

**Mediterranean Perspectives: Early Spanish and Italian Contributions to the Cinema of Irregular Migration (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe)**  
**Perspectives méditerranéennes. La migration irrégulière dans quelques films pionniers d'Espagne et d'Italie (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe)**

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article se penche sur quatre films italiens et espagnols, parmi les premiers à traiter de la migration clandestine d'outre-Méditerranée : *Bwana* d'Imanol Uribe (1996), *Saïd* de Llorenç Soler (1998), *Tornado a casa* de Vincenzo Marra (2001) et *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* de Marco Tullio Giordana (2005). L'analyse s'attarde essentiellement aux notions d'« espace » et de « lieu » ainsi qu'à leurs représentations, lesquelles évoquent à la fois les structures spatiales des films eux-mêmes et les structures idéologiques qui jalonnent la migration des clandestins. Plus précisément, cette étude se concentre sur ces lieux frontaliers qui sont directement liés à l'immigration « illégale » et propose quatre catégories permettant d'approfondir le traitement cinématographique des migrations irrégulières.

# Mediterranean Perspectives: Early Spanish and Italian Contributions to the Cinema of Irregular Migration (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe)<sup>1</sup>

Verena Berger and Daniel Winkler

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on four relatively early Italian and Spanish films treating “illegal” migrations across the Mediterranean: Imanol Uribe’s *Bwana* (1996), Llorenç Soler’s *Said* (1998), Vincenzo Marra’s *Tornando a casa* (2001) and Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005). The analysis predominantly looks at representations of the categories “space” and “place,” which refer both to the spatial structures of the films themselves and to the ideological structures through which the clandestines migrate. The focus of this investigation concentrates on the (border) places linked to “illegal” immigration and proposes four categories through which to understand the cinematic practice of locating irregular migration.

Hardly a week goes by without newspaper or TV reports on the arrival of boats with migrants to the coasts of islands such as Lampedusa, Sardinia, Sicily and the Strait of Gibraltar in the Mediterranean or the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean. For a growing number of refugees, these journeys often end either with death at sea or deportation back to their countries of origin. For the islands themselves, which have for some decades served as popular tourist destinations for an affluent northern and central European public, the effect of these migrations has been likewise ambivalent. Such are the paradoxes of globalization. Consequently, irregular or undocumented migration—expressions to be preferred here (to the term “illegal”) since they have more neutral connotations—has become a central socio-

political topic in European intellectual discussions. The debate about the Mediterranean Basin as a *Mare nostrum* (ocean of ours), a space which connects continents and thus is historically formed by transcontinental migrations—but a space also traversed by cultural and socioeconomic borders, for example, between the north and the south of Europe—is therefore intensely relevant (Saurer 2001, pp. 208-9).

Many intellectuals, such as Predrag Matvejević, argue in this sense that the Mediterranean should not merely be considered a contact zone, but also an integral part of European identity (1998, pp. 23-27). For unauthorized migrants not only *transgress* the borders constructed by the geographies of nation-states as the basis of their differentiation, they also carry borderlines into the societies into which they move. As Étienne Balibar puts it, borders are no longer only governmental instruments, controlling the free movement of people between nations and communities of nations made visible through the construction of borders and border fortifications. In the twenty-first century, these frontiers are not simply situated at the outer limit of territories (2004, pp. 1-2); they are now to be found nearly everywhere. Thus, both cosmopolitan cities like Madrid or Milan and rural areas with need of manpower become “contact zones,” “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power,” as Mary L. Pratt describes it, invoking “the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjuncture” (1997, p. 63; 1992, p. 7). Invisible borderlines are created within the host countries wherever the movement of peoples occurs. And it is the places and spaces of these shifting borderlines that this essay seeks to trace.

