

## FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

## European Identity in Cinema in the Age of Globalized Migration

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## REPORT INFO

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## ABSTRACT

The increased mobility of large groups of people from outside and inside Europe has influenced the socio-geographical fixity of a continent of nation-states, putting in question both the concepts of ‘national identity’ and ‘European identity’. This book project considers contemporary debates around the idea of ‘Europe’ and ‘European identity’ through an examination of recent European films dealing with various aspects of globalization (the refugee crisis, labor migration, the resurgence of nationalism and ethnic violence, international tourism, neoliberalism, post-colonialism etc.) in order to reflect on the ambiguities and contradictory aspects of the figure of the migrant and the ways in which this figure challenges us to rethink core concepts such as European identity, European citizenship, justice, ethics, liberty, tolerance, and hospitality in the post-national context of ephemerality, volatility, and contingency that finds people desperately looking for firmer markers of identity. By drawing attention to the structural and affective affinities between the experience of migrants and non-migrants, Europeans and non-Europeans, the book argues that it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate stories about migration from stories about life under neoliberalism in general.

**1. Project summary**

The history of the idea of ‘European identity’ can be described in terms of, on one hand, a constant oscillation between two poles, one instrumental or pragmatic (the Europe of norms), the other affective (the Europe of values and feelings) and, on the other hand, in terms of a continuous, unresolved conflict between the belief in some ineffable European ‘spirit’ or ‘ethos’ and the outright rejection of any notion of ‘European identity’. Indeed, a recurring theme in critical writings on Europe and European identity is the idea that to be European is to doubt that there is something like ‘European identity’. To grasp the ambiguity pervading attempts to define European identity one need only juxtapose the traditional

characteristics of Europeanness deriving from the continent’s founding philosophical and religious traditions, including Christianity, Roman law, and the Enlightenment—here ‘Europeanness’ is defined in relation to the concepts of the polis, citizenship, democracy and participation, rationalism, universality and cosmopolitanism—with the immense contradictions underlying the concept of Europeanness defined in relation to political and economic circumstances.

The sweeping territorial recalibration following the establishment of the EU has led many scholars to declare the emergence of a ‘post-national’ European identity and citizenship based on mobility and universal human rights

rather than on the rights of persons as members of nation-states. While it might seem that we have entered a post-national age marked by identities that are provisional, fluid, incoherent and ephemeral, the nation state has not lost any of its relevance or authority: regardless of the supposed dissolution of borders under globalization, modern citizenship still embeds identity and legal rights in the territorial nation-state. Indeed, over the last couple of decades Europe has seen a trend of populist right-wing parties riding on the wave of multicultural backlash across Europe, gaining widespread support with xenophobic nationalist-populist slogans purporting to save ethno-nationalist culture from the threat of immigrants. The Brexit referendum, following a prolonged political campaign of heightened anxiety over border control, was simply the most dramatic expression of the crisis of democracy Europe is facing.

My research project is based on the premise that a compelling case can be made for re-orienting the study of contemporary European cinema around the figure of the migrant viewed both as a symbolic figure (representing post-national citizenship, urbanization, the 'gap' between ethics and justice) *and* as a figure occupying an increasingly central place in European cinema in general rather than only in what is usually called 'migrant and diasporic cinema'. My main argument, elaborated through analyses of recent European films explicitly or implicitly dealing with migration, is that the established idea of European identity has been contested and transformed by internal and external migration. What I hope to demonstrate is that amidst the resurgence of populism and ethno-nationalism across Europe European cinema remains a *site of resistance* by self-consciously or unconsciously reviving the paradoxical philosophical foundations of the idea of 'European identity' in skepticism, a suspiciousness toward any preconceived notions and established political, moral and religious authorities that is as inherent in Europe's Enlightenment legacy as the belief in reason. Recent attempts by film scholars to rethink 'European identity' and 'European cinema' in terms of 'mythopoeitics' (Kris Ravetto-Bagioli) and 'thought experiment' (Thomas Elsaesser) inscribe themselves squarely in this philosophical tradition, which

posits skepticism and self-critique as 'quintessentially European'.

The project reflects on contemporary debates around the concepts of 'Europe' and 'European identity' through an examination of recent European films dealing with various aspects of globalization (the refugee crisis, labor migration, the resurgence of nationalism and ethnic violence, neoliberalism, post-colonialism, etc.) with a particular attention to the figure of the migrant and the ways in which this figure challenges us to rethink European identity and its core Enlightenment values (citizenship, justice, ethics, liberty, tolerance, and hospitality). The book seeks to illuminate the ambiguities and contradictions underlying the cinematic figure of the migrant, demonstrating that while on one hand migrants and refugees have become, in Rey Chow's words, 'the new 'primitives' of Europe, on the other hand, the migrant/refugee has also been celebrated as a 1) symbol of 'nomadic excess'; 2) the 'structural excess' constitutive of law and morality; 3) a utopian figure representing a model for rethinking the idea of 'Europe'.

