

Against a Migrant Cinema. Critical Reflections on the Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

“What? You did not include any reference to the Tahrir Square uprising?” In the final scene of *La Vierge, les Coptes et Moi* (Namir Abdel Messeeh, 2012), an autobiographical film in which the director, an Egyptian Copt residing in France, stages the alleged apparition of the Madonna in his native village, the (French) producer blurts out, reproaching the director for speaking about himself, and not about the political situation in his country. That same year, *Tahrir*, by the Italian Stefano Savona, documented masterfully that social reality, with an insider’s eye, although the author was a foreigner. This discomfort of the autochthonous, for which the foreign filmmaker is admitted only to the extent that he tells us of his “strangeness”, calls into account the cinephile approach, intimately Eurocentric, to the “marginal” cinemas. To seek an image “Other”, indeed, would do nothing but replicate, by its very nature, the alterity it attempts to eliminate: it is a paradox that seem to characterise part of the European contemporary cinema (Capussotti 2009; Cincinelli 2009; Corrado, Mariottini 2013, Garosi, Trapassi 2016; De Franceschi 2013; Jedlowski 2001; Schrader, Winkler 2013) and literature (Fracassa 2012; Negro 2015, Proglione 2011; Romeo 2018). This has given rise to a re-evaluation of postcolonial studies, applied to the film studies (Heffelfinger, Wright 2011; Ponzanesi, Waller 2012). The minimal common denominator of both domains seems to be the notion of gaze, with the subtle ambiguity that this approach entails: the “Other” is, by definition, “other than Us” (Baggiani, Longoni, Solano 2011). The process of othering intrinsic in any European view of the “Other”, being Eurocentrism not a rhetorical choice but an inescapable perspective (Shohat / Stam 1994), is therefore a double-edged sword: on the one hand it tends to recognise the specificity of non-European cinematographic forms, questioning some aesthetic and narrative rules of “western” cinema (where the very notion of “West”, as Said notes, is intimately Eurocentric) (1978). On the other hand, this risks to flatten the “Other” to his own culture of belonging, forcing the will of non-European directors to express themselves exclusively within more or less conscious processes of media segregation, that prevent the expression of a subjective gaze (De Franceschi, 2018). The very notion of “migrant cinema”, therefore, on the one hand tends to historicize a phenomenon, recognizing in the current socio-political context a common ground on which such products, despite their diversity, can grow; on the other hand, like any codification, this historicization tends to bring back to the collective sphere what is often an individual artistic expression: as it does not speak of society, it is simply not interesting. In this sense, as we will try to argue in this essay, the postcolonial perspective on the one hand proves to be effective, as it opens up film studies to important methodological contaminations; on the other hand, as a negative consequence, it tends to treat “migrant cinema” as a genre in its own right, thus transforming the “eye of the migrant” into an “eye on migrant”. In a critical-theoretical perspective, this paper will debate on how the denial of the existence of a migrant cinema is not an attempt to deconstruct a consolidated historiographical frame, but on the contrary, it is a way to avoid that this historicization implies and replicates the same dynamics of abjection that it tends to eliminate.

Keywords: migrant cinema; postcolonial studies; european funds; diaspora; ethnography.

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“What? You did not include any reference to the Tahrir Square uprising?” In the final scene of *The Virgin, the Copts and Me* (*Les coptes la vierge et moi*, 2012), by Namir Abdel Messeeh – an autobiographical film in which the director, an Egyptian Copt residing in France, stages the alleged apparition of the Madonna in his native village – the French producer blurts out, reproaching the author for speaking about himself, and not about the political situation in his country. In the previous year, *Tahrir Liberation Square* (*Tahrir*, 2011), directed by the Italian Stefano Savona, documented that social reality with an insider’s eye, although the author was a foreigner. The discomfort of the autochthonous, for which the ‘foreign’ filmmaker is admitted only to the extent that he tells us of his ‘foreignness’, calls into account the cinephile approach, intimately Eurocentric, to the ‘marginal’ cinemas.

