

# Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema

This exciting and original volume offers the first comprehensive critical study of the recent profusion of European films and television addressing sexual migration and seeking to capture the lives and experiences of LGBTIQ+ migrants and refugees.

*Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* argues that embodied cinematic representations of the queer migrant, even if at times highly ambivalent and contentious, constitute an urgent new repertoire of queer subjectivities and socialities that serve to undermine the patrolled borders of gender and sexuality, nationhood and citizenship, and refigure or *queer* fixed notions and universals of identity like 'Europe' and national belonging based on the model of the family. At stake ethically and politically is the elaboration of a 'transborder' consciousness and aesthetics that counters the homonationalist, xenophobic and homo/trans-phobic representation of the 'migrant to Europe' figure rooted in the toxic binaries of othering (the good vs bad migrant, host vs guest, indigenous vs foreigner).

Bringing together 15 contributors working in different national film traditions and embracing multiple theoretical perspectives, this powerful and timely collection will be of major interest to both specialists and students in film and media studies, gender and queer studies, migration/mobility studies, cultural studies, and aesthetics.

**James S. Williams** is Professor of Modern French Literature and Film at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of (among others) *The Erotics of Passage: Pleasure, Politics, and Form in the Later Work of Marguerite Duras* (1997), *The Cinema of Jean Cocteau* (2006), *Jean Cocteau* (a 'Critical Life') (2008), *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (2013) and *Encounters with Godard: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (2016). He is also co-editor of *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (2000), *Gender and French Cinema* (2001), *For Ever Godard: The Cinema of Jean-Luc Godard* (2004), *Jean-Luc Godard. Documents* (2006) (catalogue of the Godard exhibition held at the Centre Pompidou, Paris) and *May '68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution* (2011). His most recent monograph, *Ethics and Aesthetics in Contemporary African Cinema: The Politics of Beauty*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2019.

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# Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema

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This book is dedicated to all migrants to Europe whose lives and aspirations have been rendered further precarious and uncertain by the Covid-19 pandemic.



# Introduction



# 1 Queering the migrant

## Being beyond borders

*James S. Williams*

### **The queer turn in European migratory film**

Since a European Union directive in 2011 made persecution for sexual orientation and gender identity valid legal grounds for asylum in Europe – the so-called SOGI non-discrimination laws (SO = sexual orientation, GI = gender identity) – the long-overlooked phenomenon of alternatively gendered migrants and refugees escaping persecution due to sexual orientation has come urgently to the fore in European society and culture.<sup>1</sup> Refugees identifying as LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, non-binary, queer or questioning) have been attempting to cross the border into Europe and claim sexual asylum, fleeing countries where homosexuality is not just maligned but also attacked, maimed, and obliterated (14 countries worldwide, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria and Syria, impose violent physical and psychological punishments and/or the death penalty for homosexuality).<sup>2</sup> These refugees form part of the recent European migrant and humanitarian crisis – one that began in earnest in the summer of 2011 following the Arab Spring and exploded in 2015 when rising numbers of people arrived in the European Union, travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or overland through southeast Europe (at its peak, an unprecedented 1.2 million people crossed European borders in both 2015 and 2016 and applied to EU member-states for asylum (Eurostat 2017)).

Only a small number of migrants and refugees seeking asylum in Europe on grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity have been successful, although reliable official statistics are hard to obtain due to a general lack of scientific research.<sup>3</sup> To take the case of one (now former) member-state, the UK: ‘experimental’ statistics published by the Home Office in September 2018 containing data referring to SOGI applications reveal that from 2015 to 2017 a total of 5,916 asylum applications were officially lodged where a sexual orientation basis was recorded (lesbian, gay or bisexual, but not transgender or intersex), representing 6.6% of all asylum applications received during that period. More recent information provided by the Home Office indicates, however, that, as of September 2019, the UK has refused at least 3,100 asylum claims from LGBTIQ+ nationals from countries where

consensual same-sex acts are criminalised, notably Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the growing numbers of queer migrants and refugees attempting to cross both into and within the EU, contemporary European cinema has witnessed a profusion of innovative and pivotal films addressing themes of sexual migration while seeking to convey queer migrant lives in Europe and at its borders. This process had already begun in the early 2000s with works like *Princesa* (2001, Italy/Spain/France/UK/Germany, dir. Henrique Goldman), an amalgam of gritty social document and emotive melodrama telling the story of Fernanda, a 19-year-old Brazilian transsexual who goes to Milan and works as a prostitute ('Princesa') in order to raise money for her sex-change operation. It has since developed into a dazzling array of films in all forms and formats, from commercial feature films to small-budget video works, shorts and installations, and covering the full spectrum of genres and styles. They range from narrative fictions – powerful, taut, emotional dramas like *Unveiled/Fremde Haut* (2005, Germany/Austria, dir. Angelina Maccarone), about an Iranian lesbian interpreter assuming a dead man's identity in order to escape to Germany and avoid capital punishment for homosexual acts, and romantic dramas like *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017, Finland/UK, dir. Mikko Makela) tracing the intimate emotional and erotic bonds that form between a young (white) Finnish man and a Syrian refugee in rural Finland – to stirring documentaries of grassroots advocacy such as *Refugees under the Rainbow* (2018, Germany, dir. Stella Traub), where three queer Ugandan refugees tell direct to camera the story of their gruelling attempts to find safe refuge and happiness in Germany, and *Re-naissances/Re-births: The Journey of the Soul* (2018, France/Russia/China/Peru dir. Santi Zegarra), comprising intimate and affirmative portraits of queer and trans refugees in France (including a transwoman from Columbia, a transman from Russia, a lesbian from Uganda, and a gay man from China).<sup>5</sup> Other more hybrid works include the docu-fiction *Refugee's Welcome* (2017, Spain/Germany), a self-styled porn short by well-known queer *auteur* Bruce La Bruce focusing on the adventures of a young Syrian man (Moonif) who wanders the streets of Berlin after leaving the refugee camp to which he has been assigned, and the freewheeling queer road movie *Xenia* (2014, Greece, dir. Panos H. Koutras), which employs comedy and fantasy sequences to chart the quest for Greek citizenship undertaken by a flamboyantly styled, Greek-Albanian, adolescent boy and his older brother in the face of homophobic violence. In a still relatively rare instance of migrants recording their journey to Europe as it is taking place,<sup>6</sup> *Shelter: Farewell to Eden* (2019, France/Italy, 2019, dir. Enrico Masi) provides a first-person portrait documentary portrait of Filipino transsexual Pepsi, a former resistance fighter in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and nurse in Gaddafi's Libya, now seeking asylum in Italy, France, and the UK. Never directly photographed at her insistence, Pepsi speaks on the soundtrack about the in-between, transitional places of her restless journey and the

realities of the queer, Muslim, migrant everyday, complemented formally by Masi's kaleidoscopic editing style incorporating raw found footage.

The portrayal of queer refugees and migrants has also become increasingly prominent on European television, most strikingly in the genre of Nordic Noir, for example, the Swedish series *Bron/The Bridge* (2011–18, SVT) which, in its fourth season, centred on the character of a gay Iranian refugee in his late 20s living illegally in Copenhagen. Alongside this remarkable proliferation of original and often radical work on queer migration, and serving directly to stimulate it, has been the emergence of queer migrant film festivals, most notably the annual International Queer and Migrant Film Festival in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities (inaugurated in 2015), and the International Queer Minorities Film Festival: Transition in Vienna.

While occasional articles and (part-)chapters have been devoted to queer migration in European films (Loshitzky 2010; Williams 2010; Ballesteros 2015; Guha 2015; Bayraktar 2016), there has, as yet, been no sustained engagement with the complex and pressing themes of queer migration in contemporary European cinema. This is partly because the specific issue of migration (queer or otherwise) has often been conflated with those of immigration and the post-migrant experience of integration, assimilation, and diasporic identity.<sup>7</sup> In order to appreciate fully how the migrant figure has been *queered* in European film and, in the process, grasp the extraordinary thematic range and significance of this rapidly expanding field within European cinema, we need first to establish the cultural and political contexts of sexual migration,



Figure 1.1 Director Santi Zegarra (second from right) with (left to right) Cate Naluwoza, Roman Sorokine and Giovanna Rincon in *Re-naissances/Re-births: The Journey of the Soul* (2018)

Source: *Re-naissances/Re-births: The Journey of the Soul* (2018), directed by Santi Zegarra © Sunkku Producciones.

starting with what exactly is meant in legal and political terms by queer asylum, and the particular obstacles placed in its path.

### **Queer migration to Europe: asylum, rights, homonationalism**

Although SOGI-related rights have been recognised both at an international and domestic level, forming part of the EU's increasingly sophisticated body of asylum laws and policies for migrants and refugees known as the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), there have been major problems in their implementation.<sup>8</sup> A primary concern has been the burden of queer proof. In an asylum system which still presumes refugees to be heterosexual, LGBTIQ+ refugees must provide conclusive evidence that they are gay, lesbian or trans, or else find themselves deemed 'not gay enough', or not to have the expected gay 'demeanour' and 'dress code', to qualify for SOGI recognition.<sup>9</sup> 'Not gay enough', like 'too gay', is, of course, an entirely subjective and culturally relative criterion. As Rachel A. Lewis incisively puts it, in order to be considered credible and worthy candidates for asylum, alternatively gendered applicants are compelled to 'perform' a visible identity in the country to which they migrate while at the same time conform to Western stereotypes of (male) homosexual behaviour based on visibility, consumption, and an identity in the public sphere (Lewis 2013). To take just a few among the countless examples of this double bind reported by Human Rights Watch in Austria: in August 2018 the authorities rejected the asylum application of a 27-year-old Iraqi on the grounds that he was behaving 'like a girl' and 'faking' his homosexuality. One week earlier, an 18-year-old Afghan asylum seeker was denied refugee status because, according to the adjudicating official, '[n]either your walk nor behaviour nor clothing indicate in any way you might be homosexual' (Austrian authorities subsequently distanced themselves from this decision and disciplined the official). In addition, while EU member-states are entitled to investigate the validity of individual claims, asylum officers in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Cyprus (among others) have been especially suspicious of Muslim applicants, as if one could not possibly be both gay and Muslim. The result of this highly inconsistent and ambiguous processing of sexual and gender asylum across Europe is a fundamentally homophobic mispractice of credibility and assessment. Intrusive and sometimes outlandish methods have been employed: applicants to the UK, for example, have been pressured to provide sexually explicit photographic and video evidence, while Czech authorities have attempted to measure degrees of sexual arousal. Some asylum claims have even been rejected on the basis that applicants can 'behave discreetly' and hence avoid persecution in their countries of origin, although this is expressly condemned by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which provides parameters that immigration officers in EU countries must respect.

Certainly, European asylum officers are now officially required to be knowledgeable about issues facing sexual and gender minorities, and put aside their preconceived notions of how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

people should behave.<sup>10</sup> For Johannes Lukas Gartner, however, this process should go much further: instead of demanding queer refugees to account for their sexual conduct, it would be more appropriate to question them on their feelings about being (perceived as) ‘different’ in their respective societies, the stigma that arises out of this, the potential isolation that follows, and the related harm they have experienced. Yet the brute reality remains that by presupposing limited notions of supposedly European homosexuality as part of asylum processes, the asylum systems of European countries are ‘moulding’ queer petitioners into a particular Western characterisation of queer identity (Gartner 2015: 136). Queer asylum seekers are required to act their identities in a way that shows they are “‘in place” among the receiving state’s good gay and lesbian citizenry’ (Gartner 2015: 137) – a demand that usually equates to embodying the expectations immigration officials have of their own local and culturally specific queer communities.

The systemic failings and misunderstandings in the provision for queer asylum in Europe are further compounded by the politicisation of its aims and ideals. In a trenchant and well-informed analysis of LGBTIQ+ asylum in the UK entitled *Discourses on LGBT Asylum in the UK: Constructing a Queer Haven* (2017), which examines the relationship between liberalism, nationhood, and hospitality, Thibaut Raboin dissects both the neoliberal management of asylum for LGBTIQ+ seekers and the effects of persisting colonial imaginaries on the representation of sexual freedom. He reveals that the prospect of a safe haven works as an exhortation as much as a promise in asylum, and that the queer futurism offered by current neoliberal discourses on asylum perpetuates the dream of a good life – albeit a homonormative conception of it – where happiness, individual freedom, and autonomy on the market are closely entwined. Such futurism may be summed up by the notion of ‘happy queer futures’ in the UK – one that draws on the model narrative of what Sara Ahmed, in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), has called the ‘happy migrant’, that is, someone who espouses national ideals couched in terms of Empire, the twist here being that sexual diversity is now held aloft as a justification of Empire’s liberation from abjection (by contrast, according to Ahmed, postcolonial ‘melancholic migrants’ exist in a state of discontent due to their refusal of the imperial formula of ‘liberation from abjection’) (see Ahmed 2010a). Moreover, the narratives of asylum cases create a specific temporality whereby ‘queer futures’ are deemed impossible outside the UK. The tropes of the domestic homophobic past and the homophobic ‘elsewhere’ interact in discourses to produce a unique type of politicisation of asylum – one where British liberal queers become personally invested in defending the rights of LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers. However, as Raboin convincingly argues, political emotions such as sympathy can constitute both a basis for solidarity and a means of dispossessing claimants of their very agency.

The ideological discourses and ‘queer-migration-to-liberation’ rhetoric and narrative deconstructed and denounced by Raboin are fundamentally ‘homonationalist’ in nature, in that they suggest a favourable association

between a nationalist ideology and LGBTIQ+ people or their rights. A term originally proposed by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), homonationalism has proved crucial for accounting for the exclusionary and normalising effects of queer migration and asylum policies in the global North, and also for understanding the general construction of Western European nations as exceptional in terms of attitudes towards sexual and gender equality vis-à-vis an uncivilised, racialised Other. Indeed, the concept of homonationalism has profoundly influenced the development of queer migration studies, a transdisciplinary and transnational critical field that, since its emergence in the early 2000s in the groundbreaking work of Eithne Luibhéid (Luibhéid 2002) and Lionel Cantú Jr., who proposed a ‘queer political economy of migration’ (Cantú Jr. 2009), has sought to foreground the experiences of queer and nonheteronormative migrants while attending to the ways in which sexuality as a regime of power effectively shapes all migration processes.<sup>11</sup> As Lewis writes, recent queer migration scholarship has shown not only how nation-states seek to incorporate queer migrants as a measure of their exceptionalism within neoliberal narratives of modernity, but also how homonationalism (re)produces the norms of sexual citizenship grounded in heteronormative reproductive futurism and able-normativity (Lewis 2019a: 654).

The political critique of the forces of homonationalism in Europe is becoming ever more urgent with the rise in nationalism and xenophobia across the continent and the wave of populist, far-right, and anti-immigrant groups (from Italy’s *Fratelli d’Italia* and *Forza Nuova* to Finland’s *Blue Reform*, the *Danish People’s Party*, and *Alternative for Germany*). Even when not targeting specifically the LGBTIQ+ community, such movements – part of the ‘retribalisation’ affecting Europe’s post-nation states in their attempt to push back against the multitudes (Elsaesser 2018: 127) – have fuelled a toxic and divisive social climate leading to an increase in anti-gay violence and hate crimes across Europe. In such a virulent political environment, homonationalism poses an immanent threat. *Alternative for Germany*, for example, is led by an openly gay woman, Alice Weidel, who, while backing ‘other lifestyles’ including civil partnership for gay and lesbian couples, has expressed her opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage and her firm support for the protection of the traditional family. Whether in certain Dutch gay rights discourses,<sup>12</sup> or in the campaign for the minaret ban in Switzerland, or in the aftermath of the 2015–16 New Year’s Eve events in Cologne and other German cities when large numbers of women were allegedly subjected to sexual assault by migrants en masse,<sup>13</sup> the New Right and European Alt-Right have successfully joined forces with some feminist and LGBTIQ+ voices claiming that women and queers need to be protected from migrants. One of the primary objectives of queer migrant studies is precisely to establish how queer migrants have the potential to resist such state ideologies and practices of homonationalism, and, further, how queer migrant precarity and vulnerability may actually be mobilised as



direct political critique. Examples include the special 2017 issue of *Sexualities* (vol. 20, issue 5–6) entitled ‘Homonationalism: Resisting nationalist co-optation of sexual diversity’ (edited by Richard C.M. Mole), and Hila Amit’s study of queer Israeli emigrants as ‘vulnerable agents’ escaping from – and refusing the narratives of – heteronormative reproductive futurism at the heart of the Israeli nation-state (see Amit 2018).<sup>14</sup>

### Figuring the queer migrant

In view of the current, highly pernicious, political and cultural discourses around migration, and the fact that queer migrants and refugees still remain for the reasons given a largely hidden and untraceable presence, how is European cinema to represent and figure specifically queer migrants and refugees, whether those actively seeking legal asylum on SOGI grounds or those living illegally in Europe as undocumented migrants, and for whom being queer is just one facet of their marginalised identity? For if the migrant figure is still projected within Western visual and media culture as essentially anonymous and indistinct, caught in the lethal binary of the dangerous foreign invader vs. powerless victim (viz., the stereotypical portrayals of the stateless migrant as a lowly, suffering, traumatised body, effectively invisible because excluded from political representation even if made sporadically hypervisible in breaking news reports), the queer migrant appears altogether more uncertain and undecidable, at times abject, even monstrous. Indeed, queer refugees find themselves doubly ‘other’ and invisible because they are perceived ideologically within the European imaginary as an instance of the demonised ‘bad’ migrant, as opposed to the palatable ‘good’, straight (predominantly male) migrant fleeing on account of poverty, war, famine, and economic deprivation.

Michael Haneke has brilliantly interrogated the positioning of the migrant in European society and culture as a suspect, marginal, and destabilising nonfigure in *Happy End* (2017, France/Austria/Germany), a seething ‘black comedy’ set in Calais where migrants appear to be for rent. In the climactic family reception scene they are presented by the delinquent son Pierre as ‘my friends’ and identified by name and where they came from (‘Mohamed from Nigeria’, etc.), yet they are confined to the far-flung shadows of the frame and denied the right to speak. Rendered effectively faceless and indiscriminate, they are manipulated cynically by indigenous white Europeans (here upper-middle class) to resolve their own murky private scores and petty disputes. Yet the denigrated figure of the mute, undifferentiated migrant as object of racialised Western suspicion and objectification is, in fact, just one of the many highly problematic and charged tropes of the ‘migrant to Europe’ figure that have evolved in European narrative fiction films over the last 20 years. These include the migrant as symptom (implicit or explicit) of European social malaise and crisis;<sup>15</sup> the migrant as spectre;<sup>16</sup> the migrant as unwelcome other beyond recuperation by the state;<sup>17</sup> the migrant as saviour

(usually a nonwhite foreigner arriving to humanise a sad, lonely, white European through natural kindness);<sup>18</sup> and the concomitant trope of the European as white saviour of migrants.<sup>19</sup> This typology of (straight) migrant characters is far from exhaustive and does not, of course, reflect the work of political and humanitarian documentaries attempting to give authentic voice to refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>20</sup> But what happens to such tropes when the migrant in question is nonnormative and queer? Are they contested and rewired by the figure of the queer migrant, or further extended and consolidated?

Let us take the example of the low-key, sombre, social realist drama *And Breathe Normally* (2018, Iceland/Sweden/Belgium, dir. Isold Uggadóttir), which begins with an African migrant called Adja (Babetida Sadjo) from Guinea-Bissau travelling with her daughter and sister to Canada where she intends to seek asylum. During a stopover at Keflavík airport in Iceland, and still in acute mourning for her girlfriend who was killed for her sexuality, she is required to provide proof of her sexual orientation or face deportation. Peculiarly, Adja's own sexuality is presented so subtly, even subliminally, that the viewer could easily miss her allusion to her 'angel'. The narrative focuses instead on the odd relationship she forms with the (white) border control officer Lara (Kristín Thóra Haraldsdóttir) who denies her passage through immigration for using a fake French passport. Lara is a struggling single mother and recovering addict living in poverty, and Adja will end up forming a maternal bond with her and her young son Eldar, whom she looks after while Lara is at work, even sneaking the two of them into the run-down refugee centre where she has been consigned after a short prison term so they may enjoy a warm bed for the night. Despite its exemplary feminist and pro-immigration stance, the film thus succumbs rather sentimentally to the ready trope of the (black) migrant as saviour for the troubled (white) European.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1.2 Adja (Babetida Sadjo) sharing a lighter moment with Eldar (Patrik Nökvi Pétursson) in *And Breathe Normally* (2018)

Source: *And Breathe Normally* (2018), directed by Isold Uggadótti © Zik Zak Filmworks, Entre Chien et Loup, Cinetic Films, Pegasus Pictures, Skot Prods, and Netflix (2019).

Another film offering a queer spin on established migrant stereotypes, although very different in style and register, is the mainstream Norwegian comedy *Welcome to Norway!* (2015, dir. Rune Denstad Langlo), the tale of a jovial racist and xenophobe (Primus) cynically converting his defunct hotel into a shelter in order to profit from public funding for refugees in a country that has been a longstanding haven for migrants. Moving uneasily between caricature and drama as it presents Primus struggling to instal the most basic amenities in order to secure approval from the government, the film lampoons the recently emerging European culture of charitable giving. Yet towards the end, two young women suddenly ride a snowmobile to church for a shotgun wedding. The first is Primus's daughter Oda, the second is her new Lebanese friend Mona, a teenage orphan and asylum seeker who is at risk of deportation. Mona acknowledges she may go to hell for marrying a woman, but she decides this cannot be worse than deportation. Their marriage offers a wry, queer take on the expectation that every comedy film contain a happy ending, and it suggests that real generosity, however desperate and convoluted, may yet cut through the tangle of nationalist sentiment and red tape. Yet is this queering of the European feel-good migrant movie, where the European capacity for feeling and self-transformation is reactivated and authenticated by the migrant other, offering anything more than a neat, crowning, comic twist?

Another standard migrant film trope, that of the spectre, is given a more tangential – yet potentially more propitious – queer treatment in *A Bigger Splash* (2015, Italy/France) by gay director Luca Guadagnino. The film is set on the small Mediterranean island of Pantelleria, the title directly referencing David Hockney's 1967 painting *A Bigger Splash* (as well as Jack Hazan's 1973 biopic of Hockney of the same name). African migrants are glimpsed only intermittently here, notably in one encounter with two of the principal white European and American characters, Pen and Paul, who are visiting the island's wild landscape. During this scene, the viewer is twice offered privileged, subjective point-of-view access to the two white characters, while the migrants themselves are conveyed only objectively in medium-to-long shot as they look back at the Western couple in excited curiosity. Moreover, they remain out of direct earshot; it is not even clear what language they are speaking since their barely audible speech is left untranslated. The couple carry on their conversation about love affairs as if nothing had happened, seemingly impervious to this incomprehensible alien entity. Thereafter, the muted migrants are marooned in the rear of the frame or in the *hors-champ*. Later, as the white protagonists enter the local police station to surrender their passports following the death of one their party (Harry), young black and Arab men and women are shown briefly outside, confined behind a perimeter fence. While registering their presence as they go past, the Europeans immediately look away, though Pen is moved to throw a football back over the fence for them. However, during the same sequence the migrants are directly acknowledged by one disconnected voice-off ('we put them in

an enclosure, it's inhuman – it's shameful – there's twelve of them – they're human beings, theoretically'), as well as by the slightly camp, dreamlike, celebrity-obsessed Marshal (played by noted Italian satirical actor and comic, Corrado Guzzanti), who, despite the pressure exerted by Harry's grieving former lover Marianne, refuses to link the migrants to the scene of one European man's death and thereby incriminate them. Indeed, he remains focused on the tragic drowning overnight of seven migrants from North Africa.

One might justifiably argue here that the Marshal, alone compassionate towards the fate of the migrants, embodies a positive, humanist, queer sensibility. Certainly, a loose, queer/migrant alignment is being tentatively suggested, although it is not elaborated and constitutes only a vague promise. Moreover, as in *Happy End*, the minimally present migrant figures do not even feature in the final credits of the film, which thus potentially stands accused of being complicit with the behaviour of its main characters towards the migrants which it only implicitly critiques.<sup>22</sup> For these various reasons, *A Bigger Splash* presents a particular critical challenge, one that underlies many films about queer migration, namely how to read *queerly* for migrant signs and traces in European films where they often remain peripheral and evanescent, yet are still obliquely *felt*.

### Queering 'Europe'

The films just discussed call attention to the operative terms of our analysis of European queer migrant cinema, and specifically to what is really meant by 'queer' and 'Europe'. Queer is, of course, an eminently fluid term, usually deployed in its current, affirmative, sexual sense, inspired by Queer Theory, of disturbing and exploding all heteronormative understandings of the 'natural' relation between biological sex, cultural notions of gender, and sexual desire. By breaking the 'compulsory' heteronormative contract binding sex and gender, queer scholarship has called into question the logics of sexual practice and identification rooted in stable formations of gender difference. Indeed, the term 'queer' may be used to describe any sexuality not defined as heterosexual procreative monogamy while emphasising that sexuality is intersectional, that is, a mode of difference contextualised in, and intersected by, a nexus of other differences such as race and ethnicity, class and location. Yet 'queer' is not merely a noun but also a verb or process, and queerness is not limited merely to sexual identities – it may be understood in the more general theoretical and political sense of queering and subverting fixed notions of identity such as the family and nation. Dislodging queer from a too-rigid association with same-sex desire thus returns the term to its earlier oppositional force with the capacity to challenge normalising mechanisms of power, including that of the state.

Films like *A Bigger Splash*, where queer migrants (or migrants figured as queer) are not present, but where an inchoate, indefinable relation between

migrant and queer is intimated, raise questions of ‘Europeanness’ precisely by disputing the idea of Europe as a pristine Eden of enlightened, benevolent thinking. The ‘New Europe’, which incorporates countries of the former Eastern Bloc as well as border countries like Greece and Hungary, is now a mutable, contested site of post-nation states and deterritorialised national identities continually frustrated by unprecedented waves of migrants from the South and East. As Anne-Marie Fortier suggests, migration, insofar as it ‘impacts directly on how individuals, communities, nations or multi/international formations such as the European Union imagine themselves and their (co)inhabitants, encourages the New Europe to be fruitfully analysed and (re)theorised’ (see Fortier 2006). With this in mind, might one argue that European films about migration (whether gay or straight), which undermine ideologically fixed and objectifying notions (e.g. the migrant as Europe’s negative other), serve also to *queer* the very notion of Europe? We need to return again to the core term, ‘migrant’.

In her contribution to *What’s Queer About Europe?: Productive Encounters and Re-enchanting Paradigms* (2014), a transdisciplinary volume examining how Queer Theory can help initiate disorienting and counterintuitive encounters for imagining contemporary Europe and probe the blind spots that continue to structure the long and discrepant process of Europeanisation, Nacira Guénif interrogates the central paradox that, to (white) Western, straight minds, migrants are both ‘queer’ and ‘straight’. They are queer on account of ‘a series of mythic equations’ (‘Migrants equal Muslim, Muslim equals fundamentalist aliens, and fundamentalist aliens equal potential terrorists’ (Guénif 2014: 75)), but also ‘straight’ (that is, assumed to be straight), ‘while the queerness of their behaviour and mindset is condemned’ (Guénif 2014: 75). She notes the perpetuation of ‘a “queer” discourse of the strangeness of migrants’ (Guénif 2014: 75), for if migrants embody otherness, ‘they also represent queer potentialities and configurations, which include among other things food, religion, dress-code, gender, sexuality, and language’ (Guénif 2014: 74) – what Guénif suggestively calls ‘the flux of complex, embodied, migrant realities’ (Guénif 2014: 74). The displaced, lone, migrant, floating (male) body often has nonreproductive sexual relations (however productive he may prove in the workplace), and experiences a distance from the heteronormative family, thus allowing for the creation of new kinds of homosociality. For Guénif, ‘[t]his queer other threatens the enforcers of biopolitics by making alternative forms of being, becoming, and belonging possible’ (Guénif 2014: 76). Yet if ‘[s]uch queer assemblages expose the fiction of European universalism’ (Guénif 2014: 74), they often go unnoticed, not simply because ‘[t]he State apparatus seeks to convert informal human mobility into a fixed nationalisation process, transforming experience into a governmental frame’ (Guénif 2014: 74), but also because ‘their invisibility is not discernible within the more recognisable modes of identity politics through which migrant national issues are publicly staged’ (Guénif 2014: 74). Nevertheless, as Guénif rightly claims,

these forms stimulate a queer spatio-historical imagination that resists the vertical history of the Nation while also insisting on the incompleteness of the European project of social integration.

This notion of queering Europe via a ‘horizontal’, post-national perspective (i.e., across nations and ethnic groups) is also explored by Fatima El-Tayeb in *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011), which pursues the links between queerness, race, ethnicity and ‘Europe’ by examining how racialised communities are positioned in the European Union. El-Tayeb argues that the tension between a nonwhite, non-Christian population and persistent essentialist definitions of Europeanness produces new forms of identity and activism (from drag performances to feminist Muslim activism and Euro hip-hop), despite the fact that Europe still stubbornly professes its innocence and disingenuously contains debates on race as being beyond or post-race. In the same vein, filmmaker Nish Gera has spoken similarly of how queer migrants to Europe offer the means of new, positive kinds of intersection and interconnection. This is because, he contends:

LGBT refugees who come to Europe are seen as being more European than perhaps other refugees making the trek across the Mediterranean. LGBT refugees, with a foot both in Europe and in their home culture, can serve as bridges between Europeans and the refugee community.  
(Gera 2017)

Such cultural and ethnic queering of Europe, which has led Russian conservatives to castigate the continent as ‘Gayropa’, forms, of course, part of a larger theoretical project of deconstructing postcolonial Europe, whose definition is contested both internally (through the proliferation of ethnic, religious, regional differences that also transform the family as the fundamental social, emotional, and economic unit – see Simpson 2013) and externally (Europe expanding its boundaries while closing its borders).<sup>23</sup> Yet how the specifically queer reframing of the social, cultural, and political contours of European identity and the European imaginary proposed by Guénif and El-Tayeb work might work in specifically filmic terms, and how fixed, ‘straight’ notions of Europeanness may be ‘queered’ in the extended sense of queer, is one of the key questions explored in *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*. It builds thus on the work notably of transnational film theorist Daniela Berghahn who, in a study of key European diasporic films such as *Lola+Bilidikid/Lola and Billy the Kid* (1998, Germany, dir. Kutluğ Ataman), has proposed ‘queering the family of nation’ (see Berghahn 2011), as well as of Derek Duncan, a contributor to the volume, who has examined male migration to Italy from Eastern Europe in some recent Italian films where the men featured are not gay, but where their representation constructs a nonnormative heterosexual subject whose presence in Italy depends precisely on their productivity while excluding any kind of

reproductive function. The films' catastrophic plots hinging on the unsuccessful relationship between a migrant man and an Italian woman introduce the spectator to what Duncan terms 'a pedagogy of the non-national body' by queering the heterosexual romance narrative. In the process, Italy itself is queered by the insinuation of the foreign worker into a medium (film) that has long been seen as the privileged cultural vehicle for the construction of Italian national identity. Such queering is only temporary, however, as these films ultimately envisage the eradication of the foreign body from the national landscape.<sup>24</sup>

### Queer migrant relationality and affect

Let us return to the primary question of the asylum process, for migrants and refugees are, of course, never disembodied actors, and, as Fortier well states, at border crossings they *feel* the border materially as well as existentially (see Fortier 2006). The global detention and deportation regimes inflict upon LGBTIQ+ migrants in particular a permanent state of crisis. In a study of the socio-legal production of queer migrant deportability and crisis in the context of political asylum, Lewis has shown how gender and sexuality, along with race, class, nationality, and geopolitical location, produce particular migrants as deportable subjects, and how the historically specific asylum regimes transform LGBTIQ+ migrants into detainable and deportable (and ultimately disposable) subjects. State immigration controls, she forcefully argues, are sites of legalised structural violence by which queer migrants of colour in particular are differentially deprived of the resources needed to make credible asylum claims (see Lewis 2019b). The psychic forms of violence and dispossession that repeated exposure to deportability produces condemn LGBTIQ+ migrants to a state of psychic and emotional crisis and lack of mental well-being, leaving them permanently vulnerable to detention (indefinite in the case of the UK where over 1,000 queer migrants are placed in detention every year) and deportation (at any moment), even in some cases death.<sup>25</sup> As Pepsi puts it dramatically in *Shelter: Farewell to Eden*, 'You have to flow, you have to follow the wave, because if you don't, you die'.

Yet if queer migrants are clearly objectified and victimised by European detention and asylum processes, they may also be regarded as agentic subjects with a measure of influence over the border spaces through which they move and the processes of their reception. Sudeep Dasgupta has explored how global space is itself *queered* when sexual asylum law intersects with the testimony of LGBTIQ+ applicants. Analysing the legal interpretation (or reading) of asylum seekers' speech in specific court cases in different countries, Dasgupta argues that while heteronormative understandings of the tripartite relation between biological sex, cultural notions of gender, and sexual desire restrict access to refuge in sexual and gendered asylum cases, the application of the law also destabilises these heteronormative understandings and opens up such restrictive definitions of sexuality and gender

(see Dasgupta 2019b). That is, ‘the hetero/homo and male/female oppositions that undergird sexual asylum cases are both reinforced *and* reworked’ (Dasgupta 2019b: 99; original emphasis). Dasgupta elucidates this double movement:

The dialectic of sexual normalisation and deregulation in cases of sexual and gender asylum is exacerbated by the protocols of reading (by the law) which demand a *linear narrative* of sexual identity from the asylum seeker. An exposition of sexual identity assumes an essential and stable form of gender identity and sexual desire whose gradual realisation is narrativised teleologically, such that at the time of demanding sexual asylum a clear, non-contradictory and fully realised sexual and gender identity has been formed. . . . By reading *for* such narrative evidence of sexual identity, the law is unable to countenance the decentred, ambivalent and contradictory forms through which sexual desire is *lived* by asylum seekers.

(Dasgupta 2019b: 87; original emphasis)<sup>26</sup>

Hence, the stability of sexual identity is precisely queered when the renderings of unstable sexual desire in asylum seekers’ speech intersect with the reading strategies by the law which attempt to convert them into clear, ‘straightforward’ narratives of sexual identity. Moreover, if, in such cases, gays, lesbians and transpersons become the objects of law, they also become agents in the transformation of law, since the writing of the sexual subject into case judgements striates the global space produced by bodies on the move.

What Dasgupta is ultimately suggesting here is that the unconventional trajectories of individual sexual desire narrativised by mobile bodies produce global space queerly through the experience of forced displacement. Sexual asylum cases, he concludes persuasively,

demonstrate that asylum seekers are individuals who are both subject to the state while also capable of exposing the limitations of the law and altering their relation to the state in transformative ways. . . . The asylum seeker’s body configures the global into the national through international law and *deranges* conventional understandings of both sexual identity and cultural difference.

(Dasgupta 2019b: 99–100) (my emphasis)

For these reasons, queer asylum seekers need also to be viewed as at once receptive and dynamic global agents, with the potential to reframe and transform the official script of European migration. Put differently, every attempted legal queer crossing of the border into Europe may serve to queer the border itself in subtle yet profound and far-reaching ways.



Such an exciting material and theoretical extension of the ‘sensuous economy of migration’ (Fortier 2006) requires us to attend more urgently to the concrete lived realities of queer migrants and the inherently relational nature of migration and mobility. In fact, despite recent media interest in the displacement of Syrian LGBTIQ+ migrants in Turkey,<sup>27</sup> the embodied experience of queer migration to Europe has rarely been figured in terms of the specific challenges LGBTIQ+ migrants encounter when navigating state immigration and asylum bureaucracies linked to gendered, racial, and class-based norms of sexual citizenship. Cinema, however, as a medium for tracking at micro-level, and in graphic close-up, the voluntary and involuntary visual, aural, haptic traces of emotion and affect in and through time, offers a unique means for conveying the deep scars (physical, psychological, emotional) of queer migrant lives under the permanent strains of credibility and deportability.

We see this process beautifully at work in a string of recent short dramas which establish queer, relational, ‘migratory settings’, a term for articulating the differentiated figuration of the migrant in shifting relation to others within an inclusive, replotted social space (see Dasgupta 2008). In *Mukwano* (2016, Denmark, dir. Cecile McNair), a Ugandan lesbian asylum seeker, Mary Kabufufu (Wankjiku Victoria Seest), facing her uncertain final interview at the Refugee Board, realises that she has overlooked a clue that might lead her to her girlfriend who disappeared during their escape from Africa to Denmark. Already in a highly precarious situation, desolate and bereft, Mary has to translate her sexuality in order to become ‘readable’ and ‘prove’ her cause (i.e., that she truly loved her girlfriend) while negotiating accepted Danish codes of femininity (not to appear weak, but also not too aggressive). The dreadful emotional pressure and cultural anxiety this creates for her is calmly and sensitively captured by an unflinching camera. The mental scars of queer migrant vulnerability are also movingly revealed in *Crypsis* (2019, UK, dir. Christopher McGill), based directly on accounts of African LGBTIQ+ refugees, where, during his asylum interview, Ayo (David Souk) is forced repeatedly to revisit in his mind the traumatic events that led to him flee his homeland for a new life in Scotland. The cold, clinical space of the interview room provides a contrast to the second part of the film where, later that evening, Ayo enters the queer underground scene of Glasgow in a bid to obtain the required ‘evidence’ of his sexuality, but where again, amidst the alienating chaos of strobe lights and dancing crowds, he relives his unremitting emotional pain etched in the very pores of his skin. Finally, in *Scar Tissue* (2017, Netherlands, dir. Nish Gera), a gay Syrian refugee, Sami (Noah Valentyn), housed in an ‘*asiel*’ in Amsterdam, meets a local white guy, Johan, at a bar and goes home with him. On the way, they encounter a homeless Syrian refugee (Bashir) who asks for a cigarette and then calls them ‘faggots’. Both refugees are homeless in their own ways – Sami culturally and emotionally, Bashir literally – and the film encapsulates

the status of LGBTIQ+ homeless people as internally displaced, voiceless and marginalised people within a larger social and national context where the gay community is generally well integrated. Yet at the same time, *Scar Tissue* also directly challenges what Fadi Saleh has caustically termed the figure of ‘the suffering Syrian gay refugee’ constructed and institutionalised by Western media and humanitarian agencies, which reduces the differences and complexities of Syrian queer and trans histories to a queer/humanitarian visibility paradigm.<sup>28</sup>

Crossing the borders of relationality in the filmic present in order to explore the multiple physical and psychological stresses on the queer body during the asylum and detention processes, *Mukwano*, *Crypsis*, and *Scar Tissue* fit into a larger pattern of European films portraying the day-to-day transitional experience of migration, where the focus is directly on the physical body (fly-on-the-wall documentaries like *La Permanence/On Call* (2016, France, dir. Alice Diop) showing migrants receiving rare medical care, or visceral dramas such as *Une Saison en France/A Season in France* (2017, France, dir. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun) laying bare the effects of insecurity and enforced immobility). What distinguishes migration films exploring specifically queer physical and mental embodiment, however, is the attention given to self-representation and performativity as part of an individual migratory project combining desired and imagined subjectivities. *Samira* (2013, UK/France), a 28-minute two-screen installation by filmmaker and sociologist Nicola Mai, is a staged, ethnographic account (or ‘ethnofiction’) of the real life history of Karim, an Algerian man selling sex at night in Marseille as a glamorous transvestite (Samira) after having already obtained asylum in France as a transgender woman, yet who now wishes to return to Algeria as the male head of the family. Karim/Samira’s frank and uncompromising story, which Mai amplifies in parts in order to universalise it, is performed entirely by actors, with Mai himself present within the frame as ‘the anthropologist’ and gay witness. *Samira* highlights how, within the present neoliberal structures of sexual humanitarianism and protection which aim also to limit access to the labour market in the global North, migrants selling sex are obliged to represent their biographies and experiences in accordance with stereotypical canons of victimhood and suffering in order to have their rights recognised and avoid deportation. The film accurately illustrates how people’s capacity to act is expressed through decisions that are always embedded within a contextual and relational dynamics (including sociocultural, economic and historical factors) rather than according to abstract and ethnocentric notions of choice (Mai 2018: xiv).<sup>29</sup>

Yet queer migrant embodiment and relationality may also be found in European feature films that are not ostensibly queer at all and do not even present queer characters, but where the migrant body in emotional turmoil is pictured in such intensive and animate close-up that it opens up masculinity to forms of homoeroticism that directly implicate the viewer. One such is *Charmøren/The Charmer* (2017, Denmark/Sweden), a subtly engrossing, psychologically charged drama about an Iranian refugee in Denmark, directed by Milad Alami, himself an Iranian former refugee to Denmark

now living in Sweden. Faced with deportation unless he can settle down with a Danish partner, the protagonist Esmail (Ardalan Esmaili), living in a hostel for immigrant men and working as a furniture mover, chances his luck for immigration status by seducing local women for sex and ultimately a visa. His courtships of convenience and cultivated performance of smooth, uncomplicated masculinity rely on his costume – one dark blazer and a white dress-shirt. Esmail becomes an object of acute scrutiny, both for those he meets and for the camera: there is an almost obsessive focus on his shirtless, hairy chest and nipples (he is described by an older rival Danish male seducer Lars at the high-class Copenhagen singles bar they both operate in as having ‘exotic’ good looks). Such visual fascination is increased by the sense of Esmail’s inner torment: a father with family in Iran and carrying unspoken knowledge and hidden secrets (in the film’s prologue he experiences at close hand the suicide of a disturbed ‘lover’, later disclosed as the wife of Lars who then becomes his stalker), he feels perpetually blocked from doing what he would most like. Weeping at times like a lost boy, his very body appears haunted and traumatised, the pressures of transactional intimacy pushing him eventually to a form of nervous breakdown. He remains to the end a mystery, always *elsewhere* and a stranger to everyone, even himself, in a morally elusive, fluid blur, figured by the blue swimming pool he plays at drowning in under the benign, amused gaze of his Danish co-worker.

*Charmøren/The Charmer* places the viewer in the ambivalent and sensuous realm of queer impressions, or what Jason Hartford has aptly called



Figure 1.3 Esmail (Ardalan Esmaili) weighing up his options in the bar in *Charmøren/The Charmer* (2017)

Source: *Charmøren/The Charmer* (2017), directed by Milad Alami © Good Company Films, and Blaq Out (2018).

the ‘implicitly queer’ to account for cinematic intimations of queerness (see Hartford 2017). Such is the film’s discreet, unavowed, even teasing use of bodily intimacy and physicality that when Esmail is told by an Iranian-Danish woman (Sara) to penetrate her anally, and his body is promptly displayed from behind for the viewer’s gaze, this act may even be construed as a sublimated form of gay sex. Indeed, in its stylised respatialising and homoeroticising of the desiring, ‘straight’, migrant figure performing in a foreign language and constantly code-switching, *Charmøren/The Charmer* offers a potential queering of standard perceptions about Danish society and culture, while at the same raising underlying issues about intentionality and spectatorial address. In short, like the uninhibitedly queer shorts mentioned, this more opaque and nebulous work poses vital aesthetic and ethical questions about embodied subjectivity and agency while also pointing to possible new queer migrant forms of homosociality and kinship.

### For a transborder aesthetics

To bring together the various strands of this introductory chapter: *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* seeks to do critical justice to the rich panoply of recent European films and works of television capturing in compelling and often daring ways the present-day lives and experiences of LGBTIQ+ migrants and refugees. Even if sometimes highly ambivalent or contentious, these impressively diverse representations of the embodied figure of the digitally connected queer migrant constitute a major, new repertoire of queer subjectivities and potentialities. At stake ethically and politically is the elaboration of a fully sentient and desiring queer migrant/refugee subject and the formulation of a new, queer, migrant consciousness that directly counters the homonationalist, xenophobic, and homo/trans-phobic representation of the ‘migrant to Europe’ figure rooted in the toxic binaries of othering (the good vs. bad migrant, host vs. guest, indigenous vs. foreigner). Queer migrants and refugees are to be celebrated as global *shifters* in a continuous, transcultural process with important ethical and political, aesthetic and philosophical, implications, ranging from issues of human rights and citizenship to more existential areas such as subjective identity and gender fluidity. To approach sexual migration as a *mise en scène* of the queer subject negotiating new forms of encounter and intimacy across race and gender, language and culture, class and generation, is also to conceive of new forms of human interrelations and exchange – not only new forms of masculinity, femininity, and queer and transsexual identity, but also new manifestations of sociality and receptivity, friendship and solidarity.

Yet as we have seen, the study of LGBTIQ+ migrants and refugees in European cinema involves analysing not just their material depiction, but also how the migrant figure itself *queers* universals of identity like ‘Europe’ and ‘Europeanness’. Queer migrants and refugees on screen present new,

transformative configurations and relationalities (understood as sets of relations across real and imaginary borders between self and other, citizen and migrant), thus providing the basis for new forms of queer cosmopolitanism that serve to refigure straight, idealising notions of Europe and 'European man'. By revealing how European films about migrants and refugees can both disrupt the heteronormative temporality and presuppositions of migration while also denaturalising and dismantling fixed certainties and hierarchies (the patrolled borders of gender and sexuality, nationhood and citizenship), *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* will enable the reader to move decisively beyond standard European protocols, for example, of national belonging based on the model of the family.

The volume is organised thematically into three main parts that serve as a set of interrelated and overlapping critical tensions: 'Trans/migration of Bodies and Borders'; 'Refuge, (non-)hospitality, and (anti-)utopia'; 'Space, belonging, and (anti-)sociality'. These three distinct paths of enquiry correspond broadly to the key modalities of the queer migrant and refugee experience we have delineated: the physical movement across borders; the political request for refuge and asylum; and the existential search to belong while in limbo between migrant and immigrant status. A structural balance is struck between empirically based and more theoretical and speculative essays, and together the following 14 chapters by both new and established voices illustrate the immense range of critical approaches towards sexual migration. The relational, nonhierarchical composition of the collection is evident also in the fact that although some contributors may occasionally engage with the same primary material, they do so from often markedly different perspectives and with different theoretical objectives. Moreover, by engaging with all corners of the European region – from Ireland to Israel, Greece to Sweden, Spain to Hungary – *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* resolutely avoids the traditional focus on the 'prestige' Western European nation-states. It respects the fact that migration is, by its very nature, a mobile construct, and that many of the films discussed cross national borders by virtue not only of their location but also of their co-production and co-funding.

While the volume strives fully to contextualise individual works within the specific contexts of countries with different policies on queer migration and contrasting social, cultural, and political attitudes to homosexuality and LGBTIQ+ rights, it does not aspire to be an all-encompassing comparative survey. Indeed, while broadly located at the confluence of migration studies, gender and queer studies, European and transnational film studies, philosophy and aesthetics, it possesses no underlying ambition to establish a critical consensus. Rather, by drawing on the pioneering insights of scholars in migratory studies and aesthetics working not just in European but also in global migratory contexts (for example, Gorman-Murray 2007 and 2009 on 'intimate mobilities' and migrant masculinities, Al-Samman and El-Ariss 2013 on queer affects), *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European*

*Cinema* invites the reader to participate in new and original interdisciplinary debates and conversations about migration in contemporary European film and culture that both redefine our understanding of queer and migration cinema, and recalibrate the borders of migration studies in queer terms. Such breaching of strict disciplinary borders exemplifies the book's ethical imperative to problematise and undermine all notions of fixed borders and boundaries (national, aesthetic, formal, generic, sexual). By pursuing bold, migrant lines of theoretical flight, the collection will serve to showcase how European cinema is now redefining and reinventing itself as a 21st-century form of transnational cinema through a continuous queering and transmigration of forms, styles, and genres that encourage new mobilities of thought and consciousness, and, in turn, new types of enlightened critical viewer and reader.

The fifth and final section of the volume comprises an extended interview with the influential theorist and practitioner of queer European migratory cinema, Sudeep Dasgupta, whose work we have already referred to. As well as a leading figure in queer/migrant studies, Dasgupta is co-curator and programmer of the Dutch International Queer and Migrant Film Festival. In 'Curating queer migrant cinema', he talks in enlightening detail not only about the selection process and criteria for the annual festival, but also about the often fraught relations between lived, queer migrant experience and theoretical critique. Addressing some of the key themes running throughout the volume, notably the value of the aesthetic in rendering the relational experience of migration, he also considers his own personal journey and location and how these have informed his critical work and intellectual project, including the particular paradoxes of the Dutch situation – an ultra-progressive and gay-friendly territory with a proud self-image as a tolerant 'guiding nation' (*gidsland*), yet where the faultlines of homonationalism are now acutely visible.

Attending to the sounds and images of queer mobility and working the fertile seams of the queer/migrant relation, *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* aims ultimately to reveal how aesthetic movements and tensions within filmic texts are conducive to relational cinematic thinking that is arguably always *migrant*. A 'transborder' aesthetics is collectively proposed whereby films become transborder experiences stimulating new intersubjective contact zones between viewer and character, the work and the medium. Indeed, the volume will show how the screen can itself become a kind of borderspace, that is, a shifting site of experimentation and conceptual border-crossing (*trans*) at once open and fluid, porous and provisional, where change and identity may be continually negotiated and reconfigured and artificial boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (of visibility vs. invisibility, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them') directly contested. Queer migration reveals itself in such films as a radical state of 'migrancy', that is, a form of transnational, relational, queer being – or better: a 'becoming queer' *beyond borders* (geographical, political, cultural,

ideological, aesthetic, existential) – generating new, mobile, contingent, still-to-be-articulated and fleshed-out queer identities that resist precisely any simple notion of identity or selfhood. How the creation of these nascent, floating forms of ‘transmigratory’ being – glimpsed in exhilarating erotic detail in a film like the aforementioned *A Moment in the Reeds* – may be theorised, and whether they can, and even should be, mobilised politically as a tool of resistance in the neoliberal condition of increasing precarity and far-right nationalist and populist push-back, will be one of the book’s prime concerns. For at what point does the aesthetic, which assumes throughout these pages a preeminently queer, relational mode, keel over and become frozen as the political, hence potentially non- or anti-aesthetic? How, in short, is one critically to prevent a queer aesthetics of migration from congealing and cancelling itself out as a fixed, institutionalised, ‘straight’ form of political resistance? *Queering the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema* starts and ends on this urgent note of critical enquiry.

## Notes

- 1 There is no one simple definition of ‘migrant’. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), a ‘migrant’ is fundamentally different from a ‘refugee’, for whilst refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom, ‘migrant’ describes any person who moves, usually across an international border, to join family members already abroad, to search for a livelihood, to escape a natural disaster, ‘or for a range of other purposes’ (see the definition of ‘migrant’ in the *UNHCR Emergency Handbook*: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/250459/migrant-definition> (accessed 22 April 2019)). Moreover, refugees are defined and protected in international law, starting historically with the 1951 Refugee Convention where the term ‘refugee’ applies to anyone who, ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’. Yet because refugees and migrants often employ the same routes, modes of transport, and networks, the movements of both refugees and migrants are commonly referred to as ‘mixed movements’. And just like ‘irregular’ migrants who have settled without authorisation, refugees also face well-founded fears of persecution and unprotected rights. Hence, if the UNHCR and other agencies have sought to distinguish the different categories of person in mixed migratory movements in order to apply the appropriate framework of rights, responsibilities and protection, they have done so on the basis that improved human rights protection for migrants will also have a positive effect on refugees who move in mixed migratory flows, and vice versa. It is precisely due to the blurring of such definitions that both terms will be used in this volume according to context and authorial intention, which may prove as much rhetorical as legal or political.
- 2 According to the 2016 report on state-sponsored homophobia by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), 78 countries in the world still criminalise people based on their sexual orientation, and five apply the death penalty to such cases. As of 2019, only 28 countries worldwide recognise same-sex marriages.
- 3 A major report published in March 2017 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights revealed that only a few EU member-states have specific

- national guidelines for interviewing LGBTIQ+ persons and there is a general lack of adequate training and provision at all stages of the process. See <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/march-monthly-migration-focus-lgbti>.
- 4 See Grierson (2019). In 2018, the Home Office refused 970 claims from LGBTIQ+ nationals of countries where same-sex acts were criminalised, down from 1,096 in 2017 and 1,043 in 2016.
  - 5 See also Carlos Motta's *The Crossing* (2017, Netherlands), an immersive film installation comprising 11 short, harrowing, video portraits and confessionals by LGBTIQ+ migrants, including a transgender woman living in Iraq, who speak devastatingly of the physical brutalities launched against queer refugees seeking asylum.
  - 6 This first-person narrative mode – a virtual ethical 'ideal' within migration cinema – has been attempted in a number of ways. The television documentary *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (2016–17, UK), a participatory project produced by the BBC, assembles footage shot by refugees filming their journeys on mobile phones (see Bennett 2018). The controversial *Les Sauteurs/Those Who Jump* (2016, Denmark, co-dir. Abou Bakar Sidibé, Moritz Siebert and Estephan Wagner) presents African migration to Europe 'live' from the subjective point of view of a young Malian called Abou Bakar Sidibé, who documents with a video camera the extreme living conditions endured by himself and fellow migrants living hand-by-mouth in illegal, makeshift camps on Mount Guru in Morocco, on the border of the Spanish coastal enclave of Melilla (see Williams 2019: 211–13 for detailed analysis of the film and the issues of personal manipulation raised by its Danish producers who provided the equipment and edited it). Similar issues affect *Revenir* (2018, France), co-directed by David Fedele and Kumut Imesh, although this is a far more (self-)interrogative documentary that directly challenges the audience to consider who has the right to tell a migrant's story. Part road-trip, part memoir, part journalistic investigation, and presented by Fedele as a unique collaboration and experiment between filmmaker and refugee, *Revenir* follows a refugee from Ivory Coast now living in France (Imesh) as he returns alone to the African continent and attempts to retrace the same journey that he took ten years before when forced to flee civil war in his country. As with the set-up of *Les Sauteurs/Those Who Jump*, however, it is the non-white (re)migrant who risks danger here (including two weeks in jail and eventual arrest and deportation) in order to provide the precious footage.
  - 7 The scholarship on European migratory and diasporic cinema is vast. See, for example, Berghahn and Sternberg 2010, a landmark volume focused mainly on themes of diaspora and assimilation; Donald (2018), a highly specific study of children addressing world cinema in general terms; Loshitzky (2010), an important collection on migration and immigration but with nothing specifically on queer issues; Guha (2015), focused on the urban (im)migrant experience and extremely selective in its choice of films (including 1960s cinema) with no exploration of queer themes; Bayraktar (2016), a crucial interdisciplinary study that offers an excellent springboard for exploring migration and cross-border mobilities in the New Europe in contemporary film and art since the 1990s, although it does not engage at all with queer migration or migrancy despite mention of certain gay-themed works by immigrant filmmakers such as Ayşe Polat and the openly queer Turkish-German director, Kutluğ Ataman; Rungis (2016), a study of otherness in general and primarily about immigrants already settled; Ballesteros (2015), a thematically arranged book that touches on migration, but whose main focus is on immigration and diaspora, with only one short chapter devoted to queer immigration cinema; Abderrezak (2016), a noteworthy volume on migration from North Africa to Europe in European film but lacking any coverage of gay/queer themes; Nathan (2017) specifically on Italian migration cinema; Guillén



Marin (2018) on migrants in contemporary Spanish cinema, which analyses the extent to which Spanish films challenge forms of exclusion and represent ethnicity in a space that includes some and excludes others (she refers to 'contrasted masculinities'); Mendes and Sundholm (2018) featuring articles on documentaries dealing with borders to 'Fortress Europe' (specifically Ceuta, Melilla, and Barcelona) and mediating migration (by Josetxo Cerdán), film workshops, new cosmopolitan approaches to cinema, borderscapes and the cinematic imaginary (including Vicente Rodríguez-Ortega on digital technology), aesthetic imperfection, and political filmmaking in the current era of uneven globalisation. There have also been a host of important articles and chapters in other volumes and journals, including Castro (2019) on new refugee documentaries and carceral humanitarianism; Capussotti (2012) on migration cinema set in Spain and Italy; Betts (2009) on the aesthetics of European integration in migrant cinema; Hagener (2018) on migration and refugees in German cinema; Ponzanesi (2011) on migrant cinema in Europe and the politics of encounter (including reference to *Unveiled/Fremde Haut* in terms of transsexual and transnational politics); Celik Rappas and Phillis (2018) on encounters with undocumented migrants in contemporary European cinema; Previtali (2018) on representations of migratory space in contemporary Italian cinema; and Marciniak and Bennett (2018) on transnational encounters and foreignness in cinema. Finally, numerous articles on European cinema have been published in the major journal on migration, *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*.

- 8 A new set of proposals for the reform of the CEAS was put forward in 2016 by the European Commission, and they affect SOGI asylum claims in precise and acute ways. The Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Claims of Asylum (SOGICA) project, funded by the European Research Council and based at the University of Sussex (UK), is currently calling for policymakers to implement these recommendations in order to render the CEAS fairer for SOGI asylum seekers. See SOGI guidelines (with links to country case laws by the UNHCR): [www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/practitioners-guide-series-2016-eng.pdf](http://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/practitioners-guide-series-2016-eng.pdf) (accessed 23 April 2019); [www.refworld.org/sogi.html](http://www.refworld.org/sogi.html) (accessed 23 April 2019).
- 9 The problems pertaining to SOGI refugee asylum have given rise to a growing host of studies and works of reference in the field of politics of queer migration and asylum studies, most notably Giametta (2017) on the sexual politics of asylum in the UK asylum system, Spijkerboer (2013) on the chief legal issues arising in relation to LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum (including the requirement they seek state protection against violence even when they originate from countries where sexual orientation or gender identity is criminalised or where the authorities are homophobic), and Stella et al. (2016) on sexuality, sexual citizenship and belonging, which engages with notions of sexual nationalism and the construction of Western European nations as exceptional in terms of attitudes towards sexual and gender equality vis-à-vis an uncivilised, racialised other. The proliferation of queer migration and asylum studies reflects also the rise in queer migration refugee and asylum projects and conferences in Europe, not only SOGICA but also the LGBTQ Migration and Asylum Project (based at University College London and led by Richard C.M. Mole); the EPSILON Project (co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union); the EHRC-funded SEXHUM project (Sexual Humanitarianism: Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking) based at Kingston University (UK) and Aix-Marseille University (LAMES – Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology); and, further afield, the global Queer Migration Network (<https://queermigration.com>) based at the University of Texas-Austin.
- 10 See [www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/30/eu-should-follow-un-guidelines-lgbt-asylum-seekers](http://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/30/eu-should-follow-un-guidelines-lgbt-asylum-seekers). See also an important article 2019 article in *The Guardian* about prejudiced questions and essentialist assumptions about gay people made by UK

immigration judges, resulting in some cases in the outright rejection of queer asylum claims: [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/21/judge-rejected-asylum-seeker-who-did-not-have-gay-demeanour](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/21/judge-rejected-asylum-seeker-who-did-not-have-gay-demeanour) (accessed 22 August 2019).

- 11 This fast-developing field includes Chávez (2013), which explores how queerness and immigration are linked in the nation-state's construction of political belonging and exclusion, with the coalitional possibility of radical interactionality and coalitional politics in the American context (especially in the case of the US-Mexico border); Cotten (2012), an edited volume exploring transsexual citizenship, radicalised bodies, and trans aesthetics, and which proposes new 'transectionalities' by mapping multiple migrations and queer (re)territorialisations beyond transgender-based identity politics; and Haritaworn and Posocco (2014), which attends to the symbiotic co-constitution of queer subjects folded into life, and queerly abjected, racialised populations marked for death. The latter develops ideas Kuntsman proposed about nationalism, on-line sociality, and queer migranhood in Kuntsman (2009), based on an ethnographic study of Russian-speaking queer immigrants in Israel/Palestine and also in cyberspace, which examines the complicity of queerness with violent regimes of colonialism and war, and the ambivalence of immigrant belonging at the intersection of marginality and privilege. Special journal issues devoted to queer migration include *GLQ* 14:2–3 (2008) ('Queer/Migration'); *Mobilities* 4:3 (2009) ('Love, Sexuality and Migration: Mapping the Issue(s)'); *Sexualities* 17:8 (2014) ('Queer Migration, Asylum, and Displacement'); and *New Cinemas* 6:3 (2009) ('Queering Migration on European Screen'). Among notable general comparative studies of migration, migrant protest, and migratory aesthetics are the following: Marciniak and Tyler (2014), an edited volume teasing out the relations between aesthetics and migrant/immigrant protest, political mobilisation by irregular migrants and pro-migrant activists, migrant life in the global North, and shifting practices of boundary making and boundary taking; Moslund et al. (2015), which addresses issues of history, memory and temporality in relation to migration, such as the influence of migration on historical narratives of national identity, the representation of memorials, and the problems of incorporating migrant stories and cultural memories into 'national heritage' and histories; and Bal and Hernández-Navarro (2011), which considers from multiple angles the spaces where art events occur as 'political spaces', and how such spaces host events of disagreements in migratory culture. For useful, wide-ranging, interdisciplinary introductions to migration theory and aesthetics, see Brettell and Hollifield (2015) and Dogramaci and Mersmann (2019).
- 12 Geert Wilders, leader of the nativist populist *Party for Freedom* (PVV), has championed the idea of an 'illiberal democracy' while pursuing fiercely anti-Islam and anti-migrant policies. Like most populist radical-right parties, the PVV is authoritarian, hostile to elites, and fiercely xenophobic, especially towards Muslims, while claiming to be defending certain liberal values from Islamic tyranny, notably freedom of speech, women's rights, gender equality, and gay rights. By defending the latter, Wilders (not gay himself) is not only depicting Islamic culture as intolerant, sexist, and homophobic, but also claiming the superiority of a Dutch national identity that is increasingly intertwined with secularism. He even offered a resolution in Parliament to allow gay soldiers to wear their military outfit in a gay parade – an embrace of progressive values that has become almost a requirement for the electoral success of conservative parties in the highly secularised Dutch context. The particular case of Dutch homonationalism will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 16.
- 13 During the New Year's Eve celebrations there were 22 alleged rapes in Cologne, two alleged rapes in Hamburg, and numerous thefts throughout Germany, mainly in the centre of Cologne. For a discussion of these events, see Žižek (2016) which

argues that the refugee crisis also presents a unique opportunity for Europe to redefine itself by confronting difficult questions (notably the double ideological blackmail of opening 'our' doors as widely as possible, or trying to pull up the drawbridge) and by insisting on the global solidarity of the exploited and the oppressed.

- 14 The pairing of homonationalism with 'pinkwashing', as observed in the way the State of Israel proclaims to defend and advocate gay rights in order to justify the occupation of Palestine, will be discussed in Chapter 9.
- 15 See, for instance, the 2015 French crime drama *Dheepan* (dir. Jacques Audiard), which presents three Sri Lankan refugees fleeing war-torn Sri Lanka in order to paint the migrant as a sign of national precarity and instrument of social disturbance.
- 16 See films like *Waalo Fendo/Where The Earth Freezes* (1997, Switzerland, dir. Mohammed Soudani), which portrays the experience of undocumented workers both in Senegal and Italy who are doomed to disappear from society (Hoffmann 2010: 56) while obligated to foster an image or illusion of success for family left behind; and Gianfranco Rosi's earnest art documentary *Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* (2016, Italy/France), a hybrid of storytelling and captured raw footage of the rescue of African migrants, which records daily life on Lampedusa where the inhabitants live in the constant shadow of the processing of immigrants off and on its shores. The logic of the enforced disappearing act of the migrant figure is taken to its natural conclusion in *Cose dell'altro mondo/Things from Another World* (2011, Italy, dir. Francesco Patierno), a comedy where a racist, anti-immigrant firm manager, by dint of invoking the help of God to rid Veneto of its immigrants, sees the miracle finally happen: one morning they have all disappeared.
- 17 Dramas like *Manpower* (2014, Israel/France, dir. Noam Kaplan), where Israeli police strong-arm undesirable African refugees and assorted émigrés (played by actual local immigrants) to leave the country; *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns/Welcome to Germany* (2016, Germany, dir. Simon Verhoeven), a provocative mainstream comedy about a rich German family taking in a Nigerian refugee, which allows its domestic audience to chuckle at how racist, xenophobic and all-around inhospitable Germans can be; *Stranger in Paradise* (2016, Netherlands, dir. Guido Hendrikx), a provocative, semi-staged documentary about how refugees are prepared for life in Europe, and how Europeans talk to, about, and down to, them; and *The Citizen* (2016, Hungary, dir. Roland Vranik), a descent into the Kafkaesque world of Hungarian bureaucracy through the eyes of a legally established, middle-aged refugee from Guinea-Bissau who is continually applying in vain for citizenship.
- 18 Film such as *De Nieuwe Wereld/The New World* (2013, Netherlands, dir. Jaap van Heusden), an instance of the subgenre of the airport migrant detention procedural, where a West African male asylum seeker enables an isolated, white, Dutch airport cleaner and single mother to rediscover her humanity and so 're-Europeanise' herself after first deriding and exoticising him in blatantly racist terms; and Laura Luchetti's *Fiore Gemello/Twin Flower* (2018, Italy), where a young male refugee and orphan from Côte d'Ivoire is on hand during his nomadic journey through Sardinia to help a white Italian girl, on the run from human traffickers and made literally mute by trauma, eventually regain her capacity for speech and love.
- 19 See, for instance, Philippe Lioret's earnest French drama *Welcome* (2009), about an Iraqi-Kurd teenager helped in Calais by a French swimming coach to swim to the UK – unsuccessfully as it turns out, although the Frenchman has at least done all he could while risking prosecution for helping migrants according to French immigration law L622-1 (the so-called 'Crime of Solidarity' which can

- entail imprisonment for five years and a fine of €30,000); and the magical realist comedy drama *Le Havre* (2011, Finland/France/Germany, dir. Aki Kaurismäki), where the port-side community of Le Havre rallies round to help a young clandestine African stowaway boy who suddenly arrives into Marcel Marx's simple life as a shoeshine. Other European narrative fiction films focusing on the moral and ethical questions raised by how Europeans receive and personally assist the migrant other, and how they prove their humanity in the process (often at a cost), include *Die Farbe des Ozeans/Color of The Ocean* (2011, Germany/Spain, dir. Maggie Peren), and *Terraferma* (2011, France/Italy, dir. Emanuele Crialesse).
- 20 Works such as *La Forteresse/The Fortress* (2008, Switzerland, dir. Fernand Melgar), a fly-on-the-wall account of life for asylum seekers in a secluded Swiss detention centre; and *The Purple Field* (2015, Palestine, dir. Nasri Hajjaj), a short following a 14-year-old Palestinian-Syrian boy as he flees war-torn Syria and waits for the Austrian government's response to his asylum application.
  - 21 Contrast this with the 2015 short film, *Rats That Eat Men* (UK, dir. Isobel Mascarenhas-Whitman), where a Ugandan lesbian refugee (Ritah) (Anna-Maria Nabirye), forced to flee a marriage of convenience, finds herself squatting a dilapidated London townhouse with a young, white (straight) Polish labourer (Alojzy) (Joseph Olivennes) on the run from his family. Because both characters are displaced and vulnerable in an equally alien setting, the conditions for the trope of the black migrant saviour for the indigenous white European do not occur. After initial suspicion on both sides, the two forge a provisional (and short-lived) bond of friendship based on mutual respect and support, honesty and good humour (a trained physiotherapist she even kneads his back). Such mutuality is emphasised by the fact that they are both filmed frontally in objective POV fashion within a shared frame.
  - 22 Four Arab-sounding names feature in the final credits, but these are linked to differently named characters and so cannot refer to the migrants who remain nameless and all but invisible – unlike Hockney's painting which is formally thanked (the film also reworks Jacques Deray's resolutely straight psychological thriller *La Piscine/The Swimming Pool* (1969, France/Italy)).
  - 23 See, for example, Ponzanesi and Colpani (2016), which shows how the experiences of colonialism and imperialism continue to be constitutive of European space and the very idea of Europe; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard (2013), which traces alternative models for solidarity and conviviality within present-day Europe; and Robins and Aksoy (2015), which draws on extensive empirical work on the lives of migrant Turks to argue persuasively that the recent shift in the critical agenda regarding migration and belonging (including new work in migratory aesthetics such as Bennett (2011) on relationality as a response to the limitations of identity politics) runs counter to unchanging national positions and the supranational stance of 'official' European policies and approaches towards migration and identity.
  - 24 Duncan examines films such as *L'Italiano/The Italian* (2002, Italy, dir. Ennio De Domenicis), *Passo a due/Pas de deux* (2005, Italy, dir. Andrea Barzini), and *Sai-mir* (2004, Italy, dir. Francesco Munzi), which reveal 'the emphatically unproductive nature of the sexual relations' migrant men have in Italian cinema, and the 'distance they stand from the heteronormative family' (Duncan 2009: 170).
  - 25 See also Mulhall (2014) on queer temporalities and the deportation regime; Weston (2008) on state security, queer embodiment, and the environmental aspects of prison migration; and Luibhéid (2008a) on sexuality, migration, and the shifting line between legal and illegal status.
  - 26 The sociologist Dany Carnassale provides one example of this often impossible demand: four male refugees from West Africa (two from Nigeria, two from Gambia) who attempt to gain asylum in Italy by describing and legitimating

a narrative about their male gay identity that does not necessarily correspond to the actual or potential persecutions they have endured in their countries on account of their sexual behaviour. See Carnassale (2016a).

