



THOSE WHO BURN  
THEIR PASSPORTS,  
THE BORDERS,  
THEIR LIVES.

# HARRAGA حراقة

CO-AUTHOR HICHAM BOURAIS DOP JONAS SCHNEIDER EDITOR & DRAMATURGY EREC BREHMER SOUND DESIGN VOLKER ARMBRUSTER, MARCO SCHNEBEL ORIGINAL SCORE ALEXANDER VIČAR  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER SELOUA ELGOUNI, KARIM DEBBAGH PRODUCED BY MÁRK SZILÁGYI DIRECTED BY BENJAMIN ROST



WWW.HARRAGA-FILM.ORG

## LOGLINE

The film follows the 5 Moroccan boys Imad (15), Nourdine (17), Walid (18), Hamza (17) and Aziz (20) living in a cave under the lighthouse in Melilla and dream of a life in Europe. Away from the safety of their mothers, longing for the one ship that will transfer them illegally to a better life. They call themselves: Harragas - those who burn their lives.



## SYNOPSIS

The Moroccan boys Imad (15), Nourdine (17), Walid (18), Hamza (17) and Aziz (20) live in a cave under the lighthouse in Melilla. Every night they break into the harbour trying to climb onto the ships leaving for the Spanish mainland. In the shadow of the rocks, they and a hundred other kids have created their own micro-society: 'Lord of The Flies' in reality - with their own hierarchies, chants and rules. To pass the time, they phone their mothers on video or film themselves being chased by the police. The film follows the gang of boys for 5 years. From their life in the caves to their successful escape attempts to Spain. They call themselves: Harragas - those who burn the passports, the borders, their lives.

“ We were truly impressed by Benjamin’s adeptness in constructing a realm of contrasts. Through a breathtaking lens, we wear witness to the harrowing, at times restless, journey of young migrants attempting to reach Europe. The film evokes profound empathy within us, bridging the gap between their experiences and our own reality, which are miles apart. We are used to a generalizing, anti-migration discourse which denies the existence of individuals – the film does the opposite. ”

- ZURICH FILM FESTIVAL



INTERVIEW  
WITH DIRECTOR  
*BENJAMIN ROST*



**What was the starting point of your encountering the story and deciding to turn it into a film?**

As a documentary filmmaker, I have always been driven to point out injustice. I want to build bridges between worlds where none existed before. In 2017, at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe, when authoritarian regimes were building fences and walls around Europe I knew, I decided to make a film about Europe's borders. Without knowing what exactly I wanted to film, my cameraman Jonas Schneider and I traveled at our own expense first to Hungary, where Orbán was erecting a border fence around his country, and then to Melilla, the place on the African continent where the largest border fence in Europe stands: 12 meters high, electrified and guarded on both sides with weapons. It surrounds the entire town.

However little Melilla is represented in the media, this place caught our attention from a cinematic and political point of view as it is full of contrasts. During the day it seemed like small-town Spanish normalcy: mosques and Arabic teashops lined the streets between Spanish colonial architecture and tapas bars. But when it gets dark, Melilla shows a different face. At the borders, dozens of kids try to storm the fence every night. They get beaten up by the police and military and pushbacks are a sad routine. Therefore, for us as filmmakers, Melilla became a tragic cinematic allegory of Europe's failed asylum policies. An open-air prison, that is worth to be explored.

