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How Did You Get Here? Syrian Art and the ‘Aestheticization’ of the Refugee Journey Towards Europe

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ABSTRACT

The journey marks a pivotal moment in the making of refugee bodies. In the context of the Syrian Uprisings of 2011 and the subsequent civil war, Syrian refugee bodies in movement have come to be perceived as a threat to the European body politic. This paper explores ways in which artists creatively engage with the Syrian refugee journey to answer back to dominant discourses that have acted to further displace refugees beyond the bounds of empathetic reach. This answering back has had the effect of aestheticizing (and, in some cases, fetishising) the refugee journey. *The Walk*, a live theatre work directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi; Khaled Barakeh’s installation, *Self Portrait as a Power Structure*; and the Abounaddara collective’s short film, *Journey in Winter*, are works that use diverse mediums to independently shed light on the transgressive act of border crossing at the heart of the Syrian refugee experience. In each of these works, the moment of border crossing marks the simultaneous moment of erasure of the individual. In the context of this erasure important questions are raised about the structural epistemic violence of representation and the efforts of artists to overcome this violence.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the so-called refugee crisis has opened discussions about a broader crisis (or series of crises) in Europe, in the process revealing deep political and moral contradictions. Since 2011, more than 14 million Syrians have fled their country (UNHCR 2024), with 6.4 million Syrian refugees swelling the global refugee population in 2024 to 43.4 million. Over 1 million Syrians have made their way to Europe, with the largest proportion being hosted in Germany (59 per cent) (Liboreiro 2024). A narrative of ‘crisis’ around the presence of refugees in Europe, has led to the consolidation of a homogenous discourse on migration that bundles together moving populations of diverse background and motivation: economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and a whole range of other populations that collectively comprise the globally displaced (Castelli Gattinara 2017).

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Contrary to what the use of the word ‘crisis’ might indicate, the share of refugees in the European Union (EU) at the end of 2024 was just 1.5per cent of the EU’s total population (European Union 2024). By way of contrast, refugees – the vast majority from Syria – comprise over 16per cent of the population of Lebanon and 6.25per cent of the population of Jordan (UNHCR 2020). Türkiye hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world with at least 3.2 million Syrian refugees (Hahn 2024).

The ‘crisis’ has invoked a prevailing and intensifying interest in art that involves the representation of migrant and refugee experiences, produced by both migrant and non-migrant (refugee and non-refugee) artists. Throughout this paper we will explore how the refugee ‘crisis’ is, if anything, a crisis of representation, in which media images of refugees have been variously countered, reinterpreted and rejected in a complex visual ecosystem or Artscape (Fellner et al. 2023). We draw on the Syrian experience, to understand what sort of political message is conveyed by the art produced within this ecosystem and trace the ways in which it challenges dominant ideas around displacement (of Syrians and of refugees and other involuntary migrants more broadly). The artistic representation of the refugee experience has the capacity to confront and ultimately counter media and state discriminatory discourses that cultivate fear towards the outsider. Art about the refugee experience can be ‘a form of dissent to imagine and implement other modes of representation and of being and living in the world’ (Gallien 2018: 724).

Within this artscape, Syrian artists who have fled their homeland since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2010 have attracted great attention and are at the centre of a significant number of art projects and residencies. These artists find themselves confronted with a multi-faceted challenge. Many Syrian artists want to produce art that testifies to the suffering of Syrian refugees and to their perilous journey to Europe. They bear witness to the suffering of those who could not flee and are still facing the ravages of war and oppression. Some artists offer their work as an aesthetic memory of the destruction of their homeland. They face the tokenistic interest of some non-Syrian artists and institutions, who have jumped on the bandwagon of ‘humanitarian art’ (Yalouri 2019). At the same time, they are confronted with the pressure to ‘represent’ Syrian refugees and migrants against negative media images about refugees and rising fatigue on the part of European audiences (Cusenza 2019). The pressure to conform to an homogenous representation of their experience perpetuates a sort of epistemic violence, whereby the ‘refugee’ is viewed as a coherent and monolithic entity, both in the media and the arts (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015).

