

From Nation States to Communities of Interest: Solidarity and Human Rights Declarations in Wolfgang Fischer's Styx

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According to the United Nations, in 2018, every minute of every day, around the world, 25 people were forced to flee their homeland. This means that on any given day, an average of 37,000 people, and, by the end of the year, 13.6 million people were newly displaced from their country of origin (UNHCR, *Global Trends 2019*, 2). In comparison to previous years, this marked yet another record high. In most cases, forced displacement is due to persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations

(ibid.). In addition, there is a significant number of migrants who aim to escape economic hardship¹. Whether these flights are undertaken in order to seek protection and/or a higher living standard abroad, many migrants set out on extremely dangerous, often fatal journeys. The journey to Europe has proven to be particularly hazardous in recent times. In fact, the International Organization for Migration has named the Mediterranean Sea the world's most dangerous and heavily guarded border: "between 2000 and 2017 (30 June), 33,761 migrants were reported to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean during their journeys" (IOM 2017, 1). It is in light of this harrowing situation that human rights and especially the notion of who has "the right to have rights" (Arendt 1949, 30), first formulated by Hannah Arendt in 1949, has acquired new urgency.

Aside from political debates, human rights and migration have also found their way into cultural products, literature and film. In the German-speaking context, examples of such films are classics like *Sbirins Hochzeit* (Germany, 1975) and *Reise der Hoffnung* (Switzerland, Turkey,

¹ The UNHCR differentiates between migrants and refugees based on whether they are presumed to have left their country of origin voluntarily or not (see Edwards 2016). This differentiation has been contested, especially in the case of economic migrants (for an overview of the main arguments see Hermann 2016). In this article, I will employ the term "refugee" for both "persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution" (Edwards 2016) and economic hardship.

UK, France, 1989), as well as more recent productions that include both documentary and non-documentary formats. Among them are the dramas *Die Farbe des Ozeans* (Germany, Spain, 2011) and *Die Piroge* (France, Senegal, Germany, 2012) and the documentaries *Als Paul über das Meer kam* (Germany, 2017) and *Iuventa* (Germany, 2018). What many of the more recent productions have in common and what makes them distinct from earlier films is that they depict not only the migrants' journeys but also the entanglement and responsibility of Europeans. The German-Austrian film production *Styx* (2018), directed by Wolfgang Fischer, is a significant case in point.

Here, I analyze how human rights and rightlessness in particular are presented and negotiated in *Styx*, the story of one German woman's tragic maritime encounter with a group of African refugees fleeing to Europe. The film engages with human rights critically and calls attention to fundamental problems, especially the question of who is granted the right to have rights. *Styx* also suggests a reconceptualization of human rights that demands political actions based on solidarity, and thereby conforms to Arendt's understanding of politics as civic engagement and collective deliberation. In fact, the film is profoundly Arendtian in that it stresses the responsibility of individuals and their active role in politics and, more specifically, their role in putting human rights into practice.

During my analysis, I will focus specifically on the situation of rightlessness that many migrants, and in particular economic migrants, find themselves in. My contention is that rightlessness is due to a conceptual problem of human rights, as well as a good faith belief in the actions of nation states. In addition, I will demonstrate how the film proposes an alternative form of political action that is based on the concepts of solidarity and friendship as described by Hannah Arendt. This approach, further developed by Ayten Gündoğdu (2015), centers on individuals and their role in establishing communities of interests through declarations of human rights. I will explain in further detail how this affects our understanding of human rights and contributes to their “founding” (Gündoğdu 2015, 22). Finally, I discuss my findings on a broader level and address the question of what kind of role the film *Syx* in particular and film as a medium in general can play in the (re)conceptualization of human rights and their enforcement.

Human Rights and “The Right to have Rights” in *Syx* by Wolfgang Fischer

Syx is a 2018 production by Austrian screenwriter Wolfgang Fischer, starring German actress Susanne Wolff. The protagonist of the film is Rike, an emergency physician in her 40s. Fascinated by Charles Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, she embarks on a solo sailing trip from Gibraltar at the southern tip of Spain to Ascension Is-

