Representing Sanctuary

On Flatness and Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*

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ABSTRACT: This article takes sanctuary as a problematizing challenge to the state, coming into effect when political asylum fails or is denied. Sanctuary, it argues, offers a form of protection that does not take legality as its basis or reference point, and in fact often subverts such legality. Thinking with Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011), this article seeks to understand the kinds of "individual" protection that sanctuary makes possible, and what they illuminate about conceptions of refuge that do not require sovereign authorization, but instead find their foundations in interpersonal relationality, solidarity, and community formations. Through a "flat migrant aesthetics"—deadpan, anti-realism, and unarticulated motivation—Kaurismäki's film dislodges automated perceptions and clichéd narrative expectations to redirect attention to human solidarities and the building of sanctuary, on and off screen.

KEYWORDS: affect, film, refuge, representation, sanctuary, solidarity

Early in Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011), an elderly French shoeshiner encounters a child refugee hiding under a pier in the port city of Le Havre.[1] In one of the most stunning and powerful images of migrants on film, the child, half submerged in water, stares into the camera and asks: "Is this London?" Filmed in a high-angle long shot, the lone human figure is framed within large concrete pillars and against the bluish-grey water. Neither emerging from nor fully submerged in the water, the child refugee appears suspended on the screen, a surreal yet visceral speaking subject who cannot be ignored. In so doing, he forces a recognition of and a reckoning with the moral obligations of refuge. Having learned, through spectacular headlines, of the arrival of a shipping container holding African refugees from Libreville, Gabon, the shoeshiner knows that the child is a fugitive on the run from authorities. At that moment, a detective in pursuit of the child appears, but the shoeshiner refuses to reveal the child's whereabouts, making a decision then and there to disobey the state's directive. Later that evening, he returns to leave provisions for the child, who secretly follows him home. Thus begins a personal, and ultimately communal, campaign to keep the refugee away from law enforcement seeking to capture and deport him.

This telling scene dramatizes the mundane beginnings of sanctuary, which starts with an individual requiring protection from the law's punishment and another individual unwilling to abide by such laws. It lays bare that the protection of sanctuary is a specific form of protection from a state judgment that deems an individual unprotectable. A refugee might be understood as fleeing state persecution in search of asylum, but a refugee requiring sanctuary flees a state that has denied political asylum or the right to protection. What necessitates sanctuary is not persecution, the criterion so central to the United Nations definition of "refugee," but prose-

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cution, the criminalization and punishment of those enacting their human right to asylum. If the state has a monopoly on political asylum, then sanctuary is where civil society can exert influence on the shape and outcome of protection. It is where a notion of refuge not irrevocably tethered to the nation-state can emerge. As such, it is at the civil or individual level that sanctuary thrives as a concept and practice that challenges state sovereignty and its power to punish.

Representing how ordinary individuals circumvent the law to protect an individual marked for incarceration and expulsion, Kaurismäki's film is a useful heuristic device for contemplating sanctuary's conceptual logic, its cultural and political meaning. Such contemplation via a cultural object gets at a defining quandary of contemporary politics—the question of refuge. The current global condition of mass displacement and refuge-seeking, while not new or exceptional to human history, is unprecedented in scale and scope. Capitalism, climate change, neoimperialist foreign interventions, and continuous war have converged to produce the highest numbers of refugees since the end of World War II (UNHCR 2019). At the same time, documented and undocumented migrants have proliferated under the processes of globalization, becoming a constitutive part of contemporary globality. At this juncture, the concept of refuge is especially crucial to understanding international politics, social organization, and human morality. That is, such a simultaneously connected and unstable world order necessitates an examination of the forms of protection that are available to the range of migrants that populate and move through the world.

As an established principle with a centuries-long tradition, sanctuary is a particular response to the problem of protection, a particular way of providing refuge to those facing prosecution for seeking refuge. Rooted in Canon Law and Christian traditions of providing asylum for fugitives and criminals, and invoked in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by migrant and refugee rights movements, sanctuary is a framework for conceptualizing alternative forms of refuge that are in tension with or in contravention of state governance. While sanctuary is often differentiated from related concepts such as refuge and asylum by its religious genealogy and faith-based associations, its core characteristic, I suggest, derives from formations of authority that put pressure on and complicate the state's control of political power. In other words, sanctuary obstructs, for a duration of time, the state's ability to legally punish those seeking asylum, and in doing so, has the potential to call into question sovereign judgment. Sanctuary is thus an important concept and practice through which to imagine and enact alternate forms of refuge-making.

This article takes sanctuary as a problematizing challenge to the state, coming into effect when political asylum fails or is denied. Whether understood in the classical sense or in more contemporary terms, sanctuary exists in contentious relation with the state and its apparatuses. What is being offered in sanctuary is a form of protection that does not take legality as its basis or reference point, and in fact often subverts such legality. In this way, sanctuary manifests on different scales and in different sites; it is enacted by a variety of agents and subjects, including municipalities, communities, and individuals. Such forms of refuge outside or in the shadow of state surveillance direct us to considerations of what extra-juridical protection might mean and the kinds of human relations that constitute or undergird sanctuary.