This paper explores frictions and fractures that rub up against and cut across ‘refugee art’. It focuses on a central element of representation: ‘the journey’ that brought Syrians to Europe: a trip most often marked by hardship and deprivation, fear, abuse and the memory of those who did not make it. We explore how the fetishisation of the journey towards Europe presents refugees as transient and unstable; a moving element belonging to nowhere and therefore simultaneously powerless and threatening. In doing so, we turn our attention to three art projects – a puppet show, an art installation and a documentary film – each of which approach this issue not only through different mediums but from different points of view.

The puppet show, *The Walk*, produced by a UK-based company, represents the Syrian refugee experience of the journey through a giant puppet in the shape of a little girl;

Berlin-based Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh foregrounds the materiality of movement through static visual representations; and art collective Abounaddara, working from Syria, have, through their artwork, resisted media representations of the conflict and have offered an alternative narrative of exile through spatial practices. These three works offer distinct approaches to exploring the exilic journey and raise questions about spectatorship and the narratives that surround the construction of refugee identity.

The Walk – The Journey as a Tool for Mobilising Empathy

In recent years, the collective European imaginary has become animated by images of refugees walking in seemingly endless lines towards the borders of Europe, or else making their way across the Mediterranean on small boats. These representations of refugee experience have been described as ‘the most highly sensationalised images of suffering that have circulated in the media in recent history’ (Espirito and Duong 2018: 590). Such images circulate alongside inflammatory narratives of invasion, the rise of the European populist right and the representation of refugees as a threat not only to European political and economic stability, but to Western culture and civilisation in its totality. In response, there has been an artistic commitment to, and interest in, offering up counter-narratives to shift perceptions and foster empathy.

In 2015, the story of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy who tragically drowned in the Mediterranean while attempting to reach Europe with his family, drew global attention to the plight of refugees and migrants fleeing war and persecution in their home countries. His family were trying to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Kos in a small, overcrowded boat, fleeing the violence and unrest in their hometown of Kobane, which had been devastated in the Syrian Civil War. The boat capsized just a few minutes after setting off, and Alan, his five-year-old brother Galip, and their mother, Rihan, were among the 12 refugees who drowned on that occasion (Media Watch 2015). They are counted among the 3771 who drowned in the Mediterranean that year, and the tens of thousands that have died in the same stretch of water since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War (IOM 2016). Alan’s death, and the haunting image of his small, lifeless body lying on a beach, became a powerful symbol of the refugee crisis and the human cost of the war in Syria.

The story of Alan and many other refugees inspired the artwork of Little Amal, a large-scale (3.5 m tall) puppet representing a nine-year-old Syrian girl that travelled 8000 kilometres from Turkey to the United Kingdom in 2021 to reunite with her mother. She is the protagonist of *The Walk*, a live artwork produced by The Walk Productions and Good Chance Theatre, and directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi. Amal, whose name means ‘hope’ in Arabic, was designed by South African Handspring Puppet Company,¹ drawing upon a character in Good Chance Theatre’s first play *The Jungle*, written after their work in the Calais refugee camp in 2015–2016.² The giant puppet followed the Eastern Mediterranean route, mirroring the journey of thousands of migrants. Leaving from Gaziantep, a city on the Turkish-Syrian border and arriving months later in Manchester, her trip took her through Turkey, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, France, and the UK. The project aimed to raise awareness about the plight of refugees and migrants, especially children, and to promote empathy and understanding. The initial journey started in July 2021 and ended in November 2021, with Little Amal stopping

at various locations and engaging with communities and individuals along the way. By the end of 2024, little Amal had travelled to 166 towns and cities in 17 countries and had been welcomed by two million people on the street and by tens of millions online (Walk With Amal 2024). The puppet is operated by a team of puppeteers and accompanied by musicians and performers, who create a unique and immersive experience for audiences. Little Amal's journey has been documented through social media and other channels, allowing people from around the world to follow her progress and engage with the project.

The 2021 journey was supported by more than a hundred international artists, theatres, community groups, art and humanitarian organisations, funders and local governments in the different countries involved. It was designed to mobilise empathy, mostly from European audiences. Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, founding artistic directors of Good Chance, stated that they 'had hope that it might be easier to empathise, to connect with her – a young girl – than with the negative images of refugees so commonly shared in the media' (2021: 67). In other words, the representation of 'the refugee' as a young girl was a strategy to connect in particular ways with, and invoke particular responses from, European audiences.

