

The Man Without a Face: Anonymity as Subversive Self-Representation

Film Review

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In February of 2016, when Ai Weiwei asked celebrities to don the flimsy emergency blankets given to refugees upon reaching shore, over their own ballroom gowns and tuxedos, did he really understand the facts of their intrinsic convergence? And when the world-renowned artist asked the celebrities at the Cinema for Peace Foundation's gala to take selfies with their refurbished outfits, was it just another instance of memorialization literally wrapped in poverty porn, or did Weiwei unconsciously understand something fundamental about the representations that link Charlize Theron, who can be seen at the gala posing with two fingers arched in a peace sign, with someone like Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who washed ashore in the Turkish resort of Bodrum, dead before arrival. Theron is no stranger to having her image proliferate, circulating the world in ways she has no control over. Kurdi's body, too, even and especially by being lifeless, was resuscitated and re-appropriated not once—on the cover of innumerable magazines and newspapers in 2015, including the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Guardian*—but again, a year later, as Weiwei “re-created” the scene by laying, posed, on a pebbled beach on the Greek island of Lesbos, while asking bystanders to snap a few photos. In recognizing the links between a lifestyle and the bare life it prevents from protection, we can think about how we, too, within the veil of celebration, are complicit in these processes of dehumanization.

It is through this continual probing of representation that we can explore how refugees are both interned and interpellated in *Human Flow*. “At times, we are ashamed when people call us ‘stateless people,’ ‘boat people,’ and many other names,” explains a Rohingya man during an early scene. “We too have feelings. We too are humans. They give us all sorts of names: boat people, drifters ...” he nods, pauses, catches his breath. “... All because of the

tyranny of the military junta that has destroyed our future.” The man begins to cry, wiping at his eyes, rubbing out his tears. The eye of the camera comes closer to zoom in on the face, a common filmic technique of representing the refugee which plays on an affective economy, manufacturing an intimacy that brings the figure closer to us while simultaneously keeping them at a distance. This moment resolves itself through its self-contradiction, in which the close-up arrests a subject in a tight space while also making them able to move, to transcend the frame and become available to viewers. His palm covers his face, prevents us from seeing, but not from looking.

Out of all the moments of Weiwei’s much-lauded and award-winning 140-minute documentary, so many of which move from a series of subjects standing rigidly in the center of tents looking silently at the camera’s gaze, as if surveilled and in truth surveyed, or moments of interaction between refugees taking photos of each other with their cell phones and selfie sticks, nothing proves more pivotal than when we reach Pakistan. Here, as before, the camera provides the ubiquitous slow pan close-up of the faces in the crowd and yet goes one step further, moving out to show the faces being filmed and the camera moving on the dolly: a filming of the slow violence being filmed, which of course is the violence itself. As the camera cuts back to its close-up crossing of people in the crowd, many of whom are holding signs of resistance, one boy stands out for me. Instead of holding up his sign above his head, like all the others, he is using it—his sign which says RESPECT—to sheathe his face; he is finding refuge from the camera and its ability to re-present him as another symbol for a state-sanctioned cause.

By taking Fredric Jameson’s assertion that modernism could be both “reflection of the reification of late nineteenth-century social life ... [and] also a revolt against that reification” (1981, 27) as our starting point, I want to probe a counter-perspective that is largely absent in the literature of both celebrity studies and refugee analysis: How can the celebrity, or the celebrated figure of the refugee, become a site for potential resistance to cultural and political hegemony, and the system of capitalism which has produced it? The boy’s gaze is not directed at the cameramen, or even his own friends and family. And yet Ai Weiwei’s camera lingers there, vigilant, hoping to see and show some moment of surrender. In deciding not to look, and forcing us toward another perception, the boy is looking outside the frame.

Edward Said’s reflections on exile, and in particular, his contention that the experience of exile risks in some way becoming trivialized—and monetized—into a genre, through the “literature of exile,” is useful for us in questioning and critiquing our own role in undermining a possible politics of the refugee via our willingness to bow down to its representation. What is at stake here is more than just mapping one’s territory of experience but learning to read one’s history, and in learning to read one’s history, resolving, as James Baldwin wrote, to step out of the book. When Said says, in balancing the benefits of staying behind or not getting out, that “*nothing* is secure” (2002, 141), we should take him at his word, whether or not he meant that security might be found in the insecurity of negation, effacement, anonymity. We should question Said’s “perilous territory of not-belonging” (2002, 145); we should hold up the territory itself to see how it can be reclaimed by the fact of its unbelonging; we should see how the territory can itself become a territorial, concurrently inside and outside; a life that is intermittent and imminent rather than

ascendant. It is in this gaze where the banished outcast or the fetishized refugee can once again become a human.

Works Cited

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