The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary Italian Cinema

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The Image of the Migrant as an Element to Understand the Italian Nation

Michele Placido's *7 minuti* (2016), in which the workers' council representatives in an Italian textile factory undergoing a takeover by a French company must vote on the new owner's proposal to cut down their lunch break by seven minutes, dramatizes the subtle but far-reaching stakes of the workers' struggle against the erosion of their rights, bargaining power, and solidarity. The council's members, including Italians and immigrants spanning several generations and united by their desperate determination to keep their jobs, are a veritable microcosm of contemporary Europe, as well as of recent European cinema, in which precarity, legal and "illegal" migration, and the refugee crisis have become part of Europe's general "mise en scène", with the conflict Labor versus Capital attaining the suspenseful (almost epic) dimensions of a classical western or a thriller.

Sabine Schrader and Daniel Winkler's survey of the history of migration cinema in Italy, *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives* (2013), positions migrants as "the new subalterns", the successors of neorealism's favorite figures, fishermen and peasants, but for Vetri Nathan (*Marvelous Bodies: Italy's New Migrant Cinema*, 2017) there is something qualitatively "new" about migrant cinema in Italy, prompting him to coin a new term "Italy's New Migrant Cinema". Although Italian films continue to be shaped by past Italian traditions (especially neorealism, *commedia all'italiana* and the *auteur* film), Nathan argues, Italy's New Migrant Cinema has moved beyond its neo-realist roots, no longer considering immigration as a social issue but, instead, using the figure of the migrant as a prism through which to examine the Italian nation itself. Alberto Zambenedetti (2009), however, paints an unflattering picture of the representation of migration and diaspora in "the New Italian Cinema", unmasking the racist undertones

of Italian "multiculturalism" – specifically, he identifies two trends in Italian migration cinema, films about dark-skinned immigrants (*negri* and *marocchini*) and films about light-skinned immigrants (*slavi* and *albanesi*)—in opposition to the ideal of "the transnational".

Historians Rene Sigrist and Stella Ghervas (2008) have argued that throughout the 20th century Europe was a victim of two totalitarian systems, fascism and communism. The contemporary multicultural "European cocktail'" of common values and bricolage of identities is a product of the attempts of various groups to reclaim their identity by positioning themselves as victims of one or both of these systems, often relating their own oppression to previous forms of oppression in their own country or in other European countries: thus, various marginalized and oppressed groups, from feminists, through ethnic minorities, and more recently refugees and stateless people, frame their claims through an analogy with the extermination of the Jews. History has become a source of legitimation, leading to an unprecedented recalibration of values in European societies, which now tend to valorize victims, granting them a special symbolic status. Being a victim has become a durable state, justified and protected by the law, that reproduces itself in a quasi-hereditary fashion. In this paper I analyze a number of recent films, covering a wide range of genres, to see whether pity and fear continue to be the dominant affective registers in which racial and ethnic Others are represented in Italian films – exemplifying what Sigrist and Ghervas call «victim paradigm» – and whether race continues to be posited as an unbridgeable difference in the construction of the migrant Other.

In *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (Giordana 2005, fig. 46) Sandro, the son of a middle-class Italian family living in Brescia where his father owns a factory, falls overboard in the Mediterranean during a yachting vacation with his father only to be rescued by a boat of refugees, with some of whom – particularly the Romanian youth Radu and his sister Alina – Sandro becomes so close that, when the boat is intercepted by the Italian coast guard, Sandro insists on accompanying his Romanian friends to the refugee processing center rather than agreeing to be sent home. The choice of two Romanian refugees, rather than, say, two African refugees – who represent the majority of refugees on the boat – to act as Sandro's saviors reveals the racial limits of the European liberal imagination. As much as the film purports to advocate a more hospitable relationship to the migrant Other, it resorts to using an "intermediary", a figure that is Other to the Western European self yet not absolutely (i.e., racially) Other – a white Eastern European youth who comes from a country with clear linguistic

and cultural links to Italy (Romania) – to make the "hospitality" to the Other more "palatable".

