

## **The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema: Imagining a New Europe?**

**Guido Rings: *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema: Imagining a New Europe?* (Routledge Advances in Film Studies, 2016), 188 pages, ISBN-10: 1138951633 / ISBN-13: 978-1138951631**

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Rings' new book *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* takes as its starting point the contemporary migrant crises and discusses how the cultural Other is reflected in European migrant film productions. The films analysed in the study cover a period of 30 years with Montxo Armendáriz's *Letters from Alou* (1990) and Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011) as key case studies at the beginning and at the end of it. Other films are Carlos Saura's *Taxi* (1996), Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007). Thanks to Rings' profound knowledge of European film history, the analysis of each film provides rich references to many other productions.

A special feature of Rings' study is that the selected film samples are investigated not only with regard to theoretical discussions in cultural studies and to ongoing political debates, but to developments in cinema production on a European level. This approach allows to explore how cultural articulations and discourses about the migrant Other developed and changed over time in Europe. On the whole, this monograph is the first to offer an in-depth examination of the potential and limits of transcultural identity constructs in contemporary European migrant cinema with a focus on films from Germany, France, the UK, and Spain.

Rings' qualitative film analysis focuses on British, French, and German productions, because they managed to develop "the most successful migrant mediascape in Europe, both in terms of quantity and quality of productions" thanks to the fact that "they include the invaluable input of directors and scriptwriters with migrant backgrounds" (p. 2). This approach highlights in how far cinema professionals with migrant backgrounds have integrated multicultural, intercultural and transcultural experiences in cinema (see page 116 for a further discussion of these concepts), which includes

references to the directors' own experiences and ideas. The authentic impact on storytelling and transcultural aesthetics is outlined as a particularly valuable aspect of migrant cinema.

A further aim of Rings' study is „to facilitate the comparison of cinematic portrayals of new mass migration to countries like Spain“ (p. 2) with images of traditional migration in British, French and German film. By emphasising the discrepancies in media representations related to contemporary migration to Europe, Rings underlines his particular interest in contemporary trends concerning the cinematographic depiction of migration issues: While mass media often facilitates the development of new nationalist, Eurosceptic and xenophobic reactions to migration by turning migrants and their impact into melodramatic 'newsworthy' stories, migrant cinema tends to perceive Europe as increasingly depending on the successful integration of migrants. Rings agrees with this cinematic agenda and emphasises the necessity to “overcome traditional oppositions and racist hierarchies between ‘us’ and ‘them’“ (p. 1). In addition, he calls for a critical intervention against developments that lead to an increasingly essentialist and monocultural mentality and, ultimately, widen the social gap between so called natives and newly arrived migrants. In particular, Rings' study seeks to investigate how the backdrop of monocultural identity constructs in contemporary Europe shapes the cultural Other in film productions.

In the first chapter, he maps out his approach for the in-depth analysis of the film samples and discusses in a comparative way different theories on monoculturality, interculturality and transculturality. This procedure is largely informed by approaches that were developed by Graham Huggan, Wolfgang Welsch, Werner Delanoy and Heinz Antor. While criticizing Welsch for conceiving contemporary transglobal migration movements as a unique phenomenon of postmodern times, Rings highlights “that transcultural exchange and memory building can be traced back to ancient high cultures, i.e., it should not be regarded as ‘a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures’ (Welsch 1999: 197)“ (p. 12).

Yet, as transcultural forms of encounters have always existed, the same can be said about groups using monoculturality for defining their affiliation. According to Rings, neither monoculturalism nor transculturalism can be attributed only to the recent past of colonialism and nationalism. In the last years, however, the concept of monoculturalism seems to have undergone a revival, “although decolonization, mass immigration of non-

European workforce, and the alternative culture concepts proposed by 1968 movements have contributed to a growing public acceptance of greater diversification in Europe“ (p. 9).

Against the background of current debates on different concepts of culture and identity, Rings proposes to focus on transcultural viewpoints. He defines the latter in relation to the definition of interculturality and with regard to earlier concepts by Welsch, Delanoy and Antor. Therefore

“‘transculturality’ can be defined in different ways: as a radical break with rather separatist notions of cultures (see Welsch 1999: 198), as the consequence of intercultural exchange (Delanoy 2006: 239), or as a significantly different concept that finally blurs the boundaries of individual cultures (Antor 2006: 30)” (p. 10).

In line with this, Rings rejects the focus on bridging cultural differences, as often proposed by intercultural approaches. For the concept of bridging tends to stress cultural differences instead of shared ground and diversity, which ultimately reproduces the dichotomy of “them” and “us”. On the level of representation, this implies

“the continuity of binary constructs within which former colonizers and succeeding national elites tend to portray themselves to formerly colonized or neo-colonized ‘Others’ as rational, civilized, and male representatives of a superior order, which leaves more instinctive, barbarian, and female roles for those Others” (p. 14).

With regard to this theoretical background, Rings outlines how over time the representation of cultural differences in some migrant films shifted towards the concept of diversity. In films up to the 1990s, one often finds approaches that are in line with Huggan’s notion of interculturality, which often represents a kind of back-door to cultural essentialism by negatively highlighting cultural differences. Recent productions, however, embody according to Rings increasingly an idea of transculturality that goes along with the shift in theoretical approaches as suggested by Antor or Delanoy (e.g., Akin’s *The Edge of Heaven* from 2007, and Kaurismäki’s *Le Havre* from 2011).

