

“Can We Allow Ourselves to Make Films?”:

Rethinking Production Norms through the Lens of Migration

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This article examines the challenges filmmakers face when producing first-person films about migration within the European film industry, which includes films in which the director is simultaneously a subject in and of the film. Although such films have proliferated in recent years, little is known about the directors' positionality or the production processes behind these works. Drawing on interviews with filmmakers who have navigated the European film industry to share personal and often intimate perspectives on post-migration life in Europe, the article examines the key challenges they encounter in the production process and the tactics they turned to in the negotiation of these barriers. What do their lived experiences reveal about the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry? Taking the collective dimension of film production, what role can interpersonal relationships play in mitigating these challenges and barriers as they emerge? The article emphasizes the need to recognize the directors' vulnerable positionality with respect to migration as well as the importance of considering the specificity of the needs that emerge from it in order to be able to establish a thriving collaboration based on trust. It also urges for more institutional responsibility towards the structural improvement of the position of migrant filmmakers in the European film industry, and for a critical reassessment of crediting and copyright norms in the context of first-person filmmaking.



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INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the European film industry, this article examines the challenges and barriers filmmakers face in the process of making first-person films about migration, which entails films in which the director is simultaneously a subject in and of the film.¹ Migration is a key contextual element here, as I am interested in how filmmakers who are novel to the European film industry navigate its standards and norms with the aim to voice their personal, and often intimate, perspectives on life in Europe in the aftermath of migration. Based on interviews with several directors of first-person films, the article examines the key challenges that arise during their production processes and the tactics the directors turn to navigate these obstacles. What kind of insights can their lived experiences reveal about the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry? Taking the collective dimension of film production, what role can interpersonal relationships play in mitigating these challenges and barriers as they emerge?

¹ I borrow the notion of 'first-person cinema' from Alisa Lebow (2012) to describe films that are not merely autobiographical but that explore broader political or social issues from a personal perspective.

Keywords

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To answer these questions, it is necessary to shift attention from film as a cultural product to film as a cultural process and practice, the examination of which can bring insight into filmmakers' lived experiences, the actual conditions of film production, as well as their institutional contexts (Andersson and Sundholm 2019; Hammett-Jamart, Mitric and Redvall 2019; Beeston and Solomon 2023; Almenara-Niebla and Smets 2024). In particular, studying the challenges and barriers in a film's production process, and the filmmakers' negotiation of them, can be an ideal site for examining how collaborations, institutions, and policies shape the filmmaking process. Moreover, focusing on the productions within the European film industry from the perspective of migration has the potential to reveal how "power operates locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of daily interactions" (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009, 15). Therefore, even the most personal and intimate forms of filmmaking, as indeed first-person films often are, can be conceptualized as *braided*—shaped by collective processes and practices for better or worse (Sanders and Nash 2019).

The research for this article comprises an explorative qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with four directors concerning their lived experiences of producing first-person films about migration in Europe. I interviewed Kivu Ruhorahoza on the production of *Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019), Diana El Jeiroudi on the production of *The Republic of Silence* (2021), and Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández on the production of *In a Whisper* (2019). The countries of origin of the interviewed filmmakers vary—spanning Rwanda, Syria, and Cuba—as do their motivations to migrate, countries of residence, filmmaking experience, and the collaborations they have established in the film industry. Yet what connects these filmmakers is that upon migration to Europe they have all had to navigate the complexity of its film industry in order to produce their films, with the films' production countries including United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, France, and Spain. The lead producer of *Europa* was Antonio Rui Ribeiro (Moon Road Films, UK), with whom Ruhorahoza has a long-standing working relationship as both producer and editor. *Republic of Silence* was produced by Orwa Nyrabia (No Nation Films, Germany), El Jeiroudi's partner with whom she has worked closely on all her films. Unlike *Europa* and *Republic of Silence*, which were developed through long-standing director-producer partnerships, *In a Whisper* was realised by Hassan and Pérez Fernández with a newly formed team led by producer Daniel Froiz (Matriuska Films, Spain) [Table 1].

FILM	DIRECTOR	COUNTRIES OF PRODUCTION	LEAD PRODUCER
<i>Europa, "Based on a True Story"</i> (2019)	Kivu Ruhorahoza	Rwanda, United Kingdom, Switzerland	Antonio Rui Ribeiro
<i>Republic of Silence</i> (2021)	Diana El Jeiroudi	Syria, Germany, France, Italy, Qatar	Orwa Nyrabia
<i>In a Whisper</i> (2019)	Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández	Cuba, Spain, France, Switzerland	Daniel Froiz

Table 1: Overview of relevant information regarding the (co-)production of selected films.

