Fugitive Aesthetics

Echoes, Ghost Stories and Refugee Cinema

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Introduction: Fugitive Aesthetics and Marginalia

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.

Preoccupied with the phenomenology of cinematic foreignness and working within a larger field of transnational cinema, we argue that the cinematic transnational – privileging immigrants, migrants, refugees and border zones – is shot through with radical scepticism about the future while inviting a spectatorship that demands that we think about the future in terms of ethical encounters with others – in terms of an ethics of answerability that resists subsuming difference through appropriation or reducing difference to sameness. Certainly, a similar claim can be made about the category of refugee cinema. Thus 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. ‘Fugitivity’ is a concept with particular significance to Black studies in relation to histories of slavery and postcolonialism, but, since it is concerned with strategies of resistance and refusal, we...
are borrowing this term as it is a valuable one with which to think about refugee experiences. Using this notion, Tina Sikka, for example, proposes that we consider the idea of ‘a multifaceted refugee’ to account for intersectionality and multidimensionality. She insists that we regard

refugees as not solely definable by their flight from danger, but instead, through the lens of ‘fugitivity’, also described as ‘the movement to or movement towards’. Fugitivity provides a way to conceive of the refugee as a potential-laden figure of becoming.4

Noting the etymological connection between ‘fugitive’ and ‘refugee’ we are using the term fugitive aesthetics to capture the particular ways that filmmakers, some of them refugees themselves, engaged in self-representation.5 have used sounds, images, and the dynamic stylistic capacity of cinema to engage viewers with stories of 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, the aesthetics of refugee cinema is frequently characterised by misunderstandings and missed encounters, arrhythmic shifts between frantic movement and stasis, with an emotional range that shifts from suicidal despair and rage through anxiety and humour 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. This cinematic fugitivity is represented by examples that range from fiction films, such as A Lady without Passport (Joseph H Lewis, 1950), El Norte (The North, Gregory Nava, 1983), Turtles Can Fly (Bahman Ghobadi, 2005), through feature-length documentaries, amateur and activist films such as Human Flow (Ai Weiwei, 2017), Queens of Syria (Yasmin Fedda, 2014), Midnight Traveler (Hassan Fazili, 2019), to hybrid, experimental media works, for example VR installation Carne y Arena (Flesh and Sand, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2017), and Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait (Wiam Simav Bedirxan and Ossama Mohammed, 2014). However, there is a risk that the desire to draw boundaries around diverse groups of films made under very different circumstances and with various production histories 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 universalising, 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 recognise 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.5

The 1951 ‘Refugee Convention’, drawn up by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, establishes a clear distinction between refugees, who

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4 Tina Sikka, ‘Fugitivity: How Black Studies Can Help Us Rethink the Refugee’, Dismantle, 13 July 2020, https://dismantlemag.com/2020/07/13/fugitivity-black-studies-rethink-refugee/, accessed 9 June 2022

5 Raminder Kaur and Mariagiulia Grassilli approach this mode of self-representation by refugees through the lens of Fifth Cinema: ‘as a multifaceted spectrum of films made by or with the active participation of refugees, we define their outputs as Fifth Cinema’. This category, they claim, unlike the films we are discussing here, ‘complements the genre of
what Hamid Naficy defines as “accent cinema” – that is, the film-making of postcolonial, Third World, and other displaced individuals living in the West, whereby their films are marked by a certain “accent” through alternative production modes and styles’. Raminder Kaur and Mariaguila Grassilli, ‘Towards a Fifth Cinema’, *Third Text* 156, vol 33, issue 1, January 2018, pp 1–25, p 3, p 20.

6 For further discussion of *aporia*, see Marciniak and Bennett, ‘Aporias of Foreignness: Transnational Encounters in Cinema’, *Transnational Cinemas*, vol 9, issue 1, 2018, pp 1–12.

