

## Performing post-migration cinema in Italy: *Corazones de Mujer* by K. Kosoof

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Following consideration of the most common representations of migrants in Italian cinema, where they are often portrayed as victimised and minor subjects, this article analyses a film by Davide Sordella and Pablo Benedetti, *Corazones de Mujer* (2008) as a 'post-migration alternative'. This film considers a different way of depicting 'foreigners', and addresses the complex issues of gender and sexuality as they emerge at the interface between Western and Arab cultures. Within the conceptual framework of Judith Butler's 'gender performativity' and Rosi Braidotti's 'nomadic subject', this article aims to suggest an alternative way of representing migrants in Italian cinema as agents of social and gender transgressions.

**Keywords:** Italian cinema of migration; post-migration; gender performance; *Corazones de Mujer*; nomadic subjects

### Introduction

This article considers a new representation of 'foreigners' within the so-called cinema of migration in Italy. *Corazones de Mujer* (*Women's Hearts*) (2008) by the two young Italian directors Davide Sordella and Pablo Benedetti offers an alternative to the dominant representation of foreign characters, often depicted as inferior and minor within a cultural system framed by the host culture. In *Corazones de Mujer* the two main characters are of Moroccan descent and live in Turin. Despite the main characters being foreigners and migrants the film does not dwell on problems of integration and acceptance into Italian society as so often happens in the Italian cinema of migration. Rather than offering a limited identification of the characters as migrants, the film challenges us to engage with complex issues relating to gender and sexuality for individuals caught between Western and Arab cultures. The characters in this film are best described as 'nomadic subjects', according to Rosi Braidotti's definition. These are 'post-modern/industrial/colonial [subjects], depending on one's locations. In so far as axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity, the notion of the nomad refers to the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once' (Braidotti 1994, 4). 'Nomadic' is a condition wherein identities are fundamentally seen as complex and fluid; complex because identity is perceived as constituted by a host of different markers (race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, etc.) and fluid

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because these markers are interdependent and subject to change. In the case of *Corazones de Mujer* this nomadic construction of subjecthood is predominantly reflected in the conscious performative nature of the characters' gender depending on their changing locations and identities. This performative aspect of fluid subjectivity is better understood, to use Judith Butler's terms, as a '*corporeal style*, an "act"', where the fluidity of identities suggests an 'openness to resignification and recontextualisation' (Butler 1999, 176, 177, emphasis in the original).

In this context, *Corazones de Mujer*, more than any other Italian film where foreigners or migrants are represented, can be included in a category of a cinema of migration that is best described as 'post-migrant', where the 'post' indicates the possibility for overcoming the subaltern condition of the characters as migrants.

### Migration in Italian cinema

The representation of ethnic otherness is not a recent phenomenon in contemporary Italian and European cinema; it reflects the increasing number of immigrants who have arrived from many different countries in the last 30 years. In most of the films devoted to the theme of immigration, it is striking that despite the attempt to criticise and destabilise the unquestioned centrality that Europeans occupy within their own culture, immigrants are still represented as marginalised characters, as victims of abuse and exploitation, located in peripheral and anonymous spaces. It goes without saying that in films such as these, migrants are not allowed to perform real 'acts of transgression'.

Yosefa Loshitzky in her recent book, *Screening Strangers*, analyses the screening strategies adopted by 'Fortress Europe' in its filmic representations of strangers. Loshitzky makes it clear that the idea of screening migrants in Europe is still influenced by 'popular and racist myths according to which immigrants bring diseases and pollution to the body of the nation (and the continent) and therefore need to be *screened* and contained' (Loshitzky 2010, 2, emphasis in the original). This is even more true in the case of Italy, a country which more than any other in Europe has rejected its involvement in colonial exploitation and its consequent responsibilities, and is now dealing with the 'invasion' of foreigners while exposing unfiltered xenophobic attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Cinema is probably one of the most explicit forms of expressions of this tendency. One of the reasons for this, as Derek Duncan asserts, is that 'cinema in Italy has been seen as the cultural form in which national identity is most securely located' (Duncan 2008, 211). This tendency to locate and reinforce Italian national identity through cinematic representations has been supported and made increasingly more dominant by depictions of migrants as 'other' in 'well-meaning' recent films depicting the challenges inherent to the immigrant experience.