land in the South Atlantic Ocean. While off the coast of Cape Verde, Rike finds herself in the vicinity of a fishing boat that is overcrowded with refugees and in danger of sinking. She reaches out to the authorities to request emergency assistance, but the only answer she receives is an appeal to maintain her distance from the distressed craft, ostensibly for reasons of her own safety. Rike knows how dangerous the situation is. Her sailing boat *Asa Gray* is small, so if she tries to rescue the refugees it will most likely sink as well. On the other hand, Rike is acutely aware that time is of the essence and if the authorities do not come to the rescue fast enough, it will be fatal for the occupants of the fishing vessel. In this emergency situation, Rike is able to rescue and provide medical treatment to a boy named Kingsley, who had jumped off the sinking boat and swam over to her. After numerous other unsuccessful attempts to obtain assistance from the coast guard and several nearby ships, Rike realizes that none of them intend to help the refugees. She decides to set out to rescue them herself and to force the authorities into action by falsely claiming that it is her own boat that is sinking. By the time Rike eventually boards the refugees' boat, she recognizes that it is too late for many of the passengers; they are dying or dead already, while others can be saved. At the end of the film, Rike finds herself in the custody of the coast guard. Traumatized and unable to answer the questions that the authorities have, Rike realizes that she herself is the subject of an inquiry and placed under guard.

Cinematographically, *Syx* is set up in such a way that the viewers are always closely connected to Rike and her surroundings. They witness many of the most essential scenes, such as the spotting of the refugees' boat, from her perspective through point-of-view shots. The near-absence of non-diegetic sounds amplifies the effect: The audience hears exactly what Rike is hearing in each moment, which is either the sounds of the ocean, the rain, or, at the beginning, the sounds of the jungle which she imagines as the destination of her trip. The latter are accompanied by visual shots of the jungle which are inserted into the otherwise rather bleak *mise-en-scène*. This has the effect that the viewers feel like they are looking into Rike's head, imagining the paradise scenario at the end of her trip as if it were their own. Due to the frequent long and oftentimes extreme long shots, the audience also gets a good sense of the surroundings and the circumstances under which Rike's voyage is taking place. Typically, these shots show the respective scenes from a bird's eye view. In the many scenes in which Rike's boat is shown in the middle of the ocean, this perspective adds to the perception of how vast the ocean is, and how small, in contrast, the individual – in this case Rike and her sailing boat. Overall, the cinematic techniques allow the viewers to identify with Rike and to empathize well with her situation both at the beginning of the film and as the plot unfolds.

In terms of content, *Syx* captures the horror scenario that refugees in the Mediterranean and elsewhere expe-

rience on a daily basis. In addition, it touches upon the point of how such misery can be possible and generates a questioning of human rights, especially in regard to the effectiveness of treaties and frameworks. In the case of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this holds true for not only one but several Articles²; the problem becomes particularly clear, though, with the right to asylum which has been established formally in Article 14 of the declaration. It states, “1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution,” and “2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations” (United Nations 1948). Since the latter is not relevant with regard to the refugees portrayed in *Syx*, one needs to have a closer look at the first point; and while the question of what falls under persecution is a discussion in and of itself³, it is the first part of this particular passage, namely that it is “the right to *seek* ... asylum” (emphasis added) that is of importance here. As Seyla Benhabib has pointed out “the right to seek asylum is recognized as a human

2 Among them Article 1-3, 6-7, and 13-15.

3 Economic migrants, for example, are not included in the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. This means that they do not have the right to asylum, unless it can be proven that the economic conditions have caused a “seriously disturbing public order” which under Article I (2) of the 1969 OAU Convention would render them eligible for international refugee protection (see UNHCR, *OAU Convention* for details).

right” (Benhabib 2004, 69); this does not mean, however, that granting asylum by a potential host nation is an automatic expectation. Instead, “*the obligation to grant asylum*, continues to be jealously guarded by states as a sovereign privilege” (ibid.). It is precisely this discrepancy between “the right to seek asylum” on the one hand and the optional “obligation to grant asylum” on the other that is the main subject matter in *Syxx*. In fact, the plot lays bare this conceptually problematic aspect of human rights law; but not just that, the film also shows that the discrepancy does not remain on a conceptual level, but comes with devastating consequences for real lives and people, to the extent that it becomes life threatening.

As mentioned before, the discrepancy between “the right to seek” and the missing “obligation to grant asylum” is not limited to Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights only, but inherent to human rights law in general. Benhabib, in this context, speaks of “the conflict between universal human rights and sovereignty claims as being the root paradox at the heart of the territorially bounded state-centric international order” (Benhabib 2004, 69). It is a paradox that has been described by Hannah Arendt and in part by Immanuel Kant as well⁴, one that manifested at the end of the 18th-century with some of the most important and influential precursors of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

4 See Kant’s essay *Perpetual Peace* (1796) and especially the discussion of *Weltbürgerrecht* in its Third Definitive Article.

