

Fugitive Aesthetics: Echoes, Ghost Stories and Refugee Cinema

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Introduction: Fugitive Aesthetics

Fugitive

A. Adj. **1.** Apt or tending to flee; given to, or in the act of running away; also *fig.* 1606. **B.** That has taken flight. Also, of a debtor: Meditating flight. 1467 **2.** Driven out, banished, exiled. [...] **3.** Moving from place to place; vagabond: *fig.* fickle 1481. **4.** Evanescent, fleeting 1510; quickly fading or becoming effaced; perishable 1678; volatile (*rare*) 1666. **5.** Of compositions (occas. of writers): Ephemeral, occasional 1766. [...]

B. sb. **1.** One who flees from danger, an enemy, justice, or an owner; a deserter – 1659; an exile, refugee 1591. **2.** One who shifts about from place to place; a vagabond, wanderer. Also of the lower animals, 1563. **3.** Something fleeting or that eludes the grasp 1633.

Our intention with this article is to identify some of the principal features of ‘refugee cinema,’ arguing that the formal and thematic interplay of the films that might be grouped within this category exemplifies a distinctive ‘fugitive aesthetics.’ We are offering this term to capture the particular ways that filmmakers have used sounds and images to tell stories about refugee experience. This representational system is ‘fugitive’ in the sense that it is thematically concerned with describing the circumstances and the anxious experience of displacement and flight. It is also ‘fugitive’ in the sense that it is an unstable, mobile, dispersed stylistic system, comprising fractured, ambiguous narratives and a diverse, sometimes incompatible fusion of generic tropes drawn from documentary and fiction film. Echoing the experience of forced displacement and migration, refugee cinema is frequently characterized by misunderstandings and missed encounters, irregular rhythmic shifts between frantic movement and stasis, with an emotional range that shifts from suicidal despair and rage through anxiety and humor to euphoria.

The critical value of establishing such a taxonomy is that it enables us to gain some purchase on this historically and formally broad cinematic field. However, there is a risk that the desire to draw boundaries around diverse groups of films made under very different circumstances reproduces precisely the inflexible bordered thinking that underpins the institutional processes designed to classify asylum-seekers as genuine and deserving or inauthentic and unwelcome. What is at stake here is avoiding a universalizing, ahistorical gaze that is oblivious to the specific circumstances that refugees find themselves in, and in response to this, we argue that it is essential to recognize the way that many films that address refugeeism are concerned with definitional ambiguity. Whereas, in the discourses of politicians, border forces, NGOs and humanitarian charities, the refugee is a clearly defined category of person, refugee cinema as a

whole invites us to reflect upon the aporetic status of the refugee. In films that are preoccupied with misrecognition, masquerade, self-reinvention and the fear of exposure – as well as the stigma associated with the designation ‘refugee’ - the instability of identity becomes an important theme, and apparently clear-cut distinctions between refugees and asylum-seekers (both ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’), displaced persons, economic migrants, and trafficked people are frequently far less clear. The cinematic refugee is thus fugitive in a double sense, both as an individual forced into exile, and as an indeterminate figure who resists the attribution of a fixed identity.

Revenir (Fedele, Imesh, 2018), for example, recounts the attempt by Kumut Imesh, who now lives in France, to retrace the route he followed after being forced to leave the Ivory Coast ten years earlier as a student activist. The intention, he explains, was ‘to show the reality of migrants on the road, when they are forced to leave their country. To shoot this reality by someone who has lived it. From the perspective of a migrant himself.’ However, his French refugee passport didn’t give him a right to travel, and so, frustrated by the slow process of visa applications, he set off to travel as an undocumented migrant, keeping a video record of his journey from Ghana towards Libya. The journey takes months and he finds work along the way, as a labourer on a construction site, selling clothes on the street, washing cars and serving food in a café. As the film follows his movement north, Imesh recounts details of his initial flight from Ivory Coast and so the two journeys begin to merge and Imesh’s status (as genuine refugee, undercover reporter, or both) becomes increasingly unclear; the restaged trip becomes progressively more perilous as Imesh tries to avoid Ivorians who might identify him, loses money on an ill-advised trip, is robbed, and then finally arrested by police in Niger while traveling to Agadez. Accusing him of being a French spy, they confiscate his filmmaking equipment and video footage, and he is eventually released when his Australian co-director David Fedele arranges a bribe. Whereas at the beginning of the film, Imesh understood the journey as *a simulation of* refugeeism undertaken by a filmmaker or investigative journalist in order to document the reality of this experience, as the journey progresses, from the perspective of others, that distinction is indiscernible or irrelevant.

At the end of the film, forced to return reluctantly to France (in an ironic inversion of the more common refugee trajectory), Imesh reflects that the French refugee passport confers on him an interstitial, aporetic identity: ‘With this document, I realize that I am now considered neither African nor European. I am somehow stuck in the middle. It doesn’t give me the right to travel as a European, and I had also lost my freedom to travel as an African in my own continent.’ Imesh learns that his designation as a refugee confers on him a spectral differential identity that is neither one thing nor the other – that eludes the grasp – and the film concludes with an intertitle explaining that Imesh hopes ‘to soon be able to leave this identity of “refugee” behind him.’

In order to develop this discussion, we examine three recent films from different geopolitical regions: Jacek Borcuch’s Polish-Italian drama *Dolce Fine Giornata* (*Słodki koniec dnia*, 2019),

Mati Diop's internationally produced directorial debut, *Atlantics* (*Atlantique*, 2019), and *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018), a documentary by Gabrielle Brady. Although ostensibly very different, what these films have in common is a concern with the effacement of the figure of the refugee and the irruption of unresolved histories of migration, colonization, and enclosure into the present. Rather than situating refugees and migrants in the center of the screen as some refugee films do, offering them narrative agency and a visible platform from which to speak, these three films place them at the margins. In depicting these figures as evanescent traces, echoes or ghostly presences, the films refrain from exploiting the misery and wretchedness of the refugee experience as aestheticized spectacle, epitomized, for example, in the confrontational opening scene of *L'Envahisseur* (*The Invader*) (Provost, 2011) in which half-drowned African refugees are washed onto a Mediterranean beach occupied by naked, sun-worshipping holiday-makers. The sequence restages scenes familiar from shocking photographs that began to circulate in 2015 showing newly arrived refugees on beaches in the Canary Islands, Lampedusa, and Greece alongside bemused or apparently indifferent tourists, but in opening with a close-up of a naked woman's vulva (citing Courbet's 1866 painting, *L'Origine du Monde*), Provost's film gives the scene a seductively shocking art-film gloss.

