

# F O R S T

a film by Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer and Wolfgang Konrad

in cooperation with Julia Lazarus, Ben Pointeker and *WR*  
in partnership with *The Voice Refugee Forum*, *Women in Exile* and others  
music/sound in cooperation with Andreas Berger (Glim)

[www.forstfilm.com](http://www.forstfilm.com)

*[Reader]*

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*Hito Steyerl*

"...*Forst* refuses radically dominant documentary truth politics which control the public picture of migration. The video does not admit the ambivalent reinterpretation of occupied metaphors, rather offers access to universal validity of the experience of refugees..." (p.5)

*Osaren Igbino (The Voice)*

"...Some people were really angry, they had red eyes when they left the film. They were just shocked. The film shows isolation so clearly that many people just aren't able to stand it. I think that *Forst* is one of the most important references in the analysis of the refugees' situation and struggle..." (p.8f)

*Araba Johnston-Arthur*

"...*Forst* uses the cinematic medium to move within the conflict area between hard-won political subjectivity and the visualization of controlling structures... The question arises, which film language is able to cinematically negotiate the structural violence against the background of hard-earned political subjectivity?... *Forst* grapples with the structure of the powerful view. It is the view of the non-illegalized and in this sense, the privileged majority. In showing the view of those associated with this position the film makes this self-evident power position explicit... Power visualized in this manner and the threat of this view connected with it positions the audience in the context of the relationship between dominant power and powerlessness. This practice of the cinematic production of meaning questions the objectivity of the powerful "normal" view. In the invisibility, structural violence is made visible on many levels; the normalization of absolute disenfranchisement is fundamentally challenged... *Forst* challenges established representation traditions. In contrast to the dominant victimizing imagery codes, the audience is not fed pictures of "suffering faces" that appeal to their empathy..." (p.6f)

*DIAGONALE-Jury 2005*

"...The film, which with a language of pictures and sound stands out as unconventional, reflects radical aesthetics and through its cinematic abstraction makes a strong political statement in support of a courageous refugee initiative... Without showing any faces, the film subtly presents individual destinies and describes a situation that leaves one feeling irritated..."

## *Synopsis*

*Forst* is a portrayal. The documentary tells about a forest in the middle of Europe far from the urban world and from civilisation which is home to a peculiar community of the banished - it is a world for the stranded. A diffuse system that still has total control makes sure that this world doesn't show itself, that it doesn't pop up in our reality and become a disturbance. In *Forst* the banished proclaim their own truth and tell the story of their empowerment. They slowly recall their identity as political refugees and start to make plans for their escape...

The film shot on 16mm-B/W was made in cooperation with the refugees, who mostly play themselves. By way of fragmented interviews they tell the story of their powerlessness and their empowerment.

## *Awards*

Diagonale 2005 - Best Documentary

("Prize for Best Documentary or Short Film of the Jury of the Diocese Graz-Sechau")

## *Festivals (selection)*

International Film Festival Rotterdam 2006

Centre Pompidou, Hors Pistes 2007, Paris and Istanbul

Globale 2006, Berlin (opening film)

Cork Film Festival 2006

DokFest 2005 - Kasseler Film- und Videotage, Kassel

Festival Européen du Film Court de Brest 2007

International Film Festival Ankara 2005

Diagonale 2005 - Festival of Austrian Film, Graz (competition)

Dokumentarfilmwoche 2006, Hamburg

K-RAA-K-Festival, Hasselt / Belgium

xFilm Festival for Experimental Film 2005, Sofia

## *DVD*

*Hors Pistes*

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Hito Steyerl

## *Policy of Truth – Documentarism in Arts*

[...] A newer work, which dodges the widely spread representation of the aesthetics of poverty, is the video *Forst* (forest) by Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer, and Wolfgang Konrad (A/D 2005).

The black and white film primarily shows images of an impenetrable, dark teutonic forest. Off screen we hear voices, which describe the experience of the forest. The forest becomes an existential metaphor for exclusion, precariousness and abandonment. Gradually the clues increase that the voices off screen come from refugees, who live in the camp "Forst" in East Germany.

The feeling of *Forst*, a mixture of dark romanticism, existential exposure, and freedom, remains in the balance, as a universal metaphor, which does not only apply to particularisable groups such as refugees, but represents a new universal *conditio humana* (human condition).

