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‘Flee’: An Animated Documentary Recounts a Harrowing Personal Trauma

Jonas Rasmussen’s intimate and powerful 2D film tells the untold story of his long-time friend Amin’s life as a gay child growing up in Kabul before his escape via Russia to Denmark.

By [Victoria Davis](#) | Tuesday, March 2, 2021 at 10:42am

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Jonas Rasmussen’s animated documentary, ‘Flee,’ produced by Sun Creature Studio and Final Cut for Real. All images courtesy of the filmmakers.

For over two decades, documentary film director Jonas Rasmussen says he had no idea of the trauma that his friend Amin - an Afghanistan native - had experienced by the time they met in the filmmaker’s hometown of Copenhagen in 1996.

“I was 14 when we met,” he recalls. “I had just been running around, playing soccer in my garden. And then he arrived, and we’ve been friends for 25 years. And I didn’t know that, when he arrived, he’d been through all these things. When you’re 14 years old, you just meet people, and you don’t really ask about their life before.”

Those “things” began before Amin had reached high school age, when he fled his home in Kabul along with his mother, brother, and two sisters, to seek safety from attacks by the Mujahideen and Taliban. He then lived as an illegal immigrant in Russia, hiding from corrupt, abusive police, was human trafficked in the cargo hold of a sinking fisherman’s boat, and said goodbye to his entire family before escaping Russia alone to find refuge in Denmark, where he knew no one.

Amin is not his real name, but an alias used in Rasmussen’s newest animated documentary film, *Flee*, where, for the first time, the director’s long-time friend tells the story of his life, not only as a refugee, but also as a gay child growing up in Afghanistan, and his struggle to psychologically separate his traumatic past from his future. The film had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival this past January.

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"He knew that he had to tell the story at some point, because his life was split into two pieces," says Rasmussen. "He couldn't keep living for his past, and he had to bring his past and his present together to start a new life with his boyfriend. So, I think he knew he had to tell this story and this film gave him that opportunity to open up."

Flee, produced by Denmark's Sun Creature Studio, Final Cut for Real, and over a dozen others, is an unusual documentary, primarily told in 2D animation and intermixed with archival video footage of Kabul in the 80s and Russia in the 90s. While this gave Amin's character even more identity protection, animation director Kenneth Ladekjær says the highly detailed animation also allowed for the team to bring Amin's personality to the front of the film's focus in a new way.

"Jonas had the actual footage of the interviews and he let me and a few other animators see it as reference to understand Amin's character, his personality, and to get the feeling of the authenticity," explains the animation director. "So, in the animation, it really feels like a person that's being interviewed and not just a character. We studied that footage a lot, especially when he was laying down on the couch telling his story, the way his hand moved and how he opened and closed his eyes."



In the film, an animated Jonas asks Amin to lay down on a couch underneath a video camera, close his eyes, and recount his memories, starting from childhood, where a young Amin dances through his Kabul neighborhood, listening to 80s tunes in pink headphones, all the way to his adolescence, walking into his first gay bar, and trudging through a forest in the dead of winter with a group of refugees as a tight-lipped, deep-scowled human trafficker threatens to shoot those too slow to keep up.

"I use this technique to really feel the place he is at in a specific memory," notes Rasmussen. "In the beginning memories, for example, he's in the garden with his siblings, and his sister is telling stories, and I'd have him describe what's around him and what things look like. You don't hear a lot of that in the interviews, but we used it a lot in the animation."

Flee's art director Jess Nicholls adds, "It was also a lot of trying to dig up old archive footage from different places during that time period. [Finding material from] Kabul was especially hard because so much doesn't exist. But we were determined to get it as true to life as possible, down to even what the buildings were made of. We had some people come by the studio who had

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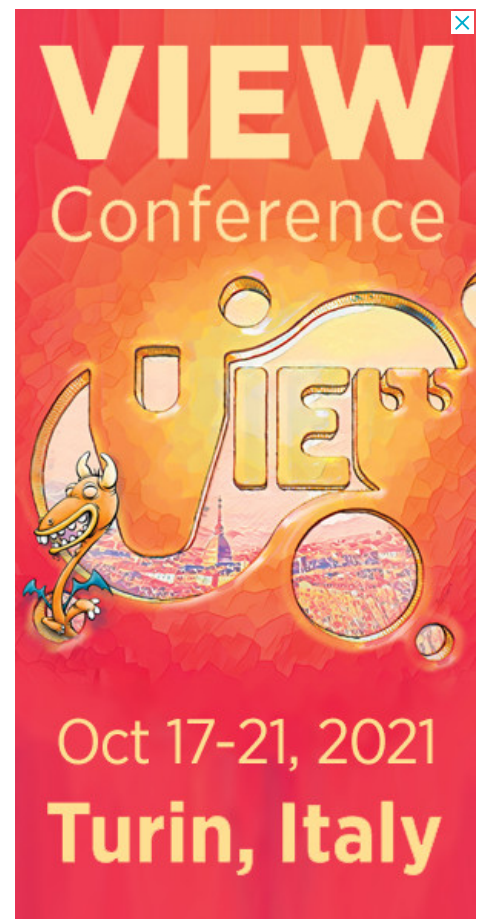
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lived in Kabul during that time period to get their opinion on whether stuff looked and felt right. We got some really good feedback there. So those scenes are close to my heart.”

Nicholls and Ladekjær explain that authenticity and realism were the key pieces to this documentary; they developed an animation style that felt tangible and organic, paying attention to the smallest of details, including barely noticeable tears that formed in the corner of Amin's shut eyes as he inhales and exhales to maintain composure through tougher narratives.



