

Nikolaj Larsen: Contemporary migrations as a sacrificial path to life

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The work of Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen touches upon one of the most sensitive, pressing and divisive issues of our time for the European continent, that of mass migration, its miseries and hopes. The topic is extraordinarily delicate from the political and cultural perspectives as it is changing forever the face of the continent. It can also be seen as a trial, for the migrant as well as for the host, a trial with transformative powers on each and many individuals.

Parts of the European population, including media-acknowledged intellectuals, younger generations moved by a genuine concern or in need of a cause, and in general all the segments of society that are ill at ease with the traditional concepts of cultural identity, nations and borders, is emotionally involved in the welcoming of migrants, which they view as either a form of human duty or an indirect means to do away with the “old”. Let us call it the “Antigone side” of society, by reference to Sophocles’ masterpiece.

Another part, more numerous but less vocal because resistance is less prone to activism, but also because it is culturally less visible, views migrants as a slow but unstoppable invasion that will ultimately destroy whatever is left of Europe, its civilization and its many cultures. Let us call it the “Creon side” of society.

Both attitudes are understandable, but “coloured” as if by different musical tones. In the first group reigns a mixture of optimism, generosity, ideology and illusion: it is in C major. In the second, where experience, pessimism, nostalgia, and a good deal of resignation darken the mood, we hear an A minor. It is the age-old difference that results from directing one’s attention either to the individual with its sorrows and charms, or the anonymous crowd, and its historic role: empathy is the enemy of policy, passion is the enemy of the State.

However, Larsen’s work goes significantly beyond this endlessly – and legitimately - rehashed issue, that is clearly redefining immense cultural territories for better or for worse. He also dwells, through the question of the migrants’ quasi-initiatory journeys, on more fundamental matters of human “desire to live”, of transformation through trial. It is the connection of this archetypal level and current historic events that provides its *weight* to a work which has found in video one of its most convincing instruments of expression.

Larsen is not intent on having us weep and commiserate; in fact, most of migrants’ destinies can be seen as ultimately enviable, and of their own making. Questions which are posed by Larsen’s work include that of the legitimacy of art to address suffering and misery, and the conditions thereto; that of the inevitable ambiguity of addressing suffering in itself, irrespective of its causes and of the consequences of the events which provoke such misery; that of the nature of utopian aspirations in a world closed upon itself; that of the tragic opposition between *θεσμός*, the ancient custom sanctioned by the gods which became “natural right”, and *νόμος*, the body of rules issued by a state and by which society is governed.

Historically, art has always been cautious with the topic of suffering, a relatively recent concern. One may think of a few works to illustrate this point, such as *The Dying Galatian*, a Roman marble sculpture which may be seen in the Capitoline Museums in Rome. It could be a copy of a now-lost Hellenistic sculpture made to celebrate the victory of Attalus I of Pergamon over the Galatians. This sculpture is particularly noteworthy because of the *pathos* expressed by the fighter’s face, a very rare occurrence indeed in the art of Antiquity. The wrinkles on the forefront, the head bent over the right shoulder, the eyes turned towards the ground

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without watching anything else but the imminent approach of the death, the visible wound on the torso, consistent with Pliny's description of the Galatians as men fighting naked, their open wounds visible on their white skins, all contribute to making it a powerful image of suffering, one capable of arousing empathy, for what is an image of suffering if not a call to empathy ?



The Dying Gaul (Musei Capitolini, Rome)

Traditionally, sculpture was dedicated to the task of elevating men to the status of heroes, or at least to celebrate such elevation, not to lead anyone to some form of commiseration: being the object of commiseration was indeed humiliating. This is probably why the *Dying Galatian* was commissioned in the first place: by showing the sufferings of the dying fighter, the Galatians were deprived of their heroic quality, they were symbolically degraded, and their victors enhanced by implication, despite their being absent from the sculpted scene.

War, a permanent companion of European history during so many centuries, has started to be considered from the perspective of its inflicted sufferings only quite late, and to a very limited extent. If we except the eighteen etchings of Jacques Callot, *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*, published in 1633, which depict some of the horrors of war but without showing any human face and therefore any emotions, Francisco Goya is perhaps the first major artist to address human misery with the eighty-two prints of *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, created between 1810 and 1815 during the invasion of Spain by Napoleon's army.



An important aspect of this work is that Goya refers directly to cruelty, terror, injustice, and misery as the fatal consequences of war for *individual human beings*; he also violently exposes the absurdity of war *given its inevitable sufferings*, and turns heroism upside down in an engravings such as *Gran hazaña, y con muertos !* (*“Great feat, and with dead ! ”*). With the Age of Enlightenment and the surge of the ideology of rationalism, the tide is turning, the age of heroes which had lasted since the Bronze Age is on the wane.

An interesting painting to be remembered before discussing Larsen’s work is of course the *Raft of the Medusa*, painted by Théodore Géricault in 1818 – 1819. This monumental canvas depicts the fate of the survivors of the frigate *Medusa* which had run aground in 1816, some fifty miles off the coasts of today’s Mauritania; of the 147 people who had sailed on a raft, only fifteen had survived when finally rescued, after suffering dehydration and practicing cannibalism during their thirteen days at sea... In Géricault’s masterpiece, bodies are idealized, in obvious contradiction with their probable condition after such an ordeal. The scenography is dramatically organized around two triangles, the left one with a summit on top of the broken mast being all about despair, abandonment and death, the right one with a summit on the white cloth held by a sailor who spotted a ship in the distance, all about a faint hope. Hope and dereliction, two themes which run as a *basso continuo* in all of Larsen’s work. This canvas horrified Géricault’s contemporaries, all the more so that this horrible episode was due entirely to the crass incompetence of the captain, who had never commanded a frigate before, not even sailed for twenty years due to his exile during the Revolution. A disaster with a human cause but diluted responsibilities, as so often. In a sense, this was a political symbol of the exhaustion of the monarchy, just as today’s climate-induced migrants might become someday a symbol of the exhaustion of an entire civilization. Art had transformed the survivors into quasi-mythical characters, just as Dante had done with Ugolin della Gherardesca in the 33rd canto of Hell, where the old captain, condemned to be starved to death with his grandsons, “let hunger have more power than sorrow”. No sign of compassion or pity in Géricault’s canvas, no call to tears and cuddling of the survivors, no collective guilt, no accusation: we are reaching the end of the heroic times, but we are not *quite* there yet.



