

### EASTERN EUROPEAN CINEMA ON THE MARGINS

In the past two decades, film studies has witnessed an incredible growth in national and regional cinemas within Europe, and the most visible of these are new movements from Eastern Europe. The Romanian New Wave, the Slovenian New Wave, and Bulgarian cinema are only a few examples that point to a growing significance of what has been termed “the cinema of small nations.”<sup>1</sup> As I will show in this article, the broader discourse around new Europe and new European cinema that has been developing since the early 1990s already points to Eastern Europe, frequently labeled as the “Other” Europe, as a determining factor in the new European identity: it has arguably become the new de-centered center shaping the new European legacy. If the 1990s were marked by the integration and re-centering through the constitution of one common Europe,<sup>2</sup> this re-centering also produced and was paralleled by the traumatic reconfiguration and fragmentation of spatial boundaries in the former Eastern block: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Thus, the new Europeanism, on the one hand a geopolitical manifestation of the homogenizing process of globalization, is on the other hand a product of fragmentation, the formation of an unprecedented number of nation-states throughout Central and Eastern Europe. It is this remapping of the “Other” Europe that brackets the largely positive assumptions of the integration processes, foregrounds the traumatic effects of the rapid march of capitalism, and reinforces, among other things, the nation-state as an important form of social configuration just as its demise is being enthusiastically pronounced. Nevertheless, while this central position of a traditionally marginalized Eastern Europe and its cinema has been implied and sometimes explicitly stated in the discourse on the new Europe and new European cinema, its critical intervention into the debates that inform the new European identity has not been explored.

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<sup>1</sup> See Duncan Petrie & Mette Hjort, eds., *The Cinema of Small Nations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The creation of a single European market in the late 1980s; the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992; the circulation of the new common currency, the Euro; and the enlargement of the E.U. from its original six members to 27 in 2007.

The idea of marginal Eastern European cinema may be fashionable, as Ewa Mazierska points out, due to contemporary “interests in small narratives, marginality, local cultures, as well as a sense of exhaustion experienced by the so-called First and Second cinemas,”<sup>3</sup> but on the other hand, it receives much less attention than during the pre-1989 period, because the hot political developments in the 1990s that fascinated and attracted the Western gaze to it are more or less passé. The study of transnational issues within European cinema has largely been conducted with disregard to Eastern European cinema, or at best, “this cinema receives only token recognition.”<sup>4</sup> I want to address this precarious position of Eastern European cinema, which may still be designated as marginal or small in terms of external and empirical variables of size, but, I argue, not insofar as it occupies a central, indeed “large” discursive position on the map of European cinema, staging differently key issues that inform the new European identity. Of particular interest to me is how this cinema marks a shift in the politics of representation of “nation” and “other/stranger/immigrant,” issues that are central to new European cinema. It is not enough merely to state that new European cinema narrates the Other Europe; we need to take seriously its enunciative position, the question of where one speaks from, and examine how the problem of Europe is conjured differently from the rapidly changing space of Eastern Europe. In the case of Eastern European cinema, whose ties to pan-European structures and therefore pan-European ideology are much looser than in most West European cinemas, this enunciative position becomes a useful point from which to better address the complexity of contemporary Europe. Hence, it is not my goal to provide an encyclopedic survey of key films from various Eastern European countries or offer a comprehensive perspective on these cinemas, and the examples offered here are necessarily limited and reductive. I want to argue that an incredibly diverse—culturally, stylistically and thematically—set of films from Eastern European countries, each embodying very specific historical, cultural, aesthetic, industrial and political contexts as well as auteurist visions, provides a similar cognitive map of the newly redrawn national and European space, and that this cinematic mapping offers a different understanding of the problem of new European subject and the space it occupies, thus supplying more than a good reason to pay careful critical attention to this cinema and its insights into the discourse of the new Europe. It is the narrative of the Other Europe that puts at stake the very possibility of European identity, and it is this

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<sup>3</sup> Ewa Mazierska, “Eastern European Cinema: Old and New Approaches.” *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 1.1 (2010): 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

impossibility, often based on anxiety about nationalism/supranationalism as well as immigration, that forms the central and troubling problematic in the critical discourse on new European cinema. It is the narrative of the Other Europe (which has historically occupied the marginal position of the Other in relation to Europe, while itself not free from practices of “othering”) that charts a different space for the European subject and uses this space as a productive point from which to re-conceive our understanding of the Other.