“The Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen” (1789), “The United States Declaration of Independence” (formally, “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America”) (1776), as well as “The Constitution of the United States of America” (1787), and “The United States Bill of Rights” (1789). What all of these documents have in common is that they are grounded in what Arendt calls “a kind of human ‘nature’” (Arendt [1951] 1973, 298). As DeGooyer et al. explain, this means that these rights are “not bestowed by an earthly power [and that they] cannot ... be taken away by any earthly power” (DeGooyer et al. 2018, 6); they are “inalienable” (ibid.). While in theory, this conceptualization uncouples humans and their rights from citizenship and the State, in practice, human rights have often been insufficiently protected, or worse, human beings have been attacked precisely because of their human nature (ibid., 7). In light of missing alternatives, rights enforcement therefore became a matter of the State again, and, despite changes in international law and politics⁵, mostly remains so. In practice, this means that until today states can decide to protect human beings but also decide not to – and thereby undermine the claim that human rights are universal.

⁵ These include, inter alia, the before-mentioned resolution of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol in 1967, the creation of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), and the formation of the World Court, as well as the International Criminal Court.

While the paradox between universal human rights and state sovereignty seems to be irresolvable, at least for the time being, it does bring forth a fundamental problem of human rights, namely the fact that they are not available to all human beings. In *Styx*, the refugees are denied access to human rights despite the term's implication and the variety of legal frameworks and institutions that exist to promote them. Hannah Arendt addresses this aspect in chapter 9 of *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) when she argues that human rights do not protect humans per se, but only those who belong to a polity granting those rights. One's access to human rights is thus preceded by what she calls "the right to have rights" (Arendt [1951] 1973, 296). In light of the masses of national minorities and stateless people at the end of World War I and in the decades that followed, Arendt explains this as follows:

We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means *to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions*) and a right *to belong to some kind of organized community*, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. (Arendt [1951] 1973, 296-297; emphasis added)

The importance of both conditions that are named as prerequisites for access to human rights here is a major theme in *Styx*. Regarding the refugees, however, none of them is met. Neither do they "live in a framework where

[they are] judged” (ibid., 296) nor do they “belong to some kind of organized community” (ibid., 297). Rather, they find themselves in a situation of complete insignificance and superfluity which, according to Arendt, is worse than that of slaves, for there is only “the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (ibid). Not belonging to some kind of organized community thus “expels him [man] from humanity” (ibid). In other words, there is not only no access to human rights but also no access to humanity in general, without the right to have rights.

This dehumanization is clearly visible in *Shtetl*. As the film demonstrates, the refugees are in desperate need of help. Their cries are, in fact, incorporated as diegetic sounds which makes them even more compelling. Despite knowing about the situation, the authorities do not help. *Shtetl* thus shows the absence of the right to have rights on the side of the refugees, while at the same time, and in stark contrast, it also portrays the full realization of this right in the case of the German citizen Rike. Most strikingly, she is on just the same route as the refugees but traveling in the opposite direction and for completely different reasons, namely for her own pleasure and out of curiosity. This curiosity and the expeditionary character of her passage is reinforced through the many scenes in which Rike is looking: through her binoculars, the porthole or simply into the distance when she is on deck. The refugees are thereby always far away. Just like the audience,

Rike does not see their faces, which makes it possible, at least potentially, to simply look away. It is only when Kingsley boards the boat that this changes and the film carefully establishes a relationship between Rike and the refugees. Until then Rike's entire journey is one big adventure that she could interrupt anytime and return to a very comfortable life if she so desires. In addition, she is not only very well equipped (both technically and in terms of food supplies) but also constantly supported by the coast guard as well as the captain of a nearby container ship named *Pulpca*. Rike's calls are answered immediately, and at one point the captain reaches out to her even before she encounters any difficulties. Warning her of an upcoming storm, he assures her "No worries. We're sharing the same route. ... If you need something, anytime, let me know. I'll be around" (0:20:23-0:22:44). Taking all this into account, Rike is a prime example of what possessing the right to have rights looks like.

At the same time, *Styx* does not cease to emphasize that this right is a privilege that is bound to citizenship. This becomes especially clear in Rike's conversations with the authorities and the captain of the nearby ship. In a short exchange with the coast guard, for example, the authorities explicitly ask about Rike's nationality, whereas they display little to no interest in the plight of the refugees. Alongside Rike, the viewers thus come to realize that the authorities are not only slow and reluctant to help, but they never intended to rescue the refugees in the

first place. The reason for this is their status as refugees which is apparently valued less than, for example, Rike's German nationality. In her famous essay "We Refugees," Arendt describes this scenario as follows:

... we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while; since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without bloodshed; since passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even income tax receipts, are no longer formal papers but matters of social distinction. (Arendt [1943] 2007, 273)

The film thus demonstrates that human rights are not granted universally to human beings but rather are contingent on citizenship, and that depending on this factor the extent to which accessibility to rights is granted varies greatly – from a "full-service-package" (in Rike's case) to not receiving help at all⁶.

