

## On immigration, life, identity.

### Interview of Yehuda Sharim by Susanne Berthier and Paul Otto

*Yehuda Sharim, University of California Merced, California, United States*

*Rice University, Houston, Texas, United States*

At the 2017 *Migrations and borders* conference at University Grenoble Alpes, coorganized by Susanne Berthier-Foglar and Paul Otto\*, Yehuda Sharim was invited for a screening of his 2016 movie *we are in it*. The film features visceral scenes from the everyday lives of Karla, Serges, Hussein, Nancy and Tutu. For all of them, Houston is their common space of struggle, pleasure, and shelter. For them, Houston is a second, third or even fourth city of residence, both home and metropolis of hostility. Here, they are safe, restless, part of a diaspora that struggles to find meaning beyond labels of foreigner, immigrant, undocumented, alien, and refugee.

#### Technical Specs

*we are in it*, July 2016, director Yehuda Sharim

<http://www.weareinitfilm.com/>

Filmed in Houston, Texas

Running Time: 107min

Ratio 16:9

Digital Frame rate 23.976

Screening format: DCP

Language: English, Arabic, Burmese, Swahili

Subtitles: English and Spanish

#### Question (Susanne Berthier and Paul Otto): What brought you to movie making?

##### What is your story?

Answer (Yehuda Sharim): I was always interested in film and writing. From Henri Michaux, and Mike Leigh, to Chantal Akerman, I was obsessed with this wonder and horror of life. After finalizing my Ph.D. at UCLA and having the privilege to join the Program

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\* *Migrations and borders in the United States: discourses, representations, imaginary contexts*, University Grenoble Alpes, ILCEA4, March 29-31, 2017.

of Jewish Studies at Rice University, Houston, TX, I had a deep urge to write poetry. I wasn't interested in arguments but life... more life... humans... I craved for some sense of community and intellectual work that is part of life (and not isolated from it). In my poems, I wrote about my parents; their experience of immigration; their inability to articulate but their willingness to talk about the slippage of their histories through different gestures, embraces, etc. I took photos of my life. I guess that I was interested in seeing not only what is in front of me but the less evident, the voiceless.

Reminding myself that these narratives of immigration are part of a more significant phenomenon that asks me to cross various intellectual and disciplinary borders, I began thinking about contemporary experiences of migration. At the same time, I met Yan Digilov, a Rice alum and my future collaborator and producer, and he became instrumental in better connecting me in Houston. Then, I rented a camera. I had some film classes at UCLA, but I didn't really know what I was doing.

I began with filming Yan, himself a Russian-Jewish refugee, who arrived in Houston with his family in the early 90's. He started telling me his story. I held the camera, and he was talking. I didn't know what I was doing. But I enjoyed it. Every weekend we met (summer of 2013-4), I got my camera, and we had a dialogue.

Gradually, I wanted to know more: his parents; friends; other son and daughters of refugees. I was interested, particularly interested, in the role of the camera in contemplating and recording silence. Words are beautiful, although I don't trust most of them. My passion rested elsewhere: moments where we are at a loss, confused, hesitating. To put it another way, I was fascinated with the most humane, that nakedness of the soul, when we are bare, most vulnerable, and thus most powerful.

Then, I found myself in this ocean... in awe... wonder... by and by, all my work and attention followed. You better begin swimming. No preparations, forget about doubt, swimming...

**Question (SB & PO): Why did you choose to work with immigrants? Why Houston?**

Answer (YS): I didn't know much about Houston before coming here from LA. I arrived here just because I have been offered a position in Jewish studies at Rice. Thankfully, the

head of the Jewish Studies Program, Prof. Matthias Henze, has always given me that ultimate freedom and has always supported my work.

Oh, for me it was not a conscious decision “I have to work with immigrants and refugees, etc.” I was aware that this is one of the most urgent challenges of my generation (and generations to come), but for me, it was more personal.

I was alone in Houston (at the time, my wife was a postdoc in Chicago, Northwestern University), and I looked for my “tribe of the displaced,” my families, most us are people of color, being forced to search for a new home, hiding our names, polishing our accents, insisting on compassion and love, carrying multiple personas, hungry for justice, being betrayed by our governments and elected politicians for decades, nothing is for free, embracing what is fleeting, just come for dinner, don’t call, just be, the door is open...

**Question (SB & PO): How did you establish contact with the immigrants? We understand that some of the immigrants interviewed may be undocumented. Why would they want to talk to you?**

Answer (YS): I don’t know really why people would like to talk with me. But they do. I usually begin talking without the camera working. I don’t have to film everything. Other times, when there is that click, I stop talking and work the camera, always with an agreement. . . and again, I have no tricks, I try to be honest, and when one is without papers, I will make sure that they feel safe being filmed. When one is not safe, and that happens, then I stop. We just go to have tea/coffee, and we chill.

**Question (SB & PO): As an immigrant to the US was it easier for you to discuss the status of immigrants? Did empathy play a role in your discussion?**

Answer (YS): Can you make any work of art without empathy or feeling? Without embracing our feelings, we are missing our life, and it then could become something alien, a tragic event. I don’t know about being immigrant as a bonus, but I do know the fact that I am an Arab-Jew, Persian and Israeli, son of working-class parents, often confuses people about who I am and what I am supposed to say and know. That confusion—is he Israeli? Arab? Palestinian? Persian? Academic? Terrorist? American?—has allowed me to feel at home in more than one place.

