

Fight of Flight: Documentary Practice in Two Views of Migrants in Sweden

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Abstract

The article examines the narrative techniques two short documentary films used to present the issue of Syrian migrants entering Sweden. Stockholm Syndrome presents immigrants as a threat to European values, utilizing a host of false assertions, the threat of rape and graphic imagery to stoke fear in its populist audience. Flight follows two young girls from Syria to Sweden, presenting the migrant's point of view with sympathy, while ignoring the larger issues of war, migration and its consequences. In both films, established documentary practices are used to invoke emotional responses while eschewing factual accuracy or explication.

Keywords: documentary practices, migration, nativism, populism, YouTube

Introduction

The global reach of the Internet and the availability of inexpensive digital recorders and smart phones have created an unprecedented distribution platform for digital information. Events can be streamed live onto websites such as Facebook and viewed by millions contemporaneously, creating an immediacy that amplifies the impact of these events in a way that after the fact video or textual descriptions cannot match.² The streaming of events such as the Arab Spring in 2010-11 and their dissemination on Facebook and YouTube help mobilize the local populace and publicize these events to a world audience.³ Recordings of such images are then taken up by content creators, large and small, who use the ubiquity and relative lack of censorship⁴ of these distribution

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² A notorious example in the US was the shooting of Philando Castile by police in Minnesota. Castile's subsequent death was live streamed by his girlfriend, resulting in riots by groups across the country.

³ Though the subsequent regime in Egypt worked to suppress social media to avoid similar protests.

⁴ This article discusses views on migrants in the West, where such censorship is less intrusive than in countries such as China.

platforms to create narratives about current events. This content ranges in production value from the slickly produced films of large media entities to low budget home productions that feature only a narrator and images collected from the internet. Distribution platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo allow users to see the number of views of these videos, creating an instant gauge on the effectiveness of a film's content, through the measure of consumption over metrics such as veracity.

The ongoing crisis of people fleeing the Syrian civil war provides fertile ground for on-line depictions of these migrants, both in regard to their perceived impact on the countries where they settle and the effect this travel has upon the migrants themselves. Populist narratives that propose migrants have more sinister motives beyond mere refugee status have proliferated on YouTube. Other film makers have created content which shows these migrants as victims of war who are fleeing for their lives. This article examines two videos that demonstrate these contrasting narratives, examining how each utilizes documentary film narrative tropes and practices to promote their respective views on migrants in Sweden. These documentary practices are manipulated to lend credence to views on the status and intentions of these migrants towards their host country. This manipulation cuts both ways, in that both filmmakers utilize basic narrative emotional story lines such as fear or empathy to promote conclusions which are not necessarily borne out by evidence presented in the film itself. In some ways, the excesses of populist filmmakers are more easily seen through than those who seek to find common ground among immigrants and Western audiences. The lies and manipulation of data by populist groups strike many as more dangerous because they often inspire violent reactions. But the truth does not always take sides, and if those who present their subjects from a sympathetic viewpoint utilize techniques that could be characterized as dishonest, it should be noted, if only to impress upon filmmakers the need to choose evidence with care.

1. Stockholm Syndrome

The short documentary *Stockholm Syndrome* (Horiwitz 2017) utilizes a news magazine style to lend authority to its alarmist approach to the influx of migrants in Sweden. The film's very title indicates that Horiwitz considers these migrants as terrorists, for this phrase refers to an historical event in Sweden; a hostage situation at a bank in Stockholm in 1973. After

the hostage takers were arrested none of the four employees would testify against their captors, instead raising money for their defense. The implication of this supposed syndrome⁵ is that the victims come to sympathize with their captors at the expense of a rational response to their ordeal. The implication for the migrant situation in Sweden is that any Swedes who defend the presence of Syrian refugees are suffering from this syndrome, and by implication these refugees are criminals who are manipulating their captives through a false narrative of victimization.