## THE QUESTION OF NEW EUROPE

For almost two decades, scholarly conferences have been devoted to addressing the question of European cinema. Most recently (June 2010), a decade into its establishment, the European Cinema Research Forum organized a conference called “Is There Such a Thing as European Cinema?” that aimed to establish where exactly the Europeaness of European cinema may lie. The conference aimed to investigate not only the pan-European film industry but also how critical investments contribute to the creation of European cinema and its critical and historical discourses. So while the question of Europe is by no means a new question, it is in the 1990s, as acknowledged by the conference, that it acquires a new form and new urgency, and constructs European cinema as a significant site of representation and identification for Europeans. A new beginning for Europeanism was on the one hand announced through the implementation of various pan-European support mechanisms, especially the MEDIA program and the Eurimages Fund, designed to strengthen and support European film by addressing structural problems (greater coordination of funding and cross-border initiatives designed to prevent encroaching Hollywood production) and encouraging filmmakers to think in pan-European terms.

In a parallel moment, the critical discourse on new Europe was inaugurated by the BFI conference in 1990, “Screening Europe,” that began an inquiry into the new European cinema.<sup>5</sup> One of the immediate realizations of the inquiry was that new European cinema does not take the construct of

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<sup>5</sup> Featuring such prominent scholars as Fredric Jameson, Stuart Hall, John Caughie, Ien Ang and Colin MacCabe, as well as a range of renowned European filmmakers including Jean-Luc Godard, Chantal Akerman and Isaac Julien, the conference addressed the problems of contemporary European identity and explored how European films are shaping and being shaped by the dramatic changes taking place in Europe. The proceedings of the conference were published in 1992. See Duncan Petrie, ed., *Screening Europe: Imaging and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema* (London: BFI Working Papers, 1992).

Europe as a given, as a cohesive, dynamic and powerful entity, but instead speaks to issues through which the elements of the new Europe are being constructed, addressing immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, diasporic communities and those outside of the European Union who move from the periphery to the metropole. In other words, it narrates the “Other” Europe, which forms the central and troubling problematic in the critical discourse on new European cinema.

But while the participants of the conference admired the films under discussion (*Women on The Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *Passion*, *Chocolat*, among others), which they considered as early representatives of new European cinema and its newly conceived European identity, they also observed that the most pressing concerns of the new Europe, particularly migration and the question of the “other,” are either not featured prominently in these films, or are treated within a limited framework. Stuart Hall expressed skepticism regarding the critical stance of the films, echoing the concerns of many other participants: “There isn’t really what I would call a post-colonial text here. It’s the European imaginary, in the face of historical change, that we’ve been trying to talk about and to figure out. How ‘otherness’ is experienced—indeed, how Europe is experienced from the periphery—would require another range of films to see.”<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson similarly concluded that the films under focus “operate to repress those features of the European idea which are unacceptable, so as to be in a position to live with the rest of the already given European situation.”<sup>7</sup> This quite unanimous observation referred more generally to a lack of films that address the issues of migration and “otherness” head-on, but also to cinematic practices that perhaps too easily narrate the problem of Europe and Other as the binary problem of Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism. Such practices thus merely reproduce the binary nature of the public discourse on European identity which juxtaposes nationalism and immigration as social problems with the liberal discourse on transnationalism. And, Stuart Hall rightly noted that this problem has something to do with the speaking position, or discursive spaces that are being discussed. To move beyond this binary and understand better the predicament of the European subject, to go beyond “a comfortably liberal celebration of the Other,”<sup>8</sup> we also need to look beyond films that speak

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan Petrie, ed., *Screening Europe: Imaging and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema* (London: BFI Working Papers, 1992), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 3.

about the Other from the center of Europe, and address cinema that speaks not *of* but *from* the peripheral spaces of Eastern Europe.

Since the early 1990s when this conference took place, we can confidently say that there has been no shortage of films that openly address what were identified as key issues of the new Europe. In prominent European productions such as *La Haine* (1995, Mathieu Kassovitz), *Besieged* (1998, Bernardo Bertolucci), *Northern Skirts* (1999, Barbara Albert), *Beautiful People* (1999, Jasmin Dizdar), *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002, Stephen Frears), *In This World* (2002, Michael Winterbottom), the issues of borders, journeying, immigration and strangers are put into the foreground of troubled European identity. Scholarly work is emerging studying the body of films that has been labeled as “journey,” “migratory” or “cross-border” films. Yosefa Loshitzky’s *Screening Strangers*,<sup>9</sup> for example, examines how the cinematic articulations of Europe’s new sociocultural space have been shaped by the experience of displacement, diaspora, exile, immigration, homelessness and border crossing, which challenge the traditional notion of Europeanness as well as the classic “others” of Europe (Jews, Roma, refugees from Eastern Europe) that are now replaced by new “others” from the so-called Third World, particularly Africa and Asia. Interestingly, as Loshitzky points out, such “journey films” often use the Other Europe, and the Bosnian war in particular, to challenge the idea of a new “multicultural” Europe and express anxieties about the “Balkanization of Europe.” Echoing Slavoj Žižek’s obsessive claim that the Balkans are not an entity in their own right but “Europe’s myth,” the screen onto which Europeans project their desires and fears,<sup>10</sup> Loshitzky notes how, in the narrative economy of “migratory” film such as *Northern Skirts* and *Beautiful People*, the Balkans play a major role and become a leading “metaphor for the fragility of multiculturalism.”<sup>11</sup> In her study of contemporary European cinema,<sup>12</sup> Mary P. Wood observes similarly the significance of how the Balkan conflict has been incorporated into European cinematic discourse, and how it has evolved to include concerns about mass immigration or population from Eastern Europe. The Balkan war, Wood claims, not only brings issues such as illegal immigration to the fore and examines them in relation to contemporary Europe, but provides “evidence of the anxiety and fear which they occasioned, and demonstrate[s] the mecha-

