

## INTRODUCTION //

# TAKING POSITIONS ON THE 'REFUGEE CRISIS': CRITICAL RESPONSES IN ART AND LITERATURE

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The recent rise in global migration movements<sup>1)</sup> and the simultaneous massive attempts to prevent migrations to the Global North have produced numerous images, concepts and narrations that try to record and convey these events and their actors. Many of these representations depict migrants as suspects and border crossings as uncontrollable. Representations of flight and illegal migration have, however, become suspect themselves in the process. In many different European countries, these images have been accompanied by discussions of their appropriateness, moral permissibility, and sociopolitical functions. There has been less reflection on how forms of making visible/invisible or making audible/silencing migration and flight are sometimes techniques of repressive migration regimes and exclusionary practices. Accordingly, not every form of in/visibility or in/audibility should be understood as *critical* per se but should rather be questioned with regard to its statements and effects as well as possible exclusions and perpetuations. Since 2015 at the latest there has been, in the artistic sphere but also in popular and media culture, an effort to find more *critical* reflections on the topic. *New* grammars and *alternative* forms of visualising or narrating flight and migration are sought that reject criminalising discourses on terrorism and threat and avoid the highly present and always also gendered topos of the victim. But *what* should these *new* or *different* visualisations and narrations look like, and what is understood today, in a Europe afflicted by diverse 'crises', as truly *critical* and *progressive*? How do artists, writers, filmmakers and creative and intellectual people in general respond to and position themselves vis-à-vis discourses on the so-called refugee crisis?

— In view of the increasingly hardening debates and the vehement demands for a stronger isolation of Europe, it seems to us urgently necessary to ask these questions—and specifically from an explicit perspective of cultural studies, queer-feminism, and postcolonialism. Such a perspective also considers, first, that the experiences of (illegalised) border crossing can be extremely different depending on how the individuals are positioned as subjects in the hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, religion, and sexuality (on this, see also Catastathis et al. 2017, 6). Second, it

1) In what follows we use various terms for the people and for their various fleeing and migration movements. We have left it to the authors to choose terms appropriate for their texts. Much as formulated by Sabine Hess et al. (2017, 6), we are critical of scholarship that thinks of different people, movements and motivations in narrow categories and statistics. Rather, we adopt positions that point out that all these terms are also inventions of the state (De Genova 2017, 8) used to mark and regulate those who cross borders (on this, see Catastathis et al. 2018, 4).

incorporates the fact that representations – that is, talk about and visualisations of flight and migration – are permeated by gendered and racist stereotypes and assumptions that affect reality. It was not the concern of our project to find a conclusive, uniform answer; rather, the point was to provide impetus to this discussion and to get involved in these debates from an intersectional perspective.

— As the starting point for this discussion, we have proposed Chantal Mouffe's agonistic approach, which she has presented in various publications (Mouffe 2007 and 2013). This approach is founded on an idea of society that she developed with Ernesto Laclau and published in several places (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In this radically anti-essentialist view, every social order is considered to be the product of hegemonic practices or power relations (Mouffe 2013: 1–18). According to Mouffe, social orders are always the result of processes of negotiation (in which emotions and affects also play a role) and of the hegemonies thereby established. In this understanding, every social order is based on the exclusion of other possibilities (Mouffe 2013: 2) and can therefore be called into question by anti-hegemonic practices. Mouffe is thus arguing against the liberalist idea of a universal and rationalist consensus that could ideally be achieved in a society (Mouffe 2013: 3). Instead, she understands every society as a permeated by ineradicable antagonisms, that is, by unbridgeable contradictions.

— Her approach does not seek to get around or resolve the constitutive character of these social contradictions and the conflicts that result from them but rather look them in the eye (Mouffe 2013: 6f.). In that sense, she understands the political as conflict over hegemony between different positions. Mouffe proposes that the antagonisms become agonisms, that is, different positions become not antagonists, not enemies, but rather adversaries who join in discussion with one another. Distinguishing herself from approaches that describe public space as a terrain on which one seeks to produce a consensus, she understands it as a place where conflicting points of view meet without a reconciliation being desirable or possible at all (Mouffe 2013: 7). For all her skepticism about more recent developments of the post-Fordist economy and about the appropriation of aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture for a capitalist order, she sees a special opportunity in the field of art for creating an agonistic public space. In this view, critical art would be art that stirs up dissent. Critical artistic practices would open up alternatives to established points of view or to common sense (Mouffe 2013: 90, and Mouffe 2007: 4). They are not merely about the deconstruction of hegemonic points of

view and assumptions or about a simple pluralism of positions but about initiating spaces in which hegemony can be openly attacked (Mouffe 2013: 92). Critical art would, according to Mouffe, make it possible to underscore existing agonisms in order to call the hegemony into question with, among other things, aesthetic experiences (Mouffe 2013: 97).

