Europe in motion: migrant cinema and the politics of encounter

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The article focuses on the contested notion of the (new) Europe from the vantage point of migrant cinema. The aim is to explore how cinematic language offers alternative modalities of representation and subjectification in relation to migration, gender and identity. The emphasis of this analysis is on the politics of encounter: how the presumed strangers to Europe are figurations of Europe's othered self while also embodying the material practices of exclusion. The politics of encounter is explored in three films made by European filmmakers in which the main female character struggles to negotiate her identity in between colonial legacies and global terror, as in the British-Pakistani *Yasmin* (Kenneth Glenaan, UK, 2004), between transsexual and transnational politics, as in the case of the Iranian refugee in *Unveiled* (Angela Maccarone, Germany, 2005), or in between trafficked bodies and renewed citizenship as in the case of the Eastern European immigrant prostitute in *The unknown woman* (Giuseppe Tornatore, Italy, 2006). These visual and ideological commentaries participate in the redefinition or abolition of the notion of Europe by proposing the representations of the strangers within not from original and unexpected positions but by highlighting the transformation of the 'European subject' through the politics of encounter. The article furthermore raises questions about the agency of Muslim women who opt for religion in the midst of the self-professed secular Europe, explores debates on homophobia and the refugee's state of exceptionalism and offers a feminist reading of the phenomena of trafficking of women.

Keywords: Europe; migrant cinema; postcolonialism; politics of encounter; migration; refugee; 9/11; fundamentalism; secularism; homosexuality; trafficking of women

We have been trying to theorize identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as the second-order mirror held out to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us a new kind of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak. (Stuart Hall, 1993, p. 402)

Migrant cinema in Europe

This paper focuses on the contested notion of the (new) Europe from the vantage point of migrant cinema. It intends to explore how cinematic language offers alternative modalities of representation and subjectification in relation to post-colonial migrants, political refugees and 'trafficked' women. The emphasis is on the politics of encounter; on how the presumed strangers to Europe are figurations of

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Europe's othered self but also embody material practices of exclusion. As Sara Ahmed (2000) poignantly writes:

> Through strange encounters, the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger'. In the gesture of recognising the one that we do not know, the one that is different from 'us', we flesh out the beyond, and give it a face and form. (p. 3)

The politics of encounter highlights how strangers were never outsiders but a constitutive part of Europe's project of modernity and of its contemporary global dynamics. This article explores these dynamics in three films made by European filmmakers. Different forms of encounter are staged in the films by proposing alternative models of belonging, identification and affectivity. The main characters in all three films are females struggling to negotiate their identity in between colonial legacies and global terror (as in the case of British-Pakistani *Yasmin*), between transsexual and transnational politics (as in the case of the Iranian refugee in *Unveiled*), and in between trafficked bodies and renewed citizenship (as in the case of the Eastern European immigrant prostitute in *The unknown woman*).

These films are part of a new emerging strand of films generically referred to as migrant cinema. Migrant cinema in Europe is characterized by its primary focus, but not exclusively, on wider socio-political processes that address concepts of European identity and national belonging as a state of being that is contested and fluid. Migrant cinema looks at how colonial legacies and new forms of colonialism, some of which operate under the aegis of globalization, powerfully affect both individual nations and Europe as a whole, and are responsible for new forms of racism, violence and exclusionary practices. Migrant cinema attempts to locate and voice how those who have been kept invisible have become centre-stage multi-cultural and multi-ethnic presences which have revitalized contemporary Europe. This transition is reflected in a growing number of films made by migrant or European filmmakers who challenge traditional concepts of national identity and of 'Europeanness' by revisiting the notions of borders, language and identity from new vantage points. They proffer perspectives that were previously considered marginal and 'external' to the core of Europe. From an aesthetic point of view, migrant cinema introduces a complex and eclectic mix of styles, genres and forms often emanating from non-Western traditions (Naficy, 2001).

Despite agreement on these key elements, migrant cinema remains a rather controversial notion since cinema depends on an extensive collective effort, more so than other creative forms (i.e. literature, art, photography) and therefore complicates the limitations of the label of 'migrant' via a correlation to the director. 'Migrant cinema' stretches along more complex lines of modes of production, distribution channels and targeted audiences. The genesis of film making is therefore less clear when it comes to the question of origin and attribution. To simplify this, we can say that migrant cinema in Europe still hinges on two major definitions: (1) films made by non-European filmmakers; and (2) European films dealing with migrant themes, characters and issues. In this paper I focus on the second definition in order to analyze how European cinema sees itself through the encounter with the other.

The first movie, *Yasmin* (2004), directed by the British Kenneth Glenaan, deals with rising Islamophobia in a town in the north of England following the 9/11

attacks. The film is centered on the figure of Yasmin, a modernized Muslim woman who easily straddles cultural divides. *Yasmin* dramatizes the increasing polarization between the British and Asian immigrant communities, which will eventually lead to Yasmin's retreat into Muslim identity. This article raises questions about the agency of Muslim women who opt for religion amidst an increasingly globalized and homogenized vision of Muslim otherness.

The second film, *Fremde Haut* (*Unveiled*, 2005), directed by the German Angelina Maccarone, deals with the question of political refugees in contemporary Germany by comparing an urbane world (the cosmopolitan Teheran of the sophisticated Fariba and the transgression of sexual boundaries) with an obtuse rural Germany that is prey to bureaucratic totalitarianism, police repression and alienating refugee centers. In this film, unveiling becomes a metaphor for the disguise of identity, both sexual and political. The film can be read against the wider debates on refugee's exceptionalism and homophobia.

