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Philip Scheffner, Havarie, Goethe-Institut, Toronto

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Philip Scheffner
← *Havarie*, video still, 2016.
Photo : © pong Berlin

↑ Installation view, Goethe Media Space, Goethe Institut, Toronto, 2018.
Photo : Jutta Brendemühl, © Goethe Institut, Toronto

Philip Scheffner
Havarie

A small dark shape floating on sparkling blue sea. This scene extends throughout the duration of Philip Scheffner's 90-minute film essay *Havarie* (2013). The subject, easily recognizable from photojournalists' accounts, is the ongoing refugee crisis—the flow of African and Middle Eastern migrants seeking safety in an unwelcoming Europe. The film's visual content is based on a 3 min. 36 sec. video clip shot by Terry Diamond, an Irish tourist on a Mediterranean cruise, which Scheffner discovered on YouTube. This surprising encounter between the massive ship, *Adventure of the Seas*, and a small rubber dinghy barely containing thirteen passengers, functions as the film's silent centre. Revealing the potency of the nearly still video image is a soundtrack of voices sharing diverse stories of refugee experience—stories of hope, loss, and trauma.

Originally planning to incorporate the found clip as one element within a larger film, Scheffner conducted research and interviews. Concerned, however, that conventional documentary approaches eliciting sympathy by delving deeply into subjects' lives only perpetuate the divide between victim and viewer, he radically changed course. Abandoning the visuals from his interview footage, he laid the collaged soundtrack onto the found clip, and dramatically slowed down the video.

Our visual focus rests on the anonymous travellers surrounded by blue. The scene shifts slightly with each advancing frame, pulsing rhythmically like a heartbeat, breath, or ocean wave. Over these visual and temporal pulses, layers of lamenting voices, which could be our own, create a universal template of trouble. The voices, punctuated with pauses and sighs, narrate their darkness. The severing of image and voice opens a space of collective memory, inviting identification with the trauma experienced by the travellers on screen and off.

The voices surface then fade, like ghosts within the cinematic space, ebbing and flowing in poetic contemplation, following the rhythm of the fragile, shifting boat. Some relate directly to the event on screen: the radio communication between the ship and Spanish Marine Rescue; Diamond's original phone recording; and later, from his Belfast home, he describes witnessing a friend's murder by the IRA during the Troubles, and how his security guard job trains him to look closely and carefully. From Algerian shores, men express sadness and hope in their desire to get to Europe. They tell terrifying tales of how they've tried: a cargo ship's Ukrainian captain and Filipino crew members describe encounters with refugees hiding in containers or floundering in the sea. A North African couple long for each other from across the sea: she stays in France for medical treatment while he endlessly awaits papers to join her.

Halfway through the film, the camera stunningly reverses perspective and we see "ourselves." A wide pan swings right then left, revealing tourists watching from high ship decks—a floating "Fortress Europe." Dislodged from our sympathetic but separate stances, we are forced to recognize our own relation to the refugee's plight. Scheffner's formal experiment draws us into the space of a shipwreck. *Havarie* paraphrases Michelet's analysis of an earlier politically charged artwork, Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*: "Our whole society is on that raft."

Jill Glessing

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