

MOTHERSHIP

a film by MURIEL CRAVATTE

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MOTHERSHIP

a film by
MURIEL CRAVATTE

FRANCE - BELGIUM
DOCUMENTARY / FRENCH - ENGLISH - ARABIC - BAMBARA - ITALIAN / 2023 / 55' & 80'

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Synopsis

In the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, the crew of the Ocean Viking is rescuing people in exile fleeing Libya, crammed in unseaworthy boats. Once rescued and welcomed on board, survivors receive first aid, then accompanied to a safe port. On this ship, like a refuge within a refuge, the Women's Shelter is a listening and care center for women and children.

To ensure that people in distress are rescued in compliance with human rights and maritime law, a tug-of-war between authorities and humanitarian aid workers occurs on a daily basis.

Director's note

On July 11, 2017, Constance, a 22-year-old woman from Cameroon, boards on the Libyan coast a fragile, wooden boat bound for Europe along with around a hundred men. She is pregnant and has been suffering from violent contractions for several hours. She has gone into labor. She gives birth in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, amid terrified strangers. One man alone comforts her by holding her hand while the others offer her no assistance, and some ask her to be quiet when she screams.

These are the conditions she gives birth to her son, whom she names Christ. When the rescue workers from SOS MEDITERRANÉE reach the boat, Christ is born. Mother and son, both safe and sound, and still linked by the umbilical cord, are hosted onto the rescue ship where the cord is cut. A few days later, they disembark in Italy, where they go through a chaotic process similar to that of many people in exile. After a journey of several months, Christ and his mother arrive in Briançon, at the Refuge Solidaire, an emergency shelter.

This is where I meet them, while filming of *TOMORROW IS FAR AWAY*, my previous documentary. I held Christ in my arms. This little being in the making, snuggled up against me, with his big eyes staring at me, overwhelmed me: so tiny and already carrying a story so full of meaning. I felt a sense of vertigo, and the need to go and see what was happening in the Mediterranean Sea. The desire, or rather the need, to make a documentary about a rescue ship like the Ocean Viking, was born at that very moment.

The Ocean Viking

The sea, ships, and rescues hold incredible mythical power. From the *Odyssey* to the *Astrolabe*, by way of *Moby Dick*, the *Belem*, or the *Titanic*, the references abound. This is probably one of the reasons why the Ocean Viking ship is so fascinating - because this ship evokes an imaginary world of travel and adventure.

The presence of the maritime element, majestic, immutable, magnificent, and often hostile, reinforces the mythological aspect of the story and gives the film a strong visual scope.

Acknowledging this is not to deny the reality of the suffering of people in exile rescued, but rather to use the strength of this imaginary world to invite viewers to share in the ship's adventure, to bring them face to face with the reality of exile and ponder the issues of welcome and solidarity.

Chartered by the European NGO SOS MÉDITERRANÉE, the Ocean Viking roams the sea rescuing migrants fleeing the hell of Libya and attempting to cross from Africa to Europe, crammed onto unseaworthy boats.

The ship's mission is founded in the values of solidarity at sea and falls within the duty to render assistance at sea. Once welcomed on board, the rescued, often exhausted, and traumatized, are given medical and sanitary care before being taken to a safe port when they are disembarked.



While they are physically and psychologically weakened, their arrival on the Ocean Viking is a moment of respite and calm. With the hell of Libya and the fear of sinking behind them, a new future seems possible.

Migrant Women

On the Ocean Viking, there is a room reserved for women and children, called the Women's Shelter, where I shot a large portion of the film. Watching a woman cradling her baby in this place is in itself a simple, universal scene. At the same time, given the context, this image is dizzying. In the collective unconscious, migration is seen as an essentially male phenomenon in which women are, at best, followers. And yet, on a global scale, women migrate as often as men.

Whether alone, with family, in a couple, self-sufficient, or as victims of trafficking, there are as many ways to migrate as there are women on the roads of exile. No path is linear, and each story is unique. Nevertheless, these women share the fact that they are exposed to systemic forces of gender-based, sexual and/ or patriarchal violence from their country of origin, throughout their journey, and all the way to their country of arrival. Because of the fragility of their situations, the women and children aboard embody the absurdity of the situation in the Mediterranean Sea. Giving visibility to women in migration means tackling the issue of migration in a current and inclusive way.

Mothership follows on my previous documentary. In Briançon, like in the central Mediterranean Sea, the authorities flout the law, and the cynicism and irresponsibility of politicians drive exiles to take life-threatening routes. The best and worst rub elbows in these geographical areas. The best being the men and women working hard to provide help.

The worst being the arbitrariness, disregard for the law, denial of human rights, and violence enacted against the people in exile as well as those in solidarity with them.

Between the two, caught in an unbearable vise, are women, men, and children simply looking for a place to live in peace.

Often, Europe is not the dream destination, but the one where, after successive escapes, these migrants end up. Leaving, abandoning everything, parting with one's ancestral lands is often not a choice, but rather a question of survival.

*"You have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land..." (Home, Warsan Shire)*

Muriel Cravatte



Sophie Beau

co-founder and director of SOS MÉDITERRANÉE

Mothership is a unique film. For years, journalists have been embarked on our ships to document the situation in the Central Mediterranean Sea, but we have never had such a sensitive and comprehensive account of these extreme missions.