7 The international visibility of these films is demonstrated by the range of awards they have won, with Borcuch’s film winning a prize at the Sundance Festival, Brady’s winning the grand jury prize at Mumbai Film Festival, and Diop’s film, the first feature film premiere by a Black woman filmmaker, winning the grand jury prize at Cannes.

8 See, for example, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Pluto Press, London, 2000; Guillermo Gómez-Peña, ‘In Defense of Performance Art’, *La Pocha Nostra*, http://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm, accessed 9 June 2022; Trinh T Minh-ha, ‘The Image and the Void’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol 15, issue 1, 2016, pp 131–140; Charlotte Witt, ‘Working on the Margins: Feminist Theory and Philosophy’, *Metaphilosophy*, vol 27, no 1/2, January–April 1996, pp 226–229 are forced to move due to fear of persecution, and migrants, who choose to move in search of a better life. 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.

In order to develop our discussion of refugee cinema and fugitive aesthetics, we examine three recent films from different geopolitical regions, all of which have circulated internationally:7 Jacek Borcuch’s Polish-Italian drama *Dolce Fine Giornata* / *Slodki koniec dnia* (Sweet End of Day, 2019); Mati Diop’s internationally produced directorial debut, *Atlantics* (*Atlantique*, 2019); and *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018), a documentary by Gabrielle Brady. In Borcuch’s film, the ‘refugee crisis’ is a lens through which to explore the complex history of violence and genocide that has shaped contemporary Europe, while for Diop the effects of migration to Europe are examined in relation to their impact on the lives of young Senegalese people and their families. Brady’s film, meanwhile, examines the traumatic effects of offshore detention employed by the Australian government. We end our discussion with a brief examination of *Life Overtakes Me* (John Haptas, Kristine Samuelson, 2019) to reflect on the paradoxical (in)visibility of the refugee body. 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, colonisation and enclosure into the present. Rather than situating refugees in the centre 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 aestheticised spectacle, epitomised, for example, in the confrontational and highly stylised opening scene of *L’Envahisseur* (The Invader, Nicolas Provost, 2011) in which half-drowned African refugees are washed on to a Mediterranean beach occupied by naked, sun-worshipping holiday-makers.

The concept of marginalia is valuable for us as it has been historically crucial for decolonial, deconstructionist and feminist critiques, speaking to the importance of struggles for social and representational change.8 Literally meaning scrribblings and commentaries, marginalia points to the bordering figure of the refugee, illuminating the importance of the marginal over the focal. The concept underscores the phenomenon of the refugee as a phantasmatic, indeterminate figure – one that is always coming here from there, always in-between, embodying ambiguities about positionality, space and identity.

Positionality, though, is central to the films we discuss, as all feature female protagonists grappling with the traumatic effects of the refugee crisis and so offer an intersectional counter-perspective to the dominant focus in media representations on male refugees and their stories. In foregrounding ‘a multifaceted refugee’ they also enrich and complicate the
rather universalised approaches to the refugee figure proposed by various male theorists whose voices tend to dominate the refugee discourse. In a broader sense, these films themselves constitute attempts to grapple with this historical trauma, within which older histories of slavery, colonisation and genocide resound. They experiment with a range of aesthetic strategies from documentary through realist drama to fantasy in search of an audio-visual language that is ethically adequate to this topic. In their refusal to treat refugee experience as 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. They therefore offer a complex analytical framework within which to comprehend the current refugee crisis and its mediated history. In this sense, the films we examine here are concerned with processes of disavowal and historical erasure as well as with apparently simple processes of visualisation and documentation – with showing and telling. Exiled artist Ai Weiwei, whose work in various media, including film, has tried to confront the vast scale of the global refugee crisis, observed in 2017 that, ‘the refugees are transparent, nobody recognizes them even as refugees’. It is precisely the problem of refugee (in)visibility that the films under discussion here are engaged with. In depicting refugees as ghosts or echoes, the films invite us to reflect upon the paradoxical invisibility of the refugee. In a period in which news media and political discourse threaten us relentlessly with the monstrous figure of the refugee, what these films insist upon is the spectral body at the heart of this discourse: the refugee herself, erased and disavowed.