To seek the image of the Other, even with solidarity purposes, would do nothing but replicate, by its very nature, the alterity it attempts to eliminate: it is a paradox that seems to characterise part of European contemporary cinema (Capussotti 2009, Cincinelli 2009, Corrado and Mariottini 2013, Garosi and Trapassi 2016, De Franceschi 2013, Jedlowski 2001, Schrader and Winkler 2013) and literature (Fracassa 2012, Negro 2015, Proglgio 2011, Romeo 2018). This new wave has given rise to a strong relationship between postcolonial and film studies (Heffelfinger and Wright 2011, Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). The minimal common denominator of both domains seems to be the notion of gaze, with the subtle ambiguity that this approach entails: the “Other” is, by definition, “other than Us” (Baggiani Longoni and Solano 2011). The process of ‘othering’ intrinsic in any European view of the ‘Other’, being Eurocentrism not a rhetorical choice but an inescapable perspective (Shohat and Stam 1994), is therefore a double-edged sword: on the one hand it tends to recognise the specificity of non-European cinematographic forms, questioning some aesthetic and narrative rules of “Western” cinema (where the very notion of ‘West’, as I will argue, is intimately Eurocentric). On the other hand, this risks to flatten the “Other” to his own culture of belonging, forcing the will of non-European directors to express themselves exclusively within more or less conscious processes of media segregation, that prevent the expression of a subjective gaze (De Franceschi 2018).

The Italian context, in this sense, is quite significant. The very notion of “migrant cinema”, often used in Italy to indicate a category of films on migratory topics, reveals to be, to this extent, a double-edged sword: on the one hand it tends to historicise a phenomenon, recognising in the current socio-political context a common ground on which such products, despite their diversity, may grow; on the other hand, like any taxonomy, it flattens the individual artistic expression to a horizon of expectations: if it does not speak of migrants, it is simply not interesting. In this sense, as I will try to argue in this essay, the postcolonial perspective on the one hand proves to be effective, as it opens up film studies to important methodological contaminations; on the other hand, as a negative consequence, it tends to treat “migrant cinema” as a genre of its own, thus transforming the “eye of the migrant” into an “eye on the migrant”. In a critical-theoretical perspective, this paper will debate on how the denial of the existence of a migrant cinema is not an attempt to deconstruct a consolidated historiographical frame; on the contrary, it is a way to avoid what this historicisation implies and to replicate the same dynamics of abjection that it tends to eliminate.

1 Definitions and problems

The heterogeneous and multicultural composition of modern Western societies increasingly imposes the problem of representing the Other. Contemporary films and film studies, as previously stated, have frequently dealt with this theme, often in terms of a dialectic between opposites (“we / them”, “here / elsewhere”, “identity / culture”), in a polyphonic relationship (Canevacci 1993, Wilson 2017). Those films are often a resistant strategy to the discourses developed by the mainstream media, where this dialectic tends to fail. The abuse of the emergency frame tends to reiterate the figures of the Other as an invader, of diversity as a threat (Binotto Bruno and Lai 2016, Musarò and Parmiggiani 2014), and of the city as an invisible danger (Binotto and Bruno 2018).

In contemporary cinema, the exploration of certain themes has almost given birth to an autonomous genre (Alovisio 2013), both in Italy and in Europe (Bayraktar 2016, Berghahn and Sternberg 2010, Loshitzky 2010, Rings 2016). The proliferation of ‘migrant’ works may lead us to rethink the location of cinema in the contemporary media ecosystem: the almost irrelevance of the medium on the public opinion seems to be coun-

terbalanced by a high degree of experimentation in the development of alternative narratives. Confronting with similar themes has also involved the development of new analytical frameworks, aimed at emphasizing the dynamics of asymmetry or subordination (Colombo 2018, De Franceschi 2018, Ponzanesi 2014, O’Healy 2019), and to conceive the static and moving images as a negotiation of meaning.