In Italy, where the question of immigration is strongly inflected by socio-political discourses of security and criminality as perpetuated by the press and other political actors, representing another side of the 'whatness' of immigrants (Parati 2005) is a challenge that only a few brave film directors have confronted. I say 'brave', because such a strategy will, most likely, result in very limited funding, distribution and media attention.

Beginning at the latest with Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994), the issue of ethnic otherness in Italian society has been investigated by film-makers such as Michele Placido, Silvio Soldini, Vittorio De Seta and Carlo Mazzacurati, who have produced films that

attempt to deconstruct the idea of foreigners as the ‘invaders’ of Italian soil, in order to represent their individualities in a more complex way. These films ‘have uniformly aligned themselves with the attempt to welcome migrants as a positive presence’ (Duncan 2009, 168). By doing so, a few migrant films reflect productively on the complexity of an Italian national identity and its cultural memory, although, as I will argue, their perspectives remain limited.

We are here talking about native white film-makers, representatives of the *cinema medio d'autore* – a definition that in the early 2000s was used to identify films of ‘good’ quality, produced on a limited budget. The subject matter of these films would be restricted to middle-class professional settings, and the expected audience would most likely be educated, urban, middle-class women and men (Capussotti 2009, 57). The migrant subjects, generally speaking, are here represented as alienated figures challenged by a social and cultural system that relegates them to the margins of society. Michele Placido’s *Pummarò* (1990) represents an attempt to denounce the prejudices and racism of Italian culture at a time when intolerance towards foreigners was becoming ubiquitous. Kwaku Toré, a young doctor from Ghana, travels all over Italy in search of his elder brother Giobbe Kwala Toré, who works as a tomato picker. The film shows a love affair between Kwaku and an Italian woman, Eleonora, which is obstructed by a close-minded white society, still very resistant to mixed-raced relationships. On the one hand, *Pummarò* has the merit of dealing, for the first time, with the conditions of immigrants coming from Africa to Italy, documenting the presence of criminal organisations exploiting the immigrant workers by taking advantage of their vulnerable situation. On the other hand, as David Forgacs has rightly observed: ‘although black people recited the lines, the film “spoke” through and on behalf of them; it was not spoken (written, researched, filmed, produced) by them’ (Forgacs 2001, 86).

At this stage, the representation of immigrants in Italian cinema is still embedded in a bourgeois respectability that remains within a simple discourse of ethnic othering. Consider, for instance, the way these films try to overcome stereotypes by actually confirming them: in *Pummarò* the white main character, the professor, sympathises with the immigrants’ conditions by saying ‘I feel I am one of you’, but at the same time he does not hesitate to take advantage of their vulnerability by ‘being a petty shark who preys on the immigrants’ (92). The immigrants in these films appear as objects of observation, the narrated, never as narrators themselves. The immigrant character is a ‘focaliser’ rather than the narrator, ‘a character within the story frame who ‘sees’ or experiences events rather than the person who tells the story’ (87).

Slightly different is the case of younger Italian film-makers such as Mattero Garrone (*Terra di mezzo*, 1997; *Ospiti*, 1998), Francesco Munzi (*Saimir* 2004) and Vincenzo Marra (*Tornando a casa*, 2001), where not only the narrative strategies but also the means used to produce their films testify to an effort to overcome the paternalistic and exotic gaze that Italian film-makers often present when dealing with the representation of immigrants in Italy.

These films were produced on low budgets, sometimes self-funded, involving the participation of non-professional actors, while the distribution was supported by film festivals and by institutions that promote experimental cinema. In these cases, the films attract an audience that is best described ‘as a socially and culturally active segment of the public, which is motivated to see films as social texts and to interpret cinema as an instrument for political and cultural action’ (Capussotti 2009, 58).

