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Book Review

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By Guido Rings

Erica Berzaghi (Cambridge)

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The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema: Imagining a New Europe?
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In recent years, issues on migration have been at the centre of media coverage as masses of war refugees arrive in the Old Continent, presidents promise walls between nations and countries vote out of unifying bodies mainly on the spur of anti-immigration propaganda. In this climate, looking for successful processes of integration between different cultures becomes a fundamental goal for all societies. However, centuries-old discourses render the path to transnationalism a complex and hard one. Fortunately, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* offers an insightful and entertaining dialogue between films, theory, history and contemporary events; in particular, Guido Rings, the author, deconstructs contemporary migrant productions in order to show residues of colonial ideologies but also to point at existing trajectories towards a transcultural coexistence.¹

The book is divided in four chapters: The first one clarifies operative concepts by offering a discussion on the main theoretical debates on post-colonialism, practices of othering and many more. To the contrary of what many scholars assume, the author argues that processes such as globalization and mass migration do not render the shift from monoculture to transculture an inevitable one; this is not just evident from the films analysed but also by their connection to our contemporary political climate and news coverage which show examples of cultural hybridization as well as xenophobia. The focus here verges on transcultural agency which is defined as “the ability to see culture as a dynamic, interconnected and transitory relational web” (*OiCMC*, p. 11): From this perspective it would be possible to create a space ‘in-between’ which the book seeks represented in contemporary films (see *ibid.*). The importance of such exploration is highlighted by the fact that European films, as a means for identity creation, can be crucial in educating and sparking considerations about migration and

¹ All quotations refer to RINGS, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* (= *OiCMC*).

transcultural dialogue. In this regard, the chapter also discusses the role of funding bodies whose power plays a fundamental function in shaping spectators' attitudes in what is referred to as the "colonization of the mind" (*OiCMC*, p. 14).

The film analysis opens in the second Chapter with an inspirational example for European cinema: Nicolas Echevarria's *Cabeza de Vaca* (1991), a co-production between Mexico and Spain, which portrays a journey towards the construction of a transcultural identity based on the recognition of similarities rather than differences. By taking into consideration various aspects of film-making and presenting a detailed comparison with *Cabeza de Vaca*'s historical report *Shipwrecks* (1999 [1542]), the chapter illustrates how the conqueror is portrayed also as a migrant Other who tries to overcome cultural differences by focusing on common values. As a matter of fact, Rings considers *Cabeza de Vaca*'s evolution as a development of a "new character who consciously draws on European and Indian cultures in his negotiation of a third way" (*OiCMC*, p. 42). The analysis is supported by considerations on cinematic choices, such as the use of flashback, silences, black backgrounds and surrealist scenes to "destabilize linear perceptions of colonial history" (*ibid.*). However, in the quest for a break from colonial mind-set, Rings points out some limits such as the absence of the deconstruction of other stereotypes: in fact, women and black people are depicted as passive, erotic and obedient objects (see *OiCMC*, p. 43).

Chapter Three presents a series of films from the 1990's to the 2000's in order to demonstrate a shift from exclusion to solidarity in European cinema's representations of the encounter with the other. Challenging the authorities' depiction of Madrid as a "cosmopolitan centre with major opportunities for everybody", the first section investigates the extent to which such claim is paralleled in films (see *OiCMC*, p. 49). Productions such as *Letters from Alou* (1990) and *Taxi* (1996) demonstrate how, despite improvements, there is still confusion as to what living in a cosmopolitan place might actual entail. Both films stress the difficulties encountered by migrants in Madrid, a space that arguably is not interested in integrating anyone who doesn't have the required cultural or economic capital. By seamlessly connecting contemporary issues and historical events to the analysis of space through montage and camera's focus, these films are presented as stories devoid of any possibility for acculturation. Rings for example comments: in *Taxi*'s "objectification of Moroccans and black Africans as

helpless victims in desperate need of patriarchal protection by strong whites, colonial hierarchies are re-established” (*OiCMC*, p. 61). He also argues that this separatism in cinematic representation perpetuates the colonial mind-set and does not put into discussion the binaries that allow such mechanisms of separation.