An important common element in the production of all three films is that they were realised through co-production arrangements and as such involve intercultural collaborations between people and institutions from different European countries and beyond. As Hammett-Jamart, Mitric and Redvall (2019, 6) aptly argue, there are many manners in which co-productions can be initiated and enacted, “from mutual decision-making about all creative aspects of the project to more pragmatic co-financing arrangements”. Indeed, understanding the specific manner of *how* (co-)productions are negotiated interpersonally—from navigating its administrative aspects to establishing working collaborations more generally—and what the effects of those decisions are, is a key focal point of this article.

The interviews with the directors on their lived experiences navigating the European film industry to produce first-person films about migration were conducted with the aim to achieve “new insights into otherwise opaque industrial processes” (Banks et al. 2015, xi). My main interest in each of the interviews has been to understand how migration might have affected the films’ production process and the collaborations that were essential to it, as well as what the directors’ key tactics were in working through the challenges and barriers they encountered. These considerations open to the study of production ethics, which involves an examination of the ethically salient aspects of the labour involved in filmmaking (Aufderheide 2012; Nash 2012; Hjort 2022; Nannicelli 2022). The aims of studying the ethics of film production can be articulated in the following manner:

As a field, film production ethics takes seriously the task of identifying, clarifying, and strengthening the force of ethical norms as they relate to film production. What is at stake here is how living beings—women, children, animals, and specific professional groups (actresses, stunt persons)—but also, for example, the natural environment, are treated during the making of motion pictures. (Hjort 2022, 151–152)

When it comes to the ethics of film production, the themes of *vulnerability* and *trust* emerge across the varied experiences of Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández, each of whom faced distinct challenges and barriers in this regard.

When ethical concerns arise in the production process, the question of *responsibility* follows, and I side with Nannicelli (2022, 182) that “filmmakers have certain moral responsibilities or duties (as well as constraints) that arise from their relationships with other agents”. Taking that the production of first-person documentaries concerns director’s own lived experiences, who often also features as a protagonist in the film, the relationship between a director and a producer who oversees the administrative, financial, and practical aspects of the production process deserves special attention, even though other relationships between the director and the crew members can also be of relevance. My aim is not to arrive at prescriptive solutions to the identified challenges and barriers

that can be universally applied to other production processes, but to examine them in the context of first-person filmmaking about migration, and, on the basis of the conducted interviews, identify potential 'good how to approach concerns regarding vulnerability and trust in film production. It is important to highlight that this article's research only includes the director's perspective, and not those of the producer or other collaborators, which would be a productive avenue to explore in further research. In addition, while the select interview corpus won't allow me to make any generalisations regarding the position of migrant filmmakers in Europe, their varied positionalities and experiences can help in rethinking production norms through the lens of migration.

The interviews with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández were conducted between February 2022 and December 2023.² The interpretations of transcribed interviews were sent to all of them for feedback and consent. Drawing on the interviews, the first section elaborates on the directors' lived experiences of production-related challenges, and discusses the importance of acknowledging the different forms of migration-related vulnerability and their impact on the production process. Building on this, the second section examines how the directors' migration-related vulnerability shapes their specific needs in establishing trust with collaborators, with a particular focus on the director-producer relationship. The interviews also highlight the need for greater institutional responsibility in improving the structural position of migrant filmmakers within the European film industry, as well as a re-examination of standards and norms regarding credit and copyright in first-person filmmaking more broadly.

While this research contributes to a long tradition of studying migrant, transnational and intercultural film practices (Marks 2000; Naficy 2001; Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal 2010; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012), it can also be considered explorative in the following ways. First, migration and the position of migrant filmmakers in the film industry are understudied topics in production studies, with some notable exceptions (Grassilli 2008; Frimberger and Bishopp 2020; Hughes 2021). Second, key studies in production ethics tend to focus on the director's responsibility towards the film's protagonist (Sanders 2010; Nash 2011; Alamouti 2020; Hjort 2022), but not on the relationship between the director and the producer in the context of first-person filmmaking. This article responds to the identified research gaps by deepening the understanding of the ethically salient aspects of collaborations on first-person documentary production in Europe to which migration is central.