### **Irregular Migration and Cinema in Italy and Spain**

Since 1990 an increasing number of cinematic representations have dealt with the question of the appropriation of space by, and the visibility of, migrants without “legal” status.<sup>2</sup> In spite of living without any legal rights, the existence of irregular migrants, Charles Taylor has highlighted, is nevertheless determined by a very present human need for recognition, for their

status to be changed from illegality to legality, from invisible to visible. Although irregular migrants are “visible” by being present in TV news, the media and sometimes spectacular, publicity-mongering reports, they nevertheless lack social recognition as they are turned into the socially and institutionally “unseen” and excluded in everyday life (Taylor 1994, p. 25). We argue, however, that a number of filmmakers have been representing the socially “unseen” but mobile irregular migrants in order to address the issue of their presence in Europe and make their fictionalized stories visible to the public. Spanish and Italian filmmakers, indeed, have been concentrating on the daily life of the “socially and institutionally unseen” to mark that presence and connect it to the locations with which they are predominantly associated, i.e. the marginal and peripheral sectors of rural and urban areas, the less regulated zones of cities where irregular migrants can disappear into crowds or hide out in order to avoid being discovered.

Thus, in our selection of fiction films dealing with undocumented migrants from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan African countries and Eastern Europe, our emphasis is placed especially on the representation of space as well as the films’ ideological attributes. In our study of four films from Italy and Spain, which engage directly with the question of irregular migration as a central theme, namely Imanol Uribe’s *Bwana* (Spain, 1996), Llorenç Soler’s *Saïd* (Spain, 1998), Vincenzo Marra’s *Tornando a casa* (Sailing Home, Italy, 2001) and Marco Tullio Giordana’s *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (Once You’re Born You Can No Longer Hide, Italy, 2005), our analysis seeks to identify five different yet related kinds of spaces: *non-lieux* as transitory “public spaces”; “public spaces” of economic sustenance; “private spaces” of intimacy; “beautiful places” as an inversion of classical tourist images; and the Mediterranean Sea as a zone of cultural contact, but also of conflict and death.

The turn to irregular migration as a cinematic subject in films from Italy and Spain clearly took place much later than it did in other European countries, for example in France. This is due to the very different historical, geopolitical and socio-political

background of these different parts of Europe: both Italy and Spain have been countries better known for emigration than immigration. Films on the subject of irregular migration in contemporary French cinema, on the other hand, follow from traditions of movies dealing with migration within Europe, such as Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935). Since the 1960s the corpus of early *Beur* and *Banlieue* filmmaking marked the blossoming of post-colonial ethnicities in work by directors such as Ali Ghalem, and later in the films of Mehdi Charef and Rachid Bouchareb, and in work by native French directors such as Francis Girod (Tarr 2005, pp. 27-31).

Spanish film, however, has only recently, since the early 1990s, begun to pay attention to processes of migration from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa and from Eastern Europe and Latin America. Montxo Armendáriz's *Las cartas de Alou* (1990), in which a Senegalese man enters Spain "illegally" by boat, is a good example. Once in Europe, Alou tries his luck as a seasonal farm hand at vegetable plantations in Almeria, at street trading in Madrid and at fruit harvesting in Segria, a village in Catalonia where he establishes a relationship with Carmen before being deported after a police raid. Such rather pessimistic storylines are typical of early films treating irregular migration.

In contrast to other European cinemas (e.g. France), however, Spanish and Italian fiction films dealing with the topic of migration have not been shot by directors who themselves issue from a migrant background. In Spain, films about transnational movements are usually made even by established filmmakers like Soler and Uribe (born in El Salvador, but with Basque origins), who have the power to set up expensive productions that are often, as in the Italian case, based on novels. Thus, Llorenç Soler's docudrama *Saïd* (1998) is a filmed adaptation of Josep Lorman's novel *La aventura de Saïd* [sic] (*The Adventure of Saïd*, 1996) set in the urban milieu of Barcelona. The young Moroccan Saïd settles in the socially marginalized *Raval* quarter where he comes into contact with the racist prejudices and legal impediments that affect irregular migrants. Saïd falls in love with a local girl, Ana, who helps foreigners denounce the xenophobic attacks by skinheads that lead to the death of Saïd's

friend Ahmed. Likewise, Imanol Uribe's film *Bwana* is an adaptation, in this case of Ignacio del Moral's drama *La mirada del hombre oscuro* (*Dark Man's Gaze*, 1992). It portrays the encounter between a stereotypical Spanish family spending a day at the seaside and the black African Ombasi who is stranded on the same beach after an accident that has left his travelling companion, Yambo, dead. When a group of three skinheads arrives, the situation escalates: the scared Spaniards drive away, leaving the African threatened and chased by the racists through the sand dunes along the shore. Such films, then, are prototypical of the recent evolution of a new social realism in Spanish cinema, a sort of social cinema able to blend generic conventions depicting irregular migration in rural and urban environments on the one hand, and which, on the other, integrates fictional love stories designed, perhaps, to solicit greater degrees of identification from audiences who might otherwise remain uninterested in the realities of migration (Santaolalla 2005, p. 136).

