



*Loshitzky Yosefa, Screening Strangers.
Migration and Diaspora
in Contemporary European Cinema*

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Screening Strangers is one of those titles that soon draw the semantic map of the books they are referred to. The key-word Loshitzky selects – “screening” – designates a cluster of meanings that seems particularly suitable to the author’s purpose in this essay: on the one hand, the word identifies the current European obsession of checking the flow of migrations, with the specific purpose of discriminating between desired and undesired migrants; on the other, the process of “screening” openly alludes to cinema, filmic representation and visual elaboration, all of them applied in this case to a defined topic (“Strangers”), in the context of popular culture. Obviously enough, the main point here is the recurring conceptualization of migrants as criminals, a conceptualization that also triggers an increasing social and political anxiety about security issues. The



experience of “being threatened by the other (the migrant, the refugee, the non-European, and Eastern European)”, therefore, becomes *the theme* to be dealt with.

From the structural point of view, Loshitzky’s volume is deliberately poised between film studies and cultural studies, while facing a major challenge: a reflection on the latest evolution of the European consciousness in the way it is articulated and problematized in contemporary films. The whole critical project seems to start on the assumption that Old Europe’s grand narrative has somehow collapsed, and at the same time a supposedly newborn identity is still struggling against the unexpected revival of xenophobia, racism and nationalism as formidable oppositional forces. Loshitzky’s strength, in this extraordinarily effective essay, is the crystal-clear definition of her analytical ground – “mostly hegemonic rather than minority/diasporic films” – and the rigour of the critical method guiding her through the various case studies she selects. Loshitzky explicitly declares her will to draw on cultural studies, putting a bit aside a more specific cinematographic analysis, while also selecting a limited number of filmic samples in the overall corpus of European cinema focussing on migration and diaspora. The choice is made with an eye to the purpose of following the process through which the so-called new European identity has been projected and negotiated, in recent films as well as in the real world.

Under a general perspective, the shaping of a culture of anxiety comes to the foreground and finds its hub in the strangers now dwelling in the European territory. It easily leads to perceive them as “the enemy within”, at times joining and conspiring with “the enemy without”, “the ‘axis of evil’ of migrants, terrorists and the poor in the post-9/11 discourse”. On this troubled backdrop, Loshitzky identifies three guiding threads in the wide field of diasporic and migrant cinema. Each of them reports on a specific stage in the migratory journey. So the first step in the complex diasporic map she draws is the journey; the second one is the arrival in what had been imagined as the Promised land, and the third one is, so to speak, a side step, opening up a new analytic thread: a reflection on the dynamics of integration/disintegration that marks the second generation of migrants and beyond. These three stages are given by Loshitzky as three evolving genres, that are approached through a number of case studies.

The first section of what Loshitzky ironically defines as the “Grand Tour of the migrant” gathers around the profile of the archetypal poor stranger normally leaving his/her home country to improve the life of his/her family. The “metaphor of the suitcase” appears perfectly suitable to translate the irretrievable loss of a whole tradition, that is swap for an uncertain future and a certain marginalization (*Journey of Hope*, X. Koller, 1990): “The journey in the foreign landscape – Loshitzky assumes – is also a journey of forgetting, a passage where identity is



lost yet where the prospects for gaining new identity are dubious". In some cases, the dialectics of gazes proves particularly complex, and the journey reports on the interaction between the spectator's gaze – somehow a tourist, observing what happens in the European context – and the refugee's gaze – often seeing a landscape that is far from familiar and friendly (*In this World*, M. Winterbottom, 2002). The persuasion that "the system is the real criminal" is articulated through a sharp focus on a policy system aiming at criminalizing the refugees and the people who traffic them (*Spare Parts*, D. Kozole, 2003). The urban environment as a favourite setting emphasizes the notion of the postmodern metropolis as a place where the refugees are to be kept into urban ghettos, articulated into high-rise slums that recall postmodern Towers of Babel, where many languages are spoken and often none of them understood by the host countries (*Last Resort*, P. Pawlikowski, 2002). A specific focus is sometimes given to what Loshitzky marks as "two major entities of European 'otherness', the Romany and the Muslim", as it happens in *Gadjo Dilo* (T. Gatlif, 1997) and *Exils* (T. Gatlif, 2004).

The issue of "Bosnia within" is developed in Chapter 2, basically through the analysis of two films. In *Northern Skirts* (B. Albert, 1999), the play between sex and violence in the host country echoes the brutal treatment of Muslim and Croatian women during the cleansing campaign that was supposed to result in the creation of the "Greater Serbia" on what was left of Tito's Yugoslavia. Women bodies are openly given – here as everywhere – as sites of conflict, while at the same time the general if generic opposition between West and East takes a very private, cruel shape (*Beautiful People*, J. Dizdar, 1999). The refugee is THE victim, more evidently so when he is forced to "donate" his internal organs to the members of the host community, as it happens in *Dirty Pretty Things* (S. Frears, 2002). At this juncture, as Loshitzky maintains, "the Empire is devouring the postcolonial subject in its heart, London. The postcolonial subject 'invade' the heart of the empire, the capital, the heart of the nation. Yet even at the heart of the old empire and even after its official demise, they continue to be devoured deep within its global bowels".

In the following chapters, Loshitzky approaches some more popular films, going from Bertolucci's *Besieged* (1989) – where the Western ambivalence about the "Dark Continent" (Africa) is exposed so to mark Europe as the real heart of darkness – to Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995) – sharply positing, in its characters, a solidarity between different kinds of Others ("black/blanc/ beur") that seems the true new issue in the current debate on European identity today.

The work on Winterbottom's Camp trilogy is grounded in Agamben's thesis about the camp as the basic biopolitical paradigm of the West. *In This World* (2002), *Code 46* (2003), and *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) develop – in different shapes and under diverging perspectives – the broad definition of



“camp” as a symbolic and/or physical place where the survival of the fittest is the basic rule, at the same time evoking the memory of the death camps and the Holocaust.

Loshitzky’s journey, coherently if sadly, actually amounts to the awareness of the European inability to cope with the notion of Otherness in a way that allows the Other to find his/her own place in the new community. And, by way of a conclusion, Loshitzky quotes a very famous though embarrassing event: “Only one day after Silvio Berlusconi’s ‘comeback’ to win a third term as Italy’s Prime Minister, he announced that one ‘of the first things to do is to close the frontiers and set up more camps to identify foreign citizens who don’t have jobs and are forced into a life crime’”. He added that more local police are needed to function as “an army of good in the squares and streets to come between Italian people and the army of evil in the post-9/11 world”: Fortress Europe at its best, and worst.

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