

## **Introduction**

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**Bio:** Temenuga Trifonova is Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at York University in Toronto. She is author of the monographs *The Image in French Philosophy* (2007) and *Warped Minds: Cinema and Psychopathology* (2014) and the edited collections *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* (2017) and *European Film Theory* (2008). She has been a Marie Curie fellow at Le Studium Centre for Advanced Studies and a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome, the Dora Maar House, the Bologna Institute for Advanced Studies, and the Waseda Institute for Advanced Studies. Her latest book, *The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Academic in 2020.

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Stanislaw Mucha's documentary *Die Mitte/The Center* (2004) follows the director's quest—through a dozen provincial towns spanning the territories of Central and Eastern Europe—for 'the center of Europe', a quest that serves as a pretext for an exploration of what Europe means to its various inhabitants, especially those on Europe's periphery. The film opens in the small Austrian town of Braunau, whose inhabitants, though proud to live in 'the center of Europe', reluctantly acknowledge that this 'center' is mostly known as Hitler's birthplace. As the search moves eastward the idea of 'Europe', shaped by people's individual and national histories, emerges as both too amorphous and too narrow. In the Slovakian town of Krahule, which also claims the status of 'Europe's center,' Mucha interviews a railroad construction worker and a monk, both of whom believe the center to be located in the belfry of a little church (now transformed into a spa with allegedly healing powers) that would have been built somewhere else, where it would have collapsed, had it not been for an angel who warned the workers not to build the church there but in Krahule. If in the German and Austrian narrative 'the center of Europe' is associated with the continent's recent political history (World War II and the Holocaust), the Slovak narrative (re)locates the 'center'—that is, the idea—of Europe in the continent's shared spiritual, specifically Christian, legacy.

*Die Mitte*, which was released in 2004—the year Slovakia joined the EU—makes palpable the tension between the concepts of 'Europe' and 'the EU'. In one scene a toothless local shows the film crew a billboard depicting the naked behinds of several men and women, under which the following sentence can be read (in Slovak): "Let's join the European Union but not with naked asses!" The ensuing lively discussion of billboard semiotics reveals the Slovaks' (and, more generally, the former communist bloc

inhabitants') ambivalence regarding their 'Europenization', a process they see as depending on them 'cleaning up' their act (and their behinds) in order to 'deserve' to be considered European, something they already are: when Mucha asks a couple of locals if they think they will have more money when they are 'in Europe', they respond "We *are* in Europe," reminding him/us that 'Europe' is not synonymous with 'the EU.'

The search for Europe's 'center' moves further east, with a stop in the towns of Suchowola, Kutno and Piatek in Poland, which also joined the EU in 2004. While the film continues exploring the distinction between the idea of 'Europe' and the concept of the EU as a political and economic entity, it now broaches a new subject—the mass emigration from Eastern to Western Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Tellingly, when a Suchowola postman informs the crew that Suchowola is 'the center of Europe' because it gets a lot of international mail (mostly from the US and western Europe)—in fact, the majority of Suchowola residents actually live abroad—he is reimagining the idea of 'Europe' in terms of absence so that a town famous for the mass exodus of its inhabitants becomes 'the center of Europe'. In Piatek a construction worker informs the crew that, "This shitty place is not the center of Europe. The center of Poland, and of Europe, is somewhere else, somewhere in the fields, but you will never find it." Eventually agreeing to serve as the crew's guide, he takes them to a bare field on the town's outskirts where the real 'center' is to be found, previously marked by a stone but now left unmarked. The man explains that the stone used to mark the spot of an important Polish military victory over the Germans thereby underscoring the importance of national histories in the construction of the idea of 'Europe'. As Mucha interviews other locals, however, even this tangible historical source of meaning seems to

disintegrate: when a peasant woman takes the crew to a building she claims to be the center of Europe all they find inside is a stone with an illegible engraving. “This could be anything,” Mucha comments skeptically. Later, another local Mucha interviews informs him that Piatek is the center of the ‘Polish Jungle’, the name given to Białowieża Forest, one of the last and largest remaining parts of the enormous primeval forest that once stretched across the European plain, now designated as a UNESCO world heritage site. At this point the center/idea of ‘Europe’ seems to dissolve completely, Europe now appearing no longer as a continent of nation states but as wild borderless terrain.

