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Fleshing Out the Invisible: Activating Social Empathy Through the Material

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Abstract

This article begins with the material—objects that hold stories, reveal histories, and provoke sensibilities. *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home* is a short film that foregrounds these materialities as a form of everyday activism (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010), tracing how displaced individuals become visible through what they hold dear. In this cinematic work, international protection applicants and refugees craft an evocative narrative around the singular object each brought from home, invoking "thick solidarity" (Liu & Shange, 2018; Maillot et al., 2023). It is the material—small, mundane, yet profoundly resonant—that animates these narratives and disrupts the apparent divide between what is visible and what is not. The film's anonymous participants emerge in fragments: hands in motion, shadows cast, voices layering against a backdrop of an original score that samples their stories. This fragmented presence centres both the material and the relationality at its core, revealing the co-presence of the visible and the unseen, of the tangible and the unspoken. Motivated by rising anti-immigrant rhetoric in Ireland (Vieten & Poynting, 2022), the film seeks to cultivate "relationships of discomfort" (Boudreau Morris, 2016), unsettling the frames of ignorance and challenging the boundary work of exclusion. This article aims to examine the materialities evoked by the film, the processes of their cinematic articulation, and their impact on audiences. Anchored in shared imaginings, co-creation, and a desire to foster social empathy, *Ordinary Treasures* becomes an uneasy yet vital form of solidarity (Roediger, 2016). It stands as a creative interruption, offering an alternative vision of everyday activism in an Ireland grappling with the rise of populism. In this article, we will trace how these materialities themselves give rise to theoretical frameworks, shaping and reshaping our understanding of their entanglements. These are not static systems but emergent dynamics, unsettling assumptions and holding space for new solidarities to form.

Keywords

celebrating the ordinary; co-design; materiality of displacement; participatory filmmaking; thick solidarity

1. Introduction

This article offers an analytical reflection on the materiality of displacement as revealed in the co-created short film *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*. At its core, this work emerges not only as a form of academic activism but as an insistence on the tangled, enduring relationships between bodies, places, and things—relationships that continue to exert force even after rupture and dislocation (Schradie, 2018). Here, the aim is not to delve into participatory filmmaking as a practice in itself but rather to trace how the film makes visible the materialities that anchor the forcibly displaced, urging us to rethink what it means to inhabit, to belong, to endure.

Ordinary Treasures embodies what Liu and Shange (2018) describe as "thick solidarity"—a solidarity forged not in grand proclamations but in the small, intimate gestures of care embedded in the everyday (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). The film unfolds over ten minutes, structured around a single evocative question: "What did you bring with you when you fled your home?" This question, deceptively simple, slices through the abstractions of policy and bureaucratic discourse, revealing the tangled material and emotional realities of forced displacement (Maillot et al., 2023).

Six participants, all members of the DCU Irish Refugee Integration Network, share their stories through the objects they carried with them on their journeys. We workshopped the film over six workshops from February to April 2023 with the shoot taking place in early May of that year. A bloodstained Nicaraguan flag evokes both the resistance and the loss that shaped its owner's departure. A Tibetan sound bowl, carried from Ukraine, resonates with the longing for peace and healing. Scuffed dance shoes remember the rhythms of a lost home, while a coat holds the warmth of familial memory. Two precious necklaces, rarely taken off, served as shields against harm and a tether to loved ones left behind. These objects, far from mere symbols, are material archives—memory in tangible form, bearing witness to lives disrupted and held together.

Five of the participants chose to remain anonymous, their voices and stories foregrounded while their identities were carefully protected. The visuals, in turn, focus on the storied objects, allowing their materiality to evoke the profound resonances of their owners' experiences. One participant chose full visibility, his story delivered with a clarity and determination that invites radical empathy. This interplay of presence and absence—of visibility and veiling—highlights the tension between precarity and agency that shapes storytelling for those navigating forced displacement (Bloemraad & Menjívar, 2022).

This dynamic raises key questions central to this article: How does *Ordinary Treasures* make visible the materialities of displacement, and in what ways do these materialities work to reconfigure public understandings of forcibly displaced experiences beyond abstraction and objectification? Furthermore, how does the participatory filmmaking process itself cultivate social empathy, challenging audiences to engage with displacement as an embodied, ongoing reality? What does it mean to use creative co-design to shift narratives and invite viewers into a form of "thick solidarity" that recognises not only the humanity but also the political agency of those so often rendered invisible?

To approach these questions, we take the objects as entry points, following their trajectories in the spirit of de Laet and Mol's (2000) invitation to "follow the objects." These storied artefacts are not static markers of loss but active agents within complex relational networks, generating meanings that exceed mere

representation. Through these material presences, *Ordinary Treasures* challenges the notion of displacement as absence, revealing instead its ongoing reassembly of fragments into new, precarious, yet resolute forms of being.

This article, like the film it discusses, is intended for a broad audience and aims to contribute to public and policy debates by exploring the material aspects of forcibly displaced life. The focus on these objects and their resonance offers a way of connecting the intimate and the systemic, suggesting how holding onto these items can reflect an effort to preserve a sense of self and maintain visibility. This attunement to the material provides a lens to understand how forcibly displaced individuals navigate their experiences of dislocation and exclusion, expressing a sense of belonging in often challenging circumstances.