*Saimir* by Munzi is probably the most representative of these. The film tells the story of a young Albanian who reluctantly helps his father in the illegal trafficking of immigrants to Italy. He tries to conduct a normal life. He meets an Italian girl but feels inadequate when trying to start a relationship with her. He ends up thieving with a group of Roma friends. Finally, after meeting a young girl illegally trafficked into Italy and exploited as a sex worker, he decides to report his father and the rest of the criminals to the police, because he is tired of a life of illegality and exploitation. In *Saimir* there is a more intimate representation of immigrant subjects, who are rarely interacting with 'Italians'. Issues of integration and assimilation are not the primary motives of the plot. The spectator is instead witness to a representation of a difficult relationship between a displaced father and his son, accompanied by dialogues in Albanian language with Italian subtitles. The story is told from the perspective of the migrants, making their characters appear more 'authentic'. But the subjects are still marginalised and subaltern, located in peripheral and detached spaces that, as Duncan suggests, 'insist on the inhospitable nature of the location to the presence of the other' (Duncan 2008, 209).

Despite the praiseworthy efforts of these Italian film directors, who suggest a new form of representation and a different way of presenting 'alterity' within the confines of an Italian cinema of migration, very little has yet been done to enable a situation wherein 'the other' may authentically talk back to the monocultural and monocoloured system that still dominates Italian culture. The films mentioned so far tend in fact to 'mythologize the subalterns' (Capussotti 2009, 65) through what could still be considered a colonising perspective. The immigrant, in this process, is still the personification of an exotic alterity that is only timidly disrupted and made more familiar. As Duncan has noted, 'in all these films, migrants to Italy remain visible as the spectator is invited to contemplate their precarious corporeality' (Duncan 2008, 177). They exist as an anonymous mass devoid of subjectivity (Parati 2005, 108), while the interest of Italian film-makers is often the result of a 'risky enthusiasm for the "Other"' (Grassilli 2008, 1248).

### Accented Italian film-makers

Within a European context of a cinema of migration, Italy shows a lack of public interest in supporting creative or aesthetic representations of and by minorities. This has contributed to the very limited availability of resources for such cultural initiatives. As Grassilli notes in this regard: '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' (Grassilli 2008, 1249). It goes without saying that, in this context of indifference, very few directors in Italy have been able to produce real 'accented' films, according to Hamid Naficy's definition, wherein 'the accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the film-makers and their artisanal production modes' (Naficy 2001, 4).

Few 'displaced' film-makers in Italy have been offered the possibility of making and producing films. Rachid Banhadj, an Algerian director who lives in Italy, and who directed *L'albero dei destini sospesi/The Tree of Pending Destinies* (1997), *Mirka* (2000) and *Il pane nudo/Naked Bread* (2004), could be considered a model displaced film-maker in Italy, who aims at destabilising the canonical representation of immigrants within Italian cinema, by

giving a voice to 'the other' through controlling the production of films. In *L'albero dei destini sospesi* the protagonist Saimir is a young Moroccan man working as a cook for a community of immigrants, who live together in a shabby common room on the outskirts of Rome. Saimir is trapped in his identity as an immigrant and hates the limited physical and social spaces he inhabits. His desire is to explore Italian society and culture by learning the Italian language and finding a better job. After a strange string of events that include a meeting with an Italian woman called Maria, he ends up as a go-between for the two cultures, driving a car from Italy to Morocco full of gifts collected by the Moroccan immigrant workers in Italy for their families left behind.

*L'albero dei destini sospesi* is a good example of an attempt to promote an authentic accented cinema in Italy, at least in terms of its production, multilingualism and border crossing: the film follows an 'interstitial way of production' as it is created in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices (Naficy 2001, 4). Benhadj's film was produced by the small production company Filmalbatros, and was supported by Rai Cinema. In other words, it was located 'at the intersection of the local and the global' (46). Benhadj's stylistic approach, furthermore, seems to respond to a pattern of accented cinema as suggested by Naficy: the language, for instance, is not neutral or standardised, it is accented due to the de-territorialisation of the characters. The Italian spoken by the immigrant characters is an accented Italian, while most of the initial dialogues between the Moroccans are in Arabic with Italian subtitles. By incorporating multilinguality, Benhadj's film destabilises 'the narrative system of the mainstream cinema' (25) and the main character Saimir has a 'border consciousness' (31). His ideal job is to work as a go-between, responding to another typical feature of accented cinema, the recurrence of the journey of return: 'Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles and a disproportionate amount of space in their films, for it is in the dream of a glorious homecoming that structures exile' (229).