The further east the crew travels the more nebulous and amorphous identities and borders become, testifying to the central role that both internal and external migration and emigration have historically played in the construction of ‘Europe’, and to the hybrid and movable nature of ‘European identity’. The inhabitants of precisely those places that claim the honorable status of Europe’s ‘center’ feel themselves the most disenfranchised members of this ‘Europe’ to which they supposedly belong, living in an almost separate temporal realm and in places increasingly abandoned and forgotten. Stopping in a Lithuanian village Mucha and his crew talk with a group of women and children, who turn out to be Poles. When Mucha comments how odd it is that only Poles seem to be living in Lithuania, the women reply, in Polish, “This is not Lithuania. This used to be Poland. Lithuania is new here,” reminding us of the constant drawing and redrawing of borders that has accompanied the construction of Europe both as an idea and a reality. The women’s disappointment with ‘joining Europe’ points up the discrepancy between East Europeans’ romantic expectations of ‘returning to Europe’ and the harsh realities of the apparently never-ending ‘transition years’. Ironically, although Lithuanians are

supposedly 'part of Europe' (Lithuania joined the EU in 2004) they feel more than ever exiled to its periphery. Yet it is not so much their 'Europenization' that the Lithuanian women Mucha interviews regard as their greatest misfortune, but rather the downfall of the Soviet Union. As an old Lithuanian couple share with Mucha the poignant story of their relatives who, unable to continue living a life of precarity and despair, committed suicide after 1989, the film questions the dominant narrative of the democratic victory that the collapse of the Soviet Union supposedly represented.

The mood is more or less the same in the Ukrainian town of Rachiv, whose inhabitants proudly escort Mucha to the 'center' of Europe, a protected historical monument marked by a bronze plaque. A local bum lounging on the side of the road lazily explains to the filmmaker 'the time difference' between Kiev and Europe—not surprisingly, 'Kiev time' moves slower than 'European time'—hinting at the sense of spatial and temporal marginalization/delay experienced by those on the eastern periphery of Europe. Here, as in Lithuania, people's response to their country's independence is, at best, muted—on the day Mucha interviews an old woman working in a newspaper kiosk Ukrainians are about to celebrate 10 years of independent Ukraine by getting drunk and trying to forget they have no money to pay the bills.

In the film's final sequence Mucha and his team run into a Swiss couple hiking in the forest. The Swiss use their GPS to determine precisely the center of Europe but when they compare what the GPS shows them to the coordinates in their guide book they find that the two do not match. Mucha and his crew follow the Swiss couple into the forest and as we lose sight of them all we can hear is a disembodied voice asking: "Where are we?" There is no answer.

Although Mucha's film deals with internal migration and with the repercussions of the EU's eastward expansion, the questions it raises about the borders of Europe and the elusive nature of 'European identity' have hardly gone away; on the contrary, they have re-emerged even more forcefully since the film was made, particularly in light of the 2008 European economic crisis and the 2015 refugee crisis. To grasp the profound ambiguity surrounding the idea of 'Europe' and 'European identity', rendered with absurdist overtones in Mucha's film, one need only juxtapose the traditional characteristics of 'Europeanness' deriving from the continent's founding philosophical and religious traditions, including Christianity, Roman law, and the Enlightenment—here 'Europeanness' is defined in relation to the concepts of the polis, citizenship, democracy and participation, rationalism, universality, and cosmopolitanism—with the immense contradictions underlying the concept of 'Europeanness' defined in relation to political and economic circumstances.

Over the last couple of decades Europe has seen a trend of populist right-wing parties riding on the wave of multicultural backlash across Europe, gaining widespread support with xenophobic nationalist-populist slogans purporting to save ethno-nationalist culture from the threat of immigrants. The Brexit referendum, following a prolonged political campaign of heightened anxiety over border control, was simply the most dramatic expression of the crisis of democracy Europe is facing. The sweeping territorial recalibration following the establishment of the EU has led many scholars to declare the emergence of a post-national European identity and citizenship based on mobility and universal human rights rather than on the rights of persons as members of nation-states. In *Tracking Europe: Mobility, Diaspora, and the Politics of Location* (2010) Ginette

Verstraette claims that the notion of 'imagined mobility' has become more essential to the notion of European identity than Benedict Anderson's influential idea of 'imagined community', which is still territorial in nature. And yet, while it might seem that we have entered a post-national age marked by identities that are provisional, fluid, incoherent and ephemeral, the nation state has not lost any of its relevance or authority: regardless of the supposed dissolution of borders under globalization, modern citizenship still embeds identity and legal rights in the territorial nation-state.

