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GENDER AND BORDER: TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECTS AND BODY IN EUROPEAN MIGRATION CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper examines the figure of the migrant in contemporary European cinema through the lens of gender, embodiment, and transnational subjectivity. Focusing on a corpus that encompasses both auteur and high-production films of 21st century – Dirty Pretty Things (Stephen Frears, 2002), Head-On (Gegen die Wand, Fatih Akin, 2004), The Melon Route (Put lubenica, Branko Schmidt, 2006), Joy (Sudabeh Mortezai, 2018), As Far as I Can Walk (Strahinja Banović, Stefan Arsenijević, 2021), Green Border (Zielona granica, Agnieszka Holland, 2023), and Io Capitano (Matteo Garrone, 2023) – the paper explores how migration is inscribed onto the body and mediated through gendered experience. Drawing on theories of transnational cinema (Ezra & Rowden, 2006), European immigration cinema (Ballesteros, 2015), and contemporary media representations of migration (Bayrakdar & Burgoyne, 2022), the paper argues that the migrant figure is constructed within a paradoxical regime of visibility and erasure.The paper further implies that gender operates as a crucial axis in shaping narrative agency, mobility, and vulnerability. By analyzing the interplay between space, corporeality, and narrative structure, this paper demonstrates how contemporary European migration cinema not only reflects but also reconfigures the cultural imagination of borders, identity, and gender in an increasingly transnational context.

Keywords: *border, gender and migrations, embodied subjectivity, female migration, sexual work, body politics, transnational cinema*

Introduction

In the 21st century, the phenomenon of migration emerged as one of the most prominent themes in European cinema, framed in film studies as migration and transnational cinema. These films narrate migrant experiences but also participate in broader cultural discourses concerning the nature of Europe itself, its borders, and its relationship to migrants desperately seeking entry into its political and social space. Here comes the

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contemporary notion of "Fortress Europe" referring to the European Union's increasingly strict migration policies, protecting EU borders through surveillance and restricted access.

Europe is now confronting its own contradictions, and migration cinema clearly shows its challenges because on the one hand, Europe presents itself as a space of mobility, human rights, and multicultural coexistence but on the other hand there is tightening of border controls, the criminalization of migrants, and continuous forms of exclusion. This tension is obvious in contemporary migration cinema.

Transnational cinema emphasizes the movement of people, their capital, and identities across borders. Thus, migrants embody the instability of national categories. As Hamid Naficy argues, migrancy involves a form of movement in which "neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain" (Naficy, 2001, p. 165, cited in Ezra & Rowden, 2006). Therefore, we can't understand migration only as a physical journey between two fixed locations (states). Instead, it is an ongoing process of negotiation in which identities and belonging can't remain fixed. The figure of migrant becomes a paradigmatic transnational subject whose existence challenges the assumption that identity can be easily contained within national borders.

As Ballesteros (2015) argues, immigration cinema has become one of the most significant cultural forms through which contemporary Europe confronts globalization and multiculturalism. But what is crucial to these cinematic representations is a paradox of visibility – migrants are highly visible in public discourse and media, but they remain socially marginalized and precarious. In that respect, migrants occupy paradoxical positions. They are hyper visible as racialized and gendered bodies subjected to surveillance and representation, yet invisible as political subjects whose agency and claims to belonging are marginalized: or the contrary, visible as social actors and invisible as individuals with their own rights (Ahmed 2000; De Genova 2013; Yuval-Davis 2011).

Migration cinema clearly depicts migrants as vulnerable and subjected to exclusion, surveillance and erased from official economy and labor market.

Contemporary border regimes in EU countries influence the politics of visibility of migrants. De Genova (2013) argues that border is more than just a territorial line between the states but a political apparatus that stigmatizes people who do not belong anywhere. De Genova's concept of the spectacle of migrant illegality is particularly relevant to migration cinema, which reveals how migrants are incorporated into European societies.

Recent comprehensive review of feminist migration theory (De Tona, 2025) addresses the historical invisibility of migrant women and how feminists have shown that migration is deeply gendered. So far, the questions of gender have been insufficiently integrated into many film analyses of mobility, borders, and transnational identity. The migrant body functions as a site where broader political, economic, and cultural forces become materially visible. Gender influences not only who migrates and under what conditions, but also how migration is represented on screen.