The very concept of migration seems to be transposable from the level of contents to that of production and distribution and, in parallel, to the critical-theoretical one. As O’Healy notes, the emergence of a transnational approach in film studies “highlights the acceptance of a broader critical question on the relevance of national frames in the globalisation landscape” (2017: I, my translation), as “cinematic narratives can reproduce without filters hegemonic assumptions on social hierarchies, on race and gender, which are familiar and, therefore, harmless to most observers” (2017: III, my translation). Part of the contemporary film production, in Italy and worldwide, has attempted to deconstruct such narratives, revealing the social constructions that underlie them.

The question becomes more complex if we consider not only the representations of the Other, but also the self-representations of the Other, which often conflict, or at least diverge, with the formers. The migrant’s gaze, indeed, is always, to some extent, twofold: never completely assimilable, never exclusively classifiable as ‘other’. This is the starting point of Said’s thought, which in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) carries out a critique of the concept of alterity advocated by European colonial ideology. The author opposes the musical metaphor of counterpoint, intended both as a look at the world and as a look at the texts that narrate this world. The perception of the exile, says Said, is always plural and able not only to grasp, but also to promote the different dimensions of culture: an event, a landscape, a human activity that unfolds before his eyes will always recall the memory of a different environment, far in time. The migratory cultures, Said observes, can be understood only in their relationship with the different reference cultures that are always present and absent at the same time. The products of these cultures are to be interpreted, in this sense, not through a unequivocal reading, of imperialist style, but, as the author suggests, contrapuntally, that is “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and those of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (1993: 51).

The counterpoint, in Said, is therefore configured as a point of view, or a “point of hearing” (Cavarero 2003: 134, my translation). In all the work of the Palestinian author there is a direct criticism of the Eurocentric perspective, innervated both in the academic culture and, more broadly, in the whole Western one. And yet, in the very formulation of this criticism, Said, himself, turns out to be openly Eurocentric, not so much for referring to a Western musical tradition, but for the apparent contradiction inherent in his own metaphor, which, emphasizing the need for a “harmonic” construction of the two gazes, presupposes, in fact, their separation.

Among the scholars who have taken up and deepened this concept, in particular, Trinh underlined the importance, in classical music, of silence, or interval, as a space which, separating the two melodies, establishes a harmonic relationship between them. The intervals, writes the scholar, constitute “interruptions and irruptions in a uniform series of surface; they designate a temporal hiatus, an intermission, a distance, a pause, a lapse, or gap between different states; and they are what comes up at the threshold of representation and communication” (Trinh 1999: XIII). Bhabha defines it as a ‘Third Space’, intended as a place that cannot be represented, yet essential in constituting “the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew” (1994: 37). As Chambers glosses, attention to silence rather than sound reminds us of how “subordination is constituted within discourse, and is created by the hegemonic discourse that, through it, is constituted as such: at the same time, however, as music cannot exist without silence, hegemonic discourse cannot exist without subordination” (2008: 92, my translation). The notion of counterpoint, in this sense, would presuppose the existence of a hegemonic speech, in the more Gramscian sense of the term (Cospito 2016), and of a subaltern or resistant speech, where the two concepts are, by definition, interdependent. Chambers, remaining within the musical metaphor, also notes how “accepting the existence of a relatively distinct entity called ‘Western classical music’ does not preclude, and indeed requires, the exposition of its underlying inconsistency, inscribed in a symphonic structure in continuous counterpoint with musical styles that Said himself fails to define if not ‘in negative’: ‘non-classical’, ‘non-Western’ music” (2008: 93, my translation).

Said's thought, beyond the contributions just mentioned, has been variously interpreted and updated, especially in the areas of cultural, subaltern and postcolonial studies (Ansell-Pearson Parry and Squires 1997, Bove 2000, Kennedy 2000, Sprinker 1992); less in the fields of media and film studies, where even the theme of visual perception as a cultural phenomenon seems, as mentioned in the introductory paragraph, to be extremely topical, as well as having tangible social repercussions. For instance, in the discourses on migrants in contemporary media, as mentioned, often the counterpoint feature is lost, especially in Italy, where the dramatic emergency narrative of the landings (Maneri 2009) tends to reiterate the images of the Other as an invader, and of diversity as a threat, in the more or less conscious attempt to provide an answer to the inequality and disorientation of the post-industrial world (Touraine 1997). Gallotti and Maneri (1998) speak, in this regard, of a process of "stratification of stereotypes": the image of cities, and suburbs in particular, as places of danger, is superimposed on a conception of migration flows articulated around the concept of 'deviance' of the Other (Binotto Bruno and Lai, 2016). If the "contrapuntal" quality of the migrant gaze, in the mainstream media, is therefore lost, it can nevertheless re-emerge in alternative cinematographic practices, as well as its paradox; that is, to configure the Other as subaltern, in the very act of denouncing its subalternity.

