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FILM REVIEW

Sea-ing like a Border: Contesting B/order Regimes in Purple Sea (2020)

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Documentary film (2020)

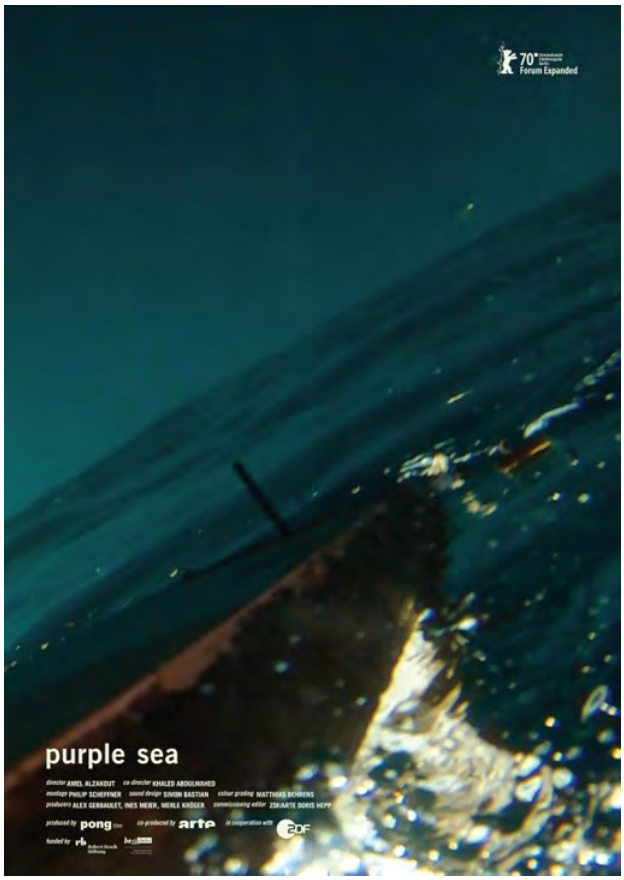
Directed by Amel Alzakout;
co-directed by Khaled Abdulwahed

Runtime: 1 hour, 7 minutes

More information at:

https://pong-berlin.de/en/project/film/purple-sea

https://www.imdb.com/de/title/tt11802768/



Purple Sea (2020) is a documentary by Syrian artist Amel Alzakout that is made from footage the filmmaker captured between 1:30 pm and 5:30 pm on October 28, 2015, as the boat that she and 315 other people were using to cross the Mediterranean Sea capsized and sank between the Turkish coast near Bektaş and Lesbos, Greece. "According to the Hellenic Coast Guard… 274 people were rescued, 42 people died," the film cites. Purple Sea invites the viewer to viscerally re-experience the filmmaker's existential experience while simultaneously confronting us with the inhumanity of what is constructed as the European Union's external borders.

What is more, unlike any other film I have come across recently, the film manages to emblematize the absurdity of Western organizational systems such as supposedly 'fixed' international borders, which in *Purple Sea* immediately lose their organizational currency when applied to maritime spaces. Through its perpetual motion and opacity, the sea liquifies Western modes of orientation; it refuses to be arrested in space and time, to be ordered, to be submitted to Western modes of knowing-as-interpretation (of data). Likewise, *Purple Sea* refuses to comply with these principles, compelling the viewer to re-experience the sea as an unconquerable agent that refuses to be made sense of through the colonial logics of interpretation and explication: we don't know where we are, we don't know whose territorial waters or maritime zones we have exited or entered, the sea denies us all means of telling.

Therefore, *Purple Sea* is not only a significant political artifact that documents both migrants' extremely perilous journeys and the inhumane practices of the

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imperial EU-border regime, but also a cultural artifact of invaluable depth and complexity that answers to pressing border studies questions, specifically as border scholars are increasing their efforts to inquire into aquatic spaces following the recent "oceanic turn" (DeLoughrey 2017) as well as the equally recent "complexity shift" (Wille 2024). This is because *Purple Sea*, among other things, manages to adequately represent the sea not exclusively as a (hostile, potentially lethal) locale but as an agent that irritates and challenges anthropocentric logics, specifically the "habitual instrumentalization of water" (Chen et al. 2013, 4), by way of rejecting simplification on the one hand, and of implementing "the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness" (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 248) on the other.