On the 10th of August 2021, Amal arrived by boat on the Greek island of Chios, one of the hotspots where refugees and asylum seekers arrive from Turkey. As stated in the project's webpage:

As she approaches the shore, she hears voices singing to her. The music welcomes her from across the sea. When she reaches the harbour, the local communities of Chios will welcome her with 'Painemata', traditional songs written especially for Amal, wishing her well as she takes her first steps in Europe (Good Chance n.d.).

The local communities of Chios rallied around her upon her arrival, devising a new space of encounter in which another kind of reception became possible. In this sense, the puppet acted as an 'enabling' tool for encounter and for creating alternative narratives around migration and refuge. Amal's scale, and the nature of the project, made her highly visible in her utilisation of transnational public spaces, countering the invisibility that is demanded of refugees in public spaces (Jeffers 2011: 85).

Even though the play was not free from controversy – the puppet was not well received by local authorities in places such as Calais, epicentre of the migration crisis between France and the UK (Delepierre 2021) – overall Amal encountered warm welcome in the different locations she visited. She was enabled to meet a range of political and religious figures, including the Pope.³ In line with Hroch's view on street puppetry (2013), *The Walk* offered to its European audiences some kind of 'critical utopia' (Gardiner 1993: 22). The project allowed for an 'open process of envisioning what is not yet' and therefore highlighted the potential for change (Moylan in Gardiner 1993: 22). Similar to other giant puppet shows, we argue that *The Walk* offers 'a "what if" model of social transformation' (Haedicke 2013: 77). It provides an alternative mode of welcome and has the potential to shift attitudes amongst its European audiences. The journey of Amal challenges ideas of refugee journeys as represented in the media and offers 'an alternative to what the existing world *could be*' (Hroch 2013: 262).

Puppet theatre has been defined as 'an illuminating source of metaphors' for ideas, people, and emotions (Jurkowski and Francis 2013: 6). In this case, Amal became a

metaphor of displacement and, as noted by *The Walk* general manager, Sarah Loader, 'represents all of the children who have had to leave their homes, looking for safety, looking for a future' (in Sherwood 2021). This claim, however, opens up a new space of query about the project, since it universalises the representation of Amal's experience. In this sense, we are made to recognise that representation is always a political act. As such, we need to acknowledge the power dynamics that underlie any representation of refugees. The claim of Amal's experience as universal overlooks the political complexities of the project's positionality. Amal appeals to European audiences precisely because of her atypical use of a transnational public space and her capacity to move across borders in a way that remains impossible to most people. Furthermore, the representation of Amal as a little girl locates her at the top of the 'hierarchy of innocence' (Moeller 2002). We argue that this representation might invoke certain discourses of colonial paternalism, especially as the play is mainly directed towards European audiences.

The project not only risks transforming the experience of all the children that Amal wants to represent into a spectacle to be consumed by viewing publics in the global north (Kozol 2014), but it also contributes to prevalent visual depictions of women and girls as the pre-eminent 'victims'. This strategy is in line with contemporary highly gendered representations of displaced peoples, which has been criticised by a growing feminist literature (Grewal 2005; Hesford 2011; 2014; Hua 2011; Nguyen 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013; Fuentes et al. 2019). Girls have been seen and represented as 'passive object(s) suffering a series of interlocking oppressions and discriminations taking place at the family, school, community and state levels' (Kirk et al. 2010: 21). In this sense, the victimisation and feminisation of the refugee, acts not only as a tool for mobilising public support but also for depoliticisation (Johnson 2011). Such depoliticisation seems to be an indispensable requirement for public representations of refugees that can be comfortably accepted and consumed by Western audiences. Moreover, it seems that in order to be able to offer what the founding artistic directors of Good Chance defined as 'the perfect welcome' (Murphy and Robertson 2021: 68), they had to offer to their audiences the 'right kind' of refugee story (Jeffers 2012: 44), one that would unproblematically fit the cultural moral frame.