It is in light of this injustice that Samuel Moyn, in his engagement with Arendt, describes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as "a set of pleasant normative assertions" (Moyn 2018, 52). Moyn explains that, from 6 For an estimation of the values attached to citizenship in various countries, see, for example, the Passport Index which, in 2021, ranked the passports from Germany and New Zealand as the #1 passport in the world whereas many African countries, among them Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, rank among the lowest (Passport Index, status: June 26th, 2021).

Arendt's point of view, holding out a list of rights to people who did not hold citizenship in the first place "was something like offering a detailed inventory of the courses of a lengthy meal in the presence of the starving" (ibid.). This metaphor and the associated critique has been directly embedded into *Syx*, especially once the boy Kingsley is on board. As he witnesses how Rike is asking for help and is being rejected again and again as long as this help is supposed to benefit the refugees and not her, it becomes evident how simultaneously close and yet far away access to human rights is. While the cruelty of these double standards is a key theme in the film, it is displayed especially in a conversation between Rike and the captain of the nearby container ship who had assured her of his help earlier. In response to her distress call, he reaches out again:

Captain: "Pulpca for Asa Gray. What's happening over there? Where is the skipper? What's going on over there?"

Rike: "Pulpca. Thank god! A ship. A fish trawler. Refugees. Way too many people. The ship is wrecked and about to sink. I repeat. Many people are in serious danger to their lives. We need rescue. Immediately. Over."

[no response]

Rike: "Pulpca, these people need help. Over."

Captain: “Unfortunately, our company has a strict policy in such cases. I’m sorry. Over.”

Rike: “Pulpca, these people are going to die. Over.”

[no response]

Rike: “Pulpca!”

Captain: “Asa Gray, I really cannot risk my job.”

Rike: “Pulpca, you can’t. You are obliged to!”

[no response]

(1:06:14-1:08:23)

As Kingsley overhears, and partly even partakes in the conversation, he becomes fully aware of the fact that human rights do exist, but not for him and “his kind”. He therefore urges Rike not to wait for help that he knows will not come, but to set out to rescue his companions on her own. At one point, he even tries to take control over the boat in a futile attempt to do something. In the end, though, as he throws bottles of drinking water into the ocean, the only emotion he has left is resignation. Knowing that this won’t be of any help either, Kingsley mumbles a name with every bottle that goes overboard, and it is clear that with each one of them he is refer-

ring to one of the occupants on the boat. From Rike's perspective, who is below deck and thus only hears the names and accompanying splashing, Kingsley's actions evoke the image of people going overboard. One after the other, just like the water bottles, they will drift along in the ocean and eventually drown. Both the conversation with the captain as well as the scene with the water bottles thus strongly suggest that the refugees have not only lost their right to citizenship, but their belonging to humanity in general. They are treated and valued as nothing more than objects. In other words, it is a precise depiction of what Arendt has described as a condition of insignificance and superfluity that again highlights the fact that humans are not born equal, nor are they equal before human rights law. "Gone. They are gone" (1:21:02) is the last thing we hear Kingsley whisper in this scene before Rike finally takes it on herself to rescue the refugees.

It is at this point and especially when Rike boards the refugees' boat that the title of the film, *Styx*, unfolds its full meaning. Hailing from Greek mythology where it is the name of a river separating earth and the underworld, the living and the dead (Geller 2016), one finds various connections to the film. First of all, it is uncontested that the earth is limited to Europe here; just as in ancient times, it ends in Gibraltar, the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula, where Rike's journey begins. The underworld, on the other hand, is represented by what Rike

encounters on the refugees' boat: suffering, death, and despair. Separated by the water, these two entities could not differ more; there is nothing the refugees' and Rike's world have in common; it is life on the one side, death on the other. This is also expressed cinematographically. For as soon as Rike sets course for and, ultimately, enters the refugees' boat, the scenery changes from day to night and the color scheme from blue to dark red, a color that evokes the image of the underworld. Another aspect is that, according to tradition, one could only cross the river with the help of the ferryman Charon, who needed to be paid for this act. If one could not afford the passage, one was not able to cross (Geller 2016). The situation depicted in the film is an augmentation of this payment: Instead of money, it is citizenship that serves as a currency in *Syx*; and, again, the film leaves no doubt about the fact that a German passport buys one a safe passage, whereas being stateless or not having the "right" citizenship condemns one to eternal waiting, and, as the film ultimately suggests, to death.