Thinking with Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*, this article seeks to understand the kinds of "personal" or "individual" protection that sanctuary makes possible, and what they illuminate about conceptions of refuge that do not require sovereign authorization, but instead find their foundations in interpersonal relationality and community formations. The point here is not to produce an extensive analysis or interpretation of the film, but to engage with it as a way to understand the meaning of sanctuary. My filmic analysis is thus primarily in service of conceptual considerations. Aesthetic representation, as Jacques Rancière reminds us, is political—it is a way

in which the reality of our lives, the way we act and the world we build, is examined, worked though, and potentially transformed (2013). In attempting to comprehend what sanctuary looks like, I take Kaurismäki's film as a "text" that stages political and philosophical issues through a deceptively simple narrative of a man who comes to the aid of a boy. The film is a pedagogical tool that directs us to questions of protection, relationality, and solidarity. That is, the particular act of sanctuary depicted in *Le Havre* is a catalyst for epistemological considerations of larger social issues that shape the world in which we live.

Yet, the film is not a direct representation of reality—its anti-realism gestures to a constructed space of sanctuary, a filmic world that keeps open the interval between the real and the imagined (Rushton 2011; Seel 2008). Although it draws on and is in conversation with the material world, *Le Havre* does not mimetically mirror what actually exists.[2] Instead, the film visualizes what sanctuary is or might be through a narrative that rehearses ethical behavior, forwarding a notion of protection that prioritizes human relations, and endeavors not to reproduce the power dynamics inherent in the violent production of the need for protection or its benevolent giving. Kaurismäki's approach to representation, characterized by a conscious refrain from engaging and fulfilling the many narrative and representational conventions of dominant stories on and about refugees, might be called a "flat migrant aesthetics."[3] This aesthetics is a way of circumventing the melodramatic dramatizations of refugees as pitiful and abject beings in need of humanitarian help. The qualities of flatness—deadpan, anti-realism, and unarticulated motivation—dislodge automated perceptions and clichéd narrative expectations to redirect attention to human solidarities. Such a representational approach creates space for us to contemplate the building of sanctuary, on and off screen.

Aesthetics, however, is not the balm or solution to political problems. What it does is fuel the imagination, allowing us to reflect, inquire, and hypothesize. As an edifying cultural object, Kaurismäki's film offers possibilities for understanding social and political issues through modes of narration and matters of stylistics. The way sanctuary is represented offers conceptual insights into what it is, what it should be, and what it could be. The film's visual narrative of how to experience sanctuary between individuals postulates a kind of ideal that is not just discursive but exists as a social horizon that international politics might one day reach toward. Such forms of representation are crucial in a contemporary world that lacks moral imagination in its brutality toward all kinds of migrants, that must utilize all its capacities for transformation in finding solutions to our most pressing political impasses. This is where art and narrative do their most potent work of providing guidance and counsel in moments of human disgrace and inhumanity.[4] Kaurismäki's film—described by the auteur himself as an "unashamedly optimistic fairy tale"—is thus an entry point into the lived world, an aesthetic object through which to consider and learn how to do the political and relate to others in the time-space of existing and forthcoming sanctuary (Von Bagh n.d.).

What Is Sanctuary?

To consider what the representation of sanctuary-building between a child refugee, Idrissa Saleh, and a group of ordinary citizens led by an unwitting shoeshiner, Marcel Marx, in *Le Havre* can provide for us, we must first consider the centuries-long tradition of sanctuary. Rather than provide a detailed historical genealogy, in what follows I examine sanctuary's substance. That is, I draw on different meanings of sanctuary—how it has been conceived and practiced at different points in time—in order to identify its conceptual logic. What differentiates sanctuary from other forms of safety and protection such as refuge and asylum? What does sanctuary mean,

and what does it do? What binds disparate meanings of sanctuary across time and space? There is no uncomplicated way of addressing these questions, as sanctuary practices have ranged in contexts, functions, and politics. Like all categories that are germane to social organization, sanctuary has no definitive or uncontested meaning, but rather a varied history and a conceptual life that overlaps with and blurs into other related ideas.

If we understand sanctuary as a form of refuge, then its historical emergence in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages is connected to practices of asylum in the ancient world and also to evolving notions of refuge in contemporary times. Whatever we choose to call it—asylum, refuge, or sanctuary—institutional forms of protection in Western traditions have their roots in religious practices. Asylum, or *asylia*, meaning "inviolability" was connected to specific temples and altars in ancient Greece. Supplicants at these sites—usually fugitive slaves and criminals—could find respite from the law's punishment or acts of vengeance, until a trial could take place and justice meted out (Schuster 2002). The biblical "cities of refuge," too, served a similar function, sheltering those who had committed accidental homicide. These cities protected manslaughterers from avengers, preventing the escalation of blood-feud violence, and facilitated the process of public justice and thereby maintain social order (Greenberg 1959).