— This issue of *FKW*, titled ‘Taking Positions on the ‘Refugee Crisis’: Critical Responses in Art and Literature,’ can be understood as itself a place in which a controversial debate becomes possible but also as a place from which hegemony can be called into question. Our authors were asked to examine the artistic works or positions in question to what extent – that is, whether and, if so, *how* – they are *critical* and *how* concretely they intervene in hegemonic orders, in this case above all in dominant representations of flight and the ‘refugee crisis’. All of the essays and reviews collected here discuss the extent to which the individual projects manage to do this, the difficulties or ambiguities that result in the process, and where supposedly well-intentioned projects instead do more to support the apparent consensus about refugees and migrants. For many, the summer of 2015 is a prominent date, in which the number of those flight to Europe via the Mediterranean and the Balkan routes increased enormously. The decisive factor was not so much this increased number of migration movements to Europe but rather the observation that an initial ‘welcoming atmosphere’ that could be identified in many European countries quite abruptly changed. Since the winter of 2015 at the latest, xenophobic resentments and calls to strengthen European borders have been heard every more clearly and in many respects are being implemented by politicians. In many European societies, nationalist and racist statements are more frequently being declared ‘sayable’. More and more, they seem to represent the consensus that most of the artists and authors discussed here identify and to which they are reacting. This consensus – or, better, this hegemony – includes various mechanisms and practices of banning and exclusion to which migrants and refugees are exposed daily (both in the diverse transit sites and where they ultimately arrive).

— Setting out from Mouffe, however, the question remains: What does it mean concretely not simply to pursue deconstruction but to intervene into the hegemonic consensus and to open up places for dissent. What does this mean from an explicitly intersectional position? After our call to participate in this issue, we found that scholars were very interested in engaging with

questions of intervention and discussing which aesthetic experiences make an agonism in Mouffe's sense possible. By contrast, there was relatively little attention paid to the role that gender and sexuality play in artistic engagements with the discourse on the 'refugee crisis'. In view of the current events and serious social conflicts, queer-feminist questions seem to be moving to the background again. Not only do we hope that our issue will provide an impulse to take up and develop the insights of queer-feminist and gender-theory scholarship in future analyses of flight and migration, but we also demand this perspective as urgently necessary, especially in times of increasing polarisation and individualization.

— In the present issue, two aspects were distilled as central: First, there was an intense discussion of which media-specific techniques and strategies of representation lead to which aesthetic experiences and which effect this has. Whereas several contributors answered this question by saying that they see opportunities to create other forms of representation and participation above all in recent digital media (virtual spaces, mobile phone videos, digital films), others turned to traditional forms of artistic expression (e.g., literature, theatre) and showed their potential for creating room for dissent. Nearly all of the authors had in common that they discussed the extent to which refugees themselves participate in the projects in question without (re)producing anew paternalistic, exploitative and ultimately neocolonial power relationships. For that reason, many of the projects discussed here are concerned with depicting refugees – contrary to the dominant reporting – as autonomous, active and defiant individuals and not just as passive victims. This goal has been linked with the approach that refugees themselves should be allowed to speak or to participate in the production of images. They reflect on *how* they can participate in the artistic work in question, *how* one avoids not only speaking *about* or *for* them in a renewal of a colonial gesture but also presenting them in a voyeuristic and stereotypical form. Many of the contributions thus focus on the question of how this participation is framed and with what effect it relates to contemporary Eurocentric hegemony.

— Mouffe, too, proclaims that critical art is constituted 'by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony' (2007, 4–5). This demand formulated by Mouffe as a task for critical art is a central concern of transnational feminism. Feminists from the Global South in particular have long expressed skepticism about the efforts of white feminists to speak about and for

‘other’ women. We mention here two of the most famous scholars who vehemently articulated an objection to a perhaps well-meant but ultimately paternalistic white feminism. For example, in the late 1980s Chandra Talpade Mohanty showed that many white feminists, precisely in their effort to speak *about* and *for* ‘other’ women were once again homogenising, colonising and instrumentalising these women: ‘the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category [...] colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political *agency*.’ (1988: 79).

—— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak formulated a farther-reaching objection under the provocative title ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988). As we read the articles submitted, it became increasingly clear that this text published in the late 1980s and the reflections it has since inspired remain highly topical today. Spivak pointed out that even when Western intellectuals believe they are giving a voice to subalterns or giving them an opportunity ‘to speak’, it is rare that women have a say.<sup>2)</sup> Even when they ‘speak’, Spivak argued, they were not understood, because the structure of listening is hegemonic as well. In her subsequent scholarly work, Spivak was concerned with finding how to create the basic conditions for subalterns to be heard and understood.<sup>3)</sup> In our view, Spivak’s question is still very topical: the contributions in this issue reaffirmed that for us. Many of the essays show that it is not about simply ‘causing to speak’ but that it is also always necessary to have strategies that expose the hegemonic power strategies and mechanisms with which exclusions are produced. It therefore seems important to us to further pursue and expand this approach – and the history of feminist debates on the subject should not be forgotten when doing so.

**THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN DETAIL** —— In *Transit: Art, Mobility and Migration in the Age of Globalisation*, Sabine Nielsen discusses a curatorial project she implemented from 2015 to 2018 at the KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces in Køge. Starting out from the work *The Room* (2018) by Pejk Malinovski, she questions the opportunities but also the tasks of art and artists as well as her own function as curator in light of conflicts in Danish society over the increased arrivals of refugees in the summer of 2015. Nielsen discusses how the artist deals with his privileged position and the extent to which his use of a virtual space successfully produces an aesthetic experience that leads to questioning the hegemonic

2) This statement can be related to all subalterns who are marginalised on the basis of gender and sexuality but also on class, and so on.

3) On this, see, among others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward’, in Rosalind Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 227–36.

power structures in Europe. She emphasises two things: first, the conceptual possibilities that the medium of virtual space opens up and, second, the discussions that the project initiated when it was shown not only in the institution of the art museum but also in a public square. With reference to Chantal Mouffe, she explains the extent to which the artistic work opens up an agonistic public space that not only leads to contacts between different actors but also, according to Mouffe, causes the inevitable conflicts to be acted out.

— Claire E. Jandot, too, takes such a space for art that can lead to agonisms as the point of departure for her analysis. From the exhibition *Voices Outside the Echo Chamber: Questioning Myths, Facts and Framings of Migration*, which was on view at the Framer Framed Gallery in Amsterdam from April to June 2016, she discusses two artistic works that were both presented there but that employ very different strategies: the audio sculpture *Bosbolobosboco #6 (Departure-Transit-Arrival)* (2014) by Libia Castro and Ólafur Ólafsson and the installation *Conflicted Phonemes* (2012) by Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Whereas the work by Castro and Ólafsson makes the individual experiences of migrants audible and also physically palpable, in an effort to evoke empathy and identification, the work by Abu Hamdan grapples with the mechanisms and procedures of Dutch asylum policy. Jandot brings the two works together in a discussion. In it she weighs how the artistic strategies in each case relate to the strategies of administrative institutions of the migration regime and what effects they could have on the viewers and listeners and ultimately on the public discourse.

— Sven Seibel discusses two recent documentary films, both of which work with participatory strategies and use shots made by refugees with mobile phones or (digital) cameras: *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* und *Les Sauteurs* (both 2016). In a comparative analysis of the two films, he shows how the documentary productions attempt to produce *other*, non-hegemonic images and to intervene in the dominant production of images. He discusses their attempts to escape current narratives of victimisation and, with reference to Poonga Rangan (2017), asks to which extent they succeed in making migration *perceptible*. Whereas in at least one film, he is able to make out forms of standardisation and making invisible, he emphasises the thematisation of the prerequisites for speaking but also for listening in each case. This thematisation goes beyond a mere form of making visible or audible and makes it possible to perceive subtle forms of agency and resistance.

— Janna Houwen's contribution to this issue also focuses on interventions from the field of lens-based art into the discourse on the 'refugee crisis'. Taking her cue from Maurizio Lazzarato's 'machine theory' (2014) and his reflections on the role of the non-discursive in systems of surveillance and control, she proposes seeing current EU border policy as part of a large, complex, and professional system that she calls the 'refugee machine'. On the basis of a parallel critical reading of two recent art-house documentary films – Morgan Knibbe's *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* (2014) and Nathalie Loubeyre's *Flow Mechanics* (2016) – she argues that these films not only reveal the workings of this refugee machine but also question and resist its function in what she calls, following Lazzarato, an 'a-signifying' mode. By employing specific technological means, they manage to express, in a non-individualised, pathic form, affects and bodily sensations that counter the processes of objectivation and enslavement of the *refugee machine*.