Since the notion of Sandro's "liberal" white family adopting black "refugee children" is apparently unthinkable, the choice falls upon two white attractive Romanian teenagers who could easily "pass" for Italian. On one hand, Sandro's accident, which transforms him, in a matter of seconds, from the child of a middle-class Italian family living in Italy's prosperous North into a nameless refugee (to protect Sandro from the Sicilian traffickers Radu tells them that Sandro is a Kurdish refugee like him) is meant to underscore what we owe one another as human beings rather than as citizens of particular nations. This idea is succinctly captured in the shot of Sandro, all alone, in the middle of the sea. Such symbolic, quasi-baptismal shots of Europeans floating in the Mediterranean seem to offer a different reading of the term "refugee", considering it not as a legal status but rather along the lines of Agamben's «bare life», which all humans share. However, such a reading is compromised by the film's title (*Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*) which Sandro discovers, to his surprise, to be the name of one of the African refugees working in the detention center. Not only does the name suggest that "refugee" is not something one "becomes" (i.e., it is not a matter of legal status) but rather something one already "is", but it also frames the status of "refugee" in terms of "racial difference/visibility", leaving unchallenged the presumed equivalence between "refugee", "illegal", and "black".

Migratory Forms from Eastern Europe: Solidarity and Neoliberalism

L'ultima rivoluzione (Amoroso 2006) does not explore cultural, ethnic or national differences but the precarious labor conditions experienced by both illegal migrants and Europeans. The film traces the burgeoning friendship between two disenfranchised men living on the fringes of society, a Romanian youth without prospects (Ioan), traveling to Italy on a tourist visa and remaining there to work illegally as a car mechanic, and a middle-aged Italian (Michele), scraping by as a train station janitor in Rome. The montage sequence that opens the film – archival footage ranging from World War II and the Holocaust to the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the Ceausescu regime – not only reminds Europeans of their shared history but also points to their shared precarious present, in which the fate of all Europeans (though,

significantly, white Europeans) is defined by the "structural violence" of neoliberalism, as distinguished from the "physical violence" captured in the opening archival footage sequence. *L'ultima rivoluzione* depicts neoliberalism as the latest incarnation of previous forms of totalitarianism – specifically, fascism and communism – though even more obscene than them, as is suggested by a subplot in which a female photographer, who used to photograph revolutions but eventually abandoned that line of work for the more lucrative world of fashion photography, exploits Ioan's personal history of forced displacement and precarious existence to advertise a new high-fashion line appropriately called "Exile".

La nostra vita (Luchetti 2010) follows Claudio, a young construction worker living happily with his pregnant wife, two children and a third on the way, on the outskirts of Rome. When his wife dies during childbirth Claudio dedicates himself to making money to make up for his sons' loss by making their lives as materially comfortable as possible. He negotiates a deal with his boss to give him his own construction site to supervise, in exchange for which Claudio promises not to report the death of an illegal Romanian worker that his boss is covering up. After spending the money he borrowed from his drug-dealing neighbor, Claudio runs into problems: his site workers (mostly illegal migrants) quit, since he is unable to pay them, and steal most of his equipment. Meanwhile, ridden by guilt, Claudio also has to deal with the dead Romanian's ex-lover and son who come looking for him. Luchetti depicts the Italian working class as sharing the same precarious existence as that of immigrants, legal or illegal. The title of the film – "our life" – reflects precisely this sense of a life shared by people that until recently used to see each other as occupying different spaces, Europeans and "Europeans without euros".

Like most of the other films considered here, however, *La nostra vita* suggests the possibility for solidarity along socio-economic lines but not along racial ones. It is instructive to compare the Italians' perception of Romanians (the ex-lover of the dead Romanian and her son) and their perception of the Senegalese woman, Celeste, whom Claudio wants to hire to take care of his baby. While Celeste lives with Claudio's drug dealing friend, with whom she has a child, Claudio's sister objects to her being her brother's nanny but refuses to admit that the reason for her objection has to do with Celeste being black. Claudio's sister is equally suspicious of her other brother's budding romance with Gabriela, the dead Romanian's ex-lover, but for different reasons – she suspects Gabriela of being a gold-digger, playing into the familiar stereotype of Eastern Europeans women as "predators"

looking to exploit financially "naïve" Western Europeans. In this respect, then, the film reproduces, even while criticizing, the familiar image of the racial Other as the ultimate "Other" and the image of the Eastern European Other as "like us but not quite us".

Precarious Lives: Parallels between Migrants and Italian Citizens

Mediterranea (Carpignano 2015, fig. 47) tells the story of Ayiva, a man from Burkina Faso who makes the difficult journey from his country to Southern Italy, where he is forced to live in a squatted property with other African illegal migrants while working as an orange picker and sending money back to his sister and daughter for their future journey to Italy. From the moment the migrants arrive in Rosarno, it is made clear that they are not welcome as some of the locals drive their scooters menacingly around them, break their parties looking for prostitutes, and stare them down threateningly at the dance club. Ayiva is soon introduced to Pio, a charismatic, no-nonsense Italian Romani boy of lower-class origins running his own version of the black market directly from his parents' house, where he sells and buys stolen goods from illegal migrants and Italians alike. Pio smokes, knows how to bargain, and boasts excellent entrepreneurial skills.