Beginning in the fourth century, asylum shifted to Christian churches with the signing of the Edict of Toleration in 313 and legally codified in the Theodosian Code shortly thereafter (Rabben 2016). Sanctuary in churches shared with earlier forms of asylum the principle that certain religious sites were sacred and, as such, protection derived from the sanctity of god, and legitimacy was based not on worldly laws but on a higher principle of morality. Even when the power to grant sanctuary was made possible by the sovereign's decree, its justification still came from ecclesiastical authority. At the heart of refuge is the question of competing authorities (between different states, between the state and religious institutions, between the state and civil groups, between the state and individuals) and separate jurisdictions (the territory that will provide protection). Sanctuary staged this tension through the interplay between the Church's Canon law and the sovereign's state law.

One major difference between asylum and church sanctuary was that the latter opened up the purview of protection to include the guilty (Marfleet 2011; McSheffrey 2017; Price 2009; Sinha 1971). Whereas previous models protected the wrongly accused or provided temporary shelter so that innocence or guilt could be established, sanctuary functioned as a "vehicle for mercy" (Price 2009: 32). Matthew E. Price notes, "A crime was viewed, first and foremost, as an offense against God, and thus could be repaired only through repentance, not through earthly punishment" (2009: 33). This expansion of asylum, one of the distinguishing qualities of sanctuary, ironically contributed to its decline. A basis upon which sanctuary was attacked near its abolition in the seventeenth century and beyond was that it was a tool of criminality, abused by those who invoked it. Karl Shoemaker remarks, "By the early modern period, not only had sanctuary come to be identified with injustice, but it was also credited with encouraging more crimes" (2013: 17).

While it continued to exist as a practice, church sanctuary as an institution declined and virtually disappeared as the state monopolized the right of asylum. The solidification of the nation-state form, especially in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), meant that asylum became an important apparatus of state sovereignty, one that was crucial to defining legal jurisdiction and interstate relations. As an animating concept, sanctuary reemerged in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly in efforts to protect conscientious objectors of the Vietnam War during the 1960s and as a response to Central American migrants seeking refuge from US-backed civil conflicts and political instability during the 1980s (Perla and Bibler Coutin 2009). This movement, and others that have coalesced in recent decades in the Global

North, such as the *sans papiers* and solidarity cities movements, are defined by civil disobedience and resistance to state laws.[5] A. Naomi Paik pithily sums up the development and function of contemporary sanctuary practices: "Emerging from congregations that have provided shelter to refugees and immigrants under threat of deportation, the movement has spread to city, county, and state governments that have passed sanctuary policies that limit their cooperation with federal immigration authorities in tracking down and deporting undocumented immigrants" (2017: 5).

Sanctuary might thus be understood as the creation of spaces of refuge that either circumvent or directly challenge the state's legal authority. Indeed, the "existence of sanctuary practices and spaces" is a "reminder that the nation-state does not have exclusive sovereign control over what happens within its territory" (Paik et al.: 3–4). The meaning of modern refuge pivots on two sometimes complementary, but often-tensional understandings. The first, and more general, meaning conceives of refuge as a condition of safety, where the danger that threatened the refuge-seeker is no longer imminent. The second and more specified meaning is legal status, where the sense of safety is solidified and guaranteed through the granting of rights within a nation-state formation. Sanctuary throws into relief this tension. It shows that the state's political protection is not the only or most rigorous kind of protection. Indeed, the specific need for sanctuary reveals how the state often punishes, through processes of criminalization, those who invoke the right to asylum, who physically cross borders to seek it.[6] Unlike asylum or refuge, sanctuary is the category in which we can most readily comprehend the various scales of protection, or how it is built among individuals and communities in civil society. The protection that sanctuary provides is often protection not *of* but *from* the state.

Defying the Law

One way to begin conceptualizing sanctuary, then, is to consider its relationship to state sovereignty. Representing how Marcel Marx and his neighborhood of working-class locals thwart the law to protect a refugee, *Le Havre* highlights a defining tenet of sanctuary—its quotidian, grassroots challenge to the state's control of protection. The precise moment of sanctuary's coming-into-being is instructive here. Sanctuary is not activated when Idrissa is safely concealed from the law or when he successfully departs from the city, but rather at the moment when the shoeshiner refuses to entrust the state with the task of protection. This moment, mentioned at the beginning of this article, unfolds visually as a scene of confrontation between sovereign power and the ordinary citizen. It begins with the ominous sounds of approaching footsteps and a bird's-eye shot of Marx—having just seen the fugitive refugee—seated on the pier's steps below ground. The next shot, a worm's-eye angle of the detective peering down on Marx, visualizes the state's surveillance and discipline of its subjects from above.