The first part of the book examines the ways in which migration in general, and the refugee crisis in particular, have challenged the idea of 'European identity', while the second part analyzes a broad range of recent European fiction films spanning different genres and dealing explicitly or implicitly with migration in order to argue that migration has become part of European cinema's general *mise-en-scène*, rather than being confined to a specific type or genre of film ('migrant and diasporic cinema' for example), and that in contemporary European cinema it is increasingly difficult to separate stories about migration from stories exploring life under the conditions of neoliberalism in general i.e. to separate the experience of migrants and non-migrants, Europeans and non-Europeans.

## 2. Table of Contents

The Introduction to the book offers a brief survey of the historical, philosophical, religious, racial and political foundations of the idea of 'Europe' and 'European Identity' in order to argue that over the last several decades thinking European identity has increasingly become a matter of theorizing transnational *feelings of belonging/identification* rather than

excavating the *historical roots* of European identity.

Chapter 1 argues that migration has challenged the traditional notion of ‘European identity’ outlined in the Introduction. Although the nation-state is alive and well, as evidenced by the resurgence of nationalism across Europe, migration has played a preeminent role in the transformation of the idea of European identity by *re-politicizing* debates around globalization, in particular renewing debates about borders and bordering, national identity and nationalism, ethics, justice and the ‘Other’, citizenship, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism as a possible corrective to multiculturalism. After discussing the two most important methodological approaches to migration shaping the majority of films discussed later in the book—autonomy of migration approaches (AoM) and phenomenological approaches—the chapter considers the symbolic importance attributed to the figure of the migrant in contemporary debates about European identity, underscoring the *contradictory* nature of this figure. On one hand, migrants and refugees have become, in Rey Chow’s words, ‘the new ‘primitives’ of Europe, replacing the ‘classical Others’ of Europe, the Jews and the Roma, who, as the two oldest minorities in Europe, were viewed as ‘the other within’ and associated with the East. On the other hand, however, the figure of the migrant has been enthusiastically promoted as a utopian model for (or symbol of) post-national citizenship, transnational European identity, urbanization, postmodern subjectivity, the gap between ethics and justice, etc. Given the multiple symbolic uses to which the figure of the migrant has been put, it is perhaps not surprising that recent scholarship on mobility and migration in Europe has seen the return of an old sociological figure—the flâneur.

Chapter 2 looks at the ways in which migration has challenged both the ‘Europeanness’ of ‘European cinema’—which used to be defined in terms of ‘national cinema’, ‘auteurism’, and ‘art cinema’—and ‘European identity’ as it is articulated in European cinema. First, I challenge several widely accepted claims about contemporary European cinema—that it is universally ‘transnational’, ‘post-colonial’, and ‘post-communist’. Second, I examine two recent attempts to rethink the ‘Europeanness of European cinema’ without falling back on

identity politics—Kris Ravetto-Biagioli’s *Mythopoetic Cinema: On the Ruins of European Identity* (Columbia UP, 2017) and Thomas Elsaesser’s *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (Bloomsbury, 2018). I engage closely with Elsaesser’s argument, which, although pertinent to my own analysis of contemporary European cinema, is nevertheless based on a series of (explicit or implicit) problematic assumptions about the increasing centrality in European cinema of what he calls ‘abject’ characters—which might or might not be migrants/refugees—who, Elsaesser claims, promise to ‘reboot’ Europe’s core Enlightenment values (citizenship, justice, ethics, liberty, tolerance, and hospitality).

Chapter 3 demonstrates that migration has undergone a transformation from a subject associated with a specific type or ‘genre’ of film—e.g. ‘migrant and diasporic cinema’—into European cinema’s general *mise-en-scène*. This transformation, I contend, has several important consequences, which I illustrate through analyses of specific film texts (mostly fiction films, almost all by European directors).

Chapter 4 argues that while Thomas Elsaesser’s and Kris Ravetto-Biagioli’s studies (discussed in chapter 2) represent valuable contributions to the project of imagining a more open and hospitable Europe, approaches foregrounding the structural and affective affinities between the experience of migrants and non-migrants, Europeans and non-Europeans—represented, for instance, by Laurent Berlant’s study of post-Fordist affect and ‘cruel optimism’—are ultimately more productive, overcoming the risk of essentializing the distinction between migrants and non-migrants. To illustrate my argument I expand on the last important consequence of the transformation of migration (identified in chapter 3) from a subject associated with a specific ‘genre’ into European cinema’s generalized *mise-en-scène*. The chapter shows that in contemporary European cinema it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate stories about migration from stories exploring life under neoliberalism in general.

### 3. Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

Although at present I don't have any concrete plans for future collaborations with the host laboratory, I will stay in close contact with my host and consider the possibility of organizing an international conference on the topic of my research at my own university (York University).

### 4. Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

My project is a research monograph. I have nearly completed the book and have already submitted the book proposal to an established academic publisher in my field. The proposal is now undergoing a blind peer review and I hope to sign a publishing contract by the end of the summer.

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