1.1. Misinformation and Manipulation

Despite the dark implications of its title, *Stockholm Syndrome* begins on a light-hearted note, with the legendary Swedish band Abba providing a soundtrack to the director's narration. Horiwitz claims that the usual Swedish exports are "hot blondes, Vikings and Swedish Chef." These rather uninspired remarks and conversational tone speaks to a younger, less informed audience, one whose views on Sweden are superficial. Horiwitz then adds another of Sweden's "accomplishments" to his list, as well as the first lie of the documentary (at only 00:14), when he displays a BBC headline about Sweden and rape while his voice-over claims that Sweden is the "rape capital of Europe." Horiwitz offers no statistics or other evidence to back up this claim, but instead uses the visual of the headline to lend it authenticity. While actual data shows that Sweden is one of the safer countries for women in Europe⁶, the BBC article that Horiwitz uses under his rape claim actually debunks the myth that Sweden has a disproportionate rate of rape, in comparison to other countries.⁷ Horiwitz uses this technique throughout his film; he makes a sensationalist claim using misleading headlines or images that appear to lend credence to the assertion, but in fact are either not relevant or debunk his very claim. At 00:30 Horiwitz shows an image of a young, dark skinned man stealing a motorcycle at gunpoint under the title image of the film. What he doesn't tell the viewer is that the image is from a robbery in São Paulo, Brazil.⁸

⁵ Law enforcement officials feel that the syndrome has been overblown by the media.

⁶ Some researchers feel that Sweden's aggressive approach in recording and pursuing rapes may give the false impression of a higher rate.

⁷ Here again it was Sweden's sexual assault reporting system that accounts for higher numbers.

⁸ Horiwitz uses a host of such misleading clips in his opening montage.

Horiwitz implies that street crime is rampant on the streets of Stockholm with this visual of a non-white man that infers this crime is being committed by a migrant, not a native Swede.

The fear of rape and sexual assault by immigrants or other marginalized groups has a long history in Europe and America, ranging from anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic literature of the 19th century to rape accusations (and subsequent lynchings) of African Americans in the American South after the Civil War and through the civil rights era of the 1960s. The populist, anti-immigrant movement has seized upon incidents such as the New Year's Eve attacks in Cologne to stoke this fear. Horiwitz takes the false claim that the majority of Syrian migrants are men⁹ to impute both the motives of these migrants and lend credence to the notion that undesirable others are swarming the once homogeneous culture of Sweden. Horiwitz asks a migrant if he would go back to Syria to fight for his country. When the migrant hesitates, Horiwitz infers his claim to having status as a political refugee is bogus. It is presumed that such a reaction is typical of all young, male Syrian migrants, whose true motive in coming to the West is hidden and nefarious. Horiwitz does not believe any narrative that a migrant might give for his decision to risk the journey from Syria to Sweden; so whenever a migrant is given a chance to speak on camera, he appears either shifty or threatening.

1.2 Correct Documentary Practices

Suppose a documentary filmmaker really wanted to discover whether Syrian refugees wanted to return, to help fight the Assad regime. First, s/he would have to define what this fight entailed. Would it be limited to refugees with military experience? Would it involve non-lethal methods such as humanitarian relief, or the use of media to bring attention to the rebel cause? What about those refugees with family still in Syria? Would their family be under threat of retribution, if this refugee returned to fight? These are just a sampling of questions and investigative work, required to explore the notion of Syrian refugee return; what it truly entails to fight the Assad regime and who might be eligible. But Horiwitz asks the questions only for the visual of a few male migrants shrugging or hesitating to answer, then uses that visual to reaffirm his predetermined

⁹ A 2018 UN study has shown that the ratio of male to female refugees is nearly equal.

conclusions, with his status as a reporter asking questions, lending credence to the notion that the refugees are making false claims about their reasons for leaving Syria. This implication gives strength to Horiwitz' underlying view that these migrants have hidden, darker motives. But these visual signifiers, in fact, represent nothing.

1.3 No-Go Zones and Cultural Essentialism

Horiwitz trades in another trope of the anti-migrant, populist movement – the creation of “no-go zones” by migrants. These are areas within cities or suburbs where migrants drive out or intimidate native inhabitants and create an area under the control of the migrants. This control extends both to safety and crime, as well as the use of Sharia law to rule the area. The idea of such no-go zones in countries such as Germany, England and Sweden has been promoted on numerous right wing websites such as InfoWars and in the US on the Fox News channel. Yet the police departments of these countries have consistently debunked the notion that there are areas of cities in which the police are afraid to enter. In *Stockholm Syndrome* Horiwitz defines the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby as such a no-go zone, then “bravely” enters the area to show his viewers what the area is like. Horiwitz is confronted by a group of Muslim men who question his efforts to film them, then claims to be attacked, though this incident occurs off-camera. Whatever the motivations of these men, Horiwitz uses the incident as evidence for the existence in Stockholm of areas which are controlled by migrants. He uses the testimony of two police officers to lend credence to the claims of no-go zones. Yet the policemen later claimed that their comments were taken out of context and their answers edited to appear for different questions.¹⁰

