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# Destination Italy

Representing Migration in  
Contemporary Media and Narrative

Emma Bond, Guido Bonsaver  
and Federico Faloppa (eds)



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undetected; and they have to face the consequences of their acts, like the Chinese in Pasquale's story.

Unlike *La sconosciuta*, *Gomorra* is not a film specifically about immigration and its protagonists are not immigrants that get under the spotlight of some breaking news because they get involved in criminal activity. Nor are they looked on as (Freudian, Lacanian, Kristevian or postcolonial) Others. And yet immigrants are there, relegated to the background of a world who cares for their social integration only on its own terms, like disembodied fragments in a blurred landscape.

ALESSANDRO JEDLOWSKI

## Nigerian Migrants, Nollywood Videos and the Emergence of an 'Anti-Humanitarian' Representation of Migration in Italian Cinema

Over the past few years I have been conducting research on the fast-growing Nigerian film industry, commonly referred to as Nollywood.<sup>1</sup> This industry, which emerged in the early 1990s, is today considered as one of the largest in the world, and the video films it produces, generally low-budget productions released straight-to-video and circulated through informal transnational networks, are today available all over the African continent and in most of the countries that host people of African descent. While conducting this research, I became aware of the long-term presence of Nollywood films in Italy and of the role these videos play in the life of a large number of migrants living in the Peninsula. Not only do these videos constitute one of the main entertainment products African migrants (particularly Nigerians, but also Ivoirians, Ghanaians, Senegalese and others) consume, but they are also the object of an interesting and complex process of vernacularization which has brought to the emergence of a number of Nigerian video production companies in Italy. As I have underlined elsewhere, these productions occupy an interesting as much as ambiguous position within the landscape of emerging migrant cinema in

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the Nigerian video industry's history and recent transformations see: Jonathan Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); and Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (eds), *Global Nollywood: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

Italy and Italian cinema about migration.<sup>2</sup> The videos these production companies produce are in fact the result of a complex encounter between entertainment-oriented film style, exploitation films and the tradition of politically engaged exile filmmaking. Their existence challenges ready-made definitions of Italian national cinema, opening the space for the articulation of complex interstitial filmmaking practices. Indeed, the analysis of these practices offer an interesting and unexpected perspective on the politics of representation of migrants and migration in (Italian) cinema.

Taking these assumptions as a starting point, in this article I intend to look at migration and the politics of representation in contemporary Italian cinema by comparing one of the Nigerian videos produced in Italy, *Akpegi Boys* (2009), directed by Vincent Omoigui and Simone Sandretti, with two Italian films which portray the experience of Nigerian migrants in Italy, *Torino Boys* (1997), a film directed by Marco and Antonio Manetti (the so-called Manetti Bros), and *Sotto il Sole Nero* (2004), a film directed by the Turin-based director Enrico Verra. Interestingly enough both these two films take, implicitly and explicitly, Nigerian videos as a narrative and aesthetic reference in order to build an original representation of Nigerian migrants in Italy, thus positioning themselves in an original position vis-à-vis the growing corpus of Italian films about migration emerged over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup>

2 See Alessandro Jedlowski, 'Una nuova voce nel cinema italiano? L'emergenza di forme di cinema migrante in Italia', in Vanessa Lanari et al. (eds), *Camera Africa: classici, noni, Nollywood e la nuova generazione del cinema delle Afriche* (Verona: Cierre Edizioni, 2011), 69–76; Alessandro Jedlowski, 'On the Periphery of Nollywood: Nigerian Video Filmmaking in Italy and the Emergence of an Intercultural Aesthetics', in Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (eds), *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 237–50.

3 See, among others: Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Outlandish Cinema: Screening the Other in Italy', in Sandra Ponzanesi and Danila Merolla (eds), *Migrant Cartographies, Cultural Travellers and New Literatures* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 267–80; Leonardo De Franceschi (ed.), *L'Africa in Italia: per una contro storia postcoloniale del cinema italiano* (Rome: Aracne, 2013).