The films we discuss all feature female protagonists grappling with the traumatic effects of the refugee crisis, and in a broader sense, these films themselves constitute attempts to grapple with this trauma, experimenting with a range of aesthetic strategies from documentary and realist drama to fantasy in search of an audiovisual language that is adequate to their subject matter. In different ways, in their refusal to treat refugee experience as aestheticized spectacle, heroic adventure, or object of ethnographic scrutiny, each film is concerned with the limits of representation and with cinema's capacity to capture different aspects of refugee experience or to provide an analytical framework with which to comprehend the current refugee crisis and its mediated history. In this sense, the films we discuss here are concerned as much with processes of disavowal and historical erasure as they are with apparently simple processes of visualization and documentation – with showing and telling. Exiled artist Ai Weiwei, whose epic documentary *Human Flow* (2017), is an attempt to describe the vast scale of the global refugee crisis, observed in 2017 that, 'The refugees are transparent, nobody recognizes them even as refugees,' and it is precisely this problematic transparency that these films are engaged with describing (69).

We start with *Fine Dolce Giornata* where there are no visible or audible refugees and then unfold our analysis by exploring *Atlantics*'s aporetic treatment of refugees as potential economic migrants who, having perished at sea, return as haunting specters. Finally, we end our discussion by approaching *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* where asylum seekers are barely visible presences whose traumas reverberate throughout the narrative, deeply affecting the protagonist.

Dolce Fine Giornata: Refugees as Echoes

When I was a kid, they scared us with Gypsies – that they kidnap, steal, all such terrifying things. Now educated Europeans are being told to fear brown-skinned Arabs who are supposedly coming with their machetes to behead them.

--*Dolce Fine Giornata*

With this observation, Maria Lindeⁱ, the Polish-Jewish protagonist of Jacek Borcuch's Polish-Italian co-production *Dolce Fine Giornata*, reflects on her childhood in Poland where, as in other European countries, the fantastic, othered figure of the Roma was employed as a nebulous, ever-present threat of invasion and violence (from within and without). Apprehending the phenomenology of racialized fear as a disciplining machine – discursively imposed fear of those who are ethnically or racially 'not like us' – Maria's observation is a response to rumors of the dangerous presence of refugees permeating the social climate in the Tuscan town where she lives with her Italian husband, hosting a visit from their daughter with Maria's two grandchildren.

These rumors echo through the narrative from the moment when the police chief Commissar Lodovici informs the family that several refugees have escaped from a nearby camp that is receiving refugees from Lampedusa, warning, 'They could be a threat.' The following day, Maria's grandson, Salvatore, disappears for several hours while playing hide-and-seek around the house, leading to panic and a widespread police search of the local area. These two separate yet coinciding events – or non-events, since the refugees never appear and Salvo is found later that evening by a local immigrant worker - cast an anxious, apprehensive mood over the narrative, transforming the picturesque rural landscape into a more doubtful, insecure space, haunted by the spectral figure of the unwelcome migrant.

Interested in narrative echoes, their unsettling reverberations and the representational limits of cinema, we thus approach *Dolce Fine Giornata* as an instructive example of refugee cinema, albeit one without perceptible refugee figures. Unlike most recent films about refugees, which place these characters center stage, *Dolce Fine Giornata* refrains from making an audio-visual spectacle of refugees or detention camps, developing an alternative paradoxical trope. The invisible refugee is located at the heart of the narrative, haunting the lush Italian countryside, the anxious gossip of local characters, and the ominous shadowy shots of a fishing boat at sea with which the film opens. Thus, the refugee is an uncertain, insubstantial figure that has the status of an echo or spectral after-image, a structuring absence that functions to intensify feelings of nationalism and xenoracism in the context of a continent whose national and regional borders have been in almost constant movement. Indeed, the narrative of *Dolce Fine Giornata* is shot through with absences and lacunae, as it withholds information about the characters, their histories and their relationships, and invites the spectator to scrutinize the film image for signs, traces, and familiar generic cues like the search parties combing the landscape for Salvo. In this respect it constitutes what we term fugitive aesthetics – a narrative form that expresses different

dimensions of refugee experience, and which is characterised by fragmented, aporetic narratives, stylistic heterogeneity, and a preoccupation with landscape and space.

In focusing on a Nobel-prize-winning expatriate poet, the film's reflections on refugeeism are interleaved with self-reflexive commentary upon the impotence of humanitarian art, Europe's genocidal history, and contemporary terrorism. As a political dissident, Maria found herself in Italy during the period of Martial Law in Poland and stayed there, establishing a new life and raising a family. As an exilic figure - and a confident, mature woman taking stock of her life - Maria becomes a disorderly transnational voice, creating an aporetic conundrum for the local community. Her disobedience is expressed in various ways that include taking cocaine in a nightclub, racing the local police in her sports car and flirting with Nazeer, the Egyptian bar-owner who retrieved Salvo after he disappeared (or 'fucking an Arab,' as the town's jealous police commissioner snarls drunkenly as he assaults her at the film's conclusion). In Derridean terms, as an embodiment of aporia, she becomes a puzzle, a threatening ambivalence, an accented voice incommensurable with the local sensibilities that easily succumb to this 'fear of strangers.' We may also think of her as exemplifying what Avery Gordon **calls 'complex personhood' (needs expanding):** 'complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning' (1997, 5). It is this idea of 'subtle meaning' that eventually causes the community to turn against Maria.

Maria's troubling, disruptive status is reinforced when, at a public lecture organized to honor her work, she reflects upon her capacity to influence the world. Her speech follows a suicide bombing in Rome on the previous day - a traumatic event rendered only through a black screen accompanied by the sound of voices, a distant explosion and then a piercing whine as a shot of thousands of swooping starlings fades in - and Maria ends the lecture with the unexpected announcement that she is returning her Nobel prize.

To gasps from her listeners, who had expected a formal civic affair, she likens the attack to an art-workⁱⁱ, a comparison that is a damning critique of the lamentable uselessness of well-meaning art, and, by extension, of the film itself: 'It is hard to imagine a more powerful work of art. We writers and creators are nothing compared to the force of destruction.' She goes on to propose that both the bombing and the presence of refugee camps in Europe with the hellish bureaucratic systems that surround them are 'gifts': 'This is the assailant's gift for others - death. What is our gift then if our desire to set ourselves apart from terrorists is so great? Our gift is refugee camps [...] Our gift is European procedures that tie our own hands.'