If these elements contribute to include Benhadj in the category of accented and diasporic film-makers who 'move away from discussions that assign agency to only one side of a traditional dichotomy' (Parati 2005, 110), his film also fails to overcome the stereotypical representation of the immigrant. One scene is particularly representative of this failure: Saimir is invited by Maria to accompany her to the wedding of a friend. When the waiters prepare to serve an entire roasted pig, Saimir is suddenly overtaken by a strong sense of disgust, forcing him to leave the room. The following scene shows Saimir vomiting. This attempt to observe the cultural and religious differences through Samir's eyes, the eyes of a Muslim, turns into a caricature of types, where Italians are depicted as avid eaters while the 'other' is left in his condition of victimisation. In other words, despite the de-territorialised perspective and the first-hand experience of migration that the filmmaker shares with his characters, Benhadj's film retraces some of the patterns already presented in films produced by Italians that interrogate issues of migration, cultural difference and otherness.

Another interesting case of a de-territorialised film-maker in Italy is Mohsen Melliti, a Tunisian immigrant, who is also known as the author of a few literary works that revolve around the issue of immigration in Italy (*Pantanella, I bambini delle rose/The Children of the Roses*). In 2006 Melliti produced the film *Io, l'Altro/Me, the Other* about the friendship between a Tunisian and an Italian (Yousef and Giuseppe) working as fishermen in Sicily. This optimistic multicultural relationship is threatened by a series of events that eventually lead to Giuseppe suspecting his beloved foreign friend of being connected to Islamic

terrorism. It is centrally a story about all-too-easy prejudices, with a very sad end. Despite the good intentions of Melliti in telling a story that criticises the possibility of cohabitation due to an inherent Italian xenophobia, and despite the director's and the characters' shared de-territorialisation, we are still far from the kind of cinema produced by migrant film-makers in other European countries. I am here referring to Black British Cinema in the UK and *Beur* cinema in France produced by second-generation immigrants. In these countries public funding institutions and national broadcasting corporations have adapted to the new 'accented' reality by making space for minorities and for the representation of diversity (Grassilli 2008, 1243). In Italy, 'the criteria of 'nationality' has not expanded to include 'accented' themes or styles; rather film-makers have at times had to adapt their themes or style to suit Italian requirements' (1248). They have thereby 'Italianised' their accent, since the alternative would be to rely on film festivals and Catholic intermediaries, which constitute the most important institutions for the dissemination of films from African countries or about the African migration to Italy, methods of distribution that have not resulted in much visibility.

Melliti's film, produced by Rai Cinema, is representative in this regard. It adapted itself to the requirements of the Italian Ministry of Culture in order to get support and reach a wider audience. The risk in this case was to lose the accent and to conform to national and local prerequisites. This, for instance, is expressed in Melliti's choice of Raul Bova, one of the most celebrated and macho Italian actors, in the role of the main character, while the Tunisian character is played by another Italian actor (Giovanni Martorana). In other words, Melliti's film is the result of a political assimilation, rather than of an interstitial and displacing artistic action.

It is true that Rachid Bhanadj's and Mohsen Melliti's films portray immigrants from a perspective of displacement and talk back from a location that has for a long time been kept subordinate, marginal and invisible. But the problem remains, as Russell King observes, given the fact that 'migrants' cultural productions still remain outside any canonical discipline in Italian culture, [they are] marginalised by the cultural industry that should be incorporating and celebrating them' (Parati, 2005, 20). The result is that very few films dealing with the issue of immigration in Italy reflect on the complexities of living between two cultures with multiple identities, and very few of these films interfere with the process of image-making or contribute to the processes of cultural transformation inherent to any act of migration (Davis, Fischer-Hornung, and Kardux 2010, 4–5).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Corazones de Mujer*: a post-migration film**

An alternative way of investigating the cinema of migration in Italy is to look at films in which the representation of immigrant characters is not limited to discourses of 'othering' or 'sympathy'.