As a number of critics have underlined over the past few years, Italian cinema about migration is inhabited and conditioned by the removal of colonial past from Italian collective memory.<sup>4</sup> While, as Alessandro Triulzi among others has evidenced,<sup>5</sup> the increase in the number of migrants in Italy and their growing capacity to 'talk back' are significantly challenging the silence that surrounds the memory of the colonial event, the effects of this collective amnesia are still pervasive, and have strongly conditioned the style and themes of Italian cinema about migration. What David Forgacs, in his analysis of Michele Placido's *Pummarò* (1990), has called 'the limits of a vicarious representation', and what Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, in her criticism of recent Italian cinema on migration, has defined as the danger of a 'ventriloquist discourse' are still present, and have haunted Italian films about migration since their appearance.<sup>6</sup>

As Enrica Capusotti has eloquently shown, even in the most politically aware cinematic attempts, such as, for instance, De Seta's *Lettere dal Sahara* (2006), the 'assertion that the film takes the migrants' point of view is misleading as it ignores the nature of the power relations between 'natives' and 'migrants'. It implies for the white filmmaker and the white audience – who are the subject of the representation and of the gaze – a mimetic move that leaves little space for productive relations and conflicts between people who are positioned according to a plurality of processes

4 See Enrica Capusotti, 'Moveable Identities: Migration, Subjectivity and Cinema in Contemporary Italy', *Modern Italy* 14.1 (2009), 55–68; Derek Duncan, 'Italy's Postcolonial Cinema and its Histories of Representation', *Italian Studies* 63.2 (2008), 195–211.

5 Alessandro Triulzi, 'Displacing the Colonial Event: Hybrid Memories of Postcolonial Italy', *Interventions* 8.3 (2006), 430–43.

6 David Forgacs, 'African Immigration on Film: Pummarò and the Limits of Vicarious Representation', in Russel King and Nancy Wood (eds), *Media and Migration: Construction of Mobility and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 83–94; Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, 'Ending "Ventriloquistic Discourses" and Creating a Dialogue of Difference in De Seta's *Lettere dal Sahara* and Moroni's *Le ferie di Licu*', in Grace Russo Bullaro (ed.), *From Terrone to Extracomunitario: New Manifestations of Racism in Contemporary Italian Cinema. Shifting Demographics and Changing Images in a Multicultural Globalized Society* (Leicester: Troubador, 2010), 366–90.

and identifications.<sup>7</sup> The conflicts that characterize the migratory experience, as well as the definition of gender and race within this context, are thus often flattened through a superficially humanitarian perspective that is based on what has been defined as a 'gentle Manichaeism',<sup>8</sup> in which the 'portrayal of characters and cultures [is] based on a division between good and bad, Africans and Europeans, values and crisis'.<sup>9</sup>

The three films that I intend to analyse here all present some of the problems I have just highlighted. However, at least in my view, they all suggest some interesting features which can help us identify the emergence of what can be defined as an 'anti-humanitarian' representation of migration. By defining their attitude as anti-humanitarian, I do not intend to mean that these films assume a negative or derogatory perspective on migration. On the contrary, what I intend to highlight is that these are films that, by using a number of specific narrative and aesthetic strategies such as, among others, the reference to Nollywood commercial and exploitation filmmaking style, make an attempt to go beyond the binary representation that much debate on migration in Italy implicitly embraces, a representation according to which the migrant is either seen as an invader or as a victim.

As Sandro Mezzadra has emphasized, while it is important to identify and condemn the public discourse that, 'strung between the obsession with security and the following of new nationalisms and racisms, has represented the 'foreigner' and the 'immigrant', legitimating the stigmatization and exclusion brought about by governmental politics and legislation', it is also necessary 'to come to terms with the image of the immigrant as a weak subject, hollowed by hunger and misery and needing above all *care* and *help*'.<sup>10</sup> While, as Mezzadra recognizes, this perspective has, in most cases, grounded important experiences of solidarity with migrants, which have offered vital 'points of reference within a social texture deserted by

7 Capusotti, 'Moveable Identities', 64.

8 Roberto Nepoti, 'L'odissea dell'immigrato Assane', *La Repubblica* (1 September 2006), quoted in Capusotti, 'Moveable Identities', 64.

9 Capusotti, 'Moveable Identities', 64.

10 Sandro Mezzadra, 'The Right to Escape', *Ephemera: Theory of the Multitude* 4 (2004), 267.

the crisis of other 'agencies of socialization' – above all the Welfare State and the traditional organizations of the labour movement', it is necessary to underline that 'this image lends itself easily to the reproduction of 'paternalistic' logics which renew an order of discourse and a complex of practices that demote migrants to an inferior position, denying them all *chance* of becoming subjects'.<sup>11</sup>