The third film, *La sconosciuta* (*The unknown woman*, 2006) was made by the Oscar-winning Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore and deals with the question of migration and the trafficking of women from Eastern Europe to Italy. Migrant women from Eastern Europe who almost 'pass as white', are often forced to deal with the stigma of prostitution before entering the 'legal' circuit of acceptance and social integration. *La sconosciuta* is read against wider debates on trafficking of women and the feminist reading of the phenomenon.

These 'European' filmmakers tackle the social and representational 'emergencies' around old and new flows of migration in their respective countries; and it is interesting to analyze how they give a visual and an aural rendition of the 'other' in European cinema. The other in these films is staged as the main character – the locus from which the echoes of many other possible stories of immigration are refracted. Through the kaleidoscope of personal narratives, the three films attempt to flesh out larger dynamics that are at stake in multicultural Europe by reproducing and contesting many of the stereotypes that the 'female' strangers occupy.

The choice of a female protagonist for these dramas is an interesting one, the more so because it highlights some of the prejudices and stereotypes, though benevolent and paternalistic, on immigrant women who are rebelling against tradition in an era of globalization. Religious fundamentalism, immigration laws and the trafficking of women are some of the recent emergencies created by the speed of globalization that increases the mobility of people, goods and knowledge. These socio-political currents affect the north and the south of the world in unequal ways and resurrect the problems of colonialism, gender discrimination and xenophobia in new and unprecedented ways. Questions of nationality, borders and identity become more intertwined with the market economy, redefining the patterns of global consumption on the material bodies of the newly demarcated outcasts (once the black colonized, and the now Muslim, refugee and trafficked other), the new guests awaiting Western citizenship and welfare.

Strangers in paradise: postcolonial encounters and global terror

Yasmin is a film about a British-Asian woman who easily alternates between her traditional Muslim background and modern Britishness. The film's subtitle is also fitting: 'one woman, two lives'. The film is set in Keighley, one of West Yorkshire's

Figure 1.   Archie Punjabi as *Yasmin*, directed by Gleenan (UK, 2004). Courtesy of Film4 Library.

most racially sensitive towns and follows the gritty style of socially engaged British directors such as Ken Loach and is reminiscent of films such as Hanif Kureishi's *My son the fanatic*.[1] The role of Yasmin is played by the well-known British-Asian actress Archie Panjabi (see Figure 1) acclaimed for her successful roles in *East is East* and *Bend it like Beckham*, popular films dealing with Asian families leading conflicted lives in modern Britain.

In the film's opening scene we see Yasmin driving a red Golf convertible along an empty, desolate Northern landscape. As we see in Figure 2 she pulls over, removes her hijab and wriggles into a pair of jeans, before heading off to work in the city centre. Yasmin reverses the operation on her return home and changes from modern

Figure 2.   Yasmin changed into western dress. Courtesy of Film4 Library.

clothes into traditional ones before heading for the suburbs, mostly populated by Asian immigrants, where she functions as a dutiful daughter, sister, and 'paper' wife. Her father has, in fact, forced her to marry her Pakistani cousin, a shepherd, so he will be eligible for a British passport. Despite this apparent submissiveness to the law of the father, Yasmin continually mocks her husband by aggressively calling him 'banana boat' and 'thick Paki'. She is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who rebukes not only her idiotic husband but also her brother who hangs around with his drug-dealing friends, sparing only her widowed father from her sharp tongue. Yasmin's father is portrayed as an old and wise religious man who tries to instill good moral values in his children amidst the chaos of a rapidly changing society. His dream is to save enough money to build himself a home in Pakistan where he wishes to spend his retirement.

The antagonism between Yasmin's traditional and western roles is rendered in a stark, graphic manner. Yet the film successfully manages to convey the complexities of living multiple identities in a globalized world. The adeptness with which Yasmin sheds her Muslim clothing suggests that she is able to maintain appearances for her community while asserting her emancipated self and successfully mingling with her white friends and colleagues in town as we see in Figure 3. However, things change drastically in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the film (released in 2004) sensitively dramatizes how the Muslim community deals with rising Islamophobia. In the film, Muslims are either pushed into the comforting world of traditional Islamic society or frightening fundamentalist terror.

Yasmin does not remain unscathed by the sudden accusation of alleged terrorism and the increased surveillance in her community. When the police raid the family home, subjecting the 'goaty' husband to violent arrest, and accusing him of being part of a terrorist network, Yasmin's young brother is soon radicalized and rejects Western values. Nassir's disorientation is transformed into religious fervor and he leaves the family home to fight in Afghanistan, where he is to be trained as a suicide bomber. Yasmin feels increasingly judged by the British community and comes to

Figure 3.   Yasmin in town. Courtesy of Film4 Library.

Figure 4. Yasmin under custody in Muslim clothing. Courtesy of Film4 Library.

stand in an indeterminate state between culture as we see from Figure 4, where she has opted to dress in Muslim clothes while detained in a British police station under the accusation of witholding information about her 'suspected terrorist' husband. She undergoes an identity crisis and begins to find new strength and meaning in her previously transgressed Muslim identity. The film closes with Yasmin veiled and clothed in traditional Muslim garments in the city centre.

