Migrant Cinema: Transnational and Guerrilla Practices of Film Production and Representation

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This paper explores the transnational industry of migrant cinema. It particularly addresses the production and ‘guerrilla film-making’ of this genre in Italy, whilst analysing the effects of cultural policies on productions and representation. After defining the genre of migrant cinema—or ‘accented cinema’, as Hamid Naficy terms it—by positioning it within the wider theoretical framework of Third Cinema, I concentrate on aspects of representation and diversity, identity and cultural participation. I focus on the means of production and distribution as they have expanded in a transnational strategy of international co-productions beyond post-colonial communication and cooperation flows, and within new dynamics created by digital technology.

Keywords: Cinema; Migration; Production; Identity; Transnationalism

Introduction

This essay surveys the transnational industry of migrant cinema. I concentrate especially on the case of film-making of this genre in Italy. I start my paper by defining the genre of migrant cinema—or ‘accented cinema’, as Hamid Naficy terms it (Naficy 2001)—by locating it within the wider theoretical framework of Third Cinema, and by concentrating on aspects of representation and diversity, identity and cultural participation. Film production for film-makers of migrant origin or a refugee background is not only the result of the expression of a professional vocation but is laden with issues of identity, whereby filming becomes a form of cultural activism, in a similar vein to what happens for indigenous film-making activity (Ginsburg 2002). The paper focuses on the means of production and distribution as they have further expanded in a transnational space of international co-productions beyond post-colonial communication and cooperation flows, along with the new
dynamics created by digital technology. I thus aim to analyse the effects that different public policy environments have on the content and production of such films, whilst describing the new opportunities created by a transnational approach to film production.

I argue that the ways in which access to resources is facilitated creates different opportunities for film productions, which in turn are linked to the different content and reception of such films. The advent of digital cinema, which has allowed for easier independent low-budget productions as well as facilitating industry networking at a global level, has created new opportunities. This has reflected itself in the ways in which film-makers have adapted their production strategies. In particular, it has led to a distribution of films carried out in a sort of ‘guerrilla style’ from within migrant communities at local levels.

A particular focus of this paper is on Italy. Mass migration has been a long-standing feature of Italian society throughout the postwar era if not long before (Bonifazi 2007). During the 1950s and 1960s emigration and internal (rural–urban, South–North) migration were dominant. Since the late 1980s, Italy has been transformed from a country of emigrants to a country of immigration. The latest data (Caritas e Migrantes 2007) suggest that there are 3.7 million immigrants living in Italy, made up of more than 100 different nationalities; thus pluralism is a matter of fact in everyday life. At present, there is not yet any cultural policy in Italy that aims to tackle cultural diversity, let alone any special provision for the production of images on the issue of migrants’ representation. Images on migration are therefore left to TV reportage or interpretation by Italian film-makers of a world that is not theirs, whilst ‘migrant’ film-makers are enacting productions which are forms of cultural resistance: in the words of Graziella Parati, they ‘talk back’ to the Italian host culture, thereby ‘recolouring’ it (Parati 2006: 12). Yet in Italy most films on migration are in fact made by Italian film-makers, whilst aspiring migrant film-makers with beautiful stories to visually tell are left without support, if not exploited in terms of filmic ideas. However, there are some exceptional film-making activities in Italy that reflect the potential of creativity within the migrant communities and challenge mainstream images of migration.

I further argue that who represents who impacts on the how of representation: if questions of representation are closely interlinked to the modes of productions—who does produce what and how—then access to funding affects the representation and the space for expression (see Grassilli 2002). Dynamics of cultural identities and social politics are thus played through the films, both at the production and at the film-making levels.

I will address these aspects in general in the next three sections of this paper, by drawing on examples in Europe and in North America, before moving on to some cases of migrant cinema in Italy in the last section of my essay.
'Accented Cinema' in Europe and Beyond

Migration has been represented in many films, by film-makers who themselves had experienced displacement and exile, either by choice or through forceful events. The need to transpose the intensity of the migration experience into art, whether through images, words or paintings, has fed some of the most important works in contemporary society. Waves of films from the mid-1980s in the UK (Black British cinema) and in France (beur cinema) attracted the attention of critics who started to recognise this cinema as a new genre: a cinema of migration or, as Hamid Naficy prefers to call it, a sort of ‘accented cinema’ (Naficy 2001), where the accent emanates from the displacement of the film-maker and their artisanal production modes. Diasporic people, at once ‘inside’ and ‘outside’—that is exilic film-makers, transnational film-makers living for instance between Paris and Dakar, second-generation ‘immigrant’ European citizens, etc.—carry in fact an ‘accent’, a particular aesthetic or genre, which is reflected in the story that they tell, or in the way the film is produced.

