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*A Conversation on Cinematic Representation and Resistance in the  
films "Altered Landscapes" (2016) by Juan del Gado  
and "The People Behind the Scenes" (2019), by Elsa Claire Gomis*

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**Abstract**

This is a conversation between Juan del Gado and Elsa Gomis about their respective films. Juan del Gado has made the film *Altered Landscapes* (2016), which is the first part of a cinematically projected triptych entitled *Drifting Narratives*. Elsa Gomis has produced the film *The People behind the Scenes* (2019), a full-length film, which builds on interviews and memory work and address current visual representations of migration by the Mediterranean.

**Keywords:** Film, Refugees, Mediterranean, Representation, Migration.

*1. Choice of methods*

Elsa Gomis: The name of your film is "Altered Landscapes". Landscapes are one of the main pictorial genres chosen by visual artists. Why did you choose to focus on this genre to deal with migration?

Juan del Gado: There are many ways to look at landscapes: I am looking at it as both a physical place and as a symbolic place, a mental landscape that has been culturally "naturalised" as the European landscape. Generally speaking, the landscape is everything you can see when you look across an area of land, including hills, rivers, buildings, trees and plants. As symbolic landscape, its significant meaning goes beyond what it simply looks like due to cultural associations.

EG: Which cultural background did you had in mind?

JdG: As Europeans we have a particular perspective, a particular way to think about Europe. What is our definition of a European landscape, rural

and urban, from a historic and contemporary perspective and how is this identity used to contrast with that of the "other" landscape?

JdG: You intertwine footage shot by your grandfather of Mediterranean places with those interviews with local residents of Malta, who share their stories about their bond to that sea as you came back to "shoot images embedded in my memory". You build the story through interviewing residents, a fashion designer, fishermen, film location manager, as well as those who were transiting this place, i.e. tourists, EU data collectors. The narratives are presented as flows of words in the shared space (of this island). What were you planning to achieve through this method?

EG: In relation to the theoretical research I pursue in my PhD, the film deals with current visual representations of migration by the Mediterranean. Following the Greek writer Nicki Giannari (2017, p. 21), I believe that migrants who arrive in Western countries "pass and conceive us". They pass because their great majority is led to temporary camps when not facing homelessness and deportations. For Giannari migrants "think us" because they mirror European democracies and in particular of their malfunctioning. Border crossings thus constitute as such a reading grid of Western social behaviours. From there, if analysing the passage left by today's exiles is a source of reflection for European societies, the production of images intended to represent them would thus be an anthropological tool to think migration policies applied to them.

EG: To get back to your title, what has 'altered' these landscapes?

JdG: I am using 'altered' in the sense of changing our perception of the landscape. The landscape captured in the film has witnessed something that we have not been able to perceive. It has witnessed an influx of migrating bodies carrying with them an undetectable pain. The landscape has had physical contact with them. It feels, senses and absorbs their trauma, on which they have left an invisible imprint. In the film the landscape screams silently from this trauma. In the film, the main character is crossing the geopolitical countryside of the Balkans and eventually arriving at the increasingly fortified borders at Calais, France. These landscapes have been 'altered' by the fences and panopticon watchtowers built to contain those on the move and ultimately defend borders.

EG: The landscapes are filmed as empty spaces, which render them impersonal and interchangeable. Yet, the places you chose to shoot were specific places and 'hotspots' in Greece (Macedonia and Calais) that host refugees. How do you explain these choices?

JdG: In my research, into an on-going project called Qisetna: Talking Syria, I interviewed many people who were either displaced inside their country, in transit while attempting to cross borders, and those who were stranded, waiting to move on, in countries such as Greece, France and Turkey. Many of those itinerant people spoke of their feelings of being invisible despite the massive influx of global images from the mainstream media that we're addressing this issue.

Before May 2015, people on the move were crossing borders by hiding in cardboard boxes allocated for luggage in the coaches traveling from Istanbul to Greece. In Athens and Thessaloniki, they were at the mercy of an international web of smugglers who only saw them as "merchandise in transit". During two weeks in Orestiadas, Idomene (Greece) and Gevgelija, (Macedonia), I listened to the experiences of many young Syrians.

EG: What did they tell you?

JdG: One night I met Abdullah, a lawyer from Damascus, who after two months of being stranded in Athens as a result of trying to cross the border, lamented to me "how much else do I have to erase from myself so that you can see me?" His eyes were enquiring. He wondered about why all this was happening. Why after having lost everything and risking his and his family's lives, fleeing his hometown, which was now converted into rubble -his world abruptly wiped out- why after surviving all this, he felt he was still being treated as a criminal and had to hide from the border police? "We are not criminals, we are victims of war, and we need help" I heard later in the days I spent at the Jungle in Calais.