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<sup>9</sup> Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Slavoj Žižek, “You May!” *London Review of Books* 21.6 (1999): 3-6.

<sup>11</sup> Loshitzky, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Mary P. Wood, *Contemporary European Cinema* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2007).

nisms through which experience can be ordered to be assimilated, understood, accepted or rejected.”<sup>13</sup> She further suggests that these narratives, besides refuting ideas of cosmopolitan liberal discourse (for example, the idea that borders are irrelevant), also provide evidence that mainstream commercial cinema is inadequate to explore and express these issues (how social breakdown and mass immigration is perceived as threatening to national and personal identity) in a meaningful way.

Valuable as the narratives discussed by Loshitzky and Wood are, I believe that they obscure at least as much as they illuminate the problems of contemporary Europe, and return us to the very dilemma expressed by the early “Screening Europe” conference. Certainly, the Other Europe or the Balkan metaphor in these films proves fertile in that it serves the dual purpose of articulating the threat or fear of the (barbaric, non-civilized) Balkan Other, while also expressing the fear of the self, the fear that the self (Europe) may be or already is acquiring the very characteristics of the Other, which it demonizes and from which it claims to be so different. Nevertheless, these films still speak from the center about the periphery and fail to incorporate the point of view of the Other. To recall Stuart Hall’s earlier statement, they still don’t tell us “how otherness is experienced from the periphery.” They thus reproduce the same problem of framing the issues of national/supranational, Europe/Other, in binary and opposing terms.

Why should it matter where these films are speaking from? Why the need to look at films that speak not only about but *from* the very changing spaces that are reshaping the new European geopolitical reality as well as its imaginary? It matters first because the position of enunciation translates into, and to an extent determines, the commercial appeal, the success of the films at the international festival circuit and consequently their presence in the critical discourse on European cinema that still tends to circle around European auteur/art cinema. And, secondly, because this position influences the critical intervention into the discursive space of new European cinema and frames it differently. If we take seriously the claim that the Other Europe today represents a new center, then we also need to examine how this discursive space is reshaped by the cinema of Other Europe.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

EASTERN EUROPEAN CINEMA:  
FROM MARGINAL TO SUSPENDED SPACE

Before even looking at cinematic texts themselves, it is worth revisiting Wood's claim that commercial cinema is inadequately positioned to address the complexities of a contemporary European subject by considering the differences that exist between patterns of production, distribution and exhibition in Eastern European and West European cinema, and how these differences determine the discursive position of each cinema. Wood explains that, while there are tensions between global industrial practices, the globalizing forces of the European Union, and national and regional interests within the European film industry, the establishment of pan-European institutions have resulted in financing and exhibition for West European film (although varying from country to country) that generally resembles a commercial structure: major players in financing being commercial banks, sales agents, distribution companies, private investors and lawyers; and patterns of exhibition/exploitation of films follow a pattern of release within the exhibition sector, followed by video DVD sales and pay-tv, cable, archive, etc. At the same time, MEDIA and Eurimages funding initiatives address not only structural problems that make it possible for European cinema to compete with Hollywood, but also encourage filmmakers to think in pan-European terms. This raises the question: To what extent is the discursive position of West European films already by definition pan-European, taking the prerogatives of new Europe for granted even as it critiques them? One case in point, for example, is *Visions of Europe* (2004), a Zentropa Entertainment omnibus film project where established directors from each E.U. country (Fatih Akin, Aki Kaurismaki, Peter Greenaway, Béla Tarr, among others) were asked to make a short film that expresses a personal vision of current or future life in the European Union. Most of the contributions reflect a weary attitude towards the idea of new Europe and European identity, many critically approach the question of "Europeanness" through the theme of immigration, and a few of them do so in a hard-hitting and innovative manner (Béla Tarr's "Prologue" tracks, in a stunning single shot, a long line of outcast people waiting for a bowl of soup and some bread). However, none of the films question the basic existence and assumptions of supranational European identity; neither do they approach that identity in truly cosmopolitan terms. The question is never, "What exactly is Europe; is there such a thing as European identity?" but rather "How do we understand and negotiate it"?