Having offered these thoughts on the ethical equivalence of art, terror and Kyriarchal bureaucracy, she continues by expressing solidarity with the refugees, mocking the self-interest of what she calls 'superficial tolerance': 'the more the hypocrite spends on humanitarian actions, the easier it is for him to sleep' (Boochani 2018, 124). As an internationally known poet, her speech has an obvious power, one enhanced further by the fact that she is a child of Holocaust

survivors, which leads her to reflect upon her complex relationship to Europe: ‘I fell in love with Europe although it was Europe which invented all that was necessary to exterminate all my nearest and dearest.’ While she regards it as the ‘homeland of reason and liberty,’ predictably, her complexly ambivalent speech as her act of defiance, associating her with the defense of terrorism, causes a social stir, unsettling the audience, and prompting a radio reporter to liken her to professional provocateur, Michel Houellebecq.

Remembering Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the gift as an act of violence that demands a return, we argue that the film invites a reflection on the limits and hypocrisies of humanitarian compassion. Evoking the idea of a gift in a Derridean sense – ‘a gift without intention to give,’ one that thwarts an easy understanding of giving and taking, an economy of exchange – Maria perplexes her audience (Derrida 1992, 27). Derrida asks: ‘But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange?’ (Derrida 1992, 7). He calls the gift ‘the impossible,’ *aneconomic*, with a relation to the foreign: ‘Not that it remains foreign to the circle [of economics], but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible’ (Derrida 1992, 7). If we understand the gift in these terms, as an aggressive demand for repayment rather than (or as well as) an offering, this potentially transforms our understanding of the significance both of the ‘artwork’ and of the degree to which humanitarian aid and activism can be understood as altruistic.

The figure of the gift is also the ultimate framework for the narrative. In the opening scenes when the family and friends celebrate Maria’s birthday and the police chief arrives with a bouquet of flowers, a Polish émigré artist talks about offering his own gift to the town of Volterra – an empty cage placed in the town’s square. During this casual discussion, the name of Ezra Pound is evoked who, as a traitor and Mussolini sympathizer, was locked in a cage in Pisa at the end of WWII. Therefore, the scene foreshadows an uneasy parallel between the two exilic poets, Pound and Linde. Indeed, at the end, when the art installation is revealed, a narrow cage framed within barbed wire and timber scaffolding, Commissar Lodovici forces Maria into it, punishing her for her transgressions. The artist explained that with this work he wanted to pose the question of whom people would be prepared to lock inside the cage, while Maria’s husband suggested that ‘We could also ponder whether a cage actually protects us from the person inside.’ These questions are answered decisively at the film’s conclusion.

A pastiche of contemporary political art, the installation invokes concentration camps, prisons and detention centers, as well as the machinery of public humiliation and torture employed across Europe since the middle ages. Maria concludes her scandalous speech with this thought: ‘Perhaps this Europe deserves to fall under the weight of its own impotence. Perhaps a true thought is expressed differently today – with an act of disobedience.’ This is the crux of the parallel she draws between art and terrorism – that both are expressive acts of disobedience - but the political inadequacy of this artist’s intervention is revealed in the final scene when Maria is locked inside it and left there as the camera tracks away and people walk past, ignoring her. The

artwork has been co-opted as an instrument of injustice, a punitive device for silencing dissenting voices (and disobedient women), reproducing the angry, disciplinary mechanisms of the state, or the public humiliation of the pillory or the gibbet. In her speech Maria decried the way that the rise of fake news and a hypocritical public culture means that words no longer have any significance, and in that context perhaps the subtle ironies of a work like the cage are imperceptible. If this artwork is a gift, it comes with a high price.

The idea of waning of Europe with a potentiality of rebirth is, in fact, conveyed formally. We often see long takes of a landscape in the early morning light that are juxtaposed with many scenes during sunsets – there are conversations filmed at dusk, in the evening when the visibility is occluded. Similarly, moments of stasis and contemplation are interrupted by Maria's fast driving in her convertible – her movement is at times about freedom of mobility, at times about her expression of anger, above all, it is about her defiance.


In one of his interviews, Borcuch comments on his attraction to the protagonist: 'The figure of a renowned artist stepping outside moral and ethical bounds fascinates me' (Sendecka 2019). Indeed, beyond Maria's speech, her unconventional actions abound. As a grandmother, for example, she is far from a predictable representation of a female figure who has just celebrated her sixty fifth birthday; there are many endearing scenes with her grandchildren where we see them laughing, playing with abandon. She teaches her granddaughter how to swear in Polish; she offers her Frank Sinatra music. As a wife, rather than speaking to him directly, she writes a letter to her husband, telling him that, in his old slippers, he moves inaudibly around the house like a ghost: 'Your steps leave no echo.'

This point takes us back to our initial comment about refugees as narrative echoes. Echoes are about sounds, sounds that return and mirror the original acoustic. But they return in a delayed form; as Joan W. Scott writes about echoes in the context of feminist theory, 'they are incomplete reproductions,' in the process creating 'gaps of meaning and intelligibility' (2001, 291). In Greek mythology, for example, Echo was a nymph who could only repeat the last words of others. Pleshette DeArmitt in 'Resonances of Echo: A Derridian Allegory,' writes: 'Echo was condemned by divine interdiction to reduplicate only a deformed or deficient discourse of the same. Thus it can be argued that Echo is nothing but voice, yet has no voice of her own' (2009, 90). Thinking about the curious absence of refugees in a film that is intensely preoccupied with the refugee discourse invites us to contemplate echoes further. We can see how resounding echoes incite anti-Arab hysteria. For example, in the wake of the Rome tragedy, Nazeer's tavern is burnt down. Commissar's son has been beaten up and called a 'dirty beige Moroccan,' even though their family is Italian from Sicily.

The film ends with one of Maria's poems, the first lines of which read, 'To be a mist which doesn't know if it is still earth or else already a cloud.' This captures the indeterminacy that permeates the entire film – a fugitive aesthetic, dispersed, mobile, formally complex, oscillating between opacity and transparency. In particular for our reading of the film, it also describes the

ambiguous status of the refugee as echo or visual trace. Like mist, the refugees fleeing through the landscape are insubstantial and in the process of becoming. Indeed, the film holds open the possibility that the refugees are *nothing but* rumour – fantasy figures that provide an alibi for the violence that is an intrinsic component of European history. This history is invoked by the figures of the cage and the camp, and rather than being brought from outside, the violence comes from within.

***Atlantics*: Refugees as Rebellious Ghosts**

 ‘What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible?’

--Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997, 24).

If *Dolce Fine Giornata* represents the refugee crisis from a Eurocentric perspective in which refugees, marginalised socially and narratively, are shadowy figures posing an unspecified threat, then *Atlantics* (*Atlantique*) offers a counter-perspective in which Europe itself is imaginary, vaguely defined and other. The first feature film by Mati Diop, the film dwells on the effects of the drowning of a number of young men attempting the perilous Atlantic journey from Senegal to Spain in a pirogue with their friends, family, and acquaintances. Employing a similarly anti-sensational strategy to *Dolce Fine Giornata* in leaving the horror of the fishing boat’s sinking off-screen, *Atlantics* instead examines the way that those left behind in Dakar are haunted by the deaths of these young economic migrants. However, haunting is more than just an evocative metaphor here since the film fuses a realist style with the conventions of horror cinema to depict the living as periodically possessed by the dead.

Discussing the persistence of haunting in contemporary society, even in ‘a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility,’ Gordon suggests that ghosts are a sign not of a lingering atavistic superstition or of individual mental instability, but of the incomplete erasure or repression of something socially significant (1997, 16). They are a sign of systemic failure, confronting us with the incompatibility between ideology and lived experience that social and cultural systems typically work to efface. Thus, Gordon writes,

Haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of Capitalism or State terror, for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous (24).

Ghosts therefore appear at the sensitive border zones and fault lines where the logic of a system such as liberal capitalism starts to fracture, and the incompatibility between an economic system devoted to globalized trade, mobile capital and a highly mobile labour force on the one hand, and political systems organised around nationalism, xenoracism and the fortification of borders on the other becomes irresistibly urgent.

Atlantics has the foundations of a classic romance narrative as the protagonist Ada, growing up in a conservative Muslim family, is unhappily committed to marrying the wealthy Omar, who spends most of the year working in Italy, but is really in love with Souleiman, a construction worker on an enormous skyscraper in Dakar, and whose boss, N'Diaye is refusing to pay the workers their wages. When Souleiman fails to meet Ada at a bar one night, she learns that he has gone to sea with a group of men and she goes ahead with the marriage reluctantly.

At the wedding reception in Omar's apartment, a friend tells Ada she has just seen Souleiman and that he ran away; Ada accuses her of being a witch and shortly afterwards the wedding bed catches fire, setting the apartment alight. A precocious young detective, Diop, is assigned to the case the next day but is struck by illness while investigating Souleiman's house, becoming feverish and then collapsing in the street, while Ada's friends Fanta and Mariama are also struck by the same illness. That night, a group of women walks silently through the streets and converge on the house of the contractor N'Diaye to demand the four months' wages he was refusing to pay the construction workers at the film's opening. The women, all of whom now have white eyes, are possessed by the dead sailors who have returned to demand their money, the earlier illness a symptom of their possession.

Ada, who is under investigation by Diop over the fire, begins receiving texts from Souleiman and is initially convinced it is a trap laid by the police, but is visited by the detective late one night who tells her, his eyes now white as well, that he is Souleiman; we learn later that he set fire to Omar's apartment while possessing Diop's body. Running away she returns to the bar, which is now occupied by the possessed women, one of whom recounts the experience of the sinking of the pirogue and that Souleiman regretted not saying goodbye to Ada who was the love of his life. In the mirrored wall of the bar, the uncanny reflections are not those of the women but the men now possessing them. The complex narrative is resolved as N'Diaye hands over the money to the possessed women, after his own house has been burnt down in retribution, and he is forced to dig graves for the dead men at the cemetery. Souleiman, occupying Diop's body, meets Ada at the bar where they consummate their relationship.

In one of her interviews, Diop observes: 'As a French person I always felt a bit of an outsider because as a mixed woman, I really evolved in multiple cultural and family environments. And so I think the film really wants to circulate in a very free way between genres. It really came from the internal needs of the film' (Olsen 2019). Indeed, *Atlantics* sits at the border between naturalism and fantasy. While some elements of the film are familiar from horror cinema, the film's fantastic quality is established through the predominance of scenes shot in early morning or evening light, or at night. We see repeated shots of Dakar shrouded in mist and haze that lend the city an unreal, futuristic quality, through the motif of shots of the sea glittering in the dark, and through Fatima Al Qadiri's score that blends electronic instruments, voices and field recordings in a reverberating underwater ambience. Rather than a source of terror for the viewer, haunting is treated by the film in a matter-of-fact way as a spectral long-distance communication technology, albeit one that is experienced by the characters themselves as unsettlingly uncanny.

Moreover, the haunting is also presented as a continuation of the incomplete journey, the migrants swapping their fishing boat for a different vessel.

The title of the film invites us to understand hauntings in relation to a particular historical continuity, since Senegal is situated within one of the two major regions from which enslaved African people were transported across the Atlantic to Brazil, the West Indies, and North America from the 16th century through to the early 19th century¹. We might imagine that the ghosts of Souleiman and his fellow economic migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees, will be jostling with the spirits of thousands of others who were killed on slave ships during the middle passage across the ocean (as well as on either side of it). Like a memory, an echo or a ripple on the water's surface, a ghost is a perceptible trace of something that no longer exists. It represents a temporal disjunction or aporia where an instance from the past irrupts into the present, confronting us with unfinished business. Speculating upon the reasons for writing a ghost story, Gordon suggests that one reason is that they 'not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place' (1997, 22). In its focus upon Dakar and Souleiman's friends and acquaintances, *Atlantics* constitutes a counter-perspective to films that are preoccupied with the impact of refugeeism upon Europe, documenting the way that the traumatic effects of the sinking spread through the space they have left behind, but the counter-perspective is also evident in the concentration upon women's experience.

A comparison with the Senegalese film, *La Pirogue* (Moussa Touré, 2012) is instructive here since that film also depicts a disastrous attempt by a group of migrants and asylum-seekers to travel from Dakar to Spain in a pirogue. The film tells the story of an unemployed fisherman, Baye Laye, who agrees reluctantly to pilot a boat to Spain, and the hellish journey is recounted at length as they find a woman stowaway, fights break out, the GPS is lost overboard, a number of passengers die and the engine packs up leaving them drifting towards Brazil. They are finally rescued by the Spanish Red Cross and returned to Dakar a fortnight later - a circular journey that is a feature of the narrative structure of many refugee films that recount failed or diverted journeys - Baye Laye stopping to buy his son a Spanish souvenir, an FC Barcelona shirt, from the local market before returning home.

Although there are brief dream sequences, capturing the passengers' memories of home, this film is more stylistically conventional than *Atlantics*. Its claustrophobic focus upon the occupants of the boat and their interactions means that the film becomes a study in masculinity under pressure, a small-scale disaster movie with the bravery (or cowardice) of Baye Laye and the travelers underlined by the boat's name, *Goor Fitt* [*Man of Courage*]. The aesthetic strategy is designed to place the spectator inside the high-sided pirogue, giving the viewer a powerfully visceral sense

¹ The plural title adopted for the English-language release, *Atlantics*, underlines the idea of historical echoes or doubles, implying that there are other histories at play, and other geographies, and that the Atlantic might be reconceived, as Paul Gilroy suggests, for example, as 'the black Atlantic', ascribing greater agency to African culture and troubling our Eurocentric understanding of trans-Atlantic modernity.

of the exhausting, dangerous lengths that people will go to in order to reach Europe, as well as the various reasons they might have.

By contrast, the decision to use the narrative mode of a ghost story to recount the circumstances of a similar voyage in *Atlantics* might seem to reproduce precisely the socio-historical (and physical) erasure of these figures that much refugee media is concerned with challenging. However, one consequence of the film's refusal to visualise or dwell upon the abject, harrowing spectacle of dead, dying and petrified travelers is that *Atlantics* also refrains from reiterating the stereotypical image of the asylum-seeker as a helpless, dehumanised body, plucked out of the sea or washed up on the beaches of Europe. It refuses to 'focus on the powerless, reduced to their powerlessness,' as Susan Sontag puts it, in reference to Sebastiao Salgado's monumental series of photographs of migrants (Sontag 2004, 68). The collision of fantasy and actuality also functions as a distancing device that potentially directs the viewer's attention towards cinema's representational regime and, more broadly, the mediated mechanisms of erasure and silencing that structure discourses of refugeeism.

Another crucial effect of the storytelling strategy employed in *Atlantics* is that the film ends on a hopeful assertion of future possibility that might have been foreclosed by a flatly realistic film that is grounded in the present. As Ada reflects upon her night with Souleiman/Diop, she says in voiceover: 'Some memories are omens. Last night will stay with me, to remind me who I am, and show me who I will become. Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada.'

Suggesting that a ghost story is a critical reflection upon the circumstances under which certain memories are generated - a detective story concerned with investigating the causes behind a haunting - Gordon proposes that they strive 'toward a counter-memory, for the future', and indeed, Ada's observation that 'some memories are omens' reiterates this paradoxical concept of a memory that recalls a possible future (1997, 22). In their preoccupation with the past, ghost stories are concerned with liberating the protagonists from this past by reframing it as a comprehensible event, rather than an unspeakable, inexplicable trauma that they are doomed to repeat in a closed narrative circuit. In *Dolce Fine Giornata*, which, we argue above, might also be considered a ghosting? story, the locals' refusal to interrogate the relationship between the current refugee crisis, contemporary terrorism, and Europe's violent histories of murder, exclusion, colonisation and extraction leaves Maria imprisoned by a relic from that past. By contrast, Ada's declaration and the final shot in which she looks confidently at the camera implies a feminist, non-Eurocentric future that is hers to write.

So, how might we think about *Atlantics* answering Gordon's question that opens this section? Indeed, what does the ghost say as it lingers in the fissures of the visible and the invisible? Commenting on her visit to Dakar in 2009, Diop recalls: 'I was talking to boys who were here in front of me, in flesh and bones, but who were so possessed by the idea of elsewhere that they were no longer here anymore...' And it's also about a youth who disappeared in the ocean, which can be felt like a ghost generation — you know, a whole group of young people who disappeared

in the ocean. And I personally — I was troubled; I was a bit haunted by that. And that's why for me, it was always going to be a ghost film" (Qureshi 2019). Gordon's comment is useful here:

To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows' (1997, 18).

To *film* a ghost story, as Gordon remarks, makes a far more emphatic claim regarding the objective material reality of ghosts, foregrounding questions of visibility and representation in a particularly unsettling way (1997, 18). In this case, the ghosts demand representation in two senses. Firstly, as presences perceptible through the voices and actions of the bodies they occupy and direct, as if parodying the process of film-making, they demand to be seen and heard by the living, and the fact that they are visualised as reflections in a mirror, indicates the degree to which the film makes conceptual play of the status of the screen as uncanny double². Secondly, this demand to be heard is a political representation, since the ghosts are, effectively, activists demanding reparations for past injustices.

Island of the Hungry Ghosts: Speaking to the Ghosts

It is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it...[out] of respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (xix, 1994, emphasis in original)

This necessity to speak 'to the ghost and with it' permeates Gabrielle Brady's hybrid documentary *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018). Shot on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean that is home to a notorious immigrant detention centre run by Serco, the film presents three separate aspects of life on the island: the work and family life of a trauma and torture counsellor at the island's community hospital who works with migrants held at the prison; the memorial rituals of the descendants of Chinese immigrants who worked in the island's phosphate mines; and the annual mass migration of the large red crabs from the forests to the shore to lay their eggs in the sea, placing them at risk of death under the wheels of motor traffic. The relationship between these three modes of migratory life is not made explicit through voice-over commentary or the observations of any of the participants. This aporetic strategy reinforces the mysterious atmosphere that pervades the film, a rhetorical approach to this topic

² Moreover, in a further doubling, the film can be seen as a distant echo of the ground-breaking Senegalese film *Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambety, 1973) by Diop's father. *Touki Bouki* is a playfully experimental road movie about a young couple attempting to escape from Dakar to Europe by boat, and also explores themes of haunting and witchcraft, colonisation and displacement.

that is very different from a compassionate activist documentary such as *Sea Sorrow* (Richardson, 2017), where the emphasis is on the transparent transmission of information about the historical background to the current refugee crisis. Indeed, with sequences of famous screen actors visiting refugee camps and speaking at demonstrations, *Sea Sorrow* belongs to what Omid Tofighian terms ‘the thriving ‘refugee industry’ that promotes stories to provide exposure and information and attempts to create empathy (if that is at all possible)’ (Boochani 2018, 372). By contrast, the juxtaposition of distinct narrative strands in Brady’s film creates uncertainty, setting off resonances that invite the viewer to reflect upon the way these violent histories of movement are entangled.

The most obvious irony that emerges from these conjunctions is the contrast between the care that is taken to protect the migrating crabs, and the hostility with which the human migrants are treated. Road signs warn drivers, ‘Red Crab Migration, No Vehicles Beyond this Point,’ and we see wardens escorting cars along the road, diligently pushing the crabs safely out of their path with rakes. However, the shots of hundreds of red crabs moving slowly and relentlessly towards the sea invite us to reflect upon the relationship between movement and freedom, but also with the futility of our obsession with surveilling, managing, and restricting movement. Thus, the intercutting of images of red crab migration, understood as ‘natural,’ with human migration, which is represented as a phenomenon to be surveilled, controlled, and, ultimately, treated as criminalizable and punishable, ultimately emerges as a counterpoint. While we see crabs in mesmerizingly beautiful long takes and close-ups as they crawl through roads, the refugees remain locked in a detention center off-screen.

‘Make a bridge for them. Otherwise, they won’t get across. We are just helping them out.’ These scenes, speaking to the protection of crabs, are endearing yet deeply ironic since ‘we are just helping them out’ does not apply to the detainees: ‘People cannot come out unless the guards say they can come out.’ Poh Lin Lee offers this simple yet absurd explanation about the refugees’ situation to her inquisitive young daughters whose multiple questions allow the audience to learn about the island. Poh Lin, a torture and trauma counsellor at the center of the diegesis, treats the refugees; they are sent to her, yet they frequently do not come back to continue their therapy and the authorities do not explain their disappearances. Her therapeutic work is thus, ultimately, frustratingly ineffective, as she does not have consistent access to the detainees whose lives are manipulated by the invisible system. While they have escaped wars, violence, and traumas elsewhere, we can sense how the refugees’ current conditions of indefinite waiting, family separations, and acts of cruelty inside the detention center re-traumatize them. We learn about brutalization and protest, we hear about suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and powerlessness, we witness tears up-close. Lee, too, is not immune to trauma; treating her patients in these haphazard conditions leaves her scarred and haunted by their violent stories. Facing a cruel immigration system that ultimately impedes her therapy work, and refusing to be complicit with ‘Australia’s border-industrial complex’ (Tofighian 362), Poh Lin abandons her practice in the end and plans to leave the island. One of the last scenes features her frustrated and breathless, moving through

the rainforest, hacking at the branches angrily with her machete. While we witness such emotional outbursts, the last shot of the film feels almost lyrical, primordial: a close-up of a freely crawling crab – protected and cared for.

Like Diop who, in her interview mentioned being haunted by her visit in Dakar, Brady too talks about a similar experience. She recalls her first visit to the island when Poh Lin showed her the hidden detention center:

In that moment, it was chilling to imagine that the people she was working with were inside this place. I mean, it really looks like a prison, and it looks like it's been built to be hidden; it's in the middle of the jungle...at that time, the migration of the crabs was beginning. So, I had textures and I had a bit of a taste of some of these really stark contrasts that sit in the island, and it stayed with me. It started haunting me (Reed 2018).

Just as in *Atlantics*, these hauntings reverberate through Brady's film as well, evoked through the imagery of fantasy cinema, and through a narrative concern with the way that the unacknowledged violent histories of migration and exploitation intrude upon and shape the present.

Certainly, such an argument about hauntings is not easy to document empirically on film; instead, it invites discourses of invisibility into play--or, better yet, 'the visibility of the invisible' (Derrida 1994, 100). In fact, Derrida aids our argument by making a similar claim about specters and hauntings:

It will not be a matter of merely accumulating... 'empirical evidence,' it will not suffice to point one's finger at the mass of undeniable facts... [The question will be] of the *double interpretation*, the concurrent readings that the picture seems to call for and to oblige us to associate (1994, 80-1; emphasis in original).

Indeed, the hauntings we are discussing are generation-specific and lodged in the memory of the living although we also see tombstones without names. While the film is asking us to contemplate these continuities of migration, the idea of ghostly speaking is compellingly exemplified by yet another narrative strand -- the practices of the island's Chinese community. They pay homage to the wandering ghosts of their forebears; indentured laborers brought over by the British colonizers a century ago in cruel circumstances and forced to work in the mines. 'Poor souls, they were here alone,' one of the islanders observes. 'They had no family with them. Once they arrived to the island [sic], they weren't allowed to leave.' The film shows their descendants making ritual offerings to the spirits of those who died on the island without receiving proper burials, the 'hungry ghosts,' and praying at unmarked graves in the jungle. The sense that the island is haunted by this history is underscored by a mysterious shot of rhizomic tree roots accompanied by whispered chanting: 'Blessings for everyone's safety, Blessings for those in between. Help the wandering spirits move through to the next realm.'

Witnessing one of the rituals, Poh Lin's daughter asks: 'What is a ghost?' Poh Lin offers a deceptively simple answer: 'Something you cannot see but it is around us.' By implication this refers to the hungry ghosts, but also to the refugees who are locked up in the detention and whose invisible presence is shrouded in secrecy (as well as the Australian immigrant security staff who work there).

Reflecting on the power of hauntings, Gordon suggests that they propel a state where 'a repressed or unresolved violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely'; certainly, the 'hungry ghost' rituals speak to that unresolved violence on the island, which, in a contemporary moment, envelops the lives of the refugees in the detention center (2011). As the audience finds out, Christmas Island was uninhabited when European colonizers found it, so, ironically, the history of the island is rooted in migration, which, once supposedly 'legal,' is now treated as 'illegal.' These discourses of (il)legality haunt the island as everybody there is a migrant. However, the refugees are interpellated into 'illegality' so strongly that a female refugee in Poh Lin's office acknowledges that she is 'illegal,' a point that Poh Lin counter argues: 'it's not illegal to seek asylum.' Narratively, thus, the island becomes a particularly intriguing *mise-en-scène* for refugee narratives, where initial colonization is imagined as fully 'legal.' Considering the refugees' appearances and disappearances in Poh Lin's office, they too acquire a somewhat metaphorical ghostly status, confirming Nicholas Mirzoeff's point that 'the ghost is somewhere between the visible and the invisible' (2002, 189). It is clear that when the three refugees we see on-screen undergo therapy with Poh Lin, their stories, often told in fragments, haunt the speakers and, ultimately haunt Poh Lin, the listener.

The central material object of Poh Lin's therapy is a sandbox, which functions as a tactile mediator, an object both soothing and evoking disquieting hauntings, as the refugees are asked to immerse their hands in the sand and create their stories out of various figurines Poh Lin has in her office. We see toy houses, boats, soldiers, lighthouses, palm trees, horses, children. We see a cross and a cage. The sandbox takes on a role of a meta-device: the space exemplifying the fugitive aesthetics as, in different ways, the refugees build narratives of flight out of the toys. Inevitably, we might also think of the sandbox as a miniature filmmaking set – a space of mediation, storytelling, and attempts at understanding. As Poh Lin is directing the refugee stories ('feeling you are drawn to, try to follow it'), at one point, she is also shown with her hands in the sand when she listens to one refugee telling her about his lip sewing: 'I wanted to sew my eyes shut as well.' At this point, she too is seeking solace by touching the sand and we understand that the retold traumas have a multidirectional effect. She becomes a patient in her own therapy, a body in need of comfort.

The hauntings emerge most forcefully through sound. The narrative opens with the sounds of rainforest, both soothing and ominous, as we see the unidentified male figure enacting the escape from the detention center, running through the forest and screaming. We hear his shrieks while the background fills with the sound of Chinese gongs, which reverberates, creating an eerie aura. Scream as an opening audibility wavers at the border of not-quite-language and not-quite-not

language, a signification that cues us to agony and bodily frustration, quivering on the borders of intelligibility. The scream might be thus conceptualized as a poignant articulation of this quivering: between life and death, between being and not-being. While the male figure expresses himself through shrieking, there are multiple contrasting scenes underscoring the sounds crabs make – audible murmurs of their legs, rustling on the ground -- all contributing to the eerie sensation.

In other ways as well, that eerie sensation permeates the narrative, which establishes yet another divergence: as we see multiple images of Poh Lin with her husband and daughters freely exploring the island and admiring its nature, their escapades underscore the immobility of the refugees off-screen. We also see several domestic scenes when Poh Lin takes care of her daughters, waking them up, playing with them – all these moments refuse to be read straightforwardly as comforting domesticity. Rather, they emerge as moments of troubling privilege; ordinary gestures of care take on a weighted significance.

Classified by the director as a ‘hybrid documentary,’ the film exemplifies the fugitive aesthetics of refugee cinema in its disarming fusion of conventional, socially concerned documentary with the stylistic and narrative devices of fiction films. This strategy makes the representational capacity of documentary cinema itself the object of scrutiny, by calling into question the reliability of the film image in a similar way to the documentary fictions of Werner Herzog. For instance, the therapy sessions between the therapist and her anonymous clients are shot in close-up and extreme close-up, which lends the exchanges the intimate intensity of film melodrama; the absence of establishing shots, captions and intertitles, or any acknowledgement of the camera’s presence, heightens the impression – or the suspicion - that these scenes are staged. As John Grierson’s definition of documentary as the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ implies, a variable degree of staging and manipulation is intrinsic to the form. Therefore, what is at stake in the combination of observational footage with directed sequences is not the question of a film’s ‘authenticity’, so much as the way this configuration guides our interpretation. Discussing the difference between Goya’s suite of atrocity etchings, *The Disasters of War* (1810-20), and photographic documents of barbarism, Susan Sontag suggests that the different media imply a different significance. ‘They [the prints] claim: things *like* this happened. In contrast, a single photograph of filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera’s lens. A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show’ (Sontag 2004, 40). Through its combination of observational and staged footage Brady’s fusion-form makes a similar claim to Goya’s prints, inviting us to understand that the fragments of damaged lives depicted on screen, while significant in themselves, are also synecdoches, local instances of a global network of institutions, processes and individuals that is far too broad and complex to be captured by one film.

Counselling sessions are alternated with scenes of Lee and her family at home and on a camping trip, but, again, the camera’s access to private moments, such as the couple in bed with their young daughter, raises the question of how far these performances have been rehearsed. In one

notable scene, as they sit in their house at night, Poh Lin recounts to her partner a story told by one of her clients of finding himself in the water when his boat sank and sharks began to pick off the people floating in the sea. She observes that she doesn't know whether she'd try to hold on to the sinking boat, if she were in that position, or let go, and the film then shows the two of them dancing silently as he comforts her. It is a moving moment in the account of Poh Lin's increasing frustration at the impossibility of her job. Whether or not this is scripted, the story echoes one told by the fisherman Quint in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), and its symbolic importance is underscored by a sequence towards the end of the film in which Poh Lin reflects that suicide is an understandable response to the experience of being held in detention. The camera then follows Poh Lin running along a road at night before a sequence of slow-motion, underwater shots show her swimming/drowning.

As with *Atlantics* and *Dolce Fine Giornata*, the film makes sparing use of the imagery of horror and exploitation cinema not as a sensational means of terrifying the viewer in order to make us *feel* what it might feel like to be a refugee, but as a means through which to insist that the experience of refugeeism and detention is horrific. Omid Tofighian describes the literary genre within which Kurdish-Iranian refugee Behrouz Boochani wrote about his experience of flight and subsequent imprisonment on Manus Island as 'horrific surrealism,' and the classification serves equally well for these films: 'Reality is fused with dreams and creative ways of re-imagining the natural environment and horrific events and architecture' (367).

Incongruous generic codes such as very slow tracking shots through the dark rainforest picking out the tangled tree roots, travelling shots along empty roads at night, or close-up shots of the slowly moving crabs (that resemble alien invaders) function to reframe what might otherwise be seen as a picturesque, lush landscape as a dangerous hellscape. Again, this effect is achieved without resorting to the ambiguously upsetting but perhaps also thrilling or gratifying spectacle of distressed, broken, or humiliated individuals. When one of Lee's clients recounts sewing his lips shut in protest in voice-over, for example, the accompanying images are close-ups of the toy figures lining her office shelves, the props for her miniature sandbox film set.

'It's a kind of hell here,' another client explains in a counselling session. 'I think hell is not just fire or something. Hell is somewhere you see suffering. You see your family suffering. You see your friends suffering. You can't do anything.' The fugitive aesthetics of refugee cinema is characterised by self-reflexivity, and the evident attention to form in Brady's film invites us to read such comments as a simultaneous commentary upon the film itself and the ethical challenges of depicting the extremity of refugee experience. To spectacularise suffering - to place it on-screen - may seem to be an obvious tactic by which to capture a viewer's attention, but as the speaker implies, it is a tactic that could be counterproductive: a film that is overwhelmingly hellish might leave the viewer feeling frozen, unable to 'do anything.'

Thus, horror film tropes are a subtly effective means of evoking the nightmarish experience of refugeeism and detention, but also the way that these horrors are not contained within the fences

of the camp. As a trauma and torture counsellor witnessing suffering, Lee is also ensnared in hell, but more generally, the film implies, the presence of such a camp – however well-hidden, anonymously institutional and disavowed it may be – contaminates and transforms the space around it. Like the cage in *Dolce Fine Giornata*, it prompts the question of whether the threat lies inside or outside, who needs protecting from whom?

Coda: *Life Overtakes Me*: Resigned Refugees as Sleeping Ghosts

‘Cinema thus allows one to cultivate what could be called “grafts” of spectrality; it inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework, the projected film, which is itself a ghost.’

