Jaydn Gosselin takes a hard look at the ways his government uses foreign policy, news media, and even film to manipulate the Arab refugee crisis. This essay, written for Megan Shea’s “Writing the World Through Art,” asks readers to get past the rhetoric and attend to the voices of those in need.
try had already solved the problem. He offered veiled advice to European leaders:

> If you want to stop the deaths, if you want to stop the drownings you have got to stop the boats. We saw yesterday on our screens a very sad, poignant image of children tragically dead at sea in illegal migration… Thankfully, we have stopped that in Australia because we have stopped the illegal boats. (Knott)

According to the “Australian Border Deaths Database” posted on the Monash University Border Crossing Observatory website, when the Labor Party was in government between 2007 and 2013, before being defeated by Tony Abbott’s conservative Liberal National Coalition, over 1,200 asylum seekers drowned en route to Australia. Since the Coalition’s election in 2014, only three have drowned. Abbott, through a series of varied policies and border protection measures, had indeed “stopped the boats,” and refugees are no longer dying in our waters. Mr. Abbott and immigration minister Peter Dutton employed one measure that people found a little strange; the Australian government staked six million dollars on a telemovie in hopes of deterring refugees (Gartrell).

This film, *Journey: The Movie*, begins with Arab men and women dreaming of a rich and distant Australia, free from war. The camera follows them as they pay people-smugglers to get there, and ends with a sinking boat. One by one, through a wide shot from a distance, the immigrants disappear into the ocean below. A mother, holding tightly onto her son, flails to remain afloat. A young man named Nadim swims over to help them. The water laps up the edges of the frame and the viewer feels submerged over and over without warning. Nadim reaches the woman and her child and holds onto them. With a painful slowness, the mother dies. The image fades to black, then light returns. Nadim is alone, buoyed by a child’s life vest around the lifeless son. The boy was only three or four, his hair had a youthful wave; he wears a red flannelette shirt, blue jeans and white Velcro sneakers. He looks, now, eerily similar to Aylan Kurdi, who had died only six months before the film’s Afghan debut in late March. Only, this time, *Journey’s* producers changed the symbolic context of Aylan’s
inescapable, heart-aching death and inverted its message; the death of a little refugee child becomes not a call to Western action, but to refugee inaction.

To get *Journey* in front of the eyes of potential refugees, my government invested over one-and-a-half million dollars in its distribution, paid to a media company that sent it off to be seen in Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and, finally, Afghanistan. There will not be an English-language version. Only Australians who understand languages such as Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Pashto, or Urdu will be able to fully grasp the film’s message—but that message was never intended to influence Australian citizens anyway. The film was shown in the countries from which the majority of refugees to Australia flee. *Journey* was made to stop the boats before they even leave (Gartrell).

In the words of veteran Australian journalist Tony Jones: “How did on-water matters become on-screen matters? How did the immigration department get into the movie business?” (qtd. in Seccombe). To the government, it was all about communicating its message. At a Senates Estimates Committee hearing, the head of Australia’s border protection operation aimed at preventing the maritime arrival of refugees, Major-General Andrew Bottrel, explained that the film was a small component of a “very comprehensive strategic communications campaign” (“Australian Customs and Border Protection Services”). The campaign is designed, the Major-General continued, “to, essentially, deliver four streams of messaging, highlighting the realities of hazardous sea journeys.” Projects would be delivered in eighteen different languages to achieve their maximum potential distribution in these countries.

My government created a film in the languages that potential refugees would understand. Not only did the characters come from their countries, they looked like them, shared similar stories, and, more than anything, spoke their language. My current suite-mate Hamza, who speaks Urdu, translated a scene for me. Three nights before their little boat will sink, the mother holds her young son’s hand and tells him a bedtime story of a crab who, each morning, watches a heron carry excited fish to a very “special pond” nearby. But, when the heron took too long and came back with a full stomach, “the crab got a little worried” (*Journey*). The fish, it turned out, would never
make it to the pond, always ending up being eaten along the way. If all Australians had Pakistani suite-mates they’d understand the mother’s story as a metaphor for the hopelessness of refugees putting their lives in the hands of people smugglers. But it didn’t matter to the film’s intended audience that we Australians were excluded; to those who saw themselves in the relation to their own domestic struggles, Journey’s message was one of inclusion and empathy. This, it said in a voice they recognise as their own, could be you.