Syx thus conveys an expression and a critique of the fundamental injustice that accompanies citizenship and the impact it has in particular on the accessibility of human rights. This does not mean, however, that the film proposes to let go of human rights entirely. What one is encouraged to let go of, though, is a good faith belief in human rights institutions and especially in states which, according to both Arendt and the film, do not

necessarily serve as guarantors for human rights. Since in *Syx* the State, represented by the coast guard, refuses to help in the first place, the film even raises the question if one should hope for state intervention at all, or if this in itself is futile. This, of course, casts not only the local coast guard but also the international community and especially the European Union in a very negative light, namely as countries who are unwilling to help even though they seem to have all the resources necessary⁷. While this impression persists throughout almost the entire film, the situation becomes a bit more complex in the end. As calls for help from other refugee boats come in, the viewers, alongside Rike, learn how excessive demands complicate and oftentimes overload state interventions. Whether it is out of incapacity or unwillingness, though, *Syx* reveals that a good faith belief in the actions of states alone is never an adequate basis for securing the universal observance of human rights. Instead, it puts individuals in need in a very vulnerable position. They are forced to compete with one another

⁷ This point is, in fact, already implied in the opening scene.

Here, the viewers watch a group of baboons moving ponderously and in slow motion through Gibraltar. Among other things, they thereby pass a weathered graffiti that reads “celebrating glorious years” (0:01:11). In light of what is yet to come, this scene can be interpreted as the expression of a ponderous Europe that reacts slowly, or not at all, to the crises outside of its borders. Just like the three wise monkeys in the Japanese pictorial maxim of the same name, Europeans thereby claim to “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” (Mieder 1987). In other words, *Syx* proposes that they lack civil courage and responsibility.

for being seen, or, in Arendt's earlier words, for the opportunity "to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions" (Arendt [1951] 1973, 296-297), just to finally be granted access to human rights.

All in all, the film paints a picture that is extremely critical of human rights, challenging especially the assumption that states treat human beings equally and always meet their human rights obligations, without exception.

Human Rights Enforcement and the Role of Individuals

In an attempt to also outline entry points for potential interventions, *Syx* suggests a reconceptualization of human rights that, first and foremost, takes the right to have rights seriously. It then demands political action that should be based on solidarity and carried out not only by the State or human rights institutions but also by individuals, ultimately, each and every one of us. In that sense, *Syx* is profoundly Arendtian again, as a later passage in Chapter 9 of *Origins of Totalitarianism* shows. Here, Arendt writes:

The right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself. It is by no means certain whether this is possible. (Arendt [1951] 1973, 298).

While Arendt remains cautious about the success of humanity as a guarantor of the right to have rights, she is certain about the foundations on which acts of granting should be based. In her opinion, that is solidarity. Even though Arendt does not develop an entire theory of solidarity, she does provide important insights into how solidarity may be conceptualized in *On Revolution*. She writes:

It is through solidarity that people establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited. The common interest would then be “the grandeur of man” or “the honour of the human race” or the dignity of man. For solidarity, because it partakes of reason, and hence of generality, is able to comprehend a multitude conceptually, not only the multitude of a class or a nation or a people, but eventually all mankind. But this solidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it, and it comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor; compared with the sentiment of pity, it may appear cold and abstract, for it remains committed to “ideas” - to greatness, or honour, or dignity - rather than to any “love” of men. ... Terminologically speaking, solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action. (Arendt [1963] 1990, 88-89)

Of fundamental importance in Arendt’s understanding of solidarity is that she distinguishes it from compassion

and pity, both of which she criticizes heavily, in particular for their anti-political attitudes and effects. Instead of practicing an idealized understanding of empathy, she proposes to think of solidarity in what she describes as a “cold and abstract” (ibid., 89) sense here. This emphasis on unsentimentality is something we also encounter in Arendt’s writings on friendship. In *Men in Dark Times*, she states that “Humaneness should be sober and cool rather than sentimental ... friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world” (Arendt, 1968, 25). In other words, friendship is not only a philosophical concept but also a political one for it is constantly translated into actions. In this regard, solidarity differs as much from compassion and pity, as friendship does from “any ‘love’ of men” (Arendt [1963] 1990, 89).

