of asylum. In this sense, it documents and ‘un-documents’ at the same time.

The building and its surroundings are abstract to a degree in which they are still recognizable, but perspective and framing emphasize geometric structures and light patterns, atmospheres. A fragmented narrative plot remains unresolved. *Forst* begins with an unlocated voice-over and a black screen that tells of the narrator’s arrival at a place beyond the reach of public transportation. Other voices follow. They tell of personal experiences within the asylum system, but they do not give exactly biographical accounts.

In a central scene, white-clad appearances with unidentifiable faces slowly emerge from the forest. *Forst* explicitly stages the refugee as the social figure of the ghost. The film avoids the credibility logic

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21 ForstFilm.com, 2005 <<http://www.forstfilm.com/>> [accessed 7 June 2020].



Figures 2 and 3. *Forst*, film still. Image credit: Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer, Wolfgang Konrad, Ben Pointeker, Julia Lazarus, wr.

that was exhibited in *La Forteresse*. Instead, it tells of the current situation in Europe and of the state practices aimed at isolating the asylum seekers to prevent solidarity and political organization. ‘I am locked out in nature’, the first narrator says — not allowed in despite already having arrived in Europe but instead confined in nature, the space of the Outside within.



Figure 4. *Forst*, film still. Image credit: Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer, Wolfgang Konrad, Ben Pointeker, Julia Lazarus, wr.

#### VIEW FROM ABOVE

In *La Forteresse* and *Forst* nature appears as that which blocks the view, isolates, and confines. As viewers, our view is equally confined in the paranoid space. In a disorienting way and with very different aesthetics, both films do not provide access to the world beyond the mountains and forests, paralleling the asylum seekers' and the audience's perspective. In both films, the camera operates on ground level but *Forst* also includes some helicopter shots of the thick forest from above.

In the films, nature mostly organizes the separation between Europe's interior and exterior horizontally. The helicopter shots indicate a vertical dimension of separation which conceptually resonates with the interview scenes in *La Forteresse*. To assume the perspective of the author can also be understood as a change from a (character's) view from below to a view, as it were, from above.

*View from Above* is the title of an experimental video piece by Hiwa K, which allows one to understand how the aerial view of surveillance and the authorial narrator's bird's eye view in the asylum interview are folded into one another. Produced for documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017,

the video tells the story of M who flees from the northern, Kurdish part of Iraq and applies for asylum 'in one of the Schengen countries'. His application is rejected because Kurdistan is considered a 'safe zone' by the UN, which denies the latter's inhabitants any claim to asylum. M applies in a different country. This time he makes the statement that he comes from the 'unsafe zone', which he proves in the interview by showing detailed cartographic knowledge of the city K in the non-Kurdish part of Iraq. The decision-maker is impressed and grants him asylum. *View from Above* transgresses the border into the fictional. Its mode remains ambiguous. Perhaps the story is autobiographical, perhaps it contains a collective experience, or still something other than that. It remains as fictional and as real as the arbitrary cuts in the political map of 'safe' and 'unsafe' zones, of economic and political refugees, of subjects worthy or unworthy of living, and living well.

The story, co-written by Hiwa K and Lawrence Abu Hamdan, is told off screen by K as narrator with calm and gentle intonation. In the beginning, we hear a disembodied, disorienting voice over a black screen. It tells the story of M, not chronologically (as I recounted it above), instead it starts in the middle, jumping back and forth throughout. Visually, the video consists of slow tracking shots over a curious miniature model of the war-torn German city of Kassel in 1945. The model was built in the 1950s, is made out of sand, cardboard, and plaster, and was commissioned by the city of Kassel. It shows the city centre in May 1945, when eighty percent of the city was destroyed by air raids. The model is based on aerial photographs taken by the same allied forces. Meant to commemorate the defeat of the National Socialist regime, it was stowed away after its construction in a storage room in the Kassel City Hall for years, only to be exhibited in 1983.<sup>22</sup> During documenta 14, the model and Hiwa K's video were presented in adjacent rooms. Both are now part of the museum's permanent exhibition.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Jörg Steinbach, 'Kassel in Schutt und Asche: Trümmermodell wieder zu sehen', *Hessische Niedersächsische Allgemeine* (2 March 2016) <<https://www.hna.de/kassel/kassel-schutt-asche-6171148.html>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

