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# Experience of Experience by Experience

Trauma, Body Memory and Cinematic Tactility in  
The Light of *Flee* (2021) by Jonas Poher  
Rasmussen

Graduate thesis in Film & Video Production

Supervisor: Nadege Lourme

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Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Art and Media Studies



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**Abstract:**

This bachelor thesis uses the film *Flee* (Rasmussen, 2021) to study the dialog between me and the film, analyzed through a phenomenological perspective. Through an analysis of the narrative and visual traits of the film, which triggered my sensual experience connected to a shared trauma with the protagonist, I aim to figure out how my personal experiences influence my experience and perception of the film. Firstly, the thesis explores the structures in critical phenomenology and postphenomenology with an emphasis on Vivian Sobchack's study of the mutual relationship between the viewer and the film. The thesis moves on to the analysis of the scenes that triggered my traumatic experiences with the refuge, meanwhile touching on the topic of body memory in trauma theory.

**Abstrakt:**

Denne bacheloroppgaven bruker filmen *Flukt* (Rasmussen, 2021) for å studere dialogen mellom meg og filmen, analysert gjennom et fenomenologisk perspektiv. Gjennom en analyse av filmens narrative og visuelle trekk, som utløste min sanselige opplevelse knyttet til en delt traume med hovedpersonen, har jeg som mål å finne ut hvordan mine personlige erfaringer påvirker min opplevelse og oppfatning av filmen. For det første utforsker oppgaven strukturene i kritisk fenomenologi og post fenomenologi med vekt på Vivian Sobchacks studie av det gjensidige forholdet mellom seeren og filmen. Oppgaven går videre til analysen av scenene som utløste mine traumatiske opplevelser med flukt, samtidig som den berører emnet kroppslig hukommelse i traumeteorien.

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“What else is film if not ‘an expression of experience of experience by experience?’” (Sobchack 1992, 3).

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

This bachelor thesis will investigate the following inquiry: How traumatic experiences manifest themselves within the animation documentary *Flee* (2021) directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen, and how my personal experiences influence my viewing of the film? My interest in the subject was motivated by the profound and immersive impact that the film had on me as someone with a shared traumatic experience as the protagonist, Amin. Since watching the film two years ago, I felt in a way its effect has never left my mind nor my body memory. Critical and post-phenomenological film theory and trauma theory helped me gain an insight in my reaction to the viewing of *Flee* that felt like being cured at the same time as being traumatized all over again. Within the framework of phenomenology and some trauma theory, I intend to scrutinize the film through the prism of memories and the somatic encoding of my past experiences. While I will gradually expound upon the narrative and audiovisual techniques employed in the film, my primary focus will be on elucidating the interplay between them and my lived experience as manifested through my own memories and corporeal sensations. This thesis is therefore grounded in an acknowledgment of the inherently personal nature of cinematic experience, wherein my background and experiences caused the most emotional and cognitive response I have ever felt watching a film.

This bachelor thesis will lay a bridge between the film theory and philosophical approach in understanding the experience of a film and structures of consciousness in phenomenology. The field of film phenomenology has not, so far, tackled many diverse perspectives within critical phenomenology. I aim to contribute to the discussions in phenomenology and film theory by offering a fresh perspective. My thesis explores the connection between my experience of

viewing the immigration film *Flee* and my traumatic memories from my personal story of immigrating.

## 1.2 Method

In its theory segment, this thesis elaborates the theory of critical and post-phenomenological structures mainly focusing on Vivian Sobchack's studies in cinesthetic subject, study of cinema's tactility with Laura Marks' contributions to the field of haptic visuality connected to bodily experiences. The most important texts for this thesis are *The Tactile Eye* by Jennifer M. Barker, *Carnal Thoughts* and *The Address of the Eye* by Vivian Sobchack. The plot of the film is presented as an entry point to film analysis. The thesis starts the analysis of the film by mentioning the first-person perspective in *Flee* as an animation documentary and its effects on my viewing of the film. Later on the text proposes an analysis of important factors in the use of audiovisual elements during some key scenes that evoked profound reactions connected to my embodiment and lived experience while engaging me on a visceral and emotional level. While exploring the contribution of audiovisual elements to film's narrative there will be an approach to the body memory in trauma theory as it is directly connected to my experience of *Flee*.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1 Phenomenology

