

We Are Here

Reflections on the production of a documentary film on the theatre in postmigrant Denmark

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We Are Here is a documentary film on the concept of postmigration and on postmigrant developments in the Danish theatre. Readers of this publication can access it via the link at the end of this chapter and screen it for free at conferences or in connection with teaching assignments. The film was produced as part of the collaborative research project “Art, Culture and Politics in the ‘Postmigrant Condition’”, in which I participated from 2017 to 2018. The interdisciplinary project was funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research (DFF), in the years 2016-2018, and was hosted by the Department for the Study of Culture at the University of Southern Denmark. A rough cut of the film was screened at the conference, “The Postmigrant Condition: Art, Culture and Politics in Contemporary Europe” in Odense in late 2018, from which this anthology springs.¹

Link: <https://vimeo.com/325718208>

Password: Postmigration

In this brief chapter, I will present the film project *We Are Here* and offer some words of reflection on the production process as well as the finished product.

1 See on the research project: www.sdu.dk/en/postmigration, and on the conference: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/1975873/-postmigrant-condition-art-culture-and-politics-contemporary> [07.13.2020]. The research project was headed by co-editor of this publication, Moritz Schramm, and consisted of Anne Ring Petersen, Sten Pultz Moslund, Mirjam Gebauer, Eva Jørholt, Frauke Wiegand, Sabrina Vitting-Seerup as well as fellow co-editor of this publication, Anna Meera Goankaar, and myself. One of the outcomes of the research project was the book, *Reframing Migration, Diversity and the Arts: the Postmigrant Condition*, co-authored by Moritz Schramm, Anne Ring Petersen, Sten Pultz Moslund, Mirjam Gebauer, Frauke Wiegand, Sabrina Vitting-Seerup and myself. (Schramm/Moslund/Petersen et al. 2019).

Planning the documentary

For the research group, the intention behind making the film was to reach a broader audience in the hope that it would enhance the academic and political impact of our project in Denmark, where political and public debates on immigration have been harsh and uncompromising for decades. To achieve this, the film was to be informative and to present the research questions and findings of the research group, while simultaneously being visually and emotionally compelling. A second objective was to explore the genre of the “science film” in the humanities. Can human science be translated into film in a meaningful way and can the film media contribute to the actual research process?²

Fig. 11.1: Still from the opening sequence of We are here. Hans Christian Post, 2019.



As it is in academic writing, producing a documentary is very much about making choices. Central themes and issues are selected, cases and material sought out, and meaningful arguments formed. In film making, however, choices made tend to be more binding in relation to both concept and process. The reality that is to

2 “Science film” is not a new genre as such since films depicting research developments and outcomes have been around for a long time. But the propagation and gradual canonization of the genre through a growing number of science film festivals worldwide and institutional focus programs certainly represents a new development. Up to the present, the festivals and the focus programs have generally been attentive primarily to the natural and social sciences and the role of these fields in finding viable solutions to global issues such as climate change. This year’s Science Film Factory program at CPH:DOX testifies to this: <https://old.cphdox.dk/en/industry/market-funding/science-film-forum/> [07:13.2020]. The human sciences and their possible potential for forming a new film genre has yet to be identified and recognised.

be documented cannot be fixated and controlled in quite the same way that empirical case material can be in written academia. Phenomena or incidents important to the film may have taken place in the past and are therefore inaccessible to the film crew; scenes recorded with technical failures can seldom be reshot; and cast members may not be available for a second or third interview that could help clarify certain issues or provide the director with vital new statements. Additionally, if choices made turn out to have been poor, and the director would rather head in new directions, film production is such a costly affair that starting anew is rarely an option. Once a filmmaker has chosen a path, it is often necessary to stick with it and hope that enough good material will be generated so that the desired end project is realised.

Most of the choices for *We Are Here* were made early in the process, as I – in close dialogue with the head of the research project, Moritz Schramm, and in briefing with the rest of the members of the group – developed the concept that was to accompany the film fund applications. It was clear that the film was to be a “science film.” However, we did not want it to be solely about science and scientists. That approach might work in films about scientists whose findings are visually stunning or spectacular, but since this clearly was not the case with our project, we decided that the film should primarily portray artists who engage with struggles and conflicts related to the postmigrant condition artistically.