Early Italian movies dealing with irregular migration were likewise made by filmmakers without any personal experience of transnationalism (Wood 2003, pp. 99-103).<sup>3</sup> Like in Spain, this was generally the result of the different national traditions of migration and the lack of a real transcultural cinema milieu in Italy. Nevertheless there were a few rare movies by Italian filmmakers in the late 1980s and early 1990s reflecting on irregular migration. Typically for this early period of the genre, these films tended to address the subject in the rather "pessimistic" style of a "militant" cinema. One of the first such films was Michele Placido's *Pummaró* (1989), which depicts the protagonist Kwaku's search for his brother Giobbe, who had migrated before him from Ghana to southern Italy in order to earn money for Kwaku's education. From southern Italy to Rome and Verona, Kwaku follows Giobbe's itinerary until, in the end, he arrives in Frankfurt and is confronted with his brother's death (Ponzanesi 2005, pp. 274-75). Over time, however, the Italian films tend to differ from those in Spain insofar as many Italian films focus on the story of migrants from Eastern Europe, especially from Albania and Romania (Wood 2003, pp. 101-5). *Quando sei nato* (2005), based on the book of the

same title by the journalist Maria Pace Ottieri, is one example of a high-budget film by a well-known director that is explicitly about migration. The film outlines the travels of the young “siblings” Radu and Alina who, pretending to be Kurdish political refugees, sail from Romania to Apulia by boat with a group of irregular migrants. Melodramatic in style, and set on the “high seas” of the Mediterranean, the film introduces Sandro, the son of the “bourgeois” family that later on hosts Alina and Radu, who falls off his father’s sailing boat and thus also lands with the group of boat people on the coast of southern Italy. The protagonists are thus received by a fairly well-off family living in Brescia, though they will later escape to Milan when faced with an insecure future.

Emigration from North African countries, on the other hand, is the main theme of Marra’s rather intimate debut film *Tornando a casa* (2001). Marra illustrates the fate of the irregular Tunisian migrant Samir and the Italian Franco, working in a fishing crew on the Mediterranean between Italy and Tunisia. They pursue the illegal trade of tuna fishing between Sicily and the North African coast, filmed in the style of *neo-neorealismo*, which can be described as a tendency of Italian filmmaking of the 1990s onwards which combines a new political cinema with references to a neo-realism that uses non-professional actors, no studio images and very little technical equipment. The plot makes it obvious that questions of national identity seem here to be less relevant than its transnational and transcontinental concerns, for Samir in the end stays in Italy whereas Franco leaves his homeland to reach the shores of North Africa.

### ***Non-Lieux* as Transitory Spaces: Giordana and Soler**

In these and other contemporary films, from Italy and Spain and elsewhere in Europe, the dramas and narratives in question are often and significantly set in spaces of transit, or what Marc Augé calls *non-lieux*. Many such films indeed begin and end in harbours, train stations, airports or transfer ports. Augé defines these locations not only as transitory spaces but also as “urban concentrations, transfers of population, installations of accelerated circulation of people and goods (expressways, airports), the

means of transport themselves, shopping centres or the camps of prolonged transit where the planet's refugees are parked"<sup>4</sup> (Augé 1992, p. 48). In this sense, they intertwine themes of home and travel, placement and displacement as well as the necessity of a physical occupation of space. Thus when irregular migrants are turned into protagonists, the cinematic use of *non-lieux* is usually a metaphor for their social status of placelessness: they no longer belong anywhere. In this sense, the filmic *non-lieux* contribute to unmasking the reality of the migrants' lack of rights.