This paper examines the figure of the migrant in contemporary European cinema through the lens of gender, embodiment, and transnational subjectivity. It focuses on a corpus of seven feature films: *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002), *Head-On* (Gegen die Wand, Fatih Akin, 2004), *The Melon Route* (Put lubenica, Branko Schmidt, 2006), *Joy* (Sudabeh Mortezai, 2018), *As Far as I Can Walk* (Strahinja Banović, Stefan Arsenijević, 2021), *Green Border* (Zielona granica, Agnieszka Holland, 2023), and *Io Capitano* (Matteo Garrone, 2023). In this paper the authors will explore and illuminate on selected movie examples how migration cinema of 21st century constructs the migrant body in intersection of border regimes, labor relations, and gendered visibility.

Interpretation will be conducted through three analytical dimensions. The first concerns mobility and border regimes, focusing on how films represent movement, waiting, transit, and restriction (*Green Border, Io Capitano, The Melon Route, and As Far as I Can Walk*). The second examines labor and embodiment, exploring how migrant bodies become sites of exploitation, surveillance, commodification, and resistance (*Dirty Pretty Things* and *Joy*). The third addresses gendered subjectivity, diasporic identity, investigating how masculinity and femininity shape experiences of displacement, agency, and belonging (*Head-On*).

Border Regimes and Mobility

In his influential analysis of migrant illegality, Nicolas de Genova (2005, 2013) argues that borders should not be understood only as geographical lines separating countries. Rather, they function as political instruments producing distinctions between citizens and non-citizens, legality and illegality, inclusion, and exclusion. Central to De Genova's argument is the concept of the spectacle of migrant illegality (2005, p. 242–249). Through media coverage, political rhetoric, and state practices, migrants become publicly visible primarily as objects of control and regulation. Border enforcement creates dramatic spectacles of exclusion that focus attention on the movement of migrants while obscuring the inequalities and geopolitical conditions that generate migration. Thus, the border becomes a site where state power is repeatedly performed and reaffirmed.

Migrant have become the main figure in transnational cinema. It embodies the instability of fixed national identity, and it usually inhabits liminal spaces. The migrant's mobility is not just a movement from one location to another. It is a continuous process of redefining and transformation. Migrants become a subject that is unfinished, their identity and home belong to the field of instability and uncertainty.

Green Border

Among the films in the corpus, *Green Border* offers the most direct examination of the contemporary European border. The film story is set on the frontier between Be-

larus and Poland during the 2021 migrant crisis and follows refugees, activists, and border guards whose lives become entangled within a political system designed to prevent entry into the European Union. Poland is the first entry point since the refugees come via Turkish airline to Belarus capital. The narrative focus shifts in three directions: first, it is a Syrian family whose grandfather and son got killed and woman from Afghanistan who joins them, second is a young Polish border guard expecting his wife to give a birth to their child and feeling reluctant to brutalize migrants, and the third is a group of (mostly female) NGO activists, among them a reclusive widowed psychiatrist ready to offer her home and all the logistic to help those in need.

Agnieszka Holland rejects sensationalist depictions of migration, she opts for personal dramas set in dark and threatening surroundings. Both Belarus and Polish government refuse to give migrants access to their countries and refugees are repeatedly pushed across the border in both directions. The bordering forest becomes a liminal zone where legal categories cease to exist, so the migrants are brutally beaten, violated, robbed and dehumanized, including the pregnant women. The border is not just a line separating Poland and Belarus, but also a space of perpetual horror and suspension. It becomes a nightmare. Migrants are neither admitted nor removed; they are trapped within an endless cycle of movement and return, acting like a human ping pong ball. The refugees in *Green Border* are hyper-visible as political objects yet invisible as individuals. Marluza da Rosa explained the functioning of hypervisibility in the media field, and how it conceals the process of social invisibility of which migrant subjects are part (2020, p. 29–33). As this movie deals with different ethnic groups and governments which are officially against giving access to migrants to their wishing countries, paradox of media and public hypervisibility, as well as their struggle to achieve individual rights. Their suffering becomes a consequence of geopolitical conflict between Belarus (considered as Putin's puppet) and Poland (representing European Union).