JdG: And yourself, how did you choose the people you interviewed?

EG: To deal with those who pass, the film's bias is to focus on those who remain, namely on those who are not led to leave. For this, I conducted around forty interviews of local residents in various locations of Malta, Gozo and Comino, the three islands that make up the Maltese archipelago. The interviews were notably carried out with people who have an indirect,

past or metaphorical relationship with exile. It could be elderly people whose family experienced exile – such as my own parents and grandparents-, a statistician gathering data about migrants of an EU's organisation, an ornithologist specialised in migratory birds or a passionate reader of Ulysses' *Odyssey*. Besides, as my research is related to current media and art images of migration, I also wanted to meet people whose activity is related to the notion of 'representation' in the broadest sense: a designer of haute couture clothing, a traditional weaver or the person in charge of renting Malta's film studios. Yet, relationships between these two 'kinds' of interviewees appeared: the fashion designer's work is related to the successive settlements to which the island has been subjected; the weaver, whose children are abroad, has the same activity as Ulysses wife; the man renting the film studios has a particular interest in shipwreck films such as *Titanic*. Alternating the interviews of people with these backgrounds allowed me to gradually put in place my subject, while avoiding today's mainstream images on migration. Hereby, the film however also offers a reflection on these very images.

## 2. Counteracting the mainstream

EG: Since the Romantic period, artists, in particular painters, use depictions of the landscape as tools for conveying inner states and moods. This artistic process also seems to be important for your work. Why did you find it relevant to convey the feeling of exile and to counter the dominant images of the "crisis" of migrants? The urban and city landscape you shot seems to correspond to a romantic vision in which natural environment reflects the mood. In what way do you think it counteracts mainstream images of the migrant 'crisis'?

JdG: The city represents a territory through which the character wanders, between past and the present, searching for clues: "I need a sign". As the narrative continues, he becomes increasingly immersed in the urban space that is charged with layers of historical significance: "I live in a world of silence". It seems the character has become both an individual but also a metaphor of this entity named Europe, a symbolic body that is changing: "Everything I know, has started to disintegrate". Yet, the body remains off

camera, only his voice over is interacting with the influx of images of a harbour, deserted streets, silenced monuments...

JdG: Your filming style seems to fall into the traditional documentary storytelling. The narrative is structured in chapters or headlines - *To fly, To imagine, To count...* - all inviting the viewer to think of the filmmaker's intentions. It that what you were looking for?

EG: My Spanish forefathers settled in Algeria at the time when this territory was colonised by France and became 'pieds-noirs'. The geopolitical and social contexts of the communities now exiled by the Mediterranean and those of the 1962 returnees are totally different. Trying to draw a common sense of exile that can bring together exiles from yesterday and today is the challenge. When my own family embodies a national past that does not pass, namely France's colonial past, the search for a shared feeling with those who suffer the repercussions of exploitation policies, particularly the exploitation of natural resources that have since continued, is a perilous exercise. However, involving my own family history was not premeditated when shooting in Malta. Back from the archipelago, I looked again at my digitised family archives, which I know very well due to previous works from them, and I realised that I had unconsciously chosen to film situations or objects that had been filmed by my grandfather in Algeria. These family archives constitute my imagination of exile. They made an imprint on the choices of images shot 2018 in Malta and shaped the editing process. I decided to organise the film around the twin images (those of today and those of yesterday) and to title according to these reminiscences, as chapters of an imaginary research in the pursuit of images of exile.

JdG: What connects these various visual mediums?

EG: The mixture between family archives and contemporary high-definition images, but also, between videos taken on mobile phones or posted on *YouTube*, is organised around a common thread: that of the circulation of visual and auditory motifs that bear the imaginary of exile by the Mediterranean.

EG: You once told me that you were inspired by this statement of Malcolm X: "If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the

people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.” How does this idea influence your artistic practice?

JdG: As a filmmaker and moving image artist, I want my stories to develop without imposing a strict meaning. By this means, I want to detach my film practice from mainstream cinema, leaving a certain level of ambiguity and therefore, encouraging the viewer to engage with the story more personally. I am very aware of the role and responsibility I have as an artist and a producer of film culture who has become preoccupied with the representation and the narratives of displacement.

EG: How do you implement this responsibility?