The scene, however, corrects this imbalance when Marx ascends the steps to face the detective, inspector Monet, who stands in for the state at this moment. The individual physically and morally "rises"—not in a heroic or dramatic manner, but as a matter of existence—to meet and challenge the law. The choreography of human bodies is visually significant, setting up sanctuary as resistance to power, as individual agency to reject the law's inhumane imperative. Through a series of alternating close ups, and with everyday sounds of lapping water and seagulls, the individual is positioned as an equal with the law, making a judgment about the state's authority. Interrogating the shoeshiner about the refugee's whereabouts, Monet conveys that the state must capture and possess the boy in order to provide him with care—"we are looking for a black boy . . . he needs care" (Kaurismäki 2011). The shoeshiner responds, "So you always say. I've seen

no one" (Kaurismäki 2011). This short but loaded exchange illuminates the impetus for sanctuary: the unequivocal knowledge that the state *will not* protect those most in need of protection. As a working-class outcast, Marx understands this on an instinctual, embodied level, which compels his refusal to comply.

In Kaurismäki's 1992 film *La Vie de Bohème*, the same character played by the same actor (André Wilms) witnesses his friend—an artist from Albania living in France without a visa—being deported from Paris. In that film, Marx curiously refrains from taking any action to aid his friend upon learning that he has been detained by authorities. Their station in life, as struggling, drifting artists unable to eke out even a meager living, seemingly renders them impotent in the face of state power—perhaps this Marx did not yet know his capacity for action. Years later, as a married but still poor man who has left behind the bohemian life in Paris to settle in Le Havre, Marx is once again confronted with another deportation, this time not of a friend but of a stranger in which he has no personal investment. The choice that Marx makes should be interpreted in relation to his inaction as a young man. Marx's decision to engage sanctuary with Idrissa is structured by this earlier moment, one in which he gains crucial understanding of the state's will and mandate to punish outsiders like himself and his friends, as well as migrants like Idrissa. The simple utterance in response to the state's pronouncement of care, "So you always say," has behind it the real and forceful conviction of lived experience, of existing under and witnessing the state's biopolitical violence. Marx's capacity to engage sanctuary, indeed, becomes available through living and knowing.

Emphasized in this scene between Marx and inspector Monet is that sanctuary does not arise from sympathy for the refugee (after all, the "container refugees" are called "dangerous" and "terrorists" in the media, construed as people not deserving of care) or compassionate goodness from the citizen, although of course these feelings are not to be discounted. Rather, sanctuary is shown to begin when an individual *knows* that "care" is a well-worn state fiction—"so you always say." Reality unfolds differently from discourse and to receive "state care" as an asylum seeker is often to be bound to the laws that punish, to be under the ambit of prosecution. Marx's refusal to cooperate with the authorities is a vote of non-confidence in the state, which sets in motion the processes of sanctuary.

Sanctuary thus could be understood as a form of refuge catalyzed when the state subjects certain individuals or groups to punishment under the law, usually in the form of prosecution and *refoulment*. Sanctuary is a specific kind of protection from a state's legal decision not to protect an asylum seeker. As a condition it only comes into being when the state has refused protection, when political protection from a nation-state—what Hannah Arendt has famously called the "right to have rights"—is denied (1958). As such, it is not commensurate with asylum seeking in the normative sense laid out by the UN Convention and national policies derived from it. Instead, sanctuary is a principle of refuge that may be invoked when those formalized, legal processes break down, when they fail to actually protect, or act as the very impediment to protection. When the law is deficient, or when it does exactly what it is meant to do, which is restrict movement and penalize migrants, sanctuary intervenes to facilitate the forging of relationships and communities that are not formally authorized by the state and do not take its law as the basis upon which to build protection.

In this way, sanctuary applies pressure on state sovereignty, throwing into relief the operations and limits of political power. It makes visible the ideological underpinnings that structure social organization, and determinations about who will or will not be included in the social. In one radical form, sanctuary has the potential to "challenge the state's attempt to monopolize sovereignty and govern the political" (Czajka 2013: 48). As alternate claims to legality, rights, and morality, sanctuary practices can directly call into question state authority and provide

other frameworks for political subjectivity and community by disputing the legitimacy of state decision-making. To be sure, however, sanctuary is not necessarily or always oppositional to the state or the sovereign, as scholars have shown how it might reinforce the king's power or reproduce state discourse (Rehaag 2009; Shoemaker 2011). Rather, as it attempts to create some kind of refuge in the face of legal punishment, in the event of state rejection, sanctuary highlights the existence of another authority, opening up the possibility that state power might not be absolute or all encompassing. It is where the civil or the individual can exert their presence and their vision of refuge.