Liminal border spaces such as harbours, train stations and airports represent not only the longing to escape from living conditions in the country of origin, but also the possibility of a new life in Europe. They are transnational spaces created by the act of border crossing and regarded as "transitory spaces" (Certeau 1988, p. 97). Most Italian and Spanish films dealing with irregular migration in metropolitan areas concentrate on locations such as bus and subway stations, airports, boats, squares, tunnels and parks. Arrests by the police in a railway station, detentions in police stations and deportations by ship or airplane due to the irregular status of migrants tend, moreover, to evoke the implicit danger of such *non-lieux*. As these transitory spaces do not offer a long-term solution, they are usually used by filmmakers to highlight the migrants trying to earn some sort of living by means of illegal street trading. In *Quando sei nato* Alina disembarks, in the final third of the film, at a dilapidated factory on the outskirts of Milan. As in many films with urban settings, the female migrant protagonist is connected with prostitution (which is rarely the case in films set in rural contexts) (Berger 2006, p. 119). Giordana chooses a very sensitive way of introducing this theme: After having received a phone call from Alina, Sandro is looking for his friend, who had suddenly left Brescia with Radu, in the immensity of that factory. He knocks at a closed door which, after some time, Alina opens. She runs back to her bed clasping her transistor radio, which is playing a popular love song by Eros Ramazzotti, "Un'emozione per sempre." There is no conversation, but we hear the sentimental music and see in contrast the respectively immobile and disillusioned faces of the two children. While Sandro, with his



schoolbag on his back, is portrayed as a pupil, Alina is made up in an over-sexualized manner. Sandro is shocked by her dress; he looks around the room and fixes his gaze on the wardrobe with her “extravagant” clothes, illustrating her fate as an underage prostitute. He realizes now that Alina’s “brother” Radu, who has disappeared completely, is her pimp.

The two last static shots of the film focus on yet another transitory space: the protagonists Alina and Sandro, sitting at a street corner in the peripheral quarter of Corea, next to a building site, watch a bus pass by. Instead of the sort of melodramatic music that one might expect here, the traffic noises are allowed to trouble the final images of the film. These become louder and louder until the credits of the film appear, which are accompanied by the appeasing music of *Die Kunst der Fuge* by Johann Sebastian Bach, contrasting with the soundtrack of the former scene. The solidarity between the two characters is in the centre of the images, but is sharply contrasted with the hostile surroundings and sounds. In this sense, migration is seen to remain, as Iain Chambers notes (2005, p. 5), “a movement, in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain.” Public and transitory spaces which, for the privileged, would appear open and enabling are therefore shown to be, for others, sites of a struggle for survival, of danger and the fear of being discovered. In the midst of this contradictory space, on the one hand the individual has to maintain his or her invisibility in order to not be arrested and deported, but on the other hand needs to be seen in order to survive. For the main character in Soler’s film *Saïd*, the streets of Barcelona, through which he must pass on his way to some sought-after security, become zones where migrants are also chased by police or by racist groups whose aggressive attacks leave both physical and psychological scars. In this sense, *non-lieux* in films dealing with the topic of immigration often turn into cross-over points where clandestinity in the sense of sociological invisibility interferes with the filmic visualization of the tensions that represent transitory spaces. In the cinema of irregular migration these spaces serve as symbols of the unstable and unprotected existence of the protagonists in a decidedly hostile environment.

### **Economic Sustenance and Intimacy: Giordana and Marra**

Besides these transitory *non-lieux*, the selected films also focus on irregular migrants' work and living spaces. While these are areas that provide a certain privacy and therefore stability, at the same time they also represent the precariousness of illicit work and short-term housing, of being situated on the edge of society. They are linked to a marginal existence and secrecy. Filmic representations of irregular migrants in rural areas, for example, usually portray the protagonists living in mass accommodations, such as tent camps, in disused factories or even in cemetery tombs. Films such as *Bwana* or *Tornando a casa* are typical, as they emphasize the extreme antagonism arising from their presence in rural areas. Whereas urban life rather facilitates the maintenance of invisibility due to its anonymous character, rural life implies an increasing vulnerability of the body in space and therefore a stronger regulating force in the migrant's life. Marra shows this by choosing southern Italy and the Mediterranean as the main setting of his film, in the tradition of Luchino Visconti's Sicilian fishing film *La terra trema: Episodio del mare* (1948). The (illegal) trade in tuna fish between Sicily and the Libyan and Tunisian coasts is constantly shown as hard work and a cause of sorrow: Salvatore's crew has to fish in this area because the Neapolitan coast is controlled by the Camorra, the Neapolitan mafia. But even at sea they have to beware—they risk being caught and even attacked by the coast guard, and any inspection would be especially dangerous for the irregular worker Samir. The images of the sea are often rough and shot at twilight. There is no exuberant dialogue or melodramatic soundtrack, as there are in *Quando sei nato*. Instead we hear a lot of everyday noises (e.g. the ship's motor).