Yasmin depicts a failed politics of encounter. The assimilated 'other', in this case Yasmin, metamorphoses from a successful immigrant to a feared stranger. The 'stranger danger' illustrated by Sara Ahmed works differently here since it does not operate as a projection of the Western fear into the 'other', but as a voluntary estrangement embraced by Yasmin to pronounce her difference, making herself into a figure of the unassimilable. By choosing to defend her identity politics, Yasmin becomes the 'figured' other, in which the 'modeled' otherness is borrowed from the West's representations of what makes the 'other' other. Yasmin enacts Spivak's dictum that the subaltern woman cannot speak as she is erased in the act of epistemic violence. Confined between embracing a normative Western identity and a 're-fashioned' Muslim one, Yasmin is silenced in the clash of civilization. Though the film shows her embracing religion as an act of conscious, reasoned free choice, the question remains as to whether she would have turned to Islam had the Western community maintained its multicultural credo.

While men are seen as 'radicalizing' when they turn to Islam, and therefore entering the path of fundamentalism out of choice and free will, women tend to be seen as victims of a patriarchal society that manipulates their religious devotion for political goals. The age-old paradigm of women materializing as the site of conflict between tradition and modernization is re-enacted, replicating colonial times when Western rulers proposed to 'unveil' the Oriental woman in order to lead the backward colonies into modernity (Fanon, 1965; Lewis, 1996; Woodhull, 2003).

In feminist scholarship, the issue of women in fundamentalist movements is highly contentious because there is a tendency to equate religion, in the wider sense

but Islam in particular, with women's oppression. A vast scholarship has addressed the issues of how to detect the agency of female converters and whether this would be a case of false consciousness (Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Bracke, 2004; Mahmood, 2005; Braidotti, 2008). False consciousness in the case of women and fundamentalism is often seen as the manipulation of female agency by religious orthodoxy, which creates the false assumption that women act and operate of their own free will (by choosing to be religious and by being active within society) without realizing that they are part of a larger ideological system that actually oppressed them and steers their choices as independent and autonomous.

This has been contested by several scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2005) who, in her influential work *The politics of piety*, investigates how the adherence of women to the patriarchal norms at the core of Islamic religious movements in Cairo parochialize key assumptions within feminist theory about freedom, agency, authority, and the human subject. Similarly, in her work on women in fundamentalist movements, Sarah Bracke (2008) attempts to unearth the paradox of women who embrace religious fundamentalism, and must therefore conform to strict codes of conduct and clearly defined gender roles, while simultaneously gaining a sense of empowerment within the spaces allocated by the fundamentalist movements. The paradox lies in the contrast between the submission to gender restrictions while at the same time gaining agency through the activism implied in the assertion of the act of devotion. The debate has been previously illustrated by Spivak in her groundbreaking analysis of the rite of sati in colonial India and whether women could be seen as agents in their religious choice of immolation and sacrifice or whether they are the victims of ancient patriarchal oppression that praises their self-annihilation under the banner of devotion (Spivak, 1988).

Though the film does not address the conversion of Yasmin as a path to fundamentalism *per se*, it does show how the foreclosure of a community by xenophobia can lead to 'choices' that can be seen as paradoxical from a feminist perspective. Yasmin's choice is portrayed as a 'cultural need' to find support and offer support to an endangered community. At the end of the film Yasmin embraces her frail and ageing father, who is shaken by the events and the disappearance of his beloved son: this simple and emotional scene shows that in a time of war, family ties and communal cohesion are more important than the independent gains of individual emancipation. Again, the message is complex because it both affirms and problematizes many of the discussions on the incompatibility of feminist agency with group rights.[2]

Yasmin resonates with the wider debates in contemporary Europe about whether or not immigrant women should practice their religion in the private sphere and submit to the enforced model of European secularization, however ambivalent that might be in the public one. The issue of the veil is paradigmatic of the uneasiness with which Europe deals with its internal multiplicity, which makes women, once more, the symbol of conflicting loyalties. This is well addressed by Joan Scott's (2007) book on the *Politics of the veil* which explores the hysteria around the foulard debate in France but whose analysis could also be extended to other European countries where the headscarf is seen as a symbol of Islam's resistance to modernity and as a challenge to values of secular liberalism.[3] The issue of the modern and the secular is more fully explored by Talal Asad (2003) in his *Formations of the secular* in which he argues that anthropologists have oriented themselves to the study of the 'strangeness

of the non-European world' and to what are seen as non-rational dimensions of social life (things like myth, taboo, and religion), without adequately studying concepts, practices and formations of the secular which cannot be viewed as a successor to religion, or be seen as on the side of the rational.

The film clearly resonates with all these issues and debates that stirred Europe after 9/11 without falling into didascalic or historically precise references. Yet, as mentioned, it manages to capture the increasing anxiety and tension among radicalising communities, with a clearly emphatic view on the paradoxical position of women as carriers of conflicting cultural values and messages.