The representation of the universal experience through the journey of a single girl, points towards what has been defined as the 'Malala Effect' (Hesford 2014). Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai was an advocate for the education rights of girls who was shot by a Taliban gunman on her way to school in 2012. The attack attracted great attention from Western media and Malala became a global icon. The Malala Effect articulates 'configurations of exceptionality' that direct attention to individualising motifs (Hesford 2014: 142). Similarly, founding artistic directors of Good Chance stated that Amal 'wasn't the girl in need we had expected her to be. Rather, she was a leader, someone who we were destined to follow as she searched for her mother across Europe' (Murphy and Robertson 2021: 68). However, as the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Navi Pillay, cautioned, 'Malala's case is not an exceptional one and, had she been less prominent, her attempted murder might have passed more or less unnoticed' (2012: 25). Similarly, Amal's story is told not because it is exceptional or because she is a leader, but because it is held to represent a common experience, not only of Syrian girls like her, but of other migrants trying to access Europe. At the same time,

it responds to a globalised discourse of girls as objects of recognition and rescue. It re-enacts discourses of exoticism and perpetuates a dangerous dynamic by representing Amal as a friendly and ultimately depoliticised ‘Other’.

Khaled Barakeh’s *Self Portrait as a Power Structure* – Material Aesthetics of the Journey as Structures of Dissent

There is an ‘emerging material aesthetics of global mobilities sparked by the refugee crisis’ (Barry 2019: 209). Such material aesthetics are represented by objects and belongings that were lost and found along the journey, such as discarded life jackets, clothing, water bottles, documents, and mementoes of home. These objects are reminders of the perilous journeys taken by refugees and migrants. They bear witness to violence and loss while, at the same time, provoke and challenge audiences. Examples of such material aesthetics are, amongst others, Ai Weiwei’s *Crystal Ball* (2017) comprised of discarded life jackets and exhibited at the Biennale of Sydney in March–June 2018, and Arabella Dorman’s *Suspended* (2017–2018), an installation artwork created out of hundreds of items of clothing that had been discarded by refugees arriving on the beaches of Lesbos, in Greece. These artistic appropriations of discarded objects, transforms their materiality and manifests ‘unexpected and often disturbing messages or symbolism’ (Barry 2019: 206). However, there is a risk that such art comes to represent refugees as ‘a mass of undignified bodies’ (Lenssen 2020), reduced to the bare materiality of their discarded items, in order to encourage viewers (based, in the case of Ai Weiwei and Dorman’s installations, in Leicester and Sydney respectively) to reflect on their own role in addressing the refugee crisis.

By way of contrast, a number of Syrian artists have explicitly tried to distance themselves from narratives that seek empathy from Western audiences, while at the same time striving to tell their own stories. This distancing comes in response to a process whereby certain categories of artist – amongst them Syrians – have seen their work come to be labelled as ‘refugee art’, pointing to a categorisation and universality of experience that ‘essentializes loss and displacement, and degrades the aesthetic and commercial value of (artists’) labour’ (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2021: 2). This labelling comes along with expectations of these artists to represent and speak for their ethnic or national communities (or for an amorphous ‘refugee collective’). While such categorisations might provide artists with opportunities to develop their artistic work (Jeffers 2012), there is an associated risk of stigmatisation and the imposition of a ‘burden of representation’ (Parzer 2021: 2460). ‘Refugee art’ and the voices of ‘refugee artists’ might be at the same time both erased and fetishised in a complex process of representation aimed at the foreign gaze.

As a response, some artists have rejected the burden of representing an imagined ‘true experience’ of exile and have reclaimed their own individual practices along the lines of what Victoria Tello describes as ‘counter-memorial aesthetics’ (Tello 2016). Counter-memorials have the power to disrupt and challenge essentialising narratives by offering up alternative spaces and objects through which themes of loss and grief can be explored. Referencing the material character of their experience has been one of the multiple strategies utilised to convey a critical dissenting message. In 2018, Berlin-based Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh presented his project *Self Portrait as a Power Structure*

