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**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE

# THE COAT





Type of output:  
Digital/Visual  
Media (Film)

by

Corin Sworn  
(& Tony Romano)

<https://vimeo.com/176440087>

Cover:

*The Coat*, 2015 Production shot.

*Photo credit: Erika Lobko*

Left: *The Coat*, 2015 Film still.

*Photo credit: Michael LeBlanc*

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# SUMMARY

*The Coat* is a 60 minute narrative film made with Canadian artist Tony Romano.

Created collaboratively with performer participants, the work depicts patterns of human movement across history. *The Coat* interleaves established film narratives, historical theatre works and contemporary and historical trajectories of emigration and immigration around the Italian south to critically position itself against common representations of the migrant. Instead of discriminatory and nativist stereotypes of migrants as alien others, the project sought instead to render the the figure of the migrant and migration in all their complexity, informed by multiple histories and social forces (Nial 2015).

Zygmunt Bauman states that “tourism and vagrancy are two faces of the same coin,” yet despite such novel insight, and that the last decade has seen the highest number of migrations in recorded history, depictions of migrant journeys remain remarkably uniform (Jones 2017). Through the staging of historical, cross-cultural and intra-national migratory trajectories, *The Coat* produces the state of being bound to move as broadly variable - framed by similar social conditions but resulting in different kinds and degrees of expulsion from the social order.

In the broad scope of the film, ancient Greek theatre, stories of medieval and contemporary Albanian migration to Italy, and recent movements around the Italian south were all intertwined. A collaborative and location-bound production method was built to ground the film’s narrative in the particular while opening out to the historical. Scripting was improvised with Canadian, Italian and Albanian migrants on location, to fold action into the landscape and reiterate migrants as involved in producing their own variable journeys.

Premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival 2014, the film has now been translated into three languages and toured by LUX and the Independent Cinema Office in 2016, and by the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London and Les Rencontres Festival in 2017. Of use beyond the academy, the work has twice served as a talking point around migration: by GRAMNet (Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network) in 2016 and later at the University of Glasgow in 2018.

# INTRODUCTION

Widely exhibited internationally, with demonstrable impact beyond art and academia, *The Coat* is itself a reflexive movement between artistic mediums. The film/video meditates on the itinerant traditions of theatre in particular and, alongside new research into migrant communities, promotes fresh insight into pressing contemporary issues.

*The Coat* loosely adapts Aristophanes' *The Birds* from Athens of 414 BC to contemporary Calabria, following a young man and his daughter fleeing the collapse of communism in 1990s Albania. Along the way the pair intercept two actors touring a heritage project on the Calabrian folk hero Pulchinella, and a woman from the Arbëresh community (an Italian cultural group originating from an Albanian exodus of 1450). Throughout the film, birds fly overhead taunting the characters as bound to forces immanent to their social structures and histories.

Co-written with, and employing, professional and amateur actors, *The Coat* was co-commissioned in 2013 by the Toronto International Film Festival and The Artists Cinema (an outreach program developed by the Independent Cinema Office and LUX, UK). Further funding was received from the Canada Council for the Arts and Creative Scotland. *The Coat* has been translated into English, German and Italian for international screening.



*The Coat*, 2015 (Film still).  
Photo credit: Michael LeBlanc

# TIMELINE

2013 Nov	2014 Mar	2014 Apr	2014 May	2014 Jun	2014 Aug	2015 Sep
<p>Discussion with Romano regarding making a film looking at migrant family narratives.</p> <p>Sworn and Romano begin autoethnographic reflection on migration, with attention to their own family stories.</p> <p>Aesthetic forms and references sought to figure migratory experience.</p>	<p>Interviews with migrants in Rome and Toronto.</p> <p>Visit to émigré museum in Rome and Museum of Popular Culture.</p> <p>First treatment written.</p> <p>Discussions of different film genres and how stylistic elements drawn from these might be employed or resisted as needed.</p> <p>Cinematographer, sound and costume crew hired.</p>	<p>Build template for script.</p> <p>Reflections on migrant interviews, their sheer variation and difference across individuals.</p> <p>To underscore the difference and agency of each particular journey, decision taken that the script should be written collaboratively with migrants as participants.</p>	<p>Location scouting.</p> <p>Meet collaborators for devising characters and script production.</p> <p>Story board laid out and organization of shooting trajectory.</p> <p>Location permissions sought.</p> <p>Prop elements determined and sourced.</p>	<p>Filming in Calabria.</p> <p>All crew and kit arrive and customs cleared for equipment.</p> <p>Each scene built on location through responsive exercises and discussion.</p> <p>Camera angle and shot list built responsively following scene construction.</p>	<p>Edit.</p> <p>Decision to make a film that gives the tempo of pedetic force; that encompasses the labor agency and rhythms of walking.</p> <p>Translation and subtitling</p>	<p>First Screening Toronto Film Festival.</p>

# RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Traditional journey narratives involve an 'everyman' who sets out from their 'hometown' into a landscape organized as a set of obstacles to be overcome. Here protagonist movement is a temporary foray away from some originary 'natural' place. *The Coat* explored how a critical use of normative narrative film structures, informed by the history of Mediterranean theatre, could help reconceive current realities of migration in the context of longer historical processes of unceasing becoming and movement (Nial 2015).