This cultural strategy (sometimes referred to as “Europudding”) may be an important part of the political idea of supranational Europe, but it often fails to find resonance with either European filmmakers or audiences, and films continue to be promoted and consumed as national products. This is particularly the case in Eastern European countries, where filmmaking still hasn’t assumed the commercial structure of the West European film industry, and significantly depends on national initiatives, with its exhibition largely limited to the festival circuit. Surely, pan-European support mechanisms, especially MEDIA and Eurimages, have been essential in the case of small productions from the countries of Eastern Europe, where filmmakers used to be dependent on state support.<sup>14</sup> However, despite the opportunities created by these new initiatives that clearly played a huge role in the promotion of new European film culture, it is often the existence of the state agency, controversial in their financial politics as they may be (for example, the Slovenian Film Fund in Slovenia; the National Council of Cinematography in Romania; the National Film Center in Bulgaria) that remains key to Eastern European film production. Programs such as MEDIA contribute up to 50 percent of the cost of the project, and the rest originates from other funding (public or private) sources; similarly, Eurimages grants support only to films that already have 50 percent of their financing covered. For a country as small as, say, Slovenia, where substantial private investments into film production are still difficult if not impossible to attract, not only because of the country’s size but because the potential for domestic commercial return is also small, at least initial support from the national film institution is often a necessary condition before seeking additional funding from pan-European programs. It is the filmmaker’s dependence—a frustrating one at that—on these state institutions, and not only the lack of film infrastructure, that led Cristi Puiu (*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*) to proclaim that “there is no Romanian film industry,”<sup>15</sup> and Slovenian filmmaker Damjan Kozole to say that “[I]t’s easier to become an astronaut than a filmmaker in Slovenia.”<sup>16</sup> While this discouraging situation clearly puts Eastern European cinema at a disadvantage when it comes to commercial opportunities both in terms of production and exhibition, it may be better positioned when it comes to critical discourse on the new Europe. In other words, Wood’s suggestions that mainstream commercial

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<sup>14</sup> Luisa Rivi, *European Cinema After 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> A. O. Scott, “New Wave on the Black Sea,” *New York Times* 20 Jan. 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/magazine/20Romanian-t.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Video interview with Damjan Kozole at the Balkan Survey of the Thessaloniki Film Festival, <http://cineuropa.org/video.aspx?lang=en&documentID=115859>.



cinema is inadequate to explore the complexity of contemporary Europe, particularly the issue of how mass immigration is perceived to threaten national and personal identity, can be pushed further to ask: To what extent is the cinema of Eastern Europe, less dependent on pan-European structures and therefore pan-European ideology, even better predisposed to address this complexity?

Also to be considered is the fact that many Eastern European countries are newly established nations and became so at the same moment they began their integration into the larger political and cultural sphere of the European Union. Therefore, they approach the question of the national and supranational and the problem of Europe quite differently. I have shown elsewhere how for instance, Slovenian cinema speaks from and about the space that was redrawn as national at the very moment that it became integrated within a larger European space, emerging onto the European cinematic map as it becomes recognized as national cinema for the first time.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, due to its repeated success at Cannes and other international film festivals, Romanian cinema was recognized as national cinema around 2005, just shortly before Romania was integrated into the European Union in 2007. Such films' attention to spatial redrawing, as a result, addresses neither the problem of integration within the larger European space nor the relationship of this new European space to the national space (which is always taken for granted in the political discourse), but often renders impossible the very process of transition from one to the other. A revised national space is thus presented as a problem of transitional space, a kind of empty, in-between space where an image indicates both an absence of the national as well as a distance from the supranational. What emerges most strongly in their portrayal of the transition from one political and economic order to the next while trying to maintain autonomy and distinct identity, is not a sense of success but a sense of marginality, isolation and alienation that stems from the process of transition. The transitional reality that is always taken for granted in the political discourse becomes troubled, and the process of redrawing national space is often presented as a failed process.