There is an echo of Nazi concentration camps in Poland – director Agnieszka Holland parallels the dehumanization of Jews and other undesirable nations in WWII with contemporary treatment of Asian and African political and economic refugees in Poland. The black-and-white cinematography delivers the documentary quality to the film. The forest becomes a space of ambiguity and uncertainty, mirroring the precarious legal status of the migrants themselves. Holland's emphasis on physical exhaustion, hunger, and bodily deterioration further highlights the extent to which border regimes operate through the regulation of bodies and movement. And what's brave and uncompromising is her political stance – last scenes of the film picture Ukrainian refugees that fled to Poland in 2023 with completely different reception. They are welcomed by Polish officials and border officers and given the asylum instantly, in contrast to underprivileged Asian and African migrants. The European Union is represented with completely opposite political and humanitarian approach to the migrants depending on their race and origin.

Io Capitano

If *Green Border* examines the violence of the European border from the perspective of arrival, *Io Capitano* shifts focus to the journey itself. Matteo Garrone's film follows Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and Moussa (Moustapha Fall), two Senegalese teenagers who secretly leave Dakar hoping to reach Italy. Their route takes them across the Sahara Desert, through detention camps and exploitation in Libya, and eventually across the Mediterranean, almost a mythical border between Africa and Europe. Rather than presenting migration as a simple movement toward a desired destination, the film foregrounds the uncertainty, vulnerability, and unpredictability that characterize contemporary migratory trajectories. But there is a mystical and ritual element that gives the antithesis to real and concrete hardships that follow – before the boys' journey, a Senegalese witch doctor performs a ritual to appease the spirits of ancestors to help Seydou and Moussa on their Odyssey.

The narrative structure reflects Naficy's understanding of migrancy as a process in which "neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain" (Naficy, 2001, p. 165, cited in Ezra & Rowden, 2006). Italy functions less as a concrete destination than as an imagined horizon, a dream and a hope. Each stage of the journey introduces additional forms of precarity, transforming migration into an extended and exhausting condition of instability rather than a finite passage from one place to another.

The Sahara, detention centers, smuggling routes, and the Mediterranean become crucial components of the migration experience. Border control begins long before migrants reach European soil, operating through networks of surveillance and detention across multiple states and territories of north Africa.

At the same time, *Io Capitano* challenges representations that reduce migrants to passive victims. Although Seydou experiences repeated forms of exploitation and violence, the film consistently foregrounds his agency, determination, and capacity for decision-making. In one moment, two friends separate their ways only to meet again in Tripoli. Seydou's vitalism, optimism and endurance, the will to reach the dreamed Italy, makes him heroic figure who cares about his friend and many refugees. He dares to drive the boat himself across Mediterranean to Sicily.

This questions the binarism identified by Bayrakdar and Burgoyne (2022), according to which migrants are frequently represented either as helpless victims or as threatening intruders. Seydou occupies neither position. Instead, he appears as a complex subject whose actions are shaped by aspiration, responsibility, fear, and resilience.

The film's visual style further reinforces this perspective. Vivid colors of Sahara and migrants' clothes and high-key photography in exterior locations contrasts darkness of claustrophobic detention camps. Mateo Garrone combines elements of realism with moments of dreamlike imagery, particularly during the desert sequences – Seydou helps a dying woman left behind and later has a hallucination of her being alive. Also, in the

moments of strongest crisis, he dreams of an angelic creature (called Malaika in Arab) who takes him to visit his mother back in Senegal. These scenes transform the journey into both a material and symbolic experience, emphasizing deep psychological dimensions of migration.

The Melon Route

Branko Schmidt's movie *The Melon Route* has a colloquial term for the smuggling of East Asian refugees already in its title. Movie plot is set along the Croatian and Bosnian border and follows Mirko (Krešimir Mikić), a former Croatian soldier in Yugoslav wars and a post-war drug addict who becomes involved in the smuggling of undocumented migrants using his small wooden boat. Through his encounter with a young Chinese woman (Mei Sun) hidden among transported migrants, the film reveals the human consequences of systems that transform mobility into a commodity.

The *Melon Route* focuses on the everyday human trafficking practices through which borders generate economic opportunities and exploitative relationships. The border appears not merely as a site of exclusion but as a market. Human movement acquires monetary value, and migrant bodies become objects of exchange within networks of trafficking and smuggling.