In the second part of the film the atmosphere changes. The forest is no longer just a dark desert of solitude, but becomes a place where new collectives and new collectives may emerge, just as much as new solidarities. In a forceful shot, figures in white t-shirts come slowly towards us, we cannot really make out their faces. The forest is not only a cipher of atomisation, but also the place where opposition can form.

The new collectives recall memories of earlier forest inhabitants, Robin Hood as an outlaw in Nottingham Forest, the Tito partisans in the Bosnian mountains, or the partnership of the last book-readers in Truffaut's film *Fahrenheit 451*. It concerns universal ciphers of oppositional solidarities. The refugees are not written into ethnic or cultural traditional lines, they are not social cases, rather they

count in a tradition of freedom fighting, for which the forest offered the necessary seclusion. To this extent, *Forst* refuses radically dominant documentary truth politics, which control the public image of migration. The video does not admit the ambivalent reinterpretation of occupied metaphors, rather offers access to universal validity of the experience of refugees. [...]

text-clipping taken from:

*Politics of Truth – Documentarism in Arts*

published in the reader of the exhibition

*MOVING ON: Border Activism – Strategies for Anti-racist Actions*

[13<sup>th</sup> Aug. – 11<sup>th</sup> Sep. 2005, NGBK Berlin]

curators: Insa Breyer, Claudia Burbaum, Maja Figge, Alex Gerbaulet, Farida Heuck, Birgit zur Nieden, Mark Schiffner, Zala T.S. Unkmeir

[www.bildwechsel.net](http://www.bildwechsel.net)

[www.ngbk.de](http://www.ngbk.de)

Hito Steyerl is filmmaker and professor for Cultural and Post-Colonial Studies at Goldsmiths College, London

## Araba Johnston-Arthur

### *Destroying the Old Images*

*“The government describes us as ‘clandestine’, as the ‘illegals’. Through this we are considered guilty at the outset and an entire arsenal of legal and technical means can be used against if need be. (...) We have rejected the label “illegals” from the beginning and claimed instead that we are women, men, and children and would kindly like to be viewed as such. The label ‘illegal’ has a negative connotation, that of a pariah or parasite. Illegals are invisible; those that hide, cause trouble, and could be dangerous. But now we are here, fully visible, and we want it to stay like this! This must be respected. We have to destroy the old images.” [1]*

In collaboration with “The Voice Refugee Forum” the film *Forst* works through a cinematic controversy with the structural violence which illegalizes Europe-wide existence and constructs lawlessness as described by the long time speaker of the organization “Sans Papiers”, Madjiguène Cissé.

#### The Question of the Language of Film

In view of the European stronghold, the normalization of its repressive structures, and its connection with the governing image of ‘illegals’ as threatening or at best pitiful objects seem to be absolutely central to the question of *Forst*’s language of film; this breaks through this representation structure of Cissé’s “old images”. The controversy of film as a social experience of the production of meaning in connection with the question of the language of film, which uncovers the normalized and deeply anchored repressive structures, stands in the foreground.

*Forst* uses the cinematic medium to move within the conflict area between hard-won political subjectivity and the visualization of controlling structures. The position taken in the opening citation from Madjiguène Cissé of “we” is the same as that of the autonomous resistance movement “Sans Papiers” in France. The

central process of making oneself politically visible is mirrored in this hard-earned position as the speaker. An act of speaking, which made the paradigm of “illegals” speechless, deconstructs and breaks through disenfranchised subjects. This brings us back to the aforementioned conflict area in which *Forst*’s cinematic controversy moves. In this context the question arises, which film language is able to cinematically negotiate the structural violence against the background of hard-earned political subjectivity?

#### The Powerful View

*Forst* chooses an “eerie” visual language. A forest seen through a night vision camera makes visible the structural dimensions of the violence of illegalization. The course-grained black and white images are reminiscent of newspaper photographs. *Forst* begins with a car ride that is drawn through the entire film like a red thread. The audience does not join in on the ride but rather observes the car’s journey through the forest from a bird’s eye view.

*Forst* grapples with the structure of the powerful view. It is the view of the non-illegalized and in this sense, the privileged majority. In showing the view of those associated with this position the film makes this self-evident power position explicit.