The film emphasizes Ayiva's and Pio's shared socio-economic disenfranchisement, once again drawing a parallel between the experience of migrants and non-migrants, specifically Italians living in a small Southern town far from the industrial, prosperous North.

In one scene a female friend of Ayiva makes fun of his clothes, telling him that he looks "like one of those guys hanging out at the train station", referring to unemployed Italians. Ultimately, however, race proves an insurmountable difference. The gradually escalating tension between locals and migrants finally erupts in a series of violent outbursts as the migrants are evicted from their house and the house burned. The hostilities quickly escalate into a riot, which Ayiva is initially reluctant to join; however, when the police fire tear gas and start beating up protesters, Ayiva joins the protesters as they march through the streets yelling «Stop shooting blacks!» (rather than «Stop shooting migrants!»), recalling a very similar sequence from another film exploring racial conflict in America, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

The implicit connection *Mediterranea* draws between the plight of socially and economically disenfranchised Europeans and the plight of refugees

is even more explicit in *Terraferma* (Crialese 2011, fig. 48), which examines the encounter between an old Sicilian family of fishermen on the island of Linosa and a group of African immigrants, specifically a mother and her two young children. The story centers on the young Filippo, who lives with his mother (Donatella) and grandfather, his father, a fisherman, having disappeared at sea three years earlier. The film paints a detailed picture of the precarious life of fishermen on Linosa, with most of the remaining fishermen getting old and selling their boats, their children having already left the island for better opportunities elsewhere. Both the Italians living on this small, isolated island and the African refugees trying to enter Europe are desperately looking for "terraferma", not just in the sense of mainland but also in the sense of socio-economic stability.

This portrayal of the Italian South as a poor and archaic region, an *Africa a casa*, is in line with a long tradition of representing the migration of Italians from the South to the North. Matteo Garrone's *Ospiti* (1998) draws a similar connection between an Albanian illegal immigrant to Italy (supposedly a guest) and a poor, unemployed Italian who has migrated 30 years ago from Sardinia to Rome. And yet, even as *Terraferma* invokes the continuities between the plight of African refugees and that of the inhabitants of *Africa a casa*, in the film's most visually striking scene the "arrival" of the African refugees on the island is depicted as a violent and horrific event. Filippo and a girl are enjoying a date on a boat when dozens of black bodies rise up menacingly from the dark water and swim furiously towards them in a shot strikingly reminiscent of the shark attack in Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975); the girl screams in horror while Filippo fends off the refugees with a stick as they try to climb on board, eventually managing to turn on the motor and speed away, leaving the black bodies behind.

Io sono Li (Segre 2011, fig. 49) tells the story of a Chinese immigrant, Shun Li, working in a café in Venice to pay off for her move to Italy and to bring her son over from China. She befriends Bepi, an older Serbian immigrant who came to Italy thirty years ago and is now perceived by the locals as Italian. The first part of the film emphasizes the widening gap between the older, traditional working class Italian culture of the fishermen and the younger generation. Conversations about family, work and fishing reveal that all characters in the film, regardless of their racial or national background, share the same history of traditional work (related to the sea) passed down from one generation to the next, but this kind of traditional lifestyle, and the worldview that it comes with, is now declining: Shun Li works in a factory (like many other immigrants), Bepi and his old

Italian fishermen friends are now retiring, and the younger generation of Italians have none of the work ethic and respect for family and tradition of the older generation. In the second part of the film, as Italians observe with growing suspicion the blossoming friendship between Shun Li and Bepi, class conflicts are gradually overshadowed by racial ones. Significantly, throughout the film Shun Li refers to Bepi as "Italian" i.e., she sees him first and foremost as a white European man rather than an immigrant like her. As the Italians become increasingly hostile to Shun Li, they rationalize their racial prejudice through recourse to economics: in one scene Avvocato explains the economic threat Shun Li represents to Italy as Chinese immigrants continue to steal jobs from Italians («It's an invasion! The New Empire!») with the animosity directed at Shun Li escalating, the older and younger generation of Italians that were previously at odds with each other reunite against the common threat of the racialized Other.