Above all, in the films under analysis, the figuration of refugees as haunting absences, as the expression of quivering ontologies, emphasises the need to understand the current refugee crisis as shot through with echoes of its roots in histories of invasion and dispossession. The narrative lacunae and reverberations structuring these films demonstrate that, despite their elision from collective memory, these historical traumas continue to echo through bodies, landscapes and social phobias.

Dolce Fine Giornata: Searching for Ghosts

‘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.’ With this observation, Maria Linde, the Polish-Jewish protagonist of 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 racialised 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 rumours 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 rumours echo through the narrative from the moment when the police chief Commissar Lodovici informs the family that several refugees

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9 See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, ‘We Refugees’, Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literature, vol 49, issue 2, 1995, pp 114–119; Michel Agier, On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2008; Zygmunt Bauman, ‘In the Lowly Nowherevilles of Liquid Modernity: Comments on and around Agier’, Ethnography, vol 3, no 3, September 2002, pp 343–349

10 Ai Weiwei, Humanity, Larry Warsh, ed, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2018, p 69

11 Marciniak, Alienhood: Citizenship, Exile, and the Logic of Difference, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2006

12 Linde is played by Krystyna Janda whose roles in films by Polish directors such as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Ryszard Bugajski mean she has been closely associated with powerful female characters throughout her career, adding a self-reflexive dimension to this character.
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 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 Nazeer, a local Arab immigrant worker – cast an anxious mood over the narrative. The picturesque rural landscape, often shot at dusk or in early morning when visibility is occluded, is transformed into a doubtful, insecure space, its ‘penitentiary geography’ haunted by the spectral figure of the unwelcome refugee.13

Interested in narrative echoes, their unsettling reverberations, and cinema’s representational limits, we approach Dolce Fine Giornata as an example of refugee cinema without foregrounded refugee figures. Unlike most recent films about refugees, which place these characters centre stage, Dolce Fine Giornata refrains from making an audiovisual 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, anxious gossip, and the ominous shots of a fishing boat at sea that open the film. Thus, the refugee is an insubstantial figure with the status of an echo or spectral after-image, a structuring absence functioning to intensify feelings of nationalism and xenoracism in the context of a continent whose borders have been in almost constant movement. Indeed, the narrative is shot through with absences and lacunae, withholding information about the characters and their histories. It invites the spectator to scrutinise the screen – like the search parties combing the landscape for Salvo – hunting for signs and familiar generic cues.

13 Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, Steve Corcoran, trans, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, and London, 2019, p 102
In this respect, it constitutes what we term fugitive aesthetics – a narrative form expressing diverse dimensions of refugee experience, and characterised by fragmented stories, stylistic heterogeneity, and a preoccupation with aporetic spaces.

In focusing on Maria, a Nobel-prize-winning expatriate poet, the film’s reflections on refugeeism are interleaved with self-reflexive commentary on the impotence of humanitarian art, Europe’s genocidal history and contemporary terrorism. Her centrality also subtly complicates our idea of marginalia because, as a political dissident, Maria had found herself in Italy during the period of martial law in Poland, establishing a new life and raising a family. Maria’s presence, as a former refugee, demonstrates that the idea of national purity is a fantasy and that refugees like herself are always already there, although, as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman, she does not correspond readily to the typical figure of the refugee. Thus, as a confident, mature woman taking stock of her life, Maria becomes a disorderly transnational voice, creating an unsettling 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. In Derridean terms, as an embodiment of aporia, she becomes, for her family and her neighbours, a puzzle, an accented voice, a threatening ambivalence incommensurable with a binary worldview. It is the confrontation with her foreignness that eventually causes the community to turn against Maria and try to push her back into the margins where she is perceived to belong.
Maria’s disruptive status is reinforced when, at a public lecture organised to honour her work, she reflects upon her capacity to influence the world. Her speech follows a suicide bombing in Rome on the previous day – an event rendered only through a black screen, a shot of swooping starlings and piercing sounds – and Maria ends the lecture by announcing that she is returning her Nobel Prize. To gasps from her listeners, she proposes that both the bombing and the presence of refugee camps in Europe (with the hellish bureaucratic systems surrounding 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.’