### *Akegi Boyz: Nollywood Abroad, Exploitation Films and the 'Aesthetics of Outrage'*

Within the context of Nigerian production companies based in Italy and producing videos for release in Nigeria and among Nigerian and African migrants in Italy and in Europe, two main tendencies can be observed.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, following a narrative paradigm that Jonathan Haynes, analysing a sample of Nigerian videos set in the diaspora, has defined as the 'Africans abroad' genre within Nollywood,<sup>13</sup> a number of videos produced by Nigerian production companies in Italy tend to give voice 'to a sort of *Eldorado* narrative about migration, in which the elsewhere is socially Africanized (there are almost only African characters in the film[s] and white people speak English with a Nigerian accent) and aesthetically exoticized (through stereotypical images of beautiful buildings and large shopping malls)'.<sup>14</sup> Examples of this trend are, for instance, the video

11 Mezzadra, 'The Right to Escape', 268.

12 Beyond the two production companies I have focused on in my previous research, GVK production based in Turin and IGB Film and Music Industry based in Brescia, I recently became aware of the existence of three other Nigerian production companies based in Italy: Pennywise Pictures based in Rome, Fibeku Productions based in Florence and Jesi Entertainment based in Padua.

13 Jonathan Haynes, 'Africans Abroad: A Theme in Film and Video', *Africa & Mediterraneo* 45 (2003), 22–9.

14 Jedlowski, 'On the Periphery of Nollywood', 244.

*The Only Way After Home But It's Risky* (2007), shot between Brescia, Verona and Como and directed by Prince Frank Abieyuwa Osharhenoguwu, and *An African Wedding in Rome* (2009), shot in Rome and directed by Ben Oduwole. Both films are Nollywood-inspired melodramas in which the harshness that characterizes the experience of many Nigerian migrants in Italy is overlooked in order to emphasize the everyday reality of love and companionship of a group of Nigerians, who, one would say, only accidentally happen to be in Rome or Brescia, but who might live a similar life in some glamorous neighbourhood of Lagos or Abuja. This is the type of film which, as I will demonstrate below, the Manetti brothers have probably looked at while shooting *Torino Boys*, films whose interest for this article's argument lies, in my view, in their capacity to 'banalize' the migration experience by producing a reassuring representation of the 'normal life' migrants try to live, and in many cases do live, beyond the 'dramatic' representation of migration the media normally conveys, and despite the violence and racism that characterize much of Italian politics and public discourse in relation to migration.

On the other hand there are a number of videos which, while being equally oriented mainly toward Nigerian and African audiences, focus on migration related issues, but they do so often through the lens of exploitation genres (horror, gangster, witchcraft films, and so on). This is the case, for instance, of *Akepegi Boys*, a video upon which I want to focus my attention for the rest of this section. This film, shot with derisory means (the budget was around €10,000, the actors were non-professional and most locations were unauthorized) and circulated mainly through informal networks and privately organized film screenings, is a gangster-horror film that portrays the life and progressive decline of a gang of Nigerian criminals, the Akpegi Boys, who terrorize the life of Nigerian migrants in a sort of underground, radically Afrocentric Turin. The gang, whose cohesion and internal order is regulated by a number of occult rituals administered by a Nigerian witchdoctor (Baba Ke),<sup>15</sup> controls the illegal

15 As the American anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff ('Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony', *American*

drug market and regulates the prostitution business by playing the role of intermediary between Madams and young prostitutes. During the course of the film the gang's boss, Rakaka, loses control of his henchmen, who commit a number of irresponsible acts driven by an individual desire for wealth and power. But as the plot of the film unfolds we understand that the gang's misfortune is due to the magical intervention, through witchcraft and possession, of one of the enslaved prostitutes, Erika, who takes revenge for the way the Akpegi treated her (her boyfriend was killed, she was raped and beaten). Because of Erika's intervention, the gang falls into disarray. The police, who throughout the film have been shown as corrupt and complicit with some of the crimes committed by the gang (particularly drug dealing and prostitution trafficking), finally track down the gang members and arrest them all, while Erika, during a Pentecostal celebration in a Nigerian church, becomes possessed and confesses to being the cause of everything that happened.

As Vincent Omoigui has reported (personal interview, 21 September 2009), when he wrote the script for this film he took inspiration from a number of violent episodes that were happening among Nigerian migrants in Turin, and considered the film as an instrument to criticize the contemporary state of events. His film culture being entirely based on Nollywood, and his objective being not only that of playing the critic within his own social group but also that of producing a profit-making, entertaining film, he shaped the script along what he thought would be the defining aspects of a commercial Nigerian video film. The final result is a highly controversial product. As a number of people who have watched it said in after-screening