The concept of phenomenology highlights the necessity of a subject for any meaningful experience to occur, this subject is also always experiencing interconnectedness of the self with its surroundings. "Phenomenology is a philosophical practice of reflecting on the transcendental structures that make the lived experience of consciousness possible and meaningful." (Weiss, Murphy and Salamon 2020, 11). These experiences then turn into memories that open up a relationship between past and now. Body restores the elements of events and the sensations caused in the body, this is also called body memory. The new experiences therefore become



meaningful linked to our body which is the source of our perspective and reactions. Vivian Sobchack explains this as: "...the film experience is meaningful not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies." (Sobchack 2004, 60).

Film as a multisensory experience can awaken body memory and recall physical sensations, emotions and patterns from the past experiences in addition to auditory stimuli. Vivian Sobchack's film phenomenological study focuses mainly on the relationship between the film and the spectators' experience. In her essay, *What My Fingers Knew*, Sobchack develops the term "cinesthetic subject" for the spectator. Cinesthesia is a term derived from the combination of cinema and synaesthesia which refers to the multisensory experience of cinema for the spectator. Sobchack explains her idea of cinesthetic subject as:

*"...the cinesthetic subject names the film viewer (and, for that matter, the filmmaker) who, through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of the other senses, 'makes sense' of what it is to 'see a movie'— both 'in the flesh' and as it 'matters.'"*(Sobchack 2004, 70)

According to Sobchack our body understands and responds to film before we make a meaning out of our consciousness. The film experience is also defined as a dialog between the audience and the film. The emphasis on the intersubjectivity of the film underlining the shared and embodied experience between the viewer and the film is mentioned by Sobchacks as: "Thus, the cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to commute seeing to touching and back again without a thought..." (Sobchack 2004, 71).

As well as the audiovisual elements, hectic structures of embodied cinematic perception creates a dynamic relationship between viewers and films. This mode of engagement can be divided in three as: haptically, kinaesthetically and muscularly. Jennifer M. Barker explains it as:

*"Cinematic tactility, then, is a general attitude toward the cinema that the human body enacts in particular ways: haptically, at the tender surface of the body; kinaesthetically and muscularly.... and visceral..."*, in which the body "...receive, respond to, and reenact the rhythms of cinema."(Barker 2009, 3) .

The audiovisuals of the cinema can evoke sensations which can also be caused by a stored experience in the body memory, like a traumatic experience.

## 2.2 Trauma theory

Henri Bergson distinguishes in between two types of memory processes:

*“...Bergson’s distinction between souvenir-image and mémoire habitude refers to a voluntarily and representative kind of memory, on the one hand, and to an involuntary and mainly enacted kind of memory, on the other hand.”* (Fuchs 2012, 2).

The body memory of an individual who has experienced trauma operates unconsciously and can exert a profound impact on them during a new experience that triggers the traumatic memory. It causes the victims of trauma to re-experience terror repeatedly combined with fragments of flashbacks from their traumatic experience. So, unlike habitual body memories that contribute to coordinated action, trauma disturbs this system of routine and smooth behavior. “...traumatic body memory is the past expressed in an incapacity for ‘normal’ action be that in a particular given situation or in general.” (Beck 2014, 6). In the context of the film when the viewer is receiving the film’s audiovisual elements the act of remembering and the triggering of memories happen unconsciously like their body memory. In this sense, a body which is an instrument of comprehension is poisoned with a traumatic experience, the viewer’s perception on things will be different than others, perhaps more violent. This can also be relativism in connection to phenomenology that acknowledges the subjective nature of human experiences. Merleau- Ponty explains this as: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’.” (Sobchack 2004, 189). In this sense no individual’s film experience can be the identical.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Plot

*Flee* (2021) by Jonas Poher Rasmussen tells the story of Amin Nawabi who escaped from the mujahideen regime in his hometown, Afghanistan. Amin, who was a child refugee tells his story of fleeing from Kabul to Scandinavia in most inhumane and dangerous conditions where they, as a family, find themselves stranded in several places including Moscow and a detention center in Estonia. As the final and unplanned destination of his journey, he arrives at Danmark while being forced to leave her family behind. The screenplay is based on Rasmussen's interviews with Amin, making the viewer engaged in a conversation between two close friends.