She expresses her solidarity with the refugees, mocking Europe’s ‘superficial tolerance’: ‘the more the hypocrite spends on humanitarian actions, the easier it is for him to sleep’. As a child of Holocaust survivors and an Eastern European, she reflects 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.’ Predictably, her defiant performance, misinterpreted as a defence of terrorism, causes a social stir.

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. Maria’s speech evokes the concept of the gift in a Derridean sense – ‘a gift without intention to give’, one that thwarts a conventional economy of exchange. Derrida calls the gift ‘the impossible’, aneconomical: ‘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

14 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamuf, trans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1992, p 27

15 Ibid, p 7
perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.\textsuperscript{15} To understand the gift in these terms, as an aggressive demand for repayment rather than an offering, also challenges the idea that humanitarian aid is straightforwardly altruistic.

Maria concludes with this scandalous 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.’ In this way, she draws a parallel between art and terrorism, understanding them both as expressive acts of disobedience. Indeed, beyond Maria’s speech, many of her unconventional actions express a demand for freedom and mobility. She is a vital female figure who has just celebrated her sixty-fifth birthday; we see endearing scenes with her grandchildren, laughing, and playing with abandon, but her relationships with her disapproving daughter and passive husband are strained. Rather than speaking to her husband, she writes him a letter, telling him that, in his old slippers, he moves around the house like a ghost: ‘Your steps leave no echo.’

This point returns us to our initial comment about refugees as narrative echoes. Echoes are sounds that return and mirror the original acoustic. But they return in a delayed form; as Joan Wallach Scott writes about echoes in the context of feminist theory, ‘they are incomplete reproductions’ in the process of returning, creating ‘gaps of meaning and intelligibility’.\textsuperscript{16} In Greek mythology Echo was a nymph who could only repeat the last words of others. As Pleshette DeArmitt 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.’\textsuperscript{17} 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.

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 in its embodiment of a fugitive aesthetic: oscillating between opacity and transparency, between different states. In particular, the poem evokes the ambiguous status of the refugee as echo or visual trace. Like mist, the refugees fleeing through the landscape are insubstantial and impossible to capture. 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, which, rather than being brought from outside, comes from within.

\textbf{Atlantics: Being-With-Ghosts}

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

\textit{Avery Gordon}\textsuperscript{18}

If \textit{Dolce Fine Giornata} represents the refugee crisis from a Eurocentric perspective in which refugees, marginalised socially and narratively, are

\textsuperscript{16} Joan W Scott, ‘Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity’, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, vol 27, no 2, winter 2001, p 291

\textsuperscript{17} Pleshette DeArmitt, ‘Resonances of Echo: A Derridean Allegory’, \textit{Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal}, vol 42 no 2, June 2009, p 90

\textsuperscript{18} Avery F Gordon, \textit{Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination}, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1997, p 24
shadowy figures posing an unspecified threat, then *Atlantics* offers a counter-perspective in which Europe itself is vaguely defined. In her first feature film, Mati Diop 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. Employing a similarly anti-sensational strategy to *Dolce Fine Giornata* in leaving the horror of the fishing boat sinking off-screen, *Atlantics* instead examines the way that those left behind in Dakar are haunted by the deaths of these young men. Haunting, however, 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 atavistic superstition or individual mental instability, but of the incomplete repression of something socially significant.

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’. Ghosts, therefore, appear at the sensitive border zones and fault lines where the logic of a system such as liberal capitalism starts to fracture. These are the points where the incompatibility between an economic system devoted to transnational 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, become irresistibly urgent.