Smugglers, traffickers, employers, and state institutions all become involved in systems that profit from migrants' precarious legal status. The film demonstrates how exclusion itself becomes economically productive. not for the victims but for the criminals.

At the center of the narrative is the young Chinese migrant woman whose family drowned in the bordering river between Bosnia and Croatia. Her limited ability to communicate reflects the broader condition described by Ballesteros (2015), in which migrants often occupy positions characterized by invisibility and marginality. She is physically present yet socially absent, visible as an object of transportation while remaining largely invisible as a political subject. She finds temporary shelter at Mirko’s crumbling house, finding support and solace in him, although Mirko was reluctant at first. His Christ-like weary and drained secluded figure suggests his self-sacrifice at the end. He kills local smuggler chief and gives all his savings to Chinese girl and his friend, war orphan, to escape to Germany. Thus, the traumatized man with PTSD becomes far more human than any of his compatriots and capable of heroic act. There is, however, a fairytale element in this narrative. Director Branko Schmidt chooses vibrant red coat for Chinese girl contrasting it with muddy and rainy riverbanks in dark grey and blue washed out tones, just as if a Little red riding hood enters the dangerous wolf’s zone. Yet her body does not end in his bowel, a symbolic representation of migrant bodies entering the zone of exclusion, but the story implies a possible happy ending.

As Far as I Can Walk

Stefan Arsenijević's *As Far as I Can Walk* (*Strahinja Banović*) offers a different perspective on migration by shifting attention from border crossing to prolonged waiting. Inspired by motifs from the eponymous Serbian epic poem, the film follows Strahinja (Ibrahim Koma), a Ghanaian refugee living in a refugee camp Serbia and playing in a local football team, whose wife Ababuo (Nancy Mensah-Offei) leaves a camp and attempts to continue her journey toward London in search of theatre acting engagement. Strahinja embarks on a search for her, transforming the narrative into both a migration story and a contemporary reworking of an epic quest. In original narrative, Serbian medieval warrior is confronted with his wife's escape to Ottoman Turk conqueror's camp and yet he decides to forgive her unfaithfulness. In this film story, Strahinja is ready to forgive Ababou for fleeting with Syrian intellectual whom she met in a refugee camp.

The film explores migration after the moment of arrival. Unlike all the other (i.e Hungarian or Croatian), Serbian authorities and immigrant policies truly respect human rights in their temporary status. Yet refugee camps emerge as spaces of temporal uncertainty and anticipation. As De Genova argues, systems of migration management increasingly operate through waiting, uncertainty, and legal precarity rather than through direct exclusion alone. Strahinja's life is defined by this condition of suspension. His future remains dependent upon bureaucratic processes but his talent for football can make him a Serbian citizen, which is not Ababou's dream. The films also display the network of smuggles and criminals involved in human trafficking, taking migrants illegally across the Serbian-Hungarian border where brutal border officers with German shepherds lurk for the refugees.

Strahinja's journey to Hungary, the first European country bordering Serbia on the north, is motivated not by economic aspiration or escape from violence but by his commitment to finding Ababuo. The narrative therefore challenges dominant representations of male migrants as figures defined exclusively by mobility, competition, or survival. Here, masculinity is associated with care, responsibility, and emotional vulnerability, the same pattern that is shown in medieval epic poem. This aspect of the film is particularly important for a gendered analysis of migration cinema. Ababuo exercises action and engagement by choosing to continue her journey independently from her husband, while Strahinja remains committed to preserving their marriage despite repeated obstacles. The film therefore subverts conventional gender roles and demonstrates how migration reshapes both masculine and feminine forms of subjectivity.

Gendered Labor

In comparison to other movies, *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Joy* reveals that the migrant experience is shaped by incorporation into economic systems that depend upon

precarious and invisible forms of work. In these narratives, the body becomes a crucial site where migration, labor, gender, and power intersect. Migrant bodies are valued, regulated, exploited, and commodified.

Migration is ultimately experienced through (moving) bodies. In line with that, gender perspective is essential for understanding the representation of migration in contemporary cinema. Women occupy central positions within global migration systems. They belong to domestic labor, care work, service industries, and informal economies. Ballesteros emphasizes that "female immigrants sustain the global sweatshop economy (…) and the domestic service industry" (2015, p. 63). Migration is, therefore, profoundly gendered not only in terms of representation but also in relation to economic structures and labor relations.