Initially we focused on theatre artists in Denmark and Germany, in part because the theatre scene in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany has played a vital role in the expansion of the concept, and partly because we determined that the work of theatre artists would be especially rewarding to follow, as it would provide “action” in the form of readings, rehearsals and plays to document. Additionally, we chose to feature younger theatre artists, who were still in the process of establishing themselves and developing their artistic stance. We believed that this would be fruitful, since the concept of postmigration is associated with a similar notion of process and development. German political scientist Naika Foroutan points this out early in the film:

The term “postmigration” can be used to describe a transitory phase in society. We haven’t yet reached the point, where we can describe our society as a utopian pluralist society. But we haven’t freed ourselves of the national corset either. We’re leaving the old order, but haven’t arrived in the new yet. (Post 2019: 14:11-14:37)

The three theatre artists we selected were the Egyptian-Danish actor and playwright, Zaki Youssef, Danish theatre director, Anna Malzer, who was still attending theatre school at the time, and German theatre director Julia Wissert, who has been heading the theatre department of Theater Dortmund since 2019, becoming the youngest female theatre director ever in Germany. However, since we were not

granted permission to film the theatre production that Wissert was working on at the time in Luzern, and because we had great difficulties in fixing a date for the interview, we decided to cast the Iraqi-Danish theatre director Sargun Oshana as the film's third protagonist.

To accompany these artists portraits that formed the main thread of the film, we supplemented with interviews with cultural study scholars Moritz Schramm and Sabrina Vitting-Seerup from the research group, as well as head of the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, Shermin Langhoff, political scientist Naika Foroutan, and German scholar of Islamic studies Riem Spielhaus representing the fields of academia and the arts. The role of these intellectuals was to discuss the development of the concept of postmigration and comment on the themes and sentiments that were raised in the storylines of the artists.

Finally, we decided to add the voices of Martin Henriksen of the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (DF) and the then Minister for Immigration and Integration from the right-wing liberal party Venstre, Inger Støjberg, both of whom take up strong anti-immigration positions. Their voices were countered with that of Poul Madsen, the editor-in-chief of the tabloid newspaper, *Ekstra Bladet*, who has promoted the progressive concept of "New Denmark" in articles and at public debates in recent years, pleading for more pragmatic, realistic and above all transparent policies of integration.

Some members of the research group expressed reservations about inviting the above-mentioned right-wing politicians to participate in the film. Nevertheless, I stuck by my decision, as I felt it necessary to somehow show the harsh realities and discourses that the young artists were facing artistically and in their everyday lives. In addition, I hoped that I would be able to get the two politicians to set aside their tough stances for a while and express some empathy as well as some uncertainty around their policies – a thing much needed in a political sphere that is growing evermore cynical when it comes to facts and nuances.

Interweaving these different threads and types of characters meant that instead of producing a character driven, 'situated film', in which concepts and themes are depicted and treated implicitly, through the courses of action, we were producing a film essay that would contain some character driven action as well as meaningful illustrations, but would be primarily a word or dialogue driven film that would discuss the ideas and topics relating to postmigration.

Conducting the interviews

In general, shooting with the three theatre artists was a pleasure as they had lots of stories, experiences and artistic visions to share. They kindly gave me access to rehearsals and performances as well as additional interviews if needed. We want-

ed to give each of them an equal amount of space in the film and follow each of them through the same stages of an ongoing theatre production. In the case of Sargun Oshana, this proved difficult as at that time he was not producing a play that was clearly and thematically connected to the concepts of postmigration laid out in the film. In addition, he was not able to grant us permission to film inside the small and intimate night club where the play was being performed. But this minor obstacle was quickly resolved as we were given free access to film footage of the play produced by Aarhus Theatre for PR purposes. Although the play still did not match the film's depiction of postmigration exactly, the footage was so exciting in itself that viewers of the film were likely to accept this discrepancy.

Fig. 11.2: Zaki Youssef on stage in Der var et yndigt land [There was a lovely land]. Still from We are here. Hans Christian Post, 2019.



Conducting the interviews with Shermin Langhoff and the selected Danish and German scholars proved to be more challenging. Being new to the academic discussions on the subject of postmigration at the time, as I conducted the interviews, it seemed difficult to define the concept and its objective precisely, and it was likewise difficult to determine its value academically or politically. Some might think that herein lies the strength of the concept, in both artistic and academic contexts, but it made the interviews difficult to conduct, especially since in the back of my mind I was constantly wondering how I would be able to interweave these interviews with the storylines of the artists. At times my conversations with Schramm, Vitting-Seerup, Langhoff and Spielhaus were therefore more political than academic and somewhat narrow in their focus on issues such as racism, exclusion and policies of integration in a Danish context. This was not the case, when I interviewed Foroutan. In this interview, the concept of postmigration still seemed

vague and hard to grasp, but at least I was able to sense the many possibilities that the concept offers in the social and political sciences. However, since Foroutan spoke about postmigration solely from these perspectives, it later proved difficult to apply her statements to the rest of the film due to its primary focus on humanities and the arts.

My conversations with the politicians were challenging in other ways. Not only were the interviews difficult to set up, once the politicians were in front of me, they were unwilling to refrain from their standard hard-line phrases and positions. Several of my questions were designed to invite them to present more nuanced views and express doubt about their hard-line policies, but unfortunately, they chose not to take the bait. As the film shows, I therefore decided to present them as politicians who might be in power and might be defining current policies, but who nonetheless appear to be out of sync with a society that is slowly but surely embracing the diversity and complexity characterising the postmigrant condition and moving beyond the clear-cut dichotomies of current politics.

Initially, I started off the interviews with a couple of meta questions. First, I asked the cast members how they would prefer to be portrayed in the film, and second, in what ways it would be possible to make a film that refrained from “marking” its cast members and at the same time remained true in a formal sense to the concept of postmigration. Interviewing Riem Spielhaus in October 2017, I began with the following questions:

I want to start with two meta questions. As you know, I am making this documentary on postmigration and it will contain many people with a background of migration. How can I ensure that this won't be a film in which the cast members will somehow be 'marked' or marginalised, and how can I make a film that conforms to the concept of postmigration?³

Riem Spielhaus responded:

Ah, you pose the difficult question to begin with. Hmm. Maybe you can't do it. Maybe it's impossible to break out of the discourse. As soon as you pose the question, “How does it affect you?”, you immediately wind up in this strange constellation, where you have to deal with it. I would say, the best thing is to make a film that doesn't talk about it at all. If you don't want to reproduce this obsession that characterises the postmigrant condition, you will have to talk about something else. Otherwise you'll get caught up in it. (Ibid.)

3 Interview with Riem Spielhaus, excerpt from Post 2019, unpublished.

However, since to my surprise none of the cast members expressed real concerns or reservations in relation to their representation on the screen, and the question of how the film could become postmigrant did not really produce elaborate answers, I soon ceased to pose these questions.

The problem of marking – filming in the streets

Still, I did on several occasions experience the problem of marking that Spielhaus had mentioned in her response, not while conducting interviews, but when my camera operator and I were filming in the streets of Copenhagen and Berlin. I wanted to shoot street scenes that could function as bridges between the different scenes and/or help illustrate the various themes of the film. One idea was to make a collage of urban scenes, signs and situations to illustrate the diversity and complexity characterising the postmigrant condition. Giving the viewer a visual impression or sensation of this particular condition was an important objective of the film and a collage seemed like a good means of expressing it on the big screen. An important aspect of the postmigrant condition is the overall obsession in postmigrant societies with the issue of migration, and since this is so, even a traditional Danish village with an all-white population can be said to illustrate the postmigrant condition, if the obsession with migration can be traced in the mindsets of the population and the way they understand and live their lives. However, for the postmigrant condition to be depicted cinematically, I deemed it necessary to work with recognisable images that clearly represented ethnic diversity.

Fig. 11.3: Urban scene collage. Still from We are here. Hans Christian Post, 2019.