In *Le Havre*, ordinary individuals creating sanctuary together—through acts such as hindering the police, hiding a refugee, and facilitating his passage out of the city—shows how refuge can bloom under the duress of state violence. Yet, because it must continually evade the state, sanctuary exists in a perpetually precarious temporality. While the film depicts sanctuary as a concerted effort to elude the law, it also keeps open the possibility that the law could facilitate sanctuary. Inspector Monet, tasked with tracking the refugee, ultimately aids the shoeshiner and his neighbors in keeping the refugee away from state capture. Giving warnings and tips to the shoeshiner throughout the process, and ultimately using his authority to secure the boy's safety in the hold of a boat that will take him out to sea, Monet's actions show the law cooperating with the citizens instead of the citizens cooperating with the law.

In one of the final scenes, inspector Monet is again shot from a worm's-eye view, peering into the hold of a boat. Also taking place at the pier and with the same sounds of bubbling water and seagulls, this scene recalls the earlier one in which Monet was in pursuit of the fugitive refugee. This time, staring up and back at him is not Marx but an expressionless and silent Idrissa. Monet decides then and there to participate in sanctuary, just as Marx did before him. The shot-making and visual repetition completes the journey of sanctuary-building in the film. It is not that the individual citizen needs to circumvent the law, but that the law itself needs to reckon with its own authority and function. If human individuals carry it out, then human individuals may alter the law's purpose and practice. That is, if sanctuary is protection from the law's punishment, then those responsible for enforcing the law might employ it to actually create sanctuary. The law, as the film suggests, could not just produce the need for sanctuary but instead engender and fuel its very possibility.

Hospitable Protection

At the end of *Le Havre*, Idrissa sails away from the port city toward the English Channel, where his fate is still to be determined. Sanctuary, as represented in the film, is not a permanent condition; its purpose is to facilitate the movement of the refugee to another space, where the state cannot have power over him. What the future holds is unknown—Idrissa seeks to go to London, where he will probably remain "illegal," to join his mother working at a Chinese laundry. The refugee is yet to find refuge, and another state may still punish him. The makeshift and temporary sanctuary that the shoeshiner, his community, and Idrissa have built, however, achieved its goal of evading the law in one jurisdiction and delivering the refugee to the next stage of his asylum-seeking journey. Sanctuary, thus, is not permanent refuge. This short but significant duration of sanctuary suggests that it is less about providing entry into a nation or home and more about facilitating freedom of movement and a crucial reprieve from the law's penalty. To host or provide hospitality, then, is not so much to grant access to a domicile, whether that domicile be the public nation or the private home, but could be conceived of as creating the conditions for the asylum seeker to escape the law, to move toward a different and less hostile space of refuge.

Understanding sanctuary as an offer of hospitality is to see hospitality as a type of protection. These two closely related concepts are linked by the idea of keeping the stranger safe and welcoming the guest. Welcome and protection often go hand in hand, but hospitality's limits, especially when it falls under the scope of the law, means that it is a specifically mediated iteration of refuge (La Caze 2004; Lambert 2017; Still 2010). As scholars have reminded us, hospitality and hostility are two sides of the same coin, sharing as they do a root word—*hostilis* (of an enemy) (Minkkinen 2007). The uncertainty of welcome indicates how the guest can easily become the enemy, and the enemy can slip into the role of the guest. Such ontological permeability between welcome and expulsion, safety and punishment, should mark for us the difficulties in viewing sanctuary primarily as a relation of hospitality.

Yet hospitality remains a dominant framework for understanding immigration and refugees or the relationship between the foreigner and the state (Balch 2016; Oliver et al. 2019; Rosello 2002). Organized through a host-guest relationality, hospitality presupposes a certain power dynamic that is difficult to dislodge from its meaning. Whether it is about the right of visitation or residence, attached with conditions or limitless, hospitality still configures inclusion in a nation-state as a gift or privileged benefit.[7] The guest is always positioned as a recipient of the benefit, even if there is no expectation of reciprocity, or when its giving is ostensibly unconditional. While discussions of hospitality have been primarily framed through its conditionality, Kaurismäki's film focuses the issue on the question of solidarity—how "hosting" is a matter of human relation, resistance to unjust law, and creating justice. Instead of examining what conditions are imposed with the offer of hospitality, we might ask what experiences, knowledge, and convictions allow it to develop. What might it mean to understand hospitality as emergent solidarity? And how might this solidarity allow us to think of protection not in terms of arrival, entry, and rights, but instead through unity of experience and feeling, or a shared social struggle?