in which visa stamps ‘representing decades of movement between various countries’⁴ were drawn out of the artist’s passport and exhibited alongside each other. According to the artist’s webpage, these stamps ‘were isolated in the printed form they take on the page, complete with their smudges and misprints, and re-etched to form new physical stamps’. In this project the materiality of the artist’s journey as a refugee is intimately linked to the very structures of power that delimit the action of crossing borders during that journey. Moreover, the political regime of immobility that these stamps seem to preserve, is materially translated into these small wooden items reproduced by Barakeh. These stamps, usually directed to marking travellers’ passports, acquire a new meaning when collected and presented next to their print made with ink ‘specifically tailored to match its original appearance’. According to the artist’s webpage, they forge ‘a personal assembly of the bureaucracies which control people’s movement, reclaiming and inverting the power they held over him’. *Self portrait as a Power Structure* does not represent an anonymous experience of exile, but brings material aesthetics to the realm of the individual and the personal. The artist’s self-portrait is constructed through the materiality of the visa stamps that marked his individual-collective trip towards Europe.

Barakeh’s work points to the impact of technologies of power in constructing a sense of self through that experience of border crossing. Through these stamps, border crossing becomes a material practice that acts upon the refugee body, producing what Barakeh calls a ‘self-portrait’. According to Keshavarz, passports are, for refugees, something that becomes ‘part of devising their lived experiences and of how they experience the world’ (2015: 2). In this sense, the presence of the passport stamp is a sign of a certain degree of acceptance by the hosting state. Where passport stamps might be a collector’s item for non-refugee travellers, in Barakeh’s case the stamps are reproduced, collected and exhibited as scars of an experience of transience that poses many questions: how long is one allowed to stay? Is he or she entitled to reside, work, or enjoy other entitlements during his or her stay? Where is he or she going to be accepted next? These questions lie at the heart of the refugee journey, full of uncertainty and far from the ‘perfect welcome’ that little Amal received. In this sense, Barakeh’s work makes a strong statement in favour of privileging rights of freedom over rights of protection (Pupavac 2008: 288), thus rejecting the depoliticised image of refugees and revealing the complex dynamics of dissent within the refugee narratives in the first person.

Ai Wei Wei’s work suggests that ‘the pleasure we get from beautiful things is necessarily experienced by others, such that the claims of beauty to a universal validity assumes agreement over general principles amongst individuals, whereby they feel part of a common humanity’ (Tsokhas 2020: 866). In this sense, he implies that through the universal experience of beauty, one can understand the reciprocal obligations of a universal human condition. This premise is shared by projects like *The Walk*, where the experience of the puppet Amal, representing that of ‘all the refugee children’, seeks to trigger empathy and solidarity. However, focusing on universality leaves aside the different political and historical trajectories of displacement. Similarly, overlooking the complexities of each and every one of those subjective experiences might render artists what Liisa Malkki calls ‘speechless emissaries’ (2005). The refugee becomes a timeless and voiceless entity that is defined by the very act of mobility, and whose experiences of loss, abandonment and absence are either silenced, or have to be shaped and told in particular ways in

order to be recognised as authentic and legitimised as valid (Fassin 2005; Johnson 2011; Cabot 2013; 2016). Barakeh's work reverses the representational trap of universality by emphasising individual experience.

Abounaddara Collective's *Journey in Winter* – Aesthetics of Material Absence

Another view of the journey's materiality as a narrative of dissent comes from the short film *Journey in Winter* by the Abounaddara collective, which operates from inside Syria. The collective is made up of a group of anonymous Syrian filmmakers whose works have raised awareness about the political and social realities of life in Syria. They produced a series of short films that address issues such as freedom, dignity, and social justice, and have gained a following both within Syria and internationally. The collective does not target international audiences as such, but wants to empower the local population and reclaim their 'right to the image'.⁵ The collective represents the effort to portray an alternative and dignified image of the Syrian population in their Vimeo channel. Since the early days of the conflict in March 2011 up until 2017, the Collective released a short video every Friday, in the years since the Collective has continued to release films and has exhibited internationally. They criticise the way violence is portrayed and consumed while attempting to offer an alternative representation to mainstream media. Their channel contains more than 450 videos and they have won international recognition. In 2014, they were awarded with the Short Film Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Festival for their film 'Of Gods and Dogs'.

