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Cinema, Migration, and the US

An Introduction



Fig 1: *America, America* (Elia Kazan, 1963)

This special issue deals with the intersection of cinema and the multifaceted forms of migration to and within the United States. Whereas the current migratory movements from the Sub-Saharan regions through the Mediterranean and Europe have triggered works that have significantly expanded postcolonial studies in the direction of film research,¹ no attempt has been made so far to provide a comprehensive and yet appropriately diversified account of the development of ‘migration cinema’ produced in and focused on the United States, despite the long entanglement of American cinema with issues of migration. This present collection aims at stimulating future efforts to fill such a gap.

From a historical point of view, cinema is a form of art which sprouted from migration—of ideas, of directors, of actors, etc.²—and which, in the US especially, became a huge artistic and

¹ See Shohat and Stam 1994, Loshitzky 2010, Ballesteros, 2015, Trifonova 2020.

² For example, pre-Hollywood film producers and distributors like Carl Laemmle, William Fox, Adolph Zukor, Sam Goldwyn, and Louis B. Mayer were mostly Jewish entrepreneurs from Eastern Europe and Russia (see Erens 1984).

economic enterprise thanks to the work of immigrants. Carlos Cortés writes that “the birth of film [at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries] coincided with an unprecedented wave of global migration, and immigrants formed a large share of film’s early audience” (2010, 354). More specifically, as Giorgio Bertellini observes, “migrants to and within the Americas inflected national cinemas’ ideological, aesthetic, and social fabric, by patterning films’ subject matter, genres, representational routines, styles, and stars’ identity—both on and off screen” (2005, 620). Because of the conditions in which cinema came into being, the life of those who migrated to the US has been a central concern in American films. Moving pictures frequently amplified the racialization pervading forms of popular entertainment like the vaudeville;³ by and large, even nickelodeons often tackled discourses that were part of the national debate in those years of mass migration (1880s-1920s). Unlike other film traditions, American cinema “engaged with racial difference as a self-defining visual and narrative resource [...] deploy[ing] migrations’ racialized subjects into stories, dramatic and comedic, of sought-after adaptation and precarious assimilation” (Bertellini 2013, 1505).

Migration is in fact at the core of the work of several founding fathers of cinema. Take for instance Thomas Edison’s *Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island* (1903),⁴ David Griffith’s *A Child of the Ghetto* (1910),⁵ or Charlie Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* (1917). Chaplin’s film is a significant example of silent comedy—a genre “indebted to the irreverent physical routines of circus and vaudeville theater” which significantly “cast immigrants, and outsiders generally, by showcasing their incapacity to master the challenges of modern technology and urban life, from transportation to commercial artifacts, and thus to adapt to an American lifestyle inflected by the Protestant work ethic and Anglo-Saxon puritanism” (Bertellini 2005, 622)—which Chaplin subverts by showing a sympathetic view of migrants.⁶ The shift from silent to ‘talkie’ cinema was likewise marked by a film dealing with migration issues, Alan Crosland’s *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which reflects the anxieties about contamination, loss of identity, preservation, and assimilation typical of the time. It pictured in fact a Jewish young man trapped between his family’s desire of seeing him singing in the local synagogue and his aspiration to a more secular career in the show business.

³ Of particular interest for the history of cinema has been the recognition and study of the pre-movie theater immigrant experience (Sklar 1994).

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694367>.

⁵ Free on YouTube. The film portrays the vicissitudes of a Jewish immigrant in New York, which Griffith had already explored in his 1908 film *Romance of a Jewess*.

⁶ On the relationship between ethnicity, humor, and cinema see also Winokur 1996.

While early cinema's coming into being mirrored and engaged with the demographic changes and public debate on social, cultural, and racial 'degeneration' of that period, movie-goers were a heterogeneous group including "foreigners, blacks, and their descendants" (Bertellini 2005, 620) who differently participated in American culture also by means of cinematic experience (see Sklar 1994 and Stewart 2005), creation, or acting. Migration found large expression in off-Hollywood ethnic productions, like Yiddish and 'race' movies in the 1920s, or, as in the case of Italian Americans, in their active participation in early American film industry, here analyzed in Rebecca Bauman's review of Giorgio Bertellini's *The Divo and the Duce* (2019) and in Valerio De Angelis's reading of Giuliana Muscio's *Napoli/New York/Hollywood* (2020).

Another example of how migrants from the Old World played a part in the consolidation of US cinema is the case of central European directors, whose contribution did not stop with classic Hollywood, but extended to the second half of the century, as Tiziana D'Amico shows here. Her article "I'm Here Because I Didn't Want to Be There" deals with the great tradition of Eastern European migration caused by censorship and political exile, and examines the experience of significant representatives of the Czech New Wave of the Sixties and Seventies. In her analysis of American-Czech film directors Miloš Forman (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest* 1975; *Amadeus* 1984) and Ivan Passer (*Born to Win* 1971), as trapped between the status of migrants and exiles, D'Amico demonstrates how these directors' relocation to the United States had an impact not only on the development of their style, but also on the narratives they spread around their public persona as émigrés instead of exiles.

