

About my film about refugees on the island of Lesbos

Sobre o meu filme a respeito dos refugiados na ilha de Lesbos

A propos de mon film sur les réfugiés sur l'île de Lesbos

Testimony of Richard Ledes, author of the film *No human is illegal - refugees detained on Lesbos**

Richard Ledes**

Full Movie available at: https://youtu.be/A_9e3-FCnU



At the time of this writing, in the largest camp on the island, I began considering organizing a small crew to film on Lesbos, I was watching on social media people seeking safety in Europe arriving on the island crammed into boats with their speech untranslated. These images are tightly cropped by their makers so they can be visible on cell-phones. The resulting borders of the frame increase the sense of people without space, like sardines in a can. I chose to film in the extra wide format known as Cinemascope and to listen to and translate what these people had to say because I wanted to give them space--both literally and figuratively.

We live in a time of hyper-privatization, extreme inequality and the loss of a public sphere. The cause of these is the world dominance of neoliberal capitalism. A consequence of neoliberalism is what Zygmunt Bauman has called "liquid modernity," meaning by this the loss of a feeling of being anchored in life and instead an increasing feeling of precariousness in a world defined by the internet, social media and the Uber-i-zation of work. As Marx put it in the communist manifesto,

* Documentário produzido em 2018 sobre as pessoas chamadas de "refugiados" ou "migrantes irregulares" que estão atualmente detidas indefinidamente na ilha grega de Lesbos.

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“all that is solid melts into air.” In the midst of the spread of this liquid modernity a nostalgia for solidity now manifests itself in a displaced demand for walls that separate nations from an exterior world.

In 1870, in regards to how an English worker perceived Irish immigrating into England, Marx wrote, “[the English worker] cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the ‘poor whites’ to the Negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A. “ Marx goes on to write, “*This antagonism* is the secret of the *impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization.” We arrived on Lesbos just after the European Union had declared its intention to expel all new arrivals back to Turkey. Today, in the largest camp on the island, Camp Moria, six thousand people, including young children, are living indefinitely in a camp built to hold a third of this number of people for no more than a few days. The spectacular squalidness of the conditions has become legendary. It has been said that this spectacle is primarily intended to discourage more people from seeking safety in Europe but I would suggest that the spectacle is intended more for Europeans living precarious lives just as the spectacle of migrant children torn from their parents is intended for a Fox News audience in the United States. If the public sphere is to be eradicated, if citizenship is to be restricted to the right to profit from one’s human capital, then the enemy are those who remind us of the political demand for human solidarity and consequently they must at the very least be shown to suffer. With unimaginable amounts of wealth being concentrated in a few hands, there is no doubt that exploitation is an incredible problem today but the migrants seeking safety are not the source of exploitation, the true source stems from the reigning ideology of neoliberal capitalism and attempts to increase its reach despite its contradictions....

In my film I contrast the boundaries of NATO with those with which Sappho articulates a poetry of subjectivity. The boundaries of Sappho take into account language and the symbolic order. In the film, after a poem by Sappho is recited, the refugee couple that ends the film—with the husband—who otherwise cannot speak—singing a love song—exists between languages and cultures. They are both Syrian but she is Arab and he is Kurdish. Before the current crisis the border between Lesbos and Turkey, like that between Mexico and the United States, has frequently been a fertile one. Border cities have until recently sparked many rich traditions of intercourse, on the level of physical love but also of speech, in music, in dance, in painting, cinema and all forms of art. Plato in the Republic compares the boundaries of the city to those of the soul. As Cornelius Castoriadis points out, πόλις (polis) has frequently been mistranslated into English as “state.” Polis, writes Castoriadis, “means both the political institution/constitution and the way people go about common affairs.” Aristotle defines a human being as a ζῷον πολιτικόν (zoon politikon). He goes on to say that the most important element of the political existence of the human being is speech. When polis is translated as “state” this link to speech is lost. If we think of speech as an integral part of an embodied human being, then that changes how we think of the boundaries of a human being and by extension the boundaries of a city and our understanding of private property. Rather than militarizing borders — or eliminating them — we need to find a way to recognize their role in producing unconscious jouissance.

As Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* reveals, all human beings are exiles, exiled by speech, refugees in the social order. The answer to our current aporia cannot be what was fantasized after the collapse of the Austro Hungarian and the Ottoman empires following WWI, that each ethnic identity will have a corresponding territory defined as a nation-state. Instead, we must find a way of acknowledging that a human being, even when a citizen, is fundamentally a refugee. Again, this is a shift in how we perceive ourselves in relation to boundaries. The existence of a human being

can never be written — as we know from the Antigone — cannot be documented. We are all in a fundamental way undocumented.

Richard Ledes
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