The discussion begins by situating the film within the broader rise of populism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in Ireland (Vieten & Poynting, 2022), contextualising the urgency of this creative intervention. We then explore how the film enacts this intervention, not through narratives of victimhood but through the presence of matter—how objects, bodies, and voices coalesce to produce a different sense of forcibly displaced experience. By employing the lenses of physicality, the sensory, and the affective, we elucidate how these materialities are made to matter, how they resonate beyond the screen and into public consciousness. This project, then, is an enactment of "thick solidarity" (Liu & Shange, 2018)—uneasy, fragmentary, yet deeply committed to unsettling the narratives that seek to confine and reduce forcibly displaced lives.

Through its focus on the materialities carried by the forcibly displaced, *Ordinary Treasures* disrupts the exclusionary and hostile narratives that dominate populist discourse. It foregrounds complexity and presence, emphasising the tangible as a means of holding together identities fractured by dislocation. This work calls for a reimagining of solidarity—one rooted in material engagement, unsettling comfort, demanding recognition, and compelling us to stay with the difficult, yet necessary, work of connection.

2. Social Empathy Through Participatory Film

The rise of far-right hate in Ireland, as elsewhere, draws its strength from the fractures and anxieties sown by decades of neoliberal austerity and the erosion of social safety nets (Cannon et al., 2022). Across Europe and beyond, far-right movements have adeptly harnessed cultural anxieties and economic grievances, reframing complex systemic failures into simplistic narratives of blame and exclusion. In Ireland, a country long defined by its diasporic history, this resurgence of nativism is particularly jarring. Anti-immigrant demonstrations are becoming more frequent, and incendiary rhetoric finds fertile ground in communities grappling with housing crises and stretched public services (Connell & O'Carroll, 2023). These grievances, instead of being addressed through systemic change, are weaponised by far-right actors, targeting asylum seekers and migrants as scapegoats (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). The arson attacks on asylum centres stand as chilling manifestations of this hostility (McCarron et al., 2024).

Such tactics thrive within the contours of what Fisher (2022) termed capitalist realism: a pervasive sense that no alternatives to the current socio-economic order exist. The far-right exploits this landscape, offering exclusionary myths as solace and redirecting anger away from the structural conditions that breed insecurity (Gallagher et al., 2023). These myths do not simply fill a void; they actively reshape social imaginaries, transmuting structural despair into reactionary fervour. In this cycle, affective economies of loss and

grievance are weaponised, not to challenge the conditions of abandonment but to entrench them further, recasting precarity as the fault of an Other rather than the logic of capital itself. What emerges is not merely ideological capture but a material investment in the reproduction of dispossession—a recursive loop in which suffering finds its release in punitive rather than emancipatory desires.

In this context, empathy becomes a radical, even subversive act—a deliberate refusal to accept the divisions dictated by capitalist and nationalist logics. As academics in a school of languages and intercultural studies and active members of the DCU Irish Refugee Integration Network, our commitment to solidarity is not theoretical but deeply entwined with our daily work, echoing Connell's (2019) vision of what a university can aspire to be. Through teaching English to international protection applicants and refugees, we have witnessed firsthand the resilience and courage of our students, who bring their stories and hopes into the classroom even amidst profound uncertainty. When far-right protests began to erupt in Dublin, our students shared with us their fears—of being targeted, of being made invisible, of having their humanity questioned. These conversations sharpened our resolve to respond together, collaboratively, through a medium that could amplify their voices and centre their lived experiences.

Our film, *Ordinary Treasures*, thus begins with refusal: a refusal to let dehumanisation and fear shape the narrative of forced displacement. Against the erasures wrought by far-right discourses, it centres the material and intimate stories of the forcibly displaced—those who navigate the liminalities of asylum, their voices too often silenced in national debates. Through the objects they carried—a bloodstained flag, a Tibetan sound bowl, shoes worn to dance, a coat imbued with familial warmth—the film renders visible the entangled threads of memory, loss, and hope that these materialities hold.

In engaging with these storied objects, *Ordinary Treasures* does more than recount individual journeys; it unsettles the structures that drive displacement and division. The film does not merely evoke empathy but reconfigures it, activating a social empathy that insists on the shared vulnerabilities and interdependencies obscured by the isolating logics of neoliberalism (Briciu, 2020; Couldry, 2010; Silke et al., 2021). It gestures towards an alternative politics—one grounded in thick solidarity, where the intimate and the systemic converge to reimagine belonging, care, and collective futures.

Social empathy, as envisioned in our short film, seeks to move beyond the surface act of emotionally identifying with another. It aims to provoke an awakening—a deeper recognition that our lives are fundamentally intertwined with those whose experiences are systematically marginalised and whose voices are often silenced by dominant narratives (Keen, 2006). This form of empathy is not about pity or condescension but about acknowledging and engaging with the relational entanglements that bind us all. As Dolan (2017) articulates, such empathy is essential for forging meaningful connections across divides, grounded in an understanding of our shared human condition and mutual vulnerabilities.