The powerful view adopts a surveillance-like, distanced, observing perspective. Power visualized in this manner and the threat of this view connected with it positions the audience in the context of the relationship between dominant power and powerlessness. [2] This practice of the cinematic production of meaning questions the objectivity of the powerful “normal” view. In the invisibility, structural violence is made visible on many levels; the normalization of absolute disenfranchisement is fundamentally challenged.

In the beginning the audience observes the car ride through the wooded setting in icy silence during which the story of a soundless voice is readable in fading subtitles. In the figurative normalcy that is communicated through a sober distance, the car ride and the subjective readable description of this ride as an act of violence create a tension filled contrast. The audience approaches the forest slowly. Within the hard-won space of the forest activists from “The Voice” project their different perspectives and tell of the visualized structural violence that is directed at them, yet not as monolithic unified mass of disenfranchised subjects. As political subjects and participants in the fight for their rights they remain in a way invisible. The speaking roles in *Forst* are taken solely by “the voices” of activists. The audience listens but is unable to see. Their powerful view is static in its societal power position and remains threatening for the speaking political subjects. The consequence of this power structure is that the voices on the image plane have to elude this view. The audience does not see who is speaking. Hard-won space within a “forest system” is often visualized in abstract images. Forms move cautiously in this “system”; they assert themselves, attach posters to trees, and confer with each other. *Forst* challenges established representation traditions. In contrast to the dominant victimizing imagery codes, the audience is not fed pictures of “suffering faces” that appeal to their empathy.

## Fields of Tension

*Forst* focuses its cinematic debate on structural dimensions of violence with haunting results. The field of tension between the revealing repressive structures and the visualized invisibility of

political subjects of the resistance nevertheless persists and questions the selected and still developing film language. On one hand, “the old images” are being destroyed and the profound dimensions of the illegalization of existence are being visualized, while on the other hand the dimension presented by Madjiguène Cissé of “invisibility that hides in the forest” is reproduced.

[1] Cissé, Madjiguène (2002): *Papiere für Alle. Die Bewegung der Sans Papiers in Frankreich*. Berlin, S.73 f.

[2] Machold, Abi-Sara: *Repräsentation ist niemals unschuldig! Videostatement in: Here to stay! Weblog der DIAGONALE 2005: www.diagonale.at/dialog*

published in the reader of the *DIAGONALE 2005 - Festival of Austrian Film: Materialien #005: FORST*  
[www.diagonale.at/jart/projects/diagonale-2005/releases/de/uploads/Materialien/Forst5.pdf](http://www.diagonale.at/jart/projects/diagonale-2005/releases/de/uploads/Materialien/Forst5.pdf)

Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur, member of the *DIAGONALE 2005* catalogue commission, co-founder of *Pamoja. Movement of the Young African Diaspora in Austria*, Activist in the *Black Community* in Vienna, member of the works council of *Initiative Minderheiten* (Initiative Minorities), works on representational politics, Black freedom theory and practice, history and present of the African Diaspora with focal point Austria, institutionalized racism and antiracism.

## Jan-Frederik Bandel

### *The System of Isolation*

„Forst“ - a film on marginalization and self-organization

“Some people were really angry, they had red eyes when they left the film”, Osaren Igbinoba says: “Many of them couldn’t even imagine a situation like this. They were just shocked.” Igbinoba, a Nigerian refugee who lives in Jena, is engaged in the networks “Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and Migrants” and “Plataforma”. He is also one of the founders of the refugee initiative “The Voice” in Jena, a group that has been actively fighting repression for the last ten years spreading information and organizing actions for the freedom of movement, against the so called “Residenzpflicht” and against the system of deportation. After the refugees’ situation in Germany has become even worse and being disappointed about cooperations with German antiracist groups, the activists have recently concentrated on debates about the chances of self-organization, networks and new forms of actions and publicity.