The collective has repeatedly declared their interest in devising an 'emergency cinema' (Popan 2016), following Walter Benjamin's idea that 'the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'emergency situation' in which we live is the rule' (in Bayoumi 2015). This definition of emergency counters both the humanitarian and securitarian discourses that underpin various representations of the Syrian conflict and the so-called refugee crisis, within European politics and mainstream media (Musarò 2017). Nyers goes even further in his interpretation of Benjamin's notion of 'emergency' and states that 'the constitution of the normality requires the identification of difference, an Other through which coherence and unity of sovereign states and subjectivities are constituted and maintained' (2006). Narratives of 'crisis' therefore serve the purpose of protecting European identity boundaries, presenting migrants as the exception: an Other against whom the norm can be established. As stated by Schmitt, 'Sovereign is he [*sic*] who decides on the exception' and must therefore protect the rule (2005). However, by looking at the so-called 'refugee crisis' as the rule in Benjamin's terms, not the exception, artists can invent 'new rules of representation', as is the case of Abounaddara's *Journey in Winter* (Bayoumi 2015).

In their very short film *Journey in Winter*, produced in 2016, Abounaddara engaged with the materiality of displacement and the infrastructures of mobility in a way that echoed Barakeh's focus on passport stamps. Abounaddara's video presented a man whose face does not appear on camera. His voice appears over an image of two children playing on the beach, surrounded by safety jackets and remains of inflatable boats. His hands are now in the foreground and a child rests his head on his lap as he speaks:

We sold everything because we probably wouldn't be back for years. Everything was valuable to us, even the cheapest things: the glasses, the pillows ... Everything was dear because we worked so hard for everything. No matter the price, it couldn't make up for that because it was our home, our mattress, our blankets, our television, the fruits of years of labour (in Abounaddara 2016).

He then explains the business that arose in Syria from salesmen buying in bulk at a very low price the belongings of people who want to migrate in order to finance their trips. With the money that they received for these belongings, his family could only afford travelling during the winter, when the sea is more dangerous and the risk of drowning is greater. At no time during the video can the viewer see the face of the man, who speaks with a calm and detached voice.

Abounaddara's video reminds the viewer of the materiality of refugee life and the possessions that are left behind. In the same way as migrants are marked as illegal by their belongings during the trip (Andersson 2014), *Journey in Winter* lays out the testimony of this man almost as a photo negative, focusing on gaps and absences. The focus is not the objects that they decided to bring with them, but the items that they had to leave behind. In this sense, the man talks about the actual price of the journey and how all their belongings were sold to fund their trip and then were bought by other families: 'There were people coming to our region. So, the salesmen buy the belongings of those who leave and re-sell them to those who stay' (Abounaddara 2016).

The focus on materiality is a strategy for contextualising and asserting a certain kind of material agency, while at the same time speaking to the loss – or at the very least to a re-framing – of other forms of identity through the rupturing of familiar connections to place and community. In both Barakeh's and Abounaddara's works, the subjects are represented and 'speak' through inarticulate material objects. In this, there are forms of silence that bolster a 'practice of community-building and maintenance against processes of essentialization and historical decontextualization' (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2021: 13). These artists assert their presence through objects, as a strategy to counter the erasure of refugee individuality and humanity and, in the context of Europe's border regimes, 'attempts to eradicate (their) visual and material presence' (Ibrahim 2020).

By hiding the subject's identity and only showing his hands, Abounaddara's video puts the emphasis on the voice (both sound and silence). As the Syrian film collective explains: 'Our spirit of filmmaking has always been to go for the countershot, not to go where the mainstream media typically go. Our notion of emergency cinema is based on disturbing and inventing' (Bayoumi 2015). Abounaddara's anti-representative cinema rejects the notion that there can be any meta-image of refugee-ness. In the case of *Journey in Winter* this rejection is literal, by relegating the image to secondary and focusing on the absence of identity, thereby offering an alternative narrative.

