



**NEW RELEASES**

# Flee

I've heard it argued, even by some in the animation industry, that animation is the art of embellished movement, wild transformations and fantastical scenarios, and that any film that doesn't channel its imagination in these directions is somehow deficient. It might as well have been live action, the thinking goes. This has always struck me as a case of double standards – how many people criticise *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) for not being animated? – and also as an oddly limited view of what animation can do. There are so many uses the medium can be put to, as a growing number of films are showing us.

Take *Flee*. The documentary is about Amin (a pseudonym), an Afghan who fled his country's civil war in the 1980s and ended up in Denmark, where he now lives as an openly gay man burdened by trauma and secrets. The story, in all its details, is sombre, nuanced and focused on his personal experience of actual events. On paper, it's a candidate for a gritty live-action treatment, yet it has become one of the most acclaimed animated features of the past year.

In fact, were it not for animation, the story might never have been told at all.

*Flee* was born from the friendship between Amin and its director Jonas Poher Rasmussen, whom Amin met at school after being granted asylum in Denmark. As Poher Rasmussen established himself as a maker of radio documentaries, he suggested making one in which Amin recounted his life story, about which the director still knew little. But Amin wasn't ready to tell it. It was only when, almost a decade later, Poher Rasmussen proposed an animated documentary that Amin consented. Crucially, his anonymity would be protected through the use of animation.

The project was a novelty for them both: Poher Rasmussen, who has also directed live-action documentaries (including 2012's *Searching for Bill*, which won an award at CPH:DOX), had never worked in the medium. 'I'd seen a lot of animation beforehand,' he tells me at the BFI London Film Festival, while *Flee* plays to a packed house at the BFI Southbank. 'I'd never thought it was something I would do myself.' The clincher was a call from ANIDOX, a pioneering Danish initiative which has done much to fund animated documentaries and develop a conceptual framework around the burgeoning genre. Asked to pitch an idea, Poher Rasmussen reimagined the Amin project for animation, and ANIDOX supported its early development.

Poher Rasmussen's research centred on intimate, detailed conversations he had with Amin, which are depicted in the film; the voices we hear are theirs. The director calls these 'interviews', but they are staged like therapy sessions: we see Amin lying on a bed, eyes closed, while Poher Rasmussen sits in a chair beside him and prompts him gently with questions. The pair held 15 to 20 such sessions at the director's home over three or four years, Amin gradually revealing the details of his tortuous journey. Often he would stop the process and wait until he felt ready to divulge the next part. 'When I did the first interview, he said, "This is going to be therapeutic to me,"' recalls Poher Rasmussen. 'And that's when I realised, "This is a lot bigger than I'd thought." Even though I'd known him for so many years, I didn't understand at the beginning how much he carried around with him.'

The set-up in the room wasn't inspired by psychotherapy so much as Poher Rasmussen's experience in radio, where he approaches interviews in the same

way: 'When you don't have an image, you really need the subject to be very descriptive about what happened. So by having [Amin] laying down, having his eyes closed and talking in the present tense, it's really a way of having him relive things instead of just retelling things.' Poher Rasmussen asked Amin to evoke the plants, houses and colours of Kabul: all the visual details he could remember.

*Flee* has images, of course, but as most scenes are recreations of Amin's memories, his descriptions served as invaluable reference points for the artists, who also made extensive use of archive materials. These flashback sequences form the film's narrative core, tracing Amin's flight to Moscow, his abortive first attempt to cross into Scandinavia and his eventual arrival in Denmark. Animation presents obvious advantages here. The character designs ensure continuity between the young and present-day Amin; there is no jarring sense of watching an actor in the dramatised sections. A live-action production, especially one with a modest budget, would struggle to stage scenes like the storm-battered crossing of a refugee boat, or to portray bygone Afghanistan and Russia so convincingly. Realist stories set in countries where a live-action shoot would prove dangerous, if not impossible, have been told in animated form before – *Tehran Taboo* (2017), which explores the Iranian capital's clandestine demi-monde, is just one example. *Flee* also deploys silence to build suspense or heighten the lyricism of a shot: say, the beautiful freedom of a plane painting its contrail across the sky. These wouldn't have been possible in a radio production.

*Flee* is a masterclass in the intelligent, unshowy use of its medium. The animation itself (directed by Kenneth Ladkjær at the young Danish studio Sun Creature) is limited – there are relatively few original frames per second – but naturalistic, as the story requires, and well observed. The character designs (by Ladkjær and Mikkel Sommer) are simple but appealing; they started out quite cartoonish in early development and were later tweaked to be more realistic. The designers had to ensure Amin looked Afghan but not too much like his real self. 'We did a lot of research on Afghans, we google-searched "Afghan man",' says Poher Rasmussen, who also looks different in the film: he is made blond, not dark-haired as in reality.