#### 3.2 *Flee* as Immigration Film & First-Person Perspective

*Flee* (2021) directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen is a feature length animated documentary. The style of documentary filmmaking traditionally utilizes live-action footage as it is, however, *Flee* proves the significance of animation as a tool for social commentary, activism, and shedding light on overlooked and personal stories of refugees.

*Flee* gives a new way of perceiving the given. As someone who had similar experiences as the protagonist, I want to address that *Flee* is a part of a wave of immigration documentary films that humanizes refugees by letting them tell their stories from their perspective. The war and immigration documentaries are mostly built around a norm that dehumanizes its "objects" while observing them from afar, creating a clichéd and dehumanized image in western media. This can also be explained as:

*"The western subject is used to seeing footage of rafts shot from a distance, showing groups of anonymous, faceless people, dark silhouettes seen from afar, the clichéd media images of refugees."* (Mrozewicz 2023, 311)

Even though Jonas Rasmussen is a Danish filmmaker which would presumably distance him from the topic of immigration, his friendship with Amin gives the film a warm touch, making him apart from being the white savior who is excited about stories of interesting, “poor” people. *Flee* presents Amin in a way that instead of pitying him, the viewer just experiences his trauma. Amin is presented as an individual who once had a normal life like the rest of us. Which can also be described as he is acting like: “...subject rather than the object of his fate...”. (Mrozewicz 2023, 319). The story is told from a first-person narrative which sets the intimate nature of the film which helped me easily connect with Amin through our shared trauma. Often, I felt as though I was reliving my own trauma through his experiences.

### 3.3 The Opening Scene

*“As a lived-body in and for the world, then, “the cinema uses modes of embodied existence (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) as the vehicle, the 'stuff,' the substance of its language.”* (Barker 2009, 8).

Since the film's expression and perception contribute to awakening similar feelings, I suggest that *Flee*'s three different visual styles are directly connected to how traumatic memory works. For flashback scenes, the film uses both mimetic and non-mimetic animation to visualize Amin's experiences. Along with these animations, real-life footage is also employed. This combination of various styles mirrors the nature of traumatic flashbacks, which defy cohesion and manifest through repetition and fragmentary recollection. As with trauma, memories are often recalled partially and from different sources.

The film, as a corporeal experience, serves both as a subject of experience and an object for experience. Barker explains that film is an “... active participant of both perception and expression” (Barker 2009, 8). This characterization makes the film both a perception and an expression in motion. The viewer's first interaction with the film is through a charcoal-like, sketchy sequence visualizing fleeing people and falling buildings, which summarizes both Amin's and my childhood experiences (*Flee* 2021, 0:01:20-0:02:15). The style of these

sequences, which appear several more times throughout the film, resembles Michelle Balaev's definition of trauma: "Trauma's strange absence yet ghostlike presence in consciousness, its lack of normal integration into memory and narration, casts a shadow that indirectly points toward trauma's meaning and the truth of the past" (Balaev 2018, 363). The combination of ghost-like visuals and melodramatic film music created by stringed instruments sets a serious tone for the film.

My body responded to the dialogue created by these elements. The sequence's dark visuals and gray color scheme, combined with the sound of a running child who is out of breath, create a powerful effect. The film's perspective shows the subjects in a slow 180-degree shot in a long take. We follow the running characters from behind and even move in front of them, the sequence feels like a nightmare where you try to run but get nowhere. This kinesthetic imagery, combined with the abrupt dive into the heavy topic and the anxious, melancholic atmosphere, made me feel as if my body was bearing the weight of the horrible memories I try to forget. My body felt tense, as if set in fight-or-flight mode, almost like my defense mechanisms were activated. The abstract nature of the drawings made it easier for me to imagine myself running among the other people, and I felt like I was sinking into my seat.

After a few seconds, Amin is asked what home means to him. This unexpected topic caused me a visceral reaction, sending immediate shivers down my spine and spreading through my legs and body. It felt like the cells on my back were vibrating and creating a tingling sensation. The topic of home opened a wide whirlpool of flashbacks from different places and experiences, causing a chaotic mix of emotions. My bodily reaction to the sequence was perhaps connected to the way I suddenly felt that the film was looking at me. This intimate question, which I felt only Amin and I could understand in the whole movie theater, made me feel as if our bodies became one. I felt like the film's body was looking at both of us. In this state, I realized that the film was made by someone who understood the struggle and aftermath of fleeing from home.