Following that objective of disturbing and inventing, Abounaddara positions the spectator in a similar fashion to that which Susan Sontag describes in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*: their videos do not demand the spectator's understanding. As Sontag puts it: 'Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject' (Sontag 2013 [1967] [2013 [1967]]). This is, we argue, a fundamental difference with other pieces of art that privilege the gaze of the Western spectator, conveying a certain image of refugees that seeks to trigger particular emotions. Indeed, the artistic

representation of the refugee experience contributes to confronting and opposing media and state discriminatory discourses that feed fear of the outsider. However, in offering an alternative narrative there needs to also be recognition of the risk of victimisation and the excessive focus on the audiences, leaving aside the centrality of spaces in which the experience of refugees is lived and narrated and the power of individual experience and its materiality.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that empathy-seeking art has great potential to create alternative realities and express messages of hope. In *The Walk*, the remarkable technical achievements in creating a giant artistic puppet refugee girl, served the purpose of countering negative representations and constructing a 'critical utopia' defined by how things 'could be'. The walk of Amal through different countries tries to emulate the journey of millions of people, while becoming a universal metaphor of displacement. In this sense, the project might overlook the political complexities of the practice of border crossing and, in seeking empathy, risks perpetuating colonial paternalist discourses that place women and girls in a position of victimisation. Throughout the paper, we have asserted the perils of depoliticisation that these representations can entail. We also recognise that this depoliticisation is often related to the targeting of Western audiences, aiming at offering a definite and non-problematic image of migrants. One that moves empathy without moral compromises.

Simultaneously, refugee artists reject the label of 'refugee art' which forces them 'to conform and identify with this category, silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic endeavours and labour demands' (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy 2021: 3). For instance, we saw the work of Khaled Barakeh rejecting the burden of representation by focusing on the material aspect of his individual experience. In *Self portrait as a Power Structure*, he draws upon the technologies of power that are marked and printed into his passports as a way of retelling his lived experience. In this sense, his self-portrait based on visa stamps appeals to a certain aesthetics of absence. Barakeh reclaims his voice in the art conversation, distancing himself from the universal concept of beauty that underlies the emergence of a material aesthetics of global mobilities in works by international artists like Ai Weiwei, or Arabella Dorman (Barry 2019: 9).

Similarly, the artistic Syrian collective Abounaddara reclaims the 'right to the image' of Syria with their weekly short documentaries that attempt to give voice to the suffering of ordinary Syrians who have been at the receiving end of horrendous violence. In *Journey in the Winter*, the group focuses on a group of refugees, who were forced to flee, as they make their way through a snowy landscape in search of safety and a better life. The short documentary presents a certain kind of materiality of the trip that is not usually portrayed. The male voiceover, a refugee who does not show his face on camera, explains the journey in terms of what is left behind and translates experiences of loss, exile, and memory in a lyrical and introspective way.

There are different artistic approaches to the way in which the experience of migration and refuge is represented in various art forms using diverse strategies that aim to raise awareness of refugee experiences beyond the dominant scaremongering and

scapegoating discourses. In all these approaches, one can witness a fragile balance in which 'refugeehood' implies simultaneously experiences of victimization and practices of overcoming it' (Korac 2009: 8). Our paper has looked into the gaps and cracks, voices and silences that negotiate with those experiences of victimisation and practices of overcoming them. Similar to the way the 'refugee voice' is often presented in ethnographic research, in art refugees 'often appear both present and absent, agentive and yet silenced' and it is in that 'in between' space, we argue, where we need to be aware of a structural epistemic violence of representational forms (Cabot 2016: 4). The Syrian artists (and those they represent) that are discussed in this paper resist the pressure to conform to a homogenous representation of experiences of seeking refuge in Europe after the 2011 Syrian Uprisings and the ensuing devastating civil war. They want their art to be seen beyond the lens of seeking sympathy, as a form of self-understanding of the brutality of their journey.

Notes

1. The Handspring Puppet Company, is a renowned company based in South Africa. The company is known for its innovative use of puppetry in exploring complex social issues and for its commitment to promoting empathy and understanding.
2. The Good Chance Theatre was founded in 2015 by playwrights Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, who were inspired by their experiences working in the Calais refugee camp. The theatre company aimed to provide a space for refugees and migrants to express themselves through the arts and to create a platform for their voices to be heard.
3. A video of Little Amal meeting the Pope is available at <https://youtu.be/CaX2v5YqlWM> (accessed 29 April 2024).
4. *Self Portrait as a Power Structure* can be viewed at <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/sp/self-portrait>.
5. A review of Abounaddara's activities is available at <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/abounaddara-collective-abounaddara-the-lives-that-remain-in-syria>.

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