*Atlantics* has the foundations of a classic romance narrative. 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. However, she is really in love with Souleiman, a construction worker on an enormous skyscraper in Dakar, 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 and she reluctantly marries Omar.

At the wedding reception, a friend tells Ada that she has just seen Souleiman. Ada accuses her of being a witch and shortly afterwards the wedding bed catches fire, setting Omar’s apartment alight. A precocious young detective, Diop, is assigned to the case but falls ill while investigating, becoming feverish and then collapsing in the street. Ada’s friends Fanta and Mariama are also struck by the same illness. Later, a group of women converges on the house of the contractor N’Diaye to demand the wages he was refusing to pay the construction workers. The women, all of whom now have white eyes, are possessed by the dead sailors who have returned to demand their money. They exemplify the status of migrants and refugees under contemporary border regimes as discussed by Achille Mbembe: ‘They are merely a kind of hollowed-out entity, walking vaults concealed by a multitude of organs, empty yet menacing forms in which we seek to bury the fantasies of an age terrified of itself and of its own excess.’

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19 Ibid, p 16
20 Ibid, p 24
21 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, op cit, p 101
Ada, under investigation by Detective Diop, begins receiving texts from the drowned Souleiman. Initially convinced that it is a trap laid by the police, she is visited by the possessed detective who tries to persuade her that he is Souleiman. Running away, she heads for a beachside bar, now occupied by the possessed women. One of them recounts the experience of the sinking of the pirogue, adding that Souleiman regretted not saying goodbye to Ada, the love of his life. In the mirrored wall of the bar, the uncanny reflections are not those of the women but of the men now haunting them. The complex narrative is resolved as N’Diaye hands over the money to the possessed women, and is forced to dig graves for the dead men at the cemetery. Souleiman, still occupying Diop’s body, meets Ada at the bar where they consummate their relationship.

In one of her interviews, Mati 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.’"" Indeed, *Atlantics* sits at the border between realism and fantasy. The film’s fantastic quality is established through the predominance of scenes shot in low light or at night. Shots of Dakar shrouded in mist and haze lend the city an unreal, futuristic quality. The sea glittering in the dark is a recurrent motif. Throughout, Fatima Al Qadiri’s score 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. 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 sixteenth through to the early nineteenth century. 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. 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 impulse to write 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’. 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 impulse to write 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’. In its focus on Dakar and Souleiman’s acquaintances, Atlantics constitutes a counter-perspective to films preoccupied with the impact of refugeeism on Europe. It documents the way in which the traumatic effects of the sinking spread through the space they have left behind, privileging, in the end, women’s experiences.

When much media coverage is concerned with spectacularising refugee experience, the use of a ghost story to recount this perilous journey might seem a perverse choice that risks reproducing precisely the socio-historical (and physical) erasure of these figures. However,
one consequence of the film’s refusal to dwell upon the abject, harrowing spectacle of dead, dying and petrified travellers 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 Sebastião Salgado’s monumental series of photographs of migrants.\(^{27}\) The collision of fantasy and realism 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 silencing that structure discourses of refugeeism. The formal hybridity allows for a hopeful assertion of feminist futurity. 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 countermemory, for the future’.\(^{28}\) Ada’s observation that ‘some memories are omens’ reiterates this paradoxical concept of a memory that recalls a possible future. In their preoccupation with the past, ghost stories engage with liberating the protagonists from the weight of the traumatic personal histories they are doomed to repeat and, more broadly, the mediated mechanisms of silencing that structure discourses of refugeeism. The formal hybridity allows for a hopeful assertion of feminist futurity. 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.’