The importance of this differentiation is something Arendt elaborates on in *The Human Condition*. She writes “Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others. ... Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces” (Arendt (1958) 1998, 242). Solidarity and friendship, on the other hand, with their deeply political nature, refer precisely to this in-between. According to Arendt, it is “*the worldly space between men* where political matters, the whole realm of human

affairs, are located” (Arendt [1963] 1990, 86; emphasis added) and where common interest lies. In fact, Arendt uses the word “interest” itself to highlight this point when she explains that something “is of interest to both because it ‘inter-est’, it is between them” (ibid.). In a very practical sense, solidarity then means recognizing this in-between and establishing communities of interest that are dedicated to human affairs. This can happen everywhere and at any time. With regard to the right to have rights, where access to human rights depends on belonging to a polity, this thought is revolutionary. It means that even though individuals might, under certain circumstances and at times, not belong to a polity officially, they can always *make* each other belong. According to Alastair Hunt, the central point here is the contingency that Bonnie Honig (1993) has singled out for the Arendtian public/private distinction (Hunt 2018, 78-79). In this context, that means that the separation between individuals who have rights and others who do not is “not [something that is] given – but rather the result of human action and hence constitutively open to contestation and transformation” (ibid., 79).

What this can look like in practice has been explored by various scholars in different contexts and settings. Since *Siyax*, especially with its cinematic focus on Rike and her perspective, primarily suggests the involvement of individuals and ordinary citizens, what is most applicable here is Ayten Gündoğdu’s conception of the “*political*

practices of founding human rights” (Gündoğdu 2015, 22). Broadly speaking, this Arendt-based approach focuses on the different ways in which human beings partake in the realization of human rights, from their conceptualization all the way to how they are being exercised. What is special about the act of founding is that it comes in the form of “*declarations* that do not have prior authorization for the new propositions of equality and freedom that they introduce” (ibid., 166), and yet, by proposing these alternatives they take human rights into new directions. As an example, Gündoğdu brings up the *sans-papiers* movement that emerged in France in the 1990s. During this time, predominantly undocumented citizens mobilized across France and demanded the same rights as citizens of France, claiming “rights that they were not yet authorized to claim” (ibid., 189). As Gündoğdu points out, this took on many forms; an important aspect, though, was that *sans-papiers*, in an Arendtian sense, “translated their plight of rightlessness into an *inter-est* that relates and binds a community of actors” (ibid., 87), for example through references to the French revolution and the discourse on the Rights of Man. Through appropriative acts like this, *sans-papiers* shed light on the limits and exclusions of current human rights frameworks and the struggles they cause for real lives and people who form a community of interest together with the French, which is indeed the most important claim here. Acts like these, thus, single out the need to change the ruling but very limited ideas of citizenship, sovereignty,

and rights; but this is not the only effect they have: Since human rights emerge from such acts, they can also be understood as “inaugural acts that involve the invention and disclosure of a new political and normative world” (Gündoğdu 2015, 166). *Sans-papiers* is thus an example for how human rights can be enacted and also (re)written through the acts of individuals.

A strong emphasis on solidarity and the role of individuals in the practical realization of human rights is deeply embedded in the narrative of *Styx*. Rike serves as a prime example for an Arendtian understanding of solidarity and friendship. Her actions are clearly not motivated by either empathy or sentimentality but solely by her professional ethics as a physician and the firm conviction that medical treatment should be provided to anyone in need. In terms of character, Rike can be described as vigorous, pragmatic and sincere. Even when her calls are ignored by the authorities, she continues to vehemently claim that right and insists that it must be granted by the State. The fact that Rike is a trained physician only adds more weight to her argument. On the one hand, we know especially from the early scene in which the viewers witness a car accident that Rike would doubtlessly be capable of helping if only she received the necessary support. Similar to the refugees on the high seas, the one being injured and suffering in this scene is entirely innocent; he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. In contrast to the refugees,