The work of African and beur film-makers in France and Belgium, Black British film-makers in the UK from the Caribbean to South Asia, and Turkish film-makers in Germany, as well as the creation of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the incredible success of sitcoms in the UK such as Goodness Gracious Me, or the irreverent figure of Ali G (now Borat!), have all contributed to the assertion of a new ‘European’ culture that is global and plural, despite the exclusionary demographic controls exerted by Fortress Europe. It is on issues of identity and representation that migrant film-makers have initiated their cinematic gaze, by denouncing and correcting distorted, stereotyped or simplified representations from the outside of that complex experience that is migration. Self-representing their community against the general hegemonic media representation has been a form of political action by the Black Audio Film Collective and the Sankofa Collective in the UK, with films by John Akomfrah, such as Handsworth Songs on the riots in Brixton, and by Isaac Julien, notably his Territories on the Notting Hill Carnival and associated questions of identity. The sense of alienation and exclusion in a country that does not truly accept them as citizens has been the inspiration in France for beur films such as Le Thé au Harem d’Archimède by Medhi Charef, or Baton Rouge and Cheb by Rachid Bouchareb. Inter-generational conflict and religious aspects of interethnic relations, as well as the contemporary mixing of cultures in the metropolitan centres have been the focus of films by British Asian film-makers such as My Beautiful Laundrette and My Son the Fanatic, scripted by Hanif Kureshi, or Bhaji on the Beach, directed by Gurinder Chada. Some female migrant film-makers—among whom Mona Hatoum (Palestinian exiled in London), Trin Minh-ha (Vietnamese living in the US) or Shirin Neshat (Iranian, also living in the US)—have instead used the instrument of their camera for autobiographical reflection, projecting and experimenting a fragmented image, dislocated, but re-contextualised for instance through cinematographic narrative and design (Naficy 2001).
As Laura Marks suggests, what she prefers to define as ‘intercultural’ cinema is not only a visual representation of experience, but also and indeed a physical and multisensory embodiment of culture. Vision can itself be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes (Marks 2000: vi). Through this sort of ‘haptic visuality’, films trigger physical memory of a sense of smell, touch and tastes, thus engaging the viewer to bodily convey cultural experience and memory. Since memory functions multisensorially, a work of cinema, though it only directly engages two senses, activates a memory that necessarily involves all the senses. A number of works by ‘accented’ film-makers appeal to touch, smell and taste. Similarly ‘haptic’ are the provocative performative and visual works by Guillermo Gomez Peña on the ‘Chicano’ stereotypes and ‘ethno-cyborg specimens’ in the US (Gomez-Peña 2000).

But what is the genre of cinema of migration? In An Accented Cinema, Hamid Naficy shows how the personal experiences of exile and diaspora translate into films. Although the experience of ‘expatriation’ varies greatly from one person to another, the films themselves exhibit stylistic similarities, from their open- and closed-form aesthetics to their nostalgic and memory-driven multilingual narratives, and from their emphasis on political agency to their concern with identity and transgression of identity (Naficy 2001).

We might read the contemporary aesthetic visual practices that are expressed through ‘accented’ cinema as a sign of the emergence of a new artistic wave, but we could also position them within the ongoing trend of committed artistic action and performance that started in the 1960s under the framework of Third Cinema (Stam 2003: 31–2). The ‘cinema of migration’ very often presents the work of socially committed film-makers: ‘accented’ film-makers make films to express their views as a tool for cultural activism, as a form of visual resistance. Like Africans, Latinos, Asians or indigenous people in the history of cinema, migrants have been the victim of stereotyping and simplistic representations. Migrant films are thus similar in aspirations to those of Third Cinema: set against social injustice and global exploitation, for cultural and political activism, towards contemporary struggles and displacement.

Third Cinema theory indisputably arose in Latin America through its various manifestos of the 1960s (e.g. An Aesthetic of Hunger by Glauber Rocha, Brazil; Towards a Third Cinema by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gentino, Argentina), in response to world-wide liberation struggles and decolonisation movements. ‘Third Cinema’ film-makers had in common that same tricontinental call to arms against social injustice and post-imperial exploitation as those of the inspirational activist-theorists of the preceding generation, Ho Chi Minh, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Amilcar Cabral (Shohat and Stam 1994: 248). ‘As an idea, its immediate inspiration was rooted in the Cuban revolution (1959) and in Brazil’s Cinema Novo . . . but also drew on the ideals of Italian neo-realism . . . of social documentary, as well as on various kinds of Marxist aesthetics . . . [T]he various manifestos and polemics . . . fused into a new, more powerful . . . programme for the political practice of cinema’ (Willemen 1989: 4–5). ‘Speaking in the form of cinema, i.e. making films, or in other
genres of audiovisual discourse . . . necessarily means entering into a dialogue . . . with the power relations enshrined in those historical uses of dominant narrative regimes, along with the cultural networks within which the experiences of making and viewing are located’. Third Cinema is most emphatically not simply concerned with ‘letting the oppressed speak with their own voices’; instead, it addresses the issues of social power, from a critical-but-committed position (Willemen 1989: 27–8).

The efforts made by migrant film-makers could also be read through the framework of media cultural activism enacted by indigenous communities in the Americas or Australia, notably their quest for self-representation and the assertion of their presence and perspective on mainstream media (Ginsburg 2002: 49).

But how do public policies affect the production and content of such cinema?

**Public Policies, Representation and Participation**

In the UK, the Arts Council has had, since the late 1980s, a policy on cultural diversity, initially stimulated by lobbying and social campaigns, but more recently strengthened by the recognised market share of minority viewers (also signalled by the entry of Asian films into mainstream multiplex programming). A film is recognised for public funding as ‘national’ by embracing an inclusive and plural version of nationality, which therefore includes Black British and British Asians. Channel 4 and the BBC have been instrumental in giving space for ‘accented’ film-makers to express their creativity, and by supporting productions either through TV rights acquisitions or through their film production units. Films such as *East is East*, scripted by British Asian Ayub Khan-din, or *Beautiful People*, by Bosnian refugee film-maker Jasmin Dizdar, have all then to be considered as *British* films, and not anymore as foreign or migrant films. The recognition of ‘accented films’ as British has also provoked some curious situations, as in the case of *The Warrior* by British-born film-maker Asif Kapadia, who is of Indian origin: the film was refused entry as a British Foreign Film at the Academy Awards because it was not recognised by the Academy Committee as British, even though it was presented by the British Committee as such, and later became winner of the Best British Film at the British Academy Awards.