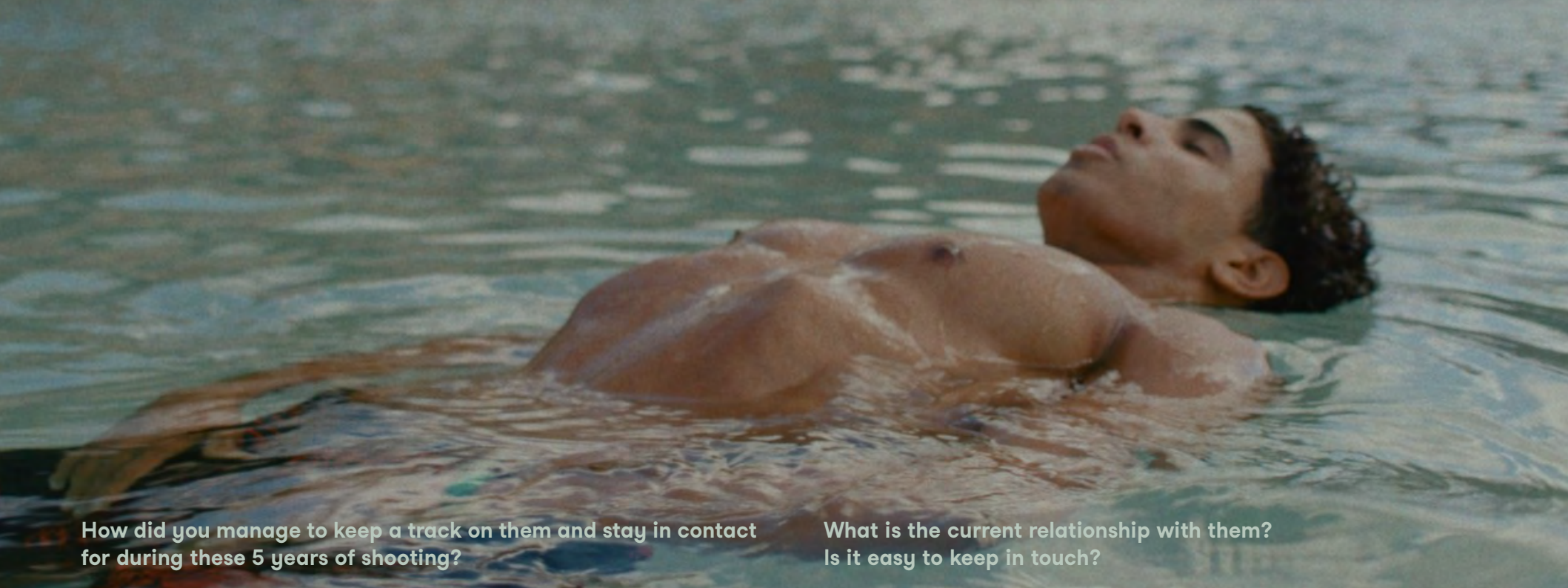
## How did you get access to Imad and the rest of the group?

So, while searching for the right form of our film, we then came across our protagonists by coincidence. As we shot a sunset at the harbor unsuspectingly, a dozen children crawled out from the rocks. They waved for us to come over but pedestrians held us back: 'Be careful, they are dangerous'. A day later, we returned with two bags full of breakfast, climbed over the fences and found a hidden world. A micro-society of hundreds of children and young people living in the caves around the harbor - with their own rules, chants and hierarchies. A kind of 'Lord of the Flies', but in reality. They all waited here for their chance to get on a ship to Europe. Among them were 15-year-old Imad and his group, whom we were allowed to accompany with our camera for 10 days and nights. It was the beginning of a long-lasting filming process. In the following five years, we would search for him again and again and followed him on his way from the caves in Melilla to the Spanish mainland, where he nowadays tries to fulfil his dream of becoming a gym model.



## How did you build this long-lasting trust between each other?

I think patience, endurance and a genuine interest were the keys to building trust. Imad and the other Harraga boys were already used to journalists and photographers from magazines coming by now and then to take pictures of them and then immediately abandoning them again. That is why they were all the more surprised that Jonas and I took such a deep interest in their daily lives over a period of weeks, months and years. They were even irritated at the beginning that we truly wanted to know how they survive and what type of problems they have to deal with every day. So we constantly went along with everything that was part of their lives. We climbed the fences with them, spent nights in the caves around the campfire, cooked, sang and listened. When one day a Harraga saved our SD card from a police confiscation, the ice was finally broken between us. From then on, we were also under their protection. Although the area around the port was not monitored by the police, we rarely got into dangerous situations. To summarise: to have such a close relationship with our protagonists it also needed a hefty dose of naivety and curiosity.



How did you manage to keep a track on them and stay in contact for during these 5 years of shooting?

Sometimes it was only thanks to social media that we reconnected with the guys. For example with Imad. After his successful crossing to Spain, hiding under a truck, we lost him for months. One day a photo of him appeared on Instagram showing him in front of a street sign in Granada. My producer Márk Szilágyi and I researched the street, drove there and knocked at the orphanage which was located across the street. A priest led us into a backyard and we could hardly believe our eyes: Imad was standing there, three heads taller than the last time we saw him, with sparkles in his eyes. In this way, we have been able to keep in touch for more than five years now. With protagonist Nourdine it was even more difficult, but again, social media helped us. He was arrested during the filming process. However, he smuggled a cell phone into his prison cell, so he was once in a while able to make Facebook calls and talk with us this way. These video calls also found their way into the film.

