



FILM REVIEW

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A 'Shadow Game' is Haunting Europe

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Shadow Game

Film (documentary), 2021

Directed by Eefje Blankevoort, Els van Driel

Run Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Original Language: Arabic, Pashtun, English

More Information at:

<https://shadowgame.eu/en/homepage/>

At night, the shadow of Mo, a 17-year-old boy from Iran, hovers over the cobblestones of a Greek town while he is saying: *Playing the game is playing life and death* and shows his tattoo: *Life is war*. This is the story of a world where war is no longer an exception; it is the story of the children of war.

As one of the main pillars of a long-term media project led by Eefje Blankevoort and Els Van Driel, *Shadow Game* is the voice of young people on the move on their perilous journey in search of a humane life in Europe, while exposing the systematized violence of the European asylum system. It accompanies the journeys of the boys on the move whose beards have started to grow on the road—on the Balkan Route, from homelands



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rendered unlivable, passing through Turkey and Greece, and hopefully reaching the EU border with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

In this documentary, we watch the struggle of four protagonists on the peripheries of Europe, carried by solidarity, friendship, endurance, and networks of knowledge. Durrab, Faiz, Yaseen, Mohammed, Fouad, and many more are the subjects and actors of another life within this life—of *borderlife*. Borderlife has its own rhythm, a routine of emergency, an emergency of being stuck in the present. If you enter this borderlife, you routinely hear the words floating in the air: *jungle, police, problem, inshallah, Europe, and the game*.

This term, *the game*, uttered for the first time by who knows who, refers simply to the attempt of crossing the border. Yet moreover, it turns into a ritual of its own; some pre-game preparations according to which game is played—*jungle game, taxi game, train/ticket game, truck game, walking game (pediri game in Pashto)*, etc. It symbolizes escape routes planned according to which border to cross, which country you are from, the color of your skin, and your gender. It is a metaphor that does many things at once. On the one hand, it functions as a safety word. On the other hand, it serves to normalize the unfathomable danger, realizing that even if it inherently involves the possibility of loss, it can be tried over and over again. Moreover, they laugh and joke about their game stories, or even write a song about the game called *Khalaf*, meaning *everything illegal*.

However, sometimes 'game over' means death in a river or the cold. *It's a mission. If you complete it, you win the game. Let's see who wins, the police or us. We will make you crazy. We're children of war.* And yes. They are children. Children who shouldn't be playing this game. *I haven't felt like a child since I came here*, Durrab says to the camera. Moustafa explains how his arm was broken by Croatian police officers, infamous for their brutality. Jano describes the horror of nearly drowning in a river. And we see the worry in the eyes of Shiro, who has no news of the brother he lost while fleeing from the police.

In these stories, the border appears as an impenetrable structure, an irresistible force. On the contrary, however, we must remember that just as the border is not static, despite attempts to standardize and systematize its operation, the experience of *refugeeness* is not the same, fixed and predestined by the border regime. We see how two brothers traveling together have different experiences of being refugees, how a black person has to take different routes, or how this ableist border regime forces women and the elderly to stay behind. Therefore, beyond a geographical demarcation line, the border in our world is alive. It's a land expanding spatially and temporally so much so that borderlife has its own measure of time and space, just as we see in the documentary: *It took five games to get Serbia, there are two-to-three borders left to Belgium, and we'll be there after four rivers*. It's an impact zone that reshapes the things that touch it and is also reshaped by them in a reciprocal process. As Faiz and his friends, who reached France after months of struggle, wrote on the wall as they walked under the bridge at midnight: *Macron here we come*. They are there. They exist. And they have been changing the world.

At first glance, we are watching stories of children turning into shadows at the borders of the EUrope. This movie wants us to see that these shadows have names, faces, voices, and stories as the camera makes us look right into their eyes with close-up shots. If we look closer, we realize that we are also watching those who use being imperceptible and clandestine, being a shadow, as a tactic of escape and resistance against the sovereign, the sovereign who claims to be visible, omnipresent, omniscient.

You can continue to follow the ongoing stories of our protagonists on the website of the project that created the documentary. To see how borderlife expands beyond geographical borders, but also to see that these boys' stories do not freeze at the border, nor on the screen, but continue. And the last word is a plot spoiler: borders are crossed.