Migrants in rural settings turn out, as Marra's film shows, to be more visible in their irregular situation so that their need for invisibility gets even more exploited. Due to the tendency towards filmic realism, many filmmakers of migrant cinema show their protagonists getting both jobs and accommodation in rural areas. At the same time, undocumented migrants get deeply involved in patriarchal structures that unscrupulously exploit their need to hide away and so manage to dominate even

their private lives. Locations such as Samir's ship or lodgings are all shown in more or less static images. This style of direct cinema illustrates the ordinary and cramped circumstances of Samir's life, addressing isolation and racially motivated affronts by his colleagues (except Franco). He is shown hiding his earnings under his bed in the hope eventually of making possible a visit to his homeland. Indeed Samir is the figure on the fishing crew who is in the weakest position, but *Tornando a casa* shows also that there are other categories of discrimination than ethnic ones in the context of the Mediterranean. In the southern Italian context, the impact of paternalistic structures is potent, so that private space is also restricted for Salvatore's Italian labourers, especially the younger ones such as Franco, who has to leave his home and his girlfriend Rosa in Naples every time Salvatore sends the ship off to sea for long periods of time. All of this suggests that were Franco to want to build an ordinary life with Rosa, there would be only one alternative open to him: leaving the south of Italy.

Images of migrants in urban settings also differ from the rural ones because metropolises such as Madrid, Barcelona, Naples and Milan offer more spatial options. Finding a job in cities is generally not connected to accommodation, but relies on ethnic community networks and other informal and semi-formal modes of communication. The protagonists are able to find refuge with fellow migrants, acquaintances or family members—although only for short periods of time. Among their places of residence one finds abandoned buildings waiting to be demolished or run-down subsidized low-rent housing. The protagonists often peddle jewelry, operate sewing machines or sell flowers and groceries. Working situations as well as social contacts in general, however, are less stable. This is even the case for migrants such as Alina and Radu, who have the good fortune to meet a generous local family. In *Quando sei nato* this positive aspect serves the melodramatic function of highlighting the contrast between the social situation of the protagonists, as irregular migrants, and the economic abundance of northern Italians, represented by Sandro's father, a factory owner. The surprise effect for the public is thus manifested all the more

powerfully by the peripeteia of Giordana's story, rife with cultural stereotype clichés: having stolen some money and valuables from their hosts, Alina and Radu leave Brescia for Milan. Alina lands, as already mentioned, in a run-down factory on the outskirts of Milan, occupied by migrants. The hopeful storyline, at this point, takes a turn for the worse when any chance for “bourgeois” privacy and intimacy for the female protagonist seems to be lost.

The spaces of economic sustenance and intimacy are therefore depicted as apparently more protected in urban settings, which promise the possibility of a secure escape back to invisibility. While the clandestine migrants in urban spaces are seen, in turn, to be less subjected to patriarchal control and individual despotism, they are that much more effectively brought under the influence of state institutions. Although they also often fail to regain their necessary invisibility, filmic representations of irregular migrants in rural areas emphasize their physical exposure by the frequent use of panoramas which highlight the lack of any obvious hideaway.

### **Trouble in Paradise: Uribe and Soler**

In many migration films one encounters locations that traditionally carry positive and sometimes even poetic connotations linked to tourism, but then acquire new, different meanings in the context of migration: migrants can only very briefly remain on boulevards in city centres or at touristic old harbours, and only irregularly or so long as it is dark. Coastal avenues and beaches are, similarly, striking examples of such “beautiful places.” In films about irregular migration the seaside, which tends to signify the moment of arrival in Europe, loses its conventional connotations as an area of pleasure and beauty, turning instead into a dramatically and existentially loaded place. In *Bwana*, a Spanish middle-class family is spending a day in the inhospitable landscape of Cabo Gato on the coast of Almeria, one of Europe's frontiers with Africa. At the beach the taxi-driver Antonio, his wife Dori and their two children discover the black African Ombasi mourning his friend Yambo who did not survive the journey to Europe. The narrative tension of