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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.\(^{29}\)

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 and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows.\(^{30}\)

To *film* a ghost story makes a far more emphatic claim regarding the objective material reality of ghosts, foregrounding questions of visibility in an even more unsettling way. In this case, the ghosts demand representation in two senses. Firstly, as presences perceptible through the voices and actions of the bodies they occupy, they demand to be *seen and heard* by the living. 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 double.\(^{31}\) In a broader sense, *Atlantics* draws our attention to the spectrality of the film image, recalling Steve Neale’s observation that ‘a photograph embalms the ghosts of the past; film brings them back to life’.\(^{32}\) Secondly, this demand to be heard is a political representation, since the ghosts are activists demanding reparations for past and ongoing injustices.

**Island of the Hungry Ghosts: Listening to 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\(^ {33}\)

This necessity to speak ‘to the ghost and with it’ permeates Gabrielle Brady’s hybrid documentary *Island of the Hungry Ghosts*. Shot on Christmas Island, an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean that is home to a notorious ‘offshoring’ detention centre run by Serco, the film presents three separate aspects of life on the island: the work and
family life of Poh Lin Lee, a trauma and torture counsellor at the island’s community hospital who treats 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 narrative strategy, which reinforces the mysterious atmosphere pervading the 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 taken to protect the migrating crabs, and the hostility with which human migrants are treated. Road signs warn drivers, ‘Red Crab Migration, No Vehicles Beyond this Point’, and wardens escort cars along the road, diligently pushing the crabs safely out of their path with rakes. The shots of hundreds of red crabs crawling relentlessly towards the sea invite us to reflect upon the relationship between movement and freedom, but also to consider 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 movement, represented as a phenomenon to be controlled and criminalised, ultimately emerges in counterpoint. While we see crabs in mesmerisingly beautiful long takes and close-ups, as they crawl across roads, the refugees remain locked in a detention centre off-screen.

‘People cannot come out unless the guards say they can come out’, says Poh Lin, in a simple yet absurd explanation about the refugees’ situation that she offers to her inquisitive young daughters, whose multiple questions allow the audience to learn about the island. Poh Lin endeavours to help the refugees as they are sent to her. Frequently, however, they do not come back to continue their therapy and the authorities do not explain their disappearances. Her therapeutic work is thus, in the end, 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 centre re-traumatise them. We learn about brutalisation and protest, we hear about suicidal thoughts, self-harm and powerlessness, we witness tears up close. Poh Lin, 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 impedes her therapy work, and refusing to be complicit with ‘Australia’s border-industrial complex’, 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. Pointedly, however, unlike her clients, Poh Lin remains freely mobile.

Like Diop, who was haunted by her visit to Dakar, Brady too talks about her first visit to the island when Poh Lin showed her the hidden detention centre:
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.35

Just as in *Atlantics*, these hauntings reverberate through Brady’s film, evoked through imagery associated with 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 into play discourses of invisibility – or, better yet, ‘the visibility of the invisible’.36 In fact, Derrida aids our argument by making a similar claim about spectres 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.37

Indeed, the hauntings evoked by the film are both documentable – marked by rituals, nameless tombstones, buildings and fences – but also ineffable, escaping the conventional aesthetics of documentary cinema. While the film asks us to contemplate historical 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 memorialise the wandering ghosts of their forebears, indentured labourers brought over by the British colonisers 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, they weren’t allowed to

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35 Gabrielle Brady, in Christopher Reed, ‘A Conversation with Gabrielle Brady (Island of the Hungry Ghosts)’, *Hammertonail*, 16 May 2018, https://www.hammertonail.com/interviews/gabrielle-brady, accessed 21 August 2020

36 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, op cit, p 100

37 Ibid, pp 80–81, emphasis in original
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.’ Asked by her daughter, ‘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 centre and whose invisible presence is shrouded in secrecy.