In the skin of the other: refugees and sexual politics

Fremde Haut (*Unveiled*, 2005) is a German film directed by Angelina Maccarone that deals with the arbitrary violence of sexual persecution in Iran and of asylum policies in Europe. It is a political film but also a compelling story about the potentiality of migration and the power of love across nations, color and sex. Literally translated, the title of the film is 'stranger's skin', which implies the wearing of another person's identity, as the movie's poster (Figure 5) so effectively visualises. However, the official English version is entitled *Unveiled* and encompasses both the material and symbolic practices of othering. As the director commented in an interview 'Fariba does not have to wear the veil anymore when she arrives in Germany but she has to hide her
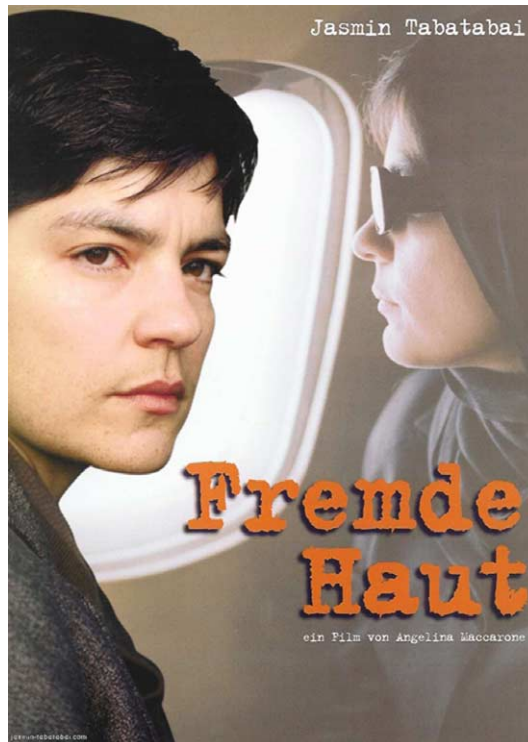

Figure 5.   Angelina Maccarone's Fremde Haut, *Unveiled*, (Germany, 2005) official German poster. Courtesy of Ventura Film.

true self behind a male disguise. She longs to get rid of this new veil and at the same time fears to be unveiled as a woman by others'.[4]

The film relates the story of the Iranian woman Fariba Tabrizi, played by Jasmin Tabatabai,[5] who flees to Germany to escape persecution for being a lesbian. In Iran homosexuality is a crime punishable by death under the country's theocratic Islamic government. In Europe, asylum is traditionally granted to political refugees who are viewed as victims of persecution by the state. Article 1, part 2, of the United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees stipulated in 1951, and amended by the 1967 Protocol, provides the definition of a refugee as:

> A person 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 or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[6]

The legislation is therefore unclear as to whether it supports other kinds of persecution. In the refugee detention centre at Frankfurt airport, Fariba does not dare to claim asylum because of sexual persecution, but she chooses to claim asylum for political reasons in order to comply with the most standardized procedure. Her application is rejected and in desperation she assumes the identity of a fellow asylum seeker from Iran who has committed suicide (Siamak Mustafai), and uses his temporary permit to remain in Germany by swapping her identity with that of a male refugee.

Fariba (on paper Siamak) is relocated in Sielmingen, a rural town near Stuttgard, as we can see from Figure 6, where she has to uphold her male disguise in cramped bedsits. She works illegally as a seasonal employee in a strenuous job at a sauerkraut factory in order to save money for newly forged documents. Fariba is educated, intellectual and well read. She worked in cosmopolitan Teheran as a professional

Figure 6.   Fariba as Siamak in front of a German bakery. Courtesy of Ventura Film.

translator and knows German culture and people only from literature. The contrast with the German community is starkly rendered in the scene where she helps her prison guard finish his crossword puzzle by suggesting he adds the word Novalis, which the prison guard is not capable of spelling so he asks her if it is spelled with V or W.

The police interrogation scenes are remarkable and portray the complexity of refugee negotiations. In these scenes, in which an Iranian translator mediates her answers (while she hesitates to communicate her real motives for escape), Fariba becomes frustrated by the style of the interrogation and by the approximations and linguistic errors of her translator. Speaking in perfect and fluent German, she blurts something out, leaving the immigration officer and the translator flabbergasted. By doing so she claims her authority and agency by speaking the language of the reluctant hosts, but at the same time she weakens her status as a victim.

Fariba undermines her claim to asylum because, as Mirian Ticktin (2005) writes, the refugee has to rely on the politics of exceptionalism. Refugees are already discursively positioned as victims in order for provisions to be legitimated. This means that narratives of exceptionalism need to be spun and told. Language and testimony become an essential part of the legal definition of victimhood. These ideas of exceptionalism work as the subtext to the right of protection. Those memories and autobiographical accounts force the refugee subject to create a depiction of self-representation that is left to the vagaries of interpretation and translation. In that sense, testimony, representation and translation are forms of the instrumentalisation of refugees. Fariba's ability to speak fluent German and to overrule her translator undermines her position of victimhood, and her assertiveness contrasts with the narrative of helplessness that she needs to reflect.

Media discourses play a crucial role in the construction of the identity of refugees because they tend to articulate the fears and anxieties of the dominant culture rather than describe the status of the refugees. It is a story about us and not them. Refugees as subjects and as objects: refugees as victims and as individual and collective (faceless and nameless). We see in Unveiled how the personal story of Fariba is magnified and depicts the voiceless, faceless and nameless refugees, who in the film only have background roles.