The aforementioned dialectic can therefore be conceived not only in a relational sense, as a meeting of individuals with distinct agencies and policies, but also as a counterpoint internal harmony to any 'migrant' gaze, which by definition reveals its otherness. This theme fits into a dense tradition of studies on the relationship between perception and media representation of the urban landscape (Georgiou 2013, Krajina 2014, Guida, 2011), which is a salient feature of many films of this 'genre'.

Said himself posed the problem to dissolve the reified and monolithic concepts of the various 'othernesses' – 'Islam', 'East', 'Africa', etc. – which have ensured a broad consensus on the civilizing mission of the white, bourgeois and European man. "I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either. As both geographical and cultural entities (...) 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made" (1978: 5-6). The author then draws a parallel between lexical alteration and geographical alteration, understood as the management of political and economic power: "just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (1993: 7).

However, continuing my criticism of the concept of 'migrant cinema', the risk of rehabilitating the same dualism and the same practices of exclusion and marginalisation of colonial power is inevitably implicit in the critique of geographical subjugation. It is therefore perhaps necessary, on a pragmatic plan, to try to break down barriers, rather than to offer an alternative spatial representation to the dominant, or 'imperial', one, to which Said refers. This breaking down of barriers can occur through a shift in meaning, a hybridisation of identities: a reaction, albeit fragmentary, to the hegemonic discourse. "What do they have left to imagine?" says Chatterjee, among the founders, in the years immediately following the publication of *Orientalism*, of the *subaltern studies* collective: "Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations remain forever colonised" (1993: 3). Analysing contemporary migrant cinema, according to this reading, means exploring these relations of difference, the cultural reasons that determine them, and the ways in which they are transformed, or can be transformed, into representation.

Needless to say, to trace a relation of difference is, in turn, a deeply Eurocentric purpose, as well. In the next two chapters, then, this essay will try to accept and integrate this contradiction, developing it in a hermeneutical sense. To this extent, I will provide some examples that might help to understand the reflections developed, through a short analysis of some significative migrant films. These examples, as we will see, are, in turn, chosen on qualitative (and perhaps dichotomic) basis, through a criterion that inevitably reveals and declares a form of exhibited Eurocentrism: my own one.

2 The postcolonial perspective and the implicit Eurocentrism

Afrique-sur-Seine (l.t.: *Africa-on-the-Seine*, 1955), by sub-Saharan directors Paulin Soumanou Vieyra and Mamadou Sarr, was perhaps the first short film shot by African people; that is, the first time that, within a European

production, two African filmmakers literally took in their hand the tools of their representation (Fig. 1). This film is considered a milestone of migrant cinema, and it is particularly fitting to the criticism proposed in this paper, because we see, in it, a non-European gaze ‘Other’ that tells French people (in French) how good is it to live in France; moreover, this praise is phrased in European terms, which underlines the Parisian *grandeur*, openness, culture and pacifism. This film is at the basis, I may say, not only to the migrant cinema as a ‘genre’, but also to the contradictions that this expression implies, and that today are more manifest than ever. Also, it is the precursor of a series of migrant films made with European funds, i.e. within European cultural industry. Today, we may see some European examples in the German *World Cinema Fund* (WCF Europe),¹ open to all the companies from European countries participating to the MEDIA sub-programme, or *French Aides aux cinémas du monde*, co-managed by the French Institute and the CNC.² Those programs ensure migrant artists to be funded (or trained, in the media education programs) ‘at home’, but inevitably need them to produce films that can be distributed (and understood, both in linguistic and cultural terms) to European audiences. This reflection implies two consequences: on the one hand, the formation and production of so-called migrant cinema is always, to some extent, Eurocentric; on the other hand, this Eurocentrism is not a disgrace that weighs on our being ‘first world’, but an inevitable prospect.



This is the starting point, and the greatest intuition, of Shohat and Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. As the authors point out, if it is true that Eurocentrism has an essential perspective function – “like Renaissance perspectives in painting, it envisions the world from a single privileged point” (1994: 2) – it is also true that any antagonistic (or ‘multicultural’, as they define it) point of view cannot completely renounce, for the simple need of orienting oneself within a space, to the proportions perceived through the initial perspective. Thus, as the two authors self-reflexively note, the same anti-Eurocentric ambition to cover a global arc by erasing, or redefining, national borders is, in itself, an intimately colonial ambition; then, in turn, Eurocentric (Shohat and Stam 1994: 6). Migrant cinema, to this extent, intertwine or overlap many points of view in a sort of semantic conflict, in the dual sense, as Shohat and Stam define it, of ‘compensatory representation’ and of ‘symbolic multicultural transformation’.

We may perhaps talk about migrant cinema, then, not so much as a genre of its own, but as a kind of critical gaze, almost a sort of reverse – and conflictual – counterpoint: this is where postcolonial and film studies converge. As Ponzanesi and Waller argues, both fields “are deeply involved with the issues of representation

1. https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/world/_cinema/_fund/wcf/_profil/index.html

2. <https://www.lescinemasdumonde.com/fr/les-programmes/aides-cinemas-du-monde%5D%7B.underline>

3. <http://www.psv-films.fr/les-photos>

and have much to offer one other with regard to the forms and legacies of epistemological violence and the role of aesthetics in reshaping the human senses" (2012: 2). Mezzadra uses the expression 'post-colonial time', that is the moment in which "at the same time, the colonial experience appears to have been handed over to the past and, precisely because of the ways in which its 'overcoming' has been realised, it is installed at the centre of contemporary social experience" (2008: 25, my translation). Similar is the notion, coined by Mulvey, of 'imperialism's blind spot', understood as the residues of a reality "unseen (or overlooked) by its perpetrators" (2011: 254).

In a broad sense, both the postcolonial approach and the migrant cinema tend to deconstruct these legacies, identifying the residues of a colonialist vision of the Other. This vision, in migrant cinema, is often refuted through an alternative, if not antithetic, representation of otherness, presented in order to criticise, overturn or exacerbate the same dialectic "we / them" that it attempts to unravel.

Postcolonial studies, applied to the Italian context, imply above all, though not exclusively, some relation to Fascist colonial cinema. If, quoting McClure's reflections, "empire provided romance with its raw materials, while romance provided empire with its aura of nobility and its agents" (1994: 10), there is no doubt that an expressive form like cinema, strongly derived from fictional narratives, is part of this phenomenon.

Although Italy has had a relatively modest colonial past, a specificity of fascist colonial cinema seems to exist: that is, its immediate removal in the years following the Second World War. Micciché (1979), provocatively, defines that period as the 'corpse in the wardrobe' of the Italian film industry. De Gaetano even recognises in this sudden change the specificity of Italian cinema in its entirety. If, according to the author, cinema already has a transnational vocation in itself, as "a-social, in-institutional and a-national (...) with a planetary and naturally cosmopolitan dimension, therefore linked to the economy", this it is even more true for Italians, capable "of starting from their position in the world, destitute of sociality, institutionality, redeeming it, or returning it in an 'impure' form in the embrace between opposing and interconnected feelings and visions" (2018: 2, my translation). One of the specificities of modern and contemporary Italian cinema, following this line of thought, would therefore reside in its contemporary international and post-colonial character: this is a contradiction within which any 'migrant' cinematographic representation is necessarily inscribed.

The Italian colonial cinema, as underlined by Ben-Ghiat – which prefers the expression "imperial cinema", indicating the films produced between 1936 and 1943 and treated by the coeval press as a distinct genre (2015: XV) – tends to consider the Africa as an "empty space' to be filled in the image of the coloniser's fantasy" (2015: XIII); namely, that of the Italian East African Empire, proclaimed in May 1936. This phase has suddenly been replaced by a radical deterritorialisation and redefinition of borders; therefore, conversely, of the figure of the migrant. As Parigi goes on to say, post-war Italian cinema speaks entirely of migration, understood "as a reconquest of the country and, at the same time, as a loss of roots, as an experience of disorientation, as the vertigo of a dispersed or exploded identity" (2012: 56, my translation). In its narrative of migrations, Italian cinema seems to have built, to use Coviello's words, a real cartography of the aesthetics of displacement, whose guidelines "describe the phases that mark the migration (the journey, the arrival, the project and the possibilities of integration, the return) through a passionate model (the drama of abandonment, hope and nostalgia, integration and disorientation)" (2014: 313, my translation).

The question is therefore broad and linked, as already mentioned, to the inevitably Eurocentric, albeit antagonistic, character of migrant cinema. This genre, in its own attempt to be 'transnational' (Radovic 2014), 'intercultural' (Heffelfinger, Wright 2011) or 'global' (Nagib 2011) – contrasting, then, the study of local cinematographies in terms of national identity (Celli 2011) – reveals a strong instance inevitably linked to the national context and to its past, colonial, ambition. This is a dualism that characterises both postcolonial studies and migrant cinema: if the merit of the concept of postcolonialism, as Marks points out, "is that it emphasises the history of power relations between the entities it designates", its main limitation lies in having become "a conceptually omnivorous term that swallows distinctions of nation, location, period, and agency" (1999: 8).

Unsurprisingly, some scholars prefer to define these cinematographic productions not on the basis of a true or presumed re-emergence of a colonial past, but on a linguistic criterion. The concept of 'polyglot cinema', for example, is often used to designate those works "marked by the naturalistic presence of two or more languages at the level of dialogue and narrative" (Dwyer 2005: 296); those films, that is, whose cornerstone is the

“representation of language diversity as its protagonists experience it” (Berger and Komori 2010: 9). Similar is the notion of ‘accented cinema’, which questions the concepts of belonging and identity through the mixture of languages or dialects, often in reaction to Western cultural colonisation. The objects of analysis of this perspective are, for example, the French *Beur* cinema (an accented expression, in itself), as well as the British-Asian, the Black-British, the African-Italian and the Turkish-German ones (Naficy 2001). In Italy, a kind of accented cinema deals with the theme of the difference between the North and South of the country, in the sense of both a national territorial strengthening (for example, by opposing Italian and Neapolitan language) and a transnational space (for example, equating the Neapolitan and Arab languages) (Gendrault 2010). Nevertheless, Naficy himself is unclear about the threshold of his concept – which is perhaps one of the reasons of its spread (Gustaf Andersson and Sundholm 2019) – including in it every “open-form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive and critically juxtaposed narrative structure” (2001: 4). Other interpretations of accented cinema are more focused on the “migrant” production, such as the Berghahn and Sternberg one (“an aesthetic response to the experience of displacement through exile”) (2010: 24), the Bayraktar one (films made “in western countries by exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial directors”) (2015: 24) or, finally, the Loshitsky one (“a style of cinema typical of diasporic filmmakers” who “have relocated to northern cosmopolitan centres where they exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and their current homes”) (2010: 174). And yet, here too, the ‘polyglot’ and ‘accented’ approaches necessarily consider the ‘other’ language as something ‘other than us’, not expunging from the discourse a Eurocentric background. In the case of the polyglot cinema, for example, Martínez-Sierra, Martí-Ferriol et al. propose to place these products along an axis that goes from the principle of domestication to the diametrically opposite one of foreignisation (2010: 21); thus implying, albeit critically, a Eurocentric concept of *domus*. Likewise, in the case of accented cinema, the aforementioned dyads (or counterpoints) do nothing but distinguish, albeit to bring them together, between a ‘we’ and a ‘them’ (Black-British, African-Italian, etc.).

The challenge, therefore, is to orient ourselves within this paradox, that is implicit in the very concept of migrant cinema. To put it in the words of Asad, we must ask ourselves not “not how far Europeans have been guilty and Third World inhabitants innocent but, rather, how far the criteria by which guilt and innocence are determined have been historically constituted” (1993: 38). It is necessary to summarise and articulate a resistant discourse, in opposition to the hegemonic one, but in the awareness of the intimate interdependence of the two concepts. All that is hegemonic, to paraphrase Said, is always, essentially, hegemonic in relation to something else. For example, European sovereign thought is hegemonic in the eyes of a European anti-sovereign, but both may appear hegemonic in the eyes of a migrant subject. The gaze of the migrant cinema, as well, may not correspond to the gaze of the migrant subject, and should be threatened as a Eurocentric concept. In the following lines I will deepen this affirmation.

3 Against the migrant cinema: a method proposal

“I don’t know what migrant cinema is about. There is no such thing as migrant cinema”: this is the answer of the German (of African origin) director Loraine Blumenthal, presenting her documentary *The Mayor’s Race* (2018) at the 2019 African Diaspora Cinema Festival, to a question regarding the state of the art of migrant cinema. Blumenthal explained her discomfort face to that taxonomy, but also to a term like Diaspora itself, which “do not reach what should be our target: black people, of first or second generation, who after a day of work want to sit on the couch and watch a good movie. They do not want you to talk about the condition of migrants, but about persons, just like them, who do things that are not ordinary.”⁴ If such a target is difficult to reach (the first thought, in this sense, goes to American blaxploitation, a genre that is, since its name, quite problematic), migrant cinema surely does not seem to achieve this goal. To this extent, the very notion of migrant cinema, which in Italy commonly indicates a category of migratory-themed productions (see events like Migrant Film Festival, Premio Mutti – Archivio delle Memorie Migranti, KarawanFest – Il sorriso del Cinema Migrante, Festival KA - Nuovo Immaginario Migrante, Walyaan – Cinema Migrante, etc.) turns out to be doubly Eurocentric. Indeed, that concept presupposes the existence of a migrant ‘other’ opposed to a sedentary ‘we’, whilst the data, at least in Italy, clearly shows how Italian e-migration flows are larger than the

4. <http://africandiasporacinemafestival.com>

im-migration ones. Provocatively, we may say that *we* are the migrants. On the other hand, the term ‘migrant’ has become, in Italy, a politically correct way to indicate the condition of the foreigner: if it is true that those arriving in Italy, especially by boat, often do not intend to remain here – although the Dublin Regulation, never really challenged by the most xenophobic Italian parties and movements, compels them to do so – it is also true that, compared to the term ‘immigrant’, it indicates more an existential condition, whereas ‘immigrant’ recall by analogy the notion of ‘host’ or ‘foreign body’. In any case, ‘migrant’ is an Italian term not only linguistically, but first and foremost culturally.

In the light of these considerations, we might support the thesis, as I am doing, that the expression migrant cinema indicates a thematic horizon to which any individual of non-European origin should, to some extent, adhere to. The migrant director, therefore, must talk about his culture, the journey he made to reach us, his homeland, his condition of migrant, his linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. This approach seriously risks to flatten the subjectivity of the migrant filmmaker, which agency may and should not entirely correspond to the description of its social or contrapuntal condition.

This is why, recalling the first lines of this essay through a necessary subjective and qualitative approach (as I have explained above), *Tahrir Liberation Square* documents Egyptian revolution better than *The Virgin, the Copts and Me*; this is why Mauro Bucci’s *Hotel Splendid* (2016) or Abel Ferrara’s *Piazza Vittorio* (2017) narrate Italian multiculturalism better than the insider gaze of Bello FiGo’s music videos *Non Pago Affitto* (l.t. *I Do Not Pay Rent*, 2016) or *Referendum Costituzionale* (*Constitutional Referendum*, 2016). This is why the problematic condition of the second generations in Italy is narrated by Claudio Giovannesi’s *Ali Has Blue Eyes* (*Ali ha gli occhi azzurri*, 2012) more efficiently than in the autobiographical Phaim Bhuiyan’s *Bangla* (2019).