*Corazones de Mujer* is a film that presents the possibility for opening up an alternative discourse of migration. Here, the migrant characters are real negotiators of identities and cultures, and they offer a more credible window onto a more contemporary world, bringing to the fore issues other than integration and racism in the destination country.

*Corazones de Mujer* belongs to a different cinematic category that could be described as 'post-migration cinema'. I use this term to refer to the fact that the characters are not obstructed by their migratory conditions, as understood in previous filmic

representations: they are, rather, individuals, who challenge their own pasts and their own identities for different reasons than mere displacement or de-territorialisation. Their 'alterity' is related to issues such as gender and sexuality, while the migratory identity expresses desire for a subjectivity 'made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity' (Braidotti 1994, 22).

*Corazones de Mujer* tells the story of a Moroccan transvestite, Shakira, who works as a tailor, and a young woman, Zina, presumably a second-generation Moroccan immigrant in Italy, who is to be married. The central narrative incident is created by the decision of Zina's parents to offer their daughter as a bride to a Moroccan man, whom she does not know. The problem is that Zina is no longer a virgin; she is not pure according to the traditional culture of her parents and her community. Shakira, the tailor, who is supposed to sew her wedding dress, offers to help Zina to find a way out of the predicament. Shakira knows a doctor in Morocco who can bring her back to 'kilometre zero', as she says. The excuse given to Zina's parents is that they need to go to Morocco to buy the right fabric for the wedding dress. This is how Shakira and Zina start their road trip together, from Turin to Morocco, in an old Alfa Romeo sports car.

The structure and diegesis of the film, I would argue, is fairly uneven. The directors used an Arabic collective stage name, *Kosoof* (meaning *eclipse*), for the film, and decided to make it after listening to the real Shakira/Aziz life story one night in a smoky bar in Turin. They decided to shoot the film with nothing but a shoulder-held movie camera, and to embark on a road trip, which would eventually become the film, without a screenplay and with a cast who knew each other only through brief encounters. Most of the scenes are improvised, and the low-cost production characterises the whole direction of the film. During the road trip, they constructed the story in collaboration with the actors, while later optimising the fictional parts in the written screenplay. The result is a convoluted narrative structure. It is part documentary and part fiction, with many diverse narrative layers that do not always combine in a logical way. The documentary part frames the narrative layers – centrally the road trip – and consists mostly of an interview with the *real* Shakira. Shakira's comments are in the documentary frame kept in Italian, while the rest of the story is performed in Arabic with some interjections in Italian.

The switching between languages is apparently irrational; the actors seem to use the languages according to their own mood and decisions. However, on closer scrutiny, it is clear that the Italian language is deliberately used by the characters only during confidential dialogues, usually related to topics of a sexual nature. A representative scene is the one that takes place in a female hammam in Casablanca, where some women start talking about their sexual experiences with their husbands; one of them, while giving details about her story, switches into Italian as soon as the description becomes too vulgar. The Italian language works, we could say, as a cultural filter. The same happens during a conversation between Aziz and Zina on the issue of homosexuality, in which Zina reveals a narrow-minded position when she states that homosexuality is to be considered a disease.

Italy, as a country, and Turin, as a city, are almost absent in the film as locations and cultural signifiers. The few scenes shot in Turin at the very beginning seem only to frame the characters and their cultural situatedness, while there is no interaction with Italians apart from the one between Shakira and her interviewers – the directors, deployed outside the diegesis. Zina and Shakira are apparently well-integrated immigrants, who presumably belong to the middle class. Their migrant identities are not questioned or highlighted, because this is apparently not the central focus of the film. The most forcefully questioned

topic in the film is, in fact, the characters' need to come to terms with their own sexual and gendered identities, conditioned by but not subservient to their socio-cultural locations and displacements. *Corazones* is in line with Derek Duncan's suggestion that migrant bodies in general 'disrupt established configurations of heterosexuality in that their difference disturbs accepted, but often unsatisfactory, patterns of gendered behaviour' (Duncan 2008, 170), and complicates this statement, as this analysis will demonstrate, by showing two characters Shakira and Zina, who rely on fluid gender and sexual performative practices.