though, this person receives exemplary medical treatment by Rike and, as the bird's eye view demonstrates impressively, by an entire healthcare system. In the end, his life can therefore be saved whereas a lack of care is the only thing offered to the boat full of people in need. On the other hand, Rike's profession puts a particular emphasis on the question of ethics as it reminds the viewers of the ancient Oath of Hippocrates which, inter alia, states: "I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice. ... In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art" (Edelstein 1967, 6). While the Hippocratic Oath is usually not officially sworn anymore, it still plays an important role in medical ethics and in the professional identity of many medical practitioners. This is also due to the World Medical Association's Declaration of Geneva, a modern version of the Hippocratic Oath that, in light of the medical crimes in Nazi Germany, was developed and adopted in 1948, only a few months before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Wiesing 2020, 83). Not only does this declaration cover "the service of humanity" and "the utmost respect" for human life; it also states explicitly that one will *not* permit "considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, *nationality*, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, social standing or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient" (World Medical Association 2017; emphasis added). Similar to the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights, the Declaration of Geneva is not a legally binding framework which means that medical practitioners are not forced to act upon these principles. Yet we see in Rike how this is a matter of course for her and that anything but doing so is unimaginable. Accordingly, she ends the distress call with a steadfast “Confirmed. But I won’t leave. Over.” (0:59:43-0:59:46) that leaves the coast guard and the audience in no doubt about her determination to help.

The true dimension of Rike’s solidarity as well as her political agency, however, does not appear until the end of the film when she decides to pretend that her own boat is sinking in order to finally force the State to act and make human rights accessible. The fact that Rike lies about the situation, and that her help comes too late, only emphasizes how serious this responsibility is and that one should deploy any means necessary to claim access to human rights – for oneself and for others. In an Arendtian sense, Rike’s actions are thus calls for the right to have rights to be taken seriously. Beyond that, and in line with Gündoğdu, we can also think of them as declarations of human rights through which Rike partakes in the process of establishing communities of interest, and, ultimately, in the founding of human rights. Inspired by Darwin’s voyage and the successful experiment of (biological) migration that took place on Ascension Island⁸, she practices an understanding of humanity

8 On his voyage with the *Beagle* in 1836, Charles Darwin did not

that is based on solidarity and the idea of common interest. Accordingly, she does not separate between “us” and “them” but understands that what she is witnessing is a matter of “inter-est” and, therefore, ultimately, of importance to everyone in the human community. Rike’s understanding of humanity and human rights thereby strongly recalls a statement made by John F. Kennedy in the Report to the American People on Civil Rights in 1963, namely: “The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened” (Duncan 2014, 356). While this suggests that as human beings, we have to think of communities in much broader terms than nation states or multi-state unions such as the European Union, we see in Rike how a practical realization, or at least the attempt, of forming such a community can look like.

Similar to Arendt, the film is thus not only critical of current conceptions of human rights; it also proposes an alternative form of political action that is based on the acts of individuals and their influence and share on hu-

only discover Ascension Island, he also laid the foundation for a unique experiment conducted by his friend the botanist Joseph Hooker seven years later. In response to how barren the island was, Hooker had plants and trees imported from England and South Africa planted there which developed into a functioning ecosystem within a few decades (Wilkinson 2004, 2). This can be read as a success story of biological migration that, in connection with *Styx*, raises the question of why migration should not work equally well in human contexts.

man rights. In many ways, it thereby resembles Gündoğdu's "*political practices of founding human rights*" (Gündoğdu 2015, 22). What makes an important difference, though, is that in *Styx*, compared to, for example, the *sans-papiers* movement Gündoğdu describes, the claim for the right to have rights does not come from people who are experiencing human rights violations themselves; instead, the protagonist is in a privileged position, witnessing the lack of the right to have rights in others while at the same time her rights are consistently guaranteed. While this brings up the problem of voicelessness and subalternity on the one hand, and white saviorism⁹ on the other, I argue that in the context of *Styx* the cinematic choice to center a white European woman emphasizes the obligation of those who have the right to have rights to speak up and demand that everyone in the human community is entitled to the same rights. In a broader sense, this also speaks to the presumably equally privileged audience the film addresses. By doing so, the film highlights that the responsibility to observe human rights is not in some abstract way connected to the State or the ones in need; but to anyone, including those of us who are privileged

⁹ The figure of the white savior is a common cinematic trope, not only in films depicting migration. Matthew Hughey describes *The White Savior Film* as a "genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate" (Hughey 2014, 1). At this time, there is only limited research on white saviorism in German or European film. For insights into the US-American context see Hughey (2014) and Vera and Gordon (2003).

enough to be members of a functioning polity. In that sense, the film calls for active citizenship in a way that is very similar to Hannah Arendt's understanding of civic engagement. It requires all of us to think of (forced) migration as a topic that affects not only individuals, but entire political communities and that we must therefore deliberate upon collectively. As we see in the case of Rike, an Arendtian understanding of friendship can, and at times must, thereby not only generate acts of solidarity, but also serve as a site of resistance against states that are not in compliance with human rights.