To achieve this, I worked with stereotypes, looking for people of colour as well as urban scenes, signs and situations that attest to ethnic diversity; in doing this, I clearly sensed that I was somehow *marking* the people, shops, signs, mosques, Islamic schools, urban scenes and situations the camera operator and I were filming. Although the overall objective was to reflect how the complexity and diversity of the postmigrant condition has already established itself in relatively harmonious ways in Danish and German contexts the means of achieving this seemed to be a process of marking. Even when I was filming situations in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods such as the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen, and was not singling out particular people, shops and urban scenes, it became clear that a history of marking and the expectations around it already existed, which meant that my actions gained this meaning anyway.

Fig. 11.4: *Confronted by shop owners during filming.* Photo by Uwe Bohrer.



Our filming in the streets and around shops always created tension. People reacted with wonder, reservation and sometimes even hostility, as if they sensed they were being singled out and marked for unknown purposes. Although I felt that my overall objective was legitimate, it was still difficult for me to defend the filming, as I so clearly experienced the act of marking. My solution was to do it as discreetly as possible and to halt the filming whenever anyone asked me to do so. A better way to go about it may have been to enter into a dialogue about what the filming was about first and then ask for permission to film. But most of the time, I felt it too laborious and difficult to introduce the concept of postmigration and explain the actual purpose of the film. Therefore, I decided to film discreetly and simply accept the tension and ambivalence, I was both creating and experiencing.

The final weeks of production

In comparison to the films I had previously made, the process of editing *We Are Here* went relatively easily. There was the overall challenge of interweaving the different threads of the film, and as always, there were a few difficult decisions to make along the way, such as our decision late in the process to not use the interview with Spielhaus, since I judged that there was too much focus on German academic discussions as well as a significant overlap between issues addressed in the interviews with Spielhaus and Langhoff. Apart from that, once we defined the balance between the film's different threads and laid out the storylines and accompanying themes of the three young theatre artists, the editing process went smoothly.

Looking back, I believe it would have been good to test screen the film a couple of times for an audience before finalising it. As mentioned, the film was screened in a rough version at the conference, "The Postmigrant Condition: Art, Culture and Politics in Contemporary Europe", which was held in Odense in late 2018. This early version of the film differed in two significant ways from the final cut. First of all, Anna Malzer appeared as the first of the three protagonists, and secondly, the political dispute was several minutes longer and was framed in a way that clearly disfavoured the two politicians. Both of these aspects were criticised in the question and answer session that followed the screening. Although it was recognised that a film about the postmigrant condition could indeed begin by featuring a white Danish woman such as Malzer, since one specific dimension in the discussions on postmigration and the postmigrant condition is about the longing to challenge and potentially overcome binary distinctions between "us" and "them", the general opinion at the conference was that it would be better to have Zaki Youssef or Sargun Oshana appear first.⁴ In regard to the political chapter, it was likewise recognised that it was legitimate to frame the politicians as I had done, as they had chosen to play these roles, but the framing was considered to be obvious and somewhat excessive and a re-edit was suggested.

During the last week of editing, I followed these recommendations. Instead of introducing Anna Malzer as the first of the three artists, I let Zaki Youssef appear first, a decision that worked out well, since we were able to use a funny meta-exchange about filters and appearances between Youssef and the camera operator.

4 Naika Foroutan points this out in the chapter, "The Post-migrant paradigm", in the book, *Refugees Welcome?: Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*: "The post-migrant paradigm deconstructs 'migration' as a dominant marker of social difference by stressing the normality of migration and mobility in a globalized world. [...] The post-migrant paradigm pushes migration and ethnicity as markers of social division into the background and seeks to describe the hybridization of societies beyond the migrant-native binary." (Foroutan 2019: 144)

Furthermore, I reduced the length of the political dispute considerably and downplayed the framing somewhat by changing the order of appearance.