*Bwana* is not only structured by the xenophobe attitude of the Spaniards towards the migrant protagonist; the beach also turns into an enchanted place of romance between Dori and Ombasi: for the Spanish woman the black body represents the attractive and exotic other. Ombasi's African origins conflate with the filmic setting in the middle of the wilderness of the sand dunes and his body becomes the object of her desire (Santaolalla 2003, p. 157). In contrast to this romantic vision, the beaches of Andalusia become Yambo's grave after crossing the Mediterranean in a tiny boat. For Ombasi himself they turn into a trap at the end of the film, as he is hunted by skinheads through the sand dunes while the Spanish family is able to flee in their car. Ombasi's body finally succumbs to the speed of his enemies driving heavy silver motorbikes.

In Soler's film *Saïd*, "beautiful places" are represented by urban areas such as Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, a dangerous place for the undocumented protagonist and his friends. As in Uribe's film, in *Saïd* migrants are chased by police and by violent racist youth gangs, but this time through the squares and streets of urban Barcelona, where the Moroccan musician Hussein gets seriously hurt. While Saïd's girlfriend Ana visits Hussein lying in a coma in the intensive care unit of the Hospital del Mar, a worried Saïd waits outside on the sea promenade, where families are enjoying the restaurants and shores of the Mediterranean city. After a supper in a restaurant in the tiny streets of the Old Town, the lovers are detained by police officers in civilian clothes demanding Saïd's documents. The lively area of the Plaza Real—a main square of Barcelona whose architecture and bar scene make it one of the city's tourist attractions—turns into a trap for the irregular Moroccan migrant, just as the Casbah in Algiers does for the French crook Pépé in Julien Duvivier's film *Pépé le Moko* (1937). The glimmer of hope for an exit from a fatal labyrinthine netherworld and for happiness in the future evoked by the love story of French Pépé and his beloved Gaby Gould, a Parisian tourist, is doomed to failure in the end because of police inspector Slimane's trap. Like Pépé, Saïd's hoped-for integration in Spain due to his relationship with the Catalan Ana fails when he gets arrested and

ends up in a centre for irregular refugees in danger of imminent deportation.

Interestingly, both *Bwana* and *Saïd* use interracial relationships as important narrative tools to such an extent that these become characteristic of Spanish films dealing with the topic of migration. Usually condemned to turn out to be an “impossible romance between an immigrant man and a Spanish woman” (Flesler 2008, p. 133), these plotlines often highlight the implicitly discriminatory message of the danger of choosing a sexual or emotional partner who is other than European. Although the couples manage to stay together for a certain period and sometimes even achieve some temporary stability until the irregular migrants have to move on, usually migrant films lack happy endings, either because the relationship fails or because they are discovered by state agents as irregular. Nevertheless, in the case of *Bwana* and *Saïd* these impossible love stories are frequently realized in romantic settings such as the beaches of southern Spain, with sunsets and the sound of breaking waves or the coziness of bars and narrow streets of historic city centres. Interestingly, in both films “beautiful urban and rural places” are told from a positive point of view become negative: The viewer may identify their filmic representations as a proper experience of pleasure or leisure time, but is shown the hidden side of dead bodies washed up on the coastline of Spain and the danger of losing invisibility as an irregular immigrant even in the protective darkness of the streets in urban spaces.

Thus both the Mediterranean coasts as natural attractions of the seaside and old city centres as emblematic tourist sites are presented from a shifted and shifting perspective: simultaneously as idyllic places of pleasure and leisure and as darker locations of irregular migrants and their constant struggle for life. On the other hand, both rural and urban “beautiful places” also embody a “world in danger of being lost” as well as a “site of memory” that is “revered as an ‘ancestral homeland’. . . to be defended at all costs” (Smith 1999, p. 151). As demonstrated by Chus Gutiérrez in her film *Poniente* (2002), the flux of immigrants entering European countries illegally is tolerated “as long as they do not make themselves visible” (Brown, Iordanova and

Torchin 2010, p. 152). By becoming visible, they not only remind European locals of the danger of losing their own well-being, but also of the infiltration of spaces marked as national territories with historic and cultural baggage. The cinematic use of these settings therefore evokes not only concepts such as “beauty,” but also “threat” and fear of the untamed and the unknown.