The production design, overseen by art director Jess Nicholls, broadly distinguishes three types of scene. The past narrative feels classically cinematic, with bold horizontal compositions and rich use of light and shadow. Kabul is recreated in detail: 'The art director and I spent tons of time finding archival footage from the time to really be sure that it felt right. We also had a group of Danish Afghans look through things to make sure that they felt precise.'

This design contrasts with the modern-day segments, in which we see Amin being interviewed or spending time with his partner, Kasper. These scenes, which are based on footage shot by Poher Rasmussen, consist of a kind of simulation of *cinéma vérité*, complete with handheld 'camerawork' and jump cuts. The director's team 'thought it was quite funny to have me, as a documentary filmmaker, coming in and saying, "Just do jump cuts – it doesn't matter". They weren't used to that at all. And also we talked about how, when you're out shooting a scene for a documentary, you always shoot something like leaves on the trees. So if you need to cut, you can cut somewhere else, then back to what's going on. So we were really trying to use the techniques I normally use when I'm out shooting, in animation.'

Then there are shots that reach for the opposite effect. *Flee* opens with the hallucinatory vision of a crowd of faceless, sketchily drawn figures dashing through a spare monochrome landscape. This semi-abstract style is used at points throughout the film to depict events Amin didn't witness or only dimly remembers. Amin's manner of speaking informed this approach: 'When he started to talk about something that was traumatic, or something he had a hard

time remembering, you could sense in his voice that the tone changed, and I thought, “We need to feel this in the visuals as well.”

Animated documentaries have existed at least since Winsor McCay’s *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) recreated the notorious torpedoing of a British liner in World War I. But *Flee* is the latest in a string of recent documentaries that see in animation, with its capacity to distort and subvert the representation of things, an opportunity to try to convey the subjective experiences of memory and trauma. This genre has flourished since the success of Lebanon War drama *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which Poher Rasmussen cites as a major influence. Another example is *Another Day of Life* (2018), an adaptation of journalist Ryszard Kapuściński’s account of the Angolan Civil War. But Poher Rasmussen was concerned that his approach to Amin’s story might untether it from its historical context, so he also wove copious archive footage into his film: ‘Even though you hear [Amin’s] real voice, you can forget that this is not a fiction. So [this was] just to remind people that the reason he’s pushed out of [Afghanistan] is because of historical events that actually happened in our world.’ The footage also helped with the film’s budget, as it was cheaper than animation.

So *Flee* speaks to us in four different visual registers, which reflect the different layers of truth it seeks to reveal: this is at once a film about Afghanistan’s conflict, one man’s flight from it, his effort to remember his experiences, and their enduring effect on his life – including his identity as a gay man. It is a strikingly sophisticated work from a newcomer to animation. This is a medium that, in theory, lets you show anything in any way. Many animated works suffer from this freedom, for example by indulging in unnecessarily dynamic camerawork. But *Flee* feels very disciplined.

‘It took me time to realise how many decisions you have to make all the time,’ Poher Rasmussen says of the production process. At times he questioned whether animation was right for him, or for the story. But he came to value the level of control he had: ‘You can be so precise with animation, down to: what does the couch need to feel like that he’s sitting on? The important things you can keep in the image, and everything else you can take out. I really like the precision of storytelling in animation. It’s difficult in [live-action] documentaries, because there’s so much disturbance in reality.’ Animation preproduction typically involves an animatic: the preliminary form of the film, consisting mostly of storyboards, which serves as a detailed blueprint for the final scenes and their order. Poher Rasmussen, who involved Amin at this stage, ‘really enjoyed that you edit before you shoot’ in animation. He is returning to the medium for his next project, an adaptation of Halfdan Pisket’s *Dane* trilogy of graphic novels, which retell the experiences of Pisket’s father as a Turkish immigrant in Denmark.

Animated features take ages to make – development on *Flee* began in 2013 – so it’s rare for them to feel very topical when they come out. But *Flee* lands in the wake of last summer’s events in Afghanistan, and in the midst of renewed discussion about refugee crossings in Europe. The film has a chance of shaping public discourse on these issues, not least in Denmark. Hopefully it will also leave a legacy in animation, reminding us that the medium can help us not just to escape reality, but also to probe it and reveal its depths.