Reflections on the final product

Looking back at the final week of editing, it would have probably been helpful to have tested the film in front of at least one more audience before wrapping up the editing process and screening it publicly. It is only when watching the film with an audience that I tend to notice its flaws. In general, I am happy with the film. Since it presents people from various fields and realities who do not actually interact in the film and could easily have stood alone, the film comes off as ruptured, potentially oversaturated as well as somewhat unresolved in its focus. But in the end, these traits can be viewed as qualities, at least if the film is screened in an academic context, where such deficiencies can be appreciated and lead to fruitful discussion. Still, some of the statements in the political chapter could have been left out. When viewing the film today, I notice many repetitive statements. Another problematic point is the Berlin chapter. Viewers already familiar with the concepts of postmigration will surely accept and be able to follow the radical discursive shift that comes with the chapter, but for more general audiences, the shift is likely to produce a degree of confusion.

This has probably influenced the screening history of *We Are Here*, which premiered at the Copenhagen Stage Theatre Festival in May 2019. Since then it has been screened at cultural festivals, in theatres, at theatre schools and in academic settings in Denmark. The international theatre and film festivals, to which I have submitted the film have elected not to screen it, and I think that one reason for this is that the film falls in between existing slots and categories. Regular film festivals find the film to be too academic, while science film festivals tend to regard “science” as meaning primarily natural science (as opposed to social sciences) and therefore consider the film to be just an ordinary documentary. The film captured the attention of theatre festivals, but apparently, the artistic examples were not deemed to be interesting enough to screen it. The Danish public service television broadcasting company (DR) reviewed it and declared it to be “a fine film”, but judged the subject to be “too narrow” and the approach a bit too academic or didactic for it to be broadcast.

Therefore, I decided to make a new and shorter version this year in which all explicit references to the concept of postmigration, as well as the entire Berlin chapter were edited out of the film, and the political chapter was further reduced.

In early June 2020, this version of the film was added to the free streaming service of the Danish library system, filmstriben.dk, where it has received good ratings.⁵

One bit of luck I have had with the film is the tremendous success that the three main protagonists have subsequently enjoyed. Zaki Youssef has since played important roles in several Danish films and more are to come. In 2019 Sargun Oshana won the Reumert Prize, the most prestigious Danish theatre award, for best director and has just been nominated for the prize again. Interestingly, in interviews Oshana has embraced the concept of postmigration as being helpful to describe the specific circumstances that we are all dealing with, and as a means of liberating himself artistically and in his daily life:

Viewing myself as “postmigrant” helps free me of the boxes that you become part of in the political world. [...] It made so much sense for me to hear that word [postmigration]. Because when one talks about refugees, it is almost as if they have no lived life after they have fled. But, of course, they have. [...] It is not so that I want to ignore that there are problems in society that result from people having fled here. But it quickly becomes a box that you are put into; a box that doesn't help anyone, because it prevents us from seeing the individual human being. (Wittrock 2019: 35)

Finally, in 2018, Anna Malzer took on the position as director of the Mungo Park theatre, becoming the youngest female director ever in Denmark; she immediately went on to form an ethnically mixed ensemble. Furthermore, in March 2020, Malzer was featured in a two-hour long documentary series by DR titled, *Dramadronning [Drama Queen]*. Although exactly how this series was inspired is unclear, I suspect that DR became aware of Malzer when they reviewed my documentary in early 2019.

It is possible that I have been less fortunate with the politicians featured in the film, since they no longer enjoy the power they once had. The Danish People's Party lost so many votes during the 2019 election that Martin Henriksen along with several of his fellow party members had to leave the Danish Parliament. At the same time, the sitting right-wing liberal government with its strong anti-immigration policies lost power to the Social Democratic opposition, causing Inger Støjberg to lose her post as minister. If I had considered these possible outcomes while making the film, I would have definitely asked for an interview with the Social Democratic leader and current prime minister, Mette Frederiksen. It would have been easier to set up an appointment with her before she became prime minister; and although a hardliner on immigration issues herself, she would have probably been more willing to enter into the concepts and discussions addressed

5 <https://fjernleje.filmstriben.dk/film/9000005290/vi-er-her>. To access this newer version of the documentary via “filmstriben”, it is necessary to have a Danish personal identification number.

in the film, which would have made the film appear less biased politically. So, this is maybe the most important lesson I have learned from making this documentary. It is always best to produce more material than the current situation indicates. In filmmaking you never know how the “reality” you are documenting will unfold.

References

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