Fiore gemello (Luchetti 2018, fig. 50), set in Sardinia, follows two teenagers on the run as they gradually form a loving bond that is instinctive and tactile, rather than based on verbal communication. Anna is running away from Manfredi, the refugee trafficker for whom her father used to work, and Basim is a refugee from Côte d'Ivoire hiding from Italian immigration authorities. Through several flashbacks we learn that Anna's father's decision to stop working as a human trafficker drove Manfredi to kill him. The film's operative metaphor of "the twin flower" – a flower that Anna comes upon in her work for an old gardener in town – refers not only to the bond of love and trust that gradually forms between Basim and Anna but also to their shared experience of vulnerability, marginalization and disenfranchisement.

The film invites us to see Basim's refugee status and all the dangers and humiliations associated with it as structurally similar to the marginal status of socially disenfranchised Italians like Anna and her father, the lonely cross-dressing male prostitute Basim meets on several occasions, and the prostitutes alongside whom Basim is forced to "work" to make some money (presumably the prostitutes include both Italians and migrants/refugees). The parallel between refugees and other marginal figures (prostitutes, transvestites, beggars) is further underscored by the setting of the film in a small, desolate coastal town consisting of an abandoned salt mine, a little café whose only customers are a few old men, and a lot of abandoned houses, in one of which Anna and Basim seek refuge. Despite the important affinities between refugees and various marginalized figures on the periphery of Italian society, the story clearly privileges Anna's character. Although

both Basim and Anna have been traumatized by their past, it is only Anna's past that the film is interested in, as evidenced by the flashback structure through which Luchetti reconstructs the tragic sequence of events that left Anna speechless. While Anna is thus granted a backstory, an interior life, and a personal trauma that explains her behavior and state of mind in the present, Basim's character remains a blank canvass onto which viewers are invited to project whatever stereotypical images of, and stories about, refugees they are familiar with from the media. Anna is a two-dimensional character, Basim remains a type ("the refugee").

No other film reflects the challenges of dramatizing the increasing overlap between migrant stories and stories of disenfranchised Europeans outside the «victim paradigm» than *Lazzaro felice* (Rohrwacher 2018, fig. 51), which tells the story of a group of villagers exploited by a woman (the Marchesa) as unpaid labor to harvest tobacco for her, despite the outlawing of sharecropping as a practice in Italy in the early 1980s. One memorable sequence, in which Lazzaro, walking towards the city, joins a crowd of unemployed, illegal immigrants of different ethnic and racial background, paints a potent image of the reproduction of the system of inequalities, the peasants and workers of the past now replaced by the refugees and illegal migrants of the present. *Lazzaro* shows the perpetuation of class inequalities by tracing the historical continuity between the aristocracy and the petit bourgeoisie of the past (the Marchesa, Nicola) and the exploiters of the present, the European Central Bank and the traffickers of illegal labor like the older Nicola, who is seen recruiting dozens of multi-ethnic, multi-racial illegal workers by "auctioning" available jobs to those who offer to do them for the least amount of money. However, the most important class (for Marx) – the working class – is missing from the film: instead, there is Lazzaro, blissfully unaware of being exploited, and the farmhands, who are only vaguely aware of some injustice being done to them but whose "revolt" is limited to absurd little pranks.

Although Lazzaro is a figure with whom any European who perceives themselves as disenfranchised can identify, a figure onto which different social groups can project their own claims phrased in terms of victimhood, this figure's main symbolic function is to represent the reproduction of class relations rather than the attainment of class consciousness; in fact, Lazzaro could be seen as the embodiment of «false consciousness». In the last scene he goes to the bank to demand that Marchesa's properties be returned to her but since the villagers, including himself, used to belong to the Marchesa, what Lazzaro actually demands is his (and the others) re-enslavement. Lazzaro is no longer the saintly figure he

was in the beginning of the film but a reactionary figure, nostalgic for the old, pre-neoliberal form of oppression, which for him does not represent oppression but simply the "natural state of things" – in short, he is an obstacle to class struggle. It is not Lazzaro but the former farmhands – now the lumpenproletariat – who, at the end of the film, begin to show signs of class consciousness as they consider, for the first time, the possibility of resistance (Pippo proposes, half-jokingly, to return to Inviolata and squat the Marchesa's house "without bosses").

As I hope this analysis has demonstrated, although recent films fail to decouple racial identity from migrant identity, many of them acknowledge the precarious existence shared by both disenfranchised Italians and migrants/refugees.

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