One phase of this process of reflection was the film tour “Menschen unter Landkreisarrest” (“People under Local Arrest”) in several cities and towns in Thüringen that took place in May 2005. The film presented was *Forst* by Ascan Breuer, Ursula Hansbauer and Wolfgang Konrad, a depressing experimental film. It uses abstract, dark black-and-white pictures and sounds to demonstrate the forced isolation and marginalization of refugees in Germany. Yet, it doesn’t rely on the well-known documentary productions of authenticity. The camera slowly moves along tree-trunks, roots, dark corridors. Voices off report about the effects of a system that is designed to reduce people’s lives to eating and drinking, to sleeping and expecting deportation – a system that makes stagnation a permanent

state. Slowly, one by one, figures become visible in the shadows, coming closer, putting “Caravan”-posters to the trees, coming together, studying a map, discussing: First steps on the way to self-organization. Successful self-organization, so the film’s condensed narration says, can at least make it possible to escape deportation by going underground in time. This is also Osaren Igbinoba’s story: He had to hide for months. Now – after three efforts to deport him – he finally was given political asylum. But the story of this successful escape is being contrasted by pictures of isolation and finally by showing brutal preparations for the deportation or transportation of a whole group of refugees in one of the last scenes of the film.

The filmmakers see their film in the tradition of what Bill Nichols calls “performing documentary”. This type of film “embodies a paradox”, the American film critic explains: “They create an obvious tension between scenic play and document, between the personal and the typical, between the bodily and the bodiless, to be short: between history and science. One of these is poetic and evocating, the other serves as a proof and stresses reference.”

The film’s title already hints at these paradox aesthetics. “Forst” is at the same time the name of a notorious “Erstaufnahme”-camp in a forest near Jena, cut off from public transport (the camp has been closed now), and a metaphor for all these strategies of exclusion. The title refers to the borders serving to make people invisible to our society and to the guilelessness or indifference of all those who refuse to know about it.



Yet, the film doesn't just show this system of isolation as the conditions under which a certain group of people has to live in Germany, it doesn't plead for pity or concessions. "These films refer to us", as Nichols says. This doesn't imply any non-committal existentialist view, but a political question: Do we really want to be part of a society that does things like these to people? The refugees aren't shown as talking faces pleading for empathy, on the contrary, the film's view is, as Ascan Breuer explains, "made to ward off any possible repressive or absorbing, any 'understanding' attitude." It doesn't intervene, it confronts. It's up to the viewer to become angry.

"The film shows isolation so clearly that many people just aren't able to stand it. They refuse to accept that this problem really exists", Osaren Igbinoba explains: "I think that *Forst* is one of the most important references in the analysis of the refugees' situation and struggle. Many activists said: It's too abstract. They couldn't see anything in it. But if you sit down and reflect about the film, so many things come to your mind. The more you see it, the more diverging conclusions you come to. It's a special film. A film that has given us a lot of motivation. Some people criticized that the film doesn't give you the power to change the situation. It leaves you depressed. But this is not the fault of the film."

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[www.iz3w.org/iz3w](http://www.iz3w.org/iz3w)

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Marcel Schwierin  
*Rendezvous of Forms*

...This year (2005) an extraordinary number of works (shown at the Cassel Dokfest filmfestival) are dedicated to the question of social spaces: How are social groups organizing themselves, how do they try to produce spaces of identity in the globalized world and its social frostiness? The film FORST, created by the artists Ursula Hansbauer and Wolfgang Konrad and the documentary filmmaker Ascan Breuer, describes the situation in an east-german refugee camp. The inhabitants of the camp are not shown but the forest surrounding them, images between corralling impassibility and German romanticism. As off-voices the inhabitants are reporting their experiences of resignation and rebellion. The artificiality of the real compulsory situation is reflected in the form of the film, the mediation of verity (authenticity), often predicted through eyewitness interviews, dissolves in this staging. This (documentary strategy) lead to intensive discussions (following the screening)...

text-clipping taken from the professional journal *Schnitt - Das Filmmagazin*, No. 41,  
1/06  
[www.schnitt.de](http://www.schnitt.de)

## Petar Hadji-Ristic

### *Voice of Africa in the Forests of Europe*

*Award-winning film focuses on the experience of African refugees in Germany*

Shackled and spread-eagled out on the ground in a forest clearing the Africans and other asylum-seekers are spared not even a side glance as the smartly-dressed woman high steps past them, gets into her car and speeds away. Her face is the only recognisable one to be seen in the final seconds of the documentary film, *Forst* (The Forest). The preceding 50 minutes are for the voices of the refugees, clips of their interviews set to grainy black-and-white views down long corridors, through windows and out into dense forests.

“They isolate us. They put us in the forest so they can treat us how they like,” says the voice of a woman as the documentary begins. “But nobody hears. Nobody will know that they are treating someone like this in the forest.”

