

Italian Filmmakers With Migration Backgrounds Engaging in Intercultural Understanding

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Abstract

This essay explores how Italian cinema engages with contemporary Mediterranean migration through the lens of filmmakers with migratory backgrounds, focusing on *Anywhere Anytime* (Milad Tangshir, 2024) and *Maka* (Elia Moutamid, 2023). Both films contribute to an emergent cinematic discourse that challenges dominant media narratives and proposes counter-representations of migration and Otherness. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1996/2001) notion of "mediascapes" and theories of cultural identity as a relational process, the paper highlights how these works can foster symbolic renegotiations of belonging and intercultural understanding. Despite differing in form and tone, both films employ aesthetic strategies that may enable a shift in perspective. They reflect on the traditional ethnocentric frame and foreground the agency of those who have historically and culturally been rendered voiceless. By positioning the migrant subject as narrative centre and active producer of meaning, these works articulate new imaginaries that challenge dynamics of structural symbolic violence and suggest a more inclusive, dialogic visual culture in the context of global mobility.

Keywords

global media studies, cinema, intercultural dialogue, mediascapes, Mediterranean

Intercultural Dialogue in Migration Cinema

In the global era, mass migration stands out as a major challenge, with cultural, social, and political implications, among others. Europe is particularly involved, having received the largest number of migrants over the past decade while simultaneously experiencing a growing and widespread perception of a migration “crisis”, especially in Italy¹. Several factors have contributed to reinforcing this idea, including the succession of uprisings in the so-called “Arab Springs”², as well as the media strategies of mainstream information in Italy and the widespread use of digital technological devices by migrants, which represents an element of multiplication and interconnection of transmedia narratives related to the migration phenomenon in Europe.

This contribution aims to shed light on the perspectives of Italian filmmakers with migratory backgrounds on the theme of contemporary Mediterranean migration, which views Europe as a destination. In particular, I propose a critical interpretation of two films taken as *exempla* in Italian cinematography on the subject: *Anywhere Anytime* by Milad Tangshir (Italy, 2024) and *Maka* by Elia Moutamid (Italy, United States of America, 2023).

If we consider the figure of the migrant within global media ecosystems, or “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1996/2001), we can see how this has assumed a prominent role in the transformation of collective imaginaries. By interweaving the paths of migratory flows with those of global cultural flows, in fact, the migrant – diasporic or indigenous – figure is placed within “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983/2018) that influence perceptions, relations and actions through the incessant symbolic negotiation between identity and cultural Otherness. People in transit thus emerge as producers in the imaginary dimension interpreting and modifying the cultural landscape they pass through, in a global symbolic exchange (Baudrillard, 1976/2015) of media production and consumption, which generates narratives that have the potential of reshaping the encounter and affecting processes of social inclusion (Nail, 2015).

The symbolic formations conveyed by mediascapes have, over time, consolidated mostly oppositional logics around migration, through media practices of Othering, especially within national television news. These logics manifest in dichotomies such as “us/them”, “citizens/foreigners”, or “inside/outside the border”. Conversely, it is often in the cinematic sphere that one finds proposals for counter-narratives aimed at deconstructing these entrenched, stereotypical symbolic concretions and fostering an intersubjective recognition of Otherness. Such alternative storytelling opens up new interpretations of encounters with other cultures.

¹ Italy, in fact, is the first European country of arrival for migrants along the Central Mediterranean route (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

² In journalistic parlance, this term refers to the protest uprisings that have shaken the Arab countries bordering the Mediterranean, symbolically initiated by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, on 17 December 2010.

The potential of cinema to mobilise an aesthetic experience rooted in the exchange of perspectives is closely tied to the unconscious mechanisms of empathic and imaginative *mimesis* (Gallese & Guerra, 2015; Metz, 1971/1977; Musatti, 1961; Wulf, 2014/2023). *Mimesis* relies on analogical thinking (Morin, 1986/2007) and, specifically, operates through the analogies established between the subject and what the subject perceives.

When the audiovisual language conveys dominant cultural codes, viewers tend to draw spontaneous and unconscious analogies between what they see and their own experiential and value-based frameworks. This occurs thanks to mirror systems in the brain, which are neurons primarily involved in learning and are stimulated by observing movement. When we observe other people's actions, these neurons trigger the same bodily responses as if we were performing those actions ourselves, and the stimulus is then translated into corresponding mental and emotional states. They play a cognitive role in supporting processes of knowledge acquisition based on embodied simulation. Mimetic thinking thus constitutes a form of cognition mediated by affective resonance and calls into question the domain of intersubjectivity, particularly those forms of mediated intersubjectivity that are proper to narrative fiction, such as cinema (Gallese & Guerra, 2015).