This isn’t the first time a country has directly communicated ‘urgent truths’ to potential refugees. In 1993, fearing a mass influx of Haitians seeking asylum, President Bill Clinton, talking over local Haitian radio, produced a message of a different, more direct, kind: “Those who leave Haiti by boat for the United States will be intercepted and returned to Haiti by the U.S. Coast Guard” (qtd. in Sciolino). My government, which, twenty years later, adopted the policy of boat turn-backs, could have delivered a similarly artless message, allowing no room for misinterpretation. However, Clinton risked a paternalistic detachment that verged on dispassionate apathy towards persecuted Haitians, who, in turn, resisted and continued on their way to the Land of the Free (Thiessen).

*Journey* was the culmination of a series of messages that marketed a similar despair, but avoided the apathy of Clinton’s speech. Early in 2014, for instance, the Department of Immigration and Border Protection distributed a graphic novel in Afghanistan with a story of broken characters hopelessly seeking asylum in Australia (Cox). It is so easy to watch Journey, to read the radio plays and the graphic novels that came before it, and feel empathy while witnessing people plagued by misfortune without realising that empathy’s carefully constructed nature. In its strategy of deterrence, my government wasn’t just emphasising empathy, they were doing their best to control it.

In fact, if Afghans were to discover who was producing their TV drama, they would realise that foreign forces were controlling the whole industry. When the United States and its allies, Australia included, invaded Afghanistan and supplanted the Taliban in 2001, a golden age of Afghan television commenced (Hudson). With foreign funding came shows carrying messages that the financing country deemed positive (Fraenkel, Shoemaker, and Himelfarb). It is within
this context that, only a few years later, Trudi-Ann Tierney, an Australian, wrote and directed Journey: The Movie.

Tierney, a middle-aged woman from Sydney with an unwavering motherly voice, saw Afghanistan with the same wide-eyes of a young soldier at a recruitment centre. “I suddenly got this great vision . . . of a wild frontier,” she told Richard Fidler in an interview on the ABC. “I kinda romanticised the whole thing.” She quickly moved up the ranks, performing her duties more like the benign Major-General doing everything she could for the war effort than the Head of Drama she had become. With respect to Journey, these duties meant deterring Afghans from seeking asylum in Australia through well-crafted, indirect and artful “positive messaging.”

“Propaganda, you mean?” Fidler butts in. “Yeah, basically propaganda,” she replies. She continues:

I always thought of propaganda as a very dirty word until I started peddling good, positive propaganda... When you’re preaching about the dangers of making homemade bombs and, you know, women’s rights, that’s propaganda according to the Taliban. (Fidler)

From her perspective, Tierney was able to separate the political message and its interpretation from what she saw as objective empathy. “This is about people, not politics,” she is quoted in an article by Dr. Binoy Kampmark, who couldn’t agree less. Kampmark rails against Tierney’s separation of politics from a film whose entire interpretation was predetermined by a government fixated on “anti-refugee” politicking. Comparing her to Hitler’s favourite propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, Kampmark views Tierney as the “fashioned mercenary of the [government] mouthpiece.” The messages of empathy that Tierney helped to produce through Journey have been commissioned by Australia’s immigration department, what Dr. Kampmark calls an “industry of loathing,” and are, thus, inseparable from the film.

Dr. Kampmark speaks to the trend of what is often considered to be an increasingly militarised immigration department since the modern War on Terror. Three days after former Liberal Prime Minister John Howard introduced mandatory offshore detention of refugees
on September 8, 2001, the 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted both a circumstantial and calculated compounding of maritime-refugee policies with a terrorist panic, interpreted as a singular problem. An article written two months later sets the scene for Australia’s exploitation of national security and border protection:

Just minutes after the atrocity, he addressed a press conference called to hear his report on talks with President George W. Bush . . . Suddenly, Howard has become leader of a nation at war and a man considered able and willing to protect Australia’s shores from any Afghanistan-fuelled invasion of refugees. (qtd. in Hugo)

Terrorists emerged as the new enemy, one whose boundaries and movements were as imprecise as the modern Arab refugee.