Discourses on representation are surely linked to colonial history, and it is in fact through post-colonial scholars that a critical gaze has been deeply cast on representation and authorship. Both the UK and France had a history of cinema in the colonies, and have continued investing in the embryonic cinema industry at the local level also following independence, through financial aid and collaborative production schemes. Similar investments have later been seen in the minority cinema industry in Paris and London. I would suggest that lobbying in the metropolitan cities by academics from the former colonies teaching in the universities, combined with the pressure from social unrest and cultural activism, have pushed attention
towards inclusive and participative cultural policies, thereby creating the conditions for the realisation of self-representative productions.

The effects of these inclusive and participatory cultural policies, combined with a cooperative broadcasting network, have surely contributed to create the conditions that have allowed the emergence and establishment in the UK of Black British film-makers from African-Caribbean or Asian background, and have allowed film-makers from Bosnia such as Jasmin Dizdar to access funding for his films. This has certainly opened up opportunities for representation and dialogue within the notion of Britishness, whilst creating access to the industry for minorities and new residents. The same inclusive and participative attitude—also expressed by the Arts Council with cultural diversity programmes for reaching out to minority audiences—have probably helped in creating the context for audience development, and for distribution of certain films also through mainstream cinemas—for instance Bollywood films in Edgware in London.

In other parts of Europe, several TV channels have been particularly sensitive to this genre of film-making: Arte and Canal Plus in France, and ZDF and Arte in Germany, have become important sources of financing and broadcasting for independent and alternative films. International co-productions between France and Germany, through particularly committed producers, have allowed for the rise of film-makers such as Fatih Akim and Jean Marie Teno in Germany.

In France, the strong relations between French producers and film institutions with (former) francophone countries (North Africa, West Africa, East Asia) have allowed for the emergence of a structured film industry that offers film-makers fertile ground to express themselves. Paris has become the referent for many film-makers from the South for post-production, thanks partly to the provisions dedicated by the Fond Sud (for the support of films from Africa, Asia and Latin America, in co-production with France). *Beur* film-makers in France might be second-generation French citizens, and therefore not able to access the resources dedicated to film-makers from the South; however their films are recognised as French, and as such given the same support devised for other film productions. Paris-based film-makers of foreign residency reflect a transnationality that is expressed not only in their personal positioning as living *here and there* but also strategically played by eventually having a production company based both in France and in the country of origin, so that they are able to access funding in Europe from all sides—as a film-maker from the South through film foundations dedicated to Cinema of the South, and as (or through) a French producer in Europe. I will expand on this later, when addressing the transnational strategies of migrant film-makers.

In the US, PBS, Starz, Bravo, Independent Film Channel and Sundance Film Channel provide support for minority and socio-politically committed film-making. Cable television has also opened transnational broadcasting to exilic, ethnic, displaced and transnational film-making. In Canada, the National Film Board has supported indigenous film-making, which has indirectly led to the creation in the Arctic of the Igloolik Isuma Production which, in 2000, won *Camera d’Or* in Cannes.
with the first Inuit-made film, *Atanarjuat* by Zacharias Kunuk. In Australia, the Aboriginal Broadcasting Corporation has created space for Aboriginal film-makers such as Tracey Moffat to emerge.

In all of these contexts, the efforts of public institutions and national broadcasters in adapting their cultural policies for making space for minorities and the representation of diversity—whether such efforts were spontaneous or more likely the result of intense lobbying and struggles for recognition from disadvantaged groups—have created the conditions for allowing film productions to be made in inclusive and participatory terms. Dialogue with the communities has allowed a critical discourse to emerge on issues of representation. Slowly, but with more efficacy than in other contexts where such attention is not given, this dynamic has made space for authorship and ownership of migrant images by migrant film-makers and artists, thereby contributing to the cultural creativity of the ‘nation’.

I would like now to turn to some transnational strategies of production for migrant cinema. From script to film, the film-maker raises funding through various sources: state subsidies, broadcasting pre-sales, and film foundation support. As I described in earlier examples referring to the UK or France, access to state subsidies is possible if the film-maker or producer is recognised in the country where he/she lives as a ‘national’ and/or if the state cultural policy provides for recognition of minorities. However, alongside either the advantages or limitations that can derive from national public policies, the means of production and distribution of ‘accented’ cinema have expanded in a transnational strategy of international co-productions beyond post-colonial cooperation.

**Transnational Strategies of Production for Migrant Cinema**

Hamid Naficy, referring to migrant cinema, introduces the notion of interstitial modes of production, underlining the transnationality and transversality of such film productions. Modes of production for accented cinema ‘are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, they are simultaneously local and global, and they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time as they benefit from them’ (Naficy 2001: 4).