Analogical thought is therefore fundamental to understanding cinematic language and audiovisual representations, since it enables understanding through the psychological processes of identification and projection – namely, through reciprocal *transfert* (Morin 1986/2007, 1956/2016, 2021). These processes can also have relevant implications in the definition of “cultural identity”, which is here understood as a relational process (Hall, 2006; Jullien, 2016/2018, 2018/2020). The opening up to unprecedented possibilities and exchanges of perspectives, however, is not automatically opened up by cinematic language and enjoyment but requires certain favourable conditions to trigger unconscious processes and set further rational self-reflection in motion (Simonigh, 2020).

In Italy, the central Mediterranean route is the one most represented and is correlated with symbolic elements linked to the sea, maritime rescue, detention centres, and reception systems in destination countries. In the two films examined, the aesthetic models and representational strategies that correlate with intercultural dialogue – and thus propose an empathic perspective on Otherness – will be highlighted.

Anywhere Anytime

Anywhere Anytime is a fiction film, the debut work of Iranian director Milad Tangshir, who seems to reimagine Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* in a contemporary key, set in Turin. The protagonist, Issa, is a young undocumented Senegalese migrant seeking a job to survive. Thanks to a friend who has already become part of the urban fabric, Issa borrows his smartphone to start working as a rider for a food delivery organisation. With some effort, he manages to buy a second-hand bicycle, which becomes

his only means of emancipation. One day, however, someone steals his bike, and Issa wanders the city to find it.

Given the clear homage to *Bicycle Thieves*, instead of dealing with post-war trauma, *Anywhere Anytime* tries to come to terms with what might be called a “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004/2005), in which only the rights of some are defended at the expense of others. In order to work as a rider, Issa is forced to assume the identity of another person – his friend’s account – which underscores how identity is subordinated to legal status and responds to hierarchies established by Western civil society (*Anywhere Anytime*, M. Tangshir, 2024, 00:11:29). Even the name of the delivery company, *Anywhere Anytime*, alludes to a total availability of the worker, interweaving the issue of ethnic inequality with the exploitative logics of capitalism.

Departing from mainstream media strategies, the director first of all chooses to make a Senegalese migrant the protagonist of the story. In preparation for the film, Tangshir follows a Senegalese rider for a year and then casts the lead role with a non-professional actor. Through techniques of focalization, the film offers Issa’s personal perspective, narrated and shown through close-ups and point-of-view shots, and stages a moral dilemma at the moment his bike is stolen.

By allowing the viewer to share the protagonist’s subjective experience, the film not only unfolds his story but also conveys his interpretation of reality, the challenges he faces, and the decisions he must make. In the proposed model, the intersubjective *transfer* is facilitated both by the possibility of the audience’s gaze moving through the urban environment with Issa’s eyes and by the ethical crossroads posed by the moral dilemma: whether to steal a bicycle himself to keep working. Placed in the protagonist’s shoes, the viewer is implicitly asked, “what would you do in this situation?”. This provokes empathetic resonance, encouraging a distancing from simplifications and a more complex, multidimensional engagement with migratory experiences and cultural identities.

In the end, Issa throws away the bike he has eventually stolen, seeking some kind of redemption, even though this will not improve his material conditions. The aesthetic regime adopted by Tangshir is minimal, devoid of rhetoric, and aimed at highlighting a phenomenon now widespread among people who migrate irregularly. In an interview, the director stated that he intended to portray the constant anxiety and emotional instability experienced by people living in a new country, with limited job opportunities and precarious economic conditions (Cavaggioni, 2024). The film’s somewhat chaotic and accelerated pace reflects this anxiety and reverberates in the general hustle and bustle of the urban environment, in which Issa is simultaneously hyper-visible, as unprotected, and invisible, as legally unrecognised (*Anywhere Anytime*, M. Tangshir, 2024, 00:28:01).

Nonetheless, the film includes lyrical moments in which the protagonist makes human connections with other marginalised individuals – a migrant woman, an elderly lady. These relationships link Issa’s personal dimension to the broader structural dynamics of the city and contemporary society, such as the growing selfishness

and a general anaesthetisation to Others' suffering (Simmel, 1903/2020; Sontag, 2003/2021). While his theft might reinforce the stereotype of the "criminal foreigner", the contextualisation carried out by the director reframes this desperate act in the light of the socio-economic conditions imposed on minority groups by the privileges of Eurocentric society.