What is the current relationship with them?  
Is it easy to keep in touch?

Real friendships have developed through the filming process. I have regular contact with all the protagonists. The guys keep me up to date on their daily challenges, and sometimes I visit them in Spain or France. We communicate almost exclusively via Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. In general, cell phones and social media were definitely a big help in the production and filming process. For the Harragas, social media has become the main communication tool and form of expression. They portray their lives in illegality on these platforms, which otherwise take place only in secrecy, they stay in touch no matter where they are in Europe. Many of them even film their life-threatening escape attempts. One of our protagonists, Mohamed, filmed himself in a live broadcast on Facebook swimming across the sea with only one energy drink and his cell phone wrapped in a plastic sheet. After he was rescued by the coast guard in Spain, completely exhausted, his video was shared millions of times on the internet. We decided to open our film with this footage.

**Your previous film was set in South Africa. Harraga is a link between Morocco and Europe. What are your priorities when documenting a world that is not your own?**

In filmmaking I always find myself drawn to people who live on the edge of society. Often the relevant problems of our time show up there. Of course, as a director, I always look for topics that are close to my heart.

For Harraga - those who burn their lives, we therefore set up a multicultural team from the very beginning, covering the important perspectives in the core positions. The Hungarian producer Márk Szilágyi and I have always had strong partners in the Moroccan-Spanish co-writer Hicham Bourais and in the producers Seloua Elgouni and Karim Debbagh of the Moroccan production company Kasbah Films. Hicham himself even lived illegally as a Moroccan in Spain for years and was able to enrich the film enormously with his perspective. On the other hand, the film is set on the European side of the border, the politics of the EU concern us all and also influence our lives here in Germany. Through our diverse team, we were able to look at cultural issues, contradictions and appropriation during the shoot and work intensively to create a collaborative, culturally relevant and credible film for both sides. The film was made in a dialogue between the cultures. I am also now a member of ACAN (Arab Culture and Arts Network) so that I can further understand cultural contexts, gather feedback and find places to showcase the film. I see the people I work with as well as my protagonists always as collaborators and partners in the creative process. They all became part of this larger process to create a film with as much authenticity as possible.

**On the film's credits, one can read a thank you note to 'the guy who saved our SD card from the police'. Are there other unsung heroes behind the story that you feel comfortable sharing?**

For me, all these guys are heroes in a way. Not everything they do is judged by everyone as morally good or right but almost all of them are driven by the fact that they have responsibility for their families on the shoulders, which they try to fulfil. Often they are even taken to the border by their mothers to build a life in Europe and provide for their families in Morocco. Like the 15-year-old Oussama. He climbed on the ships to Europe every night when we met him, but he was repeatedly beaten up by the port police. After some years in Melilla, he had assimilated perfectly into the 'cave society' of the Harragas. And even lost the wish to go to Europe. Instead, he became an integral part of the shadow society and even fell in love with a Spanish girl from the city. What always impressed me about him was how naturally he moved back and forth between the guarded fences, walls and borders. Sometimes he climbed onto the roof of a truck in the evening just for fun, in order to smuggle himself back to Morocco. Just to visit his friends and then come back. The name: 'Harraga', burning the borders, perfectly fits in his case.

# DIRECTORS NOTE

It is now 5 years since I found myself on a research trip at the borders of Europe. In Melilla, the Spanish exclave on the Moroccan side stands the largest border fence on the continent. 12 metres high. Heavily guarded by the Moroccan military, on the Spanish side by dozens of border police with automatic weapons. As I film a sunset at the harbour there with my cameraman, suddenly a dozen children crawl out of the washed-out rocks around the compound. Passers-by warns us: 'They are dangerous'. The next morning we go there again with a big bag of breakfast and climb over the fences to the rocks. We spend ten days and nights in the caves, filming Imad, a 14-year-old Moroccan boy who wants to leave for Europe from here.

Our initial ten days in Melilla have turned into five years to date. Together with our Moroccan co- author Hicham Bourais, who himself came to Spain 10 years ago as a Harraga and now lives with his wife in Zaragoza, we climbed over fences and filmed Imad and his group. The perspective of Moroccan co-writer Hicham provides a valuable intercultural dialogue for the film that illuminates both sides of the border. We were also joined by another protagonist. Mohammed, a Moroccan TikTok influencer who swam across the sea live on Facebook. When he turns his mobile phone back on after three days in the hospital, his video is shared thousands of times.