² I received an ethics approval to conduct the interviews by the Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam in June 2021.

MIGRATION AND VULNERABILITY

Understanding the vulnerability of subjects involved in the production process is key to the prevention of harm (Hjort 2022; Nannicelli 2022). In the case of first-person filmmaking, it is the director's own vulnerable positionality that needs to be addressed. In such cases, the elimination of risk and prevention of harm become complex issues, as this section aims to show. Following Judith Butler (2021), I understand vulnerability as a feature of one's relational existence rather than a subjective state, and precarity in terms of the level of support afforded by that relationality. In the context of production ethics, Hjort (2022, 153) has given the examples of "age, lack of experience, gender, and the absence of institutionalised and properly enforced protections" as potential factors for the subjects' vulnerability. Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández reflected on the specific vulnerabilities of their situations at the time of the films' making. Each of the directors identified different factors that made the production process challenging, such as concerns about the inclusivity of funding infrastructures for migrant filmmakers in Europe, the unpredictability of the production process due to migration, and the lack of accessibility of European film industry for those novel to it. This section details the directors' negotiation of these barriers and the co-production arrangements they established, which range from *non-official* to *official* co-productions (Hammett-Jamart 2019, 48–50). The former denotes "a set-up where content producers from two or more countries decide to collaborate, independently of government, each bringing financial and creative resources to the project" and the latter describes a "very specific form of international co-production which occurs under the auspices of a bilateral agreement between governments".

Inclusivity of funding infrastructures

Not being eligible to receive public funding due to his migrant status was a key challenge for Ruhorahoza when trying to find the means to produce *Europa*. The film is a documentary-fiction hybrid in which Ruhorahoza's own experience of exclusion in Britain frames a fictional story of illegalisation and deportation of a Nigerian migrant in London. The project started in 2016 as featuring only the fictional story, its production coinciding with Britain's vote to exit the European Union. This development led Ruhorahoza to expand the frame of the film to the reality he was living in, which involved increasingly more criminalisation and ostracism of migrants in Britain. He describes this period of living and working in Britain as imbued with a "sense of dread", in part because of his own insecure migrant status. At the time, Ruhorahoza was based in London as a freelance filmmaker, and the infrastructures he could rely on were scarce, if not non-existent. This led him to fund the film entirely from personal finances, rather than any filmmaking grants. "I am not eligible for any European funds that are designed, conceived, and intended for European filmmakers. There are

some funds for African filmmakers, but that's another topic. I was not eligible for anything".³ Rather than leading Ruhorahoza to abandon the project because of the precarity of its production, the experience of being excluded from the funding infrastructures of the European film industry prompted him to find alternative means to realise his vision. Ruhorahoza describes the process of producing *Europa* as one of "hustling":

Negotiating deals, using my previous work to convince collaborators, collaborators convincing other people in their network that this film should get made, renting equipment at severely reduced prices while making sure everybody has insurance, shooting at the time when the industry is a bit dormant, like in winter, when things tend to get much cheaper and technicians are available.

While Ruhorahoza was not able to rely on the official funding infrastructures in the United Kingdom, where the film's production took place, together with his long-term producer and editor Antonio Ribeiro, who is a Portuguese filmmaker based in England, he managed to find alternative means to realise *Europa*. Rather than receiving any English national funding for the film, *Europa* was largely funded through Ruhorahoza's personal investments and those of his collaborators, making the non-official co-production between Ruhorahoza and his collaborators in England and Switzerland based on the collective belief in the film's creative potential rather than financial benefit.

Unpredictability of migration

The unpredictability of her own situation and that of her protagonists was the main challenge for El Jeiroudi during the twelve-year long production of *Republic of Silence*. The film is a mosaic of different moments in El Jeiroudi's life, but also in the lives of her family and friends, tracing their interdependence in the face of the 2011–2024 conflict in Syria. After the escalation of the Syrian revolution into an armed conflict, El Jeiroudi relocated to Egypt in 2012 together with her long-term partner and producer Orwa Nyrabia, where the two were able to temporarily continue working on *Republic of Silence*, as well as other films they engaged in as producers. "At one point in 2012," El Jeiroudi explains, "we had two offices in Damascus: one hideout office, an underground office where we did a lot of operations, and our usual office, which was a facade, a legal thing. And then we had another office in Egypt." However, after a coup d'état took place in Egypt in 2013, their operations were immediately shut down, their company closed and bank accounts frozen, which led El Jeiroudi and Nyrabia to