The following section dissects Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) from different perspectives: characters relations (parents/daughters), space symbolism (football/outdoors, family/indoors) and camera work (fast turning around) all of which indicate that Jess, the main character, could be potentially located in a space in between cultures. Nevertheless, while evaluating whether the film “supports monocultural constructs”, the chapter uncovers nuances of the film’s message and evaluates its uncertain effectiveness (see *OiCMC*, p. 64). Rings makes the reader realise how strong, complex and intricate is the web of ideological constructs and how difficult it is to break free from certain modes of thinking. Ultimately, the film seems to show Anglo-American values as preferable, in particular the US as an “ultimate paradise” (*OiCMC*, p. 70). Therefore it is argued that *Bend It Like Beckham* doesn’t go beyond dichotomies, but reinforces the presentation of the West as a “superior model to follow” (*OiCMC*, p. 70). Interestingly, Rings suggests the film could have represented a girl who enjoyed both aspects of her life: embracing Indian traditions as well as enjoying football (see *OiCMC*, p. 74).

Continuing to set the films within a broader historical perspective, the third section of this chapter focuses on German-Turkish migrant cinema. In the spotlight is Fatih Akin, a fourth wave director who, unlike his predecessors, highlights processes of transcultural exchanges and multilingual realities. After an insightful examination of his previous films, *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) is analysed in depth. Due to the plot’s intricacies, Akin’s film “concentrates on individual parallels and cultural interconnectedness based on shared human affects and multidirectional memories [...] and leads to transcultural bonds” (*OiCMC*, p. 95). Contradicting Götürk’s argument that global migration will inevitably open up a third space,² Rings proposes that “the films refuse to offer a traditional happy ending, which seems to suggest that transcultural opportunities [...] very much depend on the willingness of all individuals involved to fight constantly for them” (*OiCMC*, p. 88). Through a criticism of Akin’s portrayal of

² See GÖKTÜRK, in Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Cinema*, p. 96.

the political and jurisdictional system in Turkey, this section presents the latest of his films, *The Cut* (2014), as a sign of “Akin’s growing self-awareness of the need to fight monocultural identity construction” unfortunately, its rather negative reception shows that certain issues cannot reach mainstream taste yet (see *OiCMC*, p. 93)

Chapter Three’s filmic journey towards solidarity and transculturality ends with *Le Havre* (Kurismäki, 2011). Interestingly, *Le Havre* opens up this new space for transcultural interaction by transcending temporal references, genre’s boundaries and “inexpressive acting” which gives the viewer “some freedom in interpretation” (*OiCMC*, p. 108). Furthermore, Rings shows through character analysis how the plot brings together people from different backgrounds which also adds to the blurring of boundaries without creating new ones. Ultimately, the film can be read as critique of “French law, monocultural racism, and neo-colonial tendencies in contemporary Europe” (*OiCMC*, p. 101). Despite some representational limitations, the author suggests that the film opens hopes and possibilities for a transcultural society.

The final chapter moves away from Europe to Mexico and finds in Nava’s *My Family* (1995) and *Bordertown* (2006) some noteworthy examples of cross cultural encounters and management. After an accurate and intertextual presentation of the film narratives, Rings illustrates their transcultural potential and limits. The analysis shows how processes of integration can lead to different outcomes: from ghetto segregation to assimilation of the American Dream and again from forced assimilation to an impossibility of overcoming the dominant-subaltern dichotomy. For instance, *Bordertown* might suggest that mobility and integration is only possible when “agency, bilingual competence, lighter skin colour and a certain cultural and economic capital and above all US citizenship” are in place (*OiCMC*, p. 145). In terms of cinematic choices, the role of religion and the representation of space are closely examined. Of particular interest is the analysis of music and language: an exploration of code switching as well as of the juxtaposition of rock ‘n roll and mambo convincingly enriches the debate on the potential and limitations of both films. Overall, Rings praises Nava’s work for addressing “social inequality, intercommunal violence, and economic exploitation on a global scale” and appeals to European production and funding bodies to take inspiration in order to comply with our postcolonial responsibility.

What is particularly striking in this book is how each film is embedded in a thick web of historical, socio-economical and theoretical contexts which can be said to show the interconnectedness it professes and well elucidate the significance of the subject. This makes it a truly interdisciplinary book and of potential interest for people from different backgrounds. In conclusion, this cinematic journey from segregation to transcultural solidarity encourages bolder financing, creation and dissemination of productions celebrating European communal values within multidirectional memories and narratives.

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