23 'Documenta 14-Arbeit "View from Above" von Hiwa K ist in das Stadtmuseum zurückgekehrt (27 May 2019) <<https://www.kassel.de/pressemitteilungen/2019/mai/view-from-above-von-hiwa-k-ist-in-das-stadtmuseum-kassel-zurueckgekehrt.php>> [accessed 7 June 2020].



Figure 5. *View from Above*, film still. Image credit: Hiwa K.

*View from Above* uses explicit aesthetic means to create a ghostly atmosphere. Hiwa K's voice stands out from the acoustic environment, in which otherwise only the technical hum of the camera/drone can be heard. Visually, this eerie atmosphere is intensified by the slow camera movements, as well as by the contrasting pitch black background and the illuminated model, creating sharp, accentuated shadows. Sound and image technology isolate the voice and the model from their surroundings. The camera travels through the model of the destroyed city, in which, next to the ruins, a few miniature trees are still standing, but no human figures are included. The model not only preserves a war-destroyed city, but a city without survivors — a ghost town. The relationship between image and narrative is not easily determined. What does the story of an Iraqi asylum seeker have to do with the German defeat in 1945? The narrative seems to suggest a fatalist understanding. 'All cities have destruction in common,' the narrator says at one point.

Narrative and image share a common perspective — the view from above. M memorizes the city of K by looking at its map from a bird's eye view, which, as we learn from the Kassel model, is the perspective of war. Some of the visuals in *View from Above* are reminiscent of the infrared images familiar from various military operations, as part of the





Figure 6. *View from Above*, video still. Image credit: Hiwa K.

‘occupation of the skies’, as Achille Mbembe refers to it.<sup>24</sup> It is also the perspective of the authorial narrator as it is required in the asylum interview. Just as the camera swiftly pans from the ground level of the city model to a bird’s eye view, *M* needs to lift himself up into the air, to leave his position of the powerless to be able to look down on the map drawn by those in power.

It is a violent change of perspective. Telling one’s own story is often considered a form of empowerment, possibly even more so if one masters the ability to obscure the distinction between fiction and truth. In the asylum interview, telling one’s story requires a form of narrative mastery unavailable for most. Another version, which can be found in written form on Hiwa K’s website, reads:

The people from J taught him everything and helped him draw the map of their town, all the while asking him questions to confirm that he had mastered everything about J.

When *M* finally had his refugee interview, the official was quite surprised, even impressed. He asked *M* questions about the geography of the town, and compared *M*’s answers to a map. *M*’s answers demonstrated knowledge of J as it was seen from above.

24 Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15.1 (2003), pp. 11-40 (p. 29).

It took only twenty minutes for the official to grant M refugee status. Meanwhile, thousands of people who were actually from J and other cities in the unsafe zone waited as long as ten to fifteen years for the same thing, because their answers only demonstrated knowledge of their towns from the ground.<sup>25</sup>

The story can very well be understood as an example of the ‘autonomy of migration’,<sup>26</sup> which will continue despite all efforts to close Europe off. But it also points to something beyond solidarity and resistance, raising the question of the costs of the bird’s eye view. By juxtaposing the Kassel model and today’s asylum system, *View from Above* points to the use of the bird’s eye view as equally instrument of domination and of survival. ‘To lift oneself up’ here requires to adopt a militarized perspective on life lived on the ground. M must bear to leave behind all those who have helped him, and with them the life he lived. Ultimately, in *View from Above* the bird’s eye view leads to M’s amnesia. While the narrator repeatedly reminds M how he succeeded in the asylum process, M seems to have forgotten all about it. The right of residence, the story suggests, comes at the price of losing all connection with the asylum seeker’s former life.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Premiered at the Berlinale film festival 2020, *Purple Sea* re-examines, in a shocking manner, the question of violence in the European asylum system. The film consists of images recorded by the camera which the artist Amel Alzakout tied around her wrist while crossing the Aegean Sea, from Istanbul to Lesbos. Alzakout had first fled Syria to Istanbul where she lived for a couple of years. When she decided to make the crossing to Europe, the boat fell apart shortly after departure, leaving a couple of hundred refugees to drown. Visually, the hour-long film