Female migrants are often represented within systems that commodify labor and regulate mobility, exposing the intersections between gender, class, race, and legal status. However, reducing women to passive victims' risks reproducing the very frameworks that critical migration cinema seeks to challenge. Many films instead foreground forms of constrained agency, demonstrating how migrant women develop strategies of survival, resistance, and managing within unequal social conditions.

Gender also shapes representations of male migration. Male protagonists are frequently associated with movement, endurance, and physical journeys across hostile terrain. Yet these narratives often reveal the fragility of masculine agencies under conditions of displacement. Borders, detention, precarious labor, and social exclusion undermine traditional associations between masculinity, autonomy, and control. The migrant body becomes both a vehicle of movement and a site upon which political and economic violence is inscribed.

Through representations of undocumented employment, trafficking, domestic service, and bodily exploitation, they reveal the extent to which migrant workers are simultaneously indispensable and disposable.

Dirty Pretty Things

Stephen Frears's Dirty Pretty Things is one of the most influential migration films produced in early 21st century Europe. Set in London, the film follows Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a former Nigerian doctor working illegally as a hotel receptionist and taxi driver, and young girl Senay (Audrey Tautou), a Turkish asylum seeker employed in exploitative labor conditions. London is presented through the lens of the immigrants – they clean hotel rooms, drive taxis, wash clothes, and perform other forms of labor that remain largely invisible to those who benefit from them. Their legal and social status remains precarious. This condition closely reflects Ballesteros's description of the immigrant subject as defined by "invisibility, anonymity, and transience" (2015, p. 80). Okwe even

speaks about invisibility to the human organs trafficker: “We are the people you don’t see. We are the ones who drive your cabs. We clean your rooms and suck your cocks”. Both Okwe and Senay are illegal immigrants. Employers, landlords, and criminal networks benefit from their precarious position, knowing that migrants possess limited access to legal protection. In this sense, *Dirty Pretty Things* illustrates De Genova's (2005, 2013) argument that migrant illegality is not simply a matter of legal condition but a social relation that structures labor.

The commodification of migrant existence is metaphorically displayed through the organ-trafficking plot – the manager of the hotel participates in trafficking human organs and mostly the immigrants decide to sell their organs in order to obtain forged passports and secure legal status. Citizenship acquires a biological, bodily sacrifice. The film thus exposes the extent to which migrants are valued primarily in terms of their utility. Excellent example of body sacrifice of migrants we found the dystopian narrative *Children of the People* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), in which infertility on a global level presents a challenge, until it is revealed that one woman is pregnant. Although, the triply underprivileged refugee (woman, pregnant, African American), Ki becomes a tool of political significance – a symbol of continuity, hope, and power. Yet she is treated only as a useful resource and is deprived of bare existence, as if in a cage (Perić & Vasiljević 2025, p. 105–106).

At the same time, this commodification is especially significant from a gender perspective. So, in *Dirty Pretty Things*, while both Okwe and Senay experience exploitation, the forms of vulnerability to which they are exposed differ substantially. Okwe's body is primarily valued as labor power, whereas Senay's body becomes the object of sexualized forms of control. Her experiences reveal how gender intensifies migrant precarity by linking economic exploitation to the regulation of female sexuality. She is still a virgin, but her body is violated first by a small sweatshop owner who forces her to oral sex, and then by hotel manager who rapes her. She decides to sacrifice her body even more, offering her kidney in exchange for a passport and the operation is supposed to be performed by Okwe. However, he remains highly moral and even acts as a punisher, anesthetizing the manager instead of Senay and delivering his kidney to the trafficker.

Joy

Sudabeh Mortezai's *Joy* examines one of the most gendered forms of contemporary migration: trafficking for sexual labor.

In the film’s prologue, like *Io Capitano*, an African ritual takes place – a Nigerian witch doctor (ju-ju priest) sacrifices a hen to protect the girl who is about to migrate to Europe and needs a protection along the way. But this is an obligatory act and since the ju-ju priest blackmails the girl to send him the money from Europe in order to protect her

from the evil. The film story then follows Joy (Joy Alphonsus), a Nigerian woman living in Vienna who works within a trafficking network. She is simultaneously constrained by her illegal status and capable of strategic action – she works as a prostitute for Nigerian Madame (Angela Ekeleme) but aware that in a decade she can earn her freedom.