A migrant film-maker is located in-between his/her country of origin and the country of residency. As this de-territorialisation has an effect on all aspects of a migrant’s life, it also impacts in terms of film production. If the film-maker is a ‘legal’ migrant, the aspect of transnationality can be an asset for financing, as resources can be tapped into both *here and there*. The advent of digital cinema, which has allowed for easier independent low-budget production as well as easier industry networking at a global level, has also created new opportunities. This has reflected itself in the ways in which film-makers have adapted their production strategies and the ways in which the distribution of films is also carried out from within migrant communities at local and global levels.
Within the cinema industry of Third Cinema and the more general field of art-house independent cinema (that is, non-Hollywood productions), films are usually the result of international co-productions, whereby the risk and fundraising are shared among different producers from different countries. So, for instance, a budget of 1 million Euros is shared by three co-producers, whereby each one searches for his/her share of the film funding through sources and connections in his/her country or region. This encourages higher chances for films to be made, because the funding targets are reduced and more realistic at the local level. Attention from international festivals as Berlinale (with the Berlin Co-Production Market), Sundance (with the Sundance Lab) and Toronto (with Planet Africa) in the North, but also Sithengi Film and TV Market in South Africa, Mar del Plata in Argentina and Dubai International Film Festival in Dubai, are all creating further spaces for international co-productions and exchanges beyond the North–South axis and towards a more complex web of transnational film industry relations.

Initial film resources for development—script and financing—can also be found through foundations for the support of film-making from the South of the world. Film foundations such as Hubert Bals in the Netherlands, Vision Sud Est in Switzerland, World Cinema Fund in Berlin, and Fond Sud or Fond Image Afrique in France, all have as a requirement that the film-maker live and work in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Besides the risk of privileging film projects with ‘a view from the North’—that is, an often ‘exoticised’ representation where Africa is fixed in the ‘village and baobab’ tradition, missing the modern dynamics experienced in the African city—the foundations’ requirements are in a sense encouraging the film-maker to refer back to his/her own country. The frustration of lack of recognition in the country of residency as a ‘non-national’ might paradoxically result in the rediscovering of ‘home’ support and recognition, after the distance of migration, therefore feeding on the advantages of transnationality. This might actually trigger dynamics of identity and ‘re-placement’, which would not have happened otherwise.

If the film-maker is a refugee, he/she is, however, cut off from access to the home country, including possible film-making resources related to the country of origin. He or she is also denied the possibility for fundraising through film foundations dedicated to the support of World Cinema, as these have the requirement of residency in the country of origin. If no provisions are made for cultural diversity in the new country of residence for minority and ‘accented’ films, and the film theme does not fit with the requirements of ‘nationality’ of public bodies, the chances for a film to be made are once again strongly reduced. The result is the rarity of films made by refugees, or the long delay that refugee film-makers have to endure in pursuing their film project to complete production. This can impact negatively on the strength of the creative output, or in the efficacy of the message if this is a critique of actual situations.

A possible alternative production mode is ‘guerrilla film-making’, made through film and video collectives of refugee and migrant film-makers. By ‘guerrilla-style’ I mean a sort of film-making whereby the filming itself is an act of resistance and
Therefore laden with political meaning: images are produced which are not ‘recognised’ by the cultural establishment which assigns resources and funds within the national territory. This is even more the case when the film-maker is a clandestino or ‘irregular’ film-maker, when his/her personal status as a citizen (let alone a film-maker) is not recognised. Such images might then disrupt or subvert the standard communication flow on the experience of immigration by representing stories of the under-represented, marginal or ‘illegal’ situations which only such film-makers can capture, from their own biographical experience. With tiny budgets and completely independent means of production—which means privately-owned digital camera, editing via digital programmes such as FinalCut, joint efforts to produce documentaries or fiction shorts—a guerrilla film-maker manages, against the odds, to produce images and features which represent the reality of certain migration situations. Undoubtedly, digital technologies have revolutionised and in a sense democratised film-making, by breaking down costs both of principal photography and of editing whilst still retaining high quality, especially if films are shot with a cinematic sense on HD (digital High Definition later blown up to 35mm). Digital cameras allow for a film-maker with very limited resources to participate in the flow of images by recording his or her view on his/her own world, digitally editing it and diffusing it at film festivals or even through web-networks (YouTube). Film-makers very often also perform multiple functions (film-maker, director, editor, scriptwriter, etc.) and personally invest in their films, directly financing a share of the budget, either through personal funds or in-kind by waving the fee for scriptwriting and directing, and by involving families and friends in the production or as actors to keep the costs down. Organisation in migrant collective efforts might also help: for accessing funding if the collective is formalised as a non-profit institution, for lobbying access to broadcasting and favourable cultural policies, for accessing sponsors, for sharing the costs of technology, for raising awareness and promoting the products, for organising film festivals, etc. The Black Audio Film Collective and Sankofa Film in the UK, the Mohamed Collective in France, the Third Newsreel and the Chicano/a Cinema in the United States, all have been important in raising support for migrant film-makers, together with informal networks of collaboration and solidarity (see Naficy 2001).

Other new transnational dynamics in the cinema industry create further departures from the schemes of post-colonial flows of production, opening more cracks in the system for migrant film-makers to get opportunities and inspiration. These new patterns include: the rise of a renewed cinema industry in Latin America, the boom of the Nollywood phenomenon in Nigeria, the entry into the business of South African cinema and the investment of the Arab Emirates in media and communication (Al-Jazeera, Dubai Media City). All these initiatives provide alternatives that displace Europe as the dominant Northern partner, and in a sense allow for a more global business-oriented approach also for ‘accented’ film-makers.

For instance, the Nollywood phenomenon is inspiring Nigerian film-makers living in Europe to apply a combination of the international cinema industry and
Nollywood-style production. ¹ Nigerian transnational film-makers—such as Newton Aduaka and Andy Amadi Okoroafor, living in France—are thus turning to the potential of private investment and of the business of cinema in Nigeria, as a strong partner in the international co-production structure for financing their films. The growth of satellite regional broadcasters such as M-Net in Africa, Tele Sur in Latin America, and Al-Jazeera in the Middle East, or global minority channels such as those in the US, also provides further opportunities for production and distribution.² Furthermore, the massive diasporic informal market of video (although clashing with anti-piracy regulations) which is visible in the commercialisation of films through call centres in all cities in Europe and North America, provides, indirectly, additional alternative resources for production.