Jean-Louis Théodore Géricault - *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818 – 1819)

It is probably the monstrous mass massacre of the First World War that has been the tipping point. *The Skat Players* or *The Trench* (1918) by Otto Dix, his series of etchings on the war, are violent visual reminders of what war makes to man, and by implication of its “non-sense”. With his *Portrait of the Artist’s Parents I*, dated 1921, we have one of the first great paintings of empathy: the elderly couple is shown in his loneliness, poverty, sadness, and despite everything a form of “dignity of the vanquished” of society, or of History itself.



Otto Dix – *The Trench* (1918)



Portrait of the Artist’s Parents I (1921)

By a kind of cultural turnaround, victims, whether actual or ideologically constructed as such, have become mainstream as a subject of art and literature; they have replaced the hero, or rather they have *become* heroes, though measured by their defeats rather than their feats, whether those defeats are at the hands of men, of fate, or of prejudice. Interestingly, and contrary to literature, it is not the great massacres or sufferings that have inspired modern and contemporary *visual* artists, except film-makers who are able to *narrate* much as literature does: nothing much of any worth is to be seen on the Khmer or Tutsi genocides, on the Russian Gulag or its Chinese equivalent, on the victims of the Chernobyl radiations, on the beheaded victims of Daesh. Nothing much on the suffering of those millions who die in pain from all sorts of ills and crimes. It is not suffering *in itself* that interests contemporary artists. It is suffering that is made *socially visible by a pre-constructed narrative*: for instance, being a descendent of African slaves brought to America or the West Indies in the 18th and early 19th centuries (not slavery *in general*, which has been commonplace everywhere for thousands of years, and a great specialty of Arab tribes and the Ottoman Empire until the late 19th century), or gender-related discriminations which were constructed as “mental objects” by the likes of Judith Butler since the 1970s, or the plight of migrants into Europe (some of them: not the Vietnamese *boat people* of the late 1970s, around 700,000 of them, as they tended not to fit into the dominant narratives of that time, and charity did not exist yet as a political business). In short, major segments of the visual arts tend to be complementary, if not auxiliary, to mainstream narratives, which is hardly surprising. Images come on the wake of the underlying narrative, they literally *become visible* once supported by one or more political, social or religious narratives, which they can then magnify, expand, or even twist. When the original narrative ceases to be understood by a vast majority of people, as it is the case today of the Holy Scriptures, Greek mythology, or heroism on the battlefield, to take but a few examples, related images either cease to be produced, degrade into sentimental versions in order to appeal to instincts, or mutate into a contemporary correspondence of the archetype.

“Fixed” images are not capable of addressing a political matter in an emotionally neutral manner, because – contrary to literature or the cinema – they can neither explain nor deploy a chain of consequences. Images only suggest a conclusion, or induce a feeling, provided that they are “assembled” in the right way. Therefore, images addressing, in this instance, the matter of migrations *necessarily* take the perspective of one *particular* migrant, or group of migrants, actual or somehow represented, expanding it *by virtue of the supporting narrative, and by implication* to the whole intellectual “category” of migrants, since language – which proceeds by broad categories - is able to *universalize*. And on the receiving end of the image, that perspective can only be one of empathy or fear. Empathy for the perceived suffering of the person constrained to exile by misery or violence, fear for the perceived invader. The narrative prepares the mind to interpret the image in a certain way; then the image “speaks to the heart”; finally, the mind generalizes that feeling as it finds confirmation in the image of the pre-existing narrative. The image is never the *full picture*, but a fragment thereof which focuses our attention in such a manner that we end up ignoring the full picture. This very mechanism contributes to making images such a powerful instrument of propaganda, and in the case of the refugee crisis, which has been lasting for a decade now and is bound to continue to unfold, it is not possible to avoid discussing the topic of propaganda unless one agrees to be either its instrument or its recipient, for the *refugee crisis* oscillates - depending on time and place - between a vast social phenomenon and what might just as well be called a “migration war”.

Everyone remembers the photos of the three-year old Aylan (in reality Alan) Kurdi, a Syrian refugee of Kurdish background who drowned, and whose body drifted ashore on the Turkish coast near Bodrum in September 2015, while his rubber boat was on its way to the nearby Greek island of Kos with sixteen people

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on board, instead of the maximum of eight. The boy's family had seemingly paid 5,860\$ for their four "slots" on the boat.

Nilufer Demir, a photographer from the Dogan press agency who was allegedly strolling on the beach with her camera around dawn, saw the boy's corpse, and was so moved that she took pictures and sent them around, notably to the director of the NGO *Humans Rights Watch*, who must have immediately understood the potential of a viral dissemination of the image; he later talked movingly of how important it was to preserve the privacy and dignity of the toddler. *Humans Rights Watch*, which is particularly active in anti-Israeli campaigning, was of course well received in Turkey in the years following the *Mavi Marmara* incident. The opportunity was immediately leveraged by the Turkish propaganda machine, which sent the right people on that beach in order to fully exploit the scene. It is not possible to tell how the beach looked before the pictures were taken, nor why little Alan was the only body found on that spot, although several others from the same raft had drowned, but *that* image was selected on *that* day, out of all the other similar dramas which occurred along those years, as an instrument of Turkish foreign policy. The picture ultimately promoted by Turkish propaganda was one of the "good" soldier carrying the little body with fatherly care and a look of deep sorrow on his face, obviously in front of an army of "pre-positioned" cameras. Arguably one of the greatest propaganda successes of the last decade, considering its outcome: it softened public opinions to the point where European governments could not resist opening their doors to a massive influx of migrants from middle eastern countries, thus alleviating the financial burden on the Turkish government, allowing it to set in motion a financial and political blackmail by dosing the migration pressure depending on compensations received, and fostering an additional source of destabilization of European societies that would increase Turkey's influence on Muslim minorities and its diplomatic muscle in future talks with Brussels. This outstanding instrumentalization of misery was made particularly effective by the pre-existing archetype of the "victim hero" which is so characteristic of the contemporary European conscience, and could be traced back to a particular reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*.