Back in 2001 Ascan Breuer, then a 25-year-old student in Berlin, first heard those voices at a country-wide demonstration against the German residency restrictions for refugees and asylum-seekers. They had massed at the end of the same street that leads from Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate.

That experience set him on a three-year odyssey to find those refugees again in their forests and let them tell their story on film. The conceptual artists Ursula Hansbauer and Wolfgang Konrad as well as four other filmmakers joined him and audaciously tapped the coffers of the Austrian chancellor’s office, the city of Vienna and two Austrian states to finance their subversive enterprise, which was to win him the prize for last year’s best documentary at Austria’s Diagonale Film Festival in Graz.

“The interviews we used are representative,” Ascan explains, sitting in the kitchen of his girlfriend’s Berlin flat after a film showing in the German state of Thuringia. “Every refugee told us that for the first three months after arriving in a camp they suffer from insomnia and fell into depression. Every refugee said that they entered the forests without knowing what would happen or how long they would remain.”

Ascan makes no apology for being uncompromisingly on the side of the refugees. Never did he approach a camp bureaucrat or politician to ask them to explain themselves. In contrast to the inaudible standpoints of the system’s sufferers their point of view is in any case dominating the public consensus, he states.

“Refugees are at the lowest rung of society. Exiled. Anyone who has taken an elementary introductory course in psychology knows that when you set up such a system people will react in such a way,” he explains. “They will fall into depression. Some will be driven into insanity. The refugees are not being paranoid or talking gibberish when they rail against the injustice they are suffering. The deliberate purpose in isolating them is really, just as they say, to break them.”

Nowhere in the documentary is the face behind the voice ever shown. This is deliberately to reinforce the message that they speak for every refugee from the myriad of recordings collected during two months of filming. “If we had shown a face the audience would have felt sympathy,” Ascan adds. “That would be a condescending

gesture." The interviews fell into three groups. "We did many interviews with refugees who were completely broken," Ascan says. "They explained nothing more than their leg had been hurting for a year and the doctor could do nothing to help them." Then there came those who had moved out of this stage and had made some kind of compromise to survive in the system. And then finally there was a fraction of those who had decided to organise themselves. These were associated with the Voice Refugee Forum, Women in Exile and the Caravan for the Rights of Refugees and co-operated with the making of the film.

The final voice, once again unmistakably African, with a deep West African inflection, suggests what the refugees want of the audience. "We always tell the people who work with us in support groups: 'Look, if you take our struggle as your struggle then we can walk. But if you think we are just miserable, helpless people who need support from you, we do not need that kind of support'. Not until we are able to come together in a clear position, is it ever going to hurt the authorities. The only time it hurts them is when the ordinary man in the street understands what is happening in that forest there."

## Ascan Breuer

### *The Rebels*

*With “The Voice” asylum seekers have their say and fight against marginalization.*

She came by train. It was cold and wintry and the region was shrouded in darkness. She was stranded at the train station in a strange city. But she had an address; it was “On the Forest No. 1”. She asked a few passers-by where the street was but no one knew. It seemed to her that people were avoiding her. She finally decided to take a taxi. The taxi left the city and turned onto a road leading into the woods. The driver headed up a mountain, into an endless black forest. “I asked the taxi driver where he was taking me and if he was sure this was the right way. But he just told me to be quiet. I turned my back to him so that he would not notice my frightened tears. This is how I got to the forest.”

Constance, the young woman from Cameroon, shivers when she thinks about her first impressions of Europe after her arrival two years ago. Her application for political asylum was her ticket into the depths of the Thuringian Forest. “Forst 1” was the refugee camp for asylum seekers in the Jenenser Forest. This is supposed to be her home for now, along with hundreds of other refugees from around the world. “After 15 minutes the taxi stopped,” she remembers “at the gate was a two meter high wall, crowned with barbed wire. Security was waiting there for me. They took my bag and began to rifle through it. Some of them started to ask me questions. How much money and what records do I have with me? Later they brought me to a room where I was supposed to live. Seven roommates were waiting for me. I lay down on the bed and already after two days I was not the person I used to be.”

Here in the former Soviet barracks, many months of sleep, lethargy, and depression awaited her, partitioned off in foreign solitude in the

middle of an anonymous mass of other refugees. She told of a roommate who, in desperation, ate broken glass in order to end his life.