When asked about his childhood at the beginning, viewers witness how Amin's body memory gets triggered. He dives into his memories from back home and it seems like his body is existing physically in his memory. This transition visualizes how his body relives the moment before he

comes to terms with his words. At the same time as Amin, as if the question were asked to me, I started having flashbacks of my childhood in an unconscious act. Seeing the subject of the film and experiencing the same reactions made me feel like we were both in a psychotherapy group session, listening to each other. This surprisingly fits with the therapy-like interview setting revealed later in the film.

Right after this sequence, we meet the present-day Amin in photorealistic animation. This part of the sequence displays vivid colors, which is a dominating stylistic element throughout the whole film. The film adopts an optimistic tone when he is asked about his earliest memory, showing real footage of Afghan society and cities. This montage is followed by vividly colored, mimical 2D animation of little Amin dancing alone on the streets. The clips move at a faster tempo with a cheerful song, showing happy people and creating a corporeal experience that allows my body to return to its normal position and pace through tactile interaction. I felt the tension in my body lessen. The similarities between my hometown and Afghanistan, combined with the beauty of nostalgia infused with longing, left me with a bittersweet smile.

### **3.4 Haptic Sensation of Mom's Touch**

As the cinesthetic subject, the viewer's interactions are not limited to viewing and hearing. One of the dimensions of a film capacity is its ability to evoke tactile and sensuous modes of perception. In *Flee*, while Amin is having old flashbacks from when he was child in Afghanistan, there is a scene where his mother strokes his hair (Flee 2021, 0:05:45-0:05:50). Right after a medium shot of both characters, there is also a close-up to her mothers hand and soft hair. This close-up made me immediately feel a warm touch on my cheeks and hair as if I could feel the warmth of my mother's touch on my cheeks and later in my hair while laying down on her lap. I felt the peaceful relief of being loved by someone that only a mom could give, making the scene a consolation in contrast to the trauma-inducing scene in the film's opening. The haptics of the scene are triggered by the soft texture of Amin's hair strand that dances among his mom's gentle moving fingers. Laura Marks has termed the "haptic" qualities of cinematic perception: "Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to

distinguish form so much as to discern texture." (Barker 2009, 21). Now, this scene could create a response like the feeling of stroking someone's hair, the soft hair slipping between the fingers. However, my experience with the longing for a mom figure connects the given haptic skin of the film with my associations, this highlights the relativism inherent in how different people perceive and react to the given picture differently. Also indicating that the film and the viewer both are subjects of our experience as well as objects for other visual subjects. This underlines what Sobchack (1992) means by: "The film's body, like our own, is a subjective object." (247).

### 3.5 What My Unconsciousness Knew

One of the most striking images in *Flee*, for me, was the images of "last looks". Amin experienced significant childhood trauma, including the separation from loved ones. The body of the film embodies his perspective and gaze very often especially in POV-shots from a low angle that mimic the gaze of a child. This embodiment of his gaze by film's perspective can be explained in Sobchack's words: "The film's visual subjectivity is offered to visibility as supposedly identical to the characters visual subjectivity." (Sobchack 1992, 231).

In the scene where Amin and his family are leaving their home, Amin takes a look at their house before flying to Russia (*Flee* 2021, 00:23:00-0:23:20). While watching the scene I had a strong sensation that Amin would look back at his house while leaving, just like I once did. With the pictures of his home, a rush of longing dissolved in me starting from my head as never forgotten mental pictures of my own house in my home country flashed before my eyes.

The film's perspective's embodiment of a child's view matched perfectly with my body memory from earlier. The wave of nerves fired from my head reached my body in a familiar sense and that made me feel like hugging a dear person for the last time, again. This change in my body was caused by a change in visuals of how warm and welcoming his house looked in the beginning of the film. The rooms were looking a lot darker with harsh shadows and duller and colder color scheme compared to when we first saw his house. This dramatic tone of the scene is supported by a low toned-melancholic, non-diegetic music with stillness of the pictures. I can say

the same thing about the last pictures taken by my gaze of my home. However, I do remember some warmth in my mental-pictures of my house as I did not know that would be the last look at it, unlike the gaze of *Flee*. This hints at the subjective agency of the film's body in which it plays a crucial role in guiding the viewer's perceptual engagement with the events.