This dilemma, which unifies a diverse set of films, is effectively portrayed in a film that announced the Slovenian New Wave in the mid-1990s and put Slovenian cinema on the international map, *V leri/Idle Running* (1999, Janez Burger). The film is about an eternal student, Dizzy, who has been vegetat-

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<sup>17</sup> Meta Mazaj, "Freewheeling on the Margins: The Discourse of Transition in the New Slovenian Cinema," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 2.1 (2011): 7-20.

ing in the dorms for ten years and is stuck in the space—literal and mental—that usually presents a mere passage between permanent and stable spaces. The film productively deploys the condition of free-wheeling, being stuck in a neutral gear, to signify a specific state of being that marks the existence in a transitional space. The camera, which follows the main character, reflecting his existential vacuum, denies us (although it also indicates) the coordinates of the outside space and remains limited to the dormitory. In contrast to many European films that imagine a reconfiguration of national space into a larger European one,<sup>18</sup> the film literally remains stuck in the transition between the “no-more-national” and “not-yet-transnational,” fleshing out a panic-stricken and necessarily failed search for national identity and distinct national spirit at a historic moment when nationhood is no longer dependent on ethnic identity but rather on the ideal of “constititional patriotism” (as Habermas would have it).<sup>19</sup>

The portrayal of this peculiar, suspended and empty space that is neither national nor supranational, while speaking about transition, is not transitional or short-lived itself and persists in more recent productions that more directly invoke the country’s integration into the European Union. The most awarded and internationally known Slovenian director Damjan Kozole’s recent film, *Slovenian Girl* (2009), is set in the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, in 2008, during the Slovenian presidency over the European Union. In contrast to the first wave of films that do not directly invoke Slovenia’s integration into the European Union, here this new reality provides a potent and critical backdrop, with motorcades sweeping through the city, and the concentrated presence of international politicians showcasing the glamour of the new Europe. The heroine of the film is Aleksandra, a beautiful and smart twenty-three-year-old student of literature and English who, in order to keep up with the high standards of European urban living, styles herself as a mid-level call girl under the code name “Slovenian girl.” She successfully maneuvers this double life until one day one of her clients, a powerful member of the European Parliament, dies of a heart attack after an overly enthusiastic dose of Viagra. When it is revealed to the press that

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<sup>18</sup> In *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* (Julio Medem, 1998), for example, journeys across Europe are central to image and narrative development. For its characters, crossing European spaces is either a literal project (Otto becomes a pilot so he can easily cross spaces) or fantasmatic projection (Anna’s imaginary construction of the Arctic Circle). Comments Galt, “The film is concerned with charting the psychic territory of Europe: Finland and Spain are as far apart as it is possible within Europe, but not too far for another continent” (Galt, p. 106).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. and ed. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

he was with a “Slovenian girl” at the time of his death, her code name appears everywhere on the news and her life becomes a downward spiral of lies as she juggles getting by in college, avoiding discovery by the press, keeping her secrets from everyone, and staying in the prostitution business with violent pimps trying to control her.

If, on a more immediate level, the film can be seen as a direct critique of a particular social problem that plagues the new cosmopolitan, capitalist and European, Slovenia—prostitution—reframed by Kozole as a homegrown issue rather than the domain of the “other,”<sup>20</sup> this specific story about prostitution becomes a metaphor for the nation, drawing a direct equation between the Slovenian girl and the Slovenian nation. Such transposition of the national onto a woman, using the image of the woman as stand-in for the nation, while not at all uncommon in numerous national cinemas (particularly in post-colonial contexts where a woman often stands as a sign signifying the struggles of an oppressed or emerging nation), here reveals a different dynamic. It’s not so much that the victimized, suffering woman’s body becomes a potent metonym and a powerful image that embodies both the sacrifices and strength of a nation; the Slovenian girl is a true anti-heroine, with no background that would constitute her as a three-dimensional character; her eyes remain blank, her body sterile, and her ice-cold façade is barely balanced with the presumed innocence. Placed against the cold walls of an unfurnished apartment, trapped in anonymous municipal spaces and bland hotel corridors, she seems vacant, sterile, disinterested—indeed almost photo-robotic and deprived of human subjectivity. The film thus suggests a suspension (or at best bracketing) of the signifying processes of a woman as national sign, bringing us back to the same dilemma of transitional space, of that empty in-between of the “no more national” and “not yet transnational.” Emptied out as a subject as soon as she appears on the screen, the challenge for the Slovenian girl is not how to preserve her distinct identity, how to assert her subjectivity, strength and independence; rather, she is turned into a commodity, a national brand on a transnational market, before even constituting herself as a national subject. She is neither a willing object in her own subjugation nor a struggling subject against domination but signifies only nothingness—an empty, second-order signifier.

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<sup>20</sup> The premise of the story is backed by several investigations that show not only an alarming spread of prostitution in Slovenia but the fact that over 70 percent of prostitutes are young Slovenian women (many of them students), who are not a part of an international human trafficking scheme and work as willing and independent entrepreneurs.