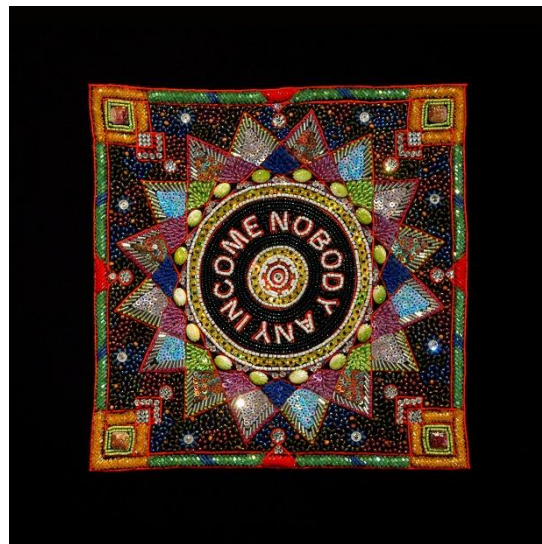
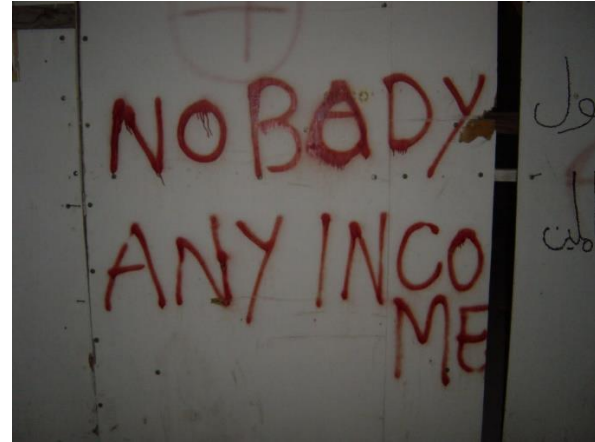
The power of that image was certainly enhanced by the fact that the toddler had *drowned*, for drowning – just as being buried alive – always had a strong resonance in the psyche. Never mind the fact that the boy's family – and most probably the corrupt local authorities – are clearly responsible for letting him on board in the first place, and for letting this overburdened raft to sail. The dominant *narrative* promoted by NGOs and the media, and coinciding with the geopolitical interest of some countries, was that the inhuman policies of the European states were directly responsible for his death, and this is the narrative which the image amplified, although the pictures of the corpse taken on the beach, endlessly broadcast and shared on all possible networks, were nothing short of pornographic. The question of who – or what – is being served by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei when he stages himself for a picture in exactly the same position as the dead little Alan Kurdi on the island of Lesbos deserves to be asked. The same question applies to the boy's image used by street artists in need of viewers. Art as a derivative product of death?

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This discussion is a necessary preamble to discussing Larsen's work, because the artist has managed most of the time to escape the propaganda "trap", while elevating the migrants' phenomenon – and sometimes plight – to a higher conceptual level where we are confronted with the interplay of conscience, liberty, ethics and history. One might dare say to the level of ontology, in his best work, far from the sobs of the mourners. In the tenth letter of his *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus*, Schelling writes that the Greek tragedy "pays tribute to human liberty insofar as it allows its heroes to fight against the infinitely stronger power of destiny", and that the defeat of Man crystallizes its liberty, its need to act which determines the substance of its very self. And he is probably aware that, at a less metaphysical level, the conflict which is intrinsic to migrations illustrates the contradiction which exists between the public good and the individual conscience "bathed" in its historicity, between the universal and the singular, at least since the age of Enlightenment when the public and the private spheres started to commingle. Also between the ancestral *spirit* of the law, embodied by Antigone, and its *letter*, embodied by Creon: there is no painless travel between the ideal and the real, the celestial and the terrestrial, utopia and πόλις.

The life of Nikolaj Larsen took a different turn when in the Emirates. Going past a UAE National Lottery poster featuring the slogan "Change your life here", he noticed the reflection of a Western Union logo on the TV screen. "Change your life" is the slogan of all illusionary propositions, of the lottery as well as of utopian ideologies, or for that matter calls to become an immigrant worker in the Emirates. The Western Union logo could be read as a fortuitous subtext which enlightens the reader: your chances of improving your life here match those of winning the lottery. Larsen would then read a "Nobody any income" tag written opposite that cheering message. These writings are a fine summary of the state of "slavery made bearable" which characterizes the Gulf's tribal monarchies. The recipe is as ancient as slavery itself, and therefore as the State: you only need give something *over and above* what is required for survival in order to keep people working for you, and that *something* is shipped back to families in the home country, not without a hefty chunk being collected by the transferring company. More importantly, these words are also a reminder of the inevitable confrontation of desire with reality, while pointing to our Promethean moment in history when we somehow feel that reality *could* conform to desire if only enough enlightened willpower were applied to the task, given our financial and technical means. Larsen had the slogan and the tag embroidered as if representing two complementary *mantras* that would subsequently orient the visual renderings of his, and our, meditation on the questions he had elected to address.