With the rise of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the first non-WASP, Catholic American president (who also authored the book *A Nation of Immigrants* [1958]), and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which ended many restrictions enforced since the 1920s, the 1960s saw a renewed interest in migration, which figured proudly and prominently on the big screen. The ethnic revival of the decade is best epitomized by groundbreaking films such as *America, America* (1963, fig. 1), in which a classic director like Elia Kazan claimed his ethnic identity by staging the story of his uncle migrating from Greece at the beginning of the 1900s. Ethnic revival blended with the revision of migrant history and feminist agenda in a milestone movie of the following decade, Joan Micklin Silver's *Hester Street* (1975), which rewrites a classic novella of Jewish migration to the United States from a woman's perspective.

The 1970s was a golden moment for the new space and visibility 'ethnic' directors managed to obtain in Hollywood, as with Italian American Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese. If, until the second part of the twentieth century, film studies mostly paid attention to the representation of the immigrant in US cinema by white directors or almost exclusively focused

on early European migration to the East Coast, often neglecting other non-English, non-white cinematic works, the second half of the century started to provide new filmic space and, later, scholarship attention to previously neglected subjects like blacks, Asians, and Latinos. US films of the 1970s and the 1980s started to portray, for example, Asian Americans, one of the most stereotyped migrants in US cinema (Cortés 2010),⁷ Mexican Americans and, in general, the complex issue of the border. *Chan Is Missing* (Wang 1982), a milestone movie for the Asian-American community and here analyzed by Dora Renna, claims new cinematic space for this racial group by defying consolidated stereotyping and appropriating a “space of absence” which, as shown by Renna’s essay, is also linguistically conveyed.

Robert M. Young’s *Alambrista!* (1977) marked a new visibility for Chicano history of troubled ‘migration,’ and was followed by meaningful examples such as Gregory Nava’s *El Norte* (1983), John Sayles’s *Lone Star* (1996), or Marc Silver’s docudrama *Who Is Dayani Cristal* (2013). This last production retraces a more global political engagement of some contemporary directors—think of Gianfranco Rosi and his *Fire at Sea* (2016), Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Biutiful* (2010), Chantal Akerman’s *From the Other Side* (2002) or Ai Weiwei’s *Human Flow* (2017)—who have represented migration as a chance to talk about geopolitical concerns, human rights abuse and, in general, to denounce American politics when it comes to border policing. In her essay “And What About Children? Representations of Infant Migration in Latino/a Cinema,” Amaia Ibarraran-Bigalondo follows this approach and investigates how children migration across the border has been portrayed in Rebecca Cammisa’s documentary *Which Way Home* (2009), Gloria Lamorte and Paola Mendoza’s *Entre Nos* (2009), and Patricia Rigger’s *La Misma Luna* (*Under the Same Moon* 2008).

The tradition of African American cinema, grown out of the pathbreaking works of black directors like Oscar Micheaux at the beginning of the century, thrived again in the 1970s. While black cinema has often focused on the migration of blacks to the great cities of the North, a more recent path of investigation has focused on the experiences of return migration to the South,

⁷ According to Cortés (2010), the representation of immigrants in American cinema defines five different stock types which would reflect the attitude towards immigrants of the larger social and political context. In his classification, which spans from early cinema to the beginning of the 1990s, Cortés lists: the incomprehensible alien, an example of foreignness, strangeness, and alienness; the cultural bumbler, as a target of humor, usually butt of cultural jokes; the dream seeker, as embodiment of the process of trying to become American and grasp the American Dream; the societal victim, as pawn, sometimes victim, sometimes combatant, in the struggle to resolve US societal issues, including prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation; finally, the alien threat, as subverter of American life, often as personification of incomprehensible and mysterious evil as in the 1970s, the figure of the Godfather as created by Francis Ford Coppola (Cortés 2010, 362) or Asian Americans.

which Anna Scacchi investigates in this Special Issue by tackling Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta* (1988) and inserting the film into a broader consideration of the contradictions and ambiguities implicit in black migration—an ambiguity that dates back to the Middle Passage.⁸ The revisionist agenda of much contemporary cinema also goes in the direction of destabilizing consolidated genres and traditions in order to enhance skepticism about assimilationist models that were the ideological background of many films of the past, and which had a lasting influence on how Americans think about themselves as a land of migrants and in relation to other past and present migrants. Elisa Bordin discusses how pioneer history, an essential component in the national rhetoric which has circulated cinematically in the form of westerns, is represented in Kelly Reichardt's *Meeks Cutoff* (2010). The director's slow aesthetics and feminist approach, Bordin contends, offers a 'decolonial' portrayal of historical white migration in the West of the United States, which allows to read settlers' history alongside other depictions of contemporary relocations. Migration as a theme in American cinema, and as an occasion for a revisitation of particular genres, is also the focus of Simone Francescato's essay on James Gray's *The Immigrant* (2013) and its dialogue with early-cinema silent melodrama.