Maka

A reflection on power structures and the position of the European gaze also emerges in the second film under examination, *Maka*. "Maka" refers to Geneviève Makaping, whose book *Reversing the Gaze: What If the Other Were You?*, published in 2001, inspired the creation of the documentary directed by Elia Moutamid. The Italian filmmaker, himself of migrant origin, collaborated with Simone Brioni, scholar of migration cinema and literature, who wrote the screenplay.

Makaping is presented as the first Black woman to be appointed as the director of a daily newspaper and a television channel in Italy. After earning a PhD in cultural anthropology at the University of Calabria and teaching there, she eventually settled in Mantua to teach English and French. At the end of the 1970s, Maka fled Cameroon with a French man to avoid being forced into a traditional Bamiléké marriage arranged by her family. During their journey to France, she discovers that her being a woman and Black puts her in a differentiated and subordinate condition compared to the socio-cultural position occupied by her companion Marcel, especially at border crossings.

The documentary shares with the book the same intention of mobilising the gaze toward alterity, also understood as subalternity, whose effects are manifested through the construction of hierarchies according to a long-standing Western ideal of beauty. The film articulates the need to reverse the dominant scopic regime, mainly through the dialogue that Maka establishes both with the figures represented in certain Renaissance Mantuan frescoes (*Maka*, E. Moutamid, 2024, 00:47:28) and with the two authors, who also appear as co-protagonists within the diegetic space. This dialogical strategy underscores the responsibility of the audience's gaze and the cultural frameworks operating beneath it. Through their filmic presence, Moutamid and Brioni enact a critical self-reflection on the cultural implications of their creative process – more specifically, on the possibility for Maka to achieve self-definition through her own voice³. In this sense, the film resonates with the broader debate on the necessary aesthetics of dissent (Rancière, 2008/2018) in its representation of migration and Otherness.

Interestingly, the main reflections – related to symbolic, intercultural, and linguistic elements – that punctuate the entire film are conveyed through the voice-over narration of Maka and the director, as well as Brioni's voice messages. In the opening

³ "There is a need for my voice to be heard, since I can speak about myself better than anyone else. There is a need for my voice to be heard. I do not just speak of my suffering. I want to tell you my story, which should not be told by those who I believe may be the 'others', or, even worse, my colonizer (...). I must not be feted by those who think they can tell my story better than me" (Makaping, 2001/2023, p. 68).

scenes, as the subjective view of the camera lingers on an open sea, and only later shifts to the car journey of Moutamid and Brioni, the viewer's first processes of identification and projection take place in relation to a still invisible entity: it is an acousmatic voice wandering on the screen (Chion, 1990/2001, p. 74; *Maka*, E. Moutamid, 2024, 00:00:26).

Through a montage that intercuts present-day sequences with archival footage from the years when *Maka* was a newsreader, the film reconstructs key moments in her growing awareness of ethnic discrimination and the systemic whitewashing in Italian media. Despite increasing multiculturalism, *Maka* observes that in Italy and Europe the beauty attributed to the Black female body remains tied to the perception of sexual availability. This occurs through a devaluing association in which femininity is both reified and exoticised, as intersectional and gender studies continue to highlight.

The film culminates in archival footage of the ceremony in which *Maka* receives Italian citizenship, marking a trajectory of emancipation. Commenting on that moment with the two authors, *Maka* is proud to have obtained her citizenship on the basis of her own personal and professional merits, rather than through marriage to an Italian, as was more common in the late 1990s. In direct reference to bell hooks (1990), the protagonist claims “the margin as a place of radical speech”, in order to tell her own story and deconstruct an Othering narrative long monopolized by those who speak *on behalf of* a subject and never expressed by the subjects themselves. By interrogating the relational dimension of identity-alterity (“what if the *others* were you?”), *Maka* articulates a decolonial thought that, in pedagogical terms, also aims to provide tools to “unlearn” ethnocentrism and look beyond personal and national traditions.

The film concludes with the director Moutamid – whose previous works have already engaged with intercultural themes⁴ – resuming the narrative and elaborating on his encounter with *Maka* as an enrichment of his own personal history.

A Meta-Viewpoint

Albeit with clear differences, both films explore aesthetic models that bring into dialogue the denunciation of discrimination against Otherness and gender stereotypes with the formulation of new representational strategies and regimes of the gaze, aimed at inhibiting the proliferation of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1997/1998) and the re-proposition of cultural power structures.