In this respect, Sandro Mezzadra (2001) attempts to expand the model of war to the study of violent processes of control and oppression that target 'illegal immigrants' and also affect asylum seekers and refugees, who are kept at the threshold of the Schengen space. He discusses how the rapidly expanding exploitation of the 'nomadic' labor force goes hand in hand with endemic forms of violence and even overt wars. Mezzadra's analysis of the 'border war' of Europe refers not only to the statistics of the permanent increase in the number of deaths in areas at the periphery of Europe which are officially recorded as casualties or tragic accidents, but it refers to the analysis of the contradictory effects of the violent security policies waged in the 'name of Europe' now aggravated by the conjunctures on the war on terror (as cited in Balibar, 2004, p. 15).

Dal Lago and Mezzadra have also widely explored how the tightening of immigration policies and the strengthening of border controls do not reduce the legal channels of immigration to Europe but have actually resulted in increased illegality as structural characteristics of migration flow (Dal Lago & Mezzadra, 2002). This is also demonstrated by Fariba's story, who enters the path of criminality when

Figure 7.   Anne and Fariba in love. Courtesy of Ventura Film.

Siamak's permit of sojourn runs out. To avoid deportation to Iran – where she will most likely be incarcerated and tortured and possibly raped by the prison guards – she resorts to the illegal circuit of passport forgers. In order to raise money to pay for the documents, she steals a car with the complicity of Anne, her German female co-worker. Fariba runs into trouble when she falls in love with Anne, as we can see from Figure 7, and comes dangerously close to unveiling her true identity. Soon after, Fariba reveals her disguise as a man to Ann, a police raid abruptly stalls Fariba's dream and she is deported back to Iran as a 'woman'.

The film builds to an unexpected climax and the final scene, which is the same as the opening one, shows Fariba traveling in a plane above Iranian soil. However, the two scenes differ dramatically: in the opening scene we see Fariba going to the toilet to remove her veil as the pilot announces that they have crossed the Iranian border. In the final scene, on the way back, she goes to the bathroom and we assume that she will re-veil herself and re-enter Iran as Fariba Tabrizi. But with an unexpected twist of the plot, she puts on the glasses and clothes belonging to Siamak and returns to Iran in a 'Fremde Haut', a stranger's skin – once more disguising her identity and gender.

Unveiled revolves around the unstable categories of identity which can be used as a skin to dress, shifting around notions of expectation, complacency and 'passing'. Fariba's attempt to pass as a man in Germany has completely different meanings and functions from those that are enacted when she disguises herself as a man in Iran. Her unveiling becomes a metaphor for the disguise of identity, both sexual and political. Fariba's sexual disguise effectively renders the ambivalence with which the European subject and the stranger encounter each other. Despite Anne's open attitude and interest in Fariba, she recoils when Fariba's true sexual identity is revealed, incapable of restoring the intimacy she has shared with him/her.

Strange bodies are precisely those bodies that are temporarily assimilated *as* the unassailable within the encounter: they function as the border that defines both the space into which the familiar body – the body which is unmarked by strangeness as its mark of privilege – cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself as (at) home. The strange body is constructed through a process of incorporation and expulsion – a movement between inside and outside, which renders that the stranger's

body has already touched the surface of the skin that appears to contain the body-at-home. (Ahmed, 2000, p. 54)

Unveiled offers a subtle view of the problems of identity and its intersection with race, sex and class, stretching the skin of Europe to encompass the infinite variations of othernesses that are already within. The film magnifies the theme of the immigrant having to penetrate Fortress Europe not only by crossing its borders but also by challenging its dominant discourses of heteronormativity. *Unveiled* contests the notion that homosexuality is a Western concept which stands for emancipation and liberation while attempting to reconcile the idea of immigrant, the stranger, with queerness. The model of Europeanness as accommodating sexual 'strangerness' is therefore deconstructed by placing heterosexism as one of Europe's dominant formations in relation to its racist ideology.

Disposable bodies: global mobility, labor and trafficking

La sconosciuta (*The unknown woman*, 2007), was made by the well-known Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore[7] and deals with urgent social issues such as migration, trafficking of women and forced adoption via an aesthetically sophisticated cinematic language. The film could easily be defined as a thriller with a migrant flavor and is in line with a series of Italian films that explore, in a fictionalized way, the encounter between Italian subjects, usually male, with Eastern European migrant women.[8]

Though the motivations behind the making of these films are honorable, as they deal with issues of illegal migration and violence against vulnerable women, the cinematic language used is somewhat ambivalent and often contradictory since the woman is subjected to the logic of the gaze and portrayed as young and naïve but also as a seductive erotic object. *La sconosciuta* is not different. It tells the story of Irina, (played by Xenia Rappaport) a young immigrant woman from Ukraine, who has arrived in Southern Italy through illegal networks. She finds herself entangled in prostitution, where she is exploited for orgies and other abuse by her pimp (played by the famous actor Michele Placido) who is sadistically obsessed with her. Irina eventually manages to escape to an opulent north Italian city (in reality Trieste), where the film is set.