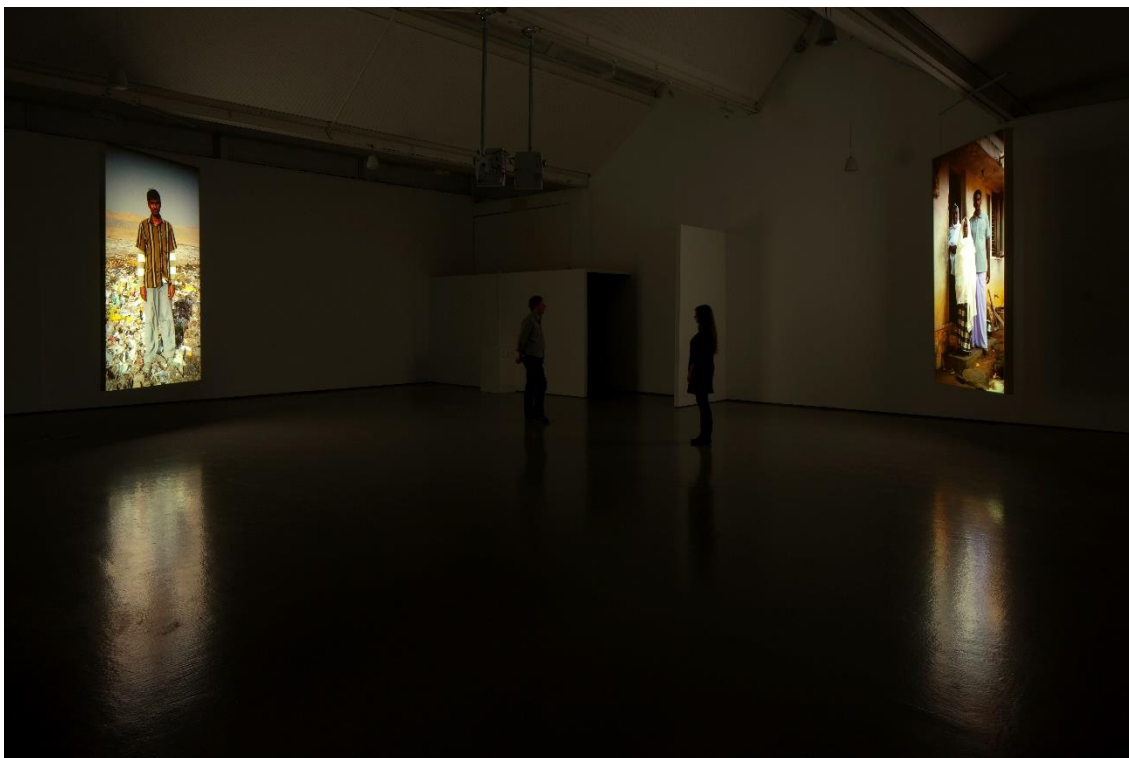
As is well known, these not-quite-slaves are usually migrants from the Indian sub-continent, mostly men, and many of them from the State of Kerala. That is how Nikolaj Larsen became acquainted with the world of economic migrants, who seem willing to stay until kicked out: a temporary arrangement. Perhaps the young artist was struck by their dignity, their calm, a form of self-sacrifice for the benefit of a distant family. He made a series of videos of these men, standing in front of the camera without saying a word, vaguely smiling, and asked to think of their family back home. In what is a moving gesture of silent communication, he went to meet some of these families in India, also asking them to think of their relative who works hard in the Gulf, in order to send back to them some meagre cash surpluses. When the two videos are shown opposite one to the other in a dark room, with only but very slight movements of the body and features, one actually feels the flow of thoughts, of untold stories, thanks, regrets, powerless resignation perhaps: a portrait of fate, if fate ever had a face. Here are people who vaguely hoped to move towards something better, whatever better might mean, but that better is unlikely to apply to *them* : there will be no second generation walking up the ladder in the receiving country. Everyone silently acknowledges that this is more of a one-way street than a road to somewhere. Silence seems to mean “this is it” while still preserving the possibility that it might not be so, a possibility which words could somehow dispel. Hence the tragedy which is both deeper and less visible than the one of ordinary migrants who actually settle. No overturned boats,

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no drowned women and children, no police beatings: only lives sacrificed to pay for the locals' air conditioning, perhaps, just as silently as those silent videos. A powerful work, no doubt, which does not attempt at drawing tears, or triggering indignation, or justifying the lives of would-be caretakers. The series *Rendez-vous* is among the earliest but also among the most moving of Larsen's works.



Rendez-vous



Nikolaj Larsen is not an *activist*; he captures a mood, a climate, on the basis of which the watchers of his videos may elaborate their own views, dive into their own selves and reflect about such fundamentally human matters as dignity, sacrifice, or hope. In an age obsessed with guilt and retribution, an age that has forgotten the Greek side of its heritage, this is a refreshing attitude indeed, but also a very fine line that will not always prove easy to follow.

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When asked by a curator to work on the giant migrants' camp near Calais, the so-called "jungle", Nikolaj Larsen had the benefit of having worked not on migration as such, as a demographic and political phenomenon about which most artists tend to take a rather emotional approach, but from the perspective of a slowly built intimacy with the persons themselves. He spent some time among the migrants trying to make it to England, day after day, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing. As he could not show their faces because of the rules in the Dublin Treaty, he focused on their hands, their shacks, their pallets. On their attempts to cross the Channel aboard a ship or a truck. The point here is not their misery, as all were perfectly conscious of the risks taken, the chances, the obstacles to be overcome. What matters is the pull towards a promised land of which little if anything is known, the strength of desire which, since the great tale of the Exodus, has an obvious utopian and metaphysical dimension. And the observation that the most difficult part of the voyage is the very last one, when the Promised Land is actually visible, so close and yet still so far. When a life's destiny seems to hang on the crossing of these few miles, when lost opportunities become so much more plausible, when shame awaits the one who goes back to where he came from, and that shame becomes a trap, a *fate*. This intimate tragedy is more powerful than the question of the mafias, the traffickers, or the physical harshness of life at the encampment. This is a video about the meanings of being *on the verge of* an accomplishment, about the *expected inner violence* of both failure and success. Something which is about to occur, but not quite yet, the vigil of a battle with one's life story at stake. Interestingly, he mentions these Iranians who were afraid of being alone in Britain once they reached their goal, as a contrast to the collective adventure lived among fellow migrants in Calais despite all hardships; a feeling much akin to the experience of World War I veterans who had suffered in the trenches but felt at a loss in a society which did not need them any more in times of peace.

When Nikolaj Larsen returned to Calais sometime later, once the "jungle" had been dismantled, he took photographs of those places where the people he had known had lived, and later abandoned either because they had succeeded in their crossing to Britain, or because they had settled elsewhere in Europe, had been displaced by the authorities, or in some cases went back to their home country. These photographs are taken on a scene that the artist has "rearranged" in order to drive the eye towards a particular spot, the place of an *absence*, and to create an artificial perspective within the "natural" one, as if to emphasize the intellectual construct which we superimpose on lives that are driven by desire, hope, regret and sorrow, far from the political and ideological discourses which transform the phenomenon beyond and despite the intents of its players.





P. Uccello – *Battaglia di San Romano* (c. 1438)

By watching these rods rearranged so as to converge towards some distance point, thus imitating the classic construction methods of artificial perspective, we are reminded of the use of such means by Paolo Uccello in his *Battaglia di San Romano*, thus introducing *reason* into the inexplicable chaos of warfare. In the same manner, these photographs are taken with a controlled lighting which enhances their artificiality, their scenographic nature: here is the *stage* of the tragedy.

A tragedy is not something awful occurring to someone, which would be a misinterpretation of the meaning of this word, an interpretation which calls for a culprit and invites a reading of good versus bad, just versus unjust, the opposite of a tragedy. A tragedy is a situation where the person is immersed, whether by “fate” or through her own unreasonable making, in a conflict where equally worthy values are engaged, but destiny has put each character on a particular side; neither reason nor justice can resolve the difference: the *Antigone* by Sophocles is a case in point. As noted by Max Scheler in *Zum Phänomen des Tragischen* (1914), fundamental conflicts such as the one between the law, order, universal principles which regulate societies on the one hand, and the unbound energies which sometimes take hold of the individual, on the other hand, cannot be resolved within the texture of reality.