As migration has long played a role in European cultural exchange and development, the project set out to explore variation in journey narratives evident across historical, mythical and contemporary stories of human movement. *The Coat* worked to develop, specify and document such narratives through plot and characters which enacted the variety of human movement.



Right: *The Coat*, 2015 (Film still).

Photo credit: Michael LeBlanc

# CONTEXT

While making the historically bound *Silent Sticks* (2015), Sworn began *The Coat* to articulate migration within specifically contemporary terms while highlighting it as an historical force central to the development of Western culture.

Emerging from traditions of experimental filmmaking that borrow and disrupt generalised narrative tropes, *The Coat* operates less in the ironic genre-skewering of British artist Shezad Dawood's work and more in the thwarted progressions of Abbas Kiarostami, yet sits firmly between artist's film and independent cinema.

In the film, travellers are figured as agents of cultural mixing. Drawing on traditional figures of displacement such as the bard, the actor and the Situationist *en dérive*, Sworn and Romano explored artists too as travelling figures who, like migrants, are creators of their own journeys and storiesjourneys and stories.

Below: *The Coat*, 2015 (Film still).

Photo credit: Michael LeBlanc





While initially drawn to Aristophanes' *The Birds* for its irreverence and ability to foreground the long recurrence of migrant stories, its storyline was gradually abandoned because it presented migration as occurring between two fixed locations, with resolution in 'the return home.' Sworn and Romano questioned the equation of stasis within settlement, instead positioning life as unceasing movement through various ongoing trajectories.

Working with Arbëresh and Albanian migrants in Italy, Sworn uncovered shared cultural histories between these groups on film, thus complicating simple inter-cultural ideas of migration (Hingdon 1993). *Intra-cultural movement* also appears in the film through the theme of migrants returning home within a generation or several, as well as migration across dialects within national boundaries.

The output is of relevance to scholars and practitioners of human geography, visual anthropology, European theatre history, migration studies, experimental film and art.



Right:  
Story Board Research Material, *The Coat*.

Photo credit: Corin Sworn

# METHODS

Sworn and Romano began *The Coat* following discussions about their own families' arrivals to Canada, and how enculturation straddles vagaries of dislocation and cumulative knowledge. In March 2014, to broaden and inform their discussions, Romano interviewed Italian migrants in Canada and Sworn interviewed recent migrants to Rome.

Following an examination of ephemera in Rome's Museo Nazionale dell'Emigrazione Italiana it was decided to film in the Italian south for its rich history of emigration and immigration and to create characters within the film to enable the interleaving of differing vectors of movement.

In Naples Sworn and Romano worked with the casting director Marchello Sannino to find people whose lives paralleled figures and journeys to be depicted within the film. Following from the rich variance of stories found from interviews, and wanting to reflect migrant journeys as actively produced by migrants themselves, the film script was written in collaboration with a cast of actors and non-actors whose life stories paralleled a basic thematic treatment.



Right:  
Research material Museo  
Nazionale dell'Emigrazione  
Italiana 2014.

Romano and Sworn did extensive location research and travelled with the crew to each site during development of the collaborative script writing to situate and enfold action within the factors and forces of place. Each scene was worked up, blocked and filmed on location with the actors. In this the film reflected the actor/participant's experiences, both as individuals and as arising from the specifics of landscape and locale. For example setting a scene outside a local cinema "for sale" reflects histories of dissemination and movement through economics; the anachronistic travelling thespians of the film were displaced by celluloid, a mode of distribution less in need of the artist's body for dissemination, only for the cinemas to close with the rise of digital culture (which arguably has no 'body' at all) (Clough 2008).

During filming and editing it was decided to use long takes and create a slow diegetic pace to underline the driving force and scale of walking: slow, steady and constant against a comparatively vast landscape. The film's pedestrian trajectories accumulate over the physical terrain of the Italian nation, as distinct from the flight of the birds above, and yet the attempt is to make them mythic - evoking long histories of migrant passage and journeying which *The Coat* draws together.

Right:  
Research material Museo  
Nazionale dell'Emigrazione  
Italiana 2014.



# DISSEMINATION

The film has been translated into German and Italian for international screening and was requested for direct circulation by the ICA London.