JdG: As I see it, the narrative of displacement is strongly connected with the landscape in which they occur. In this sense, I wanted to animate and activate the landscape and give it a voice. My decision is influenced by my interest in the aesthetics of the sublime, which revolves around the relationship between human beings and the grand, yet terrifying, aspects of nature. In the film, nature has been forever marked by the traces of those who fled and transited through it. As viewers we react to a cluster of images of a landscape that is strikingly bright, of hills, trees, a river. All this whiteness seems to wash out the memories, those words the character presented in the grainy, shaky footage during the first part of the film, such as the traces of torn clothes caught in a tree, fluttering in the howling wind, echoes of the barking dogs that punctuate the nocturnal journey.

JdG: On your side, did you deliberately choose editing certain sequences to make statements about the body and the place, i.e. swimmers floating on the swimming pool and wrecked ships in the nearby coast?

EG: Absolutely. Intertextuality, i.e. the relationship between the different registers of images, is arranged in a triangular way between the archives, the film in progress and the media images. Left out of focus or only evoked through fragmentary motifs scattered in several places in the film, media images connect the words collected today with yesterday's family documents. The images whose circulation and repetition are the most significant are therefore used as a lever to build a dialogue between different image formats but also between points of views. This dialogue shapes the statements you are mentioning, which are formulated through the film into



chapters headings. The latter can be seen as so many proposals opening way to an alternative imaginary of migration by sea.

EG: These empty landscapes, which could be anywhere, also convey the feeling of a rather universal experience. Are they a reaction of the graphic images of the 'crisis' to which it difficult to identify as Westerners?

JdG: Yes. The narrator tells the stories of refugees but the moodily shot black and white film never shows the actual characters, but instead presents the journey through which they chose to travel, the vacuum left by the migrant body. This emphasis on emptiness of the space with no human presence is in sharp contrast to the actual deluge of images published by the mainstream media in recent times. Ultimately, the landscape becomes the witness of what remains as an *un*-representable wound.

JdG: Your film also explores the territory, including the underwater archaeological remains. In what seems to be an irony, the narrative avoids the current systematic portrait of the Mediterranean Sea as a grave in which thousands of people are drowned. Can the leaving out that "other" content, the bodies that tragically have disappeared in the sea, be read as a counter-act to the images from mainstream media?

EG: Dealing with current images of exile without showing them was the goal. Before leaving Britain for Malta, I analysed a lot of media images produced to capture the migration "crisis". This work led me to gather them into a narrow range of materials, colours and motifs dealing with humanitarian rescues at sea. They display precarious ships, life jackets, rescue boats or survival blankets.

JdG: In particular, it seems that you had one famous media image in mind...

EG: Yes, the iconic photograph of Aylan Kurdi's body. It has been the subject of numerous reframing and quotations, also occupied a significant place in these typologies of images. The film is based on both the intense repetition and circulation of these motifs. More precisely, it relies on the imprint that these circulations leave in the imaginaries. I considered that the imprint of these motifs were powerful enough to evoke the rest of the images they convey into fragmented and implicit ways: by showing re-

mains of inflatable boats on rocky shores, boats in the form of shreds on rocks, canoes stowed on liners or life jackets stored on shelves. Regarding the photography of the Aylan Kurdi, I relied on its similarity with the iconological theme of the Pietà, present in the gestures of a British tourist and in the frescoes of several churches in the archipelago. Avoiding to picture what you designate as the 'other content', namely as the most burning images with regard to migration, is indeed an attempt to propose alternative ways of representing it. Not recreating them or not directly showing them provides a reflection on the way mainstream images colonise Western viewers' imaginations. Their absence helps shaping the way a collective image is built.

### *3. Specific questions about respective arts and inspirations*

EG: Another theme of your work is apparently mutation, in particular the metamorphosis of an insect. Why did you make this choice and by which other means do you think images can convey this experience that is inherent to exile?

JdG: The film is a journey that starts in a darkened room punctuated by flickering lights that penetrate through the windows. The perception of reality is different at night than in the daylight. The narrator reminds us that, "we are afraid of darkness", but for him "I am terrified of the reality that surrounds me." As viewers we might ask of which particular horror he is terrified? He is describing a 'maladie' that is affecting his body. The transformation of the landscape is echoed by the irreversible physical change as the main character transforms.

EG: One has in mind Franz Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' when seeing this sequence...