Later in the film, when Amin is in the human smuggler's car he looks at his family waving to him from their balcony (Flee 2021, 1:02:11-1:02:20). Together with the little figures of the family which gets farther with the moving car, the devastating tune of violin made me feel an immediate corporeal response as my nose was burning and my eyes got teary. His POV felt like a *deja vu* but I couldn't come to terms with it until I thought about the idea of separation. Shortly afterwards I had a flashback of my POV while sitting in a car and taking a look at my grandma to say goodbye. Presumably both me and Amin should have sensed that it might be our last time together with loved ones, as both of us turned back to record the moment in our minds. This scene is also a product of a devastating tune of violin.

### **3.6 Russia, Suffocating effect of Waiting**

Towards the middle of the movie, Amin, his brother and mother arrive in Russia after their escape from Afghanistan (Flee 2021, 0:29:35-0:31:10). The color scheme of the scene is dominated by gray colors, the light in the family's apartment is harsh with lots of dark shadows. The shadows add a desperate melancholy to almost prison-like simplicity of the interior. Everything is as motionless as it can be. The family actions of the character are a lot slower as they are just sitting or doing menial movements, the stable perspective is also helping to create a sense of motionlessness. I could feel the gloom and dampness in the atmosphere. A claustrophobic feeling set in me, I felt like I was being held in the room with his family. The family is gathered in one place as if they are seeking comfort from each other in this unsettling setting. The time jumps with various establishing shots of their building contribute to the perception of time passing slowly. The waiting and the feeling of stopped time combined with the audiovisual stimuli triggered a known experience of suffocation for me. I started taking deeper breaths as if my lungs were put in a box and my capacity to breath was limited by it. At



the same time I felt a physical pressure on my shoulders. I now attribute this to my mindset of constantly being afraid that something bad would happen during my wait in another country. This also highlights Janet Marie Bennet's vision that connects trauma and environment "“...where trauma is not contained within human subjects, but extends materially into the surrounding world.”” (Laine 2023, 49).

### 3.7 Memories of Fleeing

As dis-remembering is a storing tool in documentary filmmaking, fragmatic remembering is also a key element in memories connected to trauma. When Amin is asked about his memory of fleeing Amin states that he is not remembering the day they fled. The scene starts with the question of remembering in documentary films and also in trauma theory and ends with the family reaching the refugee boat (Flee 2021, 0:39:06-0:43:42). Memory, especially traumatic memories, can be described as a “...fluid process of reconstruction rather than a warehouse.” (Balaev 2018, 366). This is visible in the beginning of the scene when Amin can't remember his memories.

Even though Amin can't come up with the right memories and words to describe his experience, the film's visual body is already showing a very foggy flashback of some shadows and moving red lights. I want to suggest that the film embodies the protagonist's bodily experience of dis-remembering a traumatic event. In Sobchack's words “The enabling narrator enunciating the perceptual subjectivity of the various enabled and narrated characters.” (Sobchack 1992, 229). Even though there are no incidents shown explicitly, the feeling of the traumatic body memory is present. The moving different shades of gray fog and the red moving lines are enough to prepare the viewers to the serious tone of discomfort. The discomfort in the unknown images and a familiar feeling of uneasiness overwhelmed my body. The heaviness of the visuals and sound design touched my body in a way that without realizing I got tense and my muscles were squeezed tighter, especially my legs were squeezed together, which is something I do when I feel nervous. My heartbeats got faster trying to keep up with the deep, low screams of a string instrument. The non-mimical animation sequence was distinct from other coal like drawings

though the film with the bright color of red lines dancing through the fog. This sensorial experience made me feel distressed. As the fog started to form known shapes I realized that I associated the dancing red light as the waves of pain that Amin was feeling despite not remembering the incidents. For most of the time, the pain makes itself known on the body before starting to talk about traumatic events. I assume that the fear encoded in me and the traumatic situations connected to death made me associate the color also to danger and blood.