The film insists on reconstituting relationships between bodies, places, and things, focusing on the material traces of displaced lives as provocations that confront and unsettle what we take for granted as familiar. These objects—loaded with memory, loss, and hope—become conduits for rethinking relationality. They demand an active, embodied engagement from the audience, challenging the abstractions and objectifications that reduce the forcibly displaced to statistics or threats.

By foregrounding these storied materialities, the film invites viewers to see the forcibly displaced not as distant "others" but as subjects whose lived realities expose and speak back to the cultural logics of erasure and exclusion. Social empathy, in this context, is not static but generative—it reframes how we perceive, relate to, and act within a world shaped by displacement. It calls for a reckoning with our complicity in the systems that perpetuate these conditions while opening space for collective reimagination, where solidarity is not simply acknowledged but actively cultivated.

Building on the call for social empathy, participatory filmmaking has been a vital methodology for making the complex narratives of displacement visible and legible to wider publics. In *Ordinary Treasures*, we use participatory film to not only evoke empathy but to foster solidarity—positioning those often portrayed as passive subjects of discourse into active roles of representation (Lenette, 2019). This method challenges the erasures and objectifications that displacement narratives are often subject to, enabling participants to reclaim agency in how their stories are told.

As Roy et al. (2020) argue, participatory filmmaking shifts the practice from simply documenting lives to co-creating stories, opening space for more nuanced and relational understandings. Similarly, Frisina and Muresu (2018) describe this co-creation as an act of political solidarity, one that foregrounds the agency of participants and disrupts traditional hierarchies between filmmaker and subject. *Ordinary Treasures* resists the tendency to render participants as mere symbols of suffering, instead presenting them as active political subjects whose material lives carry weight and meaning.

Practically, this participatory ethos shaped every stage of the filmmaking process. The six participants were involved from the concept stage, working with a scriptwriter to refine their narratives and collaboratively shaping the visual and thematic direction of the film, attempting to adhere closely to participatory design principles (Robertson & Simonsen, 2013). Through iterative storyboarding sessions, participants reworked their stories and made decisions about how their objects—and their own presences—would be framed. Their contributions extended to the cinematography, where participants guided choices such as camera angles and the treatment of their artefacts, ensuring the visuals aligned with their visions. Even in post-production, agency was centred, with participants providing feedback on edits and adjustments, fostering a process that was as inclusive and democratic as possible.

The role of the activist academic is also deeply entangled with this work—operating within and against the neoliberal university while striving for social justice. Academic freedom is increasingly constrained by market-driven imperatives, and the rise of far-right hostility adds further challenges. Yet, even within these constraints, activist academics are uniquely positioned to leverage their platforms to engage in public discourse, resist regressive policies, and advocate for marginalised communities. Social empathy thus becomes integral to activist academia. It shapes not only the research questions we ask but also how we engage with communities and the methodologies we employ. This is about fostering solidarities that are not just analytical or theoretical but felt, embodied, and uncomfortable (Boudreau Morris, 2016; Roediger, 2016).

Our work thus aligns with the ethos of an "engaged anthropology" that foregrounds care, slowness, and horizontal participation (Rasch et al., 2022), employing participatory filmmaking to foster public engagement and activate social empathy. In this sense, *Ordinary Treasures* disrupts the extractivist tendencies of

traditional academic work—shifting away from the model of knowledge extraction and instead co-creating spaces where shared vulnerabilities are made visible. Participatory filmmaking, as employed in *Ordinary Treasures*, becomes a tool to counter the narratives of capitalist realism and far-right populism, insisting that the stories of the forcibly displaced are not only heard but felt (Roy et al., 2020).

This article thus champions the use of participatory filmmaking as a tool for activist academia. Through *Ordinary Treasures*, we seek to illustrate how film can transcend traditional academic boundaries, fostering a more inclusive space for public interaction and societal change (Roy et al., 2020). By dissecting the participatory process, we argue for the transformative potential of such filmmaking in countering narratives of exclusion and fostering an engaged, empathetic public discourse in an era marked by division and hostility. Social empathy, in this context, is not merely a rhetorical flourish but a political necessity—a means to re-imagine our entanglements and recognise the deeply relational nature of the social world, insisting on a collective presence even amidst dislocation.

3. The Methodology of Co-Design and the Materiality of Displacement

Method is never neutral. It organises relations, structures authority, and dictates the conditions under which knowledge is produced and circulated. In *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*, co-design is not simply a technique but a political stance—an insistence on care, slowness, and collaboration as forms of resistance against extractive research practices (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011; Mountz et al., 2015). This methodology does not seek to capture or translate experience but to create space for participation on participants' own terms, foregrounding ethical entanglements rather than claiming to resolve them.

At the core of this approach is a commitment to participants—international protection applicants and refugees—whose lived experiences do not serve as raw material for academic inquiry but as structuring forces that shape the project itself. Anonymity was not treated as a mere procedural safeguard but as an active decision, a negotiation of visibility in a world where forced displacement renders exposure risky. Consent was not a one-time formality but an ongoing process, ensuring that participation did not come at the cost of security or dignity. To co-design under these conditions is to recognise that voice is not freely given, nor always desired—it is shaped, constrained, and sometimes deliberately withheld. The task, then, is not simply to foster social empathy but to remain accountable to the structures that determine who gets to speak, who remains unseen, and under what conditions participation itself becomes possible.