All these opportunities and alternatives derived from the transnational nature of a migrant film-maker positioning within the cinema industry, combined with the facilities derived from digital technology, allow for wider opportunities for migrant film-makers to express their creativity beyond the limitations existing within national public policies which are not supportive of minority film-making and cultural diversity. The reality of the transnational nature of the cinema industry, the facilities for interaction at a global level through the web and digital technology, all reduce the restrictions and difficulties that a de-territorialised film-maker might experience in his/her dislocated condition. However, the lack of recognition at the local national level, and the scarcity of provision for cultural diversity within many countries’ cultural policies, still impact at the level of identity and self-confidence—necessary qualities for encouraging creativity to expression.

**Accented Film-Making in Italy**

Let us now turn to the specific case of migrant film-making in Italy—perhaps the paradigmatic example in Europe of a country hugely affected by recent immigration flows over the last 20 years (Parati 2006: 104–41).

> Italy remains on the border, and from the border it does not express a cinema of métissage born out of the arrival of foreign film-makers . . . [but] rather a stratified and fragmented path made by Italian film-makers who have confronted themselves with the idea of métissage . . . (Gariazzo 2000: 205, my translation).

Some of the most important films on immigration in Italy in the last 10–15 years have been made by Italian film-makers and Italian production companies. Five key examples:

- *Pummarò* by Michele Placido (an Italian actor making his directorial debut) was one of the first films to focus on African immigrants in Italy and on issues of work exploitation and racism. Dating from 1990, the film follows the odyssey of a Ghanaian immigrant searching for his brother in the South of Italy and then in Germany, and was inspired by the racist killing of an immigrant in the town of...
Villa Literno (close to Naples). As Forgacs critically asserts, the film is a ‘vicarious representation’ (Forgacs 2001).

- Terre di Mezzo is also a first film, this time by Italian director Matteo Garrone, who has constructed the film in episodes, combining three short documentaries on migrant experiences on the periphery of Rome. The first film focuses on Nigerian prostitutes in their daily life and on their relationships with regular elderly customers. The second follows some Albanians youths who wait on the street for some casual building work, and the third features an Egyptian night-worker in a gas station. The film builds on real situations to create fictional narratives, unfortunately not escaping classic stereotyping and naive representation—even if the film does portray the harshness of the migration experience and the absurd situations of everyday life of migrants in Italy (Parati 2006: 222). Curiously, the Albanian protagonists later lived as guests for a few years at the film-maker’s house.

- L’Assedio by Bernardo Bertolucci (an established and internationally well-known film-maker) describes the falling in love of a young aristocratic British pianist for an African domestic servant living in Rome. She asks him to prove his love by freeing her husband from an African prison. The pianist sells his piano and some antique furniture, gets the money, frees the man and finally obtains the love of the woman, Shandurai (Parati 2006: 138–9).

- Saimir, yet another directorial debut, this time by the Italian film-maker Francesco Munzi, tells the story of a young Albanian who unwillingly helps his father in the illegal trafficking of immigrants to Italy. He tries to start a relationship with an Italian girl but he feels inadequate. He also ends up stealing with a group of Rom friends, a small criminal crew, until he meets a young girl illegally trafficked into Italy and exploited as a sex worker, and his rage and violence explode (Parati 2006: 223). When presenting his film at Cineteca Bologna in April 2005, Munzi was confronted by an audience of young Albanians who strongly resented his representation.

- Bianco Nero by Cristina Comencini (2007) is my final and latest example of a film made by an Italian film-maker and of the consequent risks of (mis)representation of migration and (in this case) racism. Married to Elena, who works as a cultural mediator in an anti-racism organisation, Carlo is not interested in migration or African issues. One day, however, he meets Nadine, who works at the Senegalese Embassy and is the wife of an African historian. A love affair starts between Carlo and Nadine, which overwhelms the two families and their reciprocal perceptions of the Other and issues of prejudice. Rigidly constrained by the title, the film does not offer a ‘cultural exchange’ but turns in circles around its pre-constructed cliché, exploiting to the limit the concept of black-and-white, overlooking the subtleties of personal relations. Elsewhere, in a content analysis of 58 Italian films which feature black women, D’Arma (2008) shows that, in more than half of them, the ‘prostitute’ role is played, followed by other stereotypical roles, such as the ‘servant’, the ‘exotic beauty’ etc.
All these stories are, however, too recognisable as Italian, as an outsider’s representations of a not-directly-experienced migration. Perhaps it is my awareness of an existing yet unsatisfied desire by some migrant film-makers (whom I have encountered through my work in the cinema industry) to tell their own stories that provokes in me a sense of deep unease in viewing their stories as mostly told by Italian film-makers, without so much as even a real peer collaboration, when migrants are asked and accept the limited role made available to them as informants or gateways to their communities. Patronising film-making and simply wrong facts are at times the result of over-ambitious cinematic projects, made by ‘outsider’ film-makers in complete lack of awareness, but driven by a risky enthusiasm for the ‘Other’.