*Ethnologist* 26.2 (1999), 279–303) have emphasized, after the economic crisis which hit most sub-Saharan African countries in the 1980s, rumours about the occult and violent origins of power and wealth became extremely widespread. These rumours have found their way into Nigerian videos and constitute one of the main sources of inspiration for Nigerian video producers and scriptwriters. See, among others, Onookome Okome, 'Writing the Anxious City: Images of Lagos in Nigerian Home Video Films', in Okwui Enwezor et al. (eds), *Under Siege: Four African Cities. Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatjie Cantz Publisher, 2004), 315–36.



informal conversations, if it falls in the wrong hands, this film, with its abundance of violence, witchcraft, drugs and prostitution, would make a perfect argument against Nigerian migrants. However, as Omoigui has emphasized, following the moral and didactic orientation of much Nigerian video production, his objective was to make Nigerians themselves aware of their wrongdoings, in order to push them to rethink the moral structure of their society. By adopting what Brian Larkin has defined as an 'aesthetic of outrage', that is, an aesthetic that uses 'spectacular transgression, luridly depicted, to work on the body, generating physical revulsion',<sup>16</sup> Omoigui created a language of excesses that aims at producing a critical attitude toward society. As Larkin suggests, in this type of film revulsion often 'provides a public witnessing to the sorts of activities people in society are involved in and, through the bodily reaction to them, enacts a moral commentary on society itself'.<sup>17</sup>

By focusing on an internal moral critique, this film inevitably offers a representation of migration which is profoundly different from those produced in the majority of Italian cinema. As with most Nigerian videos, the film does not, at least in its initial intentions, target non-African audiences, and thus, if compared to other representations of African migrants in Italian cinema, it contains numerous aspects that for non-African audiences are, as Haynes emphasized, 'familiar in the wrong ways and strange in the wrong ways',<sup>18</sup> aspects which do everything but please the orientalist and exoticist expectations many viewers implicitly or explicitly hold before watching a film portraying African people. Furthermore, the film is anything but compliant or accommodating to Nigerian migrants themselves. On the contrary, the brutality of the representation it proposes is in some cases shocking. In this sense, Omoigui's film is in many ways an excess. Its anti-humanitarianism is even slightly dangerous (as already said, if the film falls in the wrong hands), but it is important because, from a position

16 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 186.

17 Ibid.

18 Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films*, 2.

which is internal to the migrants' minority itself, it emphasizes the need for a representation that is able to give space and voice to the debates that exist among migrants themselves, and that can highlight the complexity of the processes of subjectivation migrants live through. The films I will analyse in the following pages are more moderated and subtle than *Akpegi Boys*, but they undoubtedly subscribe to the same logic, a logic that demands to look at migration without preconceived conceptual schemes, in order to penetrate the social and cultural complexity of this phenomenon.

### *Torino Boys*: Pop Culture, Parody and the Making of an Italian Afrocentric Film about Migration

The film *Torino Boys* is one of the four films produced by Marco and Pier Giorgio Bellocchio's production company Filmalbatros and financed by the Radio Televisione Italiana's second channel (RAI 2) in the mid-1990s as part of the project 'Un altro paese nei miei occhi', a project which had the intention to show the migrants' point of view about their life experience in Italy (as discussed in more detail in Bonsaver's chapter in this book). Within this framework *Torino Boys* emerges as the most original of the four films, and probably the one which provoked the most controversial reactions. While some critics considered it as a highly innovative film because of its specific approach to the representation of migrants in Italy,<sup>19</sup> others denounced its inability to go beyond the objectifying gaze that characterizes

19 See Michele Anselmi, 'Ecco l'Italia dei Torino Boys: storie di immigrati in TV movie', *L'Unità* (19 November 1997) and Alberto Farassino 'I Torino Boys di Bellocchio', *La Repubblica* (19 November 1997), quoted in Giancarla Vanoli, 'Migrazione come misura del nuovo: il cinema degli anni novanta', paper presented at the conference 'Destination Italy: Representing Migration in Contemporary Media and Narrative', University of Oxford, 13–15 April 2012.

much Italian cinema about migration.<sup>20</sup> Beyond these debates, however, the Manetti brothers' film managed to achieve wide circulation, particularly thanks to the success of its soundtrack, entirely conceived by the Italian hip-hop star Neffa, which became almost a cult-movie within the Italian hip-hop and rap subculture. Today, with the directors' agreement, the film is entirely available on YouTube, and this is helping prolong its successful circulation in Italy.