**Question (SB & PO): How did you get them to trust you? Moreover, as a Jewish person did you have difficulties communicating with Muslim immigrants? Was religion, culture, or ethnicity a factor in the discussions?**

Answer (YS): Trust: that is such a challenging question, particularly since in our times when reading the news, most of us lose trust in ourselves and this world! For me, the only way to gain trust is to be honest and kind. I am not here to judge, frequently, I don't even know where I'm heading, but I allow my legs to carry me, and all my eyes (internal and external) are open as I walk into new/old spaces...

I never had a problem communicating with non-Jewish immigrants. Part of being honest, I introduce myself as a Jewish-Arab-Israeli human being. Often, I do talk about my army service, my time in the prison, and my parents. Other times, particularly when I am "the first Jew-Israeli they have ever met," I film myself being interviewed. When meeting Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian immigrants, it is always emotional: it is like meeting your brothers and sisters, being able to admit that OUR governments blind us.

Life is the dominant theme in our conversations. But sometimes, when words don't help us anymore, a new discussion takes place, I carry the camera, and we walk together, doing laundry in the local washateria.

**Question (SB & PO): Can you tell us about your interview and film technique? How were you able to reduce the intrusiveness of your team?**

Answer (YS): To reduce this level of intrusiveness, I understood early on that I must not have a team. I don't think that you reach that intimate space with ten cameras and cameraman, five technicians, twenty assistant directors, etc. At first, I had another cameraman joining me, but that's all. I keep it to the bare minimum.

I don't think that the formal idea of an interview, where questions come from one corner and answer from another, is of interest for me. It bores me. It's predictable. People throw words on each other, but we don't necessarily talk or listen. If at first, I was suggested to have a bank of questions, after my tenth interview I felt stupid. What is your interview technique when you meet your mother? Your love? Listening, it's all about listening, your mother tells she is well, but you hear in her eyes and voice that something bothers her—

hey mom are you really ok? Really? Really really? Then you listen to her hand shaking, her gaze drops (but she told she is ok, did she?!). Then she tells you about breast cancer, and her operation will take place next week. We are done talking. Next day, in a crowded flight to Tel Aviv, I try to make sense of voices, questions, answers, cancer, and our love that is always beyond and within answers and questions, if you know what I'm saying.

**Question (SB & PO): You say that writing poetry about your parents and their experiences was like taking photographs of your life. In what ways does the writing of poetry influence your filmmaking?**

Answer (YS): Poetry writing has been instrumental in developing my films. But by "writing" I am interested not merely in a combination of words but more with poetry as a state of being, a way of walking, exploring, reading and feeling the world. For me, writing, like filmmaking, is a space of great listening, where one has to be fully attuned.

**Question (SB & PO): You mention your time both in prison and in military service— in what ways have these and other experiences given you particular insights into the people you've interviewed or provided a special handle for documenting their experiences?**

Answer (YS): During both my service and time in the prison, I began to doubt words and the ways we abuse/use language. I recall months without words. Mainly in prison, the world appeared stripped of words, bare, revealing, shocking, fragile, offering me a deeper insight into how we live and handle ourselves beyond what is written in the news and screamed at us from every other corner of the world today.

Of course, the fact that I served in the IS army and prison doesn't mean that all artists/filmmakers should go to the army to develop this or that skill.

**Question (SB & PO): What advice can you offer for others who want to document the experience of immigrants? Where would you like to see filmmaking about immigrants go next?**

Answer (YS): Often, it seems to me that most films about immigrants are made and watched from a male-white point of view...

Both *Human Flow* (Ai Weiwei, AC Films, 2017) and *Fire at Sea* (Gianfranco Rosi, O1 Distribution, 2016) represent people of color who seem to become experts in suffering. Their pain appears vivid, even appealing. They live amidst endless ruins, human prisons. As such, from the viewers' point of view, they always need to be saved, rescued, mainly because they are there, somewhere in the distance, yes, that space, Africa, Middle East, far away, never here, not around us. In both films, they appear to us through a few sentences, never a complete story, that stands for large groups of people who are escaping, drowning.

As we watch them drowning in National Geographic hunting scenes with the use of Drones that attempt to give us a sense that the world is finally being revealed, our experiences as viewers of the empire is to be overwhelmed with the amount of pain, cheap sentiment of profound suffering.

Yes, we are the saviors. We need the drones to make us feel, to understand, to understand what? Beyond associating people of color and space of color with catastrophe—it seems that we are back to the Oriental model here—these films naturalize the dangerous view that people of color are carriers of pain, of course, always hyper-sentimental, in love with death. They act as important reminders to the so-called Western world: you are still the savior, the rational, who watches a catastrophe from a distance while THEY are saved or not.

This lie of the privileged that has become more attractive because of its endless attempt to “beautify” pain and exoticize tragedy perfumed with the artist-celebrity chic *a la* another visit of Ben Affleck in a refugee camp to raise awareness (without disregarding such a worthwhile venture). This media illiteracy has to be addressed carefully: I am talking here about our inability to see and feel beyond hyper-sensational drone-like shots. I am talking about the lack of understanding that this humanitarian crisis does not take place “there” but everywhere HERE, without Western countries offering much support to its communities of color. And yes, this blindness has a clear racial dimension, which reminds us that at heart it is more a deep denial to recognize inequality. Choosing, we are choosing not to see this world and its inhabitants as equal. But we can choose differently, can we?