Mucha's film testifies to the perceptiveness of Svetlana Boym's geopolitical analysis of the role 'nostalgia' plays in the construction of the idea of 'Europe'. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002) Boym maps the distinction between a narrow ('restorative') and a broad ('reflective') sense of nostalgia onto the geopolitical map of Europe, differentiating a projective or future-oriented form of nostalgia, which she associates with Eastern Europe, from a regressive, past-oriented form of nostalgia, which she associates with Western Europe. Her analysis of the different ways in which Eastern Europeans (i.e. the former communist bloc) and Western Europeans experience nostalgia sees the former as projecting themselves into the future and longing for a 'Europe-to-come' and the latter as projecting themselves into what they perceive as an objectively constituted, factual European past in which, however, they are not affectively invested. Thus, if 'Europe' is an object of nostalgic longing, this object is experienced differently at the center and at the margins: as an object of romantic longing in the first case, and as an abstract ideal stripped of affective attachment in the second case.

Boym's geopolitical reading of nostalgia, which associates the politically regressive, restorative form of nostalgia with the West, and the progressive form of

nostalgia with the margins of Europe, is continuous with the shift in recent debates around European identity from an idea of ‘Europeanness’ as a *shared cultural identity* (rooted in the past) to the idea of European identity as a *shared political project* (oriented toward the future). ‘Europe’ is increasingly thought from the margins or the periphery—hence the importance of the symbolic figure of the migrant as the quintessential *marginal* figure and, at the same time, a *utopian* figure representing the ‘third way’ between nationalism and supra-nationalism. Migrants and refugees have become, in Rey Chow’s words, ‘the new ‘primitives’ of Europe.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed, ‘immigration’ has become the most recent term for ‘race’, and Europeans’ attitudes toward migrants and refugees represent a new form of racism, a ‘benign, cultural or differentialist neo-racism’<sup>2</sup>—exemplified by anti-Semitism, Arabphobia, or the confusion of ‘Arabness’ and ‘Islamicism’—which has displaced the older, more overt form of biological racism. At the same time, the figure of the migrant has also been celebrated as a symbol of 1) ‘nomadic excess’, 2) the ‘structural excess’ constitutive of law and morality, 3) a utopian model for rethinking the idea of ‘European identity’.

The purpose of this special issue of *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* is to reflect on contemporary debates around the concepts of ‘Europe’ and ‘European identity’ with a particular attention to the ambiguities and contradictory aspects of the figure of the migrant and the ways in which this figure challenges us to rethink concepts like ‘European identity’, citizenship, justice, ethics, liberty, tolerance, and hospitality in the post-national context of ephemerality, volatility, and contingency that finds people looking for firmer markers of identity.



The issue opens with Thomas Elsaesser's reflections on the diminishing relevance of Europe and European cinema. Elsaesser elaborates on the continuities between his earlier book on European cinema, *European Cinema Face to Face with Hollywood* (2005) and his latest one, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (2018), focusing on three guiding ideas: 1) European cinema as a 'symbolic construction' or a 'thought experiment'; 2) European cinema understood in terms of 'double occupancy' or as 'a cinema of abjection'; 3) European cinema's increasingly multicultural and transnational nature articulated in terms of 'mutual interference' or 'antagonistic mutuality'. Elsaesser's main objective in developing these concepts in light of Europe's (and European cinema's) increasing marginalization on the global stage is to propose a new model and method through which European cinema can/should be studied, one no longer based on the 'Europe-Hollywood' binary and not focusing solely or mainly on cinema, but rather on 'what in this period of intense internal and external crises we mean by "Europe".'

Sharing Elsaesser's scepticism toward the idea of 'European identity,'<sup>3</sup> Ali Taşkale and Erdoğan Şima read 'European identity' as a shorthand for ontological anxiety 'that both recoils from and accepts the superfluousness of boundaries'. Using *Zama* (Lucrecia Martel, 2017) and *The Other Side of Hope* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2017) as case studies, they examine the ways in which this 'ontological anxiety' becomes embodied in the figures of the *migrant* and the *coloniser*.

In his contribution Boris Pantev argues that most recent fiction films addressing the European migrant crisis fail to convey the urgent need for an *ethical* response to the crisis. Taking his cue from Elsaesser's argument about European cinema's *philosophical*

potential, Pantev analyzes three recent non-fiction films dealing with refugees—Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016), Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* (2017), and Guido Hendriks's *Stranger in Paradise* (2016)—in order to argue that while the first two remain committed to a more traditional project, whose most prominent advocate is Jürgen Habermas—namely the idea of human rights as a universal regulative norm—Hendriks's film, which articulates what Derrida and Rudolph Gasché describe as the aporia obtaining between *unconditional* and *conditional hospitality*, represents a more radical view, according to which 'Europe is not a theoretical model of democracy to be practically realized but a demand for an unconditional openness and responsibility'.