Aesthetically and thematically very different, but with a similar mapping of the relationship between national/supranational, the phenomenally successful new Romanian cinema, bursting onto the international stage as national cinema on the brink of Romania's integration into the European Union, is preoccupied not with the question of integration, the redrawing of national space and the nature of transnational identity, but rather with the ambiguous status of the national question. Films like *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005, Cristi Puiu), *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007, Cristian Mungui), *California Dreamin'* (2007, Cristian Nemescu), and *Tales from the Golden Age* (2009, Cristian Mungui), are all different explorations of Romanian national identity or rather failed attempts at establishing one, where a transnational context still seems like a distant reality, yet the national one is already suspended. Corneliu Porumboiu's debut feature, *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006), a Cannes prizewinner about the memories of the 1989 Romanian revolution, is a scathing satire about the nature of the imprint of the past on the contemporary psyche of Romanian people. In a small rural village and on the occasion of the 16th anniversary of the Romanian revolution, a self-obsessed TV talk show host organizes a show to discuss whether the 1989 revolution that ousted the communist dictator Ceausescu actually happened in his sleepy rural community. This important national question is tackled by two "competent" guests—a hard-drinking history teacher and an old retiree whose claim to fame is his Santa Claus costume—both of whom purportedly participated in this historic event. While the film offers a mosaic of brief scenes that feature a taste, and a critique, of post-communist, contemporary (and it could be said transnational) life, most of the film focuses on the TV show and its main question about Romania's past: "Was there or was there not a revolution in our town?"<sup>21</sup> As important and defining as the question about this key historical moment is made out to be, it turns out that the guests, as well as the callers, can barely remember anything because the Revolution scarcely made a difference to them. The revolution may define the film and present the key to national identity, yet the only thing that is left of it is not even memories but the comic semblance of it, staged by the rebellious (or perhaps merely incompetent?) cameraman who, told not to experiment with the hand-held camera, frames the shots in a way that distorts and makes a caricature out of the characters on the show and the space they inhabit. No one cares about the memories of the past, but no one can escape them either.

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<sup>21</sup> *A fost sau n-a fost* or "Was There or Was There Not?" is also the original title of the film.

Hence, underlying the specific question of “Was there or was there not a revolution?” is a more general question: “Is there or is there not a Romanian nation?”—a question that always depends on a collective, and problematic, adoption of a single narrative, but that here acquires a whole new set of (im)possibilities. The nation and its alternative—though somewhat romanticized—history that the show attempts to establish become essential yet dubious entities that never were, but have to be recovered anyway. The rapid capitalization of the country that has accompanied its integration into the European Union thus produces both the problematic obliteration of the past as well as the urgency of its fabrication. Undoubtedly produced and circulating in a transnational context, both materially and discursively, the film maps a space already transformed by the transnational capitalist forces yet distant from them, lingering in an empty and dubious space of the nation that is as persistent and as unstable as the town lights bracketing the film, going on and off throughout the town at unpredictable intervals.

#### EASTERN EUROPE AS THE OTHER WITHIN

If this suspended, transitional space offers a modest critique of the discourse of Europeanism and its weak premises of integration and transnational identity, it on the other hand serves in many films as a productive point from which to approach the question of the Other, the experience of displacement and migration—issues that dominate the discourse on the new Europe and new European cinema. Although Europe has historically evolved through a process of assimilating diverse ethnic, national and religious groups, the “other” or “stranger” is necessarily threatening to what is called Fortress Europe, and the process of “screening strangers” that Loshitzky writes about is as much a process (literal and metaphorical, political and cinematic) of erecting boundaries as it is an attempt to come to terms with the presence of “otherness.” She specifically points to the significance of the increasingly prominent genre of cross-border and journey films which, by portraying the refugees’ and migrants’ lived experience, and offering new perspectives on both Europe’s historical and new “others,” challenges the idea of Europe and “challenges and subverts contemporary media and public discourse on migrants which dehumanizes and criminalizes them.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Loshitzky, p. 11.

The cinema of Eastern Europe further complicates the relationship between the self and stranger, host and guest country (which is still conceived in binary and oppositional terms in West European cinema, regardless of on which side of the opposition one stands), moving beyond the binary relationship in its explorations of both itself as the historical Other within Europe, as well as its relationship to the new Others that now constitute its geopolitical and collective imaginary sphere. Many Eastern European countries, previously classical countries of emigration, have themselves become desired destinations for migrants from the Third World. The new members of the E.U. have not only been sending migrants to Western Europe but receiving them. It is interesting to examine how this ambiguous demographic status of many Eastern European countries blurs the identity of the host and guest country and asks us to remap the traditional relationship between self/other, host/stranger, thus shifting the ground of discussion on immigration in contemporary Europe.