Reflecting on the power of hauntings, Gordon suggests that they propel a state where ‘a repressed or unresolved social 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 centre.38 As the audience learns, Christmas Island was uninhabited when European colonisers found it, so, ironically, the history of the island is rooted in migration, which, once supposedly ‘legal’, is now treated as ‘illegal’. Everybody there is a migrant (or a descendant of them). However, the refugees are interpellated into ‘illegality’ so strongly that a female refugee in Poh Lin’s office describes herself as ‘illegal’, a point that Poh Lin contests, observing, ‘it’s not illegal to seek asylum’. Considering the refugees’ appearances and disappearances in Poh Lin’s therapy sessions, they too acquire a somewhat metaphorical ghostly status, confirming Nicholas Mirzoeff’s point that ‘the ghost is somewhere between the visible and the invisible’.39
The central material object of Poh Lin’s therapy is a sandbox, which functions as a tactile mediator, an object that both soothes and evokes disquieting hauntings, as the refugees are asked to immerse their hands in the sand and create their stories using various figurines that 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 the role of meta device, the space exemplifying 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 and storytelling. As Poh Lin is directing the refugee stories (instructing her patient, ‘go with your feeling… but if there is another feeling like that 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.

Brady’s aesthetic strategy is to tease out these disquieting hauntings rather than to visualise them in a confrontationally direct way. One consequence of this indirect approach is that the hauntings emerge most forcefully through sound. The narrative opens with the noises of the rainforest, both soothing and ominous, as we see a male figure running through the jungle and screaming. We hear his shrieks while the background fills with the unsettling reverberation of Chinese gongs. This scream, as the opening sound, wavers between not-quite language and not-quite-not language, alerting us to agony and bodily frustration as it quivers on the borders of intelligibility. The scream might be thus conceptualised 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. This scene could belong to a horror film rather than a poetic documentary.

Classified by the director as a ‘hybrid documentary’, the film exemplifies an aspect of 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. 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. In noting that the film combines observational footage with directed sequences, we are not questioning the film’s ‘authenticity’, but rather, we are interested in examining how this configuration guides our interpretation. Through this combination, Brady’s fusion form invites us to understand that the fragments of damaged lives depicted on screen, while significant in themselves, are also narrative devices, evocative traces of a global network of insti-
tions, processes and individuals, which is far too broad and complex to be captured by one film.

As with *Atlanticis* and *Dolce Fine Giornata*, the film uses the imagery of horror cinema not to terrify the viewer in order to make us feel what it is like to be a refugee, but to insist that the experience of refugeeism and detention is horrific. Omid Tofighian uses the term ‘horrific surrealism’, to describe the literary genre within which Kurdish-Iranian refugee Behrouz Boochani wrote about his experience of flight and subsequent imprisonment on Manus Island. This classification serves equally well for the three films under discussion: ‘reality is fused with dreams and creative ways of re-imagining the natural environment and horrific events and architecture.’

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-ups of the slowly moving crabs (that resemble alien invaders) reframe what might otherwise be seen as a picturesque lush landscape as a dangerous hellscape. ‘It’s a kind of hell here,’ a 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 attention to form in Brady’s film suggest that such comments are a 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’.

As Jacques Rancière proposes, the assumption that unsettling images will prompt the viewer to action may be nothing more than wishful thinking:

> The classic use of the intolerable image traced a straight line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing; and from that to the desire to act in order to change it. But this link between representation, knowledge and action was sheer presupposition.41

Indeed, as Sontag offers, there are also various spectatorial pleasures offered by intolerable images:

> It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. For many centuries, in Christian art, depictions of hell offered both of these elemental satisfactions… No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching.42

Brady’s film forecloses the pleasures of flinching, refusing to portray the nightmarish experience of refugeeism and detention. As a trauma and torture counsellor, Poh Lin 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, making everyone complicit.

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40 Tofighian, ‘No Friend but the Mountains’, op cit, p 367

41 Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London and New York, 2009, p 103

42 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, op cit, p 35
Coda: *Life Overtakes Me*: Welcoming 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

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

Kristine Samuelson, commenting on *Life Overtakes Me*

The Swedish-American documentary *Life Overtakes Me*, realises cinema’s spectrality in a distinctively unsettling fashion. Unlike the films analysed above, it materialises spectrality by foregrounding the physicality of the refugee body. While in the other narratives dealt with here 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’, a phenomenon that unsettles the present.