As this brief introduction suggests, tackling how American cinema has addressed and combined with issues of migration is a way of approaching multifarious possible interpretations of the two terms in question. The essays gathered here prove that the entanglement of film with movement and displacement can be understood in different ways, which vary if we consider cinema as *produced* by migrants, as *representing* migrants, as *watched* by migrants or, again, as a *site* for new hybrid transnational artistic experimentation. 'Migration cinema' is then a slippery term, which has to do with the cinematic artifact itself and its production/reception, but also with a larger cultural context, intersecting at various levels with discourses on a specific experience and/of specific minorities, refugees, or ethnic groups, as pointed out by postcolonial and diasporic criticism.⁹

The porous character of 'migration cinema' has become especially evident after the transnational turn in film production and scholarship.¹⁰ Cinema plays a central role in the definition of global imaginations and tastes, and therefore of both national and worldwide

⁸ Recent examples have brought into focus black 'migration' across the Atlantic, historically as in *Amistad* (Spielberg 1997), a film that is part of the renewed interest in slavery-related themes of the last few decades, or as a going-back-to-Africa movement, as in *Sankofa* (1993) by Ethiopian American director Haile Gerima.

⁹ The influence of migration on cinema and the media can be found, since the 1960s, in the spread of 'narrowcasting' by which "information, programming, and advertising" is directed to "specific segments of the audience or consumer market" (Castonguay 2015, 364).

¹⁰ See Ezra and Rawle 2010, Rawle 2018, Stam 2019.

subjectivities, which are less and less bounded within national limits and, because of the fluidity of mediascapes, in a constant state of imaginary migration (Appadurai 2005). Somehow anticipating the broad and loose category of transnational cinema, at the dawn of the new century Iranian-American Hamid Naficy coined the term “accented cinema” (2001), through which he describes a variety of cinematic productions dealing with and deriving from migration, displacement, diaspora and similar phenomena. Naficy’s theory allows for both a definition and a systematization of migration cinema which goes beyond the subject matter to encompass a set of features as common denominator of this type of products. According to him, exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial cinema all display “an accented style that encompasses characteristics common to the works of differently situated filmmakers involved in varied decentered social formations and cinematic practices across the globe—all of whom are presumed to share the fact of displacement and deterritorialization” (Naficy 2001, 20-21).

Accented cinema often manifests a certain uneasiness with the limitations of the cinematic medium and calls for its intermedial redefinition. In many ways, the pioneering work of Lithuanian-American director Jonas Mekas, one of the founding fathers of US experimental film of the 1960s and 1970s, and probably “the first displaced person to make that identity the centerpiece of [his] film practice in the 1960s” (Russell 2017, 17), can be seen as the paradigmatic embodiment of the accented cinema auteur. Angelo Grossi’s essay “Bridging the Absence: Jonas Mekas’s Hybrid Cinema” investigates the mediatic hybridity and the inventiveness of Mekas’s classic independent works *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), and *Lost Lost Lost* (1975) by making use of Laura Mark’s theory of “experimental diasporan cinema” (1994). Questions of intermediality are also the focus of the essays by Marija Bradaš and Enrico Davanzo, and by Cinzia Schiavini, as they are differently concerned about how migration cinema intersects and is in constant dialogue with other forms of art, respectively literature and theater. In proposing an illuminating theory adaptation from novel to film as a form of exile, Bradaš and Davanzo’s essay investigates issues of representativeness between former Yugoslavia and the US, a nation that expands beyond its geographical boundaries to emerge as a transnational cultural referent in Miljenko Jergović’s novel *Buick Rivera* and Goran Rušinović’s film adaptation. Cinzia Schiavini examines how theater responds to the cinematic representation of Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11; this is a watershed moment that has pigeonholed this heterogeneous minority into the role of the arch-enemy which theatrical performances like El Guindi’s *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2014) and Younis’s *Browntown* (2004) acknowledge and, at the same time, deconstruct through the use of irony. Finally, transnationality is also reflected in the circulation of

paradigms, as Sabrina Vellucci writes in her essay on Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno's *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* (2006), a film in which the Italian-American directors tackle issues of environmental awareness and protection through a comparative and transnational approach which draws analogies and differences between the consequences of hurricane Katrina in the Mississippi Delta and the problems of flooding in the Venetian lagoon.

Elisa Bordin teaches *American Literature and Culture* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research deals with the western, a genre she analyses in her monograph *Masculinity & Westerns: Regenerations at the Turn of the Millennium* (2014); the literatures of minorities and of migration, with a special focus on Italian-American and Chicano literature; critical race studies, and especially the memory of slavery. On this topic, she edited *Transatlantic Memories of Slavery: Remembering the Past, Changing the Future* (2015, with Anna Scacchi) and *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017, with Stefano Bosco). In 2019 she published *Un'etnicità complessa. Negoziazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante*; she is now working on a book on the 'global Igbo' writer Chris Abani and, in general, the so-called 'new African diaspora' in the United States.

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