### **Mediterranean Perspectives: Giordana and Marra**

Although the Mediterranean is often used to introduce the action or to close a film, the *Mare Nostrum* itself is strikingly absent as a space of action in Italian and Spanish films. Indeed, often storylines end either with a deportation scene at a seaport or with an existence of unlawfulness and illegality in European harbour cities. Most of the films focusing on the Mediterranean do not leave European shores but focus on the sea only marginally, often from the vantage point of the European countryside. The Mediterranean is frequently depicted in the context of a boat landing at the very beginning of the film and then reduced to a distant space of nostalgia and homesickness, which the migrants focus on in situations of isolation and desperation. In this sense, the Mediterranean is seen as a border separating Europe from the other shores of the Mediterranean; the irregular migrants are thus constructed as immigrants who enter the European countries by the sea.

The Mediterranean is clearly shown in *Quando sei nato*, after an introductory sequence set in Brescia, where Alina and Radu travel with other irregular migrants to Italy on a barely functioning boat. In this way Giordana reflects on the transcultural and the status of the Mediterranean. After his physical rescue, Sandro follows Radu's advice and neglects to mention his Italian origins to the facilitators and pretends instead to be a Kurd, a political refugee. To authenticate his new identity he uses a sentence, which he heard repeatedly used by a foreign derelict in the streets of Brescia, “Soki Obotami Okoki Komibomba Lisusu Te.” It is only in the refugee camp, after landing at the Apulian coast, that Sandro learns what the phrase means in Italian: “Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti,” when you are

born you can't hide anymore. The inversion of the roles on the boat, where Radu saves the life of Sandro, like the title of the film itself, is an appeal to the audience to reflect on the relativity of borders and to practise solidarity in their everyday lives. Thus, Giordana thematizes the cultural technique of translation and alienation, which leads in the case of Sandro to a cultural transformation, a rebirth, one often associated with the figure of the sea, in this case the Mediterranean (Ponzanesi 2005, p. 277).

But beyond this rhetorical figure of transformation Giordana doesn't transcend the cultural borders, especially on the level of cinematic practice. He does not visualize the "other," the coasts of Greece and Albania are not shown, and southern Italy is only the location of landing, not a space of action, and thus is reduced to the status of the national "other" within Italy (Wood 2003, pp. 97-99). The sea, which does not appear again in the rest of the film, represents therefore only a passage in the sense of a veritable transitional place. This placement of irregular migrants in continental Europe and not in the larger contexts of departure and crossing thus shows the political-ideological and economic significance of the hegemony of the North over the South within the EU.

In contrast, Vincenzo Marra's film makes the passage over the sea a central issue, depicting the Mediterranean itself, along with other locations, as a space of transformation. His main interest is not idyllic images of the port of Naples or the African coast, but the Mediterranean Sea itself. Marra doesn't use camera movements or pans showing Naples or Sicily in spectacular images. The film focuses on the unstable existence of the irregular migrant Samir and depicts the (Italian) shores as points of departure and return, associating the sea not only with danger and death but also with hope and a change of identity; an ambivalent image through and through. For instance, one night Franco discovers a migrant gone overboard. He dives off Salvatore's ship to save the person and then has to be rescued with the dead body in turn by a boat of irregular migrants. As the Italian coast guard approaches, he scratches the photograph in his passport and decides to take over the identity of the dead



migrant. In this way Marra shows the Mediterranean as a space where local and global dimensions of culture get intermingled, combining everyday life and utopia.