This complexity can be understood through the framework proposed by Bayrakdar and Burgoyne (2022). As they observe, migrants are frequently represented either as "innocent victims" or as threatening outsiders. Joy refuses both categories. The protagonist is neither a helpless victim nor a criminal figure. Instead, she occupies an ambiguous position that reflects the contradictory realities of contemporary migration. Her decisions are shaped by obligation, economic necessity, family responsibility, and personal aspiration.

The film insists that women involved in trafficking networks possess histories, motivations, desires, and perform actively so that they cannot be reduced to victimhood alone. At the same time, the film foregrounds the relationship between gender and labor. Joy's body functions as a site of economic exchange, demonstrating how migration and commodification intersect within global inequalities. Particularly significant is the relationship between Joy and Precious, the younger girl she is expected to supervise. Their interactions reveal how exploitation reproduces itself through hierarchical relations among migrants themselves.

The female protagonists exhibit different roles – the chief operator in this bordello is a middle-aged woman, Madame, who also started her European life as a street prostitute, but she became a merciless exploiter. Even the mothers back in Nigeria are aware that their daughters work as prostitutes but embrace this as inevitable female's position. Through its nuanced representation of female migration, Joy demonstrates that agency and vulnerability both exist in migrant women experience.

Both *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Joy* reveal how migration is inseparable from labor and how labor is fundamentally shaped by gender. Through representations of undocumented employment, trafficking, bodily commodification, and exploitation, both movies demonstrate that the migrant body functions as a crucial intersection of economic value and political exclusion.

Gendering Transnational Subjectivity

Head-On, however, occupies a distinctive position within the corpus because it shifts attention toward the complexities and ambivalence of diasporic identity. Unlike the refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants who dominate the other films discussed in this study, Fatih Akin's protagonists inhabit a different migratory condition. Both Sibel (Sibel Kekilli, the actress briefly taking part in adult films before this film) and Cahit (Birol Ünel) belong to the Turkish-German diaspora and possess legal membership within German society. Their struggles are not primarily organized around ter-

ritorial movement or legal exclusion but around questions of cultural belonging and identity. This distinction is significant because it expands the understanding of migration beyond the moment of border crossing itself. Migration does not end upon arrival to Europe but continues to shape identities across generations. Sibel is a first generation born in Hamburg, Germany (the same as director Fatih Akin). Cahit is born in Turkey, but his German is better than his mothertongue and he cut ties with his family. They meet at psychiatric hospital after suicide attempts, him grieving his late wife and her defying her conservative parents and patriarchal Oriental heritage. Subverting traditional norms, she proposes him to marry her. Their arranged marriage is her strategy for escaping patriarchal control and in exchange she promises to act as a cook and housekeeper, the traditional woman's roles.

While *Green Border*, *Io Capitano*, *The Melon Route* and *As Far as I Can Walk* focus primarily on the external structures that regulate migration, *Head-On* investigates the psychological and cultural dimensions of transnational existence.

At the center of the film lies the experience of living between cultures. Sibel and Cahit are neither fully integrated into dominant German society nor entirely defined by traditional conceptions of Turkish identity. Instead, they inhabit what might be described as a transnational social space. This condition reflects the broader concerns of transnational cinema identified by Ezra and Rowden (2006), whose work emphasizes the instability of fixed national identities in an era of globalization and migration. In *Head-On* neither German nor Turkish identity appears as a stable category. Characters move between Hamburg and Istanbul, between languages, and between different cultural environments.

The protagonists remain suspended between multiple worlds, unable to achieve a definitive sense of home. In this respect, *Head-On* exemplifies the transnational condition described by Naficy, in which neither departure nor arrival provides a stable foundation for identity.

Unlike *Joy*, whose life is shaped by trafficking networks, or Senay in *Dirty Pretty Things*, whose vulnerability is linked to undocumented status, Sibel's struggle concerns autonomy within a diasporic and patriarchal environment. Her central conflict is not legal exclusion but the regulation of female behavior through cultural expectations and gender norms.