In many cases, those who seek asylum in Germany have to seek shelter for years through an elaborate procedure with an unknown outcome. Along with this comes the need for one’s consent to live in one of these homes that the refugees call “jungle camps”. They are frequently former barracks like the “Jena-Forst”. The closing of this camp in the past year is one achievement of this woman from Cameroon and her friends from “The Voice Refugee Forum”, a refugee-founded lobby.

#### Awoken from Sleep

When Constance first heard about this organization, it appeared like an awakening from an evil sleep, her only chance to leave this forest and lead the life that she had imagined. Eventually she got involved in politics; an African activist will not remain segregated in a European forest for long. With support from “The Voice” she began to make other refugees aware of their rights. She told them that they do not have to let themselves be forced into rotting away in the forest. She encouraged them to remember why they are here. In short, she stirred things up. The asylum law forbids the asylum seeker under threat of arrest, to leave the district without the authorization of the municipal immigration office.

The so-called ‘obligatory residence’ applies to her, making it easier for the local authorities to keep an eye on the thousands of

refugees and to smoothly organize all of the aspects of the complex asylum law up to forced deportation. Constance could do nothing about her forced removal by the police from "Jena-Forst" and being shipped to another asylum home. "I do what I want. I don't worry about them and I won't be bullied", her strong low voice is directed toward those responsible. "It is better to be strong. I learned that in this society. It is better if they are afraid of me than if I am afraid of them. It is the only way to survive in this society". She is convinced.

Thus she got involved with "The Voice" and went on to find people who shared her views as well as a new will to live. She began to inform the public about the miserably unhygienic conditions at the camp, about the expired food that the refugees had to ingest, and about her mistreatment by the security officers until the reputation of the camp was fundamentally destroyed and she was unbearable for the local authorities.

"The Voice" has been fighting for the rights of asylum seekers for ten years and belongs to the small group of organizations that are organized by the refugees themselves. "The Voice" called on asylum seekers to practice civil disobedience if their travel permit is not issued and to take their right of political activity into their own hands.

One of them is Ahmed, a young Palestinian. He asks no one for a permit. For him, all of Europe is his district. Meanwhile, he has four criminal proceedings pending. It started with 22 Euros and has jumped up to either 200 Euros or 40 days in prison; he reports this with an apparent hint of pride. Paying his way out is not a question for him. Aside from the fact that he does not have the money - he gets 40 Euros a month for pocket money from the local authorities - it would be an atrocity for him to accept this "apartheid law", as he calls it.

### Fight in the Courtrooms

Cornelius from Cameroon also resists the sanctions. He has co-initiated this campaign. He was the first that refused to accept the

invisible borders. He has been fighting with the German courts for the past four years but they have been unwilling to accept his complaints that the obligatory residence encroached upon his human dignity and his right to freedom of opinion. He happily announces that the European court, to which he now applied, has at least agreed to an investigation.

"The Voice" says that it has instructed the refugees to defy the law of obligatory residence. Otherwise the organization could not exist; this is the only way for them to reach each other. The members are scattered around the country, wherever they were placed by the bewildering relocation plan.

Osaren, from Nigeria, sits in the office of "The Voice" in Berlin and reports on the negative experiences with the government bodies and how they commonly throw up roadblocks. At the anniversary conference in autumn the guest speaker, Themba Mbhele, a prominent South African activist from the "Anti-Privatization Forum", was not granted a visa. The German embassy informed him that the Ministry of the Interior classified his entry into the country as a security risk.

Osaren has a powerful presence. With verve he talks of the many political refugees that he and the people from "The Voice" were able to protect from the threat of deportation. But the thousands that they could not protect are reflected in his exhausted facial expression. Osaren is closely connected to the history of "The Voice". The organization works miraculously well considering its constant loss of members due to deportation. Of the five founders from the Thuringian Forest, Osaren is the only one remaining. He is the only one to have retained political asylum in spite of multiple threats of deportation.

This miracle, as the founding legend of the organization, came about through an act of political disobedience. One night ten years ago the police came to his camp to deport him and send him back to Nigeria. His supporters delayed the officers with a lot of noise while he jumped out the window and fled into the forest. The next

morning he dared to find shelter with a Baptist minister. Only after a year underground he was able to convince the court of the legitimacy of his request.

Since then it has been his mission to fight the decline of the right of asylum. Nothing has improved, he sums up. In the meantime, a European refugee camp in North Africa is being openly debated. The German obligatory residence, which he tried to abolish, will likely be considered a model for the European Union.

#### „Obligatory residence“ (Residenzpflicht)

The free movement of asylum seekers is limited in Germany. The asylum law dictates in detail who can detain and where they can do it from paragraph 56 to 59. “Obligatory residence” means that asylum applicants can only move around in the district in which they live. They cannot choose where this will be. They will be assigned to certain states, which will then distribute the refugees to camps. Therefore the asylum seekers cannot travel to Berlin, even if they are staying in the surrounding area of Brandenburg. Only when an “urgent reason” presents itself do the authorities allow the people to leave the district. Paragraph 57 of the law expressly states “the permission should be granted without hesitation in order for the appointments with plenipotentiaries, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, and organizations involved in support of refugees can be kept.” The foreigners can only keep appointments with the public authorities or the court, which are mostly in their own district anyway, unless they have permission. Refugee organizations have been protesting for years against obligatory residence, especially because it makes it more difficult for refugees to avoid attacks from right-wing extremists. A member of the refugee organization, “The Voice”, is trying to topple obligatory residence in the European Court of Human Rights. *pit*

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[www.fr-aktuell.de](http://www.fr-aktuell.de)

Ascan Breuer

## *Outlines of a Theory of the Undocumentary*

*The documentary film, as scion of enlightening, is based on the premise that basically everything that is depicted can be understood. This is a mistake. Unconscious structures like racism are not comprehensible. Racism anchors itself in our every gaze. The question arises whether the documentary film should give up its greatest goods – authenticity and credibility – in order to confront the viewer with an extremely dubious reality, the “Real”, the reality of phantasm.*

What could a documentary on this topic look like? Refugees from a hazy bureaucracy are hidden in forests, made virtually invisible and cut off, deprived of the dominant gaze of the “defining culture”. Their sight is spared of our whitewashed field of vision; the public discourses are deaf to their voices and concerns. When we shoot a documentary film like *Forst*, which takes on this kind of subject matter of a displaced reality, is it then still legitimate to proceed with the classic documentary means? In this case, do documentary films perhaps run the risk of serving colonial constructed views the moment they show, for example, people with dark skin in hopeless situations? Views of fear, views of pity, liberal and charitable as well as begrudging or maybe ecstatic, in any case dominant views?

### The “Deconstructed Construction”

Reality is a construction. Since the decline of “direct cinema”, this general place has contained the guide of the documentary film movement on how best to deconstruct reality. What comes out at the end is always a contradiction of itself: a “deconstructed construction”, a construction that doesn’t want to be such. Structurally, documentary films are such contradictions; in a peculiar way they displace the forgone conclusion that it is fundamental views which construct reality. When the deconstructor looks back at the end, she will recognize that she left behind many

of his own constructions along the way, constructions that at best became independent. She will recognize that she is perhaps the biggest constructor of all time. At worst, self-conscious constructions will come out of it, empty looks, glances instead of gazes that do not really comprehend anything because they do not want to be fascinated, but rather revealing and enlightened. The viewer is first shifted into the position of a colonial expert, who in distancing (from the subject as well as from herself) searches for her denied power that awards her the position in which she can gain insight on the “deconstructive”. What she usually forgets is (an impossible task) to submit herself and her views likewise to a deconstruction. This empty coolness is always the danger in the “discourses of sobriety” (Bill Nichols), that the documentary so earnestly works to cultivate.

### “Non-racist Racism”

Do documentary films not automatically produce positive as well as negative loaded stereotypes that are almost impossible to deconstruct? A documentary film can deconstruct the (constructed) relationships within the plot; it can show, in our case, how the apparatus that causes massive oppression of migrants works. But can it also capture it with those ideological machineries, which are at work when viewing what is projected on the screen? It has to



acknowledge this because it is contractually bound to negotiate with the viewers on a realistic level. This is what is stated in the “Law of Authenticity”. When we talk about the “reality of views” we do not find ourselves in the primary sphere of reality anymore. Here it is about a secondary, unconscious-imaginary level, a level of desire and identification. In short, we find ourselves in the realm of the “real”. On this terrain it turns out that opposites like those between racism and antiracism do not necessarily have to contradict one another. Examples of this phenomenon can often be observed in political debates, where drug problems and rights of asylum get mixed up, and also in the liberal media, which is not immune to subliminal racist statements. Those with an unconscious, pre-constructed, racism-riddled perspective who avoid their conscious (antiracist) denial, are implicit in the “technology of being white”. Cultural Studies guru John Fiske calls this “non-racist racism”.