Irina's past and her traumatic memories are conveyed through recurrent flashbacks, whose haunting character can be seen in Figure 8. In one of these scenes we see her being shown naked, in line with many other women, with her face covered by a mask. The location is an abandoned factory and the setting resembles a meat market. We see a pimp peeping through a hole in order to select the 'faceless' women for a prostitution circle. The mask stands for the sexualized representation of the female body, without a head and a name (they have to invent a new 'artistic' one), a body exposed for voyeuristic pleasure and sexual consumption. After her escape, Irina manages to find work as a cleaner in a luxurious apartment complex that is mostly inhabited by the jewellers who live in the northern city. After a while she manages to get herself a position as a nanny for the wealthy Adacher family. Step by step Irina succeeds in infiltrating the life of the Adachers and establishes a strong but increasingly morbid relationship with their daughter Tea, as Figure 9 suggests. Irina is portrayed as a silent and efficient worker but also as someone with a hidden

Figure 8.   Xenia Rappaport as Irina in Giuseppe Tornatore, *La sconosciuta* (Italy, 2006). Courtesy of Outsider Pictures.

agenda. Throughout the film Irina repeatedly searches the Adacher's safe in what, we assume, is an attempt to steal the family's valuables. However, at the end of the movie, when Irina is arrested, having been accused of having killed her employer, Tea's mother, we discover that she was searching for Tea's adoption papers, which could prove that Irina is Tea's biological mother.

Through her statement to the police, which is the only moment the spectator is allowed to hear the story of the immigrant woman from her own perspective, we learn that Irina has not only been exploited for prostitution but also for illegal adoption practices. The nine children born of her 'monitored' pregnancies were all sold by her exploiter for a significant sum of money to wealthy Italian families through illegal practices that were legitimized into 'legal ones', her financial return in these transactions being minimal. In her confession Irina explains why she was

Figure 9.   Tea carried by her mother after an attack. Courtesy of Outsider Pictures.

determined to claim Tea back, unlike her other progeny. Tea is her last born, and the only child born out of a love relationship with Gino, an Italian man. In the flashback we see Gino sharing with Irina the only happy moments she has had since her traumatic passage to Italy.

La sconosciuta's plot is complicated, full of ambiguities, suggestive metaphors (the dead plants on Irina's windowsill) and many unresolved crimes (Irina's lover, the Adacher's previous nanny, Tea's mother, Irina's pimp) some of which Irina is guilty of in the first degree. Irina will eventually be released from further charges, but is unable to claim her right to motherhood as the DNA test will show that Tea is not her biological daughter. The film leaves us with the idea of Irina as a woman who strikes back and avenges herself, but who remains somewhat empty handed since her future depends on the persuasiveness of her Italian lawyer to spin tales of victimhood in order to get her off the hook with the police. Irina is once again at the mercy of her Italian hosts, even though the terms of negotiation have changed from passive objectivity (the disposable body of the trafficked woman) to illicit subject (the Slavic immigrant as the criminal other).

La sconosciuta does not delve into the reasons behind the migration of many women such as Irina, instead it emphasizes the many forms of criminalization attached to it and the biased reception of Eastern European women in Italian society, stigmatized, despite their often high educational level, as 'oppressed' but also as 'dangerous'. Áine O'Healy comments that Italian films on female migration made in the 1990s offer representation strategies that serve both to eroticize and depict the abject suffering of the Eastern European female migrant. These strategies resonate with the inherent sadistic paradigm of Oedipal narratives as described by Teresa de Lauretis (1982) as these films:

> Offer striking images of injury and debasement enacted against the women immigrant, who is alternatively fetishized and positioned as an abject other by the signifying strategies of the filmic text. Yet, the violence perpetuated against her is carefully 'justified' by the patriarchal logic of narrative realism, ostensibly appealing to the spectator as compassionate witness to her abuse. (O'Healy, 2008, p. 41)

La sconosciuta proffers an example of the dominant representation and commentary (both stereotypical and otherwise) on issues of immigration and trafficking of women in Italy. Italy has an exceptional position on immigration as its colonial legacy was denied only until recently (Del Boca, 1976–1986; Labanca, 2007; Ponzanesi, 2004). Since the 1980s the rapidly escalating number of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees coming not only from the former Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia) but also from the Maghreb and other African countries, and from Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the war in Yugoslavia), has drastically changed the structure of Italian cities. This means that immigration to Italy has been received as something of a shock, framed as a national 'emergency' in alarming tones and concomitant incompetent juridical approaches.[9]

La sconosciuta does not directly touch upon the question legislations on immigration and how the tightening of borders and the reduction of legal channels of migration actually make migrant women more vulnerable to the effect of economic exploitation and social marginalization. This happens in particular when

third parties see the 'economic' value of organizing illegal immigration that target women as a principal 'object' of revenue. Feminist theories that attend to the importance of locating women in positions other than that of coercion or depictions of exploitative and slavery-like conditions, show how the trafficking of women does not need to focus on the 'gender' element of exploitation but on the 'economic' one, since women are valuable commodities, not because of their sexual difference but because of the 'function' they come to fulfill in the host society. Europe therefore, and its differentiated policies towards prostitution and immigration, is not only responsible for and complicit in the trafficking of women but also for the reduction of the female subject to a sexual object, and thereby resorting to victimizing images of female bodies in their attempt to rescue them.

In her work on trafficking in women, Andrijasevic makes a case for mapping the link between trafficking and the current redefinition of European spaces and people. Her crucial point is that 'the representation of trafficking along the criminal-victim nexus is implicated in sanctioning the membership in the European community and consequently in establishing the material and symbolic boundaries of the European citizenship in the making' (Andrijasevic, 2004, p. 11). Border and immigration regimes create the conditions for the existence of trafficking and exploitation of women's labour in prostitution. Andrijasevic argues that in order to detect female agency it is important to analyze how these women come into contact with the trafficking networks and to explore the possibility of negotiations and articulations that they have within and outside them. Entering trafficked networks is often informed by women's desire for mobility, namely by their migratory project (Andrijasevic, 2010).

What is interesting in the case of migration from Eastern Europe is the issue of racialization, namely by looking at the ways in which the 'whiteness' of Eastern European women is repeatedly emphasized. This construction positions Eastern European women as racially indistinguishable from 'European' women (and therefore passing as Western) while at the same time it differentiates them from their European counterparts by identifying trafficked women as victims of patriarchal social relations. Therefore, it is relevant to quote Paul Gilroy (2004) who in his *After empire* poignantly positions the displacement mechanism which takes place in the question of immigration and racial theories. The arrival of newcomers to Europe, from Eastern Europe for example, is played around the politics of passing, by choosing to magnify whiteness to downplay foreignness:

> They [immigrants] too will seek salvation by trying to embrace and inflate the ebbing privileges of whiteness. That racialised identification is presumably the best way to prove they are not really immigrants at all but somehow already belong to the home-space in ways that the black and brown people against whom they have to compete in the labour market will never be recognized as doing. (Gilroy, 2004, pp. 110–111)

La sconosciuta has an ambivalent role in representing the Eastern migrant woman and does not proffer a very sophisticated one if we consider the debates described. Yet, it manages to forcefully address an issue that would otherwise remain taboo or restricted to police proceedings. The film falls back on forms of voyeurism (especially the already mentioned opening scenes in which women are treated like slaves in a market) and indulges in several clichéd representations of trafficking that render

women's bodies as passive objects of male violence and gaze and replicates traditional stereotypes of Eastern European women's femininity. However, it also illustrates the politics of encounter between the Italians and the new immigrant, placing the position of the Eastern woman to a much more dangerous proximity than the above analyzed figures of the Muslim woman or the lesbian asylum seeker. Whiteness being one of those markers of apparent 'proximity' that makes the stranger other fatally close, and yet never fully assimilable because she is subjected to other markers of social exclusion (such as marginalized forms of work: domestic care, assistance to elderly people and prostitution).

Conclusions

The films analyzed in this article were made by fairly well established European filmmakers and do not necessarily depart from dominant cinema – they use mainstream techniques and genres to address the issue of migration, identity and gender in the different national constituencies (United Kingdom, Germany, Italy). *Yasmin*, *Fremde Haut* and *La sconosciuta* portray specific local realities that are determined by the globalization of labor forces, religious revival and the globalization of sex. The choice for European filmmakers was motivated by the desire to untangle the various representations of the 'other' circulating in the new Europe, a discourse that is obsessed with the figure of the 'Muslim', the refugee and the trafficked woman as the new marginal positions that have replaced the previous postcolonial subjects in the struggle to claim European citizenship and identity.

Migrant cinema literally gives a face and a form to those defined as strangers. The investment in the figure of the stranger involves making claims about the stranger's being. As Ahmed writes, the celebration of the stranger inevitably involves the problems of anthologizing the stranger, by giving the stranger the status as a figure that contains or has meaning. In theory we are all strangers as almost all people are displaced, become immigrants or because of globalization's increasing mobility. Ahmed cites Diken who proposes a kind of universalization of the strangers and states that 'with the strangers we find ourselves' (Diken, 1998, p. 124) proposing a journey towards the stranger that becomes a form of self-discovery. However, as Ahmed (2000, p. 6) further argues, rendering strangers internal rather than external to identity, which brings us to the conclusion that we are all strangers to ourselves as Kristeva proposes, implies avoiding the political processes which designate some others as being stranger than other others. Ahmed argues that we need to consider how the stranger is an effect of the processes of inclusion and exclusion that constitutes the boundaries of bodies and communities. She describes these processes in terms of encounters, suggesting a meeting that involves recognition but also conflict. As Ahmed further writes:

> These others cannot be simply relegated to the outside: given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others, then the subject's existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered. As such, the encounter itself is ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters). (Ahmed, 2000, p. 7)

Yasmin, *Fremde Haut* and *La sconosciuta* articulate the different positions that the stranger plays in the politics of encounter as illustrated by Sarah Ahmed, both in representational and material terms. Through the illustration of three characteristic films, this article has shown how the stranger remains inassimilable and unassailable both as figuration and as a subject. The films' visual and ideological commentaries participate in the redefinition or abolition of the notion of Europe which no longer functions as a self-contained entity but searches for alternative modalities (the famous borders within and without mentioned by Balibar [1998]) that are making Europe vacillate by proposing not only the representations of the strangers within from original and unexpected positions but also by highlighting the transformation of the 'European subject' through the politics of encounter. As Bo Stråth has said: 'We should recognize that Europe can also emerge as the other from within, that is, from within what others consider to be Europe, as a kind of self-imposed exclusion' (Stråth, 2000, p. 15).

Migrant cinema in Europe is a privileged point of departure from which to explore how the 'stranger' is aurally and visually rendered, in keeping with Ahmed's idea that the stranger is opposite to but also constitutive of Europe's othered self. *Yasmin*, *Fremde Haut* and *La sconosciuta* were not chosen because they are exemplary, or representative in essentialist ways, but because they illustrate the symptomatic, and therefore significant, processes of recognition and differentiation, of inclusion and exclusion, of ideological constitution and deconstruction in the new Europe from a gendered postcolonial perspective.