Despite the lack of references to the host country in the film, Italy is still there in the background, moulding Shakira and Zina's subjective negotiations and performances. This is one of the most substantial differences from the other Italian films depicting immigrants. In *Corazones*, the only Italian gaze on the migrant characters is the directors', who do not submit to the temptation of exoticising them for the very fact of belonging to another culture.

In this respect, a main aspect of the film is the centrality of the female characters that are depicted in radically new ways. In almost all of the films analysed so far, as Áine O'Healy observes: 'the woman is configured by the logic of the gaze as both innocent victim and alluring erotic object. The thematic element that unites the narratives is violence... and there is also an implicit suggestion that the woman herself is partially compliant in her victimisation' (O'Healy 2007, 41). The two main female characters of *Corazones de Mujer*, Shakira and Zina, on the contrary, deploy a different attitude, less passive and more conscious of the position they occupy in the different cultural contexts: Shakira is a homosexual who also performs his/her hybrid gender by dressing as a woman. In Italy, where presumably s/he lives a double displacement, as migrant and as transvestite, s/he has found a way to perform his/her own identity in an apparently tolerated fashion, while it would still be incriminating in an Arab country such as Morocco, where Shakira prefers to become Aziz. This aspect is not directly addressed in the film, but is easily deducible from the way Shakira performs her queer identity in her daily life in Turin, wearing a blonde wig and a Moroccan garment, possibly a *gandora*, a wide dress worn also by men in Morocco. The only scene shot in a bar in Turin shows Shakira with Zina and her parents while discussing their trip to Morocco to find the right fabric for the wedding dress. The situation is slightly atypical: Zina's parents listen to Shakira with interest and respect, while the Italians around them seem not at all surprised to see this extravagant transvestite sitting at a table, chatting in Arabic with what looks like other Moroccan immigrants. The post-migration pattern of this film, I would argue, is here clearly displayed in its attempt to project, almost in a utopian fashion, the immigrant characters into a context in which their cultural, and in this case even sexual, difference is not questioned, scrutinised or seen as suspicious. Shakira seems at ease in Italy both as a migrant and as a transvestite.

His/her identity-shifting and fluidity is continuously deployed in the film. Shakira/Aziz constantly challenges the spectators with his/her masking/unmasking performances. As an extra-diegetic commentator, s/he often appears all dressed up, lying leisurely on a couch while smoking a narghile (Figure 1). His/her function, in these instances, is to help the viewers to unravel the plot of the story. Shakira here speaks in Italian, the language of the interviewers and of the country where she has decided to perform her queer identity.

A significant scene is the one depicting a change of identity in the simple act of cross-dressing. While crossing the sea from Spain to Morocco in a boat Shakira decides it is time





Figure 1. Shakira smoking narghile.

to abandon her queer identity and to dress like a man, in other words to ‘perform’ what people in Morocco expect him to be. This happens in front of a mirror. Shakira takes off her wig and her long dress, showing a masculine and muscular body. Finally, he puts on a snake-skin jacket. Shakira is now Aziz, and as a voice-over comments in Arabic: ‘Snakes change their skin every season. We can do it every day. But what is under the skin, does it change too, or does it remain the same? What are we really under our skin?’ This is the core question of the film, where skin does not simply refer to the ‘skin’ an individual decides to *wear* but to the one that risks relegating that person to a subordinate position, as is often the case in migratory relocations of identities, or in the gender shifting that the protagonists in *Corazones* continuously perform.