Muriel Cravatte precisely documents what goes on during a ship's mission. From the search for the boats to disembarkation in a safe Italian port, including the delicate moment of rescue, she shows every step of the way. The viewer is immersed in the day-to-day life of the rescuers, confronted with the failings of European policies, the lack of response from governments and the aggressiveness of the Libyan coastguards, who act in defiance of the law, contrary to their mission of coordinating rescues.

Above all, this film offers an exceptional look at the women and children rescued on board the ship. The camera closely follows midwife Marina, her movements and activities both on deck and in the ship's clinic. With infinite modesty, we film the confidences of the women rescued about the brutality they suffered in Libya. In this way Muriel Cravatte (re)gives a voice to the more than 5,700 women rescued by SOS MÉDITERRANÉE since 2016.

The looks and screams of terrified children at the moment of rescue give way to life gradually returns to the deck, once everyone has been brought to safety. Food distribution, laundry, card games, moments of joy when a safe port is announced... Rescue after rescue, the deck fills and teems with life, and dignity.

The viewer is plunged into the heart of this mother ship. To the complexity of our humanity amidst the chaos of the Mediterranean Sea. This film embodies the chain of solidarity that begins at sea and ends on land, bearing witness to those who have survived. We must now listen to their words.

Producers' note

Mothership, the third documentary from Belgian-French director Muriel Cravatte, plunges us into the intersecting journeys of people in exile and rescue sailors, inviting us to ponder the issues of migration and solidarity. This film was shot in the Central Mediterranean Sea over an 11-week period between July and November 2022. The first part of the filming took place on board the Ocean Viking, the rescue ship chartered by the NGO SOS MÉDITERRANÉE, and the second alongside the team of NGO Pilotes Volontaires who patrol the skies over the sea from the island of Lampedusa.

Preparation and filming proved to be highly complex. The director embarked alone, taking charge of both sound and image while also having to deal with complicated situations. The film tells the story of the adventure that is a sea rescue mission through encounters with migrants and rescuers. It takes the time to create portraits, to let the characters express themselves, and to give them life, dignity, and humanity.



More particularly, we follow Marina, the midwife on board the Ocean Viking who, with modesty and kindness, assists the rescued women and children day and night. Through her, we meet Keita, Aïcha, Mariam, Alamata and Ami, each of whom recounts their own unique journey, while forming a part of a collective narrative. On board, their hope is reborn after months, if not years, of suffering. Laughter and tears mingle.

Through Michele, the mission coordinator, and his assistant Anita, we follow the organization of the mission and witness the power struggles with the authorities. Tanguy, San and the other rescue sailors take us out on zodiacs for an up-close experience of the rescues - moments of extreme tension where things can take a turn at any moment.

Mothership goes beyond the usual images of those referred to as migrants - often presented as anonymous flows - to offer a chronological account based on two central themes: the migration of women and the issue of the respect for the law at sea. Structured around moving testimonies, it also shows how European public authorities are shirking their responsibilities.

The gamble was far from won when we started work on this film, between the Covid pandemic and the reluctance of the partners we approached regarding this subject... But in the end, the stars aligned. Two French broadcasters (France 3 and Public Sénat), a Belgian broadcaster (RTBF), and a series of public (Media Creative Europe, the CNC, the CCA) and private (two sponsors, the RAJA - Danièle Marcovici, Rosa Luxembourg and Agnès b foundations, Procirep-Angoa, and the Belgian tax shelter mechanism) funds enabled the film to go into production. The Party Film Sales is handling international sales. Thanks to all of these partners for joining us!

SOS MÉDITERRANÉE was in favor of our project from the start as it complemented the - mostly journalistic - proposals it generally receives.

We all believed in this project because we believed it could contribute to raising awareness about what happens on a daily basis in the mediterranean. It's a drop of water in the sea of current political issues concerning migration rights, and human rights, but we hope it will help move the debate forward. Thanks to all the teams, both at sea and on land, for their welcome, their work, their enthusiasm, and their trust.

Nadège Hasson & Geneviève De Bauw

Muriel Cravatte

Born in 1969, Muriel Cravatte holds dual Belgian and French nationality. After graduating from the Image section of INSAS (Belgium), she worked as an assistant camera operator, then musician and videographer, before going on to work as a director and cinematographer for both fiction and documentary films. Following several short fiction films, in 2020, she directed her first feature-length documentary, *Tomorrow is far away* (Cinéma du Réel 2020), followed by *Mothership* in 2024. She is currently developing a feature-length fiction *Silences*.

<https://murielcravatte.jimdo.com/>

Filmography

Roubato 2011

Au Loin 2013

Tomorrow Is Far Away, 2020

Angry, 2022

Mothership, 2024

Silences, in development



Credits

Direction, Image & Sound

Muriel Cravatte

Sound editing & Mix

Yann Reiland
Léon Rousseau

Music

Hervé Rigaud

Editor

Matyas Veress

Color grading

Xavier Kuylle
Paul Millot

Production

Temps noir (Nadège Hasson)
Thank You & Good Night productions (Geneviève De Bauw)

Coproduction

France Télévisions/RTBF/Temps noir/Thank You & Good Night
productions/Magellan Films

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