- 27 See Taylor (2019) on the case of 15 Syrian queer refugees detained in Turkey and dangerously caught up in the UK asylum system.
- 28 See Saleh (2020). According to Saleh, Syrian queer and trans people become intelligible within a ‘hegemonic associative frame of queerness as *only* refugee-ness (and refugees who fled to the West, specifically)’ (Saleh 2020: 60; original emphasis). Moreover, naming the figure of ‘the suffering Syrian gay refugee’

has come to substitute for any real, contextual, and in-depth documentation and analysis of the historical, material, and socio-political conditions of queer and trans\* life as well as the particularities of queer suffering in Syria prior to and during the ongoing conflict.

(Saleh 2020: 51)

‘Ironically’, Saleh argues, ‘these prevailing narratives negatively affect LGBT refugees themselves because it benefits them only to the extent that they are able to reproduce very specific suffering narratives that decision-makers deem acceptable’ (Saleh 2020: 60). Another film that powerfully contests the ‘suffering Syrian gay refugee’ figure is the documentary *Mr Gay Syria* (2017, Turkey/Germany/Malta/France, dir. Ayşe Toprak), which follows two gay Syrian refugees – Hussein, a barber in Istanbul closeted from his family, and Mahmoud, a refugee in Berlin and founder of Syria’s LGBTIQ+ movement – as they attempt to rebuild their lives and organise together in Istanbul a Syrian heat of the Mr Gay World competition.

- 29 *Samira* forms part of the ‘Emborders’ art/science project about sexual humanitarianism, migrants and sex work and can be viewed on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/188230888>. Mai’s acclaimed 2018 book, *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work, and Humanitarian Borders*, synthesises theoretically personal and scientific reflection on his 20 years of research with migrants working in the sex industry.



Part I

# Trans/migration of bodies and borders





## 2 The ghostly queer migrant

### Queering time, place, and family in contemporary German cinema

*Leanne Dawson*<sup>1</sup>

In post-reunification German cinema, a large number of transcultural and transnational films have addressed marginality and otherness by showing relationships between Germans and migrants/foreigners. Many of these films focus on migrants who are LGBTQ+, and often for the queer migrant of colour there is a German ‘white saviour’ – a meagre attempt perhaps to make good the atrocities of the past under National Socialism. Moreover, I have identified a trend that these films often – literally or figuratively – include a character represented, in at least part of the narrative, as a ‘ghost’.<sup>2</sup> These themes are especially significant right now, when the normalisation and demonisation of both LGBTQ+ people and migrants is happening in large portions of the Western world where there is a supposed right and wrong way to be. LGB people who choose to assimilate are increasingly being sociopolitically normalised through same-sex marriage, adoption rights, etc., while trans people – especially those who do not pass as cis-gender – are being savagely attacked in both lived reality and the media. Likewise, the ‘good’ migrant (white, Western, from an affluent land) is welcomed, while those who do not fit these boxes are treated as subhuman.<sup>3</sup>

For Judith Butler, who argues that gender is learned and repeated so that it appears inherent, tracing differences in genders demonstrates that they are not natural but rather part of socialisation (see Butler 1990). Similarly, Nira Yuval-Davis asserts that ‘constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both “manhood” and “womanhood”’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 1), i.e. that there is a specific way to do masculinity or femininity depending upon geographical, temporal, and cultural location, and that doing these right is key to personal safety. Hence, ‘gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of the transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence’ (Butler 1990: 278). We continue to see this in hatred directed towards trans and non-binary people, which results in violence, linguistic and physical.

Butler’s work has demonstrated a marked shift post-9/11: from a focus on gender and sexuality to a consideration of other forms of liveable lives, precarity,

and de/humanisation, particularly in relation to migration and citizenship, while keeping the red thread of what constitutes the distinctively human life and what does not (Butler 2004a: 17). I argue that part of this is because of passing:

the misrecognition of a person as a member of a sociological group other than their own. . . . Critical and social understanding of passing started with ethnicity: examples include light-skinned Black people posing as white in the racially-segregated USA and Jews passing as 'Aryan' in Nazi Germany to escape persecution. The term has since become increasingly linked to sexuality and gender: used as shorthand for passing as straight with regard to gay men and lesbians. . . . It is also used by transgender people as a strategy either to avoid negative attention or punishment for their supposed gender transgressions or out of a belief that they should be read externally in line with what they consider to be their internal gender identity. By its very definition, when certain people 'pass', others 'fail' . . . and it is those who either cannot or choose not to pass, and therefore present a disruptive surface text, who have been most celebrated in queer theory, despite the fact that failing to pass can have serious socio-political consequences.

(Dawson 2018b: 87)

Passing can, of course, also be a matter of language: what we choose or are forced to say and/or stay silent about, as well as the voice that can betray where someone was raised or indicate perhaps that they were assigned an incorrect gender at birth. When we consider migration, gender, and sexuality, it is important to note how the gay migrant could be posed in opposition to the queer one. The former, often considered to be white, slightly older, and relatively wealthy, is normalised, while the latter betrays a greater otherness. Indeed, the queer migrant may demonstrate both a queer temporality and a break in gender performativity, perhaps having to occupy an in-between space or having to try to pass to occupy a position of greater power.

This chapter examines a range of identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella and how, whether passing or failing to pass, there is often a focus on liminality – positive and negative – and being geographically stuck and temporally trapped, or, in the case of the ghost, blurring the boundaries of temporality altogether. Jack Halberstam's *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) works with queer temporality, a significant trend in queer theory since the mid-2000s. He argues that queer uses of time and space develop, 'at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification' (Halberstam 2005: 1), and do not maintain the linearity and repetition of a normative life schedule: that is heteropatriarchy's fixation on the binary and futurity. This queer rethinking of time was influenced at the end of the twentieth century by the AIDS epidemic, when young, untimely deaths and the fear of a death sentence via sexual acts resulted in a 'constantly diminishing future', which 'creates a

new emphasis on the here, the present, the now' (Halberstam 2005: 2). Since then, both progress in healthcare and the aforementioned normalisation has resulted in a straighter time for some LGBT people. Queer time is the antithesis of the middle-class logic of reproduction and the desirability of a long life, and Halberstam makes clear that queerness has become compelling as a form of self-description owing to its potential to open up new life narratives. Here, 'queer' is being used beyond sexuality and/or gender, to describe non-normative lifestyles. For Halberstam, those with queer lifestyles include drug addicts and club kids who live life in 'rapid bursts' even if their gender and sexuality are heteronormative (Halberstam 2005: 4). Indeed, there is a focus on identities and locations considered out of time and place. For middle-class white people in the West, i.e., those with white privilege and socioeconomic buffers that can significantly aid a liveable and comfortable life (especially now that HIV responds well to medication), queer temporality is perhaps a hedonistic and more selfish anti-mainstream approach to living. However, for the poor – and a significant proportion of people of colour are poor – who often cannot invest in the future and for whom living in the here-and-now is their only option, and for those migrants trapped in the eternal present of holding centres and a lack of legal recognition, what can be theorised as queer temporalities may be more prevalent but certainly more problematic, in that they are frequently the result of restricted choice and negative – and sometimes very dangerous – sociopolitical situations.

In this chapter, I consider in turn four German transnational films where queerness, migration, and the spectre intersect – *Gespenster/Ghosts* (2005, Germany/France, dir. Christian Petzold); *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (2007, Germany, dir. Fatih Akin); *Ghosted* (2009, Germany/Taiwan, dir. Monika Treut); and *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* (2005, Germany/Austria, dir. Angelina Maccarone) – in order to examine queerness in relation to space, time, and the family. Each of the films features a key topos of LGBTQ+ representation throughout history: erasure. This is where, in art, history, literature, film, and even today's soap operas, an LGBTQ+ character is killed, often as a punishment for their supposed sexual and social transgression. These four particular films present dead or absent queer people who haunt the loved ones they leave behind: a child living in a Berlin orphanage who is possibly the daughter, alive or dead (the spectator is never allowed to be sure), of a bourgeois French couple, and who, along with her small-time criminal and homeless female lover, exists on the margins of society (*Gespenster/Ghosts*); a German woman who reappears to her mother as a ghost in Turkey, where she was killed when attempting to help her Turkish girlfriend seek asylum in Germany (*Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven*); the dead Taiwanese girlfriend of a German lesbian filmmaker, who reappears as a ghost to her partner and is also memorialised in the latter's work (*Ghosted*); and an Iranian lesbian who, after her asylum in Germany is denied, takes on the identity of an Iranian cisgender man who has taken his own life in a holding centre (*Fremde Haut/Unveiled*). The ghost is significant here with regard to queer temporality for past, present, and possibly future is collapsed into the site/

sight of the ghost which, I suggest, is a site/sight of queer temporality. Furthermore, three of these films have titles which highlight an after-life: either the spectre or heaven. While I have identified these queer migrant (non-horror) ghosts as a current trend, they inevitably carry echoes of the traditional horror figure of the vampire, a longstanding trope in queer and lesbian art across cultures, with films such as *Wir sind die Nacht/We Are the Night* (2010, Germany, dir. Dennis Gansel) and *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971, dir. Jesús Franco), a West German–Spanish horror film made in Turkey. Such vampirism is linked also to the notion of passing, which means passing as human.<sup>4</sup>

### *Gespenster/Ghosts*

*Gespenster* and, as we will see later, *Ghosted*, call attention to the pre-Brexit perceived lack of European borders. Unlike the other three films in this chapter, however, *Gespenster* does not feature the process of migration (*Auf der anderen Seite* shows the Turkish protagonist appear to enter Germany with no problems but then be detained as a paperless migrant, just like *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* deals with claims for asylum and refugee status) but does incorporate multiple other tropes, themes, and techniques used in transnational cinema. A Franco-German co-production, using both languages, about two aesthetically similar troubled teenagers with lonely, family-less lives, it forms part of Berlin School German director Christian Petzold's 'Ghost Trilogy' comprising *Die innere Sicherheit/The State I Am In* (2000, Germany) and *Yella* (2007, Germany).

Protagonists Nina, who has learning difficulties and lives in a children's home, and Toni, a homeless petty criminal, are on the edges of society and often figuratively invisible to those around them, although the Berlin of *Gespenster* is almost devoid of people and barely recognisable in terms of buildings and monuments – that is, reminders of the past – associated with it, making it simultaneously a liberating and monitored space (CCTV, children's home, mental hospital, maternal surveillance). Like Nina, Berlin has an identity imposed on it by foreigners: Nina's French 'parents'. Much like a Berlin without history, we learn very little about Nina and Toni's lives before the present day of the film. Nina is presented as possibly being Marie, the child of a bourgeois French couple, who was kidnapped outside a German supermarket years earlier. She is, therefore, not a migrant in the traditional sense, but one possible take on the film is that she is a foreigner growing up in a land as if she were a native. When Nina's 'mother', Françoise, is released from a mental hospital after trying to pick up another young girl she mistook for Marie and meets teenage Nina/Marie of the filmic present, we discover that Nina uncannily bears the same distinctive scar on her ankle and heart-shaped mole on her shoulder that Marie had as a child.

Nina does not only have a history imposed on her by her 'mother', but also by her new (girl)friend Toni, who takes her to a television casting and weaves a series of lies about their background for the producer. Toni then seduces



Figure 2.1 *Gespenster/Ghosts* (2005): Nina (Julia Hummer) discovers a heart-shaped mole exactly like that of the kidnapped child, Marie

Source: *Ghosts/Gespenster* (2005), directed by Christian Petzold © Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, and GoodMovies (2006).

and sleeps with Nina, perhaps for the voyeuristic gaze of the camera, the male producer, and the audience, before quickly cheating on her with him. Here, we do not have a typically feminine and glamorous form of femininity as we are accustomed to on the screen, in what feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey called ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’ (Mulvey 1975: 11), and what is usually seen in girl-on-girl pornography aimed at the cis-heterosexual male market as well as titillating ‘lesbian chic’ in mainstream film, which is another key trend in lesbian representation on-screen.

Indeed, Nina is presented in such a bland and unimposing way that she often seems to be a ghostly shadow of someone else’s imagination. In the penultimate sequence of the film, Françoise’s husband switches from French to German for the first and only time during the film to tell Nina that she cannot be Marie: ‘Marie ist tot’/Marie is dead’, with his patriarchal voice of the film perhaps expected to provide a solid explanation, considering the mixture of mental illness, learning difficulties, criminality, and lies rather misogynistically associated with the three female protagonists. This declaration, however, does not account for Nina/Marie’s uncanny physical markings and leads Nina, the living ghost, to seek Françoise’s wallet, previously stolen by Toni, from a rubbish bin. The contents that have been dumped in the trash include a series of age-progression pictures of Marie, and suspense mounts as Nina unfolds the sheet featuring four pictures: the final image shows Nina is indeed Marie’s exact aesthetic double.

Whether Nina is and always has been Nina or is French child Marie, alive or a – metaphorical or literal – ghost, it is clear that her white skin, being born and raised in Western Europe, whether France or Germany, and ability

to communicate in German as/like a native speaker, all afford her access to privilege that many people of colour in the films throughout this chapter do not have. Here, it is not her possible status as a French child living in another country, but rather her lifestyle in a children's home, apparently without family, and her learning difficulties that contribute towards her dehumanisation, which leads her to be mistreated and exploited and, ultimately, desperate to belong with Françoise or Toni. Significant here is the queer time and place of Nina's orphanage, Françoise's mental institution, and also Toni's lack of 'home', as well as the related poverty of both Nina and Toni, which is bound to their liminality as spectral figures, often looked through, rather than at, on the outskirts of society in a Berlin presented as a rather queer, characterless, unhomey place. This is compounded by the queer time of an eternal past for Françoise, who is so haunted by her kidnapped child that she cannot enjoy the present or look forward to the future, while Nina and Toni seem stuck in a present with little past and no apparent future.

### *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven*

Also part of a trilogy, this time by director, screenwriter, and producer Fatih Akin, born in Hamburg to parents of Turkish ethnicity, *Auf der anderen Seite* is billed as the second of his love, death, and the devil trilogy, which began with *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (2004, Germany/Turkey) and culminated in *The Cut* (2014, Germany/France/Italy/Russia/Poland/Canada/Turkey/Jordan). His triad of films is a response to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's BRD (Federal Republic of Germany) trilogy, which Akin nods to in many ways, including his use of Hannah Schygulla who was in a lesbian relationship in Fassbinder's *Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant/The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972, West Germany), and who, in *Auf der anderen Seite*, plays Susanne, the mother of a German woman in a same-sex relationship. Susanne's daughter Lotte dates a woman from Turkey, Ayten, who in Germany calls herself Gül because she is a migrant without papers. Queerness extends beyond sexuality, as the film's title focuses on what I suggest is a rather queer place and time: death and heaven/an afterlife. This continues elsewhere as the film cuts between Germany and Turkey (employing both languages alongside English), and there is a constant in-betweenness due to the heavy focus on transit. The triadic structure is maintained via the three intertitled sections: Yeter's Tod/Yeter's Death; Lotte's Tod/Lotte's Death; and *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (film title) (or 'On the Other Side' (literal translation)). There is a trend in most of the transnational lesbian films analysed here that can also be seen across transnational film more broadly: of doubling and crossing, relying extensively on transnational locations and spaces, including airports, seaports, and immigration controls, as a way of conveying what Hamid Naficy terms both the interconnectedness and liminality of life on the border (Naficy 2001), with plots revolving around narratives of immigration and exile and/or exploration and escape (see Ezra and Rowden 2006; Loshitzky 2006; Naficy 2001).

Transit is foregrounded from the outset as *Auf der anderen Seite* opens with what has been deemed the director's signature situation: a man, Najat, driving a car, near Turkey's Black Sea. The main body of the film is told in flashback form and sees it close by the sea with a circularity and corresponding non-linear/straight temporality taking us back to the beginning of narrative time and the end of narrated time. After the opening, the film cuts to Bremen, Germany, which is much more recognisable than the Berlin of *Gespenster*, as the camera follows Ali, a widower and retired *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) who we soon discover is Najat's father, through a red light district. He invites widow and fellow Turk living in Germany, Yeter, to move in with him. Employed as a sex worker in order to send money back to Ayten, her daughter in Istanbul, Yeter agrees. The second part begins with Ayten, who we learn is a radical Kurdish activist escaping a police raid in Turkey and fleeing to Hamburg, where she uses the false name Gül Korkmaz. She becomes her own *Doppelgänger*, recalling the doubling of French Marie/German Nina in *Gespenster*. She leaves her old name hovering like a ghost, which will create confusion and missed connections later in the film.

Recalling the queer temporality and dehumanisation of Petzold's film, although without the white privilege and access to the country's official language, homeless Ayten/Gül is shown sleeping at the German University where Najat works as a German literature professor. She is befriended by a student of English and Spanish, Lotte, who, in their only shared language, English (a tongue foreign to both), invites Gül to move into her home, then her bed. Arriving with little aside from the clothes on her person, Gül uses Lotte's money and possessions – similar to *Gespenster* where Toni is a vagrant with only one outfit and very few belongings. The protagonists in a lesbian relationship in this film are also devoid of the aesthetics and props that would make them visions 'to-be-looked-at', although two of the first things both Toni and Gül do is shower (linked to catharsis, and significant in relation to the abject), before donning their future girlfriends' clothes for a fresh start. By now, the viewer is aware that Ayten/Gül is Yeter's daughter, who sets out on a fruitless quest to be reunited with her – dead – mother. While it takes Gül some time to reveal her past as Ayten, Toni in *Gespenster* never discloses anything about herself aside from a turbulent relationship with an ex-boyfriend, so these characters are simultaneously of the present and presented as only having hope of a future through their same-sex relationships with others, locating them in a queer temporality.

When Gül/Ayten's asylum in Germany is denied later in the narrative, she is detained. Sarah Turnbull, in her work on migrants in detention centres, describes migrants awaiting decisions relating to asylum as being 'stuck' in an extended present without personal agency (see Turnbull 2016). They are therefore, I argue, trapped in a queer temporality. Gül/Ayten is then deported and jailed in Istanbul, so dead Yeter's lover and her daughter are imprisoned, recalling the doubling of institutions – the children's home and



Figure 2.2 *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (2007): lovers Ayten (Nurgül Yesilçay) and Lotte (Patrycia Ziolkowska) pictured in the detention centre where the former is being held

Source: *The Edge of Heaven/Auf der anderen Seite* (2007), directed by Fatih Akin © Anka Film and Artificial Eye (2007).

the mental hospital – of *Gespenster*. Here, then, queer temporality is linked to the character of Ayten/Gül and her having to give up her past while living in the present with little hope for the future because of her activism, denied asylum, and imprisonment, which is unlike the collapse of past, present, and future of the queer temporality of the ghost.

Lotte follows her partner to Turkey and is accidentally killed by children who steal her bag and use Gül/Ayten's gun. The third part of the film sees the remaining characters in Turkey. White German like her daughter, Susanne does not appear to have any concerns about her right to stay there for a longer period. Najat, who had first let a room in his Turkish home to Lotte, then rents it out to Lotte's mother, Susanne, who wishes to be closer to her daughter and who we find out had undertaken the same path as Lotte when she was young. On her first evening in her daughter's former bedroom, she reads Lotte's diary to find Lotte believed her mother 'sees herself in me' ('sieht sich selbst in mir'), again doubling the mother-child relationship. The following morning, Lotte appears to her mother in the bedroom as a ghost, when shot from the mother's point of view, but when this camera angle changes to show both the mother and the space she is looking at, there is no one in the space where her mother's eyes remain transfixed, implying it is her memory combined with imagination. Mothers in two of the films are, therefore, represented as seeing their daughters when others do not: Susanne in *Ghosted* and Françoise in *Gespenster*, who is institutionalised for 'seeing' her 'dead' daughter, tying Lotte's ghostliness to memory, specifically maternal memory, rather than a literal spectral appearance.



## *Ghosted*

Unlike the bodies of work of heterosexual men, Petzold and Akin, German lesbian feminist director Monika Treut repeatedly foregrounds queer subjects, desires, and themes throughout her oeuvre. She previously highlighted coming-out narratives, and it is the trail blazed by movements such as New German Cinema, Treut's filmic work as part of the New Queer Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, and the queer movement and queer theory that have allowed the focus of many stories, including several tales examined here, to shift from the sexuality of characters and an (often harrowing) coming-out narrative to more fluid, queer characters used to recount more complex stories, where other aspects of their identity and lifestyle, e.g. ethnicity and migration, are presented at the fore. The narrative feature *Ghosted* could be grouped as part of a Taiwanese trilogy incorporating Treut's two documentary films (2004, 2005) focusing on Taiwanese women. While Turkish-German work is commonplace because of *Gastarbeiter* migration, *Ghosted* is the first German-Taiwanese co-produced narrative feature. Like Akin's Turkish-German film, Treut's *Ghosted* includes multiple crossings, shifts between two places (Germany and Taiwan), and uses three languages (German, English, Mandarin).

*Ghosted* goes even further than the previous films in terms of narrative complexity as it contains multiple, rather disorienting flashbacks. It opens with Taiwanese woman Ai-Ling receiving permission from her mother to visit her uncle, Chen Fu, in Germany, a man she secretly suspects he is her – supposedly dead – father and, in the course of the narrative, is proven correct, again creating a ghostly dynamic of parent and queer child. The film's



Figure 2.3 *Ghosted* (2009): Sophie (Inga Busch) at the video installation of *Remembrance*, with deceased Ai-Ling (Huan-Ru Ke) projected onto the wall behind her

Source: *Ghosted* (2009), directed by Monika Treut © Hyena Films, and First Run Features (2009).

main plot-line recounts the lesbian love affair between Ai-Ling, who we will discover is dead in the filmic present, and her German artist girlfriend, Sophie, who memorialises her in a video installation: *Remembrance*. Sophie is in Taipei for the opening night of the installation and, in the bathroom, a complex queer site of gender and other policing, meets and is later pursued by Taiwanese woman Mei-Li supposedly a reporter wanting to write a story on Sophie and Ai-Ling to ‘drive away the ghosts of the past’. This opening forewarns of the loss of Ai-Ling in narrative time, although this has already happened in narrated time, therefore functioning much like the deathly intertitles of Akin’s film.

*Ghosted* then employs flashback: in Germany, Ai-Ling meets Sophie at a Hamburg screening of a Taiwanese film, and their friendship becomes a lesbian relationship, due to Sophie’s persistence and rather predatory advances. Ai-Ling moves in with Sophie who, feeling suffocated, goes on a supposed business trip with a third Taiwanese woman, a filmmaker named Judy, whom Sophie had previously filmed saying that, in Taiwanese culture, women come back as ghosts to avenge what people have done to them in life, and who states that she sometimes thinks she’s the product of someone’s imagination. Jealousy sees Ai-Ling go to a lesbian bar and leave with a solicitor, a blonde German who could be considered Sophie’s double, but on their way back to Sophie and Ai-Ling’s apartment, Ai-Ling listens to a voicemail from Sophie saying she is returning early from her trip. Pulling away from her drunken companion, Ai-Ling is killed by a car. The film’s temporality is queer: while narrative time introduces the viewer to Ai-Ling then Mei-Li, narrated time saw Sophie meet Ai-Ling, then Judy, and, finally, Mei-Li after Ai-Ling’s death. This is significant in the light of Freud’s argument in his 1919 essay on the uncanny that the double becomes the ‘harbinger’ of death (Freud 2001: 234). Judy’s appearance in Sophie and Ai-Ling’s life led, in one way or another, to the latter’s demise.

Returning to the filmic present, Mei-Li travels from Taipei to Hamburg and appears, unannounced, at Sophie’s apartment, where they eventually make love, before Mei-Li traces Ai-Ling’s last steps, causing an abject reaction when she vomits in the bathroom of the lesbian bar in which Ai-Ling spent her last night. Treut creates uncertainty throughout the film by not letting the viewer know if this is a fictional take on the real world or a fantastic one blended from her imagination and Taiwanese culture, just as we are left unsure about reality and fiction within the filmic world of Petzold’s *Gespenster*. *Ghosted* eventually takes a supernatural twist when Sophie finds out that Mei-Li does not exist in a straight temporality and is instead a form of spectre haunting her.

While daughters haunt their mothers in both *Gespenster* and *Auf der anderen Seite*, Ai-Ling’s double/ghost finally disappears when Sophie is invited by Ai-Ling’s mother to the Taiwanese Ghost Festival, which incorporates a money-burning ritual to chase away ghosts. Ai-Ling and her ghost, Mei-Li, appear as doubles to Sophie and the viewer, before disappearing

through the flames, and *Ghosted* closes with this money-burning scene that was used to open the film. This recalls *Auf der anderen Seite*, *Gespenster*, and, as we shall see, *Fremde Haut/Unveiled*, which come full circle with opening and closing imagery, and sometimes with time, too. The ghost in *Ghosted* is the foreigner, although the Taiwanese woman does not appear to have any issues with her right to be in Germany, unlike the Turkish woman in *Auf der anderen Seite*. Ai-Ling, however, never seems fully settled anywhere. This is compounded by the fact that she is so often seen through others; whether Sophie's lens or her father's authority, she is continually objectified and infantilised, which is also problematic with regard to the wider representation of Asian women.

In *Gespenster*, a film with only white European characters, the role of protector oscillates, although Nina is often manipulated by unscrupulous Toni, while Lotte (*Auf der anderen Seite*) and Sophie's (*Ghosted*) generosity towards the foreigner is tied to their status as a particular kind of citizen: privileged young, white, middle-class, educated Europeans, echoing the notion of the 'good German'. Charlotte and Sophie demonstrate an easy mobility and the freedom to travel across borders as German natives. Sophie travels, twice, to Taipei, and Charlotte has just returned from a round-the-world trip. Charlotte's privileged position stands in contrast to that of her girlfriend, and although the protagonists in *Gespenster* are white German or French people, their respective institutionalised and homeless status can be likened to that of the foreigner kept outside national borders, or contained securely within an institution within a border or boundary, in order supposedly to provide a sense of security and a better socioeconomic lifestyle for those citizens allowed to roam freely in that country and beyond.

While *Auf der anderen Seite* and *Ghosted* revolve around travel across national borders and feature concrete borderland spaces, their protagonists also undertake psychological journeys stimulating personal growth and change through the creation and/or rejection of queer, nonnuclear, family units. *Ghosted* ends with Sophie visiting Taiwan for a second time, in order to visit Ai-Ling's family and partake in another memorial for the deceased woman. Where the first memorial, a video installation, was visual, and Ai-Ling took on a ghost-like quality via her presence-in-absence, the second evokes more of the senses via the warmth of fire and the smell of incense. Where Sophie trapped Ai-Ling in a ghost-like state on-screen, her family's ceremony aims to exorcise her ghost should she decide to linger, while giving offerings for her journey into the beyond. Indeed, looking up during this ceremony, Sophie sees the ghost doubles finally departing.

### *Fremde Haut/Unveiled*

Also a narrative feature film by a lesbian independent filmmaker, Angelina Maccarone, *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* follows a lesbian woman who goes on to 'pass' as a man. Iranian Fariba Tabrizi travels to Germany seeking asylum

because she had been having an affair with a married woman in her homeland, which resulted in homophobia and would lead to severe punishment. Like Gül/Ayten, we see the queer foreign protagonist, a person of colour, in transit and trying to escape from authorities in their homeland, only to be met by white German authority at the other end. Fariba is driven to the reception centre at Frankfurt airport by two white men who make heterosexist assumptions of her, and one of them

adjusts his rear-view mirror to look at her, then readjusts it for a better view of her breasts. After initially meeting his look, she dons her sunglasses and focuses out of the window and, although she refuses to actively indulge his objectification, she neither visually nor verbally challenges this, knowing her future in Germany depends on being compliant. Here the look of the powerful (a white, male official) at the relatively powerless (an asylum-seeking Iranian woman) may be combined with the Mulveyan cinematic gaze in order to gain pleasure from the sight of woman, with power exploited here to both sexualise and intimidate, although she is not presented as a feminine spectacle throughout.

(Dawson 2015a: 212)

Cautious of the negative consequences of her lesbianism, she claims asylum for ‘political reasons’ (‘politische Gründe’) in Germany, and when housed in the liminal space of a German airport immigrant holding pen, which is



*Figure 2.4 Fremde Haut/Unveiled (2005): Fariba (Jasmin Tabatabai), passing as Siamak, picking cabbage for the Sauerkraut factory with work colleague and soon-to-be partner, Anne (Anneke Kim Sarnau)*

*Source: Unveiled/Fremde Haut (2005), directed by Angelina Maccarone © Fischer Film, MM Zimmermann & Co, and Millivres Multimedia (2007).*

reminiscent of the in-between spaces run by authorities in other films (the mental institution and children's home in *Gespenster* and the prison and holding centre in *Auf der anderen Seite*), she befriends a man who fled Iran because of political activity. He later commits suicide after being granted temporary asylum. It is Fariba who finds his lifeless body and, with her own asylum denied, she secretly buries him before taking on his identity: Siamak Mustafai. Like the other queer migrants in this chapter, Fariba/Siamak code-switches, here between Farsi, German, and English. Passing as Siamak, a living ghost, Fariba is transported to a small Swabian town, where s/he shares a room with a male immigrant and takes on illegal employment in a very German location: a Sauerkraut factory, where s/he begins to date Anne, with their lesbian relationship passing as heterosexual. Indeed, it is this ghostly passing, as a man, that allows Fariba to experience these things.

When Fariba/Siamak is discovered in a state of undress by Anne's ex-boyfriend and his best friend, they take issue with the relationship, and the fight leads Anne's son to call the authorities. Police arrive and catch Fariba/Siamak as s/he attempts to flee and s/he is subsequently returned to Iran. Indeed, the other time Fariba/Siamak had feared being caught also involved the actions of the two German men, whose speeding car is stopped by police, with Fariba/Siamak, seated in the back, concerned that a police check of papers will lead to expulsion from Germany. The end of the film echoes the opening, in a doubling of the plane journey – albeit in an opposite direction – and while the headscarf was removed on the first plane trip, which suggests it was worn in her homeland for cultural rather than religious reasons (the headscarf is commonplace in Germany, mostly due to the high number of Turkish people there), it is removed during the second one in order to pass as a man, complete with false passport, in Iran. The passing in *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* had been part of a more fluid gender display, apparently due to other external factors regarding the liminal space of queerness, (homo) sexuality, and asylum, while the representation of the ghost, here, is much less fluid in terms of meaning and definition than in the other films analysed.

## Conclusion

This trend of ghostly migrants in German transcultural film is a relatively recent one, firmly lodged in post-reunification cinema and during a period when there has been a significant focus on memory, particularly in relation to the atrocities of National Socialism, in culture as well as daily reality and politics. The films analysed in this chapter combine the theme of memory with another key trend in this period, migration, with the queerness of gender and/or sexuality adding a twist to transnational tales of migration and foreignness. While the vampire, a trope in queer representation throughout history, is often sexualised and demonised, the ghost in these films is mostly used to recall memory and explore ties to a queer temporality rather than horror or explicit sexuality. The ghost plays with queerness, in/visibility, and legality: to be a ghost is no longer to be a citizen. Ghosts and the return of

the dead queer both time and place, including migration (especially without papers), as ghosts disrespect borders, boundaries, and binaries.

Indeed, the migrant and the ghost queer time, place, and family in the films I have discussed. These figures queer heteronormative/linear temporality through, for example, creating an eternal present or the (often temporary) collapse of past, present, and future into one site/sight. This queering of time is not only a filmic theme, but also part of the medium's form in most of the films examined: through circular narratives, flashbacks, and other devices used in these transnational tales, which at times make the viewer feel disoriented and lead us to question what is real in the filmic world. The transnational and migrant aspects also help to queer place, with a back-and-forth rather than linearity, as well as displacement and a lack of stability and belonging. The ghost and the migrant queer the concept of family, too, whether through mothers seeing their 'dead' daughters or a migrant who is a living ghost joining a single mother and her son.

Queer theory and queer lives have often been hailed as ways to avoid categorisation, instead living more freely and flexibly on a spectrum rather than part of a binary, but the films analysed also demonstrate some of the negative aspects of a queer – that is, non-normative rather than simply not heterosexual – life, such as imprisonment (holding cell, mental hospital, prison), financial poverty, and a lack of acceptance, whether in the law or in daily life. And while this may be transgressive and sometimes presented as positive in theory, the reality is often dangerous and deadly. What is most needed is a sociopolitical, rather than simply theoretical, break-down of binaries in relation to LGBTIQ+ people, migrants, people of colour, etc., of human and dehumanised, of those worthy of citizenship, good healthcare, legal rights relating to families and finances, a future, and those, because of norms, laws, and borders, supposedly not worthy.

## Notes

- 1 I dedicate this chapter to Marin and Deej.
- 2 I use LGBTIQ+ as an acronym here, as I do not explore other letters (intersex, asexual, etc.) that have been added in more recent times. I use LGB when discussing identities that have been normalised while transgender people are so frequently demonised. Queer is much more fluid than categories such as gay and lesbian, and could, if I had more space, allow me to theorise the positive fluidity of migration in relation to it.
- 3 This is firmly in my mind, as is my privilege as a white, relatively affluent (though with a solidly working-class background), cisgender lesbian holding a British passport.
- 4 For more on the lesbian and queer vampire, see Dawson (2010).

### 3 Trans-ing gender boundaries and national borders

Rethinking identity in Merzak Allouache's *Chouchou* (2003) and Angelina Maccarone's *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* (2005)

C.L. Quinan

Taking as its point of departure the ways in which sexualities are produced through and in relation to migration, including how the nation-state as a heteronormative institution upholds hierarchies of sexuality, race, gender, and class, queer migration studies has honed in on the structures that underlie the production of social inequalities and has offered insight into how access to transnational migration is differentially distributed (Phelan 2001; Luibhéid 2002; Luibhéid and Cantú Jr. 2005). Despite these crucial interventions, this body of work has underestimated the degree to which conforming to binary gender norms shapes possibilities for – and experiences of – mobility, citizenship, and inclusion. Scholarship in the field of trans studies, has, however, begun to fill this gap by analysing tensions between migration and belonging (Cotten 2012; Aizura 2012; Bhanji 2013). Indeed, the boundary-crossing potentialities of trans approaches attentive to mobility and movement make them especially relevant to analyses of migration. Moreover, the grammatically multifarious word ‘trans’ also participates in linguistic border-crossings: ‘It can be a noun as well as a prefix that attaches to and dynamises other words, providing new directions for them’, as Karine Espineira and Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier point out (Espineira and Bourcier 2016: 90). Unlike the English-centric ‘queer’, ‘*Trans* works as well in French, Spanish, Italian, and many other languages as it does in English. What are we to make of the mobility of this little unit of grammar, its ability to animate, to cross?’ (Espineira and Bourcier 2016: 90).

This chapter grapples with this question from a conceptual standpoint and asks how we might theorise intersections between migration and non-normative genders and sexualities in European postcolonial cinema. Starting from the premise that conceiving of trans as a mode of analysis in these ways yields productive insights into the literal and metaphoric aspects of migration and borders, this chapter analyses trans as movement in two films: Merzak Allouache's 2003 French-language comedy *Chouchou* (France), and Angelina Maccarone's 2005 German-language drama *Fremde Haut/Unveiled*

(Germany/Austria). Allouache's commercially successful comedy introduces us to a transgender North African migrant who arrives in France (disguised as a Chilean male asylum seeker fleeing Pinochet's regime) and soon begins to both present and identify as a woman, while Maccarone's drama tells the story of an Iranian female who flees to Germany due to persecution for her queer relationship, but later takes on the identity of a male acquaintance with papers in order to stay in the country. In reflecting yet also distorting the contemporary social and political climate of non-European migrants arriving to Europe, the two films 'trans' – that is surpass, transcend, and cross – notions of gender, genre, nation, and migration. While negotiating multiple border-crossings, the films' migrant outsiders prompt us to interrogate what happens not only when we *queer* but also when we *trans* migration. That is, what do we notice when we look to those whose experiences of traversing national borders is tied up in a crossing of gender boundaries?

Both films engage with the contemporary nexus of migration and displacement, and probe tensions between hospitality and hostility that continue to mark the postcolonial European metropole – tensions that are particularly salient for queer and trans migrants.<sup>1</sup> Although *Chouchou* and *Fremde Haut* predate the most recent (and ongoing) European refugee 'crisis' in which many migrants are met with a hopeless – if not deathly – situation en route to European sea and land borders, they showcase the complex negotiations that have long faced migrants of colour in gaining entry into Fortress Europe. These challenges are further exacerbated by the protagonists' gender transgressions, queer sexualities, and non-Western backgrounds.

While this chapter could easily focus on the queer potentials that both Allouache's and Maccarone's films showcase, I instead want to emphasise the possibilities that a trans analysis might hold in analysing overlapping processes of transnational and transgender assimilation, exclusion, and aggregation.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the films prompt similar questions around transgender, transnational, and transcultural experiences. Together, they have something to say about the place of gender queerness in experiences of migration, exile, diaspora, and displacement – thematics that have only begun to be depicted in postcolonial and migrant cinema.<sup>3</sup>

### *Fremde Haut/Unveiled*

*Fremde Haut* is the second feature-length film from writer and director Angelina Maccarone, who was born in Germany in 1965 to an Italian guest worker. The film received numerous awards, most notably at the Montreal Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and the Seattle Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Before turning to the film's plot, it is worth noting the ambiguity of its title. While the U.S.-based distributor retitled it *Unveiled* (which plays upon ideas of visibility and invisibility and Arab femininity), the German *Fremde Haut* has a double-meaning that is lost in its anglicised transformation. Literally translated as 'foreign skin' or 'stranger's skin', the metaphorical meaning of





Figure 3.1 Fariba/Siamak (Jasmin Tabatabai) in *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* (2005)

Source: *Unveiled/Fremde Haut* (2005), directed by Angelina Maccarone © Fischer Film, MM Zimmermann & Co, and Millivres Multimedia (2007).

the German ‘fremde Haut’ signifies ‘in orbit’, a term that is also used in the U.N.’s description of asylum seekers. Jack Halberstam elaborates: ‘Asylum seekers are spoken about as “fremde Haut” or “in orbit” . . . because they can actually find legal domicile nowhere at all. . . . [T]his notion, of asylum seekers as “in orbit”, as lost in space or in perpetual motion frames the film quite differently than the English title’ (Halberstam 2012: 349–50). The title’s reduction to ‘unveiled’ obscures the double meaning of ‘fremde Haut’, which emphasises the film’s thematic threads: the body – the skin – as well as the perpetual motion, in-betweenness, and transition of the main character.

Just as the multivalent title suggests, there is a thematic thread of movement and its relationship to gender and borders running through the film, which the viewer is met with at the immediate outset. The film opens inside a plane, with the pilot indicating over the loudspeaker that they have just left Iranian airspace, an announcement that prompts some women to remove their head scarves. We are soon introduced to one of the flight’s passengers, Fariba Tabrizi (played by Jasmin Tabatabai), an Iranian female who flees Iran when her relationship with Shirin, a married woman, is discovered. Fariba arrives in Germany and is forced to stay in a refugee holding centre at the Frankfurt airport with other asylum seekers. Among them is Siamak, a young political activist, who is also from Iran. Fariba never reveals to the German authorities her actual reason for requesting asylum (i.e., that her life was in jeopardy because of her queerness), only saying she was condemned to death for political reasons. Although persecution based on sexual

orientation and now gender identity is grounds for possible asylum, it has been notoriously difficult for sexual and gender minorities to ‘prove’ their sexuality or gender and their persecution. They must abide by normative scripts that rely on Western constructions of gender and sexuality and on static notions of sexual orientation as ‘true’, inherent, and unchanging. For these reasons, those seeking asylum on such grounds are overwhelmingly denied. In this context, Fariba is not willing to participate in the generation of a colonialist script that orientalises her home country and pinkwashes Germany, her host nation. She is also unwilling to follow a linear narrative of ‘lesbian’ normativity to gain refugee status.

Consequently, her application is denied, but before being sent back to Iran, she discovers that Siamak’s application to temporarily stay is granted. However, out of feelings of hopelessness, he kills himself. Fariba is the first to discover his body and makes the split-second decision to take on his identity in order to use his temporary permit. Now required to present as male and pass as Siamak, the protagonist is sent to a rural town near Stuttgart. Although restricted from movement or employment, Fariba/Siamak secures an under-the-table job at a sauerkraut factory, where he is met with a number of violent racist and xenophobic encounters, both verbal and physical.<sup>4</sup> There, he also develops a relationship with co-worker Anne, who begins to learn Siamak’s true identity. Eventually, German immigration officials inform Siamak that he must leave Germany, for, given the changing political climate in Iran, it is purportedly now safe to return home. This development then prompts the protagonist to tell Anne the full story and they devise a plan that will allow Siamak/Fariba to flee using a fake passport. Soon after, however, Anne’s friends come to her house where they discover that Siamak is Fariba, a revelation that causes them to violently attack her. This has devastating consequences, for the police are called and Fariba is promptly deported. The film ends with another gender transition, for on the plane back to Tehran the protagonist disposes of Fariba’s passport in the plane’s lavatory but keeps Siamak’s and now presents as male, leaving the viewer to wonder what the future holds for the protagonist.

Rather than presenting a narrative that equates westward migration with freedom and acceptance, *Fremde Haut* instead critiques German attitudes towards foreigners and European asylum policies and procedures. Writer-director Maccarone stated that she was committed to making this film reflect the real-life experiences of persecuted sexual minorities seeking asylum in Europe. In her words:

I become furious when I see how the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is firmly cemented in the majority of images one sees. ‘We’ sit in front of the TV and watch as ‘they’ attempt to gain entry to Fortress Europe.

(cited in Lewis 2016: 129)

Putting forth a clear commentary on European attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities, the film forces us to ask: even if homosexuality is

criminalised in Iran, is Germany's treatment of LGBTIQ+ identifying individuals – as well as non-Western groups more broadly – any better?

### *Chouchou*

Addressing similar themes, such as sexual citizenship, containment, and resistance, *Chouchou* is a narrative of sexual and gender otherness and transnational migration. However, unlike the more independently produced *Fremde Haut*, *Chouchou* – by virtue of its status as a blockbuster comedy – operates within a mainstream generic framework. In contrast to the growing focus in feature films and documentaries on realistic portrayals of those seeking asylum in Europe, *Chouchou* presents a near-farcical take on migration, and this time from a former colony (Algeria) to the metropole (France). Just as *Fremde Haut* opens with a plane crossing the invisible border of Iranian airspace, *Chouchou* begins with two images of transport, similarly showing its immediate interest in mobility, transportation, and crossing over. But the highly protected borders of Fortress Europe are conspicuously absent here as the protagonist disembarks from a boat in Marseille and then alights from a train in Paris. Here we see no signs of border control or detention centres. While *Fremde Haut*'s realism lent itself to a more overt commentary on European xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia, *Chouchou* is, on the whole, so outlandish that, as I suggest later, we read it as an underhand critique of French attitudes towards gender minorities and North African migrants.

*Chouchou* was directed by the highly successful filmmaker Merzak Allouache, who has been credited with the emergence of a new wave of Algerian cinema dealing with questions of gender and sexuality. Born in Algeria in 1944, Allouache has made 18 films to date (including fiction and documentary) and maintains a presence within both the French and Algerian film industries. His body of work is politically motivated and is shaped by the colonial/postcolonial relationship between France and Algeria, which, as Will Higbee has noted, is grounded in 'reinterpreting "official" versions of France's and Algeria's colonial past, while also challenging reductive stereotypes of France's North African immigrant population found in the nation's postcolonial present' (Higbee 2007: 6). *Chouchou* builds upon this trajectory in its comedic take on the experiences of an undocumented Algerian immigrant, played by well-known actor and comedian Gad Elmaleh. The comedy tells the story of Choukri, nicknamed 'Chouchou', an Algerian transgender individual who has arrived in Paris presenting as male but soon self-identifies as female.<sup>5</sup> Humour begins at the outset, as Chouchou has come dressed in clothing that we would most likely associate with South American indigenous communities. This outfit borders on the ridiculous, but we soon learn that Chouchou is claiming to be a Chilean asylum seeker fleeing Pinochet's dictatorial regime, anachronistic as that may be given the 'temporal drag' (Freeman 2010) between that historical moment and the present day.



Figure 3.2 Chouchou (Gad Elmaleh) arriving in Paris in *Chouchou* (2003)

Source: *Chouchou* (2003), directed by Merzak Allouache © France 2 Cinéma, Fehner Productions, KS2 Productions, and Warner Home Video France (2002).

Unlike Fariba in *Fremde Haut*, this narrative of victimhood that Chouchou creates may allow for refuge in France. As Mireille Rosello (2011) has pointed out, there are clear reasons why Chouchou would have chosen to take on the identity of a Chilean asylum seeker, as it shifts any sort of potential blame or guilt for a colonial past from the French on to another. Hence, France can emerge as hospitable. However, the narrative is so far-fetched that it is illegible and preposterous and so exceedingly utopic that we can only find the film to be a critique of French views towards the Other, both gender and migrant.

Attempting to find a place to stay, Chouchou ends up being taken in by two Catholic priests who are not convinced by the story but say that they do not need to know the reasons why Chouchou has ended up here in this small Parisian suburb. Eventually Chouchou gets a job as assistant to a psychoanalyst who, like the priests, is overwhelmingly accepting. In fact, it is here that we learn of Chouchou's sexuality and gender identity, for she quickly opens up to her boss, confessing 'I never had problems with homosexuality, but my real dream is to become a woman'. The therapist then insists that henceforth Chouchou come to work as a woman and will be treated as such in her office. Later on, Chouchou emerges from the Place de Clichy metro stop in Paris and has a chance encounter with Djamila, a trans friend from Algeria who has also migrated to France. Through Djamila, Chouchou is introduced to The Apocalypse, a nightclub primarily populated by drag queens, trans women, and gay men. There, Chouchou meets a wealthy man named Stanislas, with whom she falls in

love. Nothing seems to be an obstacle to this coupling of a bourgeois white French man and a transgender Algerian immigrant.

That is, until Inspector Grégoire, a police officer and former patient of Chouchou's boss, creates problems, for he sees Chouchou as standing in his way of seeing the therapist. His behaviour towards her is aggressive (if also comic), but this is not because of her perceived gender or sexual orientation. Instead, he targets Chouchou's migration status, threatening to deport her and separate her from Stanislas. Before long, Grégoire's higher-ups effectively save her when they realise that she is being targeted by their colleague. (The viewer can imagine this rescue narrative is far from reality, as there exists a long history of North African migrants being racially profiled and targeted for deportation by law enforcement in France.) In a sense, the institution of law enforcement actually 'fails' here in allowing this undocumented migrant to remain in France, thereby opening up queer kinship possibilities. Chouchou will no longer be torn from her lover, and they can pursue their hopes of being married with the community's blessing.

Under the comic surface, we can find a clear critique of France which, upon closer analysis, actually emerges as hostile to both gender non-normativity and migrant outsiderhood. It is through the film's genre as slapstick comedy and exaggerated acceptance of difference that we realise that this story cannot be taken at face-value. For instance, the priest and psychotherapist – symbolic of religion and mental health – are uncharacteristically understanding, while the police inspector is clearly hostile, but not because of Chouchou's gender presentation but because she 'blocks' him from seeing the therapist. Not only has the Catholic Church been historically intolerant of non-reproductive couplings, but psychotherapy has long been the gatekeeper of gender transition, restricting personal freedom and doing extreme violence to some trans people (if not also allowing others access to social and medical services).

The film's final scene further underlines the hidden critique. Chouchou and Stanislas jubilantly run towards one other, Chouchou decked out in a white wedding dress and Stanislas dressed in a dapper suit. We cannot help but smile – not only because Stanislas trips on the way, but also because it utilises the comic tool of filming in slow-motion. While some scholars have critiqued this final scene as being unrealistic, I argue that it is precisely this vision of a utopian vision of a multicultural France wherein different ages, races, and classes commingle (including Stanislas's high-class parents and Chouchou's community of gender-diverse Algerian migrants) to celebrate the marriage of a French bourgeois man and a transgender Algerian woman, blessed by a Catholic priest no less, that signals Allouache's final wink at the viewer. Comedy here serves a role in forcing us to return to the beginning of the film and read it as a critique of French policies related to migration, gender, and sexuality.

Certainly, Allouache would have also been aware of the contemporary growing ascendancy of the far-right Front National. As Nick Rees-Roberts



Figure 3.3 Marriage of Chouchou (Gad Elmaleh) and Stanislas (Alain Chabat) in *Chouchou* (2003)

Source: *Chouchou* (2003), directed by Merzak Allouache © France 2 Cinéma, Fechner Productions, KS2 Productions, and Warner Home Video France (2002).

has pointed out, when the film was released in 2003, almost six million people voted for this anti-immigration political party in the presidential election. Also worth mentioning is that at the time, Sarkozy held the post of Minister of the Interior and would later infamously take a hard line on immigration enforcement. While campaigning for president in 2006, he would also flip-flop on same-sex marriage, stating: ‘I’ve thought long and hard about it and I’m opposed to both same-sex marriage and adoption. That’s clear and precise. On the other hand, I’m deeply hostile to any form of discrimination against homosexuals’ (cited in Rees-Roberts 2008: 43). While this statement could be read at best as ambivalent, at worst as discriminatory, towards queer sexualities, we do know that Sarkozy was even more hostile to immigrants. In this light, *Chouchou*’s final scene ironically critiques any façade of a present-day French political climate wherein immigrants and gender and sexual minorities would be embraced by all.

### Questioning Western categorical thinking

As both *Chouchou* and *Fremde Haut* ultimately suggest, queer migration does not equate with liberation but is instead marked by different experiences of inequality (Luibhéid 2008a; Spurlin 2016). Although acceptance of LGBTIQ+ migrants and refugees by Western countries (like Germany and France) allows for a front of acceptance, progressiveness, and safety, it simultaneously obscures an investment in neocolonial and homonationalist practices. In the context of *Fremde Haut*, Rachel Lewis writes that it offers a powerful critique ‘of Fortress Europe’s immigration and asylum policies, problematising the stereotypical queer migration narrative as that

of a movement from “third world oppression” to “first world freedom” (Lewis 2012: 282), a statement that could also be applied to *Chouchou*, even if on its surface the film’s message might look quite different.

In a way, this focus on homonationalism and sexual exceptionalism is perhaps the more straightforward commentary; instead, I want to push that line of thinking further to uncover what more these films provoke. For instance, while maintaining a façade of migrant acceptance and sexual exceptionalism, Fortress Europe must actually work hard to seal its borders, paradoxically pointing to the tenuousness of these literal and symbolic boundaries between nation-states and binary genders. In this, I want to ask what insights these two films offer regarding connections between migration and non-normative genders and sexualities.

From the perspective of queer diasporic and queer of colour critique, films like *Fremde Haut* and *Chouchou* enact a radical disruption of any sense of ‘home’ (Gopinath 2005; El-Tayeb 2011). While biopolitical, life-affirming possibilities are emphasised in *Chouchou*, *Fremde Haut* is shaped by necropolitical, death-giving forces. (The necropolitics of asylum proceedings become ever more pronounced in the film, where Fariba has actually taken on the identity of one of its casualties.) Indeed, the former concludes on an optimistic (although potentially ironic) note of integration and a sense of being ‘at home’, while the latter may be less hopeful, leaving us wondering what will happen to the lead character upon returning back ‘home’ to Iran. In decentring home as both literal (as in physical location or ‘homeland’) and metaphoric (as in the feeling of being ‘at home’ in one’s body), they also destabilise gender and sexuality. While gender and sexuality are often collapsed in these films, in negotiating strict categories in their host countries – including man/woman, homosexual/heterosexual – they signal the inherent inflexibility and constraint of such labels in a Western framework, highlighting Don Romesburg’s point that ‘[g]ender diverse queer migrants must engage in self-authoring to negotiate the multiple relations of power and desire confronting their subjectivities’ (Romesburg 2013: 487). In deconstructing borders (e.g., of nation, class, and gender) and decolonising Western categories (particularly as related to gender and sexuality), they effectively trans dichotomies of active and passive within inscribed ideas of east/west or north/south and different genealogies of femininity/masculinity (Gopinath 2005: 22).

Indeed, both *Fremde Haut* and *Chouchou* point to the impossibility of applying ‘Western’ notions of gender and sexuality to the protagonists, particularly if they are conceived of from a particular geographical space or temporal moment that erases the ways in which gender and sexuality work (or do not work) across national and geopolitical borders. For example, while both films point to their respective characters falling outside of heteronormative economies of desire, labelling these characters as simply ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, or ‘transgender’ (as some commentary on the films has done) misses the mark of examining the nuances and intricacies of overlaps between gender and

sexuality. Just as Luibhéid has persuasively shown that these transformations ‘cannot be understood within progressive, unilinear, and Eurocentric models’ (Luibhéid 2008b: 170) that privilege Western notions of gender and sexuality that map to a mainstream ‘LGBT’ vocabulary, queer and trans function in these films not as fixed identity labels but as conceptual modes of analysis to negotiate critical spaces for self-creation and resistance within existing social structures.

### Conclusion: the ‘transgender move’ as trans potential

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the prefix ‘trans-’ using an excess of prepositions: ‘across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another.’ Meanwhile, a second definition emphasises its transcendent potential: ‘surpassing, transcending, crossing’. In reading the boundary-shifting potentiality of trans, I take a cue from transfeminist scholar A. Finn Enke’s call that concepts like ‘trans’ open up more broadly in all directions and ‘do more flexible work’ (Enke 2012: 3). Similarly, Aren Aizura argues that we need a theory ‘that turns “trans-” in an anti-identitarian direction’, one more attentive to ‘how bodies escape or act clandestinely outside those categories – and at moments in which the categories of immigrant, transgender person, man, and woman become incoherent and inconsistent’ (Aizura 2012: 135). Developing a trans framework for analysing representations (cinematic and otherwise) of migration holds immense potential at this moment in which borders of all kinds – including those pertaining to gender, sexuality, citizenship, and nationality – are being simultaneously razed and fortified. Indeed, like the prefix ‘trans’, the noun ‘transgender’ is intimately and historically bound up with ‘questions of nation, territory, and citizenship, with categories of belonging and exclusion, of excess and incorporation. . . . All current transgender phenomena are thus local and national phenomena that encounter transnationalizing forces’ (Stryker and Aizura 2013: 8). In this sense, as a mode of analysis, ‘trans’ may grapple with the transcultural and hybrid experiences of surpassing the limits of hetero- and cisgender norms, as both Chouchou and Fariba/Siamak do, without falling into the traps of identity politics.<sup>6</sup>

Although the films are not primarily focused on transgender subjectivity, they enact what Roshanak Kheshti in her analysis of post-1990s New Iranian cinema calls ‘the transgender move’:

A character occupies the space of transgender potential in order to move through or survive a circumstance that s/he presumably could not otherwise. Transgender, then, figures as a space of possibility and potential. . . . This transgender move presents a temporary space of political and agential potential.

(Kheshti 2009: 161–2)



This is a space of potentiality in which, as both films showcase, the protagonists creatively craft and shape their subjectivities in new cultural spaces, engaging in a form of self-authorship that allows for new possibilities of inhabiting genders and host countries.

While the ways in which Fariba and Chouchou trans gender and borders are undoubtedly different, both are fundamentally about survival. While Chouchou reveals that she identifies as a woman, Fariba takes on a male identity because it allows her to stay in Germany. For Fariba, gaining asylum literally means being someone else, which points to the paradoxical nature of contemporary refugee and asylum proceedings. What, then, the choice to live as a man, as Siamak, means upon returning to Iran is up for discussion. Transing gender appears to be about not only survival but also mobility and openness, and both films signal ambivalent but productive possibilities as they cross borders, both visible and invisible.

I want to put forth the idea that, in the context of these two films, we take up 'transgender' – or 'trans-gender' – as a move or a movement, an analytical tool, a transgression that may overlap and intersect with other transgressions, including queer desire, undocumented migration, and illegal labour. Here, I concur with Regina Kunzel's statement that if transgender identity raises 'problems of false coherence that flattens out differences among transgender subjects, of required conformities for recognition as authentically transgender, of the implicit whiteness and middle-classness of the transgender subject – transgender analysis holds considerable promise' (Kunzel 2014: 288). Instead of thinking about transgender as an identity category, adopting it as an analytical approach allows for a theorisation and conceptualisation of its 'polymorphous transformative potential' (Kheshti 2009: 173).

Despite the divergences in their protagonists' modes of resistance and transgression, *Fremde Haut* and *Chouchou* make important contributions to enactments of trans and representations of transness. They also reflect how both hetero- and gender normativity are linked to neocolonial and neo-imperialist processes, and how the biopolitical and the necropolitical continue to exert life- and death-giving forces in border crossings and immigration enforcement. Both films collaborate with – but also subvert – dominant discourses and structures around migration, immigration, and cisnormativity, as well as notions of flexible citizenship, circuits of global capital, and cosmopolitanism. In their moving beyond, surpassing, transcending, and crossing not only genders but also physical and symbolic borders and thresholds, the films' respective protagonists open up spaces of potential, possibility, and critique that, returning to the *OED*'s definition, move 'across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another'. They enact movement across the borders of nations and the borders of gender, reshaping both gender and nation in the process.

## Notes

- 1 For a nuanced exploration of the category of hospitality and its representations in French and North African literature and film, see Rosello (2001).
- 2 Neither *queer* nor *transgender* has been immune to critique. While queer theory has been critiqued for its white, Anglo-American, elitist tendencies emerging from academic institutions, the global exportation of the discourse of transgender, including the practice of labelling longstanding cultural traditions of gender diversity under the heading of ‘transgender’, can be understood as an imperialist act. See also Stryker and Aizura (2013: 4).
- 3 Although there remains a dearth of films that have specifically addressed trans issues in relation to migration, three titles that have explored this theme are worth mentioning: *Paper Dolls/Bubot Niyar* (2006, Israel, dir. Tomer Heymann); *The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela* (2008, Iceland/Philippines/France/Thailand, dir. Olaf de Fleur Johannesson); and *Shelter: Farewell to Eden* (2019, France/Italy, dir. Enrico Masi). Interestingly, all three films feature Filipino trans migrants, but presented in very different contexts and related through different genres: *Paper Dolls* and *Shelter: Farewell Eden* are documentaries, while *The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela* is a drama. It is also important to mention that in marketing material for these films, protagonists are referred to alternatively as ‘trans’, ‘transgender’, and even ‘transvestite’. In the spirit of this chapter, I would argue that the films are all invested in the potential that trans holds for moving across, through, and beyond such fixed identity categories.
- 4 I move between the proper names Fariba and Siamak, and feminine and masculine pronouns, depending on how the character presents.
- 5 Because Chouchou specifically states ‘I have always wanted to be a woman’, I use feminine pronouns throughout, even though nearly all other scholarly readings of the film refer to Chouchou with ‘he’/‘him’ pronouns.
- 6 While I take Andrea Long Chu’s critique of ‘transing’ seriously and agree that ‘verbing does not a theory make’ (Chu and Drager 2019: 112), I identify potential in ‘trans’ as a method that reconciles the metaphor of transgender as border-crossing with the real-life experiences of migration and crossing the borders of nation-states.

## 4 Transnational and migrant queer affects in two Basque films

*Alfredo Martínez-Expósito  
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The recent coalescence of populism, nationalism, and xenophobia in a growing number of European countries is nurturing, at a scale rarely seen before, discourses that seek to legitimise, when not openly acclaim, anti-migrant and anti-queer ideologies. Queer migrants to – and within – this new Europe face the unpredictable behaviour of host communities that have been on many occasions shaped by the ambiguous rhetoric of homonationalism and the corporate and state practice of pinkwashing, and that almost invariably have internalised long-held prejudices about non-Western migrants. Stereotyping, labelling, and othering are just some of the attitudes, both social and individual, that queer migrants (as opposed to Western gay tourists) encounter – especially when their journey involves a transnational component. The huge emotional dimension of such journeys is quite often kept in silence and out of public sight as queer migrants (intersectionally vulnerable by virtue of their race, language, class or gender) are frightened or disconcerted in their new settings. In the intersection of the transnational, the emotional and the queer, a theory of migrant affects that acknowledges the central role of the body as a semiotic device may offer some provisional insights about the nature of transitional, in-flux identities.

The cinematic medium is particularly well positioned for the analysis of transnational queer emotions (Siu 2013; McGlotten 2013). The two films we analyse in this chapter are to some extent representative of Spanish cinema's sustained interest in migration (well documented in Santaolalla 2005; Ballesteros 2015), transnational identities (Dennison 2013), and queer narratives (see, for example, Melero 2010, 2017; Perriam 2013). As both a country of immigration and emigration within Europe and globally, Spain and some of its autonomous territories (the Basque Country and Catalonia most notably) are quite well versed in the dynamics of migrancy and the politics of cultural identity. Both *Ander* (2009, dir. Roberto Castón) and *A escondidas/Hidden Away* (2014, dir. Mikel Rueda) offer nuanced reflections about queer migrant subjects and their sexual/romantic relations in the Basque Country, following a thematic tradition that has produced other Spanish/Basque films such as lesbian narratives *Habitación en Roma/Room in Rome* (2010, dir. Julio Medem) and *A mi madre le gustan las mujeres!*

*My Mother Likes Women* (2002, dir. Féjerman and París), and the male gay-themed *Los novios búlgaros/Bulgarian Lovers* (2003, dir. Eloy de la Iglesia). The Basque setting of both *Ander* and *A escondidas* is a powerful reminder that the current wave of nationalism in many European countries (from xenophobic Hungary to populist Italy to post-Brexit referendum UK) had recent precedents in European territories such as Euskadi, where culture and language have been used to articulate forms of defensive nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

In these two Basque films queer migrants are deliberately positioned in a transnational journey that links their European (Basque) destination to their non-European origin, in ways that evidence the differential potential of their bodies and sexualities. Theories of affect are particularly useful in this context as they provide epistemological tools to seize the unseizable, nonverbal, bodily and corporeal aspects of the self. Moreover, as we argue in the analyses that follow, it is not only subjects/bodies and journeys but also geographies and locations that are queered in these films, often creating spatial alternatives to the city or ‘the scene’ for the expression of queer narratives. Crucially, these films make a strong case for the unsettling potential of transnational and migrant queer affects as they question and ultimately destabilise the rigid binarism that regulates the orthodox gender/sexuality control system by complicating ‘the binaries of the closet/coming out, shame/pride, and complicity/resistance’ (Al-Samman and El-Ariss 2013: 206). The branch of affect theory represented by Brian Massumi considers affects as ‘the capacity to affect and be affected’ (Massumi 2015: 91). The uncompromising relational ontology thus invoked calls for an ethics of transitive and passive exchanges that resonates deeply with the queer politics of sexual migrants and dissidents: affect is not alien to questions of power just as power is never disconnected from affects. In other words, the field of the social – characterised by the pervasiveness of public and political interaction – becomes the primal scenario for both queer interactions and affective exchanges if we accept with Massumi that the latter are fundamentally relational, either in the transitive (to affect somebody) or in the passive sense (to be affected by somebody) – or, indeed, in permutations of the same formula, such as the mutual or the reciprocal (to affect each other, to affect one another). In this kind of relational ontology, there is not much space for intransitive or solipsistic theories of affect. This relational perspective is further supported by Sara Ahmed’s brilliant image of affect’s ‘stickiness’: ‘affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (Ahmed 2010b: 29). As the analysis of our films will reveal, the affective dimension of queer exchanges impregnates bodies and locations with a bonding sense of contestation that resonates particularly well with the ‘affective turn’ in cultural studies (Clough 2007). The aim of this chapter is to problematise, from an affective and bodily perspective, the transitional queer identities of *Ander* and *A escondidas* against the backdrop of an increasingly normalised and homonationalistic European milieu.