The modern war on terror and unstructured—yet not always illegal—immigration has pushed governments into a new mode of wartime, domestic propaganda to try and solve an issue at stark odds with their external pursuits of empathy: how to best alienate a refugee. If we trace my government’s department in charge of immigration through its changing titles since 2006, we see a country struggling to find its message. First, it concerned itself with Immigration and Multicultural Affairs; then, with Immigration and Citizenship; and then, finally, the Department of Immigration and Border Control was opened, its goals reinterpreted. The department would protect Australians like me from “queue jumpers,” “boat people,” “illegals” and “criminals” (“Asylum Seekers and Refugees”). These epithets are of a different, more universal vocabulary than what we heard from Tony Abbott’s advice; they do not speak of a shared compassion to the 1,100 refugees who had already died on Australian waters. No, they sound like Australia’s true reactionary fear. Despite how convincing the ‘stop the boats, save the children rhetoric’ is, refugees who no longer want to come to my country don’t just stop risking their lives in small boats; they continue to die, washed up like trash on Turkey’s shores. It doesn’t matter. The language of refugee-inclusion doesn’t exist in the domestic voices of my politicians; they are too concerned with exclusion.
In a perfect world, these languages would never have to compete; there would be one for them and one for us, separated by nearly ten thousand kilometres. I would only ever hear the one message, which, by now, I am comfortably frightened by. However, the open borders of the Internet means that I can spend five minutes to find Journey: The Movie on YouTube and witness the message of inclusive empathy my politicians rarely voice within Australia’s own borders. Through my laptop, lying in my bed, I can watch the not-so-scary faces of scared refugees on a rickety boat look out across the vast emptiness of the ocean ahead and dream of Australia, not as invaders, but as human beings with aspirations uncrushed by brutality. “It’s beautiful,” says Nadim, whose only possession is a guitar his father gave him (Journey). All he wants to do when he gets to Australia is become a musician.

I’ve never looked into the inhuman, blurred face of a real-life “boat person”—on hunger strike to protest the latest suicide, self-immolation, or rape of a detainee by a detention centre guard, curling their fingers into the steel hex-webbing of a barbed-wire fence on the six o’clock news—and thought: I wonder what kind of music he can play. Nadim’s is a face and a voice that I understand, but that runs so contrary to the culture of fear and indifference that I am used to from my country. “It’s scary,” another refugee tells Nadim as they survey the horizon, faded like a mirage. “I can’t swim.” When they drown, I am not encouraged to stop their boat, I am not heartened that my Navy, inspired by America’s, is now turning them back; I feel how many felt when little Aylan’s boat sank, his brother and mother died, and he washed up on a lonely beach; I feel like we could have helped but didn’t. Who knew that a movie made to deter asylum seekers would make me want to accept them even more?

In Journey: The Movie, Trudi-Ann Tierney offered more nuance than Australian politicians were ever willing to acknowledge. She spoke, at once, in the voices of the refugees wanting to come and the politicians telling them to stay—capturing a quality that Zadie Smith calls, a “native flexibility.” In her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” Smith argues that “those qualities we cherish in our artists we condemn in our politicians.” Politicians who concede are weak-willed, those who
compromise lack conviction. How can a “many-voiced” leader be honest?

In response to Prime Minister Howard’s 2001 militant posturing of refugee policy, then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, resisted only one proposal. Voicing concern, while also acting as a mouthpiece for bipartisanship, Beazley refused to support a bill that would render “lawful even the murder of an asylum seeker by an Australian official” (Manne). Howard seized the opportunity and painted the Opposition as soft on border security. The Liberal party, doomed to be defeated in the November federal election, stuck to their fear-stoking convictions, spoke in one unified voice to regain the trust of the Australian people, and won in a landslide.

In her 2008 essay, Smith examines the voice of another politician: the recently elected President Barack Obama, who, being born to a white, American mother and black, Kenyan father, was able to “conjure contrasting voices and seek a synthesis between disparate things.” Because of his background, President Obama spoke comfortably of “our collective human messiness;” to many, however, this multiplicity made him untrustworthy. But we trust the many-voiced artist who conjures characters from little more than her imagination, gives a voice to an aspiring musician from Iraq, and empathises with a mother fleeing war with her son. “[A]rt, the very medium of it,” Smith concludes, “allow[s] [the artist] to do what civic officers and politicians can’t seem to: speak simultaneous truths.” Smith considered this chorus of contextual truths to benefit wider social debates in which a many-voiced politician could genuinely acknowledge complexities.

