

Juan delGado's Drifting Narratives: injecting agency into refugee stories

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Juan delGado, left, and still from *Altered Landscapes* (2015)²

Conventional approaches to capturing refugee stories document the often-dramatic circumstances of escape from devastation and the struggle to rebuild a life in a foreign country. This approach risks stereotyping the refugee as a passive victim prey to malign external forces which might include unscrupulous people - smugglers, hostile border forces and unwelcome host populations. The Spanish, London-based moving image artist, Juan delGado has avoided this trap by framing the refugee narrative as one of mutual involvement with the struggles of the communities they have joined.

His Drifting Narratives website is home to a number of films which demonstrate his philosophy of facilitating the "unfolding" of the migrant narrative. [Altered Landscapes](#) (2015) the first part of a trilogy of "creative documentaries" was made in the immediate aftermath of the mass dispersal of refugees following the Syrian Civil war and was first shown as part of a multimedia installation at Watermans art centre in West London in 2016. While it evokes the claustrophobia and loneliness of the search for a safe haven, the migrants themselves are absent from the scene. We see the transitory and fragmented world of urban anonymity and their trek to safety through their own eyes. The landscape acts as a dumb witness to the migrant's journey from Damascus to Calais via Athens.

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² Images courtesy of Juan delGado, with gratitude.



Still from *Altered Landscapes* (2015)

A voiceover tells a poetic and impressionistic story of nostalgia for the war-torn country left behind. The unseen narrator is distressed and ambivalent about leaving Damascus ("this is where I belong") but he is impelled by the search for a loved one. The dissolution and reconstitution of his identity is signified in Kafkaesque style through a sequence of insect metamorphosis. The struggle to emerge from the chrysalis somehow conveys so much more than hours of documentary transit camp footage.



Still from *Altered Landscapes* (2015)

The second half of the film is a silent meditation on the windswept European landscape littered with detritus, the poignant signs of the improvised, chaotic lifestyle of refugees in flight from their homeland. We are required to fill the gaps (whose shoe, whose comb, whose bags?) and the reality of the refugee's precarious journey takes shape in our mind's eye. The final fleeting images of razor wire and lorries, a familiar sight from your comfortable Eurostar carriage as it speeds through Calais, is perceived very differently by the desperately hopeful asylum-seeker on the other side of the fence.



Still from *Altered Landscapes* (2015)

In the light of populist U.K media frenzy about the influx of “hordes of illegal refugees”, it needs constant reinforcement that comparative European statistics reveal a different story. Up to 2019, Sweden has welcomed 113,000 Syrian refugees while the U.K at the bottom of Europe’s league table has grudgingly accepted only 11,000. DelGado’s meeting with the Syrian writer Khaled Alesmael who first sought asylum in Sweden in 2014 triggered a partnership which led to extensive encounters with groups of migrants some housed in compounds following their unwilling transfer to Norrbotten, the northernmost region of Sweden.

He was struck by both the cultural and climatic shock of their arrival in Sweden. In months spent on research visits he was deeply affected by their alienated existence and its toll on their mental health. The climate, language and culture gaps between Sweden and Syria might have suggested a standard victim narrative emphasising trauma and alienation. Instead, delGado’s most recent project, *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun* (2021) amalgamates two “outsider” perspectives of migrants and the local indigenous Sami population. The contrasting fellow

feeling engendered by their experience of cultural and environmental displacement deflects the imposition of a victim narrative while illuminating their shared distress of marginalisation.



Still from *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun* (2021)

The 25-minute film traces the journey of the Syrian asylum seeker, Khaled Alesmael travelling on a sleeper train through the Arctic landscape, diarising his thoughts of his past life in Damascus and reflecting on his encounters with a range of individuals, some Sami (including deer herders, horse breeders and musicians) and some Syrian. The problems of assimilation with the dominant Swedish society that confront both migrant and indigenous peoples bring a global perspective to their plight. The common experience of climate change shared by Syrian and Sami is another link as their traditional agricultural and herding economies have both suffered from the impact of global warming.



Still from *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun* (2021)

Anna Karin is a Sami horse farmer dispossessed by the landscape despoilment of the local ore mining. The narration shared between Anna and Khaled reveals their mutual experience of displacement and grief passing down the generations and flooding their thoughts. The dramatic images of the vast open-cast iron ore mine at Kiruna that has been worked for over a hundred years contrasts with Anna's resigned stoicism whose life, along with thousands of others, has been overturned by forced resettlement.



Still from *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun* (2021)

The bleak sub-Arctic landscape scarred by the incursion of mineworking is a brutal, closing drone-shot image. The fragility of the Sami homeland mirrors the vulnerability of their cultural identity in the face of westernisation. The mutual sense of rootlessness is summed up by a Sami woman:

"It was like a kick in the stomach, I couldn't breathe. What shall we do? It was a shock. You don't just lose a home, a house, you lose your entire community, your people. This is my home; I don't have the right to my home anymore, but I still live here."