To return to Damjan Kozole, his film *Spare Parts* (2003) is one of the more important examples of the cross-border or journey genre. This drama about human trafficking was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and proclaimed by the *Guardian* as “one of the strongest and most provocative films of the year.”<sup>23</sup> The film is, on a general level, an exploration of the paradox of contemporary, global Europe, where open borders coexist with increased boundaries, and where the factor of citizenship is magnified and enforced; and, more specifically, it is about the position of Slovenia, transformed frontiers of which place it on the receiving end of the refugees not just from former Yugoslavia but from Africa, Kurdistan, China, Pakistan, Iraq, etcetera. If the film’s title refers to the unfortunate fate of those “lucky” few who do make it past the border control into the promised land (Europe)—they are killed and their organs sold for money—the film’s narrative focuses on the life of smugglers: Ludvik, an experienced smuggler and a former motorcycle racing champion, and Rudi, a novice smuggler trying to adapt to his new role. Avoiding the binary relationship between traffickers and refugees, perpetrators and victims, the film draws a parallel, and thus blurs the line, between the two, placing both groups on the fringes of a criminal underworld, with both groups lacking agency, and both trapped and captive in the processes of Europeanization. The film is set in Krsko, a depressed industrial town whose existence revolves around its nuclear power plant, and which stands in opposition to the otherwise idyllic, pic-

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<sup>23</sup> P. Bradshaw, “Spare Parts,” *Guardian*, 12 March 2004, [http://film.guardian.co.uk/News\\_Story/Critic\\_Review/Guardian\\_review/0,4267,1167230,00.html](http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_review/0,4267,1167230,00.html).

ture-perfect landscape of Slovenia. This rugged, liminal border zone between Central Eastern (Slovenia) and Western Europe (Italy) is used not only as a backdrop for the refugee drama but also “bears silent witness to the tragedy of the traffickers themselves who, like the refugees, are the victims of globalization and the New Europe.”<sup>24</sup> If refugees are the unfortunate products of the sociopolitical processes that prevail in the new Europe, the traffickers, as well, are not criminals on the opposite side of the equation but the victims of the same processes, subjected to dehumanization, inhabiting and suffocating in the diseased landscape of pollution and over-industrialization (the main character, Ludvik, is dying of cancer, a direct result of his toxic environment). The journey in *Spare Parts* is rather predictably the passage of the refugees from the status of human beings to that of human spare parts. But this same journey mirrors the journey of traffickers from innocence to maturity, where maturity projects not a resistant national subject but a loss of humanity, a kind of a blank slate onto which the forces of globalization inscribe themselves. Rather than replicating the relationship of oppression and the process of “othering” that characterizes Western Europe, both the refugees and the traffickers are placed on common ground where they have to negotiate their position in relationship with each other.

Another example that is instructive in this regard is a Bosnian film, *On the Path* (2010), a sophomore feature by Jasmila Žbanić, the director of the award winning *Grbavica*.<sup>25</sup> Set in contemporary Sarajevo, *On the Path* is a film about a young Bosnian-Muslim couple, Luna and Amar. They are an attractive, lively and hip couple, intensely in love, but their relationship, and identity, is seriously threatened when Amar loses his job and joins the community of Wahhabis or Salafi Muslims,<sup>26</sup> a fundamentalist Islamic sect, demanding that Luna follow him on his new spiritual path. If *Grbavica*<sup>27</sup> was set in a Sarajevo that was isolated, heavily marked by the recent war, and the characters in the film (also secular Muslims), as well as the city itself, were in a painful struggle to come to terms with the traumatic and still recent memories of the past, *On the Path* is about a contemporary, and European, Sarajevo that beats to the fast global, capitalist pulse of contem-

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<sup>24</sup> Loshitzky, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> The film was awarded the Berlinale Golden Bear in 2006 and AFI Grand Jury Prize, among many other festival awards, making Žbanić the first and most recognized Bosnian female filmmaker.

<sup>26</sup> Although Wahhabism is historically different from and represents a particular orientation within Salafism, the two sects have come closer in the context of a modern religious “revival,” and the two terms are now often used interchangeably.

<sup>27</sup> The film, whose title refers to the neighborhood in Sarajevo that was used as a rape camp during the war, is about Esma, a single mother struggling to raise a teenage daughter who is the result of a war rape.



*On the Path* (Jasmila Žbanić, 2010)

porary Europe. The signs of war, at least on the surface, are not visible, and Amar and Luna's fast-paced and fun-filled Sarajevo life is no different from how we envision life in any modern European city. As opposed to the main character in *Grbavica* (Esma, who is dehumanized, trapped and marked by the nation's war, unable to make free choices), Luna lives and makes her decisions in the present, and despite some difficulties, has the choice to conceive a child and create her own family. Žbanić defines her as "a woman who has been able to find her way into the present...allowing herself to be functional."<sup>28</sup> Even their jobs—Luna is a flight attendant and Amar works at the airport as a ground controller—symbolize, stereotypically so, life in a global world that they apparently embody: free, boundless, not defined by borders, air-bound rather than limited by ground obstacles, looking forward and planning the future rather than looking back and being trapped in the past.