Notes

1. *My son the fanatic* was released in 1992, directed by Udyan Prasad and based on a script by Hanif Kureishi. The Pakistani driver Parvez, played by Om Puri, has a relationship with the young British prostitute Bettina. While his family crumbles, Parvez's son, Farid, gradually rejects Western institutions and values and turns to Islamic fundamentalism. Kureishi's screenplay effectively dramatises the rise of fundamentalism in a Northern England town (in the wake of the Rushdie affair, 1989) with the son becoming holier than the father in the family. In his novel the *Black Album* Kureishi also tackles the issue of a young Asian man, Sahid Hasan, growing up in Britain amidst the rising forces of Islamic fundamentalism. Set in 1989, in the year the *fatwah* was declared against Salman Rushdie, the novel is a convincing portrayal of the rootlessness probably felt by many British Asians growing up with conflicting loyalties towards Islam and Western liberal culture.
2. There is a vast debate on whether multiculturalism and feminism can be seen as compatible terms. The debate, stirred in the first instance by Okin's (1999) polemical text *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, departs from a vision of gender equality as clashing with the interest of minority cultures and individual rights. The fundamental position of 'Western' feminist movements (in its more essentialist approaches) states that gender equality cannot be sacrificed in the name of group rights, which often do reinforce existing hierarchies. However, as the many responses to Okin have demonstrated, the definition of minorities can be essentialistic and universalizing, and if there is a need to account for conflicts within and among minority groups (such as the implicit and reified gender inequalities) this need should be specified and addressed within the group itself and not in the name of 'women' in the general sense (Ponzanesi, 2007).
3. Joan Scott emphasizes the conflicting approaches to sexuality that underlie the headscarf debate. She claims that French supporters of the ban view sexual openness as the standard for normalcy, emancipation, and individuality, and therefore modernisation, whereas the sexual modesty implicit in the wearing of the headscarf is proof that Muslims can never become fully French.

4. The English title *Unveiled* was conceived by the US distributor of the film. See Swartz (2005).

5. Jasmin Tabatabai moved, aged 12, with her mother and siblings from Teheran to Germany. The performance of Jasmin Tabatabai has been much praised by critics and audiences alike. She convincingly plays a 30 year old woman who has to cope not only with the loss of her own identity and cultural background but also with the denial of her sexual desires and leanings out of concern for her own safety. The film makes a connection between the homophobic legislation in Iran as much as with repressive German normality (law and order). As the actress said, the 'trousers role' already existed in Shakespeare's time, as well as in *Yentl* or *Boys don't cry* but unveiled is more than a question of identity crisis, but of the risk in living in a foreign skin for survival with all the sexual and political connotations and consequences that that entails. See interview with Jasmin Tabatabai on the film *Unveiled* and Press Release (2005).

6. From www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf. See also http://www.unhcr.se/SE/Protect_refugees/pdf/magazine.pdf. Retrieved 10 September 2009.

7. The Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore achieved international acclaim and status with his film *Nuovo cinema paradiso* (Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, 1990). The film before *La sconosciuta*, *Malena* (2000), was badly received as a voyeuristic film which mainly focused on the sex appeal of the female actress, Monica Bellucci, and organized around the exoticising and glossy images of a touristy and picturesque Italy. *La sconosciuta* is Tornatore's comeback and was awarded numerous prizes, both nationally and internationally. Ennio Morricone, one of the world's most famous soundtrack artists, delivered the suggestive soundtrack which alternates delirious violins with a sad and mellow melody. With *La sconosciuta* Tornatore avenges himself from the previous trademarks of nostalgic sentimentalism.

8. Recent examples of movies dealing with vulnerable migrant women portrayed in their victimised status but ambivalent eroticism are Carlo Mazzacurati's *Un'altra Vita* (1992) about the Russian Alia, *Vesna va veloce* (1996) about the Czech Tereza, Corso Solani's *Occidente* (2000) about the Romanian Malvina, Silvio Soldini's *Un'Anima divisa in due* (1993) about the gypsy Pabe, Armando Manni's *Elvjs & Merilijn* (1998) about the Romanian Ileana, Gianluca Maria Tavarelli's *Portami via* (1994) about Cinzia, from Bulgaria, and Christina, a Russian, who are callgirls.

9. The various improvised laws that attempted to regulate and legislate the presence, residence and right to citizenship of the newcomers were each more inadequate and disastrous than the other (Legge Martelli, 1990, Turco-Napolitano, 1998; Bossi-Fini, 2002; pacchetto-sicurezza 2009). The sudden influx of immigration to Italy (chaotically hosted in detention centres, refugee camps and improvised 'centri di accoglienza' [hosting centres]) was not a temporary emergency but destined to continue. The short-sighted legislation did not foresee that the sudden migration to Italy was not only due to its kilometres of unguarded coasts, which made Italy susceptible to many destitute people from nearby countries such as Albania (often using Italy as a transit zone for further migration to Northern Europe), but to a complex logic of late capitalism which intersected patterns of migration with the globalization of the labour force. Migration could therefore not be thought of outside the social and economic development of Italy itself but the fear of the other, as the resurrection of the unprocessed colonial past, re-emerged in Italy with violence. As Parati very poignantly remarks: 'The beginning and end of the century locate Italians on opposite positions' (Parati, 1999, p. 39) but Italian society has not yet adjusted to this new configuration.

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