A particularly superficial interpretation usually makes Creon into some malevolent fascist, and Antigone into some pure, altruistic woman defending supreme humanistic or divine values. The artist is not dwelling here on the nature of the tragedy, on the opposing values and forces at play; at least he does not make them explicit, but he does manage to make us feel the presence of such forces. In this particular body of works, he points at the tragedies which have been unfolding on that modest stage, and which we are not to become acquainted with. Tragedies where the impulse of *individual* human urges and aspirations have been confronted with the reason embodied in the State, to use a Hegelian approximation. The stage is now empty, empty of humans, but not of their struggles which continue to be called up by those humble objects left over.

In what is perhaps a more contentious piece of work, Larsen photographed migrants in the derelict neighborhood of Stalingrad, in the north-east of Paris. Here we can only see brightly lit and coloured blankets or sleeping bags, each “inhabited” by a person of whom nothing can be seen: no face, no feet, no hands. The environment has been removed and replaced by pitch black. Black as the sea at night, black as their destiny perhaps, with this bright shape as some precious cloth floating in the dark, indicating perhaps that the individual inside is himself as precious as the colour and brightness of the blanket suggests. One may wonder if there is no conflict here between ethics and aesthetics. Adornment and suffering are in a semiotic clash. It is not so much the question of the immorality of ornament *per se*, put forward by Adolf Loos in his essay *Ornament and crime* (1913), that comes to mind; but rather the question of whether or not the pleasure which may derive from the contemplation of a pleasant image conceals, or even

obliterates, the underlying reality. The ethical question does not stem from the pleasure given by the image, of course, but rather from the deflection from the implicit duty of care to which our look, our attention is supposed to be subjected. Each person will see it his own way.



An entirely different approach was taken by the artist when he started work on the migrants crossing the Mediterranean; he literally *invented* the shape which one is tempted to call the *sculpted body bag*. These consist of concrete canvas sheets, of the sort used for erosion control, folded around a “skeleton” made of wood and mesh fencing, and then bundled by ropes; these objects are then watered so that, once dry, they may become hard and keep their shape, a shape very similar to that of a greyish, coarse body bag: one cannot help but feel that an *actual* dead body is huddled inside. This invention crosses a frontier insofar as these shapes introduce a confusion between what is a symbol, related to the object by a rule of some kind, what is an index, actually affected by the object just as a symptom results from an illness, and what is an icon, where the sign resembles the object. It looks as if the *representamen* – to use Peircian terminology – were the icon of a body bag, its outer surface is folded *as if* by a body inside, becoming an index of this absent body, and nevertheless reason, but reason alone, tells us that it is but a symbol thereof.



Sculpture Body Bag



When, on the occasion of the third Biennale of Thessaloniki in 2011, a number of these shapes were hoisted above ground in the dome of a church in Thessaloniki – which had also been historically a mosque under Ottoman occupation and a synagogue at some other time - the message was quite complex. As is well known, a dome represents the Heavens, and therefore these bodies were symbolically ascending towards a form of immortal rest, “elected” to sit among the righteous, heroes or saints. By contrast you might infer those *others*, who had allowed such a drama to occur, had their place in much lower regions of divine hierarchies. The setting also suggests an idea of sacrificial offering whereby the ones who failed have died so as to allow a new destiny for the ones who succeeded.

This is, after all, correct from a probabilistic perspective, but resonates more deeply in our collective memories. We are reminded indeed of the myth told in the Aeneid: when Aeneas leaves Carthage for the shores of Italy, terrible storms and disasters are instigated by Juno, the everlasting enemy of the Trojans, to prevent them from reaching their new home. Venus implores Neptune to let the fleet sail safely, a request which he accepts in exchange for the sacrifice of Palinurus, the experienced navigator who leads the fleet: *“Tutus quos optas portus accedet Averni; unus erit tantum, amissum quem gurgite quaeres : unum pro multis dabitur caput”* (“It will safely reach the haven of Averno, as you pray. One alone shall perish engulfed by the sea: one head alone will be given to save the many”). And as the fleet sails at night, Palinurus is overcome by sleep and pushed by the god into the sea. *Ode to the Perished* is unquestionably troubling *because* the elevation is organized in a church, and the church is a fundamental part of that work, which would carry a very different meaning were the sculptures to hang in a gallery or some industrial space. An *ode* is a lyric poem of Greek origin; meant to glorify an individual, it was accompanied by music. It could be argued that the suspension of the body bags in a space where music is usually sung in praise of God is a *mimesis* of the voices and prayers ascending towards Him, symbolically commending the dead to some principle higher than their own lives; otherwise the setting would be a mere scenery chosen to “look good”, to impress the viewer favourably, an act of egotism. But *what* is being glorified by this Ode? Not the individual, of whom nothing is known, and who accomplished nothing in *biographical* terms; it must be the individual as a proxy for Life itself, for the self that emerged from the darkness of indetermination by engaging in the act of embarking on a quest for his own singular destiny.

At some point, Larsen decided that he wanted the audience to walk around these body bags, a walk interspersed with physical testimonies of the later part of their lives. A dangerous step for a visual artist, as by reducing - to the point of abolishing - the distance between the representation and its object, he brings the conscience of the observer close to a direct experience of a drama, as if in a play where the actor, trained with the Stanislavsky method, would forget that he is acting, his reason overcome by his feelings; but this again is a selected fragment, a scene taken from of a much longer and complex play of which the actor knows little. We are used to be engulfed by music, carried away, but music does not *represent*

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anything, even when it imitates the sounds of nature. It is capable of shaping our mood and our interpretation of a story however, and that is commonplace in filmmaking. What Larsen is doing, which remains so rare in the visual arts, is to give a “musical quality” to his installations so that the viewer’s mood is changed, his reason put in a state of greater permeability if not outright recess. This is indeed remarkable, although it increases in parallel the responsibility of the artist, his duty to permanently reconcile ethics and aesthetics. Larsen succeeds in this rather complex balancing act, given the inflammable nature of his subject.

A rather troubling experiment resulted from what is a kind of further elaboration on the *Ode to the Perished*, a work by the name of *End of Dreams*. It consisted initially in the suspension of a number of sculpted body bags under a raft moored near the small port of Pizzo Calabro in southern Italy.