## **Transnational and migrant queer affects**

Queer affects provide a particularly privileged vantage point from which to observe the dissolution of the binaries that have been used traditionally to describe queer narratives. One of the most palpable remains of structuralism, binary thinking pervaded sexology and even queer theory in its beginnings. Any theory of affect that takes ineffability (the impossibility to translate affects into words) and embodiment seriously must come to acknowledge that gender dualism and its attendant binarisms of sexual orientation (homo/hetero), sexual practices (passive/active), body-gender identification (trans/cis), and sexual politics (closeted/out) are not only epistemologically limiting but also counterintuitive with regard to the lived experience of many individuals who do not recognise themselves in such a fabricated conceptual grid. Queer and affect theories coalesce to question the validity of pre-established normative categories: if queer approaches to identity seek to destabilise external, normative notions of identity, then theories of affect effectively deconstruct external, communal, communicable affects as approximate but ultimately inexact correlates of intimate, interior, bodily phenomena. The intersection of queer theory and theories of affect brings into relief the fact that embodied feelings and emotions are, too, a form of (queer) knowledge (as amply discussed in Sedgwick 2003; Ahmed 2004, 2006, 2014; or Butler 2015). These theoretical lineaments will be useful in reading the two proposed films as sites of resistance and contestation to received notions of transnational migrant queerness as they seek to naturalise queer affects beyond the existence of political or geographical borders while, concurrently, seeking to dilute the persistence of stereotyping and labelling and their by-products (which tend to simplify reality into facile binarisms such as good/bad, in/out, us/them, and the like).

Both *Ander* and *A escondidas* thematise affective transactions that cannot be fully apprehended by conventional geopolitics or acritical stereotyping. In both films, as we will see, some emotions are hardly expressed with words, sometimes because there are no apt words to express them (or are unknown to the characters); sometimes because the pragmatic situation of the characters renders words insufficient or inappropriate. Even naming these affects, emotions, and feelings becomes a futile exercise in basic nominalism, which the cinematic medium can avoid to some degree through the use of nonverbal cues (such as glances, silences or certain types of recurring shot). One of the major difficulties of approaching a study of (queer) affects in cinema is precisely the untranslatability of feelings and emotions into words. At its best, such an exercise is bound to reduce or even dissolve the complexity and singularity of the affective realm, thus betraying the ontology of what it tries to explain. To be clear about this point: the problem is not about applying Cartesian logic to a metaphysical object, but rather about using a proper code (language) to translate another code (film narrative) which evokes emotions in ways that are irreducible to linguistic formulae.

**Triple marginalities/contested spaces**

As Isolina Ballesteros argues in her study of migration cinema in Europe, queer immigration films expose ‘the double marginality that gay immigrants inhabit by being both immigrants . . . and gay’ (Ballesteros 2015: 123). Our two case-studies are particularly good examples of this double marginality. In addition, the history of the Basque Country and, in the case of *Ander*, the rural and isolated setting add layers of marginalisation – and diversity – that complicate further the films’ queer immigration discourses. Although some of these issues are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is relevant to note their affective potential. These overlapping levels of marginality and exclusion draw the local and immigrant queer characters of these films closer together in ways that both elicit affective readings of the films and enable a queer rethinking of space and (trans)national identity.

*Ander* places a considerable and very noticeable visual investment in the Basque countryside and the typical Basque *caserío* (stone farmhouse) where the protagonist’s family lives. The long takes of the *caserío* that open and close the film function as visual bookends, and as a metaphor of apparent stasis and continuity despite the drastic reconfiguration of the family that inhabited it then and now. The presence of the rain at the end reinforces the cosiness of the new couple sharing a bed inside the house. In contrast, at the start of the film, middle-aged Ander (Josean Bengoetxea) and soon-to-be-married sister Arantxa (Leire Ucha) live under the same roof as their overprotective and controlling widower mother (Pilar Rodríguez). A bad fall leaves Ander temporarily bedridden, forcing the family to hire the help of unassuming, Peruvian, transient farm worker José (Cristhian Esquivel). Later, during a walk around the farm’s hilly surroundings, Arantxa asks José how different the landscape must be from his homeland. He responds that people keep asking him this but he finds the Basque scenery to be remarkably similar to ‘home’. The casual comparison of the characteristically green and rugged Basque landscape in front of us to the imagined land of Peru, and the deceiving sense of stasis evoked by the exterior of the iconic *caserío*, illustrate what Rob Stone and Maria Pilar Rodríguez have identified as a distinctive feature of contemporary Basque cinema: a cinema in ‘a context of flux instead of rigidity’ that ‘permits the transfer of social values from the cinema of citizens to the cinema of sentiment’ (Stone and Rodríguez 2015: 9). Citing Anthony Giddens, they explain that this is possible when ‘identity is no longer inherited, traditional or imposed but “discovered, constructed, actively sustained”’ (Stone and Rodríguez 2015: 9). The important *caserío* bookends illustrate precisely this evolution. The meaning of ‘family’ evolves from one firmly rooted in tradition (both in terms of national identity and heteronormativity) to one that is as queer as it is transnational and constructed – not inherited. This change is symbolically marked by the film’s setting at the turn of the century/millennium, a new beginning characterised by a relatively seamless continuity rather than drastic rupture. The foreboding presence of the millennium bug (in the news, in background

conversations) is also highly symbolic: in the end, despite all the worries, the clock does not stop and life goes on.

Space is also affectively charged in our second case-study, *A escondidas*, set in the suburbs of the industrial city of Bilbao. The cosy family homes of the local teenage kids are contrasted with the cold, institutionalised, living environment of the foreign kids, a temporary facility for young asylum seekers that is at times shot from behind the fence, making it look like a prison. This contrast is further underscored symbolically in shared spaces like the nightclub or the swimming pool. A water polo match that should promote integration between local and foreign kids appears instead to encourage competitive rivalry by creating teams of ‘locals’ and ‘visitors’, as they are poignantly named on the score board. In the nightclub, the local kids avoid contact with a group of Moroccan kids. The Moroccans are reduced to the role of providing illegal substances to enhance the local boys’ entertainment, but the locals won’t allow them to mix with the local girls. As in *Ander*, the queer friendship and romance that emerges between the two boy protagonists, the local Rafa (Germán Alcarazu) and Moroccan Ibra (Adil Koukouh), defies this oppressive and prejudiced separation in an abundance of idyllic two-shots in spaces that are in themselves transitional and symbolic of border-crossing, such as a building site, fairground or train station (see Figure 4.1).

In short, space in both films is highly charged in ways that fuse issues of national and sexual identities affectively. The factory and the farm in *Ander*, or the school and the swimming pool in *A escondidas*, are first introduced as oppressive spaces that govern the regimented lives of the closeted local protagonists before being disrupted/awakened by the presence of the foreign other. In *Ander*, there is an underlying critique of the exodus of young people from the Spanish countryside to urban centres – what has recently become known as the ‘España vaciada’ (emptied Spain) – with entire villages now for sale on the global market. This critique is highly nostalgic. *Ander*’s mother complains that most young people in the village have now moved to the industrial centres of Durango or Bilbao. One of the big challenges of the film is precisely whether one can be queer in a rural environment. *A escondidas* is a good reminder that urban centres have their own challenges in that respect. Age is another contributing factor here: it seems hard to come out when you are a middle-aged man living in a small rural community, but things are not much easier for teenagers struggling with their sexual identity and peer pressure from their classmates, even in a modern city almost two decades later (*Ander* is set in 1999, *A escondidas* in the 2010s).

Interestingly, none of the male protagonists in either film, local or immigrant, young or middle-aged, seems particularly defined by their sexual orientation. Despite the protagonists’ not identifying or being easily identifiable as gay or queer, and thus also defying these pre-established categories and binary oppositions, there is a clear sense of social/sexual surveillance persistently performed by their family and friends. These repressive figures



*Figure 4.1* Rafa (Germán Alcarazu) and Ibra (Adil Koukouh) in *A escondidas/Hidden Away* (2014)

*Source:* *A escondidas/Hidden Away* (2014), directed by Mikel Rueda © Baleuko, Bitart New Media, Departamento de Cultura del Gobierno Vasco, Euskal Irrati Telebista, ICAA, MEDIA, and Filmrise (2017).



*Figure 4.2* Ander (Josean Bengoetxea) and José (Cristhian Esquivel) in *Ander* (2009)

*Source:* *Ander* (2009), directed by Roberto Castón © Berdindu, Euskal Irrati Telebista, and Bodega Films (2010).

insist on asking Ander and Rafa if they have a girlfriend and even push them to pursue romance and sexual contact with women, be it the local prostitute Reme (Mamen Rivera) or Ander's former girlfriend Begoña in *Ander*, or Rafa's attractive classmate Marta (Garazi Navarro) in *A escondidas*. José's foreign 'otherness' does not free him from scrutiny either. As the sexual tension between him and his boss surreptitiously builds up, Ander's



bullish friend Peio (Pako Revueltas) asks José directly if he likes women, forcing him to avert his eyes and assent, agreeing to a three-way sex, drinks and drugs party with Reme. In both films, the local protagonists' increasingly evident lack of interest in women leads to growing pressure from their inquisitive friends and family circles. These secondary characters are a constant reminder of the heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality that still permeates Spanish society at the turn of the 21st century behind a façade of sexual permissiveness, arguably begun in the transition and culminating in 2005 with the legalisation of same-sex marriage which, as Gema Pérez-Sánchez has argued, was in part a propagandistic effort to modernise Spain's international image (Pérez-Sánchez 2010: 164).

In *Ander*, the use of Basque language amplifies national identity issues. Ander's Euskara-speaking mother adds an element of exclusion when the family welcomes José into their household (the lack of linguistic barriers is an important factor that attracts Latin American immigrants to Spain). She understands but cannot speak Spanish and relies on body language to communicate with the guest worker, largely ignoring him and demonstrating increasing levels of suspicion and aversion just as he and her son grow closer together. Yet both Arantxa and Ander communicate in Spanish with him, and the language barrier with the mother becomes a symbol of a generational divide rather than one of national identity: 'What do Peruvians even eat?' the mother asks as they prepare for José's arrival. It is as if she were about to confront a different species. Ander also uses language as a power tool in his relationships: he won't allow his mother's secret lover Evaristo (Pedro Otaegi) to call him Andrés (the Spanish version of his name), but insists that José call him by his name and not address him as 'boss'.

It is worth noting that both *Ander* and *A escondidas* also problematise the issue of regional/national identities and languages through the introduction of non-Basque characters and elements of the two other historic regions in Spain (Galicia and Catalonia). In *A escondidas*, the soundtrack (predominantly in English) includes a song in Catalan ('De bosc II' by Pau Vallvé), given prominence during the end credits. In *Ander*, the prostitute Reme hails from a coastal village in Galicia (poignantly called Cariño which translates as 'fondness', 'love' – she had to become a prostitute to care for her son, after her husband abandoned them). The final reconfiguration of the family in the *caserío* defies prejudices about sexual and national identities. A drunken Peio offensively but also transparently sums up his views on this new and unexpected scenario: 'what a trio: two fags and a whore'. Yet Peio is depicted as the loser here – an abusive, intoxicated and out-of-touch womaniser cuts a lonely figure, in contrast with José, Ander, and Reme, dignified and united by their otherness.

### **The (wounded) queer body**

There is a tendency in contemporary mainstream Spanish films dealing with immigration to exoticise and sexualise the foreign other.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, from the

moment Ibra and José appear on the screen (at the very start of the film in the case of Ibra) their bodies take centre-stage. In *A escondidas*, with the help of the rain that creates a wet t-shirt effect, Ibra's fit body is introduced to the audience in an alluring medium close-up. Wardrobe and editing here contribute to make a spectacle of his body while at the same time the composition displaces him to the side of the screen, with the Basque countryside gradually out of focus behind him in an evocative *mise-en-scène*. In *Ander*, José is fully clothed and very inconspicuous when he is first introduced to the family (and the audience), but he is later seen working with his shirt unbuttoned, sweating and glistening as a result of the heat and physical labour. His body is also objectified in other ways. Ander seems obsessed with his very white teeth from the first time he meets him, commenting on them and checking them as if he were about to purchase a farm animal. The very nature of his work means that the family's main interest in him is his physical strength and ability to carry out demanding physical work. His gradual assimilation into Basque society and acceptance into the family is marked by an invitation to Arantxa's wedding, but also by a physical transformation when he wears Ander's dead father's suit for the event (at Ander's request). José wears the suit during the only sex scene with Ander, thus adding obvious potential for a psychoanalytical reading. In a highly symbolic gesture, José will eventually also take the father's old place at the dining table, something that had been explicitly forbidden by the mother for everyone except Ander.

What is different and distinctive about these two films is that the bodies of the Spaniards are also explicitly problematised and objectified. Mirrors play an important role in Ander and Rafa's physical depictions. In Part I of the film, Ander checks out his ageing body in the bedroom mirror as part of his evening routine while drying off after a shower. José appears in that exact same medium-long profile shot, repeating the same action some 20 minutes later in Part II. These recurring mirror shots also literally mirror each other. The composition is interesting in that it places the characters right at the centre of the frame, capturing the spectator's gaze and suggesting a sense of belonging. These shots not only anticipate the compatibility of the two male characters in a highly affective way (later enhanced with a number of two-shots), but also, in their similarity, imply that, like the Basque and the Peruvian countryside, these two men have more in common than may appear. In *A escondidas*, Rafa uses the mirror to practise snogging as instructed by a friend in preparation for kissing classmate Marta. The resulting image, used as a publicity still and in the film trailer, is highly narcissistic but also homoerotic, again anticipating a kiss not with Marta but with Ibra later in the film.

Ander's body is used as a canvas to problematise and question the very idea of hegemonic masculinities, originally coined by R. W. Connell in the North American context in the 1990s and revised since then by her and Messerschmidt in the mid-2000s, and again more recently by Messerschmidt in a

global context (see Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2008, 2012). Despite the physical nature of his work on the farm (and partly in the factory), Ander's body defies ideal standards of masculinity not only because of his ordinary, ageing physique, but also because it is injured and penetrated. There are unapologetic full-frontal scenes and, importantly, a notable long shot where his body is seen from behind. In a desperate attempt to restore a masculine and especially heterosexual identity following his first sexual encounter with José, Ander organises a trip with Reme and José but is unable to get aroused by her. Unable to perform sexually with a woman (undoubtedly with José in his mind), he gets hopelessly drunk in the hotel room. The *mise-en-scène* presents a chaotic picture of someone literally losing control of his body, fully naked and face-down in bed. Importantly, the fall that causes his injury early on in the film led to the arrival of José, whose job would be not only to tend to the farm but also to physically support Ander during his recovery. This arrangement creates unusual situations as José will have to lift and carry Ander from behind, giving the impression that he is about to fuck him (as he will indeed eventually do).

The trope of the wounded male body is particularly symbolic here, since 'limping' in Spanish is used as a metaphor for being gay (like '*maricón*' – queer – it used to be a pejorative term but has been reclaimed as a symbol of pride).<sup>4</sup> This is further symbolised in the film with the figure of a lame pig that José is asked to slaughter. Surprised by the timing of the event (out of season), he realises (and checks) that he will be killing 'the lame pig'. Ander jokes that he hopes José 'does not mean him'. The equation of the wounded male body with homosexuality is another known trope in cultural representations of gay men, not uncommon in Spanish cinema, sometimes, as here and also in Gerardo Vera's *Segunda piel/Second Skin* (1999), enabling a same-sex relationship (a doctor and his patient in the case of *Segunda piel*).<sup>5</sup> The same strategy is used in *A escondidas*, except in this case it is the Moroccan boy who is injured – also on the leg and also causing him to limp. The scene is symbolic in two important ways: it happens immediately after the men's first intimate encounter (thus reinforcing the sexual connotations of Rafa lovingly cleaning Ibra's bleeding wound), and the injury hinders Ibra's escape on the very night when he is forced to run away.

### **Silences, glances and interruptions**

Despite this visual emphasis on the body and, in the case of *Ander*, perhaps inevitable comparisons with Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, USA) (leading one reviewer to refer to the film ironically as 'BrokeBasque Mountain' (Huddleston 2009)), sexual contact between the two male protagonists is extraordinarily infrequent in both films, with only one sex scene between men in *Ander* and a playful embrace with interrupted kiss in *A escondidas*.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the films rely on nervous glances and silences which, on the one

hand, seem unusual in the context of contemporary LGBTIQ+ cinema in Spain and Spanish cinema more generally, but, on the other, fit a pattern of interrupted and frustrated sex between men in Spanish films of the last four decades or so.<sup>7</sup> For example, the voice of Ander's mother checking if he's ok interrupts and frustrates his first post-fall masturbation in the shower. Later we find out from Reme that at the party that Peio organised with her and the two other men Ander could not take his eyes off José. On that occasion, following the classic love triangle pattern identified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her queer readings of the Anglo-American literary canon (see Sedgwick 1985), it could be argued that Reme's body functioned as mediator of the repressed sexual desire between the Basque and Peruvian men; but it could also be said that she was an involuntary obstruction.

The sex scene between Ander and José in the urinal at his sister's wedding is not interrupted by anyone but is very rushed and overshadowed by a sense of anxiety, since anyone could just walk in. Indeed, the tense, three-minute sex scene comes to a sudden end when Ander, overwhelmed by the situation, does not seem to ejaculate but instead throws up and pushes José away in apparent disgust at what has happened. In *A escondidas*, Rafa's kiss on the mirror, also in the bathroom, is similarly interrupted by a phone call, and his first and only kiss with Ibra is also frustrated by Rafa's friends who unexpectedly erupt in the garage used as a games room where Rafa was hiding him. Earlier, in an apparent dream sequence, that kiss was also interrupted by the alarm clock which wakes him up. The title *A escondidas* (better translated into English as 'gone into hiding') highlights the double marginality that it refers to: these young characters have to go into hiding to avoid Ibra's repatriation but also to live out their secret queer romance (see Ballesteros 2015). When they are caught just about to kiss, one of Rafa's friends sums this up quite well when he says that if Rafa is going to do that, he could at least do it with someone of his own 'species'. The implication here is that Western societies will now accept queerness more readily than interracial sex. The scene thus also illustrates the concept of homonationalism discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Although the relative lack of on-screen sexual contact between the male characters is, in part, disappointing, it is somewhat compensated for by a number of strategies that, crucially in the context of this chapter, construct their relationship affectively and in ways that serve to implicate the queer spectator through a) an insistent and harmonious visual pairing in both films, b) a series of intensively charged gazes and embraces, and c) an emphasis on the haptic image.

Visually, the frequent use of the two-shot (usually in medium shots) makes the central same-sex couples occupy most of the frame in a way that actively invites the spectator to sympathise with them and get closer to their feelings, their faces appearing in close-up at crucial moments of intimacy. In the *mise-en-scène*, the characters inhabit the space around them in clear harmony – both with each other and with the space – in sometimes unexpected

but highly symbolic ways. In *Ander*, two of the scenes that mark the growing compatibility between the two men significantly involve José occupying the same space under a tree that Arantxa had told him Ander used for his lunch break. This recurring shot is then used in the two mirror scenes in the bedrooms already commented on. Later, Ander and José sit next to each other during a break (see Figure 4.2). The clear visual harmony of the scene, enhanced by their joyful facial expressions, is temporarily disturbed when Peio enters the frame, but immediately restored when he exits it. Although Ander and José meet each other for the first time in Ander's room while he is still bedridden, their only sex scene is, as discussed, while standing up in a urinal. The urinal is, as Chris Perriam notes in his own analysis of *Ander*, not uncommon 'for a gay drama' (Perriam 2013: 59), but toilets, also used in *A escondidas* as a place of sexual curiosity for Rafa, have a very long history for gay male sexual encounters, thus implicating specially older gay male spectators through their own memories associated with these spaces and encouraging their affective involvement with the scene. Just as the cold, empty and transitional spaces symbolise the precarious and isolating nature of these transnational queer relationships, the optical compatibility between the characters and the way in which they inhabit meaningful spaces inject a certain sense of optimism into these exceptional love stories.

Many of the examples used in the two previous sections of this chapter are also illustrations of the haptic image. Ibra's soaked t-shirt at the start of *A escondidas*, Rafa's kiss in the mirror, or, in *Ander*, the scenes that show José and Ander occupying the same spaces separately and at different times, are part of an effort to make the spectator sense their bodies and become emotionally involved with the characters, to the point of inhabiting those spaces. The same could be said about symbolic spaces and places like the empty dining table chair or the lunchbreak tree in *Ander* (spaces not coincidentally associated with meal times, taste, smell and nurturing), or the empty pool and train station at the end of *A escondidas*. These are sites of loss and nostalgia that Laura U. Marks has defined as having 'a sense of aura, that is, the marks of a long-gone living presence' (Marks 2002: 132). In *Ander*, the absent father (and later the absent sister and mother) are quite literally replaced by Reme, her son, and José. In *A escondidas*, Rafa is left only with half of the amulet that Ibra gave him. Symbolically, the amulet has two parts that, in Ibra's words, must always be joined together and eventually reunite if they ever become separated (Ibra took the other part when he realised the inevitability of their looming separation). Beyond the associations with primitivism evoked by the object – which could be stereotypically linked to Morocco – the amulet also has sexual connotations. It's the fetish that will come to embody both racial otherness and queerness. In the final moments of the film, Rafa touches it nostalgically and pensively, almost kissing it while he wipes the tears off his face, completely disconnected from the classroom. This emphasis on touching, like the focus on smelling, sobbing and vomiting in the toilet sex scene in *Ander*, is part of the films' haptic narrative that, as Marks

has explained, enables a closeness between the spectator and the image which is prevented in optical distant vision. When this happens, she adds, ‘we cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting’ (Marks 2002: xvi).

Both *Ander* and *A escondidas* are filled with moments of the ‘stickiness’ that, as mentioned in our introduction, Ahmed sees in the nature of all affects: silent gestures, glances, recurring shots and visual motifs, haptic images that invite the spectator to draw unexpected connections between places and characters. These moments help to establish a dialogue between affects, bodies and locations, and to question (or at least shake up) dominant discourses of both queerness and migration. The ‘affective turn’ in cultural studies has been particularly aware of the role of place and location in relation to major affects such as trauma, shame, and happiness. As shown in our examples, places and locations are, from a transnational migrant queer perspective, rarely mere transitional throughways or non-spaces. By virtue of their own subjectivity, they become a semiotic conditioner of feelings and emotions, as much as feelings and emotions impregnate places and locations. While the films studied don’t quite break the pattern of exoticising the body of the racial/foreign other, nor reverse the sense of sexual frustration (interruption) common in other LGBTIQ+-themed Spanish films, local and foreign male bodies here are quite literally – or at least cinematically – mirrored, thus destabilising rigid binarisms and gender/sexuality/race control systems observed in other mainstream Spanish films. In other words, transnational/migrant queer affects in these films work as a subversive force that sticks, inviting the spectator to question and resist oppressive, dominant ideologies.

## Notes

- 1 We dedicate this chapter to the memory of our esteemed late colleague, Lucille Cairns.
- 2 The Basque Country (or Euskadi in the Basque language) was one of the first Spanish territories to gain political autonomy with the 1978 Constitution. As was the case in other parts of Spain such as Galicia and Catalonia, the Basque Country’s new autonomous powers favoured the expression of local cultures and languages which had been repressed during the 1939–1975 dictatorship. The years immediately before and after Franco’s death (roughly 1973–1977), referred to in Spanish as *la transición*, were a time of intense political negotiation and deep social change which resulted in a relatively peaceful change of political regime: from a centralised, totalitarian, Catholic dictatorship to a decentralised, liberal, Western democracy. The Spanish *transición* was adversely affected by the 1973 international oil crisis and internal economic problems that generated important migratory waves, both nationally and abroad. In more recent times, far-right populism has surged in Spain. The far-right Vox party more than doubled its parliamentary representation from 24 seats in the April 2019 elections to 52 in the elections repeated in November of the same year.
- 3 We discuss this at some length in Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito (2007: 161–86).
- 4 See Martínez-Expósito (2000) for a study of the trope of the wounded male body in the context of Pedro Almodóvar’s films.

- 5 See Fouz-Hernández and Martínez-Expósito (2007: 111–34).
- 6 As will be clear to many readers by now, there are significant coincidences in plot between *Ander* and the later British film *God's Own Country* (2017, dir. Francis Lee), while *A escondidas* is in some ways similar to the queer storyline of the recent BBC television series *Years and Years* (2019), created by Russell T. Davies.
- 7 See Fouz-Hernández (2017b) for further examples of this kind of interruption in contemporary Spanish cinema.

## 5 Queering the cinematic field

### Migrant love and rural beauty in *God's Own Country* (2017) and *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017)

*James S. Williams*

#### From urban straight to rural queer

To appreciate how far European cinema has evolved in its portrayal of differently gendered migrants, it is useful in the first instance to consider migratory film as a genre within a national film tradition. Stephen Frears's pioneering 2002 film *Dirty Pretty Things* (UK), part anthropological documentary, part thriller, and part tentative love story, set around a large London hotel, initiated a new trend of British films about contemporary migrants by exploring the multicultural urban grit of the metropolis within a largely social realist idiom. While involving the gruesome trade of body parts, it offered a realistic consideration of the travails and struggles of urban life experienced by migrants in Britain. *Dirty Pretty Things* was, in fact, part of a new cycle of British feature films about migration produced in the late 1990s and 2000s focusing on migrant experience in the UK rather than the journey itself (as documented, say, in Michael Winterbottom's *In This World* (2002, UK)), and which presented, as Gareth Millington terms it, a novel and radical aesthetic of planetary urbanisation based upon the mobility of the migrant and the dissolution of the city (Millington 2016). Other films in the cycle include Pawel Pawlikowski's *Last Resort* (2000, UK), set in the seaside squalor of Margate, Shane Meadows's drama/comedy *Somers Town* (UK, 2008), located in the central London working-class district of the same name, and Ken Loach's *It's A Free World* (2007, UK/Italy/Germany/Spain/Poland), an activist drama unfolding in East London. Yet if such films offered a necessary alternative to the 'cultural cityism' of previous works about migration, in each case the city haunts the frame like a spectre: the city that has been lost, the 'present' city that excludes, and the possible 'cities of refuge' of the future (Millington 2016).

In the particular case of *Dirty Pretty Things*, which takes place largely at night, the notion of spectre applies equally to the characters, none of whom is native English: the hotel receptionist Okwe is an illegal Nigerian doctor (defined by the British authorities as an 'illegal immigrant'); his Turkish co-worker Senay is a refugee without papers; Juliette is a feisty British Caribbean hooker plying her trade; the doorman Ivan is Russian; Señor Juan is a



hotel employee making use of the hotel for his own money-making schemes; and Guo Yi is a Chinese night porter in a morgue. Secondary characters include a motley collection of Somali, Nigerian, and Kenyan men who work at the cab company and a South Asian owner of a sweatshop (even the immigration inspectors who make the dreaded surprise checks for illegal aliens are of colour). Despite their omnipresence, however, the ethnically diverse characters of the film's busy narrative remain largely unseen to the world outside and are effectively invisible. As Esther Peeren has argued in her account of *Dirty Pretty Things*, such lack of full visibility translates not into the desirable ability to see without being seen (as in Derrida's 'visor effect', for example), but rather into an extreme form of vulnerability, for what is at issue is the disempowerment of being considered insignificant and expendable, and therefore overlooked (see Peeren 2014).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the film established the trope in British cinema of the undocumented migrant as invisible ghost, taken up in Nick Broomfield's *Ghosts* (UK, 2006), based on the 2004 Morecambe Bay cockling disaster, where a young Chinese girl is smuggled illegally into the UK so she can support her son and family in China.

Yet more is at stake in *Dirty Pretty Things*. From the outset, when Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is entrusted to remedy the taxi drivers' venereal diseases, the film is littered with both sexual acts (usually forced sex and fellatio) and references or allusions to sex, as in Okwe's impassioned, accusatory declaration: 'We are the people you do not see. We are the ones who drive your cabs. We clear your rooms and suck your cocks'. It is vital to the smooth running of the narrative, however, that the putative love affair between Okwe and Senay (Audrey Tautou) remain entirely chaste. In fact, Okwe is not presented in sexual terms at all, as if that might potentially jeopardise his portrayal as the caring, smart, fatherly, wise, and ethically minded 'good' migrant. A tension is thus created between sex as crude transaction (part of an illegal migrant's daily survival at the hands of corrupt employers and enslaving middle-men in Europe), and a lack of physical desire and passion between migrants as the very condition of their loyalty and solidarity to each other. For this reason, despite Ejiofor's vivid performance, Okwe remains, like the film's framing of London as a generic global metropolis, more a symbolic, universal figure of the African migrant eking out a precarious existence in the West than a fully fleshed-out individual who also happens to be a migrant.<sup>2</sup> The same applies to the other films mentioned, where migrant sexual desire is almost never allowed to rear its head, even when, as in *It's a Free World*, the protagonist Angie, a white, working-class young woman and single mother, becomes romantically involved with a migrant called Karol, an English-speaking Pole in the same predicament as those whom she recruits for her work agency (initially only for legal immigrants, then migrants without papers). In the case of *Somers Town*, the two boys can form only an idealising and wholly non-sexual attachment with an older, glamorous, French waitress.

It is in the context of this general and still prevalent depiction in British narrative cinema of the migrant as at once urban, straight, and chaste, that Francis Lee's debut feature film *God's Own Country* (2017, UK) – a gay romance set, as the title suggests, in the county of Yorkshire – blazes such a daring new path, for in the very act of sexualising the migrant film genre it also decisively queers it. Johnny (Josh O'Connor) is a troubled and embittered, twenty-something, closeted gay man obliged to look after the family sheep farm where he lives with his disabled father (Ian Hart) along with his ageing grandmother (Gemma Jones). He finds relief from his daily frustrations and resentments only through binge drinking and casual sex. All this starts to change, however, when a Romanian migrant worker Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) is hired for the lambing season, and Johnny falls slowly in love for the first time. In its foregrounding of queer male desire and sexuality within a realist framework and family milieu, the film harks back to Frears's earlier film, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, UK), one of the key works of new British cinema in the 1980s which featured a romance between a young white skinhead (also called Johnny) and his former school-friend Omar, a second-generation Pakistani immigrant. Indeed, certain scenes in *God's Own Country*, such as Johnny and Gheorghe sharing a small bath and opening up to each other in carefree banter, evoke the lyrical, erotic moments between Omar (Gordon Warnecke) and Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis) flicking soapsuds at each other in a positive image of unity and hybridity. Yet the setting of this interracial and cross-generational comedy drama was the diasporic Asian community of inner London under Thatcherism, and it raised hard-hitting questions about postcolonial identity in relation to the politics of race, class, and gender. Moreover, while *God's Own Country* has a similar pro-immigration subtext and has been hailed by some as a love story for contemporary, Brexit-era Britain, with symbolic appeal for gentleness at a time of national instability (see, for instance, Gilbey 2017), its earnest – at times dour – drama is entirely different in tone and ambition from *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which played seductively with social and sexual taboos in provocative and subversive fashion.

With its intensive focus on one man's gradual understanding of himself as gay and his gradual acquiring of sensitivity and tenderness through affection and erotic love, *God's Own Country* corresponds more to what Andrew Moor has termed the 'New Gay Sincerity', that is, the current trend in independent queer British cinema towards low-key naturalism which references also the high-style postmodernism of oppositional 1990s New Queer Cinema (Moor 2018). By recording quotidian and largely non-metropolitan gay lives, such cinema aims to achieve both LGBTIQ+ specificity and a universal application. A prime case in point is Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011, UK), shot entirely on location in Nottingham, though it could, in fact, be any other mid-sized northern provincial town. The film's agenda, Moor argues, is to marry its *vérité* realism – including sensitively and naturalistically filmed

sex scenes that are neither overly eroticised nor subject to an explicitly pornographic grammar (the two protagonists's bodies are not hyperbolically muscled or lingeringly objectified) – to patterns of static long shots that detach the viewer from the material (Moor 2018: 5–7). In Moor's neat formalisation, the film displays a commitment to a mode of observational realism founded in the long take and buttressed by rack focusing and camera movement which effectively edit what we notice within each shot. Such 'emphatic naturalism' characterises also *God's Own Country* with its frank depiction both of sex (explicit rough sex outside in the mud, bracing after-sex conversation while naked in the bath, used condoms lying on the floor, full-frontal shots of both men naked from the waist down and casually displaying their genitals), and of rural reality (brooding grey dawns, the dirt and muck of farmwork, lambing and examining of pregnant heifers undertaken by the two leads themselves) – all intensified here by Joshua James Richards's luminous cinematography capturing the dramatic Pennine landscape.

By heading into the more racially homogenous and traditionally 'straight' regions of the northern British rural countryside (the film takes place in and around the Silsden area of Keighley in West Yorkshire), *God's Own Country* takes New Gay Sincerity into entirely new social and migrant territory. Often regarded as a site of gay oppression and repression – an isolated, hostile zone where both gays and migrants can be invisible figures – the rural countryside is presented here as an authentic space of refuge and potential liberation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the film traces a clear and affirmative arc: a personal journey from desperate solitude and abjection (Johnny's random, impersonal, almost feral, anonymous sex performed in a state of self-hate) to domestic and spiritual awakening through the acceptance of emotional attraction and loving commitment. It is through Gheorghe's kind and dexterous hands – hands that can skin a dead lamb clean and put its still-warm pelt on an orphaned baby (the all-but-dead runt of the litter) in order to persuade another ewe to suckle it and keep it alive – that Johnny, himself a lost lamb, will learn finally to accept vulnerability and articulate his feelings, even about his mother whom he lost early, while at the same time opening himself up to emotion and fulgurant sensuality (the pleasures of a fireside kiss, a sustained caress). Sometimes this process can appear overdetermined, as when the portentous birds heard at one point flying above are revealed to be swallows that migrate and mate for life. Yet the film is also about the redemption of place, for Johnny's self-disgust has been induced in large part by feeling imprisoned by a legacy (the farm) that he rejects. Following his father's second debilitating stroke which leaves him comatose in hospital, Johnny will eventually secure his place on the farm with Gheorghe. Despite their temporary falling-out after Johnny's reversion to old sexual habits, prompting Gheorghe's abrupt departure to an arable farm in Fife, the two men are back together at the end and free to establish a new life on the farm together as a couple.



Figure 5.1 The very picture of New Gay Sincerity: Johnny (Josh O'Connor) opening up to Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) after their first night together in *God's Own Country* (2017)

Source: *God's Own Country* (2017), directed by Francis Lee © Dales Productions Ltd/BFI, and Lionsgate/Picturehouse Entertainment (2018).

### Migrant space foreclosed

*God's Own Country* is a consummately crafted film charting sensuously, yet un sentimentally, an intense, transformative relationship and the creation of softer, more supple forms of masculinity inflected by class and cultural and ethnic difference. Reading the film phenomenologically, Alice Pember has justly praised its startling affective force and haptic focus on small visual details, such as the textures of flowers and lambs' wool which Gheorghe carefully tends, to which we may add the lovely moments of Johnny smelling Gheorghe's clothing or finally reaching out to touch the hand of his hospitalised father. As Pember suggests, the empathy generated between the audience and the screen is modelled by Gheorghe's sensibility and sensitivity: not only does Gheorghe cherish the natural scenery (Gheorghe: 'It's beautiful here!'), but also he displays genuine care and love for the animals which Johnny has been taught to brutalise for profit. By learning not simply to assert his superiority over animals but rather embrace what he shares with lambs (a basic need for food, water, shelter, and protection), Johnny gradually develops a non-hetero-patriarchal way of relating to others grounded in their sameness and particularity. The result, Pember persuasively argues, is an alternative queer politics rooted in the empathetic embodied communications between human and animal, spectator and screen (see Pember 2018).

Yet the achievement of *God's Own Country* is also marred in a number of crucial ways, starting with its largely complacent use of the trope in European cinema of the migrant other as saviour. Possessing, like Okwe in *Dirty Pretty Things*, 'secret', intuitive knowledge and calm, moral authority, as well as the gift of expression, Gheorghe is the more worldly, older, Eastern man who initiates the lonely, loutish, and repressed pale Englishman into both meaningful emotional and erotic loving, and the appreciation of natural beauty (until now viewed by Johnny as a virtual tomb). As Shima Vezvaei notes, as the colours grow brighter and daffodils light up the kitchen table, Gheorghe, a supreme jack-of-all-trades (he even finds time to make cheese), appears less a character than an image: that of 'an exotic saviour of the lost "Western soul" in a patronising dichotomy of West versus Other' (Vezvaei 2017). Indeed, with his wide, soft, soulful eyes, light beard, deep voice, and all-round sensuous charm, Gheorghe is consistently exoticised as the swarthy, smouldering, itinerant, handsome other. What makes this portrayal even more dubious is that his own backstory is made effectively irrelevant and denied context. Gheorghe reveals virtually nothing about himself or his former life in Romania, except that 'Springs are very beautiful', although he does murmur vaguely, while confiding his need for peace and a place to belong, that he suffered heartbreak in Romania ('I can't do that again. There was someone'). Moreover, nobody defends him when he is bullied by Johnny's family, the female bartender, or the racist white man at the local pub who flicks beer at him while the drunken Johnny is having it away in a casual encounter in the toilets. Johnny himself even tars him on several occasions with the ethnic slur 'gypsy' or 'gypo'. At the end, when a repentant Johnny tracks Gheorghe down in Scotland and asks clumsily for forgiveness, the other grants it almost instantly in a shallow final dialogue that, as Vezvaei rightly states, plays out almost like a standard Hollywood rom-com (Vezvaei 2017).

Directly linked to these glaring ethical pitfalls of representation is the film's construction of the queer male gaze, which raises unsettling issues of point of view and positionality. The formal axe around which the film functions is the act of looking and being looked at, in particular the suspicious staring of the foreign 'outsider' by the white 'insider', starting with the moment Johnny first picks Gheorghe up at night in his Range Rover to take him back to the farm. By means of a high-angle subjective POV shot, the viewer assumes the position of Johnny looking out through the car window at a lowly seasonal migrant worker waiting below in the indistinguishable shadows of the station entrance. 'Fuck's sake!', Johnny bleats out. No reverse-field shot suggesting a return subjective gaze is supplied; instead, Gheorghe is automatically positioned as the alien, foreign other. From then on, the ever-proximate camera hugging close to Johnny's body is almost invariably aligned with the Englishman's point of view, even if not always in the strict form of a subjective POV shot. For example, when a half-naked Johnny enters the kitchen where Gheorghe is being fed by the grandmother, we are

immediately invited through a simple eye-line match to share Johnny's subjective point of view of Gheorghe in a high-angle POV shot. Even while Johnny is penetrating from behind, with almost brute contempt, a young, blond-haired farm assistant he has casually picked up at a sheep market, we are treated to a subjective POV shot of what he is observing outside through the bars of the livestock trailer. The first truly erotic POV shot is naturally a subjective POV shot from Johnny's perspective: the raw sight of Gheorghe outside the lambing shed wearing only jeans (00.29:40). No other character in the film enjoys such privileged point-of-view access, least of all Gheorghe who, after first being objectified as other and inferior, dutifully assumes his position as an object of erotic/exotic attraction. Significantly, one of the rare subjective POV shots from Gheorghe's point of view, when we pass from Gheorghe looking down tenderly and desiringly at Johnny sleeping in front of him (0:35:29) to an angled close-up gaze of Johnny's neck (00:35:33), goes unnoticed and unreturned, as if almost irrelevant.

The magnetic attraction of the camera towards Johnny appears unstoppable. Later, when the two men arrive at the farmhouse back from the moors on a buggy driven by Johnny, a cut to the grandmother staring down at them from a top window in the farmhouse is followed by Johnny looking up in her direction – Gheorghe can do no more here than act in kind by following the direction of Johnny's gaze. Hence, if Gheorghe represents the point of emotional and moral gravity in the film due to his innate good sense



*Figure 5.2* 'I will fuck with you': Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu) making his intentions known after Johnny (Josh O'Connor) has insulted him again in *God's Own Country* (2017)

*Source:* *God's Own Country* (2017), directed by Francis Lee © Dales Productions Ltd/BFI, and Lionsgate/Picturehouse Entertainment (2018).

and kinship with the material world, the camera's visual point of gravity is only ever that of Johnny. Even the occasional moments of pathetic fallacy, when the vast landscape is framed as oppressive or expansive according to changing personal mood, are reserved for Johnny alone. At best, the film provides objective two-shots of the two together fighting naked, then rutting together in the mud, then in the bath or in bed, either in medium or long shot. Hence, at the very moment the thematic and geographical field is being opened up queerly in *God's Own Country*, the cinematic field itself is being squarely reduced and foreclosed, with clear boundaries designated for the non-indigenous and always secondary other.

In a film where every composition and movement is presented as momentous, what happens in the pivotal scene of Johnny's sudden appreciation of natural beauty is crucial. With Gheorghe again leading the way, Johnny ascends to a high peak in the countryside. We move from an objective close-up shot of Johnny inspired by Gheorghe to look out (0:50:09), to a reverse-field shot of the landscape (0:50:10–0:50:14), then back to Johnny, with the figure of Gheorghe still present within the frame but more like an outlier lurking in the distance while peering out over the horizon in a side direction. The reverse-field shot is clearly a subjective POV shot from Johnny's point of view, as he takes in the stunning panorama of the landscape below and opens his eyes to the extraordinary landscape as if undergoing an epiphany. The sequence is extended for another twenty seconds by a series of objective two-shots from different angles and focal distances as the two men together marvel at the bounteous sweep of the landscape. Yet such shared wonder does not compensate for the fact that, although the landscape is largely filtered via Gheorghe's receptive gaze, he remains here essentially an enabler, retraining his maladjusted lover in the art of seeing, rather than a fully autonomous agent on a visual standing with Johnny. The same in matters of intimacy where Gheorghe is required to do all the necessary legwork in the slow, staggered build-up to their first romantic kiss and caress in extreme close-up (00:45:32) – the moment when Johnny finally recognises, under Gheorghe's patient guidance, the sensuous pleasure of kissing which he had aggressively refused up till now.

The increasing use of two-shots in *God's Own Country* teases with how open, equal, and inclusive the cinematic frame can be. The wide-angle shots during the tense reunion of Johnny and Gheorghe at the farm in Fife emphasise the distance between the two figures facing off against each other from opposite sides of the frame. Johnny finds himself unable to apologise for his cruel and disrespectful actions at the pub (Gheorghe: 'Is that it?'), yet with his tearful demeanour and some well-rehearsed blunt talk initiated once again by Gheorghe ('You're a freak!'; 'So are you!'; 'Faggot!'; 'Fuck off!'; 'Faggot!') the two men are quickly back together in the middle of the frame in a two-shot of passionate kissing (01:38:35). Should Gheorghe's remarkable and quite implausible decision to return now with Johnny to Yorkshire (even though, as he explained earlier, he was determined not to repeat mistakes made before

in Romania: ‘I’ve been through this before on my farm, not again’) be put down in the end purely to insatiable physical lust and desire for Johnny? Or is it more his desperate need simply to belong? As we ponder this question, the film goes into two-shot overdrive with the men’s return to the farm. After seeing Gheorghe’s initial living quarters (the caravan) being towed away, the couple turn around to face the camera before striding in unison towards the door of the farmhouse in the centre of the frame, with Gheorghe deferentially gesturing to Johnny to enter first. This symbolic crossing of the threshold to a new life together sealed by a two-shot – a spectacular queer rendition of the romantic happy ending – feels like an unjustified leap into the realms of fantasy, to the point precisely of gay ‘insincerity’. For if the two can now, as a couple, redefine their relationship and build a new livelihood together – a process that will doubtlessly be complicated by the stark realities of being a committed gay couple in a patently xenophobic local farming community – their lives together will, of course, ultimately lie in the hands of the UK Immigration Service. This issue is never raised in the film, which precludes any engagement with political issues and the related socio-economic implications (it was already in postproduction when the Brexit referendum took place in June 2016). Nevertheless, it remains a matter of genuine speculation whether Gheorghe will be able to stay and set up roots as a naturalised British citizen (will he even be able to apply for SOGI asylum post-Brexit?).

### Releasing the multi-field

With its fervent, fully embodied and embedded portrayal of alternatively gendered migrant desire, *God’s Own Country* illustrates how far British migrant cinema has travelled since *Dirty Pretty Things*. Yet, for the reasons given, it is severely compromised by its persistent and fundamentally uncritical use of troubling formal and thematic tropes, aggravated by a gleeful adherence to the expectations of genre. Such ethico-aesthetic limitations are thrown into acute relief by another contemporaneous European, queer migrant, rural drama, also working within the mainstream genre of romance but this time set in the countryside of Finland: *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017, Finland/UK, dir. Mikko Makela), a film hailed as the first-ever Finnish gay feature. Although the social context here is very different – this is not a working-class farming community but a remote area for second homes on Lake Saimaa in South-East Finland – the basic narrative set-up appears strikingly similar to that of *God’s Own Country*: a muscular, dark-haired, Syrian refugee (Tareq), an architect by profession, is hired by the father of a young, fair-haired Finnish man (Leevi), a student in Paris, to help with manual work (the renovation of the family lakehouse for sale). A similar simmering tension exists between father and the son, not only because Leevi (played by Janne Puustinen) has returned home reluctantly in midsummer, but also because he still blames his taciturn father for the unclear, possibly murky circumstances around his now-deceased mother’s departure many years before. Further, with its stylistic sparseness and restraint, *A Moment in the Reeds* displays some of the defining features of



New Gay Sincerity, such as the long take and a documentary-like emphasis on naturalism and authenticity, punctuated by sudden swells of queer desire and rapture in the bosom of nature recorded with impressive candour. The same meditative attention to material and affective surfaces and textures witnessed in *God's Own Country* is visible here too, but focused more on natural objects like the eponymous reeds on the lake, for there are no animals to serve as vehicles to refract male desire and mutual care. Moreover, the appreciation of the landscape is experienced by both men simultaneously, since Leevi admits he was blind to the beauty of the natural environment when growing up due to his wish to escape the confines of Finnish society and convention.<sup>4</sup>

Another key distinction from *God's Own Country* is that both leads in *A Moment in the Reeds* are openly gay, and, in the case of Tareq, the actor Boodi Kabbani himself migrated from Syria to Finland in 2014. This allows them to bring much of themselves into largely improvised performances. The characters communicate via the lingua franca of English, sometimes falteringly so as the softly spoken Tareq searches tentatively for words adequate to express his thoughts and feelings. Sound is an integral component of embodied spatiality, and their hushed exchanges are grounded in compassion and natural empathy. While they may have a diametrically opposed relationship to Finland – Leevi feels alienated and seeks to escape; Tareq finds refuge and wishes to set up new queer roots ('I feel free in Finland', 'I have to believe in this country') – each understands the other's need to leave a homophobic family and homeland, along with the realisation that thereafter one no longer belongs to one's home country. Tareq speaks painfully of his journey and humiliation as a migrant fleeing persecution and war in Syria, while Leevi talks in turn about the sadness of losing his artistic mother. During lighter moments they exchange confidences about their first loves, and Leevi talks about his thesis on gender and performativity in the writings of Rimbaud and Kaarlo Sarkia. Such knowing meta-references risk, of course, turning the film into something rather academic. But a difficult phone call between Tareq and his mother serves to remind us of the very real fear and fragility engendered by the migrant condition: Tareq wishes for his mother and family to be safe, yet he does not want them in Finland because that would oblige him to return to a closeted double-life.

The crucial point of difference between the two films lies, however, in how sexual desire and passion are represented and framed. From the outset, the formal option of POV shots to capture the moment Tareq enters this all-white family world is declined, allowing for a non-hierarchised perspective to be established. First, father and son come forward slowly into the frame, the former moving into the right foreground while looking ahead past the camera to movement taking place off-screen. Cut to Tareq pictured behind the father and son as he gets out of his car in the distance. He is not captured, however, from their subjective point of view, and we are situated very quickly within Tareq's general physical space, with Leevi and his father Jouko (Mikko Melender) occupying the background. What then proceeds is a series of awkward formal handshakes – a case-study in indigenous white

folk encountering a foreign other – matched by a deliberately stilted and equally uncomfortable series of shot/counter-shots. Yet significantly no POV shots are offered during this formal introduction to the three characters who are immediately presented on equal terms in the same frame. Hence, the film is encouraging us already to reflect on the relational aspects and commonality of vision, rather than suturing us into the power relations of point of view.

As Leevi becomes aware of Tareq working outside, we are treated very briefly to what might constitute a subjective POV shot of Tareq from Leevi's point of view (0:21:00), although nothing actually confirms this: as soon as Tareq looks back in Leevi's direction, the shot is cut and the latter is glimpsed in an objective POV shot looking away, slightly embarrassed. This would appear simply a device to suggest Leevi's growing physical curiosity in Tareq, and, while not consolidated or repeated, it will be complemented ten minutes later when Tareq is pictured from behind looking wistfully into the distance in Leevi's direction – a shot serving in turn to indicate a level of mutual interest and the pricking of desire. From then on, every action is rigorously conveyed in objective point-of-view fashion, and usually in the form of two-shots whereby the men are positioned in parallel – laterally, frontally, from the rear – as equally other to the viewer. Such refusal of privileged subjective POV access to either figure represents a clear formal and political *parti pris* by the director Makela. With the need for conventional shot/reverse-shots rendered immaterial, there is no sense here of an opposite or negative reverse field. Instead, *A Moment in the Reeds* deploys wide-angle shots and inclusive frames to track the men's burgeoning desire and play of furtive glances in the slow-burn passage to sexual arousal and passion. What is being created by this serene yet resolute queering of the cinematic field is a kind of extended, open 'multi-field': a versatility and elasticity of cinematic space, ranging from wide shots of the landscape and lake at dusk and dawn to extreme close-ups in the sauna and bedroom, based entirely on the equivalence and reciprocity of subject positions.

When the two men are later filmed making love, it is in lingering two-shots and long takes allowing for their sensual intimacy within the same close frame to take full hold. We start on the porch by the lake with both wearing only towels after taking a sauna together, sweating in the early evening heat while engaging in gently probing conversation and enjoying the irony of Tareq accidentally choosing a quintessentially Finnish popular song from the family record collection. Suddenly, the scene cuts dry to black and, a split second later, the sauna door flies open as the two rush forward together into the frame physically entwined and lustily kissing. It's the beginning of an intense, sultry love scene lasting almost five minutes (0:46:54–0:51:00), skilfully edited to present a continuous performance of body parts in real time where sexual pleasures are generously shared and distributed. Indeed, an easy, gentle, consensual reversibility is generated (kissing, oral sex, copulation) where neither figure dominates and each becomes an initiator of libidinal, carnal desire: after Tareq fucks Leevi, there



Figures 5.3 and 5.4 The reversible field: Tareq (Boodi Kabbani) and Leevi (Janne Puustinen) in *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017), their sameness emphasised by the shared colour tone of their t-shirts (grey-blue in 5.3, maroon in 5.4)

Source: *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017), directed by Mikko Mäkelä © Wild Beast, and Peccadillo Pictures (2018).

is a mutual masturbation scene before Leevi fucks Tareq in turn. On a formal level, they occupy the cinematic field together equitably in multiple positions (front, lateral, reverse). Tareq's deep eyes, beard, and hairy chest contrast with Leevi's smooth, glabrous, slim physique, but in the warm, reddish hue of the interior lighting their differences in skin tone and hair colour appear

levelled out: a subtle play of light and flesh subsumes them both, the eddies of sexual desire and yearning further extended by the fluid movement of water gently lapping in the lake outside. Such ardent play with indistinction and sameness – they are both, as it were, the equally indiscriminate other filmed objectively but in a wholly non-objectifying manner – deconstructs the formal positioning of indigenous subject vs. migrant other observed in *God's Own Country*, where an often paranoid fascination with the unknown other fosters a mutual antagonism that can only be resolved through acts of violence, physical, and verbal, or else, as we saw at the end, flipped into fantasy and summarily negated.

Each love scene in *A Moment in the Reeds* is compellingly different and exhilarating. Later, with the father called away due to financial matters, the two men come together again in the home sauna for two and a half minutes of sustained kissing and caressing (starting at 1:00:04). Presented as if one long take, such uninhibited, immersive queer *jouissance* – a swirl of gyrating body parts, heavy exhaling, and reverberating squeals of sexual ache and ecstasy – graphically tests the limits of New Gay Sincerity by verging on the explicitness of gay male soft porn, though significantly minus shots of genitals or ejaculation. When the scene cuts to the next morning, the two are filmed holding each other in the heady, lambent, summer light, touching the reeds as they move together through a sensate frame accompanied for the first time by moody, yet wondrously light, stylised theme music (by Sebastian Kauderer and Luke Richards) that blends with the soft breeze rustling across the water. After agreeing simply to enjoy the moment and spend time with one another in the landscape, the lovemaking becomes more muscular and direct, presented largely in mid-shot, with Leevi taking Tareq from behind. But again, they share the frame equally in a two-shot multi-field that allows the viewer to witness – and participate in – an erotic intermutuality of the objective gaze. Such intimate, self-effacing receptivity to the world, which again contrasts dramatically with Johnny and Gheorghe's ultimate desire literally to close the door and retreat solipsistically into a fantasy of belonging, evokes what Leo Bersani, building on his earlier theory of 'homo-ness' and 'expansive narcissism' (where difference is posited not as a trauma to be overcome but as a non-threatening supplement to sameness),<sup>5</sup> has recently formalised as a 'oneness of being in which the subject never ceases to correspond with, and to, the world' (Bersani 2015: xii). Here, the subject loves the other not as a source of hidden knowledge about oneself, but *aesthetically*, as a repetition, even extension, of one's likeness. (Bersani elaborates this further in *Receptive Bodies* (2018) as an ethics of 'inaccurate replications' which, by countering the 'intractable; hatred of otherness, may enable '[t]he viability of our being-in-the-world' (Bersani 2018: 49).) Such relational thinking conveys beautifully how Leevi and Tareq 'migrate' simultaneously to each other and the landscape through an appreciation – at once mental and material – of the reversible processes of sameness and difference.

It is Leevi's conservative father Jouko, lurking always around the corner and excluded from the conversations in English, who will eventually arrest

this otherwise irresistible flow of reciprocal emotion and impersonal desire. After upbraiding his son for not ensuring the successful completion of the painting (with the clear insinuation that Leevi has wasted precious time and money by cavorting with Tareq), he then lashes out at Tareq in ugly racist tones: 'You foreigner, go back to Syria!'. This, and the father's declaration that he will not pay Tareq, precipitates the latter's immediate angry departure despite Leevi's anguished pleading – a decisive act on Tareq's part offering final proof of his agency and autonomy. Although an explosive climax, this charged stand-off between father and son does not progress into all-out conflict. When Leevi returns inside the lakehouse to retrieve the car keys for his own furious exit, his father makes an unexpected and startling admission: 'Do you not think that I blame myself for your mother's death as well?'. Unable to respond, Leevi feels emotionally bound to stay. The final shot is of him bereft on the porch in the evening light, taking in the sudden total loss of Tareq who has left with no desire to remain in touch. Cut to black and a return to the gentle musical theme as the credits start to fall. The film thus ends with what was surely always meant to happen but which, with the irrepressible surges of desire and tenderness between the two men, the viewer was encouraged to overlook: the prospect of Leevi finally confronting both his repressed feelings towards his father and his relation to his motherland.

Reading this last scene against the denouement of *God's Own Country* underlines its structural inevitability. In Lee's drama options become possible for the two lovers because the ailing father, although not yet actually dead, is unable to impose his will and power on the present and future (in fact, his last conciliatory words to Johnny, delivered in impaired speech, reveal a genuine concern for the young man's happiness). In other words, the farm is no longer bound by paternal rule within 'God's own country'. In *A Moment in the Reeds*, however, the father remains very much alive, patrolling the family territory for as long as he remains its owner. It means that there can be no possibility of Leevi and Tareq – both (e)migrants in transit – forming a permanent relationship under the nationalist and homophobic Law of the Father. Their romance in the splendour of the Finnish countryside is fated to remain just that: 'a moment in the reeds'.

### New queer/migrant imaginaries

Taken together, *God's Own Country* and *A Moment in the Reeds* constitute an ironic set of formal and thematic tensions and paradoxes. In the first, the regressive replaying of conventional cinematic codes and forms goes hand in hand with subscribing to standard tropes of the migrant as European saviour and enabler. Yet this conspires ironically to produce a strangely positive narrative outcome and sense of queer futurity, however unreal. In the second, a fluid, poetic play with cinematic form frees up progressive new ways of portraying the queer migrant figure, yet this ultimately leads nowhere in narrative terms other than to a resigned though fundamental acknowledgement that one can never simply escape one's family and background, and,

moreover, that the trauma of migration, whether forced or voluntary, remains on-going. However, by so dynamically extending and sexualising the physical and social spaces and parameters of British and European migratory cinema, both films open up vital new cinematic sites and vistas for apprehending the concrete materialities and complex affectivities of queer migrant experience. By doing this within an aesthetic framework of natural beauty, they also reveal powerfully that rurality can stimulate potent new forms of queer imaginary – an intrinsic element in the emerging interdisciplinary field of rural queer studies and alternative, non-urban sexualities and genders.<sup>6</sup>

It could be argued, of course, that both films also end up effectively projecting – and in their own way inscribing – a new norm in queer migration cinema: that of the safe, established, ‘queer migrant/native couple’ (impossible in *A Moment in the Reeds*, attainable against the odds in *God’s Own Country*). There is certainly nothing immediately transgressive in *God’s Own Country* about the couple’s shared commitment to animal husbandry and homesteading, which ensures the legacy of the farm and fulfils parental expectations while remaining firmly within the normative bounds of both social/sexual propriety and property (monogamous love behind closed private doors). Yet in the case of *A Moment in the Reeds*, the radiant shared moments of queer migrant desire retain their revelatory force and ‘transmigratory’ promise precisely by not being mobilised as personal fantasy or social/political ideal. Such ultimate refusal of fixed social models, born of a profound trust in the ethical potential of the cinematic field, will surely inspire other new, radical counter-mappings of queer migrant lives.

## Notes

- 1 See Peeren (2014), which takes account of such statements in the film as Guo Yi’s ‘This is a weird city. Only ghosts are left [in the hospital]’.
- 2 Agnes Woolley rightly claims that by representing Okwe and Senay as wholly virtuous victims of oppression, *Dirty Pretty Things* merely replaces negative stereotypes with new ones. See Woolley (2014: 71–4).
- 3 The countryside as a place of refuge is a well-established trope in British cinema, notably in films made in the 1940s and 1960s, yet such refuge is usually temporary and fulfils only briefly a wish to flee the city, as in *A Taste of Honey* (1961, UK, dir. Tony Richardson) where the troubled teenager, Jo, and her gay student friend, Geoff, escape with a group of children into the beautiful hillside scenery outside Manchester. See Higson (2006) for a compact overview of the representations of the rural, and the urban/rural opposition, in the history of British cinema, where the rural setting appears to embody the nation and a picturesque version of rural England is frequently offered as the ‘true England’.
- 4 We note that in Finland, where homosexuality remained illegal until 1971, same-sex marriage has been legal since 1 March 2017.
- 5 See Bersani (1995: 7). Focusing on certain works by Proust, Gide, and Genet where gay desire reveals itself as a desire for the same from the perspective of a self already identified as different from itself, Bersani argues persuasively that the concept of homo-ness could lead to a salutary devalorising of difference.
- 6 For an excellent introduction to rural queer studies, which focuses essentially on the North American context, see Gray et al. (2016).

## 6 Facing the queer migrant in Nordic Noir

*Louise Wallenberg*

While Nordic Noir – at times referred to as Scandinavian Noir – has become an internationally powerful and evocative concept or phenomenon that encompasses literature, film and television, its existence is rather recent, at least as a definable, critical concept.<sup>1</sup> Before international audiences and critics ‘discovered’ that there was a specific regional aesthetics and mode of narration attached to the crime novels (and later, televised series) coming out of the Nordic countries, it was not considered as anything other than just ordinary Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish or Icelandic crime<sup>2</sup> – at least by the Nordics themselves.<sup>3</sup> And while ‘Nordic’ and ‘Scandinavian’ – as geographical and cultural categorisations and labels – in most international discourse are used indiscriminately, it should be pointed out that they do differ in terms of geography and in terms of inclusion: while ‘Nordic’ as a geographical label encompasses all five countries, ‘Scandinavian’ encompasses only three of them: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> Yet while Nordic and Scandinavian differ from one another – the former being more inclusive than the latter – they are, of course, intimately related, not least because they share a long, and at times complicated, history.<sup>5</sup> Linguistically, the Scandinavian languages are closely related – especially in written form – and culturally, all five Nordic countries share many traits and traditions. Further, these countries share a similar political history, with a strong Social Democratic (or at least liberal) governance starting in the early twentieth century, a governance mostly characterised by the will to create a modern, equal society informed by an inclusive welfare system. As we have reached the new millennium, these welfare states are slowly being dismantled, due much to the fervent attacks (and apparent mesmerism) coming from nationalist, populist and far-rightist ends. There is, however, one more aspect that unites the two concepts ‘Nordic’ and ‘Scandinavian’: both refuse any national claims.

In this chapter on Nordic Noir, I will concentrate on one Nordic country in particular: Sweden. I will investigate how characters who are queer and either asylum seeking refugees, (im)migrants, or in other ways ethnically different, are currently being represented and negotiated in contemporary ‘Swedish’ Noir. The characters I will be focusing on can all be described

as Scandinavian or Nordic *others* – taken that the Nordic countries for a long time remained ethnically homogenous.<sup>6</sup> While the productions examined may be labelled ‘Swedish’, it is important to point out that they are to some extent also ‘transnational’. Following Elke Weissmann, I use transnational rather than ‘global’ (an all-too-inclusive term), since transnational ‘emphasise[s] the intersection and interconnections between the national and the global, and indeed the co-existence of homogenisation and heterogenisation’ (Weissmann 2018: 121).<sup>7</sup> The transnational – especially in relation to Nordic Noir – may also propose a *narrower* position that regards a ‘phenomenon as an issue involving two or more countries and *not* a global, worldwide view’ (Toft Hansen et al. 2018: 9). This is often the case with Nordic Noir productions – as with most Euronoir productions. Most Nordic Noir, from the ‘Wallander-films’ (1995–2013) to the ‘Martin Beck-films’ (1997–2018), *Bron I–IV/The Bridge I–IV* (2011–18) and *Midnattssol/Midnight Sun* (2016), are transnational co-productions that on a narrative level serve to negotiate and identify cross-national and cross-cultural realities and geopolitics.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the *transnational* aspect of Scandinavian (and Nordic) cinema has a long history: from the very breakthrough of cinema in the Nordic region in the late nineteenth century, it has relied on joint efforts in terms of both financing and artistic creativity. As Anne Bachmann has shown, it was very common in the early twentieth century for Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian film workers to collaborate; hence the silent cinema of the North was indeed *Scandinavian* (see Bachmann 2013).

The focus here is on three recent television dramas that have been both marketed *and* perceived as part of Nordic Noir, and all of which were partly made for the Swedish public broadcasting network (Sverige Television (SVT)): *Bron IV* (2018), a series which, like its predecessors *Bron I–III* (2011–2015), was produced for both the SVT and the Danish equivalent, the Danish Public Broadcasting network (DR); *Innan vi dör/Before We Die* (2017, SVT); and *Midnattssol/Midnight Sun* (2016, SVT and Canal+). All three include characters that are queer and migrant – hence, characters that are positioned as ‘other’ (even when they are ‘inside’). But, as is so often the case with Nordic Noir and with crime fiction in general, otherness is pluralistic. It is not only the queer migrant that constitutes the ‘other’ in relation to the supposedly ‘non-other’, that is, the ‘normative’ (culturally and ethnically) insider – so do a variety of characters. Queerness in combination with ethnic ‘otherness’ makes queer migrants still more ‘other’, yet in all three dramas the most ‘other’ is presented in a complex manner that refuses simplistic stereotyping. He (in all three productions the queer migrant is male) is portrayed as a multifaceted person with whom we are invited to feel strongly for or even identify with. Hence, the queer migrant is facing us as spectators, calling out for an affective engagement.<sup>9</sup>

My aim in what follows is first to explore the tradition of Nordic Noir (and its deviances) and its relation to the current migrant crisis, then to examine the representation of the ‘queer migrant’ in the three productions. It



should be noted that while the Nordic countries are close culturally, geographically, and linguistically (to a certain extent), their immigration politics and handling of immigrants and refugees have differed – and to some extent still differ – from each other. Their respective welcoming of migrants *contra* their sturdy immigration restriction has fluctuated over the years, but what unites them today is the *perceived* threat that migrants and (im)migration are posing to the status quo of the Nordic region. The predominant mode of Nordic politics, as in other parts of the Western world, appears today to be one of fear: fear of the ‘other’, the Non-Western, an ‘other’ who – the more popular discourses declare – is bringing illegality, criminality, and terrorism. Even in Sweden, often hailed as the most progressive of the Nordic countries (adoption rights for gay and lesbian couples became law in 2003, insemination rights for lesbians were legalised in 2005, and same-sex marriage law was passed in 2009), there has been severe criticism of how the Migration Agency has handled a string of cases of queer asylum seekers in the country, most notably from voices in the LGBTIQ+ community.<sup>10</sup>

While representations of *vulnerable* (im)migrants and refugees have populated Nordic Noir for some time (like those of violent and criminal immigrants), the genre has seen very few queer characters. Hence, queer hacker Lisbeth Salander in crime novelist Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* trilogy constitutes a most welcome exception, as do the two teenage lovers in the Norwegian Noir series *Øyevitnel/Eyewitness* (2014, NRK). As for queer visual representation in general, Nordic film and television fiction is inclusive to some extent, although statistics show that queer representations on screen are still embarrassingly sparse.<sup>11</sup> In the case of documentaries dealing with queer and trans-related experiences and stories in Nordic media, most of which are broadcast on television, the number of representations has most certainly been higher (see Wallenberg 2015).

### Nordic deviations

At the centre of Scandinavian Noir, as of Nordic Noir, is often a lonesome, melancholic, and troubled male police detective struggling to keep his personal life together while fighting crimes in a welfare society that is becoming increasingly tainted by social problems.<sup>12</sup> At the root of this societal change is the fact that common solidarity is no longer a given – in tandem with the social safety net becoming more and more weakened. In many ways, the policeman with whom the readers are positioned to sympathise (although he may not be that easily likeable) is both the *interpreter* and the *bearer* of a cultural anxiety, or anxieties, that extends far beyond himself (see Robinson 2014). This makes Nordic Noir a *realist* genre: it is close to existent societal problems and tries both to represent and comment on them. A second characteristic is the sombre setting: most of these novels unfold in milieus that are dark, uninviting, and cold, and the colour saturation tends to draw towards blues, browns, and greys. Hence, the famous Nordic light – which is

never-ending during the summer months – is exchanged here for a November darkness that is constant.

