



Introduction: genres and tropes in postcolonial cinema(s) in Europe

Sandra Ponzanesi & Verena Berger

To cite this article: Sandra Ponzanesi & Verena Berger (2016) Introduction: genres and tropes in postcolonial cinema(s) in Europe, *Transnational Cinemas*, 7:2, 111-117, DOI: [10.1080/20403526.2016.1217641](https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2016.1217641)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2016.1217641>



Published online: 30 Aug 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 282



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Introduction: genres and tropes in postcolonial cinema(s) in Europe

Sandra Ponzanesi^a and Verena Berger^b

^aDepartment of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; ^bDepartment of Periodism and Audiovisual Communication, University Carlos III Madrid (UC3M), Madrid, Spain

Transnational migration and questions of identity are amongst the most powerful forces of social transformation in contemporary Europe. Hence, representations of migrant, exilic and diasporic experiences as well as the dynamics of postmodern multiculturalism have assumed a prominent position over the past three decades in European mainstream and art-house cinema (see, e.g. Berger and Komori 2010; Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Loshitzky 2010; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard 2011; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012 on this topic). Located between national, transnational and global modes of production, distribution and reception, these films not only rely on the colonial heritage of Europe's past, but also on its present-day sociopolitical and cultural influences. Consequently, both the narration and aesthetics of the so-called 'postcolonial cinema' deal with the waves of migrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia moving into the European Union, with inclusion, exclusion and pluri-ethnicity as well as with modalities of representation and politics of encounter. Therefore, the contributions in this special issue reflect three main key aspects – Europe, postcolonialism and cinema – which are not separated terms but intertwined and connected with one another in multiple ways, inflecting and generating a plurality of nuances.

This approach requires a preliminary agreement on what has to be understood under the heading of 'postcolonial cinema', which is of course an open alliance with many other categories. For example, the terms 'migrant cinema' and 'postcolonial cinema' are often used interchangeably, yet the latter has a wider theoretical and aesthetic resonance. As an established concept in Film Studies, 'migrant cinema' – also termed 'accented cinema' by Hamid Naficy (2001) – introduces a complex and eclectic mix of styles, conventions and forms, often emanating from non-Western traditions. Naficy therefore identifies three types of 'migrant cinema' based on the modes of production: firstly, that made by exiles; secondly, that made by members of a diaspora; and, thirdly, ethnic and identity film-makers (2001, 10–17). Nevertheless, migrant film-makers are not the only directors focusing on the topics of migration, multi-ethnic conviviality, Otherness and Europeanness. Moreover, as Sandra Ponzanesi points out, each national cinema deals with 'migrant themes, characters and issues' (2011, 74) in different genres, periods and ways, with local and national film-makers dedicating their filmic production to this topic.

Consequently, as categories ‘migrant cinema’ and ‘postcolonial cinema’ are often interlocked, for migration is frequently an offspring of colonial dislocations. Yet the term ‘postcolonial cinema’ not only addresses the question of mobility and uprooting, but also wider issues of visual hegemony and aesthetic counter-discourses. The ‘postcolonial’ in postcolonial cinema functions, therefore, not simply as an adjective or declination of the migrant condition, but as a framework of analysis – an epistemological or optic standpoint through which films emerge in engagement with and as contestations of colonial dynamics and their legacies in the present, as well as epistemic devices capable of implementing a substantial departure from colonial paradigms of knowledge. As Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller have pointed out in their introduction to *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, postcolonial cinema is:

constituted by and within a *conceptual* space in which making connections and drawing inferences, specifically those that are occluded by national and colonial frames, is encouraged. We discover this conceptual space by breaking with universalism and learning to navigate a fluid, situational, relational mode of knowledge production, one that requires mutual recognition and engagement as well as new methodological and aesthetic strategies. (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 1–2)

The relevant aspect is, therefore, not the origin or the topic of the films in question but the engagement with history, subjectivity and epistemology, as well as the political ramifications of all of these. Films created and received through this optic, the cinema of migration, exile or diaspora, transnational cinema or world cinema may also be engaged through the postcolonial lens (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 1).

In the light of this understanding, many of the postcolonial migrant films analysed in this special issue not only concern questions of migration and the occluded history of colonialism, but also refer to a specific mode of filming, interpreting and viewing which involves film-makers, subject matter and audiences in challenging ways. It therefore involves an aesthetic language that foregrounds notions of multilingualism, non-places and hapticness, as well as interstitial modes of production and alternative distribution channels that best make it possible to rethink Europe from different viewpoints, both within and on the margins of mainstream cinema and film festivals.