The cinematic tools are used in a way that the film's body is embracing Amin's body memory while fast forward to the next scene in which the characters are on a refugee boat, almost like the topic is calling for elements that evoke and circle around the topic of fleeing for him. The tone when they cross the border on their way to the boat is set by the ongoing sound design of storms, waves and wind. As the cinesthetic subject, I could feel the breeze into the room and got goosebumps on my arms as a response to the tactile dialog with the film. Later in the scene, when people were crossing the metal fence I could also feel the coldness of the metal fence that was brushing on the back of people. I am not sure whether my arms seeked refuge in each other's warmth and comfort at that exact moment or if I already had them crossed before the scene as a statement of disapproval against the situation a child has to go through in order to have the humane right to live. Experiencing the same traumatic images through the film's body can also be described as "...secondary traumatization..." (Rutherford 2013, 87)

Not until a couple of frames later, we are introduced to two crucial incidents for Amin. The red lines that were presented in the beginning, during his moment of not-remembering which is one of the most important aspects of a trauma documentary, we are introduced to a child's shoes with red blinking lights which I call an immortal "screenshot" from a traumatic experience.

Later on in the same sequence when an old lady is threatened to put down by a human smuggler for not being able to continue, Amin directly thinks about his own mom. We see a POV of him looking at his mom's scared face. When in the moment of fleeing there is nothing more important than family and life. And I realize as the viewer, the importance of experiencing a story through the character's POV especially in war and immigration cinema. Amin's innocent POV's and the way the film's perspective as an organ of film's body imitates his gaze definitely

tells so much about their inner concerns and thoughts which seems to turn into a habitual behavior connected to his trauma. I realized that I often analyze people around me just like Amin, which is probably a habit I got from experiencing a lot of unsafe journeys and situations as a child. As Amin was looking at his mother, I saw my mother on screen. Our mental snapshots were compatible.

### 3.8 The Boat Scene

The boat scene where the family is being forced into a fishing boat's storage room and encountering a tourist cruise on their way to cross the Baltic from Estonia to Sweden is one of the most intimate scenes I have ever felt while watching a movie (Flee 2021, 0:43:38-0:52:00). When they were carried on the boat and into the storage room, I knew the struggle of fleeing was just starting. The thunderclaps, horrific sounds of the sea hitting the boat, the fearful looks of adults and the darkness started to make me feel like I was on the boat with Amin. I felt that my heartbeats were getting faster as I was getting anxious together with a claustrophobic feeling. Without realizing I held my breath when the tank of the boat started getting water. The sounds of people screaming for help, knocking on the iron door made me feel very overstimulated in a sense that I felt like I was squeezing every muscle in my body as if it was unable to discern whether it was in a dangerous situation or not.

After they are taken out of the storage room, Amin is asked what he was thinking he says: "Who do I first, if the boat goes down?" (Flee 2021, 0:47:43). When asked if he knew how to swim, his answer was: "I didn't really think about that." (Flee 2021, 0:48:03). I never experienced something like this while watching a film before. I immediately both felt an electric wave traveling through my whole body, my nose started burning and the tears were running down my eyes. I never felt this exposed and embraced by seeing what my exact thoughts were during my time of fleeing. The desperate and herotic feeling of "I would do whatever for them!" was something I truly thought was so personal and special to me, seeing Amin experiencing the same just opened up a wound I thought was closed. My visceral reaction was an indication that this traumatic feeling was just waiting stored in my body and unconsciousness. Seeing Amin and the

ridiculousness of his state as someone who wants to try to save his family in case the boat goes under while not being able to swim made me come to terms with my own ridiculous thoughts as a child. I also felt like the film was looking at me, I felt seen by the film, by the viewers sitting in the same room watching the film with me despite the fact that there were no eyes on me. At the same time as feeling a sense of togetherness with the character and, I assume, millions of others in the same situation, I felt completely broken.

When the refugee boat was faced with the big Norwegian cruise boat, I felt my blood boiling. A rush of energy filled my body. Perhaps it was the accumulated anger from being marginalized for years and seeing it happen to little Amin that has created a crippling sensation. I genuinely felt that I wanted to take action and show how much of a mistrust I had in me against the cruise ship. POV's of the tourists looking down at Amin and others while they were calling for help triggered a pulsating sensation in my head. My body, without me realizing it, was in a fight or flight mode. Now I realize that somehow the picture of two boats right next to each probably resembled to me the feeling of being objected to the white gaze. "This cross cutting technique juxtaposes Amin and the tourist in separate frames." (Mrozewicz 2023, 312). The distance created by the height distance also perfectly represents the act of looking down and up connected to who has the power to save the other and who needs rescuing. I realized that I knew Amin was never going to step on the boat standing right in front of him in all its glory which would give him his safety.