#### The Clash of Gazes

To accommodate this problem cinematically and negotiate on the viewing level can require that the strategy deviate from the documentary and authenticity path and prevent the identification of the viewer with the subject. It may be necessary to enable what the documentary film avoids, to admit or even encourage doubt in the reality of the documented and to open an obvious gap between the film and the audience. It can be necessary for the film to shut down the usual fraternization with the audience. Hence *Forst* is not a documentary film that is committed to a general accessible reality that tries to draw in the audience in the best possible way. It neither attempts to generate understanding and recognition, nor does it want to bring about a dialogue. No one that sees this film will understand the structure of the refugees’ “reality”, nor will they understand the “feelings” of the refugees who speak in the film. Instead of affording insight in “the reality”, *Forst* consciously tries to construct the protagonists’ view, their view on a reality that turns out to be completely different from that of the viewers. The refugees live in a different reality than the viewers and a negotiation between the two “worlds” is impossible; at best, there is only one that is always simulated. This view can never be

completely understood from the audience’s position; therefore the film does not even attempt it. The refugees’ view is constructed with relish. It is established as an awkward, defiant, self-aware, uninhibited, empowered view. It aggressively conflicts with those from the other side, from the side of the objective viewer set in a preventative defensive position against the possibly repressive or monopolizing, in any case “understanding”, attitude. This view says, “We don’t need you to validate our view”. It legitimates itself; not even the heaviest marginalization can change that. Thus the protagonists hide in the forest from the audience’s gaze. They never show their faces in which the viewers could lose themselves and build a “human” relationship. Thus “humanity” is not a category of this documentary film. Thus “their world” is presented as imaginative and totally inauthentic, entranced and incomprehensible. Thus *Forst* bears traits of a blatant manifest and is not open to negotiation; one can simply sign it without contradiction or dismiss it abruptly. And thus *Forst* declares itself first indirectly as “un-documentary”.

#### The Inauthentic Real

The un-documentary does not (exclusively) relate to the reality of itself. Mainly it is focussed on the “Real”. The Real is not less “real” than reality; it is the structure of the construction named “reality”. It is the repressed side, the dark world that the view excludes from the start, that it structurally substantiates and for this exact reason this side remains concealed and inaccessible. The real is therefore the unreal; it is to reality what the unconscious is to consciousness. (The “Unconscious” is not the non-conscious, but rather the conscious that is consciously excluded from the consciousness.) *Forst* blithely construes its views as un-documentary (thus it also follows the “performative documentary film” tradition) and still feels obliged to deconstruction. Not the deconstruction of the film itself or what it depicts, but rather the process of the production of reality and view that is always in the forefront of documentary film. The un-documentary boldly digresses from this production in its departure from the dogma of authenticity. In this way it allows for awareness, where a deconstructive grasp of the real must

always consciously fail. As opposed to traditional documentary films, *Forst* is a conscious (anti-) construction of reality and thereby free from every austerity, abundantly fascinated by what it deconstructs as well as what it constructs. Insofar, *Forst* digresses from the supposed "reality" and turns towards the Real, the phantasm that keeps the production process running. The commitment that all documentary film participants employ, first and foremost the involvement of the viewers, the producers and last but not least, those that were the objects of the "social documentary", is greatly appreciated. The film team takes into account the significance of everyone's participation in this construction process, the ideas that each person brings with them with a readiness to realize, the conflicts that are sometimes fought out, the clash of views that are projected to and from the screen...

In order to pay due respect to these realities, *Forst* does without strategies of credibility and persuasiveness because these marvels - not the acquisition of insight - are the subject of the performative un-documentary. These marvels are the constructive aspect. The deconstructive aspect has to react from here on and traverse the construction with doubt. In this field, between joyful construction and (not less joyful) awakening of doubt in the construction, the un-documentary lives.

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[This statement represents the personal approach of the text's author.]

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WR

collective of artists and filmmakers since 2000  
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# FORST

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