The next two essays are, like Pantev's, concerned with the ethical encounter with the migrant/refugee 'Other'. Seung-hoon Jeong develops the idea of the socially redefined 'abject' as an existential 'gift' through a closely reading of Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) and the Dardenne brothers' *The Promise* (1006), both of which feature non-Western migrants in Western Europe as 'the abject' against the background of multicultural conflicts between global (Christian) Europe and its (Islamic) periphery, and both of which Jeong reads as variations on the Abraham-Isaac story. Taking his cue from well-known readings of this story (e.g. those by Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Luc Marion, Derrida, and Levinas) Jeong reads the Abraham-Isaac motif in these films as an instance of a new 'abject-stranger', a 'faceless Third' who takes the place of 'the Other', and whose 'otherness' is indeterminable in terms of the 'friend or enemy' dichotomy. This new 'abject Other' is better understood, Jeong proposes, through 'the ethics of the neighbor' (Kenneth Reinhard, Eric Santner, and Slavoj Žižek), in which one connects to the Other's abjectness 'beyond cultural mediation or identity labels'.

Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber's contribution continues Jeong's exploration of the 'gift' by focusing on gestures of welcome extended by white European characters to undocumented migrants in Lioret's *Welcome* (2009) and Peren's *Die Farbe des Ozeans* (2011). In both films, the authors claim, these 'gifts' or 'gestures of welcome' remain embedded in Europe's racialized and gendered politics, thus becoming acts of power and domination that do not adequately challenge the relationship between Europe, its borders, and the production of precarity. Ultimately, the grammar of power embedded in the gift can only effectively challenge Europe as a producer of precarity by suspending the terms under which the gift is offered, that is to say, by working to upend the very definition of 'giver' and 'receiver'.

Next, Mary Harrod examines the similarities in the representation of migrant and fluid identities in two otherwise very different films, *Personal Shopper* (Assayas, 2016) and *Happy End* (Haneke, 2017), suggesting that both films explicitly associate the newly fluid, 'post-human' identities, whose construction is facilitated by screen technologies, with *ethical* transgressions. In this way the films imagine broader questions about social and legal responsibility, raised by transnational mobility and advanced technology, through intimate stories that may be more viscerally affecting than openly political or allegorical narratives.

It is precisely with such openly political or allegorical narratives that Elizabeth Ezra is concerned in her essay, which focuses on *The Square* (Östlund, 2017) and *Happy End* (Haneke, 2017), two films that skirt around the edges of immigration in Europe while addressing the question of who belongs and who does not in terms of boundaries—not only the boundaries that determine where one country ends and another begins, but

also (and especially) those that determine who is a member of civil society. By exploring how the bounds of what is considered appropriate are breached in specific spatial contexts, Ezra suggests, both films question the meaning of ‘civility’ in both a social and political sense, thus prompting us to contemplate the various meanings of *hospitality*.

Alice Bardan’s essay considers the ways in which contemporary filmmakers experiment with narrative and stylistic strategies to tell a story about Europe in a moment of ‘crisis’, caught in a paranoid policing of borders. Drawing on the work of Thomas Elsaesser, Eric Bullot and Jacques Derrida, Bardan situates films like Christian Petzold’s *Transit* (2018) and Aki Kaurismaki’s *Le Havre* (2011) within a larger framework of ‘post-mortem’ films that convey a sense of haunting and raise issues of memory, history, and identity.

Finally, focusing on a single film, *The Nothing Factory* (Pedro Pinho, 2017), Mariana Liz asks what this film, which illuminates the contradictions of globalization and neoliberalism by depicting austerity in Portugal through a post-national lens, tells us about ‘Europe’ and ‘European identity’. Liz asserts that a serious consideration of marginal and peripheral cinemas is crucial for understanding what is left of ‘European identity’ in geographical, political, and cultural terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Bowman, Paul (ed.) (2010), *The Rey Chow Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (1997), *Race, nation, classe: les identités ambiguës*. Paris: La découverte/Poche.

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<sup>3</sup> Some have argued that the term 'identity' is better suited to stable and homogenous societies and is thus no longer meaningful when speaking of contemporary Europe. According to Salvador Cardus, a better metaphor for identity 'that emphasizes not content but the container...[is] the skin' (71). Salvador Cardus (2010), 'New Ways of Thinking about Identity in Europe'. In *Ethnic Europe: Mobility, Identity and Conflict in a Globalized World*, edited by Roland Hsu, 63-79. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP. For a critique of the idea of 'European identity' see also Andreas Follesdal (2009), 'If No Common and Unique European Identity Exists, Should We Create One?' In *Nationalism and Multiculturalism In a World of Immigration*, edited by Nils Holtug, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen and Sune Laegaard, 194-227. London: Palgrave Macmillan.