Whether or not you agree with Journey’s goal to deter refugees, the film spoke a truth my politicians fail to concede: that the people we don’t want coming to our country—be it from moral grandstanding or fear of an Arab invasion—are indeed people.

Aware that potential refugees might not appreciate the voices of Australian politicians—the same politicians who have called them “criminals” and reduced them to “boat people”—Journey posed as a film written in their own words. Abroad, the film would speak with one voice—a voice, to borrow Smith’s words, “flooded with empathy.” At home, politicians realised such a voice would contradict their domestic message, so they did not offer a version the majority of
Australians could understand. On March 30th, I signed my name to a Freedom of Information request for an English-language transcript of *Journey: The Movie*. The Department of Immigration and Border Protection replied via email. “Good morning . . .” they wrote, “the Department seeks your agreement (under s.15AA of the FOI Act) to extend the timeframe for the processing of your request by 30 days.” I am still waiting.

When I watched *Journey*, I couldn’t understand the dialogue. I hardly knew the characters, their stories and aspirations, or the importance of their dying words. But, at its climax, I didn’t need any of that. My politicians failed to account for the many, unpredictable voices of art. Their message was conceived in an office somewhere: how can we use deaths at sea to our advantage? But the message was translated into shots, editing and sound, and spoken in the artistry of dying faces, clearer than the water in which they drowned: these are people, they say, like us. Major-General Bottrel said that his communications program would be delivered in eighteen different languages. *Journey* added a nineteenth language that everyone knows, the language of art, which we had involuntarily understood when we first stopped to look at the dead boy who had tried to flee a war and failed.

And yet, I am still left with the nagging feeling that an image of a dying child and even more dying adults taken by journalists or recreated by Australian filmmakers doesn’t amount to refugees having their own voices heard. Tierney was just another privileged person controlling an empathy that wasn’t her own. She created fake people with real problems, which did nothing to help the autonomy of the refugees suffering in Australia’s mandatory, off-shore detention facilities in Nauru and Manus Island: the musicians, the doctors, the happy and the hopeless.

A week ago, on May 26, 2016, I finally heard the voice of one of the detained.

“This is how tired we are, this action will prove how exhausted we are,” Omid Masoumali told UNHCR representatives visiting the Nauru facility (qtd in. Doherty). “I cannot take it anymore,” he said, before setting himself on fire. He knew he was being filmed on someone’s phone nearby. Within a week, a Somali refugee, known only as Hodan, did the same (Innis). Omid and Hodan are the fourth and
fifth refugees to self-immolate under Australian care in the last two years (“Australian Border Deaths Database”).

There have been 188 incidents of self-harm on Nauru in the past year (Innis), but self-immolation is different—it has a history of changing the world. You’ve probably seen the photos: a monk, Thich Quang Duc, sitting cross-legged, eyes closed plaintively as his face chars under a whirlwind of black-and-white fire during the Vietnam War in 1963; Jan Palach, a twenty-year-old Czech student, runs through a cobblestone square in a glowing suit of fire to protest the Soviet Invasion in 1969; a Tunisian vegetable merchant, Mohamed Bouazizi kneels on all fours, carcass-black and still burning, to start the Arab Spring in 2011 (Verini). These men self-sacrificed for people like them who hadn’t been heard before, whose voices were being ignored, to haunt others with an unavoidable empathy that they could control.

I watched Omid burn himself alive. I remember his screams.

Perhaps the only thing more gut-wrenching than seeing refugees set themselves on fire under my government’s care is that it means our policies are working. A parochial deterrence can only succeed if coming to Australia is no better or worse than never fleeing at all, or becoming another country’s problem. The burning faces of deterrence are Omid and Hodan’s.

Their actions drew attention and for a moment we heard their voices, but in Australia’s atmosphere of ritual apathy towards refugees, two voices, however loud, aren’t enough. Journey: The Movie might be a good example for politicians to follow when they speak but who Australians really need to hear are the men, women, boys and girls living in detention, the ones who survived war and persecution in their countries, who left everything to get on a rickety boat, who did not drown during the perilous journey over unforgiving seas, who arrived in Australia only to be imprisoned for years in another country, behind barbed wire fences.
WORKS CITED