It is not by chance that this scene of changing identities takes place while on a boat crossing the sea. It testifies to the narrative simultaneity of the act of crossing geographical/spatial borders and genders. This identity shifting goes together, in fact, with the cultural mobility represented by the journey. The act of clothing becomes performative as a transcultural passage: ‘far from being a fixed signifier of a fixed gender identity clothing has the potential to disguise, to alter, even to reconstruct the wearer’s self. Clothing can dissemble – it may be costume, mask, masquerade’ (Kuhn 1985, 57). It incorporates a performative act aiming to destabilise an ideological fixity – an act akin to Butler’s concept of gender not as a ‘pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured’, but as ‘a corporeal style, an “act”, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning’ (Butler 1999, 179, 177, emphasis in the original). Aziz/Shakira’s performance of fluid gendered identities through the change of clothes relies precisely on the performativity of gender conceptualised as such, where ‘the transvestite’s gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations’ (Butler 1988, 527).

Once filtered by a mask of masculine appearance, Shakira/Aziz is allowed to face Moroccan culture and especially the child he/she left behind with a family that considers Aziz a degenerate person because of his homosexuality. They have even kept the real identity of Aziz a secret from the child, who has been led to believe that his father is dead.



Figure 2. Zina performing as a man in front of the mirror.

Zina is also challenged by gender questions relating to her sense of identity. She is a young unmarried woman and as such, according to her family's traditional Arabic culture, she is supposed to be something different from what she really is: a non-virgin. In Italy, Zina appears to have adapted herself to the culture: the way she dresses and speaks makes us think of a young woman who has found a way to compromise her migrant identity, at least until her parents decide to bring her back to her cultural destiny, forcing her into an arranged marriage with a Moroccan man. Zina has a complex relationship with her own ethnic and gendered identity that she repeatedly questions in front of a mirror, the real depository of her secrets. It is in front of the mirror that Zina performs as a man: she uses make-up to draw a moustache on her face whilst whispering in a melodramatic soliloquy that if she were a man 'everything would be much easier' (Figure 2).

She often performs as the masculine counterpart to Shakira/Aziz. She is able to fix the car that Aziz fails to repair, while in one of her dreams, the viewer will see Zina's attempt to sexually assault Aziz, dressed as Shakira. Through a clear inversion of gendered identities, Zina is here performing a 'female masculinity' (Halberstam 1998). In front of the mirror she is inverting the power roles traditionally recognised by society, especially the Islamic ones – it is a way for Zina to transgress, at least in her private subversive performances, the subjugated position to which her culture has relegated her. Zina, in her continuous attempts to mobilise her identity, disrupts – in the same way as Shakira/Aziz – its ideological fixity. This gender shifting also reflects the hybridity of her migrant identity, her sense of displacement between the Moroccan culture, to which she is culturally and emotionally connected, and the Italian one that has apparently allowed her to express her identity more liberally.

The post-migration pattern of the film is also conveyed, according to the perspective of this argument, by a clear attempt to disseminate gendered, cultural and linguistic ambiguities on a variety of discursive levels. Beginning with the film's paratext, the name of the director is Arabic; the film has a Spanish title despite the Italian production; the characters are Moroccan but live in Turin; they speak Arabic and sometimes Italian; and their gender is susceptible to continuous negotiations. Similarly, in the soundtrack there is

a mixture of musical genres: jazz, folk music from the north of Italy, Sefarditi music, etc. In other words, this film is the result of radical hybridisation both on the level of its diegesis and in the framework of its production.

Italy is clearly projected into an idealistic future, where no resistance is expressed to minorities, and where subjects can freely express their different identities, no matter which ethnic or gender group they belong to. Shakira and Zina decide to express in Italy and in Italian their 'desire for an identity formed by transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes' (Braidotti 1994, 22). These transitions, shifts and changes are conveyed in relation to their gendered identities, consciously performed and subverted. In so doing, Aziz and Zina become agents of their own destinies as individuals and as migrants – as nomadic subjects.

Interestingly, it is in Morocco that they decide to throw off their masks and to finally confront the lies that have restricted their existence as border-crossing individuals: Zina decides to tell her mother about the real reason for her trip to Morocco, and Shakira tells his child that he is his real father. It is in Morocco that they feel radically different, partly because of their half-belonging to a Westernised culture that offers them, especially Zina, a different framework within which to express themselves, and partly because it is in Morocco, their country of origin, that they are forced to face their past and their hypocrisies. Italy, the site where the characters live an ideal condition of 'freedom', functions more as a contrasting mirror.