The film, which develops through a series of short episodes and has a rather fragmentary and multi-layered plot structure, is based on three main parallel stories. The first one narrates the story of a group of three young Nigerian men living in Italy, Patrick, Eby and Roosevelt (called throughout the film the 'Torino boys'), who travel from Turin to Rome to go to the stadium for a football match at which the good friend of one of them is supposed to play. During their trip, while listening to and singing hip-hop music, they chat about the women they are supposed to meet in Rome and dream about ways of making money quickly. The second plot line follows the story of four young Nigerian women, Regina (the oldest and most expert of the four), Pereré (the naughty one, who believes that there is nothing other than sex in life), Sara (the one who got her heart broken) and Nike (the newcomer, somewhat naïve, who still believes in true love). The 'Roma girls', as they are called throughout the film, spend most of their time watching Nigerian videos on their VHS recorder and chatting endlessly about fashion, love deceptions and sex. The third plot line, which takes place almost entirely in Nigeria, between Benin City and Lagos, follows the story of a young girl, Ifueko, whose dream is to travel to Europe, and who, when her aunt finally dies, leaves Nigeria in order to go to Italy.

The three stories are meant to be connected, but things do not go as planned, and the film develops through a number of unexpected twists that

20 See Lietta Tornabuoni, 'A Cinema Giovani, la vita il linguaggio e le eleganze dei nigeriani: Bellocchio e l'immigrazione, "ma Spike Lee non abita qui"', *La Stampa* (19 November 1997); Parati, *Migration Italy*, 117.

make the stories diverge and the film become a sophisticated comedy, full of misunderstandings, missed opportunities and accidental encounters.

Making explicit reference to Nollywood-style melodramas, at times the Manetti brothers give the film the rhythm of a Nigerian video, with long dialogues, little action and a lot of emphasis on love intrigues, glamorous fashion and boastful attitudes. The narrative items that characterize much of the representation of migration in Italian cinema, and particularly of Nigerian migrants in Italy (the difficult journey to reach the destination country; the violence of the police; the ruthless behaviour of criminals and human traffickers that organize each step of the trip) are marginalized, and when touched upon, are represented through parody. Particularly meaningful in this sense is the development of the plot line that follows Ifueko's trip to Italy. Throughout her itinerary, all the negative and violent characters she meets (the intermediary that organizes her trip to Italy, the Madam and the gangster that wait for her in Rome) are represented as caricatures. Their dramatic features are pushed to the extreme, thus showing the inner paradoxes of their characters' nature as well as the contradictions that characterize their representation in Italian media and public discourse. For instance, the Madam who has sponsored Ifueko's trip to Italy (Sista Lulu) is represented in a radically surreal way. The sound of her voice is distorted and punctuated by sinister bursting of loud laughter, and she lies in her bed day and night, in a shinningly white room located in the backyard of a bizarre place, which seems to be, at the same time, a brothel, a call centre and a night club, and which can be seen in itself as a caricature of the way in which migrants' meeting places are portrayed in Italian public discourse.

The film, which has almost no white characters, is set in a radically Afrocentric world, which is portrayed in its 'banal' everyday routine. This Afrocentric universe, however, is short-circuited by some unrealistic elements that mark the existence of unlikely (but potentially fertile) possibilities of encounter between two worlds, that of the Nigerian migrants and that of the Italian nationals, which do not seem to interact much in the society the film portrays. For instance, most dialogues throughout the film are in Italian, even if it is clear (and it was surely evident also to the Manettis who had deep and personal contacts with Nigerian migrants

in Italy when they shot the film)<sup>21</sup> that, in a real-life situation, a group of Nigerians would most likely speak pidgin English, English or one of Nigeria's main local languages among themselves. However, the dialogues are not dubbed but directly acted in Italian by the Nigerian actors (who are all non-professionals), in a sort of 'broken Italian' which produces an interesting effect of displacement for the audience, similar, in my view, to the one produced, for instance, by reading one of the novels written by the emerging generation of Italophone African writers.<sup>22</sup> The mixture of familiarity and strangeness that this experience provokes, as much post-colonial theory has shown, contributes to the project of deconstruction of the nation-state's imagined community, whose image is based on the illusion of the existence of homogeneous national identities and languages.

In a similarly unrealistic way, the protagonists of the film endlessly listen to Italian hip-hop, which is rather unlikely behaviour considering that, as whoever has frequented Nigerian migrants would confirm, Nigerians, in Italy as elsewhere, are much keener to listen to African-American or African hip-hop music. Here again, by forcing this unrealistic element into the film, the Manetti brothers create a line of contact between Italian and migrant forms of subculture, emphasizing how these cultural forms share common references which are likely to ground an effective encounter, the encounter between transnational and hybrid forms of youth culture such as Italian and African hip-hop, and even, as the film itself testifies, Italian independent cinema and the Nollywood video phenomenon.