3 With funds specifically intended for African filmmakers, Ruhorahoza refers to grants that would require him to produce the film in Africa, while *Europa* was intended to be set in Europe. This is a common requirement of European and American funds aiming to support non-Western filmmakers, to produce the film in one's country of origin.

move to Germany. The project, *El Jeiroudi* reflects, was very vulnerable to the unpredictability of their situation:

I was very frustrated with the film because it was slipping away from my fingers. Nothing was happening as I planned or as I envisioned. I was changing as a filmmaker, and my characters were changing, they were changing places and thoughts. It was intense. We were all the time in the state of moving. We could only create a set-up that is more productive after a year or two of moving to Germany, because we also needed the time to navigate a new system of production and all of its logistics.

Rather than resist these disruptions, El Jeiroudi embraced them as part of the film's evolving form, thereby adapting the production process to the unpredictability of migration. This openness to change was sustained not only by her creative resilience but also by her partnership with Nyrabia. El Jeiroudi and Nyrabia closely worked together to establish pragmatic financing arrangements that can support the film's creative process, with *Republic of Silence* being realised through German national funding. It was officially co-produced between Germany and France, with additional finances from Italy and Qatar.

Accessibility of film industry

The struggle to gain access to the European film industry was the biggest challenge for Hassan and Pérez Fernández, whose film *In a Whisper* intimately explored their own experience of belonging in Europe through the prism of their friendship. While Hassan and Pérez Fernández had previous filmmaking experience, trying to get their first feature off the ground in the aftermath of migrating from Cuba to Switzerland and Spain respectively was a trying and lengthy operation:

It was the first time we were making a film in Europe following the 'official' rules. Everything we did before was more underground. The production of the film was a very long process and most of the time was dedicated to the finding of the funding. We spent four years trying to find ways to develop the film in a way that it could be funded as a European co-production. A lot of producers showed interest, but in the end they would always think that the project was too weak or fragile to invest in it.

Eventually, Hassan and Pérez Fernández managed to establish a co-production team with Spain as the main producer, and Switzerland, France, and Cuba as co-producers, which allowed the project to get off the ground. While the team "really believed in the project and in the story we wanted to tell," the directors found the newly established relationships challenging to navigate, which led them to reflect on the importance of carefully choosing collaborators:

Co-production is something that requires some kind of casting, in which you not only choose the producer based on financial aspects of their involvement, but also on the basis of their personality and the relationship you have established. We started a professional relationship that lasted five years with people that we only met once. For us, these were the first people that got interested in the project, which felt amazing after years of struggling to achieve funding, but the decision to work together is more complex than that.

Difficulty in gaining access to the European film industry thereby led the directors to establish a co-production team without understanding all of the implications of that decision, which continued being a challenge during the long production process. In contrast to Ruhorahoza and El Jeiroudi, for whom the established co-production arrangements helped overcome the vulnerability of their respective situations, Hassan and Pérez Fernández reflect that despite managing to establish an official co-production team between Spain and France, with additional financial support from Cuba and Switzerland—all of which was financially necessary to realise *In a Whisper*. The relationship, however, lacked a personal and creative dimension comparable to Ruhorahoza's and El Jeiroudi's production teams, which in turn negatively impacted the production process.

Sharing vulnerability

As the interviews revealed, the vulnerabilities that were identified as key for the films' production led to different challenges and barriers in the production process. Some of these vulnerabilities were of institutional nature, such as the concerns regarding the inclusivity of film funding infrastructures in Europe and the accessibility of the European film industry, while others were of more personal nature, such as the unpredictability of life in the aftermath of migration. Despite these differences, what the conversations with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández suggest is that migration—and the specificities of the directors' migrant status in Europe—can result in administrative, practical, and professional challenges that can significantly shape the production process but also the form of the films.

What proves crucial for understanding the specific form that vulnerability takes and the obstacles it may create in the production process is not whether the co-production was official or unofficial, but the nature of the director-producer relationship and their shared awareness of the nature of that vulnerability. Learning from these stories, such shared understanding and ability to develop a close working relationship based on it, emerges as pivotal for the production process. In the context of migration and first-person filmmaking, which can bring a specific set of administrative, practical, and professional challenges, having an *acknowledgement of vulnerability* as 'good practice' is relevant not only regarding the producer's ability to support the director and create a thriving production process, but also with respect to their own liability for the

project with respect to investors and financiers. The nature of the interpersonal and intercultural director-producer relationships will be further elaborated in the following section.