Conclusion: The Limits and Future of Human Rights Declarations

My analysis of *Styx* has shown that the film engages with human rights critically. It points to problems in regard to the foundation and conceptualization of human rights and state interventions. As the film and even more so real-life migration scenarios, especially in the Mediterranean, demonstrate, these grievances all-too-often cause situations of rightlessness. At the same time, *Styx* also suggests entry points for potential interventions, emphasizing the inevitability of acts of solidarity and a reconceptualization of human rights through "*political practices of founding human rights*" (Gündoğdu 2015, 22). In line with Hannah Arendt, the film thus proposes an approach to human rights enforcement that consists of ongoing political actions coming from states, orga-

nizations and, essentially, individuals. While in practice, these actions might differ greatly across contexts, they are identical in their call for the right to have rights to be taken seriously and for an understanding of community that extends beyond the nation state so that, ultimately, human rights are granted to all human beings and not just to those favored with the “right” citizenship. With this in mind, perhaps the most powerful message the film and an Arendtian perspective on human rights convey, is the need for all of us to be ready to have our previous ideas of political communities challenged through unexpected, yet growing membership claims. As the film seeks to show and as Arendt suggests, these claims cannot and should not come from migrants only but also from citizens who understand that human rights violations affect not just individuals but entire communities, and who therefore raise their voices in solidarity.

Meanwhile, the film also suggests that there are limitations to individual actions and thus to the Arendtian conception of politics as civic engagement. Despite their importance, individual actions cannot replace state intervention which, in contrast, is absolutely indispensable in granting human rights. In this sense, *Shyx* emphasizes how important it is to remind individual states and multi-state unions such as the European Union of their obligations, and even more urgently, their ethical responsibility, namely not to prevent but to govern migration¹⁰. These constant reminders of the State’s obliga-

10 A positive example, in this regard, was set by Portugal recent-

tions are important and powerful, yet *Stryx* does not dare to present them as *the solution* to what makes extremely complex, nuanced and at times contradictory scenarios. Accordingly, while the lives of some can be saved, the audience also witnesses the extent to which Rike is traumatized in the end, and, as if that were not enough, that she is part of an inquiry¹¹. The film thus concludes on a more realistic rather than optimistic note. It subverts the trope of the white savior and leaves it up to the viewers to consider what is right and wrong in the current governing of (forced) migration, their own positionality, as well as their responsibilities as citizens with guaranteed access to human rights.

Going back to Arendt's important reminder that "The right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself" (Arendt [1951] 1973, 298) and her skepticism re-

ly, when amid the Covid-19 crisis it decided to give access to healthcare, welfare benefits, bank accounts, and work and rental contracts to all foreigners in the country, including migrants and asylum seekers (Schmitt and Massimo 2020).

¹¹ Interestingly, from today's perspective, the end of the film can be understood as yet another reference to reality. It reveals, and even predicts clear parallels between the experiences of Rike and the German ship captain Carola Rackete who has been part of migrant rescue operations with the non-governmental organization *Sea-Watch* since 2016. In 2019, one year after the release of *Stryx*, Rackete was arrested by the Italian authorities after forcibly docking the vessel *Sea-Watch 3* in Lampedusa. For more information see Povoledo (2019).

garding whether or not this is possible, I have, ultimately, argued two things: First, if human rights are to be maintained in their current legal formulation, then we need to reconceptualize how we think about them. This means moving away from a good faith belief in states and institutions and towards a pragmatic understanding that stresses the obligations they have. It also means that we, as a community of human beings, persistently demand that states fulfill these obligations and put human rights into practice, a process in which both institutions and individuals are important, and need to act on even if, at times, it is at their personal expense. It is under these premises that a pragmatic faith in human rights and ethical commitment can be justified even if recent conflicts and crises have tested the faith of many. Second, I suggest that film can play an important role in human rights discourses. As my analysis of *Syxx* has shown, the medium of film has the capacity to not only denounce human rights violations, but also, and even more importantly, it can imaginatively offer concrete proposals for how to rethink and rewrite human rights, solidarity, and civic engagement. It is for this reason that I recommend that future researchers examine both film classics as well as the many productions dealing with migration that have been released over the course of the last five to ten years alone, to assess what and how they can contribute to human rights, their (re)conceptualization and enforcement. During such examinations, special consideration should be given to familiar tropes such as that of the white sav-

ior and the question of how it is enacted not only in different European films depicting migration but also in conceptions of human rights. Ultimately, and in light of the popularity and the social relevance of film as a medium, it would be interesting to also explore how *Syx*, and other similar productions, were received critically by film critics as well as the public at large.

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