During our research, we traveled for 5 years following the boys throughout Europe, gaining insights into the invisible world in which children live illegally door to door with us under desolate conditions. Together with the Hungarian producer Márk Szilágyi, who has a migration history himself, and the Moroccan associate producer Seloua Elgouni, our vision is to find food for thought in order to find a solution to a permanently topical problem. We want to draw attention to the living situation of children and young people, thousands of whom live next door to us all over Europe. We want to create dialogue and ensure that fewer of them have to drown in the sea. We want to give them a voice where they have not been heard so far and ensure that they are decriminalised in the long term.



## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Rost works as a director and activist in Europe and Africa. He studied Directing at Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg and Philosophy in Munich. Between 2017 and 2019 he lived in Rwanda and South Africa to support the launch of the Youth TV Channel 'Iwacu' for the German Development Organisation (GIZ) and to shoot his graduation film "A PORTRAIT ON THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS" supported by ARD / SWR and MfG, which is available on Amazon Prime.

With his Debut Project HARRAGA - THOSE WHO BURN THEIR LIVES he participated at the Documentary Campus Masterschool. Since then, Benjamin is also a member of ACAN (Arab Cultures and Arts Network) and actively works in Morocco, where he got to know Hicham, a now good friend of his and an important collaborator on HARRAGA. His films were screened at various international festivals like Dok Leipzig, Dok.Fest München, Camerimage etc.

## CO AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Hicham Bourais was born in Fez, Morocco. In 2000 he came to Spain to study, but after the sudden passing of his father a year and a half later, his family could no longer provide him with the economic support needed for his studies. That resulted in him losing his student residence card and living for more than 4 years without papers in the country. With the help of a Spanish friend, he moved to Madrid and started working. Hicham had then, the chance to enroll in Pedro Almodóvar's film school. Making films was his lifelong dream as cinema is the axis on which his life revolves, but in Morocco, he had no option to further pursue this field of studies.

While Hicham was studying at Escuela de Cine Madrid, he was also working as an assistant editor, and translator for a short film. Hicham's great mentor became Antonio Gómez Escalonilla, who above all is also a great friend of his. Today Hicham works in Film Projects as editor, translator, and director and lives in Zaragoza, Spain.

## INFORMATION

International Title: **HARRAGA**  
Duration (Theatrical/TV): **90**  
Countries of Production: **GERMANY**  
Dialogue Language:  
Subtitles Available: **ENGLISH**

## CAST

Mohammed Imad, Said, Nourine #Grande!, Nourine #Chef! Hamza, Walid, Aziz, Abdelrahim, Ayoub, Brahim, And the whole community of the Harragas in Melilla (2017 - 2022)

## CREW

Director BENJAMIN ROST Co-Author HICHAM BOURAIS Director of Photography JONAS SCHNEIDER  
Editor EREC BREHMER Sound-Recording BENJAMIN ROST  
Supervising Sound Editor & Re-Recording Mixer VOLKER ARMBRUSTER  
Sound Designer MARCO SCHNEBEL Foley Artist VOLKER ARMBRUSTER  
Foley Mixer & Foley Editor TIMO LETZGUS Original Score ALEXANDER VIČAR  
Additional Score SWALLOW X featuring MOHAMMED aka NEYMARDALBAHJA  
Voice Over News RAQUEL NUÑEZ, JAVIER ARGUEDAS, BASMA RKIOUI  
Visual Artist SOFIIA MELNYK & ANGELA SCHLABITZ Color Grading MANUEL PORTSCHY  
Finishing RAFAEL STARMAN Social Media SVETLANA VOLKOVA  
Translation AYMANE GHATOUS & ALAA NASSAL Produced by MÁRK SZILÁGYI  
Associate Producer SELOUA ELGOUNI + KARIM DEBBAGH  
Line Producer SWR JOCHEN DICKBERTEL Commissioning Editor MARCUS VETTER

## WATCH THE FILM:

H PS://VIMEO.COM/767846628

PW: HARRAGA

## WATCH THE TRAILER

H PS://VIMEO.COM/807914653

## CONTACT

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<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27053053/>

حراثة HARRAGA