It is no coincidence that the protagonist in the film is named Marx (after Karl), and that it is the marginalized, working-class individuals who are the ones that attempt to build sanctuary with Idrissa. In an early scene, when Marx is shining the shoes of a customer outside of a shoe store, a salesman comes out and violently kicks his equipment, shooing him away, and calling him a "terrorist." Chang, a Vietnamese migrant who entered France with false papers, lives in the city as a ghost—"I don't exist" (Kaurismäki 2011). Many others who populate this filmic world are working-class individuals whom the state has abandoned in one way or another. Such lived experiences of structural struggle and outcast, I suggest, undergird the potential for connection between the community in Le Havre and the refugee.

Yet, this potential is never made explicit, as no rationalizations are made for acts of sanctuary making. The inhabitants of Marx's neighborhood—bakers, bartenders, grocers, laborers, and artists—instinctually work together to conceal the refugee from the law, sometimes at great risk to their own safety and cost to their livelihood. They will not benefit from protecting him, and do not ask for any kind of reciprocity. Without discussion or justification, they coordinate an effort, falling in line as if what they are doing is the most natural thing, the most obvious and human behavior. The sequence of scenes when they deliver Idrissa to the boat at the harbor, obstructing the police's work and concealing him in a fruit cart, is a fantastical sequence of collaboration. Filmed in a light-hearted and comic manner and layered with the music of accordions, the scene evokes the wily human ingenuity to evade authority and achieve a mutual task. Staged here is not unconditional hospitality, but a material solidarity that recognizes shared human responsibility, unequivocally siding with the dispossessed, powerless, and punished of the world.

The lack of explicit justification for or discussion of their actions is crucial here—it thwarts narrative fulfillment and character development. We gain no insight into their individual moti-

vations or interiority. The result is that the characters remain largely "stock" or "archetypal"—their flatness representative of a type or larger idea as opposed to conveying a unique self. In this way, what is foregrounded is human action—or acts of sanctuary-building—instead of a righteous and exalted subject so central to melodramatic narratives of humanitarian rescue and notions of benevolent hosting. This novel representation of sanctuary-building, one that emerges from the "fairytale" construction of Kaurismäki's filmic world, displaces the savior subject and the dramatic catharsis of dominant humanitarian narratives. If there are no "saviors" then there are no "victims" to be saved.[8]

The "hosts" of Le Havre do not bestow on Idrissa a right or benefit, but instead act to respond to a moral problem presented to them in their everyday lives: follow the law or prioritize the well-being of a human individual. Their actions are not for the refugee per se, but are for a sense of shared humanity and knowledge of state violence. This comes through in the film precisely because of the lack of articulated motivation. The deadpan and flat mannerisms of the characters, their lack of expressive interiority, lends a kind of mundane and muted quality to their acts of care and assistance. What gets highlighted is human individuals protecting another individual from the law's punishment—people doing what is right and good, an idea that may seem simplistic and reductive, but is actually powerful when it is not excessively dramatized or explicitly named. Stripped bare of expressive emotions and the cultural association or ideological implications that are attached to them, the acts of care are not socially mediated and intentional, but exist as a basic relation that arises between individuals, particularly in a context where the system imposes violence on people attempting to create safety for themselves and for others. Sanctuary or hospitality is not a "good" that one has to give, a gift, right, or privilege that one possesses and can be bestowed, but is ordinary people living their lives with and doing things for one another.

To Hell with Realism

Le Havre's narrative plotting (or story) of sanctuary is not unique or original—a group of white Europeans, led by a down-trodden and lovable man, comes to the aid of a black child refugee. A superficial reading of the film could perceive this story as a "white savior" narrative, one in which neo-imperial logics are re-inscribed in liberal discourses of humanitarian rescue. The Western subjects are the agents of morality and social change, and the racialized, third-world subject is the object of rescue and care. Critical refugee studies scholars such as Yến Lê Espiritu (2014) and Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012) have discussed at length the ideological value of such rescue narratives, namely the ways they shore up war and militarism in the context of US imperialism. Discourses of "rescue and liberation" are embedded in discussions of refugees, circulating as a master-narrative to characterize the gift of refuge.

Yet, it is not enough to identify a representation as a white savior or rescue narrative without investigating its particular nuances—to query what the narrative does politically and the way it is told. The ethics of a narrative, I suggest, is not located in its story or plot, but rather in how the story is told. Meaning resides in the specific techniques used in telling a story and in how it conveys human relations. Narrative here is an important modality for generating ethical meaning. While the story of *Le Havre* unfolds according to the conventions of a white savior narrative, its deadpan and anti-realist style shifts to a different signification that complicates or deflects the force of this potentially problematic plot. The film's brilliance lies in how it manages to circumvent the pitfalls that so many other narratives about refugees knowingly enter.[9] Instead of a celebratory or self-congratulating narrative of humanitarian triumph, we get a choreography

of individuals working together to complete a goal. Instead of heroes and victims, we get people who have dignity and who respect the dignity of others.