“I remember seeing that tear on the footage and I really liked how natural it felt,” Ladekjær shares. “Normally, in animation, we would draw the tears to swell up and run down the cheek. But I really didn't want the animation to feel overly acted or like it went through a filter. It should feel like Amin's own identity and keep that human aspect so we can really relate to it.”

That human connection and relatability is what first drew Ladekjær to Rasmussen's project. “What resonated with me was that it wasn't this refugee story about what's happening in the world as much as it was Amin's personal story and I could relate to that, to the human in it,” he recalls.

“It's not really a refugee documentary,” adds Nicholls. “It's a story from one friend to another. That hits home.”

But amidst the anonymity, realism, and relatability, Rasmussen had another reason for choosing animation as the medium through which to bring Amin's story to life. “This is very much about memory and trauma,” the director says. “And, with animation, we were able to be more expressive and emotional in our visual styles.”

“We worked closely with Simon Rouby, who directed the feature film *Adama*, to find an art direction, really another language, to talk about visually these more dramatic moments,” adds animation producer Charlotte De La Gournerie.




To capture Amin's emotions during points of high stress throughout the story, concept artist Simon and the team added in a chaotic, charcoal-like animation made up of mostly dark figures, untamed lines, and dramatic movements. These graphical animations were cut between the more detailed, realistic images to show not only the setting but also Amin's psychological state.

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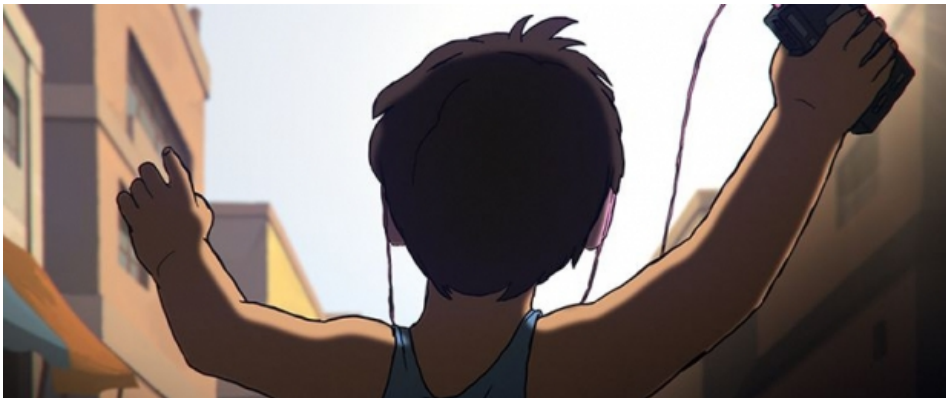
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"Plus, a lot of those sequences are also parts of Amin's life where he wasn't physically present or had it recounted from someone else," Nicholls describes. "Our goal was to illustrate the thought stream of consciousness, which is often much more chaotic than the normal life."

In addition to consulting with concept artists, Nicholls, Rasmussen, and the team dove into research about psychology to make sure that even the symbolic parts of their documentary were as accurate as possible. "We did a lot of research into what parts of memories tend to stick longer in brains during trauma and what aspects of situations tend to visually remain afterwards," says Nicholls. "For instance, we made the decision to remove the facial features from a lot of background people in the normal sequences so that you could see it was a memory and you would only focus on what was important in those moments."

With the medium of animation offering so much creative freedom, often the biggest challenge Rasmussen says he and his team faced was what to leave in and take out of scenes. "One that was really difficult was with the sinking fishing boat," he reveals. "For a long time, when we were editing the animatic, we just had too many things going on and we really couldn't crack it. We couldn't make it work. But we realized we just needed to stay on Amin. This is his story, and all these things that happened on the boat are not really important. It's more important to experience him being in that situation and just listening to his voice."

De La Gournerie believes that decision-making benefitted from having both animation and documentary-minded filmmakers on the team. "I think, in general, we're so not used to being minimalistic in animation," she says. "And since we had members on our team that had never done a documentary before, and those who had never done animation before, it took a lot of trust to rethink each scene, and that's where it's quite special. I think *Flee* really brings the best from the two worlds."



Ladekjær adds, "I think that helped our story, having these two different mindsets to think, 'What's the best for the story?' instead of getting locked down in a 'This is how we normally do it' kind of process."

While not the first animated documentary, the team hopes that *Flee* will serve as a strong example for how animation, compared to live-action, can be an equally powerful tool for documentary filmmakers to tell more stories like Amin's.

"Aside from the more abstract parts of the film, this could have been made in live-action," Ladekjær admits. "And I think often animation has to sort of justify its existence if it's not cute or funny or really crazy. But I hope this film shows that through drawing the characters, you capture expressions that are already there, which creates a unique view. And I hope that opens up the gates for other animation films to deal with a subject like this in a more mature way."

"Especially when you dive into something like traumas and memories, because it's just another kind of visual with so many possibilities in animation," Rasmussen adds. "I really hope that helps people relate to the story and feel that this is not just a story about being a refugee, but also about family and love and being together and relations."

Save for additional COVID restrictions, *Flee* is set for a June release in Danish cinemas, while Neon, Participant, Curzon Artificial Eye and Haut et Court have acquired U.S., U.K. and French distribution rights to the film. Release dates have yet to be announced.



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.



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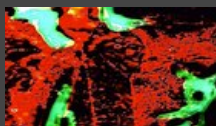
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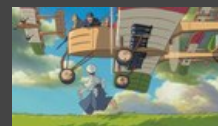
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