Throughout the co-design process, we remained acutely aware of the urgency of fostering social empathy, particularly in a climate where anti-immigrant sentiment is gaining ground. This awareness was not incidental but foundational, shaping everything from our methodological choices to the film's thematic structure (Murphy & Loftus, 2023). Rather than relying on abstraction or moral appeals, we turned to the material—objects that anchor lives, hold histories, and traverse borders. The universality of material culture became a bridge, a way to draw audiences into the complexities of displacement not through spectacle, but through recognition.

People form attachments to things; they imbue them with meaning, memory, and a sense of home. By inviting participants to share the objects they carried when forced to leave their countries, we were not only eliciting personal narratives but unsettling the assumed distance between *them* and *us*. These objects, small yet potent,

made visible the intimate, textured realities of forced migration—offering not just testimony but an invitation for audiences to locate themselves within these entangled histories of loss, survival, and belonging.

These materialities—objects as extensions of memory and identity (Miller, 2010)—did not merely serve as narrative devices but as conduits of affect, drawing participants into an act of self-inscription that was both deeply personal and inherently relational. If material culture became the bridge between audience and participant, it also structured the collaborative process itself, forging unexpected intimacies and solidarities. Participants navigated the delicate interplay between visibility and protection, shaping their narratives in ways that honoured both their agency and their right to opacity.

Co-creation was never just a methodological choice but a means of recalibrating the usual dynamics of representation—ensuring that storytelling was not something done *to* participants but something crafted *with* them. In this space of negotiated authorship, new forms of connection emerged, not only between participants but within the project team itself. This was not empathy as distant recognition but as entanglement—an active engagement with the precarities and possibilities of storytelling in a world where displacement too often reduces people to abstractions.

The performative element of the film took shape as participants rehearsed and recorded their stories, emphasising inclusivity, respect, and shared authority (Sarria-Sanz et al., 2022). As directors, our role was to facilitate rather than dictate—to manage power dynamics so that participants could genuinely co-create their representations. This participatory approach turned filmmaking into an act of solidarity, foregrounding participant agency and transforming storytelling into a shared act of meaning-making (Roy et al., 2020).

A critical moment came when participants resisted the suggestion to align their stories with places of historical conflict in Ireland. Instead, they chose settings that symbolised vitality and hope—parks, beaches, bustling streets—asserting their desire for a narrative that conveyed optimism. This decision reshaped the thematic focus of the film, actively countering the dominant discourses that frame displacement in terms of loss and suffering. Here, the participants shaped not only the content but also the affective tone of the film, challenging traditional narratives of victimhood and invoking instead a forward-looking energy.

We believe that participatory filmmaking in *Ordinary Treasures* has the potential to activate social empathy by making the materialities of displacement speak. These objects became more than symbols; they were nodes in a web of relations—connections that extended beyond the individual to encompass shared histories and future possibilities. By involving participants as co-creators, we disrupted the boundaries between filmmaker and subject, inviting audiences to see these lives not as distant or abstract, but as entangled with their own (Roy et al., 2020). In doing so, the film confronts the capitalist logic of separation, insisting instead on a shared vulnerability—a solidarity that transcends borders and categories.

The significance of material culture in migration research, as explored by Yi-Neumann et al. (2022) and Miller (2010), provides a theoretical foundation that resonates deeply with our project. Their work critiques the reduction of migrant experiences to "bare life," instead emphasising the rich, complex relationships between people and objects that persist even under conditions of forced displacement. Objects are not passive remnants but are active participants in shaping emotions, fostering belonging, and facilitating place-making. In *Ordinary Treasures*, the objects carried by displaced individuals are imbued with deep emotional, historical,

and social significance. These personal artefacts become anchors amidst the turbulence of displacement, offering continuity and a sense of belonging that resists the erasure so often imposed by forced migration. This entanglement of methodology and materiality embodies our commitment to participatory filmmaking as a practice of activist scholarship. Here, material culture is not merely a passive setting but an active force—co-constructing and mediating identities and memories in states of flux and transformation.

4. Framing as a Technique for Activating Social Empathy

In the words of Donna Haraway, "it matters what stories tell stories….It matters what worlds world worlds." Framing lies at the heart of how stories are told and understood (Entman, 1993). It shapes the contours of empathy, determining what resonates, what moves, and what remains opaque. In the context of *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*, framing was not merely a stylistic choice but an intentional strategy for challenging the pervasive narratives of victimhood and exclusion that often define the discourse around forced displacement. By deliberately framing the stories of participants in ways that highlighted agency, resilience, and shared material culture, the film sought to cultivate social empathy—an empathy that invites the audience to see themselves as implicated in the lives of others.