## Screenings:

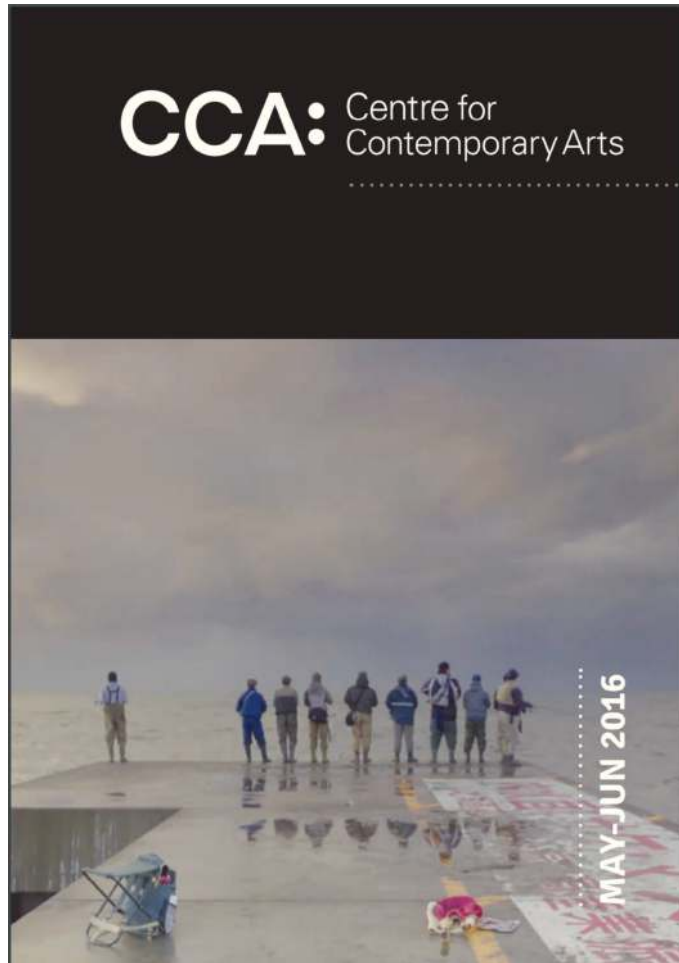
Toronto International Film Festival (2015)  
Natalia Hug, Cologne, Germany (2015)  
Jeux d'Été, Chicago (2015)  
CCA, Glasgow, UK (2015)  
Arnolfini, Bristol, UK (2016)  
ICA, London, UK (2016)  
Spike Island, Bristol, UK, (2016)  
The Cinematheque, Vancouver, Canada (2016)  
Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany (2016)  
MIMA Middlesbrough, UK, (2017)  
Gaité Lyrique, Paris, France (2017)  
Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany (2017)  
University of Glasgow, Scotland (2019)



Top right: Production still *The Coat*.  
Photo credit: Corin Sworn



Right: *The Coat* 2015, (Film still).  
Photo credit: Michael LeBlanc



The Coat screening in the CCA programme booklet for May/June 2016.

CCA: Public Engagement THE SKINNY PICKS

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**INVISIBLE KNOWLEDGE**  
 TONY ROMANO & CORIN SWORN  
 LA GIUBBA (THE COAT)

Fri 20 May, 6.30pm, Free but ticketed / All ages



La Giubba is a loose adaptation of Aristophanes' The Birds which follows the intersections of five drifters as they set out for something better in the Italian south. A young Albanian man and his daughter search for a swimming coach who fled their homeland in the 1990s but are waylaid in an Arbëresh community settled by their countrymen 600 years earlier. Two theatre actors take on a commission to increase audiences in the rural south and traverse the landscape fashioning little theatres of belief, until a Canadian relation turns up. Naive to the Calabrian landscape that surrounds them, each character charts a cartography of their own desire.

This screening will be followed by a Q&A with Corin Sworn.

Programmed in association with GRAMNet.

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GRAMNet (Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network) event.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **Directors**

Corin Sworn Tony Romano

## **Produced by**

Corin Sworn, Tony Romano,  
Michael LeBlanc

## **Executive Producer**

Giovanni Tremini

## **LEAD CAST AND COLLECTIVE WRITERS**

### **Father**

Glen Çaçi

### **Daughter**

Era Lule Çaçi

### **Pantaleo**

Angelo Laurino

### **Doctor**

Nello Mascia

### **Jake**

Maxwell McCabe-Lokos

## **SUPPORTING CAST**

### **Fruit Vendor**

Massimo Ferrante

### **Gas Attendant**

Angiolino Siciliano

### **Old Lady**

Teresa Vicchio

### **Coach**

Domenico Pelligrino

### **Director of Photography**

Michael LeBlanc

### **Sound Recording and Mix**

Ian McGettigan

### **Editors**

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### **Set and Costume Designer**

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### **Post Production Facility**

Alter Ego

## **Colorist**

Clinton Homuth

## **Costume Provision**

Francesca Apostolico  
Catello Russo

## **Music**

Taku Unami

## **Casting Director**

Marcello Sannino

## **Bird Handler**

Agatino Grillo

## **Hospitality and Catering**

Valeria Borrelli  
Antonio Sacco

## **Lighting and Grip Rental**

Frame Discreet

## **Camera Rental**

Blue Rocket Production

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