A picture taken partly above and partly below the sea level shows these bags hanging below the raft while unsuspecting bathers were sun-tanning on top of it. It tells us at first sight how unaware, and how indifferent, a part of humanity is about the fate of another part. A rather universal experience. This is however a superficial observation, considering that the part “below the raft” ended up in that situation precisely because the aspired to finding themselves on the top of it, in those bathing suits, and becoming one of those potentially unaware group of people. They are in effect *the same*. The raft creates a visual barrier, a visual border between those *below*, the sufferers, and those *above*, the enjoyers, the affluent. But the raft is one, and it is indeed a fragile, vulnerable raft. Such a symbol is powerful for its simplicity and effectiveness in triggering an instinctive conclusion, but it brings about more and more readings the more one looks at it. Here also we face a symbolic representation of tragedy: if there were nothing to desire, whether it is beauty, affluence or fame, there would be no such drownings, although many other ills may have expected the very same persons who drowned, had they lived, or afflicted the ones on top, who are alive but suffer perhaps from worse, invisible woes. Being deprived of any possibility to *reasonably* aspire to reach a goal is perhaps an even greater misery than actually missing that goal. Let us remember what is written on the gates of Hell: *lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate* (“Abandon hope, all ye’ who enter”. In Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno III, 1-21). The work of Nikolaj Larsen takes migration as a powerful metaphor of human yearning and aspiration, of that fundamental engine of life, and confronts it to the terrible forces of what was once considered fate, the result always of many inextricable factors.



End of Dreams

Fate invited itself in the artist's work: soon after it was installed, the raft was hit by a violent storm and capsized, with all the body bags torn away and sinking to the bottom of the sea. A search of these lost "sculpture bodies" was organized with local divers, and the video which documented that search became itself, although initially unintended, *the work*, a "poetic search" as the artist calls it. The icons of the dead bodies had drowned themselves, as if to achieve their iconic nature by being subject to the same fate as the individuals which were meant to be represented. By rescuing some of them, fourteen out of forty-eight, the divers had symbolically rescued the memory of these persons. But something remains symbolically of that incompleteness, despite the fact that these are not actual bodies: the vanishing of a corpse at sea was always felt as particularly unbearable by the western tradition, because the loop cannot be closed, the dead cannot return among the dead. Charon refuses passage to anyone who died without a subsequent burial. "The End of the End of Dreams" is probably more powerful than *the End of Dreams* alone because it fortuitously introduced in the very fabric of the work the ingredient that makes tragedy, rather than mere drama: *fate*, that which is beyond reason and beyond ethics.



Quicksand

With *Quicksand*, Larsen brilliantly reverses the situation so as to underscore the true topic of his work, and escape from any predominantly sentimental reactions. The video, shot in 2017 in black and white and co-written with Duncan Pickstock, is set in a not-so-distant future when Europe has no more work to offer, misery prevails, public health and education collapse, all presumably due to some form of far-right influences although the logic of that is as weak as the motive is superfluous. This turn of events presumably drives people to emigrate southwards in the hope of a better future; Jason is on board that skiff, which capsizes somewhere in the Mediterranean. We will never see him, but we can hear his voice, his story, the screams of his companions, the menacing noises of a rough sea, until we suddenly lose him. The point is clearly not to seek a culprit, as would usually result from the easy equations lazily established by a well-meaning and self-satisfied cultural establishment with their automatic equations between race, domination, colonial history and economic exploitation. The point is to explore the human condition faced with the merciless ebbing and flowing of history, to witness the power of hope and ambition, to meditate over the incomprehensible abyss of shattered aspirations.



Vasari – Allegory of Hope

Deeply ingrained archetypes are at work in such representations. Water is a age-old symbol of death, of a barrier to blessings; hence the splitting of the Red Sea (exodus 14:21-22) in the Bible, to free the Israelites from captivity, hence the Beast “rising out of the sea” (Revelation, 13:1), hence the ritual of baptism where the baptized is plunged into water where he dies to his current life to be reborn in his new life. The allegory of hope tells a similar story, as Hope is usually represented as a young woman holding an anchor, the instrument which helps avoid the ship running ashore or getting carried away by the winds and currents.

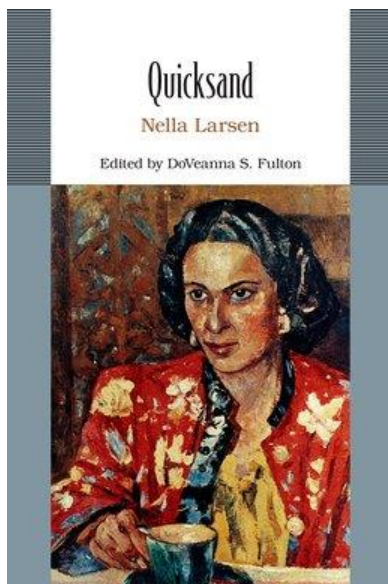
Hope is, in a nutshell, the avoidance of chaos and purposeless wandering. On his way home from Troy, Ulysses and his companions are driven off-course by a powerful storm at sea, sent by Zeus, and carried beyond the bounds of the known world. This is the beginning of their trials. The Odysseus elaborates in a narrative and symbolic manner on the fundamental religious conception of the Bronze and Iron Ages, to which the Bible also belongs of course, and which Joseph Campbell so powerfully summarizes as the idea “that the inward turning of the mind (symbolized by the sunset) should culminate in a realization of an identity *in esse* of the individual (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm) which, when achieved, would bring together in one order of act and realization the principles of eternity and time, sun and moon, male and female, Hermes ad Aphrodite, and the two serpents of the caduceus”. There may well be in this crossing of the river (Rio Grande, Meriç River...) or the sea (Mediterranean) an echo of these psychologically more fundamental – and seldom successful - crossings. Gerhard Richter famously said in a 1982 interview that “art is the highest form of hope”. This is not because art provides any hint at any *solution* to any problem;

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it does not, or that “art” is not worth its salt. It is because it symbolically points at a “place” where, to borrow from Campbell, the sun and the moon meet, the individual and the universal.

We are not drifting so far apart from Larsen’s video by calling in such ancient images. The toiling and laments of Jason come from a soul which realizes that it has lost its anchor and is soon to be lost in nothingness. It is interesting indeed that the artist should have chosen the name *Jason* for his “hero”. In the Greek myth, Jason did overcome the great dangers which were thrown in his way once he had succeeded in crossing the sea, and thus accomplished his quest thanks to the passion which he had aroused in Medea. In Larsen’s video, Argo sinks, there will be no Medea, and the Golden Fleece will not be taken away. In mythology, the pairs of opposites (life and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness and so on) are symbolized by the two clashing rocks of the Bosphorus, the Symplegades that clashed when a traveler attempted to go through. The Argonauts defeated them, and since then the rocks stopped moving. They are similar, in the words of Nicholas of Cusa (1401 – 1464), to the “Wall of Paradise” which prevents humans to be in the presence of God, until overcome. The drowning of Larsen’s Jason is a manner of symbolic reversal of the myth. The “Wall of Paradise” will not be crossed. Humanity will still wish to do so, and attempt the voyage, but to no effect, it will end up into a delusion. But while he fights for his life amidst the cold waves, Jason keeps recalling his past, in brief sequences. Perhaps the Golden Fleece was left behind because it could not be discerned, and is now out of reach. This is at least one of the readings which the video invites.