The crosscutting between the privileged families taking pictures of the "desperate refugees" and the people shouting for help suddenly categorized both me and Amin in a mold that he never felt before. Suddenly his sense of self was reduced to being seen as an object, which was also what I felt like I was being subjected to. His gaze to himself changed from "I am me" to "I am what they think of me" while being defined by his relation to the white gaze he was being subjected to for the first time. I felt like I was witnessing a new chapter in Amin's life, as if he too had fallen into the same pit that I have been in since my refuge which is a pit where the existence of self is only through other consciousnesses. My urge to "do something" with the rushing blood through my head was probably a defense mode and my desperate attempt to stop this.

Through the scene I come to terms with my own gaze and gain a conscious relationship as I understand my body memories. Almost felt like gaining a different perspective on my own self and my trauma experience by observing Amin's situation from afar. I acknowledge him through the film and in a way the film represents both of our issues with our identical traumatic experience. I was around Amin's age when I fled. Seeing Amin as just a little child in tremendous and terrifying situations through the film but especially when I saw Amin on the refugee boat among others made me realize how helpless and young I actually was back then. Realizing this grief for a childhood I really never got to experience. This experience is similar to movement or displacement of the self in which was caused by the perspective of *Flee*, as seeing "myself" from a distance made me take a distance to my own traumatic experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls it "to see is to have at a distance." (Sobchack 2004, 143). As I saw myself from a distance, I was both the observer and the observed which made me take a different stance on my situation and made me realize the hardship I faced as a child.

### **3.9 Film as Therapy**

This in a way creates a reciprocal correlation in a way that me and Amin take strength from our existence. My immersive narrative experience where I went through as many emotions as Amin, brought a lot of repressed emotions to the surface. This process of cathartic method in which can help unresolved emotions through reliving the traumatic moments. This is also explained by as: "In essence, the unfolding or explication of body memory offers valuable insights into our sense of self, our unique histories, and our emotional landscapes..." (Fuchs 2012, 1).

The last scene of the movie, in which Amin and his fiance move into their newly purchased house in the Danish countryside ends with a real life footage of their shadows though some trees in their garden. The home and his story reconstructed by animation did not need substitutions anymore as the sensation of "home" became a present reality. My last dialogue with the film felt like a farewell hug as it held me in its arms and comforted me. The end scene was a testament to Amin's existence, my existence, our existence, and a consolation that our traumatic stories were going nowhere and yet, one day, we would still find "home". When it comes to the film's effect

on Amin, making a film about personal trauma is as effective as viewing the film. This can also be described as: “Since trauma remains stored in somatic memory as imagery, creating art can provide a means to overcome it.” (Laine 2023, 61).

## **Conclusion**

This thesis treated the traumatic story of the protagonist Amin in the animation documentary film *Flee* (2021) by Jonas Poher Rasmussen. With phenomenological tools of understanding cinematic tactility and cinesthetic subject and coming to terms with my embodied traumatic memories, I come to the conclusion that I was affected deeply by *Flee* because of our shared trauma experience with the protagonist, Amin. The audiovisual elements of the film and its cinematic tactility was cleverly used to touch the viewer while conveying Amin’s trauma. While viewing the film these elements triggered the traumatic memories stored in my body, which caused my strong bodily and sensual response to the film in an intersubjective dialog. I found out that this, in a way, created a reciprocal correlation between the film, Amin and me. As a result of my research, I realized that the film applied different modes of communication with the viewer, that I was actively engaged with the film through my unique body which directed my perception and created my embodied senses and expressions. This thesis has also become a self study as I processed through my traumatic experiences and memories.