— The social anthropologist Martha Bouziouri, in turn, opens up a perspective on this issue's theme that starts out from her practice as a theatre dramaturge. Her reflections on the pitfalls and challenges of representing migrants and refugees in documentary theatre are inspired by the theatre workshop series *From Field to Stage: Dramaturgies of the Other* that she has been developing since 2018 in resisting response to what Ipek Çelik has called "the overarching trope of victimhood" (2015:127). In her contribution Bouziouri combines insights from ethnography with knowledge gained from actors who are themselves refugees and from her own work as a dramaturge. The aim of the workshop series is to go beyond the debilitating distinction between 'us' and 'them' and at the same time to arrive at an alternative conceptualisation of the stage as a space of encounter and *critical intimacy*. Self-reflection is central to this process: What does the current hegemony mean to me as an actor, director, or subject? How am I positioned within it, in particular in relation to 'others'? Self-reflection thus becomes not only a prerequisite for critical intimacy for all those involved in theatre but also contributes indirectly to opening an agonistic space on the stage. The cover image of this issue of *FKW* shows a scene from another of Bouziouri's plays, one that is also based on a combination of documentary theatre and ethnography and inspires critical reflection. The play *Amarynthos*, which was performed at the Athens and Epidaurus Festival in 2018, confronts viewers with the narrativisation of sexual violence and the precarious fabrication of truth in situations in which

differences between genders, classes and ethnic membership crucially determine patterns of in- and exclusion.

— In her essay Sarah Beeks analyses the role of the Dutch writer, poet and intellectual Ilja Pfeijffer, who has repeatedly joined public debates on the so-called refugee crisis not only in the Netherlands but also on a European level. Beeks discusses his position as a Dutch, white, male public intellectual against the backdrop of re-negotiations of European identity and the concept of Europe. In a close reading of Pfeiffer's "Brief aan Europa" (2015), she asks what specific contribution literature can make and what visual language and literary strategies Pfeiffer employs to that end. She shows how Pfeiffer's explicitly transnational positioning as a European and his decided critique of the EU's restrictive border policy nevertheless perpetuates traditional images, especially gendered images.

— The two reviews in our issue are also concerned with the question of artistic positionings in the face of the so-called refugee crisis and current discourses on migration as well as with current scholarly research on these subjects: Veronika Schöne reviews the exhibition *Die Blaue Stunde* (The Blue Hour, November 2018 to January 2019, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg) by the artist Khaled Barakeh. In an intense reading of his works, which revolve around the topics of war, exile, torture and flight, she reflects on the strategies he uses to thematise suffering without presenting it in a voyeuristic way. She also describes how he challenges viewers to take their own stance and how he manages to treat political and yet emotional subject matter using a minimal formal idiom while also addressing the clichés with which he is confronted as an artist who migrated to Germany from Syria. Katharina Hoffmann and Verena Hücke have reviewed an interdisciplinary anthology edited by Christoph Rass and Melanie Ulz titled *Migration ein Bild geben: Visuelle Aushandlungen von Diversität* (2018). They show which scholarship the volume takes up and the range with which the individual essays address different visual representations of migration. By doing so, they work out the insights that result from combining historical and representation-critical approaches. In the end, they encourage reflections on how scholars can integrate more non-Western knowledge production and alternative traditions of knowledge and thereby develop a more transcultural perspective – an idea that the present issue can also take up.

— Unfortunately, we must also be self-critical and note that few of the artistic projects discussed here focus on refugee women,



queers, transgender people or other marginalised subjects. So we are all the more pleased that Hannimari Jokinen's edition refers to women's specific refugee experiences and effective power to act. Jokinen has developed a four-part series of silk-screens for us. It emerged from the *Greener Pastures* project (2015–19) she has been pursuing with women who migrated to Germany from various countries. One essential part of this project is the life stories of women based on interviews. We highly recommend you read them: <http://www.kupla.de/greener.htm>. A text by Kea Wienand in this issue discusses Jokinen's edition and explains the associated project.

— While preparing this publication, Hannimari Jokinen told us of a woman (whose name we do not mention here for various reasons) who had fled to Germany from a war zone and later participated in the aforementioned project in Hamburg. At the time of their collaboration, the German government decided to suspend the right of family reunification for those eligible for “subsidiary protection.” This decision had far-reaching consequences for this woman, as it did for many others. At the time she had set out for Europe, she had overcome diverse obstacles and risks in order to find a safe place for her children and her partner. After her plans had been made so completely impossible, the contact between Jokinen and her broke off at some point. It is reasonable to assume that she returned with her family. Stories like these are rarely told in the media. Refugees are overwhelmingly seen as male. We are not claiming that publishing such stories more frequently would automatically change the awareness of politicians and cause them to take different decisions or lead to more solidarity in European society. But the *voices* of this woman and of others who remain unheard are necessary to intervene in existing social orders and change them permanently.

*Translated by Steven Lindberg*

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