This "functional," modern European life, however, becomes threatened not by an intrusion of some outside forces, the outsider and the stranger, but by the elements that are very much an integral part of an internal fabric of contemporary Sarajevo. When Amar loses his job, the tectonic forces of his layered past burst forth and provoke his seemingly stable and happy life. With his pre-war identity shattered, and the new "European" identity, though certainly attractive and desirable, too ephemeral and intangible, Amar finds a stable, warm structure and a sense of belonging in the community of Salafi Muslims. Comments Žbanić:

After the war, Bosnian Muslims who survived the genocide were left on a barren field where old ideas have been massacred along with their human rights. For many of them, religion became a comfortable blanket. Bosnian Muslims consider themselves European, but the European Union isn't convinced that we belong with Europe. So the question is where do we belong?<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *On the Path* press kit published by the 60th Berlin International Film Festival.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



Žbanić's statement points to the paradoxical construction of this new Other; as the majority of Bosniaks are Muslims (albeit secular), and as Salafism can be perceived as an extension or (more doctrinally rigid) version of their Muslim identity, a passionate and urgent rejection of Salafism in the region has been perceived by some Bosniaks as necessary in order to delineate and reinforce a social distinction between the two strands. Thus, while Amar's orientation toward the Salafi Muslim community seems justified, the film clearly shows how this new community clashes with and undermines the city's (and Luna's) newly adopted European identity. Regardless of the fact that Luna tries very hard to understand Amar's new identity and realizes its benefits—during her visit to the community, Luna sees firsthand how Wahhabism provides Amar with fraternity, protection, and with it a sense of belonging, peace and strength—the Wahhabi community is nevertheless constructed by the media and the public sphere as the threatening Other, the stranger, the outsider that the media love to associate with senseless terrorism and the fundamentalist group Al-Qaeda.

Yet—and this is certainly one of the film's biggest strengths—Žbanić's portrayal of this fundamentalist Islamic sect, which has (paradoxically some may say) increased its presence in Sarajevo as the city has assumed a more European identity, is thoroughly exploratory, well-researched, sincere and engaged. Rather than a foreign element, the community seems integrally connected to and is a natural part of the city's complex history and multiethnic identity. Its marginal place is given a voice and an agency, and the viewers are put in a position to think through and comprehend, through Luna's extensive explorations of the community (and with it confrontations with her own past which she was too eager to erase), their position as an essential element of contemporary Sarajevo, and Europe. Skeptical, puzzled and disoriented as she becomes facing this new Other, Luna's journey nevertheless charts a new path that refuses to reproduce prevailing inscriptions of the Other modeled by Europe (where Europe's relationship with Eastern Europe as the Other is then reproduced by Eastern Europe's own process of "othering"<sup>30</sup>).

Underlying Žbanić's sincere and rich portrayal of the multiple and contradictory layers of contemporary Sarajevo is a critique of the dangerous national politics and constructions of identity that emerge from enthusiastic orientation toward Europe, which further divides the "modern" and European

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<sup>30</sup> This process is effectively described by Milica "Bakić-Hayden as "nesting Orientalism," in Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54.4 (autumn 1995): 917-932.

elements of Eastern Europe from its primitive, “Balkan” ones, and encourages the production of historical erasure and amnesia while constructing new and dangerous national myths of origin. Luna’s enthusiastic orientation toward Europe did not simply free her from a tragic history, but it forced her to turn away from, repress and obliterate her past. Only after engrossing herself (albeit temporarily) in Amar’s new life and living with him in his new community for a few days does she decide also to return for the first time to the house where she was born and which she was forced to leave during the war. It is the process of facing the Other, engaging and trying to understand Amar’s new identity, that forces her to look back while moving forward, and to confront her past and her memories in order better to understand and negotiate her present.

*On the Path* concludes ambiguously, with Luna and Amar gazing at each other, longing for each other, still in love but standing apart, at the crossroads, and it is not clear whether they will be able to reconcile their different positions. This makes it possible for one to conclude that the film ultimately marks Amar as the Other, the terrorist (as he has been marked by the West), and that new relationships with the Other are no different in the post-communist, European Union era than they have been historically constituted. Still, the fact that the film ends with an open question rather than a firm judgment also contemplates the possibility that the two are “on the path” to reach a new level of understanding where this “introspective othering” within the renewed national identity opens up a new relationship as yet unknown. Žbanić’s narrative clearly shows resistance inscribing Amar as the Other, and in its light, the open ending, a final pause, urges the viewer to contemplate a future in which the recognition of the Other is not a mere liberal act of acceptance and the symbolic embrace of a foreign element, but an essential component of understanding one’s history as well as one’s position in the present. At the core of this understanding is not a simple openness towards otherness but the realization that otherness is always already present, that the traces of alterity are always already at the core of European—nay any—“identity.”

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