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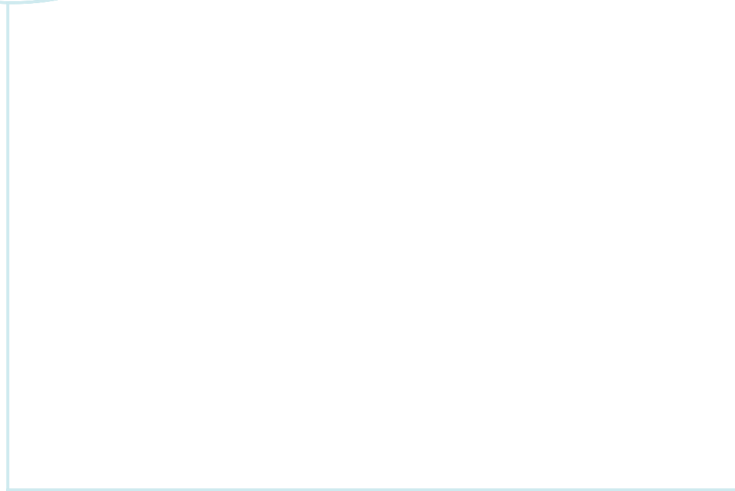
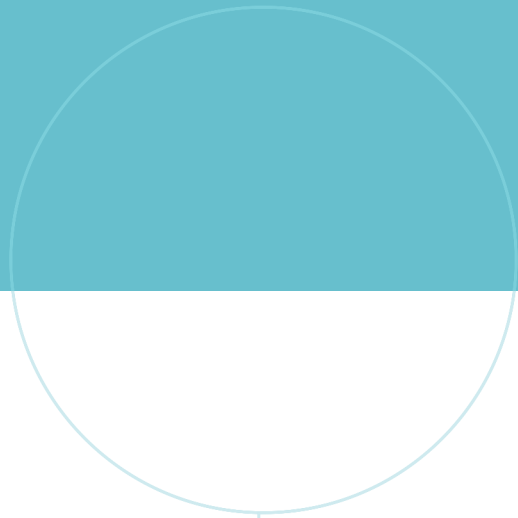
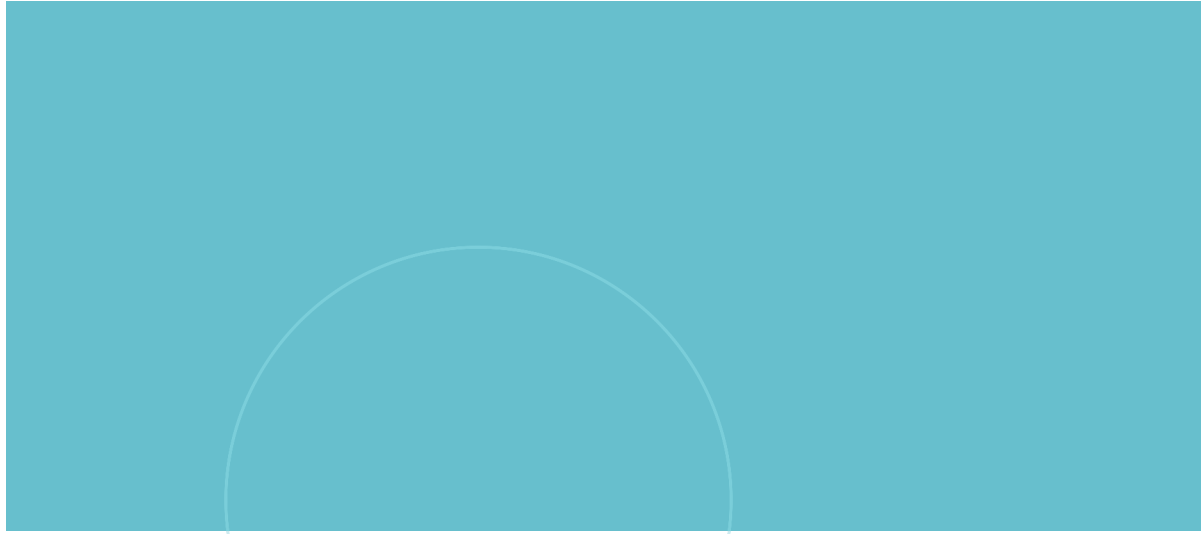
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### **Filmography**

- *Flee*. Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen. 2021; Danmark: Reel Pictures. 88min.  
[https://ntnu.blackboard.com/ultra/courses/\\_38582\\_1/cl/outline](https://ntnu.blackboard.com/ultra/courses/_38582_1/cl/outline)





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