

Session Title: Cultural Representations of the 'European Refugee Crisis'

Session organizers

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Session description

While the so called 'European refugee crisis' has been dominating continental geo-political discussions, it has also increasingly become an important reference point for different forms of cultural representation in Europe – the 'refugee crisis' is now firmly embedded in public imagination. With the rise of xenophobic sentiment and anti-immigration politics across Europe showing no signs of abating, it is more urgent than ever to find effective ways to challenge this, and to think about how different forms of cultural-political engagement may be able to counter the perpetuation of racist tropes in public discourse.

In this session, we seek to explore what cultural representations, such as artistic engagements and other forms of storytelling projects, can contribute here (Burrell & Hörschelmann, 2018; Cameron, 2012; Eastmond, 2007). We ask what tools are available to centre the experiences of refugees within this context, and what the possibilities, and dangers, of doing so are. In particular, to what extent can different kinds of artistic and creative forms of intervention, commentary and storytelling do radical and decolonial work? What are their limitations?

SESSION 1: Producing and Contesting Representations

1. Imagining the so called 'refugee crisis' in Europe: Creating and Fracturing pan-European discourses in the Eurovision Song Contest

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It is clear that the 'spectacle' of refugee movements to Europe in the last few years has made significant inroads into popular and political imaginations across the continent; indeed it would be difficult to argue that the 'refugee crisis' has not been *present* in contemporary European discourses. While the representation of refugees has often been highly problematic and loaded with racialised, colonial imagery, it is also the case that more sympathetic responses have been created, in different places and in different contexts (Burrell and Hörschelmann, 2018). Often these responses and representations are complicated and multiscalar, consciously contributing to wider political narratives at the same time as trying to highlight the emotional experience of exile.

The Eurovision Song Contest, simultaneously an emblem of popular culture and a forum for thinly veiled pan-continental political discussion (Flicker & Gluhovic, 2013; Baker, 2008), offers a fascinating, if unexpected, example of this. In recent years several of the entries have been highly emotive songs written explicitly about refugees (Portugal 2017, France 2018); in 2016 Stockholm staged an interval dance set designed to draw attention to the plight of refugees, urging Europe to 'Come Together' in response. These interventions, while clearly distanced from the experiences and positions of refugees themselves, tell us something important about the fragility of attempts to create a positive pan-European stance on the arrival of refugees, posing important questions about the ethics of appropriation and the opportunities and limitations of using a forum like this for these debates.

2. Screening the 'Crisis': European Television Fiction, Geographical Imagination and Mediated World-Building

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Negotiating the political pitfalls of the so-called 'refugee crisis' (or simply the 'Crisis') is perhaps the greatest challenge that contemporary Europe faces. While the continent has long been a destination for displaced people and economic immigrants from abroad, the Syrian Civil War (2011-present) triggered a spike in the numbers of migrants trying to reach the continent. While there is a rich reservoir of scholarship on media representation of the 'refugee' (documentaries, news, film, etc.), a gap exists in a key area of media consumption: television fiction. This paper aims to address this lacuna through an interrogation focusing on the geopolitical content of televisual narratives that engage the 'Crisis'. Operating from Saunders' (2017) claim that TV-viewing is an 'affective act of world-building' and should be viewed a part of the 'discursive battlefield of global politics', we explore how the 'Crisis' is crystallized, conveyed and transformed within and across European television fiction. We treat the (represented) 'Crisis' as a nested phenomenon with four components: 1) the actual presence of refugees and its everyday impact; 2) structural/societal changes associated with the mass movement of people into Europe; 3) anti-immigration sentiment in response to migration; and 4) the purported 'failure' of the European project under the weight the 'Crisis'. Our primary case study is the RTÉ drama *Taken Down* (2018-present), which uses the 'Crisis' as its dominant frame for exploring issues associated with race, gender, religious identity, crime, corruption and social cohesion in modern Ireland; however, we also explore other series which as employ the 'Crisis'.

3. Trivial pursuits? Serious (video) games and the media representation of refugees

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In this paper I critically analyse the representational practices of serious (video) games that focus on refugees. I argue that the technological form of serious games allows them to procedurally simulate the historical, political and socio-economic factors that shape why refugees leave their home country and their experiences when travelling to host countries. They are able to mobilise intellectual agendas that challenge the de-contextualised representations of refugees typical in traditional media. As such, serious video games challenge players to critically reflect on the complexities of refugee experiences and politics, thereby presenting a potential to move away from grand emotional discourses of pity and compassion.