This distinction makes *Head-On* particularly important for a gendered analysis of migration cinema. Isolina Ballesteros argues that migration discourse frequently "denies or minimizes female protagonism" (2015, p. 65). Akin's film directly challenges this tendency by constructing a narrative that is fundamentally driven by Sibel's desires, decisions, and acts of resistance. Although Cahit occupies a prominent role within the story, Sibel is a driving force and the film's central dramatic energy originates from her refusal to accept the limitations imposed upon her.

The body occupies a crucial position within *Head-On*, functioning as a site where cultural norms, personal desires, and social expectations intersect. Whereas the bodies depicted in *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Joy* are primarily shaped by labor and economic exploitation, the body in *Head-On* is associated with sexuality, intimacy, and self-expression. Sibel finally can be promiscuous and experimental. In this respect, *Head-On* reveals how borders can operate not only through immigration policies and state institutions but also through cultural norms that regulate women's behavior

Conclusion

Rather than culminating in integration or upward mobility, the narratives of selected movies construct a circular pattern of (female) migrant experience. The protagonists move through successive forms of economic, emotional, and social precarity, suggesting that migration does not function as a linear trajectory toward liberation. Instead, the films depict what Berlant (2011) terms "cruel optimism", where the promise of a better life continually motivates movement while remaining structurally unattainable (2011, p. 23–50).

Although classical migration matrix promising integration and "better" future, in selected movies, we faced absence of that kind of path, to call it: happy ending. These films end without expected resolution like return, success, or belonging, but with another departure, another (low) job, another border crossing, or simply the continuation of migration struggle. This issue of impossibilities of integration remind us on Avtar Brah (1996) concept of "diaspora places" arguing that migration does not automatically lead to emancipation but often reproduces existing inequalities in new settings. Therefore, female migrant trajectory ending not in integration but in a return to precarity. The chosen film corpus supports this argument. Two examples of staying in limbo between happy and without happy ending happened in T*he Melon Route* and *Head-On*. In *The Melon Route*, the Chinese girl is perhaps the closest to receiving a fairy-tale ending, but the text itself notes the fairy-tale quality of this resolution, suggesting it is exceptional rather than representative. On the other hand, ending could be understood as one more cycle of going back for Chinese migrant since her eventual love story with a war veteran is dysfunctional and a confirmation of her belonging to the underprivileged and social outcasts.

Finally, in Fatih's *Head-On* Sibel gains autonomy, but she didn't get stability, reconciliation, or belonging, but she moved from one negotiation of identity to another.

Beside denial of the main migration goal analysis implicitly shows how the old European narrative of migration as a path toward integration is weakening. The films examined in this paper demonstrate that migration is not merely a social phenomenon but also a cultural and political condition that reshapes understandings of identity and Europe itself. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of transnational cinema and mi-

gration cinema, this paper has argued that contemporary migration cinema constructs the migrant body as a central site where political power, economic inequality, and gendered social relations intersect. Whether crossing deserts and seas, waiting in refugee camps, navigating undocumented labor markets, surviving trafficking networks, or redefining diasporic identities, migrant protagonists confront systems that regulate movement while simultaneously producing forms of exclusion and precarity.

The analysis of border narratives in *Green Border*, *Io Capitano*, *The Melon Route*, and *As Far as I Can Walk* demonstrate that contemporary borders extend far beyond territorial frontiers. At the same time, these films challenge dominant political representations that reduce migrants to anonymous masses by foregrounding individual experiences of endurance and aspiration.

The examination of *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Joy* reveals that migration cannot be understood independently of labor. Both films expose the economic structures that depend upon migrant workers while simultaneously making them socially and politically marginal.

A gendered perspective proves particularly important in this context. Male protagonists are frequently associated with movement, endurance, and border crossing, whereas female protagonists more often confront forms of bodily regulation, sexualized vulnerability, and labor exploitation. Yet the corpus also challenges conventional gender binaries.

Through its exploration of diasporic identity, cultural in-betweenness, and female autonomy, the film *Head-On* reveals the psychological and cultural dimensions of transnational existence. Migration is shown not merely as geographical displacement but as an ongoing redefining of identity.

Ultimately, the figure of the migrant in 21st century transnational cinema emerges not as a marginal figure but as a key subject through which contemporary Europe understands itself. Migration cinema demonstrates that questions of mobility, citizenship, labor, and identity are no longer peripheral concerns but fundamental dimensions of contemporary European life.

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