Framing, as Goffman (1974) discusses, is an operation of power—an act of selection and emphasis that dictates not just what is seen but how it is seen, rendering certain narratives legible while foreclosing others. Within the dominant regimes of perception, forcibly displaced individuals are flattened into figures of helplessness or threat, their agency obscured by the humanitarian-industrial complex's compulsion to categorise, manage, and contain. Our project resisted these reductive frames, foregrounding instead the materialities that individuals carried with them—objects imbued with personal, cultural, and emotional significance. These were not mere possessions but inscriptions of endurance, small acts of self-worlding that exceed the logics of displacement and dispossession. In centring these material traces, we sought not to universalise suffering but to reveal the uneasy intimacies of forced displacement—the ways in which survival is tethered to objects that persist even when borders are redrawn and lives are fractured.

Solmaz Sharif's *Dear Aleph* articulates this entanglement of state violence, abandonment, and the aesthetics of suffering:

> You're correct. Every nation hates its children. This is a requirement of statehood. This and empathy. Empathy means laying yourself down in someone else's chalklines and snapping a photo. (Sharif, 2016)

Sharif's provocation unsettles the presumed ethics of witnessing, forcing us to ask: what does it mean to look at another's suffering? What does it mean to document it? In the circuits of humanitarian and journalistic representation, suffering is often rendered into spectacle—an image captured, circulated, and consumed. But what if, instead of the image, we traced the material residues of displacement, the objects that refuse to conform to the logics of victimhood, and the silent acts of world-making that persist beneath the gaze of the state?

Social empathy, as Dolan (2017) suggests, is not merely an exercise in feeling another's pain; it is an ethical and political demand to recognise the conditions that structure that pain—to apprehend not just suffering but the architectures that produce and sustain it. But here lies the rub: empathy, as it is often mobilised, risks

collapsing into sentimentality, a fleeting affective response that displaces rather than deepens responsibility. Through our film, we sought to resist this tendency, using the framing of personal objects not simply to generate emotion but to unsettle the audience's sense of distance, to pull them into the uneasy proximities of shared vulnerability.To lay oneself down in another's chalklines, as Solmaz Sharif compels us to consider, is not just an act of imaginative substitution—it is an exposure, a confrontation with the ways in which the traces of displacement, violence, and abandonment are not only witnessed but inhabited. Our framing insists that empathy cannot end at affective recognition; it must extend into an awareness of how one's own positioning is enmeshed within these structures of vulnerability and resilience. It is not about seeing oneself in the Other, but about recognising the conditions that make such distinctions possible in the first place, about tracing the material and discursive formations that render some lives precarious while others remain secure. To do otherwise would be to reproduce the very logics of dispossession that empathy, at its best, seeks to challenge.

Empathy, as an analytic category, is not without its complications. Scholars such as Bloom (2016) caution against the potential of empathy to lapse into spectacle, a mechanism through which suffering is consumed rather than confronted—an affective circuit that permits audiences to *feel* another's pain while absolving them of any obligation to act. Ponzanesi (2016) similarly warns of the depoliticisation that occurs when empathy is framed as an end in itself rather than a site of political reckoning. In *Ordinary Treasures*, we sought to resist these pitfalls, rejecting sentimental narratives that flatten suffering into affective currency and instead insisting on a framing that demands both recognition and response.

By foregrounding everyday objects, we anchored experience in the material, resisting the gravitational pull of abstraction and disembodiment. These objects—fragments of home, traces of lives interrupted—were not mere props but conduits of history, struggle, and endurance. They refused the voyeuristic gaze that too often accompanies narratives of displacement, instead insisting on the particularity of lived experience, on the weight of the material in the shaping of memory and survival. If empathy is to hold any transformative potential, it must move beyond the momentary flicker of identification; it must become a confrontation with the structures that render some lives precarious while securing others, a demand to reckon with complicity, proximity, and the politics of care.

Pooja Rangan's critique of participatory documentary in *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Rangan, 2017) further exposes the limits of this framework, revealing the ways in which participatory approaches often operate as ideological sleights of hand. The rhetoric of "giving a voice to the voiceless" risks obscuring the fundamental power asymmetries at play, offering the illusion of agency while retaining control over whose voices are heard, how they are framed, and to what ends. Even when marginalised individuals are invited to speak, their participation remains constrained by the very structures that claim to centre them; the terms of engagement—set by the filmmakers—often delimit their capacity to shape the narrative in any substantive way.

This critique is central to our project, which, despite its participatory aspirations, was not exempt from these tensions. The participatory element in *Ordinary Treasures* was necessarily bounded; while participants influenced aspects of the framing, the broader parameters of their involvement—what could be included, what could be left unsaid—remained, as Rangan highlights, ultimately dictated by the researchers. Editorial control and the final cut rested with us, underscoring the inescapable tension between inclusion and

authority. Yet, rather than treating this as an ethical failure to be mitigated, we approached it as a site of necessary reckoning—a recognition that participation, too, is always structured by histories of exclusion and control. Our aim was not to dissolve these asymmetries but to make them legible, to hold space for the contradictions inherent in collaborative storytelling, and to interrogate how such projects might move beyond the fantasy of participatory purity toward a more honest engagement with the politics of representation.