By saying Italian films, I not only refer to films made by Italian film-makers, but also to those made by non-Italian film-makers who have Italianised their ‘accent’. In Italy, the criteria of ‘nationality’ has not expanded to include ‘accented’ themes or style; rather film-makers have at times had to adapt their theme or style to suit Italian requirements. Italian is not yet a plural and inclusive definition, as was described in previous examples regarding British films made by ‘accented’ film-makers, but rather it refers to an ‘assimilative’ definition of ‘Italian nationality’. As Gariazzo notes, ‘... arriving in Italy, a film-maker such as Benhadji ... has lost much of his sensitivity of look and feelings ... and a film-maker such as Ozpeteck has started a cinema that has very little métissage, but is instead rooted in a mass product ...’ (2000: 206).

Rachid Benhadji, an Algerian living in Italy, made the film Mirka in 2000. Set in the Balkans, it is the story of an ethnic rape and of the child born out of this violence. Gariazzo writes: ‘But surely, Mirka is not an Algerian film ... it is more an Italian film, as are the works by Ferzan Ozpeteck—Haman, Il Bagno Turco and Harem Suare—which have the ambitions of telling a story of universal suffering beyond nationality ... Mirka is an anonymous text, that responds to a certain idea of art cinema without great desires and feelings ... However, Algerian layers emerge even in such a distant story ... the mountain, the wood and valleys reveal other mountains, woods and valleys, other rapes, escapes and fundamentalisms, memories of violence and tragical gestures’ (Gariazzo 2000: 210).

Ferzan Ozpeteck, a Turkish film-maker living in Italy, studied cinema in Rome. His cinema brings together a mixed presence of Italian and Turkish actors, again more to suit the requirement of production and the market rather than reflecting a real negotiation of identities. The film’s Italianness erases the ‘accent’, and the result is a recognisable Rai Cinema production, just as a Hollywood production would be recognisable as such, regardless of the nationality of the author. One of his recent films, La Finestra di Fronte (Front Window), reflects even more these features.

I have highlighted Benhadji and Ozpeteck because Gariazzo also highlights these two ‘Italian’ film-makers, but this Italianising effect is not limited to these two cases. For instance, Marco Bechis, Italian by ancestry, born in Chile, teacher in Argentina and exiled in Milan and New York, has made the beautiful films Garage Olimpo and Hijos on the drama of the desaparacedos (‘missing ones’) and the atrocity of political repression in Argentina. I believe his films, especially Hijos, can also be perceived as
Italian in style and standard, perhaps as a result of the production choices. But perhaps there are not that many options: either the film becomes Italian and thus fits within the nationality requirement of the Ministry of Culture and within the criteria of Rai Cinema (with a few exceptions for ‘real world cinema’ films such as those co-produced with Marco Müller at Fabrica/Benetton such as No Man’s Land by Danis Tanovic or Blackboards by Samira Makhmalbaf), or the film rarely receives attention and support.

But how is it that in Italy there are no cultural policies for diversity, as there are for instance in the UK? And how are migrant film-makers in Italy coping with such a lack of public policies? Italy, as a ‘disastrous’ colonial power, has left nothing in Somalia, Ethiopia, Libya and Eritrea in terms of cinema industry structures, and has done even less for training and nourishing cinema talents in the post-colonial period (Silvestri 2000: 198). This trend has been perpetuated also within Italy in terms of the lack of resources dedicated to minorities for arts and culture. Italy has not yet even considered, let alone included, in its cultural policy a provision for cultural diversity; and when it does happen that a discussion around the theme emerges, it is usually only for the protection of Italian cultural diversity against dominant global cultures, notably the US. A cultural policy for the minorities living in Italy has never been considered, as if this would not be something relevant for Italy. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in Italy’s self-perception as ‘not a post-colonial country’; a sort of diffused (and never explicit) denial of its past responsibility as a colonial power and of the shameful ‘racial laws’ of the fascist period (which was also the era of colonialism).3 This same exaggerated sense of exclusively Italian nationalism is set anachronistically against the reality of the current demographic composition of Italy with more than 3 million immigrants from a hundred or more different countries. Meanwhile, from a more academic point of view, ‘... migrants’ cultural productions still remain outside any canonical discipline in Italian culture, marginalised by the cultural industry that should be incorporating and celebrating them’ (King 2008: 173).

Despite all this, there is however an uncompromising ‘accented’ cinema which is struggling to emerge in Italy, even if its sole existence is in itself a form of cultural resistance. If, in fact, the film does not get accepted within the system as Italian, it is excluded from access to funding, leaving it on the margin of the national production system. Thus, most of the ‘accented’ film-makers in Italy—I mention below some examples of African film-makers living in Italy—carry out their productive enterprises on their own, performing multiple tasks (author, director, producer, actor). Their only hope and sustenance is to reach out for transnational strategic support, truly reflecting Naficy’s interstitial modes of production, mentioned earlier in this article.

Mohamed Zineddaine, a Moroccan film-maker resident in Italy for over 20 years, is currently developing his next feature fiction film, Ti ricordi di Adil? (Do you remember Adil?). The story is of a young boy who clandestinely migrates from Casablanca to Italy, the dream country. However, throughout the journey, the dream becomes an
unexpected harsh reality. In the script, Zineddaine manages to weave all contemporary issues of security, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, social degradation and poverty, as well as discrimination, racism and fear, in a delicate and significant way. The film has already received financial support from the Centre du Cinema Marocaine, which covers a third of the budget. In the search for support, Zineddaine has thus returned ‘back home’, where he has discovered professional recognition as film-maker and a strong sense of grounding in the Moroccan cinema industry, which he never found in the Italian context. The support from Morocco has then created the conditions for carrying forward financing and production in Italy. Here again, the strategy was that of retracing one’s own origin, as a ‘film-maker from the South’, in order to then be allowed access to funding in the North. In the dynamics of production, identities are played to suit the requirements of film foundations in the North. These latter, enthusiastic to support films from the South, might at times fail to see that there are film-makers from the South who regularly live in the North. The film-maker is thus encouraged to make a ‘return migration’ as the best chance for gaining recognition in all places for his/her work. In the case of Zineddaine, his search for funding in Italy is now no longer that of an ‘accented’ film started in Italy—as it is in reality—but as a Moroccan film searching in Italy for co-production partners, with an already established majority share. This is a way for Zineddaine to access funding for his film, whilst retaining independence and artistic freedom.