One could also refer to a tragic existentialism with Hegelian overtones; for Hegel, no individual may reach a true knowledge of himself before he realizes himself *through action* (“*ehe es sich durch Tun zur Wirklichkeit gebracht hat*”). Action is the dawn, the moment when the self emerges from its mere potentiality, from the “night of possibility”. Larsen’s Jason is struggling in darkness, fighting to emerge from that night of latent, unrealized possibilities. He will not reach the shore, he will not transform his thoughts and his talents into an individual trajectory; however, his attempt is *already* action, it is already the Hegelian *Tun der Tat*, the making of the Act. Jason has already become an “ethical substance” (*sittliche Substanz*) through his attempt.



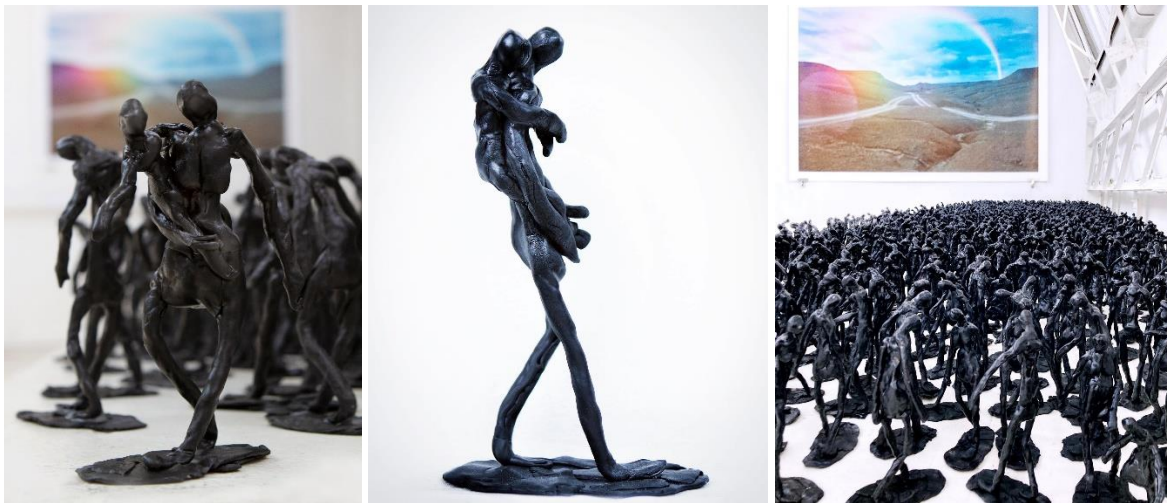
It cannot have escaped Nikolaj Larsen that a largely autobiographical novel with the title *Quicksand*, written by the American author Nella Larsen, was published in 1928. Nella Larsen’s mother was Danish, and her father a Black from the West Indies. This novel is about the identity struggle of its mixed-race female protagonist, Helga Crane, partly set in the Harlem of the 1920s, precisely the years of the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age. The question of *where do I belong?*, and of how to act as a bi-racial woman who did not easily fit into any socially determined category at that time, are dealt with in the novel without any clear conclusion, as one would expect.

It is in the end the heroin’s escape to Paris, a foreign and open environment where she would be less hostage to her mixed identity, that provides her with some solace, although it is a way to ditch the question.

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Quicksand is - both in the novel and in the video - a place *in between*, the place of a quest, neither land nor sea, a place where you are at risk of losing yourself, of drowning literally and metaphorically. A place between what you fear or reject, and wish to leave, and what you aspire to and wish to reach, between perceived insecurity and perceived security.

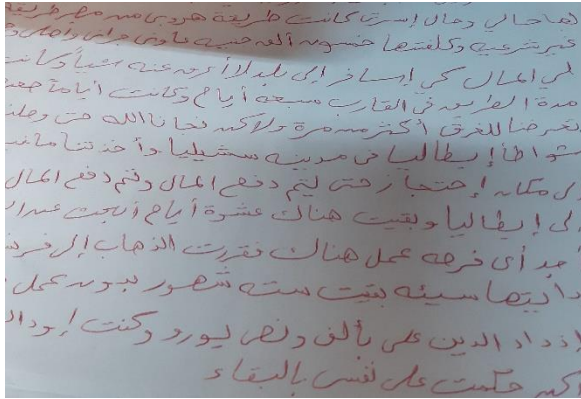
The *Wanderers*, although conceived after *Quicksand*, consist of small, seven-to-ten inches black figurines molded in platicine around an aluminium foil core. Each one is different, and Larsen produced hundreds of them. In the exhibition *Le regard du temps*, 1107 of them are lined up in a huge crowd perhaps twenty figurines wide, all walking in the same direction. None has a face, a bit like those wooden dummies used by artists, but their gender is more or less identifiable; some carry a child. Here is the depiction of a quasi-biblical exodus. Let us re-read a passage of *Exodus* 12 and 13: “12 ³⁷The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. *There were about six hundred thousand men on foot*, besides women and children [...] 13 ³ Then Moses said to the people, “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, *out of the land of slavery*, because the Lord brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Eat nothing containing yeast. ⁴ Today, in the month of Aviv, you are leaving. ⁵ When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites—the land he swore to your ancestors to give you, *a land flowing with milk and honey*—you are to observe this ceremony in this month: ⁶ For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the Lord...”. In the image of the *Wanderers*, there is implied *behind* them a “land of slavery”, which may be perhaps a land made unlivable by drought, climate change, or brutality, and *in front* of them a “land flowing with milk and honey”, be it only by contrast. In the Bible, the Israelites spend quite a while in between these two lands, forty years in the desert, with forty a number which symbolizes testing and trial; that period also corresponds to the moment when the last individual from the generation which left Egypt had died so that the honey could not have been for the ones who had set off. The desert is the tough place where they had to prove their fortitude, their faith. Larsen’s *Wanderers* are also experiencing the desert. They are all black because black is the colour of the unknown, the undifferentiated, the not-manifested, the colour also of fear and death; it is esoterically the colour of a trial, an ordeal to get through: every night, the Sun-God Rê crosses the world of darkness on his sun-bark to be reborn in the morning.