JdG: Actually, two pieces of writing have inspired me in the making of the film: Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) and Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), which look at our human response to other people's suffering. The process of mutation encapsulates the core drive of this film: the character is forced to move from where he is "out of fear of becoming paralysed". Again, the narrative navigates this ambiguity,

which triggers questions: why he is afraid of becoming paralysed? Where is he moving from and to? What or who is the motivation that forces him to move? Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is supposed to make us question our existence and ask, "Why are we here? "What purpose does our existence have?" and "Does it rest on what others think of us or are we valuable enough in our feeble existences to overcome the obstacles of perception?" These questions are particularly worth asking with regard to the existence of those among us who are often perceived as less valuable.

EG: What is the moth representing?

JdG: The moth is an eerie presence, which marks the peak of the narrative arch. The heavy breathing and voice will be irreversibly muted as the insect is seen flying away from the darkness into a strikingly white and luminous landscape. Words are replaced by the sounds of nature, including the harrowing voice of the wind. This abrupt shift in the narrative seems to evoke a sense that the immense emptiness produced in the individual by forced exile and loss, which cannot be described with words (Manea, 2012).

JdG 'The people behind the scenes', a statement said by one of the tourists about the current situation of migrants in Brexit's Britain. This title could also be interestingly applied to those who are also absent in the film, the migrant bodies, whose narratives aren't seen and yet are strongly felt. What made you decide on the title?

EG: Exactly. *The People Behind the Scenes*, those who allow the show to take place: these are the stowaways of our democracies, the essential but invisible key to their functioning. As I mentioned earlier, following Gianari (2017, p. 21), "They come, and they think us". Those who pass are those who, forced to play subordinate roles, allow the sequence, as a whole, to appear true. Thus, the refugees housed in Cinecittà in the post-war period gradually took the place of extras during the filming that took place there. "The figure of the extra", notes Marie-José Mondzain (2011, p. 289), "operates as an indicator of credibility that gives the star and the story their place in the real fabric of our history. An index of reality, without a name, without glory or history, it alone perhaps gives fiction its support and determines its plan for inscribing itself in a sensitive reality, both historical and filmed".

EG: To what extent have the various meetings you made on the field affected your work?

JdG: These encounters had a profound impact on the way I later decided to construct the narrative of this story. *Altered Landscapes* (2016) is the first part of a cinematically projected triptych entitled *Drifting Narratives*, a series of moving image works in which I continue my enquiry about displacement and trauma while presenting the landscape as the only witness to this chronicle of loss in which the human body remains invisible. The darkness is punctuated by the menacing sound of barking dogs.

JdG: How do you see the European democratic regime applying to those who are only seen as extras?

EG: Refugees, whose exploitation underpins the functioning of agriculture and construction and whose surveillance feeds high technology through national and European public markets, allow our national fictions to exist. It seems that based on this intuition, between 200 and 300 asylum seekers tried in vain to interrupt a performance of the Comédie Française on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2018. The exiles would be the missing image of our national films, which would nevertheless allow our democratic fictions to take place. The arrival of the “pieds-noirs” through the Mediterranean allows us to think about the French society of 1962, that of the exiles of the years 2010 offers a reflection on the contemporary European Union.

EG: And you, do you see this occurring in today’s Europe?

JdG: In the film *Altered Landscapes*, I select the Acropolis of Athens, as a departing point to develop a narrative that fluctuates between documentary and fiction. The Acropolis is an ancient citadel located on a rocky outcrop above the city and contains the remains of several ancient buildings of great architectural and historic significance. It is considered one of the most enduring symbols of Western civilization, a concept used very broadly to conform to the heritage of ethical values and belief systems that have their origin in Europe.

EG: Could you tell me more about some previous works that also deal with migrations by the Mediterranean?

JdG: In *Altered Landscapes* I address the topics of loss and trauma, which I had examined in a previous work, *Fléchés Sans Corps* (2003), an on-site installation presented in the harbour of Cartagena, in Southern Spain in 2008. *Fléchés Sans Corps* was set up inside a shipping container covered by sand and shoes and framed by a rear projection of seashore under a stormy sky. The footage showed the endless ebb and flow of waves edited on reverse mode: this view presents the sea as a menacing environment whose monstrosity is revealed in the waves crashing against a rocky coastline. A female voice emerges between the violent poundings of the water. Her voice sounds like an elegiac song based on Rumi's poem to those absent bodies. Eventually the sea is perceived as a liminal space between reality and dream. The lament continues evoking an incommensurable sense of loss, due to the fate of the many young men drowned in the Strait trying to cross from Morocco into Spain since 1989.

Image 1. On-site installation at the Cartagena's Harbour, Spain (2008)



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