COLLABORATION AND TRUST

The decision to collaborate is a complex one, with trust being a key dimension of thriving collaborations. “Placing trust”, Kate Nash (2010, 28) argues, “involves risk and makes us vulnerable”. Such an understanding of trust stresses its inseparability from risk and vulnerability. How is trust between directors and producers established and maintained in the process of working on first-person films to which migration is central? Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez emphasise that navigating the personal and professional dimensions of the director-producer relationship—and collaborations more broadly—is key to a project’s success, each of them highlighting different values they find essential to building trust, such as transparency, interdependence, protection, guidance, and fairness.

Transparency

The trust underlying Ruhorahoza’s collaborations appears to be based on transparency about each other’s positionality and a willingness to collaborate despite the risks that their vulnerable positions carry. Regarding his team of collaborators, Ruhorahoza stresses the importance of working with Antonio Rui Ribeiro (producer; editor) and MaryEllen Higgins (executive producer). Ruhorahoza’s relationship with Ribeiro is long-standing, and the two have collaborated on several of Ruhorahoza’s previous films. They met in 2010 when Ribeiro joined Ruhorahoza during the editing phase of his first feature film, *Grey Matter*. “Our collaboration on that film as an editor quickly turned into a discussion about many other things—about alliance, friendship, commitment to film, et cetera. From then on, everything major that I worked on or that he worked on became a professional conversation between the two of us.” Ruhorahoza elaborates on the mutual trust on which their personal and professional relationship is based:

Antonio grew up in Portugal in times of dictatorship, when his mother wanted them to migrate to Britain, which couldn’t happen at the time. He moved to England as an adult, founded a theatre, and was working with artists from Palestine, Indonesia, and Zimbabwe, among others. Because of these things he was exposed to, there are things he understood much faster. Despite the constraints and threats that the project faced, it was a risk he was willing to take. He understood that it won’t be an easy ride, like it can sometimes be when you’re working with a well-funded British director. It’s really that kind of complete conversation at all levels with the producer that can make it possible for things to happen.

A key factor in establishing a long-standing relationship based on trust between Ruhorahoza and Ribeiro was their similar positionality in Britain. This allowed them to be transparent about the possibilities and limitations of their situations, enabling them to navigate the project's financial vulnerabilities together.

Interdependence

While the process of producing *Republic of Silence* involved different vulnerabilities than *Europa*, the ability to establish trust among diverse collaborators was vital for El Jeiroudi, with interdependence among collaborators being a key value in this regard. Upon moving to Germany, she describes the hardest part of navigating the German film industry as its “compartmentalised culture”, a way of working informed by the understanding that things, people, and processes occur independently of each other. In contrast to what she experienced as an excessive emphasis on independence, interdependence informs her practice—a way of working that embraces relationality between things, people, and processes. Interdependence is key for El Jeiroudi both in production and directing: she stresses the numerous relationships that supported the project during the unpredictable years in which it was made, viewing *Republic of Silence* first and foremost as a collaboration between her, Orwa Nyrabia (producer; cinematographer; protagonist), Guevara Namer (cinematographer; protagonist), and Rami Abou Jamra (protagonist):

Personal films are very delicate. The fact that I made films before, and that I'm working with other filmmakers as a producer and mentor, helped me to realise that there are certain problems I will face. I knew that this is a personal film, I'm only doing it once, and it's difficult. Not only is it personal film, but I'm filming people who are very close to me and who are also filmmakers. The good thing, in my case, is that those are friends and people I care about, with whom I had worked before. It was a partnership. It was very important to clarify with everyone what their proportion of work will be or how their work will be portrayed vis-à-vis other contributors. It was important that each and everyone's contribution is credited and agreed on.

In this way, by developing a large team of collaborators with whom trust was mutually assured through a shared sense of interdependence, El Jeiroudi managed to work through the vulnerabilities of the unpredictable production process.