The absence of any facial or other features reinforces this element of undifferentiation, of identity either lost or yet to be found. The lightness and cheapness of the material, although a result of practicality rather

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than symbolic intent, could also be interpreted as a sign of intrinsic worthlessness or at least of vulnerability during that period of exodus. Interestingly, some visitors gave up acquiring these figurines because they seemed to be made of bronze, but when lifted resulted too *light* to appear to be worth anything. Weight and value are semiotically connected.



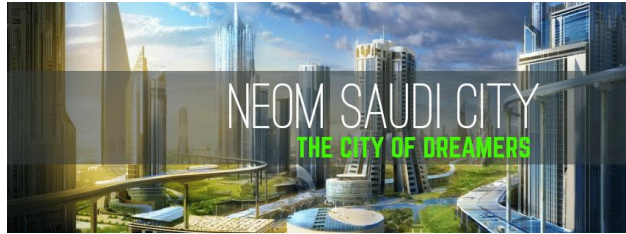
In *Keep Moving Forward*, Larsen has created a sort of video apophthegm of dashed hope, building on a very moving letter in red Arabic letters which he once received from an Egyptian migrant met by chance on the streets of Paris. While the character in the video walks in the desert with nothing in sight, other than the occasional abandoned caravanserai, he recites the very words which this migrant had written to Larsen.

This is his story, the story of a disappointed, helpless, distraught man who confesses that he feels and perhaps always felt at a loss. And despite that, here he is, walking under a blazing sun in the desert towards something, but what? One immediately perceives the inconsistency between the quest of the man walking and suffering this loneliness and unbearable heat, which must be justified at least by the plausibility of reaching some desirable place, on the one hand, and the words he utters which seem to belie this hope, on the other hand. The man talks of going back to his country with some earnings and live there in peace, but not wanting to get back to that country to find it as it was when he left... as if the country would for some reason change during his absence, as if his travails were somewhat able to change that country through some mysterious connections. He walks in the desert of his present life, without family, friends or job, and keeps walking and talking of coming back. Confusion, absurdity if you will, but this act of walking in the metaphorical desert makes this man exist, it turns him into an archetype.



Hope is symbolized in this instance by a rainbow appearing in the desert, but is it hope or mere fantasy? A trial to be experienced so as to reach some higher state of felicity? Or a delusion under the guise of hope? A rainbow in the desert is certainly an unlikely occurrence... but precisely for this reason it is an ambiguous symbol of hope, hope that rain is at least possible if only one may go a little further, wait a little longer, but a hope strongly mitigated by a sense of delusion given the likelihood that such a "rain" will materialize. Here is an Exodus in reverse, it would seem, a crossing of the desert from Canaan towards Egypt once Canaan

itself has become disappointing, unlivable perhaps. Anyone may use "Canaan" and "Egypt" as metaphors corresponding to his own experience.



Last but certainly not least, the artist is currently working on a film (Keep Moving Forward) where a character, a European man in this case, is walking in the desert with the hope of reaching a utopian town on the other side, modelled on the NEOM project in north-western Saudi Arabia, the "City of dreams". A dream from afar and potentially a nightmare from within, if one thinks of total social control in the middle of the desert, with nowhere to escape.

Migration can of course be driven by compelling reasons, ranging from persecution to misery, from environmental disaster to war and civil unrest; it has its profiteers and its victims. One may flee the wrath of nature, the violence of states, the wretchedness of ideologies. But migration is also and in parallel an interior voyage, an exploration of what is most fundamental in the human condition, from relationships to identity, and from helplessness to hope, and that dimension is considerably more important than the economic or political one, because if it were not, we would be merely talking of the moving and loss of merchandise.

Nikolaj Larsen started his journey around the *topos* of migration with the question of estrangement, where the human "soul" is split by a deliberate separation between the forces of necessity – or reason if one likes – which are also derived from an inner imperative of self-respect, on the one hand, and the forces of emotion which are all dependent on our relationships, but to some extent "impure" in the sense that the strength of those attachments is perhaps not entirely unrelated to the remittances of the migrant... The silence in the confrontation of the images lets this potential unpleasantness untold. The *fatum* of separation is produced by a double constraint, namely expectations on one side, self-respect on the other, and it is as inescapable as the gods of Antiquity.

A second phase of the artist's work is centered on death, whether physical or social, as symbolized by the "body bags" as well as the folded blankets, and as suggested by the end silence in Quicksand. In all of these instances, no part of the body, no name, no traces or remains, not even the circumstance of the death are ever visible, as if the person had vanished, or never been really there, or perhaps never had any personal history, any identity: it is forever concealed from our eyes. A structural link is created between visibility and identity. Indeed, in the age of mass images and self-projection through a permanent production of mostly irrelevant images, this radical occultation of the self is a good metaphor of physical and social death, both being more or less interchangeable in a contemporary culture which only uses circumlocutions around the general idea of *departure* to talk of death.

A third moment in Larsen's symbolic journey, which mimics to some extent the migrants' journey but in reverse, is the utopian moment, whether individual as in the case of his last film, or collective as in the case of the *Wanderers*, a direct reminder of the Exodus. The difference between this particular utopia and the many ones which were fancied in the past is that Larsen's "utopia" has no shape, no features, no name, no image. It is rather a utopian dream, the dream that perhaps there is indeed a utopia at the end of the road.

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This utopia is akin to the famed Kingdom of Prester John, first reported by the German chronicler Otto von Freising in his *Chronicon* of 1145. Otto claimed to have met with an emissary of Prince Raymond of Antioch who told him that Prester John, a Nestorian Christian and supposed descendent of the Three Magi, had conquered the city of Ecbatana over the Persians and established a wealthy kingdom. A forged letter circulated in 1165 to the Byzantine Emperor, Manuel I Comnenus, describes this marvelous kingdom where all Christian values are perfectly abided by, and which is crossed by a river flowing directly from Paradise. Many a traveler looked for this kingdom, and many more were convinced of its existence. It even had a posterity in comic strips, for instance as a character created by Marvel Comics in 1966 and appearing in *Fantastic Four Vol.1 #54*. One is tempted to call this half legendary, half plausible territory in Larsen's film the "Purpose Kingdom", the place that will ultimately give a yet-undiscernible meaning to the journey.