Some of the representational and narrative-dramaturgical conventions shared by these two works – counter to more widespread media portrayals – can be traced in the choice of point of view. In both cases, the *Other* is the protagonist and narrating

⁴ Moutamid's previous works include: *KLANdestino* (2007), *Gaiwan* (2015), *Talien* (2017), and *Kufid* (2020).

voice of the story, and using focalisation, the films seek to create conditions in which the personal perspective of the narrative subject comes to the fore, via close-ups and point-of-view shots. By encouraging the sharing of the protagonists' standpoint – as active subjects embedded in a network of relationships – the films aim to convey not only their lived experiences but also their interpretations of reality, including self-reflective insights (Cati & Grassilli, 2019). This approach tends to promote an inter-subjective exchange enacted through a transfer between *ego*-the self and *alter*-the Other, resulting from psychological processes of identification and projection. These unconscious mechanisms inscribe the world of the two protagonists into that of the viewer, and vice versa. In so doing, they enable empathetic understanding that makes the migrant figure less foreign and more familiar, thereby weakening or challenging prejudices and stereotypes in favour of a greater complexity and multidimensionality of cultural identities and experiences of deterritorialisation.

The documentary takes a further step by weaving together the life story of director Elia Moutamid with that of Geneviève Makaping, and through the collaboration of screenwriter Simone Brioni, the narrative culminates in an original outcome of the encounter among these distinct subjectivities⁵. By resorting to the *mise en abyme*, together they all enter the representational field and open up a meta-viewpoint on the dialogic relationship between cultural identities and Otherness (*Maka*, E. Moutamid, 2024, 00:41:49). The *voice-over*, finally, becomes a connecting entity between the visible and invisible dimensions of the film, capable of establishing a relationship with the audience that invests subjectivity, while simultaneously disembodimenting the migrant voice – an agent of the story who remains always “out of place” (Bourdieu, 1999/2004, p. XIV).

The film's rhythm, suited to contemplation and to lingering on facial close-ups, facilitates the emotional and discursive sedimentation necessary for the mimetic processes on which the intercultural understanding of Otherness is based. Moreover, the alternating montage – juxtaposing present-day footage with archival material from personal or television sources – generates a tension between scopic regimes aimed at ensuring a fair distance and soliciting an intellectual engagement on the part of the audience. The use of multilingualism in dialogues further activates an intercultural dimension largely excluded from the national media landscape.

Intercultural dialogue is closely connected to some foundational principles of cosmopolitanism (Beck & Grande, 2004/2006), which, in the history of European cinema, emerges as a multiplicity that nonetheless persists within a cultural unity (Sorlin, 1991/2001). Cosmopolitanism is linked to the creation of a global audiovisual media culture, and this very culture, in turn, plays a key role in shaping a cosmopolitan conscience. The Mediterranean, in particular, as a vast basin of European civilisation, has long served as a site of cultural encounter, well before the European Union

⁵ It is particularly significant to recall the concept of the “third space”, understood for its symbolic and generative value as an interstitial and intercultural zone, in which the act of representing and the interweaving of the gazes of the subjectivities involved reciprocally question one other. In the third space, discursive positions hybridise and negotiate (Bhabha, 1994).

was defined in political and economic terms. Given their history of permeable and shifting borders and maritime frontiers that once represented openings rather than barriers, Mediterranean routes have long constituted zones of cultural hybridisation. These transits have even led to the notion of a “Mediterranean vocation” and “aesthetics” extending as far as Northern Europe (Bredenkamp, 2018/2019).

If today we can speak of a “cinema of migration”, it is because its recent prolific emergence signals the urgency of addressing a complex and global issue which, beyond the question of human mobility, brings to the forefront of cultural debate the relationship between cultural identity and alterity, as well as the political dimension of the image – or, indeed, the politics of images (Didi-Huberman, 2000/2009). Filmmakers such as Dagmawi Yimer, Fred Kuwornu, Medhin Paolos, Antonio Dikele Distefano, Hleb Papou, Yosr Gasmi, Haider Rashid, Suranga Deshapriya Katugampala, and Khaled Soliman Al Nassiry explore aesthetic strategies that combine autobiographical traces, collective memory, and counter-narrative practices. Their works frequently experiment with hybrid forms, ranging from documentary to fiction and visual languages rooted in urban culture or artistic research, thereby unsettling stereotypical representations of migration and making visible the plurality of diasporic experiences in Italy.

By moving beyond the paradigms most prevalent in journalistic media, these aesthetic resources disrupt the regime of invisibility that renders the migrant figure both over-represented and reified by an anaesthetic and indifferent gaze. In this sense, the two films examined here are part of a broader framework of practices in which the iconic act addresses sensitive knowledge to invoke a form of solidarity grounded in the sharing of a common, unitary and multiple human condition (Simonigh, 2020).

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