The techniques of framing in *Ordinary Treasures* were designed not merely to elicit empathy but to provoke an encounter—one that is transformative rather than extractive, unsettling rather than affirming. By involving participants in shaping their own narratives—choosing settings, determining angles, guiding the flow of their stories—we attempted to shift the balance of representation, resisting the voyeuristic impulse that so often accompanies visual storytelling on displacement. This approach sought to recognise participants as co-creators rather than subjects, their agency not an afterthought but a structuring principle. Yet the critique persists: Does this form of co-creation truly rupture the embedded hierarchies of authorship, or does it risk becoming, as Rangan (2017) warns, an act of *immediation*—a sleight of hand that presents the illusion of unmediated authenticity while power imbalances remain intact?

Framing, then, is never neutral; it is always an ethical and political practice. It determines not only what is seen but how it is seen, how relations of power are made visible—or obscured. In participatory filmmaking, framing is not simply about storytelling but about structuring the conditions of recognition, about demanding more than passive viewership. In an era where far-right rhetoric mobilises its own framing strategies to dehumanise, exclude, and fracture solidarity, counter-framing must do more than bear witness; it must refuse the seductions of sentimentality and instead insist on complicity, on the ways in which all of us are bound—materially, historically, and affectively—to the lives of those we are called upon to empathise with. The challenge is not just to represent displacement differently, but to rupture the conditions that render displacement a chronic and inevitable feature of the present. Empathy, in this sense, can only be political—an embodied reckoning with the entanglements of responsibility, recognition, and action.

5. Resonance and Withdrawal: Crafting Audience Engagement

Framing is never just a technical choice; it is an ideological act, a structuring of perception that determines not only what is seen but how it is encountered. In *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*, participatory filmmaking offered a method—but also a provocation. How to resist the gravitational pull of the humanitarian gaze, that familiar choreography in which marginalised voices are included only to serve a pre-determined narrative, their presence legitimating the benevolent spectatorship of an audience that remains untouched?

Rangan (2017) critiques this dynamic, arguing that participatory documentaries often fail to disrupt the fundamental asymmetries between filmmaker, participant, and audience. Instead of redistributing agency, they risk turning experience into a consumable fragment—something to be *witnessed* rather than reckoned with. The challenge, then, is not simply to widen the frame but to interrogate its very conditions: Who speaks? Under what terms? And to what end?

In response, our project sought not only to reframe the narratives of forced displacement but also to explore the deeper affective processes of resonance and withdrawal. These concepts underpin how the audience is invited to connect with the film and engage with its message. Resonance, as articulated by Rosa (2019), is

more than an emotional echo; it is an active relationship between self and world, a space where both are transformed through their encounter. Resonance allows us to transcend superficial emotional identification, fostering a deeper, reciprocal engagement.

The personal objects presented in the film act as vessels of this resonance—items that carry memories, attachments, and hopes across borders. They provide a tactile, visual link to the lives of the displaced, inviting audiences to connect with them not as distant strangers but as fellow human beings who share similar attachments and emotions. The emphasis on everyday objects was intentional; it drew on the universality of material culture to evoke empathy while avoiding the spectacle of suffering that Rangan warns against. Resonance in this context is characterised by the unpredictability of genuine connection—moments when viewers encounter an emotional truth that feels both familiar and disarming. Such resonance has, in many instances, led to action, with audience members inspired to volunteer or engage with refugee issues beyond the confines of the screening room.

Where resonance invites intimacy, withdrawal makes space for distance. In *Ordinary Treasures*, withdrawal is employed as a strategic narrative device—a conscious withholding, a space that allows for privacy and agency on the part of the participants. Drawing on Hesselberth and de Bloois' (2020) politics of withdrawal, this approach is not a passive retreat but an active reconfiguration of the narrative space. By deliberately limiting what is shared, participants reclaim narrative power, maintaining control over their stories and ensuring their representation does not descend into voyeurism or exploitative empathy.

Withdrawal also serves as a critique of the conventional expectation that participatory projects should offer unmediated access. It insists on the dignity of refusal—the right of displaced individuals not to become entirely knowable to the audience. This serves as a powerful counterbalance to resonance, challenging audiences to confront the limits of their understanding and to reflect on the ethical complexities of empathetic engagement. As Rangan (2017) suggests, the imperative in participatory media is not only to provide visibility but also to interrogate the power structures underpinning that visibility. By utilising withdrawal, we sought to retain the integrity of participants' experiences while prompting viewers to consider what remains unsaid, absent, or inaccessible.

Resonance and withdrawal work together to shape the audience's experience of *Ordinary Treasures*. They cultivate a form of social empathy that goes beyond superficial emotional connection, encouraging a more thoughtful and ethical engagement with the lived experiences of displaced individuals. This approach moves the audience from passive spectatorship to a more engaged and ethically aware form of involvement—one where empathy is not just about feeling, but also about inciting responsibility.

Our screenings have demonstrated that this balance—between inviting connection and maintaining respectful distance—can provoke meaningful change. Audience members, varying from members of the university community, trainee teachers, second chance learners to grassroot activists, have not only reported feeling a deep emotional connection to the stories but have also taken steps towards engagement, such as some student viewers volunteering in refugee support efforts such as English teaching and community garden work. In this way, the film's resonance does not dissipate into passive sentimentality; it echoes in the actions taken by those who have experienced it.