The artistic and collective production of this film, its 'aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection' (Naficy 2001, 4–5), as Naficy would define it, is its particularly engaging and critical feature. There is no ethnographical or anthropological gaze in this film, not even an attempt to revise stereotypes. As a film wherein transcultural and transsexual or gendered identities are functions of each other, *Corazones de Mujer* represents an attempt to go beyond any enclosed definition.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown, with references to recent studies by Capussotti, Duncan, Forgacs, Grassilli, Parati and others, how, at least since *Lamerica* (1994) by Gianni Amelio, the cinematic representation of migrant characters in Italy has been dominated by production contexts and cultural discourses that have relegated migrant subjects to a predestined marginal and subaltern social and urban position. Even with the best intentions of 'throwing a light' on immigrant experiences, a number of more recent films produced in Italy have, paradoxically, exoticised and othered their subjects, and have thereby failed to subvert or disrupt a reductive depiction of nomadic subjects on film.

The second part of the argument focused on what is here considered a real turning point in the representation of migrant subjects in the Italian cinema of migration. The analysis of *Corazones de Mujer* has shown how an alternative and culturally enriching way of including accented Italian voices in a cinematic representation is, in fact, possible. The film uses migration as a pretext to talk about questions of identity involving gender, in itself the result of a transmutation. The characters move and transgress cultural, social and gender borders, and in this moving of borders, through performative transgressions, they are able to deconstruct monocultural constraints. The challenge for the viewers of this film derives from the combination of race, gender and sexuality as main elements that

widen the processes of representation, and disrupt the dominant paradigms of spectator identification and gaze (Ince 2008). *Corazones de Mujer* takes us on a dramatic road trip, with many forking paths, many detours and dead-end streets, with two characters who gradually become familiar to each other and to the spectator, despite the colour of their skin and their cultural belonging. Together they gain the courage to deal with their own identities and to look straight into a now less distorted mirror.

The happy ending, by which all the ambiguities disseminated in the film are resolved, is probably not exactly what the spectator would expect. The real gift of the film is, however, the idea that there is an alternative productive way of representing migrants in Italian films as nomadic subjects reflecting a post-migration condition, where Italy is not relegated to a country that resists everything foreign, but on the contrary functions as a country where liberal expression and intercultural discourses are finally possible.

## Notes

1. Despite its active involvement in the colonial imperial mission (1840–1960), today's Italy is far from being a postcolonial country that has dealt with its past. Italy's colonial memory is still weak and uncompromised. Only recently have historians such as Del Boca, Labanca and others been able to open a debate concerning the involvement of Italy in the colonial adventure, even though the legend of Italian colonialism as less violent, more humane and indulgent than other colonialisms is still alive in the public imagination. The lack of recognition of Italy's own responsibilities during the colonial period and the consequent phase of forgetfulness and oblivion have led to a growing anxiety towards immigrants, who are seen as potential invaders of the Italian country rather than as a regrettable consequence of a violent and long period of exploitations perpetrated by European and Western countries. A significant example of these anxieties in Italy is expressed through a series of legislative measures adopted to tame the immigration phenomenon (e.g. the so-called Bossi Fini Law in 2002). For further analysis of Italian colonialism and its implication on Italy's cultural memory today, see: Andall and Duncan (2005), Del Boca (1992), Labanca (2002) and Triulzi (2005).
2. The same can be said of another foreign filmmaker in Italy, the Turkish Ferzan Özpetek, whose films, according to Grassilli, 'erase the accent', and the result is a recognisable Rai Cinema production (Grassilli 2008, 1248). Although Özpetek's interest is not to produce accented films within an interstitial production, it is important to recognise that he has succeeded in initiating the Italian public to issues not frequently treated by Italian film-makers, such as those of homosexuality and queerness, with the precise intent to disrupt more conventional representations. In Özpetek's films displacement is expressed in multiple ways and on different levels. As Derek Duncan observes in his analysis of Özpetek's works, 'his authorial presence is not metaphorical, but mediated through multiple visual discourses that knit together differences of languages, geography and gender' (Duncan 2005, 111).

## Notes on contributor

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