In the Western imagination, the narrative of refuge, including stories of sanctuary, is dominated by the melodramatic genre (Buckley 2009; Puga 2016; Rajaram 2002). This genre, with its tensions, moral polarities, and excessive emotions, effectively dramatizes the conventions of refugee narratives—harrowing escapes, spectacular rescues, grief and trauma, and exceptional success stories (Brooks 1976; Williams 2001). Melodrama delivers the "refugee story," with its progressive narrative arc and cast of characters, we already know and come to expect—it is the fearful and suffering refugee's forward movement from oppression to freedom, persecution to rights, bare life to social subject. Those seeking asylum are expected to embody acceptable emotions through performances of suffering that elicit pity, sympathy, and care in affective relationality with the state and its citizens. Or, they must convey happiness and hope as a condition for and of receiving protection. In refuge, there is an expectation of expressiveness that continues to burden and enmesh the refugee in melodrama.

In Kaurismäki's 2017 film *The Other Side of Hope*, a Syrian asylum seeker, Khaled, enters Helsinki "illegally" as stowaway on a cargo ship. At the refugee processing center, he meets Mazdak, another asylum seeker, who tells him that acquiring refugee status depends on one's ability to modulate the public performance of emotion. Asylum seekers must, he explains, pretend to be happy and satisfied because "[t]he melancholy ones are the first to be sent back" (Kaurismäki 2017). Khaled responds by asking: "Should I smile and pretend too?" The reply is, "Yes, it will help. Just don't smile on the street. They might think you're crazy. It'll get you in trouble." The lesson here is learn to feel the right feelings and express them in the right way for the bureaucrat and the nation. Such an exchange between two asylum seekers reveals the affective demands placed on refugee subjects and the kinds of emotional negotiations involved in performing refuge. That these lines are delivered in a droll and deadpan style is a wry critique and subversion of asylum's expressive expectation.

Like *The Other Side of Hope*, *Le Havre* asks what it means to represent refuge-seeking and protection not through melodrama but through the stylistics of the deadpan, the recessive, or the flat. How might the refugee and the kinds of relations that are possible in refuge be understood through an aesthetics that withholds outward or dramatic expression? What might a way of representing refugees that "denies all claims of the normative, and so refuses to indicate how the listener [or viewer] is supposed to receive the story" (Bercovitch 2002: 91) achieve in terms of cracking open the discourse on refuge and refugee lives? Affective flatness or muted emotionality might be the most appropriate form to narrate the "refugee story" in the contemporary moment. If representations of refugees are often weighed down by tropes of heightened emotions that limit the potential of refugee subjectivity and forms of relationality, then the deadpan might be one way to circumvent, or provide a different approach to, how we imagine, and also engage with, people seeking refuge.

What Lauren Berlant calls "underperformed emotions" provides an alternative to the trappings of conventional refugee narratives by disrupting fixed perceptions and established expectations (2015). Through underperformed emotions, the melodrama of refuge is withheld and another mode of representation and perception becomes possible. As such, the story of asylum seeking has no emotive tension that hinges on good and bad, life and death, or trauma and hope. This opens up a way for radically comprehending the human obligation of refuge, to perceive anew the encounter between resident and migrant, the settled and the displaced, individuals seeking protection and communities providing it. It is perhaps flatness that can tell us the most profound thing about the experience of refuge, which has no guarantees, no narrative teleology, no pre-determined script or politics. Flatness recalibrates the short-circuits

and prefabrications that are readily available to us when we attempt to discourse about refugees and migrants.

This flatness is most impactful in *Le Havre*'s climactic scene. After the whole community, coordinating escape from a police raid, has managed to transport Idrissa to the harbor in order for him to board a boat that will take him across the English Channel to London, the shoeshiner and the refugee must say their goodbyes. Idrissa turns to the shoeshiner to say, "Thank you, I won't forget you." Marcel responds, "Me neither." They continue:

"Say hello to your wife."

"Take this. Your mother's address."

The two then look each other in the eyes and shake hands. These lines are delivered in a toneless, impersonal, and matter-of-fact manner. The deadpan here strips the climactic exchange of the spectacular theatrics that typically accompany such scenarios. The cathartic release of saving and being saved, of generosity and gratitude, is muted through the spare relational stylization between the two individuals. There is no celebration, no spectators clapping hands, no swelling music. Emphasized is not the transaction between a savior and a refugee, a giver and a receiver, but the experience of successfully eluding the state, of solidarity and human understanding. The visual framing of this shot places both subjects on equal footing—the refugee and the shoeshiner acknowledging the deed that has just been completed, and recognizing each other's integrity as individuals. Such careful positioning of the refugee body, of attention to how others relate to him, is part of Kaurismäki's humanist project to articulate ethical human behavior, which does not cease to see the migrant's agency and humanity even when they may be in the midst of abjection.