Above all, this is because of how the film is made. The images *Purple Sea* presents us with come entirely from a waterproof camera that Amel Alzakout had strapped around her wrist during the experience. As a result, the camera continuously moves with her arm. Save for a few exceptions, what we see is therefore rarely a consequence of a deliberate directorial gaze or intentional positioning of her arm, but almost always a consequence of indispensable or involuntary movement—of her body, other bodies in the water, the sea itself—and almost always prompted by impulses other than documenting intelligible images and sounds. If we can recognize what is happening in front of our eyes, we can discern body parts (arms, legs, heads, a finger) or items floating in the water (life vests, clothing attire, debris). Often, we can discern nothing at all, because the camera is moving wildly with the filmmaker's body and the waves, causing the images in front of our eyes to dissolve into an incongruous gush of colours. In a similar vein, what we can hear largely depends on where the camera happens to be positioned: above water, we hear the screams of people, children among them, desperately calling for help and fighting for their lives; below, their voices drown out, and what remains are the shrill but muted noises of emergency whistles, submerged human clamors, and the quiet droning sounds of the moving sea.

Through this arrangement, and most effectively through the uncontrollably, disorienting movement of the camera, *Purple Sea* disperses the boundaries and mechanisms of conventional spatial organization and order, with regard to both (realist) filmmaking and our construction of reality itself. Through Alzakout's movement in the sea, through her positioning in and documentation *from* the oceanic border (Bossé et al. 2019; Mezzadra and Nielson 2013), we re-experience the events as an extension of her body as she has experienced them, and become floating particles within the three-dimensional thalassic entropy, without a Cartesian system to guide us.

Hardly ever do we know for sure how the camera is placed and angled in relation to its surroundings; we find our eyes and ears desperately looking for orientation and visual clues that could help us make sense of what we are perceiving. Yet the film almost categorically denies us this comfort and privilege. Through her body, its dynamic position, and chaotic perpetual movement, we "[see] like a border" (Rumford 2014); one might even say, we *sea* like a border. The sea, not (only) as locale but as an active enforcer of (violent) b/ordering practices (van Houtum et al. 2005) co-constructs the ostensibly rigid but ultimately liquid, flowing, un(arre)stable phenomenology of the border (Gerst and Krämer 2021, 132) as well as the paradoxical colonial logic of "fixity" (Bhabha 2004 [1994], 94-95; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, 126) that informs it.

One navigational aid the film does offer is the voice-over commentary that occasionally accompanies the images whenever the camera on Alzakout's arm is submerged below the water's surface. As the chaotic maelstrom of noise from above drowns out, the film simultaneously opens up an auditory space of partial sensory deprivation, which the filmmaker fills with non-linear reflections about past and (potential) future events that contextualize her existence and situation in the present. Performed in Arabic, these poetic associations sometimes anchor the visual reality of her current state—for instance, referencing the butterfly-patterned blouse of one individual as we see their body floating next to hers—and sometimes flow freely without a visual or auditory referent to establish semantic cohesion.

As such, whether in consonance or dissonance with the film's momentary construction of reality, the voice-over commentary helps to re-experience the events through a multiplicity of contexts and incidentally draws our attention to the fact that, after all, and notwithstanding the dire and unquestionable truths of Alzakout's experience, *Purple Sea* is an artifact—which is not to diminish or trivialize its significance, but conversely to accentuate how this augments and elevates its contribution to meaning-making, including as an artifact of visual border studies research (Kudžmaitė and Pauwels 2022).

More importantly though, it is through its poetics—as "a holding-together of multiple registers of thinking and interpretation within a single image" (Mentz 2024, 13)—that *Purple Sea* potently amalgamates the personal and the political. Moreover, it is through its poetics that the film allows for a genuine, intersubjective experience, which may include a reflection about the tenets of Western epistemology that have created and facilitated the situation Alzakout has found herself in, and how a vehement repudiation of those very logics—"What do you call us? Refugees? Criminals? Victims? Or just numbers? Fuck you all!"—may well be the only way to preserve (her) humanity in the face of inconceivable inhumanity.

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