**Alex Dudok de Wit, *Sight and Sound*, March 2022**

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## FLEE

*Directed by:* Jonas Poher Rasmussen

©: Final Cut for Real ApS, Sun Creature Studio, Vivement Lundi!, Most Films, Mer Film, ARTE France, Copenhagen Film Fund, VPRO, Vice Studios, RYOT Films

*Production Companies:* Final Cut for Real, Sun Creature  
*in co-production with:* Vivement Lundi!, Most Films, Mer Film, ARTE France, Pictanova

*Pictanova with the support of:* Région Hauts de France  
*in co-production with:* VPRO

*with support from:* Danish Film Institute, Swedish Film Institute, Norwegian Film Institute, Nordisk Film- och TV-Fond, Copenhagen Film Fund, Den Vestdanske Filmpulje, The Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, Centre national de la cinématographie et de l'image Animée, Région Bretagne

*Région Bretagne in partnership with:* CNC

*with support from:* Procirep - Société des producteurs, ANGOA, DR, Fritt Ord, SVT, I Wonder Pictures, Movistar+

*Presented by:* Final Cut for Real, Sun Creature

*World Sales:* Cinephil

*Executive Producers:* Riz Ahmed, Nikolaj Coster Waldau, Danny Gabai, Natalie Farrey, Jannat Gargi, Hayley Pappas, Matt Ippolito, Phillipa Kowarsky

*Produced by:* Monica Hellstrøm, Signe Byrge Sørensen

*Line Producer:* Charlotte Sanchez

*Archive Research, Rights and Clearance:* Sara Thelle

*Casting Agent:* Gro Terp

*Original Screenplay:* Jonas Poher Rasmussen, Amin

*Live Action, Cinematography:* Mauricio Gonzalez-Aranda

*Animation Director:* Kenneth Ladekjaer

*Animation Producer:* Charlotte de la Gournerie

*Editor:* Janus Billeskov-Jansen

*Art Director:* Jess Nicholls

*Based on artistic development by:* Guillaume Dousse

*Composer:* Uno Helmersson

*Music Supervisor:* Bente Egelund Jorgensen *Upright Music*

*Sound Supervisor:* Edward Björner

*Sound Mix:* Tormod Ringnes

*Re-recording Mixer:* Edward Björner

*Supervising Sound Editor:* Edward Björner

## Cast

Daniel Karimyar (*Amin, 9-11*)

anonymous (*Amin, 13-15*)

Fardin Mijdzadeh (*Amin, 15-18*)

Milad Eskandari (*Saif, 8*)

Belal Faiz (*Saif, 13-19*)

Elaha Faiz (*Fahima, 13-18*)

Zahra Mehrwarz (*Fahime, 28*)

Sadia Faiz (*Sabia, 16-26*)

anonymous (*Abbas*)

anonymous (*Akthar Nawabi*)

anonymous (*Tahera*)

anonymous (*young Tahera*)

Rashid Aitouganov (*human trafficker 2/police chief*)

Georg Jagunov (*human trafficker/police officer 3*)

Fardin Mijdzadeh (*angry man/refugee*)

Navid Nazir (*boy in truck*)

Hafiz Højmark (*son of old lady*)

Fardin Mijdzadeh (*angry man/refugee*)

anonymous (*mother to the kid in the forest*)

Denis Rivin (*policeman 1/flight steward*)

Vadim Medaskovskij (*policeman 2*)

Viktor Melnikov (*Russian TV dubber*)

Mikhail Belinson (*human trafficker*)

Ditte Graa Wulff (*Red Cross lady*)

Bo Asdal Andersen (*policeman*)

The Dungeon Master (*rude Dane*)

Behrouz Bigdeli (*translator*)

Christian Torp Carlsen (*real estate agent*)

Gustaf Georg Lindstrom (*Swedish bartender*)

Tormod Ringnes (*Norwegian cruise captain*)

Susanna Azevedo (*Mexican soap opera woman*)

Maurico Gonzalez-Aranda (*Mexican soap opera man*)

Denmark, France, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, USA,

UK, Finland, Italy, Spain, Slovenia 2021©

89 mins

A Curzon release

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## NEW RELEASES

### Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas)

Continues from Fri 28 Jan

### Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy (Guzen to sozo)

From Fri 11 Feb

### The Souvenir Part II

From Fri 18 Feb

### Flee

From Fri 18 Feb

### La Mif (The Fam)

From Fri 25 Feb

### Rebel Dread

From Fri 4 Mar

### Ali & Ava

From Fri 11 Mar

## RE-RELEASES

### South: Sir Ernest Shackleton's Glorious Epic of the Antarctic

From Fri 28 Jan

### Jules et Jim (Jules and Jim)

From Fri 4 Feb

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