Malick Ba, a Senegalese film-maker, was inspired to make films through his experience at the immigration service office of the Bologna City Council, where he assisted migrants for several years with all sorts of support—from housing to health. A small fragment of the stories he witnessed was captured in the short film Foreign Office: Xmas 2001, where migrants expressed their frustration at the lack of resources and access to accommodation. The film gained an award at the Anti-Racist Meeting in Cecina, Tuscany, and was presented at various festivals. Further attempts at transferring to film the two scripts he wrote on stories of migration, as well as his ideas for feature documentaries on refugees and on the conditions of migrant workers in factories and farms, have all been frustrated by obstacles. Applying for funding at the Emilia-Romagna regional council, he was told that this would only be accessible if he was part of an immigrant association, as grants for cultural and social support to immigrants are only given to associations, not to individuals. As opposed to the criteria applied for Italian film-makers and artists, an immigrant is not recognised as an individual artist, but it seems that he or she can only be considered as a collective expression of the particular immigrant community! Other efforts in meeting Italian producers for support in the film projects have resulted in these latter cynically asking Malick Ba to ‘help with their own project’ as an informant or as a gate-keeper to the community—this happened first with a mixed-marriage documentary project of a Milan-based Italian film-maker/producer, then with a feature documentary on migrant workers in the Po Valley. Worse still, some of his own stories and ideas were recorded and then scripted in someone else’s film, by an Italian film-maker, in a total lack of respect of and sensitivity to the importance of his own authorship, in order to
create simplistic and stereotyped representations of little value. Despite all this, his scripts are still there, and he continues recording images with a very small digital camera, waiting for the appropriate situation in which to finally make films at a high professional level, perhaps starting back in Senegal. His last work, on refugees living in Bologna and their difficulties of accessing residence permits under the Bossi–Fini law,4 was recognised with a Special Mention at the Human Rights Nights Festival in Bologna (2007). The film was made in digital form for just 800 euros.

Another new ‘accented film-maker’ in the Italian context is Hedy Krissane. A Tunisian living in Turin, he has made two short films, Lebess and Colpevole sino a prova contraria (Guilty Until Proved Otherwise), which have been recognised at international festivals. Lebess plays with the stereotype of Tunisian migrants, and addresses the temptation of criminal activity in the midst of hostile environments, countered by spiritual faith in Islam. Guilty Until Proved Otherwise enacts a case of pure discrimination in the arrest of a Tunisian visitor, mistaken for a fundamentalist terrorist. Krissane started his career as an actor, and also works in various other social and cultural fields. In all his films, which he self-financed, he has performed multiple roles as film-maker, producer, actor, scriptwriter and editor.

An exception in the panorama developed above is Theo Eshetu, an Italo-Ethiopian visual artist who lives in Rome, after studying and practising in the UK and the Netherlands. By positioning himself as a contemporary visual artist, by diversifying his approach from art installation to video-art, and by orienting his efforts more towards the UK- and US-based galleries and cultural circles rather than Italy, Eshetu has been able to carve for himself a secure space from where he continues to express his art, despite the obstacles and limitations arising from the Italian context. His works, including Body and Soul, Africanised and Blood is not Fresh Water, presented and prize-winning at the Venice Film Festival and other major sites, are all about the intersecting themes of identities, memory and religion, set in a post-colonial fragmented scenario.

Finally, Laye Gaye, a new young guerrilla film-maker from Senegal, is starting his first documentary on his experience of living in Bologna, shooting everyday life in underground spaces of urban interaction, from the informal market of XM24 to the reggae music at Lazzaretto. Through the medium of informal interviews and by also putting himself in the frame, he tries to capture the reactions that people have towards a black person. At the same time he records the personal experiences of clandestini (irregular migrants)—young people with lots of dreams to chase before returning home.

**Conclusion**

The lack in Italy of a policy for cultural diversity and of any structure to support minority film-makers creates a deeply paradoxical situation. If a film-maker is embraced by the Italian cinema industry (public funding and broadcasting support), he or she risks losing their essence by becoming Italian in order to respect the criteria
and requirements of *nationality*. If instead a film-maker is determined to keep his/her ‘accent’, he/she will probably not receive support and therefore risks not having a film-making life. The best chance might thus be that of ‘going back home’ in order to ‘come back’ to the Italian cinema industry, no more as a ‘migrant’ but as a ‘foreign’ film-maker.