This intertwining of resonance and withdrawal, following our deliberate framing strategy, is designed to foster an ethical, reciprocal, and transformative engagement with stories of displacement. It invites the audience into a relational space that insists on responsibility, on understanding the limitations of empathy, and on recognising the shared structures of vulnerability and resilience that connect us all.

6. Invisibility, Voice, and the Politics of Social Empathy

Visibility is never just a condition; it is a negotiation, a terrain of power where exposure and recognition are entangled with risk. *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home* does not assume that to be seen is necessarily to be freed, nor that to remain unseen is to be erased. In contexts of forced displacement, visibility can mean advocacy, but it can also mean surveillance, categorisation, or co-optation. The film does not seek to make everything legible but instead asks how voice moves—how it emerges, recedes, and sometimes deliberately withdraws.

Rangan (2017) reminds us that visibility is not inherently emancipatory; it can just as easily be a means of capture as it can be a tool of resistance. Not all who are seen gain agency, and not all who remain unseen are without it. *Ordinary Treasures* navigates this complexity by refusing the easy equation of visibility with power, recognising that voice does not always announce itself loudly. Sometimes it takes shape in fragments, in objects, in silences that resist translation. Social empathy, then, is not about making the unseen visible, but about attending to the ways in which presence and absence are structured—who speaks, who listens, and under what conditions recognition becomes possible.

To speak is never just to vocalise; it is to assert presence, to make a claim on the world. But that claim is not always recognised, not always granted the status of legitimacy. *Ordinary Treasures* does not seek to *give* voice—a paternalistic gesture that presumes silence where there is none—but to create the conditions where voices, long present, can emerge on their own terms. Voice is not a gift bestowed but an assertion of being, shaped by histories of recognition and refusal, by the right to be heard and the right to withhold.

These voices do not draw power from the spectacle of being seen. Their force lies in the ability to dictate *when* and *how* to speak, or whether to speak at all. In this sense, voice is not a guarantee of presence but an act of resistance—a disruption of the expectation that visibility equals power. To speak under conditions not of one's choosing is another form of subjugation. To craft the terms of one's own visibility, to determine the context of one's own speech—that is where the radical potential of voice resides.

If voice is an assertion of being, then so too is the choice to remain unseen. Invisibility is not absence, not silence, but a recalibration of power—a refusal to be made legible on someone else's terms. To be seen is not always to be safe; visibility, particularly in contexts of forced displacement, too often becomes a mechanism of exposure, a condition that invites surveillance, policing, and stigmatisation. *Ordinary Treasures* does not treat anonymity as a void, as something to be filled, but as a deliberate act, a strategic negotiation of presence and withdrawal.

This negotiation is starkly evident in the film, where five of the six participants chose to remain anonymous—a decision that speaks not to reluctance, but to the realities of life in Ireland, where the forcibly displaced and migrants generally navigate an increasingly hostile public discourse. Visibility, in such a climate, is never

neutral; it carries risk, it demands justification, it can be weaponised against those who seek recognition on their own terms. As one scholar observes, "acting visibly as a group is itself fraught with risk, as the demand for recognition can easily tip over into stigmatisation and persecution" (Alloa, 2023, p. 326). Within this landscape, invisibility becomes a means of asserting control, not a failure to participate but a refusal to be consumed by a system that too often renders the displaced as either victims or threats. In this way, *Ordinary Treasures* resists the coercive politics of recognition, refusing to equate participation with hypervisibility, and instead centring the right to opacity, to strategic withdrawal, to exist outside the logics of capture.

Meizel's (2020) concept of multivocality deepens this understanding of invisibility and voice. Meizel describes multivocality as an act of "border crossing"—an engagement with overlapping and intersecting identities, which are shaped by race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. In *Ordinary Treasures*, participants navigate these crossings while choosing strategic invisibility. Their voices are not less powerful for being anonymised; they are resonant because they traverse both the personal and the collective, embodying a transnational story of displacement. The anonymity does not diminish the political weight of their voices; rather, it reinforces their agency, offering a powerful alternative to the visible subject as the primary locus of political action.

The interplay between invisibility and voice is therefore not only visual but also deeply auditory, embodied in the film's musical composition. The original score was crafted to echo the participants' vocal expressions, with each voice shaping the music that accompanied it. The owner of the shoes that dance sings in this short film. Her voice, initially fragile, carried the weight of loss—of family, of home. As she sang for us repeatedly, her voice grew braver, stronger, more present, and we re-recorded. Her voice ultimately found its place within the musical score, blending with the simple, resonant tone of a Tibetan sound bowl, both in C Sharp—a distant but resonant key to the rest of the score. The music, created from pitch tracking and analysis of each participant's voice, captures not only their speech but their emotions, shaping harmony that reflects shared experience.

The film's score is not simply an accompaniment; it is an extension of the participants' expressions. It aligns with pitch, timbre, and tempo—core elements of voice prosody—that embody the lived experience of displacement. The score thus stands as a melodic manifestation of thick solidarity, where voice and music intertwine to express not just loss but resilience, not just invisibility but the power of choosing one's presence. The result is a score that supports the voices it accompanies, allowing them to fill the auditory space, to be heard even in anonymity.

