

A new generation of films shows the human face of war and migration

Flee, Europa and Memory Box centre people and lives, not suffering and movement

[Dan Einav](#) February 5, 2022 5:00 am

Jonas Poher Rasmussen often can't face watching the news. Despite being the director of *Flee*, an acclaimed new animated documentary about a queer refugee escaping Afghanistan, he finds reports about refugees overwhelming. "I tend to block them out because if I take everything in, I'll just lie in bed and think about how awful the world is," he says over Zoom.

This is not born not from a lack of empathy, says Rasmussen, but of helplessness at not being able to alleviate the pain of those on screen. The challenge for filmmakers, then, is to tell these stories in a way that is faithful to the experiences of their subjects but doesn't push audiences to the point that they "can't cope".

For the co-directors of the London Migration Film Festival, Lily Parrott and Laura Stahnke, works such as *Flee*, *Europa* and *Memory Box* are part of a recent "move away from mere portrayals of the act of movement [and from] a hyper-focus on suffering", they say over email, towards more human and impressionistic storytelling.

"We really appreciate when filmmakers are bold and take considered and informed artistic licence, which lets them move beyond tropes," Parrott and Stahnke say. "And what we've seen to be really powerful is [when they're] entertaining — this means that people tend to let

their emotional guard down."

By using animation, Jonas Poher Rasmussen's 'Flee' encourages the viewer to use more of their imagination in understanding the protagonist's plight

Flee, which won a Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival last year and is expected to secure Oscar nominations for Best Documentary and Best International Feature, finds points of accessibility and even beauty in harrowing realities. Using atmospheric illustrations that are Hopper-esque in their use of lighting and colour, it follows the recollections and present-day life of Rasmussen's friend Amin, who, as a teenager in the early 1990s, made a treacherous journey from war-torn Afghanistan to Denmark via Russia over several years.

As Rasmussen explains, the decision to animate Amin's experiences of detention centres, makeshift homes and smuggler ships and vans is a method of deferring the viewer's visceral reaction to such upsetting images and getting them to pay close attention to the human ordeal.

"Animation is playful and something we use for entertainment: it eases the way in," he says. "It gives the story a more surreal expressive layer that [lets us] be more honest about depicting Amin's emotions. In animation you don't have to have as much detail; you interpret a lot and you have the possibility to put yourself [in those situations]".

Like Rasmussen, the director of *Europa*, Haider Rashid, makes use of a familiar cinematic framework to keep viewers engaged and immersed. His film, which screened to acclaim at Cannes last summer, follows an Iraqi refugee trying to evade guards in the forests of Bulgaria. With the focus suffocatingly close on the young man's face at all times, it plays out almost like a nerve-shredding shaky-cam thriller.

Haider Rashid's 'Europa' uses almost constant close-ups to universalise the story of a fleeing refugee

"Since we were [showing] a run for survival and a constant chase, the thriller/action genre seemed to be a good blueprint to support the narrative we were after," he says over email. "I've been saying it's a 'thriller with a conscience'. It universalises the story and makes it more accessible to a broader audience, who are maybe less interested in the subject matter than thrills. But they come out of the theatre realising that the person they've just seen on screen is just like them."

The way in which these films are able to reach viewers and make them reflect on urgent issues hinges not just on presentation but on representation. To show people living in or escaping from war zones and persecution as enfeebled victims is both inaccurate — Haider points out that his character is "a real hero who survives an experience most of us couldn't" — and reduces individuals to a homogeneity. Not only can this instil a sense of guilt in the viewer —

an emotion often conducive to avoidance rather than involvement — it can, say Parrott and Stahnke, “dehumanise” the subjects of these films, despite best intentions.

Rasmussen agrees. “Amin didn’t want to be victimised. A lot of the time being a refugee becomes an identity; they are described only in terms of what they need. I wanted to show a refugee’s story, but also a lot of other things: his love life, his sexuality, his professionalism, our friendship, his family. All these things give a more nuanced picture of Amin,” he says. “Otherwise the story becomes [part of] this mass that’s hard to relate to. For me it’s about creating relatability with people you wouldn’t normally identify with.”

For the Lebanese directors of *Memory Box*, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, complexity of representation was paramount in telling the story of a young woman living through the 1980s civil war — as both film-makers and Middle Easterners themselves. The film (below and main picture, above) revolves around a teenage girl in modern-day Montreal who discovers her Lebanese mother’s diaries, letters and tapes, which detail the experiences of those years of conflict. To her surprise, what she finds is an intimate portrait of a normal, even sometimes joyful, adolescence continuing under missile-lit skies.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s ‘Memory Box’ focuses on the universal experiences of an adolescent who happens to live in a conflict zone

“It’s not about the trauma of living in a civil war, it’s really about someone’s daily [existence] — living, loving, going out — in this context. We felt immediately that this hadn’t really been done before,” says Hadjithomas. “When people make films about the Middle East, they isolate us. Showing victims without giving them history, without empowering them. We lost our faces in this region.”

But, Hadjithomas says, it would be myopic only to consider how

these narratives come across abroad. "It's not about the west. It's about how you represent yourself. It's like Orientalism: we see ourselves like the west wants us to be... What we try to do is show how contemporary we are — we share the same time with the rest of the world."

Twenty-four-hour news may keep us up to date on events around the globe but Rasmussen feels that isn't sufficient to achieve a sense of commonality and understanding. "We have a lot more stories that superficially describe what happens," he says. "But it's so important that we also get personal, in-depth [films] that show how people are affected on a more profound level."

Amid the context of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the continued tragedies on Europe's borders and the fallout from the explosion that shook Beirut in 2020, it is both timely and necessary that these three excellent films strive to do exactly that.

'Flee' is in UK cinemas and on Curzon Home Cinema from February 11; 'Europa' is in UK cinemas and on digital platforms from March 18; 'Memory Box' is in UK cinemas and on Curzon Home Cinema now

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