As a starting point, Montxo Armendáriz’s film *Letters from Alou* is well chosen because its analysis allows to highlight changes in the European mode of coproduction at the time of the foundation of the Council of Europe’s cinematic key fund *Eurimages* (1989). The agenda of this fund is to support representations of diversity in cultural

identities (p. 2) and to raise the spectator's awareness for „human rights, racial tolerance and multicultural acceptance“ (p. 2) through cinematic productions.

However, according to Rings, this agenda to promote cultural diversity is not always taken into account, because *Eurimages* often gives its support to films “that foreground rather than obliterate cultural differences“ (p. 18). In this respect, Rings' analysis highlights a trend that goes against a social reality, which is increasingly marked by migration movements all over Europe. In a period of increasing migration in Europe and a growing virtual culture, such images in film are – according to Rings – not to be underestimated because they are not only “potential reflections of popular attitudes, ideas, and preoccupations”, but they tend to have a substantial “impact on popular views and opinions” on migration (p. 19).

In addition, the monocultural perspective is not, as opposed to what one might think, a viewpoint only to be observed in members of host societies. Rings' analysis of *Bend It Like Beckham* outlines how the monocultural paradigm of assimilation and exclusion can be easily detected in the reflection of minority culture in migrant cinema, while in *Salt Water*, *Solino*, and *Princesses* “the migrant-protagonists' return to their country of origin as the only imaginable ‘home’ and ‘correct place to be’ provides a traditional monocultural solution” (p. 62).

Therefore, Rings concludes:

“there is evidence that the insistence on clearly definable cultural borders, and especially the perception of individual cultures as essentially different and geographically fixed, continues to shape most of European cinema of the 1990s and with it the perspective of its viewers on migration and diaspora. All this can be summarized as a return to binary patterns of thought that ultimately support the neocolonial structures the films set out to de-construct“ (p. 62-63).

Furthermore, Rings criticises *Bend It Like Beckham* because the film fights the dichotomy between “them” and “us” “with another binary construct” and “by ignoring any valid hybrid construct in-between” (p. 75). The hybrid identity construct does not appear as a valid option in this film. For the protagonists are either trapped in traditional Indian customs and cannot even prepare typical English dishes such as “beans on toast without seriously injuring themselves” (Ibid.). Or the characters “are geared up for an Anglo-American way of life marked by the capitalist cult of football heroes and do not want to cook Punjabi food, dress up traditionally or pray to Guru Nanak, because it simply does not fit“ (Ibid).

The analysis of Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* points out that some migrant films move towards "a strong statement of solidarity" (p. 88). This turn provides hope for reconciliation and a better future together, yet the filmmakers refuse

"to offer a traditional happy ending, which seems to suggest that transcultural opportunities do not develop 'automatically'. Instead, they very much depend on the willingness of all individuals involved to fight constantly for them and, even then, there is no guarantee of success" (p. 88).

With the final analysis of Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* Rings continues to outline this trend towards solidarity and shows how it is interrelated with hybridity not only on the level of identity constructs, but also on the level of film aesthetics. Rings emphasizes how a mixing of genres conventions "allows the viewer to maintain a critical distance and reduces the melodramatic elements of the film" (p. 100).

Rings' particular achievement lies in the fact that his study explores two dominant trends in contemporary migrant cinema: One trend can be summarised as "transcultural" in the sense that it highlights and elaborates on the "blurring of boundaries" in contemporary multi-ethnic societies (see *The Edge of Heaven* and *Le Havre*), while the other trend stresses the rigidity of traditional boundaries and/or "a simple shift of boundaries, within which a new monocultural, traditional multicultural, or traditional intercultural construct is being created by assimilating particular features and embedding others (very selected forms of hybridity) into larger container cultures" (see *Bend it like Beckham*, *My Family* and *Bordertown*) (p. 67).

Characteristic for the second trend is therefore a continuity of separatist and homogenous constructs of identity, which can be found in monocultural perspectives, within concepts that aim to enhance the peaceful coexistence of different cultures within one society ("traditional multicultural") as well as notions of cultural interaction that continue to frame individual cultures as autonomous entities ("traditional intercultural"). While separatist ideas of multicultural and intercultural clearly reject the monocultural paradigm of assimilation and exclusion, they facilitate according to Rings the dissemination and growing popularity of monocultural viewpoints within circles that are not normally governed by xenophobic agendas. Numerous Brexit supporters in the UK as well as Trump supporters in the US might fall into that category, while others are often direct examples of monocultural mentalities.

In this respect, Rings' study closes a gap in research through its detailed exploration of interdependent developments in monocultural and transcultural identity constructs in European cinema, which includes an in-depth examination of how transcultural identity constructs and new forms of monocultural constructs work in parallel in a wide range of cinematographic productions. A further achievement of Rings' analyses is to show that the acceptance of hybrid identity constructs is not the only message European migrant films would like to disseminate as a potential alternative to current culture clashes. Of similar importance is the emphasis on solidarity as a means to deal with the current migrant crises, but also as a means to deal with the negative effects of globalization on national cultures as a whole (see the marginalization of white French citizens as well as illegal migrants due to low economic and symbolic capital in *Le Havre*).

On the whole, Rings' comparative film analysis broadens the research path of other scholars, who have worked on European migrant cinema. In particular, in comparison to studies like Celik's *In Permanent Crisis* (2015) and Berghahn's and Sternberg's *European Cinema in Motion* (2010), Rings' particular contribution to research is to examine how exactly monocultural and transcultural perspectives developed and changed within contemporary European migrant cinema since the 1990s. Rings' book breaks the ground for further research on these issues and offers valuable insights into the development of representations of the Other in contemporary European migrant cinema.