The film depicts traumatised refugee children in Sweden, hundreds of whom have fallen into a coma-like condition known as Resignation Syndrome, which can last years. While the films discussed above explore the notion of the definitional ambiguity of the refugee, *Life Overtakes Me* shows this liminal quivering in a literal way – the children suffering from Resignation Syndrome are unresponsive and immobile, in deep sleep. The film introduces three such children, Dasha, Karen and Leyla, and their parents and siblings. The audience might recognise Ukrainian on hearing Dasha’s parents, and Armenian when the camera follows Karen’s family, while Layla and her family are identified as Yazidis, an ethnic minority, ‘second-class citizens in most countries where they live’.

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. Although 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. This, in turn, prompted Swedish politicians to ask whether their condition was a genuine one, or whether they had been 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 system, 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. As the film demonstrates, however, 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

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43 Derrida, in Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse, ‘Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’, Peggy Kamuf, trans, *Discourse*, vol 37, issue 1–2, winter/spring 2015, p 27

44 Kristine Samuelson, in Matthew Carey, ‘Traumatized Children and “Resignation Syndrome”: Oscar-Shortlisted Doc “Life Overtakes Me” Reveals Strange Medical Mystery in Sweden’, *Deadline*, 20 December 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/12/life-overtakes-me-directors-kristine-samuelson-john-haptas-netflix-documentary-interview-1202814965/, accessed 20 September 2020

45 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, op cit, p 8
in the hearings in which they applied for asylum. Thus, 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, and parents’ fears and vulnerabilities transfer to their children, who then withdraw from reality. In a way, they become the repository of the family’s traumas. While we watch the parents engaged in similar activities with their lifeless children – bathing them, feeding them through tubes, exercising their limbs, covering them with blankets, and taking them on walks in pushchairs – 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 determining these refugees’ lives. Despite the value of these professional comments, it is Layla’s father who explains their positionality most poignantly: ‘the fear is in our bodies’. The children’s paradoxical vacant presence, while speaking to their trauma, generates troubling intimacy however: we watch the sleeping children, often up close, and see their naked limbs and torsos, their skin; we are close to their exposed bellies as the doctor checks their vital signs. Such moments create the sensation that the camera is violating their personal space, exposing their vulnerable bodies under a medical gaze for spectatorial inspection.
In a particularly touching moment, Dasha’s sister reads her a children’s story, from which she recites the line ‘we have to look for the ghost’. This self-reflexive moment, in this film about ghosts and parents’ loving search for their lost children, returns, yet again, to the question asked by Gordon: ‘What does the ghost say as it speaks, barely, in the interstices of the visible and the invisible?’ That question is 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’, because, as he says, it goes against the conventional understanding 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’. In contrast, unconditional hospitality necessitates the subversion of the mastery of the house. Life Overtakes Me, with children-ghosts at its centre, might be thus read as a demand for unconditional hospitality, for an ‘opening without horizon’. In fact, Dolce Fine Giornata, Atlantics, and Island of the Hungry Ghosts also ask those viewers who are watching from a position of security 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 the importance of recognising, hearing and remembering the spectral figures who populate the various films we have brought together in this article. In these films, the figuration of refugees as haunting absences, as ghosts and marginally present bodies, emphasises the need to understand the current refugee crisis as shot through with echoes of its roots in genocidal histories, colonial invasions and Western exploitations. The narrative lacunae and the hauntings that structure these films demonstrate that, in spite of their elision from collective memory, these historical traumas continue to reverberate through bodies, landscapes and social phobias. The medium of cinema, in Derrida’s words, ‘weighs heavily with the weight of its ghosts’. In refugee cinema as discussed here, the various figurations of fugitive aesthetics reveal the representational tensions of the discourses that enclose the refugee, as well as cinema’s capacity to bring us closer to these marginalised figures.

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