

Refugee – Documentary review

by Owen Hsieh

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Refugee

Director: Alexander J Farrell

2018

88 minutes

Simply entitled *Refugee*, this is the latest documentary from film maker Alexander J Farrell. Farrell is an actor-cum-left wing director and cinematographer, his previous directing credits include *Lighthouse-Lesvos*, about those volunteers who assist refugees after they have made the treacherous Mediterranean ocean crossing. His latest effort is a sympathetic documenting of the horrifying conditions of life for many refugees, though not immune from criticism.

Refugee should be considered a companion piece, or follow up, to Hernan Zin's *Born in Syria*, largely picking up where the first film left off. *Refugee* is centred on the life of the Alali family: Nazem, Raf'aa, and their two sons Ahmed & Hamoudi, who have been forced to flee in the face of the monstrous Syrian civil war.

When we last saw them in *Born in Syria*, Nazem and his sons were in limbo in Greece waiting for permission to travel further; both parents were unwell as Nazem was recovering from Brucellosis, while Raf'aa was receiving treatment for cancer in Germany. The outlook was grim indeed.

But this film is something of a good news story, amid a brief discourse into the wider experience of this generation who have been forced to leave their respective countries of origin, *Refugee* follows on as Nazem travels on with his children to reunite the family after many, many months apart.

Like *Born in Syria*, a documentary centred on the lives of the little people, children who have been victim of dire circumstances, a line of continuity through *Refugee* is the testament to the enormous effort and sacrifice these parents have made to ensure their children can have a better life, of parental love and care – a typical line is thus:

“Whatever danger we might face on the way, would have been nothing, compared to what we were running from. So just like millions of others my family and I had no choice but to make the journey.”

Or consider these lines taken at the Serbia/ Croatia border crossing from an outraged mother, standing out in the mud and rain while they are roughly detained at a checkpoint:

“Shame on you, shame on you. You don’t have humanity. We are dying of hunger. We are going to die but at least save the children”

Their story is by no means unique, there are a number of dramatic lines which are very similar, reiterating the basic premise of their whole purpose of leaving home was to make sure their loved ones make it to live in peace and safety.

The corollary is that it is very hard to be callous and indifferent in the face of such material, it is the filmmakers attempt to do something about to ameliorate their suffering and put an end to this with the camera. In taking on this project Farrow is trying to act as their voice and their advocate.

Refugee is a tender, heartfelt and personal documentary film following this single family, one can only but feel privileged to be taken into their confidence of sorts, and learn of their experiences in their harrowing tale. The film maker’s

sympathies are quite obviously with the oppressed and he attempts to convey this sentiment in telling us the story of one family.

Formalistically speaking the film is spectacular, in its beautiful cinematography, making the best use of new technologies, such as the HD camera and drone vision, to make visceral shots which capture the immense scope of the tragedy unfolding in our time.

Though politically it is on shaky ground, once again we reiterate, like *Born in Syria*, despite the filmmakers convictions it suffers from a sort of ambivalence and comes up short when it comes to making a definite statement on political issues and phenomena.

Calling out injustice and speaking truth to power means to be something of an iconoclast, taking long held views and dogmas on to subjecting them to an acerbic, withering criticism to get to the truth of the matter. Without a critical criticism, we are left no better off in terms of our understanding of these complex matters.

One thing I found particularly egregious was the footage and interviews taken from the Passau rally of the far right Alternative fur Deutschland – amid chants of *Wir ist das volk* – We are the people, we see an Afd member, Ursula Bachuber, agitate against refugees, concluding with a follow up of a short interview to our documentary camera person.



This is followed up with a comment from Johannes Hagnauer – Die Linke (the Left) candidate and Journalist – “We are here to defend our society against these maniacs (Indicates towards the counter protestors), a small minority but a loud minority, and a minority with much hatred. Our society is shrinking rapidly, Germany has the lowest birth rate all over the world..”

Quite a polite treatment from Farrell and company, hard to understand why those who know so much about, for lack of a better term the refugee question, give any credence to the Afd and their supporters, when really they do not deserve one iota of legitimacy.

The Afd can only be described as a fascist party, in their downplaying the crimes of the Nazis, calling for German rearmament, and their constant agitating against refugees, and lets be clear, this is a party who once staged a mass walk out in the German parliament in protest against the commemoration of the holocaust. In their numerous public statements and appearances they are united on these questions.

The comment of Die Linke’s Hagnauer are equally repugnant, in repeating the lies about the Great Replacement theory, his short lines are exactly the same as those taken from the manifesto of the fascist gun man Brenton Tarrant who opened

fire on praying Muslims in New Zealand.

Why would you give any air to this filth? It is nought but a shameful association, and more so what is it contrasted against? Are they lampooned, satirised or taken to task for their outrageous claims? No, these are claims that are never really answered, even simply in the interest of a fair and balanced debate, we never really see a reply from the counter protesters. Other than a quick pan over a crowd chanting simple anti-fascist slogans, we have instead a field psychologist from Medicins Sans Frontieres tamely countering some of their talking points – utterly insufficient. Farrell does not countenance the views of the extreme right wing in a way that gives a firm position on the matter.

Secondly I would think Farrell wavers on coming to an understanding and espousing the conditions of asylum. In the documentary we see a conflicting message, of the nature of the guards, checkpoints and borders, are they a brutalising or altruistic force? Which one is it?



At the Austrian border we have a heavily armed soldier holding an elderly woman's hand to assist her down the road, while the head of police communications narrates: "I have a deep respect for all the police offices doing this job because its not easy.. ..we show a lot of fire, a lot of strength.. but inside of that armour is a person".

Compared to what we has been displayed earlier the whole scene is an absurdity, in sharp difference to all we have hitherto seen through the film. For all intents and purposes it looks like a PR exercise for the Austrian military.



This is what I mean by the existence of an ambiguous, wavering line through the documentary; it is certainly not definitively speaking out, on the record against the system of armed people, coercive institutions, borders and other controls on the movement of those seeking to escape violence.

Many have been forced to flee the wars started by the ruling class of the countries that are now implementing the harshest barriers, i.e the criminal partners in Bush's coalition of the

willing. Those responsible for creating the conditions that have forced them to flee for safety, are now implementing such harsh barriers that are driving many to make the dangerous ocean crossing out of desperation as the other avenues are closed to them, the ruling class have blood on their hands many times over. This entire process represents a staggering hypocrisy and duplicity on their part, this would have been worth exploring in the film.

In these reproofs, one could easily accuse Farrell of sitting on fence. Were he to read this I would ask him to instead of his dilly dallying around the political issues, his films would benefit from a firm political line through the documentary if only for the sake of consistency.

To quickly summarise, though *Refugee* has its political limitations, it is a sensitive & beautiful film, it is worth watching.

See further

The official website – www.refugeedoc.net/

Review of *Born in Syria* – <https://classconscious.org/2019/06/10/born-in-syria/>