--Jacques Derrida (“Cinema and Its Ghosts,” 2015, 27)

‘They literally withdraw from the world as if they’re dead.’

--Kristine Samuelson, commenting on *Life Overtakes Me* (Carey, 2019)

The Swedish-American documentary *Life Overtakes Me* (Samuelson, Haptas), realizes cinema’s spectrality in a distinctively unsettling fashion. Unlike the other films analysed above, it materializes spectrality by foregrounding the physicality of the refugee body. While in previous narratives the refugee is barely there, barely visible, in *Life Overtakes Me* they are excessively present. As Gordon claims, the ghost is a ‘social figure’ and the film highlights this ghostly reality ‘not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition’ (1997, 8).

The film depicts traumatized refugee children in Sweden hundreds of whom have fallen into a coma-like condition known as Resignation Syndrome, which can last years. While we have discussed the function of the opening scream in *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* as an audio-metaphor for the lingering positionality between life and death, *Life Overtakes Me* shows this liminal quivering in a literal way – the children suffering from Resignation Syndrome are unresponsive and immobile, in deep sleep. Indeed, the opening shots, cutting from a snowy landscape to a sleeping girl suggest a fairy tale narrative. The film introduces three such children, Dasha, Karen, and Leyla, and their parents and siblings. While the audience might recognize Ukrainian when we hear Dasha’s parents and Armenian when the camera follows Karen’s family, Layla’s family is identified as Yazidis, an ethnic minority, ‘second-class citizens in most countries where they live.’ As the filmmakers explain, they purposely do not reveal the specific regions the refugees come from: ‘We made a deal with them from the very beginning: We’re not going to say where they’re from’ (Curtis 2020). Such an ethical gesture of dis-identification concealing their identities works against further imperiling the refugee families who, in order to confirm their refugee status, are continually exposed as they need to tell and retell their stories of survival. However, as with Brady’s film, this gesture also conveys the message that focusing on these individuals is a means of drawing attention to an experience that many others have had.

All three families are in various stages of the asylum process – waiting for the approval of their residency, appealing against deportation orders, reapplying for temporary residence. The parents come from different geopolitical regions and have endured various traumas – including rape, torture, persecution, surveillance – but what they have in common is the experience of torturous liminality in Sweden; while they have housing, they are all enveloped by the aura of precarity as they wait and hope for positive resolutions, not knowing their future. The children’s condition – alive but unconscious - is the embodied expression of this liminality. In turn, this prompted Swedish politicians to ask whether this is a genuine condition or whether they were poisoned by their parents, a reiteration of the perpetual scepticism with which all refugee claims are treated. Are they genuine and thus deserving of hospitality, or are they bogus, intent on securing fraudulent access to the welfare systems, housing, and employment rights of the country’s citizens by pretending to be asylum-seekers? Of course, the double bind in which many refugees are caught is that, lacking identity papers, passports or other forms of evidence, they are repeatedly required to undertake a convincing *performance* of refugee identity – to tell a compelling story. Moreover, as the film demonstrates, for Dasha, the source of her trauma lay not in the situation from which the family was fleeing, but in absorbing the stories told by her parents in the hearings in which they applied for asylum. Thiu, in a more direct fashion than Brady’s film, the violence of the asylum process itself - the *gift* that Maria Linde refers to - is underscored.

The film suggests that these feelings of insecurity, long periods of uncertainty, parents’ fears and vulnerabilities transfer to their children who withdraw from reality. In a way, they become the repository of the family’s traumas. While we watch the parents engaged in similar activities around their lifeless children – bathing them, feeding them through tubes, exercising their limbs, covering them with blankets, and taking them on walks in strollers – we hear various professionals commenting on these uncanny situations. There are child psychiatrists, doctors, and immigration attorneys offering their thoughts on trauma survivorship and legalities navigating these refugees’ lives. Despite the value of these professional comments, Layla’s father explains their positionality most poignantly: ‘the fear is in our bodies.’ The children’s non-presence over-presence, while speaking to their trauma, generates troubling intimacy though: we watch the sleeping children often up-close and see their naked limbs, torsos, their skin; we are close to their exposed bellies as the doctor checks their vital signs. All these moments of bodily manipulations create a sense that the camera violates their bodily space, exposing their vulnerable bodies under a medical gaze for spectatorial **inspection**.

In a particularly touching moment as Dasha’s sister reads her a children’s story, she recites the line ‘We have to look for the ghost.’ This self-reflexive moment, in a film about ghosts, and parents’ patient search for their lost children, also invites the question asked by Gordon, ‘What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible?’ (1997, 24) The question posed in different ways by these films, and the answer is, in each case, a plea for hospitality, for home. But, as Derrida has shown us, unconditional hospitality is difficult,

‘unbearable’ (1999, 70) because, as he says, it goes against conventional apprehension of hospitality where ‘the host remains the master in the house, the country, the nation, he controls the threshold, he controls the borders, and when he welcomes the guest he wants to keep the mastery’ (1999, 69). Such unconditional hospitality necessitates the subversion of the mastery of the house. *Life Overtakes Me*, with children-ghosts at its center, might be thus read as a demand for unconditional hospitality, for an aporetic ‘opening without horizon’ (Derrida 1999, 70). In fact, *Dolce Fine Giornata*, *Atlantics*, and *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* too ask the viewers to imagine what it might mean to suspend that mastery – the mastery of the nation, the threshold, the border, the house. Given the overwhelming presence of the displaced globally, those who, for a variety of reasons, seek inclusion into their ‘host’ nations, these philosophical discussions are not merely theoretical exercises in intellectual sophistication but have become burning issues of wider social significance.

Samuelson’s comment about the children’s withdrawal from the world as if they were dead symbolically speaks to our exploration of the various films we brought together in this article. In these films, the figuration of refugees as absent, as ghosts, as hauntings and marginally present bodies speaks to the need to apprehend the current refugee crisis as reverberations – as phenomena historically rooted in genocidal histories, colonial invasions, and western exploitations. Narrative lacunae and hauntings uncovering those elisions are thus the ultimate reverberations, leaving us with a sense that an aporetic fugitive aesthetics might reveal the ethical dimension of representation, which, in Derrida’s words, ‘weighs heavily with the weight of its ghosts’ (2015, 28).

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ⁱ Krystyna Janda was honored at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019 for her role.

ⁱⁱ This echoes composer Karlheinz Stockhausen’s proposition that the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 was ‘the greatest work of art that was ever given’, and also invokes Georges Bataille’s concept of art as a destructive practice.