Horiwitz employs the testimony of Annika Henroth-Rothstein extensively throughout *Stockholm Syndrome*, using her status as a working journalist to give substance to the claims made against migrants. Henroth-Rothstein is employed to give the “different culture” argument against Syrian migrants. She asserts that there is a distinct Swedish culture which is under assault from “190,000 people that come from a very different

¹⁰ The police officer, Anders Gorazon, said that ““We don’t stand behind it. It shocked us. He has edited the answers. We were answering completely different questions in the interview. This is bad journalism.”

culture.” This mirrors classic nativist arguments used in the US since the Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s. The various immigrant groups coming into the United States would never accept the American way because their religion (Catholicism, Judaism, etc.) and cultural habits were too ingrained and incompatible with so-called American culture. Just as it was thought that Catholics were ultimately ruled by the Pope and not the government and institutions of the US, in *Stockholm Syndrome* Henroth-Rothstein argues that in Europe the host culture is being asked to change to reflect those of migrants. Horiwitz then “backs up” this claim by interviewing migrants on the street who agree with questions such as “does Sweden have a responsibility to adapt to the culture of immigrants?” and “should women dress modestly?”. One migrant answers that “it is in our culture,” while another says that “if you come to Rinkeby, there is a dress code.”

The syllogism used by Horiwitz’ to present his culture argument is straightforward, but disingenuous. He finds a supposed expert in Henroth-Rothstein who claims that migrants have cultural mores that are not merely different, but essentially opposed to those of the host country. This expert also argues that these migrants are not simply keeping their culture, within their own communities, as an act of remembrance or cultural identity, but are imposing this essentially oppositional culture upon the host country. While it is never said explicitly, the use of “cultural difference” is a dog whistle for the supposed values of Islam. Horiwitz then shows members of this opposing culture agreeing with these statements. Case closed. What Horiwitz does not tell us is that Henroth-Rothstein is not an expert on the culture of Muslims, is a journalist only in light of having written a few articles for Israeli newspapers based upon her blog, and has made very antagonistic statements about Muslims.¹¹ Horiwitz provides no context to bolster the evidential power of his man on the street interviews. What percentage of migrants hold views like these men? Are they even being serious, or simply winding up Horiwitz for the camera? Are they like many young men, struggling to assert themselves and their culture, through brave talk and studied nonchalance? How many people did Horiwitz interview, and how many disagreed with this view? These are standard questions for any documentary filmmaker to ask to avoid making biased or

¹¹ An example of her approach can be found on the anti-migrant website savemysweden.com.

unverified claims. The truth is usually different and more interesting than one expects, yet if Horiwitz had found that the vast majority of migrants do not feel that the host country should change its culture for that of migrants, would he have included this in his film?

2. The Polemical Style Documentary

In *Stockholm Syndrome* Horiwitz uses the documentary format without utilizing the best practices that created this format. His film is a polemic designed for an audience already predisposed to his views on migrants and the threats they pose. Good documentary practice requires the filmmaker to discover the truth through interviews and research. Horiwitz is not merely cherry-picking footage that supports his view, but actually twisting the words of his subjects to promote them, as with the two policemen that have been mentioned earlier in the research. This kind of film making has a long history, and viewers' beliefs often determine their reactions to their veracity. Current high-profile practitioners of this style of film making include Michael Moore and Adam Curtis on the left and Steve Bannon on the right.¹² Usually these filmmakers are preaching to an audience fully invested in their points of view, while those with opposing views stay away. Viewers with less invested views might also be forgiving of the lack of good practices, because they know the sort of films these men make and take them with a grain of salt.

If the polemical style film is in part defined as speaking to a specific audience, what demographic is Horiwitz trying to reach? There are clues in his breezy tone, emphasis on migrant attacks on women, and by the notion that migrants have come to the West, not to escape persecution, but to get a free ride at the expense of natives who must work for a living. Horiwitz also details supposed sexual assaults at outdoor concerts, in which migrant men surround local (white) women to separate them from their friends and then systematically assault them. As with most of Horiwitz' claims, these have been largely discredited, but it plays particularly well to his target audience. Young men who find themselves under-employed and feel insecure about their role in society and with women are especially susceptible to the claims made in Horiwitz' film. In the final scenes of the film, where Swedish citizens blithely hold pro-immigrant views and

¹² See Bill Nichols' views on Michael Moore.