4. When war came back to Dresden: Connectivity as a provocation in Manaf Habouni's Syrian War "Monument"

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A week before the 2017 anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, a new sight greeted visitors to the city's "New Market" square. Opposite the recently reconstructed Church of Our Ladies, three derelict busses had been erected, upright and side by side. Manaf Halbouni's "Monument" to the war in Syria was placed in one of Dresden's most symbolic and most contested sites of memory. It provoked an outcry by representatives of right-wing parties and political groups as well as by citizens who felt affronted by the equivalences that the artwork appeared to produce between the war in Syria and the suffering of people in Dresden during the WW2 bombings. For others, the art work accomplished exactly what it set out to do: to provoke debate and reflection on connections between different times and places because of shared histories of suffering.

In this paper, I take the debates on Habouni's "Monument" as a starting point to reflect on the potential of art to prompt a *diversification* rather than narrowing down of public discourses in a city where memories of war are not only contested but also a potential source for developing a new politics of propinquity and connectivity (Amin 2002). Based on preliminary discursive analysis, I ask how "dissensus" prompted by art (Rancière 2010) can feed into such a politics of propinquity and connectivity against the odds, i.e. *through* rather than despite of uncomfortable equivalences, provocations and contestations.

SESSION 2: Co-Producing Representations

5. Moving beyond representations of the global refugee crisis: video vortexes and disruptive visual techniques

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The representations of the 'global refugee crisis' in the EU are loaded with universalising aesthetics of the precarious journeys to EU borders. In contrast, from an Australian perspective, the offshore processing and stringent government protocols restrict media access to those seeking refuge. Individual stories, particularly of undocumented refugees, are rendered invisible making it difficult to

unsettle xenophobic nationalist sentiments. Researchers working with refugee communities are therefore increasingly adopting creative and collaborative methods, such as participant-led video/photography that provide opportunities for multivocality. But what researchers do with this media (presentation for publications, exhibitions, or to return to participants), sits uncomfortably between scholarly traditions, artistic conventions, and dominant representations. We address these ethical dilemmas by drawing on experiences of using participant-led video/photo ethnographies, discussing the ethics of editing and choice of visual techniques, such as juxtaposition, montage, and the use of fades. We explore how experimental editing techniques, such as creating vortexes and distortion, bring to the surface different temporalities and visualities, yet problematize the artistic agency and collaboration processes. Although emerging artistic aesthetics of participatory media can easily lapse into stereotypical representations, at times creative and experimental techniques can also tell stories and experiences that curate more-than-representational accounts of migration and mobility.

6. Overcoming discrimination in the dominant discourse: Using Participatory Action Research for a collaboration between refugee and mainstream media organisations

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The dominant media discourse portrays the “refugee crisis” as the core issue of our times. Strategies of othering in the narratives and overall poor journalistic processes in mainstream media have consistently promoted a degrading image of refugees and migrants. As a response to a dishonest representation, refugees and individuals with a migrant background are using social media and other platforms to self-represent. Yet, this alternative discourse rarely reaches those who are not seeking to hear different narratives. This paper aims to analyse the structures and patterns of dominant and alternative discourses and argues for a collaboration between refugee and mainstream media organisations. First, the structure of European mainstream media tends to reflect many of its countries’ colonial history, shows low representativeness of minorities, and feeds “technological convergence”, facilitating the repetition and diffusion of a genre of storytelling involving patterns of shortcuts, amalgamation, othering and semantic choices that reinforce prejudices and nationalistic feelings. Second, since the structure of alternative media is fundamentally different (interactive, un- or less-regulated, enabling new public spaces to form) other patterns emerge, such as a credibility deficit and difficult long-term sustainability. Third, through Participatory Action Research (PAR) this paper outlines how a collaboration between refugee and mainstream media organisations could transform the dominant discourse. Paired with a large-scale participatory journalism approach, PAR can enable cyclical improvements to understand and overcome the contextual problems inherent to news media institutions.

7. Beyond difference? Performing art initiatives in youth integration

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In the wake of the 'refugee crises' in 2015, a range of initiatives emerged in Norway to welcome newcomers and create spaces of integration. Many of the initiatives originated from the art- and cultural sector, with numerous music, theatre and dance activities organized in cities and smaller societies throughout the country. Performing arts are seen as holding a particular potential for overcoming cultural differences and creating spaces for cross-cultural interaction. In this paper we will explore two such initiatives to integrate immigrant youths in Bodø and Tromsø, cities in North Norway. The music and dance project 'More Colors Bodø' gathered kids and youths with different backgrounds to create and perform music together. The multiplicity of cultural expressions is held as a resource in this artistic work. The project 'Here am I' gather youths in Tromsø, mainly immigrants, in creative writing, storytelling, theatre and dance activities. Aiming at helping youths to 'get a voice' in the Norwegian society, the artistic leader insists on de-emphasizing difference. Based on case-studies of these performing art initiatives, we ask how difference is articulated and negotiated in the activities. These initiatives represent creative forms of intervention into the politicized field of immigration, often focused on problems and fear. We argue that such initiatives hold the potential for telling other stories of difference. Creating spaces for shared belonging across difference, they might also contribute to spaces of hope for immigrant youths.