Within this context, the harshness of the migrants' life experience in Italy is seen in its everyday simplicity. Prostitution and other illegal activities appear vaguely in the background of the story, but they are never thematized or explicitly mentioned. The longing for home and family, on the

21 One of the directors, Marco Manetti, is married to a Nigerian woman, Juliet Esey Joseph, who acts in the film and who, since then, has collaborated on many of Manetti brothers' film projects. Interestingly enough, today she is also a producer of Nigerian videos in Italy (information from a personal interview with Marco Manetti, 10 October 2012).

22 See Jennifer Burns, 'Language and its Alternatives in Italophone Migrant Writing' in Jaqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 127–48; Parati, *Migration Italy*.

contrary, emerges often and Italy is repeatedly defined as an intermediary stage within a life itinerary that cannot but take place in Nigeria. However, this perspective is also challenged as, for instance, in the case of the two main characters of the film, Eby and Nike, who seems to believe that love and life are possible also in Italy, if only they decide to invest in it, and make Italy a place for them to live. The existence of the debate that opposes those who reject Italy as a harsh and racist country, and those who would like to make it their home, which the directors emphasize throughout the film, shows the complexity of the processes of subjectivation migrants go through, and offers a perspective on migration that looks at migrants as protagonists of their life, rather than as mere passive victims of someone else's agency.

### *Sotto il Sole Nero*: Mimesis, duplicity and the impossible truth of the Migrant's Experience

Enrico Verra shot the film *Sotto il Sole Nero* a few years after shooting a short film, *Benvenuto in San Salvario* (1999), which was also focused on migration and, as for *Sotto il Sole Nero*, was set in the central and highly multicultural neighbourhood of San Salvario, near Turin's main train station. Contrary to the short film, which had a fairly widespread circulation and received a number of prizes, *Sotto il Sole Nero* encountered endless production problems which, according to the director, damaged the final results and compromised the commercial circulation of the film. Despite the relatively high initial production budget (around €500,000), the film did not manage to achieve full access to commercial distribution and was only officially released in Turin. However, in the years that followed, it experienced a second life by circulating through thematic retrospectives around Italy and abroad, and also by witnessing an unexpectedly widespread informal circulation through pirated copies in Turin and elsewhere thanks to the personal involvement of some of the film's protagonists.<sup>23</sup>

23 Information from personal interview with the director, 20 September 2012.

The film tells the story of Sergio, a young Italian man born in a proletarian family in Turin's suburbs, who leaves home when he is still young and, after living on the streets for some time, starts to squat in an abandoned flat in San Salvario, in a building where a number of Nigerian people live. Soon after moving into the new flat, Sergio comes into contact with his Nigerian neighbours, particularly with two sisters, Judy and Jennifer, who live on the same floor as him, and whom he approaches in order to obtain a copy of the building's main door keys (which he does not have because he is occupying the flat illegally). The first day they meet, Judy asks Sergio, or better forces him, to give her multiple lifts around Turin by car. This experience quite rapidly makes Sergio become aware of the existence of a 'parallel' Turin, made of exclusively Nigerian night-clubs, restaurants and services of all types. He realizes the economic potential he (an unemployed and barely educated young man) could get from working within this world and, initially almost as a joke, and then progressively taking the job seriously, he starts working as cab driver in what is generally called, among Nigerians in Turin, the 'kabu-kabu' service, that is, the underground un-authorized taxi service that Nigerians use in order to move around the city.<sup>24</sup>

While doing this job Sergio gets increasingly familiar with the migrant population of San Salvario, progressively developing his life within it. He starts a relationship with Judy, and works within the neighbourhood as cab driver, plumber, and even video maker, helping a young Ethiopian musician (Bado) to record a video clip he wants to bring home in his imminent trip back to visit the family. The video clip Sergio shoots with Bado has an unexpected success among migrants in Turin, and pirated copies of it start circulating in food shops, barber shops and call centres frequented by migrants around the city (an explicit reference to the booming commercial success of African music video-clips and Nollywood video films among African migrants that was happening in Turin at the time the film was shot). When Sergio realizes the economic potential of such an activity, he decides to transform video filmmaking into a regular business and, together

24 I had myself multiple experiences of this informal transport service during my fieldwork research among Nigerians in Turin between 2009 and 2011.

with Judy and Bado, he sets up a video production studio in Turin. The video they produce are extremely successful and the group lives a period of remarkable ease and prosperity.