dispute the notion (which Horiwitz has supposedly proved in the preceding images) that migrants have created a rape problem in Sweden, these citizens are all women, save one young man with pink hair. These foolish liberals who approach the migrant issue from the point of view of sympathy or compassion are, in fact, like hostages bewitched by their terrorist captors. It is young men who see the migrants for who they are; interlopers intent upon taking their women and leeching off Sweden's welfare state. All those who think differently are being deceived.¹³

3. Flight

In contrast to the polemical tactics utilized by Horiwitz, the short documentary *Flight* (Wadha, 2016) offers up a more traditional participatory documentary,¹⁴ in telling the story of two young Syrian girls who are living in Sweden, after escaping Syria with their mother. Just as the title of *Stockholm Syndrome* gives notice to that film's conclusions, Wadha's title gives the viewer a sense of her film's point of view; that of the refugees who are fleeing the violence in Syria. We see their struggles from their perspective; not as symbols of an imposing culture but as victims of war. Wadha begins with a series of phone calls she makes to her two young cousins and her aunt in Syria in 2013, using home movie footage of the girls, to show their once normal lives in Syria, as their aunt describes the horrors of war. We see grainy Skype footage of her aunt, clearly at her wits end, telling Wadha that if they do not leave soon they will be killed. Next, we see cell-phone footage of the girls' preparations to leave, which means packing a few plastic bags with clothes and a life preserver for the sea voyage. This is followed by grainy footage of their perilous crossing, then the two little girls on a train, presumably making their way across Europe. We see many refugees at the train station, surrounded by white police and soldiers, the two little girls nervous but hopeful.

Wadha then moves to May of 2016, with the two girls now living in Sweden. We watch them playing in fall leaves, as they recite a Syrian song about being proud of their heritage. Sitting together in their new home, the girls are healthy and optimistic, proudly showing their cousin that they can

¹³ This is the classic "paranoid thinking" as identified by Richard Hofstadter. **Hofstadter, R.** 1964. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA

¹⁴ As defined by Bill Nichols' modes of documentary, Wadha interacts with her two subjects and is hence participating what she is documenting.

speak Swedish. The film then alternates between images of the girls discussing their new lives in Sweden, with home movie footage of their old life back in Syria. They discuss the prejudice they have encountered by Swedish children, their memories of war back home, and the strength they find encountering this new world together. They are like children everywhere; at one moment shy and the next exuberant, wanting the attention of their cousin but also acutely aware of their status as outsiders. Wadha's goal is to humanize these refugees, to show their similarities with other children, instead of the differences of their cultural background. We never see any Swedes; we approach the reality of migration strictly from the view point of the migrant. When the girls watch old home movies, they long for the life they once led in Syria, with the knowledge that they may never be able to return.

Wadha then moves to December of 2016. The girls are more embittered by their life in Sweden, telling their cousin that "they don't want to be Arabic anymore." The pressure of their classmates talking about the refugee crisis has become too much, because they constantly hear that they are not wanted in Sweden. One girl says that when any Swede says an Arabic name, s/he does so in an angry way. When Wadha counters that she feels the Arabic language is beautiful, her young cousin chastises her, saying that Wadha's attitude is from "not living it...you don't look like Arabic." This dialogue is presented under a black screen; Wadha wants the viewer to simply hear the words without the distraction of their faces. The film ends with one young cousin telling Wadha "I don't like Arabic...I don't want to be Syrian anymore...Don't ask me why because I don't know why." But of course the viewer knows why; these two girls do not want to be visible representations of the migrant crisis roiling Sweden. And we feel the pain of the unwilling visitor who has fled from war and killing, but is unwanted in the place of refuge.

3.1 Flight Manipulations and Omissions

Flight is a film from the perspective of the migrants fleeing death and finding an ambiguous place in their new country, whereas *Stockholm Syndrome* never allows the migrants to explain themselves beyond answers to provocative questions. Our sympathy for the two girls is exactly the sort of reaction Horiwitz wants to stamp out with his "facts" about migrants raping and stealing from Sweden. We see in *Flight* that far from wanting to

impress their cultural values on the host country, the girls want to be Swedish and forget about their background. Wadha show us what they are fleeing, and in the images of earlier, better times in Syria just what has been lost. Horiwitz does not show scenes of the war, the viewer only sees migrants enjoying the largesse of their duped hosts. Few things could be more vulnerable than two little girls in a strange land, which Wadha emphasizes by never showing the girls' mother once they reach Sweden. Horiwitz' migrants are young men who look capable of handling themselves and taking what they want; just as with the Masons or Communists of earlier paranoid thinking, these seemingly desperate migrants are portrayed as much smarter than the hapless liberals who welcome them with open arms. They are both the pawns and instigators of a nefarious scheme to undermine Western values, overwhelm its societies and alter its values.