While these are characteristics that have come to define Scandinavian (and Nordic) Noir, there is one more ‘trait’ that demands to be brought up: the genre’s willingness to play with – and extend – its format, making Nordic Noir constantly flexible and malleable (Forshaw 2012: 3). In this way, it refuses any homogenising classification: there are differences in gender, in the profession of the crime-solving character, in the setting, and in the amount of realism. Hence, the genre welcomes deviances, and few Nordic Noir productions fall unproblematically under the qualifications laid out previously. This is true for the three chosen television series under discussion: while all are classic police dramas and point to larger social and cultural anxieties, only two of them make *some* use of a grey, rainy and somber setting: *Innan vi dör* and *Bron IV. Midnattssol*, as the title indicates, takes place in the very north of Sweden, and when the summer is at its brightest and longest, that is, when the sun *never* goes down. *Midnattssol* also expands the genre in terms of location: whereas most Nordic Noir productions play out in the city, *Midnattssol* takes place in a small community, set in the empty vastness of the North, near the border with Finland – hence, a vast and always sunlit landscape as scenery is replacing the dark, crowded, and stressful setting of the urban environment. In addition, *Midnattssol* challenges the emphasis on realism that characterises so many crime dramas by relying on the supernatural, intimately tied to nature. In fact, the supernatural has become an ingredient in Nordic noir: whereas the Scandinavian crime novels coming out of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s were indeed socially realistic, the recent novels and television dramas often assume a more playful attitude towards the supernatural. Both *Midnattssol* and *Jordskott* (SVT, 2015–17) make use of nature as threatening, untrustworthy, and avenging.

While there existed a crime tradition in Scandinavian film and literature that preceded the 1960s, it is only in the 1960s, with the Swedish author duo Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö and their novels about police detective Martin Beck and his colleagues, that Scandinavian crime became known outside of its own regional borders.<sup>13</sup> Between 1965 and 1975, Sjöwall and Wahlöö co-wrote no less than ten novels – all containing references to real events while applying a more realist style than was common at the time. Early on, their novels were translated into several other languages, hence outlining Scandinavian crime, defining ‘the shape of Scandinavian crime fiction, making it recognisable to readers beyond the Scandinavian countries, and creating a set of expectations’ (Arvas and Nestingen 2011: 4). Most of the Sjöwall-Wahlöö novels have been adapted for cinema, and later, their characters have inspired new films loosely based on their novels. All in all, eight of their ten novels were turned into films in Sweden, produced between 1967 and 1994. Between 1997 and 2018, a series of thirty-eight films known as the ‘Martin Beck-films’ (and loosely connected to the original books) was made for television (TV4). The first of these films kicked off the transnational

production constellation that today defines Nordic Noir (the films were backed financially by Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland and Norway, and initially also France).

While most of the Beck-films have focused on crimes such as gynecide, drug trafficking, prostitution, MC gang rivalry, and underground criminality, two out of four films made in 2018 centred on issues dealing with problems and threats attached to (im)migration: in *Ditt eget blod/Your Own Blood* (2018, Sweden, dir. Mårten Klingberg), Beck has to deal with terrorist threats with direct connections to the Middle East, and in *Den tunna isen/The Thin Ice* (2018, Sweden, dir. Mårten Klingberg), with solving a murder that is the consequence of a violent resistance towards war refugees in a suburb outside of Stockholm. The inclusion of (im)migrant representations is also present in the many films made based on Henning Mankell's crime novels about detective Kurt Wallander, the Wallander series (1994–2013). Here, most (im)migrants are presented not only as vulnerable, but as victims of hate crimes and exploitation: in the four-part television series *Mördare utan ansiktet/Faceless Killers* (TV4, 1995) a refugee camp is put on fire and a Somalian man is murdered; in *Afrikanen/The African* (2005, Sweden, dir. Stephan Apelgren) an African man is found dead on a train from Poland arriving in Sweden; in *Täckmanteln/The Cover* (2006, Sweden, dir. Anders Engström), ten migrants are found dead in a container in the middle of the forest; and in *Saknaden/The Missing* (2013, Sweden, dir. Agneta Fagerström-Olsson), a Moldavian woman who has been forced into prostitution is murdered. These all take up the haunting and precarious issues of human and sex trafficking, violent (and latent) racism, and deadly xenophobia. These representations have served to bring 'Europe's minorities to the forefront of public visibility and often reduce[d] their identity to that of perpetrators or victims of violence' (Celik 2015: 5). In the three televised dramas under discussion, the migrants are composed of recognisable facets from earlier Nordic Noir productions – that is, as victims and/or criminals – but other aspects are also added to their personas. All three constitute fuller, more complex, migrant portraits, contributing to give the 'migrant' and the 'other' a multifaceted face. In this way, these three productions challenge the existing limited and generic images of migrants and serve to make them *human*.<sup>14</sup>

### Queer migrants in *Innan vi dör*, *Bron* and *Midnattssol*

*Innan vi dör/Before We Die* is a ten-part television series produced for Swedish Public National Television by B-Reel and co-produced by German ZDT and Filmregion Stockholm-Mälardalen/Filmcapital. It centres around a woman detective, Hanna Svensson (Marie Richardsson), and her thorny relationship to her son Christian (Adam Pålsson), who – without her knowledge – is working for her colleague and lover as an infiltrator in a mafia family. The focus of their investigation is the Mimica family. The Mimicas are of Croatian origin and escaped the Balkan wars in the mid-1990s

after a massacre killing many of their family members, including the father. In Stockholm, they have established a small, cosy restaurant and they use it as a cover for their criminal activity involving drug and weapon trafficking. The family is headed by the mother, Dubravka Mimica (Malgorzata Pieczynska), and working for her is her son Davor (Alexej Manvelov) and Stefan (Peshang Rad), who lost his entire family in the massacre and whose father was a friend of Davor's father.

Having spent two years in prison for drug possession and selling, Christian and Stefan have become friends. As they are released, Christian takes up a job as a dish washer at the Mimica restaurant (a job that includes helping Stefan collect drug money from dealers). Christian is well liked by the family, but Davor will soon come to suspect Christian. Yet he is slickly grooming Christian, showing appreciation and at one point giving him an expensive watch, only to threaten him the next. Davor is early on presented as cold-hearted and psychopathic, as he alternately tutors, charms, and menaces Christian. In episode two, Davor (who has established himself as the brain behind the family's plan, 'Operation Krajina', to take over the entire drug business in Stockholm and beyond) surprises us: in the opening of a scene he is shown in a medium-close up, naked and panting – it is clear that he is in a post-coitus situation. The camera then pans to the left, disclosing his male lover next to him. As he gets ready to leave the apartment, he demonstrates affectionate love for Markus (Erik Johansson); hence, his character breaks with the first characterisation of him, informed by the stereotypical male Balkan migrant as heartless and criminal (a stereotype that has marked Scandinavian, and other European, crime fiction since the Balkan wars in the 1990s). Several scenes show him as loving and caring towards Markus, mostly in Markus's flat or in the car – yet when Markus decides to surprise him at the restaurant, expecting a romantic dinner with him, Davor makes sure to have Christian escort him home. As Markus calls Davor from his cell phone during the ride, Christian realises that they are a couple. A few days later, when Davor does not turn up for a family meeting, Christian seeks him at Markus's place and finds out that a night out at a gay club has gone very, very wrong. He finally finds Davor – heavily sedated and raped – in a remote trailer park on the far outskirts of Stockholm and saves him. This painful incident will deepen the relationship between Davor and Christian, and instead of distancing Christian from him (because he knows his secret), Davor now starts involving him in his operation. From now on, Davor seems only to trust Christian – his interactions with him become affectionate, and it seems as if Christian reciprocates his affection. As the intrigue escalates and the narrative focus is placed on 'Operation Krajina', Markus is omitted, and it is instead the relation between Christian and Davor that is highlighted. As they get closer to the take-over, however, Christian's situation becomes unbearable, and, after he has been forced to kill Stefan, whom Davor now suspects is a rat, he wants out. At the end, the story is about these two men: Davor realises who Christian really is and sets out to kill him. There is a



Figure 6.1 (Davor) Alexej Manvelov and Christian (Adam Pålsson) in season one of *Innan vi dör/Before we Die* (2017)

Source: *Innan vi dör/Before We Die* (2017) © Swedish Television (SVT). [www.aftonbladet.se/mojesbladet/tv/a/VRp9gJ/klart-for-en-ny-sasong-av-innan-vi-dor-i-svt](http://www.aftonbladet.se/mojesbladet/tv/a/VRp9gJ/klart-for-en-ny-sasong-av-innan-vi-dor-i-svt) (accessed February 17 2020).

final shoot-out, set on a cliff in the Stockholm archipelago in bright sunlight. Following the conventions, the criminal has to die, but it is not Christian who is doing the killing – it is Hanna, who now steps in to protect her son.

Davor is a most compelling and complex character, and although he is a cold-hearted criminal, the series makes him utterly human. He is a war victim who has managed to make himself a life in a country in which ‘Slavophobia’ is spread, and he is a caring lover who together with Markus is vulnerable, loving, and insecure. Davor the criminal is moving through a landscape coloured by racism and homophobia, but Davor the lover is human, vulnerable – the Davor he would be, had it not been for the circumstances in which he is caught. As Hanna pulls the trigger, his eyes express sad relief more than anything else.

*Bron* is a co-production made for SVT and DR, and, after *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (DR 2007–12), it is probably the most popular Nordic noir that has been screened both within and outside of the Nordic region. The series focuses on the collaboration between a female Swedish police detective and a male Danish police detective as they try to solve a series of hideous murders that are connected to both countries (the bridge referred to

in the title is the actual sixteen-kilometre-long bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen (inaugurated in 2000)). The first season premiered in 2011, the second in 2013, the third in 2015, and the last, and final, season – *Bron IV* – premiered in early 2018.

The final season in particular is highly reflective of its pertinent political and social situation – a situation that since the first season has slightly changed in some aspects and been reinforced in others. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Scandinavia (and Europe) increased steadily, and as a consequence so did the general consciousness about the refugee crisis: the crisis was covered in the media constantly, and politicians worked hard to unite around immigration policies.<sup>15</sup> This situation affected the writing team of *Bron*, and so, in the final season, this crisis is included as an unavoidable presence. As the series' creator Hans Rosenfeldt puts it:

if we were going to do a cross-border thing for the fourth time . . . we cannot just ignore the fact that the bridge has a slightly different meaning today than it had in 2011 when it was . . . a kind of road to freedom and to Europe . . . uniting and now it is actually a border.<sup>16</sup>

In *Bron IV*, the refugee crisis, involving thousands, millions, of people, is being represented by one character: a gay Iranian man in his late twenties. The season opens, like in previous seasons, with a brutal murder: a middle-aged woman is found dead outside Copenhagen; she has been buried standing up, only her head above the ground, and stoned to death. The Danish-Swedish detective duo Saga (Sofia Helin) and Henrik (Thure Lindhardt) soon find out that the victim is the head of the Danish Immigration Board, and little by little they are led to an Iranian refugee, Taariq (Alexander Behrang Keshkar), who is hiding in Copenhagen after he has been denied a residence permit. Initially he is unwilling to help out, which makes him suspect, but one soon learns that he is afraid that his involvement will put himself at risk of deportation. In fact, Taariq turns out to be a just and caring person, and although his is only a supporting role, his character is central to the plot and his presence and impact definite. While *Bron* presents a myriad of characters that are either suspect and/or not very likeable (the detective team included), Taariq is the one character the spectator is made to feel for, and with. He is also a victim – he dies, and while his death is completely unnecessary, it is expected: following narrative conventions, the vulnerable and most likeable character is bound to die. But his death is painful to watch, much more painful than all the other horrendously sadistic butcheries that occur in *Bron*. It is painful because Taariq is a victim of outrageous circumstances – first, living under death threat as a gay man in Iran, and later, forced into hiding (and then executed) in a country he hoped would be his safe haven. Hence, Taariq is portrayed as doubly vulnerable – vulnerable because of his refugee status *and* because of his sexuality. By contrast, Davor chooses to expose his vulnerability only in relation to his lover; he manages to put that vulnerability on the

side when 'at work'. The two characters clearly differ in many aspects, one of them being their different vulnerability. Following Judith Butler's discussion of precariousness (Butler 2004a), one may contend that whereas Davor is vulnerable in the way he is at risk of injury, Taariq's situation is precarious since he is in imminent danger of perishing, that is, of being killed.

*Midnattssoll/Midnight Sun*, a French-Swedish co-production (SVT and Canal+), takes place in a small village set north of the ore-mining town Kiruna, which is situated in the most Northern part of Sweden, in a large district called Norrland (meaning North land).<sup>17</sup> As mentioned, the series breaks with the dark and sombre urban setting of most Nordic Noirs, and instead makes use of the bright summer months – months when the sun never goes down.<sup>18</sup> Half of the scenes take place during the night – in bright sunlight – and the small investigating team seems never to get any sleep. The outsider, flown in from the South, has troubles coping with the constant sunlight, but the others, born and bred up North, handle it without any problem. Still, there is no question that *Midnattssoll/Midnight Sun* conforms to the Nordic Noir genre: we have the insecure and troubled investigator (not a policeman but a prosecutor), who is a single father with a complicated relationship with his teenage daughter, and who is also struggling with his own identity. There are the more than gruesome and bestial series of murders – and just like in *Bron*, the limits for how macabre a murder can get are surpassed time and time again. The increasing problems caused by the dismantling of the welfare state, so present in most Nordic Noirs, is here palpable: the entire town of Kiruna is being dismantled and moved to another geographic area, since the mine has caused severe damage to the ground on which Kiruna rests. Also, the confrontations between Swedes and Samis – an indigenous group that has suffered severe oppression from the Scandinavian states during the past centuries – is becoming increasingly violent, with Swedes flaunting racist attitudes towards the Sami people.

The series opens with the murder of a French citizen, tied to one of the wings of a helicopter propeller, and decapitated by the strong rotation as the helicopter takes off. The nationality of the victim prompts the Swedish police to get the French involved, and Paris-based detective Kahina Zadi (Leïla Bekhti) is sent up North to investigate the crime together with the local chief prosecutor Rutger Burlin (Peter Stormare), who is assisted by the tentative and insecure prosecutor Anders Harnesk (Gustaf Hammarsten). Like Anders, Kahina has her demons: she has a teenage son whom she was forced to leave behind in Algeria just after his birth, and she struggles with her identity as a Berber-French woman. From the first episode, it is clear that Kahina is injuring herself deliberately with sharp objects. While the interesting relationship is that between Kahina and Anders – she is a reserved but talented and experienced detective working for the Office Central pour la Répression des Violences aux Personnes (OCRVP), he is a goodhearted red-tapist with little experience of murder – they will never end up as lovers. They will at one point however *share* the same lover, Thor (Richard



Figure 6.2 Berber/French detective Kahina Zadi (Leïla Bekhti) and Swedish/Sami prosecutor Anders Harnesk (Gustaf Hammarsten) in *Midnattssol/Midnight Sun* (2016)

Source: *Midnattssol/Midnight Sun* (2016) © Swedish Television (SVT) and Canal+. [www.expressen.se/noje/blogg/tvbloggen/2016/09/27/forsta-titten-sa-bra-ar-midnattssol-i-svt/](http://www.expressen.se/noje/blogg/tvbloggen/2016/09/27/forsta-titten-sa-bra-ar-midnattssol-i-svt/) (accessed February 17 2020).

Ulfstätter). Both are struggling with their identity, and both experience being considered ‘other’ – in both cases in terms of ethnicity, and also in terms of sexuality for Anders. He is, we find out in the second episode, ‘half-Sami, half-Swede’. And while Kahina can only pass as ‘Algerian’ (although she is a Berber and thus, like a Sami, linked to an indigenous people), Anders can pass as a Swede – yet he, too, is an ‘other’ ethnically. Swedes who know he is half-Sami regard him as Sami, and the Samis – including his Sami mother – see him as a Swede. In this sense, he is half, neither one nor the other.

When Anders finds out about Kahina and Thor, it saddens him so much that he ends the relationship with Thor – and he openly expresses to both of them how much they have hurt him. In conveying his emotions, he shows vulnerability, but also strength, as he tells Thor that he ‘will never accept being a footnote in someone else’s story’. His openness further touches Kahina in a way that will make her confront her own demons. Yet, as their investigation reaches its end, and he takes her to the airport, they both realise that it is over. She is off to Paris, he stays in Norrland, and they will most probably never meet again. The impact they have had on each other’s life, however, is unmistakable: they have become stronger as people and, with the help of the other, each has reached self-acceptance.

Whereas Anders is not a migrant as in a person who migrates, he is viewed as other because of his dual ethnicity. He belongs to an ethnic minority, and is being treated as one – by the dominant group. He is also gay, and is



about to come out as gay – after having forced himself to pass as straight. He is emotionally vulnerable, but he shows enormous strength in explicitly expressing how hurt he is by the betrayal, and by still cherishing his professional and personal relationship with Kahina. The two ‘others’ – the Sami and the Berber – team up, and they will find comfort and understanding in each other.

## Conclusion

Anders, Davor, and Taariq have little in common except for being ethnically and sexually ‘other’. Their situations are worlds apart: as a child Davor survived and escaped a war, and circumstances have turned him into a criminal; while he stresses that the family must always speak and ‘be’ Swedish, he is always other, always an (im)migrant. Taariq, a refugee in hiding after his application for residency has been denied, finds himself in an unbearable and precarious situation, and his death highlights the situation for many queer refugees: if not granted permission to stay, and sent back to their country of origin, they risk ‘perishing’, that is, death. Anders is ‘other’ because of being half-Sami, half-Swede, and he experiences discrimination and racism daily, both by the Samis and by the Swedes. All three are represented as vulnerable, and all three are not only likeable as characters: each series makes an effort to present complex characters with whom the spectator can also identify. They face the spectator who is forced to face them back. The affective engagement these three characters manage to evoke is, I believe, of immense importance. Although fictional characters created for the purpose of suspense and entertainment, they each make the migrant a human subject demanding recognition. Whereas actual migrants and refugees are ‘hidden’ behind statistics and press images, often showing innumerable faceless refugees moving in large groups, these three characters – in their vulnerable position as ‘other’ – make possible a form of Levinasian ‘face-to-face’ encounter that both ‘orders and ordains’ the spectator to feel and care for them.

Vulnerability, as a new political language emanating from the severe refugee crisis (and also from the #MeToo movement), is ambiguous and troubling. It is a difficult concept because it connotes dependence and weakness as well as victimisation. As Anu Koivunen et al have pointed out, ‘[m]aking injustices visible may result in reinforcing . . . assumptions about vulnerability as non-agency’ (Koivunen et al. 2018: 5). The three characters focused upon here are vulnerable, and to a certain degree their representation appears to reinforce the image of the migrant as a victim, yet they are not without agency. While the discourse of vulnerability can serve to support paternalistic, racist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-feminist agendas, these three representations instead work powerfully against them.

## Notes

- 1 Nordic Noir has spread into other visual fields beyond film and television, including fashion photography: a Nordic Noir aesthetic became popular in fashion spreads in various high fashion magazines in the early-to-mid 2010s.
- 2 According to Audun Engelstad, Nordic Noir was ‘discovered’ sometime between 2009 and 2011: in 2009, the three novels by Stieg Larsson – the *Millennium* trilogy – were released as theatrical movies (and later reedited into a six-episode television series), and in 2011 Jo Nesbø’s *Hodejegerne/Headhunters* was adapted for the big screen. Hence, Nordic Noir emerged as a concept in conjunction with the international success of a few screen versions, some of which were adapted from crime novels, some written directly for television. See Engelstad (2018: 26–7).
- 3 Regional rather than national, since ‘Nordic’ encompasses all Nordic countries.
- 4 Barry Forshaw points out the specificity of each culture, writing that ‘despite the proximity to one another of the various Scandinavian countries, their individual identities are remarkably pronounced. The patience generally shown by the inhabitants when the British and Americans lazily lump all the Scandinavian nations together is both surprising and admirable’. See Forshaw (2011).
- 5 Southern Sweden was Danish up until 1658, Finland was part of Sweden up until 1809, Norway and Denmark were in a union (together with Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland) up until 1814, and between 1814 and 1905 Norway was in a union with Sweden.
- 6 It was not until after the mid-twentieth century that the populations started to become more heterogenous, and this change was greatly due to the immigration of labour from southern Europe. Later, political and war refugees from South America, the Balkans, and the Middle East sought their way up North, and, in more recent times, the largest proportion of immigrants has consisted of war refugees from Syria and Afghanistan together with neighbouring countries.
- 7 See Esser (2002, 2007).
- 8 In terms of co-production, *Bron/The Bridge IV* is a prime example of how even Nordic Noir has become transnational in terms of funding: it involved as producers the Swedish film production companies Filmance and Nimbus Film (for the Swedish and Danish public service institutions SVT and DR), as well as ZDF (Germany) and NRK (Norway). It was co-financed by Film in Skåne, Ystad-Österlen Filmfond, the Copenhagen Film Fund, as well as Nordvision. See Toft Hansen et al. (2018: 8–9).
- 9 I have searched for lesbian migrant representations in Nordic Noir but found none. Could it be that the image of a lesbian migrant is one form of ‘othering’ too many? Or is it that representations of men are still presumed to be more ‘interesting’ than those of women?
- 10 See, for example, [www.rfsl.se/aktuellt/forsamrat-lage-for-hbtq-flyktingar/](http://www.rfsl.se/aktuellt/forsamrat-lage-for-hbtq-flyktingar/) and [www.migrationsinfo.se/migration/sverigelhbtq-flyktingar/](http://www.migrationsinfo.se/migration/sverigelhbtq-flyktingar/). In most instances, the criticism centres on the pressure that asylum seekers feel they are under to ‘perform’ their sexuality when interacting with the Agency in order to convince it of their queerness. See [www.qx.se/tag/hbtq-flykting/](http://www.qx.se/tag/hbtq-flykting/) (accessed 1 August 2019). In Norway, much criticism has been directed against the government and a system that discriminates against queer family immigration. See [www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/4d8rjG/syrisk-flyktning-faar-ikke-gjenforenes-med-kjaeresten-i-norge-systemet-diskriminerer-homofile?utm\\_source=inline-teaser&utm\\_content=jPE9rw](http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/4d8rjG/syrisk-flyktning-faar-ikke-gjenforenes-med-kjaeresten-i-norge-systemet-diskriminerer-homofile?utm_source=inline-teaser&utm_content=jPE9rw) (accessed 1 August 2019).
- 11 See, for example, Swedish Film Institute 2015. Only one per cent of all characters represented in all feature-length films produced in 2014 in Sweden were queer or, as SFI would have it, ‘homo- or bisexual’ (in the original Swedish: ‘En

- procent av alla karaktärer är homo-eller bisexuella'). The report also includes a commentary on the next-to-nonexistent representation of transsexual characters in the films made in 2014. Not surprisingly, the report was met with criticism for its failure to include queer and transgender in its survey.
- 12 While the main protagonist started out as a man, over the years a few female characters have expanded the genre: in Swedish author Liza Marklund's work, the main protagonist is Annika Bengtzon, a journalist solving the most horrid crimes (and who is clearly a great asset to the police), and in Norwegian author Anne Holt's work, the protagonist is the crime detective Hanne Wilhelmsen, who, adding to her 'uniqueness', is an out-lesbian.
  - 13 Norwegian crime author André Bjerke, who published three popular crime novels in the mid-1940s, and Swedish authors Stieg Trenter and Maria Lang, whose work became increasingly popular with the domestic audience in the 1940s and early 1950s, are worth mentioning here. As for crime on film, Arne Mattsson's five films about the married detective duo the Hillmans, made between 1958 and 1963, and based on the manuscripts written by crime writer Folke Mellvig, deserve a mention.
  - 14 Interestingly, the amount of media coverage of these three series in general, and of the three queer migrant characters in particular, differed markedly between mainstream media and LGBTIQ+ media. Whereas the 'straight' media devoted much space to them (and especially, it must be pointed out, to Alexej Manvelov who plays Davor), there was almost next to nothing reported in the queer media. One possible reading of this silence is that the latter disregarded these representations largely because the characters were all played by straight actors. Since 2014, a discussion about who should be allowed to play whom has surfaced in the media, leading to the rather absurd question of whether only straight cis actors should play straight cis characters, and queer and/or trans actors only play queer and /or trans characters. See, for example, Blomquist (2014) and Therese Färnsjö (2015).
  - 15 In the Nordic countries, as in other countries in the EU, the highest numbers of refugees seeking safety occurred in 2015 and 2016, but since then the numbers have decreased drastically: in 2018 only 18,045 refugees sought safety in Sweden; 3,120 in Denmark; 2,530 in Norway; 2,945 in Finland; and 730 in Iceland. See the UN Refugee Agency Report from 2018: [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68318#\\_ga=2.137077296.1265214860.1567145116-2032067315.1567145116](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68318#_ga=2.137077296.1265214860.1567145116-2032067315.1567145116) (accessed 20 August 2019).
  - 16 In an interview with Benji Wilson at the British Film Institute in 2018. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Mj6wj4LEJc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Mj6wj4LEJc).
  - 17 Kiruna, the series points out, is located some 250 km north of the Polar Circle, and, as chief prosecutor Burman tells his small crew, Norrland takes up a fifth of Swedish territory.
  - 18 As the female protagonist Zadi arrives in Kiruna in the first episode – and up to here the cross-cutting of scenes between Kiruna and Paris (shot at the same time) has clearly indicated that whereas the Parisian summer night is rather dark, the summer night in Norrland is as bright nighttime as it is daytime – she asks: 'When does the sun go down?'. The answer she receives is: 'In a few weeks'.



Part II

**Refuge, (non-)hospitality,  
and (anti-)utopia**



## 7 Post-communist and queer

### Eastern European queer migrants on screen

*Fanni Feldmann*

#### **Introduction: *God's Own Country* – whose fantasy?**

In 2017, a utopia of multiculturalism, equality, and sexual freedom was born – at least on the screens of cinemas with the success of Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017, UK). The love of a British farmer boy, Johnny, and Eastern European (Romanian) migrant worker, Gheorghe, culminated in a queer happy ending that fulfilled not only the dreams of Western viewers about the romanticised, orientalist Eastern European other, but also the imaginations of the Eastern European (queer) migrant about the West as a liberal utopia where personal happiness, fulfilment, and acceptance are possible unlike in their 'dead'<sup>1</sup> post-communist, heteronormative motherlands. With a romantically dramatic narrative providing the viewer with some sweetly weepy moments and a tearful happily ever after, *God's Own Country* does not fail to reflect on crucial issues of othering, silencing, marginalisation, oppression, repression and heteronormativity. Happiness for the 'strapping lads' (0:58:45) would be granted after having fought their battle against racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual and spatial stereotypes, survived the hardships of coming out, and achieved the affective reinterpretation and reclaiming of social institutions.

Upon seeing Eastern and Western Europe embracing in this queer union, the researcher (and queer post-socialist subject) might be tempted to lay back with a happy tear in their eyes thinking all is well. However, we must ask the uncomfortable question: whose fantasy exactly is fulfilled in *God's Own Country*? Is it not just too good to be true? Is it not just a postcolonial fantasy about the eroticised and orientalist Eastern European, who – this time with a queer twist – sucks cock instead of blood and revitalises the petrified heterosexual environment, that is, the spatial and cultural context around him? After all,

the East, for many writers in Britain today, is a space not only to be re-discovered, but also a mirrorspace that helps the West to complement and destabilise its conceptions about itself, its stereotypes about the East, and its ideas about Europe and the European cultural heritage.

(Korte 2010: 4)

But we should refrain from condemning only Western fantasies about the East and themselves, as *God's Own Country* – especially if viewed by an Eastern European dreaming about Western queer happiness – reflects (maybe unintentionally) on the cultural imaginations of the West in Eastern European public discourse, in which ‘the West is consciously construed as the significant “Other,” a role model and a desired destination’ (Stojanova 2017: 19). Imagining, idealising the West as a dreamland is Eastern Europe’s cultural heritage from the past spent behind the Iron Curtain; when ‘the West – sealed off by the iron curtain and mine blockade – was presumed to be an idealised space in the region dominated by Moscow’ (Sághy 2015: 242).<sup>2</sup> *God's Own Country* fulfils the Eastern fantasies of the West as a liberal, open, welcoming culture. Against all odds (racism, rundown farm, emotional turmoil) the queer Eastern European migrant finds a place and creates a home in the heart of the Western dreamland.

West-bound migration, as being a central social issue, has also occupied much attention in Eastern European cinema, but it was after the regime change that the experiences of emigration could reach the screen in larger numbers (see Király 2015: 170). The fall of the Iron Curtain made the long-desired journeys to the West possible. Yet at the same time ‘the real border-crossings and journeys after the fall of the iron curtain highlighted the split between the imagination and the actual experience of the West’ (Sághy 2015: 242). More than a decade later, the accession of several Eastern European countries to the European Union opened the borders towards the much desired West even further. However,

[i]ronically from the perspective of the Eastern European citizen, the West that we ‘got’ is no longer that West that we wanted to get to during state-socialism. Not only because it is a ‘real west’ . . . , but also because the ‘real west’ of the 2000s is also a place of economic and demographic crises, shrinking welfare functions, spreading Islamism and terrorism.

(Kalmár 2017: 21–2)

Although the possibilities of travelling, the opening up of borders after the regime change and the EU accession, and the actual experiences of the desired West, might have modified the images of the yearned-for cultural space causing serious disappointment, the Cold War’s bequest is still in force on both sides: ‘mental borders still divide the continent along the Cold War lines’ (Gott and Herzog 2015: 1).

When the migrant in question is a queer person, that is, belonging to a (sexual) minority group, the ‘usual’ fantasy of the West as a place of affluence, financial security, and abundance of possibilities is amplified by fantasies of sexual freedom, liberalism and tolerance (which is often reinforced by the Euro-sceptic conservative discourse, depicting the West as Sodom and



Gomorrah). No matter, however, how rainbowy post-communist queer people imagine the West, as depicted in the films of West-bound queer migration analysed in this chapter, they cannot be exempt from the inevitable disappointment which stems from contrasting a fantasy with lived experience.

In what follows, I delineate how the unpreventable clash between imagination and encounter modifies the attitudes towards the ‘Western queer utopia’ (fulfilled by *God’s Own Country*), which resonates with the transformation of (and disappointment in) the Western ideal in heterosexual narratives from the region.<sup>3</sup> The films chosen for analysis are all from the Eastern European region, from a time period that stretches from the socialist period through the initial post-socialist euphoria, the disappointment that followed, including the mixed feelings around the EU accessions, to the hard blow and aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Although the stories and their foci differ highly from each other (as a result of local and temporal differences), queer Westward movement is an overarching motif, which implies the consistent importance of this issue and allows the representation – and analysis – of the changing perception of the queer migrants’ destination.

Depending on the accessibility of the West, three attitudes can be distinguished in the representational strategies of queer-themed films from the region. The West appears as pure, unquestionable fantasy, when it is impossible to reach. The second attitude is brought about by what I call indirect meetings with the West: when certain characters who emigrated to the West visit their Eastern European homes temporarily, they become embodiments of the Western fantasy for those stuck in Eastern Europe. These films reflect on how the perfect image of the West is just a fairy tale, but – lacking actual experience – fail to deconstruct that daydream. It is only when the queer migrant reaches the West on the screen, and their experiences sharply contradict what they hoped for, that the authenticity and validity of the fantasy is questioned, and the sharp mental borders between the perfect West and East ‘always “lagging behind”’ (Blagojević 2009: 38) might be queered.

### West as pure fantasy

Before we tackle the changing attitudes towards the Western wonderland and the representational strategies in depicting it, the question should be asked: what is the West? What exactly does this fantasy consist of? Where and when exactly should we look for this ideal space? One has to realise that the West (of the fantasy) is just as elusive as a dream(land) can be. In the following films, for some the West means authenticity and truthfulness, for others pure survival, and some characters long for it in the hope of better lives. Its fantastic nature as an idea(l) is reflected in its spatial uncertainty as well: in some films, it is simply the other side of a barbed-wired border; sometimes it is Germany,

the Netherlands, the US or Canada. Even its temporal attributes can be hard to entangle sometimes. As Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielńska summarise it:

‘West’ is a myriad constellation, floating in a time-space of individual perceptions and ‘CEE’ idealisations. It is at times synonymous with ‘Europe’, sometimes more precisely to ‘European Union’, sometimes ‘Western Europe’; it denotes ‘Europe and America’ or only ‘America’ . . . or ‘Anglo-America’. ‘West’ is ‘liberalism and progress’ . . . ‘a promise of freedom’, ‘El Dorado’ – a dreamland of colourful prosperity; ‘here’ and ‘there’, perhaps (t)here; ‘West’ was/is where ‘we’ (CEE) want to be. Finally, ‘West’ is a normative ideal of ‘how things should be’.

(Kulpa and Mizielńska 2011a: 22)

Maybe today, thirty years after the regime changes, ‘it is clear that Eastern Europeans had much distorted, idealised views of the West’ (Kalmár 2017: 12). However, as seen (imagined) from behind the Iron Curtain, without reference points, the fantasy of the perfect West could thrive. This uncontrasted view, without the possibility to gain real-life experience, dominates Károly Makk’s *Another Way* (1982, Hungary). The film itself focuses on the conditions within Hungary just after the 1956 revolution; and, by telling the tragic love story of two female journalists (one of whom is simply incapable of lying, compromising herself or historical, political and social facts), it draws a parallel between the repression of truth and the repression of sexual difference (Berta 2013: 57).

The aim of *Another Way* might be to talk about 1982 Hungary through a story set in the dubious and fearful period that followed the 1956 revolution; the film is literally framed by the fantasy of the West. The opening and closing images of *Another Way* represent a border guarded by heavily armed military personnel, watch towers, and barbed wire, which mark the place of the uncompromising lesbian journalist Éva Szalánczky’s failed attempt to escape Hungary. Although it is never stated openly that this is the Western border, where else would be worth risking (and eventually sacrificing) one’s life? Although visually (and geographically) there is not much difference between the two sides of the border, the symbolic contrast implies that this is a border between two lands worlds apart. Éva’s self-sacrifice and the camera’s yearning gaze across the border assure that the world beyond the barbed wire is a realm of fantasy.

The idea of the Western dreamland emerges in a central scene of the film as well. After a night of stolen glances and kisses in a café, we can see the two main characters, Éva and Lívia, kissing in a snow-covered park. Their intimate bubble is interrupted by an intrusive and aggressive male voice. Two policemen show up and demand to see the women’s IDs, since ‘[being] involved in such a thing’ (0:37:06) goes against communist values. As Lívia is the wife of a high-ranking military officer, they let her go, but Éva, the single and outspoken journalist, is criminalised and removed from public space. She reacts by questioning the policemen’s rights to treat her in such an abusive

way; the officer's condescending answer, 'We are not in America' (0:38:11), spells out the spatio-cultural imaginations underlying the Eastern European fantasy of the West. From the perspective of (communist) power, this remark signifies her behaviour as decadent, and relegates it to the space beyond the Iron Curtain, where deviant wildlings are acceptable. Even though we know for a fact that the US in 1982 was not a safe haven for the LGBTIQ+ community (see Chávez 2013: 1) – let alone the United States of 1958 prior to the Civil Rights Movements – from the queer woman's perspective the condemnation of the official discourse reinforces the fantasy of the West.

In isolation, the fantasy of the West can only be constructed through inference: the real West is unknown, but if this (Eastern Europe, Hungary) is not the West, then it must be just the opposite. These two components in the film attribute the fantasy of the West with rights, freedom, and truth. First, the policemen should not have the right to treat Éva abusively, but they do – so they would not be authorised to proceed in such a manner in the West. It would be her, the queer woman, who would possess basic human rights. Second, the barbed wire on the border marks the freedom lacking (of mobility, choice, sexuality, speech, etc.), so there must be a lack of barbed wires in the Western dreamland. Part of the opening and closing montage is a bird symbolically flying across the Iron Curtain – as opposed to Éva's motionless dead body – fortifying the freedom of the land beyond. Third, truth (be that sexual or political truth) being silenced in 1958 Hungary is a central issue of



*Figure 7.1* Flying towards the imaginary West in *Another Way* (1982)

*Source:* *Another Way* (1982), directed by Károly Makk © Mafilm Dialog, and Connoisseur/Meridian Films.

the film. This silencing is a key motivating factor in Éva's attempt to escape. Lívia describes her death as follows: '[a] hero, who committed suicide. A martyr who went head-first into the barbed wire, because she couldn't bear the lies' (0:06:26). Following the previous logic, this means that the Western dreamland is a realm of authenticity and truthfulness, where facts are not distorted, opinions are not choked, and queerness is not a dangerous secret.

This 'pure' fantasy of the West (lacking any form of actual experience) resurfaces in later films as well, such as Dragan Marinković's *Take a Deep Breath* (2004, Serbia and Montenegro) and Ahmed Imamović's *Go West* (2005, Bosnia and Herzegovina), when, in theory, movement would be possible across the former Iron Curtain. As a result, such imaginations of the West cannot dominate whole films (like in *Another Way*), but only define the viewpoints of certain characters who, in fact, never actually reach the West.

### Indirect encounters

The year 1989 saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was shortly after followed by regime changes that swept through the region, and the decades of communist regimes came to an end. The year 1989 brought about rapid and radical political, legal, and institutional transformations, but on a sociocultural level it was far from being a collective *tabula rasa* experience:

after the collapse of the socialist systems in Eastern Europe on the political and economic levels, socialism did not, as a social and cultural phenomenon, suddenly become vacant and replaced with entirely new practices.

(Jelača and Lugarić 2018: 5)

The fall of state socialism gave rise to parallel (and often exclusive) discourses: previously marginalised, oppressed voices complemented the rigid, old attitudes. To make this cacophony of discourses in the 1990s even more difficult to unravel, Kulpa and Mizielińska call attention to how even time became 'knotted' for the Eastern European region. What was experienced as the beginning of something completely new in the Eastern timeline was right in the middle of Western development:

the beginning of the 1990s . . . is truly a 'queer time': a time of mismatched models and realities, strategies and possibilities, understandings and uses, 'all at once'. It is the time when 'real' and 'fake', 'the original' and 'the copy' collapse into 'the same'/'the one'; and yet, nothing is the same, nothing is straight any more.

(Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011a: 16)

Hence, even though the demarcation between the socialist and post-socialist time and space tends to be viewed as a strict, straight line, an event of sudden

change, it should be interpreted as a long transition period, where the term 'transition' itself 'does contain numerous paradoxes, mostly related to the very idea of the concepts of change, transformation, and alteration, deeply embedded in its meaning' (Blagojević and Timotijević 2018: 72). In other words, the regime changes did not miraculously away the socialist past and the mental borders that continued to haunt the line that used to be known as the Iron Curtain.

These entangled attitudes are reflected in the discourses and narratives about West-bound migration and in the fantasy of the West as well. Although the West continued (continues) to be a dream-destination for emigrants from the region, after the initial euphoria about a unified Europe and an accessible West, the transition period affected the perception of the West parallel to the disappointment that crept in during the 1990s. The fantasy of the West was met with disenchantment as well, and 'subsequent films about emigration became invariably darker' (Stojanova 2017: 21).

In terms of queer migration narratives, this modified attitude towards the West and emigration is represented by what I call indirect encounters. These encounters appear in films set after the fall of socialist regimes but prior to their respective countries' accession to the EU (if it happened at all), and they usually take place between a character temporarily returning from the West and one longing to go there. For the Eastern Europeans, the returning Easterner often turns into the embodiment of the fantasy characterising the West, the carrier of features attached to the imagined dreamland. In these narratives, the idea of the West is explicitly filtered through the idea of sexual liberation, as the returning characters bring back 'queerness'. However, a certain disconnectivity characterising these encounters questions the idealised image of the West. The motif of return in itself can be interpreted as an act of retreat, and, at the same time, it is remarkable that these returning characters can fit in neither here nor there: their relationships are dysfunctional and made more difficult by problems of communication.

In *Take a Deep Breath*, a character named Lana is the embodiment of the Western fantasy. Lana returns to Belgrade to tend to her brother, the young man who suffers a car accident with his girlfriend right before their planned emigration to Canada. She is a pretty, attractive woman, whose bohemian lifestyle as an artist (photographer) implies the Western possibilities of freedom of choice and self-expression; even her spectacular sports car conveys vibes of energy and development. For a brief moment, it seems that East and West can embrace each other: the two women – Sasha and Lana – fall in love. However, the interaction of Sasha's father highlights the problems lurking behind. The homophobic (latent homosexual?) judge – overstepping his legal limits – puts Lana into jail for a night, taking away every means of communication from her. Meanwhile, Sasha thinks that she cannot reach Lana because the young woman is cheating on her. When they meet in the morning, their encounter may be described as total miscommunication: Sasha is unable to ask the proper questions and Lana cannot (dares not) talk about

what happened to her. Shortly after that, she goes back to Paris, and her only words of goodbye are: ‘[i]t was a beautiful dream’ (1:06:33).

The returning emigrant and a total failure of communication characterise also the 2012 film *Beyond the Hills* (Romania/France/Belgium) by Cristian Mungiu. The basic conflict of the film results from Alina’s return from Germany with the explicit goal of taking her love, Voichita, with her. However, while Alina is working in Germany, Voichita is forced by circumstances (she turns eighteen and has to leave the orphanage they grew up in) to move into an Orthodox nunnery just to have some shelter. The temporal entanglement characterising the post-socialist space-time is most prominent in this film, as this medieval space lacks basically every aspect of modernity from technology to gender dynamics. *Beyond the Hills* differs from the other discussed films in its evaluation of the West, since Western ideals and values are seen by the Orthodox community as an abomination. The priest, acting as the ‘father’ of the nuns, summarises his opinion about the West:

I wouldn’t go to the West. I’ll tell you why: Western Europe deviated from the right path. Nothing is holy over there any more. Everything is permitted in the name of freedom. Man marries man, woman marries woman.

(0:10:45)



Figure 7.2 The embodiment of the desired West: Lana (Jelena Đokić) in *Take a Deep Breath* (2004)

Source: *Take a Deep Breath* (2004), directed by Dragan Marinković © Norga Investment Inc. and DV Solution.

Yet, the markers of the Western fantasy do not change, and Alina becomes their embodiment. Her behaviour patterns (seen as Western), such as sexual freedom, rapid decision making, overstepping boundaries, are not perceived as values but as deviances. The series of miscommunications between Alina and the closed, Orthodox community – her attempts to stir up the established dynamics of the nunnery by trying to revive her earlier relationship with Alina, breaking the strict religious rules, committing sacrilege unknowingly (she enters the church while on her period) – position her as queer in the old, pejorative sense from the perspective of the nuns, and trigger a course of tragic events. Her mood swings, strange behaviour and sexual attempts, which are partly symptoms of her untreated schizophrenia, are perceived as possession by the devil. As a result, the priest orders exorcism, and the series of purging, fasting, and ritualistic bondage result in Alina's death. With her, the unreflected fantasy of the West also dies, and the clash between the returning emigrant and those who stayed foreshadows the changing attitude towards the West.

### **Living the dream?**

In Eastern European migration narratives, the most heartrending disillusionment regarding the Western dreamland surfaces after 2004, when several Eastern European countries joined the European Union. With that, the gates to the Western dreamland, which had been opened up with the fall of state socialism, seemed finally to crumble for good. However, by the time the Eastern European migrant could more or less easily reach the West (let us not forget the local differences as not the whole of Eastern Europe has been welcomed into the arms of the EU), '[p]rogress and development has given way to crisis, decline, struggle and disillusionment' (Kalmár 2017: 21). These processes became painfully prominent after the 2008 crisis, which affected both sides of the former Iron Curtain. History seems to have played a wry trick with the Eastern European fairy tale: when the West was already quite easily accessible for most, the former dreamland was nowhere near the standards of fantasy. (Had it ever been anything more than just fantasy?) Disappointment seems inevitable under such circumstances:

[b]eing on a dangerous journey, vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation, humiliation, and abuse is obviously a most critical condition, but arrival at one's destination and realizing that it is not the fantasy land that one imagined can be at least as frustrating and disheartening.

(Kalmár 2019: 66)

Yet, it seems that the inevitable disappointment in the fantasy of the West is more deeply rooted (and originates earlier), and the growing accessibility of the West after the EU accessions made it only more noticeable, as already

the 2005 *Go West* from Bosnia and Herzegovina (which has not become a member of the EU at the time of writing this chapter) depicts the disintegration of the fantasy once it is contrasted with experience. Despite the partial success of going West, the original fantasy of happily-ever-after (or at least alive-ever-after) is shattered by Milan's death in the war. Kenan, his partner, does survive, but barely. When he finally reaches the West, he is in a highly traumatised state. His body is most brutally mutilated just before he leaves his home country – he is violently castrated as a revenge for being gay – but his emotional, mental condition is just as fragile as his wounded body. The film opens and concludes with an interview with Kenan being made somewhere in the West, and while telling his tragic story (the film itself) he can be seen reaching for tranquilisers just to be able to speak.

This interview and the TV studio it is made in is how the West is portrayed, which reflects on the constructedness and mediatisation of the fantasy itself. Furthermore, the failed communication with the interviewer re-evaluates the dreams of the understanding and welcoming West. Although the oral communication is helped by translation, the deeper understanding between Western interviewer and Eastern interviewee fails. Kenan's most intimate way of communication is music (he is a cellist by profession), but his instrument also falls victim to the war. Nevertheless, he offers to play at the end of the interview. In the following breathtaking scene, he is portrayed playing on his nonexistent instrument, tapping the strings in the air. The viewer actually hears the melody in the form of extra-diegetic music. However, when he finishes, the interviewer says: 'I'm sorry, I don't want to disappoint you, but I didn't hear anything' (01:33:11). At this point maybe we should ask: can the Eastern European subaltern speak after all?

The 2014 Hungarian film *Land of Storms* by Ádám Császi depicts the frustration and disappointment experienced after the 2008 crisis, but it also reflects on the inherited fantasy of the West by displaying generational differences in attitude towards the dreamland. Its protagonist, Szabolcs, is encouraged (forced) by his father – who clearly belongs to the generation that grew up during the state socialist period, clinging on to the idea(l) of the West – to follow the ageing man's dreams and pursue a Western football career. The father's imagination is filled with stardom, fame, and luxury, which indicates his concept of the West as well. However, in the son's experience, the German football career consists of humiliation, exclusion, and failure – he cannot fit in or perform the way he is expected to. As Kalmár describes it:

[t]he German scenes in the beginning of the film are always without music, and there is always some kind of tension felt by Szabolcs as well as the spectator, which never lets either him or us enjoy these scenes as liberation or joyful self-fulfilment. There seems to be a lack of faith, dissatisfaction or disappointment in the kind of life offered by the West,



in cultural connectivity, in the Eastern European subject's satisfactory integration into the great projects of Western culture.

(Kalmár 2017: 21)

His experience contradicts his father's imagination, and he cannot identify with the older generation's dreams about a football career and the West in general. Instead of forcing himself into a position that is not his own, he goes home, tries to build his own life, and openly refuses the father's concepts.

Although he rejects the (post)socialist inheritance of the Western dreamland and dream life – as returners from the West in also non-queer Eastern European narratives very often do – he is no longer able to fit in the Hungarian context either, because he replaces the failed fantasy of the West with another fantasy of the East: he moves into a secluded corner of the Hungarian Great Plains believing that he could find authenticity, selfhood, and peace there. However, his developing gay relationship with a young villager puts him into conflict with the whole village; he is again humiliated, physically abused, and finally killed by his partner almost as an expiatory sacrifice for having transgressed the value system of the village. The father's dream about the West as a dreamland of success, fame, stardom, and the son's fantasy about the Hungarian village in the middle of nowhere as a space of development, clarity, and innocence are both just fantasies, disregarding



Figure 7.3 Shaming the misbehaving footballer: Szabolcs (András Sütö) in *Land of Storms* (2014)

Source: *Land of Storms* (2014), directed by Ádám Császi © Proton, and Kultúrbarlang (Hungary) (2015).

the sociocultural context of the spaces they fantasise about. As long as we approach spaces with fantasy-tainted sunglasses, the lived experience will hit us as if we were running into a brick wall.

## Conclusion

Even if *Land of Storms* does not end on a positive note about rejecting the fantasy of the West, it does succeed – along with the other queer migration narratives analysed in this chapter – in highlighting the hazards and insecurities of thinking according to stereotypical fantasies, and in relativising the conceptions of East and West (Gott and Herzog 2015: 7). Through engaging the transforming attitudes towards the fantasy of the West, the films begin to queer the relationship between East and West: they ‘insist on the potentiality for other ways of living, other worlds, other types of relationalities’, which is how José Esteban Muñoz defines the essence of queerness – if it is not paradoxical to use the words ‘define,’ ‘essence’ and ‘queer’ in the same phrase – (Blagojević and Timotijević 2018: 78, referring to Muñoz). Even though Tomasz Zarycki warns about the danger of reinforcing certain inequalities ‘simply by an act of discussing them in public even through a critical perspective’ (Zarycki 2014: 8), I believe that neither the films nor talking about them in this chapter reinforce the West-East divide and the reign of positive-negative stereotypical binaries.

Having retraced the mutations in Eastern Europe’s public discourse about the fantastic West, the fairy tale-like happy ending of Johnny and Gheorghe in *God’s Own Country* does seem too good to be true. Although in Eastern European queer migrant narratives this type of happily-ever-after appears to be lost, is it not better to see – and set – matters ‘straight’, at least regarding the queerness of the relationship between the two halves of this continent? It truly does warm my heart when I watch Johnny and Gheorghe’s intimate journey towards their mutual home at the end of the film, but when I see a chance for ‘dialogic encounters’ and ‘a non-binary critical location – a space for inquiry that deconstructs the East-West divide while exploring and exploding its origins’ (Zaborowska et al. 2004: 25), my queer, sentimental, Eastern European heart is warmed even more.

## Notes

- 1 ‘My country is dead’ – stated at one point by Gheorghe in *God’s Own Country* (01:12:02).
- 2 All translations from the original Hungarian are my own unless otherwise stated.
- 3 Christina Stojanova points out that ‘[t]he curve of the general attitude to the West during the protracted postcommunist transition to market economy and democracy – from euphoria to disappointment to rude awakening and depression – has been reflected succinctly in Eastern European films, dealing one way or another with immigration’ (Stojanova 2017: 17).

## 8 *Eastern Boys* (2013)

### Hospitality, trauma, kinship, and the state

*Murat Aydemir*

The phrase ‘Eastern Boys’ may easily conjure up an undifferentiated mass of orientalised, racialised, and sexualised young men of Eastern European, North African, or Middle Eastern descent. However, the narration and cinematography of Robin Campillo’s *Eastern Boys* (2013, France) takes care to bestow a qualified individuality on one Eastern young man in particular, starting from the opening scenes in which protagonist Daniel Arthuis seeks out the singular object of his desire – his name is Marek – from a gang of petty thieves and undocumented sex workers soliciting clients at the Gare du Nord in Paris. This individualising trajectory culminates at the end of the film, when Daniel arranges to adopt Marek as his legal son under his real name of Rouslan Guerassiev, offering him a new home, a family, and French citizenship in one go. In this chapter, I want to unpack the conditions and foreclosures that inform the apparent happy ending of Marek/Rouslan’s individualisation, adoption, and naturalisation. What constellation of migrancy, desire, ethnicity, hospitality, domesticity, and governmentality enables the transition of Rouslan from undocumented sex worker to son and citizen? What are the costs and damages of that outcome? How are the bonds of desire and kinship distributed and redistributed in this film?

In a 1981 interview titled ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, Michel Foucault characterised homosexuality as ‘a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities’ (Foucault 1998a: 138). Not so much because of its intrinsic qualities but rather because of its sociohistorically ‘slant-wise’ position’, he claimed, homosexuality would facilitate ‘polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships’ (Foucault 1998a: 139). Those relationships tend to the development of new forms of ‘friendship’, which may improvise on established conventions of romance, kinship, age, marriage, and class (Foucault 1998a: 136).<sup>1</sup> In a different interview, Foucault questioned, ‘Why shouldn’t I adopt a friend who’s ten years younger than I am? And even if he’s ten years older?’ (Foucault 1998b: 158).<sup>2</sup> In Foucault’s argument, the socially experimental aspect of homosexuality is historically circumscribed, hence contingent: ‘a historic occasion’. Therefore, one cannot take for granted that what may have been imaginable in 1981 is still possible in the same way or to the same extent at other historical moments. In this

vein, I propose to take Campillo's exquisite and enigmatic film as a concretisation as well as a speculative update of Foucault's 1981 argument: what reinvention of sexual relationality does this particular narrative deem possible in 2013? The year is especially resonant in this respect as 2013 is when both marriage and adoption were legalised in France for same-sex couples. So, is Daniel's adoption of Rouslan still indicative of a queer opening up of the social fabric – or of its closure by inclusion or co-optation?

Something else that has arguably changed since Foucault's argument is the bearing of migration on the body politic at large. Although migrant communities are routinely taken as axiomatically patriarchal and homophobic, Martin F. Manalansan IV argues that non-normative sexuality is, in fact, a crucial factor for processes of migration (Manalansan IV 2006: 225). Moreover, the queer desires and practices of migrants do not necessarily fully assimilate to the Western, modern, bio-political, and identity-based form of sexuality that Foucault so famously analysed in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) (Manalansan IV 2006: 230). Instead, globalisation and migration facilitate 'emergent hybrid forms . . . involved in syncretic processes that create alternative sexual politics, cultures, and identities', Manalansan IV concludes (Manalansan IV 2006: 230). In that sense, migration potentially adds to the 'historic occasion' of creating new social forms of relationality, expanding the opportunity to open up the social fabric. Together, Foucault and Manalansan IV allow for a combined perspective in which migrants are 'queered' and (native) queers are 'migrated', in the sense of relocated in a changed and changing global context. As it may bear on the peculiar form of 'friendship' that develops between Daniel and Rouslan in the movie, involving sexuality as well as kinship, I want to situate *Eastern Boys* on this expanded and reshuffled map of identification and affiliation.

As a cinematic experience, *Eastern Boys* offers a striking combination of excess and economy. A generic shapeshifter, the film moves from home-invasion thriller to love story to action flick, with Daniel heroically saving Rouslan from the gang that keeps him captive. In addition, the relationship between the two main characters unexpectedly shifts from the transactional to the romantic to the familial. Throughout the story, polarities and reversals of position abound: client/sex worker, host/guest, hostage/hostage-taker, victim/criminal, native/migrant, citizen/undocumented, middle-class/underclass, hero/victim, father/son. And yet, this extravagant story of so many shifts and turns remains set within a narrowly circumscribed environment of just four Parisian locations: the Gare du Nord; Daniel's stylish, suburban, high-rise apartment; the cheap city-limits hotel hosting Rouslan and other migrants; and the courthouse where the adoption case is adjudicated. This may suggest that the film's generic and narrative excesses conceal a more binding and limited spatio-social economy.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, what I consider the critical event in the film – the startling shift in the relationship between Daniel and Rouslan from romantic to familial, from desire to kinship – occurs in response to events that happened at an altogether

different place and time: Rouslan's past in war-torn Chechnya. Daniel's adoption of Rouslan does not follow from the steady augmentation of his desire, love, or friendship *in situ*, but from a transformative interruption of suffering from elsewhere. How does the film manage this psychic interpenetration of global contexts? And why does the revelation of his lover's war trauma precisely coincide with the weaning of Daniel's desire and his assumption of paternal responsibility?

## Hospitality

At the Gare du Nord, Daniel arranges with Marek to meet at his house the next day. However, a younger boy of fourteen shows up instead, threatening consequences (in France, the legal age of consent is fifteen). A shocked Daniel remains impassive as more members of the gang file into his apartment, appraise the place as if they were prospective buyers, and start drinking and dancing. In what seems a deliberate elaboration of what Mireille Rosello has described as the 'metaphor' of hospitality, which casts the relationship between native and migrant in terms of host and guest, the movie temporarily entertains the xenophobic and paranoid fantasy of the 'guests taking over the house' (see Rosello 2001).<sup>4</sup> Fittingly, this 'chapter' or part of the film is preceded by a caption that reads, 'Cette fête dont je suis l'otage' (This party of which I'm the hostage). As Boss, the leader of the gang, reminds Daniel forcefully: 'You came to us, you invited us at the station'. In time, Daniel astonishingly yields to his new position as a guest in his own house; his role



Figure 8.1 Marek/Rouslan (Kirill Emelyanov) at the Gare du Nord in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

rapidly shifts from 'host' to 'hostage' to 'guest' in the course of the scene. Boss puts a party hat on Daniel's head, he accepts the offer of a drink from his own liquor, and joins the dancing men. Meanwhile, the gang expeditiously transports his furniture, fitness equipment, and artworks to a van waiting outside. At some point, the real Marek joins the party. They exchange glances.

The next day, Marek returns to the vandalised apartment on his own, offering sex. In the affair between the two men that follows, it seems at times that Marek may want more than just sex. However, Daniel repeatedly insists on the transactional nature of their encounters, formalising the exchange of money. Their fucking nonetheless slowly turns more tender, more reciprocal, and scenes showing the two men brushing their teeth together and eating dinner in front of the television emphasise an increasing domesticity. In a love scene that forms both the high- and the end-point of their developing romance, Daniel tells Marek, 'You are beautiful, so beautiful. Has anyone told you that? You're very beautiful'. Marek giggles helplessly and happily.<sup>5</sup> As soon as Marek starts to share more of his background, however, Daniel's infatuation seems aborted. Rouslan tells him he is not Russian nor Moldavian, but Ukrainian. He used to live in Chechnya with his parents and his sister as war broke out there. One day, he continues, his father didn't return from work, never to be seen again. The flooding river deposited bodies in the city. His mother was killed by a bomb hitting the family house. His real name, he tells Daniel, is Rouslan (the difference may be significant: Marek is Roman and Christian, Rouslan is Turkic in origin).<sup>6</sup> When Daniel's response seems at first impassive, possibly incredulous, Rouslan concludes, 'My name, you don't care. My family, you don't care. The bombs, the war, you don't care.' When he then initiates sex, Daniel declines for the first time. As Rouslan insists, Daniel responds, 'You're such a kid'.

In the morning, Daniel watches Rouslan leave from his balcony, Rouslan waving back at him boyishly from the street before he steps out of the shot. The scene that follows is remarkable for its tension between momentousness and ordinariness: everything and nothing much seem to be happening at the same time. From his apartment's balcony, Daniel is shown responding in quick succession to a random series of perceptions: loud noises down in the street that sound like gunshots (but that may well be fireworks or a car backfiring); two young boys running in the street (they may just be playing); and three planes flying in the sky in formation. That last image is repeated two more times. What seems to be happening is that Rouslan's trauma belatedly catches up with Daniel. As a result, everyday sights and sounds become charged with meaning and affect. Daniel can be seen to quasi-cinematographically 'edit' innocuous, unrelated perceptions into an evocative sequence that pictures a city under siege, transporting the Chechnya of Rouslan's past to the streets of Paris today. In that way, Daniel takes to heart a small part of Rouslan's past. The experience definitively transforms their relationship. That evening, Daniel makes up a bed for Rouslan in his home office and informs him they will not be having sex anymore.

Moreover, he will no longer pay for his services; from now on, Rouslan will receive pocket money instead.

### Family romance

The film presents the change in Daniel and Rouslan's relationship as self-explanatory, warranting no further motivation or reflection. The timing of events, however, suggests a meaningful correlation between Rouslan's revelation of his past, Daniel's subsequent reimagining of it, and his recasting of their relationship in terms of kinship, setting up the adoption that is to follow. Later, the movie makes explicit that the adoption is a considered preference, not a legal necessity. In the court scene on the adoption at the end of the movie, the prosecutor, suspecting foul play for the benefit of Rouslan's citizenship, casts doubt on their relationship. 'Their initial encounter and their living arrangements do not allow us to establish a filial bond,' he alleges. However, their lawyer retorts, '[i]f . . . the relationship were of a sexual nature, my clients would have simply opted for a civil union' (apparently, the 2013 legalisation of same-sex marriage has not yet been factored in the script). Hence, Daniel could possibly have chosen to continue their romantic relationship while still being able to secure Rouslan's naturalisation. On the one hand, Daniel is now able to acknowledge and respond to his lover's past; on the other, this engagement takes on a definitive paternal form, which aborts their burgeoning relationship. But why would the one necessarily go together with the other?

To try formulating a possible explanation, I first want to focus on how Daniel's remarkable vision from his balcony facilitates, if not enacts, his empathic response to Rouslan's war memories. This vision can be helpfully analysed, I propose, as a special case of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory'. In 'The Generation of Postmemory', Hirsch reflects on the fact that people sometimes appear to 'remember' and 'embody' other people's traumatic memories. Vicarious memories of this kind are produced by 'imaginative investment, projection, and creation', Hirsch writes (Hirsch 2008: 107). In a typical scenario, (grand)children take on the memories of their (grand)parents as their own (Hirsch 2008: 110).<sup>7</sup> However, Hirsch also points at the larger cultural function of kinship as a resource, 'idiom', or 'lingua franca' which allows for sympathetic remembrance beyond the family (Hirsch 2008: 115). In other words, the forms and affects of family life may be called upon precisely to enable people to relate to suffering from outside their immediate social, national, and historical contexts. Hirsch characterises such attempts to 're-embody' painful memories from culturally or historically different contexts as active 'postmemorial work' (Hirsch 2008: 111). In this regard, then, a sense of kinship may be the *effect* rather than the origin of shared trauma.

Daniel initially seemed unresponsive to Rouslan's history. Immediately after his postmemorial vision of a city at war, however, he opens up. Postmemories

usually transmit from older to younger generations within the same family; here, however, an older, French, and middle-class citizen takes on the trauma of an unrelated, undocumented, and younger migrant. In that sense, Daniel embodies a commemorative empathy that transgresses familial, social, and national borders. The ethical and affective vehicle that facilitates Daniel's newfound attitude is the idiom of kinship; the acknowledgement of Rouslan's past coincides with Daniel's assumption of the role of caregiver or step-father. However, this form of queer kinship is not the precondition but the result of the sharing of a historical burden. Rouslan's displaced pain can find a new home in his refashioned relationship with Daniel.

Nonetheless, in her argument on postmemory and kinship, Hirsch also takes care to indicate its negative aspects: 'does not locating trauma in the space of the family individualise it too much? Does it not risk occluding a public horizontal context and responsibility?' (Hirsch 2008: 115). Indeed, Daniel's adoption of Rouslan effectively 'privatises' care, bracketing public and collective responsibility. Furthermore, while Hirsch suggests that the (vertical, hierarchical, generational) idiom of family can facilitate shared memories amongst generational contemporaries – extending from filiation to affiliation – here the exact reverse happens: the couple moves from potentially equitable lovers or friends to step-father and son, reinstating hierarchies of position and age<sup>8</sup> (Hirsch 2008: 114–15). The congenial egalitarianism of the shared TV dinners seems left behind as Rouslan becomes, to all intents and purposes, a kid again. In this regard, it is telling that Daniel visually associates Rouslan with the much younger boys playing in the street in his postmemorial vision. Why is Daniel apparently unable to relate to Rouslan's past while their relationship remains or becomes one of equitable lovers, friends, or even step-brothers?

A second possible explanation for the shift in Daniel and Rouslan's relationship is more ideologically cumbersome. Daniel may be happy to enjoy the sexual availability of 'Eastern boys' in Paris – but only on the condition that the circumstances that have brought them there remain understated or opaque. Rouslan's past may bring up 'too much information', too much history, for Daniel to maintain his sexual desire. As director Robin Campillo suggests in an interview, 'I think if clients knew prostitutes' stories, it wouldn't be so easy for them to engage with them. . . . [L]ots of people who do prostitute [themselves], especially in Paris, do it because they are poor' (Campillo 2015). Especially at the beginning of the affair, Daniel insists on the transactional nature of their encounters; at the same time, he may not wish to acknowledge the precise conditions that bring undocumented migrants to sex work.

In this respect, Ross Chambers has written astutely on Roland Barthes's engagement with 'Eastern Boys' as detailed in the author's autobiographical writings collected in *Incidents* (1987). Chambers's reading focuses on the continuities and contrasts between two texts in the volume (see Chambers 1999). Set in Morocco, 'Incidents' features Barthes enjoying the (shall we say)



generous sexuality of young Moroccan men while the reality of prostitution is downplayed; meanwhile, the reason why Barthes works in Morocco as a French teacher remains unremarked upon. Another text, titled 'Nights in Paris' ('Soirées de Paris'), portrays Barthes's generally unhappy love life at home in the capital, with one particular night rudely interrupted by an ageing Moroccan ex-hustler, who is promptly dismissed. In this text, the context of sex work is highlighted while the reason why Paris hosts sex workers from the Maghreb remains unmentioned. Taking the two pieces together, Chambers argues that they demonstrate two sides of the 'forgetting' of the larger (post)colonial framework, which brings Barthes to Morocco and a Moroccan hustler to Paris (Chambers 1999: 255). The theme of commodification that is stressed in the Parisian context – in contrast to the supposedly more innocent exchanges in an exoticised Morocco – Chambers regards as a 'displaced figure for the incidence of colonialism in sexual relations' (Chambers 1999: 255).

In 'Nights in Paris', the urban everyday can only become so overly familiar, so dreary, to Barthes, Chambers continues, because of the maintenance of a historical and contextual closure, which represses the awareness 'that there is a context other than the present one' (Chambers 1999: 269). Similarly, the singular or one-sided gay identity that is suited to that constrained reality is 'the product of a limitation that excludes our potential to be other' (Chambers 1999: 269). Ironically, this contextual and subjective foreclosure prevents a genuine connection between Barthes and the Maghrebian men who were the preferred objects of his desire. A 'certain connectedness' might have been grounded on the simultaneity or entanglement of sexual and (post)colonial subject-positions, Chambers concludes (Chambers 1999: 268). When the historical conditions and causes that bring people together in the same place remain bracketed, real friendship would seem elusive.

Hirsch's argument on postmemory helped us to appreciate the positive aspect of the paternal shift in Daniel's relationship to Rouslan. But Chambers' analysis forces us to acknowledge a negative side as well: Daniel's new paternal and desexualised role helps prevent him from coming to terms with the inscription of global or (neo)colonial inequality in the desires of French gay men for Eastern boys. Early in the film, it seemed that Daniel was pretty much done with his established position and lifestyle. Either experimentally or self-destructively, he yielded to the gang as they partied in his apartment and robbed him blind. When Rouslan re-established contact, however, it was Daniel who kept insisting on formalising their affair as commodity exchange – the 'displaced figure' of colonialism in gay sexuality according to Chambers – thereby reasserting hierarchies of citizenship and class. As their relationship nonetheless developed into a more reciprocal romance, the introduction of Rouslan's horrific past becomes the occasion for Daniel to re-formalise his engagement in paternal, if not paternalistic, terms.