The economic success the group momentarily achieves reposes on the understanding of the difference existing between migrants' actual life experience and the way migrants themselves wish this experience to be told. Numerous people rush to their production company because they want to make video films that can represent them as television stars, that is, as the figures of success they want their family back home to believe they have become. When Judy, Sergio and Bado create their video production company, the first thing they shoot is a beauty contest, 'Miss Nigeria in Italy', a video which in many ways represents a world, that of a golden, prosperous and glamorous life in Europe, that is closer to the dream Nigerian migrants have of Italy rather than to their everyday reality.<sup>25</sup> The video, which Verra shot making explicit reference to the style of Nigerian videos filmmaking, seems to have a dignifying effect on the people who play in it. By acting, and thus by operating a mimesis that makes them move from the harshness of the everyday reality to the ideal perfection of the dreamed experience of migration to Europe, the migrants involved in the video renew the illusion that pushed them to start their migratory adventure, thus finding a new dignity not only in the eyes of their family back home (to whom the video is implicitly addressed), but also in their own.

However, as the segmented and multi-layered structure of the film itself testifies, the tension between the migrants' life and the image they would like to keep of it is particularly violent. Each character of the film has in fact a multiple and non-linear experience which obliges it to perform at the same time different, at times conflicting, social roles, a multiplicity that Sergio is unable to see and fully understand. Judy, who is a thoughtful and caring lover to Sergio, is at the same time the madam of her sister Jennifer,

25 Verra reported in the interview I had with him that he took the idea of the beauty contest from a videotape he saw in a Nigerian video shop while he was working on the film's script. This kind of tape used to circulate (and still circulates today) among Nigerians thanks to both formal and informal selling venues (video shops, barber shops, food markets and call centres) that target migrant audiences all over Italy.

whose trip to Italy she has sponsored and by whom she thus expect to be repaid with interest. Jennifer prostitutes herself in order to pay her sister back, but she also hides some money in order to buy herself the clothes she has always dreamed about, thus provoking Judy's violent anger. For his part, beyond being a musician, Bado does also a number of little jobs, some of them evidently illegal, which make the video production business the target of a police investigation. Within this context, Sergio, who throughout the film seems to become a self-conscious 'migrant in his own country', quite explicitly proud of this fact and somehow unable to avoid a kind of paternalistic (and maybe slightly 'orientalist') attitude toward the migrants who have 'adopted' him, finds himself having almost no clue about what is going on around him. The familiarity with the migrant's experience he believed to have acquired reveals itself to be an illusion, and the tensions underpinning the everyday life of his closer friends suddenly appears before his eyes in all their complexity. The situation degenerates quickly and, while Jennifer, in one of the recurrent fights she has with her sister, accidentally kills Judy with a knife, Sergio is arrested on the accusation of being a pimp (as the police seem to consider anyone who has too much to do with a group of Nigerian women) and a money launderer (because of the video production company, which the police consider to be merely a cover).

As intricate as it might seem, the plot of the film presents numerous original and interesting aspects. Contrary to many Italian films about migration which follows the experience of a migrant in Italy and his or her difficult relationship with the 'host' society (i.e. Placido's *Pummarò* and De Seta's *Lettere dal Sahara*), in *Sotto il Sole Nero* Verra turns this model up-side-down, transforming Sergio into a metaphorical migrant,<sup>26</sup> who moves into the 'parallel' world of migrants in Italy and discovers the reality of a country which conceptualizes itself as homogeneous, but which is constitutively and inescapably multiple. Sergio, who starts a romantic

26 A similar narrative twist has been adopted also in other Italian films about migration. Vincenzo Marra's *Tornando a Casa* (Sacher Film, 2001) is probably the best known example among them (see also Capusotti, 'Movable Identities').

relationship with Judy and seems to have completely taken the side of the migrants, when discussing with a friend in his home village, defines the place where he has just moved in as 'una soffitta marcia e abbandonata [dove] ci abitano solo *negri*', thus evidencing the strength of the racist stereotypes he has interiorized. Judy, who is in love with Sergio and even feeds him and buys clothes for him with the money she gets from her job as hairdresser, is extremely violent with her sister, to the point of threatening her to recur to Nigerian witchcraft rituals if she will not pay her debt back.<sup>27</sup> Whenever Sergio tries to obtain an explanation about her bizarre behaviour towards her sister, she categorically refuses to explain anything to him, thus highlighting the limits of the 'wishful thinking'<sup>28</sup> that would see Sergio as a fully integrated element within the Nigerian underground world. This world can be accessed, Judy seems to say, but only accepting its obscure rules and the existence of the rigid boundaries that separates it from the world Italian people like Sergio comes from.