What seems especially disconcerting in Italy—after already two or three decades of immigration, and a long previous history of emigration—is a persistent lack of critical thinking on representation and authorship, and a supreme lack of sensitivity coupled with pretentious and careless protagonism from Italian film-makers and producers in ‘telling their stories’. One might conclude that there seems to be no trust, no acknowledgement that a foreign film-maker would actually make a good film if put in the condition of working at a professional level. He/she is therefore locked in the role of the informant, the actor, the gateway, whereby films on migration in Italy remain under the filmic translation of Italian film-makers (or producers, when the compromise on the *nationality* requirement is accepted). Film-making on migration in Italy still reminds one of a sort of early anthropological visual ethnography, at the beginning of the encounter with the other. ‘You look at us as if we were insects’ said Sembène Ousmane to Jean Rouch (quoted in Speciale 1998: 79–81). The same could be said by the aspiring migrant film-maker to the Italian director making a film on them, when still deprived of the opportunity for directly expressing him/herself.

A lack of images and the minimal participation of migrants in the media and cinema do not help in negotiation towards plurality in Italy or for redressing the imbalance in representation, still perpetuating a lack of politically correct images on screen, especially at the level of leisure TV programmes. Exceptionally—and as a consequence to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East—some journalists of Arab origin have been able to carve a space for themselves in the news on TV and in the press—such as Rula Jebreel and Gad Lerner on La7, Magdi Allam in *Corriere della Sera*, Erfan Rashid on RaiMed, and Khaled Fouad Allam in various papers. The first African journalist who was able to regularly interact with Rai, Jean Leonard Touadi from Congo, worked for the Veltroni administration at Rome City Council at the local Ministry of Youth and Universities. However, it is only a year or so ago that the Chinese community in Bologna was very angered by the results of a TV drama in which some of them were asked to take part as actors and for facilitating locations: the film was perceived as very offensive in its representation of Chinese through the most simplistic stereotypes.

Italy still needs to seriously consider policies for diversity and equal opportunities in the field of culture, which would offer space for ‘accented film-makers’ to express themselves. Otherwise the migrant in *Italian* cinema will remain exoticised, orientalised, stereotyped, analysed through a primitive anthropological style or demonised through still-too-simplistic TV reportage . . . the *bon savage* or *l’uomo nero*.5
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Notes

[1] In Nigeria, more than 1,000 films are made every year, with an average budget of 50,000 euros, a production time of six weeks, and a recovery of investment within three weeks of entry in the market. A star system has developed out of low-budget, low-quality dramas, which, however, have conquered the huge local audience market of 110 million Nigerians, plus several million migrants living outside the country (and is celebrated in the annual Academy Movie African Award). Nollywood is now turning towards ‘cinema’, striving for a higher quality that would allow Nigerian film-makers to achieve recognition in international festivals. Therefore the industry is starting to interact with the international key players and sites, however with an independence and a self-reliance which is new to the field.

[2] For instance, Al-Jazeera has initiated the production of short films and documentaries on the Middle East, to boost production at local and global levels by Arab film-makers. The impressive venture of Dubai Media City, which aims to attract global broadcasters, is already becoming a reference for potential partnership for film-making, thus offering new options for accessing resources to Arab film-makers living around the world.

[3] For some illuminating papers on Italian fascism and colonialism which bear on my arguments in this article, see the special issue of Modern Italy on ‘Approaches to Italian Colonialism’ edited by Andall et al. (2003), especially papers by Ben-Ghiat (2003) and Polezzi (2003).


[5] L’uomo nero (literally ‘the Black Man’) is a folk image still used in popular parlance to scare children and to encourage them to behave well, otherwise ‘l’uomo nero would come …’

References


Filmography

Africanised, Theo Eshetu (2001, Italy)
Atanarjuat, Zacharias Kunuk (2000, Canada)
Baton Rouge, Rachid Bouchareb (1985, France)
Beautiful People, Jasmin Dizdar (1999, UK)
Bhaji on the Beach, Gurinder Chada (1993, UK)
Bianco Nero, Cristina Comencini (2007, Italy)
Blackboards, Samira Makhmalbaf (2000, UK)
Blood is not Fresh Water, Theo Eshetu (1997, Italy)
Body and Soul, Theo Eshetu (2004, Italy)
Cheb, Rachid Bouchareb (1991, France)
Colpevole sino a prova contraria, Hedy Krissane (2004, Italy)
East is East, Damien O’Donnel, script by Ayub Khan-din (1999, UK)
Foreign Office: Xmas 2001, Malick Ba (2001, Italy)
Garage Olimpo, Marco Bechis (1999, Italy)
Hamam—Il Bagno Turco, Ferzan Ozpeteck (1997, Italy)
Handsworth Songs, John Akomfrah (1986, UK)
Harem Suare, Ferzan Ozpeteck (1999, Italy)
Hijos, Marco Bechis (2001, Italy)
L’Assedio, Bernardo Bertolucci (1998, Italy/UK)
La Finestra di Fronte, Ferzan Ozpeteck (2003, Italy)
Le The au Harem d’Archimède, Medhi Charef (1985, France)
Lebess, Hedy Krissane (2003, Italy)
Mirka, Rachid Benhadji (1999, Italy)
My Beautiful Laundrette, Steven Frears, script by Hanif Kureishi (1985, UK)
My Son the Fanatic, Udayan Prasad, script by Hanif Kureshi (1996, UK)
No Man’s Land, Danis Tanovic (2001, Bosnia Herzegovina/Italy/France)
Pummarò, Michele Placido (1990, Italy)
Saimir, Francesco Munzi (2004, Italy)
Terre di Mezzo, Matteo Garrone (1996, Italy)
Territories, Isaac Julien (1984, UK)
The Warrior, Asif Kapadia (2001, UK)
Ti Ricordi di Adil?, Mohamed Zineddaine (in development, Italy/Morocco)