Indeed, the new form of their relationship can be seen to perversely reinstate the formalised hierarchy of their prior relationship as client and sex worker, with payment for services now making way for pocket money.

However, with sexuality taken out of the equation, this form of ‘friendship’ is no longer determined or even informed by the homosexual positionality that Foucault described as ‘slant-wise’: at odds, queer. The adoption is not so much an improvisation that is enforced by a minoritarian or marginal existence. Rather, the adoption is something Daniel can ‘afford’, a right he can claim and bestow, as a middle-class French citizen. And while this particular section of the film is titled ‘Ce qu’on fabrique ensemble’ (What we make together), Rouslan’s agency appears minimal or moot. Remember, it was Rouslan who reinitiated contact with Daniel after the gang’s scam, and he initially objected vehemently to Daniel’s breaking off of their sexual relationship. At this point in the story, however, he quietly seems to go along with the adoption. It remains unclear whether he does so by choice, opportunity, or necessity.

### Happy ending

What happens next? To start the adoption procedure, Rouslan will need his passport, which Boss keeps in a locker at their hotel on the outskirts of Paris. The hotel houses not just the Eastern European gang, but also various migrant families from Asian and African countries. As Rouslan plots to get his passport, we are introduced to Boss’s family: his wife or girlfriend and their baby; Rouslan is summarily called upon to help bottle-feeding the child. Thus, it turns out that the film includes not one but two queer families, both situated at the intersection of homosexuality and migration. Next to Daniel and Rouslan, there is Boss with his girlfriend and child, who are supported by an extended homosocial family of hustlers and petty criminals. Certainly, Boss is pretty mean and violent. Nevertheless, the gang members roughly share the same age and social position, and, crucially, have in common the same vulnerability as undocumented migrants. In contrast, Daniel and Rouslan are set to form a naturalised middle-class, single-parent, nuclear family.

Rouslan is overheard while talking to Daniel on his phone, and caught as he tries to access the hotel locker for his passport. Boss remarks on his expensive jacket, his new iPhone, and the apartment key in his pocket: ‘You think you are better than us?’. A roughed-up Rouslan is left bound and gagged in a storeroom. As Daniel can no longer reach Rouslan by phone, he calls on the hotel. When he gives Rouslan’s name at the reception and adds that he belongs to a group of Eastern European men, the manager specifies, ‘In that case we don’t get the names. We only know the number of people we have. . . . Social Services run those rooms. Those people aren’t hotel guests’. Daniel gets a room in the hotel as a proper guest, overhears Rouslan keening from the storeroom, and finds a way to set him free and get him to his room.

Then, to facilitate their escape from the hotel and the gang, Daniel calls in the police: ‘things are degenerating. . . . some undocumented migrants. . . . [Y]ou have to get here fast’. When the police arrive, they start rounding up



Figure 8.2 The police raid in the hotel in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

Source: *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

everyone in the hotel: the gang, families, children. Taking advantage of the commotion, Daniel makes his escape from the hotel carrying a feeble Rouslan over his shoulders; the scene very much looks like a deliberate citation of a classic Hollywood damsel-in-distress scenario. The scene is spectacular in its contradictions. Of course, one cannot but root for Daniel's success, for the plot to succeed, for a happy ending to be secured. At the same time, Daniel's 'heroism' is shown to be conditional on his knowing deployment of racist speech – 'things are degenerating' – and the state violence it predictably unleashes against the migrants. Moreover, he is 'saving' the man who used to be his lover and who is to become his son through a generic cliché that emphasises Rouslan's utter dependence and helplessness.

Boss manages to escape as well in the general upheaval and makes his way to Daniel's apartment. When he gets inside using the key he has taken from Rouslan's jacket, he finds the place empty: Daniel and Rouslan have moved out. He bursts out crying. Apparently, the formation of the 'proper' queer family requires the destruction of the 'improper' one – not to mention all the other families that were staying in the hotel.

When the court hearing on the adoption concludes, the lawyer assures Daniel and Rouslan that their case is straightforward and that the court is likely to rule in their favour. As Daniel and Rouslan leave the hall of the courthouse, the camera declines to follow them and stays behind. With the film's two protagonists momentarily out of frame, we start noticing the



*Figure 8.3* Boss (Daniil Vorobyov) alone in the empty apartment in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

*Source:* *Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

other people that are present in the hall: walking, standing, sitting, and talking; other lawyers, other cases, other issues. Just a moment before, they were extras merely establishing the realism of the setting; now, they become relevant in their own right. After a while, the camera slowly moves to the glass wall of the courthouse, and Daniel and Rouslan step back into shot on the street outside, walking into the distance and leaving the camera behind.

The scene amounts to a remarkably precise and understated ‘happy ending’. I want to argue that it does two things. First, it highlights the tension between the story’s main characters and the larger, impersonal, and collective issues at stake. Justice, the ending seems to imply, exceeds this particular case and this particular story. Each of the extras in the court’s hallway might have been a main character of this or another narrative. Second, the ending emphasises the power of a governmental institution – the court – over individual characters. We watch Daniel and Rouslan receding into the distance outside, starting their new life as a family, through an impersonal gaze that issues from within the courthouse. In that sense, their new existence is literally, visually, framed from within – hence conditional on – the court’s discretion.

In these two ways, the ending of *Eastern Boys* reiterates the film’s brilliant opening scenes. In a visual style that is reminiscent of surveillance cameras, the opening scenes patiently show what at first seem arbitrary people and goings-on at the Gare du Nord. It takes a while for the main characters to emerge from their surroundings and the larger crowd of people that share

it, and for the scene to focus on Daniel's slow approach of Rouslan. Once it does become clear what is happening, one realises one has seen both men before without really noticing them. In this sense, the opening scenes similarly stress the tension between a collective grouping of people assembled in public space and the two characters that are individualised in, and by, the narrative. Furthermore, the surveillance-style imagery once again indicates the power of the state. From start to finish, then, the relationship between the two men is framed in visual instances of governmental authority.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed to take *Eastern Boys* as a response to Foucault's 1981 argument that homosexuality offers a historical opportunity to reinvent social forms of relationality. I hope to have shown that the film rises to that occasion with exceptional intelligence, sensitivity, and honesty. The movie responds most programmatically to Foucault's invitation in the section called 'What we make together'. The heading suggests a joint relational creativity at some remove from societal constraints. In this part of the film, the relationship between a sex worker and a client, an undocumented migrant and a middle-class citizen, slowly develops into something else. We don't find out, however, what new form of friendship Daniel and Rouslan may have come up with together. For, when Rouslan shares details of his horrific past with his lover, the revelation doesn't lead to an increased intimacy between the two men but a change of course in the relationship. Daniel stops being Rouslan's lover and instead becomes his step-father, redistributing the balance and agency between the two men. As a result, the man who survived war in Chechnya, the loss of his family, undocumented existence in France, and the vicissitudes of gang life, becomes a minor again, a child with an allowance. In the last part of the film, the knowing, half-ironic deployment of the generic codes of the Hollywood action movie makes explicit and exacerbates this shift in the relationship: Daniel becomes an improbable action hero who saves Rouslan, now a pathetic victim, from the gang that has laboured to keep him alive in Paris. Crucially, the film takes care to point out the grim sacrifices that its ambiguous happy ending demands: Boss crying helplessly in the empty department, the families panicking as they are rounded up by the police following Daniel's ruse.

The opening and closing scenes sharpen the film's criticism vis-à-vis its own narrative of, let's say, 'How Daniel saved Rouslan'. Those scenes similarly emphasise the relationships of the main characters to larger groups of people, to public space, and to governmental agency. At the Gare du Nord and the courthouse, the characters are embedded in the public spaces that they share with other people, and that are controlled by the state. The anonymous groups of people in both places remind us of the collective scale of undocumented existence, which the story only includes through Rouslan's character. Obviously, Daniel's singular desire, quasi-heroic rescue, and



*Figure 8.4* Daniel (Olivier Rabourdin) and Marek/Rouslan (Kirill Emelyanov) leaving the courthouse in *Eastern Boys* (2013)

*Source: Eastern Boys* (2013), directed by Robin Campillo © Les Films de Pierre, and Luminor Films (2014).

elective kinship do little to address the problem at large. Furthermore, the public spaces of the train station and the courthouse contrastingly indicate how the story not only individualises but also privatises the solution. Rouslan's deliverance depends on Daniel's charity; the adoption and naturalisation amount to personal favour. In this way, the resolution that the story offers remains restricted to a private hospitality, not the recourse of public responsibilities or shared rights. Finally, the governmental powers at stake suggest that Daniel enacts a magnanimity that is strictly speaking not his, but on lease from the state. It's not so much Daniel who 'saves' Rouslan, but rather a lawyer and a judge. A normative middle-class citizen, Daniel is afforded a largesse that may be his to bestow, but that may not be available to everyone in the same way or to the same extent. In these three ways, then, the film qualifies its own storyline of Daniel's deliverance of his lover/step-son.

The beginning and ending of the film also suggest a more general critique of narrativity. The emergence of characters from an anonymous group of people (who become supporting characters or extras) and a binding constellation of circumstances (which becomes a setting) set us up to identify and to empathise; however, this individualising focus simultaneously limits our ability to see the bigger picture. In that respect, narrative may limit our ability to recognise the spatiotemporal, global, neocolonial continuities between the film's Parisian locations, Chechnya, and the countries of origin of the

other migrants in the hotel. Ultimately, I'd like to suggest, this insight may lead to a re-appraisal of the uncomfortable plural of the film's title – *Eastern Boys* – which may so easily be read as a generalising and generic label (as I certainly have). However, *Eastern Boys* makes clear that the plural in the title can only be ambivalently and partially remedied by the kind of individualising, romantic narrative that the film relays. That story the movie reveals as a violent privatisation: reductive and sentimental shorthand for an issue that demands acknowledgement precisely in its collective form. Indeed, at the ending of the film, as we watch Daniel and Rouslan walk off into the distance and the credits begin to roll, we might imagine Boss back already at the Gare du Nord, the leader of a new gang of Eastern boys soliciting clients and setting up scams.

## Notes

- 1 According to Mark Kingston, Foucault's remarks on homosexuality and friendship suggest a middle way between social and individual transformation, 'between the Enlightenment projects of large-scale social reform and an individualistic aesthetics of existence' (Kingston 2009: 17). Tom Roach draws on Foucault to propose an understanding of friendship as shared estrangement that resists forms of biopolitical normalisation, including that of gay marriage (Roach 2012).
- 2 In an interview, Campillo comments on Foucault's remarks: 'A thing that the French philosopher Michel Foucault said also inspired me. At the end of the 1970s, there were no partnerships or marriages between gays. At the time, most gay men of Foucault's age had younger lovers. And a lot of times, it was not just a question of age but also of socioeconomic difference. The older guy might have been a little wealthy, while the younger one was not. So Foucault suggested that gay men could adopt their lovers – that way, they could have the inheritance' (Campillo 2015).
- 3 See Williams 2013 (in particular 22–27) for a helpful discussion of French cinema's engagement with place as index of origin, identity, race, and ethnicity; Paris as icon of modernity; the tensions between Paris as capital and the *banlieue* inhabited primarily by immigrants and their descendants; and the emergence of Maghrebi-French films since the 1980s.
- 4 Rosello argues that hospitality, which she claims might not be the only, the most obvious, or even the most illuminating way of conceptualising the relationship between a country and its immigrants, is a multifaceted 'metaphor that has forgotten that it is a metaphor' (Rosello 2001: 3). The main disadvantage of the metaphor is that it 'blurs the distinction between a discourse of rights and a discourse of generosity, the language of social contracts and the language of excess and gift-giving' (Rosello 2001: 9).
- 5 An exquisitely saturated still from this scene, focusing on Rouslan's vulpine face and smile, is part of the publicity package for the movie. In that regard, *Eastern Boys* can be seen to enact the 'aesthetic work' of what Kaja Silverman, drawing on Lacan, conceptualises as heteropathic identification or idealisation, conferring the 'gift of love' on socially marginalised subjects (Silverman 1996: 2).
- 6 The film raises the possibility of Rouslan being Muslim without confirming it. Turkic in origin, 'Rouslan' is a common Russian name: he may belong to the Tatar minority of Crimea, Ukrainian territory until the recent Russian annexation; and Chechnya is majority Islamic. In only one scene does some aspect of cultural

difference seem at stake. When Daniel grabs Rouslan during dinner, the latter objects: 'Not now. We're eating now. Don't touch. It's not right'.

- 7 For a critique of this, see Ernst van Alphen, who argues that the term assumes too much of a continuity between actual survivors and their descendents, while the latter generation faces precisely a radical break in historical continuity and intelligibility. 'The term postmemory risks', van Alphen writes, 'becoming unwittingly symptomatic of the desire of the generation of survivors' children to connect to the past of their parents, a desire that remains frustrated' (van Alphen 2006: 488).
- 8 For an account of the interplay between filiation and affiliation, drawing on Edward Said's use of the terms and Jacques Derrida's 'politics of friendship', with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1879) as the main example, see Aydemir 2011.



## 9 Almost haven

Queer migrants' temporary refuge in Tel Aviv in *Paper Dolls* (2006), *The Bubble* (2006), and *Out in the Dark* (2012)

*Nir Cohen*

For progressive liberals in Israel, the partially successful fight for LGBTIQ+ rights and increased visibility of members of the community (or, rather, communities) has served, over the past couple of decades, as a prominent symbol of hope for a better, more equal society. The call for greater inclusion of – and protective legislation for – people identifying as LGBTIQ+ has been, for the most part, acknowledged and accepted, just as the rights of other minorities – namely, Palestinians who hold Israeli passports and those who do not and live under Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories – have been eroded. Although these two trends may have developed independently from each other, they are firmly linked. As the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank continues, the Israeli state has utilised its relatively progressive gay legislation to assert itself as a regional bastion of tolerance, thus masking other troubling human rights violations. This tendency has been heavily criticised by those who label Israel's rather late and limited embrace of its LGBTIQ+ citizens as pinkwashing – a cynical attempt to divert public opinion, at home and abroad, from the daily injustice carried out in the Occupied Territories, and in Arab cities and villages within Israel's Green Line. As American writer Sarah Schulman states,

nowhere has homonationalism been more consciously harnessed by governments than in Israel, where the manoeuvring of gay rights to support racist agendas evolved strategically from marketing impulses. This pinkwashing is a paradigm central to an understanding of queers and our relationship to occupation.

(Schulman 2012: 135)

More than any other place in the country, it is Tel Aviv that represents the kind of freedom Israel would like to claim it affords all of its citizens. The city's recent triumph over Jerusalem in the race to become the host city of the 2019 Eurovision song contest is yet another validation of Tel Aviv's secular, enlightened nature and, as such, also the unofficial capital of the country's LGBTIQ+ community/ies.<sup>1</sup> Israel's PR machine has succeeded in

making Tel Aviv a popular gay destination,<sup>2</sup> with its annual Pride parade in June a seasonal highlight which attracts thousands of international visitors. Although the visibility of LGBTIQ+ groups and their members cannot be denied, gay men, lesbians and trans people in Israel are still discriminated against on a daily basis, and Israel continues to lag behind European countries and even the US in extending to same-sex couples the same treatment their heterosexual counterparts enjoy. For example, as civil marriage does not exist in Israel, same-sex couples cannot marry, and the journey to parenthood is as difficult as it has ever been as Israel's law on surrogacy rights excludes gay men.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to migration, Israel's policy – as perhaps can be expected from a country whose *raison d'être* is providing a safe place for the world's Jewish population – is as selective as can be. Israel may not have a constitution, but its Law of Return is one of the foundations on which the country is based.<sup>4</sup> The immediate acceptance of any Jewish person regardless of his/her country of origin, age and/or occupation stands in sharp contrast not only to the position of Palestinian refugees residing in the Occupied Territories and other Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon and Jordan – they insist on being granted the right to return to their pre-1948 lands and homes – but also to other non-Jewish migrants: either foreign workers who come to Israel for economic reasons or refugees and asylum seekers who flee war or the threat of persecution.<sup>5</sup> Migrants who arrive in Israel as foreign workers – as in other countries, they mostly take jobs native residents would not want to do – are granted the right to stay in Israel for as long as they are in employment, but their temporary residence status does not lead ultimately to settlement as is the case in many Western countries.

Tel Aviv may be referred to by its residents as a bubble – a cultural and social sphere whose values are diametrically opposed to those lived by outside the city – but it is still a part of a country that, for the most part, discriminates against both its own LGBTIQ+ citizens and non-Jewish migrants. As such, the city's powers to oppose reactionary laws concerning sexual orientation and non-Jewish migration are at best limited. As much as it offers relief from homophobia and xenophobia, its refugees and migrant workers, queer or not, are still subject to the often racist immigration laws made by decision-makers who perceive them as a grave threat. Tel Aviv's liberal stance alone, it seems, cannot create the cultural and social change required to promote a more forward-looking discourse and legislation.

This duality – the aspiration to create a safe environment for ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities in Tel Aviv, and the realisation that this cannot be fully fulfilled under Israel's current rule and given its wider public opinion – is powerfully captured in three Israeli films, made between 2006 and 2012, which all have at their centre a non-Jewish queer protagonist (or, in the case of one of them, a group of characters) whose hope is to make Tel Aviv, and by extension Israel, their home. While Tel Aviv provides refuge for a short period of time, none of the films' protagonists manages to make the city

their permanent place of residence due to strict Israeli migration laws and a nationwide anti-foreign, and especially anti-Palestinian, atmosphere.

Documentary film *Paper Dolls/Bubot Niyar* (2006, Israel, dir. Tomer Heymann) and dramas *The Bubble/Ha'buva* (2006, Israel, dir. Eytan Fox) and *Out in the Dark/Alata* (2012, Israel, dir. Michael Mayer)<sup>6</sup> portray a city that serves as a halfway haven – a place where queer migrant workers (in *Paper Dolls*) and queer Palestinian refugees (in *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*) are welcomed by the city and its residents (in the case of *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*, the protagonists also form romantic relationships with Israeli men), but who are betrayed by the Israeli authorities.<sup>7</sup> In *The Bubble*, the tragic ending offers no hope. In *Paper Dolls* and *Out in the Dark*, a glimmer of hope is indeed found, though, as may be expected, not in Tel Aviv but in Europe. Tel Aviv, therefore, is represented as only a temporary, partial solution – a transitory shelter. In the battle between liberal Tel Aviv and Israel's intolerance, it is the latter that ultimately triumphs.

### *Paper Dolls*

Based on a TV series of the same name first broadcast in 2005, Tomer Heymann's *Paper Dolls* attempts to tackle the acute issue of foreign workers in Israel, especially their precarious immigration status. The film follows the life of five Filipino transvestites who work in Israel as health care providers over a period of several years. At night, they perform at clubs as the drag act Paper Dolls. Heymann, one of the most prolific documentarians working in Israel today, examines the relationships they form with the elderly people they look after, their desire to succeed onstage, their longing for their home country and the families they left behind, and their constant fear of being deported. *Paper Dolls* explores the juxtaposition of two forms of marginality – sexual and ethnic/racial.

As the film shows, some members of the group have grown attached to the people they work for and their families. This is especially true of Salvador Camatoy, known as Sally, who looks after the elderly Haim until his death. Both Haim and Sally describe their relationship as similar to that between father and daughter. But, more often than not, the attempts by Paper Dolls at fuller integration into society fail. Their dream of performing at TLV, the largest gay club in Tel Aviv, comes true with the help of Heymann, but their initial achievement of gaining recognition soon turns sour. Greeting the crowd dressed as geisha in Japanese kimonos, their national and cultural identity is completely erased. Following that, they decide to continue performing only within their own community, a further indication that their stay in Israel can never become permanent, and that even during this period their ties to Israeli culture – even gay culture – are unstable and loose.

As in his previous films,<sup>8</sup> Heymann expresses in *Paper Dolls* his desire to become part of the group of people whose lives he documents, or at least to make it seem as if he has. He is not only the film director but also

his protagonists' client (the film starts with a scene that shows him having his hair cut by one of the members of the group who also works as a hairdresser), their manager (as stated previously, he facilitates their performance at TLV), and, above all, their friend who shows up at the detention facility where one member is being held for staying in Israel illegally after his visa has been instantaneously and unexpectedly revoked. Here, Heymann seems to position himself in the role of the conscientious filmmaker who is fully involved in the intricate reality of the lives of the Filipinos he follows.<sup>9</sup>

The Filipinos' unpredictable legal status signals them out as outsiders – in the end they have to leave Israel, despite the number of years they have worked in the country, their fluent command of Hebrew, and other forms of attachment to the land and its people. Religion and race are, of course, a major factor in their exclusion, but the sexuality of *Paper Dolls* plays an important part too: although Heymann is an openly gay man and Tel Aviv a relatively inclusive city, the fluid gender identity flaunted by the members of *Paper Dolls* pushes them further to the margins of Israeli society, and even of the Tel Aviv gay community. Heymann's perception of his homosexuality is significantly different from the way *Paper Dolls* perceive theirs. Those differences are conveyed in the way each party – Heymann and *Paper Dolls* – performs its gay identity. Heymann is pushed to examine the type of identity he performs, holding on at first to his 'straight' appearance and mannerisms shaped by his army service<sup>10</sup> and inspired by the concept of the new 'Muscle Jew', a term coined by Zionist leader Max Nordau (a connection which makes Heymann's gay identity a clear expression of homonationalism), but slowly adopting, if only for dramatic effect, overt expressions of femininity through the act of drag, with the constant encouragement of *Paper Dolls*.

It is Heymann's adherence to strict masculine codes of appearance and behaviour that may explain his complex and conflicted reaction to the gender-bending flexibility celebrated by *Paper Dolls*. Although fascinated by the liminal space that the Filipino workers occupy as transvestites, Heymann makes a deliberate effort at the beginning of the film to assert his masculinity in relation to them, saying to one of the performers: 'It's strange to me. I'm not used to seeing such things. Sometimes I even find it a bit repulsive. Like, aren't you ashamed, shaving your entire body and all? . . . Aren't you ashamed of that?' Admitting that he has never dressed up as a woman, Heymann agrees to let the group dress him up. While having his face made up he says: 'I'm embarrassed. Where I grew up, if you dress like a girl, it's like . . . embarrassing. As a man, you have to act like a man, not like a woman'. Heymann's reaction brings to mind Daniel Boyarin's study of the pre-Israeli 'feminine' Jew of the diaspora, an image Zionism has done its best to erase and one which still makes most Israeli men – whether gay or not – feel uncomfortable. Boyarin argues that the male Jew was often represented as a sort of a woman who gave 'a set of performances that are culturally read as non-male within a given historical culture' (Boyarin 1995: 43). To combat that, as George L. Mosse writes, Zionism decreed that the Jew 'must acquire

solid stomachs and hard muscles, not just to overcome his stereotype . . . but also to compete, to find his place in the world' (Mosse 1993: 164). It is the aforementioned concept of the 'Muscle Jew' – 'the blueprint for the heterosexual and militaristic society Israel has turned out to be' (Cohen 2012: 20) – that has been instinctively embraced by Heymann and many others like him, and which is undermined by the subversive, threatening act of Paper Dolls. Through the performative act of drag, Heymann is shifting from one acquired category of identity, that of the virile Israeli male, to another – one that sees in drag and femininity possible components of gay existence – and exposing in the process the artificiality of both.

The interlacing of national and sexual identities lies at the core of the film. Both Paper Dolls' Filipino looks and feminised appearance stand for an exoticism that at once excites and frightens Heymann (as well as the manager of the aforementioned club, who, by dressing them in traditional geisha attire, expresses his desire to see in them an archetype of the Orient). But it exists also in the persona that Heymann adopts for himself as an Israeli gay



*Figure 9.1* Director Tomer Heymann being made up by Filipino members of Paper Dolls in his documentary about the group, *Paper Dolls* (2006)

*Source: Paper Dolls/Bubot Niyar* (2006), directed by Tomer Heymann © Heymann Brothers Films, and Strand Releasing (USA) (2006).

man. His initial discomfort about other forms of gayness can be read, to a certain extent, as yet another manifestation of the wish of many Israeli gay men to assimilate into the mainstream culture around them. However, his eventual opening up to a different mode of self-expression through the act of drag serves as an acknowledgment of the practice of performing identities and the ability to freely move between them.

The fact that at the end of the film we learn that almost all members of the group had to leave Israel, and that at least some of them have decided to settle in London instead, is yet further proof that Tel Aviv may tolerate its queer, non-Jewish migrants but cannot fully accept them for who they are, or let them stay permanently. Heymann's slight repulsion at first by the unapologetically feminine appearance of Paper Dolls, and the gay club owner's decision to ignore their national identity, expose Israel's intolerance behind its celebrated liberal façade. The members of Paper Dolls, it seems, pose a risk to the religious, ethnic, and also sexual consensus in Israel. Heymann as a liberal filmmaker decided to fight on behalf of his new friends, but before long even he had to acknowledge that the battle had already been lost.

### *The Bubble*

In *The Bubble*, veteran Israeli director Eytan Fox explores similar themes to those presented in his previous projects, namely the Israeli-Arab conflict, the tension between army and civilian life in Israel, youth culture, and the place that the urban, Ashkenazi (read in Israel as white European), gay male occupies in the complex political and cultural life of the state. The ethnically and sexually marginalised Arab protagonist in *The Bubble*, therefore, acts as a foil for his secure and connected Israeli-Jewish counterpart. Although it seems at first that Arab-Jewish coexistence is indeed possible in Fox's cinematic realm, that option is ultimately vehemently rejected.

The film's title refers to the way Tel Aviv is often discussed in the Israeli media. Criticised as a hedonistic haven for indifferent people or celebrated as a place tolerant of those who challenge Israel's prominent right-wing, nationalist inclinations, Tel Aviv is regarded as an almost separate entity. Whereas the rest of the country is seen as mobilised and on the frontline, Tel Aviv is the rear-guard, enjoying a carefree existence and accepting of non-Jewish refugees, foreign workers, and immigrants. Even though that sentiment about the distinction between Tel Aviv and the rest of the country serves as the backdrop in Fox's film, the plot itself refutes this myth. As the film shows, Tel Aviv, being a prime target for terrorists, is anything but immune to the threat of violence, and its allegedly complacent existence is thrown into doubt time and again.

The film centres on the story of gay lovers Noam (Ohad Knoller) and Ashraf (Yousef 'Joe' Sweid). Originally from Jerusalem and an Israeli citizen, Ashraf grew up in Nablus after the Israeli army destroyed his family home and is now in need of a special permit to enter Israel. He first meets Noam at one of



Figure 9.2 Palestinian Ashraf (Yusef 'Joe' Sweid) (left) and Israeli Noam (Ohad Knoller) futilely trying to live as a couple in Tel Aviv in *The Bubble/Ha'bua* (2006)

Source: *The Bubble/Ha'bua* (2006), directed by Eytan Fox © Dov Gilhar, Israeli films, and TLA Releasing (2008).

the Israeli army checkpoints on the West Bank. Ashraf is standing in line to be checked by the aggressive representatives of the Israeli forces. Noam is standing on the other side, as a soldier in reserve duty. They both witness the tragic birth of a stillborn baby to a Palestinian woman who has been held up in the queue. Noam is then seen going back to the apartment he shares with his friends Yali (Alon Friedman), a gay man, and Lulu (Daniela Wircer), a heterosexual woman. Their secure urban existence is in sharp contrast to the reality of violence and humiliation the Israelis are responsible for at the checkpoints.

Noam's difficulty in accommodating his pacifist, left-wing views with the role he assumes as a soldier (even if only temporarily as a reserve soldier) is expressed in his indifference to the strict army rules regarding filming in the checkpoint area (he allows a political activist with a camera to keep filming despite his commander's disapproval), as well as in his elaborate attempt to dissociate himself from what is happening around him: while at the checkpoint and on his way back to Tel Aviv, Noam is listening to music on his iPod, the music serving as a barrier between himself and reality.

Shortly after Noam's arrival in Tel Aviv, Ashraf shows up at his door carrying Noam's army ID, which he lost while at the checkpoint.<sup>11</sup> This unexpected meeting between the two triggers a passionate affair, which ends tragically with Ashraf blowing himself up in front of the busy Tel Aviv café

where Noam and his friends work and hang out. Ashraf and Noam die in the explosion, their bodies lying next to each other, a testimony to the futility of war, or, as may be read by others, the hope for peace. Their death also attests to the precarity of gay existence, especially one that dares to defy the existing status quo in Israel which dictates a total separation between Israelis and Palestinians. The film makes clear that no place in Israel – not even Tel Aviv – can contain a gay Palestinian-Israeli love story. Their affair was allowed to flourish in the city, but only up to a point. The tragic ending of their story is the only acceptable ending for their dual – sexual and ethnic/religious – transgression.

The film follows the tradition of what film scholar Yosefa Loshitzky has called the ‘forbidden love’ story in Israeli cinema, that between an Israeli Jew and an Arab. The importance of telling stories of ‘forbidden love’, Loshitzky argues, lies in their power to expose the effects of the conflict and the occupation at the ‘microlevel’: ‘The displacement, taking place in Israeli cinema, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the territory of forbidden love, makes it easier for the Israeli audience . . . to encounter the conflict whose roots are complex and painful’ (Loshitzky 2001: 113). I would like to suggest that for Fox it is not only the characters’ racial and ethnic origins that make their love story a transgression of the norm, but also, perhaps even primarily, their sexual orientation.

As in Fox’s previous films, *The Bubble* blends the political and the personal to maximum effect: not only do the Jewish characters oppose the occupation on moral, political, and ethical grounds, but they also experience its devastating impact first-hand. The explosion for which Ashraf is responsible was planned by Jihad, his brother-in-law, as an act of revenge for the death of his new wife, Ashraf’s sister, who was killed accidentally by Israeli soldiers. They shot her while looking for those responsible (among them Jihad) for yet another suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, in which Yali was severely wounded. Jihad’s participation in the planning of those deadly attacks stemmed from feelings of fury and frustration, a direct result of being discriminated against and humiliated by the Israeli army (like Ashraf, he is present in the film’s opening scene in which the heavily pregnant woman gives birth to a still-born). The two protagonists oppose violent acts and are engaged in political protest, but this, as it turns out, amounts to very little: their main course of action is organising a rave on a Tel Aviv beach.

This moderate, not to say ineffective, form of ‘leftist’ protest demonstrates Fox’s full identification with the mainstream and his wish not to upset any side in the debate: the Israeli-Palestinian love affair comes to satisfy those who preach coexistence, whereas the violent acts that follow are used as a proof of the futility of that hope. If anything, Fox seems to be more inclined towards a pessimistic picture that corresponds to the failure of the left in Israel, depicting its followers as naïve. The violent actions on both sides that the protagonists are either forced or encouraged to take part in (Noam as a soldier serving at the checkpoints, Ashraf as a suicide bomber), and their



end result, are much more pronounced and fatal than their peacemaking endeavours.

### *Out in the Dark*

Like *The Bubble*, *Out in the Dark* focuses also on a gay Palestinian-Israeli love story where the life of the Palestinian character is under threat at home because of his sexual orientation, and in Israel owing to his homosexuality and ethnicity. Tel Aviv – as in *The Bubble* – serves as a temporary safe place only, and permanent refuge needs to be found elsewhere. Unlike *The Bubble*, however, *Out in the Dark* ends with a happy ending of sorts, albeit one which requires both Jewish and Arab lovers to flee to Europe, away from their families and native land.

The narrative centres on Israeli lawyer Roy Schaefer (Michael Aloni) and Palestinian student Nimr Mashrawi (Nicholas Jacob), who fall in love after meeting at a gay Tel Aviv bar that caters to both Palestinian and Jewish clientele and plays traditional Arab music (so further promoting Tel Aviv's image as a tolerant city). Kissing outside the bar, they catch the attention of two passers-by who shout terms of abuse at them. This incident shows that even in Tel Aviv expressions of intolerance are possible, but it also allows Nimr and Roy to present a united front as proud gay men (who then chase after and scare their abusers), a stance that renders their ethnic and religious differences irrelevant.

Nimr, who is rejected by his family when they find out about his sexuality later in the film,<sup>12</sup> tries to settle in Israel. Having been granted a student visa, his wish seems at first a feasible option – temporarily at least. The visa, however, is revoked following Nimr's refusal to succumb to pressure put on him by the Israel Security Agency, whose representatives seek to recruit him as an informant, an arrangement Nimr's friend Mustafa enjoys too.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of Mustafa, the Israeli authorities use, or rather misuse, the knowledge they have of Nimr's homosexuality to force him into a gravely dangerous situation: Nimr has to cooperate with them or they will inform his family of their son's sexual deviation. Israel may present itself as a staunch protector of gay rights, but its representatives will not hesitate to use their knowledge of their targets' homosexuality against them if they think it may advance their idea of security. Based on Mustafa's experience as an informer, Nimr has reasons to be concerned: when Mustafa is no longer deemed a good source, he is deported back to the West Bank, where he is brutally murdered, for both his act of treason and his gayness.<sup>14</sup> Mustafa implores his contact to allow him to stay in Israel, reiterating that his life would be at risk if he was sent back, but his Israeli 'employer' seems to take a certain pleasure in sending the 'faggot', as he calls him, to his death, thus throwing much of Israel's public discourse about LGBTIQ+ rights into question. In the cases of both Mustafa and Nimr, it is representatives of the State of Israel who fail law-abiding, Palestinian citizens in need of the

state's protection because they cannot live safely in the West Bank, and that turn their sexual preference – apparently fully accepted in Israel – against them as they see fit. As Jason Ritchie states,

most queer Palestinians describe their experiences at checkpoints (and with Israeli police and soldiers generally) in uniformly negative terms; and their queerness, to the extent that it emerges as all, tends to constitute an additional source of abuse rather than a means of tempering it, more of a liability than an asset.

(Ritchie 2015: 624)

In order to escape his friend's fate, Nimr has to flee his hometown. Barred from both Palestine and Israel, he has to find a way to leave for Europe, where he hopes human rights organisations will be able to help him and where he and Roy will be able to live – and love – freely. Reaching Europe, however, is a daring operation facilitated by Roy (who, as a result of his involvement, gets arrested by Israeli police) and helped by one of his shady clients. Though it is ultimately Nimr's life that is at risk, Roy, too, pays a heavy price, as the state refuses to acknowledge his choice of partner. And although it is Nimr's Palestinian identity that is the core obstacle to fulfilling the couple's desire to live a normal life in Tel Aviv, his – and Roy's – gay identity and relationship make it all the more difficult.



*Figure 9.3* Palestinian student Nimr (Nicholas Jacob) (right) and Israeli lawyer Roy (Michael Aloni) fleeing to Europe so they can stay together in *Out in the Dark/Alata* (2012)

*Source:* *Out in the Dark/Alata* (2012), directed by Michael Mayer © m-appeal, and Network (2013).

*Out in the Dark* portrays Tel Aviv as a tolerant city, a place that can accommodate the needs of a Palestinian gay runaway and provide him with a relative sense of security and a community (of both Palestinians and Jews). In Tel Aviv, Nimr's sexuality should no longer be kept a secret, and despite his ethnicity and place of origin he is not seen as a national threat but as the bright student that he is. He is free to go out to bars, meet other men, and fall in love. But any sense of normalisation is short-lived. Nimr may be allowed to fall in love, but he cannot possibly hope to establish steady relationships, or be granted long-term permission to stay in Israel (or, indeed, settle permanently). As in the case of the members of *Paper Dolls*, a lasting solution to his plight cannot be found in Israel, not even in Tel Aviv, and he needs to move further away – to Europe.

Much has been written about the refugee crisis in Europe over the last few years, with tragic stories of thousands of human lives destroyed on their way to the promised continent. Nonetheless, as two of the three films discussed in this chapter demonstrate, Europe is still seen as a beacon of hope by those individuals whose religion and sexuality cannot be contained in a country like Israel which lies so close both geographically and culturally. Israel may be a desirable gay destination, and the Tel Aviv Pride events have become legendary, but, having been led since 2009 by a right-wing government (that of Benjamin Netanyahu) propped up by ultra-religious and ultra-nationalist parties, the state's stance on non-Jewish immigration, let alone non-Jewish queer immigration, is not going to change any time soon. It is, therefore, Europe or deportation (often meaning a death penalty) for those non-Jewish queer foreigners. The promise of freedom that Tel Aviv represents can only be briefly experienced, for it remains ultimately far out of reach.

## Notes

- 1 Contrast this with the US government's decision, enthusiastically encouraged by Israeli authorities, to relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018, a move signifying both countries' ultra-national and reactionary current regimes. President Trump's promise of building a wall to protect the US against Mexican illegal immigrants, and Israel's existing wall (also known as the Israeli West Bank barrier), are perhaps the strongest symbols of both nations' official stands towards migration and multiculturalism.
- 2 Tel Aviv was chosen as 'Best Gay City' in an American Airlines competition in 2012 (Schulman 2012: 184).
- 3 This despite Israeli society's unique obsession with the birth rate and the fact that many gay men and women have been accepted into mainstream society because of their readiness to adopt heteronormative values, such as raising families (Yaron et al. 2018).
- 4 Passed in July 1950, just over two years after the establishment of the state, the law grants any Jew who has at least one Jewish grandparent, and regardless of their connection to Israel, the right to gain Israeli citizenship upon arrival.
- 5 As is the case of refugees escaping ethnic cleansing in the Sudan's Darfur region, or others fleeing genocide in the country's Nuba region.

- 6 All filmmakers, it is important to note, are Israeli Jews.
- 7 Tel Aviv is depicted as a queer haven of sorts also in *In Between* (in Arabic: *Bar Bahar*; in Hebrew: *Lo Po, Lo Sham*) (2016, Israel/France), a drama directed by Palestinian filmmaker Maysaloun Hamoud which follow the lives of three young female friends, one of whom is a lesbian, in Tel Aviv. The film depicts internal migration from an Arab village or town to a Jewish-populated metropolitan area where one can live and love freely. However, the film's protagonists, as well as Hamoud herself (in sharp contrast to the protagonists of Heymann's, Mayer's and Fox's films), are Israeli citizens, a status that allows them the freedom of movement and settlement.
- 8 In his first film *It Kinda Scares Me/Tomer VeHasrutim* (2001, Israel), for example, Heymann documents his work with a group of disenfranchised teenagers from Azur, a poor suburb of Tel Aviv.
- 9 It is significant that Heymann plays a central part in many of the films and television series he has directed; *The Way Home/BaDerech HaBaita* (2009, Israel), an eight-part TV series from 2009, is based on home movies of Heymann's family he filmed over 13 years, a documentation through which the complex relations between its members – parents, siblings and nephews – are carefully delineated. The personal vicissitudes of his family, as well as of his love life, echo those of Israeli reality during this period. In *I Shot My Love* (2010, Israel/Germany), he examines his relationship with a German dancer who follows him to Israel.
- 10 As we learn about Heymann from some of his other films, he is one of five sons who were born to 'salt of the earth' Ashkenazi parents in a pastoral moshav in Israel. In an attempt to assert his masculinity, Heymann chose to join the paratroopers as part of his compulsory army service. It was only after his time in the army that he started to explore his gay identity and came out to his family.
- 11 This follows a similar plot device in *Time Off/After* (Israel), Fox's short film from 1990, in which the soldier hands his commander his ID after the latter left it in the park where he had anonymous sex with another man. By handing the ID to his closeted commander, the soldier makes clear that he knows about the commander's homosexuality.
- 12 Nimr's older brother Nabil is a member of a terrorist cell that plans attacks on Israeli citizens. Nabil's character brings to mind that of Jihad's in *The Bubble*, yet another similarity between the two films.
- 13 The option of political asylum, as we learn from a scene where Nimr and Roy meet a lawyer who specialises in such cases, is not available to Palestinians.
- 14 Mustafa's feminine appearance and gestures seem a threat within the context of the Palestinian nationalist movement, which follows strict and clear gender specifications. As Joseph A. Massad, writing on the formation of Palestinian nationhood, states: '[a] nationalist performance would seem to be then imbricated with masculine performances which guarantee its definitional coherence and without which it would become impossible' (Massad 2006: 49).

## 10 We are all in Xenialand

### Queer poetics, citizenship, and hospitality in Panos H. Koutras's *Xenia* (2014)

*Dimitris Papanikolaou*

*Xenia* is a 2014 film by Panos H. Koutras, based on a script he wrote with his longtime collaborator Panagiotis Evangelidis. Both had worked together on *Strella* (aka *A Woman's Way*) (2009, Greece), the celebrated trans incest story which is credited with having inaugurated, alongside Yorgos Lanthimos's *Dogtooth* (2009, Greece), the 'Greek New Wave' (Nikolaidou and Poupou 2017), the 'Greek Weird Wave' (Rose 2011), or the 'Queer Weird Wave' (Psaras 2016). As with other New Wave Greek films that followed on *Dogtooth* and *Strella*'s heels, *Xenia* came out in the middle of what has been globally narrativised as 'the Greek Crisis', the financial, social, and political turmoil that befell the country after 2009 and was mainly experienced as a debt crisis, pushing Greece to the limits of bankruptcy, Grexit from the European Union, and the collapse of the banking system. In 2014, Greece was also already becoming the stage of an intense 'refugee crisis' that would intensify in subsequent years, with thousands of asylum seekers – trying in the main to flee the war in Syria – coming to the country. On most occasions, they were hoping eventually to reach central Europe, yet they were condemned to remain in Greece, often residing in refugee camps euphemistically called 'hospitality structures'. Greece had also by that time been (and would continue to be) the stage for a rise in homophobic and xenophobic attacks, many of which were organised by the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, since 2012 a considerable force in the Greek parliament, but also since 2013 on investigation and then trial as a criminal organisation, precisely for the attacks against migrants, activists, and unionists.

*Xenia* also came out in the heat of a nation-wide debate about citizenship (Christopoulos 2017). Traditionally offering nationality and citizenship on the basis of *jus sanguinis*, Greece had faced for decades the absurd situation of not offering papers to residents who were born and lived in the country all their lives – a form of marginalisation that intensified in the 21st century, as the number of young people born to immigrant parents who came in the 1990s reached unprecedented levels and visibility. These were young Greeks without the opportunity to acquire Greek citizenship and, in most cases, as they had not kept in contact with their parents' country of origin, young people condemned to live as effectively stateless. This situation gave rise to notorious

confrontations and prominent cases of young Greeks without citizenship (the famous NBA basketball player Giannis Antetokounmpo, for instance, even though celebrated as Greek after his career took off, had lived most of his life without the opportunity to acquire Greek citizenship). Most crucially, it gave rise to concrete political demands and an eventual resolution of sorts, through the redrafting of the Citizenship Bill in 2010–12 (unsuccessfully) and 2015–18 (successfully).

The film positions itself squarely at the centre of these two debates – the Crisis and the Citizenship debates. Its central story sees two young men, whose Albanian immigrant mother has just died, realising that they could now be stripped of their right to remain in Greece after they reach adulthood (the elder, Odi, played by Greek-Albanian actor Nikos Gelia, is about to turn 18). Unless, that is, they re-establish contact with their long-gone Greek father, who has never formally recognised them, and ask him to support their application for Greek citizenship. *Xenia* confronts Greece's deep issue with racism during the Crisis (exemplified by the acts of the Golden Dawn and the – limited but existing – public support it received), by constantly providing brief glimpses of the palimpsest of -isms and -ias that have been interacting in Greece, before and during the Crisis. The two brothers and their mother have lived a life of exploitation and xenophobia; of otherisation through what Rey Chow has so aptly described as the 'ethnicization of labour' (Chow 2002; El-Tayeb 2011: xiii–xv); and, last but not least, of homophobia. For the duration of the film, they keep meeting and connecting with people who have also had similar experiences. In one early scene when he happens upon a Golden Dawn attack, for instance, the younger brother Dany (played by Kostas Nikouli, also Greek-Albanian) will witness sex-working migrants being abused, a Muslim woman being forced to unveil herself, trans women being chased alongside African street sellers, a woman drug addict being verbally abused, and a shop owned by immigrants being damaged, before he himself is also attacked in the same scene.

The fact that the two protagonists find themselves in a position where they *could* ask for citizenship (by tracing their Greek father) is not in *Xenia* treated as a solution. It becomes, rather, a way to showcase the problem, as well as to show, through their desperate act of searching for their father and eventually abandoning that aim, citizenship as being not in any way related to blood, but performatively constructed by the act of demanding it, and thus open to different reenactments and constant reconceptualisations (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Dany and Odi's double position as young people living in Greece with a Greek and Albanian background – something underlined by their constant switching between the two languages – is not used as a way to reinforce the concept of Greekness, by claiming that it is now becoming broader, more inclusive of hybrid and multiethnic identities. Quite the opposite: it is used as a way of undermining Greekness's exclusive access to citizenship in the country.

The story starts like this: queer – and occasionally sex-working – 16-year-old Dany sets out from Crete, where he has lived with his mother, a singer in seedy bars. He goes to Athens to find his older brother Odi, who works there in a sandwich shop and meets him unwillingly (he is rather embarrassed by his younger brother's effeminacy). Dany wants to announce their mother's death but also to see the capital city he has never been to before. For a little while the film follows, with a weirdly unadorned attention to detail and mostly linear storytelling, the everyday precarious life of these young men as well as their persistence and optimism, the everyday plans and hopes that keep them together and holding on. The sandwich shop owner where Odi works harasses (regularly, by the looks of it) her workforce by shouting 'If you do not want to work, just go; do you know how many people are asking for work everyday?'; he responds with a quiet smile. The radio and TV, at various points, talk about the rise in racist attacks; they treat it as background noise. On the streets, fascist groups harass migrant kids; Odi advises his younger brother not to interfere ('when they are more than one, just don't look, and go'; 'but we don't look Albanian, you know'; 'yes, but we are; and you look queer, which is probably worse'). Odi lives with a Greek-Albanian flatmate, in a dark basement, yet they have also claimed the old apartment building's terrace where they have created a makeshift space to relax, listen to music, and drink. They never complain about how difficult it is to go (with a malfunctioning lift) from basement to terrace; even when we once see the endless flights of stairs in Odi's lengthy descent from terrace to flat, the result is rather comical.

In a similar mode, and even more expressly, Dany's queerness is shown as an extreme optimism able to affect everyone around him. Dany queers everything (from brotherhood love to the assaults he receives), with his gaze and camp comments. He also expects others to follow suit. Queerness, as a set of practices but also as a viewpoint and positive disposition to people and things, becomes a way to withstand pressure and make do – a way also to re-present others' making do as affectionate, sustaining, and sustainable. Even the narration of the demise of their mother takes, in this context, a lighter tone.

During his first night in Athens, Dany visits a gay bar in order to find details about their father. He is courted by Moustafa, a migrant and occasional sex worker who is saving money in order to be able to go to Italy. They flirt, they find themselves cavorting in the streets of Athens, before they get interrupted by a group of men ('the fascists') dressed in black and shouting 'Greece [belongs to] Christian Greeks', who stage an attack on the street – a realistic reconstruction of the many similar attacks Athens and other cities were experiencing in that period (Kotouza 2019; Ellinas 2013). The police will come and end up chasing not the attackers, but their victims. Dany will spend the night in a cell and the next morning will be sent to a penitentiary hostel – as he is still underage and, officially, a legal alien in the country. He will nevertheless



Figure 10.1 Dany (Kostas Nikouli) watches, and photoshops, as he is being watched walking around Athens in *Xenia* (2014)

Source: *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

escape and return to his brother's home, the trip to try to find the missing father thus becoming imperative.

Dany and Odi, now internal migrants in a country that has been marginalising them as perennial migrants and second-class citizens with their citizenship in abeyance, decide to embark on the journey that will see them travel through mainland Greece. They stop in Larisa where they find Tasos, their mother's queer best friend, now a patron of a seedy nightclub, and in a relationship with Ahmad, an immigrant worker. After Odi, bullied by a group of macho Greek-Albanian men, shoots them in self-defence, they leave the city, hiding for a few days in an old, abandoned hotel in the northern city of Kozani. This is the 'Kozani Xenia', built in 1965 to an acclaimed modernist design by architect Giorgos Nikolettopoulos, one of 26 hotels all bearing the same iconic name 'Xenia' which the Greek state erected across the country during the 1950s and 1960s to spearhead tourist regeneration.<sup>1</sup> Both the place and its name become transformative sites for the whole film, *xenia* being at once the ancient Greek word/concept for hospitality and etymologically very close to the word *xenos* (foreigner). Alone and undisturbed in the ruins of the Xenia hotel, Dany and Odi will mend (themselves, their relationship, the traumatic experiences of the past, their sense of a mission), while celebrating Odi's 18th birthday with brotherly – and in a couple of moments not so brotherly – love.





Figure 10.2 Dany (Kostas Nikouli) (left) and Odi (Nikos Gelia) under the sign of the abandoned Xenia hotel, its meaningful name inverted and in obvious need of some reconstruction, in *Xenia* (2014)

Source: *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup. Courtesy of Panos H. Koutras.

The brothers will continue their journey to reach the northern metropolis of Thessaloniki, where they have heard that their father now resides under a different name having become . . . a very successful homophobic and xenophobic local politician, supported by Golden Dawn. In a final confrontation with such a politician who may, or may not, be their father, and who lives in what looks like a kitsch and *nouveau riche* imitation of the Kozani Xenia hotel, Dany and Odi decide not to press him anymore to sign the relevant recognition papers and prefer to procure a payment in cash instead. With the money they have extracted from the Golden Dawn politician, they may return and rebuild the Xenia hotel they have loved so much, or they may ‘go to Europe’, ‘everywhere foreigners, but, for that matter, everywhere at home’ as Odi says to Maria, a young Ukrainian-Greek singer they befriend on the last parts of their journey.

Add to all that a subplot about a ‘Greece has got talent’ TV music show taking place at the same time in Thessaloniki, to which the older brother decides to apply by singing, no less, a song from the 1960s by Italian Patty Pravo, ‘Tutt’al più’, the mother’s favourite tune. Pravo’s retro songs have

already been prominent in the film's soundtrack since the very first scene, when Dany announces that 'Patty Pravo is my goddess' (to the eventual sound of her song 'Sentimento'). And the Italian singer even briefly appears herself as a *dea ex machina*, in the very last scenes of the film (with Dany shouting once again 'Θεά!' ('Goddess!')). Patty Pravo's music and presence bookend and syncopate this film, bringing along a certain type of camp sensibility to underline its use not as escapism, but quite the opposite: a strategy of representation, affective attachment, insistence, and survival, that also provides a political statement.

*Xenia* has been praised for its clearly playful reference to the Odyssey (Odi, after all, is short for Odysseus – it seems 21st century world audiences still like their Greek film to contain a reference to the classical past, too),<sup>2</sup> its progressive representation of migration, identity, and desire, and, last but not least, its self-conscious reference to Greece-of-the-Crisis, its 'crisis realism'. It has been less discussed as a new queer film – which is a pity, since by and large it works as a self-conscious pastiche, a playful revisiting of tropes that have been used in the recent past by a canon of new queer cinema examples, including those talking about migration (Aaron 2004; Rich 2013). When, midway through the film and following a series of intertextual references (to key films by Ducastel and Martineau, Özpetek, Almodóvar, Lifshitz, Giannaris and Rodrigues), the two brothers enter the empty *Xenia* hotel, the viewer feels they may as well have entered a space called simply 'the welcoming heterotopia of queer cinema' – for reasons that I will explain in the following section. What I will argue is that not simply the references to queer desire or the presence of queer migrant characters, but also its more sustained (new) queer aesthetic, allow *Xenia* to go beyond a 'forthright celebration of homosexuality, advocacy of immigrant rights and rejection of patriarchy' (Lodge 2014).<sup>3</sup> They offer instead a radical reframing of questions regarding migrancy and refugeehood, identity and belonging, Greek/European society during the Crisis, and, last but not least, national and sexual citizenship.

*Xenia* the hotel and *Xenia* the film may stand for a metaphorical 'elsewhere', a heterotopia in which queer cinema can talk about migration, citizenship, crisis, identity and belonging, yet they are also presented as a metonymy of a national space in crisis. They become the space where a realist allegory (if there can ever be such a thing) of Greek society during the recent socioeconomic crisis is articulated. Precisely by bringing together national allegory and new queer film aesthetics, *Xenia* succeeds in problematising the two main progressive arguments around which the debate on migration is held on a global scale today: hospitality and citizenship. In this film, hospitality ('*xenia*') is not there to be offered, but becomes an expansive state of affairs – needed by everyone, and to be co-managed by everyone at a moment when everyone is becoming a foreigner, a '*xenos*'. Citizenship takes a similarly unexpected turn: it is not citizenship rights, but the very idea of citizenship (including sexual citizenship) that becomes

a quest(ion) addressed to everyone by the end of the film. With the two protagonists walking towards an unknown direction, and with Patty Pravo coming to their queer reassurance (while also offering no closure for any of the film's pressing questions or open wounds), *Xenia* ends, as we shall see, with a scene that can make us think of what Lauren Berlant has called 'diva citizenship': a genealogical provocation, a moment of emergence in which 'a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege' (Berlant 1997: 227).

### **(Queer) migrants, refugeehood, citizenship, and (the Greek) crisis**

Some of the best Greek film musicals of the 1960s, still in the cultural canon to this day, had their most spectacular (and, for many contemporary viewers who avidly rewatched them over the decades, their queerest) numbers in luxurious, modern, shining Greek hotels. Indeed, one of the main arguments about the need for those 1960s Greek musicals and the reasons for their extreme success with Greek spectators is that they were culturally working as a celebration of tourism and modernisation, being equally a paean to the Greek state and its futurity. Forget about the colourful blouses, the elaborate dance numbers meshing bouzouki with '60s global pop, or the melodramatic storylines. The point of the old Greek musicals was their setting: those new roads, the Athenian skyline, the tourist beaches, and, of course, *those* hotels (cf. Papadimitriou 2005).

In that respect, there is an irony underlying *Xenia*, reaching perhaps its peak when the two protagonists start singing and dancing elaborate routines they seem to have rehearsed in the past in the makeshift environment they have created in the derelict Xenia hotel. Do they knowingly stage a pastiche reminiscent of old popular Greek cinema in that site? Possibly not (even though, at the rate older Greek musicals are retransmitted on Greek television, they may as well have been growing up watching them on TV or online; as must have done the film's director and the members of his crew). Their dance nevertheless, in that setting, playfully underlines a set of visual allegories strategically addressing the Greek cultural context. They dance alone, in the light and the diegetic music they themselves provide, on the patio of a derelict hotel site which could be seen as a reminder of Greece's wayward path to modernisation and current financial ruin.

As the two brothers perform their dance, with the interaction of their bodies bordering on the erotic, the setting thus gently mocking the representational limits of a traditional Greek family scene, one is also reminded of the ways in which the concept of the traditional Greek family has already been working against these two men. First, by marginalising their single mother (who, we have heard, was the victim of gender violence and exploitation), then by disallowing them to claim citizenship through a strict law of blood patrilineage operating as the main citizenship law of this patriarchal

and (Greek) family-driven country. Traditional kinship network and wayward modernisation come, therefore, to be added as targets to the film's already analysed critiques of racism and xenophobia (cf. Koutras 2014).

By positioning the Xenia hotel as a metonymy of Greece-in-crisis, Koutras's work seems to be gesturing towards all those debates without necessarily choosing a side. This could indeed be a nostalgic paean to what *has been* and a revisiting of a ruinous site as a national allegory of failure: after all, we have just seen scenes from a country riven by nationalist and extremist thugs, a country in despair, with its support networks being dismantled and in political, social, and economic meltdown. Given the film's overall politics, however, one could also see here a progressive statement about migration and migrants as being the country's real new force, the way out of the dead-end. While drinking in the empty Xenia, Odi fantasises about how he will return one day to buy the hotel and 'rebuild it from scratch, make it a brilliant hotel, and live in it too'. At the end of the film, the two brothers, with the support of a queer family of sorts which they have assembled in the process (about which more later), may indeed take the decision to go back to the derelict Xenia and remake it – a new return of the optimistic Greek '60s, only now with the much-needed input of the country's new citizens. This seems like, one might say, an old debt being paid by a new reconstruction (a 'debt-restructuring', as it were), and thus by new, but 'healthier' debt – a country giving (recognition, allowance) and taking back (new labour, reconstruction). 'In *Xenia*, everyone is indebted to everyone else as a basic precondition', asserts Stathis Gourgouris, making sure to add that this is only part of the story, since it is exactly the film's uncompromising queer politics that allows it to 'refuse to be absorbed into some sort of redemptive *familiarity*' (Gourgouris 2019; original emphasis). It is exactly because the film also talks about queer trauma, queer families and kinship, while aligning itself with a recognisable queer film aesthetics, that it can also remobilise its political statements about inclusion, migrant rights, polity, and citizenship.

*Xenia*, in other words, plays with a popular progressive argument that sees migrants as 'the new regenerative power' of the old world; it allows this argument to be glimpsed, and then takes it away. Yes, this is a new story (a new beginning) for this old hotel, as well as for this old and indebted country; but it is not a repayment of the debt, it is not a refurbishment, it is not a guaranteed success story. It is not even a face-to-face dismantling of the power of neofascist politics and their racist practices. It is, instead, a return, not to a grand strategy, but to tactics and practices – not a stable assertion of hospitality (of a national 'us' that becomes hospitable to an incoming 'them'), but a thinking about sites of hospitality as ethical sites of in-betweenness. Last, but not least, even though putting forth a clear demand for citizenship, the film in no way posits that this is the end of the road. Instead, it allows for the multiple and variously queer temporalities of citizenship to become apparent, presenting us with a model of citizenship that is constantly demanding, in construction, imminent but also immanent.

### The (queer) practice of un-suturing

The same year *Xenia* came out in Greek theatres (to great critical acclaim in international festivals, but lukewarm returns at the Greek box office), the most watched Greek film (and one of the biggest recent commercial successes of Greek cinema) was Christoforos Papakaliatis's *Worlds Apart* (2015). The two films, intriguingly, have a considerable thematic proximity. They both deal with the issue of the rising attacks against migrants in Greece after 2009, especially the organised pogroms conducted by members of Golden Dawn. They also clearly attempt quite a realistic depiction of 'Crisis Greece', and they both, in some way, address the tendency of the Greek family to 'hide', to exclude, and to perpetuate violence and trauma. Yet in structural terms, these two films could not be further apart. *Worlds Apart* keeps distinct and separate its five different stories of precarity, despair, and racism, until the end when, during a classic Sunday family table gathering, the viewer realises, through constant shot-reverse shots that uncover the members of the family one after the other, that all the stories we have been watching belong to members of the same family. This 'return' and repositioning of everyone's story to the arch-narrative of a kinship network offers the storyline's most dramatic moment (because, yes, viewer, the father will be the Golden Dawn chief overseeing the pogrom against the old airport settlement where, unbeknownst to him, his daughter is staying with her refugee boyfriend; and, of course, she will be killed during the attack). The film eventually also produces a catharsis and a type of solution: the pater-familias will understand the tragic consequences of his acts and repent; the mother will find solace in the company of a gentle German man; the remaining son will take care of them and their mourning. Compare this to *Xenia*, where the point precisely is that we will never get an eventual family reunion, and the various parts of the story will *not* be tied together. Indeed, closure will be delayed and resisted to the very end, and the family itself will remain an open-ended queer process.

The best way perhaps to account for the films' crucial difference is by employing the formal terms of suture (in *Worlds Apart*) and what I would call 'un-suturing' (in *Xenia*). We are used to thinking of suture as the mechanism for providing ideological, subjective, and visual stability to a film (Heath 1977–78; Oudart 1977–78). Developed as a cinematic critical term on the basis of its use in Lacan's psychoanalysis, it has been variously employed in a more metaphorical way too. One could argue that avant-garde filmmaking is primarily engaged in producing un-suturing – in undermining visual and other stability, from how it handles framing to the way it structures shots, persistently avoiding reverse shots (thus distancing itself from one of the major suturing mechanisms in classical Hollywood cinema). Crucially, if in the new queer cinema of someone like Derek Jarman a process of un-suturing came in as an obvious link to his avant-garde aesthetics, it soon became a marker of his films' new queer aesthetics too. Often new queer

cinema after him revelled in a wider process of un-suturing, a practice of ‘exploiting existing gaps in order to create openings’ (Papanikolaou 2015), as in Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989, UK), Gus Van Sant’s *Mala Noche* (1986, USA), or Constantine Giannaris’s *A Place in the Sun* (1995, UK/Greece) and *Trojans* (1990, UK/Greece).

*Xenia* inverts closure in more than one way: in its very storyline, in the brothers’ quest, as well as in what it says about Greece and the Crisis economies, about Greekness and the economies of citizenship, about otherness and racism. As it does with much else, it provides a *mise en abyme* here too, placing a process of symbolic un-suturing at its centre. In what is a playful reference to the processes of creating visual/psychological stability, as well as the tradition of their queer undermining, Dany has been throughout the film attached to a pet rabbit, Dido. He takes it with him; he talks to it often in the presence of others (in a clever handling of the shot/reverse shot that avoids including the living rabbit in both shots). Just before the two brothers reach their Xenia hotel refuge, Dany asks Odi to kill his rabbit, crying that it has been wounded in the preceding altercations. There, in a painful confrontation that culminates in a right-to-left panning shot from one brother to the other, we realise for the first time that the rabbit is only a stuffed children’s puppet, an inanimate object. Unwilling but pressed by his brother’s crisis, Odi will rip it apart, stuffing feathers filling the air.



*Figure 10.3* Unsutured but still there: Dido the rabbit appears as a queer fairy to reassure Dany (Kostas Nikouli) in *Xenia* (2014)

*Source:* *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

On the realist plane, we have just seen a transitional object being sacrificed in the process of a traumatic reconciliation with reality. Yet, from that moment on, the ‘killed’ rabbit will follow the couple for a while, now as a huge oversized living puppet, of course with his head unhinged and falling off and feathers dropping from his torn body. Dido the rabbit has come un-sutured, yet it remains no less present; if anything, it appears to Dany as a queer reassuring fairy in a later scene. No one tries to mend or suture it together again – the point, it seems, is to let it remain like this, even if Dany has to confront the reality of it being just a puppet now. Un-suturing, after all, is in this film a way to deal with its overall story and the traumas nestled at its core. Rather than a suturing mechanism that would promote detachment as a way of making sense, un-suturing proposes attachment as a way of making do. There is another way of telling a story of migration and queer, ethnic, and racialised trauma, and one could do so without looking for the stability and familiarity of a conclusion. There is another way of confronting one’s traumas, one’s account of the self, one’s search for citizenship and belonging, without looking for suture.

### **The (queer) site of hospitality**

What nominates a site as a queer site? How do bodies which act in a non-heteronormative way affect the space they are in, how do they turn it into a queer space (Betsky 1997)? These have in various ways been central questions in queer activist practices, queer art, queer theory, and, of course, queer cinema, at least since the 1980s. Films like João Pedro Rodrigues’s *O fantasma* (2000, Portugal), Ana Kokkinos’s *Head On* (1998, Australia), or Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau’s *Drôle de Felix/The Adventures of Felix* (2000), can be seen as studies in queering urban (or, in the last case, national) space. Dany’s body is filmed walking around with a similar aim. As Dany ‘discovers’ the world around him, constantly orienting himself while being disoriented, one is again reminded of Sara Ahmed’s point about queer phenomenology – the idea that the queer body’s orientation towards objects-in-the-world redirects them as it is itself informed by non-normative desire and the experience of difference; and that in this interaction it allows the world to be seen in a different light (see Ahmed 2006).

Culminating in the scenes in the Xenia hotel, this reorientation and nomination of queer space becomes crucial in building the film’s functioning allegory. Hospitality, to the extent that its metonymical site occupies the centre of this film, is happening, as it were, in a heterotopic and queered space. And it becomes intertwined with it. It is there that the two brothers can *be* together, as they dance together, as they make that space together, nominating it with their bodies. This is how the symbol of Greece’s abandonment and noxious debt is turned into a queer refuge – with a possible future. Like the national hotel which the two brothers may make their own in the end, co-producing it as a place for a future economy, hospitality in *Xenia* is not

a 'structure', but a matter of co-managing throughout. It is not something given by some to others, it is not something that is bestowed by the state in the end, or that the state needs a push in order to bestow. Hospitality is, like queer space, what bodies make when they orient towards one another, ethically, with a view to co-belonging, queerly.

Making hospitality so central a concept in a film about migration, identity, and citizenship might seem problematic to some, and for good reason. As an argument, even though used widely by Left and Right, it cannot avoid a tendency to eventually be linked to essentialist and nationalist rhetoric, according to which it behoves a 'progressive' nation to be hospitable to 'others' who are thus castigated to remain, perennially, others. Not in this case. Not a given, not preexisting, not, even, presupposed, hospitality is in this film to be shared, to be co-managed, to be reinhabited, to be redrawn. It is very much the result of constant practices of un-suturing, of destabilising, and then trying to rebalance. The site of hospitality – Athens and the other Greek cities 'revisited' through the eyes of Dany and Odi in this travelogue, and as their metonymical extension the Xenia hotel – is one we constantly remake, and it is exactly the performativity of its queerness that also affects the constitution of this *we* as, itself, the result of a similar queer phenomenology. Hospitality, in this scenario, is not based on rules and pre-arrangements – it is instead the product of a disorientation, and a constant reorientation: of one towards the other, of every one to every other.

### The (queer) time of citizenship

When will Dany and Odi become Greek citizens? Towards the end of the film they decide not to pursue the demand of a paternity test from the politician they have ambushed. The option of a different, queer kinship is open to them – as their mother's queer friend Tasos has already offered, in a previous scene, to sign their papers instead (and 'adopt them, together with [partner] Ahmad'). They may, equally, decide to continue their journey. Because what matters, it seems, for the film, is to finish by underlining citizenship not as a specific, limited application, a right for *some* people, but as a constant demand – one that extends equally to the past and the future, that is reiterated and reinserted in the narrative of polity, all the time, every time. This does not preclude a recognition of the specificity, topicality, and urgency of particular demands.<sup>4</sup> It means, though, a leaving open of the demand, in order to realise that only by keeping it open can one conceptualise a citizenship based on inclusion and not on exclusion, a citizenship that is recognised and recognises at the same time. In the queer poetics of this film, this leaving-open is also, like so much else of its central points, a matter of both content *and* form.

In a last scene, the neofascist politician who is possibly the boys' father keeps repeating: 'I am not the one you are looking for; you are making a mistake; I am not your father'. The two brothers respond by revisiting in



front of him the trauma of their abandonment as kids. Dany, with the film's script poking queer fun at key recognition scenes of the *Odyssey* or of Greek tragedy, asks him to strip, in order to see if his hairy chest is the one he still constantly dreams of. He was not the one with the hairy chest, Odi corrects him; 'what you are remembering is the chest of [our mother's queer friend] Tasos, who used to put you to sleep when we were young' – deep recognition shown here again to have been a process of queer over-appropriation. 'Your brother has lost it. . . . He is saying that I'm your father [but] look at me, do you remember me? Do you really remember *me*?', screams the politician. At which point Odi quips: 'No, *you* tell me, do *you* remember me?'<sup>5</sup> And then he, this elder brother, who *remembers* but also *demands to be remembered*, with a focus and composure belying the fact that the importance lies not so much in extracting any confession from this older man, as in doing exactly this retelling in front of him, narrates in detail the scene 12 years before in which he saw the father abandoning them, early one morning, taking all their savings with him.