Guidance, protection, and fairness

Taking that *In a Whisper* was their first feature film, as well as that co-production was a novel form of collaboration to the directors, Hassan and Pérez

Fernández identified guidance and protection as values that were necessary to create a thriving collaboration. These were, however, hard to realise in a newly established team:

The relationships were a bit blurry and we didn't have the experience to know how to navigate it. These relationships turned out to be a lot more important than what we could understand at the moment of establishing a co-production team. It's important to note that everyone was in different countries and that the communication was online and in English, while not everyone had a very good command of English, which easily led to misunderstanding.

While the co-production team gave Hassan and Pérez Fernández creative freedom, the two emphasise that they would have approached the process of co-production differently if they had more experience in the European film industry. "It's really important to have a good personal and professional relationship with everyone in your team", they explain, "not only because these processes tend to be very long, but because, in this type of a project, you are also exposing yourself, and you need the producer to also be some kind of protector". Therefore, a collaboration and co-production primarily motivated by a financing arrangement officially led by a producer with the biggest financial contribution, who in this case was Daniel Froiz, did not meet Hassan's and Pérez Fernández's needs.

A major disagreement between Hassan and Pérez Fernández and their co-production team occurred with respect to the fair provision of credit and copyright. When it comes to co-production, an important consideration concerns the negotiation of credit, with the "recognition of one's name in connection with the role being portrayed is universally seen by performers as an essential element in developing and sustaining a professional career" (Sand 2013, 24). Provision of credit can also be of importance when it comes to the question of copyright, which is automatically granted to the director as the creator of the film, but can be transferred from the director to the producer via a license or assignment of rights, the former being a transfer of rights for a limited amount of time, and the latter involving a full transfer of ownership (Moullier 2022). Transfer of copyright involves the transfer of economic rights against a certain remuneration and/or negotiation of a revenue share. Contracts are considered as key to the efficient transfer of rights, and should stipulate which rights are being given away and which are retained (Sand 2013).

For Hassan and Pérez Fernández, who acted as the film's producers over many years before an official co-production team was established, it was a source of disappointment that this work was not reflected in the provision of credit: "In terms of work done, we also acted as producers, but we never defended that work in terms of credits". Not having a producer credit meant that the copyright to the archival footage of their own lives had to be transferred to the producer, with the initial contract about the transfer of rights stipulating the 'non-compete clause' that prevents filmmakers to reuse the footage intended

for the film in case. The two, however, managed to negotiate otherwise, arguing that the standard 'non-compete clause' needs to be rethought with regards to the autobiographical nature of the footage: "Because of the specifics of the project, its first-person form, we were able to negotiate the ability to reuse the material in our future work. It was too absurd not to have access to the archive of your own life." While the two managed to negotiate the copyright license to ensure access to their own personal archives, negotiating economic rights to the film was more difficult:

We hold 7.5% each of In a Whisper's revenue, which was in itself hard to achieve. This means that in most cases, when the film is awarded with a prize, each of us gets only 7.5% of that award. There are only select festivals that insist for the prize to be shared between the directors and producers. To avoid such situations after In a Whisper, we have decided to create our own production company, so that we can be legally recognised for the work we do, protect our own archival material, and impact the production design of the project. Since we created our own production company, we are in a slightly more comfortable situation, because now we negotiate economic rights as part of the production company's profits, which we try to make at least 20%.

These difficulties, as Hassan and Pérez Fernández explain, led them to change their approach in their subsequent projects by together establishing a production company, so as to ensure a fair credit provision and in turn also more negotiating power regarding the sharing of the revenue.

Aligning values

In previous qualitative research in production ethics focusing on the director-protagonist relationships, "trust has been found to rely on mutual vulnerability in the relationship and a shared sense of the documentary project as a valuable goal" (Nash 2011, 10), which suggests a need for a relational approach to power, rather than its understanding in terms of the director's power over the subject. Based on the cases discussed here, I would argue that a comparable observation holds for the director-producer relationships when it comes to first-person filmmaking, in particular in vulnerable contexts as the ones created by migration. What the conversations with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández reveal is how trust is relationally negotiated between the director and the producer, but also other collaborators. Rather than there being one way to establish trust among the collaborators, all of the directors identified different values that they considered key for building trust, which speaks to the diversity of needs that different vulnerable positions might require. Transparency, interdependence, guidance, protection, and fairness were values that needed to be negotiated within the respective collaborations, with the ability to establish trust having the potential to aid the director in

navigating the vulnerabilities of migration.