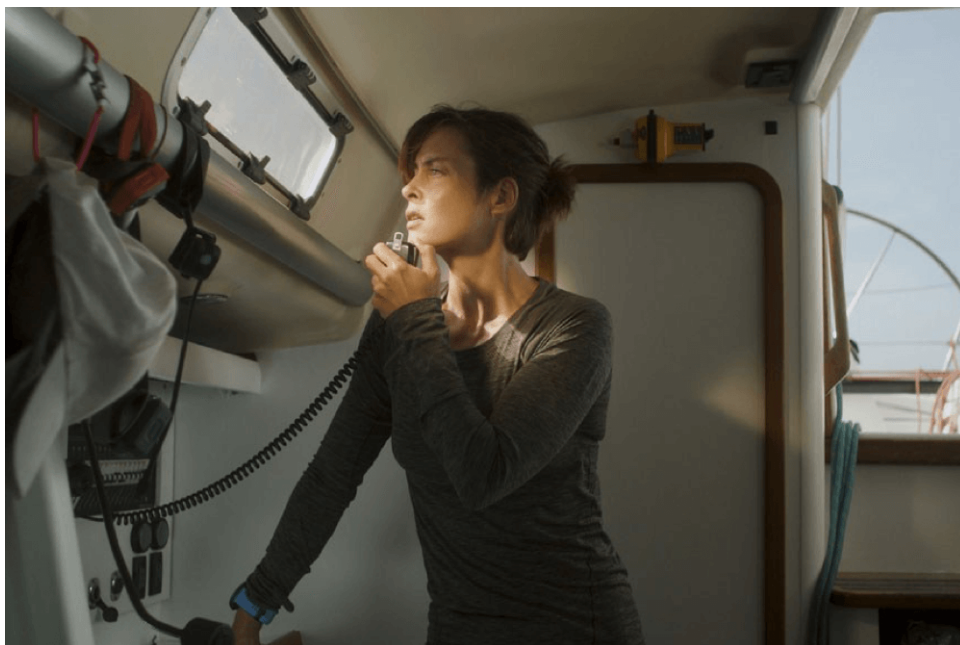


Figure. 2. *Styx* (Wolfgang Fischer, 2018)

In this sense, migrant cinema is paradoxically a fully Eurocentric cinema, but this assumption does not necessarily imply that those counter-narrations may not have an impact in describing and dramatising the condition of migrants, sometimes more efficiently than the migrants’ own storytelling, or at least differently. Nevertheless, the Eurocentric feature must not be intended as an insult for these kind of productions, but as a perspective, that could be better theorised – heuristically – and thematised by migrant cinema itself. A good – and somehow extreme – example is Wolfgang Fischer’s *Styx* (2018), the story of a German woman passionate about navigation, who encounters a migrant boat, and interrogates herself on what to do. The gaze, here, is literally outdistanced, as almost the whole narrative takes place on the lady’s boat (Fig. 2): the migrants, albeit thematised, are constantly off-screen.

The question about the migrant cinema, therefore, is strongly ambiguous, and on this ambiguity we may build both a model of analysis and an alternative storytelling. On the one hand, migrant cinema conceives the film as a space, albeit marginal, in which it is possible to exercise the deconstruction of the dominant language; in which to re-establish, to use Saidian lexicon, a 'contrapuntal' view of the reality. On the other hand, this view always hides, by its nature, a Eurocentric perspective, since any resistance perspective is intimately complementary to the hegemonic one. And yet, the solution to this impasse cannot simply reside in a 'fundamentalist' policy of self-representation, in the name of a pure 'ethnic insiderism' whereby only the individuals who belong to a certain culture are legitimated to describe that culture (Sollors 1986). On the contrary, it is precisely within the field of forces exposed, dynamic and irreducible to each of the single poles, that we may rethink the very notion of migrant cinema, in order to develop on the one hand new strategies of subjectivation of the migrant; on the other hand, a European cinema that addresses the issues of migration without hiding the Eurocentric nature of its gaze; but, on the contrary, accepting it and turning it into new aesthetics.

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