In an earlier scene, when the African refugees are first discovered in the shipping container, armed police in full-body armor are dispatched to the location. As the container is opened, a montage of still-life shots of them staring into the camera is shown. Their intentional placement in the center of the frame and their direct and still gaze in close-up, illuminated with frontlight, references European portraiture: these are subjects worthy of artistic treatment. These are people looking back on what "we"—Europeans, citizens, people of the world—are doing or failing to do. These are living, dignified individuals. The sequence is a stunning visualization of respect and humanity. Kaurismäki refuses to follow the logic of reality in order to present a different image, one that does not objectify the refugees' suffering for the viewer's scopic pleasure. Commenting on the specific scene, the director says, "I had written that the container with the refugees was filthy and that some of the immigrants had died. I could not go through with that, and I thought I'd do the complete opposite. Instead, I'd show them wearing their respectable Sunday best—to hell with realism. I'd make them arrive as proud people instead of having them lie in the container in their own filth, as some of them realistically would have done after two weeks' incarceration" (Von Bagh n.d.). The anti-realism that Kaurismäki employs suggests another way to represent refugees and the politics of protection. It is to view people who require sanctuary as proud human agents rather than "victimized objects of representation"—that is, to understand how they are subjects who require refuge, not objects defined by such needs (Demos 2013: 17).

If humanitarian care or sympathy is traditionally elicited through the refugee's pity and suffering, then this scene of refugee dignity calls on another affective register and representational strategy to recognize the human obligations of mutual aid. Helping a fellow being is not predicated on or through their suffering, but through and with the recognition that they are "our" fellow in life. Their beauty in being alive activates the impetus for protection. To turn away from melodrama is also to turn away from ethnographic realism and the demands of authenticity that often seek to expose the grave and devastating conditions of displacement. Eschewing reality's logic allows Kaurismäki to subvert representational expectations and sidestep, if not completely

resolve, some of the trappings of telling the story of individuals in the Global North coming to the aid of asylum seekers from the Global South.

Conclusion

The representational strategy I have touched on in this article—as a "flat migrant aesthetics"—is not just an issue of representation. What this different method of representing does is model for us another social and political approach to the question of sanctuary. The film demonstrates that representations of sanctuary, particularly ones that endeavor to circumvent the lure of migrant melodrama, can open up a critical conversation about the discourse, meaning, and practice of sanctuary. The insights about sanctuary-building that *Le Havre* offers through the depiction of human relations, or the way that these relations are stylized, forgoes the common sense of what protection means and how to do it. In its place, Kaurismäki visualizes a sensitive and ethical relationality based on shared dignity and individual agency. In this way, the film both represents and challenges us to imagine the sanctuaries that are possible, that we could bring into existence together.

To conclude by returning to the moment of first encounter between the shoeshiner and the fugitive refugee, the power of the scene can be perceived in its visualization of solidarity as well as its spatial construction. The location of their meeting place—underneath the piers—tells us of the alternate, ordinary space where solidarity might arise, sheltered from the encompassing surveillance of the state. The emergence of solidarity among the incommensurately marginalized, which manifests in sanctuary-building, does not pass through the power of the state and its laws but through common experience, knowledge of state violence, and ordinary humanity. The refugee half submerged in water exists in a space of interstitiality and uncertainty, but his speaking voice, his direct gaze into the lens of the camera and at the audience reminds us of the presence of life. It is a filmic and ethical insistence on the undeniable humanity of our interconnected lives. In a time when headlines direct us to the bodies of migrants who perish in the sea, such striking visuals redirect the narrative of sanctuary to genuine respect for the people who are undergoing such processes.

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NOTES

1. The city's name translates to "The Haven."
2. Newsreels of the Calais refugee camp in France, however, puncture the make-believe of *Le Havre*'s filmic world, showing us that "reality" is not outside of but intersects with it.
3. Laura Rascaroli, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, calls this approach the "becoming-minor" of European art cinema, a "stammering of a major filmic language that is deployed—often with humour, always with self-awareness" (2013: 327) to perform filmic and social critique.

4. I am influenced by Walter Benjamin's idea that the storyteller provides "counsel" in an "exchange" of experience. See Walter Benjamin (1968).
5. See, for example, David Moffette and Jennifer Ridgley (2018) and Anne McNevin (2006).
6. This right is ensconced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."
7. In his articulation of "perpetual peace" among a federation of states avoiding war, Immanuel Kant describes hospitality as a conditional right—as long as the stranger (guest) follows the rules of the state (host), and does not lay claim to permanent residence, hospitality can exist. Building on this, Jacques Derrida suggests that an unconditional form of hospitality, without terms or limits, might transform the kinds of conditional hospitality that have been inscribed in state laws. See Immanuel Kant (1970) and Jacques Derrida (2000).
8. For a discussion of cinematic representations of refugees as victims see Ipek A. Celik-Rappas (2017).
9. See, for example, Philippe Falardeau's *The Good Lie* (2014), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone* (2015), and Kate Evans' *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017).

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