It starts with a trap. Omer Fast, the filmmaker, interviews his subject, a refugee from the Niger Delta who is seeking asylum in Britain. The man speaks of his experiences as a child soldier surviving under difficult conditions, and ultimately tells a banal story of building a trap for partridges, a craft taught to him by an ex-soldier in his homeland. He narrates in detail, describing the type of stick used to construct the trap: importantly, when cut, it emits no smell to alert the prey; and also importantly, when bent, it does not yield completely, but will spring back to its original shape. And we return to the trap. In the second part of Nostalgia II, Omer Fast repurposes the anecdote of the trap, and also jumps off from the general circumstances of the asylum seeker, but upends them by inverting both racial and national dynamics: this time we follow a white, English man who seeks asylum in Africa. This inversion is an overt move to pull the narrative away from the specificity of the current news cycle, to allow the drama and the characters to be read outside of an identified time and place. It also functions to elide and avoid characterizations of people based on race and nationality, letting them be understood based on their complex motivations, outside of some predetermined victim/oppressor dynamic. This geographic dislocation is matched by a temporal ambiguity—the piece feels of a different time, from the tone and quality of the 16mm film used to shoot it to the set dressing and costuming; the 1970s are evoked but not replicated, and we are left with some atemporal projection of the future conceived in the past.

The recollection of the trap recurs and repeats throughout this fictionalized narrative, the thread passing from one character to another. Although this part of Nostalgia also begins with the subject of asylum seekers, with a caseworker interviewing a refugee about his possible asylum, this is a dead end, a trap in and of itself. Rather than follow the refugee, the film follows this anecdote as it circles around and connects these disparate episodes; the recurring dislocation is matched by a temporal ambiguity—the piece feels of a different time, from the tone and quality of the 16mm film used to shoot it to the set dressing and costuming; the 1970s are evoked but not replicated, and we are left with some atemporal projection of the future conceived in the past.

The subjects of Fast’s works are often characterized as political, and certainly within the context of history and current events they are, within the frame of his work, however, we understand politically significant events as complex grounds for more nuanced engagement with psychological, emotional, and personal experience. Fast uses these situations for their dramatic and metaphorical potential rather than to stake an explicit political position, and often the narrative thread is tangential to the political or historical circumstances. This acknowledges the reality of human complexity, that we both undermine and transcend easy categories like citizen or refugee, hero or victim, and that the politics of the individual in relation to a larger reality are never simple. Through his work’s self-conscious construction, Fast also acknowledges the complexity of representation in all guises, from the interviewee who tells a story, to the filmmaker who uses it, to the public who consumes it, projecting an ambivalence with regard to the function of politicized works, and even the trap of politicized representation.

We follow the trap. The third part of Nostalgia repurposes the anecdote of the trap, and also jumps off from the general circumstances of the asylum seeker, but upends them by inverting both racial and national dynamics: this time we follow a white, English man who seeks asylum in Africa. This inversion is an overt move to pull the narrative away from the specificity of the current news cycle, to allow the drama and the characters to be read outside of an identified time and place. It also functions to elide and avoid characterizations of people based on race and nationality, letting them be understood based on their complex motivations, outside of some predetermined victim/oppressor dynamic. This geographic dislocation is matched by a temporal ambiguity—the piece feels of a different time, from the tone and quality of the 16mm film used to shoot it to the set dressing and costuming; the 1970s are evoked but not replicated, and we are left with some atemporal projection of the future conceived in the past.

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tale of the trap connects them, but each reiteration serves to signal a loss or a projection, each personal absence echoing the larger absence at the core of the film. And it becomes clear that the title doesn’t simply refer to nostalgia for a lost homeland, or a life changed forever by immigration, but rather to ideas of loss and longing writ large.

The anecdote of the trap of course suggests a metaphorical relation to the work’s purported subject—to the reality of people trapped inside political and historical circumstances, trapped in some limbo between a troubled homeland and an unwelcoming adopted home, trapped by systems of government and control. But as a leitmotif the idea of asylum is foregrounded so much that it nearly disappears, becomes a blind spot and a void in the center of the story. And we recognize the trap of language, or the trap of our desires for narrative cohesion, again, there is great detail, but little clarity. Instead we see how this simple anecdote, carried forward from person to person, once heard and once spoken, reveals individual needs and motivations, and serves as a foil for the construction and projection of self through narrative. Fast has said that people are traps for history. His works meditate on the ways in which we hold history and release it; how experience becomes story, and story becomes experience again through its retelling, and how in the process we author our own identities in relation to the world.

Elizabeth Thomas
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