25 Hiwa K, ‘A View from Above’ <<http://www.hiwak.net/anecdotes/a-view-from-above/>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

26 Yann Moulrier Boutang, ‘No Longer Reserve Army: Theses on the Autonomy of Migration and the Necessary End of the Regime of Labour Migration’, *Jungle World* (3 April 2002) <<https://jungle.world/artikel/2002/14/nicht-laenger-reservearmee>> [accessed 7 June 2020].



Figure 7. *Purple Sea*, film still. Image credit: PURPLE SEA © pong film/Alzakout 2020.

is comprised almost entirely of the under-water shots taken by the camera on Alzakout's wrist.<sup>27</sup>

In the voice-over, Alzakout narrates a conversational text that she co-wrote years after she arrived in Berlin with others who were involved in the filmmaking process. She describes personal perceptions and feelings during the time before the trip, as well as thoughts and events leading up to the moment at sea, whose images feature in the film. The shots, which, as Alzakout says, are not hers but those of the camera, show clothed bodies up to the neck, moving, or not, objects floating in the water, cigarettes, shoes. I understand these images as neither from below nor from above. They embody neither the asylum seekers' nor the decision makers' perspective but are technical images of their own kind. The camera registers, records what floats in front of it. It films the death zone with maximal absence of intention, without authenticating, or even witnessing anything, leaving the viewer alone with the images. Disconcertingly, their immersive quality allows us to easily forget that what we see are actual human beings left to die. It requires the audience's conscious effort to not be carried away by the beauty of the underwater shots. Abruptly, the viewer is reminded of their meaning in a couple of moments when Alzakout's arm with the

27 'Synopsis', *Purple Sea*, 2019 <<https://purplesea.pong-berlin.de/en/16/synopsis>> [accessed 7 June 2020]. The original footage is much longer.



Figure 8. *Purple Sea*, film still. Image credit: PURPLE SEA © pong film/Alzakout 2020.

camera shoots out of the water, as she protests against a helicopter that circles above.

In the underwater shots, the view is limited to a few metres. The intense colour and texture of the water and the muffled sounds allows for the viewer to become lost in the images. Now, the blinding sunlight, shrill whistling sounds, people in the water shouting, and the noise of the rotating propeller blades overwhelm the perception. The helicopter is not there to rescue. Instead, it creates waves that endanger those in the water even more. A tiny red dot indicates that someone in the helicopter is filming, from above.<sup>28</sup>

In the previous films, nature served as a means of separation between Europe's interior and exterior, within Europe, which included hiding systemic violence from view. Indirectly or directly, *La Forteresse*, *Forst*, and *View from Above* convey an inherent violence in the European asylum system, in the housing, the processing, the interviews, as a haunting quality especially of nature images. Systemic violence strongly makes itself felt in the claustrophobic and eerie atmospheres of the films and in the images of the refugees as ghostly figures. In contrast, the images in *Purple Sea* seem haunted by nothing. Nothing is hidden or latent. The film lays bare the absolute violence that is the European asylum system, for everyone to see openly.

28 There is much more to be said about *Purple Sea*.

Anja Sunhyun Michaelsen, “Locked out in nature”: Films on the European Asylum System, Latent Violence, and Ghosts’, in *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 17 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. 207–25 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17\\_10](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-17_10)>

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