On an aesthetic level Marra insists on the fluid and vivid nature of the sea (Winkler 2010, pp. 52-56). He doesn't imitate Visconti's poetic cinematic language and even rejects strong symbolic images, which work with contrasts of shadows and are composed like a work of art. He uses low-contrast colour images by focusing on the empty sea and then on the inner workings of the ship itself. Only the final images show the rest of the crew on deck, believing that Franco is dead, in a rather static posture, accompanied by instrumental film music by Andrea Guerra. Thus, Marra provides at the end of the film two alternative perspectives on the status of the Mediterranean: for the "Neapolitan" crew, and especially for Samir, the disappearance of Franco is a moment of sorrow, whereas for the now "illegal" Franco it is the beginning of a new life. By playing on this sort of ambivalence, which is, once again, characteristic of our global moment, Marra challenges the audience to take a more critical stance toward the question of borders and the fact that some aspects of southern European everyday life and mentality have more in common with the north of Libya and Tunisia than with the rest of Europe. In other words, by the end of the movie it has disturbed the traditional way of associating visibility with public space and legality and invisibility with privacy and illegality.

### **Waiting for the "Other" View**

"Early" Spanish and Italian movies dealing with the issue of irregular migration, whether they follow an aesthetic of art cinema or melodrama, meticulously reveal the human impact of what has become a constant influx of irregular migration that economic globalization is carrying on in Europe. In comparison with French cinema, with its long tradition of *Beur* and *Banlieue* filmmaking, the similarity of Spanish<sup>5</sup> and Italian movies relies, on the one hand, on the relative novelty of issues dealing with irregular migration, starting in both countries in the 1990s. On the other hand, another similarity shared by both Spanish and

Italian films is the fact that nearly without fail “national” filmmakers are telling stories that need to be told from the point of view of those affected.

In their depictions of irregular migrants in public and private spaces, there is a clear contrast in Spanish and Italian films’ representation of the everyday life of clandestine migrants in European rural areas, cities and villages, but also between the specific regional inscriptions of the films (e.g. in relation to the minor role of the Mediterranean as an economic frame of reference besides tourism). The specific movies discussed here often highlight the marginalization of migrants by stressing their limited ability to appropriate spaces for themselves. In order to visualize the social component of marginalization, Spanish and Italian filmmakers also refer to spaces and places which are not consciously identified as territories in which the visibility of European citizens contrasts with the (intended or forced) invisibility of irregular migrants. The most interesting film productions focus on the depiction of “liminal” spaces which maintain migrants in the disjunction between separation and integration, and they tend to “visualize” the precise process of rendering invisible the migrants, thus defining their social status in Europe apart from the stigmatizing binary of “legality” and “illegality.”

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#### NOTES

1. This essay is a second version of our presentation “‘Clandestino’. . . Irregular Immigration in Contemporary French, Italian and Spanish Cinema” at the “Migrant and Diasporic Cinema Conference,” Oxford Brookes University, UK, in July 2006. For an initial essay on this theme in a wider context see *Rabbit Eye. Zeitschrift für Filmforschung*, no. 4, 2012, <http://www.rabbiteye.de/>.

2. For a broader discussion of the intersections between film and human trafficking as well as the filmic representation of the “invisibility” of irregular migrants see Brown, Iordanova and Torchin 2010.

3. There is of course the cinema of Rachid Benhadj and Ferzan Oztpetek, but their films do not deal directly with irregular migration and so fall outside the object of study here. The only exception is Benhadj’s TV production *L’Albero dei destini sospesi* (Italy, 1997).

4. Our translation.

5. In relation to Spanish cinema see Prout 2006 (p. 731).

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## RÉSUMÉ

### **Perspectives méditerranéennes. La migration irrégulière dans quelques films pionniers d’Espagne et d’Italie (Giordana, Marra, Soler, Uribe)**

**Verena Berger et Daniel Winkler**

Cet article se penche sur quatre films italiens et espagnols, parmi les premiers à traiter de la migration clandestine d’outre-Méditerranée: *Bwana* d’Imanol Uribe (1996), *Saïd* de Llorenç Soler (1998), *Tornando a casa* de Vincenzo Marra (2001) et *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* de Marco Tullio Giordana (2005). L’analyse s’attarde essentiellement aux notions d’« espace » et de « lieu » ainsi qu’à leurs représentations, lesquelles évoquent à la fois les structures spatiales des films eux-mêmes et les structures idéologiques qui jalonnent la migration des clandestins. Plus précisément, cette étude se concentre sur ces lieux frontaliers qui sont directement liés à l’immigration « illégale » et propose quatre catégories permettant d’approfondir le traitement cinématographique des migrations irrégulières.