As these examples evidence, each character plays a multiplicity of roles in his / her everyday life which articulate themselves in complex and at times unlikely ways. The idealistic solidarity that emerges among the marginalized is showed in its inescapable fragility. Possible 'contact zones' are experienced but the violence of the tensions that inhabit them are kept visible all throughout the film, and the 'gentle Manichaeism' that, as evidenced earlier, characterizes much of the representation of migration in Italian cinema, is swept away by a much more complex scenario, a scenario that results from never-ending interactions and negotiations put forward in order to create the common ground for the achievement of a social and cultural encounter.

27 For an ethnographic analysis of the role of witchcraft in the life of Nigerian migrants in Italy see Roberto Beneduce and Simona Taliani, 'Embodied Power, Deconstructed Bodies: Spirit Possession, Sickness, and the Search for Wealth of Nigerian Immigrant Women', *Anthropos* 101.2 (2006), 429-49.

28 Capusotti, 'Movable Identities', 61.

## Conclusion: Anti-Humanitarian Representations and the Deconstruction of the Italian Hegemonic Gaze on Migration

The analysis of the three films that I have sketched evidences the emergence of what I labelled earlier as an anti-humanitarian representation of migration in Italian cinema. In a country like Italy that has very short-sighted policies for the support of migrant cultural production, and in which, as a consequence, migrant cinema is still at an embryonic stage,<sup>29</sup> Italian cinema about migration needs to be conscious of its limits, and of the risks that a blind humanitarian approach might present. Such an approach does in fact risk, as Capusotti among others has emphasized,<sup>30</sup> perpetuating rather than deconstructing the power dynamics it focuses on.

The three films I have focused my attention on, by playing with cultural references that belong – as for instance Nollywood videos do – to the contemporary cultural universe of Nigerian migrants themselves, point to the possibility of building a bridge between the diverging ways in which Italians and migrants look at migration. This encounter, which is first and foremost a filmic encounter, has the potential of helping Italian directors and intellectuals to deconstruct their hegemonic gaze on migrants and migration phenomena, and has the possibility to inaugurate a healthy and necessary process of decentralization and provincialization of singularly ‘Italian’ (that is, expressed in Italian language, presented on Italian media, and produced by Italian intellectuals and artists) perspectives about migration in Italy.

29 See: De Franceschi, *L’Africa in Italia*; Jedlowski, ‘Una nuova voce nel cinema italiano?’; Maria Giulia Grassilli, ‘Migrant Cinema: Transnational and Guerrilla Practices of Film Production and Representation’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34.8 (2008), 1237–55; Guido Bonsaver, ‘Who’s Shooting Whom? Screening Immigration in Contemporary Italian Cinema’, in Laura Lepschy and Adam Ledgeway (eds), *Into and Out of Italy: lingua e cultura della migrazione italiana* (Perugia: Guerra, 2010), 87–98.

30 Capusotti, ‘Moveable Identities’.

ÁINE O’HEALY

## Witnessing History, Recounting Suffering: The Documentary Project of Andrea Segre

The recent surge in global migrations has inspired a growing number of Italian documentaries, facilitated by the increasing availability of lightweight, sophisticated, yet relatively inexpensive digital cameras and by parallel developments in editing software. One of the persistent revelations of documentaries that chronicle the human costs of globalization is that the much-vaunted neoliberal ideal of the unrestricted movement of labour and capital does not play out evenly in the real world. While citizens of the global north can pass with relative ease across most international borders, the barriers to international mobility become acutely visible in refugee camps, migrant holding centres and other critical border zones that signal the dividing line between the north and south.

Yet communicating the materiality of power relations in these border zones and documenting the hardships characteristic of large-scale migrations create representational challenges that may defeat the very objectives that inspired the filmmakers at the outset. These challenges include the risk of spectacularizing human distress as an object of voyeuristic consumption, of presenting biased or distorted accounts of complex situations, or of providing images that might be used to justify shifts in legislation or military interventions not primarily motivated by the objective of alleviating the circumstances documented by the filmmaker.

The documentaries of Andrea Segre disclose an acute consciousness of these potential pitfalls. In the four films<sup>1</sup> he has dedicated to the experiences of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa at various stages of their migratory

<sup>1</sup> In this article the term ‘film’ is used in the broadest sense. Segre shot all of his documentaries in digital video format.