One potential factor that speaks to the differences among the identified values could be the extent of both the director's and the producer's filmmaking experience, with the contingency becoming greater with a smaller body of experience. For example, Ruhorahoza and El Jeiroudi, who had considerable experience as filmmakers at the time,⁴ consider transparency and interdependence as key, while Hassan and Pérez Fernández, for whom the projects at stake were their first features, consider guidance and protection important. If the collaboration is established without not only an acknowledgement of vulnerability but also a *consideration of needs* that arise from a vulnerable position, the outcome could be not the mitigation but exacerbation of precarity.

Moreover, Hassan's and Pérez Fernández's critique of norms regarding the provision of credit and copyright concerns the implications of the division of labour in first-person filmmaking. As first-person filmmaking concerns the director's own life, some of the typical production tasks, such as the development of the project and managing of day-to-day operations, tend to be performed by the director, sometimes even before the producer joins the project, as is the case with films built on already existing personal archives. Among the first-person films discussed here, it was only El Jeiroudi who shared the producer credit, while Ruhorahoza co-produced his subsequent film *Father's Day* (2022), and Hassan and Pérez Fernández aim to co-produce their films in the future. While directors can negotiate arrangements in which they have a co-producer credit, it is still not a standard practice in first-person filmmaking to do so. One of the reasons for this is that a provision of producer credit has implications for copyright and economic rights, as those are shared among the co-producers. What the filmmakers here question is the normalisation of transferring the copyright to the archive of one's own life, including occasionally the complete transfer of economic rights. Learning from their stories, the negotiation of labour division in first-person filmmaking, and the implications that carry for provision of credit and copyrights, should become a more standardised practice in the production of first-person films.

CONCLUSION

"Can we allow ourselves to make films?", Ruhorahoza rhetorically asked at the end of our conversation. This appears as a key question when it comes to understanding the relationship between migration and the European film industry. How to position oneself in the environment that is not set up with your positionality in mind? To *allow* oneself to do something implies the process of not only negotiating the external challenges one faces in such an

⁴ While *Republic of Silence* was El Jeiroudi's first feature as a director, she already had ample experience as a producer.

environment but also a state of internal friction, a question of whether one is permitted to make space for one's own story. The process of navigating the European film industry to tell one's story of migration requires an extensive negotiation not only of a flawed filmmaking infrastructure but also of internalised doubts.

On the basis of interviews with Kivu Ruhorahoza (Europa, "*Based on a True Story*", 2019), Diana El Jeiroudi (*Republic of Silence*, 2021), and Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández (*In a Whisper*, 2019), this article examined how vulnerability and trust are relationally negotiated among the collaborations that were vital to the realisation of the films at stake. When it comes to production ethics, the interviews highlight the importance of acknowledging the directors' vulnerable positionality with respect to migration as well as considering the specificity of the needs that emerge from it in order to be able to establish a thriving collaboration based on trust.

Additionally, the particular situations discussed here also challenge institutional culture in terms of "accepted ways of treating persons within a given hierarchical structure" (Hjort 2022, 165) by calling for more institutional responsibility: they ask whether additional forms of institutional support could be made available to guide and protect the directors and producers who find themselves navigating equivalent or similar challenges to the ones identified here. In addition, in the cases that question the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry, there is a need to structurally improve the position of migrant filmmakers in this regard. Moreover, as the concerns regarding the provision of credit and copyright point, the blueprints for collaborating on first-person films should be structurally re-examined.

Furthermore, while the interviews reveal the intricacies of the process of expressing first-person voices, it is worth pointing out that most of these voices—all but Ruhorahoza's—constitute the filmmakers' first feature. The question then emerges whether the making of one's second feature would be easier to navigate. In other words, what are the possibilities for continuing one's work as a filmmaker in Europe after a director's first steps into the European film industry? A recent report, which was specifically focused on Arab filmmakers working in and outside of Europe, shows significant challenges for filmmakers wanting to transition from first to second and third feature (DOX BOX 2018). The number of programmes supporting experienced filmmakers in the development and funding process, as argued in the report, is significantly smaller in comparison to the available support for inexperienced filmmakers. This in turn reveals not only the necessity of better support for migrant filmmakers upon their transition to working in the European film industry, but also the need of nurturing their artistic contribution in the long term. A welcome initiative in this direction has been the recently established Displacement Film Fund, which was launched in 2025 with the support of organizations including the UNHCR and the Hubert Bals Fund, with the aim to support both emerging and established filmmakers who are displaced themselves or focus on stories of displacement.

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