This nuanced interplay between invisibility and voice is integral to activating social empathy in the audience. By framing anonymity as a deliberate choice, *Ordinary Treasures* encourages audiences to think about displacement outside the frames of victimhood and spectacle. It pushes viewers to understand that invisibility is not silence; it is a deeply political act of protection and self-definition. Here, social empathy is invoked not just through what is expressed, but also through what is withheld—the deliberate gaps, the unsaid, and the unshown.

Ultimately, *Ordinary Treasures* illustrates how invisibility and voice intersect to form a potent site of resistance, where the act of being unseen is as politically charged as the act of speaking. The film embodies the frameworks of Palumbo-Liu (2021) and Meizel (2020) while challenging audiences to interrogate the conditions under which visibility becomes a demand and to rethink empathy not merely as emotional resonance but as a recognition of the structures that compel invisibility. It is this form of empathy—one that

does not insist on exposure but instead respects the complexity of choosing when to appear—that the film strives to foster, urging the audience to confront their own positions within the dynamics of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard.

7. Conclusion

What does it mean to *feel* across the distances imposed by borders, bureaucracies, and histories of exclusion? What does it mean to engage not just with stories of displacement but with the material traces of lives uprooted and reassembled? This article has explored the entanglement of material objects, participatory filmmaking, and the materiality of displacement as sites where social empathy is not simply evoked but actively negotiated. Objects do not speak in the way bodies do, but they carry histories, affective charges, and silent demands for recognition—insisting on presence even when voices are disregarded or unheard.

At the centre of this inquiry is *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home*, a short film that moves between everyday activism (Mansbridge, 2022) and academic inquiry, unsettling entrenched narratives of displacement and reconfiguring how international protection applicants (IPAs) and refugees are framed. More than an attempt to "humanize" those so often reduced to statistics or political abstractions, the film foregrounds the agency embedded in materiality itself—the way objects carry, conceal, and make visible histories of belonging and loss. It is in this interplay, between what is held and what is withheld, that the possibility of social empathy emerges—not as a passive recognition of another's suffering, but as a call to rethink how displacement is perceived, mediated, and responded to.

The objects carried by displaced persons are more than mere artefacts—they are conduits of resonance, infused with the histories of belonging, loss, and survival. These objects provide a tangible, affective link between their experiences and the wider public, transforming perceptions of the displaced from abstract figures into individuals with complex, layered identities. Through these material connections, we hoped to foster social empathy—an empathy that extends beyond mere emotional identification and invites viewers to engage with the broader realities of displacement and resilience. The material artefacts demand a recognition of shared human impulses: to preserve, to protect, to remember.

Central to the film's creation was a commitment to co-design, embodying what has been referred to as "thick solidarity! (Liu & Shange, 2018). This form of solidarity is not simply abstract; it is rooted in the collective process of storytelling. At a time when anti-immigrant sentiment often pervades public discourse, co-creation serves as a form of academic activism, combining scholarly engagement with public impact. By involving IPAs and refugees in the filmmaking process, we sought to disrupt passive representations of the displaced and position them instead as co-creators with agency and voice.

While the film's reach has been modest, it has sparked meaningful dialogue where it has been shown. It has prompted audiences to reflect on their own roles and has even inspired some to take action—whether through volunteering or other forms of community support. Such responses highlight the potential of participatory filmmaking to create not only empathy but also engagement and solidarity. However, it is important to acknowledge that these impacts are gradual and contingent, rather than sweeping transformations.

As we reflect on this project, we remain aware of its limitations. Our aim was not to present a finished solution or assume a dramatic shift in social attitudes, but rather to open a space for reflection, shared vulnerability, and the possibility of action. We recognise the complexities and challenges inherent in representing vulnerable populations ethically and strive to remain cautious in any claims about impact.

Our journey continues through new creative mediums, including a graphic novel based on the film, which has received funding through the Irish Research Council's New Foundations grant. This graphic novel will expand our storytelling toolkit, seeking to connect with new audiences through visual narrative. Digital platforms also present new opportunities to extend the reach of this participatory work, although these must be navigated thoughtfully to maintain the integrity of participant voices.

Ultimately, *Ordinary Treasures: Objects From Home* is not an attempt to speak for the displaced, nor to offer visibility as an unexamined good, but to carve out a space where presence—whether articulated, withdrawn, or redefined—remains in the hands of those who inhabit it. In a moment when hostility towards migrants is not only rising but being codified into policy, aesthetics, and public discourse, the task is not simply to *give* voice, but to rethink the conditions under which voice is heard, who is compelled to speak, and who is granted the right to silence.

To navigate this terrain requires more than sentiment or spectacle; it demands an ongoing reckoning with how stories of displacement are told and by whom. It means recognising invisibility not as absence but as strategy, resonance not as affect but as force. Chosen visibility—when to be seen, when to withdraw, when to refuse the terms of recognition altogether—remains one of the most potent acts of resistance. This is the challenge: to create spaces where voice is not extracted but emerges on its own terms, where empathy is not passive but compels a confrontation with complicity, and where presence is not simply acknowledged but reconfigures the very frameworks that determine whose lives matter in the public imagination.

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