This happens through specific visual registers and genres, following, for example, a documentary or a fictionalized style, as well as docufictions, melodrama, romantic comedy or road movies, as is explored in the essays by contributors to this issue. Drawing on classical theories of postcolonialism (see, e.g. Bhabha 1994; Minh-ha 1999; Said 1994, 2003; Shohat and Stam 1994; Spivak 1988), the special edition of this journal shows a particular sensitivity to the question of film genres and spatiality in investigating how various European cinemas, coming from different traditions and cinematic schools, deal with the topic of migration. As a result, film as an artistic product turns into an amalgam of cultural continuum between contemporary Europe and its former empires.

This of course implies a slippery and complex take on what Europe is and what makes a film ‘European’. As Thomas Elsaesser has discussed in his ‘European Cinema as World Cinema’ (2005, 13), what should be considered ‘European cinema’ is no longer clearly established. From the past understanding of national cinemas, often operating under the aegis of Second Cinema or art-house cinema, or cinema *d’auteur*, which featured recognizable stars (from Marcello Mastroianni to Alain Delon and Romy Schneider, to mention a few examples), we now have a situation in which a more transnational, fluid system dominates.

National boundaries are no longer in tune with the international system of casting as well as global production and distribution channels. Yet international film festivals and awards still pin movies down to their national origin, as seen with the productions that are allowed to compete for the Oscar for best Foreign Film. One example is *Divine Intervention* (2002) by Elia Suleiman which could not be submitted as a Palestinian film, as the country is not recognized as such in international law. Another example is *Private* (2004), on the Palestinian conflict and directed by Saverio Costanzo. The director was not allowed to submit it for the Oscar because the languages spoken are Arabic and Hebrew in what is purported to be an Italian film, demonstrating the degree to which national cinema has been determined by language and its conflation with territory. This restriction was subsequently lifted (see Derek Duncan in this issue). So national cinemas still have their stake within a more impure or even approximate definition of world cinemas, which is often about the rest, the 'other than', outside Hollywood and the West. The national framing does still matter but obviously their definitions and assumptions are becoming paradoxical and strained. We could then plead for a suspension of these definitions or for the creation of a working term that addresses postcolonial cinemas as a critical category that questions the notion of Europe as a contested term; a postcolonial cinema that reclaims alternative visions, ideas or imaginaries of Europe, which are connected to the colonial legacies of the past but envisage a still possible common cosmopolitan project, in which Europe is not a fortress that rejects and repels, but a porous space whose boundaries do not overlap anymore with fixed geographies. This addresses a postcolonial Europe understood not as a blind spot but as a location of encounters and passages. To read Europe as a postcolonial space does not mean that its imperial past is over but, on the contrary, that its idea of self and its polity are still struggling with the continuing hold of colonialist and imperialist attitudes. The objective of postcolonial European cinemas is, therefore, to foreground new forms of interventions by accounting for silenced or marginalized histories that might be de facto centre stage in the New Europe.

As such, postcolonial cinemas in Europe do not do away with the colonial legacies but explore the transformations and transitions undergone from a more comparative and transnational perspective. New visions emerge focusing on Europe rather as a space of transit than as a point of departure or arrival. These figurations or tropes of passages, transit and movements are often conveyed in postcolonial migrant cinemas through the visualization of non-places (see e.g. Augé 1995; Ponzanesi 2012 on this topic).

Spatiality occupies a central role in postcolonial cinema, because it foregrounds movement and dislocations, borders and crossings, spaces and non-places, mental journeys and fantasies, as well as different forms of heterotopias (Foucault 1986). These are not just post-apocalyptic science fiction dystopias but integral places within Europe in which marginalization, entrapment and confinement of Otherness and deviancy is organized (refugee camps, prisons, detention centres, holding areas, checkpoints, asylum quarters, etc.). However, whereas these issues are frequently magnified in postcolonial cinemas, often in order to represent victimization and reify alterity, the focus of this special issue lies on the aesthetic forms, on languages and means through which other spaces and spatiality within Europe are articulated, not as external but as integral to a Europe project of modernity and cosmopolitanism, proposing new affective proximities (see Olivieri in this issue).