And yet, despite the modest claims that Wadha's format makes upon the viewer, her film also shows signs of her sympathies, in its limited scope and omissions. She shows us scenes of destruction in Syria, but makes no attempt to explain the reasons for the war. Wadha never talks about the girls' father; has he been killed? Did he desert the family? Could he be part of the Assad regime? Or the resistance? Wadha has said in an interview (Hampton, 2018) that "My main goal was to create empathy for Syria and my cousins; showing what life was like [before the civil war]. I wanted to create a more personal portrayal of the situation that audiences could relate to."¹⁵ The inherent limitations of such a profile (and the film's 10:34 length) preclude any analysis of the war in Syria, but it also lets the filmmaker ignore any discussion of which actors (Syria, Europe, America, Russia, etc.) are more accountable for the migrant problem that has beset Europe. Wadha's use of two charismatic young girls to represent migrants can be seen as problematic and even manipulative. These are not the sort of migrants that viewers of Horiwitz' film are concerned about, and as we've seen, they believe that children make up a tiny percentage of migrants. What if Wadha had concentrated her film on her aunt; would it have had the same power to make us sympathetic to those fleeing Syria? I've talked about the girls' missing father; would Wadha's film have the same impact with a pair of young men as the central focus? What would such young

¹⁵ Wadha also says that her cousins are doing much better in Sweden and have found the film to be a cathartic experience.

men's struggle to fit in to Swedish society have looked like on screen; might they have been like the young men Horiwitz shows to such great effect, disenchanted and disenfranchised, perhaps acting out in defiance of their low status in Swedish society?

3.2 Sympathy in Opposition to the Facts

Obviously Wadha did not choose her cousins, and she has stated her goal of making migrants sympathetic in the face of so much opposition fostered by the likes of Horiwitz and others. Yet the participatory, personal essay format she employs, one that takes no stance aside from eliciting sympathy, through the images and words of two children in a difficult place, risks being dismissed as a film that utilizes emotional appeals, while ignoring the factual issues that forced these two girls on their perilous journey. Here again, those that are predisposed to be sympathetic to the plight of migrants have no need for a more substantive inquiry into the events surrounding these girls' plight. But those who are genuinely worried about the effect of migration, much less the viewers of Horiwitz' film who are actively opposed to migrants on so called "cultural" grounds, could find Wadha's approach easily dismissed as facile or even propaganda. Wadha clearly has skin in the game, with her two subjects being relations, and the omissions I mentioned above (no scenes with her aunt or uncle, no Swedish perspective) could be used to question her motives in presenting these affecting young girls.

4. Conclusion

The issues of migration and economic uncertainty that have fueled the rise of populism in Europe and America are driven by a host of factors, from systemic changes in the economies of these countries, the obsolescence of ordinary workers through technological advances such as robotics and AI (Artificial Intelligence), to the ever increasing concentration of wealth among a very few. This has given rise to large groups of citizens who feel they are increasingly being left behind in their own countries. The immigrant has always been an easy target for these disenchanted residents, who see in the immigrants' very difference, a linkage to sinister conspiracies that might explain these changes. They become susceptible to the manipulation of this difference by politicians and polemicist

filmmakers such as Horiwitz to draw attention away from the systemic economic and technological changes that have given rise to their economic and social uncertainty. These views have found an ideal distribution platform on the internet, with its ubiquitous presence and reach. Filmmakers such as Ami Horiwitz utilize this platform to make sensational claims, whether as a true believer, or simply for the notoriety and clicks which can be monetized. Other voices such as Laura Wadha urge viewers to consider these migrants as true refugees who only want to escape violence, not as agents of a culture war contributing to the economic despair of those on the bottom rungs of society. Both use classic documentary technique, to advance their views through emotional appeals. Questions about the validity of such appropriation are perhaps rendered moot, in the post-truth realm of the Internet, with its barrage of “alternative facts” and conspiracy theories. Here success is not measured by the old standards of accuracy and factual rigor. Success on YouTube is measured only in views. Here are the numbers as of October 7, 2018.

Flight: YouTube views 14,905 *Stockholm Syndrome*: YouTube views 590,515

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