What is happening here is not a simple reversal of the scenario of recognition, but the reframing of the very question of recognition: from the 'who are you to me?' to a 'who are you to (be able to) recognise me?' (cf. Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler et al. 2016). Recognition appears here vulnerable to language, as it is also bound up to the ghostly traces of mis-recognition and loss (cf. Athanasiou 2017). Viewed within the realist frame of the story, the two boys are thus deciding to give up their willingness to establish a patrilineal, direct bloodline – a heteronormative recognition of citizenship. They are fed up. Other options are presented to them. They are no longer interested in a DNA test or a confession from the right-wing dealer-abuser-turned-politician. But as this scene, and the whole film, so persistently work at the level of (national) allegory too, the phrase directed to the father, 'do *you* remember me/do *you* recognise me', is left hanging, underlining the openness in the politics of recognition and citizenship that *Xenia* has so far been mobilising.

What astonishes in this film is how undermined nationally sanctioned linear time becomes – and this includes, in the end, the linear time of citizenship and kinship. The two main characters do not accept a heteronormative redrafting of (their) kinship and (their) national identity. They do not finish by positing a set of papers for Greek citizenship, in the same way that they do not want the recognition from a father they remember; they demand instead, in a queer time reversal, to be the ones remembered. Exactly where the realist reading of this scene cuts across the allegorical, they insist on a model of citizenship that comes out of co-presence – constant recognition as an ethics of belonging together. This can only happen in a different type of time, in a time that recognises return, cruel optimism and insistence, traumatic revisions, fixations. A queer time that can allow, instead of the promise of a future assertion (I (will) recognise you), the very radicalness of the question: do *you* remember me?

A neofascist politician who cannot play in this game of inverted recognition cedes his place at the end of this film to another figure, no longer a figure of authority, nor of a state and stable recognition, but a figure of queer emergence. Patty Pravo will emerge in the end out of nowhere, because, as happens with all ‘little queer gods’ and goddesses (Sedgwick 2011), she knows how and when to appear and offer queer reassurance, before fleeing again. After having left the politician’s house, and while the brothers walk towards the city, there she comes, Patty, in a black limousine. She opens the window, smiles to Dany and exclaims ‘Ciao, amore!’. She is, of course, as a realist reading would have it, again a fantasy, a projection of Dany’s own mind, one more in a series of his projections we have seen in this film. It is he, the queer boy who learned to obsess about her songs in order to endure, the one who now ‘brings her to life’. It is he who sees her, he who recognises her, not the other way round.

Yet we are, as I have said, well into the intersection between the realistic and the allegorical. Patty Pravo, who has appeared in all her camp aura, provides the final queer cinema allusion in a work insisting that this reference should be taken as an important political statement. She is there, the ultimate diva-citizenship statement, in Dany’s queer world which has been persistently, throughout the film, sometimes ironically, sometimes realistically, sometimes allegorically, doubling up with the xenia world, this film’s



Figure 10.4 ‘Ciao, amore!’: Patty Pravo (herself!) appears as a queer *dea ex machina* at the end of *Xenia* (2014)

Source: *Xenia* (2014), directed by Panos H. Koutras © 100% Synthetic Films, Wrong Men, Entre Chien et Loup, and Peccadillo Pictures (2016).

Xenialand. And at this transborder of realism with allegory, it is not that important whether Pravo, who remembers to come in the end, who smiles, who *recognises*, is actually there or not. What matters is that, in this queer time, in this un-suturing film, in this queer space of hospitality that it has turned into, she, as well as they, as well as us, share an understanding of citizenship created there and on the spot. Like trauma, citizenship here is not something one has, nor even something one is bestowed, once and for all, but a way of being implicated, again and again, in continuing practices (including the un-suturing practices of queer cinema), in lived durations, in places experienced. Or, to borrow Cathy Caruth's words on trauma and history paraphrasing them slightly, in the queer logi(sti)cs of this Xenialand citizenship too, like 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own' (see Caruth 1996: 24). Citizenship becomes 'precisely the way in which we are implicated' in each other's histories, in each other's history, in each other's trauma.

## Notes

- 1 Celebrated as the symbol of a modern(ist) Greece and its most iconic cultural expression, the Xenia hotels were a project overseen by famous architect Aris Konstantinides and bore a signature modernist aesthetics. With time many of them became either too difficult to manage, too run down, or else abandoned. They have been seen by critics as an index of the state's chronic managerial failures and in need of privatisation.
- 2 Directors have been playing along with this, with Yorgos Lanthimos directly referencing the myth of Iphigenia in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017, Ireland/UK), and Koutras queering Oedipus in *Strella*.
- 3 For a different, 'un-queering' reading, see Karalis (2015).
- 4 In promotional interviews for the film, Koutras repeated how important it was to change the Greek legal framework and offer immediate citizenship to at least all those people born and raised in Greece. In protest that this legal framework had not yet been adopted, he even refused to accept any accolades for *Xenia* from the Greek film academy in 2015, a gesture that attracted wide publicity.
- 5 In colloquial Greek, the question «με θυμάσαι;», even though literally meaning 'do you remember me?', also retains the strong nuance of 'do you recognise me?', and is often used to mean that.



**Part III**

**Space, belonging,  
and (anti-)sociality**



# 11 Inner exiles

## Migrant representation and queer belongings in recent Irish films

*Allison Macleod*

In recent years, Irish filmmakers have responded to Ireland's growing inward migration and changing socioeconomic conditions with films that engage with migrant narratives and representation. Described by critics as an emerging 'intercultural cinema' (Kakasi 2011; Villar-Argáiz 2014), these films address issues of racism, inclusion and intercultural dialogue inherent within the migrant state of 'outside belonging'. They further imply the potential for new relationships to form between those different identities that have historically been excluded from Ireland's national narrative, including sexual, class and ethnic minorities. This chapter builds on existing work by Agnes Kakasi and Pilar Villar-Argáiz to analyse migrant representation in Irish cinema via a politics of space. Issues of space are central to the national imaginary and the formation of the national subject. Ireland's 'imagined political community' (Anderson 1983: 6) is imagined as a natural and unified entity, and this image is maintained through ideological and material practices. As Ireland has become home to a growing number of immigrants, these new arrivals have produced new subjectivities and spatialities associated with the process of leaving their home countries and making a home in their new surroundings. The migrant subject's alternative relations to time and space can be conceptualised as a form of 'queer belonging' that challenges the dominant social order and normative modes of belonging.

Consider, for instance, a scene from Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam & Paul* (2004, Ireland). The film follows drug addicts Adam (Mark O'Halloran) and Paul (Tom Murphy) as they wander around Dublin in search of drugs. After Paul goes to a shop to buy a baguette and milk, he returns to find his friend sharing a public bench with a Bulgarian man (Ion Caramitru).<sup>1</sup> The man's battered suitcase sits between them, and when Paul asks him to move it so he can sit next to Adam, the man replies, 'I'm sitting here first. I have my bag here, it's public property'. The Bulgarian man eventually moves his suitcase to allow Paul to sit down. Paul then offends the man once more by assuming he is from Romania. When Paul asks him how long he has been in Dublin, the Bulgarian man tells him it has been two years. Paul replies that it must be a relief because Bulgaria is a shit-hole. The man angrily retorts that Bulgaria is not a shit-hole but is, in fact, beautiful. Instead, 'Dublin is the

shit-hole full of liars and maniacs and fucking Romanians'. When the men ask him why he is in Dublin, he asks them: 'Why am I here? Did you ever ask yourself the same question? Why are you here? Why the fuck are you here?' He then gets up and walks away.

This scene sets out a number of tensions regarding identity politics in contemporary Ireland. The Bulgarian man remembers his home country fondly but admits he had to leave. He has been in Dublin for two years but shows little love for his host country where citizens regularly confuse him for being Romanian. The man is temporally and spatially dislocated, separated from his past life in Bulgaria and yet not fully attached to his present life in Ireland. He is subsequently imbued with an inbetweenness, at once belonging to both and neither countries. Adam and Paul also embody alternative relations to time and space. Despite the men being Irish citizens, they do not demonstrate any strong connection to place, as evidenced by their wandering movements over the course of the film. Their attachment to Ireland as a place of belonging is questioned by the Bulgarian man with his existential question of 'why are you here?' Further, as drug users they live life in rapid bursts in a way that is contrary to the normative lifecycle of the Western subject.<sup>2</sup> Adam and Paul therefore embody alternative temporalities and spatialities that position them in opposition to the dominant social order and, in doing so, align them with the Bulgarian man. The scene further points to a criticism of the Eurocentric assumption that distinctions between non-Irish immigrants (such as Bulgarian and Romanian) are nonexistent or irrelevant.

In *Adam & Paul*, the disruptive potential of the marginalised Other emerges through their embodiment of alternative relations to space. In at once belonging and not belonging, the Bulgarian man not only embodies an inbetweenness but exposes Adam and Paul as similarly out-of-place. Using John Michael McDonagh's fiction film *Calvary* (2014, Ireland/UK) and Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien's documentary *Here to Stay* (2006, Ireland) as case studies, this chapter argues for the migrant experience as a form of queer belonging that emerges through non-normative relations to time and space and that captures 'an ongoing inbetweenness' (Probyn 1996: 6). Both films blur the lines between the native and the outsider, inclusion and exclusion, to suggest the potential for new social bonds to form between disparate groups through shared experiences of marginalisation. By exposing and challenging normative constructions of belonging and community, these films engage with spatial tactics of queer politics, or what Tim Cresswell calls 'crisis points in the normal functioning of everyday expectations' (Cresswell 1996: 22).

### **At the intersection of Irish migrant and queer cinemas**

Ireland's economic boom, popularly referred to as the Celtic Tiger, resulted in growing numbers of immigrants coming to Ireland in search of new opportunities. In 2004, 58,500 immigrants arrived in Ireland. By 2007, that



figured had almost doubled to 109,500 (Central Statistics Office 2018). This influx of migrants contributed to an Irish sociocultural landscape that was already shifting away from traditional markers of identity associated with Catholicism and rural life. Globalisation and a series of political reforms suggested that traditional signifiers of Irishness were being reworked.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the 2004 Citizenship Referendum demonstrated the limits of such liberalisation.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the growing numbers of immigrants coming to Ireland, they have remained largely absent in Irish cinema. For Kevin Rockett, newly arrived asylum seekers and refugee groups in Ireland have brought new experiences of Irishness as Otherness to the forefront. Yet the arrivals of these groups to Ireland 'are too recent to have found their way in any reflective manner into Irish film or television drama' (Rockett cited in Kakasi 2011: 40). The UK and the US have historically been the primary points of reference for migrant narratives in Irish cinema, framed via a diasporic imaginary that oscillates between a nostalgic romanticism and a dark and violent conceptualisation of Irishness, depending on the political context. Subsequently, the study of Irish migrant films beyond a British or American context remains under-theorised in Irish scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

Kakasi seeks to address this gap by using Laura U. Marks's framework of 'intercultural cinema'. For Marks, 'intercultural' suggests 'movement between one culture and another' (Marks 2000: 6). While other terms such as 'multiculturalism' risk homogenising the struggles of diverse groups, intercultural 'implies a dynamic relationship between a dominant "host" culture and a minority culture' and 'can describe exchanges between non-dominant cultures' (Marks 2000: 6–7). Framed via the lens of interculturalism, migrant representation in Irish film thus offers a space where 'processes of racialization and intercultural dialogue can be performed and explored' (Kakasi 2011: 48). Kakasi further argues that such films are defined by a more experimental and often personal formal language that challenges established modes of representation within Irish cinema.

In her arguments for an Irish migrant cinema, Kakasi suggests the inherently dynamic condition of such cinematic texts whereby representations of migrant identities and experiences are not static, but instead constantly being renegotiated and reworked in relation to the dominant culture. Such an implication of movement can be productively aligned with Elspeth Probyn's 'outside belongings' as a queer model for the bodily migrant experience. For Probyn, the desire to belong is constituted by the desire for an attachment to a space, a community or a way of being, and manifests itself from a position that is already peripheral to the social centre. The disruptive potential of such 'outside belonging' emerges when the marginal body is propelled from the periphery into the social milieu, destabilising normative configurations of power and social relations (see Probyn 1996). In *Calvary* and *Here to Stay*, the disruptive potential of the central migrant characters emerges in their ability to at once belong and not belong. Their state of outside

belonging reveals them to be bodies in flux: 'always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming' (Jagose 1996: 131).

In capturing disruptive moments of outside belonging and the new social relationships that result, *Calvary* and *Here to Stay* undermine the nation as a natural and unified formation by exposing the forms of unbelonging that are necessary to its claim of hegemony. Further insight can be unpacked via a comparative analysis of these filmic texts. While *Calvary* is a bigger-budget drama populated by a well-known cast of actors (including Brendon Gleeson and Aidan Gillen) and targeted towards a more mainstream audience, *Here to Stay* is a grass-roots documentary intended for the festival circuit with a more targeted reach. *Calvary* contains openly queer characters and jokes about acts of sexual dissidence, while *Here to Stay* is more explicitly focused on the nuances of queer identity and experience. By analysing these films alongside one another, productive comparisons regarding their spatial politics can be found that in turn provide new understandings of migrant and queer Irish cinemas.

### *Calvary*

*Calvary* is a black comedy set in a provincial and remote Irish town. The film opens with an unknown man in a confessional telling the local priest Father James (Brendon Gleeson) that he was raped as a child by a priest. The man tells him that he intends to kill Father James in retaliation in a week because 'nobody would care if I killed a bad priest. But to kill a good priest like you would really be noticed'. The remainder of the film follows Father James as he goes about his pastor duties over the course of the week. His interactions with the townspeople reveal them to be a motley cast of characters that include Simon (Isaach De Bankolé), an African immigrant and auto mechanic who is having an affair with Veronica Brennan (Orla O'Rourke), whose husband Jack Brennan (Chris O'Dowd) is the local town butcher and regularly beats his wife. Other characters include a gay police officer (Gary Lydon); a gay hustler with a penchant for 1930s gangster quips (Owen Sharpe); an atheist doctor (Aidan Gillen); and the town barman (Pat Shortt). At the end of the week, Father James is confronted by Jack, who reveals himself as the man who confessed and who then shoots and kills the priest.

From the film's onset, Simon is positioned as an outsider. It is implied that he came to Ireland to capitalise on the promises of the Celtic Tiger boom but ended up staying in the aftermath of the economic downturn. He is introduced early on in the film in a conversation between Father James and his colleague Father Leary (David Wilmot). Father Leary gossips to Father James about the townspeople, telling him that Veronica has got a black eye from someone and implying that Simon might have given it to her. When Father Leary refers to Simon as 'coloured' and from Uganda, Father James corrects him and replies that he is from Ivory Coast. In a later conversation

between Father James and Jack, Jack describes Simon as 'black' and then corrects himself to say 'coloured', apologising that the previous term is racist. The ways that the characters describe Simon in terms of his ethnicity ('coloured', 'black', from either Uganda or Ivory Coast) not only emphasise the need to identify him as non-Irish, but also reveal how he is more visibly othered than the other townspeople. Further, just as Paul confuses Romania and Bulgaria in *Adam & Paul*, Father Leary demonstrates an ignorance of the distinctions between African countries in mistaking Simon to be from Uganda.

Even as Simon is framed as an outsider to the town, an early scene in the film reveals how he navigates his liminal positioning vis-à-vis Father James to challenge the priest's authority. Father James goes to Simon's workplace to ask him about Veronica's black eye. Simon taunts him by describing how white women often beg him to hit them. Father James assumes Simon is admitting culpability and tells him to not do it again. Simon replies: 'You cannot tell me what to do. You're not in the missions now. . . . [A]re you going to chop off my hand if I disobey you?' Father James then admits 'You know your history'.

Up until this point, their conversation is framed in alternating close-up shots of the two men. As Simon tells Father James 'I like to read', the film cuts to a medium shot of the two men contained within the same frame. Simon continues: 'You probably believe that black people cannot . . .' The priest interrupts him: 'Yeah yeah yeah, black people, white people, blah blah blah'. Simon retaliates by throwing his cigarette at Father James's chest and telling him: 'Run along Father. Your sermon is finished'. By pulling back to show the two men contained within the same frame, the film emphasises competing socialities: black and white, migrant and Irish. Simon challenges the priest's stereotyped view of him as being violent and beating Veronica by alluding to the stereotype of black people being uneducated. He further questions Father James's right to investigate Simon on suspicion of abuse given the Church's role in covering up the violent mistreatment of African people by Catholic missionaries. Father James's precarious social status is later emphasised in the film when Father Leary, upon hearing of his confrontation with Simon, reminds him to tread lightly since '[t]he Church can't be seen to be getting involved in matters of diversity and the like. . . . [W]e have to be very circumspect in those areas'.

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that it is Father James who is truly peripheral to the town community whereas Simon is positioned more centrally within its social sphere. This shift is made evident in a significant scene that takes place about two thirds into the film. Father James goes to the local pub for a drink after discovering his dog has been killed. Father James is a recovering alcoholic, and therefore his decision to order a drink at the pub represents him reaching his breaking point. Father James stands at the bar, framed in a medium close-up shot facing the camera, as he orders a large drink. The film shows Simon and Jack visible

in the background behind the priest, playing chess with one another (see Figure 11.1). The film cuts to a close-up of Simon as he asks the priest if he knows who burned down the church, referencing a scene earlier in *Calvary* when Father James's church is burned down by an unknown vandal. Father James replies that 'It's not my church, it's our church'. The film cuts to a close-up shot of Jack's face as he interjects: 'I'd say it was the Romanians. They're awful heathens'. He looks off-screen left, towards Simon, and then pauses before repeating: 'Romanians'. The film cuts back to Simon, who glares in Jack's direction off-screen right and then looks down at their chess game. Simon tips over his queen, suggesting Jack has won the chess game.

Given that Simon is having an affair with Jack's wife, which Jack knows about, the expectation is that the men should be at odds with one another. Their interactions in this scene do hint at unresolved tensions between them. Jack's emphasis on Romanians being heathens as he looks at Simon and Simon's reaction suggest Jack is implying that Simon is also a heathen. At the same time, their togetherness in this scene as they play chess aligns them. Both have felt victimised by the Catholic Church: Jack was sexually abused as a child by a priest, and earlier in the film Simon criticises the mistreatment of African people by Catholic missionaries. The actions of the characters further suggest they are threats to the family unit: in addition to knowing that Simon is committing adultery with Jack's wife, we also learn that Jack



*Figure 11.1* Father James (Brendon Gleeson) orders a drink in the foreground as Simon (Isaach De Bankolé) and Jack (Chris O'Dowd) play chess in the background in *Calvary* (2014)

*Source:* *Calvary* (2014), directed by John Michael McDonagh © Fox Searchlight Pictures, Screen Ireland, British Film Institute, and Universal Pictures UK (2014).

beats Veronica. The normative family unit and the Catholic Church have historically been framed as necessary building-blocks for the Irish nation-state. Subsequently, the togetherness of Simon and Jack in this scene serves to question the continued relevance of these traditional forms of belonging. The two men at once belong to the town community and yet are alienated from those traditional institutions that have historically defined Ireland.

This state of outside belonging is expressed spatially in the scene through the juxtaposition of the men's positioning in the background against the back of the pub and Father James's positioning at the centre of the pub by the bar. While Father James's positioning would connote a position of power (centrally within the space, situated in the foreground of the shot), it is Jack and Simon who command the space from the background. Their command of the space becomes further evident when Jack gets up and walks over to Father James. He teases him, resulting in the priest walking away off-screen, and the film cuts back to a close up shot of Simon smiling as he rearranges the chess pieces.

It is also significant that this clash of different identities (migrant, abuse victim, Catholic priest) takes place within an Irish pub. Richard Stivers argues that poverty, the growing influence of the Catholic Church, and the increasing segregation of men and women into separate social spheres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, led to hard-drinking groups becoming a form of remission for men and central to the cultural definition of masculinity in Ireland. The institutionalisation of male drinking practices within the pub further became a means of governing these practices even as they themselves constituted a rebellion against familial, religious, and economic obligations (Stivers 2000). Thus, as Macleod notes, 'male drinking practices within the pub constitute a profoundly gendered national expression that is deeply imbricated within a struggle for power' (Macleod 2018: 52). As a critical site for the performance of Irish masculinity and ethnicity, the Irish pub has historically been conceptualised as a microcosm of Irish society.<sup>6</sup> By using the space of the pub as the setting for the power struggle between Father James, Simon and Jack, *Calvary* depicts a contemporary Ireland struggling with its self-identity during a time of cultural transition.

Throughout the film, the townspeople become increasingly unified through their dismissal of Father James and Catholicism in general. Each of them represents a type of social failing or marginalisation. Therefore, even as they create a community, this community is formed through processes of fractured togetherness as each member struggles with their feelings of not fully belonging to dominant Irish society. Donald Clarke criticises *Calvary* for a slightly heavy-handed approach towards critiquing contemporary Ireland whereby 'every character represented a failing of the state or a victimised proletarian sub-group' (Clarke 2014). Yet the symbolic function of these characters serves to portray an Ireland still struggling in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger economic downturn. Simon is not the only outsider; instead, *Calvary* suggests that all of the townspeople are in a state of outside belonging

to highlight how the erosion of traditional forms of belonging in contemporary Ireland has resulted in the creation of new, inner exiles.

### *Here to Stay*

*Here to Stay* focuses on the life of Fidel Taquinod, a gay Filipino nurse living in Dublin, as he navigates his personal life with his political involvement with the Overseas Nurses Section of the Irish Nurses Organisation, an organisation that aims to secure equal opportunities and rights for non-EU immigrants in Ireland. His political activism takes place alongside his participation in the Alternative Miss Philippines beauty pageant, his academic studies at University College Dublin, and his romantic relationship with an Irish man named John. In documenting the experiences of transnational migration, *Here to Stay* explores how such experiences intersect in complex ways with gender and sexuality. The film was funded by NGO organisations and the Irish Film Board. It premiered in Dublin at the Stranger Than Fiction Documentary Film Festival, and was later screened at various international film festivals to critical acclaim.

Fidel embodies a complex constellation of identities. He is a Filipino nurse in Ireland who is active in the Filipino queer community, but does not feel able to express his queer sexuality as openly amongst his Irish colleagues. He occupies a liminal position within Irish society, both in terms of his ethnicity and in terms of his sexuality. The film uses Fidel's voice-over throughout the film to share past experiences where he has encountered marginalisation or has questioned Irish societal processes. At the same time, the film demonstrates his ability to inhabit and command space in the peripheral migrant and queer communities to which he belongs. In following Fidel as he navigates these different spaces and utilising voice-over as a filmic device, *Here to Stay* reveals Fidel to be a body in flux, caught between competing spatialities (public, migrant, queer) and temporalities (past and present).

Fidel's state of inbetweenness is captured in a short sequence of scenes that takes place about three quarters of the way through the film. The film shows John and Fidel celebrating Fidel's graduation from university at their home with friends. It then cuts to a shot of the Irish landscape from inside a moving train. Fidel's voice-over describes the migrant experience of travelling from a developing country to a Western country:

I had this notion that because all of the textbooks in college or in school were authored by Americans or British, that the West was doing the right thing. . . . Initially I had this thought that, okay, here I am in Ireland, I have to be grateful to the government that they recruited me from the Philippines. But then as I was working longer in Ireland, I realised that not everything in Ireland is right or not everything in the West is perfect.

The camera cuts from the landscape shot to show Fidel leading an Overseas Nurses Section Meeting. As Fidel opens the meeting, the camera pans to show different migrant groups in the audience (Filipino, Nigerian etc.). At

the meeting, Fidel recognises that Nigerian migrants have a greater difficulty finding work than do Filipino migrants. The camera cuts between different men and women in the room as they share their challenges with getting work permits for their spouses. Fidel then describes his experience of being suspended from work for two weeks without pay because he allegedly had no working visa, even though he did.

As he continues to speak to the room about how he handled being suspended, the film plays a voice-over of Fidel describing his frustration with the experience and his suspicion that he was suspended because he was so vocal in his criticism of the government. He saw this issue being representative of greater concerns with the immigration system in Ireland rather than a problem with his employer. The camera cuts to a panning shot of a suburb and then shows Fidel inside a bedroom, folding clothes, as his voice-over describes how this experience gave him a new perspective on what is happening in Ireland. Fidel's voice-over continues: if this could happen to him, as a high-skilled worker, than low-skilled workers are even more vulnerable. While Fidel's visa enables him to move employers if he is unhappy, not everyone can do this, and the situation of migrant workers is based on a market demand that could change.

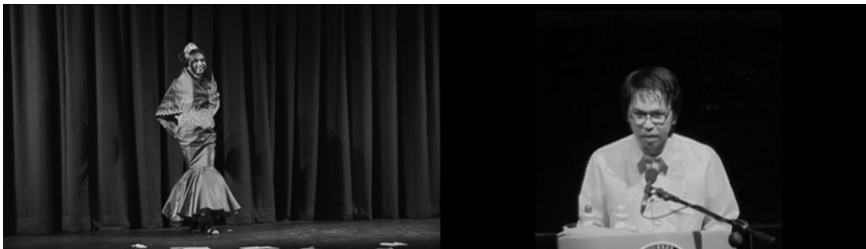
This sequence of scenes highlights a tension around Fidel's sense of belonging in Ireland. His voice-over on the train positions him on the periphery of dominant Irish society, looking in. For O'Brien, the use of the train in this shot was a deliberate choice to separate Fidel from the landscape: 'he's observing and he's very much a distant observer of his landscape. He's exoticizing the landscape in that scene; it's not exoticizing him' (Villar-Argáiz 2016: 179). The use of voice-over in these scenes further distances Fidel from his surroundings while suggesting a temporal disconnect. Even as Fidel describes a past experience during the meeting (shifting from present-day to past), the inclusion of his voice-over creates a third temporality that further dislocates him.

Although Fidel is describing his migrant experience of being marginalised, he simultaneously occupies an authoritative position within the Overseas Nurses Section, indicated by his ability to command space and control the conversation during the meeting. Throughout the film, Fidel emphasises the challenges faced by different migrant groups in Ireland and acknowledges his own privileged position not only as a highly skilled worker but also as a migrant coming from the Philippines (versus other migrant groups, such as Nigerian, that as a group tend to face more explicit discrimination in Ireland). By also beginning and ending this sequence with shots of Fidel in a domestic space, *Here to Stay* emphasises how Fidel has established a home and sense of place within Ireland.

Fidel finds a form of attachment not only with the Overseas Nurses Section, but also through his involvement with the Alternative Miss Philippines beauty pageant. Whereas in Ireland homosexuality has historically been framed in opposition to nationalism, for Fidel a form of queer belonging enables him, in fact, to remain closely tied to the Filipino community in

Ireland. He describes his difficulty bonding with his Irish colleagues since they ignore any hints he gives about being gay. Instead, his involvement with Alternative Miss Philippines becomes a primary source of queer expression. Fidel not only performs in the pageant but also organises it. In one scene, as he applies make-up, Fidel describes how gay beauty pageants are popular in the Philippines and are events the whole family attends, unlike in Ireland where children are not allowed to attend. While he acknowledges that homosexuality was not always so tolerated in his home country, he claims that there is much more tolerance in the Philippines now as long as queer citizens remain contributing members of society and help to support their families financially. Again, Fidel is positioned in the role of observer, looking in from the periphery and highlighting issues facing broader Irish society.

Fidel operates as the catalyst for exposing the economic as well as cultural barriers often facing migrant groups in Ireland. Yet even as his involvement with Alternative Miss Philippines and his political activism reveal the ways in which queer and migrant bodies are policed in Ireland, he is imbued with a sense of agency that is expressed spatially in terms of his ability to move confidently through space. In the pageant scenes, he performs in drag and moves across the stage in front of the audience with a sense of self-assurance. His involvement with the Overseas Nurses Section shows his comfort with entering into different meeting spaces and speaking with authority. For instance, when he arrives at the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism Migration Dialogue, he walks into the room and immediately greets someone who is positioned off-screen as he signs in at the welcome table. Fidel's immediate inclusion within the space underscores the position of authority he has gained. The film also includes various shots of Fidel walking along city sidewalks, moving centrally within public space, and demonstrating a sense of purpose as he walks towards his destination (see Figure 11.2). By juxtaposing Fidel's experiences of marginalisation with his ability to inhabit space, *Here to Stay* not only demonstrates how non-Irish



*Figure 11.2* Fidel commands space, both on-stage at Alternative Miss Philippines (left) and at a meeting of the Overseas Nurses Section (right), in *Here to Stay* (2016)

*Source:* *Here to Stay* (2006), directed by Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien © Telwell Productions (Ireland).



bodies are policed and regulated within space, but also reveals how different non-Irish groups are subjected to different mechanisms of control.

## Conclusion

In *Adam & Paul*, the primary role of the immigrant character is to underscore the social and economic hardship faced by many in the shadow of the celebratory Celtic Tiger narrative. Just as the Bulgarian man is caught between competing temporalities and spatialities associated with home and away, Adam and Paul similarly find themselves in a state of ongoing in-betweenness. As they question each other's right to occupy space, first referencing the bench space and then referencing Ireland, they negotiate their respective positionings along the centre-periphery divide. This negotiation is framed as a disruptive moment in the film since it questions normative configurations of power and social relations.

Similar tensions are found in *Calvary* and *Here to Stay*. In both films, the migrant characters of Simon and Fidel respectively are caught between competing socialities and spatialities. Both characters at once seek to belong to their surrounding communities and are repeatedly reminded of their liminal positions in relation to dominant Irish society. In *Calvary*, Simon is othered as an African migrant and initially framed as an outsider and threat to traditional familial values. However, his ability to question Father James and form a type of fractured togetherness with the other townspeople disrupts those normative power dynamics associated with the Catholic Church and the Irish nation-state. In *Here to Stay*, Fidel exposes the economic as well as cultural barriers often facing migrants in Ireland, including the barriers he himself has faced. At the same time, the film emphasises his ability to create a sense of belonging within Dublin as well as within the city's peripheral Filipino and LGBTIQ+ communities.

This chapter began by associating *Calvary* and *Here to Stay* with an emerging Irish migrant cinema. Yet even though both films engage with themes of displacement and intercultural dialogue that are representative of this cinematic genre, they can be further aligned with Irish queer cinema – a cinema that 'emerges as a product of the complex, interdependent and inherently conflicted relationship between nationalist discourses and sexual politics in Ireland' (Macleod 2018: 2). In *Calvary* and *Here to Stay*, this relationship is expressed not only in terms of non-normative representation, but also spatially in terms of how the characters move through and inhabit space. As Simon and Fidel shift between the periphery and centre of their respective social circles, their experiences of outside belonging undermine the idea of the nation as a unified formation by revealing those who are excluded and marginalised within the national narrative. In these films, queerness thus offers the disruptive potential to undermine normative Irish conditions of social and spatial belonging and open up new possibilities for national reimaginations.

Further, both films are indicative of a recent trend in Irish queer cinema of focusing on ‘the ongoing reconstruction of the (Irish) self’ (Macleod 2018: 25). Ireland’s experience of rapid economic growth and then decline in the 1990s and 2000s has resulted in films that comment on the county’s unease with transition and the impact of such change on people’s individual and collective identity. In *Calvary* and *Here to Stay*, the characters’ refusal to be easily categorised is represented spatially in their ability to move between spaces and communities. The two films therefore not only contribute to the increasing on-screen visibility of migrant characters in Irish cinema, but also represent an ongoing tendency in Irish queer cinema to redefine what constitutes Irishness in a globalised society.

## Notes

- 1 This character is unnamed and simply referred to as ‘Bulgarian man’ in the film credits.
- 2 For further reading on alternative temporalities and spatialities associated with non-normative life modes, see Halberstam (2005).
- 3 Significant political events include the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, the legalisation of divorce in 1997, and the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998.
- 4 The 2004 Citizenship Referendum was passed by a vote of four to one and amended Irish citizenship law to prevent migrant parents from claiming citizenship through the status of children that were born in Ireland. The political campaigns that supported this amendment have been heavily criticised for proliferating racist discourses and conservative views about what constitutes authentic and legitimate forms of Irish identity and national belonging.
- 5 Villar-Argáiz (2014) and Kakasi (2011) seek to address this gap.
- 6 See Macleod (2018) for an in-depth discussion of the role of the Irish pub in Irish cinema.

## 12 From migration to drift

### Forging queer migrant spaces and transborder relations in contemporary French cinema

*James S. Williams*

Why is it that contemporary French queer cinema, when engaging with racially and ethnically different migrants, often ends up projecting and framing them rhetorically in oppositional binary terms as the abject ‘other’ of French society? This ticklish question is prompted by a number of recent films by French gay directors that have attempted to address the migrant condition, notably Robin Campillo’s acclaimed feature *Eastern Boys* (2013, France), which narrates the path to French naturalisation of a young queer migrant from Eastern Europe. Since this film has already been analysed in extensive detail in Chapter 8, I will not rehearse here the narrative intricacies wherein a middle-aged, middle-class, white Frenchman (Daniel) hatches a plot with his young, Ukranian hustler-cum-lover (Rouslan) so that the latter may escape the hold of his Eastern European gang of *sans-papiers* and then be officially adopted through the French legal system. What concerns me most is the film’s final stage when the couple are in court pleading their case through lawyers: are they lying to the authorities to get what they want (i.e., a sexual relation under cover of adoption), or is their relationship now de-eroticised and chaste? Either way, in the concluding shot following their essentially favourable court hearing, as the camera moves slowly forward within the justice building towards the window and records them walking off outside – a shot emphasising the fixed boundary between inclusion and exclusion – they are presented almost prosaically as a closeted male couple. For this to have been possible, and for the border between ‘enlightened’ West and ‘backward’ East to remain firmly intact, the film’s carnal core of homoerotic male desire and sexiness – Rouslan’s menacing and devilishly handsome gang leader ‘Boss’, the bad Father complete with chiselled pecs and tattooed back who danced so dirtily during the stripping bare of Daniel’s apartment – has had to be expunged from the narrative, that is, abjected and effectively sublimated.

*Eastern Boys* ultimately reveals the sexual stakes of recuperation by the state, for it enacts a desexualising of the queer (and with it ultimately a *dequeering* of the sexual) in order for the French republican ideal of assimilation and ‘normalisation’ to be upheld. The new, clean, respectable, republican couple of Daniel and Rouslan is not too far removed in this respect

from the utopian, republican ‘family’ created by the young, mixed-race and HIV-positive Félix in *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (2000, France, co-dir. Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau) as he crosses the length of France. Félix remains the ‘good citizen’ precisely by not displaying overt signs of ethnic or sexual difference. Indeed, the various people he meets dissuade him from looking for his real Arab father so that he may establish new, ‘safe’, family-type connections with his French compatriots. The queer sexual cannot – and must not – be shown here. In one notable scene, Félix’s sexual passion for his new ‘cousin’ in the Ardèche is spectacularly withheld and cut (we see them go into the bushes and, in the blink of an edit, promptly return with a used condom). As Denis Provencher has argued, Félix is ultimately repositioned as part of a larger French family and national space based on the traditional republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that refuse to highlight – and indeed wilfully ignore – individual differences related to gender, class, ethnic origin or sexual orientation (Provencher 2007: 48).

The problems of objectifying the migrant figure in exclusionary, republican terms are also apparent in Vincent Dieutre’s celebrated biographical documentary *Jaurès* (2012, France), which, like *Eastern Boys*, draws an equation – here more implicit – between the abjectly sexual and the undocumented migrant as undifferentiated and unassimilated other.<sup>1</sup> In a mixing studio, Dieutre shows his friend Éva Truffaut the material he recorded during his three-year love affair with Simon conducted in secret in the latter’s apartment facing the Jaurès metro station in Paris. The footage (the subject of a running commentary by Dieutre prompted by Truffaut’s questions) documents also the movements of a group of clandestine Afghan migrants below on the quayside of the Canal Saint-Martin, filmed by Dieutre from the window as they endure a bleak, destitute existence. The period covered by the film coincides exactly with the migrants’ initial arrival and eventual forced removal by the authorities (the final credits reproduce the communiqué in July 2010 by Éric Besson, then French Minister for Immigration, justifying the need to relocate forcibly the 200 Afghan migrants to shelters). Although Simon works in the field of charity aid, the closest the couple get to any direct contact with the migrants is when they drop blankets down from the bridge during the winter cold (an action not recorded). Apparently unaware that they are a continual object of fascination for Dieutre’s secret camera, the Afghans’ all-too-visible massed bodies outside appear to compensate for the unseen, intimate bodies of the two lovers inside who have chosen not to film themselves. Seen but never heard, the migrants remain anonymous and indiscriminate, referred to at one point by Simon as ‘his little theatre’ and by Vincent as ‘petits Afghans’ (literally, ‘little Afghans’). In fact, the unidentified illegal Afghans appear as if phantoms – a blank canvas or screen for the Western gay subject freely to project on and fantasise, as when Vincent remarks that he finds it ‘touching’ they have been forced to address ‘their place’ in society, and that due to this the world has somehow been transformed (*‘tout a un peu bougé’*) (*‘everything has changed a little’*).

Such projection takes an erotic form when Vincent later states that with the arrival of Spring the migrants are adopting the seductive swagger of Parisians. Objectified and now sexualised, they are the marginalised abject other against which the couple define themselves as French citizens enjoying the security of republican subjecthood.

Towards the end of *Jaurès*, Dieutre writes over his pre-recorded images with digitally animated patches of artificial colour that cover and blank out forms and details in *bande dessinée* fashion. As pigeons and cars are digitally morphed, so, too, the bodies of some of the Afghans suddenly disappear from the screen. These digital manoeuvres proliferate to the point that they invade even the zone of the mixing studio occupied by Dieutre and Truffaut. Tom Cuthbertson suggests that such techniques of augmentation confront the viewer with the fundamentally constructed and edited nature of Dieutre's entire film (Cuthbertson 2017: 280). As such, they would extend an earlier moment when footage of young refugees dancing on the canal bank was gradually slowed down, and when a news item heard on the radio about Marine Le Pen's extremist stance on immigration was carefully edited and juxtaposed with other news about Nazi war criminals and the banning of minarets on mosques in Switzerland. Yet in a film where the undifferentiated migrants, at constant risk of being deported, are denied agency and have no say at all in Dieutre's set-up (in all senses of the word), such self-consciously manipulative artwork serves less to create new lines and patterns of thinking than to reinforce the migrants' alien, abject status, crossing them out in their very materiality and difference.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, *Jaurès* requires the total evacuation of the migrant body to be both narratologically and formally complete.

To nuance my opening question: how can French cinema, queer or straight, move beyond writing over and abjectifying the migrant as indistinguishable, alien (sexual) other, or, as in *Eastern Boys*, submitting chosen refugees to a universalising and sanitising French narrative of assimilation? That is, how might French cinematic spaces be forged aesthetically that foreground instead the migrant's embodied presence and point of view – spaces that could also harness the potential of the migrant body powerfully to resist normalising agencies and the protocols of republican identity, and thereby encourage new, more subtle, progressive, and genuinely empathetic ways of understanding and presenting migration?

### Queering the republican pitch

Taking fully on board Nacira Guénif's compelling argument (discussed in Chapter 1) for viewing migrant mobility as a form of 'queer' strangeness that can stimulate a queer spatio-historical imagination resistant to the vertical history of the Nation while also exposing the fiction of European universalism (see Guénif 2014), I wish in what follows to move precisely beyond standard political issues of representation and identity. That is, I want to explore how the objectifying spatial and affective distance observed

in French migration cinema by the citizen subject and first-person narrator towards the migrant other – let us call this a form of republican ‘discretion’ for lack of a better term – might be contested and *queered* in aesthetic terms by both a subversion of point of view and the concrete embracing of mobility as material flow – a movement potentially capable of destabilising and denarrativising fixed notions of gender and identity. My contention is that more radically *queer* modes of migration may be glimpsed in French cinema when it breaks loose of its conventional formal and narrative settings. Such modes may be encountered in places where one might least expect them, including even, I will attempt to argue, in the fiercely heterosexual, auteurist territories of Bruno Dumont. I am referring here not to Dumont’s early brutal, unsparing, neo-Bressonian dramas set largely in the impoverished, post-industrial hinterlands of Northern France (films such as *La Vie de Jésus/The Life of Jesus* (1997) and *Flandres/Flanders* (2006, France)), but rather to his more recent work for television, specifically *Coincoin et les z’inhumains/Coincoin and the Extra-humans* (2018, France), a four-part comedy made for ARTE written and directed by Dumont – for this is not only where Dumont drifts off from his sternly philosophical path, but also where French cinema migrates into fresh, unchartered, queer realms.<sup>3</sup>

*Coincoin et les z’inhumains* (which I shall refer to henceforth as a film since it was critically received as such in France) begins where his previous comic miniseries for ARTE, *P’tit Quinquin* (2014, France), left off: with evil and dread hanging heavy in the air of an incestuous village on the Côte d’Opale where entrenched racism and xenophobia breed. There, the source was a serial killer whose bloody murders included dismembered human bodies inserted grotesquely into the stomachs of dead cows. Here, the threat comes literally from sticky, blue-black, dung-like gunk falling from the sky, targeting in particular the racist elements in the area, notably the local nationalist group Le Bloc (whose members reside largely in an all-white camping village), but also characters reappearing from the first series: the hapless, tetchy, ever-twitching, detective captain Roger Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost) with his sidekick lieutenant Rudy Carpentier (Philippe Jore), and the mischievous boy Quinquin, now an unsure teenager renamed Coincoin (Alane Delhaye) with a new girlfriend, Jenny (Alexia Depret), daughter to the secretary of Le Bloc. With the lieutenant forever doing wheelies in his police car while the shit literally keeps falling down, the tendency towards bellyful slapstick is taken to a new level: in the flashes of light produced at night by the extra-terrestrial goo that enters human bodies, characters give noisy birth to clones of themselves through their buttocks. In this deliciously obscene twilight zone, these ‘clones’ (repeatedly mispronounced by the caption as ‘clowns’), false doubles because lacking human emotion, raise obvious questions of identity – questions which, with their premise of knowledge and certainty, are left deliberately suspended and unanswered. For if the police are fixated by such queer goings-on, the viewer’s attention is caught instead by another, more potent mystery: the random, floating presence across the screen of migrants.

Appearing on ten occasions yet never formally identified or named as such, the migrants are never actually heard speaking (they occasionally chant in an African tongue and will sing at the end in English). Moreover, they are not personalised or differentiated in terms of name or character, and thus remain permanently 'other' to the viewer. Each passing group of largely male migrants is of shifting number, race, and ethnicity (African, Middle Eastern). Such a vague, aleatory portrayal would seem to conform exactly to the dubious template of the apparitional, visible-yet-invisible, undifferentiated migrant other common in European cinema. Yet there is no authorial voice-over or dubbed sound to impose here a Western viewpoint. Instead, conveyed respectfully in the diegetic present, the migrants enjoy agency in that they determine their own path and turn up in the frame as and when and how they choose. With each new appearance, Dumont dares us to emplot and fix them in some kind of narrative (social, political, ideological).<sup>4</sup> But with no discourse to elaborate and nothing to 'prove', the endlessly mobile and intractable migrants seem everywhere present. Above all, they appear integrated into the landscape: this is also their land freely to roam.

Even more crucially, the migrants are immediately aligned with another form of other equally unheralded in Dumont's cinema, the out-queer, here in the shape of two young lesbian lovers Ève (Lucy Caron) (Coincoin's former girlfriend in the first series) and Corinne (Priscilla Benoist), an androgynous-looking farm-girl.<sup>5</sup> This is how the two different groups are introduced early in the opening episode called 'Noir ch'est noir' (the 'ch' denoting the inhabitants' thick, Picard, *ch'ti* accent). Four young African men walking slowly along the road into frame gently observe a passing police car carrying Van der Weyden and Carpentier. One in the group even cordially hails the police. Although not invited formally into their subjective point of view, the viewer shares the migrants' same general angle and field of vision, looking with them at ground level as the car heads off into the distance. The captain stares out of the side-window back at them, as if mystified by the sight of four relaxed black men freely passing by. A little later, at the farm, the captain mistakes Corinne for a man; she corrects him immediately: 'Mademoiselle'. Discomfited, he harps on obsessively about her gender with the similarly shocked Carpentier, attributing it to the modern generation. By contrast, Ève and Corinne are entirely straightforward and confident about who they are, and they express their affection naturally and tenderly without drama (Ève of Corinne: 'C'est la femme que j'aime' ('She's the woman I love')). It is only when Coincoin, for example, makes an issue of their relationship in derogatory terms (in his case out of sour jealousy) that they stage a spectacle of kissing to silence him.

In both scenes, we witness on the part of the police a mistrust and marginalisation of the unknown other. Misapprehended by straight white men in authority, migrants and queers are both identified as alien and classified as suspect. Later in the same episode another group of migrants is brought together tangentially with Ève and Corinne. While attempting to hitch a lift, the couple are stopped by the police and obliged reluctantly to be driven

home. Both captain and lieutenant declare themselves concerned for their safety, pointing out the unwelcome attention the two will attract with their clothing which exposes their legs. Yet such unwelcome paternalism is steeped in homophobia. Van der Weyden refers to the couple mischievously as Coincoin's 'two girlfriends' and 'notre petit couple' ('our little couple'), adding in typical binary terms: 'Les chiens font pas des chats' (literally, dogs don't make cats), an expression about hereditary resemblance suggesting that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. This has a clear homophobic undertone here, since it suggests that the two women are narcissistically the same (i.e., two dogs), and thus doubly other and base. At the same time, the term '*chat*' carries a crude whiff of '(*la chatte*)' ('pussy'). Just as we are left trying to process such abusive terms, Van der Weyden proceeds to another pet issue of difference, this time racial. Looking out of the windscreen towards what will promptly be revealed as a group of passing migrants (here two African, one Middle Eastern), whom he perceives immediately as potential sexual predators, he blurts out: 'Quand on parle du loup, là' ('Talking of the wolf, here it comes'). The animalistic discourses of homophobia and racism are thus wholly entangled. Glimpsed in silence for a few quick seconds from the back-seat by Ève and Corinne, the migrants simultaneously peer in turn into the car and hazard a friendly, inquisitive smile (there is no subjective POV shot in either case).

This brief, silent, accidental, mutual (non-)encounter between migrants and queers is over before it has even begun, yet Corinne is moved to give



*Figure 12.1* Returning the look: the police car transporting Ève and Corinne skirts another group of migrants in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

*Source:* *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and *Blaq Out* (2018).



the finger to the police sitting in the front before defiantly stroking the hand of Ève. The police drop the women off and continue blithely with their toxic talk: 'les homosexuelles-là . . . faut savoir faire la balance' ('with those homosexuals . . . you have to know how to achieve a balance'), which the captain defines as the fine line between protecting vulnerable women and observing police protocol of never giving a lift to hitchhikers. Seconds later, their car is sprayed with gunk.

How far can we take such a missed encounter, since there is no further contact (indirect or otherwise) in the film between the lesbian couple and migrants, and thus no narrative progression or development? There is certainly nothing here approximating the warm relationship that forms naturally in Éliane de Latour's picaresque feature *Après l'océan/Birds of Heaven* (2006, France/UK/Côte d'Ivoire) between straight Ivorian migrant Shad and the young French bisexual woman Tango, his free-spirited 'little white sister', whom he meets by chance in London and who, to help him out with a marriage of convenience, takes him to Paris where she falls passionately in love with an African woman called Olga (a relationship Shad treats with due respect). Dumont is, of course, not interested in purveying positive images, and if the film refuses to present the migrant as victim, it also mobilises against any type of simple *bien pensant* approach towards minorities.<sup>6</sup> Yet the seeds of a possible new intersectional convergence have arguably been sown here, for even an oblique encounter of this kind constitutes a relational movement. During the transverse *skirting* of these two different groups on the roadside, there is a silent, undeclared, yet palpable bond of understanding and affinity between them based on a shared experience of being othered and discriminated against by the oppressive, patrolling, white male agents of republican authority who view both communities as deviant. Might such an intermittent presentation and open framing of the continually proximate migrant engender a new cinematic sensitivity towards migration, while serving in the process to queer the invariably straight sub-genre of the Calais migrant film?<sup>7</sup> More generally, might it also, in its very narrative intangibility, serve to undermine and subvert the prevailing universalising paradigms of French republican identity, masculinity, and nationhood inscribed in *Eastern Boys* and *Jaurès*? I want to explore these far-reaching possibilities by focusing on the second episode of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* entitled 'Les z'inhumains', taking first a short scene that deploys a key spatial motif of European cinema's encounter with migrants: the Descent to the Abyss.

### From abyss to tunnel: tilting the vertical

The sequence begins with the captain and lieutenant, still in hopeless search of the source of the foreign gunk, standing on a hill overlooking a makeshift migrant camp on the Calais outskirts. Beholding the migrants below in a high-angle POV shot, Van der Weyden grandly proclaims that the term 'Jungle' must be understood not just metaphorically but also literally, that

is, as a truly alien ‘planet’ of non-humans.<sup>8</sup> In this paranoid binary, ‘they’ are simply inferior foreigners and impostors, not legitimate citizens worthy of differentiation like ‘us’. He then indulges in truisms such as ‘(il) faut appeler un chat un chat’ (literally, ‘one must call a cat a cat’), meaning ‘tell it like it is’ (or more appropriately in view of the manifestly racist context, ‘call a spade a spade’). The use of ‘*chat*’ recalls his earlier insult to Ève and Corinne, but here it carries a racialised charge, since the distinction between ‘cats’ and ‘dogs’ echoes the lines of demarcation and segregation between the ‘superior’ and ‘lower’ races in colonial French North Africa, where Arabs were referred to derogatively by *pieds-noirs* as subhuman rats and ‘*bicots*’ (literally, kid goats).<sup>9</sup> With his clumsily aloof, vertical posture intended to demonstrate his hard-boiled attitude towards ‘*les malheureux*’ (‘the destitute’), Van der Weyden exposes both the essentialising nature of the nationalist rhetoric of exclusion and his own consistent and impulsive phobia.<sup>10</sup> Yet his lofty stance is soon dislocated and flattened out visually by the cinematic framing which insists instead on mutuality and empathy, for the camera is as if drawn forward towards the field of the migrants when he callously pushes Carpentier down a small slope for perceived insolence (Carpentier had questioned the captain’s persistent ‘abstruseness’). A group of migrants come automatically to Carpentier’s aid and help him up off the ground, holding him aloft almost like a male group *pietà*. This shot is not matched by a reverse-field shot of Van der Weyden looking at the action from their subjective point of view since there is no strict eye-line match, although Dumont plays a little with the possibility (see Figure 12.2).<sup>11</sup> We



Figure 12.2 A group of migrants helping up Carpentier (Philippe Jore) as Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost) brandishes his gun in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and *Blaq Out* (2018).

see the captain respond in knee-jerk fashion by flashing his gun, a gesture that instantly scatters the migrants. 'They're helping me', Carpentier protests, to which the captain responds in bewilderment: 'The world's upside down' ('C'est le monde à l'envers').

And indeed it is, for the seeds have now been sown for the gradual erosion of the vertical in favour of the horizontal. By this, I mean that the sequence establishes in concrete terms a wider cinematic field whereby the French police, as they saunter through the camp, find themselves literally out of their depth in long shot, and where the white male subject does not enjoy privileged cinematic access to subjective point of view. What results in this increasing dispersal of point of view is a commonality of the gaze and a shared sense of human vulnerability and affect. We see this beautifully first in the migrants' instinctive offering of a hand to another in need, then in the way that the proliferating strangeness and softness of the everyday sounds and smells of the migrants cooking, playing and conversing convivially with each other, despite the expressly hostile intrusion of the police, disconcerts and undoes – in a word *queers* – the aggressive, polarising, straight, white, French male subject engaged in histrionic displays of power. Dumont is presenting here a graphic deflation of warped white masculinity and nationalist narcissism that greets a collective gesture of human sensitivity and kindness only with ugly intimidation. Crucially, unlike the captain's glaringly racist dismissal of the migrants who can't understand his heavy Northern *patois* (although he claims the universal purity of standard French: 'Yet I speak good French, no?') and his desperate attempt to link them with the invading gunk, the film itself assiduously avoids employing the viscous blue-black gunge as a simple metaphor for non-white foreigners. In fact, the mixed black and brown, African and Middle Eastern migrants have nothing to do with the undifferentiated molten magma that so vexes the police, although they are fully alert, as we are, to its comic effects. Moreover, if migrant figures are visible in the film only in relation to the local white residents, it is also the case that when the two communities vaguely commingle, as here, the viewer is invariably transported into the field of the migrants – not within their subjective line of vision as such, but within their material space and orbit.

Such refusal to position the migrant as the negative reverse-field other of the autochthonous subject allows for a more inclusive, *horizontal* glimpse of homosociality and *mixité* transcending the vertical, nationalist lines of race and identity. Indeed, it decisively tilts and dismantles standard objectifying positions and point of view towards the migrant other by presenting migrancy at an explicitly aesthetic rather than representational level. New openings in cinematic form that loosen the screws of point of view and shot/counter-shot create here a new mobility in the relational field that in turn frees up potential new forms of kinship and contiguity, or what we might call provisionally a new cinematic queer commons.

There are other moments later in the same episode that extend this more capacious, lateral, queer expansion of the visual field – minor, unguarded moments that glide past and might seem inconsequential, yet which are equally unique. They radiate out intersectionally to reveal how casual, informal encounters and passing contact between strangers may create potential new, unforeseen forms of relation and affectivity beyond bloodlines, gender hierarchies, and ethnic absolutes. One such occurs just after the police, in hot pursuit of Coincoin and his best mate Kevin (aka ‘l’Gros’, or Fatso) (Julien Bodart) on their motorbike, find their car splatted on once again. As the runaway gunked car appears to lose control, screeching to an abrupt halt on the roadside, another act of human solidarity performed by migrants (now six) for those in potential danger is witnessed. We are placed once more on the same level with the migrants as they encircle the car. Looking at Van der Weyden, Carpentier declares in astonishment ‘Vous êtes tout noir!’ (‘You’re all black!’), yet what might be construed as a personal insult (i.e., an attack on his superior’s status and integrity as an indigenous white Frenchman) is celebrated collectively as a term of endearment in a joyful recognition of the other as same. For ‘black’ serves here not as a term of racial othering (the captain is not being interpellated violently as inferior because non-white) but as a relative concept, that is, as a signifier of colour rather than race. Nonplussed, Van der Weyden is again thrown off-balance and disarmed by this sudden set of circumstances whereby he becomes a passive object of the



*Figure 12.3* ‘Have you seen your face? You’re all black, look!’: Carpentier to Van der Weyden while surrounded by migrants in *Coincoin et les z’inhumains* (2018)

*Source:* *Coincoin et les z’inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and *Blaq Out* (2018).

foreign male gaze, but soon transfigured by the spirited African chanting that spontaneously starts up around him to Carpentier's gentle amusement. This reshuffling of the standard European gaze towards the non-white migrant other is highlighted and extended by the flagrant lack of continuity editing: first three migrants move around the car towards Carpentier's side, then, in the next shot, there are four, including one wearing a jacket with a bright floral strip that sets off the captain's newly acquired 'black face'. It is as if an erratic act of montage were operating here in accordance with the migrants who invest creatively every space they enter without seeking to own it.

Another brief example of formal queering through an aesthetic rendition of sameness is the moment shortly after when five adolescent white boys linked to Le Bloc, including Coincoin and Kevin, roll their way threateningly through another highly determined migrant space, that of the tunnel, inhabited here by migrants in small tents. Coincoin's attention is captured by a little black girl on his right who causes him to drift gently away from the pack. Together the two are framed moving forwards through the bowels of the tunnel as the camera tracks backwards, each aware of the other's presence and mutually distracted. They are then pictured separately, with two objective POV shots running in parallel. Yet the two figures are soon brought together again in an inclusive wide-angle shot that both reverses their earlier positions relative to each other (she is now on his left) and encompasses other migrant figures. This lolling formation defuses the portentous threat of white aggression on the march and instals a mutuality of the gaze: a curious, unspoken



Figure 12.4 Coincoin (Alane Delhaye) walking in tandem with a young migrant girl in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and *Blaq Out* (2018).

attraction and complicit sharing of smiles over the borders of the frame that cuts across age, race, and culture. The last shot of the sequence occurs from within the girl's general field of vision (again, not her point of view) as she looks out of the tunnel with bemused pleasure at Coincoin being teased in laddish horseplay by the other boys for his idle distraction by a new 'girlfriend'. There is nothing objectifying or fetishising at all about this sequence: the two figures enjoy equally objective visual status, and the enticing softness of their casual propinquity and availability, which momentarily dissolves social, cultural, and racial lines, invites from the viewer intuitive understanding and empathy.

### **From migrancy to drift**

Taken together, these affectively and aesthetically queer, migrant sequences initiate us into the aesthetic processes of relational difference while posing the question how exactly to take such terms as 'black' and 'homosexual' if divested of their meaning as cultural assignations and indicators of identity. In the case of the captain's realisation of his own 'black face', we might be tempted in such a highly racialised setting to read skin colour in the Fanonian sense of masks, i.e., the projected black other of white colonial society wearing the trappings of whiteness, including the master's language, without ever being allowed to be part of it.<sup>12</sup> Yet the viewer is stripped here of the need to conceptualise the migrant other in racial terms, since that would constitute merely a form of limited 'tunnel vision'. Indeed, the migrants' very lack of discourse, which punctures and silences Van der Weyden's gabbling racist logorrhoea, together with their perpetual 'erring', even in the interstices of montage, allow them to elude positionality and the fixed social and cultural parameters of movement mapped out ideologically by conventional representation and framing. The value of the migrants' wanderings lies precisely in their narrative and ideological unreadability, making them an aesthetic relational subject attuned to the open beauty of human gesture rather than an oppositional, ideological other within French society often based, as we saw earlier, on the assumption – entirely avoided by Dumont – that the migrant figure is necessarily straight. Put differently, the migrants' ever-virtual status rests in a permanent state of receptivity and desire (never fulfilled) for the other – that is, the pleasure of encountering and welcoming contact, however minimal, with other human beings in a spirit of mutual curiosity and mystery. Like the film's queer figures who have defiantly taken off the masks of compulsory heterosexuality and shame, the migrants simply 'are'.

What we are witnessing in this pre-narrative and post-conceptual *drift* is both the creation of new kinds of relationality that resist fixed and rapacious binaries of 'us' and 'them', and the instantiation of a queer 'migrancy' of vision – that is, a continuous evacuation and dispersal of the patriarchal, republican gaze into something more objectively shared, open and non-hierarchising. This resonates strongly with Patrick Chamoiseau's vital 2017

essay, *Frères migrants*, a purposively poetic intervention in French public discourse on the migrant crisis inspired by Édouard Glissant's 'poetics of Relation' and errantry, and which makes a stirring plea for open borders by invoking the transformative nature of a relational imaginary. For Chamoiseau, 'we' are all 'congenital migrants' in a 'multi-transcultural' ecosystem of Relation ('Un vivre-ensemble multi-trans-culturel' (Chamoiseau 2017: 91; original emphasis)), and relational, global thinking is preeminently 'horizontal' – to be understood, as with the loose, lateral formations of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, as fundamentally post-national (a nation is always a 'nation-relation', Chamoiseau asserts). A crucial point of difference, however, is that Chamoiseau always speaks in the name of a universal absolute, namely 'l'humain' (the human), where, as in the conventional republican script, gender rarely features.

The queer migratory 'surplus' of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, that is, the opening up of multiple gaps and new relational spaces outside the regularised zones of cinematic grammar and knowledge, draws the viewer into a sensory apprehension of migrant movement akin to that felt in Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (2015, Italy/France), which, as Sudeep Dasgupta has persuasively argued, deploys an 'aesthetics of indirection' whereby unelaborated migrant presences appear intermittently through elliptical forms of sound/image and time/space relations and are deliberately kept out of narrative integration (Dasgupta 2017: 49–50). The sensory works here 'as a counterfoil to the cognitive and the thinking of scattered subalternity is blocked and transferred to the sensory register' (Dasgupta 2017: 47), thus entailing a reconsideration of the relationality established cinematically between the marginalised migrant and the privileged, vacationing, legal resident (Dasgupta 2017: 44). As in *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, the production of a disjunctive sensorial experience is political precisely because it disrupts the normative understanding of humanity.

The sensorial, relational, non-representational aesthetic processes of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* – in flux, adrift, *queer* – culminate in the finale of the last episode ('L'apocalypse'), where a brass-band pageant at Coincoin's family farm brings together one by one all the characters including those from the original series such as Aurélie, eaten alive by pigs for befriending a young Arab boy (Mohamed) but raised now from the dead like a gothic spook, evoking perhaps parodically the common cultural alignment in Western society of the migrant and queer as a form of zombie between life and death, both human and inhuman (see Fojas 2017). The cheesy English tune she sang in *P'tit Quinquin* at the funeral of one of the victims, 'Cause I knew that it's you', is now taken up by all of the characters in unison, led in a new American spiritual version by yet another itinerant group of African figures (greeted predictably by the police drawing their guns), and who this time seem older and more disparate than in previous sightings – the very notion of 'the migrant' continues in the film to migrate and mutate. The motley procession circling and recircling the farmyard becomes a rousing chorus

of togetherness and reconciliation sweeping everyone up in the warmth of human song. Such an impromptu celebration of human emotion and oneness through mutual difference (social, racial, cultural, sexual) is arguably for Dumont the only really valid form of identity. The vortex of human movement gradually starts to empty itself out at the end, directly resisting expectations of narrative closure and political recuperation – an impression sealed by the final, random shot (confected by CGI) of a seagull smashing directly into the camera with a desublimating splat. Hence, fixed notions and preconceptions, not just of migrancy and non-normative sexuality but also of nationhood and Frenchness, are thrown into the air and temporarily shattered in the alienated territory of the Pas-de-Calais, revealed now in the summer light as a transcultural, carnivalesque, queer space *beyond* identity.<sup>13</sup>



*Figure 12.5* Coming together in song in the final, all-encompassing procession of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018)

Source: *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* (2018), directed by Bruno Dumont © Taos Films/Arte Editions, and Blaq Out (2018).

Of course, such a transformative aesthetic approach – an aesthetic doubling of the Real that escapes the ideological discourse of the Other and the narrative bounds of identity to open up new affective and relational fields – still does not accord the exemplarily drifting migrants the possibility for full expression and the right to speak and be heard. Indeed, it could justly be argued that once again the migrant is abstracted in favour of the fully fleshed-out, white, European subject. Yet in a film where the most explicit sexual manifestation is ‘French’ kissing (Ève with Corinne, *Coincoin* with Jenny), the migrants’ free and unpredictable movements as they gently comb and haphazardly intersect the landscape figure the very movement of desire.



Indeed, the ever-shifting patterns and rhythms of their multiple fleeting presences, together with their attention to sartorial difference through subtle combinations of dress and colour – a feather boa here, a bright multicolour fedora there, plus odd sprinklings of coloured sequins, sashays, and glitter that complement the more elaborately costumed, local (white) revellers seen heading to a distant summer carnival (never glimpsed) carrying large grotesque *papier-mâché* faces – not only contribute to the film's celebration of detail and variation, but also generate an ethico-erotics of surprise. Such unbounded migrancy, such lightness of being, such queer, erotic drift on the fringes, evades and destabilises the fixed, universalising, straight, white, male, patriarchal gaze by hinting at vague, unqualifiable affinities and allegiances with other kinds of contingent other through chance proximities and non-aggressive smilings and touchings. Rather than forming queer 'identities' as such, these ad hoc configurations of race, culture, gender and class (specifically here the rural, Northern French working class), whereby migrants are linked relationally to a concrete instance of out-queer desire, point suggestively to new, inchoate, queer forms as embodied relations – all the more potent, I would argue, for *not* being articulated or defined.

To return finally to the question with which we began, *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* uncompromisingly de-frames and deflates fixed and objectifying notions of the migrant figure as abject (sexual) other of the Republic. In the very queerness of its cinematic drift which denaturalises and desublimates some of the central tropes and topoi of migration and posits original – and necessarily provisional – intersectional and post-ideological relational fields, the film forges propitious new, queer, aesthetic and erotic migrant spaces. In so doing, it helps to reconceive and reimagine the very nature of sociality and kinship beyond fixed republican values and the absolutes of legitimacy and universality advanced in works such as *Eastern Boys* and *Jaurès*. The possibility of discovering further unique queer/migrant subjectivities and desires in French cinema outside the conceptual confines of identity constitutes an exciting theoretical prospect and challenge.

## Notes

- 1 Marc Siegel argues that *Jaurès*, like Roy Dib's *Mondial 2010* (2013, Lebanon/Palestine), enacts a radical queer vision that looks beyond itself by shifting attention away from immediately proximate and narrow concerns (around gender and sexuality) towards the larger contexts of sociopolitical hierarchies and inequalities within which those concerns exist. See Siegel (2015).
- 2 Cuthbertson concedes that the Afghans are 'used merely as the passive mnemonic décor for the telling of someone else's story' (Cuthbertson 2017: 275), yet sees this 'potential act of ethical provocation' in ultimately affirmative terms, arguing that it prevents the migrants from falling 'into absence or invisibility' (Cuthbertson 2017: 276). For the reasons given, such justification that the film grants the Afghans a representational visibility denied to Dieutre himself appears rather hollow.

- 3 The title *Coincoin et les z'inhumains* plays on the French expression 'faire coincoin' ('shout like a duck'). The first sounds heard in the film are those of hens.
- 4 Dumont does not credit the migrants in the final credits or in the Locarno Festival Press Book, or indeed in any official list of the cast which is kept brief and limited, although acknowledgement of particular migrant shelters in the Calais area is made at the end of the film. Since the public disclosure of their identity and status would raise serious implications if they were *sans-papiers*, I have chosen not to make the production of the film an issue in my discussion which also moves deliberately away from strict questions of identity and representation.
- 5 In fact, Dumont had attempted to portray a queer figure in his previous film *Ma Loute/Slack Bay* (2016, France), a period comedy, but gender is not specified in the relationship between 'Ma Loute' and the androgynous-looking Billie, a gender-queer teen who may be a trans boy, or trans girl, or intersex. Billie's gender ambiguity, moving between male and female costume, is played more for laughs here, although the character is subjected to brutal traumatic violence in the film.
- 6 See Dumont (2018b) where Dumont states provocatively that the film stands against 'the nazis of right-mindedness', adding that, as in Shakespeare, it exposes evil (i.e., the simultaneously good and bad character of Van der Weyden) in order to induce goodness.
- 7 Such films include *Welcome* (2009, France, dir. Philippe Lioret), *Happy End* (2017, France/Austria/Germany, dir. Michael Haneke), and *Une Saison en France/A Season in France* (2017, France, dir. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun). To this list may be added Marc Isaacs's documentary *Calais: The Last Border* (2003, UK), which revolves around the former Sangatte refugee camp and draws lines of connection and disconnection between evicted refugees from the South, immigrants from the UK, and British day-visitors, and Sylvain George's *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (des figures de guerres 1)/May They Rest in Revolt (Figures in Wars 1)* (France, 2010), a highly stylised, experimental, black-and-white study of undocumented refugees that mixes raw documentary (including footage of migrants burning their hands as a way of evading Eurodar) and consciously poetic techniques such as slow motion and fades to black. For a positive account of the film within the context of art created in the Calais Jungle, see Sanyal (2017). See also George (2011), where George talks about his methods and aims in making the film.
- 8 The series of Calais refugee encampments originally set up in 2002, and which sheltered close to 10,000 people before it was demolished in 2016, was referred to as the 'Jungle' by the migrants themselves in ironic reference to the squalid conditions (the word 'jungle' is thought to derive from the Pashto word 'dzjanggal', meaning forest or wood).
- 9 I am grateful to Azzedine Haddour for suggesting this link. Dogs have never been viewed positively as pets by the Arab population of North Africa due to their uncertain status in the Koran.
- 10 Later in episode two of *Coincoin et les z'inhumains*, Van der Weyden will warn two male priests who are taking hands-on care of a group of young choir boys about the example of the Pope and paedophilia. Already in *P'tit Quinquin* Van der Weyden retorted 'No intimacy, gendarme!' when Carpentier tried at one point to comfort him physically.
- 11 I have explored such opening of the reverse field initiated by *P'tit Quinquin*, and how more generally the television format and serial repetition have liberated Dumont's style, in Williams (2015).
- 12 Fanon writes acutely about the subservience of the indigenous population in the racialised, Manichean economy of the French colonies in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952). See Fanon (1968).

- 13 Dumont talks about the carnival motif as part of Northern France's particular folklore (incorporating also the Flemish art of Breughel and Bosch) in terms that echo the Fanonian concept of masks: 'the carnival is an inversion of values: it's a transgression. A fiesta that becomes a general reconciliation. . . . The series [*Coincoin et les z'inhumains*] proposes that we take off our masks' (Dumont 2018a).

# 13 Trans-regional optics and queer affiliations in the work of Jonas Carpignano

*Derek Duncan*

Queer has never been just about sex. Eve Sedgwick made the point that queer's task was 'to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state' (Sedgwick 1993: 8), and indeed, since its forceful emergence as a modality of identification and practice of critical communication, queer has been operating across multiple axes of marginality and difference. What queer's diverse positionalities perhaps share, even if unequally experienced, is a dissonance and dissidence in relation to the entitlements of national citizenship, whether these entitlements be access to healthcare, education, residence, or other forms of social and cultural security. As Martin F. Manalansan IV states, "Where are you from?" is a question that is posed to the foreigner, the non-citizen, and the queer' (Manalansan IV 2014: 103). The agonistic contest over citizenship is currently being publicly acted out in debates around two modes of human mobility which call into question conventional configurations of identity, practice, and settlement that queer as a sociocultural hermeneutic has worked to destabilise. While the prefix 'trans' applied to both gender and nation has prompted new understandings and practices of being and belonging, it has simultaneously led to the aggressive reformulation of normative strictures of expulsion and abjection because of the very pressure applied by mobile subjects to preexisting temporal and spatial arrangements.

Emma Bond incisively notes that both iterations of '*trans*' are to do with 'corporeal geography' and invite 'a certain flexibility in attitudes towards (self)perception and relationality' (Bond 2018: 76). She picks up on transgender theorist Susan Stryker's idea of 'cross-cutting' to affirm the inevitably multiple, varied, and potentially antagonistic articulations of embodied subjectivity. Two almost identically titled essays reflect further on this lexical association to interrogate modalities of '*trans*' mobility in ways echoing Bond's emphasis on perception and relationality. Song Hwee Lim's 'Is the trans- in transnational the trans- in transgender?' (Lim 2007), and Jessica Berman's 'Is the Trans in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?' (Berman 2017) investigate the overlaps between the term's deployment as a critical category or heuristic tool rather than social descriptor. Lim's essay anticipates Berman's assertion about 'the potential value of deploying "trans" as

a critical practice across domains of nationality and gender, and of using it as a key critical optic within new modes of comparative, global, or planetary literary study' (Berman 2017: 236). A strand of Queer Studies has for some time now advanced an 'optic' which brings into critical alignment the discontents of national belonging and the creative imaginings of other cartographies. Gayatri Gopinath's recent work on visual culture and queer curatorial practice revises the too static national/transitional divide by arguing for 'alternative understandings of time, space, and relationality' brokered at both supra- and sub-national levels. She looks instead towards what she calls a 'queer *regional* imaginary' (my emphasis) to bypass the nation as the sole filter through which connections with other places are made. Like Berman, she posits 'queerness as an optic and reading practice that brings alternative modes of affiliation and relationality into focus' (Gopinath 2018: 10). Their common queer aspiration to reframe the visual field reprises Bond's commitment to apprehending 'shifting gender embodiments through the *lens* of cultural and linguistic translation and migration movements' (Bond 2018: 21; my emphasis). The kinetic malleability of 'trans-embodiment' productively works against received formulations of identity, agency, knowledge, and habitation.

The 'queer' and 'trans' optics or lenses of Bond, Berman, Gopinath, and Lim provide the initial methodological coordinates for an analysis of the groundbreaking work of Italian filmmaker Jonas Carpignano.<sup>1</sup> His two feature films to date are set in the southern Italian region of Calabria and engage aspects of recent migration to Italy in dialogue with other forms of social marginality. *Mediterranea* (2015, Italy/France/USA) focuses on newly arrived black African migrants and their exploitation in the agricultural labour market, while *A Ciambra* (2017, Italy/Brazil/France/Germany/Sweden/USA) centres on Calabria's almost equally marginal Romani community and its life on the edge of the state and formal economy.<sup>2</sup> Far from being 'regional' in a parochial sense, his two multiethnic and multilingual films define an optic able to apprehend shifting non-national configurations of space, time, and embodied practices of relationality. Just as 'queer' and 'trans' refuse to alight on any single fixed object, 'region' needs to remain a mobile, open signifier.<sup>3</sup>

Before looking at Carpignano's work, it is worth noting that, as Áine O'Healy states, he straddles and confounds any clear-cut categorisation of national belonging (O'Healy 2018: 218). He was raised in New York by his Barbadian mother and Italian father, but also lived for significant periods in Rome. His paternal grandfather worked in film production, introducing Carpignano to Italian cinema at an early age. Since 2010 he has been resident in Gioia Tauro, a small town in Calabria, and is artistic director of its Film Festival dedicated to emerging talent, which he helped set up in 2016. His first two features premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, and while *Mediterranea* did not secure general release in Italy, it has been distributed widely and celebrated on the international art house circuit. His follow-up

*A Ciambra*, produced by Martin Scorsese, was Italy's nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards in 2017, and Carpignano himself was named best director at Italy's David di Donatello Awards the following year.

*A Ciambra*'s Oscar nomination followed that of Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* (2016, Italy/France) the previous year, and it underlines Italian cinema's ongoing, albeit contested, engagement with mobility and multicultural diversity. Yet it has been suggested that Carpignano's work breaks previously dominant paradigms of representation. O'Healy makes the bold claim that with *Mediterranea*, Carpignano 'opens a new space for thinking about the representation of migration in film and media, not only in Italy, but across the world' (O'Healy 2018: 218). Like the later film, it is semi-scripted and shot from the perspective of its mainly non-professional cast who mostly act out events from their own lives. His involvement with the actors is intense, based on months living in close proximity.<sup>4</sup> Extensive subtitling reflecting the diversity of the actors/characters strains the conventional monolingual and monocultural bias of the national audience. Hand-held camera-work and extremes of natural lighting self-consciously texture the cinematic image, and ellipsis characterises narrative progression. Yet O'Healy's idea that the film might create a 'new space . . . across the world' points to the transnational mobility of director's aesthetic practices.

His work sits in a hybrid space between historical-national and contemporary international styles of filmmaking. Jonathan Romney, for example, in his discussion of *A Ciambra*, refers back to the hey-day of politically committed cinema: 'Italian neorealism is alive and well in the hands of writer-director Jonas Carpignano – a fairly textbook version of neorealism, at that' (Romney 2018).<sup>5</sup> Equally, Francesco Boille recognises that 'his film rediscovers the ambitions of neorealism without ever mindlessly imitating them.' With its thematic and stylistic mingling of fiction and documentary, his work also evokes 'international arthouse cinema at its best' (see Boille 2017). Carpignano echoes this tension or dissonance by both inserting himself into a particular tradition of Italian filmmaking and marking a distance from it:

If you think of what Italian cinema has done, the image that people have of Italy right now is very much attributed to what Rossellini said Italy was after the war, so the national image is very much constructed through cinema. If cinema is really going to give an accurate portrait of a nation, I think it's important to show what is happening to new black Italians or Romany Italians and show that there is a richer and more complex social fabric than Italian cinema has put forth this past century.  
(Shia 2018)

He acknowledges that his own biracial heritage may have drawn him to this subject matter but insists that moving beyond Italian cinema's 'traditional,

white Italian story' was the primary impetus behind his filmmaking. Carpignano's project then might be read as compensatory, filling a gap in Italian cinema's national narrative. Yet there are more interesting, and indeed queerer, ways to approach his revisionary aesthetic. Tavia Nyong'o coins the concept of 'afro-fabulation' to theorise the work of queer black performance artists whose interventions deliberately trouble narratives of black oppression or invisibility. 'Afro-fabulation' involves telling the world otherwise, bringing together what Nyong'o calls the 'impossible' – people and things that the real world disallows (see Nyong'o 2019). While there is political purpose in referring to Carpignano and his work as 'Italian', it also risks erasing alternative trans-collocations. For instance, before moving to Calabria, Carpignano worked as assistant to Spike Lee on *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008, Italy/USA), about four African-American GIs in Italy during the Second World War as part of the racially segregated 92nd Infantry Division. This experience points to another aesthetic and historical dimension of Carpignano's not-quite-Italian cinematographic practice. Aligning it with Nyong'o's queer black genealogy offers another axis of intelligibility or optic of cultural translation.

The first section of *Mediterranea* tracks the hazardous journey of two migrants, Ayiva (Koudous Seihon) and his friend Abas (Alassane Sy), across the desert through Algeria and Libya, before they undertake a precarious sea-crossing with the inexperienced Ayiva at the helm of the small ramshackle vessel.<sup>6</sup> Arrested and then released by the authorities in Italy, their only option for immediate survival is very badly paid seasonal agricultural work harvesting citrus fruit in Calabria. Ayiva and Abas are neither faceless nor anonymous. Their well-delineated and differentiated characterisation and back-stories prise migrant representation away from the impersonality of both statistical data and the humanitarian gaze (see Browne 2015).

Abas resents their exploitation in the labour market and calls the more compliant Ayiva a 'whore'. Their sense of relationality is very different. Abas sexualises Europe through the heteronormative pornotopia of the internet, while Ayiva develops a friendship with Rocco, his employer, and particularly with Marta, his young daughter. In the film's final section, Carpignano recreates the riots that took place in the Calabrian town of Rosarno in January 2010, when the black community rose up in protest against the multiple forms of violence to which they were subject.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of the violence, Ayiva seems to want to return home, yet the sight of his daughter's delight at the MP3 player he sent her causes him to weep and he interrupts their Skype call to hide his tears. The film offers no resolution and the final scene sees him helping out at Marta's birthday party, suggesting he might, in fact, stay on.

O'Healy's extended analysis of the film brings out effectively the startling originality of Carpignano's representation of migrants in Italy through the expansion of its geopolitical coordinates, the emphasis on the migrants' subjective experience, and their defiant resilience in the face of exploitation

(O’Healy 2018: 218–25). As she also points out, *Mediterranea* makes the migrant visible as a global or supranational agent. The film’s multiple languages push it beyond the limits of national cinema, and Ayiva’s ability to operate translingually positions him as an urbane, cosmopolitan subject. Marta’s reminder to her grandmother that Ayiva can understand them perfectly as long as they speak Italian and not dialect suggests the limits of their mother tongue. The extensive use of technology and social media to participate in a transnational network of cultural exchange and communication complicates separation on the grounds of national culture and confounds the familiar projection of backwardness onto the non-national citizen. Ayiva Skypes his sister and daughter in Burkina Faso, and the comfortable interior from where they speak contrasts with the bleakness of Ayiva’s living conditions in Italy, so inverting any residual assumptions of modernity as a Western property. Popular music has a functional role in this transnational network, and the film features both contemporary dance tracks and more dated Italian songs from artists such as American-born Heather Parisi and the Roman Edoardo Vianello. Ayiva’s ringtone is sampled from Rihanna and Calvin Harris’s ‘We found love’, his daughter’s favourite track on her new MP3 player. Rihanna’s endlessly reiterated invocation of a ‘hopeless place’ offers a neat metaphor for the desolate orchards of Calabria, yet more compelling is the work the track does in creating an alternative transnational and wholly unpredictable cartography linking Calabria with Barbados (Rihanna), Scotland (Calvin Harris), and Burkina Faso (Seihon).<sup>8</sup>

As noted, the concluding scene sees Ayiva helping out at Marta’s party. The intermittently benevolent Rocco invites him into the house for a celebratory drink as the party erupts joyously to the strains of the Italian trio Ricchi e Poveri’s anthemic ‘Sarà perché ti amo’, an old-fashioned pop song even when it premiered at the Sanremo Song Festival, the enormously popular national televisual music event, in 1981.<sup>9</sup> Ricchi e Poveri (whose career has lasted more than fifty years) unite the nation timelessly, first through anachronism and then through nostalgia for that anachronism. Ayiva’s position here in relation to the nation’s temporality is uncertain. Shot from his point of the view on the threshold of Rocco’s family home, the image blurs, and only the music is heard in a scene where time and space become radically imprecise and ill-defined. Rocco’s belated gesture of hospitality grates with his earlier refusal to help Ayiva gain the work permit that would have allowed his daughter to join him in Italy. Rocco glosses his reluctance with an anecdote about his emigrant grandfather and his heroic struggle to survive in the US relying on the support of his compatriots rather than burdening the host nation. Reminding the spectator of Calabria’s own migrant past, this lesson in the constitutive limits of nationally defined kinship disturbs the clarity of Ayiva’s optic in the final scene, leaving only the sonic imprint of the poly-temporal Italian pop classic.

Pio, the Romani adolescent who features in *Mediterranea* as a relatively minor, yet memorably charismatic, figure, is the main protagonist of *A*



*Ciambra's* fragmented coming-of-age narrative. His passage to adulthood is brokered through the fraught negotiation of relationships with his extended family, the black African community, and a group of local criminals referred to as the 'Italians'. All three groups live at the margins of the state and its bureaucracies, their antagonistic relationships fused with self-interest.<sup>10</sup> Their fraught dependency evokes the 'entangled and angular socialities generated by fabulation' identified by Nyong'o (Nyong'o 2019: 6). The film is prefaced by a pastoral scene set in an unidentified landscape and shot in a muted blue palette. A young man strokes a saddleless horse before drinking water from a fast-flowing stream into which he squeezes some fresh lemon juice. His tin cup, the canvas-covered caravans, and open fire in the background connote pastness. The scene marks a temporal and visual contrast with what follows: first, overexposed footage of Pio in close-up, then a series of fast cuts conveying the chaos of an overcrowded apartment. The subtitling of the Calabrian dialogue intensifies the national spectator's disorientation. It becomes apparent that the young man in the previous scene is Pio's now very elderly and infirm grandfather for whom Pio prepares a glass of lemon and water taken from a tap. The opening scenes introduce what is a very extended family. While Rocco and his wife's one-child-and-one-grandparent arrangement is crystal clear in its predictable heteronormativity and generational separation, Pio's is less fathomable. The large number of children is at odds with the stereotypically small contemporary Italian household, and while Rocco's family very much identifies with the domestic interior, Pio and his family are characteristically seen outside their decaying apartment block in a landscape strewn with waste.

The film takes its name from 'La Ciambra', the estate on the outskirts of Gioia Tauro where the large local Romani community is housed.<sup>11</sup> The housing blocks are often seen in aerial long-shot or in medium close-up, allowing the spectator little sense of place. Similarly, when Pio leaves the estate, he is shot in anonymous, desolate locations. Intergenerational differences blur, and the spectator struggles to map patterns of kinship with any accuracy. The family operates in a cash economy through various forms of petty crime rather than earning a living through waged work. Pio's father is arrested for electricity theft, prompting Pio to scale up his own activities to provide for the family until a clash with the local 'Italian' criminals leads to his temporary expulsion from home. Unable to read and write, Pio trades technology as a commodity on the black market. As an adolescent, he is caught between playing with the younger children and trying to become more involved in the activities of the adult family members. Boille reflects on Pio's anachronism: 'you don't get characters like Pio anymore in Italian cinema' (Boille 2017). He smokes and drinks (although he distances himself from drugs), yet the on-screen presence of cigarette-smoking toddlers suggests that Pio's apparent defiance of conventional expectations about age-appropriate behaviour is not simply a character trait but symptomatic of a broader expression of asynchronous, cultural dissonance.

The Amato family as a collective is queer when it comes to time. For Halberstam, ‘queer time’ reveals the degree to which normativity depends on selective investment in the schedules of ‘reproductive temporality’, ‘longevity’, and other measures which afford value to middle-class lives, suggesting ‘queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules and eccentric economic practices’ (Halberstam 2005: 11). Elizabeth Freeman extends this intersection of class and temporality through her concept of ‘chrononormativity’, an analysis of embodied responses to heteronormative life patterns and waged labour that also indexes class-based practices of self-organisation and corporeal disposition: ‘Bodies . . . come to matter through kinetic and sensory forms of normativity’ (Freeman 2010: 172). Wheeling and dealing in stolen goods already places Pio on the margins of the formal state economy. Out and about in the middle of the night, he is illiterate and doesn’t attend school. He dissents from the national, class-based ‘*dispositif*’ through all that he does, becoming one of Freeman’s ‘denizens of times out of joint’ (Freeman 2010: 19), ‘living aslant’ (Freeman 2010: xv) by following the beat of alternative temporal rhythms and therefore living ‘out of synch with state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming’ (Freeman 2010: xv). ‘Living aslant’ is time’s queer embodiment.

It is difficult to measure time in the film itself as the narrative’s lack of progression or development is at odds with conventional mechanisms of plotting. David Ehrlich is unsympathetic to this, saying that the ‘story is as messy as the experience of growing up in Gioia Tauro’ (Ehrlich (2017). Boille writes approvingly about the ‘floating’ or ‘suspension’ of time in the film (Boille 2017), while Romney feels that *A Ciambra* ‘does sometimes lack shape. The course of events feels baggy and repetitive’ (Romney 2018). The recurrent sight of a photograph of the younger grandfather throughout the film anticipates a non-narrativised relationship with the past while creating a marginal disturbance of vision, a kind of jump-cut in the filmic texture. Temporal alteration is most palpable in the scenes where the grandfather appears to Pio as a ghost, once in immediate anticipation of his death, and once after Pio’s expulsion from home. Carpignano reflects that he wanted his choice to express the past’s affective, hallucinatory grip on Pio:

I [Carpignano] tried to conjugate the abstraction of an imagined past with the realism of the film. The barely perceptible slow motion and the magical feeling of those scenes are an obvious departure from the rest of the film, but at the same time they are shot within the ‘rules’ of the visual language we established for the whole film.

Ghosts have little place in the world of Italian neorealism, yet they manifest strongly in queer thinking (see Freccero 2006). For Carpignano, as for Freeman, they evoke both history and the call for reparation. Drawing on Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), Freeman affirms its contribution to queer theory’s anti-chrononormative impulse towards the creation of new

relations and forms of justice. Ghosts stand outside history and insist on the presence of the past in the present. Following Avery Gordon, she asserts that they incarnate not only the dead but also ‘repressed events and social formations’ (Freeman 2010: 98). This ghost, sitting aslant life and death, has assumed the grandfather’s younger form and is accompanied by the same horse. The theatricality of their appearance announces the persistence of a troubling past whose effects reverberate across the remainder of the narrative. In Nyong’o’s terms, they represent ‘the persistent re-appearance of what was never meant to appear, but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation’ (Nyong’o 2019: 6). They form part of the texture of the film’s queerness.

After the grandfather’s funeral, Pio’s tries to persuade Cosimo, his reluctant older brother, to go into business.<sup>12</sup> The sound-track to this conversation is Tony Colombo’s ‘Nun fazzu pi tia’ (I don’t do/I am not good enough for you).<sup>13</sup> The Sicilian singer is a successful exponent of ‘new-melodic’ music, a contemporary phenomenon styling itself on traditional ‘canzone napoletana’. From the nineteenth century onwards, this dialect tradition enjoyed significant transnational success, and successive remediations by classically trained vocalists have blurred its popular origins. Sung in the dialect of Palermo (modified to render it more intelligible to a national audience), ‘Nun fazzu pi tia’, an avowedly anachronistic, homosocial ballad about a young man separated from the girl he loves because of her father’s disapproval, sits ‘aslant’ geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Colombo himself



Figure 13.1 Pio (Pio Amato) reaches out to Aviya (Koudous Seihon) in *Mediterranea* (2015)

Source: *Mediterranea* (2015), directed by Jonas Carpignano © DCM, Audax Films, Blu Grotto, Court 13 Pictures, Good Films, and Studiocanal (UK) (2016).

has been described as a ‘man out of time’ (Mariarca 2018) because of his readiness to display emotion and vulnerability. In this sense, Pio’s alternative affective alliance with Ayiva is also queerly out of time, at odds with both his family’s unselfconsciously expressed racism and their admonitions not to go outside the community. In the words of the song, Ayiva ‘doesn’t do’ for Pio.

While in *Mediterranea* Pio had been in a position to help out the newly arrived Ayiva, things have clearly moved on, and in *A Ciambra*, Ayiva assumes more the role of protective, older brother to the now vulnerable Pio.<sup>14</sup> His friendship with Ayiva is an instance of what Halberstam calls ‘alternative methods of alliance’ (Halberstam 2005: 1) and contributes to Pio’s framing as an almost archetypally queer trans-regional subject. Having managed to supply a group of Africans with a large-screen television, Pio quickly makes friends learning an alternative mode of socialisation and effecting an ‘adjustment’ (Halberstam 2005: 6) in how he experiences and moves across cultural spaces. In an overview of recent films set in Calabria, Felice Cimatti refers to their relationship as ‘monstrous’, an adjective he also applies to the triangulation of communities (Romani, migrant, criminal), or ‘angular socialities’, in which they live. Their ‘monstrosity’ relates to the baroque novelty of their existence which, like the deformed language or ‘pidgin’ they speak, does not see the nation (past or present) as a meaningful reference point (Cimatti and Dempsey 2018). It depends, too, on the scandal of race, reminiscent of the outrage documented in Countee Cullen’s short poem ‘Tableau’ (1925) glossed by Sara Ahmed. The poem presents a vignette of two queer boys, a ‘black body and a white body’, out walking together, their defiant yet carefree public appearance eliciting disapproval from both communities. Their actions flaunt the scandal of their improper pairing: ‘It is’, Ahmed reflects, ‘the proximity of these bodies that produces a queer effect’ (Ahmed 2006: 169). Seen in this light, their relationship creates a queer proximity between Carpignano and the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen had also married Yolande, the only daughter of the black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, all three men spending formative parts of their lives in Europe.<sup>15</sup>

This queerness of Pio and Ayiva’s spatial transgression proves too much for Cosimo, who forces his brother to betray his friend to secure his reintegration into the family. Pio lures Ayiva away from the lock-up where he stores the goods he sells on the black market. He deliberately crashes his bike, falling off and wounding his head before calling Ayiva to come and pick him up. Shot almost exclusively in barely lit close-up, the camera lingers on Pio’s bloodied forehead and the tears he sheds over his betrayal. The ‘proximity of these bodies’ exudes an almost unbearable poignancy and tenderness as Ayiva embraces Pio. On the back of the motorbike, Pio cleaves to his friend, their hands, black on white, firmly clasped, temporarily suspending Pio’s normative gesture of familial reconciliation. In the meantime, Cosimo has ransacked the lock-up.

The extirpation of Pio’s queerness takes a more obviously sexualised turn when his brother treats him to a visit to a local prostitute to initiate him



Figure 13.2 Aviya's hand, Pio's tears, in *A Ciambra* (2017)

Source: *A Ciambra* (2017), directed by Jonas Carpignano © Stayblack, RT Features, Rai Cinema, Sikelia Productions, and Academy Two (Italy) (2017).

into male adulthood. The camera dwells on Pio's face as the white prostitute performs oral sex. The film's subsequent and concluding sequence sees Pio welcomed into the space of adult men and leaving behind the women and children, no longer stuck in the marginal, queer space in-between. While this experience symbolically marks Pio's entry into normative adult masculinity, it also recalls a very brief scene in *Mediterranea* when Ayiva sees one of his black female friends performing oral sex on a white man. A relaxed social evening had been interrupted by the arrival of white Italian criminals who force the women to leave. Visibly uncomfortable, Ayiva and some of the other men decide to go. Their disempowerment is confirmed by his fleeting glimpse of his friend. Their common subjection to the prejudicial logics of race and citizenship is palpable through the interstices of this queer optic.

Queer is also always about sex. Both of these scenes of oral penetration bespeak subjugation rather than pleasure and arguably make manifest the erotic failure as well as the price of heteronormativity. Freeman writes about the damage and pain inflicted on the queer body, and the unlikely emergence of 'queer social contours, a wounded morphology of the social following a wounded morphology of the individual' (Freeman 2010: 12). The blood from Pio's self-inflicted wound articulates a 'morphology of the social' that rehearses the systemic violence inflicted onto all the marginal, migrant, and resolutely queer subjects of Carpignano's film. He doesn't cry, however, because his head hurts. His tears haunt by virtue of their own queer temporality emanating from an affective past, and mourning what

has become an unrealisable future.<sup>16</sup> His tears, rehearsing those of Ayiva in the earlier film, reaffirm their affective and asynchronous affinity. Pio, like Ayiva, is a denizen out of time, and the film, as a coming-of-age narrative, records his attempts to become an adult male by shunning the scandal of race and returning to a mode of fabulation driven by the segregation of sexuality and race.

Carpignano's commitment to racial and transnational diversification positions him as what might be called a trans-regional queer theorist, whose cinematic optic aligns subjects distant from normative configurations of social subjectivity and their entitlements. This commitment may be regarded as a contribution to the 'new kind of justice' intimated by Sedgwick. To reprise Stryker, his aesthetic practice of 'cutting across' accepted designations of spatial and temporal border reaffirms queer as a mobile critical category in the terms and spirit intimated by Carla Freccero:

Queer, to me [Freccero], is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity. It can be thought of as, and is akin to, the 'trace' in the field of sexuality. Thus *créolité*, *hybridity*, *mestizaje*, *métissage*, *spectrality*, *the trace*, and *the uncanny* all find themselves in certain ways allied with *queer* as terms that do the work of *différance* in relation to the identitarian inflections they carry, though each speaks to different discursive domains and targets specifically and differently inflected binaristic identitarian normativities.

(Freccero 2011: 17)

Freccero's vertiginous menu does not list 'trans' as an option. Yet all the options she does propose contain the 'trace' of a material, often linguistically marked, embodied encounter of crossing redolent of Carpignano himself as a black, American Italian aslant diverse genealogies. *Mediterranea's* inclusion of gay icon Rihanna's 'S&M' offers a 'trace' or even a promise that other forms of sociability or kinship are possible. Contrapuntally, the year of the film's release, 2015, saw the opening in Milan of *Sarà perché ti amo*, a musical drawing extensively on Ricchi e Poveri's most famous numbers, referred to by one reviewer, in a gesture to Gramsci, as 'ultranational popular music' (see Naso 2015). The twist, however, is the remediation of the title-track in a gay subplot which seemed to appeal to the audience, but came as a terrible shock to the songwriter who had imagined his lyrics to be resolutely straight. The inversion confirms the transformation of Rocco's Calabrian living room into a site of non-normative, asynchronous, musical pleasure queering the transparencies of nationally defined space and disturbing its optics. Seriously aslant.

## Notes

- 1 For Berman 'the term "trans" bears affinities with the ways that theorists deploy "queer" as an attitude, activity, or process rather than a substantive identity or

- specific sexuality' (Berman 2017: 239). In a pointed aside on his engagement with both Trans and Queer Studies, Nyong'o remarks that he 'does not seek to conflate them or force their complementarity' (Nyong'o 2019: 14). My own argument proceeds with these distinctions in mind.
- 2 Clough Marinaro (2014) provides a full account of the ways in which Italy's Romani communities have been targeted in the campaign of hostility to migrants. Over the last fifteen or so years, Romani camps have been the focus of ongoing violent incursions by supporters of the far-right. From 2018, Matteo Salvini, the Northern League politician and now former Deputy Prime Minister, has been vocal in condemning the presence of Romani people on Italian territory and supported the police clearing of the long-established River Roma camp in the face of an EU directive against the clearing (see Tondo 2019b). See Hope (2016) for a wide-ranging discussion of Roma in recent Italian cinema.
  - 3 The advantage of the term 'trans-regional' is that it remains ambiguous, playing with different scales of interconnectedness and entanglement from the relatively local to the continental. It always, however, sidesteps the nation as the determining unit of geopolitical significance.
  - 4 In interviews, Carpignano has talked extensively about the closeness of his relationship with Koudous Seihon and Pio Amato, the non-professional stars of his two films. Their friendship allowed him access to the respective communities whose experiences form the core of each narrative.
  - 5 Italian neorealism is associated primarily, albeit not exclusively, with Rome as a metonym for the nation itself. Angelo Restivo comments on Italian cinema's complex temporal layering expressed throughout the postwar period. See Restivo (2002). His argument resonates with much of what I say, although I argue that Carpignano's work does not retain the nation as a structural determinant.
  - 6 Carpignano has talked about the trauma the actors experienced reenacting the scenes of the crossing (see Rapold 2015). Alassane Sy was the only professional actor in the film. Born in Mauretania, as a child he fled to Senegal with his family. He later established himself as an actor and model working in France, the UK, and US. He currently edits *Nataal*, the African-focused digital/print culture magazine.
  - 7 The riots, in fact, inspired Carpignano's decision to relocate to Calabria. Koudous Seihon also took part in an extensive report on the events in Rosarno drafted by a group of NGOs active in Calabria. The riots were the subject of *Il Sangue Verde/Green Blood* (2010, Italy), a documentary directed by Andrea Segre. The film includes interviews with a number of those involved and makes an explicit comparison between present-day exploitation of migrants and the historical exploitation of agricultural workers.
  - 8 In the press notes issued for the release of *A Ciambra*, Carpignano talks about his love of popular music and its capacity to bring people from different backgrounds together. I would want to stress, however, that, like all cultural products, music is transformed as it travels. See Carpignano (2017).
  - 9 Countless versions of the track are available on YouTube. For more information on Ricchi e Poveri, see their website <https://ricchiepoveri.com/it/>.
  - 10 Carpignano plans to complete the sequence of films with the provisionally titled *A Chiara*, set in the town's 'Italian' community. Release is scheduled for 2020.
  - 11 Carpignano's representation of the community, its way of life, and the conditions in which it lives has been criticised as too reliant on stereotypes of criminality. See Stasolla (2017).
  - 12 Cosimo is played by Damiano Amato, his real-life twin. The brothers are named after Saints Cosma and Damiano, traditionally venerated by Calabria's Romani community and celebrated by them in a series of ceremonies held over three days every September in the town of Riace. Riace has in recent years become well known for its attempts to counter depopulation by attracting migrants to it.

Domenico Lucano, the town's mayor who led this project, has been charged with a number of offences involving the use of public funds and colluding in illegal migration.

- 13 The video accompanying the track offers a startlingly literal, yet brazenly unreal, rendition of the content and tone of the lyrics: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRS3nutbENc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRS3nutbENc).
- 14 In a general reflection on the burden placed on children in Italian migration cinema, Danielle Hipkins asks: 'What impossible futurity does Italian cinema's emphasis on the "Italian" white child fantasize?' (Hipkins 2014: 24). In my reading, Carpignano revises the conventions of that heteronormative logic through the temporal (dis)locatedness of the adolescent Pio.
- 15 Jeremy Braddock effectively elucidates the latent queerness of Cullen's work. In terms of Carpignano's own aesthetic practice, we note Braddock's reference to James Snead's work on repetition as an expressive strategy in black culture: 'the virtue of repetition consists in the way in which it enables a return or a restaging of an unavailable or repressed history' (Braddock 2002: 1265). This is a helpful way of thinking about ghosts in *A Ciambra*, and also Carpignano's comments on the triptych as a non-narrative assemblage. See Fierro and Fierro (2018).
- 16 Pio's tears can be read as a performative instance of 'heterosexual melancholy' which, according to Judith Butler, is 'culturally instituted and maintained as the price of stable, gender identities related through oppositional desires' (Butler 1990: 95).



## 14 Inside out

### Invaders, migrants, borders, and queering the Belgian family

*Michael Gott*

The family has functioned as a particularly durable metaphor for the nation and national identity in Europe. The notions of genealogical proximity, biological and terrestrial lineage, and protection from ostensibly nefarious outside contagions are particularly germane to this symbolism. The Belgian nation is a complex entity, and with its community rivalries and squabbles one might be tempted to think of Belgium as a dysfunctional, if not effectively estranged, family, the unfortunate result of an ill-conceived 1830 union. A confederation of language communities and regions, Belgium is characterised by an unusual degree of internal complexity, meaning that the very conception of Belgian identity is slippery. As a small country with three national borders in close proximity, and a federated state with three official languages, Belgium is comprised of a variety of internal frontiers, both administrative and cultural-linguistic. Nonetheless, the relationship between Belgium's insiders – the European communities that make up the nation – and its immigrants still tends to be framed as a set of intractable problems. Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, and Turkey in particular, are often viewed as fundamentally unassimilable and perhaps unwilling to assimilate to the national family or families. Many Belgians seem to be resistant to immigration and multiculturalism. By one measure, they were second most likely amongst Europeans to agree with the statement 'immigrants are a threat to your way of life' (Mulcahy 2011: 104–6, 159).

This complex make-up provides the ideal laboratory for cinematic interrogations of identity. Belgianness involves a number of layered and latent complexities, stemming from the aforementioned internal factors, a significant history of post-WWII immigration, and the significant presence of bureaucrats working for the EU and other international organisations. In Brussels, almost half (46%) of the capital's residents have roots outside Belgium, with the largest minority populations being Moroccan and Turkish (see Vandezande et al. 2011). Lieve Spaas suggests that Belgium's 'mosaic of different groups of people' is reflected in the diversity of the Belgian cinema industry. Internal diversity can be traced back to filmmakers Charles Dekeukeleire and Henri Stork, whose careers were both launched in the 1920s and whose filmographies comprised both Francophone and Flemish

films. Diversity with origins outside of Belgium is exemplified by the foreign origins of directors such as Boris Lehman (Switzerland), Marion Hänsel (France), Michel Khleifi (Lebanon), Fiona Gordon (Australia), Sam Garbarski (Germany), and Jessica Woodworth (America) (Spaas 2000: 13). Belgian filmmakers often cite the nation's diversity as a creative influence. For instance, Nabil Ben Yadir, who was born in Brussels to Moroccan parents and directed the successful 2009 film *Les Barons* (Belgium/France) about minorities living in the often disparaged, working-class Molenbeek community of Brussels, contends that Belgium's complexity is reflected in its cinema (see Van Hoeij 2010).

Long before the current migrant and refugee 'crisis' became the focus of intense media attention across Europe, Belgium and its cinema were dealing with a constant process of negotiating borders. In this chapter, I will suggest that tracing the trajectories of families (flexibly defined) as they come together, reunite, and/or fragment throughout six Belgian productions made by directors from Belgium's French and Flemish communities (and, in one case, by a Francophone director from Quebec) offers a way to understand the complexities and malleability of Belgian identity/ies. The films, in order of discussion, are: *King of the Belgians* (2016, Belgium/Netherlands/Bulgaria, dir. Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth), *L'Envahisseur/The Invader* (2011, Belgium, dir. Nicholas Provost), *25 degrés en hiver/25 Degrees in Winter* (2004, Belgium/France/Russia/Spain, dir. Stéphane Vuillet), *Black* (2015, Belgium, dir. Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah), *Congorama* (2006, Canada/Belgium/France, dir. Philippe Falardeau), and *Je suis mort mais j'ai des amis/I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015, Belgium/France, dir. Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin). These films reveal a varied and complex, though still contested, picture of citizenship. In the following analysis, I will also highlight some of the ways in which the production talent involved in their making exemplify the layered diversity of Belgium's cinema industries and the nation itself. This dual approach also enables us to move productively – at least to some extent – beyond what Walter Mosley has theorised as the 'split screen' of Belgian cultural identity, based on a linguistic division that has complicated the quest for any unified definition of national Belgian cinema (Mosley 2001: 5). By extension, the inherent diversity and multilayered nature of Belgianness furnishes the context for recent cinematic reactions to – and representation of – migrants.

### The family as micro-border

As a metaphor for the Belgian nation and its entangled relationships, tortuous genealogies, and frequent squabbles, families offer a useful framework to question such binaries as Flemish/Walloon, French/Dutch, or insider/outsider. As Daniela Berghahn observes, the family, 'as the smallest unit of society and as the prime site of socialisation and identity formation', is crucial in debates over cultural identity, belonging and assimilation (Berghahn

2013: 2). If the family is the smallest unit of the nation or community, it is also the primary locus of the everyday elaboration and construction of the community's borders, whether ideational or – to a certain extent, at least – juridical and 'hard' borders as Klaus Eder defines them (Eder 2006), through marriage or partnerships, procreation, adoption, etc.. In this sense, they function as micro-borders, where the parameters of identity and filiation are constantly tested, resisted, and remade in the course of daily life. My suggestion is that families in Belgian film 'queer' national and community identities from the inside by elaborating new interactions and updated forms of filiation. In what follows, I hope to underscore how, through families, universal themes such as intergenerational conflict, filiation, and 'return' to origins, and techniques like multilingualism, linguistic code-switching, and 'translanguaging' (moving among language and using language in diverse ways) (King 2017: 8), can be employed to address particularly Belgian identity questions. Although there is only one character in the films I discuss that is clearly identified as queer, the families in all of these narratives, and by extension the national or community family, are to different degrees all 'queered' according to the quite flexible interpretation of the term advanced by Berghahn. Queering, she suggests, 'implies transgression, subversion and dissent, and is often conceived of as a state of "in-betweenness"', and it is 'essentially about resisting containment within clearly demarcated borders and categories' (Berghahn 2011: 133).

Through the varied narrative trajectories and multiple border-crossings involved in the creation, production, and financing of these films, the family metaphor also extends to Belgium's film industry as a component of European and global cinematic industries. In my chosen corpus, I am quite wilfully looking across the linguistic and political boundaries that often separate films funded on the one hand by Wallimages and the Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel (CCA) and aimed at Francophone audiences, and on the other those funded by Screen Flanders and the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds), which now labels its productions with the slogan 'Belgian Cinema from Flanders'. The six films reveal a web or constellation circling around Belgium as one node in a particularly zigzagging family tree. Two are 'from' Wallonia, three 'from' Flanders, and another cannot be classified along this axis. In linguistic terms, they include Francophone films from Wallonia, a primarily Francophone film with some Dutch that is a Wallonia-Flanders co-production, another by a Flemish directing duo that is primarily in French, one by a Flemish director that is almost entirely in French with a small amount of English, and a multilingual film that involved Wallonia-Flanders and Bulgarian cooperation. Beyond the combinations of Dutch and French, all are multilingual to some degree and reveal multiple links to the world beyond Belgium. Thinking in terms of what some scholars have theorised as '*cinéma-monde*' (Gott and Schilt 2018; Marshall 2012) on a Belgian scale allows us to consider the porosity of the previously given economic and cultural lines, and interpret the transnational families in these

films as borderlands on several different levels between static conceptions of national or cultural identity and film industries. The *cinéma-monde* concept with its ‘web of production connections’ (Gott 2018: 149) brings together a variety of film industries and national cinemas, expanding the geographical limits of what is customarily considered the ‘Francophone world’, a preeminently heterolingual space (Gott and Schilt 2018: 5–6).

### ‘Families’ on the border: from the coast of Europe to the forests of Quebec

In the mockumentary *King of the Belgians* by directing duo Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth (the latter hailing from the United States), the fictional Belgian King Nicholas II finds himself stranded in Istanbul during a state visit with the humorous premise that he is gifting Brussels’s iconic Mini Europe park to Turkey in honour of that nation’s EU membership (Figure 14.1). This coincides with a declaration of independence by Wallonia that is sure to set up the implosion of his nation and a wider European natural crisis, a ‘cosmic event’ on the scale of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption that wreaked havoc with communications and transportation. Desperate to return home to reunite his lands, the King and his entourage must surreptitiously depart against the wishes of Turkish security forces who claim to be sequestering all visiting dignitaries in a secure location for their safety. The Belgians manage to escape, but Turkish security follows in pursuit as they traverse the Balkans to reach their home ‘at the heart of Europe’ (as the King describes Belgium). Various misadventures in the Balkans ensue, including, but not limited to, a



Figure 14.1 The royal family and entourage in *King of the Belgians* (2016)

Source: *King of the Belgians* (2016), directed by Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth © Bo Films, Entre Chien et Loup, Topkapi Films, Art Fest, and Twin Pics (Netherlands) (2017).

brief term by the group as honorary members of a Bulgarian village yogurt contest jury, and a run-in with a war criminal. Most significantly for our topic, this odd and bumbling royal odyssey involves two clandestine border crossings that recall – or perhaps reverse – the experience of undocumented migrants and refugees headed towards and through Europe. In the first, the royal troupe traverses the border between Turkey and Bulgaria by bus. They are dressed in women's clothes and mingling with a Bulgarian female folk singing group to avoid having their passports checked by Turkish border officials. Later, the party arrives by boat on the Albanian coast – which, due to a navigation foible, they believed to be Italy – and are detained because they have lost their passports and initially cannot prove their identity.

The fashion in which this darkly satirical comedy reverses roles and places the Belgians in the position of migrants is notable for two reasons. First, it alludes to the difficulty of representing the figure of the migrant in a new fashion, and one that does not repeat well-meaning but well-trodden, miserabilist tropes and images of suffering. It is difficult to view the border crossings from East to West in this film without the migrant crisis in mind, particularly given the prevalence of media images of closed borders, encampments, and other obstacles impeding the progress of migrants on the 'Balkan route' towards Western European nations. The King's itinerary even shifts in the wrong direction, compelling him to experience crossing from 'West' to 'East' as an undocumented migrant on the Albanian coast. In this sense, while no true migrants are represented, the depiction of migration is 'queered' in accordance with the transgression and subversion inherent in Berghahn's understanding of the term (Berghahn 2011: 133). Secondly, *King of the Belgians* depicts the royal family and its entourage as a symbol for the entire nation: multilingual and often fractious. The voyagers encounter various languages en route, but multilingualism is also inherently present in all of the entourage's actions. The fictional documentary director opens the film with the question: 'Belgium, is it a proper country or just some sort of geopolitical compromise?'. Belgian multilingualism is often used to comedic effect, such as the tedious countdown to 'action' by the King in all three of the nation's official languages before starting a take. However, the film also contains what can be read as a more serious message about Belgian identities. By combining the unexpected migrant experience – which situates the European 'insider' in the place of the 'outsider' – with a perhaps mildly mocking depiction of the multilayered complexity of Belgium, *King of the Belgians* blurs the distinction between inside and outside and suggests that to move across boundaries, be they cultural, physical, or linguistic, is intrinsic to Belgianness. This inherent multiplicity will be evident to some degree in each of the films I discuss.

*The Invader* by Nicholas Provost (born in Ronse in Flanders) follows the trajectory of an actual migrant from Africa. Amadou is played by Issaka Sawadogo, an actor originally from Burkina Faso. The film opens with a dreamy, abstract sequence in which Amadou washes up on a Southern

European beach full of nude sunbathers. From there he makes his way to Brussels, a passage represented elliptically and equally abstractly in a sequence showing the inside of a tunnel, where he insinuates himself into a variety of ‘insider’ situations. On one level, the film is focused on the uneasy status of migrants in Europe who, even when managing to reach their intended destination, commonly remain in flux and transit looking for steady employment and lodging. Amadou is constantly shot in motion: in the tunnel, in a van, riding the metro, running down the street. This theme, and the director’s treatment of it, links *The Invader* to *25 Degrees* and a number of other Belgian films about immigrants and migrants, including *Illégal* (2010, Belgium/Luxembourg/France) by Olivier Masset-Depasse and the Dardenne brothers’ *Rosetta* (1999, Belgium/France) (Gott 2016: 148–56). My primary interest in this discussion, however, centres on how the film represents Amadou’s interactions with Brussels society, in particular a married couple, the primary family unit represented in the film. The opening scene is bookended by an ending that is equally unreal, perhaps a blend of dream (or European nightmare) and reality. The sequence begins in the bedroom of the elegant and successful European couple formed by Agnès de Yael, with whom Amadou has become obsessed over the course of the narrative, and Dr. Charles de Yael. A naked Amadou slips stealthily inside the rooms as the couple sleeps, and watches them before appearing, in an ellipsis or a fragmentary dream, in the spot once occupied by the husband. He thus literally (or symbolically, if it is indeed a dream) inserts himself into the European couple.



Figure 14.2 Amadou (Issaka Sawadogo) takes the place in bed of the white Belgian in *The Invader* (2011)

Source: *L'Envabisseur/The Invader* (2011), directed by Nicholas Provost © Versus Production, Prime Time, Hepp Film, and O'Brother Distribution (Belgium) (2011).

This image perfectly encapsulates Amadou's eerie accommodation between inside and outside, a key preoccupation of *The Invader*. While marginal to Belgian society and the economy, Amadou takes things in his own hands (or tries to) and does manage initially to insert himself into a variety of spaces and go unnoticed when desired, or fit in well enough not to raise alarm. Charming, handsome, well-spoken in French (the film's dialogue is almost exclusively in French, with English in one scene), and, having absconded with some designer clothes stolen from the exploitative landlord and boss where he initially worked in veritable indentured servitude, Amadou is equipped to pose as an insider, at least at first glance. Most significantly, he charms Agnès into having sex in a classy apartment that she 'lends to visiting friends', and where he will subsequently outstay his welcome. As in the concluding scene that I have already described, in this instance Amadou literally positions himself inside the symbolically charged location of the native Belgian's home. This intrusion is perhaps more complex than the title's 'invasion' label suggests for, despite the economic disparities, Belgium is diverse enough for the Francophone usurper to feign at least provisional insider status. As in *King of the Belgians*, the commonplace figure of the migrant is to some degree reformulated and inverted, for, although Amadou faces many typical migrant travails, his potential insider status, added to the sexualised representation that is much more typical of female migrant narratives, marks him out as an unusual representative of on-screen migrants.

Stéphane Vuillet's *25 Degrees in Winter* links the Spanish roots of its family of protagonists – an example of Belgium's preexisting diversity – to the story of a woman from Ukraine, and explores the difficulties that migration places on families and couples through the story of several generations and waves of immigrants or migrants in Belgium. *25 Degrees* is a compressed variation of the road movie template that follows a Ukrainian migrant named Sonia, a second generation Belgian of Spanish origins named Miguel, and his daughter and mother as they search for Sonia's husband. Yevgeny emigrated to Belgium several years earlier, and Sonia came recently to join him but was detained by the authorities and spent three months in a detention centre. The film's narrative and aesthetic elaboration of confinement and escape is introduced from the opening scene, in which we witness Sonia as she is loaded into a van taking her to the airport to be deported back to Ukraine. Throughout the film, she is constantly moving and hiding to avoid the police or, later, Miguel's landlord, who comes looking for past rent that is due. When Sonia finally finds Yevgeny after having followed a trail through a series of past addresses and workplaces, she discovers that he is living with a Belgian woman and her son and that they have forged a family of their own. His explanation underscores that this arrangement, including the marriage with Estelle and the papers that came with it, offered him a previously unobtainable degree of stability and a fixed address. This aspect of Yevgeny's experience offers a reminder that borders persist as a delimiting concept well past the end of the spatial act of border crossing. Postcolonial subjects in particular, but also Eastern Europeans and others,

are commonly confronted with societal and institutional mentalities that effectively reproduce revisionist narratives about the imperviousness and stability of national borders (Gott 2016: 164). Yevgeny's infidelity is contextualised within this reality.

25 *Degrees* employs multilingual dialogues in several ways. Dialogues in French, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Flemish (and sometimes combinations of two languages) display the linguistic diversity of Belgium, both from internal and external sources. The film also demonstrates the importance of language in expressions of identity and the power that linguistic proficiency affords. For instance, Sonia explains that her French skills helped her navigate the system. Nonetheless, French is just one of the languages that immigrants need to master in order to find gainful employment in an official capacity in Brussels, where jobs require fluency in French and Dutch. Finally, the language dynamics within Miguel's family and the Spanish community offers insight into how generational vantage points differ. Miguel and his mother (who is only credited as 'Abuelita', the Spanish diminutive for grandma – a choice that highlights her importance as a pillar of the family more so than her identity as an individual) frequently move between Spanish and French in their conversations and arguments. The mother-son discussions and the choice of languages used at different points reveal disparate generational outlooks on citizenship. As Gemma King argues, code-switching between languages is, in itself, a form of 'sociocultural boundary-crossing' (King 2017: 8). The addition of one more instance of multilingualism (in this case internal) illustrates the link between the family and the Belgian nation. Sonia discovers that Yevgeny has another wife well after Miguel (and the viewer) because the revelation comes in a discussion in Flemish – which Miguel speaks competently but with evident reserve and a marked accent – with some of Yevgeny's co-workers. Thus Miguel's competency as a Belgian citizen of multilingual Brussels becomes a stepping-stone in Sonia's process of finding the truth and reconstructing her life.

The penultimate scene of the film, the reunion of Sonia with Yevgeny, takes place against the backdrop of a barbed-wire fence that separates them from the beach in the background. Although two families fall apart over the course of the narrative, the film ends on an ultimately optimistic note as another family unit is reconstituted. Sonia and Miguel fill their respective voids by coming together in a happy, and perhaps not very surprising, ending on the coast (Figure 14.3). That space offers the dual symbolism of potential physical limitation and symbolic openness and possibility: it is a gateway to the rest of the wider world that is metonymically present in the small but diverse swathe of Belgium covered in the narrative. The film then closes with a medium shot of the newly forged family unit travelling together in Miguel's vehicle, in sharp contrast with the opening close-up of a solitary Sonia in the van driving her towards her planned deportation. The new family picture serves as a microcosm of Belgian identity: a multilingual group, half of whom have foreign origins.





Figure 14.3 The family is reconstructed on the beach in *25 Degrees in Winter* (2004)  
 Source: *25 degrés en hiver/25 Degrees in Winter* (2004), directed by Stéphane Vuillet © Man's Films, Lancelot Films, Alokatu S.L., and Paradiso Home Entertainment (Netherlands) (2004).

The highly controversial film *Black* by Belgian directing duo Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah (both from Edegem in Flanders with Moroccan origins) tells the explosive story of forbidden love in Brussels between Marwan, a teenager with Moroccan roots, and Mavela, a teen of Congolese origins. Marwan is involved in mostly petty crime with a group of other Moroccans while Mavela is dangerously enmeshed – thanks to an older male cousin – in a Congolese gang known as the ‘Black Bronx’. *Black* intervenes in discussions of identity in Belgium in several ways, each of which alludes to different potential family frameworks. One is diasporic: we witness inter-generational conflicts within the families of Moroccan and Congolese origins, and struggles between gangs of Moroccans and Congolese as well as between two rival Congolese groups. An ‘extended family’ metaphor is an apt way to approach the intersection of these diasporic networks with Belgium: Congo is, of course, an erstwhile Belgian colony, while Morocco is more distantly related as a former French protectorate and a nation where French is still widely spoken. The gangs function as families of sorts, sometimes overlapping with traditional families (Marwan and his brother are in the same group) and at other times competing with them (Mavela’s gang forces her to leave her mother’s house to prove her loyalty to them). Interwoven into this are debates over the parameters of the Belgian nation as an imperfect family, with points of contention loosely organised around the topic of ‘integration’, a term used by several characters. Rivalling languages play an important role in this as well.

The film opens with exclamations in Flemish, but the youth prefer to speak French because it has more street credibility in their view, while their parents espouse the idea that Flemish is important for job opportunities. Language choices are not all binary. There is a significant element of code-switching and particularly translanguaging that puts on display some of the competing, complex vantage points on identity. An early scene in which Marwan and Mavela first meet in a Brussels police station – a building clearly representative of state authority – demonstrates how language use allows the youthful protagonists in *Black* to negotiate a variety of different stances towards identity. The first utterances of the film are in Flemish, but once inside the police station Mavela is interpellated in French by an officer. Next, when waiting on a bench next to Marwan, the two strike up a conversation in French that moves in ludic fashion into Flemish, which the two use to exchange a variety of playful insults and curses. Marwan is then approached by a female police officer familiar with him and his family who proceeds to chastise him in Arabic. The scene ends when Mavela's mother comes to pick her up and berates her daughter in Lingala.

Just as they are shifting between languages, so the young protagonists are in constant movement. Although not a straightforward example of a road movie, the film is replete with transit images: shots inside the metro, train station platforms, aerial shots of train stations, and a beautiful scene in front of a departure board, a symbolic and literal connection to the outside world. One wants to go to Bruges while the other sees that as boring and counters with a suggestion of Paris. Unlike *25 Degrees*, this film ends in a decidedly pessimistic note with a deadly confrontation between the Moroccan and Congolese gangs. If citizenship in Belgium is fraught with conflict and socioeconomic exclusion, *Black* nonetheless demonstrates that the Belgian family encompasses a multiplicity defined by constant, if unsettled, movement.<sup>1</sup>

Quebecois director Philippe Falardeau's 2006 Canadian-Belgian-French co-production *Congorama* opens with Michel (played by Belgian actor Olivier Gourmet) rehearsing for a speech he is planning to give at a ceremony honouring his father, a celebrated novelist: 'on this day that the French community of Belgium honours your work, I am proud to be your son'. It is perhaps odd that amongst all my examples, a film made by a Quebecois filmmaker draws the most explicit link between a Belgian national community and the family. The film recounts Michel's quest for his biological parents after his father reveals to him that he was adopted after being born to a single mother in Quebec. Yet *Congorama* is far from a linear 'return' narrative. As the subsequent narrative reveals, Michel's father Hervé has strong connections to the Congo, and Michel has also lived there. In its triangular Quebec-Belgium-Congo narrative structure, *Congorama* completely undermines the notion of 'return' in a binary division between present and past and '(new) home' and 'origins'. To where does one return? And what is the point of origins? Michel does eventually encounter his parents and

a brother he never knew he had, but he doesn't realise it, although we as viewers – and likely his son Jules – know the man's relationship to Michel by the end. However, the biological links between Michel and Jules, the son that he and his Congolese wife Alice are raising in Liège, are left deliberately ambiguous.

As Thibaut Schilt argues, the point of the film is to rethink filiation and family as multifaceted and multi-local phenomena (Schilt 2018: 208). Belgium is central to the film's narrative as the starting point and end-point, but the story could not take place without the connections to Quebec or the Congo. There is only one line in Dutch spoken in the film, but in Quebec Michel does utter an awkward but significant phrase in German, one of Belgium's three official languages: 'ich bin ein Quebecker'. The fact that this consequential affirmation of his newfound identity is not uttered in Michel's native language, which is also, of course, the primary and official language spoken in Quebec, might be interpreted as a commentary on the complexity of identity and the director Falardeau's belief that language does not align directly with – at least not monolingually – to a particular national or cultural identity. Falardeau has suggested in interviews that he was interested in telling this story in Belgium because of that nation's similarities to Quebec, starting with bilingualism (or multilingualism). He also expressed a wilful desire to avoid France and the French industry, which he contends is 'linguistically intolerant' (Schilt 2018: 209). The choice of Quebec for the source – or one of the sources – of Michel's origins, and the triangulation of Quebec, Belgium, and the Congo, nonetheless demonstrate that cultural affinities are often mapped along linguistic lines because language is a factor in cultural affinity. Moreover, speaking the same language does facilitate productive encounters in *Congorama*, in this case within what scholars have theorised as the 'Francosphere' (see Marshall 2012).

My final example once again involves a voyage to Quebec – this time directed by Belgians – but offers an immediate reminder that linguistic affinities need not be connected to monolingualism. The 2015 comedy *I'm Dead But I Have Friends*, by the brothers Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin, opens with a humorous monologue by an elderly Innu man framed by a vast and wild, and decidedly un-Belgian looking, landscape. The film explores the diverse meanings of 'family' by following a Belgian punk rock band's trip to North America. When the lead singer Jipé dies after an absurd string of events, his band-mates are cut out of his funeral by his biological brother and family. They proceed to abscond with his ashes and hit the road to embark on a previously scheduled North American tour, which they see as a last hurrah for the band and a way for them to process the death of their musical brother. This premise links *I'm Dead* to a preponderant current of grimly funny Belgian films as well as one of their key sources of inspiration, the quixotic Finnish road movie *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989, dir. Aki Kaurismäki), in which the eponymous band undertakes a tour of the United States with a dead member in tow. Beyond this inspirational,

transnational filiation, the make-up of the band in *I'm Dead* is particularly notable in the context of our Belgian discussion: the key surviving members are played by Belgian actors Bouli Lanners (from Wallonia) and Wim Willelaert (from Flanders).

Once again, the family unit in this film (if unconventional and an alternative to the biological family) represents a microcosm of Belgium. As with the Belgian nation, the reality of this familial fabric is more diverse than initial appearances would suggest. After pinching Jipé's ash urn from his brother's home, the remaining band members and some other close friends retreat to their deceased comrade's house to hold a wake. There they discover that Jipé had been living for five years with his partner, a man named Karim (who goes by 'Dany'), played by Algerian-born actor Lyès Salem. Dany wears a uniform with the NATO insignia, marking him potentially as a representative of Belgium's large population of people employed by international organisations. Although the ending (as I discuss later) allows us to extrapolate that all of the band-mates represent the Belgian nation, because the couple's relationship is only revealed after Dany's death, Jipé and Dany's mixed-race, queer relationship is never overtly situated within the wider context of Belgian society. In this sense, it is comparable to the relationship in the 2012 Flemish-language Belgian drama *Mixed Kebab* (dir. Guy Lee Thys) between Ibrahim (aka Bram), whose family background is Turkish, and the white Kevin. In that film, Bram grapples with what he feels are contrasting facets of his identity: Turkish versus Belgian and Muslim versus gay.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to *I'm Dead*, the band's notion that they are Jipé's true 'family' is shaken up by the discovery of his secret relationship with Dany, and an agreement is reached to split the ashes in equal parts. Dany, however, is not content to let the brash musicians handle his partner's burial and follows them on their flight to Los Angeles. As presaged by the prologue in the Innu-aimun language, a mechanical problem leads the California-bound plane to make an emergency landing in Sept-Îles, Quebec, from where the ragtag band makes its way north through stunning landscapes but, unbeknownst to them, in the opposite direction from their intended destination of Montreal. The voyage through vast spaces and expansive forests does have the effect of bringing the two band members and Dany together (Figure 14.4). It also puts all of them in contact with hospitable members of the Innu First Nations community through their shared understanding of French, following the lines of non-exclusive linguistic affinity (given that many of the characters, whether Innu or Belgian, are multilingual). Before the film ends with the newly formed trio walking off together into the horizon, Wim (Wim Willelaert's character) shares what he introduces as a 'great Belgian story' about the band around a campfire. As in *Congorama*, Quebec is the backdrop for the essentially Belgian story narrated in *I'm Dead*. Beyond the (at least) bilingual connection discussed in relation to that previous film, the directors are perhaps suggesting that Belgium is a complex and multifaceted concept



Figure 14.4 Wim (Wim Willaert), Dany (Lyès Salem), and Yvan (Bouli Lanners) walk into the Quebec sunset in *I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015)

Source: *Je suis mort mais j'ai des amis/I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015), directed by Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin © Versus Production, TS Productions, Altitude 100 Production, Minds Meet, BE TV, Proximus, and Blaq Out (2016).

based on the notion of a group of people choosing to come together, rather than a geographic or linguistically premised union.

### The Belgian (cinematic) family in the border

If Belgian cinema is characterised by a 'split' screen, as Mosley suggests, that screen is divided into more than just two segments and encompasses varied layers of often overlapping complexity. Each of the cinematic family units outlined in my analysis presents new contours for the possible parameters of Belgian identity or identities. The Flemish actor Wim Willaert won the best actor in 2016 at the *Magritte du cinéma* (the Belgian French-language industry's awards) for his role in *I'm Dead*. In his acceptance speech, he quoted a Dutch-language author when he affirmed: 'We are a mix. The writer Walter van den Broeck said that we aren't a country but the world's widest border. I'm proud to live in this border' (Bradfer and Moury 2016). All the components that make up *I'm Dead* and the other Belgian productions addressed here – from the narrative space to the production team – inhabit a border (geographic, linguistic, cultural, ideational), and Belgium is revealed to itself function as a border, both in the open (borderland) and closed (filtering and containing) sense of the term. The figure of the migrant who crosses

official borders must be contextualised within the complexity of what they are crossing into. Despite Belgium's official adherence to the European 'Fortress' mentality that often leads to policies of restriction, policing, and containment of migration, the nation is revealed in these films as an inherently open zone where being a 'migrant' of some sort is the norm, marking Wil-laert's 'we' (that is, Belgians) as potentially open.

## Notes

- 1 For an extended analysis of *Black* focusing on the film's transnational and trans-cultural presentation of the areas of Molenbeek and Matonge, see Steele (2018).
- 2 *Mixed Kebab* opens with a close-up on Ibrahim/Bram, while he introduces himself in a voiceover: 'I'm Ibrahim, I'm Turkish', followed by 'I'm Bram, I'm Belgian', 'I'm a Muslim', and 'I'm gay'. Each pronouncement is divided by a wipe that displaces the film image with a coloured credit screen, emphasising a division between each aspect of Ibrahim's identity.

## 15 Integration, perforce?

### (De)queering, (de)abjectifying, and victimising the migrant and minority figure in contemporary European cinema

*Jeremi Szaniawski*

What is it that recent genre films – particularly a few titles coming from Northern Europe – addressing at the same time queerness and foreignness (and, as I would like to argue, obliquely reflecting on the status of migrants in the twenty-first-century European Union) have to teach us about what feeling and looking at may become in what we hope may at some point turn into a post-neoliberal, but not posthuman, age? I am thinking of *Border/Gräns* (2018, Sweden, dir. Ali Abbasi), *Gutland* (2017, Luxembourg, dir. Govinda Van Maele), *Thelma* (2017, Norway, dir. Joachim Trier), and *Queen of Hearts/Dronningen* (2019, Denmark, dir. May el-Toukhy). These features, however flawed from some perspectives, have addressed the question of minority status, be it ethnic, socioeconomic, or sexual, in thought-provoking and productive ways. While none of them addresses the migrant (as political refugees fleeing war) crisis per se, they certainly all tackle issues corollary with the topic of migration and minorities: queerness, adoption, seasonal work, and the strictures of a professed ‘multicultural’ society. In effect, the allegories these films lay out allow us to engage with them as dealing with the status of any individual or group confronted with an environment trying to repress or normalise these ‘intruders’, often out of fear or xenophobia and Islamophobia. They could also all very well fit into the discussion proposed by Thomas Elsaesser around the abject subject in film: all protagonists are, not unlike migrants or homeless people (or both), treated as abjects, i.e., individuals who are not so much victims as beings with an ill-defined legal status (see Elsaesser 2018).

The four titles also compose a cogent corpus insofar as they reflect a spectrum of attitudes that has characterised the response of populations and the media to the migrant and refugee crisis: ranging from a mix of caution and hospitality (offering a modicum of help, openness, agency, and hope to the newcomers, all the while refusing to grant them full national status, mostly on economic rationale grounds), a ‘reasonable’ discourse from the centre (‘Europe cannot possibly grant asylum to all refugees’), to a deliberate policy of containment and/or assimilation that resists cultural mix as though it were some form of geopolitical threat, addressed in all manners of negatively connoted imagery (ranging from invasion to disease). In any case, the

*multi-kulti* model (a German, but by extension European, social-democrat concept) – all of a sudden hailed a failure by the media around 2016–17 – has become a problem in the European imaginary, as the given *gesellschaften* (societies), for all their efforts and gesturing at egalitarianism, are lacking a deeper *gemeinschaft* (community). It is thus around the forming – often contrived and sometimes fatal – of the artificial former, to the detriment of the authentic latter, that the drama of the four films I propose to look at becomes crystallised and is robustly denounced by their makers. Since these films may be unfamiliar to an Anglo-American readership, I shall first summarise their plots all the while conducting my analysis.

The director of the Swedish *Border*, Ali Abbasi, has a deep involvement with the question of migration, since he was born in Iran and only later came to study in Sweden and Denmark, where he shot several films. *Border* is based on a story by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who had also penned the script for *Let the Right One In/Låt den rätte komma in* (2008, Sweden, dir. Tomas Alfredson), which shares with *Border* the idea whereby queer people are in the eyes of society hypersensitive monsters, but monsters nonetheless. Abbasi, however, seems more interested in the monstrous side of regular humans: his protagonist, Tina, is a highly sensitive, empathic, and resilient individual. While the film establishes her looks as striking, as she stands in the border control zone of her local airport and literally ‘sniffs’ the fear of incoming passengers carrying prohibited items (Figure 15.1), what we feel immediately is a sense of sympathy for her. Her colleagues treat her with respect, if distance, as though they feared somehow her preternatural skills, or, more likely, her less than canonic beauty. The attitude of discreet fear her



Figure 15.1 Tina (Eva Melander), a model Swedish customs worker, despite her foreign origins and semi-bject status in *Border* (2018)

Source: *Border/Gräns* (2018), directed by Ali Abbasi © META Films, Black Spark Film & TV, Kärnfilm, and Universal Home Pictures Entertainment (USA) (2019)



co-workers display immediately trigger a form of curiosity in the viewer for Tina, who stands at a border (literally and metaphorically) between abject and subject status: her looks set her apart from the others, but she does have a job, a status, and fulfils a clear role in society – yet one that is by definition liminal and unpleasant. When a disgruntled traveler calls her ‘hideous cunt’ after she has singled him out and found bottles of booze in his bag (a common practice among youth in Nordic countries where liquor is heavily taxed), we can tell that Tina is not only accustomed to such a slur – she has learned to display patient indifference to it. Under her apparently impassive, vaguely Down-syndrome face hides a deep world of thoughts and sensations, however, as rich as the wilderness out there. The latter is promptly revealed: after work, Tina returns to the woods, where she shares a home, with some trailer-trash lothario, Roland – a dog trainer and social pariah like Tina, but, unlike her, not exactly a decent and upstanding citizen. Tina shares an uneasy relationship with Roland, part room-mate, part lover (it is quite obvious that he has sex with her to justify his presence in her home). Tina does not enjoy their intimacy, clearly divining it as fake. In this curious game of deception, it seems that it is she who shows Roland mercy, even as he seems to think he is doing her a favour by ingratiating her. Tina finds much more intimacy with the wild animals she meets in the woods, where she walks naked, revealing her hirsute body. From her looks and the ease with which she interacts with the wilderness, the viewer must assume that Tina is no ordinary human being – even as, from underneath her dour demeanour, she masters the codes of human sociality and communication, and reveals herself to be a caring and dedicated daughter to her father, now in a retirement home.

A few days later, Tina intercepts a corporate-type at the customs, carrying a well-concealed memory card containing child pornography footage. This opens a subplot of the film in which Tina assists the police in dismantling the pornography ring, highlighting the implicit racism of Swedish people all the while showing the immanent monstrosity of human beings. At the same time, Tina meets someone like her, Vore. Where Tina has fully assumed the uses of Swedish society (she has a full-time job, drives a hatchback car, lives in a modest but well-furnished home that she owns), Vore is a drifter, whose antisocial behaviour betrays his foreignness and full-on abject status. When she meets Vore for the second time at border control, Tina asks that he be pulled over for a full body search. The inspection reveals no undeclared illicit goods, but rather that Vore, despite his burly looks and deep voice, lacks male genitalia. All the while helping the police uncover the child pornography ring, Tina develops a romance with Vore. In the process, she discovers that they are both trolls, abducted at birth from their parents and mutilated – their tails severed – to resemble humans. In a graphic love scene in the woods, we see Tina’s strange, Mandragora-root like penis grow out of her like an oversized clitoris, penetrating Vore’s vagina. Unbeknownst to her, she has impregnated Vore (who otherwise gives birth to non-viable, little

imp-like creatures). The film ends with a dark twist: Tina finds out that Vore was part of the child pornography ring, abducting human children that were later subjected to unspeakable treatments. Tina, still in her in-between state of subject/abject, helps the police apprehend Vore, but he manages to escape. Some months later, Tina receives their baby in the mail: her perfectly healthy troll child with an uncertain promise of a fairer upbringing. Somehow a promise emerges from this dialectics of abject and semi-abjectified subject of another ethnicity and rule of law.

The reader may feel mystified by the summary of *Border's* plot. It sounds almost like some dark comedy, a tasteless fantasy melodrama, or a very mediocre horror film. Indeed the film is something else altogether – a rather clever allegory, doubled with a study in affect, since for the viewer to discover the suturing powers of identification, empathising with and embracing Tina wholeheartedly, only to feel what it must be to be not only a non-self-cognisant queer person but also a troll (!), is no mean feat. Not least in the scenes involving Tina and Vore frolicking in nature, the film bypasses the usual audiovisual modes of sight and hearing, highlighting textures – touch, taste, and smell – with a clear goal of making the viewer into a more aware and open subject. While the film deals rather unambiguously with queer rights through the mechanism of a semi- or full-on abjectifying of difference ('the other') by any given system, it also more subtly deconstructs stereotypes about migrants, only to better use them against the viewer. While 'prim and proper' Swedish citizens are shown flaunting the law (be it mildly – the young man smuggling in alcohol; or severely – the businessman carrying child pornography material), Vore is at first stigmatised not for any apparent wrongdoing, but for his striking looks and his lack of socialisation skills (by Swedish norms, that is, as when he is shown devouring a whole plate of smoked salmon from the ferry boat's buffet to another passenger's shock and disgust). That he later appears to have collaborated with humans as an act of revenge against children of man is both revolting and yet justified in a way: Vore is at one and the same time the more abject and less resilient of the two. He even becomes a textbook example of the abject according to Elsaesser's terms, that is, a being 'beyond victimhood, because she or he has no claims to make, which means that the abject commands a particular kind of freedom that probes the limits of both freedom and the law' (Elsaesser 2018: 140). All the while, he is more aware of his condition than Tina, and so he reproduces the models of torture and mutilation that were inflicted upon him when he was taken away from his parents both as a pathological replay of earlier trauma (a victim state) and an embracing of the power of being abject (which bypasses the victim state). The implication, here, of course, is that trolls as native populations were almost entirely exterminated by humans, and that whoever remained was socially mutilated into a strange, painful hybrid of innate/genetic behaviours versus learned sociality, which may turn either into hyperadaptability (turning the handicap into a weapon, as it were, as is the case of Tina) or antisociality/delinquency – a pattern well

recognised among children of immigrants in the Western world. Here, the notion of queering the migrant central to this volume is deconstructed in a rich and productive way: while queerness and sexual non-normativity are not celebrated but probed and identified with in order to question standards of normalcy, the migrant/social minority status is explored in its many facets, showing the inevitable entropy that may be generated by displacement, allegorised here in terms of mutilation, the trolls' severed tails a metonym for their severed familial ties and ethnic roots.

### (De)queering the migrant

The protagonist of *Gutland*, Jens, is an outlier, if not a marginal: allegedly a drifter driven from Germany to neighbouring Luxembourg to undertake seasonal work, he soon reveals himself to be a heist runaway, laying low until things back home blow over. He seduces the local belle, Lucy, and soon becomes a favourite of the town. When the police comes looking for a man on the run following a bank robbery in Germany, the villagers cover up for Jens (this attitude will come as a surprise to anyone familiar with Luxembourg, a culture marked by congeniality, perhaps, but also by a dissonance to be found in a most law-abiding small nation, home to massive amounts of tax evasions from all over Europe). A sense of menace pervades the film, however, as Jens can feel that something is off between him and some of the villagers, even as the benevolent *pater familias* Jos treats him like a worthy element and almost as kin. At one point, Jens is lured into the field and nearly killed by a combine harvester, but it is never clear whether the men of the village are actually after him or not. Jens starts a quest of his own in the village, investigating the traces of another man who would appear to have seduced and molested all the women of the township. Jens is about to come to some realisation, only to be cut short by the arrival of his fellow heisters, come to claim their share of the loot – and, likely, to do away with him. In an unexpected turn of events, Jens is rescued by the villagers, who kill the German men and bury their corpses in the forest. Only later, as his investigation continues and becomes more murky, does Jens discover that he has been chosen by the community to ‘replace’ the local womanising and violent brute, who seemingly was also eliminated by the collectivity (Jens finds his body – strangely resembling his – floating in a milk tank). At the same time, Jens appears to undergo a psychotic meltdown wherein his perspective becomes blurred and then is erased like some blank slate. At the end of the film, freed from his past, Jens has become entirely his erstwhile Luxembourgish avatar: a member of the local brass band proudly donning the band’s military-like uniform, he may have wholly vanished under the garment of his imposed self, yet become a member of a community beyond any suspicion, its darker secrets hiding down beneath. This act of extreme ‘integration’ and dequeering in a social sense (decriminalising perhaps, deindividuating to be sure) is an act of violence equal if not worse to the one perpetrated on the body of

the protagonist of *Border*, but with very different social implications. Both *Border* and *Gutland* use the genre film as an allegory for queerness and normativity, but also for the treatment bestowed on migrant populations: Tina was adopted at birth from another race, another nation. She is a semi-abject agent, a lesser citizen, even as she is preternaturally sensitive and supremely qualified to do her job. She has filled a niche in this society, without any promise of upward or social mobility. All the while, however discreetly, her fellow citizens keep on reminding her of her otherness, generating a psychosexual and social space in which she is practically isolated and alone, her relationship with her human adoptive father a paltry version of familial bonds (although benevolent, he always concealed her past from her). And her romance with the criminal, full-on abject Vore is struck with the seal of social prohibition. In the end, Tina manages to reconcile these contradictions, but what fate awaits her and Vore's child remains an open question. The open ending seems to suggest that the infant will have to grow hidden if it is to survive unscathed. One thing is certain: if the child remains an abject in the eyes of society in the film, in the viewer's eyes the simultaneous process of embracing queerness and deabjectifying the protagonist is complete. As a result, the edifying denunciation of social hypocrisy performed by the film is doubled with a grim account of a social system (Nordic social democracy) that must necessarily abjectify some of its components.<sup>1</sup>

*Gutland* presents us with another case: Jens does not differ in any substantial way from the town's population. He speaks a very similar language, and the town's folk all know German. His status as abject is contingent on social standing and can be resolved: thus, he is subject to the phagocyte of the larger collective. But in the process, Jens seems to lose far more than he gains: as a relative abject, Jens is neither saint nor victim. He enjoys a fair amount of freedom in his trailer at the periphery of the town, as the film well establishes. The real abjection (the 'meta-abjection' we might say, or the abjection of the viewer towards the character with whom they identify for as long as he is in his state of marginality or mild abjection) occurs when Jens is integrated and subjected to integration, perforce – some form of lobotomy, with effects on the spectator not unlike that of seeing a lobotomised McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, USA, dir. Miloš Forman). Here again, the critique of social integration (becoming one with the social body to the detriment of one's foreign identity) is doubled by a more subtle critique, that of the dialectics generated by the intruder. Whereas in, say, the films of Michael Haneke or Lars von Trier the intruder dismantles and disturbs the established social order (sometimes with apocalyptic consequences), here he is absorbed and digested. This 'digestion' could serve interestingly as an allegory of the ways in which globalisation has operated in Europe, particularly on smaller nations with large neighbours. In the case of Luxembourg, this could be seen as an expression of how the country has endeavoured to retain its linguistic and cultural identity while being pitted between Germany and France, and also how the new global

banking agreements have threatened to annihilate Luxembourg's economic backbone: a banking centre for North-West Europe and haven for small-time tax evaders from neighbouring countries. Jens, then, would evoke at once the felon who naively thinks he can stash his loot in Luxembourg, lay low, and disappear unbeknownst to the locals, as well as a symbol of the new electronic banking rules that have turned the banking secret into a thing of the past.

## Witches

Norway's *Thelma* tells a story of witchcraft in the modern era: Thelma is a young woman about to go to college who discovers her suppressed homosexuality. This 'unspeakable' trait is doubled by a dark secret, of which the young woman has no direct awareness either, as it dates back to her childhood and has also been repressed: she has spent her childhood and adolescence in a secluded fanatic Christian household, with her father Trond and her disabled mother Unni. When the time comes to go to college in Oslo, Thelma understandably has a hard time socialising and quickly develops epileptic seizures. Shortly thereafter Thelma realises that she is indeed attracted to another young woman, Anja, and the onset of her homosexual love gives rise to psychokinetic powers of great magnitude, to the point that it enables Thelma to cause people to be teleported or even dematerialised permanently (Figure 15.2). It is thus that she causes Anja to vanish by sheer mental force. Shocked and confused by Anja's disappearance (of which she does not know she is the cause), Thelma returns home. There, her memories resurface, including those of her long-forgotten baby brother.



Figure 15.2 Anja (Kaya Wilkins) and Thelma (Eili Harboe) in *Thelma* (2017): a forbidden or dreaded love-affair

Source: *Thelma* (2017), directed by Joachim Trier © Motlys, Film i Väst, Snowglobe Films, Filmpool Nord, B-Reel, Le Pacte, and Thunderbird Releasing (2018).

It turns out that Thelma, feeling neglected as a child in favour of her male sibling, also made him disappear, dematerialising the noisy toddler from his bath and making him reappear under the ice of a nearby frozen lake. In the melodramatic turn of events that ensue, her father finds the child and hesitates to shoot Thelma before eventually recanting. Instead, Trond opts for the route of a strict radical Christian education, to repress and possibly eradicate Thelma's 'aberrant' gift. In essence, Trond performs an action of glossing over or covering up for what he regards as Thelma's abjection (Barbara Creed's 'monstrous-feminine', in short – see Creed 1993), thereby also denying her true power and agency, and de facto turning her into a victim of patriarchy. In the meantime, Thelma's traumatised mother Unni jumps off a bridge, not dying but suffering permanent disability – a victim more than an abject. It is thus in a household with an asymmetrical parental structure that Thelma is raised and her proclivities contained. Having returned home, now a young adult discovering her full potential, embracing her abject status ('the witch') and recanting her position as a victim, Thelma confronts her parents about her past. Realising that it is time to tell her the truth, her parents explain to her that Thelma can make her deep wishes come true, an ability inherited from her grandmother, who in turn caused the disappearance of her husband and was kept heavily medicated in a mental institution – again by Trond. Sensing that his intentions are now similar towards her, Thelma causes her father to self-combust. At the same time, she realises that she can cure the ill and resurrect the dead: she revives a dead bird, cures her mother, and makes Anja reappear. Now in control of her power, Thelma resumes a normal life in Oslo, enjoying an unbridled and guilt-free relationship with Anja. In a subtly dark open ending, however, it remains unclear as to whether she has also used her powers to make Anja fall in love with her. The film's politics may be those of the abject fully shedding their previous status of victim and ushering in a new era of postabject agency, beyond the corpse of patriarchy, the European welfare system, and social democracy.

Finally, *Queen of Hearts* tells the story of Anne, an affluent and competent middle-aged lawyer who specialises in defending victims of sexual violence. She lives in Denmark with her husband Peter and their twin daughters.<sup>2</sup> One day, Peter tells Anne that his seventeen-year-old son from an earlier marriage, Gustav, will come from Sweden to live with them. At first hardly thrilled, Anne quickly discovers that she is irrepressibly attracted to her stepson. She rapidly enters into the illicit affair, raping Gustav in his bedroom one night. At first the rape leads to an idyll, Anne showering her husband's son with presents and attentions. But very quickly, as friends and neighbours start to notice Gustav's strange behaviour around her, Anne realises the madness of the situation and becomes afraid of what consequences it may hold, not least in view of her lucrative and powerful position as a lawyer defending victims of abuse similar to the one she has just been enacting on her stepson. Unable however to assume responsibility for her actions, Anne alienates Gustav from Peter, to the point of having him send his son away. The young

man, unable in turn to cope with the unfairness of the situation, silenced in his desperate attempts to be heard and for the truth to come out, drifts away, his family bonds severed, and is found dead in the wintry forest – a form of suicide, no doubt. While Peter probably knows the truth, he is in denial over the cause of his son's death, as both he and Anne are hell-bent on maintaining decorum, saving face, and preserving their home and their young daughters. Anne, who is fully cognisant of the fact that she has committed the irreparable, is left to attend Gustav's funeral and come to terms and live with the tragic consequences of her acts.

While *Thelma* normalises homosexuality and the 'demonic' powers of the protagonist, pitting them, in its manifest critique of patriarchy associated with manipulation and obscurantism, against the far more regulatory and sometimes monstrous nature of organised religion, *Queen of Hearts* serves as a cautionary tale against power. Scripted and directed by a woman, the latter refuses to present Anne as a manipulative, cold-hearted psychopath, but it does condemn the phallic woman she has become who reproduces the patterns of power and those of society at large – silencing and abjectifying the alien/foreign body which it at first feasts upon (the exoticising and instrumentalising gesture of sexually molesting a young, defenceless, but also able and attractive, body). Both films interrogate the fear, in patriarchal society, of powerful, independent women – and the desire of patriarchy to control their power and independence, or to legitimise its fear thereof. Both, too, demonstrate the inevitable mechanisms of regulation, repression, and



Figure 15.3 Anne (Trine Dyrholm) and Gustav (Gustav Lindh) in *Queen of Hearts* (2019): a forbidden love-affair

Source: *Queen of Hearts/Dronningen* (2019), directed by May el-Toukhy © Nordisk Film, and Breaking Glass Pictures (USA) (2019).

resurgence associated with and against the power these women wield. The way *Thelma's* no doubt disruptive, powerful gift generates fear and must be contained is a direct evocation of a community's effort to contain and regulate (or eliminate) the alien. Anne's position of power is critiqued and shown as a double-edged weapon: her engagement with victims of abuse, and the way she, as a lawyer, encourages a twisting of truth during testimonies in court, ironically turn against her. She becomes what she attempts over and over again to thwart, and she destroys those she is meant to defend, before lying and concealing the truth as she had done before in court 'for the right cause'. The films thus interrogate the duplicity of power and desire (not least through imageries of mirrors and doublings meant to evoke, in a somewhat cliché gesture, the duplicity and two-sided nature of the characters' actions), but they also engage, for all the abled and beautiful bodies of their protagonists, with the question of abjection and abjectifying of the other.

*Tales of abjects, tales of liberation; tales of victims, tales of entrapment*

In the four films discussed, society is shown performing a de/abjectifying, one way or another, of the protagonists who are led – or lead themselves – into self-willed or non-deliberate states of abjection. It appears clearly in the case of *Border* and *Thelma* where the protagonists, by way of their supernatural nature, deliberately abjectify themselves to gain agency and perhaps happiness. In *Gutland*, Jens is at one and the same time dequered and deabjectified by the community, leaving his better part (the part of freedom) behind, and becoming a victim of the system unawares. In *Queen of Hearts*, Anne at first uses and embraces Gustav – who is de facto the victim of repeated rape – before abjectifying him wholesale, causing his death. All four films have in common a narrative of liberation and emancipation, although they play out very differently: *Border* and *Thelma* present their characters as having experienced a positive epiphany (however gruesome) and accomplishing partial emancipation through self-abjection. They cannot reveal their secret identity, but they can hope to manoeuvre Northern European society as discerning and powerful women, beyond the law of men. Conversely, the protagonists of *Gutland* and *Queen of Hearts* are obliterated or damaged in their quest for emancipation: Jens is completely absorbed and sheds his past delinquent self behind to become a perfectly integrated Luxembourgish subject, while Gustav commits suicide out of despair. In the two latter cases, Giorgio Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer* is more pertinent even than Elsaesser's abject. Although Jens and Gustav are European citizens (German and Swedish respectively), they find themselves in neighbouring states in a situation of socioeconomic (and legal) precariousness. While both men at first undergo a process of 'deabjectification' (they become objects of sexual desire for their hosts), this is done hand in hand with stripping them of their rights – a stripping bare of their status as legal and social subjects: Jens will



be ‘deabjectified’ to the point of alienation and psychological annihilation; Gustav will be rejected and violently abjectified, silenced in his right to voice the truth of his predicament. In both cases, the characters become Agambenian ‘bare lives’: they embody a truth about society that is inconvenient (Jens) or intolerable (Gustav) and must be sacrificed (see Agamben 1998). And so, bereft of any genuine legal protection, they are killed (one metaphorically, the other literally).

Together, these four narratives of abjection serve as a sobering lesson of both, as Elsaesser pointed out, ‘what neoliberalism does to human beings and the social contract’ (Elsaesser 2018: 129), and, more specifically, of the fate proposed to migrant, minority, or any form of precarious groups. For if finding fellow nationals or people of the same religion or even sexual orientation can generate bonds, this process is stricken by the stigma of withdrawing into minority (i.e. peripheral, socially abject) status. Although migrants are protected by some laws, they can also be violently reduced to bare lives (the Agambenian ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2005) not so far removed from the ‘state of emergency’ implemented by several European states after the terrorist attacks of 2015–16 and now during the Covid-19 pandemic) and excluded from the state where they sought refuge, without having committed any crime and without any solid legal protection. They are abjectified also in the conditions by which they are contained. In order to get out of this literal precarious containment (rudimentary camps with tents in public squares and parks, overcrowded rooms in disaffected military barracks in places such as Ixelles in Belgium and Leiden in the Netherlands), not to mention the untenable legal and psychological limbo they are maintained in for lack of a clearly defined legal status, refugees are encouraged to integrate: to learn the language of the ‘host’ country, a trade, go to school. Spuriously enough, a will to become integrated into the social body, which germinates in many a resilient refugee’s mind, is concomitant with something that constitutes perhaps an even greater violence bestowed upon them (even as it is validated by the host states and compensated with a modicum of increased social rights), namely a shedding of one’s own ‘old’ identity that can at best be negotiated by the hybridising of necessities. In other words, the migrant is confronted with a rather impossible choice between abject or victim status: the former undesirable yet with an undeniable disturbing, disruptive quality, and perhaps power; the latter apparently more desirable but ultimately threatening to dissolve the self’s very essence and seat of political agency (however immanent and un(ac)countable (for)). This is a predicament that many in the host countries, even those on the left and in the centre, fail to recognise for lack of imagination or empathy.

### *Seeing and touching, differently*

Beyond the rather obvious critique of the status of minorities contained in the four works discussed, I would like to close my analysis by pointing to

the dimension of affect that powerfully traverses them. The way in which they each fail to conform to certain models seems like a parapractical resistance to a homogenic (read ‘commercial’, or even ‘Global’, or ‘Hollywood’) industry – their own stolid, sturdy way of standing abject to the dominant model. As a function of their embracing genre, all four films emphasise – over traditional narration, dialogue, and even the visual/descriptive – dimensions of textures and touch. This is very clear in the way the gaze carries a haptic, sometimes gripping, quality, and the sound mix is carefully executed. But this concern goes further than mere technical aspects of sound and cinematography, spilling into the motivic and thematic concerns of the films. For instance, *Thelma* engages fascinatingly with touchscreens and surfaces: the way Anja disappears into the surface of a window is in direct dialogue with the smartphones with which the characters communicate through the film. This is also strongly evoked in the film’s final image, with the two youths walking on campus with the typical hunch that has afflicted the posture of Generation Z-ers who grew up with smartphones in the 2010s. *Border* deals with smell but mostly touch in a quasi-haptic way, as when Tina walks on moss and mulch in the forest, or gleefully bathes in the cold waters of a lake. *Gutland* opens on beautiful images of dimly lit wheat fields that can almost be sensed (the image reinforced by the extraordinary soundtrack of wind rustling in the blades of wheat, immersing us in the countryside setting). And the film’s greatest set-piece is one in which Jens, lost in the field of tall wheat, cannot see and is confused by the direction of sound: he must guide himself with instinct and touch (Figure 15.4). Likewise, he is ‘blind’ to his predicament in the making, not knowing really where the deadly blow



*Figure 15.4* Jens (Frederick Lau), about to hide in the wheat field from what he perceives as a threat from the local community, in *Gutland* (2017)

Source: *Gutland* (2017), directed by Govinda Van Maele © Bauer & Blum, Les Films Fauves, Novak Production, and Tarantula (Luxembourg) (2018).

will come from and only sensing the doom or menace that will eventually befall him. One of the most moving scenes of *Queen of Hearts* involves Anne looking at herself, naked, in the mirror, relating the senses of sight and touch, as she painfully comes to term with her fading beauty and ageing. Gustav, reduced to silence and denied his right to voice the injustice he experiences, is removed from sight, his dead body never shown – only alluded to in its frozen, bare, and forever silent solidity. All this suggests that when talking about minorities, sexual and otherwise, sight becomes a scrutinised and fraught mode: it is the dominant mode of patriarchy, the realm of the evident and visible, as in the visual obscenity of the Western media showing the unforgettable image of the dead child Alan Kurdi on the beach – part of a group of eleven Syrians who drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Aegean Sea off the coastal town of Bodrum in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, smell (*Border*) and touch (*Thelma*) still carry more authenticity, and they provide minorities and dogged communities with the means to regain dignity and, in the end, reclaim the realm of the visible as a shared space. Certainly, it is in the way these films enable us to appreciate that we are given, through them, not only to feel but also to look differently, that they are most productively political.

Ultimately, what the four films share in common is the topic of integration and the more-often-than-not abject failure of this project in a neoliberal society. *Border* proposes tenuous and reduced models of community among people of the same ‘race’ and sexual orientation. *Gutland* highlights how, in a case-study example of Foucauldian biopolitics, a society will turn an outside member into part of its social body or eliminate them. *Thelma* addresses the topic of queerness and coming out as an important means of dialectically bypassing older societal models, all the while discreetly thematising the corollary question of touchscreen and portable social media devices and allegorising the dimension of touch in the shaping of a new *Gemeinschaft* over the old, traditional, religious *Gesellschaft*. Lastly, *Queen of Hearts* shows how precarious a ‘multi-kulti’ *Gesellschaft* can be if it is founded not on a community (the *Gemeinschaft*) but on a score of rather alienated bourgeois individuals who will objectify and instrumentalise the other, even as the latter happens to be a member of the family. Whilst individually they may be flawed on one level or another, as a conglomerate of sorts these films create a cogent network of meaning, revealing how cinematic genre has a renewed valence in addressing deep societal issues and dealing with the *homo sacer* status, and how abjection, self-abjectifying, and objectification are played out and can be productively used (if only as parapraxis) by people from minorities – be they sexual, ethnic, or indeed geopolitical. That such works can be empowering to representatives of these groups is far from certain, but that they express the anxiety of established entities over the organising and mobilising into genuine political communities of those who successfully resisted uniformisation is both unsettling and exhilarating. Indeed, that these films contribute to an expansion of an empathetic perception of

minorities, whatever they may be, and therefore propose ways of identifying with minorities, is both empowering and noteworthy – even as it, too, reveals the normative and manipulative ways of any mainstream medium which can – and probably always does – cut both ways.

## Notes

- 1 This motif recurs over and over in recent Nordic films: think of the status of lower-middle-class, Middle Eastern people in the art world satire *The Square* (2017, Sweden/Germany/France/Denmark, dir. Ruben Östlund), or that of mentally disturbed people in *The Guilty/Den Skyldige* (2018, Denmark, dir. Gustav Möller).
- 2 The actress playing Anne, Tryne Dynholm, is Danish, while the actor playing her husband, Magnus Krepper, is Swedish, addressing subtly the boundaries and borders between these two proximate countries – with a past of condescension and stereotypes from Sweden looking down on Denmark as the poor, lesser other.
- 3 This revolting image was front page of most European mainstream media outlets the following day or shortly thereafter. That it was released just as Germany was making a push to admit more migrants on European soil raised a series of queries regarding the ethics of using the image of the dead boy. A number of conspiracy theories arose in this context, some stating that the position of the child in the picture was arranged for maximum dramatic effect.

Part IV

# Curating queer migrant cinema



## 16 Curating queer migrant cinema

### Interview between Sudeep Dasgupta and James S. Williams<sup>1</sup>

JAMES S. WILLIAMS (JW): How did you become interested in the broad field of queer migration, and could you define your dual approach as theorist and activist?

SUDEEP DASGUPTA (SD): The academic field was determined by my location – wherever I find myself, that’s the starting point from which my interests develop. I was struck by two things when I moved to Amsterdam from the US [University of Pittsburgh] in 1997: I had the sense of being out of place and in the wrong time. Firstly, a strange combination of xenophobia with discourses on women’s rights and gay and lesbian rights. That produced a feeling of discomfort, since one presumed that if one was a feminist or queer activist, then xenophobia was not part of one’s programme. Further, the discourse of feminism and gay rights was often articulated by the state and by institutions of the Dutch state unlike in the US, of course. The situation in the Netherlands was quite different. Here, women’s and homosexual rights were institutionalised in a way that had not happened in the US. This sense of being out of place and out of time was connected to my previous research in the US where I began my Ph.D on Hindu nationalism in India. I was in the US watching a documentary on the massacres in 1992 of Muslims in Bombay, my hometown, and finding it incomprehensible how that could have happened. Being out of place in a place one is taught to belong to and yet not really belonging in was crucial for me. The Dutch context was quite unique, coming from the US, which was that when I moved here an openly gay man was the spokesperson for anti-immigrant discourse, Pim Fortuyn, who had his own political party.<sup>2</sup> A well-known journalist and filmmaker Theo van Gogh was also articulating a very rampant form of xenophobia against Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch citizens, once again through a discourse of women’s rights.<sup>3</sup> We have in the Netherlands a word *allochtoon*, which means someone from somewhere else [literally, emerging from another soil]. It’s a legal term, recognised by the state, so even if one is second-generation Dutch and born and brought up here, and never been to the land of one’s grandparents, one is still considered from somewhere else. When I moved here, the term was used

primarily to refer to Dutch citizens whose parents came from Morocco and Turkey (we're talking about labour migration), and later on, refugees (Syria, Eritrea, and so on). These were the groups being targeted through the deployment of discourses of sexual rights, the rights of gays and lesbians, etc. Hate speech was equated with freedom of expression. The notion of speech as an act (performative speech-act theory, or Judith Butler's work) was not recognised here as an act that harms people. The idea that you can attack anyone rests on the false assumption that we are equal. So all these issues together made me curious about how the queer and the migrant as a figure emerging in political discourse, but also about how to combat it.

JW: You haven't used the term homonationalism, but is that what we're talking about here?

SD: Yes, absolutely. The discourse of nationalism always fascinated me, starting with the work I did on Hindu nationalism, where nationalism is based on an exclusivist religious basis. In the Dutch context it's very much tied to what Gloria Wekker calls 'white innocence': once you figure the nation as an emancipatory force that has been integrally innocent, it becomes possible to then attack so-called backward people from the outside who are coming in.<sup>4</sup> That's the situation now. The question of sexual rights is problematic – it is said, for example, that all Dutch people are emancipated, that they are not homophobic, which is manifestly untrue. So it is also a deliberate way of masking internal issues around homophobia or around the inequality between different genders. We have Christian parties that have always been in some form of power here. These are parties that further gender and sexual inequalities, so the situation is not one of an emancipatory nation dealing with outside threats.

JW: That's a really useful framework for our discussion and for how the International Queer and Migrant Film Festival (IQMF) is dealing with these multiple issues. Can you talk about the history and background of the festival and its primary aims?

SD: The festival was started by Chris Belloni in Amsterdam in 2015, after he had visited Vienna, where they already had a queer migrant festival. He thought of bringing it to the Netherlands, precisely because the migrant had become such a central figure in public discourse, political discourse, and pretty much in everyday life, and precisely because of this combination of the use of sexual rights as a way of being xenophobic. One of the questions became: are all migrants straight and homophobic? Chris had made a film called *I am Gay and Muslim* [2012, Netherlands], where he had interviewed young Moroccan men who were dealing with how they combined their sexuality with their religious beliefs, which got a lot of play in the Netherlands itself. That film already showed there was a place for discussion here: it was shown in schools and different other places – gay, Dutch people of Turkish and Moroccan and other Muslim



backgrounds talked about it afterwards with school children and other groups in civil society, and that generated a lot of discussion about this question of being both Muslim and gay. So clearly this film showed the impact films can have in generating discussion and making visible what is already there but not (deliberately) talked about. IQMF emerged therefore as an occasion where films could be screened, and panel workshops, masterclasses for filmmakers, and public discussions held. Chris also made *The Turkish Boat* [2013, Netherlands] about the first Turkish boat at Gay Pride (or Canal Pride as it's called in Amsterdam) – a film also partly made possible by IQMF.<sup>5</sup> It has evolved over time: more and more activities are being added on as part of the festival; it's not only limited to once a year. During the year, films related to the topic are screened in different locations. The films circulate around four other cities at different times (The Hague, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Utrecht), but Amsterdam is where the main festival happens. Everything is spread out and networked these days – one event has got different offshoots at different times and places.

JW: Did the festival have a stated remit to different communities (queer, migrant), or was it set up by the state and local agencies as an autonomous organisation?

SD: It was not set up by the state at all. It was established through the initiative of a small group of really hard-working young people like Chris and others as part of the Stichting art.1 (or art.1 Foundation). Every year they go through the laborious process of applying for funding from the Dutch Ministry of Culture, Amsterdam town council, and other bodies. So it is partly state-helped but not state-initiated – it emerged from civil society. There is no state presence in the actual functioning of what films can be shown or the sorts of discussions held. There are issues around who has the right to speak for whom, both as festival organisers and as filmmakers within the festival itself. How does one situate and justify oneself in relation to the community one is addressing? What is one's relation to that community of queer migrants?

JW: Can you describe your role as a member of the selection committee and your shared criteria for choosing the programme?

SD: I'm part of a programming committee comprising six or seven people; the two main flags we have when we review the very large amount of material submitted on-line are literally 'queer' and 'migrant'. We also mark out if it's a fiction or documentary, as the programme is not thematised ('love' or 'violence' or regional divisions). What 'queer' and 'migrant' means is given shape by first watching the films which change, of course, our idea of thinking queer and migrant, and second by thinking about the audience. 'Queer' could work very much in terms of how sexuality might reformulate a sense of cultural or national identities. Given our location, it might be important to emphasise how sexuality connects with cultural difference since we have an international

audience. In terms of ‘migrant’, there are two issues that come up: first, migrancy from the hinterland to the city, so that it may not have to be a transnational movement but within a country. Another issue is the importance of highlighting South-South migration which is the majority form of migration. Due to financing mechanisms and technological access, North-South migrations remain much more visible in film than migrations within the South, for example, Argentina to Brazil, and within Brazil from the rural hinterland to São Paulo. It’s very important for us that these forms of migration are covered. We also include films that may not be explicitly about migration but are interesting because they expose the dynamics of sexual politics in parts of the world not very well known in the West. The minds of our audience need to migrate a bit to think about how sexuality is lived and thought in countries they might not know much about. That’s how the two frames ‘queer’ and ‘migrant’ come into play.

JW: So there’s no sense of a quota, for example, that you must have two panels at least covering a certain type of migration? It all depends on what is submitted?

SD: Yes, absolutely. One practical thing we do have to keep in mind is length. So a film that is being maybe a little too adventurous about the notion of queer may be interesting if it’s a short film, but if it’s a feature we can’t give that much space to something that may not directly relate to the theme of the festival.

JW: I’m assuming the festival is conducted wholly in English?

SD: Yes, and all non-English film material has to be subtitled in English. That’s because we don’t want to target only a Dutch audience (in the Netherlands everyone is already pretty much fluent in reading English) – we want very much to involve people from the many migrant communities in the audience and discussions, so English becomes the common language.

JW: How long does this process of selecting and programming take?

SD: We have a rolling series of deadlines. The last deadline is around now, the middle of September. Every film is reviewed by at least two people. We then meet as a group several times to discuss the films. In the case of ‘maybes’, another person is assigned to watch the film for input. We all have access via the festival’s FilmFreeway website to the comments of everyone else. The final stage in the selection process (deciding whether there is space to programme five or seven shorts, for instance) is made by a small team including Chris as Director of IQMF and Antonij Karadzowski as Vice-Director.<sup>6</sup>

JW: How are the masterclasses conceived, and how do they work?

SD: The filmmakers who attend a masterclass are those that have applied and been accepted, so it’s very much a closed setting and not a public event like the panel discussions after screenings. My own role is to translate some of the academic questions that I discuss at the university,

for example, the burden of representation on minorities that plays out in terms of visibility. One issue indeed that has come up over the last couple of years is: what is your position as a filmmaker in relation to the group, or the person that you see as representing a group, that you have chosen as the topic of the film? Is proximity a crucial factor or not? Many people felt strongly that this question of speaking from a position of closeness to your topic was important because too often certain groups have been represented by others from a distance. Other people, however, were much more willing to accept that distance, because it opened up many more perspectives than they had expected, because they came with stereotypes and were surprised by what they found. Maybe one of the middle-ground positions which also came up is that you think you know a community about which you are going to make a film, but the process of filmmaking reveals hitherto unknown issues. This is not just an aesthetic question but also about the filmmaker/activist's position with the group.

JW: How large is a masterclass?

SD: It's quite intimate, around 30 people, and part of a broader programme called 'The Academy' where they also get classes in the practical side of the filmmaking process, for example, how to market a film, how to increase its visibility. My masterclass is more concerned with bringing up intellectual issues which meet with their practical situations.

JW: Could you perhaps give a recent example and say how the session was composed?

SD: They first introduce themselves and I note down the different backgrounds and what they have worked on. I then introduce myself and pose initial questions to them such as: what motivates you to make the specific kind of film you chose to make? What was your relationship to the topic? This opens up the topic of who speaks for whom, leading to discussion of whether one feels silenced or has the right to make these sorts of films. I provoke responses and they then engage with each other. What I try to do is synthesise the various conversations, for example: Is this a matter of combatting stereotypes? Can they be used in different ways? The session lasts around two to three hours and takes place the day before the festival opens.

JW: Following on from this, can you talk more generally about how theoretical critique and activist stances can come into conflict with the lived reality of the asylum-seekers, and how you deal with that at the festival?

SD: A panel was organised on the sexual objectification of refugees and people of colour after the screening of Bruce La Bruce's expectedly provocative film *Refugee's Welcome* [2017, Spain/Germany]. On the panel were migrants and asylum seekers with some experience in the Dutch context. People in the audience and on the stage – migrants and refugees – talked about being approached as sexual objects during meetings where asylum seekers and refugees are brought into contact with those in the

neighbourhood of the asylum and detention centres. These were very heated and emotionally charged discussions. Many felt that the refugee has become – and I agreed with this – the new commodity in the market of sexual exchange. However, someone on the panel who works in these centres emphasised that due to changes in the law, the possibility of getting Dutch residency permits increases if you have a Dutch partner. This results sometimes in a ‘competition’ to get the ‘right guy’, i.e., a financially secure Dutch citizen. What he said made manifest a difficult situation whereby often a personal and theoretical critique of white privilege can slip very quickly, and paradoxically, into a condemnation of the people they claim to support, the refugees, who are accused of playing into white privilege. What this raised was that the asylum seeker is caught between on the one hand the changes in the laws of the state which open up some possibilities of security in a very vulnerable situation, and on the other hand an unnuanced activist stance which fails to recognise that asylum seekers are negotiating structures of power from vulnerable positions that open certain possibilities and shut down others. Their situation is one of constantly negotiating in very vulnerable situations – psychically, materially, and financially – with the state, and the state, through its changing regulations, regulates the most intimate dimensions of their everyday lives. The discussion was revealing because it got us out of talking about individuals with their own privilege, and bringing up the question of state institutions, shifts in laws, the situations in asylum centres, and the place of the refugee.

JW: In situations like that, is your position as an academic helpful to you by providing a certain distance?

SD: I think it helps in two ways. I thematise specific contributions more broadly so that it might be more applicable to other people in the audience. On the other hand, I bring myself into the discussion as well as a person of colour and a migrant (though not asylum seeker or refugee). What they were talking about in terms of class privilege that also goes into the objectification of the other is something I went through as well, and I could relate to that. So there is proximity.

JW: I saw on-line that you have a closing party/get-together, and there is clearly a social aspect to the festival that is very important, and which potentially can bring together everyone who has participated or attended the screenings.

SD: The social dimension is very important. We have a refugees’ dinner the night before the festival begins, and there’s a closing party. The people who come for the masterclass, from all over the world, are hosted in a hotel together, so a community forms quite quickly during the festival which works at multiple levels. The social and educative functions are very much linked, so we have an art exhibition, discussion panels, and other related events.

JW: If I understand correctly, the International Queer and Migrant Film Festival is just one of the activities of the art.1 Foundation of which you are

also currently a board member. Could you describe some of the projects you are personally involved with relating to sexual minorities in different countries, notably in the Balkans region? In particular, can you talk about your recent experience of going to Kosovo in July 2019?

- SD: IQMF programmed four nights of screenings as part of the Pristina film festival, Prifest, as well as panel discussions around trans issues, police protection of sexual minorities, etc.. The first film, *I am Sofia* [2019, Italy, dir. Silvia Luzi], is about a transwoman in Italy. The screening was followed by a panel discussion with the filmmaker and others. The award for Best European Film went to a Slovenian film about gay male harassment programmed by IQMF [Darko Stante's *Consequences* (2018)]. The foundation is involved with LGBT activists in Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Slovenia. A four-day filmmaking workshop was also held. Kosovo is a country not recognised by everyone, and certainly not by Serbia.<sup>7</sup> It is strongly marked by the war in 1999. There were EU and American flags everywhere. The people I met had come to Pristina from other parts of Kosovo that suffered from the war. The importance of family became quite evident: there is a sense of gratitude to the family and to the village because that is what saved you. But now coming into adulthood and becoming aware of their gender and sexual identity, they flee their villages and come to Pristina since that is where they feel more safe. So there was a split between a sense of faithfulness to their location and family unit and the need to flee it because of their gender and sexual orientation. The second is the question of the transnational reconstruction of Kosovo. EU and US aid has been very instrumental in the establishing of a justice system there. A so-called 'Academy of Justice' has been set up, funded by the EU, to train judges and improve jurisprudence within Kosovo. This is very important for LGBT people. Harassment, sexual assault, and murder is something they are dealing with directly. It's an odd, queer situation: you don't go to your national institutions because the national courts are not national – they are being trained and funded by international help. In that context, there is a dilemma. To take one example: in May 2019, the European Commission report on Kosovo and its accession to the EU devotes 30 (out of 110) pages to the justice system on issues of freedom and non-discrimination. Only two pages broach sexual harassment and LGBT issues (there's one paragraph on Gay Pride). The rest of the document (around 70–80 pages) is concerned with economic freedoms, the free movement of capital, and customs duties. Some of the activists I spoke to said they felt let down by the international organisations funding the justice system because gay rights, in particular concerning violence against gays and lesbians and transgender persons, is not seen as a priority. Either the police do not respond to complaints, or people don't go to the police for fear they will not be taken seriously. Judgements are delayed for so long, and there's a lack of transparency.



*Figure 16.1* A panel discussion after the screening of *I am Sofia* (2019), which opened the IQMF Queer Film Days at the 2019 Prifest in Pristina: (from left to right) Sudeep Dasgupta, Chris Belloni (IQMF), the film's director Silvia Luzi, the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador Marriët Schuurman, and Kosovan-American filmmaker Erblin Nushi

*Source:* Courtesy of Antonij Karadzowski.

- JW: Do the LGBT activists you met see themselves as both proudly Kosovan and part of a larger region? You mentioned Serbia, which is in constant tension with Kosovo, but it does, of course, currently have an out-lesbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić.
- SD: Awareness of the larger world is something very much there, and yet many of the young people feel trapped. Kosovans, unlike, say, Macedonians, cannot travel outside the country without a visa. Like the Albanians, a lot of them have family abroad, so it means that their connection to the world is very intimate, as it has to do with many family members who are abroad, in Italy and Canada. I did not sense a closed form of nationalist isolation at all. They're aware of their history of the war, but not obsessed with it in an isolationist way. Kosovans are officially primarily Muslim, as in Bosnia, but in Pristina, pork and beer are served in restaurants. The people I met are very open, but physically they are trapped. On the other hand, there are, though, nationalist leaders still revered by many. The head of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Hashim Thaçi, leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, is a hero for some.
- JW: Do you think that the Kosovan situation you describe 'queers' the notion of Europe and European borders? And if so, how might this be theorised? Is it possible (even desirable) to talk here in terms of 'queer' and 'European' identity?
- SD: The building up of the institutions of the nation-state on the basis of financial and other forms of support from other countries and international organisations is a very queer thing. Hence the startling amount of flags of other countries flying all over Pristina. The link between the nation and the nation-state came via the transnational. Kosovans also intimately identify with a country outside it, Albania. The Albanian flag was flying next to almost every Kosovan flag I saw. Albanian is the national language. So firstly, the transnational is crucial for the nation to become a nation-state, and second, the country identifies so closely with another country. And third – and this relates to the history of Yugoslavia – you see that the national emblems of Kosovo, the monuments of the nation, are integrally linked to the monuments of another country, Albania. Skanderbeg, who is seen as the warrior-hero who formed Albania, is also the national hero of Kosovo. The Skanderbeg statue in Skanderbeg Square is in Tirana, capital of Albania; the biggest statue in the main street of Pristina is of Skanderbeg. At the other end of the street, you see the huge cathedral to Mother Teresa. Skopje claims her in Macedonia, Tirana claims her in Albania, Pristina claims her in Kosovo.
- JW: Do you think that the particular 'queerness' of the Kosovo situation will be changed if/when it enters the EU? Part of its queerness is precisely this interim stage and its newness and border nature. If it becomes part of Europe, would it still retain its capacity to queer our notions of Europe?

- SD: If and when Kosovo becomes part of the EU, it will probably be the first majority-Muslim country within the European Union, and that could be quite significant, in a good way. It would be really important and positive for the European imaginary to recognise the significantly long history we have had with Islam in different forms, and how it is lived in everyday life. It is striking that the EU demands that Kosovo formalise and stabilise its relations with another country outside the EU: Serbia. In other words, the potential inclusion of belligerent nation-states into the EU – the possibility of an inter-European war – frames the further expansion of Europe. The third thing that interests me here is this: how do you be a part of the EU while enjoying hopes of being part of a larger Albania? Is this a desire for culture and commonality, or rather a desire for political union? This would be very odd for Europe, since Albania is not a potential candidate for accession to the EU; it's an aspiring candidate.
- JW: Such a situation would radically rewrite the traditional idea of the European nation-state.
- SD: Yes, don't go to war with one non-EU country (Serbia). But also: what do you want with this other non-European country, Albania? When I asked the people I met in Kosovo why they have the Albanian flag flying everywhere, they said it was because we feel part of greater Albania. There I am in Pristina with their old mosque at one end of the main street, and on the other a massive cathedral to Mother Teresa. And no one sees a contradiction there. (It reminded me of the co-presence in India of multiple religions, now under threat by Hindu nationalism and the state). I think that would be a new model for Europe, a queer way of imagining Europe, where Islam still gets read as an alien presence.
- JW: How might one relate such *queering* to the forms of queer relationality you explore theoretically in your critical work?
- SD: Édouard Glissant writes about the right to opacity which, of course, one can understand in a psychoanalytic perspective, but also in an historical and embodied way. This is not about someone who says 'I know myself but I won't express it to you transparently'; rather, the self is marked by all sorts of experiences that have not been worked through yet. Glissant writes about the Abyss of the boat where they die shackled below, the Abyss of the sea into which they are thrown overboard, the Abyss as something you are moving towards without knowing what it is. So opacity is about an experience of inadequate knowledge that is very historically specific and embodied by the enslaved as they traverse multiple abysses. In the case of Glissant, the Caribbean is the space of relationality – Stuart Hall talks of the Caribbean as a space of the African, European, and American presences, for example. So one can only think of oneself in terms of the relationalities that have formed one. Relationality is not between subjects who are completely present to themselves or to others. Opacity is crucial to me for understanding



relationality outside definitional categories. My thinking here has been informed partly by psychoanalytic notions of the self, the unconscious, the role of fantasy, desire, etc.. But opacity is also related to something else, and this is where the aesthetic comes in: you might be going through sensory experiences at the level of the body whose significance one does not know yet. So how do you affirm either yourself or your relation to the other when this process is going on continually? Bracha Ettinger [Israeli-born French artist and theorist] has had to forge a new language to articulate both opacity and relationality. I'm thinking of her early work, the Eurydice Series in particular, where she replaces 'witness' with 'withness'. If I witness to you what I have gone through, then it's not witnessing, but 'withnessing'. That's how she articulates relationality. How that relationality is formed – its contours, its processes – is very specific. Something gets revealed through the relation that one didn't know of even if one sensed it. Rancière quotes Hölderlin: a fragment is not a ruin that lies there as a dead remnant of something else. Rather, it generates something like a seed, like pollen, so that we are dispersed and germinate elsewhere, and this germination becomes the condition for generating forms of relationality with others. If I think about a migrant body: what would it accumulate as it moves through many different experiences? It is accumulating a series of experiences that perhaps cannot be fitted neatly with each other, but is continually transforming migrant subjectivity, and those fragments that come together are an opportunity for generating more relationalities. I remember talking to a teenaged asylum seeker from Syria whom I met in Berlin: we were talking in broken French, and he was telling me how the French spoken in Morocco is different from the French spoken in Mali, Senegal, and Lebanon – he was charting not only different ways of speaking French, but charting a journey and the people he has met on that journey. These are fragments that accumulate in a person and form a kind of knowledge and establish a form of connection, a kind of knowledge. So relationality in a very segmented, embodied way forms a person. Relations also means the possibility for discomfort – the possibility of uncertainty, the potential for disturbance. Ettinger talks about it in terms of co-presence: with these others that are as opaque to me as I am to them, because we are formed through developing relations, things might become less opaque and other forms of opacities open up: opacity, relationality, co-presence together in very specific historical circumstances. Relationality harbours the promise of a kind of destabilisation of the self in a productive way: one has to keep rethinking where one stands and in relation to whom.

JW: How 'real' are these presences?

SD: They are absent presences. I love walking the canals of Amsterdam and seeing the lop-sided houses next to each other in this beautiful space, but I know the grand ones belonged to slave-owners and traders, so I

will sense presences, and that is very enriching to me because it makes that location the site for many different things connected to each other, and it productively destabilises me through my contradictory reactions to where I find myself. That's fine, and necessary, because these forms of relationality are often being denied: you either don't talk about the history of Dutch colonialism and slavery, or else you talk about it in such a dismissive way – 'Haven't we heard all this already?' – so that you don't *really* have to talk about it. In that context, it's very important for me to think relationally as the possibility for disturbance, for undermining oneself and one's relation to one's location. I have called it in one article the 'politics of indifference', which means acknowledging difference but refusing to categorise that difference and know it completely.<sup>8</sup> I think with sexuality it's also very important. When Foucault was asked: 'What should gay men do?', 'What is the most radical way of being gay?', he answers 'Friendship'. This is what political activism could mean for gay men: the capacity to form relations in unlikely places with those one is not expected to feel close to. This is very threatening to a closed notion of gay identity as well as to homophobes.

## Notes

- 1 The interview took place in two stages on 31 July and 15 September 2019.
- 2 Fortuyn formed his own party, 'Pim Fortuyn List', in 2002, but was assassinated the same year on 6 May in Hilversum, North Holland.
- 3 An outspoken figure, Theo van Gogh was shot dead by a 26-year-old, Dutch-born Muslim in Amsterdam on 2 November 2004.
- 4 See Wekker (2016).
- 5 *The Turkish Boat* is a docudrama centred on two Turkish-Dutch gay activists.
- 6 A grant of €1,000 is awarded for the best pitch in the 'Impact Your Doc' programme. This is part of the festival's Awards Programme, which also includes prizes for Best Short Film and Best Feature.
- 7 Kosovo is a self-declared independent country. Although the US and most members of the EU recognised its declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, Serbia, Russia, and a number of other countries – including several EU members – did not. Owing to this lack of international consensus, Kosovo was not immediately admitted to the UN.
- 8 See Dasgupta (2016), a study of *Wild Side* (2004, France, dir. Sébastien Lifshitz).

# Filmography

- 25 degrés en hiver/25 Degrees in Winter* (2004, Belgium/France/Russia/Spain), dir. Stéphane Vuillet.
- A Ciambra* (2017, Italy/Brazil/France/Germany/Sweden/USA), dir. Jonas Carpignano.
- Adam & Paul* (2004, Ireland), dir. Lenny Abrahamson.
- A escondidas/Hidden Away* (2014, Spain), dir. Mikel Rueda.
- Afrikanen/The African* (2005, Sweden), dir. Stephan Apelgren.
- (The) Amazing Truth about Queen Raquela* (2008, Iceland/Philippines/France/Thailand), dir. Olaf de Fleur Johannesson.
- A mi madre le gustan las mujeres/My Mother Likes Women* (2002, Spain), co-dir. Daniela Féjerman and Inés París.
- And Breathe Normally* (2018, Iceland/Sweden/Belgium), dir. Isold Uggadóttir.
- Ander* (2009, Spain), dir. Roberto Castón.
- Angst/Fear* (2017, Germany), dir. Raissa Sokurowa.
- AnotherNews Story* (2018, UK), dir. Orban Wallace.
- Another Way* (1982, Hungary), dir. Károly Makk.
- Après l'océan/Birds of Heaven* (2006, France/UK/Côte d'Ivoire), dir. Éliane de Latour.
- Ataque verbal/Word Attack* (2000, Spain), dir. Miguel Albadalejo.
- Ayaneh* (2019, Switzerland), dir. Nicolas Greinacher.
- Beyond the Hills* (2012, Romania/France/Belgium), dir. Cristian Mungiu.
- (A) Bigger Splash* (2015, Italy/France), dir. Luca Guadagnino.
- Black* (2015, Belgium), dir. Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah.
- Border/Gräns* (2018, Sweden), dir. Ali Abbasi.
- Breaking Borders* (2017, Netherlands), co-dir. Fatima Warsame and Barbara Vollebregt.
- Bron/The Bridge I-III* (2011–18, Sweden/Denmark) [television series for SVT and DR].
- (The) Bubble/Ha'buva* (2006, Israel), dir. Eytan Fox.
- Calais: The Last Border* (2003, UK), dir. Marc Isaacs.
- Calvary* (2014, Ireland/UK), dir. John Michael McDonagh.
- Charmoren/The Charmer* (2017, Denmark/Sweden), dir. Milad Alami.
- Children of Men* (2006, UK/USA/Japan), dir. Alfonso Cuarón.
- Chouchou* (2003, France), dir. Merzak Allouache.
- (The) Citizen* (2016, Hungary), dir. Roland Vranik.
- Coincoin et les z'inhumains/Coincoin and the Extra-Humans* (2018, France), dir. Bruno Dumont [4-part television series for ARTE].
- Come un uomo sulla terra/Like a Man on Earth* (2008, Italy), co-dir. Riccardo Biadene, Andrea Segre and Dagmawi Yimer.

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- Congorama* (2006, Canada/Belgium/France), dir. Philippe Falardeau.  
*Conil sole negli occhi* (2015, Italy) (Sun in His Eyes), dir. Pupi Avati.  
*Cose dell'altro mondo/Things from Another World* (2011, Italy), dir. Francesco Patierno.  
*(The) Crossing* (2017, Netherlands), dir. Carlos Motta [film installation].  
*Crypsis* (2019, UK), dir. Christopher McGill.  
*(The) Cut* (2014, Germany/France/Italy/Russia/Poland/Canada/Turkey/Jordan), dir. Fatih Akin.  
*Dheepan* (2015, France), dir. Jacques Audiard.  
*Die bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant/The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972, West Germany), dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder.  
*Die Farbe des Ozeans/Color of The Ocean* (2011, Germany/Spain), dir. Maggie Peren.  
*Die innere Sicherheit/The State I am In* (2000, Germany), dir. Christian Petzold.  
*Dirty Pretty Things* (2002, UK), dir. Stephen Frears.  
*Dogtooth* (2009, Greece), dir. Yorgos Lanthimos.  
*Drôle de Felix/The Adventures of Felix* (2000, France), dir. Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau.  
*Eastern Boys* (2013, France), dir. Robin Campillo.  
*Eden* (2019, France/Germany), dir. Dominik Moll [6-part TV mini-series for ARTE]  
*Éden à l'Ouest/East is West* (2009, France/Greece/Italy), dir. Costa-Gavras.  
*(The) Edge of Heaven/Auf der anderen Seite* (2007, Germany/Turkey/Italy), dir. Fatih Akin.  
*Evaporating Borders* (2014, USA), dir. Iva Radivojevic.  
*Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (2016–17, UK) [6-part television documentary for BBC].  
*Fiore Gemello/Twin Flower* (2018, Italy), dir. Laura Luchetti.  
*Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (Denmark, 2007–12) [television series for DR].  
*Francesca* (2009, Romania), dir. Bobby Paunescu.  
*Fuocoammare/Fire at Sea* (2016, Italy/France), dir. Gianfranco Rosi.  
*Ghosted* (2009, Germany/Taiwan), dir. Monika Treut.  
*Ghosts* (2006, UK), dir. Nick Broomfield.  
*Ghosts/Gespenster* (2005, Germany/France), dir. Christian Petzold.  
*God's Own Country* (2017, UK), dir. Francis Lee.  
*Go West* (2005, Bosnia and Herzegovina), dir. Ahmed Imamović.  
*(The) Green Line* (2017, Cyprus), dir. Marios Psaras.  
*Gutland* (2017, Luxembourg), dir. Govinda Van Maele.  
*Habitación en Roma* (2010, Spain), dir. Julio Medem.  
*Happy End* (2017, France/Austria/Germany), dir. Michael Haneke.  
*Harragas* (2009, Algeria/France), dir. Merzak Allouache.  
*Head On* (1998, Australia), dir. Ana Kokkinos.  
*Heremakono/Waiting for Happiness* (2002, France/Mauritania), dir. Abderrahmane Sissako.  
*Here to Stay* (2006, Ireland), co-dir. Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien.  
*Human Flow* (2017, Germany/USA/China/Palestine), dir. Ai Weiwei.  
*I am Gay and Muslim* (2012, Netherlands), dir. Chris Belloni.  
*I am Sofia* (2019, Italy), dir. Silvia Luzi.  
*Illégal* (2010, Belgium/Luxembourg/France), dir. Olivier Masset Depasse.  
*Il Sangue Verde/Green Blood* (2010, Italy), dir. Andrea Segre.

- In Between* (in Arabic: *Bar Bahar*; in Hebrew: *Lo Po, Lo Sham*) (2016, Israel/France), dir. Maysaloun Hamoud.
- Innan vi dör/Before We Die* (Sweden, 2017) [television series for SVT].
- In This World* (2002, UK), dir. Michael Winterbottom.
- Iosto con la sposa/On the bride's side* (2014, Italy), co-dir. Antonio Augugliaro, Gabriele Del Grande and Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry.
- I Shot My Love* (2010, Israel/Germany), dir. Tomer Heymann.
- It Kinda Scares Me/Tomer VeHasrutim* (2001, Israel), dir. Tomer Heymann.
- It's a Free World* (2007, UK/Italy/Germany/Spain/Poland), dir. Ken Loach.
- Jaurès* (2012, France), dir. Vincent Dieutre.
- Je suis mort mais j'ai des amis/I'm Dead But I Have Friends* (2015, Belgium/France), co-dir. Guillaume and Stéphane Malandrin.
- (The) Judgement* (2014, Bulgaria) dir. Stephan Komandarev.
- (The) Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017, Ireland/UK), dir. Yorgos Lanthimos.
- King of the Belgians* (2016, Belgium/Netherlands/Bulgaria), co-dir. Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth.
- Kometen* (2017, Sweden), dir. Victor Lindgren.
- La Forteresse/The Fortress* (2008, Switzerland), dir. Fernand Melgar.
- Lamerica* (1995, Italy), dir. Gianni Amelio.
- Land of Storms* (2014, Hungary), dir. Ádám Császi.
- La Permanence/On Call* (2016, France), dir. Alice Diop.
- La Pirogue/The Pirogue* (2012, France/Senegal/Germany), dir. Moussa Touré.
- Lasconosciuta/The Unknown Woman* (2006, Italy), dir. Giuseppe Tornatore.
- Last Resort* (2000, UK), dir. Pawel Pawlikowski.
- Le Havre* (2011, Finland/France/Germany), dir. Aki Kaurismäki.
- L'Envahisseur/The Invader* (2011, Belgium), dir. Nicholas Provost.
- Les Barons* (2009, Belgium/France), dir. Nabil Ben Yadir.
- Les Sauteurs/Those Who Jump* (2016, Denmark), co-dir. Abou Bakar Sidibé, Moritz Siebert and Estephan Wagner.
- Let the Right One In/Låt den rätte komma in* (2008, Sweden), dir. Tomas Alfredson.
- (The) Life of Esteban* (2017, Belgium), dir. Inès Eshun.
- Limbo* (2016, USA/Italy), co-dir. Cynthia Horvilleur and Olivia Bickel.
- L'Italiano/The Italian* (2002, Italy), dir. Ennio De Domenicis.
- Lola+Bilidikid/Lola and Billy the Kid* (1999, Germany), dir. Kutluğ Ataman.
- Looking for Langston* (1989, UK), dir. Isaac Julien.
- Los novios búlgaros* (2003, Spain), dir. Eloy de la Iglesia.
- Lost Warrior* (2018, Denmark/Sweden), co-dir. Nasib Farah and Søren Steen Jespersen.
- Mala Noche* (1986, USA), dir. Gus Van Sant.
- Ma Loute/Slack Bay* (2016, France), dir. Bruno Dumont.
- Manpower* (2014, Israel/France), dir. Noam Kaplan.
- Marble Ass/Dupe od mramora* (1995, Serbia), dir. Želimir Žilnik.
- Marco* (2018, UK), dir. Saleem Haddad.
- Mare Chiuso/Closed Sea* (2012, Italy/Tunisia/France), co-dir. Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti.
- Mediterranea* (Italy/France/USA, 2015), dir. Jonas Carpignano.
- Midnattssol/Midnight Sun* (2016, Sweden) [television series for SVT and Canal+].
- Miracle at St. Anna* (2008, Italy/USA), dir. Spike Lee.
- Mixed Kebab* (2012, Belgium), dir. Guy Lee Thys.
- (A) Moment in the Reeds* (2017, Finland/UK), dir. Mikko Makela.

- Mondial 2010* (2010, Lebanon/Palestine), dir. Roy Dib.  
*Mördare utan ansiket/Killers* (1995, Sweden) [television series for TV4].  
*Morgen* (2010, Romania), dir. Marian Crisan.  
*Mr Gay Syria* (2017, Turkey/Germany/Malta/France), dir. Ayşe Toprak.  
*Mukwano* (2016, Denmark), dir. Cecilie McNair.  
*My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, UK), dir. Stephen Frears.  
*My Refugee Story* (2016, Lebanon), dir. M. Nour Metwally.  
*(The) New World/De Nieuwe Wereld* (2013, Netherlands), dir. Jaap van Heusden.  
*Nida* (2019, Netherlands), dir. Fawzi Swaid.  
*Nuovomondo* (2007, Italy), dir. Emanuele Crialese.  
*Out in the Dark/Alata* (2012, Israel/USA), dir. Michael Mayer.  
*Øyevitne/Eyewitness* (2014, Norway) [television series for NRK].  
*Paper Dolls/Bubot Niyar* (2006, Israel), dir. Tomer Heymann.  
*Passo a due/Pas de deux* (2005, Italy), dir. Andrea Barzini.  
*Pavee Lackeen* (2005, Ireland), dir. Perry Ogden.  
*(A) Place in the Sun* (1995, UK/Greece), dir. Constantine Giannaris.  
*Princesa* (2001), Italy/Spain/France/UK/Germany), dir. Henrique Goldman.  
*Problemski Hotel* (2015, Belgium/Netherlands), dir. Manu Riche.  
*P'tit Quinquin/L'il Quinquin* (2014, France), dir. Bruno Dumont [4-part television series for ARTE].  
*(The) Purple Field* (2015, Palestine), dir. Nasri Hajjaj.  
*Queen of Hearts/Dronningen* (2019, Denmark), dir. May el-Toukhy.  
*Qu'ils reposent en révolte (des figures de guerres 1)/May they rest in revolt (figures of wars 1)* (2010, France), dir. Sylvain George.  
*Rats That Eat Men* (2015, UK), dir. Isobel Mascarenhas-Whitman.  
*Refugees under the Rainbow* (2018, Germany), dir. Stella Traub.  
*Refugee's Welcome* (2017, Spain/Germany), Bruce La Bruce.  
*Re-naisances/Re-births: The Journey of the Soul* (2018, France/Russia/China/Peru), dir. Santi Zegarra.  
*Revenir* (2018, France), co-dir. David Fedele and Kumut Imesh.  
*Riverbanks/Obthes* (2015, Greece), dir. Panos Karkanevatos.  
*Rosetta* (1999, France/Belgium), co-dir. Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne.  
*Saimir* (2004, Italy), dir. Francesco Munzi.  
*Samira* (2013, France), dir. Nicola Mai [film and installation].  
*Scar Tissue* (2017, Netherlands), dir. Nish Gera.  
*(The) Sea Runs Thru My Veins* (2018, Germany), dir. Zara Zandieh.  
*Segunda piel* (1999, Spain), dir. Gerardo Vega.  
*Shelter: Farewell to Eden* (2019, Italy/France), dir. Enrico Masi.  
*Shun Li and the Poet* (2011, Italy), dir. Andrea Segre.  
*Simsbar* (2014, Malta), dir. Rebecca Cremona.  
*Somers Town* (2008, UK), dir. Shane Meadows.  
*(The) Square* (2017, Sweden/Germany/France/Denmark), dir. Ruben Östlund.  
*Stop-over/L'escale* (2013, Switzerland/France), dir. Kaveh Bakhtiari.  
*Stranger in Paradise* (2016, Netherlands), dir. Guido Hendriks.  
*Strella (aka A Woman's Way)* (2009, Greece), dir. Panos H. Koutras.  
*Take a Deep Breath* (2004, Serbia and Montenegro), dir. Dragan Marinković.  
*(A) Taste of Honey* (1961, UK), dir. Tony Richardson.  
*Terraferma* (France/Italy, 2012), dir. Emanuele Crialese.  
*Thelma* (2017, Norway), dir. Joachim Trier.

- Time Off/After* (1990, Israel), dir. Eytan Fox.  
*Trojans* (1990, UK/Greece), dir. Constantine Giannaris.  
*(The) Turkish Boat* (2013, Netherlands), dir. Chris Belloni.  
*Une Saison en France/A Season in France* (2017, France), dir. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun.  
*Unveiled/Fremde Haut* (2005, Germany/Austria), Angelina Maccarone.  
*Vampyros Lesbos* (1971, West Germany/Spain), dir. Jesús Franco.  
*Waalo Fendo/Where the earth freezes* (1997, Switzerland), dir. Mohammed Soudani.  
*(The) Way Home/BaDerech HaBaita* (2009, Israel), dir. Tomer Heymann [television series].  
*Welcome* (2009, France), dir. Philippe Lioret.  
*Welcome to Norway!* (2015, Norway), dir. Rune Denstad Langlo.  
*We Were Here* (2011, USA), dir. David Weissman.  
*When Paul Came Over the Sea* (2017, Germany), dir. Jakob Preuss.  
*Wild Side* (2004, France), dir. Sébastien Lifshitz.  
*Willkommen bei den Hartmanns/Welcome to Germany* (2016, Germany), dir. Simon Verhoeven.  
*Wir sind die Nacht/We Are the Night* (2010, Germany), dir. Dennis Gansel.  
*Worlds Apart* (2015, Greece), dir. Christoforos Papakaliatis.  
*Xenia* (2014, Greece), dir. Panos H. Koutras.  
*Years and Years* (2019, UK) [BBC television series created by Russell T. Davies].  
*Yella* (2007, Germany), dir. Christian Petzold.  
*Yossi and Jagger* (2002, Israel), dir. Eytan Fox.

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