Consequently, the following contributions study particularly central issues of migration, displacement, mobility, space and place (see, e.g. Adey 2010; Clifford 1997; Cresswell 2006; Cresswell and Dixo 2002; Morley 2000; Naficy 2001; Urry 2007 on this topic) as well as

identity (see, e.g. Bauman 1994; Hall [1989] 1992a, 1992b, 1996) and their specific narrative and aesthetic use in different film genres. However, as film critic Rick Altman outlined, film genres as well as nations and other complex communities are determined by unstable boundaries and therefore under a continuous process of re-definition (1999, 195).

Special attention is given to reaching an overall view and a comprehensive consideration of postcolonial European cinemas, including research not only on the 'big five' European film-producing cinematographies (France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom), but also co-productions as well as feature films from Europe's margins: cinemas of 'small-nation status' (Hjort 2005, ix; Hjort and Petrie 2007, 3) like Cyprus and Bosnia are also considered.

Despite these national enclaves, migrants are often placed in the 'waiting room' of Europe, and they are frequently represented as suspended in limbo, outside of the regime of citizenship and of a common humanity. This becomes evident in the many examples analysed in this special issue, which consist of less well-known or non-mainstream films realized as low-budget productions, focusing on marginal locations within Europe, such as Lampedusa (see Ponzanesi), former Yugoslavia and Cyprus (see Imre and Zimanyi), Bosnia (see Trakilovic) or liminal spaces within the nation, where multicultural encounters happen in the countryside, at harbours or 'on the road' at both sides of the Mediterranean Sea (see Berger), on the outskirts of major cities like Rome (see Duncan) or in rural villages, ring roads and metropolitan lifts (see Olivieri). The marginality of the subjects within Europe, which is perceived as the bulwark to penetrate and conquer, is often conveyed through unconventional and atmospheric visual registers that defy containment in any traditional genre. An example would be the film essay *Evaporating Borders* (2014), by Iva Radivojevic, with its allegorical meditations on borders, nationalism and mass migration, or *On the Bride's Side* (2014), which uses a wedding caravan across Europe to forge a new aesthetic of the border based on solidarity and encounters. Duncan's essay points to another important aspect of postcolonial cinemas in Europe, which is not just the issue of visibility, but also of audibility. In his essay the author claims that while the visibility of migrants, or rather their hypervisibility in the public space, has been scrutinized at length, particularly in relation to constructions of racial or ethnic difference, less attention has been paid to their audibility, referring to the different languages used, but also to the accent as a material signifier of irreducible alterity. The multiplicity of linguistic registers is a constant in many of the films analysed, which are either in Arabic in all its many international inflections from Palestinian and Syrian to Egyptian, in Sicilian as in *Fuocoammare* [Fire at Sea] (2016) by Gianfranco Rosi, or in the many different languages and dialects spoken by the migrants, ranging from Nigerian to Romanian, Bosnian, Greek, Turkish, Somali or Tigrinya amongst others.

Issues of identity and sexuality are prominently addressed in this special issue where questions of genres, borders and spatialities are also conveyed through questions of transitionality of sexual categories contesting imposed heteronormativity. As Milica Trakilovic analyses in her article, 'going West' is often assumed to be the route to freedom and liberation, creating an implicit neo-orientalizing construction of the Eastern border as backward and prey to religious fundamentalism.

All articles argue against the fixity of any categories while proposing more fluid and porous notions of borders, genre and identity, showing that positions of liminality – or the 'interregnum' in terms of Gramsci (1971, 276) – generate not morbid symptoms but rarefied conditions for new encounters and solidarities, which are both utopian and material as well as already in the 'here' and 'now'.

This special issue therefore aims to open up interdisciplinary perspectives on both film analysis and film history, drawing on Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Visual Anthropology as well as Film and Media Studies in European cinema. By bringing a geographical focus to examine how postcolonial European cinemas evoke the issues of migration, identity and spatiality, the contributions not only aim to gain a profound understanding of how these films work, but also how they are constructed socially, ideologically and affectively in different filmic 'geographical imaginations'. In summary, all contributions explore new ways of unpacking Europe by analysing conventional as well as experimental film genres through postcolonial lenses. It furthermore offers alternative readings of space and mobility in European cinema at the crossroads of local, transnational and global re- and deterritorialization. The selection of essays in this issue can, nevertheless, only indicate a few of the worthwhile viewpoints and geographic areas in a field that is in complex play on the stage of European culture in the twenty-first century. Yet this approach allows not only for Europe to be redefined from new subjective perspectives, but also a rethinking of the role of its audio-visual products as an aesthetic and political medium in a globalized world.

Acknowledgements

This special issue has its origins in a very successful conference held at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS) in March 2015, with the title 'Postcolonial Cinemas in Europe: Migration, Identity and Spatiality in Film Genres', organized by Sandra Ponzanesi (Utrecht University/Netherlands) and Verena Berger (University Carlos III Madrid/Spain). For more information see: <https://www.nias.knaw.nl/news-events/calendar/workshop-events/postcolonial-cinemas-in-europe-migration-identity-and-spatiality-in-film-genres>. We would like to thank all conference participants and contributors to this special issue. A note of thanks also to Marlijn Meijer for her assistance in the final process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Sponsored with funding from Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS); the Postcolonial Studies Initiative (PCI) and interdisciplinary focus area Culture, Citizenship and Human Rights (CCHR) at Utrecht University; the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies/University of Vienna, Austria; and CONEX Marie Curie Fellowship/University Carlos III Madrid, Spain.

Notes on contributors

Sandra Ponzanesi is a Professor of Gender and Postcolonial Studies in the Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She has published widely on postcolonial theories in relation to Europe, cinema studies and digital culture. She is currently a project leader of the ERC consolidator grant project 'Digital Crossings in Europe: Gender, Diaspora and Belonging'. She is the author of *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Suny, 2004) and *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (Palgrave, 2014), editor of *Gender, Globalization and Violence. Postcolonial Conflict Zones* (Routledge, 2014) and co-editor of *Migrant Cartographies* (Lexington Books, 2005), *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Routledge, 2011), *Deconstructing Europe* (Routledge, 2011) and *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). She has also guest-edited several special issues on postcolonial

Europe for Social Identities (17:1, 2011), Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture (4:2, 2014) and Interventions, International Journal of Postcolonial Studies (18:2, 2016).

Verena Berger currently holds the position of a CONEX Marie Curie senior fellow at the University Carlos III Madrid, Spain (2015–2018). Her main areas of research include theory and history of Cinema, Television and Media, having widely published, especially on Hispanic Cinema. At present, she is preparing a monograph on Latin American Cinema and a monograph on road movies in Global Cinema. She is the author of *Theatre and Language: The Catalan Theatre between Dictatorship and Democracy* (1999) and her most recent publications as a co-editor include, amongst others, *Polyglot Cinema: Migration and Transcultural Narration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain* (2010) and *Latin America: Identities and Frontiers in Cinema and Television in the Age of Globalization* (2013).

References

- Adey, Peter. 2010. *Mobility*. New York: Routledge.
- Altman, Rick. 1999. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1994. "From Pilgrim to Tourist – Or a Short History of Identity." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 18–36. London: Sage.
- Berger, Verena, and Miya Komori, eds. 2010. *Polyglot Cinema: Migration and Transcultural Narration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain*. Vienna: LIT.
- Berghahn, Daniela, and Claudia Sternberg, eds. 2010. *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: HUP.
- Cresswell, Tim, and Deborah Dixo, eds. 2002. *Engaging Film. Geographies of Mobility and Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. London: Routledge.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 2005. "European Cinema as World Cinema: A New Beginning?" In *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser, 485–513. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16: 22–27.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hall, Stuart. (1989) 1992a. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." In *Ex/iles. Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye Cham, 220–236. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1992b. "The Question of Cultural Identity." In *Modernity and Its Futures*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Hall, and Tony McGrew, 273–326. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, 1–17. London: Sage.
- Hjort, Mette. 2005. *Small Nation, Global Cinema: The New Danish Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hjort, Mette, and Duncan J. Petrie, eds. 2007. *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Loshitzky, Yosefa. 2010. *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1999. *Cinema Interval*. London: Routledge.
- Morley, David. 2000. *Home Territories. Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Naficy, Hamid. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra, and Bolette B. Blaagaard, eds. 2011. *Deconstructing Europe. Postcolonial Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

- Ponzanesi, Sandra. 2011. "Europe in Motion: Migrant Cinema and the Politics of Encounter." *Social Identities* 17 (1): 73–92.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra, and Marguerite Waller, eds. 2012. *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra. 2012. "The Non-places of Migrant Cinema in Europe." *Third Text* 26 (6): 675–690.
- Said, Edward W. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Said, Edward W. 2003. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. 1994. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity.